

self a silly notion in a world where every woman with confidence can be beautiful in her individual way) become so askew that normally proportioned women now consider themselves un-beautiful because they don't measure up in a world where you are never tall or thin enough. Whoever is responsible for this skewed image, may he/she go to a hell of being doomed to eat fusion cooking night and day: omelettes with caramelised *korola* (bitter gourd) for breakfast; cauliflower soup laced with molasses for lunch; and for dinner, a fish au gratin in cheese and dark chocolate.

I had just put down my spoonful of silver wrapped blueberries at the Hassler when the organiser announced that Miss India World 2004 would now reveal herself. The lights swung up towards the garden terrace overlooking the courtyard and down the steps descended a vision of a draped sari, and it descended and descended, till we finally got to see the person that actually went with it. A thin odalisque in a city of tall obelisks! As with the food, the audience was a bit hesitant. Was she a beauty or was this hype? I applauded, and so did the others, but a bit uncertainly. Beauty has many faces, and we were willing to cheer this sweet young thing although she was a bit too tall and too thin. But my nagging, unanswered question was: was she there ONLY on the strength of her height and thinness?

Had we lived in a world where only curvy women of medium height were the ideal of beauty, I would have stood up and given a standing ovation to this lanky girl for making it against the odds of convention. But given the accepted beauty standards these days, where only severely tall women need apply and the rest can go home, I feel the need to temper my applause.

Don't get me wrong; I am happy for self-confident women who are over five feet ten inches, qualifying them to show off their height to advantage on the catwalk. But a beauty pageant (a disturbing institution to start with, which determines the way many impressionable young women judge themselves) should have the social responsibility to include a variety of physical feminine types and not discriminate against women who are not of a certain height. The message they transmit is that only tall is beautiful and short is not; that grace and sensuousness cannot belong to the less than tall category;

that being a model is being the 'model' woman.

This has played havoc with the self-image of many insecure women of average height and normal weight. I have heard recent cases of young girls getting bone-extension surgery in the legs as if they were getting hair-extension. This is as disturbing as anorexia, eating disorders and liposuction. Consider complexion: dark skin is in and pale skin is out, at least in the Western world. But why cannot both be considered attractive--it would certainly prevent many women from contracting skin cancer from excessive tanning, and women in the east from damaging their complexion with bleaching creams.

I really feel that the notion of standardising beauty ideals should be seriously reconsidered as a social issue. And beauty pageants could play a healthy, responsible role in this. After the bathing suits and evening dresses, and the ridiculous 'intellectual' hurdle of the all-important question-round is over (Oh! So NOW we agree that beauty is not really physical?), I think organisers should broaden their perspectives to include all types of beauty.

I met 20-year-old Sayali Bhagat, the present Miss India World at another party in Rome and enjoyed meeting this delightful girl. She has a charming smile and a pleasing personality but lacks that combination of confidence, glamour and magnetism that could make her more memorable on the ramp. Frankly, apart from her height, she was just the pretty girl-next-door. Turns out, she was not even the one originally crowned, which was Lakshmi Pandit who turned out to be married and had to resign, upgrading the first runner-up!

The remarks I made about Sayali Bhagat relate only to the object packaged as 'Miss India', the created symbol of processed beauty. My personal opinion about the girl from Nasik, studying Management in Mumbai

University and chatting graciously with everyone was that though she is not international beauty pageant material, she is a lovely girl, nevertheless. Actually, delete the 'nevertheless'. A woman's beauty is neither conditional, nor can it be standardised or replicated; and Sayali, tall or short, and whether you win the Miss Universe title in China or not, I think you are a beautiful woman and it was a pleasure meeting you.

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**I respect tradition
but I also love breaking
them, flirting with
the unconventional--
- as long as it is done
well. So, I enjoyed
my mango soup; my
quail garam masala
with cherry sauce;
and the millefeuille
pastry layered with
saffron-yoghurt
(srikand). But many
foreign guests
balked saying 'This
is not Indian food.' I
grinned unsympa-
thetically at them as
they poked through
their landscaped
plates.**
