

SEMIOTICS IN DESTINATION BRANDING BY SELECTED INDIAN STATES: AN OVERVIEW

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Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of semiotics in destination branding of selected Indian states. Semiotics corresponds to visible signs which, in this context may be used to attract the attention of tourists and influence their destination choices. Logos and slogans are an integral part of branding, re-branding and marketing of products and services. Following the launch of the Incredible India campaign, many Indian states were encouraged to individually develop their own regional images and logos that could merge with yet stand out within the mother brand - Incredible India. This paper specifically focuses on the use of logos, slogans, colours and imagery in the destination branding efforts of selected Indian states.

Keywords:

Semiotics, Logos, Slogans, Destination Branding, Incredible India, Symbolism, Representation

Introduction:

The Incredible India campaign launched in 2002 helped to position India as a preferred destination for discerning travelers. The logo with an exclamation mark for “I” became instrumental in and central to various campaigns launched to promote tourism in India ever since. We experienced a 16% increase in tourist traffic in the first year of the campaign. Following the launch of the Incredible India campaign, many Indian states were encouraged to individually develop their own regional images and logos that could merge with yet stand out within the mother brand-Incredible India.

This paper presents an overview of the use of logos, slogans, colours and imagery by selected Indian states in their efforts to build and consolidate their respective brands. It specifically focuses on and analyses these aspects of semiotics in the destination branding efforts of selected Indian states.

Concepts/Terminology:

Semiotics

Semiotics corresponds to visible signs and as such includes all signs, symbols, imagery, pictures and colours used for communication. The use of visible signs for communication has been in existence since the beginning of time and has been evolving with mankind and technological advancements. Logos and slogans are an integral part of branding, re-branding and marketing of various products and services. Their use in destination branding and tourism marketing is widespread. While branding a place is different from branding a product or a service, the core principle remains the same-establishing a distinct identity and influencing consumer decisions.

Semiotics, also called semiology, is the study and the science of signs (Berger 2014; Tresidder and Hirst 2012; Chandler 2007; Oswald 2012). Various definitions of the term exist. An alternative definition, “semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (Eco 1976, p7 in Chandler no date). Mick’s definition emphasizes the need for context; signs are understood and simply represented by “anything that stands for something (its object), to somebody (interpreter), in some respect (its context)” (Mick 1986, p198). Semiotics can also be defined as “the study of signs and systems of representation” (Tresidder and Hirst 2012, p153). Some authors like Chandler and Echtner have taken semiotics beyond signs and symbols. Therefore, everything represented by words, language, images, actions or objects are considered as signs (Chandler 2007, Echtner 1999).

While it is said that semiotics is about signs and what they represent and stand for some authors very rightly have gone on to say that signs are meaningless unless we give them meaning. Nevertheless, these have no intrinsic meaning (Chandler 2007) unless we endow them with one; once this occurs, they become signs. In addition, their interpretation is also contingent on the perceptions of the observer: this may differ from one person to another, depending on a broad range of factors including culture, market segmentation or lifestyle (Tresidder and Hirst 2012).

Destination Branding

Blain, Levy and Ritchie define destination branding as the “marketing activities that (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice” (Blain, Levy and Ritchie 2005, p337).

In case of destination branding, the concept of the visitor experience (identified as a critical tourism concept by Ryan [2002]) requires incorporation into the process of branding (L. Berry 2000; Pine and Gilmore 1999). Research has demonstrated that although visitors purchase individual tourism services, the entire visitor experience is what is effectively being bought (Otto and Ritchie 1996).

To create a memorable brand, one needs to deliver quality and satisfaction; branding is much more than developing logos. Further, branding a destination is different from branding products and services. Destination branding differs from branding a product or service because a destination is the sum total of components (landscape, flora, fauna, architecture/buildings/landmarks, people attributes, festivals, spirituality, etc) and experiences. A destination is felt and experienced in ways that differ from the consumption of products and services.

Objectives:

This paper has been written with the following objectives in mind:

1. To present an overview of the use of semiotics in the branding of selected Indian states as tourist destinations through logos and symbolism.
2. To collect information about the use of Logos, Slogans, Colours and Imagery in the destination branding efforts of selected Indian states.
3. To explore where and how these are linked with the mother brand-Incredible India.
4. To draw conclusions in this regard.

Methodology:

This paper is based on secondary data collected from sources like books, journals, reports, publications and the internet.

Data Collection and Selected Sample:

Preliminary research on logos, slogans, websites and posters of various state tourism development corporations in India was carried out. Thereafter, 10 states were selected so as to give adequate representation North, South, East and Western parts of India. Parameters considered for selection of states include visual appeal of logos and symbols, recall value, visibility in print, outdoor, television and online media and cohesion with the theme of the Incredible India campaign. Logos, poster and print advertising of selected state tourism campaigns and website content were reviewed. Due to high volume of data the research focused on only the most recent information, more specifically since 2016 till date.

Observations and Analysis:

Logos: The logo is the most recognizable part of a brand. Findings of empirical studies suggest that a destination logo is an important element of the destination identity and should match the destinations they represent.

State	Logo	Type of Logo	Symbolism/Representation
West Bengal	Bengal	Word Mark	Range of colorful travel experiences
Gujarat	Profile of Lion and traditional textile block printing style design	Pictorial	Asiatic lions of Gir and rich textile tradition
Karnataka	Karnataka	Word Mark	Mountainous terrain
Kerala	Kerala	Word Mark	Typography and illustration. Landscape elements and name.
Madhya Pradesh	Tiger	Emblem	Represents the Tiger. State is known as the Land of the Tiger with 5 tiger reserves <i>Kanha, Pench, Bandhavgarh, Panna</i> and <i>Satpura</i>
Maharashtra	<i>Devnagari</i> script "M"	Letter Mark	Celebrates the soul of the state and signifies a range of travel experiences
Odisha	Sun, sand, waves and a patch of green	Pictorial	Sun, coastline and wildlife
Punjab	Colourful turban	Pictorial	Traditional head gear worn in the state and a colorful/vibrant travel experience
Rajasthan	Two birds and two camels (Face of a man)	Pictorial	Essence of the desert. Two birds in flight represent eyebrows and two camels facing in opposite directions stand for the trademark bushy moustaches sported by men from the desert state.
Uttarakhand	Stylized "U"	Letter mark	Free rising forms represent the Himalayan peaks that dot the state

Table 1.1: Logos, Types of Logos and Symbolism

Source: Sampled data

Observations: 4 states have pictorial logos, 3 have word marks, 2 have letter marks and only 1 has an emblem logo. Each state tourism logo indicates unique characteristics of the destination it represent.

Conclusions: One can conclude that logos are an important part of state tourism advertising campaigns. They serve to reinforce and remind target audiences while highlighting the uniqueness of each destination. Each state has its own vision as to how it wants to be perceived due to which each has opted for a different type of logo. Though majority states have pictorial logos, it cannot be said that any one type of logo is more popular or effective than the other as each has been crafted with a particular end in mind.

Colors in Logos: Colors help to build brand identity, add visual appeal, convey meaning and establish deeper psychological connections with target audiences.

State	Colors	Symbolism
West Bengal	Multicolored	Range of colorful travel experiences
Gujarat	Saffron Yellow and Brown	Colors of the Asiatic Lion and traditional block prints
Karnataka	Red	Excitement
Kerala	A Fresh/Vibrant Green interspersed with blue, red and orange	Greenery, beaches, houseboats and backwaters
Madhya Pradesh	Reddish brown	Tiger and architecture
Maharashtra	Orange	Warmth and Enthusiasm
Odisha	Yellow and Blue with a touch of Green	Yellow represents the Sun, Blue- coastline, Green-wildlife
Punjab	Multicolored	Colorful experiences
Rajasthan	Black and White	Stark like the desert
Uttarakhand	Blue, Green and Saffron	Blue stands for water and snow clad mountains, Green for wildlife and Saffron for the religious importance of the state

Table 1.2: Colors in Logos and Symbolism

Source: Sampled data

Observations: It is observed that colors lend personality to the logo. The logos come across as stark, sleek, playful, youthful or relaxed, depending on the colors used. Colors help to communicate the essence of the travel experience or the unique features of the destination. The type of logo dictates color choices. For example, the crystalline, mathematical and colorful look of the logo of West Bengal communicates the idea of a rainbow of travel experiences. The simple black and white of the Rajasthan tourism logo is minimalistic and it has charm and impact due to that. It is the only logo that has used negative space to its advantage. Maharashtra, Karnataka and Madhya Pradesh have used one colour in their logos.

Conclusion: The presence as well as the absence of colour can make a big difference to the impact of a logo.

Slogans: Slogans are catchy lines, words or groups of words and phrases which when associated with a brand or product convey a message. They can also indicate core brand values.

State	Slogan	Association/Message
West Bengal	Experience Bengal The Sweetest Part of India	Delicious sweetmeats of the state
Gujarat	<i>Khushboo Gujarat Ki</i>	Distinct, Aromatic, Earthy travel experience
Karnataka	One State. Many Worlds.	Promise of many worlds within the state
Kerala	God's Own Country	Divine beauty of the state
Madhya Pradesh	The Heart of Incredible India	Highlights the location of the state
Maharashtra	Maharashtra Unlimited	Unlimited travel experiences
Odisha	Scenic. Serene. Sublime.	Spiritual importance of Odisha, home to the Konark Sun Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site

	The Soul of Incredible India	
Punjab	India Begins Here	Geographical location as a North Indian state and ideal destination to begin a journey into India
Rajasthan	<i>Jaane Kya Dikh Jaye</i>	Promise to surprise travelers
Uttarakhand	Uttarakhand Simply Heaven	Serenity and sanctity of the state known for its scenic beauty and religious importance

Table 1.3: Slogans of State Tourism Campaigns and Symbolism

Source: Sampled data

Observations: All 10 states have unique and impactful slogans to support their branding efforts. They are used repetitively across print and poster advertisements as well as respective state tourism websites. Only 2 states have slogans in *Hindi* while the rest have slogans in English.

Conclusions: One can conclude that each of the slogans being used by these 10 states reflects the message of the type of experience or unique feature/s of the state. The slogans complement the state tourism logos. West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Punjab have managed to tie their slogan to the Incredible India campaigns in a clever and creative manner. A slogan in English helps to reach international travelers. With an increasing number of tourists carrying out online research, the website is a good platform to showcase travel experiences on offer. The use of logos, together with slogans (not independent of each other) is a good strategy that can enhance impact, recognition and recall by travelers.

Imagery in Poster and Print Advertising Campaigns:

Observation: It is observed that print and poster advertisements are a significant part of destination branding by the states surveyed. States like Karnataka and Rajasthan tourism have done an exceptionally good job with themes for their print and poster advertisements. For example the *Jaane Kya Dikh Jaaye* print and poster advertisements show off beat locations and capture the beauty of the landscape while highlighting the personalized and surprising travel experiences in the form of people attributes as characters in the narrative/story. In 2017, Karnataka celebrated the “Year of the Wild”. The recurrent theme along its print and poster advertisements highlighted the fauna of the state and its myriad travel experiences for all sorts of adventures. Such a move helps in focusing on certain aspects of the travel experiences which the state has to offer. It also helps to achieve certain distinct objectives like the Kerala tourism advertisements “*Yalla Kerala*” which aimed at reviving the state’s tourism post the 2018 floods and the poster advertisement for the third edition of the Kochi Muzeris Biennale which is the biggest contemporary art show in South Asia. Both advertisements won 2 prestigious gold awards of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

Conclusion: One can conclude that all the state tourism campaigns surveyed have used impactful imagery in print and poster advertisements. They have presented Nature, landscapes, wildlife, buildings/landmarks/architecture, festivals and people in vivid and colorful images. The repetitive use of logos and slogans in the imagery has served to remind audiences, facilitate recall, reinforce message and consolidate destination branding efforts by the states.

Website Imagery:

Observation: It is observed that all the states selected have dedicated websites to promote tourism. Further, the images used on the websites have a good mix of nature, landscapes, architecture/buildings, spirituality, culture and tradition. More than half the imagery on the websites surveyed comprised recurrent themes of Nature/landscape, architecture//buildings, landmarks, flora and fauna. People attributes were seen only in case of Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Kerala. Rajasthan and Karnataka also showcased luxury train travel options which are uniquely applicable to them.

Conclusion:

One can conclude that today, people increasingly go online to seek information before they travel. A website is necessary to establish online visibility and provide information. The use of people attributes in imagery has not been adequately explored by the state tourism websites. Establishing a “connect” with travelers is an objective that can be better achieved by incorporating people attributes on the website. For example a picture of people enjoying a festival or praying at a temple is much more effective than a picture of festive decorations or image of a standalone temple or deity. Audiences will find an image of people enjoying river rafting more interesting than that of gushing waters of a river without any people in the frame. While Rajasthan and Kerala have successfully employed people attributes in website imagery, Punjab and Uttarakhand have pictures of ministers on their website, something which is neither informative nor necessary from a traveler’s perspective and will not serve to influence destination choices.

Finally, one can conclude that the Incredible India campaign has encouraged many Indian states to produce some stellar destination brands. Marketing the country as a preferred tourist destination is not something that can be achieved in isolation. Well planned and executed campaigns by Indian states are necessary to highlight the unique experiences they offer. The development of logos, associated slogans/taglines, use of colour and websites, though significant, are only a part of the comprehensive process of destination branding. The correct use of semiotics such as these helps to adequately describe destinations and the experiences they offer, thereby augmenting destination branding efforts.

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