

Advertising and Ethnicities: A Comparative Study of Sri Lanka and Northeast India

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Ethnicity has become a key interest of advertisers in diverse societies. Contrary to the popular argument that ethnic identities are threatened by the intensified influence of media and consumer culture, they have become the core sites of representation and reproduction of ethnic identities. It is arguable that in today's (mass) mediated societies there are no ways of imagining ethnicities without the media's influence and impact on them. Advertising¹, no longer a mere commercial activity, is an important component of popular culture and hence plays a crucial part in the social and cultural life of our times. Sri Lanka² has long been a country of communal unrest, which culminated in a civil war. Northeast India is a region where a number of conflicting identities are in a constant battle of production and reproduction. The ways the ethnic identities are represented in advertisements in these two societies are worthy of studying in this context. When ad-makers segment a market for a particular brand, they mostly rely on ethnic identities. As a result, advertisements too become a site of reproduction of ethnic identities. This paper is intended to identify and analyze the ways of representations of ethnic identities in advertisements in Northeast India³ and Sri Lanka by a comparative reading of a sample of print and electronic advertisements.

Keywords: Ethnic marketing, imagining, representation, reproduction, text

On many occasions, clients have asked us to not take faces from northeast India stating that they do not represent the entire country and may end up confusing the viewers... Show me a regular ad film campaign where you have seen a north eastern face Ram Subramanian, founder and director Handloom Picture Company. (Tewari, 2014)

[F]or Sri Lankan advertising agencies, the issue is not balancing local ethnic types, but speaking to Sri Lankans by way of actors who are either Sri Lankan in a generic way or recognizably Sinhala. Steven Kemper (2001, p. 59)

Both in India and Sri Lanka advertising is probably the most visible multinational industry; in both countries, all most all the leading multinational advertising agencies are in operation. As such, no doubt, as an industry it plays a leading role in multinational capitalism. However, advertising is not only a business, industry, or a commercial activity but also a social, cultural, and political phenomenon as has been analyzed by many social and cultural theorists, ranging

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from Raymond Williams (2009) to Jean Baudrillard (2001). Despite being a multinational industry, advertising differs from country to country, region to region, allowing the construction of phrases like “European advertising”, “US advertising”, and “Indian advertising” etc. The country or regional specificities in advertising, is not a mere matter of country of origin but rather, deals with the different ways that the global is negotiated with the local in each country or region. Accordingly, advertising in any country, is about being global and local simultaneously. How advertising articulates ethnic ideologies in diverse societies is an important part of this local-global negotiation.

Sri Lanka has long been a country of communal unrest, which culminated in a civil war fought between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)⁴ (which self-declared themselves the sole representatives of the Tamils⁵ in Sri Lanka, after politically and militarily defeating the rival Tamil political/military groups), and the government forces. (For a detailed discussion on the ethnic crisis and civil war in Sri Lanka see: Tambiah, 1986; De Silva, 2012) DeVotta, 2004; Thiranagama, 2011.) The country now is facing the international community’s demand for investigations on war crimes/human rights violations during the last phase of the war. Divided across the ethnic lines yet united by legislations and constitution, the country, after five years of the end of civil war, is still meandering without a proper vision and mechanism for post-war reconciliation. Moreover, the recent rise of ethno-religious fundamentalist groups and hate campaigns against the Muslim minority (for a detailed discussion see: Stein, 2014; Gugler, 2013; Senaratne, 2014) have casted a cloud over the peace and harmony in the country.

India also is a country of ethnic diversity and ethnic unrest. Especially, Northeast India is a land for different ethnic groups and “the Northeast”, the “troubled periphery” (Bhaumik, 2009), “has been and continues to be a hotbed of ethnic, religious, linguistic and economic tension” (Barua, 2005, p. 231), now facing “insurgencies or separatist movements from over 50 groups...revolve around language and ethnicity, tribal rivalry, migration, control over local resources, access to water, and more significantly, a widespread feeling of exploitation and alienation from the Indian state” (Haokip, 2012, p. 222).

Given that both Sri Lanka and Northeast India are lands of contest of ethnic ideologies, senses and sentiments of self-respect and beyond that, right of separation and self-determination, the ideologies and violence of separatism versus national integration, make it interesting to study how advertising operates in these two lands. Also, how an industry of multinational capitalism links the global ways of consumption with the local ways of belongingness/alienation. As such, this paper intends to understand the ways in which ethnic ideologies are represented, negotiated, reconstructed, articulated, and contested in advertising in Sri Lanka and Northeast India. The focus of the paper is mainly on the most recent advertising campaigns, although it shuffle between historical examples and contemporary times for the betterment of the discussion. The secondary materials are used in contextualizing the socio-cultural relevance of advertising campaigns while a sample of advertisements is used as primary materials. In deciphering the meanings of selected advertisements a mixed method of textual reading, which includes the illuminations of semiotics, discourse analysis, hermeneutics and content analysis for the most part, is applied. As such, this is not a semiotic analysis or a discourse analysis of advertising per se. Rather, it emphasizes the importance

of a mixed method textual reading, having freedom to go beyond the limit of a particular single method.

Advertising and Ethnicities

In a broader view, advertising, all over the world, shows two kinds of people: “people similar to us” and “people different from us”. These two spans over all the models of representations like gender, class, ethnic, regional etc. Ethnic representation in advertising appears in three forms: the first, which targets the same ethnic group/s represented in, the second, which targets a different ethnic group/s than the represented, and the third, which targets to campaign across ethnicities. However, these three forms involve the subtle dichotomy of self/other, in which non-representation also becomes a way of representation. To segment a market on ethnic basis is “ethnic marketing/advertising” and to segment a market across the ethnic boundaries is “cross-cultural marketing/advertising”. These two are the “targeted versus one voice” (Business and Finance, 2011) that marketing/advertising practitioners debate on. Although this two models make sense as marketing/advertising strategies, it is not a simple matter of “targeted versus one” when it comes to the theme of representation.

Advertising that targets the same ethnic group/community that has been represented in the campaign is the most common type of ethnic representation in advertising. This involves with many forms such as featuring the people (including the celebrities) from a particular ethnic group, depicting culture specificities, lifestyles, etc. One common ethnic ad type is “copycat”⁶ ads, which again can take many different forms. A radio jingle translated into a local language can reach a particular community not only passing the message but also giving the sense of being addressed by their own language. Print ads and television commercials (TVCs) that replace the originally used models with ethnic models are also types of copycat advertising.

Anthony J Cortse argues that the copycat advertising is ethnocentric as it “mistakenly assumes that African Americans and Latinos are simply dark-skinned white people” (2008, p. 96). This argument is sociologically valid as the “originals” always are the Whites (or the dominant groups/communities). However, as the question of representation does not involve only with the self (us) but also with the other (them), the copycat advertising brings an important dimension of ethnic representation. To put it simply, it may not be an apt response to the questions like “why them only?” and “why not us?” but, in case, to the question “why differently?” Although the issue of stereotyping is in the core of the academic discourse on representation, we should not ignore that the image of a community that it wants to see and show the other/s is always not “as it is”, but rather “as it want to” or “according to its fantasy”.

In fact, the copycat advertising is a primary model of ethnic advertising. The developed forms of ethnic advertising today engage with the ethnicity more complex and subtle ways. “Social reality” model as termed by Cortse (2008), attempts to bring a “true picture” of the ethnic group concerned, and beyond that links the feelings, attitudes, histories, of the community with brands. Here, ethnic advertising becomes more an active site of representation and reproduction of ethnic identities. Unlike in copycat advertising, this model is inseparable from market researches. As Roberta J. Astroff argues,

“[T]exts” of market research can be analyzed and understood by analogy to ethnographies. They share the ethnographic text’s nature as an “invention, not representation of cultures”, and the result of a process of cultural production. Market researches produce a market by identifying, naming, and defining a culture as a market segment. (Astroff, 1994, p. 103)

Representation and reproduction have close ties; any attempt at representation is an attempt at reproduction. When an advertising campaign targets a particular ethnic group, representing them in the campaign and segments a market, it is, in fact, creating a market segment and reproducing ethnicity. In other words, both the market segment and the ethnicity are reproduced in the process of market segmenting for advertising. As a result, ethnic advertising that targets the same ethnic community represented/reproduced in the campaign becomes not the outcome but the source of ethnic imagination. “If anthropology is understood as ‘writing culture’, what advertising ‘writes’ ends up producing culture” (Kemper, 2003, p. 52).

The second way in which advertising engages ethnicity is by depicting a particular ethnic group in a campaign, targeting a different ethnic group. This form is frequently criticized for stereotyping ethnic groups for the gaze and (sadistic, humiliating, sexist, etc.) pleasure of another (most of the time, the dominant) ethnic group. Nonetheless, the other side of the same coin, advertising that utilizes the supremacy (beauty/whiteness/luxury) of a dominant ethnic group for the gaze and pleasure of another ethnic group, can also be taken as a sub category of this form. This is well observable in beauty and cosmetic, cigarettes and alcohol, automobile, and real estate and housing advertising in many countries.

The third form of ethnic advertising targets across ethnic boundaries while keeping ethnic representation as a matter of interest in the advertising campaign. Known as cross-cultural advertising, this category, perhaps, is getting more prominence in advertising in diverse societies. In a sense, it seems like using racial and ethnic prejudices for advertising is becoming old-fashioned while promoting ethnic harmony and respecting differences is becoming the new trend. Hence, it also seems like advertising has become the most prominent and practical site of multiculturalism with this form of multicultural advertising. Nevertheless, the criticism of multiculturalism gains much validity when it comes to this new trend of multicultural advertising. “By containing diversity in a common grid, multiculturalism preserves the ethnocentric paradigm of commodity relations that generate particularisms in the experience of life-worlds within transnational capitalism. Cultural difference sells” (San Juan, 2002, p. 347). As Slavoj Žižek argues, this is a postmodern or reflexive racism:

Today’s ‘reflected’ racism, however, is paradoxically able to articulate itself in terms of direct *respect* for the other’s culture; was not the official argument for apartheid in the old South Africa that black culture should be preserved in its uniqueness, not dissipated in the Western melting-pot? Do not even today’s European racists, like Le Pen, emphasize how what they ask for is only the same right to cultural identity as Africans and others demand for themselves? (2000, p. 6)

As such, “the respect for differences” becomes disguised racism; “the fetishistic disavowal of cynicism: ‘I know very well that all ethnic cultures are equal in value, yet,

nevertheless, I will act as if mine is superior” (Myers, 2003). In his essay “Multiculturalism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Multinational Capitalism” Žižek declares:

And, of course, the ideal form of ideology of this global capitalism is multiculturalism, the attitude which, from a kind of empty global position, treats each local culture the way the colonizer treats colonized people – as “natives” whose mores are to be carefully studied and “respected.”...In other words, multiculturalism is a disavowed, inverted, self-referential form of racism, a “racism with distance” – it respects the Other’s identity, conceiving the Other as a self-enclosed, “authentic” community towards which he, the multiculturalist, maintains a distance rendered possible by privileged universal position...the multiculturalist respect for the Other’s specificity is the very form of asserting one’s own superiority. (Žižek, 1997, p. 44)

Unlike the earlier forms of “racist” advertising, the new form “respects the differences”. This is best exemplified in advertising multinational fast food companies like McDonald and KFC. Nevertheless, the very process of these advertising campaigns transforms ethnicity to the “ethnic Thing”, objectifying “the Other”, reducing them to spectacles or objects. Again, what Žižek reminds us about multiculturalism well fits with this form of “multicultural advertising”:

The conflict about multiculturalism is already a conflict about *Leitkultur*⁷: it is not a conflict between cultures, but a conflict between different visions of how different cultures can and should coexist, about the rules and practices these cultures have to share if they are to coexist. (2012, p. 45)

Advertising and Ethnicity: Northeast India

Much has been written about “ethnicity in (the) Northeast India” (Agarawal, 1996; Hussain, 2004; Singh, 2008). Nonetheless, the problem lies in the core of the phrase making itself, which cannot be discussed within the limits of this paper. However, in short, “ethnicities” (despite of whether they fit into the academic definition of the concept or not) in the region as a multitude and “ethnicity” in the region as an entity, are to be problematized. Do the two women hockey players in *Chak de! India* (2007) represent an ethnic identity (of the Northeast) or a regional identity? Or, as in the most recent case of Mary Kom, does she represent an ethnic identity (of the Northeast) or a regional identity? Where does the line between ethnicity and regionality in the Northeast lay; first, for the people in the region, and second, for the people outside the region?

Perhaps, cement advertising in the region is the prime site of ethnic representation that targets the ethnic groups in the region itself. The reason behind this can be that cement being a regional product often targets a local market. Nonetheless, given the multiplicity of the ethnic identities of the region, it is a difficult task for marketers/ advertisers to segment the markets along the ethnic lines. The only exception is outdoor advertising (and to some extends print advertising too, given that the local language newspapers have a considerable readership), which is cheaper in comparison to the print and electronic advertising. (The

most noted case here is the Surya cement's "Build fresh and Strong Assam" campaign, which targeted a single state and arguably, a single "ethnic" group too.) That is the reason behind local advertising agencies mostly depend on outdoor advertising while print and electronic advertising in the region are mostly designed by the major advertising agencies outside the region (defiantly, in the metropolises).

Mostly electronic advertisements that appear in local languages are dubbed in local languages (that too by non-local people) and regionally distributed. Although one can argue whether it comes under the advertising proper or not, the music video produced for Star cement (Srinivasan, 2010) is a pioneer work in this regional segmenting and regional representation targeted the region itself. The music video brought together four celebrities from four states of the region (along with one from the mainstream) to sing a multilingual song with the theme "our Northeast our Star". Its appeal is to the development sentiments; portraying a positive picture of building Northeast (with cement). The music video is a collage of northeast's ethnicities and cultures (although not each and every). Interestingly, the metaphor of collage is more suitable as it at the same time a whole as Northeast but clearly depicts differences too; differences are alive within the whole. This is very evident in the way those celebrities were separately used as a part of the campaign, especially in print media. For example, continued use of the cultural icon Bupen Hazarika (even after his death) in advertising Star cement, addresses different people and different sentiments at different levels.

An advanced step of ethno-regional segmenting is well exemplified in the Dalmia cement advertising campaign for its Northeast launch in 2013. If Star cement used four figures to represent the ethnic identities of the region, Dalmia focused on a single figure, Mary Kom, to represent the region and the people of the region and hence to segment the Northeast cement market. (For a detailed discussion on Dalmia cement campaign see: Esse & Liyanage, 2014).

The incredible India advertising campaign's depiction of the Northeast India (Nair, 2014) is one of the best examples of bringing ethnicity to the field of advertising, by the other and for the other (the campaign targeted both the international and domestic tourist markets). There is a politics of phrase making, as it is a way and act of naming, projecting, manipulating, and even dominating. "Paradise unexplored" was the tagline that appeared in the advertisements. The question is, what really is unexplored in this "paradise"? As the visuals in the advertisements prove it is not only the land and the nature but the people and cultures too. Underlying this "unexplored" is the idea of "underdeveloped" or less civilized as Duncan McDui-Ra argues:

Images of tribal and other ethnic groups in tourism campaigns both construct and reflect dominant ways of seeing Northeast people. The portrayal of the Northeast for the tourism market reflects the three 'un' myths discussed by Echtner and Prasad (2003) in their analysis of the ways Third World destinations are represented to foreigners: 'unchanged', 'unrestrained', and 'uncivilized'. Interestingly, in the case of the Northeast, these 'un' myths not only cater for foreign tourists but to the enormous domestic tourism market. (McDui-Ra, 2012, p. 92)

If one reads the texts of the incredible India advertising campaign for the Northeast in comparison to the texts of the campaign for metropolis in the “incredible India” full campaign, this is very evident. As such, this branding of the Northeast as the “paradise unexplored”, not only brings the old wine in new bottles, but at the same time, beyond that, exemplifies how multiculturalism operates as a postmodern racism, asserting that “you are different. I respect your difference (but you are unexplored)”. The cynicism at its highest comes out; “the unexplored” is to be “explored” by (an outside) “explorer”! Here we witness, what Žižek (1997) terms as the “ethnic Thing...objectification of the Other”. This objectification is not the old racist objectification but a multicultural objectification:

Multiculturalism is a racism which empties its own position of all positive content (the multiculturalist is not a direct racist, he doesn't oppose to the Other the particular values of his own culture), but nonetheless retains this position as the privileged empty point of universality from which one is able to appreciate (and depreciate) properly other particular cultures[.] (1997, p. 45)

A recent television commercial (TVC) for Nestle (NirvanaFilms, 2014) with the tagline “when goodness is shared over food life smiles”, is another good example of multicultural advertising, and hence objectification of the Northeast ethnicity. “We went with a girl from the Northeast, an area we usually don't cast from, for I think we should break stereotypes” (Bareu, 2014) the South Asia president of the advertising agency who created the commercial said to the media. The advertisement shows how the hostile attitude of a little boy towards his adopted sister changes as they start sharing food. As shown in the commercial, the family is urban middle class and Hindi speaking and the adopted girl child is from the Northeast. The advertisement, on one level, is an attempt to exploit the anti-discrimination discourse and activism, and on another, brings the notion of “sharing” as a way of changing attitudes and relations. However, a deeper reading of the advertisement generates multitude meanings. The adopted child, being a girl, inter-texts the commercial with the social and media discourse of human trafficking, the idea that the Northeast is one of the regions infamous for human trafficking, and then, necessarily with the ideas of poverty and underdevelopment, which goes well with the theme of “sharing food”.

Metaphorically, the ad is depicting the Northeast as the adopted child of “mainland family”, as the girl is adopted to the urban middle class Hindi speaking family, so the Northeast to the mainland. As such, the ad places itself in the dominant discourse of national integration and its way of articulating the minorities or the marginalized communities, be it the “good” “patriotic” Muslim, or the “adopted child”, or any other “someone”. The integration does not mean different communities getting together to make one entity, but, rather, the way others place in the mainstream. The adopted girl child climbs trees, collects earthworms into bottle, steals food, and hence gains the curious interest of her brother. As it appeared in the media, “the client particularly wanted an oriental-looking child” (Tewari, 2014). One interesting aspect here is that in the popular “the Northeast” discourses there is a regional/ethnic resemblance. To represent the northeast is not just to represent a region but an ethnicity. In popular discourse, for the mainland, the Northeast is homogeneity, which can be trimmed down to one single ethnicity. This misconception highly depends on the physical features rather than cultural differences, and hence closer to race than ethnicity.

The TVC for the KBC 2014 launch (SET India, 2014) which is a brilliant example of advertising that simultaneously targets both the represented and other. The advertisement shows a young girl from the Northeast contesting in the popular television game show, been asked to name the country where Kohima is situated. She is given four options; China, Nepal, India, and Bhutan. The girl opts for an audience poll. The scene in the studio is parallel cuts to different audiences watching the show on the television; a family (most probably the family of the contestant), three waiters (among them one a Northeast Indian), two security guards (one a Northeast Indian), and two chefs (one a Northeast Indian). When she opts for an audience poll the viewers, who represent the “mainland” laughs at her as if she is ignorant of such a simple fact, while the viewers, who represent the Northeast, seem embarrassed about not only her ignorance but people’s ignorance of the region. When the quizzer, Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan⁸, announces the results of the audience poll that 100 per cent has the answer India and everyone knows it, the contestant replies, “yes everyone knows that but how many acknowledge it”, sending a shocking message to the audience. Moreover, her response makes the embarrassed party relieved and the humiliating party embarrassed and hence their position and roles are reversed, which can broadly be read as a role change of “mainlanders” and “Northeasterners”. The commercial plays a hide-and-seek game over truths and lies, knowns and unknowns. In fact, the commercial is reflexive as the question itself is against the 100 per cent audience poll’s result that Kohima is in India. In the commercial, the contestant, Kohima, and Northeasterners watching the show on TV, are on one side, while the quizzer and rest are on the other side, polarized though the line of being or non-being in India. It is interesting as shown in the advertisement the “mainlanders” accept it as a matter of fact when the girl counter questions, “How many acknowledge it?”

The campaign for vim bar featuring the “world’s largest family” from Mizoram (VimIndia, Sabse Badi Family, Sabse Tez Vim, 2014; VimIndia, Breakfast with World’s Largest Family, 2014; VimIndia, Football with the Family, 2014; VimIndia, 160 Birthdays, 1 Family: Sabse Tez Vim, 2014; VimIndia, Lunch with the World’s Largest Family!, 2014) is, again, about the Northeasterner, “the stranger”. A Bollywood celebrity visits the largest family to introduce the particular brand to them. The campaign shows something “strange” from the Northeast to the mainland.

The Tata Salt advertising campaign featuring Mary Kom has applied a new technique of ethnic representation. On one level, as done in Dalmia, cement campaign, tries to depict Mary Kom as a single figure that can represent an ethnic entity. However, beyond that, on the other level, it tries to negotiate this particular “ethnic figure” with the “generic Indian figure”, which makes the whole campaign double positioned both in the nationality discourse and in the Northeast discourse simultaneously. The TVCs in the campaign mixes up scenes from movie and hence takes the advantage of the filmic transformation of Mary Kom to Priyanka Chopra.

For a long, the Northeast remained untouched by the advertising industry and was considered unsuitable for the “generic Indian” model of advertising. However, the recent interest of the industry in the region has made a new way of negotiation and contest of ethnic identities in the region. The Northeast was made a “frontier” by the British, then a “political and administrative entity” by the Indian State, then “an object of study” by the academic and media discourse, and now it is the time it is being made “a brand” by the advertising industry.

Advertising and Ethnicity: Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, all the leading advertising agencies are in Colombo capital, which stands for the political and ideological power of the Sinhala majority. (To put the civil war in a metaphor, it was a south (Colombo) versus north (Jaffna) war, as such.) Accordingly, “Colombo products” are predominantly Sinhala products. As Steven Kemper rightly argues,

[T]he striking character of Sri Lankan life is the near invisibility of Tamils in Sri Lankan public culture. The occasional advertisement aims at a Tamil audience, but the general assumption that Sri Lankan culture is Sinhala culture is replicated in Sri Lankan advertising practice. (2001, p. 59)

The representation of the “generic Sri Lankan” in advertising in Sri Lanka is a matter of appearing as Sinhala than really being Sinhala. In fact, as Kemper reveals, the majority of the models used in advertising in 1990s were Burghers and Tamil male models overrepresented the industry. Moreover, not only Muslims and Bohras (a Shi’a Muslim community from Bombay, famous for their business success) appeared in Sri Lankan advertisements, in some cases, advertisements were produced in India using Indian models. The ethnic identity of the model was not a problem as far as he or she fits with figure of the “generic Sri Lankan”. “To cap off the irony, when Sri Lankan consumers look at newsprint and television, they see these models – whether they are Muslim, Tamil, Burgher, or Sinhala-as, ‘sophisticated Sinhala’” (2001, p. 67). Although, now the ethnic composition in advertising industry has changed, still this remains a reality.

Nevertheless, advertising is not a mere matter of faces and figures that appear in, rather, the ideologies it negotiates, articulates, and reconstructs through those faces and figures. While the faces and figures used in advertising themselves are ideologically embedded, advertising in Sri Lanka, during the war period, and especially, celebrating the victory over LTTE, as all other sites of dominant cultural production, was a part and parcel of, both as an agent of and respondent to, dominant ethnic ideologies and war-mentality⁹. One good example is the increased usage of “lion” symbol in advertising. The lion is the symbol that represents the Sinhala people. Although it symbolizes the nation too, appearing in the national flag, in popular discourse lions are Sinhala people. In fact, in another metaphor, the war was between “lions” and “tigers”. It is ambiguously used both for the nationality and for Sinhala people; for example, Sri Lankan cricket team is often referred as “*sinha patawu*” (lion cubs) regardless of the fact that players belong to different ethnic communities. Interestingly, one advertising campaign for recruiting the soldiers to Sri Lankan army, which is predominantly a Sinhala force with four regiments named after Sinhala royalty, came with the tagline “*sinha patawunge paradisyā*” (Lion cubs’ paradise) (De Mel, 2007, p. 72). The recurrence of lion symbol in advertising campaigns in Sri Lanka hence is highly ethno-ideological. Other than the lion symbol, there are a number of ethno-religious symbols that recur in advertisements in Sri Lanka, which include ancient cities, paddy fields, ancient reservoirs etc.

During the war, some advertising campaigns explicitly supported war and dominant ethnic ideologies:

[I]n a full-page advertisement taken out by MAS Holdings, a leading business group in the transnational apparel industry based in Colombo. On 7 June 2000, which was declared War Hero's Day by the Peoples' Alliance government, it took out a full-page advertisement depicting an idle sword leaning on a jakfruit with the question/slogan 'Is the sword that is not for war, for chopping jakfruit?' A verse in the advertisement warned the public that the time for idleness was over and that duty demanded all acts of terror be punished. In its singular address to the Sinhala public (it appeared in Sinhala even when published in the English language *Daily News*) and the referents of farmer, poet, monk and mother (icons of a circulating popular Sinhala culture), all of whom nurture the war hero, the Tamil and Muslim ethnic other remained a structuring absence. (De Mel, 2007, p. 84)

As De Mel cites, following the February 2002 Memorandum of Understanding signed by the then government of Sri Lanka and LTTE, and the ceasefire, some corporate advertisements appeared with the taglines such as "As peace enter Jaffna so we do!", "Mother, now you're not alone in Jaffna", and "Now Jaffna is in our net" (2007, p. 85). These advertisements reflect the view that Jaffna as a territory regained. She further argues that the advertising industry celebrated the (temporary) peace in highly charged militaristic language. Some of the taglines as she cites are; "In times of war the only weapon you need is talent", "Warning explosive ideas inside", "Graveyard for bombed ideas", and "Back with bang!" (2007, p. 85). Further, she argues;

War, as instrumentally used in these advertisements, was merely a witty punchline, its condition brought to us devoid of its substance. But the political economy of the sign of war, kept alive by the advertisements seemingly harmlessly in this way, had a use and exchange value that made war an available option during difficult peace negotiations if necessary, and a series of advertisements by the mobile phone operator Dialog GSM kept to this circulating economy/ narrative of the *preparedness* for war. As chief sponsor of the Sri Lankan army's rugby squad, one of Dialog GSM's advertisements depicted pictures from a rugby match and locker room as precise military-like manoeuvres on and off the field.⁵⁴ Another in the series portrayed a memo with details of the squad's game plan ratified with a seal stating in bold letters, 'Attack approved.' In this quotidianness of battle even during the ceasefire, the corporate sector played a key role in mediating war and peace as a militaristic continuum: the seduction of this trajectory precisely in its masking of the alliance between national security and global capital. (2007, p. 85)

Some advertising campaigns launched during the high time of war and celebrating the victory over the LTTE clearly depicts how the dominant ethnic ideologies and global capital converge. Depicting the military as "the saviors of the nation" and "*rana wiruwo*" (war heroes), was a common theme that brought into advertising campaigns (Heensare, 2009; 24frameslk, 2009). One among many programmes launched to hero-worship the military, "*ranawiru* real star", a reality TV show, was sponsored by corporate advertising (DialogAxista, 2010).

Advertising in Sri Lanka, thus, has been and is continuing to be reflection of mono-ethnic national identity. Although there are rare examples of minorities represented in advertising, they too have subtexts of mono-ethnic nationality.

Conclusions

Advertising in Sri Lanka and Northeast India exemplify two distinct ways of negotiating ethnic ideologies. In Sri Lanka, advertising is more direct in its mono-ethnic model and in Northeast India, the new trend is multicultural advertising as evident by the recent interest in the region shown by ad-makers. However, both the forms are in line with the logic of global capitalism; in one context cultural dominancy sells while in the other cultural differences sell. In both cases, despite of the matter of visibility or non-visibility in advertising, the Other is an “ethnic Thing”. If the former is direct racism, the latter is “racism with a distance”. In the former context, the Other is the enemy, and in the latter the Other is the “folkloric spectacle” (Žižek, 1997, p. 44). In both cases, advertising is a site of ethnic ideologies too.

Notes

¹ Although, “advertising” is a vaguely used word to refer to a number of activities and stuffs, my focus here is only on the corporate display advertising/advertisements.

² This refers to the nation island of 65610 km² with a population of 20.23 MM and situated in the Indian Ocean, below the southern tip of India. However, note that my use of the term does not mean a social or cultural homogeneity, as my focus will mostly be on the Sinhala dominated areas of the country.

³ I will be using two terms in this paper; “Northeast” and “the Northeast”. By the first I refer to the “geographical area” (which is legitimized by “[t]he political process and ‘administrative convenience’ “ (Shimray, 2004) that covers the eight states; Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura. By the second, I refer to the discursive construct of “the Northeast” as a socio-economic and cultural entity.

⁴ The demand of Tamils for political power appeared in different forms in post-colonial Sri Lanka. However, the shift from demand for a federal state to demand for separate state was the crucial turning point. LTTE was the strongest militant group, which fought for the cause of a separate state in Tamil Eelam (the areas that covers northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka) with a huge military and militant power that included suicide bombers.

⁵ The ethnic composition of population in Sri Lanka is as follows: Sinhalese 74.88%, Sri Lankan Tamils 11.21%, Sri Lankan Moors 9.23%, Indian Tamils 5.16, Malay 0.20, Burghers 0.18, others 0.14 (source: (Census of Population and Housing - 2012, 2012). The Indian Tamils, who are the descendants South Indian labourers brought by the British to work on the coffee and later on the tea plantations and live in the central highlands of the country, did not directly engaged in militant activities (Bass, 2013). They depend on trade union derived political parties for bargaining their demands.

⁶ Anthony J. Cortse uses the term for “an ad using a white model is duplicated with a black or Latino model” (2008, p. 95).

⁷ The dominant culture.

⁸ I ironically this is the same superstar who made a mistake tweeting “Mary Kom!! wins boxing bout, insured (sic) a Bronze! What a story! A Mother of two from Assam, creates moment of pride for India!!”, for which he apologized later (Karmakar, 2012).

⁹ “Mindset” is a buzzword used in advertising and marketing, which refers to a particular ways of thinking of a community.

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