

### IN DEFENCE OF BOLLYWOOD'S ITEM NUMBERS

During the TV debates following Delhi's recent rape case, Bollywood was mentioned a few times, usually by feminists outraged at heroines who perform raunchy dances. It confused me, the contradictory stance of these feminists who could not seem to see that they too were placing the blame for rape on female behaviour (in this case, Bollywood heroines), rather than firmly on rapists themselves. How could they be angered on the one hand by Abhijit Mukherjee's nonsensical remark on 'dented and painted' women, insisting on every woman's right to be painted exactly as she wished, while also demanding that Bollywood actors piously turn down item numbers because they involve scanty garments and suggestive lyrics?

Were they seriously suggesting that these sequences might lead viewers to rape? Even if someone with a pre-disposition to rape did get turned on by a semi-pornographic song scene, could we possibly ban the rest of the largely peaceable population from watching them ever again? Whether we like it or not, these songs are massively popular, played on the radio, in discos and at weddings. Besides, if censors went by the standards of the most problematic people in society, it would be impossible to show anything but the blandest stuff on screen.

There is, in fact, a far more perfidious product available to the potential rapist. I am told that certain markets in Connaught Place run a thriving side business in violent pornography. Apparently real filmed rapes are available for a few rupees. Which was why, when I heard about the attack on that young couple on the bus, I couldn't help wondering, with chilling recognition, if those rapists were imitating something they had watched on a DVD, or perhaps the internet.

By suggesting the control of pornography, I will surely invite the wrath of the moral police and those who view pornography itself as exploitative and anti-female. I'm also aware that every time anyone does stick out their neck on this issue, there is hell to pay - as was experienced by the late Vijay Anand who bravely suggested the legalisation of pornography in his capacity as new Chair of the Indian Board of Film Certification only to lose his job the very next day.

## In Defence of Bollywood for NIE

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Having worked with the British Board of Film Classification, I do not make this suggestion lightly. Instead, I speak as one who watched reams of pornography in order to expunge it of potentially harmful material before distribution in the UK. Much of this was difficult to watch and the BBFC regularly made counselling services available to its staff. Violent pornography was commonplace in which female performers were hit, spat upon, tied up, asphyxiated and worse. Fake rape scenarios were frequent but got cut as soon as they transgressed the stringent sexual violence policy. All this washed up on Britain's shores from America where pornography is not classified but released with the catch-all 'NC-17' category that most people simply avoid.

In Britain, however, pornography is classified under two categories: soft core 18-rated, simulated sex (of the sort available by payment in most hotel chains across the world) and R18 material, which depicts real sexual activity between consenting adults, and is available for purchase only in licensed sex stores.

As wise lawmakers know, the banning of any product does not remove it from general usage. Instead it is simply swept underground and into a thriving blackmarket, like Connaught Place's hidden bazaars. The legalisation of pornography is clearly too much of a political hot potato for a government like ours to ever confront. But let's at least make that the focus of our concern, rather than Bollywood's item numbers.