



# The MIR

If the pressure of looking good could kill, they would all be dead by now. **Gitanjali Prasad** checks out the beauty barometer amongst the youth.

"I think I must have lost an inch from my tummy," the girl said as she finished walking a round of the agri-horticultural garden in Calcutta — a popular place for walkers. What is new about that? The girl was just five years old!

Parul Swarup, mother of three said of her children, "When my eldest daughter, now 15, was a little girl, I often asked her, *Mummy kaisi hai?* She would say, *Mummy acchi hai*, but when I ask my youngest daughter, now three, the same question, her reply is a matter of fact, *Mummy moti hai*," says a pleasantly plump Parul, with a mixture of amusement and concern.

Teachers of six and seven-year-old girls report that birthday sweets are now no longer as popular in girls' schools. The girls are worried about their figures! In Mumbai, a young mother admitted to waxing her seven-year-old's legs in the hope that there wouldn't be too

Eyes, eyes, baby — Pallavi Murthy plays up her eyes

much hair growth in the future.

There has always been pressure on women to look good. "We all know that whatever you want to do, whether you want to get a job or even if you want to be a writer, you have to look good," says Pallavi Murthy, a third year B.Com. student at Wadia College, Pune.

Sujata Winfield, an Indian who is married to an American and settled in the United States says, "There is an increased pressure on appearance; it has always been so in our society and will continue till the status of women improves." However, Sujata sees a shift in what

the current pressure on girls to be thin, research by Dr Watson, 'the father of DNA', who was awarded the Nobel prize at the age of 34, believes that it is actually healthy for women to be a little on the plumper side. Such women are hormonally more normal.

Though the skinny body type prescribed by the fashion industry, is in vogue, the appeal of television programmes like 'Baywatch' and the well-endowed Pamela Anderson show that women, not men carry a distorted image of the kind of body men find desirable.

Nilajana Poddar, a clinical psychologist with Pacific

# ROR Crack'd

constitutes looking good. "From an emphasis on skin colour, the attention has shifted to height and a slim figure."

Theories on ideal good looks abound. Sarita Raghavan, a 21-year-old MBA student from the Cochin Institute of Management believes, "white skin and a flat chest are not hot in India." 17-year-old Pradharna Mohan, a student of the JK Krishnamurthy Foundation, The School, says, "Look at the music videos — the emphasis is on tall and slender people with Aryan features." 14-year-old Aakriti Arora, a tenth standard student at the Shri Ram School in Delhi points out that, "Indians are traditionally dark, yet everyone looks for a fair companion. In their quest for such attributes, girls will try bleaching, dieting, pumping steroids etc which can cause immense health problems." Dietician Anuradha Dalmia says her eight-year-old daughter, "is very concerned that she is not growing tall enough." Anuradha worries that as girls try to emulate the very skinny figures now in vogue, they may develop problems by the time they are 30.

Dr Chandrashekhar Mukherjee, back in India after many years in the United Kingdom, says that contrary to



High and dryer — Murthy is tressed to impress

girls in their early twenties says, "The word pressure (with regard to appearance) is wrong. Awareness is correct because no matter who they are, people have always wanted to look good."

Agrees Pooja B, a 22-year-old fashion photographer, "Thankfully being sloppy is out." Says 15-year-old Divya Swarup, a student of Loreto School, Calcutta, "I think those who have greater self-confidence are under less pressure."

But when alien concepts of beauty are foisted on a nation where heights and skin tones fall short of the international norm, the repercussions are bound to be there. Matrimonial ads, that most accurate barometer of mainstream India's preoccupations, show that not even 10 per cent of them are devoid of a reference to skin colour.

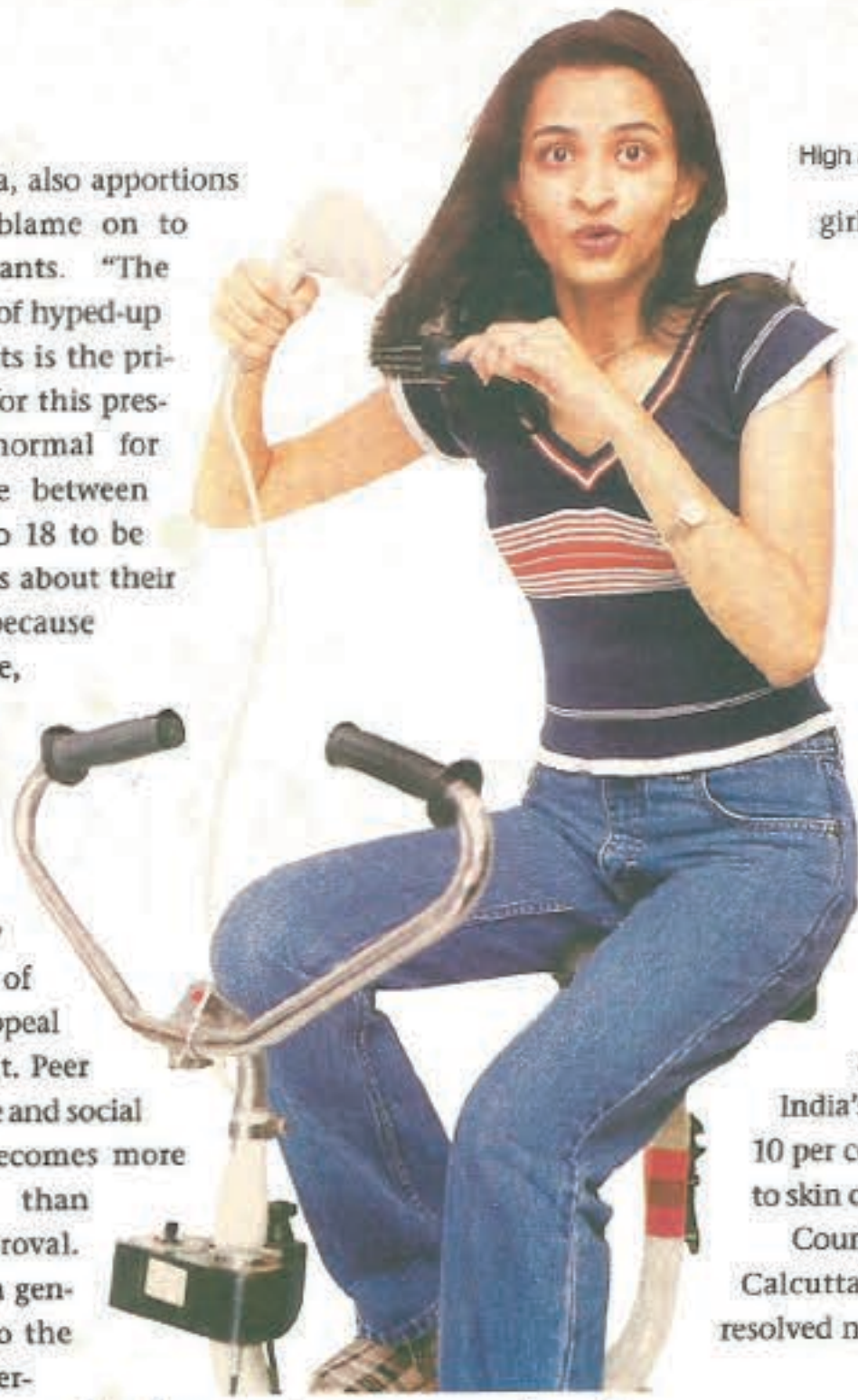
Countering this bias, some students from Calcutta, have formed a group that has resolved not to marry anyone placing a matrimonial ad with too

great an emphasis on physical characteristics. This group is online and may be checked out at [seli22@yahoo.com](mailto:seli22@yahoo.com).

Winfield points out that in the United States, the ad industry is conscious of its enormous power and ads must use models with braces and spectacles, so as not to create a false and distorted idea of reality. But the blitzkrieg is really too big to combat. Maybe, the secret is to find a fine balance. Like in life, here too, good and common sense is the key. ■

Point, Calcutta, also apportioned part of the blame on to beauty pageants. "The large number of hyped-up beauty contests is the primary reason for this pressure. It is normal for young people between the ages 15 to 18 to be very conscious about their appearance because at this stage, they are attracted to the opposite sex. Therefore they are very conscious of their sexual appeal — or lack of it. Peer group pressure and social acceptance becomes more important than parental approval. There is also a generation gap so the parents' preferences are often rejected or sidelined."

However, 26-year-old Chitra Hariharan, who works for a cosmetics multi-national chooses to give voice to the low self-esteem some people experience on account of their appearance. "In fact," she says, "I'd go as far as to say that the perception of having a scruffy appearance put us on the defensive while interacting with the western world, even though we were the best when it came to academic intelligence and intellectual ability." Undoubtedly, the knowledge that one is looking one's best works as a great confidence booster for



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