

Review of *Making Miss India Miss World: Constructing Gender, Power, and the Nation in Postliberalization India* by Susan Dewey, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2008.

Reviewed by Niko Besnier, University of Amsterdam

If we have learned anything from three decades' worth of third-wave feminist theory, it is the fact that gender inevitably articulates with other dimensions of human difference, including class, race, ethnicity, religion, national identity, age, and history. A corollary to the paradigm shift that this recognition has engendered is the fact that issues that appeared straightforward in the good old days no longer seem to be so. Such is the case of beauty pageants: Once easily dismissed as retrograde patriarchal celebrations that reduce women to commodities, beauty pageants have become in recent years the focus of sophisticated work that has sought to demonstrate that "things are not as simple as they look at the first glance." Based on a hands-on ethnographic engagement by an anthropologist armed with an intimate understanding of Indian society and culture, Susan Dewey's exploration of how changing conceptions of femininity and the rise of consumption, nationalism, and class all articulate with one another in the Miss India beauty pageant is an excellent addition to this growing corpus.

The first Miss India pageant was held in 1959, a decade after India's independence. The early contests were primarily designed to showcase Indian textiles, potent symbols of the Gandhian struggle against colonialism and for economic self-sufficiency. While the early contests also sought to promote India's image in the international pageant circuit, Miss India did not begin to capture the national imagination until 1994, when two Indian beauty queens simultaneously became Miss World and Miss Universe. This pivotal moment coincided with India's turn to economic neo-liberalism, following International Monetary Fund-controlled "structural readjustment" in 1991. From this turn to neo-liberalism emerged a privileged urban middle class and an increasingly widening gap between the rich and the poor, and the hitherto austere economy was quickly transformed into a consumption-oriented, corporate-driven, and media-saturated landscape. Not surprisingly, the pageants are today dominated by corporate sponsors and media figures, and have become a vehicle for the marketing of beauty products and magazines to urban middle class Indian women, as well as a gateway to media careers for the contestants.

Pageant officials and sponsors, as well as some contestants, assert insistently, "anyone can be Miss India" (p. 128). In practice, "anyone" is confined to wealthy urban elites of the politically dominant Northern India, where people tend to have, more than in the Dravidian-speaking South, the fair skin tones that are sine qua non to success in both the national contest and international pageants. In blatant as well as subtler ways, the pageant is designed to address and circumscribe urban elites' privileges and priorities, while at the same time saturating them with consumption, principally focused on such essential items as commercial beauty products. The pageant remains largely illegible to the country's vast rural and under-class population, most visibly represented by the beggars killing time outside its luxury venues. But the Great Unwashed is not only excluded from the pageant, its consumer products, and its elite grounding. Because so much effort goes into equating the pageants with Mother India (whose image winners promote on the global stage), they are also excluded from the nation and from the global.

The book is organized in three sections. The first, "The Power of the Gaze," examines the range of contestants' experiences as they bring to the pageant different backgrounds that officials and others scrutinize, evaluate, and attempt to transform. The discussion continues with a detailed ethnography of the contestants' month-long seclusion in

a five-star hotel, where they are physically, mentally, and emotionally molded to conform to rigid pre-established contours. They learn, for instance, to champion social causes like poverty and education, but to present these causes as devoid of politics so that they be palatable to Indian middle-classes. At the same time, some contestants confide in Dewey, “No one cares a damn about charity. This is the only chance a lot of us have to get out and do something for ourselves” (p. 132). Contestants also learn to negotiate interactions with male organizers, judges, and experts of all stripes, many of whom hold the key to the young women’s future in the media industry; widely viewed as a sordid world in which women’s advancement is largely determined on the casting couch.

The second section, entitled “Gender,” focuses on the strategies that pageant officials employ to present the Miss India contest as a celebration of Hindu “woman power,” or *strī śakti*, a move that aligns it with nationalist politics acceptable to the majority and preempts criticisms of its immodest and “un-Indian” displays of sexualized female bodies (witness, for example, the widespread protests in 1996 generated by the staging of the Miss World contest in Bangalore). The last section, “Globalization,” examines the way in which the world-scale circuit, in which Indian beauty queens have had considerable success since the 1990s (the main competitor being Venezuela), looms large over the Indian pageant. For India as well as many other nations of the “Global South,” beauty queens represent the nation’s claim to be “on par” with the “rest of the world,” which translates as the industrial world and essentially excludes the rest of the Global South. Of course, “India” here is a metonym for privileged classes, corporate interests, and the deregulated State that protects them.

In the conclusion, Dewey admits to having considered writing a book that would have alternatively critiqued the pageant as a consumption-driven celebration of misogyny, and celebrated it for the agentive opportunities it creates for the contestants, which they would otherwise never encounter (p. 222). Instead, the text that she has produced bears witness to the complexities of the beauty pageants, which neither a denouncing nor a celebrating stance would adequately capture. In her analysis, Miss India remains a contested ground, where oppression meets emancipation, and commodification, patriarchy, and the maintenance of India’s extreme class inequalities rub shoulders uneasily with agency, empowerment, and the imagination.