TWO INCIDENTS AND A QUESTION

While walking in the main bazaar in Bodh Gaya, Bihar in January 2002, I saw a jute shopping bag hanging in a bag-sellers shop that caught my attention. Imprinted on this bag was an image, in lurid colors, of two planes crashing into the World Trade Center [figure 1]. Behind this bag were two other jute bags, both featuring fuzzy bears with tails like pompoms, much like images on greeting cards. The first featured a smiling brown bear wearing a cap and holding a ball in his hands, with a caption that read, “Lat [sic] us Play with the Ball” [figure 2]. The second featured two green bears, one smiling broadly and the other looking slightly coy, hugging each other over a heart, inside of which is inscribed the words “You are Nice” [figure 3]. When I queried the bag seller whether he found it “strange” (ajīb) that such incongruous images were grouped together, he was baffled by my question. Though I rephrased and clarified my question, the bag seller, and the small crowd of merchants and customers who gathered around us on the street, were incredulous. As they repeated, again and again, these images were not different in any fundamental or special way; they were “the same” (ek hì) or even “exactly the same” (ek dam ek hì).
A similar scene occurred in a bazaar in an affluent section of Pune in October 2002. In front of a shop selling bags, t-shirts, and pants was an oversized jute bag, the largest that I’ve seen, with an image, in red, green, and purple, of a plane crashing into one of the twin towers with a second plane on its way [figure 4]. On the road below are cartoonish schematics of cars and buses, but the focus is clearly the large green plane crashing into the World Trade Center, the ensuing flames, and the rising smoke. The caption, inscribed beneath the first plane, reads:

WORLD TRADE CENTER
DESTROY•11th SEP. 2001

When I queried the owner of the shop as to the “meaning” (matlab) of the image on the bag, he was baffled by my question, just as the vendor and others in Bodh Gaya had been. “It doesn’t have any meaning,” he said. “But there must be some reason that people buy one bag and not another bag?” I asked. “Yes,” he answered, grudgingly, “but this bag doesn’t have any meaning.”

The following week, when I returned, the World Trade Center bag, which I had purchased, had been replaced by a jute bag that featured the title of the extraordinarily popular television show Kaun Banega Crorepati (“Who will Become a Millionaire”), with the word crorepati (“millionaire”) emblazoned in large letters diagonally across the bag [figure 5]. In the background, “Star Plus,” a popular television station that features the show, and its logo was repeated in a wallpapering effect. When I asked the owner of the shop about this bag, and, in particular, how it differed from the World Trade Center bag, he brushed aside my question. “Both are the same” (donom ek hi hain), he said, and
he held out his hands with his palms up in a gesture that indicated both his helplessness in answering my question and my foolishness in asking it.

It was in response to these episodes that I began to research the visual world of Indian jute bags, what work these bags do as social objects, and, most pointedly, at what level the images on these bags are, as my informants insisted, “the same” (ek hi). Though this project has now grown to include research on India's knock-off culture and gray market, what I will present here are some thoughts on the precarious task of making sense of imprinted images and texts in the Indian bazaar.

THE PROJECT

Unlike jute bags adorned with logos that are given away by select businesses as a form of advertising, jute bags silk-screened with various graphics—or "printings" as they are called in the industry—can also be found for sale in bazaars all over India. These bags are generally used for shopping or travel, and as such are commonly seen filled with goods at marketplaces, bus stations, and on train platforms. During the last three years, I have spoken with sellers of jute bags in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar about the meaning and function of the printings that adorn their wares, yet my most profitable conversations have been in Banaras, a city in which such bags can be found in abundance. My research there involved three different kinds of bag sellers at three different sites. I spoke with street vendors who hawked their wares, usually 100 bags or fewer, from positions along the main road near the Ganga; I spoke with wholesalers of jute bags who sold their goods in bulk from one of the wholesale bazaars;
and I spoke with shopkeepers, along a busy thoroughfare, who sold a variety of bags in a mostly middle-class neighborhood.

STREET VENDORS

Though the street vendors I spoke with were eager to praise the merits of the jute bags they sold, they were hesitant to try to interpret the images and text emblazoned upon them. Repeatedly I was told that the graphics didn't mean anything, even in cases when the meaning seemed clear. For example, I assumed that "OSCAR: A BEAUTIFUL MIND" [figure 6] referred to the Russell Crowe film that won four Oscar awards and "US-64" [figure 7] referred to the infamous failed mutual fund that was bailed out by the government. I guessed that the man was lunging after the fund, and his money invested in it, though both proved elusive, outside the purview of his spectacles and beyond his grasp. Yet my attempts at reading the images were met with bewilderment by vendors and customers alike.

I was told that people didn't buy bags because of their graphics. People bought bags because of their perceived quality and durability. This was also borne out by my observations. In choosing a bag, customers would test the strength of the jute and the handle, which was usually made of plastic or of bamboo, but they rarely examined the graphics closely. When I did question a customer as to why she was buying a particular bag, the answer invariably concerned practicality not aesthetics. Questions about the particular meaning of an image or a bit of text were met with incredulity. It was as though the graphics on the bags were somehow unreadable, if not invisible.
In one of the wholesale bazaars in Banaras, I had a conversation with a vendor of jute bags that was very helpful in explaining how the graphics on these bags are valued. The proprietor of the shop explained to me that one company produced bags of four different “qualities.” The best quality was called "Rangeela" [figure 8], after the popular film from 1995 with Aamir Khan and Urmila Matondkar. The second best quality was called "Reebok" [figure 9]. The next best was called "Jurassic," as in Jurassic Park, and the cheapest quality had no specific name. I asked him first about the Rangeela bag, and what accounts for its popularity, but there was some confusion. While I wanted to know what about having the name “Rangeela”—or, in this case, the more unconventional spelling “Rongila”—imprinted on the side of a bag made that bag more popular among buyers, he insisted that “Rangeela” referred to the quality of the bag, not the image or text emblazoned on it. That the “Rangeela” bag still had Rongila or some form of the name printed on the bag was, according to him, something of an historical accident. What is printed on these bags usually changes every few months, he explained, but in this case it didn’t.

While the Reebok bag likewise had “Reebok” printed on it, the Jurassic bag changed graphics. Three designs on Jurassic bags were now available, though none of them had “Jurassic” or any image or text associated with the film printed on them. At that time, only one of those bags was in stock: what appears to be an eagle, in yellow, pink, and green, hovering over the earth, though the giant land mass featured is indistinct [figure 10].
Another wholesaler explained to me that most jute bags in Banaras come from Calcutta, where the jute is processed, the plastic liner applied, the handles attached, and the designs imprinted. Yet even as one of the main wholesalers of jute bag for Eastern Uttar Pradesh, he could only purchase bags by handle design—bamboo or plastic—or whether or not they had a zipper or a pocket. He had no control over the graphics that would be imprinted on the bags he ordered, nor did he particularly care. New shipments of bags came every 15 days, with the graphics changing regularly, and he had no idea how these graphics were chosen or what they were supposed to signify. Bags needed printing just like they needed handles, but printing itself was of no importance. As he remarked, "Printing ka koi nahīṃ hotā."

RETAILERS

In a conversation with a retailer of jute bags and his friend, I remarked that no one—not street vendors, customers, or wholesalers—ever seemed to pay attention to the graphics on jute bags, even though the graphics were made up of recognizable images, such as burning planes and cuddly bears, and recognizable phrases, such as simple tag lines in English. Like my other informants, they too said that he never paid attention to these graphics. So I asked them, since nobody seems to notice the graphics on jute bags, if they could, what graphics would they put on jute bags to make them more desirable to customers. The friend explained that he would put the name of their neighborhood in Hindi on the bag—in this case, Dal Mandi—to appeal to local pride. But the retailer disagreed. He explained that the bags needed graphics, but the graphics weren't meant to be understood. Presumably if they were understood, they would be less desirable. But, I
countered, I could often grasp the "meaning" (*matlab*) of the images and the text. I could
often understand them. Then he said, "There isn't any meaning to be grasped. If you can
understand the *printing* on a bag then you didn't understand it." I had once again been
accused, though with more precision than before, of seeing something that wasn't meant
to be seen, of reading something that wasn't meant to be read.

The retailer's critique can perhaps be better understood by considering, for a
moment, Abelam art in Lowland New Guinea. Anthony Forge describes how Abelam
painters do not distinguish figurative and abstract elements in their work. Even when
figuration is "apparently" present in their painting, as in the likenesses of men's faces,
these painters vigorously deny any figurative intent or figurative content to their work.
"Two-dimensional painting for the Abelam," Forge explains, "is a closed system having
no immediate reference outside itself" (1973: 177). And within this system, "graphic
elements modified by colour, carry the meaning. The meaning is not that a painting or
carving is a picture or representation of anything in the natural or spirit world, rather it is
*about* the relationship between things" (1977: 189). As Diane Losche explains, "To ask
what a sign means is irrelevant to the Abelam . . . Asking the Abelam what this particular
design means is akin to asking 'What does your refrigerator mean?' or, to reverse the
issue, 'What does your painting do?' for the Abelam this separation between meaning and
function is an inappropriate basis on which to ask a question" (1995: 59).

Now this isn't to say that the graphics on jute bags are meaningless to their Indian
audience. The words and images that they contain are recognizable, as most of my
informants would claim, and they do constitute a system of meaning. But the power of
these graphics is generated by their words and images being slightly incomprehensible:
recognizable but not readable. It is through this discursive disjunction that these graphics generate their allure. They become potent dispensers of affect, sentimental constructions of transnational power.

EXPORTERS

This intended discursive disjunction of the graphics on Indian jute bags can be put into context by considering the graphics found on bags designed specifically for export. The exporters in Delhi sold two kinds of tote bags, though these were made of canvas, not jute. Some bags had images of gods accompanied by text in Sanskrit, such as this graphic of Śiva with the benediction om namah śivāya [figure 11]. Other bags featured reprinted advertisements, such as this one for Nisha Sarees [figure 12].

Various exporters told me that such "god-bags" were designed exclusively for tourists, and were never purchased by locals. Yet the text accompanying these images was always in Devanagari and never in Roman script. When I asked one importer why these texts weren't printed in translation—for example, "Praise to Śiva!"—he told me that this was necessary so the bag would be "real" (asli), though he did agree that the bag was also "fake" (nakli).

Advertisements for particular companies, such as Nisha Sarees, also occupy the gray zone between real and fake. While such a graphic was originally an advertisement functioning within a local economy, the same graphic on a bag intended for use in a
foreign economy is less an advertisement than an icon. To understand the graphic on the Nisha Sarees bag as a local advertisement, even if one grasps the *meaning* of the image and text in that context, is not to understand it. That meaning has been displaced.

**TRANSNATIONAL AFFECT**

So, to return to the initial question of this paper, how are bags depicting planes crashing into the World Trade Center, fuzzy bears in a variety of poses, and television game show logos all the same? While these graphics seem to reference disparate social and political spheres, my sense is that, like Abelam art, they actually exist within a rather closed system. All of these graphics use images and texts with claims to cosmopolitanism, in an effort to mark and evoke a transnational sentimentality closely connected with commerce and consumption. But the visual economy within which they function is of local construction. Within this system, these graphics resist reading and interpretation—for they exist below a certain threshold of observability. Nevertheless, they do function as icons that testify to a highly affective awareness of a globalized commercial world.

These graphics are also alike in that they function within a marketplace in which the distinction between "real" and "fake" signs has become increasingly moot. Though everyone I spoke with in the bazaar recognized that there were real and fake commercial goods for sale there, such as real and fake Levi jeans or Nike jackets, the graphics on the bags function within a visual economy that doesn't simply assign value and prestige to the real and dismiss the fake. The status associated with the bags involves the graphics functioning less as advertisements than as icons—as with the Nisha Sarees bag in the
United States—and the iconic power of the so-called real and fake on the bags both serve to show what my informants would call "fashion." Within this context, fashion means displaying an artifact that bears witness to one’s awareness and highly emotional connection to various products of a westernized—and, in particular, Americanized—consumer culture.

The dimension of affect in this construction of fashion is crucial. It isn’t enough just to be aware of westernized consumer culture; one must also buy into it, and this is done as much in the realm of affect as in the realm of commerce. It is an emotional purchase, if not a financial one, though the emotional investment will likely lead to future financial investments in products of that culture. This visual economy, however, excludes more traditional forms of sentimentality common in Banaras, noted by terms such as bhāvukatā. For example, jute bags sold at the Khadi Bhavan bearing images of Gandhi are, I was told, definitely not cool. The sentiment toward politics that is fashionable in the bazaar might be summed up by a graphic on one of the bags: NO POLITICS PLEASE.

THEN SHOW TWO BAGS—“ATTACK FORCE TALIBAN” and “AMERICA: NO WAR IN IRAQ”—AND OFFER SOME INSIGHTS.
SOURCES
