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The porn identity

March 4, 2012 | By Lakshmi Govindrajan Javeri

Tags: erotica, porngate, pornography, pornstar, voyeurism

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Pornstar Sunny Leone's entry into Bigg Boss created quite a flutter.



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Here's a look at the Indian psyche and its constant battle with its porn identity — its love for erotica, voyeurism, brazen sexuality and pleasures of the flesh.

Watching porn in the Assembly cost three ministers their jobs but brought to the fore the often-hushed topic of pornography. A pornstar made it to *Bigg Boss* and her presence brought the topic to dinner tables.

In a nation that constantly debates over the moral implications of sex education, there exists an industry that feeds the imagination and desires of millions of Indian men and not as many women.

The Internet may have made it considerably redundant, but for millions of Indian men, the homegrown pornography industry is their only chance at sexual freedom.

The Bombay High Court last year ruled that viewing of pornography in a private space does not tantamount to an offence and chose not to stand on moral judgement in the matter; a path-breaking ruling that acknowledged private pornography viewing as a matter of personal choice. We look at the Indian psyche and its constant battle with its porn identity.

Down Under

For decades the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala held the mantle of being artistically liberal very seriously. With censors being less rigid, softcore pornography was accepted and short of going full frontal, even mainstream films had heavyset voluptuous women pushing the limits of titillation.

Ironically, while south movies indulged in a lot more erotica, the people of the states appeared far more conservative than their Western counterparts. Bollywood on the contrary, believed to be the flagship of a liberal city like Mumbai, was far more restrictive in its skin show.

Malyalam actor-film-maker Madhupal feels part of the reason for Malyalam cinema of the '70-'80s having bold scenes was people's curiosity.

"People like seeing others in compromising situations. It's voyeuristic. You had the likes of Silk Smitha and Shakeela having a massive fan-following then. Today, with the Internet inundated with all sorts of pornography, people don't need to go to a movie to watch something they can so easily download."

While Tamil and Malyalam films were known for being social commentaries, Bollywood cinema, as perceived by many in the South, has always been about Mumbai.

"The women in Bollywood all looked similar, dressed alike and no matter what their situation, the films reeked of a certain Bombay way of life or style. Women of Kerala have always been strong, powerful and independent. The cinema reflected the situations these women found themselves in. The movies of the '70s and the '80s showed sexual tension between a woman and some man in her life, be it her neighbour or a relative. It is not like the society was orthodox. While people may not have spoken so much about pornography, they didn't quite object to the suggestive visuals either," says V. Sunil, executive creative director of Wieden+Kennedy.

Back in the '80s, names like Silk Smitha and her various textile titillators like Nylon Nalini, Polyester Padmini, Cotton Kamini were synonymous with brazen exposure while portraying characters of the woman in throes of passion or the exploited nymphet. Short of showing genitals, softcore scenes leaving little to the imagination made these girls household whispers.

While portraying Silk in her latest film *The Dirty Picture*, Vidya Balan said, "In real life, Silk was ahead of her time. She took pride in what she did and was never ashamed of what she was doing."

Morning shows

For a good part of three decades, pornography in India meant those 'morning shows'. Movies like *Her Nights*, *Reshma Ki Jawani* and *Pyar Ki Ek Raat* had posters of women in various stages of pleasure staring right back at you.

Says a documentary filmmaker on condition of anonymity, "You know. films of Kanti Shah were a cult. Kanti Shah ke Angoor, Shaadi Basanti Ki Honeymoon Gabbar Ka etc., made him this cult figure. He even had his wife as the leading lady of some of his films. He was the closest we got to seeing some 'action' on the big screen. I remember his most famous line: Naam hain mera Bulla, rakhta hoon main khulla." Crass? Yes. Had an audience? Undoubtedly.

Interestingly, many of these movies that made it to the 'morning shows' category were considered 'bit films' for inserting bits of other films.

"Sometimes in the middle of a seemingly raunchy film, out of nowhere would a passionate sex scene from an international film appear. In some instances they were even hardcore. Then soon after, the original film would continue," says film-maker Vikram Bhatt, while talking about a dying trend today.

The Internet has considerably killed that tradition but metros still have a few theatres committed to the cause of satisfaction. Sunil, last year paid a tribute to this industry by hosting an exhibition of his personal collection of handpainted posters of adult films.

"I wanted to start the conversation and bring the topic of pornography out of the shadows. The morning shows culture was dying and I felt it was good to document what it was in its full glory. One poster even had an image of Brooke Shields from *Blue Lagoon* but the film was regional. Such was the distinctiveness of these films and posters. You cannot ignore a culture that ushered many a boy to manhood."

Status quo

Today, India is standing at the threshold of accepting pornography as fait accompli. Pornstar Sunny Leone's entry into *Bigg Boss* created quite a flutter.

Her reaction to her profession has been rather nonchalant: "I've been doing adult porn for 10 years. In this duration I've met a whole lot of people: Those who like me, those who dislike me for what I am and what I do, or those who hate or appreciate my choice of profession."

Delhi-born Anjali Kara is a known face in Bangkok and London as a pornstar of Indian origin. "I don't have sex with these men. It's only acting. I'm not a prostitute," she clarifies in an interview.

Lifestyles are strained for time and the Internet has brought the world (of porn) to cellphones as well. Homemade clips make quick bucks and viewers have access to women of all cultures. The art of indigenous visual erotica may be dying but there are upholders in the form of Savita Bhabhi and the likes that she's inspired.

While the government may have banned the official Savita Bhabhi website, she continues to thrive in India on another domain. It is interesting how our courts are doing their objective best to ensure personal freedom is not infringed upon. The Bombay High Court turned down a public interest litigation (PIL) seeking a blanket ban on websites with sexual content on the internet.

It said, "If such an exercise is done, then an aggrieved party, depending on the sensibilities of persons

whose views may differ on what is morally degrading or prurient, will be sitting in judgement even before a competent court decides the issue”.

The courts may be willing to give pornography in personal space a chance, but how willing is society?

Says Sunil, “We started the Kama Sutra. Sex and orgies adorn Khajuraho. We love our apsaras like Rambha to be well-endowed. But cinema is held at gunpoint. Those ministers who got busted in the Assembly are a testimony of our society today. Hypocritical to say the least. Today there is almost no money left in the pornography industry in India. But we’re now more willing to talk about porn.”

In a nation of contradictions, this resurgence of public interest in private space is not surprising. Are we, as a society, itching closer to liberal thought? Or is it a case of premature exaggeration? Only time will tell.

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