

## SIRENS, COQUETTES AND VAMPS -THE SEXUALIZED AND EROTICISED REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE INDIAN REALITY SERIES “BIGG BOSS 5”

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### Abstract

*In this article, I will analyse the sexualized and eroticized representation of women participants in the popular reality series “Bigg Boss” (season 5). Since 2006, “Bigg Boss” has had a successful run on Indian television; the series focuses on celebrity contestants. Bigg Boss has been extremely controversial for the sexualized and vulgarized representation of women and the use of abusive language. By examining the professional background of women participants, the various tasks delegated and specific sexualized and eroticized representation of women in the series, I will argue how the Bigg Boss series exploits the female sexuality.*

**Keywords:** Reality Shows, Bigg Boss 5, Sexual, Vulgar, Representation, Indian Television, Bollywood

### Introduction

In one of the sensationalistic news channels of India, the anchor thunders, “Television is bringing us images of starlets bathing in a jungle, children weeping on stage and adults revealing their innermost secrets to the world. India is facing her moment of truth. Reality TV is the newest drug on the circuit and the nation is hooked” as the anchor attempts to unravel the truth behind the reality television in her programme “The Ugly Truth”, the title of the programme itself lifted from a popular Hollywood film<sup>1</sup>; she is quick to brand the ‘reality’ TV programmes in India as sensationalistic and that makes every attempt to grab the eyeballs for a high TRP (Target Rating Point). Nevertheless, the issues of reality television still rages strong across the cross section of Indian society, as people wonder which direction these ‘reality’ programmes are going and how real is the ‘reality’?

The main issues that have caused much consternation among the Indian television viewers are how unabashedly the reality television programmes have been dishing out violent and sexual contents. The fifth season of “Bigg Boss” the Indian version of the international reality show “Big Brother”, was probably the most talked about reality show in the year 2011 for its sexual and violent representation of women.

In this article, I will analyse the sexualized and eroticized representation of women participants in the popular reality series “Bigg Boss” (season 5). Since 2006, “Bigg Boss” has had a successful run on Indian television; the series focuses on celebrity contestants that mainly consist of [failed/flopped] Bollywood/TV actors, models, politicians and controversial figures [for example crook turned investigator Devinder Singh, bandit turned politician Seema Parihar etc.]. Bigg Boss has been extremely controversial for the sexualized and vulgarized representation of women and the use of abusive language. From showcasing international pornstar like Sunny Leone and bikini-clad starlets such as Kashmera Shah and Payal Rohtagi to making the women participants seductively dance and gyrate to Bollywood music and creating ripples in the Indian television by inviting international star and sex symbol Pamela Anderson as a guest participant; Bigg Boss

<sup>1</sup> India Today, "The Ugly Truth: The Truth Behind Reality Television". Web Video. Headlines Today.

[<http://indiatoday.intoday.in/video/The+truth+behind+reality+television/1/54802.html>, accessed 29 Oct. 2012].

leaves no stone unturned to exploit the female sexuality. By examining the professional background of women participants, the various tasks delegated to the women participants and their specific sexualized and eroticized representation in the series, I will argue how the Bigg Boss series exploits the female sexuality for higher TRP rating and grabbing the eyeballs.

Over the years, various academics and intellectuals have tried to provide different definitions for Reality Television. Bignell and Orlebar finds that “Reality Television is a 21<sup>st</sup> century genre of factual programming that is more entertaining than documentary,” they further point that the television companies/executives maintain a strict control on the content and the editing also is done in a manner where the focus is on entertainment<sup>2</sup>. Dunkley observes, “Reality TV could be understood as a programme type based on offering a voyeuristic gaze to its viewers and promoting exhibitionism in its participants<sup>3</sup>. While Hill is of the view that, “Reality TV is a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people<sup>4</sup>.” In a similar vein, Murray and Ouellette contends, “reality TV promises its audience revelatory insights into the lives of others as it withholds and subverts full access to it<sup>5</sup>. While, Skeggs and Wood finds that the changes in Reality Television has been phenomenal and probably the understanding has also changed over the years, but “indeterminacy and unpredictability [have been] central to the appeal of reality television regardless of the format<sup>6</sup>.” Kilborn realizes this dichotomy and points out, “one moment the term ‘reality television’ is being used to refer to slice-of-life observational modes of documentary film making, the next it is being used to describe types of fictional drama rooted in real life programming<sup>7</sup>.” One can find possibly almost all the elements discussed above in the Bigg Boss reality series, be it the elements of entertainment, voyeurism, exhibitionism or unpredictability. While, Murray and Ouellette try to categorise reality series like Big Brother/Bigg Brother under the *gamedoc* subgenre or format<sup>8</sup>; Bigg Boss particularly is much more than that. It is a mish mash of a variety of sub-genres as it includes elements of dating, makeover, talent and dance programmes to name a few and therefore, simply categorizing it under *gamedoc* subgenre would be somewhat simplistic. Bigg Boss certainly is not a fly-on-the-wall programme, nor it is a soap, it is a carefully edited and structured programme that brings in elements that the programme producers think can get them the maximum viewership, therefore, manipulation of the format in terms of eviction of the contestants and then re-entering the contestants on wild card, or bringing in special invitees to the house, or creating a neighboring Bigg Boss house to provide evicted contestants another chance to get into the house, are used as devices to exploit the “reality” format to their benefit.

In a recent episode of Bigg Boss series 6, a contestant while in an argumentative state with another co-contestant declared that there is no room for quiet and boring people in the house, as Bigg Boss is all about “entertainment, entertainment and entertainment”. This in a way represents the mindset of most of the contestants, who has an understanding regarding what the show is all about, and majority of them instead of being themselves, they strive to bring out the performer in themselves to entertain the viewers, be it through comical behavior, aggressive approach, exhibitionist mannerism or seductive style etc.

<sup>2</sup> Bignell, Jonathan, and Jeremy Orlebar. *The Television Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 2005) p. 177.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in, Bignell, Jonathan. *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First-Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) p.4.

<sup>4</sup> Hill, Annette. *Reality TV: Audience and Popular Factual Television* (New York: Routledge, 2005) p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette, (eds). *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2009)

<sup>6</sup> Skeggs, Beverly, and Helen Wood. *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (New York: Routledge 2012) p

<sup>7</sup> Kilborn, Richard. *Staging the Real: Factual TV Programming in the Age of Big Brother* (Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 55.

<sup>8</sup> Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) p. 5.

### **Housemates of Bigg Boss series 5: The Bad Man of Bollywood vs 12 Women and a Transgender**

The Bigg Boss series is designed primarily as a celebrity show, where popular or notorious people from different walks of life are brought together to live under one roof for a period of approximately 14 weeks. Barring one or two example of “true” celebrities, the assemblage in the Bigg Boss house is mainly of failed or wannabe actors from Bollywood or other Indian regional cinemas, models and “item girls”<sup>9</sup>, and politically controversial or criminally notorious characters; in addition, there is an attempt to bring in people who are renowned for their social or cultural work, members from the LGBT (lesbian, gays, bisexual and transgender) community, TV soap actors, comedians and sportspersons.

Hosted by Bollywood Superstars Sanjay Dutt and Salman Khan, Bigg Boss season 5 that was aired from 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2010 to 7<sup>th</sup> January 2012 on Colors channel has been the most controversial series so far; firstly it was able to grab national headlines due to its controversial casting, where the Bollywood Bad Man—Shakti Kapoor, notorious for playing villainous roles, especially of a molester and rapist, was pitted along with 12 women and a transgender—Laxmi Narayan Tripathy. Among the 12 women, three were models namely, Shonali Nagrani, Vida Samadai, Pooja Misra; an item dancer—Shraddha Sharma; three Bollywood actress, Mehak Chahel, Raageshwari and Pooja Bedi; Sonika Kaliraman, a sports personality; Gulabo Sapera a folk dancer; Nihita Biswas, wife of notorious serial killer—Charles Shobhraj, who is also infamous as the “bikini killer”; Juhi Parmar, a TV soap actress, and a film journalist Mandeep Bevli.

The above-mentioned list of the women participants in the Bigg Boss house mainly represents the entertainment industry or the show business, be it films, television or the modeling world. The reason for this kind of pre-selection could be attributed to the “entertainment value” that the women from the entertainment industry can actually provide. Where they would not have any hesitation to gyrate to the Hindi film music, perform over the top histrionics while doing the household chores and understand how to ‘play their game’ in front of the cameras while providing “real” entertainment.

This strange combination of one male, 12 female and one transgender evoked quite a buzz around the programme, with the PR machinery of the programme and other news and music channels affiliated with the entertainment channel Colors going on an overdrive projecting that the situation in the house might go out of hand with a notorious character like Shakti Kapoor, who other than playing villainous roles in films, had his reputation tarnished in 2005 due to the “casting couch” controversy<sup>10</sup>. Predictably, the initial episodes were focused on house tasks, where the female contestants were to please the only male in the house.

### **The tasks of subordination: 12 Women to entertain the only man in the house with Mujra (The Dance of the Courtesan)**

One of the first tasks itself was quite regressive the way it was designed, trying to evoke the era of

<sup>9</sup> “Item Girl” is referred to the women who perform in Bollywood “item numbers”, which are highly sexualized and eroticized dance numbers. “Item” numbers were initially designed in way that had danceable music and ‘glamour’ and ‘tantalizing’ elements akin to music videos by utilizing starlets and models in skimpy clothes; as the ‘item’ numbers became popular for their risqué themes, seductive and glamorous representation, popular film stars were roped in to enhance the impact of “item” numbers to work as a promotional tool for the film (for e.g. Aishwarya Rai and Shah Rukh Khan in *Shakti: The Power* 2002, Abhishek Bachchan in *Rakht* 2004, Kareena Kapoor in *Don-The Chase Begins Again* 2006, Ameisha Patel in *Heyy Baby* 2007). See, Vikrant, Kishore. "Representations of Indian Folk Dance Forms in the Song and Dance Sequences of Contemporary Bollywood Cinema." RMIT, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> In March 2005, India TV news channel in a carefully planned sting operation caught Shakti Kapoor asking for sexual favours from an undercover female reporter posing as an aspiring actress.

yesteryears Mughal nobility and the noblemen's attraction of the courtesans; the women were asked to perform as courtesan's to appease the 'Nawab'<sup>11</sup> Shakti Kapoor. The women participants were dressed in costumes of Tawaif and Kapoor donned the get-up of a Nawab. Since Kapoor was also entrusted with choosing the best and the worst performer, the women folk in order to get the maximum attention of the Nawab, employed seductive dance moves and tried hard to vie for his attention. This particular task in a way set in motion the relationship of domination and subordination between the male and female housemates.

Kate Millet in her study on gender relations finds that the relationship of domination and subordination between men and women "are organized on the basis of patriarchal system"<sup>12</sup>. In India, the domination of male ideas and attitudes are quite reflective in the sociological factors that govern the relationship between the sexes. The social construct of India being a predominantly patriarchal society, where women are traditionally reliant on the status of the male family members, be it their father or husband; is in a way mirrored in the Indian mainstream media, especially films and television. The Bigg Boss house in a way emulates the Indian households, where the females are the ones to run the kitchen and to perform basic household chores.

In another task, designed to promote the Indian formula 1 race, the women are asked to dress up like pit-stop girls and pose in front of a rickshaw. Pooja Bedi the emcee for the task announces, "the sexy and hot girls should posture like models in front of the rickshaw and then clean the rickshaw in a sexy manner." While, the girls perform this task, Bollywood music is played in the background so that they can synchronise their movement according to the beats and the mood of the music. Couple of girls also flanks Shakti Kapoor, who is dressed like a race driver. Though the task is performed in an outlandish and comical manner, but the treatment of the task in the format of an ad and making the girls appear in front of the rickshaw in a sexy and titillating manner once again points at the objectification of women by the Bigg Boss series.

What one notices in Bigg Boss series 5, is that the kind of respect that is accorded to Shakti Kapoor by the women folk, which essentially is due to his seniority and perhaps being the only male in the house. This also results in Shakti Kapoor exalted as a father figure in the house, although in public life he is somewhat viewed in a spiteful manner.

Kapoor not only was awarded with captaincy of the house in the first week, but he also managed to become the mediator, confidante and mentor of most of the female contestants. This certainly did not go well with the channel and probably with the general public, who were under the impression that Shakti Kapoor would show his true villainous colour, instead he was seen trying to utilize the opportunity in the Bigg Boss house to absolve himself of all the wrong doings and portray himself as a gentleman. No wonder Kapoor was evicted within four week. After his eviction Shakti Kapoor in an interview pointed out, "I was respectful towards all the girls. Most of them treated me like their older brother but I guess this was not expected of me. They wanted to see me fighting, abusing, sneaking into girl's rooms, but all this wasn't happening, and therefore, I guess, both, viewers as well as the channel decided to have me evicted"<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>11</sup> Nawab's were the semi-autonomous Muslim rulers of princely states of the Mughal empire of India (www.dictionary.com, accessed 30 Nov. 2012). Known for their fascination with the tawaif's (dancing girls, courtesans or prostitutes), the Nawabs patronized the courtesans, by their regular visits or even organized Mujras at their palaces.

<sup>12</sup> In Haralambos, Michael, and Martin Holborn. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. Fourth ed. (London: Collins Educational, 1995) p. 602.

<sup>13</sup> Sinha, Seema. "They Wanted to See Me Sneaking into Girl's Rooms: Shakti Kapoor". New Delhi, 2011. *The Times of India*.

### **The Vamps of the house: Catfights and Abuses**

Though Shakti Kapoor proved to be a damp squib, there were few girls who kept the house buzzing with their catfights, bickering and backbiting and probably created the most of the controversies with their antics. Prominent among them were Pooja Misrra and Mahek Chahel. Misrra somehow was singled out since day one as a psychopath by Pooja Bedi, who seemed to have some past bad experience with Misrra and thus had a very negative approach towards her. Misrra also became the first to get a taste of Bigg Boss house' punishment as Shonali Nagrani named Misrra when asked by the Bigg Boss to take any housemates' name randomly in a phone call; which resulted in Bigg Boss declaring that Misrra's bags went given to her for a week. This not only upset Misrra terribly but also created ill will between her and Nagrani, which led to Misrra taking every opportunity to run down Nagrani. Finally by day 12 this ongoing bickering resulted in a huge fight between the two where Misrra lost her cool and behaved in a very violent manner cursing, abusing and breaking kitchen utensils in a fit of rage.

In another instance Misrra was seen in a standoff with the Afghan model Vida Samadzai, who accused her of stealing her waistband. Misrra ended up having fights with almost everyone in the house, and therefore, became the most notorious and unpopular character not only inside the Bigg Boss house but also among the viewers of the show. The housemates were seen boycotting Misrra due to her ill temper and violent behavior, which saw its extreme turn with the entry of three new male housemates through wild card.

### **Sky, Siddharth and Amar: Playing the game of physical power and psychological manipulations:**

To spice up the programme three males contestants namely, Amar Upadhaya, Siddharth Bhardwaj and Akashdeep Saigal (Sky) were sent as wild card entries into the house during week two, three and five respectively. All three had come prepared with their own strategies. While Amar Upadhyay opted to play the psychological game, Sky and Siddharth initially tried to keep their cools and planned few psychological strategies as a team, but later due to their short temperament were seen threatening co-contestants and at times getting into scuffles.

Siddharth Bhardwaj was not able to control his emotion at times especially when provoked by Misrra, and was seen abusing her and threatening of dire consequences, which was retaliated in equal measure by Misrra. Sky, who initially tried to keep his calm by pretending to be cool and unaffected by the negative atmosphere of the house, was quick to form a team with Bhardwaj and Pooja Bedi and ganged up against Mahek Chahel and Pooja Misrra who were detested by Bedi and Bhardwaj in equal measure. Bhardwaj was pulled up by the shows host Sanjay Dutt for his threatening behavior and abusing language against the women and was advised to mend his ways.

During a discussion between Bedi and Chahel, Sky involved himself unnecessarily into the discussion and ended up bitterly fighting with Mahek Chahel. When Chahel opposed him tooth and nail, he started threatening her with divulging her secrets on national television and utilized a Hindi phrase to "unmask her", which literally mean to make someone naked. This enraged Chahel, who in retaliation challenged Sky to take off her clothes on national TV if he had the guts. Here the use of violent behavior by Sky was more to make sure to keep Chahel in her place and discourage her from challenging his superiority<sup>14</sup>. This particular domineering behavior in Sky and Bhardwaj was seen many a times throughout the show.

[[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-30/tv/30336254\\_1\\_shakti-kapoor-viewers-inmates](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-10-30/tv/30336254_1_shakti-kapoor-viewers-inmates), accessed 20 Nov 2012.

<sup>14</sup> In Haralambos, Michael, and Martin Holborn. *Sociology: Themes and Perspectives*. Fourth ed. (London: Collins Educational, 1995) p. 612.



The abusive fights between Misrra and Bhardwaj took an ugly turn on day 55, when Misrra pushed Bhardwaj in a fit of rage and asked him to watch his actions. Misrra's violent misdemeanor shocked Bhardwaj and he pleaded Bigg Boss to take some action, which eventually resulted in Misrra's expulsion from the house.

Though Misrra's eviction created some sort of semblance of peace in the house, but within couple of days due the scheming ways of Bedi, Sky and Upadhyay the daggers were out for Bhardwaj and Chahel. The channel also brought back Misrra on day 67, albeit this time as a houseguest for ten days on public demand.

Initially the channel and programme producers seemed to be quite happy with the constant fights in the house as it proved to grab the news headlines and raise the TRP of the show and therefore, much of the episode time was devoted to these bickering and fights, but later on the TRP declined, thus making them to adopt a different strategy.

### **Sunny Leone: Porn star in the House**

In recent years nothing has generated the kind of frenzy around a reality programme in the Indian media that was witnessed with the announcement of the participation of the India born Canadian pornstar Sunny Leone. With the phenomenal rise of internet in India, the access to porn contents especially among the youths of the Indian middle class grew drastically; with this the knowledge about the porn stars also grew. Sumantra Das, a lecturer in a New Delhi college finds that the access to porn in India has become quite easy, be it the metropolitan or a small town. He further, points out that one can find youths sitting in the internet café openly browsing and downloading porn contents. Khushal Gupta a recent graduate states, almost all the boys in his class were quite hooked to porn and knew most of the porn stars by name. He was a fan of Sunny Leone even before she was talked in the Indian media, through porn DVDs and films on the internet<sup>15</sup>. The Times of India, a prominent newspaper of India reported, "Twitter users in India went share-crazy, retweeting Sunny Leone's post [regarding her decision to join the Bigg Boss house]. Within no time, the lady was trending. And has been so, for days after. In fact, she has had 8,000 new followers in just 2 days<sup>16</sup>."

The inclusion of a porn star in the Bigg Boss house was a casting masterstroke, which generated enough discussion and attention around the issues of morality, ethics, virtue and taboo in every section of the society and media.

Before joining the Bigg Boss house Sunny Leone in an interview stated, "Through Bigg Boss, I would like to try to improve my Hindi and learn to cook some great Indian food. Bigg Boss is my attempt to connect with the Indian audiences and show them that I am just as conservative as they are regardless of the career path that I have chosen<sup>17</sup>." While Leone was in a mood to prove herself as a clean and pure soul who just happened to take on a career in the adult industry, the executives in the channel were thinking otherwise, they were keen to exploit the porn star status of Leone and thus designed most of the tasks that in a way reflected her porn connection. Though the channel was also quite aware that any wrong decision might also lead the government to ban the programme, which was already getting flak due to the abusive and violent

<sup>15</sup> Personal conversation with Sumantra Sarathi Das and Khushal Gupta, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Ramachandran, Priya. "Adult Star Sunny Leone Is Trending in India". New Delhi, 2011. *The Time of India*.

[<http://www.indiatimes.com/tv/adult-star-sunny-leone-is-trending-in-india-6810.html>, accessed 26 Nov 2012].

<sup>17</sup> Best Media Info Report. "Bigg Boss 5: Sunny Leone Enters the House". 2011. *Best Media Info*.

<<http://www.bestmediainfo.com/2011/11/bigg-boss-5-sunny-leone-enters-the-house/>, accessed 12 Oct. 2012>.

behavior of the housemates.

With Leone on board, the Channel's TRP soared, one news website reported, "according to the TAM viewership measurement data released for Week 48 of 2011, *Bigg Boss* season 5 has seen an improvement in TRP after adult star Sunny Leone entered the house. The show has garnered an average of 2.4 TVR for the week replacing Sony Entertainment Television, which has lost 38 GRPs. Colors has recorded 277 GRPs (last week 234)<sup>18</sup>."

Upon her arrival in the *Bigg Boss* house on day 49, Sunny Leone was asked to perform "item" numbers on Bollywood songs everyday for a week. The first task was to perform a pole dance on a sexy Bollywood number. Leone, with her skills in pole dance successfully managed to complete the task and was quite appreciated for her performance by the housemates, who were not disclosed about her porn star status, but merely introduced in the house as an international celebrity. Though few male participants had an inkling of who she was but they preferred to keep their mouth shut.

The attempt to exploit Leone's porn star status especially among the male viewers was quite evident in most of the tasks, be it creating a romantic angle between her and Siddharth, or getting Leone and Upadhyay into a fake marital alliance. The icing on the cake was when *Bigg Boss* decided to send a renowned Bollywood director Mahesh Bhatt inside the house to offer Leone a leading role in a mainstream Bollywood erotic thriller. Leone was quite ecstatic and readily agreed to work on Bhatt's film titled "Jism 2" (Body 2).

In conclusion, I find that channel fell into the trap of portraying the stereotypical notions regarding women, firstly giving preference to the aspects of physical beauty, that women should be fair, slim and good looking; no wonder Mahek Chahel was ridiculed by Sky for her dark complexion and Juhi Parmar was seen seriously discussing her weight issues with other female contestants, and mentioning how her weight was one of the issues that resulted in her decision to take a break from the soap she starred in. Secondly, women from the marginal society felt out of place in the *Bigg Boss* house, folk dance performer Gulabo seemed uncomfortable in the house among all the beauty queens and Bollywood actors, because she could not associate with the English speaking, high class attitude of the housemates and their glamorous outlook. While, Laxmi the transgender was in discussions due to her cosmetic enhancements rather than her attempts to create awareness about the problems of transgenders, gays and lesbians. Furthermore, on one hand the men were warned for their violent behavior, on the other, *Bigg Boss* did not attempt to resolve the fights between the women firmly. In addition, Most of the tasks in the house were designed to exploit the female sexuality and showcase them in eroticized and glamorized manner to appease the predominantly young male demographic.

Finally, with the casting of Sunny Leone, *Bigg Boss* attempted to cater to the internet generation, where porn stars are equally popular. The channel was also aware that Leone's presence would generate a huge controversy among the conservative sections of the society, which ultimately is beneficial to garner enough publicity for the programme. Thus making it quite clear how important is casting in the success or failure of any particular reality show. The selective casting also brings the issue of fabricated construction of reality programmes to the fore.

Amidst all the abuses and vulgarity, *Bigg Boss 5* lost the credibility among the viewers as a "reality show"

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<sup>18</sup> Shekhar. "Bigg Boss 5: Sunny Leone Soars up TRP Ratings of Colors". New Delhi, 2011. *OneIndia.in*.

<<http://entertainment.oneindia.in/television/news/2011/bigg-boss-5-sunny-leone-colors-trp-rating-301111.html>, 20 Nov. 2012

and was termed as a staged show not only by the viewers, but also some of the participants after their bitter exit. Taking a cue from the negative publicity, for the 6<sup>th</sup> season of Bigg Boss, the channel decided to focus on bringing the family audience back and to be slotted in the prime time. The promos of Bigg Boss season 6 has the tagline of “Alag Che” (it’s different) and the host of the show Salman Khan promises that this season is all about family values and is specifically oriented towards Indian families. Only time will tell if the family viewers will appreciate season 6 of Bigg Boss.

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