ADVERTISING, POLITICS AND THE SENTIMENTAL EDUCATION OF THE INDIAN CONSUMER

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GANGA SOAP[1]

A shot of the river Ganges at dawn from the ghats of Benares, with a broad expanse of serene, unruffled water shown in soft yellow light. A boat glides by, symbolizing in its effortless movement the harmony between humans and nature in this scene. The frame dissolves, and we see a vessel being immersed in the river to be filled with water. The camera draws back to show a flock of white doves fluttering up into the sky, against the majestic beauty of the bathing ghats. There is a chorus/*bhajan* voice-over, extolling the pure, health-enhancing Ganga. Cut to a close up of a packaged bar of Ganga soap, sky blue with swirling water patterns, and water splashing all around it. A woman anoints her forehead with vermilion powder from a silver receptacle and covers her head with the *pallu*, i.e., the end of her sari, in orthodox upper caste fashion. A child is showering in a blue-tiled bathroom, as the soundtrack switches to a high-pitched ululation. A

A mother washes her son with the auspiciously named *Ganga* soap. Credit: Mudra Communications.

woman (the same one, we presume, although we do not see her face) pours water onto the child's head with a traditional brass *lota* or mug. As the child sets off, escorted to school, he turns and calls his mother, "Ma?" He taps his cheek expectantly. She has not given him her goodbye kiss. The song rises to a crescendo as the desired benediction is delivered. Auspiciousness, purity, and the bond between mother and son, are together sealed with a chaste kiss, and signaled by Ganga soap.

The ad evokes the river Ganges, and by staging the scene at the Benares ghats, indicate that the evocation is one of a particular approach to the river, traditional and ritualistic rather than say naturalistic or scenic merely. The Ganga is of course, sacred in Hindu mythology, and bathing in its waters is considered redemptive and purifying not only physically but spiritually too; indeed the distinction between the two is not clear.[2] The sale of Ganga water is an old practice, one which Ganga soap repeated: A small percentage of the river water was claimed to be included in the soap's preparation, and posters for the soap beckoned: *Ganga se snan kar le* (Bathe in the Ganga). However, the physical cleansing properties of the river have for many years now been held in doubt at least by rationalists, due to an extraordinary amount of industrial and human waste pouring into the river all along the length of the Gangetic plain (Kapoor 1993). When the Congress (I) government led by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi came to power in December 1984, Rajiv's first address to the nation included a declaration of his intent to clean the Ganga river (Healey 1989:42). The purification project was meant as a symbolic exercise of national renewal, with an ecological component for good measure. The relatively artless and ponderous nature of the effort, which went little beyond press releases and misspent public monies, was a lame follow-up to a skilful campaign by the Hindu nationalists. Only a few months prior to Rajiv Gandhi's campaign, the cultural arm of the Hindu nationalist party (the Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party) had conducted a year-long, nation-wide campaign, called variously the Ekatmata Yatra, Unity Journey, or Ganga Jal Yatra, Ganga Water Journey. Samples from local river water were mixed with Ganga water and taken on processions across the country, and as they were sold, people were asked to pay homage to Bharat Mata, Mother India, a synthetic nationalist icon portrayed as a Hindu goddess. It was the first nation-wide test of a Hindu nationalist campaign in post-independence times, and its success in drawing large crowds confirmed, for the Hindu nationalists, the timeliness of their approach, and sanctioned a continuation of religious mobilization.

The public use of Hindu themes signaled a new context, one in which three sets of events converged. Firstly, there was the dismantling of the "license-permit raj" that had ruled over the domestic economy, beginning in 1985, indicating a turn towards the market reforms sweeping across the world. The prevailing official consensus had until then been in favor of autarkic economic development, with allowance for redistributive goals, but this was an increasingly hollow consensus, amidst the failure to lift large sections of the country out of poverty. The shift away from a welfare-state approach was in a rightward direction, with a more business-friendly regime held as the answer to developmental difficulties. Secondly, the institution of national television beginning in 1982 created a single visual regime right across the country for the first time, presenting a political opportunity waiting to be utilized. With the establishment of television, the context for all other media was transformed, since by virtue of its reach across barriers of language and literacy, it became the leading medium. For advertisers bent on maximizing their market share, television offered by far the cheapest as well as the most effective means to reach the largest number of people, and thus drew revenue away from other media, and fuelled television's own growth. Television highlighted the way in which media and political contexts were now fused together, in some sense, and forced the advertising industry's long-delayed confrontation with a larger, more diverse and unpredictable popular realm. Finally, although the Congress Party sought to seize this advantage, playing the Hindu card, it was the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party that succeeded in changing the terms of the political debate, ushering in an era of authoritarian populism more suited to the brave new world of economic liberalization.

The Hindu nationalists insisted that religious assertion responded to Hindus' long-denied participation in

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the polity, so that the exercise of faith could become an assertion of political will. By making unprecedented use of the newly enlarged circuits of media and markets, the Hindu right likened political expression to selected practices of commodity consumption. While greater degrees of commitment were of course welcome, little change in behavior was in fact required to declare one's allegiance with the Hindu camp, in this style of campaigning (and unlike earlier forms of Hindu mobilization). A newly public form of Hindu identity thus became open to all irrespective of caste or sect, while presenting itself in orthodox revivalist garb.

Religious appeals had of course been used before in advertising. In the new context, however, the reverberations amidst which such appeals were being made, and the responses they were likely to provoke, gave such appeals political significance. In their attempts to extend markets, advertisers were following the cues of the electoral field, and drawing on new modes of addressing citizen-consumers. The broadcast of such ads signaled a new kind of visibility and availability of Hindu ritual and imagery, deployed on a novel scale, and used for agglomerating constituencies in the public domain, for electoral or commercial gain.[3]

In this paper, I examine advertisements screened on Indian television in the wake of the introduction of liberalization after 1985, and the increased entry of multinationals, to understand emergent aspects of the culture of globalization in India. As the political project of making modern Indian citizens is threatened by the legitimation crisis of the political process on the one hand, and the ascendancy of an illiberal Hindu nationalism on the other, the pedagogical task of the state is increasingly taken up through the market itself. With the disintegration of an earlier secular developmental consensus, and amid the worldwide ascendancy of neoliberal regimes, markets come to be seen as both a means and a model for renewing the political process. Advertising, as a language that extols the virtues of buying specific goods, at the same time educates consumers into particular technologies of the self, and specific modes of comportment. This tutelary activity hardly occurs in a vacuum, but tends to follow the cues of the political sphere proper. With the institution of national television beginning in the 1980s, and increasingly as liberalization advanced, the numerous discrete markets within the country were perforce brought into conversation with each other, through a new visual regime. The contours of this visual regime were largely shaped in a struggle between the Hindu Right and its secular opponents, where, it is fair to say, the Hindu Right gained most ground. It was from this reformulated political consensus that advertising culture drew its fundamental understandings of the mode of signifying relations between the diverse classes and communities that comprise Indian society. Through advertisements we can see reflected the changing shape of an increasingly Hinduized public. The greater circulation of Hindu imagery is understood to provide its own sanction, and to signal popular consent; meanwhile consumers learn to objectify these images and potentially, to form new, more individualized modes of relating to them. Meanwhile, the increased circulation of desire, capital and images inflect and reshape existing class and caste configurations. As new consumers are brought into the orbit of expanding global markets, how is the libidinal economy re-inserted into the material economy?

Contemporary Hindu nationalism clearly signals the attempt to reformulate the nationalist pact along more sectarian lines, amid regional and left challenges to this attempt. With the unraveling of the post-independence secular consensus, and the unassuaged ghost of Hindu orthodoxy eager to capitalize on the resulting crisis of political legitimation, more particularistic languages now abound in the public sphere. The manner in which Hinduized imagery is taken up in advertising narratives thus deserves analysis.

When advertisers seek to persuade consumers of the virtues of their products, they do not merely sell goods. Especially in as-yet nascent consumer markets, they simultaneously offer a particular mode of perception, and a pattern of behavior commensurate with it, while picking their way through prevailing social divisions, inhibitions and proscriptions. By constructing scenes of desiring and desirability, advertisers create a sense of autonomy and independence, and a perception of the achievability of individual wishes, that is critical in constructing the subject of consumption. Locally rooted relationships of dependence, based on caste, community and gender, are gradually linked in generalized relations of commodity exchange, as more insular regional markets are transformed and consolidated within a more global market. In the process advertisers transcribe fragments of local knowledges within a wider orbit of intelligibility.[4]

There is a two-fold character to this operation. Advertisers tend to seek appeals that are familiar and recognizable, and that avoid arousing the prejudices of their audiences. At the same time ads inflect the socius with a new set of possibilities and connections, and offer new circuits along which individual desires might travel. In the process, existing ritual or community-centered bases for consumption become suffused with a new consciousness of publicity, and an awareness about the specific kinds of public they constitute, in a shift from earlier, more transcendentally rooted religious practice. If this is only part of a much larger process of social change, ads are at any rate useful in transforming "otherwise opaque goings-on," in Goffman's phrase, "into easily readable form" (1976:27). Advertisements constitute an archive of efforts at microecological changes in social orientation that has often not received its due attention.[5]

To summarize my argument briefly. The counterpart of an elite secular consensus in the political sphere was a relatively westernized advertising culture, catering to a small urban middle class. As the character of this political consensus changed, and economic liberalization proceeded, there developed a search for new sources of value within advertising, with local culture increasingly used to endow goods with symbolic distinction. If Indian advertising had evolved a set of codes to address a limited elite audience, who fashioned themselves as standing for the nation as a whole, these codes now had suddenly to be brought into alignment with a truly nation-wide market. What would be the terms on which this genuinely mass market would be included, into what had hitherto been an elite public, and what kind of public would be constituted as a result of this engagement? Although Indian advertising scarcely conceived of its mission in these grandiose terms, some of the burden of solving this vexing historical-political conundrum willy-nilly fell to its lot, with the failure of political elites to fulfill their own tasks. Without doubt, advertisers sought to maximize market share, and to win as many new consumers as they could. They were however limited by their long recalcitrance in refusing to perceive the enormous plurality of consumers that had for decades lain under their noses. As well, they were constrained by their political timidity, in imagining alternative modes of configuring the socius, that would disrupt the existing mode of distribution of capital.

An advertising executive in Mumbai observed: "Analyse the history of advertising in India and you'll realise that it was, till recently ... the last whistle stop of English colonialism ... [and] ... until the advent of television, ... the privy of the English-speaking crowd...."[6] The reluctance of agencies to commission copy in any language other than English could only have been sustained with relatively limited print audiences. Limited communications both reflected and expressed the limitations of the domestic market, and arose from a elite political consensus whose secular developmentalism could not survive the challenges of market forces on the one hand and of Hindu nationalism on the other, without considerable revision. An analysis of the character of advertising practices, situated as they are at the intersection of the realms of economy and culture, helps understand how ads mediated between the two competing sets of forces mentioned here.

Indian advertising and its vocabularies of desire†

Advertising narratives assist in accumulating surplus, through representations of desired values. Partly through the genre of advertising, television promotes a libidinal economy that helps secure and reproduce the physical economy and is interwoven with it. Ads can illuminate how markets are being reshaped - not only in terms of divisions of price and income segmentation - as in ads for low end versus premium products, for instance, but also and perhaps more importantly, in the aesthetic forms and rhetorical structures through which the attention of consumers is sought, and their desires aroused. Advertisements, being at the interface of economy and culture, help illuminate the realm where aesthetics and utility are made to merge.[7] If arguments based on the economy veer to the utilitarian, the importance of advertising reminds us of the excess that nevertheless characterizes the distribution and sale of goods, of the surplus of meaning that ensures the transformation of surplus value into profit.

Ads do not reflect the economy, rather, they elucidate, or strain to apprehend and delineate the functional limits of the economy, insofar as individual action goes. In this respect, advertisements stand in relation to the economy as the sphere of ideology. These are not to be understood in conventional Marxist terms

†Portions of this and of the following section appeared in an earlier version (Rajagopal 1999a).

as akin to base and superstructure. Rather, each has a specific form of materiality, in Balibar's terms, arising from their mode of production and mode of subjection respectively (1995:88). Each tells the story of the other, ideology of the economy, and the economy that of ideology. The economy is the efficient cause of ideology's effects, just as in turn, the kinds of subject positions, the narratives of economic and political action, the relationship of classes one to the other and to authority, that are portrayed in ideology, turn out to influence and impel events in the economy. Thus we may say that the economy works through the rhetoric of the image (as instanced in advertising), while the image itself works through the rhetoric of the economy.

Here the symbiotic relationship between markets and media can be noted. Markets enable the circulation of value, together with the information broadcast through media. This information helps endow goods with value, while at the same time securing the common understandings that enable relations of interest to be sustained. From this perspective, media are an indispensable technological supplement of the market, advancing the reach of market relations, and generating social links necessary to these relations but at the same time complicating them.

How do advertisements signify the cultural space of desire and ownership/possession that consumers inhabit? There immediately arise complicated and difficult questions of representation peculiar to an unevenly developed postcolonial society. Since the narrative must culminate in a latent or patent message of commodity consumption, the actual contradictions within relationships cannot be depicted without necessarily carrying them through to their own internal resolution. Some process of working through actually existing relationships is therefore unavoidable.

Now, the conversion of traditional relationships of patronage and clientism and of truck and barter, into relationships of commodity exchange and cash transactions traces one of the most fundamental dynamics of modern social transformation. The transformation is however, never complete, and for important reasons. Commodity relations are seldom introduced or extended in terms of naked self-interest. Rather, they tend to be described as particular instances of larger networks of mutual dependence and obligation. Since the nature of this mutual dependence undergoes change at the same time, however, the terms in which individuals enter into them are themselves ceaselessly being revised. Advertisements provide a valuable record of the ways in which businesses seek to negotiate social contradictions while expanding markets, and thus illuminate the ongoing process of transformation.

In doing so, however, advertisers face a problem. Advertisers seek to show individuals *in situ* as it were, crosshatched with prevailing caste, community and gender relations, to create a reality effect, and enable viewers to recognize themselves in the ad narratives. At the same time, however, they must necessarily transcend existing reality if new practices of consumption are to be introduced. How are they to do so without losing their audience?[8] The efforts of businesses to coach consumers in the appropriate styles of expenditure, and to render ubiquitous the signposts that equate consumption with the good life, make it clear that the outcomes are thought to be anything but inevitable.

The anxiety attending this pedagogical effort suggests that here is no purely free market transaction between equals. The transformation and expansion of the domestic market is a political as well as an economic process, resignifying as it does the relations of production and consumption within a given historical conjuncture. If individuals are coached in new habits of consumption, they must at the same time be taught to conceive of the larger affective relations within which these practices are enacted. If consumer longing must be evoked, like any desire, it has to be couched in a particular language. Given the austerity of the hitherto prevailing public culture, as well as its limited reach, it was to religion that advertising reached, obedient to the example of the electoral sphere. A given market configuration is simultaneously expressive of a particular political balance of forces and helps to achieve it. It is here that the significance of the shift from an elite secular culture to a more Hinduized national culture can be registered, as advertisements themselves fashion specific idioms from indigenous culture to cast more specific and targeted appeals to consumers. A discussion of the specific characteristics of the Indian advertising industry will illuminate how this shift occurred.

The Indian Ad Industry

Indian advertising grew in a protected economy, catering to a market that was relatively limited in terms of class and culture. Three points arise consequently. In a protected domestic market, there was little value in the theme of national culture as in itself a marker of product

difference; multinationals, who spent the most on advertising goods, were not anxious to draw attention to their origins. Secondly, the ad industry itself hardly operated with exposure to the full rigors of a market, and was only poorly professionalized. Finally, the domestic market was itself understood as small and homogeneous, and this then further simplified the work of the ad industry. In sum, advertising created an image of the market, as it could be expected to, reproducing certain assumptions about the market that dovetailed with the prevailing political consensus. With globalization, each of these assumptions came to be exposed, and its limitations revealed.

Advertising in India has historically been dominated by subsidiaries of multinationals. In this it represents a continuity with the consumer goods industry, which is a sector dominated by multinationals. After 1974 after the Foreign Exchange and Regulation Act was passed, placing restrictions on foreign ownership, multinationals outside the 'core' sector were required to dilute their equity holding to a minority share.[9] Most MNCs chose to stay in this sector where investments were relatively low and under little risk. "Globalization" is in some sense a continuing rather than a new phenomenon in Indian advertising. The difference is rather between new multinationals, and in some cases returning multinationals, such as Coca Cola and IBM, and the 'old' ones such as Hindustan Levers, Nestle, and others. If previously ads harped on becoming suitably modern, which meant western, and holding one's ethnic, regional identity in check,[10] this was the articulation of a definite sensibility, of the professional middle and upper classes who relegated the culture of their communities of origin to the domestic sphere, for the most part.

With the second wave of MNC entry coinciding with liberalization, however, this began to change. If the first time the foreign companies came it was a tragedy, this time the nationalist response had all the air of history repeating itself as farce. There were half-hearted efforts to re-ignite a movement for indigenous production, or 'swadeshi,' championed by the Hindu rightist BJP, but supported by the Communist parties as well.

Alleging MNCs were being given favorable treatment, Indian industrialists claimed they would be wiped out, and began to make demands for a 'level playing field,' although their own success had depended on the absence of fair market competition. Meanwhile in their management personnel, foreign companies had long ago Indianized, for the most part, and most large Indian companies sought foreign collaborations to gain know-how. And despite the government's efforts at wooing foreign investment, the volumes of capital being invested in India were negligible compared even to the amounts that neighbors like Thailand and Burma were receiving.

The most significant absolute increase in foreign presence was registered in television, with the advent of satellite channels, among them STAR, Zee, BBC, [V] and ATN. Although the number of viewers was initially slow to grow, because few were willing to pay cable fees, as rates lowered and channels increased, cable households have grown to about a quarter of all TV households, itself nearly 40 percent of the 160 million households in the country (*Satellite and Cable TV Magazine*, July 1999). Freed from the restrictions placed on them in the government media, and attracted by the segregation of upmarket viewership, sponsors began to flock to the satellite channels. Broadcasting up-to-date Hollywood soaps such as Santa Barbara and Baywatch, they showcased lifestyles of rich westerners, and soon bred imitations in Hindi: *Junoon, Virasat, Karm Bhoomi*, and so on. It was in the Hindi soaps that such lifestyles truly acquired their visibility. It was in this context that advertisers were well nigh forced to Indianize their content and styles.

The Indian advertising industry grew slowly from its inception in the British era. Senior members of the industry described it as having been a kind of insiders' fraternity, not engaged in a great deal of creative work but for the most part using American advertisements in Indian settings.[11] Little market research was carried out, and given the limitations of the market and the lack of competition, it was perhaps not considered necessary. Advertising was often seen as an avocation for poets, artists and others of a creative bent. Numerous ad executives testified to the heavily urban, English-language biases of Indian advertising. Some went further and located the majority of advertising's cultural sources within South Bombay, the corporate and financial capital of the country. At present, while most original ad copy is written in English, several companies are shifting to "language copywriters" who conceive their campaign in Hindi rather than in English. P&G India, for instance, spends a mere five percent of

its ad budget on English advertising. Half of their budget is now on Hindi and the rest on other regional languages. Several companies now insist that presentations be made in Hindi rather than in English (e.g., Godrej, Levers, Parle and Wipro). With the growth of sales of packaged goods in the rural sector, companies' moves in this direction have of course been predictable. But whereas most domestic companies have chosen to use translators to convert English language campaigns, newly entering multinationals have commissioned vernacular copy, and carried out consumer research on dialectal idiom for use in campaigns, departing to some extent from prevailing Anglophone biases. Hindustan Levers has the oldest and most extensive market research of any organization in India, dating from the 1950s, but other companies are also beginning to invest in it.

The recent entry of MNCs has brought a spate of mergers, acquisitions and tie-ups to the ad industry. The biggest four agencies are HTA, O&M, Lintas and Mudra, which controlled 40.3 percent of the total ad business in 1990-91, and 38.5 percent in 1995-96. The first three of these firms are wholly owned subsidiaries of western firms, with Ogilvy & Mather and Hindustan Thompson Associates (subsidiary of J. Walter Thompson) being the largest firms (both are owned by WPP group, but they remain distinct entities in India). The last few years have seen most firms vying for collaboration with foreign firms. Thus RK Swamy formed a partnership with BBD&O, Sista's Advertising with Saatchi & Saatchi, MAA with Bozell Worldwide, Chaitra with Leo Burnett, and Rediffusion with DY&R.

The advent of commercially sponsored television in the mid-eighties, which raised expenditure enormously (and kept them increasing as audiences and rates kept rising) helped impose stricter criteria of market performance, backed by research. Between 1990 and 1996, Indian advertising has expanded enormously, with an average growth of over 32 percent per year, reaching a historic high of 49.5 percent in 1994-95 (Singh et al., 1996: 41-48). [12] The size of the advertising industry is expected to reach Rs.10,000 crore by the year 2000, by which time the growth rate may stabilize at 25% (Bhattacharjee, 1993). It must be pointed out that, although the gross revenues of the advertising industry have risen several times over in the past ten years or so, the increase in the cost of media occupy a large part of this rise, so that the real growth of the industry is considerably less. At any event, members of the industry agree that it was only from the advent of television, and more particularly from about 1989-90 that advertising in India came to be a business where firms began to be judged by stricter criteria of market performance, backed by research. At the same time, there are complaints of the rise of MBAs within advertising firms, and of management 'experts' countermanding those more knowledgeable in advertising per se, of the race to bill more and more clients, with less attention being devoted to the actual quality of advertising work. Although the gross revenues of the advertising industry have risen several times over in the past ten years or so, the increase in the cost of media would occupy a large part of this rise, so that the actual growth of the industry risks being overestimated. Since 1990, Indian advertising has expanded enormously, with an average growth of over 32 percent per year, and reaching a peak of 49.5 percent in 1994-95 (Singh *et al.*, 1996: 41-48).

Marketers in India constantly refer to the homogeneous character of the market before liberalization, as opposed to its much more stratified aspect today. This is quite misleading unless we realize that what they refer to is a middle class market - not the middle class per se but the middle class of the marketers' imagination, which was indeed homogeneous. The market itself is highly segmented, but what allows the illusion of homogeneity is its price segmentation - and price is the principal means by which the Indian market is segmented. In the West, if the difference between economy and premium brands in many categories is about 1:3, in India it can be as high as 1:8, or nearly three times as high. What resulted with the institution of television and commercial sponsorship, especially after satellite television in mid 1994, was of course that the economics of conveying messages was changed completely, with one platform becoming available for all price segments. Simultaneously, the relationship between income and affordability that had earlier been established was disrupted, as consumers in low income segments reach out for products advertised for higher income groups.

Traditionally, advertisers have not attempted to go beyond highly patronizing modes of address in selling goods to lower income sections of society. Thus for instance in advertisements such as for Wheel detergent, Levers' low-cost answer to their competition Nirma,

women were 'shown' that their earlier soaps were ineffective, by a man lecturing to them, that the new soap was the answer to their unceasing struggle for whiteness. Ads adopted an explicitly pedagogical strategy, and if any aesthetic value was contained in the ads, it was in terms of the score, usually something approximating a folksy jingle or a Hindi film tune. If one could risk an overly general statement, one might say that utility was presented as the most salient aspect of consumer messages for the lower middle and working classes, while aesthetics remained the province of the their betters, the middle and upper classes. It was for them that the finer particulars of appearance, individual satisfaction and self-actualization were important. Not that these aspects were entirely omitted in ads for lower income segments, but if we examined the amounts of money spent in creating those ads, a clear stratification would emerge. What occurs in recent times is that attention is finally paid to the insistent demand made by these (hitherto neglected) segments, a demand that was noticed because of their size and capacity, and their ability to reward businesses for catering to them.

As down market consumers wean themselves from unbranded and regionally branded goods, they enter a new regime of consumption whose contours are not self-evident or readily available. Rather, it has to be constructed, by dint of advertising and marketing effort, through new modes of signification and styles of reading that consumers must then learn to deploy efficiently. A selection of ads thus reveals not merely a class-stratified range of texts to match a price-stratified array of products. We can find, as well, appeals that can be distinguished in terms of different audio-visual semantics, according to the character of the publics sought to be addressed or constructed (the assumption of a particular kind of address tending over time to form its own object). If advertisers envision the establishment, sooner or later, of a universe populated entirely by international brands, the pathway forged for the purpose must still negotiate intractable national histories. Ads within a protected domestic market evinced a clear stratification, between a visual aesthetic for the upmarket consumers and utilitarian appeals for downmarket consumers (Rajagopal 1999:79). The distinction of the latter, more inexpensive ads emerged rather in the audio, through the jingle, which would be based on Hindi film or folk tunes. As the regime of consumption is resignified to manage an expanding class spectrum, the relationship between class-stratified appeals has to be reworked, and indeed takes on a different character with television.

Ads work through a constant indexing of meanings, pointing to things whose significance depends on their being inferred rather than stated, in effect coaching the viewer in the practice of decoding ads, and in tracing the circuit of exchanges through which the narrative is threaded.[13] Broadly, the distinction that emerges is between a more self-conscious reading style made available for upmarket products as opposed to those downstream. In the former, the desirability of the product is linked to the perception of the viewing pleasure of the ad text itself, whereas ads aimed at newer consumers, and for mid-range and more downmarket products tend to reinforce narrative enjoyment with more assured and sanctified visual signs, of indigenous culture, religion and nationality.

Below, I analyze some recent ads from Indian television as exercises in pedagogy, i.e., as exercises in the sentimental education of consumers. I will begin by discussing two ads for upmarket products, the first for Pepsi and the second for premium condoms.

Pepsi: Sachin's love letter

Sachin Tendulkar, India's greatest cricketing star, is unable to compose a love letter to his fiancee Anita. Vinod Kambli, his teammate, spies his difficulty in the numerous crumpled notes scattered on the floor. Sachin's feelings have not found their vehicle, just as the litter has missed its proper receptacle. Picking a tall, cold Pepsi from a row of neatly arrayed Pepsis in the refrigerator, Kambli begins extemporizing, as he unscrews the lid and gazes at the foaming cola. There and then, he begins a soulful declaration of love, addressed to the Pepsi bottle. Sachin, raptly focused on the glass of Pepsi Kambli has poured for him, finds his own tongue loosening, and begins to chime in. Together, with hands crossed over their hearts, they avow eternal devotion to the "*chulbuli, bulbuli haseen*" – the frolicsome, bubbly beauty, before them. Thus a pair of muscular and normally inarticulate sportsmen begin to gush with the inspiration provided by the Pepsi, although in fact neither of them has tasted a drop yet. Intercut with this sequence are images of Anita and a friend of hers, doubled over in girlish merriment as they savor the letter from Sachin. The moments of the

composition of the letter and its reception are placed side by side. As each phrase is composed, we are treated to the spectacle of its delighted consumption. Although a love letter has been simulated from a frank adoration of soda pop, it appears entirely to have fulfilled its purpose. Or has it? At the conclusion of the letter, Anita's friend remarks to her – "You must feel so special!" To which she replies, with a slightly disconcerted look on her face, "I feel like a ... a Pepsi."

The ostensible message, albeit humorously delivered, is that the desire for Pepsi can be spoken without inhibition, and is a desire everyone can recognize. There are many reasons that might make it difficult to speak one's feelings, but perhaps the most obvious reason it could take a Pepsi to provoke this outpouring is that there can be no fear of rejection (meanwhile of course, images of Pepsi's desirability are ubiquitous). Anyone can thus immerse themselves in a fantasy of acceptance and desirability. This is a privilege enabled in the private space of commodity consumption, and in a tongue in cheek manner, the ad dramatizes this point.

Kama Sutra premium condoms

The Sanskritic name stands out against the Westernized narrative and imagery of this ad, in which blue and white are the predominant colors. A solitary man comes in by boat on a foggy night, pulls the boat onto shore, walks into an unguarded house, strips and walks into a shower. Within the stall is a woman who holds a shower hose caressingly in her fingertips and applies the jet of water over herself languorously. *For the pleasure of making love – just ask for KS*, concludes this ad, notable as the first to boldly present condoms as instruments of sensual satisfaction as the burden of a tedious civic duty. But the way in which passion is suggested is not by any expressed or visible desire for another, but by its opposite, a restraint of passion, on the expressions of the actors, and indeed on all the human surfaces before us. The house is gaunt and bare, except for a few angular beam formations, highlighting the stripped-down, elemental quality of the scene. Only nature is eloquent. The soundtrack suggests a sea in high tide, and spray scatters through the air. Then there are the taut, exposed bodies of the man and the woman, he walking towards the house and she in the shower. The rapid intercutting between the two set up the expectation of an encounter. When they converge, however, amid the clouds of steam, they caress themselves rather than each other, although stills of the ad show him kissing her. (She does not kiss back in any of the pictures, preserving a still-indispensable "Indianness" in her manner, it would seem.) As the music rises to a climax, the woman's hand turns on the cold water, indicating that the temperature within has achieved its peak, and the narrative concludes.

The name Kama Sutra of course evokes the legendary treatise on sensuality, the body and intimate etiquette, now understood mainly as a sex manual. It is a paradoxical reference. The invocation implies, We were sexually liberated before the West, and the name of this essentially Indian text is proof of it. This goes along with the characteristic one-upmanship of cultural nationalism, which is to say that India was modern before today's moderns. The theme of the ad, however, brings up the limit condition of such claims, namely sexual behavior. Indianness is located in its traditions, even if they are traditions that are modern *avant la lettre*, and chief among them is certainly the purity of its women. No "good" woman could behave in explicitly provocative ways, therefore. We thus have an "Indian" sexuality where virtually all specifically Indian signs are erased from the scene, including clothing, decoration and caste marks of any kind. (The man, however, in one frame, is shown wearing a *yantra*, a protective amulet, around his neck, discreetly suggesting the legitimacy of a gendered (male) Indian sexuality.)

In the first ad, Sachin's letter is ostensibly addressed to Anita, but really it is to Pepsi. Or is it really to Pepsi and only ostensibly to Anita? The viewer is asked to hold these two possibilities in suspense as parallel narrative tracks, the pleasure of the text residing in part in the uncertainty of meaning, and in the equivalence suggested between two very unlike things. The characteristic indexing function of ads (e.g., investing products with desirability) is laid bare here, and made into a humorous story, so that the viewers may at once learn and enjoy the lesson, while complimenting themselves on their reading skill. Whereas this ad depicts a celebrity's mock worship of the brand, the second does not display the product or vouch for its qualities. Rather, it attempts to equate the visual evocation of a kind of smoldering passion with the product, whose name we hear repeated in voiceover. From the scenes, we can imagine the unseen, while through the

insistent sibilant whisper, KamaSutra, we may hear echoes of what is imagined. Both ads place a question mark against the assurance of the reader's knowledge about the world, substituting for this certitude the pleasure of engaging with the text's own signifying process. It is this set of features that marks these ads as belonging to the premium segment. On the other hand, those ads addressed to lower reaches of the market seek to persuade consumers of the importance of new kinds of knowledge, and new habits of consumption. They tend to do this by extrapolating familiar signs in new directions, endowing old names with new meanings. As such, the character of screen-literacy invoked is different, as we will see in the following two ads.

In an effort to fight foreign competition, Bajaj scooters' ad offers a liberal nationalist message, identifying the product with rich and poor, and with some minority groups as well. Credt: Ammirati Puris Lintas.

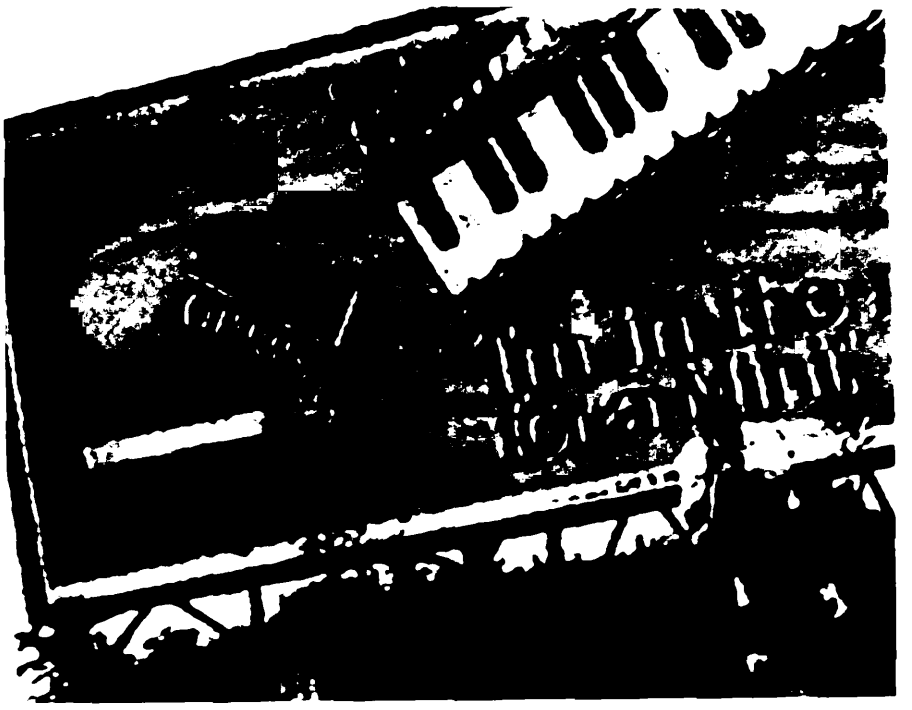
Bajaj Scooters

A bare-waisted man is praying beside a hillside temple, and a Bajaj scooter stands parked beside him, with a marigold garland on it. A woman performs *arati* to a Bajaj scooter. A milkman on a scooter wends his way through a village path, a large milkcan suspended from the vehicle's side. Women carrying pots on their heads walk alongside him, conveying a picture of village or small town life, comfortable in the diversity of their transport systems. A bearded sadhu is talking vigorously, his confidence and certitude in his words suggested in the way he shakes his white locks. This glimpse of a traditional figure of Hindu authority is unconventional not only for its appearance in an ad, but as well for the casual style of its acknowledgment. There follows a shot of the Gateway of India (in Mumbai), with scores of pigeons fluttering into the air as a Bajaj weaves its way through. Several helmeted riders set off on Bajaj scooters, as if on a rally or a race, with a magnificent temple in the background. A Parsi man, identifiable by his headgear, is shown cleaning his Bajaj, blowing on it and polishing it with pride. This medley of shots that are all product-related, suggest its weaving into the fabric of daily life. Here is a series of activities, of people with no relation to each other. The sequence is accompanied by a background song:

Yeh zameen yeh aasman (2)
Hamara kal, hamara aaj (2)
[This earth, this sky,
Our yesterdays, our todays.]

The words gesture and point without seeming to say much – this earth, this sky. But their brevity, and their repetition, suggest feelings too deep for words. The next line invokes a collective subject, and a sense of shared destiny, linked to the shared horizon of a common territory. In the visuals, no narrative sequence is manifest except for the recurring appearance of a Bajaj scooter; the words immediately provide a logic however, conveying, along with the pictures, the sense of a multitudinous oneness. The lack of connection of disparate people and activities becomes precisely the basis of their connection, asserted and repeated through the collective pronoun, in a characteristic paradox of nationalist argumentation. The ad concludes with the following words, sung, *Buland Bharat ki buland tasveer,*

Hamara Bajaj: the great portrait/image of our great India, our Bajaj. Viewers are thus taught to see "India" in the diverse scenes presented, while moving between two senses of the word *tasveer*: both portrait (India's tapestry) and symbol (Bajaj).



The excitement of translating fleeting glimpses of lives in a dense cityscape into a familar narrative of brand recognition, in an ad for Charms MiniKings cigarettes. Credit: Enterprise.

The Hamara Bajaj campaign marked a moment of corporate defensiveness, signaling the market leader's unpreparedness for foreign competition. Bajaj scooters were based on an old Italian design from Piaggio, whose brand Vespa had earlier been licensed to the Indian company. Bajaj came to dominate the Indian market, marginalizing contenders, and handling waiting lists that were so long that a huge black market developed for its scooters. Once import tariffs were lowered, Piaggio and other companies, including Honda, began to offer products technically far superior to Bajaj, who had not invested their profits in upgrading the product or keeping it in any sense abreast of advances in the two-wheeler industry. The company (whose chairman used to be a vocal member of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party) derived an extended lease of life, a fact attributed in part to the success of this ad, and other ads made as variations on the same theme.

There is a liberal aspect to the ad's gesture of recruiting lower middle and rural classes in the making of a nationalist statement. However, we do not see these figures sharing an intimate, interior space. Rather, there is a sweeping inclusion of a motley cast of characters in the "grand tapestry" of India, one in which the prolific presence of Hindu imagery is noteworthy. We may understand this as a purely nominal gesture, in its failure to address the terms of inclusion other than through identity assertion. The power of this nominal gesture however is not to be understated, closing as it does the differences between urban and rural, rich and poor, scooter-riders and the scooterless, by invoking a collective identity. There is no indecision here, nor any suspense, about the parallel sets of meaning (Bharat and Bajaj), unlike say in the Pepsi ad. The words instead encourage the identification of "Bharat" (i.e.m India) with visual montage of its apparently dissimilar parts while offering assurance that the sum of these parts is something known and familiar.

Charms Mini Kings Cigarettes:

The beat of a vigorous folk song inaugurates this piece (music associated with Durga puja, and hence signifying Calcutta-ness to those who know it). Each shot by itself is mundane and inconsequential, but black and white film and rapid cutting give it a documentary immediacy. A newspaper delivery boy tosses the paper onto an upper balcony. Smoking his morning cigarette, a man catches it. A man hops off a streetcar. The camera pans to a cricket match taking place just off the road. Someone applauds the batsman's stroke. A passerby puffs on his cigarette as the rickshaw-puller takes him through the street. A vendor at a food stall in a corner expertly stir fries some vegetables. In another corner, a street side barber is giving a man a shave. With the rapid cutting, we absorb the breadth and variety of urban life, and the simple pleasures that make it up, adorned, in nearly every frame, by a smoker. We sense the masculine camaraderie of the crowded streets, the

casual intimacy of its strangers, and the freemasonry of smokers who can wordlessly demand and be given a light. People make the space of the lanes and alleys their own, as they play cards or chess, chat and argue with one another. Here is an urban kaleidoscope too vast to be comprehended in its entirety, but here each part is like the whole. What is referred to is perhaps more audible than visible, in the festive exultation of the beat. The outdoors setting reinforces the coding of the product as male. This follows the polarity that relegates things feminine to the domestic sphere, and so codes the male intimacy here as "safe." The shots are the glimpses of a Baudelairean *flaneur* glimpsing the ephemera of urban modernity, their very fleetingness creating a kind of poetry. The class coding of the characters is, however, firm. In the multitude of exchanges that the camera pans across, we see varieties of services being delivered to men as they smoke; the worker in each case is faceless, although their labor is visible. These efforts however come to fruition in the visages of their customers, whose serenity is confirmed in the white clouds of satisfaction they emit. The final flourish – "Charms Mini Kings - Calcutta's only cigarette," spoken in Bengali, associates the uniqueness of Calcutta's public culture with the quality of the cigarette.[14] A story about the *beedi*, the indigenous hand-rolled cigarette used as a badge of identity by working classes, would be somewhat different, of course. The distinct Bengali beats help cue the reader to the message of "Calcutta-ness" sought to be conveyed across the variety of scenes, which share nothing more than successive shots of smokers.

In both the above ads, we see a new process of reading being set up, as viewers see a series of disconnected frames whose synthesis needs to be secured at an abstract level, not necessarily transparent from the movement of the sequence itself. The fragmentary quality of modern experience is summoned, but an acknowledgment of the modern reader's self-consciousness would also require a suspension of the outcome of reading, and confer a more open quality to the text than in fact we are granted. Instead there is an insistent audio track to each of these ads that closes its obvious gaps and slippages, claiming instead a coherence and unity to each of them, as Hindu/Indianness, or as Calcutta-ness. The zealousness of advertisers' efforts to steer their readers is even clearer in the ads discussed below.

AVTAR WASHING POWDER

The dhobis [washermen] are on strike, and are marching in procession, waving placards and shouting slogans, calling for a ban on Avtar washing powder. A fair-skinned, high caste woman, hanging her wash out on the line in her front porch, watches the men go by. She explains to a neighbor that the dhobis are threatened by unemployment; since Avtar washing powder is so effective, no one requires the dhobis' services anymore. One dhobi passing by overhears her and comes closer to eavesdrop. The woman goes on to remark that for people to continue to patronize them, the dhobis should use Avtar. *Avtar ka kaam aur dhobiyon ka naam,* she sums up - the work of Avtar and (along with) the name of dhobis. The dhobi, a swarthy, mustachioed man, is visibly impressed by the wisdom, and in an aside to the camera, professes he had never thought of this. In the next scene, the strike has been changed into a public service announcement, with the dhobis calling out,

Maaon, behenon, suno pukar
Hamare pas bhi hai Avtar
[Mothers, Sisters, listen to us!
Avtar is now with us too!]

From her front porch, the woman smiles to herself. Upper caste rights to the dhobis' labor have now been taken away by Avtar washing powder. But it is the dhobis who are up in arms about it, since it is they who need patronage; their former customers appear more than satisfied with Avtar as replacement. The dhobis' march has the connotation of class insurrection, but any threat is deftly thwarted by high caste feminine intelligence. What's in a name, after all? Dhobis should be content to stay in the background, and cede the place of honor to Avtar, which has swept the market, at least in this account. If they do so, dhobis can persuade customers to retain their services. Thus the laborer is reduced to his name, and his function is usurped by the brand, which is now itself held to perform the work. The arbitrariness of this semiotic switch is however, naturalized as upper caste womanly wiles, and presented as a triumphant outcome. This ad neatly demonstrates how a brand name can be encoded with caste and gender connotations, with Avtar washing powder symbolizing the labor and the virility of dhobis, subordinated to the

intellectual power of upper castes. At the same time, it is through a woman's superiority to men that the caste order is signaled. The hierarchy it represents is thus softened or sexualized.

John Berger has argued that advertisements express the culture of an industrial society that has moved "halfway towards democracy and stopped."[15] Thus social aspiration becomes widespread, even if often frustrated. Envy then becomes a widespread emotion, something absent in a society that has not known mobility as a routine possibility. In Indian visual culture, envy has typically been depicted in the figure of a demon, the buri nazar wale, the one with the evil eye, evil in this case being caused by covetousness. Ads for Onida appliances dramatically invert its signification, showing the product's worth as directly proportional to its desirability to others. At the same time, envy is shown as a destructive force, and embracing it is implied to be an act of iconoclastic individualism.

In the Avtar ad, the dhobi is deferential, even obsequious, while the woman is peremptory in her manner. The gulf between them is too great to be bridged; indeed their differences are heavily accentuated, in terms of costume, complexion, demeanor and tone. Although they occupy the same frame, they do not speak to each other. Cultural difference, for the audience imagined for this ad, is of the order of nature, dense, overwhelming and immutable. The labor required to separate the sign from its referent for such an audience would be hard indeed, and this text does not venture very far.

The Pepsi ad discussed above skirts any involvement with cultural difference: Tendulkar and Kambli, identifiable as light-skinned brahmin and dark-skinned lower caste respectively, are teammates and comrades, and indeed it is Tendulkar who takes dictation from Kambli. In contrast, the ad sponsored by the indigenous company (JVC Group, an investment company having recently diversified into consumer products and entered the national market) appears relatively tactless in its social conservatism. By the same token, the Avtar ad has the virtue of candor, in suggesting how upper castes might envision the expansion of branded markets under their protection.

Market expansion by multinationals has perhaps been most fiercely challenged by indigenous manufacturers of low-cost laundry detergent. The ads resulting from this competition offer in a distilled form of the logic advertisers have sought to use in addressing new consumers.

Wheel Detergent Powder

An advertisement for a women's radio in a magazine aimed at advertisers carried a photograph of a woman with large eyes and parted lips, and the caption, *No One's Home – Seduce Her Now!*[16] If empathy with exchange value is what advertisers are struggling to evoke, sexual desire becomes the easiest means with which to approximate this goal. The product therefore takes on attributes of a sexual predator of sorts. Thus ads for Surf detergent (made by Lever), where a smart woman shopper explains, in conversation with an unseen male voiceover, why she pays more for less detergent powder (i.e., for Surf). Accompanied by her little son, and possessed of a stern voice and an intimidating manner with shopkeepers, she does not appear at first sight as feminine prey. Her body language, however, tells another story. The unseen male announcer calls her by name, "Lalitaji." When she is named, she looks directly, full face, at the camera. Her facial expression is mischievous, and her lip movements are suggestive. She interjects her answers to his questions with coquettish movements of her head and eyes, and a tone of voice that a woman might ordinarily use for a child, or with someone intimate whom one was engaging in a form of play.

Surf is a detergent powder for the premium market. Adopting the rhetoric of seduction for downmarket consumers, however, is less common. Market research executives spoke of the extraordinary difficulty they experienced in researching the attitudes and tastes of women from low-income families, due to what they described as the extremely patriarchal and conservative nature of the hoseuholds. The women would often decline to come out of the house, no matter what the inducement, even if invited by other women.[17] Using the same strategy for them as for the consumers of premium detergents could be hazardous, then. However, when Lever began to market Wheel detergent powder, to combat the challenge from an indigenous manufacturer, that was the first method it used.

The first ad for Wheel shows a woman hanging her wash out in her back yard, and a man passing by comments on the whiteness of her wash. The nature of the encounter is an odd one: for a respectable woman

to engage in conversation with a stranger would be inappropriate, from a conservative viewpoint. He turns out to be a salesman, offering an alternative product. He gets her to demonstrate the use of his product, Wheel, and wins her over. Her final line, when she reveals she is persuaded is: "Then who will be interested in ordinary powders?" She flashes a dazzling smile at the salesman as she says these words.

This ad, however, was ineffective in addressing the challenge posed by indigenous manufacturers of detergents, specifically, Nirma (Rajagopal, 1999b). There was then a shift from a didacticism of content to a didacticism of form. Subsequent ads became melodramatic, borrowing from Hindi film codes to structure the sequence, with greatly exaggerated histrionics and loud violins signaling each phase of the narrative. The practice of a man lecturing to the female consumer was dropped, and instead, the ad sought to make the message emanate from the progression of the story itself. But the device for introducing the new product (Wheel) remained to be settled. It could not be seen to emerge from any conflict within the family itself, because the man of the house would interpret that as a challenge to his authority.[18] The ad settled on a voice from heaven, offering Wheel as a solution to the intractable problem of the husband's dirty shirts, a difficulty threatening his survival as a salesman. The main narrative focused on boosting the self-image of the working or lower middle class housewife. According to market research, women in this class position rely heavily on the men of the house for reassurance, and never receive the affirmation they need. In the narrative, the man first abused his wife and then turns adoring, at her successful accomplishment of household chores. In this way the ad attempted, improbably, to boost women's self-esteem within the terms of prevailing misogyny. Not surprisingly perhaps, it did little to address Wheel's competition. It was through the addition of lemons and *chakras*, spinning wheels, religious fetishes both, that the ads began to turn the sales of Wheel around, and helped to combat the challenge of Nirma. Tests were said to reveal that results were directly proportional to the number of lemons and the three-dimensionality and velocity of the spinning wheels. Neither were integral to the ad's overt narrative, although claims were made for lemon's cleaning power (these claims were merely notional, however). A rendition of a popular film song (*Arre aisa mauka phir kahan milega* [Oh when will we get a chance like this again?] from *An Evening in Paris*, starring Shammi Kapoor) was used for the happy ending, here rephrased *Arre aisi bibi aur kahan milegi* [Oh where would I find a wife like you?]. Once the shirts were washed clean, the man stood ready to reward his woman. In one variation of the ad, the man went so far as to doff his turban on a ceremonial occasion and put it on her head, a sign of her symbolic accession to a status equivalent to her husband's, albeit as his favor to her.

As businesses seek to educate new consumers in the transmissibility and substitutability of meanings, and so into the traffic in exchange value, the path before them is uncertain, since these consumers represent a market segment they have little experience with. Since these consumers are believed to be more conservative, and less suggestible to changes in lifestyle and habit, their habits of reading, i.e. of deciphering social codes, are thought to be decided by custom rather than by their own impulses. It is then by expanding the reach of familiar sign systems, and extending their applicability to new configurations of people and things, that the transition to a new regime of consumption is being indexed.[19] In the process of this transition, a new scale of social legibility is achieved, creating a kind of transparency effect in communication, as the logic of the cultural realm and of the market swing into closer alignment. Such an effect is both the result of political change, wrought for instance by the Hindu nationalists, and has political outcomes of its own.

Conclusion

In the now famous correspondence between Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin on the latter's work, Adorno wrote of the fruitful tension between the former's theory of the consumption of exchange value and the latter's theory about empathy with the soul of the commodity (Benjamin, 1997:135).[20] Adorno understood commodity consumption as being not so much about the things in themselves as it was about the idea they stood for, of equivalence and the power this represented. Citing Adorno's remark, Benjamin observed that empathy with the commodity was nothing other than empathy with exchange value itself. By this he meant that in consuming exchange value, ideas of equivalence and an open-ended availability were hardly

apparent as conscious or palpable benefits of consumption. Rather, individuals could identify with the commodity and the sense of promiscuous possibility it connoted, of a many-sided and costless engagement with an infinitely various world.

I take the insight resulting from this debate as crucial in understanding the task of advertisements, which work by proferring identification with shifting objects of desire. Although the commodity opens out into an endless series of equivalences, the commodity cannot in fact be signified without mystification through particular images of longing. This is a reminder that although commodification is universalistic in conception, it can only be a phase in "the social life of things," becoming thereafter, gifts in exchange, and/or objects in use or disuse, and part of affective networks of interdependence and domination (Appadurai, 1986). Advertisers, however, maintain the fiction that the space of the commodity is one of freedom, and that to draw consumers into the realms of branded goods is to set in motion a process of improvement. The more consumers are drawn up to the heights of upmarket privilege and sophistication, the more realized they are, in this view, as they learn how to perceive their own needs.[21] But even if advertisers seek to improve consumers in the mass market as a whole, *they at the same time reproduce the cultural dynamics that maintain class differences, and thus act as a brake on any pedagogical process.* Thus they tend to mirror a given configuration of consumption patterns without acknowledging their complicity in the political balance of forces that any such configuration must represent.

Advertising culture in India in the 1980s and before was marked by the absence, by and large, of a popular aesthetic for the majority of the consuming population. This was symptomatic of an elitist politics that Hindu nationalists both capitalized upon and overcame, as they drew on religion and ritual to indigenize the languages of politics, in an attempt to forge a new hegemonizing ideology.[22] Advertisers in India, long identified with a colonial boxwallah culture, have begun to follow this lead. Religio-ritualistic imagery offers valuable resources in endowing brands with the aura they lack for new entrants into the global market. A spectrum of uses of religious or cultural symbolism can be noted, ranging from fetish imagery for inexpensive goods to abstract Sanskritic/classical evocations (e.g., KamaSutra) for premium products. Advertisers thus appear to prescribe different modes of reading for different classes as they adapt their erstwhile approach to the constraints of a single visual regime. Ads for premium products are most explicit in acknowledging the pleasures of the text, and the gaps and slippages to be negotiated in arriving at its meaning. Indigenous symbols tend to appear here as class markers, burnishing the aura of the brand rather than creating it, adorning the narrative rather than underpinning it. This is in contrast to ads for mid-market and downmarket products, where such symbols tend to be used as mass markers (to coin a phrase), and to form a kind of reference or ground, absorbing and reconciling the trajectories of different segments of the text. In such ads, then, indigenous imagery is understood by advertisers in a relatively literal manner, corresponding to the literal character of belief they attribute to the intended readers of these ads. In this way, advertisers continue to imagine a public whose internal divisions are harmonious with respect to each other. However, the production of a unified visual field across an antagonistic social terrain (consisting not only of contradictory class and caste formations, but of Muslims and other minorities as well) complicates such assumptions.

Through the late 'eighties and the early nineties, the rise of Hindu nationalism was feared to presage the end of democratic politics in India, as an aggressive "syndicated Hinduism" came to the fore. What emerged instead was an era of more federated politics and more powerful regional parties, with voters discriminating more keenly across a galvanized national electoral field. It is safe to say now that the methods of Hindu nationalists contradicted some of their stated goals; what has proved most influential has been their experimentation in new methods of exercising power. Prominent among these new stratagems has been the production of what we may call retail Hindu identities, excavated from the ritual and hierarchical context of caste, and shifted to a national media context and to urban public spaces (Rajagopal, forthcoming). Hindu nationalism has thus sought to provide the political and cultural façade of Hindu society "liberalizing" without a frontal challenge to the illiberal ordering of caste. This is however, a deeply contradictory project, certain to run up against unresolved caste, class and religious conflicts.

I have argued that the pedagogical project of making subjects into citizens is assumed not only by the

state, but as well and increasingly, by the market, in an age of economic liberalization. The state seeks to utilize the rhetorical device of nationalism, through which local tradition is acknowledged while orienting individuals towards an indigenous modernity. But the state's failure to carry through on the rhetorical possibilities of nationalism, and the resulting ossification of an increasingly official form of nationalism, strengthens market-led initiatives in this respect. Advertisers' progress as pedagogues quickly reaches its limits, however, given their parasitism on the prevailing political dispensation on the one hand, and their misleading conception of the market as an autonomous space of freedom, on the other. Religious imagery is reformulated to provide a class-stratified sign system, as advertisers seek to accommodate diverse reading styles in one visual arena. In this process, the symbolic limits of a public based on Hindu imagery are reinforced rather than opened up, as advertisers endow these images with an iconic status to reach new consumers. As a result, even as Hindu nationalists fail to secure the kind of political power it was feared they would achieve, we may have images of "soft Hindutva" circulating in public life, representing the unreconciled contradictions of Hindu orthodoxy with modern social reform. If new publics then take shape under the dispensation of older images of caste Hindu authority, the internal contradictions developing in the process are likely to increase over time. While advertising narratives of desire and fulfillment are powerful in germinating modern forms of consciousness, it is only in the political realm that the logic unleashed by them can find their resolution.

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Notes

1. The soap, released in 1992, was made by an indigenously owned company, Godrej; the following year, Godrej was taken over by Proctor and Gamble, a new entrant into the Indian market. The campaign was then changed from a religious appeal to one based on celebrity endorsement, to the detriment of the product's market share.
2. To quote the well-known chronicler of Indian folklore, William Crooke, "Ganges water is carried long distances into the interior, and is highly valued for its use in sacrifices, as a remedy, a form of stringent oath, and a viaticum for the dying." (William Crooke 1896: 37).
3. In this paper, I draw from fieldwork in the advertising industry in Mumbai, with interviews performed between January and March 1997. The names of executives have been withheld. Various ad executives I spoke to denounced this campaign for drawing on a reserve of imagery that ought to be proscribed from advertising, invoking as it did explicitly religious sanctions for promoting private consumption.
4. In this respect, ads reproduce the structure of urban experience, exposing the individual viewer to fragments of the lives of strangers, whose past and future remain unknown. Goffman makes this point, but refuses to grant the distinct character of advertising as a discourse with a specific end. (Goffman 1976:22).
5. A growing body of scholarship is beginning to remedy this defect. See, e.g., McClintock (1995), Burke (1996), Daniel Miller (1997).
6. Kiran Khalap, "Chasing the rainbow: A two-colour, one decade catechism on the hunt for advertising excellence in a pseduomature market," *Advertising & Marketing*, 30 June 1995, p. 27. Khalap is senior vice-president of Clarion Advertising in Mumbai, India.
7. As Siegfried Kracauer has argued, the inconspicuous surface-level phenomena of an age, while not providing definitive accounts of its overall logic, do provide access to basic facts about its nature and substance. To quote Kracauer, "The fundamental substance of an epoch and its unheeded impulses illuminate each other reciprocally" (1995: 75).
8. Not only advocates of market society, but many critics as well, often assume that most populations are somehow waiting to be modern consumers, needing only the presence of really desirable commodities, often brought to them from the West. The withdrawal or the assertion

of state intervention of state intervention is then posited as the answer, according to the conception of the problem. In addition to the question of the state, however, is the issue of cultural mediation, and the lack of transparency of local cultures to new influences.

9. Under the 1974 Foreign Exchange and Regulation Act of course, foreign companies were required to dilute their equity to 40% or below unless they were in core sectors of the economy.

10. Air India, the government-operated international airlines, was one of the few companies to forefront national identity in its ads, through its figure of the Maharajah, a small rotund figure with moustaches and a turban. With his aristocratic demeanor and his courtly humor, however, the messages perhaps highlighted more of an Orientalist than a specifically national form of identification.

11. This section draws on fieldwork in Mumbai, October 1996-February 1997, including interviews with advertising and market research executives. There is little published research on the Indian advertising industry itself that I have found useful for my discussion here.

12. The survey was based on 143 agencies that made their financial details available to an A&M study. Their collective gross income in 1996 was Rs 632.48 crore, and total capitalized billings totaled Rs 4218.64 crore.

13. I thank Donald Brenneis for alerting me to the importance of indexicality as a concept through which to think of the work of advertisements.

14. The cigarettes, sold in a denim colored pack by Vazir Sultan Tobacco Company, a subsidiary of a multinational, was able to capitalize on a new young urban professional niche, till then unexploited.

15. John Berger *et al. Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin, 1972, 92.

16. RP Goenka Group's FM Radio Women's Hour. In *Advertising & Marketing* magazine, January 1997.

17. Interview, market research executives (Names withheld). January 1997.

18. Here it is interesting to note that overt social rivalry as a motive for consumption tends not to be used as a means of pitching new products. The explanation may be that advertisers are unsure how to handle the depiction of social difference in the lower castes. Are they to show it as something to be bridged and superseded, or as something consumers should strive to respect? In either case, there is the risk of running up against resistance, or of stumbling upon trip-wires of caste or community boundary-maintenance. (In this respect, the Avtar ad is striking in its portrayal of social inequality.)

19. Even with respect to familiar sign systems, the level of socialization is very uneven, it should be noted. Thus the leadership of the Hindu nationalists perceive the public use of Hindu ritual as a means of drawing less educated Indians, to say nothing of minorities, into the national mainstream.

20. Here I will forbear from delving into the extremely important debate between the advocate of the overarching necessity of theory (Adorno) and the adherent of an approach influenced by surrealism (Benjamin), wherein truth could be glimpsed via a confrontation with the objects themselves. See *op. cit.*, 110-141.

21. This view received its most influential formulation with Abraham Maslow, whose "hierarchy of needs" presented primitive and laboring peoples as brute, and managerial executives as becoming self-actualized.

22. It may be argued that the Indian film industry has addressed and resolved the questions of the depiction of desire and fulfilment, and thus represents a fully developed public culture in post-Independence India, but this is not necessarily correct. Social conflicts as depicted in film narratives are invariably resolved by a mode of external intervention, either of the law or of the local or family patriarch, and often in an alliance of the two. The actual contradictions within relationships may therefore be depicted without necessarily carrying them through to their own internal resolution. In advertisements, by contrast, such a device is unsatisfactory, since the narrative must culminate in a latent or patent message of commodity consumption. The entire sequence of the ad has to build up to this conclusion, whereas the film's worth is not so dependent on its ending. Some process of working through actually existing relationships is therefore unavoidable in ads.

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