



Jhola bag image, Varanasi U.P. , contemporary

## Baba's Got a Brand New Bag: Indian Jute Bags and Exotic Others

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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. 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 the caption "Lat [sic] us Play with the Ball." 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." When I queried the bag seller whether he found it strange 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 hi) or even "exactly the same" (ek dam ek hi).

A similar scene occurred in a bazaar in an affluent section of Pune, in Maharashtra, in October 2002. In front of a shop selling bags, t-shirts, and pants was an oversized jute bag, the largest 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. 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The following day, when I returned, the World Trade Center bag, which I had purchased, had been replaced by a jute bag that featured the title of the extraordinarily popular television show *Kaun Banega Crorepati* ("Who will Become a Millionaire"), with the word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. In the background, "Star Plus," the popular

television station that featured the show, and its logo are 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," 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, how the images on these bags are "the same," as my informants insisted, and the larger work these bags do as social objects. To this end, I have spoken with a wide variety of people involved in the jute bag industry – designers, manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, footpath vendors, and consumers – regarding the meaning and function of the graphics on these bags, as well as the ways that these graphics are contested sites in the formation of identity. I have also had the opportunity to watch my informants' answers change over time. Since I began this project, much has changed in India, with Chinese synthetics overtaking jute, multinational brands saturating the marketplace, and new media fomenting desire for ever-changing objects. What began as an ethnography has turned, in part, into an historical study, as old ways of thinking and being have been quickly superseded. In what follows, how-

ever, I will offer a few insights into the shifts that have occurred in the bazaar's visual regimes, and how the bazaar has been a battlefield — though, at times a force field as well — in the construction of new Indian consumers.

#### THE OLD VISUAL REGIME: KNOWING IS HALF-UNDERSTANDING

Jute bags with images and text silk-screened upon them have long been a common sight in Indian bazaars, trains, and bus stations. While an estimated 90% of these bags are gift-wala, adorned with promotional logos and given away by businesses as a form of advertising, the remaining 10% are calu-wala, "crappy" bags bearing some form of commodity image and sold in the bazaar for roughly 50 cents. The images that adorn bags in the latter category might be read as kitsch, for there is a predominance of affect-laden icons of cuteness and nostalgia accompanied by text in English, but bag vendors and their customers routinely resist such a reading.

During my fieldwork in Banaras in 2003, in fact, vendors and customers resisted ANY reading of the calu bags. To read those bags in the conventional sense of the term was to misread them as well as to misunderstand the visual economy in which they operated. All of my informants agreed that the graphics imprinted on the bags had no "meaning" (matlab). These included the

street vendors who hawked jute bags from positions along the main road near the Ganga; the wholesalers of jute bags who sold their goods in bulk from one of the bazaars in the old city; and the shopkeepers 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 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" referred to the Russell Crowe film that won four Oscar awards and "US-64" referred to the infamous failed mutual fund that was bailed out by the government. I guessed that the man pictured in the latter 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 made of bamboo or plastic, 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.

#### • WHOLESALE

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 were valued. The proprietor of the shop explained to me that one company produced bags of four different "qualities." The best quality was called "Rangeela," after the popular film from 1995 with Aamir Khan and Urmila Matondkar. The second best quality was called "Reebok." 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 accounted 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 was printed on these bags usually changed 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.

Another wholesaler explained to me that most jute bags in Banaras came from Calcutta, where the jute was 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 fifteen days, with the graphics changing regularly, and he had no idea how these graphics were chosen or what they were sup-

posed to signify. Bags needed printing just like they needed handles, but printing itself was of no importance. As he remarked, "Printing ka koi nahiim hotaa."

#### •RETAILERS

In a conversation with a retailer of jute bags named Amitabh, 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, he too said that he never paid attention to these graphics, and his good friend who was listening in concurred. 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 Amitabh 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" 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.

Amitabh'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 (1973: 177) explains, "is a closed system having no immediate reference outside itself." 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" (1973: 189). As Diane Losche (1995: 59) 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 inappropri-

ate basis on which to ask a question.”

Now this isn't to say that the graphics on jute bags were meaningless to their Indian audience. The words and images that they contain were recognizable, as most of my informants would claim, and they did constitute a system of meaning. But the power of these graphics was generated by their words and images being slightly incomprehensible: recognizable but not fully readable. It was through this discursive disjunction that these graphics generated their allure, or as my informants would say, their “exotic” or “foreign” quality. To the brand-trained eye of western consumers such as myself, the bags seemed, to use Jean-François Lyotard's distinction, mostly discursive and barely figural, but to the producers and consumers in the bazaar, the opposite was the case. The graphics were not texts to be read or images to be decoded; they were icons that testified to a highly affective awareness of a globalized commercial world. To own such an icon was to have bought into a world of westernized consumer culture and to begin to possess the cultural capital, if not financial capital, of participants in that economic field.

#### • 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. In Delhi, in 2003, exporters sold two kinds of canvas tote bags — nothing in jute was available. Some bags had images of gods accompanied by text in Sanskrit, such as a graphic of Shiva with the benediction *om namah shivaaya*. Other bags featured reprinted advertisements, such as one for Nisha Sarees.

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 Shiva!” — he told me that this was necessary so the bag would be “real” (*aslii*), though he did agree that the bag was also “fake” (*naklii*).

Advertisements for particular companies, such as Nisha Sarees, occupied 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, was not to understand it. That meaning had been displaced.

#### • TRANSNATIONAL AFFECT

So, to return to my initial question, how were 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 seemed to reference disparate social and political spheres, my sense is that, like Abalam art, they actually existed within a rather closed system. All of these graphics used 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 *bhaavukataa*. For example, jute bags sold at the Khadi Bhandar bearing images of Gandhi are, I was told, definitely not cool. The sentiment toward such products that is fashionable in the bazaar might be summed up by a graphic on one of the bags: NO POLITICS PLEASE.

#### THE NEW VISUAL REGIME: VALUE-ADDED COMMODITIES AND A NEW ENGLISH

By 2006, the visual regime that I just described had transformed. In the interim, India had fur-

ther opened its markets and increasingly reduced government controls on foreign trade and investment. For the world of graphics imprinted on jute bags, this led to two noteworthy transformations: the first concerns brand names and commodity images, and the second concerns the status of English.

The English word "brand" and the idea of branding had now both entered the language and consciousness of the bazaar, though not all the graphics on bags represented brands. Perusing his stock of school bags, Amitabh, still a bag retailer, explained to me that Popeye, Harry Potter, Scooby Doo, and Pokemon were brands. Yet when I asked about his other bags, which were inscribed, respectively, with "Diesel," "Armani," "Polo," and "Adidas," he explained that these were "styles" not "brands." The manufacturer of the Diesel bag was Donex, and the manufacturer of the Adidas bag was Mayur, but neither, according to Amitabh, was a brand. So, I asked, within his world of merchandise what constituted a brand? "Brands," he explained, "are really films and shows you see on television." Yet Amitabh was upset that customers would now come to his shop asking for brands, and evaluate bags by their printing and not the quality of their construction. In response to this disturbing trend, Amitabh had begun manufacturing his own line of bags. They come in a variety of sizes, and each

is made from strong, green canvas and bears no printing, branding, or logos. Though Amitabh thinks they offer a great "value," they don't sell particularly well. Nevertheless, Amitabh still makes them and stocks them because he believes that brands "have no meaning." "Brand ka koi matlab nahiim," he said, with a bit of righteous indignation. In 2003 I was told that the graphics on the bags had no meaning; now I was told that brands had no meaning.

Much to Amitabh's consternation, however, it was clear that the words imprinted on bags had become meaningful, and that understanding the graphics on bags, as well as their appeal, required that these words were read and understood. Even the barely educated bag vendors on the street could, for the most part, read the English slogans imprinted on the bags they sold and recognize their significance. In the old visual regime, the half-comprehensible English and colorful images on the bags signified a world of hyper-affect connected with being "hip," for lack of a better term, to a global commercial world. The otherness and exoticism of English allowed one to access this powerful emotional realm, for this "hipness" was conceived as being outside the confines of the bazaar and of Hindi. In the new visual regime, however, English is no longer exotic in the half-understood way it was previously. As one of the street vendors explained to me, "the words are



meant to be read," a seemingly obvious remark, though it was exactly what I had been cautioned against three years earlier. People bought the ESPN and NIKE bags, he explained, because they recognized the names from television. Along with this reconfiguration of English has been a reconfiguration of the affect that English invokes. As the bazaar has domesticated English – or, perhaps, been domesticated by it – the exotic allure that the English words on bags used to invoke has faded.

#### • VALUE-DEPRIVED JUTE

In the last five years, there has been a drastic decrease in the number of jute bags for sale in the market. Though there are a variety of factors that help account for this decrease, the one that my informants mentioned most frequently was that jute bags were simply calu, or "crappy." While the bag vendors on the street, for example, were aware that Harry Potter was a good brand, they were also aware that the value of a brand could be offset if it were associated with something bad. The street vendors thought of jute as a cheap product, and they associated it with an impoverished workforce in West Bengal and Bangladesh. There is, in fact, much academic writing about the long history of disenfranchisement among the subcontinent's jute workers (e.g., Fernandes 1997; Ghosh 2001; Goswami 1991; Sen 1999;

Stewart 1998). Moreover, calu bags are so-called because they use very low-quality jute, often the very same material used for making bags to store grain. When I asked various street vendors whether there was any graphic or brand that could make a jute bag cool, they invariably said, "No." Jute was clearly in need of rebranding.

Yet jute bags have been under attack for more than being uncool. Many bag manufacturers have begun to forego jute, instead making use of synthetic material from China, which is 60% cheaper. A majority of stores in North India now use this material for their promotional bags, and owing to its cheap price, the number of gift bags in the bazaar has increased dramatically. Though this synthetic material doesn't hold up to rugged use, and definitely falls apart in the rain – as I know from personal experience – it does serve as a cost-effective form of advertising. Conversely, jute bags don't seem to be cool enough or cheap enough to interest many in the bazaar.

#### JUTE ANSWERS BACK

During a trip to Bodh Gaya, Bihar in January 2007, I wandered through the bazaar looking for bags. As I expected, most were made from imported Chinese synthetics or recycled nylon, generally from cement sacks. But there were a few bags made of jute. In one shop, I found three jute bags, each with an identical picture of a sail-

boat, yet one also had the slogan "Jute is Biodegradable." I showed the bag to the shopkeeper and to a variety of customers in the bazaar, but no one knew or even recognized the word "biodegradable." It is an English word with no obvious Hindi equivalent. It was as though a savvy bag designer was trying out a new idea: take a graphic already in circulation and add a tag line that appeals to the eco-friendly market in an attempt to attract environmentally conscientious consumers. It was unclear, however, if the ploy had met with any success besides getting me to buy another jute bag.

The following week I traveled to Calcutta, home of the jute industry, in the hope of finding out more about my eco-friendly bag and the designers who created such graphics. As I wandered through the city and its markets, I was surprised to see no jute bags at all. Even in the jute bazaar on Cotton Street, I found only a few jute bags for sale, though I did learn that "Jute is Biodegradable" is the jute industry's official slogan. I was, however, directed to Belghoria, a northern suburb of Calcutta, where roughly 15,000 people are involved in the bag-making industry, and where an estimated 90% of calu bags in India are manufactured.

In Belghoria, I met with designers, distributors, and laborers in the calu bag market. My conversations with Bishwanath, a successful bag

designer and distributor, were particularly instructive. In response to my question about the changing designs on calu bags, he explained that his designs weren't that calculated: "Any design that comes from your heart will do." When asked about the predominance of English and seemingly foreign images, he remarked, "Everyone can read English. It's the fashion." And then, "America to dada hai!" America is India's big brother, he explained, but it's also the mafia don who controls the market. Considering this, he continued, why shouldn't the images on the bags feature English words and American images? Nevertheless, there were almost no jute bags for sale in the Belghoria bazaar, and I counted only a few of them among the shoppers and commuters in town. Even in Belghoria, jute bags were dying out, and neither Bishwanath nor his workers were sure how to market them successfully to the local population.

The only place in Calcutta that I saw jute bags for sale, and customers actually buying them, was on the sidewalk in front of the Oberoi Hotel, one of Calcutta's poshest destinations. The jute bags for sale, however, were neither calu nor gift. They were bags designed for export to be sold to eco-friendly consumers abroad. The proprietor, Abdul, explained to me that he used to sell calu bags, but the market for them had disappeared. Among the most popular items he now sold

were two promotional bags of nearly identical construction intended for grocery stores in the UK, Sainsbury and Tesco. The former capitalizes on its biodegradable pedigree: "It's not just our Sainsbury's SO organic food that's good for the environment, our jute bags are too." The Tesco bag is more enigmatic and less grammatical: "Every little helps," and features a meandering row of red ladybugs. Though the Tesco bag contains a beguiling text with little or no connection to its image of ladybugs, it was nevertheless the current bestseller at Abdul's streetside shop. None of the customers whom I questioned claimed to understand the English text on either bag, nor were any of them considering purchasing a jute bag because it was good for the environment. When I asked them about the appeal of the bags, they invariably mentioned that the Tesco bag was "pretty," pointing to the ladybugs, and "foreign."

As in the old visual regime, here too graphics were not texts to be read or images to be decoded; instead, they were a kind of affect-laden icon, much like the reprinted advertisement for Nisha Sarees. But how did a foreign, jute grocery bag function within the local economy in Calcutta? I wasn't sure, but when I walked along the bazaar in front of the Oberoi Hotel empty-handed I was barely noticed by the numerous touts and vendors. When I carried the Tesco bag, however, I was recognized as a foreigner and beseeched in

English to buy things.

### THE NEW EXOTIC

These days in Banaras the most popular bags for sale in the bazaar are not made from jute, feature almost no text, and don't capitalize on multinational brands. These bags are designed and produced in Delhi, from cotton, and their main appeal seems to derive from their large, colorful graphics. Though the beguiling jute bags of the old visual regime are now more rare, these bags preserve a similar sense of the exotic, an appealing foreign world that is slightly incomprehensible.

On one bag, we see a charming, seaside town, and in the middle of the image, the appropriately named "Seaside Café." In the background, there are boats and a lighthouse, and in the foreground, a man walking his dog. Yet in the lower left hand corner there is a horse pulling a man in an old-fashioned buggy and then, more mysteriously, a decorated Christmas tree on a stand. Christmas and its icons are popular in the bazaar. In fact, the best-selling bag in the bazaar features the text "Happy Holidays" along the top and bottom, and "Let it snow" on both sides. In the middle is an assortment of smiling snowmen with carrots for noses and a colorful assortment of hats, scarves, and jackets. No one I interviewed in the bazaar had ever seen a snowman or a seaside café, not

even on television. As one of the street vendors explained, "The images are beautiful, but they don't have any meaning" – un ka koi matlab nahiim. Once again I was cautioned not to read too much into the graphics. This all sounded very familiar.

One bag in particular seemed to offer a commentary on the "meaning" of the two bags I just described. In this bag, as in the Seaside Cafe bag, we see horses and people in the lower left corner, but the configuration is peculiar. There are four horses, though only one of them has a rider, and behind them is a sleigh with two inhabitants. There is, however, no snow. The trees have no leaves, so perhaps it is winter, but the fields that abut the road and stretch off in the distance are verdant green – hardly ideal sleighing conditions. This odd assemblage is apparently traveling to the large house up ahead, next to which is another lighthouse. There is, however, no body of water. So why use a sleigh to travel on a dirt road in order to get to a lighthouse that is landlocked?

In response to that rhetorical question, I am reminded of the words of caution I was offered years earlier: "If you can understand the printing on a bag, then you didn't understand it." So what, then, is this new exotic? In the old visual regime, there was a tension between image and text, between affect-laden designs and English slogans, which produced a pleasurable frisson

of emotion. In the new visual regime, image and text combine more seamlessly, with commodity images and pithy English captions indexing brands. In this visual world however, there is a disjunction, as in the old visual regime, but it happens between images within a graphic, not between images and text.

#### REFLECTIONS: TWO ODDITIES AND A ONE ANECDOTE

In my fieldwork in Banaras in 2009, I was repeatedly told that branded goods are the best quality products; that they are exclusively foreign; and that they are only available in shopping malls. This set of beliefs has manifested in multiple oddities, such as a craze to buy foreign goods that is the very antithesis of the swadeshi movement of a century ago and a craze to apply brand labels onto seemingly everything for sale in the bazaar, even though everyone knows that branded goods aren't for sale in the bazaar. Even Amitabh now puts brand labels on some of his bags.

Yet, the inception of brands in India, and the faith that they have so quickly engendered, raises questions for me about the ways that religion has been mobilized to configure India's new marketplace. Brand loyalty, one shopkeeper in the bazaar explained, is this generation's bhakti – their devotion, their faith. Recent work, in fact, has

shown that viewers have the same neurological response to strong brands that they do to religious icons (Lindstrom 2008). Brand loyalty and bhakti are neurological twins, likewise Nike the goddess and Nike the swoosh.

With that said, I will leave you an anecdote. Earlier this year I had a conversation with a successful silk merchant in Banaras. He lamented that it seemed that one day all of India would turn into one big mall and that everything would be branded – except, of course, the gods. “But can’t a god be a brand?” I asked. Everyone recognizes the Hanuman image from the Sankat Mochan Temple, with his tilted head and gentle smile. The image is everywhere in the bazaar, on posters and postcards, statues and paintings. “Couldn’t the temple copyright that image,” I asked, “and charge licensing fees if people wanted to use it?” “No, no, no,” he said. “They wouldn’t do that.” But neither of us were very sure.

Perhaps bhakti will be the next generation’s brand loyalty.

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