

WAITING FOR A SEXUAL REVOLUTION

Despite the overexcited media it's not likely to happen any time soon, writes **RASHMEE ROSHAN LALL**



Look and learn: schoolgirls giggle at exhibits in India's first sex museum, in Mumbai

Towards the end of 2004, two Delhi teenagers made headline news in India for unusually risqué reasons. A 17-year-old boy had secretly used his camera phone to film his 16-year-old girlfriend performing an act made famous by Monica Lewinsky in the Oval Office. Both were students at one of the capital's leading secondary schools. The resulting pictures – which were uploaded on to the web by the boy's older friend – transfixed the nation and were soon transferred on to CDs, which sold fast and furiously online. Red-faced custodians of Baazee.com, eBay's Indian subsidiary, were questioned and the Indian-American manager was arrested. Both teenagers were expelled from school, the girl cast into deep disgrace.

India was suddenly face to face with something it had never dared admit to itself before – that its young people are doing “it”, and that sometimes they do it riotously, daringly, in full view of a watching world. It was a sordid but sober reckoning for a country that still tremulously awaits the sexual revolution, its very own Summer of Love, nearly 40 years after much of the western world.

Sex is everywhere in India: on roadside hoardings, on the big screen, in newspaper adverts. Skirts have got shorter, and home-grown television shows and commercials more daring and suggestive. The thriving black market in pornography has inched sideways and into full view, and media agony aunts now boldly discuss that forbidden subject – the female orgasm. Divorce is more common: almost every urban Indian claims to know someone who knows someone else with a failed marriage. Urban Indians laughingly describe SMS (mobile text-messaging) as an abbreviation for “some more sex” because “textual intercourse” has become the norm. In the Durex Global Sex Survey 2005, less than half the Indians surveyed (49 per cent) believed abstaining from sex before marriage should be a priority.

Yet the apparent new openness must be seen alongside a raft of stark statistics. An estimated 95 per cent of all Indian marriages are still “arranged”. The “soaring” divorce rates described by an excited media refer to about 11 of every 1,000 Indian marriages. That is considered a giant leap from 7.41 per 1,000 in 1991, but in

Women in India: the good news and the bad

In India, more than anywhere else in the world, women learn early – and learn well – that they cannot have it all. Women have had the vote for 56 years, helped elect India's first female prime minister 40 years ago, and they take the lead – with equal pay – in the boardroom, the civil liberties movement, academia, the liberal arts. But the full picture is less than rosy.

- The sex ratio is skewed against women (933 females per 1,000 males). Researchers in India and Canada recently reported in the *Lancet* that prenatal selection and selective abortion was causing the loss of 500,000 girls a year, or more than ten million “lost” girls over the past two decades. (The Indian

Medical Association disputes these figures)

- Maternal mortality is the second-highest in the world (385-487 per 100,000 live births)
- About 50 per cent of women are illiterate
- Crimes against women are on the rise (there were 6,822 dowry deaths in 2002, rising to 7,026 in 2004)
- The Indian government admits that one in five married women suffers domestic violence (there were 49,237 cases in 2002, rising to 58,121 in 2004)
- Women have never made up more than 10 per cent of the Indian parliament
- A 1996 bill to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the lower house of parliament has yet to be passed

High points for women include:

- India's affirmative action for rural women. In a huge experiment with grass-roots democracy, nearly one million women have entered *panchayats* or village assemblies because of a 14-year-old constitutional amendment that sets aside one-third of all seats for them
- Late last year, parliament amended the Hindu Succession Act to delete a gender-discriminatory clause that barred women from inheriting agricultural land
- In December 2003, a 26-year-old Bengali villager, Shabnam Ara Begum, became India's first female *qazi*, the traditionally male position of Muslim cleric who can officiate at marriages

Rashmee Roshan Lall

real terms, hardly an apocalypse. Attitudes among urban twenty-somethings may appear to be changing: in a recent survey for an authoritative Indian magazine, less than one-third of single women ranked pornography as “something to be condemned” and less than half thought premarital sex was “wrong”. Yet most Indian yuppies are still content with finding a partner chosen by their parents. The new freedom to live and let love in today’s India often goes no further than the “arranged love” marriage – a hybrid in which the family identifies a potential spouse and the prospective couple are allowed to get acquainted through one-to-one meetings before they marry with everyone’s blessings.

Traditional prudery also extends to attitudes towards differing sexual orientations. A few gay nightclubs flourish in Mumbai and Delhi, and some campaigning organisations have started a tentative gay rights movement, but India is still a country where the love that dare not speak its name is well advised to remain silent. Homosexuality is technically still a crime under a 146-year-old statute dating from British times. The punishment for “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” ranges from a “slap on the wrist” to incarceration for life.

Last November, a well-known southern Indian actress, Khushboo, dared to confront the Indian “double standard” by saying publicly that 21st-century educated Indian men should not expect their brides to be virgins. Newspaper surveys indicated that every second young urban woman agreed with her, albeit *sotto voce*. Meanwhile, Khushboo’s defence of the unvirtuous bride caused angry demonstrations on the streets of the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

India’s new permissiveness cohabits with three articles of faith – unshakeable belief in the family unit, undisputed respect for older people and unswerving conviction that sex should be a private matter. The sexual revolution is not likely to happen any time soon.

Rashmee Roshan Lall is the London-based foreign editor of the Times of India

Coconuts and cappuccinos

My friend Priya is 20 and lives in Mumbai. She’s not religious but accompanies her mother to the temple every morning. She wears a vest top to college but covers herself in a jacket when she leaves the house. She attends cookery classes every afternoon to please her parents and sneakily meets her boyfriend every evening. She wants to have a career *and* a boyfriend. Her parents think it’s time for marriage and a family. She needs to make a choice.

Another friend, Rahul, is 24. He wants to study art but is struggling as an accountant in a corporate. He wants to follow his passion for art, but doesn’t want the wife and children his parents expect him to have in the next two years. He needs to make a choice.

India’s youth are confused. Our political leanings are unclear. Our values are torn between traditional and modern. We are defining the country but have yet to define ourselves. We are conquering the world but inside all of us is a conflict between individual choice and collective values, what is or is not part of “our culture”.

Rashmi Bansal, editor of India’s youth magazine *JAM*, categorises Indian young people as coconuts (brown on the outside and white inside) or cappuccinos (white and frothy on top and dark beneath). The former visibly accept traditional Indian fashion, food, music and other paraphernalia but are essentially individuals. They will, for instance, consider premarital sex as a personal decision. The cappuccinos, on the other hand, appear cool, hip and western on the surface but are very conservative beneath. Men of this category will date many girls but marry only a homely girl of their parents’ choice.

Young Indians can be both at different times or simply in between. Many are now choosing their own partners but seeking their parents’ approval before forming any alliance. This new combination of arranged marriage and marrying for love is perhaps the best example of the compromise that young people are reaching.

Neha Bhayana

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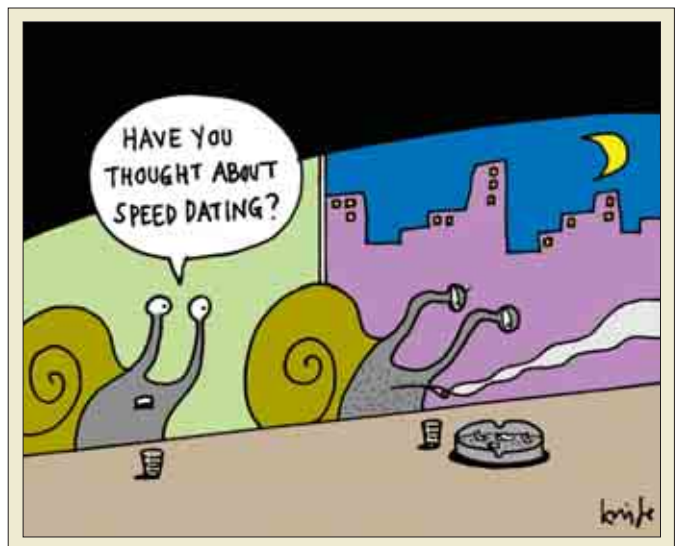
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Psychiatric patients receive significantly fewer greetings cards than other patients, according to Professor Sean Spence and Dr Sudheer Lankappa of Sheffield University. They surveyed cards on the wards of Sheffield’s Royal Hallamshire and Northern General Hospitals as well as all psychiatric wards. Professor Spence said: “Every card denotes a sequence of actions: card selection, writing the message, delivering the card. That such actions occur less often provides an insight into the way the patients are treated by others.”

Sheffield Star (B A Jackson)

PC David Harrison, who went on the raid in Weymouth, Dorset, said it was tricky to get close to the house without being spotted. “So we came up with the idea of dressing up as carol singers. None of us has a particularly good voice. It wasn’t until the third verse that the door opened.”

Guardian (J Webb)



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