

GENDER ADVERTISING

Introduction

This article is about advertisements and gender images, and hinges on the argument that they can be fruitfully understood as the rhetoric of India's project of globalisation. It rests on the assumption that the shift in the Indian state's economic policy in favour of globalisation has accompanied a shift in public discourse as evidenced in the media. My focus is on advertisements in the English print media—a media whose hegemonic significance cannot be wished away by its apparently inconsequential numerical strength. Because the focus is on "shift," I make frequent forays into the past for purposes of comparison. By the past I refer to the decades preceding the Indian state's far-reaching economic reforms in the latter part of the 1980s—a process commonly termed "liberalization," referring to the process of opening up the Indian market and integrating it into the global economy. This process, I argue, marks a break with the Indian state's stated sympathy with socialist ideas, with the notion of growth with equity and a public discourse on which there was near unanimity that such goals were desirable in themselves. This self-proclaimed ideology of the Indian state was a legacy of the Indian national movement, itself a rich and complex repository of ideas of which a significant part were those of socialism and distributive justice. The Indian national movement's struggle for freedom cannot therefore be simply negatively defined as an oppositional movement against British imperialism, but must be seen as a positive projection of a worldview that understood "freedom" as a commitment to political, economic, and social freedom for all sections of the people—men and women—the world over, with particular reference to the dispossessed. I would like to draw attention to this idea of "freedom," because contemporary advertisements that I analyse later also tend to articulate a vision of freedom for the Indian woman and man, but one that is very differently anchored. In emphasising the dispossessed, I do not mean to suggest that the ideology of the Indian national movement or of globalisation are ungendered, but to stress that the category of gender cannot be exclusively deployed to the exclusion of the myriad ways in which it articulates with class and the specific histories of nonwestern postcolonial societies.

I see, therefore, in the recasting of gender images in adverts, a simultaneous recreation of both a new consuming Indian "middle" class in a globalised economy and a reorientation of the salient issues taken up by the media. I emphasise that, although the explicit focus in this paper is the new normative Indian consumer who dons the glossy advertisements, a key argument is that these adverts implicitly but effectively eclipse the image of "another world" of Indian men and women—poor and battered, tribal and peasant, working class and Dalit¹—from public discourse.²

Apart from the construction of a "new normative Indian man and woman," apart from the banishment of the poor and marginalised in the media in general and advertisements in particular, there has also been a shift from a widely held view in independent India that believed freedom from the commercial imperatives of sponsors would enable it to function as the fourth estate of an economically poor democracy. No newspaper or magazine today, however, can be commercially viable without advertisements.³ Industry sources⁴ show a dramatic rise in total advertising revenue. From 3,000 crore Rupees (30,000 million) in 1994–1995, it has shot up to 82,000 crores (820,000 million) in 1999–2000. Of this, 56% are from

the print media and 36% from television. It is against this context that this article has been written.

Because my central contention is that there has been a shift in Indian public discourse, I will turn to history to illustrate an earlier discourse from where the shift has taken place. Indian nationalist thought was a curious mixture of disparate ideologies and world views, possible perhaps only in the tragic sites of colonized countries. Although the image of the traditional Hindu self-effacing woman was always an icon, so was the struggling Indian peasant and worker, as was the recast modern Indian woman—educated, politically aware, and yet innocent of western cultural mores. Writings of major women activists in the nationalist period opined that, unlike in the west, the Indian women's movement was supported by male reformers and nationalists. And, in contemporary times cultural nationalists have sought to portray the Indian woman as chaste, demure, and sexually sanitized, unlike her prurient western counterpart.

I have discussed elsewhere that modern Indian thought on nationalism and on the woman question was a curious agglomeration of ideas freely drawn from liberalism, socialism, and cultural revivalism ([Chaudhuri, 1996](#)). So along with conflicting gender images, there was always the attempt to represent men and women from different classes. Independent India was largely dominated by a public discourse that this body of nationalist thought had shaped. Today, some of that curious admixture of ideas on gender lingers on, and is clearly noticeable even in advertisements. It would be easy, therefore, to find images of the demure, chaste Indian woman along with the self-possessed career woman. But images of either a peasant woman or a working-class man are well-nigh impossible to discover. It is well-recognized that "society ... requires discourse (the mapping, description and articulation of situations and processes) which by definition has the effect of annihilating and delegitimising certain views and positions while including others" ([van Zoonen, 1994](#), p. 40). I maintain that advertisements play precisely this role of delegitimising space in public discourse for the majority of Indian men and women.

Understanding advertisements

The focus in this article is on the text of the adverts themselves. I confine my study to select English-medium newspapers and magazines in the 1990s, a decade when India's new economic policy made its presence felt. The newspapers surveyed are *The Times of India*, its sister publication *The Economic Times*, *Business Standard*, and *The Hindu*. The magazines consist of women's magazines such as *Femina*, *The Women's Era*, *Savvy*, *The New Woman*, and the popular general weeklies like *The Sunday*, *The Week*, and *The Outlook*. I have been following these on a regular basis, subscribing to some and borrowing others from a local lending library that is a regular feature of middle class colonies in Delhi, often functioning from what are narrow rooms built as garages for two wheelers. I mention this because although a *Savvy* is more expensive than a *Week*, and could be therefore targeting different socio-economic segments, the daily lending rates are such that women and men can in practice read across a wide range of weeklies. I also make the point because I am *not* making a comparative analysis of advertisements that appear in different publications.⁵ I am instead arguing that I discern a wider pattern despite the differences.

I attempt here to read the ideological meanings of the adverts, locating them against the concrete historical instance of liberalising India. I favour, therefore, a causal logic of determinacy, but also pay deference to the internal logic of arrangement, of internal relations,

of articulations of parts within a structure. I understand advertising as "the necessary material production within which an apparently self-subsistent mode of production can alone be carried on" ([Williams, 1977](#), pp. 92–93). The product is not separable from the act of producing ([Marx, 1976](#), p. 1048). The analysis of adverts cannot, therefore, be separated from the economic processes of liberalisation. I take the decisive relationship between the media and monopoly capitalism as given ([Murdoch & Golding 1979](#)). Scholars have extensively dealt with this as with the impact of advertising on mass media ([Curran](#) and [Williams](#)).

This relationship between the media and adverts gets further compounded in "Third World" media, for here the issue is not just about media being profit-driven but driven by "international capitalist interests" ([Reeves, 1993](#)). The international is more often western than not, which has its own set of cultural implications for an erstwhile colonised society such as India. India has a long history of self-reliant development and fierce defence of "national sovereignty." Fears about the impact of liberalisation generally and on the media in particular persist. We thus have not only adverts but features in defense of advertisements and what they portend for a free society, now that the long years of independent India's tryst with "planned development" is over ([Chaudhuri](#) and [Chaudhuri](#)).

A concerted ideological campaign thus has to be carried out to establish the legitimacy of the new economic regime, to which advertising contributes. Adverts have been likened to myths, in that they frequently resolve social contradictions, provide models of identity, and celebrate the existing social order. As [Barthes \(1977\)](#) puts it, myth consists in overturning culture into nature with the quite contingent foundations of the utterance becoming Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm and General Opinion ([Barthes, 1977](#)). That this is the way dominant ideology functions has had its share of adherents and opponents. Adherents very broadly draw their understanding, however mediated, from Marx ([Marx & Engels, 1984](#)). The suggestion that the ideas of the ruling class are the ideas of society has undergone periodic refurbishment. [Gramsci \(1971\)](#)(p. 245) used "hegemony" to refer to the process by which general consent is actively sought for the interpretations of the ruling class. Dominant ideology becomes invisible because it is translated into common sense, appearing as the natural, apolitical state of things. Clearly, advertisements are the contemporary mediators of hegemony. In Althusserian theories of ideology the individual is interpolated by dominant ideology. Advertisements would, we can infer, act as ideological apparatuses.

Not surprisingly then, adverts have a key role to play in the ideological transformation of public discourse. And within modern advertising, gender is probably the social resource that is used most ([Jhally, 1987](#), p. 135). The obsession is said to spring from the "signifying power" of gender. "Something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes as the most basic characteristic of the individual" ([Goffman, 1976](#), p. 7). Thus, the extremely condensed form of communication in advertising lends itself exceptionally well to an examination of cultural values, beliefs, and myths connected to gender. I argue that it also lends itself to an examination of the desirable values and practices of the normative Indian—man and woman—in a postliberalised era.

The new generation indian man and woman

The reader may understand by now that my intent is to show a shift in the dominant representation of the normative Indian, and hence, my periodic reference to the colonial past. The colonial period witnessed dramatic social transformations, region-specific histories of

middle-class growth and region-specific responses of this class to articulate a modern normative Indian. Although different ideological responses contested their way through, it may not be wide of the mark to claim that they were united in their commitment to the wider Indian society—to questions of inequity and justice. Collective concern defined their notion of selfhood. If I were asked to describe the "new Indian" that adverts depict today, I would identify a typical corporate sector executive, an upwardly mobile professional who travels a great deal, works hard, and unwinds at weekends and holidays. This, I contend, would hold true for both men and women, with the difference that images of a traditional woman homemaker coexist with adverts of female high achievers, while for men images of high achievers are always at the forefront.

The entry of a large number of transnational companies at the beginning of liberalization led to a real possibility of young men and women entering the corporate sectors at salaries that their parents could not dream of even at retirement. A new work ethos entered Indian public discourse as India's middle class learned to exchange safety and security for success and upward mobility. What I am arguing is that certain changes are taking place in the ideas and ways of life of the middle class. My discussion here is nongendered to the extent that I emphasise certain new "universal" characteristics of the middle class; but in a gendered society many of these characteristics are operationalized in a gendered fashion. Thus, we have a redefining of middle-class virtues at home, with the household actively redrawn as a site of consumption. Within this context the Indian woman learns that "thrift" is no longer a virtue, and "shopping" is a legitimate pleasure ([Chaudhuri, 1998](#)), while Indian men learn that looking good is not a woman's privilege. I will focus first on the "general" impact of adverts on Indian society before moving on to gender differences in the next section.

Adverts both depict new trends and accelerate them. Adverts also obliterate other trends. This raises the contentious question of the relationship between "reality" and "representation." A central debate among feminist media scholars concerns the "distortion" theme; that the media does not represent the "real" picture of women. The epistemological basis of this transmission model of communication is twofold. One is that "there is a reality and then after the fact, our account of it" ([Carey, 1989](#), p. 25). The second is that the role of the media in modern societies is bardic: by definition the media cannot simply "reflect" for the bard's task is primarily to render the unfamiliar into the already known, or into "common sense" ([van Zoonen, 1994](#), p. 38).

The analysis below demonstrates how obviously adverts seek to create a branded self. My method of analysis avers that a reading of meanings from texts alone is guilty of internal fallacy, and that cognizance should be given to the author's intention. In the case of adverts the intent of the sponsor is mediated through the advert maker. Before looking into the texts of adverts themselves, therefore, it is useful to explore how the advert maker understands the emergence of the "new Indian." The "reader" is the "customer," and today the advertising industry is brainstorming about who the customer is. "What drives Sybil?" is the name for a market survey conducted by the advertising firm Lintas to study consumer profiles. "The AP Lintas universe⁶ prefers to slice Indian consumers into survivors, savers, enhancers, and splurgers. The urban and rural poor are survivors, and savers are the middle classes. Enhancers are the urban upper class, and splurgers the rich" (*Brand Equity The Economic Times* 16–22 June 1999).

Not all can afford to buy what the adverts seek to sell. Not all those who can afford to will buy. But they can desire and aspire to possess them and thereby be like the new Indians the

advert project. A new normative Indian is being established. I find David Chaney's observation of interest where he tries to show how "the new social form of lifestyles was coloured by some of the broader narratives of the cultural forms of consumerism" summarized under the headings of "fantasy, excess, spectacle and citizenship" ([Chaney, 1994](#), p. 19). The first three features are reasonably self-evident. The last, citizenship, is not. Chaney's reason for using it is that he found no better way of putting the idea that mass marketing, as with other forms of mass democracy, offers the illusion of equal participation, and indeed even the glory of "national culture" without much of its substantive powers. This, I think, is a useful way of understanding advertisements and the images they extend. Most people can look at and hear adverts. Few can read adverts. Fewer still can read English adverts. The numbers that can actually possess the goods advertised are smaller still. But theoretically everyone has access to adverts, to the pleasure of looking, to desiring.

It is widely known that product advertisement has generally given way to lifestyle adverts. Hence, the language of advertisements is more about the consumer than the object to be consumed. The adverts themselves give overt profiles of the new generation. Adverts demand that the media seek an audience who are "hedonists"—who like to "experiment" and have an attitude of spending. I attempt below to identify some key features of the new Indian, but before that a few words on what it is from which the new Indian is breaking away.

Colonial societies underwent dramatic and often violent social, cultural, economic, and political changes. In response, these societies produced a whole range of social movements. A key component of these movements—reform, nationalist, radical—was a redefinition of what constituted the Indian. The dominant nationalist rhetoric suggested that the Indian be modern, rational, and rooted in India's past. His vision was embedded in a collectivist vision where the growth of the nation meant equity and justice, and a modest and low key lifestyle was a desired code in public life. The erstwhile maharajas, ostentatious displays and spectacle were not part of legitimate public discourse.

The old "new Indian" was internationalist. Nonalignment, close ties with the former socialist block, fraternity, with the nationalist struggles of Asia and Africa were creeds of public life. Here, too, internationalism meant an imagining of collective struggles of the dispossessed. It is important to make this point to distinguish the internationalist from the globe trotting Indian.

I would like to argue that liberalization has broken down a more traditional system of marking identities within the middle class. The middle class has expanded and markings have changed. The sensualist has replaced the intellectualist paradigm. "The shift from producer to consumer capitalism has meant its disruption, which ... has brought the transience of new styles, the introduction of a new flattening temporality and the reduction of the self to the mere politics of presentation" ([Lash & Friedman, 1996](#), p. 18).

The New Indian Is Global and Cosmopolitan

A premier builder in India makes an offer to the Nonresident Indian (NRI) that is splashed in almost all the newspapers: "Would an Elite NRI like you really need any other Residence more luxurious in India?" than "Ansals Celebrity Homes—the international class country township." Vip Skybags, with a half page picture of its luggage visible in *Outlook* and *India Today* (but not the women's magazines), writes: "He treats his export business like sport. And airport lobbies, like racing tracks." Skybag Luggage asks: "Where next? Seven wonders of the

world. Five Great lakes in the States. 4 days–3 nights in Seychelles. Two semis in England. One mother-of-a-trek in the Himalayas." The advert for Mercedes-Benz, which appears in magazines (except women's magazines), says: "1. This is when he promised you his love, his hand, and a Mercedes. 2. This is when he gave you his love and his hand (pity not the Mercedes). 3. You are here now. Isn't it time?"

I have never seen an advert for Mercedes before mid-1999. Perhaps here is the contentious issue of "equality" of access, in form if not content. The relative democratization is not entirely illusory. Liberalization has led to the emergence of a much larger very rich section of the population than before. The juxtaposition of love and Merces needs no elaboration. Significantly, the advert is addressed to the woman. The potential buyer is a man. The reason for buying—the woman.

It has been argued by some that this new Indian is cosmopolitan and unmarked by the divisions (ethnic, religious, caste) that have plagued India in the last decade or more. Some have argued that a kind of secession has taken place within Indian society whereby the middle classes, whom the market seeks, no longer have even the appearance of commitment to the larger Indian populace mired in poverty and distress. Others have sought to show that many of the "young" with an attitude of spending were among those who cheered at the demolition of the Babri Masjid (the mosque torn down by Hindu fundamentalists), and therefore, the new Indian is very much marked by class, caste, and religion. My own reading of adverts suggests that for the splurgers and enhancers, the thrust is to cultivate an image of international looks, international lifestyles. For the savers, more overt statements of cultural specificities are made. *Elle*, an up-market magazine carried on its cover page India model Sheetal Malhans who has been picked up as the face of Maybelline cosmetics. Images such as hers are truly "international," marked only by the rules of the fashion business, which are still very west-centric. When the "traditional" or "ethnicised" Indian is presented, therefore, the construct is a western one. What has become a clichéd observation perhaps needs repeating in a different context. The orient is an invention of the occident.

The New Indian Is Body Conscious

There is a column in almost every magazine and newspaper on health. To illustrate, "A toast to good health" has an assortment of recipes with the introductory commentary saying:

"You are what you eat." So why not take a break from relishing fried food and oily fare that is unhealthy. Here's an assortment of low calorie salads that not only promise to keep you healthy, but also tickles your taste buds. You don't need to think twice here. So go ahead and indulge. (*New Woman*, March 1999, p. 121)

"The prospect of stretch marks may seem scary to a woman of today who is conscious of herself and her body. But today, with 'Stretch Nil' a herbal stretch mark preventive is available with the local chemist" and stretch marks "are no longer the dreadful nightmare they used to be" (*The Outlook*, May 4, 1999). The advert further mentions that "one always tends to concentrate on the baby more than oneself during pregnancy. Though this may seem the right thing to do, it is imperative the mother takes as much care of herself too." This new body consciousness cuts across gender as an article on the "slimming craze" seeks to show. "The demand of today's young men and women to keep fit and remain attractive spawned a multi-billion industry all over the world" (*The Hindu*, November 16, 1998).

A VIP luggage advert with a woman's face (three-fourths of the page) has just this line: "You don't have to be good-looking but it helps" in bold. Another of "Ever Yuth; collagen and elastin"—an antiwrinkle cream—screams "STOP THAT CLOCK." This premium on youthful appearance is certainly a break in a society where age used to mean authority. I will explore the implications of the new awareness of the body in the concluding section.

The New Indian Is "Free"

Advertisements have contributed to the dismantling of a public discourse where social equity was as critical as, if not more important than, growth, and have legitimised the pleasures and ethos of the free market. "Freedom," according to a caption of an American Express advert, is "knowing just how far you can go and then getting there." "It's all about living without ambiguities. Including the facts about your credit cards." Another claims: "You want more from life, because you give it your best." Both adverts have full-sized silhouettes of a young figure in a stretching-out gymnastic posture. Significantly, one of these is a man, the other a woman. Credit cards have made their presence felt in the market only in the last decade and acquired prominence in metropolitan cities in the last 5 years.

Then there is the family,⁷ cycling into the sunset on the sea shore, celebrating "freedom." "I am *free* to appreciate what I have—, to look into the future—, to open new doors for my family. I am *free* because I have one of the largest financial organizations behind me" (emphasis mine). The sponsor is Hong Kong Bank, the advert visible across the selection of nonwomen's magazines.

The New Indian Is Ethnic Not "Desi"

One feature that has been commented upon in contemporary culture has been "hybridization"—the mixing and matching of styles and artifacts from different cultures and a general stylistic promiscuity and playful mixing of codes. The argument is that hegemony is passé and hybridity is the state of being. I would differ and argue that while the fashion industry's appropriation of the ethnic may be in, the Indian still cannot be just native or "desi."

In the face of competition, Amrutanjan, a traditional health care company, is going in for a complete facelift, and taking the war right to the multinational companies. "The balm is no longer being advertised as the quintessential grandma's home-treatment, or the secret recommendation of one housewife to another; the *target segment now is the hip, smarter set—the younger no-oil-in-the-hair generation*" (*Business Standard*, Wednesday January 7, 1998, emphasis mine). The American is clearly of a different order. Petal Smooth, a ladies hair shaver is "the fastest, cleanest, easiest way to remove unwanted hair" for it is "made only in the USA" and it is "*the great American way* to feminine grooming" (emphasis mine).

Gender in advertisements

Mention of a typical Indian woman invokes set images. It is culturally loaded, filled with allusions. The dominant discourse of social reform, nationalism, and independent India's state policies explicitly sought to create a model of womanhood that was deemed authentically Indian. Much has been written on India's recasted culture, tradition, and women in the colonial period ([Chaudhuri](#) and [Sangari](#)), and how the woman question became a site for redefining what constituted India's tradition and culture. This entire process, which was both

exclusive and hegemonic, wherein a specifically upper-caste gender norm was imposed as the "Indian" norm, has been extensively documented. My purpose for referring to the past here is to underscore the fact that, while the Indian women's image was actively recast, we do not have a parallel portrayal of what the desirable Indian male ought to be. There are inferences (often contradictory) we can draw from but no deliberate exposition from the writings of Indians. What is implied is that he is "the Indian." The woman is "the Indian woman," the companionate figure but by no means the central actor. He is the upper-caste family patriarch. He is the rationalist social reformer, the nationalist with a scientific temper, the fierce cultural revivalist, desirous of the more manly virtues of the western imperial man. For the colonial rulers he was simply the effeminate babu, the groveling native or a loyal soldier from the deemed martial races ([Sinha, 1997](#), pp. 15–16).

Although colonial descriptions of the native male are explicitly articulated, the Indian (male) account can be inferred from Indian men's recasting of the Indian woman. The reason the Indian woman has an image when the man does not is that she is the cultural emblem of the national, but he *is* the national ([Chaudhuri, 1996](#)). If colonialism ushered in an epoch of recasting of Indian femininity, liberalization, I argue, has been redefining ideas about dominant representations of Indian masculinity. I analyse below how far the new male images break with patriarchal attitudes and usher in more gender-equitable times.

What is new in the indian man

Liberalization has heralded a new effort to make the Indian male more like a "man," and less the "native slob." A portend of this trend is the appearance of the male in a large number of adverts. As argued earlier, there seems to be a shift from an intellectual paradigm to a sensual one, where the politics of presentation is what matters.

The New Appearance of the Indian Man

Today "male models have come a long way from the days of being props for the more popular women" (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 40)

It would be a difficult choice to make even for the beautician, considering that the market has seen an influx of male commodities. From designer underwear to men's cosmetics they are all available now. The size of the men's toiletries market is Rs 150 crore. There are shaving foams, after-shave lotions, moisturisers, deodorants, eau de toilettes, colognes, hair cream, styling gels, talcum powders, shampoos and soaps. (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 40)

Choice is a key word. "Ten years ago there was just Old Spice. Now you have many choices," said the deputy general manager of Menezes Cosmetics, which has 15 products like aftershaves and colognes of Blur Stratos. "The market has grown because men have realized that it is high time they looked and smelt good" (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 41). Businessman Ketan Mehta agrees: if Indian men are becoming choosy it is because they have a choice that was not there earlier. "Ten years ago if I wanted a pair of suspenders even hunting I would not get a good choice" (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 40). An interesting figure of a man titled "The branded man" (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 41) has an accompanying chart with arrows indicating "hair," "glass," "face," "body," "shirts," "ties," "suits," "trousers," "underwear," "belts," "socks," "shoes." Against each part we have a list of

relevant brand products, for example, "socks" has "Louis Philippes, Reebok, Nike, Proline, Bata, Lacoste."

Men also feature as "catwalk kings":

THE CONTESTANTS are topless and their polished and chiseled bodies glisten in the light. Amid loud catcalls and whistling they walk gingerly down the ramp, unnerved by the ogling and leering. They are the male beauties of India, participating in an all-male beauty contest. The leers and jeers are obviously from women.

Nowadays beauty conscious men, too, are getting plenty of opportunities to exhibit themselves and have silly questions thrown at them for equally silly replies. And the women just love it. (*The Week*, May 30, 1997)

An up-market fashion magazine *Gladrags* was launched a couple of years ago and "The Gladrag Man Hunt" contest was started soon after. Maureen Wadia, the proprietor, contends that: "It's a fun context and it's also serious," for "it will make Indian men figure conscious and they should be. Why should we settle for pot bellies? We also work in offices but we take care of our figures." "They can't be sloppy and bad mannered. Etiquette is important to succeed with women or in one's job" (*The Week*, March 30, 1997, p. 40).⁸

Men, Power, and Success

Power has been men's in patriarchal societies. Power as an attribute of men may be seen as an "old" characteristic of men. My survey of adverts suggests, however, that while "power" is projected clearly as a male quality, the image of "power" that most adverts communicate is the very specific power of the successful executive in the corporate world. This is power at work, not at home. The "native" had power at home, not at work. The image here is not that of the authority exercised by the household patriarch. It is the "power" of the corporate world.⁹ It is the power of achieved status, not of an ascribed one. As a men's wear advert says, "Because you know you deserve your place in the sun." The enormous possibilities that liberalization has offered to the metropolitan middle class are dramatic. This affirmation of the "self" as potentially capable of reaching high places also means an ideological distrust of those who do not go places, or go anywhere. Adverts have played an important role in bringing into parlance a language of "success" and "power." The following text of an advert selling Contessa cars is illuminating:

We had never met before. I decided to size him up over a game of golf. But *when he pulled up his car; I knew I'd found my business partner.*

There was a *spring in his step, a firmness in his handshake* when he stepped out of his Contessa. They complement each other so well. Both of them are comfortable in the power they wield. Assertive but not arrogant. *Distinguished*, not deliberate.

Unflappable and in control. It is easy to know a man from his car. So when you are looking for fine men, just look inside a Contessa. (emphasis mine)

The above text can be held up for closer scrutiny on two grounds. One, that there is an overt affirmation of power as a desirable quality of men. Two, that there is an unabashed association of the person (here male) with material objects. Descriptions of the car and men are interchangeable. Western feminist writings have dwelt on the ways adverts affirm traditional male qualities. My contention is that "power" and "success" as defining attributes of malehood in India is a postliberalization phenomenon. Mention has already been made that colonialism unleashed a process by which the Indian male had to either masculinize himself or rest content with being the stereotypical effeminate native. For how male can you be without power? Independent India, with its policies of growth with equity, did little to encourage excess of any kind. Although power may have still be an attribute, the process of democratization of "power" had clearly not taken place. The hypothetical possibility of anybody accessing the power of a corporate executive was absent. I randomly draw upon adverts to illustrate the deployment of the image of "power."

"He exudes power, good looks and an ease with international corporate life style. He is the much sought-after Organization Guru. Those who can't afford him can study his luggage" says an ad for VIP skybag luggage. For "if Skybags in general speaks volumes about its owner, Skybag Infiniti, one can say, speaks with the *authority* of a much sought-after consultant" (emphasis mine). You see adverts with "him" working at the computer, in the boardroom, at the airport. Microsoft invites the "new man" to "increase productivity at office" and also "do less work." It is noticeable that on the very next page, Microsoft has a woman looking harassed at work with the words: "It's not a holiday you need: It's a new office." In smaller print the words go on: "Overwhelmed by work? Before you check out the nearest holiday spot, we suggest you check out Microsoft's new office suite: Office 97." Could the contrasting images of the male and female executive be accidental? As a young male professional speaks over the cellular phone, Infosys Technological Limited enquires "A college campus? A software hotshop? A professionals' powerhouse?"

When it's Denis Parkar, *clothes make more than the man*. Creations of mastercraftspersons, they make his future. They widen the horizon of his progress. And they add a whole *new power* to his personality. That's why when you're in one of Denis Parkar's unique line of high-class BUSINESS SUITS or distinctive ETHNIC OUTFITS or elegant PARTY SHIRTS, you're sure to stand out At home or abroad. (emphasis mine)

"The power of a perfect suit" from Bombay Dyeing "with a fall, feel and comfort that spells luxury" shows a Caucasian-looking male dressed in a black suit. "You travel with a purpose and we appreciate that. Ours is a hotel which speaks your language. The *universal language of professionalism*. So take a deep breath and plunge into your schedule. You will be surprised at how refreshing the deep end can be" reads an advert of Oberoi Hotels (emphasis mine). The accompanying picture is again a Caucasian in the pool.

Meet Navroze Dhondy who when he:

isn't chasing deadlines, deadlines are chasing him. Everything is wanted yesterday. Airlines meals. Late nights. Dinner diplomacy. It's difficult to cope with all this. Even more difficult for the stomach. While Navroze is fine tuning the art of crisis management, stomach management is something he delegates to Pudin Hara.

A Wipro advert, too, has the executive in a chair, phone in hand, a computer facing him, and the words: "We know how valuable your time is. That's why we have ensured that our responsive computer maintenance service is just a keystroke away from you."

Some people say pay in gold. Doors open to you. Extra hands attend to you. Ask for anything and the answer is always yes. It's amazing how the flash of BOBCARD GOLD can turn a shopping trip into an unforgettable experience. After all, it's a reflection of *financial power* that only a few possess. (emphasis mine)

The new mantra for the Indian male is power and success. He has to be rich and glamorous. He has to be at the top of his job early in life. But along with this consolidation of a western male model, we also have affirmation of gentler qualities in men. He is no brute, a point evident in a whole array of adverts sponsored to create an image of the complete man. Significantly it is the up-market male who is now attributed with softer qualities.

The Complete Man

The complete man has to be rich and successful. But to complete the persona he has to be caring, tender, and endowed with what traditionally women alone were capable of. He bathes his baby and changes the nappy. He talks to his children and worries about stains in the tablecloth. He goes for long walks in the forests. Raymond, specialists in men's wear, have been bringing out a steady string of adverts projecting the new, gentle, soft caring man. Below I cite some of the descriptions:

Indifference is out, involvement is in, hearing is out, listening is in, selling is out, relationships are in

Get real

It's-not-my-job is out, sharing is in, control is out, nurturing is in, authority is out, responsibility is in

Get real

Hierarchy is out, collaborations are in, rule models are out, role models are in, efficiency is out, effectiveness is in

Get real

What is old in the indian man

The new Indian man may have acquired some new dimensions to his personality. But on the whole, he is still involved in the public world doing important things. He has no time for trivia. The cigarette industry has had a long-held practice of emphasising men's rugged nature and virile world with cigarette smoking. With the growth of the anti-tobacco movement in the west, third-world countries like India have been specially targeted. Following is the text of one such advert: "He has no room for trivia. No designer crystal. No fancy champagne, No pictures of vacations in Seychelles. Just the deep satisfaction of the world's finest smoke. For

the man who has no room for trivia. A very private luxury," reads an advert for the cigarette INDIA KINGS.

He has to give his daughter away: Here is an advert with an interesting combination of the old and the new. The practice of patriliney and patrilocality within much of North Indian kinship and marriage implies that the daughter of the family has to be married out of kin and village. This departure of the bride is an emotional moment for everybody. She now no longer belongs to her natal family. She can only come when her husband's family permits it. It was part of the upper-caste Hindu male's dharma to marry her off. The advert cited below has a picture of the traditional ceremony of the daughter's departure at marriage, with the father discreetly wiping away a tear, and the words:

Raymond Suitings

Like a million fathers you knew from the moment she was born it had to happen. Like a million fathers you thought you would be prepared for it. It's okay, real men cry.

What is new in the indian woman

The myriad beauty contests that have sprung up all over the country reflect the way the Miss India/Miss World contests have captured the imagination of the people. My contention has been that adverts and features merge until boundaries are hard to discern. Just as Palmolive rests its advertising campaign on Miss India winners, we have features interviewing the various winners and aspirants in the media, as well as the hairdresser, the costume designer, etc. *Femina* carries a piece on "Why we need MISS AMERICA." The blurb tell us that "Jill Neimark speaks to psychologists to unravel the appeal of the Miss America Contest. We could draw some parallels here in India, too" ([Neimark, 1999](#), p. 50).

The modern Indian woman knows how to "dare" and to "dream." NEPC Agro Foods Limited for awhile brought out weekly insertions from "today's woman" ("aaj-ki-nari"). One such advert carries an athletic young girl in shorts who announces:

I'm here again. The aaj-ki-nari. And your Sunday fitness friend. Sharing today's women's concerns for their menfolk. Ready for your weekly dose of goodness. PRESSURE CHECK. Your body is only human. Overwork, mental fatigue and undue work tensions can take their toll. Premature greying (or balding), dark circles around the eyes, insomnia are only too common ... You'll find that physical exercise actually takes away mental weariness ... so a good game of shuttle or squash in the evenings is not a bad idea. How about some TM? Spare 20 minutes every day religiously for just yourself. And you'll be ready to take on the world. ALL WORK AND NO PLAY ... If you don't have a hobby, a passion, get one ... quick! Because a man without an absorbing extracurricular life is indeed a dull boy! Read a lot more ... as a general rule, it takes your mind away from day-to day worries and keeps depression at bay. And while I won't say ban all late nights, smoking and social drinking, it really helps to know where to draw the line.

That's all from this aaj-ki-nari ... this Sunday. See you same time, next week. It's a date!

Today's woman is old fashioned enough to care and new enough to tell him what she likes. She has the standard suggestions for the overworked ambitious corporate executive. The male who is not these things is clearly a loser—a term alien to Indians even a few years ago. Alien too were ideas of space for oneself or meditation for healing.

What is old in the indian woman

The Family Woman

Sushmita Sen, the first Indian woman to win the coveted Miss Universe title, was stated as reiterating the new postfeminist ideology when she said, "The essence of a woman is motherhood and teaches a man to love and care" (*The Time of India*, 16 June, 1995) The woman remains the mainstay of her family; she is the one who rears and nurtures. Not surprisingly, then, it is the woman who is targeted in adverts selling pressure cookers. The pressure cooker came into Indian housewives' lives in the 1960s and never really left it. It made cooking quicker, simpler, saved fuel, and was a more nutritious mode of cooking. It represented the Indian urban, middle-class housewife. This is one lineage with which the millennium woman has not broken. A smallish, black and white picture of a young woman with a Hawkins pressure cooker and an older woman (mother-in-law/mother) touching her arm in an expression of approval and support accompanies a text in largish print, which reads "Because my family depends on me, I depend on Hawkins." In smaller print the text goes on:

Looking after this dear, demanding family of mine isn't easy. The children, my husband and his parents all need my time—sometimes all at once! And all of them want their food cooked just as they like it, on time, every time. Truly, I don't think I could manage without my Hawkins. It cooks so fast and never lets me down. I have had it for so many years and I have had no problems with it. It's reliable—just as I am, my husband says!

One of India's oldest manufacturers of traditional Ayurvedic medicines invokes an image of eternal Indian womanhood. Chyawanprash, a product common to India's middle-class household is "prepared the Dabur way: Authentic Ayurvedic principles matched with modern standards of hygiene and quality. A tradition helping over 25 million users build a strong immunity for more than 112 years. One day at a time." It is not difficult to discern the parallel between the qualities of authentic Indian womanhood and Dabur—both incorporating the best in the modern and traditional.

Somewhere between breakfast, dinner, and history books is a subject called Motherhood. The story of a woman who wants to mean everything to everybody. Hundred questions. Million demands. No time for herself. No time to fall sick. Will an ordinary health tonic do the job?

Kelvinator Refrigerator asks the question. "Why do some women need the extra room in the New 165 litre Corona Deluxe?" Below a picture of a mother, daughter/daughter-in-law, granddaughter the answer reads "We believe it has something to do with the extra room in their hearts."

The joys of children, parents and grandparents all living together, are many.

Perhaps that's why some families refuse to abandon this way of life. Even though houses today are becoming increasingly small.

Which only shows that it shows that it does not necessarily take a larger house to accommodate a large family. It takes a large heart.

And it's for women with such hearts that our engineers built the 165 litre corona Deluxe.

Women Love "Shingar"

Women's love for clothes and jewelry are part of India's folklore. An advert of a silk shop is titled "The Ultimate Women's Paradise," while a jewelry shop claims "We capture the fires of passion that lie in the deep of a woman's heart." Yet another sari shop heralds women to "unravel the woman in you." While for women to beautify is in their very essence, adverts for men celebrate men's looks but do not invoke any "natural" reasons for doing so.

Women still save but not just money. Although up-market Indian women are visible in the adverts, the more traditional middle-class woman is present also. Reminiscent of an earlier era, we have a typical middle-class urban Indian woman smiling alongside a text with a caption "Women of Today Excel Everywhere": "Women of today have a distinct presence in every aspect of life with an inherent instinct to SAVE for safety and security." But in another Hong Kong Bank advert the word "save" takes a twist. For now "I save more than just money ... I save precious time."

Conclusion

I began this article on the note that the Indian national movement and the public discourse that independent India inherited were marked by a stated claim of social responsibility to goals of equity, justice and "freedom." Written into the Indian constitution was a pledge to battle against discrimination on grounds of sex, caste, community, class, and tribe. Although serious gaps existed between the stated intent towards social equity and both class and patriarchal claims on social privileges,¹⁰ only the very naïve would dismiss the tangible significance of the intent. Perusals of the English language print media in the last decade embolden me to claim a break, if not a discernible shift, in the dominant discourse. What comes across is the heralding of a new epoch, a celebration of a new Indian man and woman who shape their own destinies and are unabashed about their pursuit of the good life. What is conveyed also is an adroit deployment of words familiar in the earlier discourse. "Freedom" and women's "liberation" are two examples. The print media appears to have given vent to a collective feeling of the nation (read "middle class") that at last the individual (read "consumer") is *free to choose*. But it is important to recall that the language of the freedom struggle, of self-reliance and nonalignment that Indian men and women articulated in an earlier epoch also stemmed from a desire for freedom and dignity.

The crucial difference is that freedom, choice, and assertion of autonomous selfhood were earlier linked to broader issues of social justice in the collective nation (the poor and marginalised). Significantly, the onset of liberalisation has accompanied a concerted expression of the values of individualism and untrammelled selfhood. Furthermore, successful (often corporate) superwomen are too often posited as models from whom the women's movement could learn a lesson or two.¹¹ Accompanying this has been a questionable

suggestion that the increase in male models in advertising, the practice of holding male pageants, and the presence in some adverts of a more gender-sensitive image of malehood spell the onset of a gender-equal era. Crucially, these new discourses and gender images effectively displace the largest section of Indian men and women from the public eye.

Endnotes

Dalits have been traditionally regarded as the lowest in the caste hierarchy. Significantly, the Dalit movement in contemporary India has been very strong and have also increasingly making its presence felt in both domestic politics and academic research.

In the construction of the norm, the whole and the national has always been hegemonic and exclusive. But the dominant discourse on gender in the past had never quite so systematically excluded the poor and dispossessed. Indeed, some may argue that the working class woman was privileged in discourse even if not in action.

"Today, publications are almost mortally dependent on advertising revenue. The cover price of publication brands move within a narrow band. While the material cost and news gathering cost of newspapers have gone up (several have folded up in the last few years), the cover price has remained stagnant. So the bottom line of any publication business can be pushed up only in advertising revenue."