

Shaping Sexuality in Colonial North India: Aphrodisiac Advertisements and the Public Sphere

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to understand the refiguring and reaffirming the concept of sexuality in colonial north India (Twentieth century) through advertisements of aphrodisiacs in one particular journal, Rasili Kahaniyan, which appears to be dedicated solely to that end. The remarkable aspect of these times being the construction of morality in general and masculine and feminine ideals in particular due to the influence of the anti-colonial struggle, the stories in Rasili Kahaniyan attempt to unlock the repressed sexual fantasies of the general public in the times of strict social and legal censure where the attempts to reign in the rasili were manifold. The public sphere attempted to sanitise 'low' culture and the literature signifying it, which in turn led to journals like Rasili Kahaniyan, mocking the socio-sexual 'norms' and feeding off the societal anxiety of repressed sexuality.*

Key Words: colonial India, sexuality, repression, aphrodisiac advertisements

An advertisement in the journal *Rasili Kahaniyan* goes like this: (1)

Adbhut Art

22 adbhut rangin sundar auraton ki tasveeren, aur ek reflecto ainak jismein se jab tasveeren dekhen to ek aankh se kapde pahne hue nazar aawein aur doosri aankh se dekhne par tasveeren bagair kapdon ke asli roop mein dikhai dewein.

(Translation: Amazing Art. 22 amazing colored photographs of extremely beautiful women, with reflective goggles through which when you view the photographs, with one eye you see them wearing clothes and through the other eye you can see them naked as nature meant them to be.)

This appears in the 1945 issue of a journal dedicated to publishing short stories from Allahabad. It sure tells an interesting story. Since nineteenth century, advertisements were being printed in large numbers in newspapers and magazines. One can delineate their progress from first being solely about a new book or journal, moving on to medicines and consumer products in which aphrodisiacs figure prominently in the early twentieth century; and as we move towards the 1940s, gadgets such as Adbhut Art and advertisements about motion pictures and theatre also start figuring in considerable numbers.

1. INTRODUCTION:

The print advertisements in colonial India allows us to study consumerism, cultural ideals and the dynamics of the contemporary society. By looking at them one can see the emerging patterns of culture and the social morphology of the target readers. This paper will explore advertisements in a popular journal to understand how they looked at notions of human sexuality and expressed the anxieties related to it in colonial India. All this was happening in the public arena, in an atmosphere that was filled with moral censure.

Early-twentieth century onwards, aphrodisiac advertisements become a regular feature of the journals and newspapers of the times (2). What is most interesting here to note is the fact that though there was censure against sex manuals and other titillating literature during this time, these advertisements continued to be printed and that too with increasing frequency and more extensive cover space. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the colonial government as well as the reformist brigade which was pushing the state, were infused with a drive to cleanse anything that had the 'tendency to deprave the mind' (3). Hence this period was a blend of opposites. We notice here a contestation of space and logic, a drive to repress hand in hand with a desire to express and explore. A lot has been written about it and continues to be written, the reason being this amazing dynamism of those times: the tussle between 'low print' and 'high literature', the appropriation of space and their conversion into instruments of power. The proliferation in the publication of 'obscene' books and pamphlets (with the government itself claiming so) has been variously interpreted, but one thing is clear: popular print culture revolted against the repression of sexuality even as it affirmed it. In exploring a market for sexuality it expanded the space within which sexuality could be discussed and ideas about sexuality could circulate. The borrowed notion of Victorian morality when imposed in India created a confused state of affairs. Rising nationalism and reformist zeal fused with a Christian moralism to create a

new moral public culture in which what had been accepted and prevalent so far became a taboo. ‘Depravity’ was sought to be repressed, sensuousness in literature and art was disapproved. It is in this context that we see *Sringar* poetry came under criticism, holi songs were seen as lewd (4), songs sung in marriages were labeled obscene (5) and even some dialects and languages were criticized for being sensuous. Seen through the lens of morality, they suddenly became ‘obscene’ (6). Thus marginalized and sanitized, the void left by them was filled in by cheap pulp literature which found a ready market. Using a tactful strategy, these tracts and sex manuals used a Sanskritized language and claimed to be spreading sexual science. Advertising thus became a new means of cultural socialization – circulation of new ideas, in new ways.

2. Rasili Kahaniyan: The Story told through advertisements

Mahatmaji ka Chamatkar

Mera janm ek dhani parivar mein hua. Apne pita ka ladla putra hone ke kaaran main dhan aur vyanjan mein ghira rehtha tha, lekin phir bhi main sukhi nahi tha. Kusangat mein padkar mujhe gupt rog ho gaye (7). Pehle to ek do saal maine lok-laaj ke bhay se apna bhed chhipaye rakha parantu rog ne bhayanak soorat ikhtiyar kar li. Ab main ghabra utha, sansaar mein chaaro aur andhera maaloom hone laga, tab meri aankhein khuli. Ilaaj shuru kiya, bade-bade doctoron, hakimon, vaidyon ki fees roop mein rupiye aur dawaiyon ke kharidne mein pani ki tarah rupya behne laga, phir bhi main nirash hi raha. Ab main ghabra utha aur charon taraf se andhkaar dikhlai dene laga aur lagne laga ki is dukhmay jeevan se to mar jana behtar hai... Ek mahatmaji ek gaanv mein eent par raam hue the, main bhi saubhagya se aur logon ke sath unke darshan karne gaya... Daivi shakti se mere dukhi jeevan ke pichhle adhyay unke hridayay pat par khinch gaye aur meri aankhon ne hridayay ka sara bhed apne aap us mahaan purush par pratkar diya... (8)

(Translation: Miracle of the Saint. I was born in a wealthy family. Being loved by my father, I was surrounded by wealth and indulged in merriment but still I was not happy and satisfied. I got into bad company due to which I acquired sexually transmitted diseases. Initially, due to fear of social ostracisation I kept it under wraps for a couple of years but the ailment deteriorated. Then I panicked, it felt as if I was engulfed by darkness all around. I became conscious then and started medications. I visited famous doctors and spent a lot of money but all in vain. I was so disappointed and hopeless that death seemed a better option than the atrocities of life...there was a saint residing in a village nearby and fortunately I went to get his blessings along with some people...through divine powers, he saw through the troubles of my past and my eyes betrayed the turbulence of my heart...)

This is an abstract from the journal *Rasili Kahaniyan*. At first glance it appears to be a story, judging from the title of both the abstract as well as the journal, and even from the way it was printed. But it is actually an advertisement for an aphrodisiac ‘*Premvati*’. The advertisement is narrated in the first person keeping the identity of the narrator concealed. As has been already stated above, aphrodisiac advertisements became a regular feature of the journals and newspapers from early-twentieth century onwards (9). Print culture allowed circulation of all sorts of ideas to spaces that were earlier secluded, and insulated from the world. It could tap people’s anxieties and fantasies, promise miracle cures, announce impossible solutions to intimate problems.

There was suddenly an increase in the number and types of such remedies available and a lot of people claimed to cure all kind of deficiencies and ailments catering to a wide range of consumers, chiefly male. Using large and attractive images and a language that was immensely persuasive, advertisements of these ‘wonder medicines’ persuaded men to believe in omnipotent power of their sexuality. Written into these advertisements are stories of a whole range of categories and ideas.

Going back to the “*Mahatmaji ka Chamatkar*” from *Rasili Kahaniyan*, one can notice in it a gradual change in which the notion of sexuality was being commercially exploited. This particular advertisement is a far cry from the advertisements published prior to it in other magazines. Initially, as one goes from one advertisement to another (in different magazines and newspapers), they are chiefly descriptive in nature, with the text narrating the way in which the ‘wondrous concoctions’ works. Advertisements for ‘*Madan Manjari*’ declared cures for impotence, premature ejaculation and nocturnal emissions (10). Here the deficiencies themselves catch attention purely because of their sexual nature and therefore on the virtue of being which, generally not discussed or openly talked about.

These advertisements opened a new public space for sexual information. So huge was the popularity of these products that even “respectable” newspapers and journals printed them in large numbers. On a single page of

Vartaman, dated 6 August, 1938, there were five such advertisements (11). Clearly the primary purpose of a journal like *Rasili Kahaniyan* was not to publish stories and eventually establishing itself as a literary journal; its actual stories were advertisements. In its March 1945 edition, there were fifteen advertisements of aphrodisiacs and sex manuals filling around twenty five pages. Almost all the advertisements for aphrodisiacs were in a story form similar to “*Mahatmaji ka Chamatkar*”: starting like a story, building the plot, and eventually turn into an advertisement. This advertisement further goes on to say:

Par yeh bees saal pahle ki baat hai. Ab aaj main khush hoon. Aaj us parmatma ki kripa se aarogya hoon aur teen swasthya bachche bhi hain jo bilkul aarogya hain.

Hua Kya? Mujh mein itna parivartan kaise ho gaya? Yeh jaan kar aapko aashcharya hoga ki main eek dawa sevan ki (12)

(Translation: this story goes back twenty years. I am happy and healthy now and I have three kids who are healthy too. But how did this happen? How did I change so much? You will be surprised to know that I took a medicine)

The advertisement finally describes how the narrator was given the formula for the medicine called ‘*Premvati*’ by the saint and how he was directed by him to prepare it under his supervision and then ordered to consume for forty days. ‘*Premvati*’ then cured him of his ailments and infused in him a vigour that made him what he is today. And as a promise to the saint, he has been helping people by producing and distributing ‘*Premvati*’.

Using the first person narrative, the advertisements address laymen and ascribe the reasons for his ailments to ‘*kusangat*’ or ‘bad company’, which when translated culturally, points to the practice of masturbation. Sexual practices are both publicly talked about and repressed, the magazines print the advertisements but speak in a language that both reveals and hides. It identifies the taboo, brings it out in the open, but reaffirms it as taboo, it can be alluded to but not spoken about categorically. Till today, the same word ‘*kusangat*’ is used in advertisements in general claiming to cure the weaknesses generated by masturbation. The advertisements thus tap popular desire for medical knowledge about sexual life, and use popular belief in miracles and saints. The knowledge that is publicly circulated is authenticated as scientific as well as sacred – sanctified by saints.

What is interesting here is that these story-advertisements are without any images. While other aphrodisiac advertisements generally carry the image of a muscular and confident looking man and also sometimes an elephant and lion (13), the advertisements in *Rasili Kahaniyan* are sans any image. It seems words sought to create the real imagery in such advertisements. The whole narrative that starts from falling into ‘bad company’, acquiring ‘bad’ habits, to keeping the ailments under a wrap because of societal considerations produces an imagery that recurs. Addressing young men, the narratives seek to identify with their anxieties, their fear of social ostracization and ‘*badnaami*’. This fear is revealed and addressed, made the ground for the sale of miracle cures, the promise of a life without tension and anxiety.

Another reason for not having images could be the attempt to avoid censure. As we will see later, there was a section of people who were extremely offended by these advertisements. Their repressive tirade was most often aimed at images. Thus a magazine like *Rasili Kahaniyan*, which seems to have been created in order to circulate “juicy stories,” refrained from using images. Even the advertisement mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Adbhut art*, which tries to lure its male readers into buying a reflective goggle through which one could see clothed woman as naked, is without any sexually provocative image.

Rasili Kahaniyan, with a cover no different from *Madhuri* or *Chand*, held a completely different world inside its pages – a world in which “*Mahatmaji ka Chamatkar*” led to “*Adbhut art*.”

Main daawa karta hoon: Game of trust and the Public Spectacle

We have seen above how *Rasili Kahaniyan* ushered in a new kind of advertising. The recurring tropes of the stories and the use of first person narrative solidified the claims made by the product. Let’s look at another sample:

Dampatya jeevan ka sachcha sukh

Aajkal vigyapan ki adhikta ke karan duniya wale sachche vigyapan ko bhi ghrina ki drishti se dekhte hain, aur na hi un par vishwaas karte hain. Kintu sochne ki baat hai ki yadi ishtihaar na kiya jaye to public tak apni baat kis prakar pahunchai ja sakti hai? Aaj hum unhi bhaiyon ko vishwaas dilate hain ki mera uddeshya dhan kamana nahi, balki sewa aur sachchai ka vishwas dilakar pratyek manushya matra ke hriday mein uch sthan pane ki asha rakhna hai, yahi karan hai ki hamari aushadhiyan bharat mein hi nahi, desho-videshon, vaidya-sammelanon, Congress ke leaderon, bade-bade doctor, hakimon, vaidyon, seth-sahukaron, raison tatha sarkari afsaron aiwam samachar patron ne hamari dawaiyon ke uttamotam hone ke pramann

diye hain. Yadi phir bhi aapne hamare ishtihar par vishwas kar laabh na uthaya to aapki badkismati hai bhaiyon! Hamara yeh ishtihaar nahi, balki abe-hayat ka pyala hai (14)

(Translation: True Marital bliss - It has been observed nowadays that due to a literal flood of advertisements, people have stopped believing even the authentic ones and have developed a disgust for them. But isn't it noteworthy that if there weren't any advertisements, how is one supposed to convey one's message to the public at large? It is for our skeptical brothers that we are issuing this advertisement. We assure you that our motive is not profiteering, instead we want to serve you with true dedication and want to create a place for ourselves in your hearts by doing so. It is precisely due to such a noble motive of ours that medicines have been able to earn the esteemed recommendation not only in the country and abroad and in medicinal seminars, but also of the leaders of the Congress, famous doctors and learned men of medicines, big business men, high government official and even reputed newspapers. If still you mistrust us, then its your misfortune brothers! It's not just an advertisement, it's an elixir of life.)

The advertisement seeks to build public trust by disavowing its commercial intent, and by affirming its desire to serve the public at large. At the same time it seeks to sell the product by listing the recommendation of those who were seen as important and powerful in society. Even in the advertisement titled "*Mahatmaji ka Chamatkar*", the 'Premvati' there is a listing of all those important people who backed the product: 'eminent lawyers, businessmen and even the leaders of Congress'. The testimonial reads somewhat like this:

Premvati ne apni khubi se saari duniya mein tehelka macha diya.

Congress ki rai

(Premvati vastav mein ek adwitya aushadhi hai, pahle humein is aushadhi par itna vishwas na tha kintu jab hum ne iska swayam parikshan kiya tab hum is parinaam par pahunche hain ki yeh aushadhi vigyapan mein diye gaye tamaam rogon ki kewal ek matra achook aushadhi hai. Hum asha karte hain ki bhavishya mein yeh company is se bhi uttam aushadhiyon ka nirman kar janta ko laabh pahunchayegi.- Congress Dehli) (15)

(Translation: Due to its remarkable properties, Premvati has taken the world by storm. Congress's stand. The text further quotes the Congress as saying that Premvati is an exceptional medicine but we did not believe it. It was only after we tested it ourself that we realized it is *the* only medicine that can cure the ailments mentioned in the advertisement. We hope that the company concerned will carry forward its noble task of creating better medicines which will relieve people of their afflictions.)

The statement reflects the times. The national movement was at its peak after the Quit India Movement and the air was rife with the possibility of freedom. The Congress under Gandhi was the 'pan-Indian' representative. Amid such times, even aphrodisiac were sold in the name of Congress; they were said to be approved by Congress leaders. We know all sorts of actions were sanctified by referring to the name of Mahatma. Similarly all sorts of products were sold and sanctified by referring to Congress sanction. Gandhi, amongst other Congress leaders, was agitated by this, and wrote against 'obscene' advertisements (16) .

But for all we know, these advertisements, whether in *Rasili Kahaniyan* or elsewhere 'seemed to have perceived the real and imagined anxieties of the man on the street'. While puritans sought to enforce the virtues of *Brahmacharya*, these advertisements were trying to tap the repressed energies of people. *Brahmacharya* has been one of the pillars of Hindu religious philosophy, and its ideals are linked critically to a discourse around semen. As Wendy Doniger argues, in Hinduism semen is considered a product of life-blood; hence to retain semen is 'to preserve one's very life, to save one's life – literally, as one would save money' (17). To retain semen is more than to preserve one's life, however, for the unspent semen travels upwards to the head and provides the *brahmachari* with 'wonderful potency' (18). In popular culture, too, the loss of semen is linked to a range of anxieties, about disease and death, potency and virility, weakness and strength.

3. CONCLUSION:

Popular advertisements, at one level, reaffirmed the ideology even as it subverted it. It did not advocate self-restraint and conservation of semen, but it reasserted the idea that loss of semen through masturbation weakened the body. To vitalize the body, the advertised remedy had to be consumed. Sexual anxieties were reaffirmed and released; it was talked of and yet repressed. The ideas of sexuality became a ground for commerce, not of reform. At another level, the advertisements celebrated hetero-sexual marital sexuality. Whether it is:

Bilkul ekant mein baith ke dekhne ke kabil

Kokshatra

Ismein stree purushon ki adbhut rangin tasveeren, yauvan ke anand prapt karne ke poshida tarike, Pandit Koka ke aise-aise bhed jinka likhna sabhyata ke virudh hai... (19)

(Translation: To be read in total isolation. Kokshastra. It contains titillating colored pictures of men and women and has instructions to achieve maximum sexual pleasure. *Pandit Koka* has written about such hidden treasures that to mention them goes against civilization.)

or:

...Is Jeevan Prabha tonic ke sevan karne wale purushon se unki kamwati striyan ko santushta hoti hai. Jo purush nirbal, shaktiheen hain, kabhi bhi apni stri ko prassann nahi kar sakte, we sarv such hote hue bhi dampatya ke sachche such se sarvatha vanchit rahte hain, idhar unki striyan unhe din raat tane deti hain aur apne swami se hataash ho jati hain... (20)

(Translation: Men who consume *Jeevan prabha* tonic satisfy their women because men who are weak are cursed with unhappiness despite having everything, and cannot relish true marital bliss. They become the targets of ridicule of their women who cannot hope for any kind of thrill and excitement from their husbands)

The tendency in such advertisements was to glorify the sexual energy which in turn meant a sale of these products. The way the advertisement of the '*Jeevan prabha*' tonic stresses on pleasing women sexually is completely antagonistic to the notion that sex was not for pleasure but for procreation. Thus these advertisements and tracts helped open a new space for sexual expression which did not go down well with the reformers. It led to an almost comic situation. While on the one hand a magazine like *Arya Mahila* contained an article about the suppression such 'obscenities', on the other hand in the same issue it had published an advertisement for an aphrodisiac.

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