

# 'Celebrating Molesters?'

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*'Men Are Back—And They Are Ruling The Roads' blares the latest ad by Maruti-Suzuki for its 'Tallest, Longest ...Now the Largest Selling' car.*

According to the advertisement, if 'you see the new Maruti Suzuki SX 4 for the first time' you would say "Now, that's a man" as 'there is muscularity, but not without captivating looks, there's bigness ... accompanied with astonishing agility and surefootedness. Step inside and the charm and suaveness will disarm you in a jiffy. The SX 4 makes your head turn and your heart beat faster'.

It further adds that 'positioning of the SX4 comes from its imposing presence, muscular looks and styling.' Of course, it continues to peddle this image of the car with another caption 'SX4—The Man Amongst Cars' as it is High on power, muscle, style and control, the SX4 is truly a man amongst cars'.

While it is quite repulsive to see how *Maruti-Suzuki* people perceive a 'Man' but looking at the social impact such portrayal makes it appears highly disgusting and disturbing.

Anyone remotely concerned with growing incidents of molestation of women in this part of the earth would immediately notice the keenness of the *Maruti-Suzuki* people in selling/peddling a 'Macho Image' of their car. In fact, the ad also exhibits their total indifference to the milieu in which they operate where 'one out of three women are likely to be sexually assaulted during their lifetimes.' (UNIFKM—United Nations Development Fund for Women- Nov 2003).

Of course it is not for the first time that *Maruti* has been found to be a party to portrayal of its products in a rabid 'anti-women' manner. Few years back the ad series launched by them for their then 'new' car model Zen had also become controversial. And it is now history how they had to withdraw that ad, after a persistent protest by a small but determined group of gender activists and intellectuals.

The controversial ad showed a young beautiful blonde being stalked by a tiger through the city at night. The girl passes through the various areas of the city. ...Whenever she is on the road, it is the new look car that follows her. The moment she is on stairs or overbridge, the car is transformed into a tiger. The TVC ends with the girl finally giving up the chase with a deep male voiceover 'Surrender, to the new'...The advertisement fashioned on the "predator concept" was chosen to attract young consumers below the age of 35, and it was deliberately selected to "build excitement around the brand in a completely different manner". [ECONOMICTIMES.COM, MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2003 05:01:16 PM ]

In the petition which this group of activists had sent to the big bosses of the company as well as different concerned organisations it was clearly stated that the said ad 'completely ignored the campaign against carjacking and rape.' It also overlooked the fact that cars in general had become a weapon for men, who abduct and rape women. It has been repeatedly argued that the projection of cars as predators, women as sexual objects and travel as a hunt constitutes rape culture.

Can it be then said that Maruti people are suffering from selective amnesia that on the one hand they are engaged in marketing their gender friendly image they have no qualms in 'celebrating a rabid type of masculinity which rules the roads'. Only the top echelons of the company would be able to answer the question.

It would not be incorrect to say that they seem to be engaged in the the process of sanitising violence against women to enhance their business prospects which is said to be an effective marketing strategy the world over and media has been a party to this.

Definitely, only the bosses of Maruti-Suzuki cannot be only singled out for engaging in such practice.

Sometime back 'Reliance Infocom' was charged for 'displaying an advertisement on its website pertaining to sex determination of the foetus.' The ad talked about Chinese tips for predicting the gender of the child. It also talked about techniques ensuring and increasing probability that an embryo will be of a particular sex." (HT, Feb 1, 2005). A case under the Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) act was duly registered against it.

One still remembers how a programme in Hindi modelled on the famous 'Hard Talk' demonstrated a few years back the depths to which the media here can reach supposedly for providing titillating infotainment to their viewers. Interestingly the great villain of yesteryears who was a guest on the programme had not expected that the compere would put him in jeopardy. (Seedhi Baat, *Aaj Tak*, 5 Sep 2004, Prabhu Chawla interview-ing Pran) Discussing his track record in films and presenting before him some interesting queries about his life and career, all of a sudden the wellknown compere broached the topic of the 'rapes committed by the villain' in many of the films he had enacted. Despite visible discomfiture on the 'villain's' face he unashamedly asked him, looking at the galaxy of 'sexy heroines' in the industry today 'whom would you 'prefer' in the upcoming film if given a chance' ? Taken aback, the 'great villain' who had carved out a niche for himself in the industry then with his acting, somehow wriggled himself out of this situation.

In her well researched piece *Media Culpability In The Continuum Of Violence Against Women*, Lucinda Marshall ( feminist artist, writer and activist, founder of the Feminist Peace Network, <http://www.feministpeacenet.org/>) critically examines the issue. (30 September, 2004 counter currents.org) "...[M]ost disturbing is the disproportionate coverage of sensationalized violence. Invariably, rape stories get far more coverage than domestic violence stories. In all likelihood, this is because rape stories usually focus on one individual woman. If she is attractive, and particularly if she is white, she is a very marketable victim." While Ms Marshall's studies must have been based on the way media in the west presents women, it cannot be said that her observations are irrelevant for Indian conditions. Even a random look at the programmes or ads on the media circuit in this part of the world makes it clear that things are unfolding here in a much vulgar manner.

Explaining the rationale behind presenting violence before its viewers or concealing the routinised violence Jennifer L Pozner (former director of the FAIR Women's Desk) makes it clear that, 'economic benefits' of 'rape—the most

titillating crime' are immense. According to her "The sexual brutalization of women is a highly marketable business, bringing in some \$10 billion in profits in the US every year. As lucrative as the portrayal of rape is in the adult entertainment industry, it stands to reason that it is also a profitable story for the news media as well." □