

Made in India: Faith and the Ideology of Mass Culture

Sucharita Sarkar

1. How Industrialisation Revolutionised Hinduism

In popular discourse, India is regarded as the land of unity (not uniformity) in diversity. The reason for the diversity is the successive waves of invasions and migrations over the centuries, which have cumulatively led to an accumulation of cultures and faiths in the subcontinent. The concept of 'unity' is more modern - both a colonial legacy and a nationalist ideal. However, the propagation of faith in India has always been contoured by complex issues of class, commerce, community, and nationhood. In this paper, I would like to focus on the discourse of Hindu faith in the post-industrial era through popularly circulated ephemera.

In predominantly agricultural India, industrialism was a by-product of British imperialism. The colonial encounter resulted in the 'historic introduction of oil painting to the subcontinent' (Mathur 5) as well as in the arrival of the printing press. Both these events are significant in the setting up of Raja Ravi Varma's lithographic printing press in 1894.

Since the onset of the Age of Reason in the 'Western' world, 'Galileo's scientific revolution and Darwin's theory of evolution seemed to put science and religion forever into warring camps – one waving the banner of faith, the other marching to the certainty of fact' (Cimino and Lattin 41). This led to the crisis of faith after the Industrial Revolution, when 'things fall apart' and the 'centre cannot hold', as W.B. Yeats lamented in *Byzantium*. Inclusive, decentralized Hindu theology 'does not think...in such binary terms' and this may have helped to avert or cope with such a crisis (Desai 142). The ambivalence that is seen in 'the absence of a pronounced heaven/hell narrative' also led Hinduism to see science, and especially technology (here, of the printing press), not as a rival to religion, but as an ally (Desai 142).

Raja Ravi Varma, often called the Father of Indian Calendar Art, not only used European styles of oil-painting to depict Indian religious or mythological figures, his Ravi Varma Press used Western techniques of lithography to circulate prints developed from his oil paintings amongst the devout masses of Hindus. This started a deluge of Hindu ‘bazaar’ art – which included both calendars and framing pictures - manufactured at lithography and, later, offset printing presses around the country - which ‘vernacularized capitalism’ and harnessed mass culture and mass production for and through indigenous religious, cultural and even nationalistic discourses (Jain 38).

Ravi Varma and other print shops such as Chitrashala Press and S.S. Brijbasi & Sons brought lithograph and oleograph prints to new heights in quality and distribution. Celebrating gods, maharajahs, native beauties and national heroes, the prints played a role in arousing Indian identity during the colonial period (Winata and Darmon 8).

2. The Irony of Mass Hindu Iconography

Culture theorist Theodor Adorno noted, ‘The more the system of merchandising culture is expanded, the more it tends also to assimilate the serious art of the past by adapting this art to the system’s own requirements’ (160). This is what Raja Ravi Varma did, basing his chromolithograph prints (low art) on his own acclaimed oil paintings (high art). Many of the devotional prints flooding the market thereafter followed the Ravi Varma template, while some deviated, especially in annually printed calendars which targeted local and regional markets. For instance, in the images of the Goddess Saraswati printed by S. Murugakani, the brass lamps flanking the idol ‘indicate that this design is specifically aimed at the South Indian market’ (Jain 33).

Adorno critiqued the schema of mass culture for its ‘unproblematic, cliché-like characterization’, and because ‘the repetitiveness, the selfsameness, and the ubiquity of modern mass culture tend to make for automatized reactions and to weaken the forces of individual resistance’ (160). But it is this very repetitiveness of devotional prints that gives them the power of reassurance – like the repetitive consolatory power of prayer - since the devotee/receiver is looking for exactly this kind of unchanging certainty from these religious images/texts.

A calendar is by nature temporary, embedding the mass consumer ideology of ‘use and throw’ disposability. Ironically, the religious image depicted on it becomes more than ephemera, and the devotee often keeps out-of-date calendars hanging on his walls, often piling one on top of another, because of the notion of permanence encoded in the icon. Often, too, these images are framed in an attempt to transfer permanence to what are, essentially, ephemera. When things around him are ‘falling apart’, these religious ephemera offer the devotee the steadfast consolation of the ‘still centre’.

3. The Metamorphosis from Ephemera to Eternity

How does a transient image make this transition to a reassuring, timeless icon? Adorno comments, ‘Mass media consist of various layers of meanings superimposed on one another, all of which contribute to the effect’ (164). Studying these images as texts, we find a ‘heritage of polymorphic meaning’ accumulated within, and how these overt and hidden meanings are absorbed by the receiver’s conscious and subconscious mind to create a complex response of spiritual reassurance and desire for acquisition (Adorno 164).

The devotional calendar or print starts its journey as commodity, sold on pavement shops. Competing with other similar commodities, the colourful glossiness is an important attribute to gain consumer desirability. The consumer is initially a purchaser, literally ‘shopping for faith’. The image is selected after comparison and deliberation, often on the basis of surface-appeal and affordability. Once the image occupies

pride of place on the wall, (often decorated with garlands and incense-sticks), it is transformed from ephemera to icon, by the rituals of faith, just as the consumer is transformed from buyer to devotee. The monetary value of the image is superseded by spiritual value as object of faith. This shift from ephemera to eternity requires a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’: a ‘leap of faith’ that is easy to critique but almost impossible to challenge, so unshakeable is the spiritual faith of most believers.

Founded on multiple sources, Hinduism absorbs all contraries, being both monotheistic and polytheistic. The many divine manifestations are related to the formless One Supreme Being (*nirguna brahman*) as spokes are to the wheel. Mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik decodes the metaphysical meanings in the Hindu calendar image/texts using the Hindu paradigm of the divine having many forms (*saguna brahman*, ‘the absolute with qualities’). The images in Hindu calendar art are mostly taken from the three major cults of Hinduism - the worship of Shiva, Vishnu and the Great Goddess – as they appear in ancient paintings, sculptures and temple architecture (Blurton). Yet these cults are not separate categories, but fluid narratives that often intersect and co-exist. For instance, in the image of Krishna as *Vishwarupa* or *Viratswarupa* or cosmic form, the apparently fantastic multiple-armed, many-headed image incorporates the all-inclusive, expansive, Hindu idea of God: ‘God is all things. He is in all things. He is outside all things. He is She... the human, the subhuman, the superhuman – all are God’ (Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 55). By incorporating the devotee (in this case, Arjuna) in the narrative, the receiver becomes part of the divinity: ‘We are the observers who create the observation that is life... We and our world are the same. This is *Advaita* or non-duality of being’ ((Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 55). The inclusion of the devotee/receiver in the image-narrative also dissolves the logical boundaries between past and present, tradition and modernity, transforming the profane into the sacred, the material commodity (here, calendar) into religious icon and ideology. ‘Reality becomes its own ideology through the spell cast by its faithful duplication’, distribution and circulation (Adorno 63).

On closer reading, the surface-gloss of popular Hindu iconography reveals a wealth of details developed from centuries of tradition. These details function both as metonyms, explaining the part as whole, and also as metaphors, explicating the material in terms of the spiritual/theological. For instance, in the image-narrative of the Vaishno Devi Shrine, the umbrella is a 'symbol of reverence and awe', whereas the three rocks represent the 'three aspects of the Goddess: she enlightens (Saraswati), enriches (Lakshmi) and empowers (Durga)' (Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 116). The devotee worshipping these images may not always be critically decoding the multi-layered symbolism, but then faith has always operated in the realm of intuition and belief rather than reasoning.

Unquestioning acceptance is central to the reception of both mass culture and popular religions. Wisdom may come to those who delve deep into religious philosophy, but consolation comes from the unresisting faith of the common man, the 'non-intellectual'. The popularity of Hindu iconography in its many ephemeral forms is a testimony both to its easy availability and ease of reception/acceptance. Jain notes that a tiny place like Sivakasi (known as mini-Japan or kuttu-Japan) has over 373 printing presses which 'bear the major weight (over 60%) of print production in the subcontinent' (39). Starting with the stone lithographic press of Nadar Press Limited in 1928, the business of religion in Sivakasi flourished with the import of offset machines from East Germany, and the devotional prints manufactured there were distributed in markets across India and even abroad (Jain 40 - 46).

4. Writing Back to the Centre

Art critics have marginalised and devalued Hindu calendar art as disposable, kitsch and low culture, part of the 'feminization of mass culture' that nineteenth century modernism objected to (Mathur 130). Yet the circulation and reception of these images in local and global markets is a problematic phenomenon that merges religion, mass culture, propaganda, ideology and the marketing of an 'image' of India to the 'other' or non-Indian audiences. The alien-ness of Hindu polytheism from a Judeo-Christian monotheistic perspective as well as the vivid

banality of Indian/Hindu religious ephemera has increasingly aroused the curiosity of the Western gaze, leading to ‘the renewed and spectacular visibility of India in the West, a phenomenon dubbed “Indo Chic” by *The New York Times*’ (Mathur 166).

Because of their exotic, mystical appeal, Hindu calendar art and other religious objects/signs (the yogic ‘*Om*’ chant and the *rudraksh*, for instance) have gained global – albeit niche – popularity, especially since the onset of the ‘crisis of faith’. Restless ‘Westerners’ shop for faith, moving from ‘denominational doctrine’ to ‘experiential elements of religion and spirituality’ (Cimino and Lattin 18). This reflects a growing tendency ‘to mix elements of different traditions into new hybrid forms... as seekers separated from their religious heritage search out new expressions of faith’, like the ISCKON movement (called the *Hare Krishna* cult) (Cimino and Lattin 26). This may be read as another instance of reverse colonization, of the faith of the empire writing back.

5. From Icon to Kitsch

Blurring of boundaries is intrinsic to Hinduism, for instance, between the worshipper and the worshipped. Hanuman is a devotee of Rama (who is an incarnation of Vishnu worshipped as a god). Again, Hanuman is also a deity who is worshipped in temples and on calendars. Such border-crossings make it easier for Hindus to accept uncritically the blurring of intent between calendar as religious icon and calendar as commercial advertisement. The inevitable worshipping of Ganesha and Lakshmi idols in homes and business establishments is proof that in the Hindu mindset, religion and commerce can exist without conflict or scepticism.

In these transactions between religion and commerce, between spiritual discourse and mass culture, the lines between sacred and profane shift in other ways, too. Not only does the profane take on the attributes of the sacred, the sacred is sometimes divested of its spiritual connotations, to become merely a commodity. One of the most famous instances of such a crossover would be the early twentieth-century print advertisement

for Pears soap that used the image of the lotus-seated Mother Goddess to sell soap that was ‘pure as the lotus’.

As Jain notes, the devotional prints of Sivakasi have been reproduced on ‘CDs, postcards, diaries...wrapping paper, coffee table books, jeans, handbags, lunchboxes, even underwear, and – it is rumoured – toilet seat covers’ (46). We may add other commodities like matchbox covers, fridge magnets and coasters to the growing list. In the flourishing market for Indian kitsch, especially those having a religious motif, the ‘curse of mass culture’ has denuded the religious tradition of centuries and has commoditised the icons of faith to serve the needs of consumerism. The ideology of mass culture has levelled artistic value and spiritual value with material value. The commodity which was transformed into an icon by the power of faith has once again metamorphosed into kitsch because of the power of commerce. Adorno observes, ‘The commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear’ (61). The commodity which was transformed into an icon by the power of faith has once again metamorphosed into kitsch because of the power of commerce.

6. Faith in the Internet Age

But then again, there is another side of the story. Just as the old technologies of mass production, like the printing press, have helped in disseminating Hindu religious images and texts among all sections of the population, and just as the very abundance of these images in the mass-market have somewhat devalued their spiritual quotient, the new technologies of mass communication have led to a revival of spiritual awareness, at least among the privileged classes. The Internet today is an indispensable aid in the dissemination of faith. Interestingly, the devotional prints of the past are re-circulated virtually via the Internet, as in the ‘celestial screen-savers from *www.ePrarthana.com*’ (Jain 46).

The Times of India, India’s largest print newspaper, brings out a weekly supplement called *The Speaking Tree* promoting the concept of ‘wellness’, which includes spiritual and material well-being. The online

blog version, *speakingtree.in*, is advertised as a site where one can ‘Find happiness right here, right now’. The features often include analyses of current affairs from a spiritual perspective. For instance, cricketer Sreesanth’s spot-fixing scandal becomes a dissertation on how money corrupts and how to ‘counter corruption with the five C’s: Connectedness, Courage, Cosmology, Compassion and Commitment’ (Pereira and Singh 1), while the Uttarakhand flood tragedy leads to ruminations on how we reap what we sow (Bhagwati 1). Such texts, along with columns on healthy eating, life-skills advice, astrological predictions, nuggets of information about ‘Sacred Objects’ from various religions, combine to provide ‘intelligent and informed coverage of religion – if only it makes good business sense’ (Cimino and Lattin 148). The overt thrust of *The Speaking Tree* discourses is to raise awareness of spirituality without discrimination among religions – so as to offer the readers various paths to consolation and salvation.

The desire to find salvation through a personally-chosen route has led seekers to the internet, which literally delivers spirituality to our fingertips. Cimino and Lattin comment, ‘In the new millennium, peace may finally come to science and religion’ (42). Again, we see science becoming an ally, a tool for circulating religion. ‘Prayer, instruction and fellowship are all found in the cathedrals of cyberspace’ (Cimino and Lattin 113). There is a clear linkage of purpose and reception between the faith on the walls and the faith on the phone/PC screensaver. Just as the quotidian calendar art offers a daily glimpse of the divine, spiritual websites and SMS-es give the devotee ‘Your Daily Dose of Spirituality’ (*speakingtree.in*). The plethora of choices available to the receiver is also a pragmatic advantage of Hindu polytheism.

[Polytheism] is found in cultures with a clearly stratified social and/or political hierarchy.... Different divinities, like different bureaucrats, have different powers. One then approaches and propitiates the being with the requisite power to fulfil his or her needs or desires. Additionally, one can choose to focus exclusively on a divinity who appeals to one’s own personality (Lamb).

The Speaking Tree website homepage has links to Meditation, Self-Improvement, Philosophy, Faith & Rituals, Pilgrimage, Science of Spirituality, Mysticism, God & I, Wellness, as well as apps for mobile phones. Websites like *spiritualgurusofindia.blogspot.in* and *indiaspirituality.blogspot.in/* act as a platform for sharing quotes and teachings by spiritual gurus and visual images. In this way, the devotional images and texts are circulated and repeated endlessly via the internet, transcending boundaries of space and time, ‘repetitions whose perpetual sameness always expresses an identical meaning’ (Adorno 93). As with the religious ephemera, this very sameness, coupled with Internet and mobile phones’ ease of access, is crucial to the steadfastness and security that faith offers.

The interlinked, cross-referential, spiritual discourse on the Internet can be read as a metaphor for the circle of Brahma, ‘because Hindus see the world as being timeless, fetterless, boundless, cyclical and infinite (Pattanaik *Myth* 1). The Internet’s virtual reality is paradigmatic of the Hindu concept of *Maya* (illusion/delusion), while the proliferation of narratives across this virtual world is reminiscent of the Protean *Shatarupa*, ‘she of the myriad forms’ (Pattanaik *Myth* 159). The ideology of mass culture is based on endless repetition, which is a parallel of the 330 million gods in the Hindu pantheon, who are ‘countless forms by which the divine makes itself accessible to the human mind’ (Pattanaik *7 Secrets* 5), as well the countless choices open to the devotee who is shopping/surfing for faith. The blurring of binaries such as religion/science, tradition/modernity, sacred/profane, art/commerce, and Indian/Western that started with the Ravi Varma Press has continued and expanded in the Internet age to include other dichotomies like real/virtual, virtual/spiritual and private/public.

These apparently fluid shifts within the objects/texts created by the merging of mass culture and faith has its own problematic - one of the side-effects being a confusion of values. Chetan Bhagat comments, ‘Indian society has spent a long time living with a muddled set of values,’ for example, in our rampant overlooking of corruption. Yet he hopes for a ‘values clarification, especially for the new generation’ (4-5.) While

that is the ideal, we may begin with values clarification at the individual level as each seeker follows his own path from the plethora of options available to him/her in this unfixed, post-modern, internet-connected age, and also with affirmative action at the social level, where the many vehicles of religion come together in a harmony of values to fight against corruption, divisiveness and other ills for a better world.

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