

# Susan Runkle

## MAKING 'MISS INDIA'

### Constructing gender, power and the nation

*This article, based upon the author's intensive participant observation at the 2003 Miss India pageant's month-long training programme for contestants, addresses how the pageant has emerged as a site for the creation of a new kind of woman in the post-liberalisation sphere. Under the guidance of leaders of the Indian fashion, film and beauty industries, Miss India contestants learn how to construct gendered identities in a process that closely resembles Foucault's notion of the panopticon while simultaneously reflecting greater global power structures.*

#### Introduction

Throughout my presence at the Miss India training programme, I was consistently struck by similarities between the creation of beauty queens and theories of the body that stem from the Industrial Revolution. Perhaps there has never been a more apt example of thinking of the body as a machine with parts to be repaired and replaced; indeed, more than one individual at the training programme referred to contestants' bodies as 'in need of work' or 'not up to standard'. Emblematic of gender as performance (Butler, 1994), the construction of 23 potential Miss Indias from a group of relatively ordinary young women points to ways in which the body is what scholars such as Davis (1995) have called 'cultural plastic'. This paper discusses the ways in which young women at the Miss India pageant seek to literally embody what are discursively constructed in urban South Asia as 'international standards' and how contestants negotiate the training program in order to meet their own goals. Via discussions of how the pageant can be viewed through both a Foucauldian and postcolonial framework, a clearer picture will emerge of what it means to live in post-liberalization, postcolonial and, indeed, post-modern urban India.

#### Background and history of the Miss India Pageant

Following economic liberalisation in 1991, the Miss India pageant grew from an event that originally showcased Indian textiles into a full-fledged media extravaganza. The most notable post-liberalisation change has been a shift from a focus on national identity to a focus on individual identity, which has mirrored changes at *Femina* Magazine, which owns the pageant. Current *Femina* editor, Sathya Saran, was quick to describe the Miss India pageant as a tool with which to 'launch young women into

life'. Indeed, it was only after liberalisation that the three winners were chosen each year in the Miss India pageant, titled Miss India – World, Miss India – Universe, and Miss India – Asia Pacific were groomed specifically for each pageant. Each title winner then goes on to compete in the international pageant that her Miss India title decides for her, with Miss Universe being the most prestigious.

The process of becoming Miss India begins every year in August or September, when *Femina* magazine prints entry forms in both its pages and in the pages of its owner, the *Times of India*. Several thousand young women from Delhi, Bombay and Bangalore submit the form along with photographs of themselves, upon the basis of which a more limited number of young women are summoned to participate in the pageant if they fall within the parameters of being above 5'7" in height and under 25 years of age. The Miss India pageant holds a 30-day training seminar in Bombay prior to the event itself. During the course of this one month, 23 contestants are housed, trained and made beautiful in what is a Foucauldian total institution with one goal in mind: to create a Miss World or a Miss Universe. Every morning for 30 days, Miss India contestants attend fitness classes twice a day and have all of their meals catered by a well-known dietician. Having the opportunity to meet with the individuals who train them, all of whom are extremely well known throughout urban India gives young women who compete in the pageant the chance to create a social network that will allow them to build careers in the glamour industry in India.

Beyond fitness and diet regimens, however, the month-long seminar also includes a heavy focus on the worlds of modelling, fashion and cinema. As these are the fields which most Miss India contestants enter after the pageant, simply being able to make it into the training programme can serve as a life changing experience for many young women, who compete with one another in a process, undertaken by experts in the Indian fashion, film and beauty industries. Pradeep Guha referred to this as 'chiselling', a word, which in and of itself speaks to notions about altering women's bodies to fit a certain set of standards; standards which can be best contextualised in the realm of both Foucauldian and postcolonial feminist theory.

### **Theoretical framework: Foucault and postcolonial feminism(s)**

Following Foucault, who describes power as omnipresent because it is ever changing, situated at once inside and outside situations via complex processes of positioning (1968: 93), this article discusses the way in which young women at the pageant construct elaborate hierarchies of beauty and nationality at the training programme. Within a Foucauldian framework, power is exercised at all social levels, by all social actors, embedded in all human relationships and it is reinforced from below via hegemony. Power is also always exercised as a means to an end, and is consistently accompanied by resistance (Foucault, 1968: 95). This resistance takes various forms, and is in fact necessary for the system of power relations.

This, in turn, is related to the idea of the body as an identity project, which refers to the construction and manipulation of the female body as an act central to the creation of a gendered self. As relationships of power are necessarily about the construction of selfhood and the positioning of the self in broader social fields, this article maintains a focus on what it means to construct and present a gendered

self at Miss India. Through a feminist theoretical framework that draws upon Butler (1993), Bordo (1993), Hammonds (1999) and Brumberg (2000), in turn, this analysis examines what it means for women to use their bodies as measurements of self-worth.

Feminist theory is couched within a framework that emphasizes the effect of instruments of domination in a gendered world. This world, at least as it has been depicted in feminist anthropology over time (e.g. Martin, 1987; Rapp, 2000), is one in which gender is a central organizing principle through which individuals negotiate the course of their everyday lived experience. As feminist theory works largely by examining, and re-examining, female roles, it is employed throughout this dissertation to analyze critically how women embody, as well as transgress, such roles. As such, it is important to have an understanding of what I term 'real world feminism', in which young women use the Miss India pageant to advance themselves socially via the creation of networks. It is difficult to argue, for example, that women are oppressed when they choose to beautify themselves, especially when that beautification process wins them additional benefits. Following Cole's (1995) discussion of Portuguese fisherwomen who aspired to be stay-at-home mothers, it is important to remember that power, and empowerment, are constructed in vastly different ways by different women, and that such constructions are heavily influenced by class.

Postcolonial feminist theory, in turn, discusses the way in which feminism as a concept is in and of itself divided. In essence, it contends that what it means to be a woman in South Asia, for example, is very different from the articulation of gender in the United States. Numerous scholars have noted the way in which this difference is constructed (Alcoff, 2001; Bhavnani, 2001; Etienne and Leacock, 1980), enforced (Alexander, 1991), perpetuated (Amos, 1984; Minh-ha, 1989; Mohanty, 1991) and lived in specific geographical locations (e.g. Abu-Lughod, 1998; Basu, 1995; Chang 2000; Fernandez-Kelly, 1989; Mies, 1982). Drawing upon a postcolonial feminist theoretical framework which recognizes that notions of difference are just as important as constructions of gender themselves, the analysis which follows assumes that ideas about what it means to be 'Indian' are just as important as conceptions of what it means to be 'female' at Miss India.

## Methodology

As a part of the 2003 pageant as a researcher conducting intensive participant observation I was given access to all aspects of the Miss India process. I travelled to Delhi and Bangalore as well as to my research site of Bombay for the initial selection rounds of the pageant in November. This was followed by a six-week training programme, in which I stayed with contestants in the most luxurious hotel in Bombay and watched while they were prepared for the pageant. Next, I went to Bangalore with the Miss India team for the semi-finals of the pageant, followed by a return to Bombay for the final pageant on 31 January.

## Economic liberalisation and the culture of experts

Making Miss World: Ingredients  
A suburban Mumbaiite

The Femina Miss India pageant for marination  
 The essence of a diet, a la Anjali Mukherjee  
 A powder blue concoction from Hemant 'Sheetal' Trevedi  
 Large helpings of Mickey Mehta/Rama Bans workouts  
 Dermatologist Jamuna Pai's skincare, peeled to perfection  
 Finely grated talk by the high priestess of politesse Sabira Merchant  
 A dash of timely marketing  
 Swarovsky to sprinkle  
 Sundry advice (optional)

(*Times of India*, 27 December 1996)

As the 'recipe' above clearly illustrates, the contestant herself is discursively constructed as contributing rather little to the process of becoming Miss World. Rather, 'the experts' do the majority of the work by sculpting her into the ideal of what Miss World should be. The initial ingredient 'a suburban Mumbaiite', followed as it is by the names of the experts, is a rather snide reference to the enormous class divide that exists between a young woman from the suburbs and the elite, South Bombay-dwelling experts.

However, it is precisely this class difference that allows for social mobility on the part of the Miss India contestants at the pageant. As Mareesha, a 2003 contestant, noted 'Even if you don't win, you gain something, so it's not a wasted effort. You make so many contacts, by the end of it you have fifteen different options – serials, ramp, whatever.' Mareesha's statement points to the way in which the training program gives contestants the opportunity to create a social network that allows them to enter numerous fields in media. India is so incredibly socially stratified that building such a network would ordinarily otherwise be impossible for a young woman not from an elite background. Citing the benefits that simply participating in the training programme provides to young women, Mareesha underscores the way in which Miss India acts as a gateway to social mobility.

The culture of celebrity that positions those deemed the experts as authorities on everything from their actual field to what constitutes symbolic capital, is largely the result of economic liberalisation, which necessitated the development of a group of individuals who could translate between international trends and an urban Indian context. Positioned as cosmopolitan individuals of the highest calibre, the experts are treated with deference both at the pageant and in popular culture at large. The panel of experts who comprised the 2003 training staff did not vary much from years past. Comprised of a list of celebrities and individuals well known in the field of media in Bombay, they are chosen to impart knowledge to the contestants as part of the *gurukul* system that Mr Parigi envisions. These included a fashion designer, dermatologist, dietician, two hair stylists, a make up artist, a self-styled 'grooming expert', a personal trainer, a cosmetic dental surgeon, a spiritual guide, a diction coach, the head of an art foundation, and a photographer.

The contestants are consistently reminded of how they should behave with the experts, even by other experts themselves. As makeup artist, Cory Walia explained to the contestants during a session, one must never presuppose that one has knowledge that the expert does not, even if it concerns oneself. 'Do not tell the makeup artist what suits you' he insisted, 'that person is a professional – you will end up in tears

and you may even get a slap'. For a month, the contestants' lives are controlled and dictated by the experts. From skin care to diction to diet to spirituality, the training is designed to provide what *Femina* consistently describes as 'a comprehensive crash course in life'. Of course, the kind of life that the training programme cultivates is one that revolves around physical appearance.

### Training contestants to be beauty queens

Although the body and diet were consistent points of attention, the most striking focus of the training programme was on skin color. I sat in on weekly individual sessions that dermatologist Dr Jamuna Pai held with the contestants in order to examine their skin. Every single one of the young women was taking some sort of medication to alter their skin, particularly in colour. In a disturbingly casual manner, Dr Pai emphasized the need for all the contestants to bleach their skin by prescribing the peeling agent Retin-A as well as glycolic acid and, in the case of isolated dark patches, a laser treatment.

When I asked Dr Pai why fair skin was such a concern at the pageant, she noted that 'Fair skin is really an obsession with us, it's a fixation. Even with the fairest of the fair, they feel they want to be fairer. It isn't important anymore, because the international winners are getting darker and darker ... but we still lighten their skin here because it gives the girls extra confidence when they go abroad.' In the name of confidence, then, the contestants undergo chemical peels and daily medication, some of which have rather unpleasant side-effects. One contestant complained daily to the doctor that she felt nauseous and weak because of the medication prescribed to lighten her naturally darker South Indian skin.

The contestants also received supplements in order to make their skin appear healthier. However, sometimes these did not work; in one contestant's case, Dr Pai sighed and said 'I'm giving you ten multivitamins, but you're still not glowing. I'm afraid that the only solution is to eat more.' The notion of being 'afraid' to tell a contestant to eat more, and that contestant actually looking concerned at the prospect of having to do so in order to make her skin healthier, was extremely interesting, and led to the question of how thin is thin enough. While most of the young women were already very thin when they tried out for the pageant, only two of them, who were severely undernourished, were put on a weight gain diet during the training. Indeed, throughout the training, I watched two young women clearly struggle with eating disorders that no one attended to, although other contestants did mention them as problematic in terms of their eating patterns.

While Anjali's diet plan helped in the project of creating the Miss India body, fitness expert Mickey Mehta focused on the realisation of that body. Every day, he led the contestants with an exercise regimen that began at 7:00 am each morning. It involved mostly aerobic exercise, which allows the body to maintain a lithe form without building up muscle, which is not a part of the Miss India body. When I questioned him about his views of the kind of body he was being asked to help engineer for the contestants, he conceptualised thinness as something of a necessary evil. 'I think that some of them are too thin, but that's not me, that's the demands of the line of work that they're getting into after this ... Some girls were so huge around the hips

that they needed to lose weight; otherwise they would look out of place and probably spoil the show for the other girls.'

As an actively involved participant from the beginning of the pageant, I was very aware of the fact there never were any young women who were, in Mickey's words, 'huge around the hips'. All of the young women who tried out for Miss India were of normal weight, and many of them had been underweight before they even came to the training programme. As we walked around the grounds of the hotel where the contestants were getting ready to begin their exercise routine for the morning, Mehta pointed to Swetha, who went on to win the Miss India – Universe title, as an example of someone who had worked very hard. Slumped against a pillar and clearly exhausted, Mehta congratulated her on the eight pounds she had lost in two weeks. She smiled and thanked him before dozing off again, trying to catch a bit more sleep before her morning run began.

Yet this effort was highly rewarded, contextualized as it was within rhetoric of achievement at the training. Mickey Mehta noted with pride that the young women who worked the hardest to lose weight often went on to win:

The ones who keep working hard despite everything are the ones who win. I've seen many such girls. I worked the hardest with Diana Hayden, who lost almost fifteen kilos, and then there was Yukta Mookhey, who was so huge that people just wrote her off completely, but during the training she worked so hard she lost twelve kilos and then on her way to Miss World she lost more.

Mickey's association of losing weight with hard work is part of the interesting language of the beauty pageant. As young woman 'work hard' to become underweight and use their 'confidence' to answer largely vapid questions, they subscribe to a vision of femininity that undervalues womanhood in general.

While I made sure to attend most of the training sessions, those conducted by former flight attendant and 'grooming expert' Rukshana Eisa were by far the most interesting, as well as entertaining in a way which almost mocked the urban South Asian admiration of the foreign. In these sessions, she used the symbolic capital that being a flight attendant in India still commands as a way to teach the contestants etiquette. As a trainer for Delta Airlines, Rukshana flies to Paris three times a week, and runs her own grooming school, called Image Incorporated. In a style characterised by a series of exhortations for proper behaviour that begin with 'you should' and 'you must never', she advised the contestants on how to conduct themselves. Rukshana was clear that her training was essential for the contestants, 'This is important for the girls, because our own culture doesn't teach these things. They can take it or leave it, but after this they'll be able to sit with diplomats and heads of state and know what to do. That's important.' Equally important is the ability of the contestants to answer questions both in Miss India and at international pageants. For nearly three hours every day, the young women would sit in chairs around a ramp as choreographer Hemant Trevedi sat with a microphone at a table directly in front of the ramp. As they practiced answering questions, Trevedi advised them on how to improve their responses. When contestants were not able to answer quickly enough, he would note, 'when you hesitated, it showed you were unsure, which also makes me unsure about your sincerity.'

As contestants tried to answer questions about which person they most admired and what their views on subjects as diverse as abortion and reincarnation were in an apolitical, audience-pleasing manner, I saw how difficult it is to present views that seem to be the products of an independent, thinking woman, but are in fact platitudes. Contestants were warned to monitor every part of their being as they answered the question posed to them, from their words to their posture to where they held their hands. The very formation of their sentences, as well as their tone of voice, was also the subject of daily sessions for the contestants. Sabira Merchant is a diction coach who speaks with an accent that is the amalgamation of British inflections and American usage that is generally marked as elite in urban India. As it is elsewhere, accent is a major indicator of class in India, and the development of a certain accent as a class marker is discursively constructed as essential for success at international beauty pageants like Miss World.

Throughout all of the experts' training sessions, there was a consistent focus on how the cultivation of the contestants served as a means by which to empower women throughout India. I contend that such rhetoric allows for the masking of the pageant's objectification of women, and is therefore, necessary in order to accept this message as fact. The participation of experts, who are enshrined in urban popular culture as the demi-gods of post-liberalisation India, only serves to legitimise this project further. Although they were advised on how to improve themselves at all times in order to better their chances at winning, the rhetoric of never being good enough was further entrenched by the obvious reality that only three young women would win in the final pageant. As such, while the focus of the experts was obviously to prepare and advise contestants on how to win an international pageant, several sessions were also conducted on career-related subjects. In this way, even the young women who did not win were provided with a social network that would enable them to enter media-related fields.

Miss India training serves as a site in which young women are able to decide their future, or at least expand their options in terms of media-related careers. However, the training is extremely emotionally taxing, as it involves a rigorous 16-hour schedule each day as well as the constant, unrelenting supervision of each young woman's behaviour. Whether because or in spite of this consistent focus on measuring up to a certain set of standards, the contestants sometimes revealed subtle subversions of the training programme itself.

### **Contestant negotiations of the training**

The sheer act of altering one's entire life in order to reshape the body is a powerful statement indeed. Combined with the class mobility that participating in the Miss India training programme entails, contestants are able to use the pageant as a means by which to attain their goals, especially in terms of succeeding in media-related professions. Over and over again, the contestants were adamant that participating in the training programme allowed them a degree of freedom that they would not otherwise be able to experience. However, there is a limit to how much agency is allowed at the pageant.

Shivmeet, a contestant from Delhi, noted that ‘the training programme means that you kill whatever you are in terms of lifestyle, in order to handle celebrity.’ The use of the verb ‘kill’ to describe the transformation of self during the course of the training programme is a striking one. It was precisely because of Shivmeet’s strong personality that she was selected for the training programme, which she was subsequently asked to leave after having been found to be too problematic. She had difficulty getting along with the other contestants, and was often too outspoken during training sessions. Miss Indias are asked to walk an impossible path that entails being strong, but not unpleasantly aggressive. As one of the Miss India officials said to me regarding Shivmeet, ‘I hope that she doesn’t get selected – she’s not confident, her attitude is a defence mechanism. If you push someone to the wall in life, that’s how they act.’ As such, in the context of Miss India, Shivmeet’s attitude was discursively constructed not as one of confidence, but as one of aggression.

While it is understood that all of the contestants must be physically beautiful, or will be by the end of the training programme, cultivating ‘confidence’ is regarded as the most difficult part of the training. The unspoken rhetoric of confidence at Miss India is that because most women do not have it, it needs to be learned. In fact, the word ‘confidence’ was the most over-used one throughout the three months I spent with the pageant. It took on an almost magical connotation, as if it were a mantra to be repeated over and over again; whenever a contestant was asked why she was qualified for a particular task or title, she would beam and respond with ‘because of my confidence’. While the word ‘confidence’ seemed to signify everything from faith in one’s beauty to the ability to speak in public, above all its frequency of use was the result of the sheer cultural abnormality of what young women were doing at Miss India, namely, being the focus of attention. As Mareesha, a contestant at the training programme, noted, ‘Miss India has everything to do with inner confidence. In India, girls are not that independent at this age.’ Citing cultural norms as the reason for the need to build confidence, Mareesha’s statement underscores, albeit in a veiled manner, the way in which young women are marginalised by society. Silenced by popular culture, young women at Miss India are put in the interesting position of having to learn how to speak, but not too much. As Shivmeet’s example shows, too much ‘confidence’ is unwelcome at Miss India. Perhaps because of this, contestants often choose deliberately to espouse a beauty queen ethos revolving around charity as a means by which to attain their goals. As more than one contestant noted to me privately throughout the course of the training programme, ‘I don’t give a damn about world peace – I just want to be famous.’ This desire, then, inspired contestants consciously to mould themselves under the gaze of the experts throughout the course of the pageant.

### **Foucault and the politics of Miss India training**

‘Remember, the moment you’re out of this hotel, you’re onstage 24 hours’.

(Choreographer Hemant Trevedi to contestants)

Eerily resembling Foucault’s concept of the Panopticon, Trevedi’s comment exhorts contestants always to monitor themselves, even when the experts are unable

to do it themselves. As emblematic of the Foucauldian total institution, the Miss India training program completely takes over the lives of the contestants for a month, placing them under the gaze of experts who are discursively constructed as able to transform the young women into glamorous icons which fit the ever-exalted 'international standards'. As a concept, gender inequality at Miss India is writ unabashedly large. The contestants are watched every minute by chaperones, some of whom are their age or younger, who make sure that they eat, sleep and do what they are told. One chaperone mentioned the responsibility of making sure the contestants follow the regimen assigned to them, noting 'I have to be the one to make sure that they all stick with their assigned diets.' Put in the odd position of supervising grown women, the chaperone's complaint points to the way in which contestants are always being observed. Yet, the contestants also observe themselves and each other, thereby internalising the process of monitoring. The very fact that all meals were eaten as a group, where consumption could be watched by all, was in itself part of this.

As I sat with the young women over breakfast one morning, they entered into a complex discussion of the diets assigned to them by the dietician. One girl noted 'I've lost two hundred grams, that's it. I'm 61 and one half kilos right now, and I want to be 60. She says I can't have fruit today, because it's fattening.' Another commiserated that she had been assigned bread and eggs for breakfast, followed by two days of cucumber and chutney. As part of the odd speculations that are inherent in playing the diet game, the girls decided that fruit does not actually fall into the category of fattening, because 'it's more of a maintenance food'. The disturbing intensity with which the young women discussed their consumption patterns points to the way in which the total institution of the training programme enforces a kind of self-monitoring. However, the monitoring of contestants' consumption of food also extended to outright policing at times. When the young women were taken to meet the press, their first time outside of the hotel in a month, a pageant organiser warned, 'there will be normal food there, but control yourselves. I don't want to have to come up to you and ask you to stop eating.'

The politics of eating were the subject of much discussion throughout the training period. Contestants ate every meal from a buffet table on which large three tureens of food were arranged for them. For breakfast, they had cereal or fruit as an option, while for lunch, they had two vegetables and soup, and for dinner, they had rice and a protein-based dish. From these selections, contestants were expected to pick out what they had been assigned to eat by a dietician. The fear of over consumption, as well as the pressures of being watched while consuming in front of the competition, in effect, served to make it painfully clear to the contestants that the standards of beauty were dependent upon both their self-control and their attention to expert advice. Although some young women worked harder than others did at doing this, the message of having to struggle to be beautiful was a constant at the training. This closely corresponds to Foucault's concept of how the Panopticon works to force prisoners to begin monitoring themselves. Indeed, defines power as embodied in 'the strategies ... whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied ... in the various social hegemonies' (1968: 93). As such, Miss India serves not only to reinforce standards of beauty for the contestants, but for the urban population who consume images of the pageant as well.

Even the allotted one-hour visits from family members, held between 9:00 and 10:00 pm every night in the hotel's coffee shop, were supervised by chaperones. The coffee shop was rather conspicuously placed in the centre of the hotel, which all 24 floors of the hallways looked down upon. This made it impossible for the contestants to express any emotions with family members that they may have felt uncomfortable expressing in front of others. One chaperone explained the rationale behind this policy as 'because the reputation of the pageant is at stake, and we can't have ugly rumours cropping up.' As a result, she argued, it was necessary for the contestants to be in full view of the chaperones at all times.

When I questioned organisers as to why the contestants were not allowed outside the hotel during their limited amount of free time, a chaperone stressed the fact that the outside world is, in a matter of speaking, not ready for the kind of young women that are contestants in Miss India:

The other day when we took them shopping we had to push them onto the bus because all the *janta* (crowd, in a negative sense) was gathering to stare at them. In India, women can't wear short things and those things all the girls wear make all the *kachra log* (literally, 'garbage people') stare at them. That's why we have to keep them in the hotel all the time.

Utilizing the rhetoric of protection, the chaperone underscores the sharp division between the world of Miss India and the reality that is India. While the contestants were free to roam around the hotel in varying degrees of undress without attracting much attention, the average man on the street would not be able to take his eyes off a glamorous woman in a mini skirt, simply because it is something that he would usually see only on TV, as he is unable to frequent the kind of spaces in which this sort of dress is common.

Yet the phenomenon of being watched is also complimented by the power of being looked at. In most parts of South Asia, staring is not rude; in fact, it is common. If someone is different, others will let that person know it by looking at him or her. The notion of 'darshan', or the holy gaze, is deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, and other concepts, such as '*boori nazar*', or the evil eye, are imports from Central Asian cultural contact long predating the British colonial period. Being looked at, then, is a form of power. One contestant laughed as she described how her servants 'just love' watching her in her thong underwear, which she named as her garment of choice when she is at home. While this may be out of sheer disbelief about the practicality of such a garment from a servant's perspective, the opportunity to be gazed at is a coveted one in Bombay and Delhi. Page Three of the *Bombay Times* (or, in Delhi, the *Delhi Times*), a supplement of the *Times of India*, visually chronicles the nightlife of celebrities and is avidly consumed by a middle class readership.

Shonal, a successful model in her native Calcutta before she was selected for the training programme, noted that doing well in Calcutta and at Miss India were two completely different things, 'I'll lose my privacy if I win. In Calcutta, people know me, and there I have to be cautious about what I say and do. But as Miss India, I'll never be able to relax. Here, they turn you into a complete lady, but when people watch you more and more, your concept of individuality just goes.' Shonal's assertion that she will 'never be able to relax' points to the kind of constant public scrutiny that

the contestants are subjected to, and how it increases tenfold if they win. When she insists 'people watch you more and more', the metaphor of the Panopticon, as well as the two-sided compliment of the gaze become especially clear given her matter-of-factness: being watched, it seems, is simply a part of life as a beauty queen.

Indeed, numerous sessions at the training programme were designed to prepare the contestants to be watched. For several hours one afternoon, diction expert Sabira Merchant led the contestants through an exercise designed to prepare them to be on television, perhaps the ultimate instrument of the gaze. One by one, each contestant came to the podium, where Sabira advised them that, 'Everyone is watching you. Hold the mike level to your chest, make sure it's an extension of yourself. You'll sound sexy that way, well-modulated. You've got to sex up the audience, let's be honest. Everyone will be watching you, so be breezy, happy and in control, cool.' In a few brief sentences, Sabira sums up the need for contestants to be sexual, yet non-threatening, and calm, but still in control. The more I learned about how difficult it is to present oneself as a beauty queen, the more I realized that it is incredibly sad that, like most things feminine, women's work in the space of the pageant is so profoundly devalued. However, given the chance to be looked at via the opportunities made possible by the training programme, the strain of being observed may very well be seen as worth the effort by many young women. Throughout the training, contestants learned how to cultivate themselves in such a way that they fit into norms surrounding gender, class and beauty. What they were doing, in short, was forming relationships with both themselves and positioning those brand new selves in the world simultaneously. As representatives of what is discursively constructed by many urban Indians as a brand new, post-liberalisation India, Miss India contestants, quite literally, serve as embodiments of the nation.

### **Viewing the Miss India Project through a postcolonial lens: performing India**

One of the most difficult things that the contestants had to learn to do was to walk in a sari, which many of them had never worn before. As the iconic Hindu female garment, the sari is made of six yards of cloth worn wrapped around the body. It is not considered a very convenient or modern garment by most urban young women, who wear them only at weddings, if that, preferring instead to wear the kind of clothing that global popular culture dictates as fashionable. This, of course, is in sharp contrast to villages, in which young women wear saris everyday. Designer Ritu Kumar was exasperated with the contestants as they struggled to walk in saris during the training programme. None of the young women was comfortable wearing the garment, and changed into it only when it was necessary for rehearsals. Although many of the young women were professional models, it was an enormous effort for them to learn to walk down a ramp in the heavy floor-length saris that they had been asked to wear, and many of them tripped over the hem as they walked down the ramp. Much to choreographer Anu Ahuja's chagrin, only three contestants had brought saris with them to the pageant, which meant that the others attended their afternoon ramp walk sessions in their normal attire of mini skirts and tank tops. 'Please', she pleaded with the young woman in the leather mini skirt, 'walk as if

you're wearing a sari!' The contestant responded by reducing her confident mini skirt-clad stride into the slower shuffle that a sari demands.

This reluctance on the part of contestants to perform India in the sari round draws attention to the disjuncture between being Miss India and the reality of being a Miss India contestant. While Miss India as an icon wears saris and she is considered extremely glamorous in the realm of the international stage, Miss India contestants as individual young women were uncomfortable with the sari, which they saw as a relic of an old-fashioned India that they were not a part of. To wear a sari as Miss Universe, it seemed, was elegant because of the way in which it showcased and highlighted difference, but as a contestant, seemed prosaic and conservative. The contestants eventually did learn how to walk in saris, especially after a special meeting was held between the pageant organisers about how best to explain to the young women that while saris are not a part of their everyday lives, such attire is a key part of the understanding of India and Indian femininity at a global level. In order to be able to succeed at Miss Universe, pageant organisers contended, the Miss India participants needed to be able to fit into a model of womanhood that was more in keeping with international conceptions of it than with Indian ones.

From the slogan of '*stri shakti*' (woman power) to each contestant's brief speech at the semi-finals about womanhood in India, the entire process was pregnant with the rhetoric of Indian-ness. Ami, a contestant who was raised in Los Angeles, introduced herself onstage at the semi-finals by saying 'Tonight, Bharat Mata (Mother India) stands proud!' The audience was thrilled with this statement, and responded to it with resounding applause. Much more than just a phrase such as 'motherland', the concept of Bharat Mata, is a complex amalgamation of ideas that involve religion, femininity and power. Bharat Mata is often invoked as both a powerful force and a cause to defend in the speeches of right wing Hindu politicians, especially in reference to the perceived Muslim male threat most often embodied in the form of Pakistan. If, as Ami insisted, Bharat Mata stood proud in the form of Miss India, beauty and the nation were linked in a very fundamental way at the semi-finals.

What 23 young women were doing onstage throughout both the semi-finals and the finals, then, was playing at nationhood. Performing India in the saris that they had to take great pains to learn how to wear, they served as paragons of Indian femininity. Throughout the course of the training program, this was alluded to routinely. As Dr Apoorva Shah, a hair consultant for the pageant, mentioned, 'this is Bharat Darshan, a great medium of national integration.' His statement positions the concept of 'Bharat Darshan', of gazing at India in an almost reverential way, as a means by which to link the diverse groups that make up the subcontinent. When I asked former Miss Universe, Lara Dutta how important self-confidence was at the pageant, she insisted that it was crucial because of the enormous amount of responsibility involved in representing an entire country. 'You see' she said, 'at Miss India, you're just another girl, but at Miss Universe, you are India, you are everyone's idea of India and everything that it stands for.' As the literal embodiment of the nation, Miss India serves not only as the representative of the state, but also as the repository of stereotypes to some degree. While Lara Dutta may never wear saris in her everyday life in India, she 'lived up' to an idea of Indian womanhood when she was Miss Universe. This, in turn, speaks to broader issues surrounding what it means to be an urban Indian following liberalisation.

## Conclusions

There are three main conclusions that can be drawn from this research: that although structural readjustment programs affect people in different ways, they affect everyone nonetheless; that globalisation works within existing structures, especially those related to gender, and that economic changes are necessarily social changes. In the project of making Miss India Miss Universe, we see young women negotiating complex structures in which they are constantly measured both by the culture of experts, the pageant itself and themselves. Economic liberalisation changed urban India in more ways than can be described in one article; indeed, it affected people at all levels of society. The discussion of the history of the Miss India pageant illustrated the vast changes in images which followed liberalisation, while the example of performing India detailed the kind of mimicry and positioning oneself in the world that took place at the pageant's training program, in which contestants studied the behaviour and beauty of other contestants from around the world. Indeed, in the geographically compressed space that the world seemed to be in post-liberalisation India, young women often credited liberalisation with changing their lives.

This is precisely the second major conclusion: that what is called 'globalisation' works within existing structures, rather than as a force imposed from outside. Just as individuals negotiate what it means to participate in Miss India, so they position themselves according to others within hierarchies, which existed before liberalisation at least superficially increased that knowledge about the rest of the world. This is true particularly in the case of women: the section on the Foucauldian containment of women is strikingly similar to intrinsically South Asian ideas surrounding women's need to be protected and contained in structures such as *purdah*, seclusion, made this clear. As in most other parts of the world, gender is the most difficult structures in place to negotiate in South Asia, and although ideas about women have superficially changed, or have been questioned with increasing frequency since 1991, India remains a male-dominated space. This is a case of *plus ça change* for women; as many other scholars have noted (e.g. Daskalova, 1991; Fernandez-Kelley, 1995; Kapadia, 1999; Moser, 1993; and Safa, 1992), what is called globalisation often simply reinforces what are already deeply entrenched inequalities surrounding womanhood and femininity.

All of this leads to the third key conclusion: that economic changes are necessarily social changes, especially in terms of how contestants seek to literally embody 'international standards' while under the watchful eye of the experts, members of the culture of celebrity who guide the contestants along in the pageant process. What I found, repeatedly, was that participating in the pageant allowed young women a form of social mobility that they otherwise would not have had. Although this mobility came at the price of modifying their bodies and, in some cases, their very selves, I was consistently impressed by the way in which 26 young women were willing to work so hard to be someone called 'Miss India'. Women who participate in Miss India do so because they are not members of the small circle of media elites. As a result of this, they have to play certain games surrounding gender and power, of which Miss India is the most socially respectable. Historically, women have always had to negotiate flawed gender systems in place in order to fulfil their goals, and the Miss India pageant

is no exception to this. It is because of this, for better or worse, that aspiring to be Miss India can be as feminist a cause as any other can.

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