INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture25

Constructing the Indian Consumer

Hello everyone. We discussed the political influences of advertisements in our last session. Today, we will explore constructing the Indian consumer. We will address two questions: how the Indian consumer differs from the Western consumer and the intriguing studies that have emerged on this topic.

In the early days of the Cola Wars, why did Coca-Cola stumble in India despite its global dominance? Coca-Cola exited the Indian market in the 1970s due to certain policies and RBI regulations, with some involvement from George Fernandez. This failure intrigued the world, as Coca-Cola, a global giant, struggled in India. This highlights how the Indian consumer differs from global markets.

India's diversity—encompassing a range of tastes and languages—means that Indian popular imagination cannot be directly compared to Western consumerism.

Regarding MTV, it initially struggled in India due to its standardized global content, which did not resonate with Indian viewers. Inspired by Star, which successfully adapted to the Indian market in the 1990s with the help of Zee TV, MTV learned to rebrand itself to better suit Indian tastes. Star's collaboration with Zee, which understood local preferences, enabled it to connect with the Indian audience. MTV adopted a similar approach and adjusted its strategy accordingly.

MTV adapted its content to be more Indianized, which led to its success as a leading music channel in India. These examples highlight how the Indian consumer differs from global counterparts.

Rama Bijapurkar's statement, "We are like that only," from her book *Ad Katha: The Story of Indian Advertising*, underscores that the Indian consumer has a

unique perspective and buying behavior that doesn't align with Western advertising theories.

The Indian consumer market has its own distinct characteristics. In the 1950s and 60s, marketers painstakingly educated the Indian consumer on product usage and its benefits. Big brands, usually one per category, led this education—examples include Emami and HUL in FMCG categories.

By the 70s and 80s, the market saw a more aggressive consumer base. The 1980s, in particular, marked a vibrant customer-brand relationship. Economic liberalization introduced a shift from Gandhian abstention and Nehruvian socialism to a consumer-friendly environment. Luxury items, which had been expensive before liberalization, became more affordable. Economic liberalization thus played a crucial role in teaching consumers to spend.

India began learning to spend more due to economic liberalization. This shift led to a more demanding consumer base. Competition in the market resulted in better products at lower prices, which became crucial for Indian consumers.

Brands like Nokia, Titan, and Boxer demonstrated that luxury products were now within reach for Indians. These brands made it clear that items previously considered luxury could now be affordable.

Another significant phenomenon was unlike in other parts of the world where technology often replaced high-touch experiences, the Indian market embraced both tech and traditional elements. Indian consumers, after initially learning to spend, have become very demanding. They now expect advanced quality and technology, reflecting a shift from merely adapting to spending to seeking superior service. Anthropologist Shiv Vishwanathan has compared the cell phone's importance in India to that of the automobile in America. The cell phone has become a transformative force, acting as the central nervous system of India. This revolution has also led to the widespread adoption of telemarketing, with frequent calls becoming a common experience.

People often activate Do Not Disturb (DND) to avoid telemarketing calls. Technology is regarded as a great leveler in India, bringing the country to the same stage as global leaders. The availability of cheap data, though not mentioned in the article, has significantly shaped the Indian consumer landscape,

particularly in popular culture. This surge in online consumerism has been fueled by uninterrupted data and the rise of e-commerce platforms.

The phenomenon of increased online activity, often referred to as the "geo effect," has been theorized by many scholars. Key players like Jio and Airtel have contributed to this shift.

We see the emergence of the sophisticated consumer. Evolving from merely learning to spend and becoming demanding, this new middle class possesses significant purchasing power and a new consumer logic. They are focused on upgrading and seeking higher-quality products and services, not out of necessity but to enhance their lifestyles.

With the rise of shopping centers and malls, the middle class's shopping destinations have also evolved. India's consumer economy has diversified, with a growing segment of self-employed individuals, including IT professionals, shopkeepers, small-scale entrepreneurs, and single-brand owners.

This sophisticated consumer economy is driven not only by government initiatives but also by the private sector. For example, Bangalore's emergence as the Silicon Valley of India, with numerous tech giants establishing their presence there, reflects this shift. The growth of startups and a wide array of choices further contribute to the sophistication of Indian consumers.

In terms of taste and cultural classification, the 90s and 2000s witnessed a shift towards regionalism in politics and media. This regional focus has expanded into OTT platforms, reflecting how tastes have evolved. Rather than a decline, we see an evolution in expression and regional identities, with social media giving rise to new cultural classes.

We'll explore these cultural classes and how the advertising world situates them within socio-economic classifications, particularly categories A and B. The traditional urban-rural divide, which was once defined by background, literacy, and language, has diminished with the advent of the internet and improved connectivity. Elements like sarees and miniskirts coexist in the same wardrobe, illustrating how Indian consumers have evolved. The distinction between vernacular and elite cultures has lessened, showcasing a greater blending of cultural elements.

It's not just a brand but a magazine like *India Today*. *India Today* is indeed a brand that published both Hindi and English editions, reflecting an understanding of diverse consumer preferences. This approach reveals how editors and advertisers tailored their content to meet the needs of different linguistic audiences.

Early market predictions suggested that Indian consumers might favor imported goods. However, this prediction was overturned. Instead, Indian consumers developed their own unique patterns, blending megatrends with a continuity of modernity and traditionalism. This coexistence surprised market experts and defied their expectations.

They anticipated that consumers would simply follow the trends, but Indian consumers have shown a unique ability to blend mega trends with a retention of traditionalism. Despite the influence of global trends, they maintain a connection to their cultural roots. With one of the largest consumer bases in the world, India continues to innovate and evolve in the 21st century marketplace.

The discourse around Indian consumers, particularly the class-based grammar of Indian advertising, is informed by publications like *India Today* from the 1990s, especially post-1995. Julien Cayla and Mark Elson's study sheds light on how market giants like *India Today* approached content for both vernacular and elite audiences. This historical perspective helps us understand how advertising strategies were shaped to cater to diverse consumer segments.

The class-based distinction in Indian advertising is quite intriguing. Indian advertising differentiates between English-speaking audiences, classified as socioeconomic class A, and vernacular-speaking audiences, classified as B. There is also a class C, but our focus is on A and B. Class A consists of cosmopolitan, well-traveled individuals who are familiar with Western media. Class B, on the other hand, comprises wealthy but locally oriented consumers who engage with vernacular media. For instance, India Today caters to both A and B with its Hindi and English editions.

Advertising strategies for these classes are tailored to their respective preferences. Class A is targeted with aspirational Western-themed advertisements, while Class B receives marketing that features more accessible, culturally familiar products. These strategies ensure that advertising resonates

with the specific tastes and expectations of each audience segment. The challenges in representation faced by advertisers were significant. One key issue was predicting an authentic middle-class lifestyle without appearing too vernacular. Advertisers grappled with defining the boundaries of what constitutes middle-class status while avoiding depictions that seemed overly local or simplistic.

Additionally, campaigns aimed at vernacular consumers risked diluting the prestige of the brand. Advertisers were concerned that targeting vernacular audiences could negatively impact the perceived status of their products.

Regional diversity also posed a challenge. With the vast array of languages and regional cultures in India, determining how to present a product as a national brand while respecting local differences was complex.

Lastly, the politics of advertising production were another focus area. Researchers concentrated on how advertisements are produced rather than how they are received by consumers. The focus of these studies is often on how mass media producers present their worlds and audiences in their work. They shape advertisements to reflect the imagined world of their target consumers.

A concept called "invisible fictional fictions" describes how advertisers create assumptions about what customers want. Ong explains this as a process where writers or creators imagine a fictional world for their audience. This imagined world influences the creation of advertisements.

In the business context, there's a separation between production and consumption. This disconnect leads producers to envision their target consumers based on their own ideologies, which can influence the dominant ideology reflected in advertisements.

Donfeld's perspective on cultural production emphasizes that it involves creating imagined worlds for audiences. Advertisers may not fully understand their audience's realities but instead craft idealized representations based on their own assumptions and cultural symbols.

Ang explains that television audiences are both socially constituted and institutionally produced. Socially constituted refers to how society shapes views on politics, religion, traditions, and rituals. Institutionally produced refers to how established institutions, such as religion, shape and categorize these audiences.

The process of constructing audiences and consumers has been well-studied in the American context, but it differs significantly in the Indian context. In India, it involves numerous small but important decisions about how to address diverse audiences and emerging problems.

A key issue in this process is the translation of advertisements. The way advertisements are translated can reveal insights into how editors perceive their audiences. For example, in a 1997 edition of *India Today*, an English article referred to then-Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao as employing "Machiavellian" methods, suggesting he used cunning strategies to maintain power. However, in the Hindi edition, "Machiavellian" was translated as "Jodh Tor," meaning "cunning." This translation places the term in a different context, making it more accessible to Hindi-speaking readers who might not be familiar with Machiavelli.

This example indicates that the editors of *India Today* perceived the Hindi-speaking audience as needing more straightforward language, implying a belief that their understanding might be less nuanced compared to the English-speaking elite.

The choice of translation reflects how editors perceive the audience's understanding. For example, in a 1997 editorial from *The Times of India*, the line described the political sartorial trends during Rajiv Gandhi's late 1980s tenure, referring to it as "the Gucci years" when homespun fabric gained designer status. It humorously noted that dustbins were filled with Gandhi caps, and now, with Khadi back in style, Congressmen were rummaging through discarded headgear.

In the Hindi translation, the terms "Gucci" and "homespun" were rendered in a way that reflects the editors' assumptions about their audience's familiarity with these references. The translation aimed to make the content relatable to readers who might not be acquainted with Western fashion brands, emphasizing how localized adaptations were used to bridge cultural gaps.

In the Hindi translation, terms like "Gucci" and "homespun" were adapted with different undertones. "Gucci" was translated as "Adhunikta Wadi" (modernist era), which doesn't directly convey the luxury connotation of the brand but rather reflects a broader sense of modernity. Similarly, "homespun acquired designer status" was translated as "adhunikta ka rang chadha diya" (modernity took on a new hue), which shifts the focus from the specific status of homespun fabric to a more general idea of modernity.

These translations suggest that the editors believed the vernacular audience might not fully grasp the original references. Thus, they opted for terms that were familiar but not exact, aiming to make the content accessible while possibly altering its nuanced meaning.