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On Visual Literacy: Genderscapes in the Daily Press of Bengali India

Sandra C. S. Marques

The system of meanings, which we make use of in order to read and inscribe the world surrounding us, serves the purpose of preserving *our* identity integrity on the right place of *our* ordering system for the universe, people and things. Visual images, along with other narrative practices and representational techniques, compete for organising the modes of understanding this ordering of things and of social relationships. As it has been already widely described, the power of the mass media, particularly that of the written press, television, widely circulated cinema and internet, is significant in this regard. It transcends the ocular-centric conditioning (of limitation of visibilities) for a relationship of social control, through the effects associated with anticipation, classification, demonstration, delimitation and obliteration of alternative possibilities of representation (Adoni and Mane, 1984; Bourdieu, 2005).

Visual literacy refers to the ability to “read” images, much like the way we “read” language. This form of literacy requires an awareness of the ways that visual images communicate meanings. Visual rhetoric does not only include specific concepts of design or aesthetic codes; it also describes how images reflect, communicate, and shape meanings. Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to visual images as well as the ideas that inform the construction or manipulation of cultural images.

Media use symbolic techniques through which they transmit images and imprint them on the collective memory (*imaginaire*). The politics of images relies on their mediality, as mediality usually is controlled by institutions and serves the interests of those in power; even when it, as we experience it today, hides behind an apparently anonymous transmission (Belting, 2005). The ‘La Palissian truth’ used by producers of mass communication about the products they offer being the ones desired by their public, is held up by the manipulation of this bridging that serves the reproduction of the social order.

In this context, ‘journalistic’ photographs are particularly important, as they are frequently produced and recognised as metonymic. While the metaphor takes recourse to analogy, the metonymy is transnominative: the expression (or image) stands for the referent by making use of a conventional/commonly recognised association to a certain meaning. Moreover, as described by George Lakoff, ‘Metonymy is one of the basic characteristics of cognition. It is extremely common for people to take one well-understood or easy-to-perceive aspect of something and use it to stand either for the thing as a whole or for some other aspects or part of it’ (1987: 77). By virtue of which, the ‘journalistic’ (metonymic) photograph is not randomly chosen; it is chosen with the purpose of being easily recognised by the thing/object/idea that it replaces in the repository of knowledge shared by the producer and the receptors.

There are several methods to analyse visual materials and namely photographs. In 1988, Patricia Albers and William James synthesized the possibilities for the study of photographs as representations, in

two large groups that I consider valid referentials: the analysis at the level of content and the analysis at the level of semiotics. Of these two, I summarily present some of the dimensions, which were relevant to collect the evidence reported in this essay.

The first method rests on the quantification and description of that which is *manifesto* in the image – thematics (objects), distribution, frequency, context, etc. According to the aims of the study, the researcher establishes the parameters of analysis of the content and the composition, that is to say, the operational domains: who and the number of subjects photographed; presentation of the subjects, type of framing, clothing; surroundings; or others that may be relevant for the analysis. The quantification and description of the operational domains allow charting variation curves, uniformities and prevalence of pictorial elements, thematics of contents and types of composition. This methodology is, for this reason, particularly suitable in the analysis of large samples of visual data as in the case of newspapers, providing empirical foundation for contrasting and comparing appearances within the totality of the data-set as well as by publication (Albers & James, 1988; Buzinde et al. 2006). The second kind of approach is semiotic analysis. Based on models used in the analysis of language, semiotic analysis of photographs treats each image as a whole, looking for patterns in the relationship of the constituent elements that repeat or contrast with other photographs, and relating to the written, verbal, or other narratives that accompany them. The recourse to this kind of analysis attempts to access the symbolic meanings and ideological formations underlying the *manifesto* in the image (Clawson & Trice, 2000; Szorényi 2006).

Study Sample

The evidence presented here to illustrate the issues around the manipulation, “reading” and interpretation of the imagery is drawn from the author’s larger research on the interplays between mass-mediated images in the state of West Bengal, India, and the ideological discourses associated to the constitution/reproduction of the dominant Bengali culture and the politics of alterity and gender. In this essay, I present some of the ways in which gendered appearances are represented in “journalistic” photographs, and chart some methodological directions for studying these materials as a socially constructed medium for communicating gender models imagery.

A sample of three dailies with wide circulation in Kolkata and West Bengal was picked for reference: *The Times of India*, *The Telegraph* and *Anandabazar Patrika* along a period of 4 months. 12 editions of each of these newspapers were selected (3 in each month, distributed over different weeks), with a total sample of 36 newspapers and 3419 photographs submitted to analysis, between November, 2010 and February, 2011.¹ The aim was to cover the winter period in this region, which is considered the festive season, assumed as the most suitable to “go around” and “hang out” (public display), to strengthen relationships and tie up matrimony agreements (*i.e.* to choose the adequate subjects to enter the family cell).

In line with the trends registered in other countries, these photographs were either taken by the newspapers photographers (all males, as I was informed) or bought from image banks such as Getty Images (namely those displaying foreign subjects and places). According to the local photographers I have spoken

to, though they do not receive specific directives on “how” to photograph, they are directed on “what” and “when”, and publishing decisions rely on the sections editors and above (some of them are females). All of them stated that they never faced direct censorship, but they are aware on “how” they should represent certain kinds of subjects. ‘A politician is presented in a way, an intellectual in a different one, an actor or an unknown woman in a party is different ...and so, and so’ (photographer TTI, Kolkata, January 28, 2011); ‘we are careful on the presentation of women. Now it is more liberal, but Indian women are not supposed to be undressed, smoking cigarettes...you know, things like that’ (photographer TT, Kolkata, January 25, 2011).

In order to frame the social impact of these mediators of popular communication, I refer to the study conducted by Chaitali Dutta in 2008 on information literacy and readership in Kolkata metropolitan area. The following results are reported about the regular reading habits among the resident adolescent and adult population: 76% of males and 90.19 % of females assume reading as preferential pastime. The reading of Bengali fiction, that is, in origin as well as linguistically mediated, is the most chosen (data also corroborated by the libraries), being indicated amidst their favourites, especially among the female population, classic authors of the 19th and 20th centuries like Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, widely recognized as icons of ‘Bengali culture’. Nevertheless, from the age of 20 years onwards, newspapers continue to constitute reference sources, the most read being *Anandabazar Patrika*, followed by *The Telegraph*, *Bartaman* and *The Times of India* (Dutta, 2008).

These data converge with the information given out by the publishing houses and the market of the print media in the region. According to the Indian Readership Survey (IRS) on the average indices of the reading of newspapers related to the third trimester of 2010, *Anandabazar Patrika* led with more than 2.8 million readers. It was followed by *Bartaman* that exceeded 1 million, *The Telegraph* with more than 880,000 and *The Times of India* being read by more than 0.5 million (IRS 2010 Q3, made available by the agency Exchange4media). It is also noteworthy that regarding the reading of magazines, according to the same study by Dutta, the three most read are common to men and women: *Desh*, *Sananda* and *Saptahik Bartaman*. Significantly, *Anandabazar Patrika*, *The Telegraph*, *Desh* and *Sananda* are all publications of the influential Bengali multimedia group Anandabazar and the newspaper *Bartaman* and *Saptahik Bartaman* belong to the Bartaman group, which is also Bengali. In this framework, *The Times of India* published by the powerful multimedia The Times Group of national coverage, based in Mumbai, emerges as the unique counterpoint of non-Bengali production with high penetration levels in this region.

Gendered Visibilities

I have selected for this essay only that part of the overall results directly related to gender representation. I begin with the quantitative analysis of the images published by the three newspapers at the level of the operational domain ‘human subjects represented’. Of the totality of the photographs analysed, a mere 13% do not represent human subjects (or their appearance is undefinable) and children residually

appear in 3% of the remaining. The domain of the public interest considered in the media discourse of the daily press in Kolkata is, therefore, overwhelmingly dominated by bodies with adult appearance, with 52% of the images exclusively representing subjects of male gender, 12% including both and 20% exclusively representing females. When the distribution of the presence of women is evaluated per sections, it was further verified that more than half of all images that include them are concentrated in the sections of 'society/arts/entertainment'. There is a clear convergence of all newspapers for an over-representation of adult males and for the concentration of the visibility of adult females in the 'lighter, less valued areas of the public sphere' associated with leisure and entertainment, with their nearly exclusion from the economics/business domain (2%). Female gender is thus considered more appropriate to display archetypes of attractive passive bodies alienated from productive resources and workforce.

The appearance of children was assessed with the purpose of discriminating the inclusion of adults by gender in the photographs. Represented in merely 97 photographs, children appear mostly accompanied by female adults. However, when editorial tendencies are compared, it can be observed that this result is directly dependent on the contribution of the Bengali newspapers. *The Times of India* shows children mostly accompanied by males or by both genders. Hence, the tendency of representing females as preferential companions of children, placing the emphasis on their role as prime nurturers/guardians/caretakers is seemingly stronger amongst the Bengali media.

Operational domains were also established at the level of the type of framing. Images were divided into three categories, keeping in mind the 'scale of the adult human subjects represented': a) close shot (portrait), b) medium shot/American shot (half-figure), c) full shot (whole figure), thus allowing the evaluation of the phenomenon of gendered facial prominence in the three newspapers in consideration. 'Face-ism' is a term coined by Archer et al. (1983), which may be defined as the phenomenon in which the high facial prominence of a person represented in photograph or other pictorial image is translated into a more positive evaluation associated with affirmative intellectual qualities, attractiveness, intelligence, ambition or dominance, by comparison to his/her full body representation.² This phenomenon has been evaluated in various studies for different mediators and countries, having been repeatedly confirmed in the representational discrimination of female *versus* male gender. Males tend to be represented 'by face' and females tend to be represented 'by body'. In the case of 'Western' countries, it is even observed for drawing and painting since the 15th century (Costa & Bitti, 2000; Anderson, 2003).

As already stated, when considered as a whole, the daily press in Kolkata follows the tendency found in other countries of male over-representation. However, when the phenomenon of relative facial prominence is assessed, the results are less linear. The photographs exclusively representing male (one or more) and those exclusively representing female (one or more) adults were undertaken, and it was verified that, overall, men tend clearly to be represented more in portrait (66%) than women (58%). Meanwhile, when the representations of full figure are considered (the lowest indices), the numbers are 14% for the former and 10% for the women. In other words, despite an overall over-representation of the male gender by

face, their representation by the whole body is also higher. This means that females tend to be represented by face or by half-figure.

When editorial tendencies are compared, another inversion is revealed on the part of the newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika*. Contrary to the two English-language newspapers, this daily not only represents the female gender with higher indices of relative facial prominence, but it also presents its greater divergence in the representation between genders: 81% of all women are represented by face *versus* 68% of all men. That is to say, the most read daily newspaper in West Bengal, contradicts the gendered representational trends of relative facial prominence found in its counterparts published in English and, as per the studies referred to, in some tens of other newspapers from different countries. According to the theoretical foundation of the phenomenon, these representational strategies lead to positive evaluations of females, predisposing to cognitive associations of these subjects to affirmative intellectual qualities such as intelligence, ambition or dominance. However, I suggest that these strategies for gendered visibilities are more due to the concepts of public displaying of gendered bodies and to the ideals of appropriate female conduct and virtues in a social space where Bengali culture is dominant. I will substantiate this statement, as more data are included on who are these visible bodies.

Verbal Images on Multiple Identities

As this is a secular nation, since long, of multiple linguistic, cultural and religious universes, it encompasses, apart from numerous communities included in that which is commonly designated as Hinduism, various Islamic, tribal, nomadic, Buddhist, Christian, Jewish communities, *Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Nepali*, etc. According to the Project People of India (POI), 4693 distinct communities were identified in this country, of which more than 170 are represented in West Bengal (Singh, 2003). In independent India, the strategies applied to reorganize the social order of the 'new' nation took off from many of those representational assumptions efficiently implanted over two centuries of British colonialism. Hence, some of these categorisations still serve as the basis of census and support the establishment of criteria for constitutional discrimination of specific groups in relation to the dominance of the nationalist 'Hindu' perspective. Though this discrimination is legally framed with the purpose of achieving the right to equality, the use of concepts such as 'ST', 'SC', 'OBC', 'race', 'backwards', 'weaker sections', denounces in itself the categorical objectification and inequality between members of this society. These categories and many others (social categorisations are contingently updated in all societies), legitimised by formal legal and political discourses, are, thus, used by the media as well as by the common people for immediate identity ascription to others and oneself. Facial and body structure, hair type, dress and ornamentations are frequently sufficient to ascribe roughly the identity of another person to a social unit. And the distinctiveness of social identity belonging, in any given society and certainly in India, tends to be translated into differential social ranking and differential access to goods, services, and other rewards in society. Identity ascription thus makes a very tangible difference in one's life chances and privileges in any given society.

In West Bengal, the dominant culture is Bengali Hindu, whose influence and impregnation in the social universe also appears to be a determining factor in the (re)configuration of the various social units that make up the territory. That is why the dominant representation used as the referent *us* for differentiating the *others* is that of the ‘Bengali Hindu’ body, getting merged, when used in a metonymic way (as Bengalis are dominant in this region), with ‘Hindu Indian’. However, as one would expect, there are differences amongst this *us*, which need some considerations. Regarding the use of verbal representations such as ‘urban’ and ‘modern’, they are subject to different classifications depending upon gender, class, generation and, frequently associated with a harrowing duo of ‘Indianised Western’ and ‘Westernised Indian’. For male bodies, in public and workspaces in secular environment, wearing tailored trousers and shirt (‘Indianised Western’) is the distinctive mark of the dominant culture in urban surroundings. Yet it is connoted as conservative in opposition to the more androgynous *prêt-à-porter*, *jeans* and *shirt* (‘Indianised’ in the Bollywood style³) or shorter *kurta*, to which are attributed meanings of youth, rebellion and modernity, and that are frequently used by both genders. The garments *salwar-kamize* or *churidar-kamize* (with *dupatta*) and *sari* (with *blouje* and *saia*) are the most common among female population, while the strategies used for distinction are, above all, the fabrics utilised and ornaments, variants of patterns, colour, shape and the ways of dressing. The concept of ‘ethnic’ is used in reference to specificities of clothing that serve as an index for distinctive marks of some Indian “folk, peasant, tribal” communities, sometimes with a connotation of ruralness and atavism when used in this context, sometimes with the attributes of “modernity”, when incorporated with other pieces of urban clothing.

It is in the domestic space and in ostentatious public situations (ceremonious) that the use of garments understood as ‘traditional’ still prevails and are weared in the conventional way (according to the different levels of identity differentiation). For the ‘Hindu’ identity ascription, Bengali being dominant in this region, non-tailored and non-stitched clothing, such as *dhoti*, *chador* and *sari*, are the referents. Nevertheless, the incorporation of syncretic clothing, such as in the cases of ‘Mughal’ and ‘Western’ styles combinations, was, since a long time, widely undertaken by both genders. This is evident by the extensive usage, and their adoption as ‘typically Indian’ garments, of *kurta-pijama* or *kurta-dhoti*, *salwar-kamize* or *churidar-kamize*, *dupatta*, *saia* and *blouje*, *topi*, *sherwani*, *achkan* and ‘Nehru’ coats, etc. (on Indian dress and its history, see Bayly, 1988; Tarlo, 1996; Cohn, 2001).

To look for the latent content as well as some ideological formations on the politics of alterity underlying the representations of these male and female bodies *manifest* in the newspapers photographs, the data was organized according to several unities understood as operational domains for ‘identity ascription’. These unities emerged from the course of doing fieldwork research, using a multi-method approach of consecutive scrutiny of the photographs and verbal images of identity ascription from other sources. Thus, the distribution was operated through the combination of elements that included external identity marks of immediate recognition in this socio-geographic universe with the textual references for identification and description as well as the situation and the surroundings into which the bodies are displayed. The focus was

placed on each picture as a totality, looking for patterned relationships of repetition and contrast in the constituent elements within all photographs of half-figure and full figure.

Gender Visibilities and Otherhood

The first evidence to be underlined here is that of the total number of adult bodies represented in the three newspapers, 80% are ‘apparently’ Hindu Indians. That is to say, the overwhelming majority of the bodies that make up the social landscape of public interest have Hindu Indian appearance, revealing their dominance as role models in the hierarchy of social organization. These male and female appearances dominate the visibilities in all spheres of public life, also occupying the role of the most successful, illustrious and beautiful idealized bodies. ‘Apparently’ Western men appear in only 9% of the photographs and ‘apparently’ Western women in 6%. The less visible kinds of bodies are those ‘apparently’ non-Hindu Indians and non-Western, comprising a mere 5% of all the appearances. They are the least representative of the social landscape that is supposed to be of public interest for the press, whether at the national or international level. It is also noteworthy that 62% of these ‘apparently’ non-Hindu Indians and non-Western subjects appear wearing ‘Western’ dress, their inclusion in this category being dependent on the identification and textual references that accompany the photographs.

Considering that in 84% of the photographs that display the dominant male Hindu Indian appearance, their bodies also appear in ‘Western’ dress, one can conclude that the landscape of visible bodies in secular public space is widely represented by ‘Westernised’ appearance. The daily press in Kolkata validates, in this way, the tendency of global standardisation of ‘Westernised’ attires to the detriment of the affirmation of identity differentiations. The normative use of men’s tailored trousers, complete suit in situations that are more formal or *prêt-à-porter*, with *jeans* and *shirt* for the youngsters, is reinforced by the dominance of the use of short hair, clean-shaven face or with moustache and absence of earrings and decorations on the skin. The reduced number of males with a Hindu appearance that find place in the press using ‘traditional’ dress (only 16%) come up with variants of ‘Indian’ garments as has been described earlier. One feature is noteworthy here: in national and international political scenarios, the press reiterates the use of white *khadi* as the appropriate textile for the ‘traditional’ dress of *kurta-pijama* or *kurta-dhoti* for the politicians.

Regarding the representation of Indian women, the equivalent distribution is the following: in 54% of the photographs all of them wear ‘Indian’ dress, in 40% ‘Western’ and in 6% they are represented with one or other kind of attire. In contrast with the male body, the representation of the appearance of the Hindu female is mostly ‘non Westernised’, appearing with variants of clothing understood as ‘Indian’ as described earlier. This appearance is reinforced by the rejection of closed shoes, dominance of the long dark hair (flat or wavy, always black or brown in colour), and the use of make-up and ‘Indian’ ornaments for distinctive identity ascription (the marks of marital status according to the group of belonging are the most evident).

It should further be noted, that while in the case of representing male Indian Hindu appearance there are no significant differences between the three newspapers; in the representation of this female body, a

substantial disruption is established by *The Times of India*. This newspaper showed an occurrence of ‘mannequin’ women in bikini and an actress apparently only covered with a shawl. Representations of the ‘Indian’ female body of this kind, even when in such a residual number and confined to women who are ‘clearly identified in less respectable categories’, is thus a note of transgression of external origin in this Bengali universe. Here is the comment of a Bengali Hindu university student, who defines herself as a rebel and cosmopolitan, habitually dressed in ‘Westernised’ style:

Imagine that! You are not supposed to step out of your house in shorts. Showing your legs like that. In the West, boys and girls can wear shorts together, right? In gyms, and all, and taking shower together? We cannot think of that. And in India, going around naked is like you put yourself at your most vulnerable point: you’ll never do it! Just like guys are never supposed to cry, never, ever, at least in public. That’s why those actresses who wear skin revealing clothes are not admired at all, generally speaking... Now you can also see the deep back cleavages in the *blouje*, a huge U, but many women think that those women are not really respectable or something...I also don’t wear my *blouje* like that, they are all very decent like 9 inches or something! ...And, yes, people expose a lot through *sari* but, then, it is a different thing: you are wearing a *sari*! (AM, Kolkata, January 22, 2011)

The daily press in Kolkata also establishes this unequivocal demarcation from the “Western” female bodies. 70% of western female appearances take place in situations of ‘pose/leisure’ for contemplation purposes, a number far higher than the 52% of apparently Hindu Indian ones and, than the 25% of the remaining other kinds of female bodies. Customarily famous in the global industry of entertainment (actresses, models, and singers), these female bodies ‘of Western appearance’ are assumed by these newspapers as the most appropriate to represent objects for sexual seduction, with greater exposure of stripped areas and explicitly eroticised poses. The *Anandabazar Patrika*, published in Bengali, is again the exception by not including any representation of this kind.

I have mentioned that Bengali literature, at the level of origin as well as of linguistic mediation is the most chosen, while classics of 19th and 20th centuries by writers widely recognised as icons of the ‘Bengali culture’ are extremely influential. It is necessary to add that through several forms of expression (writing, theatre, satire, music, painting), a large number of these Bengali authors (both men and women) have also played a fundamental role in the debate and the ideological construction of the reformist movement of the post-colonial ‘Indian identity’. Their influence left a distinctive mark on the references used for ‘good taste’ (Bourdieu, 1984) in the present ‘Bengali identity’ (Nag, 1991; Ray, 1991), that are embodied in the archetypes of the ‘*Bengali babu*’ and his female counterpart *bhadramahila*.

This project for the nationalist construction of India would have found the conciliation between the preservation of its identity singularity and the immersion into modernity, through an ideological principle of *selection* reified on the difference of the female and the male body. The former came to be conceptualised as the repository of the ‘essential Indian spirituality’ and the latter as the repository of ‘the materiality appropriated from the West’. As Partha Chatterjee describes:

The new norm for organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women in the conditions of the modern world could now be deduced with ease. Adjustments would have to be made in the external world of material activity, and men would bear the brunt of this task. ...No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, female) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized (1989: 626-7).

This meant that the female bodies were from then on to be submitted to a new patriarchal order (understood as superiorly refined and emancipating), distanced from the 'Western' and the earlier 'Indian' one. Women should be educated for participating in the public sphere, but preserving the 'spiritual' virtues of nurture, chastity, modesty, submission, self-sacrifice, compassion, kindness and patience, and that should be reflected in their external appearance, foodways and use of the body, devotion to family and religiosity, etc. The distancing of the 'West' in the 'modern Indian identity' is, thus, ensured by the women, through the preservation of their 'spiritual' marks of conduct and appearance, clearly demarcated from the figure of the *memsahab* ('Western woman').

It is interesting to note that, in West Bengal, the form of addressing to 'respectable' women (married or not) in qualified professions exercised outside the domain of the house (e.g professors, researchers, journalists, lawyers, etc.) is *mem*, diminutive for *memsahab*. In spite of the high value attributed to education, political and cultural interventionism that is reflected in the high F/M ratio of literacy (positioned as the 3rd best state at the national rank since the 1970's) and high qualifications (Bagchi, 2005), the use of this verbal image '*mem*' denounces the ambiguity that yet prevails towards their social position and their closeness to the 'Western woman'.

Hence, the ideal female should be visible outside of the house as a repository of these essentially Indian spiritual virtues, which are embedded in the normalised Bengali Hindu female identity. Her sexual body should be invisible and, therefore, she should be publicly represented 'by face' and not 'by body'. *Anandabazar Patrika*, the most read daily newspaper in West Bengal, does not transgress this principle. And of course, if female bodies should be made visible only by their reflection of the essentially Indian spirituality all other kinds of female bodies are irrelevant, namely the non-Indian ones. The exception coming from the 'West', that seems to continue to provide the image-referent to oppose the embodied ideals of the female Indian body for the last two centuries.

Conclusion

The mediality of images reaches far beyond the visual realm. Language transmits verbal imagery when we turn words into mental images. Words stimulate imagination, while the imagination in turn transforms them into the images they signify. In the case of verbal imagery, however, we are well trained to distinguish image from medium, while in the case of physical or visible imagery we are not that skilled. My argument is that "journalistic" photographs, metonymic as they are, play a major role on the dissemination of the invisible strategies of normalisation (McNay, 1994) and discrimination of otherhood, through the manipulation of this mediality. Throughout the text, it is shown how the strategies of visibility are played in

reiterating gendered inequalities, roles ascriptions, dressing standardisation, ideals for physical and moral bodies as well as dominant views on the hierarchy of these bodies in the social organization.

In India, the construction of dialectics of positive/negative dichotomies between *the others* and *us* is officially dissuaded. The Indian Constitution ensures freedom of expression, but with several restrictions, allowing the official intervention in various mass media products, imposing, for example, an ‘ethical and moral’ self-regulation on the press and other organs of media as well as the regular censorship in publication and exhibition of audio-visual materials. In this framework, the expression of hierarchies of representational importance and the discrimination of alterity by reference to a clear social and political dominance of the male Hindu Indian appearance is managed by the daily press in Kolkata, not so much by the qualitative selection of contents and composition, but through the over-representation of its visibility. I should clarify that according to the 2011 census, non-Hindus account for 19.5% of India’s population, and the minorities SCs and STs together have increased to 24.5%, as many social units are trying to be identified as distinct to access the benefits of positive constitutional discrimination. When asserting this “multi-ethnic” configuration, one can easily understand that the strategies used by the press, towards Indian otherhood, are based on the suppression of their visibility, undercutting the strength of their large number.

Conspicuously, contrary to the internationally diffused imagery on the impregnation of marks of religiosity in the public space of this nation, one observed a clear domain of the representation of secularity and of the secular appearance of the bodies that make up the social landscape. The Hindu Indian male body (here, merging with the ‘*Bengali babu*’) unequivocally dominates the hierarchy of visibilities and stands for the referent *us* for the identity ascription of the *others*. Yet it is the representation of its ‘Westernised’ appearance, with the suppression of differentiating external religious marks, which defines it as the metonymic Indian body in this socio-geographic universe.

It is also alleged by many ‘Indianist’ observers that the search for the affirmation of ‘Hindu’ identity in India is primarily supported on the demarcation of an ‘Islamic’ identity, but, according to this study, in what concerns to the daily press in Kolkata, this is not, in any way, the relevant demarcation. Even when one considers the representational discrimination of the female gender and the referents used for opposing identity ascriptions, only the female body of ‘Western appearance’ seems to acquire significant visibility. All the others, including the Islamic kinds, remain nearly invisible.

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Notes

¹ All the photographic images published in these newspapers were considered, except for the sections of classifieds, advertisement, TV programmes (as they do not make to the 'journalistic' category) and all the sections headlines (usually crops of other photographs reproduced alongside the articles). The reasons underlying the choice of these criteria for collecting the sample relate to the necessity of their limitation to comparable characteristics in the grid of the operational domains under study.

² The relative facial prominence is evaluated through an index in which the numerator is the distance between the top of the head and the extreme bottom of the chin and the denominator is the distance between the top of the head and the extreme bottom that is visible of the body. The index varies theoretically between the lowest value of 0.00 (the face is not shown) to the highest of 1.00 when only the face is visible (Archer et al, 1983: 726). For the present study, the evaluation of the phenomenon of facial prominence was simplified, proceeding merely to the analysis of the increasing order of the index, in the categories: whole figure (minimum index), half-figure (medium index) and portrait (maximum index), discarding images with close-ups of small parts of the body or where the head is not visible.

³ About the 'Indianisation' of the 'Western' garments and the influence of Bollywood cinema (or 'Hindi film') in the dynamics of style and representations on clothing in India, see, for example, Wilkinson-Weber (2005).