

Am I speaking Hindian yet?

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An English copywriter, God bless her, was quick to celebrate the return of the English copywriter (had we ever left?), and a Hindi loyalist was quick to attempt to reclaim lost ground (had it ever been lost?). The irony, I am sure, escaped us all: The pro-Hindi gentleman was writing in English, on an English website. And if you think that Hindi is a catch-all for any Indian language, think again: It's Hindi per se that the yelling is about.

A cheeky poser: If the epicentre of Indian advertising has moved irretrievably away from English, why isn't there a single Indian advertising website in... Hindi?

Because the principal linguistic currency of commerce was, is and will be English. And for the simple reason that as India lusts after a place among the mightiest global nations, its most important efforts will employ English. As eager as the world is to do business with, and give business to India, it is entirely on 'English' terms – no one is going to feel especially obliged to learn the 18 languages or 800 dialects of India.

Simply put: The marketplace of the Indian future is annoyingly dependent on English. And brands live first in the marketplace and you get the drift.

What, then, of Hindi? And any other Indian language? Has the language bell curve looped and bit its own 'bhasha' in the bum? Should our 'desi' copywriters lose sleep over an imminent English victory march round the Indian language stadium?

Don't be silly. As everyone knows, our advertising has been translated and dubbed in regional languages from the very beginning – Malayalam, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati and Bengali being the dominant ones. Indian advertising did not, is not and will not become Hindi advertising for the simple reason that there are too many constituencies, each speaking a different language, each holding enough buying power to render the Hindi or English advertisement meaningless.

You don't have to be a Chanakya or Birbal or, excuse me, Sherlock Holmes to know that when it comes to the purchasing power of the non-Hindi speaking people of India, these are not numbers that can be dismissed. And the bizarre fact remains: If there is but one language with which you can reach all of India in one fell swoop, it is still English.

'Thanda matlab Coca-Cola' is most definitely Hindi and, without a doubt, appears rendered in the English alphabet. And that's how it appeared on the ad that won at Cannes.

Make a little place here for the annual soul-searching and hand-wringing we hear about the fact that Indian advertising has 'not found its voice'. I keep thinking that this is a hilarious problem to have when we're all ooh-ing and aah-ing over the fact that Indian advertising had found its true language. Please note that this terribly artistic angst surfaces most often from sulking creatives returning empty handed from Cannes.

But not one individual has ever dared to articulate what the 'Indian voice' is. Er, is there supposed to be one? Is it not enough that Indian advertising seems to have a perfectly coherent voice (or voices) when speaking to over one billion Indians? When it comes to the global stage, let's just play them the way all other countries play them – on global terms: Great idea, great execution, in and out.

I'm being querulous here, but I don't see a voice in European advertising, or American advertising. (Hey, I don't even see their pundits holding forth on their respective voices.) Oh yes, the Europeans don't shy from skin, the Americans are all about the laugh, and the classic Japanese ad is insanely shrill. The Thais and Australians both lay claim to distinctive casts of humour, but if the laugh is the goal, then what's the real difference?

Of course, one sees a country's idioms, its mores, its personalities, its peeves and its persuasions, but I don't really see these distinctive voices in the purist's sense of the word, like the Beatles or Ravi Shankar having a distinctive and non-negotiable sound. A Japanese marque called Honda makes jaw-dropping advertising in England as well as America (Orchestra and Cog) and we applaud it the world over and we don't really celebrate it as a Japanese advertisement or an English ad or an American ad.

The Fevicol commercial that shows the unshakeable mountain of passengers aboard an overloaded truck in Rajasthan is unmistakably Indian: The brand is Indian, the people are Indian, the moment is Indian, the colours are Indian, the sound is Indian, but it is understood (and awarded) with equal facility anywhere in the world. Just like we stylishly proclaimed Hinglish to be the buzz some time ago, must we needlessly occupy ourselves with banging around with the back-to-English drums?

The point I'm making is that all this breathless talk of the return of English is, while it is quite accurate, a confused storm in a teacup. We had 'Tandurusti ki raksha karta hai Lifebuoy', 'Sona sona naya Rexona', 'Double maza hai aur kam daam, MR coffee jiska naam' entire bloody decades before this supposed Great Hindi Leap Forward.

Yes, we're now seeing a blizzard of jingles, 'shairi' and dialogues in the last few years, but it's just a reflection of the change in the demographics: More people have joined the 'people with money' class and they are not necessarily the English or convent educated class of yore. But they all now aspire to English, in the meaning that they are planning for a future in which the borders between India and the world are blurred and they aspire to make their lives proficient in all things global. And that is what is bringing the English back.

Another dynamic has also helped. Over the years, we have upgraded our skills and the sheer technical quality of our best work can hold its own in an international forum. Indian advertising today is smoother, more fluid, more compelling, more arresting than it ever was and comes close to matching the technical and artistic virtuosity of Bollywood and Hollywood.

Coming as this does in tandem with a new place for Hindi, it plays a major part in this Hindi-to-English brouhaha. Have we lost sight of the fact that these are not significant growths in the intelligence of Indian advertising nor are they the great change or transformation in the essential fabric of Indian advertising?

As India repeatedly accommodates all things global, and then corrects itself to preserve everything Indian, it will call on foresights, insights and hindsight that will help craft a surefooted journey for our brands through these shifting times. Let us beware of missing the point if we see it in mere terms of a 'turn to Hindi' and a 'return to English'.

What we need to spend our energies on is to quickly start a body of observations, assessments and anticipations about the colossal dynamics that we are facing and will face. We also need points of view about how nimbly we will practise the sophistications of our crafts in a market that would fry the brains of those pretty white men who traipse off with the Lions at Cannes.

And having said that, a round of applause to Geetha Rao. She has, without a doubt, called our attention to an important development, and on behalf of all the derided English copywriters in this fair land of ours, Geetha, I owe you my salaams. Yes, salaams. 'Gratitude' is just too... English?

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