

# R K Sarkar Memorial Lecture

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Delivered to the  
Advertising Club Calcutta

11 December 2003

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Stanley Pinto

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*(Stanley Pinto worked at Lintas India for 21 years, 12 of them as head of Lintas Calcutta which he started, before moving on to South-east Asia, first as Managing Director of Lintas in Indonesia and Malaysia, then as Managing Director of Bozell Malaysia, Chairman of Bozell Singapore and Regional Director of Bozell South- and South-east Asia. He withdrew from corporate life in 1950 and 'has lived off the kindness and gullibility of many' since then. A past-President of the Advertising Club Calcutta for four years, Mr Pinto was invited to deliver the R K Sarkar Memorial Lecture to Calcutta's advertising and marketing fraternity in December 2003.)*

## **A LIFE (And Other Leaps Of Incredulity) IN ADVERTISING**

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I look out at you, and I feel like a dinosaur. I *am* a dinosaur.

I left India in 1984, after exactly twenty years in Advertising in India— and when I returned, everything had changed. It's all so thrilling, so fast and furious, so risqué today. Everything is so different.

For example, in our time, you never ever made unsolicited pitches for other people's accounts. It simply wasn't done. Once in 1982, I casually spoke – just *spoke* – to the Managing Director of one of Bal Mundkur's clients at a party somewhere. Safari Luggage, I believe he was. But I must have had the gleam of greed in my eye, because Bal was so furious he went out and stole my Hongkong Bank account, just to show me he could do better what I wasn't supposed to do in the first place. I got my backside right royally scalded by the bosses at Lintas – who then even apologised to Bal for my unprofessional behaviour. Safari Luggage has long disappeared. Bal has sold Ulka and is living the life of a country squire in Goa. But the Hongkong Bank account is still a huge one – and Lintas never ever got it back.

Today, it's all so different. All your CEOs seem to be doing is raiding the competition's larders, with impunity.

Again, in our time, only losers kicked back their agency commissions. And only sleaze-bag clients took them. They weren't members of the AAA of I or the ISA anyway. Today, I don't know ...everyone's negotiating. Fees they call it. Righteous alibis to defend the indefensible, more likely.

Perhaps most changed of all is the way the business world sees Advertising. In our time, it was almost something you sent your half-wit son or decorative daughter off to. Advertising wasn't anywhere as respectable as, say, selling neckties on the street corner. It was immoral – not just the rumours of semi-clad models and late night bingeing, but oh, by far the most despicable sin of all, the quest for Profit. Profit, that obscene word. It flew in the face of Gandhian economics, Nehruvian socialism, the Fabian order of social morality, all that good stuff that underpinned civilised living in India at the time.

Profit was bad --- and just to make certain you got the point, should you have the temerity to make any, the government took away 90% of it in Corporate Taxes. In fact, there was a time, for a couple of years, when Lintas' marginal tax rate was 102%. As the Americans say, go figure.

Today, the Economic Times has a front page story on the world of Indian Advertising almost every day of the week. The idols of the Advertising industry are right up there at the head table with the leaders of industry, and on Page 3 with all the pop icons of today's *mirch-masala* society. We of times past were

denied all that, though some would say my most un-geriatric of all friends, Alyque Padamsee, is holding his own quite heroically.

My point is that my life in advertising, and all its leaps and troughs, was occasioned at another time, a different place. Much of what I know, and *who* I know, is part of a time whose idea has long gone. Still, if we hadn't happened, *you* mightn't have. There were icons then who set the groundwork, and laid the trails that you have followed. That's the life in advertising I knew, and it's what I will largely range over in this talk. I'm about yesterday – but isn't ours a country that takes pride in its glorious recorded history of several thousand years? I hope then that you will allow me to wallow in just the last fifty.

So, back to the future.

Once upon a very long time ago, more than 40 years ago to be precise, I was a piano player. For five years I played in hotels and night clubs all over the country. Advertising just happened to me - and what a marvellous case of happenstance it turned out.

There I was at Bombay's Berry's Restaurant, eating dinner with my band and four free-loaders. Navin Nischol, a college mate who was trying to break into the films; Jatin Das, a struggling artist, and his girl friend, later to become the first of his three or four wives; and Harnesh Kothari, a budding businessman. Navin and Jatin were fixtures – both needed the free meal. Harnesh didn't, but he was a fixture too, revelling in the risqué company of a jazz band.

It was on an evening in June 1964. I was feeling particularly blue that evening. A disillusioned 21 year old, five years into a career that was beginning to pall despite the peroxide blondes and nightly bacchanals. Wondering what I was going to do with myself for the next hundred years or so. Eternal life is a commonplace expectation of the young, but an eternity behind bad pianos in all manner of dives was not what I wanted to look forward to.

What am I to do, I asked my friends.

You're a good writer, try Advertising, said Harnesh. He was in the process of developing the first contemporary brand of menswear in India and very much into the world of advertising. S. H. Bensons was his agency, Frank Simoes his Account Director and Playboy was the brand – launched on the back of a Kojak-type cigar-smoking roundhead.

Right, I said, and which ad company pays the best? I was a cashmere suited, Marlboro smoking dandy at the time – with a lifestyle that required quite meaningful infusions of cash regularly.

Lintas, said Harnesh, who knew a thing or two about these things. Looking back on that monosyllabic reply, I'm thinking it's just as well he didn't suggest his

own agency, S. H. Benson, or I'd have ended up as cannon fodder to Ranjan Kapur and Piyush Pandey.

The letter I wrote to Lintas, in long hand, drew a reply from a fellow with the lugubrious look of a cuckolded St Bernard. His name was Sanat Lahiri. Now, given its Unilever pedigree and perch on the top floor of the spectacularly upmarket Lever House, Lintas was something of an elitist company in those days, and few of its denizens more aware of it than Sanat-da. So, not unexpectedly, when we met in his office, it took him about five minutes to distance himself from me – and to shove me in the direction of a very odd camel-gaited fellow called Alyque Padamsee.

Untainted as I was by hierarchical structures and politically correct behaviour, I promptly asked him what sort of name Alyque was. Oh, he said, with all the panache of someone scripting the reply even as he spoke, which he probably was doing, it's a derivation of the Arabic 'Aly-ekh' - complete with an ersatz-Arab guttural 'ekh'. It was the first of many impromptu and imaginative responses, as many of them rooted in fact as not, that I came to hear from the great man over the years. But this first one impressed me no end. What the hell did I know, I was only a piano player.

Two months and three copy tests later, I was inducted into Lintas, on 16 August 1964.

I arrived promptly at 9.00 a.m. Almost nobody else did. And when they did arrive, they staggered into their offices, with a hang-dog bleariness not unfamiliar to this veteran of the night life. I later discovered they'd been farewell partying all night with Shyam Benegal and Kersi Kartrak, who had moved on from Lintas just before I slipped in the door. In the years to follow, both have reassured me it had nothing to do with my coming on board – though Kersi did add that that it might as well have, now that he knew me better. Incidentally, between our first meeting and my first day in the office, Sanat Lahiri had also fled the coop, to Dunlop in Calcutta.

So this was my chronological induction into the world of Advertising.

However, it all really came alive for me six years later, in November 1970, when I was deported to Calcutta. I'd been found out for a charlatan in Creative department. (And that's really saying something – Lintas wasn't a 'creative' agency by any manner of means. Unilever would never have permitted that. They probably still don't – but that's another story). I'd been found out and moved to Client Service; then three years later I was on the train to Calcutta. The Naxalites were in full flow at the time, cutting policemen and other obstructive elements down in broad daylight – and perhaps someone at Lintas thought sending me into the front lines was a move that would benefit the company, one way or another.

To everybody's surprise I loved it and loved it and loved it – for twelve years.

The Calcutta ad scene I came upon was a deliciously ordered and uncomplicated one. Subhas Ghosal and J Walter Thompson reigned supreme. Prasanta Sanyal and Clarion glowered in second place – and Mani Ayer at Bensons picked up whatever they inadvertently dropped, perhaps kissing the hems of the two High Priests’ gowns as he stooped to it.

And that was it. The rest of the blokes, at Grants and other holes in the wall, were the flotsam and jetsam that served to round off what was laughingly called an “industry”. It was into this scenario that I arrived, as Lintas’ Resident Account Executive.

The very next day, my late lamented friend Arup Choudhary, boss of a thriving home entertainment company and a Clarion client, took my wife and myself to the Ad Club’s annual do. A grand way to meet your *bête noires*, was how he described it. There was a momentary quiet when we walked in – but only momentary. Eyes were quickly averted, and the din resumed at roar level, excluding me firmly. The knives were surely out.

The main event of the evening was an advertising quiz. A large cannonball of a fellow whom I later came to know as Ram Ray had put it together and was now shouting it out. Uncharacteristic embarrassment prevents me from spelling out who won the quiz, but you get the picture. It was a life-threatening experience. Those knives were now positively gleaming with outrage.

Yet, those twelve years I spent in Calcutta turned out to be the most inspiring and educational experience ever. There’s a key element in the make-up of the Bengali that has infiltrated my own take on life – and has allowed me to enjoy the hell out of it in all the years that followed. It’s called No Bullshit. Don’t complicate life with the embroidery of unnecessary brouhaha, leave that to those shallow fellows on the west coast. Just tell it like it is. And the devil take the hindmost.

And so today I look back on over 35 years in advertising through the crystal glasses of a plain-speaking pragmatist.

What we do is not the cure for cancer – statistically, it’s infinitely more important. A fraction of the world’s six billion people are stricken by the dread disease each year. The rest live on, to standards that are set, often quite directly, by this arcane discipline called Advertising.

There are bankers, engineers, scientists and philosophers in Advertising who chose it over banking, engineering, biology, geology, archaeology and all the rest of the -ologies. That’s because Advertising isn’t just about a single facet of life – it is about Life itself.

Advertising is the business of delivering a society’s standard of living - that’s how that marvellous man Subhas Ghosal put it in an article he wrote for the Ad

Club's journal AD-MISSIVE. I've never forgotten it – and over the years I have borrowed it shamelessly whenever the opportunity arose. Hindustan Lever and Reliance and Tata and Citibank and even good ol' ITC may design, devise or produce the world's most phantasmagoric goods and services – but it's the advertising that takes it to the people. That's why they spend gazillions on all manner of advertising. They're not stupid. Just helpless. Even that gift from Valhalla to Calcutta's management circles, Yogi Deveshwar. Without advertising, he'd be dead in the water.

Are all their products desirable, even commendable? Of course not. There are charlatans and clunkers in every industry. But all of them play an interesting role in the business of building a GNP.

It's really quite simple:

Companies set up manufacturing facilities using money borrowed from banks. They employ millions of people for the manufacturing processes, and several more million for distributing and selling their wares. Not to mention millions of others in support industries as varied as packaging and printing and trucking.

But a product doesn't sell just because it is there. The consumer needs to be sold into buying it, at least once, the first time. That's what advertising does. Sales are created, money flows in, manufacturing capacities are increased, support systems are doubled, millions more enter the work and consuming force, money flows back to the banks who lend out more to the manufacturing industries – and the circle is squared. Only to start all over again.

The point I am labouring is actually an obvious one: Without advertising, there'd be no sales, and working backward, no manufacture, no factories, no employment at multiple levels, no banks, no money, no GNP.

Does that sound simplistic? Sure it does, but that doesn't make it untrue. Let me give you a simple example of how true it all is:

In a populist move in the 60s, the government settled the price of Dalda at a rupee less per kilogram than prevailed at that time. That made it 2 paise less per kilogram than it cost to manufacture. Given the zillions of kilogrammes that Dalda sold, the potential loss to HLL was horrendous. The company decided to stop manufacture immediately. The Government said don't even think about it.

So HLL, caught in the cleft stick of government bullying and delivering a return to its shareholders, did the one thing they knew would work: they stopped Dada's advertising. Within three years, a brand that was the best-known in the country, had dropped its sales by 60%. The loss to the ex-chequer from the reduction in employment across the country, bank borrowings, investments in further business expansion etc etc was so frightening, the government backed off.

That apart, Advertising is a profession with more colour, fragrance, excitement, than any other I can think of. Many years ago, Gerson da Cunha called Advertising a raffishly un-dull avocation. Marvellous words. It certainly is. Let me count the ways.

Advertising is about unabashed arrogance.

In 1982, I told DCM's ad manager in Delhi that we wouldn't pitch for his business without a Rs 5,000 fee. He had the last laugh at my arrogance. He sent us a cheque – then turned us away at the door when we arrived to make the pitch.

Ouch.

In 1990, Piyush Pandey didn't even reply to my letter offering him a job as CD of Lintas Malaysia. It was unspeakable arrogance, of course, but on balance a good call, at least for Ranjan Kapur's sake. How else would he have become a Page 3 icon?

Another time, when Surf was under its usual, cyclical fierce attack from the competition, we wrote the famous Lalitaji campaign. Marketing Manager Anand Bhatia, now swanning about in the Bahamas as Unilever's Chairman for the Caribbean, rejected it out of hand. Too lowbrow, he said. Insults the consumer's intelligence, he added. I remember well how outraged Alyque Padamsee was. So outraged, he and I rang Marketing Controller Shunu Sen's doorbell at almost midnight to make our case. Lalitaji went on to enter the annals of the most famous ad campaigns in Indian history – and Surf lived on to continue its unending battles in the marketplace.

Advertising is about unbounded chutzpah.

Some time in the 1970s, the always scary Ram Ray called me to ask if it was true that Lintas was looking for a Branch Manager. He'd be interested, he said. After I had recovered from the terror of it, I called Gerson da Cunha, our Grand Panjandrum in Bombay, to pass on the message. Put the man on a plane immediately, said Gerson.

Three days later, I was on the mat good and proper. Gerson called, put the call on speakerphone, and there with him were the other three directors of the company. I paraphrase now, but only just.

- Ram Ray is an interesting man, said Alyque Padamsee, Creative Director. A right comedian ... would have a future in theatre.

- Did we pay to fly him down, asked Media & Finance Director Gyan Bahl. We should take it out of your salary. This was serious. The air fare then was only Rs 700, Calcutta-Bombay return. But my salary was Rs 1,000. Before Provident Fund and Income Tax deductions.

- The bloody man was interviewing *us*, fumed Raj Jagga, Client Service Director. I don't understand what his game was, he certainly wasn't interested in a job.
- Ummm ... said Gerson, I don't know about that. I think he'd have settled for mine.

I couldn't understand it. Ram had managed to upset them all, apparently by design. I was blessing the powers that be for what I surely saw as a close shave when Subhas Ghosal called in his most Gawd Almighty voice. So you thought you could pinch Ram, did you, young man? Oh ... how did you find out, quoth I, naively. What do you think, Ram came straight to me, direct from the airport, told me all about it. Even said he was considering the offer. But he's a good lad, Ram. I've immediately appointed him Manager of HTA Calcutta. That should fix you thieving Bombay-wallahs.

I'm sure Ram had the grace to be hugely surprised at this unexpected elevation.

Chutzpah. Lovely word. My friend Ram had it in spades. That first evening when I won the ad club quiz, he told me I'd actually come second but he thought it would be a generous welcome gesture to give it to me instead. Right. A man of large, generous, expansive gestures, our Ram. (Note: Ram was in the audience when I delivered this talk. He remained stoic while the audience howled with laughter.)

Advertising is influential - in a way that almost no other profession is.

You alter entrenched trends, invent new inspirations, create volcanic changes in lifestyles, often without even realising it. I will not enumerate the many examples when Advertising has moved mountains. I will instead, while reminding you advertising professionals of the power of your craft, bemoan your apparent disinterest in putting those skills to work for the real betterment of our country.

The IT industry may well make the fortunes of the urban creamy layer of our society – the rest continue to be hapless victims of what I consider criminal neglect. Or let me put it in another way. If the IT-led move into fame and fortune had not happened to India, our country would be dirt-poor, with our engineers and doctors and professional managers fleeing the country in even greater numbers for greener pastures.

Look around you; while we are busy being anaesthetised by our emergence on the world map as an international leader and catalyst in the IT industry, the rest of our nation-building effort is a sad travesty. 75% of our parliamentarians allegedly have criminal and other cases against them. A third-rate infrastructure, a terrifyingly unreliable legal and public safety system, a corrupt financial edifice and, above all, real investment in human infrastructure a pathetic joke that nobody could possibly be laughing at - all combine to make our country's performance comparable with many notorious banana republics. Don't



believe me? Just look up Transparency International's latest list of corrupt and under-performing countries.

Last week's issue of *Business Week*, one of the most respected international business magazines, had a cover story on India. It was a glowing report on India's brilliant engineers, and their potential for turning India into a world power within the next decade. But it also said: *For all it's R&D labs, India remains visibly Third World.*

That's our India today. A diamond in the rough – very rough, very flawed.

Just consider the scams that are coming at us fast and free.

Consider the sudden collapse of the UTI two years ago. Long touted as the safest refuge for our savings, it was almost bankrupted by so many of our 'leaders' who connived to siphon its assets off into fake and self-enriching industrial and business projects, resulting in multiple crores of rupees, the life savings of millions of people, being written off as non-performing assets. Bankruptcy has been averted – but not the moral bankruptcy. Does anyone remember – or care – that not one single member of the scam brigade has ever been had up for it?

Take another more recent example: does any thinking person believe that the 30,000 crore stamp paper scam could have flourished over fifteen years without the active patronage, participation and protection of the various institutions within our finance and commerce authorities? And is there anybody here tonight who believes that a single minister or ex-minister or bureaucrat or ex-bureaucrat will go to jail for it? Perhaps they'll surprise us yet, but for now let's have a show of hands on that simple question. (Note: Not a single hand was raised.)

Is there a solution to these endemic problems that plague us? In a democratic set-up, just one. The empowerment of the majority of the people. And empowerment becomes reality only when education and literacy standards rise.

In that context, consider just one statistical fact: there are more illiterate Indians today than there were Indians in 1947. I don't believe this is accidental ... or the result of incompetent implementation of inadequate policies. I think it's by design. Or are we to believe that the eradication of illiteracy over a 50-year period was really an insurmountable task for a country brimming over with such an entrenched passion for education as India? I think not. I think educated people are a threat to our venal leaders. They ask questions, demand answers, insist on accountability, and reject the scam at the ballot box. Given that threat, if you were a politician in today's India, would you do anything meaningful to accelerate literacy?

So what are you advertising people, with your much-vaunted reputations for strategic solutions to problems, going to do about it? And when? State governments everywhere in India today say nation-building must be a joint task, the people and the government working together. Good. Why don't you take them

up on it? I plead with you in idealist Calcutta to take them up on it. Devise an ‘educate the people’ programme that will change everything in one short generation. Wind down the tinted windows of your Mercedes and Opels and Hondas and Sonatas, look at how huge is the dragon of discontent before you. And how thrilling the thought of grappling it to the ground.

Yesterday’s newspapers announced that for the first time since independence, the country’s literacy growth rate has outpaced the population growth rate. If this is true, hallelujah. We should be OK in a couple of hundred years. Unless someone decides to accelerate the pace of it. Why shouldn’t that someone be the Advertising professionals of India?

Advertising is about competing fiercely.

Then, whether you win or lose, it’s about having a drink or two or five at Olympia Bar, with the competition of course.

In 1974 or thereabouts, a short stretch of road on Chowringhee, just in front of Everest Building, got a miraculous row of new generation street lights, donated by my client GEC. Even Bombay had nothing to match it. GEC wanted an ad to trumpet their coup and quietly asked Calcutta’s two largest agencies to design an ad that would reflect it.

As the incumbent agency, so did we. I never did see what HTA and Clarion produced, but ours was a lovely ad, and it was selected to run. It featured a night shot of the new lighting by the great Ahmed Ali, under a headline that said “Calcutta. The Return to Splendour.” Pompous and hyperbolic as all hell, but the day it ran every Bengali I knew, and his grandmother too, called to say how thrilled they were. One of the earliest came from Deepak Sen, HTA’s Manager. Now you are one of us, he said, and tonight we will drink together. Which we did, at the Olympia Bar, with a dozen others from ad agencies all over the city.

But that bonhomie aside, Advertising is also about hating to lose.

I was bereft when Pradeep Dutt, then Managing Director of Lipton, gave his new noodles account to Rediffusion. And I was disconsolate when he followed it up by giving the new tea-based soft drink to Clarion. Those losses remained an open wound long after the brands themselves had disappeared into the ranks of ignominious history. Did I gloat when they did? Oh yes, I’m ashamed to say. I was young, a lot less forgiving and took rejection even more badly than I do today. (Note: Pradeep Dutt was in the audience. As it turned out, the noodles and soft drinks forays were dismal failures, almost sinking Lipton in the bargain.)

If there’s one thing every one in this room must surely know, it is that Advertising is about awards for creative excellence that creative directors fling at each other.

Here I have a king-size bee in my bonnet, and always have. Awards for outstanding creativity are fine, but what is creativity in advertising? Was it Leo Burnett who said it ain’t creative if it don’t sell? David Ogilvy, for as long as he was at the helm of his agency, refused to enter any awards race; instead he set

up his own in-house awards for advertising creativity that moved share points for clients' brands.

For many years, my friend Neil French, Archduke & Eminence Plenipotentiary of this and every other Creative World, and I, had an on-again-off-again battle in South-east Asia's media over the distortion in values brought on by creative awards. Neil is a large shaven-headed fellow. We'd often walk down the back streets of Singapore chomping on outsize cigars, debating the point loudly. Just like Schwarzenegger and De Vito in that silly movie. No cigars for guessing who was De Vito. You're anti awards because you've never won one, he'd say. But I have built more brands than you ever have, I'd reply. And so it went.

But I guess I was a joyless bastard because I went further. I researched every South-east Asian country for the market shares of all the brands that had won top creative awards, every year for the preceding decade. Then compared the tables with actual brand leader reckonings in their markets. And then gloated over the fact that there was no meaningful correlation between the two lists.

Fizzy drinks excepted, few brands supported by award-winning advertising were market leaders as well. In fact, many of the top awards went to brands that died in the market place within a few years.

And that's why I have a problem with creative awards in advertising. Not that they exist but that their distribution is wrong-headed.

I often wonder what a similar enquiry would throw up today. Somebody should try it. I can only tell you that I didn't understand more than five of the Cannes 2003 award winners that I sat through with you here in Calcutta, in May this year.

The nonsense seems to live on in Europe. Two decades ago, the young turks of Unilever strong-armed their management at an international marketing meet to consider moving out of the club of four (Lintas, JWT, Ogilvy & Mather and McCann Erickson) to a 'creative' agency. All right, said the management, try it. So they launched a new variant of Omo (I think), their prized detergent, through Collett Dickenson & Pierce, then the world's most admired (and award winning) creative hot shop.

The result was a campaign designed around Shakespeare's Midsummer Nights Dream, with elves and fairies floating around in gossamer whites and pastels, shot through glycerine tinged lenses. A slew of awards followed, of course.

Six months later, the variant died on the shelves. Britain's mums didn't give a jot for Shakespeare when it came to doing their laundry. They wanted assurances of 'whiter than white', a phrase that Shakespeare didn't write.

The multi-million pound sterling campaign was withdrawn, and Collett Dickenson Pierce sacked. Later to be merged into some other agency and disappear as a name into ignominious history.

But Sir Martin Sorrell, today's king of the mountain, says you ignore awards at your peril. Great motivators, he calls them. And Sorrell is an honourable man. So are they all, all honourable men, the creative directors with arms disjuncted at the elbows, crippled by the effort of patting their own backs.

I remember my friend Mohammed Khan's gorgeous campaign for VIP Skybags. It won many awards. But the suitcases stayed resolutely put on the shelves. Then the client moved the account to Lintas. Mohammed was outraged. What the fornication do you nethermost orifices know about advertising, he screamed at us. He was right, in his own way. Nina Verma's campaign was a study in plain vanilla compared to the one that had preceded it. But for some reason, the client was delighted. It might have had something to do with the skyrocketing sales.

The rest of the VIP account arrived at Lintas shortly after. Mohammed, I was told, was uncharacteristically speechless.

Mohammed hasn't mellowed much since then. In the latest issue of the Times of India's Strategic Marketing magazine, he says the big agencies use their size to con their way into gaining and holding on to large accounts. He'd never do that, he vows. So I guess the HTA and Clarion and Lintas agencies in Calcutta can heave a sigh of relief. Mohammed will never accept the humongous ITC account of which he has a small part, even if he were offered it. It would probably make his the largest agency in the country, but he has his principles about things like that. Good old Mohammed.

Still, there's hope. And it is entirely in the fitness of things that Calcutta, honest, intelligent, professional Calcutta gives away creative awards to advertising that is creative holistically. Creative because it sells the brand. That's how we (to be honest, I) set up the Advertising Club Calcutta's awards 20 years ago and it makes me proud that you've held the line. Congratulations, Ad Club Calcutta. And thank you.

Advertising brings with it a particular freedom that copywriters most enjoy – the freedom to rewrite the language ... any language.

We had a Tamilian writer at Lintas, a litterateur who had won a raft of Tamilnadu's State and Government awards for his literary penmanship. Every morning the office reverberated to his wails of anguish as he took in the ads in the Dinamani newspaper. And my renowned friend Pandit Satyadev Dubey, a sometime Hindi writer at Lintas, made us promise we would never call him at home, lest his mother discovered he was in advertising.

My dear departed colleague Gautam Bose, a man Frank Simoes called the country's best copywriter at a time when the country was calling Frank the best writer in the business, once used a word in the headline of a Siemens ad. The

word was ‘contemporaneity’. Con-tem-po-raneity. I’d never heard it – nobody had, because Gautam had concocted it – but it sounded mighty, and we ran with it. Rahul Bajaj, a plain-speaking man if ever there was one, asked me what the hell it meant. Gautam was the writer on his account too. Damned if I know, I said, but isn’t it a power word? Yes, said Rahul, a champion boxer in his youth, it certainly packs a punch. My teeth hurt every time I try to pronounce it

Today we continue to have all sorts of new words and phrases coined by advertising people. Some work, others don’t.

I saw a TV commercial yesterday that promised me rock hard abs. Abs. Ugh. Whatever they are, I don’t want them.

And then there’s this firm of lawyers (or perhaps they’re accountants) who apparently have something to do with the Tata Safari car. Fast & How. Complete with an ampersand. Fast & How. Chinese accountants probably.

Advertising is about being ingenuous in the extreme.

That’s why we have the Johnny Walker portfolio of Business Case Studies. Also, bad news for my bibulous friends, Chivas is all about some fish in Alaska. How did Scottish fish get to Alaska? Search me. Perhaps the tectonic plates under us are starting to move again. Another achievement of the wild and woolly world of Advertising.

And don’t you just adore how sexy advertising allows us to be?

I remember how in the late 60s I became the envy of all my friends. Our secretary in Lintas’ copy department, a comely wench called Trudy Pogose, suddenly burst into the nation’s consciousness as the first woman in Indian advertising history to pose live in a bra. The Maidenform girl, she was, in glorious double spreads. Male readership of the women’s magazines showed a dramatic increase. We’d open each new issue directly onto the page carrying the Maidenform ad with the same breathless anticipation as we would the Playboy centrefold. Remember, that was when the *raison d’être* for condoms was protection against disease. Or so their labels said.

Two decades later, things had moved along quite nicely. Mild-mannered Dalip Tahil took to cavorting around the streets of Bombay, knocking out the bad guys, wearing his VIP underwear, and nothing else.

Today? Condoms are advertised in a variety of gourmet flavours. And Jockey – ‘the next best thing to naked’ – has me writhing in lascivious pleasure, no matter how often I hear it.

Advertising is about people wearing their hearts on their sleeves.

One example stands out in my memory.

Some time in the 70s, HTA went through a horrendous patch. The agency was apparently hopelessly over-leveraged and a recession in the economy was driving

it into bankruptcy. Morris Mathias, the new CEO, did what any professional manager would – he attacked the largest cost component, HTA's head-count, ruthlessly. A few hundred HTA people reportedly lost their jobs all around the country. Morris even took the agency's flagship office in Bombay out of its shiny and monstrously expensive new offices at Express Towers in Nariman Point back to its grey old Pherozeshah Mehta Road office.

Morale imploded. Morris did what had to be done but his tenure became untenable. The agency fell back on the one man who had resolutely refused the crown several times: Calcutta's brilliant Subhas Ghosal. But even as he struggled to get the good ship HTA right side up again, there was a restiveness among HTA's clients. Clients love to be associated with a winner, and HTA was a winner like Mike Tyson is a winner. (Note: Tyson had lost his crown and was doing time in jail. A poignant metaphor of the HTA dilemma)

At Lintas we started getting calls from their clients. Doubtless others did as well. That's when Gerson da Cunha called a meeting of the CEOs of the top five agencies. His message: Let's be sensible. We need a strong HTA. Our industry would be seriously damaged if it went down. We also need to be compassionate. HTA has set standards of quality and integrity that have been the hallmarks of our industry. We must show our gratitude for that by standing by them. Let us agree not to take on a single HTA client for the next two years. That's all the time they need to get it right. And of course they did.

Back at the ranch, all of us at Lintas had our instructions from Gerson: if an HTA client contacts you, do nothing. Let me know. And when we did, Gerson would call Subhas and let him know.

Years later, when I returned from Calcutta to Bombay, Mr Ghosal gave me a welcome dinner in his home. In a short little toast he said he wouldn't have survived, nor would HTA, but for that initiative by Gerson da Cunha and Lintas.

Yes, when it comes down to the wire, advertising people do wear their hearts on their sleeves.

Advertising people also love unsparingly.

I absolutely loved my colleagues at Lintas Calcutta. We were young and strong and wonderful together.

Around that time, the Interpublic Group's magical new business team of Barry Day, Anne Burdus and Phil Geier at McCann UK were setting the ad world on fire, winning a new account every week somewhere in Europe. We felt almost as invincible, and truth be told, we had our moments.

Twenty years later, scattered all over the place as we are, the bond is just as strong as ever it was. Pranesh Misra, who will run Lintas India one day soon. (Note: He did.) Atul Sharma, now Marketing Director of a company within the Pepsi Group in Australia. Bhaskar Rao, Managing Director of Foote Cone

Belding in Singapore. Shubhabrata Ghose, our crazy SG, CEO of Saatchi & Saatchi in Bangalore. And Pronab Ghose and Rema Ezra and .... so many more. Great people, wonderful friends.

Yesterday, when I went to Lintas House on Ballygunge Circular Road, Durga the tea boy and Ishaan my old driver and two of the security guards, still there all these years later, rushed out and unashamedly embraced me. That's the untrammelled love that people in Advertising are all about.

There were loveable people on the Client side as well, of course, and none more than the late great Shunu Sen.

Enough has been written about Shunu in the eulogies that appeared after his sad passing, to bear repeating today. But please permit me to share a personal experience with you.

In the late 80s, I was responsible for putting together the programme for the Asian Advertising Congress in Kuala Lumpur. The Indian speakers who accepted my invitation were Subhas Ghosal, Gerson da Cunha --- and Shunu Sen. Gerson & Uma and Shunu & Indu threw in a proviso: they would only come if they were billeted in our home instead of some local 5-star hotel.

When Shunu arrived, it was plain to see that his spinal problem had considerably worsened. Walking was a visibly painful affair. Did it faze him? Perish the thought. He was the first one into our swimming pool every morning, falling in with a thunderous crash. And blow me if he didn't have our otherwise quite demure Malay maid Susie towelling him down when he was done. The process was interrupted several times by cries of 'gently, darling, gently'. Susie tittered, but I knew it wasn't only a joke. The man was in pain, God rest him, but he wasn't about to admit it. It was enough to make me weep for my dear friend of so many years.

Yes, Advertising people cry easily too.

Tears of chagrin, tears of grief, tears of blind hatred, we know them all.

I wept when Pradeep Dutt vetoed what might have been the greatest testimonial campaign of them all. At a time when almost nobody in India was drinking Green Label Darjeeling Tea, we got Hussain, General Maneckshaw, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Dom Moraes, Chitra & Jagjit Singh to sign up to its sophisticated taste. That great artist Bikash Bhattacharjee painted their portraits for the print campaign. It was damn hard to put it all together, I can tell you. Only Satyajit Ray turned us down. I don't believe in advertising, he said. Excuse me, sir, but weren't you yourself an art director at Clarion, I asked. Didn't you even invent a new typeface call Ray Roman at the time? Flattery, I thought, would win the day for me. Yes, but that was a long time ago, said Mr Ray. Excuse me sir, but don't they still pay you Director's sitting fees for being on their Board, I bravely ventured. Get out of my house, said the great man. He was 6'4, I was 4'6, I got out of his house.

Pradeep Dutt wasn't 6'4 when he ditched our campaign, but he said get out of my house too, and I did. If you're out there, Pradeep, perhaps its not too late to tell you that as I wept into my beer that evening, I hated you something terrible. And you know what Pradeep, almost nobody in India drinks Green Label Tea even today, 30 years later. How much worse could it have got with that spectacular campaign?

I cried when Rema Ezra called me last month to say Gautam Bose had died. Dear troubled Gautam Bose.

But seldom did I weep as much as when one day in Calcutta, in 1982, I returned home at 2.00 in the morning to find Alyque Padamsee asleep on our doorstep. Enough is enough, he said, and twelve years is more than enough. It's time you returned to Bombay, he said. Immediately, he said. In four hours, with me, on the first flight leaving Dum Dum for Bombay, he commanded. I wept at the suddenness of it, the unfairness of it – and seeing me so lachrymose, Alyque wept too, though I don't know what he was crying about, the old crocodile.

It was the end of the road for me in Calcutta. But wherever I have lived and worked after that day ... Bombay, Jakarta, Malaysia, New York ... none have managed ever to dislodge Calcutta from that special place in my heart.

This talk has rambled on. They tell me R K Sarkar had a lovely sense of humour. He'd need it I think, to forgive whatever sins I have committed under his aegis today. But I've had fun. I hope you did too, my friends Ram Ray and Ranjan Kapur and Pradeep Dutt and Mohammed Khan and all the rest of the wonderful folk of our trade who populated this talk.

Because Advertising is first and last about having fun, even as you turn a buck. Unadulterated, unashamed, huge dollops of incomparable fun. Fun like no other profession could ever know.

All of us in the business have lived Jerry Della Femina's famous comment that Advertising is the most fun you can have with your clothes on. Anyone in the trade who doesn't agree is a killjoy who should leave this auditorium immediately and head for his GP and a prescription for Viagra.

Just imagine the fun some smart aleck had convincing my wife to buy an electric chapatti maker for Rs 2,999. I'd like to tell the little sod that my home-made chapattis now cost Rs 127 each, Interest and Depreciation costs included, and the maid who once produced them for free is now enjoying the half-hour's respite.

The fact is, for sheer *joie de vivre*, nothing comes close to the experience of turning a million people into instant addicts of something they didn't even know existed five minutes earlier. Something like pugs. Small, irreversibly ugly, pop-eyed and yappy creatures who fart on demand. Completely unnecessary beasts,



but also impossible to live without after you see the Hutch campaign. Pugs are now going at Rs 40,000 a pop. *Dharun!*

Of course Advertising is fun. In fact, ladies and gentlemen of the Advertising Club Calcutta, to misquote something someone once said, if you're not in this business for the fun in it, what the hell were you doing here for best part of the last hour listening to this old windbag in the first place?

**END**

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*08.12.2003*