

# Gestalt To Semiotics: Cultural Construction Through Visual Experiences In Indian Arts

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**Abstract;** *The potpourri of Indian culture is deciphered by identifying certain popular visual elements that are a part of our everyday experiences. These elements define our perception and comprehension of that which is ubiquitously Indian. There is an assortment of factors that influences their evolution whilst preserving their indigenous essence. Changing visual technology is one such prominent factor that has defined and redefined cultural value systems in India. This paper essentially deals with how certain cultural ideas in India have been visually transformed through influence of global interventions, while retaining their core essence with change in technology. Phenomenological analysis based on the Gestalt theory of perception has been adopted to decipher the meaning of visuals. Random sampling of popular contemporary visuals which exuberate cultural values or practices have been compared with images from past that are engraved in the collective memory of people. This paper is an attempt to introduce a methodology on how the chosen historical segregations of visuals can be compared to contemporary visual art forms; and interpretations can be done for further investigation of meanings in art, culture and society for future generations of artists, academicians & practitioners.*

**Keywords:** *Visual culture, Visual technology, Meditation, Heritage, Religion*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The formation of visual memory happens through regular visual encounters, which leads to our comprehension of culture. It is interesting to note that as certain aspects of Indian culture evolve, they are imbued with associated meanings due to visual transformations. This subtle metamorphosis of cultural ideas can be comprehended through a comparative approach of popular imagery of past with the present. The word *gestalt* signifies a form or pattern in the theory of visual perception, but in wider application it implies the idea that the whole is different from the sum of its parts. This theory in psychology which scrutinizes the way our brain organizes sensory inputs and recognizes visuals is formulated into principles or laws of perception. The first principle is known as the figure and ground relation, wherein our brain constructs the meaning of the visual world by identifying a distinct object in the foreground and its contextual background. The second principle is that of similarity, according to which objects that look alike are grouped together. Similarity can be on any visual parameter that leads our brain into grouping objects as belonging to one particular category. The third principle of continuation and closure is where the brain tends to fill in the incomplete information and create a meaning of the whole. The awareness of the visual forms

is necessary for brain's ability to complete visual information on the basis of familiarity. The last principle of *Pragnanz* also known as the law of good figure, allows the brain to simplify complex information and see the visual stimuli in an uncomplicated way.

Application of these principles in perception of popular visuals in India for a comparative study of meanings in the changing cultural context, leads us into adopting a semiotic approach for constructing cultural values. The root word for semiotics is *sema*, a derivation from Greek language which refers to the study of signs or symbols and a critical analysis of their use or interpretation. With reference to linguistic studies, there are essentially three stages of development in semiotics. The first stage deals with the notion of structuralism which aims at identifying universal mental structures and where meanings can be decoded based on popular understanding rather than by an individual. The second stage corresponds to post structuralist approach which extended the relation between signifier and signified from language to images and to various aspects of culture. The third stage of semiotics deals with the deconstruction theory, which recognizes the indexical, metaphorical and connotative qualities of a sign. These three theories form the foundation for critically analysing visuals and interpreting various cultural values associated with them.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cusak (2012) in her chapter on gods on television explores the political and emotional dynamics of RamanandSagar's *Ramayan*. According to her, the religious and aesthetic approach of the series was imbricated with the spirit of nationalism. It elaborates on the popular reception of the religious forms in continuation to the cinematic tradition in India and their political participation for building of a Hindu nation. The research however limits itself to the version released in 1987 and does not make a comparative analysis of the second version released by the same production house in 2008.

AnjanaRanjan (2014) in her article on TajMahal tea and table maestro ZakirHussainelucidates on the conceptualization of the WahTaj campaign, briefly mentioning the use of image which is placed in the background. The article concentrates on the choice of celebrity for brand promotion and does not mention the symbolism associated with the image of TajMahal or its impact and significance.

Basu (2014) in her article explores the propaganda in establishing the relation of religious sanctity associated with characters of *Ramayana* and its impact on the politics of the era. The author takes a comparative approach in understanding the literary source of *Ramayana* by poets Valmiki and Tulsidas and makes a critical analysis of reasons for representation by RamanandSagar. The article however but does not extend the discussion to the contemporary depiction of characters with reference to evolved visual technology in 2008 version.

Cooksey (2016) in the article explores the influence of great modern artist Raja Ravi Varma thematic choice of mythology in the context of popular art. The author traces the life of the artist historically, elucidating on his style, varied subjects and his shift from painting to prints by making a comparative study of the value accorded to these two mediums. It is inclusive of other artists who worked in the same genre, the aspect of commodification and early cinema advertising as well as its impact on mythological genre of cinema. However, there is no mention of the depiction of religious characters in the popular medium of television.

Prabha and Revathi (2018) have explored the marketing strategies of the brand Patanjali, which has been referred to for its visual advertising in this paper. The paper concentrates on smart strategies adopted by the company for launching, pricing and promoting its range of products. It also considers the fact that the owner has millions of followers online and offline which has resulted in creating a unique brand image for Patanjali. There is no specific mention regarding the use and impact of any image in the advertising and marketing propaganda, which needs investigation.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

Since the purview of Indian culture is very comprehensive, random selection of cultural notions has been done keeping in view iconic visuals from the past. For this, three visuals have been adopted that have been broadly segregated as ancient, medieval and modern. The first cultural phenomenon associated with ancient time period is meditation; a practice which has been credited with its origin in India. The second cultural notion from the medieval era in India is the concept of heritage; for which a monument enlisted in one of the wonders of the world is deliberated upon. The third cultural aspect from modern time period in India is visual representation of religious icons; for which an image of Hindu god and goddess popularly circulated even today is reflected upon.

Comparative analysis of these three ancient, medieval and modern ideas has been done with popular visual representations from contemporary India, reflecting the phenomenon mentioned. Observation method using the Gestalt theory of perception has been referred to for decoding semiotic meanings. The comparison is also done on the basis of visual technology adopted which ranges from traditional mediums such as sculpture, architecture and painting to contemporary print and electronic mediums. The aim has been to deconstruct the multiplicity of meanings of these visuals as expressed through various mediums in the context of structuralism, post structuralism and deconstruction theories in semiotics.

#### ***Meditation as a cultural visual notion***

The phenomenon of meditation has been one of the core cultural practice and value in India. It is well established that the first visual record of meditation in ancient India is found in the *Pashupati* seal or the *Yogi* seal from Mohenjodaro in Indus Valley civilization. Made out of steatite, the seal displays a stylized seated human figure apparently in meditative posture. Rendered in a low relief, it is surrounded by four animals and is deciphered as one of the earliest representations of the existence of contemplative practices in Indian culture. The figure ground relationship later aids in the establishment of iconographic conventions for popular Hindu god *Shiva* who is also known as *Pashupati*. In the later centuries, the idea of meditation gets associated with *shanta rasa* or relishing a feeling of calmness, expressed in various artistic mediums. Whether it is the mesmerising fresco of *Bodhisattva Padmapani* from Ajanta or the three faced *Maheshmurti* from Shiva cave at Ellora, the iconographic representation of figures with half closed or closed eyes spans across various religions and regions.

However, in contemporary India, the evolution of celebrity culture juxtaposed with developing technology has revolutionized the dissemination of meditation. With extensive advertising, social media platforms and mobile applications the perception of meditation has donned an glamorous form. Popular images of Ramakrishna Yadav better known as Baba Ramdev who is also the co-founder of Patanjali Ayurveda Ltd, have become synonymous to meditation and healthy lifestyle. Abundant advertisements represent him posing in meditation while the background displays a range of Ayurveda products. Here, the figure ground relationship denotes an age old practice cultural practice that is used for commodification. This becomes an interesting case which according to Gestalt's law of grouping through similarity, which in this case is that of posture, we subconsciously relate the health benefits of the products to the notion of meditation and perceive the image in the same iconographic value which has existed for centuries. The matter of fact is that this association of meditation with advertising has been propagandistic.



Above: Print advertisement of Patanjali with Baba Ramdev

Left: Yogi seal from Mohenjodaro, Indus Valley Civilization

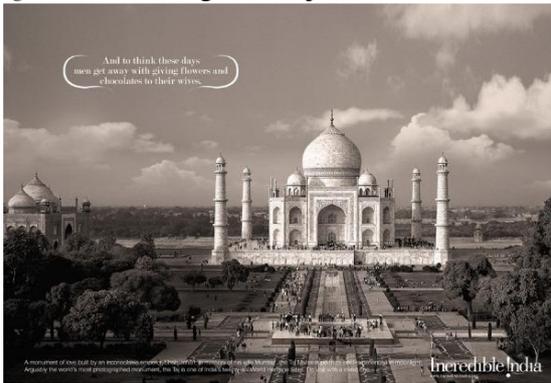
Recent Indian advertisements, such as the one with celebrity Ranveer Singh promoting the ecstasy of Yippee noodles or young model meditating and endorsing Ponds pure white facial foam are changing the denoted meaning that one associates with meditation and associating it with sale of products and services. Furthermore, the Shilpa Yoga videos of popular actress Shilpa Shetty on YouTube are pure glamorization in promotion of meditative practices. Yoga is also an essential visual element in the advertising campaign of Incredible India. The central and state governments advertise India as a heartland for yogic practices and promote the tourism industry with strategies such as the international yoga day. Hence, the essence of meditation is loaded with associative meanings in contemporary age that range from beauty, health, ecstasy or tourism. Meditation in India which is essentially yogic in character has been perceived in contemporary India as a visual for much more than the equilibrium of mind and body.

### ***The visual heritage of TajMahal***

The epitome of medieval architecture in India is the Mughal monument of TajMahal; built in the city of Agra by emperor Shahjahan for his beloved wife MumtazMahal. With its pleasing proportions and elegant form, gleaming in white marble that is adorned with carvings and pietra dura of precious and semi-precious stones; TajMahal is an iconic construction synonymous with architectural aesthetics in medieval India. Hence it is vital to comprehend the many notions associated with this ubiquitous image that is confronted with in our contemporary life. Historically, the building is a personification of the feeling of immense love which the emperor had for his adored wife. If there is any other memory of the Taj in the world of Indian architecture, it is the Taj Palace; a luxury hotel in Mumbai launched by J.N Tata, founder of Tata group in 1903. Entertaining only European guests, dignitaries and maharajas, this Indo- Saracenic building was a landmark to the city and synonymous with extravagance. Despite their historic importance, in contemporary Indian advertising, the image of TajMahal mausoleum was an obvious choice for the incredible India campaign; developed by Ogilvy & Mather in 2002. It is safe to presume that the visual identity of the country was promoted through this image, which symbolized the rich medieval heritage and culture of India.

Interestingly, in the year 1966, when Hindustan Unilever Limited launched its successful Brooke Bond's tea brand known as TajMahal, it supplemented another visual dimension to the word Taj. The word Taj as a signifier now denoted not just a monument but a consumable product, branded to symbolize taste and class. The conceptualization of the iconic 'WahTaj' campaign amalgamated the product with Ustad Zakir Hussain, a classical music celebrity playing *tabla* (an Indian drum) with TajMahal in the background. The figure ground relationship here contributed to brand recall as well as engraved a visual memory of Taj as a

tea brand, perpetually changing its connotation. Thus, according to the Gestalt's law of *pragnanz*, the image of Taj was associated with notion of exquisite taste and classical music.



Above: Incredible India campaign with Taj Mahal



Above: Brooke Bond 'Wah Taj' tea advertisement with Zakir Hussain

### ***Visual transformation of religious form***

Modern era in India paved its way through the experimental spirit of artist Raja Ravi Varma, who incarnated the Hindu deities in his paintings and took a propagandistic approach towards their spread through calendar art. The dainty image of Ram, Sita and Lakshman by him is a common find in religious prints found in Indian bazaar; which eventually adorns sacred spaces of Hindu homes and offices. Visual transformation of this oil painting circulated in print form commenced with the evolution of visual technology that led to live characterization of these deities in electronic medium. Cinematic innovations in India were already embracing the mythological genre in films such as *Raja Harishchandra* during the silent era in 1913, *Lanka Dahan* in 1917 and *Gangavataran* in 1937 with sound. As popular romances exhilarated with dance and music subjugated the theme of mythology, the expression of pious emotions was channelized with the launch of television in 1980's. With the launch of *Doordarshan*, the first national channel for communication, Ramanand Sagar adopted this popular cinematic mythological genre and created the epic of *Ramayana* in 1987-88. This series holds a record of world's most viewed mythological serial as it eulogised the physiognomy of Ram, Lakshman and Sita in the memory of people; along with inculcating piety and religious values.

However, the cultural values of *Ramayan* were impregnated with an aesthetic desire of sensuous forms with Sagar Art's new version of *Ramayana* being released in 2008. The notion of the 'ideal man' now had overtones of perfected bodies, dramatizing a range of human emotions in luxuriant settings that were technologically advanced; and when compared to the earlier version received mixed responses. This advancement in visual technology with its special effects influenced by global environment was responsible for attracting the targeted youth and added a new dimension to the visualized image of 'God'. Thus, deconstructing the characters and settings in *Ramayana*'s print and electronic mediums according to Gestalt's law of continuity helps us to comprehend the change in visual of divine form with cultural values of idealism and added sensuality.



Above: Ram, Sita and Lakshman by modern artist Raja Ravi Varma, oleograph print



Above: RamanandSagar's television series on Indian epic Ramayana, 1987-88 and 2008

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The evolution of visual culture in India is not just indisputably related to globalization and visual technology, it is also a phenomenon in 'fluxus' that needs to be deciphered through the kaleidoscope of theories and contexts. An attempt has been made to evolve a methodology for comprehending the multiplicity of cultural meanings as they have changed over a period of time. Resemblance of posture as in the case of Yogi seal and Patanjali advertisements, becomes the basis for an iconographic study. It ignites associations of the concept of meditation through the principle of figure and ground to the commoditization of products. The principle of similarity is evident in the iconic architecture of TajMahal as a cultural symbol of India's opulent love and heritage; and its use for nomenclature, design and connection in promotion of a tea brand that is symbolic of taste and class. Representation of religious characters in painting, print and television inspires an analytical probe into the law of continuity with reference to changing dimensions of time and modernism of conceptualization and execution of the epic of *Ramayana*. An in depth research to trace the progression of Indian cultural ideas is further required; which can be undertaken through a visual journey that will enable us to comprehend systematically the notion of visual culture of India.

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