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THE AESTHETICS OF NARRATIVIZATION:

Negotiating the Sustainable Concerns of the Commercials in the Indian Anthropocene

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Abstract: India is a land of diverse cultures, traditions and languages. Among the developing countries in the world, India is one of the rapidly growing nations on account of industrialization and technological advancements. The expansion of Indian trade relations on a global scale has led to a significant transformation in the marketing policies and consumer culture. The increasing materialistic concerns among the people, however, tend to pose a detrimental threat to sustainable development of the country. To prevent development at the cost of environment, many advertising agencies adopt diverse techniques to perpetuate sustainability. One of the crucial methods by which this can be implemented is through proper mode of communication. This paper focuses on a close examination of the story-telling approach in Indian commercials that serves a dual purpose. While on the one hand, it subtly challenges and subverts the stereotypes prevalent in the Indian culture, on the other hand, it conveys to the viewers the idea of adopting means that shall promote sustainability. As a starting point, this study shall highlight the importance of narratives in the advertisements of goods and products in the Indian context. In a country where the population is overwhelming, where majority of the people lack education and awareness, and where pollution levels are intimidating, mere didactic mass propaganda on sustainable use of resources cannot be effective. On the contrary, stories have potential to evoke emotional responses and elicit the desired effect upon the audience. By narrativizing the advertisements, the companies appeal to the inner sentiments of the people thereby not only alluring them to buy the product but also moralizing on the principles of sustainability. Thereafter, the essay shall emphasize on the power of music and song in adding life and colour to these narratives. Finally, it will underline the role of children and how their involvement in the ads not only makes the adult viewers rethink the socially sanctioned and accepted norms but also encourages the future generation to align themselves along the path of sustainability, thereby, providing an additional impetus to achieve the goals of sustainable development. This essay shall analyse these strands through various case studies of Indian advertisements.

Keywords: advertisement, narrativization, song, children, sustainability

In the 'Introduction' of *Development as Freedom* Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner in Economics, states that development can be viewed, though in a narrow sense, as identification with "the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization" (1999, p.3).¹ These premises of development often lead to or result in not only increasing materialistic concerns among the people but also an indiscriminate use of the country's resources. Consequently, mass propaganda on sustainable development becomes inevitable. However, a mere didactic

¹ Amartya Sen, however, views development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy." The premises of development mentioned here are envisioned by him as "narrower views". (p.3)

discourse may not be effective enough to reach the desired goal. Herein lies the essential significance of the proper mode of communication through which the message can be conveyed to the audience. While advertisements can be used as powerful tools for this purpose, their techniques vary far and wide. The objective of this paper is to focus on the story-telling approaches and the other narrative structures that are embedded in Indian advertisements that reflect the native culture besides promoting the notion of sustainability.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the narrative techniques through various case studies, let us cast an eye on what we understand by sustainability or sustainable development. According to *Our Common Future* by World Commission on Environment and Development, it is defined as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987, p.8). This entails adopting such measures of progress that will satisfy the demands of the present but not at the cost of the future. Thus, all such practices which might have a detrimental impact upon the environment must be avoided. Conversely, sufficient means should also be undertaken to spread awareness about the preservation of nature, maintenance of ecological balance, judicious use of energy resources and promotion of sustainable growth. This can be acquired through the various channels of mass media of which advertisement is one.

In today's world of cut-throat competition and consumerism, we are floating in a sea of advertisements. In its rudimentary form, advertisement can be seen as the process of drawing the attention of the people through enticing means and alluring them to purchase any particular product or service. Among the many characteristics of advertisements, communicating awareness among the people features as one of the most important. However, if the mode of communication is not appealing to the audience, the entire endeavour becomes redundant since the success or failure of a particular product largely rests on the strategies employed for its advertisements. It has been observed that a story-telling approach, including drama and dialogue, leaves a lasting impression upon the people and evokes emotional responses from them (Randazzo, 2006). Moreover, in the Indian context where the population is overwhelming, where majority of the people lack education and awareness, and where pollution levels are intimidating, narrative advertising can be very effective in influencing the crowd.

The Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms defines a narrative as having two overlapping aspects: “One is a question of content, the assemblage of material, the nature of the connections implied. The other is rhetorical, how the narrative is presented to the audience” (Childs and Fowler, p.148). When a story is used in narrative advertising, an implied connection is subtly established between the consumer and the advertisement or the product that is advertised. The reason behind this can be best explained and understood from the notion of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm which presupposes human beings as storytellers. He defines narration as “a conceptual framework, like dramatism, for understanding human decision, discourse, and action” (Allen, p.575). Moreover, the decision-making is governed by rationality which in turn is determined by narrative probability, that is, the coherence of the story, and narrative fidelity, that is, whether the story is relatable in the real life or not (Fisher, 1984, p.7). It is only when the ads appeal to the viewers' emotions that they drive them to be fully immersed in the narrative. This is further suggested by Jennifer Edson Escalas' narrative transportation theory.

Transportation is conceptualized as a viewer's experience of being lost in context or immersed in a story's plot. The literature suggests that by using drama or storytelling, narrative advertising captivates and mesmerizes its audience through the dramatic unfolding of causally related events in the form of storytelling or drama, which “transports” the viewer to the narrative world. (Ching, p.415)

As a result, the more profoundly the viewer is involved, the more favourable the response will be towards the ad or the brand.

The fact that narrativization of an ad is more impressionable can be discerned if we undertake a comparative analysis of two advertisements, both on the same issue, that is, anti-smoking but one employs a narrative strategy, *The Child*² while the other, *Sponge*³ is non-narrative. The latter is a 30-second commercial ad commencing with an anatomical image of the human lungs which functions similar to a sponge. The narrator informs the audience about the catastrophic implications of smoking and how adversely the organ can be affected by it. The final scene is of a beaker of tar collected when the sponge is squeezed which is said to be sufficient enough to cause the deadly and incurable cancer. The ad ends there. There is no plot, no character, no setting and no story.

The Child, on the other hand, situates the story in a common domestic sphere inhabited by ordinary people like us. It presents a simple tale of a family consisting of three members, the parents and their daughter. The father is a smoker who, by the end of the narrative, quits smoking. However, behind the garb of an ordinary story, the ad employs extraordinary narrative technique that makes it evocative to the audience. Therefore, as Gerard Genette discusses in his *Narrative Discourse*, the focus is not on the story but on the story-telling. It begins with the girl involved in colouring a picture when her father returns from the office. However, instead of any word of endearment, the child is greeted by the father's hysteric cough. This very episode is striking enough for the viewers to be unsettled. Unlike *Sponge*, *The Child* adopts a 'mimetic' narrative mode. Peter Barry explains,

The parts of a narrative which are presented in a mimetic manner are 'dramatised', which is to say that they are represented in a scenic way, with a specified setting, and making use of dialogue ... creating the illusion that we are 'seeing' and 'hearing' things for ourselves. (p.223)

The audience, thus, unconsciously gets indulged in the story as they witness it unfolding before their very eyes.

Another very significant technique employed in *The Child* is the use of meta-narrative. All stories may not follow a linear pattern; often some stories have a frame narrative, that is an outer story, and placed within it an embedded narrative, that is an inner story. Genette calls a narrative within a narrative a 'meta-narrative'. Even though in this ad there is no such vivid inner story but the realization of the father about the dangers of smoking comes from an advertisement that he sees on one occasion while smoking in his daughter's presence. In the embedded narrative an ailing patient is shown to be coughing on his death-bed presumably as a result of smoking. Witnessing this, the aghast child of the outer story casts a horrified look on her father which inescapably arouses feelings of guilt in his mind. He leaves the room, perhaps ashamed of himself and ponders upon his damnable act. When he returns next to his daughter, the exuberance of his smile emanates the joy of having abandoned smoking. Thus, the narrative traverses different kinds of feelings which are tacitly transmitted to the viewers as they participate in the narrative since stories, according to Fisher, create identification between the storyteller and the audience. *Sponge*, on the contrary, lacks any such emotions and, therefore, completely fails to establish any attachment with the consumers or evoke any emotional responses. Moreover, it is worth noting that each packet of cigarette comes with the line – 'Smoking is injurious to health' or 'Smoking causes cancer' – printed on it but to no avail. As the message does not tell a story, it does not affect the buyer.

These two advertisements may have different approaches in their representation but their objective is the same. It is in their end aim that they adhere to the idea of sustainable development. Though they emphasize on bodily harm and damage caused by smoking and implies refraining from it may prevent one from incurring cancer, on the flip side of the coin no-smoking shall also contribute to the preservation of nature by reducing the levels of air pollution. According to the data provided by Conserve Energy Future, a green website spreading awareness, "Smoking globally emits nearly 2.6 billion kilograms of carbon dioxide and 5.2 billion kilograms of methane into the atmosphere each year. This provides a clear picture of how smoking alone contributes to climate change." Therefore, the microcosmic episode of living happily with the family without smoking is a reflection of the macrocosm where man and nature shall co-exist harmoniously in a symbiotic relation.

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bavZ_QeGbFE

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htY_NBSyOk0

On the other hand, there are certain advertisements where the narrative is foregrounded on the insecurities of the people, thereby not only attracting the attention of the viewers but also very strategically eye washing them of the products' harmful ingredients. One such instance is the daily commercial on Mountain Dew featuring Hrithik Roshan where the narrative revolves around a dangerous bike stunt on a very precarious realm.⁴ As the biker prepares to start off with the stunt, he swallows his fears with the drink and ends up successfully achieving the feat. The story enthralls the viewers not to be cowed down by the insurmountable hurdles on their path of fulfilling their dreams but to confront the challenges with a brave heart, and becomes almost an inspirational commentary on overcoming fears, as very aptly summarized by the tagline "Darr ke aage jeet hai".

Such a narrative is bound to encourage the consumers to buy the product but delving deeper if we go through the list of ingredients, which people hardly do, we shall be appalled to find, among other constituents, brominated vegetable oils (BVO) which is hazardous for human health, besides other heavy metals like antimony, lead, chromium and cadmium which has been found through a study conducted by All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIIPH&PH). According to an article in *The Indian Express*, "The study commissioned by the top Health Ministry body, the Drugs Technical Advisory Board (DTAB), found that these toxins leached into five cold drink samples picked up for study – Pepsi, Coca Cola, Mountain Dew, Sprite and 7Up" (Patel, 2016). In a similar vein, we find the presence of parabens, a toxic chemical substance in Himalaya Fairness Kesar Face Pack. The Himalaya product which claims to be herbal and medicated, beguiles the prospective users under the guise of the society's conventional propensity to prioritise fair complexion. Thus, in these cases we find it is the narrative structures of the advertisements that gull the audience without reflecting any moral concern for public welfare.

The strain of sustainability and environmental concern becomes much more prominent in the advertisement of Green Good Deeds featuring Amitabh Bachchan.⁵ Green Good Deeds is an initiative of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change encouraging people to actively participate in the conservation of environment. This advertisement exploits a different technique that is, attracting the attention of the viewers through the rhetoric of music and song. Melody plays a multifaceted role in advertising as David Huron states in 'Music in Advertising: An Analytic Paradigm', "music can serve the overall promotional goals in one or more of several capacities" (p.560). The fact that music and song are closely associated with festivity renders the advertisement an entertaining dimension.

A good ad engages the attention of an audience, and the most straightforward way of achieving this is to fashion an appeal which is entertaining. Historically, the use of music in advertising originated in early vaudeville, where music served to candy coat a spoken narrative sales pitch. (p.560)

However, it must be kept in mind that entertainment here does not merely mean a form of frivolous merry-making but is used in its etymological sense, that is, to engage the attention. Besides appealing to the emotions, music also evokes sensory responses from the listener. Moreover, it leaves a lingering echo of its tune resounding in the mind of the viewer as Wordsworth very famously says in *The Solitary Reaper*, 'The music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more' and as has been observed in the very popular ad of Idea Mobile employing the song 'You're my pumpkin pumpkin, hello honey bunny'. As such, it becomes an important tool in narrative advertising.

If the story is the heart of the narrative, music is the soul that brings the ad to life. In the ad of Green Good Deeds there is no single story but multiple embedded narratives recounted through a song and each narrative has far and wide social implications projecting the poverty, scarcity of water and electricity, and death of marine life in various parts of India. While the frame narrative seeks our participation in this noble endeavour by coming for a contribution, the song is a brutal reminder of all the little steps that we inadvertently avoid but must necessarily adopt for a cleaner present and a greener future. Delving deeper, if we analyse the texture of the song, we shall discover that it has an ebullient spirit that calls for an immediate action as Morris and Boone

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiDj4WwRzXw>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3tbIrul5sU

mention, “Exciting music was shown to increase emotional arousal in subjects via their skin response and heart rate, which are assumed to be the two physiological manifestations of emotional response” (1998). The song, besides the narratives, therefore, lends an additional impetus to the message.

Coming to the final strand, the paper shall explore how children are featured in Indian advertisements as influencers to colour the narrative with a complementary charm. Speaking about the role of children in advertisements, the ad filmmaker Prahlad Kakkar says, “If the kid is cute and good at role-playing, you look at the child beyond the ad; you say this child is really smart, and you remember the brand because you remember the kid, even if the ad was not directed at the kids” (Fernandes, 2017). In this sense, children create a visual appeal among the viewers unwittingly establishing an indelible identification with the product. This technique of commodifying children for the promotion of goods and items has always been exploited by the ad agencies ever since the latter half of the 20th century. However, the function of children in ads has not been confined simply to blind adorability. Children not only think differently but also, unlike adults, act differently. Therefore, often they allow the viewers to revisit their childhood, unmistakably evoking sentiments of nostalgia. For instance, the stories of Surf Excel ads featuring children wallowing in the mud reflect the universal childhood innocence and spontaneity. At the same time, some of these ads convey very strong social messages. The 2019 ad⁶ narrates a story where we find children, celebrating Holi, throw water balloons from both the sides of a lane to a young girl who cycles down the alley. She entices them to drench her fully only to exhaust their colours so that she can safely escort her friend thereafter to the mosque to offer the *namaaz*. While the story undeniably emanates a self-sacrificing spirit in the character of the girl, it also projects a humanitarian concern beyond all social and religious barriers. Though the tagline, “Daag Achhe hai” has a tacit business motive of multiplying the use of the detergent thereby increasing the company’s profit, this ulterior objective, however, is moulded and presented through the narrative of an evocative tale.

With the turn of the century, children have also been weaponized as a powerful tool in social advertisements to promote sustainable development, reminding the audience of their responsibility to conserve the environment and protect the earth. In the Bijli Bachao Desh Banao advertisement by the Government of India, the children adopt the role of teachers and take a vow to indoctrinate among parents, relatives, neighbours and every section of society the spirit of sustainability. The narrative traverses through common episodes of everyday life where the children moralise on the waste of electricity and endorse the use of natural energy resources. The strategy adopted is indeed very powerful in the sense that it makes the adults rethink their mindlessness and espouse means or practices for sustainable growth. What makes it more moving is perhaps the deliberate use of a girl child as the leader of the group who instructs the other members what needs to be done. Therefore, it also acts as an incisive assault on the gender stereotypes prevalent in the traditionally patriarchal Indian society. On the other hand, it can also enable child viewers to align themselves along these thoughts as children are said to emulate what they witness on the screen. Though it cannot be denied that there are many negative impacts of advertisement upon children, this is one of the few positive effects discernible.

Thus, we find that narrativization plays a dual role in the world of advertisements. While, on the one hand, it acts as a deceptive tool tempting the audience to the use of products which might, in the long run, lead to hazardous consequences, on the other hand, this very effective instrument can be employed to bring about sustainable development. This paper has focused on how advertisements in India capitalize upon the story-telling approach, the diverse narrative structures and strategies to make the ads not only emotionally evocative but also hypnotically captivating. It is only when the ads penetrate to the core of the viewers’ emotion that it leaves a trace upon their consumer behaviour. This essay has shown through various case studies how stories act as gateways to the hearts of the audience. When it is coupled with music and song, it becomes more effectively eloquent. Additionally, the study also delineates how showcasing children amplifies the possibilities of meeting the objectives of the ads. The narratives and the case studies have been chosen to show how far the advertisements in the Indian context adhere to and deviate from the aims of achieving sustainable development.

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zq7mN8oi8ds>

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