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male prostitution

## Aunty's Lovers

**They are unintelligent and risque, crass and dirty. Yet they make anywhere between Rs 5,000 and Rs 20,000 a night. They are the Indian gigolos. Their world is about desire and passion. Of frustrated and loveless women. They are...**

SHEFALEE VASUDEV

Why am I doing this? It is four in the afternoon and I am waiting for a whore at a Delhi coffee shop. It's been 30 minutes: this feels terrifying and hilarious, almost in equal measure. This is no regular whore. It is a man to begin with. His pimp, a girl who calls herself Mansi, allays my restlessness with hot sell on the phone. Later I realise that someone has been watching me all along as I sit fidgeting there. Mansi's voice is insistent: *jo ladka maine aapke liye chuna hai, woh bahut special hai. Mil to lo.*" (The boy I have chosen for you is very special. At least meet him.)

Six days on the gigolo trail, I have met ten-twelve male whores in Delhi and Mumbai. And never is the story the same. So what's the story?

It is an invisible story which is familiar but not really. It's about desire and sexual passion. About frustration and need. Sex and money. A bizarre cocktail of secret meetings and inflamed ambition. Of young men selling themselves to support a fantasised lifestyle. Of women who find neither sex nor intimacy in marriages. It is about heterosexual men who will try sex with bisexual boys to kick boredom. The twist in the tale is that unlike female prostitution, it is not driven by heart-wrenching *majboori*. Most men are in it for mega bucks and the sheer fun of it. After all, men can't be forced to "do it" if they don't want to.

"Yes, I love doing it," chorus Rohit, Amit, Mike. They are production-line perfect. Gelled, streaked hair and jewellery—rings, pendants, bracelets in weird designs. The metrosexual look is their trademark. "Sex with Aunties is always good. We get taken out to nice restaurants for dinner and drinks and then to the disco," says Mike, a 21-year-old who has joined me from a disco in a top-notch five star hotel in Mumbai. Aunty is a Mumbai term for loaded women who shop for sex.

"I charge Rs 1,000 an hour and up to Rs 5,000 for a night," warns Mike as we get into a taxi. Tall and muscular, he looks like a club bouncer. His crotch-hugging jeans add to his crassness and he smells as if he's emptied a bottle of cologne. Unintelligent and boring, he's all pectoral, nothing else. He plays the only game he knows and sends me dirty messages across the table. Cut it, I tell him, I am not interested. So he hints at what all he can do in the bedroom and that I would be wasting my money if I just talk to him. Mike is right. Conversation will never earn him any money.



But sex is not the only transaction in this game. Some aunties pay just to hold hands while others will lie with their 'boys' in bed refusing to be touched. Dosti (friendship) is another buzzword in this trade where actually friends are few. But that's what Rohit from Delhi promises me. I found him through one of the 150-odd massage parlour advertisements that regularly appear in the weekend classifieds of all top dailies. Quite a few of these places that offer herbal, ayurveda and relaxation massages are links to buy sex. They 'guarantee' satisfaction, promising male or female, home or hotel facilities. Some are escort services that will send you arm candy for the night. Others offer body to body massage—which means sex—starting from Rs 1,500 or more for an 'encounter'. Some send photographs of the gigolos on email or mms to choose from. If you don't like a guy, you can send him back, having paid for his conveyance. But once you say yes, the meter starts running. Rates start from Rs 500 for forty-five minutes and go up to Rs 10,000 a night depending on the kind of guy you hire and the service you ask for.

But Rohit, it turns out, comes cheap. A Meerut college dropout, he runs a beauty parlour in Delhi and has the Gayatri Mantra as his cellphone hello tune. He smses 'blue shirt' to me for identification and quibbles for Rs 600. When I hesitate, he quickly drops his price. "You are very nice, I don't want money, buy me a gift instead," he pleads in Hindi. I am getting tired of speaking the same set of lies. So I say I am a novelist from Chicago researching some "masala" for my new novel.

We order chicken masala and he bares all. "Everybody, men or women, wants sex, massage is just a *bahana* (excuse). Many of my clients are women whose husbands are always busy. They have a lot of what you call black and other lace panties (he is groping for the word lingerie) from foreign and wear them when they call us." I ask him what happens if he doesn't like a woman who has hired him. "It is the client's choice, we have to go with it. This is *dhandha*," he says. His wife, a cashier at his parlour, has no clue about his secret life. Later, I help Rohit select a checked shirt from a nearby mall as his gift, hoping that I don't bump into friends or family as I wait outside the trial room.

Sex, says everyone, is easy money. No stories of tortured men with hearts of gold come to the fore. But the sex is peculiar. Oral sex, yes, but no kissing, which is too intimate and off bounds. Some say that foreigners don't mind kissing but Indians do and that men from the Middle East are the most generous clients when it comes to payment and tips. The boys claim they can get to state their own sexual preferences too and insist on safe sex. There are no older men in the trade. If you ask for a 35-plus intelligent man, chances are you will go to bed alone. Most of them are young, brash, brawny, brainless and bisexual. But there are exceptions.

Like Abraham. He is the Alpha male at Voodoo, a notorious hangout in Colaba, Mumbai, with a dance bar called Slip Disc. A college student around 22, Abraham is strictly heterosexual. Dressed in blue jeans with a pale yellow designer dhakai shirt, he makes heads turn as he walks up to me with a macho swagger. "I am a model," he announces with a flourish. I believe him. He claims he has modelled for *Man's World* and *Times of India*, done auditions for adman Prahlad Kakkar and photoshoots with lens guru Prabuddha Das Gupta. Once, a businesswoman from Hyderabad offered him a modelling contract and a visit to her bedroom one night. Since then he has been bedroom-hopping.

Abraham claims he 'understands' when women want to give him up to Rs 20,000 for a night or a computer or "anything, anything that I want". You are a rich man, I tell him. But do you polish your craft like all professionals must? "Oh yes. See, sex is business for me and I better be good at my work. I have enough stamina to go on and on till the woman is satisfied. I make sure I don't have an orgasm until she does," he says, unable to disguise his libidinal arrogance. Abraham doesn't want a steady girlfriend but allows himself to fall in love with his clients. These days he's besotted with a 36-year-old housewife from Jaipur. He pulls out a fancy palmtop and shows me her photograph. "Isn't she gorgeous?" he gushes, bashfully revealing his forearm that is scarred with her name in cigarette burns.



The thick cigarette smoke at Voodoo does not cloud people's naked desires. Voodoo is an inferno that comes to life after midnight. Male and female whores, gays and lesbians crowd the dank bar for sex and sleaze. It reminds me of a bar in Pattaya, Thailand, except that a young man is dancing on the floor thrusting his hips at potential punters. I am escorted by three men. My photographer colleague stays by me as the other two give us cover from a distance. Men leer and lech openly—everyone here is fair game.

For those who would rather shop posh, there are the five-star discotheques. But it is the internet that most aunties trust. Abbas, all of 18, talks to me with trembling hands at Cafe Ideal at Mumbai's Chowpatty and shows me the cyber pathway. The bespectacled and mild-mannered Abbas has moved to Mumbai from Bangalore for work and is "doing aunties and men" till he finds a job. In Bangalore, he sometimes had sex with aunties for free. The dinner and drinks that came along were enough motivation. He logs on to Yahoo messenger on my computer and points out to the numerous chatrooms that open up. Mumbai Gay Lounge, Aunty Bar, Gay Shreeram bar, Lesbian for Aunties, M2M (men to men) and many more.

It is a fast world. Of webcams, chatrooms and mobile phones. In Delhi, Mansi and Amit were carrying pornographic magazines in their car, the doors of which didn't open from inside. Between the two of them, they had four mobile phones. Networks are widened through technology, the new pimp in the open market of surreptitious sex. It connects pain with pleasure, guilt with guise, sex with intrigue, infidelity with incessant desire. It links an Indian-born Miami architect with Abbas, who he wants to stay in his Versova flat so that he can have sex with him during his trips to India.

More than anything else, the internet has converted women into buyers in a bazaar where they have only been sold. They can now have oral sex for a few thousand rupees, tenderness for two drinks and kinky amusement at a private party. Which is why male strippers like Ali, nicknamed the Greek God, who appeared on a popular TV show last year, now boldly proclaim their popularity.

By now, the empty souls of these disturbed and aimless young men have begun to peep out from their eyes. There is something pathetic about their swagger. They want to believe that sex with aunties is the best way to secure their future but are often attacked by sharp pangs of self-doubt.

I am equally bewildered by the other half of the story: who are these aunties? Do their husbands send detectives after them? Aren't they risking too much to buy orgasms, reassurance, self-worth? Do they think this is an extension of women's empowerment? Do they have male buddies?



A socialite friend finds one woman willing to talk to me. Mrs K lives on Mumbai's Carter road in a luxurious double flat. She says she is 35 but looks ten years older. She has been a slave of her husband's indifference and never got a chance to try buddy sex. With money stacked in her cupboard and nobody to fulfil her sexual appetite, she buys frequent escapes out of loneliness. She is wearing a smart black capri, a chiffon top and huge diamond earrings. She looks tired and cynical as she applies frosty pink nail polish on her yellowed nails. "To glide, you must grease," says Mrs K, quoting someone she can't remember. "The need to have a man inside the body is a real one," she adds. Has she ever considered walking out of the marriage? I ask. She laughs loudly. Clearly, this is the dumbest question she has been asked in a long time.

Desperate housewives is perhaps a trendy term to use but it is explanatory. I wonder what Mrs K would do when even these hired men start rejecting her. When cellulite wins the war over passion and money cannot give her a makeover.

Within this murky network, the business of pleasure is well-oiled. In both cities, I am told there are designated areas, pubs and bars where you can pick up gigolos. But a popular Mumbai socialite corrects this. "You don't even have to look. They come to you themselves—you can get male prostitutes by the size, by the colour, by the minute," he says. "*Bas hasi to phasi*" (smile and you are in trouble), he adds. "I will put you on my caller group," says Shakeel, a pimp, promising me *behtereen* (best) 'service'. "You will get a missed call...then you call back at your convenience. Or just walk in Colaba or Marine Drive smiling and looking around and someone will approach you to ask the time. This is a hint that the man is for sale," he says, ranting off locations where you can pick up gigolos. In Delhi, the trade doesn't appear to



be so overt but if someone has a wish, its fulfilment is easy.

As the sleaze gets uncovered, references and names from the glamour world and from the rich and swish set keep cropping up. I wonder about the verification of these anecdotes. But I also realise that different versions of people tell the same big story. Somehow, it all falls into place.

But despite multiple partners, most people seem to be lonely. There is deception, so there is anxiety. Boys who don't get enough business rape and rob their clients and often land up in jail, says a Mumbai policeman. Some women are caught by their husbands and messy chapters begin in their marriages.

At the other end of the pecking order are desperadoes who do not distinguish between aunties and uncles. These are the real nowhere men, bisexual and destitute, they are the flotsam of the trade—risking death and disease for small monies and mean sex. Sometimes they will dress up in drag or togs, go out and do it with anyone, money or no money. In Delhi, I meet a group of hiv positive men, now a part of a support group. All of them have got the virus through mindless whoring. Male prostitution eventually brings with it the same pathos that female whoring does.

I want to go back and ask Abraham that after the deed is done, what will he do with the dagger? What about the day when he himself becomes an Uncle?

This new story has an old beginning and end. Thrilling when it starts and chilling when it finishes.

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## Secret Garden

**Its fruits may be forbidden, but our survey shows, many are going for bigger bites.**

If it is forbidden, it must be had. Biblically, historically, presently. More so, if it is sexual, erotic, carnal. Unattainability, the headiest aphrodisiac of them all, always turns taboo into temptation. The *Outlook-Cfore* survey on Forbidden Sex reveals that the oldest cliché is still true. Perhaps it will always be.

Between the forgiven and the forbidden lies a continent of unfulfilled desires that awaken disturbing lust and longing. In its most raw form, transgressions define sex. Great lovemaking, as they say, is first about imagining the impossible. But in its social mould, sex is also about restraint. On the one hand is the belief that putting a leash on sexuality limits its liberating odyssey. On the other, the equally strong argument that if all caution is thrown to the winds and narcissism rules, sex will become a mindless orgy preventing the union between love and lust from becoming orgasmic.

In this survey, men and women in the age group of 20-45 years from eight cities were asked about the push and pull of the unspoken. Of sex in unequal relationships of power—with gurus, teachers, therapists, doctors, bosses. Of desire for those with whom affinity is sacrosanct. Like: mother's friends, partner's best friend or sibling, the older brother's wife, the younger sister's boyfriend, relatives within a joint family. In some places the questionnaire was just a blank slate—to be filled as desired.

In India, the line between taboo and approval is rather diaphanous. In rural Punjab, marrying the younger brother-in-law after the husband's death is an old custom as is marrying cousins or uncles in some communities in the South. Even so, inside the forbidden zone lingers a wicked explicitness pulsating with passion. After the purdah system was abolished, the language of women had to be civilised; they were too used to unrestrained libidinal expression. Beneath the veneer of the bhadrakok coyness, say many, lingers a layer of searing sensuality. This survey looks behind such civilised masks.

The questionnaire was received with an expected mix of doubt and caution but the responses are outstandingly bold. Some junked it and others refused to answer it, but of those who did, a majority confess to breaking rules when it comes to sex. Both men and women show a willingness to try casual sex. But disturbingly, only 57 per cent say they always have safe sex. There are confessions about sex with the spouse's sibling and a desire to try threesomes and multiple partners. It is surprising how despite initial

resistance towards discussing intimate lives, some startlingly honest admissions come up in sex surveys. Indeed, 61 per cent men say they have pretended to be in love to get sex. Nine per cent of heterosexual women from Mumbai say they have had sex with other women just for the fun of it whereas 26 per cent women from Calcutta would hire a male prostitute for oral sex if their husbands refused. Curiously, respondents are divided in their stand on adultery. There is no moral vote for or against it.

What's new is not the story of the forbidden but the outlook towards it.

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## The Gigolo Giveaways

**Age** Young, usually between 18 and 28 years.

**Address** Massage parlour ads in classifieds, escort services, designated pubs, bars or markets. A pimp's mobile call group or an Internet chatroom.

**Look** Muscular and metrosexual. Loaded with weird jewellery and figure-hugging clothes in loud colours.

**Walk** Strutting without grace, legs apart.

**Talk** Boring, unintelligent.

**Vocabulary** Aunty, M2M (men to men), meetha (gay, bisexual), dosti, sex karna hai ya nahin? (do you want sex or not) Yes, sab kuch karte hain (Everything goes)

**Cell phone hello tunes** Anything from Gayatri Mantra to Mangala, Mangala...or Be Sexy...

**Skills** Anything in and out of bed: men or women, active or passive, couple or group. Kissing optional.

**Rates** From Rs 600 for 45 minutes for a B-class gigolo to Rs 10,000 a night for the suave variety. Tip as you wish.

**Come On lines** Gud Chahiye Kya? Chalna Hai? Hi Babe, do you want a boyfriend? What's the time?

**Additional qualifications** SMS and Net-friendly, some can eat with a fork and knife or chopsticks, understand safe sex.

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## 41% Women Think Sex & Love Are Not Connected

That's just the tip of the melting sexual iceberg. Many such revelations tumble out in this Outlook-Cfore poll on forbidden sex.



Sex Survey

## 41% Women Think Sex & Love Are Not Connected

That's just the tip of the melting sexual iceberg. Many such revelations tumble out in this Outlook-Cfore poll on forbidden sex.

### Answers by both men and women respondents

#### Do you believe in breaking rules when it comes to sex?

Sometimes	50%
Never	43%
Always	7%

#### Have you ever had sex with any of the following?

Teacher	5%
Doctor	5%
Guru	2%
Therapist	2%
None	86%

#### Is it all right to have sex with one's religious guru or teacher?

Yes	13%
No	61%
Can't Say	26%



**Do you know people who have had sexual relationships within their joint family?**

Yes	45%
No	55%

**Have you ever tried partner-swapping?**

Never wanted to do it	77%
Never got a chance	20%
Sometimes	2%
Yes, many times	1%

**What would you do if you were caught having sex with a relative?**

Apologise	42%
Deny	23%
Vow never to do it again	21%
Tell others to mind their own business	1%





**Do you think sexual fidelity to one's spouse or companion is important?**

Yes	32%
No	25%
Can't Say	43%

**Do you think having forbidden sex is better than having sex with your spouse/partner?**

Yes	36%
No	64%

**Do you know of anyone who is bisexual?**

None	65%
More than one person	23%
Yes, one person	10%
More than 10 people	2%

**Do you always have safe sex?**

Always	57%
Sometimes	35%
Never	8%



### Answers by male respondents

**Do you ever fantasise about your wife or girlfriend's sister?**

Yes	29%
No	71%

**Have you ever pretended to be in love to get sex?**

Yes	61%
No	39%

**Given a chance would you have sex with your wife/girlfriend's best friend or sister?**

Yes	31%
No	69%

**Have you ever cheated on your wife/partner?**

Yes	41%
No	59%

**Have you tried any of the following?**

Sex with call girls	58%
Drug parties and sex	15%
Blind dating and sex	14%
None of these	12%
All of these	9%

*(Multiple response was allowed)*



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### Answers by female respondents

#### Have you ever sexually fantasised about your husband's brother or best friend?

About his best friend	16%
About his brother	4%
Never	80%

#### What would you do if your boyfriend cheated on you with your best friend?

End both relationships	60%
Forgive and forget	17%
Do the same	13%
Complain to his family	10%



#### Who do you enjoy having sex with most?

Younger men	64%
Older men	36%

**Would you like to try a threesome sexual experience with a close friend plus husband or boyfriend?**

Yes	21%
No	79%

**Have you ever been asked for sexual favours from teachers, doctors, gurus or bosses?**

Never	80%
Sometimes	12%
Very often	6%
Always	2%

**Do you discuss your sex life with your doctor or boss?**

Yes	12%
No	88%

**If your husband did not give you oral sex, what would you do?**

Forget it, it's not important	53%
Have an extramarital affair	16%
Find other ways of pleasure	16%
Hire a male prostitute	15%



**Photographs by Anita Khemka / Photoink**

*An English literature graduate, Anita Khemka began photography in 1996. Her oeuvre has largely been defined by social documentary work; people living with HIV, the mentally challenged, child labour etc. Her current work dealing with alternative sexuality has been made into a German film,*

Between the Lines—India's Third Gender, *which opened at the recent Locarno Film Festival.*

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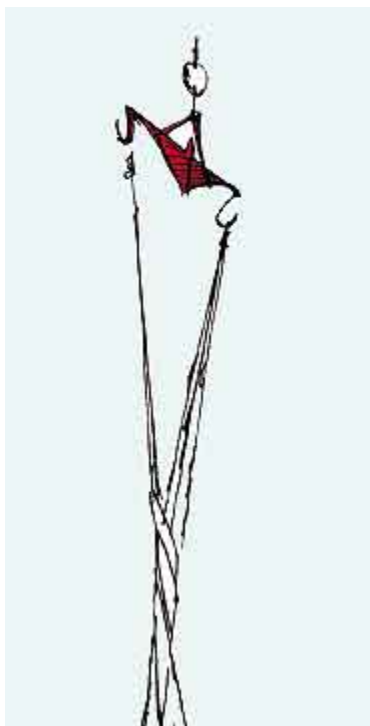
### Methodology OUTLOOK-Cfore survey

Research organisation Cfore conducted the survey in eight cities—Delhi, Mumbai, Calcutta, Bangalore, Chennai, Kochi, Ahmedabad and Guwahati between August 28 and September 7, 2005. A structured questionnaire that was based on the realm of forbidden sexuality, keeping the Indian culture and social taboos in mind, was given to male and female respondents in the age group of 20-45 years. These respondents belonged to SEC A and SEC B category of the above cities. A total of 2,000 people were initially approached to zero down to the final list of 800 which was the targeted sample size. Out of these, 784 responded with the questionnaire fully completed. The total sample size had 47 per cent females and 53 per cent males as a representative set. The surveying method was one-to-one interviews, in which the researchers explained the theme and purpose of the survey and then handed over the questionnaire to the respondents to be filled and returned two days later, assuring complete anonymity.

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## The Same Difference, Just Chill

**Do we need the government in our pants? Section 377 wants to go there.**



Last year, after a reading at the Edinburgh Book Festival, I was tired and homesick. So, when my British editor suggested dinner with some writers, I was hesitant (from authors, as with inflammable trucks on Indian highways, I Keep Safe Distance). But the British novelist Shamim Sarif and her partner, Hanan Kattan, astonished my heart with the grace of their rapport. The two women, in their thirties, make up a family with their two sons. I recall how Shamim's eyes shone at their mention and how Hanan called the babysitter to check if the boys, at home in London, were in bed.

To glimpse the scruffy loveliness of maternal anxiety, to find affirmation in contracts of trust, to recognise lives lived on authentic terms: all this was an unexpected blessing. As I tried to picture a similar scene in India, the audacity of my imagination was betrayed by reality. Never mind cultural constraints, the fact that even today, as a citizenry, we tolerate Section 377 on our books of law is proof that the benefits of India's coming of age are, at best, economic, erratic, and available mainly to the elite. Section 377 asserts: "Whosoever has carnal intercourse voluntarily against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or imprisonment for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall be liable to fine." Although rarely used to punish, Section 377 blasts a violent stigma over a specific sexual act—anal intercourse; stigmatising homosexuality. The power of Section 377 lies not in its capacity to criminalise as much as in its power to shame.



And shame remains the gun in the hands of the upper castes of the sexual classes. Remember Gore Vidal's famous adage "Sex is Politics"? Well, sex is also power. To identify one sexual conduct as "normal" and another as "perverse" is less an exercise in the moral upkeep of society as it is a manipulation of power. Let's also not forget that one person's power is defined by another person's powerlessness: power, without relative value, ceases to exist. And the power to forbid is innately arousing: it's sadomasochism of the mind.

In 2004, the Delhi High Court rejected an ngo's petition asking for Section 377 to be no longer applicable for consenting adults. (Consensual intercourse, simply put, is a private privilege—who asked the state to pen our private Kamasutra?) In 2001, the government had refused to append or repeal Section 377. A home ministry affidavit suggested that Indian society offered little tolerance for any sexuality other than heterosexuality: reason enough for Section 377 to exist. In the past, child marriage and dowry were tolerated; today, both are illegal. If the court believes it must reflect society, how can it forget that society reflects the law? If Section 377 is cleaned out, how long before societal outlook—prejudices included—undergo vacuuming? Section 377, unappended, not only inflicts bigotry, it prevents society from adapting to zeitgeist.

My India is Remixville; 50 per cent of urban marriages end in separation or divorce; Bollywood stars zoom off with murder (and croon, ostensibly to judges, "*Just Chill, Chill...Just Chill*"). Change is so palpable I can almost extend my hands and dance with it. So, when will the government wake up and smell the chai of the mtv electorate? Of course, one argument is that same-sex relationships exist in India heedless of social limitations or legal ramifications. Why purge Section 377? Inherently, by condemning a sexual act as an abnormality worthy of prosecution, the courts standardises heterosexuality. It creates room to punish sex that doesn't conform to this standard. The only thing worse than turning homosexuality into pathology is assuming that heterosexuality is the healthy norm. (This defeats, consequently, the idea of fair trial.) In *Theorising Heterosexuality*, Jean Carabine asks: "Why does social policy tend to adopt a fixed idea of sexuality as heterosexuality, which has normalising effects?" Perhaps because governance is essentially concerned with power management, and for one person to be in control, another has to be controlled.

Within heterosexuality, men control women (although this is changing); and heterosexuality, as a whole if ambiguous unit, manages other sexualities. But as the global sexual rights movement strides beyond the politics of desire and ploughs the amorphous landscape of love, writers, activists, citizens ask: whoever said heterosexuality was supposed to wear the pants in the house? Section 377 needs to go for several reasons. Because we don't want the government in our pants. Because it interferes with the tasks of aids outreach workers. And because it is anti-democratic. In a nation where democracy is reduced to an item number, a law forbidding a particular sexual liberty is patently inhuman and shockingly regressive.

Perhaps my generation must recognise the freedom our ancestors died for: only so it can refurbish the meaning, privileges and the bravery of freedom: this, after all, gives our children something to live for. When extending marriage to all its citizens, Spanish prime minister Zapatero said: "We are enlarging the opportunity for happiness to our neighbours, our co-workers, our friends and, our families: at the same time we are making a more decent society, one that does not humiliate its members." By denying dignity, Section 377 humiliates a part of its citizenry.

Besides, if Shamim, Hanan and their kids ever visit me in Bombay, I'd like them to feel safe and their sexual self to be intrinsically respected. I'd assure their children that you can forbid a lot of things in this world, but you can't forbid love: its power is invincible, its range transformative, its tenderness subtle enough to stun. Their mothers, I'd tell the boys, were right all along. And brave as hell.

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(Shangvi is the author of *The Last Song of Dusk*)

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## God Forbid

**Gullible devotees are easy prey for many spiritual gurus. They hunt with impunity.**

Six months ago, an FIR was filed with the Madhya Pradesh police against a senior monk, Digambar Jain Acharya Virag Sagarji Maharaj, accusing him of more than 40 rapes over the past 14 years. The allegation came from an organisation called the Jain Sanskriti Raksha evam Samvardhak Samiti of Agra on the basis of horrifying complaints from female devotees.

Last year, a BBC film called *Secret Swami* showed the iconic, curly-haired godman, Satya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, as a homosexual abuser. Former devotees Alaya Rahm and Mark Roche, featured in the film, gave graphic accounts of the sexual exploits of one of India's most sought after spiritual gurus. He had allegedly forced young male devotees to join him in his private chambers, undressed them and, on the pretext of purifying them, had abused them. Others had been forced into oral sex by him.

Blasphemous? The sexexploits of godmen have become a routine section of crime news now. Satya Sai Baba, whose notoriety perhaps equals his fame, was first accused of sinful ways long years ago in 1976 when a former American follower, Tal Brooke, wrote a book called *Avatar of the Night: The Hidden Side of Sai Baba*. Since then, many of his western devotees have been levelling charges against him. As did Conny Larson, a Swede and a former companion of the Baba who led an international movement against him. There were allegations that Larson was the Baba's sexual partner and rebelled against him after the guru shifted his sexual gaze away from him. Guru-buster Basava Premanand, leader of South India's atheist movement, also firmly believes the godman should be exposed.

Virag Sagarji Maharaj and Satya Sai Baba are aberrations but not the exceptions. Sordid sagas of rape, sleaze, murder and molestation have emerged from big and small religious ashrams across India. They have put a big question mark over the unflinching trust people repose in spiritual leaders. Saffron-clad monks raping young boys and girls, hypnotising women to have sex with them and indulging in murder most foul have made some godly cults ghettos of exploitation. "Many young people are looking for instant meaning and in that search they become victims of instant sex," says social anthropologist Shiv Visvanathan, who has researched the subject. "Who knows what all those places coming up everywhere promising yoga or body development are actually doing inside?"

A number of lesser known ashrams in Bengal's hinterland have been labelled as hotbeds of sleaze, substance abuse and perverse acts. One run by Siddheshwar Baba (now reportedly absconding) at Purulia was a den of such activities. The 'baba', who claimed to have miraculous healing powers, used to routinely molest young women. His modus operandi was scary: childless couples would visit the baba for blessings to reproduce. The women would be told to have sex with the baba and the men with his associates. An orgy would follow. After the goings-on were splashed in a local newspaper four years ago, the baba and his associates fled the ashram. A 'saint' near Siliguri, Swami Lokeshwar, used to entice young boys and girls into his ashram with drugs before having sex with them. He too disappeared.

There is, of course, the big guru of sin and shame, Swamy Premananda of Tiruchirapalli in Tamil Nadu. In April this year, the Supreme Court upheld the sentences awarded to him by the Madras High Court and the sessions court of Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu. He had been sentenced to two life sentences for raping 13 girls, including his own niece, and murdering a man. The Sri Lankan-born godman, who migrated to India in 1984, had managed to build up a following of a few lakh devotees spread over many countries within a few years. As money flowed in, he set up a sprawling ashram spread over 150 acres. This became a virtual bordello where girls were dragged to his kudil or sacred room and raped. The victims told the court that Divya Matha, one of the swami's partners-in-sleaze, would keep a watch on their menstruation cycles, forcing them to eat pineapple and papaya in the early stages of pregnancy to force abortions. Eventually, it was an abortion that led to Premananda's arrest. One of his victims sought the court's permission to terminate her pregnancy and dna tests confirmed that she had been raped by the swami. As the whole story unfolded, he got 28 years in prison.



The Iskcon's global HQ at Mayapur in West Bengal had, a few years ago, faced allegations of senior monks molesting young male school students. Those who have left the commune allege that homosexuality is a widespread practice in Iskcon and sexual abuse of young boys who join the order is routine.

"Godmen or senior monks command a lot of respect, even blind devotion. Some take advantage of their position to indulge in sexual dalliances. They try to be gods but are human after all," says Dr Robin Bhattacharya, who has counselled a couple of victims of sexual exploitation inside a religious commune. "But such people are supposed to set standards for the rest of society in morality and spirituality. So their failings cannot be explained away as those of humans," he adds.

Visvanathan offers a valid critique. "Conmen in religious movements have only increased because ashrams have become totally unscrutinised spaces. Contempt of religion has become like contempt of court. It is not allowed. Media must create conditions to get such places scrutinised. Being a godman cannot become a shield for wrongdoings," he says.

Unfortunately, the law is unable to pin down the erring godmen because of their circles of influence and faith. Only a few are arrested, the rest skirt punishment.

If guilty gurus are allowed to walk free, the law against rape will remain subjective and conditional. A claim to godliness does not give any human being the right to do the utterly unforgivable.

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Jaideep Mazumdar In Calcutta And Ravi Belagare In Bangalore

magazine | Sep 26, 2005

## Sleazy Swamis

- **April 2005:** Swami Premananda of Tiruchirapalli convicted for raping devotees and murdering a disciple.
- **March 2005:** Jain monk Virag Sagarji Maharaj accused of more than 40 rapes over 14 years.
- **February 2005:** Swami Narayan Vadtal sect of Gujarat exposed. Sadhus taped having sex with

married female devotees.

- **January 2005:** Todkar Maharaj of Dronagiri ashram in Kolhapur caught for molesting two women. Porn literature seized.
- **December 2004:** Tamil writer Anuradha Ramanan says Jayendra Saraswati of Kanchi tried to molest her.
- **Since 1998:** An ongoing revolt inside Iskcon has brought out cases of child abuse, elopement and homosexual molestation.

magazine | Sep 26, 2005

## Closet, Couch, Camera

Sexuality research offers us many positives, but we must be careful how it guides our lives



As a neuropsychiatrist, I get a front-row view of the formative stages of some extraordinary social upheavals that are shaping our lives. Individuals talk to professionals on the premise of anonymity and confidentiality. Psychiatrists, trained to be non-judgemental as human beings, facilitate a comfort level in those who open up their deepest fears, fantasies and behaviour patterns.

I remember a couple. The man was under my care for depression and alcoholism. The wife played a significant role in his recovery. She was nurturing, supportive and totally cooperative with the medical staff in all aspects of his treatment. I have seldom come across such an understanding and dedicated spouse of an alcoholic patient. Over the years, she had stoically dealt with his illness, been the pillar of support for the family, taken up jobs to supplement the income lost due to alcohol consumption, bravely did the double shift—at home and at work; a model wife one would think. Except that, as I discovered in my second interview with her, she had been chronically unfaithful to her husband for several years. I am not sure if 'unfaithful' is even the right word. In many ways she was the most faithful and loyal wife any man could hope to have. And yet, there were all these relationships. The story of this couple—and those of many others that I have come across—has always made me ponder on the broad spectrum of vivid patterns that emerge in some of our most intimate relationships.

Some of these motifs are discerned by methodically conducted stratified surveys. These have been time-tested instruments of documenting emerging trends in almost all aspects of human behaviour. American sex researcher Alfred Kinsey was the first to legitimise the scholarship of such research on sexual behaviour. The data culled from such studies has found a wide array of applications in fields as diverse as advertising and psychotherapy.

One unintended consequence of such research and of its interpretation and dissemination on a wider platform such as a newsmagazine is that individuals tend to use it to validate their own behaviour. We are, after all, amongst the most social and imitative of animal species. The awareness of a trend sometimes causes it to feed itself and swell into tsunami proportions.

Kinsey's data triggered research that helped reduce the stigmatisation of homosexual behaviour. In a span of half a century, homosexuality went from being criminal to a mental disorder to deviational behaviour to a form of sexual variation and finally being accepted as normal. Such are the enormous consequences of researching human behaviour.

Among the areas that the stratified survey sometimes attempts to decipher are those within the forbidden zone—areas proscribed by society, family, and often by our own conscious

minds. Yet, as Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, conclusively demonstrated over a century ago, the human mind constantly and often delightfully traverses these demarcated areas. Children fantasise vividly. Then, clumsily and hastily-woven adult guilt tries unsuccessfully to wrap them. At night, however, dreams turn into reality. Even the daunting admonitions of the philosopher Dante sometimes serves only to provoke curiosity and exploration.

Indeed, we all fantasise. While former president Jimmy Carter confessed during his presidential campaign that he lusted in his heart, most presidents before and after him have fulfilled their unspoken pledges to their libido soon after entering the Oval Office. Perhaps the moralists are right. We need to be responsible in our behaviour and judicious in the interpretation of research and its application. On the other hand, the unrestrained human imagination has transformed the earth and one might add the heavens in, well, unimaginable ways!

I dare say, Prometheus would steal fire again and given the choice once more, Icarus who soared upwards to the sun till the wax melted...would still fly. One can well speculate whether Adam in our children's sms Version of the Bible would ever xprss rgrt.

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(The author is a neuropsychiatrist at Jaslok Hospital, Mumbai.)

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