Consumer Society in India: Some Reflections

Manoj Kumar

PG Government College for Girls, Sector 11, Chandigarh

*Corresponding author: manojchandigarh@yahoo.co.in

Abstract:

In the current phase of globalization and changing economic scenario in India, it appears that the increase in money flow in the market is an artificial creation. The government also keeps on pumping money to save the industrialists. The ordinary people in any part of the world find it difficult; however, to comprehend the intricacies of the economics. However, with increase in salaries and easy availability of loans, they keep on purchasing the items which are of no use to them. This paper is an attempt to bring back the attention to the neo-marxist, critical theorists and post-modernist critiques of emerging market society in the world. An attempt is made to relate the theories to the current situations in India where the government claims the highest growth ratio but the Human Development Index and other indexes show the bitter truths of rising inequality, poverty and skewed development.

The traditional society in India seemed to be fascinated by the idea of simple living and high thinking. The religious scripts are filled with edicts on the benefits of saving for the rainy day and spending only when it is most urgent. However, contemporary society in India is now fast emerging as a consumer society. The number of people applying for bank loans and purchasing cars, scooters, laptops and other items for their houses in increasing manifold.

Keywords: Globalization, industrialists, inequality, poverty, traditional society.

Market and Society

It is important to understand the relation between market and society to explain the current stage of society. The history of development of urban centres shows clearly that the society created markets to exchange its surplus production and enabling all to fulfil their needs. It was also in the interest of markets to produce what will be useful and hence saleable in the society. Thus the relationship between market and society appears to be symbiotic. Of late, the relation seems to have become one-sided, with market deciding the nature of norms, values and thus social structure of the society. It is argued by

some scholars that in contemporary scenario market is like God and people mend their ways of living and thinking in a way to please the new 'God'. ie market.

The new state of affairs in the society can be attributed to the advances in science and technology. So far as progress of knowledge is concerned, the contributions of the scientists are marvelous but scientists frequently at war with the ethics of the society in one way or the other. They develop market based technologies and help the industrialists in increasing their production. The society sooner or later accepts all the new products and using products based upon latest technology are considered as a sign of traditionalism and backwardness. The latest technologies have made India a market oriented society.

Market in modern society creates our needs and also defines the ways to fulfills all our needs. The needs created may not be essential as Marcuse categorizes these as false needs. Market shows these needs as the true needs of masses, which must be fulfilled. Marcuse feels that the people become one dimensional only with all their energies being channelized to fulfill these false needs. They became the slave of market. They cannot even think against the will of market. It guides even their consciousness. .

For another sociologist of those times Habermas (1984) the decline of public sphere is visible in the society. People are not interested in matters of public interest. They are not seen discussing the contemporary political social or economic problems being faced by their countries. However, they are more and more interested and concerned with their personal and private affairs. They like to discuss which brand of mobile, Television or car should they purchase for them or their children. Thus, lack of interest in matters of public interest makes them remain self-centered in their lives and they do not discuss with their neighbours or friends before they purchase any item.

 Lukas (1968) also agreed to this view. He finds that in cities, although more and more people shrug their shoulders in trains, buses, and cinemas still the social distance among them is increasing. The technologies have made people independent and personal. And increasing thrust to right to privacy has left people less close to their brethren in the society. A personal computer, a Cellular phone and even personal bike, personal room are the normal demands of the youth today.

 This lack of interest in others or public affairs suits the capitalists and multinational companies. The companies are more interested in converting individuals into consumers. The spirit of collectivity among people does not suit them. The collective and public discussions will bring people to believe that many of the consumer items they are purchasing from the market are unnecessary. They may come to understand that they are purchasing those items which are of no use to them and they do not need them. This is compelling people to loose their public sphere. The lack of public discourse results in people turn alone in decision making and is turning them into blind consumers trying to fulfil their false needs.

 Post modernists like James Baudillard also believe in the legitimacy of the above assumption. Further he argues that in earlier times capitalists used to misguide the public about the utility of their products as they has overproduction of commodities which they wished to sell. They used various institutions to to spread their ideology of consumerism. But in contemporary times, he maintains that the assumption that today it is not the capitalist overdriven by production who is playing foul to make people buy his

products. In fact, in this age anyone who understands that the people are less interested in listening to matters of public interest and guided by media to make their purchase decisions is prospering. Baudillard (1994) is highly critical of the present media. He reasons that media was created and is assumed to represent reality. However, these days instead of becoming a representative of the reality, it is just guiding the reality. The people come to believe that what they see in TV is reality and mould their life style accordingly. Thus the reality of the masses is infact the hyper-reality with a lot of romance and drama but little down to the earth knowledge of the phenomenon. The women bodies are exposed to get more viewership for cinema but the girls in villages try to follow the norms shown in serials and thereby face conflicts in their family and married life. The market thus is guiding relations, needs, preferences, ideals, norms, values etc. and media is playing great role in helping the establishment of the market society.

Market and social institutions

Sociological understanding also takes us close to believe that the traditional institutions are loosing control over the individual and he is motivated to consume more than save. The market society is not only making the people as spendthrifts, infact it has deep impact on all the social institutions. In modern society, religion lost its monopoly over man. M.N Srinivas made the observation that there is trend of secularization in all over the world. The secular needs of the people have become important than the sacred needs. The people are less worried about Moksha than the education of their children. In this way the people's thinking is becoming more and more secular and materialistic. The caste position of people is dependent upon the market position of their skills. Position of schedule castes in Indian society was low because their market value was low. Now when choice of occupation is open, social status of the individuals varies with his market value. The scheduled castes and Brahmin castes are not being differentiated much. Thus the parochial basis of social stratification like caste and ethnicity are being replaced by the universal measures of class and educational criterion.

 The political, the educational, familial, and marital institutions are modifying themselves according to the requirements of the market. Even socialization of the coming generations occurs according to the dictates of the market. The social status of the people is determined by the kind of materials they posses. Such a state compels them to somehow purchase and bring all the latest gadgets to be displayed in their drawing rooms.. The cleverness of the producers in financing at zero percent interest and making the sales through credit cards is hardly thought upon by the people. The easy installments and hire and purchase system had once turned the middle classes in many European nations as paupers.

Various studies in psychology have shown that the market based technology is not making people happy. But it is the cause of frustrations. The use of mobile phone, internet, and machines have caused a major change in the social set up by creating new kinds of groups formed on the basis of common interests rather than the feeling of intimacy. The results of individualism are obvious. The individuals don't take any responsibility for group decisions and the leaders in the group pass on the responsibility to individual members. The globalization is leading to open markets instead of closed village economies.

The easy and vide transfer of technology and information has promoted a culture of anonymity. But The Multimedia technology and chatting etc has led to the danger of cyber crimes more than promoting the social interaction of the people.

 The new kind of knowledge based society is not promoting imagination in research but the researches which are rational. The researches on Human rights, scheduled castes and women are frequently done to grab grants from government and other international agencies. This being said, the knowledge to use technology effectively is not widely dispersed and many small to medium sized businesses still struggle, using their computers for basic data entry and dial up internet. A whole new social divide between those who possess the knowledge to use software, computers and related technology and those who do not has become visible. Technology has also allowed economic systems to be controlled, managed and manipulated easily and although in theory, privacy is protected by laws, in practice this is difficult to enforce. Technology can be used to collect information about the people's spending, lifestyle, personal and business contacts and habits and all communication done through telecommunication mediums like the telephone or internet is transparent. There is great scope to abuse technology to 'manage' society. There is no doubt that technological change brings about social change. The industrial revolution saw many people displaced from their land, to find work in crowded city factories. Serfdom was abolished and the population shifted from villages to the cities. Strong family ties, self sufficiency and the right to occupy land were replaced with uncertain tenancy of land, dependency on trade and a weakening of the family unit.

Conclusion

Resisting the tide of market is impossible. The world today is about competition, and technology is about leverage. Of course, it seems impossible to do business without a website or email or mobile phone or a fax machine but people have been doing business well before any of these gadgets were. The matter of concern is that the Industrial age saw the concentration of economic power in the hands of the rich and the powerful, allowing them to dominate and subdue the population into harsh working conditions. It is true to say that the advances in technology are generally not equitably shared within society. People with money have more opportunity to acquire technology, which enables them to acquire even more wealth. Technology leads to greater social economic division. Laborers are viewed as commodities and expendable. Technology leads to alienation because it can create jobs that require no specialist knowledge.

The need of the hour is to just stop and ponder whether the Indian society is prepared to face all the impact of new market based technologies and what should or may be done to preserve the traditional social institutions of Indian culture like religion, family, marriage, ethics and community sentiments. We should not forget that the technology is always neutral. It depends upon individual to choose between V channel and aastha over TV, to open porn sites or educational sites over the net, to be just amused by the advertisements or make the purchases on the basis of them. Technology is off-course a major friend of individual but blindly following to feel luxury in life is useless.

We may refer back to the explanations of the present state of society to the critical and post modernist theories discussed above. The author is of firm believe that the rise in consumerism in India will result in lose of community life in India. The markets both in cities and villages will be flooded with consumers but the society and the social interaction will be more frequent but lack any depth.

References

Doshi S.L..,2003. Modernity Post Modernity and Neo-Sociological Theories. Jaipur: Rawat Publishers

Habermas, Jurgeon.1984. *The theory of Communicative Action.* Boston : Beacon Press

Habermas, Jurgeon. German(1962)English Translation 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press,

Marcuse, Herbert (1991). "Introduction to the Second Edition". *One-dimensional Man: studies in ideology of advanced industrial society.* London: Routledge.

Lukas, George.1968. *History and class consciousness.* Cambridge,Mass :MIT Press, originally published in 1922

Sriniwas (1966) Social Change in Modern India. Hyderabad: Orient Longman. Berkley: University of California Press.

Baudillard. 1994. *The Illusion of the End*, Oxford: Polity PressTurner, Jonathan 1978 *The structure of Sociological theory* Illinois. Dorsey Press