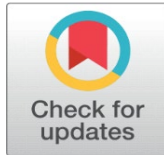
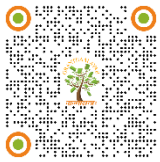


# VISUAL SEMIOTICS AS A HUMAN-CENTRED COMMUNICATION TOOL IN THE INDIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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## ABSTRACT

India is a nation where communication is deeply embedded in visual and symbolic traditions, from religious iconography and folk art to contemporary advertising and digital media. Visual semiotics—the study of signs and meanings—offers a powerful framework for understanding how these visual codes shape human-centred communication in Indian society. This paper examines the role of visual semiotics in designing communication that is empathetic, culturally resonant, and socially inclusive. Drawing on semiotic theory, human-centred design principles, and Indian case studies, the study employs a qualitative methodology combining semiotic analysis, ethnographic interviews with designers, and critical review of public campaigns and branding strategies. Findings highlight how Indian semiotic codes—such as motifs from Madhubani and Warli art, religious symbols like the lotus and Om, and cultural icons like Gandhi’s spectacles—function as tools for building trust, inclusivity, and national identity. The study argues that integrating indigenous semiotic frameworks with human-centred design fosters more impactful and culturally grounded communication strategies for India’s diverse society.

**Keywords:** Visual Semiotics, Human-Centred Design, Indian Culture, Communication Design, Folk Art, Cultural Codes

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India’s socio-cultural fabric is plural, shaped by centuries of religious traditions, regional practices, folk arts, and global influences. In such diversity, visual communication is not merely aesthetic but cultural negotiation. A single symbol—such as the cow—may signify divinity, livelihood, or political identity depending on context [Nanda \(2003\)](#). Human-centred communication thus requires tools that acknowledge these layered meanings.

Visual semiotics has emerged as a significant paradigm in understanding how communication operates through signs, symbols, and cultural codes. Rooted in Saussurean linguistics and further advanced by [Barthes \(1967\)](#), semiotics views communication as a process of signification, where meaning is culturally produced and socially interpreted. In human-centred design (HCD), semiotics bridges the gap between design artefacts and user interpretation, allowing communication to move beyond functionality toward resonance, identity, and inclusivity [Chandler \(2017\)](#), [Niemeyer \(2014\)](#).

In the Indian socio-cultural context, semiotic practices are deeply embedded in visual traditions such as Madhubani painting, religious iconography, handloom patterns, and cinema [Dey \(2018\)](#), [Sen \(2005\)](#). These cultural symbols act as codes that are immediately recognizable within communities, thereby facilitating shared meanings. Unlike Western design paradigms, Indian communication systems emphasize multiplicity, syncretism, and embeddedness in ritual and everyday life [Bhabha \(1994\)](#), [Raghavendra \(2021\)](#). Visual semiotics thus provides an analytical lens to explore how design in India achieves cultural resonance while maintaining human-centredness.

This paper addresses that gap by examining visual semiotics as a human-centred communication tool in India. It asks: How do Indian semiotic codes shape interpretation and engagement? How can designers employ these codes to foster inclusivity, empathy, and cultural resonance? Through case studies spanning folk traditions, campaigns, and digital media, this study demonstrates how semiotics serves as both a design framework and a cultural bridge for effective human-centred communication in India.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. SEMIOTICS AND COMMUNICATION**

Semiotics examines meaning-making through signs, as theorized by Saussure's dyadic model (signifier and signified) and Peirce's triadic model (representamen, object, interpretant). [Barthes \(1977\)](#) extended these theories to cultural myths, where everyday visuals acquire ideological meaning. Visual semiotics has since been applied across fields such as advertising, film, interface design, and political communication. Scholars argue that images are never neutral but embedded with cultural values that influence perception and interpretation [Chandler \(2017\)](#).

### **2.2. HUMAN-CENTRED DESIGN (HCD) IN INDIA**

[Norman \(2013\)](#) emphasizes that human-centred design places user needs and cultural contexts at the core of design. However, in India, HCD cannot be separated from semiotics, given the symbolic richness of everyday life. For instance, colors and motifs carry layered meanings: saffron may indicate spirituality, courage, or political affiliation; green signifies prosperity, but also religious identity. Effective communication must therefore account for these associations to avoid misinterpretation. Indian HCD research increasingly highlights the importance of culturally embedded design practices, especially in rural and multilingual contexts [Raghavan \(2019\)](#).

### **2.3. INDIAN SEMIOTIC CODES**

Indian visual culture is saturated with symbolic systems that function as cultural languages across regions and communities.

- 1) **Religious & Mythological Symbols:** The lotus conveys purity and rebirth, the Om represents spirituality, and the swastika signifies auspiciousness [Singh \(2009\)](#). These motifs cut across religious and secular domains, making them powerful but context-sensitive semiotic codes. The cow, lamp, and conch are similarly recurring motifs in religious and political imagery, evoking layered associations of sanctity, tradition, and authority [Nanda \(2003\)](#).
- 2) **Folk Art Traditions:** Forms such as Madhubani (Bihar), Warli (Maharashtra), Pattachitra (Odisha), and Gond (Madhya Pradesh) rely on recurring motifs—fish for fertility, peacocks for love, concentric circles for community life, and tree of life for continuity [Archer \(2011\)](#), [Jha \(2018\)](#). These folk traditions function not only as artistic practices but also as semiotic systems transmitting oral histories, cosmologies, and social structures [Varma \(2012\)](#). For example, Warli art uses simple geometric figures to encode narratives of community life and ecological harmony [Mehrotra \(2015\)](#), while Madhubani art often encodes mythological tales alongside domestic and ritual themes.
- 3) **Modern Icons:** Contemporary campaigns frequently repurpose traditional codes. Gandhi's spectacles, used in *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, symbolize moral authority and national pride [Kaur \(2017\)](#). Similarly, the Amul girl, introduced in the 1960s, has become a living semiotic resource, embodying satire, collective memory, and national commentary [Munshi \(2010\)](#). In branding, companies like Fabindia and Titan frequently mobilize folk motifs and indigenous symbols to emphasize cultural authenticity [Chaudhuri \(2011\)](#).

Together, these codes illustrate the blending of traditional and contemporary semiotic frameworks in Indian communication design. They also highlight the importance of contextual literacy: while symbols such as the swastika hold positive connotations in Indian contexts, their global misinterpretation demonstrates the risks of decontextualized semiotics [Dutta \(2016\)](#).

## 2.4. VISUAL SEMIOTICS IN COMMUNICATION DESIGN

Research demonstrates the utility of semiotics in decoding persuasive strategies in advertising [Williamson \(1978\)](#), multimodal campaigns [Machin and Mayr \(2012\)](#), and digital environments [van Leeuwen \(2005\)](#). In India, advertising scholars note that brands often embed cultural codes—such as festival imagery, mythological references, and folk motifs—to build authenticity and trust [Kumar \(2020\)](#). Studies on political communication also highlight the mobilization of visual semiotics in election campaigns, where colors, emblems, and icons become vehicles of ideology [Dutta \(2016\)](#).

## 2.5. IDENTIFIED GAPS

While global literature has robustly engaged with semiotics, fewer studies focus on India's unique symbolic density and cultural pluralism. Research has often examined Indian advertising semiotically but less attention has been given to public campaigns or digital media, where visual codes play a vital role in overcoming literacy and language barriers. Moreover, the integration of semiotic awareness into HCD frameworks in India remains under-theorized, leaving a significant gap at the intersection of design, culture, and communication.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a **qualitative interpretive approach** and was designed to capture both the symbolic depth of visual communication and the lived experiences of designers and audiences who engage with these codes.

#### 3.1. SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

Semiotic analysis was conducted on a purposive sample of visual materials drawn from branding, public campaigns, and digital interfaces included.

#### 3.2. ETHNOGRAPHIC INTERVIEWS

Interviews were conducted with practicing designers and visual artists in India, representing advertising agencies, social campaigns, and digital product teams. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diversity in practice areas. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and explored:

- How designers interpret and apply cultural semiotics.
  - Strategies for ensuring inclusivity and resonance in diverse audiences.
  - Examples where semiotic choices influenced campaign success or failure.
- Interviews were transcribed and thematically coded 3. Case Study Contextualization

The analysis was complemented with case studies of Indian folk art traditions (Madhubani, Warli, and Gond) to situate semiotics in its indigenous roots. These traditions were examined through secondary literature, museum archives, and existing ethnographic studies [Jha \(2018\)](#), [Mehrotra \(2015\)](#). By linking traditional semiotic systems with contemporary campaigns, the study highlights continuities and transformations in Indian visual communication.

Findings from semiotic analysis, interviews, and case study research were triangulated to ensure validity. For example, motifs identified in Madhubani art as fertility symbols were cross-checked with both designer interpretations and campaign applications in rural health communication. This triangulation strengthened the reliability of insights by capturing both scholarly and practitioner perspectives.





Cultural Semiotics in Indian Brands



Semiotics in Swachh Bharat Campaign

#### 4. FINDINGS

The analysis generated three dominant themes that illustrate how visual semiotics operates as a human-centred communication tool in the Indian socio-cultural context.

##### 1) Cultural Continuity and Resonance

Designers consistently emphasized that Indian audiences respond positively to visual communication rooted in familiar cultural codes. Campaigns that incorporate religious or folk motifs establish emotional trust and recognition. For instance, the lotus symbol used in government campaigns was interpreted as a sign of purity and renewal, while rangoli patterns in festival advertising were associated with domesticity, hospitality, and celebration. Similarly, the Paytm interface's blue-and-white palette was described by users as evoking clarity and trustworthiness, subtly resonating with traditional Indian associations of blue with divinity (e.g., Krishna) and purity.

In rural contexts, respondents noted that the use of Madhubani-inspired motifs in public health posters made information more accessible. Local audiences associated such motifs with authenticity and community identity, which increased engagement with the message. This illustrates how continuity with traditional semiotic systems strengthens the credibility of contemporary communication.

##### 2) Inclusivity through Familiar Semiotics

Semiotic strategies were also found to be essential for ensuring inclusivity across India's diverse population. Designers highlighted that symbols can transcend linguistic and literacy barriers. For example, Warli-inspired stick figures were used

in several grassroots campaigns to represent family, community, and health practices, enabling comprehension without textual explanation.

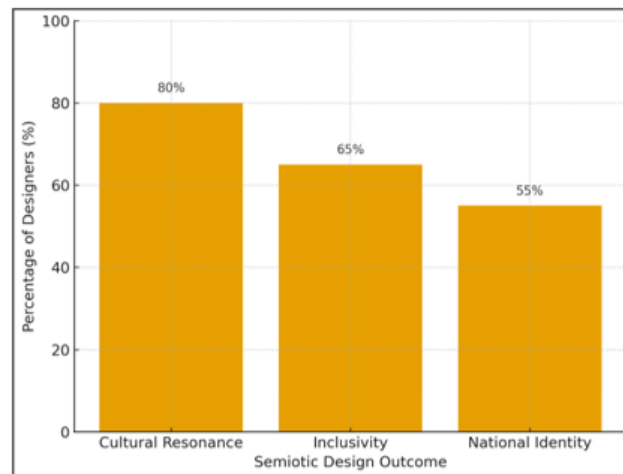
Interviews revealed that designers deliberately avoid certain culturally sensitive symbols—such as religious deities—when targeting multi-religious audiences, instead relying on universally relatable motifs like the tree of life, diya (lamp), or hands in gestures of offering and care. This selective use of symbols demonstrates how semiotics contributes to inclusive design by anticipating audience sensitivities while still maintaining cultural resonance.

### 3) National Identity and Collective Memory

A recurring theme was the mobilization of visual semiotics to reinforce national identity. The most prominent example is the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*, which used Gandhi's spectacles as its emblem. Semiotic analysis revealed that the spectacles served as more than a literal reference—they evoked Gandhi's moral vision, collective responsibility, and national pride. Interviews confirmed that audiences saw this symbol as a unifying image, cutting across class and regional divides.

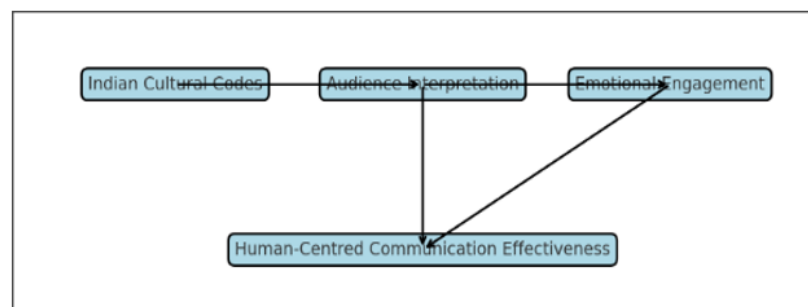
Similarly, the Amul girl's long-standing presence in Indian advertising demonstrates how semiotics constructs collective memory. By commenting on current events through satire, she has become a cultural shorthand for Indian public opinion. Designers noted that this continuity of character acts as a "semiotic anchor," connecting past and present cultural references.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Designers' Perspectives on Semiotic Design Outcomes in India  
Data based on semi-structured interviews with 10 designers.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Conceptual Framework: Semiotics and Human-Centred Communication in India

This framework illustrates the progression from **Indian cultural codes** to **audience interpretation** and **emotional engagement**, leading to **human-centred communication effectiveness**. It was developed through a synthesis of semiotic analysis, designer interviews, and case studies.

## 5. DISCUSSION

The findings show that visual semiotics is deeply intertwined with human-centred communication in India. Unlike Western contexts where semiotic design may emphasize minimalism, Indian communication thrives on symbolic richness and cultural layering.

- **Folk art traditions** are not mere decoration but function as semiotic systems that preserve cultural memory while making communication accessible.
- **Religious and mythological symbols** remain powerful but must be used with sensitivity to avoid political polarization.
- **Modern branding and campaigns** increasingly hybridize traditional motifs with contemporary aesthetics, balancing authenticity and modernity.

This indicates that effective human-centred communication in India requires designers to navigate cultural codes carefully, ensuring resonance without oversimplification.

## 6. CONCLUSION

**Meaning-making process.** Findings show that semiotic strategies enhance **cultural resonance, inclusivity, and national identity**, strengthening design's relevance in a pluralistic society. Semiotics functions through **audience interpretation and emotional engagement**, positioning cultural symbols as **strategic tools** for building identity, empathy, and trust. For Indian designers, it enables bridging **tradition and modernity**, producing campaigns and interfaces that are both **authentic and accessible**. The proposed framework [Figure 2](#) captures this pathway from cultural codes to effective communication.

Globally, the study contributes to **human-centred design debates** by emphasizing culture's role in shaping meaning and user experience. The Indian case shows that culturally embedded semiotics is essential for inclusive and resonant design. Future research should include **comparative studies across regions and platforms** to explore how semiotic codes evolve with globalization and digitalization, further establishing visual semiotics as a **driver of inclusive, emotionally engaging communication**.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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