

No racist slurs, Shilpa now says

Bollywood actor Shilpa Shetty Thursday moved to defuse a ballooning row over alleged racist slurs against her in a British TV reality show by saying nothing of the sort happened, even as the future of the show hung in the balance after its main sponsor withdrew.

'I don't feel that there was any racial discrimination,' a highly emotional Shetty said on Channel 4, which had broadcast an episode of the Celebrity Big Brother show in which some of the participants seemed to be racially taunting the leggy actor.

This was a clear retraction from an earlier statement Wednesday in which Shetty, the first Indian actor to participate in the popular Channel 4 show, maintained she was racially targeted.

'I think there are a lot of insecurities in (show participant Jade Goody) but that's not racial,' Shetty maintained.

'I take that back,' she said of her earlier statement.

'I don't like the way she speaks - that's my only complaint against Jade. She does need to brush up on her manners.'

Celebrity Big Brother had drawn unprecedented viewership after a controversy exploded over alleged racist slurs and became a diplomatic issue.

Carphone Warehouse suspended sponsorship of the show, saying this would be removed from the current series 'with immediate effect'. The move follows Britain's media watchdog Ofcom's demand that the channel must respond to complaints of racist remarks against the Bollywood star.

A record 30,000 complaints were made over the alleged racist comments as the viewership of the programme crossed six million mark.

The controversy had deepened further with the long-legged Indian beauty herself saying that she indeed was a victim of racial abuse even as British leader Gordon Brown, on his first visit to India, called the much-publicised slurs 'unacceptable'.

'This is unacceptable. Thousands of British people have already condemned it,' British Chancellor of the Exchequer Brown, the Labour's prime minister-in-waiting, told reporters in New Delhi.

'India and Britain are bound by shared values that support fairness and tolerance. We are against any form of racism or intolerance,' Brown stressed at a joint press conference in [New Delhi](#) with Indian Finance Minister P. Chidambaram.

'There is no strain on ties between the governments of Britain and India. Nor is there any strain between the people of India and Britain,' Chidambaram said after launching the India-UK economic and financial dialogue.

'We hope that the universal condemnation will bring out a change in behaviour. I am pleased to say British Prime Minister Tony Blair has condemned it,' said Chidambaram, trying to downplay the

potential of the incident to dent bilateral ties.

'The only thing is that this show allows bad behaviour to be advertised. It will pass,' he said in a lighter vein.

In London, Channel 4 initially claimed that Shetty herself had not alleged racism, but Shilpa had maintained she believed that she was indeed facing racism from others, even as she was unaware that the race row has developed into an international issue.

Celebrity Big Brother housemates Wednesday had an argument over stock cubes. After the spat, housemate Cleo Rocos told Shetty: 'I don't think there's anything racist in it.' Shilpa replied: 'It is, I'm telling you.'

The viewership for Wednesday was over a million more than that recorded for Tuesday night as allegations of racism against Shetty figured not only high on the agenda of diplomacy between India and Britain and hogged international headlines.

On the reality show, Shilpa was said to have been targeted by some housemates because she is Indian and has been derided for her background and even her cooking.

Big Brother housemates Jade Goody, Danielle Lloyd and Jo O'Meara seemed to have ganged up against her in the past few days. She had become the subject of snide and biting remarks because of her hauteur and popularity as the heartthrob of millions of Bollywood fans, it was alleged.

Shetty's housemates have often referred to her as 'the Indian', and some have found it difficult to pronounce her name, poked fun at her accent and asked her if she lived in a shack.

After Blair, Brown and others intervened to express their opposition to racism in all forms, Conservative leader David Cameron said: 'I completely abhor racism. Everyone has got a responsibility here. There's a great regulator called the off button and I think we should use it.'

In large sections of the British media, Brown's comments on Shetty were given more prominence than his speech on globalisation and economic issues in [Bangalore](#) Wednesday. Television news channels provided back-to-back coverage of the Shetty show, including exclusive interviews with her mother in Mumbai.

Television regulator Ofcom and Channel 4 have now received over 30,000 complaints, as British Asian websites, chat rooms and radio stations continue to buzz with indignation over the treatment meted out to the long-legged stunner from Bollywood.

William Hill bookmaker made Shetty favourite to win the series, at odds of 6/4. 'She has stuck in there and if she now picks up the public sympathy vote, punters certainly believe she will be very hard to beat,' it said.

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