Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

Sex and the Indian woman

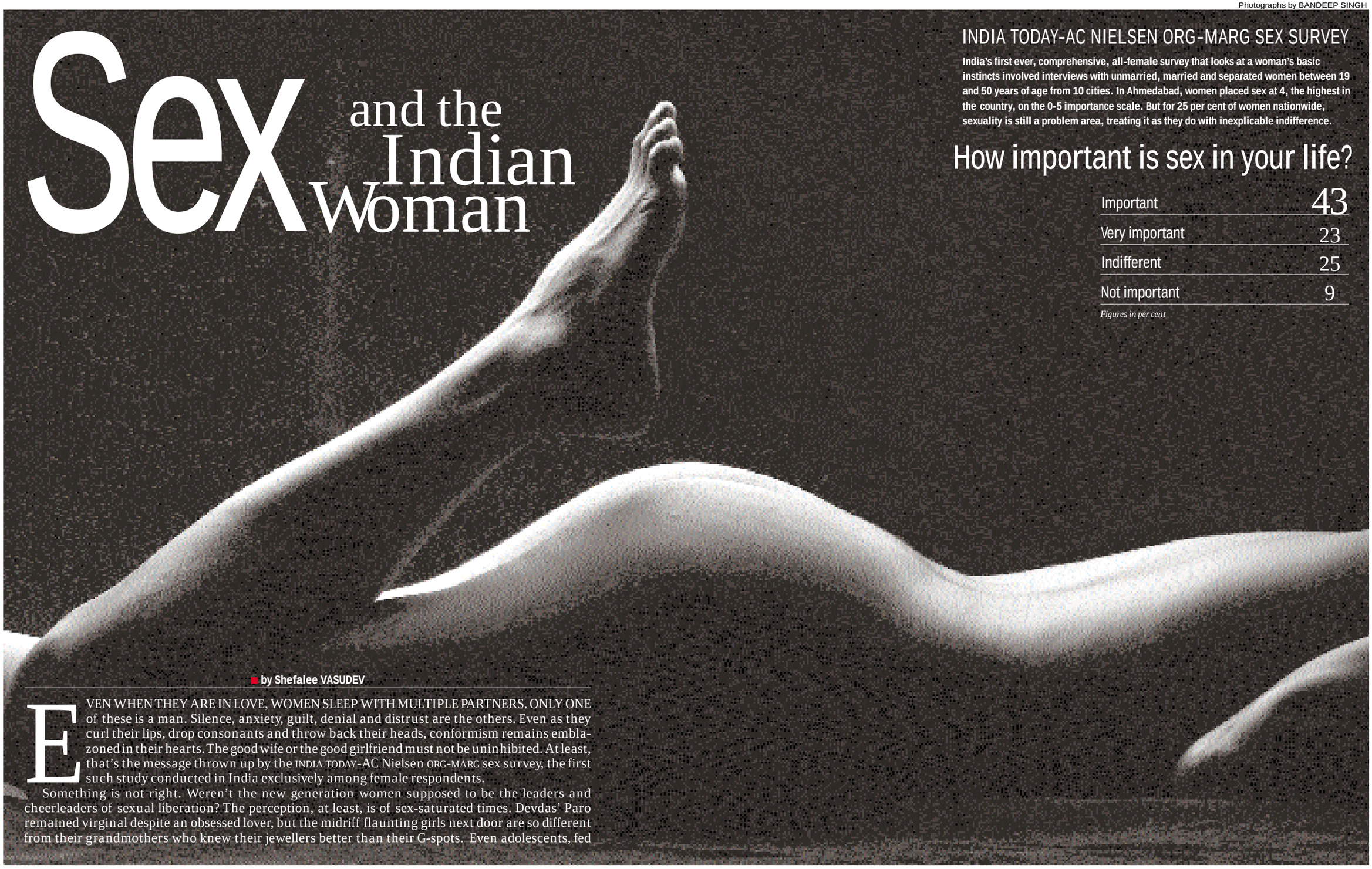
INDIA TODAY-AC NIELSEN ORG-MARG SEX SURVEY

India's first ever, comprehensive, all-female survey that looks at a woman's basic instincts involved interviews with unmarried, married and separated women between 19 and 50 years of age from 10 cities. In Ahmedabad, women placed sex at 4, the highest in the country, on the 0-5 importance scale. But for 25 per cent of women nationwide, sexuality is still a problem area, treating it as they do with inexplicable indifference.

How important is sex in your life?

Important	43
Very important	23
Indifferent	25
Not important	9

Figures in per cent



■ by Shefalee VASUDEV

EVEN WHEN THEY ARE IN LOVE, WOMEN SLEEP WITH MULTIPLE PARTNERS. ONLY ONE of these is a man. Silence, anxiety, guilt, denial and distrust are the others. Even as they curl their lips, drop consonants and throw back their heads, conformism remains emblazoned in their hearts. The good wife or the good girlfriend must not be uninhibited. At least, that's the message thrown up by the INDIA TODAY-AC Nielsen ORG-MARG sex survey, the first such study conducted in India exclusively among female respondents.

Something is not right. Weren't the new generation women supposed to be the leaders and cheerleaders of sexual liberation? The perception, at least, is of sex-saturated times. Devdas' Paro remained virginal despite an obsessed lover, but the midriff flaunting girls next door are so different from their grandmothers who knew their jewellers better than their G-spots. Even adolescents, fed

64% women do not approve of sex prior to marriage.

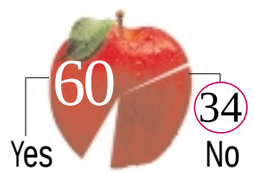
on diets of raunchy music videos and who-slept-with-whom soaps, seem with it. Cleavage-clever Page 3 babes, bare-legged models, bored housewives having phone sex, trophy wives hiring male strippers for kitty parties, the heady kicks of night-life—all create an illusion of women driven by the torment of flesh that carries them beyond their social identities. The illusion that a sexual revolution is breathing fire in urban India.

There could not have been a better way to validate this idea than conducting a survey among women, for female behaviour effectively maps social ebbs and tides. But as it appears, the idea of a revolution is a false prophecy for India. The herd remains loyal to *lajja* (shame)—the most popular word in the Indian woman's sexual vocabulary. The word that smothers sexual awakening and makes kissing in public a sin but not breast-feeding on a bus. Those headaches may well have been for real.

When a contemporary survey reinvents the traditional approach to sex it is time to pause and wonder. But such questioning doesn't gather critical mass because personal interviews with urban women show a sharp contrast in attitude. There seem to be more avenues for women to talk about sex. Many love being called sexy, others understand that wearing revealing cholis doesn't make them sex objects. Quite a few share the sweet-and-sour bits of their lives—erotic, ecstatic, sometimes deviant, dotted with privileged and penalised sexual activities. And explain why they want to make extraordinary choices for meaningful sex.

The disparity is clear: silence or indifference is countered by

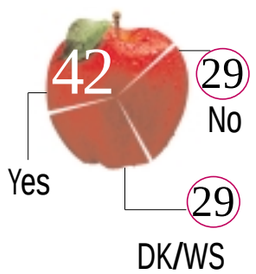
Do you share your sexual fantasies with your husband/ boyfriend?



Figures in per cent *Rest: Don't know/Won't say*

Fantasies being flights of the mind were supposed to be closely guarded secrets. Till women realised that the only way to give them hues of reality was to share them with their partners. It is ironic that 34 per cent still keep the fantasy factory to themselves. The G-spot, on the other hand, seems to have found a place in the way women recognise their sexual selves. Supposed to be the point of no return, it is good news that more women now admit that their jewel is not in the crown. The G-spot is no longer disowned. A happy discovery.

Do you know where your G-spot is?



Figures in per cent; DK/WS: Don't know/Won't say

What is your preference in foreplay?

Kissing	55
Massage	16
Looking at body parts	14
Undressing the partner	11
Watching a blue film	6
Don't know/Won't say	27

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

What would you do if you were not happy with sex in your marriage/relationship?

Talk to your partner	61
Do nothing about it	17
Have an affair on the side	2
Masturbate	2
Don't know/Won't say	18

Figures in per cent

Talking is still the best way to chase away the sex blues. But it is kissing that lights up the hot zone. Erotic massage, the tireless gaze at body parts, undressing the partner and watching a blue film are the other thrill frills. Women chose more than one option, making foreplay longer than four words. Wonder what the 27 per cent who "don't know" do to warm up.

passionate rhetoric. But it can't be written off by saying that all women who talk about sex are the new, few decadent drifters. That they fake smiles and orgasms. That they are sexual exhibitionists in male imitation. That the overload of sexual stimuli bombarding us—sexy ideas, sexy ads, sexy films—is contriving to create sexually confident women. That they may be using the F-word or buying vibrators in grey markets, but their sexual liberation is just good old Indian fiction after all.

The conflict is deep and searing. In the boiler room that is the Indian woman's mind, Vatsyayana, Buddha, Freud, Foucault, Rajneesh, Shere Hite and Germaine Greer seem to be having a relentless screaming match. And when they fall silent, Sita and Kali pick up a fight. Sita, in her ever-relenting, passive form, and Kali, intoxicated with power, blinded by rage and voraciously sexual. It is too early on the rolls of India-in-transition to expect the women to resolve this literary-historical-traditional mess entirely and say, "Yes, we want sex and how".

Sure, the modern woman's yearning for liberation feels hollow if she confuses virginity with chastity. Worse, if she talks about her intimate life in practised responses, she will only pave the path for her submissiveness, in and out of bed. The fact, an antithesis to the war-cry of the modern woman, is that she actually doesn't know what she wants. Even women who are challenging or negotiating their relationships for better sex, admit it is not easy to distinguish between promiscuity and sexual freedom, decency and obscenity.

52% said equality in sexual pleasure was important.

As experts say, the truth doesn't lie entirely in our survey. Neither does it lie in the accounts of women who say they have been to orgies, tried threesomes or swapped spouses. Even the globally lauded Shere Hite Report on female sexuality found that a large number of American women felt guilty about masturbation. The 1998 University of Chicago Report, next in importance to the Kinsey Report, showed that Americans were overwhelmingly monogamous, with 94 per cent women finding extramarital sex unacceptable.

In this survey too, it is the inconsistencies that spark off the questions. A large number of women say they find premarital and extramarital sex and masturbation unacceptable. That heterosexual marriage must be guarded against alternative sexuality. At the same time, some are willing to tick the number of partners they have had outside marriage and whether they had sex in their homes or in hotel rooms. They know where there erogenous zones are and find oral sex and foreplay essential ingredients of gourmet sex. Some even masturbate before their lovers and for most, orgasms are a must for fulfilment.

It doesn't add up. If the modern woman continues to represent her sexuality as different from what it really is, the fear is she may become a caricature, more in control of her lingerie than her life. If she wants good sex, she will have to begin by admitting to that need in clear, unambiguous terms. Why blame the men? So two cheers for the survey that has pointed this out. But the third one must be reserved for the Kamasutra that says, "Of what use is virtue when its results are so uncertain?" ■

SEX SURVEY

42% women find chest hair the most attractiv e feature in a man.

METHODOLOGY

Purposive interviews were conducted using a mix of house-to-house interviews and Central Location Tests (CLTs). The field researchers encountered severe resistance from respondents in some cities after they had had a look at the questionnaire. In some cases, people tore up the questionnaires, in other areas respondents were uncomfortable with house-to-house interviews. In yet others, they felt awkward about the CLTs. So a mix of the two data collection techniques had to be employed to carry out the survey.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

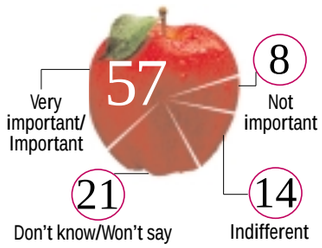
Nearly 2,305 women belonging to the middle and upper-middle class (SEC A and SEC B) were interviewed across 10 cities. They belonged to three age groups: 19-24 years, 25-34 years and 35-50 years and included unmarried, married and divorced/separated women. Some questions were asked only to those women who said they had had sex (1,814). Questions on extramarital sex were put only to those who said they had had relationships outside marriage (119). Two-thirds of the respondents were graduates/postgraduates; the rest were educated till senior or higher secondary. Almost all respondents owned a colour TV, four-fifths owned a house, while 15 per cent owned a mobile phone and a quarter drove a vehicle.

PREVIOUS SURVEYS

- **In 1978, a survey conducted by The Social Research Unit of the Indian Market Research Bureau for INDIA TODAY, polled 604 college students in Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. Two-thirds of the students found premarital sex unacceptable. A staggering 81 per cent said the girls who lost their virginity before marriage had "bad reputations". Contrary to the INDIA TODAY-AC Nielsen ORG-MARG survey of 2003, Delhi was the most conservative in 1978 where only 31 per cent students admitted to petting compared to Kolkata where 76 per cent claimed to have done the same. In Chennai, only 11 per cent admitted to premarital sex.**
- **In 1982, a Chennai survey on sexuality among 9,000 students in nine colleges found that 52.4 per cent students had had premarital sex.**
- **In 1994, an INDIA TODAY-MARG survey among 1,365 undergraduates from eight cities found that 18 per cent girls accepted premarital sex, 15 per cent didn't mind using sex appeal to get ahead and 34 per cent were amenable to having a fling even while going steady.**
- **In 1996, an Indian Council of Medical Research survey studied sexual behaviour of 5,000 adolescents in the 10-14 years age group in six Indian states. It concluded that both premarital sex and teenage pregnancies were rapidly growing trends.**

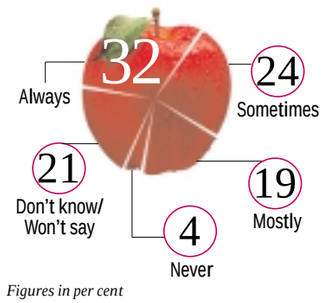
85% women first had sex only after marriage.

How important is having an orgasm for your sexual fulfilment?



Figures in per cent

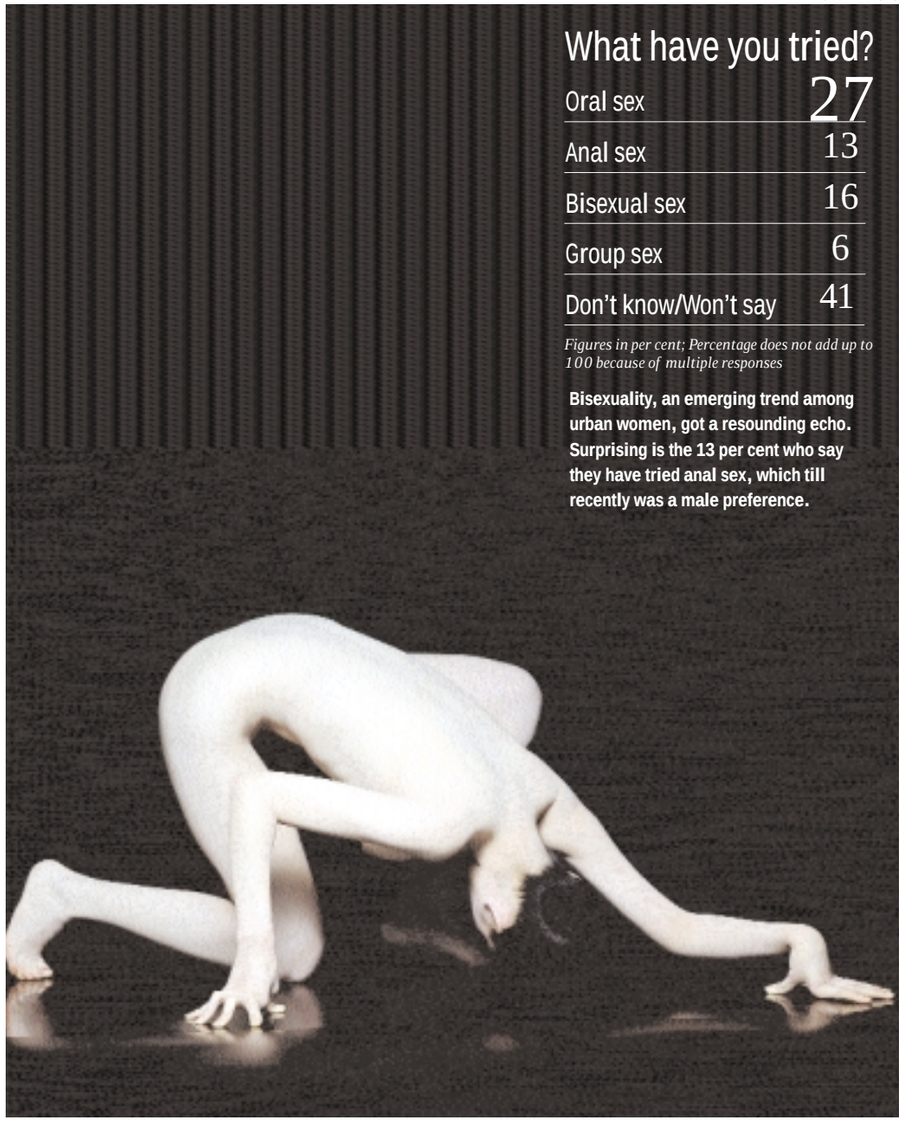
How often do you feel satisfied after a sexual encounter?



Figures in per cent

Sensitivity and orgasmic fulfilment, crucial to assessing sex lives, get a high rating. Despite popular rhetoric that women don't find men matching up to their sexual awakening, 64 per cent of those polled said their partners were sensitive to their sexual needs. The tricky figure is the 24 per cent who find sex only occasionally satisfying.

GETTY IMAGES



What have you tried?

Oral sex	27
Anal sex	13
Bisexual sex	16
Group sex	6
Don't know/Won't say	41

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

Bisexuality, an emerging trend among urban women, got a resounding echo. Surprising is the 13 per cent who say they have tried anal sex, which till recently was a male preference.

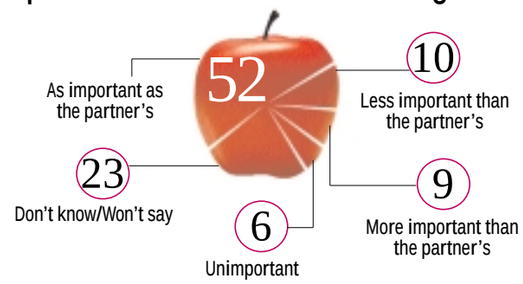
How many orgasms satisfy you?

One	49
Two-Three	14
Multiple	4
Don't know/Won't say	33

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

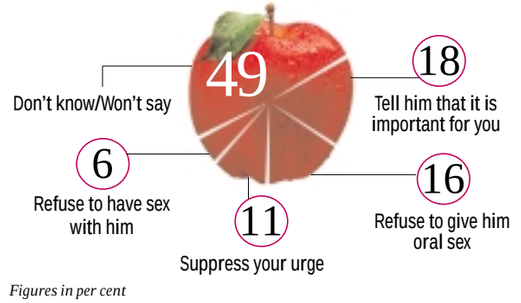
Multiple orgasms need a deep understanding of how the body responds to desire. Since 18 per cent say they are satisfied by more than one, it should be seen as a pointer to greater sexual fulfilment. The finding below is a similar reflection: women give the same importance to their pleasure as their partner's.

How important is your own pleasure to you while having sex?



Figures in per cent

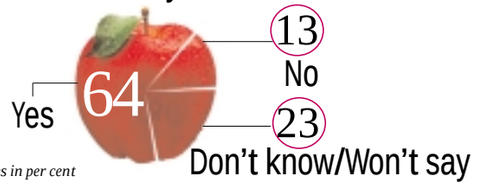
What would you do if your partner refused to have oral sex with you?



Figures in per cent

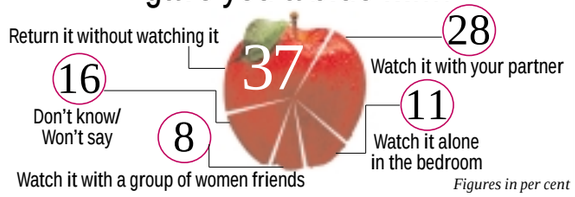
Old hat? Perhaps, but oral sex was for long considered a man's prerogative and a woman's dream. Now that much of fantasy is being shared by sexual partners, it is surprising that 49 per cent women say they wouldn't know what to say if their partner refused to have oral sex with them. Not knowing must be the toughest choice.
On the other hand, blue films aren't remote anymore. For the 28 per cent who watch it with partners, there is the promise of a turn-on. But the real thrill—for 11 per cent—is watching a blue film alone.

Do you think your partner is sensitive to your sexual needs?



Figures in per cent

What would you do if your friend gave you a blue film?



Figures in per cent

41% of women have a contented sex life, 21% find it thrilling.

Dr Madhu Sarin
Psychoanalyst

ANALYSIS

Intimate Masks

IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN HARD TO PUZZLE OUT INDIAN ATTITUDES ON SEXUAlity. Indians are affectionate and sensual, though their philosophical aspirations tend to valourise asceticism and renunciation. So it isn't surprising that the INDIA TODAY-AC Nielsen ORG-MARG survey paints women as conservative and cautious.

In traditional cultures, much that is socially taboo is implicitly accepted as long as it is not explicit. Particularly sexuality. As long as social facade and the traditional family structure—usually a heterosexual marriage with one male child—is maintained, a blind eye is turned towards other sexual liaisons. The taboo is not on sexual conduct but on "outing" it, which may involve a loss of face or threaten the stability of accepted social arrangements. In such cultures, women are the safekeepers of traditions and values, resulting in the strict regulation and control of women's sexuality to maintain family honour and ensure legitimacy of progeny.

So no matter how "emancipated" today's women are, they will experience some conflict between their new desires and previously internalised social expectations. To engage in or talk openly about their sexuality would generate a sense of vulnerability. This is clearly reflected in the survey. On the one hand, the frankness that some women show reflects a newfound sense of power and confidence. For some, it could be a form of exhibitionism to shock and titillate. Or, it could be an attempt to gain attention, a kind of Page 3 prestige. On the other hand, it should be expected that such answers would be tempered with some anxiety about a potential backlash (internally), which may lead to a measure of caution or prudence in responses.

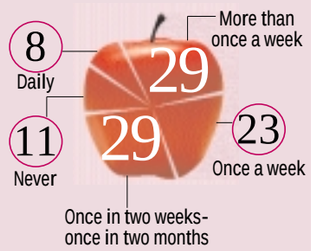
Sexuality is always framed by intense fantasies which often get merged with factual narratives. This leads to distortions in surveys which reflect some compromise between the self-image and their own fantasies and desires. For instance, 22 per cent of women surveyed associate masturbation with an image of being out of control. This is a common fantasy in India.

Sexuality is a part of a person's experience from birth. The way a mother handles a baby determines the capacity for sexual excitement. In India, babies are handled for much longer than in other cultures. This leads to a stimulation of all kinds of sensuality, including sexuality. But our joint family system promotes family solidarity over the conjugal relationship. This inhibits the expression of sexual fulfilment in marriage, resulting in sexual repression. Sons and mothers especially have a close relationship, which is overly eroticised because of the frustration many women feel in their conjugal relationship. This may lead to the "internal mother" threatening the son's sense of self and may spill over to other women in his life, making him inhibited. This creates a vicious cycle of sexually-inhibited husbands and sexually-frustrated wives.

Although there are many exceptions, a stereotype governs men and women when it comes to erotic desire and emotional commitment. Men like to play the field and have an easier time expressing their sexual desires, while women find it easier to make long-term, monogamous commitments. Since girls shift their passionate attachment from mother to father, they develop a better capacity to develop a deep relationship with an admired and more distant loved one. This promotes their capability for commitment in sexual and emotional life. Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to note some of the newer nuances in this survey. Many women seem to be thinking out of the stereotype. They say that sexual pleasure, orgasms, frequent and non-traditional sex are all important. Also, a fairly large proportion say their husbands are sensitive to their sexual needs and that they are not bored by sex in marriage. It could mean a variety of things.

Possibly, because of changes in the way women perceive themselves and the adaptation made by their husbands, they ask for and enjoy greater sexual satisfaction. Or it may mean that they regard sex as a significant but not critical part of marriage—that they are not terribly excited by sex, but not bored by it either. A selective survey will not answer all these questions.

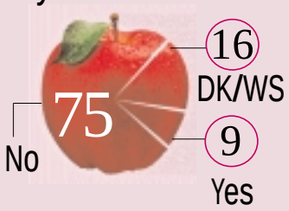
How often do you have sex?



Figures in per cent

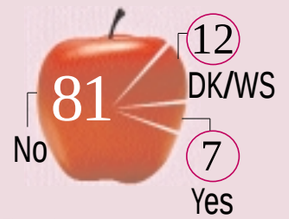
Frequent sex doesn't translate into better sex,say women: only 8 per cent have sex daily. Masturbation and extramarital sex, associated with guilt across the world by women, find few takers in India.

Do you masturbate?



Figures in per cent
DK/WS: Don't know/Won't say

Have you had extramarital sex?



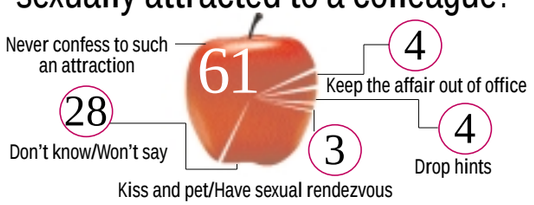
Figures in per cent
DK/WS: Don't know/Won't say

What do you fantasise about?

Different love-making positions with your partner	66
Watching other people have sex	9
Orgies/group sex	10
Others	5
Don't know/Won't say	14

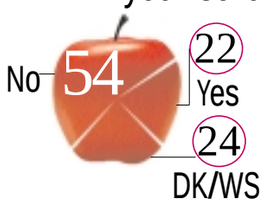
Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

What would you do if you were sexually attracted to a colleague?



Figures in per cent

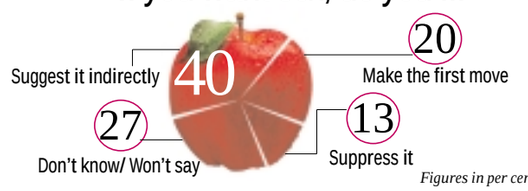
Does your poor body image reduce your sexual pleasure?



Sex with a colleague? Not good, say most. Indirect hints make for a sexual statement despite the fact that 22 per cent have had sex in front of a mirror! The best finding is that women don't let their body image dampen their pleasure.

Figures in per cent; DK/WS: Don't know/Won't say

If you want sex, do you ...

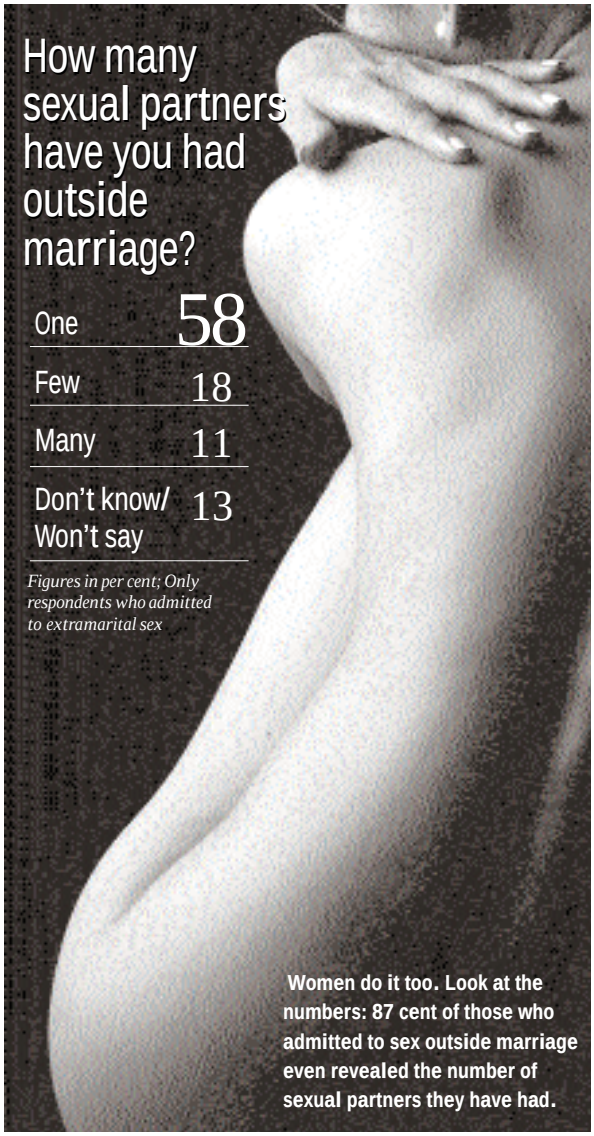


Figures in per cent

In which of these places have you had sex?

Outside the bedroom	40
In front of a mirror	22
In car/train/on beach	10
On the dining table	2
Don't know/Won't say	42

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses



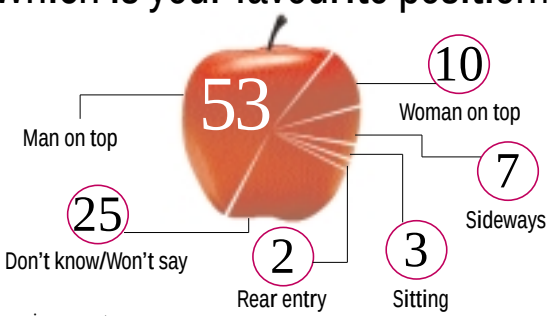
How many sexual partners have you had outside marriage?

One	58
Few	18
Many	11
Don't know/ Won't say	13

Figures in per cent; Only respondents who admitted to extramarital sex

Women do it too. Look at the numbers: 87 cent of those who admitted to sex outside marriage even revealed the number of sexual partners they have had.

Which is your favourite position?



Figures in per cent

Man is still on top. But it isn't necessarily a boring choice. Off record, women will admit that it is the missionary position that revs up intimacy the most. Besides motivation and opportunity, some women also want the other man. But when 22 per cent say they had had sex with their husbands' friends they also explain why the same age group is the most sexually attractive.

Would you exchange sexual favours for a raise or promotion?

Figures in per cent

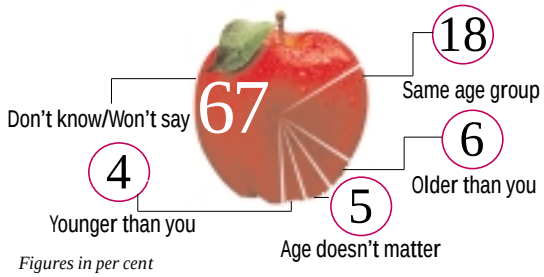
Predictable. Women wouldn't exchange sexual favours to scale the success ladder. What isn't so predictable is that 31 per cent still say they held hands and hugged in the name of sex. How come 50 per cent don't know what they did?

Before marriage, which of these did you allow your partner to do?

Holding hands and hugging you	31
Kissing	22
Stimulating your body parts	6
Having sexual intercourse	5
Don't know/Won't say	50

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses

How old would you want your extramarital partner to be?



Figures in per cent

Who have you had extramarital sex with?

Husband's friends	22
Relatives	19
Office colleagues	16
Casual acquaintances	13
Don't know/Won't say	38

Figures in per cent; Percentage does not add up to 100 because of multiple responses