

MEDIA DISFIGURES BEAUTY *

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The Miss World beauty pageant that took place in Bangalore in November 1996 demonstrated, once again, how the media can shape both events and public perceptions of them.

The controversy over the international beauty pageant dominated the front and third pages of dailies, in Bangalore at least, for several weeks, made headlines in national and international television news programmes and prompted hordes of media persons from different parts of the country and the world to descend on the city under siege.

From the beginning, both the organisers of the event and its most vocal and visible opponents played to the gallery. Amitabh Bachchan, whose corporation brought the pageant to India, set the ball rolling by getting the government of Karnataka to take the unprecedented step of opening the doors of the Vidhana Soudha to a private individual heading a private corporation for the purpose of announcing a private event. To make matters worse, the chief minister of the state "graced the occasion."

Enter Mahila Jagran (MJ) — a self-styled women's organisation which appears to have come into being solely to spearhead the war against Miss world — with its threat of female suicide squads willing to immolate themselves to register their protest against the event. And the pageant, which would otherwise have remained a fringe phenomenon for the rest of the world, was transformed into a global news event.

NO LOOKING BACK

After that there was no looking back. If the organisers assembled former beauty queens at a genteel luncheon to refute allegations against the event, some of the opponents got animals on their side, with monkeys, donkeys and dogs displaying dissenting slogans slung around their necks. If the organisers tried to tug at public heartstrings by arranging for the contestants to mingle with children with cerebral palsy in the presence of the media [the Spastics Society of India was to be the main beneficiary of their largesse], their opponents were able to muster disabled persons, including children, to demonstrate against what they claimed was the misuse of the handicapped to promote a profit-making enterprise.

Then there were the guerilla attacks, two of which vandalised the wrong targets — a business centre which had housed the local office of the Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited (ABCL) till it had moved out a month earlier and the showroom of Godrej Appliances (when the

main sponsor of the event was Godrej Soaps). After a minor bomb blast outside the Chinnaswamy stadium, the chosen venue of the pageant, security was beefed up to such an extent that the whole business began to seem like a bad dream. To add to the black comedy, an anonymous outfit called the Indian Tigers, whose antecedents remain a mystery, joined the ranks of the violence-prone sections of the opposition.

And, whenever there was a dull moment, MJ was around to pep things up with quotable quotes from its president, K.N. Sashikala. One example: "Wearing a bikini is an offence under Section 292 of the Indian Penal Code as it amounts to indecent exposure."

It was quite clear that the campaign strategies employed by both the organisers and some of their opponents in the run-up to the pageant were designed with an eye on the media, particularly the camera. Fortunately or unfortunately— depending on one's viewpoint — the saner sections of the opposition did not tailor their events to suit the media's hunger for drama and, above all, images. As a result, their events and arguments received scant media attention and, therefore, remained largely unknown to the general public.

MEDIA FLAWS

To make matters worse, the media did little to distinguish between the various shades of opinion represented by different sections of the opposition. For instance, MJ and Mahila Sangarsha Okkoota —, a coalition of progressive women's organisations in Karnataka, both of which opposed the pageant, had widely differing objections to the event.

In fact, the latter took pains to distance itself from the conservative forces [with which the MJ was clearly associated] who had appointed themselves guardians of a mythical, homogenised "Indian culture" that that were apparently prepared to fight in the streets and even die to defend. Feminists know only too well that, just a few years ago, some of these very forces had come out in equally militant support of "sati," again in the name of Indian culture and tradition.

Yet, with MJ getting wide media coverage and the progressive groups hardly any, the former's focus on "vulgarity" and "obscenity" came to be wrongly regarded as the primary argument of women who disapproved of the pageant. What's more, this stance was easily dismissed with references to the cheesecake routinely tolerated in popular Indian cinema.

Similarly, since the broader coalition

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of progressive groups, including some women's organisations, focussed attention on the Miss World pageant as a symbol of the neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism promoted by the path of economic liberalisation and globalisation taken by India over the past few years, as well as on the transnational business interests behind such events, the media took the easy route of classifying the opposition as either "right" or "left." This obscured the fact that culture and economics were not the only issues involved.

SERIOUS CONCERNS NEGLECTED

In fact, the media paid little heed to other serious concerns, such as the spread of the beauty myth and the growth of the beauty cult within the country since Sushmita Sen and

news paper-reading, television-watching citizen. For instance, there was hardly any reference to the fact that protests against beauty contests are neither new nor indigenous and that it is chiefly thanks to earlier opposition and growing public indifference to such contests in North America and Europe that the international pageants have been moved to other continents.

Instead, the media did much to promote the idea that the location of the Miss World pageant in India was an honour bestowed on the country, a sign that the nation had finally arrived on the global stage, and so on. They did not bother to inquire into the puzzling question of why the decision to hold the event here was taken at the last minute [such international events are custom arily planned at least a year in advance] or

to highlight the fact that the three-month lead time was hardly enough to promote tourism or develop, or at least improve civic amenities and other infrastructure, or even "showcase" the country no matter what over-enthusiastic politicians said or did.

At least one newspaper, which is closely associated with beauty contests, went out of its way to promote the event, with regular special stories on the front page matched by reams of copy elsewhere. Among the page one story was a report which presented the pro-pageant views of a

carefully selected sample of highprofile, successful women as proof that women opposing the event belonged to a lunatic fringe. A prominently displayed interview with a well-known woman writer highlighted her rather unoriginal view that those against the pageant were just jealous of "the lissome beauties with their long legs."

In the end, the nature of the media coverage generated by the Miss World pageant ensured that, despite all the newsprint and air-time devoted to the controversy surrounding it, the public got little to ponder over. Now that the dust kicked up by the international beauty queens has settled, perhaps it is time for some introspection about how far the event, the campaigns against it and, most importantly, the public's perceptions of both were shaped by the media.



Aishwarya Rai became Miss Universe and Miss World respectively in 1994. A cover story in a leading newsmagazine, headlined "The Beauty Craze," was one of the few to focus public attention on the alarming rise in the incidence of eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, the demand for cosmetic surgery, the public expenditure on beauty products and services, as well as on the growing preoccupation of ever-younger girls with their physical attributes. The impact of the extraordinary media hype surrounding beauty contests, particularly after the Sen-Rai double bill on young girls, their vision of themselves and what they wish to make of their lives does not seem to worry many associated with the media.

Further, the media did little to provide a context that could have made the controversy more intelligible to the average