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**AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Marketing, especially consumer behavior, has learnt a lot from social sciences, over the years. The study of anthropology has contributed immensely to the evolution of marketing, and understanding and appreciation of consumer behavior. This study aims to give a historical perspective of how anthropology has shaped consumer behavior – from ancient cultures, tribal social systems and ultimately leading to the modern consumption theories.*

***Anthropology – History***

*It is the study of human race over time. There were five large cultures, if we look at the history of societies. There was the Indo – Gangetic, Roman – Tigris Valley, Greek – Euphrates, Persian and Egyptian – Nile. If we look at evolution of Human Consumption, it started with the Stone Age, followed by Cave Age, then started the learning and practice of hunting followed by storing and finally settling near the water source.*

***Development of Exchange Principle***

*The first profession of the human civilization was that of fishing. Exchange of goods started with the growth of civilization. First, it was the individual, and then started the formation of groups which culminated into guilds. Slowly, craftsmanship developed primarily with iron which then gave way to the formation of the feudal system. About 30,000 years ago, commerce started happening for the first time in human civilization. This led to the formation of groups which started exerting pressure on society for exchange of goods.*

***Modern Society***

*The feudal lords, over a period of time, gave way to the Empire system. The first commodity which was traded as a means of exchange was Salt. Salt was replaced by Sugar. The great empires, like Roman, Greek and Indian started breaking up during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. The conflict between civilizations started just before Christ. Empires started expanding and people began to become aware of various kinds of commodities that are available for consumption.*

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**International Exchanges**

Around the same time, Silk route with China was established. Roman and Greeks started wearing silk and it grew in importance in their society. Silk became a fashion in Europe and quality became a differentiator. Purple colour in Silk was considered premium and was worn by nobleman in their dress called Toga(overcoat).

Gold was discovered in Africa and was considered the magic metal, next only to silk. Arabs and Mesopotamia started using gold as ornaments and it became hugely popular in the Islamic countries. At around this same time, war between Christians and Muslims broke out in Europe.

**Value in Society**

In a relatively small amount of time, Gold attained universal value. The Romans started trading gold from Africa and spices from India. The Europeans started consuming dry meat. Social class related to consumption became the norm. The Europeans started using spice with meat. At that time, divorce was allowed only among the Muslims. As a result of this, Muslim women started amassing gold. So, Islamic law was passed which made wearing or storing of gold illegal.

At this time, Coffee was discovered.

**Religious Impact on Consumption**

Soon coffee became a habit and so Muslims started calling it Haram. Punishment or sanctions were announced against drinking coffee and hence, the value of coffee went up. Europeans liked coffee and started paying heavily for it. At about the same time, Chinese started having tea in porcelain pots. So, porcelain pots became an important item of possession. Africans started killing wild animals and produced fur. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Europeans started wearing fur. These came to be known as Aristocratic Consumption. Those who could afford them were considered rich or nobility.

**Growth of divide between haves and have-nots**

The culture of Democracy was ushered in by the Romans. Ordinary men could kill a nobleman and acquire his wealth. This gave rise to violence in the society. Comparatively, Greeks were more philosophical and they travelled to China. The Chinese society, under the influence of Confucius, led a very simple life. China and India never appreciated Materialism – probably, under the influence of their tradition, culture and their philosophies. There was a reversal of value where these societies learnt to attach values to the exotic. Their religion exhorted them to lead a simple life.

**Colonialism**

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The European culture was totally dominated by materialistic thoughts. At the same time, materialism was completely absent in China and India. Industrial Revolution took place in the West and there was a significant change in the attitudes and belief systems of these societies. Karl Marx came along at this time with his famous theories. He was totally against the culture of consumption and asserted that there was no difference between the mechanic, the labour and the lord. This gave rise to the concept of socialism, which eventually gave birth to communism. Confucius had asserted that there was no joy in acquiring wealth. Eventually, the systems clashed with each other.

#### **Industrial Revolution and After**

Engels brought in the concept of Tax, where his main objective was equitable distribution of money for a just society. The consumption theories were born and the concept of desire came in vogue. Consumption, as proposed then, had three levels of activity – need, want and demand. There was another level between want and demand, which was termed desire. Need was defined as a feeling of deprivation. Want was what the consumer did – to necessarily identify a solution.

#### **Modern Theory of Consumption**

Desire is defined as an expression given to a consumer's want, whereas, demand is backed by ability and willingness. In this environment, the concept of trade and merchants began to take root. Even in China and India, it became part of social structure as it was accepted in religion. In case of India, Vaishyas were accepted as the trading community. For them, making profits was not materialistic as it was their Dharma; they were just doing the work expected from them.

#### **Money and Value**

The concept of money came in at this time. Coins made of gold were used as the medium. For Hindus, sharing was the normal way of their lives. Europeans started using many adverse ways. European men dressed up as women and started enticing customers inside their homes. The concept of fashion originated at around this same time. In this time period, older people started becoming more fashionable. The difference between the Aristocrat and the Proletariat became very pronounced in Europe at this time. However, the Catholics never interfered in trading.

#### **Culture and Dynasty**

The Protestants tried to control every aspect of a common man's life. They decreed that only certain people can dress-up. The Church was also brought under control with many decrees

and restrictions. Treffles law prohibited hunting by commoners. A particular kind of value system developed in the society and products got demarcated.

In the physiological aspects, the world was divided into five major segments. They were: Caucasian, Negroid, Low Lands, Lilliputian and Amazonian. Europeans were Caucasians, whereas lowlands referred to the Indians. Japanese were Lilliputians, whereas, the Chinese were the Yellow tribe. Indians were influenced by both Caucasians as well as Negroids. Central Europe was part of lowlands, whereas, Mongols were formed from the intermixing of Lilliputians and Amazonians.

### **Cultural**

Among the Christians, there are Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox's (primarily, Russians). The Europeans travelled and dispersed all over the world. If we look at the composition of the world population now, we will find that sixty percent of the world population is Christians and twenty percent are Muslims. Only ten percent of the world population is Hindus and Buddhists. There are some countries like Cambodia, which is a synthesis of Buddhism and Hinduism. China and south-east Asia remained primarily Buddhists, while Japan which worshipped the Sun God, went into what they called the Meiji (which also emanated from Buddhism).

### **Imperialism**

This is the time which gave birth to imperialism. The Europeans considered themselves superior to others. They believed that they were the centre of the world. The New Continent, which was primarily America, also considered themselves to be superior to others. Between them, they tried to control the world. The Chinese believed in what they called – ZhongGuo, which meant The Future Is Ours.

### **Distribution and Consumption**

Distribution developed as mechanisms of exchange. People had time, resources and energy which they converted to five categories of ends. The five categories were subsistence fund, replacement fund, social fund, ceremonial fund and rent fund. The exchange of goods and services helped form strands of social networks which allied one group with another. Consumption was the use of goods and services, whereas, distribution was primarily the movement through an exchange system.

### **Demand and Supply**

This new concept of distribution gave rise to a peculiar problem. The small-scale societies had to learn to deal with new sets of principles and problems. The transactions became deeply embedded components of social relationships. Polyani [1] gave a different explanation. He

claims that the ways in which societies manage distribution became, in turn, different forms of integration for the same society. He further goes on to claim that this new forms of distribution gave rise to reciprocity, redistribution and market exchange systems within a culture.

### **Reciprocity**

From our standpoint, generally we view reciprocity as generalized, balanced and negative. In the generalized form, we see reciprocity among closely related persons as exchange partners. There were no specific expectations of exchange in reciprocity. The partners in exchange just waited for similar opportunities, and sooner than later, were available. Reciprocity served an important purpose: they were the key to exchanges in non-market economies. This was a form of delayed exchange.

### **Some Distinctions in Societies**

Marcel Mauss [2] observed that gifts as a form of exchange was deeply embedded in some of these primitive societies. In these societies, gifts serve many important purposes: it strengthens social network, keeps the cycle of indebtedness running, and maintains complex relationships. He also observes that contrary to the cultural idea of free gift in English language, there is, in reality, no such thing as a free gift. Marcel Mauss [3] asserts that there are three obligations: give gifts, repay gifts and receive gifts. The only distinction he makes is that tribals give gifts while the west has markets.

### **Kula Exchange and the Trobrianders**

These are Polynesians and they had the custom of ceremonial gift exchange. Bronislaw Malinowski [4] studied their system of exchange in 1922. He observed that the tribals made long voyages for exchange of gifts. When they travelled counter clockwise, they gifted shell bracelets which they called Mwali. When they travelled clockwise, they gifted coral necklace which they called Bagi. Only a few got to control the gifts, which was the power of the elite. Mostly men and only a few women had this power. Only a few items were exchanged, among which were fine pottery, canoe wood, great yams, greenstone etc.

### **Trobriand Islands – Sixty Years Later**

Annette Weiner [5] studied tourist art and particularly, the funeral gifts of women. She saw that they exchanged 'cloth', which was produced by weaving, plaiting, knitting, netting and sewing. She arrives at the conclusion that these exchanges confirm matrilineage; they also dramatize both matrilineage [6] and patrilineage. It puts women at the centre of exchange during the funeral. It is also an arena for women to compete.

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**Food Sharing as Insurance**

This acts as a social refrigerator. This is another form of reciprocity where they share surplus food. This helps in strengthening social network, especially in times of environmental variability. In case of the Kantutribe of Indonesia, feasts were held once every week. The drink was of rice wine, but sobriety was the norm. The host pushes the participants to drink more and more, to the point of vomiting. The articulated objective of such feasts was to please the spirits; which, if pleased, will give bounty to the tribe and then the resources can be spread. The underlying reason could be to ensure support from fellow tribesmen in times of need.

**Savings**

The Kantu tribe learnt to plant rubber trees as a fall back resource. The ceremonial feasting was also diminished in scale. The Ju/'hoansi tribe practiced the culture of sharing food on an everyday basis. They downplayed individualism and promoted egalitarianism. Men were hunters – they were the owners of arrows. Men distributed the meat. Richard Lee observed a peculiar a peculiar culture. The cultural custom was that everybody insults the meat. They downplayed the quality and importance of the meat offered to them.

**Marriage as Exchange**

Marriage was the most common form of generalized reciprocity. Marriage was a contract between groups and not individuals. Among the KwaKwaka' Wakw[7] tribe, the groom's family gave canoes filled with gifts to the bride's village. After the feast is over, the bride's family [8] will give set of gifts to the groom's family. The norm was that the bride will distribute gifts to several clans. In winter, the bride's family will come back to the groom's village and shower them with gifts.

**Procreation and Social Law**

Among the Trobrianders, women managed to keep while giving. The society was structured in the lines of being matrilineage and patrilocal. Brothers and sisters separated [9] while they were adults. More importance was given to the mother's clan and not that of the fathers. The father's family continued to give gifts all through the adulthood. So, the assumption was that the individual owed huge debt to father's family. Through this process, the two sides of the family were held together.

**Balanced & Negative Reciprocity**

In tribal societies, distantly related partners had an expectation of equivalent exchange [10] and were thus balanced. Barter was the common form of exchange and they had the custom

of paying for dinner by rotation. We have seen this in Modern societies as well. In USA, in order to avoid income tax, an auto mechanic and dentist could exchange services. However, this was declared illegal in that country.

### **The object called Desire**

The negative part of the entire process was that very distant trading partners always wanted to maximize their profits [11] and so there was an expectation of immediate exchange. This could also end up being trickery. Thus, partners often became enemies and it was perceived to be alright to inflict abuse on them.

### **Redistribution**

This is a typical model of exchange in chiefdoms and, even in these days, in some non-industrial states. The mode of operation is that the goods are sent from the local area to the hierarchical centre and is reorganized there. Then it is sent back to the local level. The expectation of reciprocity [12] does not exist in this case. An example of this is the practice of taxation, which is perceived to be progressive and has a levelling effect. It is also seen to be a mechanism for wealth distribution. There is, in some cases, probability of formation of civil-religious hierarchy – like, in the case of Mexico and Guatemala.

### **Extravagance**

The KwaKwaka' Wakw in the Northwest coast of America, observes what has come to be known as the Potlatch ritual. The group sponsors give away resources, primarily manufactured wealth, thus generating prestige for themselves. Lavish feasts were held with surplus food and property and very often, provided for a rival village. The goods were often exchanged for higher status. The groups indulged in both – reciprocal as well as redistributive gift-giving. Marcel Mauss[13] observed this total social phenomenon and, probably, the concept of regressive taxation arose from there.

### **Focus Culture :Zinacantan Mayans**

The Mayan civilization was characterized by the Chiapas in Mexico. They lost their independence to the nation-state. Their primary agricultural crop was Corn (Maize). The crop was cultivated and grown by slash-and-burn techniques. Beans and squashes were also grown, which was called the Three Sisters. The tribesmen [14] were primarily farmers, but market exchange was the dominant characteristic. Intense rituals around religion were observed by the tribe.

### **Power and Consumption**

An important part of their economy and religion was the cargo system. In their religious office, there were four hierarchical levels. Demand went up as their levels became higher.

More time and money was expected to be invested. 3 cargoes were sufficient for Level 4, 4 cargoes for Level 3, and 14 cargoes for Level 2; while, for Level 1, 34 cargoes were required. There was great economic loss, but was compensated by the gains in prestige. Women did not participate in the cargo system.

**Market Exchange**

Exchange rates and organization governed by arbitrary money standard. The impersonal law of supply and demand determined price. Anthropologists had a superficial view [15] as they were more concerned with relationships. This was common to industrial societies and money was used as a symbolic medium of exchange.

**Trade**

In the US system, goods and services were produced and were converted to money when the same goods and services were bought. There was little or no social bonding. Economists went mostly by only cash exchange and were concerned about per capita income. There was a concept of garage sales, which was a blend of markets and gifts. Personal goods in decent condition were sold at much below market rates. The goods were not for resale and buyers were treated as 'guests'.

**Consumption**

Consumer demand drives production and the end result of the economic chain was: production –distribution – consumption. This process got embedded in social relations [16] and cultural meanings. Anthropologists talked about COMMENSUALITY, or group sharing of food. Food was not personal or a matter of idiosyncratic preferences; because of health, moral or religious reasons.

**Social Anthropology**

All cultural groups had some form of food prohibitions in the form of taboos. Marvin Harris [17] talked of cow and pig taboos, which also brought in the concept of medical materialism, known as trichinosis. Hindus had their proscriptions regarding eating of cattle, which was a form of functionalism. Similar conditions were observed in other religion; like, fasting in Ramadan for Muslims, Lent for Christians etc.

**The Case of Sugar**

Sugar was an expensive item which made profits for traders. The spin-off effect was staggering. Expansion of Sugar industries was a major factor contributing to the slave trade. Sugar resulted in the expansion of Atlantic slave trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries – between the Caribbean and the Northern South America. A lot of jobs resulted from the

expansion of the sugar industry. Sidney Mintz called it the drug food as it was cheap, without nutrition, deadens hunger pangs and stimulates the user.

### **Changing Consumption Basket – India, The Process of Change**

Consumer preferences have evolved over the last two decades. Rapid urbanization is changing the household consumption pattern. This is altering food consumption and has an impact on food demand. In our behavioural pattern, there are intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors are our values, attitudes, culture, education etc. Extrinsic factors are our disposable income, time availability and family composition.

### **Materialism in an Emerging Society**

As level of income increases, share of food items in total household expenditure declines. This is in conformity with Engel's law. More than a decade ago, urban households spend more on non-food items. Rural households are yet to achieve that. According to experts, this is likely to happen in the coming decade. As an example, the proportion of expenditure in cereals has come down – both, in urban as well as rural households.

### **Where we are Now**

In the past few years, we have witnessed the sharpest rise in education, medical expenditure, consumer services, minor durable goods, conveyance and toilet articles. The growth has been 24% in rural and 38% in urban. Expenditures have gone up dramatically in durable goods and fuel and light. In rural it is 10%, whereas in urban it is 8%. Simultaneously, lifestyle choice and food habits are also evolving continuously.

### **Emergence of Consumerism**

Modern consumerism started from 18<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe. It started in Britain, France, and in parts of Germany and Italy. The initial signs of growing consumerism were witnessed in the growing market for sugar. That way, sugar was the world's first mass consumer good. Among the consumers, the new taste for indulgence grew. There was a noticeable increase in household furnishings and in usage of better beds and wooden cabinets. Tulips were exported from Asia to Holland. New varieties were continuously developed, which was a typical symptom of consumerism.

### **Consumer Apparatus**

At this point in time, there was an explosion of shops and new marketing methods were developed. Fairs and peddlers continued as consumer needs and wants were and are infinitely stretchable. Among the new marketing techniques, enticing window displays developed. Sugar followed the concept of 'loss leader', whereas consumer gifts and credit came in vogue. Small shopkeepers started using special gimmicks and the use of advertisements

proliferated. Posters and trade cards started appearing along with fashion magazines and dolls. These were particularly prevalent in Britain and France.

Packwood's Razor Strop was the first organization to use testimonials in order to increase consumer awareness. Manufacturers started combining with shopkeepers in order to stimulate as well as check on public taste. Production combined with sales in order to whip up enthusiasm. There was a spontaneous shifting of taste and preferences in society and very often, new craze will sweep over the consumers. Sales techniques were invented and technology was completely different.

### **What they bought**

Clothing headed the list, closely followed by tall hats, wigs and wide skirts. There was an 'Epidemical Madness' to consume latest fashions, among which the most prevalent was printed cotton cloth. Local salesmen held monthly fashion shows in many areas. Soon, aping superiors became the norm in the society. The products which came to fashion after this, was watches and perfumes. Then it was the turn of Greek style furnishings and brass work, followed by China items. Among the favourites were tableware, knives and forks, and tea equipment. Soon, toys and children's books started becoming popular. Circuses were being organized in France and coffee houses started offering reading material as well. Then the concept of fine food arrived and Restaurants started cropping up, in place of inns. At this time, French Revolution took place and goods of prime necessity like sugar, soaps, candles and coffee was branded as clear luxuries. Slowly, products like tobacco, cosmetics, decorative buttons and cheap jewellery made their entry into everyday use.

### **Some Thoughts**

David Graeber[18] talks of movements against neoliberalism (free markets). He also discusses about postmodernism and asserts that we live in the post-modern world and no one is responsible for the current condition. We have to simply learn to adopt. He is of the opinion that changing the world or human society through collective political action is no longer viable. Everything is so broken up or fragmented that it is either impossible or will give rise to totalitarian nightmares. The only possibility is that of legitimate political action through fashioning of subversive identities or forms of creative consumption.

His assessment about globalization is also along the same lines. This is the age of the global market and we cannot do anything about it – we must adopt. Changing society through revolution or collective political action is impossible and has long been abandoned in the name of "competitiveness". Market behaviour as decided by individual consumption

decisions are what is called democracy. According to him, this is all the democracy we will really ever need.

His conclusion is that the totalizing monolithic system of global market has subordinated everything to single standard of value.

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