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# Following the Endorser's Shadow: Shah Rukh Khan and the Creation of the Cosmopolitan Indian Male

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## Abstract:

Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) is ubiquitous in the Indian public sphere. At last count, he was endorsing more than 25 brands, from computers and cars to vegetable oil, facial creams, noodles, and cream biscuits. However, this ubiquity, rather than hurting SRK's image, helps to make him the quintessential pan-Indian male. Because he is everywhere, for everyone, endorsing every role and every brand, SRK progressively comes to stand for the desires and aspirations of the whole Indian nation. He becomes one of the few symbols that can represent the idea of India in the minds of audiences. Because India is an extremely heterogeneous nation—divided along the lines of language, race, regional communities, religion, class, and caste—pan-Indian symbols such as SRK are especially valuable to the marketing community. This article explores the construction of SRK as a master Indian symbol and more generally, the use of celebrity endorsements in the construction of a national imaginary.

In May 2000, I started field work in the world of Indian advertising agencies and their clients. And in my first days in Bombay, I saw the face of the Indian actor Shah Rukh Khan (SRK) everywhere I went. On my television screen, SRK was playback-singing the tune of “*Phir bhi dil hai hindustani*” [at heart we are still Indian], promising audiences that despite rapid economic changes Indians would hold on to core Indian values. Across the city, SRK's grinning face advertised for Hyundai Santro, Pepsi, and Omega watches. SRK had become the symbol of India's globalization and access to new commodities.

This paper attempts to follow and deconstruct SRK as a symbol of India's globalizing economy, and the re-definition of Indian national identity as consumerist, urban, and resolutely global. In the spirit of cultural biographies following the social life of things, I follow SRK as he moves between advertising endorsements, movies, interviews and public appearances.<sup>1</sup> I build upon Dyer's argument that the screen biography and a star's actual life intersect and build upon each other.<sup>2</sup> In other words, to understand the crafting of SRK as an Indian icon, one has to look at a variety of marketing and media institutions. The cultural meaning of a celebrity lies in the intersections and juxtapositions between his life on the screen and his many other avatars.<sup>3</sup>

This analysis contributes to an understanding of celebrities as vehicles for advancing the national project. Brands have been analyzed for the way they mobilize national consciousness around a set of themes.<sup>4</sup> Through an analysis of SRK's cultural meaning, I show how a celebrity evolves to eventually stand for a whole nation. By examining key advertising campaigns for brands such as Hyundai Santro, ICICI bank, and Lux [an interview with the creative director who worked on the campaign appears as a separate article in this issue of *Advertising and Society Review*], this paper shows the process by which SRK has come to symbolize the quintessential Indian man.

## Becoming Indian by Being for Everyone

SRK is no stranger to the tactics of advertising. He graduated with a degree in mass communications from Jamia Millia Islamia University in New Delhi before embarking on a career in theater, television, and cinema.<sup>5</sup> In the movie *Yes Boss*, SRK even played a young advertising executive who aspired to have his own agency one day. At the annual awards ceremony of the advertising community in 2002, he declared that he saw advertising as an alternate profession and that advertising endorsements formed an essential part of his career:

People ask me, “How did you become such a big star?” It is not because of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, it’s not because of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, *Baazigar* or *Darr*. I think I became a big star because I had the right to choose. I was in a position of choice, a choice that the advertising world gave me, as an alternate profession, to choose the right kind of films that would suit my personality, my capabilities, my acting style and I could do that because I knew that I had an alternate profession in advertising.

SRK has applied the perspective of the marketing and advertising world to the way he chooses his films, carefully selecting the type of movies he makes to cover a wide range of audiences. As Choi and Rifton highlight, this reflects the way celebrities control their public persona as brands:

Just as marketers strive to create and enhance brand images that can resonate with their target markets, celebrities manage and market their images in hopes that the images are viewed as appealing and ideal to the audiences.<sup>6</sup>

In an interview with the BBC in 1997, SRK declared:

I believe that the audience is so varied in India [...] There are still people who ask me in villages, “Do you really bleed when you fight?”[...] You have to do films that go to every section. So I’ll do a film that appeals to perhaps parents. Or I’ll do a film which is absolutely aggressive like *Ram Jaane*, which appeals to people on the roads, which may not do as well commercially as the others. But for the audience it was made for it works for them. I also do what they call fluffy films, middle-class, middle of the road cinema. I’ve done all kinds of films.

In many interviews SRK has repeated that he wants to be a superstar. By selecting a large variety of films, he is able to come closer to a truly pan-Indian hero, appealing to different sensibilities and tastes. He has played Hindu (*Devdas*) and Muslim (*Chak De*) characters. He has been a country bumpkin trying to adjust to urban life (*Chahaat*) and an urban executive trying to succeed in the big city (*Yes Boss*); a non-resident Indian working on a NASA project in the US (*Swades*) and an Indian pilot in love with a Pakistani woman (*Veer Zaara*).

SRK has been even more ubiquitous in the advertising arena. At last count, he was endorsing more than 30 brands in India, including Compaq Presario computers, Sunfeast cream biscuits, TAG Heuer watches, Videocon's consumer electronics, Airtel's cellular phone service, Bagpiper Whisky, Top Ramen Curry Smoodles, Sona Chandi natural health tonic, and facial cream Fair and Handsome.<sup>7</sup> He is the face of so many campaigns and companies that some Indian consumers even associate his name with brands for which he has never advertised.

More than his ability to attract attention for little-known brands, his ability to symbolize the nation as a whole makes him the perfect candidate for the lead role in advertising some of the most popular brands in India such as Pepsi, ICICI bank, and Videocon. McCracken argues that an endorser's effectiveness depends upon the meanings associated with the endorser, which are transferred onto the product or service.<sup>8</sup> Here I argue that SRK has come to symbolize India itself, and that, with every endorsement and movie role, it is SRK's ubiquity that helps reinforce the celebrity's quintessentially Indian identity.

His ability to straddle different worlds echoes earlier cinematic depictions of characters that are able to reconcile the great divides of the Indian folk imagination: village and city, poverty and wealth, modernity and tradition.<sup>9</sup> Through the figure of SRK, marketers are able to balance Indian-ness with modernization in ways that suggest that Indians are able to deal with the contradictions of modern life. SRK's ability to evolve in different spheres, and to reconcile the incredible heterogeneity of the Indian subcontinent, makes him an especially suitable semiotic device for Indian marketers.

Finding a pan-Indian hero is a crucial recurring concern for both film producers and advertising professionals. As Steve Dorné aptly argues, the heterogeneity of the Indian audiences has led to the crafting of Indian films that mix romantic storylines and action sequences, dancing and singing, urban and rural scenes; a mix that has been labeled as the *masālā* film, in reference to the eponymous spice mix used in Indian cooking.<sup>10</sup> The blending of film elements has become such a mainstay of Indian cinema that it is used as a generic term to qualify a large part of the Indian film industry. This blending of elements is intimately related to an idea of the Indian audience as extremely heterogeneous. Cinema hall managers, film producers, and film directors all talk about the financial necessity to appeal to filmgoers across age, gender, and class divisions.<sup>11</sup> Cultural theorists have argued that the increasing use of the urban, upper-class hero such as SRK helps erase caste and regional divisions.<sup>12</sup> Westernized characters, such as the ones often played by SRK, are difficult to identify as members of a particular caste, region, or ethnicity. SRK himself crosses caste and regional divisions: in interviews and public appearances, he manages to craft the story of the man of the masses who has succeeded through hard work. He often talks about his humble beginnings in New Delhi, of losing his parents at an early age, of his love for his family, all of which increase his appeal as the regular, approachable guy. But through his endorsements of the latest commodities and reports of his success abroad, he also incarnates a more Westernized and global version of the Indian man.

Some of the most striking conversations in Indian advertising circles revolve around the definition of the Indian man that can appeal to the whole country. In the advertising agency where I was doing fieldwork, executives debated two aspects of

Indian-ness. They questioned, who the prototypical Indian man is. What does he wear? What kind of values does he espouse? Where does he live? Equally important were the discussions about the vast differences across consumer groups in India: between people of different regions, different social classes, and income levels, speaking different languages. Characters such as the Gujarati businessman, the South Indian housewife or the flamboyant Punjabi family form the stock conversations about Indian advertising. The stuff of advertising discussions in Bombay was culture itself and the boundaries that delineate cultural groups.

Because of such diversity, creating a national advertising campaign would often prove to be a very difficult exercise. Indian advertisers have to craft commercials that have appeal across regional and cultural lines. For example, advertisers would think very carefully about the semiotics of weddings because the specific rituals, clothing, and symbols of wedding ceremonies are so tightly bound to specific communities. There is no such thing as an “Indian wedding,” but rather a myriad of diverse practices throughout the nation. As creative industries try to deal with the heterogeneity of the country, they select master symbols which come to stand for the experience of the nation. The world of cricket, for example, is regularly invoked to evoke national pride.<sup>13</sup> SRK has become one of these pan-Indian master symbols.

The advertising industry has jumped at the opportunity to use a truly pan-Indian man to advertise products. Now although SRK’s ubiquity might seem unsustainable—and indeed some viewers feel they have had an overdose of Shah Rukh—it is this ubiquity itself that has insured his transformation into a truly pan-Indian hero. The stories advertisers tell are often about change: the release of innovative new products or the access to new services. These stories are usually implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, about modernity, about India, and about the definition of a new type of modern identity in a global world. SRK, by evoking the global Indian man, has been co-opted as the symbol of these changes.

## **Becoming Indian by Becoming Global**

Many advertisements featuring SRK depict a man fundamentally connected to his Indian roots, yet unconstrained from achieving international mobility and success. To understand such advertising representations, we need to return to early cinematic representations of the global Indian man, notably in SRK Khan’s most successful movie to date, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* or DDLJ [Those with a Heart Will Take the Bride]. In DDLJ, SRK plays the young Raj, a second generation British Indian living in London. Raj is a spoilt brat who enjoys all the comforts and commodities of a Westernized lifestyle but follows Indian rules of moral conduct. Notably, Raj refuses to elope with the film’s heroine because he wants to marry her with her father’s consent. The movie gave value to the hybridized Indian who can hold on to core Indian values while embracing the opportunities that the West has to offer. Hugely popular with the Indian diaspora, the film also signaled the emergence of non-resident Indians as the reference group for upwardly mobile young Indians.<sup>14</sup> It signaled the rise of the global Indian man as the character to emulate.

We find a reincarnation of Raj/SRK as the global Indian in an advertisement for an Indian bank, ICICI. In the commercial, which appeared in 2006, SRK is simply inviting the audience to go on the “SRK world tour.” He starts his tour by opening the

windows of his room through which we catch a glimpse of diverse international monuments and landscapes: New York's Statue of Liberty, the billowing sail of Dubai's iconic Burj al Arab hotel, the Hong Kong skyline, London's Tower Bridge—all places where a large number of non-resident Indians live. SRK declares that ICICI is like "coming home." In him come together several ideas: of a modern and well-traveled Indian, of an Indian at ease with technology and success, and most of all, of an Indian that is firmly attached to his roots.



**Video 1.** ICICI spot. (Shown with permission from [www.srkpagali.net](http://www.srkpagali.net).)

SRK's endorsements tell the story of India's complex and tumultuous relationship with the West. In a commercial for Hyundai's new car we find SRK sporting sunglasses and a golden jacket, welcomed by fans, for the "world premiere of the i10." As SRK walks on the red carpet, a young blonde woman walks abreast him, her eyes firmly on him. As she enters the car, SRK bars entry saying "Sorry, you'll have to wait." The commercial is designed to emphasize the world debut of the Hyundai i10 in India, where the car is manufactured.<sup>15</sup> In addition, the commercial emblemizes India's accession to the world stage as a powerful economic center. The parallel path of SRK and the Caucasian model stand for India and Western countries evolving side by side, sharing parallel paths to the same economic prosperity. The image of the Western woman shunned by SRK is a dramatic reversal of the relationship between India and the West. Cultural theorists have often commented on the way colonial powers represented Indians as feminine and passive and how these representations helped justify the subjugation of Indians.<sup>16</sup> Instead, in this ad, the West is portrayed as the somewhat passive observer of India's economic success. The scenario of the advertisement evokes the colonial images of domination, but in an ironic and postcolonial reversal of the relationship. In these new representations, the West becomes feminine and passive, India masculine and dominating.



**Video 2.** Hyundai spot.

The figure of SRK has become a metaphor for the economic and social transformations of the Indian nation. A very significant trend is the lightning quick urbanization of the country and the mushrooming of shopping centers, apartment

complexes and cinema multiplexes. Cities are booming: 31 villagers migrate to an Indian city every minute, a trend that is projected to last for another 43 years.<sup>17</sup> In this context of urban development, SRK stands for the good life in Indian cities and the access to commodities and services that until now were reserved to Western elites.

In commercials for property developer DLF, SRK invites audiences to say “no to Singapore, no Dubai, no London” and instead be surprised by the development of large Indian cities such as Mumbai, Ludhiana, Kolkata, or Hyderabad, where DLF has built properties for young middle-class Indians. In the DLF ads he is depicted as a global Indian who vacations in London and shops in Singapore but has stopped country-hopping because of all the developments made in India, a world of shopping malls, “American style homes,” and modern office buildings where “progress is made.”



**Video 3.** DLF spot. (Shown with permission from [www.srkpagali.net](http://www.srkpagali.net).)

Such advertising images reflect a new type of social life arising in India. This new segment of the population is characterized by nuclear families living in apartment buildings with names like Oakwood Estates, Trinity Towers, Princeton Estate, or Beverly Park. It is an American style of living for the new *comprador* class of young professionals working in call centers, foreign multinationals or software companies. They come to reinforce, in the minds of audiences, an idea of the good life as access to the shopping centers, gyms, and American-style residences that urban living affords. The prominence of urban themes in Indian advertising recalls the emphasis on urban life that is used to project an Asian type of modernity: a resolutely consumerist type of modernity where being modern is associated with the image of the global manager going through an anonymous airport, or a similarly placeless and nameless financial district, before returning to an American-style home in the suburbs of Shanghai or New Delhi.<sup>18</sup> By embodying this vision of modernity, SRK continues to be the favored icon for spurring the desires of the middle class for new products and services. SRK has now become a trope for the global cosmopolitan Indian, the new rising Indian man.

### **Becoming the New Indian Male**

Until the 1980s, representations of Indian men in advertising and other spheres of Indian popular culture emphasized Indian men as citizens. In the past 20 years, however, these representations have been slowly replaced by the image of the Indian man as cosmopolitan, upwardly mobile, and resolutely ambitious. This evolution is reflected in the depiction of Indian movies since the 1970s, particularly in the person of Amitabh Bachchan. In Bachchan’s most famous roles of the 1970s, he plays an angry young man, a working-class hero trying to fight corruption, and expressing a

strong sense of revolt against the system. By the 1990s, however, this model became outmoded: the rapid economic changes and the liberalization of the Indian economy helped shape the new Indian hero as a well-traveled, globally recognized urban professional, sporting foreign designer clothes but keeping true to his Indian roots—SRK. The shift from Amitabh Bachchan to SRK signals a movement from the figure of the Indian man as citizen fighting for the nation, to the celebration of the Indian man as connected to global networks of consumption and production, the Indian man as consumer and manager.

The new Indian man, as portrayed by SRK, is more at ease displaying his feminine side. He has let other actors, such as Salman Khan or Akshay Kumar, endorse brands that play on a more aggressive version of masculinity. For example, both Kumar and Salman Khan featured in campaigns for Thums Up's campaign "Grow up to Thums Up", where the drinking of Thums Up is associated with being a grown-up, a virile and muscular hero. In contrast, SRK is often selected to play the boyish, mischievous character in ads and films, a character whose fluidity and hybridity can appeal across wide audiences.

In his most feminine incarnation [see the interview of Nandita Chalam interview in this issue of *Advertising and Society Review*], SRK endorsed the Lux brand of soap. Breaking with its tradition of depicting female stars, Hindustan Lever and advertising agency J. Walter Thompson decided on SRK as the best endorser to rejuvenate the brand. In the commercial, SRK is shown sitting in a tub of petals, with actresses who have already appeared as Lux models by his side.



**Figure 1.** Lux print ad.



**Video 4.** Lux spot.

In an interview with an Indian newspaper, Hindustan Lever's senior executive Ashok Venkatramani declared that the company wanted to portray the new "metrosexual male":

Instead of showing SRK as a macho man riding a horse like the Marlboro man, the idea was to portray the metrosexual male who

had a soft touch. SRK has been portrayed as a different kind of male who is different from the rest of the stars. He is shown as a soft guy who is in touch with his emotions.<sup>19</sup>

Once again, SRK's fluidity and hybridity become his most potent assets. He is able to reconcile tradition and modernity, masculinity and femininity, emotion and ambition. His ability to evolve all at once in different spheres of Indian life, to transcend gender roles, and ethnic and religious divisions, helps craft his story as the Indian man. SRK stands for the Indian nation.

## Epilogue

In a very recent campaign, advertisers have pushed the boundaries of SRK's symbolism as the Indian nation to explicitly make him speak to and for the nation. Designed by J. Walter Thompson's Bombay office for the national newspaper *Times of India*, the campaign promotes a competition designed to "identify new leaders for a new India, men and women with the vision and ability to empower India with the kind of political leadership that is so conspicuous by its absence."<sup>20</sup>

In the advertising campaign "Lead India," SRK motivates young Indians:

The last time we decided to Do or Die, it changed the map of the world. Today the eyes of the world are on us again [...] So let's stop basking in our glorious past or daydreaming about a great future. Let's start by dominating today. And domination starts with DO.



**Video 5.** Lead India spot. (Shown with permission from [www.srkpagali.net](http://www.srkpagali.net).)

In linking action to domination, these slogans depart radically from earlier Gandhian ideas about non-violence. SRK symbolizes a more assertive India, a nuclear India ready to stake out its claim to global political and economic power. SRK's latest reincarnation harks back to Bachchan's roles of the rebellious vigilante ready to take on the system. We have come full circle, from the citizen-patriot of the 1970s to the consumer-patriot of the new century. All along, celebrities have been used to facilitate the national consciousness. The craving of Indian heroes has helped form an imagined community of citizen-consumers partaking in the dream of economic prosperity and global power.

## Conclusion

*Main Koi Aisa Geet Gaon  
Ki Aarzo Jagaoon*

*Agar Tum Kaho*

[If you want I will sing you a song that brings up all desires]  
From the movie *Yes Boss* (1997)

To follow SRK is to follow the evolution of India as a nation and the rising desires of the Indian middle class for the commodities and services of the global economy. Throughout the last 20 years, he has sung the story of many brands, a story that brings up all desires.

The construction of SRK as a quintessential pan-Indian hero transforms him into a special kind of celebrity. Because he has come to stand for the nation, he derives meaning from Indian's evolution into a global power, but conversely he endows the nation with his own dimensions. Like other celebrities, SRK acts as a carrier of cultural meaning.<sup>21</sup> He endows products with a constellation of meanings and images, specifically, images of a young, urban, consumption-oriented and cosmopolitan India. But he also gives meaning to what it is to be Indian today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Arjun, Appadurai, "Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket," in *Modernity at large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 89-114; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditisation as a Process", in Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64-94.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> See Lisa Peñaloza, "Consuming Madonna: A Critical Look at the Structure and Dynamics of Celebrity Consumption," in *20 Years of Madonna: New Approaches to Madonna's Cultural Transformations*, ed. Freya Jarman and Santiago Fouz (London: Ashgate, 2004), 176-192.

<sup>4</sup> Julien Cayla and Giana Eckardt, "Asian Brands and the Construction of a Transnational Imagined Community," forthcoming in the *Journal of Consumer Research*, August 2008.

<sup>5</sup> Anupama Chopra, *King of Bollywood: Shah Rukh and the Seductive World of Indian Cinema* (Warner Books: New York, NY, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Sejung Marina Choi and Nora J. Rifton, "Who Is the Celebrity in Advertising? Understanding Dimensions of Celebrity Images," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 40, no. 2 (2007), 304-324.

<sup>7</sup> Times of India (2006) "TV ads: Dhoni hogs limelight", <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/955723.cms>, [accessed 13/12/2007].

<sup>8</sup> Grant McCracken, "Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process," *Journal of Consumer Research*, 16 (1989), 310-321.

- <sup>9</sup> Sumita Chakravarty, *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema, 1947-1987*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993).
- <sup>10</sup> Steve Derné, *Movies, Masculinity and Modernity: An Ethnography of Men's Filmgoing in India* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000).
- <sup>11</sup> Derné, *op cit*.
- <sup>12</sup> See Patricia Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ", *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 32, no. 2 (1998), 305–36; Aruna Vasudey, *Liberty and License in the Indian Cinema*, (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978).
- <sup>13</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Playing with Modernity: The Decolonization of Indian Cricket," in *Modernity at large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 89-114. Rohitashva Chattopadhyay, "Batting And Buying: Cricket As A Visual Metaphor In Indian Advertising," *Advertising and Society Review*, 6, no. 1 (2005). Kimberley Wright, "Advertising National Pride: The Unifying Power of Cricket Fever, Kashmir, and Politics," *Advertising and Society Review* 4, no. 1 (2003).
- <sup>14</sup> Jigna Desai, *Beyond Bollywood; The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004).
- <sup>15</sup> The Hindu (2007) Hyundai unveils new compact car Thursday, <http://www.hindu.com/2007/11/01/stories/2007110156521800.htm>, November 1<sup>st</sup>, accessed 21/11/2007
- <sup>16</sup> See Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1978); Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)* (Orient Longman: New Delhi, 2002).
- <sup>17</sup> Anand Giridharadas, "Rumbling Across India To A New Life In The City," [www.nyt.com](http://www.nyt.com), accessed November 25 2007.
- <sup>18</sup> Cayla and Eckardt, *op. cit*.
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Purvita Chatterjee, "Coup Lux Khan", September 29, 2005. <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/catalyst/2005/09/29/stories/2005092900160300.htm>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> of December 2007.
- <sup>20</sup> <http://lead.timesofindia.com>.
- <sup>21</sup> See Grant McCracken, *op. cit*; Thomas O'Guinn, "Touching Greatness: The Central Midwest Barry Manilow Fan Club," in *Highways and Buyways: Naturalistic Research from the Consumer Behavior Odyssey*, ed. Russell W. Belk (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1991), 102-111.

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Julien received his PhD in 2003 from the University of Colorado (Boulder, United States) where he majored in marketing and minored in cultural anthropology. His dissertation examined the way foreign multinational companies learn about culture in the context of their work with Indian advertising agencies. This work received the prestigious Alden Clayton Prize from the Marketing Science Institute as well as the Sheth Foundation Best Doctoral Dissertation Prize.

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