

Brand India: Master Images and Narratives in the Backdrop of Globalism

Sunanda Mongia

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The jacket designer of Sunanda Mongia's study on "nation and narration" – to remind us of the seminal essay collection edited by Homi Bhabha in 1990 – had an ingenious idea when he chose the Indian 3.00 rupee stamp issued in 2000 to commemorate "50 years of the Republic of India." At its centre it depicts a stylised image representing at the same time the outline of the subcontinent and a rear view of Mahatma Gandhi's head. Wearing "India" as a garment on his back and over his shoulders while moving away from the spectator with his long walking stick, the India/Gandhi image suggests literally and with reference to its caption "Father of the Nation," the father-child relationship that intimates burden and responsibility as well as care and protection. Symbolically, it represents an icon, a macro-personality that according to Mongia is at the heart of a national narrative (3). Gandhi stands for the brand ambassador of the abstract concept of India (24). Yet the stamp says more. Printed in the Devanagari and Roman script we read both the Hindi and English version of INDIA; 50 YEARS OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA; and MAHATMA GANDHI FATHER OF THE NATION. And here we are reminded of the double heritage of the nation symbolically caught in the coexistence of the most widely spoken Indian and the imported colonial language. The simultaneous use of these two languages on the postage stamp indicates, on the one hand, that the controversy about the 'official' national Indian language has not yet been resolved. On the other hand, the occasion of commemorating 50 years of the Republic draws our attention to the Indian nation's relative 'youthfulness' as a state. The 3.00 rupee stamp then takes the reader right into Mongia's study on "Master Images and Narratives," which, however, she undertakes by looking at her subject from the perspective of globalism.

In the effort of understanding itself, Mongia argues modern India has undergone a process of defining itself as uniquely Indian by making images of itself for the benefit of the West and itself, a process that dates back to the 19th century and was occasioned both by the subcontinent's colonization and its subsequent struggle of re-asserting its own distinct identity. To understand this process, Mongia looks at the ways three central images have assumed the status of macro-icons governing the discourse on the nation to this day. Are these traditional elements of Indian nationhood still to be considered valid at present,

she asks. And will they survive in the future with the concept and the existent reality of the nation being increasingly challenged by globalism? Here, the author is doubtful not the least because her deconstruction of the three images reveals them as mythologizing and stereotyping India. Neither the macro-icon of the ascetic or “spiritual India,” nor of its femininization as “India the Mother,” nor of “language” have ever been embedded in society, Mongia says, though they have certainly impacted on it. Theory, though, requires “ground realities” (17), and if we want to speak of “Brand India,” we have to construct “different modes of nationhoods [...]” that will define India more adequately “in the context of increasing globalization” (ix). What is needed is a paradigmatic shift in the discourse on nationhood from “the textual to the actual” (9), from narrating the nation to considering the political, economic and material implications of defining it. This is the task for the future, a task that will not totally put aside our concern with Indian spirituality, the role of woman and language but will “help to balance the material and the spiritual in the individual and the community” (208).

Mongia’s book tackles a complex web of difficult issues, the most important of which are the construction of nationhood generally and of an erstwhile colonized country in particular. She also looks at modernity and globalisation; the Indian philosophical tradition and the nation’s social, political and economic realities; gender problematic in a patriarchal society; and finally, the difficulties arising from the country’s multi-linguistic character. Parts of the book ask for more than can be gained, however, because each of the topics demands a thorough historical and textual analysis which a book of around 200 pages simply cannot achieve. Thus, generalizations, summarizing and frequently repetitive remarks and passages are not altogether avoided while the main argument taking us beyond the deconstruction of stereotypes of India is relegated to the background though it is not altogether abandoned as the last chapter on “Fabricating A Country in the Age of Globalism” demonstrates.

Methodological and methodical considerations at the start making up a quarter of the book are given so much space that I expected that analyses of the three macro-icons would immediately be related to “the backdrop of globalism.” Instead, in the chapter on “Spiritual India: The *Dharma Kshetra*,” the reader is taken on a quick gallop through the millennia that allows only a brief look at Philostratus (3rd c. B.C.), Jones, Dow, Halhead and Wilkins in the 18th, Mueller and Macaulay in the 19th and Vivekananda, Nehru and Gandhi in the 20th century. Much of what is being said about the non-fictional discourse on Indian spirituality and the ascetic-guru icon is not really news, and a few pages summarizing the guru figure in Indian English fiction appear out of place because of their critical stance.

The chapter on the Mother of India icon, by contrast, combines an historical with a systematic approach and offers a varied picture that convincingly deconstructs the discourse through looking at the reality of women’s lives. The two final chapters confine themselves to a systematic survey of the Indian language debate and the possibilities of

defining the nation anew against the background of presently argued differing concepts such as multi-culturalism, globalism and liberal imperialism. Though rich in material and ideas, a more narrow focus would have enabled Mongia to substantiate her own view of “India re-Branded” more concisely than her provisional ‘master’ definition of the Indian country does, a definition which she relates to Claude Levi-Strauss and Erich Fromm’s ideas of humanism as “minimalist economic, freedom-actualizing and progressive” (197). Nevertheless, *Brand India* testifies to the preparedness and soundness of Indian cultural studies to critically intervene into a fundamentalist nationalist discourse on the nation and its dangerous impact on society we have been witness of during the last two decades. It is the general political aspect and not so much the strictly scholarly which is commendable of a study that tackles the problem of re-branding India.