

The gender tradition-transforming power of advertising

 By Leigh Andrews

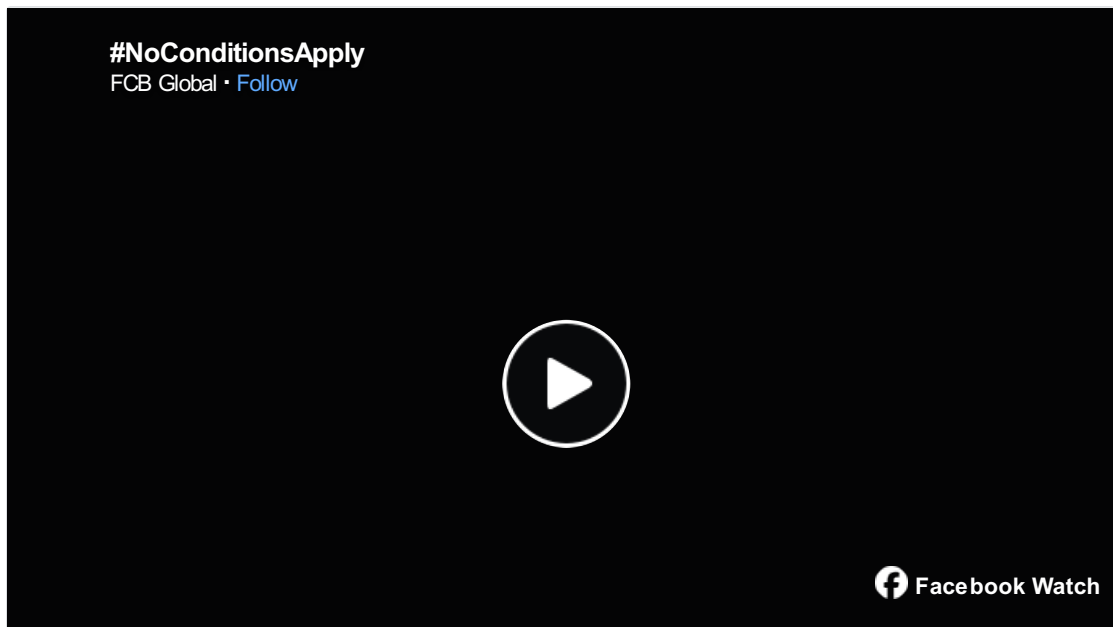
30 Nov 2017

Swati Bhattacharya, CCO of FCB Ulka in India, explains the intricacies of changing a 400-year-old Hindu tradition from one of status-based exclusion into a sisterhood of inclusion through the #NoConditionsApply campaign.

Back in June, FCB held its global leadership conference in Cape Town. Bhattacharya shared at the time that:

“ ... When your workday is a melting pot of peoples and cultures, your storytelling ability becomes more layered, more nuanced and richer. I believe there is no such thing as Chinese pain, Jewish love, Palestinian orgasm, Asian jealousy or African laughter. If we all feel the same things, well, we must be the same. ”

FCB Ulka has since honed in on the divisive nuances within a single culture, when it released the second leg of its #NoConditionsApply campaign across print and across social media platforms for *Times of India*.



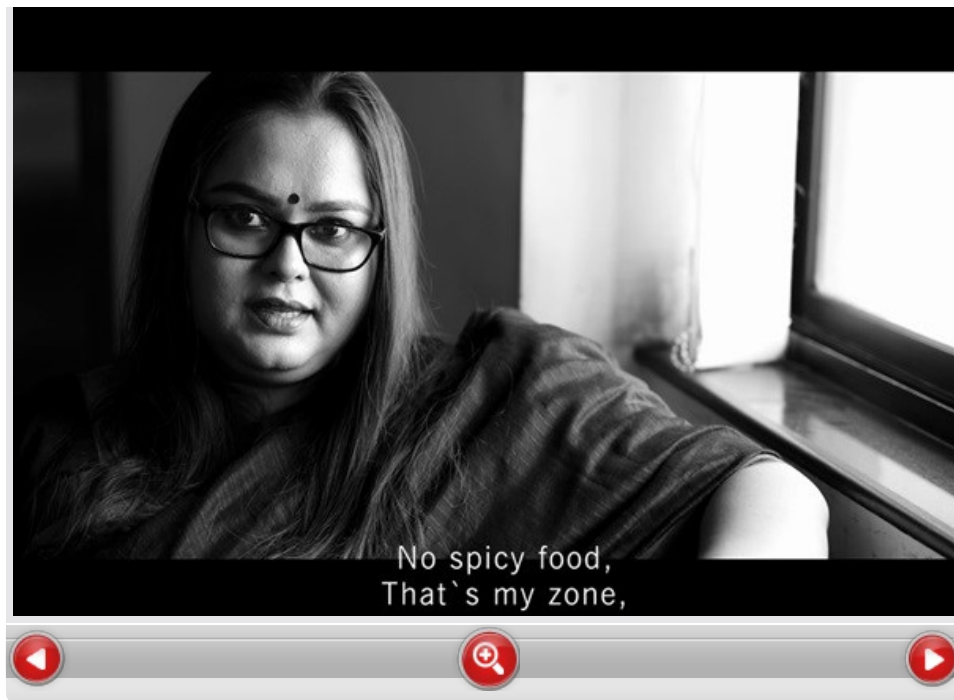
For the past four centuries, the Shindoor Khela ritual - also known as Sindoor or Sundur Khela, has seen married women playfully cover each other with rich red paint on the last day of the annual Durga Puja festival celebrating the warrior goddess, Durga, to both mark and honour their marital status. Now, the agency has flipped the script on the conditions for participating in the custom.

In the new celebration filmed in Kolkata – seen as the mecca of Bengali Hindu culture, as it's where the religious heads reside – all women were celebrated and invited to participate, and to change the symbolism from the traditional single forehead dot to a double dot, thereby doing away with the tradition's 'divisiveness'.



Swati Bhattacharya, CCO of FCB Ulka.

So the single ladies, whether as yet unmarried, divorcees or widows, as well as the gay and transgender community formerly outliers left on the outskirts, were all made to feel part of the sisterhood tradition, and the campaign is told from their perspective.



Bhattacharya says the impact is like what you'd imagine from "holding a gay wedding in the Vatican – it will have more of a meaning for the rest of the world. Every culture can benefit from a closer look, an inclusive story, and hopefully every divisive practice that exists will be questioned and protested."

That's because she feels every progressive, inclusive thought is only as powerful as the ritual it permeates – at least in a country like India, where ritual is everything.



Here are the women - FCB's female dynamos tell it like it is

Leigh Andrews 1 Jun 2017



Sumeli Chatterjee, vice president and head of brand for *Times of India*, comments on the campaign's social significance as follows:

“ #NoConditionsApply is an initiative that is close to our heart and existence. There is a lot of talk about diversity of gender; this highlights the need to have diversity even within the gender. While we have hosted this inclusive Shindoor Khela initiative in Kolkata, the messaging is relevant to every occasion and every festivity. When we talk of gender equity, we cannot limit our conversations to only ambition and opportunities; we need to talk about inclusion in festivals, celebrations and every walk of life, which will allow everyone to walk that step together. No celebration can ever be complete without including one and all. ”

It's an irresistible message. Here, Bhattacharya explains the impact of advertising on society and the challenge of condensing five hours of powerful guerrilla footage into a two-minute package.

■ **Talk us through the current impact of advertising on society and how this has changed over the years.**

Advertising, like art, began by mirroring society, and even today it has the potential to genuinely capture its audience's attention. However, to do that, brands and advertisers need to transcend product functionality and look at the bigger picture.

Intimacy is the true algorithm of creativity, and as advertisers we should know how to forge a closeness with our audience. We need to commit to addressing what is coming in the way of us being humans. We need to commit to forming a deeper

connection. We need to commit to making a genuine difference in people's lives. It is all about unpacking the power of purpose in advertising and in the brand.

■ ***Why is this type of advertising, which moves towards better female empowerment – much like #LikeaGirl and #FearlessGirl – so important?***

As much as 80% of advertising caters to the woman as a consumer, and while we continue to speak to her as a consumer, it's appalling how only a handful of brands genuinely listen to the woman that she is.

This is all the more exasperating when we think about how gender equality and female empowerment have become movements of incredible urgency. Breaking the glass ceiling is a universal emotionality and ambition that women share across the world, and it transcends all geographies and all socioeconomic divides. So if we are not committing to it in some way, we are not only failing our consumers, but also failing humanity.

By listening, by resolving and by genuinely understanding women in their own life, brands can move from being just transactional to being empowering. Women will then move from “we bought something” to “we believe in something.”

■ ***#NoConditionsApply is a moving piece of work. Explain how the widows in the ashram reacted to the invitation to participate.***

The biggest breakdown happened in the ashram. These were the women who had played Shindoor Khela as married women, and then when their husbands died, they had to stop. Not only did they lose their husbands, they suddenly also lost their place in society.

I think that their coming into the fold was too overwhelming, even for them. The transgenders and the prostitutes were a little more wary as to “what does this invitation mean?” They looked at this with a bit of suspicion, which says a lot about how we've been making them feel.

■ ***Definitely. It was so clever to remove the ‘dividing line’ in the symbol for division as a symbol of this movement, also to switch from black-and-white film to colour once the festival begins. Explain the creative work behind this.***

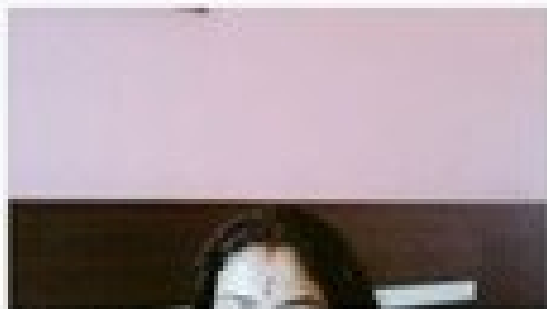
The film wasn't shot with any of the traditional methods that come with shooting an ad. There were 5,000 women that day, and it was so guerrilla that everyone ended up being a cameraman. The film wasn't about controlling reality, but about how much to take out from it. The film was also not about making the shiniest piece of work, it was about capturing the day, as it unfolded. We had about five hours of footage, and to tell all of it in two minutes was really the biggest challenge.

■ ***Explain the importance of social media and the #NoConditionsApply hashtag spreading the message of ‘double-dot selfies’ as part of the campaign's success.***

Social media was really big. The kind of cathartic outpouring, across all links shared, was overwhelming.



Amrita Misra I support the #NoConditionsApply movement. This year during Shindoor Khela I will be having the double dot in place. Dont forget to send in you double dot selfies and show support for including all women in the celebration.



Like · Reply · September 28 at 4:00pm



Ankita Jain Proud to be a part of #NoConditionsApply movement! If you think all women should celebrate Shindoor Khela together, send in your double dot selfies.



Like · Reply · September 29 at 10:57am

[click to enlarge](#)



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A lot of my work is feminist in nature, but seeing 2,500 comments with no negative response was very endearing. People internalised the message and felt that they were now responsible to take it forward. There was also a cumulative guilt, “Why didn’t I get my mum or that aunt who never married to play shindoor khela?” All this was possible because of the discursive nature of social media.

Tweets
5,893

Following
884

Followers
127K

Likes
616

Calcutta
Times

Calcutta Times • @Calcutta_Times · 5h

The students of Rani Birla College are pledging their support. Join the movement & send us ur double dot Shindoor selfie. [#NoConditionsApply](#)



[click to enlarge](#)



[click to enlarge](#)

Strangers from around the country, including people who never knew of such a practice, talked about how beautiful it was. There were so many men who posted on their Twitter with the two dots – it was a pleasant surprise! The part where the leftover vermilion was distributed also played out on social media very powerfully.

❏ ***So much of tradition is based on exclusionary practices like this. Do you think advertising will keep moving towards making the world a better place as we enter 2018?***

Absolutely. I think cultural nuances will be spoken about more openly. Like, motherhood is a biological state, and there are as many kinds of mothers as there are kinds of women. But according to advertising and often to society, motherhood is only one type.

“ Until we show single mothers, divorced mothers, unwed mothers, women who struggle with IVF, we aren't being honest enough. ”

❏ ***How can agencies inspire their clients to be brave and take a chance on honest work like this, going forward?***
There has to come a time where brands need to question whether they're only talking to themselves or whether they are

truly connecting. Because with so many choices now, if you don't have a place in people's hearts, you won't have a place on their shelves.

“ Until and unless what you are really saying is connecting with people, you are just making white noise. ”

Too true – let's hope the world takes note. Click [here](#) for FCB Africa's press office and [here](#) for more of Bhattacharya's views of the role of females in advertising.

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

Leigh Andrews AKA the #MilkshakeQueen, is former Editor-in-Chief: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com, with a passion for issues of diversity, inclusion and equality, and of course, gourmet food and drinks! She can be reached on Twitter at @Leigh_Andrews.

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