

SO, boom town Bangalore has really arrived. It would seem, judging from the massive build up being given to the Miss World Contest to be held in the city in November. The evolution of Bangalore from a Pensioner's Paradise to a blossoming Garden City to India's own Silicon Valley has been dramatic and rapid. Old timers may mourn the disappearing ethos and the multistoreyed apartment culture which has Bangalore in its maws. But for the young and enterprising, Bangalore is the place to be, in spite of the black-outs and noxious traffic fumes.

Into this burgeoning scenario comes none other than the Big B himself with his mouth-watering package of beautiful women and mega bucks. But mega bucks for whom? Not for the commuter on the street facing his daily dose of worsening traffic jams. Not for the housewife struggling with candles as the power goes off when her work load is at its peak. Not even for the many survivors of sexual harassment and dowry torture who are the real victims of a culture which places physical beauty on such a high pedestal.

Boom town Bangalore was apparently hand-picked from a list of aspiring cities to host this international beauty contest. Answering a question on what the pageant would leave behind for the city, Bachchan replied, "just a lot of beautiful memories of beautiful women. I can't possibly invest in Bangalore." The money, he said, would go to the Spastics Society of India. But, what kind of money are we talking about here? The entire event will cost a mind-boggling seven to eight crore rupees. Obviously the financial benefits will be equally mind-boggling.

Beauty contests have come a long way since those early innocent days when local beauties mounted the ramp. Not just in terms of exposure...no pun intended... but in terms of sheer size.

Today, a winner, even in a preliminary round, stands to win advertising endorsements and job offers apart from lavish cash prizes and gifts. Obviously money would not come pouring in, in such enormous bucketfuls, if a beauty contest was not a marketable business deal.

Feminist protests against the holding of beauty contests have also come a long way, but one can hear the voices growing feebler and feebler against the onslaught of big money. In fact so feeble are they now that when someone asked him what he had to say to the questions raised by feminists, the Big B just replied he would like to hear the questions first.

Subsequently, the questions and the protests came in a deluge and, not surprisingly, the feminist voice was still hardly heard. The protests were all against cultural invasion and multinational take overs. Right from the women who threatened to immolate themselves at the venue to the Chief Minister who quipped that grown women had a right to parade in the nude if they



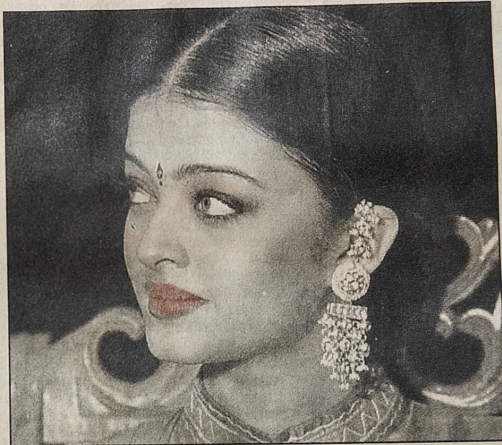
The business of beauty

F O C U S

wanted to, no one talked about the basic feminist issues on trial: the trivialisation of women as human beings and the irony of holding such contests in societies which victimise women for being physically beautiful.

In the early days when feminist perceptions were not so sharp, the protests centred around the exposure of women's bodies to public gaze. Women's rights activists realised there was something wrong in these gender-biased contests which placed so much emphasis on physical beauty, neglecting the other important attributes which go into making a beautiful woman.

In those days, the organisers of beauty contests were on shaky ground. They needed beautiful women to come and participate in these contests. But where would they come from if the contests were dubbed immoral? Mothers had to be persuaded that the contests were show cases for their daughters' talents and not just their physical endowments.



Top: A protest against staging the Miss World contest 1996 in Bangalore. Above: Miss World 1994 Aishwarya Rai.

And so, beauty contests acquired a new dimension. They began including question rounds where judges quizzed the contestants on their general knowledge and social commitment. The women who entered were projected as talented beauties with brains. Live telecasts and international TV coverage added a new dimension. The beauties who stride across international ramps with utter confidence could be shown doing socially purposeful things. We can now watch them on our monitors, visiting slum children and helping handicapped persons, projecting themselves as women who are as beautiful within as without. In fact a joke doing the rounds in Bangalore these days is that the city was chosen because there are so many convenient slums to pose in.

Today entering a beauty contest needs no justification. It is considered a competition like any other and is socially acceptable even among the middle class. No one is apologetic about

swimsuit rounds. The girls who enter are in to win and they put a lot of money, effort and training into getting there. This is because the stakes are high. Winning an international contest can turn an ordinary young woman into a national heroine and a millionairess.

And all the while the commoditising of these women has grown beyond anything those early protesters envisioned. The contestants themselves have not only accepted but internalised the justification of "using" beauty. Today the contestants can win separate prizes for the beauty of their skin or hair or eyes. Where once the whole woman was commoditised, today, she is dissected into various little parts, each of which is used to sell the multitude of products being spewed out by the booming beauty industry.

The once scorned Third World, where economies are on an upswing, is now viewed as a giant potential market. The Asian face is in demand to endorse multinational products in order to make them more acceptable to domestic consumers. Local business interests don't lag far behind. If Bangalore can be presented as the ideal boom town which has strong cultural roots, the tourism industry stands to gain and so does the State exchequer. And if it takes a bevy of international beauties to "expose" this culture to the world, so be it.

Even women themselves are divided over the issue. There are the liberal, free thinking achievers who, ironically, like the Chief Minister, feel that adult women have the right to choose. There are others who feel that docile acceptance of a beauty contest is a sign of the decadent times. There are some who feel that the voices being raised are those of fundamentalists who would like to keep the firm hand of patriarchy in place. And

others who believe that a beauty contest is a symbol of the emancipation of Indian women. Token protests may not achieve spectacular results. At best, the Bachchan bandwagon can shift the contest to another venue. But, the contests will go on as long as the big bucks keep pouring in. The local cacophony of protest has only shown that the once complacent and accepting Pensioners' Paradise has developed a social conscience.

Local feminists might ask what social conscience? What culture are we talking about? A culture which sanctions female infanticide, dowry, bride slaughter, child marriage and sati? True, the arguments may be misdirected. But, at least they have helped to focus public attention on an issue which would have otherwise been dazzled out of sight by the high-power glitz. ■

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