

The traumas of beauty

India's success at producing IT and international beauties hides dark realities that have recently been revealed



DINESH WAGLE

As India experienced splendid progress in bringing out some of the world's best information technology (IT) companies and beautiful ladies on the world stage in the 90s, many people considered IT and beauty as two hallmarks of India. The 90s witnessed the phenomenal rise of tech firms like Infosys, Wipro and Tata Consultancy Services and the pleasant arrival of beauties like Aishwarya Rai, Sushmita Sen and Priyanka Chopra on the international arenas of Miss World and Miss Universe pageants. But although India is thriving in both sectors, the ride hasn't always been smooth. There are countless instances of failures in both industries. Not all Indian beauties make it to the top positions and not all IT companies make the amount of profits they claim. Last month was of particular interest as it saw a missed chance for an Indian beauty on the world stage and the exposure of the largest ever fraud in India that involved an IT company.

In the Miss World pageant held on December 13 in Johannesburg Parvathy Omanakuttan, a beauty from the southern Indian state of Kerala, had to be satisfied with the First Runner Up title as Miss Russia Ksenia Sukhinova walked away with the coveted crown. Parvathy reportedly criticized the jury for unfair results which drew mixed reactions from other beauties and models in India. Some criti-



cized her for acting like a loser while others praised her for speaking out. The next day it appeared that Parvathy retracted her statement as she clarified that she was satisfied with the results.

That was a small controversy that disappeared as soon as it erupted. Three days after the beauty contest another controversy erupted in India that has shocked country and has shown no sign of fading away anytime soon. On Jan 7, Ramalinga Raju, the boss of Satyam Computers, India's fourth-biggest software firm, admitted to fraud saying that the company's cash and bank balance sheet had been inflated and fudged to the tune of about one billion US dollars. "What started as a marginal gap between actual operating profits and the one reflected in the

books of accounts continued to grow over the years," said Raju in a statement. "It was like riding a tiger, not knowing how to get off without being eaten."

But let me continue with the appealing topic of beauty for now. The 21-year-old Parvathy narrowly missed out on joining five Indian glamour queens -- Reita Faria (1966), Aishwarya Rai (1994), Diana Hayden (1997), Yukta Mookhey (1999) and Priyanka Chopra (2000) -- who had won the title of Miss World. The two who have won the Miss Universe title are Sushmita Sen (1994) and Lara Dutta (2000). The success of these women contributed a lot to the growth of the beauty market in India. After all who doesn't want to be beautiful (or handsome)?

But the desperate efforts of



Indian youths to look beautiful have surprised Ene Adobunu. The 23 year old girl who came from Nigeria two months ago is a student of Media Studies in a prestigious film school in Noida, a city near New Delhi. "They are very much conscious about their looks," said the girl about her Indian friends. "They judge themselves from their looks. There is inferiority complex in those who don't have good looks."

Stating that she met many young Indians who spend a lot of time thinking about their hair, face, physique and the clothes they wear and judge themselves based on those factors Ene continued in a philosophical tone that "the excess of such attention shadows other human qualities."

"Don't you want to be fair?" I asked.

"No," she said clearly and confidently. "Not even if someone offers me millions (of dollars)."

Fair enough. The cultural standard of beauty in Nepal and India is different from that of Africa. There is a craze among many people in this part of the world to look fair. That's why they are willing to spend lots of money to bring a glow to their faces. Radhika Kharel is one of many whose career thrives on that craze.

The woman from Surkhet, western Nepal, opened a beauty parlour in south Delhi last month hoping to serve women in the area who want to look fair. Customers are flocking to her, which has made her enthusiastic about business prospects. "Who doesn't want to look good?" she said in an interview.

Of course, everyone wants to look good. Thus the profitable business of cosmetics is booming worldwide. But some efforts to sell those products become controversial in a country like India

where people with both 'dark' and 'fair' complexions live and many of them can't afford to have enough food. A few years ago a 'Fair and Lovely' TV advert that linked fairness to beauty and darkness to unemployment and inferiority came under heavy criticism from women activists and a large section of society in India. The company that made the ad, Hindustan Lever Limited, immediately withdrew the commercial. By the time the ad went off air, a debate in India had already started: do you have to be 'fair' to be 'beautiful'?

That question is still alive. There are ongoing efforts that try to delink fairness with beauty. For instance, Mail Today, a tabloid from Delhi has been publishing an advert these that tries to portray the 'fair-is-beautiful' concept as outdated. A smiling girl with dark complexion and clad in a beautifully designed outfit is seen holding a glass of wine. Below her photo are these words: "I am not fair but I am lovely. I am not yesterday."

Despite these new efforts people still feel to be dark is to be ugly. Ene from Nigeria has seen many such youth in Noida.

"Unconsciously they are flowing with the wave that says fair is beautiful but black is not," said Ene. "And they behave accordingly. A fair girl has boldness and she walks confident. Black guys are reserved and maintain a low profile. I feel terrible for them. I don't know how long it has been going on but I want to tell them 'hey stand up, black is beautiful. You can't buy black from market. No one wants to be black. That is why this is beautiful.'"

Sometimes she gives her own example. "Look at me," she tells them, "I am black and I feel I am beautiful. I don't want to change this. Why do you worry?" The Nigerian said the western media which influences media elsewhere in the world was to be blamed for associating fairness with beauty.

Oh, the media. The Indian media these days are filled with the Satyam (truth) scandal. Newspapers have renamed the company 'Asatyam' (untruth). Chairman Raju has been arrested, agencies have started investigation and government has disbanded the old board and replaced it with new one. More than fifty thousand jobs are at stake. More than that, India's reputation as outsourcing hub is at stake. Along with this devastating news came a report that the World Bank, in addition to banning Satyam for bribery and data theft, debarred another prestigious Indian IT firm Wipro for its involvement in unfair activities that included providing its shares to World Bank staff.

As the investigations are going on, many are anxiously waiting for the confirmation that the case of Satyam is an isolated one and other companies are well and healthy.

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Forgive and forget?

Obama should reconsider his decision to let the previous administration get away with crime

PAUL KRUGMAN

Last Sunday President-elect Barack Obama was asked whether he would seek an investigation of possible crimes by the Bush administration. "I don't believe that anybody is above the law," he responded, but "we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards."

I'm sorry, but if we don't have an inquest into what happened during the Bush years -- and nearly everyone has taken Mr. Obama's remarks to mean that we won't -- this means that those who hold power are indeed above the law because they don't face any consequences if they abuse their power.

Let's be clear what we're talking about here. It's not just torture and illegal wiretapping, whose perpetrators claim, however implausibly, that they were patriots acting to defend the nation's security. The fact is that the Bush administration's abuses extended from environmental policy to voting rights. And most of the abuses involved using the power of government to reward political friends and punish political enemies.

At the Justice Department, for example, political appointees illegally reserved nonpolitical positions for "right-thinking Americans" -- their term, not mine -- and there's strong evidence that officials used their positions both to undermine the protection of minority voting rights and to persecute Democratic politicians.

The hiring process at Justice echoed the hiring process during the occupation of Iraq -- an occupation whose success was supposedly essential to national security -- in which applicants were judged by their politics, their personal loyalty to President

Bush and, according to some reports, by their views on Roe v. Wade, rather than by their ability to do the job.

Speaking of Iraq, let's also not forget that country's failed reconstruction: the Bush administration handed billions of dollars in no-bid contracts to politically connected companies, companies that then failed to deliver. And why should they have bothered to do their jobs? Any government official who tried to enforce accountability on, say, Halliburton quickly found his or her career derailed.

There's much, much more. By my count, at least six important government agencies experienced major scandals over the past eight years -- in most cases, scandals that were never properly investigated. And then there was the biggest scandal of all: Does anyone seriously doubt that the Bush administration deliberately misled the nation into invading Iraq?

Why, then, shouldn't we have an official inquiry into abuses during the Bush years?

One answer you hear is that pursuing the truth would be divisive, that it would exacerbate partisanship. But if partisanship is so terrible, shouldn't there be some penalty for the Bush administration's politicization of every aspect of government?

Alternatively, we're told that we don't have to dwell on past abuses, because we won't repeat them. But no important figure in the Bush administration, or among that administration's political allies, has expressed remorse for breaking the law. What makes anyone think that they or their political heirs won't do it all over again, given the chance?

In fact, we've already seen this movie.

During the Reagan years, the Iran-contra conspirators violated the Constitution in the name of national security. But the first President Bush pardoned the major malefactors, and when the White House finally changed hands the political and media establishment gave Bill Clinton the same advice it's giving Mr. Obama: let sleeping scandals lie. Sure enough, the second Bush administration picked up right where the Iran-contra conspirators left off -- which isn't too surprising when you bear in mind that Mr. Bush actually hired some of those conspirators.

Now, it's true that a serious investigation of Bush-era abuses would make Washington an uncomfortable place, both for those who abused power and those who acted as their enablers or apologists. And these people have a lot of friends. But the price of protecting their comfort would be high: If we whitewash the abuses of the past eight years, we'll guarantee that they will happen again.

Meanwhile, about Mr. Obama: while it's probably in his short-term political interests to forgive and forget, next week he's going to swear to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States." That's not a conditional oath to be honored only when it's convenient.

And to protect and defend the Constitution, a president must do more than obey the Constitution himself; he must hold those who violate the Constitution accountable. So Mr. Obama should reconsider his apparent decision to let the previous administration get away with crime. Consequences aside, that's not a decision he has the right to make.

The New York Times

Insecurity haunts Peshawar

ALI HAZRAT BACHA

THE fresh assaults by militants on several houses of pro-government elders here in the suburbs, NATO cargo terminals, police posts and unabated kidnapping of scores of people from parts of the provincial metropolis demonstrate that the so-called government efforts to overcome the deteriorating law and order situation have so far proved unproductive. It is not merely a presumption but a fact that Peshawar is in grip of militancy as sabotage activities have been taking place in every nook and corner of the district. There is no hindrance in way of militants as when and wherever they want carry out their activities.

No doubt, security agencies might be planning to counter the attacks, but till now the situation seems to be out of control. That is why sense of insecurity among people is increasing fast with each passing day.

Taking exception of the increasing terrorist acts, the government had launched a number of operations in areas like Matni, Mathra, and Michini; they also apprehended many suspects and destroyed their hideouts in limits of various police stations. However, these operations in areas of Peshawar proved ineffective. Officials of the police department link the failure to the bordering tribal areas where criminals have safe havens.

The motive behind the operations in Bara and Jamrud tehsils of Khyber Agency aimed at securing the provincial capital. Whatever is the government's version, but it can rightly be said that all such efforts made so far have proved futile exercises. It was reported that the

militants had fled the areas prior to launching of the operations.

Following are some facts and figures which are enough to prove the presence of armed militants in and around Peshawar district. The terrorist acts which were noted during the past 15 days include:

The main 12-inch diameter pipeline of Sui-gas - supplying gas to Hayatabad, Achini and Badbher - was blown up on Ring Road in limits of Bana Mani police station on December 31.

Militants blew up a police post near Jabba Masjid on Pejagi Road in jurisdiction of Mathra police station where a police constable was also killed on Jan 1.

Dozens of militants armed with sophisticated weapons attacked and blown up another police checkpoint at Arbab Tapo on Indus Highway in limits of the Matni police station on Jan 5.

The militants have started targeting leaders of public peace committees, which were found by police in limits of different police stations to assist security forces while countering the militant attacks. Thus the militants blew up the house of a peace committee leader, Mohammad Ali, at Sharikera village in limits of Matni on Jan 6.

Unidentified persons also blew up a music centre at Jamil Chowk, by planting a heavy explosive beneath its foundations in limits of Chamkani police station on Jan 9.

A priest of the St. John Cathedral Church was kidnapped during daylight by unidentified persons from area closed to the Allied Bank in Saddar on Jan 10, who was thrown at the Church gate two days later reportedly in unconscious condition.

A television artist, Alamzeb Muhahid, was kidnapped by unidenti-

fied armed men from Phase-6 Hayatabad during daylight hours in a street when he came out of his residence to catch a vehicle for his office on Jan 12.

On Jan 13, militants attacked cargo supplies of the Northern Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) on Ring Road and damaged four containers.

Majority of these incidents have occurred in the cantonment area which is considered to be the most guarded and comparatively safe than the rural areas. Now even the people of the cantonment area are feeling themselves totally insecure.

The Taliban are also targeting people who are extending support to the local police for maintenance of peace in their localities.

One question, which is often raised by all the people, is still unresolved as to how easily the criminals disappear after committing crimes.

During the past two weeks, it has been observed that incidents of motorcycle snatching and other street crimes have increased alarmingly even on the Gulberg, Bamba, Gulabad and Chambapir roads.

A number of people have also been kidnapped from the city areas, but police always deny having information about the incidents. The people are also avoiding registration of cases with police as the department has lost confidence of the public.

In the past the police riders' squads used to monitor movements of suspected people on roads, but now there is no system of checking anti-social elements. If the police department didn't take notice of this situation, the criminals would further intensify their activities in Peshawar.

Dawn

PM's remark



This is in response to the prime minister's recent remark that the reactionaries and regressive forces are hell bent on foiling the peace process. On one hand, we admire his bold speech against imperialism, reactionaries and expansionism, one the other hand, we laugh at his utter failure to effect a change in the society and improve diplomatic relations. It has shattered the hopes and aspirations of the people who are longing for a peaceful and prosperous Nepal. His threat undermines the spirit of the peace process. It is wise to con-

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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centrate on resolving the burning problems of the day: loadshedding, price hike of consumer goods, unemployment, border encroachment, rampant corruption, lawlessness, criminal activities, etc., which have wreaked a havoc in the life of the nation. People will appreciate him more if he reduces the loadshedding hours than if he gives revolutionary speeches.

Suresh Adhikari
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Free health services

This refers to the news story "Free materni-

ty services" (Jan. 11, Page 1). This is a landmark decision of the government for improving access to and utilization of safe motherhood services in the country. In a country like ours where maternal mortality is still a huge challenge in public health, the provision of free health services at district hospitals will definitely improve access to and utilization of the health services for the poor, socially disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

But much more has to be done at the community level to create an enabling environment for better access and utilization of the health services. This includes overcom-

ing social, cultural, economic and behavioural barriers at individual, family and community levels. There is an urgent need to ensure skilled birth attendants and other trained human resources in health facilities, and to improve community support for referrals, transportation and care at families and health facilities. The government must think of improving health infrastructure, provide trained human resources and implement policies to enhance community participation in health care management at all levels.

Jhabindra Bhandari
New Baneshwor, Kathmandu

Encirclement of China

Maoist leader CP Gajurel has charged that India and the United States are playing foul to topple the running government of Nepal and replace it with a new government to encircle China. If Gajurel is right, India would be entangled in a blunder that would prove too costly for Delhi. India should play a more positive role in settling the issue of the disputed 60,000 hectares (12,00,000 ropanis) of land. A recent joint military exercise by India and China in Karnataka, India was a very positive start. President of the "National People's Front", Chitra Bahadur KC has stated that federalism in Nepal is "Made in India". Federalism in Nepal seems to pose a serious hurdle in writing the constitution. I think India really needs a more positive policy to bring peace in the birth place of the Buddha.

R. Sayami
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