

# Sexism is still Sexy in South Asia

Sexist advertisements and commercials have outraged some sections of South Asia's tradition-bound societies as they embrace free market consumerism. Mitu Varma of IPS reports from New Delhi.

A scantily-clad Indian woman strolls seductively across the television screen and lies down on a car bonnet. The voice-over reveals it is a commercial for tyres.

An insurance company exhorts prospective clients to invest in policies for educating their sons. In the same breath, it tells fathers they should invest money for their daughters' wedding.

Such instances of sexist advertising that exploit women as decorative props while glorifying or reinforcing the gender stereotype are becoming increasingly evident in tradition-bound South Asian societies like India and Sri Lanka.

Women's organisations and other activist groups in the two countries have expressed serious concern and have tried to convince the media about its role with limited success.

Brinda Karat, secretary of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), holds the government's free market reforms with the consumerism that it encourages, primarily responsible for breeding advertisers for whom gender sensitivity is the least of concerns.

For Karat, an even more disturbing phenomenon is the effect the advertisements are having on children.

Five-year-old, Bharu, constantly reproaches his mother, a busy airlines executive with: "Why can't you be like that mummy on television who is always at home to prepare two-minute noodles whenever her children are hungry?"

Shikha, four, tells her mother her clothes are never clean because she does not use the soap 'aunties use on television'.

Says Karat: "Women are always portrayed as passive re-

ceivers in the domestic capacity... as users of soap, cooking oil or such products. In the rare instances where women are shown as professionals, they are more often than not office secretaries."

Probir Purkayastha, a senior advertising professional who has worked with most major Indian agencies, however, feels that advertisers merely portray "a slice of life."

Though it is a fact that more and more middle-class women are now venturing out of their homes to work, they are still the ones who have to do the major share of housework, he says.

"If they prefer to see themselves primarily as homemakers and if such advertising does help sell the product, I don't see why the advertiser should be pilloried," he adds. "After all, the advertiser is primarily a brand custodian."

The argument seems inviolable. But activists say women are trapped in a vicious cycle

that must be broken. And the best place to begin would be through the state-run electronic media that reaches over 80 per cent of the country's 840 million people.

But this they have found is easier said than done. Information Minister Aji Kumar Panja told an AIDWA delegation that the print and electronic media could not afford to offend advertisers because commercials were what kept them solvent.

India's National Commission for Women, which looks into issues that concern women's welfare, has also taken up sexist advertising and is consulting legal experts to see how the law against indecent representation of women in the media can be tightened to remove loopholes.

While the official electronic media is only occasionally guilty of portraying women as sex objects, uncensored satellite television and cable TV which have invaded drawing

rooms throughout the region are having a field day.

In Sri Lanka, women's groups have succeeded in getting an overtly sexist advertisement banned from state-run television.

The visual depicts a woman walking down a dimly-lit alleyway in which a man is shown lurking in the shadows. As the woman nears, the man makes a grab at her, but she walks away with a toss of her head. Cut to the man spraying himself with a cologne and lunging at the woman. This time the woman succumbs.

Women's organisations, and prominent intellectuals initiated a protest letter against the advertisement that appeared in Colombo's state-controlled 'Daily News' newspaper.

Manouri Mutteetuwagama, a signatory on behalf of the Sri Lankan Bar Association, says she objected to the advertisement because it showed that a woman could be taken by violence and its airing in a violence-addicted society is bad."

Sunila Abheysakere, a media-person, speaks for most activists when she says: "What needs to be done is to set up a consistent public campaign for a policy against advertisements that are offensive stereotypes."



## My Patches of Disquiet

Waheedul Haque

On a spree. For the houses were no palaces, except perhaps the architecturally significant Uttara, and some like the petite Shyamoli were plainly mud-built. Each of these residences — Punashcha and Dvarik and Konark were interesting in more ways than one.

One feature that distinguished all of these involved the poet's bedroom. Everywhere this was an inconceivably small space not allowing enough room for the big — 6 feet and 2 plus — man even to stretch. No furniture besides a humble cot more familiar as a *taktopash*, a writing desk, a wooden frame to hang clothes on and a pitcher for drinking water. So, what was it the poet was looking for when wanting so much to move from one place to another? The poet has answered to such thoughts in his inimitable way. A big room was never a cozy thing for him to sleep in. He wanted it comfortably close to his body parameters — after all he was going to sleep here and do nothing besides. And he wanted this to be more than recompensed by having a milieu opening up to the horizon. The ambience is important, it must have all that intimates of living nature and the cosmos that transcends life. He wanted an open unending view, — for his pre-dawn meditation as also for his sleepless nocturnal hours of relentless writing.

When I chose to move into a two-roomed ground-floor flat in the backyard of Rokeya Sarani I ruminated loudly on the Tagorean preferences regarding residences, not only to impress friends who thought my foolishness now stood confirmed for good but more to silence my own doubts about the adventure. What had won me over was that I would now have

a south-facing wee little verandah with a literally heavenly view. Spread before me was one of the bigger water-bodies in this megalopolis. And the sodium lamps of the Rokeya Sarani reflected in that big *dighi* to cast an all-night spell of a sheet of liquid gold. Whenever one queried about my latest hideout I would ask him or her to visit me by the shores of Lake Geneva. Whoever cared to would pass into a state of ecstasy without any prompting. Yes, this was quite a discovery and certainly this was the best view any dwelling can afford in Dhaka. Not only the wonderful lake. There was a big big sky, open in all directions to far far horizons that made the lake change mood every hour of the day — and, yes, night.

The lake, very much man-made and very recent, was unknown even to most people using the Rokeya Sarani regularly. But it had bewitched at least one other fellow beside me in its life of two decades and three. On the main Rokeya Sarani stands a Chinese eatery by the evocative name of Blue Lagoon. The name first reminded one of the popular film of the same name starring Jean Simmons — so popular that it eventually was dubbed into Urdu/Hindi under the name of Sahel-se-Door. After some time it became clear to me that the lagoon was not the romantic eyes of the owner of that restaurant, very much there behind his establishment. He built up his business on the premise that the Blue Lagoon. If ever there was one, existed only there. Inside his shop tables were so laid as to allow cooing couples in love a view of this wonderful lagoon.

Three years have passed after I moved into this bit of a paradise. In order to have an

even better view I jumped to the second floor on the first opportunity I had for doing so. I have now a bigger and better view, no doubt about that. But of what? Not one cubic centimetre of water is in sight when I stand in my wind-blown verandah. The big expanse has been filled with water-hyacinth growing to such compact density that cats and dogs, if not man, can cross it without fear of drowning. Some plants that grow on soil have found the hyacinth-bed congenial enough as their habitat.

At first I deluded myself with the thought of some people coming anyway to clean the lake of the green invaders. When the shores of the lake started being sold out and lowly shanties began sprouting in an unmistakable intimation of a slum coming up to devour my Lake Geneva, there wasn't anymore fooling myself. Gone was yet another big and could-be-very-important water-body from the face of Dhaka city which would soon enough start weeping over such unaffordable loss.

The government is at best indifferent to whatever happens to private property. In truth, there seems to be some sinister pattern behind this apparent indifference. What is happening on the whole stretch of Rokeya Sarani from the Taltola bus stand to Sheorapara is a wholesale property loot robbing the whole area of its sky and all of its wonderful views. When the government has been so particular about greening this part of the Sarani, why is governmental care failing to see the mushroom developments on the side of the road that had all the potential of becoming the best avenue of the city — an afternoon promenade for all in the city.

If action is not taken to stop the rape of Rokeya Sarani before the year is out, I can promise the authorities a new sprawling slum, one of the worst possible, rising up in two years' time.

fact, the problem of the University of Lagos is internal and is complicated by indiscipline on the part of the outgoing Students' Union leader and his clique."

Now, a panel constituted by the University to investigate cult activities has suspended seven students for various acts unbecoming of undergraduates of the University."

Soyinka condemns the ac-

## Archaeological Monuments

Continued from page 9

suffering from the impending decay and destruction.

It is the duty of the government to ensure more scope to provide further opportunity to learn more about the past. What is representative of cultural identity of each nation is its impartial account of the past. More research on the part of our archaeologists

should be encouraged and further excavation works should be taken up in the ancient historical sites to gather more information. Government aids are surely required for this challenging purpose. What we can preserve at present will be a constant source of interest to the generations to follow. An awareness of the importance of preserving our national heritage should be promoted among the public. It must be realised that the loss of archaeological inheritance is irreparable.

REVILLE, scold, rebuke or the like are expressions of your anger which takes language as its vehicle. This is the non-lethal weapon of inciting or exciting nature and prepares ground for physical assault. When anger rides the vehicle of language, the throwing is highly accented and softness takes leave. The artist in man, his cultured and composed state of countenance temporarily suffers demise. Language has its own negative armoury — hurting, insulting and insinuating.

Loudness often changes the meaning of the expression. If one says that Mussolini was the son of a cobbler, it is no abuse. It is just a statement of fact. But if the claim is made loudly in an angry voice with the intent of hurting Mussolini, dead or alive, it becomes reproach or revile. Its Bangla equivalent is 'gaal'. Gaal or gaali is no objective information and not at all a noble utterance. It is a vocal beating and is intended to malign the person. Its English synonyms are many — abuse, chide, scold, injure, mar, vituperate, libel etc. Modulation, voice pitch and anger are ingredients of 'gaal'. To these is added the ugly facial countenance when 'gaal' is hurled. Brother-in-law or sister-in-law in Bangla are the sweetest persons who trail behind the weeded wife or sister and join your establishment in her wake. But when you utter the words 'Shaalaa' or 'Shaal' to an unconcerned person it eats all the sweetness off the relationship and 'gaal' is born. Gaal or revile is an window of your anger and settles the issue at minimum cost.

Sometimes non-expressive silent projection of ideas or gestures assume the character of reviling. William the conqueror, the Viking King of tenth century once laid siege to a river-side port in the present day Normandy in France. The inhabitants hanged up a dried animal skin on city walls, suggesting the heredity of William. Otherwise a harmless exhibit, it was insulting to William because his grandfather traded in and tanned animal skins. Reacting violently to this revile he used the local people as the fodder of his catapults and hurled many of them alive.

To express disgust or just to hurt people, many call enemies 'bastard' a common reproach. But William, this Viking King, was a real bastard because his mother was not legally married to his father. William accepted this fact without shame and he used to

## Distant Drum

M N Mustafa

sign: Gulelmu. Nothus — William the bastard.

Some Bengali words, if used and uttered in other language particularly in Urdu and Punjabi, assume all ingredients of rebukes and reviles. Urdu synonym of Bengali *hair* is an abusive term in Bengali. Similarly some of the words in these languages become absolute reproaches. While studying journalism in the Punjab University a class friend of mine one day suggested — 'Yaar, Bangla ka goal to sunao' — friend, tell me stories of Bengal. Just baptised to smatter rudimentary Urdu or Punjabi, I did not understand what he meant by 'gaal' and therefore followed the golden rule — remained silent. Later I came to know that 'gaal' in Punjabi means to talk or narrate. In Bangladesh every region or district has its local crop of 'gaal'. Dagu Bardhan, a one-time stage and film actor was having a hair cut in 1952 when the language movement was at its peak. To set his anxiety at rest the barber wanted to know from Dagu the consequences of having Urdu as state language. Without hesitation Dagu informed the barber that he would have to cut at the same price what in Urdu was called hair.

Recently I came across a lexicon — Dictionary of English and American Abuses. The areas to which the vulgar words or rebukes referred are almost similar to ours, such as those concerning heredity, 'son of a bitch or son of a pig'. Its common Bengali echo — *kuttar bachcha* or *shuoror bachcha* are common reviles. Some harmless innocent and unqualifying words in one language assume indecency and vulgarity in another. Since rebukes and reviling in writing amount to slander or libel and punishable under law, we use them mostly in talks, often in his pitch of the voice. In Christian West, to hurl abuse on Muslims or Islam, the Christians often named dogs and cats after the name of some Muslim celebrity. The phrase 'to give a bad name to the dog and call it' originated from here.

Although the Creator exhorts us to talk decently 'Kululinnasy Husnan' (Al-Quran) — 'tell decently for the people' we tend to descend to lower level. There is a raging controversy over the male-fe-

male ratio in using abusive language. The verdict, being inconclusive, has left an arithmetical quiz — the women resort to reproaches more than men during eleven months and they do the least in February. Because February has the smallest number of days. But many will not agree although 'nagging women' is a sobriquet earned by women, not men.

To hurl abuses at enemies and non-conformists in fealty or indecent language was frequent in medieval times, almost common in ancient times particularly by the powerful.

Taimur Lane could never spoke a word without vulgarity or abusive term in the sentence. This was perhaps because of his rough and rustic childhood and youth. Halaqu Khan, the ruthless Mongol who burnt Baghdad had hardly any sweet words on his tongue. The ninth century Viking King Olaf of Norway, after the conquest of Sweden, desired to marry the Queen of Sweden. Sigfrid, who agreed to wed but refused to abandon her pagan faith. Olaf struck her in the face with his glove, saying, 'Why should I care to have thee, an old faded woman, a heathen jade?' The abuse covered the body and faith both. Some proper names, by virtue of their deed, attain abusive character. The names of Mirjaaf, Quisting, Harmad, Feraun etc. are proper names but have become connotative.

In official communication, rulers at times leave imprint of their wrath. Nicephorus I, the Byzantine emperor, refused to continue payment of taxes pledged by his predecessor. Queen Irene, to Caliph Harun Ur-Rashid. Instead, Nicephorus I demanded return of the tribute already paid. Nicephorus wrote an audacious letter to Harun, Caliph Harun in an angry note replied:

In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. From Harun, commander of the faithful, to Nicephorus, dog of a Roman: I have your letter. O son of an infidel mother. The answer shall be for your eyes to see, not for your ears to hear. Salaam.

In modern statecraft the reviling has been replaced by

diplomacy, subtle and suave, often with sugar-coated 'aide memoire' or note verbale. The language of these letters may conceal the tough and stubborn official stand told in carefully selected terms and words. Yet many top leaders, often carried by high emotions, burst up in feathery language. It is more true of leaders with forces background. Adolf Hitler was noted for his abusive tongue. I have heard a Bangladeshi leader, what they call, *bull shitting* on the manager of sports team which could not bring home even a medal of cow dung from Asian games. Nikita Khrushchev while attending a meeting at the UN thumped the desk with his shoes.

In literature, abusive and vituperative words and terms are often used to vilify characters or persons. In the epic *Bishad Shindhu* by Mir Mosharruf Hussain one comes across words, dialogues or monologues which chided and reviled villains. Bankim Chatterjee and Ismail Hussain Shirajee are noted for the manner they tainted characters and hurled abuses. A poet here abused another powerful poet for his aspiring to become a poet. The sword proved powerful than the pen when the challenging bard suffered some harassment. Mohitlal Majumdar who was among the first few to use Arab-Persian words was chided vertically by his literary opponents in the following language:

Hushiar, hushiar  
O aashay kalo shar  
Take care, be careful!  
Here goes the black ox!  
Mohitlal was black in complexion and bulky in volume and hence the hit.

Sometimes politicians dig at each other. These may not be abuses in crude form but suggestive of the same in subtle form. A Tory MP in British Parliament claimed that he was a self-made man; he would promote the causes of the hardworking people. A Labour MP retorted, by becoming self-made man the honourable Tory MP relieved the Almighty God of a great responsibility in transforming the raw clay into a Tory MP. The British politician Gladstone and Disraeli were political rivals. Some one wanted to know from Disraeli the difference between misfortune and calamity. Disraeli replied that if Gladstone fell into the Thames it would be a misfortune, but if anybody pulled him up it would be a calamity.

## The True Story of Queen Margot

by Jean-Marc Dupuich

Isabelle Adjani recently finished filming 'La Reine Margot', directed by Patrice Chereau. That scandalous and legendary name, popularised by the writer Alexandre Dumas, concealed Marguerite de Valois, whose life was more than a novel.



MARGUERITE was born in 1553, in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. She was the daughter of King Henri II and Catherine de Medicis. Her father was accidentally killed in a tournament when she was 6 years old. Her mother was to reign over France as regent and the adviser to her sons who followed one another on the throne. Francois II, Charles IX and Henri III.

## The Wait

by Rabiul Hasan

I fight — it's time — it's right — and am torn to pieces fighting.

— Robert Bly

The half-asleep December moon  
Leans over the shunting yard.  
The frost-coated sleepers lie  
Invisible beyond the signal.  
And the station, aloof from the town,  
Dormant in the darkness

From Fargo, North Dakota,  
I am expecting my parents,  
And my brothers and sisters,  
And Philippa my beloved.

I wait — the train coming late — and wait till midnight.  
We wait like this when we expect our loved ones.  
If we die in another land, we will arrive in coffins.  
Our loved ones will wait late for us.

I pace 'up and down' the platform  
Watching the moon peering out of the clouds,  
Then disappearing into the darkness again —  
Swallowed by the grayling interior of the light.

How long the train shall take to arrive!  
I stand there alone, with attenuated heartbeats,  
Waiting as I wait for a thousand years.  
Then suddenly I see the stationmaster's face, coming toward me.  
I weep — it is true — it is certain — and am torn to pieces weeping.

Rabiul Hasan is a citizen of the United States of America. His work has appeared in more than forty periodicals and anthologies in the United States and Canada. He is listed in A Directory of American Poets and Fiction Writers.

'The Wait', previously appeared in Impressions: A Collection of Poetry and Publications of the Mississippi Philological Association.

## A Question

by Nazim Mahmood

Father often said:  
Look at the light,  
not at the darkness —  
There's your emancipation.

He said again:  
Find out the goodness in man,  
not his faults —  
That is the humanity.

He said further:  
Build a house under the shade of love,  
a house without walls —  
That is man's religion.

Papa, do you know  
How awfully dark it is now around me,  
How obnoxious is the filth and smut under my feet,  
How small is my existence with thousand walls within!  
So long with your hand in mine  
Like a child walking step by step  
At last where I have arrived at!

Did you then tell a lie, papa?

## Pirates Become Buccaneers

Continued from page 9  
compiling reports from our various institutions and liaising with other law enforcement agencies to tackle the cancer-worm.

"We cannot build institutions for science and technological advancement and allow them to be taken over by mystics and cults," he commented.

Dr Ayu also lamented that "the nation is going through a despicable phenomenon in our school system. Our collective psyche has been assaulted by the trade wave of secret cults on our campuses. Bizarre killings, intimidation, violence and indiscipline precipitated by the activities of secret cults on our campus is daily on the rise."

Not everyone is convinced by the assurances of action. The Lagos University Students Union justified taking the law into its own hands earlier this

year because of what it alleged was the University authority's tacit connivance with other powerful Nigerians not to expose and bring to book secret cult members because they are the children of the high and mighty in society."

The students also accused the police of releasing suspected cult members, who had been handed over to them, without proper investigations.

Expressing dismay at the Students' Union actions, University Registrar Dr Adebisi Omotoso said that "while the Senate condemns in its totality all cult activities, Senate cannot equally condone acts of hooliganism, lawlessness, and gangsterism."

The police also denied the accusations. Lagos state Police Commissioner James Danbaba said that "to the best of our knowledge, the three students are not cult members." And he added: "As a matter of