



# ***Glocal-Cola***

***Visual Communications of Coca Cola  
in India as a Site of Mediation  
Between Global and Local Factors***

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**KEYWORDS**

globalisation, glocalisation, cultural consumption

**ABSTRACT**

This study attempts to investigate how effectively Coca Cola has been marketed in India and how the Indian cultural identity maintained itself during this process – exemplifying global and local duality. In order to proceed with such an enquiry I have considered the challenges that India poses for the marketing of globally produced FMCGs (fast moving consumer goods) followed by observation of how the marketing of Coca Cola has been tailored for the Indian context and commentary on its relative successes.

The relevance of such an investigation lies in the emerging theoretical theme of 'glocalisation' which explores both the effective expansion of transnational companies into new markets and the ability of cultures to exert their own identity in their interplay with the global scenario.



## THE DIVERSE INDIAN CONTEXT

*“high-rise office buildings can share the same street with tin-shacks, water buffalo share the road with BMW’s; dung fuels many fires while CNG fuels all the buses and rickshaws of Delhi.”*

Praveen Nahar,  
National Institute of Design, India

## THE DIVERSE INDIAN CONTEXT

India's diversity can be somewhat attributed to its lengthy history, extensive size, extreme range of climatic and geographic conditions and the absorption of the prolonged influence of traders, invaders, immigrants and colonizers.

Although Hindi is the native language of 30% of the population, there are 24 languages spoken by more than a million people followed by numerous further languages and dialects. It is worth noting that India possesses the world's largest English speaking/ understanding population. Alongside the diversity of language are the variety of religious beliefs (6 with over 1 million believers: Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Christian) and local customs which flourish in its 29 states. Urban dwellers, including those of the six key areas ('metros') of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Bangalore, Chennai and Pune are countered by a rural dwellers that comprise more than two thirds of the population. Add to this issues of literacy (52%) and extremities of class and caste and one sees that India presents a potent mix for transnational marketers to contend with. (CIA, 2001 & Wikipedia, 2006)

## COCA COLA'S BACKGROUND IN INDIA

In 1977 Coke was forced out from operations in India by a socialist government as part of a drive for national self-sufficiency. After a 16-year absence, neo-liberation policies in India allowed for its return in 1993 but to a very different cultural and economic landscape.

A Coca Cola sub-brand, Jaipur, Rajasthan



During their absence local company Parle Brothers had formulated an alternative cola, Thums Up, alongside a number of other beverages like the lemon flavoured soda Limca and mango flavoured Maaza. Coke bought the complete Parle operations in 1993 and presumed that they could use their tried and tested method of taking their biggest competitors out of action. But "a generation had grown up without Coke and wasn't pining for its return." (Deogun & Karp, 1998) It also seems that locals feel that unlike Coke, Thums Up tastes fine even when not refrigerated which has obvious significance for less affluent consumers.

Vastrapur, Ahmedabad



Although Pepsi, with their 6-year head start had paved the way in renewing demand for global cola, it was not so easy for the returning international soda-superstar. Pepsi embraced youth in its campaigning whereas Coke mistakenly focused on the American way of life. (Kaye, 2004) It has been argued that such errant focus by global companies had undermined the popular conception of commercial imperialism. Such de-localisation resulted in a situation where “multinationals were being interpreted as a kind of recapitulation of the colonial encounter, in which Indians... were proving resistant to the best laid plans that the finest marketing minds of the West had to offer.” (Mazzarella, 2003a)

Although their intensive investment in the first five years back in India gave them the credit of being one of India’s largest investors (Kaye, 2004) Coca Cola’s dismal sales results during this period begged significant re-strategising.

## MEDIATION OF MARKET & MARKETING

Hindustan Lever, global giant Unilever's local arm, was among the first producers and distributors of FMCGs to realise the potential of India's rural market by introducing small size packets of washing powder that would last several washes. **By reducing margins but increasing turnover, profit-seeking in India by global players was unleashed.** It was seen that FMCGs in India require employment of the 3As of availability, affordability and acceptability. (Balakrishna, 2003)

Sign-writer template advertising the 200ml Coke at Rs.5 in Gujarati



Coca Cola acknowledging its lack of comprehension of local particularities, launched upon extensive research in India. It realised that it was competing with traditional refreshments such as narial-pani (coconut-water), nimbu-pani (lemon-water), chai (tea), lassi (yoghurt drink) and fruit juices. Competitive pricing in such a scenario was imperative. (Kaye, 2004) Additionally one could note that affordability was a driver in the Indian context for desirability so Coke launched a 200ml returnable glass bottle at a lower prices of Rs. 5 with accompanying advertising campaigns. (Businessline, 1998)

Gujarati script acknowledging linguistic diversity.  
(Translation in Regional Campaigns chapter)



It was also noted that soft drink consumption was somewhat limited to special occasions like outings, parties, festivals and weddings in contrast to more affluent countries where daily consumption occurred. Within consumers Coke located two distinct target markets: urban youth which they called India A and rural Indians which were called India B (Balakrishna, 2003). Worth noting is that India A only made up 4% of India's total population (Kaye, 2004) although could be seen as a lucrative market in terms of influence, income & consumption habits.

In line with decentralising thrust of Coke internationally, local managers and advertising teams were recruited and regional teams were established in a multi-local network system. Such embracing of transnationality has been commended as encouraging local responsiveness. (Gajendar, 2003) Further investigation of regionally segmented audiences have resulted in advertisements currently being in more than six languages reflecting India's linguistic diversity (Businessline, 1998).



Coke and food combo with Southern style meal



Southern states often require markedly different strategies such as alternate celebrity endorsements (Tamil vs. Bollywood stars) and promotion of Coke accompanying regionally relevant food combos.

Further to such localised efforts were the national television commercial and print campaigns which took a turn from earlier American style aspiration value to a much more vernacular style which will be discussed in detail in the following section. Collectively such cultural mediation of marketing, based on greater insights of local specificity, contributed to the doubling of rural penetration from 2001 to 2003 and the pushing of Coke ahead of former leaders Pepsi and Thums Up in rural markets. (Businessline, 2003 & IBEF, 2004)



**THANDA MATLAB  
COCA COLA**

*“The retooling of Indian  
marketing professionals  
as cultural consultants”*

(Mazarella, 2003a)

Thanda Print Ad (detail)

In order to illustrate the successful use of idiomatic advertising in television and print media I will be focusing for the most part on the *Thanda* campaign created by Prasoon Joshi of the Mumbai office of international advertising firm McCann Erickson which has included various manifestations from 1998 onwards.

*Thanda Matlab Coca Cola* (Thanda Means Coca Cola) played on the Northern Indian vernacular use of 'thanda' (cold) as a generic term for a cold drink. Guests are commonly asked "garam? thanda?" on arrival, implying that they state their preference for tea or cold drinks. In this manner one can see that the *Thanda* campaign attempts to embed Coca Cola in local tradition rather than inserting a foreign one. Rather than highlighting aspirational distance it focuses on proximity to the familiar with the intention of appealing to rural sensibilities. Emphasis on *cold* is also a strategic position in the annual summer 'cola wars' which take place between Coke and Pepsi to the backdrop of searing temperatures.



*Thanda* print ad showing a truck driver using a Coke bottle pour water into radiator.



The *Thanda* print ads show a series of scenes in which Coca Cola is subsumed by 'Indianess'. The ads are shot to look unconstructed in a way that embraces the local and celebrates the common-man. *Drinking* Coca Cola is not emphasised but cooling connotations are evident in the complete series.

The concept of creolisation, which is usually equated with errant decoding of brand value, is here harnessed by the advertisers. Creolisation refers to the mixture of meanings and forms from ambivalent sources in transcultural contexts. (Hannerz, 1992 in Belk & Ger, 1996) In this way it can be seen that "consumers often appropriate the meanings of global brands to their own ends, creatively adding new cultural associations, dropping incompatible ones, and transforming others to fit into local cultural and lifestyle patterns." (Arsel & Thompson, 2004) Whereas examples of creolisation are usually frowned upon by brand producers, Prasoon saw it as effective to produce virtue from such necessity that commonly underpins the Indian rural sector (Majumdar, S. 2005).

Award-winning *Thanda* press ad



In this way the specifically Indian concept of *juggard* is captured which entails localised ingenious improvisation.

Although the campaign was aimed at India B, the way that it seems to intentionally undermine the conventional advertising project itself created an additional appeal with India A. This operates in the same way that ironic campaigns by Benetton and Diesel capture more affluent international audiences that have become jaded by incessant advertising. In fact the *Shade of Crates* ad attracted favourable international attention in winning a Golden Lion at Cannes in 2003 (Majumdar, S. 2005)

The local thrust of the press ads was accompanied by a complimentary yet markedly different television commercial campaign. Bollywood actor Aamir Khan poses as a variety of regionally inspired characters in a highly idiomatic series of ads which additionally largely parody the Bollywood film genre.

Once again the campaign represented an attempt to speak to the rural sector with the main screenings being on local television channels but later gained surprising popularity with India A and began to appear on cable and satellite channels as well. (Businessline, 2003)

Mumbai Gangster Thanda TVC



To follow are a sample of Thanda campaign television commercial synopses:

MUMBAI GANGSTER – Arrogant gangster enters bar and asks for a *thanda*. Barman gives him a soft drink. He asks again, same problem. Explains that by *thanda* he means Coca Cola leading into song and product focused shots.

## Punjabi Farmer and Hyderabad *Thanda* TVCs



PUNJABI FARMER – Three metro girls get stranded in country due to car breakdown. They venture into field and ask farmer for a *thanda*. He proceeds with poetically, rural, flirtatious banter. He draws up a bucket from the well which is full of Coke, leading into the tag-line and a song which parodies a traditional Punjabi folksong. The common-man wows the elite women.



HYDERABADI SHOP-OWNER – Khan feigns disappointment as beautiful customer calls him *bhai* (brother) which quashes his hopes of romantic development. He goes on to explain that *thanda* means Coke which leads into a song. [The local and class-based characteristics of paan chewing and tying of the lungi add a vernacular humor.](#) The ad places Coke within reach of the elite (woman) and the common-man (Khan).

Nepali Tourist Guide *Thanda* TVC



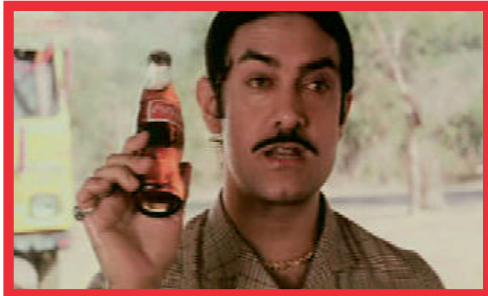
NEPALI TOURIST GUIDE – Nepali guide shows honeymoon tourists through the mountains. Husband asks for a *thanda* and wife gives him Coke. Guide asks for *thanda* and they give him a boxed juice of inferior quality. He is insulted and starts giving them an obviously misguided tour which they find confusing. Khan then announces that this is all as real as the juice is *thanda* to which they look embarrassed and hand over a Coke, leading into the tag-line and a comic song. The common-man gets the better of the middle-class couple.

The comical characters do not patronise Indians as the ads employ the Bollywood genre feature of self-effacing male characters. All use regionally specific language though this is able to be decoded by most Indians. All include a song which ties in the *Thanda Matlab Coca-Cola* tag line – usually related in style, language or manner to the location. Most ads show common-men in a favourable light than more elite characters. The exception being the gangster, but he would also not be considered elite so in this case rebel wisdom is celebrated. Hybridisation is further emphasized by mixture of Anglo and Indo scripts which reflects everyday speaking in which local languages like Hindi are peppered with English.



A sub-section of the *Thanda* campaign promoted the reduced size and corresponding price reduction of Coca Cola bottles, using the tag-line *Panch Rupiya Matlab Chota Coca Cola* (Five Rupees Means Small Coca Cola)

UP Bahiya in the *Panch Rupiya* TVC



UP BAHIYA – Two girls buy Coke and the shop owner requests Rs. 6 (former price) The safari suit-clad bahiya saunters over and asks how many fingers he's holding up to which the shop owner answers "five" followed by the query of how many fingerprints it will make when it slaps him? "Five". How many rupees for a Coke? "Five" How many wives has he got? "Five". Everyone laughs and the women are impressed with their 1 rupee saviour.

## SIGN-WRITERS

Coke lahri outside IIM, Ahmedabad



Adaptation to distribution in diverse conditions includes use of branded rickshaw vans, tricycles and *lahris* (pushcarts) that can cope with congested Indian urban roads and an extensive network and hub system has been devised for rural delivery. (Kaye, 2004) Additionally *lahris* mobilise supply, as fixed shops are often not apparent in popular locations such as parks, colleges and even slums. Such vehicles are commonly branded by local sign-writers who also produce numerous wall advertisements – another way in which the Coca Cola visual marketing has become localised.

Sign-writing of Coke advertising in India tempers the brand standardisation and consistency evident in more affluent countries while firmly anchoring it in an vernacular style of the Indian streetscape. Sign-writers tend to be relatively self-taught or have learnt through apprenticeships, adding to such inconsistency. The legacy of a prolonged and extensive trading culture since Vedic-Aryan times has had a pervasive effect on the lure for buyers' attention in the form of an onslaught of signboards in India. Although modernisation is evident, hand painted typography is still commonly sighted in the array of competing signs (Lovegrove, 2003) and Coca Cola is apparent in such displays.



Blanketed  
hand-painted  
signage.  
Satellite,  
Ahmedabad



Painters Suresh Koshti & Ramesh Kaniya in Jamalpur, Ahmedabad.



Various delivery vehicles.

Clockwise from top left: Rural Rajasthan

Paldi, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Law Garden, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

## REGIONAL CAMPAIGNS

Coca Cola in Ahmedabad services the Gujarat region including rural locations. It uses a local advertising company to devise locally relevant campaigns for the abundant number of festivals in the state. Such ads are not as slick as campaigns for more affluent countries but speak directly to their Gujarati audience and exemplify the multi-local approach of Coca Cola in India.

Independence Day specials  
for Gujarati Adani supermarket



Examples of using Coke to celebrate the local are campaigns for Navratri (Gujarati nine night festival of traditional dance) which look nothing like campaigns one would encounter for Coca Cola elsewhere in the world. **To appeal to the mercantile sensibility of Gujaratis, tie-ups with alternate brands are apparent with Coke being coupled with other items for value added purchase.**

Rather than aspirational value it would seem that Indians respond more effectively to mediation of tradition by FMCGs. This is seen in the success of the *Coke Goes Better with Food* strategy which is used nationwide in the form of tie-ups with food outlets who get favourable deals for exclusivity of Coca Cola products. In so doing Coke again partakes in existing traditions rather than forging new ones. (Gajendar, 2003) In Ahmedabad, as in other locales, table-top advertising is provided that highlights Coke and food combos that are region specific.



## **GLOCALISATION DISCUSSION**

*“Globalisation does not merely homogenize. It differentiates and homogenizes simultaneously. It does not destroy difference but manipulates it. The interplay between the global and the local ... can be played out in differing ways in different contexts”*

(RMIT, 2006)

M.B. Kadri Rd,  
Raikhad, Ahmedabad

## GLOCALISATION DISCUSSION

Much academic research centres around the notion that globalisation can be likened to cultural colonisation though more recent anthropologically-leaning findings suggest that global branding provides a site of negotiation between local cultures and global products. (Arsel & Thompson, 2004) Such positions can be exemplified by Gujendar (2003) and Mazzarella (2003) respectively.

In the late 80s the term 'glocalisation' first appeared in the Harvard Business Review as used by a Japanese economists. Sociologist Roland Robertson popularized the term in the 90s as the "the simultaneity --- the co-presence --- of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies." (Robertson, 1997) which is used to describe the reciprocal tempering effects of global and local forces.

Some like journalist Thomas Friedman defines glocalisation as a 'cultural ability' (Friedman, 1999) which views globalisation through the lens of localization. Others look the other way through the same lens to justify local awareness and adaptation as a successful strategy in international product marketing. (Raimi, 2003 and Svensson, 2002) It is worth noting that Robertson's notion lay between these extremes which framed glocalisation as 'interpenetration' and 'co-presence' of the local and global (1997) which is further supported by the concept of 'heterohybridization' as discussed by Asel & Thompson (2004).



In regards to this more central position on glocalisation, I propose use the term to discuss visual branding as a *site of negotiation* between the duality of foreign company and local consumer. Although it is commonly noted that there is an international imbalance of power that favours more affluent countries (Belk & Ger, 1996), the case of the turn around of Coca Cola sales in India demonstrates that economic gain is not necessarily at the cost of a direct transferal of such countries' values to passive less affluent consumers.

Viewing globalisation as an essentially homogenising force seems non-representative. Rather, as Appadurai (1990) suggests, "the central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenisation and cultural heterogenisation". One could see the *Thanda* press ads in India mediate such tension. Indian advertising can be seen as negotiation between the past, present and future of Indian global modernity and local tradition (Mazzarella, 2003b) which is exemplified by Coca Cola's campaigns. In this way we can see that advertising is a process of transculturation (synthesis of hybrid cultural forms) and that as much as cultures can be perceived as globalising, introduced products frequently themselves become *indigenised*. (Lull, 1995) Furthermore advertising can be seen as a contemporary form of myth-making which bridge contradictions as an anxiety reducing mechanism. (Leymore, 1975) The Coca Cola *Thanda* campaign can be seen to attempt resolve Indian ambivalence of class, status and modernity.

Hybridising of introduced products seems to come naturally to resilient Indian consumers who have fared a lengthy legacy of foreign influences. In a country where tandoori-chicken pizzas compete with McDonalds it is the ability to absorb and transform that seems to constitute the contemporary Indian (Mazzarella, 2003a) The insertion of global products into local cultures can paradoxically result in diversity as such products are reconfigured through more localised meanings. (Arsel & Thompson, 2004)

Though it is not my intention to glorify Coca Cola's presence in India, I feel that their visual brand strategies counter popular opinion about their colonising commercial manner. Furthermore such an examination of the *cultural* as well as economic implications of transnational globalisation fuels future dialogue that has been hampered from more marketing-centric vantage points. **It is my hope that this study contributes in some small way to the acknowledgement of active cultures over passive consumers as the end point for visual branding.**

Margao, Goa



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Recycled Coke sign at Jaisalmer fort, Rajasthan



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