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## Evolution of Print Advertisements in Pre-Independent India

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### **Abstract:**

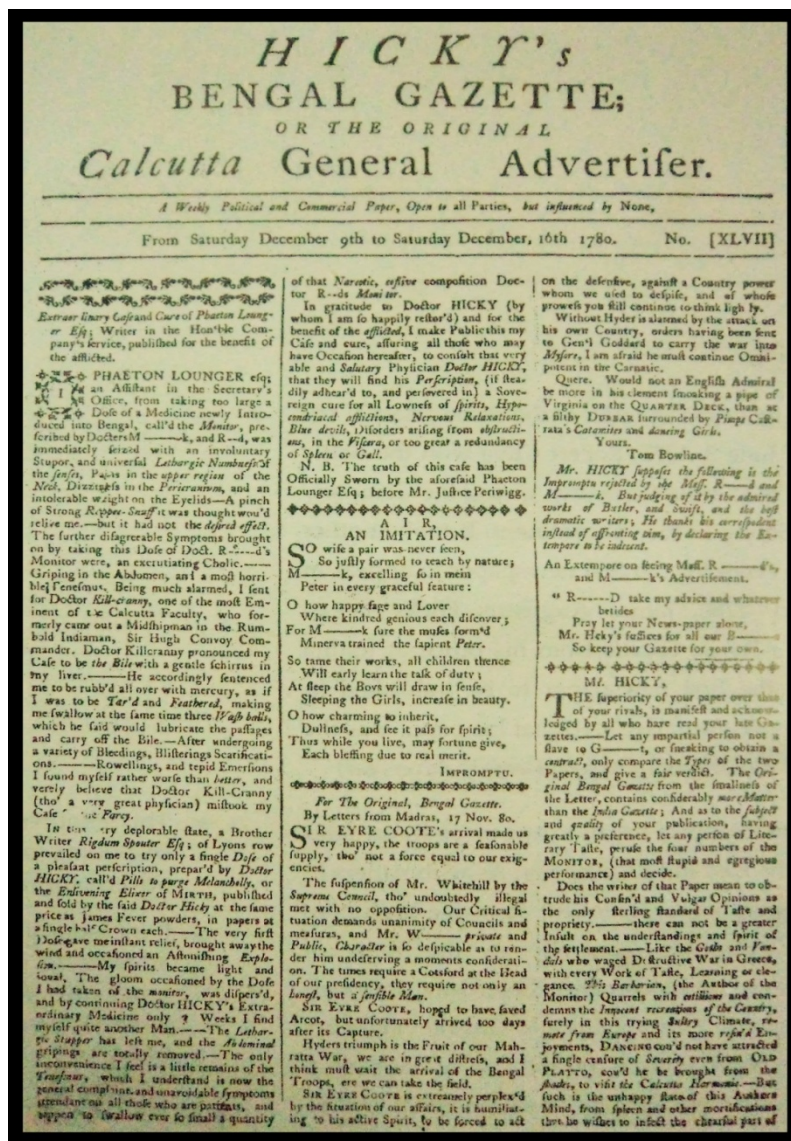
Advertising is itself a cultural product which significantly affects social attitudes, influences social roles, and contributes to the alteration of cultural values. Advertising evolved and developed in Indian society as a means of stimulating the consumption of products generated by new and expanding industries. This article has tried to explore the profile of advertising in the Indian context along with the societal changes. The main issue dealt with here has been that of the cultural impact of advertising in India. The whole purpose of advertising is to sell an idea and thereby construct a common consensus among the mass. A close 'reading' of some print advertisements in colonial India, thus, unfolds the evolution and intrigue politics of the same.

### **Keywords: Advertisements, Society, Culture**

It is often believed that a newspaper reflects contemporary societal changes and events only in its news columns, editorial columns and features. Such a view tends to gloss over a significant chunk of printed matter comprising of paid communications, popularly known as advertisements.

Early newspaper advertisements were very much like announcements, giving factual information such as the availability of a particular item and in most cases indicating its price and the address of a retailer. In the next step was introduced a sketch of the object along with its descriptive details. The third step involved the display of photographs which in time replaced the sketches.

Gradually, advertising developed in India, as elsewhere in the world, from a more neutral to a positive role, ushering in a dynamic era of wider and livelier interaction. Advertising no longer remained mere a transmitter of information; it became a modifier of information as well. It was based on the assumption that society interprets information in various ways depending on packaging. In other words, the same facts expressed in different formats or in different sizes, colours or words mean different things to people. S. Mehta in the introduction to *Brand New Advertising Through The Times Of India* states, "This mode of interpretation or misinterpretation is not an invention of advertising specialists. They merely practice the art by understanding and researching what already exists." [Mehta, S. (1989)].



It was the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century that witnessed the emergence of modern advertising in India. However, Robert Clive, winning the battle of Plassey, gave the East India Company a firm political footing in the subcontinent of India. Thereafter, the weekly newspapers began to appear in those cities which were under the governance of East India Company. It took another 23 years after the Battle of Plassey, for the first newspaper to appear in India. The first newspaper, *Hicky's Bengal Gazette* (or the original Calcutta General Advertiser), was published in January 1780, under the entrepreneurship of James Augustus Hicky from his office at Radhabazar in Calcutta. Right from the inception, government patronage in the form of advertisements was the prime capital of the newspapers. The newspapers published in India followed the trends operative in England, both in terms of journalism and advertising. Trade, legal notices, as well as matters of a personal interest- like people looking for employment were advertised in *Hicky's Calcutta General Advertiser*.

Hicky's paper frequently launched attacks, against people placed in important posts in Bengal administration. Naturally, his paper was often denied advertisements from the East India

Company. In the issue dated December 9th to December 16th No. XXLVII, Hicky's Bengal Gazette even made the bold statement, that it was "A weekly Political and commercial paper, open to all Parties, but influenced byNone". As the initial line in the following illustration shows, to put an emphasis on the word 'None', it was printed in straight types, as opposed to the italicized types used in the rest of the sentence. And of course it is possible to see this line as an advertisement of sorts.

The next Indian newspaper to be published was the *India Gazette* which appeared within 10 months of the publication of *Hicky's Bengal Gazette*. The *India Gazette* was allowed to be distributed through the postal system without any postage. These two papers fuelled the growth of advertisement in India, a process that was further stimulated by the appearance of several other periodicals that began to appear from Bombay, Calcutta and Madras between 1780 and 1799. Preeminent among these was the *Bombay Courier* which was founded by Luke Ashburner, an Alderman of the Mayor's court of Bombay in 1790. The *Bombay Courier* featured all advertisement on the front page. The political news and articles were published in the inside pages, which were mostly plagiarized. As *Bombay Courier* is now known as *The Times of India*, one of the leading publications of the country, this paper has undoubtedly made significant contribution to the development of advertising in India. The print media in India developed particularly in the last two decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Print advertising developed in many ways over the last two decades of 18<sup>th</sup> century. Printers' rule was used to demarcate advertisements by Hicky, but within a decade not only the printers' rule was being used to decorate pages; advertisements also carried illustrations of buildings, ships, horses, and wooden casks depending on the subject of the advertisement. Variations in typography were also used in the layout of advertisements in order to draw the attention of the reader, and the compositors often used types of various sizes, and utilized italicized and straight types. Towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century advertisements carrying illustrations became quite common. The following illustration shows a sample of a late 18<sup>th</sup> century government advertisement

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| BOMBAY CASTLE   |             |
| 11 <sup>TH</sup> July, 1793   |             |
| Government Advertisement  |             |
| Notice is hereby given,   |             |
| THAT all Persons have liberty to make                                 |             |
| BRICKS, TILES, AND CHUNAM, either for their own use or for sale.      |             |
| <i>Published by order of the Honourable the President in Council,</i> |             |
| BOMBAY CASTLE   | JOHN MORRIS |
| 5 <sup>TH</sup> July, 1793.   | Secretary   |

The language used herein is simple and written to deliver an immediate impact but what is especially interesting is the use of the word “CHUNAM” in this advertisement. The language of this advertisement in fact carries a local, Indian flavour for its intended target audience was one of Indian readers in particular. The writer of this advertisement used a word that was more Indian than English when he used it.

Until the end of the First World War, all newspapers in India carried advertisements on the same page. Advertisements were hardly printed along with editorial matter. Therefore, every advertisement that appeared on a page had to work hard to be noticed. In the three main cities of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras, Europeans had a common lifestyle. A study of old newspaper advertisement shows how people lived, their entertainment and the kind of items they purchased in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The references in the advertisement given below are restricted chiefly to the Europeans because the Indians lived in a different world altogether and were relatively untouched by the influence of the English advertisements. The large number of liquor advertisements published indicates that the English people in India drank heavily.



| FOR SALE<br>AT THE<br>TAVERN WAREHOUSES.       |     |
|--|-----|
|  | Rs. |
| ENGLISH Claret, by the Chest, per Dozen,       | 20  |
| By single dozen,                               | 24  |
| French Claret 1st quality per dozen,           | 9   |
| Old Hock per ditto,                            | 24  |
| Burgundy per ditto,                            | 31  |
| Chateau-lige per ditto,                        | 30  |
| Port Wine per ditto,                           | 20  |
| Constantia per ditto,                          | 30  |
| Perry per ditto,                               | 11  |
| Cyder per ditto,                               | 10  |
| Cherry and Raspberry Brandy per ditto,         | 12  |
| Ratafia per ditto,                             | 12  |
| Madeira in Pipes of the 1st quality, per Pipe, | 400 |
| Ditto in Bottles, per dozen,                   | 13  |
| Ditto in Pipes 2d quality, per Pipe,           | 250 |
| Ditto in Bottles, per dozen,                   | 9   |
| Pale Ale in Bottles, per ditto,                | 8   |
| Porter, per ditto,                             | 7   |
| Brandy Cognac, per Gallon,                     | 4   |
| Ditto ditto in Bottles per dozen,              | 13  |
| Ditto French per Gallon,                       | 3   |
| Ditto in Bottles per dozen,                    | 10  |
| Jamaica Rum per Gallon,                        | 4   |
| Ditto in Bottles per dozen,                    | 14  |
| Europe Tongues at 2½ or Ktg, per ditto,        | 28  |
| Jews Beef 3 Rop. per piece or per Tierce,      | 80  |
| Coffee per Picul,                              | 18  |
| Large Cases Gin of the 1st quality, per Case,  | 25  |
| Small ditto ditto,                             | 14  |
| Large ditto 2d quality per Case,               | 24  |
| Small ditto ditto,                             | 12  |
| Salted Oil, 1½ per Picul or per dozen,         | 12  |
| Mustard per Bottle,                            | 1   |
| Fish Sauces,                                   |     |
| Confectionary:                                 |     |
| Raisins per Box of 25 Pounds,                  | 12  |
| Cheese and Hams, per Pound,                    | 1   |
| Kits of Salmon per Kit,                        | 8   |
| Herrings,                                      |     |
| September 28th, 1793                           |     |

More diversified advertising contents are to be found in other contemporary Calcutta papers. The Anglo-Indian people used to go to plays and Balls, and life in Calcutta was an unending fun-ride for English men. As Robert Clive wrote in one of his letter to his wife in 1766:

In short, I will pronounce Calcutta to be one of the most wicked places in the universe. Corruption, licentiousness and a want of principles seem to have possessed the minds of all civil servants. By frequent and bad examples they are grown callous, rapacious, and luxurious beyond conception. [Chaudhuri, A. (2007)].

Formulation and packaging of the products gradually became the prime objective of advertisements in the last two decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century. An advertisement from *The Times of India*, dated November 21, 1888 (Bombay) substantiates this fact. This advertisement was for a brand of pre-cooked food meant for infants and the aged.

*GOOD NEWS FOR MOTHER'S!*

MELIN'S FOOD

PERFECT NOURISHMENT!

FOR INFANTS WITHOUT MOTHER'S MILK

Marvellous Effects On Sick Children

Purely Vegetable

TRADE  
MARK  
HERE

MADE BY  
**MACHINERY**  
**ONLY.**  
Never Touched  
With  
The Hand

INVALIDS  
AND THE  
AGED RESTORED  
TO  
HEALTH  
AND  
VIGOUR

There are a number of significant points to be noted about the above advertisement:

- The fact of that the food product is advertised as being manufactured entirely with the help of machinery has been highlighted placing the text within a box (right hand side). This emphasizes the concept of hygiene backed by a catch line, “Never Touched with Hand”.
- Native Indians were also consumers of the product and this fact is revealed from the statement, “Full directions in all Indian languages”.
- Yet another important aspect of this advertisement is the attempt made by it to situate the product as an alternative to mother’s milk.
- The use of a trade mark within a box (left hand side) depicts the concern of the company regarding its own brand image.

Another interesting case of wooing the consumer with a claim for a psycho-physiological benefit appears in a Pears Soap Advertisement shown below.

“The Worst Complexion is improved by the daily use of Pears’ Soap”

**Pears’**

**Transparent**

**SOAP**

Produces Soft, White, and Beautiful Hands; keeps the Skin Soft as Velvet, and free from Redness and Roughness.

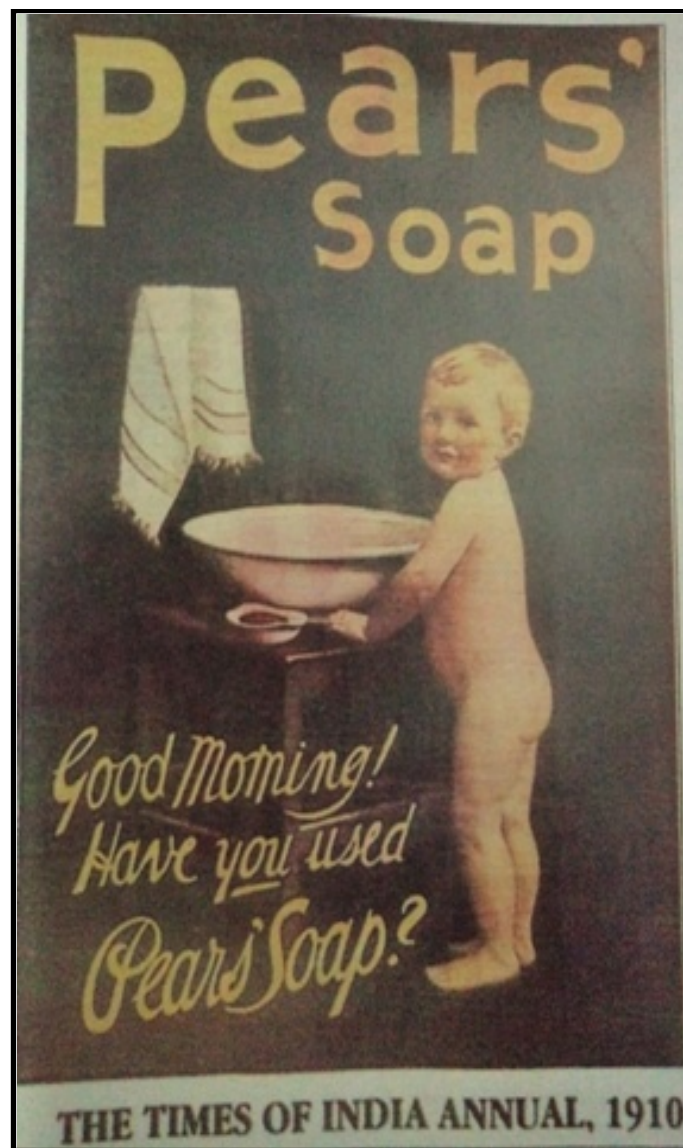
“Matchless for the Complexion”

Complexion has always been a major concern among the Indians. One singular aspect of this advertisement is the attempt made to persuade



the consumer to have a fair and soft skin, which is largely regarded by Indians as synonymous with beauty.

*The Times of India* began to print colour advertisements as early as 1910, though to annual issues only. The Illustrations in those advertisements were mainly paintings. The advertisement shown below portrays a figure of a nude child and not any adult. To make people understand that Pears' soap is good for sensitive and delicate skin, the advertiser celebrates the innocence of the baby. Since adultery was not accepted freely in India during that time, child nudity was the only option. This advertisement shown below, which is designed like a poster, has an immediacy of appeal.



A fusion of the English language with a regional language is quite a common practice in Indian advertising. Hints of this practice can be traced back to even the 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. The use of the word “Dekho!” and the sentence “Achakhana Sahib Moorghee and Yorkshire Relish” is an apt example in this context. The fusion of Hindi with English in the present advertisement may perhaps be referred to as an early example of ‘Hinglish’.

**DEKHO! HAVE YOU TRIED  
YORKSHIRE RELISH?  
IF NOT, DO SO AT ONCE!!**

When the Col. Sahib asked what there was for Khana, the Khitmatghar answered,  
“Acha Khanah Sahib, Morghee Cutlets aur Yorkshire Relish.”

It is just what you want to enable you to relish your food in  
India, especially in hot weather and when camping out.  
With either Cold or Hot Meat, Poultry, &c., it is incomparable!  
If you go to England, you will find it is the most popular Sauce  
of the day.

Over 6,000,000 Bottles sold Annually!

Instruct your Khansamah to obtain it, and you will be delighted  
with the piquancy of the Soups, Stews, Curries, Bhat and  
Morghee Cutlets.

The Bawarchi uses, and prefers Yorkshire Relish to all other Sauces.

SOLD BY ALL STORES & RETAIL MERCHANTS THROUGHOUT INDIA.  
IN BOTTLES AT 6d., 1s., & 2s. EACH.

It is one of the most celebrated of the well-known Household Specialties of  
**GOODALL, BACKHOUSE & Co., OF LEEDS.**

**YORKSHIRE RELISH—used by every class in India.**  
**YORKSHIRE RELISH—a household word in every Bungalow & Camp.**  
**YORKSHIRE RELISH—known all over the Indian Empire.**

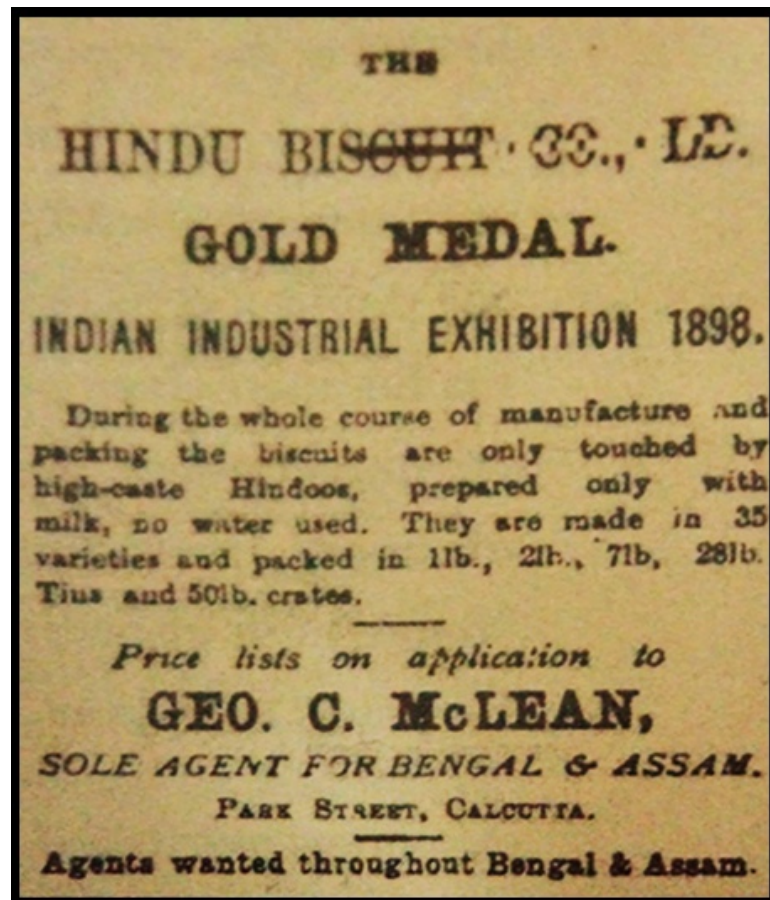
Warranted pure and free from any injurious ingredient.  
This Cheap and Excellent Sauce makes the plainest viands palatable, and the daintiest dishes  
most delicious.

The most cultivated culinary connoisseurs in India have awarded the palm to the YORKSHIRE  
RELISH on the ground that neither its strength nor its piquancy is overpowering, and that its invigorating  
rest by no means impairs the normal flavour of the dishes to which it is added. Employed either as  
material as a fillip to Chops, Steaks, Game, Salads, or Cold Meats, or used in combination by a skilful  
Bawarchi in concocting Soups, Stews, Ragouts, Curries, or Gravies for Fish and made dishes.

Sold in Bottles, 6d., 1s., & 2s. each. Prepared by GOODALL, BACKHOUSE & CO., LEEDS, ENGLAND.

**Sole Wholesale Agent for India: F. T. ATKINS, ALLAHABAD, N.W.P.**  
DEPOTS ALSO AT CALCUTTA, BOMBAY, MADRAS, LAHORE, and RANGOON.

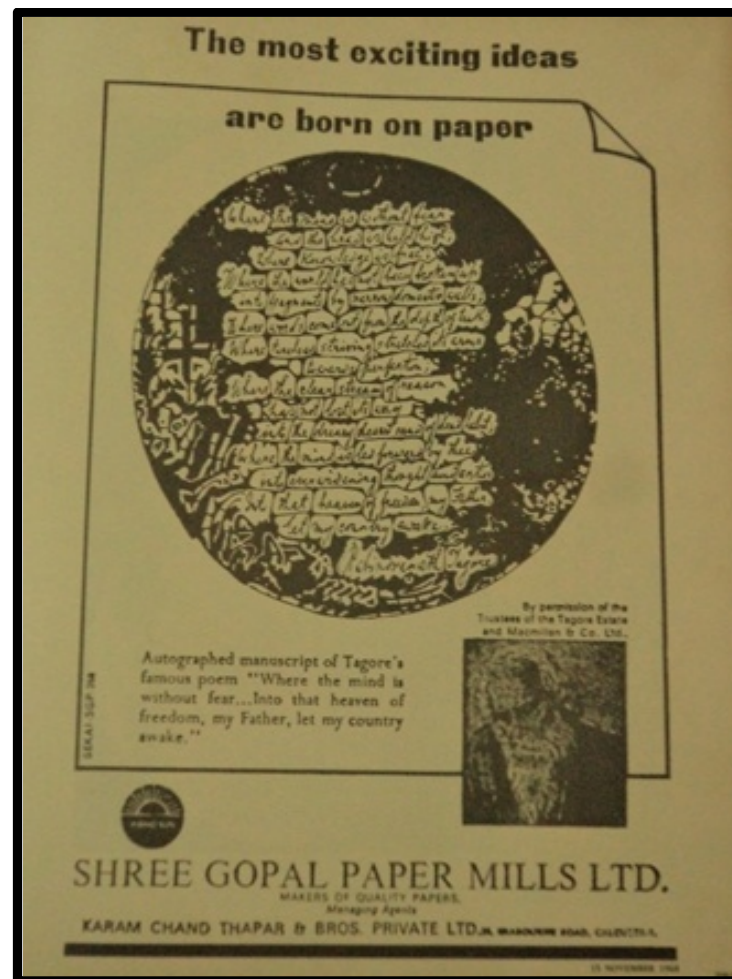
The use of religious sentiments has been an age old practice in advertising. Untouchability, still prevalent in the country, was practiced throughout India in the 1890s. An advertisement of The Hindu Biscuit Co. Ltd. states that “During the whole course of manufacture and packing the biscuits are only touched by high-caste Hindoos...” The advertiser explicitly claimed that the biscuits were prepared by high caste Hindus in order to cater the high caste Hindus and those who were of lower caste would, presumably, be more than satisfied since high caste Hindu people had prepared the biscuits.



Even in 1990s the launch of GANGA soap was the result of the strong communal undercurrent prevailing in India during that time. The decade of 1990s witnessed the advent of aggressive Hindutva. Since the river Ganga is considered as holy as God to the Hindus, the brand name GANGA pampered Hindu sentiments. It is ironic that the owners of The Hindu Biscuit Co. Ltd. and Ganga soap were both, apparently not devout Hindus.

Not only religious sentiments, but cultural sentiments have also formed the capital of advertising since long. An advertisement of Shree Gopal Paper Mills Ltd. that was featured in *The Times of India*, dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 1968, states: "The most exciting ideas are born on paper". The illustration of the advertisement used an autographed manuscript (photocopy) of Tagore's famous poem: "Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high...Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake."





Rabindranath Tagore is a part of our cultural heritage and almost a brand of Indian culture to the rest of the world. The use of Tagore's photograph and manuscript, thus, seems to be a sincere attempt on the part of the advertiser to evoke emotional feelings amongst the consumers.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a paradigm shift among the educated urban middle class Indians. The western mode of lifestyle became the refuge of many who were influenced by occidental thought-processes. There was a growing middle class during this time that started following the European lifestyle. Free thinking among women, though low in number, was a noticeable trend. The late 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century, thus, witnessed a few instances of female enterprise. A magazine entitled *Anthapur* from Baranagar in North Calcutta was solely a women endeavour. Banalata Devi was the chief editor and the tag line of the title stated: "EDITED, CONDUCTED AND WRITTEN BY THE FEMALES ONLY". Some of the most popular products of the time like Kuntaleen hair




advertisement declared the product as the “BIGGEST VALUE FOR MONEY”

**The CALENDER**  
makes you OLDER,  
but **KUNTALINE**  
makes you much  
YOUNGER.

Every occasion on the Calender, every day in the year, will be an added toilet-pleasure from the daily use of this restorative, stimulant, hair-beautifying

**KUNTALINE**, which will keep your hair healthy and full of vitality for months to follow. Don't you prefer 'a pure oil,' 'a good oil,' 'a healthful oil,' when it costs no more than the common?

**KUNTALINE** needs no recommendation.



In quality-the highest. | In fragrance-the sweetest.  
In quantity-the largest. | In popularity-the first.

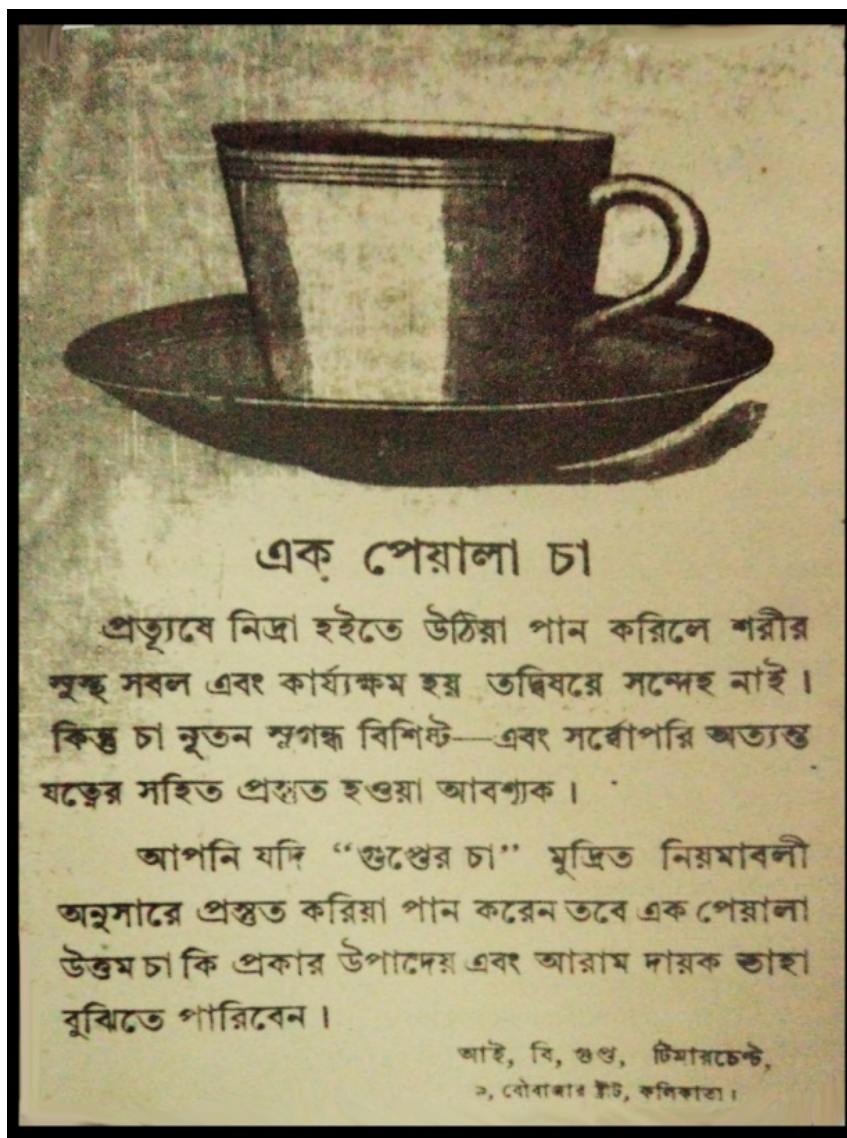
**HENCE THE BIGGEST VALUE FOR YOUR MONEY**

Sweet Rs. 1.    Lily Rs. 1-8.    Rose Rs. 2.  
Jasmin Rs. 2.    Violet Rs. 2-8.

**H. Bose,** Manufacturing Perfumer,  
61, Bowbazar Street,  
CALCUTTA.

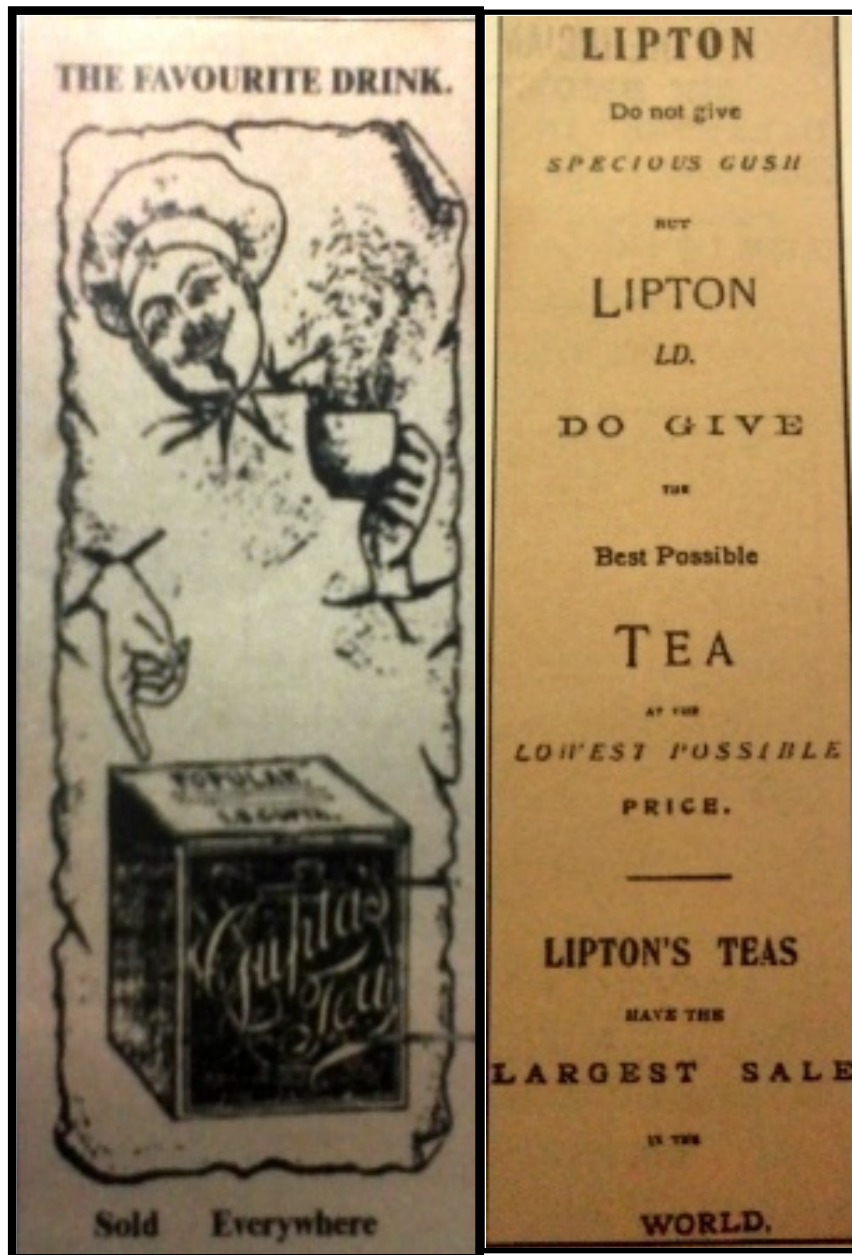
The concept of drinking tea was still not very popular in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century or at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In order to promote tea as a morning brew among the Bengalis, this 19<sup>th</sup> century advertisement of a tea company reflected the advantages of tea drinking besides highlighting the delicate aroma of that particular brand.



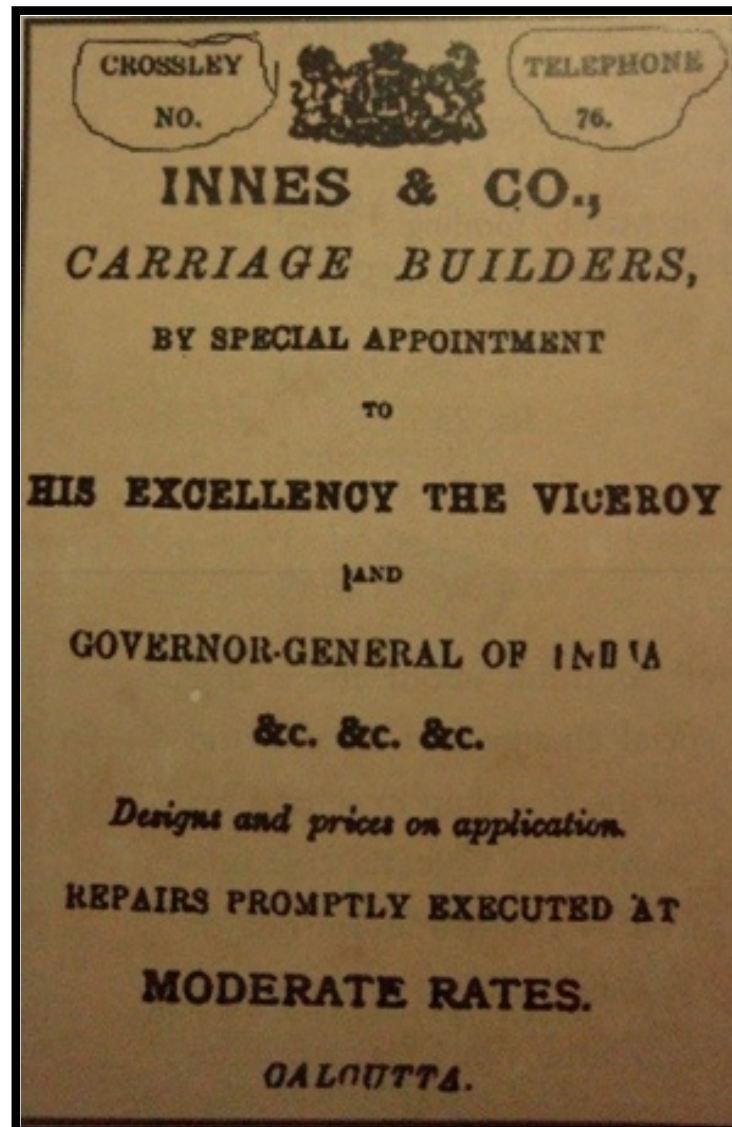


It is significant that this advertisement does not portray any illustration of tea leaves or even a packet of tea, but that it depicts a cup and a saucer. The focus of this advertisement is certainly on popularizing the concept of teadrinking. Gradually the concept of tea drinking became popular and the native Indians got familiarized with the morning brew.

In the year 1905, *The Statesman* published an advertisement of the same brand, I.B.Gupta's Tea, where the focus shifted from selling the concept of drinking tea to positioning the particular brand.



It has already been mentioned that a diachronic study of advertising mirrors the societal changes. Around 1881-82, a 50-line telephone exchange was set up in Calcutta and it flourished gradually. The first advertisement mentioning a telephone number appeared in 1865.



By 1885 there were at least 76 telephones in operation in Calcutta connections as evident from the above shown advertisement. The use of a telephone number proves the increasing popularity of telephone for business purposes.

The use of electricity changed the lives of people living in cities. An advertisement of F. & C. Olser, Calcutta helps us to understand the interest in people regarding electricity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



**ELECTRIC LIGHTING IN CALCUTTA.**

Installing Electric Light in Private Houses,  
Government and Mercantile Offices,  
Banks, Shops, etc.

*For connection with the mains of the Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation.*

F. & C. OSLER undertake the installing of Electric Light in Calcutta ready for connection with the mains of the Supply Corporation, whose current will be available on or about the 1st of January 1899.

F. & C. OSLER are prepared to receive orders for early execution, so that the light may be installed by the time current is available.

F. & C. OSLER undertake the wiring of houses in accordance with the Rules of the principal Fire Insurance Companies. All work is carefully executed under expert European supervision.

F. & C. OSLER guarantee their workmanship and materials to be of the best quality.

F. & C. OSLER supply Electroliers, Pendants, Brackets, and other Fittings of their own manufacture. A large and varied stock is available and may be seen in actual use in their Show-rooms worked by their own plant.

F. & C. OSLER'S charges are as low as they can be placed consistent with first-class workmanship and materials.

*ESTIMATES GIVEN ON APPLICATION.*

**F. & C. OSLER,**  
CALCUTTA.

The above discussed advertisements, thus, encapsulate almost 200 years of Pre-independent India reflecting the socio-religious-political & cultural aspirations of the people besides significant nuances as well.

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