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# Consumption as Lifestyle: The Use of Western Lifestyle as a Status Symbol in Multinational Corporations' Advertising in India

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CONSUMPTION AS LIFESTYLE:  
THE USE OF WESTERN LIFESTYLE AS A STATUS SYMBOL IN  
MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS' ADVERTISING IN INDIA

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the use of Western lifestyle as depicted in advertising by multinational companies through the use of English in advertising; sexually evocative imagery; and background images in advertisements that reflect Western lifestyles. These messages perpetuated by multinational companies of the elite status of Western lifestyle are further enhanced due to the pervasive influences of the mediums in which these lifestyles are communicated to Indian consumers (e.g. primarily television and magazines).

However, this paper also examines how the products that the Indian consumer purchases to emulate this Western lifestyle are actually not the same products sold in the Western world. This is either because the average Indian consumer cannot afford the products that are sold in the Western world or because the Indian consumers want Western products with Indian style. This means that the products produced by multinational companies in India and sold as representing the Western lifestyle are actually Indian products associated with Western brands.

## **Introduction**

With the relatively recent opening of the Indian economy, the issue of Western influences is a crucial one. In particular multinational companies have been an important influence on India consumers. Specifically, multinational companies attempt to sell Western brands in India by promoting Western lifestyle as a status symbol in India; however, due to the need to appeal to the Indian consumer and the relatively lower income of the average Indian compared to Westerners in the same class brackets, the products that are sold in India by multinational companies are Indian and not part of the Western lifestyle.

The methodology utilized in this paper is varied. This paper was partially based on studies on consumer behavior, in particular with respect to the influences that country of origin had on consumer attitudes. It was also based on a vast array of literature reviews including historical

and sociological writings. It also included insight gained through interviews conducted with experts on marketing and multinational companies. Finally, the paper was based on observations of advertisements. This created an in depth methodology that looked at the paper's thesis from a variety of viewpoints.

This paper will first look at the historical background. This section is included to give a summary of important historical time periods that formed the modern Indian economy and dictated the manner in which the Indian consumer would relate to multinational brands. The section will also attempt to determine what social and economic factors lead to the development of current marketing techniques in India for multinational companies, specifically what has caused multinational companies to attempt to appeal to both Indian ideas of Western lifestyle and to appeal to Indian culture and tastes.

This section will examine the historical events and theories that support the thesis that modern multinational companies attempt to appeal to the India consumer by depicting a Western lifestyle in advertising while presenting the Indian consumer with a largely modified Indian product. Included in this section is an examination of the historical importance of status in Indian culture, the historical development of English and Western lifestyle as status symbols in India, early forms of Western advertising in India, England's attempt to Indianize goods while simultaneously enforcing racist ideas through advertising, the post-Independence economy, the effects of economic liberalization, and finally the initial failure of multinationals in India due to a lack of cultural awareness. The combination of theory and history demonstrate how the evolved attitudes multinationals have towards marketing in India.

The second section of the paper focuses specifically on the marketing techniques utilized by multinational companies to promote Western lifestyle as a status symbol. Firstly, mediums of social influence will be examined, specifically magazines and television due to their growing

influences on Indian consumers. Next the use of English to exclude certain consumer groups will be discussed, and the promotion of English as a language of success. Next the promotion of sexuality will be examined as a medium of conveying Western morals. To further examine Western lifestyle in advertisements, the context of multinational company's advertising for certain products is discussed, which shows how multinational companies sell more than their brands but also a lifestyle. This section concludes with the discussion of the actual nature of multinational company's products in India and analysis why these products are different from those available to actual Western consumers. This reveals the contradiction between the Western lifestyle advertised as being obtainable by consuming products and the Indian nature of the products sold, which make the Western lifestyle a fallacy.

### **Historical Background: Status, Marketing, and Economics in India**

#### *Caste Structure: India's History of Social Status Independent of Economic Status*

Historically, India has always been a society concerned with hierarchy and status. Initially, this hierarchy was based on the Hindu caste system, which has now evolved into a hierarchical system based on class.<sup>1</sup> The caste system consists of four main groups that are based on occupation and ranked by social status in the following decreasing order: the Brahmins who were priests and scholars, the Kshatriyas who were kings and warriors, the Vaishyas who composed the traders, and Shudras, also known as the 'untouchables,' who were the service providers and artisans. What is unique about the Hindu caste system is that the status was not based on economic class but on birth. Through the caste system, Indians isolated the power gained through status (i.e. of being from a certain caste) from other types of power, and this

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<sup>1</sup> Rajeev Batra et al., "Effects of Brand Local and Nonlocal Origins on Consumer Attitudes in Developing Countries." *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 9, no. 2 (2000): 86.



created a society that valued status in-and-of itself.<sup>2</sup> Due to the caste systems, status associated with caste, importance in India's history, and its inalienability, other forms of power besides status power do not easily trump status power in the caste system.<sup>3</sup> This means that historically Indians have always valued status regardless of the commonly values socio-economic status. In a society that had such a complex status hierarchy, it follows that with the legal abolishment of discrimination based on caste according to the Indian Constitution that a new system of social hierarchy would need to fill the void.

The castes system had a long history of being the dominant hierarchal system in India. Aspects of the caste system dates back to approximately between the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. and the 2<sup>nd</sup> century C.E. and are found in the Vedic text *Manusmriti*. Salim Lakh states that, "The Indian caste system and related religious tradition is the oldest historically specific and identifiable human institution."<sup>4</sup> The caste system is not only long-established in terms of India's history of human institutions but is long-established in terms of the history of all human institutions and considering its lengthy existence has remained relatively unchanged.

India has a history of following a caste system and is already used to social, as apposed to economic, hierarchies, and with the technical collapse of the caste system's ability to be used to discriminate coupled with the advent of Western lifestyle, the need for a new socially based hierarchal system was satiated with the introduction of a class based system. However, this system is not solely based on socio-economic class but is also based largely on material possessions or accumulating a Western lifestyle. This Western lifestyle can be imitated to varying degrees by individuals of different socio-economic class, and compared to the caste system, provides a relative ease of social mobility.

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<sup>2</sup> Salim Lakh. "Explaining the Key Features of Caste," in *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia*, edited by Michael Pinches (1999; reprint, New York: Routledge an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2005), 54.

<sup>3</sup> Salim Lakh. "Explaining the Key Features of Caste," 56.

<sup>4</sup> Salim Lakh. "Explaining the Key Features of Caste," 55.

*The Ability to Speak English: How Western Lifestyle Became a Status Symbol in India*

One way advertisers currently target Indians of the highest socio-economic background, A and B) is by having their advertisements in only English;<sup>5</sup> the tradition of the ability to speak English as being a social symbol is rooted in the East India Company. In 1828, the East India Company faced bankruptcy and Governor General William Bentinck arrived in India with the duty of cutting cost. In order to cut costs, he allowed government posts to be opened to qualified individuals, including Indians, according to his creation of a clause in The East India Company's 1833 Charter Act. In order to qualify for government post, Indians needed to be able to speak English.<sup>6</sup>

To teach Indians not only how to speak English but also to teach other subjects in English required a reform of the Indian education system. This reform was the 1835 English Education Act, which was encouraged by a declaration in 1844 that stated that English-Educated Indians would receive preferential treatment with regards to public sector appointments.<sup>7</sup> From the initiation of English into Indian society, the British utilized English as a symbol of status for native Indians due to the air of privileges associated with English. English speaking native Indians were better educated and according to British law in India, were of a higher status than non-English speaking Indians.

The formation of a class of English speaking and English admiring native Indians was a conscious decision on behalf of the East India Company. Thomas Macaulay, president of General Committee of Public Instruction in 1835, stated, "We must . . . form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern—a class of persons Indian in blood

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<sup>5</sup> Sulina Menon (), interviewed by Alissa Goddard. November 13, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India: Ideas for the New Century* (New Delhi: Allen Lane by Penguin Books India, 2008), 84-85.

<sup>7</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India*, 85.

and colour, but English in testes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.”<sup>8</sup> Macaulay’s speech resulted in English being adopted as the lingua franca of administration.<sup>9</sup>

Through the East India Company’s implementation of English education for Indian natives, this elite Indian class was formed and crafted to British lifestyle and reject their cultural. The masses rejected English and viewed it an imperialist tool, but among the social conscious native Indians who already associated English with cultural prestige and viewed it as indispensable for social life in the upper social spheres, English education was embraced.<sup>10</sup> As Nandan Nilekani states, “[English] became an additional accessory for the elite, a pretty bauble to be acquired in the same way upper-crust Indians adopted British dress, tea parties and socials.”<sup>11</sup> For the Indian elite, the British lifestyle was already a symbol of upper class status, and the ability to speak English became an additional tool to be used to showoff one’s status.

This fascination with English was further encouraged when rule by the East India Company was replaced with British colonial rule in 1858. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, former princely courts of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and wealthy urban Indians provided patronage for visiting European oil painters as well as collected European art as a status symbol.<sup>12</sup> The imitation of Western life did not merely consist of imitating British social habit, but for those who could afford to, it became the ability to posses original pieces that represented Western aesthetic and the ability to totally immerse oneself in original Western creations through art.

English remained the largely unchallenged lingua franca until 1925 when a formal Resolution by congress required that conduct proceedings be conducted in as much as possible in

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<sup>8</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India*, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India*, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India*, 85-86.

<sup>11</sup> Nandan Nilekani, *Imagining India*, 86.

<sup>12</sup> Kajri Jain, “When the Gods Go to Market,” in *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art* (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 94.

Hindustani;<sup>13</sup> English was challenged again, post-Independence when Article 351 of the constitution was created:

It shall be the duty of the union to promote the spread of the Hindi language, to develop it so that it may serve as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India and to secure its environment by assimilating, without interfering with genius, the forms, style and expression used in Hindustani and in the other languages of India specified in the English schedule, and by drawing, wherever necessary or desirable, for its vocabulary, primarily on Sanskrit and secondarily on other languages.<sup>14</sup>

However, there was little incentive for the middle class, who were among the elite that knew English, to adopt Hindi, and since the middle class was in control of the government and other institutes that were to phase out English, the middle class prevented English from being phased out by resisting conducting business and government in Hindi.<sup>15</sup> The ability to speak English remained the lingua franca for business and government and also remained a means of segregating the upper and middle classes from the lower classes and excluding the lower classes from certain industries.

English not only helped distinguish the lower classes from the upper classes, but even among English speakers there was a status hierarchy based on the quality of one's English. English was a mode of exclusion even within the higher classes. According to Pavan Varma, "The ability to speak English with the right accent and fluency and pronunciation was the touchstone for entry into the charmed circle of the ruling elite."<sup>16</sup> The ability to speak English was not enough to be associated with the highest class; even among English speakers, there is a hierarchy that favors individuals who know the 'correct' form of English.

Even post-Independence, the desire to imitate the British lifestyle remained. M. Tully in *No Full Stops India* claims, "Colonialism teaches the native elite it creates to admire... the ways

<sup>13</sup> Pavan Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 58.

<sup>14</sup> The Indian Constitution: Article 351 quoted in Pavan Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Pavan Varma, *The Great*, 58 & 60.

<sup>16</sup> Pavan Varma, *The Great*, 61.

of their foreign rulers. That habit of mind has survived in independent India.”<sup>17</sup> The effects of the British were so persistent among the native Indian elite that even post-Independence the native elite maintained an admiration for British life. Not only did the elite’s admiration for British life remain, but the desire for English also spread. In post-Independent India, the lower middle class wanted to emulate the upper middle class by speaking English also.<sup>18</sup> The admiration and longing for British life and status via the ability to speak English did not diminish with the absence of the British, but specifically with respects to English, the hunger for such knowledge grew and became a very important class symbol.

#### *Early Forms of Western Advertising: An Attempt to Appeal to Indian Culture*

The Indian economy was originally based on a bazaar economy, which is an economy composed of informal social and economic networks that connect indigenous trading companies, specifically on the subcontinent.<sup>19</sup> This system remained present throughout the colonial period and proved mutually beneficial for indigenous traders and colonials.<sup>20</sup> This type of economy also lasted post-independence and was embodied by calendar art.<sup>21</sup> This economy was partially social in nature and revolved largely around credit as apposed to one’s actual means: “Thus participation in this system meant... maintaining a profile within the community... and generally maintaining the appearance (for here appearances are key) of being an honourable, morally upright, god-fearing... soul.”<sup>22</sup> Even within the native Indian economy, status was based largely on what one could procure due to one’s reputation as a posed to what one could procure due to one’s means.

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<sup>17</sup> M. Tully, *No Full Stops in India* (New York: Viking, 1991), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Pavan Varma, *The Great*, 62.

<sup>19</sup> Kajri Jain, “More than Meets the Eye: The Circulation of Images and the Embodiment of Value,” in *Beyond Appearances? Visual Practices and Ideologies in Modern India*, edited by Sumathi Ramaswamy (New Delhi: Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, 2003), 41.

<sup>20</sup> Kajri Jain, “More than Meets the Eye,” 41.

<sup>21</sup> Kajri Jain, “More than Meets the Eye,” 46.

<sup>22</sup> Kajri Jain, “More than Meets the Eye,” 46.

The exemplification of the bazaar economy was calendar art, which was originally introduced to India by the British in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British gave the Indians the concept of using calendars as a form of advertising.<sup>23</sup> However, the concept of mass produced calendars was not new. Religious almanacs were some of the first native items to utilize the woodblock printing technique demonstrated by missionaries in the early 1800s, which soon became a platform for sacred images, calendars, astrology, advertisements, and instructions/dates for festivals and ceremonies. Brahmans also circulated handwritten almanacs to earn money prior to British presence.<sup>24</sup> However, the utilization of calendar art in advertising and the use of Indian religious themes in advertising were propelled by Western companies during colonization.<sup>25</sup>

The calendar was used as an auspicious social greeting distributed to customers, family, and friends from the companies and distributors of the advertised goods. The annual distribution of the calendar was used to connect with one's economic networks especially when the networks were vast and scattered. The distribution of the calendars usually takes place on Diwali, which makes it an auspicious ritual. The calendar's auspiciousness is also increased due to its contents of images of the gods and other positive images painted in bright auspicious colors.<sup>26</sup> The level of auspicious imagery in the calendar as well as the prompt yearly distribution enhanced the reputation of the distributing company and its creditworthiness.<sup>27</sup> The calendar also helps the consumer to track holidays that require spending, frequently beyond one's immediate ability, and thus helps to make the consumer aware of a need to spend for religious purposes.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 48.

<sup>24</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," in *Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art*. (London: Duke University Press, 2007), 123.

<sup>26</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 46.

<sup>27</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 47.

<sup>28</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 48.

During the interwar period from World War I to World War II, especially during the 1930's, multiple multinational companies entered the Indian market geared towards the middle-class consumer. Some of these companies were "Lever (sunlight soap), Wimco (matches), Associated Biscuit Manufactures (Britannia biscuits), Dunlop (tires and rubber goods), Bata (shoes), and General Electric and Philips (light bulbs)." During this period, foreign companies also Indianize their products via advertising or packaging.<sup>29</sup> Products sold exclusively to natives used popular images as labels while companies with more global sphere utilized posters and calendars to appeal to Indians (see Appendix Fig. 1, 2, 3, & 4).<sup>30</sup> Through use of religious images on labels, these Western companies created a unity between business and the sacred.<sup>31</sup>

Despite being pauranic images, the images of calendar art are heavily influenced by the British since individuals who trained in the Calcutta colonial art schools established many of the first lithographic presses. Calendar artists also frequently had some training at an art school, but due to the industrial arts revival in England, these contemporary calendar artists were not trained in 'fine art' but were trained in 'industrial art.' Because of the colonial art schools, the quality of art was also influenced by British racism and the belief that Indians were not talented in fine arts but did excel in 'decorative arts.'<sup>32</sup>

Besides advertisements painted by colonial art school artists, labels and advertisements were often reproductions from Ravi Varma's Press created by foreign-owned firms.<sup>33</sup> However, due to Ravi Varma's imitation of Western art, even the iconic images of the gods in early advertising reflected Western ideologies with respect to art.<sup>34</sup> What is ironic about that is that Ravi Varma's images, as well as calendar art images in general, were embraced by Indians of

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<sup>29</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 125.

<sup>30</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 126.

<sup>31</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 132.

<sup>32</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 40.

<sup>33</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 126.

<sup>34</sup> Kajri Jain, "When the Gods," 93.

diverse backgrounds and embraced by nationalists as representing India. Calendar art appeals to all socioeconomic classes and can be fondly displayed in the homes of people from different classes.<sup>35</sup> To emphasize the complex nature advertisements adapted and what they came to represent to Indians, Jain states, "A picture... embod[ies] a civilization or cultural essence incarnated in the artwork via the artist as a privileged medium or vehicle of that civilization."<sup>36</sup> However, if this is true then India's identity is in essence Western due to education in colonial art schools and acquiring skills in fine art from such institute via imitation.

Multinational companies faced an added challenge in what images they used because they were not just advertising to Indians but also to European Indians. Multinationals in turn attempted to create advertisements through calendar art that addressed the Indian elite and European Indian through its combined use of the secular and religious themes. Calendar art attempted to reach the widest possible audience while referencing familiar concepts to sell products.<sup>37</sup> For instance, images of mothers and children were used due to its relevance to the modernizing Indian middle class and European Indians while these interactions were portrayed using Indian myths to appeal specifically to Indian consumers but which does not distort the reliability of the mother-child relationship (see Appendix Fig. 1).<sup>38</sup> In this way, calendar art became an object that symbolized and acknowledged the relationship between different people and different cultures.<sup>39</sup> Jain states, "[Calendar art is] the common element between different constellations of value, [and] draws them into a relationship where it becomes possible for value to switch tracks, to jump from one economy to another, drawing their subjects into each other's

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<sup>35</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 37.

<sup>36</sup> Kajri Jain, "When the Gods," 93.

<sup>37</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 123.

<sup>38</sup> Kajri Jain, "Naturalizing the Popular," 127.

<sup>39</sup> Kajri Jain, "More than Meets the Eye," 64.