

# Mail Today - 1st Anniversary - Special Edition

## THE New Sexual Revolution

It is not your regular contraceptive, but i-Pill has liberated Indian women like never before

by Swati Sharma

**I**N 1978, when the Social Research Unit of the Indian Market Research Bureau conducted a first-of-its-kind survey of teenagers from the four main metros about the state of their sexual knowledge and preferences, the results were startling enough to deserve an *India Today* cover story. An overwhelming majority of college-going women hadn't kissed a man on the lips and they considered pre-marital sex wrong. "Virginity is an honour. I want to gift it to my husband on the wedding night," said one respondent.

Thirty years on, virginity has ceased to carry its old premium, as pre-marital sex is no longer viewed through the blinkers of old-fashioned morality. Year after year, sex surveys show men and women in relationships are having sex, and even couples opting for arranged marriage are checking each other out sexually before tying the knot. What hasn't changed, though, is the fear of an unwanted pregnancy after a heat-of-the-moment session of unprotected sex.

If there's one development that has liberated Indian women from this fear, it is i-pill, an emergency contraception pill containing the hormone levonorgestrel (it prevents a fertilised egg from attaching itself to the uterus). Cipla launched i-pill in August 2007 with a visible advertising campaign: "Why take a chance?" It found many takers among young, single women. Within nine months, the pill - priced at Rs 32 each - registered sales worth Rs 21 crore, leading to the fear that a number of women may be using it for regular contraception and thereby exposing their bodies to great harm.

Social commentators, though, are convinced that the knowledge of i-pill has empowered women to have sex whenever they want without being burdened by the fear of an unwanted pregnancy or abortion.

India is one of the few countries that allow the sale of non-prescription emergency contraception drugs. The government is also proposing to bring the drug under the Reproductive and Child Health Programme, which will make i-pill affordable for the lower middle class and those from small towns.

Sociologist Shiv Vishwanthan, senior fellow, Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi, has been studying the i-pill phenomenon since its launch. "It is a step forward for a woman to express her sexual desires," he says. "Unprotected sex leads to uncertainty and anxiety. The pill takes care of both."

Out of more than 50 million annual conceptions in India, 30 per cent end up in abortions. Reportedly, 75 per cent of pregnancies are unplanned. An estimated 20,000 deaths occur each year because of abortion-related complications. Clearly, there is public health rationale to i-pill.

Says i-pill user Namrata Malik (name changed), who has been in a steady relationship for the past



Illustration: ARYA PRHARAJ

### Pill Power

- In 1960, the oral contraceptive Pill was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration but its use was limited to married women only. In 1962, 1.2 million US women were using it. In the 1970s, the US allowed single women to use the pill as well.
- Because the pill was effective, it soon became widespread. It also heightened the debate about the moral and health consequences of pre-marital sex. A backlash against the Pill took place in the early and mid-1970s, when reports appeared linking the pill to breast cancer.
- Feminists hailed the pill as an "equaliser" because it had given them the same sexual freedom as

men. Harvard economics professor, Claudia Goldin, wrote three papers on the pill's positive effects on women's willingness to invest in a higher education and a fruitful career.

- The biggest supporter of the pill was American birth control activist, Margaret Higgins Sanger, who had engaged Mahatma Gandhi in a long debate on contraception. Gandhi did not support her. In 1950 Sanger, now in her 80s, met reproductive scientist Gregory Pincus, and financially helped his research on the pill.

two years: "We all come across situations when we run out of protection or simply forget to use it. This is when i-pill is most useful." The 24-year-old HR executive adds: "The best thing about i-pill is that it frees women from fear and uncertainty."

Adds Dr Sonia Malik, director, Southend Fertility and IVF Centre, Vasant Vihar: "i-pill has definitely freed women from the fear of abortion. Even if a woman has protected sex, there are situations when the condom tears or the diaphragm slips i-pill serves a very useful purpose here."

Says filmmaker Tanuja Chandra: "In today's high-pressure urban life, we all wish for extra control over our life. i-pill is successful because it ups a woman's control over her sexual life."

Malik says she receives many young, single women who find the drug liberating, but she says it is equally useful for married women. "i-pill has given a woman unprecedented control over her sexual life," says talk show host Mini Mathur.

But the fear is that i-pill could be misused as regular contraception. "The drug should not be used more than once in three months because it can botch up the men-



**OUTtake**

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strual cycle," says Dr Anuradha Kapoor, gynaecologist, Max Healthcare. "But we're already getting cases of young women who use i-pill frequently and then can't cope with the side-effects."

Mumbai-based clinical psychologist and Mail Today columnist Dr Anjali Chhabria says, "The flip side of i-pill is that it may encourage teenagers to engage in casual sex." Actress Sandhya Mridul agrees: "We can't ignore the fact that this may make young girls more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases."

Vishwanathan counters: "There are better incentives to engage in pre-marital sex than i-pill. If the choice is between safety and anxiety, nothing else matters than helping a woman get over anxiety." The debate may be as old as the arguments over contraception, but at the moment, i-pill has given young women a sense of freedom and they seem to be loving it.