

Back of the book

Palpitations *Western promises*



by Anuvab Pal

There are certain commercials on our hoardings, televisions and print for what are defined in the media as "luxury items" that I find somewhat odd.

Charles Saatchi had once said that advertising was "not about selling a product but a way of life". I take this to mean aspiration. You advertise something and it isn't so much about the thing itself but the person and their enviable environs. Which is why ads for posh things like suits or cars or watches always have a protagonist encircled by admiring beautiful people in

some jet-setting European playground, laughing over champagne. It is to say, "Yes you maybe Mr Tripathi, a relationship manager for ICICI in Bhandup, but if you buy this thing, this could be you in Monte Carlo with all these beautiful women walking past you with sly smiles".

Now in an economy growing at eight per cent a quarter while old Europe crumbles, it's no surprise that we're a goldmine for advertisers. And if you followed Saatchi's wisdom, ads can't just sell to us; it must show us how to live the privileged world we're missing out on.

There's an ad on TV for a kind of cookie featuring movie star Rihthikk Roshan (or however he spells it this week) where the central premise is that he is locked in a dungeon somewhere in Renaissance Italy, blindfolded, by his Roman baker boss and this seductress tempts him into having sex. Their passion creates the cookie

accidentally as the ingredients (with aphrodisiac undertones like butter and honey) fall or spill fortuitously into place as their coitus climaxes.

What is the message here? These cookies are so good that you'll feel like a blindfolded movie star having sex? Or making these cookies is like making love? Great but what does that have to do with eating them? It's an ad for a cookie not being a pastry chef, which most people would agree, would get you a tryst anyway. And what are they aspiring to? People in dungeons who end up baking well because they're being taught by a seductress?

There's another one for a very elite business magazine launched in India where a high-powered CEO drives to a meeting in a fancy BMW. A group of businessmen waits to receive her but she is so enthralled by what she is reading in this elite business magazine that she makes her

chauffeur go around the driveway several times. Each time, people lean forward to open the door thinking she'll stop, and each time she tricks them. What's the aspiration here? Insanity? Are there corporate people across India watching this and thinking, "Someday, I'm going to be so powerful in business that I will sit in my BMW and go around in circles reading some article as people expect me to get out of the car. That's real power".

There are also luxury Indian things, but of western ideas like a new mall, or whisky or ice cream or suits and dresses, where the models are usually white people in situations of joy in foreign locales. What is the lifestyle ambition there? A change of nationality, race and age simultaneously? It's as if the advertiser is saying, "Look Mr Gopinath, if you shop at this mall, you can become a 22-year-old British woman for an hour."

Morparia

