

**(In)credible India? : a critical analysis of India's nation branding**

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**(In)credible India?**

**A Critical Analysis of India's Nation Branding**

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### Abstract

We offer a political-economic, postcolonial interrogation of nation branding based on the Incredible India campaign. We show how the violence inherent in nation branding promotes internal hegemonies and external market interests at the expense of ideas of belonging and community. In Incredible India, colonial identities are reinscribed, peripheralising India in line with the demands of global markets and privileging Western desires and imagination. Internal political hegemonies promoting India as a Hindu nation are also reflected in the campaign, marginalising minority groups. However, the attempt to construct a unitary nation simultaneously reveals the presence of the 'other', contesting the boundaries of the narrative. The analysis confirms nation branding as a fundamentally political process, implicated in the production and perpetuation of inequalities.

*Keywords:* nation branding; India; postcolonial criticism; Hindutva; neoliberalism; tourism and media

(In)credible India? A Critical Analysis of India's Nation Branding

Neoliberal globalisation has attempted to naturalise and depoliticise the logic of the market. While the history of postcolonial nations challenges this logic, many governments in the global South have embraced the push for unfettered markets in an attempt to harness neoliberal promises of wealth creation. However, global trade organisations and multinationals, dominated by imperialist nations, determine what form the market takes. The resulting uneven playing field means that global inequalities continue to grow, protecting those who have historically enjoyed power and increasing the marginalisation of those on the periphery (Makki, 2004; Pieterse, 2002). The pattern is reflected within nations too, as neoliberal market reforms remove protection for the poorest and privilege the interests of capital over individual or collective well-being (Parameswaran, 2008).

This divisive system is accompanied by increasing global integration (Pieterse, 2002, p. 1039). Because market parameters are set by the global North, countries in the global South have little choice but to cooperate with the global economic order and find ways to become competitive. Nation branding has been touted as one tool that can enhance their visibility and reputation vis-à-vis other countries (Anholt, 2005; Aronczyk, 2013) and the existence of multiple country brand rankings (see, e.g. Anholt, 2009; Brand Finance, 2014; Futurebrand, 2014) is testament to the now commonplace belief in its economic and political power. However, in the process of nation branding, national identities become commodified and depoliticised in discourses that reinvent the nation to serve the interests of global capital.

In this article, we explore the connections between nation branding, ethnic nationalism and globalisation in the context of one acclaimed nation branding campaign, 'Incredible India'. As Shome and Hedge (2002, p. 261) argue, "the politics of communication are of central

importance in the understanding of the contradictions and ambivalence in our deeply divided world”, and our objective is to reveal the politics behind a form of communication that is too often presented as an unproblematic tool for commercial success. Previous research on the Incredible India campaign is varied, with some focusing on the apparent success of the campaign and ways to improve it (Harish, 2010; Venkatachalam, & Venkateswaran, 2010), or exploring how tourists add to and sometimes counter campaign messages by sharing their experiences of India (Dwivedi, 2009). Others have analysed the campaign as a political exercise, countering Orientalist stereotypes by asserting India’s cultural and economic power in global markets (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Geary, 2013). More critically, Kerrigan, Shivanandan and Hede (2012) note how the combined imperatives of globalisation and nation branding prompt the use of simplified, idealised images in Incredible India, that reinforce colonial stereotypes in order to connect with the tourist imagination.

In this article, we challenge suggestions that Incredible India is an example of post-Orientalist communication and critically interrogate the concept of India as Hindu, which remains unexamined in most scholarship on the campaign. We situate our analysis in the historical and current Indian political environment, and specifically in relation to the Hinduisation of India that began during the colonial period and continues today. We draw on postcolonial critiques of nation branding and globalisation theory to frame our analysis and show how, far from being a politically neutral, commercial strategy that unifies a nation, the practice of nation branding is deeply implicated in the production and perpetuation of inequalities.

### **Constructing the Indian “Nation” - Past and Present**

Nations are largely imagined (Anderson, 1991), their identities created through forever changing narratives and marked by tensions between different temporal and spatial

interpretations (Bhabha, 1990a). In India, the elision of Hindu and India in popular discourse is characteristic of a narrative constructed during the colonial period. Indology sought to categorise India through processes that would make it governable and allow colonial rulers to claim authority over the whole of the territory in order to extract financial and material wealth (Van de Veer, 1994). In the search for national origins through written texts, the majority of Orientalist scholarship turned to ancient Sanskrit texts to define Indian heritage, inevitably privileging Hindu culture and civilisation (Van de Veer, 1994). Through the invention of religious traditionalism, Hindu-Muslim differences were crystallised and Orientalist historiography presented the Muslim presence in India's past as a “history of foreign conquest or a domesticated element of everyday popular life” (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 90). This re-writing of history was part of a process of divide and rule, consolidated following united Hindu-Muslim resistance to British rule during the rebellions of 1857 (Wilson 2012). The term Hindu, as Thapar (1989) and Ludden (2005) note, only came into usage when adopted by the colonial government in census statistics and elections (Ludden 2005, p. 9). Derived from “Hind”, a term that referred to the geographical area of India, this linguistic conflation has affected the narration of national identity by making it natural to represent India as Hindu, to the exclusion of other religious communities. Communal conflict in India can therefore be seen as a by-product of Orientalism and the colonial state (Pandey 1990).

As Gellner (1983, p. 56) notes, nationalism “is not what it seems and above all not what it seems to itself [...] The cultural shreds and patches used by nationalism are often arbitrary historical interventions.” In India, Hindu nationalism or Hindutva - a project that aims to turn India into an exclusively Hindu state and views minorities as anti-national and alien – has adopted the “shreds and patches” that made up the colonialist view of Indian history. First

articulated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar at the beginning of the twentieth century, Hindu nationalism found political voice through the establishment of the Rashtriya Swamisevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. While in the 1920s, the Indian National Congress and Gandhi called for a unitary national struggle across religious identities - a secular India, and while Gandhi lost his life as a result of RSS violence, both adopted Hindu symbols in the struggle for independence. Thus “the ‘official creed’ of secularism was paralleled with a medium that employed excessive Hindu symbolism” (Bajpai 2012, p. 195). The “secular” post-independence Indian state has continued to privilege Hindu identities and racialize “others” (Baber, 2004; Singh, 2005), creating a space in which political parties such as the Hindu chauvinist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Sangh Parivar (the family of Hindutva organisations) have been able to foment communal politics. In presenting the struggle between Hindus and Muslims as the structuring principle of Indian history, Christians, Dalits and Parsees have also been marginalised.

Hindutva is also patriarchal. As Savarkar articulated: “a Hindu is a person who regards this land... from Indus to the Seas as his fatherland as well as his Holyland” (Misra, 2004, p. 155). It contributes to a vision of an authoritarian society that fits the ideals of a high caste, patriarchal family which attempts to control the lives of women - Hindus and “others” – as campaigns such as “love jihad” have shown (Lal, 2014). Claiming to represent 85% of the population that are classed as Hindu, Hindutva organisations assert the right to define what Hinduism means, ignoring class, caste, ethnic and gender divisions in order to argue that they speak for a majority (Basu, 1993, p. 2). This essentialised, high-caste and fabricated Hindu identity is a form of ethnic nationalism that can be bent to political and economic goals (Bannerji, 2006).

The Sangh's use of popular culture and media has been significant in the popularisation of Hindutva in a country where illiteracy is high, contributing to election successes since the late 1990s (Bannerji, 2006, p. 382-385; Visweswaran, Witzel, Manjrenkar, Bhog, & Chakravarti, 2009). Sarkar (2008) has noted how the BJP's increasingly aggressive emphasis on Hindu cultural-religious identity emerged in parallel with the Party's support for market-driven economic and political policies in the 1990s. This represented a significant change to India's international reputation, because they were in direct contrast with post-independence policies of state-supported development and protection for Indian industry. The changes marked India's entry into neoliberal markets as both producer and consumer (Fernandes, 2000) and meant that international audiences were now an important target for communicating Indian identity. The result was a period of "heightened anxiety about the meaning and value of 'Indianness' vis-à-vis a global field" (Mazzarella, 2003, p. 34), exacerbated by the scrutiny of global business media attempting to assess the country's status as an emerging economy (Parameswaran, 2015).

These circumstances have led to nation branding becoming an important policy tool for government, a means of creating a "global Indianness" that would "create the look of an ancient civilisation turned global power ready to conduct business with the world" (Kaur 2012, p. 610), a safe and coherent space in which global capital can thrive. In Incredible India this "global Indianness" frames India as a hybrid nation, open to global capital but distinctively Hindu in nature. It can be understood as an extension of cultural chauvinism, justified through the economic imperative to engage with global markets. Yet, as Bhabha notes, the "other" "emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously 'between ourselves'" (1990b, p. 4). The result is that, in its efforts to create unity through exclusion, the construction of India in the Incredible India campaign produces a narrative



characterised by splitting and ambivalence (Bhabha, 1990b), permanently incomplete and under construction. This interpretation of national narratives runs counter to the dominant neoliberal understanding of nation branding, as we illustrate in the next section.

### **Narrating Nations: The ‘Promise’ of Nation Branding in Globalised Markets**

Nation branding revolves around the idea of nations as actors in competitive, globalised markets, where visibility and distinctiveness are essential to securing space and attention in target markets. Nation brands are regarded as successful when they construct a clear, unitary and unproblematic identity that citizens will buy into, and that can “make people see the country in a different light” (Anholt, 2008, p. 265). A strong nation brand should deliver favourable economic and political consequences, including greater foreign investment, higher levels of tourism and foreign exchange earnings, a more vibrant economy, the ability to win market share in key industry sectors, respect from international allies and a stronger presence in the international political arena (Fan, 2010; Porter, 1998). A nation’s brand, however, cannot only depend on facts about its economic and political attractiveness; the requirement for difference and uniqueness places culture centre-stage, commodifying attributes and characteristics that support the brand narrative (Dinnie, 2008). Visual representations of a country or region act as “socio-cultural artefacts” that “have the power to make us believe that we know something of which we have no experience” (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002, p. 571), prompting unreflective consumption of a place and its people. Tourism campaigns like Incredible India, for example, combine image and discourse in powerful ways to extend the symbolic work of branding in global markets (Kerr, 2006).

Nation branding critics highlight its political and ideological nature and focus on the ways in which the construction and commodification of the nation through branding activities

facilitates notions of self/Other, belonging and exclusion, favouring the interests and identities of political and economic elites while shutting down the diverse voices, identities and political debates that are part of any country's reality (Eisenschitz, 2010; Kaur & Wahlberg, 2012; Varga, 2013). Thus, questions of power lie at the heart of nation branding, which is best understood as situated "at the intersection of politics, the economy, and culture" (Aronczyk, 2013, p.17).

Nation branding is constrained by the narratives, tropes and stereotypes that already circulate and constitute the "common sense" about a nation that forms the basis of hegemonic power (Bannerji, 2006; Mazzarella, 2003). Postcolonial scholars have pointed out how pedagogical representations of the nation frequently draw on Orientalist tropes that construct an "ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority" (Said, 1979, p. 42). Just as Said noted how the Orient is sometimes referred to as an Eden or paradise, to which Europeans can travel to establish a new world (1979, p. 58), modern tourism campaigns for countries in the global South present the nation as a natural paradise, characterised by "beauty, liminality, isolation, climatic warmth, unfettered sexuality, bountiful environment, leisured pace, and the exotic" (Costa, 1998, p. 317). These havens from industrialised, urban modernity are a place to which tourists may "return" to rediscover their spirituality and humanity (Roy, 1997). Timeless landscapes are used as metaphors for the timelessness of the nation and travellers are invited to search out an exotic experience, framed in terms of racialised, sexualised and gendered stereotypes associated with European colonial discourses (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002; Echtner & Prasad 2003; Good, 2013; Pomeroy & White, 2011; Urry, 2002).

Critics also problematise the modernist, teleological idea of progress that underpins nation brands in the context of globalisation (Krishnaswamy, 2008). Representations of former colonised nations as "young" and in the early stages of commercial development, which emerged

as a representation in post-war ideologies (Rostow, 1960) to overcome (rhetorically at least) the colonial dichotomy of a civilised power and its “primitive” subjects (Makki, 2004), have continued within globalisation discourses. Former colonised nations and their inhabitants are located in a perpetual “derivative discourse” where they can only be the “consumers of modernity”, since modernity itself is located in European urban industrialised worlds (Chatterjee, 1993, p. 5). As Kaur argues:

Compared with mature nations across the North Atlantic, the nations in the global South are imagined as beginners who have merely tiptoed out of the ‘waiting room of history’. In other words, their history proper is only seen as beginning with market reforms. (Kaur, 2012, p. 607; see also Saraswati, 2008)

Today, market rationality has become the defining principle for “successful” national identities in the Global South. Nation branding enables them to demonstrate that they “are ‘normal’ and that they ‘work’” (Aronczyk, 2013, p. 33), making them a safe bet in a globalised economy.

As constructions of (dislocated) nation-spaces, rather than (located) places, nation brand narratives are a public articulation of identity that facilitates claims about the right to occupy space in global markets. They neutralise territory, erase conflict and diversity and obscure the complexities that mark the performance of the nation on a daily basis (Kaur & Wahlberg, 2012). In tourism campaigns in particular, hegemonic visual styles generate sterile imaginaries that inscribe difference in familiar aesthetic representations (Aiello, 2012). They identify a country as available for consumption by businesses, investors and wealthy metropolitan tourists, “creating a flat world only for those who are privileged to participate in its technocratic and consumerist agendas” (Parameswaran 2008, p. 117). In globalised markets, nation brands correspond not to a

particular reality, but rather reflect the universal tropes that mark the spaces of globalised mass consumerism to which a branding campaign must appeal. Mazzarella (2003) has identified how one Indian advertising campaign struggled with this tension, ultimately producing an “auto-orientalizing” marketing campaign that combined “Indian spiritual transcendence with Western technological transcendence; ancient Indian sensuality with consumerist indulgence; Indian timelessness and holism with the end of history announced by the global hegemony of the neoliberal regime” (Mazzarella, 2003, p.58).

At the same time, however, the public nature of brand narratives means they are always available for reformulation, reappropriation and redefinition. They are partial, to some extent fantastical and vulnerable to fragmentation (Krishnaswamy, 2008). This tension reflects Bhabha’s argument that national narratives, as both pedagogic (communicating an historically-defined “people” and “culture”) and performative (enacted through people’s complex and diverse present) “open up the possibility of other narratives of the people and their difference” (Bhabha, 1990c, p. 300). In the analysis that follows, we analyse Incredible India as a “worked-over set of discourses, constructions or representations, deeply embedded in an overall political project” (Bannerji, 2006, p. 369). We pinpoint the tropes used in the campaign that proscribe India in ways that align with the BJP’s Hindutva agenda and the requirements of globalisation while revealing the liminal spaces that contest hegemonic narratives.

### **Campaign Overview**

The Incredible India campaign was launched in 2002 by the BJP-led government as part of a new National Tourism Policy (Khanna, 2011). It was designed to create a distinctive identity for India and establish the country as a high end destination. Conceived by the creative director of Ogilvy & Mather and the joint secretary of the Ministry of Tourism, it targeted overseas

tourist markets with a range of visual media disseminated in print, on television and online (Ministry of Tourism, 2010a). The concept was subsequently extended into more tightly targeted, smaller campaigns including a campaign to promote rural tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2007), the “India Everywhere” campaign at the World Economic Forum in Davos, 2006, a campaign to promote India as a film location (Ministry of Tourism, 2010b), and a domestic campaign, “Guest is God” (Atithi Devo Bhava), launched in 2009, designed to encourage those contributing to the tourism industry to welcome tourists and treat them well. More recently, TV advertisements and a comprehensive website ([www.incredibleindia.org](http://www.incredibleindia.org)) have extended the branding exercise into the present (Geary, 2013).

The scope of Incredible India suggests the kind of brand architecture that Kerr (2006) recommends, a collaboration between branding experts and policymakers to deliver tourism and its associated promises of improved reputation, competitiveness, desirability and development (Anholt, 2007; Dinnie, 2008). The result is an authoritative discursive elaboration of Indianness across potentially lucrative spaces in global markets, through which “desire is harnessed to meaning and value is realized” (Mazzarella, 2003, p. 46) both for the Indian government and for the tourists and businesspeople attracted to the country (Geary, 2013). Incredible India has reaped numerous awards and is credited with pushing India up the global rankings of country brands, significantly increasing tourism volume and revenue (Kant, 2009; Kerrigan, Shivanandan, & Hede, 2012; Ministry of Tourism, 2014). Claims of its impact extend to the suggestion that it is responsible for building the Indian nation:

The largest democracy in the world, with twenty-eight states, seven union territories, eighteen official languages and 1.12 billion people spread across 3.29 million square kilometres of breath-taking geography and history, was brought together under the realm

of tourism by a simple branding exercise that unified this magnificent diversity. (Kant, 2009, p. 13).

However, the political context for Incredible India prompts a different reading of its purpose and success. The campaign was released during the BJP's first term in government, and arguably extended the cultural and domestic hegemony of Hindutva into India's international trading environment, adding a new source of credibility for its claims by aligning it with market success. The launch of Incredible India also came at a time when international press coverage was focussed on communal violence in Gujarat, where over 2,000 Muslims lost their lives and 150,000 were displaced in events with which the then Chief Minister Narendra Modi was revealed to be complicit (Varadarajan, 2002). Global Islamophobic discourses circulating after 9/11 also made it desirable to marginalise the Muslim heritage that is fundamental to India's cultural, social and politically diverse history (Wilson, 2012, p. 234). 2002 also saw the introduction of neoliberal market policies such as the recommendations of the Second Labour Commission, which eroded workers' and trade union rights (Sarker, 2014) as the government sought to encourage more 'flexible' labour organisation (Kaur, 2012, p. 610). In the midst of this complex environment, Incredible India deflected attention from "reputational damage" by communicating a more easily digestible national narrative that offered visitors an exotic, "paradisaal" experience, reassuringly packaged to suggest modernity, stability and security.

### **Sample and Methodology**

Our analysis focuses on five poster campaigns executed between 2002 and 2009, a total of 48 images. These images marked the beginning of nation branding for India targeted at overseas audiences, prior to the extension of the brand within India (Table 1). They are easily accessible via [www.incredibleindiacampaign.org](http://www.incredibleindiacampaign.org) and provide a reliable comparison over a

longer period of time than other media. They are also the most complete publicly available record of Incredible India's progression over time; the TV commercials and films that were introduced from 2006 are not archived and cannot easily be tracked or reliably accessed via YouTube, while the more targeted campaigns themselves drew on images from the five campaigns in our sample. Thus, while the Incredible India concept was translated into diverse platforms and its framing of Indian identity was frequently re-narrated, the posters in our sample established the discursive frame that shaped these initiatives.

Table 1: Incredible India campaign themes

<b>Year</b>	<b>Theme</b>
2002-3	An experience that's truly incredible
2003-4	Spiritual tourism
2006-7	Self-assured India
2007-8	Colours of India
2008-9	Motherland: India

The first poster campaign is made up of spectacular landscapes, a close up of the Indian tiger, iconic architecture and the practice of yoga. The second series focusses on "spiritual tourism", highlighting ancient but scientific practices that enable the integration of mind, body and soul. This second campaign is attributed with increasing tourist traffic by 28.8%. In 2004-5 there is a break in the campaigns, coinciding with the BJP's adoption of the unpopular 'India Shining' slogan for its election activities from 2004, which contributed to the party's defeat in

the national elections that year. The poster campaigns continued from 2006 onwards under a Congress government, but led by the original Incredible India marketing team ([incredibleindiacampaign.com](http://incredibleindiacampaign.com)). Over the next two years a wider set of imagery was presented: diverse landscapes; Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh architectural sites; rural heritage; spectacular festivals; and outdoor adventure in dramatic locations. The final poster campaign (2008-9) focused on Westerners who have made India their home.

[insert table 1 about here]

We conducted a critical semiotic analysis of the representation of India in the 48 campaign posters, considering both denotative and connotative meanings as well as the production of ideology (Barthes, 1972, 1977; Berger, 2009; Machin & van Leeuwen, 2007; Williamson, 1978). We paid particular attention to both what was present and what was erased from India's identity, and considered why such erasures happened. We also scrutinised intertextuality within the poster campaign as well as in wider media representations (Kellner, 1995; 2003). Our postcolonial approach countered the decontextualisation that marks nation branding in the context of globalisation, by situating the images in the context of India's present and past, deconstructing and problematising the dominant commercial narrative.

We first reviewed each of the campaigns as a series of connected images, exploring how different themes were realised through visual tropes and discursive genres. We then delved deeper into the semiotic construction of each poster, reviewing the style of photography, the use of colour, the selection, positioning and activity of people and animals, the landscapes employed to denote India and the relationships between these components. Finally, drawing on approaches from postcolonial cultural critique, we put the images into their historical and political context in order to uncover both the re-inscription of divisions both within India and between India and the



global North, as well as the insistent presence of the “other” throughout the campaign narrative (Hall, 1997; Pieterse, 1992; Ramamurthy, 2003; Shohat, 1994).

### **Findings**

We identified four recurrent themes in Incredible India: passivity/stillness; spirituality; diversity and India as periphery. The themes overlapped across the poster campaigns, but provide a useful heuristic tool for analysis.

#### **Passivity/Stillness**

The majority of the images adopt stylistic conventions that encourage a feeling of stillness and timelessness to meet the conventional tourist expectations of India as unchanging, a place of ancient civilisations that provides an escape from modernity. Activity and movement are kept to a minimum. Scenes are photographed in high definition, with strong horizontal lines creating a sense of fixity. Figures provide accents of colour in a landscape rather than marking activity: a photograph of massage focuses on repose; yoga poses are held in perpetuity. Water is often depicted with barely a ripple and sand dunes and beaches are hardly touched by human presence.

The generic photographic style is akin to standard creative stock photography that creates symbolic, deracinated, bright, airy images with flat, rich colour and a blank background (Machin, 2004). Such imagery, adopted from the very first poster campaign in 2002-3, presents locations that are de-territorialised: they speak of mountains, not the Himalayas, and of deserts, rather than Rajasthan. The only specific and located image is that of the Taj Mahal, a monument so iconic for India abroad that it acts as a familiar signifier and needs no additional context. The images connote a sense of difference that is not rooted in specific histories or languages, but rather offers

a general ambience of strangeness packaged in a style of photography that offers comfort in its unthreatening familiarity and meaninglessness (Aiello, 2012; Nothias, 2014). Even a close up of an Indian tiger, while clearly alluding to the idea of India as the next ‘Asian tiger’ economy, focuses attention on the animal’s patterned coat rather than its potential aggression. This visual language is established in the first poster campaign, maintained in the second and although there is a slightly wider range of imagery in 2006/7, the generic style is heavily reinscribed in the last two campaigns.

Figure 1. ‘Ride the Camel Safari’, An experience that’s truly incredible, 2002/03 Campaign



The framing of India as passively open to global capital is also gendered through the recurring image of a rural Indian woman throughout the campaigns. She is a silent figure, appearing in saris or traditional village dress (usually red or pink) with her head covered and her face never completely revealed. She acts as an exotic signifier, walking barefoot away from the

camera to an unidentifiable location, making the spaces of India (deserts, courtyards, monuments) available to the global tourist whose empowered and unhindered gaze (aided by the high camera angle) is left to occupy and consume the landscape (Figure 1). In contrast, the white woman is established as an agentic figure from the first poster campaign, where she strikes a yoga pose and faces the viewer. The direct frontal camera angle reveals her face and gives power to her presence. The presentation of authoritative, active whiteness continues throughout the campaigns.

The images echo the gendered and racialised hierarchies of Orientalist scholarship, framing the East as feminine, emotional and ownable in contrast to a powerful, rational, masculinised West (Kabbani, 1994; Lewis, 1995; Said, 1979). Incredible India translates this hierarchy into a subordinated, desirable and feminised India, while the assured, contemporary photographic style appeals to global markets by suggesting modernity and openness. The paralleling of neoliberal globalisation with Hindutva ideologies is also articulated through a depiction of Indian womanhood as acquiescent, fitting comfortably with the Hindutva high-caste, patriarchal order.

### **Spirituality**

The second poster series (2003-4) consolidates a Hindutva narrative with its focus on an entirely Hindu form of “spiritual tourism”. The posters commodify yoga, Ayurveda, meditation and reflexology as “an incredible balm for the mind, body and soul”. A yoga practitioner levitates above a lake, a towel-clad western tourist lies prone in front of a lake, with hands caressing her head (Figure 2), lotus flowers provide a focus for meditation. The “journey of self-discovery” for the traveller that offers a “step-by-step guide to salvation” takes place in exotic locations, suggesting that India’s unique forms of spirituality cater to needs and desires that

Figure 2 The five elements, Spiritual tourism, 2003/04 campaign



cannot be fulfilled in an industrialised environment. Sexuality is part of this experience: one poster features a topless Indian woman in front of a waterfall with her back to the camera, glancing as though inviting the viewer into a paradisaal space. At the same time, modernity is reassured through rational explanations of ancient content and practice. Landscapes are overlaid with diagrams, symbols and terminology (given in Sanskrit but translated into English for the global audience) to visually elevate Vedic knowledge as an alternative science. Such pseudo-science promoted by the Sangh, who locate scientific knowledge in Hindu scriptures, thereby rejecting secularism and rationalism, is tacitly supported through these posters.

Other forms of spirituality are noticeable by their absence. Across all the campaigns, the only structure to represent Moghul India is the Taj Mahal, one of the seven wonders of the world

and so iconic that it could not be ignored. However, its presentation undermines the centrality of Muslim culture to Indian history and identity: it is a watery, upside down reflection in the first poster campaign, and in two of the remaining three depictions it is pictured in black and white, a common visual trope to represent the past and contrasting sharply with the other, vibrant, full-colour posters (Figure 3). Even in the 2006 poster campaign, the first to be launched after the establishment of a Congress government and in which the content suggests an integration of Nehru's "Unity in Diversity" (1953) concept, there are no Muslim or Christian religious shrines represented. The campaign includes the Golden Temple (a Sikh shrine) and a Buddhist monk, but these do not disrupt the Hindutva narrative. It is the exclusion of Muslims and Christians that matters since, as Bannerji (2006) notes, they "could not, unlike the Sikhs and Buddhists, be compressed within the definitional container of Hindutva" (p. 378).

Figure 3 'An ode to eternal love', 2002/03 campaign



The lack of attention to Muslim sensibilities can also be seen in a 2007 poster campaign used to promote India in New York, where the typeface adopted above the Taj image makes ‘york’ look like the word ‘pork’. Recent nation branding actions by the BJP, who were returned to power in 2014, reflect the same process of branding Indian spirituality as Hindu. In 2015, UN World Yoga Day was established following lobbying by the BJP leader Narendra Modi. The initiative has been met with controversy in India, with allegations of Hindu chauvinism following a mass BJP-led yoga participation event on 22 June 2015, to which the Muslim Vice-President Hamid Ansari was not invited (BBC Trending, 2015).

Thus, Incredible India keeps Hindutva’s ethnic nationalism intact and India is simultaneously framed as a “safe” new entrant to global markets, a source of new commodities whose identity leaves the normative Christian identity of the Occident unthreatened, and is simultaneously separated from Islam, too frequently framed by global Islamophobic discourses as a violent and unpalatable “other”.

### **Diversity**

While diversity is a recurrent theme in Incredible India, its representation varies. In the early posters, diversity is exemplified by an array of landscape locations, ignoring the people of India and thereby opening the country up to unhindered commodification. In 2006 the imagery expanded to include festivals; religious architecture; clothes; food; and culture, as well as landscapes. Readily identifiable tropes such as Bollywood, saris and spicy food tap into elements of culture already globalised through the Indian diaspora, communicating a version of India which fits with Western perceptions of both the country and the look and feel of an exotic holiday. Highly decorated elephants and exotically costumed participants provide “the biggest

gallery [of art] on earth”, a backdrop for the European’s exploration of this “spectacle of the ‘other’” (Hall, 1997, p. 223) (Figure 4).

Figure 4 'Probably as many festivals as days on the calendar', 2006/07 Campaign



Lists, dates and quantities reinforce the commodity narrative that frames diversity. The tourist can see “billions of people”; “130,000 species of flora and fauna”; taste “millions of curries” and “shop for over sixty kinds of tulips”. The text reinforces the primacy of the European gaze and experience, mitigating any residual fear of the “other” (Bhabha, 1983) through light humour: “It’s a bit like a Bollywood dream sequence, only you are in it”. Individual Indians literally add “colour” to the tourist experience through their presence and dress, but remain anonymous.

This “safe” presentation of diversity is retained in the 2007-8 “Colours of India” campaign. Described as promoting “India’s diverse cultural spectrum” (Ministry of Tourism, 2010c), it reinscribes exoticism. A range of images are overlaid with phrases that play on colour: “Red Hot”; for a field of chillis; “Golden Yellow” for a desert landscape; “Mystic Maroon” for a group of prostrate monks. The generic, stock-style images present diversity in abstract, deterritorialised forms, disavowing contested histories and political differences. While buildings or food are the main focus for the campaign, when people are photographed, they are framed for racialised consumption. Two are head portraits of broadly smiling individuals: one a man, with the words “Coffee Brown” superimposed on his face, and the other a woman, with the words “Honey Brown” in the same position. Eliding skin colour with food and drink suggests Indians are available to be tasted according to desire and draws directly on colonial advertising which frequently associated black people with commodities such as cocoa and coffee (Pieterse 1992; Ramamurthy 2003).

### **India as Periphery**

India’s peripheral status is constructed in relation to global markets and to the global tourist more specifically. Indians are depicted as mysterious Orientals, never fully present. This identity is tightly intertwined with gender: mass crowd scenes aside, most individuals depicted are women; their faces are rarely fully visible and they often depart, rather than enter or act in a scene. Their gendered, “Oriental” gaze is averted, their identity subordinated to the need to commodify India. Through their postures and positions, they invite the tourist to engage with an abstract idea of the Indian nation made up of unpopulated landscapes and almost completely deserted spaces: a deterritorialised “Motherland” available to be mastered without any rules of engagement.



The 2006-07 campaign is structured around what is described as “self-discovery”. According to the creative director of the campaign, it was “symptomatic of [...] an optimistic and extroverted new India, eager to make its presence felt in the global community...a far cry from the meek, tentative, ‘offshore’ destination of the last decade” (Ministry of Tourism, 2010d). Yet the campaign positions India as a backdrop, a stage set for western experiences: the quality of the tourism experience, whether white-water rafting or spiritual self-discovery, depends on the agency of visitors and the choices they make. Indians create the tourist experience (and are made responsible for it through the “Guest is God” campaign) by welcoming, massaging, working, sailing, guiding, or withdrawing so that the global tourist can occupy their space. Their position is normalised through the constant obfuscation of native identity: photographs of Indians are taken from the middle distance or as long shots; faces are frequently unclear or obscured and bodies are reduced to cultural signifiers or aesthetic features.

The 2009 campaign, themed “Motherland: India”, epitomises the peripheralisation of India and Indians. The experience of tourists who “stayed back and made India their home” (Ministry of Tourism, 2010e) is the focus. They are pictured in the foreground of each poster and, in direct contrast with the native Indians depicted elsewhere in the campaigns, directly face the camera, offering a “demand gaze” and subjecting the viewer to scrutiny, rather than looking away to become an object of scrutiny themselves. In contrast to the native Indians, who are usually depicted en masse or turned away, they confidently embody their new-found Indian identity in their dress and stance (in Bharat Natyam pose, holding a yoga position, wearing a sari) and their stories are briefly narrated next to their images (Figure 5).

Figure 5 'Country of Birth: France, Motherland: India', 2008/09 Campaign



The only named people throughout the poster campaigns, they are given a voice because their stories about India are framed as worth hearing. These non-native “Indians” are depicted as powerful individuals who have made life-changing decisions and found success in their new home:

Louba Schild came to India in 1967 with a scholarship to learn Kathakali, a 500 year old Indian art form [...]. In 1977, she set up Vijnana Kala Vedi Cultural Centre, which trains students in traditional Indian arts. If you are looking for a fulfilling journey unlike any other, visit India. Like Louba, you will find that your search ends here.

However, the knowledge they have learned and adopted is from a reified Hindu past.

Their affirmation of Hindu India eliminates the possibility that Indian Muslim culture, or that of

other religious minorities, might be transformative or relevant to a contemporary India. As converts, they ostensibly embody India and might be interpreted as representing a reversal of colonial power. However, the text turns the viewer's gaze back on itself to consider the possibilities that India offers for "finding what they seek". The apparent "conversion" prompts Western reflexivity and an instrumental approach to Indian culture rather than any acceptance of India as equal to the West.

The contrast between these women and the passive presentation of native Indian women reflects the stereotypical opposition that Mohanty (1988) identifies, between "third world" women as leading truncated lives, bound by tradition, gender and social constraints, and western women as liberated, educated and modern. The "third world" woman in these posters is constructed as a "single monolithic subject," an unthreatening signifier of otherness and an ahistorical "subject outside of social relations" (p. 80), while the white convert is a knowing figure in the same way that Orientalists "knew" the Orient they had dissected and learnt about through exploration, literature and the arts (Said, 1979).

The marginalisation of Indian knowledge and experience also occurs through the privileging of Whiteness throughout the campaigns. Only white bodies face the viewer, only white faces are seen in detail, only white lives are explained. "Converts" grant whiteness the power to be "authentically" Indian, while their gaze as the tourist-converted-to-native-Indian legitimises and recognises the world-class Indianness claimed as justification for inclusion in global markets. Racial purity is preserved throughout: in the only two interactions depicted between women, the reality that globalisation can also prompt racial mixing is avoided by keeping physical contact within racial boundaries. This consolidation of whiteness aligns with

the narratives and structures of globalisation, which position capital and affluent consumers in the global North.

### **Concluding Discussion**

In the process of nation branding, Aronczyk (2013, p. 30) argues that the nation becomes “a boundary object - a category of discourse and practice deployed for a range of ends, whose scale and scope mutates to accommodate the claims being made in the name of those ends”. The tension inherent in being such a “boundary object” is reflected in Incredible India’s narrative contradictions and political underbelly. To keep up with globalisation’s narrative of progress, India must claim to be a modern nation, yet the discursive space in which it can make such claims is limited both by its derivative status in relation to the West (Chatterjee, 1993) and by the need to play the “game” of international tourism as already determined by the structures of global markets. The result is an auto-orientalising discourse (Mazzarella, 2003) that empowers India as a producer of elite tourist experiences, but disempowers it as a cultural and political force. The condition of realising Incredible India’s claim that India is a modern nation is to revert to a subordinate, colonial identity, responding to Western narcissism by framing the country “through Western eyes” (Mohanty, 1988). The language of modernity in the photographic style presents marketable, generic locations and experiences, but is simultaneously characterised by Orientalist representations emphasising cultural difference, spirituality and paradisaical spaces as symbols of India’s fundamental nature. Implicitly, Incredible India responds to the global business media’s cultural branding of India as tiger or elephant (Paramareswaran, 2015), countering the strangeness and unpredictability of these animals by introducing India as exotic yet familiar. The resulting nation brand is depoliticised and culturally approachable, “safe” in terms of both global markets and global politics.

The duality of India as both modern and traditional is structured into the Incredible India posters through a classed, gendered and racialised discourse. Fernandes (2000) notes how contemporary Indian commodity advertising addresses anxieties about liberalisation of market economies in India through a gendered imagination in which women are symbolically employed to stand for tradition and modernity, and women play a similar role in Incredible India, although racialized boundaries remain. Ancient, traditional India is symbolically represented by the passive, rural woman who literally moves aside for a new liberal and modern woman, here represented as European, but active in consuming “Indian” culture. Thus, visibility and agency is granted to a modernity in which India takes part - through offering experiences - although agency remains with the European. The fact that the two types of women never have contact undermines the “single social space” that Incredible India attempts to construct through images and discourse that suggest a welcoming nation and reflect globalisation’s celebratory claim that it can bring together formerly colonised peoples in the global South with their former colonisers (Brennan, 2008, p. 39).

Incredible India presents a “reductive and fantasized vision – caught between colonial imagination and neoliberalism” (Nothias, 2014, p. 335), which structures India’s Hindu past as its future in a powerful exercise of ethnic nationalism. The “accent of difference” is “not contra-British, but, significantly, contra-Muslim” (Bannerji, 2006, p. 375), removing reference to Muslim history and spirituality from the nation’s identity. The Indian nation emerges as an ideological artefact that “removes content from context [...] so that what appears, and what is, are qualitatively different” (Bannerji, 2006, p. 372). The Incredible India narrative is politically and economically coherent, denying class and communal conflict while constructing an image of openness and malleability through gendered, market-friendly representations. However, while

conflict and contestation must be erased to serve the market-driven narrative of stability and unity, the act of erasure makes violence all the more spectacular and visible when it does happen, allowing international media to report it in terms that reinforce Orientalist discourses of the East as dangerous, irrational and uncontrolled, where oppressed women need to be saved (Durham, 2015; Spivak, 1988). Similarly, by creating an abstract and dislocated nation space, Incredible India makes more visible the contestation of tourism by local communities in India, whose interests lie in protecting a sustainable economy, society and ecology (Sreekumar & Parayil, 2002). Thus, pedagogy constantly threatens to rub up against performativity (Bhabha, 1990b) as lived experiences of politics, economics and culture interfere with the Incredible India narrative. This was illustrated most recently by the removal of Amir Khan as brand ambassador for Incredible India in January 2016 after he raised concerns about “growing intolerance” in India. Employed in 2009 by the Congress government to front the Guest is God campaign, Khan’s reference to Muslim difference and non-integration prompted his replacement by the BJP with the safer figure of high-caste Amitabh Bachchan (Amitabh Bachchan first choice to replace Aamir Khan for ‘Incredible India’ campaign, 2016).

Our aim in this analysis was to intervene in the hegemonic discourses of nation branding by presenting an epistemic challenge to branding as an unproblematic strategy for nations subjected to the inequities of globalisation. We add to emerging understandings of nation branding as a complex, inherently political and contradictory narrative process. For countries in the global South, encouraged to commodify their identity in order to benefit from global trade, national branding frequently works to impose identities and deny or commodify diversity in the interests of the market rather than communities. These ideological dimensions of nation branding are both divisive and destabilising. We also contribute to debates about the importance of images

and visual styles as intertextual representations that communicate belonging, difference and otherness (Fernandes, 2000; Shome & Hedge, 2002). The construction of India through the use of familiar, uncontroversial stock-style photography in dialogue with texts, increases the “common sense” impression of the Incredible India narrative in the context of modernity and globalisation. It reinforces the power of images as ideological tools, both independent of and in dialectical relationship with texts.

Finally, our analysis raises questions about where we might find space for subaltern voices to speak in the context of global markets. In India, opposition to gender inequality, religious intolerance and commercial hegemony remind us that a nation’s pedagogic narrative will always stand in tension with a people’s performances of nationhood. Nonetheless, it is in the nature of global commerce to persistently marginalise subaltern voices; its violent exclusion of the “other” remains a constant threat to a more equal and just global economic, political and cultural order.

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**Figures and Tables**



