

Consuming Pornography

A Question of Individual Rights

By Sakuntala Narasimhan

Pornography is now available from the armchair as it enters, unbidden, into homes—in-forming, influencing, and often corrupting young minds. Proliferation of visualising techniques combined with easy-to-access modes today pose a new area of concern. This article looks at instances of artistic expression which border on pornography and visuals created only to titillate.

One man's meat, the saying goes, is another's poison. If I want to consume potassium cyanide, either because I consider it food or because I claim the right to consume what I choose, I cannot purchase it. Because the state recognises an obligation to safeguard the public against something that is considered harmful, dangerous. No one decries this as an infringement of the individual's rights. Why then should a controversy be raised when the same yardstick is applied to things that poison the mind?

Does pornography poison the mind? Consider the recent Press Trust of India (PTI) report on a survey that found a 67 percent rise in eve-teasing cases in the last two years (figures in these kinds of cases are always underquoted because not all cases are reported, whether it is eve-teasing, rape, or sexual harassment). The report specifically mentions the boom in infotainment as one of the causes. That mongrel word is itself a mirror of the times—entertainment masquerading as information—and titillation in turn accepted as synonym for entertainment.

In the name of information and awareness creation, a programme on AIR FM discussed sex, but was declared to be objectionable by the then

JP minister who described it as promoting adultery. The crux of the matter is not whether such education is needed, but whether the commodification of modern technology in the media itself poisons the mind, in the sense that it destroys and/or corrupts (*Collins Dictionary*).

MASKED OBSCENITY

- ◆ Pasted on a wall along a thoroughfare in central Coimbatore is a poster for the Tamil film, *Apoorva Sahodarargal*. What differentiates it from other cinema posters is the phrase in bold lettering underneath the title—"with censored portions." That, undoubtedly, is meant to lure a larger crowd than would normally turn up. The motive: titillation, for profits.
- ◆ Another film poster. This one, in south Bombay, is for *College Girl*. An innocuous title? Not quite. Under the title it says, "Based on a true story." A sure-fire crowd puller because the "true story" involving a college girl is a rape incident that hit the headlines prominently that year, with a boy from a VIP family accused as the culprit.
- ◆ A magazine called *Health and Nutrition* has, on its cover, a teenager posing provocatively, with her knees drawn up in such a way that her thighs are laid bare all the way up to the crotch, and it looks as if she was wearing nothing except a sweater and hat. Even the sweater is pushed off one shoulder, to reveal a white strap underneath. If this is not an offensive, debasing, and commodifica-

tion of the female form in order to sell a story on slimming, what is?

- ◆ Another magazine called *Police News* comes out in Kannada, Tamil, Marathi, and probably several other editions, and sells fast. It is a "detective paper," the news agent claims, because the stories are all taken from police crime records.

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But the photographs, captions, and style of reportage are all clearly and unabashedly meant to titillate. (A report on a pregnant woman who had her baby delivered with a blade in an emergency shows a young girl lying upside down on a flight of stairs, with her petticoat drawn up to reveal the contours of her leg through her sari. The cover girl has, however, nothing to do with the woman who actually gave birth—again, titillation, to boost sales.)

- ◆ The latest in this line of masked obscenity is the ad for a 24-hour "Friendship Line" telephone service that urges you to "dial and make friends." The ad features sultry young girls, sometimes shown fondling the telephone cord while (pre-

sumably) murmuring sweet nothings. Britain's Dial-a-titillation facility enables one to listen to "erotic spiels" but at a cost. In the name of "liberalisation" and "going modern," we are not merely aping these trends of the West but, more saliently, enabling the electronic media to spread this culture faster than the spread of tangible evidence of well-being.

DRAWING THE LINE

If the line dividing offensive, debasing pornography on the one hand and "artistic freedom" on the other is blurred, the issue today is not so much where the line lies as the manner in which modern technology is hijacking this gray area to invade individual rights.

Material not suitable for immature, impressionable minds has always been available to those who sought it and went out to get it. Today, it comes unbidden into the living rooms of millions of homes through television and video players. Primary school children, sitting before the idiot box, are exposed to vulgar film dances with suggestive gyrations and to all kinds of advertisements (including use of contraceptives) in a manner that would not have been possible two generations ago. Even a child who cannot read gets bombarded with messages that undoubtedly influence his or her perceptions. *Chitrahaar*, the film-based programme, has a very high viewership nationwide; in one of its recent telecasts, the hero was shown disrobing the heroine by pulling off her sari till she stood in her blouse and petticoat. Heroines rolling down a meadow with

heaving bosoms and throbbing movements, with the camera zooming down their cleavage (or between the legs of the hero while the heroine runs her face up his leg) are not uncommon.

These are all nothing but instances of pornography as per the dictionary definition. And children, whose only vulnerability and crime is that they happen to live in homes that own TV sets, learn a distorted set of debasing values that legitimise offensive behaviour patterns and add up to the dehumanising, desensitised life-styles of today, frazzled by rootlessness, cynicism, and erosion of ethical values.

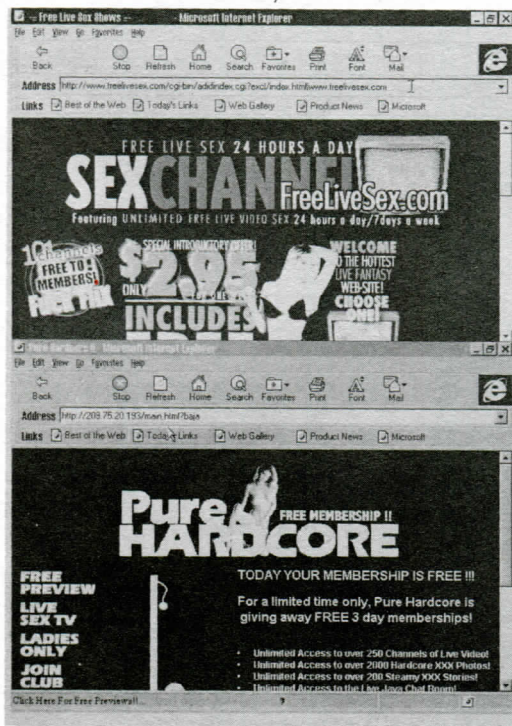
Given the overriding commercialisation of everything—from finding a spouse to political agendas—what we end up with is not the furtherance of individual rights but an evasion and perversion of it.

EASY-TO-ACCESS

How far is the consumption of pornography (even the word consumption is symptomatic of the commercial overtones of our present day ethics and ethos) a question of individual rights? To answer that, we only need to posit a counter question—does a nine-year-old child need the freedom to watch on TV and learn the pelvic thrust that go by the name of dance in Indian movies? Or the freedom to borrow from the neighbourhood lending library a blue movie videotape? Are we infringing upon this child's "rights" as an individual to get acquainted with and promote perverted urges?

Does liberalisation mean

the freedom to import *Playboy* magazine freely? Does "modernisation" mean developing our own versions of such magazines (recall the recent case of *Fantasy* magazine, being the subject of a controversy after it was found offensive by the authorities)?



Sex on cyberspace

If cyanide, which destroys the body, were to be freely available on supermarket shelves to cater to those demanding the freedom to purchase it, there would be a hue and cry. If magazines that destroy or pervert the mind are banned because they are unhealthy, the "rights of the individual to consume what he or she wants" is quickly cited. Debasement of the mind, being insidious and less palpably measurable than debasement of the body, is not seen as such. That is the crux.

Pornography objectifies women and reinforces sexism. Sexposing gimmicks (visuals,

ads, films) do the same, with the additional dimension of coming right into our homes. We even have access to Internet now, making porn consumption easier than ever before, from the comfort of one's armchair.

Nude paintings in the Sistine chapel of the Vatican or the nude monolith of Gomateswara in Sravanabelagola do not offend or corrupt because the *intention* is not to titillate. A nude centrespread in a girlie magazine is something else again, because the intention is clearly to titillate, to arouse, and attract.

If the mind—the intention—makes the difference, then we need to address the issue of how the mind is molded and sensitised. Which is where censorship requires its legitimacy. Certainly there is a gray area where something that is considered "artistic" by some could offend others who see it as "obscene." So who decides?

We, the people—to use that democratic phrase. If women's groups find an ad or film demeaning and obscene, their voices of protest need to be heeded. As the people's representative, the Censor Board, or a similar body, needs to keep its receptors honed. The right to spread filth, tangible or otherwise, has no legitimacy under any pattern of society, democratic or otherwise.

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Source: VOICES, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1996