

Reclaiming Indian Culture One Chaddi at a Time

Valentine's day in India is controversial – more conservative groups view it as a Western influence corroding traditional Indian values and norms. Sometimes these views have manifested as violence against young, such as in 2009 when the Sri Ram Sene, a hardline organisation, attacked young people at a pub in Mangalore, India. Patrons at the pub were beaten for violating good Indian values. Subsequently, the attack became one of the most watched clips on YouTube. The outfit's chief and founder, Pramod Muthalik, supported the incident and announced his plan to target couples displaying any public affection on Valentine's Day (The Hindu, 2009).

The response to this incident was The Pink Chaddi Campaign, spearheaded by the Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women (a Facebook group). The Facebook group saw exponential growth within days – at its peak there were 49,050 members (Chamikutty, 2009). A pink chaddi means a pink knicker in Hindi.

The campaign urged Indian women to mail pink panties to Muthalik as a valentine's gift and to fill pubs on Valentine's Day. The campaign was Gandhian in nature – peaceful and non-violent, and dispatched over 4000 pink underwear to the organisation's head office.

As a result, Muthalik and 140 other members were placed under preventative custody on Valentine's Day 2009 as a precaution (Times News Network, 2009). Several national dailies and channels began covering the story extensively. Debates were held on national television discussing the attack and the campaign. It was even featured by international media organisations such as the BBC Radio Four's Woman's Hour, Global Voices, Fox News and the Guardian.

“One day, the campaign had 500 members; a week later, it had 30,000. A 75-year-old woman from Delhi sent us panties. A Bollywood lyricist wrote a poem in honour of the rose-coloured chaddi. Amul, India's best-known brand of butter, put up a billboard featuring a pink chaddi. More than 2,000 chaddis arrived at the SRS office” (Susan, 2009).

The Amul Billboard is one of India's most iconic brand campaigns ongoing since the 1960s. The Amul girl (the mascot) provides commentary on current issues, while promoting the dairy brand.

So, what made the campaign so popular and effective?

It can be viewed as “a sort of performative culture jamming, “where women are re-appropriating dominant cultural codes that have been used to oppress them and justify their sexual and physical victimization. (Fominaya, 2014, p. 108)”

For one, the campaign was a fun and allowed people to reduce the incendiary claims to the absurd, by meeting their expectations of violence with an amusing response – pink panties. It also made use of something revolutionary (in 2009): the Internet. The campaign was entirely conducted using social media without any input from mainstream media or involving mainstream forms of protest. They also distributed posters and started email campaigns in different cities, across the country.

But more important than that, was the fact that it allowed women to begin to reclaim spaces that had been traditionally the male realm. The campaign protested the violence against women

for behaving in ways questioning the status quo and ‘unbalancing’ the traditional way of things. By going to the pub and drinking alcohol, women were pushing the boundaries of the traditional worldview and were also claiming agency over their own bodies and actions. They were trying to redefine the boundaries of “morality, culture and ‘public decency’” (Srivastava, 2019).

The pink panties too, were a symbol of this reclamation, an embracing of the worst slurs, “Chaddi is a childish word for underwear and slang for right-wing hardliner” (Susan, 2009). They added shock value, hilarity and a became a great conversation starter for the larger debate around moral policing and violence against women.

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