

# The Miss India-Singapore Pageant

or, *What am I Doing Here?*

by

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Generally speaking, I look askance at beauty pageants. My jaundiced attitude toward them is not something I have affected to impress my shallow and more frivolous acquaintances with my depth and gravity. As the father of two daughters, you can understand why I might find most pageants at least vaguely insulting to the intelligence.

However, I am not hidebound about this. And my curiosity got the better of me this hot July Sunday in Singapore.

Actually, what caught my eye was an absolutely stunning picture in the *Straits Times* of one Ms. Moon Moon Sen, erstwhile Hindi film sex-kitten and now a mature sex-cat, the mother of two and the co-hostess this night of the *Third Miss India-Singapore Pageant*.

Since we Indians have now taken over the Universe (can you imagine a “Ms. Belgium-Argentina Pageant?”), a series of twenty “Miss India-whatever Pageants” are held around the world each year. At the end of that grueling process, a “Miss India-Universe Pageant” is held in New York City (where else?), after which the newly crowned beauty queen is pretty much ignored by the rest of the world for the rest of her life. Ah, but the journey to that point must indeed be exhilarating. Let me take you to the crowded starting gate.

With a free evening on my hands, and having been enticed by the picture of Ms. Sen, I made

my dignified way to the World Trade Center auditorium and plunked down my \$15 for a peanut-gallery ticket (I was not about to spring for the \$40 seats; those were reserved for the truly deranged.) Foolishly, I rushed to arrive at 7:20 for the 7:30 show, thinking that perhaps that some of the legendary Singapore efficiency may have rubbed off on my local compatriots. Of course, it was around 8:30 by the time the milling crowd even made it in to the large auditorium.

As milling crowds go, this one would have to be rated pretty highly. It was quite well-dressed and polished-looking, the sort of crowd you could take someplace and expect that it would not embarrass you. Let me qualify that. There was a large contingent of local Sikhs who were very much in evidence; these were very different-looking Sikhs than any I have seen elsewhere. They were all tall and lanky, and had on small pointy turbans that pointed forward, rather like the lights on miners’ helmets. They had very closely trimmed and shaped beards, clearly a giveaway that they were not your salt-of-the-earth pious and conservative type of Sikhs. These Sikhs looked like they had a Plan; they seemed to be very much in the mood for some serious heckling and taunting. Since about a third of the contestants were named Something Kaur (a common Sikh name), it was apparent that they were out to impress the aspiring beauties, and of course every guy knows that nothing impresses an aspiring beauty as much as proficient heckling.

The vast majority of Indians in Singapore are Tamils, a generally conservative community from a state in the south of India; however, only a small percentage of the audience and two of the twenty-six contestants were Tamil. The rest were all north Indians, especially Punjabis, who are known throughout India for their gregarious, outgoing ways. Think of them as the Texans of India.

After the late start, the program was quite professionally run. It was filled with numerous musical numbers, most of which were actually well performed. Since I had to leave after only three-and-a-half hours, I can't tell you who won. However, there were some very interesting moments, especially during the talent segment.

While most of the girls did the standard undulating dance to the standard recorded Hindi movie song, one fearless contestant performed a show-stopping belly-dance, (un)dressed in full Arabic attire and oozing all the oomph and verve that particular dance demands. The audience was stunned into silence, except for the Sikhs, who clearly loved it and left no trace of doubt about their feelings for the rest of the audience. One of the two Tamil girls, Uma Devi, was clearly determined to out-vamp all the others. Dressed in a leather miniskirt outfit, she performed a rap-dance (much of it with her back to the audience) that looked as authentic as anything you might see on *Soul Train* or in a Spike Lee movie. Once again, it went over big with the Sikhs, while the few remaining Tamils, faces frozen in mortified disbelief, tried their hardest to look like Bengalis.

Not all was performance art. To gauge her level of intellectual acuity, each of the girls was asked just one question (you don't want to overdo the intellectual angle); unfortunately, most of them

derailed their chances of ever making it to New York as soon as they opened their mouths:

Qn: Should swimsuits be allowed in next year's pageant? (Remember, this was an Indian beauty pageant.)

Ans: *"No, I don't think my parents would approve."* (This was definitely not Uma Devi, who might have suggested a nude modeling segment if asked such a leading question.)

Qn: What is an R-rated movie and what would you do if the person next to you in the theater started acting funny?

Ans: *"I would give him one cold hard stare, and that would put him in his place, no?"*

Qn: What would you do if your husband had an affair?

Ans: *"I would search his pockets, yeah? I would look for lipstick on his shirt, yeah? Then I would ask him, what about it? Then I would divorce him or something."*

Of all the singers, the most visually stunning was one rather rotund Mr. Haresh, resplendent in his white pants, gold jewelry and wide-open printed Hawaiian shirt. His sponsorship advertisement in the program listed him as:

**Mr. Haresh Gulabrai Buxani**  
(Mukesh of Singapore)  
Businessman-cum-Singer  
Haresh Brothers

*(Importers, Exporters, Wholesalers and Confirmers)*

[Mukesh being one of India's most popular singers.]

Mr. Haresh and his Brothers must have Imported and Confirmed a whole bunch of stuff that day,

for he sang like an Exporter/Wholesaler possessed. Twirling the microphone cord with one hand, shooting his finger up in the air with the other (Travolta of Singapore?), quivering in place and standing head down with his broad back to the audience (Tom Jones of Singapore?), his was a stupefying and electrifying (if not exactly high-voltage) performance. It was exhausting just to watch him perform, as he labored mightily to bring forth song after song. Even the Sikhs were subdued into pensively twirling their moustaches. At the end of his set, the audience applauded him heartily, perhaps more in relief than in approbation.

What brought the house down was a delightful Hindi duet performed by a Chinese man and a Filipino woman, both of whom understood no Hindi whatsoever. Their performance was so endearing that even the presiding sex-cat herself, Ms. Sen, impulsively slinked out of the darkness stage-left to link arms with them and sway graciously with them for a few minutes. The photographers clicked away at this perfect picture of cultural harmony.

Ah yes, you must be wondering about Ms. Moon Moon Sen. Well, since I could barely see her from where I sat initially, I soon got up and took a vacant seat in the third row, right in with the Mughals, the Nabobs, the wholesalers and the forwarders. Looking rather unlike her picture, Ms. Sen was nonetheless a sight for sore eyes, and one of the more appealing mature sex-cats you are likely to find. However, she was also a bit too cutesy and demure for words. Her insistence on speaking in highly affected British-accented English rather than in Hindi (“But I’m Bengali!” she protested) did not go over well with a rather vocal patriotic minority in the audience, including the Sikhs. Peeved, she exited stage left,

and did not reappear until the Sino-Filipino number much later.

Alas, I had to leave left before the conclusion, so the winner will have to remain a mystery. But if you’re willing to travel to New York in October, you’ll find out. And if you happen to run into Ms. Moon Moon Sen while you are there, do give her my very best. Thanks to her, I will never look at cats the same way again. And please ask her never to marry someone from the Unitarian Church; somehow, Ms. Moon Moon Moonie just doesn’t sound like a sex-kitten.