

ETHNIC STEREOTYPING AS MARKETING STRATEGY: A STUDY OF SOUTH-INDIAN CHARACTERS IN SELECT POPULAR COMMERCIALS AND FEATURE FILMS

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ABSTRACT

Glocalization of marketing strategies of international brands has been happening for years since multinational corporations (MNC) realized new grazing grounds in upcoming economies. But in a country like India, where culture changes every ten kilometers, intra-localization became the order of the day and for the same multicultural reason intra-generalization was also inevitable. Thus culturally the nation got divided into South and North with the latter dominating as a result of the presence of the seat of power as well as trade. The recent emergence of South India as a crucial market of all products ranging from balloons to BMWs has led to the active portrayal of South Indian characters in commercials and feature films. By incorporating South-Indians, especially Tamil characters, in advertisements and movies, corporates localize their product by creating an illusion of its commonplaceness by covertly instilling it into the everyday culture. But behind what seems to be a naive promotion of the lesser market is a well thought out strategy to tickle the bigger market and to get them to focus their attention. One example from popular adverts is the Kotak Mahindra Bank T.V. commercial featuring the character Subbu played by Vinay Pathak. On one side Subbu is the stereotypical Tamil Brahmin, an artless man, a strict vegetarian, a brainy calculator who chooses only the best and that too only when fully convinced, a paradigm of forthrightness, someone who is innately immune to thoughts of fraud, in short someone who one can trust their money with. On the other side he is an arithmetic nerd and sceptic with only brains and no language. This advertisement concentrates both on his pronunciation as well as prudence, rendering it both funny and convincing, thus drawing the attention of both the North and the South.

Keywords: glocalization, advertisement, stereotype, ethnicity

Marketing strategies, over the years, have undergone a sea change from the general standardized approach to the particular heterogeneous treatment. Understanding the risks associated with both policies, MNCs zeroed in on a mix and match manoeuvring widely known as glocalization (portmanteau from the words *globalization* and *localization*). The new move was set off as a result of the need for the companies to flag their products in each nook and corner of the world catering to the local cultures without giving up the global appeal. The standard American commercials used globally became a thing of the past and the new localized ads were ushered in. Such a radical shift in marketing was kick-started by the irrefutable sway of the developing economies like India. Thus commercials changed for the better differing in character, length, background, music etc. according to places where it is telecast. Now we have new varieties of products and their advertisements brought out to mark every special occasion like Diwali, Christmas, Ramzan, Independence day, World Cup, new film release and so on.

Being a country as diverse in its cultures as the globe itself, India is one place where there should have been as many varieties of a particular ad in proportion to the number of different communities. This being the case we have earlier only had commercials which are predominantly North Indian in flavour featuring either bollywood or sports (read cricket) stars. Now with South India growing into a crucial contributor to the Indian GDP and its metamorphosis as a significant market has prompted major players to introduce indigenized advertisements at the same time retaining their global or national charm. Thus local actors began appearing in ads the threads of which remained more or less the same throughout the country. This evolution has ever since caught the wind having gone to an extent where a multi-million dollar company known for its carbonized drink discontinued its association with an ageing Bollywood actor (North Indian) to start a fresh innings with a much younger local actor. It was Thums Up, a product of the Coca-Cola Company, which ditched Akshay Kumar, still enjoying more than decent big screen successes, to rope in Mahesh Babu, the young superstar of Telugu film industry. Such a drastic and risky tactic is vindicated by the fact that Andhra Pradesh, according to the latest statistics, is the biggest market of the Thums Up drink. The decision to adapt is not at all uncalled for and one may refer to it as genuine advertising strategy since it points to the shift of power from north to south.

But all Hindi or North Indian commercials which feature South Indians as part of the intra-glocalization of marketing are not as genuine or innocuous as the aforementioned one. More than often they represent South Indians as members of a particular ethnic community displaced in space and time. The presence of such a character will invite attention from those of the south while his/her stereotypic characterisation will elicit laughter from those of the north. All such commercials and films which profess a glocalized *modus operandi* have this camouflaged dual agenda. In this paper I seek to analyze four popular television commercials and one feature film to identify how people of a certain ethnicity (in this case the South Indians especially Tamilians) are stereotyped for the mirth of their northern neighbours by caricaturing their customs and culture especially their manner of articulation, fashion, music, cuisine, body language etc.

Volta, a product of the TATA Company, launched a commercial series in 2012, for their “All Weather” air conditioners, which features Murthy, a Madurai Brahmin, as the central

character who gets transferred to different parts of the country on account of him being an ingenuous, untainted individual who cannot come to terms with his corrupt boss. In one of the ads he even shows a photo of him receiving a memento from his boss who looks furiously at him while he in the stereotypical Brahmin style with his head forward and close to his shoulders, humble and surprised accepts the parting gift with a meek smile. South Indians are thus branded as ethical, honourable and God-fearing citizens who grab a major chunk of positions related to finance management, a fact which owes much to their academic brilliance as well. Vinay Pathak, who plays ‘Subbu’ in the commercials of the financial service firm Kotak Mahindra, proclaims that he is a vegetarian; a fact which he himself says is immaterial to decisions taken on investments but which is consequential for the marketing of the brand since a Tamil Brahmin is the archetypal investment adviser. He works hard by canvassing or rather counselling his friends and neighbours outside office hours proving himself to be the epitome of commitment. The widespread notion that people from the south are proven connoisseurs when it comes to money matters is exemplified by the ICICI bank naming the clay model central character in its ads as Chintamani, a popular Brahmin name. Even selling a vehicle to this conservative bunch of people is tough business, as Kareena Kapoor in the Mahindra Duro ad finds out, since buying a scooter is also a kind of investment and it is a very tiresome job to convince this community to part with their money. It is widely believed that it is only after innumerable number of calculations that this group of people spend money for comforts.

The encomiastical larger picture might highlight the expertise of South Indians in handling hard-earned money but evidently that is not the sole purpose of these outwardly harmless adverts. A solitary man lecturing on economic prospects or an animated clay model with a voice over (in the case of the ICICI ad) obviously do not guarantee the attention of the viewers except may be that of the community which the leading character represents. An appurtenant and more fundamental purpose, one feels, is definitely to please the majority group by projecting certain distinct attributes of the select minority which they find to be hilarious. A lot of caricaturing is discernible vis-à-vis language, food, music and customs. Stress is laid on the Voltas commercial’s hero’s Indianisation or rather the Tamilisation of English especially in his tendency to replace the back open rounded vowel “ɔ” in words like ‘all’, ‘not’, ‘fault’, ‘always’, ‘torque’, ‘gone’ etc with front open rounded vowel “a:”. These characters mostly use short aphoristic rhyming phrases, devoid of appropriate articles, thus disseminating an image of escapism from articulating long sentences in a language which they are, allegedly, not at home with. Some examples are

- “Walking sweating, talking sweating, bathing sweating...
But Moorthy no sweating.”
- “A/C on/ Sweat is gone.”
- “Myself Moorthy/ Madurai se.”
- “Wife woollen *diya*/ But Moorthy smart...AC *liya*.”
- “Mukteshwar outside/ Madurai inside.
- “Boss taking department money/ *me sab ko bathaya/ mujhe Kota bhagaya*.”
- “Outside hot/ *Shiva Shiva* Inside cold/ Shiver Shiver.”
- “Failing to plan is planning to fail.”
- “Morning, evening he has one thing on mind
Tax savings and future security how to find.”

The Mahindra Duro Romba Solid commercial contrasts the Bollywood diva Kareena Kapoor, the paradigm of glamour, charisma and fashion to actor Karan who plays a Tamilian sporting a vibhuti and attired in a monotonous insipid and dated costume. Vinay Pathak's Subbu is likewise garbed in run-of-the-mill shirt and trousers thereby pigeonholing Brahmins as a class who are thrifty when it comes to spending for trend.

Playing Carnatic ragas or native South Indian instruments is a motif exercised in most commercials featuring characters from the south. The Duro ad, for instance, features the melodious music of the nadaswaram in the background while in the Voltas ad the protagonist happily claps his palms while talking as if providing *thalam* to his rhythmic dialogues.

Films too are never shy of disseminating the reputed "oddities" attributed to the culture of the south. Shahrukh Khan, when he released the film *Ra.One*, hoped for a pan Indian and global blockbuster, but fell short by a long way. Apart from Hollywood-like action which was expected to give the film a global appeal it was noted for the pathetic attempt by the brains behind the film to give it a South Indian or rather Tamil shade as part of an attempt to rake in huge profits from one of the biggest entertainment markets in India where usually no movies, other than Tamil ones, make an impact. They even tried to lure Tamils into the theatre by making the central character, Shekhar Subramaniam, a native Tamil and also by incorporating Rajnikanth's Chitti (*Endhiran* fame) sequences. But after all these efforts the film failed to click and it turned out be a disaster wherever it got released. Behind what seemed to be an earnest labour from the makers of the film to woo the Tamil audiences, lies an attempt to elicit laughter from the north for the same scenes. Rajnikanth may be worshipped God-like in Tamil Nadu and people down south throng theatres just to catch a glimpse of him however bore the film is. They would want him to perform all his stylish signature movements from time to time. What is part of pride for the Tamils is intended as pure fun for those up north. The same dual intention plays its part when Shekhar adds curd to his noodles. The scene intended to tickle North Indians did its job but those down in the Deccan might not have identified their food culture with the act, as expected, since as opposed to the preconceived notions of the filmmaker, people down south know perfectly well what noodles is and what goes best with it. Thus South Indians are negatively stereotyped as a well-educated bunch of people who still holds fast to their customs that in dire circumstances they are forced to try modern cuisine but only with a touch of the taste which they believe to be their own.

The aim of this paper is to point out how deep set conceptions which entail prejudice is cunningly taken advantage of by certain money-minded individuals or groups in order to please a presumed superior and majority class or community. But stereotyping is never limited to the professed mainstream since the habit is infectious and it is doomed to exist within targeted groups too. For example, the gunning down of five alleged bank robbers (natives of Bengal and Bihar) in Velachery, Chennai has prompted a sort of xenophobia against North Indian labourers in Tamil Nadu. Increase in incidence of crimes related to this group, already typecast as unclean, uncivilized, and uneducated has led to them being branded as thieves. It's a case of give a dog an ill name and hang him. In a country like India, where borders of diversity is becoming pronounced on account of the feeling of insecurity by the people, no amount of stereotyping by gender, race or ethnicity can be tolerated since the "unity" in diversity is still evading actuality even after sixty-six years of independence.

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