Chapter Five. Consumer Culture in India:

The Emergence
Industrial societies didn’t completely abandon religious ideas but simply re-worked them into the new industrial mise en scène. In Europe, ‘within Protestant communities, work became associated with a calling of God’\(^1\) To undertake God’s work on earth brought heavenly rewards, and this work ethic was the motivation force behind the industrial society. According to Max Weber efficiency, productivity, thrift, discipline, and hard work were the work ethics that provided the motivation necessary to build the Industrial society. But in India ‘a ritual law in which every change of occupation, every change in work technique, may result in ritual degradation [was] certainly not capable of giving birth to economic and technical revolutions from within itself, or even facilitation the first germination of capitalism in its midst’\(^2\).

Historians and economists had variously traced the capitalism in technology, mass production, population, the profit motive etc. For Weber these were important, but not the only motivating forces for the emergence of capitalism in the West. Weber first defined what he meant by capitalism. If capitalism meant ‘an expectation of profit based on the utilization of opportunities for exchange; that is of (formally) peaceful opportunities for acquisition’ then such as system had existed in China,
India, Babylon, Egypt and the Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Europe. It wasn't something uniquely Western. Capitalist enterprise guided by profit motive was universal and ancient. So capitalism wasn't something inherently unique to Western civilization. For Weber to investigate the emergence of capitalism guided by the pursuit of gain had to abandon to the 'kindergarten of cultural history methodology'.

Capitalism wasn't just a compulsion to acquire goods. Rather capitalism was the taming of this irrational motivation. Profit was to be pursued, but nonetheless in a rational continuous manner. But what distinguished Western capitalism from Eastern capitalism was the rational organization of industrial companies and their orientation to market opportunities rather than to irrational speculation or political violence. What was present in Eastern capitalism was the form and not the spirit. The anomie of traditional economic ethics was banished by an ethically ordered way of life anchored in methodical values. A set of work-oriented values that emerged out of the Protestant ethics drove the zeal of capitalism. Protestant Ethics placed psychological reward on 'methodical work and entrepreneurial activity'.

The spirit of capitalism was firmly anchored in the doctrines of 'ascetic' protestant sects and Calvinist, Pietist, Methodist, Quaker, Baptist and Mennonite churches of
the 16th and the 17th century Europe. This deification of 'work' was anchored in the belief that to praise the Almighty and save the believer's soul from eternal damnation, the faithful had to praise God, and work to create 'abundance' in his Realm. Work and labour came to acquire a 'providential' fiat, sanctified by divinity and became a call to God. The wealth created in this fashion was thus sanctified and became moral. Capitalism therefore wasn't just a drive to acquire profit. This systematic work ethic could only give rise to economic rationalism or the organization of the production process according to scientific method. The resultant increase in productivity was able to banish forever the limitations nature had imposed on man. A rationalist capitalist economy was bound to triumph on the uncertainties and incertitudes of the traditional mode of life. It was this puritan idea that sanctified vocation and acquisition of goods ushering in consumerism; or acquirement of goods that made comfortable and 'livable'. This Christian asceticism slammed the gates of the cloister, entered into the hustle and bustle of life, and undertook to 'saturate mundane everyday life with its methodicalness'⁶.

'The earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling'⁸.

Protestant Ethics was also able to re-fashion ethics and give them new meanings one that had market value. As Weber wrote: ‘Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtue’7. While in Europe, Protestant ethics gave an aura of divine benevolence to earthly success and tangibility to heavenly munificence that could be measured in terms of profit and loss at the end of the day, in Asia, salvation lay not in vocation but escape from the sufferings of the terrestrial world. Protestant asceticism required the faithful to partake the world affairs; Eastern asceticism required the renunciation of the world itself. ‘Instead of a drive towards the rational accumulation of capital, Hinduism created irrational accumulation chances for magicians, mystagogues and the ritually oriented strata’8. But how does it explain the extant capitalism of the traders, the guilds and the venture capitalists? The spiritualism of the Indian religion didn’t diminish the interests of the traders, the merchants, and other venture capitalists. It merely channelized their materialism to ‘ineffective ends’9.

In India case, economic rationalism and the development of organized life oriented towards economic activity faced opposition from magical and religious forces.
inhibiting growth and development. As a consequence the masses were left in undisturbed 'magical bondage'. But perhaps the more appropriate reasoning for regression of Indian capital was vulnerabilities to the irrationalities of law and administration to which Indian capitalism was subjected. Because of these deficiencies Indian capitalism was caught in a state of arrested development.

However what Weber missed out in his analysis of the progress of capitalism was the help rendered to it by the consuming colonies that were being carved out even as Weber was postulating on the temporal side of ascetical protestant ethics, in which he claimed resided the nascent spirit of capitalism. That colonialism had a large albeit indirect role in keeping fire in the engine of capitalism was ignored by him.

It is important to note that goods and commodities come into existence not by individual will but by social needs. Goods also bring into existence ideas pertaining to their function, habit and use, and absorption into the system of things. Take for example a pair of jeans, which is linked with a specific socio-historic moment: the Gold Rush. While mining men would often stuff rocks and stones in their pockets
tearing the garment not used to such wear and tear. To tide over the problem Jacob Davis a tailor by profession wrote to Levi Strauss, a dry goods wholesaler about a process in which rivets were to be used to reinforce the joints. By early next year, they successfully applied for a patent. The jeans therefore came to be associated with rough use. But in America, the jeans became a style statement and eventually a symbol of individuality and nonconformity in the Hollywood of the 1950s, when it was donned by action heroes like James Dean and Marlon Brando. And this is how it is marketed across the globe, symbolizing masculinity, disorderliness of approach to life, and non-conformity.

Goods and commodities can be adopted successfully if they can be adjusted into social system of things. Ahsan Jan Qaiser\(^{11}\) mentions the reason why the mechanical clock could never become popular during the time they was introduced. In India time measurement was based on a system of 4 quarters (pahrs) in the day and 4 quarter in the night. Each quarter was further divided into gharis of 24 minutes. The imported clocks made in England were based on a system of twelve equal double hours. The European clock would not have served any purpose unless Indian adopted the English method of time keeping. On the contrary
Europeans themselves took to keeping Indian clepsydra at their official residences. Mechanical clocks based on the 12 hours system therefore never became popular until the English scheme of affairs made significant inroads into India, and merely remained curio gifts to Mughal nobles and princes, including the Mughal Emperor Jahangir, and 'there is no evidence to indicate its acceptance among any social group of Indian society for general use' 13. What was a curio became a thing of necessity when the English made deep inroads into the administration and it became imperative for Indian to ‘keep up their time’ with the English. Likewise, use of dining table will have no use in a society in which its customary to eat while sitting cross legged on the floor. Similarly cutlery will no wide use if it is customary prefer to eat with their hands.

What were the other checks that imperiled the adoption of new social and consumption patterns? Social customs hindered mobility: both spatial and social. The 6th century BrhatSamhita of Varahamihira prescribed varying sizes of houses both according to varnas and also according to the grades of the ruling chiefs 14. The very limited opportunities for social mobility were noticed by many foreign travelers noticeably Francisco Pelsart who wrote:
Poverty so extreme and so miserable that the lie of the people can’t be adequately described ... yet people endure patiently, seeing that there is no prospect on anything better and scarcely anyone will make an effort for a ladder by which to climb higher is hard to find, a workman’s children can follow no occupation other than their father’s nor can they marry into any other caste.

Caste regulations operated on the upper castes as well, and thus ‘religious beliefs reduced the range of consumption more or less strictly for all castes’. The consumption habits of the priestly, merchants and peasants emphasized frugality. The behavior of the merchants, the class that could afford display of affluence professed the husbanding of resources. As C. A. Bayly puts it, ‘the demand for ordinary and luxury demand was a consequence of the influence of cultural models of patterns of consumption’. Jainism and Buddhist text were uncomfortable with display of wealth and for the merchants ‘domestic onanism was as undesirable as personal’. This hierarchical social order showed remarkable persistency even during the Mughal era that lasted for 500 years coming under strain only towards
the end of the 17th century, as the English East India Company took over the civil administration, and used various politico-legal means to undermine it.
References:

4. Ibid. Pg. 56
5. Ibid. Pg. 70
6. Ibid. Pg. 85
12. Ibid. Pg. 68
13. Ibid. Pg. 67
18. Ibid. pg. 61