



Lux soap



Olympic battery



Pakiza saree

| PERSPECTIVE |

UNFORGETTABLE JINGLES OF THE SILVER SCREEN

SAIQ'A S CHOWDHURY

I woke up one day with a song stuck in my head. For the longest time, I couldn't recall where it was from. After two hours of obsessive tinkering on YouTube, I found that what I was remembering was one of the catchiest tunes from a Star Ship commercial of the 90s that would appear on BTV. Ah, the classic Bangla commercials with their catchy jingles and memorable punch lines—who can forget them even after all these years!

Remember “Maachher raja Ilish, ar battir raja Phillips!”? There was a time when everyone was saying it, from the kid at home to the shopkeeper down the street. The story unfolded on a typical day at a village where a mother wants to show her affection and hospitality to her son-in-law. She sends out her son to get some fresh fish, who brought home some hilsa for his brother-in-law. Sprawled on the floor was a delicious platter of food, but the lighting in the area was so poor that the son-in-law expressed his dissatisfaction as he could not see the fish bones. The mother instructs her son to replace the bulb with the one used in their *boithhok khana*, and once installed, the son-in-law exclaimed in pure delight, “*Ki tamsha! Shaob fokfoka!*”—and, of course, made the famous proclamation likening the king of fish to the king of bulbs, Phillips.

This ad was so loved that I am curious to find the statistics of Phillips' sales from that period. I bet it spiked quite a bit, especially in the rural areas. Few would debate the affections of a proud mother-in-law towards her daughter's husband—a theme quite relatable to our people in both urban and rural areas. Tapping into these simple human (and in this case Bangali) emotions ensures the success of a good advertisement.

Some of our jingles are also worthy of mention. The unforgettable melodies in Olympic Battery (“*Alo alo beshi alo!*”) and Star Ship Condensed Milk (“*Beshi shaad, beshi laabh, beshi cup cha!*”) were reflective of the youthful spirit of the time—a little grungy, a little bohemian, and very much the cassette-tape generation! However, my personal favourite was the one from Meril Fresh Gel, with its lively theme and popping sound effect of water droplets. The visuals were also very intelligent, as it showed off the toothpaste's colours and flavours, each with a flash of fun and specially characterised graphics, including one cleverly drawn out of Piet Mondrian's works.

The storyline for a lot of commercials involved the innocence of young love, the pursuit of your beloved, coming of age, and transitions. There was a time that we, the city-dwellers, were going through a big change. The city was expanding northward and a lot of young couples were moving out to an apartment of their own. This was a time when the joint family started



Philips lamp

dissipating. Childhood homes were being left behind and such has been the case even in my own life. Leaving behind my *Dadubari-Namubari* was utterly painful and this pain of nostalgia was a very common theme during this time of transition in the urban community. How the child grows up and reminisces about old times—running around, playing with grandparents, getting scolded, flirting with the neighbouring boy or girl, studying in the evenings, family gatherings—and comes back to the present life in a smaller apartment. Even through the changes in time, there was the familiarity of the product weaving the new with the old. Companies such as Red Cow, Jui Narikel Tel, Danish Condensed Milk, Berger Paints, and others had used such themes, and it is interesting to note that it was during this period of change. Unsurprisingly, this was also a time when there were quite a few ads about new residential areas opening up, like Shinepukur, which entailed a spark of independence for the young working couple.

Speaking of reminiscing, why do I not see saree ads anymore? Whatever happened to the catchy tunes of Pakiza Print, Shundori Print, Nandini Print? Whatever

happened to the adorable, quirky wife sticking a note at the back of her husband's jacket for the world to remind him to buy her a Bou Rani Print Saree? Honestly, I miss them the most, especially since I see increasingly less young women wear sarees these days, which perhaps means these ads need to make a comeback!

I truly miss the depiction of the typical *Bangali Romoni* in our commercial narratives. The young girl with her knee-length hair, her *teep*, and her *anchal* spread like wings in the air, sometimes speaking out to the audience in a husky, alluring, highly-feminine voice. During my childhood, Bipasha, Shomi, Bijori, and Mimi were some of the popular ladies dominating the silver screen, stealing the hearts of men and women alike. A particular Lux ad with both Bipasha and Shomi exemplified how young women looked up to them—they were the faces of confidence and success, and the epitome of feminine Bangali beauty.

Before them, often in black and white, the silver screen was charmed by the likes of Shuborna and Diti. That generation of artists had a level of sophistication that remains unparalleled, even today.

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| BOOK REVIEW |

“From Heaven Lake: Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet” by Vikram Seth is a 1983 travelogue about the author hitch-hiking through China in his student days. Much of the book dwells on the journey rather than the destination—Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Starting from Turfan in the northwest province of Xinjiang (Sinkiang) in China, it culminates two months later, back in the author's home city of Delhi, India.

Chafing at the tediousness of an organised group trip for foreign students by Nanjing University, where he was a student, Seth stumbled on an opportunity to get permission to go to Tibet. Travel in China at the time, for foreigners, was strictly regulated and expensive. Seth writes that he obtained permission for “a song and a walk.”

*'No family, no world have I
And nobody's love ...'
'Ah! My chest is covered with wounds.
I am struck by the arrows of fate!'*

— Awara Hoon', from *Awara* (1951)

One evening in Turfan, following a musical performance put on by a local troupe, Seth and his fellow foreign contingent were urged to perform. Seth sang the theme song from the Hindi film *Awara* (The Wanderer), which is hugely popular in China. On a walk the following morning, Seth stopped on impulse at a police station to attempt to get Lhasa on his travel pass. The officer and a friend (who had heard Seth's performance the previous night) and Seth get into discussing Indian films, *Awara* and its leads. Voilà! Seth managed to get a rare pass to travel to Tibet.

With air travel proving too expensive, Seth settled on hitch-hiking through western China to Lhasa that summer. Originally intending to fly home from Hong Kong, he decides to also then cross the Nepal border with Tibet and go home to Delhi from there. This is indeed “by a more interesting route” as Seth cryptically wrote to his family in a letter before departing.

On the road

In his interactions with locals in the places he travels, Seth reveals interesting particulars of China such as the fact that Uighur, the language spoken by the Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang region, was initially written using the Arabic script, but then changed to Latin script, before reverting to the original in a government turnabout. This led to families with the middle generation being unable to understand the writing of either their parents or their children.

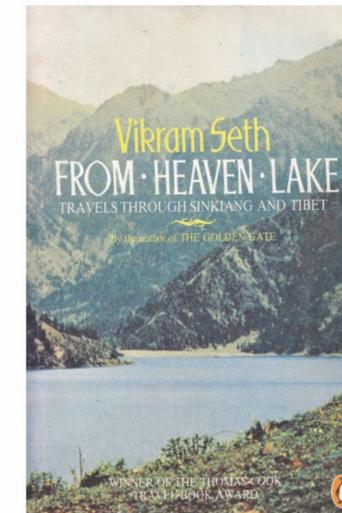
Seth recounts the kindness of the many people he encounters, who help him out on his travels in China. An old Uighur shopkeeper, on learning Seth is from India, stitches a cap more firmly for him because he “will be travelling a long way.” A police officer in the town of Germu, while grilling Seth about complying with regulations, completely changes his attitude when he sees a family picture of Seth's and learns that he has been away from his family for years and was going home for the holidays. Seth feels that the people of China showed “a remarkable warmth to the outsider from a people into whom a



PHOTO: COURTESY

TRAVEL, IN AN ERA GONE BY

MALIHA KHAN



suspicion of foreigners has so long been instilled.”

This is what forms lasting memories of China for Seth rather than just the monuments and scenery he sees: “One's attitudes towards a place are only partly determined by the greatness of its

history, or the magnificence of its scenery. When I think of China, I think first of my friends and only then of Qin Shi Huang's tomb.”

In the midst of his travels, Seth ponders the point of his travels: “Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future... What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometime seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias.”

Seth acknowledges that he wanted to go to Tibet because of “the glamour surrounding the unknown.” Despite knowing little of the climate, landscape, religion, or history of Tibet, Seth attempts the journey, that too by the route less travelled. He finds a lift in a truck going to Lhasa, the only ride available to hitch-hikers and an option unthinkable for less hardy foreigners.

It is this part of the journey that is given most prominence in the book. Seth's companions are Han Chinese and one Tibetan, all jammed together in the front of the truck. Seth is forewarned of the ill-comforts of the impending journey—endless waiting if roads were flooded or buried in a landslide and extreme cold and sparse air up on the plateau, among others. He decides to stick it out and the companions' time on the road passes with getting to know each other, which surprisingly takes some time though they are, for the most part, sharing extremely close quarters.

An excerpt from a poem written by Seth during a particularly arduous part of the journey captures this paradox.

*“Here we three, cooped, alone,
Tibetan, Indian, Han,
Against a common dawn
Catch what poor sleep we can,
And sleeping drag the same
Sparse air into our lungs,
And dreaming each of home
Sleeptalk in different tongues.”*

Crossing over

On the penultimate stretch of his journey, Seth traversed by foot from Zhangmu in Tibet to the border with Nepal. Crossing a stream in which a woman was washing clothes, Seth only realised he had inadvertently crossed the border when he was stopped by a Nepali customs officer emerging from the trees behind.

With so much emphasis on citizenship and the sanctity of borders at present, it is difficult to see that crossing a border can be just as unobtrusive as it was for Seth. In light of the refugees crossing into Bangladesh over the past three weeks, we may choose to remember that the border is exactly that, an invisible line, which makes little difference to the daily lives of those who dwell on the periphery.

“From Heaven Lake” is a story of travel in its most adventurous form—uncertain as to means and hopes of reaching the destination, expected hardships and unexpected rewards, and memories and acquaintances made along the way. ■