

Mail Today

It's spilling over from Bollywood to the Indian middle class

by Sunaina Kumar

RECENTLY an ex-Bunny girl and a housewife from UK — Sarah Burge — was in the news for spending half a million pounds on cosmetic surgery. The forty-something lady went through 100 operations to turn herself into a real life Barbie doll. A self-confessed cosmetic surgery addict, she says she wants to keep her body and face to always look the way they did when she was young.

Sarah Burge might be an extremist, but there is no dearth of beauty junkies in our country too. As cosmetic surgery becomes more accessible, it is enabling people to find quick fix solutions to ageing, losing weight or even grappling with self-confidence issues.

Take the case of 30-year-old Niti Ahuja (name changed) who works in the front office of a hotel. Since her teens, she was unhappy with the shape of her nose. Finally, when she started earning, she saved up enough money to get a nose job done at the age of 28. Now four years later, Ahuja has already done liposuction on her stomach and is keen to do some contouring on her hips, for which she's saving money again. "I've already maxed out my credit card. This can be a little addictive," she confesses. "I've always been fairly self-confident about my looks, except for my nose. Once that was fixed, I realised how easy it is to achieve perfection in looks through surgery. It has bolstered my ego immensely and improved my communication skills at work — I certainly feel more confident."

Says Sanjay Chowdhury, head, aesthetics and cosmetic surgery department, Max Healthcare Institute in Saket, Delhi: "About 70 per cent of the people who come to us have normal demands like breast jobs, tummy tucks, scar revision. Most young people come for body contouring, breast augmentation, or rhinoplasty (nose jobs), while the older lot go in for face lifts." Chowdhury finds that of the nearly 500 patients they get in a year, about 20 per cent opt for cosmetic surgery to increase job prospects. "They are aspiring models or from the entertainment industry or executives who might be in jobs where they have to interact with people — even some media professionals, working for television news channels. Only about 5 per cent of the people fall into the category of addicts." He adds: "However, there are standard, references or frameworks for what a surgeon can do and bizarre requests are not entertained. If a patient is adamant, she/he is referred to a psychoanalyst."

THE DARK side of cosmetic surgery is something which has been under the scanner for the past couple of years. Just recently, a Korean woman injected cooking oil in her face leaving it disfigured when her supply of silicone ran out. Last year, rapper Kanye West's mother died of cosmetic surgery and there was a whole campaign to highlight the negative fallout of cosmetic surgery and the sinister story that lies behind Botox. Bollywood actress and model Koena Mitra is a victim of botched cosmetic surgery. The actress went through multiple nose jobs, lip injections, brow lifts and breast implants. When the nose job went bad, she had to go into hiding for a while. She finally came clean and confessed that, "I wish people would learn from my mistake. Plastic surgery is the worst-kept secret in the industry. But, it is a gamble."

Till a few years back, a beauty junkie was someone who was mostly in the public eye, such as a socialite or a star, but not anymore. According to Dr Mohan Thomas, president, Cosmetic Surgery Institute of India in Mumbai, "In this day and age almost everyone is a beauty junkie, just like there are food junkies and style junkies. Everyone is extremely image conscious." A large chunk of his clientele are middle class, working professionals. "Many come for one procedure, followed by another. But as long as these are not in quick succession, they cannot be labelled as beauty junkies." He adds: "People now treat surgery the way they would a house revamp. So just like you change the drapes, the carpet

and the sofa, you change things about you that need a revamp."

Just as Rakhi Sawant with her usual way of hitting the nail on the head had said once that *joh bhagwan nahin deta woh doctor deta hai*. And as Koena Mitra admits, cosmetic surgery is the worst kept secret of Bollywood. With all of Bollywood nipped and tucked to perfection, there is constant speculation on which star has done what on the internet: from Shilpa Shetty's nose job, to Kareena Kapoor's cellulite removal, Bipasha and Sushmita's silicone implants to Preity's face rejuvenation.

Recently there has been buzz about Priyanka Chopra getting a face lift to compete with Kangana, her co-star in *Fashion*, who in turn reportedly got a nose job done. While male stars like Salman and Himesh Reshammiya have had hair transplants, Govinda has been open in his intent to go in for corrective surgery for the face. For the

stars, it's a tightrope walk between being mocked if they look older and if they appear to be trying too hard.

OF COURSE, there are always those who're triggered by reasons other than vanity. "Some people come for all the wrong reasons — if they're depressed, say after a breakup or are obsessive about rectifying a certain body part, they can almost reach the point of paranoia, where they feel nothing else matters," adds Dr Thomas. There are those who suffer from body dysmorphic disorder or "broken mirror syndrome". These people are never satisfied and have a chronic need for more surgery. "Often their features are perfectly aligned, but they're convinced there's something wrong with them. We never treat such patients and mostly refer them for psychological counselling," he says.

According to Dr Samir Parikh, psychiatrist at Max Healthcare: "Every few decades the definition of the ideal look changes and the impact felt in our age is manifold with the bombardment of media images of what is considered the ideal look." He says he has many beauty junkies referred to him and feels that psychological counselling should be a necessary part of cosmetic correction. "Some people start obsessing about their looks and surgery at the cost of everything else in their life. So the role of a mental health practitioner is very important in for surgery." Surgery to enhance one's looks is still a hush-hush affair — but that may not be the case a few years from now as India's urban population get obsessive about looking like their favourite stars.

sunaina.kumar@mailtoday.in

Multiple cosmetic surgeries to reach out to the stars

CONFESSIONS OF A BEAUTY JUNKIE

SHWEETA SHARMA (name changed) works with an international airline as an airhostess. The 33-year-old claims that she has been Botox-free for 6 months now and is trying her best to control herself. Her cosmetic surgeon's contact is on her speed dial. Her obsessions with Botox and cosmetic surgery began when one of her friends took her for a Botox session. "I never thought I would be the one who would fight against nature to stay young and perfect. I thought it's the purview of ageing stars or vanity-obsessed people."

When her friend came out looking "fresh and restored", that's when she decided to give it a shot. "I had frown lines which had always worried me and bag under my eyes, as a result of my irregular working hours." So she got a shot which left her with a stinging pain for a few minutes, but it subsided after a while, and the effect was miraculous, she says.

"In the professional world, you need to have everything to survive — intelligence, a great body and good looks. My dalliance began with Botox and then just escalated from there on." She then got collagen implants on her lips which she felt were thin and could do with a little enhancement. She's also got liposuction on her thighs for a toned look without sweating it out at the gym. And the final straw was when she was in the United States for a holiday and got a toe job done, as she was conscious of her second toe being bigger than her first. "I thought I'd look fabulous in my high-heels after the toe job and I sunk in all my money on that. However, no one even noticed it. Even I couldn't care beyond a point that my toes were now proportional. I guess that was my Eureka moment! Since then, I've avowed to myself to stay away from this self-improvement business."

There's constant speculation in the media on which star has done what look-enhancement job. Some of those who've been discussed quite a bit are (from left) Rakhi Sawant, Shilpa Shetty, Koena Mitra

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The £1/2m Barbie: She's in search of plastic perfection

ONLY her earlobes (and her brain) remain untouched by the surgeon's knife. And, says Sarah Burge, who's spent 20 years in search of plastic perfection, she's not finished yet...

Sarah Burge has just completed some essential maintenance on her body. One of her bottom implants recently dislodged itself and had to be replaced, along with the one on the other cheek, to avoid any discrepancy in shape or size.

On top of that, her breasts had lost some of their pertness, so she had yet another 'uplift' as well as some strange substance injected into them to fill them out nicely. After two facelifts, a third wasn't strictly necessary but, hey, she thought, why not while we're at it?

Then a touch of liposuction on her stomach to flatten it out further after an earlier tummy tuck didn't quite do the trick, and the maintenance was nearly done. Two weeks ago, the body MoI was completed when Sarah had an implant inserted into the tip of her nose to make it upturned and cute.

Throughout all of this, there has been an ongoing assault on her face with the Botox needle, injectible fillers, dermabrasion and peels. Since embarking on her peculiar odyssey 20 years ago in search of the perfect plastic body, the 49-year-old mother of three has had more than £500,000 worth of treatments and around 150 surgical procedures. She's broken the world record, she tells me, for the amount spent on cosmetic treatments, which was held until now by another loon - sorry, lady - who liked to make the best of herself, called Cindy Jackson. So here I am face to face with the

The 49-year-old mother of three has had 150 surgeries

£1/2million woman. I had been expecting a cross between the Bride of Wildenstein and Zsa Zsa Gabor, with Leslie Ash's lips. It's not that frightening. In fact, the work is pretty good. Yet something is not quite right. Upon closer scrutiny I realise what it is: Sarah's face, while delicate and doll-like, is too small. Those three facelifts and liposuction on her chin - yes, really - have caused her visage to shrink.

She's like a little Botoxed alien. And all that buffing and injecting with Botox and peels has left her skin with a scrubbed, almost sore look. Can she begin, then, by explaining - if there is a rational explanation - her obsession with plastic surgery?

"I wouldn't let my house fall apart, so why should I let my body fall apart? I want my husband to look at me in the mornings and jump on top of me. I don't want to feel old and miserable."

"I was a bunny girl in my 20s. I had the time of my life. I realised back then that to get on in life you have to be good-looking and go for it. I'm 50 next year and I want to look the same then as I did in my 20s."

And she argues: "What is wrong with wanting to look good? I'm a Virgo, and Virgos are perfectionists. My aim is to look better with each passport picture. Why do people have such a downer on plastic surgery? And to be honest, all the people who have made a judgement about it are the ones who need it the most." — *Daily Mail*