

Ravana In Advertising: Contemporary Interpretations Of The Mythological Evil

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ABSTRACT

Religion and mythology has been ubiquitous to the development of cultural ideas and their representations in various mediums. The idea of god as a personification of abstract values has fascinated the creative mind for generations. In India, the popular pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses has been worshipped for establishing and upholding these positive values by subduing the negative characters in various narratives. Within this broad spectrum is the dominant character of Ravana who has varied literary descriptions and visual representations. This paper while investigating into the dichotomy that exists between the neutral literary portrayal of Ravana and his preferred negative visual depictions, will elaborate on the various cultural notions that are signified with him in the context of contemporary India.

It is a qualitative enquiry for which Indian print advertisements published in the last two decades depicting Ravana have been analysed for their content and form. Formal analysis reveals that the visual representation of Ravana can be broadly categorized as realistic, illustrated or symbolic, wherein the realistic is the least preferred style. Though maximum advertisers have preferred an illustrated version, a growing trend towards its symbolic representation can be seen in the end of the current decade. Content analysis unveils that safety while travelling and unhealthy eating or hunger in India is two prominent evils that have been visually associated with Ravana. Maximum reference to Ravana in advertising is during the festival of Dussehra but there are a few brands which use his iconography for promotion at any time of the year.

Keywords: Ravana, Iconography, Advertising, Symbolism, Evil, Demon

1. INTRODUCTION

Ravana I is the first ever satellite launched by Srilanka in 2019, a fact which is very less known. The name Ravana always conjures up a formidable appearance in our minds with its set iconographic depiction of ten heads, twenty arms, angry expression and display of power with its huge size. The original version of the epic of *Ramayana* authored by Valmiki and subsequent versions by Tulsidas and Ved Vyas portray Ravana as a neutral character. He is introduced as a person of supreme knowledge and immense power who ruled the empire of Lanka. Portrayed as a disciple of Lord *Shiva*, the text also elaborates on diverse aspects of his personality. As a part of the narrative, swayed by his ego he abducted Lord Rama's virtuous wife Sita which consequently led him into a battle which he lost.

This popular narrative told and retold for centuries through various mediums such as painting, sculpture, illustration, film and theatre has emphasized the negative aspect of his persona and designated Ravana as an embodiment of evil. The pompous celebration of the festival of Dussehra in India every year, as a reminder of victory of good over evil has

strongly etched a hostile image of Ravana in the minds of people. However, this century has witnessed a few attempts to revisit, redefine and reintroduce other aspects of his personality, though he still largely remains synonymous to the age old predilection for negative in the visual format. What are interesting in these attempts are various cultural notions that have been associated with the idea of evil and the spirit of experimentation with his standard iconographic depiction. The probe into this change requires a multidimensional approach and this research paper concentrates only on the medium of advertisements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

There are abundant versions of historical literature available on the theme of *Ramayana* and Ravana. The aim of this paper has been to review the contemporary texts to comprehend a change that has emerged in attitude towards the demon. With reference to contemporary popular literature on him, Punalingham (2003) was perhaps the earliest in this century to portray Ravana in positive light. The author highlights his profuse knowledge of vedas, administrative skills and power as a king.

Banker (2011) in his book recreates the grand narrative and portrays the power of the king of Lanka which exists even after Rama has won the battle. The essence of the book lies in realization of the fact that the evil prevails in various shapes and forms; a fact which is relevant even today. Neelakantan (2012) has rediscovered the character of Ravana by retelling the epic of *Ramayana* from the so called villain's perspective; with an aim to highlight the subjectivity of portrayal in earlier texts.

Pattnaik (2017) in his book glorifies the existence of Ravana as a mighty enemy; without whom the repute of Lord Ram would not have existed; conferring equality of narrative and perspective. Tripathi (2019) has also reintroduced the personality of Ravana with a humanistic view illustrating with words the strengths and flaws of this genius villain. The approach of the narrative focuses on human emotions of love and loss and the ability to make choices in life

In terms of visual art, there is much reading available on traditional mediums of art where Ravana is represented such as painting, sculpture, architecture etc. However, there is no data on contemporary depictions of the popular demon, especially in the context of mass media. Popular graphic novelist Sisodia (2011) has illustrated a comic on the famous villain with in a new perspective, highlighting the many positive aspects of his personality. Mohanty (2011) in his graphic novel *Ravanyana* has explored the life and time of Ravana from a neutral viewpoint. The existing literature lacks insight on how Ravana is represented in advertisements, which is one of the most popular mediums of expression and art. This research attempts to portray the connotations associated with the character of Ravana and its symbolic significance in India today.

3. METHODOLOGY:

This is a qualitative study of various print advertisements which depict the images of Ravana. The data has been collected from various online sources and segregated on the basis of its visual content in the theoretical framework of types of advertising. Two broad categories into which these print advertisements have been placed are brand advertising or public service advertising. Advertisements published in the last two decades have been considered for the purpose of study. Through observation method, the data has been analysed for its content and the symbolic meaning. Conclusion has been drawn on the basis of popular trend followed thematically by most advertisers.

4. DISCUSSION

Travelling with the demon: In popular advertising memory today, one juxtaposes the character of Yamraj with death caused by road accidents. However, there is an array of advertisements which depict the evil of carelessness with a representation of Ravana for the same subject. Most of these public service advertisements are sponsored by various State police authorities in India. The iconography of his ten heads is a ready reference for his depiction. One of the earliest instances where Ravana was depicted for road safety was in an advertisement by Bhadra Communications in 2008 (Fig.1.1). The composition had an illustration of a strong bodied and ten headed Ravana, riding on a chariot driven by three white horses. A small headline in the right corner directs the target audience that they only have one head and requests them to wear a helmet; reinstating his commanding expression in the illustration.



Fig.1.1-Bhadra Communications for road safety, 2008



Fig.1.2-Bengaluru Police, 2017



Fig. 1.4- Road Safety Organization, Gurugram Police, 2018



Fig. 1.6- Ministry of Road Transport Highways, Govt. of India, 2018

Fig.1.3- Bengaluru Police, 2017



Fig. 1.5 Chandigarh Traffic Police, 2018



Fig. 1.7- Indore Traffic Police, 2019

This idea was widely adopted towards the end of this decade by various State police authorities in the country. Bengaluru police preferred to show the ten heads of Ravana in a wicked and angry expression wearing the 'horn crown', while questioning affirmatively through the headline on wearing the helmet. A similar approach in representation can be found in advertisements by Chandigarh Police in 2018 and Indore Traffic Police in 2019. However, there was a variation seen in the way Ravana was illustrated in an advertisement by Road Safety Organization in Gurugram, 2018. The layout surprisingly depicted a benevolent expression on Ravana's slightly tilted face as he stood with folded arms over the concern of helmet. The Ministry of Road Transport and Highways also released an advertisement in 2018 where the expression of Ravana can be described as curious and happy rather than the conventionally expected anger and haughtiness.



Fig. 1.8 Western Railway, 2018



Fig.1.9 Funcher Design Shop, Bengaluru, 2018

This amalgamation of Ravana's ten heads and road safety was adopted by other means of transport such as the Western Railways in 2018. However, in the advertisement the idea of travelling safely was not the only concern, as the angry expression on the ten heads symbolically depicted prohibitions as the many evils related to rail travel. In sharp contrast to all the other advertisements is Fig. 1.9 with a curious black and white illustration of Ravana, riding his RA-1 motorcycle. He is identifiable because of the ten heads that have a rowdy expression and clumsy hairdos; as he travels sans the crowning helmet, grinning foolishly in an advertisement by Funcher Shop in 2018. RA-1. With its quirky approach, Ravana here dually represents the one who does not follow the traffic rules as well as depicts a typical criminal looking character. It is noteworthy that there is a great regional variation found in the depiction of crown worn by Ravana which ranges from the horn to dishevelled hair.

And the evil sells

Mythology and advertising has been unanimously combined ever since the idea of reaching out to people was discovered. Hindu deities such as Krishna, Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesha et al. have been variously utilized for promotion and communication of ideas; which were in

some cases objected upon as they hurt the religious sentiments of the society. Interestingly, there has been no controversy regarding the depiction of Ravana. Brands have signified him with various social evils and concepts and in most cases even altered his iconography to promote brands. One of the earliest depiction of Ravana was by Amul India in 1987 (Fig.2.1) where an illustration depicted the then trending television serial of Ramayana and the notion of hunger. It has the famous Amul girl in the garb of adorable looking ten headed Ravana; desirous of the bread and butter as the heads popped out of the television screen. This connotation of food and Ravana's ten head was revived with much popularity in the current decade; which is discussed ahead in the paper.

Another company to adopt this evil character was Volkswagen in 2011 (Fig.2.2) which depicted a man dressed up as Ravana, sans the nine heads near his desired car. This is one of the rare advertisements where he is shown realistically, as the edited heads lie in the bin near him. The smiling and happy expression on his face as he stands proudly is an early example of relating the notion of desire and sensibility with Ravana; which is an exceptional manifestation of his otherwise designated evil personality. Another symbolic depiction of Ravana was in an advertisement of Axe Effect Deodorants (Fig 2.3) in 2011 which completely altered the meaning one associates with the intellect of ten heads. In the layout here, the nine female heads symbolized attraction to the man in the centre, as he mischievously lay in the bed representing desire and attraction.

An Advertisement by Maggi in 2014 (Fig.2.4) was also iconic in the sense that it supplanted the traditional ten heads with ten bowls full of Maggi, signifying hunger as evil which can be satiated with the tasteful product. In the lower part of the design is a stretched bow with a fork, a formula which was adopted by many advertisers later. This idea started a new trend.

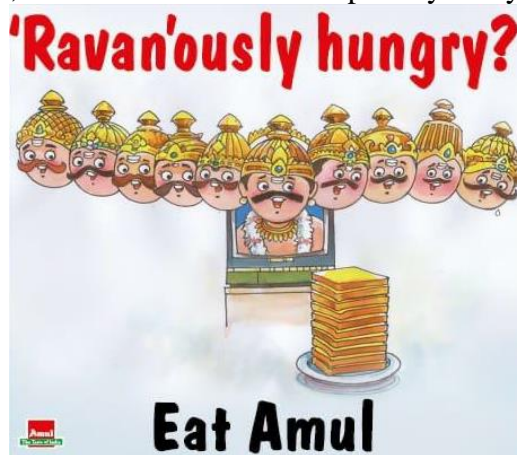


Fig. 2.1-Amul India, 1987



Fig.2.2 -Volkswagen, 2011



Fig.2.3-Axe Deodorants, 2011



Fig.2.4-Maggi, 2014

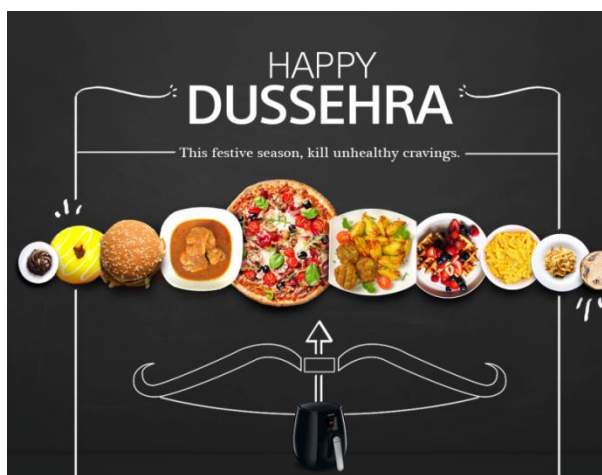


Fig.2.5-Philips Airfryer, 2015



Fig.2.6-Cadbury Five Star, 2015

In the year 2015, Philips Home Living for promoting its air fryer modified this idea and depicted the bow with the air fryer in its print advertisement (Fig.2.5). Here, the ten heads were symbolically replaced with ten different healthy delicacies that one could prepare using this product, as fried food was presented as evil. In the same year, 5 Star a popular chocolate brand following this trend symbolically presented the bow with ten arrows as chocolates, with an aim to dispel the evil, though the evil was not precisely defined (Fig.2.6). Dominos in 2015 (Fig. 2.7) used the iconography of ten heads to promote its sale during the festival of Dussehra. The ten round faces replaced with pizzas, pierced with an arrow evoked the image of Ravana's heads. Another interesting advertisement was by a leading coffee brand Nescafe, also in 2015 (Fig.2.8) where the ten heads illustrated displayed a gradual metamorphosis of mood from anger to calm; as a promotion of the effect caused by the coffee. One could decipher this idea as emphasizing good qualities that exist in an evil.

An innovative strategy for brand promotion during the festive season was also adopted by Havas India for Mortein mosquito repellent. The product packaging (Fig.2.9) imitated the form of Ravana in pop bright colours to capture attention; with an angry expression as if to scare away the mosquitoes. The idea can be interpreted as an attempt to highlight the power associated with the character of the demon.

To return to the notion of wicked feasting in India, the time of festivity is synonymous to sumptuous but unhealthy eating. A popular trend can be observed in food advertising by various brands during Dussehra in 2017. The Crust Bakery in Jaipur equated the notion of sweet craving with the variety of bakery items it had to offer during the festival. The layout had photographs of the products (Fig.2.10) forming the iconography of ten heads. McDonalds was also quick to adopt this trend (Fig.2.11) and depicted photographs of its range of delicious burgers as the ten heads, while the central one had a drawing of titled crown above it, symbolizing satisfaction of the evil of hunger. This idea of displaying food variety as the ten heads was seen in many local food advertisements of this year. The Sunday Kitchen, a restaurant was more specific in its approach towards expressing the idea of evil related with food (Fig.2.12). The design depicted an illustration of a Ravana with cream over its central head instead of crown, while the heads were composed of an array of junk food items. The headline supported the visual by promoting healthy food to kill the demon of craving for junk. Another interesting dimension was added to this juxtaposition of food and evil by The Artisan House, a bakery and cafe in Patna (Fig. 2.13). The design related to the youth through

the use of emoticons, as the ten heads with different moods. The advertisement promoted the products as an end to the evil of mood swings caused by sweet cravings.



Fig.2.7- Domino's Pizza, 2015

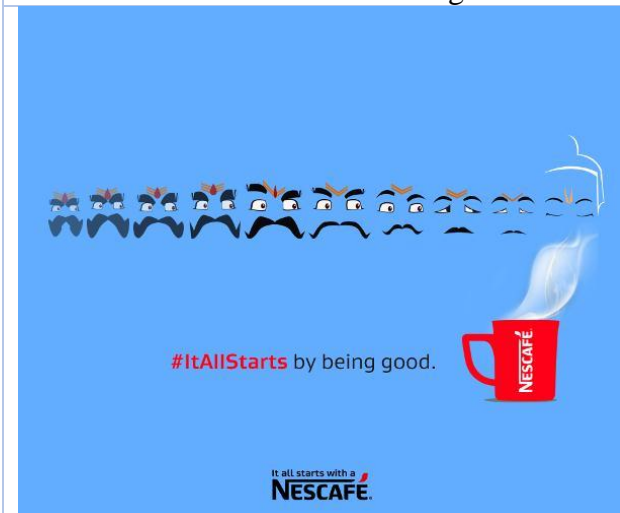


Fig.2.8- Nescafe, 2015

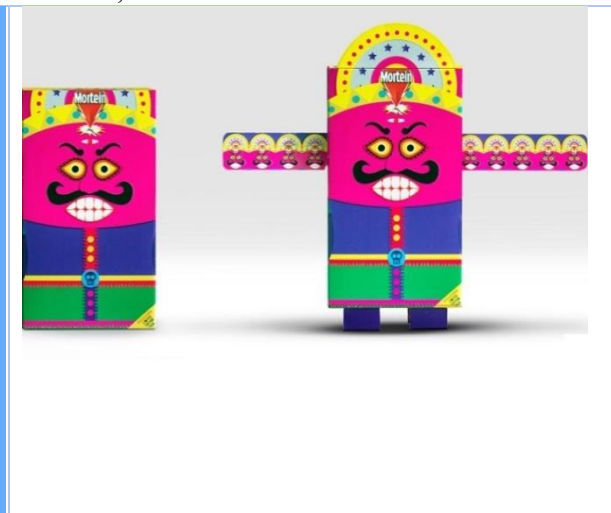


Fig.2.9-Mortein by Havas India, 2016



Fig. 2.10- The Crust Bakery, Jaipur, 2017



Fig. 2.11- McDonalds Restaurant, 2017

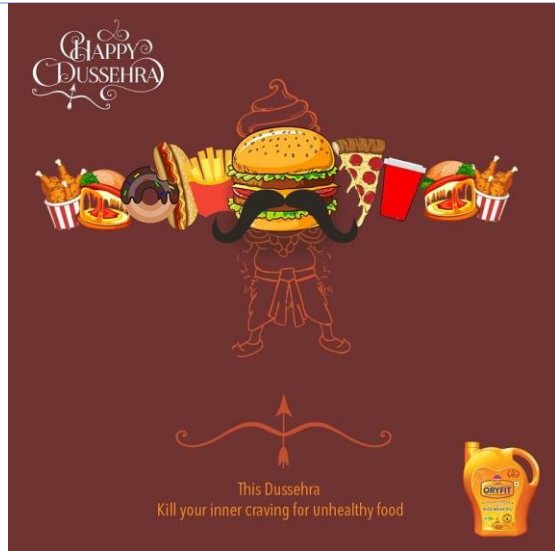


Fig. 2.12- The Sunday Kitchen advertisement, 2018

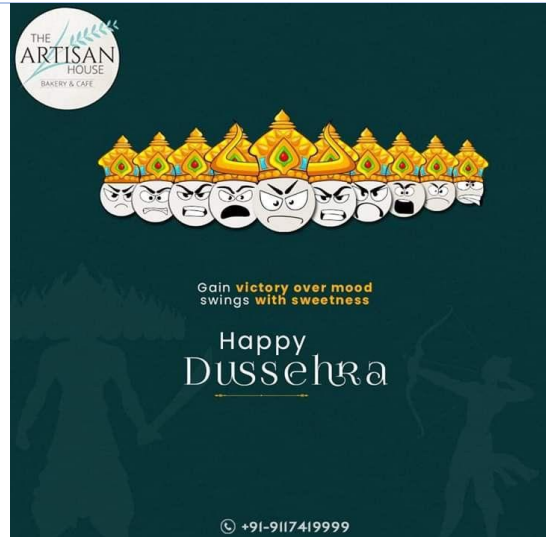


Fig.2.13- The Artisan House, Bakery In Patna



Fig.2.14- Big FM, Chandigarh, 2018

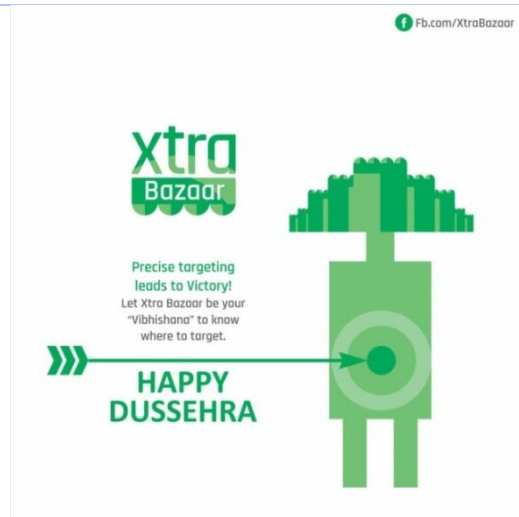


Fig.2.15-Xtra Bazaar, Marketing company 2018

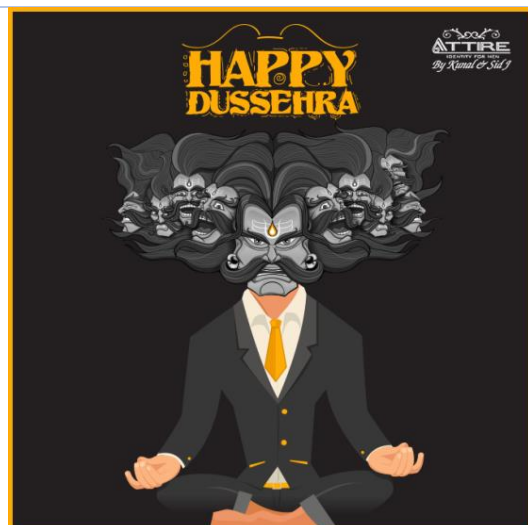


Fig.2.16-Post by Attire , Delhi (Kunal and Sid J)



Fig.2.17- Fevikwik 2019

Apart from food, other genres also adopted the popular character of Ravana for promoting their products and services. An advertisement by BigFM which was published in Chandigarh in year 2018 displayed another dimension for decoding the qualities of Ravana (Fig.2.14). The angry ten headed Ravana illustrated over Taj Mahal behind low hills, with a bow in foreground did not really convey a specific visual meaning. Except that one can visually observe the large composition of heads prominently dominating the landscape denoting his power.

Xtra Bazaar, an online marketing company was innovated during the festival season as it utilized another aspect from the epic related to the end of Ravana for its advertisement in 2018 (Fig. 2.15). To propagate the idea of focused marketing, it graphically depicted Ravana with an arrow pointing towards the target navel. The depiction of Ravana here is abbreviated in green as he symbolises challenges and issues of a growing market. The experimentation with depiction of this popular demon was a trend in that year as can also be seen in an online post by Delhi based men's fashion store (Fig.2.15). The illustration depicts ten arrogantly laughing heads of a formally dressed Ravana, who can be seen seated in meditative posture in his well fitted suit and tie. Deciphering the exact connotation of this advertisement would be a challenge as there is no headline to clarify the context. However, the attire surely adds a hint of power to the meaning of the character in contemporary India.

Fevikwick was also quick to adopt this trending celebrity. In an advertisement in 2019, this popular glue making company promoted its product by illustrating its use during the festival (Fig.2.13). The visual depicted how Fevikwick can be reliable in keeping Ravana's heads together. Except the fallen head which changes the iconography, the image follows the established angry looking demon.

5. CONCLUSION:

Ravana is the mythological celebrity of the current decade. The translations of old literary texts and traditional visual representations do not display much variation in his character; as he is majorly shrouded in negativity. People since time immemorial have also been culturally attuned to comprehend him as a sign for corruption, anger, ego, lust and the like. Other optimistic dimensions of his identity have been a rarity. However, in the past two decades, Ravana has been rediscovered and reinterpreted by authors and artists alike. Advertisers have boldly adopted and altered his standard iconography to convey a variety of meanings whilst promoting their cause, product or service. Illustration is found to be the preferred mode of Ravana's representation, though a sense of experimentation has been seen for its symbolic depiction towards the end of the current decade. Thematically, travel by road and railway along with its related dangers, has been one of the popular associations with the idea of evil. It has been deciphered in relation to the ten heads of the demon. Hunger pangs, unhealthy eating and cravings for sweets have also been one of the prominent themes for food advertising with manipulated iconographic depiction of Ravana. Further research on its depiction in other mediums is requisite for a holistic understanding of the kaleidoscopic meanings associated with this new avatar of mythological personality.

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