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A Study on Iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian Banknotes

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Abstract

This study on iconography of Indian banknotes with special focus on Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series strives for a comprehensive study on the iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian banknotes. It seeks to delve into the intricate design elements, the symbolic meanings embedded within them, and the historical context that shaped their creation. By analysing the choice of motifs, colours, and security features, this study will explore how these banknotes contribute to the construction and

representation of India's national identity. It also examines the semiotic implications of these choices, considering how they communicate broader messages about India's past, present, and future. It traces the historical developments in this course of development and covers the challenges in conceiving and arriving at the current series of banknotes. The paper considers the public discourse and the controversies that arose concerning the design and symbolism of this new currency series.

Keywords: Banknote, Symbolism, Iconography, Semiotics, Aesthetics, Design

Introduction

Panofsky lays out his theory of analysing art through three levels: pre-iconographical, iconographical, and iconological. The pre-iconographical level involves a basic, factual identification of the work's subject matter, while the iconographical level goes deeper, interpreting conventional motifs, stories, and allegories based on cultural knowledge. Finally, the iconological level analyses the work's intrinsic meaning by considering its broader historical, social, and intellectual context, moving beyond symbols to understand the underlying worldview^[1]. This paper aims to conduct a comprehensive study on the iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian banknotes. It seeks to delve into the intricate design elements, the symbolic meanings embedded within them, and the historical context that shaped their creation. By analysing the choice of motifs, colours, and security features, this study will explore how these banknotes contribute to the construction and representation of India's national identity. Furthermore, it will examine the semiotic implications of these choices, considering how they communicate broader messages about India's past, present, and future. The paper will also address the public discourse and any controversies that arose concerning the design and symbolism of this new currency series.

Review of Literature

European elites used currency iconography to enhance legitimacy by aligning with pan-European societal values, suggesting a desire for international belonging^[2]. "A descriptive analysis of bank notes is needed. The unlimited satirical force of such a book would be equalled only by its objectivity. For nowhere more naively than in these documents does capitalism display itself in solemn earnest"^[3].

Hawkins examines how Tunisian banknotes construct a state-sponsored vision of national identity through specific imagery^[4]. Hymans investigates currency iconography as an indicator of the content of collective identities in Europe. His finding suggests that rather than using the currency to indoctrinate the public with a set of specifically national values, European state elites have traditionally tried to use the currency to enhance their public legitimacy by embracing the values currently fashionable in pan-European society and draws out the implications of this argument for understanding the iconography of the euro^[5].

Study by Hymans uses qualitative and quantitative content analysis to show the convergence of the New Taiwan Dollar with advanced country norms of progressive banknote iconography^[6]. Helleiner suggests that national currencies might foster

national identities by providing a vehicle for nationalist imagery that constructs a sense of collective tradition and memory, acting as a common medium of social communication and encourage similar frameworks of thought, creating collective monetary experiences, contributing to a sense of popular sovereignty and strengthening the kind of quasi-religious faith that is associated with nationalism, especially when the currency is managed in a stable manner [7].

Barreneche proposes a semiotics approach to study the design of a selection of banknotes and coins currently circulating in the American and European continents. It argues how the iconography used to decorate them draws on pre-existing social discourses and meaning to produce specific effects of sense [8].

A study on Algerian banknotes utilizes semiotic methods to analyse Algerian banknotes as representations of culture and state-sponsored narratives [9]. Haldylaya explores how the latest Indonesian banknotes use visual elements to project national identity and cultural values [10].

Marin Marian-Bălașa argues that showcasing musical culture on currency is a strategic, political act used by states to build legitimacy, establish national identity, and project a specific image of their cultural heritage. It connects musicology with political economy by analysing the visual look of money as a communicative tool that embeds ideological, national, and cultural values [11].

Elbardawil Investigates the semiotics of the local-global binary in Jordanian currency design [12]. Josh Lauer argued that U.S. currency is legitimated through visual strategies of rationalization and mystification, whereby the contractual obligations of the state are merged with the sacred bonds of national identity [13].

Kerianne Lawson analyses how images on money (political, religious, cultural/scientific content) reflect societal values and institutional quality. It posits that currency design serves as a communicative tool for government legitimacy and highlights that, among other findings, increased political imagery correlates with lower institutional quality, while representation of women correlates with better socio-economic outcomes [14]. Yue Xiang Lin states that a semiotic approach to currency design, analysing symbols, icons, and indices, is crucial for understanding how these visual elements influence audience perception [15].

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical research approach to investigate the iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian banknotes. The methodology is structured to systematically examine the design elements, symbolic meanings, and socio-cultural implications of these currency notes. The research design is primarily qualitative, focusing on in-depth interpretation and understanding rather than statistical measurement. It adopts a descriptive approach to detail the visual components of each banknote denomination and an analytical approach to uncover the underlying meanings and messages. The study is interdisciplinary, drawing insights from numismatics, semiotics, cultural studies, and political science. The analysis of the banknote iconography was conducted using a multi-faceted framework:

Historical Analysis: This involved tracing the evolution of Indian banknote design from the pre-independence era through various post-independence series, up to the

introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series. This historical perspective helped contextualize the design choices of this series and identify significant shifts in thematic representation.

Iconographic Analysis: Each motif and design element on both the obverse and reverse of the banknotes was meticulously identified and described. This included the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi, the various heritage sites, the Mangalyaan motif, security features, and linguistic elements. The historical and cultural significance of each motif was researched to understand its intended meaning.

Semiotic Analysis: Drawing upon semiotic theories, the study interpreted the banknotes as complete systems of signs and symbols. This involved analysing:

Denotation: The literal meaning of the visual elements (e.g., Red Fort as a historical monument).

Connotation: The associated cultural, social, and political meanings (e.g., Red Fort as a symbol of sovereignty and freedom).

Myth: The broader ideological messages conveyed by the collective iconography (e.g., India as a nation proud of its heritage and scientific prowess). The integration of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan logo was specifically examined for its role in communicating contemporary national campaigns.

Comparative Analysis: The iconography of the new series was compared with that of previous series, particularly the earlier Mahatma Gandhi Series, to highlight continuities, departures, and the underlying reasons for these changes. This comparison helped to articulate the unique design philosophy and symbolic rhetoric of the new series.

By employing this comprehensive methodology, the study aimed to provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of how the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian banknotes functions as a powerful medium for national identity construction and cultural communication.

Data

Data for this study was collected from a variety of primary and secondary sources:

Primary Sources: High-resolution images of all denominations within the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series (₹10, ₹20, ₹50, ₹100, ₹200, ₹500, ₹2000) were obtained from official Reserve Bank of India (RBI) publications and numismatic archives. Official press releases, notifications, and explanatory documents issued by the RBI regarding the introduction and features of the new series also served as primary data, providing insights into the stated design philosophy and security features.

Secondary Sources: Extensive literature review was conducted to gather relevant academic articles, books, numismatic journals, and reputable news reports. These sources provided historical context on Indian currency design, semiotic theories applicable to visual communication, and analyses of public perception and controversies surrounding the banknotes. Specific attention was paid to scholarly works discussing national identity, cultural representation, and the role of symbols in nation-building.

Historical Context of Indian Banknotes

To fully appreciate the iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series, it is essential to understand the historical evolution of Indian banknotes. The journey of Indian

currency reflects the nation's political transformations, from colonial rule to independence and beyond.

Pre-Independence Era: During the British Raj, Indian banknotes featured portraits of British monarchs, most notably King George VI. These notes served as a constant reminder of colonial authority, with their designs reflecting imperial power and administrative control rather than indigenous Indian culture.

Post-Independence Transition: Following India's independence in 1947, there was an immediate need to replace the colonial imagery with symbols that represented the newly sovereign nation. Initially, there were discussions about featuring Mahatma Gandhi on the banknotes. However, in a surprising turn, the Reserve Bank of India opted for a non-personal symbol: the Lion Capital of Ashoka at Sarnath [16]. This emblem, drawn from India's ancient heritage, was chosen because it was felt to better capture the idea of a modern, democratic republic. Thus, in 1949, the new ₹1 note appeared with the Lion Capital watermark, and the idea of Gandhi's portrait was temporarily shelved.

In the subsequent decades, Indian banknotes became miniature showcases of the country's identity and ambitions. The designs featured a variety of motifs, including tigers, deer, and peacocks, symbolizing the nation's natural heritage. Other notes depicted the Konark Wheel, the Brihadeeswara Temple, and the Hirakud Dam, speaking to cultural pride and industrial progress. The Aryabhata satellite was also featured, hinting at a future in science and space. During the 1950s and 1960s, the currency was not about a single leader but rather about the nation as a whole [16].

The Introduction of Mahatma Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi made his first official appearance on an Indian banknote in 1969, commemorating his birth centenary. This special issue design showed him seated with the Sevagram Ashram in the background, a gentle nod to his life of simplicity and service [16]. However, this was a commemorative issue and not a permanent feature of the regular currency. The real turning point occurred in 1987 when the Rajiv Gandhi government reintroduced the ₹500 denomination. For the first time on a regular note, Gandhi's portrait appeared on the obverse. This paved the way for the Mahatma Gandhi Series, launched by the RBI in 1996. This series featured redesigned notes with improved security features and, crucially, Gandhi's smiling face on all denominations [16]. The 1996 series solidified Gandhi's position as the enduring face of the Indian rupee.

The 2016 Shift to the New Series: In November 2016, the Indian government announced the demonetization of the existing ₹500 and ₹1000 banknotes. This move was aimed at curbing black money, corruption, and counterfeit currency. Concurrently, the RBI introduced the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series, starting with the new ₹500 and a newly introduced ₹2000 denomination [17]. Over the next few years, new designs for the ₹10, ₹20, ₹50, ₹100, and ₹200 notes were also released, completing the transition to the new series. This new series, maintained Gandhi's portrait but introduced significant changes in colour, size, and thematic motifs, reflecting a renewed vision for the nation's currency.

Design Philosophy of the New Series

The design philosophy of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series represents a deliberate and thoughtful evolution from

its predecessors. The RBI stated that the series was designed to "distinctly showcase India's heritage and scientific accomplishments" [18]. This philosophy is evident in several key aspects of the banknotes' design.

Transition from Natural to Cultural and Scientific Heritage: Previous series of Indian banknotes often featured motifs related to the country's flora and fauna, such as tigers, elephants, and rhinoceroses, or scenes of agricultural and industrial development. The new series marks a distinct shift towards architectural and scientific heritage. The reverse of each note features a prominent Indian heritage site or a symbol of scientific achievement. This transition signifies a move from celebrating India's natural resources to highlighting its civilizational history and modern technological prowess.

Modern Aesthetic: Colours, Patterns, and Dimensions: The new series introduced a vibrant and modern aesthetic. The base colours of the notes are striking and distinct, ranging from chocolate brown and fluorescent blue to bright yellow and magenta. This departure from the more muted tones of the past aims for a contemporary, globalized look. Furthermore, the notes feature unique intertwining geometric patterns on both sides, adding to their visual complexity and modern appeal [18]. The dimensions of the notes were also standardised. While the width remains constant at 66 mm for denominations from ₹50 to ₹2000 (and 63 mm for ₹10 and ₹20), the length increases progressively with the denomination. This systematic sizing aids in easy identification and handling.

Standardising the Portrait of Mahatma Gandhi: Despite the significant changes in the reverse motifs and overall aesthetic, the obverse of all notes in the new series continues to prominently display the portrait of Mahatma Gandhi. The portrait used is based on a 1946 photograph of Gandhi with Lord Pethick-Lawrence [19]. By standardizing this portrait across all denominations, the RBI reaffirms Gandhi's status as the unifying moral compass of the nation, providing a sense of continuity amidst the sweeping design changes.

Iconographic Analysis by Denomination

The most striking feature of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series is the diverse array of motifs featured on the reverse of the banknotes. Each denomination tells a specific story, contributing to a broader narrative of India's heritage and progress.

Table 1: Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series Banknotes (20)





Table 2: Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series Banknotes – Motif, Theme, Base Colour and Dimensions [20]

Denomination	Motif	Theme	Base Colour	Dimensions
₹10	Sun Temple, Konark	Cultural Heritage	Chocolate Brown	123 x 63 mm
₹20	Ellora Caves	Cultural Heritage	Greenish Yellow	129 x 63 mm
₹50	Hampi with Chariot	Cultural Heritage	Fluorescent Blue	135 x 66 mm
₹100	Rani Ki Vav	Cultural Heritage	Lavender	142 x 66 mm
₹200	Sanchi Stupa	Cultural Heritage	Bright Yellow	146 x 66 mm
₹500	Red Fort	Indian Heritage Site	Stone Grey	150 x 66 mm
₹2000	Mangalyaan	Scientific Accomplishment	Magenta	166 x 66 mm

₹10: Sun Temple, Konark: The ₹10 note, introduced in 2018, features the Sun Temple of Konark in Odisha. This 13th-century temple, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is designed in the shape of a colossal chariot with intricately carved stone wheels, pillars, and walls. The inclusion of the Sun Temple symbolises India's ancient architectural brilliance and its deep-rooted reverence for cosmic order and time.

₹20: Ellora Caves: Introduced in 2019, the ₹20 note depicts the Ellora Caves in Maharashtra. This UNESCO World Heritage site comprises Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain temples and monasteries, carved out of solid rock. The Ellora Caves motif represents India's historical spirit of religious harmony and its unparalleled achievements in rock-cut architecture.

₹50: Hampi with Chariot: The ₹50 note, released in 2017, showcases the stone chariot at Hampi in Karnataka. Hampi was the capital of the prosperous Vijayanagara Empire. The stone chariot is a masterpiece of Dravidian architecture. Its presence on the banknote serves as a reminder of India's glorious past, economic prosperity, and artistic excellence during the medieval period.

₹100: Rani Ki Vav: The ₹100 note, issued in 2018, features Rani Ki Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) located in Patan, Gujarat. This intricate stepwell, another UNESCO World Heritage site, was built in the 11th century as a memorial to a king. It highlights ancient India's sophisticated water

management systems and the significant role of women in commissioning monumental heritage structures.

₹200: Sanchi Stupa: Introduced in 2017, the ₹200 note depicts the Sanchi Stupa in Madhya Pradesh. Built by Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, it is one of the oldest stone structures in India and an important monument of Indian architecture. The Sanchi Stupa motif symbolizes India's ancient spiritual heritage, the spread of Buddhism, and the enduring message of peace.

₹500: Red Fort: The ₹500 note, one of the first to be released in the new series in 2016, features the Red Fort in Delhi. The Red Fort is a powerful symbol of India's sovereignty and its struggle for independence. It is from the ramparts of this fort that the Prime Minister of India hoists the national flag on Independence Day. Its inclusion on the currency underscores the nation's political history and democratic resilience.

₹2000: Mangalyaan: The ₹2000 note, the highest denomination in the series (withdrawn from circulation in 2023 but remaining legal tender), features Mangalyaan, India's Mars Orbiter Mission. This motif is a stark departure from historical sites, representing India's first venture into interplanetary space. It symbolizes the nation's scientific ambition, technological prowess, and its emergence as a global player in space exploration [18].

Semiotic Analysis: Symbolism and National Identity

Banknotes, as widely circulated artefacts, are potent carriers of semiotic meaning, constantly reinforcing national narratives and cultural values. The iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series is particularly rich in semiotic content, reflecting a conscious effort by the RBI to project a specific image of India.

Currency as a Medium of National Storytelling: The selection of motifs on the new series transforms each banknote into a miniature narrative. Collectively, they tell a story of India that spans millennia, from ancient spiritual wisdom (Sanchi Stupa) and medieval architectural grandeur (Sun Temple, Ellora Caves, Hampi, Rani Ki Vav) to modern scientific achievement (Mangalyaan) and the enduring struggle for independence (Red Fort). This curated collection of images serves to construct a cohesive national identity, emphasizing both historical depth and contemporary dynamism.

The Shift in Motifs: From Agrarian/Faunal to Civilization/Scientific Themes: The transition from earlier series, which often featured agrarian scenes, wildlife, or symbols of industrial development, to the current focus on architectural heritage and scientific milestones, is a significant semiotic shift. This change suggests a redefinition of India's self-perception. It moves away from an identity primarily rooted in its natural environment or early industrialization towards one that celebrates its rich civilizational legacy and its aspirations as a technologically advanced nation. The emphasis on UNESCO World Heritage sites, in particular, positions India's cultural assets within a global framework of recognized significance.

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan: Integration of Social Missions into Currency: A unique feature of the new series is the inclusion of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) logo and slogan on the reverse of all denominations. This initiative, launched by the Indian government, aims to improve sanitation and cleanliness across the country. Its presence on the banknotes is a

powerful example of how currency can be utilized as a tool for social communication and behavioural change. By embedding a contemporary national mission into the daily exchange of money, the RBI transforms the banknote into a constant reminder of civic responsibility and national goals. This semiotic choice elevates the currency beyond mere economic function, imbuing it with a pedagogical role in promoting a cleaner India.

Unity in Diversity: The Role of the Language Panel and Multilingualism: India is renowned for its linguistic diversity, with 22 official languages. The language panel on the reverse of each banknote, displaying the denomination in 15 of these languages (in addition to English and Hindi on the obverse), is a long-standing and crucial semiotic feature. This multilingual representation visually reinforces the constitutional principle of unity in diversity. It acknowledges the pluralistic nature of Indian society and ensures that the currency is accessible and recognizable across various linguistic communities. This feature is not merely functional; it is a symbolic affirmation of India's federal structure and its commitment to linguistic inclusivity, making the banknote a microcosm of the nation itself.

Security Features and Technical Iconography: Beyond their aesthetic and symbolic roles, banknotes are also complex feats of engineering, incorporating advanced security features to deter counterfeiting. In the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series, these security elements are not just functional but also contribute to the overall iconography, often integrating seamlessly with the design.

Visual vs. Functional Design: The security features are meticulously integrated into the visual design, making them an intrinsic part of the banknote's iconography. For instance, the see-through register, latent image, and micro-letting are subtle yet critical elements that require careful observation. The windowed security thread, which changes colour from green to blue when tilted, adds a dynamic visual element while serving a crucial anti-counterfeiting purpose. These features demonstrate a sophisticated interplay between art and technology, where visual appeal and security functionality are mutually reinforcing.

Features for the Visually Impaired: A significant aspect of the technical iconography in the new series is the inclusion of features designed to assist the visually impaired. These include intaglio or raised printing of Mahatma Gandhi's portrait, the Ashoka Pillar emblem, and the denominational numerals. Additionally, angular bleed lines, which vary in number and configuration across denominations, are incorporated on the left and right sides of the notes. These tactile features ensure that the currency remains inclusive and accessible to all segments of the population, reflecting a commitment to social equity in design.

Advanced Security Elements as Part of the Visual Landscape: Other advanced security features, such as the watermarks (Mahatma Gandhi's portrait and electrotype denomination) and the number panel with numerals growing from small to big, are also integral to the visual landscape of the banknotes. These elements, while primarily serving security functions, also contribute to the intricate and detailed aesthetic of the currency. The continuous innovation in security features reflects the RBI's ongoing efforts to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the Indian rupee in an evolving technological landscape.

Public Discourse and Controversies: The introduction of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series, particularly in the context of the 2016 demonetization, generated considerable public discourse and some controversies. These discussions often revolved around the design choices and their broader implications.

Use of Devanagari Numerals: One notable point of contention was the prominent use of the denominational numeral in Devanagari script alongside the international numerals. While intended to promote Indian languages, some critics argued that it could lead to confusion or was an unnecessary deviation from a universally recognized standard. This debate highlighted the tension between promoting national identity through linguistic symbols and ensuring practical usability in a globalized world.

Debates on Including Other Historical Figures: Periodically, there have been debates and suggestions to include other prominent historical figures, such as Subhas Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel, or Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, on Indian banknotes alongside or in place of Mahatma Gandhi. While these discussions reflect a desire to acknowledge the contributions of other national heroes, the RBI has consistently maintained Gandhi's singular presence on the currency. A high-level committee in 2016 reaffirmed that "there is no need to change Mahatma Gandhi's photo on the currency notes" [16]. This decision underscores Gandhi's unparalleled status as the Father of the Nation and a symbol of India's core values.

The Psychological Impact of the New Colour Palette: The vibrant and distinct colour palette of the new series also drew attention. While some appreciated the modern aesthetic and ease of differentiation between denominations, others found the colours too bright or unconventional compared to the more subdued tones of previous series. The psychological impact of colour on public perception and acceptance of currency is a subtle yet important aspect of banknote design, and the new palette certainly provoked varied reactions.

Conclusion

The Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series of Indian banknotes represents a significant chapter in the numismatic history of India. Far from being mere instruments of commerce, these banknotes are rich tapestries of iconography, weaving together threads of history, culture, science, and national aspiration. The deliberate shift in motifs from natural heritage to architectural marvels and scientific achievements reflects a conscious effort to redefine and project India's national identity on a global stage. The enduring presence of Mahatma Gandhi on the obverse provides a powerful sense of continuity and moral grounding, while the diverse reverse motifs celebrate the nation's rich past and ambitious future.

Through a semiotic analysis, it becomes clear that these banknotes serve as more than just legal tender; they are potent symbols that communicate India's story, promote national missions like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, and affirm its commitment to linguistic diversity. The integration of advanced security features with inclusive design elements for the visually impaired further underscores a holistic approach to currency design.

While the introduction of the series was accompanied by public discourse and some controversies, particularly concerning the use of Devanagari numerals and debates over alternative historical figures, the overall design philosophy

reinforces a vision of a 'New India' – one that is proud of its ancient heritage, confident in its scientific prowess, and committed to social progress. The iconography of the Mahatma Gandhi (New) Series thus stands as a compelling visual narrative, constantly circulating and subtly shaping the collective consciousness of a nation in flux.

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