



From Walled to World City: Creating Brand Delhi Rachna Sethi

Abstract

We live in an era of branding, where not just goods, but people, educational institutes and cities carry tags aiming to create a recall value and emotional association with their products and services. Individuals have styled themselves as influencers; schools and universities sport carry the global label; phone companies are “connecting people”, and advertisements attract the tourists with experiences of “city of nawabs” and “city of joy”. The paper discusses the idea of brand, the notion of place branding, the compulsions of creating a city brand in a globalized world, and the problematics of reducing a city’s diversity to a singular brand-tag. These concepts are explored with reference to Delhi; and the city’s aspirations to redefine itself from the labyrinth of walled city to a world class city of modern architectural spectacles is delineated. The sociological and geographical lens of place making and branding is further used for analysis of literary spaces in Namita Gokhale’s *Priya in Incredible Indyya*.

Keywords: Branding, Advertisements, City, Global, Spectacles, Architectural

Yes, cities have always been brands, in the truest sense of the word. Paris is romance, Milan is style, New York is energy, Washington is power.

(Anholt “City Brands” 18)

Branding Cities

Branding is a term traditionally used for goods, whereby a product, its name and design is used to uniquely identify it and differentiate it from those of competitors (Wood 664). Ambler

(1992) provides a counter consumer-oriented definition of a brand where its attributes promise satisfaction. While opinion is divided between which approach is more relevant, Anholt insists that “the value of brands resides primarily in the mind of the consumer, not in the factory of the producer” (“Branding” 4), and branding evokes strong emotional ties with goods, services, persons, or places (Florek 209). The last few decades have witnessed a shift in direction, whereby the concept of branding is applied not just to products but to places, and more specifically cities.

Even as marketing and research gains momentum around branding of cities, we need to raise and problematise the core questions around it. Can places be branded, or should be branded like products/services? If a city is promoted as a brand, who is the (co)owner of that brand – government, real estate developers or corporate houses? What are the products that a city offers – infrastructure, tourist attractions or exciting experiences? Who are the consumers of the city- locals or tourists or both? Does the branding strengthen the bond between citizens and the city or is it targeted primarily at tourists and business investors? Hankinson (2004) argues that city branding is similar to corporate branding in reflecting a set of sub brands and consumer experiences – both address multiple groups of stakeholders, both have a high level of intangibility and complexity, both deal with multiple identities, and both need a long-term development. The problems arise in creation of a city brand when there is a gap in implementing these principles; and this paper argues that there are three major contentious areas that need to be addressed – subsuming diversity of a place under a single/fancy/flagship tag, not taking cognizance of needs of the stakeholders, and lack of vision regarding the future directions.

In today’s globalised world, perhaps it is no longer imperative to question the branding of cities, and political leadership realizes not just the pressures of brand creation but the strategic importance of it too, especially capital cities. Capital cities house administrative and diplomatic offices, are

part of the global political map, and are hubs of network and information. Governments often make concerted efforts in promoting the capital city through favourable policies and investments, and Delhi as the capital of India has been a beneficiary of these over the years. Let us examine the defining and redefining of the city, conceptualisation and perception of Delhi by focusing on the following aspects: city of academic institutions, historical city and the changing iconography of the city.

Defining Delhi

Delhi, the capital of India, houses several state, central and private universities that spatially and imaginatively create spaces of intellectual stimulation. The University of Delhi (established in 1922), Jawaharlal Nehru University (established in 1969), Indian Institute of Technology – Delhi (1961), Indira Gandhi National Open University (established in 1985), Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University (1998) and B.R. Ambedkar University are some of the universities that have played a prominent role in shaping the intellectual thinking and opinions of the youth. More recently one has witnessed the establishment of private universities in the suburbs of Delhi like Amity University (Noida), Shiv Nadar University (Greater Noida), O.P. Jindal Global University (Sonapat, Haryana) and Ashoka University (Sonapat, Haryana). The universities are spaces of promoting academic excellence by fostering new ideas and research, mentoring of young scholars, and funding of innovative projects. The university campuses are also places that bring forth people from different regions, states, languages and cultures, all driven by common goals. The university as a space of ideas and ideals is a concept rapidly changing with corporatisation of education. The universities face compulsions of academic branding like NAAC (National Assessment and Accreditation Council) grading, National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking and QS World University rankings. Surprisingly despite the presence of various public and private universities, research institutes and technical institutes, city administrators have rarely branded or promoted Delhi as an

education city with a significant human resource contribution towards higher education.

The repeated reference in creating brand Delhi is its historicity, with the earliest mention to the city arguably being in the epic *The Mahabharata*. From eighth century till date, there is historical documentation of the establishment and destruction of various empires, evoking the popular phrase “city of cities” to discuss the monuments and monumental ruins of the previous dynasties. To capitalise on its significance as a historical city, both nationally and internationally, the government initiated the process for Delhi to be nominated as UNESCO World Heritage City but this was withdrawn by the Union Cultural Ministry in May 2015 over concerns that it would hamper “infrastructure and construction” plans in the capital. Mahesh Sharma, the cultural minister said “Once the city comes into that heritage list, you are unable to make some construction in the city plans and land use plans, so it will become difficult. With that view the government has taken a decision to withdraw the nomination” (“Delhi’s Heritage City Dream”). Since only Lutyens’ Bungalow Zone (LBZ) and Shahjahanabad were to be included in the tag, critics felt the withdrawal move was motivated by vested interests of the politician-builder nexus, who perhaps had other architectural plans and wanted to promote Delhi as a modern city. Was there a vision to create an image of “Walled to World City” (phrase borrowed from *The Times of India* campaign) and if so, is the architectural-cultural heritage of the city antithetical to its aspiring world city plans? We need to examine if heritage city and world city are incongruous ideas, and if in the desire to (re)package the place as a global city, the role of its antiquity and heritage is consciously being diminished.

There is a perceptible change in the way Delhi city is now being perceived, conceived and received in media representations and popular imagination. The opening shots of Delhi in visual media till a few decades ago used to be Qutub Minar and India Gate, this is now often supplemented or even replaced by images of the Delhi Metro. The metro, with its

network of rainbow-coloured lines and inter-change stations in the city plots an alternative physical and digitally coded map of the city as against roads and traffic crossings. For many, the travel by metro is part of their everyday routine, and some take their guests from other cities for a metro ride, whereby the metro becomes the tourist attraction rather than the means to reach a destination, say of a historical monument. The citizens play the role of brand ambassadors of the technological wonder and the progressive city as the metro offers stunning visuals of the city from the elevated rail.

When the train whizzes through tunnels in the underground corridors, it creates almost a parallel network city that is far removed from the blaring horns, slow moving traffic and pollution of the “real city” above it. This contrast is most striking when one exits the air-conditioned and clean environs of the station at one of the Old Delhi stations to the pollution and noise of the congested streets. Sadana observes, “Who could not be impressed? The ordered space and gleaming surfaces are nothing if not a crucible of the city’s modernity. The metro is a marvel, something to marvel at, for anyone who visits Delhi, but also, and especially so, for its residents” (Sadana 78).

The ordered and disciplined spaces of the metro seem at odds with the city at large, and create an alternative imaginary space that one is possibly in any global city, “this new mental landscape is as significant as what the metro is forging on the ground (79). While the metro underlines the gap between the modern coded spaces and the older labyrinth, it also facilitates connection between the two by easing travel to the historical monuments and the walled city. I suggest that we regard the two facets of the city, historicity and modernity, both physically and imaginatively as double-faced Janus, a gateway between what was and the future, “Walled to World City”.



Photo 1: Delhi Metro whizzing past the 108 feet tall statue of Hanuman. This landmark is a regular feature in movies and TV shows based in Delhi.



Photo 2: The underground corridor and stations of metro create a parallel city below the traffic snarls and pollution of Delhi roads.

The duality suggested above (see photo 1 & 2) and the transforming image of Delhi in popular imagination underlines

the problematics of bestowing a singular tag upon a city. Can a city be subsumed under a single brand-image, and does that not disregard the multiple facets and heterogeneity of the place?

Creating Brand Delhi

Malpas asserts that “Whatever the reality of city life, the branding of city implies an understanding of the nature of the city as a homogeneous entity whose identity can indeed be encapsulated and subsumed under a single brand or image” (Malpas 191). City branding by highlighting the place as an education city or as a place of economic opportunities or tourist-friendly, aims at attracting the “other”, the business investor or tourist and often disregards the key stakeholder, the citizen. In giving prominence to the image associated with it; the city “ceases to be a place and becomes instead, an abstracted image, a disembodied desire, a generic ‘myth’” (Malpas 195). This idea of brand is not related to citizen’s engagement with the city’s physical and cultural environs, the “image” often depends heavily on visual and narrative representations of the city.

There is undeniable pressure of creating a city-brand under globalization as cities compete for corporate investment. Since visuality creates immediate impact and recall, redevelopment projects, especially the construction of signature buildings, seek to define modernity. Short (2006) in *Urban Theory* writes that in the twenty-first century, “almost all city governments promote growth aggressively on a scope unimaginable just a decade ago. We live in an era characterized by.... ‘place wars’” (112). King in *Spaces of Global Cultures* (2004) questions the signs of a modern city and identifies five that combine social and spatial modernity: a self-consciously “world” city, a fascination with tall buildings, the work of signature architects and spectacular architecture, multiculturalism, and modern ways of living. Spectacle plays a significant role in pursuit of being a global city; in Delhi too the network of flyovers and expressways, renovated airport, luxury hotels, signature buildings, business

centres and shopping malls are manifestations of an aspiring global city.



Photo 3: Spectacle and height play a role in pursuit of a world class city. Municipal Corporation of Delhi Civic Centre is the tallest building in Delhi at 101 metres.

Frampton (1991) points out that twentieth century advanced building technologies have given rise to the starchitect, the self-styled aesthetic genius redefining skyline of cities (see photo 3). In Delhi NCR, Hafeez Contractor is famous for designing signature buildings like the DLF Gateway Tower, popularly called “Titanic” for its shape and size (see photo 4), but it bears no relevance to the landscape in which it is located. The spectacle-aesthetics of buildings are visually iconic in promoting and photographing the brand of the city, but are often at variance with spaces, structures, landscape and cultures around it. The purpose of global signature buildings, be it Burj Khalifa in Dubai or Petronas Twin Towers in Malaysia is to dazzle, to overpower space and mind through verticality. Historically, rulers have inscribed spaces with symbols of power, be it through forts or minars or the construction of imperial city, New Delhi by the British with its grand vistas, landscape gardens and monumental arches. A century later, we are witnessing the construction and revamping of Lutyens Delhi under the ambitious Central Vista Project that includes the plan for a new parliament and buildings to accommodate offices of various ministries. The proposed project is an assertion and inscribing of power onto city space, and an emphatic creation of new iconography of the capital city.



Photo 4: DLF Gateway Tower in Delhi NCR, popularly called the “Titanic”, was designed by Hafeez Contractor. The ship design bears no relevance to the land around.

The skyline of Delhi has been changing with signature buildings and symbols of modernity like metro, malls and Akshardham jostling for attention along with historical monuments. One is witnessing an intersection of spectacle-architecture with media technologies, and the conjunction produces what has been described as “augmented reality” or “mixed reality” emphasizing the heterogeneous spatiality that McQuire calls the media city, “encompassing both the historical dimensions of the relation between media and modern urban space, and in connecting this history to the changes driven by digital convergence in the present” (21). This intersection transforms the social experience of the city, Lash writes “I operate as a man-machine interface...I cannot achieve sociality apart from my machine interface” (qtd. in McQuire 4). Be it applying for a driver’s license or passport, filing income tax return, shopping, lodging an FIR, school and college admissions or fixing an appointment for Covid-19 vaccine, everything is managed through phone apps, redefining physical concept of space. On 11 August, 2021, Delhi CM put a lock on the

premises of Regional Transport Office, IP Estate; this symbolic locking of physical premises underlines the redefining of spaces where services would be faceless. Sorkin (1992) calls it “the emergence of a wholly new kind of a city, a city without a place attached to it” (xi). The physical space gains legitimacy only in digital space as check-ins at theatre, restaurant, airport, restaurants and hotels, or by tagging locations on social media.

As Delhi adapts to the transformations in both its physical and virtual forms, it seems to elude a tag that quintessentially defines it. It is city whose urban imaginary is produced at the intersection of Old and New Delhi; it is a city that fills one with nostalgia and also carries dreams of futurity, two-faced Janus as suggested above. While the tags of popular usage like “Dildaar Dilli” and “Dilli dil walon ki” attempt to capture the heartbeat of the city, the administration evokes more generic terms like world city and smart city to emphasize its modernity and role in global network as a capital city. Further, it needs to be examined if “world city” is an aspiration or an achievement for the city; Namita Gokhale’s novel, *Priya in Incredible Indyya* in mapping the transformations in Delhi exposes the gaps between the city’s projection and reality.

Delhi Shining in Gokhale’s *Priya in Incredible Indyya*

Namita Gokhale’s *Priya in Incredible Indyya* (2011) unfolds events in Delhi NCR roughly from 2005 to 2008. The economic liberalisation reforms were impacting the social fabric, mobile phones and facebook were beginning to transform lives but technology had not yet permeated into everyday lives via smart phones. The protagonist, Priya Kaushal, is the wife of a minister in Lutyens Delhi. The narrative unfolds through Priya’s perspective, exposing the powerpolis of Delhi, the shallowness of high-class society and a city changing beyond recognition.

The title of the novel is reminiscent of “Incredible India”, the marketing campaign launched by the Government of India to promote tourism in 2002. It also bears echoes of “India Shining”, a campaign popularised by the NDA government in 2004 creating a feeling of economic optimism. In promoting

India as poised to take off on global scale, it was aimed at both Indian and global markets, and Delhi as the capital city is symbolic of these aspirations spatially and ideologically. The two campaigns were front running media events used by the government to highlight achievements as an image building exercise. The events in Gokhale's *Priya in Incredible Indya* coincide largely with these campaigns and one takes cognizance of the interconnectedness between politics, urban imagination and the role of media in creation of an image.

Gokhale chronicles the changing landscape of Delhi and its suburb, Gurgaon (renamed as Gurugram in 2016). Gurgaon had been restructured into Special Economic Zones (SEZ) to set up factories and corporate offices, green fields made way for skyscrapers, "everywhere, new cars and new money, old potholes and tall skeletons of steel and glass. Delhi is changing so much every day, growing and cannibalizing its outskirts" (Gokhale *Priya* 18). It is a city in the transitory phase of creating a new urban imaginary, a "wannabe city" reinventing itself into a world city. Short in *Urban Theory* comments, "Wannabe cities are cities of spectacle, cities of intense urban redevelopment, and cities with powerful growth rhetoric" (Short 115). The accelerated rate of growth, focused on external aesthetics, seems to suggest that the height of a skyscraper is directly proportional to a city's ranking and desirability. The city thrives on vertical climbing, be it of buildings, social ladder or political ascendancy. Whether it is a film, elections, or a city, the brand or image is created and marketed through mega events; the gamut was entertainment is far wider than movies, "now everything is entertainment. Everything. Politics is entertainment. Cricket is entertainment. IPL is *mega* entertainment" (Gokhale *Priya* 28). Spectacle is the common thread connecting the dazzling architecture, mega entertainment and running of media campaigns. The liberal economy ostensibly offers more work opportunities and upward mobility with use of technology but in reality, creates greater socio-economic disparity, both in physical and digital spaces.

The alternative voices are marginalised in creation of the world class city, be it the voice of the protestors against SEZ and Food Bills or the servants who enrol in Rapidex English Speaking Course to break the class barrier. Lenin's visit to the mall underlines the gap between the two worlds, the mall "seduced me, that mall, until we stepped out and I saw steel and glass reflected in the eyes of the beggar children outside" (Gokhale *Priya* 89). The pseudo-public place creates new spaces of "urban apartheid" (Davis 224); Cohen notes that while the shopping centre/mall tries to portray itself as community space, it actually defines the society in "exclusionary socio-economic terms" (Cohen 1061). The glossy glass towers reflect the poverty below and outside, creating new spaces of class exclusion, treating its have-nots as non-citizens. The marketing campaigns of the city focusing on its modernity create an image of neatness and order, the focus is on materiality and gloss, and the chaotic underbelly is disenfranchised and ignored, exposing the "conflict between Bharat and India, and the needs and demands of two Indias" (Gokhale *Priya* 93).

Delhi as the capital is often seen as the microcosm of the country, and the stark and widening gap in urban spaces and classes of Delhi makes one question if it is on the path to being a world class city, and to examine the premises of a global city. While the disenfranchised struggle for basics like hygienic living conditions, the affluent are creating new connections across space and geographical distance through events conducted "online". The engagement ceremony of Priya's nephew in India is conducted online while the bride's family is based in Philadelphia, technology aids immediacy, as McQuire (2008) argues, "In the screen window, spaces appear and disappear in screen abruptly (10). Priya's son introduces her to Facebook, "to join the dots with the rest of the world" (Gokhale *Priya* 69); with human interaction mediated through machine interface, mobile phones become an extension of the person. In the post liberal technological world, the protagonist shifts her medium from notebook to keyboard, and her narrative from diary to blog, reorganising the interaction between people and

city through the mediation of technology. Much before the launch of “Digital India” in 2015, ease of digital access was given focus in “India Shining” and “Incredible India” projects and the novel reflects the growing impact of digital technology in daily lives of characters.

Gokhale suggests that Delhi seeks to rebrand itself from a sleepy bureaucratic capital to a world city of opportunities, but it is still a “wannabe city”. Short’s idea of “wannabe cities” as cities of spectacle have been discussed above, further it is interesting to correlate the idea of branding and reinvention vis-à-vis individuals and cities. Can the anatomy of a city be transposed onto the individual citizens or of individuals onto city space? Priya thinks of Paro who figures prominently in Gokhale’s novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984) and wonders,

She would have rebranded herself that’s for sure...Paro was beautiful, always. Poonam is merely pretty, a glam-sham construct. Unfazed by the world, our Paro had cared for nobody and nothing except herself-or perhaps not even for herself. Poo is the very opposite, needy, seeking approval. They are completely different, I’ve decided. Paro had been a triumphant original; Poonam Uma Chand a clever wannabe. (Gokhale *Paro* 157)

Nnutasha, a tarotist, in *Priya in Incredible Indyya* offers services that are “botox for the spirit!” (176), she claims to have created the brand “Poonam”. Repeatedly one encounters the vocabulary of marketing and branding being used for products, people and city. Paro and Poonam are brands that depend on meticulous creation of an image, Paro confesses “It’s part of being a Beautiful Woman. It’s a full-time occupation” (Gokhale *Paro* 62) and it is about “ceaselessly refurbishing and reupholstering oneself and using the exact shade of foundation, simply to remain a woman” (Gokhale *Priya* 182). To extend the metaphor, is the city a woman who has been to be conquered by male rulers in the past who constructed phallic symbols of dominance? Are the city’s allurements aimed at attracting the male investor? Are the new dramatic buildings designed to woo as a woman with makeup; Hafeez Contractor known for his

architectural penchant for glitz puts forth his views in an interview, “I always say . . . that you definitely like a woman with lipstick, rouge, eyelashes. So if you make your building more beautiful with some appliquéés, there’s nothing wrong” (Brook). While the power of visual is immediate and powerful, one needs to interrogate the role of iconic structures in creation of a city brand, and be cautious in giving centrality to spectacle. The dazzle can be the start off point in generating interest but to create a lasting city brand it needs more than visual appeal and media campaigns.



Photo 7: Dazzling visuality of contemporary buildings.

As mentioned earlier, we can move beyond questioning the need for a city brand, and instead accept branding as a demand of globalization where cities compete for tourism, business investment and holding of international events. One has to be aware that a city’s historical and cultural evolution carries multiple and at times conflicting features, and be attentive that branding should not reduce the diversity under a singular tag line. Ideally city branding should be in consultation with various stakeholders, and not be a top-down approach imposed by the government. Also, in branding the needs of the “insider”, the citizen should be taken cognizance of and not be targeted merely at the “outsider”, the tourists and the investors. Puttkamer

(2020) suggests that “city branding should be oriented towards the future direction of the city. It can represent a vision or a call for action, but these should be directed at its own citizens, rather than at visitors alone.” Lack of vision and a road map for future is generally lacking in bestowing brand names and launching media campaigns for cities.

Recently the Chief Minister of Delhi launched “Delhi@2047” campaign that outlined the roadmap to make Delhi a “world class city”. The blueprint acknowledges that “Achieving this vision is not possible by any single stakeholder and requires deep, sustained collaboration between the government, private sector and civil society” (“Delhi@2047”). One hopes that the long-term plan with aim to foster partnerships will be a push in the right direction for the city with its current “wannabe” status. The creation of a city brand needs vision and planning and one needs to look beyond the image, marketing and media hype that often create a false bubble. It is important to recognise that a city is not just malls and flyovers, bullet trains and metro, but a pulsating space where multitudes live and interact. Gokhale’s *Priya in Incredible Indya* in mapping a transforming city, a wannabe city, is cautious in giving easy answers to creation of a city brand. While old tags of Delhi like “powerpolis” still linger on in the novel, it also unfolds action in new spaces like the malls and the digital space. The text bears no pretensions of being a grand narrative, “In the storyboard, the drama and heroism lie in the everyday aggravations, the small triumphs of daily life” (Gokhale *Priya* 193); it suggests that it is in the negotiations between the policy makers and everyday practices of its citizens that the city acquires significance and branding.

Photo credits: All the photographs have been clicked by Rachna Sethi.

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