

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH IN COMMERCE, ECONOMICS & MANAGEMENT

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**CONSUMPTION TO CONSUMERISM-EFFECTS AND IMPACTS**

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**TRIVANDRUM**

**ABSTRACT**

*In this paper a general attempt has been made to elucidate the effects of consumerism on Indian society. It also tries to highlight the driving forces that motivate the ever increasing trend of impulsive consumption. An attempt has also been made to conceptualize the idea of green consumerism in the context of current environmental crisis. Economic Development of any country is based on consumers as the whole economy revolves around them. They are the basis for building of the economy and responsible for the transformation of resources in the productive things. They are also responsible for the production of good and services which are the index of economic growth. Thus consumers are the wheels of the chariot of the economy and they are the kings of the market. Now the purchasing power of the consumers throughout the world has gone up to many fold since last two to three decades. The families spend adequate portion of their income on consumer goods. Consumerism is manifested in the chronic purchase of new goods and services without the proper valuation of their true needs, durability and the environmental consequences of manufacture. Materialism is one of the end results of consumerism. People are eager to emulate those who are above them in the social hierarchy. The poor strive to imitate the wealthy and the wealthy imitate celebrities and other icons. The celebrity endorsement of products can be seen as evidence of the desire of modern consumers to purchase products partly or solely to emulate people of higher social status. This purchasing behavior may co-exist with an image of oneself as being an individual. Eventhough consumerism can enhance the material prosperity of a society, it can have some detrimental effects too.*

**KEYWORDS**

Conspicuous consumption, Consumer, Consumerism. Consumption, Gross Domestic Product.

**INTRODUCTION**

Just as feeding, digestion and growth are the vital processes of living beings, similarly production, consumption and distribution are the essentials of economies. Consumption is considered as the second vital process of an economy next to production. When we use a commodity, we really use its want satisfying quality. When the goods that we purchase satisfy our wants directly and immediately, we can call it as direct consumption. On the other hand, consumption is called indirect or productive when the goods are not meant for final consumption but for producing other goods which will satisfy human wants. On the basis of commodities involved consumption can again be divided in to two categories:- i) food consumption which is the consumption of those goods to meet the needs arising from hunger and thirst and ii) Non-food consumption that relates to satisfaction of health, educational, travel and recreational requirements. Consumption is of vital importance as it is the beginning as well as the end of all economic activities. A man feels desire and then he makes an effort to satisfy it, when the effort has been made the result is the satisfaction of want. Thus want is the beginning and satisfaction is the end of our economic activity. Production, the first vital process of an economy, depends up on consumption. Producer is taking production of a certain good because it is going to be consumed by the consumer. Therefore consumption determines the production. The intensity of consumption of a particular good determines its price in the market. Thus consumption also influences the exchange activity. The existence of exchange in an economy is due to consumption only. Distribution, that is sharing of income to land, labour and capital is influenced by consumption. Consumption indicates standard of living and standard of living determines the efficiency and the efficiency determines the share in national income.

Consumerism is a social and economic order that encourages the purchase of goods and services in ever greater amounts. Sometimes, the term consumerism is often used to refer the economist's movement, consumer protection or consumer activism, which seeks to protect and inform consumers by requiring such practices as honest packaging and advertising, product guarantees and improved safety standards. In this sense it is a movement or a set of policies aimed at regulating the products, services, methods and standards of manufacturers, sellers and advertisers in the interest of the buyer. In Economics, consumerism refers to economic policies placing emphasis on consumption. In an abstract sense it is the belief that the free choice of consumers should dictate the economic structure of a society. Consumerism, on the other hand is the belief that personal happiness is based on the increasing consumption of products. Citizens of consumer countries are subject to advertising that promotes the buying of more and more things, making them feel inadequate unless they buy in.

Consumerism is becoming the hallmark of most world economies. In the West, it is a common phenomenon, but now even developing countries in the world are resorting to it. An economy is judged by the production and selling of goods. The more the volumes of goods are produced and consumed, the higher the growth rate of the economy. The prosperity of a nation is judged by the per capita income of its individuals. In a consumer society with people having sufficient money backing, the question of repair does not arise. They purchase goods, use them and throw them away. Thus new goods when they become old are replaced by newer ones.

**RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY**

India is passing through a phase of unprecedented demographic changes. As per the Census projection report working age population is likely to increase from approximately 58% in 2001 to 64% by 2021 and bulk of this increase is likely to take place in the relatively younger age group of 20-35 years. This trend would make India one of the youngest nations in the world. The fact is that the younger age group is more emulative in nature. Indian economy is also witnessing a rising trend in urbanization, household incomes and population growth that tend to widen India's consumer market. Today India's consumer market ranks 12<sup>th</sup>. By 2025 India's market will be 5<sup>th</sup> largest in the world. Increase in the number of working women, strong domestic consumer goods manufacturing sector, growing middle class, new type of super bazaars and outlets and entry of multinational corporations also provided added incentive for increasing consumer expenditure.

Another remarkable factor that tend to augment the purchase habit is the growth of sunrise sector, that is the food processing and value addition units in Indian economy. These units provide quick access to wide variety of ready to cook and ready to eat items and thereby helps people to diversify their consumption basket. The aforesaid facts will have the capability to enhance and amend household expenditure in favour of highly luxurious items not only at present but in future also. In this scenario the present article that intends to explore the impacts of consumerism seems to be highly significant and a seminal work.

**OBJECTIVES**

1. To examine the historical aspects of the concept of consumerism in the context of India's increasing demographic dividend.
2. To explore the motivating forces behind the rising pattern of India's consumption.
3. To highlight to effect of consumerism on society, economy and environment.
4. To conceptualize the idea of green consumerism.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is explorative in nature and is conducted mainly on the basis of secondary sources. Thus earlier studies and observed facts are more relied on Past studies pertaining to consumption behaviour provide a theoretical underpinning for the preparation of historical aspects of consumerism. This historical backup makes the direct observability of overall spending pattern of consumers more feasible.

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

Need of the human being whether primary or secondary undergo change from time to time in accordance with growth and development of societies. Amazing progress in the realm of science and technology open immense possibilities for gratifying the ever increasing needs of man (MC Cracken 1987: 158). The evolutionary phase of consumption can be traced back to three successive stages -1) subsistence minimum consumption, consumption meant for a comfortable living and finally, consumption to a level where commodities and utilities could create a very comfortable luxurious living. Things once considered luxurious and meant for the consumption of upper crest of societies have turned out be necessities in the third and final stage. Once primary needs are gratified, consumers will seek out the way for gratifying the next level of needs. When a need is fairly well satisfied, a new need emerges and process continues. This is a continuous and never ending process.

Industrial growth and development in many countries accelerated production of goods on a massive scale. It enlarged employment opportunities leading to a rise in Gross Domestic Product and per capita income and thereby provides more disposable income to consumers. Industrial developing also brings about structural transformation of societies and people began to misplace many of their traditional qualities reflecting changes in needs. In this changed socio economic condition, consumption pattern has also achieved new dimensions both in the quantity of things consumed and also in the kind of consumption. Consumption largely meant for secondary needs gained dominance and popularity with a subsequent rise in the number of consumers. Due to increased disposable income people spend relatively larger amount on goods that satisfy their secondary needs became fashionable and widespread. This tendency of consumption is widespread in purchase of cosmetics. Superfine clothing, expensive foot wear, consumer durables, home appliances, electronic gadgets sophisticated using material and others. Consumption of these things that mainly intend to satisfy secondary level needs can be better termed as consumerism. It is a practice of consumption necessitated not entirely by absolute utility considerations but predominantly by aspirations of consumers for a better standard of living and as a means of vertical social mobility.

Consumerism has weak link with the Western world, but in fact an international phenomenon. People purchasing goods and consuming materials over and above their basic needs is as old as the earliest civilizations. A great turn in consumerism arrived just before the Industrial Revolution. In the nineteenth century, capitalist development and the industrial revolution were primarily focused on the capital goods sector and industrial infrastructure. At that time agricultural commodities, essential consumer goods and commercial activities had witnessed much lesser growth compared to capital goods and industrial infrastructure sectors. Moreover little time or money was left for consumer activities because members of working classes worked for long hours for low wages. But the industrial revolution created an unusual economic situation. For the first time in history, products were available in outstanding quantities at outstandingly low prices, being thus available to virtually everyone. So began the era of mass consumption, the only era where the concept of consumerism is applicable. The term consumerism was first used in 1915 to refer the advocacy of rights and interests of consumers (Oxford English Dictionary). The term has also link with concept of conspicuous consumption, implying the irrational and confounding form of economic behavior, originated at the turn of the twentieth century in the writings of sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen. Emulation is also a core component of 21<sup>st</sup> century. As a general trend, regular consumers seek to emulate those who are above them in the society. The tastes, preferences and life styles trickle down to become the standard for all consumers. A consumer can have the instant gratification of purchasing an expensive item to improve social status that is people want to become a snob consumer so as to differentiate themselves from the society.

Luxuries attain excessive importance and are sold more profitably (Friedman, 1973, 166-67). It has also been regarded as a means to enhance social status and prestige. Things consumed today would become obsolete tomorrow. Consumption was prevalent in societies from immemorial. Eminent thinkers like Adam Smith and Rousseau explained the types of consumption aimed at gratifying the aspirations of people other than utility. Adam Smith noted the gratification of bodily needs gave way to the gratification of social and cultural one from physical to social survival. According to Veblen any consumption primarily concerned with the ostentatious display of wealth is conspicuous consumption. The wish to impress others with one's ability to pay higher prices is the reason behind this type of consumption. It is a clear manifestation of the desire to display ones economic ability and hence the direct utility of consumers is of no prime interest. Conspicuous consumption, as Veblen thought, mostly determined not by the utility of commodities that individual purchase, but by status and prestige considerations. Pecuniary emulation, invidious distinction, honour, esteem and social prestige are the prominent motives behind conspicuous consumption.

In 1981 Roger Mason undertook the task of constructing wide theoretical frame works to understand the phenomenon of conspicuous consumption as applicable to societies in various stages of transition. He cited Indian society as an example where all caste groups exhibit conspicuous consumption as a way to improve their social standing. In India conspicuous consumption is still manifest during festivals. Extravagant consumption behaviour is common in such occasions. The motivation behind this extravaganza is apparent enhancement of social position through lavish spending. Such occasions provide them an opportunity to project the image of their family and make it an event which would have a lasting effect on the minds of the people in the locality.

However, term conspicuous consumption propounded by Veblen and Mason has to be differentiated from Consumerism. Ostentatious display of wealth is the prime motive of conspicuous consumption. But consumption is never restricted to the consumption of luxuries alone. The need creation plays a pivotal role in consumerism. Consumerism is to satisfy the need of the consumer created day by day. But proliferation of need is not responsible for conspicuous consumption. Excessive consumption is not a feature of conspicuous consumption but it is a feature of consumerism.

Expansion of capitalist commodity production gave rise to an accumulation of material culture, in which the dominance of exchange value eradicates the memory of the original use value of goods. Instead of the Marxian "use-values" and "exchange-values", consumables become "sign-values". Consumerism pre supposes the benefit that human happiness is directly proportional to the amount of materials purchased possessed and consumed. The danger embedded in consumerism is that it makes human beings materialistically driven compulsive buyers who consume goods disproportionate to their basic needs.

**DRIVING FORCES OF CONSUMERISM IN INDIA**

In traditional societies, such as India, life styles were largely regulated by long standing practices. Today's post-modern trends-increasing consumerism and affluence, individualism, demographic complexity, ideological diversity, global migration and constant innovation in communication technology have proliferated new social identities and deconstructed social identities imposed by past (Johnston and Shoon 1998, Rumbo 2002; Benn 2003). With rising fragmentation of joint families, greater urbanization and employment related mobility across cities; the contemporary New Age Urban Indian (NAUI) is increasingly de-linked from social identity in-groups and is constantly faced with an erosion of previously established norms and values. The process has been accentuated by what is popularly called the BPO culture. This culture has put unprecedented money power in the hands of youth who have been just out of college (Business world 2004). With the advent of consumerism, the NAUI's enacted role as a consumer is gaining far greater importance. They consider material possession especially status goods as an indicator of personal identity. The supply side with proliferation of malls and super markets coupled with efficient distribution has been fueling the rise in consumerism.

India is passing through a phase of unprecedented demographic changes. These demographic changes are likely to contribute to a substantially increased labor force in the country. The Census projection report shows that the proportion of working age population between 15 and 59 years is likely to increase from approximately 58% in 2001 to more than 64% by 2021. Further it is more important to note that bulk of this increase is likely to take place in the relatively younger age group of 20-35-years. Such a trend would make India one of the youngest nations in the world. In 2020, the average Indian will be only 29 years old as against 37 years in China, 45 for West Bengal and 48 for Japan. This demographic trend is expected to intensify the trend of consumerism further provided the younger age group is more emulative in character.



Increase in consumption is also direct fallout of increase in urbanization as the average percapita income is twice the percapita income in rural India. The average monthly percapita consumption expenditure for urban India has nearly doubled in the last decade and the fact that urban India accounts for nearly 42% of consumer expenditure; one can easily attribute the rising consumerism to growth in urbanization. A strong rural India with growing capacities is also fueling demand for products and services. Today, despite their low incomes, rural households, due to their majority share of population, are collectively India's largest consumers-57% of current consumption is in rural areas versus 43% in cities. Enabling the consumer to spend more and more are the numerous consumer finance schemes that have gained acceptance among the consuming classes. At an individual level, borrowing constraints have reduced substantially with banks/finance companies becoming aggressive lenders. Today, finance is available for almost all kinds of purchases whether large purchases or small ones. Low interest rates and narrowing down of the gap between deposit and lending rates is also aiding growth in consumerism. The rise in usage patterns of credit cards by the consuming class has also helped to bring a change in spending patterns. The policies of economic reforms and the resultant inflow of varietal products also enlarge the choice of consumers.

The combination of rapidly rising household incomes and a robustly growing population will lead to a striking increase in overall consumer spending. MC Kinsey Study forecast that aggregate consumption in India will grow in real terms from 107 trillion by 2015 and 70 trillion by 2025-a fourfold increase. This soaring consumption will vault India into the premier league among the world's consumer markets. Today its consumer market ranks 12<sup>th</sup>. By 2015, it will be almost as large as Italy's market. By 2025 India's market will be the 5<sup>th</sup> largest in the world, surpassing the size of Germany's consumer market. The size of India's market will still be tied closely to its large population.

The specific factors that account for Indian consumerism are shortlisted below:

- a) Growing middle class, its changing values and pent up consumer demand
- b) Changing women's role, their labor participation and the changing structure of the family.
- c) Rising consumer aspirations and expectations across many segments of the population.
- d) Increased consumer spending on luxury items aided by past savings and the introduction of credit system.
- e) New types of shopping environments and outlets.
- f) Strong domestic consumer goods manufacturing sector.
- g) Resurfacing of hedonistic cultural elements after centuries of dormant state.
- h) Entry of multi-national corporations in to India.
- i) The emergence of rural consumer sector

### EFFECTS OF CONSUMERISM ON SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND ENVIRONMENT

Two basic needs of human beings are to manufacturing and consuming (Sen 2007). Consumerism causes the wasteful use of energy and material far above and beyond that needed for everyday living at a comfortable level. However, day by day consumption has become a wastage than satisfying basic needs. Shah (2008) added that: we consumed a variety of resources and products today having moved beyond basic needs to include luxury items and technological innovations to try to improve efficiency. Consumption affects our lives in all respect with its power. Therefore, Sen (2007) explained that now-a-days consumption is beyond an addiction, it is a passion and a power that affects and directs societal values. Because of that power, consuming become a thing that countries are competing for Sen(2007) explained this situation with an example that the countries which have the largest economic power such as Japan and USA evaluate their power with respect to the amount they consume. Consumerism is appreciated in Western economies since a person's standard of living is valued by his or her material possessions.

Consumerism is economically manifested in the chronic purchasing of new goods and services without the proper assessment of their true need, durability, product origin or the environmental consequences of manufacture and origin. Huge sums of money spent on advertising by business firms promote the acquisition character of people. Practice of consumerism interferes the very working of the society by replacing the basic desire for an adequate supply of life necessities, community life, a stable family and a healthy relationship with an artificial ongoing and insatiable quest for things and the money to buy them with little regard for the utility of what is bought. An intended consequence of this, that is the financial resources better spend on social capital such as education, health, nutrition, housing etc.....are spend on products of dubious value and little social return. The consumer is really robbed by the high price of new things. Moreover consumerism has certain positive and negative effects in an economy.

#### POSITIVE EFFECTS

- a) A higher growth rate of the economy
- b) Creation of more employment opportunities through the expansion of production
- c) Improvements in the standard of living of the people and thereby reduction in the number of people living below the poverty line
- d) A variety of goods and services to choose from
- e) Expansion of industrial and agricultural sector if the economy can domestically meet more than half of the choice of consumers.

The fast growing desire for over consumption has direct and indirect effect on environmental resource endowments. Consumer society carries it with many economic benefits. Yet, the staggering growth in consumption over the years suggests that the impact on water, air quality, forests, climate, sustainability/development and human health have been severe. Consumption may not be a bad thing but it threatens the well being and environment when it becomes an end itself or taken as ultimate measure of success of economic development. Consumption pattern among world's wealthy and middle class today has gone well beyond limits. The world is now glamorized by a consumption revolution level swelled from \$ 4.8 trillion in 1960 to \$ 20 trillion in 2000 as per 1995 prices. About 1.7 billion people, 27% of the world population have entered the consumer society. Nearly half of these global consumers live in developing countries including 240 million in China and 120 million in India. In the context of increasing environmental crises the concept of green consumerism is of greater significance. It refers to recycling purchasing, and using ecofriendly products that minimize damage to the environment. The goal of green consumerism is to reduce carbon foot print and lower green house gas emissions.

Material prosperity may be there in consumerism but, it has its negative effects on the people and society at large.

#### NEGATIVE EFFECTS

- a) Over dependence on labor saving devices and import of cheaper goods further accelerate the speed of jobless growth.
- b) Crime rate also increases as wants to become expensive items, then theft become common and daylight robberies take place
- c) Personal relations also get affected as people are busy trying to earn more to maintain their standard of living.
- d) Consumerism has also resulted in ecological imbalances. The natural habitat is being destroyed to create more goods and more buildings and affect the weather. Global warming will eventually result in health problems. Industrial pollution is affecting people in many ways. Consumption can cause air and water pollution, land contamination and forest degradation. Industrial waste(especially when just dumped in to rivers and oceans), waste from agriculture and automobile emissions are examples of air and water pollution caused by consumerism. By realizing the negative effects of consumerism on environment, Ted Dave, a Canadian artist, founded the Buy Nothing Day, which is an informal day of protest against consumerism.

#### FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Production, distribution and consumption are the three vital processes necessary for every economy to sustain. Consumption is of prime importance as it is the beginning as well as the end of all economic activities provided production and distribution in turn are influenced by consumption. In responses to the transformation of traditional so cities, needs of human beings also get multiplied. The over whelming progress in science and technology opened innumerable

avenues for gratifying their wants. It was with the advent of industrial Revolution, for the first time in history, products were available in outstanding quantities at outstanding low prices that increased people's access to the available quantity of commodities and so began the era of mass consumption.

Disintegration of joint family system, greater urbanization, employment related mobility across cities, unprecedented demographic changes, wide spread usage of credit card, rising household incomes, increase in the number of working women, policies of economic reforms and resultant inflow of varietal products also enlarge the choice of consumers and speed up the process of consumerism in India. The ever increasing consumption pattern of people has the capability to produce certain beneficial effects in an economy in terms of higher growth, creation of employment opportunities, improvement in standard of living and expansion of agricultural and industrial sectors. At the same time we can't deny the ecological imbalances that result from irrational consumer behaviour. There is no denying that India will emerge as a consumer oriented society in future years and so we should be cautious of fruitfully reaping its beneficial effects as against its detrimental impacts. Here we seem to be setting up of agro processing and value addition units as a viable option. These units tend to ensure the availability of food items, generate employment and income and thereby enhance purchasing power of the people. They are also capable of promoting farm-industry linkages which inturn stimulate sustainable growth of agriculture and industrial sector and thereby maintain adequate supply of goods that satisfy not only the primary needs but also the secondary needs of the consumers. Moreover, because of the greater scope of by-product utilization and organic nature of waste products, these units are considered as environment friendly. India's varied agro climatic conditions suitable for the production of wide varieties of agro produce also provide necessary impetus for these units to sustain as a means of reaping the benefits of ever growing spending culture of India's younger age group.

## CONCLUSION

In the present world consumer is called the king of the market. He is at the centre stage of all market activities. It is constant endeavor of producers that the product must conform to the needs of consumer. In addition to the satisfaction of consumer, he also aims at the maximization of his sales and therefore try to increase the sales by all means. It is an undisputable fact that consumption is the core element of economic activities. But the status symbol consumption that ultimately led to consumerism, is it good or bad for a growing economy. The foregoing discussion lends credence to the fact that it has both positive and negative aspects. There is no doubt that consumerism increases consumption, more consumption requires more production, more production means more jobs and more income in the society and more income means more consumption. This is the cycle if managed properly can bring growth and prosperity to the society. At the same time it costs more to the environment and ultimately led to the collapse of the environmental system as and when waste disposal outweighs the waste assimilating capacity of the environment. Considering the infinite multiplicity of wants of modern civilization Mahatma Gandhi termed it 'Satanic Civilization' and cautioned India against imitating the West. He categorically said that the world has enough for today's need, but not the every body's greed.

In the economic world of scarcity and choice it should be better to think of its negative impact in terms of alternative or opportunity cost of resources used for unnecessary consumption. In the words of famous economist Milton Friedman there is no free lunch in a society, that is everything has an opportunity cost. The effects of consumerism may become more detrimental if it creates a recessionary trend in the economy as in the case of USA, where marginal propensity to consume is nearly one at the time of recession. Moreover the US economy is a consumer economy and is known for its material growth and prosperity. Even at present the US economy is reeling under the pressure of recession. Consumption is essential to our economy, but authorities should imply rules and laws, especially to regulate the availability of consumer credit, to make sure that consumerism does not destroy the very existence of our economy and the environment.

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