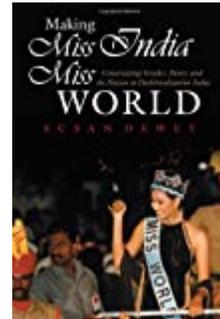




**Susan Dewey.** *Making Miss India Miss World: Constructing Gender, Power, and the Nation in Post-liberalization India.* Gender and Globalization Series. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2008. xii + 245 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8156-3176-7.



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## Refashioning Femininity: National, Global, and Gendered Identities

Susan Dewey's *Making Miss India Miss World* brings much-needed academic attention to a highly visible and spectacular theater of cultural life in India following "liberalization" (or the economic reforms of 1991 when the Indian state moved from a mixed-economy model to a more pro-market paradigm of economic and political governance). That theater is the Miss India beauty pageant, which is also seen as a step en route to the Miss Universe or Miss World beauty pageants. The Miss India beauty contest exercises the imagination of Indian society and state, including prominent public and political figures, members of Parliament, film stars, and sports stars, with an intensity that is utterly perplexing to an outsider. In the United States, for instance, the contest is associated largely with tackiness and kitsch. In India, as Dewey aims to show through her cultural anthropological analysis of the event, the contest cathects fundamental aspirations and anxieties about national identity and gender in a globalized world.

Since its inception in the late 1950s, the contest has been associated with *Femina*, a magazine published by

the Times of India Group. Aimed chiefly at "urban and English-language educated upper-middle-class women," the magazine and contest have claimed to represent the modern Indian woman (p. 17). After the economic reforms of 1991, that project of shaping Indian female modernity has been given a global ambition and veneer, with the form and content of the pageant indelibly altered by the economic and cultural logic of neoliberalism.

In what is essentially a Foucauldian reading, Dewey focuses on the 2003 pageant—and, more narrowly, on the figure of the female participant of the Miss India 2003 contest—as a site constituted by the social, political, and economic transformations experienced by post-liberalization India. She parses the process by which a participant turns into a "contestant" to identify attitudes toward tradition and modernity, negotiations between "Indian" and "Western" values, and the social divides that plague Indian society, all of which condense as discourses about and around gender in the context of the contest. Indeed, the problematic of gender occupies center stage in Dewey's analysis in several critical ways.

First, Dewey describes the profoundly gendered nature of *all* aspects of the Miss India pageant, in ways predictable and unpredictable, expected as well as unexpected. Beyond the obvious fact that a beauty contest for women will reflect social attitudes about gender roles and relations, she delineates, for instance, how neoliberal conceptions of internationality operate as a disciplinary regime that seeks to produce Indian women in a certain mold. Second, Dewey assesses the pageant with respect to the politics of changing cultural conceptions of beauty in India. Here she uses, as a point of departure for her analysis, her own ambivalent attitude to socially constructed notions of feminine beauty. And, third, drawing on the work of, and in conversation with, feminist scholars, Dewey aims to show that while the larger social structures that produce the Miss India contest might be constricting or oppressive from the perspective of gender relations, the contestants are nonetheless able to mobilize the opportunities produced by the contest as a source of personal empowerment. A regime of fashioning, then, also becomes a means of self-fashioning, of the productive exercise of female agency. Here, as well, we see at work the Foucauldian axiom that power as it traverses the social body cannot be seen only as repressive. It is, at the same time, productive.

The achievements of the book include the careful ethnographic work undertaken by Dewey; the meticulous documentation of the background of the contestants; the precise descriptions of various aspects of the event, including the training program and dynamics between the participants; and the incisive assessment of how urban-rural or north-south Indian divides map out in the contest. For example, Dewey's description of the ritualistic training that contestants have to undergo with diction coaches, choreographers, and the like reveals the regimented and authoritarian power structures in the world of the pageant as well as the peculiar fact that this appears to be quite acceptable to all those locked in these relationships.

Dewey also provides insightful analyses of the modes in which women's bodies perform the nation and the mechanisms by which the vectors of globalization link together nation, gender, and consumption in the pageant. The performativity at work in the pageant rests on a strategic framing and rephrasing of the female body in terms of supposedly traditional codes, such as received notions of female power or energy. Women's bodies, Dewey also demonstrates, are doubly yoked to practices of consumption. Products themselves, they are also associated with the products of pageant sponsors.

There is one important sense, however, in which the book represents a missed opportunity. Dewey does not critique in sufficient depth the attitudes—especially regarding gender, class, and metropolitan and rural India—of Pradeep Guha, an enormously important figure in the history of the Miss India pageant. Although Guha was not directly involved in the 2003 contest, he had organized the event for a decade as head of the pageant from 1991-2003. A significantly more critical examination of the extent to which the contest bears the imprimatur of Guha's views, politics, and self-perception as a Pygmalion-like persona bequeathing international-standard Indian beauties to the world would have given the book a stronger critical dimension.

Nor does Dewey examine in any sustained manner the questions that arise about the relationship between the contest and the Times of India Group's own economic interests in an India that is rapidly integrating into the global economy. She briefly mentions that in a postliberalization world, the *Times* must negotiate the line between the commercial and the substantial, although it very often sways toward the former (p. 202). But the Times of India Group has come under severe criticism for blurring that very line between news and content for sale to advertisers, a fact that warrants greater attention.<sup>[1]</sup> A rigorous assessment of the ethical implications of a newspaper or media group engaging in the activity of shaping conceptions of identity and developing markets for the consumption of social practices and goods associated with those practices would have added another layer of complexity to an accomplished work.

It should be pointed out that Dewey is scrupulous in acknowledging at the outset the generous support and help provided to her by the Times of India Group and by Guha for her project. (Disclosure: I worked briefly in 1995 for The Times of India, Bombay, and was involved in the company's organization of the Femina Look of the Year Beauty Contest.) She states that the Times of India Group subsidized her work, requiring no more than a balanced and nuanced analysis of Miss India in return, although she occasionally engaged in some public relations work or provided feedback to organizers in reciprocity (p. 16). She is candid about the politics of her access to the pageant, which, she acknowledges, may have had to do in part with her being a young, fair-skinned, and attractive foreigner (p. 15). Dewey also notes that her dual roles of active participant and anthropologist sometimes ran up awkwardly against each other.

Dewey draws attention to the fact that anthropologists' needs must be part of, and invested in, the communities they study, with all the attendant complications that such engagement entails. Yet, although this reflexive move inaugurates her work, the reflexive imperative is inconsistently applied in the course of the analysis. The reflexive consciousness dissipates as a methodological and analytical principle at points in the text—for example, with regard to the Times of India Group's approach to commercial and substantial content, which is noted but not pursued—even as it is clearly present at other points. One can empathize with the challenges that anthropologists face in the field, and the necessary negotiations and research bargains they have to engage in with gatekeepers, informants, authority figures, and institutional sites of power. Addressing in greater detail the impact of such challenges on the research enterprise would have opened out the conversation in Dewey's book in additional, productive, directions.

In sum, then, the book is a valuable and original contribution to the study of popular culture, public life, and gender in post-liberalization India, as indeed to the anthropology of Indian modernity in the global ecumene. In her reading of Miss India 2003, Dewey manages to effectively accomplish the anthropologist's task of simultaneously rendering the strange comprehensible and defamiliarizing the quotidian. In the celebrity-obsessed culture of present-day India, beauty pageants are unlikely to fade in importance as significant cultural events, and will surely draw more academic interest. Dewey's book is likely to be the measure for future work on this area of Indian social and cultural life.

#### Note

[1]. See, for instance, the article by former *Times of India* journalist Sucheta Dalal, "Selling News or Buying Silence?" *rediff.com*, <http://www.rediff.com/money/2003/mar/05dalal.htm> (accessed June 30, 2009)

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