

# 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 scantly-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 Bhanu, 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 "aunty uses 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 house-work, 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 Ajit 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 Muttetuwegama, 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 Abhayaekere, 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 *Uttarayan*, 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 involves 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 an humble cot more familiar as a *takatopash* 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 noontide 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

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 any day 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 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 his 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 did not come from the film but was, to 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 coddling 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

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 indiscretions 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 unbending of undergraduates of the University."

NKECHI NWANKWO is on the staff of *The Champion* newspaper in Lagos.

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

Archaeological Monuments

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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.

**R**EVILE, 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*. *Gaol* or *gaal* 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 Bengali 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 *Shaaf* to an unconcerned person it eats all the sweetness of the relationship and *gaal* is born. *Gaaf* 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 his grandfather because he was a

trader 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

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