

Cultural appropriation: Analysing the use of Hindu symbols within consumerism



*The use of Hindu symbols in the media and within consumer culture has led to tensions as symbols become dislocated from their religious or socio-political meaning and are perceived to be distorted. In this context **Rina Arya** discusses the need for greater scholarship to explore notions of appropriation and cultural boundaries.*

Cultural appropriation is a topic that is often discussed in the media, usually with a sensationalist spin. In 2015 the bindi, a Hindu symbol of religious significance, became a key cultural trend and the latest fashion accessory at Coachella and other music festivals in the U.S. In early 2017 Amazon [came under fire](#) for selling flip flops depicting the Father of India, Mahatma Gandhi. This came shortly after Amazon Canada [apologised](#) for selling doormats featuring the Indian flag. Desecration of the flag is a punishable offence in India resulting in fines or imprisonment. Almost on a weekly basis a new controversy arises raising questions about borrowing rights and entitlement.

All of these incidents involve the adoption of elements from one culture – which may include artistic styles and representations, land, artefacts, intellectual property, folklore and religious symbols – by members of another. The act of taking becomes political where there is an imbalance of power between the two cultures. This is the basis of the conceptualisation of cultural appropriation within post-colonial discourse. All the above examples show the extent of cultural transmission where a symbol can be taken up in a culture completely unrelated to it in ways that transform the meaning of the symbol and its reception. It also shows how, through the processes of globalisation, the world is becoming increasingly connected though not necessarily unified.

In the modern consumer mindset it is not unusual to adopt a pick-and-mix approach to different cultural experiences, and the choices are ever widening. In the UK for instance we don't need to make do with one form of Indian cuisine, for example, but can choose between Balti cuisine, South Indian style or even Indian streetfood, which is the latest brand of authenticity. The colonialist-styled restaurants, so popular in the last couple of decades, have been replaced by more rustic makeshift stalls designed to make people feel closer to the types of food that 'real' Indians eat in India. Advances in travel, import and information exchange have made it possible to access difference across thinner, more permeable interfaces. From the perspective of culture this constitutes more boundary crossing, where the boundaries separating cultures are stepped over leading to exchange and appropriation, but also towards a strenuous drive towards the preservation of traditions and heritage.

My forthcoming monograph, *Cultural Appropriation: A Hindu Context*, is concerned with the cultural analysis of Hindu symbols within consumerism. India has a strong history of visual culture, seen in the chromolithographic prints of images of deities, saints and sacred sites that became popular in the late nineteenth century. Widely referred to as 'god posters' or 'calendar art', these are found in a host of religious and secular locations throughout India, such as shops, cinemas, factories, public transport, and temples. Variants of these stock images have appeared on merchandise primarily intended for a Western audience in the form of everyday apparel on the high street and also on the catwalks of fashion collections by esteemed designers such as Roberto Cavalli.



Image: God posters in an Indian market. Credit: [Sudeep Mukherjee](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The West's fascination with Hindu imagery can be traced back to an interest in Indian spirituality, which started in the nineteenth century in the Transcendentalist movement. During the counter-cultural years the desire for learning about Indian spirituality became more direct and India became a haven for spiritual seekers. 'Indian spirituality' became an umbrella term encompassing different rituals and practices, mostly those within the Vedanta tradition. Interest in Hindu deities was promulgated in India through the medieval *bhakti* tradition of devotion where cultivating a personal relationship with one's deity was through *darshan*, the sanctified practice of looking. This aesthetic of looking, combined with the widespread view of Hinduism as polytheistic, has been popularised in contemporary representations of Hindu deities in the consumer market where bold, saturated colours and the gods, each with their own distinctive character and iconography, lent themselves well to being reproduced on fabrics and other surfaces. Furthermore, the celebration of diversity or multiculturalism conveyed (albeit superficially) is politically progressive. The appeal of other symbols such as Om, arguably the most sacred symbol and sound, are also wide-reaching and it has been commodified, like yoga, as an expression of spiritual serenity.

With increasing exposure to cultures in the contemporary era, there needs to be greater scholarship about the manifold issues that arise as a result of cultural appropriation. Some of these involve the more generic problems of thinking about culture, given its mutability. The fluid nature of a number of central concepts, including culture and identity, means that the boundary separating cultures is often indeterminate, or at least differently placed for contesting parties. But the need for the boundary remains permanent to protect the culture from desecration. Transgression is at once a disruption but also, paradoxically, a reinstatement, because it is only through threat and invasion that the importance of the boundary is reasserted and the need for the sanctity of the culture called into question. Moreover, there are other issues that problematise the question of ownership. These concern the convoluted narratives of ideas and objects, which cannot always be traced back to their cultural origins.

The main issue pertinent to the study of Hindu symbols concerns the boundaries between purity (sanctity) and impurity. In India images of gods are circulated within the hub of everyday life; they are sold by roadsides, feature in workplaces, are plastered on walls – but in all these spaces they are treated reverentially as sacred objects. This means the conditions on how they are articulated, viewed, touched, circulated has to be done with due attention to their sacred status. This means that they are to be kept apart from the realm of the mundane or the profane. The same boundaries are not necessarily adhered to in the West, which is why the presence of a bindi on a festival goer, or an image of the goddess Laxmi on a swimsuit, is regarded as blasphemous. To restate, it is not the imprint of Hindu deities on clothing or other surfaces that causes offence *per se* but the way these objects are subsequently (mis)treated, meaning their special status as sacred symbols is not being accorded.

Wider questions that need to be addressed are: what is permissible (for outsiders) and what are the various constraints placed upon this use? What emerges in the case studies is that the meaning of symbols is not static but subject to change, for both outsiders and those within the community. There is also the danger that minority and indigenous cultures are treated trivially and exotically as an alternative to the norm. What often happens, as seen in commodification, is that the symbol becomes dislocated from its religious or socio-political meaning, and is enjoyed for its aesthetic value. This superficial approach reduces culture to the notion of 'the spectacle', something to be looked at, rather than as a deeper understanding of the politics of inequality or the significance of the symbols for its people.

The use of Hindu images in consumer culture in the West also raises important issues about both the visibility and the growth of the global Hindu community. The use of Hindu symbols in the media and within consumer culture has been fraught with accusations of blasphemy and denigration by members and groups within the Hindu community both in the subcontinent and across the diaspora. This has facilitated the creation of regulatory bodies to work on behalf of the community to contest the desecration of religious and cultural values and to restore and uphold the sanctity of their religion. These voices have been crucial in demonstrating the rise of Hindu groups within the UK, and the fervour of the Hindu global community, which unites Hindu diaspora communities in their attitudes to the sacred.

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About the Author



Dr Rina Arya works in the areas of art theory and cultural anthropology. Author of *Francis Bacon: Painting in a Godless World* (2012) and *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (2014), she is currently working on a book about the cultural appropriation of Hindu symbols.