

**Ravinder Kaur**, *Brand New Nation: Capitalist Dreams and Nationalist Designs in Twenty-first-century India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 346 pp, with illustrations. ISBN 1503612597

In this highly readable study of nation branding, Ravinder Kaur analyses the combination of free market capitalism and ethnonationalism that helped catapult Modi into the driver's seat by pointing out the active promotion by state and publicity consultants – a promotion that effectively entangled high-pitch investment drives with collective dreamworlds. 'Nation branding' is a peculiar twenty-first century ailment that has infected countries and cities all around the globe. In itself merely an avatar of the Public Relations (PR) industry's inherent promotion of dazzle, it becomes something more sinister and ominous, as Kaur shows, when married to a political agenda. Her study underlines that, as in every successful marriage, there is a give and take. Corporate industries and multinationals go happily along with ethnonationalists of an exclusionist and often violent kind as long as investments are welcome, while the ethnonationalists have given up their swadeshi ideology of the home-made and home-grown for their piece of the globalised economy. And it worked: the dreamworld of capitalist design was an attractive future to sell to the emerging post-colonial middle class.

The study is divided into a long introduction and six individual chapters divided into three main parts: Dreamworlds, New Time and Anxiety. The different campaigns undertaken by Indian governments included the famous 'India Shining' campaign as well as 'New India', 'Acche din' and other campaigns, all with their happy message of a new, energetic and tuned-in India. Kaur describes fieldwork in Davos and among PR consultants in Delhi. She analyses how this new happy India was marketed for an international audience in Davos and on billboards in Western countries, as well as for an inland audience in newspaper and television ads. Kaur shows how public relations companies – not politicians – were instrumental in forming the messages and the early versions of the dreamworld, and then she disaggregates and dissects those messages. The core technique of nation branding is to emphasise a basic sameness that ensures competitiveness in the globalised marketplace, while charming the customer and investor with cultural difference. India as a land of hospitality, of playfulness,

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of colour and spices and buzzing market constituted the mainstay of the campaigns directed at a foreign audience. Cultural distinctiveness becomes a competitive advantage. Kaur is particularly acerbic in showing how the message for selling India was conveyed as a land of innovation while also culturally and historically distinct – a colourful India, without the dust.

However, the international campaigns were also very much present in campaigns at home, in newspapers ads, on billboards and on television. Kaur draws out several interesting aspects of these campaigns. She points out, crucially, that it was not the *fons et origo* of Indian liberalisation, the Congress party, that most successfully embraced the message, but its opponent, the Hindu nationalist movement. Its turn-around from the original swadeshi ideology of the homespun to a warm embrace of the globalised corporation constitute a crucial political change that shaped what was to come. In particular, I liked Kaur's underlining of how 'the invisible hand' of capitalism was being replaced in practice by the very visible hand of political intervention – and sometimes manipulation – through demonetisation, which in particular, made some people rich in the process. Another important aspect of these campaigns was the re-creation of the ordinary Indian (the *aam admi*) into an investor-citizen. This investor-citizen invests in the future as part of his nationalist fervour, and his (or her) personal gain is a form of nation building. And here lies the crux.

This study and Kaur's excellent analysis crucially underlines how the main problem with nation branding is that it is anti-politics. It claims that its particular set of future-forward solutions are the only ones viable. The calls for minimum government, the notion that caste politics and reservations are for the corrupt 'Bleed India'-politicians and the notion that establishment figures and politicians are holding the country back constitute a fundamentally ideological message in the garb of common sense conveyed with great slogans and colourful images. Those opposed are selfish, backward looking and almost anti-national for not supporting the natural urges of reaching for riches just there. One campaign even stated, 'There are two Indias in this country. One India is straining at the leash, eager to spring forth and live up to all the adjectives that the world has recently been showering upon us. The other India is the leash'. This line of argument, Kaur convincingly argues, played directly into Modi's script, with his then image of the *chaiwallah* who had become a pro-business CEO of Gujarat.

Kaur has painstakingly assembled a story of great importance for

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an informed analysis of contemporary India, and she should be commended for it. It is of course not the only story in town. The catapulting of Modi into the driver's seat was not just due to clever PR. Other political parties fumbled, there was anti-incumbency and the new generations' lack of reverence for established forces and new media intervened in ways not foreseen. Also, the question of why the dreamworld message seems to have suited so many Indian voters is not addressed. Although the ads certainly played a role, the value of *Brand New Nation* lies in analysing how the message covers an ethnonationalist political agenda behind the attractive dreamworld images of a dust-free, corruption-free and happy future, but the question of the effect of the message remains open.

One might want to criticise the publisher: The photographs of the posters are all in black and white. This is a great shame, because in the original, they are colourful posters and the colours underline how professionally they were made. This was not the India of pre-liberalisation with its fantastic but amateurishly hand painted walls; this is India of the twenty-first century: professional, sleek, mass-produced and corporate. The black and white reproductions leave an aftertaste of something old and downplay the force of the PR industry, and in effect counter the force of the analysis.

These words of reservation notwithstanding, *Brand New Nation* is a *tour de force* and highly recommendable for its informed analysis of how easily professional PR lends itself to selling political agendas – however illiberal – and how the message helped shape contemporary India.

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