During the early 1990s, the Indian public sphere witnessed a proliferation of representations of erotics. Some of the erotic (re)charging of the public has been attributed to the expansion of transnational public culture, in particular to the images, texts, and commodities flooding India after the liberalization of the economy. It has also been attributed to the advent of transnational satellite television—and here I refer not only to “imported” shows such as *The Bold and the Beautiful* and *Santa Barbara* but, more important, to soap operas, films, and talk shows produced specifically for viewers in India and its diasporas and beamed via transnational satellite networks like *STAR* (Satellite Television for the Asian Region), Sony Entertainment Television, and *Zee TV*. In this chapter, I analyze the eroticization of two domains of public culture that represent contemporary manifestations of globalization: the discourses and desires surrounding commodities, and television programs telecast on transnational television. My objective is to examine the place of erotics in the reconfiguration of gender, family, class, and nation, occurring in metropolitan centers like New Delhi in late twentieth-century India.

I learned through my ethnographic research to conceive of erotics as sexualized longings and pleasures constructed at the intersection of the psychic and the structural. Because the erotic is frequently “clandestine and covert” (Sunder Rajan 1999a, 7), it is not always decipherable through hermeneutic interpretations of discourse, language, or the everyday practices of individuals (compare Zavella 1997). At the same time, I want to challenge the assumption that the erotic might be “purely” instinctive or primordial or lie
outside the domain of the *socius* (see also Manderson and Jolly [1997], especially pages 2–5 and 13). While doing fieldwork, I glimpsed just how deeply media texts were embedded in the subjectivities, imaginaries, and fantasies of my informants. I also learned that my informants *inhabited* these texts in profound and intimate ways. I quickly realized that I would have to go beyond the verbal, the discursive, and the visible if I was to understand how media inflected the yearnings, anxieties, and desires of my informants.

My sense of inadequacy was compounded by the fact that I was interested in tracing the elusive, yet powerful, relationship between media, fantasy, and the erotic. Shortly after commencing my research, I realized that a study of erotics presented unique challenges to my ethnographic practice, in part because of the difficulties in talking about these topics with lower-middle-class and working-class women in urban India.³ While interviews and participation-observation taught me a great deal about how media shaped my informants’ social relationships and everyday practices, I felt I was barely scratching the surface: the realm of the erotic remained elusive—or, at least, opaque. I became acutely sensitive to the importance of respecting the silences, hesitations, and discursive detours that saturated our conversations. For one, my informants tended to discuss sex and, in particular, erotics in the idiom of power as much as pleasure, and, more important, they would do so through metaphors, tropes, and gestures. We thus had to learn to glean each other’s thoughts and feelings indirectly rather than solicit or express them directly.⁴ For instance, many women I spoke with expressed their erotic longing via their yearnings for certain commodities. Thus, talking about a particular sari or lipstick would enable a young woman to express her dreams and anxieties regarding her forthcoming marriage. In such cases, erotic desire was articulated through the trope of the commodity. On other occasions, my informants expressed their attitudes, feelings, and, very occasionally, their experiences of sex and erotics while discussing television programs. Here, our discussions were veiled and took the surreptitious form of commentaries on what they saw on television. I deemed it neither ethical nor culturally appropriate to interrogate my lower-middle-class and working-class informants about their attitudes toward sex or, worse, their sexual practices; my concern was not with how the proliferation of erotics in the public sphere has affected the sex lives of people in late twentieth-century India. Instead, my analysis of the cultural significance of erotics is based on ethnographically refracted practices of analyzing the intertextual field in which my informants live and love.

Mary E. John has argued that, in late twentieth-century India, trans—
national media played “a disproportionate role in organising our visual field, and, in the present context, is itself one of the hallmarks of globalisation” (1998, 372). While transnational media were certainly hallmarks of contemporary forms of globalization, they led to the dissolution neither of the nation-state nor of nationalist structures of feeling. On the contrary, transnational media participated in the reconfiguration of national identity. Furthermore, rather than see erotic desire in opposition to nationalist affect (compare Mankekar 1999), I am interested in tracing the relationship between the two. How did nationalist belonging and notions of what it means to be Indian shape the ways in which erotic desire was constituted? Conversely, how did new representations of the erotic mediate how “Indian culture” was reconfigured? In addition to examining the intersection of representations of the erotic with discourses of caste, class, and family, I am concerned with tracing how erotic longing articulates with nationalist belonging, and how these apparently disparate structures of feeling constitute the subject of consumption in late twentieth-century India.

**Genealogies of the Erotic in India**

This chapter militates against the notion that transnational media swept into India to *introduce* images and discourses of the erotic. Indeed, by tracing the (re)eroticization of the public sphere in India, the ensuing discussion also serves to interrogate Eurocentric and universalistic notions of erotics (compare Manderson and Jolly 1997, 12, 22). Diverse genealogies of the erotic have always coexisted in Indian public cultures. However, I want to insert the following caveats. For one, my delineation of previously existing genealogies is based entirely on textual sources and does not take into account vernacular or oral traditions. These texts are largely masculinist and, in the case of Sanskrit sources, upper caste. In the case of sources affiliated with Hindu traditions, we also run the risk of being complicit with Orientalist and/or Hindu nationalist attempts to hark back to a classical Sanskritic past, in an effort to seek the “roots” of contemporary cultural phenomena. In fact, multiple traditions exist, including “Indo-Islamic” traditions of representations of erotics. My objective in the following partial genealogy is simply to underscore that late twentieth-century representations of erotics did not emerge in a cultural or discursive vacuum and that, in all probability, they resonated with older, perhaps residual (R. Williams 1977), conventions of erotics.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to compare recent representations of erotics with premodern ones. Nevertheless, late twentieth-century repre-
sentations need to be situated vis-à-vis heterogeneous traditions of erotics in the premodern past. These include the *Kamasutra* (said to have been written between the second and fourth centuries ce), which was a didactic text that conceived of erotics as part of a range of pleasures, including those offered by art, dance, and poetry. Erotics also appeared as an aesthetic category in Bharata’s *Natyashastra*, in the work of Abhinavagupta (in the eleventh century), in Sanskrit poetry such as Kalidasa’s *Kumarasambhava*, the twelfth-century poem *Gitagovinda*, by Jayadeva, Tamil *akam* poetry, and in medieval *bhakti* poetry dedicated to Krishna. Many bhakti poems were in local languages (rather than in Sanskrit) and continue to be influential in contemporary, Hindu popular culture. Indo-Islamic *sufi* traditions incorporated the erotic into aesthetic conventions, expressing the mystical union of the devout with the Divine Beloved (see Schimmel 1975, especially pages 287–89). Among Indo-Islamic and Urdu performative traditions, the most influential in contemporary popular culture is the *ghazal* (see Dwyer 2000).

In the modern conjuncture, the most ubiquitous and influential form of popular culture in India and its diasporas is popular film. Popular music, circulated in audio cassettes and CDs, or consumed as music videos on television, draws largely on film music. Film and television have developed a symbiotic relationship, and many televisual representations of erotics—whether in *MTV*-style music programs or television serials—draw on the representational strategies and narrative conventions of popular film. Yet, in late twentieth-century India, televisual representations of erotics diverged significantly from those in popular film. The past few decades have also witnessed the flowering of heterogeneous print media, ranging from novels, magazines, and pamphlets in English and regional languages to “Indianized” versions of U.S.-based magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. Since the early 1990s, a large proportion of these media have focused centrally on intimate relationships and contain representations of the erotic. These media use a range of aesthetic codes to represent the erotic, and many juxtapose transnational discourses with more familiar “Indian” ones. Thus, for instance, a copy of the Indianized *Cosmopolitan* might include excerpts from the *Kamasutra* alongside articles on safe sex and dating. In general, contemporary representations of erotics in hegemonic popular culture are predominantly heterosexist in orientation, thus inscribing heterosexual erotic desire as normative, if not normal. This does not, of course, preclude readings or interpretations of these representations in terms of homoerotic desire, which might sometimes lie just beneath their surfaces (Gopinath 2005).
There is no unitary or singular “Indian” discourse on erotics. At the close of the twentieth century, discourses of the erotic proliferating in the Indian public sphere drew upon some of these preexisting genealogies or existed in uneasy tension with them. At the same time, it is crucial to note that prior genealogies of the erotic have not survived unchanged through the ages. As part of larger discursive formations, they are as contingent and contested as other discourses and have been appropriated and reconstituted at different historical moments. For instance, contemporary confluences of middle-class respectability with the sexual modesty of women have been influenced by colonial and Victorian discourses of gender and domesticity (see Bannerjee 1989; Chatterjee 1993; Tharu 1989). Hence, instead of either harking back to a static tradition of “Indian erotics” or assuming that transnational mass media caused the Westernization or homogenization of “local” discourses of the erotic, we might consider how local cultural forms are produced in articulation with the translocal, and also how the transnational itself is reconfigured as it intersects with the local or, indeed, the national (Gupta and Ferguson 1997a).

Given that there are such rich and heterogeneous genealogies of the erotic in India, what is so notable about recent representations? First, recent representations of the erotic are imbricated with the feverish commodity consumption precipitated by the expansion of mass culture, the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the proliferation of globalized capital. Second, the production, circulation, and consumption of these representations occur in a transnational, intertextual field. Furthermore, representations of the erotic in postcolonial India frequently provoke discourses of the defense of “Indian” or national culture. Notwithstanding older traditions of erotics, contemporary representations are often associated with Westernization and are, therefore, deemed transgressive. Nowhere is this association stronger than with reference to women’s erotic desire.

In what follows, I focus on the relationship between erotics and the consumption of commodities and texts. Following Appadurai (1996), I conceive of consumption as a set of (primarily) imaginative practices, which, in the historical context in which my research was based, were profoundly mediated by transnational circuits of images, texts, and commodities. I begin by examining how the yearning for erotic pleasure is conjoined with the yearning for commodities. Next, I situate these yearnings in an intertextual field by analyzing televisual representations of erotics and viewers’ responses to them. Finally, I point to how representations of erotics, and some viewers’
responses to them, provide us with a perspective on not only the cultural and social changes occurring in India at the close of the twentieth century but, more broadly, on redefinitions of “Indian culture.”

**Dangerous Desires**

I first learned of the conjunction between erotic desire and the desire to consume, what I will call commodity affect, through my fieldwork in India. Commodity affect refers to the range of affective regimes evoked and constructed by the desire for commodities, some of which are suffused with erotics. Several observers have pointed to the eroticization of representations of commodities; hence, there is nothing new about the argument that desire is cathexed with commodities. Commodity affect subsumes the desire to consume a particular commodity, the desire to acquire it, to the desire to display it. More importantly, desire in commodity affect pertains not just to the pleasure of acquiring a commodity, but also to the pleasures of gazing upon it—what Louisa Schein terms browsing the commodity space (1999a; on the relationship between desire and affect, see Deleuze 1997). As several informants suggested to me, gazing at commodities in advertisements and in shops provided them with “a window on the world”: it introduced them to the lives and worlds of people removed from them in terms of class, region, and nation. Commodities and their representations created a visual field that enabled forms of imaginative travel, so that a young woman in a small town in northern India was able to imagine the life of her friend in Bombay. Similarly, a young man who had never traveled outside India but was an avid viewer of television ads could speak eloquently of youth culture in the United States. But beyond gazing upon commodities, it was the yearning for commodities that appeared laced with erotics. Significantly, the lower-middle-class and working-class women I worked with could not afford to purchase most of the commodities they so lovingly viewed in ads and in shop windows. Their yearning for these commodities was itself a source of pleasure, a pleasure not dissimilar to erotic yearning.

The eroticization of the commodity needs to be placed in the larger context of commodity aesthetics. As Wolfgang Fritz Haug points out, “Modern commodity production, as it increasingly incorporates the aesthetic dimension (in, for example, advertising or contemporary design), develops a discourse which connects with and transforms the ‘sensual awareness’ of modern consumer society. In so doing, it plays, with increasing complexity, across the ambiguities of the ‘real’ and the ‘fantastic’” (1986, 4). Commodity aesthetics shape not only our sense of visuality but also our “sensual under-
Commodity aesthetics shape our ideas of what might be pleasurable to our senses in terms of the exchange-value of the commodity so as to “stimulate in the onlooker the desire to possess and the impulse to buy” (1986, 8). In addition, commodities might themselves be cathected with libidinal desire, such that “a whole range of commodities can be seen casting flirtatious glances at the buyers, in an exact imitation of or even surpassing the buyers’ own glances, which they use in courting their human objects of affection” (1986, 19). Thus, even though a majority of men and women I worked with could not always afford to buy all the commodities they so ardently desired, they were, nevertheless, interpellated by commodity aesthetics in terms of their desire to desire them, gaze upon them, and consume them.

Erotics mediate a range of affects and fantasies surrounding commodities. Let me now describe how one woman represented her daughter-in-law’s desires for commodities. This woman’s discourses of commodity desire were mediated by her relationship to her daughter-in-law and, therefore, by their respective positions in the politics of the family. They were also mediated by their caste and class positions and, thus, needed to be situated in a broader sociohistorical context. The struggles, individual as well as collective, to realign caste and class hegemony became extremely volatile after conflicts erupted around the ill-fated Mandal Commission Bill of 1990. The Mandal Commission Bill was introduced by the political regime then in power to create quotas for lower castes and “backward” castes in government institutions, but was stalled after it was violently resisted by upper castes and middle castes all over India. The consumption of commodities acquired a particularly potent significance in this explosive context: the possibility of acquiring consumer goods presented some lower-caste individuals and families with potential access to a middle-class lifestyle. Although acquiring such a lifestyle did not, by any means, enable them to transcend their caste position, to a limited extent it enabled an apparent realignment of caste and class. For Omvati’s family, and many others like it, the consumption of commodities became an especially fraught marker of their struggles for upward mobility.

Omvati was in her mid-fifties when I first interviewed her in 1992, and hers was one of the few lower-caste households in their neighborhood. She lived with her son Satish, her daughter-in-law Radha, and their four-year-old son, Sonu. Satish worked as a clerk in a government office, and Radha was employed as a salesperson in a government-run fabric store. Omvati was extremely proud that her son was the first in their extended family to have
received a college degree and, more important, to hold a government job. Radha also had a college degree, but Omvati’s feelings about her were mediated by her ambivalence toward the fact that she was city-bred and “modern.” For Omvati, as much as for Radha, modernity was indexed not only by Radha’s college education but, equally, by her fashionable clothes. But while Radha embraced what she perceived as the accoutrements of modernity, Omvati was very anxious about some of the slow, but inexorable, changes she saw around her, especially as they affected her position in her family. The entire family was acutely conscious of two harsh social facts: one, that their struggles to achieve middle-class status were only just beginning, and two, that their aspirations to middle-classness were viewed with considerable resentment by their (largely) upper-caste and middle-caste neighbors (see Geetha 1998, 323–24).

When I first met the family, Radha was in an advanced stage of pregnancy and Omvati was very happy at the prospect of having another grandchild. At the same time, it was clear to me that Omvati resented Radha’s closeness to Satish. Omvati often commented sarcastically on Radha’s “obsession” with adorning herself and about the couple’s going out together in the evenings to the movies or to the nearby bazaar. She commented that Radha was “greedy”—but most of the time, it wasn’t clear to me if she was referring to Radha’s “greed” for commodities or for her husband. Omvati frequently complained that “city girls” were “different” from girls in her village: city girls like Radha were independent, ambitious, and always hankered after “more.” “They want too much,” she said, “and that is dangerous.” I got the distinct impression that, in Omvati’s discourse, the dangers of erotic desire were conflated with women’s desires for commodities. This impression was confirmed in my subsequent interactions with her and Radha.

Omvati hinted at the relation between erotic desire and desires for commodities several times. She complained: “I think these days women want too much. They want everything. It is dangerous to always want all the time. What will happen to the family if women always want more and more.” Frequently in my interactions with them, I would get an acute sense that when Omvati complained to me about Radha’s “greed,” she was not merely talking about Radha’s desire for commodities. This was confirmed when, on another occasion, Omvati repeated, “Girls these days, especially city girls, want everything.” When I pushed her to clarify what she meant, she replied: “They want more things. They always want to have, have, have. But they also want a lot from their husbands.” In Omvati’s discourse, Radha was emblem-
atic of the urban, modern Indian woman whose dangerous desires articulate the coimplication of erotic desire and the yearning for commodities.

Omvati was not the only one to suggest the mutual imbrication of erotics and the yearning for commodities. Sunita, another young, lower-middle-class woman compared her “feelings” for commodities with love. Sunita, who was unmarried, rarely went shopping. But she enjoyed watching ads on TV and going to the nearby market to window-shop. One day, I asked how she felt about looking at ads and shop windows even when she knew she could not afford to buy the commodities being advertised. She responded that her longing for these goods was like unrequited love. Using language that reminded me of a Hindi film dialogue, she said: “It’s like when you love someone [jab kissise mohabbat ho jati hai] and they don’t love you back. You don’t stop loving that person. You get happiness from looking at them, and from knowing they are there. It is like that. It is nice to look at these new things that have come into the market. We can’t afford them. We may never be able to afford them. But who knows. And in any case, what is wrong in wondering?”

According to Žižek, fantasy provides the coordinates or frame for desire: “Through fantasy we learn to desire” (1989, 118). Through wondering or (in my terms) fantasizing, Sunita learns to desire. The fantasies of women like Sunita are engendered not just by the desires to acquire commodities, but also by their experiences of longing and deprivation. At the same time, women like Radha and Sunita seemed to obtain a bittersweet pleasure from their desire for commodities, from what Louisa Schein has termed the desire to desire (1999a, 366, 369; see also Žižek’s [1989] study on the reflexivity of desire). The desires evoked by commodities were at once real and phantasmic, desires that were impossible to fulfill “within the parameters of sociality [the ‘symbolic’ in Lacanian terminology, ‘capitalism’ in Marxian]” (Allison 1996, 27). There seemed to be a pleasure in imagining, in fantasizing about the kinds of lives that might be possible if one owned these commodities. This pleasure was like the bittersweet pleasure of falling in love, even when one knew that it was unrequited.

The eroticization of the commodity has been well demonstrated by Schein in her analysis of cargo cults and commodity erotics in China (1999a, 345, 363). In India, state-endorsed discourses of consumerism and mass-mediated incitements to the desire for objects resulted in the emergence of a new “brand” of woman (Sunder Rajan 1999b; compare Irigaray 1985). Mary John argues that a new form of subjectivity is produced by “the need to re-
cruit the new middle class woman as a ‘consuming subject’ of local/global products in a vastly expanded market . . . , a recruitment that cannot take place without her sexualization as an actively desiring subject” (1998, 382).

Consumerist subjectivity, however, is constructed not only by dominant discourses on gender but also, as we saw with Omvati and her family, class and caste. For most of the men and women with whom I worked, aspirations to upward mobility into the middle class were frequently expressed in terms of a greater preoccupation with female modesty and respectability and, in many cases, an increased surveillance of women’s sexuality. These anxieties were especially heightened in the case of my lower-caste informants who, surrounded as they were by upper-caste neighbors, felt particularly subject to their surveillance. Their concerns about the purity of “their” women’s sexuality were frequently expressed in terms of anxieties about the desires and behavior of their young daughters and daughters-in-law. In some cases, it was also expressed in terms of worries about young sons.

Let me turn to the example of Prabhakar, a lower-caste man who lived in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in West Delhi with his wife, who was a schoolteacher, and his young son. Prabhakar had migrated from Tamil Nadu after finishing high school, and had attended two years of college. One of his biggest regrets was that he had been unable to complete his college education because of financial problems—this, he believed, had hampered his ability to “improve the conditions” of his life and those of his family. He and his wife were extremely anxious about how, at the same time that his family was gradually acquiring upward mobility, they had less and less control over the behavior of their college-going son. Their son, on the other hand, was supremely self-confident and told me on several occasions that he was only going to college to allay his parents’ anxieties. He insisted that “social knowledge and not book knowledge” would help him succeed in life. He wished to start his own business and believed that “knowing the right people, being in the right set [he used the English phrase], knowing how to talk and how to dress” was what was important. An attractive young man, dressed in the latest fashion of an MTV VJ, he had a reputation in the neighborhood for being quite the ladies’ man. While this filled him with pride, it caused a great deal of concern to his parents. One day, his father confided to me: “My son roams around in the market with his buddies all evening . . . [he] often comes home late night. God knows what he does there: it’s not as if he is always buying things there. But it is bad for his character to hang around there all the time. You should see the clothes he wears and how he reeks of fragrance. He is always hanging around in the market. It puts ideas into his head. One
of our neighbors saw him with a girl. I hope he never does anything that will bring shame to our family.”

Evidently, Prabhakar and his son had very different opinions as to what would enable him to ascend, as it were, the ladder of caste and class mobility. While Prabhakar believed education was the key to upward mobility, his son depended on “social knowledge.” It is important to note that “social knowledge,” for him, consisted not only of having the right contacts but of also being able to display the outward markers of belonging “in the right set”—through making certain consumerist lifestyle choices, such as wearing the right clothes. On one level, this might be indicative of a generational shift occurring in the aftermath of economic liberalization and the rampant consumerism it unleashed. However, we need also to attend to Prabhakar’s implicit fears about how consumerism brought about not only a change in people’s appearance but also their behavior and, by implication, their desires. More concretely, as in Omvati’s concerns about Radha’s desires to “want more,” the pleasures of being in the market, and presumably of gazing upon the commodities prominently displayed there, are explicitly linked with erotic pleasure: who knows what ideas come into a young man’s head as he roams the (deceptively) anonymous and seductively sensuous spaces of the market? And, worse, what if he acts on these ideas and does something that will shame his lower-caste and precariously lower-middle-class family?

Thus, while most of the other examples in this chapter are about women, it is essential that we do not attribute consumerist desires solely to them: the most casual observations of households and markets in urban India will attest to the fact that men shared equally, if not more, in these longings for commodities. Almost all the men that I met in the course of my fieldwork aspired to own at least some of the commodities advertised on television, such as color television sets, VCRs, automobiles, and, especially in the case of younger men, fashionable clothes. Several spoke of how in the past they had been uninterested (or less interested) in shopping, whereas in recent years, they had become “curious” about the objects advertised on television. They all insisted that before the advent of advertisements on television, they had had little idea of what was available in the markets. Yet, significantly, apart from some concerns about how consumerism was preventing families from saving money, there did not seem to be a moralistic discourse about how men’s consumer habits might be undermining “Indian culture” or “tradition.” In contrast, women’s desires for commodities were more likely to be perceived as a threat to the moral (and not just financial)
welfare of the family, or as indicative of an attrition of “traditional” values under the onslaught of transnational media. Even those men who coveted the latest VCR or scooter would complain to me, without the least irony or self-consciousness, of how the extravagant habits of their wives and daughters was not only driving them to bankruptcy but, more pertinent to my argument here, encouraging them to adopt “Western” or “foreign” lifestyles and aspirations and, therefore, threatening to erode their “tradition.”

Also, let us not forget that the yearning for commodities implicated women in more ways than one. In some cases, the febrile consumerism of the middle and lower-middle classes led to a rise in demands for increasingly ostentatious dowries. Consequently, young brides were especially vulnerable to being harassed for dowries. Almost all the lower-middle-class men and women I interviewed, in particular those with daughters of marriageable age, expressed intense anxieties about the kinds of dowries they would be expected to provide, and many young women were terrified about the kind of treatment they would receive if their in-laws were dissatisfied with the dowries they brought with them when they got married. As noted by V. Geetha, “It is not accidental that dowry demands are never simply that: they inscribe themselves literally and metaphorically on the wifely body. They constitute this body as a thing, which may be discarded if it cannot yield its essential ‘use’ value” (1998, 314). For many of the women with whom I did fieldwork, on the other side of the pleasures of yearning for commodities lay a sinister nexus between consumerist desire, avarice, and the gendered (female) body.

Commodities, and the yearnings they evoked, were not simply reflective or expressive of individual and collective fantasies, but were constitutive of different forms of gendered subjectivity. It seems most productive to situate the pleasure my informants derived from gazing on commodities, and yearning for them, in larger realms of practice or habitus, such as bodily comportment, everyday practices and habits, social relationships, fantasies, anxieties, and yearnings—all of which were evoked and mediated by an intertextual field that developed in late twentieth-century India. I turn next to this intertextual field and the sociodiscursive context in which it was located.

**Transnationalism, Commodity Erotics, and the Intertextual Field**

The markets and streets of urban and semiurban Indian centers present many examples of the visual density of transnational public culture that, as Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge point out, is an “interocular
field...structured so that each site or setting for the socializing or regulating of the public gaze is to some degree affected by the experience of the other sites” (1995, 12). This interocular field is also intertextual, and is constituted by a range of texts, such as advertisements and billboards dominating cityscapes, the novels and magazines conspicuously displayed in kiosks and newspaper stands in markets, railway stations, and bus stands, the proliferation of television channels now available for people to watch in the privacy of their homes, and, of course, the ubiquitous persistence of popular cinema.

By the late 1990s, this intertextual field was saturated with representations of commodities. Alluring photographs of commodities were splashed across the pages of newspapers and magazines. The enormous range of print media that thrived in the 1980s was enhanced in the 1990s by a spate of lifestyle-oriented magazines devoted to the consumption of new commodities newly available to Indians with discretionary incomes (for instance, *India Today Plus* and numerous “bridal magazines”). Popular cinema has always imaged commodities in the spectacles it staged for its spectators, but films made in the 1990s revealed an excess of spectacle dominated by commodity aesthetics. These films explicitly focused on the consumerist lifestyles of affluent Indians, newly visible yuppies, and Non-Resident Indians, or NRIs (for instance, *Hum apke hain kaun* [Who are we to you, 1994], *Kuch kuch hota hai* [Something is happening, 1999], and *Pardes* [Distant land, 1997], respectively).

As Haug points out, in its widest sense, the aesthetics of a commodity frequently become detached from the object itself (1986, 17). In late twentieth-century India, representations of commodities were everywhere. As noted above, markets, shop windows, billboards—literally, the physical landscape of large cities, small towns, and some rural areas—were completely transformed so that the visual field was now dense with images of commodities in a manner that was unprecedented in scale, depth, or magnitude. Representations of commodities acquired a force of their own quite apart from the commodities themselves.

In addition, after the 1990s, the intertextual field constituted by mass media was simultaneously saturated with representations of erotics. Emblematic of this phenomenon was a series of print ads for a condom called Kamasutra, or KS. Released in the early 1990s, these controversial and popular ads portrayed a young, scantily clad heterosexual couple engaging in foreplay. In almost all the ads, our eyes are drawn to the woman who is depicted in near-orgasmic ecstasy. The KS ads reinscribed Orientalist discourses about the *Kamasutra* in their attempts to invoke an essentially
Indian attitude toward sex. More significantly, however, they marked their difference from earlier ads for condoms in several ways. While previous ads for condoms emphasized family planning, Ks focused unequivocally, if not solely, on erotic pleasure. The second striking feature of the Ks ads was that, while they depicted the sexual pleasure of the couple, they visually foreground the erotic desires and pleasures of the woman.

Mary John asks if “the legitimacy accorded to visual representations of the erotic couple” and India’s entry into “a new phase of capitalist development” might not be related (1998, 382). The intertextual field I have described above did not emerge in a vacuum, but grew out of a political-economic and cultural context marked by the heightened presence of globalized capital and transnational mass media. The 1980s were dominated by a significant shift in the government’s economic policy from capital-goods investment to a consumer economy. This shift in investment was accompanied by the imposition of structural adjustment policies by the International Monetary Fund, which emphasized “austerity measures” and decreased social spending by the state, and a relaxation of curbs on imports. In the 1980s, state-controlled television played a crucial role in creating the cultural conditions for these economic changes by encouraging citizen-viewers to spend on consumer goods (see studies by Mankekar [1999] and Rajagopal [2001] for extended analyses of the role of television in facilitating consumer spending).

The expansion of the middle classes and the rise in consumer spending correlated with (and accelerated after) the advent of transnational television in 1991 (see Mankekar’s [2004] study, for additional information on consumer spending in the early 1990s). The spectral presence of “the West” shaped many of the conflicts and debates that arose at this time about the definition of “Indianness” and the boundaries between the “East” and the “West.” These debates and conflicts became especially volatile after the rapid expansion of transnational satellite television. Nationalist elites and the lower-middle-class men and women with whom I worked responded to transnational satellite television with a mixture of excitement and anxiety; many were concerned that imported programs like The Young and the Restless and MTV would erode or contaminate Indian culture. Fears about Westernization, or rather Americanization, were somewhat allayed when broadcasters realized that they would have to “Indianize” their programming in order to cater to a broad spectrum of viewers. While at first viewers had watched imported shows out of curiosity, they reverted to state-controlled television as the novelty wore off, and ratings began to plummet. Many of the new programs adopted some of the generic characteristics of the im-
ports, so that there were Indianized versions of talk shows, game shows, soap operas, made-for-TV movies and miniseries, and music videos. These programs were by no means simple imitations of their Western counterparts: they were hybrid productions that incorporated “Indian” themes and discourses into their narrative frameworks and deployed a diverse range of representational codes and aesthetic conventions.

These television programs were produced in a context overdetermined by an intensification of the transnational traffic in images, texts, and commodities. Within India, the programs beamed via transnational satellite networks facilitated the creation of the new intertextual field described above, in which commodity aesthetics and erotics were inextricably entangled. This newly formed intertextual field, and the commodity aesthetics it fostered, formed the context for the longings and anxieties of consumers described earlier in this chapter. In contrast to the earlier Gandhian ethos of austerity that had been hegemonic among some sections of the urban middle classes from the 1950s through (about) the 1970s, from the 1980s onward, consumer goods fast became indices of upward mobility for middle-class and lower-middle-class consumers. And as my ethnographic research demonstrated, these goods became fantasy objects of “what life could be like.”

The production of consumerist desire was accelerated with the advent of transnational satellite television. The talk shows, films, and soap operas beamed via transnational networks played a crucial role in introducing Indian audiences to consumerist and, in the case of imported programs, Western lifestyles. A consumerist lifestyle entailed the desire for and, if possible, the acquisition of commodities, such as fashionable clothes, cosmetics, automobiles (or, at the very least, scooters), and home appliances like mixer-grinders, televisions, VCRs, refrigerators, cooking ranges, and so on.

According to several of my informants, acquiring a consumerist lifestyle enabled one to display visible signifiers of modernity, but, they argued, it was critically important to retain “traditional” values. As one lower-caste, lower-middle-class man argued, buying commodities could “help one become modern, have a modern lifestyle, yet hold on to traditional values.” When I asked him to clarify what he meant by “traditional values,” he promptly replied: “Our family, our personal relationships, our culture.” This man was not alone in drawing a distinction between “lifestyle” and “values,” such that one could acquire a modern lifestyle, yet “hold on” to “traditional” values. Furthermore, for many of my informants, the adoption of a “modern” lifestyle did not necessarily endanger one’s national identity. In fact, as another viewer claimed, it was now possible to be “proud of being Indian” because
Indians “can now get everything here.” This informant was alluding to the fact that in most urban centers in India it was now possible for people with discretionary incomes to purchase consumer goods that were once available only in the West. This viewer was by no means exceptional: for most of the men and women that I worked with, the availability of such a wide range of consumer goods was an important marker of India having “finally” attained modernity.

If the introduction of transnational satellite television led to far-reaching quantitative changes in terms of the numbers of channels now available to viewers, it also enabled new kinds of cultural production consisting of a marked qualitative and discursive shift in television programming from an earlier emphasis on nationalist themes and “social messages” (the mainstay of state-owned TV from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s; compare Mankekar 1999) to an explicit focus on the intimate. On the one hand, many of the serials shown on transnational networks contained extremely conservative representations of gender and family, with many extolling the virtues of “traditional” (that is, extended) families; at the same time, the new preoccupation with the intimate entailed diverse representations of the erotic never before seen on Indian television (see John 1998, 368).

**Eroticizing the Intimate**

The programs of the early 1990s displayed an unprecedented fascination with intimate relationships, particularly marital, premarital, and extramarital relationships, and contained new and varied representations of erotics (explicit as well as implicit). These programs included serials (for instance, *Tara* [Zee TV], *Shanti* [STAR], and *Hasratein* [Zee TV], sitcoms, talk shows (like *Purush kshetra* and *The Priya Tendulkar Show* [both ETV]), made-for-TV films and miniseries, music programs (many of which were based on songs from Indian films), Indianized versions of mtV, and television advertisements telecast on transnational networks but produced specifically for audiences in South Asia and its diasporas. The emphasis on the intimate and the erotic was strongest in talk shows (which proliferated after the advent of transnational television), serials, mtV-influenced music videos, and television advertisements.

But for years now, popular films have provided opportunities for the public expression of erotics. How were televisual representations of erotics different from those prevalent in popular Hindi film? Since the Indian film industry is so large and heterogeneous, I will focus on popular Hindi, or Bollywood, films. As Rachel Dwyer points out, in Hindi films, erotic long-
ing is frequently portrayed in terms of romance and expressed through the use of song, fetishization, and metaphor. In most “mainstream” films, she adds, “film songs and their picturization provide greater opportunities for sexual display than dialogue and narrative sections of the films, with their specific images of clothes, body and body language, while the song lyrics are largely to do with sexuality, ranging from romance to suggestive and overt lyrics” (Dwyer 2000, 187–88). Representations of erotics in Bollywood films have shifted over time. As one viewer pointed out to me, while in older Hindi films sexual desire tended to be portrayed rather elliptically (which, she claimed, accentuated rather than diffused their erotic power), more recent Hindi films, with songs like *Jumma chumma de de* (“Give me, give me a kiss”; *Hum*, music director Laxmikant Pyarelal, lyrics Anand Bakshi) or *Choli ke Peeche Kya Hai* (“What lies beneath my blouse?”; *Khalnayak*; music director Laxmikant Pyarelal, lyrics Anand Bakshi) were fairly explicit in their representation of erotic desire. Bollywood representations of erotics drew on diverse aesthetic practices, ranging from “folk” performative conventions to MTV-influenced song-and-dance sequences—including several that focused not only on the sexualized female body but also the sexualized male body.

Despite the sometimes explicit display of erotics in song sequences, in terms of narrative focus, erotics in early 90s Hindi films tended to be subordinated to and subsumed under romance (compare Dwyer 2000). Thus, while Hindi films have always provided sites for public representations of erotics, the content, modalities, and cultural implications of televisual representations of erotics in the 1990s were qualitatively different. For one, in most 1990s Hindi films, erotic desire outside romance was explicitly condemned and was restricted largely to villains and vamps. In contrast, television programs in the early 1990s represented erotic desire in a relatively open-ended manner. Furthermore, the erotic constituted a central and explicit focus of many television programs.

This was particularly true of talk shows. Hosts, panelists, and live audiences in talk shows like *Purush Kshetra* (which roughly translates to Man’s World; El TV) would analyze, in considerable detail and with unabashed candor, different aspects of male sexuality (ranging from impotence to “male” perspectives on polygyny), and male and female sexual desires. For instance, one controversial episode examined the following question: Why do men visit prostitutes? The episode presented a panel of two prostitutes, a man who visited a prostitute and eventually married her, a psychologist, and a social worker. The episode’s host, the celebrated stage and film actor...
Kiron Kher, moderated the discussion and asked questions about the sexual and psychological “needs” that men fulfilled by going to prostitutes, and audience members debated whether these needs could ever be completely fulfilled within the confines of marriage. For example, one of the prostitutes on the panel spoke of how some of her clients came to her because their wives would not do “certain things” with them, thus making it “necessary” for them to seek sexual satisfaction elsewhere, at which point Kiron Kher brought up the question of women's unfulfilled sexual desires and the avenues available to them to seek sexual fulfillment. While in its last few moments the episode acquired a somewhat moralistic tone with the social worker and the host speaking about the “dirty needs” of men who exploit women, this episode was remarkable in that it discussed questions of sexuality, erotic desire, and marriage in a manner unprecedented on Indian television.

Similarly, Indi-pop music videos frequently focused on women's erotic desires. One popular Indi-pop music video, Deewane deewane to deewane hain (Shweta Shetty; Magnasound), has the heroine complaining about the number of men who wish to have sexual relationships with her. In a husky voice, pulsating with erotic desire, she humorously describes how, despite her turning them away, these “mad men” persist in their desire for her (deewane deewane hi rahenge). She sings of how her beauty has made it impossible for her to go out of her house for fear of causing a sensation. But this is no passive, self-effacing beauty: she alternately titillates and rejects her suitors’ advances toward her. There is nothing coy or virginal about her—her clothing, her demeanor, and her voice are all strident with erotic desire. She turns down her lovers’ amorous advances not to protect her virtue but because she is weary of their pursuit. The movements of her body as she gyrates sensuously to the music and her expressions as she alternately arches her eyebrows in mock scorn or shrugs her shoulders as if to dismiss their ardor emphasize that she wants to be in control of when (not if) she will have sex with them. One frame features her tickling one of the men seductively, sensuously, with a feather. Another places her in the foreground, complaining about “mad” men who will not leave her alone. In the background we see another man lying exhausted on a bed. She pokes fun throughout at her suitors and, at one point, goes so far as to claim that their desire for her has robbed them of their identities. They are so pathetic, she claims, that they have stayed unmarried because they are mad with desire for her.

The aesthetic conventions of this video are a postmodern pastiche that playfully parodies “tradition” and “modernity” through, for instance, the
clothes the characters wear. As in other music videos (and, for that matter, Hindi film songs) the heroine changes her clothes frequently during the song, switching back and forth between leather boots and tights and attire featured in the erotic sculptures of Hindu temples. The video contains several close-ups of the men pursuing her, with the camera lingering voyeuristically (but also parodically) on their bare, buffed upper bodies. A series of frames focus on one of the men vainly flexing his muscles for our consumption. These shots target not just women in the audience but, through their evocation of homoerotic desire, men as well—the evocation of homoerotic desire will intensify at the end of the video.

The closing frames of this video are particularly significant: tired of turning away the mad men who are trying desperately to woo her, our heroine stands outside her boudoir inviting each of them in. As soon as the last man has entered the room, she locks the door from outside. The camera immediately takes us inside: we see the men bump into each other and discover they have been conned into believing that they will be able to make love with her. But they do not stay disappointed for too long, for they discover an erotic interest in each other. We next see them enter into a collective, unmistakably sexual, embrace. The video ends with our heroine standing outside the room, smiling smugly, knowingly. She has been able to shake them off and deflect their erotic interest in her onto each other.

Like many Bollywood heroines, the protagonist of Deewane deewane to deewane hain is represented as an eroticized subject. Unlike the film heroines of the early 1990s, many of whom were coy about their erotic desires, this woman derives obvious pleasure from her sexual attractiveness and her sexuality. In this music video, and in countless others like it, women are no longer simply objects of male fantasy, but are represented as active and assertive erotic subjects who choose whether, when, and with whom to pursue their desires. While most televisual representations of erotics reinscribe it in heteronormative terms, a few recent productions (for instance, music videos like Deewane deewane to deewane hain) also contain an explicit homoerotic content, and a few others portray men and women cross-dressing or displaying homoerotic desire or both.

The struggles and dilemmas of women in the serials of the 1990s contrasted sharply with those of the 1980s. As several of my informants pointed out to me, while in earlier television serials women struggled to balance their commitments to the family versus nation (as in Rajani [Doordarshan]), the heroines of the 1990s confronted entirely different dilemmas and conflicts. At the same time that most serials of the 1990s continued to depict women
in conservative terms (that is, as sexually modest, dutiful toward their families, etc.), there were several that, because of their foregrounding of women’s erotic desires, attracted tremendous attention. Serials like Tara (Zee TV) or Shanti (Star), which drew huge ratings and sparked a new trend, showed women actively, sometimes aggressively, pursuing erotic pleasure and facing the social and emotional consequences of doing so. Indeed, when I began this research in 1992, I would attempt to get the ball rolling by asking viewers what they thought were some of the major differences between the programs they used to watch in the 1980s, and those telecast after the introduction of transnational satellite networks. An overwhelming majority would respond that the most striking change lay in terms of the contrast in the portrayal of women. One viewer summarized this contrast between the serials of the 1980s and 1990s in terms of “the change from Rajani to Tara.” This viewer was pointing to the contrasts in the preoccupations, personalities, and trajectories of these TV heroines who had become household names in the 1980s and 1990s, respectively. Rajani was the heroine of a serial telecast in the late 1980s on Doordarshan, state-controlled television, before the advent of transnational satellite television. Rajani was a housewife who committed her energies to correcting “social ills” (such as the corruption of bureaucrats, domestic violence, and so on) while remaining a dutiful wife and mother (see Mankekar 1999). Tara was the heroine of a serial telecast in the early 1990s, shortly after Zee TV was introduced in India. This serial pioneered a new genre of narratives that dwelled on the intimate lives of modern, urban (frequently upper-middle-class and upper-class) Indian women: its heroine and some others who followed in her wake were independent, led unconventional lives, were assertive in their pursuit of erotic desire, and had premarital or extramarital affairs. For instance, Svetlana, of the immensely popular Swabhimaan (Doordarshan), was the mistress of a wealthy industrialist who struggled to maintain her dignity and power. Serials such as Dard (Zee TV) and Kora Kagaz (Star) portrayed strong women who were emotionally and sexually frustrated in their marriages and turned to younger men for satisfaction and comfort. As I learned from my ethnographic observations, the portrayals of heroines like Tara and Svetlana were not without ambivalence; yet these women were generally depicted with sympathy, as heroines who struggled courageously to seek fulfillment not only from their careers but also through erotic pleasure.

Dwyer points out that the family remains central in Bollywood film: “In many romances, the problem facing the family is the incorporation of erotic
love into the family’s other relationships” (2000, 139). Thus, for instance, most mainstream Bollywood films of the 1990s (such as *Hum saath saath hain* [We stand united, 1999], *Dilwale dulhaniya le jayenge* [The brave of heart will take the bride, 1995], and *Kuch kuch hota hai* [Something is happening, 1999]) portrayed a consistent preoccupation with the subordination of erotic desire to familial obligations and duties. In comparison, some of the television programs produced after the advent of transnational satellite networks reveal a more complicated discursive terrain in which erotic desire was, at once, foregrounded and held in tension with familial obligation. Erotic desire was variably positioned vis-à-vis conjugality, and these representations, in turn, had consequences for how the family was portrayed.

As in Hindi films, most television serials kept alive the tension between the purportedly sacrosanct nature of the (extended) family and the conjugal unit (compare John 1997 and Niranjana 1995). However, while the conflict between conjugal desire and duties toward the extended family is hardly new (it is, in fact, the subject of innumerable folk tales, songs, and novels; see, for instance, Raheja and Gold 1994), television programs of the 1990s exhibited an increased visibility of conjugality. As I learned from my fieldwork, this heightened visibility of conjugality articulated with the tension many of my informants experienced between conjugal desire and obligations and duties toward the extended family (compare John 1999). Several of my informants spoke explicitly of how the “new” emphasis on the married couple threatened to tear the “traditional” joint family asunder.21

But, as I note above, erotic desire on television was not confined to the conjugal relationship. In a hegemonic context where erotic desire is presumably contained within the confines of heterosexual marriage, what do televisual representations of erotic desire outside or before marriage signify? In many serials and talk shows in the early 1990s, women were portrayed engaging in premarital and extramarital affairs, bearing illegitimate children, seducing younger men, and defying parental restrictions by pursuing erotic desire—and, unlike cinematic representations of erotically assertive women, these women were represented not as hyper-Westernized vamps but as “modern Indian women.”22 For instance, Savitri, the heroine of a popular television serial *Hasratein* (Zee TV), was portrayed as a modern woman who is a partner in a public relations company. Like all soap operas, *Hasratein*’s plot is convoluted and is virtually impossible to summarize, but the central story line focuses on the heroine Savitri’s fifteen-year relationship with a man who is married and has another family. Savitri, or Savi, as
she is known in the serial, and her lover live together and have a child. A successful, upper-middle-class professional, she is supremely self-confident as she advances in her career.

I expected my lower-middle-class and working-class informants to disapprove of Savi, and many, indeed, did. But, as several of them insisted, she remained quintessentially “Indian” in her devotion to her children and in her loyalty to her husband and his parents. In fact, as Savi reminds her lover’s father, she is the reason why her lover has maintained his ties with his “other family.” Until the end, when the narrative reaches its denouement, she maintains a cordial relationship with his parents and treats them with the respect a “traditional” daughter-in-law is supposed to extend to her in-laws.

However, as the serial draws to a close, Savi is penalized for pushing the boundaries of conventional Indian womanhood. Hasratein ends on a highly ambivalent note. Savi’s lover is injured in a car accident and loses his memory. His wife and parents take care of him and convince him that they are his (primary) family. He remembers only fragments of his life with Savi, and cannot recognize their daughter. At the same time, he misses Savi and longs for her. When he fails to regain his health and memory, his wife decides to take him abroad for treatment. In the last episode, his wife permits Savi to bid him good-bye; in the end, Savi and her daughter are left alone. Savi is clearly punished for pursuing erotic desire, that too for a married man. Yet, she is represented with tremendous sympathy. She is always portrayed as elegantly yet modestly dressed (she is frequently portrayed in “traditional” Indian clothes). She is soft-spoken and performs all the conventional duties of a wife and mother. She is dignified and respectful but does not hesitate to fight for her rights. This is in sharp contrast to her lover, who is depicted as loving but confused and somewhat weak-willed; after his accident he is reduced to utter dependency on his wife and parents. He can no longer attend to the business he and Savi set up, because of his amnesia and, in fact, appears incoherent in most of the closing episode.

Savi’s portrayal is noteworthy for several reasons. As noted above, her pursuit of erotic desire in this serial is not represented without ambivalence (she does suffer for her transgressions); nevertheless, she is represented as a mature and dignified woman (rather than as immature or promiscuous). Further, in narratives like Hasratein, the pursuit of erotic pleasure becomes the hallmark of a particular kind of woman: upper-class, usually professional, but still “Indian” in her loyalty to her family and to other “traditional” customs and conventions. While Hasratein was, by no means, the norm, this serial, along with others like Tara, Shanti, and Swabhimaan revealed...
ambivalent and shifting discourses of Indian Womanhood in which women struggled to juggle their responsibilities and duties to their families vis-à-vis their pursuit of erotic pleasure.

Women viewers’ reactions to these representations spoke volumes—not of their own erotic desires per se, but about the changing configurations of gender, class, and nation that occurred in late twentieth-century India. In most cases, these reconfigurations were refracted by class. Many of the lower-middle-class and working-class women I worked with were quick to point out that most of the women pursuing erotic pleasure on television were upper middle class or upper class, with successful careers and financial independence. One lower-middle-class woman spoke of how upper-class women inhabited a “different world” in which the “rules for behavior and for conducting relationships” were completely different from those regulating her world. At the same time, several of the women I interviewed argued that these women’s stories revealed how “Indian culture” was changing. While some hastened to add that these were not changes that they wanted to institute in their own lives, they believed nonetheless that “Indian culture” was being transformed, and that these TV heroines were harbingers of other changes that would follow, such as the breakup of families, teen pregnancies, and so on.

Most of the women I interviewed believed that these women’s pursuit of erotic pleasure was explicitly tied to their class positions, specifically to their upward mobility and financial independence. As one lower-middle-class woman pointed out to me, the sexual freedom women like Tara and Svetlana enjoyed was enabled by their financial independence. She insisted that it fell to the middle classes to “protect” their culture and their values (apni sabhyata, apne sanskar ki raksha madhya varg ke logon ko hi karni hai). Like several other informants, this woman claimed that most “rich people,” the upper classes, had been “contaminated” by Westernization, in particular by their access to Western education and, in some cases, their ability to travel abroad. For many of my lower-middle-class and middle-class informants, upper-class women were emblematic of the influence of Western promiscuity, and their opinions of “rich” women were based primarily on what they saw on television.

Some of my informants responded to the proliferation of erotics in public culture by attempting to hark back to a “traditional” culture, one that was untouched by the contaminating influences of Westernization. As several feminist historians and cultural analysts remind us, contests over tradition are profoundly gendered and are frequently predicated on the containment
of women (for instance, Mani 1989 and Sunder Rajan 1990). One upper-caste, lower-middle-class woman suggested that when upward mobility and financial independence were not “anchored” in a “fundamental understanding of our culture, what it means to be Indian, what it means for a woman to obey her elders, be loyal to her family, and put her family first,” what results is “chaos.” In general, for many of my Hindu informants (of different castes), one way to retain ties with “Indian culture” was by watching the televised Hindu epics (see Gillespie 1995; Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001).

Several others who were highly critical of representations of erotics on television, responded to these female characters with anger and defensive-ness. They often reacted by appropriating Hindu nationalist discourses of national purity in which Indian culture was conflated with a pristine Hindu culture. For instance, one upper-caste and lower-middle-class woman said that she felt that “when the winds of change blow” it is important to “return to our roots.” When pushed to clarify how one might return to one’s “roots” and what these “roots” were, she explained it in terms of a pristine Hindu culture (see also Oza 2001 and Rajagopal 2001). These discourses about roots and Indian culture were aligned with the attempts, over the past couple of decades, of Hindu nationalists to recuperate a “glorious Hindu” culture. In conjunction with the Hindu nationalist project to establish Hindu culture as national culture, these discourses were predicated on excluding, sometimes eliminating, Other (Islamic, Christian, and lower-caste) cultures.

**Conclusion**

The mass consumption of texts and commodities made possible by the advent of transnational television in the 1990s had consequences not only for viewers’ imagination of erotics and intimacy but, perhaps, also for their perspectives on upward mobility, and affiliations to community. In this chapter, I have focused on the eroticization of two interrelated domains of Indian public culture: commodities and their representations, and discourses of intimacy on transnational television. I began by analyzing how, as part of a transnational and intertextual field, commodities displayed in the public sphere were erotically charged, such that eroticism and consumption were mutually implicated. The erotic charge of commodities ensued not only from the desire to buy or acquire them, but also from the fantasies and yearnings they evoked. But unlike what Schein (1999a) found in China, where the desire to desire may be interpreted as a critique of the state, in India the desire to desire was incited and endorsed by uneasy alliances between the state, domestic industry, and multinational capital.
Arvind Rajagopal has pointed out that “through the genre of advertising, television promotes a libidinal economy that helps secure and reproduce the physical economy and is interwoven with it” (1999, 58). Transnational television played a crucial role in the yoking of erotic and commodity desire, not only through the advertisements it telecast but, equally important, through a range of other programs, such as talk shows, serials, and MTV-inspired music programs. Unlike programs telecast on state-run television during the 1980s, those telecast via transnational networks revealed an overwhelming preoccupation with intimate relationships. Some of the programs telecast on transnational networks portrayed women who were not only eroticized, but who actively pursued erotic pleasure. The erotic agency of these women was mediated and circumscribed in various ways. In some cases, even though they pursued erotic pleasure, they retained their “Indianness” (defined, by many of my informants, in terms of their devotion to their families). Others were represented as upper-class and Westernized women who, indeed, seemed to embody a threat to the purported purity of “Indian culture.” These portrayals articulated with the anxieties of my lower-middle-class and middle-class informants who were concerned about how their own identities and ways of life might be endangered by the social changes they observed around themselves. Moreover, not all my informants derived pleasure or were even comfortable with televisual representations of women as erotic subjects. Many responded by increasing their surveillance of family members and neighbors; still others, by aligning themselves with Hindu-nationalist and exclusionary discourses of cultural purity and national culture.

In some instances, representations of erotics in public culture resulted in the reification of the boundaries between Indian and “Western” culture. When perceived as foreign or Western in orientation or origin, representations of erotics were deemed extremely threatening to the purported purity of national culture—as indicated by the controversies surrounding the Miss World pageant in Bangalore in December 1996, and the protests against the portrayal of a lesbian relationship between the heroines of Deepa Mehta’s film *Fire* (see the work of Gopinath [2005] and Patel [2004] for excellent analyses of the controversies surrounding *Fire*). In the case of the Miss World pageant, a large coalition of protesters criticized the decision to hold the pageant in India as symptomatic of the contamination of Indian culture by Western discourses of gender, sexuality, and the erotic (see John 1998 and Oza 2001). Similarly, the protesters against *Fire* represented the lesbian relationship between the heroines as “foreign” and, therefore, antinational. In the public protests surrounding both these controversies, transnational
television, multinational capital, and the globalization of the Indian economy were all conceived as threats to the purity of Indian culture. In these protests, Indian culture was reified, and its difference from Western culture essentialized and fetishized. Erotics became the terrain on which these reifications of Indianness took place.

At the same time, representations of erotics also signaled how notions of Indianness and Indian culture were being reconfigured. In the specific historical and cultural context in which I did my research, erotics were inseparably entangled with hegemonic discourses of caste, class, and nation. Hence, while it has not been my intent to describe “the sexual lives of [urban] Indians,” I have examined how the construction and evocation of erotic pleasure provides us with a lens to trace the contours of a sociohistorical conjuncture. I was witness to the twinning of desire and deprivation for many of the men and women that I got to know during my fieldwork. This combination of desire and deprivation was built into the very structure of commodity capitalism and the specific forms it acquired in late twentieth-century India. The erotic was deeply enmeshed in psychic and structural configurations of longing, pleasure, and power, and was part of the constitution of subjectivity along axes of caste, class, gender, and family position. Erotics constituted a force field of power, pleasure, and danger, through its articulation of desires and anxieties pertaining to upward mobility, class, modernity, and tradition. At stake in these desires and anxieties was not only the reconfiguration of hierarchies of gender, caste, and class within India, but the very definition of Indian culture.

Notes

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1. Although representations of erotics continue to be enormously popular, the late 1990s and early 2000s (coinciding, not surprisingly, with the consolidation of the stronghold of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party over both the state and civil society) have also seen a profusion of television serials that valorize “family values,” in particular, the virtues of the so-called traditional extended family. Far from replacing or displacing the earlier emphasis on erotics, these new serials may be interpreted, in part, as a backlash against them and, more important, as articulations of ongoing debates about the cultural implications of transnational media (compare Mankekar and Schein, this volume).

2. A related project, but one that lies outside the scope of this chapter, involves the place occupied by India in transnational discourses of erotics. See, for instance, the work of Manderson and Jolly (1997) for a discussion of “Western-imagined Oriental sexuality” (1997, 8).

3. Perhaps my experience would have been different had I chosen to interview rural women on sex and erotics. Compare Raheja and Gold (1994).

4. Compare V. Geetha’s discussion of the covert and indirect expression of women’s erotic desires (and frustrations) (1998). In one instance, she observes, a woman expressed her resentment against her husband: “The child sleeps between us these days” (1998, 307).

5. As Lenore Manderson and Margaret Jolly posit with respect to cross-cultural studies of sexuality, erotic desire is most fruitfully analyzed in terms of cultural encounters and “confluences” (1997). By situating contemporary expressions of erotic desire in India in the larger context of globalization and transnational media, I argue against either exoticizing an essentially “Indian” form of erotics or assuming that expressions of erotics in India are the same as in other parts of the world.


7. Although the authorship of the Kamasutra has been attributed to Vatsayana, it is more likely that it was a composite text. See the work of Kumkum Roy (1998) for an excellent discussion of the politics underlying the translations and appropriations of the Kamasutra in the modern era.

8. It appears to be difficult to date the Natyashastra. Dimock et al. (1974) date it to before the sixth or seventh centuries CE. For more information on erotics within Sanskritic rasa theory, see the work of Dimock et al. (1974) and Siegel (1978). On the elaborate classification of love in the Gitagovinda, see Siegel’s (1978) study, especially pages 42–57. On Tamil akam poetry, in which “the central relationship is that of man and woman,” see the work of Dimock et al. (1974, 172) and Ramanujan (1973, 170–81). On the erotic components of bhakti poetry, see Lele’s (1981) study.

9. For an analysis of the development of the ghazal in terms of the rise of middle-class consumerism and state policy, see also Manuel’s (1993) study.
10. The relationship between same-sex erotics and the formation of gay and lesbian identities in modern India has been a site of controversy among analysts of popular culture, queer theorists, and gay and lesbian activists in India. Scholars like Rachel Dwyer have argued that “in India, some people enjoy same-sex sexual activity without wishing to claim a gay or lesbian or even bisexual identity; it is simply that they have sex with someone of the same sex but they expect to marry and live in a heterosexual relationship” (2000, 51–52), thus drawing a distinction between same-sex desire and the formation of gay and lesbian identities. Another perspective is offered by Giti Thadani, who points to the ways “heteropatriarchal” discourses have rendered gay and lesbian desire so invisible as to have foreclosed the articulation (until very recently) of gay and lesbian identities (1996). The formation of gay and lesbian identities are, therefore, mediated by a politics of visibility and invisibility and legibility and illegibility. In this regard, the heteronormativity of the representations I analyze in this chapter may serve to reinforce the hegemonic invisibility and illegibility of gay and lesbian identities. Nevertheless, there is a burgeoning gay and lesbian movement in India. See the pioneering work of Arondekar (2009) on homoerotic desire in a historical frame, and also Abraham (2004), Balachandran (2004), Bandyopadhyay (2007), Biswas (2007), Bose and Bhattacharya (2007), L. Cohen (1995), Gandhi (2007), Ghosh (2007), Merchant (2007), Mutneja (2007), Pandey (2004), Patel (1998, 2007), Reddy (2007), Shahani (2008), Srivastava (2004), and Thadani (1996) on same-sex and gay and lesbian erotics in contemporary India.


12. Haug also cautions us that commodity aesthetics form just one “functional complex, one aspect among others in our social reality” (1986, 138).

13. To clarify: while many of my informants could afford some of the less expensive commodities that had come into the market (such as cosmetics, some varieties of packaged foods, and small appliances like mixers, gas stoves, and electric fans), they were unable to purchase most of the high-end durable consumer goods advertised, such as automobiles, air conditioners, and expensive clothing.

14. Omvati’s discomfort with the relationship between her son and daughter-in-law is not unusual in the context of the politics of extended families in North India. See, for instance, Raheja and Gold’s discussion of the tensions surrounding conjugality in rural North India (1994). However, it also articulated with the new visibility of conjugality in the public sphere.

15. See Rajagopal’s (1999) study for an excellent analysis of the Ks ads.

16. My ethnographic observations are corroborated by quantitative data collected by a Pathfinders Survey, according to which 41.8 percent of a total sample size of 10,955 individuals believed that “Western influence on TV programmes is harmful to Indian culture” (Pathfinders India, 1998, table 2.8.7).
For superb analyses of conventions of erotic representation in Bollywood film, see the work of Dwyer (2000) and Uberoi (1997).

Recent representations of the sexualized male body are not unprecedented: male stars have frequently been eroticized, for instance, Shammi Kapoor, a 1960s star who apparently drew inspiration from the gyrating Elvis Presley (see Rai 1994). Recent films feature actors like Salman Khan, whose buffed body is explicitly staged as an object of erotic desire for male and female spectators.

In Hindi films released around this time, erotic desire continued to be subsumed within discourses of romance, and premarital and extramarital erotic relations continued to be depicted as transgressive. Some notable examples of such films were Astitiva (Rahul Sughand Productions, 2000), Salaam Namaste, Corporate (v One Entertainment, 2006), Hum tum, and Kabhi alvida naa kehna (Dharma Productions, 2006).

Anjali Monteiro, of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, in Bombay, linked this new focus on intimacy in the talk shows of the 1990s with emerging notions of selfhood. She explained: “Traditionally, the distinction between individual identity and group identity was not so sharp. Today there is an emphasis on moulding and presenting oneself. The self is something you must work on and talk shows provide an opportunity to look at yourself through others’ experiences” (Anupama Chandra, “Opening New Channels of Conversation,” India Today, March 15, 1995). Indeed, other theorists have also linked a preoccupation with intimacy with the emergence of bourgeois forms of selfhood, for instance, Foucault’s (1984) analysis of the history of sexuality and the constitution of the modern subject. While I hesitate to generalize that the recent preoccupation with intimacy and erotics in television programs heralds the birth of new subjectivities in urban India, representations of sexuality and, in particular, erotics, seem to have served as “a prime connecting point between body, self-identity and social norms” (Giddens 1992, 14).

These anxieties were also mirrored in and perhaps fueled by television serials that focused on tensions between the conjugal unit and the extended family. These anxieties continue to be a staple of many television serials. Serials like Kuch jhuki palkein (Sony Entertainment Television) and Gharana (Zee TV) focus centrally on conflicts between the two, even as others (such as Justajoo [Zee TV]) depict the trials, but also the clandestine pleasures, of extramarital sexual relationships. Justajoo, in fact, is about an incestuous extramarital relationship, and profoundly problematizes dominant discourses of family and kinship by making explicit the politics of desire between members of a family.

In some Hindi films released at this time, for instance Drishti (1991, directed by Govind Nihalani) or Paroma (1985, directed by Aparna Sen), which narrate the erotic awakening of married women through extramarital relationships, women are severely punished for pursuing erotic pleasure. It is also important to note, however, that these films are not conventional Bollywood films, but are “crossover” films made by directors who have established their reputations in “middle cinema.”

This is corroborated by researchers David Page and William Crawley, who report
that middle-class students in Ahmedabad did not find Savi to be “bold.” According to Page and Crawley, asked whether Hasratein was bold, one student replied: “It is bold, but Savitri does not act bold. She is like a traditional wife.” Another responded: “She respects everyone and teaches me to respect everyone” (2001, 166).

24. See Giddens’s reminder that sexuality might also be “worrying, disturbing, fraught with tensions” (1992, 177).

25. I wish to thank Sudipta Kaviraj and Kumkum Sangari for their help with clarifying the ideas presented in this paragraph.