

INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture24

Advertisements: Political influence of brands

Hello everyone. Earlier modules on visual narrative advertisements discussed Indianness in ad campaigns, how it is positioned in the consumer market, and its role in popular culture. It's crucial to understand how politics influence brands and how they promote certain ideologies.

An example is a Tanishq ad that faced significant backlash from right-wing groups who claimed it promoted "love jihad." The ad depicted a Hindu woman in a sari performing a ritual called Godbharai, which is associated with childbirth. Her mother-in-law, dressed in a salwar dupatta, was shown as a Muslim woman. The right-wing critics argued that the ad was promoting love jihad, leading to considerable controversy. Ultimately, Tanishq had to withdraw the ad. It was named "Ektavam," meaning unity, and was part of a new jewellery line from Tanishq.

Since some people perceived the ad as promoting interfaith marriage, equated with "love jihad," Tharoor made a statement. He tweeted that if one is protesting this ad on the grounds of it symbolizing love jihad, they should protest against India itself. According to Tharoor, India, as a symbol of unity, is an assemblage of diverse populations, including both Hindus and Muslims. Historically, the Mughals, who ruled India for a long period, propagated the idea of "unity in diversity." For instance, Akbar married Jodha, a Hindu queen, illustrating this concept.

These ads highlight how political influences shape brands and their messages. In the case of the Tanishq ad, the ad maker explained that the idea stemmed from serials of the past, where mother-in-law-daughter-in-law relationships were often depicted negatively. The intention was to show that two women could coexist harmoniously and support each other, challenging the portrayal of such relationships as contentious.

Aravind Rajagopal extensively discusses the intersection of political influence and branding in his works. In his books—*Thinking Through Emerging Markets: Brand Logics and Cultural Forms of Political Society in India* (2001), *Advertising in India: Genealogy of Consumer Subjects* (2011), and *Advertising Politics and the Sentimental Education of the Indian Consumer*—he explores how brands are politically influenced and how this influence is often normalized. Rajagopal argues that brands, through their political messaging, shape consumer sentiment and political narratives. He highlights the intersection of politics and marketing, emphasizing the role of revolution and communication in shaping market logic and political discourse.

So, Aravind Rajagopal says, he quotes, Hindu nationalism is both the globalizing face of Indian politics and the bearer of a violent and brutal form of religious chauvinism within the confines of the nation state, unquote. So this is what Rajagopal believes in that how Hindu nationalism is trying to, it is in a way globalizing face of India, how the Indian-ness is equated with Hindu nationalism, though it is more of a religious trajectory, but it is associating it, it is clinging it with the mainstream politics of India. and it comes with the baggages that he mentioned.

Everything is done through communication, whether visual, dialogue, or ads. This all falls within the realm of communication. Rajagopal emphasizes this point. He also highlights the fusion of cultural economy and politics facilitated by what he calls the visual regime or electronic media. Electronic media is controlled by certain factors, influencing what is shown to the audience. This controlled visibility raises concerns about the problems of such convergence.

When cultural economy and politics converge, it is crucial to examine how they influence each other, with particular emphasis on branding and symbolism. The Tanishq ad is a fitting example of this, where symbolism is derived from the attire of the characters. The ad's portrayal of a Hindu daughter-in-law and a Muslim mother-in-law was inferred from their clothing, illustrating the use of symbolism in marketing strategy.

Cultural identity has become a salient feature of consumer behavior and consumerism. In the mid-1980s, political developments reshaped the visual

landscape towards indigenous traditions. Rajagopal traces advertisements back to these traditions, suggesting that brands often draw from them. He notes that Hindu Brahmanical culture has come to accept the use of Hindu imagery in marketing.

He points out that broadcasting commercially sponsored Hindu epics, like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, on state-owned national TV contributed to mass participation. National television's acceptance and sponsorship aimed to familiarize the mass audience with these cultural narratives.

Rajagopal discusses a specific ad from his books, a Wheel ad featuring lemons dropping and a wheel spinning rapidly. The spinning wheel functions as a religious fetish signifying purity and strength. While the religious connotations might not be obvious to the general audience, the association of purity and cleanliness with the product is clear.

In his works, Rajagopal situates the political influences of brands, using the example of indigenous traditions and how they have evolved. He also examines how Swadeshi, initially tied to political movements, has become more culturally associated.

Culture situates itself in religion. With that, we move to the subjectivity of the consumer in a political state. Another philosopher has established that the politics of economy and the economy of politics are intertwined and interchangeable. Whether you refer to the politics of economy or the economy of politics, both are interrelated and interchangeable. The economy operates through rhetorical images, and vice versa.

This leads to the concept of political subjectivity. As discussed earlier, political subjectivity can involve either objective or polarized views. A consumer's political subjectivity influences the types of advertisements produced, which must align with current political sentiments to be effective. For instance, an ad like the Tanishq ad, which deals with interfaith marriage, may not resonate with the current political climate.

Advertisements reflect, endorse, or oppose political ideologies or values based on prevailing political sentiments. For example, Gillette's ad with the slogan "The Best Men Can Be" addresses toxic masculinity and polarizes audiences. Some

see it as a positive promotion of better masculinity, while others view it as promoting toxicity, depending on their political stance.

Significant shifts in government often reflect changes in advertisements. When a government shifts in its ideological inclination, advertisements may also shift to align with this new direction. For instance, under a left-leaning government, advertisements might reflect left-leaning values, while a right-leaning government would lead to right-leaning advertisements. The political system espouses particular ethics of morality, whether market capitalism, state capitalism, or socialism. Market capitalism is often perceived as amoral, with undefined larger projects.

If you're working on a line of projects from the same company, they tend to lend themselves wholly to that company. The political field may impose restrictions on the questions that might arise from the market flow. Governments often restrict or censor questions to manage risks before they even emerge. Different governments handle this in various ways, formulating their approach based on their specific inclinations.

Questions of private and individual interest must be framed in terms of collective interest. Individual interests should not overshadow collective needs. Issues of language change and rhetoric also vary with political regimes. For example, in the earlier discussion, we mentioned Hindustani and Bharatiya. Hindustani, associated with Urdu, was widely used in regions like Punjab and Sindh, while Bharatiya, derived from Bharat (the nation-state), is more closely related to Hindi or Sanskrit. As regimes change, the language used, and its associations also shift.

Many renowned poets and lyricists from the UP belt wrote in Urdu, reflecting the linguistic and cultural dynamics of their time. So, the larger question is whether such an approach is possible. This also ties into whether the country should be referred to as India, Hindustan, or Bharat—an ongoing discourse. Language changes with different political regimes, and the rhetoric of enunciation reflects this. The rhetoric of enunciation encompasses the speaker's position, context, audience, and medium used. For instance, in advertising, the discourse presented depends on the context in which the company operates.

Consider the example of Ganga soap. While not widely known across all of India, it offers a significant case. The ad uses religious imagery of the Ganga, featuring a woman depicted with popular markers of Bharatiya Nari, such as wearing a sari. She pours water onto a child's head using a traditional brass lota, another marker of Bharatiya tradition. The ad ends by establishing the woman as a pious mother, linking auspiciousness, purity, and the bond between mother and son with Ganga soap. The soap is promoted using symbols and imagery tied to traditional Bharatiya values. Ganga soap claims to include a small percentage of river water in its preparation, reinforcing its religious and sacred associations. Posters for the soap suggested that bathing with it could absolve one of sins, further embedding it in the religious discourse and showcasing how political influence and branding intersect in advertisements.

Washing with Ganga soap is symbolically linked to absolving sins, reflecting the religious significance of the Ganga river. The soap's marketing suggests that using it cleanses past sins, enhancing its appeal through religious imagery. This ties into the broader trend of public use of Hindu themes in advertising, particularly before the 1990s. During this period, Hindu nationalism grew with events like the Babri Masjid and Ayodhya, while the economic policies shifted away from a welfare state towards a more business-friendly regime.

The institution of national television began in 1982, creating a unified visual regime across the country. Before the arrival of private channels, Doordarshan's monopoly meant it could control the visual regime without market competition. The Congress Party initially tried to leverage this advantage but was ultimately succeeded by the BJP, which adapted the visual regime to suit its agenda and ushered in an era of authoritarian populism aligned with economic liberalization.

Rajagopal notes that advertising functions as a pedagogy of politics, teaching consumers not just about products but also about self-improvement and societal values. For instance, Fair & Lovely promoted fairness as a marker of beauty and social status, reflecting broader class and caste ideologies. Rajagopal argues that advertisements are influenced by political contexts, shaping consumer desires and reinforcing particular values.

Hindu imagery in ads, like that of Ganga soap, becomes more than a symbol; it becomes a tool for legitimizing and objectifying religious and cultural narratives. Consumers interpret and interact with these images, creating new meanings and legitimizing them through their understanding.

Rajagopal's concept of a libidinal economy suggests that ads stimulate emotional and psychological desires, driving consumer behavior. This is linked to passive consumption, where emotional stimulation leads to physical purchases. Media and advertising play crucial roles in advancing market relations and generating social links.

The semiotics of sartorial choices also illustrate how clothing reflects political and cultural narratives. Gandhi's promotion of khadi as anti-imperial protest and Nehru's adoption of the Nehru jacket, integrating elements of Islamicate culture, demonstrate how sartorial choices can symbolize broader political and cultural shifts. The Handloom House, founded by Pupul Jayakar, aimed to revive traditional Indian textiles and craftsmanship, contributing to the narrative of Indian identity and heritage post-independence.