

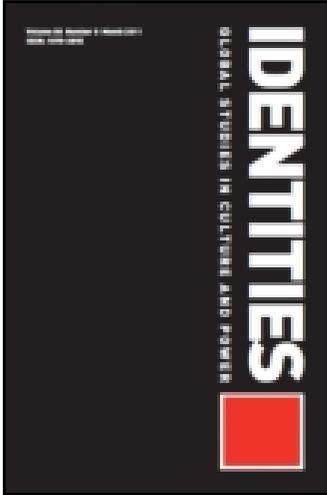
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Post-exotic India: on remixed histories and smart images

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Post-exotic India: on remixed histories and smart images

Ravinder Kaur

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This paper examines the aesthetics of *remixing history* at the heart of the neoliberal project of India's image makeover as the 'land of limitless opportunity' for global tourists and investors. I argue that the project of remixing India's history is predicated upon the ontological fault line of how to retain and erase the *original* simultaneously while shaping the new in the contemporary global. Taking the Incredible India campaign as an example, I show how the original essence of India is revealed and authenticated in the very moment of its disappearance as it is morphed in the aesthetics of the contemporary global. The post-exotic self, I further argue, is not produced by effacing the exotic past, but by condensing, accelerating and fast-forwarding it into a timeless, infinite global present. And in doing so, it also reveals the blueprint of the ongoing visual rearrangement of nation's civilisational past in the making of new India.

Keywords: Incredible India; images; remixed history; globalisation; civilisational culture; post-exotic

Hop aboard for this ride of your life. India 2.0 is hurtling down the information superhighway, carrying its mind-boggling baggage of ever-accelerating GDP, extreme geography, kaleidoscopic culture, deep-rooted spirituality and photogenic chaos into a fascinating future. Watch *history being remixed* right in front of your eyes. Incredible! But true.

India Version 2.0, Berlin 2007.

Introduction

The invitation above to watch 'history being remixed' was displayed on a placard placed at the India Pavillion in *Internationale Tourismus Bourse* (ITB) at the spectacular global launch of Incredible India – post-reform India's largest and most visible nation publicity campaign – that sought to transform India's image from a Third World nation to a global player. Imagined as a fast paced, colourfully decked auto-rickshaw, India 2.0, the visitors were told, boasts of 'digital entertainment system with a selection of Bollywood hits; satellite TV for cricket and stock market updates; smog/fog lights for all weather urban/rural capability; incense stick holder for mobile meditation; eco-friendly engine powered by compressed natural gas'.¹ In a clever wordplay, a number of keywords associated

with India – the familiar Bollywood, cricket, spirituality, culture, incense sticks and the new seductions of GDP, stock market, information superhighway and satellites – are humorously strung together for a greater recall value to create India 2.0 with unique features. (Figure 1) Each of these high-technology features is represented in the form of graphic icons which techno-friendly publics across cultures are familiar with. The choice of the usually slow paced auto-rickshaw as the vehicle to represent ‘new’ India is noteworthy – the desire to reimagine what is ‘our own’ as the vernacular forerunner of global futures. The India 2.0, then, appears as a seductive polychromous package of hyper-technology and great civilisational culture with wide ranging aspects difficult for anyone to grasp at a glance. Yet this is precisely what the designers of India 2.0 seemed to be aiming at – to condense and make legible the vast complexities and contradictions of India across temporalities to the outside world. The global publics could now witness a live performance of an ancient civilisational culture morphing itself into a state-of-the-art high-speed vehicle prefiguring the twenty-first-century futures.

In this paper, I examine the aesthetics of *remixing history* at the heart of the neoliberal project of India’s image makeover as ‘land of limitless opportunity’ or ‘Incredible India’ for global tourists and investors. The use of the verb ‘remix’ is telling about the nature of the project. While remixing, literally speaking, means blending different elements together once again to harmonise and smooth out rough edges, it has a different set of connotations in popular culture especially in the field of music (see Gilroy 1993; Hebdige 1987). To remix is to cut-up the original, isolate elements, repeat, rearrange and add



Figure 1. India 2.0 vehicle displayed at ITB, Berlin, 2007.

contemporary effects in order to create an altogether different version than what was before. Remix is not an altered copy, but original composition in its own right that rearranges the sensory experiences of the audience. In short, the remix version retains traces of the original even while erasing it – to ultimately morph into its own being.

I will argue that the project of remixing India's history in the nation branding project is predicated upon this ontological fault line – how to retain and erase the original simultaneously while shaping the new in the contemporary global. At the core of this dilemma is the cultural politics of originality or inalienable essence of India itself that occupies a contested domain in contemporary Indian politics.² Taking Incredible India as an example, I further argue that the 'original' essence of India is revealed and authenticated in the very moment of its disappearance as it is remixed and morphed in the aesthetics of the contemporary global. If the romanticised pre-Islamic Hindu civilisational culture forms a part of the archive of the post-exotic, the other is the familiar exotica – natural landscape, wildlife, cultural forms and practices – through which India has long been perceived in the foreign eyes. The paradox of Incredible India images is this – if the exotic draws attention to the enigma of India, it also risks overshadowing neoliberal India's desire to be seen as the high technology, investor friendly 'land of limitless opportunity' in the world. To be sure, India is not the only nation that has embarked upon the project of nation branding in the past decade or so (see Aronczysk 2013; Cooke 2014). In fact, nation branding is increasingly becoming a ubiquitous strategy to create a new form of territoriality in the world of free-markets. Consider brand campaigns such as *Malaysia: Truly Asia*, *Cool Korea*, *Croatia: The Mediterranean as it Once Was*, *Turkey: Discover The Potential*, *Brand South Africa* and *Amazing Thailand* as examples of this yet growing phenomenon. Unlike older tourism campaigns where nations sold their cultural products to tourists, now nations themselves have become branded commodities in the global markets (see Kaur 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Ranciere 1999).³ While the existing literature on nation branding largely locates it as an external strategy (for example, Anholt 2007), what I show here is how the logics of external representation inevitably rearrange the insides too (cf. Mitchell 1988). The making of publicity images invariably reveals the shifting ideas and accounts of the nation itself.

In this paper, I trace the tensions and conflicts in the nation brand making at three interlinked levels – the actual visual framing of a *post-exotic* nation in the 'Incredible India' campaign that seeks to re-embed the exotic features within the global political economy; the world of policy-makers, bureaucrats and designers where imagination of India's post-exotic self is negotiated; and finally, the ontological tensions which underpin this new self. The post-exotic self, I show, is not produced by effacing the exotic past, but by condensing, accelerating and fast-forwarding it into a timeless, infinite global present. And in doing so, it also reveals the blueprint of the ongoing visual rearrangement of nation's civilisational past in the making of new India. In what follows, I describe the making of India's

first global image campaign for tourists and investors and the ways in which it is intrinsically linked to the demands of neoliberal economic reforms.

In search of the ‘smart image’

The origins of ‘Incredible India’ campaign are located in a sense of deep crisis when the nascent ‘India growth story’ was said to have experienced its first serious setback in 2002. It is a critical moment that was often recreated passionately for me during my conversations with government officials, commentators and journalists attempting to narrate India’s upward mobility towards the high table of global politics. The account was roughly along the following lines. A decade into the economic reforms, the magic of the India story was unravelling after losing its momentum of the boom years. While policy-makers in 2002 had modestly pegged the growth prospects at 5.4% that year, the actual growth at 4% was turning out to be the lowest since the reforms were initiated (*IE* 2002). The constantly sliding figures were edging worryingly closer to the much feared ‘Hindu rate of growth’ – signifying the economic stagnation of the pre-reform decades – causing alarm in the policy circles and among the middle classes (Aiyar 2003). As this sense of panic seeped into the public discourse, the crisis became ‘a time for reflection’ among policy-makers calling for a serious rethinking of India’s failure to reach its full potential.⁴ How might India recover and realise its rightful place in the global scheme of things? This question became the basis of a variety of intense debates within the government apparatus that sought to bring India’s potential into the realm of possibility. At this stage, the Ministry of Tourism commissioned a market survey that revealed India’s *lack* of a discernible identity or rather, a ‘strong and clear image that could enhance (its) desirability’ (Kant 2009, 3). While India’s rich history, culture and economic growth potential were well recognised internationally, its actual performance was found to be suffering from a deficit of ‘positioning, common branding or a clear, precise message’.⁵ In other words, India had an image deficit because of which the exchange value of its assets was not being fully realised in the global markets. It was not that India did not have a prior image, the problem was found to be just the opposite. It had too many images, or as I was repeatedly told, India had a ‘crowd of images’ mostly consisting of clichés and stereotypes: spirituality, wildlife, ancient civilisation, maharajas and magic besides chaos and poverty. What it did not have was a *smart image* with a contemporary global aura – clean minimal design enlivening India’s authenticity and appeal among global publics – through which India could re-connect with the world (for an earlier history of India’s representation in the world, see Mathur 2007). It is this perceived deficit that became the basis of search for a unified smart image that would make visible ‘the contemporary feel of a young nation’ rather than reinforcing ‘the clichéd visuals, such as saffron-clad sadhus in the Himalayas and rope tricks performed amidst crowds’ (Kant 2009, 4). These cultural stereotypes that equate India with ancient mysticism, material deprivation and dystopic visions are particularly

loathed by the Indian elite for aligning the sign of India with the non-rational world of superstition and consequently backwardness. The dilemma was how to extract economic value from the very cultural exoticism that one wished to otherwise erase. Or, to articulate the designers' concerns, how to present a post-exotic nation in the outside world in a smart way.

I encountered the word 'smart' frequently during my fieldwork among the advertising professionals. It was an oft-used catchphrase and at first it is almost reflexive use made it seem meaningless at some level. It appeared in all possible combinations – smart vibes, smart frame, smart image, smart look, smart feel, smart logo, smart design or just being smart – conjured to describe the quality of a given image campaign. The word smart invokes a range of meanings – sharp, intelligent, quick, witty and neat – to paint a picture of impressiveness. Among the advertising professionals, it is seemingly used to indicate a presentable self that exudes 'quick-wit, tongue-in-cheek humour, confidence and intellect' – personal qualities that can be proudly displayed without a shade of embarrassment to the outside world.⁶ The work of the Incredible India images, I was often told, was to imbue and convey the attributes of smartness to the nation – to effectively transform the old exotic into the new post-exotic. The smart images appeared to be the labour of seductive signs – alluring forms that establish and reiterate the potential of the nation even as they disclose the sense of crisis within which they were conceived and fabricated – through which, first, contours of the post-reform nation were made visible that simultaneously sought recognition from and defied the global publics; and second, helped transform thus generated attention from the outside world into surplus value. The work of the smart image, it was emphasised, was not only to imagine the nation anew but also to redirect the foreign gaze so as to 'correct' the long-held perceptions that mar the nation's image.⁷ The smart image was clearly as entwined with circulation and accumulation of global capital as it was with visualisation of new histories that sought to construct 'coherent and intelligible picture of modernity' (Mirzoeff 2011, 23). This is not to suggest that the goal of creating visual coherence is necessarily realised, rather how unifying visuality is posed as the essential frame within which the post-reform nation's legitimacy is established both inside and outside.

In short, the project of remixing history to produce smart images also seeks to position the state as the central authority that claims an exclusive right to visualise, to be able to look, or see – firstly, at the people, resources and landscapes within its territory in order to enumerate, classify and order the inside, and secondly, at the world outside as legitimate representative of the nation's interest as well as honour, its culture and history. As will become evident, the ability and privilege to look, then, is easily transformed into the power to design the look, or appearance of the nation to be displayed in a global spectacle. The making of Incredible India is located on this interface of state policy, bureaucratic negotiations and aesthetic sensibilities of advertising professionals shaped against the weight of history and neo-liberal economic dreams.

The wonder that is India

The brief V Sunil, a Delhi-based advertising professional, received from the government of India in 2002 was quite straightforward.⁸ He had been asked to initiate a global branding exercise ‘to create a distinctive identity for the country’.⁹ It was hardly a coincidence that this young designer had been offered as strategic and important task as branding the nation. In the advertising circles in Delhi, he had already made his name as one of the most creative minds of his generation.¹⁰ Sunil took up the project readily, as he recalled, as all signs suggested that the creative project would not run aground in the maze of bureaucratic machinery. In fact the bureaucratic hurdles had already been eased in a vision statement issued by the Ministry of Tourism earlier that year that outlined its aim to position India as, one, ‘a global brand, with worldwide brand recognition and strong brand equity, especially in the (tourism) trade and among the target audience’, and two, ‘a premier holiday destination for high yielding tourists’.¹¹

The stage was further set when the Planning Commission substantially increased and earmarked more nearly one-fifth of its annual budget for ‘tourism and heritage’ that year for ‘brand building of India’.¹² The bureaucratic apparatus, as it turned out, was for once not only operating efficiently but taking lead in what was said to be a ‘moment for action’ in the nation’s interest (Kant 2009, 2). The need of the moment was, or as the official brief translated in advertising terms meant, to create ‘a smart image that would present India smartly in front of the world’.¹³

In the official narrative, the origin of the campaign is presented not as a routine instance of creative outsourcing by a government department to an advertising agency, rather as a joint effort where the bureaucracy creates an optimal environment for ‘thinking big, focusing on professional promotion and marketing (.) and working with the best creative minds’ (Kant 2009, 7). The need for ‘thinking big’ could not be exaggerated in this case as the assembled group found it

extremely difficult and complex to establish a clear, precise identity for a multi-product destination like India. India is a land of contrasts, a combination of tradition and modernity, a land that is at once mystical and mysterious. India is bigger than twenty-three countries of Europe put together and every single state of India has its own unique attractions (Kant 2009, 7).

Could a single word or expression capture the rich cultural heritage, civilisation and economic potentiality of India? The only word which the creative team found to be close enough was ‘Incredible’ said to be appropriate for a country which is ‘at times overwhelming, but always incredible’ (Kant 2009, 7). The word ‘incredible’ literally suggests the quality of being ‘so extraordinary as to seem impossible; beyond belief; improbable’ and in a more informal sense ‘amazing; marvellous’. Yet, it was not the improbability of India that was being

communicated here, rather its awe-inspiring and seductive landscape, natural beauty, millennia old civilisation and rich modern culture that was being turned into its global signature. The use of 'incredible' was precisely meant to invoke the alluring mix of magic and modernity in everyday life.¹⁴

Yet the idea of 'incredible', I was told, was not the original choice of policy-makers rather a negotiated substitute.¹⁵ The idea proposed by the minister of Tourism, Jagmohan, was to call the campaign 'the wonder that *is* India' (emphasis added) as that felt more representative of how India is known in the world.¹⁶ The tagline was evidently a play upon AL Basham's ([1954] 2005) famous work 'The wonder that was India: a survey of the culture of the Indian subcontinent before the coming of the Muslims'. The title already indicates the temporalisation of Indian history along the event of the arrival of Islam in the subcontinent dividing it into 'before' and 'after' with specific and separate histories. While this widely read work has long been used as teaching material on ancient India, it is also invoked by the Hindu nationalists as scholarly evidence of India's authentic, magical and celebratory past that flourished until the arrival of Muslims. In popular discourse, the onset of Islamic era is seen as temporal transgression and ultimately the loss of the high Vedic culture. The minister's suggestion was to revive this long-lost essence of India familiar through Orientalist scholarship in the outside world and somehow transport it from the past to present. The only alteration in the text, therefore, was to change the tense – from 'was' to 'is' – and fast-forward the past into present. This change of tense offered an important insight into how the Indian nation is imagined as a unique entity performed eternally in timelessness on one hand, and on the other the anxiety of temporally lagging behind in the global race towards progress and development. The ideological persuasions at work were apparent as the minister's directive invoked the familiar Hindu nationalist discourse where India's authentic past remains essentially Hindu and what effectively defines its difference and exclusiveness in the world. The proposal, however, was withdrawn quickly not because of any ideological turnabout, rather because of market surveys which showed that 'the wonder that is India' would be a non-starter, whereas Incredible India 'in its creative form would be catchy, appealing, contemporary and would make an impact' (Kant 2009, 44).

Once the final bureaucratic difficulty had been overcome, the creative challenge was to obtain a semiotic translation of the idea of incredibility into a readily legible sign. The sign found to be the most accurate representation of the idea of Incredible India was – ! – the exclamation mark. In many ways, the sheer form of the sign was both aesthetically pleasing as well as ambiguous. It could be interpreted in more ways than one in order to weave the India story imaginatively. The idea had first struck Sunil when he began examining the map of India closely to look for visual clues to create a graphic essence of Incredible India. The cartographic form appeared as a long, beautifully curvaceous loop (India) that narrowed towards the bottom, and was held in place by a lush round spot (Sri Lanka). The contours of India, in its more abstract form, appeared to resemble an

exclamation mark. In order to sell the idea, he presented a top shot of the globe to visualise the moment ‘when God created India, he placed a dot below to make an exclamation mark’.¹⁷ The allusion clearly was to the mythical event of *manthan*, the great churning that produced the universe and therein created Earth for the humankind to live upon. India was produced in this churning and shaped as an exclamation mark by the gods. The sense of awe and marvel, thus, was presented as a natural, innate feature of India that was etched on its very body and the basic sense of being. The very physical shape of India, because of its abstract likeness to the exclamation mark, was now read as a proof of its enchanting being. This was the making of a new creation myth of the post-reform India – entwined with the older creation narrative of *manthan* – where Sri Lanka was reinvented as an essential ornamental accessory. Needless to say, the idea was readily bought by the government officials keen on presenting the magical difference of an ancient civilisation within a contemporary frame. The exclamation mark was thus deployed to

convey the mind-boggling depth and intensity of the Indian experience. Every aspect of India – be it its every-accelerating GDP, extreme geography, kaleidoscopic culture, deep-rooted spirituality or even photogenic chaos – is summed up by the simple yet profound exclamation mark.¹⁸

Even as the exclamation mark subsumed and unified a highly divergent range of facts, figures, sights, sounds and images of India into an intense India ‘experience’, it displayed its versatility and seductive appeal by invoking a variety of associations. Some visualised it as a pin with its head turned downwards that held the idea of India together. For others it seemed symbolic of India with its iconic representation of *bindi* on the forehead in reverse. In a variety of modes, it seemed to work as an effective unifying symbol that had been found lacking all along. The original brand architecture was built around a single word ‘!ndia’ that would *package* all official representations of India. The suffix ‘incredible’ was incorporated as a compromise formula upon ministry’s insistence but with an intention to eventually drop it. The three evolutionary stages of the logo were designed as follows

Incredible !ndia
!ndia
!

The idea was to ultimately simplify the logo to ‘!’ so the exclamation mark would turn into a signifier of India’s magic and growth potential without the need for explanatory words (Figure 2). The logo was imagined visually on the lines of iconic brands such as Nike’s ‘Just do it’ campaign which enclosed every image with a ‘swoosh’ sign in order to graphically express energy and sport without a word.¹⁹ The ultimate success of a brand logo, I was often told, was its ability to



Figure 2. Incredible India banners aligning the logo with business opportunities at ITB Berlin, 2007.

invoke emotions and create a vocabulary of its own.²⁰ The essential ingredient in the recipe of a powerful brand is its ability ‘to express itself not just in terms of a product benefit, but in terms of a greater socio-economic truth’. One might ask, what innate truth constitutes Incredible India. The answer was its ability to narrate artfully the changes set in motion by the neoliberal reforms, and represent

a much bigger social phenomenon – an optimistic and extroverted new India, eager to make its presence felt in the global community. . . It is this subtext that transforms ‘Incredible India’ from a mere branding exercise into a pop culture milestone, denoting a turning point in the evolution of one of mankind’s greatest civilisations.

The exclamation mark in Incredible India, in short, was symbol of a confident, prosperous, smart and even humorous India in the twenty-first century. It is

telling that the symbol chosen to describe India actually does not trace its origin to the archives of Indian culture and history. The exclamation mark known as ‘the note of admiration’ was derived in the fifteenth century when print culture was becoming popular in Europe. It was said to have been an artistic derivation of the Latin expression for exclamation of joy that since has become an oft-used character in, and even a prominent sign of, the age of instant communication. It was precisely its widespread usage and near universal recognition in the tele-connected world of instant messaging, broadcasting and sharing of ideas and images which made the exclamation mark an ideal sign of India’s aspirational post-reform incarnation. Or as Sunil put it, the exclamation mark could convey ‘the smart new vibe, the feeling of new India’ to the world most effectively.²¹ Rather than choose an ‘authentic sign’ such as Sanskrit words or letters written in Devnagari script as many had advised him to do, he had taken the opposite route of appropriating a sign that had prior meaning for the intended global audience. The familiar sign was now framed as a ‘smartly designed’ graphic device through which one could look at India, just as India was looking back at the world.²² The first step, thus, in the project of remixing history had been fulfilled. The next step was to visualise and rearrange the nation itself through the newly designed graphic device.

The art of remixing

The inaugural campaign of Incredible India contained an eye-catching image of a young woman pictured in *vrikshasna*, or the tree position in yoga meditation, against a distant blue silhouette of the Himalayan mountain range in the background (Figure 3). She can be seen standing upright on her right leg, her left leg



Figure 3. The Global Yogini formed the inaugural campaign of Incredible India, 2002–2003.

bent and placed on the right inner thigh in a half lotus position. Her arms are stretched upwards and palms joined together in prayer form. Besides her serene posture, what immediately catches one's attention is her chic clothing made of shiny stretch lycra material that would be at home in any urban fitness studio. She was described to me as a 'global yogini' – someone who could belong anywhere in the contemporary world yet retained her authentic Indian-ness. The other remarkable feature of the picture is a large shallow bowl filled with water and prayer flowers that lie at her feet. Her body stretched skywards and bowl of flowers at her feet together create an arresting visual of an organic exclamation mark that creatively replaces 'i' in India within the Incredible India signature.²³

This image was one of the first ones I was shown on a computer screen as an example of the kind of look Incredible India campaign sought to create.²⁴ It was precisely a desirable confluence of tradition and modernity, in appropriate proportions that could publicise the contemporary version – India 2.0 – of an ancient civilisation like India. The ancient art of yoga – literally meaning drawing of connections between the human body and the Eternal Being in order to attain liberation of the spirit – here is not performed by a *yogini* in her robes of renunciation, but a sculpted female body dressed in trendy sports ensemble that speaks to the contemporary urban ideals of fitness, beauty and spiritual consumption. In this visual shift from renunciation to consumption, we witness the transformative work of the exclamation mark. On one hand, the mark superimposes itself on the natural landscape to imbue it with a contemporary quality, and on the other, subsumes the body to an extent that the body becomes a magical sign itself signalling the subtle rearrangement of the nation. This schema of subsuming, imposing and interweaving the sign with material bodies to create the contemporary effect is something that we will witness repeatedly. The encounter with the image was particularly significant in the way it was framed for me – as smartly packaged reality. In this framework, two core ideas at the heart of the branding process – reality and smart packaging – were thus disclosed. Let us begin with the notion of reality in the process of remixing.

The framing of images as reality predicates upon a possibility of interchange, overlap and even continuity, between the visions encountered in the image and reality – so that to view the images of Incredible India becomes a bodily experience of the landscape complete with its sights, scents and sounds. And conversely to bodily experience the landscape is turned into an encounter with the avalanche of images created in the past decade. Images, in such a frame, do not intend to function as representations, they seek to replace reality itself. In fact, the strategy underpinning the project of image fixing aimed to

veer away from the traditional advertising approach. As opposed to staging unrealistic scenarios, the core motivation was to reflect the people, landscape and emotions of India with a sincere honesty and simplicity (.) as visiting travellers would find them when they arrived. We endeavoured to portray the very same, completely real emotions they would feel when they experienced India for

themselves. All the moments shown in the film, in that sense, are real and readily accessible to those who seek them.²⁵

How are we to understand this specific notion of reality said to be underpinning the smart images? Moving beyond the registers of truth and falsehood, the Incredible India images begin making sense once we position them as *sites of enhancement* where flawless visions of coherence are unveiled, illuminated and amplified to an extent that all other realities are foreshadowed. The notion of enhancement suggests both embellishment as well as manipulation, but not necessarily to deceive rather to convey the object of publicity in the best possible light (cf. Mitchell 2007). In doing so, it produces an exaggerated reality that seeks to subsume and replace all other realities constituting the imaginary. Thinking of the image here as a site of enhancement and remixing where the transformative work of seductive signs can be witnessed helps open the entanglements and tensions, between reality and image; fantasy and materiality which underpin this new visuality. Reality, in this sense, appears as a limited concept with a limited function to position the nation in its flawless and coherent form.

If reality is one end of the framework, then the other is the idea of ‘smart packaging’ that would help highlight the deep cultural richness and economic potential of the post-reform nation. The idea of smart packaging seemed to convey more an expression of a deeply rooted belief that every product can be made valuable and saleable if illuminated optimally. If packaged the right way, the brand personality of the product can be enhanced and projected to the consumers efficiently. Thus, the remixed images were unified by three common characteristics. First, the creative use of the exclamation mark that uses bodies, corporeal marks and natural features to weave the new creation myth of India. Second, the use of minimalist approach tracing neat lines and silhouettes that helps create an un-chaotic look. And third, the near absence of people/crowds in the visual framing of a country which is known as the second most populous nation in the world. The look of the nation framed for the viewers is that of an un-crowded, un-chaotic, neat landscape where the traveller is distracted by nothing but sheer beauty and amazing natural scenery.

The strategy to create the smart packaging was to subject the ‘stereotypes’ to a threefold process of remixing. The *first* step was to treat the selected image with ‘digital scrubbing’ not in order to fantasise a new dream landscape, but to illuminate what was already there. The neat, clean and well-scrubbed India was created through digital manipulations afforded by latest technology. The images, thus, were no longer that of

sad old India. Dusty. We cleaned all that dust. This is the biggest thing we have done in the campaign. We just cleansed it, just scrubbed it. It’s the same India we

sold. It's not an artificial India. It's the same backwaters, unfiltered, but it is very cleanly designed, cleanly projected.²⁶

What we witness here is how the digital technology is put to use to *fix* the image, in all its senses, by removing blemishes and spots, zooming in/out to highlight or blur specific parts, enhancing colours, adjusting sharpness, cropping, splicing and in some cases even rotating the pictured subject upside down to create the incredible effect. The extra information contained in the deep copy of the image is reorganised, and even erased if found to be in excess, to set the focus sharply on all that is beautiful and worthy of looking. The image thus created is devoid of matter deemed superfluous and which threatens to detract the viewer's attention from the object of display.

The question of excess and superfluity in the production of effective image making is not merely that of technical nature that disrupts the creation of well focused and 'clean' pictures. It also serves as a metaphorical device for the deep-rooted anxieties in the nation about the excess that clogs the outside gaze and risks unfixing the image itself. The human excess – the poor, the surplus labour, the vagabonds crowding the city sidewalks, the undisciplined classes or what Marx called the 'lumpen proletariat' – superfluous to the neoliberal economy is seen as an aberration in the 'smart look' the image makers desire to portray. The presence of excessive material waste – filth, un-recycled garbage dumps, littered streets and toxic fumes of pollution – in the urban centres similarly threatens to disrupt the clean image. The reality manufactured in the digitally scrubbed images, therefore, commands attention precisely for drawing explicitly the desires of the reformed nation.

Once the raw images were dusted and scrubbed, the *second* step was to draw out the new personality of the nation from the ruins of the stereotypes. The idea was to match the smart new looks with a smart new personality of the nation – as clean, confident and funny.²⁷ The last characteristic – of being humorous – was underlined for me as the most important ingredient in the making of a smart nation. To be able to poke fun at oneself is to betray the confidence in one's strengths, I was told. In an iconic poster, we witness the image of a lone tiger on the lookout for his prey in Ranthambore National Park (Figure 4 – tiger). The picture is accompanied by words which suggest that 'not all Indians are polite, hospitable and vegetarians'. The image and text together address the long-held discourses of 'pre-modern' India with its primitive associations with nature and wildlife. The presence of the tiger, on the one hand, highlights the rich wildlife and natural scenery, and on the other, countermands the portrayal of Indians as meek, submissive and obedient. The old description of India as 'the land of tigers and elephants' is turned on its head to create a different narrative of India and Indians. The very cliché of the primitive wild India is used to portray Indians as confident and humorous people, and thereby turning a weakness into strength. The aim, here, clearly was not just to produce clever, witty advertising copy, but to use humour as 'symptomatic of a much bigger social phenomenon – an

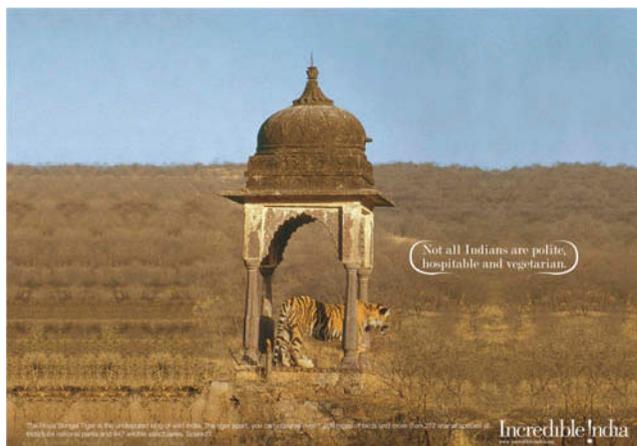


Figure 4. The tongue-in-cheek tiger poster, 2006–2007.

optimistic and extroverted new India, eager to make its presence felt in the global community’.

These images, then, become personification of new India, or rather icons of a nation that ‘is a far cry from the meek, tentative and “offshore” destination of the last decade’. The iconic images themselves have acquired attributes of personhood – clever, funny, smart, vital, seductive, desiring – to become totemic signs of a nation in search of its place in the global scheme of things. The smart image makeover is almost a visual restoration of pride especially for the urban youth who imagine themselves part of a global community far more than the previous generations.²⁸ The popularity of the images – within and outside – lie precisely in the projection of exaggerated realities that the nation was said to have failed to display in the outside world.

The *third* step towards smart packaging was to weave the *old* into a *new* narrative of exchange value and consumption. Of particular note in this frame are two eye-catching images of Taj Mahal, one of the prime tourist attractions of India and a World Heritage site deemed to be of universal importance.²⁹ The iconic monument built (1631–1648) in white marble is also one of the finest examples of Indo-Islamic architecture of Mughal era. While the story of Taj Mahal as the symbol of love and its place within the power struggles of succession in Mughal dynasty are well known, the Incredible India places it in a somewhat different frame. For one, the two images of Taj Mahal are the only examples of Muslim architecture and presence in the catalogue of Incredible India. To a large extent, the photographic core of Incredible India is built around its distant Vedic past and the contemporary present that circumvents its Muslim history. The first image (Figure 5a) depicts the inverse reflection of white marble contours of Taj Mahal in a pool of blue water. Here the white moon is placed as

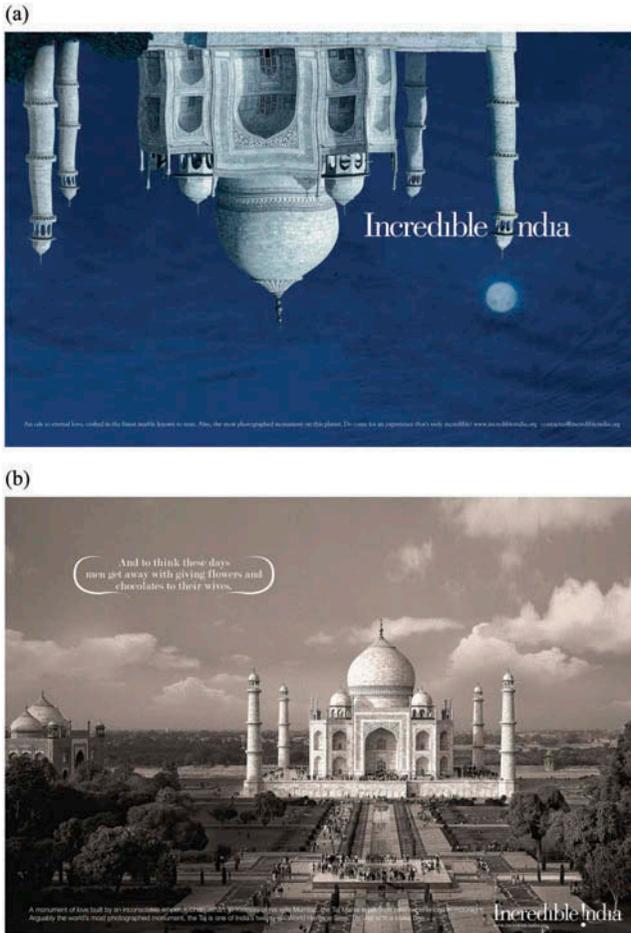


Figure 5. Two images of Taj Mahal that weave the iconic monument in a new narrative of timeless consumption.

the dot on top of the *minar* to form the ‘i’ in India. Taj Mahal is now graphically framed in the familiar iconography of Incredible India to create a new/old enchanting landscape. The second image (Figure 5b) is a black and white postcard picture of Taj Mahal with accompanying text ‘and to think these days, men get away with giving flowers and chocolates to their wives’. If the image reminds the viewer of the old world charm of Taj Mahal and its eternal love story – as the subtext in very small print at the bottom reminds us – shorn of its full history, it also contemporises it as a form of gift-giving between lovers. Taj Mahal, in this frame, is reinvented as a truly opulent gesture of contemporary

consumption in the same genre as chocolates and flowers, only much grander, almost inimitable for most people, and therefore, possibly something to aspire for in the times of prosperity. In its commodified form, Taj Mahal overcomes its own mediaeval Muslim past and original function – as a mausoleum, the final resting place of Mumtaz in whose memory her husband, Emperor Shahjahan, commissioned it – to reappear as the ultimate object of modern desire.

Its very function is altered in the new scheme. Taj Mahal now not only signals new age aspiration and consumption in this frame, consumption itself appears to be a timeless preoccupation and an enduring feature of India. Taj Mahal becomes the point of this double mediation. If the iconic monument is re-presented in the language of consumption to the outside world, it imbues India with the vernacular idea of consumption derived from its own timeless past. This seductive, and globally legible, language of consumption also shows in what form India's Muslim past can be revealed in the contemporary global. The appearance of the Muslim past in the global publicity is contingent upon its ability to overcome itself and then facilitate the neoliberal economic project.

Novelty of versions

Let us return here to India 2.0 we encountered in the beginning. Or better still revisit the idea of 'version' itself that is central to the remixing of history. Version denotes a difference or an element of novelty in the original matter presumed to be stable and somewhat fixed. To create a version, then, is to overcome this tension between the change that difference demands and a stable core that provides the frame. And this can only be achieved if the original matter can *absorb* the external difference even as it seeks to maintain its originality. The making of a post-exotic version, of nation as commodity via the state agency, reveals the inherent tensions and contradictions as it straddles between the imperatives of acceleration into future and the authenticity of a timeless past.

At the heart of this problem, then, is the inherently political question of foreignness, or more a kind of hierarchy of the foreign that can be absorbed and that which cannot in this imagination of new India. The Incredible India imagery, I have argued, brings to surface the rearrangements taking place below at a more fundamental level. Take the very nomenclature of India 2.0 which is not just a clever reference to the IT industry, it discloses the presumption of a core, settled matter that can be improved, altered time and again to fit in with contemporary times. Despite the techno-friendly gesture, the mimicking of the language of fast-paced computer programming to describe India hints at something else – the discourse of (Hindu) civilisational culture that pitches India as an eternal being capable of reincarnating itself. It can be varied, remixed, but its core remains unaltered, even indifferent to external forces. In this view, India in its twenty-first century digital reincarnation remains

unchanged even as it is modified. It is precisely within the story of the 'great transformation' that we witness the opposite: the claims of eternal stability that India 2.0 as Incredible India ultimately presents to its consumers. The global aesthetics of India 2.0 are located within these seeming contradictions of change and continuity – the idea of versions providing the necessary frame. Consider the repetitive themes visible in the Incredible India imagery – natural landscape, wildlife, Hindu festivals, rituals and exotica – that recall the old colonial imagery. These themes are loathed even as they are reproduced, and their capacity to create the smart image never beyond doubt. The point is not whether they work effectively towards their intended goal, rather how they reveal the imagined blueprint of India and the centrality of these themes therein.

Connected to this is the related question of authenticity that discloses another contradiction. Recall the India 2.0 installation we began with. It is a green and yellow auto-rickshaw dressed up in pink roof made of sheer luxury fabric and matching pink silk cushions positioned to display the dramatic transformations unfolding in post-reform India. The choice of auto-rickshaw as a symbol of new Incredible India is telling. Auto-rickshaws are a ubiquitous part of the Indian urban life as slow paced but affordable means of transport. The very name suggests that the vehicle is an improvisation of the cycle rickshaws that are popular for short distance travel. Yet auto-rickshaws are not only *not* unique to India given their popularity across Asia and Africa, but were introduced in India as recently as 1950s by the Indian licensee of Piaggio, an Italian automobile manufacturer. We witness the notion of authenticity here not as apriori true master copy, rather in its formation as it is produced by drawing the foreign inside, and by absorbing it into the vernacular texture. This quality of absorbing, assimilating the foreign, of bringing the outside inside is what is sometimes said to cast India in timelessness. The word 'Incredible' precisely seeks to convey that magical, marvellous quality. The very choice of this English word would appear to be the work of these contradictions too. I was told during my fieldwork that no word exists in the Hindi language that can fully describe the potential and richness of India. While India has been translated for the global publics in the shape of Incredible India, it has also been translated back for the vernacular publics as 'Atulya Bharat' that literally means 'incomparable' or 'unique' India. It is telling that the multitude of vernacular languages is found to be lacking words to appropriately describe the post-exotic self. Similarly, the graphic identity for new India in the logo form -! – is also extracted from the global archive of the printing press. It has been effortlessly absorbed in the graphic logo of India.

In contrast, what has not been absorbed easily is India's Muslim past in Incredible India. The catalogue of images that constitutes Incredible India is pointer in this direction. The sole exception to this rule is the presence of Taj Mahal – now pitched as the ultimate sign of consumption and pleasure. The monument is presented in the global publicity as the priceless, and unattainable, commodity that the consumers can only dream and aspire for. If the near-absence

of the Muslim past reflects the contemporary politics of Hindutava in the blueprint of India 2.0, the presence of the commodified Taj Mahal signals the post-exotic futures ahead. The absorption of the foreign in the folds of timelessness now is not merely a question of cultural translation, it is as much a question of its capacity to generate value in the global political economy.

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Notes

1. Text accompanying the India 2.0 vehicle at ITB Berlin, 2007.
2. The contemporary political mobilisations in India have often been about uncovering and restoring the Hindu essence of ancient nation. This basically means ‘removing’ the foreign elements especially Muslims and traces of Islamic culture. The destruction of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalist groups in December 1992 is an example of how the authentic is sometimes violently restored in contemporary India.
3. The older Indian tourism campaigns did not create a discernible brand identity. The only memorable logo in tourism sector is that of Air India’s *Maharaja*, but its reach and scope was limited to the airline rather than the nation. Incredible India campaign is one of the earliest such global campaigns and has won a number of international awards since its launch more than a decade ago. In fact, Indian advertising agencies are recognised for their professional skills and now even offer their services to other nations wishing to create brands.
4. Interview with Amitabh Kant, 6 October 2010.
5. Interview with Amitabh Kant, 6 October 2010.
6. Interview with V.Sunil, 19 March 2012.
7. See Brand India objectives.
8. In 2002, V Sunil was the creative director Ogilvy&Mather, Delhi at that time. He went on to form an independent ad agency in Delhi that later merged with W + K.
9. Interview with V. Sunil.
10. When he received this new brief, he had the distinction of being the youngest creative director of a major advertising agency in India. At 27, he was appointed the Creative Director of Ogilvy and Mather, a major advertising firm in Delhi.
11. National Tourism Policy, 2002, Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Government of India.
12. The budget outlay for 2002–2003 was especially enhanced so as to reserve Rs. 34 crore for overseas marketing and Rs. 6 crore for domestic marketing out of a total

- budget of Rs. 202 crore. Annual Plan, Planning Commission of India, Chapter 8, 667.
13. Interview with V. Sunil, 12 August 2012.
 14. A contemporary example of such a narrative is the recent travelogue by William Dalrymple (2009).
 15. Interview with Amitabh Kant, 6 October 2010.
 16. Interview with Amitabh Kant, 6 October 2010.
 17. Interview with Sunil, 10 October 2010.
 18. Sunil quoted in Kant (2009).
 19. Incidentally W + K is the agency that created the Nike campaign as well.
 20. Interview with Sunil, 19 March 2012.
 21. Interview with Sunil, 10 October 2010.
 22. Interview with Sunil, 10 October 2010.
 23. Allusions to the figure of Mother India are obvious here. See Ramaswamy (2010).
 24. Interview with Sunil, 10 October 2010.
 25. Bharat Bala, the filmmaker quoted in Kant, 21.
 26. Interview with Sunil, 11 October 2010.
 27. Interview with Sunil, 12 August 2012.
 28. Though *Incredible India* was aimed at the outside world, it has gained as much attention and popularity inside especially among the upwardly mobile middle classes.
 29. See <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/252> accessed 12 October 2014.

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