

COMMERCIALS FROM INDIA THAT ILLUSTRATE TYPICAL CONCEPTS FROM INDIAN CULTURE

By

Hemant Patwardhan
Winthrop University

This is an attempt to collect commercials created and / or released in India to exhibit some typically Indian values, traditions and lifestyles. This is by no means an exhaustive listing – rather a limited few that tend to stand out most vividly. This collection may help a reader begin to understand and appreciate some of the nuances of Indian culture.

It needs to be mentioned that these do not typify the entire Indian sub-continent. Intra-country cultural differences abound, most notably between the southern and northern states. Major urban centers like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, etc. also differ from smaller towns and villages. Differences due to literacy levels, education, income and wealth, and international exposure also determine the extent to which these characteristics will apply. Demographic statistics of the country can be found online at http://www.indexmundi.com/india/demographics_profile.html or the CIA Factbook at <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/in.html>. Greater insight into attitudes, interests, opinions and lifestyles is offered by a variety of articles and monographs, published by academics and professionals.

With these caveats in mind, the following commercials illustrate some of the typically Indian values, traditions and lifestyles. It is useful to appreciate and understand these while remaining alert to their varying degrees of influence and practice in each setting.

1. Collectivism:

India is a collectivist culture. On Hofstede's scale of individualism, India measures 48 while the US measures 91. In advertising, Indian ads typically include the extended family (grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.) in commercials directed to smaller towns and rural areas. Commercials directed at urban audiences, specially a younger demographic, may depict nuclear families. Here is a commercial made by Fevicol, a brand of adhesives showing a large extended family in a rural setting, on their way to a wedding. While this commercial exaggerates to make a point, the setting nevertheless underscores the collectivistic nature – more so in the rural areas – of the Indian society

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jURZhtMX914>

2. Masculinity:

India (56) and the US (62) share fairly similar scores on masculinity. Gender roles are specified though they are certainly blurring in urban areas. The woman is typically the homemaker while the man is the breadwinner. Here is a video clip with several commercials that show sharper distinctions in the nineties as opposed to changing attitudes today. Women, as the earlier commercials show, are in charge of the kitchen (knowledge of kitchen gadgets – pressure cooker), making tea and doing laundry. The later commercials show women as having more fun and doing things men normally do

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpdqFDJ5wG4>

Another commercial by Anouk – a brand of ethnic apparel takes on the subject of working women and pregnancy. Traditionally pregnant women were expected to stay home, take it easy and devote themselves to impending motherhood. Pregnant women were not easily accepted in the hustle and bustle of office life and management decisions. This commercial shows a successful but pregnant female architect being advised by her supervisor to stay home (essentially relegating her to a secondary status). Seeing this an insult and an aspersion on her abilities, the protagonist decides to take life in her own hands by starting her own design firm. Note this commercial is in English – it is directed at urban audiences only – and reflects changes in society over the role of women in life and their increasing acceptance in the work force in management jobs.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rz5rAFAvqCs>

3. Widow remarriage:

Widow re-marriage, in the past was considered an impossibility, Women whose husbands pre-deceased them (and had children from their marriage), were deemed to be unfit to re-marry and usually ended up being forgotten. This is however changing quite rapidly, especially in cities (unfortunately, some rural pockets may still practice this age-old custom). Here is a commercial by Tanishq – a brand of Indian jewellery – that celebrates widow remarriage and breaks new ground. The bride (a dark-skinned woman – this breaks new ground as well) – with a daughter, - is shown walking around the sacred fire with the groom. Her young daughter wants to walk around the fire with the couple as well. While the bride gently asks her to stay quiet, the groom invites her to join is, much to the little girl's delight and the bride's evident pleasure – showing to a large extent how some hidebound social traditions are rapidly changing for the better in urban India.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jqggcplL79qw>

4. Skin color:

Traditionally, Indians believed that fairer skin colors indicated general superiority and beauty. There is a general preference for fair skin. This is often evident in arranged marriage proposals where skin color is often specific as a pre-qualification. This practice may have had its roots in the caste system where the lowest caste (the Shudras) were dark-skinned and were consigned to menial work, while the fairer skin castes (the Brahmins) were expected to acquire and disseminate knowledge and were at the highest level on the social ladder. The caste system has since been abolished and the government consciously tries to grant equal opportunities for all citizens. However, here is a brand of a skin fairness cream that exploits this cultural weakness.

Fair & Lovely, the skin fairness cream has faced a lot of backlash in traditional and social media over their advertising, alleging the brand as racist and derogatory treatment of dark-skinned (read ugly) women. In response, the company has toned down its message (that the cream makes your skin fair). There are now commercials that celebrate dark skin – the previous commercial on widow remarriage, for instance, shows a dark skinned bride.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYfyzsIWm2c>

5. Bollywood:

The Indian film industry (notably Bollywood – Hindi language films) is one of the largest in the world. More importantly, superstars of Hindi language cinema have huge fan followings and are often adored as Gods. Names like Amitabh Bacchhan, Shah Rukh Khan, and Aamir Khan bring the masses in droves to the theatre to watch their latest movies. These celebrities enjoy great popularity, and are powerful endorsers for products in India. Some like Priyanka Chopra, Aishwarya Rai Bachhan, and Deepika Padukone have also gained international recognition. Bollywood stars command high fees and if a brand can bring about an association between themselves and the star, it would command premium pricing and sales. Here is a commercial by Coca Cola with Aamir Khan and Aishwarya Rai Bacchhan as the endorsers setting up a date over the internet:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8SpKtrhXTU>

This coke commercial is very similar to the Michael J. Fox commercial that was released in the US:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aptaw0QgcsA>

6. Cricket:

The game of cricket is a national passion. Cricket matches command high TV ratings and prime time rates for commercials. Matches played with Pakistan enjoy especially high ratings and passions run deep. People are even known to skip work often calling in sick. Cricketers in the national side enjoy demi-god status, rivalling the pulling power of Bollywood actors. They are also celebrities commanding premium fees for endorsing products and appearances. While Coke uses Bollywood superstars, its market rival Pepsi uses cricket super stars. Here is a collection of Pepsi ads using cricket and cricketers in their ads:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGV-ZwA0hjY>

7. Music and Color

Indian events and festivities (celebrating festivals, marriages, births, birthdays, etc.) are often accompanied by upbeat music and use of color. Colors normally used would be in shades of reds, yellows and orange – vibrant, dynamic, hot and rich – though shades of blues may also be used. Indian commercials make abundant use of such colors accompanied by upbeat music. Here is an ad that shows upbeat music (product: Anchor toothpaste):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rw5arTc26-0&list=PLB0A80683B61DF98A>

Here is an ad that shows the colors of a festivals (Holi) used to sell tourism in a state (Madhya Pradesh) in India:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vLWYDvp61H0>

8. Treatment of sex:

Sex and discussions on sex in public is taboo in India. Public displays of affection are generally frowned upon. Attitudes however, are changing in urban areas with greater sex education, use of sex appeal in ads, and relaxed censor board standards towards sex and violence in Indian movies. However sex is still largely seen as a subject that should be discussed only in private. In this scenario, here is a commercial by a brand of condoms (Nirodh) that handles the subject very sensitively. It is worth noting that this commercial was commissioned by the central government. The commercial shows a young, just-married couple on their wedding night. The bride is nervous (as most brides in arranged marriages are); the new husband is sensitive and empathetic to her predicament. Rather than initiate sex, the husband decides to focus on putting his new wife at ease by initiating a conversation (and putting away the condom for use at a future time):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Fb7eYyIidY>

9. Use of 'Hinglish':

Commercials in India commonly use a mixture of Hindi and English in their dialogue and voiceovers. This seamless blend of the two languages (commonly called 'Hinglish') characterizes many commercials directed towards urban audiences. It should be noted that 'Hinglish' is popular amongst a younger, urban demographic. It symbolizes their ease with both languages and is commonly used in day-to-day conversations. Here is an example (McVities digestive biscuits):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WleE6v64rDE>

Use of 'hinglish' is much more pronounced amongst the younger generation. India has a large population of young adults and their use of 'hinglish' suggests their comfort with western and Indian influences. It represents a conscious effort to blend two cultures, sometimes quite successfully. Here is one more from Kit Kat. The dialogue seamlessly blends Hindi and English.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pQkhSPK3Apo>

10. Surrogate advertising:

This is a strategy unique to India mainly for cigarette and alcohol brands. Since the Indian government bans advertising of spirits and liquor, businesses have resorted to advertising other extremely minor products under the same brand name, using a loophole in the law. The law allows such advertising if these 'minor' products are actually available, so businesses keep very limited quantities of such products available for sale. However, the brand name is much more strongly associated with the main product (alcohol), so in effect, this serves as advertising for the alcohol brand. Here are several examples:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsfXddAVMxM>

Seagrams Imperial Blue is a brand of whisky, however this commercial shows them advertising music CDs under the Imperial Blue brand name. Naturally, no one gets taken in by such ads, yet they remain popular

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XQ7x7c2hkQ>

11. 'Jugaad' advertising

'Jugaad' (pronounced joo-gaad) is a typically Indian term that celebrates the initiative to improvise / innovate without having to resort to expensive repairs and replacements. Doing 'jugaad' is very deeply ingrained in Indian society and one can see examples of this in daily life. Here is a collection of commercials that demonstrate this trait:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9V4GN_Of6nE

12. Arranged marriages

Arranged marriages are still very frequent in India. Considered a lifelong bond, they are seen as a union between two families. The thinking behind this goes as follows: 'Love is not required to be present at the time of the wedding, only liking is sufficient. Love develops over time through proximity to each other after the wedding'. Often the bride and bridegroom may meet formally only a couple of times (in the company of other family members) after which they are expected to announce their (un)willingness. However, the final decisions are made by the respective parents in consultation with the bride and groom. While this practice sounds strange to other cultures, many marriage studies actually show such unions to be more permanent and fulfilling. However the jury is still out on this. Here is a collection of commercials that show scenes from marriages in India. The bride and groom wear traditional clothes, the imagery is rife with color and music, and jewellery predominates:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8yT7BquLefU>

The various commercials in the video clip above show (in order of appearance):

- a. An Indian bride in her wedding finery welcoming her husband on their wedding night, teasingly admonishing him for coming in late (bridal collection);
- b. A bride-to-be being introduced to her potential in-laws and groom-to-be, tense about having to decide about a life partner on the basis of just one meeting and serving samosas (an Indian savory snack), but becoming more receptive to the groom-to-be on the basis of his response assuring the bride's father that he would learn cooking (Indian wives are expected to be good cooks and take charge of the kitchen) (Biba – a brand of ethnic women's dresses);
- c. Another first meeting between the potential groom's family and the bride's family in which the grandmother noisily slurps tea from the saucer (a very rural, age-old practice) – seeing this and so as to be appreciative and inclusive towards her, the groom-to-be and his family also follow suit, much to the delight of the potential bride (Nazraana – diamond jewellery brand);
- d. Shopping for wedding jewellery with mother, sister and grandmother, in which the grandmother clearly shows her appreciation for another bride-to-be of south Indian origin decked out plentifully in expensive jewellery, and suggests her granddaughter breaks her marriage and marry a south Indian instead so she can avail of such fine jewellery. The bride-to-be playfully suggests that her grandmother instead work on

that with her younger sister (much to the younger sister's chagrin) (Tanishq – and Indian jewellery brand);

- e. A humorous take on a groom's impatience to be with his beautiful wife on their wedding night that leads to his physical impairment following a sudden loss of power in the house, and their subsequent decision to adopt a child – something that could have been avoided had they invested in an inverter that guarantees 24 hour power supply (V-guard inverter);
- f. The last one shows a custom usually played out in North Indian weddings – that the bride's sister and cousins steal the groom's shoes and in return he must pay them money to get them back. The commercial takes a different angle showing the bride as having stolen the groom's shoes and that she playfully demands money from him to get them back (Another jewellery brand – Tribovandas Bhimji Zaveri).