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# INDIA TODAY



**EXCLUSIVE SEX SURVEY**

## THE PLEASURE GAP

**DESIRE RUNS HIGH AMONG INDIANS BUT SATISFACTION  
REMAINS LOW. WHY STRESS AND LACK OF INTIMACY  
ARE GETTING IN THE WAY OF FULFILMENT**



Dr. Vishwanath Karad

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**N**umbers and statistics may seem a coy method to access the subject of sexuality, but broad chunks of data can give us vital clues to how society is evolving. The 18th edition of the India Today Sex Survey, the first after a Covid-enforced hiatus of four years, offers us a lens into the state of post-pandemic India in its most intimate realm. The news is not all good. A kind of generalised dissatisfaction is the overwhelming sense one gets from the 3,032 respondents who filled up the questionnaire prepared by poll agency MDRA. Deeper patterns reinforce that conclusion. We are calling it ‘The Pleasure Gap’. If we treat this as a barometer of how happy and balanced we are at the core, it means our indices are in the red.

Sex is a primal need, like air, water and food, so its scarcity is a matter of concern for both individual and collective well-being. Are we living through an undeclared crisis? Counter-intuitive though it may seem, the numbers would suggest so. Take one broad-brush statistic from the survey: over 57 per cent say they “need more sex” than they get. And those who say they are “not at all happy” with their sex life have increased from 5.5 per cent in 2018 to 19 per cent. But this is not just a question of quantity. As we travel deeper into the statistical map, we see frustration is not a mere function of the absence of sex. It’s woven into the very tapestry of human interactions. The question of quality is creeping in.

Some trends apply across the board and capture us as a people caught in transition—half-liberated, half-inhibited. Demonstrating the first part, respondents expectedly reveal more permissive attitudes on certain aspects. Those who have had multiple partners went up from 5 per cent in 2017 to 19 per cent in 2023; those who say yes to one-night stands from 35 per cent to 54 per cent; and teenage sex from 24 per cent in 2018 to 35 per cent in 2023. But this cohabits with conservatism, prudishness and plain awkwardness on aspects like sexual positions or foreplay. Or that favourite of the past that lingers: virginity is still important for 52.2 per cent.

That last one leads us to a vital truth. The Pleasure Gap has a direct correlation with that other one: the Gender Gap. The systemic creation of unfulfilled wants applies more to women. Consider the bald facts. Getting mid-way into the third decade of the 21st century, 45.2 per cent of women still admit to faking orgasms. The awareness of female erogenous zones is poor among both men and women. These statistics may not have been drastically different in more repressed epochs, but that is precisely what is surprising.

Combine these with the varying responses to technology or artefacts, and the trend is revealing. More women than men feel virtual sex can improve the quality of their sex lives. Also, more of them use dating apps to find sexual partners and feel sex gadgets could replace intimacy with a partner and are willing to spend more on them. Any means to expand the ambit of pleasure is good, but this want stems from non-fulfilment in real-life relationships.

There are other pointers to what Amrita Narayanan, in

her column, calls “patriarchal anxiety”. Old feudal attitudes that value virginity have a new-age counterpart. Sex toys remain a taboo, and perhaps women tend to internalise the shame over it more. Over 54 per cent of men say they wouldn’t date a woman who uses sex toys. Around 57 per cent of women reciprocate too. And more women (63.4 per cent) would *not* admit to using one to their friends than those who would (22.1 per cent). More men than women feel a woman using sex toys is worse than a man using them (41.9 per cent against 36.6 per cent). Also, as Narayanan points out, both sides may actually be more comfortable discussing this with the opinion pollster than with each other! “Women are more reluctant to discuss their sexual needs.... Is this reticence a function of women’s shyness in sexual matters?” she asks, and proceeds to embed her answer in the phenomenon of the self-absorbed male. She feels women still tend to accept the centrality of men and the whole drama of sex being written around their perspective, while they “identify more with being pleasing objects”. This internalised denial extends to homosexuality: 40 per cent of those who identify as gays have never had gay sex.



November 11, 2019

**A**ll this is against the larger contradiction that Leeza Mangaldas, India’s foremost sex-positive content creator, points to in her column. Contemporary life creates the illusion of society being awash with a surfeit of sex. A variety of stimuli for pleasure seems to permeate the air: hypersexualised pop culture images, the arrival of sex toys on online shelves, digital access via the profusion of digital apps or modern inventions like phone sex, and online porn that is even easier to reach than the friendly neighbourhood store. But there is a mismatch between impression and reality. While technology is rapidly changing all aspects of our lives, social mores are slower to change, creating an imbalance. The survey numbers capture this gulf between what surrounds us as a loose ambient culture and our hesitant immersion in it. So it’s well to be aware that a gap exists between desire and fulfilment and try and understand why.

At one level, strong residues from an older culture of shame continue to infect our present amidst the bustling super-bazaars of desire. On another, we see the present creating its own distortions. As Mangaldas writes, “Learning about sex from mainstream internet porn is like learning how to drive by watching *The Fast and the Furious*.” Sex education exists mainly as a joke in the country, and this is the exact age when it is most needed. Conversations about sexuality need to be more open at the social level, self-affirming at the individual level and, most importantly, reciprocal between partners. Hope this special issue helps open the curtains, and lets in some light.

(Aroon Purie)

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Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

INDIA TODAY SEX SURVEY

## THE PLEASURE GAP

Stress, stigma and ignorance are robbing Indians of joy in their sex lives, leaving them in a miasma of unfulfilled desire

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**KNIVES OUT**

Waris Punjab De  
chief Amritpal Singh

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH

PUNJAB

## Cracks in the Crackdown

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

If at all there was a trail, it seemed to consist of taunts coming from the fugitive. By March 29 evening, there had been two in succession. The endgame for Khalistani propagandist Amritpal Singh was still an open script at that stage—arrest, surrender, anything was possible—but for now it was showing up one of the biggest manhunts of recent times as a shambolic chase after shadows. On March 27, a selfie of Amritpal and aide Papanpreet Singh popped up on social media platforms. With Ray-Ban aviators, a sweatshirt and a loosely tied maroon turban, it was

an insouciant contrast from his usual sombre attire. Sipping on cans of energy drinks, the duo looked fairly unconcerned that they were No. 1 on Punjab Police's most wanted list, with the whole might of the force—and indeed, of central investigation agencies—hot on his heels. Two days later, he scaled up. It was a video this time, mocking the cops for not arresting him at his home, comparing the crackdown on his Waris Punjab De group as an atrocity against the entire Sikh community, and responding to the Akal Takht jathedar's appeal and asking that he convene

a *sarbat khalsa*—a convention of all Sikh sects—on April 13, Baisakhi day. Amritpal showed no intent of surrender. That seemed to cock a snook at the hints police officers had been putting out all day: that it could happen any time, and he was merely negotiating terms.

To be sure, no one knows when exactly the selfie was taken, or who was putting out the video. Whatever information was there was a patchwork of shards: the hazy CCTV footage cops had been leaking, claiming various sightings of Amritpal, or news that central agencies had shared details of

the duo with authorities in Nepal, voicing concerns that Amritpal had crossed the borders and could be attempting to flee to the UK from Kathmandu.

The crackdown had started on March 18, a day after Amritsar wound up some G-20 meetings. Amritpal and his associates were slapped with serious charges under the National Security Act, including spreading disharmony, attempt to murder and attacking police personnel. Punjab Police started off on a high thereafter by claiming to dismantle the separatist network “without firing a bullet”, but with Amritpal and his pal still at large, the pressure on the force and acting DGP Gaurav Yadav was beginning to tell.

And pressure has been mounting on all sides. On March 27, the head priest of the supreme Sikh council—Akal Takht jathedar Giani Harpreet Singh—issued an ultimatum warning the Punjab government that matters could escalate if every Sikh youth arrested in the case was not released immediately. On the political side, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) chief Sukhbir Badal, on a low since his party’s assembly poll decimation, has also been promising the detainees legal help. This segued right into an emotive issue that had already been simmering: that of the ‘Bandi Singhs’, or Sikh convicts from older terror-related cases. In fact, Amritpal hit the front pages in late February extending that very line of protest—controversially laying siege to a police station in Ajnala to get one of his aides, a kidnapping accused, released. The ensuing clashes, the force’s inability to retaliate, Amritpal’s aide being freed, none of it showed the cops in good light.

**O**n March 2, the Bhagwant Mann-led state government was nudged by Union home minister Amit Shah to take action. The Centre moved 18 contingents (19,000 personnel) of the anti-riot Rapid Action Force (RAF) and paramilitary forces to Punjab. The Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), National Investigation Agency (NIA) and Intelligence Bureau (IB) provided intel support. Then started the chase after a chimera. Conspiracy theorists say the cops never had any intention of arresting

Amritpal, fearing that would make him a “bigger public figure”. A top cop, denying that, says intelligence spooks were tailing him and the police had laid a trap near Mehatpur village in Jalandhar where he had a preaching programme. Amritpal apparently gave them the slip, with the CCTV footage suggesting he had used link roads instead of highways to escape to Haryana, UP and maybe Nepal. But when the internet was blocked for three days in Punjab, why were the state bor-



### IMAGES OF AMRITPAL HAVE BEEN LEAKED REGULARLY ON SOCIAL MEDIA SINCE THE CHASE BEGAN

ders not sealed? The authorities have no answer. Meanwhile, in lightning raids, 353 people across Punjab were detained for questioning—after universal flak, 197 of them have since been released.

Perhaps just as well, because of the impression it could create—erroneously—that he had the whole landscape backing him. Amritpal’s emergence, rise and now flight have been more of a social media phenomenon than anything else. A former top cop in Punjab, who tracks his social media posts, told INDIA TODAY that most of his followers were overseas. The major reactions to the crackdown too came from pro-Khalistan activists in the UK, US, Canada and Australia. Security agencies claim Amritpal

was trained by a UK-based Khalistan activist, Avtar Singh Khanda, before he arrived in India last August. On March 9, his social media manager, Gurinderpal Aujala, was nabbed at Amritsar airport—he too was apparently in touch with Khanda. The latter, who has “sought asylum” in the UK, is stated to be behind the violence at the Indian consulate in London on March 19, over which the two countries got into a diplomatic tiff, with India withdrawing security at the British mission in Delhi in a tit-for-tat move.

Of Amritpal’s two mentors in India, Kulwant Singh Rauke, a known radical, has been arrested while Papanpreet is on the run with him. A cashier at the Punjab State Power Corporation, Kulwant has been charged under the NSA and shifted to the high-security Dibrugarh central jail in Assam. Punjab Police has slapped the NSA on seven people and shifted five of them to Dibrugarh jail. This includes Amritpal’s uncle Harjeet Singh, actor-turned-Waris financier Daljit Singh Kalsi, Bhagwant ‘Pradhanmantri’ Bajeka, and close aides Bhagwant Singh and Gurmeet Singh. ‘Pradhanmantri’ is a social media phenomenon, though his family claims he’s not “fit mentally”. Even the jathedar criticised the slapping of NSA on him. “If the nation’s security can be threatened by characters like Bajeka...”, he left the sentence hanging.

But authorities say Amritpal was creating a private militia, stockpiling weapons, even preparing suicide bombers—and had a firing range to train those he was recruiting to the ‘Anandpur Khalsa Force’ from among youth turning up at a deaddiction camp he ran in his village Jallapur Khera. One of those, liquor smuggler Tejinder Gill or Gorkha Baba, who was nabbed from Khanna on March 25, is Exhibit A and is apparently singing like a canary. Dozens of raids so far have unearthed just 10 weapons, though. That too of .315 and .32 bore, hardly a cache to wage war against the state. Indeed, many theories floated by officials don’t entirely add up. Amritpal’s counsel has even filed a habeas corpus plea, saying the whole chase is a sham and he has been in illegal custody since March 18. The truth, for sure, was a fugitive as of mid-week. ■

# THE RETURN OF COVID?



MANISH RAJPUT

**LOOMING THREAT**  
A person getting tested for Covid-19

By Sonali Acharjee

**J**ust over two months ago, on January 17, India had logged the lowest-ever number of daily Covid-19 infections since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. For many, this signalled the end of the pandemic after three long, challenging years. That precious end, however, now seems debatable, with the virus again sweeping through India on the back of a new variant: the XBB.1.16, of which the country has recorded over 600 cases so far. The total Covid-19 caseload has risen sharply: on March 29, India saw a single-day rise of 2,151 cases, the highest in five months. Active cases on the same day stood at 11,903, the highest in over four months. The average daily cases recorded in the week

## WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

➤ India has reported over 600 cases of the XBB.1.16 variant so far, per latest INSACOG data

➤ On March 29, India saw a single-day rise of 2,151 cases, the highest in five months

➤ Active cases as of March 29 stood at 11,903, the highest in over four months

➤ As of March 27, as many as 44 districts in 18 states and UTs had a weekly test positivity rate of 10 per cent or more, higher than the WHO-prescribed limit of 5 per cent

ending March 23 was 966, thrice the daily average of 313 seen in the week ending March 3. More worryingly, in the week ending March 27, as many as 44 districts across 18 states and UTs had a weekly test positivity rate (TPR) of 10 per cent or more, double the World Health Organization's (WHO) prescribed limit of 5 per cent. Also, there were 72 districts across 16 states and UTs where the TPR was 5-10 per cent, up from 15 (across eight states) around two weeks ago. The figures have sent alarm bells ringing across the country.

"There is no room for complacency. We are closely assessing the situation and are vigilant," says N.K. Arora, chairman of the Indian SARS-CoV-2 Genomics Consortium (INSACOG). On March 27, the Centre also held a meeting with states to review preparedness and asked authorities to focus on increasing genomic surveillance and testing, as well as on ensuring that there are enough beds in hospitals should India see a massive wave again.

But, there's reason to be optimistic. Though the XBB.1.16, a recombinant of Omicron's BA.2.10.1 and BA.2.75 sub-variants, is highly contagious—the total number of XBB.1.16 cases reported by INSACOG rose from 349 on March 23 to 610 in less than a week—most infections, so far, have been manageable. Also, while the XBB, and another sub-variant, the XBB 1.5, which have been around since October last year, caused massive surges in the US, Singapore and Europe, they didn't have a major impact on the Indian population. There's a reason for it. "Indians have hybrid immunity, which is very effective," says noted virologist Dr Gagandeep Kang. "We have naturally-acquired immunity gained through infection in the past, as well as vaccine immunity. Small variations in daily numbers is not something to be alarmed by," she says.

Dr Vikas Deswal, a senior consultant for internal medicine at Medanta, Gurugram, is of a similar opinion: “The XBB.1.16 variant is unlikely to cause severe disease in patients who are vaccinated or who do not have any other comorbidities.”

In fact, while the constantly mutating Omicron may continue to give rise to new sub-variants that can infect better, they are unlikely to be as severe as the Delta variant, which killed lakhs of people in 2021, says Rakesh Mishra, director of the Tata Institute for Genetics and Society. “The virus mutates to survive. Over time, it’ll start focusing on mutations that allow it to infect and replicate continuously. Causing more severe symptoms is actually not in the best interest of the virus’s survival plan.”

Thus, virologists and doctors aren’t overly concerned for now. In the capital, for instance, most hospital beds remain empty, even though five districts have reported a TPR of over 10 per cent—South (15.8%), East (15.2%), North-East (13.6%), Central (10.4%) and South-East (10.2%). As of March 27, there were only two patients in the ward of the Lok Nayak Jai Prakash Narayan (LNJP) Hospital, Delhi’s largest Covid-19 facility. “We are not seeing any uptick in the number of patients who need to be admitted. Those who do come in reporting symptoms usually have mild infection,” says Dr Suresh Kumar, medical director, LNJP hospital.

The variant is also not causing any new or unusual symptoms, and most people experience only fever, cough, sore throat and runny nose. And so, treatment, too, remains the same. “Mild Covid-19 cases are to be managed at home and care is entirely symptomatic. Patients must self-isolate, stay hydrated, take rest, and use paracetamol for fever and body-aches. There is no role for any antibiotics or antivirals at this stage, and it’s only for people who are at high risk of developing complications or severe disease that doctors can consider antiviral medications,” says Dr Sandeep Budhiraja, internal medicine specialist and medical director of Max Healthcare.

This, however, does not mean that people can let their guard down. The elderly and those with comorbidities or immunocompromising issues must remain careful, for they are at a greater risk of getting infected as well as developing serious illness. “Covid-appropriate behaviour must be reinforced. Anybody who is symptomatic of disease with flu-like symp-

toms should isolate and wear a mask, caregivers and other members who are exposed to this person should wear masks, people should avoid crowded places, should wash hands frequently, and follow coughing and sneezing etiquettes,” says Dr Budhiraja. It is also important to understand that

prior infection and being fully vaccinated do not mean that one won’t get infected again. “The risk of infection is still there, but the severity of disease is less. There is no need to take an extra dose of a Covid-19 vaccine as of now, but those who have not yet taken their three doses must get vaccinated,” says Dr Arora.

What experts mean is that though things are currently under control, India is not completely out of the woods yet. Letting the virus run wild and unchecked through the population not only poses a threat to vulnerable groups but also raises the chances of new variants coming up. And with a virus that has proven to be as unpredictable as the SARS-CoV-2, it’s best not to take chances. ■

**THOUGH THE XBB.1.16 IS CAUSING ONLY MILD SYMPTOMS IN MOST PEOPLE, THE ELDERLY AND THOSE WITH COMORBIDITIES MUST BE CAREFUL**

Just the other day, Basavaraj Bommai had made a conspicuous break from convention. After he convened a full cabinet meet on March 24, Karnataka’s chief minister chose to brief the press himself, instead of deputing a senior minister. The proactive urgency explained itself within days, as May 10 was declared as the date for assembly polls. In effect, that was his last pre-poll cabinet meet—and the agenda, brimful with 119 items, indeed matched up to the occasion. Two moves, in particular, were loaded—the allocation of internal quotas for various sub-groups in the Scheduled Castes (SC) list, and the increase in Other Backward Classes (OBC) reservation for the two key caste groups in the state, Veerashaiva-Lingayats and Vokkaligas. Especially how the space for the latter was created.

Taking up these matters, the CM noted, had been akin to ‘stirring up a hornet’s nest’. “For 2-3 decades, governments kept putting things off. There had been no effort to find solutions,” he said. But the solution that the BJP came up with was essentially to take Muslims out of backward classes reservation, thereby freeing up a 4 per cent quota which would then be equally redistributed among the Lingayats and Vokkaligas.

The move immediately came in for sharp criticism from various quarters and the two main opposition parties, the Congress and Janata Dal (Secular), which called it an election gimmick to polarise communities. It was the second time in four months that the Bommai government was resorting to a rejig of OBC reservations—in December, amid agitations by the Panchamashali sub-sect of the Lingayat community seeking a 15 per cent quota, the government had created two new slabs to accommodate both Lingayats and Vokkaligas, assuring that they could claim the spillover surplus from the 10 per cent reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS).

Now, the government has changed tack and proposes to shift Muslims—who come under Category II(b) with 4 per cent reservation—to the EWS group, reasoning that there is no constitutional provision for reservation for religious minorities. Bommai described it as



## GEARING UP

Union home minister Amit Shah at a function with CM Bommali in Bengaluru, March 26, where he defended the exclusion of Muslims from OBC quota

## KARNATAKA

# PERCENTAGE POLITICS

a 'proactive' step, pointing to how reservation for religious minorities in Andhra Pradesh was challenged in court and struck down. Since eligibility criteria such as income apply to both the OBC and EWS categories, there will be no change for Muslims in shifting from II(b), he reasoned. "In fact, from 4 per cent, without any change of condition, they will be going into a 10 per cent pool," the CM said.

"It is a clear eyewash. There is no legal sanctity for all this," says C.S.

Dwarakanath, a former chairman of the Karnataka Backward Classes Commission, explaining that any changes to the OBC list must be done on the basis of a report by the commission, relying on empirical evidence. So far, the government is only citing an interim report. "If they shift the Muslims to EWS, then what about the other communities which are in the backward classes list like Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists?" asks Dwarakanath.

On March 26, Union home minister Amit Shah congratulated the Karnataka government for doing away with the reservation on religious grounds, which he said had been brought in by previous governments "greedy for a vote bank". But experts point out that Karnataka's pioneering steps in affirmative action for various groups including Muslims—dating back over a century to the Mysore princely state—were based on social backwardness. The current move is "most unscientific,"

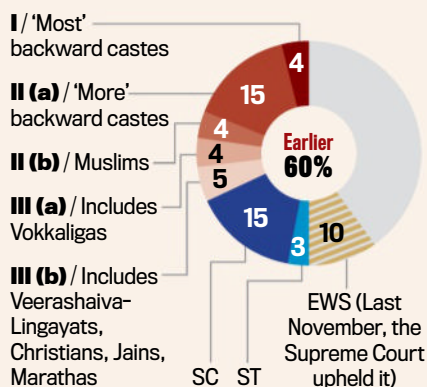
says Prof. S. Japhet of the National Law School of India University, Bengaluru. Where is the "data to show that Muslims have socially or economically improved" to be categorised as EWS, he asks.

"Will this stand in court? Why are you pitting communities against each other?" asked C.M. Ibrahim, state president of the Janata Dal (Secular), at a rally on March 26, pointing out that the II(b) category was created in 1994 when H.D. Deve Gowda was chief minister. "We are not interested in the 4 per cent quota. The Lingayats and Vokkaligas are not beggars," says Karnataka Congress president D.K. Shivakumar, vowing to scrap the move if voted to power.

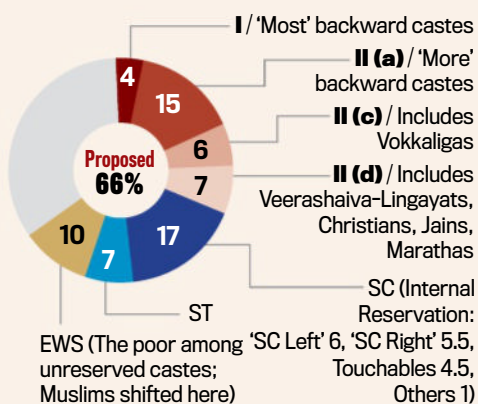
The BJP, meanwhile, is hoping the reservation rearrangement will give it an edge in the coming elections. However, with the internal reservations for SC groups sparking off protests against the party in Shivamogga and Bagalkot this week, especially by the Banjara community, the key question is whether the gambit will pay off. ■

## RIISING RESERVATIONS

### OBC category/castes



(Figures in percentage)



## BOOKS

# A Life in Diplomacy

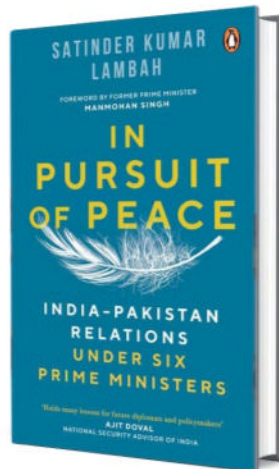
By T.C.A Raghavan

**M**uch of the late S.K. Lambah's half-century-long sojourn in diplomacy had to do with Pakistan. Even without the Pakistan interface, his would have been a most distinguished career, serving as he did as ambassador to Germany and Russia. Yet, it was diplomacy with Pakistan that will constitute his legacy.

In this book, Lambah provides in part a historical recap of Pakistan's evolution, an anecdotal journey of his own engagement with it, and finally a reflection on the value of diplomacy as an instrument in dealing with our most recalcitrant of neighbours. There is, in addition, a valuable chapter on post-9/11 Afghanistan, where Lambah played a major role both in ensuring that the Indian voice was heard and in bringing about a settlement on which the new architecture of governance was constructed by the US.

Lambah's interface with Pakistan began with its dissolution in 1971; he was in Dacca in January 1972 as part of the small diplomatic mission established in the immediate aftermath of the emergence of Bangladesh. A few years later, he was in Islamabad for a long stint as India's deputy high commissioner. In the 1980s, he headed the Pakistan-Afghanistan-Iran desk in the ministry of external affairs and then, in the 1990s, he was back in Islamabad as High Commissioner.

Yet, this long exposure had a prehistory. This was a familial background in pre-1947 Peshawar and Lahore: both he and his wife came from prominent families of these cities. This gave him an access that deepened his insights, including into the mindset of his interlocutors and of Pakistan's ruling elite. Through this prism, these memoirs take us through half a century of the



**IN PURSUIT OF PEACE**  
By S.K. Lambah  
PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE  
₹799; 384 pages

India-Pakistan roller-coaster of terrorist attacks, hijackings, near-conflict situations and crisis management, but also attempts at constructive diplomacy. This is a journey through military dictators, generals and politicians and through the tenures of Indian prime ministers from Indira Gandhi onwards. Lambah argues that the Prime Minister of India has the strongest impact in determining the mould of this fraught relationship, because it's "difficult to identify and justify a particular course of action from a mere examination of the material at hand"; and "bureaucratic and political processes tend to favour safe options and status quo". It's the top-down decision that makes a difference as "the wheels are set in motion and the choreogra-

phy works itself out".

After his retirement as Indian ambassador in Moscow in 2001, Lambah was appointed as Special Envoy for Afghanistan by Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee. With the change in government in 2004, PM Manmohan Singh made him the Special Envoy for Pakistan. For over a decade, he was the "back channel"—negotiating with Pakistani counterparts the contours of a non-territorial 'solution' to Jammu and Kashmir that would enable both parties to claim that an honourable settlement had been reached. The book provides a great deal of granular and substantial detail of that process and for that alone would be a valuable addition to the existing literature on Indian diplomacy during that time. Though it failed because the dynamics of India-Pakistan relations changed, the progress it made remains a template.

Lambah's reflections remain clear-sighted about the challenges: "a fundamental change in attitude towards bilateral issues is unlikely to occur in the near future, expectations have therefore to be pegged at a realistic level". An intimate knowledge of Pakistan permeates the book—"Like radicalised people elsewhere, Pakistanis tend to view differences through the prism of religious dogma." He is also perceptive about the role of external powers—"As major powers realised Pakistan's extreme predilections and weakness, unfortunately Kashmir came to be regarded as a sort of quarry with which Pakistan's behaviour, responses and actions could be altered." However, Lambah's approach throughout also saw the big picture and recognised that "memories should not become perpetual shackles on shaping our future" and that "no country's destiny is immune from its relationship with neighbours".

Such dilemmas constitute the core of diplomacy with Pakistan and make the book invaluable for South Asia experts and general readers alike. ■

**S.K. Lambah's  
reflections on the  
challenges in India-  
Pakistan diplomacy  
remain clear-sighted**

T.C.A. Raghavan is a  
former high commissioner  
to Pakistan





Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

## GLASSHOUSE

# A MATTER OF DEGREE

Once it was pedigree, now it's about educational degrees. Political rivals have always questioned Prime Minister Narendra Modi's post-graduate degree despite a mention in his election affidavit. Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, an IIT graduate himself, is only the most recent to call him 12th-pass and even "illiterate". Meanwhile, the BJP isn't done with Rahul Gandhi. When sister Priyanka defended him after his Lok Sabha disqualification, saying the BJP called him Pappu even though he has degrees from Harvard and Cambridge, BJP IT cell head Amit Malviya was quick to ask for proof of the former since Rahul's affidavits don't mention it. Priyanka is partially correct. Rahul was at Harvard briefly, but earned his BA degree at Rollins College, Florida. His affidavit also mentions an M.Phil. degree from Trinity College, University of Cambridge.



## AIDE OF NO USE

Sign of things to come? TDP cadre has been feeling enthused after the party won four Andhra Pradesh Legislative Council seats and four MLAs of the ruling YSR Congress cross-voted. Chief Minister **Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy** may retain a firm grip on the party and government, but cracks are starting to appear. Many blame Sajjala Ramakrishna Reddy, the CM's political advisor, for bringing the party to this pass and want him removed. A one-man show so far, Reddy will finally have to contend with dissent.

## Getting Filmy



As he rose to speak in the Bihar assembly on March 23, Bihar deputy chief minister **Tejashwi Yadav** drew a rather stretched analogy with the film *Karan Arjun* to take a dig at Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the film, mother Durga's prayers are answered as her slain sons return in reincarnated avatars. And it was because "*Ganga maiyya ne bulaya hai*", the PM had said, that he contested from Varanasi. But Bihar too is situated on the Ganga, Yadav said. Has Ganga Maiyya stopped calling her son now? *Na beta aaya, na achhe din laya*, Yadav quipped, giving a glimpse of some of the wit he may have inherited from father Lalu Prasad.

## State as Matchmaker?



They may exchange heated arguments as political adversaries but occasionally there is light-hearted banter too. As in the Maharashtra legislature recently when Maharashtra deputy chief minister **Devendra Fadnavis** said that the state government was willing to take responsibility for the marriage of Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) leader **Aaditya Thackeray**, the bachelor boy retorted with a smile: "Is this a *rajkiya dhamki* (threat of a political nature)?" The exchange left the house in splits.

## SURPRISE SPREE

Raids or visits, the Gujarat government's conducting them with surprise. State home minister **Harsh Sanghavi** recently led a surprise raid on all the state's central and sub-jails. Personally supervising the operation from a control room through multiple CCTV cameras, the raid involving 1,700 cops resulted in the seizure of weapons, narcotics and cellphones. Earlier, CM Bhupendra Patel paid surprise visits to the villages in Mansa taluka near Gandhinagar, the slums of Vadodara, the Directorate of Pension & Provident Fund in Gandhinagar and the SP office in Ahmedabad Rural. Government officials are on high alert, not knowing when they'll be taken by surprise.





THE BIG STORY | **RAHUL GANDHI**

# THE POLITICS OF DISQUALIFICATION

HE MAY HAVE BEEN BLINDSIDED BY THE LATEST MOVE FROM THE SAFFRON CAMP, BUT THE CONGRESS SCION COULD **TURN IT TO HIS ADVANTAGE TO UNITE THE OPPOSITION** AND BUILD A STRONG, SUSTAINED NARRATIVE

**By Kaushik Deka**

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**PRESSING ON**  
Rahul  
addresses the  
media at the  
Congress HQ,  
Mar. 25

Photograph by CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

**L**ittle could Congress leader Rahul Gandhi have known that the ordinance he tore up so dramatically in September 2013 would come back to bite him 10 years down the line. That ordinance, passed by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government, had sought to help lawmakers convicted for criminal offences and sentenced to at least two years in prison avoid immediate disqualification from Parliament or state assemblies.

At a press conference, Rahul had overturned his own government's legislation in public, calling it "nonsense". Two years later, he moved the Supreme Court seeking a decriminalisation of the act of defamation. He had reason to worry. Till 2014, he had no criminal cases against him, but his election

affidavit in 2019 showed six criminal cases against him, mostly related to defamation. His plea was rejected.

Rahul had also, at the 85th plenary of the Congress in Raipur in Chhattisgarh this February, made an emotional pitch saying how he had been homeless since childhood, owning no house except the official bungalows allotted to him and his family.

Fate now seems to have caught up with him in a multitude of ironies. On March 23, a district court in Surat pronounced Rahul guilty of defamation for an election speech he had made in 2019 where he asked, "How come all thieves have the surname Modi?", and proceeded to name fugitive diamondaire Nirav Modi, controversial cricket administrator Lalit Modi and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Saying that he could have named others such as Vijay Mallya or Mehul Choksi instead of all Modis, the court sentenced him to two years in prison. The complaint was lodged by BJP MLA, ex-Gujarat minister and lawyer Purnesh Modi on the grounds that Rahul's remark was a smear against all those who share the Modi surname.

No sooner was the conviction handed to Rahul, with bail for 30 days to allow him to file an appeal, than the Lok Sabha secretariat issued a notification disqualifying the Wayanad MP from its membership for eight years as per law. A few days later, Rahul was asked to vacate the official bungalow at 12, Tughlaq Lane, allotted to him as MP.

The twin blows have left Rahul hunting not just for a new home but also a concerted strategy to chart out a path for political revival, for himself and his party.

Many in the Congress see it as a blessing in disguise. It gives the party a chance to project Rahul as a martyr, the victim of an "attack by the BJP dispensation", and is likely to enthuse party cadre in the run-up to the 2024 general election. Riding so far on the momentum provided by the Bharat Jodo Yatra and speeches abroad, this can serve as additional ballast for the party's campaign in the six assembly elections set to take place this year. Positive outcomes in these electoral outings are likely to set the tone for the general election next year and a sustained and aggressive campaign is a must for the party to get there.

The first test, of course, will take place in the very state where Rahul made the controversial speech—Karnataka. The Congress hopes to deploy Rahul's victimhood as an effective plank against the ruling BJP, which is reportedly battling anti-incumbency in the state. In a meeting held to strategise on the Congress response to Rahul's disqualification, party general secretary Priyanka Gandhi Vadra talked about how victory in the upcoming Karnataka polls could be the best response to the blow the BJP has inflicted. Even BJP leader Ravi Shankar Prasad acknowledged the chance the episode has handed the Congress when he said that Rahul Gandhi will now try to emerge a "martyr"

# WILL THE VERDICT STAND?

Rahul Gandhi's dismissal of the UPA ordinance protecting lawmakers from disqualification and failed petition to decriminalise defamation have returned to haunt him, but the law may offer some hope yet

**O**n March 23, the Surat district court found Congress leader Rahul Gandhi guilty in a 2019 criminal defamation case under Sections 499 (defamation) and 500 (punishment for defamation) of the IPC and sentenced him to two years in jail, the highest penalty for a conviction under these charges. He was granted bail and the sentence suspended for 30 days to allow an appeal. The case followed a plaint by BJP MLA Purnesh Modi, who said Rahul's remarks defamed the "Modi community" as a whole.

Defamation is the act of injuring another person's character, reputation or fame by publishing false or malicious statements. In India, defamation can be both a civil as well as a criminal offence. In civil defamation, the defamed can move court seeking damages in the form of monetary compensation. There is no jail sentence involved. In criminal defamation, governed by the IPC, the accused can face up to two years' imprisonment or a fine or both. IPC Sec. 499 lays down the definition of defamation and Sec. 500 lays down the punishment for criminal defamation.

In the case against Rahul, the complaint was based on the second explanation to Sec. 499, which reads:

"It may amount to defamation to make an imputation concerning a company or an association or collection of persons as such." Legal experts are now raising the question—can all people with the Modi surname qualify to be counted as a "collection of persons"? In India, the

**In 2018, the SC held that once a conviction has been stayed during the pendency of an appeal, the disqualification is no longer valid**

Modi surname is used across religions (Hindu and Parsi), communities (upper caste and OBCs) and geography. Supreme Court lawyer Santosh Hegde says people with a common surname do not form a "collection of persons" as they are not a homogeneous company or association of the type required under Explanation 2 of Section 499.

In May 2016, the apex court had upheld the constitutional validity of the penal laws on defamation, saying "reputation of one cannot be allowed to be crucified at the altar of the other's right of free speech". One of the petitioners against the law was Rahul himself.

Following his conviction, Rahul has been disqualified as a member of Parliament. Clause (3) of Section 8 of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, says if a member of a legislature is convicted of a criminal offence and sentenced to at least two years in jail, he or she will be disqualified from the date of conviction and continue to be so for six years from the release date.

However, Section 8(4) of the RPA says that disqualification takes effect only "after three months have elapsed" from the date of conviction and if the MP or MLA has appealed against it in a higher court during that interregnum. However, in *Lily Thomas vs Union of India* in 2013, the SC declared Section 8(4) of the RPA unconstitutional on the ground that Parliament had no power to enact such an exemption for sitting members. The judg-

ment, in effect, made instant disqualification of a legislator possible as soon as he or she is convicted.

In 2013, the United Progressive Alliance government had tried to circumvent the Lily Thomas ruling by enacting an ordinance nullifying immediate disqualification on conviction. Ironically, Rahul tore up a copy of the ordinance at a press conference to express his displeasure with it. The government later withdrew the ordinance. Following Rahul's disqualification, a Kerala-based social activist has filed a petition in the SC challenging the constitutional validity of Section 8(3) of the RPA that provides for automatic

disqualification. "If a person is acquitted after the appeal, what happens to the lost period? If disqualification happens immediately, what is the point of the appeal? The first verdict becomes the final verdict. That is the crux of our appeal," says lawyer Deepak Prakash, who is representing petitioner Aabha Muralidharan.

In 2018, the Supreme Court held that once a conviction has been stayed during the pendency of an appeal, the disqualification ceases to be in effect. Satya Narayan Sahu, former joint secretary of Rajya Sabha, says that anomalies in the RPA and Supreme Court rulings have left serious loopholes. In January this year, the Lok Sabha MP from Lakshadweep, Mohammad Faizal, was disqualified after being sentenced to 10 years' imprisonment by a district court in an attempt-to-murder case. The Lok Sabha Ethics Committee stripped Faizal of his membership from the date of his conviction, January 11. On January 18, the Election Commission also announced byelections to the vacant Lakshadweep Lok Sabha seat. However, on January 25, the Kerala High Court suspended Faizal's conviction, following which the EC cancelled the bypoll. When Faizal was not automatically reinstated as an MP, following suspension of his conviction, he moved the Supreme Court. On March 29, shortly before the top court was set to hear his petition, his Lok Sabha membership was reinstated.

In Rahul's case, if he gets a stay after six months and by then a new member is elected from his constituency Wayanad, what will happen to the newly elected MP from Wayanad? Will Rahul again become MP from Wayanad? "Nobody has answers to these questions," says Sahu, a view seconded by constitutional expert Subhash Kashyap. ■

# ROLL OF DISHONOUR

More than 30 legislators have been disqualified after being convicted in a criminal case. Here are some of the prominent names



## INDIRA GANDHI

**Year:** June 1975; **Party:** Congress

**Constituency:** Lok Sabha MP from Rae Bareilly, UP

**Reason:** The Allahabad HC convicted the then PM of electoral malpractices and debarred her from holding any elected post for six years. The SC overturned her conviction on Nov. 7, 1975



## LALU PRASAD

**Year:** Sept. 2013

**Party:** RJD

**Constituency:** Lok Sabha MP from Saran, Bihar

**Reason:** Convicted in the fodder scam case, gets five-year jail term



## RASHEED MASOOD

**Year:** Sept. 2013

**Party:** Congress

**Constituency:** RS MP from Saharanpur, UP

**Reason:** Convicted in the MBBS seats scam, gets four-year jail term



## J. JAYALALITHAA

**Year:** Sept. 2014

**Party:** AIADMK

**Constituency:** MLA from R.K. Nagar, Tamil Nadu

**Reason:** Gets four years in jail in a disproportionate assets case. Loses CM chair



## KULDEEP SINGH SENGAR

**Year:** Mar. 2020

**Party:** BJP

**Constituency:** MLA from Bangarmau, UP

**Reason:** Convicted in a rape case, sentenced to 10 years in jail



## AZAM KHAN

**Year:** Oct. 2022

**Party:** SP

**Constituency:** MLA from Rampur Sadar, UP

**Reason:** Sentenced to three years in jail in a 2019 hate speech case



## RAHUL GANDHI

**Year:** Mar. 2023

**Party:** Congress

**Constituency:** Lok Sabha MP from Wayanad, Kerala

**Reason:** Sentenced to two years in jail in a criminal defamation case

to gain political mileage in the Karnataka election as “the Congress didn’t show any urgency to get a stay on his conviction to avoid disqualification”. Indeed, in almost a week, the Congress has not approached any higher court seeking relief from the conviction and punishment.

The official line is that the legal team is taking time to translate the court order from Gujarati to English, but several Congress leaders admit in private that they want to prolong the issue to capitalise on public sympathy and turn it into political gain. A legal associate working for social worker Aabha Muralidharan, who has filed a plea in the Supreme Court challenging the immediate disqualification of legislators after conviction in a criminal case, told INDIA TODAY that the Congress legal team has asked them to go slow in the case.

“As the case itself is very weak, there is every possibility that we will get a stay and Rahul’s conviction is nullified. In that case, the narrative of BJP hounding Rahul will fizzle out. So, we are taking our own sweet time,” says a senior Congress leader. However, asked why his lawyers could not prevent the conviction in the first place if the case was weak, the blame is laid on Rahul’s close associate Kanishka Singh. “He was monitoring the case and did not share details. The day Rahul went for the final verdict in the defamation case, even the Gujarat Congress Committee had no clue,” says a Congress leader.

Rahul’s aides claim that the disqualification will have little impact on the Congress leader’s future as his primary objective is not to “become an MP or prime minister”. They believe the “turnaround in Rahul’s public image from Pappu to a serious and committed politician” on account of BJY has scared the BJP, hence Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah’s attempt to corner him thus. “When they came to know that he is not a Pappu and lakhs of people are walking with him, they got disturbed over the questions he raised in Parliament for which they don’t have answers,” Priyanka said in the meeting to protest Rahul’s disqualification.

Several other Congress leaders also believe that more than BJY, Rahul’s attack on Modi’s connection with industrialist Gautam Adani, whose company was accused of stock market manipulation by short-selling company Hindenburg Research, has rattled the BJP brass. “Modi often distinguishes himself from other politicians

as a clean, incorruptible person,” says a Congress Rajya Sabha MP. “Rahul targeted his personal integrity, Modi’s biggest USP, in 2019 by connecting him to Anil Ambani and now to Gautam Adani. With his suit-boot jibe, he caused a great deal of discomfort to Modi in 2015. So, the message is loud and clear. They will go to any length if Modi is challenged.”

Hence the digging up of an old case to embroil Rahul in. The case itself was filed on April 16, 2019, and Rahul Gandhi appeared in the court of the then chief judicial magistrate, Surat, A.N. Dave, on June 24, 2021, to record his statement in person. In March 2022, when the CJM rejected the complainant’s request to summon Rahul again and insisted that arguments commence immediately, Purnesh Modi rushed to the high court to seek a stay on proceedings. This was granted on March 7, 2022. On February 16 this year, nine days after Rahul’s fiery speech in the Lok Sabha attacking PM Modi for his alleged links with Adani, the complainant moved the high court again seeking vacation of the stay, pleading that “sufficient evidence has come on record of the trial court, and the pendency of the present matter delays the trial”. Meanwhile, H.H. Varma took over as the new CJM, finished a speedy trial and sentenced Rahul by March 23. “They wanted him silenced so that he does not raise his voice against the prime minister on the Adani issue,” says Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge.

## A Binding Force?

Having been handed this ‘opportunity’, as some in the Congress perceive it, will Rahul’s disqualification be the glue for that elusive Opposition unity? It has certainly brought together all the non-BJP parties, including the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress in West Bengal, the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi and the K. Chandrashekar Rao-led Bharat Rashtra Samithi in Telangana. So far, the three chief ministers had maintained their distance from the Congress, skipping

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR



**UNITED FORCE** Opposition leaders march to the ED office on the Adani issue, Mar. 15

## THE BJP IS LIKELY TO PICK ON RAHUL FOR NAMING THE PM **AMONG THE MODIS HE CALLED THIEVES** TO RALLY THE OBCS WHO HAVE STOOD BY THE PARTY FOR TWO LOK SABHA POLLS

the Opposition meetings it convened. Unhappy with Rahul’s style of leadership, they had been reluctant to ally with the Congress. But his disqualification led them all to condemn the BJP action as a death knell for democracy.

Unless the higher courts come to his rescue, the disqualification will bar Rahul for eight years—two in jail and six after his release—from parliamentary membership. And since the prime minister of India has to be a member of either House, Rahul is also effectively out of contention for the post. Not only does it eliminate competition for Prime Minister Modi, the leaders of regional parties too can now fancy their chances of becoming prime minister in a coalition of Opposition parties.

For the moment, though, prominent leaders and allies such as Sharad Pawar of the Nationalist Congress Party, Akhilesh Yadav of the Samajwadi Party,

Tamil Nadu chief minister M.K. Stalin, his Chhattisgarh counterpart Hemant Soren and Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasahb Thackeray) leader Uddhav Thackeray (though he expressed his displeasure with Rahul’s remark on Savarkar) have rallied behind the Congress on the issue. The sense of common purpose is also motivated by the realisation that they could be next. Most of them have been alleging that the BJP-led central government has been misusing central agencies such as the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), Enforcement Directorate (ED) and the Income Tax (IT) department to harass rivals. Fourteen Opposition parties, including the Congress, have already approached the Supreme Court over “arbitrary use” of the CBI and ED against its leaders.

However, the true test of Opposition unity will come in the electoral arena, where the Congress and other Opposition parties will have to be accommodative, both in terms of pre-poll seat-sharing and in drafting a common narrative. And this is where things can quickly come undone. Already Uddhav’s party colleagues have declined to participate in a meeting convened by the Congress to chalk out a future strategy because they were offended by Rahul’s comments on Veer Savarkar. Asked if he would apologise for the alleged defamation, Rahul had said in a press conference: “My name is not Savarkar, my name is Gandhi and Gandhi does

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not offer an apology to anyone.” Saying that he considered Savarkar his idol, Uddhav asked Rahul to refrain from insulting him.

Even on the Adani issue, while the Opposition parties united on seeking a joint parliamentary committee (JPC) to probe the allegations, the TMC and BRS have often stayed away from Congress-led agitations. Any attempt to project Priyanka in the absence of Rahul may also antagonise some allies who see the party’s obsession with the Gandhis as counter-productive.

## Will History Repeat Itself?

Regardless of support from other parties, several senior Congress leaders are looking upon this as an historic opportunity to turn disqualification into political revival for Rahul just as it did for his grandmother nearly five decades ago. Indira Gandhi, too, was disqualified from Parliament and debarred from holding any elected post for six years after the Allahabad High Court convicted her on charges of electoral malpractices on June 12, 1975. However, she declared Emergency soon after even though the Supreme Court overturned her conviction in November 1975. Public anger against her saw Indira Gandhi losing even her own seat in the 1977 election, but an ill-advised arrest by the Morarji Desai-led Janata Party government later that year saw her regain public sympathy and make a massive comeback in the next general election. She had projected herself as a lone warrior against a group of ideologically riven political stalwarts who had come together only to grab power. What also aided her return to power were stunning newspaper visuals of her atop an elephant en route to the nondescript village of Belchi in Bihar, where some Dalits had been murdered. Rahul, too, stares at a jail term and has famously talked of waging a lonely battle against the might of the BJP-RSS. He has also provided enough photo-ops during BJY, like the time he delivered a speech in Mysuru, braving a downpour.

However, unlike his grandmother, Rahul is up against the organised

might of the Sangh Parivar and the unprecedented popularity of PM Modi, and not a disjointed political coalition. The Congress’s lack of firepower to combat BJP’s carpet-bombing narrative has been all too evident in the past.

The BJP, in fact, has already begun a carefully curated campaign against Rahul, citing the current defamation case as an example of his disrespect for the OBC community. While Rahul has invited punishment for defaming a surname that can be found among upper castes and is common even to Parsis, the BJP is picking on Rahul naming PM Modi, an OBC, among others. This is because the OBCs have played a key role in bringing the BJP to power in the previous two Lok Sabha elections. The party’s OBC support has doubled

2024 election, he will rob the BJP of its chief target, around whom the party weaves its entire campaign. This, too, may boomerang on the ruling party.

As per the BJP’s calculations, Rahul’s disqualification will force the Opposition to focus their narrative on him, which works to the saffron party’s advantage. PM Modi has always retained the edge in a Modi vs Rahul contest, as successive India Today Mood of the Nation polls and parliamentary election results have shown. In both 2014 and 2019, in the 100 seats across six states—Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand—where the Congress and the BJP were pitted directly against each other, the grand old party won only three seats each time.

## IF RAHUL IS OUT OF THE ELECTORAL RACE, THE **BJP WILL BE ROBBED OF ITS CHIEF TARGET**, AROUND WHOM THEY HAVE OFTEN BASED THEIR POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

from 22 per cent in 2009 to 44 per cent in 2019. Among the big states going to polls this year, OBCs form more than half of the population in Karnataka and Telangana while in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, they account for more than 40 per cent of the population. Parliamentary affairs minister Prahlad Joshi, a senior BJP leader from Karnataka, has already held a meeting of the party’s OBC MPs and directed them to take up the issue of “Rahul Gandhi insulting OBCs” vigorously.

## Misfired Gambit for BJP?

Not everyone, though, is sure that the BJP’s gambit will pay off. Rahul’s disqualification has fired up the Congress, brought almost the entire opposition together and lent strength to the narrative that the Modi regime is muzzling the voice of democracy, exactly what Rahul Gandhi accused them of on foreign shores. More significantly, if Rahul is not reinstated and cannot contest the

There are doubts within Rahul’s own party too. “Rahul loves scoring a self-goal,” says a Congress Lok Sabha leader. “After the success of BJY, he had no business to go abroad and talk about Indian democracy. Even though he painted a true picture, the criticism on foreign soil gave the BJP the ‘nationalistic’ ammunition to attack him and diluted the gains from BJY.”

Rahul may have the moral high ground and the sympathy and support of Opposition parties, but the real challenge will be if he can channelise this unity into electoral gain. The Congress has outlined a series of agitations it will carry out till April 30 and Rahul himself is keen on another yatra. But whether this becomes a journey of revival or oblivion will depend on the narrative the Congress can build and how strongly the leadership and organisation can communicate it. It has been said before but bears repetition: It’s now or never. For Rahul and his party. ■

# INDIA TODAY



EXCLUSIVE SEX SURVEY

## THE PLEASURE GAP

DESIRE RUNS HIGH AMONG INDIANS BUT **SATISFACTION REMAINS LOW**. WHY  
STRESS AND LACK OF INTIMACY ARE GETTING IN THE WAY OF FULFILMENT

Presented by *MsChief*



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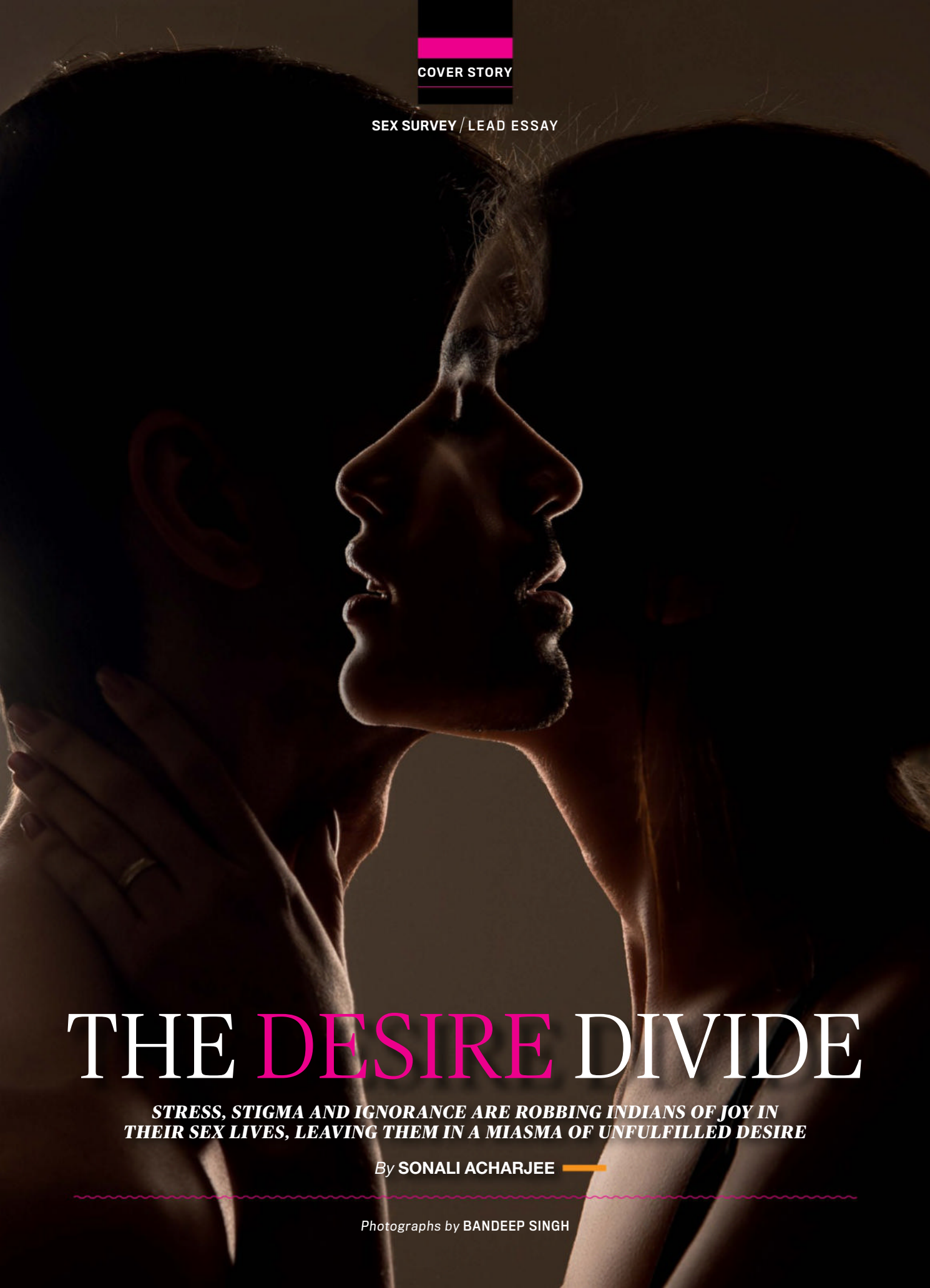
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COVER STORY

SEX SURVEY / LEAD ESSAY

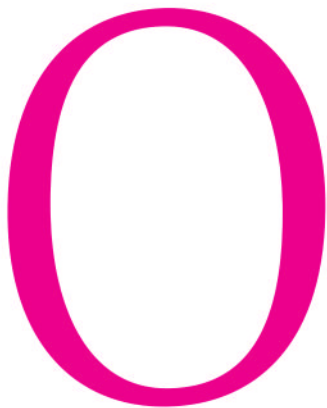
# THE DESIRE DIVIDE

**STRESS, STIGMA AND IGNORANCE ARE ROBBING INDIANS OF JOY IN THEIR SEX LIVES, LEAVING THEM IN A MIASMA OF UNFULFILLED DESIRE**

By SONALI ACHARJEE

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Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH



**ONCE UPON A TIME**, Amrita Pillai (*name changed*) would keep Friday nights for hooking up with her various digital chat buddies. This was five years ago when Pillai was 29 and still a mid-career professional in the investment banking sector. Now, at the age of 34, Mumbai-based Pillai has a lot more commitments that occupy all her time, including her once-favourite Friday night. She is responsible for two young interns, has double the work load, housing loans to repay, a longer commute to work ever since she shifted from the local train to driving her own car. Not to mention an ageing mother recovering from endometrial cancer. “Where is the time for pleasure?” she asks. “When there is time on hand, all I want to do is sleep and be alone. Dating, sex, masturbation, romance... seem more work than fun now.” When she has had the time to date, the men, she says, have been hopeless failures. “The people I meet are also tired. They are only interested in themselves and don’t put in the effort to learn about a woman’s body. It’s a double whammy—there’s less time for sex and when there is time, the sex is bad,” says Pillai.

The INDIA TODAY Sex Survey 2023 reflects this precise pleasure gap—both between people and sex, as well as between partners. On the one hand, a majority of the respondents—57 per cent, or more than half—seem to want more sex than they are getting, indicating that there is most definitely a need for pleasure. This finding is corroborated by another—that the number of people who are unhappy with their sex lives today is four times as high as it was just five years ago. In 2018, only 5.5 per cent of the respondents said they felt unsatisfied with their sex lives. This has increased to 19 per cent today. Even allowing for sampling issues, a worrying high. Experts say stress and lifestyle are the chief villains causing dissatisfaction in rela-



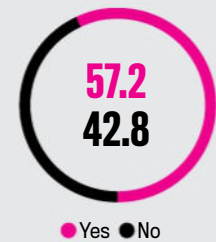
Models: CAMILA AND FELIPE / OPAL MODELS  
Makeup & Hair: KHUSHI JANGID Clothes: DASH AND DOT



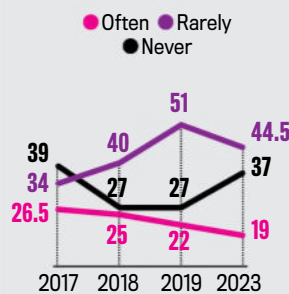
### ARE YOU **HAPPY** WITH YOUR SEX LIFE?



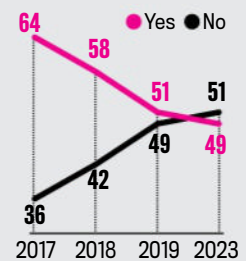
### DO YOU **NEED** MORE SEX THAN YOU GET?



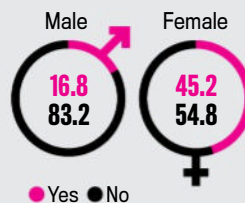
### HOW OFTEN DO YOU **MASTURBATE**?



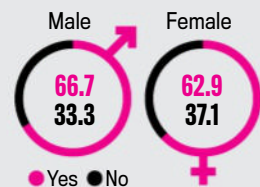
### DO YOU KNOW WHERE **YOUR OR YOUR PARTNER'S G-SPOT** IS?



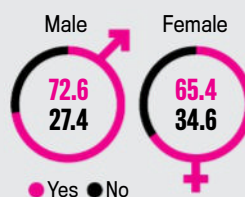
### HAVE YOU EVER **FAKED AN ORGASM**?



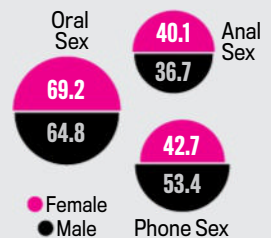
### DO YOU SHARE **SEXUAL FANTASIES** WITH YOUR PARTNER?



### WOULD YOUR **PARTNER BE INTERESTED IN DISCUSSING YOUR SEXUAL NEEDS**?



### WHAT **KIND/S OF SEXUAL EXPERIMENT** HAVE YOU HAD?



All figures in percentage

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

## SEX SURVEY / LEAD ESSAY

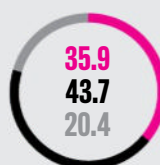
tionships. “Most people are in a rush today to get somewhere, physically and metaphorically. Stress releases such strong hormones that it can directly lower our libido. If one partner is overworked, they might not be willing to have sex, putting a strain on the relationship and the other partner,” says Dr Sameer Malhotra, director of the department of mental health at Max Hospital, Saket, Delhi.

And if you thought this would push people towards self-pleasure, the findings have another surprise for you. There is a decrease in both the act, and knowledge, of masturbation. While the 2017 survey results showed that 26.5 per cent people masturbated often, that figure has fallen to 19 per cent in this survey. In fact, many Indians participated in the ‘nofap’ challenge, an online pledge where participants, also known as fapstronauts, try to reboot their brains by abstaining from masturbation and porn in the hope of a healthier sex life. Various websites help guide participants through it: No Fap LLC, Your Brain on Porn, Reboot Nation and Mr Mind Blowing. However, studies have shown that masturbation actually holds more positive health benefits, and abstinence might not lead to a healthier sex life. Not only does masturbation release hormones associated with happiness and pleasure such as dopamine, endorphins and oxytocin, it also helps improve sleep, self-image, even your marriage. According to a 2017 study in the *Journal of Sex Education and Therapy*, women who masturbated had greater sexual desire, higher self-esteem, required less time for sexual arousal and had more satisfactory marital and sex lives.

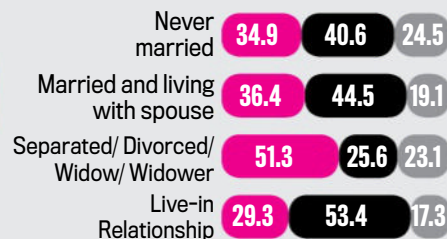
Ask 17-year-old Rishi Kulkarni (*name changed*), a recent high school graduate from Mumbai and a former fapstronaut himself. Life improved when he quit the challenge, he says. The reason why he took it on in the first place was because he thought masturbation would turn him into a sex addict. He displayed no other sign of addiction except that he felt the need to relieve himself once or twice a week. With no parental guidance or education on sex, an article on the benefits of the nofap challenge convinced him that he was in need of a sexual detox. “It was easy to do at first. But after four months of not masturbating, I started to feel frustrated and irritable. One day, I just happened to masturbate and immediately felt an improvement in my mood,” says Kulkarni. After a visit to his school counsellor and discovering he was nowhere near sexual addiction, he abandoned the nofap challenge.

“A lot of young people are getting their educa-

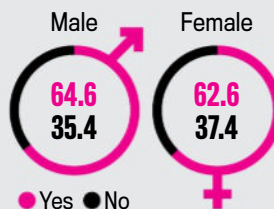
## IS THERE A DISPARITY IN PLEASURE BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN?



● Yes ● No  
● Not sure

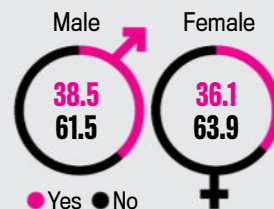


### ARE YOU AWARE OF PRODUCTS THAT CAN IMPROVE FEMALE PLEASURE DURING SEX?



● Yes ● No

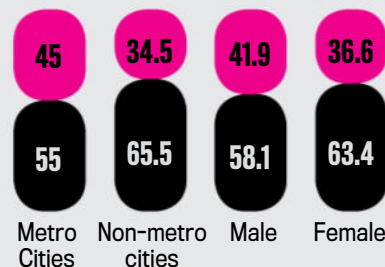
### WOULD YOU USE SEX GADGETS TO IMPROVE YOUR OWN PLEASURE?



● Yes ● No

### DO YOU THINK WOMEN USING SEX TOYS IS SOMEHOW WORSE THAN MEN USING THEM?

● Yes ● No



All figures in percentage

tion from the internet, social media forwards or pornography,” says clinical sexologist Dr Prakash Kothari. “This can lead to a rather unrealistic and ignorant approach towards sex and sexual habits. The offline is very different from the online.” Sexual ignorance could be having more consequences. The survey results also measure men and women’s comfort and satisfaction with sex. When it comes to faking an orgasm, 45 per cent of the women respondents



## THE SEXUAL WELLNESS MARKET IN INDIA HAS EXPLODED IN SERVICE OF THE FEMALE CONSUMER

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admit to doing so compared to 17 per cent men. More men (73 per cent) believe their partner would be interested in discussing their sexual needs than women (65 per cent). Also, more men (67 per cent) say they share their fantasies with their partners than women (63 per cent). Women, on the other hand, appear more experimental—a larger number say they have tried out oral and anal sex than men. However, when asked if they think there is a gap between male and female pleasure, one-fifth of the respondents say they aren't sure, 36 per cent agree there is a gap and 44 per cent say there isn't. The responses are pretty much the same across sex and age groups. However, among the respondents who are separated or divorced, more than half agree to a pleasure gap between men and women.

Bad sex is often accepted as the norm in a relationship because many don't know any better. "When I was married, I suspected our sex life was poor but could never figure out what was wrong. My body had a certain set of needs I wasn't even aware of," says 42-year-old Sudeshna Bose (*name changed*), a homemaker from Kolkata. "Now that I am divorced and dating again, I see how much I was missing out. I actually don't want to get tied down if it means sacrificing my own happiness to feed a male ego." The first she heard of female masturbation, says Basu, was at age 38 when she saw the Netflix show *Lust Stories*. "It was a huge eye-opener." Looking back, Basu realises, sex played an equal part in the breakdown of her marriage as the lack of communication. She recalls that she mostly played a passive role in the entire act and could not even beg off if she

Two out of three  
women aren't seen  
to have an orgasm,  
the other probably  
fakes it.

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## SEX SURVEY / LEAD ESSAY

84%

Bengaluru had the highest no. of those admitting disparity in male/female pleasure

94%

Lucknow had the most people satisfied with their sex lives

87%

people in Kochi have sex daily, the highest among all metros



wasn't interested or tired. "If you can't share your physical and mental stimulation with your partner, it makes you a very sad, unfulfilled and bitter person," she reflects. Today, she finds pleasure not just in the various partners that she meets through friends and colleagues but also in demanding an equal say in sexual matters.

That trend is showing up on data from dating apps, as women express a stronger urge to seek more options and prioritise their own happiness, even if they are married. The France-based extramarital dating app Gleeden, for instance, has announced that it currently has 10 million users worldwide. Nearly a million of the Indian users are women. Bumble, a dating app, has around 43 per cent female users. Last year, dating app QuackQuack reported a 12 per cent rise in its female base. "Our socio-cultural

set-up, expectations and values are way too deeply rooted for people to look on the other side and understand humans and their desires. So what makes modern-day couples opt for the other side despite the continuing societal prejudice? Well, there is one and only one answer to this—technology. The spread of information, personal beliefs and experiences is extremely easy and accessible through technology, helping people understand different value systems," says Sybil Shiddel, India manager of Gleeden. While open marriages are not a new concept, Shiddel says the option is more easily accessible to women today. The benefits flow into the marriage too, as sexual frustration is taken out of the equation.

There's more help at hand to improve female pleasure. The sexual wellness market in India has seen an explosion

of products at the service of its female consumer—be it scented and self-warming lubricants, dotted condoms available readily on e-commerce sites, personal pleasure massagers or a whole array of sex toys.

Most people, however, remain averse to using them. The survey results show that both men and women are aware of products that improve female pleasure but less than half would be willing to actually use such products even if it meant more pleasure for themselves. The pleasure gap seeps in here as well. More men seem open to using sex toys to increase their pleasure than women—38.5 per cent men versus 36 per cent women. Traditional mindsets play a spoiler too. More male respondents (42 per cent) were judgemental of women using sex toys than their female counterparts (37 per cent). “I would be afraid to use a sex toy not just out of fear of what others would think of me but also what I would think of myself,” says Neha Kumar (*name changed*), 24, a Delhi-based student. Sex itself is nothing negative or shameful for her, but masturbation or using a sex toy? She wouldn’t even entertain the thought. Contrary to her belief, her fiancé does not think there would be anything wrong if she did use

sex toys. “I don’t think I am ready yet to focus only on my own pleasure. Changing that mindset will need time. Right now, it feels too self-indulgent. I was brought up to believe focusing on yourself is not the right thing to do,” she says.

People like Neha may still be hesitating to embrace their sexuality, but a whole lot of Indians are also working towards building a sex-positive mindset, for themselves and others. A number of sex influencers online are encouraging both men and women to be more sexually vocal, aware and accepting. Millennial doctor Tanaya, for example, runs an Instagram page called Dr Cuterus, where she tries to break popular misconceptions about sex and reproductive health. ‘Sexuality educator’ Karishma posts a variety of information

on topics ranging from condoms to lubricants, from sexual shame to sexual expectation on Talk You Never Got. Simran Balar Jain, another sex educator, tackles uncomfortable sexual subjects in an attempt to normalise them and to promote safe sex practices. “Sex is a part of life, and sexual health contributes to your overall well-being. Such a thought process needs to be normalised across gender, ages and geographies,” says Dr Kothari.

The pleasure gap opens up when needs and expectations are not met. Ignorance, stressful lifestyles, self-imposed and social stereotypes are a few of the reasons why Indians are not getting what they need from sex. Normalising sex, instead of treating it as an exceptional act, is an important first step towards greater awareness, more reasons to make time for it (just like one would for the gym), have more conversations and debates around it, and more openness to explore different solutions. What we need less of is stigma. ■

## **BOTH MEN AND WOMEN ARE AWARE OF SEX AIDS, BUT LESS THAN HALF ARE WILLING TO USE THEM**



## METHODOLOGY

**T**he INDIA TODAY Sex Survey was conducted by Marketing and Development Research Associates (MDRA) between December 2022 and January 2023 in 19 cities across all zones of the country among 3,032 adults who were sexually active.

The respondents have been selected randomly to prevent any bias from creeping into the samples. We have followed a multi-stage sampling process: at the first stage, any major factors that could cause sampling errors have been controlled through an appropriate selection process (among males, females, geographical distribution, sexuality, age, etc.). In the second stage, contact points with the respondents are a mix of colleges/universities, shopping malls/ multiplexes, hostels/ lodges, restaurants, etc. This is an adaptation of the queuing theory, where randomisation is built into the system. The confidence level is 95 per cent with an error of margin of  $\pm 1.78$  per cent.

A structured questionnaire was administered to the respondents by experienced and trained investigators of the MDRA through quantitative face-to-face interviews. It must be noted that in view of the sensitivity of the subject and questions, the survey was conducted through self-administered questionnaires, that is, the respondents have filled up the questionnaires themselves.

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Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

# BETWEEN THE SILOS

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**THE PROGRESSIVE ATTITUDES TOWARDS SEXUALITY THAT  
EXIST AMONG THE VAST MAJORITY OF YOUNG INDIANS  
TODAY SURVIVE WITHIN A BUBBLE OF PRIVILEGE**

**By MEENA KANDASAMY**

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**TECHNOLOGY HAS TRANSFORMED THE VERY LANDSCAPE IN WHICH**

our conversations around sexuality were once situated. In less than a decade, the ground beneath our feet has shifted beyond belief. On the one hand, the rise of online dating apps has normalised casual sexual encounters, smashed quaint notions of propriety, widened the acceptance of non-binary and LGBTQ+ identities and, operating under the logic of the market, has paved the way for self-objectification, self-commodification and instant gratification. On the other hand, the same advances have enabled the proliferation of misogynistic right-wing groups, often masquerading as men's rights groups; they have also increased the feeling of alienation even as there is a state of abundance, fuelled anxieties, unrealistic expectations and addiction to pornography and, worse of all, made women the victims of sextortion, revenge porn and cyber-bullying. In some ways, these are two sides of the same coin—the effects of, and pushback against, liberal attitudes in India.

The progressive frame of mind that exists among the vast majority of young people today survives within a certain bubble of privilege, class-caste location, urban/university-centricity. Outside this cocoon, old habits die hard. The reason for such change to not catch on and spread like wildfire through the body of our nation is that we are a deeply unequal, undemocratic society. Writing about an ideal society, Dr Ambedkar observed that it “should be mobile, should be full of channels for conveying a change taking place in one part to other parts”.

Calling this process of conscious communication and sharing of varied interests “social endosmosis”, Dr Ambedkar underlined that this was fraternity, “only another name for democracy”. Sadly, in our less-than-ideal society, a positive change taking place in one part of society is only met with stiff resistance when it is conveyed to other, socially more conservative sections deeply invested in upholding the patriarchal status quo. In fact, when these notions reach them and they realise that getting laid is as easy as swiping right, they counter it through scare-mongering, homopho-

bia, transphobia and, most of all, a demographic paranoia that finds an outlet in propagandist red flags such as ‘love jihad’. Forget about the transmission of these changes from starkly different parts of society—today's younger generation is often constrained to conceal several aspects of their lives, their sexual identities and their sexual orientation from their own parents.

For the above reasons, I want to argue that just as discussions around sexuality in India cannot be divorced from the direction in which they are taken forward by technological innovations, we must also ground our understanding on this by getting in touch with our cultural, social and political history. This means that we do not take our hard-won freedoms for granted. This means that we have to be prepared to face criticism for every act of disruption that threatens the old order of things: whether we are writing about female sexual desire, narrating an anecdote about a Bumble date, fighting for the right to live together, or reclaiming our right to fall in love across caste, class and religious lines.

One of the pitfalls of liberal-speak on sexuality is that an awareness of the fraught and precious nature of the few avenues open to hosting such discussions makes people censor and constrain themselves into safe zones. The few women who openly speak about these are hounded, branded

and trolled. Even those who address sexuality and female desire do not have the luxury of making noise about how fascist regimes reinforce cis-heterosexual relationships. Conversations about sexuality have huge silences and blanks on violence, perpetuated by both individuals and states. Last year, 21 million Indian women disappeared from the workforce, the sharpest plummet ever. It underlines the bitter truth that we are being forced to become wives and stay-at-home mothers. How does this connect with agency, autonomy, mobility and the exercise of female sexual desire?

It does not end here. Even as online dating apps become popular, the

struggle to, say, find oral and emergency contraceptives is an uphill task, and often an exercise in public humiliation. How do we deal with this hypocrisy, and how do we hold institutions to account for this gap between word and deed? Sexuality and female desire are an entry point into setting right several ills in our society, and I feel that these discussions should not be viewed as an end in itself. ■

## DEBATES ON SEXUALITY HAVE HUGE SILENCES ON VIOLENCE BY STATES, INDIVIDUALS



**Meena Kandasamy is a poet, author, translator and activist**



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# THE CHIMERA OF SEX

***FOR SEX DESIRE TO TRANSLATE  
INTO SEX DEMAND, SEXUAL  
AWKWARDNESS HAS TO BE  
NAVIGATED FIRST***

**By AMRITA NARAYANAN**

# IF

**WE WERE TO DESCRIBE THE SEXUAL ECONOMY IN THE LANGUAGE OF ECONOMICS**, then the results of the INDIA TODAY-MDRA nationwide sex survey suggest high desire, but not high demand. A majority of those surveyed, both men and women, reported needing more sex. But unlike some other kinds of satisfiable needs, sexual ones depend in part upon other people. And the results tell us that the respondents might be more comfortable opening up on the survey questionnaire than they are with their partners. The survey results show high sexual self-knowledge and sex desire, but they also point to a lag in the willingness to be sexually vulnerable with, and reliant upon, another person in a sexual partnership.

The variables of vulnerability and dependency complicate the overall sex survey results. These variables make the sexual economy unique; they correspond to what might translate as cost or price in the language of material economics, where desire is only considered demand when it is backed up by a willingness to pay. In the sexual economy, willingness to pay means, among other things, being willing to bear the uncertainties of desire within a sexual relationship.

Here, the gender gap presses. Women are more reluctant than men to discuss their sexual needs with their partners: they imagine their partners would not



Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

be open to it. Cross-cultural studies in psychology have shown that women's shyness in sexual matters is socially produced. In countries that have not had a sexual revolution, concerns about gossip, reputation, and maternal socialisation—how women experienced their mothers' views on sex—are thought to be key factors that shape women's bedroom experiences.

The high numbers of women who fake orgasms in 2023 points to the possibility that women still see men as the rightful subjects of the (hetero) sexual dream. That women fake orgasms more suggests that during the sexual experience, they identify more with being pleasing objects—attending to men's needs—than needy subjects. Sex, after all, is not only an arena for the experience of pleasure, it is also the theatre in which individual and relationship identities are enacted. Faking an orgasm performs pleasure while actually renouncing it: the faker may get relationship satisfaction—she has pleased her partner and made him feel secure—but not sexual satisfaction. The orgasm may be fake, but the pleasure in enacting the familiar cultural trope of a hungry man ably hosted by a generous woman may be genuine.

Anxiety about women as sexual subjects is a longstanding theme in patriarchal societies. Sexually agential women are spoilers to the fantasy of heterosexual male

sexual power—they remind men that the sexual dream is not a one-person dream of a male satisfied by a female. For both men and women to have their sexual needs satisfied in heterosexuality, the 'woman gives and man takes' equation has to be given up, but the survey results suggest that as a collective, we are reluctant to do so. Both men and women are particularly appalled by the idea of a woman using a sex toy. The Woman Who Pleases Herself is an interloper to a scene that hitherto belonged to The Man Who Must be Pleased.

For all genders and sexualities, the survey results on the use of sex toys seem to further illuminate why high sex desire does not translate into high sex demand.

That the majority of respondents won't

date someone who uses a sex toy, and won't admit to using one, suggests that it is still shameful to admit the truth of sexual pleasure as a necessary force in the human experience. What is the shame associated with being someone who (literally) takes the matter of sex into their own hands? Unlike other arenas of life where independence and self-development are valued, people who use sex toys are seen as at once powerless against the needs of desire and powerful sources of insecurity to their human partners.

Navigating sexual awkwardness is critical to translate sex desire into sex demand. Whether that awkwardness is in bearing the anxiety of rummaging around for a partner's G-spot, facing a partner who might know themselves much better than we do because they use a sex toy, or accepting a partner who might not, eventually, please us as reliably as our toys do, anxiety is an undeniable part of the sexual experience. Without a capacity for sexual awkwardness, we remain locked in a world of sexual fantasy: delicious in its own right, but for many, as the survey results show, insufficiently real. ■

## WOMEN FAKE ORGASMS WHEN THEY SEE THEMSELVES AS PLEASING OBJECTS, NOT NEEDY SUBJECTS



Amrita Narayanan is a psychologist and the author of *Women's Sexuality and Modern India: In a Rapture of Distress* (Oxford University Press)

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# ONLINE ADVANCES

**DATING APPS, ROBOTS AND AI: TECHNOLOGY HAVE TRANSFORMED  
THE WAY INDIANS THINK ABOUT AND ENGAGE WITH SEX**

By **SONALI ACHARJEE**

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Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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**HERE WAS A TIME WHEN DHRUV SHARMA (NAME CHANGED), A 19-YEAR-OLD STUDENT** from Pune, would shudder at the thought of asking someone out. Engaging women or trying to develop sexual intimacy was a daunting task, one not made easy by his body image issues. But that's all in the past now, thanks to technology and the internet, where, Sharma says, he is free of such physical hang-ups and can have consensual virtual sex. "It is empowering. I have four-five partners on various apps. We use video chats that are non-encrypted.... It has helped me feel better about my body and I can now even meet women offline without feeling ashamed of myself," he says.

Thousands of Indian youths like Sharma have in recent years embraced the idea of finding sexual or emotional intimacy virtually. India emerged as the fifth-largest growing market in terms of year-over-year growth in dating app spending in 2022, according to data.ai Intelligence, a platform that brings together consumer data and market insights. In fact, Indians spent \$31 million more on dating apps last year than they did in 2021. That is not all, technological advances also mean that more Indians are focusing on their sexual wellness and pleasure. According to sex toy analysis firm ThatsPersonal.com, there was a 54 per cent rise in Google searches for sex toys by



## SEX SURVEY / SESTECH

Indian women in 2020 and a 65 per cent boost in sex toy sales post the Covid-19 lockdown. India also remains the third-largest consumer of porn globally.

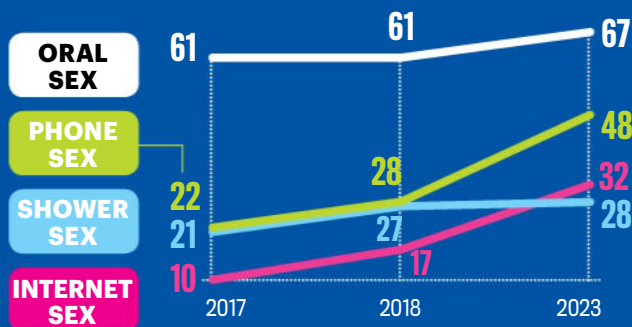
What these figures underline is that the general attitudes around sex have evolved. With total dating apps users in India expected to touch 28.4 million by 2027 (per Statista, a market insights platform), the contours of the Indian relationship culture are shifting. The INDIA TODAY sex survey shows that the number of people having phone sex and internet sex has more than doubled in the past five years: while only 22 per cent had tried phone sex in 2017, that figure stands at 48 per cent today. For internet sex, the number has gone up from 10 per cent in 2017 to 32 per cent in 2023. There is also greater acceptance towards having multiple partners and engaging

## POST-COVID-19, A SLEW OF NEW FEATURES HAVE SPRUNG UP IN THE VIRTUAL DATING WORLD

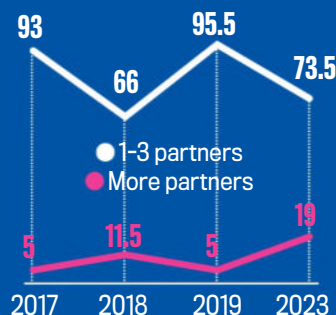
in one-night stands. In 2017, only 5 per cent of respondents had reported having had more than three sexual partners; today, 19 per cent say they've had multiple partners, whereas 54 per cent say they are open to having one-night stands, compared to 35 per cent in 2017. Ravi Mittal, CEO and founder of homegrown dating app QuackQuack, attributes these numbers to an intrinsic shift. "Yes, there is a portion of people who are interested in casual relationships, but that's always been there. It has come to light now more so because people are unapologetically comfortable with and vocal about their choices."

What can this openness be attributed to? Perhaps, the myriad options that have sprung up after the Covid-19 pandemic. There's something for everyone—while Tinder offers Hot Takes, a timed quiz to see whether two people have similar interests, Aisle has launched Jalebi, a dating app for Gen Z with audio prompts and selfie verifications, and Bumble allows videos on profiles. Video chat rooms, text chat rooms, audio chat rooms, blind date rooms—the dating app world is flush with ways to build user confidence and make sexual or romantic relationships

## WHAT KIND/S OF EXPERIMENTS HAVE YOU HAD WITH SEX?

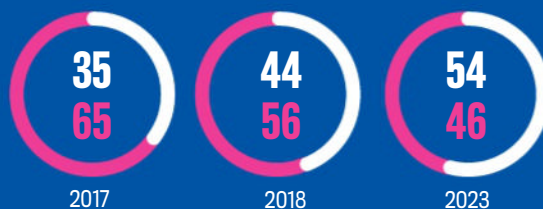


## HOW MANY SEXUAL PARTNERS HAVE YOU HAD?



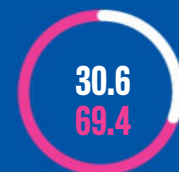
## ARE YOU OKAY WITH ONE-NIGHT STANDS?

● Yes ● No



## HAVE YOU EVER MET ANY OF YOUR VIRTUAL SEX PARTNERS IN PERSON?

● Yes ● No



58%

Share of respondents who said they might feel bad if a virtual sex partner ghosted them (vanished without an explanation or goodbye)

43%

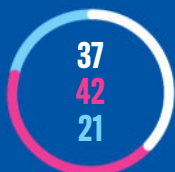
Share of respondents who said virtual sex may lead to a long-term relationship as well



Models: TAIS AND DANISH NAZIR / OPAL MODELS  
Makeup & Hair: SURJEET KUMAR Clothes: VICTORIA'S SECRET

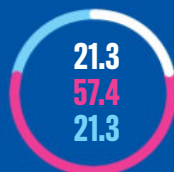
### WOULD YOU FEEL BAD IF A VIRTUAL SEX PARTNER GHOSTED OR IGNORED YOU?

● Yes ● No ● Maybe



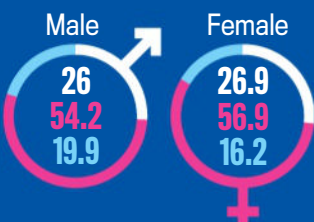
### CAN VIRTUAL SEX LEAD TO A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP?

● Yes ● No ● Maybe



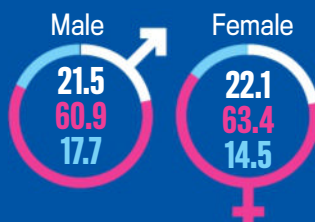
as convenient as possible. An outcome is that more people feel comfortable in their skin online. As many as 14 per cent of respondents in the INDIA TODAY sex survey said they felt as confident having virtual sex as physical sex, while 26 per cent said the former gave them greater confidence. Also, more men (50 per cent) than women (42 per cent) said it's easier to approach someone online for sex, and more men (25 per cent) than women (17 per cent) said they can have virtual sex with a stranger.

### WOULD YOU DATE SOMEONE WHO USES SEX TOYS TO MASTURBATE?



● Yes ● No ● Maybe

### WOULD YOU EVER TELL YOUR FRIENDS THAT YOU USE SEX GADGETS?



● Yes ● No ● Maybe

All figures in percentage

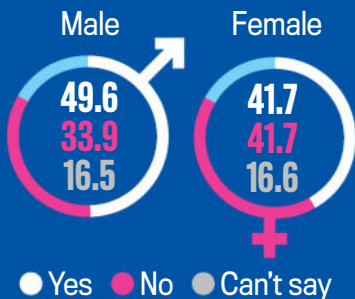
**She  
He  
We  
They  
Them**

There's pleasure for all.

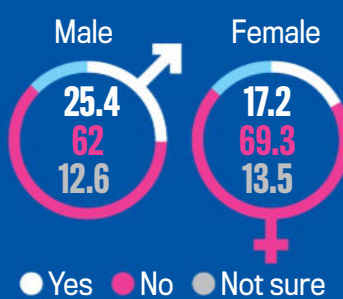


#ThePleasuresAllYours  
www.lovedepot.com

## IS IT EASIER TO APPROACH SOMEONE FOR SEX ONLINE THAN OFFLINE?



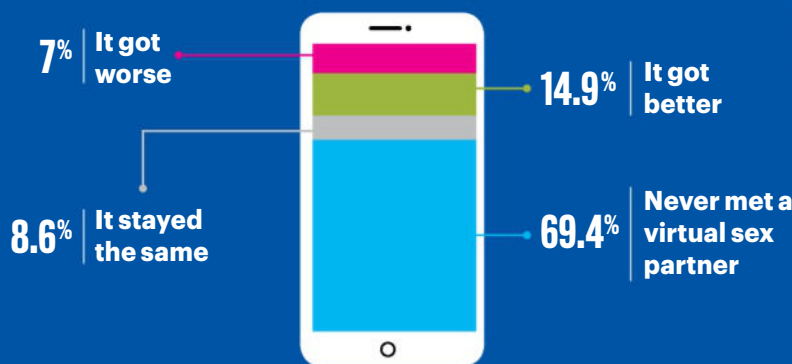
## COULD YOU HAVE VIRTUAL SEX WITH A STRANGER?



# 34%

Share of respondents who would spend more than Rs 500 for a high-quality sex gadget

## HOW DID MEETING A VIRTUAL SEX PARTNER OFFLINE CHANGE YOUR SEXUAL PARTNERSHIP?



That more people are now in tune with their sexual needs is also evident from the range of sex gadgets available today. Around 36 per cent of the INDIA TODAY survey respondents said that sex gadgets could replace physical intimacy with a real person. Today, top companies like IMBesharam, Lovetreats and Kinkpin have merchandise lists that have gone beyond the once-popular rings, lubricants and outfits. It's the age of far more advanced gadgets now: there is Motorbunny, available in India for Rs 4 lakh, which can mimic intercourse by inducing similar bodily movements in users; another gadget, Fleshlight, can cost between Rs 8,000 and Rs 16,000, depending on how real one wants the artificial vagina to feel. Artificial Intelligence has made sex toys smarter than ever before—Hot Octopuss is an auto oral sex machine for men that can work on a flaccid penis, and Lovense vibrators now offer wireless dildos with pre-enabled mechanisms that will adjust their movements based on the shape of a vagina. Then there are AI-powered sex 'robots' that can tell jokes, converse and remember names. At

## BEYOND ADVANCES IN SEXTECH, EMOTIONAL INTIMACY REMAINS A CRUCIAL NEED

\$20,000, the Harmony robot can be bought overseas easily. Nearly 40 per cent of the respondents said they might even consider using such a robot. That's not all—most porn websites today allow syncing with popular VR systems such as Google Cardboard and Oculus Rift. A study published in the *Journal of Sex Research* found that when men watched VR porn, they felt more desired and connected. That's not surprising, given how VR porn allows you to play a character.

24%

Share of respondents who would spend more than Rs 500 on dating apps/ VR porn/ pornography

## DO YOU FEEL MORE CONFIDENT HAVING VIRTUAL SEX?

26

14

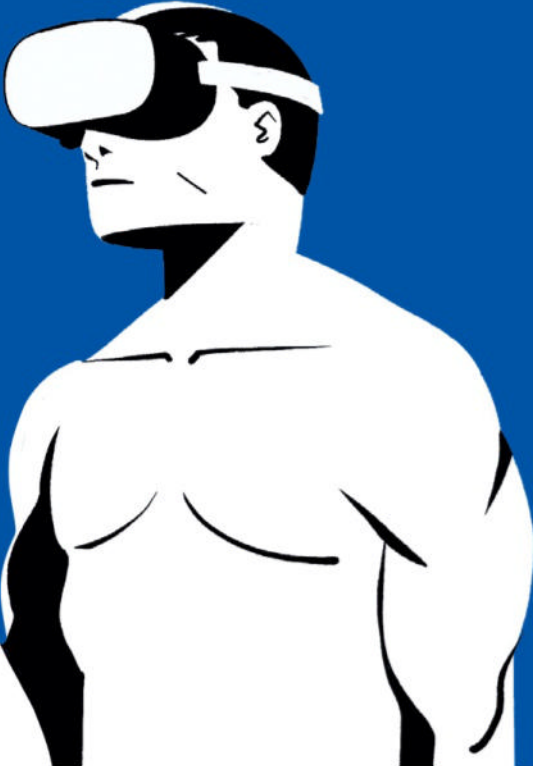
13

46.5

● Yes ● Same ● Not sure ● No

40%

Share of respondents who said they feel as or more confident having virtual sex as offline sex



## HAVE APPS AND WEBSITES IMPROVED THE QUALITY OF YOUR SEX LIFE?

Yes 17 No 10

Do not use an app 68

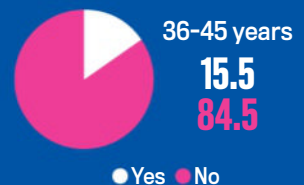
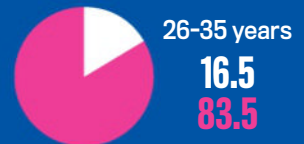
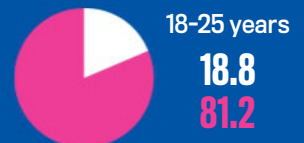
Maybe 5

## CAN SEX GADGETS REPLACE PHYSICAL INTIMACY WITH A REAL PERSON?

17.2  
64  
18.9

● Yes  
● No  
● Maybe

## HAVE YOU EVER WATCHED VR PORN?



Some websites also let you sync with devices such as Flesh-light, giving both the digital experience of being on screen and the offline experience of sexual touch. In fact, 19 per cent of those between 18 and 25 years of age who participated in the INDIA TODAY sex survey said they have tried VR porn.

However, despite these advances, conversations around sexual pleasure remain hushed. Most people still wouldn't comfortably admit to using sex toys—the survey found that most men (61 per cent) and women (63 per cent) would not tell their friends that they use sex toys, and a majority (54 per cent men and 57 per cent women) wouldn't even date someone who uses them.

### EMOTIONS STILL RULE

Beyond this sea change, however, what remains important is the need for emotional intimacy. There is more to the dating game than just casual sex. "Texting and video telephony are how my generation communicates. To us, it is a perfectly natural way to get to know someone. Even when I hadn't

met my partner, I still cared greatly for her," says 34-year-old Aditya Agarwal from Noida, an IT executive who met his wife on a dating app. The survey results also indicate that you don't have to physically meet someone before developing feelings for them, underlining what Mumbai-based clinical sexologist Dr Prakash Kothari also says—that even virtual partners can get attached to one another, seeking progressive, meaningful and long-term relationships. Around 43 per cent of the respondents in the survey said that virtual sex may lead to a long-term relationship, and 58 per cent said that they might feel bad if a virtual sex partner 'ghosted' them, that is, vanished without an explanation or goodbye.

Technology has thus drastically transformed the way Indians have sex or try to find intimacy. Sex is still as much an emotional need as a physical one, but the real—and much-needed—shift is the focus on understanding the self. And while stigma and questions around sexual pleasure remain, behind closed doors, things certainly are changing. One step at a time. ■

# WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

# AVAXHOME-

the biggest Internet portal,  
providing you various content:  
brand new books, trending movies,  
fresh magazines, hot games,  
recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price

Cheap constant access to piping hot media

Protect your downloadings from Big brother

Safer, than torrent-trackers

18 years of seamless operation and our users' satisfaction

All languages

Brand new content

One site



# AVXLIVE • ICU

AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open <https://avxlive.icu>

SEX SURVEY / GUEST COLUMN

# RIDING HIGH ON GADGETS

**GIVE THEM A SHAPE, PACKAGE THEM WELL AND PAIR THEM WITH YOUR IMAGINATION... SEX TOYS CAN DELIVER THE MOST WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE**

By **RAJ ARMANI**

*"Have you gone totally crazy?"*

*"You will be behind bars in no time!"*

*"It is not only a crime, but also against our culture"*

*"You will be blacklisted..."*

**T**HESE ARE SOME OF THE NICEST COMMENTS I HAD THE pleasure of receiving when people came to know we were about to launch India's first adult store (a nicer way of saying 'sex shop'), but that was 2012. It has been almost 10 years since we have been live. As of October 2022, we have delivered to over a million customers in India and welcome 4-5 million visitors to our website annually from various sections of society: celebrities, politicians, sportspeople, the rich and famous, middle class, and even people whom we know in our network... who quietly place orders praying hard that we won't find out. Well, we do, but our lips are sealed because we promise 100 per cent privacy to each and every customer who shops with us.

And so far, we haven't been put behind bars. But I did get myself on the front page of a newspaper (side by side with the Mumbai police commissioner) as I became the face of a 'new-age India'—all by selling sex toys online. Give them a shape, package them well and pair them with your imagination, and they can deliver the most awesome experience.

In my opinion, they are crucial aids to happiness. But, alas, a majority of our population does not think that way. There are many challenges in working in India's sex economy—your nosy Pammi aunty is the least of which.

The real challenges we have faced have evolved over the years. In the early days, it was about restrictions in reaching out to the masses. Though we signed Sunny Leone to be the face of our brand and started out with a robust budget for marketing, the social media would find our brand too outrageous and restrictions imposed on Google by Indian laws limited our reach. Even though we had built a healthy pool of customers, we couldn't get enough word-of-mouth—because '*log kya kahenge*' (what would the people say)? We tried to put up billboards, but the deal fell through at the last minute because the legal department freaked out.

When we managed to improve our reach through organic growth, we encountered newer challenges around imports and often had tiffs with the Customs. They fondly called us the 'Playboy of India' and then shut down two of our warehouses, taking away almost \$200,000 worth of merchandise. We tried to stick to our guns, asking how a hairbrush with a vibrating handle could be a sex toy





## WE MAY BE MAKING SOME PROGRESS, BUT THE STIGMA AROUND SEX TOYS PERSISTS



when Durex vibe rings or condoms were not seen as one? Their justification was that the latter brought pleasure to sexual organs. Our argument was sound, but they considered us the enemy of Indian culture, and there was not much we could do. But, then, Bollywood movies started showing women using vibrators having orgasms. The audience went berserk; within two-three weeks after *Lust Stories* (2018) was released, we sold out all kinds of vibrators. This can be considered the first turning point in our journey—where our industry grew from a toddler to a teenager. The next two years brought the demand for toys for women on par with that for toys for men. The female traffic went from 20-22 per cent to 45-50 per cent. Then came the Covid-19 pandemic.

Later, when the markets opened and we could deliver our orders, the entire business boomed. And how! Our sales doubled and we finished 2020 at 40 per cent higher sales than in 2019. The post-pandemic era can be described as one where sexual wellness as a business category stepped out of puberty into adulthood. There is more acceptance, demand has soared and we are investing in new and upcoming homegrown companies to

build the foundation of a new India, where asking, shopping or wanting to invest in a pleasure product for your sexual health is as normal—and even required—as taking care of your mental and physical health.

However, no matter how much we celebrate this new wave of thinking, the fact remains that this acceptance of pleasure and pleasure products has come from a very small fraction of Indian society. The majority continues to feel that desire for pleasure or conversations around sex have no place in our culture and make you look like a pervert or 'abnormal'. We may be making small progress in broadening the mindset of Indians, but most households still stigmatise the use of sex toys. The INDIA TODAY SEX SURVEY 2023 also underlines this: a majority of respondents noted that they wouldn't admit to using sex toys, and that they wouldn't even date someone who uses them. Nonetheless, that technology has democratised sex and pleasure is a ray of hope. You no longer need to travel to Paris or Bangkok to get your favourite vibrator, nor do you need to walk down the aisles of Palika Bazaar or the glitzy floors at Emporio Mall to purchase them. Today, you can see, compare, research and shop anywhere and anytime you wish, with a few taps on your smartphone. And the last time we checked, over 700 million Indians had a smartphone.

Not only does technology level the playing field for all classes of society when it comes to accessing and owning sex toys of their choice, it also makes a tremendous impact on our sex lives. These toys, which have been perfected with technology and have evolved through the years, can transform your sexual pleasure with the switch of a button and some imagination. Regardless of whether you use them for solo play, with a partner or with multiple partners, there is always a finish line you will cross, which may otherwise have been a challenge for many in the past. Tech in new-age toys can stimulate your erogenous zones and awaken or speed up your climax while delivering newer sensations to your body that you may never have thought possible. For partners who may lose interest in sex over a period of time, these gadgets come as a new experience. For the curious who are yet to experience sexual pleasure with a partner, the same gadgets double up as training tools. They give people's 'me time' an upgrade and a new definition.

As Indians, we gave the world the *Kama Sutra*. Now, over 2,000 years later, we are about to reclaim our place in the sun and step into a decade that may bear a real sexual revolution for our generation. While haters gonna hate, seeking pleasure is not a fad or a disease, and thus it doesn't have to invite embarrassment or stigma. It's a bodily need, just like food and water. The day it will be okay for a parent and a child to discuss puberty, sex organs, childbirth, reproduction, pregnancy, contraception and menstruation, we as a nation will finally have become progressive and sex-positive. Till then, let us knock on closed doors and stir up conversations. ■

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**Raj Armani is the co-founder of IMBesharam.com, an online sex toys store in India**

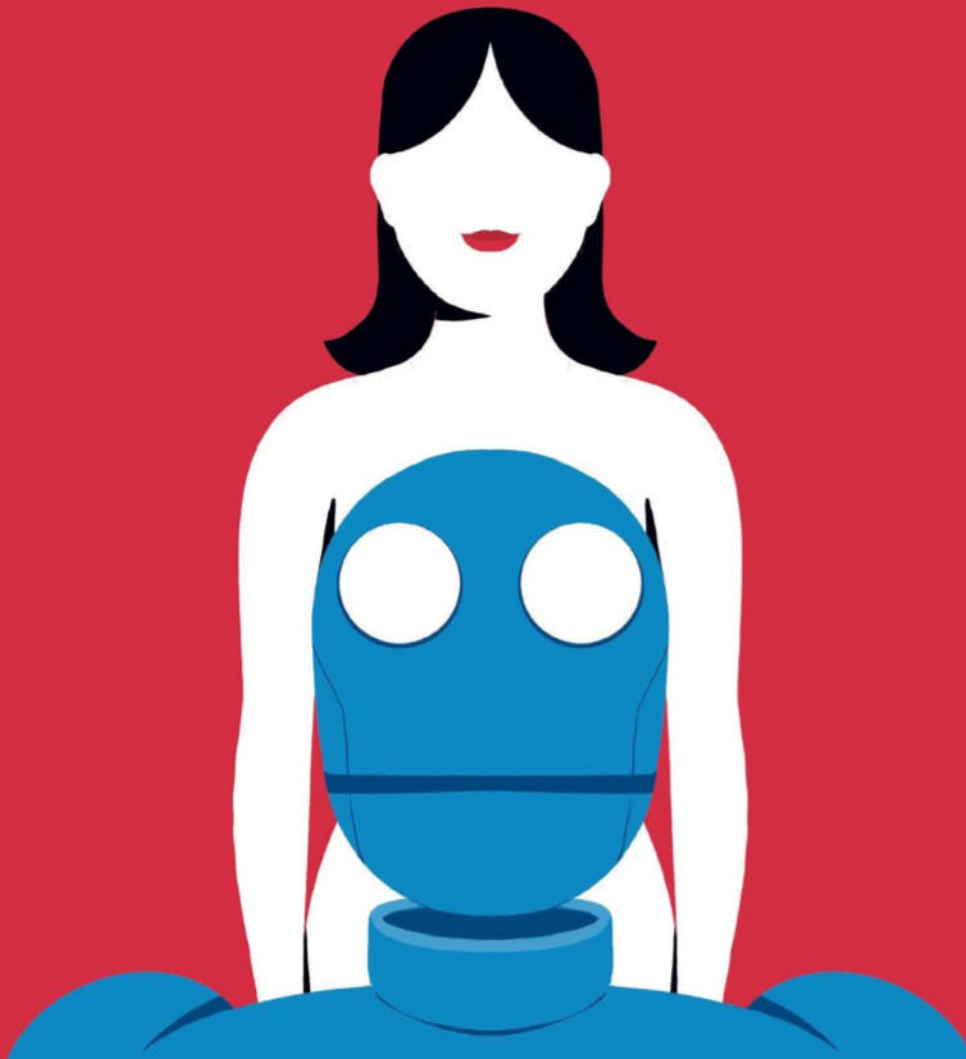
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# DIGITAL AWAKENING

**THE INCREASED OPENNESS AND SHIFTING ATTITUDES  
AROUND SEXUAL WELLNESS ARE CLEARLY LINKED TO THE  
RISE OF THE INTERNET, SOCIAL MEDIA AND OTT CONTENT**

**By ANUSHKA GUPTA**

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# W

**WE LIVE IN THE (ALMOST) GOLDEN AGE OF SEXUAL WELLNESS.** Sure, sex toys and paraphernalia have been around for aeons, but until very recently, they existed only in the underbelly of society: the black markets, shady alleys and garish sex toy shops where you would avert your gaze from fellow shoppers. While humans have innovated and experimented with creating instruments to explore their bodies probably for as long as humans have lived, sex (and, moreover, *pleasure*) is still a topic reserved for lower voices and closed doors.

And often accompanied by a healthy dose of shame.

But this is quickly changing. The increased openness and shifting attitudes around sexual wellness across the world are clearly linked to the rise of the internet, social media, and OTT content. While on the one hand, the internet has made pornography ubiquitous, it has also undeniably increased access to education, resources, and discourse around sex and sexuality. In the US, 84 per cent of adults now say that masturbation is a form of self-care, according to a study published in 2020 by TENGA, a sexual wellness brand for men. Also, per a 2022 report by *The Economist*, mentions of the phrase 'sexual wellness' grew six-fold on Twitter between 2018 and 2021.

As technology has evolved in recent years, the larger category of sexual wellness and devices has evolved too. Pleasure accessories today can look as sleek as Apple products, and are now taking pride of place in stores right next to high-end luxury and lifestyle goods. Numerous news reports have also highlighted how the Covid-19 lockdowns saw a surge in consumers using sextech apps and

**PLEASURE  
ACCESSORIES  
TODAY  
CAN LOOK  
AS SLEEK  
AND CHIC  
AS APPLE  
PRODUCTS**



products—and this has continued post-pandemic.

In India, attitudes, sensitivities and generational thinking around sex and intimacy vary as wildly across segments as the cuisine from each part of our culturally rich country. When my partner and I were thinking about launching our sexual wellness brand MyMuse back in 2020, our first question was—“Are Indians ready for this?” We conducted in-depth qualitative and quantitative studies, and saw clear patterns.

In our survey of over 20,000 people across the country, one of the biggest surprises was that 44 per cent were already using products *other* than contraceptives in their intimate lives. What wasn't surprising were the endless complaints about quality and accessibility. And of the remaining 56 per cent of folks that hadn't used products in the bedroom before, eight out of 10 people said they were curious and willing to try. It was clear that India was ready for change.

I was initially afraid of the reaction, more from extended friends and family than from strangers. But we have been blessed to receive incredible support from those near and far. The most common response we hear is, “Thank god something like this finally exists in India!” At MyMuse, our customers range from men, women, and those across the binary, from the ages of 21 to 50+. Our massagers remain our bestsellers, indicating that Indians across the spectrum are eager to experiment in the bedroom. We believe that intimacy is universal, so we have strived to build a brand that to its core is inclusive and deeply approachable. A brand that celebrates intimacy, rather than shying away from it.

In a time where our digital worlds and physical worlds are inseparable, with an endless stream of likes, clicks and options at our fingertips, it's easier than ever to feel isolated and disconnected. So in 2023, self-care is no longer a buzzword: it's a necessity. Today, people are more acutely aware of their needs, and are searching for ways to make true connection and intimacy a priority. While we still have a long way to go in smashing taboos and unlearning deeply conditioned stereotypes around sex, we're coming closer to an age where people are accepting and ready to talk about how sexual wellness is inextricably tied to our mental, physical and holistic wellbeing. Both on and off the internet. ■

**Anushka Gupta is Co-founder, MyMuse India**



AN EARLY



# START

COVER STORY

SEX SURVEY / TRENDS

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**THERE IS A WIDE  
GENERATION GAP WHEN  
IT COMES TO SEXUAL  
ATTITUDES, WITH THE  
YOUNG MORE WILLING  
TO EXPERIMENT**

By **SONALI ACHARJEE**

Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**

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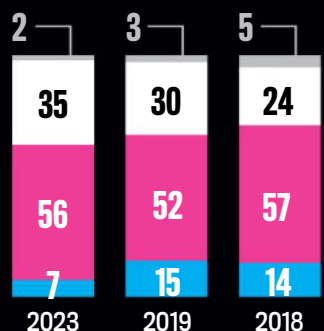
# T

**THE GENERATION GAP BETWEEN**

14-year-old Neha Kapoor (*name changed*) and her 27-year-old sister Jyoti is never more apparent than when it comes to the topic of sex. The Delhi-based siblings say they were shocked to learn how differently they viewed physical intimacy. While Neha doesn't bat an eyelid if one of her friends at a popular south Delhi school hooks up with someone, Jyoti, a website designer, has the complete opposite reaction. "For me, sex still means something. It is not something you have freely and carelessly. But my sister is the opposite, sex is like breathing. They are more shocked if someone hasn't had sex than if someone has," says Jyoti.

The INDIA TODAY sex survey 2023, too, records this slow generational shift, with more people having sex in their teens today than before. In 2018, around 24 per cent had sex between 13 and 19. Today, the results show the figure to be 35 per cent. A similar attitude can be noted when it comes to the significance

## AT WHAT AGE DID YOU FIRST HAVE SEX?

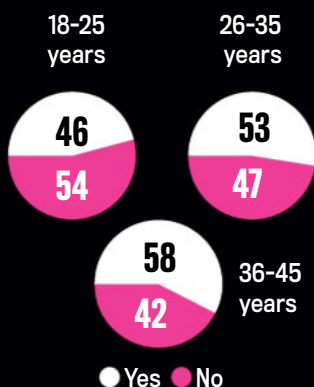


● Upto 12 years ● 13-19 years  
● 20s ● 30s or later

# 40%

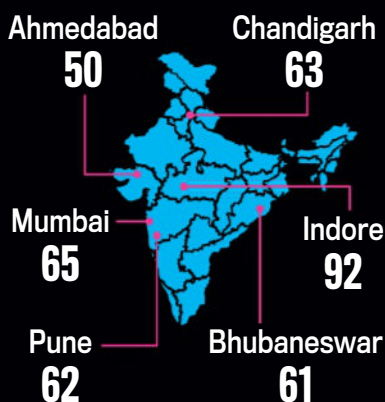
Homosexuals say they have not had sex with a homosexual partner

## IS VIRGINITY IMPORTANT TO YOU?

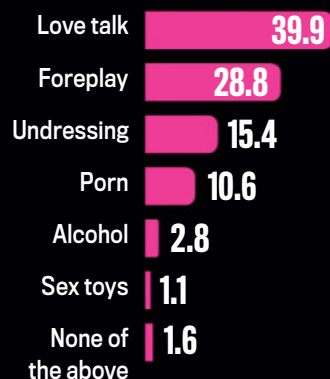


● Yes ● No

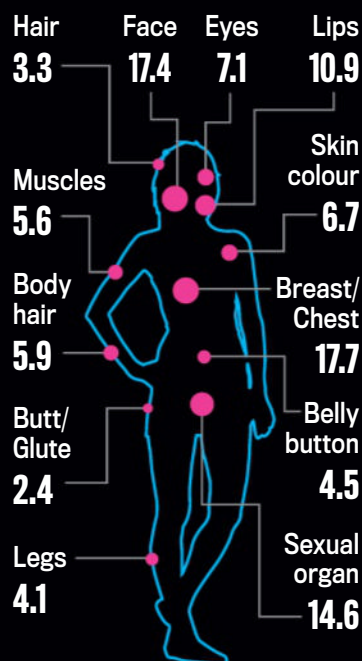
## Cities where virginity mattered the least



## WHAT PUTS YOU IN THE MOOD?

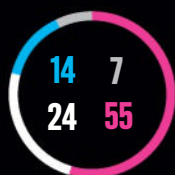


## WHAT AROUSES YOU THE MOST ABOUT THE OPPOSITE SEX?



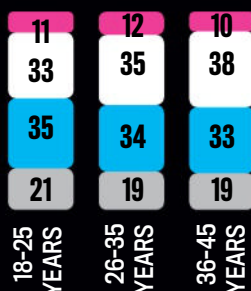
All figures are in percentage

## WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE FORM OF FOREPLAY?



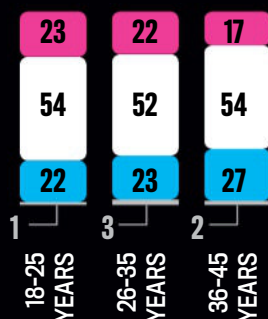
- Kissing ● Caressing
- Love talk
- Watching porn

## HOW LONG DO YOU SPEND ON FOREPLAY?



- Less than 5 min
- 5-10 min ● 10-15 min
- More than 15 min

## FOR HOW LONG DO YOU MAKE LOVE?



- Up to 45 minutes
- Up to 30 minutes
- Approx. 15 minutes
- Less

## THE YOUNG SPEND MORE TIME ON BOTH FOREPLAY AND SEX

of virginity. A majority (54 per cent) of those between 18 and 25 years say virginity is not important to them and 46 per cent say that it is. But the attitude reverses when it comes to those older than 25—52.5 per cent of those from 26 to 35 years and 57.5 per cent of those between 36 and 45 years say virginity does matter to them. Interestingly, respondents from smaller towns are more liberal regarding virginity—92 per cent from Indore, 63 per cent from Chandigarh, 61 per cent from Bhubaneswar, 50 per cent from Ahmedabad and 62 per cent from Pune say they don't care about it.

There is, however, consensus across age groups when it comes to what is the biggest turn-on, with a majority saying it is love talk, followed by foreplay. The favourite sex position (man on top) and favourite form of foreplay (kissing) also remain consistent across age groups. And while oral sex is the most common form of sexual experimentation across ages, more people under the age of 25 have tried out phone sex. "The digital age has had a great impact on how young people view sex and relationships. Since they are exposed to it almost everywhere from a very young age, it does not matter to them as much as it would to someone who hasn't grown up watching OTT, TV shows, movies, songs and video games where sexual suggestiveness is the norm," explains Dr Harish Shetty, a Mumbai-based psychiatrist.

The young also seem to have more time for sex. A majority (35 per cent)

of those between 18 and 25 years spend 10 to 15 minutes on foreplay, followed by 20 per cent saying they spend more than 15 minutes on it. When it comes to those between 36 and 45 years, a majority (38 per cent) say they spend 5 to 10 minutes on foreplay. Similarly, those who spend up to 45 minutes having sex are primarily the young, with 23.4 per cent in the 18 to 25 year age group saying they do so and 17.5 per cent of those between 36 and 45 saying the same. While 34 per cent of those under 25 say they can have sex any time of the day, only 22 per cent of those above 36 say the same, with the latter mostly preferring to have sex at night (70 per cent).

There are other signs of change too. Among those who identify as homosexuals, 60 per cent say they have had sex with a homosexual partner. While the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2018 has helped, some say there is also a marginal increase in acceptance due to portrayals of homosexuals in popular media. "Compared to pre-2018, there is far more ease of dating today in a city like Delhi. I can't comment on smaller towns. Gay-friendly dating apps have also helped improve our chances to find a partner, but I would still not openly kiss on the road or speak to the media as a gay man and we still need to strive for such a day to come," says Anurag Seth (*name*

Pleasure  
is your right.

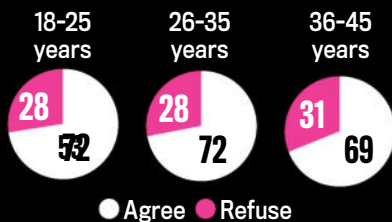
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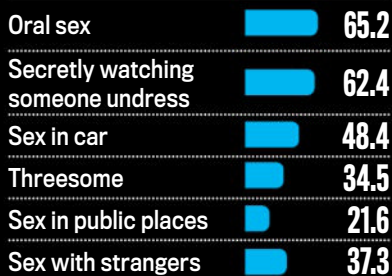
## SEX SURVEY / TRENDS

## WHAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOUR PARTNER WANTED ORAL SEX?

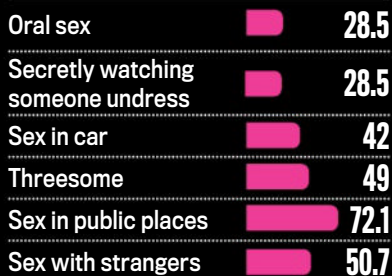


● Agree ● Refuse

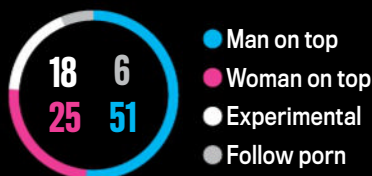
## RANK YOUR FANTASIES (3 MOST LIKED)



## RANK YOUR FANTASIES (3 LEAST LIKED)



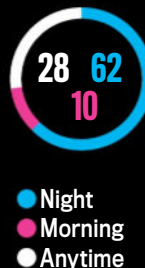
## WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE POSITION?



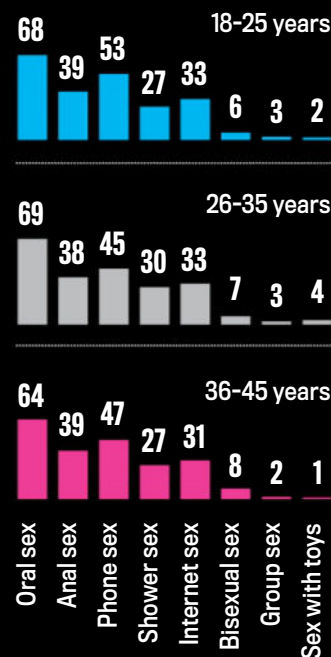
## HOW OFTEN DO YOU LIKE TO HAVE SEX?



## WHEN DO YOU LIKE TO HAVE SEX?



## WHAT KIND/S OF SEX HAVE YOU EXPERIMENTED WITH?



All figures are in percentage

## LOVE TALK IS THE BIGGEST TURN-ON ACROSS AGE GROUPS

changed), 29, who works in his father's export business.

With the growing normalisation of sex and sexual behaviours, a change in mindset is inevitable. Experts say it is futile to characterise this change as good or bad but it has to be viewed as the genesis of a new culture where there is more access and less hesitation to seek and speak about pleasure. ■

# WHAT INDIAN LAWS SAY ABOUT...

## WATCHING PORN

In India, viewing sexually explicit material in private spaces is not illegal. The Centre has, however, enforced bans on various porn websites from time to time. In 2015, the government banned 857 pornographic websites. Many of these are now operational again under new domain names. Last year as well, the government ordered internet companies to block 67 pornographic websites for violating the new IT rules issued in 2021.

## PORN AND AGE

Section 293 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) makes it illegal to sell, distribute, exhibit or circulate obscene objects to anyone under the age of 20 years.

## PUBLISHING OR TRANSMITTING PORN

Section 67 of the IT Act makes it illegal to publish or transmit obscene material or material containing sexually explicit acts or conduct in electronic form. This material can be anything that is "lascivious or appeals to the prurient interest or if its effect is such as to tend to deprave and corrupt" people who read, see or hear it.

## VIOLATION OF PRIVACY

Section 66E of the IT Act has provisions for punishing someone who "intentionally or knowingly captures, publishes or transmits the image of a private area of any person without his or her consent, under circumstances violating the privacy of that person".

## SHOWING PORN TO WOMEN

Section 354A of the IPC includes in its definition of sexual harassment "showing pornography against the will of a woman".

## SHOWING WOMEN IN PORN

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986, prohibits "indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner".

## CHILD PORN

Section 14 of the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, makes it a crime to "use a child or children for pornographic purposes". The Act also makes it illegal to store or possess child pornography "for transmitting or propagating or displaying or distributing" it in any manner. Additionally, Section 67B of the IT Act makes it punishable for anyone to create, publish, transmit, promote, advertise or browse material depicting children in sexually explicit acts in electronic form. It also punishes those who cultivate or induce children to "online relationship with one or more children for and on sexually explicit act or in a manner that may offend a reasonable adult on the computer resource", and those who "facilitate abusing children online".

## SALE OF SEX TOYS

There is no legal provision in India that expressly bars or permits the sale of sex toys. However, Section

292 of the IPC is often invoked to restrict the sale, exhibition, advertising, import or export of sex toys on the ground of "obscenity". Many sex toy sellers in India are able to operate as long as the product is not deemed "obscene"—by avoiding nudity in the packaging, or showing women in a demeaning manner, etc. They also label their products as 'sexual wellness' items.

## RIGHT TO PRIVACY IN TERMS OF USING SEX TOYS

Right to sexual privacy is part of the law and the usage of sex toys in private is not expressly illegal, unless they are being given to a minor.

## NON-CONSENSUAL USE OF SEX TOYS

For adults, the non-consensual usage of such toys is punishable under Section 376 (digital rape) and Section 377 of the IPC.

## SAME-SEX COUPLES

Previously, Section 377 of the IPC criminalised what it termed "unnatural offences" or "voluntary carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal". This was often used to punish homosexuals in India. In 2018, the SC decriminalised homosexuality. The ruling effectively allows gay sex among consenting adults in private spaces.

## SAME-SEX MARRIAGE

Same-sex marriages are still not legalised in India, although there is a petition for the same in the SC currently.

# MORE IS LESS

**THE SUPERABUNDANCE TECHNOLOGY OFFERS HAS MADE SEX MORE ACCESSIBLE, BUT IT HAS ALSO LEFT US PHYSICALLY LONELIER**

By **LEEZA MANGALDAS**

# I

**IT'S TEMPTING TO THINK THAT IN THE ERA OF THE INTERNET, WHEN MOST PEOPLE ARE**

equipped with smartphones, dating apps and social media and can initiate dozens of new connections daily, sex has never been more accessible. Self-proclaimed custodians of a prudish 'morality' whine tirelessly that the internet is 'corrupting' today's youth, as if because of technology, we're all having more sex than ever before. But, are we really having more sex? Or is technology actually having the opposite effect?

According to the latest INDIA TODAY sex survey results, over 57 per cent of the respondents indicated that they "need more sex" than they get. When asked if they were happy with their sex life this year, 19 per cent said, "Not at all." In 2018, only 5.5 per cent said the same.

While technology connects people digitally, it leaves us physically lonelier in many ways. Between work and emails, video games and scrolling purposelessly on Instagram, porn and an unending stream of movies and TV shows, it seems the unexpected is happening in this tech-enabled, productivity-obsessed society: we're more and more likely to be "too busy" on most days to have sex.

The opportunity cost of increased productivity,

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE



heightened efficiency and convenience, and limitless entertainment available at the click of a few buttons from the comfort of our home or office, is perhaps that many of us are less likely to actually go out and about. Chance in-person interactions, which oftentimes led to intimacy in the pre-internet world, are less likely to occur now. You're never going to meet a sexy stranger at the movie theatre if no one goes to movie theatres. You're not going to chat with someone at the bar as you wait for your table for one at a restaurant if you're Swiggying that dinner home instead.

This has been a globally reported trend for several years now. The National Survey of Sexual Health and Behaviour in the US and the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in the UK as well as similar surveys in several other countries have found that, over the past three decades, people across geographies

reported having less and less sex. While of course there is no "right" or "wrong" level of frequency of sexual activity, that people are having sex less frequently today than they were 30 years ago may seem surprising to many.

There are a few more aspects to consider. With young people more open to delaying marriage than in the past, more of us are less likely to be living with a sexual partner by a certain age—say, the early 20s—than before. As for the 'hook-up culture' and the supposed ease of access to casual sex provided by online dating apps, it's worth keeping in mind that dating apps make it easier for certain people to access sexual intimacy than others. Given the visual basis of the 'swipe' system—swipe right if you like what you see—people who fall within society's traditional definitions of attractiveness (good looks, high income) get the majority of the swipes. The rest often get few or no matches. Additionally, in India, premarital sex remains taboo. Even in 2023, over 52 per cent of the INDIA TODAY sex survey respondents in the 26-35 years age group said 'virginity' was 'important' to them.

Notably, while porn consumption is another key facet of the internet era—leading many to believe that people know more about sex and the body today than they did before—it's worth remembering that learning about sex from mainstream internet porn is like learning how to drive by watching *Fast & Furious*. Not the greatest reference point. In fact, for many, it's also another reason to stay home. How could your dating pool compete with the abundance, variety and intensity of what's on offer on the

internet? And yet, consider the fact that over half of the INDIA TODAY survey's respondents said they had no idea what the G-Spot is (by the way, it's simply an erogenous zone within the vaginal canal due to the proximity to the internal parts of the clitoris and the urethra, not a separate physical structure or a 'magic button'). Therefore, mainstream porn is not a stand-in for comprehensive sex education.

Speaking from personal experience, technology has certainly impacted how much sex I have. I was definitely having more sex in 2013 than I am in 2023. I had less work, no social media, no Netflix, no vibrator and far less experience dating. Today, with constant deadlines that have me working past midnight on most days, overwhelming amounts of great OTT shows to choose from when in need of entertainment, the knowledge that hookups are often disappointing and an enviable sex toy collection, the idea of having to actually deal with a person or disrupt my vaginal pH seems much less exciting than it did once. Even for people who live with their partner, so often, both parties get into bed glued to their respective smartphones, not each other.

Perhaps the key to having more and more satisfying sex is to ultimately put our phones away. ■

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Leeza Mangaldas is a sex-positive content creator and author



**WE'RE MORE  
LIKELY TO BE  
'TOO BUSY' ON  
MOST DAYS TO  
HAVE SEX**



# REWRITING THE LUST STORY

**THE NARRATIVE AROUND SEX, PLEASURE AND SEXUAL WELLNESS HAS BEEN HYPER-MASCULINE AND MISOGYNISTIC FOR TOO LONG. IT IS TIME FOR WOMEN TO CLAIM THAT SPACE**

By **SACHEE MALHOTRA**

# Is

**INDIA READY FOR A SEX-POSITIVE REVOLUTION?** Instagram says so. With so many educators and influencers bringing sex-positive conversations to the forefront, you'll soon see a world where people are openly discussing body positivity, sexual health and pleasure. It is indeed encouraging for

entrepreneurs like me who are in the business of changing mindsets. Having said that, what's on the gram isn't always the whole truth. When I look around, I see generations of people raised with little to absolutely no Sex Ed at all, weighed down by misogyny and patriarchal norms. People may claim to know about sex, but most of them have been coached by mainstream porn because, sadly, our school SOPs were particular about skipping any chapters related to our anatomy or the basics of sex education.

## **Internalised misogyny**

When young girls are conditioned to look and behave a certain way, how can we expect them to have agency over their bodies when they grow up? I remember my own childhood when I was told to wear clothes that wouldn't make me look 'fat' or makeup that wasn't 'too much'. I remember giving up on so many of those cute frocks as a little girl just because I was told I have 'thunder thighs'.

The question is, who decides what looks good on that girl? Shouldn't every girl be empowered to decide for herself? For some, it may be just a small anecdote, but this shame and lack of confidence in your body at such a young age has a lasting impact on so many women as they grow up.

We're fighting this today by showing diverse bodies—big, small, thick, thin, all shapes and sizes, in our communication. We show women with body hair, stretch marks, dimples, pimples—raw and real. In doing so, we're normalising all types of bodies and helping people feel more affirmed in theirs. We also work with credible educators and content creators to bust myths around the 'perfect body'.

## **Women ignored in the sexual wellness space**

The sexual wellness market has been drowning in the sea of sameness—crowded with brands owned by men, making products that cater primarily to the needs of men and, in the process, serving the male gaze. When the narrative around sex and pleasure has been so utterly hyper-masculine and misogynistic for long, it becomes challenging for women to find that one voice in a space so cramped that understands them, relates to them and empowers them.

When there aren't enough conversations about a vulva owner's pleasure, the power dynamics automatically skew towards men in the bedroom. This is one of the main reasons behind the orgasm gap (in a cis-het relationship). Speaking of a personal instance, I had a close friend who I knew was getting treated for vaginismus, but her partner often claimed, "I prefer natural lubrication. Lubes and condoms are so overrated." She'd been having painful sex for years without addressing the issue or being able to talk about it with her partner.

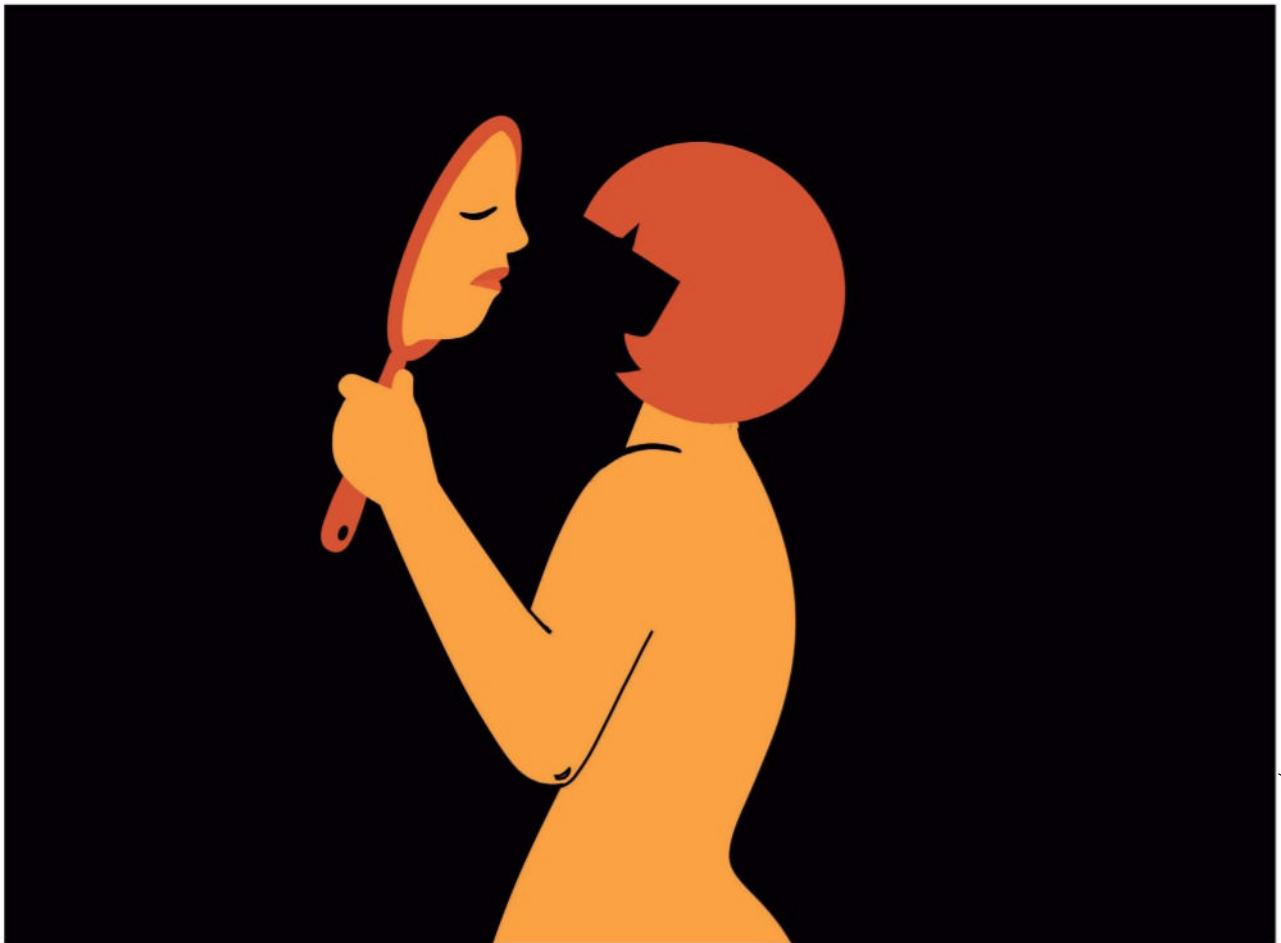


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUNDE

Unfortunately, women are conditioned to feel that pain is part of the package and that it's normal. But we are here to change that narrative. At That Sassy Thing, we are flipping the script by creating products prioritising vulva owners and their pleasure. Our bestselling massager, LIT, has emerged as a liberator for so many of our customers. We've had customers who've been married for over 10 years writing to us that they experienced an orgasm for the first time using LIT. That's super encouraging and empowering for us.

### ***How business can change mindsets***

Naturally, we need more women in positions of power to come forward and talk about body positivity and sexual health. Sadly, that is not the case in India. I remember talking to a woman investor who told me that sexual wellness products are a 'want', not a 'need'. This mindset has to change and women need to be at the forefront of that revolution. The funding landscape already has very few women investors and the sexual wellness space isn't getting the support it deserves. And though I understand how bringing change can take time, I am sure we will be able to make it happen, one day at a time.

## **SEXUAL WELLNESS PRODUCTS SHOULDN'T BE JUST A 'WANT' BUT A 'NEED'**



I believe a business can be profitable and do greater good at the same time. So, we're not just about selling pleasure products but also want to educate people about how to use them to start their own sexual wellness journey. We've also launched India's first online, free, queer, and trans-affirmative Masterclasses on Sex Ed, in collaboration with sexuality experts in India. Our goal is to provide people with language and resources relevant to their sexual wellness journey. In keeping with our larger vision to build for Bharat, we recently started a masterclass in Hinglish (Hindi + English) on 'Consent' and are soon launching one in Tamil + English on 'Intimacy After Childbirth'.

We're making sex education accessible, inclusive and realistic for people of diverse identities, ages and bodies, across regions. With credible Sex Ed, we believe we can empower more and more people to take ownership of their bodies and, in turn, normalise all things sex. I envision a world where sex care is as mainstream as skincare. ■

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**Sachee Malhotra is founder, That Sassy Thing, a wellness brand**



INDIA TODAY CONCLAVE 2023



**GLOBAL OUTLOOK** From left: HelpAge International chairman Arun Nath Maira; VIF director Arvind Gupta; Ambassadors Ina Krishnamurthi, Cameron Bertelsmann Stiftung; India's G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant; India Today Group Editorial Director Raj Chengappa; India Today Editorial Advisor Rohit Saran,

► **BERTELSMANN STIFTUNG ROUNDTABLE** | HOW INDIA CAN MAKE G20 MORE EFFECTIVE

# G20: INDIAN VOICE FOR GLOBAL SOUTH

APPRECIATION OF INDIA'S G20 PRESIDENCY AND DEBATES ON ITS FUTURE COURSE DOMINATED THE ROUNDTABLE ATTENDED BY FOREIGN DIGNITARIES AND EXPERTS

Photographs by RAJWANT RAWAT



Mackay and Philipp Ackermann; Aroon Purie, Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, India Today Group; Liz Mohn, honorary member, board of trustees, Ambassadors Barry Robert O'Farrell and Naor Gilon; economist Surjit Bhalla; foreign policy expert C. Raja Mohan and entrepreneur Niraj Singh

# A

**successful presidency of the G20, according to India's G20 Sherpa Amitabh Kant,** is dependent on three factors: it has to be action-oriented and inclusive, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi has stated, with the political narrative of India's development story being an important element; the priorities and issue notes India has spelt out, and the organisation of G20 events in a distinct manner—across all states. Kant was speaking at the roundtable discussion on India's presidency of the G20, the progress made and how it can be made more effective, at the India Today Conclave 2023. The roundtable was attended by ambassadors of various nations, foreign policy experts and prominent economists and heads of organisations. INDIA TODAY organised it in collaboration with Bertelsmann Stiftung, a German foundation that works for global social reform. Kant said India has adopted the ancient Sanskrit pri-

nciple of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—one earth, one family, one future—as the theme for its year of G20 presidency. He expressed hope that amid challenging times—conflict, recession and a looming debt crisis confronting many nations—world leaders who will meet in New Delhi on September 9-10 for the G20 leaders' summit will focus on inclusive and sustainable growth. India's G20 Sherpa spoke about the UN's Sustainable Development Goals on education, health and food security and their importance for the Global South. He pointed out that in the G20 meetings of finance ministers and central bank governors, there was full consensus on all economic, finance and developmental issues. However, he said that the Ukraine conflict—the 'elephant in the room' as it was referred to by several participants—is external to the G20 and its mandate. Opinion was divided on the issue. While German ambassador



**“On all economic and developmental issues, we received full support from all G20 countries. One of India’s focus areas is women-led development. If you put women in leadership roles, you bring in greater digital and financial inclusion**

**AMITABH KANT**

G20 Sherpa, former CEO, NITI Aayog



Philipp Ackermann and Australian high commissioner Barry R. O’Farrell hoped the issue would be positively tackled in September’s declaration, Israeli ambassador Naor Gilon said India could use its good ties with Russia for a positive outcome. However, VIF director Arvind Gupta echoed Kant and said G20 wasn’t the right forum for the conflict, and foreign policy expert C. Raja Mohan said G20 was itself under huge pressure and even a statement on Ukraine wouldn’t make a difference. All foreign dignitaries expressed admiration at India’s ongoing presidency and acknowledged its leadership in the digital empowerment of the masses.

Earlier, in her address, Liz Mohn, honorary member of the board of trustees of Bertelsmann Stiftung, said that in a world riven by crises, India’s role as a mediator and bridge-builder is more important than ever during its G20 presidency. She said fact-based international dialogue and face-to-face exchanges are fundamental to resolving international conflicts. ■

**“Fact-based dialogue and face-to-face exchanges are fundamental to resolving global conflicts. Amidst all the uncertainty, India’s role as a mediator and bridge-builder is more important than ever”**

**LIZ MOHN**

Honorary member, board of trustees, Bertelsmann Stiftung





**“It’s a hugely ambitious programme and India is walking the extra mile to get this presidency done in the best possible way. We know that within the G20, India is a heavyweight”**

**DR PHILIPP ACKERMANN**  
Ambassador of Germany to India



**NAOR GILON**  
Ambassador of Israel to India

**“After the Cold War, it seems we’re back into a zero sum game world. It’s not good for anyone, including the G20. India has good relations with Russia. India should use its connection to put pressure....”**

**INA KRISNAMURTHI**  
Ambassador of the Republic of Indonesia to India

**“Collaboration is the only answer to global problems. We are all in the same boat in this challenging era. We believe India will thrive in the G20 presidency”**



**“India is uniquely positioned to lead on digital empowerment, women’s equality, climate change, the use of creative finance for infrastructure development. We’re all looking to Indian leadership on these areas”**

**CAMERON MACKAY**  
Canadian High Commissioner to India



**“Australia has confidence in India’s leadership. If there are two people who can do some diplomatic jugaad and get a result in September, it’s Narendra Modi and Amitabh Kant”**

**BARRY R. O’FARRELL**  
Australian High Commissioner to India





**DR SURJIT BHALLA**

*Former Executive Director, IMF*

**“India is lucky to get the G20 presidency now. The world has been through a wringer, but it can be set right by intensified globalisation and multilateralism”**

**“If the G20 has to save itself and remain relevant, it should not take up problems that it cannot resolve, that it was not meant to resolve”**

**ARVIND GUPTA**

*Director, Vivekananda International Foundation, and ex-Deputy NSA*



**“As there are tensions in the global system, we must be prepared to make this a success but also recognise that the G20 and the other multilateral institutions are in a crisis”**

**C. RAJA MOHAN**

*Expert on geopolitics and G20*



**NIRAJ SINGH**

*Founder & CEO, Spinny*

**“We are trying to build a brand which is a synonym for trust. We arrived at a model and developed capabilities. If we can partner with firms in our respective nations, we can learn from each other”**



**“We have in the UN Sustainable Development Goals 16 bundles of crises and we have to make progress on those. The system is in bad shape. The only way global systemic problems can be solved is by local system solutions implemented by communities”**

**ARUN NATH MAIRA**

*Chairman, HelpAge International, former member of the Planning Commission*



# देश का नं. 1 हिंदी न्यूज़ ऐप

जुड़े रहिए हर खबर से,  
कहीं भी, कभी भी

अभी डाउनलोड करें

[aajtak.in/app](http://aajtak.in/app)

उपलब्ध है



► **BMW BREAKAWAY SESSION** | Sustainable Mobility New Ways Forward

**L-R:** Rajesh Menon, Director General, Society of Indian Automobile Manufacturers; Deepak Bagla, former MD & CEO, Invest India; Vikram Pawah, President, BMW India; Sudhendu Jyoti Sinha, Adviser, Infrastructure Connectivity (Transport), E-Mobility and Compliance Burden, NITI Aayog; Yogendra Pratap, Editor, Auto Today

# FOR A GREEN TOMORROW

Sustainable mobility is the future, but India needs to address concerns like charging infrastructure and recycling of lithium-ion batteries, says a panel of experts

**O**ne of the toughest environmental and social challenges of our time is managing the mobility of people and goods. As countries across the world try to tackle this extremely important question, the need has also come to bring about mobility as sustainably as possible to protect the earth. Through the Union budget this year, the government has given a clear direction to a zero-carbon strategy for the economy. Experts at the BMW Breakaway Session at the India Today Conclave deliberated on new developments and challenges in clean mobility in India and how the adoption of green vehicles can be expedited. ■

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

It took India five years to sell the first million EVs. From October 2022 to February 2023, EV sales exceeded 100,000 every month

Automotive sector constitutes 7% of India's GDP and 49% of manufacturing GDP

To reduce the carbon footprint and the country's oil imports, the auto industry is adopting multiple pathways through EVs, bio fuels, ethanol blending, CNG and hydrogen

The penetration of EVs is only 1% in cars, 4% in two-wheelers and 53% in three-wheelers

## HITACHI BREAKAWAY SESSION

### Connecting Humans with Humans

How Technology Driven by Green and Digital is Accelerating Innovation to Touch Billions of Lives

# NEW DIGITAL FRONTIER

Technology can transform businesses, but it's also necessary to keep an eye on sustainability and innovation to help improve the quality of life

**I**ndia is on the cusp of a transformational change, advantageously positioned as a bright spot amidst the global uncertainty. The Centre has set aside Rs 10 lakh crore towards capital expenditure for 2023-24, making the Indian market a potential destination for global giants. But, according to experts at the Hitachi Breakaway Session, apart from the business opportunities, MNCs are collaborating with their stakeholders to build a resilient and green society, and enhance people's quality of life in critical sectors such as mobility, manufacture, e-governance, payments and healthcare. ■

## KEY TAKEAWAYS



India converted the complexity in its infrastructure into an opportunity through steadfast implementation



Generating 1.37 billion Aadhaar numbers in 10 years is the base on which we have built our financial services



In the next 5-7 years, more than 40 per cent of India's power production will be from renewable energy



India's young entrepreneurs are coming from small towns. This is leading to a technology upsurge in the country



With the 'connected' citizen as the fulcrum, all B2B models need to become B2C too



Photographs by RAJWANT RAWAT

**L-R:** Manoj Kohli, Chairman and Managing Partner, MK Knowledge LLP; Bharat Kaushal, Managing Director, Hitachi India; Abhishek Singh, President and CEO, National e-Governance, Union Ministry of Electronics and IT; Piyush Jha, Head of Strategy and Technology, APAC, GlobalLogic; Bharat Salhotra, Co-founder/ President, Insightzz, and Chair, Hydrogen Committee, FICCI



**JOY CRUSADERS:** (1) YouTuber Ashish Chanchlani; (2) Arun Mishra, IAS, Secretary, Environment, Government of Goa; (3) Anant Goenka, (6) Aroon Purie, Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, India Today Group; (7) Shantanu Mishra, Co-founder, Smile Foundation; (8, 9) Megha Tata and Kumar, Founder, The Viral Fever; (12) Bhediya actor Abhishek Banerjee, (13, 14, 15) Panchayat 2 actors Raghubir Yadav, Faisal Malik and



# CHAMPIONS

*The Happiness Fest and Awards celebrated the most inspiring, funny and positive influencers for bringing joy and giving hope to people in these trying times*

By **SUHANI SINGH**

**M**usic, laughter and a celebration of the most inspiring, funny and positive influencers—that's how the India Today Group and RPG Group brought down the curtains on their second season of the Happiness Quest campaign with the Happiness Fest and Awards at a gala evening in Mumbai on March 25.

It was in 2022 when the two came together to launch the Happiness Quest, a

much-needed initiative after the Covid-19 pandemic had left people reeling from anxiety and grief. Under such trying circumstances, it seemed the best time for seeking answers to what truly makes one happy. In the face of adversity, how does one rise and find new meaning in life, to maintain equanimity and remain cheerful?

This year, as the quest entered its second season, it was pegged around three tent-poles. First, in January, the INDIA TODAY



Vice-Chairman, RPG Group; (4) Harsh Goenka, Chairman, RPG Group; (5) Navneet Kaur, Vice Captain, India Women's Hockey Team; Rachna Bahadur of the Isha Foundation; (10) Raj Chengappa, Group Editorial Director (Publishing), India Today Group; (11) Arunabh director Deepak Mishra

Photographs by MANDAR DEODHAR, MILIND SHELTE

# OF CHEER

magazine came out with a special issue—"The Secret of Happiness"—that featured inspirational, heartwarming and emotive insights from seers, celebrities and do-gooders on the many paths to bliss and how to find them. The next month saw the first-ever INDIA TODAY-RPG Group Happiness at Workplace Summit and Awards that, based on a comprehensive survey, recognised companies for creating employee-friendly spaces and policies.

The grand finale came with the Happiness Fest and Awards. The evening kicked off with a performance by The Suryansh Project, a band of young musicians known for their Indian classical, Sufi and indie pop

***The India Today Group and RPG Group had launched the Happiness Quest in 2022, at a time when Covid had left people reeling from anxiety and grief. Its second season came to an end with the Happiness Fest and Awards***

compositions. It was followed by celebrity chef-author Ranveer Brar recounting his culinary journey and sharing his 'recipe' for happiness. As comic legend Johny Lever took the stage with actor Kunal Kemmu, his co-star in the Disney+ Hotstar comedy series *Pop Kaun?*, the hall was bound to reverberate with laughter. Breaking into spontaneous comic acts and elaborating on his process ("observe everyone and everything"), the veteran said that good comedy boils down to "good writing".

Fresh off the success of her Netflix heist thriller *Chor Nikal Ke Bhaga*, actor Yami Gautam spoke about how her happiness comes from spending time with family, which includes husband Aditya Dhar's and her mutual love for "nature and finding peace in the mountains". Her one piece of advice to the audience—"Never take work back home" if you want to be happy. Stand-up comedian Abish Mathew

# Why They Won

## FUNNIEST FILM PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR

### Abhishek Banerjee, *Bhediya*

For tickling the funny bone by playing Janardan, a.k.a. Jana, whose reactions to a new landscape and culture and a new furry friend provide constant comic relief



## MOST INSPIRING PERFORMANCE OF THE YEAR

### Alia Bhatt, *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

For commanding every frame of this female-fronted drama with an impressive swagger and raspy voice. *Gangubai* is Bhatt at the peak of her thespian prowess



## MOST INSPIRING SPORTSPERSON OF THE YEAR

### Harmanpreet Kaur

The captain of India Women's Cricket Team, who comes from a small village in Punjab, not only dreamt of playing cricket, a male-dominated sport till recently, but

has also lived her dream and is inspiring a whole generation



## SPECIAL JURY AWARD

### India Women's Hockey Team

The Women in Blue won the hearts of millions of Indians after lifting the inaugural FIH Women's Nations Cup. They also won the bronze at the Asia Cup and Commonwealth Games 2022

## SPECIAL JURY AWARD

### Rishab Shetty, *Kantara*

Not only does Shetty have us rooting for him as a rebel with a cause, he also has us riveted with his artistry in the ritual performance of 'bhoota kola'. The pan-India love for the Kannada film boils down to his compelling act



## NGO THAT BROUGHT THE MOST HAPPINESS

### Smile Foundation

For their seminal contribution in the areas of education, healthcare, women's empowerment, Covid management, and even skiing. Smile's body of work has touched a multitude of lives meaningfully and made a decisively positive impact

## HAPPIEST STATE

### Goa

Goa has emerged as the happiest small state for two consecutive years. It is based on its superlative performance in the parameters indicating prosperity, health, education, ease of living, peace of living, environment, and cleanliness



## MOST POSITIVE INFLUENCER

### Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev

Through his yoga and meditation programs, and initiatives like Isha Outreach, Project Green Hands, Action for Rural Rejuvenation and Cauvery Calling, he has contributed towards making people and communities happy



## MOST INSPIRATIONAL OTT SERIES

### The Viral Fever for *Panchayat 2*

For saying the most profound and pertinent things in the most simple and effective manner. *Panchayat*'s big-hearted, amiable characters, its authentic setting and relatable issues, all make it a winner



## FUNNIEST YOUTUBER OF THE YEAR

### Ashish Chanchlani

With his appropriate and well-intended humour that touches on family dynamics as well as pop culture trends, Ashish Chanchlani Vines has amassed nearly 30 million subscribers



## MOST INSPIRING MUSICIAN

### M.M. Keeravani

For making the nation dance to his peppy tunes in 'Naatu Naatu', which became the first song from an Indian production to win an Oscar



### RANVEER BRAR

Celebrity chef-author

**“THE BIGGEST SECRET TO BEING HAPPY IS TO HAVE THE MEMORY OF A GOLD FISH. FORGET WHAT HAPPENED YESTERDAY AND LIVE IN THE MOMENT”**



### JOHNY LEVER

Comic legend

**“I APPROACH ALL MY FILMS AS IF IT IS MY FIRST FILM. I NEVER TAKE COMEDY LIGHTLY. I TRY AND IMPROVE MY CRAFT EVERY DAY AND MAKE IT BETTER”**

### KUNAL KEMMU

Actor

**“YOU NEED TO BE HAPPY WITHIN TO BE ABLE TO RADIATE HAPPINESS. TRY TO MAKE SOMEONE SMILE, YOU’LL AUTOMATICALLY FEEL HAPPIER”**

next got the laughs going with his observational humour.

The highlight of the evening was the INDIA TODAY-RPG Happiness Awards. To shortlist the categories and nominees, INDIA TODAY had engaged the research agency MDRA. It researched each nominee’s contribution thoroughly and conducted a perception survey across a dozen cities to shortlist five names under each of the categories. Jury members Aroon Purie, Chairman and Editor-in-Chief, India Today Group; Harsh Goenka, Chairman, RPG Group; Anant Goenka, Vice-Chairman, RPG Group; and Raj Chengappa, Group Editorial Director (Publishing), India Today Group, presented the trophies to the winners for bringing happiness and giving hope to people in these trying times.

The illustrious list included Alia Bhatt, who was awarded for the ‘Most Inspiring Performance of the Year’ in the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Ashish Chanchlani for being the ‘Funniest YouTuber of the Year’, and



### YAMI GAUTAM

Actor

**“I TALK TO MY FAMILY DAILY—‘WHAT WERE YOU DOING... WHAT WAS COOKED TODAY?’ JUST TO KNOW THEY ARE ALRIGHT AND HAPPY MAKES ME HAPPY”**

Abhishek Banerjee for the ‘Funniest Film Performance of the Year’ in *Bhediya*. The Viral Fever team followed up its last year’s win (for *Kota Factory*) with yet another for making the ‘Most Inspirational OTT Series’—*Panchayat 2*. India Women’s Cricket Captain Harmanpreet Kaur was adjudged the ‘Most Inspiring Sportsperson of the Year’ and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev the ‘Most Positive Influencer’. Goa was the ‘Happiest State’ and Smile Foundation the ‘NGO that Brought the Most Happiness’. And then there were two Special Jury Awards for the India Women’s Hockey Team and actor Rishab Shetty (see *Why They Won*).

The evening concluded with the ‘desi’ rock and roll group Faridkot bringing the audience to their feet with a setlist that included Amar Jalal singing their chartbuster ‘Nasha’ twice on special demand. There were smiles all around and a spring in everyone’s step after the group’s hour-long vibrant act—bringing to an end the Happiness Fest that surely lived up to its name. ■

# A FEW HAPPY MOMENTS



1



2

1. The 'desi' rock and roll group Faridkot performs the closing act
2. Deepak Mishra, Arunabh Kumar, Faisal Malik and Raghubir Yadav
3. Kunal Kemmu, Ranveer Brar and Johny Lever
4. INOX Group Chairman Pavan Jain with Harsh Goenka and Aroon Purie
5. The Suryansh Project performs the opening act



4



3



5



- 6.** Navneet Kaur and Yami Gautam
- 7.** Raj Chengappa, Aroon Purie and Harsh Goenka
- 8.** Aroon Purie and Harsh Goenka with Sanjiv Mehta, CEO and MD, Hindustan Unilever Limited, and his wife Mona Mehta
- 9.** Abish Mathew
- 10.** Hemant Sikka, President, Mahindra & Mahindra Farm Equipment Sector, with Anant Goenka



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THE SCANDAL THAT  
ROCKED INDIAN CRICKET  
PG 71

KOCHI BIENNALE: ART  
FOR THE PEOPLE  
PG 74

# LEISURE

LIKE BARBARIANS IN  
INDIA: A HOMAGE  
PG 73

Q&A WITH  
RAHUL KHANNA  
PG 76

CINEMA

## *Breaking the Mould*

With *Gaslight* and other  
upcoming projects,  
**Sara Ali Khan** is taking  
her acting career in a  
brave new direction

A

Among Gen Z actors in Bollywood, few make as much noise as Sara Ali Khan. Her quirky *shayaris*, inspiring workout videos and picturesque travel diaries on Instagram, where she has 41.8 million followers (and growing), keep her in the headlines, sometimes more than her films. But one senses that the 27-year-old, five-films-old actor wants to turn the page and start a new chapter in her creative journey. No, she isn't giving up on her penchant for rhyme schemes; she's just looking to surprise audiences with her work. The whodunit, psychological thriller *Gaslight*, which releases on Disney+ Hotstar on March 31, signals the dawn of a more adventurous Sara. Talking to her reaffirms the belief that she is a tad wiser, more introspective and cognisant of her mistakes.

"I had started catering to different things," she says. "I was becoming louder, more attention-seeking and saying things that you wanted to hear rather than being myself, which is what people loved in the first place." The pandemic-necessitated break gave her time to ponder and realise that a course-correction was needed. *Kedarnath* (2018) and *Simmba* (2018) had got her off to a smooth start, but the hiccups came in *Love Aaj Kal* (2020) and Prime Video release *Coolie No. 1* (2020), with questions ris-

ing on her choices. Looking back on the professional lull, Khan says, "I was told they would work and I was stupid enough to believe that."

What changed? *Atrangi Re* (2021), her second straight direct-to-digital release, got her acting chops noticed. It was a much-needed fillip. Khan decided there'd be no more calculations; it was time for instinct to kick in. "One got hungrier to learn," she says, "The desire to do meatier films grew. It's the age to explore different kinds of cinema and make mistakes." Her attempts at reinvention include *Gaslight*, where she plays a wheelchair-bound woman who grows suspicious of her grandfather's absence only to be shut down and doubted. Also starring Vikrant Massey and Chitrangada Singh, it is a film where Khan, as the protagonist, has to do much of the heavy lifting.

Khan revels in that responsibility. "It has been a genuine desire of mine to do films where I don't have a genre that's going to restrict or bracket me," she says, "I am a very high-energy, bubbly person, so *Gaslight* is not something you would expect me to do. Second, it is not something I expected myself to do." That filmmaker Pavan Kirpalani [*Ragini MMS* (2011), *Phobia* (2016), *Bhoot Police* (2021)] came to her with a character whose mental faculties are questioned and whose movements are restricted was challenging. Says Khan, "I was raised by a single

mother who has only given me love. I don't know what it is like to be in an environment where there's no trust. It is alien to me."

What helped was shooting the film at one go in Gujarat. The physical isolation and separation from home, says Khan, helped her sink deeper into Meesha's predicament. Rather than take the method approach, Khan's approach involved "understanding the emotional landscape of the character with empathy". "It's more exciting to use imagination than bog myself down mentally," she adds.

From Alfred Hitch-

Whether *Gaslight* will start a conversation in India about the concept itself remains to be seen, but Khan hopes it'll raise awareness



cock's classic adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's book *Rebecca* (1938) to the more recent series *Gaslit* (2022) starring Julia Roberts, 'gaslighting' as a concept has slowly caught on in popular imagination in the West, much like 'mansplaining'. Whether the film starts a conversation around it in India remains to be seen, but Khan hopes it will raise awareness and viewers will find her character inspiring. "You don't know that you are a victim of it until much later," she says, "but Meesha is strong-willed and determined in the face of adversity, be it physical or mental. She knows what she stands for and that is admirable."

That surety and sense of purpose have seeped into Khan as well, reflecting in her upcoming choices. She plays freedom fighter and underground radio operator Usha Mehta in Amazon Prime Video's period drama *Ae Watan, Mere Watan*; there's a finished film with Vicky Kaushal; she appears in Anurag Basu's ensemble drama *Metro... In Dino* and in *Murder Mubarak* with Karisma Kapoor. The parts, she adds, are from different worlds, enabling her to present a new version of herself each time. Says Khan, "My only thing is honesty, conviction and realism. If I start polluting that, I won't have anything." It's in this knowledge that Khan is flourishing. ■

**Suhani Singh**

## DOCUMENTARY

# JUST NOT CRICKET

*Caught Out*, a new documentary on Netflix by **Supriya Sobti Gupta**, revisits the biggest scandal to hit Indian cricket

Supriya Sobti Gupta is not new to the Indian non-fiction landscape. The 38-year-old filmmaker has served as the producer on two documentaries streaming on Netflix: *Bad Boy Billionaires: India* (2020) and *Mumbai Mafia: Police vs the Underworld* (2023). She is also a former journalist, having worked with organisations like the BBC and Al Jazeera. For her directorial debut, she melded her vocation and profession in a way. Gupta trained her lens on the horrific match-fixing scandal of 2000 that shook Indian cricket to the core. The result is *Caught Out: Crime. Corruption. Cricket*, the recent addition to the slate of non-fiction titles on Netflix.

Gupta says that she was propelled by a desire to shed light on a dark period. "I was interested because it is a retrospective story that involves a lot of emotions, especially for someone like me who grew up watching cricket in the '90s," she says. For long, there were doubts hanging on the gentlemen's game. But it would take persistent journalism and a chance intervention of the Delhi Police in a phone conversation between former South African skipper Hansie Cronje and an Indian bookie called Sanjeev Chawla for the lid to eventually blow. By the end, guilt was scattered all around, including in the then Indian cricket team. Former Indian skipper Mohammad Azharuddin faced a lifetime ban, while Ajay Jadeja and India physio Ali Irani were banned for five years.

*Caught Out...* works best as a reiteration of the tumultuous time and doesn't unearth new details. This poses a query regarding the need for the outing. Gupta supplies the reason, "I don't think the CBI investigators ever came out like this and shared the burden they carried when investigating the captain of India."

*Caught Out...* does that. In fact, it frames the narrative around the heroism of the common person more than the dishonesty of the heroes. Journalists and CBI officials



**DARK DAYS**  
(top) Supriya Sobti Gupta and  
(left) stills from *Caught Out*

populate the frames. Gupta regards them as "unsung heroes". "They stuck their necks out 20 years ago to tell us what happened, and they did it again.

They don't enjoy any sort of security and yet, they have made some pretty damning statements," she says. Gupta also reached out to cricketers, including Azharuddin and Irani, but none agreed to talk. "There is a conspiracy of silence," she says.

Even gaining the trust of the officers was not easy. Gupta says having Passion Pictures, the British-based company that has Oscar-winning titles such as *One Day in September* (1999) and *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012) under its belt, as co-producers brought in credibility.

Having said that, *Caught Out...* glosses over some details. For instance, it focuses on Cronje and Azharuddin as the key accused, although many were guilty. The director acknowledges this, but maintains that including them lent a narrative heft, since both were captains. Moreover, she states, "The big CBI inquiry was on Azharuddin and Kapil Dev; with Jadeja, the findings were few." Some exclusions were because of lack of access.

*Caught Out...* excavates a chapter in Indian cricket history that many would like to pretend never happened. "The writing's on the wall. Have you seen a Virat Kohli or a Sachin Tendulkar tweet about it? It's a cricket film, you know," Gupta says. But she does hope the documentary will be a conversation-starter. ■

**Shिता Sengupta**

**Caught Out excavates a chapter in Indian sports history that many would like to believe never happened**

# CONTINENTAL DRIFT

[ BOOKS ]

Six interconnected and subtly ironic short stories by **Buku Sarkar** about life and its discontents, spanning two continents

**A**njali Ray, the protagonist of the title-story, is a London-based author and life-style guru. She arrives in New York to attend the launch of her new book, *This Good Home*. Alas, her assistant Jenny is a low-energy flea and her editor, Sophie, is merely a well-tailored version of the same species.

Anjali, however, is a Calcutta-born alpha-tigress. She powers through the evening's near-disasters with steely aplomb, even as memories resurface of a doomed romance, in college days, with a lanky, drug-dealing bartender called Shane. We groan at Jenny's incompetence and the ghastly décor of the evening's venue alongside the grotty particulars of that long-dead affair. The distant close-shave with disaster

dovetails neatly with the events of the launch. Ultimately, of course, wealth and privilege save the princess.

The skill with which the author delivers this double-headed narrative is impressive. By contrast, the other five pieces in this slender volume feel a bit like filler-foam. Two are told through the gaze of an adoring but less-privileged female friend of Anjali's called Anita. In 'The Visit', she's a young mother in a dead-end marriage with a dull man. She almost has an interesting adventure alone in New York only to have it deflate into nothingness. In 'The Conversation', she's set up a longed-for dinner date with her glamorous, globe-trotting friend. Predictably, the only

meal on offer is late arrival and mediocre wine with bitter tears on the side.

The two stories of childhood, written in the unnamed first person, have interesting fangs. In 'Afternoons', there's an encounter of the scary-sexy kind.

In 'Auntie B' there's a class struggle between two little girls, fought with weapons of Coke versus Thumbs Up. Perhaps it takes guts to write directly about the snarky underside of growing up super-rich. But the lack of external perspective numbs any desire to know more. We can't possibly like the narrator because of her corrosive honesty, while the needy relatives remind us of all the times we were rude to our own.

'Lily and Reece' is a stark and pitiless visit to Shane's World. Anjali is seen

The skill with which author **Buku Sarkar** delivers a double-headed narrative is impressive



Good Indian noir is an infrequent occurrence, especially in the written medium. Good Indian noir that also has insightful things to say about the systemic injustices of Indian society is rarer still. Tanuj Solanki's new novel, *Manjhi's Mayhem* (2022), featuring a rough-around-the-edges Dalit hero (the promotional literature calls him an 'anti-hero', which isn't really accurate) called Sewaram

Manjhi, is a member of this small club.

Manjhi works as a security guard at a Mumbai café frequented by the well-heeled. At the restaurant across the road, a beautiful hostess named Santosh runs into a spot of bother, only for the muscular Manjhi to thrash the problems out of sight. From that point begins the 'mayhem': Manjhi becomes embroiled in a heist initiated by Santosh and her sister, and there are crooked bankers and mob bosses in the mix. Nobody's motivations are what they seem,

## Subaltern Suspense

A good noir novel is more than mere entertainment. **Tanuj Solanki's** latest certainly fits the bill



**MANJHI'S MAYHEM**  
by Tanuj Solanki  
PENGUIN INDIA  
₹399; 216 pages

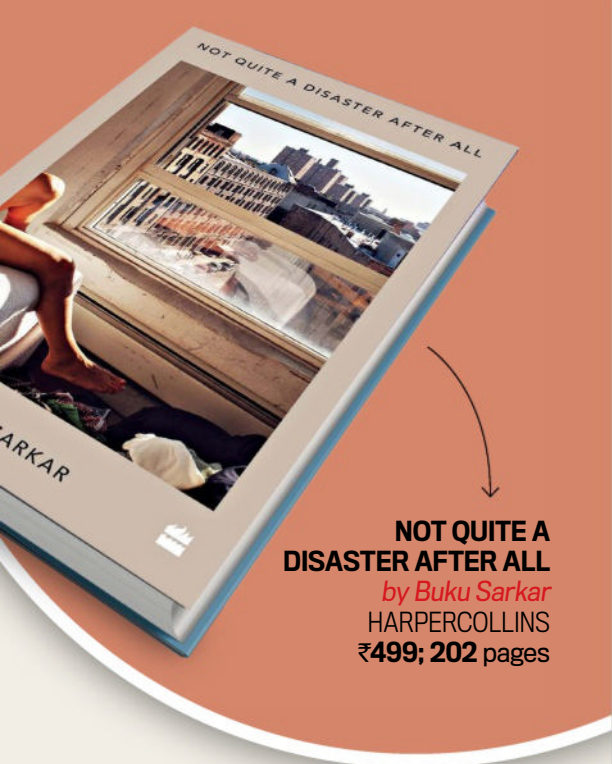
and Manjhi must excavate the truth with his fists (but also his mind).

Solanki is good at taking a basic action set-piece—like Manjhi threatening a corrupt banker called Patil in front of his wife and teen-aged daughter—and extracting incredible mileage from it. The wife doesn't know that Patil was 'gifted' a mistress (Santosh's sister Mithilesh) as payment for his less-than-legal banking services (when she finds out, she eggs on Manjhi, asking him to beat up her

husband more).

She does, however, know banking quite well; better than her husband, in fact, and we're told that Patil forced her wife to quit banking because of... her work outfits. This is a wonderful detail, as is the fact that it's Mrs Patil who explains to Manjhi how the banking system works (he wants to know how Patil's 'scam' works), even as the lord of the manor cowers in the background.

Then there's Manjhi's fury at realising that poor farmers pay a higher



**NOT QUITE A DISASTER AFTER ALL**  
by Buku Sarkar  
HARPERCOLLINS  
₹499; 202 pages

trawling New York's gutters in the company of people for whom dealing and using drugs is as commonplace as eating mishti doi in Calcutta. She's sustained by handouts from Daddy, as well as by the rare flicker of affection from the barely-sentient Shane. As a piece of documentary, it's vivid. But the hand holding the camera is the same one that withheld a Coke from her young cousin. Perhaps. We don't know for sure.

These are powerful stories. They make you think. And look away. ■

**Manjula Padmanabhan**

rate of interest than shady businessmen. This scene, which could've finished as a satisfactory beat-down, instead chose to swing for the fences. It's miraculously good, as are many of the other scenes. A chance meeting by night aboard a local train segues into a touching section about parents and children, a conversation about forging documents offers insights on conversion and religious duty.

These sleights of hand are possible because Solanki understands the

dynamics of noir—for example, in the bit about conversion and forged documents, he is confident enough to slip in a joke about a former pope. Manjhi's forger, Martin Kalu, has only one line he won't cross; because of his faith, he won't create 'fake Christian' documents. Manjhi asks him once again to "make him a John or a Paul".

*Manjhi's Mayhem* is a thrilling, action-packed, cerebral novel—hopefully, the first of many featuring Sewaram Manjhi. ■

**Aditya Mani Jha**

## BOOKS

# League of Extraordinary Indophiles



**Jean-Claude Perrier's** breathless homage to India and the French travellers who have loved it

**I**ndia evokes strong emotions in those who fall into its warm embrace. Love it or loathe it, you can't ignore it. Jean-Claude Perrier's *Like Barbarians in India* revolves around four French writers—Pierre Loti, Henri Michaux, André Malraux and André Gide—who wrote (mostly) endearingly about India. Of them, only Gide never travelled here.

While Pierre Loti (Captain Julien Viaud in real life) is unapologetically Orientalist ("The people we meet are all beautiful, calm, noble, with big velvet eyes—those Indian eyes with a mysterious black charm") in his *L'Inde: sans les Anglais* ('India without the English'), 1903, with Henri Michaux—half of whose *Un barbare en Asie* ('A Barbarian in Asia'), 1933, is dedicated to India and has inspired this book's title—we are slightly less wide-eyed, but only slightly ("When I saw India... for the first time, people on this earth seemed to me to deserve to be real"). Much more engaged is André Malraux in *Antimémoires* ('Anti-Memoirs'), 1967. He made numerous visits to India and was close to Nehru. As for Gide—who once said, "I am quite resistant to India; its dizzying quality has an opposite effect on me"—his translations

of Tagore's works sparked a correspondence with the poet and an interest in Indian literature. Perrier loves them all.

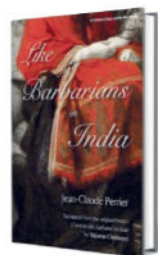
Until this book, Perrier himself had 'hardly dared to write about India', apart from a volume with journal entries from a trip through former French colonial posts in India (*Dans les Comptoirs de l'Inde: Carnets de Voyage*, 2003). His literary musings in *Barbarians* are interspersed

with his own travels in India. Occasionally, he follows in the writers' footsteps, his path littered with epiphanies. In Mahé, he meets the Sishupals. The wife, Karthy Sishupal, had met Malraux in France, written a dissertation on him and corresponded with him later. She shares a letter from Malraux that Perrier goes on to publish. Rummaging

through the Gide archives, he stumbles upon an unpublished translation of Kabir's poems. He writes about a friendship with Pt. Ravi Shankar (they were introduced by Pramod Kapoor of Roli Books).

For a literary history wrapped in a travelogue, this is a remarkably slim and supple book—and introspective. Perrier leaves us with this thought: "But my India, is it the 'real' one? Or am I not tempted by a form of idealisation? Maya, an illusion?". ■

**Amit Dixit**



**LIKE BARBARIANS IN INDIA**  
by Jean-Claude Perrier  
NIYOGI BOOKS  
₹450; 152 pages



Photographs Courtesy: KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE

ART

# ART FOR THE PEOPLE

Despite a few hiccups, the current edition of the **Kochi-Muziris Biennale** has managed to rekindle public interest in art events after the pandemic

**T**HE FIFTH EDITION OF THE KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE (opened on December 23 and concluding on April 10) has been a resurgence of sorts, coming to life in 14 venues in and around Fort Kochi after a three-and-a-half-year gap. The central exhibition titled *In Our Veins Flow Ink and Fire*, curated by Singaporean artist Shubigi Rao, runs in three locations. “This edition has been a recalibration of our lives post the Covid-19 pandemic,” says artist and co-founder of the 10-year-old Kochi Biennale Foundation, Bose Krishnamachari, whom I met on a hot muggy morning in the cool

deep interiors of Aspinwall House, the nerve centre of the Biennale.

Recalibration meant not just dealing with hiatus issues but other unexpected and long-standing ones as well. There was unseasonal, heavy rain three days before the opening. Financial issues have over the years dogged both the Foundation (delaying the opening last December by a couple of weeks, and getting the artist community up in arms) as well as various editions of the Biennale. However, the great success of *Lokame Tharavadu* (“The World is One Family”), an exhibition curated by Bose and spread across seven venues in the port town of Alleppey towards the

end of 2021, rekindled public interest and enthusiasm in art events that had virtually vanished since the beginning of the pandemic.

The success of the Biennale is in no small measure because of its very nature; it is an event that has been birthed, nurtured and living in spaces within the city itself. The possibility that you can discover art, the city and yourself in a process that seems so seamless and organic, irrespective of personal likes and dislikes with regard to what’s on display, makes the Biennale unique. For Payal Puri, New Delhi-based writer, editor and co-founder of graphics communications agency Auteur, this was her first visit. “I was struck by the fact that the Kochi Biennale accomplishes something quite remarkable—it really lays claim to the idea of art and the arts as a public good, a powerful way to feel an immersion into rather than an ‘attending’ of an event.” The same thought is echoed by Kristy H.A. Kang, media artist and Associate Professor at Arizona State University, for whom this was her



**THE KOCHI-MUZIRIS BIENNALE HAS COME TO LIFE AFTER A GAP OF OVER THREE YEARS, AT 14 VENUES IN AND AROUND FORT KOCHI**



#### LIFE AS ART

(clockwise from far left) installations by CAMP; Jitish Kallat's 'Covering Letter'; a viewer taking a look at an artwork by Archana Hande



natural consequence of, and reflection on, our post-pandemic way of life.

Bengaluru-based artist Archana Hande is here to document her site-specific installation 'My Kotigge', in which she delves into the past to "explore the living archives of the everyday". She tells me she was a signatory to the open letter written by the artists about the 'organisational challenges' that plagued the opening, but "we have to emerge stronger and move on, not dwell on what is behind us". Visual anthropologist and photographer Biju Ibrahim speaks eloquently about his current project that is rooted in his village Kondotty in Malappuram. An earlier one, curated by Riyas Komu, had showcased the nearly 40 different communities living in a five-kilometre radius in Mattancherry in Fort Kochi: co-existence as integral to our lives as breathing, not something to be labelled as 'other'.

For Puri, the experience was also compelling in that "this is one of those ways of triggering powerful conversations that are often political in nature without turning the city into a political site. We have only institutional mechanisms for conducting the work of democracy in our country, few social and cultural ones. This is invaluable for that very reason."

My favourite of this edition remains *Idam* (Space), a special and fascinating exhibition showcasing around 200 diverse works of art by 34 contemporary Malayali artists at the magnificent Durbar Hall in the city. And if we ever needed proof that such events revitalise, energise and inspire ordinary people, it can be had in the crowds made up mostly of young people, who visit all the venues, with total footfalls to date nearly 700,000, forging threads of unity in our increasingly fractured spaces. ■

**Elizabeth Eapen**

second visit. "Sometimes the spaces are more interesting than the artwork," she says, "The Kochi Biennale is unique because of the dialogue between the art and the people and spaces in the city."

Kang was disappointed by the delayed opening; she had made the long journey from the US especially for this, but, she says, "I enjoyed many of the collaterals; Jitish Kallat's 'Covering Letter' and Amar Kanwar's *Such a Morning* (2017), both video installations, were highlights, as were *Shadow Circus* (1998) by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, and *Bhumi*, a community art project initiated during the lockdown with craftspeople in a village in north-western Bangladesh. At the students' biennale, the brickwork installation of A. Livingstan and Shivaganam was striking." The increased digital footprint in this edition, not favoured by some, was deliberate, says Bose, a

## BEYOND FORT KOCHI



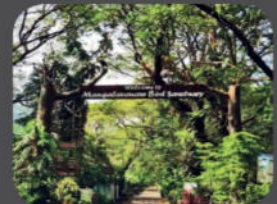
**The Museum of Kerala History in Edapally**, Kochi, run by the Madhavan Nair Foundation, is worth a visit. It includes a sound-and-light show detailing the history of the region through life-sized tableaux, a gallery of contemporary Indian art, a dolls museum, and a centre for visual arts.



**The Hill Palace Museum in Tripunithura**, Kochi, was once the administrative office and official residence of the Cochin Maharaja. The complex consists of 49 buildings in the traditional architectural style, an art gallery and expansive grounds.



**Chendamangalam** has some interesting Muziris sites, including one of the oldest-known synagogues built by the Malabar Jews, and Paliam House, which is now a museum. Ancient temples, churches, mosques and synagogues make Chendamangalam unique. There is also a handloom weaving centre.



**The Mangalavanam Bird Sanctuary**, a rather unkempt 2.74 hectares of green zone in the heart of the city, behind the Kerala High Court, attracts many migratory birds.

# LOST & FOUND

At 50, **Rahul Khanna** is more relevant than ever—from his latest OTT appearance to a premium accessories line

**Q. What was it about the role of polished politician Ranjan Varman in *Lost* that made you choose it? Do grey characters appeal to you?**

It was the script—such a taut, intricate thriller written by Shyamal Sengupta and Ritesh Shah. Just reading it kept me on the edge of my seat. I was surprised by the role. It was completely different from anything I'd been offered before... Sinister yet stylish villains are such fun for any actor to play!

**Q. After critical acclaim and popularity in your early films, why did you choose to go 'boutique'?**

I use 'Boutique Bollywood Actor' as my bio for my social media accounts. I don't know why it triggers people—it's not meant to be taken seriously! I had been hearing the term 'boutique' used to describe everything from hotels to investment companies that were niche, and I realised it was also quite apt for me and the way my career has unfolded.

**Q. Your easy-going fashion sense fits into the Hamptons-meets-Alibag vibe. How has it evolved over the years?**

I've always liked simple, classic clothing. It was once I entered the entertainment industry that I started having an appreciation for fashion and personal style. As a kid, I was inspired by movies, books, and family albums. I had some very stylish ancestors! As an adult, I'm inspired by people who are firm in their stylistic principles. I was once on a flight with designer Tom Ford and was mesmerised by the way he conducted himself. In India, the way the late Jivi Sethi dressed and entertained at his home in Goa was also impressive to me.

**Q. While most of us present our happiest side on social media—and the common perception of you is one of posh privilege—are there bleak days too?**

I love the quote: "What others think of you is none of your business!"... Social media is hardly a comprehensive representation of someone's life. It's merely a highlights brochure. I'm intrinsically an extremely private person...

with Priya Pathiyan



RAHUL KHANNA X CHOKORE

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