

USE OF SPORTING IMAGERY IN TONIC ADVERTISEMENTS OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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Introduction

From the first decade of twentieth century middle class Bengalis made several efforts to break the Colonial stereotyping of 'effeminacy' and instil a sense of pride in their physical prowess. Advertisers of sex tonics drew upon a variety of ideas about masculinity that were circulating in Bengal as they tried to create a customer base. They generally evoked anxieties resonant among middle class men about "weakness" and effeminacy notions that had acquired particular salience in the context of British Colonialism. Advertisers projected these anxieties into the realm of male sexuality, indicating that inadequacies in political and social realms were associated with sexual shortcomings. These advertisements could simultaneously draw upon worries about accumulating effects of bad habits in one's youth, middle class self conceptions of being modern and scientific in outlook and notions grounded in powerful erotic/romantic fantasies. This paper tries to trace the role of unique advertising campaigns of tonics using sporting imageries in the evolution of masculinity in colonial Bengal.

Role of sporting imageries in advertising media

Sports always played a major part in popular culture, with the result that the sports icons began to figure prominently in advertisements for consumer articles, invariably associating the attributes of a sporting activity with a product.³³ The growing popularity of sports made sportsmen, iconic figures, who were reported as protagonists in the advertisement world. Advertisements for health drinks and tonics, quiet expectedly, used the virile images of sportsmen. Sport images were used to magnify the positive growth and fitness resulting from the systematic consumption of these products.

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³³ Bush, A. J., Martin, C. A., & Bush, V. D., Sports celebrity influence on the behavioral intentions of generation Y. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 44(1), 2004, pp. 108-118; Ruihley, B. J., Runyan, R. C., & Lear, K. E., The use of sport celebrities in advertising: A replication and extension. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 19(3), 2010, pp.132-142.

Advertisement of Western tonics

Sport images were used to magnify the positive growth and fitness resulting from the systematic consumption of health drinks. A Wincarnis advertisement showed a batsman in an attacking position, implying that a daily dose of the tonic enhance vigour and makes a man suitable to hard work.³⁴ Since the start of its production in UK in 1887 by Coleman & Co., Wincarnis has been recommended because of its positive effects, especially for mothers after child-birth, for those recovering from an operation or those simply wanting good health. *The British Journal of Nursing* recorded in 1916 that its 'primary effect is immediate stimulation and invigoration of the system, and the secondary an upbuilding of mental and physical vigour'.³⁵ In a Waterbury's compound advertisement, a small boy stands with a cricket bat in his shoulders and in the background a batsman plays an authentic cover drive. It is implied that the small boy grown up with Waterbury's compound will have enough stamina to achieve success in sporting career. Here the caption is: 'Big little Man in Tip Top form'.³⁶ The most popular tonic after the First World War, Waterbury's Compound was taken as a cure to malaria, weak lung conditions and more commonly cough and cold.³⁷ Tonics have been advertised in different forms. One interesting advertisement of tonic was done by Cola Tonic with the caption 'work overtime without exertion'. Here rowing was featured as a medium of illustration.³⁸ Brovil, projected as a quick energiser drink was advertised as symbol of atheletic prowess all over the globe with illustrations of athletes, engaged in different sports.

Suratone, a wine like tonic ideal for the unfortunates who have demand for extra vitality and energy, advertised with the caption 'take a good start' featuring an athlete.³⁹ Sanatogen, a true tonic food, was advertised with the test result by a M.D on sportsmen in training which proved that Sanatogen increases the energy by about 23% after a fortnight's use. His report runs: 'I could prove that after using Sanatogen for sometime, long distance runners increased their pace by about 15% and that they recovered much more quickly when the race is over. A one mile runner reduced his record by 16 seconds.'⁴⁰

Virol health drink advertised with a picture of a child boxer with the caption 'will he fall in the fight?' and prescribed to give every children Virol, which contains just

³⁴ *The Statesman*, October 21, 1938.

³⁵ *The British Journal of Nursing* 57, 8 July 1916, p. 39.

³⁶ *Times of India*, 12 Jan 1942.

³⁷ Madhuri Sharma, 'Creating a Consumer: Exploring Medical Advertisements in Colonial India', in Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison eds., *The Social History of Health and Medicine in Colonial India*, Abingdon & New York: Routledge, p. 227.

³⁸ *The Bengalee*, 10 January, 1920

³⁹ *Hindusthan Standard*, September 7, 1945.

⁴⁰ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, July 13, 1928.

those vital foods which strengthen resistance to the attacks of illness.⁴¹ R. Banerjea, the sole stockiest of 'Hamlyn's Energy Drops ' put up their product as invaluable to the Athletes and Sportsmen, which gives amazing new strength and vitality (through blood stream) to out- class their competitors splendidly. The cost of a vial was Re. 1|4.⁴² Ladcovine, the perfect tonic wine of Lister antiseptics of Calcutta uses the simile of a winning horse with the man with vigour. The advertisement proclaimed:

*A horse that wins a classic event proves his speed and stamina beyond dispute. In other words strength and endurance are the two qualities which men need most for success in life. Ladcovine happily combines the properties that give both strength and stamina.*⁴³

In another instance, Ladcovine was advertised using the simile of wrestlers with the pain and sufferings of everyday life and advised the wrestlers in life to—

*take a regular dose of ladcovine before each meal to be successful in many bouts that you have to fight in life.*⁴⁴

Phosferine tonic was advertised as the panacea to every conceivable sort of psychosomatic disorder that a wrestler or athlete may confront. It alluded to actual events in which wrestlers admittedly benefited from using the tonic on the condition of remaining anonymous. Consumption of the tonic was projected as an ideal way to sustain stamina and produce expected outcomes. Additionally, the tonic advertised its nerve-steadying effects in everyday encounters on regular consumption. It often featured sportspersons who gave publicity to the product by confessing the benefit gained from its consumption. W.H. Walker writes that -

*As a player in one of the most famous teams in England, I must admit that Phosferine gives invaluable aid in the continuous training one undergoes to keep fit throughout the Season. Each game means every fraction of endurance and skill we can summon up, and, however hard the game, or rough the weather, I have found that Phosferine helped me to go through it and finish as fresh as paint, with nerve steady to meet all that comes along. In short, Phosferine gives the player the dash and impetus to outlast the hottest game.*⁴⁵

In a unique advertisement of Scott's Emulsion it was proclaimed as the only tonic for body building. The advertisement showed an Englishman carrying a huge cod fish in his back. The caption was—"When you are weak and run down you need Scott's Emulsion- the proved strength maker."⁴⁶

⁴¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 21 July, 1927.

⁴² *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, January 22, 1934

⁴³ *The Statesman*, September 2, 1945.

⁴⁴ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 24 February, 1939

⁴⁵ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, July 14, 1927.

⁴⁶ *The Englishman*, 8 January, 1927

Horlicks enabled its consumers to play with vigour and energy by giving them balanced nourishment. In one of the cartoons, a hockey player lifts his game after drinking Horlicks on a doctor's advice.⁴⁷ Horlick's Malted Milk was advertised as a drink which gives health and energy featuring a sketch of a horseman playing polo with an assertion 'makes you feel fit, and enter into every sport with the keenest and absolute enjoyment.'⁴⁸

Noor Mohamed Jr promoted Dextrosol, which was taken in tea, milk or fruit drinks, as an essential part of his regular diet, especially ahead of a football match.⁴⁹ In one of the Cadbury's Bourn-Vita advertisements, the footballer Sanmatha Dutt championed the drink by admitting that as a footballer he had benefited immensely from taking the refreshing drink regularly.⁵⁰ The famous Mohan Bagan football icon Gostho Paul endorsed Bournvita and proclaimed it as an essential secret behind his success:

"During my 25 years active participation in 1st class football I always felt that for all strenuous outdoor games nutritious food essential to keep oneself fit. I have been taking Bournvita regularly lately and find it very useful to keep me fit."⁵¹ In another advertisement the famous swimmer and winner of world's endurance record P. K. Ghosh recommended this ideal body building food to all swimmers.⁵²

Indigenous tonic advertisements

Dr. Burman's *Nervine* tonic pills advertised with the caption –

"Will bring energy in every dose."

Here also a man of robust physique is featured with a pose of flexing his muscle.⁵³ A similar product, D.A.P.'s *Mrita Sanjibani Sudha* carried out a similar picture. The advertisers thus drew upon prevailing ideas about men's sexual health to fashion appeals they hoped would compel readers to buy their tonics, potions and lotions.⁵⁴

Chemist Company C. K. Sen & Co. Ltd. advertised with a picture of a bowler in action from the runners up end with the following lines—

"Athletes are often specially subject to various internal troubles. Regular doses of Suraballi Kasaya will cleanse the system and remove any trace of

⁴⁷ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, July 26, 1937.

⁴⁸ *The Hindoo Patriot*, January 20, 1913.

⁴⁹ *Indian Cricket*, October, 1939.

⁵⁰ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, March 22, 1937.

⁵¹ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 10, 1937.

⁵² *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 24, 1937.

⁵³ *The Indian Planter's Gazette and Sporting News*, 3 January, 1920.

⁵⁴ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, May 17, 1937.

*congestion, muscular aches, pains or acidity and bring a delightful change from mental and nervous fatigue.*⁵⁵

Thus we find the famous Calcutta Chemist using the colonial sporting action which signifies wide acceptance and popularity of the game among almost all sections of the society. Instance may be made of *Amritaballi Kasay*, a restorative sarsaparilla, prepared by Kaviraj N. N. Sen promised to keep fit for the approaching winter, the season of healthy activities featuring an athlete in long jump track and a lawn tennis player.⁵⁶ *Suraballi Kasaya* of C.K.Sen & Co. Ltd proclaimed to cleanse the system and remove the various internal troubles which the athletes are often subject to featuring the cricketers in action.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Physical disability of the Bengali's happened to be a much discussed topic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Thus the tonic advertisers actually found ample vacuum for filling up the constructed gaps which was very much there. In this paper, I have analysed the visuals and texts of select advertisements to show how the advertisers utilised discourses related to masculinity and male sexuality to make very similar items appear different and more persuasive than their counterparts. In the contemporary period, athleticism as a representation of masculinity or as a symbol of physical vigour was used as a mode of selling tonics. Thus, these advertisements played a critical role in the construction of masculinity or male sexuality, as they generally evoked anxieties resonant among middle class men about "weakness" and effeminacy notions for consumption of tonics alluring the urge to restore manhood.

⁵⁵ *The Statesman*, 2 January, 1927

⁵⁶ *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 11 February, 1939

⁵⁷ *The Statesman*, 2 January, 1927