

Promiscuity in a new, young India

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There is something else that stood out from the just-concluded cricket World Cup, other than the “feel good” about winning it after 28 years, at least for me. It was to do with the underlying social message about a sexual awakening of India associated with the younger demography in the advertisements that frequented our television screens for most of March; an awakening, like an incoming tide, that has come upon us without any of the usual reactionary noise.



Three of them, all showcasing mobile phones, stood out. One featured this girl who is clearly having an affair with three separate boys but survives detection by using different colour skins for her cellphone at each date. The second has this woman sitting at the cash register of a supermarket who runs out of change; impressed by the cellphone of a young male customer, she suggestively hands out a condom. The third advertisement features the country’s hero of the hour, Mahendra Singh Dhoni. The cricket captain is seated at a bus window that pulls up along side another one, which has an attractive woman also seated at a window seat. There is an exchange of flirtatious gestures and Dhoni manages to get the attention of the girl, who at least to me seemed a little older than the cricket captain, and suggestively pulls up a coffee icon on his mobile to successfully forge a date.

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Besides the fact that all three advertisements are for mobile phones and feature the younger demography—60% of India is less than 35 years of age—they also send out an implicit message of a new social reality: celebration of promiscuity. Shocking while it may sound and outrageous to our moral compass, it is quite simply a fact; not a good or a bad thing. To be sure, I have no way to verify whether the advertisers desired this message go out like it is perceived.

The fact is that these advertisements—surely there are many more out there—went out at prime time and not some adult-viewing hour. So, it is out there for all to see. It was an instance of an intersection between commerce and a new sentiment among the most sought after demography, 18-25 years, of consumers in the country, yet another example of the political economy of the new India.

A survey of this demography conducted by MTV, the youth channel of Viacom18 Media Pvt. Ltd, a joint venture between Network18 and Viacom Inc., and published in *Mint* on 27 April, reveals that mobile phone bills form the second biggest spend item in the monthly budget. It also found that sexual awareness picks up somewhere in the late teens and that most youth are sexually active by the time they are 24 years of age.

The survey also reveals the gender differences in their attitude towards sexual promiscuity. While one out of two males found sexual promiscuity to be a sign of coolness and sexual prowess for a single guy, the ratio was two for every five females. Similarly, on the issue of sexual promiscuity being a sign of loose morals for a girl, more than one out of two men believed so, while only two out five females thought so.

News magazines have, in their annual surveys over the years, been flagging the changing sexual attitudes of new India, particularly among women. One done by the weekly news magazine *Outlook* in 2003 revealed that more than one out of two women surveyed across 10 cities felt that sex was as important to them in a relationship as it was to a man. And, nearly seven out of every 10 women believed that they were more comfortable with their sexuality now than they were even five years previously.

Clearly, change has long been coming. About a couple of years back, *Time Out* magazine introduced a section for gays and lesbians. Interestingly, it never drew any public flak. This from a country that had in 1998 so violently opposed Deepa Mehta's portrayal of a lesbian relationship on celluloid in *Fire* and starring Nandita Das and Shabana Azmi. More than greater acceptability, there is less traction for the reactionary naysayers from among us today.

Funnily, we are not willing to discuss these new trends openly, but are content seeing its proliferation in the new media around us. Clearly, there is no debate about the change, even though society is not visibly uncomfortable with it when it happens. That is significant and something that is being tapped by consumer goods companies without drawing any untoward responses.

If youth with their aspirations are already forcing shifts in society's attitudes to social issues, can polity remain unscathed? Are politicians listening?

Anil Padmanabhan is a deputy managing editor of Mint and writes every week on the intersection of politics and economics. Comments are welcome at capitalcalculus@livemint.com