

Parables of the Market: Advertising, Middle Class and Consumption  
in Post-Reform India

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## **ABSTRACT**

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This dissertation presents an ethnography of market dynamics in India, following state-directed economic liberalization during early 1990's. The decade of the 90's convulsed Indian society deeply through an aggressive and top-down economic reform program, while at the same time, militant Hinduism and lower caste movements sought violently to capture and dominate social space. Engaging this social context my dissertation looks at the market forces, which hitherto were a subordinate partner to the paternalist Indian state in the cultural production of meaning and identities, take the center-stage and move out of the shadows of a tactically receding Indian state, and strive to re-establish hegemony in a highly contested, fraught and charged politico-cultural field.

The dissertation then analyzes the corporatist understanding and viewpoints of contemporary India's economic standing and prospects, highlighting their own projects and ambitions that appear uniquely tied to their self-imagination of the role they are poised to play in the emerging shape of economy and society in India. In the process, I show that the concepts, frameworks and classificatory schemas used by corporate houses to understand, capture and represent the Indian social, which first and foremost involved constitution of an immense ethnographically based epistemological cartography of Indian society, are neither neutral, nor transparent, but rather, inflected and laden with a desire to conquer a social field that is already ideologically rife with neo-liberalism and Hindu fundamentalist motifs. I suggest that the aforementioned strategies of publicity and

advertising – and the advertising industry is the focus of this dissertation- are not averse to symbolically borrowing and encoding neo-liberal and religious faith as everyday commonsense. By extension I show how the production of their vision of the ‘new India’ quite undermines the Nehruvian vision of secularism and its juridical schemas of inter-religious tolerance and co-existence, of socialism and its ethic of labor and production, displacing it with a late-capitalist, neo-liberal, middle class conceptions of consumption and enjoyment.

## **Table of Contents**

Chapter 1 Introduction	1-74
Chapter 2 Kal Par Control: Thinking Risk and Life Insurance in Contemporary India.	75-126
Chapter 3 Kare Bhitari Shakti Ka Vikas: Dabur, Advertising and an aesthetic of body and health	127- 171
Chapter 4 Branding India	172-241
Conclusion	242-256
Bibliography	257-271.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Picture I, Fevicol-----	P. 53
Picture II, Fevicol-----	P. 54
Picture III, ICICI Retirement Solutions-----	P. 99
Picture IV, ICICI Retirement Solutions-----	P. 100
Picture V, Dabur New Logo-----	P. 146
Picture VI, Dabur, Veer Ras-----	P.168
Picture VII, Dabur Veer Ras-----	P.168
Picture VIII, Tajmahal -----	P. 192
Picture IX, Himalayas -----	P. 200
Picture X, Thar Desert -----	P. 201
Picture XI, Bengal Tiger -----	P.202
Picture XII, Yoga -----	P.202
Picture XIII, Irada Ek Naye India Ka -----	P. 217
Picture XIV, India Shinning -----	P.218
Picture XV, India Shinning -----	P.218

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**DEDICATION**

**To my mother and father.**

## Chapter I

### Introduction

*“The animal urges of Indian entrepreneurs were “uncaged”*,  
Atul Kohli<sup>1</sup>

*The place, which an epoch occupies in the historical process, is determined more forcefully from the analysis of its insignificant superficial manifestations than from the judgments of the epoch upon itself... The basic content of an epoch and its unobserved impulses reciprocally illuminate one another”*

Sigfried Kracauer<sup>2</sup>

*“Don't part with your illusions. When they are gone you may still exist, but you have ceased to live.”*

Mark Twain.

*“Speaking is not seeing”*,  
Maurice Blanchot<sup>3</sup>

*“It is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say”*  
Michel Foucault<sup>4</sup>

This dissertation notwithstanding appearances is not about advertising or just about advertising. Or more appropriately, is about advertising only insofar presumably as “insignificant superficial manifestations” it illuminates, and is symptomatic of, the contemporary epoch constituting the Indian social. Following Kracauer remarkable assertion, I would argue ads, as insignificant manifestations, or more forcefully, precisely because these are insignificant manifestation, they manage to index and convey the emerging nature of changes in attitudes, cultural forms and social relations, or what might be referred to as processes of subjectivation and ascendant notions of sociality. And it is

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<sup>1</sup> The metaphor “uncaged” is not Kohli’s; he is citing its usage in an article in *The Economist* (India Survey, *The Economist*, May 4, 1991), see Kohli: 2004. The conference was organized by Developing Countries Research Center, Delhi and London School of Economics, London.

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Pinney (2001:1).

<sup>3</sup> Blanchot (1992: 25-32).

<sup>4</sup> Foucault (1994:9).

in this sense, ads inflect and refract, and can be treated as the *mise en scene* for, the emerging social configuration, and in that constitute the point of departure for this thesis. It engages ads, and ad industry as a corporate institution, as symptomatic of and indexical of the social transformation triggered by liberalization of Indian economy. Ads as insignificant and surface manifestations, when coupled with its pervasiveness within the social space (even as, or precisely as, *insignificant* symbolic forms) and its proliferation through all available representational registers cease to be insignificant; these become mimetic of the defining trajectories of social milieu. The ruse of ‘insignificance’ consequently, I would argue, is ideological, a matter I will return to below.

One of the possible ways to begin talking about the transformation in India following liberalization of the economy is with a simple question, and one that animates this dissertation: what happens when words and things go out of joint? Or rather when things dislodge themselves from words? What predicament do words and things find themselves in? How do we make sense? What are the consequences of this dislodging of things from words for the social affects, or the affective terrain constituting any sociality? If structurally, as Blanchot and Foucault note (see the epigraph above), what we say does not say what we see<sup>5</sup>, how is this disjuncting doubled, foreground and exacerbated in times of precipitous change and with what social implications? I argue that economic liberalization in early 1990’s was a time of radical deterritorialization where things, affects and words were dislodged from their place in India. The discourses that have taken shape in nearly two decades since reorganized the relationship between affects,

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<sup>5</sup> The chasm separating words and things, discourses and materiality is the staple of the writings of thinkers bunched together as ‘poststructuralists’. For elaborations of the same in the writings of Blanchot, see Blanchot (1992:25-32), and for Foucault, see Deleuze (1987). Also see Vishnupad (1999, unpublished).

words and things, with a dominant role played by the Indian economy and especially the market institutions. In this context while engaging the market institutions and practices in the cultural and discursive production of sociality, my dissertation specifically interrogates the advertising practices as a one of the pivotal sites of discourse production and the nature of its participation in re-territorialization of words, things and affects.

My dissertation presents ethnography of market dynamics in India, following state-directed economic liberalization during early 1990's. The decade of the 90's convulsed Indian society deeply through an aggressive and top-down economic reform program, while at the same time, militant Hinduism and lower caste movements sought violently to capture and dominate social space. Engaging this social context my dissertation looks at the market forces, which hitherto were a subordinate partner to the paternalist Indian state in the cultural production of meaning and identities, take the center-stage and move out of the shadows of a tactically receding Indian state, and strive to re-establish hegemony in a highly contested, fraught and charged politico-cultural field.

Consequently, and it needs to be stated at the outset, this dissertation is not merely or just about a textualist-semeiotic reading of advertisements. Rather, it analyzes the corporatist understanding and viewpoints of contemporary India's economic standing and prospects, highlighting their own projects and ambitions that appear uniquely tied to their self-imagination of the role they are poised to play in the emerging shape of economy and society in India. In the process, I show that the concepts, frameworks and classificatory schemas used by corporate houses to understand, capture and represent the Indian social, which first and foremost involved constitution of an immense ethnographically based

epistemological cartography of Indian society<sup>6</sup>, are neither neutral, nor transparent, but rather, inflected and laden with a desire to conquer a social field that is already ideologically rife with neo-liberalism and Hindu fundamentalist motifs. I suggest that the aforementioned strategies of publicity and advertising are not averse to symbolically borrowing and encoding neo-liberal and religious faith as everyday commonsense. By extension I show how the production of their vision of the ‘new India’ quite undermines the Nehruvian vision of secularism and its juridical schemas of inter-religious tolerance and co-existence, of socialism and its ethic of labor and production, displacing it with a late-capitalist, neo-liberal, middle class conceptions of consumption and enjoyment.

Capital and markets in the “millennial moment”<sup>7</sup> postures themselves as the panacea for or resolution of all ills not least for the middle classes in India. An exuberant capital enfolds and shapes the institutions, processes, places and people in its wake with an overt and naked force it hitherto concealed and now owing to a series of historical and geo-political reasons sees no reason to continue leading a subterranean life. Retroactively rewriting the socialist decades as a gargantuan aberration, it sets itself the task, not least in the desires and fantasies of the middle class and the social imaginaries of corporate India, of re-instituting India in its rightful place in the comity of nation, and largely in the

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<sup>6</sup> I show in subsequent chapters the research based epistemophilia animating not only the market based research firms patronized by corporate houses but also the in-house research divisions of advertising agencies; the discovery of this ambitious recourse to knowledge production, howsoever problematic in terms of rigor, competence and in their failure to follow established methodological protocols of social science disciplines, was astounding.

<sup>7</sup> For a sprawling, and infinitely ambitious (and no less brilliant for precisely that), prologue to the fate of global sociality in the times of late capitalism, see Jean and John Comaroff’s essay in Comaroff and Comaroff (eds.). 2001: chapter 1. The essay breathlessly, almost mesmerically captures and conjoins the diverse array of social processes, and multiple and layered texture of social experiences under the rubric of what the authors call “millennial capitalism”. Aside from indicating the magical accrual of value as one of its significant processes, millennialism specifically also speaks to the voracious claims to salvation the triumphant late capitalism makes. On various ramifications of globalization Arjun Appadurai (1996) remains a major signpost. For a recent succinct statement encapsulating the history of neo-liberalism, see David Harvey (2007).

ascendant geopolitical order. The place that called the shots, for so long occupied by the paternal Indian state now it increasingly shares with the corporate institutions and generally a joyous and confident capital.

The locus of this dissertation is advertising as a symbolic-aesthetic form especially the production of ads in the formal advertising industry in India. Advertising ontologically as a practice and aesthetic genre befits the twentieth century capitalism, in more ways than one. Benjamin drew attention to distraction or distractedness as the mode of being subject of capitalism<sup>8</sup>. Simultaneously lamenting the loss of meditative and measured existence of pre-capitalist era, and overawed and inspired by the social adaptation to frenetic pace of life in a metropolis, Benjamin's ambivalence was subsequently shared by many scholars<sup>9</sup>. Indexing the existential predicament in a metropolis- of abstraction and mediation, enforced and calculable homogeneity as a well as unremitting excess, violent circulation of commodities and universalist-monetary paradigm of exchange and translation- advertising more than adequately participates in and fore-announces the capitalist economy. Further if modern aesthetic practices as cinema, modern-theater and novel demand focused engagement and deliberate suspension of disbelief as scholars have argued<sup>10</sup>, ads are non-serious, seemingly insignificant, not requiring focused attention, and it is in that quality it readily participates in the distracted economy Benjamin speaks of. Ads insert themselves into this economy of distracted awareness or half awareness; these in more ways than one, annoyingly

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<sup>8</sup> See Benjamin (2006). Benjamin wrote at least three version of this essay (citation here refers to his latest one).

<sup>9</sup> For a reading of Benjamin's essay documenting his complex ambivalence, see Samuel Weber (1996: 76-107). We might quickly also note in Simmel's blasé attitude- numbing of senses following their hyper stimulation- the anticipation of Benjamin's notion of distraction (Simmel 1903).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance, Morse (1998: 99-124).

intrude one's representational-scopophilic space, interrupt and even colonize it, and are banally repetitive and inescapable. We could argue for advertising, as does Margaret Morse (1998) for TV and its analogs (highways and malls), that in their semi-fictional orientation where the suspension of disbelief is not a requirement<sup>11</sup>, in their subliminal social omnipresence –in their repetition and pervasiveness- ads are ideologically more efficacious and insidious.

More emphatically, I would argue, in the moment of social transition in India following liberalization and the attendant crisis of master-signifiers (such as socialism, Nehruvian nationalism, ethic of work and production) and the metonymic chain of signifiers it supported (such as conservation, austerity, non-materialism and so on) and the demise of an earlier moment of vertically framed pedagogical aspiration of these master-signifiers furnished by nationalist realism of the Indian State, ad narratives near-surreptitiously operate as ersatz master-signifiers<sup>12</sup>. Precisely by refusing to overtly impose a patronizing ideological discourse (as the Indian state and the formal market institutions did during the socialist decades in relation to its presumed addressee that is the citizenry), by abandoning the position of the master's discourse, ad narrative stubbornly, through reiteration, repetition and omnipresence, weaves itself through the social fabric and everyday social life. In a social context where competing symbolic

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<sup>11</sup> Aesthetic forms such as theater, cinema and novel required, as has been argued, suspension of disbelief; these contemporary forms on the other hand by not demanding concerted attention, operate as Morse suggests far more efficaciously; these literally form the *mise en scene* against which general social experiences unravel.

<sup>12</sup> Elaborations of the categories such as master signifiers, master's discourse, metonymic chain of signifiers and so on will drive the narrative astray and hence I am avoiding engaging them at length here. For a quick summation of the work of master signifiers and the ways in which these hold a discourse together, see Laclau (1996: 36-46), (2007), Žižek (1989: 87-130). For extensive treatments of these concepts see Fink 1995; the concluding chapter of this dissertation engages Lacan's Four Discourse.

clusters (of pro-socialism versus pro-liberalization, of spiritualism versus materialism, of austerity versus consumption, and so on) contest to instantiate the master-signifiers and establish a dominant social narrative, ad discourses deserting the verticality of erstwhile pedagogical-patronizing speech initiate a language of intimacy, operating thereby ever more effectively as the master signifier<sup>13</sup>. But before launching into the consequences of proliferation of ad forms and discourses within the Indian social following liberalization and the corporate vision informing these aesthetic forms, I intend to lie out the skeletal framework of this introduction. I begin with the Ad Asia Congress, 1982 held in Delhi, which invited the advertising agencies working in different countries in Asia to converse on the state of ad industry and the ways in which through mutual exchange and support, its prospects can be enhanced. I use the deliberations on the occasion to meditate on the subservience of the ad industry in India to the Indian state ideologically committed to socialism. Taking recourse to lacanian category of the hysteric subject – the one who is perpetually unsure of its identity and place notwithstanding any assurance offered it by the other- and through a brief excursion into the history of advertising industry in post-colonial India, I elaborate on the inherent elitism of the industry through the socialist decades. This elitism I suggest was the consequence not only of its purported allegiance to the postcolonial nationalist project but also the cosmopolitan middle and upper classes it drew its professionals from. The following section engages the processes of economic liberalization and its consequences for the middle class; notwithstanding the immense conceptual and empirical difficulties in defining the constitution of middle class in Indian context, the section strives to arrive upon a plausible and analytically relevant

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<sup>13</sup> This shift terms of lacanian conception of the four discourses constitutes a transition from master-university discourse to university-analyst (or university-pervert) discourse; see Lacan (2006), Gregg and Clemens (2006); also see Appendix I.



delimitation of the category. Opening up of the Indian economy in its wake, I will subsequently argue, inaugurated a time of crisis of meaning and value as much for the middle class as for the domestic and incoming MNCs. The crisis of value obtained for a conjuncture of reasons: ideological contestations of various hues with that of late capitalist practices and consumption acquiring ascendancy over hitherto extant socialist cosmologies, the gargantuan influx of commodities, cultural and aesthetic forms, not to mention the mediatic invasion: all colluded to invigorate the Indian social reworking, questioning, animating and undermining existing social values and certitudes.

Advertising as a cultural-aesthetic form engaged and participated in this cauldron of shifting social terrain, giving it shape to the extent it could. The presumed crisis of value in 1990s nonetheless presupposes a degree of dominance the Indian State possessed over the Indian social, economy, political processes and its public culture. Arguably over a period of four decades prior to liberalization, the Indian state and its master signifiers or what has been called the discourses and practices of “nationalist realism” by Appadurai and Breckenridge (1996) had acquired currency and efficacy within the Indian social, notwithstanding the presence of practices, narratives and everyday modes of sociality that contested, colluded, diverged, engaged and negotiated Indian state’s avowed and fetishized master signifiers and attendant practices, denying them any easy and absolute ascendancy. And yet, especially for the middle and upper classes reliant upon Indian state’s patronage, latter’s containment and territorialization of forces and processes composing the Indian social was crucial and significant. Liberalization with all its accompanying processes nudged the Indian State from this place of dominance especially in the determination of the contours of public culture, amongst other sectors of social life.

If the unruliness of image and sound were two of the sites the Indian state strove to submit to pedagogical drive, discipline and excise from the everyday social, the market inspired cultural-aesthetic forms, including the ads, decidedly returned to everyday, to the sounds and images animating the everyday social as its point of departure.

I will turn to an earlier moment- the 13<sup>th</sup> Asian Advertising Congress, 1982 held in Delhi as it was recalled by my interlocutors in the ad industry - when the industry was beholden to, as were market institutions generally, the Indian state.

#### Asian Advertising Congress 1982

The five day 13<sup>th</sup> Asian Advertising Congress in New Delhi, Bobby Sista, a doyen of Indian advertising, remembered, was an event of great significance of the Indian ad industry with several famous admen from all over the world gracing it by their presence. The event was inaugurated by the then Vice President of India, M. Hidayatullah, followed by keynote address and speeches by several other dignitaries. Both the speeches –inaugural as well as keynote- convey something of the essence of not only the advertising industry’s place in the scheme of things and state’s near-derisory relation to it, but generally of the corporate world. Hidayatullah in the very first minute of his address choose to recognize the presence of eminent adman David Ogilvy by saying the following: “the account that I read of him (Ogilvy) makes a fairy tale. He certainly has mastered, what Stephen Leacock called, the science of arresting the human intelligence long enough to get money from it”<sup>14</sup>. Sista had to be reminded of the text of the speech, which he did not remember, and in retrospect found it quite odd. It is not known what Ogilvy thought of these remarks, if he took umbrage on this near-association

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<sup>14</sup> Advertising: An Essential Input for Economic Growth, 13<sup>th</sup> Asian Advertising Congress, New Delhi, Sept. 27-Oct. 1, 1982: 8. Henceforth abbreviated as ‘Advertising, Essential Input’.

of his name, life's work and his profession almost with pilfering or generally with money extraction from duped other with or without consent. The oddity nonetheless Sista argued relayed the general social attitudes around advertising, as frivolous as well as marginal to the social demands and requirements. Consider as well the keynote address by L. K. Jha, who was the chairman of the Economic Reforms Advisory Commission<sup>15</sup>, "Ten years ago when I was Ambassador to the USA, one of the most popular advertising slogans was, "try it, you will like it". The thought occurred to me then that these must have been the very words with which Eve offered the apple to Adam. Advertising could then well claim to be the world's oldest profession; it certainly is a hoary one"(p.12)<sup>16</sup>. For a keynote speech of an event of immense importance, the unsaid of the subtext is ominous. Not only is a not so subtle equation, not to mention substitution, with the world's oldest profession hinted at, in naming Eve's coaxing as advertising the premonition of subsequent and eternal damnation is more than amply made<sup>17</sup>.

Hidayatullah's was a cordially disdainful master's discourse that barely concealed or contained its irritation at the presumed extravagance. The speech ignores moralizing or

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<sup>15</sup> He served in the early 1970's as the Indian ambassador to USA, which he for good measure did not fail to mention at the very inception of his speech.

<sup>16</sup> The ad Mr. Jha was referring to was made for Alka-Seltzer in 1971 by the ad agency Wells Rich Greene from Madison Avenue and went on to become one of the iconic ads in USA and was rated at no.13 of all ads made in USA in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Advertising Age; no mean feat this! The ad was re-made in 2006 with the TV star Kathy Griffin playing the lead. The narrative theme of the original-reproduced in the re-make- was gastronomic overindulgence followed by digestive relief produced by Alka-Seltzer. The male protagonist enters a restaurant and narrates the following: "Came to this little place. Waiter says, 'Try this, you'll like it.' What's this? 'Try it, you'll like it.' But what is it? 'Try it, you'll like it.' So I tried it. Thought I was going to die. Took two Alka-Seltzer." The man ends announcing: "Alka-Seltzer works. Try it, you'll like it."

<sup>17</sup> The alliance with the nationalist master-signifier, which I elaborate in this introductory chapter, is discernible. In its semantic density, "liking" signifies a form of jouissance (immersion in commodity consumption), which is inadmissible within a post-colonial nationalist realism. It might also be noted that Mr. Jha went on to make a case for advertising but in terms of its alliance with economic growth, a narrative in circulation in the Indian social from at least the mid 50's if not earlier.

sermonizing about the “how-to” or “what to” do of advertising, a task which most other speakers representing the government of India, for instance, indulged in<sup>18</sup>. In Hidayatullah on the other hand the master spoke in his own tongue. A closer attention evinces with resplendent transparency the undertone of summary dismissal the speech bears. Tongue in cheek, nearly facetious, delivered with an authoritarian assurance and a distinct facility with the language, his speech evinced a suppressed annoyance at the ubiquity of ads, almost an infestation or a plague scourging the social body. He declares, “Advertisements appear in newspaper, magazines, souvenirs and even lamp posts and walls. We are not told the name of street or the way to the airport or hospital. We gather names of mills and cinema. It seems that nothing from a pencil to a jet plane can be sold without advertising” (Advertising, Essential Input 1982:9). Noting this omnipresence he laments the succumbing of the political sphere to the charms of advertising. In sum, the discourse displays spite albeit concealed with some talent, and yet reeking through the edges and clefts remarkably capturing the governmental lack of concern for or interest in the advertising industry. A socialist state could not see without distrust or with suspicion or as anything other than harboring the interests and plans of wealthy and elites, ultimately to be frowned upon and summarily dismissed.

Frivolous, dispensable, marginal, supplementary, incongruous to the demands of the social then; Nehru’s famed irritation with the adverting industry almost under girded and defined an informal official line<sup>19</sup>. What was espoused by the successive

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<sup>18</sup> I might quickly add, the “how-to” and “what to” elicits concern, social and libidinal investment in the industry, an aspect Hidayatullah’s speech was radically bereft of as we shall see.

<sup>19</sup> Nehru was reported to have announced to the Indian Society of Advertisers (ISA), that “advertising is essentially a thing to induce consumption, to make people buy things they do not want” (cited in Doctor and Khan (1996: 51)). As Mani Ayer put it, “Nehru and the Congress were guided by the classic theory that media is a manipulator” (ibid:51). In a nationalist imaginary

governments was publicity, whereas advertisements only tolerated. Publicity, the way in which the public semantic field unraveled acquired a positive spin: it suggested dissemination of knowledge and information, as pedagogical and necessarily indispensable for the nationalist-modernist project (or what Appadurai and Breckenridge have called the “nationalist realism”). Publicity addressed people as citizens and announced the governmental position to the citizenry. Its role was instrumental-functional and devoid of ideological or ulterior motives. Publicized material was government’s mandate and responsibility apropos of the nation. Advertising on the other hand was not conceived as entirely without substance or functional value; as Hidayatullah put it, “doing business without advertising is like winking at a woman in dark”<sup>20</sup>. And yet the analogy, if also by way of negation, with winking at and solicitation of a woman in dark indicates more than a trace of indecency if not outright obscenity that advertising

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where media-as-manipulator thesis dominated, advertising industry was, as Doctor and Khan put it, “doubly suspect”, for “as the bankroller of the media, it was theoretically in a position to manipulate the manipulator” (ibid: 51); the Indian state needless to say, refused to open its media (radio and TV) to the advertising. And especially in the mid 60’s as the populist nationalization drive took over, through Foreign Exchange Regulation Act (FERA), it legislated (Section 18 of FERA) to strictly limit the expansion of foreign owned agencies (ibid:51). The socialist regime indirectly as well created difficulties for the ad industry; for instance, the restrictions on import of newsprint as well of raw film stock limiting thereby the space available for advertising showed up as a matter of crucial concern in several interviews and has been much discussed compelling the industry heads to take recourse to non-traditional media. To quote Subhas Ghosal, “we have billboards, we have propaganda vans, the booth at the mela, the itinerant squad of sandwich boys on stilts. We have posters and leaflets. We have mud-wall of a village hut. Put together in judicious media-mix these could add up to a mammoth effort” (Ghosal 2002:116). Some have insisted as does Bobby Sista, that the problems for advertising notwithstanding Nehru’s irritation with the industry, increased more in the time of Indira Gandhi’s reign; to quote, “While Nehru did not overtly support advertising, the Government did not consider anything wrong with the profession of advertising... These came much later during Indira Gandhi’s reign” (S. V. Sista’s response to Varuna Varma, dated August 1, 1997; private correspondence). During my conversation with him he nonetheless comparing it the contemporary times regarded those as “...rather difficult decades” (Interview with S V Sista, 14, December 2004)

<sup>20</sup> Advertising, Essential Inputs, 1982:8. This theme of winking in the dark seemed to be more commonplace than I had imagined; Navroze Dhondy, a veteran adman, in an interview defending advertising repeated what he called the “old classic”: “Doing business without advertising is like winking at a woman in the dark. Only you know about it and no one else does” quoted in Shatrujeet (1999:127).

consisted in the socialist state's imaginary that ultimately exceeded the functional, and warranted masterly prohibition and containment.

This uncertainty about the place of advertising in a socialist economy was rife and one that the industry shared with the state. One of the leading business publications of the day drawing attention to the theme of the Congress, "Advertising: An Essential Input for Economic Growth" considered it hardly a serendipitous matter, and dubbed it "industry's subtle bid for respectability"<sup>21</sup>. The concerted effort put in by the various agencies in unison amply elicited the investment of the industry as a whole in the event. The very moment they won the bid in the previous Congress at Singapore, a standing committee on advertising (STACA) consisting of the major advertising bodies of the day, namely Indian Society of Advertisers (ISA), the National Council for Advertising Agency (NCAA) and the Indian Language Newspapers Association (ILNA) all moved to action. A full-fledged secretariat was established along with 21 committees attending to various arrangements and a director in Brigadier Gen. E. D'Souza who nonetheless confessed his complete ignorance about advertising while highlighting his organizational skills<sup>22</sup>. The selected and approved venue was the heartland of the bureaucratic apparatus, the Vigyan Bhawan. The choice was symbolic as much as it was logistically sound<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Advertising: through the looking glass. 1982: 64. (Henceforth abbreviated as Advertising, looking glass). The Congress held every two years in one of the Asian countries marks the difference of the Asian markets from the advanced parts of the world, and claims to attend to the specific requirements of the advertising industry in these parts.

<sup>22</sup> By way of eliciting the nature of the times, one might note the joy of the organizers on procuring the latest Sony audio visual equipment (the SPH 6700 WPS) at discounted rates and 60 video monitors roughly catering to 20 delegates each, provided by the leading television manufacturers of the time, Weston, Dyanora Beltek and Televista.

<sup>23</sup> The large seating capacity of the auditorium at 1350 was cited as a prime reason for around 1200 delegates (with approximately 350 foreign and 770 Indian delegates attending).

The fraught lines around the question of its social legitimacy were evident, and in a way was the very object cause of its staging. S.R. Iyer, the grand old man of Indian advertising toed the official line of the industry, which is not to suggest he was disingenuous, defending it on grounds of cosmopolitanism and dialogue, and noted with sincerity, “The Congress is meant to be a window to the world. It will give us a chance to interact with people doing the same kind of work in different environments. A congress of this kind is not designed to improve our day-to-day work. After all, this is not a training course. It has nothing to do with technology and everything to do with understanding”(Ibid: 64). S. Krishnan of Clarion Advertising, more direct in his defense, betrayed the anxieties of the industry: “the fact that advertising has a larger impact needs to be established both within and outside the industry. This has to be provided to key decision makers” (Ibid: 64). If his words elicited industry’s liminality, Ahmed Ibrahim’s, chairman of Everest Advertising combatively expressed the industry’s frustrations. Likening advertising to inescapable processes of social communication he remarked, “Advertising can, in fact, be used as a tool for change and development. Products are not bought or sold merely by being made available. Mass competitive marketing ensures that a consumer has a meaningful choice. Besides, bettering the lifestyle of a person is not a criminal act” (Ibid: 65). If ever an emphatic evidence of its appendage-like status was needed, Ibrahim’s hyperbolic and not so nuanced equation of the industry with criminality, if only by way of disavowal, indicated it with more than ample sufficiency. Some others on the other hand suggested that they come out clean. One director from a leading agency objected to the performative claims of the very theme of the Congress, “The theme chosen proves that we advertising people have a tremendous guilt about our

profession. Why go into such issues as economic growth? Let's face it, we're in this business to make money. I wish we could have had a straightforward professional congress where the focus would be on new technology and techniques" (Ibid: 64). That the director not speak in his own name, and that a public confession of guilt be anonymous is hardly surprising for it let the unbearable truth out, the one that it painfully required to cloak and sublimate through the socialist decades. What these enunciations articulate nonetheless is the oscillation on their self-identity. Even a cursory glance through the writings, speeches, discourses of the better known faces of advertising through those decades, in the very hysteric verbosity and repetitive iteration of its social and developmentalist role drips with the crisis of its illegitimacy. Excessive and unrelenting speech, Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst reminds us, is the sure sign of a hysteric who flails and wrestles against the inadequacy, even illegality, of the signifier that the master bestows on it and that putatively names it<sup>24</sup>. Through the socialist decades, the industry spoke hysterically without finding the signifier that could competently name it and its place in the social scheme of things.

The predicament Ogilvy found himself in could not have been more perplexing. Following the script laid out for him by an ingratiating Indian ad industry he surely sermonizes and preaches the basics of cutting edge advertising, and yet he ends on an

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<sup>24</sup> For Jacques Lacan hysteria alongside obsessive neurosis, psychosis and perversion is a structural and enduring subjective stance framing a subject's sense of and relation to the world; further, these four positions are mutually exclusive. His enunciations on the hysteric are strewn all over his writings through over thirty years of public seminars and hence impossible to locate in one specific text; if one still has to identify a single text on hysteria, especially in articulating the relation between the hysteric and the master-Other, the Seminar XVII comes closest (Lacan, 2006: 31-8). Secondary works on Lacan is an academic industry by itself by now, but for a lucid engagement that does not sacrifice the nuance of his thought on hysteria, see Joel Dor, (1999: 69-105). See conclusion for Lacan's Four Discourses and their relevance for social and cultural forms in India.



ambivalent note that though unexpected he could scarcely be faulted for. Instead of taking up the cudgels thrown at him personally and at the ad industry at large, declares his indecision in choosing between the contrary positions of a Toynbee and Galbraith with their unconcealed aversion for ad as a practice on one end to a Churchill and Roosevelt with their qualified espousal of ad industry on the other, as he concludes with the dilemma: “Which do I believe? Churchill and Roosevelt or Toynbee and Galbraith? Until I arrived in Bombay last week, I believed Roosevelt and Churchill. Now I’m not so sure, it’s bad enough for people to be poor without rubbing it in” (Advertising, Essential Input: 49).

Arguably while the place of ad industry was especially precarious, one could have invoked any number of private industries and corporations, established and fledgling, to elicit this very structure of relations between the state and corporate institutions, which was ineluctably marked by dominance and patronage on one side and subservience and appeasement on the other<sup>25</sup>. In other words, the subservient status of the ad industry indexes with some eloquence the truncated fate of the markets and corporations in the socialist decades<sup>26</sup>. Caught and framed within a command economy, the market, especially the corporations flailed and complained in hushed tones, and even verbosely on occasions, about the control and containment effected by the bureaucratic state

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<sup>25</sup> Gurcharan Das (2000) written in an immensely readable, anecdotal style collects memoirs and reminiscences of a senior corporate professional living and working in and outside the country, enunciating the predicament of market players. While deeply ideologically invested in the neo-liberal reforms, the text surprisingly manages to elucidate with some cogency the world-view of middle and upper middle classes as well as the travails of the corporations during the socialist decades. Interestingly the consistency of his rant against the socialist state can be discerned through his writings and interviews through all these years.

<sup>26</sup> Following Rajiv Gandhi’s liberal policies, 1985 onwards, “business spokesmen reported that for the first time in independent India they had felt as if they were not ‘cheats’ or ‘pariahs’, that they were part of the national mainstream” (Kohli, 1990: 325, cited in Ohm 1999: 82).

apparatus, its legendary license permit Raj and inherent red-tapism, non-transparency, corruption and unaccountability. And yet largely, an equilibrium had obtained, or what following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), what we can call a territorialization of the economy of forces been effected, with the postcolonial state manning its center, and acquiring through the four decades of socialist rule an immense and overwhelming presence within the Indian social<sup>27</sup>.

One of the earliest, almost the inaugural version, of this necessary alignment of ad industry to the discourse of the postcolonial state was articulated in another international fora nearly three decades before, around the time of the birth of the Indian nation-state. Speaking on that occasion, and as a representative of Asia, Venkatrao Sista<sup>28</sup> enunciated a series of claims that nearly repeated the nationalist socialist ideological rhetoric. His address begins with references to “more than half the world’s population” residing in India, he enumerates amongst its plaguing problems, “extremely backward in literacy, means of communication and purchasing power” much of which he underscores will be resolved through industrialization. The advertising fraternity he argued must prepare itself for the growth in purchasing power resulting from industrialization. In emphasizing the special communicative role of advertising in the emerging scenario, he spoke of three stages of advertising. “We are already aspiring to go into the third stage, which it is hoped this conference will lead us to. To put it more plainly, the first stage was ‘Untruth concealed’, the second and the present stage is ‘truth well told’ and the next is going to be

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<sup>27</sup> The question of the nature of dominance of the Indian state has been a matter of immense scholastic debate, to which I will return to briefly; I might quickly mention nonetheless, for the formal sectors of economy, including the advertising industry, the policies, rules and laws were consequential, and in ways in which it could not be for the other sectors of social life.

<sup>28</sup> Bobby Sista spoke eloquently about the contribution his father Dr. Venkatrao Sista to the ad industry (Interview 14 December 2004).

‘Truth plainly told,<sup>29</sup> because truth demands plain speaking’. The question of truth and transparency and the need to ascertain social relevance of advertising was of course not frivolous matter. “ I have often heard it said that modern advertising is anti-social in that every advertiser claims his product is best. The consumer fails to be informed as to which is good, which better and which best”.

He continued, “we have therefore our own peculiar problems which must be solved almost immediately, and it is here that advertising has vast potentialities. Its scope is unlimited. In the narrow sense it no doubt helps us to sell our merchandise and our commercial ideas; in the broader sense it must first sell our social, political and spiritual ideals”. He continues, “If we have the disastrous and soul killing effects of Goebbels’ variety of propaganda, we have also seen examples of how to-day publicity has awakened slumbering nations, popularized the pursuits of peace, unified separated peoples, and conferred countless social and political benefits on mankind. It is this form of advertising that our Asian countries and the their governments need so badly”. Venkatrao Sista’s insistence on the pertinence of advertising industry for postcolonial countries such as India conveys an anxiety that only deepened in the subsequent decades, and particularly following the populist socialism in the times of Indira Gandhi, the effects of which are evident in the Ad Asia 1982. With the unraveling of economic liberalization in 1990’s nonetheless the ad industry as much as other corporate institutions and players will find ways of re-configuring their relation with the Indian State as well as the Indian social. For the ad industry, S. V. Sista particularly noted the shift from “defensive stance to positive

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<sup>29</sup> I will return to this rhetoric of “truth well told” when we turn to Lacan’s university discourse in Appendix I.

and more aggressive one”<sup>30</sup> as it finally found a place to lodge itself within Indian social without having to hystericize itself, produce copious discourse legitimating itself to the Other (be it the Indian state or the Indian Social). My dissertation in foregrounding the practices of advertising as well as the work of select corporations including and particularly the advertising industry looks at the ways in which the market has made sense of and inserted itself within the substantive transformations that the decade of 1990s entailed for India, to which I now turn to.

Liberalization, the 1990s and the middle class(es)

Economic reforms of the 1990s altered the shape of this stasis in the economy of forces and their territorialized form as the relation between the Indian state and market processes underwent dramatic changes. The existing and the emerging lines of flight within the Indian social solicited, tied up, got entangled with and opened up to those from outside the Indian nation-state. This of course took many forms: from intrusion of the foreign capital and commodities, market institutions and processes, mediatic technologies and accompanying cultural forms, increased mobility of labor, persons and communities, politicization of lower castes and ascendant Hindu militancy: all colluded to reconfigure the Nehruvian nationalist realism and its familiar ideological signposts which in any case were feeling the strains for a while now.

In fact, Atul Kohli (2004) in a significant argument has traced the emphatic realignment of relations between the Indian state and the business classes to at least the early 1980s if not even earlier to the late 70s, questioning thereby the mythic place of

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<sup>30</sup> S. V. Sista’s response to Varuna Varma, dated August 1, 1997; private correspondence.

1991 in the transition narratives<sup>31</sup>. In his recounting, a scaling down of socialist rhetoric and planning had begun even before Rajiv Gandhi inaugurated the ideology of the “twenty-first century” in the mid-80’s, which is another date generally recognized as the time when the Indian Republic nudged ever so slowly towards liberalization of the following decade. The folkloric story of economic reforms assigns the balance of payment crisis on the heels of immense loss of remittances and surge in oil prices following the first Gulf War as well as the collapse of Soviet Union, India’s largest trading partner, the responsibility of transition<sup>32</sup>. Underplaying the salience of crisis itself, Kohli demonstrates the ideological use of “crisis” as a legitimating instrument: marshalling credible economic reports, data and statistics, he claims the crisis was not as gargantuan as claimed or projected; instead it was mobilized, most visibly and publicly, to do what the state was doing for a decade now, and henceforth could do some more<sup>33</sup>.

The reason why this new, and in time, definitive alliance remained under the surface of visibility was partly owing to the continued invocation of the populist ideological carapace with the “garibi hatao” (“remove poverty”) slogan as one of its pivotal and still efficacious master-signifiers, and partly due to the complex functioning of a “fragmented multi-class state” which ensured that the tilt go unnoticed and even proceed in fits and starts. The sizable growth rates witnessed in the 1990’s, he argues then, misattributes the economic liberalization for it, oblivious in the process the events

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<sup>31</sup> The year 1991 is universally identified as the year India liberalized its economy.

<sup>32</sup> See for instance, Jalan (ed.)(1992); Bhaduri and Nayyar (1996). For a rigorous work that situates economic liberalization within the longer trends in post colonial economic context, see Byres (ed.)(1998); for Francine Frankel’s update of her colossal masterpiece with two new chapters dealing with reforms see her Frankel (2005). For a work that situates reforms within the Indian democratic machinery and processes of labyrinthine political machinations of the ruling elites, see Rob Jenkins brilliant, but unfortunately less read Jenkins (2000).

<sup>33</sup> As Kohli puts it, “while the macroeconomic problems were real, the government also used the occasion to do what it already wanted to do” (Kohli 2004: 3, footnote 3).

and structural shifts of the previous decades<sup>34</sup>. Notwithstanding, his alternative account of the political economy of reforms, Kohli of course concedes the ideological efficacy of 1990 and the ways in which it transformed the social landscape in India.

### **Defining the Middle classes**

Probably it is more pertinent in the Indian context to speak of the middle classes instead of the middle class for the latter invokes a quasi-monolithic imagery of a relatively homogeneous entity with shared cultural norms and ethical values. While such imagery some might argue is not entirely misplaced, the schisms through the middle class along the lines of religion, class and caste ultimately leaves it implausible. Middle class as an entity acquired visibility in recent times, following the liberalization of economy, and articulations on its character, size and moral nature has mostly been market inspired and media driven; the absence of sociological studies or of any rigorous scholastic work of any substantive value is more or less stark. As Beteille notes, this lack is ironic given the fair relevance of a study of this kind, and the general scholastic activism of a large body of sociological professionals in India (Beteille 2001)<sup>35</sup>. Their focus instead has been on issues such as familialism and domesticity, kinship and communities, religion, tribe and caste. If in the West, for instance, the middle classes have been framed through

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<sup>34</sup>The economy of the 1980's he points out brought to an end the "era of stagnation", albeit it was built on some of the basic foundation laid during that period which he enumerates as "accumulating technology, entrepreneurship and management, trained workers, a sufficient tax base, dense supplier networks, and adequate demand in the economy"(Kohli 2004: 8). Further, notwithstanding the "garibi hatao" rhetoric (used but used sparsely now), Indira Gandhi after Emergency of June 1975 effectively downplayed redistributive concerns prioritizing growth, took anti-labor stance while engaging big business, attenuated growth of public sector industries, and reduced the significance of planning and finance commissions (Kohli, 2004: 9).

<sup>35</sup> This anthology collates a set of essays that speaks to the historical and contemporary formation of middle classes in India. Also see Gupta 2008.  
<<http://southasianidea.wordpress.com/2008/03/26/the-middle-class>> (accessed on 25th Jan 2009); also see Tharoor (2005).

researches and discussions on occupational structures, their social differentiation and internal mobility, similar studies have been surprisingly absent here, and only now beginning to surface (Fernandez 2006)<sup>36</sup>. Absence of reliable data confirming the size and nature exacerbates the situation and contributes to a milieu where profuse and seemingly self-evident claims and counter claims about it circulate unanchored in empirically researched material. The corporations especially in the post reform period, needless to say, have been a major player in this conversation. While this dissertation does not contribute by way of addressing this lack in sociological empirical research, its interest lies in the ways in which it is imagined, thought about, repeated and circulated, i.e., per formatively brought to presence as a conceptual category of some efficacy. To assume though that these corporations are oblivious of segmentation, internal differentiation and variations along the lines especially of region and language in what they invoke and address as the Indian middle class will be patently erroneous. I will argue and hope to show that while the obtaining differences along regional and linguistic lines are explicitly articulated, accounted for and addressed, the one's along religion and caste for instance remained unmarked.

Historically, from its very inception, if one were to trace the genealogy of the middle class in India, its debt to the modern state has been undoubted and its relation to and reliance on it, inextricable. Emerging as a response to the colonial technologies of rule, the character of the class nevertheless was determined by immense regional

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<sup>36</sup> Fernandes (2006) is of course a significant exception in recent times but more focused on the post reform period. Joshi (2001) engages the historical material in the constitution of north Indian middle class. For post colonial India, Varma (1998) makes for an interesting read strewn with perceptive insights which makes up a lack of sociological rigor; as much as Das (2000), it can be usefully read as an index of the social imaginary of the urban middle classes in post-colonial India.

variations and localized articulations of religion, caste, and kinship structure and other communitarian assemblages, and geographical proximity to the colonial centers of power. In a way they were the direct results of Lord Macaulay's dream of a class of Indians who will be brown in color but British in taste and upbringing. The ever sprawling apparatus of the colonial state accommodated them as educators in schools and colleges, lawyers in mofussil areas, petty officials in lower rungs of administration and private companies, journalists and middle men of similar kind. This class also lacked a direct entrenchment in the emerging colonial economic structure. In the absence of an "industrial revolution proper" marked essentially by the colonial nature of economic subservience to the metropole, the rise of middle classes was inextricably associated with the colonial state apparatus. The professional class predicated essentially on its claims to a knowledge system serving the colonial state apparatus burgeoned during this phase. Aside from this emerging class of professionals nonetheless, Beteille (2001) points out, were the trading and mercantile communities such as marwaris who while they asserted their presence in the economic sphere, in their cultural makeup were conservative and traditionally oriented; consequently while belonging to the middle class they staked out a distinct identity for themselves<sup>37</sup>.

During the colonial period, in any event, the middle classes mostly constituted a minority, though following independence its size has grown considerably, but so has the internal differentiation within it. If a traditional hierarchy in the Indian social was differentiated along caste, religion and gender lines, the modern one is shaped by occupation, education and income. If one considers the occupational structure, in the distinction between the manual and non-manual works, the middle classes mostly occupy

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<sup>37</sup> Beteille 2001: 73-86.



the latter category, with the working class proper inhabiting the former. Yet, access to education had implied social mobility for at least certain sections of the working class, and consequently the distinctions along income lines between the lower rungs of non-manual workers and educated manual labor has been blurred. When the employment status is invoked, the middle classes people the category of employees, more than that of the employers and the self-employed, although in the trading communities one encounters more self-employed people than either employers or employees. And yet again when for instance the employees of the state are considered, the bureaucrats at the higher echelons are culturally and economically distinct from those in the lower rungs although both putatively belong to the middle class.

In sum then the internal stratification within what the middle class consisted in too vast to consider it as a homogeneous group. And it is this very heterogeneity Leela Fernandes (2006) notes, that informs scholarly writings on the nature of class alliances in India. Pranab Bardhan (2004: 40-53) for instance identifies the dominant coalition (as the “proprietary classes”) as that of industrial capitalists and large traders, rich farmers and professionals including the white-collar workers. Sudita Kaviraj (1998) speaking of similarly overlapping classes refers to them as the urban bourgeois, rural landlords and the administrative and educated intelligentsia as the significant classes. What is drowned in the process, Fernandes argues, is the specificity of the middle class: all these aforementioned classes for instance partake of the sections of population that otherwise are properly a part of the middle class. Further, the patronage structure on the other hand is not solely marked by externality; on the contrary, the middle class was a significant participant in the state apparatus. The retroactive identification in the 1990’s of the ills of

the socialist decades with bureaucratic inertia of the license-regime and red-tapism, with the trade unionism of the working class and protest movements of the marginalized underclass misrepresents its own collusion with the extant scheme of things and no less hefty presence in determining the trajectory of the postcolonial socialist state<sup>38</sup>.

In the post reform period one of the spaces where conceptions of the middle class will be organized and consolidated is the corporate imaginary. Increasingly there are three broad axes around which middle class is being conceived. One is the conception organized around parameters such as income levels<sup>39</sup>; second, around overlapping regional and linguistic differences; and finally around loose descriptors as old or traditional middle class which was dependant on state apparatus especially the upper echelons of bureaucracy, and the new middle class, which includes the sections from the earlier low income classes who are now active participant in the new economy, middle classes in smaller towns, sections from other backward castes. While the last category is most readily invoked in the ad industry, at insurance companies and other corporate institutions the one based on more statistically anchored category of 'income' is current.

Partha Chatterjee (2011) in a recent series of essays<sup>40</sup> has significantly contributed to the debate on re-figuration of ruling class coalition following liberalization.

Commensurably aligning the categories of "corporate" and "non-corporate" capital to his notions of "civil" and "political" society, he has suggested the ascendancy of the former, that is, the corporate capital in the formal process of capitalist accumulation as well as cultural processes of collective imaginary in post-liberal India especially in rapidly

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<sup>38</sup> Fernandes 2006: 24.

<sup>39</sup> NCAER reports from mid 1980's have framed the classes along the lines of income for instance. See Rao (2004).

<sup>40</sup> Chatterjee (2011), see particularly chapter 10: 208-34.

urbanizing India. Re-working Bardhan's and Kaviraj's insistence on a class coalition of urban bourgeoisie, rural landlords and middle class based urban bureaucracy and intelligentsia as the determining feature of socialist post colonial India (with different coalition partner dominating the alliance at different times), for the contemporary period he diagnoses the dominance-cultural as well as economic- of the urban bourgeoisie and corporate capital. The dominance, not to mention social legitimacy, of the latter notably however is predicated on the concessions it has to increasingly offer to the deprived social classes and constituencies<sup>41</sup>. The story of advertising industry in India in this context bespeaks then the language and idiom of the corporate capital and Indian bourgeoisie in the moment its more or less decisive capture of the state apparatus.

#### Liberalization and the crisis of value

Reforms compelled into existence a regime of consumption, and culturally at the very least, first and foremost, introduced a crisis of value for the middle class. Hitherto laced in a language of conservation and austerity, idealism and socialist utopianism, the ideological regime of valuation or the master-signifiers triumphantly instituted by a patronizing and overbearing national state underwent a dramatic reconfiguration. As the state tactically receded from the horizon, challenged not merely by the reforms and its aftermath, but also politically assaulted by the religious right as well as the rise of the underclass in the shape of lower caste movements in north India, the Indian social,

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<sup>41</sup> Chatterjee in elaborating of the deprivation of lower classes in rural and urban India invokes the Marxian category of 'primitive accumulation of capital' involving the loss of access to or ownership of the means of production, which he also suggests demands of the Indian state commensurable social efforts and measures to contain potentially pernicious effects transforming these lower classes into "dangerous" ones for social stability (the space of these transactions and negotiations of course constitute the very nub and girth of essential activities and practices of what he deems the 'political' society).

especially the established and traditional middle class struggled to re-suture the gaping fissures opened up by shifting taxonomies of sign, meaning and materialities. Confused and energized and shoved into a cauldron where things and words no longer kept their places, the middle class looked for new master-signifiers and the “subject-supposed to know”<sup>42</sup>. Stripped of the assurances posited by proprietary claims over ‘merit’, education, English with ‘propah’ diction, potential access to higher echelons of bureaucracy, of the nationalist ideologies of scarcity and simplicity, the confrontation with emerging lexicon of valuation could not have been more acute. Witnessing the rise of the political and economic underclass with contempt, repetitive recourse to normative discourses, with trepidation and even not so concealed hint of envy, this class wallowed and screamed to soon join in the practices of consumption while still no less desperately striving to retain the moral high-ground<sup>43</sup> as the very sign of an increasingly blurred and indefensible distinctions. Recall for instance the middle class and English media’s response to the “intrusion” of deputy prime minister Devi Lal and his entourage of the elitist bastions such as *le Meridian* in the early 1990’s or for that matter media’s dalliance with Lalu Prasad Yadav later in the decade<sup>44</sup>. Framing of this scene as comical was only one of the

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<sup>42</sup> The recourse through this phrase is to Lacan and his presumption that meaning, the symbolic and sociality ultimately hinges not on reason or rational ordering but master-signifiers, ‘subject-supposed-to-know’ effects and the organization of what he would refer to simply as *jouissance* (translated in English as enjoyment). On master signifiers and the “subject-supposed-to-know”, see Mark Bracher (1994: 107-128).

<sup>43</sup> As Rothermund (2008: 198) puts it, “In general, the members of this old middle class look down upon the new middle class, whom they regard as *vulgar and uncultured*” (italics mine).

<sup>44</sup> The old middle class framed the appalling emergence of rustic Yadav onto the media scene as entertainment; the laughter nonetheless was anxious; “what’s the country coming to” was the usual refrain. Santosh Desai (2010: 216-7) speaks of the same discomfort with Mayawati: “We cringe when an important Indian who doesn’t speak the language well interacts with anybody western; we feel smaller vicariously. The sense of foreboding with which the middle class views the prospect of Mayawati becoming prime minister has less to do with caste ... and more to do with an overall demeanor of which her inability to communicate well in English is a big part”.

ways of containing the threat that intrusion bore, no more an aberration the old middle class began to apprehend. Allure of lucre was too luring nonetheless to pass off albeit not without imposing one's own ground rules howsoever flagging and conciliatory. What one discovers in the writings of commentators such as Gurcharan Das and sundry, notwithstanding a contrary veneer, is a language of inevitability, resignation and concession on the face of the rising tide. The new middle class, on the other hand, always knew the battle was political and cared less for the moral pieties of the earlier regime, which it amply recognized incapacitated it, and was geared to keep it out of the game. Both obviously as well as with cognizance it flouted the master signifiers of the old middle class; it avidly and openly consumed, exhibiting with joy and aggression, displaying its possessions, garish and aesthetic, for everyone to see.

The crisis of value – symbolic as well as material- was universally felt and was scarcely only the predicament of the middle classes<sup>45</sup>. To quote extensively from my interview with Bobby Sista notes, “1995-96 particularly but the 1990's in general caused upheaval in India, (in) Indian markets. Remember this was not the first time India saw such goods or influx of commodities. Till mid 1950's it was like that only till the government came down heavily with import restrictions and all that. People who are being euphoric about now have not seen that time, that era of consumption. But something happened in mid 1990's. Values, prices of things went up dramatically. People were still buying things and to most it did not make sense. They were buying cell phones but still using the pay phones to call. Teenagers squabbling with parents who grew in a

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Briefly, Mayawati is the leader of lower caste political formation Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in north India.

<sup>45</sup> The notion of value I invoke refers to a whole array of registers, moral-ethical, materialist, numerary, monetary-quantitative, and generally speaking the very sense of the world.

different time for expensive shoes and clothes, it did not make sense to them (the parents). Materialist values set in for sure, but it was all about showing, exhibiting, flaunting, and it did not make sense to the(ir) parents' generation". The crisis of value Sista speaks eloquently about is not a frivolous one. One might recall that while the markets opened up in 1991 the real impact was only felt a few years later. It is by then that the Indian social was beginning to be inundated and swamped by the sheer materiality of the commodities- branded, unbranded, fake and locally manufactured commodities – all circulated and jostled within the social space for attention and addressees. Appadurai in a recent essay with characteristic perceptiveness alerts us to the chaotic materiality that landscapes, constitutes and gives thickness, if you will, to the everyday social life in India (Appadurai 2006)<sup>46</sup>. With a certain recalcitrant stubbornness, this thick, dense materiality refuses, he argues, appropriation by or sublation into symbolic or semeiotic form and refusing thereby the clarity of sense. This argument nonetheless, as perceptive as it is, in the very generality and ahistoricity of its claims fails to acknowledge the qualitative difference and the very experience of dislocation that the gargantuan material infusion of the mid 1990s introduced in India. Words and things literally were out of joint as it were. As commodities of all kinds invaded the social space, the existing ideological-linguistic cartographies struggled to map and make sense of them. These engender in Eric Santner (1990) terms (albeit invoked in a different context), "stranded objects", which are material forms that have for the moment failed to acquire a proper address and remain inassimilable in the available and reigning

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<sup>46</sup> I will return to this essay in the following section.

discourses, triggering a crisis of value itself<sup>47</sup>. The crisis of value Sista as much as scores of others I interviewed spoke about were not pointing towards merely a normative crisis with the visible substitution of a Nehruvian ethos of austerity, productive labor and prohibition by that of consumption and immediacy of gratification; the crisis of value in a more fundamental sense I am arguing was an existential, phenomenological or if you will, a materialist one; the latter specifically because what one witnessed is the very inundation of the Indian social by commodity forms without necessary ideologies of legitimation. Clearly, a series of other intertwined factors concatenated to poignantly inflect the crisis- the cultural invasion through opening up of the air channels, the political assault of a more militant Hinduism and more organized lower caste movement, the increased porosity of national boundaries facilitating motile peregrinations across and back, the forced recession on the national state from the cultural horizon- all contributed to the dislocation of sense and meaning as things too were floating and moving, finding it difficult to anchor themselves. It is in this context of unsure values, unanchored things and floating meaning that the neo-liberal market players, corporations and advertising industry soon cleared a space for themselves and became one of the fundamental purveyors in the reconstitution of the Indian national imaginary. Meanings, things and

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<sup>47</sup> Rigorously speaking, the stranded objects in Santner's narrative (Santner, 1990) are not limited or reducible to unassimilated material forms; the category, rather more capaciously, points towards both material as well as apparitional bodies without seeming density or thickness. The latter are no less effective in animating the subject or the social on account of their ghostly character; more appropriately these resemble the Lacanian category of the real or the extimate. This spectrality is the very consequence of the unsettled nature of the social; unmapped objects and spectral forms condition and form one another and co-exist. On lacanian category of 'extimate', see Miller (1994), Gueguen (2006). This conception questions and complicates the rather simplistic, historicist understanding of relation between subjects and subjects construed as one of the socially constituted mutual reciprocity, stressing therefore the category of excess and outside etc. (see footnote 52 for extended commentary on this).

values settled and found feet at the very least for the middle class as the ethos of consumption took roots by the early years of this decade.

And yet when the MNCs entered India they were hardly settled and were very much a part of that crisis. In fact, the narratives of initial hiccups experienced by the MNCs in the early to mid-1990's have almost acquired folkloric consistency in the corporate world including the advertising industry, and recurred in myriad conversations with the professionals; the very acronym MNC, one of my primary informants, Arvind Mohan, referred to as 'multinational confusion' or Alyque Padamsee, the renowned bespectacled adman of India, dubbed as 'Misreading National Culture'<sup>48</sup>. The MNCs' rush to India, premised on 250 million people consisting the strong and burgeoning middle class, was severely misplaced, a fact they quickly confronted. Rama Bijapurkar, a well-known and respected market consultant recalled in a conversation, "Company after company made a beeline in mid-90's. I don't remember the names of all of them on the top of my head, but there were many...hoping their stuff will be bought. But they went bust, well not exactly bust but had to rework their strategy soon. No one was buying their stuff, expensive stuff. Indian middle class was not used to these things, expensive things with boutique prices.... The place was swarming with things with very limited buyers. No one (the companies) was sure how to sell these things. Interesting those years, soon they will learn how to sell and the middle class what to buy and what not to buy"<sup>49</sup>. And she would reiterate the same in her book: "Consumer India has been the source of belied expectations and frustrating resistance to conventional global offerings. Never before has any market been so rebellious about what it will embrace and what it will not. Nokia

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<sup>48</sup> Cited in Kohli (1997: 39).

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Rama Bijapurkar, December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2003.



wins. Coca-Cola and Pepsi struggle. Honda wins. Mercedes struggles. LG and Samsung walk away with the market. GE appliances don't. Levi's lags behind expectations. Nike limps along. Diageo does not make a big splash, STAR tv has had many rethinks, MTV localizes, Kellogs still struggles. Heinz ketchup doesn't catch on. Beware! Consumer India offers as much pain as gain and there will be no walkover for the global big brands that don't think through their India strategy from the ground upwards"<sup>50</sup>. Following the same argument Padamsee ruminates on Coke's misadventures in India, "Coke is under the impression that they invented the world, and Coca colonization is very easy. All you have to do is roll out the coke machine and everyone buys it. Not true"<sup>51</sup>.

*The Thing itself and the crisis of value*

Arjun Appadurai in his essay, already alluded to, "The Thing Itself", alerts us to chaotic materiality that landscapes the social existential predicament in India (Appadurai 2006). In main, he argues, this materiality impedes its abstraction, or sublation into semeiotic forms unlike in developed West. In other words, the translation, given the coarseness or more precisely the profusion of things is refused. "This sense of the luxuriance of objects and of their comfortable place in order of things is everywhere in Indian life. Indian society is a panorama of piles, stacks, bunches, bundles, baskets, bags among which people appear, as laborers, as shopkeepers, as vendors, as housewives and as pedestrians, making their way through endless landscape of things, ranging from most precious to the most ugly and filthy. Things meld into bodies, especially in Indian society, where objects provide the material for people to sleep on, to live in, to rest on, to buy, to sell, store, to repair, to trade, to scavenge and to display" (Appadurai, 2005:17).

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<sup>50</sup> Bijapurkar (2008: 3).

<sup>51</sup> Cited in Kohli (1997: 40)

This profusion of things or absence of “minimalism” or “enchantment of multiplicity” is what defines the Indian social. It is a place literally bloating and bleeding with profusion of things, where minimalism is alien to social sensibilities, and multiplicity enchants, and consequently, to name such an economy of things as one of scarcity, as is usually claimed in popular discourses, seems to be paradoxical and a mis-nomination. On close inspection, I’d suggest we could arguably recognize the complementarity of scarcity and profusion. Where commodities are limited and hard to come by, things are amassed, miserly hoarded, secured and protected with life, and displayed and exhibited when demanded; life of every commodity is long and seemingly endless. Cars, scooters, bicycles, refrigerators, cameras, VCRs, furniture, utensils and sundry, all are for life, for more or less individuals revenues are limited, exchange values of these commodities are high, even when available. Things then are not refused and thrown easily; they are used and re-used, and when discarded as waste, these are re-circulated by the lower social strata, re-appropriated, re-possessed, gifted, surrendered or handed over, and the life of things subsists. In other words, in the economy of scarcity, the social brims with profusion of things as these are relentlessly circulated and they acquire multiple lives and after-lives till these are literally ground to dust. In such a space, he notes bodies and things meld into one another, borders between one and the other blurred. Further, as he presciently notes if abstraction and mediation define economies entirely submitted to exchange, India where profusion dominates and boundaries of bodies and things are not sharply delineated, the economy is chaotically suspended somewhere between gift and exchange economy.

What he fails to remark nonetheless is the qualitative difference of the neo-liberal times of abundance. The infusion of material forms in the form of commodities of all varieties and their accelerated circulation I would argue exacerbates the profusion and existing confusion. In the newly instituted neo-liberal economy of abundance where the practices of hoarding and amassing nonetheless continue to dominate the social swells uncontrollably with things. And it is in this transition to abundance and its different texture and tactility, the qualitative difference of the new times needs to be noted and acknowledged, which in a sense Appadurai fails to remark<sup>52</sup>. Confounding the already chaotic scenario is the displacement of extant languages, narratives and ideologies of austerity, conservation, non-waste and recirculation of waste venerated in the previous era as much by the socialist master narratives or signifiers of the state as by the modern articulations of Hindu philosophical assumptions in the shape of Gandhian stress on minimal materialism amongst other several national and regional variants<sup>53</sup>. Consider this ethnographic account by Purnima Mankekar of her trip in 1993 to Connaught Place in Delhi: “I am hit simultaneously by claustrophobia and a dizzying sense of vertigo-the visual stimuli almost seems unbearable. As I snake through the cars parked on the streets and negotiate my way through the vendors selling their wares on sidewalks, I am stuck by the density of the visual field that I encounter...One of the visible markers of the “new

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<sup>52</sup> In haste I might quickly mark my difference from Appadurai on another count. His account of materiality proposes the traditionalist conception of mutuality of constitution of objects and subjects in a gesture of reciprocity (this reciprocity of course can alternatively take the form of sharp demarcation of boundaries or inextricable entanglements refusing sublation and ‘clarity’ of thought) (See Appadurai 1985, 2006). The proposal here instead is to assert the refusal of reciprocity and mutual co-constitution, indicating thereby conditions where words and things are “out of joint” or non-contemporaneous (while belonging to the same time). See Spyer (1997), Pinney (2005b).

<sup>53</sup> For a text engaging the ways in which Gandhian ethic of minimalism aligned itself to the socialist statist imperatives of modern industrial developmentalism notwithstanding their radically distinct philosophies, aims and ambitions, see Frankel (1978: 3-27).

economy” is the profusion of billboards and neon signs, which advertise an overwhelming array of commodities...Imported and indigenously manufactured cosmetics, clothes, and home appliances fill store windows and noisily jostle with one another to claim my attention...I get a sense of how these newly available commodities have not only saturated the visual landscape but also have boggled the imagination of so many residents of the city...(Moreover) the commodities I now see were unavailable before the liberalization of the economy-except as contraband...” (Mankekar 2004: 413-4). This narrative, in other words, attests to the profound discontinuity –as material-visceral, visual-semeiotic- the new economy marked in the 1990s.

Consequently, aside from the continued and continuing confounding of bodies and things the crisis of sense and meaning I would suggest was aggravated by the contestation of ideologies as the narratives of consumption still strove for legitimacy and the extant edgy narratives of socialist austerity struggled and flailed and conceded ground. In other words, the gargantuan material infusion secreting and invading a place of already immense profusion found no narratives to easily hinge itself onto, compounding the a priori difficulty of sublation of material forms into semiotic idioms, and in that the new crisis was one decidedly of the language or more precisely, the failure of language. Where the relation between words and things was already messy, where words did not always draw sharp lines of distinction between bodies and things, the inundation of things from outside as well as its profuse production inside the nation-state, at the very least provisionally threw it out of gear in say the mid 1990’s till by early decade of this century contesting ideologies redrew the fences and lines of combat, now in favor of neo-liberal philosophies of consumption.

I would argue, in this time of provisional crisis of sense or value and meaning, where definitive narratives of “how to engage” (or alternatively an adequate and socially legitimated hermeneutic matrix) with the emerging social conditions are absent, caused and exacerbated no less by the newly arriving or emerging material forms that advertisements as aesthetic and semiotic forms insert themselves in<sup>54</sup>. Needless to say, ads albeit visibly prominent owing to their relentless proliferation across social registers of representation, were only one of the discursive-visible forms, and in that their role in making sense of the newer conditions cannot be overstated. And yet in their joyous participation in the emerging post-liberalization regime, in their social omnipresence even as nuisance and excess, I suggest, they begin to anchor and shape meaning and value. Further, in a sense their symbolic efficacy resided in their excessive and annoying presence; these almost formed a backdrop to any representation, be it television or cinema, or textual forms such as newspapers, magazine and the like, or general urban landscape. Operating as the *mise en scene* it framed the template on which other representations unraveled. Functioning then as inescapable template through sheer accumulation, it embedded itself in, what in the advertising jargon they call, the public’s “mind space”. While subject to addressee’s inattention or distracted attention, it utilized

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<sup>54</sup> I will argue using Lacan that such moments of disjoining of words, things and affects effectively ensue psychotic social conditions. Lacan clarifies psychosis as a clinical or social condition where the mediating third term of the symbolic fails to dialecticalize “experience”; suspension of the intervening rigors of symbolic thereby propels the subject(s) into the phantasmatic world of non-sense, haunting, and despair in the long-term. Alternatively, in times of transition involving the collapse of the extant master signifier without the emergence and institutionalization of the newer one, the void of the real shows itself, causing much social anxiety and incertitude. The task of the newer master signifier is precisely to domesticate and contain the threat of this “void of the real” by producing newer narratives to re-organize social desires, projects and practices; in other words, the newer master signifier is borne with the work of re-animating the social fantasy, concealing the threatening void of the real. The labor of the critical scholar on the other hand is that of the analyst: to sustain the focus on the ‘produced’ nature of these fantasies by speaking and addressing the addressee from the place of that void. I will return to these reflections in the concluding chapter.

several genres or modes of address- tutelary or pedagogic, humor, irony, fantasy, mimesis of the fabricated everydayness and so on. Following Jacques-Alain Miller's re-characterization of Lacan's perspective on contemporary capitalism, I would argue, advertisements address the subject from the place of lack and of what Lacan called the *objet petit a*. Synoptically put, if therapy, especially in the Lacanian psychoanalysis, consists in the analyst addressing the analysand from the latter's place of lack and thereby drawing his attention to its logic and mode of functioning, the market (including ads as their iconic symbolic forms) in late capitalism presumes to address the consumers from that very place of lack. To render greater clarity to these formulations I will return to them in the latter part of this introduction.

### **Indian State, Public culture and the Politics of the everyday social life**

The strategic recession of the Indian state from economy and generally the public sphere is not an event that is either insignificant or can be understated by any stretch. The rhetoric of 'transition' from a socialist economy to a late capitalist one, in its seeming and inevitable naturalization of the *progression* conceals the near-cataclysmic character of the process, and is not a mere repetition of similar transitions in global elsewhere, conveniently staging the denouement of capital, furnishing yet another evidentiary proof for say, Francis Fukuyama's "End of History" thesis. The claims around similitude bury the specificities of local histories and life-experiences of the Indian social. Arguably, the postcolonial Indian state, its governmental apparatus and ideological carapace over the four decades of its existence had gradually but also irrevocably left more than just an indelible trace of the Indian social. The vast institutional machinery and its attendant

practices had spread nearly through the nook and corner of Indian society; its pervasive and patronizing presence within the Indian social with its didactic language and ideology of secular-modernity and of socialism organizing identities, sociality, communitarian ethics and nationalist economy performatively instituted its own regimes of truth, notions of legality, taboos and transgressions, and certainty of material-visceral, phenomenological forms and frameworks, or instituted in other words to use a Deleuzian category, a “territorialized”, national assemblage; or alternatively to invoke Appadurai and Breckenridge’s felicitous phrase again, a “nationalist realism” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1996)<sup>55</sup>. Arguably in the four decades of its existence the modern state had succeeded in the acquisition of “dominance with hegemony”<sup>56</sup>.

The question of the reach of the Indian State and the postcolonial nationalist realism and its impact on the public culture generally remains a vexed one. Arvind Rajagopal summarizes the issue thus: “Since independence the task of development has been predominantly understood as economic, with culture being treated as a residual category. With the labors of the state directed elsewhere, ‘national culture’ has largely meant official propaganda indifferent to its reception... The notion of national identity promoted by the Indian government was in many ways similar (to USA and UK), but it was little known beyond a segment of the predominantly Hindu, upper caste, middle and upper classes” (Rajagopal 1996:1659). Possibly one could profitably take recourse to

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<sup>55</sup> See also Despande 2003a.

<sup>56</sup> The reference of course is to Ranajit Guha’s celebrated indictment of the coloniality of the colonial state: its inevitable foreignness and engineered distance: as much a structural limitation as the very condition of racialized colonial rule. (Guha 1997). Notwithstanding the debates on the nature and extent of reach of the postcolonial state through the four decades following independence, even the staunchest advocates of limited spread are now pessimistic about availability of social sectors or arena uncontaminated by the modern state (see for instance Ashis Nandy 2001: chapter 1, 2). See also Chatterjee 2011a.

Kaviraj's notion of overlapping concentric circles in determining the nature of identity in India, and the consequences of statist imposition on it (Kaviraj 1992); identities, he argues, are multiple and overlap, are locally and temporally articulated and specific. Relative distance from authorities, structures and processes of social and political power determines the purchase of these powers on the organization of sociality and the notion of self and identity within communities and peoples. Given the limited reach of the state apparatus and its ideologies and processes of rule, localized and regional articulation of power, culture and meaning had greater say in the ways in which people, especially those distant from the Indian state, determined their lives and ways of being; while this was more true during the colonial times, to certain degree this is valid even during the postcolonial times.

Appadurai and Breckenridge in this context characterizing a more contemporary moment-the time of globalization- invoke the category of "public culture" to speak of the space between the continuing socio-cultural projects of nation-state and the mobile as well as concrete communitarian forms including the sites of domesticity, enchanted, animated and decidedly reworked by mediatic forms<sup>57</sup>. The term public culture amasses for itself a terrain that mediates the domestic-familial with the nation-state, gestures towards a conjuncture and mixing of social forces- of late capitalism, statist fetishizations, swarming media forms, agitated modern and non-modern cultural forms-

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<sup>57</sup> In their felicitous phrasing, public culture designates, "the space between domestic life and projects of nation-state-where different social groups... constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life" (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995:4-5).



transcending the venerated and now defunct categories and divisions<sup>58</sup>, pointing towards a sociality increasingly mired in ‘generalized perversion’.

Characteristically, the manifested public cultural forms or the public culture were inseparably entwined with the authorized cultural discourse and forms, or the master signifiers of the state without mimetically repeating its narratives, nor stancing a discourse of opposition. Mbembe’s theorization of the postcolony in this regard is relevant (Mbembe 2001). Postcolonial predicament of living is not simply one of opposition or resistance or submission or capitulation to the commandment of the sovereign; and yet if for Mbembe’s Togo or Kenya and other African countries it is about living in the shadows of omnipotent sovereign state, and thereby fabricating the particular socio-cultural responses of sociality and subjectivity, in formally democratic India, the public cultural forms were conflated, inflected, detracted and diverted by the master’s discourse without being determined by it; it effortlessly or at least seemingly effortlessly dug into sources and resources the state neither controlled nor could control, and in that addressed the very vibrancy and rich and specific genealogies of these forms in India<sup>59</sup>. And in that sense Pinney’s declaration of the non-dominance of the authorized or non-popular culture (or elitist culture, as he calls it also), makes sense: “In India, ‘public culture’ is only intermittently opposed to an authorized cultural discourse. It is not characterized at every turn by its fundamental ontological alterity... and the authorized

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<sup>58</sup> In the inaugural essay for the journal *Public Culture* Appadurai and Breckenridge (1988:6) defend the term thus: “The term *public* is not neutral or arbitrary substitute for all these existing alternatives [popular, mass, folk, consumer, national or middle class]. Nevertheless it appears to be less embedded in such highly specific Western dichotomies and debates as high versus low culture. With the term public culture we wish to escape these now conventional hierarchies and generate an approach which is open to the cultural nuances of cosmopolitanism and of the modern in India”.

<sup>59</sup> See for instance Frietag (2003).

discourse, which very occasionally disparages it, is –although it might be termed elite-hardly dominant. It is a discourse authorized in large part by state agencies but it has little authority and even fewer adherents” (Pinney 2001:11). With his usual deft eloquence, he further writes discourses of various hues and with differing trajectories, ambitions and projects populate the public culture in India without framing their inter-relations in terms of sharp oppositions or contradictions; the relation is more in the nature of mutual inflections, deflections, influences, entwinements and habitations of conjuncture spaces without one having the capacity to totally determine the rest; these in other words, occupy an expansive continuum across which they are uneasily and even convergent laid out.

Consequently, in a sense the master, the Indian state, garrulously spoke to everybody, and nobody in particular, and some listened and most did not or could not hear. Amongst those who did hear, the upper and traditional middle class were a few and from where the formal ad industry drew most of its personnel during the socialist years. I would argue and hopefully show the formal advertising industry was both elitist and constituted itself within an epistemological and cultural framework dominated by the reigning ideologies of the postcolonial state. The master, on the other hand, spoke through its governmental apparatus and its several agencies. While its language and signifiers devolved into the public sphere through the non-state institutions such as the press and Hindi film industry as well albeit in compromised or attenuated forms, in the first two decades of its existence it re-incarnated several state institutions of publicity to expressly propagate its own vision. Coming down heavily on these non-state institutions from time to time it relied on its own slew of agencies to construct and disseminate its

vision for the nation-state. The Film Division, All India Radio, the Publication Division, the Directorate of Audio-Visual Publicity, the Press Information Bureau, the Research and Reference Division formed an immense ideological apparatus working in tandem to spread the word. The postcolonial Indian nation aware of the myriad fissures animating the social recognized the imminent necessity of performing the nation<sup>60</sup>.

### *Fear of the Image*

Instituting a regime of nationalist realism required the paternal Indian state to determine, disseminate, contain and domesticate the images as well as speech, sounds and discourse it both itself circulated and permitted circulation of<sup>61</sup>. Theorists of the image have copiously commented on the intimate viscosity of the visible form (“to see is to touch, feel”) and its inherent semeiotic openness; the cinematic image particularly in its motility and verisimilitude as well as in simultaneously signifying presence and presence of absence invited fantasies and projections<sup>62</sup>. In a social context then where the majority of people were unlettered, the potency of image, the Indian state recognized, was incalculable. Strategies of containment included taming, policing and censorship, excision of jouissance, textual and aural circumscription and containment, control and ownership of airwaves. Britta Ohm (1999) for instance perceptively locates in the Indian

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<sup>60</sup> Of course, the reference is to the performative dimension of nation-state formation on which the scholarly literature abounds; see for instance, Anderson 1983,1991; in the context of India, Roy 2007.

<sup>61</sup> The ambitions of the Indian state and its processes of governmentality were delimited, circumscribed or upset of course by the discrepancy between ambition and its conditions of possibility: the limitedness of resources, variance within the political will, contestatory cultural-symbolic fields and so on. It has to be noted nonetheless this social condition specific to postcolonial societies does not so much index the failure of political power or rule of law or the bio-political regime so much as configure it as an animated social space with floating un-captured energies, productive conjoining of values, laws, structures of regulation and contingency, a dense sociality with ever jostling bodies, pervasiveness of noise and screaming images continually transgressing tenuously established boundaries and rules: in other words, what Mbembe (2001: 102-141) has felicitously called the carnivalesque.

<sup>62</sup> For a classic statement, see Metz (1986).

state's control of Doordarshan the definitive instances of its paranoia of the recalcitrant image and the absolute necessity of containing and domesticating the economy of images and ensuring its alignment to the dictates of nationalist-socialist project<sup>63</sup>. Heir to the anti-colonial nationalist movement and continuing to draw its legitimacy from it, the post-colonial Indian National Congress regime pursued didactic tactics in its relation to the Indian social reminiscent of the colonial era (albeit with significant differences as well<sup>64</sup>). The performative consolidation of nationalist realism potentially demanded the submission of all and every register of representation it could control and determine to this pedagogical drive. Dissemination of high-nationalist state modernism distinguished itself, for instance, from the alternative and no less immense and influential cultural production of the cinematic industry in Bombay. Cinematic images and narratives were disdained at, morbidly distinguished from its own, tolerated and policed. Ashis Nandy, as Ohm also notes, finds in this supercilious disposition of passionate dismissal inevitable trace of envy; Indian state, he argues, would have loved to replicate the reach and hegemony of the cinema industry<sup>65</sup>. The "...fear of uncontrollable image", she writes

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<sup>63</sup> Fear of the potency of the recalcitrant image is of course not limited to socialist regime in India, and similar instances can be multiplied in other parts of the world, for example from the years of communist rule in USSR to the contemporary censorship of images of body-bags from Iraq in recent years in the USA; for an interesting commentary images and control of images, see Badiou (2006).

<sup>64</sup> Difference of the postcolonial from the colonial regime of course are aplenty, not least the sense of ownership of the nation-state, the inauguration of postcolonial nationalist project through the instituting of the Symbolic law through exercises in constitutionalism, practices of governmentality including economic developmentalism and so on, features that mark its discontinuity from the colonial era. And yet in its didacticism in its relation to the Indian social, the lingering continuities with the colonial state can be easily discerned, and it is in this defining characteristic I will locate what Lacan called the master discourse in greater detail in this chapter.

<sup>65</sup> One might quickly note couple of things here: (a) the schism between the idealism of the normative the state identified itself with and the projection of the cinema as catering to the baser instincts, as the very site of jouissance; in other words, the commitment to the nationalist project required the sacrifice of jouissance, a task the cinema industry was ill suited for; (b) the "hint of envy" Nandy speaks of points both to the subjective narcissistic injury of the paternal Indian state

rested on “the basic assumption that the new images were seducing the audience reveals not only how Doordarshan was thinking of its viewers, but how it was thinking of and dealing with television images. The perception of the image and the visual as being dangerous, irresistible, escapist and intrinsically capitalist was created by the pre-definition of the image in the West and by the extrovert images in Hindi commercial film industry. The latter was looked down upon by the state with so great an arrogance that one cannot help but interpret it as envy (Nandy 1995b). Television’s task in India was to civilize the image in contrast to its vulgar exuberance elsewhere- abroad and in India. This taming included contrasting the image to its capitalist use. In this sense, television always belonged to a public sphere which embraced large parts of industry and educational system, and was led by a bureaucracy and its technocrats” (Ohm 1999:75). Image of course was not the only place from where it perceived threat; voice, sound and speech too became, to the extent it could manage, obsessive sites where it sought to institute postcolonial state’s ideal ego, anticipating and hoping gregarious identification from the Indian social.

“Ab aap samachar mein Hindi suniye”<sup>66</sup>

One of the gestures of displacing, if not dismantling, of the national cultural formation instituted by the post-colonial Indian state was to symbolically undo the voice and the language it spoke in. Assigning to itself the pedagogical- tutelary role, and

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as well as to the lacanian claim that undergirding the ideal father is the obscene one (i.e., behind the ideal (image of) father who sacrifices, upholds law and so on, is the one who is envious, craves and solicits recognition, and most of all enjoys). On Ideal and obscene father see Zizek (1992).

<sup>66</sup> It means “now listen to Hindi in news”. It was a joke I heard during my ethnography in Mumbai about the Hindi news on the national radio station, the All India Radio in the socialist years.

aligning itself to the ideology of austerity and production, of citizenry's obligations and duties, the socialist state spoke, as Srirupa Roy (2007) has noted<sup>67</sup>, in its documentaries, newsreels, print and nationalized televisual media, and in its myriad publications and other discursive efforts in a language that was authoritative, and simultaneously devoid of the pulsating rush and intimacy of everyday language<sup>68</sup>. The paternal state, in other words, spoke not in colloquialisms but through antiseptic, puritanical and standardized language, both in its scriptural and aural forms; it spoke exclusively either in 'propah' English and 'shudh' Hindi<sup>69</sup>. Not only were the linguistic strains deemed dialects not uttered but also generally monolinguality ruled; almost nearly English and Hindi were not mixed. The banter in "Ab aap samachar mein Hindi suniye" was more than a joke. In a signature move the Hindi news of All India Radio in the socialist years (even now as a matter of fact) started with the newsreader announcing, "listen to news in Hindi now". Its parodic reversal – "listen to Hindi in the news now"- pointedly conveys as well as mocks the stakes for the paternal national state in not only relaying news and informing the public but also doing so in pristinely standardized Hindi. Albeit said in a different context, Marshall McLuhan's "Medium is the message" curiously and most aptly applies here. In other words, what is conveyed in the Hindi news is Hindi itself, that is, in the performative insistence on pure Hindi; the paternal state fetishized 'proper' cultural forms and demanded identification with it, or literally demanded its embodiment through

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<sup>67</sup> Roy (2007: chapter 1).

<sup>68</sup> Documentaries were immediately recognizable in standardization of their constitutive format. The supervening extra-diegetic voices in which the State spoke were overwhelmingly male, authoritative, elitist in intonation, instructive in its mode and in its monotony dull and signified the figure of the ideal father or the ideal-ego in Freudo-Lacanian terms; in its austerity it bore the weight of state's normative order and injunctions, prohibiting and excising jouissance from the social body.

<sup>69</sup> "Shudh" means pure or pristine; 'propah' is 'proper' in accented anglicized diction.

hearing and repeating, as an adequate mode of model citizenship<sup>70</sup>. This instance in transparently indexing the paternal state's didacticism suggests that what mattered was not only *what* the state spoke but also the *how* of what it spoke; the State in other words, demanded not merely learning through attention to the substantive content of its speech, but also no less emphatically an identification with and repetition of the way it spoke what it spoke. Not a mere recognition, but imitation and mimesis then.

The place of voice in the humanization and socialization of the subject has been assiduously invoked and remarked upon in the psychoanalytic clinic, especially in the lacanian clinic; it is as singularly consequential as seeing of one's image on the mirror<sup>71</sup>. As Marie Janus writes, "For the humanization of an individual, voice has to enter the body and designate it as a resounding and desiring body, a body with voice. The body image unifies the fragmented body and hides it. The human voice dominates and binds up organism's sounds and noises. It triumphs over natural sounds, these mere indistinct, unpatterned and un-regularized sounds... the capacity to respond libidinally to acoustical order and harmony distinguishes the human body from organisms in nature. It is the musical and linguistic order that the human infant is able to link a part of its initially chaotic bodily and affective experience. This auditory experience is as jubilatory as is the discovery of form in mirror"<sup>72</sup>. Extrapolating from the analytic clinic and extending it to the Indian social one can say the following: In its tonal standardization and express

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<sup>70</sup> And yet of course the anticipation of failure of repetition is the very object cause of the Indian state's pedagogic desire, that is to say the inevitable persistence of the chasm between the standardized language and the colloquial renditions continually refueled statist ambitions.

<sup>71</sup> Lacan's Mirror Phase essay (Lacan 2006) is much read, what is ignored though is not only the later complications of mirror phase through notions of gaze and the real, but also the place of voice as objet petit a in the constitution of the subject. See Chiesa (2007) rethinking the mirror phase, for voice as the real, see Dolar (2006).

<sup>72</sup> Janus (1996: 208).

evisceration of the libidinal, the mechanically reproduced voices in documentaries, not least the ones produced under the sign of Indian State, remain machinic<sup>73</sup>; to quote Roy, “...the Film Division will rely on the same individuals to record voice-overs for as many of its films as possible. As a result, the “sound” of the state came to acquire a distinctive and recognizable quality: the distinctive tone of and enunciations of the anglicized baritones of Romesh Thapar and Sam Berkeley-Hill or the modulations of sanskritized Hindi. The effort to establish a regionally unmarked “voice from nowhere” had the effect of constituting a “voice from somewhere,” enabling as it did the identification of how “the state states”” (Roy 2007: 57)<sup>74</sup>. For sure they intrude as the super-egoic “voice of God” or “voice from nowhere” addressing the social, but bereft of jouissance, of the intimacy of the everyday speech, and as the voice of banal prohibition, they remain ineffective in transforming or commanding the chaotic social into orderliness of responsible citizenship<sup>75</sup>. Not that the Indian state was unaware of this disaffection and disenchantment, and not least its inability to inspire the Indian social given the monotony of the very form and content of its address. As a matter of fact it summarily tried to

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<sup>73</sup> By machinic the allusion is to the banality of mechanical logic, not to the profound significance of machines and machinic practices, especially as the Other and in the process their constitution of the human subjectivity and sociality particularly in modern times. For a text rigorously thinking through the implications of machinic reproductions on subjectivity and sociality, see Kittler (1992), (1999).

<sup>74</sup> The other voices aside from that of these two were of Nobby Clarke, Zul Vellani and Pratap Sharma (Jag Mohan. 1969. *Two Decades of the Films Division*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting: 50, cited in Roy, 2007:194, footnote 70).

<sup>75</sup> As Roy in any case, has noted with prescience, without decrying the ideological effects of discursive and broadcasted forms, what holds and constitutes the nation is not necessarily the magical enchantment it invests itself with, but through the very banal routinization of its presence in the social everydayness of a nation’s life. The nation, in other words, entrenches, institutes and naturalizes itself through repetitive iteration in a social space where the people who putatively constitute its citizenry, primary addressee and constituency apprehend it in a state of half-belief, disaffection, disenchantment and even lack of trust; the nation as imagined community then overstates the fantasy of or veers on the side of official nationalisms overlooking the fissures and chasms it performatively sutures, deliberately conceals or amnesiacally forgets (Roy 2007).



address the issue by first and foremost seeking to libidinise it, introduce jouissance that could potentially cut through the social and give the latter a form it desired. Roy quotes from the Chanda committee report, “It is necessary that the objectives of the planning effort should be presented with subtlety, and *be able to hold the attention* and make an impact on the viewing public. They should be proactive and pose a challenge to the community...they should portray the realities of life, pose the problem boldly” (Ibid: 2007:59)<sup>76</sup>. Further, on “aesthetic lack”, she summarizes the findings of the Committee thus: “the penchant for spoken commentary at the expense of visual content; the absence of human interest stories in newsreel, and the absence of humor, satire, suspense ad drama in documentaries” (Ibid: 2007:59)<sup>77</sup>. In fact voice and image will be the two places the market will address, where the “libidinization of Indian social” will begin all over again in the 1990’s<sup>78</sup>. In becoming that object a, the voice and the image will re-enchant the Indian social to the economy of commodities. In other words, the density and girth of voice, the lilt of the masterly speech and the standardized language, excision of drama, humor, curiosity and generally the enjoyment factor or jouissance - in all that the language of command consisted in, the market in the post reform era will consciously

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<sup>76</sup> Italics mine, but Roy also hones in on this matter in her book (See Roy 2007:57-8). Chanda Committee was convened by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting in 1967 to investigate the work of the publicity wings of the government of India (primarily Directorate of Advertising and Publicity, the Films Division and the Press Information Bureau).

<sup>77</sup> Mohan (1969) cited in Roy (2007:194, footnote 70) argues though that these voices gave “flesh” to the cold written texts, and yet as Roy notes one of the limitations the Chanda Committee cited was precisely these documentaries incapacity to animate the addressee, blame resting needless to say not only with the voices but also with unimaginative narratives, drab filmic form and their pedantic character. In any case, the flesh given to the cold text might not be something that the addressee identifies with or could identify with (one of the charges of the Chanda Committee), and it very well might index the narcissistic jouissance of the master i.e., the speech in its unflinching fidelity to proper diction, purity of semantic and syntactic structure, in its lilt and rhythm and flesh, arguably was geared towards not necessarily identification on the part of addressee as much their exclusion.

<sup>78</sup> For a succinct statement on the libidinization of the Indian social in the 1990’s, see Arvind Rajagopal (1994).

undermine, selectively invoke as it will simultaneously claim to reclaim for and return to its addressee, i.e., the public, its own everyday language, and that too in its own voice no less<sup>79</sup>, snippets from ordinary social life, dramatized, with elements of banter, parody, self mockery. In invoking the figure of market I am not merely referring to the ad industry and the advertising discourse but a larger assemblage of processes, institution and efforts associated or affiliated with the market in post liberalized India, and in that the reference is to proliferating TV channels such as MTV and V, news channels such as Aajtak, soap operas, various ‘win-the-award’ shows such as Kaun banega crorepati to Indian idols and their offshoots, programs such as Radiomirchi and its imitators on FM radio, music industry reliant upon the cassette culture, to the very modality of engagement of companies- from MNCs to nationally based ones- with the Indian public, for once we have witnessed a difference of relationship that is stuck between these market institutions and the Indian masses. The emphasis on localization consisted in these efforts to attune itself to the cultural and aesthetic forms they imagined and constituted as Indian. It is in this context I argue using the lacanian notion of *Advertising in 1990’s: “They can see themselves in it”*

Advertising form in its 1990’s version, in its second coming labored to shatter this high-modern cathexis on the proper and the formal. The playfulness that previously only sometimes surfaced in the ad forms, now were beginning to become the basis of that challenge to the proprietary form that allegedly caged the national-social energies in the limiting modernist versions (or “nationalist realist” versions) imagined by the elites and their cohorts. The everyday social life and Indian socio-cultural forms – or more

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<sup>79</sup> I will dwell on the significance of “Hinglish” in this context in the subsequent sections of this chapter.

generally the real of Indian social- was construed and mobilized as the spectral<sup>80</sup> site of this implosion of the formal form and its resistances. Fueling the task of recovery of the everyday social life was the recognition of the MNCs, especially following their initial failure, the necessities of translating their brands and commodities in the idiom of vernacular cultural habits and desires. When the MNCs initially arrived in the early 1990's drawn by the fantasies of a captive and long-deprived constituency of 250 million middle class, they peddled their wares haughtily, without attending to the needs of translation and generally failed (See for instance, Bijapurkar 2008, especially chap 1); they soon nonetheless learnt their lesson, and altered their ways, striving in the process to attune themselves to the local, regional and national assumptions and demands. The nationally based corporations after initial bickering about competition surrendered to its inevitability, and for sheer survival in due course became responsive to the Indian social. The presumed recourse to the real of the Indian social took many forms: recovery of the everyday social life, invocation of Hindu religious motifs under the sign of Indian culture and tradition and the like, and shared the space with the existing genres of advertising. Pidilite's Fevicol ad campaign was one such endeavor.

Fevicol's became one of the legendary ad campaigns through the 90's. "It brought smile to people's faces"<sup>81</sup>, commented Piyush Pandey, the maker of the ad

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<sup>80</sup> The 'spectral' nature of the 'everyday Indian social' and the investment of corporate players especially the ad industry in it, is fascinating: it is 'spectral' for it haunts the craft of advertisers as the valorized point of departure and putative source of inspiration, as mark of its difference within a market place over-proliferated with purveyors of Indian culture; it operates as an ever-receding horizon that paradoxically vanishes the greater the effort to approach it; the 'everyday Indian social' appears in commodity-form which re-instantiates an aura and the ad industry diligently and inevitably produces it, instead of recovering it (and this recovery, needless to say, it appropriates as its imagined and self-appointed task).

<sup>81</sup> Interview with Piyush Pandey, 8 Dec 2004. He repeats more or less the same claim verbatim in another interview: "All Fevicol ads are just our takes on how we observe life

campaign and one on which he planted his signature which became common in due course of time bestowing him an iconic status in advertising industry<sup>82</sup>. The series from the inception transgressed the established codes and aligned itself with the emerging ones that were slipping into images and voices that felt more “Indian”. Briefly, Fevicol is leading brand of the synthetic adhesive company Pidilite launched in 1959<sup>83</sup>. Ogilvy and Mather (O&M), the ad agency had Pidilite as one of its major accounts since 1972. By 1987 Fevicol commanded around 12 percent of the market share for branded adhesives and was the leader amongst the synthetic ones. Nonetheless, its growth had reached a plateau and seventy percent of the adhesive market was still controlled by ‘saresh’ and non-branded adhesive and therefore promised immense profits if tapped into. In this context, the ad campaign O&M launched in early 1990’s became pivotal, and eventually led to it controlling 42 percent of the market by 1999.

The first ad, as Pandey recalled, was actually made not for fevicol but one of smaller brands, fevitite, within the Pidilite stable. Following the intervention of the B.K. Parikh, the long continuing chairman of the company, nonetheless, the ad was deemed fit for Fevicol, their main product. Known as the ‘elephant ad’ in advertising circles, it showed two blocks of wood joined by fevicol being pulled along a rope by several muscular men on either side, including an elephant at one end; all effort comes to a naught as the blocks stay glued. The men while pulling the rope rhythmically vocalize a

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and are designed to make both the man on the street and the international advertising awards jury smile," says Pandey, cited in Fevicol Goes Egypt,

<<http://inhome.rediff.com/money/2005/aug/26fevicol.htm>> accessed on 2, June 2008

<sup>82</sup> Piyush Pandey arguably is the most famous and influential ad personality in India.

<sup>83</sup> Pidilite was established in Bombay in the same year. It claims to be the first company to use synthetic adhesive material instead of the animal fat based adhesives generically known as ‘saresh’.

popular colloquial slogan, “zor laga ke... haisa”<sup>84</sup>. After several tries to separate the glued wooden blocks, they give up as a man walks across the unfurling scene smiling, nearly smirking, and says, “fevicol ka jod hai, tootega nahi” (it is glued by fevicol, it will not break)<sup>85</sup>. The purchase of the ad of course, relies on the rhythmic lilt of spoken north Indian Hindi as well as the whole scene with common, ordinary looking, albeit muscular men, engaged in a common everyday act. The ad was an instant hit with the public, and as Pandey said, “brought smile to people’s faces”. In the next decade and a half O&M came up with series of such ads building on similar everyday social acts, with identifiable faces and dialogues spoken in north Indian dialects of Hindi. What we notice with ads

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<sup>84</sup> Translated as “using force...”.

<sup>85</sup> The protagonist in this ad is Rajkumar Hirani, now a famous film director who during this time was struggling to establish himself in Bombay Film industry.

during this period is the very



PIC I (courtesy Ogilvy and Mather, India)



PIC II (courtesy Ogilvy and Mather, India)

recourse to the ordinary and the everyday, making claims to a certain version of realism; or as Pandey mentions in our conversation, “people liked the ads because they are realistic, and *they could see something of themselves* in these ads. They aren’t being lectured or told to do things one way or other. These ads are, only just, snippets or snapshots of life in India”<sup>86</sup>. If Peter Fielden and Subhas Ghosal amongst many ad professionals in the earlier decades lamented the elitist nature of advertising, what we have witnessed in last decade and a half, is a deliberate and concerted effort by the advertising industry to break away from that genre of advertising. To quote Peter Fielden, who meditating on earlier generation of advertising professions notes, “The fact of the

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<sup>86</sup> Interviewed on 8 December 2004.

matter is that we have peopled the creative side of the advertising business with bright young men and women who are products of a small, well educated, well-placed minority. They have grown up in the vacuum of their own set. Their outside contacts are few and superficial, and as a consequence, they know little or nothing about India as a whole and Indian life at large. No matter how bright or intelligent or hardworking they may be, and they have all those admirable qualities, they are ill equipped to deal in proportions when they are strangers to the people they have to influence” (Ghosal 2002:30). By no stretch of imagination it should be assumed though that either the instructive, tutelary or elitist character of advertising vanished entirely in 1990’s or afterwards. The mode of address is generally a function of the product being advertised, the constituency being interpolated and solicited, the limitations and possibilities inhering the media being used<sup>87</sup>. Further, one of the continuing and recurrent complaints within the ad industry during my ethnography was about continuing recourse to models, celebrities, to narratives, themes, images, cinematic presentations divorced from the lived realities in India. And yet what has also increasingly been visible is the solicitation of cinematic forms and modalities, actors and narratives that more readily represent the Indian social, howsoever skewed, limited and limiting that genre of ‘everyday’ realism might be. K S Chakravarty in the following quote, for instance, complains about the elitist orientation while noticing the changes that have come about: “One of the reasons for this (i.e., for the disconnect from Indian realities) is the historical demand for chocolate faces. In the past, the client used to say, ‘young mother, plastic face, plastic eyes. Plastic nose et cetera.’ Plastic advertising and cardboard cutouts, that’s all. Now, obviously, when you have such models, they’ll act

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<sup>87</sup> That is to say, if it is television or radio, or press or computer screen or simply wall graffiti or door to door canvassing or publicity vans or in a rural mela.



a certain way. They're not natural. But that was what the demand was for. And that was what was supplied. Of course, the clients have become smarter in last three years, when it comes to TVs. They do ask for real people more, these days."<sup>88</sup>.

Transgression with the Fevicol ads consisted both at the level of the word and that of the image. Relying neither on shudh Hindi, nor propah English it spoke either in colloquial Hindi or Hinglish, and the cinematic images purportedly conveyed the everyday Indian social life. If the Indian state with its monopoly over the televisual media sought to contain the unruly image (as Ohm has perceptively suggested), and marginalize colloquial speech in favor of the ideal image and pure speech, the proliferation of private TV channels with the opening up of the broadcasting media altered the conditions. If the elitism of the ad industry was a function both of its submission to the statist realism as well as the upper classes and urban-cosmopolitan areas from where it drew its professionals, the 1990's transmuted the conditions of its operation. Extricated from its own subjectivation as hysteric in relation to the dominant Indian state which in its turn had tactically, and tacitly receded as much as was it was pushed out, it-the ad industry- could now participate in the late capitalist economy without having to be constantly held accountable at every turn by the Indian state. If, in terms of the lacanian four discourses<sup>89</sup> I am striving to propose in this thesis, what dominated in the socialist decades was the master-university discourse, now in the contemporary moment, the ad industry in

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<sup>88</sup> Interview with K. S. Chakravarty, July 01,2001, Agencyfaqs.com  
<<http://www.agencyfaqs.com/news/interviews/data/42.html> > Accessed on 24 July 2005. This of course was a constant theme at both the ad agencies I worked in. Chakravarty also got involved in the industry initiative to locate and identify theatre actors from smaller towns in different part of India

<sup>89</sup> See the concluding chapter for Lacan's four discourses.

collusion with and as a participant in late capitalist economy could thrive in the university-pervert discourse; these claims I will elaborate at length, in the conclusion.

Piyush Pandey's claim on the representation of the social everydayness in ads and the fact that "*they could see something of themselves in these ads*" is a significant one. In alluding to the 'smile' it brought to people's faces, Pandey was expressly speaking to the funniness of ads themselves, and yet that was not all. The smile pointed to more than the ludic ad, and more towards one's self-recognition. For once Indians, the claim is, saw themselves, or "could see something of them" in the ad. The smile then, literally recalls, the mirroring Lacan spoke of, that in a moment of self-recognition on the screen invites jubilation for the subject in his infancy (Lacan 2006c). Not that in public sphere especially in performative arts (say theatre and Bombay film industry) and innumerable other aesthetic cultural practices the Indians did not find their own self-reflection, for these aesthetic forms, irrespective of their origins, colonial or otherwise, were inevitably always appropriated and submitted to translation into local idioms and familiar cultural forms<sup>90</sup>. Advertising industry nonetheless given its subsumption within the statist ideology, not to mention the cadre of professionals it invited from cosmopolitan sections generally beholden to the ideologies of nationalist realism, refused mimesis or a mimetic relation to the Indian social. Mostly it indexed what "should or ought to be", instead of "what is". The Fevicol ads invited smile because the Indians finally recognized themselves in the ads even as this recognition and identification accrued in the form of comedy.

### *Hinglish: Speaking "Indian"*

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<sup>90</sup> Instances of scholastic work alluding to the appropriation, translation and subsumption of aesthetic forms and traditions with local imaginaries and concerns are several; see for instance that Prasad 2001, Pinney 1998, Jain 2007.

“there’s also a certain flamboyance to using a Hindi word in Roman letters”, Denis Joseph, Vice-president, HTA <sup>91</sup>

If speech has been one of the sites of the unraveling of paternal Indian state’s presumed authority, then aside from recourse to colloquial Hindi, Hinglish has been readily used. “Hinglish” is a portmanteau word that conjoins Hindi and English, and involves intermixing, in varying combinations, words, phrases and sentence fragments in speech. While its origins can be traced to north Indian cities and urbanized small towns it has acquired a pan-Indian currency over the decades, not least through Bombay film industry. Shunned by the Indian State, as were most other bastardized colloquial linguistic forms (devoted as it was to the pristine linguistic versions), it has nonetheless acquired respectability in public sphere and mass media through the 1990’s. Advertising industry’s recourse to Hinglish consists, needless to say, in its marking it as sign of authenticity (“they could see themselves in them”, to repeat Pandey’s assertion). Pandey reminded me Hinglish had its precursor in Bumbiya Hindi renditions that had a longstanding presence in Hindi movies but also in the ads by late 1980’s, as in the quite famous “Humko Binnie’s Maangta”, which was one of the first FMCG products to resort to the Mumbai street lingo <sup>92</sup>. One of the earliest that bestowed legitimacy to the colloquialism with the middle and upper middle classes was the Pepsi tag line in mid-1990’s “Yehi hai right choice baby”. Soon Hinglish took off as the idiomatic language of ads. Taglines such as “Uncle Chipps, bole mere lips” inundated not only ads but also

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<sup>91</sup> Mathur 1999a.

<sup>92</sup> See also Mathur 1999b.

music aired by MTV and Radio FM<sup>93</sup>; for instance Alisha Chinai's whole song "Dil Chahiye Made in India" that hit the charts in 1990's was in Hinglish.

As a matter of fact, the ad industry was aware of its linguistic biases. Abhinav Dhar of Dhar and Hoon notes, earlier, "there was a lot of posturing in advertising" where the South Bombay ad folks ended up "talking to two people in Sunder Nagar" (Mathur 1999a)<sup>94</sup>. Several decades earlier Ghosal had identified this problem: "All these years murder of the Indian languages has been committed en masse by advertisers" (Ghosal 2002:140). Elsewhere he says, "We all know that it is important to create advertising in the Indian language rather than translate from the English. But today a new problem has arisen- this is the agency copywriter who feels unfulfilled if he cannot wield western slang. Forgotten is the fact that copy is being written for an Indian audience in a foreign language" and go on to characterize it as "the problem of overly-western or at any rate un-Indian advertising" (Ghosal 2002: 29)<sup>95</sup>.

Hinglish, then makes claims to authenticity, to having returned Indians their own speech. "Dismissed earlier as a fad, Hingis has moved to being a potential youth lingua franca of sorts", reports Sujata Mathur (Mathur 1999a). In fact she asserts it has acquired a "cult status", "not because they were oddities but because they were the language of the

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<sup>93</sup> Shivjeet Khullar, the national creative director insisted that it is more in prevalence in north India, and more so in Radio FM, which he suggested "should be renamed HM (Hinglish Modulation)", Quoted in Mathur, 1999a.

<sup>94</sup> Sunder Nagar is one of the old time posh locality in Delhi.

<sup>95</sup> Ghosal (2002: 29). Many of course made this point. Ghosal cites Peter Fielden, legendary chairman of HTA: "The fact of the matter is that we have peopled the creative side of the advertising business with bright young men and women who are the products of a small, well educated, well placed minority. They have grown up in the vacuum of their own set. Their outside contacts are few and superficial, and as consequence they know little or nothing about India as a whole and Indian life at large. No matter how bright or intelligent or hard working they maybe, and they have all those admirable qualities, they are ill equipped to deal in proportions when they are strangers to the people they have to influence", Ghosal (2002:30).

people” (Mathur 1999b), and quotes Rekha Nigam, an ad professional in Mumbai to good effect: “Advertising is slowly getting over the Raj hangover and coming to terms with the Indian India”, and continues, “Ads today are looking and sounding more real” (Mathur 1999b).

Arguably, the linguistic infestation of Hinglish pretends to give, literally, voice to an ‘imagined’ urban middle class. “Imagined”, for the regional and linguistic variance severely undercuts this homogeneity and coherence of the fantasized middle class. And yet this auditory mode working at cross-purposes, is not without its effectivity. Fronting itself as market’s mode of public visibility, or literally audibility, through its voluminous and reiterative strategies, it performatively engenders the fantasized addressee- the urban middle class- into presence. The performative implications of this vocalization strategy cannot be underestimated. Santosh Desai for instance, argues that the market’s patronage of Hinglish given its compulsions at communication augurs well for it (and compares it to the north Indian dialect of standardized Hindi patronized by the Indian State following independence with remarkable consequence for the spread of the language)<sup>96</sup>. He, nonetheless, also alerts us quite rightly to complexities involved. He writes, “Hinglish is neither homogeneous nor politically innocent. What we call Hinglish is actually an array of argots, each with its own uses and contexts. For instance, we have the phenomenon of Hindi garnished with English words, where use of English either gives voice to a concept that was born in English (department, transfer) or underlines the importance of what is sought to be communicated by elevating its ritual status (yeh mamla bahut urgent hai, ise aaap please seriously lijiye; kya main tumhen hot lagti hoon?) This Hinglish is different from that of casual conversation (Tension nahi lene ka), which is different from when the

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<sup>96</sup> Interview with Santosh Desai 12 Jan 2005.

languages and their grammatical structures are intertwined (Don't maskofy me; chal yaar, aaj bunk marte hain). The combination of technology, popular culture and the cross-fertilization that is taking place within regional and global cultures is producing new set of interactions between languages. Formal structures are loosening, and language is not the totalizing force it once was" (Desai 2010: 219) Having read Hinglish as contextually sensitive and largely as a inevitable symptom of globalization, "loosening" language's "totalizing force", he cautions us "...even now Hinglish is not bereft of any lingering association with hierarchy. The truth is that Hinglish is a rung used by the educated elite to descend to a more relaxed engagement with the world that the one used by the emerging classes to ascend into a world of privilege" (Desai 2010: 209)<sup>97</sup>.

A crucial question then is the nature of what was recovered in the name of the Indian social or the everyday social life at least at two levels: first, is at the very level of choice, intention, selection, mode of cinematic display and raises the question of performativity over that of mere "re-presentation" as the advertisers seemed to claim, and second, the transmutation that informs any displayed object submitted to the mediatic apparatus. Questions addressed to advertising professionals on these themes through my ethnographic work failed to elicit any rigorous or substantive response; the claims of fidelity to the Indian social in representations were oft-repeated with singular monotony. That advertising might participate in shaping the sense of the world amounted for these professionals to attributing greater symbolic efficacy to it than it actually possessed; for them its relation to the social reality was more or less mimetic, and hardly ever

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<sup>97</sup> He continues: "The Hinglish used by those unfamiliar with the language marks them as outsiders even to day. Hinglish as a medium of communication is employed much too effortlessly by those who know the language and choose to play with it, rather than those who don't" (Desai 2010: 209-210).

performative<sup>98</sup>. Performativity was recognized and accepted in so far as the “content” of the ad went, i.e., these could be pedagogic in nature or fantastical and geared towards animating desire, but so far as the representation itself was concerned i.e., selection of cultural motifs, aesthetic forms, scenes from daily life, the putative aim it was claimed was to be faithful to the Indian social.

One such question I had posed to several ad professionals was around the proliferation of Hindu religious motifs as representational of Indian tradition and culture<sup>99</sup>. The responses mostly were defensive, and sought to characterize these, even overtly religious motifs, as partaking of Indian tradition and presumably were not religious. Arguably, the discomfort at the identification of tradition with religion continues to bespeak the recognition of elitist secularist discourse as representative of self. While the movements of democratization and of the hinduization of the cultural forms legitimated in the 1990’s the re-appropriation of “tradition” and the Indian everyday as the site of authenticity and authentic self and worthy claimant of representational space in public sphere, in the discourse of several advertisers, this notion of the “traditional” was ambivalently de-linked from the religious. During a conversation with Kunal Sinha at O& M, Mumbai, on my deliberately provocative and repeated use of religion and tradition as inter-substitutive categories inhabiting the metonymic chain, he categorically alerted me to the implausibility of such interchange and located the category of tradition as one that putatively the work of advertisers engages with and in<sup>100</sup>. This

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<sup>98</sup> One of the commodities where the professionals emphasized on the necessarily performative nature of advertising was life insurance, which I will engage in the first chapter.

<sup>99</sup> See also Rajagopal (1994, 1998)

<sup>100</sup> Sinha’s claims to difference of tradition from religion were more declarative than argued and substantiated. And in any case how sustainable is the collapsing of these categories onto one another, for it easily then raises the orientalist specter that thrived making the same gesture, i.e.,

effort at expressly distancing one's own work and that of one's cohorts from the religious, I'd suggest, is not insignificant. For many especially in the ad industry which is taken as one of the most modern of sectors of the Indian social notwithstanding its populating in recent decade or a half by professionals whose origins and upbringing could be traced to small towns if not rural hinterlands, the ambivalence towards the ascendant militant Hinduism was palpable. While possibly sympathetic to a range of concerns politicized by the Hindutva brigade, the desire to not be identified with the latter or its position entirely was more or less evident. The labored if sustainable at some level distinction between tradition and religion gestured to that discomfort<sup>101</sup>. A more or less similar logic and sentiment informs Rajiv Sabnis (COO, Ambience Publicis) response to a question by Pritha Mitra<sup>102</sup>. On being asked, "Talking about the Videocon Corporate campaign, you have used the 'Gayatri Mantra' to symbolize India. Don't you think Gayatri Mantra is a symbol of particular religion, Hinduism?" he responds, "I am not too sure of that because if you look at 'namaste' (the Indian gesture for greeting people by folding the hands), it cannot be categorized as Hindu or Muslim. It doesn't really have a religious color. To that extent, we used the 'Gayatri Mantra' more to relate to the Indian in us, rather than to give it any religious aspect. The 'Gayatri mantra' is as Indian as a 'qawwali'". He goes on clarify that "...Videocon had just completed the acquisition of

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Indian social is religious. If "auto-orientalizing" has been one of the defining axes of advertising practice in 1990's as William Mazzarella (2003) has suggested, this was one moment where tradition was sought to be extricated from religion, if not in practice then at the very least conceptually so, which is not unremarkable.

<sup>101</sup> Needless to say, I am not suggesting that tradition and religion are synonymous categories; instead what was of interest to me was the invocation, use and circulation of Hindu religious motifs under the name of Indian tradition and the desire to not refer to it as religious; what intrigued me in other words, was this discomfort in referring to these as religious and the motivations behind it.

<sup>102</sup> Pritha Mitra is a reporter for the widely followed web-based portal on ad industry in India <[www.agencyfaqs.com](http://www.agencyfaqs.com)> (accessed 12 December 2006)



Thompson, and that is a pretty big step for any Indian company to take. The challenge was to communicate this to people and the question was how to present this reality. Hence, the use of the ‘Gayatri Mantra’ to say that people are singing praises of India. It was to project the fact that Videocon has gone out of India to become an ‘Indian multinational’. The best way to symbolize this was by showing people all over the world actually chanting an Indian hymn.”<sup>103</sup>. To inhabit the category of tradition was easier and less discomfiting than that of religion, which immediately allowed the outsider such as myself to seemingly recognize their political affiliations and cultural sensibilities. Sinha nonetheless during the conversations acknowledged the significance of the Hindutva cultural politics as one of the significant conditions for the production of ‘tradition’ as the object of desire for the advertising fraternity. The cultural politics of Hindutva and that of the market in the figure of advertising industry were coincident and overlapping but not the same.

### **Indian advertising: a brief history<sup>104</sup>**

The earliest advertising in India were newspaper advertising stretching back to late eighteenth century<sup>105</sup>. The newspapers were replete with classifieds neatly arranged

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<sup>103</sup> December 12, 2005 <<http://www.agencyfaqs.com/news/interviews/data/285.html>> Accessed on 12/ 12/ 2006.

<sup>104</sup> Not entirely unsurprisingly, work on temporal or chronological or even thematic, narrative history of the advertising industry in India is nearly absent. Vikram Pandit, the director of Ad club of India in Bombay, recalled in a conversation that one of the attempts at collecting archival material failed as the trunk carrying the stuff was stolen from one of the metro stations in Mumbai (the same story was repeated by Vikram Doctor). Conversations with several people but especially with Bobby Sista, Gita Simoes (Frank Simoes’ wife), Kersy Kattrak, and Vikram Doctor were most useful. Material generously provided by Frank Simoes’ wife from his archives, from the archives of one of the earliest Indian advertising agencies, Everest, by Bobby Sista and finally the journalistic writings of Vikram Doctor and Anvar Ali Khan have been most crucial in assembling this brief historical narrative.

<sup>105</sup> From the early years of colonial till the first World War two categories dominated the advertising: one was the patented medicine advertisers and second the retailers such as Army &

in terms of categories<sup>106</sup>. Most advertising in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was done by British Business houses and trading companies who imported mass-produced goods to the colonies including India. The newspapers initially solicited advertisers and set up studios to assist in illustration and hired artists and visualizers. With these newspapers studios the first Indian advertising agencies were born. As canvassing agents for the newspapers their revenue was based on commissions. One of the oldest agencies, which still survive was B. Dattaram' and Co. founded in Girgaum in Bombay in 1905 where it sold advertising space in newspapers and public transport such as trams. Many others such as Gujrat Advertising, Allied Advertising and Indian Advertising sprung up in 1920's. The other two categories of ad agencies, which were more dominant, were the foreign owned agencies first setup in 1920's and the in-house agencies of companies such as Hindustan Lever (Lintas), ITC (General Advertising), Mahindra & Mahindra (Press Syndicate). Of the foreign agencies L A Stronach & Co. was the earliest in 1925 to then be followed by D.J Keymer and J Walter Thomson in 1928 and 1929 respectively (Alikhan and Doctor 1996:48-49)<sup>107</sup>.

Mostly the advertising copies were sent with the products exported to India, and the responsibility of the ad agency was around placement and to literally translate the copy, when required, into local vernacular. The imageries, figures and narratives depicted

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Navy, Spencers and Whiteway & Laidlaw. Both these categories were generally addressed to the colonizers (Khan and Doctor 1996: 48).

<sup>106</sup> The extent of infestation of newspaper with ads was such that as Zaidi and Doctor (1997:110) point out the day after Mahatma Gandhi's assassination by Nathuram Godse (31 Jan, 1948) the news did not make it to the front page of the national newspaper, The Hindu for it was "chock-a-block with advertisements"!

<sup>107</sup> Khan and Doctor (1996:49) also note the significant but short-lived agencies formed by the British expatriates called Alliance Advertising around the time of the first World War although not much information exists about it. D. J Keymer went through several incarnations and today is the parent agency of two of the most successful agencies in the country Ogilvy & Mather, and Clarion.

were foreign, and were circulated as such without any alteration or concessions to regional or local markets<sup>108</sup>. Through the 1930's and 40's while this tendency was predominant, some significant instances of efforts at localization beyond simple translation were also witnessed. Khan and Doctor (1996) allude to the Lux soap campaign, Beecham's Horlicks, and Unilever's Dalda ghee, all some of the first instances of branding of commodities in India. For the Indian ad agencies the conditions were different and difficult, and they compelled to encourage Indian advertisers. One such agency was established by Venkatrao Sista called Sista's Sales and Publicity Service, in 1934. Sista was responsible for one of the earliest and successful attempts at branding which they did for Khataus textiles (the brand name was known as Khatau Voiles)<sup>109</sup>. Regionally based vernacular advertising too was beginning to find its feet for products such as pharmaceutical and health tonics, but was limited in size when compared to advertising for imported products done by India based foreign agencies. Indian themes and motifs on the other hand were in circulation in ads with the homegrown companies specializing on home remedies. Sista mentions, "Jammi's Liver Cure (from Madras), Dongre's Balamrut, Amrutanjan, Monkey and Nanjangud brand tooth powder". The work of Indianizing advertising nonetheless including usage of local vernacular did take off to an extent in 1950's although that was limited. S. V Sista comments, "Work of translation already began in 1940's and 50's and with the domination of the art directors in Calcutta which was the main center of advertising in India during the period", notes

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<sup>108</sup> One might consider and speculate on the allure of these ads depicting the "outside" and the colonial Other

<sup>109</sup> S. V. Sista's response to Varuna Varma, dated August 1, 1997; private correspondence. Textiles were unsurprisingly some of the first brands in India, and Sista notes the domineering presence of Indian textile companies such as Tata textiles, Swadeshi mills, Mafatlals, Ruias, Thackereys.

Sista. The Bengali art directors were the first to “indianise” advertising with illustrations from mythology, folklore (imitations of the Jamini Roy style) and of course, contemporary themes. The “art in Industry” movement started in Calcutta. The focus shifted to Bombay in 50’s when some expatriates gave way to other stalwarts like Umesh Rao, P.N. Sharma, S V Waghulkar, S.N. Parmarand and others from the J J School of Art, Bombay”<sup>110</sup>.

Around the time of independence the size of ad industry was merely Rs. 5 crore according to the first independent survey by the Press Commission in 1953 (Alikhan and Doctor 1997:44). In 1950’s with enshrining of import substitution policy in the second Five Year plan, the Indian government embarked on rigorous control of commerce and industry, and in particular led to the drastic curtailment of imports. The ad industry till then heavily reliant upon the imported goods suffered. In consequence two kinds of advertising took off: one those that were explanatory, explaining the reason for the absence of particular brands to the public and two assuring the public of the quality of goods that were available (Alikhan and Doctor 1997)<sup>111</sup>. Corporate advertising on other hand was dominant during the time. Following the divestment of the British interests from Indian companies the new entrepreneurs were reposed with the task of proving their credibility to the Indian public as well as to the Indian state. The case of Burmah Shell was amusing in this context. Fearing nationalization and striving to prove its bona fides to the Indian state, BOMAS came up with one of the most memorable ad campaign with the slogan, “In India’s life and part of it”<sup>112</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> Sista, *ibid*.

<sup>111</sup> The authors mention Beecham’s Horlicks as a classic instance of the former, i.e., explaining the absence of the product.

<sup>112</sup> Sista (*op.cit.*) Also noted in Alikhan and Doctor (1997: 48).

While the 1960's and 70's were more difficult for the multinational agencies with the implementation of FERA provisions, it witnessed the growth of Indian based ad agencies<sup>113</sup>. These two decades were identified with the meteoric rise and fall of some agencies, chiefly that of Kersy Katrak led MCM (Alikhan and Doctor 1997). Of the top ten agencies in the Advertising and Marketing magazine's 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Agency Report, five of the agencies were established in these two decades. This was also the time once again the industry strove to legitimate its presence and value to the Indian state, especially following the implementation of policies such as FERA as well the general tilt towards socialistic principles. In other words, the task of proving one's relevance and bonafides to the paternal state, which was constant, now became greater. In a speech delivered at an advertising luncheon in Bombay, 1962, Ghosal takes up the task yet again. The general tenor of the speech reiterates yet again, the subservience of the industry to the Indian state. Lamenting the dismissal of the industry by the government, he nonetheless attributes the blame on the industry itself for its passivity as well as for its invisibility beyond the confines of small business circles: "it is this kind of waiting-for-signals' stance that limits the image of advertising to the confines of little league in business circles and makes of it suspect –sometimes almost subversive- activity in the minds of those who govern us" (Ghosal 2002:117). While making a plea for being proactive and for forging newer alliances with the government he concedes the ideological odds the industry was battling. He says, "Advertising is in need of such concerted, professional actions in many directions, particularly in an economy like ours in which its functions tend to get obscured. At almost every discussion, meeting or seminar that one

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<sup>113</sup> JWT who had set up shop in 1920, for instance, divested in 1960's and became an employee-owned company.

attended in 1962 the question asked more than any other was “*what is the role of advertising in a controlled economy?*” (Ibid:117, italics mine). Consenting to the need for protected economy in a country such as India, like Sista did nearly decade and a half ago in the London conference, he strives to reinstate the legitimacy of advertising industry on similar if not identical, grounds. He contends that expansion of even protected economy, which is the goal of Indian state requires raising demand; citing instances of underproduction in many industries, especially consumer goods industry, he points out, the reason for under utilization of production facilities is limited demand<sup>114</sup>, and it is in raising demand the ad industry play a crucial role. “How then can it be argued that advertising is not required to create and maintain markets? How is advertising’s basic function altered because of controls on production? Indeed it would appear that advertising must be employed to help ensure economic employment of capital invested in productive capacity, which one would like to believe is licensed by Government on purely objective calculations” (Ibid: 119). And finally he takes recourse to “what is wrong in raising the living standards” argument: “finally, the creation of awareness of wants and satisfaction is something that cannot be ignored in our country; a rise in people’s living standards is both economically and psychologically desirable. If the common man and his family are unable to live better, eat better, be better clothed, indulge in some consumption that is not directly related to survival- does it constitute a total

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<sup>114</sup> “...the monthly statistics revealed by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry reveals how many industries are working below capacity. During 1961, for instance, soap production by the organized sector reached 57% of installed capacity, while vanaspati production was approximately 40%below capacity. Biscuits and footwear also could not produce to capacity. It is obvious in every case this under-utilization of production facility was not due only to insufficient demand but it is probable that in every case insufficient demand was factor, in certain industries perhaps the most important one” (Ghosal 2002: 119)

negation of our planning and all our aspirations?” (Ibid: 119-120)<sup>115</sup>. Ghosal’s writings are strewn with these pleas to “...prove our bonafides, to make ourselves really useful to the Government ...” (Ibid: 117).

With limited liberalization in the 1980’s, which witnessed easing of restriction of foreign investment in various sectors and industries including consumer goods, and subsequently in 1990’s, the ad industry came into its own. Its growth was assisted in no small measure by the spread of national television broadcasting from early 80’s (Rajagopal 1998, Alikhan and Doctor 1997). Many transnational agencies returned striking alliances with national agencies<sup>116</sup>. The alliances were symbiotic: the multinational agencies enabled the national agencies access to multinational accounts and to technology and expertise; in return they provided the cushion for the Multinational agencies by providing initial start-ups, pre-established links with nationally based corporations and most of all the socio-cultural understanding of India, which it claimed was indispensable. The growth in the industry was immediately discernible with three successive years from 1992-95 the growth rate being 36.5%, 37.4% and 49.5%, following which it settled down to a more modest, but no less impressive 20% by early 2000’s. The total gross income of the industry in 93-94 was Rs. 3.33 billion, which by 2000-01 grew

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<sup>115</sup> He ends the speech invoking the economic rationale: “...rising income –greater discretionary income- are a reality not a myth. The Indian Institute of Public Opinion in its 25<sup>th</sup> Quarterly Report estimated a rise in annual discretionary expenditure in the decade 1961 to 1971 from Rs 2,974 crore to Rs. 4826 crore. Where will this additional expenditure be directed? Guaranteed freedom of choice, but without advertising, would it not tend to be dissipated on traditional purchase or buried in traditional savings- neither of which will help accelerate the process of a developing economy” (Ghosal 2002: 120).

<sup>116</sup> JWT returned to HTA in 1993-94; Tara Sinha allied with McCann Erickson in 1985, Interpublic Group of New York bought equities in Lintas, WPP and DY&R increased its shareholding of O&M and Rediffusion respectively as the 1990’s progressed.

to 12.75 billion<sup>117</sup>. The industry is top-heavy with the first five agencies sharing nearly half of the total gross income.

Arguably with dissipation of the overbearing presence of the Indian state following liberalization and following alliances with foreign media conglomerates, the ad industry established a niche for itself and came into its own. It also shed its previous elitism it shared with the culture of the Indian state, partly owing to the necessities of a subservient relation to it, and even more crucially because of the cosmopolitan and English educated constituencies of the Indian society it drew its professionals from. The ad produced during these decades indexed that elitist bend to the dismay of several advertising stalwarts as I have already noted. If in the colonial times the dominant ad agencies were reposed with the task of literal translation of ad copies accompanying the goods consignment, and in the socialist decades the industry predominantly thought, wrote and imagined in English, in the 1990's the industry made definitive gestures towards the Indian social and cultural life. For once as Pandey claims, at the level of images, sounds and gestures, "they could see themselves in them". This presumed gesture of reciprocity and mimesis in lieu of longstanding ones of hierarchy and didacticism, I am suggesting marks the transition, in lacanian terms, from the dominance of master-university discourse to university-pervert discourse where if previously the paternal state spoke and supervised from above furnishing its master signifiers and narratives while supplementing them in the language of scientific and economic developmentalism, in the contemporary moment where the symbolic field has multiplied for the middle classes as the Indian state competes with other actors for its share in the public culture, market and with it the ad agencies abandon the high perch from where the master speaks and

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<sup>117</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Agency Report. 2002. Advertising and Marketing, 31 Jan.



simulate a language of intimacy with the addressee, soliciting, constituting and framing its desire (discourse of perversion) without abandoning claims of scientificity and rigor of its claims. I will return to these themes through the chapters<sup>118</sup>.

### **Chapters and the ethnographic context**

The second chapters deal with the effort by new private life insurance companies to insert themselves in and articulate their relevance within the neo-liberal context in India where conditions of economic uncertainty have begun setting in. For the old middle class especially, traditionally reliant upon the post- colonial state, the contemporary social conditions are not quite what they were used to. Through ethnographic work in an ad agency working on an insurance ad campaign and at an insurance company where I was trained as an insurance agent I lay out the stakes for these corporate bodies in reading these conditions of social and economic uncertainty in the language of risk and thereby lending them appropriate for risk commodity such as insurance. What neo-liberalism demands in other words, as Bill Mauer has also argued amongst others, the displacement of the subject of rights by that of subject of risk<sup>119</sup>. The subject of risk in the emerging neo-liberal conditions recognizes that one's financial security consists not in extricating oneself from risk but by immersing in it; accrual of wealth in this regime rests in the deftness with which one can juggle with one's money and investments. Insurance as a financial instrument by providing both traditional safety cover as well as by investing part of one's investment in securities market claims to ensure security of one's wealth as well as possible 'magical' accumulation<sup>120</sup>. Ethnographic work for this chapter was based

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<sup>118</sup> For greater elaboration of the Four Discourses, see the concluding chapter.

<sup>119</sup> Mauer (1999).

<sup>120</sup> For 'magical' accumulation see Comaroff and Comaroff (2000).

in an ad agency although I draw liberally from my training as an insurance agent at an insurance firm.

The third chapter engages the predicament of Ayurvedic giant Dabur. Dabur notwithstanding its unassailable market position where it controls 64 percent of the Ayurveda market share in India felt the need to refurbish its market image and re-brand itself in the 1990's. It tussled with two fundamental problems, one of which is a longstanding concern, which goes to the core of its identity and the second it encountered in the 1990s. The longstanding difficulty for Dabur has been to continually instantiate and perform its relevance in modern times given the ancientness of the apothecary tradition, i.e., Ayurveda and particularly in a social context where the medicinal culture is dominated by western medicinal system. Ancientness and possible irrelevance overlapped in the 1990s with the dated aesthetics of its commodities and packaging, the image as a 'bania' company<sup>121</sup>, out of tune cinematic and print ads, and dipping fortunes: all of which contributed to its desire to radically re-brand itself which started with shift to sleek plastic packaging, to refurbishing of logo as well as images, to streamlining of its product portfolio to a very public transfer of day to day management of company to professionals to finally the launch of radically altered ad campaign mobilizing a slew of celebrities with the Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bacchhan as the centerpiece. Its transmutation indexes the nature of presence demanded even of the most secure corporations in increasingly mediatically saturated society. The ethnography for this chapter was done at the ad agency doing the ad campaign for Dabur in Delhi and at Dabur in Shahibabad, Uttar Pradesh.

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<sup>121</sup> 'Banias' is a pejorative pan-Indian reference to a sprawling and prosperous mercantile community (-ies) and its stereotyped mean, stingy ways.

The final chapter engages the consequences of what I have called the corporatization of the political where I have looked at the ways in which the increasingly pervasive and simultaneous processes of commodification and mediatization of social and cultural forms has affected and compelled the political field to respond to as well as and inevitably situate itself in relation to it. First, through my ethnographic work on the “Incredible India” campaign I look at the very process of nation-branding where I delve into the conundrums, not to mention the audacity, of producing the nation as an image, affect and experience. Second, I deal with the India Shinning ad campaign of the ruling NDA coalition during the run-up to the general elections in 2004, its subsequent electoral loss from a position of immense strength, and in retrospect what considered to be the abject failure of the ad campaign. At the outset it has to be clearly stated that to imagine that NDA coalition lost the election due to the infamous ad campaign is to give the latter more credit than it deserves and to repeat the same misreading that the corporate-ad culture did of the Indian social during the elections. And yet its contributory role, I argue, was not entirely insignificant. What the signifier “India shining” emphatically brought to the fore is a conversation it could have or should have avoided in an election year. The more it spoke and explained the bigger the hole it dug for itself. In retrospect again, the fissures and clefts in the India shining fantasy were hardly difficult to identify and isolate where the opposition more or less easily, if also somewhat diffidently and ambivalently at the time, managed to lodge itself and allowed to unravel. The larger point nonetheless is to think through mutation in the nature of the political in neo-liberal and increasingly late capitalist context in India.

## Chapter II

### **Kal Par Control<sup>122</sup>: Thinking Risk and Life Insurance in Contemporary India**

*“Nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality”*  
*Ewald Francois<sup>123</sup>*

*“Gift de raha hoon kya? Free mein chahiye? .....Mera Paisa hai, mehnat ka paisa hai”<sup>124</sup>*

We reached Mohit Sharma’s apartment around lunch-time hoping that we finally find him. For Srimath, my insurance agent friend, this was the fourth trip to his house. On all three occasions, he was turned back by Sharma’s family on the grounds that he was not home. Srimath suspected the family was lying but knew he had to persist. His phone calls too had gone unanswered. As it turned out Sharma was again not in. Seeing our persistence nonetheless we were invited to come in and served chai (tea) and biscuit while we waited. Sharma walked in sooner than we anticipated but looked distinctly miffed at seeing us although he concealed it well. He knew Srimath from when they were

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<sup>122</sup> “Kal par Control” meaning “control over tomorrow” is a very well received slogan of a private insurance company whose advertising campaign I worked on as a part of my ethnography at the ad agency. This chapter is based on the pitch the agency was making to get the account, but failed to do so in the end. The agency nonetheless worked on the pitch for over five months, and this ethnography is based on that. During the time I also was trained as an insurance agent, although I stopped short of acquiring the license which contractually and ethically will have required me to solicit life insurance customers. I draw some of the ethnographic material from the classroom training and the field experience.

<sup>123</sup> F. Ewald. (1991:199).

<sup>124</sup> Imperfectly translated as “You think I am giving gifts? You want it (my money) for free? .....It is my money, I labored for it”. This response was elicited by Mohit Sharma, one of the several employees at the thriving call centers at Gurgaon. It was also a response to question around a pure risk insurance product one of the new insurance companies had recently launched. The translation of the whole quote went something like the following: “You think I am giving gifts? You want it for free? I spend sleepless nights, I work all night. It is my money, I labored for it”. Reference to ‘sleepless night’ and all night work is obviously to the catering of the call centers to the customers in North America and Europe that requires employees to work all night.

very young as they went to the local school together, and their relations were fairly cordial. The conversation started with reminiscing about old times and friends, jokes and funny incidents and finally veered towards the reason for our visit, which of course was to persuade Sharma to buy a life insurance policy. He listened to us patiently as we waxed eloquently about the merits of our policy over similar offerings of other insurance companies, and of insurance in general over other financial instruments such as bank deposits and popular post office policies to real estate to riskier ones such as stock markets. Srimath also spoke at length about the changes in the socio-economic conditions with liberalization and the resulting social uncertainty; he took pains at explaining how the times have changed from his LIC days when insurance was used just as any other investment and mostly for tax benefits, how the insurance products generally now, but particularly the one he was offering, are flexible and supportive of lifestyle changes, provide disability benefits <sup>125</sup>. He ended with elaborating on the efficacy of insurance as a risk instrument in dealing with times of economic uncertainty, an argument that mostly rested on the claim that part of one's insurance investment can be invested in the stock markets and allowed to participate in the fortunes made in it. I had heard him make the same case for insurance to several other potential customers in the last one month.

Notwithstanding his twenty five- minute disquisition, Sharma looked doubtful and unconvinced, and finally without betraying his irritation, said politely, "You think I am giving gifts? You want it for free? I spend sleepless nights, I work all night. It is my money, I labored for it". And so we gave him a copy of the policy statement for his perusal and left empty handed. A month later Srimath elatedly called me declaring,

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<sup>125</sup> Srimath worked as the Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) agent for close to eight years before joining his current employers in the private sector.

“murgi phas gayi” (literally, “caught the chicken”), informing that Sharma finally succumbed and bought the policy. The whole incident reminded me of discussions during our training sessions as insurance agents as well as of deliberations on an insurance ad campaign at the ad agency. At the insurance firm, many longstanding and experienced agents were invited to come and share their on-field experience. One of the constant themes was the very lowly public perception of the insurance agents who often were colloquially referred to as “chep” which meant something that annoyingly sticks, and almost viscerally to the body, like a leech and doesn’t let go. Prolonged evasion as a means of extrication from the tentacles of a chep results in failure for the latter is relentless. Consequently the only way to escape is to give in to his demands. Conversely the agents nearly always spoke in the language of capture (“murgi phas gayi”). For sure they recognized the centrality of the art of persuasion requiring an array of knowledge and information about insurance and other financial instruments, an adequate sense of the state of economy and the ability to think in the shoes of the customer; ultimately nevertheless convincing an uninterested but potential customer demanded skills of coaxing and cajoling and mostly of relentless pursuit.

This ethnographic vignette conveys with some lucidity the barrage of challenges the new private insurance companies face in India. If Francois Ewald writes that “Nothing is risk in itself. There is no risk in reality” (Ewald 1991: 199), the predicament that the private insurers find themselves in aptly illustrates it. Ideally the socio-economic conditions of indeterminacy and uncertainty that liberalization has introduced should lend themselves, as a natural corollary almost, to social investment in financial instruments of risk of which insurance is a paramount example, and yet that is not the case. What Ewald

is arguing with subtlety and persuasively is that these social conditions generating sense of anxiety and danger, of instability and crisis of meaning and value require to be read and understood in and through not only the category of risk but also require engaging through commodified notions of risk which insurance essentially is. Through my ethnography in the insurance company and in the ad agency working on an insurance ad campaign, I argue that these corporate players have recognized the argument Ewald offers only all too well. In other words, they have recognized that their task is textual and performative, that is to say, in as much as “there is no risk in reality”, risk becomes a matter of reading the social. And if indeed this is so, they are obliged and imposed with the labor of inscribing and re-inscribing, reading and re-reading the social, and its conditions of instability and flux, real and imagined, in the language and framework offered by the discourses of risk (see Douglas 1992, Beck 1992, O’Maley 2004, Zelizer 1983, Baker and Simon, 2002, Mauer 1999).

This labor nonetheless is all the more arduous within a social (and here I am referring to the Indian social) where primary mode of engaging socio-economic uncertainty has not been through insurance. For decades now, the limited penetration of insurance in India has been lamented by the policy makers, economists and scholars alike, and several causal factors cited to explain it away<sup>126</sup>. In so far as it has embedded itself as a financial instrument within the Indian social, the general consensus is, it has done so more on the Indian state’s prodding as a tax incentive and as a means of saving for retirement. “In terms of investment it is well documented that Indians prefer security

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<sup>126</sup> At time of my ethnography at the insurance company, the figures provided to us were the following: from a population of 1044.15 million, only 300 million can buy life insurance policy, but only 77.7 million Indians actually have a life insurance policy. In other words, only 20% of potential buyers have coverage. Further, penetration was as low as 1.2 % of GDP.

over rate of returns. Safety of the investment is the first concern. Savings accounts, bank fixed deposits and post office deposits are the major favorites. Accessibility is another factor, which is why long lock in period on investment is definite deterrent” (Bhaduri 2001:8).

Further, not only is the penetration limited, but as an investment option also it has been nearly indistinguishable other available ones, and only peripherally and almost by default, seen as a risk instrument engaging economic instability. Interest in insurance was predominantly ensured by the tax breaks the government offered to the existing and potential buyers. Moreover, for the middle classes, the relative stability of the Indian economy through the socialist decades, a system of life-time employment, a general continuation of kinship support system, both financial and other wise, fatalistic attitudes delimited the significance of insurance. Further, and ironically as Bhaduri (2001:8) notes, “Life insurance is mainly bought for tax saving purposes and also as a symbol of being responsible householder. But the kind of policies that are bought and the amount for which they are bought indicate that it is mainly ritualistic buying of a talisman. And the poorer sections of society who would benefit even more don’t buy it. This again seems the universal feature of low income consumers across the globe, It is paradoxical that it is people who are risk averse do not buy the idea of insurance. It seems to be their belief in the manifestation of destiny and man’s inevitability on the face of its inevitability”.

Arvind Mohan, my main interlocutor at the ad agency explained, for both the advertisers as well as the insurance companies, the very issue of broaching the topic of life insurance has been fraught with difficulties. Most crucially because it foregrounds the very issue of the death of the main-earner of family who is the addressee of the



commodity (or the target audience) and who ultimately underwrites the premiums. Of the many strategies developed, debates have raged if the very issue of death should be directly invoked and the main-earner compelled to consider it rationally and thereby convinced, or should the approach be to skirt and circumvent the whole question and displace the attention onto other issues, for instance the “happily-ever-after story”. Mostly the advertisers especially in the recent years have gravitated towards the latter. And yet that wasn’t entirely satisfactory either for it conveyed to the premium payer “the family enjoying in his absence (even death)”. The solution finally devolved especially by LIC was one where the theme of immortality of the premium payer is foregrounded. The paradigmatic LIC ad of which others were versions, through the 1990’s, was one, which shows a woman remembering the late husband whose responsible investment finally enabled her to marry the daughter off. In other words, what has dominated the scene were the themes of immortality, responsibility, sacrifice and family’s future well being. This he argued were historically specific and attuned to a socialist economy and its demands; changing times required different imageries, imaginaries and narratives.

Before I engage my ethnography a quick note on Ewald’s Foucauldian framing of risk and insurance, which I elaborately delve into the latter part of this chapter, is in order to avoid any confusion or misgiving: Not that dangers, threats, uncertainties and violence are not experienced as such, but that even that as well as the most intimate and visceral experiences are discursively framed and comprehended, a process Deleuze and Guattari would call “capture” by “order word”(Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 75-110)<sup>127</sup>. In

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<sup>127</sup> Deleuze’s “order word” is *performative* in Derridan sense. For a lucid elaboration of Derrida’s notion of the performative see, Butler, 1993, p.ix-xii, 1-55. For a brief statement by Derrida on the affinities of his project with Deleuze’s, see Derrida (2001:189-95). Briefly put, if Derrida laboriously submitted all invocations of matter (or the real) under erasure, Deleuze while entirely

the scheme of this chapter, following Ewald, I am arguing, risk is that order-word, proposed and circulated by the corporate entities, that strives to *capture* the disparate, indeterminate and uncertain social experiences, and *submits* it to the logic of insurance-commodity. What is at stake ultimately then, as Bill Mauer has argued, (Mauer 1999) are the neo-liberal forms of governmentality with a primary role of market within it that seeks to *read and recognizes* risk as immanent to the social in conditions of systemic indeterminacy in contemporary capitalism (see also Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). In other words, this *reading and recognition* which is neither self evident nor inevitable requires the labor of re-reading of the social conditions through the frameworks of risk and the reiterative performance of this reading in the public sphere which is precisely what I show these corporate entities engaging in in this chapter and the ensuing one.

More specifically in this chapter I deal with the thinking and planning of an insurance ad campaign by an advertising agency pitching for an account and look at the ways in which the ad professionals conceive the socio-cultural change that has come about in India generally and the shifts in the regime of values for the middle classes in particular. The ethnography at the ad agency also involved participation in several focus group meetings where the members drawn from middle class meditated on conditions of increasing economic flux and on insurance as an investment. Drawing from these conversations, in the latter part of the chapter, I delve into paradoxical and anomalous character of insurance as a commodity and as a category, which I submit, contributes to the public's misgivings about it and explains some of the hesitation in using it as a viable investment option.

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buying into this understanding of language and discourse, wrote as though he could *say* a thing (in language) and *mean* it too; or as Derrida notes he wrote “innocently” (Derrida 2001: 193-4).

I lay out in greater detail why and how insurance was imagined and proposed as an instrument or technology of risk for the subjects of neo-liberal regime, how it was distinct from other financial instruments and why, it was argued by the planners in the ad agency, it should be used not merely for tax breaks (as was the case with LIC life insurance policies during the socialist decades) or as retirement fund, but as risk technology to secure one's life and that of one's family in riskier times in contemporary capitalism. Following my ethnography I would argue that notwithstanding conditions of social indeterminacy, participation in commodified forms of risk such as insurance is neither natural nor obvious. Instead what such participation requires, and which the insurance firms as well as their advertising agencies recognized, is a socialization in the practices of commodified forms of risk such as insurance which also then presupposes the dissemination of information about such practices, not to mention their efficacy in combating and hedging against economic uncertainty, within the social sphere.

### ***Liberalization of the Insurance Sector***

The life insurance industry in India was opened up in early 2000-1 to private players. Prior to this it was dominated by the public sector monolith Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) for about five decades since its institutionalization in 1956 through a Parliamentary Act. Through this act about 245 privately operating insurance firms (including 75 provident fund societies), some of them since late nineteenth century, were subsumed within the LIC, and the life insurance industry was thoroughly nationalized. The impetus for nationalization was provided by several set of factors: a socialist political

regime's distrust for private capital<sup>128</sup>, the emerging developmentalist regime's need for large pool of funds for investment in governmental programs and policies, and an immense public dissatisfaction with existing private insurance firms and their rampantly corrupt and inefficient practices. For four decades following its nationalization, insurance as a financial instrument would remain somewhat indistinguishable from other forms of investment such as in banks, real estate, precious metals and so on. While the question of risk will ideologically remain central to its self-articulation, for the larger investing public, it continued to function as another investment option with an additional, if most crucial, tax saving device<sup>129</sup>. The failure to implicate risk as a category fundamental to this investment option for the middle classes can also be sought in the relative social and economic stasis during this period secured by a nationalist-socialist economy.

The liberalization of the economy in the early 1990's and the increased participation of private players – both from within national boundaries and outside it- in the market place will eventually create conditions supportive of risk discourses. The debates on privatization of the insurance sector that had lain dormant during the socialist decades sprung to the forefront during this phase. Following close to a decade of ruminations, bickering and ideological contestations, through the formation of the Insurance Regulatory and Developmental Authority (IRDA) Act in 2000, the insurance sector was opened up to private players<sup>130</sup>. By early 2006, fourteen market players

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<sup>128</sup> Indian state's relationship with the nationalist bourgeoisie has been variously characterized. For critical leftist position, see Kaviraj (1998).

<sup>129</sup> The tax-saving option was continually provided by the government of India so as to encourage increased public savings (and investment in it), and available figures amply attest to the colossal success of this strategy. The reference in this chapter to insurance is to life insurance and not to other forms of insurance such as health, property and so on.

<sup>130</sup> Amongst other regulations, IRDA instituted strict regulations for advertising of insurance products.

already were in the fray with most of them constituted by joint ventures between an Indian and a multinational firm.

With the greater implication of the Indian economy in global late capitalist processes, burgeoning participation of private –global and national- players in the economy, and strategic, if limited, withdrawal of Indian state from economic processes, imagined and real conditions of uncertainty and instability have begun to spread through the national body-politic.

***Ethnographic detours: Trip to Gurgaon***

We traveled to Gurgaon<sup>131</sup> to meet the clients (the insurance company) where their office was housed. I had accompanied Arvind Mohan and his colleague Kishore Sinha<sup>132</sup>. It was to be their first face to face sojourn with them. Earlier interfaces happened over telephone calls in which the account planning professionals from both side were involved. The 45 minutes drive in a B-class sedan with the air condition running at full throttle in simmering heat of north India was pleasant. Conversations revolved around the pitch on insurance, the stock market and other more academic-philosophical discussions, the latter for which Mohan had more than unusual appetite for a marketing professional. As we alighted from the valet driven automotive, we were led to the elevators of a high-tech tower office. The tower office was distinguished in its appearance, clearly marking the arrival of global class architecture in India. In fact Gurgaon, an hour and half away from central Delhi during peak traffic hours, is famous for its trendy malls, housing societies, several BPO offices that work on a 24-hr schedule

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<sup>131</sup> Gurgaon is a satellite town twenty kilometers from Delhi in the adjoining state of Haryana.

<sup>132</sup> Both were senior professionals at this ad agency in Delhi where this ethnography was done. Arvind, who is the head of planning within the ad agency, eventually became the main informant within the ad agency where I stayed for over a year.

and generally orderly nature of its civic structure; at least that is the visible side of it till ones drives into the bylanes. Residents have complained over the years about the severe malfunctioning of precisely these civic institutions. Traffic and road conditions particularly could have been better. But then these complaints say something about the bourgeois aspirations of the middle class in urban India. If there are any places in India where the bourgeois dream of a utopic city-space is realized, a dream, as Chatterjee has noted (Chatterjee 2004), that was held at least since the beginning of the Indian Republic, Gurgaon should be considered one of them.

The office we were led to was a statement of minimality: impressively clean, functional with aesthetically adorned furnitures, plants and decorations, well dressed sentries at different entry points, and mildly accented lady receptionist. Physically interfacing with the clients for the first time, my colleagues informed me that they could not risk my true identity as an academic on the team in the very first meeting, and so I was required to put up an appearance of an ad executive, and generally stay quiet through the meeting so as to not give up my true self. Accordingly I was also suggested to tuck in my shirt in the nature of a true professional, which I promptly did<sup>133</sup>.

We were soon addressed by a senior marketing executive of insurance company, who extensively described the company's requirements, the previous ad campaign and expectations from us. Several parameters were provided around which the campaign was to be built, the chief idea being to reiterate the "feeling good about life" factor. He informed us that the company had made a good start in an already crowded insurance

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<sup>133</sup> In fact the sartorial demeanor of different departments within in an ad agency are differently marked. While the account and planning professionals given their regular interactions with the clients are expected to appropriately attired. The creatives, on the other hand, had a leeway in this regard, and more often than not they, true to their identity as imaginatively inclined folks, bore a carefully cultivated style of casual dressing.

market and its success was structured around a host of unique initiatives and appropriate products. Thus, the ad campaign needed to be revamped so as to enable it to make further inroads into a market, which everyone agreed had huge potential.

We were strictly instructed that the brand slogan from the previous campaign, “*Kal Par Control*”<sup>134</sup> was to be retained. Evidently, company’s own research had revealed that this slogan had “hit the sweet spot” with its middle class target audience and had to be retained at any cost. This sacrosanct market advantage accruing around the brand slogan was definitely not something to be tinkered with.

On our return, Mohan summarized the mandate from the client succinctly thus: the issues to be addressed were threefold: a) “open the brand space, wherein all offerings the company supports could be adequately delineated”, which is to say, create a visual-cinematic and semeiotic language capacious enough to emblemize the characteristic features of the insurance product offered by the company; b) “to ensure differentiation by not repeating generic representations that were commonplace in such brands”; and c)

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<sup>134</sup> The Hinglish phrase literally means, “control over tomorrow”. Hinglish is a portmanteau word from Hindi and English, and is a fairly dominant dialect form in urban areas in northern India. For the economy of use of Hinglish and question of recognition, identification and intimacy it permitted and entertained, see the first chapter. A quick note on these tag lines is in order here. In a public culture dominated by a tele-technic of visibility, the issue of ad forms, both its visual and narrative form, in print and electronic media acquires relevance. In the modern and de-sacralized capitalist scheme of things, therefore, for instance, the role of economy of taglines (truncated or curtailed tit-bits of verbiage)- that meaningless fragment of signifier-signification- cannot be underestimated. As recession of an idealized symbolic- in the Indian case, that of a patriarchal social state- becomes a reality, the need for another meta-narrative ideological scaffolding that sutures the discursive field together becomes imminent. Taglines (either in the scriptural mode apprehended through gaze or as voice-over invoking the voice as object petit a) play their part in affording that momentary spurt of meaning or sense. In effect, a meaningless fragment of meaning holds together a larger ideological framework through its insinuations, the S<sub>2</sub> in the lacanian scheme of social subjectivity, in the process also becoming the mode of brand visibility and recognition. The lacanian understanding of language and processes of subjectivation is useful in illuminating the workings of cultural forms in late capitalism. For an understanding of schemata of signifiers (S1, S2 and so on) in lacanian psychoanalysis, see Bruce Fink (1995), Bracher (1994).

“finds ways and modes of investing more meaning into the brand slogan ‘kal par control’”.

Mohan and his team concluded that a fundamental, yet missing aspect in insurance advertising was that very few ‘brands’ actually occupied the mind space. As he noted aptly, “Imageries in the category were weak in differentiation, with one happy shiny world framed by different baselines”; consequently the gains that were made in most cases were “tactical in nature, and hardly territorial in nature”. In other words, innovative product lines and novel strategies of marketing and distribution had not yet materialized into a distinctive territorialization. Thus far, two brands dominated the market. The first was obviously LIC of India, the 50 years old government-owned company, and second was ICICI, the first private player to enter the insurance market immediately following the opening up of the insurance sector to private capital. Interestingly, ICICI was perceived as an upgraded, if privatized version of LIC. Having got a headstart over other private players, it managed to garner a precious market advantage, well-aided by an advertising campaign that tried, and had succeeded in striking an ‘emotional connect’ with its middle class target audience.

After viewing several ad campaigns from LIC from early 1990’s and of the newer private companies, Mohan concluded that “downsides of life dominates the insurance ads” and insurance products are almost offered as “substitution for loss of life and as release from life condition”. In other words, the ad campaigns were still lodged in the “traditionally negative campaign-space”. In a way, this problem for the insurance ads had been an old one, for first and foremost, it inevitably involved invoking the death of potential customer. The challenge for life insurance ads therefore has been to skirt the



very figure of death that overshadows it. The challenge for both the ads as well as the agents was to talk about insurance without talking about death. The general aim in planning and making the ad then was to work on the ‘role of imagery’, in ‘positivizing’ this ad cinematic space.

***On affects: Insurance and Ambient Uncertainty***

*“Virtual (is) real, without being actual”*

*Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari*<sup>135</sup>

Before I proceed in to Mohan and team’s conception of insurance within contemporary India, I would contend that although they articulated their effort as an unearthing of social meaning around insurance, the stakes for them were much broader; it involved not merely the register we traditionally identify as that of semiotics or signification, but more appropriately, what Massumi, following Deleuze calls “affects” or the affective domain (see Massumi 2004). Deleuze in distinguishing the virtual from the actual defined it as containing all those tendencies and trajectories that potentially inhere, subsist and float in, as it were, in an event or a process and yet are not actualized or not actually manifested (“Virtual... is real without being actual”, as he puts it)<sup>136</sup>. Massumi suggests that affects float and reside as it were in this space of the virtual or the unactualised<sup>137</sup>. Further, in late capitalism as capital annexes and spread through every

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<sup>135</sup> Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 90).

<sup>136</sup> His entire oeuvre generally can be fruitfully read as a long and unending engagement with this very category of the virtual. For a quick, succinct account, see Deleuze and Guattari, (1987: 75-100). Invoking the name transcendental empiricism for his philosophical stance (as distinct from say the Kantian transcendental rationalism), he unremittingly focused on the “empiricities” as concrete actualizations of events without losing sight of the unrealized potentials and possibilities that the event contained within itself. By calling that (non-) space of the virtual as affects or affective tendencies, he sought to reintroduce the affective –sensory, perceptive and so on -- experience of the material form, by extension also countering in the process the celebratory and no less problematic assumptions of discourse theory dominating the critical social sciences today.

<sup>137</sup> Here I might quickly note Badiou’s significant critique of Deleuze’s conceptual dyad “virtual-actual”. Irrespective of Deleuze’s claims to the contrary, Badiou argues, he reinstates the platonic distinction between the real/original and the simulacra/copy where the virtual stands in

available real and imagined nook and cranny of the social, the space of the virtual and the affective are also not left untouched. Capital, in other words, meticulously ferrets out minutest meanings, most ephemeral of desires and fleeting fantasies, and even the ones we are not aware of; in other words, capital strives to enter and determine the domain of affects which does not have an actual and concretely manifested presence. What I am suggesting here is that in thinking through the notions of risk and insurance and their implications, relevance and unrealized potential for the Indian social, in addressing the semeiotic and visceral context where they might potentially make sense, Mohan and his team are exploring and interrogating, what Massumi has called the affective domain or affective trajectories within the Indian social. In a way the fundamental labor that Mohan's team reposed on itself was to sense, feel and articulate the ambient and floating affective sense of uncertainty, anxiety and fear surrounding social and economic shifts and indeterminacy, and insert the pointed relevance of insurance as a versatile and flexible financial commodity within that space.

Consequently then, it is this very domain of the affective he addressed in seeking to “interrogate the implicit worldview” surrounding insurance as a commodity. The immediate implications for planning the campaign were three-fold which he summarized as following: (a) “understand ‘cultural surround’ of the category”; b) locate “where it connects with our life space”; c) “map how it is changing over time”. The basic idea of

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the former and the actual for the latter. In spite of his life long project of instantiating the ontology of the multiple, Deleuze then in this rendition is framed as the philosopher of univocity and transcendentalism. While Badiou's critique is incisive, Deleuze's virtual-actual binary can be resurrected without falling into the trap of univocity where the virtual becomes the transcendental as well as originary template and actual reduced to the status of its provisional articulation by resorting to Bersonian notion of temporality where both virtual and actual are real, and the virtual is absolute past of the actual and its conditions of possibility without absolutely determining it. For a succinct quasi-resolution of this problematic, which my argument utilizes here, see May 2004: 67-76.

insurance obviously was “inextricably linked to the notion of risk”, which involved “transfer of individual risk to the social sphere at a premium”. Measured in probabilities, the calculus of risk, and hence, the insurance products were essentially a “function of time and money”. Varying life insurance products were in essence “one product delivered in many ways”, in other words, through various permutations of premium involved, the length of time and the nature of investment option chosen, the final form of product was determined and offered to the customer, all of which ultimately secured a “humanly engineered security” program in place.

### **Money and Circulation: Kal par Control**

In the rest of this section I sketch out in detail the Mohan’s conception of socio-cultural change in India and where possibly insurance fits in the emerging scheme of things. To provide a flavor of his thought I extensively quote him verbatim in this section; consequently unless otherwise mentioned, the statements within quotation marks are Mohan’s. Noticeably his account was laden heavily with assumptions about Indian social that can be called orientalist. And yet the reason for my elaborating them is precisely that it was not his alone; these themes, assumptions and ideas were repeated by other members of his team, by the insurance professionals and are in many cases commonly held notions in India.

In articulating the “historically” and “commonsensically” prevalent sense of money in India, Mohan argued it was mostly a “static view of money”, a notion of money as though it were to be “stored in vaults”, and the vaults “double locked and the key secured”. In suggesting that money was static, Mohan wasn’t in any sense defining its ontological character or eliciting his ignorance about its circulatory and essentially

protean aspects; in fact, he was very well versed in the intricacies of money as a commodity form in capitalism<sup>138</sup>. At stake for him in this formulation was an recognition of processes of intense liquidity of money that distinguished the Indian present from its past, facilitated in no small measure by technological and financial shifts in 1990's and the immense apparatus of new media forms implicated in the larger global unraveling of late capitalism. Insurance as a relevant mode of engagement with financial uncertainty, so far as he was concerned, had to be inserted and articulated within this late capitalist context.

He continued: money while being singularly essential nonetheless was never the “be all and end all for people”; (or even if it arguably was, the character of that engagement with or concern with money was qualitatively different than now); only “businessmen knew how to rotate it”. The insinuation was, in deft rotation money grew, and this facility, a trickery almost, was confined to a select class within the social. With institutionalization of late capitalist economy, the requirements of securing one's financial stability and the ability in the consumption practices would compel the others to train oneself in the basics of the new regime, the ‘deft rotation of money’ being one of them. In some ways, he seemed to be conveying, besides himself, an ontological sense of money, the possibility of whose accumulation lied in rotation, and the business community somehow being privy to this ontological character always already expertly approximated or mimicked it, and therein lied the secret to their material fortunes. Rehearsing some of the longstanding orientalist assumptions about incongruity of

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<sup>138</sup> He majored in commerce at St. Stephan's college, Delhi and was subsequently trained as an MBA in a top-end management institute in India.

‘materialism’ and ‘spiritualism’<sup>139</sup>, and the latter as more representative trait of Indian social, he argued that “middle class value system is build around the absence of money”, involved “managing households in a zero growth economy”, and that “Laksmi and Saraswati never got along<sup>140</sup>”.

In a socialist economy then, money was more “a means of *coping* with life, as opposed to improving one’s lot”. The distinction purportedly indicated here is qualitative. Its function is limited and utilitarian. “Money is what you regrettably need for everyday life to discharge your duties like getting your son educated”. The asymmetry marking this worldview from what obtains now, he suggested, was significant. “The idea of an economic surplus that propels one’s life into a different orbit of existence was unthinkable”.

The word ‘coping’ invokes an arrangement of the social that is marked by meagerness of resources, and arduous management of life within it. Living is not so much about its pleasures and festivities, as it is about a social subjectivity bound by obligations

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<sup>139</sup> The use of term materialism here is more mundane and commonsensical here; conveying an oppositional sense to ‘spiritualism’, it refers to pursuit of material possessions.

<sup>140</sup> Laksmi and Saraswati respectively are the revered deities in Hindu cosmology of money/material possessions, and knowledge and wisdom. Bhaduri (2001:4) writes, “Saraswati and Lakshmi are two sisters who are in eternal argument and share a somewhat antagonistic relationship. There is of course little doubt who has the upper hand. By and large they are not found in the same place together, but where Saraswati goes Lakshmi may follow but this relationship is not reciprocal. The depiction of the two goddess is also starkly different. Laksmi is depicted as being gorgeously dressed in red and gold. She is beautiful and dangerously seductive. She is demure consort of Vishnu and is seated at his feet and rides an owl which is a nocturnal bird. Saraswati by contrast is dressed more simply in white and gold and rides a swan. Her relationship with Brahma is on a more independent and equal footing. Their characters are also in contrast. Lakshmi is known as *chanchala* or the fickle one. She may come in easily but also leaves just as easily. She is not very discriminating. She is known to reside in the kingdom of demon rulers as well if the king follows the path of dharma. Saraswati on the other hand is far more stable and discriminating. She doesn’t come very easily, but once she comes in she doesn’t leave. In sum, Lakshmi is more alluring and seductive but shallow whereas Saraswati is more hard and extracting but reliable”. Bhaduri worked in the same agency as Mohan and his exegesis on this relationship repeated some of these themes, which I resist elaborating on in the main text.

and duties, and in the Indian case, also determined by a fetishized ethic of productive labor and social responsibility, a heritage in no small measure of developmentalist and socialist ideology. Excess and immersion in *jouissance* was not so much deferred as it was confined to pre-determined times such as festivals, kin-gatherings and annually recurring social events. Heavily weighed by a language of fatalism, temporality had a dull quality to it where in a circular movement past repeated itself in future. Circularity of time or circular temporal organization of social life is cited as a definitive index of non-modernity of a society, a distinguishing feature that also allowed separation of the progressive modern from static traditional<sup>141</sup>. If, in the former, time and change was cumulative, in latter it was merely repetitive. The colloquial referencing of *yesterday* and *tomorrow* with a single word “kal” alluded to their sameness, where not much changed through time. Change in so far as was discernible was, to borrow a concept from Fernand Braudel, ‘long duree’, almost the time of the natural, and was hardly a function of human effort. There was “no belief in one’s ability to transform one’s life” and that “transcendence of one’s past” as a possibility was unthinkable. There was then, “a hesitancy about seeing life positively”, where “contained in a good today is the ever-lurking threat of a bad tomorrow”.

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<sup>141</sup>The shift from a circular to a linear temporal mode of organization of social life has been identified as pivotal to transformation from medieval to modern times. See for instance, Koselleck (1985). In general public discourses the narrative of supercession of a circular notion of time defining traditional societies by modernity hinging on linearity of time is commonplace, and has a particular ideological efficacy; it becomes a convenient, seemingly self-evident and condensed, shorthand trope of transition to modernity. Mohan’s almost non-conscious invocation of this narrative of temporal shift bespeaks precisely that ideological efficiency. Scholars have nonetheless challenged the obviousness of this narrative and assumption. For a ‘postcolonial’ perspective see, Chakrabarty (2000).

Surely one could easily fault Mohan for self-orientalizing<sup>142</sup>, not to mention for his near, if only deliberate caricaturing of transition, not least to accentuate the distinction between the present and the immediate past. In a way his elaborations were heuristic in nature, and were not making claims to historical accuracy of his every assumption. While he was aware of possible errors, historical and conceptual, he was also aware that he was partaking of the larger orientalist narrative that had long taken roots in collective social imagination of self in India and very much formed an intrinsic part of a commonsensical worldview<sup>143</sup>, and his task he self-confessedly noted, was precisely, as a advertising professional was to tap into this cultural reservoir<sup>144</sup>. The phrase “Hindu rate of growth” he invoked almost reproduced an orientalist discourse that inscribed the Indian social as intensely religious and as pre-disposed to the non-material, to the other world.

The thinking about insurance, he suggested, was rooted in this rather somber cosmology and social arrangement. Investment in insurance was not an “investment in tomorrow”, but a means of “preventing it from becoming as bleak as potentially can be”. Life insurance specifically as an attempt to underwrite life was an issue of “crisis management”, and means of “uncertainty avoidance” that ultimately mirrored an

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<sup>142</sup> Or in William Mazzarella’s felicitous phrase, “auto-orientalizing”. See Mazzarella (2003). Arvind Mohan in fact was very much taken in by this phrase, and thought it sufficiently enunciated the stakes for his professions, without necessarily getting anxious about the pejorative sense associated with it. This I imagine was significant, for immersion in assumptions and articulation that were self-confessedly ‘orientalist’ did not deter him (or for that matter many in his profession) in continuing to pursue them.

<sup>143</sup> The ease with which much of these binaries, material-spiritual, linear-circular time and so on are mobilized by well educated and rational folks from middle classes amply serves to demonstrate the continuing ideological force of orientalist discourses that are at least over two centuries old now.

<sup>144</sup> One of the issues that acquires some urgency here is that of the nature of engagement with categories that are putatively ‘orientalist’. What status especially as a marketing professional, does one attribute to it especially when these categories have become fundamental in the imagination of self and one’s community, and in that sense have acquired a stubborn materiality about them?

obsessive perception of “vulnerability of self” and a “fear of tomorrow”. And in this context as a monetary form it contested with material wealth in the form of “gold, fixed deposits, savings, cash, real estate, investment in blue chip stocks and the like”, singularly lacking in other words, an identity of its own. The “implicit world-view” was comparable to a “safe deposit box view of the world” where money had to be safely kept in an “impregnable vault”, and the stability in social existence was assured by “a permanent government job, an assured pension, and a guaranteed return on policies”. “Double lock” the safe and “throw the key away” for “money saved was money earned” and “time was the multiplier of money”.

Liberalization of the economy spectacularly inaugurated around the economic crisis in 1991 (Jalan 1992), and subsequently doggedly pursued amidst debates, criticism and protests, visibly and within the public arena had with some momentum transformed the socio-economic landscape<sup>145</sup>. Mohan summarized the change identifying the following trajectories: “market-based economy, general affluence, loosening of authority structures, legitimacy of money, education of women and media explosion”.

Concomitantly, the shift has been in the imagination of life where “life as a destination”

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<sup>145</sup> Rob Jenkins (Jenkins 1999) reveals the underside of Indian state’ functioning, the underside that has been structurally fundamental to its drive towards liberalization in the 1990’s. Populating the account through first person recountings of bureaucrats, politicians, middle men and sundry, he manages to construct a narrative hitherto unavailable to the reading public. The national-social transition to a liberalized economy was neither necessarily nor entirely achieved through contestations on the ideologico-political battlefields, nor through the creation of a ravenously consuming middle class. He persuasively shows the functioning of the logic of self-interest in a context that enabled the mobilization, disbursal and a general appropriation of social resources by the state elites permitting thereby a gradual opening of the Indian markets to global forces. In elucidating the underhanded, para-legal and corrupt practices of these elites he also exposes the market ideologies that focus inordinately on notions of transparency as a means of their social legitimation.



supplants notions of “life as destiny”, “life as product” replaces “life as condition”, “life as an open system” over it being a “closed” one. Discernibly, the allusion here is to the coming into being of social, economic and cultural conditions that support practices and notions of the autonomous subject<sup>146</sup>. What pervades is a feeling “that the individual is the seat of everything” and there is a “newfound belief in one’s capacities”, the sense that “I can actively change my tomorrow”. Commensurably, “what is expected from life has changed; every moment, every sense has to be amplified and enjoyed”. Imputed here is what he called “a linear view of life” which is the very quality that gave it a ‘finite’ measure in contrast to the circular time that indefinitely repeated itself. The former also presumably ‘humanizes’ time to then be consumed in “human sized units” and further, there is a “greater fluidity, more transparency, a more direct connect with life”.

The accompanying shift in the thinking about money too became apparent. Money was piled, stocked and conserved, its accumulation was equated its physical growth behind locked vaults, and it is precisely in impeding circulation, in being withdrawn from circulation, money grew. But now the historical processes, signified by the arrival of late capitalism, forced the revelation of its ontology, that in “deft rotation” it accumulated. A truth hitherto available to a certain class of business communities, now was putatively public. In other words, as Mohan said, “it literally”, became “an exchange medium”. Not only has “it acquired a certain velocity or energy”, but also a sense that in “competing” it grew. Finally, it has realized its own truth and become “literally an

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<sup>146</sup> While the liberal category of ‘autonomous subject’ is conveniently recovered as are the assumptions of cultural homogeneity and similitude that putatively spread and obtain under the reign of global capitalism, the notions of “Indian” difference is rigorously solicited and maintained. The anxiety to construct *Indian* forms and language that heavily beset Arvind, and many other ad professionals I met, partook of that need to emphatically and publicly state its *difference*.

exchange medium”. And in becoming an exchange medium, and in acquiring “velocity”, it has become the “conveyor belt of dreams, desires and destination”.

As Mohan notes, “If the father built his house on his life savings, the son bought his on a loan pledged against future earnings”. The difference is significant. What the newer monetary regime entertained was not a conservation of resources or deferral of *jouissance* (or enjoyment), but its immediacy and now-ness. What reigns now is “not a fear of tomorrow but the desire to extend today”. The point then is not to be “resigned to the circularity of life” but to become a “part of ever expanding world of opportunities”. What is at stake here as Mohan summarized was a shift from a notion of life to one of lifestyle. What insurance firms need to underwrite now therefore, he emphatically claimed, is not a life but a “lifestyle”; the point of insurance is not so much to insure “my life” as much as “my lifestyle and my money”.

The ad that caught his attention (and that of his team), and which neatly encapsulated the series of themes he was keen on proposing and rendering cinematically in the ad, was one by ICICI, the first private entrant in the life insurance scene following its liberalization. Although Mohan was not convinced by what he considered the series of other ads LOWE (the ad agency) made for ICICI retirement scheme, this particular one he thought rather appositely conveyed the stakes for life insurance in India, and hence I describe it below in some detail.

The ad begins by showing a man in a neat aesthetically organized room with wooden floors, looking out of massive inclined window panels at rain outside; he is shown sitting relaxed on *dewan* like furniture as the camera pans from behind him to by the end of the ad transfixed on his smiling and content visage. As the camera moves the

male voice over, his own in this diegetic space, begins to speak conveying his desires, fantasies and ambitions. The narration goes like this:

Man reflecting :

Mein...mein retire nahin hoonga, apne khwaabon se  
 Mere apno se, unki khushiyon se,  
 Na apni aadaton se, na bahano se,  
 Man behlane se, bas kuch bhi khareedne se,  
 Mein retire nahin hoonga, apni zid se,  
 Apni pehchaan se, na jeene se, na zindagi se,  
 Mein retire hoonga, to bas apne kaam se

Background voice:

‘Retirement Solutions, ICICI Prudential Life Insurance ki ore se.....retirement, sirf kaam se.’

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

Man reflecting:

I...I will not retire, from my dreams,  
 From my near and dear ones, from their happiness,  
 Nor from my habits, my excuses,  
 From lighthearted entertainment, from random buying,  
 I will not retire, from my stubborn-ness,  
 From my identity, from life and from living,  
 The only thing I will retire from, will be from work.

Background voice:

‘Retirement solutions from ICICI Prudential Life Insurance... retirement, only from work.’ (See Pic III and IV).

The ad communicates the altered notions of self and assertion of individuality, notions of freedom coupled with responsibility especially towards the immediate

members in a nuclear family, escape from drudgery of work, and the refusal to submit or subsume one's happiness (or in lacanian language what we might call jouissance or



Pic III: ICICI Prudential: Retirement Solutions (courtesy Ogilvy and Mather, India)



Pic IV: ICICI Prudential: Retirement Solutions (courtesy Ogilvy and Mather, India)

enjoyment). As the narrative unfolds we are shown scenes where he is hiking, is in a theme park and grocery store with family, and most leisurely and with content inhabiting these spaces. The telos of the ad of course is the ways in which ICICI Retirement plan affords him these possibilities.

***From Father's No to Perverse Father's Command to Enjoy***

Arvind Mohan's narrative rehearses some of the social sciences' diagnoses of the subject formation and forms of sociality that dominate late capitalism: production of an intense ethics of consumption, commodification of (seemingly) subjective forms of pleasure, harnessing of jouissance as market's primary mode of accumulation and so on<sup>147</sup>. Mohan's intervention, indexing market's thinking about risk and pleasure, was in

<sup>147</sup> See McGowan (2004), Zizek (2005), Salecl (2004).

the implication of this discourse of risk within the larger narrative of consumption and jouissance.

The language of risk Mohan proposed, or for that matter market advocates, re-works the primary Freudian lament of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*<sup>148</sup>. Freud had lamented the repression of jouissance as the root of all civilizational ills, and had diagnosed the erasure of this repression as the means to uplift it from general morass. As if taking their Freud too seriously, the market has activated a process whereby instead of the reign of father's norm and father's 'No', now we have a perverse father commanding and spurring us to enjoy<sup>149</sup>.

In fact, in perverse ways it also engages with Kant's notion of the ethical<sup>150</sup>. Kant predication of ethics on practical reason forecloses, as it slights, subjective investment in the pathological. The assumption that subject will choose security over jouissance, that the pathological drive is inevitably excluded from the subjective scheme of things is premature. In that famous example where a subject is reasonably thought to weigh in for placid life over sex with certain death, is hastily adduced. What if, as Lacan proposed, the

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<sup>148</sup> Notwithstanding the lament, repression and prohibition also remains the very condition or even the very sine qua non of jouissance, as lacan has repeatedly emphasized. See chapter 1.

<sup>149</sup> Psychoanalytic literature on these issues of father's symbolic role in the constitution of subject is prolific to say the least. In referring to the symbolic (father's) command to deter from jouissance or to immerse in it as seems to be the case in late capitalism, I am drawing on now immense work on late Lacan, and in that my allusions are not limited to massive and conveniently available works of Slavoj Zizek but of scholars such as Jacques Alain Miller, Eric Laurent, Colette Soler, Bruce Fink, amongst others. Again the larger chapter as well as the introductory engages with these issues more sufficiently. Particularly useful for mapping this shift from the regime of symbolic father to perverse father/ brother is Juliet F. MacCannell (1991). See also Russell Grigg and Justin Clemens (2006).

<sup>150</sup> One might recall here Kant's example in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, (Kant, 1997) where constructing a 'rational' notion of the subject, he surmises that threat of physical harm (and possible death) could function as a sufficient deterrent to perverse forms of jouissance. Lacan in his reading of this example questions Kant's assumptions about the subject, and asks what if instead of being a deterrent, the threat begins to operate as the very condition of subject's jouissance? See Lacan (1997:108-110).

subject elects for that moment of sexual jouissance over life, what if choices in life are not as categorical as Kant suggests, and notions of denial and disavowal structure subjective experience? Exclusion of risk then is not the necessary condition for subjective being, but an internal limit that is constantly transgressed, becoming in the process the very condition of possible jouissance.

In characterizing the contemporary moment of late capitalism, scholars have identified market's tendency to engage with jouissance as a fundamental one. If hitherto the economy of economy had valorized notions of production and conservation at the expense of consumption and excess, late capitalist forms of sociality seem to have reversed this configuration.

Market's proposal then, and here in the figure of Arvind Mohan is for a harnessing of risk as the means of accumulation over its disavowal then; embracing it over its denial, jouissance over pleasure principle, immersion instead of hermeticism and distance: that then is what the discourses of risk propose. And yet this proposal of immersion into jouissance is not about a suspension entirely of regulation as much as it is about a mobilization of every available means and resources of accumulation. Given that neither the safety of money can be absolutely secured, nor can conventional instruments of investment (banks, etc.) be relied upon to provide adequate returns, insurance in proposing a combination of play (in stock market)<sup>151</sup> and security (regular returns, deposits in bank and so on) furnishes itself as a financial instrument attuned to the unique demands of the times, and yet it is in the latter, that is in proposing itself as a solution to

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<sup>151</sup> We will return to this theme of investment in insurance as that in securities in the following section of this chapter

financial imbroglios that the infant private insurance industry has not been entirely successful as yet.

While clearly the hitherto extant notion of stability of economy and money is vanishing with some pace, and the notion of precariousness of money is gaining ground, insurance industry, Mohan argued, has not managed to articulate its own usefulness in this context. Given the “built-in risk in money now”, he argued, while insurance seeks to function as a “hedge against the open-market place”, in fact, in a seemingly paradoxical gesture, it “ensures that you are linked to the market and yet hedged against it”, it hasn’t entirely managed to articulate its relevance as a financial instrument. Most market-linked policies now guarantee protection of capital, risks can be calibrated and there is a provision for inflation adjustment. For the consumer then, it potentially, as he put it, “reconciles his today and tomorrow, the need for growth and stability, leveraging his potential and hedging his risks”, becoming in the process, the “building block for better tomorrow, and enabling him to make choices in life”. Insurance therefore, is a “seductive idea, promising equilibrium in the face of constant fluctuations and variations in one’s life, and offers the ability to run smoothly over all surfaces without ever losing one’s balance”<sup>152</sup>.

### ***Risk, insurance and stock market***

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<sup>152</sup> This argument was not limited to Mohan alone; it was repeated to me constantly when I was being trained as an insurance agent in an insurance firm in New Delhi. The argument was not entirely merely or only performative, and on rational consideration, one imagines, is sustainable and has considerable weight. Through an appropriate tailoring of the insurance product, one could determine the proportion of sum one was willing to expose to the rises and falls of stock market, and the portion one was keen in investing in other traditional financial instruments. Again, the discussion of my training in the insurance agency and ways it inflected my participation in the insurance ad campaign is the labor of the larger chapter.



One of the points of discussion in all the focus group meetings I attended at the ad agency veered around the benefits of securities market through the unit linked insurance products<sup>153</sup>. Some argued the deprivation of Indian customer through the socialist decades of the unit-linked products was unfortunate, and sustained mostly owing to the domination of a public sector giant disinclined to invest in the stock markets. This bias in the long run it was suggested was counter-productive, and an index of insular socialistic policies. Examples from developed countries of similar engagements in stocks through unit-linked products were usually proffered<sup>154</sup>. One of the advantages of unit linked product is its transparency; instead of being a function of an actuary's determination following complex actuarial calculations and formulations (the fixing of premium price, bonus to be given, benefits to be calculated and so on), which are always shrouded in mystery, and represent a form of knowledge that is inaccessible, the value or yield of unit

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<sup>153</sup> RN Jha. (2000). The discussions alluded to here refer to ones I had not only with Arvind Mohan and the participants of the focus group meetings, but also with other agents getting trained as insurance advisors, as well as the trainers or tutors themselves with longstanding experience in the financial market, particularly the insurance sector in India. The Unit-linked policies refer to policies where part of the investment is exposed to the stock market, and the benefits or declines that accrue from it.

<sup>154</sup> Jha (2000). Some of the earliest instances of unit trust products (mutual funds) could be traced to Britain of 1930's; the first unit linked insurance product was issued in 1957. Currently around 40% of insurances are investment linked insurance products, of which the unit linked ones are the most pervasive. These products have also acquired popular currency in Asian markets generally through the 1990's. in Singapore for instance these were introduced in 1973, but actually took off only in 1993 as the financialization of global markets routed monies through East Asian markets. By early 21<sup>st</sup> century around 43% of insurance was market linked. In Malaysia where the unit linked products were only introduced in 1997, following the stock market crash policy holders lost huge amounts of money, but the product now has assumed distinct valence. In Indonesia as well, the linkages of these products to stock market has provided them visibility and popularity at a time where the bank rates are dwindling (R.N. Jha, 2000). It has been ascertained by studies that the market players take a while to take off in newer markets; initial years of about five to six years are dominated by the state insurance companies. Atul Pradhan of KPMG points out for instance that since the early years of 1990's the market share of foreign insurers in Latin America went up by 45% by 2001, and the similar share for eastern and central Europe went up to 40% (LIC learns to Tango, June25-July 8, 2001, Business India). Some of the aspects dominating their decision are concerns such as market size, growth potential, accessibility and strategic importance of market, management control issue, and consistency of state regulatory apparatus and policies.

linked product though no less inconvenient to calculate- it required deployment of experts to determine its accurate market value on periodic basis- was readily available for customers' information. Constancy of visibility of yield information and the relative transparency of the process, if only apparently so, were cited as definite benefits<sup>155</sup>.

It also scored in the minds of the focus group at least over the regular insurance products. Replicating some of the newer options available with the entry of private players, add-ons such as critical health benefit, premium waivers and so on, the unit linked products permitted a flexibility that these lacked; one could with these switch mid-stream the funds one was investing in through the life of the product. Consequently, depending on the health and vibrancy of a particular company, and through a fore-knowledge acquired on the advise of the insurers or other means customers are allowed to shift one's investments as they think befitting. Resembling mutual funds in its basic build-up that have invaded the Indian markets, the unit-linked products further operate within a competitive milieu, the advantage of it ultimately accruing to the customer in terms of lowering of premiums.

The interests of insurer in these products too cannot be understated, the major one being the transfer of investment risk to the customer. If the traditional product required the relinquishing of sum assured at the conclusion of product term, irrespective of the market conditions (which meant in case of losses, insurers having to underwrite it), unit linked products, unless specifically promised, generally absolve the insurer of this obligation. At the end of term, the yield granted is market value of the investments made.

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<sup>155</sup> One could obviously and quite justifiably so remark the equally arduous task of determining the values in securities market; and yet the distinction at stake here pertains the ready availability of information regarding the prices of stocks, now almost every minute if not second, through the media networks, as opposed to that of insurance products that requires the routing of proposer's painstakingly detailed information through the actuary who finally determine its value.

Absolving the insurer of absolute liability<sup>156</sup>, and hence augmenting its attractiveness as a financial instrument for them (the insurer), it also permitted customers a taste of possible high returns of the stock market, while being advised and guided by a body of knowledgeable personnel the insurer employed for the purpose. Additional benefits for the insurers, given the absence of investment guarantees, are the maintenance of lower statutory reserves and solvency margins, and ultimately lower capital requirements to initiate and sustain the business.

The products nonetheless require greater administrative surveillance and management, and hence called for investment in adequate technological and bureaucratic know how. The regularity of calculation of unit prices, also require the constancy of engagement of a section of the work force with it. As regards the social dissemination of information on unit-linked insurance, given the low level of awareness about insurance in general, the argument is for continuance of the traditional agent mode of communication. For the moment, the penetration level through the bank assurance schemes in the absence of greater awareness will be low. Although reliance upon an agent force is possibly the available route, the nature of unit linked insurance products require knowledge of the stock market and a particular training that for the moment is lacking; consequently one the additional investment for the insurance agencies is in training a work force that is adequate for the task.

The rhetorical claim that the Indian consumer had been deprived of these products, and had been “awaiting its (re-)institution” is a rather redundant one if only for

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<sup>156</sup> Critics and policy-makers have nonetheless striven to insert as a policy measure a degree of liability onto the insurer for ensuring responsible disposition on latter's part; elimination of all liability, it has been argued, could result in needless/unsolicited adventurism and recklessness on their part.

its repetitive quality. Recurrence of this reiteration across several industries endows this rhetoric with a somewhat universal character that claims to bespeak and lament a general socialist inadequacy and malaise the people were somehow waiting to be delivered from<sup>157</sup>. The inherence of large dose of retroactive imputation in such a claim exposes it to critical assailment.

***“Is our money safe?”***

The animation of public discourse around the issue of safe keeping of one’s “hard-earned money” cannot be underestimated. One of the primary concerns determining discussions of privatization of insurance industry through the 1990’s was one of safety of State’s as well as people’s money. The longstanding delay through the 1990’s in opening of insurance industry only by early 2000 is an index of nationals-social churning around the question of its privatization<sup>158</sup>.

At the time of my field-work, the incredible financial exploits of a man named Abdul Karim Telgi was hogging the media limelight. Telgi through remarkable acuity had managed to siphon huge sums of monies of several states in India since about early 1990’s. Very briefly, his modus operandi constituted in replicating and circulating financial papers (known as Stamp paper) that is an absolute prerogative of particular states alone. These, the stamp papers constitute a particular form of state taxation on every legal financial transaction, and a crucial source of state revenues. My conversations

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<sup>157</sup> The claim is no less specious; a knowledge or the specter of relative material inadequacy required a general public exposure to a comparative framework that prior to 1990’s on an appropriately large scale was more or less absent. For the larger public, it is the liberalization of markets and media in 1990’s, and a concrete and fantasized dialectical mode it permitted that will recode the earlier socialist mode as one of lack and absence.

<sup>158</sup> The larger chapter engages with the debates and issues around the privatization of insurance industry in India, particularly as the issues and questions were raised and discussed during the focus group sessions and while I was interviewing both ad professionals and insurance agents.

with my informants in the ad agency as well as the insurance firm I getting trained at were dominated by this event. During one of the focus group meetings while brainstorming about insurance at the ad agency, the Telgi issue and the possible insecurity of one's money emerged as a major concern.

The Telgi case in fact had severely shaken the national-economic imaginary. His collusion with the bureaucratic and political personnel in the breaching of monetary regime did not necessarily come as a surprise. What surprised the general public and sleuths alike was the nature and extent of its spread. A vast number of state official and political figures of consequence were discovered to be on Telgi's payroll (as discovered partly from his diary entries and partly during his confessions and subsequent disclosures) since at least mid 1990's. The disclosure was so stunning that the sleuths ultimately had to suppress the information from getting public. What was more damaging though was the nature of his offence. Breaching the physical secure-holds of the monetarist regime, physically re-routing the relevant machinery from these places to assigned destinations (without any resistance from the officials; in fact he bought these from them using a combination of cajoling, bribery and threat), and most of all replicating financial papers and its official-symbolic imprimatur through these machineries. What is at stake here is the question of replication or doubling of the exclusive official authority to sanction collection of cess on financial/commercial matters. This amounted on being an extraordinary crime.

One newspaper editorial determined that the main culprit in the whole scam was the high modernist technology of print<sup>159</sup>. Print it argued intrinsically opens itself to

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<sup>159</sup> Fake Economy: Stamp paper scam subverts sanctity of property and contract, Editorial, Times of India, November 14<sup>th</sup> 2003.

replication and (re-) semblance, and therefore to possibilities of fakery. Now what distinguishes the original from the fake or the semblant is the precise profile of lines and smudges, the reproduction of which is the sole prerogative of specific machineries that only state commanded. Access to these particular machinic apparatus either legally (through market exchange) or fraudulently (buying by bribing) exposed the monetary regime to criminal activities. After all much of the task of reproduction of these unique and singular paper currencies is accomplished by the very acquisition of these machines; rest of the job, no less arduous by any stretch though, is to put these counterfeit into circulation in appropriate circuitry through relevant network of connections and channels. While the latter operation required attention and vigilance from the state investigative and surveillance mechanism, it is the first it was argued needed to be overhauled. The means of doing so it was suggested was to dispense with the very paper technology which was very much its underlying premise; for the reproduction of these machines, in any case, was not necessarily impossible even though no interested group had as yet managed to accomplish the task. The “as yet” is crucial here: a temporal lag was never going to be a sufficient deterrent. Telgi circumvented the very need of getting the machines manufactured from elsewhere by acquiring it directly from the relevant state departments. The alternative to reliance upon paper was sought in the virtual techniques of computers, internet and its virtual informational circuitries. As to how exactly could this be performed, and how the public long-socialized and habituated into paper technology could be weaned away from it and re-socialized into this newer form was a fundamental question no one seemed yet to have a solution. The task, not easy in any sense, was to plug it into an already established and thriving informational and financial practices.

The high media interest and state anxiety in the Telgi scam only heightened as it reiterated for the consuming public (consuming the news as avidly as anything else) the limits of state's control over economy and its thriving underbellies, and ultimately the very precariousness of the economic regime that the talent of one man could subvert its proper functioning<sup>160</sup>. When Kailash Seth queried, 'Is our money safe in the market', he was merely echoing the anxieties of the rest of the group<sup>161</sup>. And this anxiety was scarcely limited to this focus group; conversations with ad personnel, insurance agents revealed otherwise and so did the drift of general discourses on these matters in the national print and electronic media<sup>162</sup>.

Most in the focus group, un-socialized in the discourses of risk and that of insurance products, if also increasingly aware following their cursory reading prior to the meeting or through conversation during the meeting, were unsure as to how life insurance

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<sup>160</sup> It was clear from the conversation within this group and outside it that no one grudged Telgi his talent and creativity in operationalising this entire para-(ill-)legal regime; his abilities and genius was, in fact, summarily conceded, and in fact acquired something of the status of folkloric heroism in urban India in certain circles. This also possibly evidences the shifting nature of social ethics, and indexes the grip of consumption ethos India currently finds itself in. Accentuation of life-chances through any means possible seems to be the reigning mantra/slogan. Notions of integrity, honesty and so on seems to be qualities the social doesnot mostly believe in or care for any more; and the icons of these values for much of the decades of the Republic such as Gandhi, Nehru and other nationalist leaders are rendered ineffectual, as they find themselves caught within the commodified circuits as mute images, simulacra of their substantive selves, to whom habitual and empty/impotent homage is nonetheless periodically paid.

<sup>161</sup> Kailash Seth was one of the persons invited to participate in the second focus group meeting on Nov. 23, 2004 at the ad agency.

<sup>162</sup> If this was one of the sensational events in the national media public sphere, it was not an isolated one. Last decade of twentieth century in India has been marked by proliferation of financial scams emanating from higher echelons of political and bureaucratic machineries at both national and state or federal levels. Another one of the equally sensational scams around the same time that popped with equal regularity in my discussions, and had greater consequence and related directly to people's money, was the US-64 scheme of the Unit Trust of India. A longer discussion of US-64 and the ways it implicated the Indian state's incompetence in the minds of public generally is possibly in order here, but I refrain for the moment. The failure of Indian state's ability to safeguard its own money (Telgi scam) and that of its citizenry (US-64 scam) had the national public immensely nervous about both the state and market financial institutions, and particularly, the fate of their monies.

might serve as a safe option for their monies, particularly when compared to other forms of financial instruments. While the realities of late capitalist changes were semeiotically and materially palpable, the mode of ensuring the security and growth of one's monetary resources was not entirely clear.

For both the ad agency and the client insurance company then, the program of dissemination of risk discourse within the social the was two-fold: one, ensure visibility through afforded by mediatic technologies and two, pursue pedagogical-informational strategies to enable reading the uncertainties engendered by social transformation in the language of risk and its containment, or even better its harnessing for better life-chances. In other words, through a language of risk and its management, it sought to re-suture the emerging fissures, following the abundance and dislocation of sign from its referent<sup>163</sup>.

The striving then is to re-code the transformation of social landscape in the idiom of risk. And not only in that of risk, but in *risk as an opportunity for better life*. In an ironic emblemization of the principle of gambling, the mode of survival proposed is that of compulsive risk-taking<sup>164</sup>. Transcending the slogan of stability that belonged to an earlier era of apotheosis of nation-building, the valorized narrative emerging in late

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<sup>163</sup> It is the labor of my introductory chapter, where I make a case for the emerging disjunctures between signs, meanings and referents following the decline of a paternal socialist Indian state, and the institutionalization of the apparatus of market and of late capitalist cultural and social forms in India.

<sup>164</sup> The identification of insurance with gambling is not a misplaced one; in fact it alludes to moments and phases on the history of capitalism where this distinction had not acquired the self-evidence that it seemingly possesses in contemporary times. For long in the 19<sup>th</sup> century USA, the state's revulsion of life insurance contracts as akin to gambling allowed for their exclusion from the purview of contract laws. Only by the later part of 19<sup>th</sup> century its legitimacy was juridically established. Similar accounts since the early years of industrial capitalism can be gleaned from developments in laws around gambling and insurance in other parts of the western world. See for instance, Zelizer (1983), Bernstein (1998). See also Susan Strange's brilliant work entitled *Casino Capitalism* that speaks to the reentry of gambling themes to the core of late capitalism. Strange (1997).



capitalist order now speaks in the language of inevitability of instability and imperative of management of life within this order, and hence the language of risk and risk-management.

The impropriety of signs structurally bedevils the subject, forever suspending the assurances of identifications. Capital in as much as it works with and traffics in signs and objects, it exacerbates this impropriety<sup>165</sup>. In so far as in late capitalism, being a subject implies being a subject-in-capital, this impropriety constitutes the limits of subjectivity. In a historical period where signs have gone awry, insurance claiming an adequate readability (or ability to read) of shifting lexicons of capital and value promises a constancy and recurrence of surplus for the subject. In combining cover with play or gambling (cover from risk and play with risk to generate disproportionate surplus), it proposes a deal or an exchange, it claims, other financial instruments cannot make the same offer.

But by no measure, it should be assumed that this claim went uncontested. One of the issues that came up during the discussion in the focus group and also with conversation with the erstwhile LIC officials who now took up the pedagogical functions at the newly established insurance agencies was the issue of widespread opposition the Insurance bill through the late 1990's<sup>166</sup>.

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<sup>165</sup> The reference here is to psychoanalytic and post-structural notions of the subject, and to ideas of its necessarily structural incompleteness. What is of interest to me is the fate or historicity of this subject in late capitalist social formations, in this particular case India. My dissertation continually engages with this question through its chapters. In this chapter, my concern is to engage with particular ways in which discourses of risk emanating from advertising industry, to draw a category from Louis Althusser (1984) 'interpellates' the subject, and offers and allows them to read the social transformations in specific ways.

<sup>166</sup> Unions in a lonely insurance battle, 29 Oct 1999, *The Telegraph*; also Insurance Bill introduced amid protests, 29<sup>th</sup> Oct 1999, *The Hindu*.

“....*there is no risk in reality*”<sup>167</sup>

Risk as a conceptual category, Francois Ewald points out, is the “neologism of insurance” (Ewald 1991:198). Deriving from the Italian word, *risco*, it signified “that which cuts” and referred to ‘reef’ with the “risk to cargo in high seas” (Ibid.:199). He argues, in and of itself it signified nothing, or conversely, nothing signified risk. In other words, “nothing is a risk in itself; there is no risk in reality”. It is a mode of reading the real. To render it plausible he invokes the Kantian distinction between understanding and intuition or sensibility to ascertain the conceptual-textual character of risk. “As a technology of risk, insurance is first and foremost a schema of *rationality*, a way of breaking down, rearranging, ordering certain elements of reality” (Ibid: 199, italics mine)<sup>168</sup>. One might recall here that sensibility or intuition in the first Kantian critique refers to the mode of presencing of the world in the form of manifold or plenitude where this immensity is not organized in any “understandable” form; it refers to a passive form of presencing without the activity of any other faculty yet<sup>169</sup>. It is the faculty of understanding or reason that provides a conceptual matrix to make sense of this manifold that intuition makes available in the first place. Understanding therefore imputes a retroactive suturing of the manifold made available by intuition that ultimately allows us to make sense of the world. The discourse of risk Ewald suggests primarily exists as that order of reality, that retroactive reading of the available (manifold) reality.

Alternatively, one might take recourse to Deleuze’s articulation of relationship between representation and its putative object. Meditating over the relation, or more

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<sup>167</sup> F. Ewald, (1991:199).

<sup>168</sup> Ewald’s emphasis on ‘rationality’ evokes both (a) the Kantian category of reason or rationality as the faculty that is the very conditions of possibility of any knowledge, and (b) in the Foucauldian sense as a historically situate technique or technology for organization of the social.

<sup>169</sup> Space and time as two a priori forms make this presencing of the manifold possible.

precisely the non-relation, between language and material forms, he incisively points out that the latter do not possess a semeiotic form of its own, or in other words, their own “natural” language through which it could securely communicate itself universally<sup>170</sup>. The predicament of making “sense” of the world is therefore always about an entanglement of language and the material. In other words, it is about coincidences of overlapping and intrusion of one into the other, of language over materiality and vice versa. By coincidences, one is not referring to merely ‘accidents’ of history, but also making a case for forces of history that have particular genealogies, moments of origination and articulation, and complex relationship with other forces<sup>171</sup>. Consequently then the attempted overwriting of the Indian present and its social and economic instabilities in the language of risk is too a moment of similar overlap and intrusion, where the purveyors of risk discourse labor to read the late capitalist social through the ideologies of risk and its containment; in other words there is nothing absolutely essential or obvious or ‘natural’ about this reading<sup>172</sup>. To repeat following Ewald, “.....there is no risk in reality”. Its non-essential character is summarily exposed when and where a people who are supposed to be immersed in this instability, in this case, India, refuse to read it as such, i.e., in the language of risk. The task for the insurance industry as much as it is for the ad agencies therefore becomes performative. Performativity of risk discourse,

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<sup>170</sup> By ‘universally’, I mean transcendently and ahistorically without reference to temporality or spatiality or to socio-cultural specificity. For representative writing on this although all his writing engage this question, see Deleuze (1987), (1986).

<sup>171</sup> It also excises the notion of historical ‘necessity’ for any and all events are overdetermined by several force-fields.

<sup>172</sup> Recall here Deleuze’s reading of relationship of discourses of criminality and material-architectural form of prison system in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe: one did not necessarily ‘represent’ the other or even ‘refer’ to the other. Both forms had separate genealogies, and had “overlapped” onto or came to ‘refer’ to or ‘represent’ one another during this phase. See Deleuze (1986b: 32-3, 62-3).

of reading the contemporary conditions of living as marred with risk as an adequate reading of the present is therefore also fundamentally ideological<sup>173</sup>.

Production of risk as the discourse for the reconstitution of late capitalist subjectivity, as a fundamental mode of citizenship then is not necessarily a ('natural') "response" to the obtaining conditions of pecuniary risk or social insecurity necessarily. The constant public evocation of notion of risk, the reiterative strategies speak to the processes of its performative production. The discourse that naturalizes and hinges risk containment strategies onto late-capitalist processes through a rhetoric of inevitability conceals the fragility of its claim. A paradox runs through its heart: the logic of inevitability entertains the recourse to technologies of risk containment as the only adequate and inevitable mode of socializing capital in this era, and yet the entire effort at institutionalization of this risk apparatus, most of all the didacticism that informs its practices betrays this claim to inevitability. On the contrary, the practices of publicity, of education of risk point towards the necessities of a cultural learning, hitherto unavailable within the social lexicon, as is the case in India for instance, as one of the modes of coping with the market in late capitalism. Through an animation of cultural process, a proper subject of risk is sought to be produced.

What accompanied this performative reading of the Indian social through the language of insurantal risk, Arvind argued, was a specific coupling of citizenship and responsibility. This is a very particular mode of subjectivation of the citizenship in the era of consumption in late capitalism. The figure he invoked is that of the "entrepreneur" that

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<sup>173</sup> What is not being contested here is the plausibility of insurance instrument possibly as adequate modes of engaging with uncertain times; these might well be so. What is being indicated is that there is nothing obvious about people wanting to read the contemporary situation in and through the category of risk, and especially commoditized risk (that insurance essentially is). Therefore the task for risk ideologies becomes performative.

has a longer genealogy in the history of capitalism<sup>174</sup>. This heroic figure that Max Weber championed in his Protestant Ethic<sup>175</sup> is one that almost obsessively relying on practices of frugality and thrift, of a tortuous and endless deferring of *jouissance* invests every possible and available resource into his economic ventures, “accumulating as opposed to enjoying” as Jacques Alain Miller puts it<sup>176</sup>. This mythic figure was imagined by Weber to have been pivotal alongside if not substitutive of an almost de-subjectivized process of primitive accumulation narrated by Marx, in the rise of capitalism as an economic and social system. The entrepreneur though was replaced by the bureaucratic machinery of capital and modern state through the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, peopled as it was by a collectivity of administrators and policy-makers, and a culture of expertise and experts primarily reliant upon a numerary understanding of the social world and modernist philosophy of social engineering. The neo-liberal economic regime though has authored the return of the trope of entrepreneurship<sup>177</sup>. If in the intervening moment, subjective initiative was excised to a large measure from the constructions of individualized citizenship, as it (initiative) was invested in the specialized functioning of large collectivities of market and state, a return to notions of individual responsibility and initiative is currently being envisaged.

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<sup>174</sup> I am unsure if he himself was aware of the genealogy of this figure of the entrepreneur, or of its celebration, in the generally accepted accounts of the history of capitalism.

<sup>175</sup> See Weber (1992)

<sup>176</sup> See Miller (2006:12). In recalling Lacan’s seminar of 1969 (Seminar XVII, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*) that engages Freud’s repression thesis (most explicitly articulated in his *Civilization and its Discontents*), Miller elaborates in this essay the very failure of repression and a general spread of the ethic of permissiveness, and the difficulty in the “prohibition of prohibiting”. As Lacan in his commentary on the transcendence of repression as the symptom of our times, says “there is no longer any shame” (cited in Miller 2006: 12)

<sup>177</sup> This of course is concomitant with the displacement of structures and notions of accountability and responsibility onto the consumer-citizen subject from the welfare state apparatus.

This though is not a return of the same, and that at least in two senses. One, while the citizen-subject is reinvested with personal responsibility, the latter is aided and abetted in no small measure by the industries of experts and their highly specialized knowledges unlike the Weberian individual entrepreneur. Responsibility for self though in the last instance still resides nearly solely on the individual. And two, what is also dispensed is the ethic of conservatism, replaced as it is by that of profligacy of, or near obscenity of, consumption. Practices of risk support as much as they encourage an immersion in hedonistic jouissance; in fact the risk discourses presuppose insurance as a technology of self as an indispensable precondition for this captivation by jouissance and commodification. The emerging discourse of insurantal risk in India (as in the global elsewhere) therefore envisions as it effects this very specific imaginary of individuated subjectivity, consumption and responsibility<sup>178</sup>.

***Insurance and Inscribing the Incommensurable***<sup>179</sup>

Insurance as a category fundamentally is an engagement with the incommensurable, which it confronts at least at two points. One, while seeking numerary-monetary commensuration of a life, which is to say while determining the value of a life (or in more simple terms in attesting the premiums on a life insurance), and two, the incommensurability of the event, say death or any other misfortune that is the very

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<sup>178</sup> If previously autistic jouissance and excess in all its tropes were equated with irresponsibility, now a relation between jouissance and responsibility; engagement with one's own jouissance is being articulated as irrevocable form of ethics; see Slavoj Žižek (2005). Also, see conclusion for more extended statement on this. For interesting readings of insurance as a technology of self in the context of developed countries, see Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle (2003)

<sup>179</sup> "Incommensurable" for insurance proposes to endow exchange value to that which either it cannot apprehend as an event (death or accident or any other uncertainty) or cannot calculate (value of a "life").

ground of insurance as a category. So first let's look at this attempt at attesting value to a human life.

*Valuing the incommensurable: evaluating a human life*

Construction of a dense matrix of information about the life to be insured is carried out first through the proposal form<sup>180</sup>, which purports precisely to attend to the task at hand: to adequately apportion the degree of risk of that life and thereby attribute it with an annual (or half-yearly, quarterly or monthly) exchange value. The immense chart created through the actuarial science of probabilistic mathematics proposes to slot the life to be insured in one of the holes on its surface. A whole horde of variants participate to determine the exchange value of the risk on a particular life. Apart from the age and term of the plan to be undertaken, the physiological and moral state of being of the proposer is to be ascertained. The question of morality is not an insignificant one, and reveals another paradox of insurance as a commodity, which we shall allude to again in the next few pages.

While writing the insurance form, age of the proposer is a fundamental consideration. The older one is, the greater the risk (of bodily malfunctioning, and of

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<sup>180</sup> Proposal form is filled out by the proposer (the person who is being insured) with assistance from the insurance agent. It was reiterated to us during the training sessions that a rigorous protocol is to be followed for filling out the form: "The proposal form is to be completed by the proposer in *his own handwriting* and *signed* duly authenticated by a *witness*" (some exceptions are permitted though). Few issues acquire centrality here, of which let's consider two: One, what is at stake in this insistence that the proposer *write* his/her own form "in his own handwriting", if only with outside *assistance* from the agent? And insistence upon a form of writing that is not limited to inscribing one's signature on the proposal form, that seemingly absolutely singular and authentic mark of the self? Writing that is demanded here equates it with a full presence; a presence that is identical with awareness or consciousness, and a presence that takes full responsibility of its engagements, and here engagement with insurance as a financial instrument. Inscribing the form in full enables the proposer to know fully the stakes involved in the investment; amongst many other inviolable conditions, this is insisted as a moral clause. And that is not all, the act of inscription has to be witnessed by an other, more precisely a responsible other.

death) and hence higher the premium. And beyond a certain cut-off point, say 55 years of age in most cases, the proposer's application for life insurance is inadmissible. And hence given the heavy burden on age as the determinant of exchange value on the life, extreme care is taken in admitting documents furnished for age proof. But that in itself is not a convenient task. A society where the official commemoration of birth date is generally, if at all, long after the birth, being the function as it is of complex barrage of factors- illiteracy, the limitations of the state apparatus' means of ascertaining and documenting birth (and also its collusion in fabrication of dates), the interests of the immediate kinship group in hedging the age qua life-chances in a society increasingly circumscribed and infiltrated by state networks determining future well being of individual and collective lives- the problem of ascertaining the true birth rate is only compounded. Of the several possible documentary evidences only a few qualify<sup>181</sup>.

Further, in the times when social itinerancy or movement is the condition of modern living, the proof of address that settles the issue of constancy of contact and communication is also an imperative. Premiums should keep coming, and in any event, a hiatus in communication should not be a reason for this exercise to suffer. And hence, a permanent address alongside the provisional one is also to be noted in the proposal form.

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<sup>181</sup> We were provided the list of permissible documents: passport, ration card, high school matriculation certificate and a few others. Clearly, what is in evidence are at least two things. One, another instance of modern state's reliance upon adequate scriptural form as constituting appropriate evidence, and two, circularity and inter-textuality of these legal documents; the presence of one document is a function of presence of another and so on, which is not to suggest either that it is unending nor that an originary moment is not locatable. (As Ramesh Khandelwal had noted to the tutor in the training class for training insurance agents, "But sir, once you have the birth certificate you can have the rest, isn't it?").



The modern form of surveillance should be able to trace you down to your original address in the national-territorial scheme of things<sup>182</sup>.

Insurance business involves a paradoxical attempt at engaging with human life. While on the one hand, human life is considered ‘invaluable’ and incommensurable, the conceit of the concept of life insurance attempts to do precisely that. That is to say, conflictingly on the one hand, the exercise is to relentlessly ascertain the singularity of human life, on the other hand, through probabilistic mathematics the striving is to contain and articulate it within the logic of exchange value. The meticulous anthropomorphic detail resorted to ultimately seeks out to do the impossible: put an exchange value on the singular (singular as that which cannot be exchanged, as that which cannot be sufficiently put in the circulating economy of exchange). This paradox rehearses one that Marx confronted: how to account for value of a material form in the circulatory framework of exchange. While Marx performed the heavily contested suturing through the figure of labor, no such mediation is available here. The relationship is one of circumvention, of approximation and containment. A weak mediation is performed by resorting to the phrase “a human life is an income generating asset”. And since a human life is immeasurable, the value of life insurance is adjudicated on the basis of ‘income’ a life potentially generates. The insurance then properly speaking is the insurance of this potential income and not that of the human life that generates this income. The resolution,

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<sup>182</sup> According to the established parlance of documentation in the modern nation-state, you should have a permanent address; it is, in principle an inviolable rule, if only rampantly violated in practice in myriad ways.

maybe the only possible one, ultimately involves the elision of the mammoth and impossible question it cannot confront: put a measure on life<sup>183</sup>.

The resolution offered then ultimately is one of pragmatics. Pragmatics, in this context, suggests that since a way has to be found to measure life for life plans, it has to be rendered workable. “How else can we have a workable life plan?” is the constant rhetoric. Or as F. Ewald writes, “One can always argue that life and health are things beyond price. But the practice of life, health and accident insurance constantly attests that *everything can have a price*, that all of us have a price and that this price is not the same for all” (Ewald 1991: 204). This argument, nevertheless, merely circumvents the issue on the anvil, and not engage it. This sidestepping though subsequently allows the work of insurance to begin with the construction of a massive and meticulous apparatus to pin down and extract the measure of a life.

*Risky event as the incommensurable: notions of certainty and uncertainty*

Through actuarial sciences insurantal technology proclaims not only an ability to read events and social processes, but also in that gesture of commodification that is its primary function as a financial category, it audaciously marks these social processes with exchange values. And yet as we know, the very efficacy of the category is articulated around the ideology of uncertainty (or the unreadability of events) as its primary ground<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> When questioned on this paradox, the tutors in the training classes could not be bothered; the addendum in the form of the phrase “human life creates value” to the one that affirms the incommensurability of human life (“human life is invaluable”) resolves the insurmountable problem, if not adequately then at least for all practical purposes.

<sup>184</sup> We buy insurance to cover for that uncertainty that might erupt at any time; specifically in the case of pure death coverage as well, the absolute certainty of death obviously is not in question; what is its the spatio-temporal matrix, that is where, how and when it might occur. So that in other words, insurance as a social technique is a mode of engagement with the uncertain. For an enunciation of insurance as a financial instrument ascertaining certainty through similitude and

(O'Maley 2004, Ericsson and Doyle 2003). The determination of exchange value of uncertainty paradoxically takes the form of intricate mapping of trajectories of the present and its possibilities, in fact of creation of an elaborate topographical architecture of possibilities not only of the social but also that of the individuated subject. The entire apparatus is vertiginously driven to ultimately confront that event that it strictly speaking has no adequate response to, and yet has to ascribe an exchange value.

In so far as it claims to adequately read and map the trajectories of the social, insurance as a category of risk functions on the assumptions of citationality. Citation works on notions of similitude (Derrida 1985). Similitude or reiteration of events renders it (risk) plausible. What is recruited by the category of risk, therefore is a notion of past that is repeatable. In other words, tenability of risk technologies rely on, at the level of the social this qualitatively unchanging time. That events and processes repeat themselves then open them up to the textuality of numerical assessments and calculability<sup>185</sup>. Certainty then, certainty about regularity of events, of temporal re-iterativity then permits a quantitative approach to them.

And yet the immanent force that determines citation implicitly recalls, as Derrida has reminded us, the assumptions of non-identity<sup>186</sup>. It is partly the non-identity of events that plagues similitude that the performance of citation, in the first place, is called upon to restrain or contain or account for. Through citation or citational practices performed by actuarial sciences the absolutely singular events are folded onto each other and through

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the inherent contradictions of this assumption, if not entirely in the manner in which I am striving to do here, see Pat O'Maley (2004), Richard V. Ericson and Aaron Doyle (2004).

<sup>185</sup> Emphasis on textuality here is not inadvertent; numbers perform, possibly with even greater force the task usually assigned to what we colloquially call language. That numerical performance derives its force from their implicit function as language, cannot be lost sight of; in that sense these are linguistic forms.

<sup>186</sup> See Derrida (1985) for his notion of similitude and difference built into citational practices.

the ruse rendered readable. Citation then as a category has written into it notions of non-identity or what Derrida calls ‘difference’ as much as of similitude. Non-identity of events that requires performance of citation, also introduces, by the same token the element of uncertainty.

And paradoxically it is this “uncertainty” that is built into the matrix of insurance as a social technology; in other words, it is the certainty of uncertainty that this social technology is found upon, and through probabilistic calculus it ascertains the possible number of such uncertain incidents. What is crucial here is another splitting at the level of the social and the individual: on the register of the social, the insurers operate on the foreknowledge established by actuarial sciences that certain number of uncertain events will eventually occur (that is to say they operate on the certainty that certain number of uncertain events will happen). And, on the other hand, what remains uncertain, and this is at the level of the individual, is who will be the site of this uncertain events. In other words, the practice of citationality is, ultimately called upon to ascertain not only the recurrence of the same, but also of not the same. Put another way, it is mobilized to establish the recurrence of hazardous event in the midst of uneventful events.

The category of risk then is split, recruiting as it does both the notions of certainty and uncertainty. Ironically in the Indian context precisely owing to a post colonial interventionist state and a controlled economy, the discourses of risk never really took the shape they did in developed capitalist economies, the consequence being once economy was opened, inevitably it is more the discourses of uncertainty that have permitted its social deepening<sup>187</sup>. In interesting ways, owing to volatility of social process, and

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<sup>187</sup> In now classic writings on risk, a strained distinction between risk and uncertainty is called upon to attribute a specific sense to it, one that is a function of calculative aggregation of possible

consequent difficulties in reading the future and establishing “certainty” that insurance as an engagement with uncertainty makes itself more readily germane in the contemporary Indian context.

***Conclusion: Thinking Risk Discourse and the Indian Social***

A possible if also provisional way to end this chapter might be to mark yet another anomaly of insurance as a commodity in its relation to temporality. As Manish Arora during one of the focus group meetings commented, “Once you are invested, you have to continue investing. The option of getting out is difficult (sic). You get tied to it”<sup>188</sup>. In a way strictly speaking this is not entirely true for insurance at least in principle always had inbuilt possibilities of withdrawal at different stages before maturity of the term (if also with some losses depending on how long one had stayed invested amongst other parameters). And in recent years the private players have also introduced more versatile products that permit greater liquidity. Nonetheless, the conception that money’s “gets tied” for long periods of time in insurance is a paramount one.

In other words, insurance anticipates a deferred return, and thereby binds doubly with the temporal. Not only is the exchange or circulation occurring *in* time as is inevitable, but the transaction for its redemption takes time or happens *through* time; the return is deferred through the (pre-) determined period of the financial instrument<sup>189</sup>.

What insinuates anxiety vis a vis insurance, that Manish Arora spoke of and Arvind did

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futures, in which calculation is predicated upon repeatability and hence predictability of social patterns.

<sup>188</sup> This is not the place to compare insurance with other financial instruments, but will take it up in the following chapter.

<sup>189</sup> Strictly speaking, all exchanges occur *in* and *through* time, and involve *deferral*, and yet the exchange undergirding insurance prolong this deferral to an extent where it becomes discomfiting unless a subject or a community is socialized in its practices, and which is ultimately what insurance companies are aiming at in the Indian context (i.e., socialization).

not fail to note on other occasions, is this deferral, and in certain cases a deferral without return, at least in one's lifetime<sup>190</sup>. Experientially the anxiety and confusion also stems from its typical abstraction: one is unsure of the exchange that took place<sup>191</sup>. The return that is constitutive of an exchange process is deferred temporally almost without end, especially when compared to normal economic transactions. There is a seeming defiance of symmetry and reciprocity, a suspension of the circulation intrinsic to exchange; a defiance of regular ways of being in modern capitalist times; as though it were a gift as Derrida would have said of insurance (Derrida 1992)<sup>192</sup>. But since strictly speaking gift is an impossibility, insurance too is not a gift. But the confusion persists as can be discerned from the epigraph quoting Mohit Sharma we started the chapter with (" Do you think I am giving you a gift? ... ) In distinguishing gift from commercial exchange this instance recalls for us the possible confusion (and the accompanying accusations) between *kula* and *gamwali*, Malinowski spoke of: "He conducts his kula as if it were gimwali" (Malinowski 1961: 96). For the Trobrianders the confusion between kula or gift and gamwali or barter is untenable, and any effort to this intermixing of categories of which the lines of separation is not always clear, is unviable and disparaged. Insurance in this instance proposes the same miscegenation of categories that is impermissible and hence is subject to ridicule. It also rehearses at least one of the classic features of kula: temporal deferring. To quote Malinowaski, "the Kula consists in bestowing of a ceremonial gift,

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<sup>190</sup> That for instance is how the policies on life (or pure life policies) work: the money is handed over to one's immediate kin following one's death.

<sup>191</sup> "What do I get for this?" was the constant refrain of potential customers unconvinced of its value or relevance; while abstraction in exchanges is not necessarily alien to subjects-of-capital, this was one deferral of reciprocity that seemed to make them quite anxious. Clearly at some level the issue was one of socialization in this financial technology albeit in the language of risk and not of mere investment as a tax saving device.

<sup>192</sup> See also Mauss, (1967), and Godelier (1999).

which has to be repaid by an equivalent counter-gift after a lapse of time, be it a few hours or even minutes, though sometimes as much as a year or more may elapse between payments” (Malinowski 1961: 95). It is this defiance of reciprocity that properly consists a commercial exchange and is akin more to gifting that unnerved my interlocutor, Sharma, and elicited an exhortative response, howsoever polite, that I had not expected.

In a social economy then, where as a technique of governance and self, insurance has long been utilized as a tax-saving device, and where notions of state sanctioned social stability marginalize categories of risk and uncertainty, insurance performed the task of being just another financial instrument albeit characteristically different in its investment in the temporal. For a people unused to treating insurance as mode of engaging with risk, especially financial risk as well as social indeterminacy and uncertainty require to be trained in this technology, and for the incoming private insurance players advertising became one of the performative mode of dissemination of knowledges regarding this technology of self.

### Chapter III

#### ***Kare Bhitari Shakti Ka Vikas: Dabur, Advertising and an aesthetic of body and health***<sup>193</sup>

*“Not only do you have to be good, you have to be seen to be good”*

Aliagroup<sup>194</sup>

It was a hot summer June day when I met Kishore Chutani, a senior professional at Dabur<sup>195</sup>. Getting to meet him was arduous as he was maintaining a very busy schedule lately, and was not sure of the purpose of meeting a research scholar. Phone calls and persuasion from the ad agency convinced him that it will not be a complete waste of time. It was my third visit to the Dabur office at Sahibabad. From the first trip to the office I was stuck by the “modernist” architectural grandeur of the multi-storied building. On two sides it was totally covered by glass with a life-size image of the famous cine-star

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<sup>193</sup> Research for this paper was done through conversation with Dabur professionals at the Sahibabad Office in Uttar Pradesh between April to October 2004; conversation with their ad agency, particularly Arvind Mohan, their Head of Planning Division, though had been happening for much longer time, at least since the September of the previous year when my stint with the agency was initiated. Dabur is the fourth largest Fast Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) company in India (2005-6), and the largest Ayurvedic one, making products ranging from Health supplements, pharmacological products, cosmetic items and so on in a product portfolio that is as large as 450.

<sup>194</sup> Aliagroup’s DMA was responsible for the refurbishing of the Dabur Chyawanprash’s logo and packaging in 2003. Initially Delhi based, but now with offices in Mumbai and Vermont, USA, DMA as a part of Aliagroup was one of the first branding agency established in India in 1998, boasts of handling the packaging and designing needs of Indian corporate giants such as ITC, HLL, Air India, TATA apart from nearly more than 500 projects including of several global MNCs and over 20 product categories all over Asia. It was established by like-minded corporate entrepreneurs who perceived its potential in India. In its current form DMA is one of the five specialist companies constituting the holding company Aliagroup attending to the spheres such as e-branding, outsourcing facilities, experiential retail marketing and landmark branding.

<sup>195</sup> Conversations with Kishore Chutani took place on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 2004 at Dabur’s Sahibabad office.



Amitabh Bachhan<sup>196</sup>, who was the company's brand ambassador, standing aside an equally large bottle of Dabur Chyawanprash dominated one whole façade. The anomaly of its appearance, erected as it was in the midst of smaller nondescript concrete buildings, made it more conspicuous and hard to miss as you drove down into this northern India state from Delhi. Living nearby, I was at the office for my appointment notwithstanding the viral fever ailing me for last two days and being low on energy. My rather pallid appearance gave away the truth of my condition, and the first query from Kishore was about my health. "Kuch lete kyon nahin", he half-smiled and said, and continued "Chyawanprash liya?"<sup>197</sup>. This initial banter was followed by almost automatic allusion to the merits of taking Chyawanprash: "kare andar se strong" (which is translatable as "makes you strong from inside"). He was aware that the meeting was going to be about the chyawanprash campaign they were working on with their ad agency, and sought to somewhat comically invoke the issue<sup>198</sup>. This immediately recalled for me, my numerous conversations with Arvind Mohan at the ad agency on Dabur and his more or less identical statement: "kare bhitari shakti ka vikas" (meaning "it augments the vital inner strength") as the enframing platform of new ad campaigns.

From the very inception of its confrontation with the allopathic medicines, ayurveda's claim to social legitimacy was structured by a notion of "holism". This notion

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<sup>196</sup> Amitabh Bachhan possibly is the most well known cinema star from India who reinvented himself to suit the cinematic needs in early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>197</sup> "Kuuch lete kyon nahin" (meaning "why don't you take something") was a line from everyday conversation emblemized in late 1980's by the Unani medicinal company Hamdard in the cinematic ad for its health tonic Sinkara. Spoken in colloquial Hindi it was preceded by the "yeh kya haal bana rakhha hai" (what have you made of yourself or what terrible condition are you in?). In posing the question Kishore substituted the Hamdard product with chyawanprash.

<sup>198</sup> Comically, for everyday social cultural forms when these dialectically return from cinematic and tele-visual screen to everyday social conversations, seem to then have strange social lives, and often times humorous effects.

drew from a cosmological philosophical system that believed in a continuum of natural ecology and human physiological living; the argument went that disruption or imbalance in one affected the other and vice versa<sup>199</sup>. Healing constituted in the restoration of balance within the bodily hormonal system, and of the body with the ambient social and natural circumstances. Further, the therapeutic results were not immediate, and took longer time than the allopathic medicines; but conversely the medicinal effects were not localized onto the particular ailment as in the case of allopathic medicines, but addressed the larger physiological processes, dealt with them holistically and eradicated them from the very source (literally as Kishore Chutani said, *bimari ko jad se bahar nikaal the*<sup>200</sup>) and eliminates the possibility of recurrence. This although and arguably took time unlike the allopathic medicines where the physiological focus nonetheless was severely delimited.

This narrative Mr. Chutani rehearsed for me in that meeting is not necessarily one that he learnt at Dabur; it forms one of those knowledges we have available to us in our everyday social life as Indians or as South Asians generally. The larger cosmological understanding that undergirds this narrative is not so much the division of the body into internal and the external, as much as the predication of the latter on the former, which is to say that the external bodily form is an expression of the health and vigor (or lack) of the bodily inside. Appearance in other words indexes the substantive solidity of the bodily insides<sup>201</sup>. While this rhetoric of substantivism<sup>202</sup> - *Kare andar se strong*- always

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<sup>199</sup> See for instance, P.Bala (1995).

<sup>200</sup> Literally, it “uproots the ailment from its roots”.

<sup>201</sup> This framework would allow it to distinguish itself from other cosmetic products whose effects Dabur and similar ayurvedic companies would claim is merely is on the appearance, and by extension, limited and ephemeral.

one of its ideological supports, I would argue, it acquired newer resonance in the late 1990's, as Dabur again sought to reinvent itself as modern and relevant. This anxiety about, for a lack of a better word, its "non-modernity" has been a longstanding one, and clearly not one that rooted itself only in the 1990's. For a medicinal form reliant upon its "traditionalism" and ancientness for its social currency, the burden of articulation of its contemporary relevance has been recurrent and endless. Confronted with the growing hegemony of western medical science- not least because of latter's patronage by colonial and subsequently post- colonial state and its relative nosological efficacy- and its attendant social marginalization, it felt this need to continually rearticulate its therapeutic claims and contemporary relevance.

The appeal to a substantivist logic by Chutani (and Arvind Mohan) was complemented by the solicitation of the figure of science and research in its manufacturing processes. The conversations with several other personnel of the company, apart from him (Chutani), were strewn with references to the state of the art research and manufacturing division in the same building (in the main office at Sahibabad)<sup>203</sup>. In the rather brief official biography of the company containing entries of more or less fifteen important events – inscribed in the form of booklets, and also reproduced on its website- the company projects the fact of its early recourse to research and automation, on at least three occasions. This bidding for scientific status for its products and their modes of

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<sup>202</sup> Recourse to a word such as "substantivism" is awkward, and yet I stick to it for Chutani kept insisting on how Dabur (and Ayurveda) was about "substance" and solidity (as he would roll his wrists and form a fist with his palm and fingers), and not about mere appearances or surfaces. Arvind Mohan, my interlocutor at the ad agency spoke of it in terms of "substance", substantive" and "substantial" and so on.

<sup>203</sup> In fact the building itself in its architectural form and organization of internal and outside space sought to perform the 'modern'; it was geared to towards invoking in the visitors as much as people living in the vicinity the recognition of its modernity. The longer chapter engages with this argument more adequately.

production becomes not only a way of replicating the efforts of allopathic medical system and a means of circumventing competition from other ayurvedic firms that began emerging at least since early 1900's, but also articulate and perform its very modernity. One of the Dabur booklets Chutani handed out to me, for instance, had the following description: "Dabur's main asset is its knowledge base and the backup of research initiatives through modern science. Dabur deals mainly with traditional Ayurvedic products; we take care to conduct rigorous trials and authentication of processes so that our consumers get the best. Dabur Research Foundation (DRF), set up in 1979 as an independent research organisation, spearheads the R&D activity of the Company. DRF is well equipped with the most modern research facilities and more than 125 highly qualified scientists from diverse fields like Ayurvedic doctors, chemists and phytochemists, botanists, agronomists, clinical pharmacologists, microbiologists, food technologists, bio-technologists, oil technologists, oncologists, and so on"<sup>204</sup>.

In this chapter I would argue that through a language of substantivism<sup>205</sup>, as opposed to cosmetic and surface changes, Dabur Chyawanprash, in uncertain and late capitalist times in India, inserted itself within the reigning discourses of health and bodily aesthetics as a mode of articulation of its difference and self-identity. What was also resorted to by Dabur was a claim to scientism and research of its methods of manufacturing and of its therapeutic effects. The recurrence, as I would suggest, of this claim or of the very need of this claim though, ultimately, exposed the anxieties of the company of the contemporary irrelevance of its therapeutic tradition, of its very "non-

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<sup>204</sup> It continues in the following lines, "We have been involved in developing products for consumer applications as well as highly specialised areas of genomics, proteomics and bio-informatics. Through the ceaseless quest of our scientists in frontier areas, Dabur has been able to mark a presence even in critical aspects of health care like cancer therapy"

<sup>205</sup> As to what "substantivism" means will become clear in the following sections.

modernity”. Failure of social recognition and legitimation of its healing system as adequately modern then compelled its immersion in the late capitalist strategies of marketing and publicity as a means of making that claim<sup>206</sup>. Ironically for a company whose self-identity is a function of its claims to substantivism, participation in the “economy of appearances”<sup>207</sup> and a sufficient mastery of its strategies becomes a crucial mode of articulating its contemporary relevance. This, I argue, is ultimately a predicament it finds itself in, in a social space where the cultural, and systems of meaning are increasingly being framed by the aesthetic of commodity form and mass media.

### **A brief introduction of Dabur and Chyawanprash**

Dabur is the oldest ayurvedic medicinal company in India today. Not everyone I spoke to at Dabur seemed to know the origin of the name ‘Dabur’. Kishore Chutani, narrated a story that was corroborated by other insiders later on. The founder of the company, entrepreneur- philanthropist, Dr. S. K .Burman (1856-1907), started his ayurvedic operations in the late 1870’s. Aimed at alleviating the poor and isolated in the rural areas of Bengal where the burgeoning allopathic medicine had limited reach, Burman’s endeavor was to deploy indigenous and relatively inexpensive therapeutic means to confront deadly recurrent diseases such as cholera, plague and malaria. Spread of his fame as a “medicine man” or doctor, and more importantly his medicines, across

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<sup>206</sup> Dabur has been one of the oldest Ayurvedic companies advertising its products since 1910’s and 20’s. The 1990’s nonetheless inserted it in a rather different social and visual regime. If hitherto compulsion of social dissemination of information of itself and its product determined its imperative for advertising, now with the proliferation of mediatic surfaces and register within the social, its survival, social visibility and presence seemed to depend on its mediatic visibility and presence to which end then it had to nearly completely and radically gear itself and respond to. This chapter then considers the consequences of the mediatization of the Indian social and its immense implications for even established companies such as Dabur.

<sup>207</sup> I get this phrase from Morris (2000).

the breadth of Bengal was quick; and soon *Daktar*, which is the phonetic rendering of ‘doctor’ in Bengali dialects and Burman gave way to truncated portmanteau word “Da”-“bur” as the attenuated version of “Doctor Burman”. The entire enterprise was subsequently formalized with the setting up of the first Dabur pharmacy in 1884 in Calcutta. In over a decade’s time, with the fame of *daktar* growing, demand for its products was enough for Dabur to set of manufacturing unit in Garhia, Bengal in 1896, and subsequently a research and development division in 1919. What it entailed, as Chutani claimed, was “standardization of ayurvedic medicine, which were nature-based, and not simply standardization, but these were also scientifically tested and manufactured in large volumes”. It claims to be the first company to do so, and ‘automation’ of the manufacturing unit apart from being ‘scientific’-in both production and quality testing- in its approach marked its entrepreneurship. By 1920’s two new manufacturing units are opened in Narendrapur and Daburgram<sup>208</sup> as its distribution network spread to North East and to the area we now know as the state of Bihar, and it becomes a full fledged company in 1936, Dabur India (Dr. S.K.Burman) Pvt. Ltd.

Initially focusing on the mass production of medicinal, pharmacological products on the basis of ancient philosophical texts, the company gradually started manufacturing other health and personal care products. At this moment it boasts of over 450 products constituted within six major portfolios which have undergone several shifts through last sixty years. In this chapter, my focus will be on Dabur Chyawanprash which is one of the two leading brands (alongside Dabur Amla Hair oil). Chyawanprash is a generic ayurvedic product and was first launched by Dabur as a mass marketed product in 1949.

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<sup>208</sup> As to whether Daburgram got its name from Dabur company which is likely, Chutani was not entirely certain.

While several ayurvedic companies have tried to replicate this product, chyawanprash as a brand is inevitably associated with Dabur in popular imagination. We might recall briefly here that ayurvedic medicinal system alongside the Unani system formed the dominant healing system in India prior to the advent of colonial rule, and by late nineteenth century both these therapeutic traditions were already beginning lose out to allopathic system that enjoyed patronage of the colonial state<sup>209</sup>. Clearly it was not only a matter of patronage; in several respects the allopathic medicines scored over the indigenous healing systems, foremost being the immediacy of healing effects that the former ensured. I will return to the matter of therapeutic efficacy and its consequences for Dabur in the subsequent sections.

### **1990's and the sprucing up of the image**

The implication within the economy of images precipitously announced by the economic liberalization in early 1990's, is paradoxical for a pharmaceutical company whose public persona of (avowed) claims to holism rested upon the rhetoric of substance or of substantivism (of the underlying, the inside) as we shall see<sup>210</sup>. For long Ayurveda's politico-economic contestation for social hegemony with the western allopathic

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<sup>209</sup> For the predicament of indigenous healing traditions during the colonial rule, see Bala (1991), Arnold (1993).

<sup>210</sup> The predicament Dabur found itself in the 1990s with economic liberalization and opening of the airwaves to private interests and the new visual regime is needless to say was scarcely unique to it; other Indian companies experienced it with no less intensity, and were similarly compelled to engage, and respond to, it. Dabur's discomfort in participation with this emerging visual regime nonetheless seemed to stem from its own ontological self definition and self image as an entity invested in certain notion of depth, nurturing of the insides and so on; Chutani's assertion for instance, "upari cheezon mein hamara interest nahi hai" (translated as "we are not interested in surface matters"); what is in exhibition here is a certain conflation of the fundamental claims of ayurveda as a medicinal tradition and the ways in which Dabur instituted itself, and its self-image as a company along those lines. In a sense it is as though the company was contagiously infected by the philosophical assumptions of its therapeutic tradition: i.e., take care of the content, the form will take care of itself. Chutani, to my question about the recent investments in advertising campaigns, responded, "Yeh to karna padta hai abhi ke time mein, koi chara nahi hai" (translation: "we are compelled to do this in today's time, there is no other way").

therapeutic tradition had cajoled it to recruit and project a holistic-ecological philosophy of the body as its basis that sharply diverged in its cosmological philosophy, attitude and notions from the assumptions of allopathic medicinal forms. With the gradual loss of territory to allopathic medicine for over hundred years during the colonial and postcolonial period, ayurveda and other indigenous medical systems came to be associated with were the lower section of the society (both in rural and urban India) for whom the allopathic medicines was inaccessible either owing to its limited spread or on account of its relative high price (Banerji 1981). For this customer base of indigenous medicines, allopathic therapeutic forms, in as much as it was associated with the upper and middle classes and urban sociality, it became an object of desire, and access to it, a marker of imagined social mobility. This, needless to say, was unacceptable to Dabur. Working on the defensible functionalist assumption, that the desires and wants of lower sections in a hierarchical social context are animated by social practices of classes above it, the Dabur management contrived to insert ayurvedic products as medicinal products of value in the existing regimes of desire of the upper classes. At various points in its twentieth century history, through a discourse of tradition, more specifically of that of ‘ethnic’<sup>211</sup> medicinal forms, and a language of naturalism, it sought to lure the urban constituencies that had seemingly abandoned it. And yet it is only in the 1980’s, Kaushik notes, it came to be known nationally, although it was generally equated with ayurveda and the name also evoked an assurance of good quality (Kaushik 2000). The 1990’s and

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<sup>211</sup> A resurgence of the putative ‘ethnic’ forms –mostly commodities such as handicrafts and similar cultural artifacts- especially in the metropolitan milieu in 1980’s in India is severely under researched. Provisionally one could conjecture it to be the symptom of a loss engineered by de-rooting from one’s rural genealogies, and the emergence of proto-consumerist forms as the middle class began to find its voice in the national public life. Everyday cultural artifacts from rural India returned to metropolitan contexts as commodities of (high) fashion, permitting the nursing of an imagined or real loss. See for instance, Greenough 1996.



the altered economic scenario compelled the company to adopt a more aggressive posture and refurbish its corporate image. The refurbishing of the image nevertheless the company recognized will require not merely launching a more contemporaneous ad campaign, but series of other concatenated efforts geared towards that end: from hiring competent professionals, to delimiting the promoter family's intervention in the day to day affairs of the company, to streamlining its product portfolios, product placement and attending to the very aesthetics of packaging of its products to reworking the company logo, soliciting commensurate celebrities as brand ambassadors to launching a slew of ads conveying the contemporary feel of its large portfolio of commodities.

*Fuddy-duddy image*

One of the first issues the company had to engage and address was its “fuddy-duddy” image, with a laidback corporate culture and lack of aggressive advertising and marketing. “Analysts aver that perhaps the biggest problem with Dabur was its advertising, which did not really change with the times. And also that promotions were not carried out too aggressively” (Kaushik 2000). As A C Burman chairman and one of the grandsons conjectured, “We knew that for the kind of future we had in mind for Dabur, we would have to change style of functioning and simultaneously *spruce up our corporate image*”(Pande1996: 29)<sup>212</sup>. One of the initial steps taken in the wake of liberalization of Indian economy was to radically restructure of the mode of functioning of the company. It was the sales and marketing division of Dabur that felt the impact the most as it successfully poached marketing professionals from incoming and existing MNCs such as Procter and Gamble, Pepsi, Smithkline Beecham amongst others. A crucial precondition for luring professionals was the restructuring of the remuneration

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<sup>212</sup> Emphasis mine.

structure in line with emerging trends in the Indian markets. As G C Burman, the managing director and one of the grandsons of S. K Burman (the founder) in charge of production and administration noted, “we realized for the first time the need to involve an outside agency for pay revision. This may well become an annual exercise” (Pande 1996: 28).

On the other hand, dawning of the need for an image makeover occurred more urgently in 1993 when in a prologue to company’s decision to go public<sup>213</sup>, an internal study revealed that while certain brands such as chyawanprash (and Amla hair oil) were publically well known, the imaginary around the company was unflattering, which in turn were beginning to adversely affect these known brands. The company was perceived as ‘smallish’ and confined in some unknown corner of the country, which was quite a damning disclosure for a Rs. 300 crore company. This perception was reiterated in the A&M brand surveys<sup>214</sup>. Dabur entered the surveys in 1992, and was ranked at 32 holding strong position in the middle-income segments and amongst Young Adults. Amidst the regions, its visibility was pronounced in the northern territories and poorest in south, with somewhat satisfactory presence in both eastern and western provinces. Through 1990’s its ranking declined from 32 in 1992 to 39 in 1993 to 46 in 1994, making marginal improvements in 1995 and 1996 (43 and 44 respectively); it climbed the ladders in 1997 to 28 to fall again to 56 in 1998, to finally rest at 44 in 1999. While the precise reason for these recurrent falls were not easily discernible, the marketing and advertising drawbacks were immediately noted, and identified as areas requiring urgent attention (Kaushik

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<sup>213</sup> Dabur went public in 1994.

<sup>214</sup> A&M as already mentioned stands for Advertising and Marketing magazine, which was marketing biweekly magazine with high circulation in metropolitan areas, particularly Delhi and Mumbai. It was an instant hit in the marketing circuits when it started in early 1990’s, till it folded up in 2003 owing to management problems.

2000)<sup>215</sup>. Perhaps the only notable ad that hit the chord with the viewing public was the one of Hajmola<sup>216</sup>, where kids at night in a boarding school dormitory do everything possible to keep a bottle of hajmola from the prying eyes of a martinet teacher; this classic ad was repeatedly telecast nationally. Notwithstanding exceptions though on the whole it indexed the perceptions of Rahul Dhawan controller, corporate communications, Dabur, who had confessed in 1993, “It was perceived as a *churan* company with a few product in its range”, and so therefore by this time, the brief from the top was simple: “we were given a one-line brief: to create awareness about Dabur as a complete beauty and health care company” (Pande 1996: 29)<sup>217</sup>.

As a part of the pro-active restructuring plan in 1993, assistance of A.F. Ferguson and Co. was sought. On the latter’s recommendation the company was broken up into seven lean ‘profit centers’, namely consumer health care, family products, ayurvedic specialities, veterinary products, pharmaceuticals, bulk drugs and exports. This decentralization, it was argued, will permit “the board members to look into other important matters such as expansion and diversification”(Pande 1996:29). By 2005, it was consolidated into three major portfolios of health, home care and personal care. The task of such consolidation was not easy by any means as Dabur boasted of over 450 different products and it was difficult to locate and classify these within three major categories, and yet the imperative for such restructuring was recognized for part of the

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<sup>215</sup> During this period, the only silver lining for the company was its growing recognition in southern territories, and in the midst of urban customers. In the northern India that formed the bulk of its market, its brand value continued to register fluctuating values.

<sup>216</sup> Hajmola are digestive tablets from Dabur.

<sup>217</sup> In as much as the beauty products formed a bulk of its product portfolio, the rhetoric of substantivism was never abandoned for these either. In fact for the longest time the beauty-products bore the label that said, “this is an ayurvedic health product, not a cosmetic one”. The need to mark this distinction mirrored its fear of being identified as a mere cosmetic product.

problem with its public persona was precisely the immense cacophony of products from its stable and bearing its brand name circulating in the market<sup>218</sup>. This was followed up with professionalization of management as it yet again actively sought and succeeded in poaching executives from other well-known companies. As a crucial strategy of modernization of the organization of the company, and sprucing up of its public image, was the separation of the promoter family from its management which seemed to be the trend in family managed corporations in India at this time. Following the recommendations of the global consulting firm McKinsey in 1997, it finally handed over the management to professional CEO, hiring in the process an outsider Ninu Khanna as its first non-family CEO<sup>219</sup>. The promoter family nonetheless still dominated the Board of Directors through which it offered its input; it took another few years to further limit its participation in the Board. In 2001 it established a Family Council (FC) thereby reducing the number of promoter directors on the Board. The Family Council comprised all the adult males (above the age of 25 years) in the family, with a trusted senior employee Mr. P.D.Narang playing the go-between the Family Council and the Board of Directors. Ninu Khanna resigned in late 2001, very close to the end of his three-year term, after rumored differences with the promoters<sup>220</sup>. Whatever the reasons, his resignation saw the return of a company insider Mr Sunil Duggal who had joined the company in 1995 as the CEO<sup>221</sup>.

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<sup>218</sup> It also involved discarding many products and reducing the product offerings to manageable levels.

<sup>219</sup> Ninu Khanna had come to Dabur from Colgate Palmolive; his tenure at Dabur saw the deployment of several measure suggested by McKinsey including the Company's exit from several non-core areas.

<sup>220</sup> The demise of his main patron in the Burman family, Mr. G C Burman is also cited as one of the main motivation for his resignation.

<sup>221</sup> It took Dabur several months to select the successor CEO. After several months of deliberations, it mandated the consultancy firm Heidrick and Struggles in April 2002 to find the new CEO. Duggal who was serving as the interim CEO finally got the nod.

On the heels of product portfolio streamlining and management restructuring it redressed its advertising strategies. For several decades now, Dabur's advertising was handled by plethora of agencies: for instance, JWT handled Promise, Lowe Hajmola and Dabur Honey, O&M Dabur Amla, McCann Sanifresh and Chywanprash, Bates Dabur Red toothpaste, Contract Vatika shampoo and the bay care range, and Mudra Vatika hair oil. The need to delimit the number of agencies for better and concerted focus on its celebrated brands and management of its mediatic visibility was pressing and immediate. By early 2007, Dabur sought to have two ad agencies for each major portfolio or consolidate with four agencies in all. As V.S.Sitaram, Executive Director (Consumer Care Division), Dabur put it, "it pays to have fewer people involved with bigger stakes"(quoted in Vinay Kamath 2005).

### **Looks Matter: Packaging and the phenomenology of the material surfaces**

An indispensable aspect of marketing and brand building is packaging of the products, and more so for companies with medicinal and health-related products such as Dabur<sup>222</sup>. Its function primarily is one of protection from the elements, especially while storing or transporting, or from other forms of degeneration. In India, the tropical conditions- extreme heat, humidity and monsoons- compounded the difficulty<sup>223</sup>. For Dabur as much as for other companies the putative function of packaging for long though had remained decidedly utilitarian. The rigorous attention to and aestheticization of packaging in the 1990's on the other hand, indexes the consolidation of general

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<sup>222</sup> Packaging industry in India registered immense growth especially from 1993 onwards. P.V. Narayanan, director of the Indian Institute of Packaging (IIP), the Mumbai based institute noted that the industry grew from Rs. 10,000 crore in 1992 to Rs.11,5000 crore in 1995 registering a growth of 8-10 percent with a distinct possibility of a better growth rate.

<sup>223</sup> Commenting on the severity of the elements in India, not to mention Indian state's stipulations that were difficult to meet, Dhamindra Dias says, "Everything seemed anti-packaging". (Medium is the Message, p.63)

commodity aesthetics of late capitalism. As Vivek Dheer noted, “we have two ways of communicating with our potential customers, one is through advertising, and second is through packaging. And it is in packaging that we need to pay lot more attention. How a product ‘looks’ is big now”<sup>224</sup>. This sensibility clearly is not an isolated one. Damindra Dias, managing director of Kellogg’s India ltd puts the issue in perspective: “it is important to convey the message of a good quality product to the end users. This can be put across through packaging... In the past, packaging solution was a product manager’s baby. Now it has entered board rooms”<sup>225</sup>. Even more emphatically if also pompously, Ravi Chidambaram, Controller of finance, Paper Products, equated it with the development of a society! In an interview he comments, “The level of development of packaging is directly linked to the level of development of society”(Sangani 2006)<sup>226</sup>. In any case, attention to the surface and the aesthetics of how products look and feel acquired a severe primacy in India through the 1990s.

But this attention to surfaces and packaging of these commodities, especially for Dabur being a medicinal company, is not entirely new. In packaging generally, three or even four forms of container were in use for the longest time. Metallic materials were ruled unfit for medicines, in case of both allopathic and non-allopathic medicines for these chemicals abreacted with each other, tin being the only exception. For smaller quantities, paper readily served as a temporary container with limited utility, which it still does especially in rural areas and for indigenous medicines. Earthenware vessels and glass were suitably used for specific products, the latter increasingly and more so for

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<sup>224</sup> Vivek Dheer is a senior executive at Dabur; interviewed on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2004.

<sup>225</sup> The Medium Is the Message, A&M Survey, 15 July, 1995:62-8.

<sup>226</sup> Needless to say, in so far as the surface aesthetics of commodities index their historicity and socio-cultural location, Chidambaram’s assertion makes sense.

mass produced medicines. The industries, especially glass manufacturing ones, were set up quite early as allopathic medicines partook of the same. Attention to the shape and size of the bottles and containers apart from the labels used were of significant concern to the company. Reiterativity of appearance –both of the dimensions of the containers and the labels and logos- was crucial for enduring recognition. And yet costs were burdensome, for the bottles were handmade. A. Bahal notes, “those who believed in change had to virtually steamroll the decision because of the strong opposition from the marketing division, which believed that some products sold well precisely because of fancy bottles. According to reports, the managing director of the time had to cut down the number to 19... the result: increased automation of bottles, an increase in sales, more shapely bottles, less breakages and slick packaging”<sup>227</sup>

One speculates about the prescience of the management on the relative malleability of processes of identification and recognition in a capitalist regime. Not only were the machinic manufacturing costs decidedly low, permitting efficient and voluminous production, the reduction of number of bottles from one too many to a manageable 19 decidedly aided its recognition. The 1970’s also witnessed the emergence of widespread use of plastic containers, as the packaging of churans, bhasmas, and rasayanas such as chyawanprash were overhauled and convenience of customer consumption was held paramount. An articulation of the modernity of the commodity was at stake for sure in this period, and hence one witnessed the recourse to this kind of packaging. Packaging, especially plastic packaging sought to speak the language of modernity while rendering the modes of consumption of commodity convenient. The

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<sup>227</sup> Quoted in Banerjee 2002: 459.

moment of anxiety around packaging in 1990's nonetheless is different<sup>228</sup>. We will return to this issue in the following sections.

Vivek Dheer reiterated in my conversations with him the relevance of attention to packaging for shoppers; shoppers, he claimed, do not necessarily go to shops with predetermined idea of which brand they are buying, and consequently catching their attention through “slick packaging” become a crucial consideration. Sanjay Nanavati of Yellow, a brand design consultancy concurs as much: “... with about 60 percent of purchase decisions being taken in the store, product differentiation becomes all the more important”; “how the product is packaged can make a big difference in terms of appealing to the target customer” (Sangani 2006). Packaging along with other aspects of the product then acquires centrality; it becomes a question of constituting and projecting a non-contradictory imaginary around a product. As Harmeet Pental marketing manager, of Lakhme Ltd. notes, “Every aspect of the product must tie in with what the brand and the company stands for. And packaging is most important of it”<sup>229</sup>. When one thinks of liberalization in India, he particularly comments, packaging industry does not expressly come to mind, and yet it laid the very conditions of possibility for reconfiguring of the existing materialist commodity aesthetics. “Three years ago, the excise duty on cosmetics was 120 percent. The marketer was preoccupied with keeping prices low in order to optimize sales. And now the duty is down to 40 percent, manufacturers can at least think of packaging”<sup>230</sup>.

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<sup>228</sup> Packaging of Dabur Chyawanprash was done in late 1990's by Ray and Keshavan Designs, a leading brand identity and designs consultants based in Bangalore; in 2003 Aliagroup's DMA took over (see footnote 2 of this chapter).

<sup>229</sup> The Medium is the Message, *ibid.* p. 62-3

<sup>230</sup> Harmeet Pental, cited in The Medium is the Message, *ibid.* p. 62-3. P.V. Narayanan, director of the Indian Institute of Packaging (IIP), the Mumbai based institute noted that the industry



### **The economy of the logo**

The logo of the banyan tree sported for fifteen odd years was not so much entirely replaced as radically revamped in October 2004 exhibiting the company's desire to look, as the CEO Sunil Duggal put it "more contemporary and relevant"(Bhattacharya, 2004a)<sup>231</sup>. He explained, "the current logo has been with Dabur for last 15 years. While it has been evolving, and the banyan tree has been progressively modernized we felt to contemporize the logo and make it relevant" (ibid). The new logo was sought to index the continual changes brought about since the previous year that streamlined and delimited the product portfolios into three major ones and the brand architecture in general. Dabur with its characteristic banyan tree logo operated, as Mr Duggal explained, at three distinct yet related registers: as the company's corporate brand identity, as the mother brand for a whole range of products and finally as individual product names. In the newer scheme of things, Dabur and its new logo was limited to the healthcare initiatives of Dabur India Limited (DIL), and distinguished from other portfolios with their own logos. To quote Duggal again, "our research showed that consumer found it difficult to distinguish Dabur as a corporate brand and as a master brand. The positioning was unclear to the public. So we decided to embark on a brand recast to identify brands based on their product properties. This essentially means that Dabur is shedding its age-old umbrella brand strategy, where its entire product portfolio was under one roof."(Zachariah and Datta

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grew from Rs. 10,000 crore in 1992 to Rs.11,500 crore in 1995 registering a growth of 8-10 percent with a distinct possibility of a better growth rate.

<sup>231</sup> Also see Bhattacharya 2004b.

2004)<sup>232</sup> The task of revamping was entrusted with a Delhi based branding services agency DMA belonging to the global conglomerate Aliagroup<sup>233</sup>.

In a notice to the Bombay Stock Exchange, the company explained the new logo. While retaining the banyan tree, it was given a refurbished and distinctly younger look in its color and form. The tree trunk figuratively represented three people with arms raised in exultation conveying energy and vibrancy. The leaves mirrored the emotion relaying a sense of “growth, vitality, rejuvenation and wellness”. “The banyan tree logo has been an integral part of the company’s identity for many decades, symbolizing trust and quality associated with the company and its range of ayurvedic healthcare products since inception” The revamping of the logo it noted signified “the transformation of the company to its present form” (See Pic V) <sup>234</sup>.

Ensuring recognition of the commodity through logo is central to the branding processes. The economy of logo mobilizes a labor that is primarily linguistic. More precisely it involves the invention of a language. Through iterative strategies that work on a sign and a sense a relation is forged and sustained. In overt ways, the process unravels the actual ways of working of language (that there is nothing obvious or natural about a relationship between sign and sense or meaning), revealing its historical character (that this relation between sign and sense is socio-historically engendered). Our recognition of the relation between logo, its meaning and referent is both created somewhat ex nihilo, and maintained through the repetitive performance of this relation. In that sense it not only functions as language as inevitably is the predicament of any sign, but also the

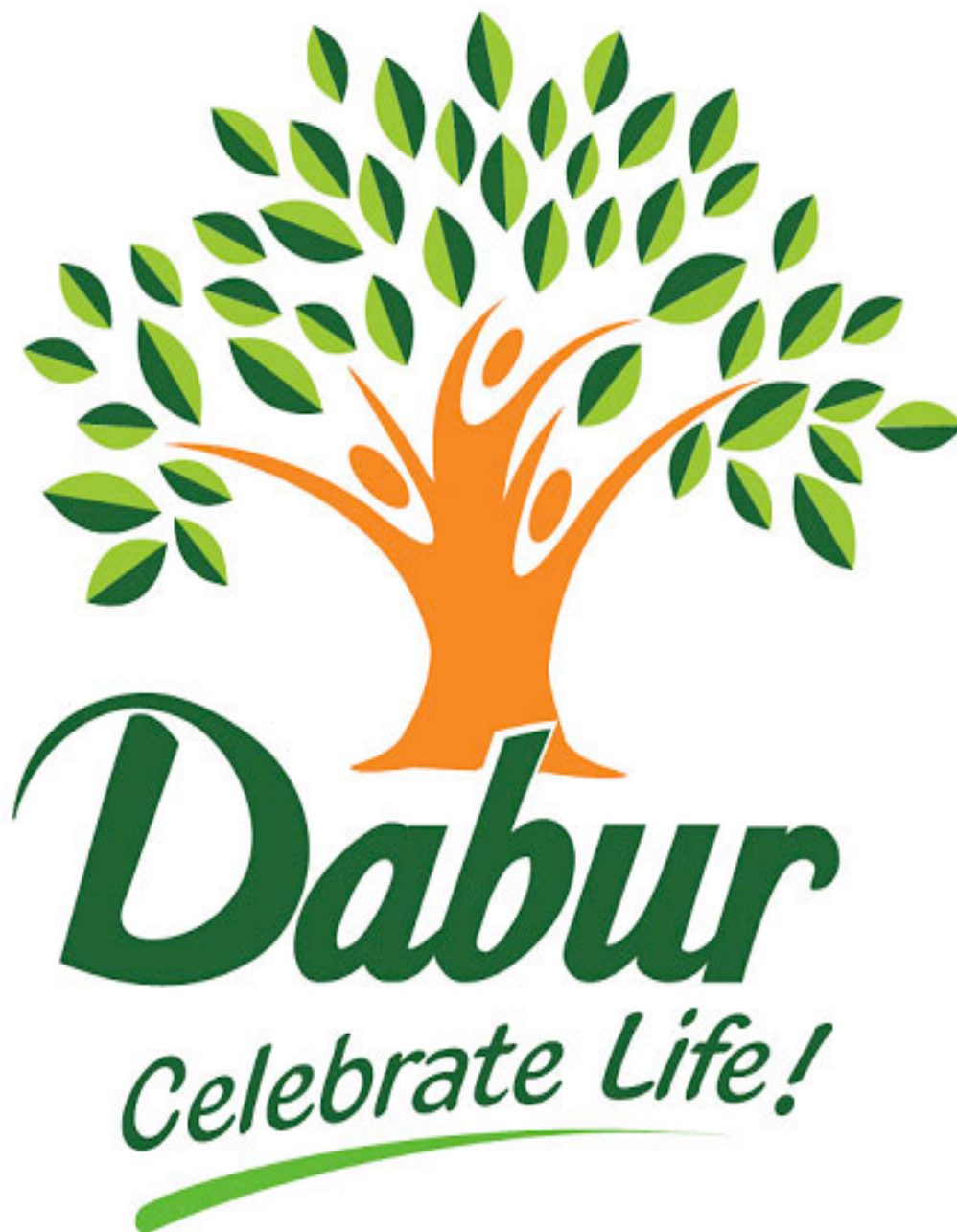
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<sup>232</sup> Dispensing with the umbrella brands and re-shifting the focus on individual product-brands as a strategy was not limited to Dabur, and had been followed by the FMCG giant HLL among others with considerable success for some years now.

<sup>233</sup> See footnote 2 on this chapter for brief statement on Aliagroup.

<sup>234</sup> Dabur to unveil new logo today, Business Line, 22 November, 2004.

reveals the very essentials of the functioning of language, that is it is a ruse, that essentially a fantasy sustains the relation between not only the sign and sense, but also between sign, sense and the referent.



Pic V: Dabur's New Logo

### **Branding Matters: Big B as brand ambassador**

Recourse to Amitabh Bachchan as the brand ambassador for Dabur Chywanprash was tactically significant. As Kishore Chutani explained, “Both Bachchan and Dabur stand for continuity and endurance on the face of long standing competition. Both complement each other very well as both have been around for a long, long time and have this larger than life presence in India”<sup>235</sup>. This argument around complementarity where the social value accrued onto one iconic figure embellished the other was already articulated by the company CEO Sunil Duggal as it relationship with Bachchan was being consolidated. As early as in October 2003 around the time of contracting Bachchan, he had noted the rationale: “ Dabur is the largest manufacturer of chywanprash and holds 64 percent share in India. The coming together of Amitabh and Dabur Chywanprash would not only help the brand but also the category which has been stagnant for the last few years”<sup>236</sup>. In another interview he noted, “We hope to record a sales growth of 10 to 15 percent to touch Rs150 crores by the end of the current financial year ..... We are repositioning the brand because there was a virtual halt in the branded chyawanprash market in recent years following the absence of marketing innovations”<sup>237</sup> As a matter of fact the parallels of recent history of both were no less uncanny. Bachchan had only recently resurrected his filmic career following a steady decline of box-office popularity through the 1990’s as he reconfigured his cinematic image to play characters appropriate to his age and

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<sup>235</sup> Interview with Kishore Chutani 12 June 2004. If Bachchan was mobilized to suggest endurance, longevity and refurbishment of Dabur’s image, the company also contracted in 2004-5 a slew of young and emerging film and cricket icons to stress the youthfulness of the products and the rejuvenation of the company in general. Vivek Oberoi, Virender Sehwal and his wife Aarti were contracted in late 2004 as brand ambassadors. Rani Mukherjee was already the spokesperson for Dabur Vatika.

<sup>236</sup> Economic Times, 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2003.

<sup>237</sup> Financial Express, 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2003. The overall chyawanprash market was of around Rs. 200 crores. The investment in the re-packaging of chywanprash cost the company around Rs2 Crores.

thereby assuring his own durability through the changing times and sustaining his appeal to the newer generations. That the predicament Chyawanprash found itself in as has been the primary argument of this chapter, in some ways was no different. While still the undisputed leader of the Chyawanprash market and notwithstanding the impetus provided by the efforts towards modernization through the last decade, in recent years its market share was stagnant, and was searching for avenues of growth. IMRB in its recent study had concluded that Bachchan was found to be well suited to endorse apart from insurance and banking products, companies and products that required a jump-start in their respective categories. To quote the then executive director of IMRB B. Narayanswami, “Amitabh Bachchan is a multi-dimensional personality. Besides credibility, he has a range of positive association factors working for him, instant brand recognition being the most important one. His name has also proved beneficial for those brands that needed an immediate connect with consumers”<sup>238</sup>. Bachchan was the highest paid amongst the brand ambassador such as matinee icons Amir Khan and Shahrukh Khan and cricketing idol Sachin Tendulkar; while their remuneration was anywhere between 2.5-4 crores, Bachchan sources claimed was easily much higher. Dabur for instance signed him for 8 crores for two years<sup>239</sup>.

### **Planning the Ad: Daburness of Dabur**

The ad agency I was located in had the Dabur portfolio for a while, but had acquired Chyawanprash in early August 2003; the Rs 10 crore account had moved from Leo Burnett, another well established ad agency. In late 2003 they roped in Amitabh Bachchan as the brand ambassador, and had been planning on launching a series of ads to

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<sup>238</sup> Quoted in Shukla 2003.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid. The correct figures in this regard has been difficult to ascertain. Some other reports claimed it was Rs. 8.5 crores.

reinvigorate the brand. Arvind Mohan led the planning division on this ad campaign from its inception. In this section the aim will be engage the planning and thought process that went into the ads produced during this campaign keeping the main focus on a particular ad Mohan and his team of planners were specifically invested in with Bachchan as its centerpiece which putatively conveyed with force and eloquence the core of Dabur chyawanprash as a brand and an ayurvedic product<sup>240</sup>. I will return to that ad in the following pages.

In the usual schema of things in this agency once it bagged an account through the accounts division, the planning division, which Mohan led, communicated directly with the client and took entire control over the campaign. It planned, conceived and executed the ad from start to finish. Further its role was one of mediation between the client and the creatives<sup>241</sup> in the ad agency, and yet it was more than just that. More pointedly it saw its role as one of translation: of paying attention to the client's needs, and understanding of its brand, and subsequently unraveling all the possible meanings associated with a product and brand, and conveying to the creative department the expectation from the final ad. The word Mohan invoked repeatedly, and almost in its colloquial sense, was "semiotics" as a means of conveying the stakes in uncovering a product category and the brand. The usage of 'semeiotics' for what he (and his team of planners) did was not frivolous for him (or for them). For him semeiotics consisted in the very labor of peeling off layers of meaning and sense one socially associated with a product, the category of products it belonged to, and the particular brand one was engaging. The point, in other

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<sup>240</sup> This section is based on my conversations with Arvind Mohan and the power point presentation he made to the clients; since I will be copiously quoting from both I will designate the former with AM and the latter as PP.

<sup>241</sup> The professionals-artists, directors etc.- who finally translated planning's conceptualization of a brand into cinematic form are called the 'creatives'.

words, was to excavate the core of that category, extricate and draw forth the density of associated connections and meanings, and use this cartography of immediate and implied associations as a means or as raw material for the advertisements. Investment in this stage of planning was of singular importance for Mohan (as well as the agency). In a sense this has been one of the primary claims advertising agencies, some more than others, have made to both the incoming MNCs as well as nationally based companies. Ad agencies apropos of the MNCs claim to be the purveyors of the keys to decoding and understanding Indian people and its culture, and in that they were distinct from quantitatively based research agencies. For the nationally based companies, the emphasis was in re-connecting with the Indian social. In responding to both constituencies (the MNCs and the Indian society), the ad agencies therefore make a special claim to having access to the real of the Indian social and to its everyday social life. This claim to access to the Indian social also overtly critiques the advertising of the socialist generation for its elitism and didacticism and for the absence of any desire to generate ads representational of actually existing conditions and everyday social life in India. Semeiotics then becomes a shorthand, not so much for the methodologies, concerns and philosophical assumptions one associates with the well established discipline that goes by that name, but for a mélange of tactics, recourse to non-rigorous as well as rigorous methods, flights of fancy and assumptions that on many occasions partake of deeply sedimented orientalist ideas, purely impressionistic presumptions and the like.

### *The brief*

The brief Mohan received from the Dabur was two-fold: (a) “Health was moving from problem-solution and deficiency management to adding value and performance

enhancement” which translated into “offering higher order health benefits and not being limited to problem-solution use”, and (b) to accentuate “the consumer connect” translate “low belief in one’s ability to transform one’s environment to being increasingly seen as an enabler of one’s aspirations, aligning in the process with consumer aspirations and becoming an integral part of his life”. In other words, Dabur Chyawanprash was to be inserted in a social condition where the existing parameters or conceptions of health were changing. Health in the contemporary re-figuration was not so much a negative condition of individual and social life conceptualized through matters of cure or prevention as much as a springboard or an enabling condition for a more vitalist and dynamic life. And secondly, healthy constitution of self was conceived and emphasized as the precondition for imputing the capacity for engaging and confronting life and its problems, and more crucially a social life now framed as one involving consumption.

Underlying these briefs was the assumption that Dabur’s over hundred years of experience and expertise “brings in 1000 years of knowledge of Ayurveda for today’s needs and formats which help in providing better health that enables one to achieve more out of life”(PP)<sup>242</sup>. That the consumer perception inextricably links the brand to the ayurveda also worked in its favor. The primary concern though he noted is “how to contemporize (ayurveda) thereby making the brand contemporary and relevant to today’s consumer, how can you *infuse modernity into Ayurveda*, how can you contemporize the brand from outside” (AM). At its heart, he recognized is a battle of the world-views, which he enumerated as “ayurveda vs allopathy, natural vs scientific, traditional vs modern, Indian vs western, holistic vs reductionist”(PP).

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<sup>242</sup> 1000 years alluded to of course is a conservative estimate, and one that keeps changing in different accounts.



The crux of the matter he argued was to locate “the Dabur-ness in Dabur”(PP). What does this “dabur-ness” constitute in? Will the advertising exercise amount to elaborations and information dissemination: “Is it enough to communicate facts about the brand and showcase its wide range of products?” (PP) Or is something else at stake? Mohan raised the question more pointedly: “What will be the source of disproportionate value?” The crux of the matter was to identify Dabur not “just as a product-ingredient formulation” but to recognize and isolate “*the Dabur-ness in Dabur*”. This of course recalls for us the classic Lacanian formulation of the *extimate*: “that thing in me that is more than me”<sup>243</sup>. The thing or the extimate is simultaneously that which refuses sublation into or onto language or symbolization, and yet that which is the very condition or source of the symbolization and the animation of the subject. A subject in as much as it is a subject is the very symptom of this extimacy in its core; the subject owes his subjecthood to this Thing in its midst. In so far as the extimate refuses the clarity of sense, it frustrates calculation or calculability and exceeds any exchange. And yet while subsisting outside any exchange or circulation it remains the very condition of such an exchange or circulation, is the very source of its disproportionate value. In seeking the very core of Dabur, the Dabur-ness of Dabur, Mohan was keen in invoking as he called it, “the source of its disproportionate value”. And it is in identifying the under-explored category of ayurveda as that core or that extimacy that he will locate the source of its disproportionate value<sup>244</sup>.

Consequently then, the crux of the advertising planning for Mohan would reside in recognizing this thing in Dabur that is more than Dabur itself, that intangible excess at

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<sup>243</sup> For the category of ‘extimacy’ (and ‘extimate’), see Miller (1994), Gueguen (2006).

<sup>244</sup> Ayurveda in its semiotic pliability offers an immense range of possible meanings and associations which Arvind will strive to decode and put to service for Dabur.

its intimate core or rather that extimacy that accrues onto it following the series of associations it almost inescapably provokes: as near stand-in signifier for Ayurveda in modern India, the possibilities of fantasmatic re-figurations ayurveda could be submitted to in the late modern times with its emerging regime of health while also marking it as the sign of one's own tradition and ancient wisdom.

Approached another way, Mohan distinguished between the category and the brand. Simplistically said, the distinction was one between ayurveda as a category and Dabur chyawanprash as a brand. First and foremost, the problem as he saw it was one of category, of an under-exploration and under-exploitation of the possible range of semeiotic implications that inhered the category and the potential registers it operated on. While implication within a discourse of contemporary social transformation and needs was logically inevitable, and one that as the advertiser of Dabur was his responsibility to articulate, for Mohan, the absence of rigorous thinking of what ayurveda meant socially was an issue that needed to be addressed. In as much as the brand Dabur was mired in difficulties, it was not so much or merely a function of its own organizational or institutional problems nor that of competition from other ayurvedic companies for it was clearly the unassailable market leader, as much as it was the inattention to signficatory valence and density it possessed by virtue of it being an ayurvedic company. The non- or under-exploration of the category then was a primary concern that needed engagement. And yet again, it was not as though the extrication from other organization or institutional difficulties and sustained aggression with competitors was not relevant and useful, but so far as he was concerned, “‘big’ gains are in the unlocking the category” (PP).

Before thoroughly interrogating the Dabur chyawanprash Mohan sought to unearth the general hermeneutic matrix surrounding chyawanprash as an ayurvedic concoction and its significance; this he argued was crucial to unravel the semeiotic density of Dabur Chywanprash itself. Chyawanprash, he argued, in general public perception was “the foremost of all rasayanas”, and “was in many ways synonymous with ayurveda”. The product had been “unchanged” and had “been used ‘safely’ for several centuries” (AM). As I questioned him about its ‘unchanging’ character, he argued without necessarily contesting the critical need to attend to the historical genealogies of ayurveda through medieval and modern-colonial times, that the essential content with a few inflections here and there has remained the same, for which he thought a plausible case can be made given especially the scriptural nature of apothecary tradition. Through all these centuries following the discovery in the vedic period, circa 1200 BCE, it has been associated with “mythic search for eternal youth”<sup>245</sup>. He proposed to enumerate a series of qualities attributed to this “versatile health tonic”: that “it strengthens the immune system, that it is anti-stress and anti-ageing, protect liver, improves lung functions and memory and learning skills, helps fight respiratory infections, and establishes bodily vigor, vibrancy and vitality” (AM). In so far as in public imaginary Dabur Chyawanprash was the quintessential ayurvedic chyawanprash product, that is was the archetypal brand in the category, all these essential qualities accrued onto it. First and foremost, equity of this product is built around bodily immunity. This immunity nonetheless is fundamentally internally reinforced: “kare bhitari shakti ka vikas” and “banaye andar se strong” (both more or less meaning “develops the internal bodily strength”). And yet notwithstanding the range of associations chyawanprash afforded,

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<sup>245</sup> Again I was unsure where he got his chronology from.

these were not necessarily translating into greater points of leverage for the company in the emerging market. A quick survey by the ad agency in Delhi, Mumbai and Meerut in late September 2003 revealed that 41% of existing users were uncommitted, and about 8% were annually lapsing. Holding on to the existing customers was becoming a problem for the company.

While the insertion into the emerging discourses of health provides it a niche to articulate its contemporary relevance, the idiom of health delimits the vast range of semiotic associations that the “daburness of dabur” can potentially generate for it. In other words, as Mohan would put it, “the claims are narrowly cast” and it languishes in the cacophony of similar claims made by other brands and products. For instance the taglines for some of the well-known brands that invoke health as their product platform are the following: for Horlicks, “Parivaar ka mahaan pushtidata”<sup>246</sup>, for Boost, “secret of my energy”, Complian, “extra growing power for kids”, Bournvita, “Bacchon ko de ek naya balance; posshan bhee swaad bhee”<sup>247</sup>, Dr. Morepen, Health in your hand”, Saffola, “swasth parivar ke dil kee dhadkan”<sup>248</sup>; and even the electronics brand LG, howsoever outlandish it might seem, solicits the health and protection platform with the tagline, “mujhe kuuch nahi ho sakta”<sup>249</sup>. In this context, Dabur’s claim, “kare andar se strong” (“makes strong from inside”) remains indistinct from other similar “scientific” claims by these brands competing to inhabit the platform of health, a pivotal problem compounded

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<sup>246</sup> Horlicks is one of the oldest brand of energy drinks in India; the tagline can be translated as “family’s great energy-health source”.

<sup>247</sup> Bournvita is a popular energy drink for kids; the line can be translated as “gives new balance to kids, health as well as taste”.

<sup>248</sup> Saffola is a brand of cooking oil, and the line can be translated as: “healthy family’s heartbeat”

<sup>249</sup> This was a tagline for LG electronics TV brand, and most intriguingly it solicits the health platform; the translation goes like this: “nothing can cause harm to me” or alternately “nothing can harm me”.

further by the indistinguishable representational language. Further, at a time when health had become nearly omnipresent as an enframing platform for commodities, a “natural carrier” seemed to be absent for Dabur. By natural carrier, he meant, some of the commodities had managed to establish a near automatic association with some or other food supplement; for instance, for salt with iodine, one was reminded of Tata namak (or salt), for chapatti with iron, Annapurna atta, for milk with calcium, Horlicks, and for Juice with vitamins, Kissan. One could question the presumed automatism of these associations, but his point was generally well taken. The issue of image and sign in the era of marred by short attention span of its social subjects is of paramount concern, and Mohan recognized only all too well that it is the investment of the “daburness of dabur” into the brand imagery that could provide it with the “natural carrier” and the difference he was seeking to re-animate the brand in the social imaginary<sup>250</sup>.

The difficulty then as Mohan summarized were threefold: One, while large, the brand was distant from people’s lives, “the connect with my life was low”; two, the advertising had a narrow cast, where its claims and its representational language were indistinguishable from that of the other brands; and finally it lacked a “natural carrier” or as he put it, its “access requires effort”; in the late capitalist regime where instantaneity not only of recognition but also a recognition that compels desired associations, is indispensable, Dabur’s efforts seemed to have fallen short as yet; that ‘access’ to these

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<sup>250</sup> One of the other issues that concerned Mohan was the ways in which both visibly and in taste, Chyawanprash nonetheless seemingly lacked ‘allure’. As he put it, it’s glistening black and stewed “ugly look” certainly made it generally unpalatable. The taste is an acquired one: “first time does not taste too well . . . One must get used to it”. And yet this abject appearance also worked to reinstate its symbolic efficacy as a therapeutic form: in popular wisdom, he argued, the therapeutic valence of a medicinal form was an inverse function of its looks and taste: the bitter the pill, the greater the efficacy. Further the “herbal jam” as he called it was seasonal and suitable for winters for it “heats the body” (“garam hota hai, Sardeeyon mein khana chahiye”: translated as “it heats the body, should be taken in winter”).

associations was not immediate and required “effort” or labor on the part of consumers was a condition enough for Mohan to arouse a set of semeiotic sensibilities it naturally carried with it by virtue of its unique and longstanding socio-historic legacy as an ayurvedic company, in its publicity campaign of which the agency’s work was a crucial component.

In consequence then, Mohan argued while the “brand enjoyed enormous goodwill”, the onus of failure in communicating its relevance rested with its “limited role in the life of today’s consumer”. The task will be to “find a truth from within and make the whole brand proposition relevant, to articulate the idea of the brand and unlock the full potential in the brand”, which will inevitably require “not just change of the outward appearance (which nonetheless will remain crucial), but connect with the real needs and motivations of the consumers” (AM). The underlying social belief that “inner strength matters more than outward appearance, that difficult times can be overcome through inner strength, and that all of us however we may appear have the ability to build this inner strength” also tied in almost seamlessly with Dabur’s principal claims about holistic health and what its ayurvedic solutions has to offer. Given the enormous goodwill the brand enjoyed and the conjunction of social sensibilities around health and its own philosophy, what remained to be articulated is the contemporary social context where Dabur could insert itself within the lives of people as relevant and indispensable.

The paradigmatic forms Mohan’s elaborations on the contemporary social reality took in this context were unsurprisingly similar to the ones he had been making for all the other brands (see for instance the chapter on risk and insurance), and hence this section will repeat briefly some of those prescriptions. The social context was of late capitalism

where the patriarchal structures were being loosened and reconfigured, if not dispensed with as yet; affluence particularly of the middle class was becoming more and more evident through their practices of consumption and gratification as acquisition and circulation of money was acquiring social legitimacy it hitherto lacked; and the mediatic explosion invigorated the cultural forms and norms as the global outside invaded, contested and reworked the national imaginary. These large-scale processes we identify with the overworked and over-determined category of globalization also instituted commensurable changes in the notions of individuality and selfhood, which were not only heightened, but for once found the social context and processes suitable for their expression and assertion. In other words, as Mohan put it, “not only is there a belief in self-transformation”, but also an “availability of the social transport” where it can be realized. At its core this conception entertains a notion of “anchored individualism with body as the key locus point”, and involves retrieval of space where “I do things my own way”. What he rehearsed through these elaborations was the same distinction he had proposed between “life as product” and “life as condition” when speaking of risk and insurance products. In a nutshell, the expectations from life had changed, “individual was the seat of everything” and there was a “liberating sense of release as one sought new experiences and felt the need to excel in and enjoy life unhindered”. If hitherto the individual was “submerged in the collective unconscious”, he is now “self-consciously emerging out in open”<sup>251</sup>.

Ultimately, and aside from the series of difficulties he identified with the product and its under-usage of the product category, the problem finally devolved with the sense

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<sup>251</sup> For an elaborate discussion of these claims Mohan makes on the social experience of transition in India, see Chapter 2 on this dissertation on insurance.

of anachronism associated with the product, and its incapacity as yet to insert itself in any significantly relevant manner in the contemporary and changing times. In other words, while the public generally was sympathetic to the product for its longstanding social presence, it was not seen as contemporaneous (*purane zamane ki dawa*<sup>252</sup>). Part of its non-contemporaneity was its inability to articulate itself in relation with the late capitalist times. If Dabur did provoke an association it was with a sense of pastness, of one's tradition, of its holism as a health supplement. Significantly there was a failure to implicate it within the anxieties and requirements of the contemporary moment.

### ***Splitting between mythic and secular history***

Ayurvedic as therapeutic system alongwith other indigenous nosological traditions such as the Unani system, lost the battle of hegemony and dominance to the western allopathic system through the late nineteenth century. The dominance of the latter was more or less complete by later part of twentieth century. The nosological efficacy and social dominance of the allopathy compelled the indigenous traditions, in order to survive, to articulate their significance in terms of, and in the language of, difference. One of the resources that were permitted traditions such as ayurveda, and by extension Dabur as an ayurvedic company, was the claims around the ancientness of the tradition, and the wisdom that presumably accrues from its continuing existence and survival through the expanse of time. Needless to say, what the claims around ancientness also, and significantly so, permits it is to map itself onto and conflate itself with, the Indian "thing". Alongside aesthetic traditions such as Yoga it situates itself as the essence of the Indian, not to mention Hindu, traditions. In articulating the difference from the allopathy, through the cosmological-philosophical thought and practice

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<sup>252</sup> which means that "it belongs to the earlier times".



undergirding it - which is putatively holistic, where the seeming chasm between the body and mind is transcended, where the vitality of the bodily insides is offered as the very condition for outer and general vibrancy of the human self - then Ayurveda seeks to acquire its significance and relevance.

And yet this very ancientness of its tradition, the relative inefficacy of the therapeutic system in comparison to the allopathic one, and the consequent social irrelevance in a context where it has been superseded by the latter begins to have a heavy bearing on it. While ancientness, claims to traditionalism, notions of holism and naturalism abound and become the very condition of its social currency, the sense of anachronism and possible contemporary irrelevance accruing from these very notions become the very condition for its anxiety. It is compelled in other words to articulate and convey its contemporary relevance as a therapeutic tradition and as a compelling alternative to the western medicinal system. And yet again the ancientness that defines its self-identity, refuses to translate itself with any convenient ease as relevant in modern and late modern times. What emerges then is a splitting where it is required to both reclaim its ancient heritage and all that accumulates under that sign i.e., Indian tradition, philosophical wisdom, holistic vision of human self, or in a word, the Indian “Thing”, and at the same time, advance the pitch for its continuing efficacy as a therapeutic tradition in contemporary times. One of the means of achieving a resolution and assert its continuing relevance as a therapeutic tradition is by submitting to the techniques and methodologies valorized by the dominant medical system. This submission, needless to say, cannot be underestimated; the submission allows it to make claims to its modernity and continuing relevance in the modern times. Consequently, the imperative for Dabur to

repeatedly foreground its investment in scientific research is seminally crucial to its public persona, an aspect of Dabur (and Ayurveda) continually invoked and stressed by two of my main interlocutors at Dabur (Kishore Chutani and Vivek Dheer). It sought, in other words, to translate this very splitting the ground for its continuing relevance, as well as marketing success especially in the late modern context where concerns around holistic notions of the body and health has acquired social currency.

In concrete terms it translates into Dabur invoking and making claims to both the mythic as well as secular history. Consider for instance its rendition on Chywanprash and its history:

### **History Of Chyawanprash<sup>253</sup>**

According to Mahabharata Chyawan was one of the eight son of Bhrigu and Puloma, he was physically weak due to his premature birth and he has enjoyed the status of being the only divine son of Puloma. Maharashi Chyawan married King Sharyati's daughter Sukanya at an old age. Sometime after the marriage, the twins Ashvini Kumaras came to the hermitage of saint Chyawan and offered him a medicine after the use of which the saint regained his youth. That drug was named as 'Chyawanprash' after the name of Chyawan; thus it is a divine preparation.

Times have changed and Chyawanprash is now more easily accessible than ever. Dabur Chyawanprash strictly follows the recipe that was laid down centuries ago and its magical properties still remain the same.

This is not the only entry on the Dabur website (or the booklets handed to me by Vivek Dheer) that takes recourse to the mythic and the secular; virtually all entries on different products from its vast stable of products, invoke the narratives presumably derived from Hindu scriptures. All of these products nonetheless, the claim is, are also submitted to rigorous experimentation and testing, their nosological efficacy proved and

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<sup>253</sup> <<http://www.dabur.com/en/chy/history.htm>> accessed on 2, December 2008.

established through scientific methods in the most advanced laboratories established and owned by Dabur. Managing to capture and convey these myriad and even conflicting set of trajectories had not been easy for Dabur, and it was ironic for a company of its size; in a sense the very need for these representational tactics was the consequence of the shifts in the 1990's. The compelling need for mediatic presence which was not the most pressing concern in the previous decades became an indispensable imperative to undo its “fuddy-duddy” image, to convey its singular value that consisted in the holism of its therapeutic tradition, in its recourse to an ancient system of medicine without sacrificing the rigors of scientificity, to recapture its aura and establish its contemporaneity.

### ***Visual regime and the “Auratic”***

Ultimately, it lacked what Mohan called ‘aura’ or an auratic value that is properly its own. Walter Benjamin in his famous essay addressed this question of aura of singular objects. While processes of mass production seemed to strip these unique objects of their discernible singularity or aura, in a paradoxical mode auratic value is reinvested in these multipliable object through strategies of fetishization permitted by commodification and mass mediatization<sup>254</sup>. For a commodity that for over a period of five decades had become a trusted brand, the time was ripe to reinvent its auratic value.

The task then was to rescue the product from its position of marginality and reinvest it with an auratic value through the representational economy that televisualization instituted and processes of branding enabled. Diagnosis revealed the absence of ‘contemporaneity’ – its time being out of joint- coupled with non-articulation

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<sup>254</sup> For this fascinating formulation, see the rereading of Benjamin essay by Samuel Weber (1996).

of its present relevance as one of the several factors plaguing it. In an increasingly mass mediated public sphere where constancy of public visibility is one of the crucial modes of 'presence', Dabur seemed to as Mohan put it, not make any noise; and in as much it did make any noise these remained indistinct from the general cacophony of aural and auditory claims that were already being made. Mohan's recourse to the auditory, even unintentionally, in an era dominated by vision and visual culture is interesting as it is instructive; it is as though he seemed to suggest we hear by seeing, hearing is mediated increasingly by seeing, to be aurally available, a perception has to route itself through the ocular; the ocular in other words, becomes the condition of possibility for other sensory perceptions to emerge. Further, the inability to articulate itself in an idiom that could sufficiently mark its distinction was itself a symptom its non-aggressive character, he opined.

The inability to make a noise or attune to the economy of representation that televisualisation of public sphere established, debilitated its efforts to 'present' itself within any distinction within the visual culture. While being available readily as a category in the general everyday social life, its non-articulation within the televisual economy relegated it to a liminal existence. What is noticeable here is a strange paradox that newer economies of representation institute: notwithstanding Dabur Chyawanprash's general everyday availability, its non-emphatic representational presence within the televisual culture putatively condemned it to liminality; presence in such an economy implied the necessity of recurrent televisual availability or presence; social memory, affect and desire seem to turn around this televisual availability.

Arguably then, the economy of representation instituted by mass media transforms the nature of 'presence'. Ironically, circulation of image in tele-visual media begins to assure social presence of the object; in a strange reversion, image secures the object of which it is merely an image; image, in other words, rescues the object from the fate of occlusion or marginality. And yet in this state of ontological transmutation, where presence of the object is sustained through its image<sup>255</sup>, non-recognition owing to in-distinction within a plenitude of images is also very real, and hence the resort to what Mohan calls branding- locating the Daburness of Dabur- is not a minor one. It is through this process of branding only, he reiterates the object's true presence, or in an economy of circulation, 'exchangeable' presence<sup>256</sup> can be actually sustained. Branding marks the triumph of an economy of forces that fetishizes the form- how something looks and feels. In a state of overproduction or in-distinction between commodities, where delivery is not necessarily the mark of difference, branding redirects attention and social energies to material surfaces; it is a reconfiguring and recoding of phenomenology of the surface, both in how it is made available to visibility and tactility, and sutured into the dominant and also repressed narratives of late capitalist anxieties and possibilities.

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<sup>255</sup> My articulation of this problematic of relationship between object and image might suggest an implied primacy of the former over the latter that through time, finally, in late capitalism has been superseded or reversed; nothing though could be afar from truth. My conceptualization abides by the writings of authors such as Derrida who have questioned this ontology of presence (or the object or the real) that such a schema propagates; the argument then is that the object was never available to us in its immediacy, in its 'real' plenitude, which some how now has been suspended. The point here is to evoke the power of newer economies of representation that mass media forms inaugurate, and the semeiotic layers and registers of presence they render possible, and the implications of such possibilities in the organization of social life in late capitalism.

<sup>256</sup> 'Exchangeable' here refers to both registers, that of capital and its accumulation, and of language and its metonymic displacement that enables (and disables) meaning, registers that are mutually implicated and not rigorously separable anymore, especially following the financialization of world markets. See in this regard, J-J Goux 1990.

But tracing the contours of what branding might look like for an ayurvedic product in late capitalist India will require drawing out the full implications of semeiotic matrix within which it is ensconced, in anchoring it with anxieties and desires of the times to offer it as a redress. Crucial to the task of representation then, aside from inserting it within the emerging anxieties and a state of social indeterminacy, was to solicit the “dabur-ness of dabur” which involved both the mythic and secular histories. The Amitabh Bachchan “veer rasa” ad managed, so far as the ad agency, and particularly Mohan was concerned these myriad and seemingly divergent trajectories.

### **Dabur Veer Ras ad**

The mise en scene of the ad could be mistaken for shots from the noir films except for the use of deep colors (See Pic VI and VII). The shot begins with Bachchan standing next to a massive column inside what seems to be an impressive gothic building with light filtering through massive high ceiling windows. He is delivering the poem and acts out the inspirational lines he intonates in his now famous and familiar baritone. His visage as well as his gestures display a certain reserved robustness and tensile potency as he walks around in measured steps and enunciates the poem. Dressed in long black coat, which seems to be a combination of sherwani, and a priest’s habit, he is not so much preachy as much as rousing the addressee to take hold of his life, give it direction and move ahead. The choice of poem in the veer ras tradition, Mohan mentioned was deliberate; veer ras he informed me belongs in the Shastric tradition belongs to Natya Sastra, which speaks of nine emotional states, with veer ras speaking to bravery, courage and heroism. The poem runs like this:

***A Bachchan reciting poem:***

Gagan guja, Nadi baha, pawan chala,  
 Vijay teri, ho jai teri, jyot si jala jala,  
 Bhuja bhuja, bhadak bhadak  
 Rakt mein dhadak dhadak,  
 Dhanush utha, prahar kar,  
 Tu sab se pehle vaar kar,  
 Agni sa dhadhak ghadhak,  
 Hiran sa sajak sajak,  
 Singh si dahaad kar,  
 Shankh si pukar kar,  
 Ruke na tu, thake na tu, jhuke na tu,  
 Thame na tu, sada chale, thake na tu, ruke na tu, jhuke na tu,

Background Voice:

Andarooni shakti, yaani Dabur Chyavanpraash

A Bachchan speaking again:

Raho zindagi ke liya hardam tayyar.

ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

A Bachchan reciting poem:

Make skies echo, make rivers move, make the winds blow,  
 Victory to you, may you be coronated, makes the lights glow,  
 Your arms, strong and willing,  
 Your blood, beating in your veins,  
 Pick up the bow, attack/go on the offensive,  
 You be the first to attack,  
 Simmer like fire,  
 You are agile as the deer,  
 You roar like a lion,  
 You resonate like conch shells,  
 Never stop, never tire out, never submit,  
 Never pause, always on the move, never tire out, never stop, never submit.

Background Voice:

Inner strength means Dabur Chavanyapraash

A Bachchan speaking again:

Be prepared for life at all moments.

The ad arguably captured and conveyed the stakes for Dabur and the ad agency.

Rendered in Hindi, albeit in literary Hindi (not colloquial Hindi), partaking of the veer ras

tradition it relayed its links with the Indian, and not to mention Hindu past, and its ancientness. And yet delivered by Amitabh Bachchan who had only just managed in the last few years to resurrect his cinematic (and television) career in the emerging regime and late capitalist India offered it its contemporary relevance. Bachchan in his recitation brings certain intensity to the delivery, exerts and exhorts in a contained theatrical display with his signature moves and gestures that have made him immediately identifiable in the Indian public culture. The performance is masterly, it commands, adjures the addressee, not entreat or preach or beseech; it dictates the addressee to “never stop, never tire out, never submit”. As Mohan put it, it is “inspirational”, and crucially the imagery, the narrative, the speech and the protagonist is “indistinguishably Indian”, evoking and encompassing the mythic and the secular on the same register. Bachchan’s visibly simmering yet restrained and controlled visage and speech indexes the inner and innate vitality and potency of his being which then is finally mapped onto Dabur chywanprash and its claims of consolidation of inner strength. While this was the centerpiece of the whole ad campaign, few other campaigns were made showing Bachchan as the main protagonist in his everyday social encounters with ordinary characters; these ads deliberately are more relaxed and less intense, and yet strive to communicate the same theme of incontrovertible relevance of chywanprash in everyday life<sup>257</sup>.

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<sup>257</sup> The results were immediately witnessed. The ORG-Marg retail audit data for the period ending November 2003 for chyawanprash which was showing negative growth till October 2003 for the first time turned around showing positive growth; the category recorded 3.8 percent in November 2003, up from -18.7 percent recorded during October 2003. (Kaul 2004).





Pic VI: Amitabh Bachchan, Dabur Chywanprash Ad



Pic VII: Amitabh Bachchan, Dabur Chywanprash Ad

### **Conclusion: (Non-)Modernity and the real of Dabur**

What is at stake in this constant claim about modernity of the commodity that we hear the Dabur spokespersons making? It is as though the commodity in so far as the looks are concerned is being left behind. As Arvind noted, “Every age seems to have a visual and material register or texture or quality that can be identified with it. Dabur seems to lack that quality, that feel right now; it feels old”. This sensibility was, as already documented, shared by those at Dabur; there was an anxiety about the seeming non-modernity of its products, indicating the urgency to replicate the material forms of its times. But this anxiety is much deeper as well, an anxiety that is the primary symptomatology of its identity: the non-modernity of its therapeutic forms, that its irrelevance will be revealed finally, and hence also the constant need to perform the ‘modern’. A paradoxical mode of identity then: a putatively traditional therapeutic form recurrently performing the modern and the traditional to stay relevant.

Through the substantivist argument<sup>258</sup> and performance of science (and modernity) - emblemized in the figure of research and technological innovation- Dabur recurrently draws the sources of its legitimation. And yet the failure to forget the tenuous grounds of its claims<sup>259</sup> reinforces the precariousness of its identity. The substantivist argument then is replaced by strategies that focus on the forms that are preeminently late capitalist. The recourse to commodity aesthetics –preeminently in its dual tactics of advertising and packaging- become the mode of resolution through the quagmire it

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<sup>258</sup> The substantivist argument is not without its nostalgic lure and ideological currency in the contemporary moment. The fashionable and also defensible return to holism and natural therapeutic schools has gained ideological force in recent years. A discussion of how that has enabled a forceful ideological articulation of ayurvedic products in recent years is outside the scope of this paper, but is dealt with at greater length in my chapter.

<sup>259</sup> ‘Tenuous’ for the fact of its secondary or alternative status as a healing system for the longest time now is not lost on it.

discovers itself within. Further, where difference is not afforded by substantive content- for these are made conveniently available now by automation and machinic production to competing ayurvedic companies- “form” as the site of articulation of difference is scrupulously sought.

The real of dabur (and of ayurveda) is its possible irrelevance, its non-modernity<sup>260</sup> that never ceases to show up, and hence also its need for the reiteration or performance of its modernity. Packaging, advertising and other forms of publicity then are not merely its marketing modes of articulation, it is the very symptom of its real, of the fear of its dissolution or irrelevance. Lacan wrote that identity of a subject is the symptom of its real, of the absolute necessity (for the subject) to allay the resurgence of its real; participation within and through late-capitalist material aesthetics of surface-of packaging and advertising- restructuring of management and portfolios and so on performs the same function for Dabur, it performs for it its modernity. Dabur is Rs 1800 crore company, and so to speak of an identity crisis seems exaggerated and misplaced, and yet this haunting, this spectral presence of its non-modernity never ceases to haunt the discourse around it. Packaging, advertising, other strategies of publicity mark the general ways of being or operation for an enterprise in late capitalist symbolic regime. For Dabur the recourse to form, apart for ensuring the fundamental mode of ‘presence’ that the era of mass mediatization recognizes and considers indispensable, marks the

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<sup>260</sup> Which is also ironically its plank of articulation. I get the ‘real’ from Jacques Lacan’s work. Through the several phases his oeuvre progressed, the conception of ‘real’ within his analytic framework changed as well. Very briefly though it refers to a founding contradiction or anxiety that is never fully available for a subject but continues to plague him/er; in some senses it forms the core of the subject; as Mladen Dolar following Lacan had called it, the ‘intimate’ in us, “that which is more in me than me”; see Dolar 1991.

means of containment of its real, i.e., its possible irrelevance, the real that never desists from animating it.

## Chapter IV Branding India

*“Both (propaganda and advertising) are languages of masses, issuing from the mass production of ideas or commodities, their registers separate at first, progressively converge. Propaganda becomes the marketing and merchandising of idea-forces, of political men and parties with their “trade-mark image”. Propaganda approaches advertising... This convergence defines a society-ours- in which there is no longer any difference between economic and the political, because the same language reigns in both, from one end to the other; a society therefore where the political economy, literally speaking is finally fully realized. That is to say, dissolved as a specific power (as an historical mode of social contradiction), resolute, absorbed in a language without contradictions, like a dream, because traversed by purely superficial intensities”*

Baudrillard, in *Absolute Advertising, Ground Zero Advertising* (87-8)<sup>261</sup>. (Use this for the last chapter)

*“India is like a mother brand, with lot of sub-brands i.e., states. The “incredible India campaign has tried to capture that uniqueness”, Amitabh Kant<sup>262</sup>*

*“There aren’t any real issues in elections anymore. It’s all being dictated by market forces. The election system has been reduced to a farce where political parties are asking you to choose between Coke and Pepsi.” J.M. Lyngdoh, Former CEC<sup>263</sup>*

This chapter considers the consequences of entrenchment of neo-liberal processes, including the institutionalization of the mediatic apparatus on the political processes. In main it engages two advertising campaigns –Incredible India and India Shinning- and reads them as symptomatic of the obtaining neo-liberal conditions. Incredible India Campaign was launched by the Department of Tourism, Government of India in 2001-2 to establish India as a ‘destination brand’ and increase the tourist flow in the country. India Shinning campaign on the other hand, was announced in 2003 by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government to showcase its economic achievements of the previous three years, and a year preceding the general elections. Both the campaigns singularly elicit and index, and in no small measure, the

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<sup>261</sup> Baudrillard (1994: 87-88).

<sup>262</sup> Kant, <<http://www.amitabh-kant.com/>>; accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> August, 2009.

<sup>263</sup> Cited in Naqvi and Das 2004. J M Lyngdoh was the 12<sup>th</sup> Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) from 2001-4, and his tenure ended couple of months before the 14<sup>th</sup> general election.

reconfiguring of political processes by neo-liberal economic ones. While India Shinning campaign was inevitably submitted to the electoral-political processes and in retrospect adjudicated as a failure (both in terms of its representational narrative and its timing) and a crucial reason for NDA government's electoral loss, the Incredible India campaign on the other hand escaping the predicament of political judgment and processes, by all accounts and by now is seen as an unqualified success. If we follow Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the corporate and non-corporate capital (and commensurably, civil and political society) alluded to in the introduction, the varying fates of the two campaigns elucidate

Liberal modernist nation-statist ideology imagines the political and economic domains as distinct with their respective spheres of operation, constituencies they address, modes of address and interpellation, substantive concerns they raise, differential treatment of ethics and notions of moral personhood. That these spheres are inextricably interlinked and constitutive of each other is a *sine qua non*. In framing the issue in this manner, one is obviously indicating, for instance, the role of class structure in the determination of various realms and registers of the political: the state apparatus, the nature of sovereignty and organization of the rule of law, the bio-political regime that Foucault elaborated also as governmentality, the political institutions such as political parties, interest groups and so on; the economy in other words is articulated with the other domains of life, of which political is a significant one.

In the Indian context, scholars have extensively written about the co-articulation of the economic and the political, in colonial and postcolonial times. Kaviraj (1998) for instance has spoken of passive revolution; Pranab Bardhan (2004) has insisted on the

class structure grounding, and determining the nature of Indian state apparatus to name just two. While these scholars attend to the ways in which the political realm could retain its autonomy from, and even dialectically and reciprocally affect, the economic processes especially in the socialist postcolonial period, Nandy (2001:13-60) perceptively identified the consequences of deepening of electoral, vote-bank politics and the increasing intermeshing of the political institutions and practices with the ethics of accumulation and self aggrandizement reigning in economic realm with the rise of what he identifies as the entrepreneurial political class. Unimpressed by, or indifferent to, the ethics inspiring the other three political classes, the machinations of this class of entrepreneurial politicians with the general receding of the political realm from the intentions, philosophies and idealisms of the political actors of previous generations (affected as they were by the ideologies of anti-colonial nationalism, post-colonial promise of Indian nation-state and a general notion of ethics not entirely submitted to singular drives of self interest and accumulation), these entrepreneurial politicians efficaciously submitted the political sphere to the logic of commerce, its instrumental rationality and ethics of calculation.

Arguably nonetheless, following the entrenchment of processes of economic liberalization through the 1990s and especially by early 2000s, the relation between the political and economic has been reworked. While the elements and trajectories of what the Comraoff and Comaroff (2009) have identified as “corporatism” of the modern state in late capitalist conditions with its submission to and subsumption within the logic of capital are discernible, I’d argue through the example of two campaigns –the India Shining and Incredible India- the ways in which a reconstellation of relations between the political and economic processes is evident. In this chapter through a reading of these

campaigns I argue a larger submission to the processes of late capitalism is manifestly evident as I also note the assertion and demands of the domain of the political, even while the Indian state has tactically receded from the public sphere, and has been compelled to give up its paternalistic place in the social scheme of things. One of the appropriate places to begin is by considering the stakes in the very idea of “nation-branding” for one of its globally renowned spokesperson Wally Olins, following which I will go through the Incredible India and India Shinning campaigns.

### **Branding Nation?**

Olins<sup>264</sup> begins one of his seminal essays on ‘nation-branding’ by exhibiting his incomprehension over the counter-attacks (or ‘visceral antagonism’ as he puts it) of the critics of nation-branding: he polemically asks, “Why do they get so excited? I never cease to be amazed at the violent reactions, which the concept of branding the nation provokes. There is clearly something about it that sets some people’s teeth on edge. A visceral antagonism ... In almost every country I have visited the notion has been discussed, a few individuals have expressed their revulsion to it in strongest terms” (Olins 2002: 1). To Olins these opponents’ stance verges on the anachronistic. And in a way one could argue, he has grasped the ontology of capital- its drive towards universalism and transcendental signification, that is, to become the universal signifier and become the measure of all things- better than his critics. Nation-branding as manifesting that drive of

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<sup>264</sup> See Olins (2002). Aside from Olin, Anholt (2003, 2007) is one of the more famous spokespersons of nation and destination branding. I might quickly note both Olins and Anholt are cited by Amitabh Kant, the person behind the Incredible India campaign in his book, as inspirational; see Kant (2009). Olins was also invoked at least by two other informants during my ethnography of this campaign.



capital was only to be anticipated and was a matter of time; in so far as these critics seek an exemption for nation as a category from that drive, Olins is not persuaded.

What then annoys the critics and leaves them unconvinced? Arguably, a certain incongruity seems to mark the very idea of branding nations and is suggestive of miscegenation of categories. In an anomalous transference as though, the domain of capital and marketing overstepped, transgressed and misused their concepts and processes, completely submitting nation to the neo-liberal logic of commodities. But the affront extends deeper. The disquiet, not to mention the effrontery, consists not only in the construed miscegenation, but in the very audacity of the exercise that submits a people- whom the category 'nation' putatively represents- to limited and limiting idiom of commodification. Possibly, if not entirely persuasively, one could argue that nations, in their conceptual and lived form in modern, and even in secular times, arguably incarnate the apotheosis of the sacral, and therefore, highest form of veneration is reserved for it. The very assumption that this immensity –the nation-form- could be encapsulated and re-presented within a commodified sign and its narrative is more disquieting than compelling or assuring. Further, the presumed comfort that branding can itself consecrate and sacralize, a process the cult brands experience, is not assuaging enough. Perhaps what annoys is the defining logic of commodities and that of equivalences where nation becomes another sign in the metonymic chain, immensely repeatable, losing its singularity, and the very “national thing” that made it singular. What disconcerts is the identity, the equation with the commodified form itself.

If we stick to the nation as sacral entity theme, ultimately what disturbs the critics is the audacity of the market forces in submitting the sacrality of the nation to the logic of

commodified circulation. Carl Schmitt (1985) compelling thesis lay in his identification of the theological roots in several master-signifiers of modernity and modern political institutions such as democracy, rights and so on. Although explicitly he does not invoke nation as one such category in the metonymic chain of master signifiers of modernity, the implication for the category within this series is possibly transparent enough. Anthony Marx (2003) in recent years has returned to that formulation where in so far as the nation as a category organizes and consolidates sociality in modernity, he argues in a claim resembling Schmitt's, national sociality succeeds a religious one from pre-modern times. In other words, nation with its symbolic narrative, iconic forms, consecrating rituals and performative dimensions, in its ontological as well as phenomenological registers essentially reproduces experiences one identified in pre-modern times with religious ones. In a Durkheimian vein, one could proffer the social function of glue or consolidation that religion and nationalism perform as the evidentiary proof.

Scholars nonetheless have questioned and critiqued these assumptions that classify nation, and similar modern categories such as sovereignty as a mere repetition of theological categories and experiences in modern times. Asad (2003: 189-190), for instance, has incisively shown that such claims are erroneously impervious to the questions of historicity, and historical articulation of social process. In a Foucauldian mold Asad insists on the ruptures, and the specificities these ruptures introduce to the human experience and reconstitute them as radically discontinuous. In the re-constellation of social forces, extant and new, that signified the transition to modernity, things, ideas, socio-culturally specific notions of sociality, did neither remain the same nor were these infinitely repeated.

Nonetheless, while Asad's dissociation of nation and religion hinges on claims of historicism, none of it detracts from considering the sense of sacrality associated with nation as an entity and its deification in modern times. One could argue that it is this very sacrality that Michel Girard is citing, in his opposition to nation-branding, by invoking the 'dignity' proper to the nation. To quote, "In France the idea of re-branding the country would be widely unacceptable because the popular feeling is that France is something that has a nature and a substance other than that of a corporation. A corporation can be re-branded, not a state. One can take a product, a washing powder for instance, and then change the name, which is actually done very regularly. Regular re-branding is normal, particularly in the life of consumer products, but can this actually be the case for countries? ... A country carries specific dignity unlike a marketed product... In France it is unimaginable for Chirac to attempt to re-brand France"<sup>265</sup>. In other words, something, which Girard names "dignity" (or "specific dignity") resists the profanation ensuing from crass materialism of commodified circulation.

One might recall here Durkheim's sprawling and no less rigorous demarcation of the sacred from the profane. He considered several potential axes of division to ultimately discard all but one. He invokes for instance the hierarchy or rank but shows its limitations; he meditates on the *ease* of the relation with the sacral object notwithstanding its superiority and brushes it aside. Ultimately the distinction devolves onto the absolute heterogeneity of the realms as primary and foundational. As he says, "... if the criterion of a purely hierarchical distinction is at once too general and too imprecise, nothing but their heterogeneity is left to define the relation between the sacred and profane. ...It is

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<sup>265</sup> Girard, 1999. (No title, paper delivered at a conference on Image, State and International Relations held at the London School of Economics on 24 June 1999,) cited in Olins (2002:1).

absolute in the history of human thought. There is no other example of two categories of things as profoundly differentiated or as radically opposed to one another...the sacred and profane always and everywhere is conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two world with nothing in common” (Durkheim 1995: 36). This radical disjuncture bordering on antagonism and jealousy, as he says, where even spatial proximity is a delicate exercise, prohibitions and meticulously ritualized practices of separation maintain the required chasm. Not that the passage from one realm to another, howsoever heterogeneous, does not happen, but even that passage or precisely through severe attention to the practices attending that passage, the rigorous distinction is ensured and constantly performed. The movement from one realm to another therefore is a “true metamorphoses” accompanied by “rites of initiation” and “rites of passage”.

If we were compelled, if not by the extremities of the Durkheimian claim, then by the valence of its essence, the urgency and violence of the critics that irritate Olin begins to make more sense. Most fundamentally nation branding involves entangling of heterogeneous realms and accompanying adulteration of categories where it is impermissible, and as a form of contagion it fails to recognize the care and attention required of the rites of passage as it submits the nation-thing to profanations of capital, which is nothing short of desecration.

However, and further, discomfort with branding the nation, on the other hand, needn't necessarily be around the gestures of desacralization it unleashes. If nation is imagined as a communitarian form organized around familiarity, sacrifice, affection and limited intrusion of (or fantasmatic absence of) commercialized exchanges and branding animates a transactional space where the social relations are entirely colonized by a

Weberian instrumental rationality; what is lost in the process is the sensitivity of the human and so on<sup>266</sup>. The claim in final analysis is that in the human and by extension nation as a form of sociality, something singular and immeasurable subsists (the national ‘thing’<sup>267</sup>) that cannot be submitted to the logic and presumptions of equity and exchange.

Olins in his response to his critics then tries to defend and explain his conception of nation-branding. In identifying several historical moments of crisis and re-consolidation of the France as a nation-state he locates the instances of nation-branding. Nation-branding in this schema begins to resemble any number of similar instances of nationalist-ideological self-imagination and fashioning of the French nation-state. What he fails to recognize though is the immensity and capaciousness of such nationalist reconstruction that partake of and engage several registers, at once political, cultural and economic, a process quite distinct to a near-monological production entailed by the nation-branding exercises.

Olins defense is constituted around claims to historical legitimacy. Any and all historical moments of symbolic and material reconstitution of France in the post-revolutionary period, or for that matter other countries in modern times, was mobilized as exemplary instantiation of (re-) branding. Decrying the presumed novelty of notions of nation branding by seeking historical continuity, in this rather capacious, not to mention loose redefinition of branding, the reconstruction of France five times, of Russia, of Turkey of Ataturk all then become its singular examples<sup>268</sup>. Subsequently of course he

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<sup>266</sup> This argument, if it needs stating, of course is reciting the Marxian-weberian-psychoanalytic critique of colonization of the social by capital, attendant experiences of alienation, anomie and blasé attitude and the like.

<sup>267</sup> For the claims around the ‘national-thing’, see Zizek, 1993.

<sup>268</sup> To quote him at some length: “After 1945, the collapse of the great European colonial empires created a new wave of nations. Many of those gave themselves new names, Ceylon became Sri

ropes in scholars of nationalism to substantiate his claims, “ All the historians and political scientists who have studied the subject, Hobsbawm, Geller, Kedourie, Benedict Anderson, Dominic Lieven and many other share more or less similar views” (Olins 2002: 6). He finally notices that possibly what irks the critics such as Girard are the choice of words, “it seems that it is not so much the ideas they worry about as much as the words. Image and national identity are fine but brand sticks in the gullet”. In the end the academic critics resistance is captured as the sign of snobbery, ignorance and semantics (p.8), and ultimately a futile one, for he recognizes the process as becoming a “normal national practice” and inevitably the question is “which country does it well and which badly” (Olins 2002: 9).

Olins mistakenly assumes that nation-branding and nationalist reconstitution of national identity are identical processes. Not that the latter is oblivious of the structures and processes of capital or class relations; far from it. Nationalist imagination is a hegemonic process structured by contestations, domination, selective recuperation of signs and icons, and not least implicated within class structures and relations. Nation building involves a larger participation of people but different identities, socio-cultural backgrounds, ambitions and interests, classes, ethnicities and languages, not to mention some notion of the political. Needless to say, though this imputed sense of democratic participation cannot be overstated for we are only too well aware of the processes of

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Lanka, Gold Coast became Ghana, Southern Rhodesia became Zimbabwe and its capital Salisbury, Harare. The Dutch East Indies Became Indonesia. Its capital Batavia was renamed Jakarta and its multiplicity of languages was replaced by the newly coined Bahasa Indonesian. The former Belgian Congo became plain Congo, the Zaire, then Congo again. Entirely new countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh emerged from what has been the British Indian Empire. Bangladesh has had three names in just over half a century; first it was a part of India as East Bengal, then it became East Pakistan and then Bangladesh. How about that for rebranding the nation?” (Olins, 2002:5).

exclusion, hierarchy and racialization, of marginalization and dominance. And yet what cannot be denied is the catholic and capacious nature of the contestatory process. To equate branding to this pulsating, temporally extensive, agonistically engaging process is to entirely miss the point. Not least because branding is preeminently submitted to the measure of capital and to the logic of accumulation and commodification, and is inevitably predominantly exclusivist in its conception limited as it is to the upper echelons of the corporate classes<sup>269</sup>. In a sense it is this submission of the entity such as nation-state (in Incredible India campaign) and political processes (in India Shinning campaign) that is discomfiting. I start with the Incredible India campaign.

### **Incredible India Campaign**

The campaign was born of a “severe crisis”, Amitabh Kant, the bureaucrat and brainchild behind the campaign, heroically announces, in the very beginning of his book, “Branding India: An Incredible Story” and a severity not just borne of complete neglect of the industry by the postcolonial Indian state, but that of terrorism no less. Having orchestrated a remarkably successful, the Kerala “God’s Own Country” campaign, he had anticipated the national tenure to be a reasonably easy one, but as he writes, truth could not have more distant than that<sup>270</sup>. The “crisis of massive magnitude” he invoked was one

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<sup>269</sup> In the top down, non-participatory (or selective participation) character it is more totalitarian and fascistic than democratic; the difference of course is consumption and the super-egoic command to enjoyment. In a way the difference in predicament of the two campaigns, India Shinning and Incredible India is instructive: both imagined and conceived by a certain section of the population, but one was submitted to the political field and conversations within it, which ultimately exposed its fault-lines. On the other hand the possible and potential opposition to Incredible India is elided for it is not exposed to the contestatory political domain. I will return to this theme in the following sections.

<sup>270</sup> Following his stint in Kerala, he moved to the Indian capital city New Delhi to join the Department of Tourism, Government of India.

that had seen a huge decline of tourism following the attacks on the World Trade Center in NYC, the war in Afghanistan, the attacks on the Indian Parliament, and not to mention the SARS epidemic in East Asia. By way of anti-thetically posing tourism and terrorism, he cites A. B. Vajpayee's speech to a chief ministers conference on Tourism following the 9/11 attacks at some length, " Now we know why terrorism has hit tourism the most. Tourism is a foe of terrorism. Whereas terrorism feeds on intolerance, tourism breeds tolerance and empathy. Terrorism has no respect for human life. In contrast, tourism teaches us to savor and celebrate all that is beautiful in nature and human life. Terrorism seeks to erect walls of hatred between faiths and communities. Tourism breaks such barriers. Terrorism detests pluralism, whereas tourism celebrates it. Terrorism may have temporarily hit tourism in this metaphorical battle between the two. But tourism will make a major contribution to the eventual defeat of terrorism and all other manifestation of fanaticism" (Kant 2009: Preface).

That of course was not all that ailed the industry. A series of reasons were regularly cited as factors obstructing tourism in the country. The primary one, which in retrospect never ceased to amaze the critics, was its low priority in the hierarchy of Five-Year plans of the government of India, especially given its immense potential. Cascading effect of this lack of statist interest and attention was felt on the attendant institutions and infrastructural requirements that sustained tourism as an industry: absence of planned and sustained investment in roads and railway travel, in marketing, publicity and promotion, lack of skilled labor<sup>271</sup> to serve in the service industry which tourism essentially was. Accompanying these lacks was the national aviation policy and the absence of high

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<sup>271</sup> Severe shortcoming associated with labor for service sector was noted as one of the biggest challenges; see for instance, Singh, 1997.



quality air travel, which was identified as the preferred mode of travel for high value foreign travelers (Raghuram:1998). A quick glance through the statistical figures for, for instance two decades prior to the campaign could be quite misleading and would suggest, all was fine with the tourism industry. Annual growth rate for tourist arrival for the period between 1981 to 1995 was about 5%, which is respectable (from 1.28 million in 1981 to 2.12 million in 1995), and commensurable receipts for the same period grew at a handsome 20%. And as Raguraman rightly reminds us, these figures are skewed for in comparative global framework these don't stack up favorably. Comparative figures for Malaysia, Hongkong, Thailand and Singapore for 1995 were 7.47 million, 10.20 million, 6.95 million and 6.42 million; the gains by receipts too show similar numbers<sup>272</sup>. Further what was more alarming was the gradual decline of India's share of world's total arrivals as well as receipts. These then were the immediately obtaining conditions calling for redress to which Incredible India campaign presumably was a response.

The campaign was conceived along the lines of similar destination branding campaigns already successfully launched by several nation-states. Lavanya Anirudh, who was the account manager and point person at Ogilvy & Mather (the ad agency that made the initial slew of ads for the campaign), singled out for praise the "Amazing Thailand" launched in 1998, "Malaysia-Truly Asia" campaign initiated in 1999, the "Live it to Singapore" campaign of 2000. Kant (2009:5) repeating the same list appends "100% Pure New Zealand" campaign to the list of inspiration for the Incredible India Campaign in his book. Taking these as inspirational campaigns, their own started in late 2002.

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<sup>272</sup> See Raguraman, 1998: 533; also see Table 1, p.534. The ranking in terms of tourist destination also declined from 41<sup>st</sup> position in 1981 to 44<sup>th</sup> in 1995.

### *Planning the Campaign*

One of the issues Anirudh<sup>273</sup> insistently returned to was the relevance and meaning of branding in the context of the ad campaign. India she pointed out was obviously not yet bracketed as one of the developed countries and yet nor was it a non-descript third world nation. It has a presence within the geo-political context, she asserted, and rehearsed some of the commonly held claims alluding to its special place in the comity of nations. One of the most crucial features she pointed out was the ancientness and continuity of civilization in India and the resulting cultural accumulation that ascertain her uniqueness. The challenges for capturing the essence of what India signified given its “over five millennia history” was colossal. The success of the campaign was to be measured by lucidity and transparency of its conveyance of what was authentically Indian; the enormous emphasis on ‘authenticity’ was, as we shall see, not a minor issue.

The drawback of the existing portrayals of India as she saw it, was very much the multiplicity of things, images and signs that accrued under the name India; this multiplicity inhering the semiotic density was haphazard and immense. In the absence of a planned and sustained portrayals, or of “branding” of India in the words of advertising professionals as well as the tourism bureaucracy, as much as Anirudh’s, as we shall see, in post-colonial Indian history, it had diverse connotations for people of different parts of the world. As Kant notes, “Until 2002, India had eighteen offices abroad. There was no positioning, common branding or clear, precise message. One foreign office called it ‘Spiritual India’, another termed it ‘cultural India’ and the third ‘unbelievable India’”

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<sup>273</sup> Lavanya Anirudh interviewed on June 20, 2005.

(Kant 2009:4). A polyphony of voices, images and messages plagued the global identity of India, especially a touristic destination, and neutralized or at the very least mitigated, the assets otherwise often “eulogized in every international platform”. The “sleeping giant” or “sleeping elephant” nevertheless did wake up in 2002 to keep its date with its touristic destiny. The Union Tourism and Culture minister, Mr. Jagmohan articulated the spur for the campaign in the language of subjective national choice, remarking, “For the first time in 50 years, India *chose* to promote itself, and we used this opportunity to position India as a destination for cultural enrichment, spiritual elevation, physical invigoration and mental rejuvenation...”<sup>274</sup>. This four-fold address, recited to me almost verbatim by Anirudh, repeated ad hominem by other ministry officials in interviews and reports<sup>275</sup> became the primary axis of a sustained branding process congealed under the sign Incredible India.

At stake is the re-codification of India as a place of travel and tourism. The exercise first and foremost required culling out from a plethora of already extant touristic sites constituted in different times as places worthy of visits a few that articulated in essence and with eloquence what was being re-imagined as the Indian “thing”. In fact it was this immense plurality of places that irked the new professionals including Anirudh. Plurality, it was argued, by its very nature dissipated attention and confounded the

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<sup>274</sup> Economic Times, 16<sup>th</sup> Jan 2004. Italics mine. The idiom of choice, not compulsion, almost is suggestive of a proud nation deigning to finally “advertise” and “sell” itself; the flip side of course is that it choose not to for so long and can again choose not to do so in future. This language of bravado nonetheless belied the anxieties of the group of bureaucrats, marketing professionals and local vendors who invested in and labored for the campaign.

<sup>275</sup> These references or words are cited verbatim in The National Tourism Policy 2002, Ministry of Tourism and Culture; to quote, the campaign “aimed to achieve a superior quality of life for India’s people through tourism, which would provide a unique opportunity for physical invigoration, mental rejuvenation, cultural enrichment and spiritual elevation”, cited in Kant (2009:6).

potential tourists; hence, drawing the boundaries, containing excess was thought to be the primary task. Through delimitation, by identifying a few core tourist sites and by potentially sketching the itineraries of the international travelers, India was sought to be re-produced simultaneously as an object of knowledge and a place of ecstatic and comfortable travel. Arguably this cartographic marking of travel itinerary, foregrounding of some places, marginalization of many others re-sutured India for the foreigner Other as a very particular form of knowledge and experience, travel and exploration. The determination of these selected marks on the map was for sure a function of historically accumulated knowledges and sensibilities, but ultimately was subjected to the logics of market, extant social conditions and decisions of a small coterie of bureaucrats and corporate professionals.

The task of branding consequently, Anirudh summarized, was threefold: first and foremost, identification of signs and images that distilled and conveyed authentically the essence and immensity of India as one of the oldest human civilizations; the point of course for an advertising and branding process was to select from the “savory images”. Two, delimiting of these signs to a few absolutely primary ones, invocation of which inescapably and with easy immediacy recalls for the foreign addressee, India. She repeated the point in an interview to a foreign journal, “Before (this campaign) India was being promoted differently in different countries, if at all. There weren’t two or three distinct images. This campaign changed that” (Neelakantan 2004:45). And finally, construction of a narrative, its repetition and its repeated circulation within the mediatic sphere to ensure the accrual of value around these signs.

Further notwithstanding the focused pointedness that branding demanded the campaign required a nominal sign that simultaneously indicated and recalled a limited and transparent set images and narratives, and yet possessed intertextual density, directing the potential addressee towards the immensity of what was left out; in other words, a bounded sign with the clarity of what it said and made visible, and yet one that convoked the traces of the excess left aside: a paradoxical sign that delimited, yet was capacious in the same gesture. That was not all though: the chosen nominal sign had also to lug the emerging sensibilities of the late capitalist India- with re-constellated class alliances- screaming and yelling its arrival on the global geo-political and economic scene as superpower in waiting. As Kant notes in distancing the campaign from earlier publicities, “the clichéd visuals, such as saffron-clad sadhus in the Himalayas and rope-tricks performed amidst crowds, reinforced the traditional image of India rather than the contemporary feel of a young nation...” (Kant 2009:4)<sup>276</sup> and it is the latter that he was aiming for i.e., not a mere re-circulation of already existing, clichéd and overused images but its juxtaposing alongside images that carried the vitalism that reforms had injected in the Indian social. Bharat Bala, the film director for the early campaigns subscribing to Kant’s viewpoint, noted, “Today, India cannot be thought of without acknowledging the irony of it being an ancient country with a modern outlook. The film was shot bearing

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<sup>276</sup> Allusion to ‘youth’ of the nation barely conceals the claims to not only the developed countries status it wants to lay stakes on but also to the stature of a global superpower; it clearly knows that, and yet if the reports consistently circulating in the media are anything to go by the projections of economic superpower status by 2030 many consider to be inevitable; it then is only a matter of time.

this in mind; we were careful to preserve the eternal quality of its people and landscape, yet remain modern in its execution” (cited in Kant 2009: 21-22)<sup>277</sup>.

For these several demands made of the sign, the word “incredible”, the team concurred, was the most suitable and adequate one. “The rich tapestry that is India cannot be captured in a single word or expression but ‘Incredible’ comes close enough. At times overwhelming, but always ‘Incredible’” (Kant 2009: 7)<sup>278</sup>. In another conversation, he remarks, “It’s crazy to sell India. Mauritius is beaches. South Africa is wild life. How do you say we have all this and more”? (cited in Joseph 2003) Anirudh says that in so many words, “I just keep hearing that ‘incredible’ is absolutely the apt word to describe India. The country is not perfect; everything is not laid out for you on a platter. Yes we have cows on the narrow streets, but this is mixed with some amazing stuff” (Neelkantan 2004: 46)<sup>279</sup>. In a way what this default use of a nearly adequate sign confesses and marks in its own oblivious manner, is both the excess that it could not, and those it did not intend to, usurp, and in either case, ultimately attests the violence of marginalization

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<sup>277</sup> I might note it was unclear what the irony he speaks of consisted in; possibly he meant the ‘paradox’ of the traditional and the modern.

<sup>278</sup> The report by the Department of Tourism says the same adding slightly different words, “The rich tapestry that is India cannot be captured in a single word or expression but ‘incredible’ comes close enough. *At times unbelievable*, at times overwhelming, always incredible”. Incredible India Campaign, A Report by Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India, p.2, (italics mine).

<sup>279</sup> The choice of ‘Incredible India’ as it turns out was not unanimous. Kant notes in his book, the Tourism minister of the time Mr. Jagmohan, of the Emergency fame, and known as a stern task master and dubbed by Kant as man with “highest level of integrity” (now with the BJP) had his own brandline: “The Wonder that is India”, a self-professed rip-off of A.L Bhasham’s “The Wonder that was India”. It took Kant the marshalling of consumer research results and esteemed opinions of marketing professionals to convince Jagmohan otherwise. It might be noted in passing that Kant in his infinite judgment discerned a “passion for infrastructure” in Jagmohan!! (Kant 2009). Jagmohan’s modernist desire-“passion for infrastructure” - were expressly manifest during the Emergency with the demolitions and dislocation of large body of Muslim migrant labor in Ajmeri Gate in Delhi in 1975; in the insertion of the same passion in branding India through the Incredible India campaign a continuity of same bourgeois desire for modernity can be discerned with its final articulation within a neo-liberal regime with its ideology of transparency and efficiency.

that any process of nation-branding perpetrates. The point not be missed of course is ceaseless iteration of few lines or phrases through virtually every representational and mediatic register they choose to use, very much in consonance with the larger aim of the branding process that requires a repetition of key signifiers and narratives to reinforce the consistency of the circulated message. The repetition needless to say betrays the foundational anxiety that rankled the branding process and was the very object cause of the campaign; the tautological repetition of the same, nearly identically, was not frivolous and its immense labor was geared towards impeding the return of excess and plurality that reportedly confounded the representations of India to the outside world. The recurrence therefore, of the nominal signifier ‘incredible’ was not sufficient; its legitimation demanded hackneyed parroting of identical phrases strung into a nearly identical statements.

Anirudh spent sometime explaining with care and investment the attention that went into the imagination and consolidation of the Incredible India logo. True to the institutionalized function of logos in the capitalist economy, this logo too had to rehearse all the avowed properties. Absolutely irrespective of the multiplicity of images of same or different tourist sites, the make and shape of the letters in Incredible India, the spacing between them, the font, the combination of colors used all had to be irrevocably identical permitting only very minor playful difference here and there depending on the scope allowed by the particular sites<sup>280</sup>. She seemed particularly invested in the first “i” of India, which is an exclamation mark with the dot underneath and its consistency through

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<sup>280</sup> A fact that can of course be attested by all the ads produced under the campaign and are still being produced.

all the images<sup>281</sup>. One of the images she showed to me was that of Taj Mahal inverted against the surface of water (see pic VIII). On it, she gleefully pointed out the reflection of moon forming the dot to the exclamation which was one of the four minarets of Taj Mahal and spoke passionately about the effort that went to the fabrication of that particular image; in other words, even when the images were turned upside down, the stasis and similitude in Incredible India, including the consistent placement of the dot under ‘i’ or the exclamation anchored the image. I soon discovered the collective investment of the team in the substitution of “!” for “I” and the meticulous precision in the place of the dot was anything but capricious or trivial: the surrogate sign, “!”, stood for more than a relation of equivalence with the letter “I”; in a way it bulwarked the ponderous load of the entire signification demanded of the signifiers “Incredible India”<sup>282</sup>.

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<sup>281</sup> This “innovativeness” as Kant calls it, does not go unmentioned in his book either (Kant 2009: 7).

<sup>282</sup> The generic dot, V. Sunil explained stood for bindi. Sunil does not elaborate on why ‘bindi’, why the implication of that motif and in place or doubling the dot of the exclamation mark. The question I’d argue, if not try to answer, has to be posed: why that motif and why there? What was the inspiration? Or was it a spur of the moment thought? Is it pure pastiche instead and result of a random, passing muse? One could for instance do an interesting reading of its prefiguration as bindi and its semeiotic layers. Bindi though, and needless to say prefigures and figures the very essence of Indian womanliness or femininity and in that captures the Indian “thing”.





Pic VIII: Tajmahal (courtesy Department of Tourism, Government of India)

The substitution, we are informed by Kant was the brainchild of V. Sunil, who of course writes, speaks and discourses appropriately as the originary author of that significant insertion. The signification he expects from or posits on the sign, the exclamation point, is immense. He compares it to that other iconic symbol of high capitalism, the swoosh of Nike and its labor: “Nike told flabby, procrastinating city-dwellers everywhere to stop making excuses and ‘Just do it’, following it up with the brilliant ‘swoosh’ icon, a graphic device that expressed energy and inspired sport without a word. The ‘Incredible India’ campaign belongs to this generation of branding” (cited in Kant 2006: 20). The iconic sign he argues ideally should speak not merely the product truth but also the express the larger socio-economic truth. “Visually, it uses the ‘!’ symbol to convey the mid-boggling depth and intensity of the Indian experience. Every

aspect of India – be it its ever-accelerating GDP, extreme geography, kaleidoscope culture, deep-rooted spirituality or even photogenic chaos, even- is summed up by the simple yet profound exclamation point”. The ‘i’ as exclamation then stood as the summation or condensation of the immense density and myriad connotations it signified. “Incredible India”, the signifier, as well as the exclamation mark (!) is ambitious to say the least. It dreams of being a master signifier around which then series of other signifier can lodge and anchor themselves, hopefully producing a seamless narrative. And yet like every master signifier it ultimately sustains a symbolic fantasy, an issue we will come back to in the following pages. As Sunil, the master craftsman of late capitalism (the creative director) proposes for it the task of becoming the synecdoche for the new India, a new India that does not so much supersede the heritage of the ancient India but usurp it as an indelible part and parcel of the new India.

In fact the positioning of the “i” of India in all the images on the series was curious, if also deliberate. In allowing the ‘i’ to be inscribed by figure in the images (and in dispensing with the letter ‘i’ itself), the signifier ‘incredible India’ begins as if to anchor itself in a moment of metaphorization (both in lacanian and non-lacanian sense) along the axis of that ‘i’ prefigured by that figure in the image<sup>283</sup>. The latter, in other words, belongs both to the image and to the signifiers ‘Incredible India’ and is the place where the stitching of the word and image takes place; the ‘i’ melts both into the word and the image. But that gesture of stitching itself then splits the flattened surface of image into two: one bearing the image and the other the superimposed signifiers. The weaving of the signifier and the image along the ‘i’ axis afford the impression that the signifiers

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<sup>283</sup> So for instance in the wildlife image it is the stripe on the tiger, in the yoga posture and the lone woman walking through the desert, it is the leg(s) of the woman and so on.

are emerging from the vortex along that axis (or even the dot; can we call it an umbilical cord?), and if the images could speak or verbalize themselves they would exclaim “incredible India” (it is as though the relief of the image throws out these signifiers from the pit of axis ‘i’, and as if to re-present it, speak it in language).

The place of stitching nonetheless is also an intense mark of ambiguity and anxiety. In such framing of the image, the very gesture of solicitation of attention by the stitch foregrounds and unravels its artifice i.e., that it is a stitch that sutures a gap. In a flash it begins to function as Barthesian punctum that draws attention and begins to unravel the gap separating the image and words, and expose the representational ruse of language. The word and the image begin to get into the war they eternally fought; in remarking on Rene Char’s famous painting with pipe with the written address “this is not a pipe”, Foucault brilliantly summarized the relation between word and image, “Between the figure and the text we must admit a whole series of crisscrossing, or rather between the one and the other attacks are launched and arrows fly against the enemy target, campaigns designed to undermine and destroy, wounds and blows from the lance, a battle.....images falling in the midst of words, verbal flashes crisscrossing drawings..... discourse cutting in to the form of things”<sup>284</sup>. In this unraveling of the words and the image along the axis ‘i’, the letter that nominally announces India no less, the picture on the image begins to look menacing, and begins to say, maybe it is not incredible India after all. The stitch or the axis operates as the stain on the surface of the image that in a moment of anamorphosis disturbs the fantasy the conjoining of image and words were supposed to uphold. The image in its unraveling portends and pre-announces

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<sup>284</sup>M.Foucault, cited in Deleuze (1986: 66).

for the potential traveler that what awaits is not incredible India but menacing India; the very surface of the image which thrusts outwards the jubilatory cry of incredible India ruptures that very fantasy through that very cleft of the stitch to project the menacing real that is India, the real that countless travelers can in their reported and unreported miseries can attest to.

*Projecting the “positive image”*

The Tourism Report summarized its task thusly: “a) Create a distinct image of India, through a unique style of communication; b) to *project* a ‘*positive image*’ of India; c) to position India as a high value, upmarket destination”<sup>285</sup>. It is curious to note the apostrophe semi-bracketing the letters “positive image” in the campaign statement. In the very precision of its wording it rehearses the classic lacanian formulation of the formation of the self-imaginary of the subject with any greater facility. Lacan in his famous “mirror stage theory”, commenting on the formation of self image of the subject (or subjective imaginary in the mirror) had spoken of the jubilatory moment of identification the subject experiences. This imaginary nonetheless, he noted while empowering and essential was also alienating and discomfiting for the self-experience of the body, for child is at odds with the projected consolidated image; and further, the image in any case is a ‘projection’ and a projection on a surface elsewhere, and not one the subject owns as his own<sup>286</sup>. In other words, jubilation or exclamation is conjoined

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<sup>285</sup> Incredible India Campaign, A report by Department of Tourism, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India, 2004. Italics are mine.

<sup>286</sup> What is noteworthy, if also possibly obvious, is three things: a) that this condition is structural, i.e., it is not limited to the subject as child; this drama of relation to self-image continues to enact itself through the subject’s life; b) the image in due course implicates itself with the narratives engendered and supported by the Symbolic; c) the image is both specular and non-specular: in its specularity the mirror could be the look of the other that reconstitutes the subject as image, and in its non-specularity, the self image could be and is consolidated by and in the aural register as well

with self-doubt and anxiety. Lacan in his later lectures complicates this constitution of the mirror stage by implicating the register of the real into this play, which hitherto was articulated around the imaginary and symbolic axes. He notes, “man... as image is interesting for the hollow the image leaves behind”<sup>287</sup>. This “hollow in the image”, he names the real, is that which cannot be specularized or covered over (or submitted to the facilitation work of symbolic fantasy) and continues to be not only the site of immense anxiety for the subject, but also the very condition of an insatiable desire (or to even just desire). In sum then, any projected positive self-image is plagued by anxiety and the conditions of its undoing and failure. And it recognizes this perpetually hovering lack or hollow and conditions of failure and unraveling. And by extension it clearly recognizes the nature as its work as ideological- performative requiring relentless excision of ruptures and chasms, unsavory images and narratives and thereby ultimately discloses the fantasmatic character of its symbolic narratives.

And in the case of the Incredible India campaign, it is within the space of this symbolic fantasy, the authentic is sought to be constituted, and revealed as recovered. The claim to authenticity, howsoever at odds with the desire for “positive image”, is not frivolous. An impossible demand, at the very least in principle, is made of the campaign: to produce a symbolic image without lack or ruptures, and yet that be authentic. This demand in and of itself reveals the impossibility of the task (of producing seamless symbolic without it being ideological), and hence also the resort to the only mode in which resolution is possible: through production of fantasy. What this exercise ultimately conveys is the very fantasy the whole campaign is all about but one in which all

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(Lacan is invoking ‘voice’ here both in its sensible and nonsensical dimensions; see introduction, p. for a statement on the auditory play that constitutes and humanizes a subject).

<sup>287</sup> Lacan (1997: 196). See also Lorenzo Chiesa’s similar reading, Chiesa, (2007:105-7).

participating and on many occasion the addressee choose to accede to. It nonetheless still raises the question of what national-cultural authenticity looks like in a phantasmatic space? Conversely, it also compels the question whether any claim to authenticity ultimately requires fantasy as a condition of its possibility?

*Other's flaunt, we Choose to Showcase*

To confine the incredible India campaign to its statist origins and fantasy in the Department of Tourism would be to interpellate ourselves to its ideological carapace and misconstrue its true nature. Neither is the desire for global presence it exhibits limited to the statist ambitions nor to that of its market-corporate partners. In its drive to visibility its originary inspiration can be rightfully located in the articulation of the Indian state within a neo-liberal paradigm, and the near-total submission of nation-states generally to the logic of capital, not to mention the imaginary of the ambitious, assertive and spreading middle class. In its inspiration and conception the campaign squarely addresses the global Other. Soliciting the Other's gaze, it especially assembles, mobilizes, orchestrates and performs the framework of image and narrative in which it was captured and codified following the colonial encounter if not earlier. Knowing and aware of the object cause of other's desire in it- ancientness, tradition, spirituality and still untamed nature- it re-animates, or in the idiom of professionals, "showcases" these registers to recapture that desire. Retaining the 'dignity' and sacrality proper to the nation, it does not participate in crass and obscene "flaunting" so much as a "display" of its varied richness, in the process reclaiming the national thing (Yoga, ayurveda, Buddhism, Himalayas, the Bengal tiger and the like).

If the collective mandate was to juxtapose the ancient and the traditional with the modern and the youthful, from the very inception of the campaign then the five ad series of images released under the first installment placed the burden of that articulation on the body of the woman. While three of the five images were bereft of human presence, of the remaining two inhabited by a woman, one is anonymous and has the face turned away from the camera, and she melts into the sandy landscape; in the other with the human presence, the woman's body, youthful and exerting, yet again, is called upon to suture and anchor the ideological fantasy the campaign wished to posit and institutionalize, i.e., the conjoining of the ancient wisdom with the newness and vigor of the modern.

A hugely successful campaign in a concerted exercise marshaled a panoply of machineries of state apparatus, the marketing firms, the media agencies, a dedicated bunch of planners and other key stakeholders in tourism industry in India. The acquisition of the visibility it desired was ensured by a series of concatenated efforts. The ads both in its cinematic and photographic form were circulated first through international press and television. In a simultaneous undertaking several forms of 'collaterals' were organized: to be precise, brochures and leaflets<sup>288</sup>, informative CDs<sup>289</sup>, postcards<sup>290</sup>, posters<sup>291</sup>, airport translites<sup>292</sup>. This work was further appended by a tourism website<sup>293</sup> where the number

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<sup>288</sup> 10 each to be precise.

<sup>289</sup> Basically an 'image CD' that included "the logo manual and another CD specific to the Indian Himalayas" given to the Trade and Media.

<sup>290</sup> A booklet of six postcards depicting the Indian Himalayas was disseminated within trading partners, media and general public.

<sup>291</sup> A set of 15 posters depicting a wide variety of landscapes, cultures, people and activities distributed to Trade across the world to put up at their establishment. Apart from posters a set of scrolls was designed for display by Overseas India tourism offices to be exhibited in events they participated in or organized.

<sup>292</sup> Initially displayed in the Indira Gandhi International airport in Delhi, but in subsequent years in other international airports as well.

<sup>293</sup> The website <[www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)> is still in operation.

of hits rose from 2.6 million in June 2002 to 13 million by April 2003, and finally a series of events and exhibitions were organized that foreground the idea of incredible India<sup>294</sup>. For the subsequent two years as the brand became known, sustenance of the brand through newer additions of ads and posters and such, and through deft use of the international media<sup>295</sup> greater reach was acquired. Soon the branding exercise became more than mere advertising and took on, what they called “a 360-degree perspective”, encompassing public relations, outdoor hoardings, in-flight television advertising and a special campaigns such as on Buddhism, brochures on Sindhu Darshan in Ladakh, focused ads on Yoga and Ayurveda. The centerpiece of the initial campaign were the set of five ad depicting Taj Mahal, Himalayas, Thar desert, Bengal Tiger and Yoga, all of which can easily draw their orientalist genealogies without much difficulty (see pic IX, X, XI, XII). The concern for the Kant as much as for Anirudh was not orientalist images standing in for India as a destination brand as much the accumulation of unlimited number of such images; the point in other words to limit the number of images and repeat them so that in public imaginary it begins to stand in for India as tourist destination.

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<sup>294</sup> The highlight amongst events was the exhibition on Himalayas coinciding timely with 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ascent of Mt. Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary.

<sup>295</sup> The team illustrated its media savvy-ness during the celebrity Big Brother fracas involving a known cinema star from India; one of the participants, Jade Goody was sent an open letter through national newspapers and invited to visit India; the whole gesture needless to say became public.





Pic IX: Himalayas (courtesy Department of Tourism, Government of India)



Pic X: Thar Desert (courtesy Department of Tourism, Government of India)



Pic XI: Bengal Tiger (courtesy Department of Tourism, Government of India)



Pic XII: Yoga (courtesy Department of Tourism, Government of India)

The campaign then began with the ambition of curtailing under the sign “incredible India” the number of images, and the denotative and connotative references these were projected to conjure and animate. The initial task, in other words, was the very containment of a long history of capacious (if also repetitive in their orientalist imagination) and disseminating imaginary and a fortification of a very particular series of references by invoking specific places, crafts, healing traditions and wildlife. From the very beginning nonetheless, irrespective of the fantasy of possible containment and bounding (“we wanted to focus on two or three images” as Anirudh had reported to me), the plurality and excess that circulated under the sign India haunted the ambitions of the team to the extent that Kant equated the exercise to madness: “It’s crazy to try to brand India....Mauritius has beaches. South Africa has wildlife. India has all this and much more” (Kant 2009:11). The excess or the remainder always lurked beneath the master signifier “incredible India” and the limited set of signs assembled and released around it. The initial campaign itself structured in a tiered manner with the master-signifier ‘incredible India’ at the apex, followed by the five main ad campaigns then sliding into CDs, brochures and leaflets, posters and the information on the official website, already did not augur well for the fantasy of containment Kant and his team nursed. The very gesture of containment, in other words, was always already falling apart in the very first campaign itself. As one follows the newer campaigns through the following years, the dissemination, that had triggered immense anxiety in the initial years, is complete. In a way recognizing the impossibility of that fantasy of containment through limited and controlled circulation of signs, images and narratives the drive now one speculates is

towards the abandonment of that gesture. And yet this abandonment of the containment exercise is not the disavowal of the primal fantasy though: the ever sprawling and mutating signs and images are paradoxically held together and anchored by the master signifier “incredible India”. The more the ancillary signs and images proliferate, the more they return to invest the meta-sign; in a recursive fashion, with every dissemination, the sign ‘incredible’ is bulwarked; and inversely, and even ironically, the “incredible” to be credible requires that signs disseminate and images proliferate. The route the campaign had pursued over the last seven years now instantiates the embracing of this paradoxical move. One could argue that this eventual predicament always foreshadowed the campaign from the start, and in a way the sign incredible in “Incredible India” realized its true potential only once it abandoned the project of containment and embraced proliferation.

It should be noted simultaneously that the proliferation which it once feared would undermine the task of consolidation of fantasy, in due course secured it. The other fear nonetheless, the fear of the real of the Indian social, remained. Again, the fear of the real was discerned from its very inception. Rati Vinay Jha remarked early on, “It is easy to tell people about the sights and sounds of India. But how do you tell them about the smells of India, which is a great disincentive?” (Cited in Joseph 2003). Smell of course, was no small matter. One can argue, the olfactory senses are the most recalcitrant ones. Stench leaks, seeps and spreads, transgress borders and legislations, refuses containment. In oozing inconsolably it threatens fantasy. Jha recognized that smell lets the real out. Where the sight, sound and stories can be worked and reworked, odor lacking obedience reeks through the fissures. That the real of smell disturbed the Indian state and threatened

the fantasy of incredible India was attested by the ministerial level discussion, reported the New York Times in early 2005<sup>296</sup>. In a conversation around the collapsing infrastructure qua tourism, the figure of the taxi-driver surfaced as an inevitable nuisance and more particularly the odors emanating from his unhygienic body. Renuka Chowdhary, the minister of Tourism of the incumbent Congress coalition government in a radical move literally took the matter into her own hands and mingled in disguise with the tourists to personally ascertain what ails the poor service in tourism industry. “I’ve spoken”, she announces, “to a lot of tourists- none of whom know who I am- and I identified this overwhelming need to address this problem”<sup>297</sup>. The overwhelming problem she ‘discovered’ aside from squabbling with taxi drivers and fear of their own security was the matter of hygiene, and yet again and even predictably perhaps, she “took it upon herself to lecture the taxi drivers about cleanliness, convinced that tourists are often aghast at the smells inside hot vehicles”. She proudly declares, “I’ve have been telling the drivers, ‘You must be clean, you must launder your clothes, you must wash your socks.’ I think I get away with it because I look so motherly”<sup>298</sup>.

*“Atithi Devo Bhavah”*

Setting aside the problematic maternal-familial trope Chowdhary invokes<sup>299</sup> to supplement, if not justify, her gestures, we must recognize the stakes for the state in

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<sup>296</sup> India Gives Its Image An Airing, New York Times, 24 April, 2005.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid. It is unclear what is at stake in her claim of disguise (“none of whom know who I am”), aside of course from narcissism, or what she wanted to glean from disguised interactions with the tourists; if the aim was to isolate hygiene or other infrastructural problems, its visibility could only have been hidden from a blind man; mind you, visibility not perception.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid.

<sup>299</sup> ‘Frivolous’ of course neither for the taxi driver being humiliated and disciplined by a Union minister albeit in a motherly garb nor for the esteemed union minister herself and her tokenist-liberal gesture; rather frivolous for what it attempts (or does not attempt) to do for the taxi-driver’s conditions of living.

disciplining the subaltern bodies. These measures under which disciplining the subaltern figured as a pivotal exercise was planned under what was called the “Atithi Devo Bhavah” campaign, launched in Jan 2005<sup>300</sup>. A common phrase drawn from Hindu scriptures meaning “guest is god”, it is spoken in Sanskrit, which is entirely a language of erudition and not of social conversation. Again without delving into the imputed connotation of sacrality and of equation of guests with deities, all invoked within processes of consolidation of a neo-liberal regime, and not to mention, a social context where the lines of separation between the secular and religious, the profane and the sacred and their entanglement with the political is an attested political as well as scholarly minefield, I will move into the nuts and bolts of what the campaign entailed.

Conceived as a part of the Incredible India campaign, and addressed to Indians in general, it directed the citizenry’s gaze inwards and was launched with a tutelary purpose in mind. The meta-idea was to rouse awareness around the socio-economic benefits of tourism industry and conjointly compel a general public attitudinal and behavioral change especially amidst the major stakeholders in the industry. Three segments of the directly involved stakeholders was identified: first were the taxi-drivers, porters, baggage handlers and tour guides; second consisted of restaurant owners, staff of small hotels, shop owners and shop staff and the third were bureaucratic officials serving customs and immigration desks, airline staff and tour operator. Interestingly a particular emphasis on this list was on the lower class labor manning the industry, and on teaching them lessons in bourgeois civility: in notions of integrity, conduct and behavior, in ways of securing tourists’ safety. Those undergoing the training were awarded certificates, badges and stickers with the slogan “Atithi Devo Bhavah” embossed on them, given a training

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<sup>300</sup> The advertisements for the campaign were handled by Frank Simoes Advertising.

manual for continual reference and learning, and finally, given a pledge, the oral promissory note, which Kant does not forget to mention, is “verbalized” (Kant 2009: 55-56) (about which much can be spoken)<sup>301</sup>. Apart from this training process, media campaigns figuring Bollywood stars Amir Khan and Shahrukh Khan were pursued<sup>302</sup> and public relations exercise and road shows were conducted.

This campaign is a classic instance of the neo-liberal anxiety of the real of Indian social rupturing the fantasy. It also exemplifies the transactional quality of the negotiations<sup>303</sup> across the spaces, Chatterjee (2004) has identified as, civil and political societies in post-colonial countries. The Indian state’s gestures are plainly and painfully ad hoc and limited. Literacy, hygiene and cleanliness, polite disposition towards the foreign other, and generally personal integrity of the taxi driver become provisional matters of state concern. Having exiled these sections of population from the bourgeois civil society and having been submitted to the punitive disciplinary machineries of bio-power under states of exception, they are again recalled into the civil social fold if only provisionally, if only to serve and serve well no less. Not a fundamental right to literacy, to better conditions of work or living, but recovered to be trained in bourgeois civility and be certified and bestowed accompanying accoutrements – T-shirt and a badge with the

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<sup>301</sup> Kant notes that the campaign was run in two phases with the first (from Jan –Mar 2005) training and certifying 26000 stakeholders and the second (from November 2005- March 2006) 52000 stakeholders.

<sup>302</sup> In the ad campaigns featuring the two cine-stars, they were shown admonishing the irreverent conduct of middle class family towards tourist monuments and a taxi driver ill-disposed towards a foreign tourist.

<sup>303</sup> Or what I have tried to call “generalized perversion”, which involves a provisional, temporary character of relationship with the law or the symbolic; it substitutes for a transcendental relation to the sovereign or the symbolic law a transactional one. The point of use of a psychoanalytic conception is to intrude the question of jouissance and libidinization of the social into the discursive field (see the introduction, but especially the conclusion for greater treatment of this issue).



Incredible India logo- and their integrity secured through verbalized pledge, and commanded to return in six months to undergo the same process. Relying on the trickling of economic benefits, the neo-liberal Indian state re-defines (or shelves) its developmental agenda with the assurance that the pedagogical initiative is well taken by the subaltern addressee. And for good measure solicits the testimony of Vinod Kumar Ujjainwala, a taxi driver and union leader of 670 drivers at Delhi's domestic airport who informs us that all these drivers now keep mineral water and tissues in nearly clean taxis and notes "none of his team had been offended by the criticism of them implicit in the campaign and that drivers had noticed their tips increasing"; he continues, "we always knew these things were important, but we never much bothered with them before. Passengers feel good if we're dressed nicely; it gives them a sense that we're trustworthy"<sup>304</sup>. The testimonial in its negation avows the affective charges animating the relation of hierarchy, and across the civil-political divide. Notwithstanding the couching of a desperate pedagogy in the idiom of civilizing mission or through invocation of material self interest<sup>305</sup> or conveyed through the maternal touch of the Union minister no less, the tension is palpable in its very denial.

### **Political Advertising and India Shining**

India Shinning was not the first time that advertisers were mobilized by a political party before elections. One of the earliest was Rajiv Gandhi's campaign in 1984 elections when Congress hired Rediffusion for the task of communication and publicity.

Subsequent years of course saw the intrusion of other ad agencies, big and small, at the

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<sup>304</sup> India Gives Its Image An Airing, New York Times, 24 April, 2005.

<sup>305</sup> "With this latest campaign we're trying to teach people that good tourism practice will help them to earn a better buck", remarks, Renuka Chowdhary, cited in India Gives Its Image An Airing, New York Times, 24 April, 2005.

behest of their client political parties participating in the electoral scene. Yet, none of the subsequent ones resembled the 2004 elections. Scholars such as Nandy have directed our attention to the enormous intrusion of money into the political processes, and of the commercialization of the political with the emergence of what he called the entrepreneurial class of politicians. Lacking the normative sensibilities of the earlier generation of politicians, this class unabashedly commercialized the political institutions and processes. What we witnessed in 2004 general elections on the other hand was a somewhat different process. If the earlier moment of commercialization regularized the infiltration and mobility of capital through the political, while legitimating the entry of an underclass of political operators without qualms and interest in the questions of morality or ethics, in the more contemporary moment in 2004, alongside their continuance and deepening effect, we witnessed, for a lack of a better word, we can call, an immense corporatization of the political processes.

Corporatization being referred to alludes to an intense entanglement of the mediatic, political and market-corporate processes. In a social space increasingly interpellated by the mediatic forms, with the question of visibility and public presence increasingly becomes an issue of mediatic visibility, irrespective of the realm within which a social process hitherto functioned, the demands of a mediatic economy begins to shape and determine its nature, and imposes isomorphic forms on these differential arenas of social life. Consequently we witness that the market-corporate world, which is already cued into these demands of the mediatization lending its expertise to the political field. The question that acquires centrality then becomes one of positioning, placement, segmentation, identification of target audience, rigorous research on the potential

addressees, sample surveys, all of which also begins to involve the market research companies. I will return to these issues and their effects on the political field after having laid out elaborately the India Shinning campaign and its aftermath.

### **National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and India Shinning Campaign**

The inception of the campaign can be traced to July of 2003 when the ruling NDA (National Democratic Alliance) with BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) as the senior party at the helm of affairs invited over twenty advertising agencies to pitch for an ambitious advertising campaign to highlight the achievements, especially in economic sphere, of the incumbent alliance. With the approaching elections in four states<sup>306</sup> as well as the national election<sup>307</sup> in the October of the following year, it wished to take the lead, striving in the process to translate the general economic successes of the previous few years into an unassailable electoral one especially at the national level<sup>308</sup>. "The popularity of the National Democratic Alliance and the standing of the PM himself have never been as high as they are currently"<sup>309</sup>, and the ambition was to leverage this presumed popularity of the government as well as the prime minister for the polls ahead.

Unsatisfied with the proposals submitted, it rejected all, and again in the October of the same year it selectively approached eleven ad agencies. After several tough rounds of pitching for the lucrative campaign, which witnessed the ad agencies like Lowe,

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<sup>306</sup> State assembly elections were held in November 2003 in Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Delhi and Rajasthan. NDA coalition won all except in Delhi.

<sup>307</sup> BJP led NDA coalition was elected to power in the 13<sup>th</sup> general elections in 1999. In the Lok Sabha it was single largest party with 179 members, with Congress with 112 members the second largest (total number of seats being 545).

<sup>308</sup> The term of the NDA coalition government was to end in October 2004, but it called for early elections in April-May 2004; the call for early elections suggests its confidence of winning the elections.

<sup>309</sup> "Get set," The Telegraph, January 14, 2004

Rediffusion DY&R and FCB Ulka vying for the job, Grey Worldwide<sup>310</sup> made to the finish line. Ashutosh Khanna, the Chief Operating Officer (COO) of Grey Worldwide, recalls that the brief from the Finance Ministry: “The brief was simple: The economic macro indices are looking up. The public have the option of participate in the booming economy. We worked on this brief and came up with a creative interpretation of that theme” (Subramaniam, 2004).

Pratap Suthan, national creative director, Grey Worldwide, purportedly considered several slogans- “India Dazzling”, “India Alive”, “India Rising” to name a few- but finally gravitated towards “India Shining”. Reportedly, these other slogans were discarded for various reasons: “India Dazzling” overstated the case and hence was disingenuous, “India Alive” animated concerns around life, death, sickliness and life of grinding in India, and “India Rising” was seemingly anachronistic for it invited attention to the years immediately following independence and the struggle to find a place in the comity of nations. India Shining on the other hand seemed more appropriate for it extricated the Indian identity of the historical baggage (including that of the four decades of socialism), indexed the economic successes of the recent times and promised the inevitability of even better times; as he puts it another interview, “It projects how the economy actually is, which is different from ‘dawning’ and ‘dazzling’. It represents an in-between state for the country” (Verma 2003)

NDA splurged over Rs 150 crores in a period of three months, which merely in terms of the gargantuan sum spent easily qualifies as one of the largest ever in Indian

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<sup>310</sup> Grey Worldwide’s Delhi team had previously come up with brandlines such as “Hungry Kya” for Dominoes pizza and “Tumse Hai Zindagi” for Samsung. The collation and collusion of publicity efforts of political parties and marketing companies is significant in the ways in which the social and the political are being redefined, an issue to which I will return to in the latter part of this chapter.

history<sup>311</sup>. The campaign consisted of a slew of ads titled India Shinning in English and Bharat Uday in Hindi, and coined slogans such as “feel good factor” which immediately caught on. Comprising a series of montage shots, displaying the material prosperity putatively during the NDA regime. The narrative for instance in the Hindi version, “Bharat Uday”<sup>312</sup> runs as follows:

*The Song:*

Night has gone, now it is a new dawn  
 India has arisen, new is this shine (2)  
 Wanted the earth, got the whole sky  
 Had seen those dream, now cannot see any limitations  
 To leap ahead, roads were never easier  
 Bharat Uday

The song in male playback plays to the sequential unraveling of a collection of scenes stitched together as if in a collage displaying people in all walks of life content, happy and enjoying, conveying by extension economic prosperity, which is undergird by the superimposed and running textual narrative. The text is as follows;

*The Text:*

Home loans have gone down  
 Easy tax policy  
 Growth in foreign exchange  
 Highway increase at four km every day  
 Crop insurance for farmers, low tax on credit card and loan  
 Free primary education  
 LIC retirement pension policy  
 GIC Health insurance policy for everyone  
 Telecom’s expanding spread  
 Stable prices  
 Easing of stock market rules  
 Bharat Uday

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<sup>311</sup> To give a sense of this gargantuan sum, it makes sense to give a comparative ad spend of some of the largest corporations in India: HLL spends around Rs. 150 crores annually on brands like sunsilk, close-up, Rin, Lux and lifebuoy taken together; the cola companies similarly spend around Rs. 100 crores (Team BE 2004).

<sup>312</sup> The correct translation should be “India Rising”, but as Suthan mentions they gravitated towards “India Shinning”, expressly rejected India Rising.

The liberal use of colors signifying personal and social resplendence straddling across the urban and rural India all convey accounts of the incumbent government. The English version titled India Shinning has a female playback humming, not intonate, the same song, as other presumed achievements of the NDA government are textually announced against the background of similarly joyous people in different sectors of life. The linguistic split- English and Hindi versions- exhibits of course the deft means of addressing the social split straddling the urban- rural, literate- illiterate, English speaking –Hindi speaking populace<sup>313</sup>. The posters and cinematic ads in the very excessive nature of the fantasy instantiate the conditions of their unraveling and failure. Deceiving oneself with the assumptions that excessive display will support and anchor the fantasy projected, the very excess will in the final analysis return to haunt the incumbent coalition as we shall see.

In a moment of narcissistic glory as the campaign gained general kudos and professional envy for the ad maker Pratap Suthan, he reflected on the reasons for the choices he made (note of course the celerity with which the shift from government’s brief to the self aggrandizing claims of ownership to ultimate attribution of failure to the government and its brief): “I *choose* ‘India Shining’ because there’s a glow on everyone’s face and a sense of pride and well-being” (Suhasini, 2004).

The tagline India shinning became the master signifier anchoring the social fantasy of the NDA coalition as well as sections of the buoyed middle classes and the corporate world. Ashutosh Khanna, quipped, “the fact that the tagline ‘India Shining’ and ‘feel-good factor’ have become a part of the everyday parlance indicates how big and

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<sup>313</sup> See Rajagopal (2001: 151-211) on the differential mode of address to the split public in India (especially north India).

successful the campaign has become. While internally, we knew that we had something good and were confident that the ads would work, this kind of success has come to us as a pleasant surprise”(Subramaniam, 2004). Nivrik Singh, Grey Worldwide, in the moment of glory (of course before the election results) remembers the grand launch of the ad during the India-Australia one-day cricket match and cited the instance of a man holding up the India Shining ad as Indian cricket team was winning as the evidence of the pace with which the slogan caught on. “It shows the tagline caught on immediately” and announced “this has been the mother of all campaigns” (Subramaniam, 2004). The cause of its potency and efficacy resided, it was contended, in its seeming catholicity or inclusiveness, or so it seemed during the time to many. Adman Atul Phadnis was recorded saying, “If we analyze the India shining campaign, it is very clear that the target group was very, very broad. It was clearly targeted at anybody and everybody across all states and all strata. Airtime was bought not only on Doordarshan and its regional *kendras* but also on mass private entertainment channels such as discovery and National Geographic” (Subramaniam 2004). In another interview Nivrik Singh repeats Phadnis’ assessment, “The phrase has become a part of the lexicon, so much so that even front-page stories in newspaper in the past month have used it, whether it’s to describe the India cricket team or the economy” (Suhasini, 2004)<sup>314</sup>. The State Bank of India (one of the oldest nationalized banks in India) for instance used the following tagline, “India is Shinning! So is State Bank Group!!” The ad was conceived by Concept advertising, whose creative head Sanjay Suri admitted not to copying but to an ambient sense of India Shining and his plugging into it. To quote, “It’s not unique, but there’s no question of copying another ad either. We’ve just picked on ‘India Shining’ because it’s topical and

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<sup>314</sup> Suhasini notes at least five ads in Jan 2004 picking up on the India Shinning tag line.

works” (Suhasini 2004). Established figures from the ad world such as R. Balakrishnan, Santosh Desai and Kiran Khallap concurred. Balakrishnan quipped, “It’s a fantastic campaign for BJP and it doesn’t matter what image or text they have used, the ad’s picked up” (Suhasini 2004). Desai, on the other hand, merely saw it as government’s publicity sharing its achievements with the citizenry and found nothing insidious about it. And some like Rahul da Cunha, who was not moved by the ad itself nevertheless still choose to use it for its notorious Amul hoardings campaign, calling it ‘India Dining’. “It does not tell me anything”, he says, “the TVC’s too boring and we’ve all the montage shots of happy people before. We’re going through bad times and we need a message that goes deep into our hearts. But these images just don’t move you” (Suhasini 2004). Mohammed Khan, the veteran ad maker and chairman of Enterprise Nexus thought, “... I thought ‘India Shining’ campaign did not look like a normal government campaigns and touched a chord” (Suhasini 2004). Maharashtra although ruled by the opposition, the Congress party followed suit with a “Maharashtra leads” campaign, and the Shipping Corporation of India’s spin-off read, “And now India’s shine finds its reflection on water!” (Suhasini 2004)

Notwithstanding the concurrence of this thought of inclusiveness, some within the establishment itself were not satisfied, a group that included the Indian prime-minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, himself. Discerning an urban and pro-business bias in the India Shining campaign he insisted on a Hindi version keeping the rural addressee in mind. The result was another campaign run, specially tuned in for the elections and as the official election campaign of the party, alongside the India Shining and Bharat Uday ads called “Irada Naye Bharat Ka” (translatable as “Determination of the New India”) first in the



regional and Hindi TV channels and newspaper and subsequently in the national and English channels as well. Vajpayee's personal investment in the campaign can be gauged from the fact that he is shown orating a poem in the ad. Ajay Singh, an IIT graduate, who was mobilized to work on election campaign, noted Vajpayee's interest thus, "Atalji was clear that he did not want us to talk of the stock-market or technology. He wanted us to focus on rural roads, poverty and agrarian scheme. He changed several lines that he had recorded on the need to overcome poverty" (Naqvi 2004). The conceptualization of the ads tellingly also shifted from the headquarters of the India Shining campaign, ad agency Grey Worldwide to Pramod Mahajan's residence. The poem in the ad recited by Vajpayee goes as follows (see Pic. XIII):

Had a dream from long ago, which is now in every heart  
 To build a new India which is in everyone's mind now  
 A new India,  
 Which believes in herself  
 Which has a shine in her eyes  
 A new joy  
 Where every religion and community is respected  
 Has a goal that everyone can submit oneself to  
 A new pride that is each and everyone  
 Determination of the New India<sup>315</sup>

True to his expressed intent, predominantly the scenes are from rural India, and shift the focus away from urban, cosmopolitan India. Different scenes showed green

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<sup>315</sup> The Hindi version goes like this:

Swapna dekha tha kabhi, ke aaj har dhadkan mein hai  
 Ek naya Bharat banane ka irada hur man mein hai  
 Ek naya Bharat  
 ke jisme ek naya vishwas ho,  
 jiski aankhon mein chamak ho  
 Ek naya ullas ho  
 Ho jahan sammaan hur ek dharma hur ek jati ka  
 Kar samarpit jise, who laksh jiske pas ho  
 Ek naya abhiman jo jan jan mein ho

farmland with purposefully laboring peasant on tractors, diligently studying teenage girl in school dress, old mother hugging her son, and finally a factory worker. The ad ends with Vajpayee standing next to the national flag with his right hand raised in a flourish, hailing the citizenry to his clarion call. The ad was appropriately understated compared to the India shinning campaign.



Pic XIII: Irada Ek Naye Bharat Ka (Determination for a New India) (courtesy BJP)



Pic XIV: India Shining (courtesy Grey Worldwide)



Pic XV: India Shinning (courtesy Grey Worldwide)

### **Reception of the ads**

The initial purchase of the campaign bamboozled the other political parties who would till the election had difficulty responding to its ideological and fantastic efficacy;

in a way most political parties did not know how to respond. Congress returned with a toned down, nowhere as flamboyant, assertive and extravagant, almost somewhat limp “aam admi”<sup>316</sup> campaign. Clearly it was required to respond, and it recognized the need more to deflect the focus from the set of issues foregrounded by the Indian shinning campaign. That it had ruled the country for nearly four decades and the ways in which the retroactive readings of its period of rule, especially the socialist agenda, was conveniently read as a colossal mistake during the post reform, always bore down on its shoulders as a burden. In hindsight, one could argue as many did, openly and on print and electronic media, the “aam admi” campaign was a masterstroke in understatement and as such managed the twin objective of not allowing the public attention to settle on its decades of misrule and took the wind out of the NDA sail; I will return to the ad campaign in the following pages.

The response of other political denominations were no less lame or ludicrous, and almost a non-response. Consider the Samajwadi Party manifesto for instance. Released by the party president Mulayam Singh Yadav, it declared, India will be renamed Bharat. Blaming the British for the mischief of misnaming it sought to bring a constitutional amendment to redress the immense infraction and end the remains of the colonial vestige. “Due to some unknown circumstances after independence, the makers of the Constitution gave prominence to the word “India”, starting theory work with the mention of ‘India that is Bharat’. That was a mistake that had to be corrected...”<sup>317</sup>, he claimed. It is difficult to fathom the sensibilities behind the address, as though it was merely responding to the agenda already framed by the NDA, that of certain claims around nativism. That similar

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<sup>316</sup> Translated as “common man”.

<sup>317</sup> The Hindu, 9 April, 2004.

campaigns on naming or name changing, politically charged and some utterly vacuous, had seen Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore transmute into Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and Bengaluru respectively seems to be the only logical rationale, but as a response to NDA campaign utterly inadequate. More assertively it claimed the change in name was “a step to protect the identity of the country and take suitable economic and political measures to end the cultural degeneration being encouraged by the western consumerist lifestyle”(ibid.). Recuperating a version of swadeshi that was fast losing any bite with the middle classes (which in any case it has to be said was not squarely the political constituency it was addressing its campaign to), it claimed to “ban the import of luxury goods, besides discouraging their production in the country as long as the basic needs of the masses were not fulfilled”. Further, it claimed to limit the “personal expenditure, which would cover everyone including politicians, industrialists and bureaucrats. TV programs encouraging consumerism and cultural degeneration would be banned” as well<sup>318</sup>.

Vocal opposition to the campaign was registered from many quarters, amongst who were the gandhians as well. The veteran Gandhian Siddharaj Dhadda while conceding the NDA government’s legal rights to showcase its achievements challenged the moral authority to do so. “Mr. Vajpayee is only technically correct when he asserts that everything is being done according to the law. Morally he is wrong in spending taxpayers hard earned money in such advertisements. It is criminal misuse of money”<sup>319</sup>.

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<sup>318</sup> The other items on the manifesto invoked the betterment of dalits and backward classes sound-bites, exhibited its secular credentials by refusing intrusion in the Muslim personal law and claiming to bring the perpetrator of Babri masjid demolition and the 1984 anti Sikh riots to justice, brushed aside Sonia Gandhi and her foreign origin issue aside; the focus clearly nonetheless was on one-upmanship qua the India shining campaign using the swadeshi card.

<sup>319</sup> Gandhian questions India Shining ad, *The Hindu*, Feb 12, 2004.

Downplaying the tall claims of the government as nothing extraordinary, “for they are expected to execute these things while in power. If progress is there, one can see it. There is no need to spend crores of rupees to highlight it” (ibid.).

### **Congress’ retaliation:**

Congress found itself in such doldrums that commentators, many in the media, speculated the realization of Gandhi’s prophecy of its demise. Consider this article, titled “Gandhi’s Prophecy: Will the party wither away?” in a leading English biweekly which starts with the following lines, “Even before the battle for Lok Sabha 2004 is joined, the headquarters at 24, Akbar Road wears a palpable air of defeat. Many congressmen reckon that never in its 119-year history has the party campaign been so lackluster. It is as if it’s merely going through the motions; there’s no discernible strategy, no cogent agenda, no credible voice. There is no message and hence the lack of inspired messengers does not come as a surprise” (Kang 2004). Seasoned academics concurred. Mushirul Hasan, historian in Jamia Milia Islamia University remarked about Congress, “there is a perceived inability to capture power... it is not seen as a winning party” (Kang 2004). The BJP in its re-incarnated form as it strove to dispense with and distance itself from the “riot and election model”, it simultaneously many noted had substituted Congress as the driver of reforms and development agenda, a platform that originally belonged to the latter. Many suggested that the party needed to recast its traditional agenda without abandoning it; consider the economist Y.K Alagh comments, “India Shining is ‘Mera Bharat Mahan’ recast. The message of fast growth and change, of modern processes and technology linking up with weaker sections is what Rajiv (Gandhi) first spoke of. But

Congress can't reclaim his vision just by chanting old mantras"<sup>320</sup>. Some argued that Congress has abandoned its established platform, compelled as it was by the ways in which the political space had been transformed by BJP and its politics: "The BJP has junked the four basic principles of non-alignment, secularism, socialism and democracy, but there's been certain level of complicity by the Congress in that jettisoning. Its faint-hearted calculus is neither principled nor pragmatic"<sup>321</sup> Further, Congress had failed to derive much mileage from innumerable scams during the NDA period even as it kept hoisting the Gujarat riots, which putatively had some purchase with the minorities and the secularists. Many augured the elections to be the make or break event for the party, and particularly its leader Sonia Gandhi. Not everyone was as despondent about Congress though; Sunil Khilnani, the political scientist, bestowed faith in the party's sphinx-like talents: "The Congress is a survivor. In its long history, it has drawn many obituaries; somehow it remains standing. It has endured a wide range of leadership styles: that's an index of how deeply rooted in the political landscape it is" (Kang 2004). Of the very few who called the NDA's bluff was Arvind Rajagopal, who seemingly contrarily at the time (if also somewhat prophetically) assessed, "The Bharatiya Janata Party's publicity management far exaggerates its real political strength" (Rajagopal 2004), and notwithstanding the glittering success of the campaign it might not have the desired results.

The Congress Party as much as the other parties conceded, howsoever grudgingly, the success of the India Shinning campaign. Others confessed more candidly. "BJP has been elbowing us out. We needed to get back quickly, and hence decided to go in for an all-round publicity onslaught," said Jairam Ramesh, Congress Economic Cell adviser and

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<sup>320</sup> Y.K. Alagh, cited in Words of Advice, *Outlook Magazine*, March 15, 2004.

<sup>321</sup> Harsh Mander, a noted social activist, cited in Words of Advice, *Outlook Magazine*, March 15, 2004.

AICC member (Hector 2004)<sup>322</sup>. They admitted as did the professionals in the advertising industry that the campaign hit the home run. "India Shining has truly been the most high-profile and high-salience campaign. Political parties will have to come up with some smart ideas to counter this," remarked Mr Sandip Tarkas, President, MPG India (part of Havas Advertising) (Subramaniam 2004). Congress' response was belated for it took a long time to decide on the ad agency for its campaign. When it did respond, it was compelled to do so on the turf already framed by the India Shinning blitz. Allocation of funds was limited for its campaign<sup>323</sup> and so was the ambition. Pramod Mahajan found Congress' inability to raise funds notwithstanding ruling states such as Maharashtra, Karnataka, Delhi and Punjab most perplexing, and blaming it on the general disarray in the party, speculated near revolt from the state units of the party: "I don't know how that party (the Congress Party) works but I can't understand how someone with government in Maharashtra can be broke. Perhaps their problem is that the states don't really want to raise funds for the central leadership" (Naqvi 2004)<sup>324</sup>. Another BJP general secretary

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<sup>322</sup> In fact the confusion and low morale of the congress rank and file can be gauged from the fact that rumors were flying about Ramesh being a BJP mole in the party; Ramesh's close association with many BJP high profile leaders and the fact that he came close to abandoning Congress in frustration and joining the arch-rival BJP was rumored in the political circles.

<sup>323</sup> An early estimate measure it at Rs. 65 lakhs to NDA's Rs 65 Crore, a gargantuan difference of 1 to 10. In huge measure the problem laid in its inability, unlike the BJP to raise funds from corporate India who as much as others saw the NDA coalition returning to power. As Kang reported on Congress, "The squeeze is being put on the party CMs to generate funds; prospective candidates have been told they had better foot their own bills. To the BJP's 20 helicopters, the Congress had booked only seven last fortnight" (Kang, 2004). These respective figure after the elections would rise respectively to 20 crores (for Congress) and 150 crores for NDA.

<sup>324</sup> Within BJP on the other hand the mood was buoyant and state BJP governments sharing their largess. Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi of BJP for instance was quoted remarking, "Seven of our state governments such as those in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan will also facilitate the campaign in their states and neighboring areas" (Naqvi, 2004). BJP had devised a novel means of generating funds. Each sitting MP was given banners and posters, suggestive of the centralized production and circulation of signs and images; but they were expected to raise their own campaign funds for which they were given coupons worth anywhere between Rs 1000 to Rs.10,000 which they had to 'sell' to the local party loyalists and other potential financiers who in



explaining the rule of thumb of corporate funding quipped, “It’s quite simple really. If a corporate house is giving Rs. 10 crore to us, it will throw Rs. 2 crore at the Congress. That’s how it is done” (Naqvi 2004).

One of the first things Congress changed was its perennial election slogan: from “Congress ka Haath, Garib ke saath” to “Congress ka Haath, Aam Aadmi ke Saath”<sup>325</sup>. Not necessarily predicted, but was understandable; in a visual economy axiomatically defined by the continual need to re-invent one’s image, the exercise was not entirely radical. Several rationales were offered. One was the lessons learnt from the debacle in assembly elections in late 2003 in Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Rajasthan where the persistence with idiom of ‘garibi’ (or poverty) it was concluded, was construed by the rural and tribal populace as patronizing and pessimistic. Further, given the actual and perceived move of the urban and semi-urban middle classes to BJP, the need for interpellating this traditional constituency was urgently felt. The invocation of ‘garibi’ had an air of socialist past, which it was striving to drift past. Congress ideologue Devendra Dwiwedi noted for instance, the shift was a “response to the changes that have taken place in the last 30 years or so. From 1950s to 1970’s, ‘poverty was a central aspect of the national situation and removal of poverty was the central theme. But the next two decades have seen a great deal of development and growth, and the Congress main theme is ‘growth with equity’ (Chatterjee 2004). Jairam Reddy was more assertive and claimed the decision to focus on “aam aadmi” was spontaneous: “We were discussing the India

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return expected to paid in kind in due course; notes a party MP, “These coupons will be like an iou (“I owe you”) that the donor can hope to later encash in kind” (Naqvi 2004).

<sup>325</sup> Translation is the following: “Congress ka Haath, Garib ke saath” – “Congress’ hand with the poor”; “Congress ka Haath, Aam Aadmi ke Saath” – “Congress’ hand with common man”. Congress official symbol is the forward facing palm of a hand.

Shining campaign and asked- Does it shine for the man in Laxmibai Nagar? Aakhir aam aadmi ko kya mila hain? That's how it came about" (Chatterjee 2004)<sup>326</sup>.

The Congress party eventually hired Leo Burnett (and its subsidiary Orchard) and a public relations firm, Perfect Relations headed by Dilip Cherian<sup>327</sup> to configure its media strategy and for its "aam aadmi" campaign. Its ad retort nevertheless took quite long to come by, and by early march 2004 when it did reply, the Election Code of Conduct had set in, which effectively required all political parties to take their electronic ads off air, and thus so far as the publicity war went it had to entirely rely on the print media. Nonetheless for a period of around two weeks when the electronic ad was on air it almost stealthily introduced the recalcitrant signifier articulating the oppositional discourse within the public sphere. It was surreptitious in more ways than one; initially it appeared without disclosing the source of origin or the political party that caused it<sup>328</sup>. Only after the intervention of the election commission it decided to put its name to the ads it was sponsoring and producing. The Commission as was its official mandate first approached the various publications and media houses carrying these print ads. The section 127A of Representation of the People Act, 1951 requires that no person can print election relation publicity material "unless a declaration as to the identity of the publisher

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<sup>326</sup> "Aam admi" translates into "common man"; "aakhir aam admi ko kya mila hain" can be translated as "what did the common man get?"

<sup>327</sup> Cherian has had a long history with the Congress party and particularly Rajiv Gandhi; Gandhi was one of the earliest to have grasped the potential of communication and image building and the use of media technologies and publicity agencies, both Public Relations as well as advertising firms for electoral and political ends in mid-1980's and had put them to service since his arrival on the political scene in 1984.

<sup>328</sup> The problem of surrogate political ads was rife during this period compelling the Election Commission to act against it as well as getting the Supreme Court mired in it. The refusal to be identified as the authors of the ad initiative is interesting: in a sense the essence was to insert within the Indian social the contrarian discourse without being identified as the site of its origin (at the least till being assured of the consequences of such identification).

thereof, signed by him and attested by two persons to whom he is personally known, is delivered by him to the printer in duplicate”. Further the law required that within a reasonable time after the printing of the publicity material at least one copy of the declaration is sent by the printer, together with one copy of the document to the Election Commission<sup>329</sup>. In their response to the Commission, four newspapers claimed they are contracted by the media agencies and not political parties. In their missive to the newspapers, the Commission also demanded the disclosure of the revenue amount as well as to append it to the election expenditure of the political denominations<sup>330</sup>.

In the face of the NDA India Shining campaign with the budget totaling nearly 150 crores, Congress mobilized a comparatively miniscule Rs. 20 crores. It also followed a different tack: instead of focusing on one major national campaign it sought to shift the locus to regions, used vernacular language and targeted the segments putatively not addressed by the India Shinning Campaign: women, unemployed youths, small farmers, investors, rural and semi-rural India. From March 2 to May 10, for a period of little over three months, 3000 insertions appeared in press with an average of 70 per day, of which 80% was in the regional media. The ads were conceived and scripted in Hindi and

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<sup>329</sup> Jha (2004). The election law requires that the formal affidavit approved by the Commission has to be signed by the publisher at the time of their request to the newspaper, which then subsequently has to be submitted to the Commission.

<sup>330</sup> The disclosure of publisher issue was not a minor one: the matter reached the Supreme Court as the Election Commission (EC) unable to weed out the surrogate ad infestation (where the political parties concealed themselves behind the private media agencies, instead of coming out in open) banned political ads in the electronic media. The media warfare by proxy had reached a frenzy and was tiresome as many pundits had noted. In response to a petition against the EC banning airing of political ads, Supreme Court asked on what grounds could the right to information be denied to the citizenry. In his reply, Venugopal, the counsel for EC remarked that the task of monitoring political ads is a gigantic task. Summing up his compelling argument, he noted, “There are about 53 private satellite channels and as many channels telecasting general programmes. There are about 33,000 cable operators and 10 major multi-services cable operators. In addition, there are six national political parties, 45 recognised state parties and 702 registered unrecognised parties”. The Supreme Court confronted with a persuasive claim, enjoined the EC to “fine tune” its proposal. Times of India, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

regional languages, actors and models specific to the region were mobilized, topical concerns indexing government failure- such as the Gujrat carnage, the UTI scam, the unemployment figures or the farmers' suicides- aired. Leo Burnett carried out two wave of researches, one at the time it won the account and second at the very end of the campaign; these researches both qualitative and quantitative in nature conveyed to it the feeling of marginalization people in regional and rural areas were experiencing (Razdan, 2004). That aside the Congress strove to reach out to the rural population even beyond the traditional high media. "I have noticed the Congress scoring with a lot of door-to-door activity, wall paintings etc, reaching out to groups such as sarpanch, village teachers, postmen", notes Ashish Bhasin, director IMAG Lintas (cited in Team BE, 2004: 2).

While initially with ads with color, the Congress campaign soon resorted to black and white template. Black and white template for an advertising image immediately marked them as anomalous and demanded attention. Very nearly simulating the realist *mise en sens* of documentary aesthetics and its ethos of framing truth, it launched the counter-discourse to the compelling social fantasy engendered and sustained by the India Shinning campaign. The drab, dull and *noire* imagery (or "*politique noire*" in Pinney's felicitous imagery (Pinney 2005)) strove to expose the underbelly of the economy, and selective and exclusionary character of the reforms and counterposing it to the fantastical *trance*, if no less convincing, induced by the resplendent colors and aspirational narrative of the India Shinning ads. Recognizing the fecund efficacy of images and signs in an increasingly mediatized social, as a riposte, it literally summoned the antonymous signifiers and vocabulary to stand in for any substantive and effective political discourse:

India whining for India shinning, fool-good for feel-good and so on. Drowned, as it seemed during the time, in the fantastical success of the NDA campaign, disheartened, bereft of vitality, lacking conviction, the Congress campaign was shooting in the dark and hoping will hit some target. The opinion polls- neutral, oppositional as well as its own- one way or the other had written it off. As an adman interacting with the senior Congress leadership noted, "The only thing they want to do now is take some sheen off the India Shining or Bharat Uday campaign." (Subrahmaniam 2004). Many seasoned campaigners for sure were combative<sup>331</sup>, but their words and demeanor indexed listlessness, loss of direction and the unbearable lightness of their political discourse.

The jostling for reclaiming credit for coining the slogan "Aam aadmi to kya mila" began with earnestness following the triumphant election results for Congress, which was ironic given its near surreptitious dissemination within the Indian social initially, with none seemingly ready to be held accountable for it. The injunction from the Election Commission had compelled the disclosure of source. Jairam Ramesh a key player in the campaign hardly ever spoke of it before the results, nor did the agency Leo Burnett publically disclose its high profile political client. Arvind Sharma, the CEO and Chairman of Leo Burnett declared to a national newspaper as his brainchild that he serendipitously hit upon while traveling to Pune for another client meeting. Some others, without directly contradicting Sharma, located in Sonia Gandhi, the source and

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<sup>331</sup> Kamal Nath, long time Congress MP and cabinet minister when asked about the charismatic BJP campaigners retorted, "The BJP leaders may be more visible because they control the official electronic media, but Congress leaders are drawing far bigger crowds. We are connecting with the people while the BJP's top guns are connected to TV cameras". On why Congress campaign being less visible: "the BJP has been running their smoke and mirrors show on the public exchequer thus far. It is easy to shine on someone else's money", in Outlook, Mar 22, 2004.

inspiration for the campaign. The mandate as Jayashree Sundar, executive director, Leo Burnett notes, was to represent and capture the real India: “It was Mrs Gandhi’s idea to reflect the real India consistently throughout the campaign.

### **Feel Not Good Factor: Diagnosis of why the Campaign Failed**

The NDA lost the 2004 elections to the shock and surprise of most; clearly it was an unanticipated result. While a reduction of number of seats it previously had in the Parliament was conceivable (and suggested by some), the coalition was still expected to form the 14<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha and government. The causes and factors shaping the results were many and varied, and the rhetoric- offered by many- that the ad campaigns and campaign wars determined the elections results misapprehends and overstates its significance. As a matter of fact for instance a national survey, as much as the surveys can be trusted, conducted by IMRB, only 30 odd percent of people knew about the campaign. More crucially series of concatenating factors locally and regionally specific as well as national ones, calculations of identitarian politics factoring in caste, religion, region and other affiliations pitched in to shape and determine the ultimate result. To attribute it to the India Shining campaign would be to grossly overestimate its primacy in the first place. Qualification of the efficacy of the campaign nonetheless is not its denial altogether. It surely was a moment of significance for the political processes in India and has to be recognized as such. For sure also if electoral success was the overt ambition of the ad campaign then of course it failed and did so miserably. The argument that the incumbent government, the NDA coalition, misdiagnosed the pulse of the nation in a way is too obvious to warrant explication; scholars, journalists and laymen all have considered it

with care and agitation and commented at length<sup>332</sup>. My interest in a slightly different vein is to consider how and why an event, here marked by the master-signifier, India Shining, could cut through the Indian social, and recover and reanimate the wound or the real of the social.

India shining unlike the other attempts such as the Brand India at AdAsia in Jaipur (2003) or the Incredible India campaign unleashed by the Tourism department was submitted to a political conversation. The slogan literally strove to become the master signifier pretending to suture the gaps in the symbolic field, erase the existing contradictions but in the process became the real of the symbolic. Master signifiers require performativity for acquiring hegemonic presence, and yet in this case, the more the master signifier was mobilized and performed, the more it undermined itself. Dividing the Indian social almost in half, the slogan animated the real of Indian social. The real of the social is conceived here not in terms of a primordial stuff eluding symbolization, but as real of the symbolic and becoming the very cause of its (symbolic's) movement.

Sam Balsara, Madison advertising, following the election failure and with the benefits of hindsight noted, "In advertising, we know that very good campaign kills a bad product faster! The India Shining campaign was not based on reality: just because the stock exchange index went up and the country's forex reserves went up, the plight of common man did not improve-it became worse. He or she got upset, wondering what are these guys talking about" (cited in Team BE, 2004). In similar vein, Adrian Mendonza, creative director Rediffusion concludes, "People are not stupid, and one cannot go on

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<sup>332</sup> For a remarkably lucid and brilliant postmortem of 2004 election and the loss of NDA coalition see, Rangarajan 2005.

about India Shinning and expect them to lap it up, if it is not manifest in their lives”  
(cited in Team BE, 2004).

Sharma, who handled the Aam aadmi campaign recognized the role it played: as he says, it literally poked holes in the India Shinning campaign. “India Shining was a brilliant campaign till the time our campaign happened. They played on the front foot but we spotted the chinks and got them at the right spot,” recalls Sharma (Banerjee et. al., *ibid*). Santosh Desai, who as I had noted earlier liked the India shining campaign when it began till the Congress responded with its own. Not that Congress’ campaign was brilliant by any stretch; definitely not so in aesthetic or narrative. It managed nonetheless to put a finger on the limitations of the campaign<sup>333</sup>.

Photographic lure, and the “disturbance it caused in the epistemic field” (Barthes: 1991: 12)<sup>334</sup> rested with its strength of indexicality, inaugurating in the same gesture newer conditions of visibility, not least the claims to realism it anchored, sustained and propagated. Critics too for a while now have exposed the chimerical quality of the realist ruse and addressed the semeiotic-textual character of photographs. Barthes nonetheless concurring with the semeiotic-textualist nature of the photographic sign refuses to entirely submit it to the trace of differance. In “punctum” as a “floating wound”

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<sup>333</sup> Interview with Santosh Desai, January 17, 2005.

<sup>334</sup> Of course Barthes has also famously noted the domestication of this disturbance which causes no reverberations in thought any more, which precisely is the object of his meditation in the text. Alain Badiou (2006), the French philosopher, speculating on the economy of image circulation in politics and in times of war remarked on their propagandist nature. Classifying these into three categories: one, which is available to both sides of the warring factions and therefore used by both; second category of photographic images are those available to one side and exploited by it for its point of view and thirdly the ones that fall through the crack and not available to any side in particular and are the most effective and closest to conveying the truth of the real, as opposed to those that fall in the first two categories. But Badiou also notes that on occasions images falling in the first two categories can nonetheless surprise us, and uncannily, inspite of the express purpose of the users or the propagandist, communicate the true. The images under the “aam admi ko kya mila” campaign arguably all under that category.



hypnotically exhorting his attention, he identifies something of the trace of the real that refuses subsumption in the logic of equivalence that metonymic movement of signifiers accomplish in constituting a textual surface<sup>335</sup>. Images circulated under the sign India Shining, in other words, communicated, by default or even by negation, something of the real of the Indian social. If the social fantasy and its ideological efficacy consists in the distance from and containment of the traumatic real as a mode of its resolution, erroneous signifiers in inviting near metaphoric associations with this real can severely undermine the social fantasy, and India Shining campaign proffers a rather apposite instance of that failure of fantasy.

In other words, images with propagandist slant, which by definition are ideological re-presentations can and do in fact, speak the real. Consider one of the images of campaign for instance. This image incisively captures the predicament of the social's relation to the state apparatus in post-colonial India. Young men lined up in a queue at employment exchange with the peon slumbering on his chair outside the closed office door: the image could not have been more presciently and perceptively conceived and executed. The imagery of queues was for long the very iconic sign of the socialist command economy of scarcity and delayed delivery of goods and services; the nation forever suspended in unending lines and long waits. Queues were ubiquitous, formed anywhere and everywhere and were synonymous not only with resource crunch but mismanagement, corruption and the clientalist relation of the social to the state apparatus.

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<sup>335</sup> It is here and on this very premise I note my dissonance with R. Srivatsan's otherwise very fascinating reading of Barthes' and of the photographic culture in India. Srivatsan convinced by the textualist-semiotic tradition of thought ultimately finds "punctum" (and its allegiance to Lacanian notions of the real) untenable. In invoking the Bartheisan "punctum" I align it the Lacanian notion of the real, and here to the ways in which real of the social is foregrounded by dialectical articulation of India Shining and Aam Aadmi Ad campaigns; see Srivatsan (2000).

The image eloquently conveys the despondency of the unemployed youth, the irresponsiveness of the state not only in the figure of the slumbering peon but also in the exclusion signified by the grilled window. The latter aside from indicating exclusion suggests the inside, the domain of the bureaucratic official as that of secrecy and consequence, inner sanctum of the official space, participation within which is severely limited. The figure of the master it invokes nonetheless is not that of the ideal father or the revered master, the one who obeys and upholds the law<sup>336</sup>. Following four decades of postcolonial rule, the populace knew, including those unemployed youths that the father enjoyed and was fundamentally obscene (also figured in the irresponsible jouissance of the sleeping peon). While the state apparatus and its occupants never ceased to speak the language of idealism and invoke the proceduralism of the officialese as its support, the populace was discerning. In a state of generalized perversion it knew the Other especially the master enjoyed. This foreknowledge adds poignancy to the experience of exclusion for most and that of enjoyment for few. What is more remarkable is the irony of the situation for the ad was sponsored by a political party, i.e., the Congress party that presided over the institutionalization of this very regime of state apparatus and was singularly responsible for its degenerescence especially through the 1970's as countless commentators have observed<sup>337</sup>; the deftness of campaign nonetheless rested precisely in the very elision of that equation, and deflect attention from its own participation in the production of this regime which it now was attributing the NDA government responsibility for.

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<sup>336</sup> For commentaries on the figure of the ideal and obscene master and father, see Zizek (1992: 124-165).

<sup>337</sup> See Kaviraj (1986) for instance.

The more the government strove to cork the gap, the more it widened. Every data, every figure-statistical or otherwise- every argument had its obverse. The more it spoke, the more it misspoke or by definition it was misspeaking; on occasions, the most efficient mode of evading the traumatic real is not to contain, domesticate or paper over it through speech and symbolization, but to avoid or disengage. In trying to give a “full” account, to furnish symbolization without fissures it faltered not because it spoke less or did not make an effort, but because it spoke too much, exerted too long. Social fantasy’s efficiency lies in not appearing as such, that is as fantasy. When Lacan invokes metonymy as the figure for the movement of cascading signifiers the erroneous assumption is to grasp this sliding to consist of only the synonymous signifiers; the metonymic chain he has in mind is one that animates more a differential network which by definition is constituted by the synonyms as well as the antonyms. Any signifier when invoked potentially mobilizes the same and the opposite for sustaining its meaning. The predicament Indian Shinning found itself in was its location within a political field where not only did the opposition refuse to let go of the contrary and oppositional signifiers, but its very invocation assumed a proximity to the traumatic real; the citizenry could not, in other words, ‘think’ the India shinning without thinking the India not shinning<sup>338</sup>.

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<sup>338</sup> The labor of course is to suggest a certain automatism inhering meaning making process through the metonymic and metaphoric movements of signifiers and to do so without losing track of the object cause of such movement; lacanian notion of the real of the symbolic elucidates such a movement: in the very movement of an articulation the symbolization hits upon or produces the traumatic real; the real in this case was always already there, but only so after the fact of its symbolization or the symbolization retroactively produces the traumatic real which then was always already there as the object cause. The wolf man example in Freud is illustrative. In other words, before its symbolization in and through the India shinning slogan and narrative, the traumatic real was non-existent (or avoided/evaded); but that symbolization ended up producing the India not-shinning as the traumatic real (poverty, immiseration, class difference, violence etc.)

Prathap Suthan, the poster boy of the campaign following the election loss, coyly noted, “Well, for one, the campaign was not political. The sentiment of India Shining still holds, as the caliber of India to become a superpower still doesn’t diminish. Now whether that’s under the Congress Party or BJP-led NDA, it doesn’t matter” (cited in Team BE, 2004). The campaign in its conceptualization and execution found many takers with the ad industry even after the NDA defeat. R. Balakrishnan, national creative director, Lowe for instance comments, “The BJP campaign was fantastic. Its intentions were not elitist at all, it’s just that the feel-good factor did not extend to everyone even though at that point all the statistics went in its favor” (cited in Team BE, 2004).

### **Conclusion: Branding and the Regime of Political Simulacra?**

The language of advertising and marketing jostled with established jargon of politics. Branding practices, which concern the image and packaging, sound-bytes and aesthetic feel definitively skewed the political field. “Positioning, segmentation, psychographics, brand identity, unaided recall, target rollout...no, this is no backroom brainstorm for a new detergent launch from Hindustan lever. It is Election 2004”, writes Gauri Bhatia and quotes a senior marketing professional, “The way these political parties are operating, they would put any MNC to shame” (Bhatia 2004). Or consider Kunal Lalani, President of the Guild, “Political parties have become media savvy, making these accounts similar to any other corporate brands. Not only in the process of pitching and the award of the work more organized, the media plans and the objectives are well defined. The electronic media is expected to be used in a major way in these elections. The budgets are also substantial” (Verma 2003). Election 2004 brought to India in full

force the implication of a late capitalist economy with an emerging media regime for the political domain. While the political was always about images and their reputation, ideology and sloganeering, the deepening concoction of the master signifiers of consumption and entertainment, the mediatization of the social and the aesthetics of the surface or appearances have striven to evacuate the political field of its real. To quote J M Lyngdoh, “there ain’t any real issues in the elections anymore. It’s all being displaced by market forces. The elections system has been reduced to a farce where political parties are asking you choose between coke or pepsi” (quoted in Das and Naqvi 2004)<sup>339</sup>.

In lieu of conversation and debates on substantive issues, what are offered are cryptic signs and sound-bytes. Scholars and commentators have lamented the loss of seriousness and gravity appropriate to the political engagement. Historian Ramachandra Guha commented, “Today no party stands for anything. No one is in politics for the implementation of ideas or policies. Politicians of the past felt deeply about solving economic or social problems. Today they only care about getting votes and retaining power. There is a dumbing down across the entire spectrum of political parties from the right to the left.” (Das and Naqvi 2004). The economy of appearances obsesses itself with the surfaces as it dispenses with the actual issues and concerns. The political is submitted not only to the logic of commodities, hence requiring branding and intervention of marketing pundits, but these commodities and images of the political are submitted to hyper-libidinal economy of entertainment, or what N Ram, the longtime editor of *The Hindu* called the “tabloidization of media” and reduction of politics to spectacle (Das and Naqvi 2004). The marketing executives recognized the entanglement and read the signs

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<sup>339</sup> J M Lyngdoh was the 12<sup>th</sup> Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) from 2001-4, and his tenure ended couple of months before the 14<sup>th</sup> general election.

clearly. The Times of India, the national daily, reported Vijay Mallya instructed his party's<sup>340</sup> advertising agency Grey Worldwide, to get "Maximum bang for my buck", and continued, "I'm pushing for this election campaign like a marketing blitz". For him canvassing for his party was no different from selling his products. "When I am trying to sell a product for UB, I'm trying to create an intent to purchase. Similarly, through my election campaign I'm creating awareness about my party. It's up to the customer or voter to eventually budge to my prompting" (Hector 2004). Needless to say, when a BJP spokesperson stated, "we have positioned our leaders according to their usps" (Bhatia 2004), we shouldn't be entirely surprised; the currency given to words such as 'position' and usps (unique selling propositions) was not simply a matter of one sector of social life borrowing loan-words for its own use. Instead it eloquently registered the ways in which these two sectors of social were increasingly intertwined, spoke the same language, addressed their constituency in similar ways. In other words, so far as the political parties, their corporate alliances and media experts were concerned, the conflation of voter-citizen and consumer was complete.

In its tactics the parties replicated the example of the market firms. The constituencies were classified into safe seats, close-contest seats and difficult seats and resources apportioned accordingly, maximizing its returns. For BJP Pradip Mahajan and Arun Jaitley were in the hot seat managing the show. Mahajan relied on market research firms Resource Data Inc (RDI) and ORG-Marg to get details of castes and candidates of each constituency. Jaitley employed the services of the pollster G.V.Narasmha Rao for opinions polls on larger trends for the elections. Apart from the states where the party had

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<sup>340</sup> Mallya was supporting the NDA coalition during the elections as were very many corporate head honchos.

just won state elections few months prior to the national elections, every constituency in most of the other states were minutely researched with these questions in mind. In fact researching each and every constituency with painstaking detail was pursued in the state elections, which it was argued enabled efficient allocation of resources- financial as well as human- and was cited as a primary reason for the electoral success in these states<sup>341</sup>.

The determination of party candidates which hitherto was on the basis of local leadership's recommendations who furnished the details of the potential candidates (if also ultimately a function of final imprimatur of the central leadership's decisions), now through the market researches on the constituencies the latter – the central leadership- had its own channels for procuring information and data it considered more neutral as well as reliable in indexing the pulse of the people. The sample size for instance was a respectable 1800-2500 respondents for each and every constituency, which is remarkable. The parallels with the researches undertaken by marketing firms prior to launching a product could not have been stark<sup>342</sup>.

What this imagines and constitutes is, of course more than a simple borrowing, dislocation or temporary misuse of idioms and languages belonging to distinct realms of social life. At stake is the issue of visibility and presence, of the dominant ways of framing the social. Processes of naming and language are modes in and through which

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<sup>341</sup> For instance by the end of February (2004) it had minutest information about the make up of the constituencies for Maharashtra, Orissa, Bihar, Karnataka, Assam, Andhra and UP, which then became the basis for the categorization into safe, close or difficult seats.

<sup>342</sup> Needless to say the surveillance of media events too was attended with utmost care; tech savvy professional were mobilized and hired by most political parties with the job-description: "keep a tab on media". A member of BJP media management cell noted, "We have deployed a 30-member group which would keep an account of the various political bytes being aired by the television channels". Needless to say Congress Party returned the gesture: Congress media committee secretary Tom Vadakkan said, "We are monitoring and cataloguing each and every telecast by the media and would react if we deem fit." Times of India, 9 March, 2004

the social acquires visibility and is concurrently engaged with. Media and market's dominance axiomatically frames the populace as scopophilic viewers and enjoying consumers, enjoined in the Debordian figure is the spectacle (Debord, 1994) submitting in the process the political to the same frameworks putting it in deep tension if not evacuating it of its specificity, the dialogic, contestatory and substantive character that is its own; the corollary is the transmutation of voter-citizens to viewer-consumers.

Baudrillard diagnosed persuasively, if also manically, late capitalism as the regime of images and of images as signs. The consequence of blanketing of the social by images and signs, he argued, is the evisceration of the real, with profound implications for all the registers and dimensions of the social, not least that of the political. Scholars in their copious commentaries of his work have noted his affinity and allegiance to his predecessor and theorist of the spectacle, Guy Debord, and to an extent I would suggest misrecognized the extent of rupture his work performs apropos of Debord's thesis. The misrecognition consists in reading Baudrillard's obsessive concern with images as an extension and mere totalization of Debord's claims around the enveloping function of images. His claims, I'd argue, are more radical. The pervasive presence, spread and circulation of spectacles and images not only unhinge themselves from the real, as Debord argues and Baudrillard concurs, but that these images have literally constituted a language in and of themselves; that is to say, in a way very much akin to the differential arrangement of signifiers consisting language, and the set of constitutive and immanent relations it inaugurates and allows for the production of meaning and sense of the world, is precisely what happens to regime of images. Images, in other words, begin to speak to each other, construct themselves in relation to other images, and thereby become



signifiers in differential relation to each other and through this difference begin to constitute the sense of the world and a very imaginary sense of the world at that (dominating even the symbolic or actually linguistic forms as well). In the process, not only does it rehearse the capacity for occlusion inherent to any image (notwithstanding the photographic and cinematic ideologies of realism) but by almost becoming a linguistic form recuperate and reduplicate the singular opacity that distinguishes language from other forms of representation. Consequently then, for sure Baudrillard's regime of simulacra is more totalitarian than Debord's, but not merely because of increased prevalence of images but because these images have constituted a system of sign and language, and bring with them the opacity proper to any language. What we witness with the electoral-political branding wars in the 2004 elections, I'd argue, is an intense evacuation of the real social issues as branded images and profiles begin constituting each other in relation to each other; so for instance for India shinning and feel good as a retort we get "India whining", "India cheated" and "fool-good" as conversations around substantive social and political issues fall by the way side; image of Bharatiya nari Sushma Swaraj opposite foreign bahu Sonia Gandhi, Brand Vajpayee against competitor Sonia Gandhi; in this schema what is hoisted as the face of BJP is Sushma Swaraj as *adarsh bhartiya nari*, Vasundara Raje as *rani*, Pramod Mahajan and Arun Jaitley as smart aggressive ones (Bhatia 2004). Gauri Bhatia quotes a BJP spokesperson, "we have positioned our leaders according to their usps" (ibid.) At the same time nonetheless, the elections marked something of a failure of that schema as NDA's loss brought home not only the necessities of engaging substantive issues but also the limited purchase of Baudrillardian totalitarian rhetoric of regime of simulacra. One could plausibly read the

elections results, and as many did in retrospect, that the real can and still bites. The NDA's electoral failure nonetheless does not falsify in its entirety the Baudrillardian thesis and prognosis. In a sense it alludes to the very nature of the Indian social and the public culture therein which is not submitted to a singular logic, master signifier or regime. Rather it is animated by cacophony of images and voices, practice and social modes of being not entirely subjected to a singular narrative, master-signifier or regime or trajectory. Incredible India for it was not submitted to political conversations in the same manner in which the India Shinning campaign had to could escape the same fate<sup>343</sup>.

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<sup>343</sup> Arguably, the desire inhabiting both campaigns mirror the ambitions of the middle and upper classes in India to extricate it from the defiles and corruption that the political- institutions, practices and processes- are mired in. It fantasizes in other words a forceful inauguration of a *post*-political era where the social is submitted to and determined by the administrative rigors of a bio-political regime; and yet as Partha Chatterjee (2004) amongst others have persuasively shown the cleavages, chasms and antagonism within the Indian social refuses these ambitions. It is worth noticing however the differences on the conversations around the question of the post-political in the western and non-western (expressly Indian) contexts: if in the West ( See Mouffe 2006, Ranciere 1998 for instance), the post-political requires the smooth operation of the bio-political regime, in India the latter is mobilized for the efficacious functioning of (to resort to Chatterjee's categories) of both the civil society and the political society; in the former to ensure a harmonious unraveling of state granted rights, rule of law and governmental technologies, in the latter however precisely the failure of functioning of rule of law and state's incapacity to provide for the basic provisions of life then demands organization of sociality in and through the pragmatic, transactional invocation and usage of governmental, bio-political technologies: these then become the enduring means of engagement with the social that is left out of the proper sphere of civil society.

## Conclusion Late Capitalism and Generalized Perversion (?)

Partha Chatterjee (2011) in a recent essay has written about the reconfiguration of class coalition following liberalization in India. If the passivity of the bourgeoisie marked the controlled capitalist transition in the immediacy of postcolonial period (referred to as “passive revolution” by Kaviraj, 1998) with the Indian State at the helm of affairs directing the state policies, programs and institutional mechanisms, the aftermath of economic policy reforms in the early 1990’s has witnessed the irrevocable emergence of Indian bourgeoisie as the *uber*-dominant force in the economic, political and cultural domains. The dominance has further led to, as he argues, the re-consolidation of the “civil” and “political” society divisions, each with its distinct differential operational logics<sup>344</sup>. This dissertation in focusing on the corporate players, including advertising industry, identifies one of the moments of the processes of bourgeoisification of the Indian social and ascendancy of corporate capital (see Chatterjee 2004, 2011).

The dissertation then engages the processes of subjectivation and of formation of sociality in the post reform period in India, while invoking advertising as the primary locus of its inquiry. The question of symbolic-ideological interpellation and its efficacy has always been a vexed one. In the postcolonial socialist decades the paternalist Indian

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<sup>344</sup> Fundamental distinction between these spaces turn around the figure of law: in civil society, rule of law is paramount, whereas political society is defined by continual production of “exceptions” to law, while paradoxically through these exceptions law is consolidated in return. While it is not within the ambit of this work, we might suggestively indicate the logic that traverses the divide, thereby questioning its analytical efficacy of the binary itself: arguably both spaces fetishize and instrumentalize law (note that for Chatterjee, instrumentalization of law –in the form of exceptions- is limited to political society, an axiomatic claim we might question), and in that are perverse spaces in strict lacanian sense. It is this characteristic determining of the Indian social on the whole that is pervasive and undergirds the putative binary. Elaborations of the argument will lead us askew and hence I limit the reference here. See Vishnupad (2010).

state's reach was arguably limited to middle and upper-middle classes which relied upon it for patronage and sustenance; the larger social body on the other hand derived its resources of self-determination equally from sites and sources other than the Indian state. The state spoke loquaciously and strove to institute its version of what Appadurai and Breckenridge (1996) have called "nationalist realism", which over time dug deep and took roots<sup>345</sup>. In this context, following Rajagopal (1994), we could identify at least two stages of the national cultural formation. In the first prior to the spread of televisual form, the Indian state struggled to address and reach an indifferent public. In the phase following entry of color television and ASIAD games in Delhi in the early 1980's, and the Rajiv Gandhi government's limited economic opening up and inception of a regime of consumption hitherto unseen, a certain version of national culture begins to coagulate itself around television and other media. What is significant about this period as he points out is not only the representational register that opens up as the very iconic site of the cultural and the national cultural, but by the same token initiates the process of a certain standardization and reification (or as he puts it, "the growing distance between lived experience and public culture" 1994:1660) of what is constituted as national cultural. To quote, "With the boost given to consumption by Rajiv Gandhi's government, the increasing prominence of the media signaled an industrialization of not only material cultural goods but also 'culture' in general. The things people used, as well as the ideas and images they received, were more and more part of a single circuit of consumption, relayed by industries that for all their differences, were engaged in the business of business. The unprecedented centralization of cultural production makes understandable

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<sup>345</sup> Also see Chatterjee 2008 where he speaks of the spread of the state apparatus through the length and breadth of Indian society, rendering hitherto plausible claims of "dominance without hegemony" (Guha 1997) unsuitable for contemporary times.

the circulation of similar narratives in different fields-economy, polity, and culture, as social discourse increasingly begins to pass through a small number of interconnected channels” (Rajagopal, 1994:1660). In other words, the very extensive reach of the TV broadcasting finds its addressees for its ideological interpellation, and sutures together, howsoever alienated, reified, standardized and mediated, a national cultural formation by virtue of the very act of daily and continuous broadcasting of messages to which then the addressees are compelled to respond (be it by way of negation, resistance, negotiation, affirmation, indifference and the like), and by way of this response constitute themselves as the rightful addressee of the messages<sup>346</sup>. What the paternalist national state manages to constitute, in this second phase, is an array of master signifiers and master narratives, and is heard and seen by, if still not compelling enough to garner agitated response, from its citizen addressees<sup>347</sup>. In a sense the nationalist realist project for once found currency by virtue of agitated circulation within the public culture and ‘territorialized’ the Indian social with its own master-signifiers. It continued to speak from above and in its tutelary tone, commanding, directing and strove to convert subjects into citizens.

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<sup>346</sup> This is precisely what Lacan meant when he wrote, one way or another, the signifier always finds its addressee (See Lacan 2006b).

<sup>347</sup> An interesting point to consider will be the discontinuities across the pre- and post- television days for the nationalist realist narratives. Arguably notwithstanding the ideological and thematic continuation of postcolonial narratives, projects, plans and ambitions across the tele-visual temporal divide, perhaps it is never the repetition of the same, not least owing the structurally disparate nature of the television as a representational space. At the very least for once many more than hitherto had been the case were hearing and seeing the Indian nation-state broadcast into their homes, quasi-public and public places, and thereby were compelled to engage and respond if not to comply. Rajagopal’s perceptive insight around abstraction and standardization of the national culture following television then is indicative of that very discontinuity where the nationalist realist ideologies are recovered and re-agitated in and through the structures, circuits and representational surfaces of the tele-visual screens with its own economy, logic and economy of articulation, projection and reception all of which belies any simplistic, retroactive claims of continuities.

The 1990's on the other hand following processes associated with liberalization will joust, compete with and ultimately compel the unraveling of the paternalist master signifiers and narratives of the Indian state, and proliferate signifiers making claims to the status of the master signifier. Shifts in the economic terrain were accompanied by political transformations through the previous decade, which witnessed the demise of dominance on Congress Party, the assertion of Hindu Right and the lower caste movements in north India. Further, if monopoly over the television broadcasting especially through the 1980's provided the Indian state control over the national cultural formation, the opening up of the skies and entry of private players dislodged statist master narratives as they struggled to retain their slipping ideological dominance in public culture.

In the context of this shift –socio-cultural and politico-economic - with the attendant alterations in the structures of value and valuation, I have tried to argue that the mode of address to the public has also changed. If the paternal state irrespective of who listened to it, harangued and commanded from a self-assigned high perch, directed, sought to educate and train, spoke and disseminated a normative discourse of ethical citizenship, it was, to use Lacan's four discourses, the discourse of the master and the university. This discourse, the master's discourse, issues from a "high" place and institutes a relationship of patronage, distance, nurture and even violence (or what colloquially one refers to as "mai-baap"), and in this venture is assisted by the discourse of university, that is, the discourse of neutral knowledge offering narratives of scientific socialism, developmentalism, pursuits of science and technology and the like. This mode

of address now nonetheless, and arguably, is jostling with another mode of address that market and corporate capital has instituted following liberalization. The latter instead of intervening “from above”, makes claims to proximity and intimacy, instead of commanding, lecturing and exhorting, it coaxes, cajoles, teases and persuades by animating the subject and by speaking from a place the latter is more inclined to listen to. (The invocation of everyday social life in ads for instance where “they see themselves” and makes them “smile” is an appropriate example; use of real life images, of Hinglish, all pretend to lay claim to that proximity and intimacy I am striving to suggest). And this mode of address (analyst/perversion discourse) is supplemented no less by the discourse of the university, which still continues in the veneer of neutrality, positivistic empiricism: in other words these discourses constitute an essential part of the regime of consumption (in the chapters on Dabur and insurance, the discourse of health Dabur proposes as well as subjects of risk insurance industry proposes, enjoyment or *jouissance* is coupled with self-responsibility, and presumably aided by discourses of social sciences offering knowledges the social subjects can and are required to rely on).

Crucially, by no stretch of imagination should it be understood that advertising necessarily played a primary role in the reconstitution of the post-liberalized Indian polity and sociality. In most obvious ways it *participated* alongside more emphatic and consequential socio-cultural and politico-economic process that inaugurated the new era, which reconfigured the nature of relation between the Indian state and the market forces on the one side and the Indian social on the other; without entirely abandoning the paternalist-patriarchal and the attendant didactic disposition towards the Indian social, and by shifting its mode of address now geared towards practices of consumption,

arguably the Indian state as well as the market forces re-situated themselves. And yet in its very non-pedagogic character and non-didactic presence, in its very subsumption within the everyday Indian social and in its seeming ordinariness, I claim, advertising's efficacy lies.

*Market and Generalized Perversion: Lacan's Four Discourses*

Lacan's articulations on the subjective positions (psychosis, neurosis and perversion<sup>348</sup>) and his four discourses (master, university, hysteric and analyst/pervert<sup>349</sup>) thinks through the nature of relationship between law, sociality and processes of subjectivation or subject formation. For the sake of brevity and clarity I will engage his four discourses and the ways in which it has a bearing on my discussion of late capitalism in India. The argument essentially hinges on the claim that market has managed to establish the discourse of perversion in alliance with the discourse of university.

Discourses, we can axiomatically claim, enable us our sense of the world, and our place in it. By the same token, discourses produce social bonds and are about social links; their relevance in the production of meaning and of social bonds is further accentuated in the periods of transition and crisis of meaning. Lacan's notion of four discourses (master, university, hysteric and analyst/pervert) allow us to trace the transition from one form of dominant discourse to another and in the Indian case, through the socialist to post-

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<sup>348</sup> For a quick, rigorous yet accessible introduction to these categories see, Apollon, Bergeron, Cantin 2002.

<sup>349</sup> Lacan never spoke of the discourse of the pervert in his four discourses; Jacques-Alain Miller in a recent characterization of late capitalism holds the analysts' discourse akin to that of the pervert (See Zizek 2006; Miller's essay is unpublished and unavailable in English). For a quick elaboration on perversion, see Miller's classic essay, Miller 1996; for a rigorous, extended statement on perversion, see Dor 2001; on constitution of perverse sociality, see Rothenberg, Foster, Zizek 2003.



liberalized phase, and the subsequent stabilization of structures of meaning and valuation, and reconsolidation of social bond in the newer regime<sup>350</sup>.

Discourses form social bonds or links. The nature of the discourse determines who addresses whom, with what kind of authority or legitimacy, and with what consequence. It configures the nature of truth and knowledge, of ideological operations and belief systems. It orients the formation of subjects as well as of sociality in general within a dominant regime of discourse; and shapes the conditions of compliance, protests, possibilities of subjective and social transformation. And it also crucially mobilizes jouissance or enjoyment, the conditions of its exclusion, of manifestation, demands for its sacrifice or immersion in it<sup>351</sup>.

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<sup>350</sup> Lacanian notion of discourse is more useful to consider than Foucauldian one, in this discussion for more reasons than one. For Foucault, cryptically put, discourses through production of meaning frame our understanding, these also discipline, train, produce docility as well as allow sites and practices of resistance. Lacan's notion of discourse as social bond on the other hand elides the discipline-resistance coupling as a mode of examination of subject formation by preemptively conceptualizing any interpellation by discourse as incomplete. In other words, discourses addressing the subject as their addressee and constituting social bond, always leaves residues, which is to say the first and foremost stance of the subject is one where s/he is always questioning the commandment emanating from the Other (and his discourses). Which is also why the most primary stance of subjectivity for Lacan is that of the hysteric, i.e., the one who asks, "You say this but what are you really telling me?" Aside from drawing attention to splitting of the subject in the process of subject formation, where interpellation is always incomplete and docility is never entirely achieved, what this stance on subject formation also takes into account is the affective economy constituted at the very moment of subjectivation through discursive interpellation.

<sup>351</sup> And following his obsessions with formulaic writing Lacan distills these discourses to seemingly cryptic mathemes and the matheme of the basic structure of discourse looks like the following:

<u>Agent</u>	→	<u>Other</u>
Truth		Production

These four positions constitute the essential structure of the discourse, and these are occupied by different categories in the four discourses. The positions on the left side are active ones and stand for the subject sending the messages and the right, on the other hand, represent the addressee to whom the message is directed. The upper two positions are overt factors and the lower two are latent or implicit ones. The most dominant factor in the entire configuration is the top upper left, that of the agent who initiates the discourse and directs it towards the top right who receives it. Similarly the bottom left is

Zizek (2006: 107-128) enunciates the historicity of the four discourses as Lacan proposes them. The master's discourse<sup>352</sup> dominated not so much as the medieval times (as might be conveniently presumed) as much as during transition to the regime of absolutist states in Europe as monarchy takes over social control from the feudal landlords, where "flattery" replaced "fidelity"<sup>353</sup>. With the unraveling of modernity and onset of democracy and modern regimes of power qua what Foucault identifies as 'biopolitics', the vacillating discourse of the master, following the democratic revolution, undergoes shift and transmutes into that of the hysteric and the university especially in the context of advanced West; for the colonial regimes on the other hand the master's discourse finds another apposite place of articulation. The hysteric<sup>354</sup> forever questioning the adequacy of any and all signifiers becomes the basis for the ever revolutionizing capitalist subject, whereas the university discourse with its foregrounding of knowledge as in natural and social sciences as the premise for any social organization results in the formation of foucauldian bio-political regime (exemplified both by the totalitarian as well

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the concealed factor, which nonetheless is the 'truth' of the 'agent' above it. Discourse, finally, also has a product, which is on the bottom right. Aside from these four structural positions, there are four factors whose relation with each other and location within the four positions determines the nature of discourse. The four factors are S1 (master signifier), S2 (system of knowledge), \$ (subject or more precisely, split subject), a (objet petit a or small object a).

<sup>352</sup> Master's discourse looks like the following; further it is the anti-clockwise quarter turn of each term that lends itself to the discourses of university, analyst and hysteric respectively.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{S1} & \rightarrow & \underline{S2} \\ \$ & & a \end{array}$$

In the master's discourse, what dominates and determines the discursive structure is the master signifier, which occupies the place of agent addressing and directing the disseminated knowledge; the place of truth is occupied by the split subjectivity of the master itself and that of production is that of the amorphous social subject who are shaped by the master's discourse.

<sup>353</sup> The instance he highlights is that of the "Sun-King", Louis XIV. Zizek (2006: 109).

<sup>354</sup> The hysteric, for Lacan, in a way is the primary position of subjectivation, for she in situating herself in relation to the Other continually asks, "what do you want from me, what am I to you" and so on.

as democratic political systems)<sup>355</sup>. Both these modes, “two faces of modernity”, as Zizek calls them, becomes the means of undermining the master’s discourse, when need be, as well as operate complementarily; to cite Zizek, “doubt about the efficiency of the master signifier can be supplemented by the direct rule of the experts legitimized by their knowledge or the excess of doubt, of permanent questioning can be directly integrated into social reproduction”

The last discourse of the analyst on the other hand is animated in the revolutionary, critical discourse where the void<sup>356</sup> operating as the agent questions the legitimacy of systems of knowledge and regimens of action and opens up the possibility for critical discourse. The lacanian matheme for the analyst’s discourse is the following:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \underline{a} & \rightarrow & \underline{\$} \\ S2 & & S1 \end{array}$$

What is noticeable and significant here is the analyst occupying, or striving to occupy<sup>357</sup> the place of objet petit a, or the void of the subject and addressing the subject (\$) from that place (also note in the structure of discourse this also the place of the agent of discourse). The place of truth is occupied by knowledge, and what results from therapy is a master signifier that will allow the subject to anchor itself in the world.

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<sup>355</sup> “The university discourse has an extremely precise function, in effect, one that at every moment is related to the state we are in with respect to the master’s discourse- namely its elucidation. As a matter of fact, this discourse has been masked discourse for a very long time. Through its internal necessity it will become less and less masked” Lacan (2007: 148)

<sup>356</sup> The significance of analysts’ structural stance or position within the discourse in relation to the analysand or the addressee consist in the occupation of the place of void (or lack or loss); therapy consists in compelling the analysand to come to terms with this void which subject normally avoids engaging (unless s/he is suffering). Over the question of the void in the formation of subjectivity however, psychoanalytical-philosophical thought is divided. Deleuze and Foucault radically dissenting with the Lacanian claim, attributing void a foundational status, spoke of its derived or secondary nature. See Deleuze (1986), Foucault (1980).

<sup>357</sup> I say “striving to occupy” for only in this the success of therapy consists in, i.e., the analyst successfully address the analysand from the space of that void which various objet petit a temporarily occupy (see also the previous footnote).

Lacan in his production of the four discourses then imagines and situates the analyst's discourse as the obverse of the master's discourse in capitalism. Miller (cited in Zizek 2006: 198-206) however in a recent rendition wonders and argues if the analyst's discourse hasn't been usurped by late capitalism and submitted to its own logic; and in that its proximity to the discourse of pervert is remarkable and indicative of this usurpation. The claim around homology of the analyst's and pervert's discourse rests on the similitude of relations between the various terms in the discourse with object petit a occupying the place of the agent determining the nature of social relations. In pervert's discourse the place of agent is occupied by objet petit a, which is to say in perversion subject submits itself to the life of pleasure (indicated in the matheme by "a", i.e., object petit a)<sup>358</sup>.

Late capitalism in instituting a regime of consumption directs its subjects to sacrifice sacrifice itself, and submit themselves to a regimen of jouissance or enjoyment. Accumulation in late capitalism demands from its subjects not austerity, conservation of resources and sacrifice or deferral of jouissance, but immersion in the latter, its immediacy. Commodities (and discourses around consumption, including advertising discourse) as objet petit a – "packets of enjoyment"- occupy the place of agent (or the one directs the discourse and sociality) in late capitalism.

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<sup>358</sup> Zizek (2006: 198-206) nonetheless quite rightly draws the distinction between analyst's and pervert's discourse: If the analyst's discourse foreground the void that objet a stood for, the discourse of perversion persists in the concealment of void while ensuring the continual animation of this very place through relentless substitution of proffered objet a. If the *traversal of fantasy* - as the very point of therapeutic intervention- in the analyst's discourse consists in confronting one's real (or one's core or the switch that ticks one), the pervert's discourse persists in subsisting in the fantasy: this is an essential difference with wide and significant ramifications, and one which Miller seems to paper over thereby failing to note the difference between conditions of generalized perversion that capitalism enables and critical efficiency of analyst's intervention.

Further, market, not least through recourse to researches in social sciences, ethnographies, psychoanalysis and so on (or through the proliferation of, what we also know as market research agencies), especially in the contemporary times portends to animate, define, frame, extend and lay out the “unmanifest” realm within the social and the individual that Deleuze called the ‘virtual’<sup>359</sup>. This terrain of the virtual, if at all the solidity of a topography can be attributed to it, is painstakingly engaged, solicited, drawn out, and the map of it drafted. Or in Lacanian language, the market strives to draw out the core or the real of the subject; in other words, it wants to and needs to find out what *ticks* the subject. In the process, seeking to become the object cause of subject’s desire, the ambition is to occupy the place of *object a* within the subject.

Market animates, in other words, the discourse of perversion. Claiming to know the subject and its desire, and investing the social with *object a* arrived at through detailed and tortuous routes it harangues and invites the subject’s attention and desire. And yet market does not only rely on the discourse of perversion, but also that of university. Consider the insurance and risk technologies for instance.

The discourse of risk in late capitalism productively conjoins the university discourse with the perversion. First and foremost the risk discourse is a university discourse par excellence. Seeking to speak from the place of neutral knowledge while concealing within it the truth of its own discourse which is the master signifier of capitalism and its logic of accumulation, it enunciates imperiously demanding attention from the subjects hitherto configured by a different university discourse, that is, of bureaucratic socialism. In a reconfigured social, with subjects lacking the certitude of

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<sup>359</sup> See chapter II on insurance for an elaboration of Deleuze’s conception on the virtual, and its relation to capitalism.

quilting points, it demands the unformed and amorphous mass of individuals to re-learn the tricks of sociality. Reading the social conditions of incertitude and indeterminacy in the language of risk, it strives to transform the socialist subjects into the subjects of risk, trained in the abilities to engage the shifting hieroglyphics of signs and value, and acquire a relatively stable sense of self and identity. In interpellating the individual as the subject of risk, the market nonetheless claims to ground and arm them with researches, studies and popularly as well as mediatically disseminated information about the working of capital and markets; in other words, scientifically based information (S2) and seemingly neutral, remains the lynchpin of the sociality.

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capital and markets; in other words, scientifically based information (S2) and seemingly neutral, remains the lynchpin of the sociality.

This university discourse of risk nonetheless aligns itself rather comfortably with the pervert's discourse, which is the larger discourse of capitalism<sup>360</sup>. If hitherto capitalism in its heyday required a disciplinary or administered society and produced docile and productive subjects submitted to systems of prohibition, late capitalism requires a different kind of subject. With the prohibition of prohibition and the superegoic demand for jouissance as duty the subjects are confronted with the demand to consume and enjoy. And with it comes the corollary shift: the foregrounding of object a, or the object of jouissance as the determining agent of the discourse. I have argued then market, and the advertising industry as one of its visible faces foreground a discourse of enjoyment (perversion) aligned with that of self-accountability (university discourse).

In a reconfigured social terrain following economic liberalization, particularly with the re-constellation of the existing class coalition with bourgeoisie and corporate capital acquiring a general hegemony and capacity to mobilize capitalist accumulative processes as well as the state apparatus to its ends, an unabashed culture of commodification and consumption has begun to entrench itself. In the process it has compelled established corporate bodies (such as Dabur) and the Indian state (as we saw with the Incredible India campaign) to re-articulate and frame their identities in accordance with demands of the mediatic requirements and market processes; seminal political-democratic processes too (as we saw with the India Shinning campaign) were

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<sup>360</sup> A similar case needless to say can be made out for the discourses of health proposed by Dabur for instance.

submitted to the logic of same processes<sup>361</sup>. Identified subjects from the ever-bloating middle classes too are subjected to the same regime of demands; as we saw with the discourses of insurance, the citizen-subjects are now being addressed and solicited as subjects of risk. Notwithstanding the ascendancy however, corporate capital has refused to ‘speak at’ its constituency, the mode deployed by the Indian state during the socialist era. Instead, in striving to ‘speak to’ its constituency of consumer citizens, it has initiated and animated an idiom of intimacy, proximity and care, thereby also refusing to adorn the garb of the paternalist master. Acquisition of social legitimacy for practices of consumption further, I have argued, has installed conditions of “generalized perversion”<sup>362</sup>, and at least in two senses: (a) Karl Marx over a century and half ago diagnosed the structural feature of capitalism as one of accelerated change, a characteristic that has acquired a deafening pace in the contemporary times, the immense consequence of which is experienced in blowing away of any stable master signifiers or meta narratives (except that of enjoyment) disallowing subjects to anchor themselves with any certitude, stand against a stable platform and organize individual and social lives. The refusal of the market to “speak at” the subjects is symptomatic of this condition and a structural requirement of late capitalism<sup>363</sup>. Social subjects then are subjected to a frenetic regime of competing claims and choices offered by market and corporate capital as ever-shifting signposts for organizing minimally stable identities; the responsibility for choices made however rests with the subject, and in conditions where all assurances are

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<sup>361</sup> See in this context, amongst several authors, Brown 2011.

<sup>362</sup> I get this term from Miller (1996:314); for the specific sense I am deploying it, see also Boucher (2006:289).

<sup>363</sup> The strategic retreat of the Indian state and its paternalist discourse offering anchoring signifiers and narratives, needless to say, has aggravated this symptomatic condition.



lacking<sup>364</sup>. The fleeting desire of the subject searching for minimal certitude and symbolic assurance in an “atonal world”<sup>365</sup> becomes a perverse subject “by default” as Gerard Wajcman (2011) puts it. (b) In conditions of atonality, in diverse ways, the dominantly remaining commandement issuing from the Symbolic Other is one of enjoyment, and it is in that sense that subjects are interpellated by the commodities promising to fulfill the constitutional lack (or in lacanese, objet a occupying the place of agent in the discourse of perversion).

And needless to say, however, the dominance given the stratifications informing the Indian social, primarily along the class lines, refuse the complete subordination of it (i.e., the Indian social) to the dictates of corporate capital and the emerging logic of market. The very failure the India Shinning campaign and the very nature of pedagogical and disciplinary labor required during the Incredible India campaign, attests to fraught nature of the Indian social and the limitations of claims of ascendancy of corporate capital howsoever dominant it has become under the contemporary conditions, and the class coalitions have found themselves rearranged. In terms of Partha Chatterjee’s categories, the bourgeois desire emanating from the civil society to produce an efficiently administered society hits into the unruliness of the political of the political society, which annoys it to no end and which in vain it strives to domesticate<sup>366</sup>.

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<sup>364</sup> See Salecl (2004, 2011), Leiberman (1993)

<sup>365</sup> The term is Alain Badiou’s, and he is referring to the collapse of reigning master signifiers and the resulting absence of anchoring points leading to proliferation of multiplicity and consequent difficulty in ordering the sense of the world. (See Badiou 2009).

<sup>366</sup> The current Anna Hazare fiasco illustrates the inherent tensions constituting the relations between these two spaces with extreme lucidity (see Chatterjee 2011b).

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