

From Bollywood to Hollywood: Ripping Up the Social Fabric of India

By [Colin Todhunter](#)

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Apparently, we should 'take care' because we are 'worth it.' These are the feel-good catch phrases on English language TV channels in India that are being used to sell certain products. The commercials employ the same wording and that has been used in the West to sell these products for years. The actual news bulletins in India also bear a striking resemblance to the 'newsworthiness' agenda used by western channels. As in the West, the commercials and the news are becoming virtually one and the same.

Take the various Indian channels that were running wall-to-wall coverage of Bollywood star Shah Rukh Khan's Mumbai stadium scuffle with security guards and officials, until it was eclipsed by Zohal Hameed's alleged ordeal of sexual abuse in relation to Australian cricketer Luke Pomersbach. Both incidents were associated with that glorified, media-hyped, money spinning cricket fest known as the Indian Premier League (IPL), which took place a few months back.

As far as these channels are concerned, it seems that it is only the rich and affluent who really count and are 'worth it' in terms of news coverage. The alleged female victim received an extraordinary amount of media attention. She and the cricketer in question were much more newsworthy than the 50 million plus ordinary females who have been eliminated from the population as a result of foeticide, infanticide, dowry murder or just plain murder.

Women are battered, raped and subjected to all kinds of violence in India every day. But this affluent, articulate, media-savvy US-Indian woman grabbed banner headlines. Who requires real news when a sex and cricket celebrity hotel scandal will do? Each day, a mere few column inches appear in the press about a woman who has been murdered, attacked or raped. By and large, these crimes are underreported by the media.

India faces massive problems, ranging from mass poverty and female genocide to environmental degradation. You wouldn't know it if you watched these channels.

From the building sites to the farms, the scrawny bodies of the disadvantaged and exploited provide the sweated labour for today's affluent India that wallows in high rise AC penthouses and is dominated by obesity and other 'rich man's' nutrition-related diseases – living off the fat of the land, quite literally.

Making ends meet is the be all and end all for most of India's population. But for the urban elite and their TV channels, other concerns dominate. Just visit the newest shopping mall to have suddenly sprung, where the price of designer jeans or sportswear is the burning priority. The international brands have arrived, adorning the large glass frontages of the latest temple of consumerism. This is not a world of lunghis, steaming chai and steaming

filth or of undernourished parents with their hungry kids.

This is the world of Lacoste, Nike and Baristo. This is the world where a cup of coffee can cost the best part of a daily wage for most in this country. This is a world of acquisitive materialism, conspicuous consumption and huge four-wheel drive vehicles. It's the 'modern India' lying next door to the other India whose inhabitants will never visit or step foot inside, unless it's to collect plastic bottles in a sack carried on back or to wipe clean its hallowed floors.

Poor, thin women worked each day till they dropped in order to help build such malls. Their babies played in the dirt nearby. They built it for privileged, well-nourished women whose servants will mind their kids as they adhere to the 'shop till you drop' dogma of modern advertising.

While most of India remains trapped by poverty and disadvantage, another part has bought into the filthy veneration of money and narcissism – a power play that is concerned with redefining who people are and what India should be about – a consumerism and a neo-liberalism that is divisive and ultimately wholly unsustainable.

But this is the world we live in. Who cares about the plight of a dalit woman who is raped and murdered? Who gives a damn about women being trafficked from Nepal and poor parts of India to work in city brothels?

These outrages are not outrages because they are a fact of everyday life. Too boring for headline status. Too unsettling for the middle class palate. Can't offend their sensibilities and have them channel hopping. Just think of all that lost ad revenue.

The white looking woman who dominated the news because of the incident with the cricketer definitely fitted the ratings bill. She was indeed 'very, very sexy' because 'dark is out' and 'white is in,' according to another Indian ad industry sound bite. The ugly world of skin whitening is supposed to make you look more beautiful and really 'cool.' This racist nonsense goes unquestioned and is quite acceptable across many sections of Indian society. It's not good enough to buy into the West's values. You must look like white people too!

When satellite TV appeared on the scene in India, concern was expressed about thousands of years of Indian culture being eroded as a result of foreign channels' output. Then came the transnationals pushing their products. In order to sell them, mindsets had to be changed. Whether it's the 'white is in' phenomenon, the hedonistic 'live life to the max' mantra or the ad industry and media's blatant sexualisation of the individual, there is an ongoing attempt to dismantle the social and cultural fabric of Indian from the top down in order to fit the needs of powerful corporate players.

Individualism has increasingly become an accepted form of reality, of how we view ourselves and evaluate those around us. If you do not stand out from the crowd (or become part of the 'cool' crowd), you are not hip. If you don't buy this product, wear that item or apply some skin colouring cream, you somehow don't cut it.

Consumerism and a notion of 'the self' in terms of individualism, rather than the communal, fits 'free market' ideology. There is now a never ending list of disposable commodities to be fetishised, individually consumed then spat out when they pass their very short sell by dates, all built on celebrity endorsements and highly 'newsworthy,' commercialized IPL-like

events. A 'modern' India is in the making, even in the villages where most people still live, given the increasing access to TV in rural India over the last decade.

The question is, however, whose brave new India is this? Who is setting the criteria and ultimately benefits? A quick glimpse at the TV news and the commercials shows precisely who is calling the shots.

Are you really 'worth it?' Are you truly 'very, very sexy?' Do the product makers really like you so much that they really do want you to 'take care?' On all counts, the answer is no.

They regard you as worthless - why else would you need these products if it wasn't to make you feel a little more worthy? And they don't really 'care' about you. They just want to con you out of your cash with their temporary-feel-good, permanently-need-more products that have as much substance as the bogus science they use to hype them.

As long as consumerism's world view is fed to us and corporate 'news' organisations follow suit with sensationalist, celebrity-related infotainment formats that dovetail with the images created by the celebrity endorsed commercials and high-profile events, fewer and fewer people will recognize this controlling culture for what it is, let alone strive to challenge its hegemony.

Originally from the northwest of England, Colin Todhunter has spent many years in India. He has written extensively for the Deccan Herald (the Bangalore-based broadsheet), New Indian Express and Morning Star (Britain). His articles have also appeared in various other newspapers, journals and books and his East by Northwest website is at: <http://colintodhunter.blogspot.com>

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About the author:

Colin Todhunter is an extensively published independent writer and former social policy researcher. Originally from the UK, he has spent many years in India. His website is www.colintodhunter.com
https://twitter.com/colin_todhunter

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