

IS MINIMALISM A SOLUTION TO GROWING CONSUMERISM ?

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Abstract

Changing demographic profiles, increasing income levels, urbanization, technology, globalization and free flow of ideas from within and outside the country is bringing about a dramatic shift in consumer tastes and preferences.

The most challenging and exciting time to live in, is on the cusp of change. And that is where India is today. Will moving back to minimalism save the planet ? David Wann has introduced the idea of "simple prosperity" as it applies to a sustainable lifestyle. From his point of view, and as a point of departure for what he calls real sustainability, "it is important to ask ourselves three fundamental questions: what is the point of all our commuting and consuming? What is the economy for? And, finally, why do we seem to be unhappier now than when we began our initial pursuit for rich abundance?" This paper is an attempt to understand the fact , that can simple living i.e being less preoccupied with quantity and more concerned about the preservation of cities, traditions and nature a challenge for our modern quest for affluence.

INTRODUCTION

Indians have come a long way from being known as the shrewdest customers in the world, 'value factor' very much intertwined with their lives, so much so that even luxury brands have to devise unique pricing strategies to inspire the great Indian consumers. They are family people, giving more importance to nurture and care than ambition.

But the dramatic population growth with a large portion in the age band of 25-35 years with dual income is the catalyst behind the spectacular rise in consumer market in India. Liberalisation and globalisation- the twin drivers of employment and business opportunities.

The Indian consumer trend is moving towards bulk buying (buying from hyper markets) and living a stylish lifestyle, effect of the heavy western influence. Increasing number of beauty parlours in the city, eateries, designer wear, watches, hi-tech products are a few examples which mirror these changes.

The seller market is slowing giving way to the buyer's market. With economic liberalization initiated in 1991, new products have made way into the Indian markets, thereby increasing the product varieties. Import licensing restrictions have been abolished, and as a result an assortment of consumer goods has been flooding Indian markets. Indian consumers have always longed for foreign goods and with open-market policies being practiced by the government, their longings have apparently reached a fruitful end.

These changes in the structure of Indian society raise the question of whether consumption patterns in India will converge with those in Western countries. Will Indian consumers move closer towards what has been called a 'global consumer culture' (Alden et al. 1999; Merz et al. 2008) This idea is based on the assumption that globalization—i.e. greater and less restricted flows of capital, goods and information—together with media and the expansion of international brands will tend to homogenize consumer needs and wants

across the world. This, added to the proliferation of modern retail formats like supermarket and shopping malls (Rear- don et al. 2010), could result in similar consumer behaviour irrespective of local custom and tradition.

Certainly, the bulging of India's middle class has some features of a process of Westernization. Rising incomes have come along with greater urbanization, changing lifestyles, shifts in the roles of women and different expectations in the younger generations. However, consumerism and materialism are not exclusive of Western societies (Belk and Costa 1998; Cleveland et al. 2007), so we must be very careful about inferring changes in consumer attitudes and motivations simply from the increase in discretionary purchases. In addition, most of the research on consumer behaviour has a strong Western bias, so the universality of its principles should not be taken for granted (Henrich et al. 2010).

It is important, however, to emphasize that this possible collectivist tendency tends to be limited to the own extended family or social group, and does not extend to the deprived and the poor in Indian society (Varma 1998). In his seminal work on 'the Great Indian Middle Class', Varma argues how the Indian middle class in recent decades lost its societal engagement inspired by Ghandian and Nehruvian values, became disillusioned with Indian politics and increasingly narrowed its focus on its own material gains (Varma 1998). Obviously, many engaged activists and scholars remain committed to support and work with marginalized groups in Indian society, but this trend does seem to have further solidified the mental and material gap between the middle classes and the poor.

The Indian traditional values have always been in a flux, as from time to time there has been an amalgamation of various cultures and religious philosophies. Indian tradition professes a universal humanist tradition, which has neither been dogmatized by any particular set of beliefs nor has it glorified any particular cultural pattern or lifestyle. In contrast, it has always emphasized on a pluralistic culture which has led to a complete individual fulfilment.

Let us enumerate a few of the major assumptions of the Indian tradition, which probably serve as the basic foundation in understanding the Indian society. One being, the concept of a harmonic relationship that exists among man, nature and society and the other being, the origin of man from infinity and his final dissolution into the same. It talks about this final achievement of self-realization of man through his individual means, which is achieved through the process of 'simple living and high thinking'. So as per the traditional Indian institution, cultural and spiritual growth gained predominance over material possessions. (Naik,1983)

The growing flair for material comforts, loss of faith in the time-honoured Indian values, burning zeal for the possession of articles of mass consumption produced by the industrialized west were some of the characteristic features among the Indians during the British Raj which led towards their increasing dependency, both on economic and political front.

Psychological research indicates that people's feelings of well-being adapt over time to their situation (or reference point). To the extent that a society emphasizes the consumption of material goods, this means that subjective feelings of happiness and satisfaction can be maintained only by continually ratcheting up the pleasures to be had by consuming them.

Does more consumption make people happier? In surveys of people *at any point in time*, people with more to spend generally report themselves as somewhat more satisfied with their lives than do people with less to spend. This makes sense, given both the stresses of

being poor and the way people lower down will tend to compare themselves, negatively, with people higher up. Factors not as related to consumption, however, like good health and good relationships, often contribute even more strongly to people's self-reported sense of satisfaction.

In the rat race to earn more one is forced to cope with stress and other work related tensions. Material wealth is the deciding factor for success. The ethical and the spiritual values are left unimportant under the circumstances. Crime rate is on increase as wants to possess new things in the market are on rise. Personal relations are also being affected as people are trying to earn more and as a result are not able to invest in meaningful relationships.

Consumerism has also resulted in ecological imbalances. The natural habitat is being destroyed to build more housing spaces and commercial setups, affecting the weather and resulting in global warming.

Eliminate excess, go with less - that's the motto of 'minimalists,' a new breed who'd rather take a bike to work, de-own their possessions and live the simple life. In our world of excess, there's a quiet movement towards minimalistic living that's gaining momentum. A growing number of people in urban cities is questioning whether they need as much as they have: clothes, accessories, gadgets and everything that fills our homes but doesn't necessarily serve us better or make us happy. People are embracing 'voluntary simplicity'. In other words, they are developing the art of living with less - going back to our rustic roots.

Minimalism is a lifestyle in which one reduces the possessions to the least possible. Living with only the bare essentials has not only provided superficial benefits such as the pleasure of a tidy room or the simple ease of cleaning, it has also led to a more fundamental shift.

It is often thought that the more one has, the happier he will be. Not knowing what tomorrow might bring, man collects and saves as much as he can. This means a lot of money is needed, so gradually people are being judged by how much money they have. They convince themselves that one needs to make a lot of money so that they don't miss out on success. And for one to make money, everyone else needs to spend their money. And so, it goes.

Minimalism was "the last of the modernist styles" and thus "a transition between the modern and the postmodern" (Levin, 1979).

In a study titled "Life at Home in the Twenty-First Century," researchers at U.C.L.A. observed 32 middle-class Los Angeles families and found that all of the mothers' stress hormones spiked during the time they spent dealing with their belongings. Seventy-five percent of the families involved in the study couldn't park their cars in their garages because they were too jammed with things.

Enormous consumption has global, environmental and social consequences. For at least 335 consecutive months, the average temperature of the globe has exceeded the average for the 20th century. As a recent report for Congress explained, this temperature increase, as well as acidifying oceans, melting glaciers and Arctic Sea ice are "primarily driven by human activity." Many experts believe consumerism and all that it entails – from the extraction of resources to manufacturing to waste disposal – plays a big part in pushing our planet to the brink.

Does all this endless consumption result in measurably increased happiness?

In a study, the North western University psychologist Bodenhausen linked consumption with aberrant, antisocial behavior. Professor Bodenhausen found that "Irrespective of

personality, in situations that activate a consumer mind-set, people show the same sorts of problematic patterns in well-being, including negative affect and social disengagement." After a certain point, material objects have a tendency to crowd out the emotional needs they are meant to support. Often, material objects take up mental as well as physical space.

Courtney Carver, author of *Be More With Less*, says, "The purpose of minimalism is to remove the things in your life that don't serve you, so that you can make room for the things that do. When you eliminate the excess, you'll gain more clarity about what you really need for a healthy, happy life. I believe living in a city may provide more opportunity for simple living. City life can inspire smaller-space living and car-free transportation. It may also be easier to connect with like-minded people in a more populated area to support habit changes that encourage living simply." Bollywood director Mansoor Khan practises minimalism in his organic farm stay. He says, "If you want to be happy, don't chase growth and materialism. Chase slowness, smallness and minimalism. Be connected to the earth, try to pursue organic life. More material success means loss of social capital - you won't have time for your family and will have no peace."

HOW TO RUSTICATE YOUR LIFE

Get yourself in a natural place, like a park and just sit. You can be by yourself or be with loved ones. Look out for the stars and the moon - it will make you happy. Not wanting a lot and not needing to do anything is conducive to happiness. A lot of us are really wound up, so it doesn't happen automatically. It's a habit you teach yourself.

Pare down your possessions or at least stop buying things you don't really need. Move to a smaller place, get people with negative energy out of your life. Spend time with people you love. Schedule time where you can just relax, turn off your gadgets, eat simple, whole, fresh foods, and talk to your family.

Most urban dwellers need to rusticate, or they will be depressed. Learn folk dancing, go visit friends, just sit and chat, or go for a walk.

Minimalism may not win the revolution or solve climate change, but it can change perspectives and allow people to shift their lifestyles and ultimately influence the market and economy to something more sustainable and ecological.

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