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women

BusinessWeek online

Pete Engardio, Businessweek | October 03, 2005

When the first American music videos and popular TV shows began appearing in Indian homes in the early 1990s thanks to satellite and cable, many pundits predicted Indian society would never be the same. For the first time, young Indian women saw a regular dose of sexy, scantily clad divas shimmying.

Female viewers also saw independent, successful women -- think Ally McBeal -- and fun, sensitive guys a la Friends. Sex and divorce were openly discussed in these TV imports and couples kissed passionately -- then still a taboo in Indian TV shows and movies.

Indeed, the impact on younger generations of Indian women has been profound. Whereas Indian women traditionally have been submissive to parents and husbands and valued frugality and modesty, a number of sociological studies show that young Indian females now prize financial independence, freedom to decide when to marry and have children, and glamorous careers.

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"A generation back, women would sacrifice themselves and believed in saving," says Nisha Singhania, senior strategic planning director of Grey Worldwide India. "Today, it is spend, spend, spend. It is O.K. for a woman to want something for herself, and people will accept it if she goes out into a man's world making a statement."

Because today's young women are the key consumer group of

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tomorrow, these shifts have big implications for marketing companies.

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And the trends come out clearly in two recent studies by Grey Global Group. One study examined 3,400 unmarried women aged 19-22 of different income and social levels. Altogether, the project involved 40 focus groups in five large metro areas and five smaller cities.

In some cases, the researchers lived with the women for a while to study them more closely. The researchers supplemented this data with interviews of journalists, teachers, and psychologists.

Among the findings:

**Guilt-free materialism.** Fifty-one per cent of young single women in major metro areas say it's necessary to have a big house and big car to be happy. In smaller cities, 86% agreed with this statement. "This shows that the less women have, the greater are their aspirations," says Singhania.

One woman interviewed was making just \$200 a year but said she wants to own a jet plane. "A typical comment in recent interviews was, 'I want money, fame and success,'" says Singhania.

**Parental ties.** Traditionally, parents regarded girls as somebody else's future property. They arranged marriages for their daughters, and then the daughters would go away and take care of their in-laws, so parents needed and doted on sons. "As a girl, you never spoke to your parents. They spoke to you," Singhania says.

But today's young women are rebelling against that. Sixty-seven per cent say they plan to take care of their parents into their old age -- and that means they need money.

Unilever played on that sentiment with a recent controversial -- but successful -- ad for its Fair and Lovely line of beauty products. A daughter came home and found that her parents had no sugar for coffee because they couldn't afford it. She became an airline hostess after using the Fair and Lovely products to make her beautiful. She then visited her parents and took them to a first-class restaurant.

**Marital freedom.** Now many women say they'll marry when ready -- not when their parents decide to marry them off. Sixty-five per cent say dating is essential, and they also want to become financially independent before they marry. More than three-quarters -- 76% -- say they want to maintain that independence afterward. Sixty per cent say they'll decide how to spend their own salaries.

What's more, 76% say they'll decide when to have children. "They now regard this as the woman's decision completely," observes Singhania. In big metro areas, 24% say they never want children, and that number reaches 40% in smaller cities.

**Individualism.** Female role models in Indian culture used to personify perfection, Singhania says. Now, 62% of girls say it's O.K. if

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they have faults and that people see them. "They don't want to be seen as Mrs. Perfect," she says. "Popular characters are Phoebe of Friends and Ally McBeal. They like women who commit blunders."

**Careerism.** A decade ago, most young women saw themselves as housewives. After that, most said they wanted to be teachers or doctors. "If they had a profession at all, it had to be a noble cause," Singhanian says. "Now, it is about glamour, money, and fame."

A surprising 45% of young single females say they would like to be journalists. Singhanian says that's largely because prominent female journalists, especially TV reporters, are seen as very glamorous.

Another 39% say they would like to be managers, 38% are interested in design, and 20% think they want to be teachers. Interestingly, 13% say they would like to be in the military. The percentage of those saying they want to be a full-time housewife was minuscule.

**Modern husbands.** "The relationship with the husband used to be one of awe," Singhanian says. "Now, women want a partner and a relationship of equals. They want to marry a man like Greg of Dharma and Greg or Chandler of Friends."

A recent Whirlpool ad shows a man washing the family clothes before his wife comes home from work, while a Samsung home-appliance ad shows a husband and wife cooking together.

For Indian society, the changes in young women's outlook on life is revolutionary. For marketers, they offer interesting new opportunities to exploit.

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