

Savita Bhabhi: A (Sex) Symbol of Free Speech?

By S. MITRA KALITA



Article | Comments MORE IN WORLD »

[Email](#) [Print](#) [Save](#) [A](#) [A](#)

What does Savita Bhabhi—the sari-clad Internet porn star—have to do with Google's threat to leave China?

For Indian companies, potentially a lot.

Savita, of course, is the voluptuous cartoon character who looks like a cross between reality television star Rakhi Sawant and Veronica Lodge of the Archie Comic book series. There's nothing subtle about Savita—although she certainly tries.

"I'm going to take a shower! You should also change out of those wet clothes," she greeted a neighbor in a November episode, for example. As expected, the two end up together in the shower. The illustrations are explicit, the dialogue laughably simple: "Oh that feels so..." or "Oh I'm going to..."



AFP/Getty Images

A picture taken on July 27, 2009 shows an online cartoon of Savita Bhabhi displayed on the screen of a computer at an undisclosed location.

In June, the Indian government banned her. Sachin Pilot, minister of state in the ministry of communications and technology, says the decision was driven by a complaint received from a women's group in Maharashtra. He did not know which one.

"Indian cyberspace is very free," he said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal this week. "It's through what prism you see it. ...It's hard to justify pornography on the Internet."

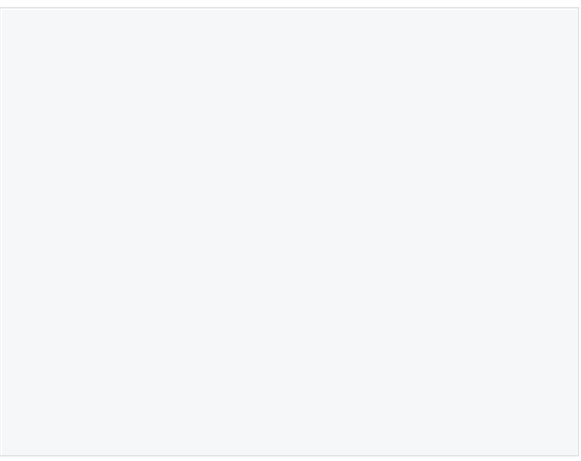
Savita's creators were a mystery until U.K.-based Puneet Agarwal briefly revealed himself to fight India's censors last summer. Then, after "personal and family issues" arose with his coming forward, he gave up, according to a press release on a site dedicated to saving Savita. Mr. Agarwal did not return repeated emails seeking comment over the last few months from The Wall Street Journal.

It is unfortunate on many levels, but it is more the collective silence that has been deafening. For sure, columnists lashed out at the government in the wake of the ban. Libertarian columnist Amit Varma blogged, "This is arbitrary, this is wrong—and it could happen to any of us tomorrow." But much of the outrage has died down now.

The Google-China showdown might change that. For years, in the cliché tireless debates about the rise of India versus China, Indians have self-righteously warned that its status as a democracy would help India surge ahead. Did a pivotal moment come this week as Google stood up to the Chinese and said it would no longer censor search results?

Indians could be gloating. Ah, but then there's the stifled Savita.

Tech-savvy fans, light years ahead of their public officials, have saved Savita from complete exile in her home country. Confessed one friend: "I just loaded the site on my phone." And if an Internet Protocol address is from outside India, for example, the site—now renamed and repackaged under kirtu.com—works. A worldwide fan base has kept Savita and her adventures alive and continuously updated on the site.



Email Newsletters and Alerts

The latest news and analysis delivered to your in-box. Check the boxes below to sign up.

- Asian Markets
- Today's Paper: Asia
- News Alert
- India News Alert

[SIGN UP](#)

New! To sign up for Keyword or Symbol Alerts click [here](#).

To view or change all of your email settings, visit the [Email Setup Center](#).

Email Newsletters and Alerts

The latest news and analysis delivered to your in-box. Check the boxes below to sign up.

- This Week's Most Popular
- On the Editorial Page

[SIGN UP](#)

[Manage Email Preferences](#)

Recent Columns >

- [King of Bollywood Dreams of Global Hit](#)
- [This Channel Hopes to See Green](#)
- [Savita Bhabhi: A \(Sex\) Symbol of Free Speech?](#)

About This Column

The New Global Indian is a weekly feature looking at India's vast diaspora, scattered across the world but with ever-stronger ties to the subcontinent. It runs every Tuesday, alternating between deputy global economics editor S. Mitra Kalita, Wall Street Journal staff and guest contributors. We welcome your comments at mitra.kalita@wsj.com.

Censorship in India, however, continues. As The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) last week, Google Inc.'s New Delhi office removed material from the social networking site, Orkut, due to offensive material circulated about the late chief minister of Andhra Pradesh. "The Internet giant feared the comments could heighten tensions at a time when thousands of mourners of the popular politician were emptying into the street," the article said.

To be sure, outright comparisons to China are unfair. The Orkut incident "was trying to deal with a rumor mill. It's a sensitive issue where a group of people were accusing corporates and individuals of murder. It was a temporary removal," Mr. Pilot said. He said there have only been about 20 web sites shut down in India over the last decade, mostly over national security issues. "We don't want to be in the business of banning web sites," he said.

Few to-do lists among governments of the world are as long as India's: fix roads, clean water, improve schools, install more power lines. Somehow last summer, some bureaucrat made Savita a priority. "I honestly haven't seen the government take action on anything as swiftly as it did in banning Savita Bhabhi," a friend remarked.

Dhananjay Varma, editor of Techgoss, a web site about the technology industry in India, said his company plans to file a Right to Information request to find out what specifically triggered the government ban of Savita Bhabhi.

Concerns that pornography subjugates women are certainly fair. But in the hierarchy of pornography, Savita is perhaps the safest form of all. She is a cartoon, representing no risk of human trafficking or sexually transmitted disease. She asserts her desires, namely to be an equal with her partners. She is certainly more innocuous than other atrocities against women the Indian government manages to ignore, from companies asking female workers for their father's or husband's name on every other form to the euphemistic "eve-teasing" on city buses.

"There is an ego battle somewhere," said Mr. Varma of Techgoss, who is based in New Delhi. "We have terrorists to chase. We are a developing country. Why waste energy and resources pursuing an adult cartoon site? Somebody wanted to make an example of Savita."

In light of the free-speech battle waging within India's neighbor to the north, it might be time to make an example of Savita yet again.

Write to S. Mitra Kalita at mitra.kalita@wsj.com

[JOIN THE DISCUSSION](#)

[MORE IN World »](#)

[Email](#) [Print](#) [Order Reprints](#)

Editors' Picks



Why We Pair Up With Our Emotional Opposites



As Job Market Mends, Dropouts Fall Behind



Is China's Next CEO Good for Business?



Religion for Everyone



Shaddid's Voice Critical to Understanding Middle East

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

[BACK TO TOP ^](#)

Customer Center:

- My Account
- My Subscriptions

Create an Account:

- Register for Limited Access

About:

- News Licensing
- Reprints
- Advertising
- Classifieds
- Conferences

WSJ.com:

- Site Map
- Home
- World
- U.S.
- Business

Tools & Formats

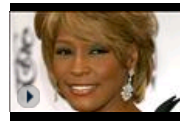
- Today's Paper
- Video Center
- Graphics
- Columns
- Blogs

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Digital Network

- WSJ.com
- Marketwatch.com
- Barrons.com
- SmartMoney.com

Most Popular Video >



Whitney Houston's Visit to Her Mother
6:50



Fisker Karma: The World's Most Interesting Car
2:45



Democracy Derailed - Egypt's Unraveled Revolution
21:14

More in World

[Europe Reaches a Greek Deal](#)

[Afghanistan to Spy on Own Troops](#)

[U.S., Mexico Sign Oil Drilling Deal](#)

[Mexico Kidnapping Takes Toll on Family](#)

['Friends' of Syria Expected to Spar](#)

Most Popular In Europe >

[Read](#) [Emailed](#) [Video](#) [Commented](#)

1. [Europe Reaches a Greek Deal](#)
2. [The World's Most Interesting Car](#)
3. [Greek Rescue Is Not End of the Story](#)
4. [Price of iPad's Name: \\$55,000 to \\$2 Billion](#)
5. [Apple's Mac Makeover](#)

[Most Read Articles Feed](#)

• [Subscribe to WSJ.com](#)

• [Sign up for WSJ Professional](#)

• [Subscribe to WSJ Weekend - Print Edition](#)

Help & Information Center:

• [Help](#)

• [Customer Service](#)

• [Contact Us](#)

• [Global Support](#)

• [New on WSJ.com](#)

• [Print Subscriber Services](#)

• [Subscriptions](#)

• [Buy the Newspaper](#)

• [About Dow Jones](#)

• [Privacy Policy - UPDATED 10/18/2011](#)

• [Your Ad Choices](#)

• [Subscriber Agreement & Terms of Use - Updated](#)

• [Copyright Policy](#)

• [Jobs at WSJ.com](#)

• [Markets](#)

• [Market Data](#)

• [Tech](#)

• [Personal Finance](#)

• [Life & Style](#)

• [Opinion](#)

• [Autos](#)

• [Careers](#)

• [Real Estate](#)

• [Small Business](#)

• [Corrections](#)

• [SafeHouse - Send Us Information](#)

• [Topics](#)

• [Guides](#)

• [Alerts](#)

• [Newsletters](#)

• [Mobile](#)

• [WSJ Social](#)

• [Tablet Edition](#)

• [Podcasts](#)

• [RSS Feeds](#)

• [Journal Community](#)

• [WSJ on Twitter](#)

• [WSJ on Facebook](#)

• [WSJ on Foursquare](#)

• [My Journal](#)

• [Portfolio](#)

• [WSJ Digital Downloads](#)

• [AllThingsD.com](#)

• [FINS: Finance, IT jobs, Sales jobs](#)

• [BigCharts.com](#)

• [Virtual Stock Exchange](#)

• [WSJ Radio](#)

• [WSJ U.S. Edition](#)

• [WSJ Asia Edition](#)

• [WSJ Europe Edition](#)

• [WSJ India Page](#)

Foreign Language Editions:

• [WSJ Chinese](#)

• [WSJ Japanese](#)

• [WSJ Portuguese](#)

• [WSJ Spanish](#)

• [WSJ Deutschland](#)



Copyright ©2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved