Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power
School of Arts and Communication, Malmö University
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Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics and Power in Context of South Asia

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In this region of the world; power, politics and design maybe considered quite a trio of tricky terminologies. Due to lack of literacy, exposure and critical understanding, a lot of people in this region may not realize the breadth of meanings these words might imply. In my paper, I will discuss with the aid of two examples that how ethnocentricity or nationalism is promoted through design intentionally and/or unintentionally; in the context of South Asia, particularly Pakistan. I will also discuss how design, power and politics can influence each other and the masses in reference to intersectionality. Intersectionality can be a means to understand certain power structures being built on the foundations of ethnocentrism/nationalism among other things such as class, education level, race etc. It can help in dissecting the interwoven factors that are influential in power and political systems and can furthermore help pin-pointing how these factors can be used to counter certain negative aspects of power structures.

The examples discussed in this paper are of mundane objects and how the objects themselves, or their symbolic connotations; essentially the game between the signifier and the signified; are contributing towards ethnocentrism or nationalism. The examples being of really small and seemingly insignificant things further supports the argument that political implications can be deeply embedded in the everyday things, and thus it becomes imperative to take note of them. Furthermore, being a product designer by profession, it is interesting for me to understand and discuss the said examples in layers; firstly as mere products, then as graphical elements and lastly as symbolic entities.

The first example is that of an electoral symbol of a lantern called *Lalten* in Urdu. The tubular cold blasted kerosene lantern was designed by John H. Irwin in the late 1860s, and was more efficient and safe compared to oil lamps (*Fig. 1*). With the advent of electricity in the modern world, the lantern usage in the West dwindled while the lantern continued to light up the third world. The design of the lantern presumably came to the subcontinent through the British since the area was a British colony till 1947. Before that, the rural population used simple oil lamps called *diyas* in the area which today encompasses India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka (*Figs. 2 & 3*). Author Ravinder Randhawa has given a very insightful description of the usage of the *Lalten* in his novel The Coral Strand: "The *Lalten* glows in the dark. Throughout time, those who must travel in the dark have always lit a *Lalten* to light their way and to frighten off predators. If there are sightings of tigers in the vicinity, every lantern in the village is lit and other lights are improvised…" The *Lalten* is still used in the rural areas of South Asia where electricity connections are scarce, unreliable or too expensive to afford.

Electoral symbols are very important in Pakistan, where there is a multitude of parties each with its own distinct identity. The voting ballots in Pakistan only contain the electoral symbols of political parties, since

many parties have similar names and hence would cause confusions as a major chunk of the population eligible for voting is illiterate. "The challenge in Pakistan is to effectively communicate with a plural heterogeneous society constituting millions of voters, who not only speak different languages and dialects but also have varying degrees of literacy, both in reading and decoding visual symbols." (Zaidi, 2009) While other large parties choose electoral symbols such as the tiger or the arrow which have very blunt and obvious connections to power and authority with their connotations of predatoriness, assault and superiority; the choice of the *Lalten* is a subtle yet clever one which is made by a leftist, secular, *Pakhtun* Nationalist political party (*Fig. 4*). While *Lalten* is significant of the common man because as mentioned earlier it is still used in a majority of rural areas of the country due to lack of an adequate reliable supply of electricity; a leftist yet *Pakhtun* nationalist party using it as a symbol has given it new layers of meaning.

"The election symbols are thus open to interpretation by political parties, proving Gombrich's notion of the beholder's share." (Zaidi, 2009) Political parties as well as independent candidates try to make the most of their symbols by attaching desired meanings to the symbols of seemingly simple objects. A small example can be of a private candidate in Karachi who was initially dismayed when he received a water bucket as his electoral symbol (Private candidates are not provided much choice in what symbols represent them as compared to political parties who get to choose one) but then decided to make good use of it, by adorning the façade of the head-office of his campaign with buckets. "The bucket is a common household item here, so he believes it may actually serve him well, as a symbol of the common man." (Desmukh, 2013) Since in Pakistan, most of the electoral symbols are adopted from basic Urdu alphabet books for the sake of recognition; just like in English there is C for Cat and D for Dog, in Urdu there is *Laam se Laltain* (the equivalent of saying L for Lantern); the aim of this symbol is to cater to the rural illiterate masses because that is the audience that identifies most with the object *Lalten* (*Fig. 5*). The party using this symbol with red color on their posters signifies the leftist inclination since the color red has become synonymous with leftist thought among other things. Moreover, the lantern is often depicted glowing which refers to enlightenment and being guided on your path and also fending off predators, referring back to the description of R. Randhawa. This is where intersectionality comes into play.

The audience is being manipulated; "Manipulation and design share one point of contact: appearance" (Bonsiepe, 2009); on the basis of their social class, their literacy, their lifestyle and their ethnicity all through a simple symbol of a *Lalten*. Another rather obscure implication attached to the symbol is of male superiority. *Lalten* is mostly used by male peasants outside at night time since in the rural areas of the Asian Subcontinent there is a highly patriarchal system that is practiced in villages where men are the breadwinners as well as the protectors of their households. Similarly the political party at hand is also one of

the major patriarchal parties. Since *Pakhtuns* are one of the many major ethnic communities that make up Pakistan, *Pakhtun* nationalism is perhaps the most important connotation being attached to the symbol here (*Fig. 6*).

The point here is that even though a party using red color and a *Lalten* as an electoral and campaigning symbol could be assumed to be a party for all common men in rural areas regardless of their ethnicity; the stance of the party clarified it to be a populist party mainly for the *Pakhtuns* hence appropriating the symbol of the *Lalten* with a certain meaning that excludes a huge chunk of the initial market the symbol could have. Hence intersectionality applies here as the symbol used for electoral campaigning and voting is being interpreted on the basis of the ethnicity of the people, the language they speak, where they live geographically (as the party being discussed is a major one in two regions: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Karachi; both locations are geographically at a distance from each other but both have a number of their population identifying as *Pakhtun*), as well as their education, their income level, their occupation and their gender to an extent.

The second example is that of something quite different from the *Lalten*. While the symbol of *Lalten* is included in popular culture due to the quite long-lasting and overwhelming smearing of public places with posters, banners, symbol bearing flags prior to an election in Pakistan; the other example is a part of popular culture in its own way while being a FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Good): Pakola.

Pakola is a green ice-cream flavoured fizzy drink whose formula is derived from vanilla, chocolate and rosewater (*Fig. 7*). It was first created by Seth Mohammad Haji Ali Teli by the company which he and his brothers had founded in 1950 by the name of Pakistan Beverages (pvt.) Limited. Pakistan was a fairly new country at that time, having been founded in 1947, and the strength of patriotism was almost tangible. Teli had just the right ingredients to accentuate that patriotism; a green drink (green being the colour of Pakistan"s flag) with the name of Pak(istani) C(ola). "Pakola was launched on 14 August 1950, the third anniversary of Pakistan"s creation, in Karachi (the then capital of Pakistan), at the Pakistan Air Force Base on Drigh Road in the presence of the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan. And thus was forged an enduring association between brand and country." (Baig, 2009) The initial advertising of Pakola was done by K.U.Malany and Company who was the local branch of the infamous agency J. Walter Thompson. The branding on the bottle of Pakola from the 1950s depicts a crescent and star on the neck of the bottle and the same symbols repeated on either side of Pakola text on the larger label on the bottle (*Fig. 8 & 9*). This reflects that to what extent Pakola was identifying itself with Pakistan, the crescent and star being the symbols on the flag of Pakistan.

But interestingly, Pakola was not famous all over Pakistan. "The brand flourished and the fifties and sixties became Karachi's Pakola tinted decades. Pakola has always been a Karachi drink." (Baig, 2009) Even though the brand name Pakola boasts of being the quintessential Pakistani drink, it was not quite known in the country except for Karachi. Karachi is a metropolitan city and even remained the capital of Pakistan for many years (Fig. 10), but looking at the market of Pakola from an intersectional perspective, it can be noted that it *just* catered to middle class Karachi-ites who were patriots. Pepsi licensed Pakistan Beverages for its bottling in 1979 and a new company called Mehran Bottlers by the same family was established for Pakola and other brands being manufactured previously at Pakistan Beverages. During the 80s the Pepsi and Coca Cola companies entered the market and even though Pakola lost most of its market share to them, Pepsi and Coca Cola both still launched Mirinda Green and Green Fanta in order to eliminate Pakola but both the new beverages failed. Pakola's inconspicuous spreading of ethnocentricity to their cause became more apparent when during the late 80s it tried to cater to the nostalgic Pakistani expatriates, most of whom again belonged from Karachi. There is an ever-existent tussle between Karachi-ites and Lahor-ites with the residents of each city always trying to prove how their city and their people are better, and Pakola might inadvertently be increasing this breach with their ethnocentric market strategy. The enthusiastic patriotism of the country now becoming old steadily, the company also changed the mood of its advertising to catering towards the youngsters more; with the slogan Green, Green Pakola (the Urdu version of which rhymes nicely). In the 90s the sale and advertisement of Pakola dwindled and the last advertisement of Pakola of the decade was on a National day in 1997, stating "The great green flag, the great green drink". Then in 2004 the brand was reinvigorated by Ali Teli"s grandson Seth Zeeshan Habib. The advertising was done by a different company this time and thus came forth the slogan „*Dil Bola Pakola*" (The Heart Says Pakola), with the target market being the youth. It is interesting to note however that even the current marketing campaigns of the brand still happen to target Karachi-ites a lot more often than other areas of Pakistan (*Fig. 11, 12 & 13*).

These both examples might seem poles apart but there is more than glass and Karachi (the city being one of the areas where the political party using *Lalten* as their symbol has a huge support, as well as the city being the birthplace and the consistent hometown of the Pakola drink) which is common in both the cases discussed, i.e. the promotion of a certain kind of nationalism; with Pakola claiming to be the heart of the nation while it had popularity in one city of the country only and the party connoting the symbol with *Pakhtun* nationalism while technically the lantern should represent rural population regardless of their ethnicity since they all use it. Considering the fact that Pakistan already suffers from deep resentments within the provinces and the population due to ethnic differences; with provinces and different ethnicities almost competing against each other for gaining resources; is it ethical of design aiding to promote ethnocentrism? (as in the case of the aforementioned examples).

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It can be noticed throughout the world these days that tolerance among communities is decreasing and ethnocentrism is generally increasing. The role of design is also being recognized, with it playing an increasingly huge role in different major political campaigns such as Brexit. From the brand name itself to the simplicity of the 'vote leave' logo and slogan to the color red itself, it was a significant example of how much design can influence politics and vice versa. (Creative Review, 2016) Design aiding in promoting ethnocentrism is something designers and marketers need to be sensitive about as it is a delicate matter. "Galbraith criticizes the use of the term market as an anonymous and impersonal institution, and instead insists on talking about corporate power. Against this use of design- after all, a tool for domination- stands the intent not to remain fixed exclusively on the aspects of power and of the anonymous market. In this contradiction, design practice is unfolding and resisting a harmonizing discourse that is camouflaging the contradictions. One can deny the contradictions but not bypass them". (Bonsiepe, 2009) It also brings us to think about the fact that how can design be used as a tool to counteract such ethnocentrism, which is where using intersectionality as a tool to analyze a situation might be extremely useful. An intersectional approach towards understanding a case of ethnocentric branding will help us identify the exact social categorizations being targeted or excluded and then that information could be used to articulate a counter design. Also, it can be duly noted from the examples mentioned above that especially in relation to branding, the adjectives ascribed to a target market can enable us to locate with ease the intersectional threads of power being woven together.

"Yet even industrial society knows only the *product*, not the *object*. The object only begins truly to exist at the time of its formal liberation as a sign function... That is to say, the object only appears when the problem of its finality of meaning, of its status as message and as sign (of its mode of signification, of communication and of sign exchange) begins to be posed beyond its status as product and as commodity (beyond the mode of production, of circulation and of economic exchange)." (Baudrillard, 1981) It is this value of the designed artefacts as objects and not mere products, where the artefact has a significance as a message and a sign, that designers need to be sensitive about. Design has to play a rather unifying role rather than promoting cracks within a society by appreciating ethnocentrism on the pretext of effective marketing to target audiences.

In the examples mentioned in this paper, the interplay of design and power with each other is evident. However, while coming across these designs in daily life one does not think of them in terms of design and/ or power. This is the biggest dilemma; politics is clever, it hides in plain sight. Almost all artefacts which we come across embody a political connotation but it is usually imperceptible while it does its job in charming our minds into its desired motives. All in all, intersectionality is a very complex concept in itself and looking at power through this concept with the help of design is a very novel approach. It is anticipated that the

aspects considered in this essay will pave the way towards recognizing and grasping the precarious relationship between ethnocentrism, power and design and will result in further research which can facilitate in substantiating the power connotations associated with any designed artefact.

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Manahil Huda is a final year student of Industrial Design in Islamabad, Pakistan. Her own design practice has been informed by her personal experiences as well as local metaphor. She has an avid interest in researching about and critically appraising the cultures, habits and ubiquities found in South Asia since they are unique to the area and offer room for much learning.
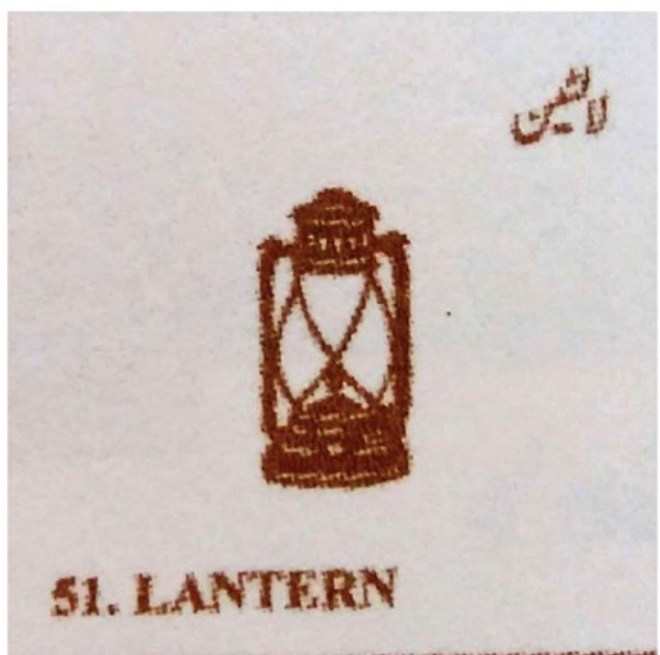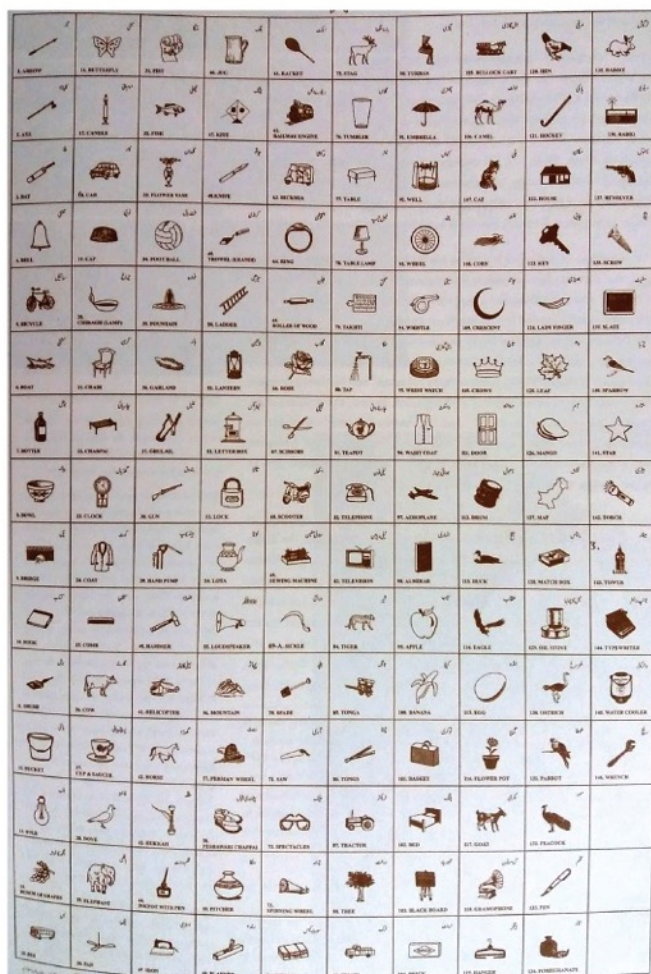
APPENDIX I

Fig. 01

Fig. 02

Clockwise, from top: Fig. 03, Fig. 04, Fig. 05

From top: Fig. 06, Fig. 07

Clockwise, from top left: Fig.08, Fig.09, Fig.10

Clockwise from top left: Fig. 11, Fig.12, Fig.13