CHAPTER- II

THE VISUAL LANGUAGE

Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak. But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled. – John Berger in Ways of Seeing

Visual communication has been probably the most powerful medium of understanding, since time immemorial. So is it stated in the Bhagavad Gita: *idriyal nayanam pramaindreyam*, meaning, amongst all the sense organs, the eyes are the most vital. Other ancient texts too express this thought. Today the world is embroiled in a chase for global lead and power hierarchy even in the world of words and visuals, and today, the amount of visual production in various media is probably the highest in volume ever. The visual is available to anyone and surmounts boundaries of geography, language, culture. For instance, the films of Rajinikanth seem to release worldwide before their release in India. In fact, specific target audiences like North America, UK and Japan seem to give his films a more excited reception than the Indian audience (outside Tamil Nadu) in spite of the vernacular culture depicted in them. His films have given a tough challenge to the heavily loaded budget blockbusters of Hollywood: his recent film *Robot* which was showing on some 2,100 screens worldwide was certainly one of the leading films of the world, beating *Resident Evil: Afterlife*, which grossed $18 million on 6,000 screens worldwide, according to The-Numbers.com. In fact, Rajini’s film totalled $280 million in its fifth week. The film was made for $50 million and raked in approximately $300 million. The website robot-thefilm.blogspot.com quotes a distributor in New York who asked not to be named as saying: "This is an awesome gross for any Indian film, particularly a Tamil film. But people forget a number of theatres doubled the admission price for many shows to $25, some even charged $40 which would be more than the IMAX admission price for *Avatar.*" Sir Charles Spencer ‘Charlie’ Chaplin was extremely successful in establishing himself worldwide obviously for visual expressions, with very minimal oral communication. Similarly with Mr. Bean (Rowan Atkinson in a series of the same name). These facts not only stress on the impact of the visual medium but also on its
subjective expressions in specific genres. In similar contexts the visual portraits of Bob Marley and Che Guevara seem to be more noticed in the urban youth culture than any other well branded influential personalities like Obama or proclaimed youth icons like David Beckham or Sachin Tendulkar. Similarly, the weed leaf and the peace symbol designed for the British nuclear disarmament movement by Gerald Holtom is noticed not only in the First World countries but in selective towns of India too. Interestingly these visuals are not just trend setters or mass promotional exercises, but carry a potential message regarding the reason of their origin and at times even a political reminder. Visual politics has a crucial role in dynamic society today, and has always attempted not only to remind, but to establish, survive and dominate. Many of the assumptions on the factors of visuals based on beauty and intelligence, that people have learnt to look at, no longer are in accordance with the world as it is today. Visual representations thus are not just visual fillers or a visual treat, but a very powerful mystic medium.

Are the visuals in India, just mere visuals? Or are they images? Do these visuals really have a conscious origin, and do they need to play any role in a specific society? And how many of them are chosen for the sense of language or grammar in their content? What I am referring to here is the contemporary context of Indian street art, specifically the Bengalurian non-commercial, commercial and semi-commercial visual elements, and not the public statues or post-modern sculptures. Though the language of visuals is over utilized to such an unquantifiable extent that these hardly get filtered through any intellectual process or even through any mild thought process, both unfortunately and fortunately in India visuals are in such a plethora, that the rare sensible standard image often slips off in the overcrowded visual public presentations. Yet these visuals are the life and the rhythm of Indian street culture, with a fusion of the West and East in the unexplainable visual synthesis without which the texture, look and feel of this contemporary contextual vernacularism would not be complete. Yes, they are fast processed, less thought-out, much hyped, and mass produced, and these are the commercial sustainers, the local choice, the urban image makers and the dominant visual language.

Amongst these polluted population of visuals, a varied contextual element on numerous subjects exists based on the specific geographic demography, surviving, challenging and coexisting in an untamed fashion jostling for space from visibilities of ground to the vanishing points of the sky, in all possibilities of the public eyesight. These visuals further have contexts and roles, defined and dictated by the representative, which range from the politically gaudy on cluttered banners to the IPL posters on the streets in all metropolises. Specifically, a cosmopolitan city like
Bengaluru like any other city has its own taste for visual sensibilities, with an untold format of representations and unquestioned exhibitionism of unimaginable immensity of depictions. For instance, when you travel from the new international airport to MG Road in Bengaluru, you tend to notice that the amount of varied representations and visuals that flows across is innumerable, ranging from the contemporary architecture of IT companies to the public statues of the local representative bodies of the early Kannada king Kempegowda, to the auto stand miniature boards featuring actors ranging from Dr Rajkumar to Shankar Nag in a very vernacular style, pitching on to the new tourism initiative of the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike’s (BBMP) wall murals with depictions ranging from the monuments of Karnataka to the matinée idols of the Kannada film industry, and moving on with global brand names like McDonalds and KFC. If you observe closely here, you tend to find a multi-cultural existence which is not an approach cultivated but one generated and degenerated by the pace of time. This ‘local versus global’ which is well celebrated and in the parallel condemned by the locals has been a subject of dispute to concerned Bengalurian’s over the past few decades in all verticals of the Kannada identity. Is this an issue only in Bengaluru or in all metros? No, the issue has been perceived in various situations in other metros like Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, but their responses to the situations are history. It is specific in Bangalore obviously as it is case sensitive, because of its various identity nuances and appertaining crisis. Here the visuals are seen as “their” visuals and “our” visuals, relating to the west as “theirs” and India as “ours”, and further Bangalore itself as “namma Bengaluru” meaning “our Bangalore”, which can be seen in all mediums of expressions and their extensions. On the same perspectives Sugatha Srinivasaraju, a very concerned Kannada thinker and feisty journalist had highlighted on renowned Kannada linguist KV Narayana’s write up, who made a clear questioning on the identity of Kannada knowledge as to what is the nature of Kannada knowledge. And what is the identity in the framework of Kannada contents?

“... As a city, Bangalore has no distinctive edge or landmark that will make any pictorial representation of it immediately recognizable as in the case of cities such as Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi or even Chennai. This lack of an image is itself a sign of how this reluctant metropolis has grown, as a gradual replication of the low rise, low density structures, separated by green spaces, annexing more and more of the rural to its boundaries. Only more recently has the taller structure pierced the skyline, or made a difference to the lifestyle of the inhabitants. Other aspects of the difficulty of capturing Bangalore as a metropolis in the visual medium are a consequence of its unique history of invisibility: there has been no smokestack industrial growth for instance, which is a dominant feature of many cities. This is far from suggesting that there is no industry
but that it is largely invisible, tucked away into large and distant industrial estates, or more recently, tech parks, or slums which are hidden from the public eye. Similarly invisible are its workers, in an overwhelmingly middle class city. Its green cover masks its high levels of pollution, visually neutralising the tedium of fumes and dust which frustrate its inhabitants. And the blandness of innumerable middle class layouts hides the sheer scale of the problem of housing.” From the work on Bangalore, Beladide Noda Bengaluru Nagaral Janaki Nair further says: “Yet, in a democracy such as ours, people make their own meanings of urban space, in both physical-material and mental-imaginative ways. The two dimensional map may be only one limited way of getting to know the territory of the city. Territories are marked and used in ways that were not anticipated by planners and designers. These are moments in a city’s history that are not usually memorialised in stone, recorded in texts, or captured in photographs. Yet they tell us much that is different from the triumphal procession of heroes and victors in usual histories of the city.

This exhibition offers a different perspective, free of nostalgia for other times (e.g. the colonial past) or yearning for unreal spaces (e.g. Singapore). Because only an unsentimental look at the city of our time may help us imagine a possible future.”

Bangalore to Bengaluru

Bangalore, now “Bengaluru”, is definitely a subject and scope for various arguments and controversies like any other growing cosmopolitan capital, starting with the name itself! This cosmopolitan state capital has its sensitivity in its veins intertangled with the nation’s global positioning and issues of its own identity and survival. For, the question of what is Bangalore’s identity is itself a largely debatable topic; and Bangalore being the capital, does it represent the state or its own geography is another. Another question preferring to remain unanswered is: who is a Kannadiga? Do all ‘Kannadigas’ trace their origins to this geography? And are all Bengalurians considered Kannadigas? If not, then who are Bengalurians? The descendants of various dynasties that ruled here down the centuries, or those who have owned land here since the last few decades?

If a Kannadiga is person who must know to read and write Kannada, then what about those illiterate farmers who can hardly speak literary Kannada or write it fluently? And according to Sri Alur Venkat Rao, a Kannadiga is defined as one who possesses the property or quality of ‘Karnatakatwa’, or rather, he is an embodiment and
exemplification of the principle of ‘Karnatakatwa’, but being a Kannadiga does not eliminate his other identities as an Indian and as a human being.

What is Bengaluru is the next question. It’s a whirlpool of migrants from neighbouring states and districts, some settled long ago and some settling now, including a number of North Indians too since the boom in the IT-BT-BPO sectors in Bangalore. This, in fact, is the second wave, a result of the change which occurred in the early ’70s onwards, with the establishment of several prominent public sector enterprises in Bangalore, like HAL, BEMI, BEL, ISRO, NAL, DRDO, BHEL and HMT.

In 1956 during the formation of a united Karnataka by grouping all the scattered Kannada speaking regions, there were a number of minor geographical populations speaking languages like Kodava, Konkani, Byari, Havyak, and so on. These languages had a very strong oral cultural history, but did not have a definite script, and hence were written in the Kannada script. Karnataka unification brought together various such sectors of diverse cultural communities, including migrants from other states. During this process there had been a tremendous socio-political rise in Kannada awareness, and Kannada ‘nation making’. These didn’t happen over a large time period unlike the Indian independence struggle. However, over the past five decades this struggle for Kannada identity had contributed to several milestones and important incidents which benchmarked the identity making in Karnataka in great challenging circumstances in the time and space of developing India from the post-independence period to the post-modern context, culminating in the global growth of contemporary cosmopolitan Bangalore, the Silicon Valley of India, and the capital of Karnataka.

Though there were parallel state unification or rather language pride and concerns in the neighboring states like Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra with their own respective movement and their nation development, for survival and sustenance of their own mother tongue, or for the majority priority or for the hidden political intentions are seen in various contexts, where within there has been noticeable inter diverse, contradictory perceptions and difference of opinion for obvious even with the chase for the economical global growth to make their capitals into metropolitan and cosmopolitans, which is invited in an extravagant style by the IT BT BPO and the involved crowd and the same been contested by a another large crowd on the blame on the loss of identity for instance- in context of massive usage of English in public versus the lack or loss of Kannada usage in public. Here it is not just the language that is the issue, it is more than that. The bigger issue is jobs, with a large percentage of
migrants from other cities taking away hot jobs in the IT-BT-BPO sectors, leaving the local youth resentful. Here I am citing the example of the much hyped controversy over jobs for locals vs 'outsiders' that Mr. Narayana Murthy of Infosys found himself in. which was responded by Mr. Narayan Murthy in the obvious wishy-washy diplomatic corporate language to the local Kannada activists. This further was nailed into its crux when he was chosen as the President for the Kannada Viswa Samelana at Belgaum with ruling BJP government immediately after the Kannada Sahitya Sammelana since 1915, which was held in Bangalore with much debatable talks on the current scenario and circumstances.

God making and Hinduism

Hinduism, a vast cultural tradition, has erupted into countless systems of disciplines which, on dissection, reveal the existence of thousands of representations and probably millions of versions, thanks to the interpretations lavished on its visual synthesis. Each image here has a conceptual theory, and on its involvement through programmed identities reveals its power. Thus each image is a constructive medium of energy, which is incorporated with various concepts like *darshan*, meaning 'seeing and being seen', which also means to dream, visualize intuitions, foresee, wisdom, intelligence, see beyond, etc. 'Seeing' is conceived of as an outward reaching process: "seeing itself is extrusive, a medium through which seers and the seen come in contact, and, in a sense, blend and mix", as described by Lawrence Babb in a context related to various Hindu traditions. Arvind Rajgopal has made a similar point: "one is 'touched' by *darshan* and seeks it as a form of contact with the deity." Sandria Freitag has suggested that in India it was the religious and political procession that carved out a public sphere in colonial India. We might here have to step forward in this preformative realm stretching into the incarnative visual field that as a part of practice has privileged the power of the images with visually intensified encounters which have implicit within them the possibility of deity and the metaphorical transformations to a mother goddess for a nationhood forming a backdrop against a new kind of a history sought to be written.
NOVEMBER 1, 1973

From this historic day our state is KARNATAKA

The visual culture of contemporary India

ASSERTION OF KANNADA VISUAL IDENTITY IN CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

PAGE 32 OF 406