Showcasing India: Gender, Geography, and Globalization

On a cool late November evening in Bangalore, India, a city held under siege by a 12,500-strong security contingent, Irene Skliva from Greece was crowned Miss World 1996. Since August of 1996, when it was announced that India was to host the Miss World Pageant, controversy and debate had surrounded the issue. Members of political parties and particular national and local women’s organizations, farmers, students, and trade unions from various parts of the country demonstrated, wrote petitions, filed public interest litigations in court, and threatened to damage the venue of the pageant. Opposition to the pageant spanned a broad enough spectrum to accommodate an entire range of concerns. For instance, opposition to imperialism, resentment against the retreating role of the state, high inflation, threatened Indian culture, and an anxiety with the “foreign” all crystallized in response to the pageant. Conversely, for the state and domestic capital, the pageant provided an international opportunity to “showcase” new, liberalized India to the world. The pageant, therefore, was a site at which political protest and anxiety with “globalization” as well as the opportunity to showcase India to the world were articulated. It is in this tension between sentiments of proving national worth, on the one hand, and the protests against the pageant, on the other, that I examine the staging of discourses of gender, nation, sexuality, and place in this article.

A month prior to the event, in the Times of India, a major English-language newspaper, an advertisement for the pageant read “the time has come for the world to see . . . what real India is all about, Indian hospitality, Indian culture, Indian beauty, Indian capability.”1 What is striking about the advertisement is the statement that “real” India — its capability

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1 Times of India, October 24, 1996.
and culture—will be showcased through an international beauty pageant. Recent work on beauty pageants, rather than dismissing these events as misogynist cultural kitsch, reveals that “these contests showcase values, concepts, and behavior that exist at the center of a group’s sense of itself and exhibit values of morality, gender, and place” (Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996, 2). Pageants are spectacles whose performances showcase important ways that gender and sexuality are linked with geography. Whether pageants are performed at the national scale, such as the Miss America Pageant (Banet-Weiser 1999) or as local community events (Wu 1997), they are remarkably similar in the ways in which they link gender and sexual identity with particular places.

In this article, I examine the 1996 Miss World beauty pageant and, in particular, the protests that marked the event. While the pageant itself showcased gender and nation, I am more concerned with the way in which the protests invoked a fidelity to nation and place in response to globalization. There are three analytical tasks with which I engage: first, I explore the way in which the pageant signified globalization in India and became the target of local opposition; second, I trace the politics of opposition and its attempts to redefine the nation in globalization; and third, I reveal the manner in which gender and sexuality became inextricable from imagining contemporary India in the rhetoric of the supporters of as well as the opposition to the pageant.

The pageant provides an excellent empirical opportunity to examine the contours of globalization and local opposition in India. Rather than implicitly endorsing local opposition to globalization, I argue for a critical understanding of the formation of “the local” in the politics of opposition. Within anthropology, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) have argued the need to destabilize and denaturalize the fixity of place, identity, and culture. Drawing on this assessment in combination with geographical literature on space, I critically examine how opposing groups’ ideological and political positions manifest themselves by considering “place” as fixed and bounded. Toward this effort, then, I examine the ways in which opposition to the pageant employed a politics of place, whereby local opposition was spatially manifested as preserving the nation against the larger forces of globalization. In so doing, the nation in opposition to globalization rested on deeply problematic constructions of gender and sexuality. Three problems arose from these constructions. First, women’s bodies and sexuality became the material and discursive sites where the nation was per-

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formed, values were contested, and borders and boundaries were policed and controlled. Second, the nation's resistance to globalization was structured on and through maintaining oppressive gender and sexual codes. Such oppositional praxis alerts us to the ways in which some structures may "borrow" from each other, at times across different scales, to perpetuate structures that are oppressive to women. Finally, the formulation of such oppositional praxis reinforced the idea that spaces such as the nation or the global are discrete and fixed "places" rather than persistently dynamic and mutable.

I begin with a brief outline of the analytical category of globalization and suggest the way the pageant was considered iconic of globalization in India. Next, I outline the rhetoric that the organizers and the state used to support the pageant primarily as a vehicle to showcase the "new" India to the world. It is here that the nation is reconstructed primarily as Hindu and gendered in terms of masculine capability and feminine compassion. If the support of the pageant sought to create a fixed identity of the nation in globalization, in the opposition to the pageant this was further evident. In this section, I examine the opposition stemming from those allied with feminist and other progressive groups and those allied with the Hindu right-wing political party, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Finally, I dismantle the fixed notion of place and nation that emerged in the rhetoric of the supporters and the opposition in the face of globalization. I argue that this fixed notion had to do with a concern for belonging and with an attempt to fortify against border crossings, which is indicative of an anxiety with sexual transgression in globalization. I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of geography and globalization will open opportunities for oppositional politics that preclude considering place and position as fixed and immutable and local resistance as always subversive. The political concern with such a project is to formulate a nuanced politics of opposition, one that is responsive to both the possibilities and predicaments that globalization generates.

The research for this article was conducted in 1996 over a period of four months preceding and during the Miss World Pageant in Bangalore. I interviewed officials, participants, organizers, set designers, and several opposing groups. In addition, I drew on the extensive media coverage in

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3 For the way in which women and nation are collapsed in pageants, see Banet-Weiser 1999. With regard to gender, nation, and sexuality, see Parker et al. 1992.

4 Indepal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (1994) draw our attention to the way various patriarchies may collaborate to reinforce oppressive practices.

5 I draw on Arif Dirlik's (1996) use of the terms promise and predicament in relation to globalization.
newspapers and magazines and on ethnographic observations of the pageant. As a researcher and participant, I worked with some of the progressive- and left-allied women's organizations to mobilize opposition to the pageant. I am, therefore, implicated in the complex politics generated from the protests against the pageant.

**Globalization and the pageant**

We live in a world where everyone seems to be watching satellite television and drinking Coke; it is also a world where making, claiming, and maintaining local identity and culture is increasingly important.

—Cohen, Wilk, and Stoeltje 1996, 2

There is now a significant literature on globalization that supports the claim that greater mobility and the faster circulation of capital mark the contemporary era.⁶ According to David Harvey (2000), globalization per se is not new and can be dated back at least to 1492 with the internationalization of trade and commerce. This current phase, however, is significant for the profound reorganization of geography, where prior configurations of borders and boundaries are rapidly reshaped, effecting change in the politics of gender, class, and place. These changes have caused some to speculate on the demise of prior configurations of boundaries such as the nation-state (Appadurai 1996), while others see this more as a “nexus” between global and local scales (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996).

In this article, I consider globalization in terms of the ways in which place is reconfigured. This is not to suggest that globalization is a one-way process whereby the global “creates” the local, precluding its converse (the local creates the global), but rather that globalization is considered here as the dynamic reorganization of borders and boundaries from the most local and intimate scale of the body to that of the global.⁷ In the reorganization of these borders, prior established boundaries are challenged, and the politics around public spectacles such as the pageant afford the possibility to open new and perhaps more emancipatory spaces of political expression. My focus here is on the assertion of place in response to globalization. In my analysis, I examine place in terms of the scales of the body and the nation, and I look at how these borders overlap and signify each other. My attention, then, is to boundaries that were being formed and contested in

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⁷ For an interesting account of the production of the global through nationalist imagination, see Fernandes 2000.
response to the pageant as iconic of globalization and to how particular boundaries, such as the nation-state, were forcefully established against others.

The factors that contributed to the pageant as an icon of globalization in contemporary India arose from the intersection of complex political, economic, and cultural changes. These changes began roughly in the mid-1970s with a series of economic liberalization policies and led up to globalization in the early 1990s. The distinction between a period of “economic liberalization” and one of “globalization” is somewhat arbitrary, since globalization per se in India can be traced back to the beginning of its history of trade with various parts of the world. The difference between the two, however, is based on the emphasis on marketing India in the early 1990s as an important global destination for foreign investment versus the domestic liberalization policies of the 1970s and 1980s that set the precedent for the changes initiated in 1991.

The early 1990s were preceded by a decade and a half of significant political and economic changes made manifest particularly in the policy shift from investment in infrastructure development to an emphasis on consumer durables. Beginning with Indira Gandhi’s regime and continuing later with her son Rajiv Gandhi’s government, this change in policy combined materially and discursively a discourse of modernity with the middle class in India. According to Purnima Mankekar, the emphasis on consumer durables during the mid-1970s was based on “the premise that India could become a modern nation when its citizens acquired middle-class lifestyles through the acquisition of consumer goods” (1999, 75). By the mid-1980s, the policy changes and attention to the middle class were evident. For instance, one magazine reported that, for the first time in India, the prime minister understood the importance of owning a color television in the aspirations of the middle class (Ninan 1985). Along with the political visibility of the middle class, the late 1980s also witnessed the dramatic rise of the religious right. Through a series of often violent campaigns, the Hindu right repeatedly sought to define the nation in terms of a unified virile masculine Hindu identity.

Subsequent to the economic liberalization of the 1970s and 1980s, the economic reforms initiated in the early 1990s were anticipated by a series of factors manifested most particularly in the depletion of foreign exchange reserves (Jalan 1991). Advised by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, India initiated aggressive measures to attract foreign direct investment. Following the economic logic established in the 1980s,

*For further details, see Kohli 1989.
that of the middle class and consumer durables, the economic policies of
the 1990s renewed their emphasis on India's consumer base, projecting it
as a "land of opportunity." For instance, one investment brochure declared
the emergence of a "new" India, claiming: "India today is a whole 'new'
country. Vibrant. Active. Alive. . . . You can feel a sense of urgency perme-
ating just about every sector. A determination to catch up." In addition to these dramatic changes in the political economy, city
landscapes and cultural politics also witnessed a shift. Retail outlets re-
placed local brand names with multinational merchandise; across cities,
billboards advertised Citibank and Levi's jeans, while walls and store shut-
ters were painted over with Coca-Cola and Pepsi logos, marking the urban
landscape with perceptible signs of an opening economy. One of the most
dramatic changes witnessed in cultural politics was the privatization of televi-
sion. From three state-run channels available in metropolitan areas in
1987, by 1996 approximately forty international and domestic satellite and
cable channels, such as CNN, BBC, Zee, and STAR TV, made their pres-
ence felt. The increase in channels led to a burgeoning of the television
software industry to fill the available airtime and presented an alternative
to the imported English-language fare of soap operas and game shows.

This dramatic change in the visual spectrum fostered a discourse of pub-
lic anxiety at multiple locations, from the parliament and print media to
public interest groups and some women's organizations. This discourse
was primarily focused on measures to control "obscenity and violence" on
satellite and cable television. Women and children recurred persistently in
the rhetoric as those most in need of protection against the corrupting
influences of the new media. Of even greater concern was that several satel-
lite channels were beamed from outside of Indian borders and thus were
structurally outside the jurisdiction of the state, which limited its ability to
control the medium. By 1996 this concern with television resulted in
four writ petitions filed by a few women's organizations in the Delhi high

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9 For an account of the politics of gender, commodity class, and caste politics in advertis-
ing, see Rajagopal 1999.
10 Director general of tourism, quoted in "Tourism in India" (New Delhi: Government
of India, 1996), 1.
11 For an extensive review of these changes, see Oza 1999.
12 I do not refer to anxiety in this sense as personal or intimate; rather, it is "public," where
concern is expressed in the name of public morality, Indian tradition, and the nation.
13 Measures by which satellite and cable television can and should be regulated were a
significant part of the debate in formulating the Broadcast Bill. The bill emerged in response
to a landmark Supreme Court directive where the court claimed that the airwaves were public
property and should thus be governed by an autonomous body. For further details, see Oza
1999.
court against several satellite and cable companies (see Oza 1999). These petitions claimed that the satellite and cable channels violated the 1986 Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act and the Customs Act and thus threatened the integrity of Indian borders. These court cases were significant because they were able to intertwine, ideologically and symbolically, the representation of women with the integrity of the nation's borders. In the context of increasing concern with the integrity of Indian borders, the cases solidified the link between women and the nation's borders within the state apparatus. These court cases were part of a larger and increasingly conservative campaign, begun in the early 1990s, that echoed the concern with Indian borders. From banned advertisements and film songs to the burning of Maqbool Fida Husain's tapestries—in protest of his rendering of a Hindu goddess in the nude—these instances of censorship in popular culture signaled systematic measures to curtail women's sexuality and sexual expression.¹⁴

Each of these instances, and particularly the rhetoric of opposition to the Miss World Pageant, was remarkable for the manner in which representations of women's bodies and sexuality were considered a threat to borders. In some of the Hindu right's opposition to the pageant, the perceived threat to borders resulted in efforts to protect Indian culture and tradition. For the progressive women's groups, the pageant signified the threat of the reentrenchment of imperialism in the country. Significantly, for both groups this concern with borders was gendered and sexualized. For the Hindu right, the threat was expressed in terms of rampant transgressive women's sexuality and body exposure, while for the progressive organizations the concern was with the commodification of women's bodies and the spread of the sex trade. In both cases, the borders of the nation were symbolized through women's bodies. Such concern with borders and scales demonstrates, according to Sankaran Krishna (1996), a "cartographic anxiety." Instances such as the pageant, therefore, allow a way to understand how globalization was negotiated and contested and the manner in which borders were constantly recreated and policed at the scale of the gendered and sexualized body.

The opposition to the pageant, therefore, arose from a broad context of concerns that coalesced in the protests surrounding the pageant. High inflation, increasing rural poverty, and the rise of the Hindu right combined with images of "Baywatch," cellular phones, and Citibank billboards

¹⁴ Some of these instances include controversy around the popular Hindi song "Chooli ke peeche," banned advertisements, and confiscated magazines, and later the controversy around the film Fire.
to create a fractured and dislocated image of a globalizing nation.\textsuperscript{15} Consumers and activist groups were faced with the question: “To whom should [we] address [our] protests?” (Batalia and Chakravarti 1996, 5). Oppositional praxis was frustrated, on the one hand, by the state’s retreating role and, on the other, by often inaccessible corporate owners. It is within this context, then, that the pageant became a viable target for opposition to globalization, because the event made visible the alliance between the state and domestic and global capital. Measures such as providing financial assistance for tourist spots, rather than infrastructure, and extensive police protection for the pageant visibly reinforced state alliances with corporate capital. Because of the visibility of such alliances and the identification of specific companies that sponsored the event, it was possible to name and identify the companies and people responsible for the pageant. The ability to name and identify was significant because it was then possible to implicate particular people and power relationships in the social and discursive critique of the pageant.

Showcasing India: The state, ABCL, and the Miss World organization

For the state, the managers, and the sponsors, the opportunity to showcase India to the world through the pageant crystallized multiple agendas. For each, the opportunity was saturated with the promise of a worldwide audience. The collaboration between the managers of the event, the state, and domestic capital was thus forged to safeguard this opportunity. For instance, Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited (ABCL), the Indian event managers of the pageant, claimed, “the pageant will showcase India and will provide a tremendous opportunity for Indian tourism, as a global audience of nearly 3 billion will watch this show.”\textsuperscript{16} For Godrej, the official domestic sponsor of the event, the pageant was an opportunity to expand its large domestic market beyond India’s borders. Meanwhile, for the state, the pageant would help put Karnataka on the global tourist map. The chief minister of Karnataka justified the pageant by claiming it would “elevate the spirit of Indian women,” adding that the pageant would be like a traditional Indian mela (a carnival or fair) and that it should be viewed as an

\textsuperscript{15} A national sample survey suggests that rural poverty increased steadily, from 35.04 percent in 1990–91 to approximately 44 percent by 1993–94, and that those constituting the rural poor increased from 230 million in 1987–88 to 245 million by 1993–94. For further details, see Ghosh 1996. The average rate of inflation between 1991 and 1995 was 10.6 percent. For further details, see Upadhyay 1996.

\textsuperscript{16} Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited press release, November 4, 1996.
international *mela* where "there will be buyers and sellers" (quoted in Menon 1996, 13).

The pageant served as a televisual exhibit for a worldwide audience of 2.3 billion. It was carefully marketed as an opportunity for India to be "exhibited" on the world stage—to be viewed and experienced from afar (Mitchell 1989, 220). In a telling instance, Julia Morley, the managing director of the Miss World organization, stated that the pageant allowed the opportunity for "many people to know about Indian women. And I think that it's good that people have been able to get to know the Indian woman without visiting."17 As with exhibitions, the pageant allowed spectators the distance of viewing India "without visiting," a window through which India came packaged and ready to be consumed. Gender and sexuality occupied a carefully balanced position in the language of the pageant; on the one hand, there was the veiled eroticism of viewing India without visiting, while, on the other, the participants' sexual codes were held in check through traditional displays of femininity and compassion. The discourse of the political and economic opportunities that the pageant would generate was able to balance a particular tension between the erotic possibilities of exoticized land and geography and strictly controlled displays of respectable sexuality of the participants within its borders.18 The pageant presented, therefore, the opportunity for erotic, voyeuristic pleasure "without visiting."

The idea of "showcasing India" generated strong sentiments of proving masculine capability. For instance, Amitabh Bachchan, the chief executive officer of ABCL, claimed, "I wanted to prove that an Indian show can be a world class event. . . . I've heard so many people treating India as a backward country that I wanted to prove them wrong. . . . They will realize that we can do it better than a western country" (quoted in Sanghvi 1996, 17).19 The pageant as an international exhibit of India that also provided the opportunity to prove Indian capability tapped into a particularly middle- and upper-class engagement with a discourse on India's worth in the global arena. Articulating the reasons for hosting the pageant in terms of Indian capability, Bachchan sought the endorsement of the middle and upper classes for the event.

The pageant sought to construct India as a modern and economically

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18 For similar arguments about eroticized land, see Alexander 1994.
19 Bachchan was one of the biggest superstars of Indian cinema during the 1970s and 1980s.
liberalized nation. These representational efforts were attentive to the shift in the balance of power in the post–Cold War era and therefore at great pains to demonstrate a nation that determined its own modernity. The selection of the venue of the pageant—Bangalore—was crucial toward these efforts. As a modern metropolis that did not show the scars of the communal riots from a few years earlier, Bangalore, which exports thousands of software engineers all over the world, claimed to be India’s Silicon Valley. Therefore, strategically removed from associations such as the communal riots that would mark the nation as “primitive” and “third world,” Bangalore’s burgeoning computer industry was the icon of modern India. Modernity in India, however, was not to be confused with Westernization and a loss of tradition. An extravagantly designed stage on which the main pageant would be held and telecast worldwide achieved this balance. The stage, designed to reflect India’s ancient culture, drew on architectural motifs of traditional temples and caves. In addition, the theme of the pageant, “Kanyakumari to Kashmir,” was crafted to show India’s cultural diversity and, according to an official press release, sought to “project unity amidst diversity to remind the people of mother Earth that all human beings belong to one big global family.”

According to Liisa Malkki, international spectacles such as the Miss World Pageant and the Olympic games serve as ceremonial arenas for nations—in this case, for India—to take their place among the “family of nations” (1994, 50). Therefore, internationalisms, in essence, are not about a dissolving of national borders toward the larger goal of a unified humanity but about recognition of the nation in the international, thus reinforcing particularly nationalist paradigms in the global era. Within the international arena of the pageant, therefore, India was not only to prove masculine capability but also to display feminine compassion. To this end, the pageant was advertised as “beauty with a purpose.” In India, the pageant would raise money to be shared by the Spastics Society of Karnataka and the Variety Club International. Both agencies raise funds to help children. The ABCL organized a children’s party for the eighty-eight international contestants in “a touching function . . . commemorating the concern for the child who is not normal.”

20 For a detailed account of Indian modernity created through television discourses in the 1980s and early 1990s, see Manekkar 1999.


22 Ibid.

international beauty pageant inevitably highlights the assumption of an implicit connection between women and children. The contestants are shown as women with a natural compassion for children, an image that also serves to contain their sexuality within respectable boundaries. Children with disabilities are meant to evoke immediate support and empathy and are politically safe avenues of support.

In her discussion of international beauty pageants, Sarah Banet-Weiser comments on the way in which contestants are linked with geography. Each contestant embodies an exotic locale worth visiting, particularly with reference to third-world countries (Banet-Weiser 1999). As the host country, India displayed its cultural diversity in the encompassing theme — Kanyakumari to Kashmir, which spans the length of the nation, peppered with exotic tourist destinations. The portrayal of a unified geography, however, erased the landscape of conflict, so that borderlands such as Kashmir were co-opted within the universal theme of the pageant — “peace on Earth, and belonging to one big global family.” Furthermore, the unified rhetoric erased India of minority groups and thus crafted the country as primarily Hindu. In one particularly telling instance, during an interview with the stage designer Sabu Cyril, I asked whether the ancient Indian motifs used for the set design also included those from Mughal architecture. In reply, he claimed that “Mughal was not part of Indian culture.” Cyril’s judgments of what constitutes Indian culture brought into focus the recent history of Hindu and Muslim conflicts in India. Thus, the Indian dance forms and the stage design were to show a markedly Hindu India that did not acknowledge Muslim influence and presence as constitutive of Indian culture.

Reconstructing the nation as Hindu was an attempt to link space with ideology. Satish Deshpande suggests that “successful spatial strategies are able to link, in a durable and ideologically credible way, abstract (imagined) spaces to concrete (physical) spaces” (1998, 250). Conflict and protest around spectacles such as the pageant thus expose how meanings are created that link places, and borders around places, to particular ideologies and identities. In one significant response to the protests surrounding the swimwear part of the pageant, spaces and nation’s borders were fortified against obscenity and transgression. The objections to obscenity and vulgarity in the swimwear event, raised primarily by the political right, resulted in moving the event outside of India’s borders to Seychelles, a small island country in the Indian Ocean. The integrity of Indian borders was therefore maintained and shielded against any obscenity. The protests as well as the decision to hold the swimwear event outside India’s borders

24 Sabu Cyril, interview by author, November 16, 1996, Bangalore, India.
reinforced a linear logic whereby body exposure is akin to obscenity and, by extension, a threat to the nation. The shift in the event reinforced a linking of conservative gender and body codes with the nation and its borders.

The pageant, therefore, was framed within complex structures of power that made safeguarding the event, as well as its success, paramount. In efforts to make the event successful, the alliances of the state with domestic and international capital were most visible. Efforts by the state, for instance, included the allotment of one hundred million rupees by the central government “to beautify its tourist spots” for the pageant. Financial assistance specifically for the pageant stood in stark relief against prior requests to the central government for infrastructure support in Bangalore. In addition, faced with increasing protests by both the right and left coalitions against the pageant, the state mobilized a 12,500-member police force in Bangalore consisting of central paramilitary contingents, including National Security Guard personnel, to safeguard its opportunity to advertise the new India. It was the first time in India that the police force was mobilized with such extensive detail to protect what was, in essence, a private multinational venture.

The pageant, for its supporters, was a vehicle to showcase liberalized India to the world. For the state, the pageant advertised India as a tourist destination; for ABCL, it served as an opportunity to display Indian capability; and, for the corporate sponsors, the pageant would help create worldwide markets. To create these opportunities, structural alliances between the state and capital were forged, while choreography and set design helped to reinvent India as primarily Hindu, erased of other communities. For those opposed to the pageant, in these multiple registers some of the anxieties with globalization were reflected.

The opposition: Cultural protectionism and imperial domination
Feminist theory has destabilized the notion of gender as a stable category. In its place, critical work on gender now reflects on gender performativity (Butler 1990). The controversy over the pageant created a space where meaning about gender and sexuality in contemporary India was expressed and debated. Consequently, as a public arena, the pageant was significant for the important political positions about gender and sexuality that emerged from the pageant itself as well as in the protests. While for the organizers

and the state, the event would showcase India, for the opposition, the pageant signified a threat to the nation. The opposition to the pageant emerged from many different political positions, producing a complex discourse on gender and sexuality in contemporary India.

Groups opposing the pageant included students, farmers, unions, the political religious right, and a series of women's organizations that formed a loosely defined progressive coalition. The sharpest distinctions emerged between the political religious right and the progressive coalition, which strategically distanced itself from the right. While these groups diverged ideologically and politically on several issues, in several instances the progressive group's rhetoric came surprisingly close to the views expressed by the political right. The resultant blurring of boundaries between the progressive coalition and the political right indicates the ways in which the right effectively used some feminist politics to construct its opposition. It also indicates the challenge of formulating a coherent and nuanced radical critique of the pageant.

In a period of tremendous flux, the contours that defined the nation (in terms of not only political economy but also cultural politics, gender, and sexuality) were in transition. The pageant provided a stage on which to define these contours and to secure meaning and identity to the space within its boundaries. Within this context, the opposition to the pageant mapped onto women's representation and body politic the debate of globalization in India. Concerns with perforated borders and the loss of autonomy with political, cultural, and economic changes were displaced onto women's sexuality and bodies. Therefore, containment entailed securing the female body and sexuality against transgression.

Among the various groups that voiced their protest of the pageant, none received as much media attention as the political religious right—the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Mahila Jagran, a women's organization allied with the BJP. The BJP's form and articulation of protest, which included threats to destroy the venue of the pageant, self-immolation, strikes, and mass violent demonstrations, resulted in extensive media coverage. According to the BJP and Mahila Jagran, the Miss World Pageant was a "show of obscenity" and "against Indian culture." In a large BJP demonstration in Bangalore, placards read "Stop Miss World Pageant—Save National Honor" and "Big B [Amitabh Bachchan] means bring bad culture to Bharat" (Srikanth 1996, 1).

The progressive women's coalitions, allied with the political left, categorically distanced themselves from the right-wing arguments and focused their critique of the pageant on imperialism, arguing that the pageant encouraged the entry of multinational corporations into the country. The
Center for Indian Trade Union voiced a typical position adopted by the political left: “Selection of India/Bangalore for the Beauty Pageant to select Miss World is nothing but an attempt to smoothen [sic] the entry of Multi Nationals into our country in a big way. It is also an attempt to divert the attention of the toiling people from their real problems adversely affecting their livelihood.”

A significant aspect of the differences between various groups that were critical of the pageant was the ways in which their political campaigns were organized. Political campaigning and demonstrations by the religious right gained immediate attention in the media, and often the positions adopted by progressive organizations were deliberately left out. Opposition to the pageant consequently was most visibly marked by a rightist political position with relatively few alternate arguments. In the face of the primarily right-wing position visible in the media, progressive and left-allied political organizations sought to present a different opinion and critique of the pageant. For instance, the All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA), a women’s organization allied with the political left, made a point of presenting an alternative to the right-wing political position. In a press release, AIDWA claimed: “We do not agree with those who are opposing the contest in the name of ‘Indian culture’ and ‘Indian womanhood.’ We reject the notion of any one definition of culture, womanhood, and tradition being imposed on women.” Instead, AIDWA focused its critique on state expenditure on the pageant and sought to expose to public scrutiny the state’s priorities and its alliance with global and domestic capital.

However, in the strategic rejection of the political right wing’s version of culture, progressive groups relinquished the issue of culture, so that the only visible opinion about culture was the conservative view of threatened Indian tradition and culture. In the context of rapid political, economic, and cultural changes, about which there already existed concern with the corrupting impact of the media, the political right effectively mobilized sympathy for its concern for threatened Indian culture. Moreover, indigenous notions of sexuality that draw on a rich tradition of myth and legend remained silent in discourses of the opposition, so that it became easier for the right wing to claim that any discourse on sexuality was other, foreign, and not within the parameters of what is considered Indian culture.

20 Center for Indian Trade Union pamphlet distributed at a mass demonstration against pageant, “Mass Protest by CITU Beauty Contest Heralding the Entry of Multi-nationals in a Big Way,” November 17, 1996, Bangalore, India.
21 All India Democratic Women’s Association (AIDWA) press release, November 16, 1996, Bangalore, India.
A significant distinction between political parties affiliated with the religious right, such as BJP, and those that distanced themselves from the right were the particular ways in which their arguments against the pageant framed gender and body politics. For the right wing, such concern was primarily a link between body exposure and the perceived threat to the sanctity of the nation. An extremely vocal right-wing opponent of the pageant, Pramila Nesargi, a BJP member of the legislative assembly in Bangalore, articulated the political right’s position as: “The portions of the body which has to be covered, which women knows which has to be covered, which in the society it should not be shown it should not be meant for public places, and in other words, such portion of the body which will arouse the sensual or the sexual parts of man that must not be shown” (quoted in Menon 1996, 13). Nesargi’s statement affords a particular kind of slippage between women’s sexuality, body exposure, and femininity, such that “women must know” which parts of their body should be covered so as not to “arouse” men. They prescribe a certain kind of femininity that controls women’s bodies and sexuality, since men’s sexuality is naturalized as uncontrollable. Women’s bodies, sexuality, and femininity then are intricately woven together so that perceived transgression of any one threatens others and subsequently threatens Indian culture. This is the other slippage evidenced in the BJP’s arguments: exposure of certain parts of the female body was perceived as a threat to Indian culture and, by extension, to national sovereignty.

Conversely, for women’s organizations, gender and body politics were expressed primarily in terms of commodification of women and exploitation by structures of patriarchy and capital. However, in some instances, the rhetoric of a few organizations mirrored the slippage between women’s bodies and sexuality articulated by the political right. For instance, the Active Opposition Association, a consortium of six women’s organizations in Bangalore, alleged that “the concept of prosperity of tourism through the exhibition of beautiful bodies is questionable. This is not the prosperity of tourism, instead this is the prosperity of sex trade in the country.” Other organizations voiced a similar rhetoric, asking: “Do we need to be watched and admired on such issues or as a nation hosting an almost pornographic show for the benefit of a few organizations who want to exploit us for profit?” Such positions assume that the exhibition of women’s bodies will

28 I would like to acknowledge Laura Liu for drawing my attention to this point.
29 Pamphlet distributed by the Active Opposition Association, “Who Is the World Beauty Contest For?” Bangalore, India.
30 Pamphlet distributed during a Communist Party of India (Marxist) and AIDWA demonstration, November 17, 1996, Bangalore, India.
inevitably lead to “sex trade” in the country; they articulate the slippage between exposure of women’s bodies and the encouragement of deviant sexualities, which are a threat to the nation.

Significant similarities in rhetoric between the political right and the progressive coalitions also occurred because of the ways in which the right borrowed and adapted particular feminist agendas to their terms. For instance, most progressive groups that criticized the pageant and its impact were concerned with the commodification of women and the exploitation of women through patriarchy and capital. The political right used the argument against the commodification of women to suggest that the selling of women’s bodies offended Indian culture. For example, AIDWA based their critique on the claim that “the media attention that they [the pageant’s contestants] receive contributes greatly to the commercialization of social relations and the commodification of women and their bodies that in turn reinforce their subordinate status.”31 In another instance, Mahila Sangharsha Okkuta (MSO), a consortium of fifteen women’s organizations in Bangalore, linked the pageant with multinational business and the denigration of women, stating that, “at the altar of capital, a woman’s body is turned into a salable commodity. . . . It is this market created fraudulent image of beauty that we resist. An image that is falsely liberating and modern but which in reality pushes women into stereotypical, subordinate roles.”32

Adapting these arguments about the commodification and exploitation of women’s bodies to fit the agenda of the right wing, Nesargi claimed: “In India women are not meant to be sold. Women are not treated as a commodity available for sale in the bazaar. If she sells herself, either her flesh, or body or beauty, she is offending every law in India. . . . Beauty cannot be sold” (quoted in Menon 1996, 13). The distinction between the two positions was that, for the right, the commodification of women was an offense against Indian culture, while for the women’s groups the commodification of women was a consequence of capitalist relations of power.

However, political arguments concerning the commodification of women’s bodies need to be rethought. The problem with this conceptualization, besides its conservative reenactment, is that it rests on the assumption that there are “pure” spaces outside a commodified realm. This inevitably raises questions: What would the outside of commodification be? Why and how must women occupy this realm? Furthermore, this outside of commodification then allows quite easily for the right to claim that women must

31 Ibid.
occupy some sanctified, pure realm; this argument is politically dangerous precisely because it easily slips to fit the religious right-wing agenda.

While the political positions adopted by the religious right and the progressive organizations often came close and were at times remarkably similar, a significant arena of difference between them has been their positions on women and work. Historically, women’s paid and unpaid labor has been an important site of political struggle for progressive groups.33 Conversely, the right has continued to recreate the public-private division, with women’s primary responsibility structured from within the domestic sphere. This reiteration of the inside-outside division has been perpetuated in spite of the presence of more women in public spaces, some occupying prominent political positions in the right-wing political apparatus. Tanika Sarkar (1993) points out that, with several women in such prominent positions, more women within the right-wing political movement have mobility in public spaces earlier deemed closed to them. While the inclusion of women in the public and their agency in the right-wing political movement may be seen as signs of progressive factions within a conservative movement, Sarkar cautions against such claims, stating that “limited public identity and mobility that has become available to these women is made conditional on their submission to a new form of patriarchy” (1993, 42). Therefore, political organizing has to be attentive not only to what kinds of gender and sexual politics are enabled but through which structures they are enabled.

In the context of the pageant, I am concerned with the particular gender and sexual politics that were sanctioned conditional to new grids of oppression. A particularly interesting instance of such grids was evidenced when a prominent BJP member of parliament, Uma Bharti, voiced her protest of the pageant, stating that she was against “Westernization,” not “modernity,” in India. She distinguished modernization from Westernization, saying: “We want women to become doctors, engineers, IAS [Indian Administrative Service] and IPS [Indian Police Service] officers and ministers. But we don’t want them to smoke, drink and adopt Western styles of living.”34 While Bharti’s carefully crafted distinction is emblematic of the crisis perceived in the contemporary moment, attempts to articulate the distinction between modernity and Westernization have historically recurred since the middle of the nineteenth century. Partha Chatterjee (1989, 237), for instance, claims that within the nationalist struggle the woman question, in

33 Since structural adjustment in 1991, more attention has been given to the impact of the reforms on women’s labor. See Shah et al. 1994 and John 1996.

34 Times of India, October 25, 1996, 1.
the middle of the nineteenth century, was resolved in the separation of the outside material sphere from the internal spiritual sphere. Women occupied the inner spiritual sphere and were shielded from the influences of Western civilization. Postindependence, the issue of India’s modernity was evidenced in Nehru’s rhetoric by the importance given to institutions and heavy industry, and toward the latter part of the century this recurs in the vision of his grandson, Rajiv Gandhi, for India’s modernity realized through computerization.

The reason for the recurrence of this debate on Indian modernity as distinguished from Westernization, Chatterjee argues, is because “of the way in which the history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism[,] we have never quite been able to believe that there exists a universal domain of free discourse, unfettered by differences of race or nationality” (1997, 275). The recurrence of this debate in contemporary India and through various points in history is indicative of the persistent desire to craft an Indian modernity.

Anxiety with crafting a specifically Indian modernity is particularly evident in both Nesargi’s and Bharti’s statements, where modernity is distinguished from Westernization, and this distinction is effected through the intersections of gender, class, and caste. Women are encouraged to join respectable middle-class public service professions such as medicine and engineering but not to smoke or drink. Women’s participation in waged labor is encouraged but only as prescribed from within particular parameters through which India’s modernity is defined. Thus, while Indian borders must be open to economic investment, Western value systems, seen as corrupting influences, must be policed and even censored. This dichotomy is enacted on women’s bodies and representational praxis; women must balance the desired modern against the undesirable Western values. For the political right, then, women are used to define modernity but are not active participants in crafting India’s modernity.

The concern that women will adopt Western styles of living is a ruse for the anxiety related to women’s sexuality in liberalized India. The balancing of Westernization versus modernity is particularly indicative of Bharti’s statement that modernity in terms of women as doctors and lawyers is acceptable, but women smoking or drinking and adopting Western values is not. Defining “smoking or drinking” as Westernization echoes vamp images in Hindi films from the 1960s and 1970s (Mazumdar 1996). The image of the vamp, according to Ranjani Mazumdar, “was the visible intrusion of the West into the cinematic space of Indian films, signifying an unrestrained sexuality and license, given to vices ‘unknown’ to ‘Indian’ women” (1996, 29). The recurrence of women’s bodies as a site of control
and containment is registered in other geographic locations. For instance, Aihwa Ong remarks that, in Malaysia, "women's bodily containment was key to the envisaged order that would contain those social forces unleashed by state policies and the capitalist economy" (1990, 270).

The opposition between Westernization and modernization, therefore, placed into public discourse regulatory norms about body and sexuality. Smoking and drinking were associated with transgressive sexuality and the contamination by Western cultural influences made possible through globalization. It is through public spectacles, such as the pageant, that norms and ideas about sexuality and gender are fixed or, in the words of Butler (1993), "materialized." In place of gender construction, Butler contends that gender is materialized through "a process . . . that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (1993, 9). My concern with the fixity of "matter" on the body stems from the ways in which bodies and sexualities then become regulated and prescribed within structures of state, patriarchy, and capital.

In the context of the pageant, such fixity was evident when the Bangalore High Court ruled in a landmark judgment that the pageant could not be stopped but would, however, be monitored by the director general of Police for Indecent Exposure of Women. Although the court ruled against the political right's petition to have the pageant banned, the judgment nevertheless served to endorse the concern that exposure of women's bodies constitutes obscenity and indecent exposure and therefore must be policed. Such judgments by structures of the state are crucial because particular ideas of gender and sexuality become, in the words of Davina Cooper, "embedded within the state's technologies of power" (1995, 2).

**Sexuality, nation, globalization**

Thus far I have argued that the pageant was iconic of globalization in India for those who supported as well as those who opposed the event. For the supporters, the pageant provided an international forum to advertise India's capability to stage a world event successfully and its compassion in raising money for disabled children. The contours of the nation defined here, it was hoped, would draw the world's attention to the new "modern" India and secure its future as a world tourist destination. Meanwhile, for

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36 Gender is constantly being fixed and unfixed; by highlighting the pageant I do not mean that there are not other spaces but, rather, that the pageant was a critical space in the contemporary moment.
the opposition, the pageant as an icon of globalization in India signified a threat. The discourses of the opponents and the supporters of the pageant defined the contours of the nation through women's bodies and sexuality. From both, there emerged a particular politics of place that accorded primacy to the nation in globalization and, in so doing, asserted boundaries that were deeply problematic for gender and sexual politics in India. In this concluding section, I argue that attention to gender and sexual politics warrants a more nuanced understanding of the politics of place that precludes automatic endorsement of local opposition to globalization.

Politics of place is critical to formulate oppositional praxis. That is, oppositional praxis locates itself in some place—defined through an ideological, political, and geographical grid. According to Stuart Hall, "the discovery of place, a past, of one's roots, of one's context, [is] a necessary moment of enunciation" (1991, 36). He adds, "I do not think the margins could speak up without first grounding themselves somewhere" (36). The opponents of the pageant grounded themselves and located their critique in the nation. The politics of opposition that ensued from this locational grid, thus, reestablished the contours of the nation in a period when the sanctity of boundaries were perceived to be under threat. The political right and the progressive coalition therefore constructed their opposition to the pageant by arguing for the autonomy of the nation. Within the framework of globalization, then, local opposition was formulated as the nation against globalization. However, for the two groups the nation as local opposition signified different things.

For the political right, the pageant afforded the public possibility to articulate a national Hindu identity in a period of change. Women's bodies became the trope of "mother India," who had to be protected against the contaminating influences of globalization. For members of the progressive coalition, this was more complicated. Articulating the nation-state as their place of opposition was based on an argument that the pageant symbolized the imperialist power of globalization. Their concern with globalization was the dissolving power of the nation-state; consequently, their opposition attempted to reassert the responsibility of the nation-state. The progressive coalition's political opposition recognized the impossibility of doing away with the nation in globalization; they, thus, acknowledged that the jurisdiction of the state is still the only structural unit of power with whom they can negotiate issues of rights and responsibility. Consequently, much of the opposition to the pageant focused on the funds allocated to the pageant by the federal and state governments and the deployment of 12,500 security personnel. The structure of their position, however, was predicated on the following linear argument: the pageant symbolized
globalization, which encouraged imperialism, resulting in the commodification of women and the encouragement of sex trade. Within this structure, opposition to commodification and sex trade entailed implementing structural measures prohibiting events, images, and representational praxis deemed to commodify women. Since only the state has the jurisdiction to implement these measures, the progressive coalitions sought to draw the state’s attention to its responsibility toward women. Thus, unlike the political right wing—for whom women were symbolic signifiers of the nation and, therefore, must be protected and policed—for the progressive coalition opposition to the pageant was based on opposition to structures of patriarchy and imperialism. The different ways the political right and the progressive coalition linked gender with the nation-state emerged from different critiques. For the right wing and progressive coalitions, clearly, there are both structural and discursive ways in which gender and nation-state were linked. However, the difference I want to highlight is the way in which the opposing groups constructed their critique of globalization by connecting gender with the nation-state.

For political organizing, the position of gender implicated, symbolically and structurally, in the nation-state raises the question: Can radical feminist politics emerge from within nationalist discourses? Why, for instance, do both right and progressive political parties critique the pageant at the site of women’s bodies and sexuality because of a perceived threat to the nation? My attempt here is not to suggest that radical feminist politics is realizable only by “wishing away” the nation. Rather, my aim is to point out that our efforts to rethink contemporary feminist politics and praxis attempt a reworking of their imbrication within the nation-state. Such rethinking is possible through a critical look at the politics of place as played out in the opposition to the pageant. Two threads of argument follow: first, opposition to the pageant and, by extension, against globalization rested on the identity of the nation as conceived in terms of desexualized womanhood. Second, this construction set up the nation in opposition to globalization as a fixed and bounded sphere of power.

While beauty pageants clearly reinforce traditional and limited notions of sexuality and gender that, in turn, reinforce the cosmetics industry with its narrow heterosexual notions of beauty, these qualities do not account for their continued popularity or, as Mary John points out, for “the aspirations

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and anxieties symptomatic of the desire for beauty” (1998, 375). In India, beauty pageants have gained immense popularity in the past few years, with pageants occurring in schools, at community events, and as part of intercollegiate competitions. These pageants, quite successfully, link beauty and femininity with group identity. This is even more evident in international beauty pageants, where each woman is representative of a nation. For instance, Rhenuma Dilrubha, the Miss World contestant from Bangladesh, stated, “I was chosen from among 1,000-odd women in Bangladesh. This is to prove how liberal we are.” Through her participation as a representative of Bangladesh, she embodied, quite literally, national qualities of liberalism. In another interesting instance, Joan Rani Jeyraj, who is of Indian parentage but was born and brought up in Zambia and had recently decided to live in India, claimed, “I think I’m representative of India because I made a choice to make it my home.” For Jeyraj, representing the nation is based on deciding which place is “home.” Being considered to represent the nation on an international stage is a powerfully strong sentiment that anchors a complex frame of justifications and desires.

Responding to the opposition’s criticism that the women who participated in the pageant were exploited, Jeyraj defended the pageant and justified the participation of the contestants: “I do not think that the women here feel exploited. I do not think that 88 countries could have forced the women to come here. It was each one’s individual choice to come here.” The discourse of individual choice and freedom to participate forcefully asserts the agency of the eighty-eight contestants. Agency and individual choice attempt to counter the argument that the contestants’ willingness to participate simply indicates the extent to which they have absorbed the ideas of the beauty industry, suspending their own agency and judgment. However, it simultaneously suggests that freedom and choice are unmediated by social structures and constraints. There is also the assumption, as with other international events, that all eighty-eight contestants participate in a fair contest, where each is given equal consideration. In the 1996 Miss World Pageant, however, some of the African contestants challenged this assumption, alleging that the Indian media paid them little attention in contrast with the media frenzy that surrounded other participants. For instance, Miss Tanzania claimed: “The Indian Press has totally ignored us (black Africans) from the day we have landed in your country. Just about

38 *The Hindu* (Bangalore), November 24, 1996, 4.
39 *Express Magazine* (Delhi), November 17, 1996, 1.
40 *The Hindu* (Bangalore), November 24, 1996, 4.
everyone in the press is paying attention only to the whites. Structures of racism thus are ignored in the discourse of “free and fair” participation. This complicates the assumption that, for each of the contestants, “willingness to participate” means the same thing and that each occupies the position of a participant within the structure of the pageant in the same way. These dual conceptions force us to understand the contestants’ willingness to participate “as neither complete victims nor entirely free agents” (Banet-Weiser 1999, 23). The opposition, however, predicated its arguments on considering the eighty-eight contestants of the pageant as victims erased of autonomy over their bodies and sexuality. This was a critical facet of the opponents’ positions because it allowed the argument that women’s bodies and sexuality must be controlled in public. For instance, in her response to the rights of women over their bodies and sexuality, Nesargi, of the political right-wing BJP, claimed that a woman is free to use her body, “at her home. Free to do within the four walls . . . free to do in her bedroom. Not before the public where youngsters are there, young children are there, where they will have an impact on the minds, weaker section of the society.” The progressive coalition asserted that the representation of women’s bodies and sexuality in public encouraged prostitution and commodified women. For both, there is a direct link between the representation of women’s bodies and sexuality and its “effect” and consequently the assumption that reception of images and representations is unmediated by discursive practices and structures and open to multiple interpretive frames.

Therefore, women’s engagement with desire and pleasure through events such as the pageant remained silent in the discourse of the opposition. Instead, a desexualized Indian womanhood as emblematic of the nation became an effective icon to protect the nation against globalization (John 1998, 373). A desexualized iconic figure does not threaten the nation with sexual transgression. This desexualized narrative was most particularly evidenced in the rhetoric of the political right, which held that women’s modernity is acceptable but not Westernization—which was symbolic of uncontrolled sexuality. Conversely, while the progressive coalitions were critical of the conceptions of womanhood adopted by the right, they, too, did not consider women’s agency and sexuality, so that the primary arguments about women’s sexuality concerned commodification and the threat of sex trade. In effect, then, for the progressive coalition, women remained desexualized.

41 Asian Age (Mumbai), November 18, 1996, 3.
42 Pramila Nesargi, interview by author, November 20, 1996, Bangalore, India.
By fashioning resistance to globalization in terms of desexualized icons and symbols, the right affected a slide whereby this resistance was predicated on erasing women’s autonomy over their bodies and sexualities.

The construction of resistance at any level that is predicated on structures of oppression or suppression at other levels or is contained through them is problematic from the start. Equally problematic are the assumptions of political hierarchy whereby gender and sexual politics are put on hold against the priority of local resistance to the overarching force of globalization. The underlying assumption here is that gender and sexuality can be put on hold or that gender and sexuality are not already constitutive of globalization and of local resistance. The political hierarchy in this context, then, is a ruse for denying agency to gender and sexuality. These issues have been raised in the context of the struggles for women’s rights and the structural place of the women’s movement within nationalism. Therefore, conceptually progressive politics, when framed in terms of local resistance to globalization yet dependent on adherence to hegemonic structural positions within a “new” patriarchy, is politically dangerous and theoretically precarious.

My second thread of argument entails examining geography and the politics of location that was played out in the opposition to the pageant. Events like the pageant have significance because they allow the public possibility to deepen the contours of national imaginings and to color in homogenous identity. The possibility of imagining the nation, according to Gupta, “involves the creation of a new order of difference, a new alignment of ‘self’ in relation to ‘other’” (1997, 196). This self-other distinction was fundamental for constructing a politics of opposition. It entailed a dynamic drawing of boundaries enclosing the nation from the outside influence of globalization. These boundaries of the nation, as I have argued, were predicated on the construction of the nation in terms of desexualized womanhood. In the construction of the self-other distinction, the other is rendered outside the boundaries and therefore always suspect. For instance, in her study of refugees Malkki (1997) points out that attachment to place is naturalized, while displacement is pathologized. Drawing on this construct, attachment and belonging to a nation is naturalized, whereas borderlands of the nation occupied by those who transgress or are refugees are suspect. It is this construction of the self versus the other that is reminiscent of India’s persistence with crafting its own modernity. Particularly in the perceived threat from globalization, the construction of the nation

43 In particular, see McClintock 1997.
entails fixing or solidifying identity of the self, of constantly defining boundaries and borders that mark the self-nation from the other-global.

The pageant symbolized a threat to the self so that defense was based on fortifying the self as the nation against the outside. In so doing, the nation became defined and prescribed through fixed contours. This self-nation–other-global distinction raises the question: Who in the nation feels invaded, and who is protected by fortifying the nation's boundaries? Particular structures of class, caste, gender, and sexuality are implicitly assumed to stand for the nation. These structures fix the location of the opposition where other configurations of these structures become erased. Furthermore, the concern with the threat from the other becomes a trope that is then available to level against a multitude of others. In addition, the concern with perforated boundaries assumes that the boundaries around the nation have not historically been made and remade in a process that propels the articulation of multiple modernities. Finally, the nation-global distinctions are gendered so that the nation is coded as enclosed and feminine while the global is coded as free floating and masculine, mirroring the public-private divide. In the vision of more emancipatory politics, rather than envisioning the politics of place as the production of fixed locations, we may consider instead, to use Caren Kaplan's terms, location as an "axis" (1996, 183). In such a formulation, the nation can be envisioned not as fixed and enclosed but as dynamic and open.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the pageant was considered iconic of globalization by the state and the organizers as well as by the opposition to the pageant. The pageant and the opposition effectively opened to scrutiny the debate about women's sexuality and autonomy in a period of tremendous political and economic change. A focus on women's bodies and representation contained and controlled the concern with rapid change in the country. For the opposition, the symbol of desexualized womanhood fortified the nation in globalization and effectively secured the borders and boundaries of the nation against sexual transgression. In so doing, the opposition to the pageant refashioned gender and sexuality to fit new forms of patriarchy that were structured to accommodate the concern with the "contaminating" influence of globalization in India.

Doreen Massey directs this question to those who perceive a threat to home and homeland in globalization. See Massey 1994.
A politics of opposition fashioned through new forms of oppression, such as in the case of the pageant, where the arguments against globalization were predicated on erasing women's agency and sexuality, is deeply problematic. This framework, I argue, was based on a particular politics of place, where the nation was ideologically and symbolically fixed and immutable. The structure of such oppositional praxis forecloses the possibility of considering globalization and the nation as mutually constitutive spaces where location is not fixed but an "axis." The insistence on generating a nuanced politics of place stems from an argument against the assumption of "pure" spaces of agency or oppression on either side of globalization or local opposition. Therefore, public spectacles such as the pageant are important sites of political intervention because they create the possibility to articulate new spatial geographies.

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References


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