

## **SHIFTING NARRATIVE: THE EVOLVING IMAGE OF WOMEN THROUGH ADS IN INDIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Women comprise half of the population but are one of the most repressed and suppressed species in world history. Regardless of who wins and loses, women have always been the ones who suffer. The media is contributing to this suffering. The ad owners have generated 1.1 billion dollars in the year 2023<sup>1</sup>. This shows the impact that it has on an individual's mind. It is said that an individual sees around 50–400 advertisements per day<sup>2</sup>. The advertisements do two things: first, they reinstate the social norm or bring about new changes. Society is composed of different aspects, and half of society is composed of women who not only watch ads but are conditioned in such a way that prevents them from seeing the advertisement in a rational sense. As any human could, they also get attracted to the emotional angle of the movies. Women's education and empowerment measures are still low in India; therefore, advertisements can impact the lives of women more rapidly due to a lack of education and awareness. This research paper will explore the impact of the incorrect depiction of women in advertisements and how it is legally regulated. For better analysis, some ads are analysed from pre-independence to the modern day.*

**Keywords:** Advertisements, women, society, gender bias, equality

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<sup>1</sup> “Advertising Revenue in India 2008-2026” (Statista, March 14, 2024)

<[<sup>2</sup> Rishi Rawat, “Fact-Checking — How Many Ads Do We See in a Day?” \(Frictionless Commerce, March 5, 2024\)](https://www.statista.com/statistics/233468/india-advertising-revenue/#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20the%20total%20revenue,half%20of%20the%20advertising%20revenue.>.</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Advertisements, due to growing digitalization are now becoming an integral part of the society. advertisement not only reinstate the existing roles in the society but also are the witness of change in the social norms. It is said that the cultural dimension of advertising came in 1920s when the producers wanted to link their product to the lifestyle of the consumer making it relatable or crate aspiration to attainment of certain goal by the product.

Women account to 50 % of population and thus can be proportionally regarded as equally important as men. But this is not the case , society's social norms and customs have also seeped in the advertisement industry .In United states during the world war II when women were required to enter into labor force they were shown responsible for the working of the country's economy and showed them the path of financial freedom as an way to achieving their freedom.<sup>3</sup> As the WW-II ended women were forced back to their homes by citing the various bad conditions of the day care centers. In the late 1960s women were portrayed as an sex object and were restricted to their "motherly" roles. In 1970s due the feminist movement and organizations demanding freedom to vote, jobs and reproductive rights this notion changed.

In India unlike the monolithic homogenous society, India had a multicultural structure. Due to the previous British rule a lot of new customs and traditions were adopted in India. the modernity was associated to the western thinking and ideals and were often looked upon in the family settings in India.

Though women did not fight for voting rights but the freedom was passively restricted by the society by conditioning young girls into thinking that household jobs are their only priority and their feminine features like being submissive, passive and subservient will only fulfill their end goal; to find a good husband who will support her financially.

In this project the researcher has tried to compare two MTR ads, which is of a ready to eat meal mix company. In the first ad which is date 2010 the housewife makes ten different types of dishes in very less amount of time; it portrays her feminine ability to multitask and is shown like Hindu

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<sup>3</sup> "From Housewife to Superwoman: The Evolution of Advertising to Women – Consuming Women, Liberating Women: Women and Advertising in the Mid 20th Century"  
<<https://sites.duke.edu/womenandadvertising/exhibits/women-in-advertising/from-housewife-to-superwoman-the-evolution-of-advertising-to-women/>>.

goddess having multiple hands which effortlessly obey the commands of the members of the household. The other ad, set in 2016 portrays a nuclear family cooking meal together. this is a modern-day touch to the evolving family structure and encourages equality in household tasks.

## **STATEMENT OF PROBLEM**

The revenue for television advertisements is 297 billion Indian rupees in 2023 and is estimated to rise to 330 billion Indian rupees. the shows how much the ads contribute to the lives of an individual. The FMGC sector contributes to the total spending of the industry. This includes the foods, beverages, toiletries and cosmetics and other consumables. 32% of women are housewives and 92% of them take part in household activities. This makes them more susceptible to the advertisements related to this sector. Thus, the women actor's presence as a lead actor is more in these advertisements. these ads show the societies perspective and dream of an ideal women, that's they are suitable to determine the gender goals of society. the aim of the research is whether this change is really a change or the social stigma wrapper in the glossy paper of modernity

## **ANALYSIS**

### World view and changes

During the war, women in the United States were called upon to join the workforce, but they were later expected to return to their homes when the men came back.the ads that came after , portrayed women in to decorative , homely ways. Following the feminist movement, this perception shifted towards women being independent and able to behave according to their own wishes. This change is evident in the Virginia Slims campaign 'You've Come a Long Way Baby,' which incorporated phrases from the women's liberation movement. During the 1980s, the Enjoli perfume ad '24 Hour Woman' portrayed a 'Superwoman,' perpetuating the stereotype that women can juggle both household responsibilities and work. Such stereotypes put pressure on working women to demonstrate their ability to balance both domains and handle responsibilities without external or family assistance. These stereotypes also pressure homemakers to believe that their work is less important compared to the work in the economic market.

Socio – Legal perspective on the status of women in India

In India feminist movements can be divided into three waves, first started from 1850-1920 can be recognised as when sati was banned and widow remarriage was introduced, the second when Gandhi Incorporated women in the freedom struggle movement which resulted in Sarojini Naidu becoming the first congress president and the third after the independence when women demanded equality and freedom to work. It can be also associated with the formation of national commission for women in 1992. Then came the case of Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan<sup>4</sup> which laid the foundation of Prevention of Sexual Harassment at workplace (prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) which gave remedy and procedure associated with sexual harassment cases at workplaces. Other cases followed wherein regressive and unequal practises were brought down these include laws on talaq and acceptance of trans rights.

In Indian society though the political rights were provided without any struggle, social rights were still at the mercy of men. A woman though is encouraged to be educated but her end goal is often associated with being married and having kids and see the household. After the marriage the ‘permission’ to work by the husband is required, this notion gives uncharted power to the in-laws and the husband to decide the woman’s life, laying conditions as they wish, while performing this so called ‘open minded’ perception.

In India, advertizing has been very important tool for propagating generic ideas to a large group. These ads also state the underlying sociological state of the country. According to a study conducted by UN women, women take almost same screen time as men and have high speaking time compared to men but is attributed to cleaning ads and household related ads directed toward the female consumers. Colour also plays an important role as 66.9% of women shown in the advertisement have light to medium skin tones campaigns like Fair and Lovely encourage the lighter skin colour and discourages people who have darker skin tone. Male characters are twice as likely to be part of a paid occupation than women characters, they are more likely to be depicted in leadership positions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan AIR 1997, SUPREME COURT 3011

<sup>5</sup> India Chapter of International Advertising Association at.el. , pg 17-23, (UNICEF,2021)

### Analysing the selected ads

The advertisements have a huge impact on the rural society where social norms and customs are more stringent and freedom of deviance is limited. The add can be of two type one which institutionalises the existing social norm and the second which inspires change while respecting traditions.

#### 1960s- 1980s

This ad from the 1965 tell the social condition of those times.<sup>6</sup> Here the parents are the target audience advised to save for their daughter's marriage from the childhood itself. This is reflected in the age of consent being 15 years. This also signifies a judicial amendment done by the British called the Sharda act also called the *child marriage restraint act* 1929<sup>7</sup> which prohibits child marriages and fixed the age of consent to 14 years for females and 18 years for men. This ad represents the underlying notion that a woman's job is only to get married and assume household responsibilities. The ad also suggests the dominance of the groom's side on the bride's family to pay for the wedding and probably dowry charges too. The dowry prohibition act 1961 prohibit giving or receiving of dowry by the families. Still, a study conducted on 40,000 marriages in rural India showed that 95% of marriages had dowry payments. In 2022, 6.4 thousand deaths are reported by torture related to dowry.

This ad of a sewing machine company from 1970s<sup>8</sup> again portrays the stereotypical role of a women and is urging the parents to teach the girl child to behave like a housewife and only then will she be respectable in the society. This can be seen in the data from NSSO stating on 33% of women joining work force and is regarded as the highest percentage of all times. Even today 67% of working women are dependent on their male family member for money. This also hinders fundamental rights of the women to choose her own profession "*Article 19 ( 1) (g) of Constitution of India provides Right to practice any profession or to carry on any occupation, trade or business to all citizens subject to*"

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<sup>6</sup> Medda S, "Experts Speak: The Evolution of Women's Portrayal in Indian Ads" (SocialSamosa, March 12, 2024) <<https://www.socialsamosa.com/experts-speak/evolution-women-portrayal-indian-ads-4326737>> .

<sup>7</sup> The Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. (19 of 1929)

<sup>8</sup> Sarjana singh , 'Sewing your way to a good marriage – 1972'(Storypick ,25<sup>th</sup> June 2015) , <<https://www.storypick.com/old-indian-ads/>> . accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> june 2024

1990s to 2010

The 1990s brought in liberalisation but women were still shown as street smart and having good bargaining skills. This can be seen in the ad<sup>9</sup> below where the woman is shown bargaining and stingy but doesn't compromise on the quality of the products. The woman is portrayed as a typical Indian housewife with the traditional symbols of married woman like mangalsutra (nuptial chain), bindi etc. , her intelligence is only accepted in the realms of the household. This stingy attitude also maybe a result of 1990s economic crisis which led to rise in consumer price index of 13%.

This MTR Ready to eat mixes ad screened in 2010<sup>10</sup> shows that while the woman is multitasking to cater needs of all the members of the family, her wishes and need are forgotten. She is compared to the Hindu goddess who have multiple hands, working effortlessly for her family. In this era, we are unable to see the traditional symbols of marriage, she is modernised but still in the clutches of traditions.

2011 to 2024

The era can be characterised as the fourth wave of feminism ,where the # MeToo movement had started and women education campaigns like beti bachao beti padhao campaigns were also seen.

This MTR ad<sup>11</sup> shows a woman who is helped by her family to cook a Sunday brunch using the Ready to eat mixes. Here gender inclusivity is shown but it is flawed as the woman is only helped on Sundays to cook meals but is silent on the contribution on other days. But still, this shows us a shift in the ideology no matter how small it is. This era also witnessed higher marriage age and more higher education rate in women.

In 2016, ariel launched the #Sharethe load campaign<sup>12</sup> wherein people were asked who was responsible for laundry in the household, 70% men said that laundry is a wife's job. This ad depicts the burden of household work on one individual when both of the partners are working. According

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<sup>9</sup> Surf Excel, "Surf Excel Lalitaji" <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALxiXkHxqCc>> . accessed on 31<sup>st</sup> may 2024

<sup>10</sup> Gaurav Shah, MTR Breakfast Mix 30 Sec Hindi, YOUTUBE (Jul 16, 2012), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NEal64YLTIE> accessed on 31<sup>st</sup> may 2024

<sup>11</sup> ET Bureau ,photograph of a mother having six arms ,Brand Equity ( Jul 23, 2015 at 12:43 PM ) ,<https://brandequity.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/advertising/mtr-makes-weekends-special-with-new-ad-for-breakfast-mixes/48185235> accessed on 20<sup>th</sup>

<sup>12</sup> "The #ShareTheLoad Journey | Ariel India" <<https://www.ariel.in/en-in/about-ariel/share-the-load/the-share-the-load-journey>>.

to a study, women spend around 297 min in contrast to 31 min spend by men in domestic work. This impedes women to achieve financial independence and is then dependent on the man for her financial needs. The research tells us that in 1993-94 in rural India 46.5% of women engage in the unpaid domestic duties, this number has drastically increased to 59.7% in 2011-12. Similarly in the urban area the shift is similar; from 53.3% in 1993-94 to 63.7% in 2011-12.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

### *Sociological changes*

According to a report the consumers are more willing to see different groups in advertisements. People want to feel related to the characters, and find consonance with their own life situations.

Because of the increasing awareness in the consumers, creators are forced to bring positive changes to the stereotypical depiction of women. This can be seen in ads like Dove's StopTheBeautyTest<sup>13</sup> film campaign which highlighted the problems women face due to their physical traits during matchmaking. Another of these reformatory ads is "Swiggy's Women's Day ad" which showed what pops up when one searches the word 'Desi Masala', instead of indigenous spices being shown in the internet, obscene and derogatory pictures of women are shown on the internet. This ad very well shed light on the objectification of women.

These stereotypical depiction can only change when the creators are themselves not gender biased and are aware of the impact that the depiction has on society. This call for a need for more and more female directors like Zoya Ahtar, Gurneet Moonga etc to represent women voices in a largely male dominated show industry.

### *Legal changes*

The association of National advertisers has launched a SeeHer movement which strives toward the accurate portrayal of women in advertisements, media and entertainment. They have used a data driven methodology to identify gender bias in media. The GEM quantifies the four key measures in women in Advertisements

- Presentation

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<sup>13</sup> Dove India, "Dove | #StopTheBeautyTest (Hindi)" <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E3kWzRB6Yy8>>.

- Respectfulness
- Appropriate manner of presentation
- If the female character is being view as a powerful role model or not.

Acts like Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986 (IRWP Act) prohibit the indecent and obscene representation of women in advertisements. The Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 (CTNR Act), one among the various media regulations in India, “prohibits the transmission of advertisements on the cable network which are not in conformity with the Advertisement Code.”<sup>14</sup> The problem with these regulations is that it only prohibit obscenity in ads but cannot prevent the ads which reinstate the social norms unless they are indecent.

Judicial changes are coming up like ‘<sup>15</sup>replacing phrases like “adulteress” to “ a woman who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage” and “chaste” woman, “dutiful” wife, “housewife” to a plain “woman”, “wife” and “homemaker” respectively.’

## **CONCLUSION**

Advertisements and media are reflections of a society. They give us a sneak peak into the ongoing trends and ideologies prevailing in the country. Society is a group of individuals having varied ideologies and cultural background. The Indian society has come along a long path from having “rishikas” like ‘gargi’ and ‘Maitreyi’ to keeping women in purdah, giving women voting right to leading women education and empowerment. With this change the society has also brought along with its stereotypes.

Stereotype are then reinstated by the advertisements. They make a woman sitting in rural village believe that her job is to only manage the household and bring up her children, whereas the advertisements like “:24 Hour superwomen” make a housewife feel that her work is not that important. These advertisements play with the viewers emotions to sell their products.

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<sup>14</sup> Prabhat Kumar Saha, Sthiti Dasgupta, *OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN IN MEDIA: A FEMINIST-LEGAL PERSPECTIVE*, 180 ,(ILI Law Review 2022).

<sup>15</sup> “Fighting Stereotypes: The Hindu Editorial on the Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes” (The Hindu, August 17, 2023) <<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/fighting-stereotypes-the-hindu-editorial-on-the-handbook-on-combating-gender-stereotypes/article67204889.ece>>.



But these advertisements have also led to social changes like the Fair & Lovely controversy where colourism in ads is portrayed though the brand changed its name still it continues to exhibit the same colour bias.

Slowly changes are being brought in and the society is slowly developing its tolerance towards equality. This can be seen in the depiction of a female driver in the Hyundai Ad where she is helping the man to park his car, while breaking the stereotype of women being bad drivers.

Still, we have a long way to go. We while doing this struggle should remember what Michelle Bachelet said

*“Gender equality will only be reached if we are able to empower women”*