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Globalising Everyday Consumption in India

History and Ethnography

**Edited by Bhaswati Bhattacharya
and Henrike Donner**



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1 Notes on the advertisement and the advertising agency in India's twentieth century

Arvind Rajagopal

A correspondent asks for my definition of the objective of advertising. That's like asking for the objective of electricity. I doubt if one can be written that is broad enough to cover all cases, and specific enough to be useful.

(James Webb Young [1943] 1944: 183)

Introduction

In the arena of fast-moving consumer goods, in which brands fashioned by advertising agencies are prominent, it is unbranded commodities that have long formed the universe, certainly in India and probably elsewhere too, against which modern brands claim their distinction. Too often, questions about the advertisement and its influence have been posed from within a context dominated if not saturated by branded consumer goods, and by extension, of advanced capitalist societies in the west. Some widely cited analyses of advertisements, e.g. Raymond Williams (1980) or Judith Williamson (1978), in fact pay little attention to historical analysis. Those that do tend to form their arguments based on specific historical contexts, e.g., Jackson Lears (1994) and Marchand (1985), without considering what comparative analysis might reveal. One could easily draw the conclusion that advertisements constitute abstractions from the complex entanglements of social relations and can be analysed on their own terms, as if capitalism itself were thereby briefly made legible. Such an assumption eliminates the distinction between the commodity and its image, or between commerce and communication, as if the one automatically implied the other. This assumption is certainly advanced by the advertising agency, which has sought to become, and arguably has become, the chief curator of the history of advertising.¹

But advertisements can be produced in diverse historical contexts, and by a range of actors. Within consumer advertisements alone, there are those for branded goods sold by the modern corporation, and ads for products that may appear like brands but feature the names and images of animals, flowers, gods, or numbers that sometimes have only a tenuous relationship to what is being sold. Then there are announcements aimed at the sale of commodities

and services from any of a variety of parties, and messages from governments and voluntary organisations that 'sell' ideas or instruction, not products for cash.

However, accounts produced by the advertising agency tend to treat the progression from the classified advertisement, which is a personal notice, to contemporary consumer brand promotion, as a natural evolution and as representing the development of the advertisement as such. The advertising agency has in fact sought to become the custodian of its own history, keeping larger issues of capitalism's history constant, as fixtures adorning the evolution of the modern ad (Halve et al., 2011). A comparative approach however, leads us to reverse the direction of inquiry, to ask what we can learn about a given historical context by examining advertisements and debates accompanying their production. While modern manufacturers and bazaar merchants both used advertisements, they related to each other as signal to noise in advertising agency accounts: bazaar advertisements are treated as curiosities at best, while advertisements produced by the agency are treated as if destined to become dominant. I will argue that the competition between metropolitan capital and bazaar capital, or big and small business, is valuable in clarifying how the history of advertisements in India is distinct, while noting that this competition is itself partial and inconsistent.

The oldest profession?

An advertising executive has observed, 'We must ... accept the contention that advertising is as old as human civilisation' (Banerjee 1982: 23).² This impulse, to naturalise and indeed neutralise the distinction of the advertisement as a form of communication, coexisted with a rival impulse, namely to aggrandise its power and to persuade potential clients to engage the services of an advertising agency. The argument made usually depended on the audience.

The worldwide expansion of the advertising industry began in the interwar years, before the era of decolonisation. As challenges grew to colonial rule, the advertising industry, which became dominated by multinational agencies, learned to acknowledge nationalist sentiment and to avoid antagonising national governments. Professional expertise became their credo and the function of advertisers acquired a technocratic aura. If advertising and electricity had similar objectives, as James Webb Young suggested (in the epigraph above), the task of advertisers was then akin to a scientific task, helping economies grow by cultivating demand to meet supply. This meant playing a supporting role to the government in economic planning. Curiously, the advertising agencies' own accounts describe this involvement with the state as one of subjugation followed by emancipation from the state, the latter being thanks to economic liberalisation. Alongside, advertising agencies claim kinship and continuity between apparently primitive forms such as the cries of bazaar pedlars and the demonstrations of fairground hucksters with their own, implicitly more sophisticated appeals.

Thus, in an interview in the early 1990s, a former country head of Ogilvy & Mather in India and a legendary figure in his own right, S.R. 'Mani' Ayer, described the situation of the advertising industry during the license-permit raj:

Even if people had purchasing power, there was nothing to buy. Getting even a scooter or a fridge could require waiting for a long time, and credit was tight. It was only when liberalization came, and restrictions on import and consumption relaxed that advertising could take off.³

Ayer's picture of the period prior to economic reforms is recognisable from many other such accounts of the era of strict state regulations. Consumer spending was an exercise in frustration, Ayer suggests, with the government limiting supplies, not only of essential commodities, but also of items that many soon regarded as basic necessities, such as two wheelers, cars, and telephones. The government treated the latter as 'luxury goods', and interested customers had to endure lengthy waiting periods before being able to buy what western counterparts assumed as their right. Advertising was a 'fringe benefit' and taxed, instead of being encouraged. Advertisers, in this account, were the unsung prophets of the Nehruvian era; they knew better than the government what Indians really wanted, but were ignored or punished instead of rewarded.

Ayer's account characterises the agencies' view of advertising, as celebrating the pleasures of consumption, i.e., of a private vice with far-reaching virtues. It thereby stimulates demand and economic growth, and enhances consumer power as well as the general prosperity. When India was in the grip of Nehruvian socialism, owing to the well-meant but misguided assumptions of the first Prime Minister, the power of this beneficent form of communication was throttled. But its ubiquity and force thereafter confirmed that, had advertisers only been allowed to do as they believed was right, the nation would have benefited.

S.R. Ayer's story about the industry suggests that it was not only future-oriented, but that the future it anticipated was more or less the one that finally materialised. In other words, the world changed, but advertisers, and advertising, in some fundamental sense, did not change because they did not need to change.

Until recently, historical accounts of advertising have tended to be biased towards the kind of story that those such as S.R. Ayer, who worked in large advertising agencies, chose to tell about their industry. Such accounts celebrate the vision of large agencies, and confirm the sense that however much artistry it might involve, advertising as a form of communication is essentially commonsensical and natural, and an expression of basic human tendencies. These accounts often locate their origins in face-to-face interaction, and in elemental forms of market exchange, as in a hawker peddling his or her wares, and calling out to customers in the bazaar. Likening it to the unaided

endeavours of individual entrepreneurs, however, implies that a pre-existing environment mediates advertising. However, advertising as an aspect of the culture industry, posits a social environment that copywriters and visualisers strive to make plausible, in which consumption of the goods in question seems natural or necessary. This larger industrial effort at orchestration is obviously lost from view in such accounts.

When the bazaar had a more extensive presence than it does today in India, however, advertising agencies could not hide the uphill character of the battle they were engaged in. Advertisers were keen to distinguish their own activity as modern and enlightened, in contrast to what they claimed as unsanitary and/or unsavoury bazaar practices (see, e.g. Burke 1996; McClintock 1995). Such assumptions not only pertained to the racial and cultural attributes of natives, they also extended to the potential contained in the native economy as symbolised by the bazaar. Such assumptions were not necessarily restricted to those who endorsed the benefits of colonial rule. For example, Clifford Geertz has written about the inherently limited nature of the bazaar economy, due to its reliance on kin and client networks and, consequently, on limited forms of information that made the bazaar involute rather than outward-looking and future-oriented (Geertz 1978: 28–32).

Stigmatising the bazaar did not prevent foreign manufacturers from utilising it to the hilt in promoting their wares, however. They had no option: the bazaar was the principal venue for selling goods. Thus, when large companies introduced products, they hired hawkers, itinerant vendors who often circulated in bazaars, thus relying on old ways to sell new kinds of merchandise. We know that Japanese manufacturers gained a foothold in Indian markets using such methods in the colonial period (Renshaw and Spofford 1925: 22). Large companies cultivated relationships with local ‘big men’, engaging them as stockists to supply bazaars with their products. Exposure to trading customs in the bazaar was the equivalent of fieldwork; it oriented company recruits with knowledge that ensured their professional expertise would yield value.

With deeply rooted trading networks that spanned the country long before the British arrived, there was inevitably the ambivalence of bazaar merchants towards branded goods, whose margins were lower than those on commodities. Although advertisements tended to present each branded product as *sui generis*, shoppers could purchase the brand piecemeal, as if it were a commodity. ‘More often than not, products are asked for by their price – “Give me one rupee’s worth of soap”’, according to one account, more than four decades after independence (Mukherjee and Jacob 1990: 1). A branded bar of soap would then be sold by the slice. The price sensitivity of the Indian market has remained, even as consumption has increased. Over time, however, the bazaar’s margins have been squeezed by the growing market for branded goods. A conversation with bazaar merchants can easily turn to a discussion on the predatory force of big firms, who demand that retailers invest more money in successful brands even while reducing margins.

Meanwhile these merchants have less capital for trade in commodities, from which most of their revenue may derive (Rajagopal 2016: 88–98). Why then would they stock brands at all? Because when they are plentiful, the presence of branded goods suggests a prosperous business. Moreover, brands are acknowledged to have a certain pulling power in luring customers away from merchants merely stocking commodities. In other words, the impact of advertising branded goods as a whole outweighs that which results from individual brands and individual advertisements, which are often the focus of scholarly analysis.

Market extension into the bazaar, as well as the latter's resistance to branding (and therefore to 'full' or more intensive commodification) is part of the history of Indian advertising. In the view of advertisers, the bazaar confronts the self-styled modern market not as an encounter between two equal and independent social forces, but rather as a phase of development in which commodities are incompletely realised until they are branded and shelved in the ordered space of the supermarket.

For many years advertisements in India were defined as those forms of publicity directed chiefly towards imported goods, and for a very limited market, as a 1925 report from the US Department of Commerce suggests:

The great bulk of advertising done in India is intended to attract attention to imported goods and is paid for, directly or otherwise, by foreign manufacturers ... On several occasions actual measurements confirmed the fact that of the display advertising contained in one of Calcutta's leading English newspapers, 33 per cent related to American goods, an equal amount to British goods, while the remainder was devoted to the wares of India and of all other foreign countries.

(Renshaw and Spofford 1925: 13)

There were, however, different streams of advertisements, reflecting a market that was deeply stratified. There were ads directed at the trade and others aimed at potential consumers for all manner of merchandise. Ads in the bazaar signalled the use of a gift economy to open up the indigenous domain of business to external sources of capital. For example, pictures of Hindu gods, accompanied by calendars, could serve as gifts from manufacturers to wholesalers, distributors and retailers, one or more of whose names could be included in the text. Outside city stores, most goods were sold through bazaars run by indigenous merchants. Despite their entanglement with the segment of the market that styled itself as modern, the relationship between the two strata was deeply hierarchical, reflecting, initially, the dominance of the colonial ruling class and after independence, that of the urban middle classes. Notwithstanding its ubiquity, the bazaar has persistently been imagined by corporate advertisers and marketers as destined to fade away, ceding place to the department store and its mutations. The modern advertisement, which

was a key element in the attempt to implement such a vision of the future, was thus part of a project never to be realised.

Commerce, communication, and advertising's civilising mission

In 1922, the Hon W. Hulme Lever, then acting Chairman of Lever Brothers, and son of the founder, Viscount Leverhulme, addressed the members of the Commerce Society of the Liverpool University on the subject of advertising thus:

Today we live in an age of advertising. It calls to us from almost every page of our morning paper. Its echoes reverberate down the streets of our cities. It shrieks at us from the skies at night. It is our constant travelling companion by railway or by tram; nor can we escape from it in the high roads nor in the lanes of the countryside ... If the public desire for an article ceases, the goodwill of a business is destroyed, the machinery stands idle, capital ceases to receive any return, management is no longer required. It is advertising that creates this public desire. It is the honest advertising of an honest article that builds up the goodwill of a business.
(1922: 75–7)

In Lever's view, advertising was an inescapable and obtrusive presence, though it generated goodwill and was indispensable to business success. Interestingly, Lever assumes the desire of others for the products as a social fact, proven by the persistent circulation of advertisements, although his own response is ambivalent to say the least.

Such facts, produced through publicity but invested with a sense of intimacy imputed to others, could not have emerged without resistance. Curiously, existing accounts of the history of advertising offer little detail in this regard. If advertisements do not indicate by what authority they claim attention, or with whose endorsement they are allowed to dominate public space, many historical accounts compound the error by conflating commerce with communication. In the particulars Lever offers, the status quo has hardly changed from his day to ours, although his vivid observations help interrogate our own more anaesthetised perceptions.

Not only commerce but communication too, is at issue here. The right to communicate freely with a general public was far from a natural right. On the contrary, it was and remains a contested issue, liable to be compromised by shifts in political equilibrium and by new technologies. The right to communicate was in fact crucial in one the first successful anti-colonial struggles, namely in the American Revolution, triggered by the 1765 Stamp Act which imposed a tax on all printed communication. It was nearly a century before a similar struggle succeeded in Great Britain itself, when the duty on newspapers and on advertisements was repealed, following many years of protest against any 'taxes on knowledge'.

Such campaigns in Britain thus assumed a political hue, arguing that taxes on newspapers and on advertisements represented an impediment to public enlightenment and were not a justifiable levy on trade and labour as the government claimed. One influential advocate stated in Parliament, 'It is a tax on the intercommunication of wants and wishes, which, in a commercial community, strikes at the foundation of all transactions' (Cobden 1853). So construed, the agitation gained an unstoppable political force. In the words of one historian, 'The people did not appreciate the evils of taxes on industry, they did care for politics, and thus did see the iniquity of Taxes on Knowledge [*sic*]' (Collet 1899: 143).

The irony is that once the tax was repealed in 1853, serious concern over advertisements returned to the domain of trade and industry. Advertisements were acknowledged as crucial to the growth of the press, but dubious as a set of truth claims since they were after all a form of propaganda. For example, a nineteenth-century historical account describes advertising as 'an important branch of commercial speculation' (Henry 1874: 6). This is a precise definition. It is difficult to predict what kind of advertising appeal will succeed, or to isolate the effect of a successful ad campaign from that of distribution, marketing and sales. But such definitions are rarely reproduced. The nineteenth-century candour could not survive the growth of the advertising agency, which sought to professionalise the field and emphasise variously, scientific method and positive cultural knowledge over speculative practice.

By 1925, *The Statesman* of Calcutta was running advertisements which elaborated on the virtues of advertising Lever alluded to:

Who pays for advertising? Nobody pays for advertising. It pays for itself. It pays for itself out of the money it saves on the cost of making goods and the cost of selling them.

(Choudhury 1992: vi)

Economies of scale are implied to be inherent in advertising, as if communication were only an aspect of the production of goods themselves. The claim does not bear scrutiny, but it was part of a widespread campaign to render advertising respectable in the years following World War I, perhaps to distinguish it from any association with war propaganda. Thus a 1924 editorial titled 'Truth in Advertising' in the *Times of India* stated:

Prejudices and convention die hard, and the opinion of many English people is still that the advertised article must be dear, because it has to bear the cost of advertising, and inferior for otherwise it would sell itself. Neither of these ideas has the remotest connection with the truth.

(1924: 10)

The previous month, the Prince of Wales had inaugurated the first International Advertising Convention of Europe, attended by over 5,000

delegates from all over the world. In his speech, Prince Edward praised advertising for promoting free competition, reducing prices and unemployment (see *Times of India* 1924). In 1926, President Calvin Coolidge addressed the convention of the American Association of Advertising and stated that advertising was ‘part of the great work of the regeneration and redemption of mankind’ (Marchand 1985: 9).

In the interwar years many leaders conceived of advertising as a civilising force and as part of the global extension of commodity markets, although market cultures were manifestly uneven and far from being globalised at this time. Just as the war had made leaders aware of the power of propaganda and the capacity of governments to effectively engage in mass mobilisation, advertising offered the prospect of a motivational tool whose possibilities seemed limitless at this time. Advertising could stimulate economic growth and thereby add to state revenues. And it could also mould minds and uplift citizens, it seemed (Marchand 1985: 8–9). The Indian market itself was deemed important enough that the US government produced a report in 1925 on Indian advertising, for the benefit of US firms (Renshaw and Spofford 1925).

This mutual interfusion of commerce, publicity and opinion was so well established by the second half of the twentieth century, and the view about advertisements as a form of protected speech so well entrenched, that it has escaped scrutiny. For example, few scholars appear to have noticed that questions of taxation and regulation, including censorship, do provide strong if subtle ties between the civil society advertisers claim to represent and the state that they typically distance themselves from.

In the 90 or so years after these remarks by Hulme Lever, the advertising industry has grown enormously. Today it pervades not only the economy but politics and culture as well. As a curious legacy of Reform Era protection given to the newspaper industry in Britain, print advertising in India retained tax exemption well into the post-Independence era (A. Sarath, personal communication, 3 March 2013). Advertisers also have the remarkable status of being ubiquitous in their announcements and displays, and yet are subject to weak oversight at best in terms of the accuracy of their messages. Instead, the advertising industry regulates itself, through the Advertising Standards Council of India, a body founded only in 1985, amid national television’s rise (Chowdhry 2009: 123–39; Mazzarella 2003). If advertisers claim a primordial status for their activity, advertising has also been allowed to grow with little hindrance. This growth has been accompanied by claims likening advertising to an elementary aspect of human society, while in fact it benefitted from the most advanced developments.

Whether owing to attempts by the industry to dissuade from or mystify their influence, advertisements have typically been treated as a self-evident category, not requiring definition. Attempts to understand it are bedevilled not only by the scarcity of documentation internal to the advertising industry but also by a persistent conflation of specific products of the industry, chiefly print, radio, and audio-visual messages, with the much broader array of

activities to which the gerund 'advertising' can refer. The latter can include everything from calls by street vendors and up-country promotional motor tours, to point of purchase artefacts such as calendars, danglers, posters, and stickers, and product demonstrations such as washing clothes with soap or frying sweets with cooking oil. The failure to define advertisements was of course useful for the advertising agency in its efforts to lobby against taxation. If the object to be taxed was undefined, the category included many 'advertisements' that would be hard to tax, such as pedlars' cries and 'dangling' publicity at the storefront (Rao 1965: 549–50).

Fugitive commodity aesthetics

Available source material on the introduction and promotion of fast-moving consumer goods in India suggests that advertising became significant during the interwar years. During this time, the need to retain political support for colonial rule dominated over purely economic interests in India; British imports diminished and Indian manufacture gained ground over the same period. If World War I brought a measure of prosperity to the Indian economy, colonial administrators were also concerned to limit the disruption that unchecked market growth could cause. Many members of the colonial administrators were oriented not in favour of industry so much as against it, one historian has noted (Tomlinson 2002). The organised sector for consumer goods in India, for its part, tended to assume a limited market. Such a reckoning was based on the premium consumer market, which remained relatively stable until nationwide television uncovered the extent of latent demand. However, at the level of commodity aesthetics we notice a fugitive movement between the bazaar and its more modern counterpart, alongside market growth.

For example, native manufacturers as well as British and other European companies relied extensively on images of Hindu deities in advertising and packaging of consumer goods. This can be read as emphasising traditional values in the course of reproducing or expanding markets. But traditional Hindu practice did not necessarily centre on the authority of Hindu deities. Louis Dumont, for instance, has noted that the figure of god as understood in the Christian tradition, is epiphenomenal to Hindu practice; custom and ritual nested in caste communities are superordinate (Dumont 1970: 16). Nevertheless, images of Hindu deities became something like a currency generating recognition across differences of region and literacy. Indian nationalists themselves drew on this deistic bazaar art to fashion an altogether new deity, Bharat Mata, to which religious orthodoxy did not object because such an innovation was neither heretical nor impious.

But at this time, advertising agencies in India could not disguise the limited status of their presence. In fact, a wealth of recent scholarship from a range of disciplinary perspectives has implicitly drawn attention to the limited character of the advertising agency's promotional narrative. Scholars have pointed to the

profusion of non-realist visualisations circulating in the bazaar, often of gods and goddesses, and of violence alongside more conventional private behaviour whether of consumption or of worship (Jain 2007; MacLean 2015; Pinney 2004; Ramaswamy 2010). But accounts to replace the advertising agency's view of the history of market growth are only recently beginning to emerge (see Haynes, forthcoming). Here it is the English language work of advertising agencies that is best known. Indian language advertisements are of course accessible in newspapers and periodicals, but less is known as yet about who produced them and under what conditions. Embedded in the way advertising developed in India was a distinction between copywriters and visualisers. The former were usually convent-educated and spoke English, while the latter were more comfortable in Indian languages, and if they had college degrees were from technical institutes and art schools, which emphasised more narrow and specialised curricula. At least until recently, it was verbal copy that dominated in national advertising campaigns, however, with the initial copy conceived in English and then translated into Indian languages by lowly paid translators. Ads conceived for regional markets could, by contrast, be conceived and circulated in regional languages (Haynes et al. 2010).

To see calendar art and hawking as part of the extension of commodity logic underlines the epistemically diverse spaces across which the market functioned. The mediatic forms provided by advertisements created material links across compartmentalised worlds. Calendar advertising, which could be purchased or given as gifts, and often contained pictures of Hindu gods, had a long display life (Jain 2007; Pinney 2004). Meanwhile the kinds of in-person vocal appeals by hawkers regarded as the original form of advertising as well as other demonstrations and performances aimed at selling goods are at best mentioned, although industry literature itself includes the latter under this rubric.

The urban affluent classes were the focus of the big advertising agencies, and Western consumption models set the standards for most of the appeal during the British era, although *swadeshi* made some inroads. One industry chronicler notes:

Advertising served British big business and relied on English newspapers. There was little competition. There was no need to develop an Indian idiom, although some of the Indian manufacturers of toiletries and textiles did make a feeble attempt.

(Banerjee 1982: 26)

Contained in this dismissal of Indian manufacturers' 'feeble attempt' are unspoken assumptions about what a more vigorous or viable 'Indian idiom' would be in advertising and for whom this would be the case. Animals, birds, colours, numbers and Hindu deities had been used to identify and label products in the market since the latter half of the nineteenth century. Imitations of successful advertised products also flourished and constituted a

distinct genre in the market, that in terms of their commercial presence were hardly feeble. Lever's Chairman W.P. Scott, referring inter alia to the promotion of local imitations through his company's advertising, observed after a tour of the Indian market: 'We should bear in mind that whatever we may do in an endeavour to increase soap consumption will benefit our competitors as well as ourselves and may attract other competition to the market' (Banerjee 1982: 53).

'A soapless country'

In a country notable for what a 1936 Lever report called 'the incredible poorness ... of the Indian consumer', with an average annual income per head of between £4 and £5 a year, advertised goods catered to a minority. Most advertised goods were sold in the towns and cities, but most of the goods consumed were in rural areas, procured for cash or kind, and most of the trade occurred in up-country bazaars. As late as 1959, a report by J. Walter Thompson & Co noted that advertised goods were almost never sold in villages. The more prosperous villagers travelled to the towns to buy such goods (J. Walter Thompson Co., 1959).

Not only was the bazaar a problem, so too were the kind of goods that might be procured there. Fourteen years after Lever had arrived in India, a correspondent observed in 1902:

India is still virtually a soapless country. Throughout the villages of Hindustan soap is, indeed, regarded as a natural curiosity. And in 1936, Levers still did not have even one percent of the market, which only amounted to 140,000 metric tons in the entire country.

(van den Berghe 1936)⁴

The bulk of the soaps sold were made on a small scale and were either unbranded or locally branded, and were more or less commodities not brands. The advertising industry focused on the sale of branded goods, but the overwhelming majority of goods sold were commodities. A third category, not large but significant in terms of market dynamics, comprised commodities that aspired to be brands but lacked the wherewithal in terms of advertising, adequate packaging, incentive schemes for dealers and retailers to promote the product, and so on.

Brand advertisements targeted the relatively well to do and effectively advertised their consumption, making the general public more conscious of branded products. A host of imitators typically sprang up around any successful brand, moreover. Advertisements not only sought to open the minds of their target audience to choose their product, therefore. Frequently, they also attempted to influence potential consumers about the appropriate setting for consumption, and to be wary of the bazaar as a place where quality could be compromised.

The bazaar was indispensable to market extension because it was constituted through the social networks that provided credit, employment and selling space, not only for the trading castes and those who assisted them but also for those who had nowhere else to go, even if the terms were exploitative. It is ironic that although the growth of the rural and small town market constituted the economic frontier of expanding consumption, there is little available research on the forms of engagement between metropolitan and small business. For this reason, one needs to read the archive against the grain to see just how important the bazaar was to modern commerce, despite being stigmatised as a lesser form of activity.

Correspondence internal to Tata Oil Mills Co. (Tomco) from 1950 hints at the constant tug of war between the large business firms and the traders in the bazaar. The front line of business competition was the retail store. For traders, the margins offered by branded goods were smaller than with unbranded or 'feebly' branded commodities, but they constituted a source of prestige and increased the chances that more affluent customers would patronise their establishment. Stocking relatively expensive brands such as those of Tata or Lever was a mark of distinction in a marketplace where most traders were merely selling grains, lentils and oil, or betelnut and tobacco. Big businesses were aware of this and sought to make distributors and retailers work hard to earn their distinction. They asked traders to buy more items in 'slow moving lines' and place them more advantageously in storefront displays, and held out faster moving items as an inducement. Tata was of course an Indian company, but its claims of *swadeshi* identity tended to arise mainly when it was on the defensive in market competition; consumers of branded advertised goods preferred the foreign *chaap*.

Businesses had to compete with each other for the limited display space and labour time available within each store, using cash discounts, concession schemes, and retail margins as both carrot and stick. Although Tomco ("Tata Oil Mills Co") and Lever both operated within the prestige economy of branded consumer goods, they adopted different strategies while also constantly monitoring each other's practices. Lever shipped their goods to the major ports where wholesalers would pick them up. They relied on a combination of advertising, brand power, and financial inducements to move their goods up-country, largely through third parties, although this changed gradually over time. Interestingly, Tomco spent far more on advertising than some of its board members thought wise. But as an Indian company, they prided themselves on ground level work, rather than simply launching their products from big cities like Lever. The expense of appointing distributors added to the cost of the products, however, and even then, Lever's products outsold theirs. Dealers and retail traders had significant clout in this situation, and the archives provide occasional hints of the fierce antagonism even within the supply chain of a given item:

By the presence of distributors we can remain in constant touch with the markets. Although our salesmen are now carrying out retail sales pretty

regularly since the expenses have been sanctioned by us, the appointment of distributors is likely to improve our retail distribution still further. The sale of our slow moving lines will also receive more attention ... As regards Messrs. Lever Bros. you are well aware that in this area they have a very strong hold, on account of the popularity of Sunlight and Lifebuoy Soaps and it will take us some time to dislodge them. According to my observations during the last year or so they have been losing ground, but their sphere of influence is so vast that it is very difficult to observe any minor set-back ... I would also like to remind you that while you were in Delhi last some of the wholesalers apprised you of the difficulties in connection with our present system of bonus and have been pressing us all along to change this to cash discount. My suggestion is that if this is not feasible and I think it is not feasible under the distributorship system, we should agree to pay the bonus to parties who cross the maximum limit. Bonus for the rest of the dealers can be settled at the end of the year. These dealers have given us to understand that in case no suitable arrangement is made to meet their wishes they will cease taking interest in our products.

(Varma 1951)

Dealers could boycott the products of manufacturers who displeased them, or who failed to grant them a reasonable return on their efforts. And so on down the line. There were repeated discussions on the merits of the 'open market system' which Lever's relied on, which was more driven by brand power, as against working through a series of known intermediaries in the supply chain.

There was a two-way street here, it should be emphasised. The issue of demand did not arise from the consumer as such, and shape supply on its own, of course. Customers often had long-lasting relationships with their retailers, whose advice they followed about which products were worth buying. Retailers in turn allowed their own decisions to be influenced by how well their distributors rewarded them. Retail sellers earned the least for their efforts and were the most numerous and diffused in their presence. But as the interface with customers, they could not be ignored. When Tata considered following Lever in using the open market system, one shareholder wrote a warning letter:

In his note Mr Gosalia remarks that the retail dealer is the most important link in our business and that the present system does not cater to their requirements. I am convinced that working the open market is not going to yield good results and that the distributor system has to be retained.

(Narielwala 1950)

Eventually, it was Lever who adopted Tata's system of appointing distributors, whom they christened 'redistribution stockists'. The expansion of the market

and intensifying competition led to increasing expenditure in advertising, but nothing could obviate the need for specific attention to the bazaar as the crucial site where revenue was earned. There is a cryptic allusion to this fact years later, in a Lever in-house magazine:

Mr Sen, Marketing Manager, Toilet Soaps and Promotions, explained that the relaunch of Rexona [toilet soap] was to improve its market share in the competitive toilet soaps market ... Sen informed the salesmen that a major factor for the success of Rexona in the market-place today would be the use of what he described tersely as 'bazaar power' or the power of merchandising and displays.

(*Hamara* 1971: 5)

What the company magazine writer diplomatically glossed was a reference to the fact that in market competition words and images did not always substitute for grosser weapons. 'When we fight, we fight to kill. I've done it', a former Levers distributor said, clenching his fist (personal communication, 7 January 1997).⁵

The competition between Tomco and Lever illustrates the strategic distinction that the claim of origin could exercise in the market. Lever advertised powerful brands that dominated the market, while Tomco's indigenous brands were priced to mimic foreign brands or insinuate a similar status, but invoked *swadeshi* origins when on the defensive.

Advertisers claimed they were engaged in a pedagogical mission and not merely fulfilling the needs of commerce. The task of most advertising agencies was self-consciously a modern one: to wean Indians away from their existing habits that often involved no purchase at all, to consumption practices that required the purchase of branded, packaged consumer goods. From using twigs to clean one's teeth and mud to bathe one's body, from beating clothes on rocks to wash them, or from wearing no upper garments (for men) or footwear at all, it was considered modern to use toothpaste and toothbrush, toilet soap and washing soap, and to don shirts and shoes, for example. Cigarettes were more modern than *bidis*, and tea was better than water, although of course no substitute for it.

In the universe of Indian advertising, using electricity was modern, as was using mechanical forms of transportation, such as the bicycle, whereas manually powered activities acquired a lower status. Boiled sweets, chocolate, and toffee were modern, whereas traditional Indian sweets including anything made with jaggery were, by definition, not. Hats were modern, turbans not. Suits and dresses were modern, dhotis and saris were not – or not until much later, at least as far as saris were concerned.

The dividing line for advertising was thus a clear if shifting line between forms of consumption designated as enhancing personal life and those pre-existing habits that were based on custom which did not allow individuals to

distinguish themselves from others. Although this was overlaid with *swadeshi* themes over time, it is a fair summary to say that advertisers in India justified their task as one of modernisation, where what was modern was derived from the West.

Beyond the content of the communication, which promoted branded, packaged goods that the overwhelming majority of the population could not afford, the modernity of advertising was also a matter of form. Although advertising agencies might claim kinship with bazaar vendors when indulging in rhetorical flights of fancy, the former saw their own communication as insulated from the bazaar's physical contamination and cultural opacity. As purer communication, advertising promoted by the agency enabled bypassing the confusing signals the shopper might get from the indigenous merchant. Rigging of the scales, adulterated or unsanitary produce and the fear of infection, and the proximity to poverty, all combined to present threatening images invoked in early advertising that contrasted with its own self-presentation as relatively rational and trustworthy.

Derogatory references to the bazaar were routine in advertisements. A 1934 ad for Tata's Cocogem, a cooking medium, compared the 'absolutely pure and wholesome' product with 'adulterated bazaar ghees', as if that would be the commonsense point of reference (Figure 1.1).

'You never know with bazaar ghee', went another ad. In the accompanying cartoon, in a conversation between a European couple in response to a question from the man about whether the woman, presumably his wife, had read about adulterated bazaar ghee in the newspaper, she replies in the affirmative and mentions 'the flies swarming in those shops' (Figure 1.2). Even honest merchants would, despite themselves, be selling impure products under such circumstances.

Caste and racial distinctions can be discerned in some of the advertisements. An ad for Horlicks begins 'Coming, Sahib!', and the figure shows a coloured hand bearing a silver dish and bowl, and a bottle of Horlicks Malted Milk (Halve and Sarkar, n.d.: 48; Figure 1.3). The space of branded consumption was conceived as implicitly reproducing caste and racial privilege. Advertisements in latent or patent ways took this reality as a selling point for the goods being promoted.

Advertising and the war

Against this context of a limited market for advertised goods, advertising began to be conceived of in much larger terms. For example, Evelyn Wood, writing a report for J. Walter Thompson & Co. from Bombay on the eve of World War II, urged his superiors not to relax in their quest to gain accounts for the advertising agency. The war could afford opportunities in the Indian market even if it had diverted consumption towards military hardware in the West. Given the extremely low levels of income prevailing in the country, the



Impure ghees . . . doubtful oils . . . **DON'T RISK THEM**

Pure **COCOGE**M, in vacuum-sealed tins,
is more economical, infinitely better

YOU never know, with bazaar ghee. It may be (often is!) heavily adulterated . . . or contaminated before it reaches you. But, apart from that risk, nothing which makes good food greasy and indigestible is a real economy.

You're safe with Cocogem, in its sealed tin. It costs no more than pure ghee. And it is infinitely better for frying than any animal fat—ghee, dripping or lard—because it reaches a far higher temperature without burning.

Any chef will tell you that the secret of good frying is to use great heat, so that the outside of your fish, meat, rissoles or whatever it may be is instantly browned, sealing the flavour in and the fat out. Cocogem can be heated above 450°

Fahrenheit, the best frying temperature—more than 100° above the burning point of ghee or dripping. Result: crisp, light, digestible food, with no greasy flavour.

Thanks to this high cooking temperature, Cocogem neither absorbs nor transmits the flavour of meat, fish, vegetables or anything else—so it can be used again and again. There's a real economy!

And because Cocogem is itself tasteless, it is ideal for such dishes as pillaus and also for cakes and pastry, which it makes as light as a feather and with no trace of greasy flavour.

Make your cook use Cocogem and notice the difference! And remember—Cocogem is rich in food value and has an addition of bone-building Vitamin D.

DID YOU READ THIS ABOUT ADULTERATED BAZAAR GHEE?



YES, AND I'VE SEEN THE FLIES SWARMING IN THOSE SHOPS! COCOGEM FOR ME, EVERY CLEAN IT'S PERFECTLY CLEAN AND PURE



Cocogem is not merely sealed in vacuum-sealed tins. The air is exhausted from the tin before it is sealed in this vacuum chamber.



Cocogem

Cocogem is sold at all provision stores in 1 lb., 2 lb., 6 lb., 9 lb. and 36 lb. vacuum-sealed tins



Sales Dept.
P. O. Box 528
Bombay

Figure 1.1 Adulterated bazaar products. *Times of India*, 23 May 1934.

Impure ghees . . . doubtful oils . . . **DON'T RISK THEM**

Pure **COCOGEN**, in vacuum-sealed tins,
 is more economical, infinitely better

YOU never know, with bazaar ghee. It may be (often is!) heavily adulterated . . . or contaminated before it reaches you. But, apart from that risk, nothing which makes good food greasy and indigestible is a real economy.

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Sales Dept.
P. O. Box 528
Bombay

Figure 1.2 You never know with bazaar ghee. *Times of India*, 5 July 1933.



Figure 1.3 The Bearer is kept busy with calls for Horlicks. Anand Halve and Anita Sarkar, *Adkatha: The Story of Indian Advertising*, p. 48. Centrum Charitable Trust, Goa, India. No date.

influx of investment, even if aimed at advancing the Allied War effort, would be certain to lead to advantages that advertisers could make use of:

It is quite definite that the war of 1914–18 brought a sudden increase of prosperity to the lower-middle classes and those of higher incomes throughout India. All the primary products of this country ... definitely secured bigger money returns to the petty trader and his dependents as well as the richer classes, who all became bigger customers for imported manufactures, largely as the result of war conditions. India's new industrial

opportunities were also created by the last war. The wealth generated in India by her new iron and steel industry, her cotton and jute mills, and in part her sugar factories was a gift of troubled Europe to the (up to 1914) considerably exploited Indian lower-middle and upper-classes.

(Wood 1939)

The sale of imported consumer goods benefitted from the growth of the expansion during the interwar years in the market for raw materials, although it is not clear just how strong this expansion was. The Depression had led to a downturn in the market for most raw materials, from 1929 until the war (Hazari 1986: 36). But Wood understood the effect of advertising in wider terms than merely reproducing a limited market. Even if only a small consuming class spent its money on advertised goods, it was through public recognition that this motivation had to be sustained. This is where the work of advertisers was critical:

The prognosis of business in packaged goods in India is therefore, in our view, a healthy one, provided that the 'nervous system' of advertising is not impaired. We are thinking of businesses in imported products which cannot easily be reproduced by Indian manufacturers; or which are no attractive to the industrialist here. To cancel any advertising campaign for imported goods indefinitely at this juncture would go a long way towards the complete destruction of the public recognition of the imported product which has been built up during recent years.

(Wood 1939)

Using a formulation that is analogous to James Webb Young's (in the opening epigraph), Wood explicitly focused on the market for imported goods alone. But his argument for advertising was framed as if it were conceived in relation to the economy as a whole. He described advertising as a nervous system whose signals traverse an organism and coordinate voluntary and involuntary parts of the body. Investment in advertising had to be continued even if its effects could not be evaluated in the short term and even if returns were not immediately forthcoming, in this view. Maintenance of the nervous system is of course essential to health and thus not an option. To view the company's work in terms of discrete acts of persuasion would underline the modest character of J. Walter Thompson's portfolio of client accounts in a limited consumer market. Instead, Wood urged his superiors to take the long view and behave as if advertising were an indispensable part of the economy. This was the kind of activity that needed to be undertaken by governments, and interestingly enough, that is precisely what occurred.

In World War II, advertising and propaganda would fuse together and several advertising agencies would combine to assist in the government's war effort. This was a turning point in the development of Indian advertising. British personnel left their jobs to enlist in their military, to be replaced by

Indians who filled their shoes and helped in the creation of war propaganda. Following the war, government planning allocated large sums of money for advertising to advance its developmental goals. This, combined with the money accumulated during the war, suddenly expanded the existing elitist consumer market (Banerjee 1982: 26–7).

The Indian government also supported the advertising industry's demand for a 15 per cent commission on advertisements published in newspapers registered with the Indian and Eastern Newspaper Society, which was the accrediting agency for Indian newspapers. This meant that all government and public sector advertisements, which formed the largest share of advertising accounts, would yield the commission that agencies desired and create a demonstration effect for clients who might seek to pay less. Advertising became, as a chief executive of J. Walter Thompson & Co. in India would later remark, 'a protected sector' (Ghosal 1984).

Although they were periodically subject to criticism for underwriting wasteful consumption and for being dominated by foreign companies, advertising agencies had little option other than to endorse the planned economy and state-led development. Once Mrs Indira Gandhi became the Prime Minister in 1966, however, contracts for government work, beginning with family planning and tourism, began to be awarded. The slogan 'If You Have Two, That Will Do', was coined by Sylvester Da Cunha who ran ASP (Advertising, Sales and Promotion, Ltd.); later 'We Two, Ours Two', was a slogan included in much of the family planning publicity (G. Da Cunha, personal communication, 25 October 2018]. Public sector units began to initiate outreach campaigns; notably, Bharat Heavy Electricals Ltd. commissioned a widely appreciated series of advertisements via R.K. Swamy & Co., leading other PSUs to inaugurate publicity efforts (Chakrapani and Ramnarayan 2007: 182–3).

From Mrs Gandhi's tenure onwards, agencies were treated as professionals whose communicational expertise was valued (see Raja 1975: 229–32 for the earliest explicit criticism I have found). The communication they practised, however, in key respects retained a colonial mindset; foreign goods and foreign advertising were assumed to be superior to Indian goods and Indian advertising, for example. Tata was an indigenous company but used foreign advertising agencies, for example. The consumer goods they sold were marked at prices higher than those of 'important manufacturers', local and foreign, 'for obvious reasons', according to a confidential company note. It is likely that their higher price signalled a level of quality that compensated for the product's domestic source.⁶

For example, a confidential note from Tomco in 1938 regarding the company's strategy observes:

All the varieties of Levers' products are far cheaper than ours. In spite of the cheapness of Levers products and their free gifts of saleable soap and vigorous and lavish propaganda, it will be appreciated that we have

more or less been able to maintain our sales ... For obvious reasons we do not wish our prices to be on level with those of the important manufacturers ...

We do not at present recommend any reduction in the price of Toilet Soaps as their sales are steadily going up and the cake of Hamam is bigger than any other standard soap for 0-3-0. It requires more publicity which is being attended to.

(Tata Oil Mills Co 1938: 3)

Lever itself explored the possibility of producing its soaps within India and, based on discouraging responses, postponed local production by at least a decade. Duraiswamy Iyengar, Lever's agent in Madras, reported to the company's representative A.C. Knight in December 1923, saying that if soap were made locally, the market would expect the price to drop and expect it to be priced 'at native soap levels' (Fieldhouse 1978: 161). They decided that they would fare better by marketing foreign-made soaps even though they knew they could make equivalent products more cheaply within India.

The advertising and marketing of packaged consumer goods was overwhelmingly oriented to a relatively well-to-do minority. Agencies catered to the educated elite and paid little attention to the majority. Although in the United States Ford Motors had transformed the market by acting on the view that workers should also be customers, the same was not true in India even for relatively inexpensive products like Lever's soap. By and large, this elitist mindset carried over into the post-Independence period with little opposition from the national state or from the Indian business community, until a more extensive market emerged in the wake of the growth of television and, later, mobile telephony.

Conclusion: advertising's hegemony

Advertisements today are ubiquitous and indispensable to both economy and politics. It belongs in a conception of modern society where individuals make informed choices based on their desires, opinions, and interests. Such a conception is often held to confirm the participatory if not democratic character of modern society. Although advertising's success depends on what we can call an infrastructure of marketing, distribution, and sales, the advertising industry promotes its products as if pure communication could do the job, informing or inspiring consumers who then decide how to consume. At the same time advertisements are not only means of selling goods; they are themselves products that are promoted intensively by the industry.

Today, private communication promoting commerce has acquired what we may call social gravity. Freestanding messages, absent any knowledge about the communicator's antecedents, can now routinely inform social action without bringing any discredit to that action. While speaking to the public maybe treated as a free speech right, the massive growth of advertising has

led to a situation where advertisers can appear to speak not just to, but for, the public as a whole. Such messages thereby undergo a steep elevation from the low status of the itinerant pedlar's cries or of bazaar discourse. The advertisement, which began as private communication and for the most part is still understood as such, has over time unobtrusively acquired the authority to address the public as a whole without identifying at whose behest the message is delivered, although the interests at stake are typically sectional.

To the extent that we focus on advertising messages and omit a consideration of other factors bearing upon consumption choice, we risk assuming communication to be a separable category of activity, encountered as discrete information, which may succeed or fail as suasion. The unintended effect is to overlook not only the lengthy historical process through which the perception of communication became distinct and separable from both the communicator and from the scene of communication, but as well the infrastructure essential to this process. On this account, the history favoured by the advertising agency focuses largely if not exclusively on the superstructure.

The brief accounts presented here, drawn from a moment before the advertising agencies' own perspective became commonsense, suggest that it was not clear where the boundary was to be drawn between what was considered advertising and other activities, but no one seemed perturbed about the lack of clarity. Manufacturers did not understand it to be a specialisation confined to advertising agencies; modestly paid propagandists accompanying up-country motor vehicles could do it as well, while conveying consumer goods to remote places. Marketing, distribution and sales, point of purchase promotion, packaging and other aspects of product get-up, credit lines and octroi subsidies to dealers and wholesalers, to name but a few, are not so glamorous and seldom find much discussion in historical accounts of advertising, except perhaps to acknowledge in passing that promoting consumption is a many-sided activity.

Contrast the image conjured in Sarojini Naidu's oft-cited poem, *In the Bazaars of Hyderabad*:

What do you sell, O ye merchants?
 Richly your wares are displayed,
 Turbans of crimson and silver,
 Tunics of purple brocade,
 Mirrors with panels of amber,
 Daggers with handles of jade.
 What do you weigh, O ye vendors?
 Saffron, lentil and rice.

...

What do you call, O ye pedlars?
 Chessmen and ivory dice.

(Naidu 1912: 62–3)

More a museum than a place where goods were sold, Sarojini Naidu's bazaar was a space insulated from most of the modern economy, a scene of delectation and not a mundane site of exchange. For companies like Lever, the bazaar was merely a means of gaining access for their products to the rural hinterland. Since the increase in market share thereby gained was small, the bazaar was of limited interest. For nationalists, for whom the colonial drain of Indian wealth was the stimulus to define their political concerns in modern form, the bazaar was a site of tradition and was treated with ambivalence. Home of the *bania* and of native usury, it was subject to critique, while as the place where indigenous products were gathered, it could be regarded as a place of Orientalist fantasy. Both for the British and for nationalists, therefore, the bazaar was overlooked as a site of analysis or theory generation.

Industry accounts encouraged this view, despite intricate and extensive channels of distribution whose tendrils encompassed virtually every corner of hinterland markets. In fact it is in the electoral arena where political parties are like brands, albeit of a distinct kind, and where advertisers achieved their greatest victories (Rajagopal 2015; Shah 2014). Advertisers' impact on political outcomes in India today is arguably at least as significant as their effect in the marketplace, to the extent that we can regard these contests as distinct. No doubt the consuming middle classes are increasingly large and brand-aware, but this should not detract from the peculiar nature of advertising's success in India. It has been more of a political than an economic success and today advertisers are engaged in attempts to tilt the market itself, in addition to staging market competition as such (Rajagopal, 1999). As this chapter has tried to show, analysis of the economic history of advertising in terms of its relationship to the bazaar, can help to diminish the extraordinary, unquestioned power this form of communication has acquired.

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Notes

- 1 The use of the gerund form, advertising, to characterize the process, the product and the producers too, can be confusing. The advertising industry itself has not attempted to dispell this confusion; on the contrary, it has sought to make capital of it, as I will show below.
- 2 Banerjee, who is one of the first chroniclers of the advertising industry, started as an advertising copywriter with D.J. Keymer & Co. (which later became Ogilvy, Benson & Mather), and later joined Clarion Advertising Services as account executive. By 1964 he had become resident director at Clarion, which was one of the major Indian agencies at the time (see Banerjee's entry in Dunn [1964: 566–94]).

- 3 Interview with S.R. 'Mani' Ayer, MICA Communications Review, vol. 1, no. 1.
- 4 Young (1944: 183).
- 5 Name and place withheld.
- 6 Sampson (1874: 6).

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