CHAPTER 4

CHILDHOOD AND CONSUMPTION IN CONTEMPORARY PARENTING

4.1 Who is a child?

The Oxford Dictionary of Sociology defines a child: ‘...to mean either an offspring or someone who has not reached full economic and jural status as an adult in a society. Individuals in the latter state are passing through an age-related period known as childhood.’ While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK government in 1991, states that a child ‘means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.’ (Article 1, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989).

4.2 Brief History of Childhood

A history of childhood is a history of ideas, institutions and adult practices as roles, status and experiences of children are always related to the wider sets of ideas and concepts. There are numerous perspectives and theories which try to construct what a childhood is. Some view childhood from the social constructionist perspective which regards childhood as constructed out of class activities. M.J. Kehily mentions Gittins pointing out that ‘the development of childhood as a concept was class-specific, reflecting the values and practices of a rising European middle class that increasingly differentiated adults and children, girls and boys.’ According to this theory, there is no childhood as such and childhood is a bourgeois concept. Rousseau and others like John Locke view child as tabula rasa and regard ‘innocence’ as the most essential component of childhood. They consider childhood as a once in lifetime, precious phase or experience which should be protected at all costs.
from adults- or those punished for the original sin. The world of adults is corrupt and children should enter quite late. And physical labour was an adult task so the physical labour by children was criticized and not working became synonymous with childhood. Mead (1955) and Ariès (1962) were among the first to draw attention to the idea that childhood is socially and historically constructed rather than innate or natural and the concept of social construction remains important in research on childhood.

4.3 Pre-industrialization childhood

The childhood has been a neglected area of study in all the disciplines in spite of the fact that children have been part of the families since the evolution of family man. One reason behind the gap or neglect of child in the text and disciplines may be, as Ariès (1962) contends, that childhood is a very modern conception- i.e. childhood, as we know it today, is quite a recent phenomenon and was not there not until late middle ages. He claims that in the Middle Ages the idea of childhood did not exist. There is an interesting proposition regarding the history of childhood that during the pre-modern era, due to high child mortality rates, parents were not much attached to the children and therefore viewed them as temporary.

4.4 Industrial turn in childhood

It was in the 17th century that the concept of contemporary childhood began taking shape in the wake of industrialization and its effects on the society. The romantic discourse about children as exemplified in the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau considered them as embodying a natural state of innocence and purity. Further romantic ideals portrayed them as closest to God in their state of innocence. Here, romanticism seems to be influenced by Christianity in considering innocence as the uncorrupted stage and knowledge as the corrupting force. The child was also represented as *tabula rasa* inspired
by the philosophy of Locke who saw children coming to this world as a blank slate to be trained into rational adults through the means of education. The Industrial Revolution led to changes in various institutions, like the education system, health care and decreasing mortality rate etc. which, in turn, helped define and establish the modern conception of childhood. A whole new culture of childhood began to evolve and, as Ariès mentions, there was a new found interest in children’s language and mispronunciation. Even in clothing, slight distinctions began to be made although the clothes were mainly like adults. The clothes were ‘hands-me-down’ from the adult world. And not only the clothes were ‘hands-me-down’ but the games today children play and the fairy tales they listen were once played and listened by the adults and later were left for the children.

Schooling brought out considerable changes in our conceptions towards childhood as education was age based and progressive and separated adult world from children world. Children were considered to be corruptible and therefore there was a need felt to monitor, supervise and discipline children which were brought parental supervision at home and through boarding schools. The exact age recording of a child was done in the wake of educational policies/objectives. And a child who hitherto was recognizable from physical features was soon codified into his/her age. This is evident in the Indian context, where the baby Boomers do not exactly remember or register their date of birth but all Gen X have their medical records citing their date. This was necessitated due to the tying together of age with education and institutional deliveries, especially in rural areas, while earlier, the criteria for admitting to a school was not age and but bodily development Boomers Almost universally, industrialization has generally lead to an exodus of labour from rural hinterlands to the urban centres This, in turn, has constricted living space in the city which offered small and private spaces. Nuclear families developed and flourished in the discourse of medical health and upbringing of children.
The private spaces brought children to the center stage of family and furthered the replacement of apprenticeship by formal education for the children making them almost ‘God like’- revered for their innocence.

There was, thus, an important change in outlook towards the mental and physical capacities of children and infancy. The adult-like-child was reduced to incapablity, immaturity, innocence, and waiting- to- be- developed -as –full-adult. In the 20th century, childhood à la western world was ‘a period in the life course characterized by social dependency, asexuality, and the obligation to be happy, with children having the right to protection and training but not to social or personal autonomy’ (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998:62)

4.5 Contemporary childhood

The contemporary society has changed a lot from its pre cursor pre-modern society. The social institution like family has undergone a great change which in turn is induced by the changes in technology of communication, financial positions, city architecture, new movements etc. The world is facing ‘clash of civilizations’ (Huntington: 1996) in the times of ‘global village’ (Mcluhan: 1962). The identities are strained and the world is felt to be increasingly insecure in the wake of global terrorism or separatist/ violent ideological movements or revolutions. Contemporary society is suffering from identity hypersensitivity. Materialism has come to define our contemporary society. The above social conditions and symptoms are required to be kept in mind before analyzing contemporary childhood. Child rearing practices are toeing the line of companies based not only upon the childhood products but also upon a notion of childhood manufactured by the market itself.

4.6 New Age parenting

There has been a talk of new age parenting in Asia and elsewhere. The west to some extent has seen the complications of first industrial society and
then post-industrial society. Countries like India and China are catching up fast with the first world and along with their particular characteristics. In China, parenting has changed a lot keeping in view two major social policy and economic changes. Parenting changed drastically after the official imposition of one-child norm. In India, the main event which changed the nature of parenting and especially in Indian Middle Class was the adoption of economic liberalization policy (neo-liberal policies) in 1991 which brought liquidity in the economy and increased disposable income coinciding with import of technological. The middle class expanded its base in prosperity and policy frameworks, emboldened with a sudden increase in purchasing power. Since child was at the center of the family, the economic benefits were also passed on to the child. Today, the new middle class parents are more educated than ever before, they plan for finance and family security in advance, they want material things and success instantly, and are highly conscious for their children’s education, social and financial security. In June 2004, an Indian English news magazine *India Today* published an issue which amply demonstrated the phenomenon of new parenting—its concerns, obsessions, fears, nature and dynamics. Here is a piece from the story that shows typical concerns of a new age parents—

‘Shaan Mukherjee, the star singer, and his wife Radhika, are type A parents: focused, committed, concerned. Radhika, a stewardess with Swiss Air, quit her job before her son Soham was born. While pregnant, she read extensively on birth and children, played spiritual music and completely cut down on partying. At three months, Soham was playing with flash cards and touch-and-feel books. At 11 months, he was in an exclusive playschool enjoying mum-toddler sessions. Radhika's shelves are stacked with books on raising contended children, yet she is wracked by uncertainty. ‘I see
another woman with a child and I wonder if I'm playing enough with my son,’ she says.’

The Indian middle class has become quite obsessed in creating child prodigies out of their offspring. Their children are pampered within the family and no compromises are made in their young age to ensure their economic successes in their adult lives. As the above quotation from news item shows, the mother shows her concern for the baby by quitting her job and the baby starts playing with flash cards while being only three months old! According to Alissa, such a pampered cultivation, undertaken with the aim of discovering a child prodigy in the family, might disable the child himself/herself to the extent that the s/he may lose in the long run of cut-throat competition of life- an fear-inducing phrase prevalent in the Indian middle class discourse to motivate the child towards receiving the care and expectations bestowed upon him/her. As Alissa writes:

‘…parents, whose obsession with ‘creating’ or ‘nurturing’ giftedness, has led to a full-blown transformation of middle-class childhood into aggressive skill-set pageantry…. the daily grinds of genuine prodigies (in everything from violin to preaching to entrepreneurship)… relentlessly tested, totally overscheduled and joylessly competitive is being created by striving parents of all stripes… The effort to produce ‘gifted’ children through an exhausting regimen of early (and ever-earlier) training has grown into a troubling national phenomenon.’ – Alissa Quart’s comments on Hothouse

The parents also use the kids to grow their self by indulging in the conspicuous consumption. The child is given branded clothes, his English medium convent school becomes a thing for show off and all the more all his prodigious talent is a points towards the self-gratifying nature of the parents
who want to buy everything for their kids without considering the effects upon
the child. It is as if they are in the haste of casting away the middle class
values. The ironically paradoxical effect of it being that the more they try to do
so the nearer they are to the middle class aspirations. The Infant Siddha
Programme (ISP) in Mumbai claims that the kids enrolled with them would get
a spiritual training and blessing that could make kids do wonders in their lives.
Its website lists some fantastic things a 4 year child can do after doing the
course. Here is a part of it:

**Fig. 4.1 An ad of Infant Siddha Programme**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>About (ISP) ® - Infant SSY Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you know?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your 4 year child can …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Read like your self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Understand 10 or more languages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Do binary functions in mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Operate computers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Play the piano, violin, harmonium or any other instrument?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well come and learn how learning happens naturally when a child is trained from before birth until the age of 8 in the most unique program of Infant Siddha Program (ISP).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ISP guides parents on how to bring up children right from the stage of conception to 8 years. It specially deals with improving all the 8 types of intelligence of children. It also deals with the overall development of the child covering the Physical, Mental, Social, Emotional and Spiritual areas.

The purpose of ISP is
- To develop both sides of the brain of the child.
- To give the child ‘the Love for loving’
- To bring up a very happy & playful child.
- To develop and intimate bond between mother, father and child.

The duration of ISP
is 8 week where both parents attend a session once a week for a period of 2 hours each.

Eligibility for joining this program
- parent who are planning to have a child.
- Parents who are already pregnant.
- Parents who have children below 8 years of age.
- Others who wish to contribute towards the growth and development of children.

When can you start?
Right now! Because the earlier you start, the easier it is. 80% of your child’s brain is developed by the time he/she becomes 8. In fact the best time to start is at the time of conception itself!

Source: http://www.meetup.com/Infant-Siddha-Program-ISP/events/14958793/

Parenthood is now understood as a project of shaping one’s own life and that of the child as ‘a rational, autonomous, responsible individual seeking to maximize one’s potential and achievements as a worthy person’ (Lupton and Barclay 1997:18). Regimes of rationality based on ‘obedience’ shifted to regimes of ‘influence’ through complex negotiations and persuasions (Lareau 2003). Contemporary parents are expected to impart to their children the ability ‘to be oneself’ and ‘to develop oneself’ (Gullestad 1997:216) rather than specific ideas and values.

4.7 Glimpse of Indian Parenting and Childhood in Post-Independence India

Generations across time have had different experiences shaped by the economic environment of the national situation of their times. The Boomers were the offspring of the post-Independence. India became free in 1947, and the policy of industrialization was designed by the Nehruvian vision (dirigiste state) for India’s prosperity and development. The 1960s were soaked in anti-colonial nationalism combined with a vision of national development through scientific and technological innovations. The ‘hangover’ of ideals and idealism was all-pervasive. Later in the decade that idealism was met with a strange
disillusion and rebellion by 60’s youth who were brought on a cocktail of Jimi Hendrix, Elvis Presley, Marijuana, Chevy, Charu Majumdar, Naxal Bari. But today’s Kurukshetra’s Boomers were individuals who migrated from villages nearby or at the most the rural hinterlands of Northern India. The villagers were oblivious to the hippi movement and led disciplined life generally governed by customs and norms of the society because the social structure of villages did not allow them to experiment much. The Boomers had spent their childhood in villages the unique experience of a completely unsupervised affair. Education and schooling were not considered a question of ‘life and death’, although there was a general recognition of the fact that education was important to get a job or to live in city or in towns. In the large joint families, close and effective supervision was neither possible nor desirable. For boys, leisure time was spent playing rural games and in lying idle while for girls, it meant helping to the domestic chores. The children were on their own regarding career choices. There was an option of joining paternal professions like agriculture or business depending upon the community and caste if at all the child failed in education. This researcher personally knows many cases where a child was withdrawn from school because of receiving corporal punishment from the teacher. The act of withdrawing one’s child from education was a show of exquisite love for the child- which is something unimaginable in today’s context. The childhood of Boomers remained free from consumption practices as cash in villages was a difficult option and at the most children could barter some foodgrains, kabads (trash), broken plastics for eatables like ice cream, candies or groundnuts etc. The media exposure was almost nil as the penetration of radio and television was not there. TV was rarer. Even owning a radio set could be objected to.

The childhood of Gen X- the offspring of Boomers - changed a lot as Boomers began settling in cities and towns to get education and jobs. They were able to provide their children a life full of urban sophistications. The Gen X got city schooling with fair chances of English Medium of education. When
Boomers migrated to cities they constituted nuclear families providing a mechanism for the regulation of daily time table of their kids. The city setting was insecure and unknown for such families unlike their rural backgrounds where one was known to everybody. Children remained in the stricter control and close supervision of family. For their recreation they were provided indoor games obtainable from shops like carom, snakes and ladders, and even video games. Their schooling became an important and serious part of parenting. Their exposure to media was not much and in their childhood they watched whatever was available on Doordarshan- a government owned and controlled channel ‘with entertainment last thing on their mind’- the only channel available to them. And, of course, the internet with its application such as e-mail, chatting, social networking was nowhere in the scene. Usually only one newspaper was subscribed or at most 1 Hindi newspaper coupled with an English language daily.

But, things began to change after 1991. Marx’s schema of the base conditioning the superstructure seems quite relevant in this context. The economic turn changed the entire socio-cultural fabric of India. The bourgeoisie began to swell in an expanded manner. The children of Gen X found itself presented with a lot of options.

4.8 Children’s Socialization as Consumers

Consumer socialization is defined as ‘the processes by which young people acquire skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to their functioning as consumers in the marketplace’ (Ward, 1974:2). It is also referred to as ‘consumer education’ and ‘consumer development’ (McNeal 1993). Consumer socialization, which is a part of socialization, is achieved through various agencies of which important are peers, media, and parents. Each agency has own degree of influence on a child depending upon his/her developmental age.
During teenage, peer group and media has a considerable influence on teenager while in childhood or in tweenage parents are an important agency of influence (Acuff 1997:106). George P. Moschis (1985) mentions the five methods mother teaches their children consumer skills as advanced by Ward et al (1977).

1. Prohibiting certain acts
2. Giving lectures on consumer activities
3. Holding discussion with the child about consumer decisions
4. Acting as an example
5. Allowing the child to learn from his/her own experiences

Consumption lessons are first given by parents. At the same time, Ward et al (1977) note that parents prefer that their children observe while in consumption situation. Also, as discussed earlier, parents are not a great consumer socialization agency apart some peculiar contexts. Media and peers great influence but they do not tell how to go for consumption; they just recommend and persuade. So, in terms of consumer literacy these agencies are not much helpful. Blackwell et al (2001:387) described that children acquire their consumer skills through shopping or accompanied shopping and observe their parents in transaction of goods at shopping sites. They call it as ‘co-shopping’. This is what happens in the case of tweenagers. Their shopping efforts are actually co-shopping efforts because their parents are involved in their shopping experience. Especially in a middle class setting, they are less likely to take independent decisions. Moschis (1985) notes that:

‘…the extent to which young people attain family independence in decision making may be conditioned by specific characteristics such as social class and sex. … Middle-class adolescents appear to attain less independence in purchasing as they grow older than do
adolescent consumers in lower and upper social class. The finding has been attributed to middle-class families’ greater consciousness of the normative standards of their class, and their subsequent greater desire to closely supervise their children’s activities in an effort to socialize them into the class norms.’

The consumer socialization has thus a class character also. The middle class is much cautious and particular about the consumption behavior of their children. This is the class that is most likely to engage in the teaching of consumer skills directly or indirectly in their supervision. Their class instincts guide their behavior towards this. And not only in case of consumer goods, but also in case of brands the class character can be associated with the brand consumption and brand loyalty. In another study by Moschis (1983), it was found that the observation of parental behaviour resulted in strong brand preferences and among middle class weak brand loyalty was seen. This was due to as Moschis further elaborates that lower class may want to be sure of branded good and middle class adolescent due to ‘shop around’ behavior of his parents had weak brand preference or loyalty.

The family as an agency of socialisation affects the consumer behavior of children directly. But, indirectly, it can control the information source, its credibility, the reach and access to the children. It means it also act as agency itself and as well as an agency controlling other agencies also. But again it depends upon the family structure and family’s socio-economic background.

As discussed before the co-shopping induces the process of consumer socialization which Blackwell et al have defined to be occurring in 5 stages as the child develops-

1. **Observing** - This is the first stage of consumerisation. Today even children of very young age accompany their parents in the shopping
project. In India, since the onslaught of mall culture and large Walmart type air conditioned stores children of the youngest age accompany their parents sitting in the shopping cart seats especially built for them. It shows the efforts of marketing and branding to include children in the shopping experience. Although they cannot understand what is going on but at least they are becoming familiar with the bright lighting, and ambience of the shopping center.

2. **Making requests** - In this phase, children ask for whatever product on the shelves. They cannot speak or articulate their demands but by gestures they may convey their preferences for a special product they find attractive. The second phase may see the children demanding the very product at home under the influence of some stimulus like TV ads.

3. **Making selections** - At the stage when children are usually 3-4 year old, they begin to feel the charm or pleasure of touching and feeling the product. They are ‘big enough’ to reach to the object without directions on their own.

4. **Assisted Purchase** - After spending long time in the shopping experience with their parents at this stage a child knows the importance of money for buying product. The monetary transactions make a sense to him and s/he knows that they have to give that paper or coin thing before they can take their favorite object home.

5. **Making Independent Purchases** - The last stage saw him/her purchasing items on his/her own. But of course the value of the item is not very high. But s/he is old enough to make purchases after completing the monetary transaction. He has the full liberty to choose not only the products but also the brand of the particular object. Acuff (1997 :109) writes that children do not consult their parents while they buy a low value cold drink (92 % respondents) while only 20 % consult parents before buying a computer software. It might be due to their perception.
of parents being less techno geek than themselves. About clothes which are highly personal items, 70% teenagers do not bother to seek opinion from their parents. They might consult their peers though.

4.9 Cognitive Stages of Tweenagers and Branding

Childhood is an intermediary stage leading to adulthood. Now childhood is a site where a growing individual encounters some basic existential issues relating to his identity and self. Although these issues are more vigorously pursued in adolescence but when a child is in his pre-teens these issues start to make sense to him. Pre-teen is the age which this study has referred to as tweenage. Marketing and segmentation strategies refer this age bracket mainly to denote those children in late childhood who show characteristics different from both children and adolescents. The emergence of the category can also be attributed to the phenomenon of early maturity seen largely in developed societies but now also visible in a developing society like India where media plays a greater role in the socialization of children. Thus, the entry into adolescence is virtually hastened. Earlier, the children as economic agents were absent in the consumption theory debates in economics or sociology or elsewhere. Cook (2008) makes an apt observation regarding the negligence of children by the theories. He quotes: The absence or near absence of ‘the child’ in general theories of consumers society signifies something beyond simple conceptual myopia...Excluding consideration of children and childhood from the conceptualization of the genesis, makeup and trajectory of consumption and consumer culture has effectively rendered them invisible. Children were therefore outside the domain of consumption as they posed ‘analytic, ontological and epistemological problems’. (Cook 2008:229)

Now, child consumption has assumed an immense business potential in the contemporary society. If we talk about specifically Indian society, the rising great Indian middle class has set the ball rolling for consumption in great
volumes. Also, the rising middle class has an important implication on direct and indirect child consumption patterns. The child is, of course, not a direct purchaser of goods but a consumer of the goods - the choice of goods is dictated by him/her and there lay his/her potential as a consumer. Their choices are honoured sincerely and translated into action with religious fervor. The increasing per capita income, more specifically in the middle class, has given more space to the performance of the bourgeois discourse of highly sophisticated parental care through ensuring generous material commodity supply at the disposal of the child. The consumption item then becomes the barometer of a great care and concern for the children. The Indian middle class is becoming highly status conscious even in small cities or towns and making their own children their fashion or style statements, rendering them a commodity themselves in a process which itself merits a separate inquiry.

Consumption by children is a peculiar phenomenon. Even though the commodity is being consumed by the children, parents are also agents of consumption at the same time. So, the expenditure incurred on the children’s clothing, for example, becomes a social investment for parents. The investment made in the children consumption has the capacity to pay dividends to the whole family in the way of perceived enhanced social/identitarian status. All the above factors make childhood a promising field of semantic investment. This initiates the establishment of a whole new business and marketing strategies. Although, in the USA the marketers have recognized and began chalking out strategies directly addressing the concerns of children way back in the twentieth century, in India it has been a recent effort after the liberalization, privatization and globalization (LPG) in 1991. The mall culture invaded India riding on the property boom of this decade. All the above factors contributed to the shaping of children consumption market. Below is the table which shows the stages of development which may be connected to consumption practices. The tweenagers in the research comes in the analytical age which is 7-11 years
and in which a tween is able to form dual perspectives; he/she recognizes the ‘other self’.

### Table – 4.1
Cognitive Map of Child Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Perceptual Stage 3-7 yrs</th>
<th>Analytical stage, 7-11 yrs</th>
<th>Reflective stage 11-16 yrs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Knowledge structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Perceptual Features</td>
<td>Functional/underlying features</td>
<td>Functional/underlying features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Uni-dimensional Simple</td>
<td>Two or more dimensions</td>
<td>Multidimensional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>Egocentric(own perspective)</td>
<td>Dual (own+others)</td>
<td>Dual Perspectives in social context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Decision-making and influence strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation</td>
<td>Expedient</td>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>Strategic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>Perceptual features</td>
<td>Functional/underlying features</td>
<td>Functional/underlying features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Salient features</td>
<td>Relevant Features</td>
<td>Relevant features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>Single attributes</td>
<td>Two or more attributes</td>
<td>Multiple attributes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited repertoire of strategies</td>
<td>Expanded repertoire of strategies</td>
<td>complete repertoire of strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptive Perspective</td>
<td>Emerging</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Fully developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Egocentric</td>
<td>Dual perspective</td>
<td>Dual Perspectives in social context</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source- Deborah Roedder John (1999)
The analytical age is quite advantageous for tweens regarding consumer/branding decisions. There is a clear demarcation from childhood cognitively in tween age. The ‘tween’ then emerges as a consumption ready category. The tweens can process brands as their cognitive skills needed to process the meanings of brands are in the process of development. The tweens can easily process the tangible aspects of brands like people, buildings, advertising as the given below figure tries to explain the branding components which a child consumer processes.

**Fig. 4.2 The set of Physical Identity Elements of Brands**

*Source: Franzen & Moriarty*

“Scholars have also argued that children are informed consumers, becoming "brand aware by age three" with the capacity to remember close to 400 brand names (Schor, 2004:25; Penn, Schoen and Berland, 2001; see also, Comiteau, 2003)” quotes sarah Jane (2011). So branding as a commercial communication can be understood by a tween though not fully as a teenager or an adult understands but in his/her own way. And this understanding is translatable into commercial gains.