



Beyond the practical reasons: Creolization of consumerism, Globalization and tribal communities in India

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Abstract

The conventional meaning of consumption justifies the meaningful use of the objects associated with them. The uses can be mental or material; the objects can be things, ideas or relationships; and the association can range from ownership to contemplation. However, anthropological works do not agree with this conventional Economics and Marxian political economy. While anthropologists recognize that some needs have a material basis, they stress the fact that need and demand reflect the ways the objects facilitate social relationships and define social identities. Based upon empirical data on the impact of consumerism upon the tribes of Southern Odisha in India, this paper is an attempt to locate the tribal consumers in the modern globalised market beyond this culturalist orientation in the line of Baudrillard's critique of political economy of signs (1981), Sahlin's idea of practical reasons (1976), Douglas and Isherwood's idea of material goods (1978) and Bourdieu's idea of distinction (1984). It addresses two major issues: the meaning and impacts of consumerism upon the marginalized tribal communities of India. Firstly, denotation or deconstruction of 'consumption' itself, which seems at times to mean little more than 'not production', developed a coherent view of the subject. Secondly, it was observed that many objects of consumption come with complex structures of meaning already in them, such as songs and television programmes, already attached to them through advertising and global cultural imagery, such as soft drinks and cell phones (rock dance vs. tribal dance). This paper addresses the ways that these pre-existing meanings affect those who consume the objects that carry them.

Keywords: Consumerism, political economy, deconstruction, globalization

Introduction

Consumerism is an ideology in which every believer of this ideology has different motivations and justifications for following it. The school of social sciences (of postmodernism) is aware that, in this know-it-all-and-feel-nothing age of consumerism, the consumerist culture lulls us against the basic lesson that society stands on the principle of co-existence, and when a small number of people live at the cost of a large number of them, it means the death of a society (Baudrillard, 1981; Sahlin, 1976; Douglas and Isherwood, 1978 and Bourdieu, 1984)^[10].

The contemporary debate centres on processes of consumerism, disastrous consequences of unbridled consumerism, and the methods of inculcating the ideas of outsiders in a specific population. It is also argued that the aim of consumerism is not the happiness of all. It is the new face of capitalism, arising within what is called 'modernity', bewitching and persuasive at that, which promises happiness and security in different colors and forms, as it were, but never delivers. In our context, consumerism, which has already conquered the urban population and started to invade rural and tribal sectors, where millions live in abject poverty without access to the fulfillment of even their basic needs, is ugly, unethical and harmful. In other words, in a country where the large majority live under terrible poverty and injustice, where basic necessities like shelter, nutritious food, potable water, health care and education are still beyond their means and reach, consumer culture can only create more injustices and inequalities and cause endless suffering. Our shift from social goals to

technological goals, the very dubious development projects, has worsened the existing condition, marginalizing huge sectors of a population living under the dire economic conditions.

This paper is based upon empirical fieldwork based data on the impact of consumerism upon the indigenous tribal communities of Koraput district in southern Odisha to locate the tribal consumers in the modern globalized market beyond this culturalist orientation. This paper deeply investigates globalization as the harbinger of consumerism, Impact of consumerism, meaning of objects, social meaning of needs and demands, needs and social behavior, how the objects (of needs and demands) reflect the social relationships and how the objects (of needs and demands) construct social identities. It is an attempt to investigate the different processes by which the consumer culture offers the "tribal being", the illusion of joy and power and freedom, only to alienate them from themselves, colonizing their everyday life, and keeping them insatiate ever hungry for more and more, never contented with themselves and with life.

Adivasis of Koraput Region: Few Reflections

The Koraput region in the state of Orissa, India consists of four districts; Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, and Malkangiri and four distinct natural divisions based on the altitude of landscapes (Bell, 1945)^[4]. Out of 64 tribal communities in Odisha, this region is inhabited by as much as 52 tribal groups.

Table 1: Distribution of Major Tribal Groups in Pre-divided Koraput Region

Tribe	Distribution in sub-divisions
Kondha, Kond, Khond	Koraput, Rayagada, Gunupur and Nabarangpur
Bhatara or Bhatada	Jeypore and Nabarangpur
Paroja	Koraput, Jeypore, Rayagada and Nabarangpur
Godaba	Koraput and Jeypore
Bhumia	Koraput, Jeypore and Malkangiri
Koya	Malkangiri
Saura, Savara, Sabara	Gunupur and other sub-divisions
Kondha Dora	Koraput and Rayagada
Gond	Nabarangpur
KutiaKondha	Rayagada and Gunupur
Omanatya	Jeypore and Nabarangpur

Results and Discussion

Based on empirical data on the impact of consumerism upon the tribals of southern Odisha, the tribal consumers can be located in the modern globalized market beyond this culturalist orientation on four major ways; Political economy of globalization (Baudrillard's For a critique of the political economy of the sign, 1981), changing value system in tribal society (Douglas and Isherwood's The world of goods, 1978), symbolic meaning of objects and Culture and practical reasons (Sahlin's Culture and practical reason, 1976) [12], and Bourdieu's Distinction (1984) [10]. On culturalist framework, these works focus on the meaning that objects bear, meanings that are taken to explain why people consume those objects rather than others.

The tribals/ adivasi or tribal culture is basically a non-consumerist one. It is integrated with the environment and all living beings. Equality, collectivity, co-existence and co-operation are its cornerstone. Tribals have the informal economy based on the concept of the resources, word of mouth and legitimacy provided by the community. Other basic features of their economic system are the following: a. forest-based economy, b. family as the unit of production-consumption and pattern of labour, c. simple technology, d. absence of profit and capitalism in economic dealings and e. interdependence. However, in this market-driven society it is seen that many tribes are becoming the victim of consumer culture, because the formal economic, social, political and legal systems are based on the concept of property, the individual and the written words. For example, the tribals do not have the land rights according to the legal documents because of their forest habitation. With this, they are facing two-faceted problems – firstly, the land not having an individual title belongs to the state, and secondly, the state alone has the right to decide what a public purpose is and deprive even individual owners of their livelihood. Further, due to the entry of MNCs and the public sector industries in the tribal areas, the land rights and the ownership of land issue have been aggravated to violent acts of defense and suppression. For example, Vedanta alumina in the Niyamgiri Hills and other industries in the undivided Koraput district have led to strong protests by the tribals against the company.

Globalization as the Harbinger of Consumerism

Globalization means different things to different people. In the social fields, globalization is defined as the free movement of goods, services, capital (Foreign Direct

Investment), people, and information technology across national boundaries. It creates and, in turn, is driven by an integrated global economy, which influences both economic as well as social relations within and across countries. The opening up of an economy increases competition internally as well as externally, leads to structural changes in the economy, and alters consumer preferences, lifestyles, and demands of citizens. The process of global economic integration gained momentum only in the 1970s with the development of capital markets (Mahbub UIHaq, 2001). While mainstream economists suggest that the globalization process is a strong force for equalizing per capita income between nations, others say that the developing countries like India are exposed to threats of further aggravation and marginalization in the process. In India, it can be said that the process of globalization was in a pure economic sense in the 1990s when the Narasimha Rao-Manmohan government initiated the New Economic Policy (NEP) and, in the name of development, gave unbridled entry to multinational companies (MNCs). This policy is three-dimensional, consisting of Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG). In reality, all three are interrelated when the political economy of any population or state is concerned, and the final term for this process is called as Globalization.

Besides increasing consumerism, the process of globalization has also had an adverse impact upon local governance, marriage practices, agriculture, shifting cultivation and forest management, erosion of tribal culture, collective lifestyle to individualistic lifestyle, increase in psychological violence and anti-social activities, exploitation by outsiders, unemployment, displacement, changes in religious practices, gods and goddesses and worship patterns, processes of hegemonisation, culture contact or acculturation, mass media shifts, cost of entertainment, land acquisition/land alienation, impact upon environment and health, and many more.

Since the tribals are away from consumerist culture, globalization led to their plight in the form of selling the goods that are not really needed by them. This may not be perceived in the short term, but in the long term it will have an adverse impact on them. The business groups are synonymous with the destruction of culture, freedom, and indigenous technological development. They try their maximum for rationalization, homogenization, marketization, and standardization of their branded products, which massify and destroy individual thought and action. Consumerism, by straight-jacketing desires and felt needs through the media, advertising, and TV channels, can only upset the preferences and priorities whereby we go on producing goods that have absolutely no relevance to people's felt needs (Biswal 2003) [2]. For example, in the tribal society, the branded products starting from cloth to mobile cell phones, whose cost of buying is always much higher than a thing actually needed, are always higher. Is there any assessment that, in the name of communication, a poor tribal needs the Nokia cell phone in the deep forest? It requires evaluation socially and environmentally.

Hence, a need-based, self-sufficient society is being transformed into a desire-based, consumer society. The process is accelerated by the neoliberal public policies in India that promote the idea of 'desired development.

Minimalism to consumerism

Globalization has transformed tribal society from minimalism to consumerism. Earlier, they were unexposed to consumerism or advertising. They had no urges to go out and buy cool new clothes or gadgets or cars or shoes. It's not that they don't have desires, but it's not at the same scale as in our society. Consumerism, on the other hand, stems from fears and insecurities, which are exploited by corporations and advertising. Advertising is designed to get us to desire more, to want to buy, and because it works so well, we end up buying way, way more than we need. Even in the days before advertising, these kinds of desires for more were not as prevalent. It is advertising and consumerism that have created the desires, or at least magnified them to a hugely exaggerated level.

Cultural Meaning of Consumption contradicts self-sufficiency

The conventional meaning of consumption justifies the meaningful use people make of the objects associated with them. The uses can be mental or material; the objects can be things, ideas or relationships; and the association can range from ownership to contemplation. However, anthropological works do not agree with this conventional economics and Marxian political economy. While anthropologists recognize that some needs have a material basis, they stress the fact that need and demand reflect the ways the objects facilitate social relationships and define social identities.

In anthropology, consumption became an important topic in the 1980s, which saw the marked onset of neoliberal policies that shifted a lot of economic power from workers and states to the owners of capital. The consequences were striking. Media attention was focused on the consumption boom amongst a small body of the newly enriched, the 'yuppies' (young upwardly mobile professionals) and the dinks (dual-income no kids), and the industry that catered to them (e.g., Silverman 1986)^[14]. In some countries, then, the 1980s was a decade of declining consumption; in many others, consumption became more uncertain for significant sections of the population (Schor 1991; Heyman 1991)^[13]. Baudrillard's notion of 'sign value' says that objects of a certain type have meaning because they are different from objects of another type. Those types and their meanings define an overall structure of objects that maps on to a structure of society, made up of various types of people defined by their differences from other types of people. Sahlins illustrates clothing revolves around 'basic notions of time, place, and person as constituted in the cultural order and it produces and reproduces 'the meaningful differences between' social units (Sahlins 1976)^[12]. Bourdieu's work is on consumption preferences. In *Distinction*, he elaborates model of society, of social resources or capital, and of predispositions or *habitués*.

There are three levels of arguments in favour of consumption. Firstly, denotation/DECONSTRUCTION of 'consumption' itself, which seems at times to mean little more than 'not production', and developed a coherent view of the subject. Secondly, it was observed that many objects of consumption come with complex structures of meaning already in them, such as songs and television programmes, already attached to them through advertising and global cultural imagery, such as soft drinks and cell phones (rock dance vs. tribal dance).

In our postmodern society, few things play the influential role in our lives consumerism does. Consumption is intimately tied to the creation and production of a sense of self. Few would argue that products are imbued with a greater significance than what their primary function may be. Today, it is virtually impossible to buy any product not embedded with certain symbols of identity acquired by the buyer knowingly or otherwise. Recognising this, it is possible to draw the conclusion that consumption functions as a way to create a sense of self. However, this is merely the tip of the iceberg. The consumer may assume their consumption pattern sets them apart from the rest of society, marking them as an individual, but this is a fallacy. Consumption is one of our most creative and most restrictive practices. Due to this fact, it must be concluded that consumer-driven production of self has less to do with "Who am I?" and more with "Who are we?" or "With whom do I belong?" There is no such thing as individualization no matter what we may think. Rather, consumption functions as a way for the consumer to communicate with society at large where they fit within the social structure. Jean Baudrillard claims that consumerism, or late capitalism, is an extension of his idea of the hyper real. In his way of thinking, everything in our daily world is a simulation of reality. The simulation is completed through the production and consumption of goods.

Because this is the age of the free market in which fruits are manufactured, animals can be grown, people can be made to order, laughter is canned, nirvana is sold, and the devils can save your soul. An argument against it is that consumerism is as shaming as it is heady. It can take your human dignity and sensibilities away from you, and it can bestow upon you god-fearlessness. Which is why the privileged can smack their lips, delicious from the taste of overflowing ice cream cones and juice of steak-laden pizzas, while little mouths, agape with hunger, and eyes, open to an eternity of want, look on? However, very few of us uncaring souls know that our tomorrow is being scripted in these mouths and eyes dry with want. If these children survive to live as adults, they will not look at us or wait for us to throw them the crumbs. They will grab our food from us, if necessary, along with our lives.

In such a situation, consumerism, by straitjacketing desires and felt needs through the media, advertising and TV channels, can only upset the preferences and priorities of people and distort production priorities, whereby we go on producing and overproducing goods that have absolutely no relevance to people's needs. The deprived classes, in particular, are tempted to enter the rat race, to buy things that they do not need, to consume and to possess goods because these 'goods' carry the signs of status and prestige in the society. Consumer goods, such as soaps, mixers and grinders; washing machines; motor cars; alcoholic drinks and so on, take a wide range of cultural associations and illusions: exotica, beauty, fulfillment, community and scientific progress. Consumer culture cannot but falsify human needs and can only create a world of false or illusory comfort, security, power and happiness. Thus, the standardizing, homogenizing and globalizing forces of consumer culture are an unprecedented threat to humankind.

Conclusion

This paper addresses the ways that these pre-existing meanings affect those who consume the objects that carry

them. While anthropologists recognize that some needs have a material basis, they stress the fact that need and demand reflect the ways the objects facilitate social relationships and define social identities. Further, the postmodern interpretation of consumerism seems at times to mean little more than 'not production' and to develop a coherent view of the subject. Secondly, it was observed that many objects of consumption come with complex structures of meaning already in them, such as songs and television programmes, already attached to them through advertising and global cultural imagery, such as soft drinks and cell phones (rock dance vs. tribal dance).

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