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## **Rasa Theory and Emotional Storytelling in Indian Advertising: A Study of Google India's "Reunion" Campaign**

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### **Abstract**

*Modern-day advertising in India is increasingly focused on storytelling and creating an emotional experience rather than simply marketing products. Brands today are looking to build emotional connections with consumers, as well as create symbols through which the consumer relates to their products, so that they are culturally relevant to consumers and have a strong emotional connection. The shift from traditional product-based advertising toward the use of Indian Aesthetic Theory's theoretical framework provides an understanding of how emotional persuasion is used in advertising discourse.*

*This research study will provide a Rasa based analysis of Google India's "Reunion" advertisement utilizing Rasa Theory, which is one of the foundational elements of Indian Aesthetics identified in Bharata's Natyashastra. The advertisement was released in 2013 as part of the Google Search India campaign that was developed by Ogilvy & Mather India and is representative of an emotional reunion between two elderly male friends after the Partition of India in 1947 via digital technology (Google India, 2013) after not having seen each other for over 50 years. Through the use of qualitative textual and visual analysis, this research study will analyse the four Rasa (Karuna, Adbhuta, Shanta, and Hasya) elements and how they have been mobilized by the advertisement in order to create a connection with the advertisement and influence a sense of persuasion.*

*This research finds the campaign effective because it utilizes culturally contextualized and emotionally charged stories to traditionally sell products through technology and not via straightforward promotion of a product. The paper also states that Rasa Theory can provide an analytical framework that is culturally relevant in explaining emotional branding in Indian advertising than using a Western model for persuasive communication. The final product of this study is a contribution towards an emerging body of work on emotional branding, affective communication, and Indigenous Media Theory that integrates Indian aesthetic philosophy and contemporary advertising analyses.*

**Keywords:** Rasa Theory, emotional branding, Indian advertising, Google Reunion advertisement, nostalgia, emotional persuasion, media aesthetics

## **Introduction**

Advertising has changed a lot in today's media world. In the past, advertisers focused primarily on how useful and functional their products were and conformed to traditional selling methods that were mostly persuasive in nature. In today's world with more media being available, increased competition from digital advertising channels, and changing audience expectations, advertisers are shifting their tactics to use more emotional and symbolic approaches to communicate through storytelling. Brands now appeal to audience members through storytelling, emotion, memory, and experience in order to engage them in more meaningful ways.

As a result, emotional branding has become the primary advertising communication strategy for brands in today's advertising environment. According to Gobé (2001), brands create stronger relationships with consumers when they appeal to consumers emotionally than when they simply sell products based on functional attributes. Similarly, Kotler and Keller (2016) argue that emotional connections play a key role in influencing consumers' memories, perceptions, and brand loyalty.

In India, emotional storytelling is especially relevant culturally because historically Indian art forms have been based upon the emotional experience of being fully engaged/immersed in an aesthetic experience. For example, Indian film, theatre, literature, mythology, and performance arts have all traditionally emphasised emotional content, symbolism, and participatory affective experience. However, the bulk of contemporary research around advertising in India is still rooted largely in traditional Western constructs regarding how to persuade and use brand image in advertising contexts. In contrast to Western models, Indian media and advertising studies have largely failed to fully utilise culturally-based frameworks such as the Rasa Theory for providing insight into emotional dimensions of advertising.

The Theory of Rasa has its first systematic description in Bharata's *Natyashastra*, and it describes how audiences can be moved emotionally by artistic performances (Bharata, 2005). Rasa is the emotion or aesthetic experience produced by the performance, gesture, language, music, and symbolism of the art form. While Rasa is often used when discussing the theatre and classical

performance traditions, Rasa Theory also can be applied to modern visual media with advertisements using similar methods of creating emotional responses, symbolic meaning, and identification by consumers to produce a desired behaviour through their message.

This study will explore the advertisement from Google India, “Reunion”, through the lens of Rasa Theory. The advertisement illustrates the story of two elderly men who were childhood friends who were separated at the time of the Partition of India in 1947, only to be reunited using Google Search decades later. The advertisement is part of the larger Google Search India campaign, and Ogilvy & Mather India produced it in November 2013. The Google Reunion campaign was met with critical acclaim due to its ability to tell an emotionally layered story and represent technology through a human-centred perspective (Nudd, 2013).

The “Reunion” advertisement also differs from traditional advertisements that focus on the demonstration of the product. Instead of being seen as a functional digital tool, technology can also be viewed as an emotional agent and as a reconnecting device used to bring broken human relationships back together. Thus, the Google Reunion advertisement offers a rich opportunity to evaluate emotional aesthetics, narrative persuasion, and symbolic communication in contemporary Indian advertising.

This study discusses how emotions are created through the ad's different Rasa forms; in particular, Karuna, Adbhuta, and Shanta provide the advertising piece's emotional power. Furthermore, it illustrates that contemporary advertising in India increasingly incorporates culturally relevant forms of emotional structure that fit well with indigenous aesthetic traditions.

### **Background of the Advertisement**

"Reunion," one of the ads created by Ogilvy & Mather India as part of the Google Search ad campaign, was released by Google India in November 2013 (Google India, 2013). The ad tells an emotional story of two boys who were separated during Partition in 1947. Google Search assists them in being reunited many years later.

Upon being released, the ad was very popular both on TV and digitally; It has been named as one of the most popular emotional campaigns in India. Commentators and advertising professors praised this campaign for its cinematography, realistic portrayal of emotions, and how both technology and humanity are joined through the stories told by the ad (Nudd, 2013). With its significant international audience recognition, it proved that marketing and advertisements have the potential to communicate with people's past by communicating through historical memories of emotions.

The way the campaign visualized memory about Partition created emotion in people. The campaign did not portray Partition memory through images of violence and political conflict, but instead used images of emotional separation, longing, friendship, and the idea of reconciliation. Because it was such a human-centered approach, people across different generations could connect to the emotions of the story being told by watching the advertisement.

The campaign continues to be referred to as one of the most significant emotional branding campaigns in Indian advertising today, and is also still used in discussions of nostalgia and storytelling, as well as in discussions on how to communicate affectionately.

## **Literature Review**

### **Emotional Branding and Contemporary Advertising**

Emotional-based branding is now at the heart of today's advertising discussions. Today's advertisements are focusing on creating emotional connections and meanings between people and brands alongside utility versus product. According to Gobé (2001), emotional-based branding gives brands the opportunity to develop strong emotional and psychological relationships with consumers. Emotionally connected brands will have stronger memories and more extended periods of consumer engagement.

Kotler and Keller (2016) also point out that emotional communication is a significant factor in how consumers perceive and react to purchasing behaviour. In works of advertisement based on emotion, consumers will often view items purchased as symbolic representations of who they are, their aspirations, and their emotional feelings about their experiences.

Narrative advertising is key to emotional branding. Escalas (2004) believes that the narrative form of advertising allows the audience to relate to brands in a way that incorporates the brand into the individual's memory. Emotional storytelling allows brands to play a role beyond that of just a pure commercial enterprise; they become members of the culture.

In India specifically, the emotional aspect of branding can usually be seen to have strong connections with family, nostalgia, ritualistic behaviours, and collective memories. Many of the advertisements seen in India tend to value emotional connection more than promoting direct product benefits. Google India, Cadbury, Tanishq and Surf Excel are just some examples of how emotional narrative-driven advertisements are taking over Indian advertising today.

### **Rasa Theory and Indian Aesthetics**

The classical Rasa Theory derived from Bharata's *Natyashastra*, one of the foundational texts of Indian aesthetic philosophy and theatre. Bharata first developed the meaning of aesthetic experience as the emotional process of representation that results in universal emotions experienced by an audience (Bharata, 2005). Examples of the classical Rasas are:

- a) Shringara (love/desire)
- b) Hasya (joy/humour)
- c) Karuna (pathos/compassion)
- d) Raudra (anger)
- e) Veera (heroism)
- f) Bhayanaka (fear)

- g) Bibhatsa (disgust)
- h) Adbhuta (wonder)
- i) Shanta (peace)

According to the Rasa Theory, aesthetic emotions arise from the interrelation of definitive, expressive, and transitory emotions creating the experience of Rasa (Vatsyayan, 1996). Rasas are distinct from ordinary emotions in that they are created as aestheticized emotional experiences, which allow spectators to become immersed and participate emotionally.

Although presented within the context of theatre and performance arts, Rasa Theory has been applied more frequently to cinema, television and the visual arts. Indian cinema specifically incorporates many elements of emotional intensification, symbolic imagery and a narrative style consistent with the Rasa Structure; however, advertising rarely incorporates the Rasa Theory when producing advertisements, despite their reliance upon the emotional aspect and symbolism in their communications.

Rasa Theory is therefore culturally grounded with the ability to provide an ideological framework for analysing emotional persuasion as demonstrated within Indian media culture.

### **Nostalgia and Emotional Persuasion**

Today, by using nostalgia as an effective marketing tool in modern-day ads, many of today's advertisers look to use fond memories from our lives (e.g., from childhood), cultural connections, or even emotional familiarity in order to appeal to their target audiences with their ads. According to Stern (1992), ads using nostalgia tend to stimulate affective memory and idealised memories from years past.

As it relates to India, nostalgia is often congruent with family, culture, social relationships, and community identity. Many advertisers will promote their products as being the same as emotionally timeless products for all ages.

Google India's "Reunion" advertisement represents a powerful example of how advertising communicates nostalgia because it integrates both personal memories and a collective cultural memory. The ad connects to our emotional state after the Partition of India and places individual memories within a larger memory context of India. As such, the emotional appeal of this ad comes from the relationship between our memories, losing loved ones or needing to heal from emotional wounds (reconciliation).

### **Rationale for Selection of Advertisement**

This study is concerned with an analysis of the "Reunion" advertisement by Google India; its pivotal characteristic is its capacity for deeply evoking emotion, its rich cultural connection and its complex story-telling format. With so many layers of emotional experience present in this text

including, for example, longing, nostalgia, joy, wonder, reconciliation and closure, it would provide a rich text for Rasa-based analysis.

As opposed to most current advertisements that rely primarily on visually enticing images and/or direct selling messaging, the emotional progression of characters and the structure of storytelling as formed through the cinematic technique of the "Reunion" campaign is the structure of this campaign which forms an emotional progression in the way that we experience and remember the product.

Historically significant themes such as the partition of India are connected to the advertisement, creating a bridge to existing memories and experiences around an important aspect of collective society that exists today and beyond commercial advertising.

This campaign is also significant because it illustrates the humanisation of contemporary digital technologies through the demonstration of a function (Google Search) that not only interacts with a person as a user, but can provide the user with the means to bring together broken emotional connections.

The ongoing academic relevance of this advertisement, its emotional intensity, and the positive response from a wide audience make it an appropriate example for investigating the application of Rasa theory in current advertising literature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The primary analytical framework of this study is focused on Rasa Theory, which is relevant to this advertisement due to the use of emotional progression, visual representation, silence, memory and affective immersion; thus, this study will use Rasa Theory to determine the extent to which the advertisement uses emotional expression. In particular this study will focus on the following Rasas:

- a) Karuna Rasa (The Rasa of Sorrow) - emotional suffering, yearning, compassion
- b) Adbhuta Rasa (The Rasa of Wonder) - amazement, emotional wonder
- c) Shanta Rasa (The Rasa of Peace) - peacefulness, emotional reconciliation
- d) Hasya Rasa (The Rasa of Laughter) - emotional warmth, joyful closeness

This study will also selectively employ semiotic analysis in relation to the advertisement's visual signification and symbolic meaning, specifically using Barthes' (1977) semiotic analysis. There are many visual symbols present in the advertisement that relate to a variety of symbols that indicate borders, travel, memory, aging, food, and friendship, which play a role in determining how emotions influence our understanding of the advertisement.

Lastly, emotional branding theory will help to analyse how Google has changed technological functionality to be more emotionally intimate through the use of visual symbols and their symbolic connections.

## Methodology

This research employs a qualitative interpretive methodology for the purpose of text and image analysis. Since the goal is not to quantify what an individual felt as a member of an audience but rather to learn about those feelings by analysing emotional structures, symbols and aesthetics of the advertisement, this analytical approach can be classified as qualitative.

The analysis is performed on the primary text of "Reunion", a Google India advertisement that was released in 2013. The focus of this analysis will be on the following criteria:

- a) Narrative Structure
- b) Visual Composition
- c) Music/Sound Design
- d) Emotional Progression
- e) Symbolism
- f) Interaction Between Characters
- g) Audience Positioning
- h) Strategies To Persuade Emotionally

The advertisement was viewed multiple times so as to identify emotional patterns and aesthetic structures that reflect Rasa Theory.

## Analysis and Discussion

### **Karuna Rasa: Separation, Memory, and Emotional Longing**

Although it is based in Karuna Rasa, the main emotional basis for the "Reunion" ad is grounded in memories of childhood and childhood friendships before India was partitioned. The ad conveys a deep sense of longing, incompleteness and unresolved emotions.

In the way the performance unfolds, the individual shown as reflecting on this relationship does so through restraint rather than through excessively sentimental or melodramatic expression of his emotions. When viewing this ad, the viewer can experience his absence, the quality of nostalgia, through silence, pauses in the music, zooming in with close-up shots of individuals' facial expressions of looking back to someone long missing and reflecting.

There is no explicit visual violence shown in the ad. Instead, the ad conveys the fundamental emotional consequences of separation. The ad's use of warm; muted colour tones also add to the overall feeling of the melancholy emotion of memories of loss. According to Bharata (2005), Karuna Rasa originates from (1) feelings of emotional suffering and (2) feelings of love, both of which are reflective of the main emotional structure of the ad. The underlying emotional success of the advertisement is that it creates a connection with the viewer; therefore, the emotional experience of the viewer is a share with the protagonist through their longing and emotional incompleteness.

### **Adbhuta Rasa: Technology as Emotional Wonder**

The gradual development of technological possibilities leads to Adbhuta Rasa. Google Search is described not only as a tool that exists in the digital domain but as a source for creating emotional connection beyond time, space, and distance. When the younger generation makes use of Google Search to find a childhood friend for the main character, this transforms Google Search into a source of hope through technology. The wonder generated here comes not just from a technological spectacle, but from an emotional possibility enabled by the technology. This portrayal of technology humanizes it. Unlike typical technology commercials that promote connection through speed or innovation, the "Reunion" campaign links technology with human connection via the restoration of emotions. "Search" is not only a functional representation, it is also symbolic. "Search" has become a metaphor for searching for memories, belonging, friends, and closure. Adbhuta Rasa is built through the use of pacing, emotional expectation, and gradual reveal. The audience witnesses the transition from what seems to be an impossibility becoming a possibility as they experience an emotional sense of wonder.

### **Shanta Rasa: Reunion and Emotional Resolution**

Shanta Rasa is the emotional climax of the ad. The two elderly men who are long-separated friends have their emotions rise before coming together. In contrast to the emotional intensity prior to that point, the emotion-filled reunion scene is more about the emotional stillness of the characters than it is about the large drama of their reunion.

Shanta grows through the expressions of silence, tears, gentle touch and the flow of images at a slow and peaceful pace. The overall result of the emotional resolution is meditative and tranquil. Shanta represents a level emotionality and spiritual tranquillity in the context of Indian drama theory (Vatsyayan, 1996). The advertisement finishes with an emotional tone which is not triumphalistic but deeply humane and reflective. The viewer is emotionally connected with the other two men through the dissolution of borders and the sharing of memories.

The emotional tranquillity portrayed through the emotional connection increases the viewer's trust of Google, which is portrayed as not just a business that sells products, but a business that helps foster and create those types of meaningful human interactions.

### **Hasya Rasa and Emotional Warmth**

Most of the story is driven by Karuna's journey, but there are some lighter moments through Hasya. The childhood stories, loving exchanges and food memories give the audience moments of emotional lightness within the context of the overall emotional structure (i.e., to prevent the audience from being overwhelmed emotionally by the overall story); therefore, the advertisement oscillates between sad vs happy, longing vs joy. Food memories also symbolically serve as vehicles for both continuities of culture and emotional feelings and the emotional warmth generated from these images creates a stronger connection (identification) between the audience and the characters.

### **Nostalgia as Emotional Strategy**

Nostalgia is one of the most powerful persuasive techniques that an advertisement can use. It can stimulate memory on both a personal and collective level. The viewer can feel a connection with both the friends in the advertisement as well as with the broader cultural memories related to Partition and thereby create an emotional connection to a shared cultural history.

In creating an atmosphere of nostalgia, care is taken to create a pacing, visual texture, style of storytelling and a level of emotion that reflects a connection to the memory itself; there is not just an emotional recollection of memory but an emotional rememory created by the loss/absence.

More importantly, the use of nostalgia supports the overall narrative; it does not keep us trapped in a memory but rather, uses the past to create an opportunity for the viewer to have an emotional resolution and closure to their past.

From a brand perspective, nostalgic advertising creates greater emotional connection and trust to the brand. Thus, through the use of nostalgia, Google develops an association with such things as continuity of memory and as a source of emotional connection.

### **Emotional Branding and Soft Persuasion**

Among the characteristics of the "Reunion" campaign is that it uses less assertive commercial content and instead focuses on soft persuasion to communicate its message to audiences. The commercial is not obtrusive to the overall story. The integrated use of Google search into the narrative is done naturally rather than through an overtly repetitive promotion of Google (or of the product) (Gobé, 2001). The use of emotionally-based associations with the brand in the campaign supports emotionally-based brand building principles where the emotional connection is more important than traditional product-driven methodologies. The advertisement has demonstrated how modern brands are, more so than ever before, becoming cultural storytellers and creating emotional/symbolic experiences.

### **Conclusion**

One of the most sophisticated examples of contemporary Indian advertising, Google India's "Reunion" ad uses memory, longing, nostalgia, technology and emotional reconciliation to convert commercial communication into storytelling based on feelings.

This study shows that Rasa Theory is an effective and culturally relevant means for analysing the role of emotional persuasion in Indian advertising. The ad uses the four Rasa of Karuna, Adbhuta, Shanta and Hasya to create an emotional connection between audience members and the product advertised.

Additionally, the campaign demonstrates that emotional aesthetics have become increasingly important in a contemporary advertising arena where persuasion takes place primarily through

narrative rather than product-focused messages. Google Search, therefore, is seen to be more than just technology; it represents the potential for emotional connection with people.

Furthermore, Rasa Theory supports the ongoing relevance of indigenous Indian aesthetic practices to the study of contemporary media. While branding and persuasion research from a global perspective tends to rely on Western theories of advertising, Rasa Theory provides a unique perspective on emotional experience that is based on Indian traditions and expressed through art.

As advertising continues its evolution toward becoming an emotional form of narrative-based communication, culturally relevant frameworks such as Rasa Theory will aid the development of more contextualised models of media and advertising studies in India.

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