

Ideology, Age of the Image and Television Advertising in India

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Abstract

This article will explore how the ideology of advertising converts the value-system of a “constructed” social life into “natural reality” and also how the hyperreal “ad world” seemingly becomes a “reality” in its own right. It will analyse ads in their material form to see through their “false” materiality. Ideology as a term has acquired many connotations in this age of globalisation. Likewise, the semiotic world of advertisements has expanded at a phenomenal pace. Commodities in a postmodern, globalised world are ubiquitous and their multimedia ad-campaigns are well and truly omnipresent. Whether they are also omnipotent is something that the paper will explore. The ad-world in the present age creates consciousness rather than getting validated by consciousness. It creates an ideology that would turn the exchange value of a commodity into a new kind of use-value. By deconstructing a few recent TV ads made in India the paper will analyse whether in the complex relationship between ideology and advertising the former functions as a process whereby social life is converted to a natural reality. The paper will also attempt to identify fault-lines of the constructed reality of the advertisements as the makers sometimes end up deconstructing the very narratives that they construct. Thus, the present study hopefully will show the self-referential nature of advertisements which will give us clues to understand the nature of the visual culture as it thrives in the world of advertisements.

Keywords

Ideology, globalisation, advertisements, commodity fetishism, use and exchange values, visual culture

আমরা যাইনি মরে আজও – তবু কেবলই দৃশ্যের জন্ম হয়,
জীবনানন্দ দাশ, “ঘোড়া”

(“We are not dead yet, still visions keep appearing,” Jibanananda Das,
“Horse”)

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Past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again.... The present, which, as a model of the Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgement....” (Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”)

Raymond Williams, the famous British cultural historian, in his classic study named *Television* (1978), has analysed how TV has become instrumental in altering many of our institutions and natures of social relationships in a fundamental way. It not only contributed to the rise of a new kind of large-scale, complex and atomised society but also, more importantly, it ended up altering our basic perceptions of reality. Four decades have passed since the publication of his book, but the trajectory of change ushered in by TV that he identified has remained more or less the same. Its impact on social life is getting more and more entrenched every day. In our 21st century post-modern world, creation of images has become the privileged mode of communicating knowledge and television culture has contributed to it in a major way.

There has been a phenomenal rise of the modern media and its individualised and at the same time community-based forms of communication. Consequently, image-making, of colossal magnitude, has become the signature of contemporary life. Nowadays, images do not merely communicate knowledge, they seem to “create” it. As a result of this kind of full-frontal attack of images – and the enchantment of glamour most often associated with them – we have reached a situation which can only be explained with a new formula, “believing is seeing,” instead of using the age-old one, “seeing is believing.” There seems to be no “outside” in the kind of intricate relationship that the new mass media has developed with the modern society, built upon the unit of a privatised home, as one maps concretely onto the other. This postmodern visuality – a mode of seeing – is like a disembodied gaze, a view from “nowhere,” which produces data that is in no way under the control of the person who sees. Everyday life, thus, metamorphoses into a series of spectacles in which visuals, commodities and the labour of seeing seem to construct a different order of reality.

Television is playing its role in this project in a crucial way. Since in contemporary life ideas like the primacy of the individual, the family with its limited number of members and home as the centre of all activities have by and large replaced other kinds of collective activities based on class, gender or group, TV-viewing has emerged almost as an everyday ritual. It will not, therefore, be a surprise if we come to know that an average US citizen spends around three hours and 35 minutes (which is around 19% of his/her waking life) watching television (Watson). In a country like India, where literacy rate is low, the impact of TV is even greater because all that TV-viewing requires is visual literacy and nothing

more.² Television makes its impact upon Indian viewers through programming and even more through its commercials. Any regular TV viewer in India is more likely to recall TV ads of products than the advertisements of the same products from other media. That is probably why in middle-class and lower-middle-class homes in India TV has emerged as the defining medium of Indian consumer culture. The aspiration to attain a particular lifestyle, to fashion a new “self” based upon the principles of consumption, lies at the heart of this culture.

In the present article, my objective is to examine how the contemporary Indian commodity culture – buttressed by globalisation and liberalisation of the Indian economy – and its ideologies and discourses are formed and disseminated through TV commercials. By studying a few recent TV ads, I will try to chart the contours of this ideological world and also look for possible fissures and fault-lines in its discursive practices. Terry Eagleton, in the “Introduction” to his 1991 book, *Ideology: An Introduction*, has given as many as sixteen probable meanings of the term “ideology.” I will not explore all those meanings in this article but rather use the concept representing two basic ideas. First, ideology as ideas appropriate to a class, like, for example, middle-class ideology or working-class ideology, and second, ideology as an illusion, an upside-down version of reality in which we see a failure among citizens to discern the nature of the dominant material relationships prevalent in society. How the ideology of consumerism in India is built and consolidated through the discourses of television culture – controlled, selected, organised and distributed by multinational companies through aggressive advertising campaigns – is something I wish to explore in this article. I also wish to discover how “truth” and only those statements which are “in the true”³ are produced and circulated by ad agencies through TV ads.

Let me begin with a diamond jewellery ad. Since this is a commercial for an expensive product – a product mostly owned by the rich and the famous – the language used in the ad is exclusively English. This ad very interestingly features characters who can be labelled as upper-class or upwardly mobile at the most; not the super-rich. The protagonist of this ad is a female doctor who has a happy family life comprising an understanding husband and loving kids. At the beginning of the micro-narrative of the ad, the lady doctor is about to call it a day after a hectic dinner party when her cell phone rings and she has to rush to the hospital for attending an emergency. But, amidst all the rush and as she is given the car keys and bade goodbye by a supportive husband, she does not forget to wear her diamond jewellery as she leaves for work late at night. At the end, we

² According to 2011 census, the Indian literacy rate is 74.04%. See http://censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/india/Final_PPT_2011_chapter6.pdf, p.98. In comparison, the U.S. literacy rate for 2018 was 99%. See <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/USA/united-states/literacy-rate>.

³ See Foucault’s elaboration of the idea of how a proposition in order to belong to a discipline of knowledge must first be “in the true” since any discipline preselects true and false propositions (Foucault, “The Order of Discourse” 60).

see the doctor, who is a gynaecologist, completing a successful baby-delivery operation. So, here we see a glamorous lady who is a successful professional, a caring mother and a loving wife – one who has her priorities in place. She is one who can strike a perfect balance between her family and her profession – an ideal combination of beauty, brain and ethical principles – someone whose duties as a mother and a wife do not come in the way of her duties as a doctor. One might be tempted to say that she is projected as a kind of “role model” for the 21st century educated women of India. In addition to marriage and motherhood, which for so long have remained the ultimate goals for a young woman in India, she gives direction and legitimacy to aspirations of modern-day, metropolitan Indian women who are independent and competitive and also wish to possess cosmopolitan poise. The normative standard that she sets for women in the changing scenario of contemporary Indian society, where the presence of Indian women is felt more and more each day, has diamonds as one of its foundational principles. As the ad comes to an end, we hear in the background the punchline, “A diamond is forever,” made famous by De Beers. This line which is also used in the theme song for a Bond movie and wonderfully performed by the great Shirley Bassey has through the years become like a “ringtone” which sounds like words of wisdom to women, successful in their careers.

Thus, in this ad, the craze for owning brands – a tendency among consumers whose requirements are upgraded from products to brands due to aggressive marketing of multinational companies during the last 30 years in India – gets consolidated in the end. What is even more interesting is that we see a direct parallel is drawn between the importance of the lady’s husband and her diamond jewellery in her life, as both are considered as “better halves” by the lady. The lady is shown to act intimate with her husband as she gives a peck on his cheek but at the same time, she seems to be passionately attached to her diamond ear studs. Could this be considered as an example of “commodity affect” involving a clever act of eroticisation of representation of a commodity by the ad-maker in which modern individual’s desire for commodities gets entwined with pleasure not dissimilar to erotic feelings? The normative, the aspirational and the erotic – all seem to get neatly packaged in such a consumerist discursive scheme.

Let me move onto the next commercial. Before I discuss the ad in detail, let me remind readers that in the financial-investment scenario of contemporary India the financial companies are working overtime to create a positive impression in the public imagination that “Mutual Fund/Systematic Investment Plan (SIP)” investments are the only smart choice. Hence, there is an overdrive among banks and non-banking finance companies to create awareness through an aggressive ad campaign. At the beginning of one such television ad, we see a young man trying out his wedding suit in front of a mirror when his mother arrives in the frame. She embraces him and advises him to start a SIP account while beginning the new innings of his life – his marriage. The youth is unsure as

he lacks an in-depth understanding of how such an investment might turn out to be profitable for him in future. His mother then draws his attention to his father – an innocuous, hapless bald man whom we see in the frame at a distance – and confides in him that at the beginning she too was not sure about the durability of her marriage to the “uninteresting” man. But her married-life, after all, has turned out to be, with the passage of time, a successful one. It is because, she explains at the end of the ad, the words of wisdom into her son’s ear, “*Pyar aur bharosa naa, beta, dhirey dhirey bartaa hain*” (“Both love and dependency, my dear boy, take time to mature!”).

It is interesting to note that the punchline is given in Hindi, a vernacular spoken in most parts of the country, as the class-character of the members of the family shown in the ad is very much middle-class. The ad is, therefore, about the endless middle-class aspirations of 21st century India, with the unfulfilled desire to lead a “better” life. Thus, we see in this ad, like the previous one, an equation is drawn between the choice of a life-partner and the choice of investment on one hand, and between the blossoming of love within the partners and the growth in dividend in Mutual Fund bonds, on the other. The possibility that lurks in the corner is that of the former being supplanted by the latter – whether individuals might begin to measure love in a scale to measure market shares – but worse still, if the semiotics of NIFTY and SENSEX⁴ might become the only sign-system to encode and decode intimate human emotions. In other words, the discourse of the ideology of advertising might be successful in converting the value-system of a “constructed” social life to a “natural reality” – one important function of “ideology.”

Through repeated and reinforced spectacles, commodities gradually succeed in completely colonising social life. The products and the “reality” associated with them begin to share a continuity. They constitute a world constantly experienced as “real..” In the world of TV commercials, thus, commodity seems to take on a life of its own as the hyperreal “ad world” seemingly becomes separate from the material medium, the products it promotes, and becomes a “reality” in its own right. Therefore, there is a need to analyse ads in their *material form* to avoid endowing them with a *false* materiality and letting the “ad world” distort the real world on the TV screen. To do that I shall have to look closely at the discourses of advertising and try to untie the knot between advertising and its ideology. Karl Marx, in his famous book *Grundrisse*, observes:

Because the *product becomes a commodity*, and the commodity becomes an exchange value, it obtains, at first only in the head, a *double existence*. This

⁴ “Sensex, also called BSE 30, is the market index consisting of 30 well-established and financially sound companies listed on Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE).” “Nifty, also called NIFTY 50, is the market index consisting of 50 well-established and financially sound companies listed on National Stock Exchange of India (NSE).” See <https://tradebrains.in/what-is-nifty-and-sensex/>.

doubling in the idea proceeds (and must proceed) to the point where the *commodity appears double in real exchange: as a natural product* on one side, as *exchange value* on the other. (55; italics mine)

Marx developed the idea of “commodity fetishism,” a hallmark of capitalism, around this factor of “exchange value.”⁵ And, by looking at the workings of advanced capitalism in the contemporary world one may notice that the “exchange value” of a commodity within such a mode of production can function independently, irrespective of the natural product that it is supposed to represent. Consequently, this new kind of exchange value no longer needs to pass through consciousness to be validated. It somehow secures its own reproduction. In other words, it metamorphoses into a different kind of “use value.” Therefore, the world of advertising in the postmodern era of advanced capitalism, can be said to help capitalism to create consciousness rather than getting validated by consciousness; and, to extend the Marxian idea, to create an ideology that would turn “exchange value” of a commodity into a new kind of “use value.” This special kind of “exchange value” which functions as a “use value” can be termed as “use value of the second order.”

However, if one is an alert reader of advertising discourse one might be able to notice traces of “constructedness” of reality created by the advertising industry when, only rarely, the armature of the great advertising-grid fleetingly appears before our eyes. It is when the fault lines of the “hyperreal” reality of the advert become visible.

Let us look at the next ad. In this television ad of a motorcycle model, we see the rider, who is supposedly late for a date with his girlfriend, decides to start his journey to her place in his underpants. But as he hits the road and vrooms past we see him wearing his shirt, his trousers and even tying his shoelaces with great acrobatic skills while riding (and, presumably, thanks also to the extreme “stability” and “manoeuvrability” of the bike that he is riding) and becomes “dressed for the occasion” as he reaches his date’s home. The signifiers used here to portray the devil-may-care attitude (the desire for living on the edge) as well as

⁵ “A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing... simply because in it the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to *the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.* This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses.... There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.... In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. *This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities*” (Marx, “Section 4: The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”; Italics mine).

the virile machismo of the rider, threaten to overshadow the signified, and, subsequently blur the technical features of the bike's new model. In real life, such an act could be potentially disastrous. If anyone tries to replicate the actions performed by the model in the ad on a public road it will surely be extremely dangerous for the rider and the pedestrians alike. Besides, it will be against the traffic laws in the first place. The ad-makers, therefore, have no other choice but to show a statutory warning in bold, on screen, throughout the running time of the ad which reads as, "Extreme actions performed by *experts* on *empty roads*. Please do not copy" (italics mine). The "empty roads" bit in the warning is the most significant. Nobody buys a motorcycle intending to ride only on empty roads. This is even truer for the "Generation Y" (the target buyer-group for the makers of the bike), for whom a slick bike is a machine used more for "showing off," or making a "style-statement," than merely a mode of transport. Therefore, the ad-makers, in a bizarre way, themselves end up deconstructing the very narrative that they aim to construct in the ad. The self-referentiality of the world of advertising, therefore, for once lies exposed. The ads can, thus, sometimes, for alert eyes, throw up images, à la the theory of Walter Benjamin as developed in his famous essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1968) which flash up at the instant when they can be recognised and are never seen again. If one wants to discover the real nature of the relationship between advertising and ideology one has to be on the lookout for such fleeting images.

The ideologies and discourses of advertisements in contemporary Indian society not only comprise the self-referentiality that is in-built in the world of advertisement but they also have to engage with the unique reflexivity of desire – the desire to desire – the mainstay of 21st-century materialism. This tendency of the buyers, unleashed by consumer capitalism is most clearly visible in the "Fast Moving Consumer Goods" (FMCG) sector. Modern-day materialism is built upon possession-defined success, acquisition tendency and unscrupulous nature in man's pursuit of happiness. Advertising world whose primary purpose is, after all, to establish a communication intended to inform and/or persuade people reflects such social tendencies in a manner that can be called a "realistic" portrayal of consumers in television commercials. This, in turn, not only helps the ad-makers to "connect" with the consumers. In the process social reality and "perceived reality" seem to reflect each other but also doubles up and validates the amoral values unleashed by the materialism of consumer culture.

We shall take up one ad to elucidate our point. This ad features Ranbir Kapoor, the current Bollywood heartthrob, playing the role of a corrupt politician. This ad, which is a micro-story in its own right, makes effective use of an old narrative structure found in folktales around the world which is called the "repetition-break plot structure." This kind of plot structure combines linear narratives with vignettes narratives. To put it simply, in this kind of narrative incidents have a repetitive pattern but, in the end, throw up surprises. In the

beginning of the ad the political career of Ranbir Kapoor, the leader, is shown to be in dire straits after he has returned serving a punishment in jail on corruption charges. But when his supporters seem to give up on him, he bounces back as a politician and wins people's mandate overwhelmingly. The opportunity to serve the people and to work as a public servant gives him one more a chance to carry on his corrupt ways and it is shown in the ad that he does exactly so. But this time too, the public finds out and attacks him with brickbats. However, like the proverbial phoenix, he rises from the ashes once again and wins the election to become a minister. All along with the ups and downs of his political career, the paint on the walls of the bungalow of the corrupt politician remains intact and untarnished. The punchline of the ad states that like the paint the entire political life of the leader is "laminated." Using a celebrity as a model for an ad in the electronic media increases the television rating point (TRP) of the ad manifold, and if the celebrity plays the role of a common man the identification with the character by the viewers happens almost instantaneously. The language used in this ad is significantly a bizarre mixture of Indian English and Mumbaiiyya Hindi which helps to make this identification even more foolproof. It is altogether a different matter that the values that the character, played by a celebrity-model, represents are anything but moral and ethical. We seem to have come a long way from the ideological intention of the advertisement discourses to present normative figures to the creation of characters who are criminals in the eye of the law. But both kinds of advertisement work as they are intimately bound with the basic *mantra* of transnational, consumer-capitalism, which is the "desire to possess."

The world of political economy and discourses of advanced capitalism in the present-day world, therefore, is built up as much on reinforcing the dominant ideologies of contemporary times as on creating alternative principles. Taboo subjects like sexuality and politics and marginal voices of the underprivileged which have the power to subvert the status quo are brought to the centre as well. This is nothing unique in the epistemological matrix of human society as Michel Foucault has proved in many of his important works throughout his life that the history of thought often exposes, beneath continuities built around the idea of a sovereign subject, discontinuities, displacements and transformations. In his Inaugural Lecture at College de France, on 2 December 1970, titled "The Order of Discourse," he observes,

discourse is not simply that which *manifests (or hides) desire* – it is also the *object of desire*; discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, *discourse is the power which is to be seized.* (52-53; italics mine)

The last ad that I want to take up for discussion is about such power of discourse which the hidden desires of the society wish to seize. This is the ad of a brand of biscuits manufactured by an Indian company. The ad comprises a single episode involving an encounter between a middle-class housewife and her maidservant. The lady asks her maid as to why she has been absent from her duties the previous day without any prior intimation. The young, nubile maid answers back with great panache and street smartness. The viewers get to know from her answer that she has been to see a Bollywood blockbuster starring the biggest star of Bollywood as it has been the day of the première (“first day, first show” in local parlance). The maid tells the lady that she has also shared the information by giving “status update” on her Facebook page. This the husband of her employer has “seen,” has given his “like” and has replied with a “miss you” message. From the reaction of the housewife and the punchline of the ad it becomes clear that her answer turns out to be quite an unplayable “googly” for her employer. There is a pun on the word “googly” here as it also refers to the brand-name of the product.

Any attempt of subversion of the accepted mores of social behaviour and the world of sexual morality takes the help of comedy and often makes use of Bakhtinian “carnival laughter.” The world of TV commercials in contemporary India is also no exception. We must remember that the yearning for commodities is by no means an exclusively middle-class affair in India. Members of the lower middle-class and lower class are also equally susceptible to the charms of consumer culture. And for them, fantasy provides the frame for the desire of social mobility achievable through possessing commodities mostly used by members of the upper echelons of the society. Large-scale use of dish TV, motorbikes and smartphones by members of these classes is an obvious example of that. However, domestic maids regularly posting on the walls of their Facebook accounts is still perhaps a rarity as far as the social reality of India is concerned, but probably not for long. Hence, the clever script-writer of this TV commercial takes a little bit of poetic license to create a character of a young maidservant who is heavily into both watching Bollywood blockbusters and being super-active on social media. Watching the “first day first show” of a Shah Rukh Khan-starrer, referring the film as “awesome” and enjoying the compliments of the husband of her employer in the form of “likes” and “miss you” – all these she seems to take into her stride with great élan. Such events seem to legitimise her claim to be accepted as a decent girl, very much like a college-going girl of her age from a middle-class family. Beneath the veneer of incongruity between the “expected” and the actual behaviour of the maid-servant (which is the chief source of surprise and comedy in the ad) lies a not-so-comfortable truth. In metropolitan cities in India today young women of lower-middle-class families also want to replicate the single, independent lifestyle of their educated, middle-class counterparts. Their aspirations are often overdetermined by an intensification of visuals and commodities that always is taking place in the world

of advertisements and consumer culture. This culture has become well and truly a mass culture – a strange kind of level-playing field where many members of the society across the board are vying for acquiring similar objects and achieving similar goals. In addition to commodity fetishism, the other impulse that binds this materialistic society is of course sexuality – both legitimate and illegitimate kinds. The biscuit ad that I have discussed hints at the possibility of a dangerous liaison between the maid-servant and her male employer. That the possibility does not seem weird and beyond the boundaries of the social imaginary is proved by the fact that a realistic anthology film named *Lust Stories* produced in Bollywood in 2018, has an episode focusing exclusively on a passionate relationship between Sudha, the maid and Ajit, her employer.

But that possibility which has the power to subvert a number of social mores and hierarchies is not the point that I wish to focus my attention here. What I am interested in is the contours of an ideology that aims to hide the real conditions of economic production and frames it instead as a discourse of perceived well-being, built upon the acquisition of products whose exchange values lord over their actual use-values. In such a circuitry of a sense of happiness and commodity fetishism erotic yearnings seem to act like a glue. Both male and female selves are fashioned with the glittering and fleeting images of the world of visuals, created by the makers of television commercials in which commodities seem to take on a life of their own as they promise a never-to-be-satisfied erotic pleasure. For the 21st-century Indian consumers, the TV ad-makers seem to create a new moral of the story of the visual culture. It reads like, consumerism is not against the better judgement; it *is the better* judgement.

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