

The time evolution of iconographic conventions in the public sphere is a fascinating thing. Of course it is obvious that a more relevant sphere of enquiry is the origin of specific iconographic patterns and their semiotic significance. But that is something for the semioticians and culture theorists of the popular to decipher. I am instead fascinated by how these conventions evolve-why some things don't change while others change radically in a fairly short time frame?

Anyone passing through a small town in North India can't help notice the proliferation of fruit juice sellers. I am not talking about the seasonal sugarcane juice sellers but instead fixed shops which run through the year. These establishments, which came into being in a big way in the late seventies-early eighties, were aided by two technological developments-one, the introduction of the "mixie" at affordable prices and second the availability of fruits and vegetables from distant parts of the country because of the transport revolution. The mixie, in reality a pseudo food processor became common as a kitchen appliance only when relatively cheap local clones began to be sold.

The fruit juice seller would sell mango milk shakes and some other juices during the summers, "mausami" juice through the year (since this has an almost totemic hold on our psyche as "the" health drink) and carrot and pomegranate juice in the winters. It is important to realize that until the introduction of packaged fruit juices, juice was considered a relative luxury-one had seasonal fruit at home but juice was something for the ailing (anyone would recall the cluster of fruit juice sellers outside of hospitals- and papaya vendors of course!).

Now for some reason, all fruit juice sellers had an identical board outside their shops- it of course said what kinds of juice was sold. But more interestingly, it typically had 3-4 images painted garishly. Two of these were invariably the male and female actors of Bollywood who were currently the rage. Thus, it started off with Dharmendra and Hema Malini, or Rajesh Khanna and Sharmila Tagore. The other image(s) were typically of a cherubic, blonde infant, usually wearing a cap, sipping the juice through a drinking straw. The picture was straight out of another relic from those days-magazines like *Woman & Home* which were imported and had advertisements with healthy, blonde Caucasian infants.

The interesting thing about these images is that over two decades or more, the stars have obviously changed to reflect the latest in Bollywood. But the blonde infant with his frilly cap is still a part of the collage! I am not sure what the reasons for this are- it obviously can't be the lack of imagination or competence

on the part of the artist. Is it inertia? Maybe, though then why would Rajesh Khanna give way to Amitabha Bachhan to Shah Rukh Khan etc?

A similar phenomenon is noticeable in a completely unrelated sphere. The ubiquity of OK TATA, HORN PLEASE on the back of trucks has been the source of many puns and jokes. However, there is another image on trucks, almost as common which people have not commented on. And this is the image of a cow and a calf- the old Congress election symbol.

Interestingly, this bovine symbolism is completely unrelated to religion. Trucks which otherwise are obviously owned or driven by non-Hindus (as is evident from other symbols like 786, or a crescent and a star etc) also have this image! Again, why it persists is a mystery to me.

On the other hand, there has been the introduction of several new kinds of images especially in hoardings. Thus, for instance, meat shops never had any images except the name and description of wares. Now, it is almost inevitable that the shops will have a rooster (chicken) and in some cases a goat painted on the hoarding.

The changing iconography in the public sphere of course has a technological component also. With the development of printing comes the convenience of printing (not painting) of images. Barbers, now called hairdressers, typically have either the latest Bollywood icon in a stylish haircut or their own photographs printed on their boards. Beauty saloons would have a photograph of the latest Bollywood sex symbol, in a bridal attire.

The evolving nature of some symbols while others remain unchanged, might have several dimensions-commercial, technological, ideological etc. Or maybe it is just a random phenomenon which doesn't merit much explanation. I don't really know!