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OPINION

Let the Cat Walk

A biased media thrives on the dark image of models

DIRGES on the fashion world have become a media neurosis. The easiest copy to write, or TV debate to run, is the kind in which judgemental speculation is passed off as fairplay. A week after her suicide, few know why exactly former model Viveka Babajee killed herself. But if you've been watching TV, you will conclude that models are manic-depressives who survive on Ecstasy and alcohol, party with rich boyfriends, and then kill themselves—with their stilettos on.

It is a harsh and premature obituary. Worse, it indicates misplaced paranoia about a prospering industry. To begin with, Babajee was no supermodel. Most people know her for her Kamasutra campaign, but nobody remembers the last time she was a showstopper or a cover girl. Moreover, assessing the 'mental health' of the fashion industry through the tragic suicides of a few models in the last decade is a flawed idea. Not one channel featured a model currently at the top, like Lakshmi Menon, a former but real supermodel like Mehr Jessia, or those senior designers who have mentored models for years, to get their insights into the industry and the pressures that models face. Sushma Puri, head of Elite Model Management India, says she is surprised that nobody in the media wants to know how agencies bolster, buffer and plan the careers of models. "The modelling world is safer than it has ever been. We not only ensure that models are cast appropriately, we protect their professional rights, look after their comforts and counsel them about the competitive market that they're in," says Puri.

SORIT

Entry-level models make Rs 6,000 to Rs 7,000 per ramp show, while a successful one makes up to Rs 25,000. Many get up to six shows a month on average, not including fashion weeks held in six cities twice a year. Even smaller cities like Chandigarh, Bhopal, Kochi and Guwahati host fashion events, inflating catwalk opportunities for these young women. Commercials fetch between Rs 1 to Rs 2 lakh per assignment. For the women in modelling (male models are usually paid less), this is a very lucrative career while it lasts, one carefully guided by image gurus, grooming experts and fashion directors. Model contracts are legally binding documents. Post-show partying, seen as hedonism by some and exploitation by others, is a must-do clause in some contracts. However, nobody puts a gun to the heads of models to wear short dresses and dance with cricketers.

Look at the winners. Priyanka Chopra, a Bareilly girl, easily tops the list of resilient, small-town girls who empowered themselves by becoming models; she went on to become Miss India, Miss World and a top Bollywood star without ever slashing her wrists. If Aishwarya Rai is too pat a name to base a debate on, what about girls like Carol Gracias, Indrani Dasgupta, Joey Matthews, Lisa Hayden, Nethra Raghuraman—all smart professionals? "Let's not forget that these girls create enormous aspirations and inspire millions of others," says senior choreographer Harmeet Bajaj. Some like Sheetal Malhar, Madhu Sapre, Ujjwala Raut and now Lakshmi Menon shine on the international fashion stage.

Is there life after modelling? For those who plan well, yes. Former supermodel Anna Bredemeyer spent years grooming younger models after she quit the ramp, then represented luxury brands like Canali, Mont Blanc and Brioni in India. Noyonika Chatterjee does choreography and model management. Mehr Jessia-Rampal, wise enough to bid adieu to the ramp early, now runs a successful event company. Besides, not one Indian designer, stylist or darzi has committed suicide till date. The industry is on an upswing and its lehnga-choli optimism has held through even in a recession.

Yes, there are pressures on models. Of competing with Bollywood for endorsements and covers, of the need to maintain super bodies, of getting their networking and PR right, of succeeding in a competitive world—not everyone becomes a Miss India. Among the new pressures is living with a maniacal media. On the one hand, it wields the Photoshop, quick to airbrush reality. One the other, it zooms in on slender limbs, shrieking about starvation, and gleefully flashes every fashion malfunction. It's a sexy story for this media if a beautiful model is lonely and heartbroken. It's even sexier if she kills herself.

The truth, though, is that modelling is alive and kicking. As is the Indian fashion industry, which now needs full-time defenders to protect it from cynics waiting to tear it apart. I want to formally apply for this job. ◘