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'What an Idea Sirji!': Intersections of neo-liberal subjectivities and development discourses in Idea Cellular ads

ABSTRACT

The Idea Cellular ad campaign has included advertisements dealing with themes ranging from participative democracy and education for all to ending caste wars and controlling population. I examine the ads for their tendency to posit technology as a solution to solving socio-political problems and in turn idealizing a neo-liberal subject who, aided by technology, can be a unit all into itself. These ads may then be seen to operate as 'technologies of subjectivity', with the cell phone network enabling the 'self-activating capacities' of the neo-liberal subject. Specifically, I analyse how the ads mix the discourses of inclusive development and neo-liberal reform by recon-figuring the relationship between the state, corporations and the consumer-citizen. Furthermore, I unravel the creative tensions the ads negotiate while forging individ-ual desires and responsibilities into collective goals by exploring how their construc-tion of neo-liberal subjectivities exists in multi-layered processual relations with brand management strategies, development narratives, technological affordances of cell phones and advertising cultures in India.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2008, India-based mobile telephony service company Idea Cellular Group launched its 'What an Idea Sirji!' series ad campaign with a short ad film *Idea Caste War* (May, 2008) that proposed resolving the antagonisms of caste in a village through the widespread use of Idea Cellular network numbers. The disunity sparked by varied castes was challenged, supposedly, by the unity of having Idea phone numbers. Teaming up with the ad agency Lowe Lintas, the Idea Cellular campaign has since then repeatedly incorporated social messages into its ad campaigns.

For instance, the *Idea Democracy* ad (December, 2008) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vf6d1kzTR3k) showed how the Idea Cellular network service could enable two-way communication between politicians and people to prevent the unjust acquisition of agricultural land for building shopping malls. The *Idea Education for All* ad (August, 2008) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0bh3HP51rJs) promoted the efficacy of mobile phone connections in spreading education to distant villages of India. Individuals in the *Idea Education for All* ad are not being asked to demand their right of education from the government as citizens or comprehend the many difficulties (besides technological ones) in having access to education. Rather, they are being addressed as consumers who need to use Idea Cellular's network to participate in distance-education programmes (where information is relayed to them from urban schools through mobile phones) and thereby self-activate themselves in realizing their dream of education.

My thesis, stated at the outset, is that the Idea Cellular campaign creates a neo-liberal subject whose self-activating capacities can be fulfilled by the use of cell phones.

Both Wendy Brown and Aihwa Ong, following Michel Foucault, have influentially contended that neo-liberalism is not just about the easing of free trade, reduction in welfare benefits and a state deferring to the whims and fancies of transnational corporations and the market, but a 'logic of governing' (Ong 2007) or a 'mode of governance' (Brown 2005: 37). The two scholars stress that neo-liberalism has to deal with the problem of making the 'free subject' capable of self-mastery and self-governing. Such a subject is able to make rational and calculative choices from a set of social and political options. Brown explains, via Lemke, how the increasing privatization of public services and the rapid escalation in state deregulation are deeply connected to, and in fact necessitate, creating a discourse of the self-regulating subject (Brown 2005: 44). Ong stresses the need to explore the 'relations between the governing, self-governed, and space of administration' (2007: 4). Adapting Ong and Brown's work, I suggest that beyond creating a self-enterprising subject, the neo-liberal discourse reconfigures the relations between the state, corporation and the individual, with each of these actors being portrayed as playing particular roles and enacting specific responsibilities. Such a transformation of relationships within the particularities of India's negotiation with neo-liberalism is also demonstrated by the Idea Cellular ads in their prescriptions to potential consumers. These ads, in particular, address their audiences to be at once both consumers of mobile phone technologies and citizens of the nation by mixing issues of national pride along with technopolitical ideas of using their cellular network service. If, by purchasing an Idea Network Connection, consumers see mobile telephony being used for the idea of bringing education and furthering political democracy, then it is deemed, at least in the ads, responsible consumption that benefits the nation.

First, a quick note on neo-liberalism and India. With its inception in the mid-1980s and then rapid escalation in the early 1990s, the Indian neo-liberal adventure has attempted to reconcile the public culture of the urban middle classes poised between a *developmentalist* and a *consumerist* vision of the nation (Mazzarella 2003). Here, I trace a shift in neo-liberal discourse towards an inclusive developmentalist vision that continues to depend on a reconfigured form of consumerism, where making a consumerist choice is framed as part of fulfilling one's responsibilities as citizens of India. Neo-liberalist ideology therefore marks the rise of a 'consumer citizenship' (Featherstone 2007; Cronin 2000). Mike Featherstone (2007: xv) points out how, in the last decade, the concept of 'consumer-citizen' can be understood to be both about a citizen having the rights to be a consumer and the consumer having the responsibility to ask the possible consequences of his or her act of consumption. Anne M. Cronin (2000: 10) observes how the category of the 'individual' comes to stand as a bridging term between the 'political culture of citizenship' and the 'consumer culture of advertising'.

In the *Idea Population* (July, 2011) (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU8QnX8Jo8w) ad, the decision to indulge in the 'pleasures' of the network's 3G services as a substitute for sex is shown as a quick-fix solution to the nation's long-standing population problem – the decision to not have sex is shown as an individual *choice* (and in some cases a *sacrifice*) that Idea Cellular *consumers* make towards not increasing the national population, thus becoming ideal *citizens* of the nation. Consumer citizenship is also visible in the ads when one thinks of the language of consumerism used to describe the (in)efficiency of the functioning of government and public services. It is the corporations (not the government) who supposedly have the right intent and plan: they have the right *ideas*, claim the Idea Cellular ads, when they allude to the inadequacy of the state in solving socio-political problems.

The ads tacitly reference and incorporate particular popular events and perceptions such as the Singur incident related to acquisition of agricultural land that was successfully resisted by farmers or the vasectomy clinics that remind one of the unsuccessful state-planned ventures of population control into their narrative. Mobile phones and wireless connectivity as technologies have particular affordances and emergent potentials. These features make it easy to endow them with 'utopian communication myths' of 'omniscience and collectiveness through ever-present knowledge' (de Vries 2012: 151). Such a reading of *the popular* alongside *the technological*, helps us avoid the totalizing narratives of neo-liberal effects and at the same time provide opportunities to see how neo-liberalism works together with these material-discursive formations.

Allied to this embrace of the popular and the technological by the ads, an embrace that neatly brushes aside aspects of class and gender inequality, are strategies that negotiate the tensions between individual desires and responsibilities and collective (national) goals. Both the ad industry and the neo-liberal discourse face the challenge of legitimizing themselves 'under the sign of development', where they are obliged to connect 'individual consuming desires and collective progress' (Mazzarella 2003: 86). How the ads show individual actions of consumer-citizens translating into collective progress that would benefit the whole Indian nation is therefore a key aspect that I look towards comprehending in this article.

Advertising itself continues to be both a science of communication and an art of mediation because it strives to communicate information supposedly appealing to the rational–critical outlook, and at the same time works in the

sensory realm attempting to forge an affective (and in some cases embodied) relationship with the product and the user. Therefore, studying the cultural-politics of advertising necessitates comprehending its informative and ideological role along with its aesthetic playfulness that engages with people's stereotypes, their desires and inhibitions, and then converts them into aspirations within symbolic-material circuits.

I begin my analysis by examining how the social relationship suggested by the Idea Cellular ads between the individual citizen and the Indian state, and that between the consumer and the corporate brand, intersects with neo-liberal discourse's construction of identity, social relations and the consumer-citizen.

REDRAWING THE STATE–CONSUMER-CITIZEN–CORPORATION RELATIONSHIPS

The *Idea Democracy* ad begins with a scene in a woman minister's office with pictures of dead leaders and a map of India. Two party officials and her spokesperson or secretary stand on her right and left, respectively. There is an antiquarian landline telephone on her table. Facing her is a businessman dressed in a suit. The party officials who ask the minister to sign on a document are dressed in khaki and the minister is also clothed in a white, mildly coloured unassuming *sari*, quite the stereotypical dress for politicians in India. One of the party officials asks the minister to sign on a proposal to build shopping malls on a piece of agricultural land. In hushed voices, they add that the businessman is a rich guy and would contribute towards party funds. The minister looks from her right to her left side and we find her spokesperson dressed in a dark cotton T-shirt differing from the typical khaki wear of the party officials. He comes with the idea that one would have to consult the *Janta*/people about this proposal. The party officials are taken aback and surprised by this *idea*.

The next shot cuts to an agricultural field with a background of scarecrows and electrical pylons. Then we have shots of people holding mobiles saying 'Na'/'No' to the proposal of acquisition. In this one-to-many Q&A session, after a few rural rustic scenes, the minister solicits the opinion of an industrialist (at least visibly so) who is the only person who says 'Yes'. Two young people, quite urban from their clothing, emphatically say 'No'. The spokesperson/secretary relays the message to the leader, who says 'If the *Janta*/people say "No" then there won't be any acquisition'. In the end, this decision is celebrated with people sprinkling colours on each other in green fields.

The 'market' and the 'state' contrast and then blur in well together in the clothing of the characters and the corresponding actions they perform. The *khaki*-dressed officials are portrayed as corrupt, intent on building malls because it would make them and the party rich and are at best surprised by the *idea* that a leader should consult people before taking any decision. The minister's secretary standing on the opposite side of the party officials is dressed more contemporarily and feels that a leader should solicit the opinion of the people. He advocates transparency of the functioning of the government and accountability to the people – giving the people their political right to participate. He is not only with the times in terms of his dress but also in his belief that the government should hear the voices of the people. He is suave enough to use an Idea Cellular phone rather than the old landline telephones to contact people (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Contrasting sartorial choices and conspicuous presence of an old telephone set (snapshot from Idea Democracy *ad).*

The semiotic codes and the choices made are indeed revealing. The secretary's conduct embodies a practice of 'technology of governing' (Ong 2006) as he is able to find the cutting-edge technological solution (adopts the more modern cellular phone network to a landline telephone) for a political problem of public participation in decision making. At the same time he also represents the perfect blurring of boundaries between the market and the state. He is associated with a political leader/party (state) and yet is in touch with the latest fashion both in terms of wearing a stylish shirt and carrying an Idea mobile (market). He is not only an 'ideal consumer-citizen' himself but preaches consumer citizenship by facilitating public participation of potential consumers by encouraging them to exercise their option of joining the Idea Cellular network. Here the state government finally embraces consumerism, in as far as it means efficiency of service delivered.

How is the social relationship between the consumer-citizen, state and corporation reorganized in this ad? The state is mired in politics and corruption and it needs the modernizing touch of mobile telephony to be raised from the depths of inefficiency. Such a use for mobile telephony is provided by Idea Cellular and through such a connection it is able to both guarantee transparency in government activities and ensure citizen participation. The consumer-citizens need to exercise their consumer freedom and switch into the Idea network and rely on cellular operators and their own handset connection to get their voice heard in the Indian democracy. The state's roles and responsibilities are to some extent shifted to the individual through the mediation of corporations.

Such a reconfiguration of roles and responsibilities is even more strongly indicated in the *Idea Education for All* ad. This ad begins with a small girl, Lakshmi Raghav, who has come from a village in a school to study in the city. Because the class has already reached its full enrolment capacity, Lakshmi is unable to gain admission. As they are sent away, Lakshmi's grandfather keeps repeating, 'There is no school in the village, so how will she study?'. Seeing the dejected faces of the child and grandfather, the principal of the school feels he needs to come up with an 'idea' so that children from villages also receive education.

Figure 2: Rhythm of running feet in sync with Idea caller tune played as soundtrack (snapshot from Idea Education for All *ad).*

The sparking of the 'idea' of education through mobile telephony is conveyed through a shift from the pensive face of the principal to rapidly edited scenes showing groups of enthusiastic children in villages running across landscapes with green fields, desert, pine trees, and mud and brick buildings in the background. The soundtrack shifts from quiet notes to the signature Idea caller tune, which conveys the impression of being played in the same rhythm as the children's running feet. This call to education, bright and early in the morning, is made synonymous with Idea Cellular's caller id and the ability of mobile technology to self-activate neo-liberal subjects is given expression in the form of the smiling faces of children, their running feet and their eager, responsive cries (see Figure 2).

The children finally gather around a mobile phone in an open space that would effectively act as their school. The teacher in some institute in the city is lecturing into a whole set of mobile phones and her lecture is carried over to the groups of children in different rural localities – again a whole set of scenes from marshy lands to beaches follow. The narrative of the ad film comes to a close when Lakshmi receives Best Student of the Year award from the Principal of the school (played by Abhishek Bachchan) who thought up the *idea*. But just before that, the school principal celebrates the success of his idea by shaking a leg to the same tune (see Figure 3) – the rhythms of the feet of children and principal's dance are sonically connected by Idea's signature tune with the implication that the company is working towards bridging the rural–urban divide.

In this ad, we witness neo-liberalism not just in its market ideology mode but as prescribing a particular way of governing that reconfigures social relations by forging a 'new relationship between government and knowledge through which governing activities are recast as non-political and non-ideological that need technological solutions' (Ong 2006: 3).

T. H. Marshall (2009) argued in early 1950s that without social rights such as the right to education and health care, which help citizens become socio-economically self-sufficient, other citizenship rights such as the political rights (voting) or civil rights (property rights) cannot be enjoyed fully. The Indian

Figure 3: Snapshot from Idea Education for All *ad.*

state is supposed to provide these social rights but the ad suggests that the state's responsibility can be shifted to corporate social responsibility (CSR) and individual responsibility. *Idea Education for All* ad brings into focus the rural–urban divide within the Indian society in terms of access to education, a *social right* required to produce capable citizens of a nation, but proposes that this divide could be bridged by bridging the telecommunication divide between rural and urban India. Therefore, the need is for more Idea Cellular phones and networks in the Indian villages.

The *Idea Education for All* ad suggests not so much a paring back of social rights as making them available through other means. Barry Hindess (2002) perspicaciously discerns that the 'liberal perception of government utility of markets' not only relates to 'conduct of states' but also to the conduct of individuals. The consumer-citizen emerging out of neo-liberal reforms in India is discouraged from looking at the Indian state as its sole provider of social rights and is encouraged to choose to participate in the Idea Cellular network (or more generally in the mobile telephony revolution) to be able to enjoy those social rights. In forging a relationship between the mobile phone network (product) and an Indian villager in need of education (the potential consumer), we again see a reordering of the triangular relations between the state, citizen and corporation. The ad implies that the task of the Indian state to provide education is so very difficult that one needs private initiatives and private–public partnerships.[1] But in its refusal to take the government to task for its inability to provide education, Idea Cellular restages the extension of 'neo-liberal rationality': the state's successful functioning is not measured by its ability to provide social rights but its ability to 'sustain and foster market' (Brown 2005; Hindess 2002). The market ostensibly, as is implied in the ad, is in a position to help individuals take care of themselves and win their social rights.

The relatively new *Idea Population* ad continues to suggest the creation of the consumer-citizen and the reordering of the inter-subjective framework of such a hybrid citizen with respect to the state and corporation. In this ad, introduction of the new affordances of having data on 3G mobile phones is well melded with the population control message. In earlier days, the

electricity going off would result in women getting pregnant; the ad suggests there is a now twist in the tale, thanks to Idea Cellular. Now during a power cut, when a husband proposes intercourse, the wife is shown to be engaged in using Idea's 3G services to Skype chat with her mother, or when a wife feels like sharing an intimate moment, the husband is on the Internet. From playing games to watching cricket, various functions of the mobile 3G network are showcased.

The *Idea Population* ad mocks the contemporary relevance of vasectomy clinics that were, at one point of time, symbolic of the Indian state-planned economy's population-control drives. Standing in front of a vasectomy clinic, two people joke: 'Ab Iski kya Zaroorat'/'we no longer need it' (see Figure 4). Idea's 3G services render contraceptive and birth-control procedures irrelevant and transfer the role formerly played by the Indian state (from the 1970s till the 1990s when massive state campaigns sought to inform people of the need for birth control) to individual consumer-citizens who, by working with the 3G technology, will be self-disciplining and self-regulating in an instance of both biopower and biopolitics. Foucault noted that biopower and biopolitics continue to work with disciplinary techniques but modify and integrate these technologies of governing to not only make them work at the level of 'man-as-body' but to 'man-as-species' and therefore at the scale of masses (1975–1976: 242). To effectively make comprehensible this leap from man-as-body to man-as-species is needed for the ad because it purports to solve the problem of population control.

Explicating the advertising discourse and the consumer attitude in life, Cronin notes how 'actualizing one's potential as individual and *citizen of a national community* becomes intertwined: as *consumerist choice,* which comes to be seen as a right and a duty to express *one's inner, authentic essence*' (2000: 32, emphasis added). A married Indian woman equates the self-regulated use of the Idea 3G network and the concomitant non-indulgence in sexual activities to a 'sacrifice' that she is ready to make for her nation – she contemplates this in the foreground as her husband is shown to be immersed in the

Figure 4: No need of vasectomy clinics because Idea 3G data services are available (snapshot from Idea Population *ad).*

Figure 5: Woman resolves to sacrifice as husband is busy with Idea 3G (snapshot from Idea Population *ad).*

pleasures of 3G mobile in the background (see Figure 5). The *Idea Population* ad clearly suggests that such a woman becomes a worthy citizen precisely because of her consumerist choice. When the women with such a resolution opens the doors of her house she finds a huge public gathered around the shared balcony space who are repeatedly addressing her as 'Tu Devi'/'You are Goddess' and glorifying her sacrifice (see Figures 6 and 7).

With a tongue-in-cheek representation of the woman as 'Mother India', in this movement from private domestic space to the public space, the ad shows how individual sacrifices and technology consumption choices can be integrated towards the national goal of biopolitical control of the population. This moment in the ad also provides an opportunity to see that neo-liberal and
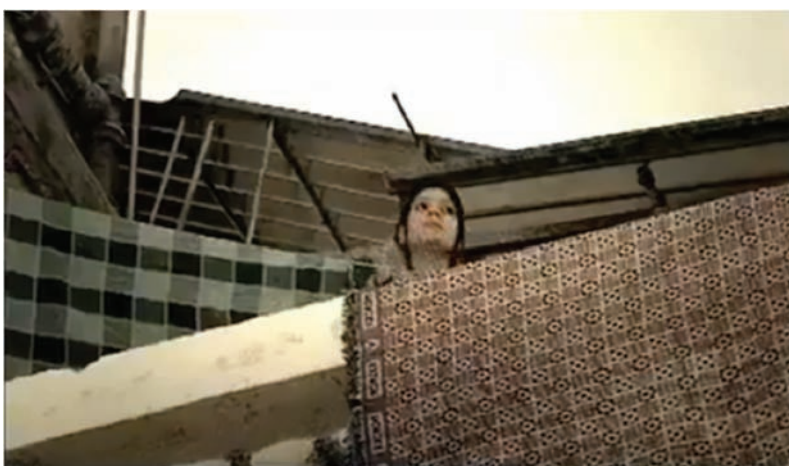

Figure 6: Woman comes from private domestic space to shared public balcony space (snapshot from Idea Population *ad).*

*Figure 7: Public acknowledgment and celebration of the woman's sacrifice
(snapshot from* Idea Population *ad).*

advertising discourses appreciate the challenge of demonstrating how these technologies-of-the-self (3G mobile phones) can be shown to coalesce a public around a collective issue or problem. Thereby, at an affective level, the *Idea Population* ad does make an effort to merge the private and the public, the individual and the collective, and the logics of consumerism and development.

MERGING INDIVIDUAL DESIRES AND COLLECTIVE GOALS AROUND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

In terms of the issues highlighted and identities represented, what potential customer base, spanning geographies, demographics and socio-economic classifications do the Idea Cellular ads reach out to? Such audience and consumer segment considerations are connected to the neo-liberal and popular discourses being propounded through the ads.

Pradeep Shrivastava, Chief Marketing Officer, Idea Cellular noted:

> the (*Idea Democracy*) ad is aimed at conveying a socially relevant message in an easy-to-understand form to our target audience, which mainly comprises of mobile users and intenders in rural India, and the youth. Through our new campaign, we wish to highlight the need for Governance through active public involvement, while promoting the usage of mobile phone.
>
> (NewsWire7 2008)

The use of the term 'intenders' when talking about rural mobile phone usage is telling. Idea Cellular seems to certainly have an interest in wooing rural intenders who could soon be the new mobile users. The use of 'youth' seems tailored to both urban and rural Indians. The *Idea Democracy*, *Idea Education for All* and *Idea Caste War* ads look at the problems of agricultural land grab, access to education and perennial caste disputes, respectively, all problems

that plague rural India. These, along with providing opportunities for rural Indians to identify themselves with the images, also have an affective appeal for urban middle-class Indians. The aesthetic representation of the rural areas in the *Idea Education* ad comprises of children sitting inside makeshift thatched tents in hot deserts to children gathered around a mobile phone tied to a tree with greenery around to children sitting on boats along a beach reciting the multiplication table. This juxtaposition of images across different exotic rural landscapes at once is a stereotypical construction of rural India and at the same time is an attempt to forge together a collective India – a celebration of unity in diversity – and also a celebration of the ability of mobile phones to solve accessibility issues irrespective of terrain and environment.[2]

Several copyeditors employed in various ad firms that I conversed with regarding the Idea ads opined that the ad is creatively geared towards evoking emotions of love for 'Mother Earth'. The class bias of middle-class copyeditors working in air-conditioned ad agencies in Delhi and Mumbai projecting their perception of rural India through exotic images needs to be acknowledged, and beyond that, the ads can be read as targeted also towards urban youths who are encouraged to connect back to rural India in all its 'naturalness'.

Contrary to Shrivastava's views, one of the Idea Cellular officials, occupying a managerial position in the company, with whom I had a conversation, denied that there is a conscious effort on the part of Idea Cellular or the Lowe Lintas agency to place the ads within rural landscapes with a view to targeting rural customers. When I queried further about the *Idea Caste War* ad that unfolds completely in rural settings, he replied, 'you do not have (caste-based) rioting in Mumbai, so if you have to have a story which is talking about that then it has to be based in a village, it is dictated by what the script demands' (interview excerpt, 26 June 2012). What he lets slip here is that the scripts chosen do tackle issues relevant to rural India. His categorical distancing of these ads from being 'rural' also indicates Idea Cellular's strategies at portraying a holistic India because the ads are equally directed at urban and rural consumers – indicating a campaign championing inclusive development.

The Idea official also clarified that in this particular ad campaign, the aim was not so much to 'push a particular product or service' but 'it is the way mobile telephony is portrayed [in these ads] that helps build association with the brand' (interview excerpt). It is an exercise in brand differentiation in a telecommunication market flooded with too many players and thus attempting to get a distinctive brand image helps Idea Cellular. My contention is that aims of brand differentiation and pushing products (in this case, network service) cannot be dissociated, and in fact, they often work together or separately (at different denotative and connotative registers) to appeal to diverse audience or consumer segments. Themes and values of inclusive development and CSR help Idea Cellular to publicly address both urban and rural consumers, aiding it to target potential (new) customers in rural India on the one hand and increasing its brand equity among urban (youthful) audiences of its ads on the other.

In their act of exercising choice as potential consumers or in their recognition of Idea Cellular's social change brand image, urban youthful individuals or consumer-citizens are being asked to responsibly choose (or be favourably disposed towards) Idea Cellular, which in its turn hints at the idea of being a corporation that takes its social responsibility seriously. Merging the ethical (social change programmes) with the material (network connection), Idea Cellular ads use CSR as a signifier (Manokha 2004). Ostensibly, the distinctiveness

2. Like Idea Cellular ads, the ads of another cellular operator Airtel, called *Airtel Tarrakki* ads, offer technological solutions to rural problems, but unlike Idea Cellular ads, they are not engaged in tracing the transformation of individual pursuits into collective national goals. In various *Tarrakki* ads, two Bollywood actors, Rajpal Yadav and Shreyas Talpade as main protagonists, enact , roles of village *Paan*/betel vine shopwallahs, tour guides, and *Dhol*/drum players – these small businesses they run seem to prosper and grow only after they get a Airtel mobile phone connection which helps them to expand their business with access to a greater clientele without the interference of middlemen. In these ads, development is very much on the agenda but the purpose is not collective social change but to demonstrate the functional and economic utility of possessing a mobile phone.

3. On the occasion of the first anniversary of Mumbai 26/11 terror attacks, Idea Cellular's 'Talk for India' campaign was launched where the net income of all calls made between 8: 36 pm and 9: 36 pm on 26th November were donated to Government of India for strengthening national security. Idea Cellular spokespersons noted this initiative was a 'movement' and not 'regular advertisement' and was more pragmatic than the ads, which contained some elements of 'fantasy.' For more, see Das (2009). The parent company of Idea Cellular, Aditya Birla Group, has a detailed dossier of its corporate responsibility work, including many rural development and community initiatives, which can be found here: http://www.adityabirla.com/social_projects/overview.htm.

4. The story of the Indian middle class that I have presented is one kind; there are others. Jyotsna Kapur's (2011: 201) persuasive tracing of the rise of the unconscious desire amidst the middle class for the *lumpen masculinity* in neo-liberal India is another narrative. Mentioning several Bollywood films, Kapur explains that the fear of remaining ordinary has made the urban middle-class youth want not only to be savvy and cosmopolitan but also learn to 'con, swindle' and flex their muscles in their efforts to rise up quickly in the socio-economic ladder and achieve sexual liberation and gain independence from parental interference.

of the Idea Cellular ads is not that they show their actual CSR projects (even though they have them in the form of organized fund drives for social causes), but allude to what some potential CSR projects could look like as 'ideas'.[3]

The CSR-based appeal of Idea Cellular ads for the Indian middle class is not just predicated on the notion of 'commodity activism', which, in its emergence in the neo-liberal moment, involves harnessing as-of-yet untapped socio-cultural realms to the domain of official economy and where buying commodities translates into doing social activism (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee 2012). My argument is that there are subtle forms of power politics operating along classist, nationalist and regional lines that are entangled with these appeals to commodity activism of the Indian urban middle class. The Indian nationalist middle class had been forced to realize its limitation in electoral politics and political decision-making with the rise of the country's multi-party system, growth of regional parties representing local aspirations and success of subaltern political formations (Krishna 2009). Nonetheless, with the beginning of the process of liberalization, the middle class in the country once again found itself in a position to shape national public policy in the name of development by promoting consumerist technologies (Mazzarella 2010).[4] The middle class felt anxious that for India as a nation to really catch up with the developed countries, the rural population of India needed to embrace development as well and this anxiety then guided rural development around digital divide issues. However, for a long time, the post-liberalization development discourse concerned itself with urbanization.

From 2004 onwards, changes have certainly taken place in the dominant discourse of development in the country – focus has shifted from *rapid urbanization* to *inclusive development* following the political debacle of Indian Nationalist party that had focused too much on urban development in its India Shining campaign. The Congress Party, which came to power, has since then, through schemes such as National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), showcased its concerns for the rural poor.[5]

The discourse of inclusive development, which gained prevalence in subsequent years, seemed to sanctify such visions of rural development and also provided a chance to the by now doubly alienated middle-class population (first, from electoral politics and second, from exclusively urban development) to both re-associate themselves with rural India and become responsible consumer-citizens playing their part in the Indian growth story. The Singur incident in West Bengal, where the acquisition of agricultural land for the construction of Tata Nano car factory without prior consultation was successfully resisted by a popular movement (Bhattacharyya 2006; Dhar 2008), resonated with large sections of the Indian society including the urban middle class. The *Idea Democracy* seems to refer to this popular event with the ad commencing in farmlands but then shifting to youthful urban voices participating in the agricultural land debate in support of farmers' lands (see Figures 8 and 9). The *Idea Education for All* ad has each different rustic scene in different landscapes alternating with that of a teacher instructing in front of a mobile phone in an urban school. Such an edited montage showing urban–rural contrasts builds up a unified collective beginning with individual consumers and also shows leanings towards the idea of inclusive development.

It is a widely acknowledged fact that the production of ads has as much to do with the corporation's vision for itself as it has to do with the way the ad agency that handles that corporation's (client's) account decides to build on the client's brief. The ads with social messages that Lowe Lintas has emerged

Figure 8: Snapshot from Idea Democracy *ad.*

with, as an Idea Cellular executive noted, was about answering a constant brief from their client Idea Cellular: 'An Idea can change your life'. While this brief certainly helps in coming up with ideas of social change based on particular ways of using mobile telephony, it is not just for *Idea Cellular* that Lowe Lintas created social message ads that take up (or seem inspired by) contemporary popular issues and events. They have executed with great success the Tata Tea *Jaago Re* ad campaign, designed to *awaken* the socially conscious citizen in the Indian masses as they are encouraged and convinced to go and exercise their right of voting and to stop paying or taking bribes. Lowe Lintas CEO, R. Balki, in an interview given to the *Storyboard* show (SenGupta 2011), claimed that his agency was able to see the prevalent widespread discontent with corruption and the political system and they seized upon it before the dissatisfaction reached its explosive stage and ushered in a nationwide Anna movement.[6] The timing of these ad campaigns (both Idea Cellular and Tata Tea campaigns) brings into sharp focus the contingencies within which advertising thrives and notions of popular that it borrows from.

Along with rapid urbanization, the discourse of rural development backed by the urban middle class was guided by consumerist visions and practices of

    featured on 27 August
    2011 in CNBC TV 18
    hosted by Anuradha
    SenGupta (2011) dealt
    with the ways in which
    the advertising world
    was responding to the
    issue of corruption that
    was made popular by
    Anna Hazare, who, with
    his team, was able to
    create a veritable social
    movement around
    the issue. Balki, when
    asked about the Idea
    Cellular and Tata Tea
    Jaago Re ads as having
    appeared before the
    time the agitation
    against corruption was
    gathering momentum,
    explains:

    What's an ad
    coming and saying
    the same thing
    which is on top of
    your mind. If it's the
    back of your mind,
    an ad brings the
    back of your mind
    to your top of your
    mind ... ok ... that's
    what I believe is
    about pre-empting.
    You are not pre-
    empting something
    that is not existing
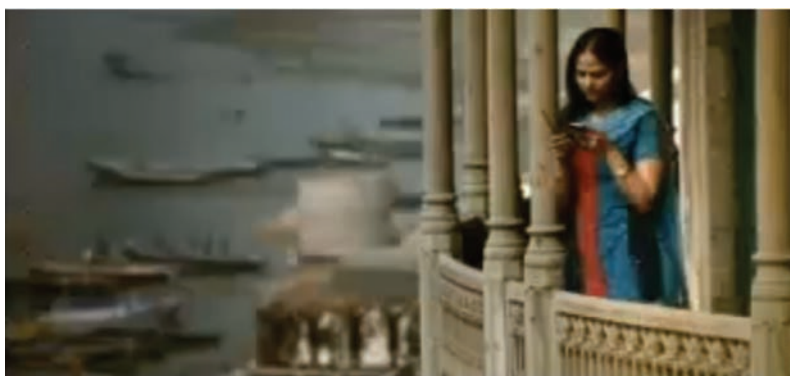   at all there, it is
    there ... but from

Figure 9: Snapshot from Idea Democracy *ad.*

here to here … to front. …

(excerpt from *Storyboard* interview)

Balki's comments suggest that the timing of ads needs to be seen in relation to their being both a relevant and a popular issue in the minds of the public. The *Idea Democracy* ad becomes a way of channelizing popular public discontent about corruption in government circles and exclusive development, be it about Singur, Nandigram that were local and sporadic compared with the Anna movement, and yet lingered on the back of an Indian citizen's mind. On Singur and Nandigram, see S. Dhar (2008) and OneIndiaNews (2007).

promoting buying of computers and mobile phones (as part of the discourse of ICTs for development) and which in many ways came to be understood as bottom-up interventions differing from the perceived top-down model deployed by the state over the years (Mazzarella 2010). Given this context, what needs to be emphasized is the urban middle-class Indian's tacit agreement with the consumerist neo-liberal prescriptions in the Idea Cellular ads that seem to invite rural Indians to choose Idea Cellular specifically (and mobile technology in general) to liberate themselves from underdevelopment.

Cronin (2000) echoes Carole Pateman in contending that the ideal of free civil relations is embedded in social contracts such as marriage, employment and citizenship and each of them, while appearing to be neutral, transparent and egalitarian, are based on exclusion. Cronin observes that *the individual* is not formed before engagement with discourse; it is by participation/performance in discourse that the individual is created. Men (thought as 'Self') require women (considered as 'Other') to participate in the contract (of say marriage) for the 'contract' and the 'Self' to be recognized. Thought in terms of consumption society, women are required to perform the role of active consumers and yet could just be 'passive ciphers for consumerist ideology' (Cronin 2000: 14), thus helping the practice of consumption to be recognized. Talking about the paradoxical nature of freedom in contracts that require mutual recognition, she notes, 'the process (of contract) requires pre-constituted individuals to initiate the process of mutual-recognition, and yet it is only at the moment of mutual recognition that those individuals become constituted' (Cronin 2000: 19).

Here, while Cronin talks about women as a marginalized group, we could think of applying this example to rural people in India. Villagers in India – a so far marginalized group, because they are yet to receive the fruits of Indian development – who are the targets of the new Idea Cellular ads end up becoming ciphers for consumerist ideology. The co-opting of the inclusive development agenda by the Idea Cellular ads is a new form of consumerism, which, if it needs to be successful, has to be sanctioned by the villagers. Marginalized rural Indians, if they do finally take up Idea connections, not only empower themselves (which is the 'Ad speak') but also aid in making consumerism (and mobile phones) successful in rural India even as it comes in the garb of sustainable and/or equitable development. Rural consumers in the *Idea Education for All* ad are shown to be making full use of the opportunity for learning through mobiles. They are depicted as spirited and almost every shot has them collected together in groups sitting around a mobile phone. These images of collectivity again seem to portray that the idea of public common good is not antithetical to neo-liberal subjectivity, with its stress on individualism.

Furthermore, the Idea Cellular ads suggest that they are not forcing consumers to choose their mobile phone service, but creating an environment where choosing mobile phone technology becomes the right pragmatic choice for the self-regulated individuals (here rural Indians). Such a consumerist choice would purportedly help them develop more quickly and efficiently than state-enabled public services. But then this is precisely how advertising and neo-liberal ideologies come together in their ability to eulogize the individual's autonomy and agency for, as Rosalind Gill has argued, that the creation of the self-regulating subject in neo-liberal times takes place not by 'top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance and articulation' (2008: 439). Indeed, negotiation and mediation surely seem to be the registers on which the Idea Cellular ads are operating.

To further my argument about the differential targeting of consumer-citizens in urban and rural India, one has to look for the gender biases in the ads' proposed social change. The Habermasian conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere as being a discursive arena where 'private persons' would debate about 'public matters' with the goal of 'common good' is questioned by Nancy Fraser (1990) because it leads to the exclusion of oppressions in the domain of (private/domestic) family and other group interests. Fraser, in her article, advocates the presence of multiple, competing publics rather just one public, in both 'stratified' and 'egalitarian multi-cultural societies' (1990: 64–65). Fraser's perceptive point provides pointers towards understanding why in the three ads – *Caste War*, *Education for All* and *Democracy* – developed by Idea Cellular dealing explicitly with rural India, the villagers get largely represented at a mass/community level, in contrast to numerous ads which showcase mobile phone in the urban landscape as being very much a part of domestic life. The *Idea Population* ad, while it raises issues of sexual intercourse, remains at best regionally ambivalent.

If social change was indeed the message of this ad campaign, it failed to address the social inequalities within domestic family life in rural India including female labour and patriarchy. The *Idea Democracy* ad, in pursuing its goal of having rural India participate in the Indian public sphere (civil society), eschews the private domestic concerns.

SOCIAL–TECHNICAL CHANGES AND TECHNOPOLITICAL VISIONS

The idealized notion around mobile telephony's exceptional efficacy in sharing knowledge and in ushering both 'communicative liberation and social inclusion' (de Vries 2012: 154) helps the *Idea Education for All* and *Idea Democracy* ads to target both rural and urban consumer-citizens around the popular agenda of inclusive development. But this inclusive development is being caressed incessantly by neo-liberal reform, with the success of all these social changes hinging on the individual consumer ready to become a part of the mobile phone network (that is, buy an Idea Cellular connection). In forging individual desires and responsibilities into collective goals, the ads are certainly aided by the product they are promoting. Mobile telephony as a material technology that indeed connects and collectivizes helps to create an impression that inclusive development and neo-liberalization are not strange bedfellows.

In the *Idea Education for All* ad, the cellular network connection that Idea provides finds figuration in the phone set with a display of '!dea School' that is occasionally shown in close-ups and zoomed into (Figure 10). Beyond that, the camera is tilted to frame mobile phones attached to tall coconut trees (Figure 11). In another scene, a low-angle camera shot with a deep focus lens presents the mobile phone in the foreground, and the children gathered on a thatched roof and the houses in a desert landscape at different planes with clarity and thus as significant actors (Figure 12). These sequences suggest the ability of mobile phones to be raised to and grounded in any location and culture.

Through these camera and editing techniques, where much of the ad emphasizes the ubiquity of cell phones, their lightness and reach, their flexibility and ability to break barriers, it also invites criticism for abstracting the particular problems of different places. The technological mobility of cellular networks blends in well with neo-liberal capital's fluidity to perpetuate the continuing depiction of places as immobile, unchanging, static and as either

Figure 10: Close-ups and zoom-ins of mobile phone (snapshot from Idea Education for All *ad).*

Figure 11: Snapshot from Idea Education for All *ad.*

Figure 12: Snapshot from Idea Education for All *ad.*

exotic or mere anthropological curiosities, something that critics of techno-capitalism such as Arif Dirlik (2001) and Arturo Escobar (2000) have often pointed to.

Beyond breaking spatial barriers, mobile technology in these ads is also suggesting instantaneous solutions to long-standing problems as a trump card over the years of inefficiency characteristic of Indian public services. When I asked my Idea Cellular official whether these social change ideas of Idea Cellular were futuristic visions, he immediately corrected me, proffering the example of *Idea Democracy* ad. He argued that political democracy through mobile telephony as depicted in the ad was not 'sci-fi,' or 'futuristic' or 'Star Wars' (interview excerpt, 26 June 2012) but had already been realized in many real-life instances. Mentioning how some politicians (possibly Rahul Gandhi) had run participative governance campaigns using SMS to source opinions from their respective constituencies, he further nuanced his position about the complex temporalities of the visions of these ads: "it is not futuristic in the sense that technology will happen, you know, and then the world will change … it is whatever is there today … it is not happening today but it could be a possibility … in that sense, it is futuristic but otherwise its daily life" (interview excerpt, 26 June 2012).

This clarification certainly offers a fascinating insight into how many of today's technologies are waiting for their potential actualization, not for the want of further technological innovation, but because of the lack of swift policy-making and implementation. However, his views, that some of the uses of mobile telephony shown in the ads are workable solutions right now (and some have already happened) and that the technology is already there, resemble an immediacy-oriented temporal rhetoric, prevalent since the 1980s onwards among advertising-led mass consumerism ideologues. William Mazzarella notes this mentality in his elaborate sketch of the history of the culture of advertising in India. Mazzarella explicates that since the 1980s, the Indian advertising industry started being critical of centralized state planning for being slow, ineffective and mired in bureaucratic red tape. While the centralized planning system asked for 'sacrifice and deferral in the present in return for plenitude in the future' (Mazzarella 2003: 87), defenders of consumerism promised instant gratification and efficiency through individual consumption of goods.[7]

The Idea Cellular ad campaign borrows from the discourse that Information and Communication ('New Media') Technologies, if made available to marginalized sections of the society, can change lives and potentially lead to inclusive development. While in the last decade, the growth of cyber cafes has shown mixed results (Rangaswamy 2003), mobile phones, owing to their 'relative accessibility, affordability, and ease of use (compared to the PC), hold the promise of bridging the so-called digital divide' (Ling and Horst 2011). Even as the efficacy of bringing actionable education, health and agricultural information through mobile phone networks cannot be underestimated, empirical studies seem to suggest that people's motivation to have mobile phones is less guided by a planned development initiative and more by the perception that it helps them to plan their daily life arrangements better. There is an intensification of already existing family/social networks of communication rather than opening up to new/external networks (Palackal et al. 2011). Such findings, certainly not conclusive, however, do point to some glaring tensions that remain in the translation process from individual responsibilities to the collective goals that Idea Cellular ads depict.

7. Through a case study of the advertising of Kamasutra condoms, Mazzarella demonstrates how the promise of immediate gratification seemed to have worked for the ad partly because they were tacitly opposing the endless deferrals characteristic of state-planned economy, which again and again had proven itself incapable of controlling the growth of national population. I cannot resist the temptation to mention here that Lowe Lintas, the same agency that championed Kamasutra condoms as allowing Indian consumers to make love without producing babies, is involved here again to promote Idea 3G, suggesting that wallowing in the entertainment provided by 3G services can be a way to fix the population problem. Mazzarella (2003: 59) summed up the Kamasutra ad pitch in the following manner: 'Citizens have sex, Consumers make love', and slightly inflecting it, I have tried to argue that *Idea Population* ad's message is *Citizens produce babies, Consumer Citizens use Idea 3G*.

The social change proposed by Idea Cellular ads is indeed a socio-technical change with flexible interchangeability of infrastructures strikingly represented in the ads: from concrete schools in rural India to educational instruction organized around telecom networks, from electricity-run television entertainment to Idea 3G services. The *Idea Population* ad places a dramatic emphasis on the shift. The tendency to have sexual intercourse just after the television set goes off is captured through chants such as 'TV to Biwi/wife', with the hand-held camera moving from framing the television set in one shot to the wife in another shot in a number of such quick-paced sequences across varied couple pairings. With the introduction of Idea 3G services, the chant transforms into 'Ab Biwi se 3G'/'Now from wife to 3G'. But this flexible shift of technologies – from television to 3G data service – quite tellingly fails to mention that mobile phones are supported by base station towers, which require large amounts of power that in India are often obtained from burning diesel.[8] Thus, mobile phones are not necessarily the cleanest or energy-efficient technologies and they too, like television, are dependent on power. Furthermore, uncertainty remains about the health effects of radiation from cell phone tower signals (Varshney 2012). Undoubtedly, mobile telephony will have much to contribute towards India's future development, but what kind of values and visions we should attach to information, mobility and infrastructures is something that needs more debate.

CODA

Throughout this article, I have contended that Idea Cellular ads are innovative and do raise awareness about social issues, and yet they are not just innocently humorous, but actively restage relations between the state, corporation and the individual consumer-citizen that closely resemble discourses of neo-liberalism. The neo-liberal governing prescriptions that the Idea Cellular ads dole out have also to do with the Indian advertising world's understanding of the contemporary Indian citizen's disenchantment with state bureaucracy, failures of centralized planning to solve socio-economic problems and the ad industry's continued celebration of consumer freedom.

Even as this article is a socio-cultural critique of neo-liberal subjectivity founded upon individualized ethos, it does recognize that the individualizing trend could potentially manifest political alliances and social change (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). These are the representations to be found in the Idea Cellular ads, which I have argued, themselves work towards smoothening the frictions between individual aspirations and collective aims, and attempt to resolve the contradictions between neo-liberal reforms and inclusive development.

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