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Newspapers As National Symbols

What are national symbols and what makes them national properties? Why do we get emotionally connected to both visual and verbal symbols that belong to a nation and its people? Do all symbols that belong to a state become national symbols? Why do we think newspapers are **national symbols** that belong to us? Sethu Das of Design & People looks at some of the Indian national newspapers and the redesign industry.



What are national symbols and what makes them national properties? Why do we get emotionally connected to both visual and verbal symbols that belong to a nation and its people? Do people really own these symbols?

Association

Subba Raju was only 29 years old when he started an indefinite hunger-strike in front of the Mahatma Gandhi statue at the Marina Beach, Madras, on April 20, 1960. The demand of this Congress worker was modest — he merely wanted the statue, which had been inaugurated by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, to be removed. He argued that the statue bore no resemblance with the real Gandhi he was familiar with. Subba Raju kept a photograph of Gandhiji beside himself to prove his point. He felt that the larger than life statue by sculptor Roy Chowdhary was an insult to the father of the nation. The image of Mahatma Gandhi had already become a national symbol.

We relate ourselves with national emblems, anthems, flags and even the political map of a nation because of our long-term association with these visual and verbal symbols, developed over a period of time. These symbols belong not only to a politically organised body but the entire population that forms the state.

It is probably our 'association' with these national symbols that brings our mind closer to a nation, its history, its values and the national community. These symbols are more than mere iconic representations of a nation. The images that come to our mind when we listen to the national anthem manage to connect us to our patriotic feelings and to the concept of nationhood. Similarly the national symbols we associate with also connect us to events, history and our collective memory. Each symbol has its own significance according to its historic and national context.



Libyan protesters with their single Green colour National Flag adopted in 1977 (left) and pro-Tibet demonstrators in New York with the complex Tibetan National Flag — unified and designed by His Holiness the Great 13th Dalai Lama.

It is amazing to see how a single shade of green symbolising one's devotion to Islam, with no other design element, forms the national flag for the native inhabitants of Libya. How an outlawed complex national flag of Chinese-occupied Tibet, (with two snow lions against snow-capped mountains, a rising yellow sun against six red rays that represent the six original people of Tibet, and a yellow border that symbolises the flourishing teachings of Gautam Buddha) manages to unflinchingly invoke nationalistic feelings for an exiled community of Tibetans. Similarly, the shortest national anthem — that of Japan, with 32 characters, and the 52-second long national anthem of India written by Rabindranath Tagore, also unite and associate the respective people of these countries to the idea of their nation. The first humble and ordinary stamp from the 'Indian Independence Series' featured the National Flag and 'Jai Hind' written on it. It not only replaced the stamps of the British colonial rule, but evoked feelings of nationalism among the people of a free and independent India. The world has seen people dying to defend and protect their national symbols — from the land of Colonel Gaddafi's Libya to Mahatma Gandhi's India.



Do all symbols that belong to a state become national symbols? Keiko Sei, writer and media art curator, wishes to differ by giving the example of Japan's national symbol. "According to me, the Imperial crest of the chrysanthemum which is the official emblem has nothing to do with citizens though most people believe that it does represent Japan and her people," she says. "Ideally speaking, there should be no such thing as a national symbol, but realistically speaking, considering the majority's psyche, a national symbol is something that represents the majority and makes them proud to belong to that nation. To compromise both positions, a national symbol may be separated from any political association. But then a symbol is a symbol and any attribution can be added later to anything. It changes and evolves too. Even an abstract design cannot be spared of such fate," says

Keiko Sei, while expressing her concern over the concept of a nation itself.

It is likely that national symbols are not always created, but evolved over a time. Perhaps the best example from modern times would be the historic logo of the Solidarity movement of Poland. When Jurek Janiszewski, a low-profile designer from a small town in Poland was creating this logo for a new born movement in 1980, he was probably unaware that he was making a national symbol that would soon represent a movement of the Polish people. Janiszewski, who got inspired by a large representation of Solidarity graffiti on city walls, was able to capture the spirit of the growing movement of workers who eventually overthrew the communist regime in his country. Once again, design played an important role in the making of a nation.



Hidden Symbol: Solidarity logo, one of the national symbols of Poland among other logotypes created by the Polish designer Jurek Janiszewski.

Newspapers and the Redesign Industry

Most newspapers in India underwent a massive makeover on the pretext of adding values while hiding their real agenda of wooing advertisers in order to increase the revenue. The Hindu, Times of India, Hindustan Times and Malayala Manorama are some among the dailies which spent millions to redesign and re-launch their products.

The Hindu in English and Malayala Manorama in Malayalam were two newspapers with which most of us in South of India grew up with. Both are household names and readers could not start their day without reading or at least having a cursory glimpse at these dailies. Malayala Manorama tops the readership in Kerala, the most literate state of the country, while English dailies top in circulation. I still remember the day I got the redesigned edition of Malayala Manorama several years ago and The Hindu recently. I was saddened by the redesigned mastheads and disturbed to see the non-readable text. These are dimensions that have already fit into our minds. Newspapers are what you develop a relationship with over a period of years, and I had already developed my relationship with these newspapers.

Founded in 1878, The Hindu is still the second largest selling English daily in India. When The Hindu spent millions to launch the redesigned newspaper by the celebrated designer Dr Mario R Garcia in 2005, it promised its readers that they would meet the 'exciting challenge' of remaining attractive while staying true to the journalistic values of truth-telling. Sadly, this reader took some more years to realise that in spite of having the credibility of owning some of the best internal journalistic and design practices and being the first Indian National daily to appoint a Reader's Ombudsman, The Hindu remains the only national newspaper which aligns itself with some of the most brutal military regimes in the world — from Sri Lanka to the People's Republic of China (PRC), while conveniently taking the side of people's movements in India.



Men In Black: Renowned designer Dr Mario R Garcia with his co-worker Jan Kny during The Hindu relaunch (left) and at The Hindu office in Chennai, Tamil Nadu with the redesigned newspaper. Dr Garcia has redesigned more than 550 publications including The Wall Street Journal, Die Zeit (Germany), El Mercurio (Chile), Hindustan Times (India), The Hindu (India), Malayala Manorama (India) and many others. (Photo Courtesy: Vino John and V Ganesan of The Hindu)

While The Hindu and Malayala Manorama reached my hands the day they were re-launched, I was fortunate to miss the Hindustan Times on July 11, 2009. On the day of the launch, I received several calls asking if I had seen the latest edition of the Hindustan Times. I knew then that something had drastically gone wrong with yet another national newspaper. The 85-year old 'national symbol' underwent another design surgery since 2004 by Dr Mario Garcia and Anup Gupta, Group Creative Director of HT Media Limited.

Design & People decided to approach one of the longest readers of the Hindustan Times for his feedback on its redesign — Rajiv Vora, a leader from Jayaprakash Narayan's Bihar Movement. His association with the newspaper spans more than 30 years and he believes that the old Hindustan Times was a lot more attractive and readable than what it is today. While discussing the identity and the institution that very identity creates, Rajiv Vora stated: "Hindustan Times is an institution and it has an identity. Its identity has created a certain image in the mind of people which is fixed. The success of any institution lies in how unshakably it fixes an image in your mind. Close your eyes and imagine Hindustan Times and you get the Hindustan Times image. However, if you close your eyes today, the institution has gone! You get no image! The identity is lost!"



Natural Destruction: The Tsunami edition of the Hindustan Times in the old format (left) and the Hindustan Times after re-launch. "The new design and the unfriendly 'noise' stop me from reading anything in the pages. Change of colour in one word of a headline again stops me from going anywhere near it. A research into the minds of youngsters will definitely help in understanding how they feel," advises Prof GV Sreekumar, who teaches Typography and Publication Design at the Industrial Design Centre of IIT-Bombay.

"This is a loss of the national identity Hindustan Times had earned over the years. Image means identity, and identity means an association. When you destroy that image, you destroy that identity. You destroy that identity, you destroy that relationship," says Rajiv Vora, a concerned,

loyal reader. "When I saw the new Hindustan Times, I thought it was a new paper somebody had started. I did not have my Hindustan Times which was with me for long years. It was like losing an old friend. This new image is not what I am familiar with. I thought Hindustan Times is dead and in its place a new shape, a new 'roop' has come up," he says, looking at the latest Hindustan Times edition he bought from the Bengali Market in New Delhi.

"It is good to hear criticism," says a confident Anup Gupta of HT Media Limited, who has the experience of working with some of the best writers and designers in the Indian publishing industry. He disagrees with the argument that the original identity of Hindustan Times is being lost. "If you have a liking for a certain cuisine, you would go and hunt it out. You would go to the remotest corner of the city to enjoy that cuisine. That's precisely what Hindustan Times did not have. The first objective of the Hindustan Times redesign was to bring back that flavour. While the purists among Hindustan Times readers may feel that the identity has been destroyed, to my mind the lack of cuisine also gave us the opportunity to build something different and in sync with the audience we were trying to reach out," says Anup Gupta, drinking his diet Coke.



Bang of the Day: The Hindustan Times dares to experiment. But not all experiments bring good results. The edition dated March 19, 2010 carries one of the biggest design errors with the newly-introduced method of colouring keywords in headlines that a reader would otherwise Google. Even after 300 days of its re-launch, there has not been a single day that the Hindustan Times has come out without what we call as 'design error'. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Even after 300 days of its re-launch, there has not been a single day that the Hindustan Times has come out without what we call as 'design error'. On March 19, 2010, the day I met with Anup Gupta at the Hindustan Times Head Office in New Delhi, the newspaper had carried one of the biggest design errors with the newly-introduced design experiment — colouring keywords in headlines which a reader would otherwise Google. "I too believe that we should drop this because we are unable to use it correctly. We have held workshops on how to use the manual and the tick-sheet. But most people ignore them. This is fallout from the previous avatar of Hindustan Times, when everybody did whatever they wanted," admits Anup Gupta, who is critical of the way people use creative headlines but are not very creative when it comes to following the style-sheet.

The issues concerning one of the old-time readers like Rajiv Vora may seem more philosophical than technical. He may not be interested in analysing the difference between Helvetica and Garamond, but he too had something to say about the usage of fonts in a newspaper. "Human beings, animals, plants — whatever we see and are familiar with, whatever we communicate with non verbally or verbally — they have their own natural forms. Similarly the 'letter' or 'akshara', (in Sanskrit) is perennial or permanent, like the soul that does not die or perish. Akshara means indestructible. So actually the design of a letter is indestructible as an image of the things you see around you in their natural form," says Rajiv Vora.

Even at a very technical level, designers like Prof GV Sreekumar of Industrial Design Centre, IIT-Bombay who teaches Typography and Publication Design feels that the earlier Hindustan Times used to be among the well-designed newspapers in the country. "The new Hindustan Times has selected the font 'Vonnies' which falls under the 'grotesque' category of fonts. The problem with this font is that there is an element of a unique and ugly visual feel mixed with a good sans-serif font! The stroke endings of this font are designed in such a way that it shouts at us and seeks

attention," he continues, "I believe that design in the context of a newspaper should act as a humble, silent carrier which delivers the content to the reader. It is like a fragrance — you can experience it but you cannot touch or hold it in your hands, or even weigh it." He further explains on the usage of fonts: "This might have been inspired by the Basel school, which used the font 'Univers' in different weights and widths. But the point here is that Univers has that unique quality of being very 'silent' and even when used with so many variations, it remains silent. In the case of 'Vonnos', the visual noise it makes it so high that a reader finds it uncomfortable, if not irritating!"



The Hindu Turns Red: (Left) The first available edition of The Hindu dated June 21, 1881 — published every Wednesday from Madras. The newspaper was founded by six 'angry' teenagers with the aim of exposing the abuse of power and challenging the Anglo-Indian Press. (Right) The Hindu after the relaunch. The stories of national importance were slowly replaced with propaganda from Xinhua, the official news agency of the Chinese Communist Party.

The recent redesign of Hindustan Times is also in total contrast with Dr Mario Garcia's own philosophy that a good newspaper is in a constant state of evolutionary change with little modifications. The drastic design changes that were brought in make a reader feel like he is holding a new and unfamiliar product in his hand. How necessary is it to break the conventions? Here's what Rajiv Vora has to say: "I don't say that one has to stick to convention. But convention has its value. After ages people have arrived at a certain design for letters. Be it with the English language or Sanskrit; each has a unique shape for the alphabets or letters. You cannot change it. Because you are familiar with it so it readable, graspable and you do not exercise yourself in order to decipher what a letter is all about."

"Speed" is the sacred word of our times. In April 2005 at a function in Chennai to announce the redesign and the one million circulation of the The Hindu, Dr Garcia said: "The eye-tracking studies had shown that a reader in 2003 took only 10 seconds to decide what to read on a page. There was therefore a need to attract readers who were in a hurry." The data from an eye-ball movement recorder once again blamed the readers for not spending enough time and not reading enough! I always wonder why our illustrious designers spend years in closed doors redesigning newspapers for 'hurried' and 'careless' readers like us who supposedly spend less than ten seconds to decide what to read and what not to. Apparently there are two design objectives every newspaper designer has while redesigning a newspaper — a quicker trip through the newspaper and better visual display — factors influenced by the results of the eye-tracking devices. An eye-ball movement recorder may scan and record the movement of human eyes, but it may never succeed in capturing the intellectual and aesthetics needs of the complex human mind.



The Lost Reader: "If the newspapers are for the youth, give them something that would make them think," says Rajiv Vora, a leader from Jayaprakash Narayan's Bihar Movement. His association with the newspaper spans more than 30 years. (Photo: Sethu Das)

Why are we so emotional about our national newspapers? Why do we think these are national symbols that belong to us? At the end of the day we, the readers must realise that our relationship with the newspaper consists of spending less than five rupees a day on it, and investing once in our lifetime in the obituary columns. But, we are no 'investor' according to the newspaper industry. We do not give classified advertisements for them to run their fashion and newspaper industries. Readers, we have no other choice but to accept the realities of everyday life.

Sometimes history helps. Whenever our media institutions try to move away from their real investors to align themselves with the affluent section of our society to propagate their elite opinion, there is one thing they seem to forget — the very purpose for which these great institutions were founded. It may be good to remember that as an institution, the Hindustan Times was very much rooted in the Indian Nationalist Struggle for independence. It was inaugurated by none other than Mahatma Gandhi in 1924. And The Hindu, India's prestigious national newspaper was founded by six 'angry' teenagers in 1878, with a borrowed sum of one Rupee and twelve annas and printing just 80 copies to fight the British-owned newspapers. The answer to our questions lies in the purpose for which the very first step was contemplated.

While special events and celebrations were marking the launch of refurbished Indian national dailies, the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) releases the 2009 Survey results — out of 52 editions of various dailies surveyed, not a single national daily mentioned in this story had created new readers, instead registered a drastic drop in their circulation. Anticipating such tendencies in the field of marketing and creativity, the legendary ad-man David Ogilvy once wrote: "The best way to improve the sale of a product is to improve the quality of the product."

Examples around teach us that design alone can neither create a successful product nor bring drastic transformation in the making of a product. A well-designed product may act only as an ornament on a physical body, if we do not accept the existence of the very soul of the product itself.

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