

PATHOLOGIES AND DYSFUNCTIONS OF DEMOCRACY IN THE MEDIA CONTEXT

**THE RETURN OF THE
PROPAGANDA MODEL:
EMOTIONS, POPULISM,
AND POLARIZATION**

**JOÃO CARLOS CORREIA
(ED.)**



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Contents

Introduction	9
João Carlos Correia	
“The Russo-Ukrainian war in the society of the selfie”	13
Jeremiah Morelock, Felipe Ziotti Narita, Addressa Michelotti & Uyen Hoang Minh Ly	
Literacy for citizenship and democracy: framing propaganda within the scope of organized persuasive communication	33
Naïde Müller	
Seven key pathologies of contemporary democracy that make emotional appeal a successful formula of the communication model of extremist populism in Portugal: Propaganda Model	59
Martim Ramos Vasco	
Populism, presentism, emotions and spin doctoring on social networks: Jair Bolsonaro’s digital communication	81
Edson Capoano, Vítor de Sousa & Vinicius Prates	
Friends and enemies of the people: representations of historical figures in textbooks for the chinese post-80s and post-90s generations	99
Shenglan Zhou	
Incredible India shining: the idea of India in political and touristic propaganda posters of the XXI century	121
João Pedro Marques Morgado Ferreira de Oliveira	
How propaganda could influence social media: the case of climate change debate on Twitter	151
Pedro Rodrigues Costa, Edson Capoano & Alice Dutra Balbé	

INCREDIBLE INDIA SHINING: THE IDEA OF INDIA IN POLITICAL AND TOURISTIC PROPAGANDA POSTERS OF THE XXI CENTURY

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Abstract: Political campaigns directed towards a national audience and touristic campaigns directed towards an international audience often deal with stereotyped representations of the nation-state. The goals of such representations are the direct and immediate consumption of the represented nation. This paper analyses the visual and textual representations of India made for local citizens through two political campaigns launched by two political parties. These are: *India Shining*, launched by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and the counter-campaign *Aam Admi*, launched by the Indian National Congress (Congress), both in 2004. It also analyses an ongoing touristic campaign for foreign visitors, the campaign *Incredible India*, launched by the Indian Government in 2002. Through discourse analysis based on qualitative data, this paper shows how political campaigns spread positive or negative representations of the nation, depending on whether the politician/party in question is in power or belongs to the opposition. It also reveals that touristic campaigns are invariably positive and how positive representations function as creators and consolidators of nationalistic ideas of the nation-state in space and time. Finally, it also analyses the way in which, while contemporary and globalised, such campaigns are informed and influenced by Orientalism and re-Orientalism, that is, the reinvention of Orientalism in the public and academic spheres in contemporary India.

Keywords: *Nation branding, India Shining, Incredible India, idea of India*

Introduction

Due to the spread of mass media and the increasing influence of globalisation, images of the nation to be consumed internally for political purposes or externally for diplomatic and touristic purposes have been increasingly relevant. The creation of homogeneous and centrally planned representations has turned nations first into political and cultural ideas and into commercial brands. Accordingly, such attempts have been called “nation branding”. Kerrigan, Shivanandan and Hede (2012) show how this strategy attempts to create particular ideas of a nation within the global framework of travellers and other imagined nations and how it aims at idealising third-world peoples by effacing signs of poverty and violence (322-324). According to Blaney and Shah (2018), attempts at nation-branding in India have created and reinforced stereotypes about Indian people, culture and landscapes. But where do such stereotypes come from, what are their uses, and how are they consolidated?

This article focuses on three such campaigns launched in contemporary India and aimed at national and international audiences. These include: the *Incredible India* (2002-) campaign, which has aimed to create touristic images for both internal and external consumers; the *India Shining* (2004) campaign launched by the Bharatiya Janati Party (BJP) for the general elections of 2004; and 3) the *Aam Admi* (Hindi for *Ordinary Person*) (2004) campaign, the response to *India Shining* by the Indian National Congress (Congress), the BJP’s main political opponent then and now. Through discourse analysis based on qualitative data, I describe the main textual and visual representations of India created by these three campaigns. I then compare and contrast them with Orientalist discourses and contemporary Indian discourses created by influential Indian public intellectuals and academics who study modern India. I focus particularly on economist Amartya Sen, politician Shashi Tharoor and Indo-American activist Rajiv Malhotra.

To Be or Not to Be: Indian Political and Touristic Campaigns

1) *Incredible India*: Since the end of Nehruvian economic policies and the introduction of neoliberalism in India in 1991, tourism has become an increasing economic priority. In this role, it has been publicly set and privately developed.

Incredible India has been part of an Asian and global tendency of creating stereotyped touristic representations of nation-states for external consumption. Other examples in Asia include *Amazing Thailand/Discover Thainess* (2013), *Malaysia - Truly Asia* (1999), *Live it Up! Singapore/Uniquely Singapore* (2000), *Singapore Roars* (2003), *Wonderful Indonesia* (2011), *HK: Asia's World City* (2001), *Korea Sparkling* (2007), *Cool Japan* (2013).¹ These campaigns have similar naming strategies. Most names consist of the name of the place in question (India, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan) with the addition of a positively charged adjective (incredible, amazing, wonderful, sparkling, cool), adverb (truly, uniquely) or verb (live it up, roars). There is also an attempt at localising (truly Asia) and globalising (Asia's World City). All of these campaigns have consisted of short and poetic or witty slogans visually aided by symbols which stand for the nation in question and which are immediately recognisable by international audiences.

As an ongoing campaign, *Incredible India* has an active website.² The website has several submenus which focus on time/history (Heritage destinations, UNESCO World Heritage Sites, Museums in India), local geography (States and Union Territories, Nature and Wildlife), culture (Art, Food and Cuisine, Crafted in India), consumerism (Luxury, Shopping) spirituality (Spiritual destinations, The Land of Buddha, Yoga and Wellness). The posters made for the campaign from 2002 until 2009 are available online.³ Unless stated

1. See ROLL, Martin (2015), *Asian Brand Strategy: Building & Sustaining Strong Global Brands in Asia*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

2. <https://www.incredibleindia.org/content/incredible-india-v2/en.html> (accessed on 26/10/2022).

3. <https://www.incredibleindiacampaign.in/> (accessed on 26/10/2022). The year between brackets refer to the year when the poster was created.

otherwise, it is to these versions which I shall refer to. Referring to these posters, Blaney and Shah (2018) consider that *Incredible India* creates a representation of India in which iconic landscapes predominate, mainly deserts, backwaters, national reserve parks and the Himalayas (2). Geary (2013) has added more Indian “icons”, such as the Bengal tiger or the Taj Mahal (41). Out of the 68 different posters which fall under the category “iconic photo with short witty slogan”, there are four which represent the Bengal tiger and three which represent the Taj Mahal. There are other posters focusing on the same symbols from later campaigns, whose posters are unavailable in the official website.

Picture 1 (2007) shows a Bengal tiger inside a small monument. It comes with the tagline “not all Indians are polite, hospitable and vegetarian”. The text makes use of a stereotype, the idea that Indians are all polite, hospitable and vegetarian. The use of a negative sentence makes it seem as if the stereotype is contradicted, but once the reader realises that there is a pun and that, in this case, the expression “all Indians” does not refer to “all Indian people”, but “all Indian creatures”, the stereotype is perpetuated, as one can implicitly conclude that “all Indian people are polite, hospitable and vegetarian”.



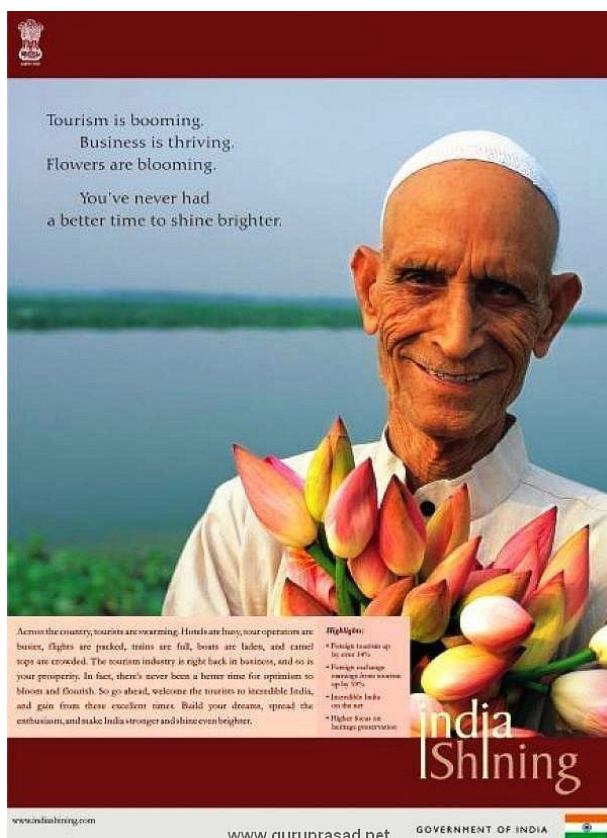
Picture 1 – *Incredible India* (2007)

2) *India Shining*: This political campaign consisted of eight slogans and posters aimed at highlighting positive representations of India since the neoliberal turn taken in 1991. Even though this was a political campaign, its naming strategy is readily comparable with the touristic one, as it also focuses on the place (India) and on a very positive adjective associated with light (shining). The name of this campaign can be semantically compared to Korea's touristic campaign *Korea Sparkling*. *India Shining* focused on the neoliberal and commodified "supermarket of dreams" (Pinney, 2005) and was therefore comparable to similar discourses on the American or, more recently, on the "Chinese dream". In this universe, middle-class Indians are supposed to engage with the larger nation as individual consumers and investors and to improve the national economy through self-interest.

Kaur (2016: 630) shows how this campaign was concerned with a monolithic vision of India which focused solely in representing the contemporary global consumer. The main strategy adopted by the BJP consisted in depicting colourful and joyful scenes of everyday middle-class life related to different age and gender groups. The posters show: 1) a child raising his hand in school, 2) a middle-aged parent/grandparent raising his (grand) daughter on his shoulders; 3) a mother playing cricket while her child looks at her; 4) a group of young girls riding bicycles; 5) a group of young girls sitting near a computer; 6) a middle-aged man making a phone call in a long empty road; 7) a middle-aged man working in a traditional loom; and 8) an old man holding a bunch of colourful flowers (Picture 2).⁴ These images are accompanied by poetic lines in free verse which reveal how the natural, personal and social conditions of the present are positive. The text which accompanies Picture 2 is written in English and reads: "Tourism is booming / Business is thriving / Flowers are blooming / You've never had

4. See the eight posters in Pinney (2005); Kaur (2016); <https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/10/from-india-shining-to-india-whining/> (accessed on 26/10/2022); http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3518029.stm (accessed on 26/10/2022); <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-game-of-googly/289698> (accessed on 26/10/2022).

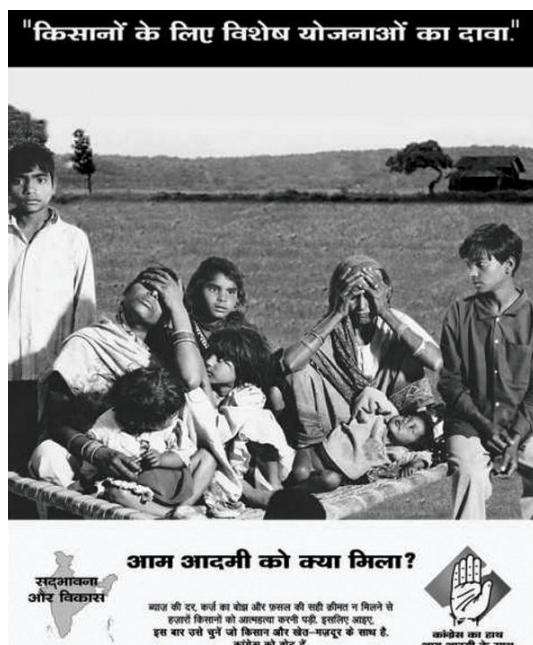
a better time to shine brighter”. English in India has been strongly associated with education and job opportunities and, in fact, textually and visually, nearly all of these images are directly related either to education or to job opportunities/business and to the relationship between two. All characters are invariably represented as smiling, confident and active, as many of them are depicted with their arms raised and/or open.



Picture 2 – *India Shining* (Pimney, 2005).

The *India Shining* campaign turned out to be a flop. Most Indians perceived the difference between reality and representation and comically started to slightly alter the representations of the campaign in order to better conform with reality from their own perspective. What was initially conceived as a “feel good” campaign turned into a “fool good” one and the slogan was playfully changed to India Whining, India Stinking, India Burning, and India Declining by the general public. For that reason, the *India Shining* campaign was abandoned. Nowadays, there is no active online information associating it with the BJP. In 2014, when he won the elections for the first time, current prime-minister Narendra Modi, a BJP politician, chose not to focus so much on the “shining” present but rather on the “shining” future, as he spoke of “good days” (*ache din*) coming ahead (Kaur, 2016: 643).

Aam Admi: India Shining’s representation was textually and visually countered by another campaign created by BJP’s main political opponent, the Indian Congress (see Pinney, 2005; Kaur, 2016). Contrary to *India Shining*, this campaign presented black and white images which focused on the social problems of India, mainly urban and rural poverty and unemployed youth. The people depicted rarely look directly and confidently at the camera. They often look dejected, helpless and passive. Picture 3 depicts a group of farmers. Two of the women cover their heads with their hands in a clear sign of desperation. The taglines of this poster, written in Hindi at the top, translates as “special conditions for the farmers”. The general slogan of the campaign, written at the bottom, translates as “what has the ordinary person [*aam admi*] gained?”, whence the name for which the campaign came to be known. Apart from English, Hindi is the other language of communication for the national government, but, unlike English, it is not associated with the ex-colonisers nor with globalisation and is mainly spoken in the states of North India.



Picture 3 – Pinney (2005)

In sum, these three campaigns rely on both textual and visual representative strategies to selectively pick (or perhaps invent) parts of a wider reality and deliberately hide others in order to create cohesive and homogeneous representations and effectively convey positive or negative emotions.

Grotesquely Primitive or Dazzlingly Glorious: Where Does it All Come From?

Two Religious and Political Ideas of India

Previous to the contemporary capitalistic idea of “nation branding”, the main nation-building campaign in India was informally called “idea of India”, a phrase which is said to have been created by the writer Rabindranath Tagore.⁵ The idea has been closely related to Hinduism as a religion and

5. See BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi (1997), *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915–1941*, New Delhi: National Book Trust, India; BHATTACHARYA, Sabyasachi (2017). “Rethinking Tagore on the Antinomies of Nationalism” In TUTEJA, K. L. & CHAKRABORTY,

as a political phenomenon. The main bone of contention related to the religious question has been whether Hinduism has been concocted or at least codified by the British colonisers, which is the view of most contemporary scholars,⁶ or whether Hinduism existed in pre-colonial times, which is the view of some scholars⁷ and most Hindu activists.

The debate of artificiality against authenticity has been evident not only in discussions about Hinduism as a religion but also and in discussions about India as a nation. Most works, both scholarly and non-scholarly, have acknowledged the ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious diversity of the modern nation-state of India, an idea which shows that India is “an imagined community” like every nation.⁸ Discourses on India as a culturally-unified nation are similar to those of Hinduism as a culturally-unified religion. As there are arguments for the creation of a pan-Hinduism influenced by a Western holistic view, there are also arguments for the creation of a pan-India, a contemporary nation-state based on the Western concept of nationalism, but with at least a claim to difference, according to which variety is as much prized as similarity. Therefore, this identification between the constructs of “religion” and “state” has facilitated the creation of a discourse in which both concepts have been intermingled.

There exist several political concepts of India, a country with more than one billion people, but, since the beginning of discussions around this idea, two main ones have eclipsed all others in the public sphere (see Tharoor, 2020): Indian secularism and Hindu nationalism (also called *Hindutva*). The former has regarded India as a modern secular and tolerant culture with no hierarchic social preferences. The latter has seen it as an intrinsically Hindu culture in which diversity has only existed because Hinduism itself has

Kaustav (eds.). *Tagore and Nationalism*, New Delhi: Springer.

6. See KING, Richard (1999), *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and “The Mythic East”*, London: Routledge for a comprehensive overview of this topic.

7. NICHOLSON, Andrew J. (2010). *Unifying Hinduism: Philosophy and Identity in Indian Intellectual History*, Columbia University Press.

8. See KHILNANI, Sunil (1997), *The Idea of India*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux for a comprehensive overview on the topic.

been said to allow and promote such diversity.⁹ These concepts have been competing in the cultural and political arenas since colonial times. Despite their differences, some scholars have advocated that secular India and Hindu nationalist India have been similar in structure and that they have stemmed from the same root.¹⁰ The concepts of unity and diversity have been significant for both ideas, which have posited a fundamental historical, cultural, social, and religious unity that existed throughout the whole territory controlled by the British before the British came. Secular India has emphasised diversity and Hindu nationalism unity, but both have strongly relied on Hindu textual and visual discourses. In sum, the difference between the two ideas of India has been more quantitative than qualitative. It is for that reason that Sen (2005) has acknowledged that, even though hardcore supporters of Hindu nationalism have been small in number, a larger group of proto-*Hindutva* enthusiasts have clustered around them (53).

Orientalism and Re-Orientalism

The creation of India as a modern nation-state and its representation is intimately connected with the issue of Orientalism and what has been called re-Orientalism. Orientalism refers to the way the Western sciences and arts have created the idea of the exotic East in order to impose its cultural superiority over it. This concept was first introduced by Edward Said (2003, first edition in 1978). Said stated that Orientalism constitutes a discourse based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between East and West (2), whereby the relationship between both has been one of power and domination (5). In other words, Western intellectuals have created an imaginary representation of the East in order to exert their hegemony over the East and to define what the West is.

9. See THAPAR, Romila (2014), *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company.

10. See NANDY, Ashis (1998). "The twilight of certitudes: secularism, Hindu nationalism and other masks of deculturation" *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 283-298; NANDY, Ashis (2003), *The Romance of the State and the Fate of Dissent in the Tropics*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Said also argued that one aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient has been viewed (26). Through the modern mass media, Orientalist discourses have infiltrated Eastern traditions. Stereotypes similar to the ones devised by the German Orientalist school,¹¹ which stated in general terms that ancient Indian civilisation was highly advanced and had later decayed, may present ready-made ideas that can be put to work in favour of given native political agendas, even when they are dissociated from their European source. Contrary to Orientalism, this phenomenon has not yet become an established academic subject and has thus been called by many different names. I use the concept of *re-Orientalism*, which has been extensively used by human geographer Lisa Lau and by Om Prakash Dwivedi and Ana Cristina Mendes, both professors of English Studies (Lau, 2009; Lau & Mendes, 2011; Lau & Dwivedi, 2014; Mendes & Lau, 2014).

The concept of re-Orientalism as theorised by these authors refers to how contemporary (Indian) writers have used Orientalist stereotypes in their own fiction and nonfiction works. Lau, Dwivedi and Mendes have created and have used this notion in order to describe Indian literature in English to be consumed abroad (e.g. Salman Rushdie), as well as films, most prominently the Hollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009). Such authors and films, which have been quite popular in the West and for the most part ignored in India, have been considered to make extensive use of Orientalist stereotypes in order to better captivate their mostly Western audiences and therefore to better sell their work in the globalised market. Such stereotypes have mainly been negative and have been related to poverty, pollution, and violence.

The concept of re-Orientalism may also be applied to the cultural discourses that are created by Indians for internal and for external consumption, as Hindu nationalist Indian authors, politicians and marketing strategists have endeavoured to selectively pick the more positive Orientalist tropes

11. See INDEN, Ronald B. (2001), *Imagining India*, Cambridge: Indiana University Press for a comprehensive overview on the topic.

which Westerners applied to them. According to Sen, the Orientalist representation of India was, for the most part, “grotesquely primitive”, while the Hindu nationalist one, which I regard as re-Orientalist, has been “dazzlingly glorious” (140).

The negative representation of contemporary India has often been called “Dark India” by Lau, Dwivedi, Mendes and other scholars. This name conforms both to the textual and visual representations present in the *Aam Admi* campaign. In one article about the film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2009), Mendes has even played with and inverted the BJP slogan and called this kind of representation “India unshining”, therefore showing how both the campaigns and the two general representations are mirrors of each other.¹² One can therefore understand how such positive and negative Orientalist and re-Orientalist representations can be easily appropriated by political discourses. Politicians and parties in power will naturally wish to represent their nation as shining and “dazzlingly glorious”, while those in the opposition may wish to represent it as dark, “unshining” and “grotesquely primitive” and to present themselves as the political alternative which will turn the nation into a shining and dazzlingly glorious one in the future.

One can also notice the influence of such cultural discourses in the touristic marketing of the *Incredible India* campaign, not exactly in the way that it presents a contemporary neoliberal middle-class fantasy but rather a dream-like Orientalist one. Picture 4 is an Orientalist artwork titled *Old Blue Tiled Mosque Outside of Delhi India* painted by the American Orientalist artist Edwin Lord Weeks (1849-1903) around 1885.¹³ This picture presents a single small mosque in an otherwise empty and dreamlike landscape. The human figures within the picture all point to the ultimate exoticism of this landscape, both when one considers the lavish clothes of the characters mounted on or pulling camels, or the nakedness of the ascetic talking to them.

12. MENDES, Ana Cristina (2010), “Showcasing India Unshining: Film Tourism in Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*” Third Text, <http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/10.1080/09528822.2010.491379> (accessed on 2/12/2020).

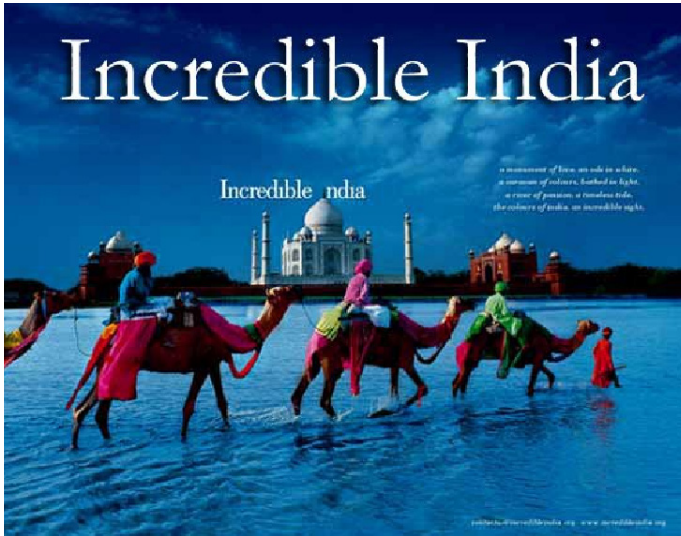
13. Retrieved from <https://www.edwinlordweeks.org/Blue-Tiled-Mosque-At-Delhi-India.html> (accessed on 27/5/2022).



Picture 4 - Edwin Lord Weeks' *Old Blue Tiled Mosque Outside of Delhi India* (c. 1885)

Picture 5 is a poster for the *Incredible India* campaign which is not available in the campaign's official website, which means that it was published after 2009.¹⁴ The similarities between this “native” poster and the Orientalist painting by Edwin Lord Weeks are striking. The Taj Mahal in the background and the otherwise empty and fuzzy landscape are readily comparable to the blue-tiled mosque. Similarly, the foreground reveals several lavishly and colourfully clothed men riding camels. In this case, the primitive and glorious come together in order to form the “exotic”, an epithet which was negative for India and for Indians when they were dominated by the British, but which can be profitable in modern times when India and Indians themselves may reap the profits of foreigners who wish to visit India for its exoticism.

14. Retrieved from <https://www.india-briefing.com/news/incredible-india-campaign-launched-chinese-8549.html> (accessed on 27/5/2022).



Picture 5 – *Incredible India* (after 2009)

Another poster for the same campaign (2007) makes the connection between old Orientalist representations and modern popular ones. It shows a group of colourfully dressed women lined up in a desert. The caption reads: “It’s a bit like a Bollywood dream sequence. Only, you are in it”. This poster invites the reader to join the Orientalist fantasy, not the one of the “grotesquely primitive” Hollywood film *Slumdog Millionaire* but that of the “dazzlingly glorious” Bollywood universe. This poster, the positive political and touristic campaign in general and Bollywood blockbusters rely on strong colours as markers of prosperity and exoticism. In fact, the 2008 *Incredible India* campaign consisted of colourful posters with titles related to colours and the way they are related to Indian nature and material culture. The titles of such posters include: “red hot”, “pure white”, “mustard yellow”, “water colours”, “revolutionary green”, “mystic maroon”, “deep purple”, “charcoal grey”, “tea green”, “flaming orange”, “coffee brown”, “pure gold”, “golden yellow”, “multi-colour”, “honey brown”, “technicolor”, “ultramarine”, “oil paint”, and “sun tan”.

She Loves Me, She Loves me Not: Representations of India in the Posters

Religiously and politically, India and Hinduism have been represented according to a contemporary, politically correct, pluralist American discourse.¹⁵ Given that the Indian “way of life” and Hinduism in particular are said to have had a positive effect on Indian history and geography, the general argument goes that it may have the same effect in the modern world, which is said to be in need of the same positive features.

Political scientist Jyotirmaya Sharma (2003) has been the only author who has made a systematic typology of stereotypes about Hinduism. He has stated that Hindus have usually been represented as non-violent, tolerant, mild, inward-looking and spiritually inclined, non-materialistic and non-proselytising (7). These features do not aim only to describe Hindus and Indians but also to contrast them with their most common *Others*, mainly Muslims and the British (or Westerners in general), which have often been represented by the opposite negative features. The only reason why Hindus are said to be non-proselytising is because Islam and Christianity are usually represented as religions which are proselytising in a violent and intolerant fashion. Specifically, Christianity has been connected to and has justified British colonialism, which was characterised by the outward-looking and materially inclined goal of economic profit.

I now present some of the most common traits of the “idea of India” according to contemporary Indian discourses:

1) Rural origins: It has often been said that Hinduism and “real” India culture has stemmed from the Indian countryside, where one can still find a culture which has not been adulterated by Western discourses. The same idea shaped the idea of the whole Western Romantic movement(s), which considered that the cultural roots could be found only in the rural *Völker* of developed societies or in the *noble savages* of so-called primitive societies.

15. See KURIEN, Prema A. (2007), *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

This tendency is obvious in the *Incredible India* campaign, whose posters never focus on any element directly related to urbane modernity. There are no images of modern concrete buildings or of people wearing Western clothes. The buildings which appear are invariably traditional and historical Indian ones and the depicted human figures always wear local or national clothes. One poster (2007) shows Westerners in modern attire travelling through the jungles of South India with local people wearing local clothes. The caption states that “one day, man will travel at the speed of thought. Pity” and claims that, in India, by contrast, one can “live life slower than snail’s pace in local houseboats”.

While *India Shining* is more concerned with representing India as technologically similar to other modern nations, these native origins also hold true for this campaign, as, in these contemporary representations, there are also no images of bustling metropolises and the human figures always wear traditional clothes.

2) Unity and diversity: Modern political discourses often represent India as an ethnic and culturally diverse country unified by the Sanskritic Hindu civilisation and tradition from North India. Several authors have resorted to metaphors in order to describe the contradiction between unity and diversity. The most stereotyped comparison states that Hinduism is like a Banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), a single living organism which possesses many branches.¹⁶ Other authors have compared India or Hinduism to a jungle, a sponge,¹⁷ a mosaic (Das, 2000), a hologram (Ramanujan, 2004), and a *thālī*, Hindi for “plate”, of mixed yet harmonious foods (Tharoor, 2007b).

Tharoor (2007a) has written that the singular thing about India is that one can only speak of it in the plural, given that in India everything has always existed in countless variants and that there has never been a single standard (2007a: 8). Elsewhere, Tharoor (2007b) has remarked that all

16. Julius Lipner has famously made this comparison in an academic context, but the metaphor is much older, though its origins are uncertain. See LIPNER, Julius (1994), *Hindus: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York: Routledge.

17. See INDEN, Ronald B. (2001), *Imagining India*, Cambridge: Indiana University Press.

Indian identities have been minorities and that there have never been representatives like the “archetypal Englishman or Frenchman” (57). Other scholars have written similar claims, not about India as a nation, but about Hinduism. Sanskritist Wendy Doniger (2009) has discussed the “eclectic pluralism of India”, whereby persons or groups may hold different beliefs coexisting peacefully and which can be used in different situations, given that Hindus usually care more about proper behaviour (orthopraxy) than about straight opinions (orthodoxy) (46).

As political campaigns, *India Shining* and *Aam admi* are directed towards different but unified audiences (the Indian middle-class and the rural and urban poor) and present homogeneous representations of those same audiences, both textually and visually. In *India Shining*, Indians have been able to pursue their educational and professional dreams and now live happy and colourful modern lives. In *Aam Admi*, Indians have seen their dreams shattered and live in a bleak black-and-white world. *Incredible India* presents a huge array of natural and cultural realities, but the fact that they are also depicted similarly in textual and visual terms and are all under the general banner of an “incredible India”, make them all fit into a greater national category.

In fact, India’s diversity has allowed for the sponge-like quality of India and Hinduism, which have been said to integrate and harmonise other traditions into their systems. Buddhism, for instance, is often said to have emerged as a critique to Hinduism.¹⁸ Even though it has not been a relevant religion in India for centuries and has been more relevant in Central, Southeast and East Asia and in Western New Age religions, given its contemporary global popularity it often appears in the *Incredible India* campaign as constituting a part of India. Out of the 68 posters, two allude directly to Buddhism. Even though the *Incredible India* campaign was national, like the other touristic campaigns in Asia, it also aimed at presenting the intrinsic regional diversity of India. Geary (2013) describes how the poor state of Bihar was

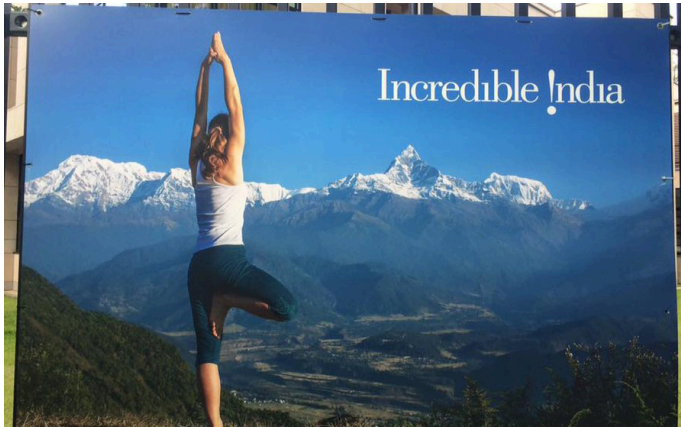
18. See ZIMMER, Heinrich (1951), *The Philosophies of India*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

represented as a significant place for the development of Buddhism (42), nowadays considered to be a “world religion”. In this way, a geographic and cultural subaltern region has been turned into a universal symbol of history and religion.

3) Spirituality: Another feature which has often been mentioned is that of the intrinsic spirituality of India. This trait has often been compared and contrasted to the materialism of the West. Both are representations which have remained alive since Orientalist times.

Within the constellation of Indian holy men and sages who were and are still significant for the development of the concept of the idea of India as a spiritual nation, special mention has to be made of religious teacher Swami Vivekananda, who popularised Hinduism abroad in the 19th century starting from his participation in the Chicago World Parliament of Religions in 1893.¹⁹ Vivekananda adopted the common Orientalist discourse and placed particular emphasis on the timeless spirituality of Indian wisdom as a curative for the nihilism and materialism of modern Western culture, but ironically he became an important spokesperson for Hinduism in India only when he achieved success in the West. This seems to hint that more important than Vivekananda’s definition of his religious tradition is the way in which he compared and contrasted it with Western religious tradition(s) and therefore fitted both within the same epistemological system. Playing on the defensive, Malhotra (2016) has stated that the main goal of his work *Indra’s Net: Defending Hinduism’s Philosophical Unity* has been to topple this idea that Vivekananda used Western Judaeo-Christian (re-Orientalist) terminology in order to reform Hinduism and to prove that Vivekananda was truthful to past Indian discourses all along (xiv).

19. See RADICE, William (ed.) (1998). *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, Delhi: Oxford University Press; King (1999); SHARMA, Jyotirmaya (2013). *A Restatement of Religion: Swami Vivekananda and the Making of Hindu Nationalism*, New Haven: Yale University Press; GREGG, Stephen E. (2019). *Swami Vivekananda and Non-Hindu Traditions: A Universal Advaita*, London: Routledge.



Picture 6 – *Incredible India* (after 2009)

This dimension of the idea of India has been absent in the political campaigns, which have been more concerned with material welfare than with spiritual goals. However, it has been present in the touristic *Incredible India* campaign. The 2003/2004 posters have specifically focused on yoga, a spiritual practice which has been equated with Hinduism in ancient Orientalist and modern New Age Western imagination and which has been accordingly taken up by Indian themselves.²⁰ Picture 6, which is not available in the official database, provides a good example.²¹ Even though it is about an “Indian” spiritual practice, this image depicts a foreigner, more specifically a Westerner, which shows that the journey to India is not merely an external one but also an internal one, a means to escape the excessive materialism and lack of spirituality of the West. Another poster (2002/2003) states that the reader shall, approve yoga through his “mind, body and soul”, which explicitly depicts yoga as an intellectual, physical and spiritual practice. Even one poster (2007) which focuses on very physical and emotional radical “adventures”, another keyword for the touristic campaign, resort to the spirituality stereotype. The picture shows a man rafting and

20. See <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/21/how-yoga-diplomacy-helps-india-assert-its-rising-global-influence> (accessed on 6/6/2022); <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/6/21/indias-modi-joins-thousands-for-global-yoga-day> (accessed on 7/6/2022).

21. Retrieved from <https://www.buzzfeed.com/andreborges/the-indian-embassy-in-poland-used-a-stock-image-fo> (accessed on 26/10/2022).

the caption reads that, even in the face of danger, one should not panic, given that “there’s always rebirth”.

Buddhism has also served as one of the “refractions of one great Indian spirituality” (Veer, 1994: 23) in one poster (2007), according to which India offers “a step-by-step guide to salvation”. The use of the word “salvation”, more readily associated with Judaeo-Christian religions than with Indian ones, also point to the major audience of this kind of campaign.

5) Universality, inclusiveness, tolerance and relativism: Even though the idea of India has been a crucial tool for Indian nationalistic purposes, it has often been described as possessing universal value. Indian ex-entrepreneur Gurcharan Das (2009), for instance, has stated that Vivekananda already spoke about a *dharma* (human conduct) of humanity (310).

When it comes to claims to universality, comparison and contrast with other traditions, mainly Western ones, have been common. Tharoor (2018b) has stated that Hinduism is different from the Abrahamic religions, given that it has no claims to universalise itself, even though its tenets are universally applicable (274). There has also been an attempt to demonstrate Hinduism’s holistic features in contrast with the partial nature of Western “ways of life”. For this reason, Hinduism’s tenets may also be universal in the temporal plane. In Malhotra’s (2016) view, Hinduism cannot be pigeon-holed into concepts such as “tradition”, “modern” or “postmodern” in the same way that the West sees itself, given that Hinduism has always been all three simultaneously and without contradiction (xviii).

Due to its universality and inclusiveness, India has been represented as more tolerant towards difference than other nations. In the view of anthropologist Peter van der Veer (1994), this discourse on the tolerance of Hinduism has been intended to unite competing Hindu groups and to establish a difference between other “intolerant” groups, mainly the Muslims (66-73). In order to prove the inherent tolerance and peacefulness of Indians, one often finds the idea that in the past India gave shelter to non-Indians with different worldviews. Tharoor (2020) has written that Vivekananda stated

in the Parliament of World Religions (1893) that he was proud to speak for a land that had always granted exile to the persecuted of all nations and faiths without ever asking about their religion.

Indian writers have often considered the inclusiveness and tolerance of Indian thought to be a model which should ideally be pursued by others, given that this trait allows cultural relativism, an important cultural trait in the contemporary globalised world. This relativistic stance has often been contrasted with a non-relativistic Western one, an idea best summarised by folklorist A. K. Ramanujan (2004), who, in his essay “Is there an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay”, stated that Western thought tries to fathom what is universal, while Indian thought stresses the particular in relational and contextual terms.

The Indian propensity for relativism has been superficially manifested in the idea of debate, when different and sometimes contradicting points of view are argued for or against. Tharoor (2007a) has remarked that every truism about India could be readily contradicted by the opposite truism and that it has often been said that, with regard to anything one can say about India, the opposite would also be true (7-22). Sen’s (2005) main goal with his work *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* has been to argue that India has had an ancient argumentative tradition which has been thwarted by Hindu nationalism. The author has drawn examples of past Indian leaders who followed such traditions, most commonly Aśoka (III century BCE), a converted Buddhist emperor of the Maurya dynasty, and Akbar (1542-1603), a Mughal emperor who was nominally Muslim interested in many other religions and even created his own syncretic one.

The 2008/2009 posters of the *Incredible India* campaign alluded directly to these ideas of universality, inclusiveness, tolerance and relativism. These posters focus on international visitors to India, mainly women, who have been integrated into Indian culture and society and have ultimately become Indian. When one looks at Picture 7 (2008/2009), the non-Indian element is not immediately clear. The monument in the background clearly marks

the landscape as Indian. The person depicted in the foreground is dressed in Indian clothes and performs recognisable Indian dance postures. Only the textual clues reveal the ultimate foreignness of this image. The title reveals that the physical “country of birth” of the depicted lady is France, but that her spiritual “motherland” is India. According to the text, she went to India in order to learn the ancient “spiritual” Bharat Natyam dance style and ultimately became one of its greatest exponents. These descriptions represent India as universal because “you [whoever you are and wherever you come from] will find that your search ends here”. It is inclusive and tolerant because it not only integrates foreigners into its cultural system but also allows them to become the “foremost exponents” of native Indian culture. Finally, it is relative because it allows for the breaking of strict national and cultural boundaries and for the creation of hybrid realities. The other posters tell similar stories about an American, an Algerian raised in Paris and a Spanish-German couple. In other words, the claims to universality mainly rest on Western individuals and in an idealised representation in which the physical colonialism of the past turns into contemporary cultural soft power.



Picture 7 – *Incredible India* (2008/2009)

Another poster (2003/2004) claims that “many around the world are getting their daily dose of bliss through meditation”. A poster (2007) showing the Sikh Golden Temple in Amritsar states that “doors [are] open in all four directions” and that “all are truly welcome”. The temple is then introduced as a “symbol of unity”, given that its foundation has been laid by a Muslim and that hymns about it have been written by Sikh, Hindu and Muslim saints. In the process, as happens with Buddhism, Amritsar and Sikhism get integrated into the greater Indian spirituality.

8) Antiquity: In both Orientalist and re-Orientalist discourses, India has often been singled out for its antiquity. Hindu nationalism has considered that Hinduism is the most ancient and perfect of existing faiths, “the mother of all religions” with nothing to learn from other faiths (Sharma, 2003: 16). Due to the diffusion of this discourse, most educated people emerging from Indian universities have believed that the length of their culture and history has surpassed others. Conversely, they have felt contempt for countries like the United States, which has “only two hundred years of history” (Brass, 2003: 383).

This stress on the antiquity of India is clear in the *Incredible India* campaign, which often presents the nation-state as constituting an ancient civilisation and as an historical alternative to the stress of modern life. Picture 8, a poster which is not available in the official website of the campaign, shows a group of camels in the desert.²² The caption reads “Get on a camel, get on a time machine”. A similar visual symbol connects this theme to another one: that of escape from materialism and, implicitly, to that of spirituality. This poster, which also shows camels, invites the reader to “watch a camel race” and “escape the rat race”.²³ An image (2007) which shows a person practicing parachuting in the Himalayas, tells the reader to “rise above” the “rat race, stress and corporate friction”. A poster (2002/2003) on the topic

22. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/brands/from-camel-races-to-breath-taking-vistas-check-out-the-stunning-incredible-india-campaign-1084405.html> (accessed on 16/10/2022).

23. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/brands/from-camel-races-to-breath-taking-vistas-check-out-the-stunning-incredible-india-campaign-1084405.html> (accessed on 16/10/2022).

of yoga states that the practice consists of “a few thousand-year-old recipes for eternal youth”. Finally, one poster (2009) states that India is “a tale 3000 years in the making”.



Picture 8 – *Incredible India* (after 2009)

9) Distinctiveness and superiority: All the previous traits define India as a culture distinct from others. Malhotra’s (2015) *Being Different: An Indian Challenge to Western Universalism* focuses on the trait of distinctiveness of Indian/Hindu civilisation. As the author has stated, the text deals with the issue of how India differs from the West and how *dharmic* traditions have had no parallel in universal Judaeo-Christian ones (1-9). Malhotra’s has listed such differences as: 1) embodied knowledge versus history-centrism; 2) integral unity versus synthetic unity; 3) comfort with complexity and ambiguity versus anxiety over chaos and 4) Sanskrit “non-translatables” versus cultural digestion (*Ibid.*). In Malhotra’s short description, one can realise how India has been described as both more holistic and universal than the West, but also as more culturally unified. Point 2) implies that the Hindu worldview has tended to view reality holistically, while the Western one has seen it in binary terms. Point 4) implies that Sanskrit has been much more integral to the Hindu civilisation than any language has been to the West,

which has created its body of knowledge through the “cultural digestion” of many languages, including Sanskrit itself. In this point, Malhotra dismisses not only all the vernacular languages derived from Sanskrit but also all the other classical and contemporary Indian languages that did not derive from Sanskrit.

Tharoor (2007a) has ranked Indian pluralism as one of India’s distinctive traits, given that, at a time when most developing countries opted for authoritarian models of government to promote nation-building and to direct development, India chose to be a multi-party democracy (8). Tharoor and Saran (2020) have stated that India has developed a distinctly non-Western form of democracy and religious freedom that have made it an exemplar of the successful management of diversity in the developing world. Referring specifically to Hinduism, Tharoor (2018a) has remarked that he has been proud to offer such a religion to the world, a religion which has never sought to proselytise, but has only been an example that others may or may not choose to follow (274). Hinduism has therefore been considered to be an almost ideal faith for the uncertainties of the postmodern 21st century, provided that it is freed from the excesses and perversions perpetrated by Hindu nationalists and restored to its “truest essence”, when there were neither apostasy nor heresies (78). This is another wink at the universality of Hinduism and of the political idea of India.

The argument of India’s distinctiveness has usually carried with it the idea of the superiority of Indian traditions. This idea is expressed both qualitatively and quantitatively in the poster of the *Incredible India* campaign. The Taj Mahal is ranked in one poster (2002/03) as “the most photographed monument on this planet”. Another poster (2007) depicting the same monument tries to present the qualitative/quantitative superiority of India and, more specifically, of pre-modern India. The caption reads “And to think these days men get away with giving flowers and chocolates to their wives”. This is the contemporary consumerist St. Valentine’s Day view on love relationships. The implicit idea is that Indian culture is grander than the global contemporary one, as in the past men (or at least Indo-Persian rulers) offered

grandiose monuments to their beloved. One poster (2007) announces India as “the biggest [art] gallery on Earth”, another (2007/2008) announces the Himalayas as “the world’s highest playground” and another (2007) states that India has arguably “the highest concentration of forts and palaces on earth” which “deserves at least one visit per lifetime”. Two posters (2008) specifically number the forts and palaces as 476. Explicitly stating numbers of natural and humanmade touristic spots, dishes, spoken languages, deities, festivals, dance forms, animal and plant species (as in Picture 1) in the hundreds of thousands is a common hyperbolic strategy, particularly in the 2007/2008 campaign. Picture 9 (2007/2008), for instance, presents the reader with the gradation: “Hundreds of spices. Thousands of curries. Millions of colours. Billions of People”.



Picture 10 – *Incredible India* (2007/2008)

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show how the phenomenon of nation branding is both a political and economic enterprise. The *India Shining* campaign launched by the BJP and the counter-campaign launched by the Congress reveal how political representations of the nation usually hover between two positive

and negative extremes, depending on whether the politician/party making such representations is in power or in the opposition. Such positive or negative representations do not appear in a cultural vacuum. They are clearly informed and influenced by similar past discourses. In India's case, these past discourses are related to Orientalism, the way Western nations have represented Asian societies, and the way these past discourses have been updated in order to fit globalised discourses of the "global village". According to these discourses, citizens of two metropolises in distant and historically unrelated countries share more commonalities with each other than with the rural folk of their own countries, even when there is a deliberate attempt to identify with the rural folk.

The touristic *Incredible India* campaign reveals that, while touristic campaigns are supposed to be always positive and appealing, the fact that they also need to be direct and immediate also makes them rely on well-known stereotypes, which can also be traced to past Orientalist ones. The engagement with such stereotypes reveals the complex love-hate relationship between India and the West, simultaneously India's greatest source of epistemological inspiration and its main epistemological competitor.²⁴ This complex, ambiguous and hybrid relationship has been represented in the hybrid posters of the *India Now* (2007) and the *LA* (2009) campaigns, two subsets of *Incredible India*, which were launched in London and Los Angeles, respectively. The posters produced for the former campaign presented words and expressions one would typically associate with England ("Oxford circus", "Arsenal", "King's Cross", "Elephant & Castle", "Bayswater", "All Saints", "Green Park", "Archway", "Shepherd's Bush", "Whitechapel"), while showing semantically related images of India. The posters produced for the latter did the same for classic Western films ("The Sound of Music", "From Dusk till Dawn", "Some Like it Hot", "Mystic River", "Toy Story", "Trainspotting", "Natural Born Killers", "Fight Club"). India's universality and superiority have recently been symbolised by Indian/Hindu Rishi Sunak nomination as

24. See PATTANAİK, Devdutt (2016). "From Macaulay to Frawley, from Doniger to Elst: Why do many Indians need White saviours?" Scoll.in, <https://scroll.in/article/824732/from-macaulay-to-frawley-from-doniger-to-elst-why-do-many-indians-need-white-saviours> (accessed on 18/11/2021).

the prime-minister of Great Britain. The Indian media celebrated this nomination as a reversal of power paradigms according to which the ex-coloniser is suddenly ruled by a representative of the ex-colonised.²⁵ Implicit in such discourses is the idea that the traits of India and possibly of postcolonial societies fit the contemporary world better than the old-fashioned artificial universality of Enlightenment-based thinking.

These political and politicised touristic discourses ultimately mean that nation(alism)s are never constructed in isolation. Representations of specific nations are always contrasted to those of other historically/geographically and politically/economically competing nations as they are understood in time: the stereotypes of the past, the aspirations of the present and the predictions of the future. In the case of India, the visual and textual representation which has been created since Orientalist times until the present have consisted in the following traits, which have been considered to be distinctive and superior: its local rural origins; unity rooted in diversity; spirituality; universally applicable inclusiveness, tolerance and relativism; and antiquity.

It would be interesting to see whether these conclusions would hold true in the political and touristic campaigns in other postcolonial countries in Africa and Asia which were subject to Orientalist representations.

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