

FCBOOKS with Amitabh Kant, documenting a micro history of what put India on the map, in glorious technicolour, for the world to gape at. And buy into. "Advertising was one component of the thing, but that's what gets noticed." The 'thing' is called brand strategy, and if the Incredible India campaign mastermind can't teach you that, no one ever will.

ATULYA BHARAT

REVIEW

The story of how India became Incredible, so much so that in March and October 2007, at the world's largest travel and tourism show - International Tourismus Bourse (ITB) Berlin, and later in New York, Sivamani thundered on to a standing German ovation (and Vikku Vinayakram captured London), while Indian classical dancers were stealing hearts by the million at the Lincoln Center. "...Indians were performing everywhere. We were everywhere. Buses, taxis... it was unprecedented," relives Amitabh Kant, author of *Branding India: An Incredible Story*, a detailed Cliffs notes (so to speak) to a campaign that tied in 28 states, seven Union Territories and 1.12 billion people "under one brand" where, as the civil servant author tells us, "consumer research by marketing experts had revealed that the phrase 'Incredible India' in its creative form would be catchy, appealing, contemporary and would make an impact." A useful reminder this, that within five years, the dazzling campaign managers (government-led pick of the private: "We worked with some of the finest creative minds. Bharat Bala for commercials and V Sunil who was with O&M - minds who could really position India.") made sure that nobody here could draw mind pictures of our country without referencing one or the other of the Incredible India campaign visuals (Madhya Pradesh is in the centre, eh? Just like the *bindi*). Nobody out there could get India out of their systems either. "We attacked the market in a 360-degree manner," says Kant, former joint secretary, Ministry of

Tourism, 2001 - 2007. "Electronic media, hoardings, print, television, outdoors-you go to London, and India was visible on buses, on electronic, in print. And we worked in partnership with tour operators to structure packages. Suddenly, we realised demand has grown, because hotels were saying that rooms are not available. Suddenly, people were not getting tickets to India..."



BRANDING INDIA: AN INCREDIBLE STORY

Amitabh Kant

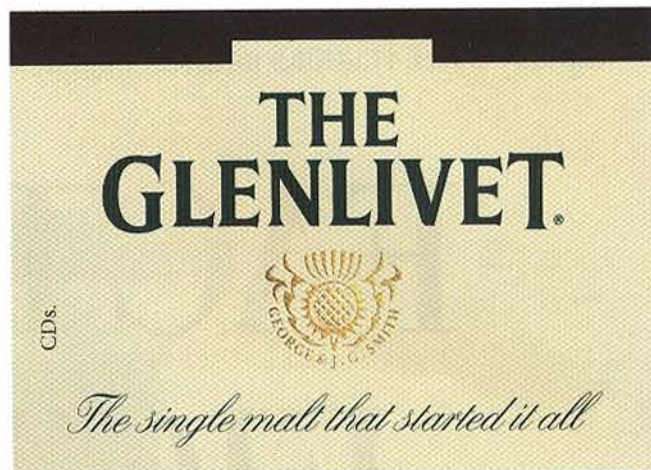
A campaign of wit, charm and irreverence took India into the next millennium, a campaign of daring, backed by the highest quality and production standard. But as the author, the civil servant architect ("It's difficult to change the mindsets of people. But, in the government, I've noticed that, nine out of 10 times, if you're dealing with it in a persistent way, and you come across as an open, transparent, well-meaning person who wants to do good for the country, you will get somewhere...") of the Incredible India phenomenon shares with us in this book, the advertising and visual plugs is just *part* of this story (even if it did win every award under the sun). The rest, the hard, sweaty, work of making the destination worthy of its branding, is what Amitabh Kant excels in documenting. With a special ability of never falling into the trap of brand India, of treating the country as a generic whole, but instead, refining and differentiating strategies and strengths that can be applied to the particulars of each state. So from the initial days of the God's Own Country campaign to particular individuals that keep the state's legacy intact (eco-friendly is the future, he makes no bones about it) to propping up of infrastructure fundamentals to case-studies (how the Ajanta-Ellora caves were saved) to statistics and maps all laid out non-business-like and young, because success stories are for all.

The story of how a country gets branded, burnt into popular (and subterranean) consciousness in record time (five years ago, you didn't know Kerala had backwaters that could give a Venice vacation serious threat) is now documented in a hip, fuchsia pink journal. "The intention was that it should cut across the travel and tourism sector. Something which people in advertising, laymen, schools, businessmen that they can all read and enjoy," says Kant. "And it all started in Kerala (as Secretary, Tourism). I worked on the 'God's Own Country' Kerala campaign - which was very interesting, because we were moving away from high mass, low value

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strategy of one product that was Kovalam, and shifting it into a high value strategy. We stopped cheap charters from coming in. We used to get a lot of cobblers and garbage collectors. We stopped that and shifted into totally new products - backwaters and Ayurveda. And developed those products," explains the civil servant, pointing to some cheerful statistics, shaped like air balloons. "We also did something that no other destination does - that is, go back to the destination's roots, go back to its traditional vernacular architecture, which was getting destroyed. We went back to its traditional culture - Kathakali, Thayyam - we went back to its traditional cuisine - and its traditional martial arts - Kalaripayattu." And there you were thinking you discovered that for yourself. "Developing new products unleashed a lot of young entrepreneurship. And a lot of young entrepreneurs came with a range of products - houseboats and home stays, tree houses. It's very fascinating the kind of things done in Kerala."

By the time Amitabh Kant moved to the Central Ministry of Tourism, post the attack on Indian Parliament and in the wake of the ongoing war in Afghanistan, "the travel industry was in shambles. There were travel advisories against India," he admits. "At that time, hotels were doing 20 per cent occupancy and most in bound tour operators had become outbound tour operators. They all started selling other destinations to India. So the challenge was in bringing consumer demand back. For which we had to do a lot of things. Advertising was one part of it," he clarifies, "but we had to build infrastructure to support everything. We started the *Aithi Devo Bhava* campaign to train taxi drivers, guides, we had to force the civil aviation to open up airways, the airport infrastructure had to improve - it started with Cochin, Hyderabad... and there are several others now... Rural tourism and medical tourism came in," he narrates, condensing a book worth in a paragraph. "In a country like India, when you're talking of growth, you're talking of growth with employment, growth with equity and that's where tourism comes in. The action is in the states, but they have to get their road map clear. And that is



why, in many ways, this book is a story for other states. In my mind, there are several states just waiting to emerge like Kerala did... the Himalayan states, the Buddhist states, Madhya Pradesh, all are waiting to emerge. And what I've done is present the case study of Kerala, and what kind of backward-forward integration you need so that states can drive it."

That is true, though. The book's heart lies in Kerala, even if, like its Bharatbala films, it gives spectacular snippets of what could be branded and sold in each state. In a prized full-page moment, there's a tiger in a sunlit ruin, with copy that chuckles 'Not all Indians are polite, hospitable and vegetarian'. "Indians are not used to humour," observes Kant, "And the tiger ad had such a powerful impact, because we showed a young confident India that is capable of laughing at itself." Which is like a sub-narrative of sorts in the book, where the author examines the world traveller, Pico Iyer like, from the other side of the prism. "The future of tourism is changing very rapidly. It's changing because of several factors - one is the emergence of BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China). In Europe, 50 per cent of the people have already traveled abroad. In China and India, only five per cent have. With wealth creation, these are the people who're going to travel in large numbers, and the world will have to notice that and cater to that. Unlike the Swiss institutes that were catering to European lifestyles, you'll need institutes who cater to Indian and Chinese tourists. Because, they're the wealth creators and they'll be moving in large numbers."

It's a book that demands attention, not little because of its author, because the last time the Incredible India team was in New York, and Times Square celebrated India, Amitabh Kant was asked by "all the heads of state that were present, Brazil, Australia, they all wanted to know how we did it. And they wanted us to teach them how to do this kind of destination branding in the future."

Now, for Rs. 499, they will. ■

(Branding India: An Incredible Story, Collins Business, priced at Rs. 499, available at bookstores.)

