

SEX, SOCIETY AND FAMILY

# the bold and the dutiful

SHEFALEE VASUDEV

**Y**oung India has given sex the meanings it never had. Imagination, moulded by the open university of free-floating seductive stimuli, is creating a new boudoir of desire. The female form is draped in delicious fabrics, tattoos peep out of thongs, navels are studded with gems and gauzy lingerie lines shop shelves. The tools, accessories and vocabulary to design a sexual fantasy are all there in flamboyant excess. Good now means sexy, whether it is ideas, people, cars, houses, deals or meals. Like Thai girl Tata Young's number in the film *Dhoom*, sex pounds in the ear. Everyone is a babe if not a sweetheart. It is easy to envision the torment of wanton lust while scented candles burn in Swarovski bowls that you saw in an exhibition. There is music for every moan, a prop for every embrace, a nook for every kiss. Being sexy or feeling so seems to have become effortless. Particularly for the young, because they are the victims of sex, bought or sold.

The rising sales of sexuality are reflected in the responses of the youth. There is a slight departure from the

conservative reluctance shown in earlier surveys. But, the "but" endures. Sex is becoming hotter but romance is getting cold feet. The effortlessness behind sex appeal has made it so pointless. Sex clips of real people having sex fade out as the fully-clothed simmer of Madhubala and Dilip Kumar in *Mughal-e-Azam* fades in. Good, fidelity-evoking intimacy is not borne of item girls dancing in pink rain. You need empathy, humour, imagination and yogic flexibility. It is *tapasya* (penance) to be rehearsed unflinchingly. Or like arithmetic, to be practised till you get it right.

The youth agree that there may be a lot of sex in their lives but the longing is missing. They admit to a blunting of the intensity that accompanied lust in old love stories. "Do I pine for my partner? Does her touch leave me secure about our relationship? I am not so sure," says 28-year-old lecturer Jayant Mehta. Growing impermanence in relationships has left everyone a bit afraid. Having swapped vulnerability for vigour, many are unsure about the emotional worth of their relationships. "When people come together in a sexual connection, a repository of intense and complex emotions come into play," says psychoanalyst Madhu

**BONDS OF FREEDOM:** Society's disapproval does not concern the increasing number of live-in couples

The bombardment of sexual stimuli is not radically altering old notions on sex. Kissing in public is still unacceptable, so is premarital sex. The joint family holds sway even as everyone accepts the impermanence of relationships. The youth may be veering towards change but are far from making it a revolution.

Would you want to have a live-in relationship with someone prior to marriage?

YES	22
NO	75

Rest: Don't know/Can't say; Figures in per cent



SUMMET INDER SINGH

Sarin, adding that emotions lubricate fantasies and serve as the most potent arsenal of a sexual relationship. It is a flawed debate. To say that liberation is about making love in a vibrant mustard field is as confining a dogma as saying that commitment should be the precondition to good sex. Confusion over freedom and bondage of sex continues: 88 per cent find kissing in public unacceptable. As lovers, they are bolder, but as opinion makers on sexuality, they still walk the trodden path.

Despite that, there are some bright sparks of change. Take Mumbai and Kolkata, both contrary in belief and texture. As many as 49 per cent in both the cities say prostitution should be legalised. You could shrug it off by saying that youngsters want to have paid sex. But behind this socially liberal thought could be the horror tales of red light districts of Kamathipura and Sonagacchi respectively in these cities. Legalising prostitution will check exploitation of sex workers, get them condoms and curb the transmission of HIV-AIDS that threatens to strangle India. On the other hand, Bangalore stands out as the most sexually broadminded city.

For many young people, choice and conviction make judgements instead of neighbours. Virginal truths don't define sexual morality and virginity is not the gift girls want to give their princes. Why, they are not even looking for a prince. They love men but in the single Indian woman's freedom struggle, men are incidental companions. "I am my own heroine," said Marie Bashkirtseff, Ukrainian writer, painter and sculptor. That's exactly what some Indian women are trying to be. "This phenomenon is rare in the West—even high earning, young women spend enormous amounts of time on 'trouser chasing'," says Jaishree Misra, author of the book *Ancient Promises*. "Young Indian



# Would you rather live in a nuclear or a joint family?

NUCLEAR 28

JOINT 70

Rest: Don't know/Can't say; Figures in per cent

BHASKAR PAUL



ALL FOR ONE: Mumbai's Motwani family is a cluster of Sindhis, Gujaratis and differing ideologies

the matrimonial history of India, it is the girls. "Love," said philosopher Kierkegaard, "is spontaneous, while marriage is a decision." Women are proving that they are good at the latter too. As a reflex, some husbands are stepping down from their thrones. They may cling to the crown but have begun to share the broom. They now know how to chop onions vertically, memorise vaccination calendars and don't choke if the wife wants an after-dinner cigarette or another orgasm. What is sexy is that there is an effort to integrate sexuality and marriage, which is new to India. Also, rising instances of pre-marital sex have trimmed down the excitement of the honeymoon. It used to be a licence for a paid trip to a hill station for consensual sex, for holding hands for photographs and for giving brides the liberty to wear trousers. Now honeymoon destinations are sexier and brides wear bustiers, but the event lacks bristling sexual tension.

Curiously, despite the redone rules of marriage, divorce, live-in relationships, old-age homes and nuclear families, the great Indian joint family still holds sway. In value and grit, it has no replica in any culture across the world. It is like the Indian peepul tree around which the women tie threads of faith. As the trunk increases in girth and the bark becomes wrinkled, its roots go deeper, unaffected by heat, dust or autumn. The past decade of spiralling divorces have already caused a backlash.

women have an old institution to thank for their new indifference, the bulwark of the family," she adds. A Londoner ends her day with friends at the pub, returning home to an empty flat, while her counterpart in Delhi does so to a hot dinner and *gup-*

*shup* with mum, says Misra.

Most mums, of course, still believe that marriage is the destiny they must offer their daughters who are "sitting" unmarried. But girls, tired of "sitting", are standing up. Defying song and story, myth and fairy tale, they have come out of locked towers, imaginary palaces and caves where they had been waiting for the husband to come and transport them to married glory. If anyone is rewriting

# Would it be better if prostitution were to be legalised?

YES 39

NO 56

Rest: Don't know/Can't say; Figures in per cent

# Would you consider an old-age home for an elderly person in your family?

YES

14

NO

71

Rest: Don't know/Can't say; Figures in per cent

## LIVING WITH IT

**P**ooja Jayaram, 24, comes home to a hot coffee and a loving boyfriend in Bangalore. "We've been seeing each other since we were in engineering college and our families know we will marry one day," says Jayaram who has been living with Rajesh Vaidyanathan for two years. "Who knows what the future holds, but right now we are okay with this arrangement," agrees Vaidyanathan.

This is the changing face of Bangalore where more and more young couples are living in. Reflecting the changing attitude, the survey says 42 per cent of youth, much above the national average of 22 per cent, endorse living in. To an extent, loneliness due to erratic working hours in call centres has resulted in this pre-marital arrangement. But it doesn't reflect a cultural change, insists sociologist Shanta Kumar Gowda: "Being away from prying families is pushing the trend, not some radical attitude."

But Simi Chandran, 27, a software consultant, disagrees: "I've told my parents I live with my boyfriend. They are not happy, but accept it." So girls and boys live in rented flats or as paying guests and think it is more practical. Anxiety over social disapproval too is decreasing. "What society?" scoffs 27-year-old graphic designer Arjun Bhat. "With long working hours, traffic, watching TV or getting drunk, who has the time to think about others?" he asks. Who indeed?

by **Nirmala Ravindran**

More people are again looking for safety in numbers. "The joint family is the USP of Indian culture even though the compositions are changing," says social anthropologist Patricia Uberoi, explaining that families are both joint and nuclear in a life cycle. "A son grows up, brings home the bride; they have children and move away into their own set-ups. Later, as the cycle turns, parents come back to the basic family and the family reintegrates."

For survival in the midst of nuclearisation, large families are agreeing to disagree within expectations of kinship and filial piety. Separate living areas, different beliefs in bringing up

fall. Friends as family, dhobi as uncle, housekeeper as confidant, pet as a buddy and the family physician as counsellor. Young people are dutiful as children and liberal as parents. They want to extend to their children, the freedom they think was denied to them. Submissiveness is not the first duty of the wife, the mother-in-law's office is threatened and the family priest does not guard consciences. Well-wishers and interferers are still

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI



**Abhay Singh, 35**  
PRODUCER, ETV

Singh moved out of a joint family in Delhi to Lucknow with his wife and six-year-old daughter. He says he could realise his dreams only after moving out, but now respects the unflinching support system of a joint family.

"Joint families tend to promote a culture of obedience. They resist personal growth."

children, inter-religion marriages and the inclusion of privacy are turning the old rules upside down. Take Mumbai's Motwani family. Headed by Sindhi writer Hari Motwani, the family is an endearing cluster of Gujaratis, Sindhis and cross-cultural ideologies. "It is about adjustment and assertion for space," says Ekta, the Gujarati daughter-in-law. New kinships step in where old constructs

around but are losing their identity.

Like everything else. The pan-Indian mass culture has no single identity. Even today, 25 per cent say dowry is acceptable depending on the demand. Youth still agree on caste, class and a "good" marriage. If 87 per cent claim that both sexes are treated equally, what explains the rising incest and sexual abuse of children? Every year, thousands of women die for dowry while the youth who sing paeans of equality look on. At the end, liberalism is as liberalism does. Even that is a conservative footnote. ■