

Business Standard

Kishan S Rana: How to brand India

To galvanise foreign investment, the government has to think harder about how to create and maintain a national brand

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Governments are living embodiments of 'mission creep' - often starting with noble intentions of reducing personnel, they end up with trying to do more, and spread themselves in unimaginable nooks and crannies, consequently becoming ineffective in most actions. The Narendra Modi-led government has promised 'less government, more governance'. Then, where should one fit the notion of India's 'country brand'? In the *government* box, that refers to new actions to be undertaken by official agencies, or that labeled *governance*, relating to actions that may be guided by the *government*, but involve many others, i.e. non-state actors? Let me lay out the case and let you judge.

Marketing guru Martin Sorrel was in India a few months back and delivered some home truths (BS, August 20, 2014). His core message: 'Brand India has lots of positives, but there are negatives too. The new government will have to take immediate steps to rectify these.' He went on: 'Poor brand image and FDI inflows have a direct correlation, in terms of tourism, fresh investment, education and technology.'

In my first book *Inside Diplomacy* (2000) I had argued that there had been 'no global survey or assessment of how Indians are seen by others'. An "India brand audit" carried out by Ogilvy and Mather was published in August 1998 which summarised assessments of people in different countries towards India. Americans interviewed said: restores faith in humanity; like going back to childhood, standing before a toy store; generates curiosity, rewarding. British observers said: a synthesis of the impossible, real and harsh, coexistence with the spiritual, the spirit of India never leaves you. Chinese said: offers more than can be seen, feel curious and alienated, too strange; they also had nasty comments about squalor and inefficiency.

Images evolve over time, even while basics are deep-rooted and shift only gradually; Wally Olins, another leading exponent, said: 'Branding works when it projects and reinforces a changing reality - but it can be counterproductive if isn't rooted in fact.' This is a key issue for India - in the 1990s, in the early days of reforms, the challenge was to project India as a country open for business, with a transformed economic environment. In recent years, thanks to the economic slowdown and a slackened will in the government, many foreign investors lost interest in India - and many opted for alternate destinations.

The only bright cloud on that dismal horizon has been the 'Incredible India' tourism promotion campaign, which helped to keep up a momentum of rising foreign tourist arrivals. (Our tourist numbers, at 7.2 million in 2013, seem puny in comparison to Thailand's 27 million, and China's 120 million; but the average foreign tourist spend in India is the second highest in the world). But what has been missing is a link between this tourism campaign, and wider promotion of an 'India Brand', across the spectrum of economic activity. Needed actions:

First, a dispassionate assessment is required in the major target countries of how India is perceived, to provide a baseline, and identify the principal issues. This should cover not only potential foreign visitors, but also business, academia, the media and other important sectors and information multipliers. We should do this jointly with a reputed agency such as Pew, because at each location, it is local surveyors that can obtain authentic responses.

Second, a national strategy has to be established, to cover promotion actions in tourism, attracting foreign investments and business, external TV and radio broadcasting strategy, the education establishment that attracts foreign students, and our public diplomacy. In a word, we must coordinate the projection of the India brand. This entails harmonisation of the perspectives of different government agencies, business associations, the tourism industry, and a series of non-state actors that can contribute. A permanent 'India brand board' should be established, which draws in major contributors, state and non-state - not because

they have to function under the authority of such a board, but because they would be valued partners in a harmonised national strategy. Similar boards function well in France and the UK, bringing in multiple autonomous entities, with foreign ministries coordinating such actions. Perhaps in India this should be nested in the PM's office.

Third, this country image is for external audiences, but this exercise must not be used to serve domestic political objectives. The experience of the 2003 'Indian Shining' campaign has entered the lore of how branding is can be misused for partisan purpose - and boomerang. The presence of non-state actors in a brand board should help. Another benefit: deepened engagement of business, academic scholars, the media, and other non-official agencies in Indian public diplomacy, largely missing at present.

Fourth, 'India Brand Equity' and 'Invest India' are joint undertakings of the Departments of Commerce and Industry, respectively, with CII and Ficci. They have a major role in projecting the India brand, and should be integrated into this harmonised new campaign. The former dates to the late 1990s, and needs renewed impetus. The Invest India campaign too needs strong collective effort.

Fifth, the network of over 120 Indian embassies and high commissions and 40 consulates is currently under-utilised in India promotion activities. The ministry of external affairs is only their direct supervisor - they belong to the whole of government and the whole of India. It is the narrow walls that have been raised between different official agencies, with further separation between them and non-state public institutions. The unified marketing of India is just the kind of activity that mandates such collective 'ownership' of our overseas representation. Embassies have a latent capacity for micro-actions that fit into a macro image strategy.

'Make in India' is a simple, captivating slogan. It's realisation hinges on multiple actions by a gamut of state and non-state actors, who together constitute India's 'national diplomatic system'; the first step is to acknowledge them in their diversity, as legitimate contributors. A second is to harness them in what has to be nothing short of a national effort. The goal is not just the branding of India, but how we use it for the realisation of a prosperous, dynamic, egalitarian India.

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