

## **Consumerism and its Effect in the Contemporary Times**

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### **Introduction**

Biosphere ethics and consumption have a relation. People are convinced that to consume is the surest route to personal happiness, social status, and national success. Advertising, packaging, and marketing create false needs that are believed real because the 'economic' machine has made people feel inferior and insufficient. To keep the economic machine moving, people have to be dissatisfied with what they have, hence with who they are. Consequently, the meaning of one's life is located in acquisition, possessions, and consumption.

The rationale behind writing on consumerism is: I am personally convinced that by changing our habits and the way we think, can alter or put a halt to the present level of devastation of the biosphere. In the contemporary world, the rise of consumers and consumerism has a strong impact to the nation and the world. The present level of consumption is ecologically destructive and unsustainable. Consumerism affects the psychological health of the individual through erosion of the true self and replacing it with false self, and the spiritual health of the individual by eroding our spiritual connections with nature and replacing it with consumption of goods and services. Awareness of the link between the consumerism and the functioning of the biosphere can give rise to the ecosophical development. We as humans are not just the residents of the earth and pass our life period just by extraction and stuffing our necessities but also to be responsible and be aware.

### **What is Consumerism?**

Consumerism is defined as: The theory that a progressively greater consumption of goods is economically beneficial; attachment to materialistic values or possessions. The need that we have to consume and feel good has percolated deep in our psyche. As substantial population is migrating from the rural regions to the urban centers there is a delineation of the human with the nature. Historically, men were engaged with the nature through hunting, primitive agriculture, past times whereas in the contemporary times man's activities are dotted with gadgets like I-Phone, gizmos, play stations although this has its own benefits and it comes with a price that the existing civilization has to pay. As the society gets innovative through product innovation, there is a provocation by the capitalist that use more, buy more and get the benefits. So, the mantra that is subtly hammered that the benefits come through more usages. With the mass production facilities and the establishment of mega factories, million or a billion stock keeping units can be manufactured and special pricing schemes are aired to entice the consumers. I am not writing this paper to label that consumerism is bad and people should practice austerity. This writing of mine is a striving towards getting conscious about the biosphere and what can an individual or society do.

## The Roots of Modern Consumerism

In the time period spanning 1800–1920, a number of important events in the development of consumerism occurred. In 1830, the first departmental store opened in Paris. By 1850, large departmental stores had spread to other major cities in Western Europe and United States. Also, mail order catalogue and a wide variety of imports and consumer goods become available. As the nation's become industrialized and new methods of production came in the foray, availability of the goods were not a question and the research was how the people can be induced to consume more and more. The capitalist wanted to churn money and the route was massive production. The industrial leaders understood that want of certain categories of products are dull so what is required is continual promotion and reinforcement.

## Consumerism: An Existential Enquiry

Heidegger first distinguishes between the being of an entity qua particular thing (static, structural: what he calls 'ontic' questions) and the way something is 'in-a-world' (the dynamic, 'ontological' relations to other things in the world that cannot be understood as properties or attributes of independently existing things). Modern man, through consumption, is at the ontic level and the deeper and subtler living is the missing link. The German word '*Dasein*', which literally means 'Being There', and is normally translated as existence, is used by Heidegger to refer to human being in the world. The central thesis of *Being and Time* is that the only way 'to work out the question of Being adequately' is by 'making an entity - the enquirer - transparent in his own Being'<sup>4</sup>. Modern day people are living in the realm of consumption; so living in the present age is about consuming. An enquiry into self can reveal why am I consuming? How much should I consume? How is my consumption affecting the ecology? What should I do to prevent consumption? Heidegger says that *Dasein* understands itself in its being. Once a consumer questions self, then the nature of consumption can alter as it can be felt that being in the world means luxury and disposition. An analytic and felt enquiry can lift a man and get wisdom about his consumption. Man in the state of inwardness can exchange self with self and the authentic self-need not be redeemed with goods which eventually make the individual insensitive. This insensitivity gets manifested through reckless usage and treating nature as a resource and not as a subject.

I believe consuming is a stage that man has acquired as the civilization progressed, In considering Kierkegaard's three stages in adult developments, there is a possibility in exploring the evolutionary leap man can take in the days of consumption.

1. The Aesthetic stage.
2. The Ethical stage.
3. The Religious stage.

In the aesthetic stage, the person who lives at this stage and one who could do so for an entire lifetime, is focused on the present and remains indifferent to the past as repentance or the future as obligation except in a calculating manner geared to enhance the present. Consumption falls in this zone where the earth as a larger being gets displaced and man remains in the state of oblivion.

The ethical sphere of existence is marked by duty, a duty to ethical principles. Rather than doing things for one's own sake like the aesthetic, the ethical person moves away from this and realizes that he must commit to a set of universal, abstract ethical principles. Something is done for the sake of what is right, and left undone to the extent that it is wrong. The ethical person wills this commitment and acts in accordance with her moral obligations even to her own displeasure. This is in accordance with man's sense of duty and get conscious about consumption. The ethical person realizes that recollection is backward-looking, and in willing himself into the ethical, looks forward instead. Kierkegaard's claims that the forward-looking-ness of the ethical person is represented by the theme of repetition and in the third stage Kierkegaard's view is the 'leap' of faith which constitutes entrance into the religious sphere and the highest form of individuation. Here, the operative categories are neither pleasure nor pain, as in the aesthetic sphere, nor good and evil, as in the ethical, but sin and grace. Man's commitment towards nature can have a religious dimension. The word 'religion' derives from the Latin *religare*, which means 'to bind together'. The joining character of 'ligare' is expressed in the word 'ligament', the structure that binds muscle to bone. The British political writer David Edwards, in his book *Burning All Illusions* makes a point of *religare* as that rejoins the individual with society, the world, and the cosmos. My belief and interpretation of Kierkegaard religious stage is a coherent connection, a connection that doesn't require any external tools or authority but an illumination within. We are in the stage of evolution and coming to the religious stage would be an achievement at a collective level that can redeem from the world of stuffs and goods that is in the process of perpetual over-production and over-consumption. Humans are the connecting tissue with the environment and the doings of humans, especially, through conscious consumption can dramatically reduce the harms imposed on the environment.

### **Over-Consumption as Bad Faith**

One of the characteristic features of Sartre's philosophical writing, especially in *Being and Nothingness* about the structures of conscious experience and the shape of the human condition is Bad Faith. Among the best known of these are his description of Parisian café waiters, who somehow contrive to caricature themselves, and his analysis of feeling shame upon being caught spying through a keyhole. The waiter is usually taken to provide an example of Bad Faith, on grounds that he is taking himself to have a fixed nature that determines his actions. Bad faith is the failure to face the openness of human existence and in the age of awareness on ecology, individuals are closed and fixated to consume. Bad Faith blocks motivation to take responsibility for what we do, and thus who we are in the process of becoming by denying the importance of action, attitude, change and even innovation. Consuming and stuffing the earth and remaining

blind to the repercussion on the earth are Bad Faith. Humans have the responsibility and a duty to reflect on what I am doing. As the species humans have the intellect and the discriminating ability and if that is not practiced then it remains a Bad Faith. As Sartre describes: 'One puts oneself in bad faith as one goes to sleep and one is in Bad Faith as one dreams.' But because of the unblinking eye of pre-reflective consciousness, one is aware of having settled for this non-persuasive evidence. One remains responsible for remaining in Bad Faith.

### **Mass Advertising: The Generator of Consumerism**

It was understood that production is one part of the story and the crux was on to keep on producing so that money keeps on coming to the capitalist few. It was also understood that general consumers are averse to buying so what is required to be in their mind and hence the birth of the Advertising Industry. At present the Advertising Industry predicts that a global total TV advertising revenue will rise at a 4.1% CAGR to US\$204.07 bn in 2019 (global entertainment and media outlook). This shows that the industry leaders and the decision involve a game of consuming. On reflection, it would be noticed that many-a-times we don't require the product but we are urged to buy and this is being manufactured somewhere. Benjamin Hunnicutt described the situation in the following terms: Consumption was not guaranteed, but it could be promoted. It would be the hard work of the investors, marketing experts, advertisers, and the business leaders, as well as the spending examples set by the rich that would promote consumption...the business community broke its long concentration on production, introduced, the age of mass consumption, founded a new age of progress in an abundant society, and gave life to the advertising industry.

### **Consumption and its Effect**

It is documented that the depletion and the biospheric hazards are caused and directly related to mindless consumption and services. When we consume, we are mindless and we lack the connected wisdom. Our biosphere is in relation to us. We, in the race of life and in the mode of acquiring, lost the relational aspect; so, our consumption patterns have grown and have been growing unabated. Yes, we are required to consume, to survive and enjoy the benefits of technology but not at the cost of the invaluable relation component with the sacred realm. We tend to believe that what can an individual do and the irony is everything thinks alike and the after-effect is the toxic accumulation of wastes and colossal extractions from the nature to manufacture finished goods. To find its effect, I found the following results that are worth reading slowly:

1. 75% of the major marine fish stocks are either depleted, overexploited or being fished at their biological limit. (World Summit on Sustainable Development 2002, *A Framework for Action on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Management*.)
2. The Western world spends more on luxury products than it would cost to achieve the UN's Millennium Development Goals.

(Worldwatch Institute, State of the World 2004: The Consumer Society.)

3. A survey of 15,500 consumers in 17 countries revealed that more than a third was boycotting, at least one brand. (GM Poll, 2005)
4. Each person in the United States makes 4.5 pounds of garbage a day. That is twice what they each made thirty years ago.  
(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2007).
5. For every one garbage can of waste you put out on the curb, 70 garbage cans of waste were made upstream to make the junk in that one garbage can you put out on the curb.  
(U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2001).
6. Some 4 billion PET recyclable bottles end up in the U.S. waste stream each year, costing cities some \$70 million in cleanup and landfill costs. A plastic water bottle can take up to 1000 years to degrade in a landfill; when plastic is burned in incinerators, it releases dioxins, some of the most harmful manmade chemicals that exist.
7. The Story of Bottled Water, [www.storyofbottledwater.org](http://www.storyofbottledwater.org)  
Around 10 and 15 percent of the price of a bottle of water goes to advertising costs. Effective marketing of bottled water has contributed to undermining confidence – and investment – in public tap water and encouraging underfunding of public agencies.  
(The Story of Bottled Water, [www.storyofbottledwater.org](http://www.storyofbottledwater.org))
8. North America has the largest market for organics – \$14.6 billion in 2005, up 17% on the year before. Organic food now represents 2.5% of total US food sales.  
(Organic Trade Association, 2006 Manufacturer Survey.)
9. The global market for organic food and drink was worth \$28 billion in 2005 – \$2 billion more than 2004. In 2005, 31 million hectares of land were farmed organically by 623,147 farmers in 120 countries.  
(UK Soil Association, Organic Market Report 2006)

## The Revelation

The above statistics shows a stark reality where we are heading. I was researching on the internet how is human consumption impacting the reality and distorting the ecological cycle. When I got the above data from various sites and collated, it struck me that at least I should be careful what I consume and why should I consume. As Holmes Rolston states, 'Consumption must be constrained by the larger sense of community. Everyone has the right to live; no one has the right to jeopardize the community of life. No one can claim a right to increased consumption if this jeopardizes the health of us all. One common thread that connects all is the force. Here the force is the domination and proving to stand apart. This force has given a push to the civilization in terms of material convenience and mankind has stretched it so much that the biosphere is unable to

tolerate it. In the process of growth and refinement, the society has turned to be society of appearance.

## **Conscious Consumption**

In the biospheric terms, consumption means the using up of natural and physical resources. It is sometimes referred to in terms of the throughput of energy and materials from energy and materials from natural resources tap to environmental sink (the eventual depositing of the waste in air, land, and sea). It is being observed that consumerism is the cultural orientation that leads people to find meaning, contentment, and acceptance through what they consume.

The culture that has evolved over last three centuries has shaped our behaviour to live a life that is desired based on the evolved display mechanisms. The realities of the external world are stark and palpable. The more we consume the more we feel like consuming. As Mahatma Gandhi stated, 'there is enough in the world for satisfying the need but not enough for satisfying the greed.' My contention of the thesis is to find through review of literature and personal reflection is where we can bridge the gap. As a civilization, we need to be progressive and strive for having a better condition in the realm of biosphere that houses us, the social sphere that glues us and the economy that makes us operable. And for the society to be sustainable, it has to consider all the three. So the challenge is to keep consumption alive and at the same time maintain social equity and be concerned about the biosphere. For these things to manifest, the intangibles have to be given significance. Once one is aware about his home, one is touched at its core and then it is not just consumption but conscious consumption and that demands inner transformation.

## **Conclusion**

The UN recognized the link between consumption, citizenship and development. The 1998 UN Human Development Report was titled: 'Changing Today Consumption Patterns: For Tomorrow Human Development. The premise of this report was to make people aware of how consumption patterns affect human development and sustainability. It is recognized that the irony in the fact that human life is nourished and sustained by consumption but that our current consumption patterns are not sustaining all human life. The report recommended 4S to illustrate how consumption could benefit human and social development:

1. It should be shared, meaning basic needs should be ensured for all (equality);
2. Strengthening-build human capabilities;
3. Socially responsible so it does not compromise the well-being of others;
4. Ecologically sustainable for future generations.

What is demanded is a sense of responsibility and respect for our biosphere by the individuals and be conscious about consumption. The crux of the matter is shared living is sustainable living and this requires us to explore the intricacies of biosphere and humans interconnectedness.

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