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## INDIAN WRITINGS IN ENGLISH: AMUL ADVERTISEMENTS AS A CHRONICLE OF THE INDIAN HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

Advertisements are also a form of expression and hence can be categorized under the umbrella term of "Literature." In this paper, I intend to examine how the advertisement campaigns used by the Indian dairy brand Amul fit into the compartment of "Indian Writings in English." Amul, one of the oldest brands in India owes its success to the Amul mascot, fondly called the Amul girl. The iconic figure and her witty, yet thought-provoking comments on the contemporary issues appeal to the general Indian sensibility. If one were to compile the one-liners in Amul ads chronologically, it would chronicle the transition that India has gone through. In this sense, these advertisements are a document of Indian history presented as literature. I also examine the factors that make these ads truly Indian.

**Keywords:** Indian Writing, Advertisement, Hinglish, Mascot

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### INTRODUCTION

Chandran was thoroughly mystified. He asked: "You write in English or in Tamil?"  
"Of course in English. It is the language of the world."

"Why don't you read your poems before the Literary Association?"

"Ah, do you think any such thing is possible with grandmother Brown as its president? As long as he is in this college no original work will ever be possible. He is very jealous, won't tolerate a pinch of original work. Go and read before the Literary Association, for the two-hundredth time, a rehash of his lecture notes on Wordsworth or Eighteenth-century Prose and he will permit it. He won't stand anything else."

-R. K. Narayan, *The Bachelor of Arts*

The above extract highlights not only the importance given to English over regional languages in India, but also of the presumptions associated with it. When it comes to this foreign language that

we adopted into our mother tongue and crowned as one of the National languages, Indians have always been meticulous and choosy—be it the obsession with the right pronunciation or the coinage of new words like "eve-teasing" and "pre-poner" or the fixation with fancy vocabulary like "bamboozled."<sup>1</sup> Over the years, however, Indians passed over the stage of pretentious admiration for Shakespeare and Wordsworth, and has moved on to establishing their own identity in the international English speaking scenario. The world-wide acclaim received by works like *Midnight's Children* by Salman Rushdie and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy are a testimony to this. Lately, Indian Writings in English

<sup>1</sup> In "Author's Note" of *The Life of Pi*, Yann Martel recalls a friend's warning that Indians speak "funny English," using words like "bamboozle." Martel's narrator persona makes good use of the word disputing expensive train fare. "You're not trying to bamboozle me, are you? . . . There is no bamboozlement here."

have expanded itself over the boundaries of conventional genres of fiction, poetry, drama, and film.

#### MASCOTS IN THE WORLD OF ADVERTISING

At times, brands are promoted or presented with the help of personification—personified features or symbolic representatives which present the features of the brand symbolically. They are considered to be lucky for the brand because of their ability to promote the brand and are therefore called mascots. Usually, they give simple, easily graspable messages—“People tend to remember the mascots because of their uniqueness.” (Naqvi 199)

In case of certain brands, the identity of the mascot is the identity of the brand itself. One such brand in India is Amul—known for its “Amul girl” and the tagline “utterly butterly delicious.” This popularity is due to the many number of Amul hoardings which came with an amazing blend of humor and satire in their messages. There are very few Indian mascots that have survived this long in the advertising world. As for some of the other famous Indian mascots that we grew up with, they are no more. Air India's Maharaja has been driven out by his managers. Onida's devil has been ousted by the Koreans. And little Gattu, one of R. K. Laxman's creations, has been painted out by Asian Paints.

#### THE BIRTH OF THE AMUL GIRL

The Amul girl was created as a response to the Rival brand Polson's butter girl. Alyque Padamsee who is widely acknowledged as “the advertising guru of India” recalls in “Tickling the Funny Bone” that the first butter he ate at Bombay was Polson Butter:

They had coupons on each carton, which could be collected and redeemed for gifts. [...] [Then came] the Amul branding with just six hoardings located at prime sites. One of these was at the Chowpatty traffic light, where one invariably stopped, and it would never go unnoticed—one always wanted to wait and see what it said. Six months later, Amul became a major brand in Bombay and the Polson family quietly faded away!

(*Amul's India* 149)

The idea of a mascot for Amul was conceived in 1967 and executed by Sylester DaCunha, owner of the advertisement agency DaCunha Communications and his art director Eustace Fernandez. The Old Amul ad tagline said “Purely the Best” and was usually accompanied by the picture of a baby, dubbed as the “Amul baby.” It was DaCunha's wife Nisha who came up with the idea “Utterly Amul” which was later modified into “Utterly Butterly Amul.”

Thus the Amul girl was born—a chubby, healthy little girl who actually looks like she loves butter. After the little girl's first appearance as a charming little poppet in a polka-dotted frock and matching ribbon in her ponytail—licking her lips as if to say “utterly, butterly delicious”—the public response was so good that the creators decided to build an outdoor campaign around her. The first display presented the little girl praying by her bedside: “Give us this day our daily bread—with Amul butter.”

#### INDIA AS CHRONICLED THROUGH AMUL ADVERTISEMENTS

The evolution of the mascot is in fact a depiction of the changes that the nation has gone through in the past fifty years. What makes these advertisements a success is their immediacy—they are observations on the current issues. The most highlighted news of the week is taken and wittily commented upon in the hoardings that change every three days. “You might say that the ads represent a history of modern India acted out by a little heroine, healthy and confident about the future,” says Sylvester DaCunha in “The ‘Utterly Butterly’ Story.” (*Amul's India* 21)

Between 1970s and the coming of the economic reform in the mid-1980s, the Amul billboards document the disconnected concerns of a small group. An extensive mixture of subjects are tackled such as President Carter's 1978 visit (a tribute to the President and his love for peanuts), Charlie Chaplin's Gold Rush which was re-released in 1942, Lata Mangeshkar's honorary doctorate, the auction of Nizam's jewellery at Hyderabad, the introduction of cushioned seats and sleeping berths in train (wooden seats and berths were the most

common until the 1970s in Second and Third classes), and world's first test tube baby. The 1970s is usually regarded as the most demanding tiring decade for India as the very ideals on which this country was founded were misled and there were no contending farsightedness to replace those ideals. Most of hoardings therefore mention not very significant events as the overall condition of the nation was passive and gloomy. For instance, a hoarding about an Englishwoman marrying an Indian rickshaw-wallah with a caption that is bordering on offensive, and another hoarding about fashionable raincoats in Bombay were put up.

The Emergency is, of course mentioned. There are hoardings that refer to the mass sterilization program of Indira Gandhi's Emergency years (India's state of emergency between 1975 and 1977 included a family planning initiative that began in April 1976 through which the government hoped to lower India's ever increasing population) and the controversial Maintenance of Internal Security Act (MISA), a law passed by the Indian parliament in 1971 giving the administration of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Indian law enforcement agencies super powers.

As the National picture became more and more dismal, international subjects were focused upon. For example, Margaret Thatcher, who became the first woman Prime Minister after winning the 1979 general elections, is paid tribute to. No one can possibly miss the labored use of the word "Tory." Another example is the reference to UNESCO's proclamation of 1979 as the International Year of the Child. Mostly, these advertisements catered to the newspaper-reading elite upper class population. Take for instance the hoarding that refers to policemen demanding more wages (with the caption "Police sir, may I have some more...") which has strong likeness to a scene in Oliver Twist where boy Oliver asks "Please, sir, I want some more." This is a parallelism that only the Dickens-reading group would appreciate, which at the time was a minority in India.

The period between 1985 to mid 1990s is one in which the world went through dramatic changes and the Amul billboards stood witness to these. The focus was now on politics, international

affairs, and aspects of economic reform. The importance of popular culture was also growing with the increase in popularity of cinema and television. The major subjects of this period included the Bofors scandal, the grand achievement of India winning the kabaddi gold at the Asian Games, the end of the cold War, Ramayana and Mahabharata on TV, Operation Desert Storm, and the Mandal Commission.

Post 1991, Amul campaigns centered more around the middle class audience, with Indian affairs taking the center stage. Politicians began to be portrayed as villains. These were in reference to a series of political scandals and controversies during this time, namely, Jayalalita going to jail, Narasimha Rao's alleged involvement with a pickle baron, and the altogether messy situation in Uttar Pradesh. This is fueled by the growing recognition of media, which started to frame people's sense of reality. It is during this time that popular culture becomes one of the primary modes through which change is experienced. Such changes can be particularly seen in the hoardings marking the coming of satellite television and events like Miss Universe and Miss. Moreover, references of business begin to creep in including the Enron power controversy, Maruti Udyog's collaboration with Suzuki to launch Zen on the Indian roads, and the passing away of J.R.D. Tata.

Also, it can be observed that while the fetish with the international continued, India began to acquire an international profile by itself. The visit of Charles and Diana to the country, Arundhati Roy winning the Booker Prize, and Yuktha Mookhey becoming the 3rd Indian miss world in the last six years, all marked the rise of India's international profile.

After 2000, a prominent portion of the messages began to be drawn from Bollywood. The Hindi film industry was now in such an elevated position that the ordinary middle class existence revolved around it. Allusions to movies were everywhere and the Amul advertisements were no different. Most new movies got their own billboards. Apart from this, movie scraps and celebrity news were found to be eye-catching. There are hoardings that refer to a model's halter top snapping open on

the ramp during Lakme fashion week, controversy over Katrina Kaif's skirt while shooting for a film in Ajmer shrine, Ekta Kapoor's obsession with the alphabet 'k' (always used as the beginning alphabet in the titles of her serials) fused with the buzz that she checks her actors' horoscope before casting them, popularity of "saas-bahu" serials, Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt making a movie in Mumbai, and Shah Rukh Khan being stopped at US airport and detained for questioning.

Just like the media, the world of business and consumption grew to become an integral part of people's lives. The unveiling of the revolutionary Tata Nano—"world's cheapest, most cost effective, and technologically advanced car" with an affordable price tag of one lakh rupees, tributes to the popular ad campaigns like Vodafone's Zoo-Zoos, the new VAT proposals which were not well-received, and the public's feeling about stock markets and volatile Sensex, all feature in Amul campaigns.

We also see the anxiety caused by rapid liberalization. The impact of flyovers, the proposal to build a mall in front of Taj Mahal, the 2G scandal, and the Satyam scandal find mention too.

Interestingly enough, the ruling class was portrayed with undisguised disgust in Amul ads. Even the obituaries put up during this period do not contain even a single mention of a politician. Tributes were paid to actors and directors (Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Amrish Puri, Johnny Walker, Mehmood), artists, writers, and musicians (M.F. Hussain, Michael Jackson, Mario Miranda, George Harrison)—indicating who India thought worthy of respect.

Another important change during this period is the Internet and the many possibilities it brought with it. We also notice the first reference to issues of alternate sexuality marking the Delhi High Court judgment legalizing homosexuality. Unlike the usual witticism of Amul advertisements, the issue of terrorism is addressed with much seriousness in both content and tone.

Overall, the Amul ads are an interesting way to look at the history of our lived experiences.

**AMUL ADVERTISEMENTS AS "INDIAN WRITING IN ENGLISH"**

The nation being as wide and disparate as it is, there is very rarely a pan-India subject. Rahul DaCunha, the managing director and creative head of DaCunha Communications observes:

The south doesn't really speak Hindi. The east doesn't really watch Bollywood. [...] And the Hindi belt is obsessed with local politics. (*Amul's India* 109)

However, he goes on to say that the nation enjoys hoardings created in Hindi, so long as the language is simple, preferably Bollywoodized. Being one of the most popular Indian ads that choose to comment on almost all significant Indian topics, some subject matters are inevitable as they mirror what can be only called Indian sensibility. These include Bollywood, sports (especially cricket), and the great Indian drama of politics.

As far as the Amul ads are concerned, most movies do get a mention in their billboards. Apart from this, celebrity news is also targeted. Also, like most Indians, the Amul girl loves sports and has a faint bias for cricket. One of the best ads of all time was when India won over Australia in the 1987 Davis Cup semi-final in a totally unexpected manner. With the rubber tied 2-2, Ramesh Krishnan, with a gentle serve and guileful ground strokes, beat the Australian Wally Masur in straight sets, and Amul came up with: "Krishnan makes Masur ki daal." As far as the sport of cricket is concerned, the ads have paid tributes to cricket legends like Rahul Dravid, Kapil Dev, Sunil Gavaskar, and of course, Sachin Tendulkar. During IPL 3, came the ad "Chennai Sapaad Kings. Fully Yellow" that captured the essence of Chennai beautifully. Apart from Bollywood and sports, the Amul girl also finds inspiration in the Indian politicians. The shenanigans at the centre of power, the reign of the family, and the very personalities of the leaders have initiated much light-hearted and amusing Amul ads. Most of the political advertisements ridicule the leaders and portray them as hypocrites. When it comes to politics, the ads do not merely evaluate, but subliminally give an opinion that makes the reader think out-of-the-box. An MP's sexist comment about girls wearing jeans and using cell-phones, bill for 33% reservation for women in Parliament and State Assemblies passed by Rajya Sabha (a play on the

acronyms MP—Member of Parliament and MCP—Male Chauvenist Pigs), Sachin Tendulkar contesting for Rajya Sabha, the division of Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu CM Jayalalitha sacking her close confidant, and Maharashtra board excluding Arunachal Pradesh from the map of India, echoing the popular sentiment when Kiran Bedi was ousted from Tihar, Medha Patkar's resolve regarding the Narmada Dam Project, and two Karnataka ministers getting caught watching pornography on their phones in legislative assembly are few among them. Just 2011 alone witnessed countless scams: 2G, Radia Tapes, spot-fixing, CWG, the list goes on. Amul however managed to see the light-hearted side of the scandalous scandals.

Apart from the issues addressed by the advertisements, the "Indianess" also derives from the use of language. Amul ads are known for its puns and the local flavor of language. Though the Amul girl does not shy away from those in power, there is an unmistakable patriotism about her that Indians appreciate. This nationalism is mirrored in her delightful tautology. As Dave Barry observes in *Why Humor Is Funny*:

Puns are little "plays on words" that a certain breed of person loves to spring on you and then look at you in a certain self-satisfied way to indicate that he thinks that you must think that he is by far the cleverest person on Earth now that Benjamin Franklin is dead, when in fact what you are thinking is that if this person ever ends up in a lifeboat, the other passengers will hurl him overboard by the end of the first day even if they have plenty of food and water. (Barry 2)

How the creators of Amul advertisements find a trending story, drop it on its head and make a dairy pun out of it sure is a mystery. Puns are what help these advertisements stand out. They make you think and so you carry the advertisement with you. Also, the lines are seldom more than three or four words. All these add up to a formula that exemplifies the brand. Satire is a strong tool in this country. When this is publically done, it is appreciated and enjoyed as it gives a feeling of "telling it as it is." And what better way to express

this than the use of puns? Some of the best advertisements by this pun-tastic brand were created when the MPs demanded special treatment in airplanes ("Plane arrogance!"), when the municipal Corporation of Mumbai decided to clean the till-then-dirty city when Bill Clinton came on a visit ("Bill Clean town"), when Victoria terminal was renamed as Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus ("Victoria Terminated?"), and during the times of Mumbai floods ("Townpour!"). But as Edgar Allan Poe remarked in *Marginalia*, "The goodness of the true pun is in the direct ratio of its intolerability." (Frank 222) And sure enough, the puns have often led Amul to the doorstep of legal process.

Another interesting manipulation of language adopted by Amul is the use of Hinglish, a combination of Hindi and English. Hinglish is not a new phenomenon. From Salman Rushdie's "chutneyfication" to pop songs like "The Ketchup Song" to movie titles like *Love Breakups Zindagi* and *Shaadi ke Side Effects* to the publication of the book *The Queen's Hinglish: How to Speak Pukka* by Baljinder Mahal, Hinglish has become an unnoticed part of the Indian life. In "It's Hinglish, innit?," Sean Coughlan notes:

The exporting of words into English has also caught the attention of the south Asian media, with the Times of India reporting: "Brand India has shaken, stirred and otherwise Bangalored the world's consciousness." Yes, "to Bangalore" is another Hinglishism, meaning to send overseas, as in call centres. (BBC News Magazine)

Even in the field of advertising, Hinglish has been effectively used over the years. Some examples of this are Pepsi's 1998 slogan "Yeh Dil Maange More!" (This heart desires more!), "Yehi hai right choice, Baby" (This is the Right Choice, Baby), "Yeh Hai Youngistaan."

As mentioned earlier, till 1990, the Amul ads addressed a population living in the metros, talking and thinking in English—a group that felt more at home with what happened internationally than what happened within the country. The boards then are entirely in English, maybe with slight grammatical twists. Later, the whole Hinglish thing

came into existence—it gave the campaign a local flavor. It is the language of globalisation. There are more English-speakers in India than anywhere else in the world. Satellite television, movies and the internet mean that more and more people in the sub-continent are exposed to both Standard English and Hinglish.

Apart from Hinglish advertisements, there are those that cater to the regional audience too. During the Naxalite uprising in Calcutta in the 1960s, the city was in the grip of hartals with processions yelling, “Cholbe na!” (“Won’t do!”); Amul came with the hoarding that said, “Bread without Amul—cholbe na, cholbe na.”

#### CONCLUSION

The whole campaign including the famous tagline is a form of English which can be called nothing but Indian. The initial skepticism that “butterly” is ungrammatical was soon overlooked because no one cared. In fact, the word play amused people that it was incorporated into everyday vocabulary. If we take a look at the first campaigns and the recent one, we can see a great change. The transition has been gradual, but India has changed beyond recognition. Amul ads are thus like the country’s own diary. The closest parallel that can be thought of is R.K. Laxman’s common man pocket cartoons in *The Times of India*. The only difference is that while Laxman did it as newspaper cartoons and Amul as advertisement campaigns. The beauty of these campaigns is that its essence can be fully understood only by an Indian.

The story of Amul’s India is also one of a country coming in touch with itself, even as it transforms beyond recognition. From a somewhat disconnected class living in a world of its own, we see a country create its own narrative, with its own distinctive language, its own set of heroes, its own set of issues, and do the battle with its weakness. The river that is India flows on, and the brand that is Amul continues to give us a running commentary on what it sees, feels and experiences as it accompanies us on this glorious ride.

-Sylvester daCunha, Amul’s India

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