INDIA AS AN EMERGING CONSUMER SOCIETY—A CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT
This chapter is a critical analysis of the changing consumer trends in India. The basic argument in the paper is that (a) the changes that we are witnessing in India as a consumer society are very recent and very dramatic, and there are at least a dozen different factors that seem to contribute to these changes including transformation of basic value systems and family structures, and the recent introduction of new communication technologies, (b) that the changes will continue to occur in equally dramatic terms in the next ten years or so, and (c) there is no single adequate theoretical framework to account for these changes except perhaps such factors as global culturalism, postmodernism, informational capitalism and ethno-cultural transformations under late capitalism.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter focuses on the changing consumer trends in India. The first part of the paper deals with relevant conceptual and theoretical issues, and some broad trends. The second part of the paper introduces some basic themes of current interest using advertising visuals and other presentation material.
The basic argument in the paper is that (a) the changes that we are witnessing in India as a consumer society are very recent and very dramatic, and there are at least a dozen different factors that seem to contribute to these changes, (b) that the changes will continue to occur in equally dramatic terms in the next ten years or so, and (c) there is no single adequate theoretical framework to account for these changes except perhaps such factors as global culturalism, postmodernism, informational capitalism and ethno-cultural transformations under late capitalism.

In this paper we use the term “consumerism” in the way it has been used by cultural theorists and social historians (see Campbell’s 1987 work titled, “The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism”) to represent the tendencies of consumer orientation and not in the sense of an activist movement concerning consumer rights in the market place. Additionally, we use the term “consumer society” in a contemporary sense, consistent with the usage of Fox and Lears (1983), and Marchand (1983) in their socio-historical analyses.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Recent work on consumerism has provided an exposure to various consumer trends in major parts of the world. Research is now in progress regarding developments in different settings, affluent Asian cultures—Japan (Anderson and Wadkins 1991), Korea (Ko and Gentry 1991), and Hong Kong (Tse, Belk and Zhou 1993), developing Asian cultures—India (Joy and Dholakia 1991; Mehta and Belk 1991; Venkatesh 1993), and China (Tse, Belk and Zhou 1993), developing African cultures (Belk 1988), and emerging East European markets—Poland (Witkowski 1993). The general theme pursued in these studies is how these different countries are becoming more and more consumer oriented in the Western sense of the term. The idea is elaborated thematically in great detail by Belk (1988). There has also been much press publicity in the past two years regarding the marketing and consumerist oriented developments in these societies touting them as the emerging major markets ripe for multinational expansion into them (Businessweek, 1993).

In analyzing the developments across these different regions, two approaches can be seen. The first approach points to the commonalities in these developments which warrant generalizations regarding global consumer trends. The other approach emphasizes the peculiarities of each region and reminds us that deep down there are differences in the way consumer trends are unfolding, and, therefore, superficial similarities may hide real cultural differences. We believe that there is some truth in both positions. It is in this context of similarities and differences that the present study on India, which is part of an ongoing research, is being reported.

This study is based on the results of a formal fieldwork conducted by the first author who is an academic researcher, and the professional work experience of the second author who is an advertising executive. The general strategy in this analysis is to combine a “field view” and the “text view” of the current trends in India. First, we introduce some very relevant social, economic and cultural factors that provide a conceptual background to contemporary India. In the second section, we focus on some theoretical issues that are relevant to global consumerism and suggest that the consumer oriented developments in India are part of the world-wide consumer movement. In the third and final section, we identify the specific factors within the Indian context that account for the consumer oriented trends within the country.

Background Factors About India

Although India, along with many other countries, tends to be viewed as a third world nation with attendant political and economic problems, there is a growing tendency to go beyond the simple economic measures of income and material progress to other characteristics in order to explore many consumer oriented possibilities. Therefore, a balanced view of India is certainly required as an aid to the understanding of these various possibilities. For our purpose, the salient aspects of India that are both challenging and interesting are described briefly in the following:

a. India is multilingual, that is, it has 15 major languages and 11 non-comparable scripts. See for example, a currency note from India (Figure 1) which shows all the different languages.

Figure 1. A Fifty Rupee Currency Note Depicting 15 Languages and 11 Non-comparable scripts.
For consumer researchers and practitioners, multi-lingualism presents some challenging issues of translation, semantic representation in advertising and package design. Even for consumers, the semantic differences create problems of meaning and comprehension. In Figures 2-5 we have different sets of ads in different languages, English, Tamil and Hindi. Here, the question is, what elements constitute the controlling language and semantic representation?

b. India is multi-cultural. (Here, following Maus, an Indianist himself, we have to emphasize that India is culturally diverse but not culturally heterogeneous (Dumont 1986, p. xiv)). This means that various practices relating to food, clothing, the use of symbolic forms, and rituals have regional as well sub-cultural variations, while they also have many common threads both at the religio-social and semantic levels.

As before, the question here is, what cultural symbols are appropriate given that differences exist across cultural and linguistic divides within India? For example, in India, the bridal colors vary from one region to another, it is red in Tamil Nadu, white in Andhra and so forth. In the north of India, women wear veils and in the South they do not (Mandelbaum 1988) (see Figure 6 showing two brides, one from the North (UP or Punjab with veil) and South (Karnataka or Maharashtra, without veil)). Also, this wearing of the veil differs among castes. So one can see various possibilities in daily practices.

c. Indian society is stratified hierarchically and laterally on the basis of caste. Caste is a social category that is unique to India and cannot be compared to race or class while some of its features may have some resemblance to both of them (Betelle 1991).

Caste differences are very distinct and enter into many practices. At the same time, it is not fashionable to discuss caste and its relevant symbolic forms in public discourse. The question then is, how does one take into account caste differences and still not address them in a direct fashion? In Figure 7, we show how caste is used or ignored in matrimonial advertisements, where both would-be brides and bride-grooms are seeking marriage partners.

d. India is multi-religious. The majority (82 percent) are Hindus, followed by Muslims (12 percent), and Christians (4 percent). The rest include Sikhs, Buddhists and Parsis. Religious strife in India has been historically confined to Hindus and Muslims although the recent conflicts involving Sikhs have widened its scope. Although religious symbols are not frequently used, it is not uncommon to find them in the ads (see Figure 8).

Religion is a very important force in India, it has been so in the past and continues to be so now. Many social theorists believe that it is the religious presence that has given India its vitality and essentialism ever since the dawn of its history and, in fact, has never declined as a powerful force of life (Basham 1976, 494-495).

e. India is witnessing some of the most significant changes in the economic and social status of women. The attitudes of women with respect to marriage.
Figure 3. *India Today* English and Tamil versions.

Figure 4. Vicco—Product based on indigenous Ayurvedic Medicine
(Ads in English and Tamil—Translations)
Figure 5. Sunilk—English and Tamil
(Ads are Different, copy different)

Figure 6. Brides of India. Some wear veils (Northern States—UP, Punjab, Rajasthan etc.,) and some don’t.
(South and Central—Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Andhra, Kerala etc.,)
Figure 7. Matrimonial Ads some with caste restrictions and some without. (Notice how caste is stressed more in the case of ads seeking grooms than brides.)

Figure 8. A Religious icon (Sri Rama) shown in ad for Capital Bonds.

career, and their roles in the family and society are undergoing radical changes
and there is considerable literature describing these changes (Liddle and Joshi
1986; Sharma 1986; Wadley 1977). The changing roles of women is
accompounded by similar changes in the family structure and household systems
(Saradamoni 1992). The consumer implications of these changes will be
discussed in the later sections of this paper.

f. The clash between traditionalism and modernism, or the blending of the
two, is a perennial theme that one discovers while studying India, and is played
out in different ways depending on the social and historical contexts. From an etic point of view, one can find Indians who are traditional, or modern, or progressive, or even Westernized, or some combination thereof (Chakrabarty 1991; Srinivas 1967). From an emic point of view, similar labels are used by Indians to describe themselves, although the term “Westernized” seems the least favored (based on personal interviews). Indians use a combination of this terminology, to represent the notion that on some aspects of their lives, they are modern, while on some other aspects, they are quite traditional. Among many middle-class Indians this ontological tension exists regardless of age or gender, signifying the fear of a possible loss of cultural identity in moving away from their imagined notions of Indianness. Figure 10 has some print ads showing how consumers are represented in a combination of traditional and modern values.

g. One also has to examine India in terms of what may be called the “development imperatives.” Borrowing from the traditional notions of development, the post-independent Indian government formulated a series of plans to get India up to speed in terms of six major areas of public concern, food, clothing, shelter, education, health/hygiene and transportation (D’Souza 1990). Using a socialist mixed economy and combining it with the idea of a welfare state, Indian polity attempted to ensure minimum conditions of life across all these categories, but has not succeeded. There have been eight five-year plans that have gone into formulation since India gained independence in 1947. Many of these planned growth targets were never achieved and India remains very inadequate on many dimensions. A major reason for this is the Byzantine political system and colonial bureaucratic apparatus which have left many parts of the country underdeveloped. There is also the view that the development theories as postulated within the context of Western-liberal democratic ideals are completely misplaced in a country like India.

h. In terms of the contemporary power structure based on political, social and economic means, but leaving the caste aside for a moment, we describe India as a six-layered society. The layers can be discussed in descending order within the power structure. The first layer, which consists of politicians who have been considered to be corrupt and incapable of providing a moral leadership to the people of the country. The second layer includes bureaucrats and civil servants who have been described as inefficient and helpless at the same time, and are subservient to the political machinery. The third layer includes the affluent, the industrial leaders and major land owners. This is the traditional economically privileged class which since the days of independence has supported (and sometimes clashed with) the political system. It controls the financial resources of the country. The fourth layer includes a variety of groups, the salaried middle class, professionals (lawyers, doctors, business managers, some bureaucrats, etc.), small entrepreneurs, educationists and the like. It is this layer that is most significant from the point of view of social change. The changing values within the Indian context that are having an impact on the rest of the society seem to find most resonance in this class of people. People in this category succeed in being very ambitious, work very hard, and want to improve their financial condition. We regard this category of people most important for studying the changing consumer culture. The fifth layer consists of low income people who can barely meet their daily needs, and lead a life of economic struggle. Their aspirational levels are also on the rise leading to a consumer revolution on many fronts. The sixth layer consists of the destitute and poor and is really the most unfortunate segment of the society, untouched by many governmental or social reforms and living on the margins.

We would like to argue that almost all the ads presented in Figures 2 thru 5 represent middle-class consumers (layer 4) and their values.

B. Indian Cultural Ethos

From the point of view of a study of consumer culture, we need to recognize that “caste” (the term was originally coined by the Portuguese—the Sanskrit word is Varṇa) represents the quintessential social category, while “renunciation” (l’evader de la vie) best exemplifies the basic cultural value, whether practiced or not. As Dumont (1980) and Madan (1987) point out, caste and renunciation are antithetical though complementary. Caste is based on the doctrine of “karma” which assigns to an individual his/her life position and duties thereof, the enjoyment of privileges that go with it, while renunciation is the annulment of material pleasure-seeking and the abandonment of even familial ties and responsibilities. Superficially, these terms are contradictory, and in actual practice, one is not expected to renounce anything until he fulfills all the obligations of his position. However, as Dumont suggests (1980, 186), these two have become complementary and not merely contradictory, for while caste has become the universal social institution in Indian society, renunciation has become the universal cultural value. This opposition between one’s position in life and a cultural value represented by renunciation is crucial to the understanding of human behavior in the Indian context. We use two terms to describe this situation, “bhogin” (the enjoyer or the sensualist), and “yogin” (the renouncer, the wise-person). Indian cultural ethos swings from one to the other and we feel that the Indian consumer ethos is also caught between these two positions. It seems that the rung of the current consumer climate in India is that one can be a bhogin and a yogin at the same time. As a footnote, we are aware that in many cultures these two positions exist (e.g. asceticism and hedonism), as is particularly the case with Protestant work ethic and the consumption ethic (Campbell 1987; McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb 1982; Weber 1930).
C. India as a Consumer Society—Some General Issues

To attach the label consumer society to India begs some questions. What is a consumer society, and why now—as if to say that there was no consumption in India prior to the recent history or that there were no consumers to speak of. We use the term “consumer society” in a contemporary sense.

What constitutes a consumer society is difficult to define but perhaps easier to describe. India has always been known for centuries for its trade, exotic markets and bazaars (Subrahmanym 1990). However, until the European penetration, the market structure in India showed no evidence of being a “spatially sophisticated economy with production and consumption zones” that characterize modern industrial economies. In the colonial period that coincided with the industrial revolution, India was basically a primary goods producing economy and most consumer outlets were small distribution centers for indigenous products. It is only after independence that India began to develop as a major consumer economy and only recently that many aspects of consumerism have begun to surface with remarkable ease and diffusion.

We describe a consumer society as one where the discourse and practices of consumerism enter the dominant ethos of life, where consumer products—personal, domestic and others—are marketed through a variety of organized shopping outlets, where advertising is not only an informational system but becomes an active cultural medium and an agent of change, where social status begins to be defined by one’s goods and his/her standing as a consumer, where people’s fantasies about possessions seem to be realizable, where consumption becomes a socially sanctioned activity, where business personalities begin to appear as celebrities in social contexts, and where branding of products becomes the means by which marketing accomplishes its goals.

There are two basic ways in which the issue of rising consumerism in India can be handled. One is to examine the philosophical and cultural positions of the social order in which consumerism takes place and the other is to examine the various practices (everyday practices) that point to the notion of consumerism. We hope it is evident that we have attempted to do both in this paper. In the Western discourse, the broad philosophical and historical notions of consumerism have been captured in the works of different categories of thinkers and writers, (a) social critics who may be considered modernists, such as Veblen and Galbraith; (b) social historians, Campbell, McKendrick, Schudson, Marchand; (c) cultural theorists and critics who may be considered late modernists, Ewen, Leiss, Jhally, McLuhan, Adorno, and Horkheimer, whose writings reflect a combination of Marxism and Critical Theory; and (d) the postmodernists who include Jameson, Baudrillard, Lyotard, Poster, among others. As opposed to the broad philosophical and cultural level, the works of Braudel, Marchand, Lefebvre and de Certeau are in the nature of studies that describe everyday life patterns. The challenge facing any body

writing about contemporary India is, which of these perspectives or which combination of these perspectives would be appropriate? Another question is, are there any perspectives outside these four? There are indeed some modernist and postmodernist elements in the Indian consumer revolution. Then there are what Marriott (1990) calls ethno-socio-cultural elements which give rise to cultural categories generated within the Indian dynamic. All of these perspectives seem applicable in trying to examine the consumer culture in India. These can be seen both from the supply side and the demand side of the economy. From the supply side, we have the role of market economy, the rise of consumer marketing, the entry of multi-national corporations, and the emergence of a new managerial class. From the demand side, we have the rising expectations of the consumers, the rising incomes of the middle class, the changing tastes of younger generation and the generally more tolerant view of consumption, the disenchantment with the socialist controlled economy at almost every level of the society. Then at the micro, everyday level there are a lot of practices that are very consumer and marketing oriented. We refer to the indigenous cultural practices, rituals and value enactments that are very specific to different regions of India. In our presentation there is reference to all of these multiple dimensions, both macro and micro.

D. Indian Consumerism as a Part of Global Consumerism

The world is witnessing today a new form of human being called the consumer. The consumer is to the current global context as a citizen has been to a nation. The rights and privileges of citizen are confined to one’s political boundaries. Beyond the political system, one is a guest and does not have any special powers or privileges. On the other hand, one can be a consumer whether inside one’s country or outside, and enjoy similar rights. The ability to be a consumer even outside one’s traditional boundaries, and the ease with which one is able to realize this position is what we call the postmodern consumer development. Just as the eighteenth-century political thought gave rise to a political entity called the “citizen,” who was given rights to vote, elect his/her representatives and participate in the political process, the contemporary form of human participation is not so much in the political process but in the consumption process. Thus the emerging entity today can be called the global consumer. The consumer’s rights exercised through participation in the exchange process are a part of what Baudrillard (1981) calls the political economy of the sign. The consumer’s fulfillment and spiritual upliftment seems to come from this participation, where one controls one’s destiny by accessing the products from all over the world, where aspirations are distributed over products from all over the world. Obviously, not all consumers have this power invested in them to acquire products that are produced globally. Just as the political citizen of the nineteenth-century is an illusion because he or she never
participates in the daily political process and only does so in theory, and yet
the image survives, the postmodern consumer does not have to acquire the
products, nor need to have the means to acquire them. All that is needed is
the image, that is, the image of accessibility to these various products, and this
image is created through advertising (Firat and Venkatesh 1993, Venkatesh
1992). So consumer culture has really become a globalized culture of consumer
images, the representation of symbolic processes for consumers to participate
across extra-national boundaries.

How does India fit into these overall patterns of global consumerism. We
refer to the tremendous economic consumption oriented energy coming from
a number of Indians traveling abroad, a number of families whose members
are employed in the middle-east, Africa, Europe, and the United States. They
represent various castes and social class groupings in India and must be
considered change agents with respect to the acquisition of new consumer
tastes. They are able to enjoy the fruits of consumerism in their new
environments, and being mobile, they bring back their own experiences and
share them with their relatives and friends in India. This new emerging
consumer class can be called “traveling consumers” who include immigrants,
tourists, workers, professionals, and the residual group of parents, relatives
and friends, who travel abroad on vacation and visit their kith and kin. These
are certainly not the type of stable consumers who have lived in their
environments for a long periods of time.

For residents within India, who may not travel abroad, global consumerism
is also rendered possible by the diffusion of satellite and communications
technology, and their exposure to international advertising for the latest
products on various cable TV channels, CNN, BBC, MTV and the like. The
global participation is further enhanced by a familiarity with English, the
universal language of the late twentieth century commerce and culture. Not
far behind these forces are the proliferation of local media within India and
their marketing activism.

Specific Factors That Account for Indian Consumerism

We have identified 13 different factors to describe India as an emerging
consumer society. Some of them have been either discussed or alluded to in
the earlier sections. These factors are not to be considered exhaustive, as
they are representative of the movement of India towards a consumer oriented
society. The factors are:

- Burgeoning middle class, its changing values and pent-up consumer
demand,
- Changing women’s roles, their labor participation and the changing
structure of the family,
- Rising consumer aspirations and expectations across many segments of
the population,
- Increased consumer spending on luxury items aided by past savings and
the introduction of the credit system,
- New types of shopping environments and outlets,
- Media proliferation, satellite and cable TV, and the thriving film
industry,
- Media sophistication and familiarity with English language among
media people and a wide segment of the population,
- High degree of consumer awareness and sophistication across different
segments,
- The emergence of traveling Indian consumers—immigrants in United
States and England, overseas workers, tourists, professionals and their
exposure to world-wide consumer products,
- Strong domestic consumer goods manufacturing sector,
- Resurfacing of hedonistic cultural elements after centuries of dormant
state,
- Entry of multi-national corporations into India, and
- The emergence of the rural consumer sector.

The size and the economic strength of the Indian middle class has received
much attention both within India and in foreign press. The estimates of its size
vary anywhere between 200 and 250 million people with an ability to afford many
standard consumer goods, if not luxury items. An interesting aspect of the middle
class is that its median age is lower than in most Western countries, as is the
case with many third-world countries, thus suggesting the potential for rapid
growth in income generation and wealth accumulation. Because of a number of
economic, cultural and social/family factors, the savings rate of the middle
class has been slightly on the higher side. Among the economic factors, we include
various government schemes for savings, the availability of a limited number of
brands in consumer markets, and the emphasis on utilitarian goods rather than
symbolic goods. In the cultural factors, we include those norms that discourage
borrowing and spending within one’s means. We also include conservatism in
clothing, fashion, and physical appearance, and general disciplining of body and
mind. In the social/family factors are included the joint family system where
resources are pooled and assets are shared to minimize purchases of multiple
items of the same products. Many of these traditional features are now
undergoing change. Families are becoming more nucleated and the so-called
middle class cultural norms are undergoing major transformation.

Many women, especially in the urban areas, are getting educated and are
entering professional or career oriented jobs once reserved for men. There is
a rapid increase of women in the labor force. Women’s income has now been
recognized as a major factor in the creation of family’s wealth. Women
magazines have multiplied in unbelievable numbers both on terms of different
languages and for different role groups (see Figure 9 for sample magazines in English, Hindi and Tamil). Women are independent across many dimensions, in transportation, career choices, marriages, in family responsibilities. Recent advertising aimed at women recognizes these changing roles, yet the pull toward maintaining traditions remains quite strong among Indians (Figure 10). This tension between developing a more progressive element and maintaining what is desirable and acceptable within the traditional context is never more evident than in the case of the changing women's roles.

In another article (Venkatesh 1993), one of the present authors has shown how the play of gender roles in contemporary India is marked by this tension.

Another indicator which attests to the emergence of consumerism is the rising consumer aspirations and expectations across many segments of the population. A large part of this has been possible because of the profusion of popular magazines and the entrenchedness of electronic media and cinema verite. Changing consumerism depends on how individuals and families, as members of society, express their desire for consumer products that have both a utilitarian and symbolic value. Consumers want better products in the sense of better performing products. These are being expressed in India in the following way.

There is a demand for a number of household appliances. The concept of a modern home both as a physical space and symbolic space has not been a generally accepted theme in the Indian cultural context until recently, although traditional physical spaces have always projected very high symbolic meanings of their own. With the rise of the population, the emergence of nuclear families, and a growth in family incomes, more Indians are opting for separate, independent households. The problem of urban space is so acute that land developers and architects have to come up with innovative schemes and new buildings to meet this demand. In a number of urban communities, older homes are being torn down giving way to multi-apartment or high-rise complexes. These apartments are being built by professional architects who are exposed to many Western ideas of use of space and construction materials. Thus one can see many modern style apartments with many gadgets and appliances.

Symbolically (based on personal interviews), for many Indians products represent a hierarchy of positions and meanings. Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Cultural Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A motorized transportation</td>
<td>Family mobility, independence, social status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A refrigerator, cooking range, washing machine</td>
<td>Social status, Modernization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fashion clothing</td>
<td>Cultural distinction, participation in global consumerism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grooming products</td>
<td>Sexual attractiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television</td>
<td>Access to Indian culture as well as global culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian arts and crafts</td>
<td>Preservation of Indianness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 9. A sample of Women's magazines*
For a number of Indians, the participation in a consumer society means becoming more modernized or Westernized in dress, food, and in the use of many grooming products and cosmetics. While showing such preferences, Indians are also conscious of Indianizing their experiences, for too much Westernizing means giving up their unique cultural identity. Consequently, we are witnessing an interesting development of what might be called an Indian version of modernization. Western ideas and products are adopted with an Indian twist as can be seen in many commercials and print ads.

Historically, Indian tradition allowed for hedonism in various aspects of life. The Hindu religious texts are full of descriptions of goddesses and gods whose physical appearance has been a major subject of textual description. In this respect, Indian culture presents a seeming contradiction to the Western eye. First, there is an asceticism of the East which seems to suggest that all material possessions and goods are to be avoided. At the same time, Indian culture is known for its joviality and eroticism. Normally, these seem to stand in opposition to each other. The reason why they seem to stand in opposition to each other is because in the modernist West, the body and mind are separated, the body being considered inferior to the mind. In Indian thought, such dualisms exist but not in any antagonistic way. Contemplation of the human form in Indian culture is as important as contemplating spiritual forms (see seventh century Sanskrit religious work of Sankara, Soudaryalahari - trans., The Ocean of Beauty). The exploitation of erotic themes, both in the electronic and print media have a liberatory appeal to them arising out of new sensibilities. First, the younger generation no longer feels compelled to obey traditional authorities on these matters. This is particularly true of women whose exposure to Western media combined with their search for Indian cultural norms/forms of the past has given them a certain amount of legitimacy and cultural pride in these matters.

A second aspect of this movement toward consumerism relates to brand proliferations and market choices. Several multinational corporations have entered the Indian market to sell their wares (see Figure 11 for a sample of ads by multinationals). The locus of marketing is the brand. Recent studies on brand equity suggest that the central focus of marketing is the establishment of brand identity both as a competitive weapon as well as a semiotic tool. The traditional use of brand as a competitive weapon is too well known to bear any repetition here. What is important, however, is that in this age of electronic symbolism the brand assumes the role of a semiotic symbol. Brands generate meanings and with meanings begin the symbolic processes. Indian ethos is highly semiotically oriented and the concepts of brand identity and iconic images of brands find a fertile soil in Indian marketing conditions. Ironically, it seems to require more of an effort to talk about iconic forms of brands in Western Protestant cultures where religious icons are totally absent and grave images are considered in very negative terms. Not so in India. In the Indian
religio-cultural context, the symbolism of an icon whether it be a religious idol or a mere secular symbol finds a natural expression in the image oriented traditions of India. In this sense, the brand symbolism in India becomes truly postmodernistic.

The Indian consumer is also becoming extremely sophisticated. In a culture that is full of ironies and ironies, the subtleties of modern advertising and consumer consciousness run quite deep. Thus for example, the Indian rural consumer who may look illiterate in a modernistic sense because he/she cannot read or write has no difficulty in negotiating symbols that appear in TV advertising. Since advertising primarily depends on visual imagery, it requires a certain degree of sophistication in the analysis and understanding of symbols. Indian consumers are accustomed to dealing with symbols whether or not they have the facility for textual reading or writing. Of course, those that can read and write have a double advantage because they are equally comfortable with negotiating visual as well as written symbolic forms.

![Three steps to your dream house.](image)

![Now, a distinctive housing scheme from Unit Trust.](image)

*Figure 12.* Credit is the fuel that moves the Capitalistic economic machine

The modern capitalist consumer system thrives on credit. Credit is the fuel that makes the economy run. Without credit, consumers will be unable to participate in the modern consumer economy. Credit is also necessary for marketers to promote their products, to make sure that all their productive energies are well spent. The concept of Fordism is well known in this regard. Through a number of financial institutions and direct retail financing, consumers are able to expand their purchasing capacities which are used to buy mostly luxuries (Figure 12). What is a luxury is relative to one's economic means. So for example, a poor laborer may find a TV a luxury from the point of view of financial investment but a total necessity from the point of view of entertainment and social status.

The growing recognition of the rural sector by consumer marketers is a testimony to the power of this sector and to the fact that there are two pulses beating in India, the urban and the rural. Mahatma Gandhi, the freedom fighter (no relative of Indira Gandhi—in fact they are not even from the same caste), maintained that India is really its 500,000 villages. To a large extent, historical factors have perpetuated these two distinct sectors of life both as economic and cultural dichotomies. The colonial rule of the British did not have much impact on the rural life of India except when it came to the collection of land revenues. The villages were left behind in many aspects of development and depending upon one's perspective, one might say that it is just as well because the villages have maintained a certain ecological balance both as economic and social organizations. Since independence, various reforms have been attempted in villages to develop them economically and culturally. Close to 70 percent of the population lives in the rural sectors which depend mostly on agriculture. In recent years, rural households have begun to show some structural changes resulting from modernized agricultural methods of production, income and wealth concentration and expansion, as well as male migration to urban areas. Generally, there is turbulence in the rural sector. One development of much relevance to us here is the recognition that the rural sector represents a giant market for consumer goods. With the arrival of TV into the villages, accompanied by television advertising, and the diffusion of Indian cinema into the rural sectors, villagers are becoming exposed to consumer environments and products hitherto unheard of. In those villages which have witnessed economic boom, villagers have more discretionary income and are real targets for hundreds of consumer products. Table I gives a picture of the rural sector in comparison with the urban sector on selected products. As can be seen from the table, rural sector dominates in basic household products such as radios, bicycles, mechanical watches, cooking oil, tooth paste and cigarettes. The urban sector is much stronger in many modern consumer products such as color TVs, kitchen appliances, quartz watches, tea, soaps, cosmetics and so forth. One can never speak of consumer revolution in India without making reference to the transformation of the village life.
Table 1. Rural Vs. Urban Market Share For Selective Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanical Watches, Radios, Bicycles, Cigarettes</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing Cakes, Cooking Oil, Tooth Paste</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table Fans, Sewing Machines, Motor Cycles, Tea, Soaps, Leather Footwear</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quartz Watches, Ceiling Fans, B&amp;W TVs, Mopeds, Cassette Recorders, Biscuits, Confectioneries</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure Cookers, Electric Stoves, Coffee, Tea, Electric Bulbs</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scooters, Fans, Blenders, Cold Creams, Suitcases, Fancy Leather Ware</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color-Televisions, Refrigerators, Western Style Cosmetics, Fragrances, Fashion Clothing</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Population Distribution)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (Business India, October 1992)

VISUAL MATERIAL AND EXAMPLES

Ogilvy and Mather (O&M) from whose commercials these examples are drawn, is a multinational advertising agency operating in 35 different countries. In India, it is the third largest advertising agency. It handles a variety of products—detergents, skin-care creams and lotions, coffee, tea, automobiles and automobile products, paints, cooking products, banking and financial services, hotels and resorts.

O&M positions most of its consumer products to the growing middle class, which has been identified as managers, professionals, housewives, government officials, traders, shopkeepers, technicians, children of all ages, and rural agriculturists.

India is beginning to catch up with the great wave of consumerism that has flowed over from other post-colonial Asian societies such as Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Philippines. Since we are the world's largest democracy, it should follow that we should have an enormous market for consumer products. But the large population, a lack of funds, part-socialist politics along with old value systems have held the country back all these years. On the other hand, it has helped India develop her own consumer products industry. Among other things, India makes its own automobiles, machinery, TVs and stereo systems, kitchenware, household appliances, cosmetics, and leather ware. What India needs in terms of its basic products and luxuries it makes. There are, of course, several foreign brands, but for every Honda two-wheeler, there are several other Indian makes, and for every Oil of Olay, there are Indian-made skin lotions.

The consumer revolution began in the 1980s when India's former prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi, a British educated, youngish man of about forty, loosened restrictions on industrial activity, giving impetus to India's first big burst of consumerism. A whole generation of educated Indians, like Rajiv had traveled abroad, seen the world, created a hunger for material life, and increased the purchasing power of many middle-class Indians. If they did not have ready money, then banks were now ready to lend. The idea of hire-purchase, which was unthinkable as recently as 20 years ago, became the norm. This young group spearheaded India's first consumer movement— which continues relentlessly. Today, about 80 percent of India's population is under 40 years.

In 1982, came color television giving rise to ready-made entertainment in the home. In a country which produces the largest number of feature films in multiple languages, where cinema can reach the remotest village providing cheap and addictive form of entertainment, where movie stars are elected officials, and where even temples are constructed for some of them (1), the coming of entertainment into the home had a magical effect. TV suddenly became the medium and could reach more people than the printed word had ever done. In a land where literacy is uneven and low (some parts of India do enjoy very high rates of literacy), the impact of TV was dramatic, for all that it required was visual literacy, and it was much more intimate than cinema. Varied programming offered reach to different kinds of audience, men, women, and children, urban and rural. The emergence of a large cash economy in the agriculture sector also created rural demand and promoted consumption.

More and more foreign collaborations have been approved by the government over the last few years resulting in sophisticated marketing techniques and advertising.

Here are some examples from Indian television advertising.

**Traditional Market Segments**

Three traditional target groups in Indian marketing are identified here. This classification has lasted since the early 1960s to the 1980s, and to some extent exists even today in some markets.

Here is a commercial for a brand of scooters (Brand name - Bajaj) which gives a picture of a proud and happy member of the middle class.

1. TV Commercial presentation for Hamara Bajaj

   (Language: Hindi. Trans: Our Bajaj)
Indian as an Emerging Consumer Society

The Sociologically “Conditioned” Female Consumer

The consumer as a wife, providing emotional support and partnership to her husband.

3. TV Commercial presentation for washing detergent
   (Brand names—Wheel and Top Star), tea (Brand—Lipton)
   The consumer as a daughter-in-law, preserve/protector of traditional values.

4. TV Commercial presentation for a food ingredient, Channa Masala,
   (Brand name—Everest), Pressure Cooker (Brand name—Prestige) and
dergent (Brand name—Ariel)
The consumer as a mother, the nurturer.

5. TV Commercial presentation for various children’s food products;
   protein drink (Brand name—Maltova), noodles (Brand name—Maggi)

The Newly-rich Urban Indians

The Indian male or female who has either traveled abroad and returned with
new tastes and insights, or is a home-grown product who has acquired the
necessary sophistication and tastes.

The new thinking man, young adult, single or married.

6. TV Commercial presentation for Men’s clothing (Brand name—
   Raymonds)

7. Greeting cards targeted to men (Brand name—Archie’s)
   The consumer as a thinking woman, a self-achiever, single or married.
   Vocal about what she wants, confident in herself but not a feminist (as the
term is popularly understood), yet. She is presented as a role model for any
upper middle class woman or women with aspirations.

8. TV Commercial presentations for a cosmetic product
   (Brand name—Lakme moisturizer), and a refrigerator (Kelvinator)
She is no longer unidimensional. She may be a wife, mother or girl friend
but she is now conscious of her individual persona. The boom in women’s
beauty-care products also shows that she has none of the earlier guilt about
spending money on herself.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1991, India acquired access to the 24 hour multi-channel satellite network,
Star TV, from Hong Kong. It offers BBC, American Soap Operas, talk shows,
comedies, international sports and MTV round the clock. The Indians no
longer need to go abroad to compare and question their lifestyles. The world
has come into the living room, making the consumer more restless and
acquisitive than ever before.
And, then, most recently, the Indian government delivered a new finance budget which further lowers the barriers to consumption. For the first time in memory, taxes have been reduced and prices have dropped. The government has cleared 1,520 foreign collaborations within the last 18 months. In the short term, the Indian consumer may feel wonderfully hefty. All these trends suggest that India is emerging as a modern consumer society, on par with more established Western nations. On the other hand, these tendencies also mean structural changes that can be quite fundamental. It remains to be seen if these changes bring long term prosperity without affecting the core values of an established culture.

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REFERENCES


