

GUJARATIS AND THEIR BEDTIME SOIREEES

AHMEDABAD, OFTEN DUBBED CONSERVATIVE, IS THE MOST EROTIC CITY. THE UNUSUAL TREND EXPLAINS WHY TRADITIONAL SOCIETIES ARE MOST OBSESSED WITH SEX.



HOT SPOT: Dandiya raas is Gujarat's sensual energy in the open

How important is oral sex to you?

Very important	16
Reasonably important	18
Not so important	28

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



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

Refuse to give her oral sex	28
Refuse to have sex with her	16
Tell her that it is important for you	22

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

88% Ahmedabadi men make sure that their partner has an orgasm.

By Shefalee Vasudev

Kantaben isn't surprised. "Amdavad sexy chhe (Is Ahmedabad sexy)?" she chuckles on the phone as only a hearty, 70-year-old woman can. Kantaben, who got married at 20, says she was very attractive and had an insatiable appetite for sex. Married into a joint family of four brothers, their wives, children and her in-laws, she found neither space nor sanction for long sexual play. "And yet those were the most heady days of my life," she recalls. When her husband Kiritbhai, now 76, would return from his shop in the evening, he would bring back small packets of burfi or jalebis, hiding them in his kurta pocket. Later in their bedroom, they would share these—much like the forbidden fruit. The restrictions on conduct, walk, talk and dressing were so many that dating and mating had to be experienced at the same time, in the same room, at night. "But sex was a big deal for us," she says.

Two generations later, Vandana, a student of philosophy at the Gujarat University and Kantaben's granddaughter, agrees that sex is still a big deal. "Sex sustains everything else in life," she says. Curiously, the Gujaratis, one of the most orthodox communities, known more for their bandhini saris, dhoklas, dandiya raas and bustling joint families, seem peculiarly vulnerable to the power of Eros. For them, sex is not just procreation or domination, it is enjoyable consumption. Ahmedabadi men, often portrayed as non-

academic and mercantile, have peculiarly come up as the only group in the country that revels in sex without being bothered about power play. Sample this: 69 per cent of the men in the city say they are very happy with their sex lives, and 59 per cent say oral sex is very important for them—the highest figures in the country. The survey also shows that 88 per cent of the Ahmedabadi men make sure their partner has an orgasm. While 72 per cent find women as enthusiastic about sex as men are, 88 per cent agree that both man and woman deserve equal pleasure in bed, and 82 per cent say their wives understand their sexual needs—again, the figures are higher than those in any other city.

These are not one-time statistics. Last year, when INDIA TODAY studied female sexuality, women from Ahmedabad admitted most to sexual experimentation. On a scale of 5, they rated the importance of sex at 4 while the national average was 3.5. This year's survey also throws up curious statistics from the city—regarding premarital, oral and anal sex (nearly twice the number of people from Ahmedabad have tried anal sex as compared with the rest of the country), acceptance of the needs of the partner and homosexual experiments. Never mind the horror that gripped another Kantaben, Saif Ali Khan's housekeeper in the movie *Kal Ho*

Naa Ho, who faints every time she sees Saif with friend Shah Rukh Khan on the same bed.

Paradoxes fuel each other. Analysts say that conservative societies are the ones most obsessed with sex, that it is not liberalism but the other extreme of denial. Freud's famous metaphor, the lid of self-control which compresses and heats up the contents in the cauldron of sexual desire, explains to some extent the grammar of sex in Gujarat. Bhavna Acharya, a 33-year-old Ahmedabad-based housewife, reiterates this in her fervent tirade. "One can't sit close to one's husband, call him by name, touch him or show any signs of physical intimacy in front of others. So at night, the bedroom becomes the melting pot of intense sexual action."

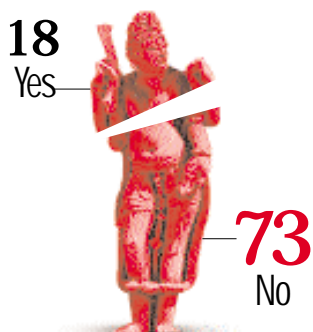
In traditional Gujarati households, where extended joint families breed numerous notions of conservatism and morality (think *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* and *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi*), women are seldom encouraged to leave their bedrooms in casual wear, let alone sexy night dresses. Acharya says that while her family was holidaying in Goa, she had to wear saris even on the beaches as her in-laws were with them. Predictably, for 39 per cent of men from Ahmedabad, boots, lingerie and women's feet are the big fetishes and 13 per cent find the bikini the sexiest female

38% men from Ahmedabad prefer woman on top.

attire. While there is no open discussion on sex, double entendre heavily punctuates men-women banter. Incidentally, it was only in Gujarat that the Maitri Karaar, a legal contract sanctioning live-in relationships, was accepted till the mid-1990s.

"Of all those who come to me seeking information on sexual toys and experimentation, people from Ahmedabad form the majority," says sexologist Dr Prakash Kothari. Coincidentally, Kothari, talked of as the first Indian sexologist and who claims to own the biggest collection of erotica in the country, is a Gujarati himself. He adds that streetside pornographic literature is common in the state as are instances of people quoting aloud from them on local trains. The demand for books on sex is definitely high. *Sannidhiya*

Have you ever asked a woman for a sexual favour in return for a job, assignment or a promotion?



Figures in per cent; Rest: Won't say

What have you tried?

Oral sex	25
Anal sex	15
Bisexual sex	10
Group sex	4

Figures in per cent; Rest: Haven't tried any of these/Won't say

Sampoorna Sex Guide, the first slick book written in Gujarati on sexual techniques by Ahmedabad-based sex specialist Paras Shah, has sold 70,000 copies in two years. "Couples have started experimenting with positions other than the missionary," says Shah. This is validated by the survey in which 38 per cent say that woman on top is their favourite position—the national average is 21 per cent. In last year's study on women, 73 per cent said they shared their fantasies with their partners—again the highest national figure.

However, Gujarati women, in their bandhej saris, huge bindis and glass bangles jingling on their arms, are rarely perceived as radical. They move in herds with children and family, not alone as independent individuals. But they nurture bold views on sex. The sex appeal of Gujarati women is wholesome, says Mumbai-based actor Ketaki Dave. "They are culture conscious, warm, hospitable and aware of their feminine charms and sexuality which make for an irresistible combination," says Dave, whose roles on TV and in films as a fiery Gujju woman have won her a big fan following. But she also points out that the consuming chemistry which these women generate finds expression only in private.

Except during the Navratri festival. Then Gujarat rocks with dholak and dandiya beats, the festivity fuels people's erotic desires and men and women figure out the physics of sexual chemistry in domains outside the bedroom. Gujarat then resembles Lord Krishna's raas leela where the gopis and gwalas of Vrindavan become one with the sensual surroundings. Last year, as if in justification, the sales of oral contraceptives overtook that of condoms during the garba festival. Says Snehal Patel, a college student: "Today pre-marital sex has virtually got social sanction among a large



SHAILESH RAVAL

69% Ahmedabadi men are happy with their sex lives.

section of liberated youngsters in Ahmedabad."

The new generation is not only challenging norms by wearing sleeveless blouses with Gujarati saris, but they are also trying to delink sex from the act of intercourse. Change always takes place simultaneously at different sites. Take the case of Poonam and Rita. Two months ago, these post-graduate students walked into the clinic of an Ahmedabad-based sex specialist, asking for a sex doll which they wanted to gift to a male friend on his birthday.

So, are the Gujaratis indiscriminate? Or are they easily ushering in what might be a difficult revolution for the rest of India? Probably neither. As a social scientist says, "What we see in Gujarat is the mixed effect of popular culture and films. Gujaratis are also big tourists and a hedonistic nexus of food, travel, time-pass and sex seems to be working here." Truly, there is no great aesthetic theory behind it. What works for sexuality doesn't necessarily work in other facets of social life. As dancer Mallika Sarabhai says, "Don't forget that hypocrisy is pervasive here. Despite vegetarianism, there are long queues outside non-veg restaurants. Despite prohibition, alcohol abuse is very high. Despite the value placed on non-violence, violence has shaken Gujarat. There is sex clothed in silence but contradictions peep out."

An inherent contradiction—a strange but explicable swing between conservatism and consumption of pleasures—explains Gujarat. According to some versions (still debated by historians) Vatsayana wrote the *Kamasutra* between 351 and 375 A.D. in Lat Pradesh, near Khambhat in Gujarat. On the other end of the spectrum, there is Mahatma Gandhi, born in Porbandar, Gujarat, who, after his long engagement with the dark God of desire, made sexual renunciation the sine qua non of his self-realisation.

So when Kantaben insists, "*Gujarati loko hot chhe*", there is more than sex to it.