

■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

**T**HERE IS A MILD QUAKE on Mars and Venus. Ask SNAG Girish Subramaniam. With a dreamy look in his caramel eyes, he strums a guitar at one of the crowded Barista coffee bars in Delhi as he waits for his girlfriend. "She is never on time and is always in a hurry to leave," he says coolly, as if waiting for his girlfriend is a meditative state. When Beena Sharma, his girlfriend, arrives after 20 minutes, it is a scene out of a movie that Bollywood scriptwriters may soon want to write. She sits down with an assertive smile, not even mildly apologetic. To his "cappuccino with cream?" query, she nods an unthinking assent. Subramaniam ruffles her hair, strokes her arm and looks deep into her eyes. But before the intimate look warms into more, Sharma's cell phone rings and she crisply talks business. Subramaniam looks on indulgently. And it is not even Valentine's Day.

SNAG? Sensitive New Age Guy. Subramaniam is one of the new emotionally intelligent men who are clued in to the needs of the women in their lives. They do not leave wet towels around the house, neither do they sit with legs arrogantly crossed on tables, asking their wives for a cup of hot tea as they watch cricket. They are mushier than their beloveds on Valentine's Day. They know that women in the throes of premenstrual syndrome need to be hugged and that fatherhood is an enjoyable dilemma. They smell good, look good. Amidst tender moments, they are concerned about the sexual fulfilment of their girlfriends, spouses, significant others. They share their heartbreaks, disillusionment and guilt (strictly female words earlier), and that too with women.

In a society where sexual denominations are deeply entrenched in culture and define thought and behaviour right from the time of "It's a boy!", a change is on, and it is not all that quiet. Slowly, but definitely, gender equations are melting, merging and reforming. A predominantly urban trend, the uberwoman is exchanging places with the alpha male. The urban woman is becoming unapologetically assertive, and men, in reflex, empathetic. Women tougher,

# Mr SHE

The rules of romance could well be rewritten with the alpha male making way for the uberwoman. But the balance between the genders could be in peril.

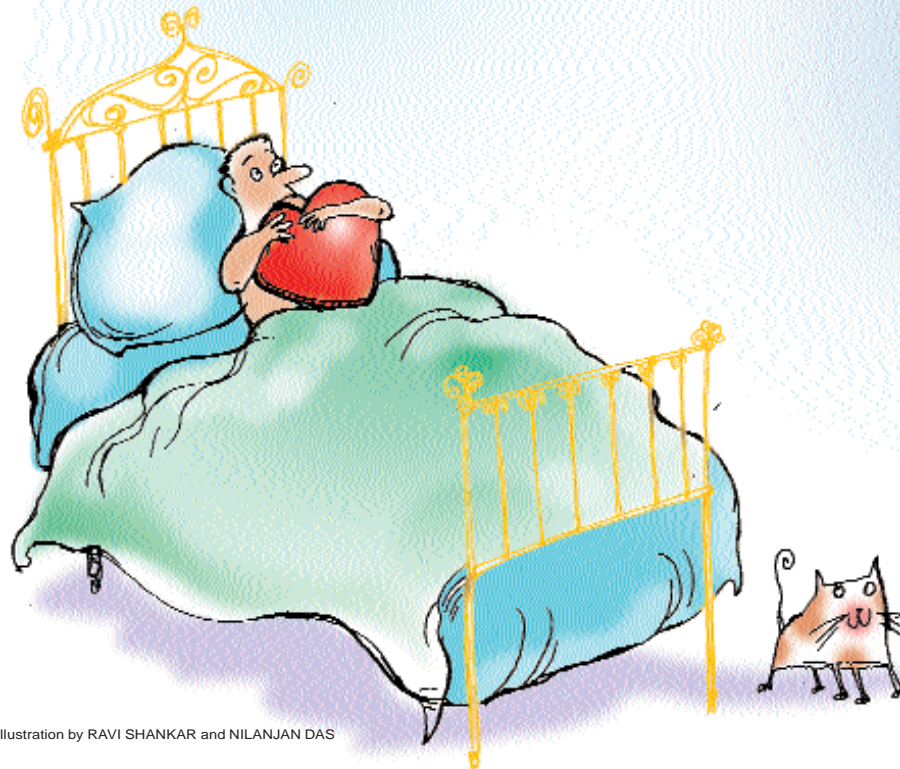


Illustration by RAVI SHANKAR and NILANJANA DAS

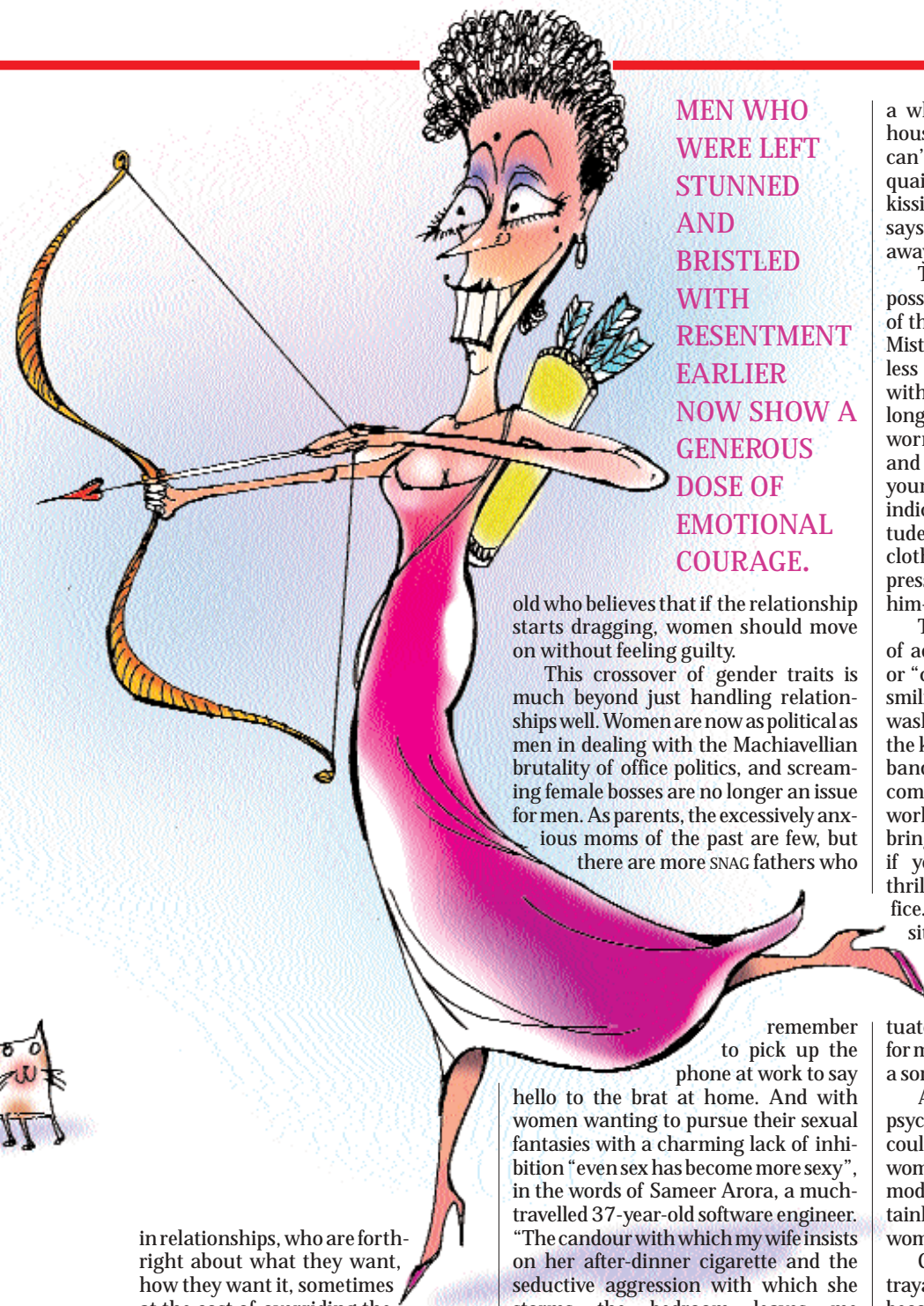
realistic, men gentler, romantic. Says 28-year-old Nilanjana Tripathi: "My boyfriend wants a Valentine's Day party. But too much mush puts me off. His support matters to me, not his roses or chocolates." Dhiren, her boyfriend, finds this unacceptable, saying she is hurting him with her ruthlessness.

Contemporary urban women cannot be simply defined with words like emotional vulnerability and submissiveness anymore. Though the self-

assured Indian male is very much around, he is discreet about his masculine ego around the ladies. "Women are no longer as stoic as they were," agrees Delhi-based psychotherapist Akash Dharmaraj. "The corresponding shift in men is not equal but they are catching up. It has also become okay for men to be emotionally vulnerable," she adds.

There are more self-driven, self-centred, dominating women than ever before who constantly draw boundaries

Photographs by HEMANT CHAWLA



**MEN WHO WERE LEFT STUNNED AND BRISTLED WITH RESENTMENT EARLIER NOW SHOW A GENEROUS DOSE OF EMOTIONAL COURAGE.**

old who believes that if the relationship starts dragging, women should move on without feeling guilty.

This crossover of gender traits is much beyond just handling relationships well. Women are now as political as men in dealing with the Machiavellian brutality of office politics, and screaming female bosses are no longer an issue for men. As parents, the excessively anxious moms of the past are few, but there are more SNAG fathers who

remember to pick up the phone at work to say hello to the brat at home. And with women wanting to pursue their sexual fantasies with a charming lack of inhibition "even sex has become more sexy", in the words of Sameer Arora, a much-travelled 37-year-old software engineer. "The candour with which my wife insists on her after-dinner cigarette and the seductive aggression with which she storms the bedroom leaves me stumped." Women are overtaking men in the after-dinner groping for quick, passionate sex that was earlier a part of the insensitive masculine image.

Brijesh Gupta, a 28-year-old NRI who was carrying a gift from abroad for a friend's sister in Delhi, admits he was taken aback when the lady offered him

a whisky-soda when he went to her house. "I used to think Indian women can't kiss," he says. "But an hour of acquaintance and two pegs later we were kissing as if there was no tomorrow," says Gupta who found himself swept away by this breezy confidence.

The beginnings of this trend can possibly be traced back to a redefinition of the urban Indian woman's priorities. Mistresses of their bank accounts and less hassled about pregnancy issues with the Pill in their purse, they need no longer look at men as the focus of their worries and ecstasies. Throaty laughs and unabashed whistles of bubbly young girls at beefcake shows in metros indicate a sexual repositioning of attitudes. Even as the men shed their clothes, women strip away their suppressed "I-must-not-even-think-about-him-like that" desires.

The SNAG factor is the gender flavour of advertising today. Men look "sweet" or "cute" when they cradle the baby or smilingly wring stained tablecloths in a washing machine. Women go weak in the knees as a smashing hunk of a husband makes tea for the wife who has come back drained after a hard day's work. The message is clear: you can bring the smile back on your wife's face if you can make a sippable cuppa, thrilled at having her back from the office. Sugar may be optional but not sensitivity. So while men look good when they hold the basket, the baby and the briefcase, the same combination on women does not accentuate their identity. It has become okay for men to cry but weeping women paint a sorry figure.

Arpita Anand, a 31-year-old clinical psychologist from Delhi, thinks that this couldn't-care-less avatar of the Indian woman is sometimes an auto-protection mode. "Don't mess with me and certainly not because I am a woman" is what women are trying to convey," she says.

Coping tactic? The external portrayal of ruthlessness in women is fast becoming an epidermal reality. The exhibition of masculine traits swims to a noticeable level easily in working women. More so in single women whose pursuit of "I, me, myself" is not supervised by husbands. But among married women too there is an unwillingness to toe the husband's line. More women are opting for divorces than men. "Married

"We are now learning to explore the sensitivity within us which was missing earlier."

DILIP SHANKAR *Film and theatre artist*  
Feels loving oneself translates into genuine caring for others



"Whether they are genuinely empathetic or not, it has become important for men to project it."

ARPITA ANAND *Clinical psychologist*  
Thinks men are not able to deal with the changes in women





“I do not take arguments personally. Perception and responsiveness are a boon for any marriage.”

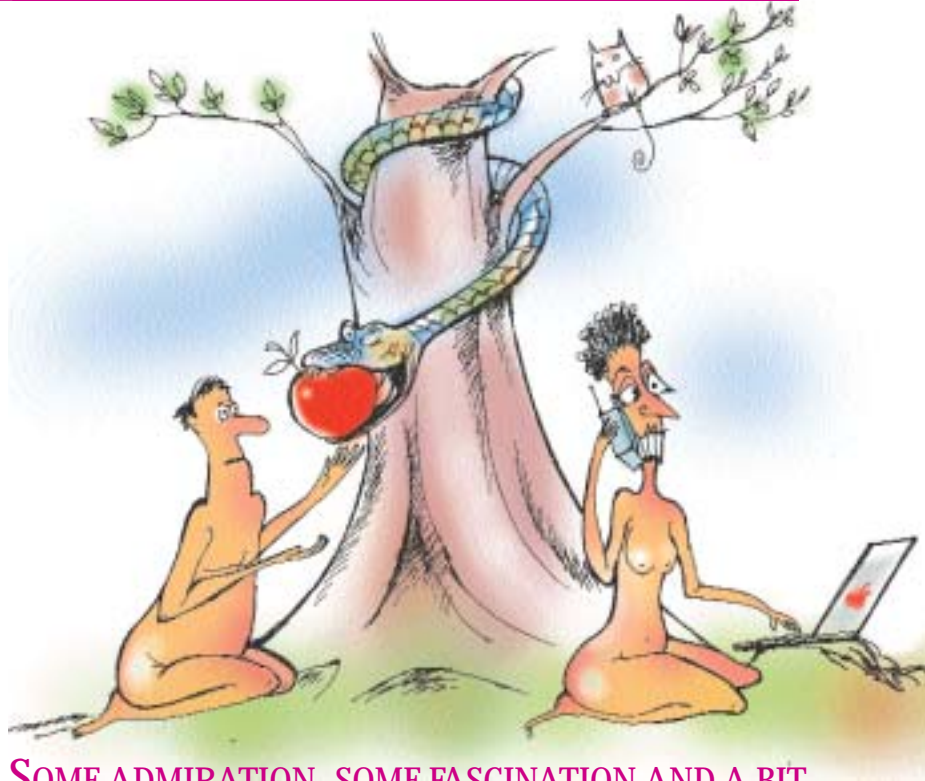
PUSHPENDRA KULSHRESTHA, *TV journalist*  
Doesn't think crying before his wife is unmanly

women,” says Dharmaraj, “are not rejecting their husbands because they are violent, alcoholic or cruel but because they find that the emotional anchoring in their marriages doesn't suit their expectations.” Most interestingly, this trend is not limited to young women. Sitarist and homemaker Meera Prasad, who is in her 50s, lives a life where the masculine traits she has found within herself are her lifeline. “My leadership in emotional and other issues in the family is acknowledged by all, including my husband, and I have never been emotionally fragile or insecure,” she says with taut affirmation.

**M**EN who were left stunned for some years and then bristled with resentment now show a generous dose of emotional courage. However, 39-year-old orthopaedician Rajesh Malhotra, an associate professor at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi, ruminates about the change in women. He feels that women come in tough packages these days. “We can't make women to order. If we want educated, earning and socially charming wives, then we have to accept what comes along,” he says, adding a little ruefully that women are becoming rather selfish and political at work and home, and getting away with it.

Some admiration, some fascination and a little bit of awe apart, some men are also responding to dominating women with impotence, feels Dharmaraj. “Impotence, not as a withdrawal from sexual needs or as a punishment to the women in their lives, but impotence as a result of a threat to themselves,” she explains. Noted Mumbai sexologist Prakash Kothari views this scenario differently. “The forthright women are a stimulating challenge to men,” he says, revealing some patterns in the OPD Department for Sexual Dysfunctions at Mumbai's KEM Hospital. “In fact, men find them sexually more attractive.”

The most endearing part is the willingness with which men accept the change in sensitivity levels and plunge further into honing it. A sentiment loudly echoed by film and theatre person Dilip Shankar, who says he is very comfortable with the assertiveness with which women are storming the



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unexplored dimensions. “It is high time they did so too,” says Shankar. “Unless women hit the other end of the spectrum, the harmony between the sexes will never be struck.” The only caveat is in men's anxiety about being labelled gentle. While women are smug about being called dominating, all men don't think that the SNAG label is a comfortable one. “Emotional men are considered fools,” says Malhotra. A sentiment echoed by Arora who insists that his name be changed and no picture taken. “I may be taken for a ride because of my soft approach,” he quips. No wonder Nimesh Desai, medical superintendent at the Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences, Delhi, feels that men need to be reminded that sensitivity is not a sign of weakness. “It takes courage to be emotional and emotive at the right time,” he says.

While the present manifestations of Yin and Yang qualities being shaken up are very interesting, what would be

the consequences if both there was a progression of this trend among the genders? Would the differences between them forever remain equal and opposite? A new generation of people where boys will not be boys? “The number of sensitive, empathetic men will definitely increase,” feels Dharmaraj, “but it would be very sad if women started behaving the way men have done for centuries and vice versa.” Even Desai points out this homogenisation of roles is too rapid in Indian society and if the rush towards the extreme behaviour is not reined in, both sexes will be at a loss. It would be a loss all right if men stopped taking the initiative to hold a woman's hand in love and women started whistling on the roads. Or, if women started emotionally neglecting their spouses and men became victims of abuse.

Frankly, my dear, it's all about giving a damn. And how much.

*Some names have been changed on request*