Developing a taste for coffee: Bangladesh, Nescafe, and Australian student photographers'

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In the highly competitive marketing environment of today it is extremely necessary for the tea industry of Bangladesh to increase production and to improve the quality by adopting finer plucking standards and modernization of factories and reduce per unit cost of production so as to be able to sell more of our teas to foreign markets and thereby earn higher amounts of much needed foreign exchange for the country as well as generate additional resources within the industry for ploughing back for further development (Ali 55).

In Bangladesh, tea is a cash crop that, even in the 1970s following vicious conflicts, is more than capable of meeting local demand and producing an export dividend. Coffee is imported commodity that, historically, has had little place in Bangladeshi life or culture. However important tea is, it is not the traditional Bangladeshi stimulant. Instead, over the years, when people in the West would have had a cup of tea or coffee and/or a cigarette, most Bangladeshis have turned to the betel nut.

A 2005 study of 100 citizens from Araihazar, Bangladesh, conducted by researchers from Columbia University, found that coffee consumption is “very low in this population” (Hafeman et al. 567). The purpose of the study was to assess the impact of betel quids (the wad of masticated nut) and the chewing of betel nuts, upon teenagers. For this reason, it was important to record the consumption of stimulants in the 98 participants who had progressed to the next stage of the study and took a freehand spiral-drawing test. While “26 (27%) participants had chewed betel quids, 23 (23%) had smoked one or more cigarettes, and 14 (14%) drank tea; on that day, only 1 (1%) drank caffeinated soda, and none (0%) drank coffee” (Hafeman et al. 568). Given its addictive and carcinogenic properties (Sharma), the people who chewed betel quids were more likely to exhibit tremor in their spiral drawings than the people who did not.

As this (albeit small) study suggests, the preferred Bangladeshi stimulant is more likely to be tobacco or betel nut rather than a beverage. Insofar as hot drinks are concerned, coffee is the drink to be marketed. This poses a significant challenge for multinational advertisers who seek to promote the consumption of instant coffee as a means of growing the global market for Nescafé.

Marketing Nescafé to Bangladesh

In Dhaka, in January 2012, the television campaign slogan for Nescafé is “My first cup”, with the tagline, “Time you started.” This Nescafé television commercial (NTC) impresses itself upon the Australian visitors, both in terms of its frequency of broadcast and in its referencing of Western culture and values. (The advertisement can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=286mFx43oAM). The NTC’s three stars, Vir Das, Purab Kohli, and leading Bollywood actress Deepika Padukone, are highly-recognisable to young Bangladeshi audiences and the storyline is part of a developing series of advertisements which together form a mini-soap opera, like that used so successfully to advertise the Nescafé Gold Blend brand of instant coffee in the West in the 1980s to 1990s (D’Onofrio 242; Beale).

The action takes place in Kohli’s affluent, Western-style apartment. The drama starts with Das challenging Kohli regarding whether he has successfully developed a relationship with his attractive neighbour, Padukone. Using a combination of local language with English words and subtitles, the first sequence is captioned: “Any progress with Deepika, or are you still mixing coffee?” Suggesting incredulity, and that he could do better, Das asks Kohli, according to the next subtitle, “What are you doing dude?” The use of the word “dude” clearly refers to American youth culture, familiar in such movies as Dude, where’s my car? This is underlined by the immediate transition to the English words of “bikes … biceps … chest … explosion.” Of these four words only “chest” is pronounced in the local tongue, although all four words are included as captions in English.

Kohli appears less and less impressed as Das becomes increasingly insistent, with Das going on to express frustration with Kohli through the exclamation “u don’t even have a plan. … and the use of the text-speak English “u” here can be constructed as another way of persuading young Bangladeshi viewers that this advertisement is directed at them: the “u” in place of “you” is likely to appeal to their English-speaking elders. Das continues speaking in his mother tongue, with the subtitle “Deepika padukone [sic] is your neighbour and you are only drinking coffee,” with the subsequent subtitle emphasizing: “Deepika and only coffee.” At this point, Padukone enters the apartment through the open door without knocking and confidently says “Hi.” Kohli explains the situation by responding (in English, and subtitled) “my school friend, Das”. Padukone, in turn, responds in a friendly way to both men (in English, and subtitled) “You guys want to have coffee?”

Instead of responding directly to this invitation, Das models to Kohli what it is to take the initiative in this situation: what it is to have a plan. “Hello” (he says, in English and subtitled) “I don’t have coffee but I have a plan. You and me, my bike, right now, hit the town, party!” Kohli looks down at the floor, embarrassed, while Padukone looks quizzically at him over Das’s shoulder. Kohli smiles, and points to himself and Padukone, clearly excluding Das: “I will have coffee” (in English, and subtitled). “Better plan” exclaims Padukone, “You and me, my place, right now, coffee.” She looks challengingly at Das: “Right?”, a statement rather than a request, and exits, with Kohli following and Das left behind in the apartment. Cue voice-over (not a subtitle, but in-screen speech bubble) “[It’s] time you started” (spoken) “the new Nescafé” (shot change) “My first cup” (with an in-screen price promotion).

This commercial associates drinking coffee with Western values of social and personal autonomy. For young women in the traditional Muslim culture of Bangladesh, it is acceptable for women in a world in which they are at liberty to spend time with the suitors they choose, ignoring those whom they find pushy or inappropriate, and free to invite a man back to “my place, right now” for coffee. The scene setting in this advertisement and the use of English in both the spoken and written text suggests its target is the educated middle class, and indicates that sophisticated, affluent, trend-setters drink coffee as a part of getting to know their neighbours. In line with this, the still which ends the commercial promotes the Facebook page “Know your neighbours.”

The flirtatious nature of the actors in the advertisement, the emphasis on each of the male characters spending time alone with the female character, and the female character having both power and choice in this situation is likely to be highly unacceptable to traditional Bangladeshi parental values and, therefore, proportionately more exciting to the target audience. The underlying suggestion of “my first cup” and “time you started” is that the social consumption of that first cup of coffee is the “first step” to becoming more Western. The statement also has overtones of sexual initiation. The advertisement aligns itself with the world portrayed in the Western media consumed in Bangladesh, and the implication is that—even if Western liberal values are not currently a possible choice for all—it is at least feasible to start on the journey towards these values through drinking that first cup of coffee.

Unbeknownst to the Western audience, this Nescafé marketing strategy echoes, in almost all material particulars, the same approach that was so successful in persuading Australians to embrace instant coffee. Khamis, in her essay on Australia and the convenience of instant coffee, argues that, while in 1928 Australia had the highest per capita consumption of tea in the world, this had begun to change by the 1950s. The transformation in the market positioning of coffee was partly achieved through an association between tea and old-fashioned ‘Britishness’ and coffee and the United States:

this discovery [of coffee] spoke to changes in Australia’s lifestyle options: the tea habit was tied to Australia’s development as a far-flung colonial outpost, a daily reminder that many still looked to London as the nation’s cultural capital: the growing appeal of instant coffee reflected a widening and more nuanced cultural palate. This was not just ‘another’ example of the United States postwar juggernaut; it marks the transitional phase in Australia’s loss of identity as a British colony, as its cultural identity was informed less by the laid conservativism of Britain than the heady flux of New World glamour (219).

Coffee was associated with the USA not simply through advertising but also through cultural exposure. By 1943, notes Khamis, there were 120,000 American service personnel stationed in Australia and she quotes Symons (168) as saying that “when an American got on a friendly footing with an Australian family he was usually found in the kitchen, teaching theMrs how to make coffee, or washing the dishes” (168, cited in Khamis 222). The chances were that “the Mrs”—the Australian housewife—felt she needed the tuition: an Australian survey conducted by Gallup in March 1950 indicated that 55 per cent of respondents at that time had never tried production by raising the per acre yield, improve quality by adoption...
They had more money to spend (than Australian troops). They seemed to have plenty of supplies, they always bringing you presents—stockings and cartons of cigarettes [...] Their uniforms were better. They took you to more places. They were quite good dancers, some of them. They always brought you flowers. They were more polite to women. They charmed the mums because they were very polite. Some dads were a bit more sceptical of them. They weren't sure if all that charm was genuine (quoted in Munro).

Darian-Smith argues that, at that time, Australian understanding of Americans was based on Hollywood films, which led to an impression of American technological superiority and cultural sophistication (215-16, 232). "Against the American-style combination of smart advertising, consumerism, self-expression and popular democracy, the British class system and its buttoned-up royals appeared dull and dour" writes Khamis (226, citing Grant 15)—almost as dull and dour as 1950s tea compared with the postwar sophistication of Nescafé instant coffee.

Conclusion

The approach Nestlé is using in Bangladesh to market instant coffee is tried and tested: coffee is associated with the new, radical cultural influence while tea and other traditional stimulants are relegated to the choice of an older, more staid generation. Younger consumers are targeted with a romantic story about the love of coffee, reflected in a mini-soap opera about two people becoming a couple over a cup of Nescafé.

Hopefully, the Pathshala-Edith Cowan University collaboration is at least as strong. Some of the overseas visitors return to Bangladesh on a regular basis—the student presentations in 2012 were, for instance, attended by two visiting graduates from the 2008 program who were working in Bangladesh. For the Australian participants, the association with Pathshala, South Asian Media Institute, and Drik Photo Agency brings recognition, credibility and opportunity. It also offers a totally new perspective on what to order in the coffee queue once they are home again in Australia.

Postscript

The final week of the residency in Bangladesh was taken up with presentations and a public exhibition of the students’ work at Drik Picture Agency, Dhaka, 3–7 February 2012. Danielle Fusco’s photographs can be accessed at: http://public-files.appes.ecu.edu.au/SCA_Marketing/coffee/coffee.html

References

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