

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 6 | Issue 3

2023

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Woke-Washing and Its Retaliation: Evidence from the Indian Business Context

GARIMAA JALAN¹ AND PIYUSH PRANJAL²

ABSTRACT

Woke-washing refers to organizations appearing to support progressive causes, such as promoting diversity and inclusion, while their actions do not align with these principles. The present article explores the concept and phenomenon of Woke-washing and its retaliation via three recent noteworthy incidents. It further highlights its implications for consumers, organizations, and society.

Keywords: *Wokeism, Woke-washing, Consumer activism, Brand retaliation, Diversity and inclusion.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The term ‘Woke’ originated in the Black community and refers to being aware of and actively working to address social and political issues, particularly race and social justice (Cambridge Dictionary). In recent years, the term has been co-opted by corporations and organizations who use it as a marketing tool to appeal to consumers who are becoming increasingly conscious of these issues. However, such usage of the term has been criticized for being inauthentic and lacking in substance, leading to the term ‘Woke-washing’ being coined to describe the phenomenon (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper, 2020).

Woke-washing is not just regarded as exploitative, but it can also damage real issues in social justice and movements supporting those issues/causes. By projecting itself as supporting such issues/causes, the Brand (Corporation/Organization/Individual) tries to sell its products and/or services. However, it makes no real effort to operationalize the cause within its area of influence (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, and Kemper, 2020). ‘Green-washing’ (Bowen and Aragon-Correa, 2014) and ‘Sports-washing’ (Søyland, 2020) are precursors to Woke-washing, but Woke-washing has acquired greater significance in recent times due to many reasons, including geopolitics, immigration, and religious/ethnic fanaticism. India is not immune to this rising phenomenon. Indian consumers and even some organizations (brands) are probably facing the worst possible manifestation of this phenomenon and are retaliating with intense activism.

¹ Author is a student at the O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India.

² Author is an Associate Professor at the O. P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India.

While Woke-washing is still relatively new to the Indian public discourse, it is the start of what should be a larger conversation about holding organizations accountable for matching their corporate actions to their public-facing values. Popular organizations in India have taken this recourse in promoting their products/services/brands and have yet to give much thought to authenticity and ethics.

The article's next section highlights the phenomenon of Woke-washing and its retaliation via three recent noteworthy incidents in the Indian business context. The third section provides a brief discussion on the impact of Woke-washing on consumers, organizations, and society. The final section of the article provides a brief conclusion.

II. RECENT NOTEWORTHY WOKE-WASHING INCIDENTS IN THE INDIAN BUSINESS CONTEXT

Incident 1

Every year, brands make special efforts to put their best foot forward during the Indian religious festive season, starting with 'Shri Ganesh Chaturthi' by providing customers with discounts and fresh collections. However, over the past few years, brands have always been on edge since it seems complicated to get it right and avoid offending consumers over the most trivial things. A recent noteworthy incident was associated with Fabindia, an apparel and home decor brand. Fabindia is an Indian chain store retailing garments, furnishings, fabrics, and ethnic products hand-made by craftspeople across rural India. Established in 1960 by John Bissell, it links over 55,000 rural artisans to urban markets, preserving Indian traditional skill sets while promoting sustainable rural development.

For "unnecessarily boosting secularism" and offending religious sensitivities by "defacing" a Hindu religious festival with a non-Hindi(u) term and appropriating it for a festive collection, Fabindia received backlash on social media (India Today Television, 2021). The brand called its Deepawali festive collection "Jashn-e-Riwaaz" (celebration of tradition), which was released on Twitter on 9th October 2021. It was interesting how the brand's advertising campaign completely contradicted the name of the Deepawali collection. Ironically, the "Jashn-e-Riwaaz" video campaign highlighted Rajasthan's vibrant culture and traditions during Deepawali. The campaign video/advertisement opened with a young Rajasthani boy inviting friends from all ethnic backgrounds to his house to celebrate Deepawali. The child wonders how his companions might interpret Rajasthan's rich heritage and history as he drives through its various traditional features.

A single tweet or a noteworthy social media trend can upend the entire business sector. Author, Lecturer, and Textile Aficionado Shefali Vaidya criticized Fabindia for “de-Hinduizing” festivals (Deka, 2021). She said, “Wow @FabindiaNews great job at de-Hinduizing Deepawali!” Call it a “festival of love and light,” name the collection “Jashn-e-Riwaaz,” remove Bindis from models' heads, but expect Hindus to buy your overpriced, mass-produced products in the name of “honoring Indian culture,” she tweeted. “Speaking for myself I'm not going to buy anything for #Deepawali from any brand that shows models without bindis. #NoBindiNoBusiness”, author Shefali Vaidya further tweeted, first opposing #NoBindis, sad faces, and the heavy non-Hindi(u) terminology used by the American clothing brand Fabindia (Deka, 2021). The cultural appropriation left many social media users uncomfortable; few favored Deepawali being translated to “Jashn-e-Riwaaz.” The female models in the poster were seen wearing red clothes but no bindi. While Shefali Vaidya's voice went viral on Twitter within no time, several users shared photos of themselves wearing bindis or tilaks. Many Twitter users discussed how wearing a bindi was essential to their identity.

In contrast, others contended that whether one wears or not wear a bindi should be a matter of personal preference. “Bindi has nothing to do with an individual’s personal choice. It is about brands de-Hinduizing Deepawali with models looking like Rudaalis at a Janaza. If brands want Hindu money, they should respect Hindu sentiments,” Shefali Vaidya said in a loud and precise response. MP Tejasvi Surya said on Twitter, “This deliberate attempt of abrahamization of Hindu festivals, depicting models without traditional Hindu attires, must be called out. Moreover, brands like Fabindia must face economic costs for such deliberate misadventures” (Deka, 2021). The tweet got more than one lakh impressions, and thousands of people unitedly raised their voices against the brands (this spilled over to other brands) of those who failed to showcase bindi as Bharat's pride.

Meanwhile, the brand Fabindia that sparked the entire debate was photographed empty, as Shefali Vaidya and many others shared. Before messing with religious and cultural sensitivities, the clothing firm, which operates over 327 outlets and generates Rs 1500 cr. in revenue in India, ought to have given it some thought. Shefali Vaidya titled the empty Fabindia showroom photo(s) “Jashn-e-Khali.” The idea that “bad publicity is also publicity” does not hold well when Members of Parliament join the calls for a boycott/buycott. Fabindia eventually pulled the campaign off-air. After the incident, the company created a collection called “Jhilmil si Diwali” that was much more in line with the Hindu ethos of the festival. However, the brand wanted its customers to forget that the “Jashn-e-Riwaaz” fiasco had never happened. A small amount of sensitivity and market research could have helped the brand avert such a fiasco and the annual

financial loss incurred first time in twenty years (Mishra, 2021).

Incident 2

Unanimously acknowledged as the leader in the RO (Reverse Osmosis) Water Purifier category, KENT pioneered bringing the revolutionary RO technology to India. Equipped with the vision for a healthier world and the technological expertise to come up with innovative solutions, the brand started its operations in Noida, India, in 1999 and has now become the largest manufacturer of water purifiers in India.

As the Coronavirus lockdown lifted and many upper- and middle-class Indians returned to work (from the office), they required cooks and cleaners. However, their absence from household work for months during the different COVID waves had not erased previous pre-/misconceptions. The KENT atta-maker commercial, released on 27th May 2020, was a stark reminder as it wreaked havoc on social media. Indian advertisements, since time immemorial, have continued to intrigue the country's audience and pique their curiosity like any other medium. However, on 27th May 2020, KENT RO Systems received massive backlash for allegedly coming up with a 'classist' advertisement (Jain, 2020).

"Are you allowing your maid to knead atta dough by hand? Her hands may be infected," read the copy of the advertisement. The advertisement said, "Do not compromise on health and purity. Choose KENT atta and bread maker for hands-free kneading of dough". It drew much flak from people on social media as multiple users on Twitter bashed the advertisement and even reported it to the Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) for being insensitive towards domestic help who were already facing discrimination from housing societies across the country during and post-COVID. The advertisement was later taken down from the company's social media handles (PTI, 2020).

Many people will not be surprised by this type of thinking. Many RWAs (Resident Welfare Associations) refuse to let domestic servants use the elevator, instead telling them to hike multiple flights of stairs. Despite having played no part in introducing the pandemic to the country, the poor and working class had been the hardest hit by the problem. The middle class (and above) had consistently failed the working class during the coronavirus crisis, spraying them with bleach, refusing them admission to workplaces, and demanding a COVID-negative certificate during the peak of the pandemic when in some places, it was worth 4000 rupees. Ironically, the upper- and middle-class who traveled abroad and got infected with the virus came back and knowingly or unknowingly spread the infection among many, including their family, friends, and house-help.

The advertisement by KENT exposed the upper- and middle-class's irrational fixation with 'purity,' stigmatizing those who run our homes and cities as 'carriers of the contagion.' The advertisement primarily targeted upper- and middle-class families who could afford a maid and a flour-kneading machine. However, it exposed the upper- and middle-class' classist worldview — the advertisement merely served as a mirror for the Brand and the society at large. The advertisement demonstrated how deeply prejudices and class biases are ingrained in the society. Issuing an apology on the company's official Twitter handle, KENT RO's Chairperson and Managing Director Mahesh Gupta tweeted, “Please accept our sincere apologies for having published the Ad of Kent Atta & Bread Maker. It was unintentional but wrongly communicated, and it has been withdrawn. We support and respect all sections of society.” He further said, “Our recent advertisement of Kent Atta & Bread Maker on social media was unintentional, badly communicated, and was wrong. And therefore, it was immediately withdrawn. We are extremely sorry for this incident and want to apologize to everyone, especially to the people whose sentiments were hurt.” “We will investigate how our advertisement standards were compromised and we will further take corrective and preventive action so that such incidents are not repeated in future,” Mahesh Gupta added, “we support and respect all sections of the society and apologize for the mistake” (Jain, 2020; PTI, 2020).

Incident 3

Founded in 1946, AMUL (Anand Milk Union Ltd.), the ‘utterly, butterly, delicious’ company, was started by Dr. Verghese Kurien (Father of India's White Revolution) in Anand, Gujarat, as a co-operative to purchase the milk supplied by nearby farmers. Its mission was to provide fair remuneration to farmers and quality and value-for-money products to its consumers. The brand is managed today by the Gujarat Co-operative Milk Marketing Federation Ltd. (GCMMF Ltd.), jointly owned by about 3 million milk producers in the state. More than 15 million milk producers contribute their milk in 144,500 dairy co-operative societies across the country, thus helping India emerge as the largest milk producer in the world.

AMUL Vice-Chairman Valamji Humbal had asked Prime Minister Narendra Modi to ban People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) after the NGO suggested to the Indian dairy giant AMUL to capitalize on what it called India’s and the whole world’s readiness for vegan milk and food instead of animal-sourced products. PETA had written to AMUL Managing Director R. S. Sodhi, requesting that they switch to 'vegan milk.' "We would again like to encourage AMUL to benefit from the booming vegan food and milk market instead of wasting resources trying to fight the demand for plant-based products that are only growing.

Other companies are responding to market changes, and AMUL can too”, PETA stated (India Times, 2021).

In response to media reports of PETA’s letter to AMUL, R. S. Sodhi questioned whether the NGO would provide a living for 100 million dairy farmers, 70% of whom are landless (Times of India, 2021). "Who will pay for children school fee, how many can afford expensive lab manufactured factory food made out of chemicals, and synthetic vitamins," he asked. The Advertising Standards Council of India (ASCI) denied a plea submitted by PETA and two other organizations against AMUL, stating that plant-based products cannot be referred to as 'milk.' AMUL then sponsored a 'Myths Vs. Facts' campaign highlighting that 'plant-based beverages are impersonating and masquerading as dairy products' (Methri, 2021).

According to ASCI, AMUL's advertisement was correct because plant-based milk does not fall within the definition of 'milk' defined by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Milk is a vegetarian product, according to FSSAI criteria. According to ASCI, plant-based beverages contain proteins and essential minerals; however, most plant-based 'milk' contains less protein than milk (Methri, 2021).

"Dairy sector is an important contributor to the GDP of India, but the GDP can be affected adversely by misinformation spread by opportunistic elements like this NGO. Organizations like this are part of the conspiracy to render unemployed the milk producers of India”, Humbal said in a release. He added that the said NGO was trying to ruin the livelihood of 100 million people by tarnishing the image of the Indian dairy sector (Times of India, 2021).

“Indian culture positions livestock as part of their family and raises them as family members. Therefore, the question of cruelty does not arise at all... This entire episode is (a) misinformation campaign and an attempt to break the Indian dairy industry, which is self-sufficient and thereby saves the country from the trouble of importing milk and milk products, and render unemployed 10 crore people who are relying on it. The move appears to have been prompted by various foreign companies”, said Humbal, who is also the president of Sarhad Dairy, a member union of GCMMF Ltd (Prabhu, 2021).

Reacting to Humbal, PETA India’s CEO Dr. Manilal Valliyate was quoted as saying by The Indian Express, “AMUL has shown itself to be a bully, unable to appreciate the public’s concern for animals, and a business that apparently cannot change despite changing consumer trends. But no amount of bullying is going to change the fact: vegan eating is taking the world by storm” (Express News Service, 2021).

However, it is an entirely different story (and beyond the scope of this article) that veganism

itself seems like a refurbished, deduced, rehashed, commercial, and less-healthier version of the ancient Indian understanding of leading a ‘Satvik’ life, including food wherein, plant and dairy sourced and consumed sustainably (read, naturally) takes precedence (Madhavi Kale Bodke, 2017; Jain, 2019). It refutes all modern-day machine and chemical processing as it renders the food less healthy/unhealthy and lifeless (devoid of life's energy – ‘Prana’). Woke-washing in the form of veganism, such as vegan milk and now vegan ghee, hints strongly at the commercial motive behind it of merely introducing new terminology to disrupt the market under the garb of a healthier lifestyle. In contrast, it is merely further appropriation and industrialization/commercialization of ancient Indian knowledge. 'Yoga' (particularly Ashtanga Yoga) and ‘Ayurveda’ are probably the most significant cases in point.

III. IMPACT ON CONSUMERS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND SOCIETY

Consumers who are genuinely committed to social and political issues may feel misled and disenchanted when they realize that an organization they believe to be aligned with their values is engaged in Woke-washing. It can lead to a loss of trust in the organization and a sense of betrayal among consumers. Moreover, it can also lead to cynicism and apathy towards social and political issues, as consumers may feel that their efforts to support organizations that align with their values are futile.

For organizations, Woke-washing can harm their reputation and bottom line (e.g., Fabindia, Kent RO). It has the potential to cause an existential crisis for the organization. Consumers who feel misled by an organization's Woke-washing efforts may choose to take their business and loyalty elsewhere, leading to a loss of revenue. Additionally, organizations that engage in Woke-washing may be subject to public backlash and negative media coverage, which can further damage their reputation. Furthermore, it can also lead to a lack of trust from customers and a lack of employee motivation and engagement.

Woke-washing can harm society as a whole, as it undermines the progress toward achieving genuine social and political change. Furthermore, it can erode trust in institutions and contribute to a general sense of cynicism and apathy toward social and political issues. When organizations engage in Woke-washing, they are not genuinely committing to the issues they claim to support, and therefore, they are not contributing to any meaningful change.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Woke-washing is a severe issue that has implications for consumers, organizations, and society. Sellers are enforcing the concept of Woke-washing, and the buyers are retaliating via consumer

activism in the form of boycotting/buycotting products and services. It is essential for consumers (and even some organizations, as in the case of AMUL) to be aware of this phenomenon and to critically evaluate the actions of organizations that claim to support progressive causes. Additionally, organizations must be held accountable for their actions and commit to social and political issues if they want to be seen as authentic and trustworthy. Finally, society must ensure that institutions/organizations are held accountable for their actions. That progress is made toward achieving sensible and meaningful social and political change. Rather than being 'Woke,' it would do us (consumers, organizations/institutions) good if we are awakened (rather than woke) and remain vigilant as the Department of Consumer Affairs, Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, Government of India says, "JAGO GRAHAK JAGO."

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