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Contemporary Calendar Design: A Case Study of Indian National Banks

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ABSTRACT

In this age of fast moving technology, printed calendars have retained their traditional presence in most personal and professional spaces. With the dawn of every year, one looks forward to replacing them with a visually appealing design. The art of calendars as known in India is reminiscent of contributions made by Raja Ravi Varma. Over many decades now, this art has gradually transformed itself to calendar design with new mediums sufficing the commercial demands. The objective of this research is to systematically comprehend the evolution of calendar design since the British era with reference to important patrons after Ravi Varma. The evolution of Nationalized Banks in India has been of significant importance to the world of art as they have acted as major patrons, developing a thematic and stylistic trend in calendar design. The dearth of data makes it difficult to trace this evolution, defining the scope of this research and making it imperative to document the contemporary calendars for a systematic study of design. Hence, this paper is an analytical study about Bank calendars, published by nationalized Indian banks. A few case studies will help us to recognise the notion of branding done through calendars and define contemporary aesthetics adopted by the banks.

Keywords: Art, Calendar, Design, Indian Banks, Visual trend.

1. INTRODUCTION

There has been a paradigm shift in the way technology has transformed our everyday experience and has evolved to subtly alter our perceptions about objects and concepts. In the realm of art, the traditional definitions have blurred, merged, overlapped and have been redefined with this development. The notion and scope of 'commercial art' has also advanced over the past century with innovative advertising and branding. This research focuses on current advertising trends of nationalized banks of India with reference to the medium of calendars and their progression from art to design.

A bank calendar, one of the most trusted official documents, is what a common man habitually refers to for discerning holidays, festivals et.al. One may come across wall calendars which are ubiquitously published by all nationalized banks in India, as well as table formats, circulated by a chosen few. Some of them have come a long way from unexciting, formatted tabular patterns to visually appealing designs that are complemented by meaningful images. Others have vestiges of the formalism that is associated with financial government institutions. The objective of this research is to document and decipher the current trends in calendar designs, specifically with reference to government institutions; nationalised banks to commence with. The intention is also to construe the notion of branding done through this popular medium of 'calendar art'.

Though this is a vast unexplored field for research with nineteen nationalized banks¹ and much scope lies for a comparative study with the private banks in India; this paper shall attempt to trace a current trend in calendar designs for a few nationalized banks. The art of calendars is reminiscent of India's glorious past; associated with the era of Raja Ravi Varma. The impact of aesthetics established by and associated with the great master has its remnants in the contemporary time as well. The aim is to explore the current visual trend and comprehend the reasons for a feeble attempt to experiment with dynamics of design. For the purpose of sketching the same, the paper would focus on the available data for the year 2017 and 2018. However, a reference would be made to visuals which are randomly available from past years, since the process of data collection is a time consuming one and not much has been preserved. It is expected that the study will be able to document the designs, decipher the trend and reappraise this lost genre of art.

Since this research focuses on calendar designs of nationalized banks in India, it is imperative to comprehend the historical development of these nineteen banks that exist in India today. This will enable us to gain an insight into their role as patrons for initiating a modern trend in calendar art and its design evolution ever since. Bank of Hindustan was the first bank which was established in India in the year 1770 C.E, followed by other banks, some of which do not exist today. The oldest bank in India today is the State Bank of India which initiated its financial services in 1806 C.E. under the nomenclature of Bank of Calcutta. Since then, the State Bank of India with its six associates and other eighteen nationalized banks have been rendering financial services to different states of India. This information will help us in justifying the thematic variety of designs available that are bound with an undercurrent of India.

The existing repertoire of calendars can be broadly categorized as those which adorn the wall and those which have retained a place on the table. Occasionally, one may also come across pocket sized calendars. Not all nationalized banks in India publish table and pocket sized calendars, though a consistent practice has been followed in printing and circulation of wall calendars. A critical look at the design of most bank calendars exhibits a certain severity that escorts the formalism associated with the profession². The colour

¹ State Bank of India and its associates (Six associates), Allahabad Bank, Bank of Baroda, Bank of Maharashtra, Central Bank of India, Dena Bank, Indian Overseas Bank, Punjab National Bank, Union Bank of India, Punjab & Sind Bank, Vijaya Bank, Andhra Bank, Bank of India, Canara Bank, Corporation Bank, Indian Bank, Oriental Bank of Commerce, Syndicate Bank, United Bank of India and UCO Bank are the nineteen nationalized banks in India. Fourteen Banks were nationalized by the Congress government, under the leadership of Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1969, while the rest were done in 1980.

² According to Kajri Jain, "Even though 'calendar art' refers to a particular function and 'bazaar art' to an arena of circulation, both have come to be used as properly generic terms in that they refer both to a set of expectations on the part of the consumers and critics of a specific range of subjects and their visual treatment and to a set of imaginings on the part of producers of who these customers are and what they want." She elaborates that the difference between 'bazaar' and

scheme of the design ubiquitously follows the colour of the bank logo, reinforcing its brand identity. The tabulated formats have English and Hindi names of the months, days, position of the sun and moon, and important festivals marked with widely recognised symbols. The preliminary impression that one acquires about Bank calendars is that they lack images or graphics. This fact is established in the light of the fact that the copies which are circulated among general public are the ones which have a formal dated format, sans the images. It is essential to note here that every year a certain budget is allocated for advertising and marketing by all banks, which is inclusive of the designing and printing of calendars. Wall and table calendars with attractive images are printed in a restricted quantity and are meant for display in banks or distribution only to the esteemed clients of the banks. However, exceptions can be sought in certain cases where patronage and personal initiative of the administrative members have lent an aesthetic value to the art of calendar design.

I would specifically refer to the calendars of Punjab and Sind Bank, which was established in 1908 with a humble aim to uplift the people of Punjab. The visual agenda of the calendars published by the bank has been to propagate the philosophy of the Sikh faith. As a design convention, the bank follows a six-page calendar design with one visual embellishing a format of two months. As per the online record which is available from 2002 to 2018; calendars from the early years of the first decade of twenty first century depicts realistic paintings, executed in the medium of oil/pastels? thematically based on the life of Sikh Gurus. These paintings are credited to the artistic vision and skill of Devender Singh, a prolific artist from Amritsar, who associated himself with the calendar art of Punjab and Sind bank with his first series on Sikh women in 1972. This trend is interrupted by photographs of significant Gurudwaras around the world and those of historic importance in the year 2007 and 2008 respectively. The calendar of 2009 revives the tradition of painting which depicts holy people who have contributed to the Sikh faith, apart from the revered ten Gurus. However, the predilection for photography of the holy shrines of the Sikhs dominated the following years; a trend that has continued till date. The concept of religious imagery is not a novel theme in the popular culture of calendar art in India. The aesthetics for calendar art established by Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) found continuation in the colonial and post-colonial, witnessing a rise of varied patrons and subjects. Interestingly, the trend of religious calendars being patronized by the financial institutions such as banks is a matter of historic importance and demands documentation. According to Stephen R. Inglis, "Printed images of Hindu deities were used as a part of commercial advertising as early as the 1920s...by the 1950s businesses of every kind purchased printed pictures of deities as advertising posters and calendars". The author also points out that in such cases, although the religious imagery maybe appropriated to advertising, its primary concern has been the relationship between the devotee and the divine, expressed through aesthetic calendar illustrations (Babb, 1977). It is perhaps in this context, that the Bank continued the vestiges of tradition of religious paintings

The theme of picturesque sites is not an innovative theme that is adopted in the art of calendar design. However, the credibility of the visual and the cause it is associated with is undoubtedly reinforced by the earnestness of the financial institution. Another bank that is conscious of associating itself with aesthetics of calendar design is Bank of Baroda; who has adopted a visual agenda of supporting a social cause in collaboration with World Wildlife Fund for the past few years. For instance, the calendar of 2017 was a

'commercial art' is not elemental but it is a particular form of bazaar which became a part of the colonial economy. The author elaborates that printed images in general emerged from 'institutional contexts where European technologies such as printing, photography, naturalist modelling and perspective' were expertise. P.8

delightful cluster of images with nature as its theme. The design comprises of a series of twelve photographs set individually with all months, depicting sites of natural forests and wildlife conserves throughout India. These are credited to twelve different Indian photographers of repute. The dating format of the concerned month is complemented by a smaller version of previous and forthcoming month on the left. On similar lines of thought, the calendar of 2018 displays a series of twelve photographs of birds and animals close to water bodies in their natural environment. The theme of conservation for the current year is the natural resource of water which is adopted as a visual theme, where water bodies are impressively shot, glorified by reflections of surrounding flora and fauna. The bank has associated itself with a cause only recently, prior to which themes based on India such as festival and dances were published.

Thus, yet another category that one can identify in the visual catalogue of nationalized calendar designs is the idea of India. This is also not a novel practice and has its predecessors in posters with representations of *bharatmata* or political personalities. Interestingly, the representation of India as per the propaganda followed by the banks can be categorically divided into two distinct approaches. Firstly, where *Hindustan* or *Bharatvarsha* is depicted with its magnificent cultural heritage-rich in traditions, festivals, rituals and values systems. Secondly, the notion of modern India with its innovations and practices, causes and concerns, progressing to showcase itself as a developing superpower. Consider the case study of calendar published by Oriental Bank of Commerce. The calendar of 2017 was based on the theme of India's contribution to the world, whether in terms of spices, medicine, mathematics or astronomy etc. Critically, the twelve-page design contains visuals that are a mix of photographs and illustrations of varied styles. The current year calendar is a more visually focused initiative with the bank concerned about promoting health awareness and adoption through *Yoga*. Hence, one finds twelve photographs of important *yoga aasanas*, with supporting text that elucidates its health benefits. However, the design circulated with the masses is sans this theme and follows the tabulated format in green and black with the lowermost part of the design displaying dates of previous and forthcoming months. Another instance of a bank which focuses on the theme of representing India is Vijaya Bank. The calendar of 2017 is a vibrant array of twelve edited photographs based on various classical and folk dance forms of India.

Apart from the traditional representations of Indian culture, certain banks are advertising themselves through calendars based on the concepts that display modernity of the Nation. The calendar design of 2015 for Indian Bank is adorned with photographs that support its tagline, "Your Tech-Friendly Bank". These images which are placed above the dates are based on the use of various technological services offered by the bank to people of all professions. The lower part of the calendar is occupied by a strip which highlights the products and services offered by Indian Bank. However, the current calendar has colourful images based on popular Indian festivals, while the rest of the design follows the established pattern. This trend of displaying its products and services has been adopted by other banks as well, such as the Punjab National Bank. The calendar circulated among the masses contains a tabulated month in sync with colours of the bank logo; while the lower part on each of the twelve pages has an attractive headline related to the product or service offered by the bank. What needs to be noted here is that along with the text, the visual appeal of the calendar design is created by the use of images of a celebrity, who endorses the bank. The notion of adorning the design with a celebrity is an age old credible strategy to create attraction for the bank.

Contrary to this, creating an emotional appeal is also a popular advertising practice that finds much success in a country like India. Bank of India propagates its values and beliefs through their calendar designs

as well; which is evident in the design of 2018 that is based on the value of 'Relationship beyond Banking'. The design is comprised of a series of twelve photographs displaying common people in their everyday activities, highlighting various values such as reliability, risk management etc. The bank keeps its visual agenda in sync with its values.

The case of table calendar design however needs a more careful and systematic analysis, which is available in a perplexing variety. The standardization of design that is evident in most wall calendars seems to be lacking in these designs. The planning department of each bank initiates printing of table calendars according their annual approved budget for advertising. The visuals may range from images of flora, fauna, nature, religious entities and motivational quotes.

What furthers the obstructions in this research is the case study of State Bank of India and its associates. These banks under the common prefix of "State Bank" have an enormous assortment of table calendar designs. The analysis done is based on the available designs which are ubiquitously based on the theme of India with a diverse visual propaganda. For instance, the State Bank of Patiala had printed a calendar in 2017 which has Sikh religious imagery. The calendar is a twelve-page design with ten revered Gurus adorning the months from January to October, while the months of November and December have images of the holy Guru Granth Sahib and Golden temple. Stylistically, these paintings have been executed in the manner of etchings found from the company school of art; an illustrative style which amalgamates realism and miniature like detail. Designed with a subtle background and adorned with a delicate border, the calendar has an overall aesthetic appeal that one would not associate with a bank. Interestingly, State bank of Patiala had also printed another table calendar in 2017, which was based on a natural theme, with appealing photographs of flowers complimented by short quotations. Usually, the planning department approves of a standard design for printing and circulation; but in certain cases, regional variations of table calendars are found. This forms an important link in deciphering the contribution of certain Banks as patrons; wherein the personal initiatives of the members of the administrative authority become responsible for preserving the tradition of religious calendars.

On similar lines, the table calendar of The State Bank of Bikaner and Jaipur for the year 2012 had three variations. The first design is based on the classical and folk dance forms of India wherein photographs of a single dancer are cut out and merged with a subtly textured background. The second variation is based on the theme of 'modern times in India', visually represented through photographs of newspapers; which carry a headline related to some important news of India's achievement. The third variation of design highlights the concept of youth as 'not a stage of life but as a state of mind' empowered with attitude, passion, brilliance etc. The thematic assortment and stylistic experimentation of visual representation found in the realm of table calendars is way more varied as compared to the feeble attempt made in wall calendars. Though, certain banks do maintain a certain level of consistency in both these formats, the notion of creating a brand image through visuals is lacking.

Photographs of magnificent species of twelve birds in their natural environment adorned the table calendar for 2017, published by the Bank of Baroda on the theme of "Winged Wonders", reminding us of the threat of their extinction. The design for the current year titled "Power and Beauty" is also a visual delight, displaying images of twelve colourful and delicate butterflies. The cover of the calendar mentions, "Butterflies epitomise change & focus, endurance & serenity and above all the power to overcome obstacles". The visual propaganda of these calendars designs is consistent with the wall calendars, which

are also based on nature and conservation efforts by WWF across the country. There are many more examples of table calendars where one can find experimentation with images that create a visually attractive design.

To conclude, this study suggests that despite a variety in design and format, the 'art of calendar design' in the context of nationalized banks in India has evolved with a mission to promote the brand of India as a nation. Though, over a period of time the notion of 'calendar art' has gradually succumbed and is reincarnated as 'calendar design'; it does not get the privilege of the aesthetic value that was attached to this medium in the past. The commercialization associated with this format demands a systemic documentation to comprehend how the medium has evolved and established a contemporary aesthetic.

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