



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Communicating Social Change Through Design: A Semiotic Analysis of Indian Awareness Advertisements

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Abstract

This paper examines how design communicates social change through a semiotic analysis of five Indian awareness advertisements: the Swachh Bharat Mission logo, a Pulse Polio immunisation poster, Ariel India's #ShareTheLoad campaign, Tata Tea's Jaago Re 2.0 campaign, and the Sadak Suraksha Abhiyaan 2026 road-safety visual. The study uses a qualitative, interpretive framework combining Barthes's levels of denotation, connotation, and myth; Peirce's categories of icon, index, and symbol; and Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. Each advertisement is analysed in relation to imagery, colour, typography, composition, language, gaze, cultural codes, emotional appeal, and call to action. The comparative findings show that Indian social-cause advertising frequently condenses complex public issues into memorable everyday objects: spectacles, vaccine drops, laundry, an alarm clock, and a traffic sign. These objects operate as culturally intelligible signs that translate abstract goals into personal duties. Across the sample, the viewer is positioned not as a passive recipient of information but as a citizen, parent, partner, consumer, or road user who is expected to act. At the same time, the analysis identifies limitations. Messages that emphasise individual responsibility may understate structural barriers, while brand-led activism can blur civic communication and commercial interest. The paper argues that socially responsible design becomes more persuasive and ethically sound when symbolic clarity is joined with behavioural specificity, inclusive representation, and an acknowledgement of the systems within which individual choices are made.

Keywords: social change, visual communication, semiotics, Indian advertising, social advertising, public awareness, visual design

1. Introduction

Social change is communicated not only through laws, speeches, statistics, and institutions, but also through designed images that enter ordinary life. A poster at a health centre, a campaign logo on a government building, a social-media frame shared by a brand, or a road-safety message seen while travelling can make a public issue visible within seconds. Such advertisements do more than provide information. They select a problem, give it a visual form, attach emotions and values to it, and suggest

what a responsible person should do next. In this sense, design is not a neutral container for a message; it participates in defining the social problem itself.

Social advertising differs from conventional product advertising because its immediate purpose is to influence knowledge, attitudes, norms, or behaviour in relation to a public good. Yet it still borrows the persuasive tools of commercial communication: memorable slogans, brand-like identities, emotional storytelling, aspirational imagery, repetition, celebrity, and visual simplification. The idea of social marketing formalised this transfer of marketing principles to planned social change (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971). Later work has stressed that sustainable change cannot be reduced to message exposure or individual choice alone; it is shaped by communities, institutions, social norms, and unequal access to resources (Lefebvre, 2013). Awareness advertising therefore sits within a productive tension. It needs to simplify a problem enough to be understood quickly, but excessive simplification can hide its structural causes.

Semiotics offers a useful way to study this tension because it asks how meaning is made through signs. A photograph of a child receiving vaccine drops denotes a medical act, but it may also connote parental care, scientific trust, vulnerability, and national duty. A pair of spectacles can resemble an object once used by Mahatma Gandhi while simultaneously invoking cleanliness, moral discipline, and a collective vision of India. These secondary meanings are neither accidental nor universal. They are produced through cultural histories and established conventions (Barthes, 1972, 1977; Hall, 1997). Visual design arranges those meanings through salience, framing, gaze, colour, scale, typography, and the relationship between text and image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021).

This study focuses on Indian awareness advertising, where diverse languages, religious and regional identities, social inequalities, and rapidly changing media environments make the design of public communication especially significant. The selected cases cover sanitation, public health, gender equality, civic activism, and road safety. Together, they show how government agencies and commercial brands construct different versions of the socially responsible Indian subject.

Aim. The study aims to examine how Indian social-cause advertisements use visual, linguistic, and cultural signs to make social problems understandable, emotionally meaningful, and actionable.

Objectives. The paper has five objectives: (a) to identify the denotative and connotative meanings in five selected advertisements; (b) to classify important signs as icons, indexes, or symbols; (c) to examine composition, colour, typography, gaze, and language as resources of visual persuasion; (d) to compare how the campaigns position the viewer and frame responsibility; and (e) to discuss the ethical and ideological strengths and limitations of these design strategies. The guiding research question is: How do Indian awareness advertisements employ semiotic resources to construct preferred meanings of social responsibility and social change?

2. Literature Review

Semiotics begins from the proposition that meaning is produced through relationships between signs, concepts, and interpretive communities. Saussure's model distinguishes the signifier, or perceptible form, from the signified, or concept to which it refers (Saussure, 1983). Peirce's triadic approach places greater emphasis on interpretation and differentiates icons, which resemble their objects; indexes, which point to them through a material or causal connection; and symbols, which depend on convention (Peirce, 1998). Advertising routinely combines all three. A photograph of a road is iconic, skid marks are indexical traces of risky movement, and a red prohibition circle is a legally learned symbol.

Barthes extended semiotic analysis from individual signs to cultural ideology. He distinguished literal description from connotation and showed how repeated associations can become myth: historically produced ideas begin to appear natural and self-evident (Barthes, 1972, 1977). Advertising is particularly effective at this movement because it transfers values from familiar cultural objects to a product, institution, or behaviour. Williamson (1978) describes advertising as a system that connects commodities with already meaningful social differences and desires. In social advertising, the same transfer can connect a behaviour with citizenship, care, modernity, equality, or morality. The desired action is consequently presented not merely as useful but as an expression of who a good person is.

Social semiotics shifts attention from a fixed dictionary of signs to the way communicators select semiotic resources in specific contexts (van Leeuwen, 2005). Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) visual grammar is especially valuable for analysing advertisements. Representational meaning concerns what is depicted and what actions or concepts are shown. Interactive meaning concerns the relationship established with the viewer through gaze, distance, angle, and modality. Compositional meaning concerns information value, salience, framing, and the integration of elements. A direct gaze can make a demand of the viewer; a distant shot can turn people into objects of observation; central placement can mark an element as the nucleus of a message; and colour contrast can create urgency or trust. Multimodal analysis also recognises that words, images, typography, colour, and layout do not simply repeat one another. They distribute meaning across modes (Jewitt, 2014).

Research on representation further reminds us that advertisements do not mirror social reality transparently. They produce recognisable identities and invite audiences into preferred positions from which a message appears coherent (Hall, 1997). This matters in awareness campaigns because the citizen is often imagined in advance: as a caring mother, a responsible father, an equal partner, a vigilant voter, or a disciplined driver. These roles can mobilise action, but they can also reproduce assumptions about gender, class, literacy, family structure, or access to services. Rose (2016) therefore recommends attention not only to what an image contains but also to its production, circulation, and social effects.

The literature on social marketing describes communication as one component of a larger intervention. Kotler and Zaltman (1971) proposed that marketing ideas could be applied to social goals, while Lefebvre (2013) places stronger emphasis on participation, value exchange, services, and the conditions that enable behaviour. This distinction is important: a persuasive advertisement may increase recognition without resolving the economic, infrastructural, or institutional barriers that prevent action. Recent public-health work in India similarly argues that contextually grounded, collective, and multi-touchpoint approaches are more likely to support sustained behaviour change than linear information campaigns alone (Misra & Thakur, 2026).

Within Indian digital advertising, semiotic research has begun to examine how brands challenge established social identities. Akanksha and Kalita (2025), for example, show that portrayals of dating and gender can disrupt stereotypes while still operating within the persuasive economy of branding. Such work is useful for understanding campaigns like #ShareTheLoad, where a household product becomes a platform for debating domestic labour. However, studies often focus on a single issue, one campaign, or film narrative. Less attention is given to comparative analysis across government and corporate campaigns, particularly across public health, sanitation, gender, civic action, and road safety.

The present paper addresses that gap through a focused comparison of five highly legible campaign visuals. It does not measure audience response or claim that a sign has one stable meaning for every viewer. Instead, it identifies the preferred readings organised by the designs and considers where those readings may be negotiated or resisted. This approach treats advertisements as culturally situated proposals about social reality rather than as transparent evidence of behavioural impact.

3. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, comparative case-study design. Purposive sampling was used to select five Indian awareness advertisements that met five criteria: national or wide public visibility; representation of a distinct social issue; availability of an identifiable key visual; clear use of both verbal and visual modes; and an explicit or implied call to action. The sample consists of the Swachh Bharat Mission logo, a Pulse Polio poster, Ariel India's #ShareTheLoad visual, Tata Tea's Jaago Re 2.0 key visual, and a Sadak Suraksha Abhiyaan 2026 poster. The sample deliberately includes government communication and corporate cause advertising so that similarities and tensions between civic authority and brand activism can be compared.

The unit of analysis is the campaign key visual or poster as publicly circulated, read alongside official or organisational descriptions of the campaign. The analysis combines three frameworks. First, Barthes's model is used to separate denotation, connotation, and myth. Second, Peirce's categories identify iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. Third, visual social semiotics is used to examine representational, interactive, and compositional meaning, including gaze, distance, colour, salience, framing, typography, and text–image relations (Barthes, 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021; Peirce, 1998). For each case, a coding sheet recorded: (a) literal content; (b) culturally associated meanings; (c) dominant sign types; (d) emotional appeal; (e) the social identity offered to the viewer; (f) the behavioural instruction; and (g) ideological tensions or absences.

To strengthen interpretive credibility, the visual reading was checked against official campaign explanations where available. For example, the Press Information Bureau's explanation of the Swachh Bharat logo confirms the intended connection between Gandhi's spectacles, the national tricolour, and collective effort (Press Information Bureau, 2014). Official sources also provide campaign context for Pulse Polio, #ShareTheLoad, and Jaago Re 2.0 (BBDO, n.d.; Tata Consumer Products, 2017; World Health Organization, 2021). This contextual comparison does not eliminate subjectivity; it makes the relationship between intended meaning and critical interpretation more transparent.

The study has three limitations. It analyses selected still visuals rather than the full moving-image, social-media, and on-ground campaign ecosystems. It identifies preferred meanings but does not test how different audiences actually interpret them. Finally, it cannot establish whether exposure caused behavioural change. Its contribution is therefore analytical: it explains how design makes particular actions, emotions, and identities appear desirable or necessary.

4. Semiotic Analysis of Five Indian Social-Cause Advertisements

The following analyses move from literal description to cultural association, visual grammar, and ideology. The figures are reproduced for scholarly analysis; ownership remains with the respective campaign organisations and publishers.

4.1 Swachh Bharat Mission: Seeing Cleanliness Through Gandhi's Spectacles

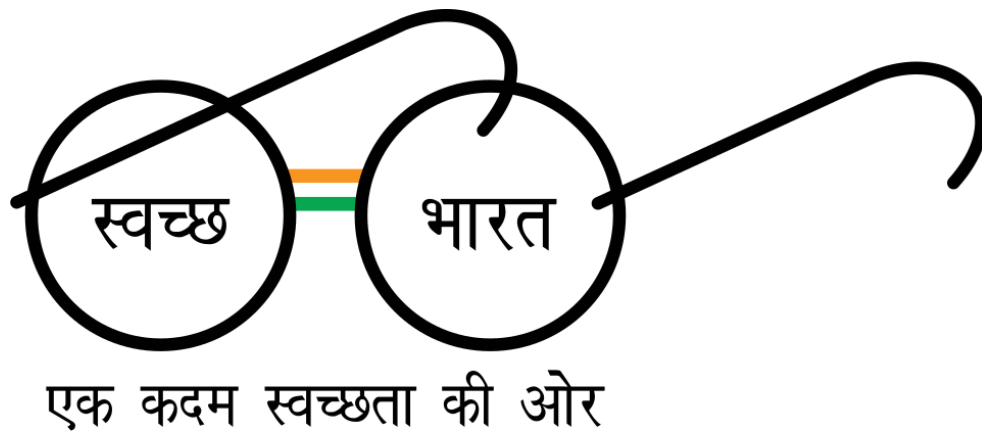


Figure 1. Swachh Bharat Mission logo. Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India (2014).

At the denotative level, the Swachh Bharat mark consists of a simplified pair of round spectacles. The words “Swachh” and “Bharat” occupy the two lenses, the bridge uses the colours of the Indian flag, and the Hindi tagline “Ek Kadam Swachhata Ki Ore” asks for one step towards cleanliness. The design contains no photograph of dirt, sanitation labour, a toilet, or a cleaned street. Instead, it presents a sparse emblem capable of being reproduced across walls, vehicles, documents, dustbins, digital screens, and public events.

The spectacles function iconically because they resemble eyewear and symbolically because Indian viewers are likely to associate their round form with Mahatma Gandhi. The Press Information Bureau explicitly described the bridge in the tricolour as a sign of the nation uniting to realise Gandhi’s vision of a clean India (Press Information Bureau, 2014). This association transforms sanitation from a technical municipal service into a moral-national project. Cleanliness is seen through Gandhi’s eyes, and participation becomes a contemporary continuation of an unfinished ethical task. The logo thus creates a Barthesian myth of civic cleanliness as patriotic self-discipline.

Compositionally, the two equal lenses produce balance, while the central tricolour bridge visually binds “Swachh” to “Bharat.” The eye-like structure also suggests surveillance and self-observation: India is both the object being seen and the collective subject asked to examine itself. The handwritten quality of the tagline softens bureaucratic authority and turns a national mission into a personal invitation. Its phrase “one step” reduces the psychological distance between an enormous public problem and an achievable individual act.

The strength of the design lies in portability, cultural memory, and immediate recognition. Its limitation follows from the same simplicity. By centring voluntary citizen action, the emblem can understate sanitation infrastructure, caste-linked labour, waste systems, local governance, and unequal access to toilets and services. The preferred reading is that every citizen can and should act; a critical reading asks whether equal responsibility is being assigned to people with unequal power and resources.

4.2 Pulse Polio: Care, Repetition, and the Visible Medical Act



Figure 2. Pulse Polio awareness poster. Source: National Health Mission campaign visual; reproduced for scholarly analysis.

The Pulse Polio poster depicts a child receiving oral vaccine drops. A green field carries the Hindi appeal to help make the country polio-free, a brightly coloured droplet announces Polio Day, and the large phrase “Do Boond Har Baar” foregrounds the repeated action of giving two drops every time. Institutional marks and a helpline line anchor the image within the National Health Mission. The visual is informational, but its organisation makes the medical act emotionally legible.

The photograph is an icon of vaccination and an index of physical care: a hand supports the child while another administers the drop. The open mouth and upward gaze make the child visibly dependent on adult action. The coloured droplet is simultaneously iconic, because it resembles liquid, and symbolic, because decades of campaign repetition have made “two drops” a shorthand for polio prevention. Repetition is itself built into the slogan. “Har baar” counters the possible assumption that one encounter is sufficient and converts memory into a behavioural schedule.

Green dominates the poster, connoting health, safety, growth, and official public-service communication. Yellow and magenta supply high salience around the date and slogan. The curved white frame separates the photograph from the information field while visually enclosing the child in a protected zone. Unlike an image built on fear of paralysis, this poster relies on care, reassurance, and practical instruction. The nation is invoked in the opening text, but the decisive action occurs at intimate scale between caregiver, health worker, and child.

The viewer is positioned primarily as a parent or guardian who can protect both the child and the country through compliance. This is a powerful translation of epidemiology into a simple ritual. India introduced the programme in the 1990s and received polio-free certification in 2014 after extensive vaccination and community mobilisation (World Health Organization, 2021). Nevertheless, the poster’s clean biomedical scene cannot represent the logistical labour, local trust-building, vaccine

hesitancy, mobility, or access barriers involved. Its semiotic economy makes action clear, but it leaves the enabling system largely outside the frame.

4.3 Ariel #ShareTheLoad: Domestic Labour as a Test of Equality



Figure 3. Ariel India #ShareTheLoad campaign visual. Source: Ariel/BBDO India.

Ariel's #ShareTheLoad visual shows a woman holding a full laundry basket in front of a washing machine. She turns towards the viewer and meets the camera with a steady, unsmiling gaze. Across her body appears the question, "Do you see me as equal?" The Ariel logo and hashtag sit below. On the literal level, the advertisement joins a familiar product-use situation with an explicit question about gender equality.

Laundry is the central sign. It is iconic as a recognisable household task, indexical as evidence of work waiting to be done, and symbolic as a culturally feminised responsibility. The basket does not merely contain clothes; it materialises the invisible mental and physical load of maintaining a household. The woman's direct gaze creates what Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) call a demand image. She does not offer herself for detached observation. She asks the viewer—implicitly a partner, family member, and consumer—to answer.

The composition intensifies this demand. Her body and the basket occupy the foreground, while the washing machine establishes the product category without becoming the most salient element. The large white question cuts across the scene and interrupts an ordinary domestic image with a moral challenge. Muted olive, beige, and grey tones avoid celebratory advertising brightness; they make the setting feel everyday and slightly heavy. Equality is therefore measured not through abstract agreement but through the distribution of repetitive work.

The campaign, created with BBDO India, has used household chores to frame gender equality for a decade (BBDO, n.d.). Its most effective semiotic move is the conversion of "load" into a double sign: a load of laundry and an unequal social burden. The hashtag makes the imperative shareable and turns the product verb into a public proposition. Yet the campaign also contains a commercial tension. A detergent brand gains moral value by attaching itself to feminist change, and the domestic solution remains organised around consumption. Moreover, the visual still places the woman beside the machine; the man whose behaviour must change is absent. This absence can make the viewer accountable, but it can also preserve the woman as the default visual owner of household labour.

4.4 Tata Tea Jaago Re 2.0: The Alarm as a Metaphor for Pre-Activism



Figure 4. Tata Tea Jaago Re 2.0 key visual. Source: Tata Consumer Products (2017).

The Jaago Re 2.0 key visual centres a large mechanical alarm clock. Inside its face, bold green capital letters state “Alarm Bajne Se Pehle,” while a red brushstroke carries the handwritten “Jaago Re!” The Tata Tea identity sits above the bells, visually joining the product with the act of waking. A broad red stroke crosses a dark green field, creating strong contrast and a sense of interruption.

The alarm clock is an icon of waking and an index of an approaching moment that demands response. At the connotative level, waking becomes political awareness. The campaign extends the familiar tea association—tea helps one wake physically—into a civic claim: the alert citizen should act before crisis becomes tragedy. Tata described this as “pre-activism,” encouraging people to intervene before events rather than react afterwards, with campaigns around women’s safety and sports participation (Tata Consumer Products, 2017). The clock therefore organises time morally. Delay is associated with passivity, while anticipation becomes responsible citizenship.

The design’s typography distributes authority and energy. The condensed capitals inside the clock resemble an official instruction, whereas the handwritten “Jaago Re!” feels urgent, voiced, and participatory. The rough red brushstroke carries associations of warning, protest, and public marking; the dark green background connects the social message to Tata Tea’s established visual identity. The brand is not placed outside the cause. It crowns the clock, implying that commercial and civic awakening can be mutually reinforcing.

The preferred viewer is an informed middle-class citizen who has the agency to sign, pledge, speak, educate, or organise. Compared with the Pulse Polio poster, the call is less behaviourally specific within the visual itself. “Wake before the alarm” is memorable but metaphorical; the actual pathway depends on surrounding campaign material. This openness allows the platform to address multiple issues, but it can also make activism appear as a matter of attitude rather than sustained collective work. The campaign’s semiotic power lies in transforming temporal urgency into a personal ethic, while its limitation is that the metaphor may exceed the concrete action offered.

4.5 Sadak Suraksha Abhiyaan 2026: Overtaking and the Irreversibility of Risk



Figure 5. Sadak Suraksha Abhiyaan 2026 awareness visual. Source: campaign image reproduced by Moneycontrol News (2026).

The road-safety poster shows three cars on a multi-lane road. The central blue vehicle swerves to overtake a red car, leaving dark tyre traces, while a small red warning sign appears above it. A prohibition sign on the left displays merging directional arrows. Above the road, the words “Think Before You OVERTAKE” place “OVERTAKE” in large red capitals, followed by “There’s no rewind on the road.” The Sadak Suraksha Abhiyaan 2026 identity occupies the upper-left corner.

The cars and road operate iconically, while the tyre marks, angled vehicle, and warning symbol are indexes of sudden movement and danger. Red is used conventionally as a symbol of prohibition, risk, and urgency. The most distinctive sign, however, is the word “rewind.” It imports a familiar media-control metaphor into road behaviour. Digital content can be replayed; a collision cannot. This contrast compresses mortality and irreversible consequence into a phrase that is particularly intelligible within a screen-saturated culture.

The visual perspective places the viewer behind the vehicles, approximating a driver’s field of vision. The road lines direct the eye towards the horizon, but the overtaking car disrupts this stable geometry. The design therefore stages risky behaviour as a break from orderly movement. The city skyline is desaturated and distant, allowing the coloured vehicles and red text to dominate. “Think before you” uses a conversational imperative rather than legal language, while the oversized verb makes the risky action impossible to overlook.

The broader 2026 initiative frames road safety as a movement from concern to duty and emphasises everyday responsibility (Moneycontrol News, 2026). The poster is strongest where it links a specific behaviour to a memorable consequence. Unlike general appeals to “drive safely,” it names overtaking and visualises the moment of error. Its limitation is the individualised frame: road design, commercial driving pressures, enforcement, vehicle safety, emergency response, and licensing cultures remain absent. The image communicates that one decision can be fatal, but not that safe mobility is also a systemic design problem.

5. Results of the Semiotic Analysis

Across the five cases, the most consistent finding is the use of a portable central object to condense a large social issue. Gandhi's spectacles stand for a national vision of cleanliness; two vaccine drops stand for repeated protection; a laundry basket stands for unequal domestic labour; an alarm clock stands for anticipatory citizenship; and overtaking stands for irreversible road risk. These objects succeed because they are already familiar. Design does not create their meanings from nothing; it redirects existing cultural knowledge towards a desired action.

A second pattern is the close anchoring of image by language. "Ek Kadam," "Do Boond Har Baar," "Do you see me as equal?," "Alarm Bajne Se Pehle Jaago Re," and "There's no rewind on the road" narrow the range of possible interpretation. The slogans are brief, rhythmic, and organised around verbs. They transform seeing into doing: step, give, share, wake, think. Hindi, English, and hybrid usage also reveal the campaigns' imagined publics. Government health and sanitation messages lean on accessible Hindi and national symbols, while corporate campaigns use English or Hinglish to address media-connected urban audiences.

Third, each design offers a social identity to the viewer. The Swachh Bharat mark calls forth the patriotic citizen; Pulse Polio the protective caregiver; #ShareTheLoad the equal partner; Jaago Re the alert pre-activist; and Sadak Suraksha the disciplined driver. Social change is communicated through subject positions rather than information alone. The viewer is invited to recognise a desirable self and to reject an irresponsible alternative.

Fourth, emotional appeals vary by issue. Swachh Bharat uses reverence and collective pride; Pulse Polio uses care and reassurance; Ariel uses moral discomfort and recognition; Jaago Re uses urgency and aspiration; road safety uses caution and anticipated regret. None of the selected visuals relies primarily on graphic shock. Their persuasion comes from recognisable situations, ethical questioning, and the possibility of immediate agency.

Finally, the cases share an ideological tendency to personalise responsibility. This makes the call to action clear, but it can move institutional conditions outside the frame. The strongest designs are those in which personal action is specific and achievable; the most ethically complete campaigns would connect that action to visible services, collective pathways, and institutional accountability.

Table 1. Comparative summary of semiotic strategies

Campaign	Dominant sign	Preferred identity/action	Principal tension
Swachh Bharat	Gandhi's spectacles and tricolour	Patriotic citizen; take a step towards cleanliness	Individual duty may obscure sanitation systems and labour
Pulse Polio	Two drops and vaccination act	Protective caregiver; repeat immunisation	Simple ritual hides logistical and access conditions
#ShareTheLoad	Laundry as material and social burden	Equal partner; share domestic work	Brand activism and continued feminisation of the scene
Jaago Re 2.0	Alarm clock as civic awakening	Pre-activist; act before crisis	Powerful metaphor but a less specific action in the key visual
Sadak Suraksha	Overtaking and "no rewind"	Disciplined driver; think before overtaking	Driver responsibility foregrounded over systemic road safety

6. Discussion

The findings confirm that design communicates social change by reorganising common signs into moral arguments. The campaigns rarely begin with unfamiliar symbols. Instead, they select objects from public memory and everyday life and make them carry a second level of meaning. Barthes's concept of myth is useful here: cleanliness becomes a continuation of Gandhi's vision, vaccination becomes parental and national care, shared laundry becomes proof of equality, early waking becomes responsible activism, and careful overtaking becomes duty towards life. The desired behaviour is made to appear culturally reasonable and ethically natural rather than merely administratively required.

This naturalisation has practical value. Public communication competes for attention, and a socially complex issue must often be recognised in a glance. The logo, droplet, basket, clock, and traffic sign each provide high mnemonic economy. Their visual form can travel across print, digital media, public spaces, packaging, and events. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) framework helps explain how this economy is organised: central placement establishes conceptual importance; contrast produces salience; direct gaze creates interpersonal demand; and directional lines guide the viewer through a proposed action or consequence.

At the same time, semiotic clarity is not equivalent to social completeness. Social marketing scholarship warns against treating communication as a substitute for enabling environments (Lefebvre, 2013). The Swachh Bharat logo can encourage participation, but sanitation depends on infrastructure, municipal capacity, labour conditions, and waste systems. Pulse Polio's "two drops" is behaviourally precise, yet its success also depended on vast networks of vaccinators, local leaders, surveillance, access, and trust (World Health Organization, 2021). Road safety involves driver choices, but also road engineering, enforcement, licensing, work pressures, and post-crash care. When an advertisement isolates the individual, structural responsibility can become visually invisible.

The corporate cases introduce a related tension. #ShareTheLoad and Jaago Re expand the social vocabulary available to brands. Ariel makes unpaid domestic labour discussable through a mundane product category, while Tata Tea builds a durable platform around civic alertness. These campaigns may generate conversation precisely because commercial media budgets give them reach and production quality. Yet their causes also generate brand distinction. Williamson's (1978) account of advertising is relevant: social values can be transferred to commodities, enabling the product to signify equality or citizenship. A critical reading need not dismiss the campaigns as insincere; it should recognise that social purpose and market value can be produced together.

Representation also deserves attention. The Pulse Polio child is represented through vulnerability and care; the Ariel woman through labour and moral authority; the other designs largely avoid human diversity by relying on symbols and objects. Object-centred design supports broad identification, but it can erase the people who face unequal risks or perform invisible work. Future awareness design should test not only whether a message is memorable but also whose experience it treats as normal, whose labour it recognises, and who is imagined to possess the capacity to act.

From the comparative analysis, four design principles emerge. First, cultural intelligibility: the central sign should be quickly recognisable without depending on a narrow stereotype. Second, behavioural specificity: the viewer should understand what action is requested and when it should occur. Third, ethical representation: fear, guilt, gender, childhood, disability, poverty, and national identity should not be used in ways that stigmatise or oversimplify. Fourth, structural honesty: communication should connect personal responsibility to services, institutions, and collective action. These principles can help designers move beyond awareness as visibility towards communication that supports participation and accountability.

The paper also suggests that evaluation should combine semiotic analysis with audience research and outcome evidence. Semiotics can show how a preferred meaning is built, but audiences may

negotiate it according to language, region, class, age, gender, political orientation, or prior experience (Hall, 1997). A future study could therefore use interviews, focus groups, eye-tracking, or reception analysis to examine whether viewers notice the intended signs, how they interpret responsibility, and whether the call to action feels feasible. Such work would connect the design of meaning with the lived conditions of response.

7. Conclusion

Indian awareness advertisements communicate social change by turning public problems into culturally resonant visual propositions. In the five cases examined, design gives each issue a memorable object, an emotional orientation, a model of the responsible subject, and a verbal instruction. Spectacles, drops, laundry, an alarm, and a road manoeuvre do not simply illustrate sanitation, immunisation, equality, activism, and safety. They organise how these issues should be seen and who should feel answerable for them.

The analysis demonstrates the value of combining Barthes, Peirce, and visual social semiotics. Iconic resemblance makes the situation recognisable; indexical traces imply care, work, time, or danger; symbolic codes connect the message to nation, health, gender, citizenship, and law. Composition and language then establish a preferred reading. The most effective visuals in the sample are not necessarily the most dramatic. They are those that connect a familiar sign to a concrete and memorable action.

However, responsible design must also show awareness of what falls outside the frame. Personal action is essential, but social change is rarely produced by personal intention alone. Campaigns become more ethically persuasive when they acknowledge institutional responsibility, provide accessible pathways for action, and represent affected communities without reducing them to symbols of vulnerability. Social-cause advertising is therefore best understood not as a decorative supplement to policy or activism, but as one part of a wider ecology of services, participation, regulation, and collective meaning-making.

Ultimately, design contributes to social change when it enables people to recognise a problem, locate themselves within it, and imagine an action that is both morally meaningful and practically possible. Semiotic analysis makes that process visible—and also reveals the cultural assumptions and power relations on which its persuasiveness depends.

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