CHAPTER 3

CONSTRUCTING A CONSUMER ‘COMMON MAN’: THE MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITY AND CONSUMPTION PRACTICES

Consumption practices embody a system of everyday signs and symbols through which people make sense of their cultural identity. The formation of cultural identity is always a political process, as it implies inclusion of certain cultural practices and exclusion of others. Consumerism is a hegemonic process, linked with production of identities – individual, cultural and national. In the comic book Chacha Choudhary, through representational paradigm, consumption has been foregrounded, constructing a new model of ‘common man’ based on consumer way of life. All incidents, situations and characters, that weave the narrative, represent an urban consumer space. The reader is interpellated to imagine the urban consumer space, inhabited by the consumer middle class, as India, leading to the construction of hegemonic identity of the urban middle class. Dominantly catered by the media, the middle class has projected itself as a ‘spectacle of consumption’ to be imagined and emulated by the other classes. The spectacle of the middle class consumption is not “a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 4). The middle class, linking itself with consumption, has projected itself through representational paradigm as a site of desires and dreams to be realized by every Indian citizen. Adorno and Horkheimer also argue that the cultural industry provides the context in which socialization occurs (123). Consumption is employed as a mode of identity to produce hegemonic identity of the urban middle class. As Fernandes (2006) has defined the middle class as “a class in practice”, the middle class has exploited cultural strategies to represent itself as a central agent of national progress and prosperity. Consumption is linked to the national pride and national prosperity. Consumption is projected as both citizen’s right and duty: right as an expression of individual freedom in a democratic system and duty as an expression of citizen’s responsibility to contribute to the national prosperity. The study of the consumption patterns of the middle class can provide us insights to unravel some of the central patterns of the cultural politics of the Indian middle class.
In the post-Nehruvian period, the middle class sought to construct new ‘common sense’ culture based on consumption patterns, redefining the categories of nation and citizen. The represented consumer culture in the comic book is implicated in the politics of ‘self expression’ of the Indian middle class. The middle class consumption has been represented as a virtue to be persuaded ethically, and all connotations of vulgarity attached to consumption have been transferred to the other classes. After two decades of constriction on consumerism, the middle class finally abandoned the socialist ideology of the state and began to assert themselves through consumption practices. The state is represented as “bureaucratic and repressive” but the market as “the domain of choice and autonomy” (Hall 1988). The middle class’s rebellion against the Nehruvian and Gandhian legacy is coded in terms of consumption.

Consumption is no longer understood now as the last stage of production. Rather, consumption is analyzed as reproduction of the relation of productive forces (Friedman 11). In the present era, in which consumption has been reconfigured as “new mode of domination,” commodities cease to be simply objects (Chua 3). Rather, they function as signs, replacing reality with representation. Consumption is a discursive practice that constitutes the very source of identity formation. In the construction of identity, commodities are consumed as signifiers, which are organized around what Hebdige termed “a theology of appearances” (89). It is a semiotic system which constructs the structure of relationship not only between objects but also between people. Baudrillard explains consumption as “an active form of relationship” and as “a mode of systematic activity” that structures our cultural system (The System 218). We exploit consumer goods including ‘consumer space’ to display our social standing and an object is consumed “never in its materiality but in its difference” (The System 218). Jackson also defines consumption “as a process by which artifacts are not simply bought and ‘consumed’, but given meaning through their active incorporation in people’s lives” (209).

Baudrillard approaches consumption in Durkheimian terms as a “collective behavior,” “something enforced, a morality, and an institution, a whole system of values” (The Consumer 4). As a social activity, consumption is perceived as an institutionalized duty. Herbert Marcuse in his book One Dimensional Man (1964), argues that ideology of consumption not only creates false needs but also promotes
them as ‘survival needs’. Consumption works as a mechanism of social control. Consumption is a system of ideological values, and the ideology of consumption installs a belief in the human mind that justice has been restored to man in the form of satisfied desires. Linking individual consumption to the structure of society, Baudrillard points out that “Consumption is an active form of relationship (not only to objects but also to society and to the world), a mode of systematic activity and global response which founds our entire cultural system” (The System 217). He further adds that consumption of objects as markers of social standing implies “the simultaneous transformation of the human relationship into a relationship of consumption—of consuming and being consumed” (218-19). In consumption of objects, what is consumed and displayed is a mode of relationship between people. As a result, objects become mere a semiotic site where identity is constructed and differentiated. Both individual and collective identities are now defined by consumption practices—taste, appearance, style, and food and consumer space. Consumption, being an abstract idea, requires consistent investment to be circulated as a way of life. The middle class appropriates and make use of popular forms of culture to link consumption patterns with the middle class identity, and naturalizes their consumer identity as national representative. As Baudrillard asserts that consumption is “a statement of contemporary society about itself” (The System193), the middle class represents itself as embodying new values and ethics based on consumption.

During the colonial period, Gandhi and other nationalists invoked the discourse of Swadeshi to mobilize the Indian masses against the colonizers. An austere life was idealized as the Indian way of life in which consumption was stigmatized as an immoral activity. Sada Jivan Uchh Vichar (simple life and high thinking) came to be perceived as the essence of the Indian way of life. The Indian spirituality was pitted against the Western materialism. Consequently, consumption was rejected as mimicry of the Western way of life. Aurobindo Ghosh links the emerging consumption patterns of the Indian middle class to the British politics and defines the Indian middle class as those who are “eager to import it into India along with cheap Liverpool clothes, shoddy Brummagem wares, and other useful and necessary things which have killed the fine and genuine textures” (qtd. in Joshi, The Middle Class12). Much emphasis was given to ‘local’ in terms of production and consumption.
After independence, the discourse of Swadeshi continued to shape the national culture. The dichotomy between Deshi and Angreji provided a paradigm to view consumption patterns. Although economic nationalism was central to the process of nation-building but national progress was perceived in terms of production, not in terms of consumption. The national economy was regarded as both a result of modernization and a channel, through which modernization entered the Indian society. The nation was projected as an economic space in which production was foregrounded. The citizens of the newly emerged nation were invited to “see themselves reflected in the mirror of technological progress and development, to identify themselves as fellow travelers on the journey towards this common goal” (Deshapande, “Communalising” 3223). The economic nationalism was conditioned by both the socialist state and the Gandhian discourse of simple living and high thinking. The socialist ethos emphasized the development of productive capacities of the nation, postponing consumption. Consumption was projected as a social responsibility; consumption based on utility was advocated as citizen’s responsibility and luxury was discouraged as an unethical and irresponsible behavior. Varma points out, how the consumption of commodities was perceived by the Indian middle class during the Nehruvian period:

Material pursuits were thus subsumed in a larger framework that did not give them the aggressive primacy that they have acquired today…. Even the more well-to-do family felt that to flaunt their assets was in bad taste. Indeed there was a sense of slight disdain for those who lived only at the level of their material acquisitions …. status and the respect it earned, was not so directly linked to what one owned; it still had more to do with what one did or what one had achieved. Keeping up with the image of refinement associated with a restraint on materialistic exhibition in a poor country—an ideal directly imbibed from Gandhi and the freedom movement (40).

In the national discourse, the large dams and mass based factories were projected as the national symbols of progress and development, and the villager was depicted as the archetypical object of economic development. Inspired by the Western middle class’s role in the project of nation-building and social transformation, the Indian middle class enthusiastically participated in the Indian dream of building a
nation in which all people socially and economically are equal. Nevertheless, the centrality of economy in the national discourse also prepared the ground for the economic power of the middle class. Scholars have pointed out that, right from the colonial period, the middle class has never abandoned its self-interests and aspirations. Rather, it has influenced the state to cater to its interests. The middle class support for the socialist state is now analyzed as anticipation of fulfillment of long-term dreams.

But the middle class withdrew its support for the state and began to perceive the state as anti-middle class when the state sponsored economic and social polices led to the emergence of the social movements in 1970s and 1980s. The middle class came to perceive the rise of the marginalized groups as a threat to the middle class hegemonic power, and attributed the rise of the socially backward classes to the state’s excessive social concern for them. The growing visibility of the marginalized groups in the political culture discomforted the complacent existence of the middle class, which was politically invisible, and was dependent upon the state. Disillusioned with the Nehruvian socialist model of the state, the middle class turned away from the state and looked for alternative ways to pursue its interests. Another important factor that contributed to its increasing frustration with state was its aspiration to become a mirror-image of the Western middle class, which had turned itself into consumer class, participating in the global economy. While the Indian middle class was restricted by state policies and was denied access to the pleasure of the market, the Western middle class was enjoying the hedonistic pleasures of the consumer society. The wounds of the middle class got further rubbed by the disintegration of the political system of the Congress party and the rise of several regional parties. The political culture came to be perceived by the middle class as regulated by self-interest, and patriotism as a façade to gain power. By the 1970s a new political generation emerged and developed a political sense that politics was less about pursuing the national ideals but more about individual pursuit of money and power (Atul Kohli 2001). The rampage corruption and inefficiency of the state turned the middle class into cynical observer of the national events. The middle class felt “a sense of deprivation and feelings of self-pity, assuming that the middle class consists of the ‘nowhere people’ at the receiving end of an inefficient and inequitable system” (Varma 136). They became overt in their pursuit of interests and aspirations. The
middle class created different discourses about the state as an inefficient system and indifferent to its citizens, and shifted its affiliations from the state to the market to pursue its interests and aspirations. The ideology of consumerism attacked the planned economy as a rotting system marked by corruption and deferral of fulfillment of dreams. The idea of nation propagated by the socialist state came to be perceived as an excessively abstract rhetoric, lost in its attempts to touch the reality. In contrast to it, consumerism is projected as grounded in reality, a concrete embodiment of progress and prosperity. The middle class overtly became “a self perpetuating class” (Dobbin 1972), and represented itself as a new ‘common man’ of the Indian nation, who has been under representation in the national culture, and has been at the receiving end, constructing new meanings of citizenship, nation and society.

While the earlier socialist state projected the rural villager as the common man and object of development, the middle class oriented media projected the consumer as a new ‘common man’; as an embodiment of all pleasures of the market, and at the same time, a victim of the state policies and working of the democratic system. Fernandes (2006) argues that as the middle class is socially and culturally visible, but its political role is invisible, the middle class strives to create a hegemonic identity and project themselves as a distinctive class with specific interests, and demands dominant representation in the national culture. They exploit different cultural strategies to generate cultural power to shape the national politics, and stake claim to the national culture. In the post Nehruvian period they exploited consumption as a mode of identity, and through consumption practices, they represented their interests as public interests. They generated cultural capital to preserve their social standing through deploying everyday practices. Pierre Bourdieu argues that ever day practices are “classificatory practices” that individuals and social groups develop and deploy as strategies of conversion of different forms of capital to preserve their social status and capacities to increase their social standing (46). The middle class oriented media, including comics, cartoons, movies and even advertisements, began to project the consumer as the Indian citizen. Gradually, media began to perceive itself as representative of the middle class. The growth of the visual media subverted the state sponsored national culture, highlighted the middle class desires and aspirations, and linked them with the rising India. The famous advertisement of Bajaj scooter in the 1970s with its tag line “buland bharat ki buland tasveer” reflects the shifting
paradigm of imagining the Indian nation. The penetration of the visual medium into
the private sphere helped to create a more globally–oriented consumption culture
(Mazzarella 2003). With the end of the Nehruvian ideology, the middle class began to
construct new national imaginary in order to shape the political culture in accordance
with their own invested interests. The media paid considerable attentions to the
middle class’s claim for national representation. Both the middle class and media
exerted pressure on the state to transform itself into a middle class agency. The global
market also provided the context for the political transformation. Tharu and Lalita
highlight the interlinkages between the global inclination and the political
transformation in the mid-1970s:

World capitalism’ made powerful efforts to assimilate the third worlds
markets into international market and the ‘internationalization of
markets, and the transformation of the Indian state essentially into a
mediator in that process required that the nation be imagined anew.
(49)

The assertiveness of the middle class that began in the 1960s, culminated in
Rajiv Gandhi’s regime. Pressurized by the assertiveness of the middle class and the
middle class oriented media representation, the state also began to sponsor the middle
class consumption as a marker of the nation. To consolidate its power in the
democratic system, the state not only supported the middle class demands but also
paved the way for their aspirations to be materialized. The spectacle of consumerism
was considered as the most potent source of realizing the Indian nation and
consolidating the state. During the Rajiv Gandhi period, “A television in every
village” was the slogan propagated by the state. Both state and media manifested the
libidinal engagement with commodity as a promise of a better life.

The popular culture, including comics, newspapers and the magazines,
reflected a fixation with the “exploding middle class”. The middle class civic
problems began to be the main topic of media debates. Consequently, the middle class
daily life became the central metaphor in the imagining the nation, and provided
background for popular literature. The Indian consumer was synonymously used for
the middle class. The middle class was further explained in new sub categories like
“the Indian teenager” and “the new Indian woman” to enhance the spectacle of
consumption. Different media forms, like comics, became a mirror in which the
middle class consumers saw the reflection of their own public and private subjectivities. Mazzarella asserts that “tying the tactile concretion of modern surfaces and bodies to a generalized narrative of middle class transformation, the commodity image was offered, for the first time in India, as a generalized social ontology” (73). The state formulated economic policies in order to encourage the construction of ‘consumer spaces’ and demarcate boundaries between the urban and the rural India. Varma indicates the promotion of consumerism in the post-Nehruvian period:

Consumerism was sanctified because the middle class ability to consume was an index to progress. Material wants were suddenly served from any notion of guilt. In a sense, it was the collective exorcism from the nation’s psyche of the ‘repressive and life–denying nature of Gandhi’s idealism’. (175)

It was during Rajiv Gandhi’s regime that the state began to project the middle class consumer culture as national representative culture, recognizing the middle class as an agency of economic transformation. Rajiv Gandhi emerged as the spokesman of the middle class desires and aspirations. In absence of an ideological framework, the middle class found a new source of identity in consumption. Tired of the deceit of ideology, the middle class adopted hedonistic tendencies to gain instant gratification, and explored consumerism as an empowering experience. Varma quotes a magazine article to explain the shifting attitude of the Indian middle class:

They have become far more international in their outlook and aspirations, more sophisticated and liberal in lifestyle and attitudes and certainly more adventurous and demanding in terms of holiday and leisure activities. One of the psychological legacies of the Nehruvian socialistic era was that the more affluent sections of society were branded as being rather vulgar, and spending money to live well was considered an even an greater sin. Today, that stigma seems to have vanished for many. (qtd. in Varma 177)

The traditional social institutions were abandoned as legitimate sources of identity construction. The middle class privileged consumption over the social institutions in the construction of their identity. Fernandes (2006) argues that the middle class project of self–projection coincided with their claim to represent the
public interests, which further resulted in a politics of distinction from both the state and marginalized social groups. This distinction is unfolded through new consumption practices and spatial politics in which the middle class consumer space is projected as threatened by the marginalized groups, and the state was depicted as an inefficient system. Consequently, the Nehruvian social space was replaced by the middle class consumer space. The emergence of the middle class as a consumer class has political significance because these consumption patterns represent a shift in the way the nation is perceived by both the middle class and the state. In the national imaginary, the existence of the rural Indian is described in terms of encroachment and as an obstacle in the realization of a modern globalized nation.

The identity of new middle class is encoded in terms of consumption and lifestyle associated with consumer goods. To perpetuate itself as consumer class, the middle class has developed new discourse of urban aesthetics and theme parks that seek to remove all signs of poverty from public spaces (Fernandes 2006). The middle class’s assertion manifests in their claim to represent the public interests, covertly illegitimating the existence of the poor as encroachment of the space of the ‘bhadralok’. In the form of contestations over public space, the middle class projects its lifestyle as a marker of the Indian identity. Consumption that has replaced the citizen with the consumer is perceived by scholars as ‘a daily election whereby consumers, who wield considerable power, make daily ethical choices in terms of the goods they purchase and the way they inhabit public and private space’ (Stevenson 262). Mazzarella argues in his book *Shoveling Smoke* (2003) that the new consumerist ontology interrogates the Swadeshi distinction between ‘the concretion of local community and the abstraction of the market.’ Rather, the market is seen as an ideal mechanism through which individual and community needs could be realized. The distinction between true and false needs is deconstructed in order to purge consumption of negative connotation of immoral activity. Once a moral dimension is added to consumption as rights of a citizen, the traditional distinction between necessities and luxuries are eroded.

The middle class, consumerism and media have been mutually constitutive. The middle class has recreated itself by representing consumerism in different forms of popular culture. The consumption patterns that serve to provide the background of these media representations, in fact, reconstruct a sense of reality, meditating the real
world through the prism of consumerism. The media presentation of the middle class consumerism has helped the middle class to get rid of guilt, associated with consumption, and has liberated them from the shackles of socialism that failed to deliver its promises to the aspirant middle class. The sensuous intensity and richness of the image is added to the libidinal engagement with commodity through visualization of consumption patterns in the comic book (Mazzarella 2003). The media representation of consumption suggests and allows the middle class to liberate from the ideological constraints on consumption and release the libidinal energies suppressed by the decade of socialist ideology. The planned dream, as advocated by the state, is perceived as infinite postponement of dream. By contrast, consumerism offers instant gratification. Consumption is projected not as individual gratification. Rather, it is advocated as a democratic force and as a collective participation in modernity. The ideology of consumerism projects its own vision as a vision of the social collective: consumption as citizens’ right and duty. The sense of “not yet” implied in the Nehruvian socialist model is replaced by the sense of “now” associated with the ideology of consumerism. This sense of now is projected as possibility in the representation. A new notion of collectivity, which is based on the “idea of democratization of aspiration,” has been constructed and propagated through representation (Mazzarella 98). Through representation, a new vision, based on ‘aspirational consumption’, is negotiated, and a dimension of sensuousness is added to the model of citizenship (Mazzarella 2003). The ideology of consumerism links the consumer desires with the identity of the middle class and provides an alternative with its own language of evolution and progress. The model of citizen, constructed by the austerities of Gandhian swaraj and Nehruvian socialism, is replaced by a new model of citizenship that embodies progress through pleasure (Mazzarrela 2003).

It is through the practice of consumption that the Indian middle class has recreated itself as representative of the national culture and differentiated itself from the other classes, at the same time. Liechty (2003) argues that middle class consumption is less about having or possession than it is about being and belonging. The middle class consumption is “about middle class production; it is in the practice of consumer regimens (from “doing fashion” to restaurant going to watching videos) that the middle class performs its cultural existence day by day” (Liechty 34). In the construction of middle classness, consumer behavior takes centre stage in the cultural
performances and narrative practices through which new realities of the consumer culture are created and enacted. Through these cultural performances, the middle class stakes claim to new consumer spaces, and uses them as zones in which its class privilege is performed and naturalized. Consumerism is not represented as antipode to the Indian culture. Rather, it is projected as an opportunity to revive Indianness. Consumerism is naturalized by representing it “as an unbeatable sensitive index to the innermost needs of the population at large” (Mazzarella 248). The middle class reinvented itself by reproducing the discourse of consumption as something to be celebrated, as a tool of liberalization, as a democratic process.

The eponymous hero, Chacha Choudhary embodies the consumer values and norms, serving the Indian society, which is marked by abundance of consumer commodities and their consumption. He is depicted as a competent individual, leading a life of pleasure and social reputation as well. He is an ‘Indian flaneur,’ the emblematic archetype of urban and modern experience, and a marker of the Indian culture as well. He is the observer of the market place, and the reporter of the middle class society, which is saturated with images of commodities (Benjamin 1999). He is an adventurous hero, who displays and personifies the middle class consumer culture. He stands for synchronization of the Indian middle class with a new consumer life. His role is symbolic in the narrative i.e. to represent the middle class consumption as phantasmagoric experiences with their own independent life-experiences that do not project consumerism as antithesis to the social life. Rather, the consumer experience has been linked to the well-being of the Indian society through his adventures. The Indian reality that he seems to represent is the mediated reality in which a consumer society is projected as an ideal pursuit of happiness. As Baudrillard (1998) argues that in the consumer society, heroes of production are replaced by heroes of consumption, in the comic book series, Chacha Choudhary is a hero of consumption, not a hero of production. A comparative analysis of realistic tendencies of Nehruvian period and representation in the comic book may help us analyze the shift in the way nation has been imagined. In the movies, during the Nehruvian period, the hero, who inhabits a rural space, is seen as selfless soul, who sacrifices his own comforts to build a strong nation.

The project of nation-building with the rural culture at the centre constitutes the theme of most of the realistic movies produced in the Nehruvian period. In such movies, heroes tend to compromise with their lives in order to improve the lot of the
peasantry by creating new economic opportunities and providing new sources of survival. For instance, in the classical Hindi movie *Mother India* (1957), the protagonist is depicted as a mother, a producer of productive forces, who serves as the symbol of nation-building. The conflict between the peasantry and exploitative landlord is envisaged as a national conflict, which is solved through suffering and sacrifices of the archetypal heroine. The movie ends with the inauguration of a canal for irrigation, symbolizing aspirations and hopes of the citizens of the Nehruvian period. In another classical Hindi movie, *Naya Daur* (1957) of the Nehruvian era, the emergence of capitalist mode of production is seen as a threat to the traditional Indian society and economic survival of the rural workers. However, the hero, the representative of the rural culture, manages to defeat the son of a rich business man, who conspires to drive the tonga wallahs away from the town by introducing bus services. However, in the comic book, such conflicts between the rural culture and urban culture, and between the peasants and landlords are permanently replaced by the social and economic problems of the urban middle class. The problems of survival have given way to the problems of consumptions. Rather, consumer desires have been projected as survival needs.

In contrast to the Nehruvian depiction of the rural India as an archetypal object of economic development, the urban middle class life is seen as a model of national development and progress in the comic book. The hero’s way of life is a symbolic projection of the middle class desires and aspirations that have been held back by the long held socialist ideals. In all stories, he is depicted as an intelligent Indian, who is famous for his social work. While enjoying a life of pleasure, he happens to be engaged in a variety of social work. The life of pleasure seems to provide background to his social self. By linking consumer way of life with social service, the consumer way of life has been naturalized. Chacha Choudhary is the hero of consumption, whose engagement with consumer life is a source of inspiration for others. In the comic book, the hero is not seen as a crusader, whose life reflects the possibilities of better future, or signifies the dispensation of a new way of life. Rather, the hero is depicted as committed to protect the libidinal engagement with the times “now,” not the time “not yet,” associated with the socialist state, which calls for the postponement of desire for building a strong nation to provide equal opportunities to all citizens irrespective of their caste, religion, class and region. Throughout the
narrative, commodities and money are stolen, usurped, and the institutions of consumer society are destroyed and robbed. Finally the hero intervenes and succeeds to restore harmony in the middle class society. The middle class India is depicted as a consumer society, where pleasure is duty, and problems are comically encountered and farcically solved.

The hero embodies a consumerist attitude that life, even in its lowest time, should be humorously lived through intensive consumption of commodities. Chacha Choudhary is portrayed as solving problems while indulging in leisure time. For instance, in the story entitled ‘The Ship’ *Chacha Choudhary in Tokyo* (Diamond Comics-882), in the beginning, Chacha Choudhary and Sabu are seen as enjoying leisure time on the beach, followed by a tragic scene, depicting the scene of a sinking ship. While swimming in the ocean, both Chacha Choudhary and Sabu succeed to rescue the passengers. Through narrative trick, the leisure time is incorporated into the narrative, marking the consumer identity of the Indian middle class. The leisure activities constitute the thread of the story, naturalizing the consumer class existence as an Indian way of life.

![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Fig.1.** Leisure time as cultural capital, ‘The Ship,’ *Chacha Choudhary* (No.882).

In the story entitled ‘The Crown of Yudhishtir’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics-1699), the eponymous hero is awarded by the city’s citizen committee for his social contribution to the city. For his sincere efforts to protect the city, an aircraft and good amount of money are gifted to the hero so that he could indulge in hedonistic pleasure for few days after his tedious job of protecting the city life, and solving both
social and economic problems. Both Chacha Choudhary and Sabu relish in luxury and live lavishly during the trip, suggesting the urban middle class consumer aspirations. In another story entitled ‘Don’s Strange Fan’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics-556), Chacha Choudhary appears as a member of elite class, who holds meeting in five stars hotels, participates in an international car races, bragging endlessly about his vintage car. In a dialogue with his assistant Sabu, he points out the social significance of possessing a vintage car. He proudly reveals to Sabu that he has been invited by a colonel for a cup of tea in a five star hotel. Chacha Choudhary consciously decides to visit him in his vintage car, reflecting his anxiety about his social status. In the comic book, there are no more scenes of poverty stricken people, filth and dirt. Instead, there are ample opportunities to live happily and intensively. The archetypal hero enables the reader to abbreviate a set of values to be imbibed in his/her character through his mythical battles between good and evil in which good always triumphs over evil. But the boundaries between good and evil are constructed and suggested by the hero. The comic heroes provide the potential models for children to develop their self-image.

Fig.2. Leisure time as cultural capital, ‘Don’s Strange Fan,’ *Chacha Choudhary* (No.556).

The life style and behavior patterns that the hero represents are decoded by the reader as universally desired patterns of behaviour in order to be a member of the society in which the hero is located. In the comic book, the hero is engaged in solving economic problems of the urban middle class, emphasizing the central role of money and commodities in social recognition and status. Belk (1987) in his paper “Material Values in the Comics,” argues that through heroic consumption figures in comic
books, children are being socialized, corresponding to the consumer middle class values and norms. The display of wealth through the central figure serves to legitimize and reinforce the consumer values. In the comic book, the hero visits restaurants, travels abroad, enjoys parties, and even enthusiastically attends social gatherings, where he exhibits his social standing and power. Unlike the heroes of the previous period, he does not shun those aspects of social existence which could be termed astrivial or pompous. Rather, he engages himself intensively in those facets of existence that could provide maximum pleasure to his consumer self. Even the social commitments are playfully performed. His social self is an integral part of his consumer identity. Even his social self is merely extended to the urban consumer space. In the comic book, he is mostly seen as guarding or helping the institutions of the consumer life, rich businessman, shopkeepers and consumer-citizens. In the story entitled ‘Chacha Choudhary and Aflatoon’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-1453), the city–based business men and shopkeepers approach the hero to protect their interests. The city–based criminal, Aflatoon extorts money from the rich people by threatening them, forcing them to pay him money as tax.

Fig 3. Threatened consumer society, ‘Chacha Choudhary and Aflatoon,’ Chacha Choudhary (No.1453).

The first two panels depict Aflatoon in conversation with his men, who have collected tax from the rich people. In the third panel, Aflatoon commends his men to collect more money from the rich people as his expenses have increased. In the next five panels, his men are seen as collecting money from the business men and shopkeepers, who agree to pay the increased tax, even without slight resistance. The hero Chacha Choudhary circumstantially encounters Aflatoon’s men in a shop, leading to a farcical fight between them. Chacha Choudhary rebukes the rich men for
encouraging such criminals by submitting to their demands. Inspired and convinced by the hero, who promises them to protect their interests, the business men and shopkeepers refuse to entertain the dictates of the mafia leader. The hero risks his life in order to protect the rich people and eventually, succeeds to eliminate the imminent economic threat.

The space, represented in the narrative, is a ‘consumer space’, a space that manifests all pleasures of the market, and embodies the ideal conditions for consumption. The imagined space is the ideal world of consumerism – a concretization of the abstract consumer way of life, marked by an absence of immoral dimension of consumerism. The spectacular space, projected in the narrative, is an unidentified space. Only the cultural signifiers suggest its Indian identity. The background setting, characters, their inter-relationships, all embody a consumer way of life and articulate the discourse of consumerism, projecting consumerism as embodying human values. This ‘nowhere’ space is the space that the middle class tends to imagine as its own cultural space. In this space, the social problems are replaced by the problems of management of consumer space. The imagined consumer space is depicted as a fantastical world where all problems are humorously solved. The discourse of consumption has been created through narrative that tends to purge consumption of negative connotations it carries in the Indian context. In the comic book, banks, offices, companies, Coffee houses, cinema hall and a busy market street lined by showrooms, jeweler shops, all constitute the background of the narrative, constructing the consumer identity of the Indian middle class. All incidents, which constitute the story line, usually occur in a street, lined by shopping malls, shops and restaurants.

In the story entitled ‘Market King’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-882), the share market is the backdrop of the story, depicting the rivalry between two companies. Drawing on the archetypal depiction of victory of good over evil, the narrative describes the story of a growing popularity of a company in the share market, which is highly envied by another corrupted company. Even the names of both companies respectively, Honest International and Lootmar International signify their moral status. The owner of the Lootmar Company deploys a criminal mafia to kill the owner of the company Honest International. Chacha Choudhary takes side
with goodness, represented by the company Honest International, and rescues the owner of the company from the mafia. In the narrative, the market place is not described as an immoral space where profit is privileged over welfare.

Fig.4. The market space, ‘Market King,’ Chacha Choudhary (No.882).

Rather, the market is seen as an immense opportunity, a marker of social and economic progress. If the market is marked by immorality and unscrupulousness, it is because of certain individuals, who could not restrain their greed for money and power. Consumption is never projected as an immoral or unethical activity. Rather, the locus of unethical consumption is shifted from commodity to the human agency. Commodities themselves do not embody unscrupulousness; instead, it is the human agency that carries possibilities of immorality. As a result, the human agency has to be educated and groomed to utilize commodities’ potency for goodness.

In the comic book, consumption is represented as a marker of development and progress. With the end of the socialist state’s ideology, the middle class revolted against the stalemated of the Nehruvian socialism which had continuously postponed their dreams and aspirations. The postponement of consumer desires was interpreted by the middle class as a never ending process. As a result, the middle class began to express their suppressed desires and indulge in the hedonistic pleasure of the market. Through media representations, consumerism was projected as a new mechanism through which both individual and national needs could be realized. The new ‘consumerist ontology’ erodes the distinction between deshi and swadeshi and depicts pleasure as a marker of progress (Mazarrella 2003). The imagined nation is not
plagued by the social problems, like deprevation and social marginalization. Rather, the imagined nation is well-equipped with all kind of facilities to facilitate a substantial existence to its consumers/citizens.

In absence of any social problem, pleasure is framed as a marker of the progress of the nation. In almost all stories, the middle class is depicted as indulging in all kinds of pleasure. The social welfare is replaced by the provision of pleasures of the market. Consumerism is explained in terms of social welfare that the state must strive to achieve. To consume consumer goods is represented as the citizen’s responsibility. By consuming consumer goods, the citizen contributes to the nation’s progress. In the comic book, the plight of the poor population and dearth of basic survival needs do not do not figure in the narrative. Rather, the consumer middle class and their consumer desires, aspirations and insecurities constitute the central thread of the narrative. Pleasure of consuming commodities is depicted as a marker of prosperity of the Indian nation, and the hero’s role is to ensure such libidinal existence of the Indian society remain protected from both outside and inside threats. In the story entitled ‘Chacha Choudhary in Agra’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics - 1260), the city, Agra is portrayed as a consumer city where there is no sign of poverty and survival problems. The first panel depicts the night view of the city, representing the city as a tranquil space, marked by the richness of consumer experience. The next three panels describe thecity’s prosperity and consumer life. The reader is forced to consume the spectacular city through the hero’s eye, who is strolling in the street at mid night. The well-cemented streets with street lights, lined by well designed house mark the identity of the city as a consumer space.

![Image](image_url)

Fig.5. The consumer behavior of the urban middle class, ‘Chacha Choudhary in Agra,’ Chacha Choudhary (No.1260).
The very next panel shifts the view from the urban street to a restaurant where Indians are seen enjoying their leisure time, visualized within the same panel. Having described the economic and social background, the story progresses from harmony to conflict, foregrounding the consumer space as a threatened space. The owner of the restaurant is threatened by a criminal, who demands twenty crores as protection money. The owner agrees to pay him the protection money in order to safeguard his business. The enemy of the owner is linked with the enemy of the national identity through a reference to the historical monument Taj Mahal, which symbolizes the glorious past of India. After receiving money from the business man, he plots to blow Taj Mahal. However, the nationalist, Chacha Choudhary gets air of his destructive plan, and averts the approaching menace.

The middle class’ political identity is dependent upon its claim to represent the public interests. To naturalize its own invested interests as public interests, the middle class has created the concept of ‘common man’-a representative of the public. The middle class oriented media representations helped circulate the discourse of ‘common man’ and consolidate the ruling class’ political power, representing the whole nation. During the Nehruvian period, which emphasized the improvement of the poor, the middle class supported the state’s projection of the villager as a common man. Although the middle class projected itself as a patriotic class, concerned with the plight of the poor, but it had never abandoned its self-interests. With the end of the socialist ideology, the middle class became overt in their ‘pursuit of Lakshmi’ and began to represent its ‘aspirational consumerism’ as an Indian dream (Mazzarella 2003). The Nehruvian ‘common man’ was replaced by new ‘common man’ based on middle class consumption practices. Consequently, the villager with rural background disappeared in the imagining the Indian nation. The urban middle class way of life constituted the core of the national imaginary, which centered on the consumer ‘common man,’ reconstructing the categories of citizen and nation.

The ‘common man’ depicted in the comic book is drastically opposite to the ‘common man’ projected in the Nehruvian period. Unlike Nehruvian ‘common man,’ Chacha Choudhary is a citizen of a consumer society, which obliterates the distinction between needs and desires, and retains the ‘Indian’ identity as well. A hero, present in art forms in a particular community, tends to represent the aspirations and dreams of that community. In art, the notion of hero is exploited either to confirm or reconstruct
the collective consciousness of the society in which hero is situated. It is through imaginative identification with heroes that members of a particular social group construct/reconstruct their identity. The social identity of the hero Chacha Choudhary, with whom the reader easily identifies as the representative of his/her society, relocates the reader in an imaginary society marked by proliferation of images of consumerism. In the Nehruvian period, the hero was seen as a ‘common man’ from the rural culture, marked by deprivation and dearth of facilities, and the hero usually used to sacrifice the gratifications of his own ‘self’ in order to provide basic facilities to the society or take great pains to protect their interests by exposing their exploitation in the hands of landlords, or the rich people. On the contrary, Chacha Choudhary is a consumerist hero, who protects the consumer interests of the urban middle class. The ‘common man,’ Chacha Choudhary is never seen in the narrative as economically deprived person, or he is heartbroken at the plight of poor citizens. Rather, he is depicted as an indulgent consumer, who helps and solves others’ problems while enjoying his own life. Even in several stories, he is described as a health trainer, who teaches the art of Yoga to the members of the urban middle class society. In such a story entitled ‘The miracle of Yoga’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics -253), the hero is seen as a yoga trainer, who teaches how to become healthy, cheerful and alert by practising Yoga.

Through his demonstration of the Yoga aasan, he not only marks the social identity of the middle class but also distinguishes the middle class from those who are ignorant of Yoga as means of ‘caring of the self’. Ignorant of the notion of the ‘self,’ two thieves try to steal money from his house, while he is engaged in training. The
hero, who is known for his presence of mind, exposes their trickery and punishes them for their criminal behavior. Through reference to the practice of Yoga, the consumer identity of the middle class is constructed and differentiated from the criminals, who do not have ‘self’ to be cared.

Through the discourse of bhadralok, the middle class constructs its cultural identity and differentiates itself from other classes. The discourse of bhadralok situates the middle class as morally superior to the other classes and hence, their claim to represent the nation is legitimized. The political assertion of the middle class is a result of the construction of a public discourse of respectability, moral regeneration and social reform (Chatterjee 1993; Joshi 2001; Sarkar 2001). With the emergence of the middle class as a consumer class, the discourse Bhadralok is coded in terms of consumption patterns. While in the Nehruvian period, the discourse of bhadralok is described in terms of morality, social ethics and a simple way of life in line with the ideology of socialist state, in the post-Nehruvian period, the notion of bhadralok is framed as consumer behavior that requires a modern outlook and self-discipline with much emphasis on individual pursuit of happiness. The new discourse of bhadralok advocates cultivation of new forms of subjectivity and self-discipline. Mahmood (2005) argues that to acquire and master the codes of middle class, only material resources are not sufficient; rather self-discipline to cultivate new forms of subjectivity is also required.

In the comic book, the middle class identity is marked by self-discipline, independent thinking, modern outlook, consumer attitude, and ‘Indian’ in terms of values at the same time. The middle class is characterized by consumerist tendencies: indulging in ‘aspirational consumerism’; travelling new places, visiting restaurants and cinema halls; enjoying weekends in shopping malls; attending birthdays parties. Even the streets are visualized as lined by shopping malls, where consumers are purchasing commodities. In the scene of such a consumer market, the sophisticated and rational citizens are differentiated from the vulgar and crooked individuals, who steal money and commodities from the consumer-citizens of the Indian society. The moral values and social respectability are reconstructed through the prism of consumerism. Good citizens earn money themselves and purchase all commodities that mark the national progress and prosperity. As responsible Indians, they participate in the global economy and contribute to the world economic system through their hard work and
dedication, indicating India’s growing global importance. The locus of bhadralok behavior patterns is relocated from traditional social institutions to the market place. The characters are forced to exhibit their values and norms in the market through narrative designs. The good citizens are differentiated from the criminal citizens, who represent an obstacle in the realization of the ‘global’ India. While good citizens of India like Chacha Choudhary attend international meetings and help the international bodies to solve economic and social problems, the criminal citizens indulge in robberies, and steal money and commodities, suggesting the cultural boundaries. Such characters function as binary scheme to define the bhadralok behavior of the Indian middle class.

Fig.7. The intelligent consumer, ‘Chacha Choudhary and the Great Kidnapping,’
Chacha Choudhary (No.1598).

In the story entitled ‘Chacha Choudhary and the Great Kidnapping’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-1598), the Indian consumer is depicted as intelligent Indian, who does not get overwhelmed by sugar-coated words. The two pickpockets assume that the rich people easily succumb to flattery. They exploit this human weakness in order to steal money and other commodities from the rich people. They try to divert a rich Seth’s attention in order to steal his money by flattering him for his high status and high living standard. When they are convinced that Seth is overwhelmingly engrossed in conversation, one of them tries to steal money from his pocket. However, when they find not even a single penny in his pocket, they shout at Seth in desperation, and question his identity as a rich man. The rich man makes fun of their backwardness and ignorance of the consumer culture by asserting that rich
men do not carry money in their pockets, instead they make payments by credit cards. In the next panel, while Seth is portrayed as sarcastically amused at the behavior of the pickpockets, Chacha Choudhary and Sabu join Seth in his amusement, and are seen laughing loudly, indicating their class solidarity with the rich man. The two pickpockets are visualized in the panel as bewildered, disgraced and alienated.

Consumption is not depicted as anti-social; rather it is projected as emancipator. Consumption is not seen as a dehumanizing or unethical practice. Instead, it is exhibited as a marker of progress of the Nation. Consumption of commodities is explained as assisting in restoring harmony in the Indian society. Development is described in terms of technological progress and consumption of consumer goods, not in terms of social welfare. In the comic book, consumption is depicted as a modern middle class way of life to be emulated by Indians as a marker of Indian identity. Consumerism is seen as an opportunity to redress the humiliations of the colonial experiences (Mazzarella 2003). By representing consumption as a citizen’s duty and right, it has been purged of pejorative connotations it had carried before. The guilt feeling attached to consumption as display of wealth in a poor country has been removed through spatial politics in which India is visualized as urban Indian, engaged in modern way of life. All signs of poverty are removed in the visualization of the nation. In the Nehruvian period, in the narrative, influenced by the socialist state, the rural culture used to constitute the social background, and the conflict between peasants and landlords constituted the theme of the narrative, reaching climax with the resolution of social conflicts. The social space of the Nehruvian era is replaced by the consumer space, where social problems have given way to commodity related problems. The comic book does not reflect the dark realities of the Indian society, nor is the rural culture incorporated in the narrative. Rather, the comic book manifests the fantastical world of commodities in which commodities are fantasized, desired, acquired, seized and finally reclaimed, and the human relationships are judged through possession of these commodities. In the story entitled ‘Hand in Hand’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-1616), the characters are described in a consumer space, where consumer commodities are sold and purchased at discount prices.
The incidents that constitute the narrative occur in the consumer space. Chacha Choudhary and his wife Binni are seen as engaged in a conversation with a well-dressed gentleman, cracking jokes and appreciating the enigmatic ambience of the consumer street. Their festive mood is disrupted by some uncultured criminal individuals, who plot to snatch money from Binni, but they are easily subjugated by the hero. Through the discourse of criminality, the members of the working class are differentiated from the consumer middle class.

In the nationalist discourse, the rural culture was romanticized as a true reflection of the Indian culture, situating the human relationships as central to the social existence. On the contrary to it, the urban culture was demonized as a reflection of the material world in which personal interests preferred over the human values. After independence, the rural culture came to embody ‘Indian’ values and constituted the content of all forms of literature in the Nehruvian period. In the literature, conditioned by such nationalist discourse, the rural culture was compared with the urban culture, setting the rural culture superior to the urban culture in terms of human values. The romanticized depiction of the rural culture as retention of the ‘Indian’ values was later on exposed by authors like SriLal Sukla. The novelist Sukla, in his classical text *Rag Darbari* (1968), debunks the myth of the rural culture as inhabited by innocent people, who live their life sincerely and meaningfully, untouched by the corrupted urban culture. The dichotomy of urban and rural has been central to the construction of national identity. The emergence of consumerism in the Indian context has shaped the depiction of urban/rural contradiction in popular literature. The depiction of urban culture as an immense possibility of realizing the nation coincided...
with the emergence of middle class as a consumer class. The Indian middle class began to represent the urban culture as a space of future possibilities of turning the middle class aspirations into reality. Consequently, the setting of the narrative has shifted from the rural culture to the urban culture, where the immense possibilities of realizing the middle class dreams are obscured by the delinquent citizens, who strive to earn money through unethical means.

In the story entitled ‘Transfer of Money’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-1215), there is no reference to the rural culture, nor are social problems of the Indian society mentioned. Instead, money and commodities make up the story, embodying the urban middle class values. The story begins not with the depiction of dark realities, prevailing in the rural India, instead, with a representation of the consumer life of the urban middle class. In the beginning of the story, the middle class is seen as enjoying the pleasures of the market, and then their consumer life is disrupted by their class enemies, followed by the restoration of harmony in the middle class society by the middle class hero Chacha Choudhary.

The depiction of the middle class as the consumer class is implicated in the construction of the middle class identity. Veblen (1899) argues that this class expresses itself through distancing itself from the manual work. The depiction of the consumer life functions as what Bourdieu (1984) has termed “classificatory practices” to mark the class boundaries. The first five panels of the story focus solely on both Chacha Choudhary and Sabu, depicting their libidinal engagement in their free time. Their free time is disrupted by a private bank manager, who approaches them to help him in transferring money from one place to another. Chacha Choudhary, with the help of Sabu, protects his money and humiliates the ‘goondas,’ who seem to belong to the remote area. In the narrative, the social responsibility of the hero is envisaged as protection of the consumer space. The social welfare, a concern that often figures in the socialist literature, is displaced by the problems of consumer space. The locus of immoral consumerism is shifted from the urban middle class to the working class. The middle class consumption is differentiated from the consumption of the working class. The pejorative connotations attached to consumption are transferred to the working class consumption practices. It is the working class criminals who succumb to their greed and resort to unethical means in order to possess commodities. It is their practice of consumption that is coded in terms of immoral activity.
In the story entitled ‘Chacha Choudhary and Deadly Dan’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics-1499), consumption is not described as an immoral activity. Rather, certain individuals are portrayed as unscrupulous, who succumb to their greed, and indulge in immoral activities. In the narrative, the owner of a car company does not want to lose money due to the government’s decision to increase excise duty on luxury cars. While the middle class consumers, including the hero, support the finance minister’s decision to increase excise duty on luxury cars, as it is their responsibility to contribute to the national economy, the owner of a company of car production perceives it as detrimental to his business. The owner conspires to assassinate the finance minister. However, he is punished by Chacha Choudhary for his anti-national stance. In the narrative, Consumption is not demonized, as it was perceived before. Instead, consumption is legitimized if tax is paid to the nation. Consumption is advocated as both a marker of the progress of the nation and as an alternative source of the national income. In the early decades of independence, consumer commodities were discouraged through imposing heavy tax. Even import of such commodities was economically and socially condemned. In the narrative, the role of consumption in the construction of Indian identity is reinforced, and ethical consumption is advocated as an indicator of the globalizing India.

In the story entitled ‘Tooth of Tablatour’ *Chacha Chouhdary* (Diamod Comics-1593) the consumer tendencies are implicitly advocated, and hoarding money is ridiculed in the narrative. The first panel depicts a rich Seth, engrossed in counting his money on his Computer and his wife looking curiously at his face, fixed on

![Fig.9](image_url)

**Fig.9.** The traditional society, ‘Tooth of Tablatour,’ *Chacha Chouhdary* (No.1593)
computer screen, indicating his obsession with hoarding money. In another panel, his wife mocks him for his inability to spend money. He is ridiculed for his chosen lower standard of living. The comments of his wife on his miserly behavior function to question his identity as a consumer middle class. Even the appearance of both Seth and his wife is linked to their attitude towards life and consumption, differentiating them from the consumer class. Both Seth and his wife are seen in traditional dresses, suggesting their identity as traditional Indians, who have not adopted the emerging consumer culture. Their life is projected as dull, monotonous, and without essential pleasure of life due to their traditional attitude to towards life. Even the eponymous hero Chacha Choudhary is disappointed at his inflexibility to pace with the time, ridiculing his obsession with money.

Dress codes displayed in the narrative also mark the consumer identity of the Indian middle class. The narrative, set against the urban middle class background, involves characters, who are Westernized individuals, and still, they manage to retain their Indian identity through selection of dress codes. Tarlo (1996) argues that clothing plays an active role in the identity construction of individuals, families, castes, regions and nations. In the narrative, the consumer identity of the Indian middle class is constructed through dress codes. What is striking is that, how conflict between the Indian values and the Western values has been resolved through dress codes. For instance, the eponymous hero is depicted as well dressed in a Western formal dress—a combination of trouser, shirt, jacket and tie, but he is never seen without his turban and his Indian stick—markers of his Indian identity. While in the private sphere, the Indian woman is depicted in Indian clothes, she is portrayed in Western formal clothes in the public sphere. The young girls and boys are seen in contemporary western suits, marking their identity as Indian consumers, but their Indian identity is preserved through the Indian values that they reflect in their behavior.

The domestic and married women are represented as Indian wives, wearing sari, bindi and other Indian costumes, but the independent working women are portrayed as well dressed in western clothes, English speaking individuals, who are also engaged in economic activities, contributing to the national progress and
development. During the Nehruvian period, much emphasis was given on local clothes for both economic and political reasons. Even Western clothes were perceived as vulgar and commercial products as opposed to the colorful Indian clothes. The middle class, through media representation, has subverted the way Western clothes are seen as luxury. In the comic book, Western clothes have been naturalized as a marker of the globalizing India. The middle class reconstructs itself as a global consumer class through displaying their new dress codes. Through clothing, they have created their self image. As Wilson asserts that clothing “links the biological body to the social being, and public to private….Dress is the frontier between the self and the not self” (2-3). The change in dress code from dhoti kurta to Western clothes points out a significant change in the way the nation is imagined in the middle class oriented media representations. Tarlo argues that a change of clothes can be interpreted as an act of desertion or change of affiliation (17).

As the nation is transformed from the Nehruvian developmentalist state to a consumerist India, the subsequent socio-economic changes are reflected in the world of the comic book series. The characters in the comic book keep pace with the changing the socio-economic transformations. The cartoonist Pran Kumar Sharma also emphasizes the need to reinvent characters in order to make them contemporary, accommodating new social and economic changes. In the comic book Chacha Choudhary, dress codes have been aptly exploited not only to reflect the changing times but also draw class boundaries. The urban middle class is clearly distinguished from other classes through deploying class-based dress codes. In the initial issues, Chacha Choudhary is seen in a traditional Indian dress, kurta, dhoti and turban, representing the essence of the Indian culture or what Aurbindo Ghose termed ‘fine texture ’of traditional India (qtd. in Joshi 2010). In the later issues, he is portrayed as a well dressed gentleman, wearing Western clothes, embodying the urban middle class values. His traditional dress kurta and dhoti are replaced by the Western dress-shirt and trouser. His vest and tie further reinforce his identity as an urban middle class individual. However his ‘Indian’ identity is retained symbolically through his turban and stick. The turban is an important identity marker in the Indian society.
In the Indian society, turban signifies ‘*ijjat*’ (respect), and possession of turban is a dominant symbol of status. In fact there are several stories in the comic book in which possessing and not possessing turban constitutes conflict of the narrative.

The character of Sabu is also reinvented from a genie to an urban gentleman, signifying the emerging consumer middle class society. Initially, the character of Sabu was introduced as a giant from Jupiter, who wears only a ‘*kachha*’ (underwear), and his ears are pierced with earrings, which resemble the ‘*kundle*’ (earrings) of the epic character Hanuman, marking his Indian identity. In the later issues, he is metamorphosed from a rural character to an urban gentleman by changing his costume from underwear to a Western formal dress. In one story entitled ‘Sabu in Suit’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-322), Sabu is represented in a gentleman’s attire, wearing a Western formal suit, but his consumer identity is questioned by the hero for his lack of urban class’s manners in his personality. Through his suggestion to Sabu, Chacha Choudhary indicates the importance of attire and manners in the construction of urban identity. Through dress codes, the class boundaries are also constructed, distinguishing the urban middle class from the rural masses. The rural people are depicted as religious, ignorant and stupidly innocent, who are easily deceived by the criminals, and are unable to solve their problems. On the contrary, the urban middle class people are seen as modern, intelligent and international in outlook, economically independent, indulging in the pleasures of commodities. While the rural people are portrayed as wearing *kurta, dhoti* and traditional turban, marking their rural identity, the urban middle class characters appear as well clothed in the colorful
Western costumes, suggesting their urban identity. The interplay between dress codes and manners plays an important role in the construction of class identity. The characters, those who are attired in Western clothes, are seen as sophisticated and modern, engaged in different professions and enjoying the Western lifestyle. On the contrary, the characters, arrayed in the traditional Indian clothes, are seen either as ignorant villagers, engaged in agricultural activities or servants, working in the urban setting.

There are several stories in the comic book in which the icon of Chacha Choudhary is employed as a merchandiser to advertise commodities. In such stories, commodities appear as characters and represent themselves as embodying the urban middle class values. The icon of Chacha Choudhary is exploited to testify and promote commodities as middle class consumption. Both the use value and symbolic value of commodities are embedded into the narrative in such a way that their presence/absence in the middle class consumption determines the climax of the narrative. The consumerist ideology exploits the human tendency of extending one’s self to commodities and other possessions. We tend to construct our identity by linking our sense of life with our assets, and with what we have around us. The consumerist ideology exploits this human capacity in the narrative by representing commodities as essential to the formation of the self. Tuan also argues that "Our fragile sense of self needs support, and this we get by having and possessing things because, to a large degree, we are what we have and possess" (472).
The victory of goodness over evil constitutes the theme of the narrative, and commodities seem to take side with goodness. In the story entitled ‘Chacha Choudhary and Lifebuoy’ Chacha Choudhary (Diamond Comics-1378), the mafia men plot to assassinate the minister, but the gunman fails to target the minister due to the deterioration of his vision. In the meantime, Sabu appears on the scene and rescues the minister. The mafia men’s failure to assassinate the minister is attributed to the deterioration of the vision. The gunman touches his eyes with germ-affected hands which causes infection in his eyes. The commodity ‘Lifebuoy’ itself appears in the narrative to explain the reason of their failure. The commodity is humanized, turning it into an essential part of human life. Even a single large panel is also inserted between stories, flashing commodities embedded into the urban middle class existence, promoting commodities as a marker of the middle class identity. In such a cover page the soap ‘Lifebuoy’ appear as personified with Chacha Choudhary and Sabu. Chacha Choudhary and Sabu are well dressed in Western clothes, signifying their urban middle class identity.

The personified commodity ‘Lifebuoy’ is depicted in a pose similar to Sabu’s pose, linking the commodity’s identity with Sabu’s Identity and subsequently, the commodity is seen as an integral part of the society, which the middle class hero Chacha Choudhary protects through his semi-heroic adventures. What is ambiguously persuasive in the image is the depiction of the reader, anchored with the tag line “Chacha Choudhary’s mind works faster than computer and yours?” The child, supposedly reader, is sketched as an empty space to be filled by the reader himself/herself by imagining himself/herself in that space. The empty cartoon allows
easily the reader to imagine himself/herself in that space. The empty space, defined by border lines, transcends the story and its setting, and is capable of entering the reader’s imagination, playing an important role in the construction of identity. The icon of the reader is differentiated from the other three icons not only through its iconic emptiness, but also through its posturing, suggesting the reader’s identity crisis. The icon of the reader seems to suggest the reader’s discomposure at not possessing the commodity which could enable the reader to identify with Chacha Choudhary and Sabu. The tag line of the comic book “Chacha Choudhary’s mind works faster than computer”, which is woven in each story at the end of the story, highlighting the role of wisdom of the hero, is also exploited in the image to anchor the icon of the reader. The edited tag line “Chacha Choudhary mind works faster than computer. And yours,?” not only interrogates the identity of the reader but also suggestively rejects his/her identity. The icon of the reader, anchored by text, notifies and persuades the real reader to construct his/her identity by consuming the suggested commodity.

Fig.13. Chacha Choudhary as merchandise, Chacha Choudhary (No.1378).

The consumer identity of the Indian middle class is also articulated through reconstituting new gender roles, which would mark the Indian middle class identity as essentially Indian, but modern. Consumption is also a form of patriarchal domination in which the woman is subjected to a new patriarchy which tends to dictate women to perform double gender roles: as a symbol of Indian values and norms in the private domain, and as a marker of middle class modern outlook in the public domain. The family is not simply a context in the narrative. Rather, it has been reconfigured through its articulation in the narrative, which focuses on the middle class consumer
patterns. The representation of women as modern, independent, actively participating in the material world, previously dominated by men, and ‘Indian’ as well, representing all spiritual qualities, which conferred on them by the nationalist discourse, is implicated in the politics of identity. By representing “new women” of the Indian society, the middle class has attempted to not only create its consumer identity but also manage the dichotomy of Indian / Western. Through consumerist ideology, the family is reconfigured in order to create consumer identity, without losing the essence of ‘Indian’ culture.

Historically, the Indian woman has been exploited as an ideological site for marking the ‘Indian’ culture. While the colonizers exploited the condition of women in the Indian culture to stigmatize the Indian society as barbarian and uncivilized, the nationalists contested the colonial hegemony by projecting the ‘Indian’ spiritual culture, represented by the female as superior to the material culture of the West. The Indian woman came to represent the private sphere of the Indian society. The encroachment of the private sphere by the material world was condemned and ridiculed. The pernicious effects of the material world were highlighted through depiction of the Westernized woman. Chatterjee points out the cultural role of woman assigned by the nationalist:

The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world—and woman is its representation. And so one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir. (qtd. in Guha, A Subaltern 245)

He argues that the threatened Westernization of women constitutes the theme of every form of written, oral and visual communication. The Indian women’s love for wealth, jewellery, cosmetics, new clothes and specific manners is ridiculed in the form of social parody (qtd. in Guha, The Subaltern). The middle class has continued the dichotomies, designed by the nationalist discourse, even in the construction of consumer identity. In a way, the ‘new woman,’ who actively participates in the domain of material, is also subjected to a new patriarchy. The new woman is also
compared with the “common” woman, who is coarse, vulgar, loud, and is devoid of the superior moral sense. The new woman can participate in the material world, but she has to retain her feminine self, manifested in her dress, eating habits, social sensibility and religiosity. On one hand, the Indian woman has to retain womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness and patience, she also has to prove herself in the competitive material world, on the other hand. Chatterjee also argues that “the specific ideological form in which we know the “Indian woman” construct in the literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle class culture coeval with the era of nationalism” (qtd. in Guha, The Subaltern).

In the comic book, Chacha Choudhary’s fat wife Binni is seen as a bhartiya nari (Indian woman) who is quarrelsome and nagging wife, but she is a sensible woman also. She represents the Indian values encoded in femininity of a woman. Binni is portrayed as a fat housewife, who loves jewellery, costumes, and get easily affected emotionally by what happens in the TV serials, symbolizing the private sphere of the Indian culture known as ‘ghar’ in the Indian culture. In contrast to the depiction of Binni as gharelu aurat (domestic woman), the Westernized women are seen as slim, beautiful and independent who, participate actively in the world of business. Unlike Binni’s dullness and ignorance of the worldly affairs, the Westernized women are confident, who independently manage their everyday day life. Although the active participation of Westernized women in the public life marks the new identity of the Indian middle class as a consumer middle class, yet their excessive indulgence in consumption has been condemned.

Fig.14. Depiction of Indian women in the comic book series Chacha Choudhary.
through depiction of the Westernized women. In the story entitled ‘Gold dust’ *Chacha Choudhary* (1615), the Indian women are so greedy for jewellery and gold that they are easily deceived by a jeweler, who capitalizes on their greed for golden jewellery and sell them fake jewellery. Like a guardian, Chacha Choudhary reprimands them for their mindlessly obsession with gold. He traces the culprit and recovers their money. In another story entitled ‘Internet Crime’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics-1211), both traditional Indian woman and “new Indian woman” are depicted in the same narrative. In the two consecutive panels, the new Indian woman, who is independent and westernized actress, is contrasted with the Indian traditional wife, who is seen as dominating and quarrelsome woman. While Chacha Choudhary’s wife Binni represents the private sphere of Indian culture in which the behavior patterns of women signify the Indian values, the Westernized Indian girl suggests the public sphere, the material world in which women are seen as modern progressive, competing with men in the different spheres of life.

The woman is exploited as a site where encounter between the Indian values and consumerism is managed by representing women as traditional and feminine at home and modern and independent in the public, constructing the middle class identity as the consumer Indian middle class. In the story, Binni is economically dependent on his husband, and her life is wholly engaged in domestic work. Her whole purpose of life seems to cook food for Chacha Choudhary and Sabu, and take care of her house. On the other hand, the ‘new woman’ is depicted as public figure, who is highly regarded by the urban middle class for her independence. Unlike Binni, who is dominating, politically ignorant and intellectually dull, the new woman is confident, intelligent and socially active. In the story entitled ‘Golden Brick’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics Digest-102), Binni is ridiculed for her love for jewellery and cosmetics. The first panel introduces Binni with her friend, engaged in conversation. Both are seen as discussing new jewelry, which her friend has got as a gift from her husband. Following her friend’s footsteps, Binni asks Chacha Choudhary to bring something for her neck. Humor in the story arises from incongruity between what Binni is expecting and what her husband does. In contrary to her expectations, Chacha Choudhary contemptuously brings tablets for her throat, ridiculing her obsession with jewellery.

Similarly, in the story entitled ‘Market king’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics-1378), the dichotomy of *ghar* and *bahr* (private and public) is exploited to construct and manage the consumer identity of the Indian middle class. The first five
panels in the story represent the private life of the Indian middle class, suggesting the Indian family values. In the private life, woman is a traditional, quarrelsome and dominating housewife. Chacha Choudhary’s wife Binni is illustrated as a domestic fat wife, who is aggressive and intellectually dull but is a nice human being at the same time. In spite of her temperament deformities, she is deeply admired by Chacha Choudhary due to her imbibed Indian values. In the sixth panel, the view is shifted from the private to the public life of the Indian middle class. The sixth panel depicts the over view of a market, characterized by skyscrapers, tall buildings, green parks, cemented streets and well maintained roads, representing a consumer space. In the next panel, a young Indian working woman is seen in the office of an international company. She is briefing her boss on the status of the company in the market. On the contrary to the depiction of gharelu aurat like Binni, the working women are portrayed as slim, independent, and intellectually active who equally attend the worldly affairs.

In the comic book, the socialist world of the Nehruvian period is replaced by the world of commodities in which the human-human relationship is superseded by human–commodity relationship. Mankekar also comments on the shift from the socialist state to the market:

This change in policy rested on the premise that India would become a modern nation when its citizens acquired modern lifestyle through the acquisition of consumer goods. The new economic policies enabled middle class Indians to consume what, until a few years ago, were deemed luxuries but were now perceived as crucial indicators of upward mobility. (37)

Fig.15. The Indian woman as domestic woman and modern woman, ‘Market king,’ *Chacha Choudhary* (No.1378).
In such a consumer existence, commodities and money, not human beings and human relationships constitute the theme of the narrative. In the comic book, almost all stories move around money and commodities. The complexity of social relationships is replaced by the complex fantasies of commodities in the comic book series *Chacha Choudhary*. Appadurai (1986) also remarks that things have “social lives,” and middle class culture is uniquely embedded in the social trajectories of things. They construct their cultural identity through their interaction with commodities. In one story entitled ‘Dream World’ *Chacha Choudhary* (Diamond Comics- 570), the hidden middle class consumer desires and fears are articulated through a dream sequence. In psychological term, dreams tend to reflect the suppressed desires and fears. The suppressed desires get manifested through fantastical articulation in dreams and arts. In the story, Sabu suggests Chacha Choudhary to share each other’s dreams of the last night in order to kill boredom of the long way. Initially, Chacha Choudhary rejects Sabu’s suggestion of sharing each other’s dreams by asserting that he does not believe in bizarre dreams because he is a realist, suggesting his distrust of unrealistic dreams. Sabu challenges Chacha Choudhary’s rejection of dreams as a substantial content for conversation by arguing that dreams are important for the human life, implicitly indicating the role of dreams in human emotions. Both, in their dreams, reflect fears and desires, shaped by their own respective cultural positioning. Sabu narrates a fantastic story of giant fairy, who asks him to marry her in order to return gratitude as he was rescued by her when he fell down from a cliff. While Sabu’s fear of marriage manifests in his dream, Chacha Choudhary’s dream reflects consumer desires and fears. In the description of his fantastical dream, he narrates, how fruits and flowers were replaced by cakes, chocolates and ice creams in the garden. The trees and plants were blossomed with sweets. But these sweets were protected and eaten by a dark skinned devil. Chacha Choudhary’s desire to consume those sweets is thwarted by the violent assertion of the dark-skinned devil. The narrative reflects both the middle class’s ‘aspirational consumption’ (Mazzarella 2003) and the threatening presence of the marginalized groups, representing an obstacle in the realization of consumer aspirations.
In the comic book, commodities are purged of their negative connotation by presenting them as inseparable part of the Indian society. They are depicted as locked within a filial relationship with the Indian middle class. They are humanized through the narrative to be seen members of the Indian society. In the initial years of independence, the bull cart was portrayed as an archetypal icon of both mode of production and social life, embedded in that mode of production. The archetypal bull cart was depicted as an identity marker of the Indian citizen. The embedded depiction of both the archetypal bull cart and the villager as Indian citizen reflects the socio-economic structure of the Indian society, suggesting the essence of the traditional culture of India. In the colonial period, the nationalists, like Gandhi, projected the rural culture as the authentic Indian culture, and posed the rural culture against the ‘shahri’ culture, which was perceived as corrupted by the Western material culture. After independence, under the socialist state, the rural culture came to embody Indian traditional values. The archetypal icons of the rural culture were employed in the media representation to build a nation on the basis of the traditional ‘Indian’ culture, simultaneously incorporating the modern values. In the post Nehruvian period, these icons of rural culture began to be replaced by the icons of emerging consumer middle class. The consumer culture of the emerging Indian middle class was represented as a new Indian way of life through utilizing new symbols and icons of the consumer middle class in media representation. In such media representation, the rural setting was replaced by the urban setting, reflecting the cultural transformation. The archetypal bull cart was replaced by an automobile, a symbol of the urban culture, suggesting the paradigm shift in the construction of the national culture. In the comic book, the stock characters and situations of the media representation, during the Nehruvian period, are reworked in order to disseminate the consumer ideology. The hero Chacha Choudhary is not seen with a humanized and loyal horse or bull cart like old movies in the 1950s and 1960s, helping his master even in the most critical situations. Rather, the hero of the comic book is the owner of a truck, which has been domesticated and named as Dug-Dug. The truck Dug-Dug is not simply a machine, which requires jus fuel to move. Rather, it is a member of Chacha Choudhary’s family.
Fig. 16. The truck as half-human machine in the comic book series *Chacha Choudhary*

It is depicted as an integral part of a filial network held by the hero. There are several occasions in the narrative, when the hero can be found engaged in conversation with the truck. Whenever there is a critical situation, requiring immediate action to be taken, the hero hails the Dug-Dug to show its power, suggesting the urgency to assist in his mission of restoring harmony in the troubled society. In some stories, some individuals approach Chacha Choudhary to buy his truck after perceiving its capacity to act on in critical situations like human beings, but their dream of possessing the truck is, at once, turned down by the hero. The truck is not depicted just as a machine to be maneuvered manually. Rather, it is a humanized machine. It is so much emotionally attached with the hero that nobody can drive it without Chacha Choudhary’s permission. Through invocation of filial ties, the machine is naturalized as an integral part of the Indian society.

Consumption is a hegemonic practice which partakes in the production of class identity. Consumption generates cultural capital, serving as a strategy of inclusion and exclusion. The representation of the consumer middle class as a national representative culture reflects the paradigm shift in the way the Indian nation is to be imagined. The consumer identity of the Indian middle class is constructed in the comic book series, redefining the categories of ‘citizenship,’ ‘national culture’ and ‘common man.’ In the next chapter the nexus between religion and class is explored, highlighting the role of the Hindu majority in the construction of the Muslim identity in the public discourses.