

India

Consumers, Culture & Contexts



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Everyone says that the Indian market is booming. From Friedman to Prahalad, they talk about opportunities across the pyramid - from top to bottom.

The challenge for marketers and communicators remains this - how does one come to grips with the diversity that is India?

This collection of articles delves into the cultural consciousness and symbolism that seem to define modern-day India. Some describe an India that balances tradition with modernity, and is seemingly reluctant to let go of its rich past even as it seeks to embrace a more prosperous future. Others are articles about innovations in research, necessitated by the need to uncover the unarticulated codes that are embedded in the consumer's psyche.

Hope you enjoy reading them.

CONSUMER INSIGHTS @ THE TRAIN OF THOUGHT

In the business of consumer insight, I am constantly challenged by the need to get deeper under the skin of people. How can I make people tell us stories about their lives, reveal their true feelings & passions? How can I keep them interested during a focus group discussion or a depth interview beyond an hour, when they start thinking about that grocery list or the week's sales targets? Will 'respondents' be really comfortable in a hotel room, or a stranger's living room, or will they be on the guard with a bunch of strangers? What is it that has changed in society and culture that we can really understand and profit from? It is such questions that lead me to re-examine some of the ways by which we unearth insights.

One of the things most of us in the marketing & advertising world covet is an upgrade in the class we travel by. Unless the destination does not have an airport, no way I'm taking a train! If I do have to take a train, get me an overnight one – so that I can just crash out in the night, so that I don't have to waste the day. When can I reach the grade when I shall be entitled to business class? Can I now afford to fly my whole family on our next holiday? As we upgrade to a 'higher class', we increasingly cocoon ourselves from real world, the world that is inhabited by many who we wish to communicate with or sell to.

My first aircraft ride was two months after I began working, and I was desperate to pretend to my fellow passengers that I knew how to fasten a seatbelt. As a child, and as a young student, I always travelled by train. That was all my father could afford for the family, and every journey was an experience that had me craving for more. It gave me the opportunity to make friends, experience cuisine from different states of India; and the thrill of clambering aboard just as the train began to move. For the fourteen years that I have worked, I have made it a point to undertake at least two long distance train journeys. At a philosophical level, it could be termed as an almost-Gandhian endeavour to understand the middle class psyche. In reality, I became a cultural anthropologist, a classical participant observer. Where else but on a long distance train ride can you have a captive, animated group of people to seek opinion from, observe, and draw conclusions about human behaviour but a second class railway compartment?



As the journey begins, observe the desperation of the waitlisted passenger as he sidles up to the Ticket Collector, impressing upon him the dire need to get to his destination in the hope that the bribe he has to pay will be lower than the TC's rate. I have personally managed to get a berth by showing one such TC the tins of infant food I was carrying for my nephew – my family had forgotten them, and I had to go back and take a later train to the same destination. Out

here, the compartment is the kingdom, and the TC is king, the bribes essential to curry favour from the king. In every public service domain in our country, be it at the Road Transport Office, municipality or tax office, there are kingdoms and emperors. If you want something, you need to know what makes them move your case.

Watch what magazines different people pick up : the young men travelling alone roll up the girlie magazines or the racy *Nutan Kabaniyan* they buy and scramble up to the upper berth; the small kids' glee as the father buys them a *Champak* in the hope that it will keep them quiet for a couple of hours. In the days when they were still available through A H Wheeler in the north and Higginbothams in the south, my father's collection of Perry Mason and James Hadley Chase grew over his train journeys. Today, it is books by Harold Robbins and Jeffrey Archer that are the rage among those who read in English. For the Hindi reader, there are racy detective-and-lust novels by Gulshan Nanda, Ved Prakash Sharma and others which go by names like *Khooni Mujrim*, *Sookhe Ped – Subz Pattey*, *Vijay Vikas aur Singahi Ki Lalkaar* . Ask the reader, and he will tell you that these books are excellent time-pass. On some railway platforms, bookstalls of the Gita Press and the Sarvodaya Ashram valiantly attempt to alter the reader's sensitivities, to no avail. It is only a matter of time before every compartment acquires a lending library. Magazines, newspapers change hands (even the Debonairs – as other young and not so young men take turns with the upper berth), and become the starting points for animated discussion.

Among men, politics is the first topic – triggered off by the capers of some politician, as reported in the papers. Every sixth man (between the ages 35 and 75), I have discovered, is an authority on politics, professes to know a distant cousin of Laloo Yadav, Rajnath Singh or A K Antony, and therefore knows the inside story about most scams. It is surprising how they never seem to know a national – level politician. The younger couldn't be bothered, interested more in film stars, cricket and pornography. Women usually begin by exchanging notes on the snacks and meals they carry, sampling each other's packed (now unpacked) tiffins. The warnings on the railway platform 'Please do not eat if someone offers you food. They may drug you and take away all your belongings' have no effect; I mean, how could that matronly lady in a synthetic saree, glass bangles, *sindoor* and half covered head ever put anything but the choicest *masalas* in her food? Their conversation then moves on to the family, their mother's house, the water problems, the husband's workplace and how stressful it is. And they want to know all about you. I have heard of a lady pull out a picture of her software engineer son and show it to a colleague – a single, young, eligible lady – in the hope of a matrimonial alliance. Between Vindhyachal and Satna stations, I have found that the lady sitting across lived next door to a distant uncle of mine in Patna, and (sensing a sudden intimacy) that she and her husband were making a trip to various temples to pray for an end to their infertile marriage. Did someone tell that to you in a focus group?



Nowhere are people more adjusting; and the adjustment factor goes down as the class goes up. In an unreserved bogie, the scramble for a place to sit is limited to the few minutes after the train pulls into the station. Once a passenger can get a spot, it's his for the journey. If he has to get up, he can leave a handkerchief, a tiffin-box – anything; and fellow passengers will fiercely protect his territory while he steps out to the loo, or to buy a snack. The seat is symbolic of a small victory, and other victors appreciate that, having won their own

territories in the same way. It is a telling comment on the frugality of the lower-middle class of our population – being happy with the little that you’ve got. Not so in the airconditioned class, where the first question the berth occupant will ask you is “Do you have a reservation?”. The subtext is – are you the privileged sort, like me, to be entitled to a higher mode of transportation? The train, and that berth, for the duration of the journey, also becomes an acquired temporary home. Have you seen, in any other mode of transport, people go off to the washroom, change from trousers to a *lungi*, pack their shoes off and wear slippers, and make themselves so comfortable?

Over the years, there have been several changes in what we do during our journeys that I think are provide important clues towards our understanding of society. Some where in the mid-1980s, people said (and I mean no ill towards that state), “Stay awake, and guard your luggage when you’re travelling through Bihar at night”. It became quite common, on trains passing through the state, for petty thieves to snatch luggage at night. Thus was born insecurity



during travel, and a magnificent product category was born to serve the need to secure one’s suitcases – chains and locks. The sellers were quick to suggest that no matter where you travelled in the country, your luggage was at risk – and now chains and locks are available on virtually every railway platform across India. Similarly, travellers carried drinking water from home in water bottles, or picked up a *surahi* (an earthen pot that keeps water cool in summer), and filled them up from taps at the platform. No more! The perceived threat from the environment, in the form of disease, has made sure that bottled water is available, usually chilled, everywhere – including at your berth. No effort required, no queues at the tap, no rushing back if the train started moving. Rs 10 is surely worth the price to pay for convenience and peace of mind. The ‘product category’ of the *surahi* died a natural death; taking along with it the *kullarbs* (earthen cups) in which tea would be served, as disposable plastic / thermocol glasses replaced them and cluttered up the environment. By the early 1990s, the aluminum / steel *thalis* in which was served food from the pantry car made way for foil wrapped dinner to make it all seem so hygienic, never mind the conditions in the pantry car – which I can assure you remains squalid as ever. Packaged modernity, which the Indian middle class readily has embraced.

Yet another two categories that existed solely to serve the needs of the traveller have perished : the inflatable pillow, and the canvas holdall. Of course, it is entirely the result of the railways offering us a value-added service – laundered bed linen in the airconditioned classes. With crisp white sheets on offer, who wanted to burden themselves? But this innovation quickly ‘diffused’ to the lower classes – where bedding is not on offer. Passengers began to think it was infra-dig to carry a holdall; so a sheet and blanket are now folded into the suitcase for use at night. The pillow still survives, but barely; the holdall has disappeared.

As the journey progresses, you find boredom setting in. The perfect time to provoke people to talk, by referring to a broad social observation like ‘These days I find everyone going to those fancy shopping malls. I think everything in those shops is overpriced. After all, someone has to pay for the airconditioning’ – and hear the strong opinions pour out. After

six hours of knowing your personal life (cook it up, make it interesting !), they want to tell you all about themselves, and try to make it as interesting as they can.

So the next time you wish to 'understand your consumer' better, resist the urge to call up your research agency. Buy a long distance train ticket instead, preferably a round trip, by second class. Carry magazines as stimulus material, do not tape record all responses. Soak in the experience, mingle with your 'target group'. I am sure you will come off with a lot more insights than you would from that group at Mrs Mehta's Vile Parle apartment.

SHOPPING MALLS : THE URBAN *CHAUPAL*

As cities in metropolitan India spiral outwards and upwards, the pressure on spaces for their inhabitants to socialize grows every day. Cities like Mumbai, where every bit of open land triggers the impulse to construct, are the worst affected. But then, we are remarkable adaptive as a species. We find new ways to practice some of our old, primitive behaviours – to imitate, to consume, to court. This piece is based on observations at the latest symbol of India's prosperity – the shopping mall.

When the first Western-style shopping malls appeared in India's metros – Crossroads in Mumbai and Ansal Plaza in New Delhi, they evoked awe and excitement among the residents of the city. Here was the opportunity to touch, try and hopefully buy merchandise pretty much the same way as the citizens of the First World could. Malls offered amazing choice, a climate controlled environment that took the drudgery out of shopping. Modern technology made the shopping spaces to be airy, light and easy to navigate. Everything was designed to pamper the shopper, and companies rushed in to showcase their brands. These were places where the entire family could go, and this encouraged family expeditions to the malls.

Pretty soon, on weekends, enormous queues began to form outside the malls. Ansal Plaza's cavernous parking lot no longer had space for the shoppers' cars. Crossroads introduced an entry barrier – only if you had a mobile phone or a credit card, could you enter, else you had to buy a ticket. It was like going to the movies, or an amusement park. Once inside the mall, many middle-class shoppers found themselves intimidated by the prices, the variety; yet found it difficult to tear themselves away from the possibility of dreaming how the flat-screen TVs would look in their living rooms, of how the expensive dress would look on their bodies. The touch-feel experience enabled them to live those dreams, even if momentarily. It created a tension in their lives. And they reacted, by subverting the originally commercial venture to turn the mall into a place for socializing.



Teenagers needed a place to hang out, and their neighbourhoods were getting boring. Suddenly, the mall was an exciting and colourful place to spend their evenings. It became the equivalent, albeit younger, of the village *chaupal*. All over the stone steps of Ansal Plaza, in the vast central courtyard of Crossroads, small groups of teenage boys and girls, interspersed with slightly older, dating couples, began a ritual that is best associated with rural life – exchanging gossip, joking, observing and commenting on others in the mall. The mall offered bustle and movement, which they loved. On the other hand, the elegant facades, the orderly display of merchandise, the fact that everything is in public view inhibits them from rowdiness or indecent behaviour, something that the young are often associated with in the alleys of their neighbourhoods.

The seven-rupee ice cream cone at McDonald's gave the young and families an anchor in the mall. Interestingly – at both malls, the fast-food outlet is always within eyesight, wherever you might be in the central plaza. They could come in, buy an inexpensive cone, and feel they had done their duty towards the shopowners at the mall. Not more than 15% of those who walk into a Shoppers Stop at Ansal Plaza or Piramyd at Crossroads exit with shopping bags. I have observed college girls walk into Shoppers Stop put on makeup, spray perfume from the tester bottles, and walk out completely decked up for their date or party on several occasions. After some initial resistance, mallowners have reconciled themselves to the way things have shaped up. Companies are beginning to see occupying mallspace as a way of showcasing rather than selling.

The mall is also a place where people dream about and plan their futures. Young couples walk arm-in-arm admiring the clothes and jewellery in the show-windows, and the boy promises the girl, this is what I'll buy you after we get married. It is a place for finding role models in the real world – as non-shoppers closely observe what the young and relatively affluent are buying from the boutiques, following and later imitating their styles – even if they pick up their clothes at Sarojini Nagar or Fashion Street. Young men and women, in their first jobs, check out the consumer electronics and compare prices, as they figure out how soon they would be able to afford all that gadgetry. They are making wishlists of what they would buy when they got their next raise, or performance bonus.

Given all that, a mall has to evolve to serve a different need altogether – if people are there to socialize, if they are going to spend several hours, they must be entertained and fed. The Big Daddy of shopping malls in the world, the Mall of America in Minneapolis, in the USA, has a gigantic Snoopy theme park in the centre. It keeps the kids absolutely glued. One floor is dedicated to multiplexes, another to restaurants. We are beginning to learn. If endless cups of tea and *pakor*as are consumed at a *chaupal*, half of Dilli Haat, another popular hangout place for Delhi's young, is dedicated to street food. More and more restaurants and pubs are opening up in Ansal Plaza. Films – songs, chases (boy chases girl kind of) – are now being shot at the malls. It gives the idle youth a chance to have a shot to be on the big screen, even if as a bystander. It provides them the chance to be spotted by the talent scouts who prowl these spaces looking for fresh faces for music videos, commercials or films. Reminds me of the *nantanki* or *jatra* performance in the village square, where actors emerge from the audience and people in the audience are made fun of – and momentarily become the centre of attraction. Kids at a mall behave exactly the same way as they would in a village fairground – going ballistic in the toy and gift sections; there is none of that bored, get-on-with-it look that you would see them give at a grocery store.



Given the rush of malls that are springing up in the suburbia, those setting up shop might well be cognizant of how people behave in them. The trick will lie in building long term relationships with prospective consumers, making them feel they are welcome to return even if they did not but anything the first, or the second time around. Why give a loyalty card only

when a customer buys something? Let even visits be rewarded. It will lie in collaborating with others renting space in the mall to create excitement that draws in people and keeps them there – because, in the future, it is quite possible that competition will not be between brands or outlets in a mall, but between malls themselves. And one must remember not to ignore or forget the young, as they will be the affluent consumers of the future.

FESTIVE FERVOUR

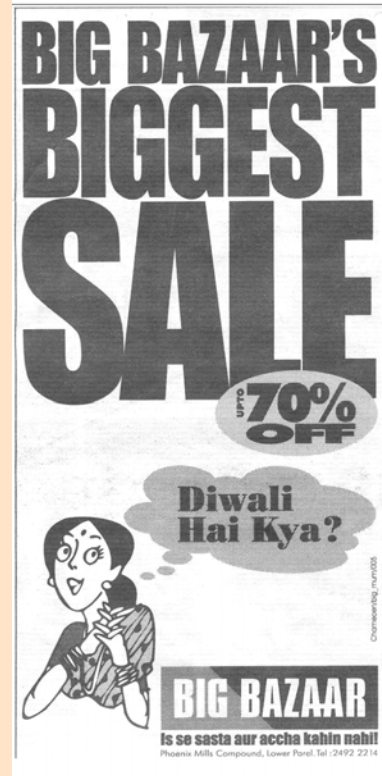
It is that time of the year once again. Marketplaces have been decked up with bright lights, balloons and buntings. The newspaper supplements are full of offers. Decibel levels are at their highest on television, especially in the consumer durables, jewellery and apparel categories. Yes, it is indeed festival time.

For marketers and their agencies, the months of October and November are the time to make a killing. This is when there is that upward blip in sales and billings; and because it is a time that is close to the end of the financial year, it is also a time to up the ante on meeting the year-end targets. But the question that niggles at the back of all minds is: will the consumer open her purse even wider this year?

To try answer that question, it may make sense to understand how the meaning and practice of celebrating festivals have undergone change in the last two decades. And no subject holds greater fascination for a cultural analyst than the most popular festivals of a society. This article is an attempt to highlight some of the important changes that we have observed across different parts of the country, in the manner in which festivals have come to redefine some of the ways people express themselves.

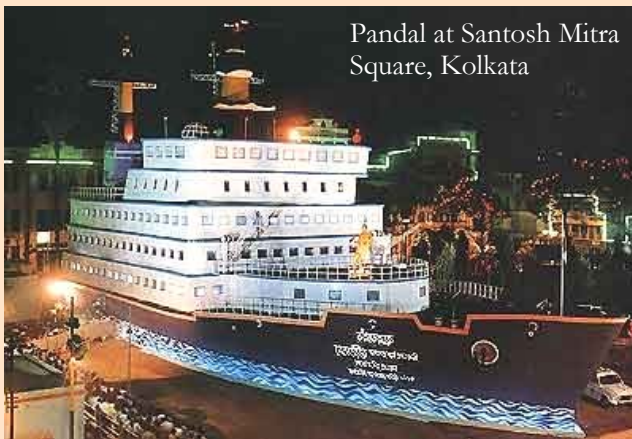
In traditional agrarian society, festivals coincided with harvest time. Money became available to families- to spend on essentials like cattle and clothing. In some ways, the promise of new things symbolized renewal. In urban India, the practice of the government and companies disbursing bonuses at festival time paralleled this welcome addition to a family's bottom-line. This was essential to give the immigrant family the same sense of well-being. The splurge that followed, be it through the purchase of that long-coveted refrigerator for the housewife or the man's suit that would make him look good in the next office function, in many ways, marked the beginning of festivals emerging as the time to spend with little guilt. What we are seeing today is an exponential magnification of the bonus-enabled indulgence.

A good harvest was also reason to remember and thank the Gods for bounty bestowed, as well as keep Him/Her pleased so that the next year would be as prosperous. Today, the Gods are quite different. In a world that beseeches favours from acquaintances, the extended family and business associates, it is they who must be remembered and kept happy. Bribery (and I would call it nothing but that) rears its ugly head the highest during Diwali and Holi. The mountains of dry fruits, the boxes of real and faux crystal piled high on the pavements of markets disappear in no time to make their way into homes of those who bestow



privileges. And there is hardly anyone who refuses such tokens of ‘festive goodwill’!

Traditionally, festivals were celebrated at home. There were the usual rituals and fasts to be observed, new clothes worn, and blessings sought from both the divine and the respected members in the family. Roles of various family members were defined in the celebration, and the family deity assumed center stage. Sometimes, it was the inability of families to please the Gods in a manner that befitted them, that brought several families from a neighbourhood together to stage a community worship – the birth of the Durga Puja and Ganapati pandals. See what form this had taken today! A festival is a spectacle. Hear the din that accompanies a Ganapati Visarjan in Mumbai, where the sorry 12-inch Ganapati statue is overshadowed drum-beating, synthesizer screaming, disco-dancing bunch of revelers who think disrupting traffic is their cultural birthright. A festival is more about the pursuit and admiration of opulence, and sometimes craftsmanship. Hence, places of community worship are now referred to as (the singer) Abhijeet’s pandal, or (politician) Suresh



Kalmadi’s Ganesh Puja. From a voluntary contribution to the humble puja, we now have sponsorships that pay for everything from the pandals that resemble the Gateway of India, Belur Math, Victoria Memorial or even, morbidly, the World Trade Centre in New York; to the prasad that is served to devotees. It is those who collect the greatest amount of contributions that are voted general secretaries and presidents of the ‘societies’ that stage such events (what else can you call them?)

No doubt, such a passion for opulence has made heroes out of the craftspersons of Pen (in Maharashtra, where many Ganapati statues are made) and Kumartuli (in Kolkata, home to Durga image artisans), as you see covered in almost every news channel in the run-up to the festivals. But every needs a warm up now. Enter the Diwali/Holi Mela, which create the perfect opportunity for families to loosen up their purse strings. Since many of these profess to be held for the benefit of the disadvantaged, they do provide some emotional balm in the times of splurge. Isn’t it far cooler to buy those candles made by the blind students in the shadow of the Oberoi, than firecrackers made by the child-labourers of Sivakasi?

What festivals have succeeded in doing more than any economic activity is in bringing women out of their closeted homes. Since the very arena of celebration had changed, it has brought women out, in a manner in which they can express themselves and strive for recognition. The various side – events that go eith the main festival – the cultural programs, the Ananda Mela preceding the Durga Puja where women from the neighbourhood cook goodies and put up stalls, all provide them the opportunity to showcase talent that had hitherto been confined to appreciation only within the family. As such events are also organized by women, their ‘management skills’ are also pretty much on display. What is remarkable is that even the concept of *shringar*- an intensely private, personal activity for a woman - is being played out in the open, as women have no qualms about getting their *mehndi* done on the pavements of busy marketplaces, Such activities speak volumes about the

confidence and gumption of today's women, undoubtedly enabled by festive occasions. Restaurants have been quick to cash in on the woman's desire to step out of her home and have as good a time as anyone else by offering the same *sattwik*, Navratra meals during festivals that her mother would have spent hours to rustle up.

In cosmopolitan worlds, festivals allow communities to reaffirm their ethnic identities. Look at the transformation of the corporate CEO into a Bengali *bhadralok*, as he ditches his pinstripes for a starched *dhuti* and embroidered silk *panjabi*. See how the sixteen-year old exchanges her low-waist jeans for a *lehnga*, or a *jamdani* saree, and begins extolling the virtues of her aunt's homemade sweets as opposed to the chocolate mousse served at Mocha, as she digs into her *dabeli* or *Kobiraji cutlet*. Traditional songs, dances and plays are brushed up to be performed (and if I may add, evaluated by the purists - as I overheard a sixty-year old criticize popular singer Shaan's Bangla accent).



What I find truly is the intermingling of rituals while celebrating festivals today. Traditionally, firecrackers have been burst at Diwali – to scare off the symbolic demons. The noise and sparkle they generate now transcends that festival, and one has to bear them during Ganpati Visarjan, and even Holika and Baisakhi. If people threw *gulal* at each other during Holi in celebration of spring, they now do so during many other festivals, just (I believe) to add colour to the festivity.

How can marketers benefit from these trends? First, they must realize that there are more ways of engaging the consumer than just offering deals that would make them choose their brand. After all, everyone does exactly the same thing. Doing a census of all Dandiya festivals in Mumbai, and then choosing a few to put up banners doesn't help either. The opportunity lies in enhancing the festival experience, simply because that is what most people are looking forward to. Design the promotion to be community/ ethnicity specific if you are looking at cementing bonds – e.g. For company in the grooming/apparel business it may make sense to give prizes to the best traditionally dressed person at a community gathering. A food company could sponsor the many Ananda Melas across a city and gain valuable association in terms of tradition. Or, introduce special festival flavours in its product line for that period. If a company wanted to be seen as socially responsible, it could either employ an army of volunteers to regulate traffic during those chaotic visarjans, or do a campaign against noise pollution during Diwali (and suggest alternate ways of celebration). If ours is a nation that is characterized by the saying “*Barah Maas, Terah Parab*” (Twelve months, Thirteen festivals), let us find ways of channelizing the festive fervour more responsibly and profitably.

THE HUMBLE SEWING MACHINE

Usha. Singer. Merritt. Once household names, now seemingly consigned to the cobwebs of memory.



Most Indians above the age of thirty would remember the sewing machine, kept in a corner of their parents' bedroom. It was symbolic of their mother's life beyond the kitchen. A window to the possibility that she could perhaps escape from her domestic responsibilities and look for fame and fortune among her neighbours.

The sewing machine was a part of the woman's dowry. It brought together two of the homemaker's desirable

qualities – craft, and frugality. Craft because she was expected to be the keeper of the aesthetic flame, through the fashioning of tablecloths, napkins, curtains, blouses, and petticoats, Frugality, because all this did not have to be made by the tailor, and money was saved for more important things such as books for the children and petrol for the family scooter.

My mother, like many other women of her times, and those of the more recent, did not know how to operate the damn thing at the time they were married off. But the sewing machine, complete with its wooden cover (and a lace one, on top) beckoned, asking them to learn. So off they went, the shy bride stepping out of home for her first sewing lessons, to a neighbouring auntie's home. Or it was grandma, the veteran of a hundred blouses, who played willing teacher. In a few week, the first straight edges of the handkerchief emerged from the machine. Proudly embroidered with the initials of the family name, coyly shown to her husband, see, I made it for you. Handkerchief today, pajamas tomorrow.

There were two types of sewing machines, the hand operated one, and the foot-powered one. It was once anathema for the woman to sit on a chair. Social norms allowed only the men to sit on chairs. The ten-kilo machine was hefted onto the bed by a manservant, and the lady sat cross-legged with her bales of cloth and scissors beside her, as also the carved wooden box (or the old tin box that once held candy) containing the multicoloured thread and buttons. The foot-operated machine, on the other hand, reduced her labour, and enhanced her status, simply by allowing her to sit her on a cushioned stool. Maybe it was a subtle ploy by her parents. Being rich enough to afford such a sewing machine, they knew that its mode of use



would quite literally, lift their daughter up in her new family.

As the years went on, her creativity would blossom. She was now able to stitch a perfect circle, and the scalloped hems of her petticoats were evidence of her deftness. The afternoons, in the absence of TV soap opera, filled up with the rhythmic clatter of the spindle. The living room overflowed with her creations, and her mother-in-law began showing off her creations to the neighbours and visiting relatives. As she basked in the praise, a thought began to cross her mind – can I profit from my skill? Can I start stitching clothes for my neighbours, not the ordinary kind but the more flowery, elaborate stuff that would enable them to see me as a designer, not just a domestic seamstress? For most women, it remained just a dream, wishful thinking, their creativity nipped in the bud by patriarchy. Money is to be made by the men, let it stay that way. Let creativity remain confined within the domain of the family.

And so it did. The young bride turned into an arthritic, bespectacled grandma. She could no longer thread the needle, and a grandchild would happily do it for her. But the teacosies, curtains and pillowcovers she had fashioned were still the talking point in every family gathering.

Is it all nostalgia?



We might be tempted to believe so. But just last weekend, I visited a family in Pune, a reasonably large city 150 kms east of Mumbai, and there it was (see picture on the left). Not gathering dust in some corner, but evidently in use. I lifted the cover, and the needles were shiny and the spindles greased with machine oil (a bottle of which rested on the window sill). There were enough sofa covers, TV covers and homemade cushions around to convince me. I was reminded of the sight of a newly married couple getting into an auto-rickshaw at Varanasi railway station, with new

bags and a shiny Usha sewing machine, merely a year ago.

Sewing machine manufacturers have started offering sew-it-yourself patterns printed in full size, making it simple to trace, cut and sew. Multiple styles are provided, and so, users can design six trendy outfits from a single pattern sheet. Of course, these are designs created by the National Institute of Fashion Technology, for added fashion credibility !

The upper-classes might be shopping for brand-name apparel and furnishings at the shiny new malls. But for middle-class India, the sewing machine remains a stolid anchor of domesticity, its mastery holding out hope for the woman who looks outside home.

TRAFFIC LIGHT SALESMEN

Rushed for time, consumers in India's metros attempt to maximize every moment of their lives. But catching up on the day's headlines, while ensconced in the back seat of a car or taxi, is a universal urban phenomenon. Shopping-on-the-go is an entirely different story. Here's an example of how sellers and buyers come together at traffic signals in a rapid transaction, that we, the creators of the 30 second sales pitch (or the 20 page shop assistant training manual) can learn from.

If you ever run into Zig Ziglar, the bestselling author of 'Secrets of Closing a Sale', tell him to hire a cab on the streets of Mumbai or Delhi. He will be a transformed man.

The average waiting time at a traffic signal in an Indian metropolis is 90 seconds. From the moment the lights turn red, a posse of salespersons descends on the occupant of the automobile, bearing the most incredible variety of merchandise.



The latest issue of Time Out. A box of ripe Alphonso mangoes. A pack of luscious strawberries from Mahabaleshwar. Sunshades for car windows. Chilled bottles of Aquafina water. A six-pack of toy cars. A little toy boy, who squirts a stream of water when you pull his pants down. A bunch of red roses. A garland of fragrant jasmine flowers. Dusters to wipe the car clean. Bright balloons. Pirated copies of Blink, the latest Harry Potter (Half Blood Brother, isn't it?), The Da Vinci Code. A pack of ear buds.

Theirs is not a random hit-or-miss effort at snagging a buyer. Observing their sales pitch closely, I find that their 90 seconds are planned and executed to perfection. In the first 5 seconds, they scan the occupants of the bumper-to-bumper packed cars.

The twenty-five year old woman or man is a prime Time Out prospect, probably thinking of which nightspot to hit that evening or over the weekend. The forty-year old woman returning from a shopping



trip – the bags in the backseat are a dead giveaway – will buy those fruits, surely, to feel healthy after a bout of spending. Non air-conditioned car, open window, and parched lips, and Aquafina it is. Kids in the car? Here are the toy cars, and the toyboy that pees. Infants, such as my daughter, attract the balloon-seller. A couple holding hands is a magnet for the flower sellers. If the sun is out in full glory, the shade seller puts it against the glass and provides a fair maiden momentary shade and tempts her to roll down the window. The duster seller never, almost never, approaches the passenger in the back seat. He knows that the chauffeur is the one who knows if the old duster has worn out.



The street-seller knows precisely how much time s/he must spend on each prospect. Should the person in the car hold his or her gaze for more than a second, the object in hand is thrust into the open window, or held against a closed one, as if encouraging the occupant of the car to roll down the window. Some targets, such as the couple holding hands, are soft. The sales spiel begins immediately, a flattering tone that suggest how pretty the lady would look with flowers in her hair, or

how the roses would be a perfect, impromptu declaration of amour. So are little children, who are immediately drawn to toys and their parents (considering that the child is anyway being a pest within the confines of the car) consider it worth the five rupees to keep them quiet for the rest of the journey. Others are not, like the smart young college girl who wants a copy of Vogue for Rs 50, one-fifth the price she would pay at a bookstore. Thirty seconds go by. It is time worth spent on chasing the hottest prospect. The hit rate is one out of hundred, better on a lucky day.

And then someone rolls down a window and beckons. Her impulses have gotten the better of her. She asks the price of the strawberries. A price is quoted, obviously too high. The bargaining begins. The lady forgets she is at a traffic signal, not at her neighbourhood wet market. She insists on checking each piece of fruit, knowing fully well that those in the bottom layer are likely to be rotten. Another 45 seconds are consumed.

The lights change from red to green. The fruits are thrust inside the open window. The lady rummages inside her purse for change. The cars behind begin to honk. Her driver gets the car moving. The seller runs along. Money and fruits change hands.

Meanwhile, in a taxi nearby, the young man braids jasmine in his beloved's long hair, and she snuggles closer to him.

90 seconds are up.

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST IN THE ADVERTISING WORLD

Media Ethnography as a Consumer Insight Tool

We know that the media both influence and draw from society. However, most media research focusses on only the former, either by measuring the popularity of programming or content, or by assessing the popularity of themes and characters. Much of media research is thus actually ‘reception research’ which concentrates on the immediate situation of decoding media content and its effect.

Media ethnography offers a different perspective, one where the point of departure is a particular group of people and not a particular medium. As a key method of cultural analysis, its primary aim is to determine and interpret the culture (and therefore the values, rituals, symbols, shared meanings and role models) of a community as it is portrayed in the media that they read and watch. As we know it, culture is expressed in a group’s behaviour – its language or jargon, rules and norms, the expectations concerning relationships, use of products and services, rules and norms within families and communities. From that perspective, media ethnography is a valuable methodology in the consumer insight toolbox, because it helps uncover the nuances in people’s behaviour and attitudes that conventional qualitative research often fails to elicit.

The nuances can be picked up, because the media often magnify them to dramatic effect. Just 6 issues of a popular women’s magazine like *Kumudam*, or *Grihsobha* can provide us with a window to the lives, dreams, fears and hopes of a hundred thousand women – more than any ‘robust’ focus group sample. The writers, producers and columnists in any medium serve as moderators and interpreters of the data for us.

When *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (the first-ever game show on Indian TV, modelled after ‘Who Wants to be a Millionaire’) was on the drawing board, skeptics argued that Indian society was not yet ready for a program that offered such a huge sum of prize money. Greed for money was something that couldn’t be openly acknowledged in a society where knowledge is given more respect than money. Traditionally, Brahmins are higher than Vaishyas in the social ladder; Saraswati (the Goddess of Learning) is accorded higher status than Lakshmi (the Goddess of Wealth). What the skeptics hadn’t accounted for was the change – that post-liberalization of the Indian economy, people found the opportunity and many new ways of making money. It had become quite acceptable to amass wealth as long it was done the ‘right way’; and if knowledge was the means to acquire wealth, brilliant. This, to us, was the biggest learning from *Kaun Banega Crorepati* – where participants were as unapologetic about their material desires as they were confident about putting their knowledge to public scrutiny. It was not the resurrection or draw of the superstar Amitabh Bachchan. We are sure that none of the pre-show research uncovered that insight.

This paper outlines some of the principles of the discipline of media ethnography, and how they lead us to arrive at insights; using examples of projects that the Discovery team at Ogilvy & Mather have done in the past one year. We outline the steps involved, and use examples of different projects to show how insights were unearthed.

Choosing the Media to Study

The starting point for a media ethnography project is to **determine what media does the intended group of people under study consume**. When we were trying to uncover youth trends, we studied the content of youth & college festival magazines – JAM, JLT and Femina Girl, and the music / youth channels like Channel V and MTV India. When we wanted to have a point-of-view on the Indian middle-class homemaker, we looked at mainstream women’s magazines like *Meri Sabeli*, *Grihsobha* & *Vanita*. When we wanted to understand the difference between the middle-class home and the upper-class one, we looked at those magazines as well as *Elle*, *Femina* and *New Woman*. One didn’t have to spend time and money visiting ‘50 homes each’ from the two segments; just 6 copies each of these magazines provided sufficient cues towards the motives for home décor.

Content Analysis : Macro and Micro

Grooming	60	Women Achievers	10
Relationships	51	Shopping	10
Health	41	Cinema	8
Parenting	26	Poetry	8
Interior Décor	22	Working women	7
Romance	18	Travel	7
Cooking/Recipe	15	Home management	6
Society	14	Music	5
Sex	13	Gender issues	5
Humour	10	Etiquette	5

The next step is to take a **bird’s eye view of the content**. That might mean simply listing down the themes that the sample media have covered, and determining how frequently those themes recur across the sample. That gives us a sense of priority for the group under study. For example, our study of 407

articles (*Meri Sabeli*, *Grihsobha* & *Vanita*) revealed the themes listed in the table on the left. It is evident that the woman today gives great importance to her grooming. What is significant, and interesting is the fact that there were several articles that advised her how to ensure that other family members, like her husband, her sister / brother-in-law, and her children could dress better. This suggested that it was equally important to her that her family’s projected public image was good, and that she could be the family’s image consultant. The woman manages and balances many relationships –with her in-laws, husband, her parents, and even her onetime boyfriend, as the contents of these articles confirm. She is getting increasingly health conscious – perceiving threats from the environment and hectic lifestyles; and is concerned whether she’s being a good parent (the magazine articles now play the advisory role that members from her erstwhile joint family system had played). A large number of articles on romance and sex are representative of her openness about the need for the same, within the bounds of her marriage though *‘Kyon na dikhen apne pati ke liye sexy’* (Why don’t you look sexy for your husband). The nuances in the husband-wife relationship, as depicted in the Ponds Fair & Young advertising were the result of our media ethnography of romance.





We did a similar study of children's popular media – magazines such as Champak and Tinkle, and the widely read series of Indian comics – Chacha Chaudhury, Billoo and Pinky. What was common to most stories was the eternal contest between good and evil, the abiding moral tone and the victory of the underdog. The differentiating factor, however, in many stories is the absence of the superhero. There are no magical Harry Potter-ish or Superheroes transformations in these tales. The stories are about small achievements in everyday life. The titles – Billoo and Summer Vacations / Hockey Final / Film's Heroine / Five star hotel / Picnic / Summer Vacations / Bicycle / Softy / Mr India / Cake / Film show; Pinky and Ice cream / Charity ticket / Juggler / New Frock / School Bell / Bengali sweets – celebrate

the high points in a child's routine existence. They provide a momentary respite from the pressure that they face at an early age, with parents pushing them to achieve more. They suggest ways in which a child can be in the spotlight for fifteen minutes, even if it is only in their classroom, or living room when guests come calling. The key insight : a brand targeted at children must then enable them to either celebrate the moments of respite, or provide the opportunity for achieving small victories and be heroes.

The macro view allows us to define the world of the reader / viewer; and provides cues for getting into the subject of exploration deeper. We do that by **reading / watching the content closely, and spotting patterns.**

मेरी उम्र बाईस साल है। तीन साल पहले अपनी कार के शादीशुदा ड्राइवर से मुझे प्रेम हो गया। मेरे घरवालों को पता चल गया और बहुत हंगामा हुआ। उसने जहर खा कर अपनी जान देने की कोशिश की। उसके बाद मैंने उसे समझाया कि हमारे ना मिलने में दोनों परिवारों की भलाई है। अब मैं दूसरे शहर आ गयी हूँ, पर उसने यहाँ भी मेरा पीछा नहीं छोड़ा। कहता है कि तुम्हीं से शादी करूंगा। उसकी वजह से मेरी बदनामी हो रही है। उससे तो शादी हो ही नहीं सकती, उसके तो बच्चे भी हैं। मैं अपने घरवालों की मदद भी नहीं ले सकती। आप ही बताएं मैं क्या करूँ ?

शिरखा (पटना)

Staying with the subject of romance, we discovered that many women talk of relationships before marriage, columnists offer advice on dealing with ex-boyfriends and even ex-girlfriends of husbands. Looking closely at the source of the letters shows that this phenomenon is not confined to metros, but is quite common in smaller cities like Patna (see letter on the left – from a woman who fell in love with her married driver), Muzaffarnagar and Bareilly. Articles provide advice to working women, on not just managing their own money, but also on how to deal with the insecurity of the husband. Such articles provide cues about how society prescribes where women should draw the line – equality, not dominance of the husband.

Let us see, for a moment, how hours of television watching can yield insights into the changing aspirations of women. With the proliferation of television soap operas, mostly in the genre of 'family drama' such as *Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* and *Kabani Ghar Ghar Ki*, there is an ever-growing need for actresses. The world of cinema - particularly Bollywood where women today are nothing more than scantily clothed sidekicks of the male characters – is quite unacceptable to most conservative middle class families for their daughters to pursue careers. Not so with the TV soaps. The female characters in them wear traditional *sarees* and the modest *salwar kameez*, albeit jazzed up; many of the directors such as Ekta

Kapoor and Aruna Irani are women. The same goes for news television – modestly clad reporters and anchors. All this provides a safe environment for women to work (barring the rare occasion when an intrepid Barkha Dutt ventures into strife-torn Kashmir); and many women's magazines carry articles on how to make careers in the world of television. Newspapers carry increasing amounts of advertising for 'acting / grooming / diction' academies that promise to transform any young woman into a TV star! These are discoveries about the woman's world which could only be uncovered by avid media analysis - discoveries that are sure to find expression in the creation and depiction of characters in TV commercials.

Regional Culture Mapping through Vernacular Media

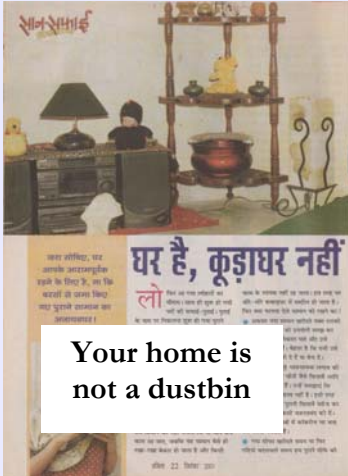
Media ethnology is particularly useful in understanding differences between regional cultures – a necessity in a culturally diverse nation like India. Through a comparison between the storylines and characters of soap operas in Hindi and Malayalam, we were able to determine how the woman in the southern Indian state of Kerala was different from the north Indian woman. The Hindi soaps are based on the complex set of relationships within joint families, and heavily loaded with traditional family values of honour and pride. Women play out their given roles of being mothers and nurturers, the main protagonists are depicted as the upholder of the family values, and hardly anyone strays from the 'right path'. Those who do are jettisoned from the family immediately. The lesson often is a regressive one – that the woman's place is in her home. In contrast, the Malayalam soaps are based on man-woman relationships (as in the serial *Swapnam*), or even a friendship between two woman (as in *Stree Oru Santhwam*) with an individual as the focus. The storylines are about the dreams, and subsequent trials and tribulations of that individual, usually a woman and encourage the woman to break out of the cocoon of her home. The heroes / heroines have shades of black and white in their personalities – which suggest that the Malayali society is more accepting and forgiving of flaws in one's character. This analysis provided us helpful cues for sketching out characters in TV commercials for the Kerala market.

The Creator's Viewpoint

An ethnography of this nature can be sometimes enriched by delving into the minds and lives of the people who are the creators of such stories. Authors, filmmakers (especially TV serial makers), actors and editors – the 'media creators' – do not operate in a vacuum. They need to know what ticks among their readers / viewers as much as advertisers do. What these storytellers do is to take an emotion, or behaviour that might already exist in people and magnify them in a dramatic fashion. One such example, which emerges out of content analysis of popular TV serials, is the popularity of the 'bad woman' in every serial. The *saas-bahu* (mother-in-law – daughter-in-law) scenarios are nothing but a magnification of the emotions of conflict. In real life, a 'wronged *bahu*' will never walk out of the home and take revenge. She will harbour her resentment at the 'older *bahu*', the favoured one and her mother-in-law; and take vicarious pleasure from what a Pallavi (the wronged *bahu*) does to the Agarwal *khandaan* (joint family). She sees these figures in her life all the time, and wishes she could do something similar to her tormentors. But she can't, and latches on to the emotions weeknight after weeknight. The first piece of advertising, based on such conflicts within the family, has hit the airwaves very recently. A TV commercial for the popular detergent brand, Nirma (enclosed), shows various daughters-in-law in a family flinging food

at each other, in apparent anger; and then walking away to wash their dirty clothes. It is comic; it is a magnification of suppressed emotion.

Example: Understanding Middle and Upper Class Homes



A short case study, based on a media ethnography on the Meaning of the Home, will demonstrate how **insights can be obtained through a comparative analysis.** The home of the middle-class woman, as exemplified by the home décor articles in Grihshobha, Woman's Era and Meri Saheli, is her expression of her family. The home is meant to be a place of comfort, grace and peace. It is a place that aids



social interactions, and at its best when the prospective groom's family comes-a-calling. A beautiful home is one that is decorated traditionally, has objects signalling the family's achievements like souvenirs and certificates on display. It reflects her need for organization and order, and she gives much importance to keeping the home neat and tidy. However this is restricted largely to the living room where guests are likely to be entertained. She seeks solutions that are within her limited budget, and she seeks self-expression through do-it-yourself décor

ideas. In doing up her home, she yearns for an enhancement in her status from a housewife to a homemaker.

In contrast, the home of the upper class woman is a statement about her superior position in society and an expression of her identity. The purpose of décor is to create an atmosphere for individual needs. Privacy for family members becomes important – contemplative spaces are created, and the focus shifts to catering to inner-directed individual rather than family needs. The purpose of décor is to enhance the entire home, including the bathroom and the kitchen, or transform one part at a time based on that individual need. Since it is believed that the life of the inhabitants is likely to be stressful in the world outside, an environment of calm is striven for within the home. The status indicators are different – ‘museum pieces’, art



and objects picked up on foreign trips, signalling exclusivity. These magazines are marked by an absence of tips on cleanliness and maintenance, because those are issues she wouldn't be concerned about, having domestic help to take care of those aspects. The current Asian Paints advertising (enclosed) is based on this analysis. Based on the insight that it is the woman who dreams up décor, and the man who is the implementer, the advertising shows a family's kids' delight at discovering their father having their room repainted in a really interesting way (with murals and stuff) while they were away on vacation.

What we have attempted through some of the above examples is to illustrate how the technique of media ethnography can provide that alternate path to arrive at insights into a society or a group. It is cheap and quick (you only need to walk across to your *raddiwallah*, or secondhand magazine stall next door), it is fun to do, it never ceases to surprise. It also takes much less time than most consumer research. And because, you can illustrate your findings with pictures and text, or clips, it commands credibility – a picture worth a thousand words, or tables if I may add. Armchair anthropologists, hurrah.

FREEDOM, FUN, FANTASY : UNDERSTANDING THE YOUNG URBAN INDIAN

Hum hain naye, andaaz kyon ho purana? Or We don't need no education, we don't need no thought control! Which song, the Dil Chahta Hai number or the Pink Floyd anthem do you think reflects the mindset of the teen generation today? Is it about the rebellious 70s, or about a we have a mind of our own, it is only tempered by reality 2000s?

These are the kind of questions that are constantly popping up in meeting rooms and the minds of marketers and communicators who have ideas, brands and entertainment to communicate to the youth. At Ogilvy & Mather Discovery, we set about uncovering behavioural and attitudinal insights into a set of people who are dynamic, vibrant, and constantly changing. We began by looking at published data and literature. That left us with some hypotheses and unanswered questions, for which we spoke to youth directly. In those conversations, we got to know what was uppermost in their minds. However our experience suggested that the young are experts at putting on different personae in different situations. To really understand what they are all about, we spoke to people who come into contact with a large number of young boys and girls in course of their work. They were people who study the youth and write about them – sociology teachers at colleges, editors of youth magazines and marketers of brands targeted at the young: Nandini Sardesai at St. Xavier's College, Vikram Raizada, the marketing head of MTV, Lata Narayan, the head of the Child & Youth research unit at Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and Priya Tanna, editor of Femina Girl. We analyzed the content of media that the young were watching and reading to see what trends they could possibly be deriving from these. Finally, we pooled the collective experience of nearly a dozen advertising professionals, in observing and communicating with teenagers. This article is the articulation of our key findings about the teen generation, no longer Gen-X, possibly Gen-Cool.

Teenage Archetypes

Archetype, the most perfect example of a particular kind of person or thing.

Archetypes enable us to define the character of any group. The beauty of an archetype is that it is culture-neutral. We begin our analysis by identifying the archetypal teenage girl and boy, the source being the world of comics. There are two teenage girl archetypes – Betty Cooper and Veronica Lodge. Betty is the girl-next-door. She is a do-gooder and has a golden heart, is a young man's best friend, there when needed. She is loyal to one boy, Archie, and readily sacrificing. To most young Indian men, she exemplifies what a wife should be like. Veronica is the rich, arrogant, insensitive girl who most men would like to have as a girlfriend. She is enchanting and alluring, and a magnet for boys in school, and at parties. She is the quintessential seductress. If you think that the examples are too western, think again. The Betty-Veronica archetypes have found expression in Bollywood: Ayesha Julka and Pooja Bedi in *Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar*, Juhi Chawla and Amrita Singh in *Aaina*, Kajol and Rani Mukherji in *Kuchh Kuchh Hota Hai*, and Kajol and

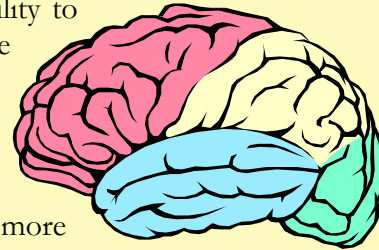


Kareena Kapoor in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. Then there are three boy archetypes: the rich, arrogant, showoff Reggie, the average, perpetual trier, always broke Archie, and the studious, nerdy Dilton. Again, the movie *Dil Chahta Hai* represents the three in its characterization of Aamir Khan, Saif Ali Khan and Akshaye Khanna. From a marketing and communication perspective, an intimate knowledge of these archetypes can enable us to connect better with the consumer.

The Physiology of Teens; Early and Late Teenage

The first thing to appreciate about a young segment is that 'young' cannot be a broad, sweeping generalization. While archetypes enable us to appreciate the personality differences, physiology allows us to determine the biological changes that determine the manner in which the young begin interpreting the world.

- The early teenage years, from the age 13 to 15, is the onset of puberty. This is the period of mid-brain development, when the young begins to see the things beyond black and white, good and evil, into shades of grey. They now develop the faculty to take things apart (analysis), explore it from a variety of angles and put solutions together (synthesis), and monitor how it works (evaluation). It is at this stage that they start understanding sarcasm, irony and innuendo. Psychologist Dan Acuff, in his book *What Kids Buy, and Why*, writes, "Their extreme selfishness and seeming inability to appreciate your point of view is in part a function of the development of the evolving brain."
- As the youth enter the late teens (16 to 19), the hormonal changes and the emotional and physical impact on their bodies are complete. They now begin to effectively relate to others and have the ability to create and sustain more relationship. Social mobility becomes desirable – and if we look back into our own lives, we know that this was indeed the time when we made the largest number of friends. As the prefrontal lobe in the brain develops, the faculties of metacognition – thinking about one's own thinking, and empathy – being able to put oneself in the shoes of others, take shape. The young mind can now control impulse reaction, can reflect upon actions taken, and has the ability to plan for the future. There is increased space between stimulus and response. Logan Smith, in his book *'Afterthought'* says, "Don't laugh at a youth for his affectations. He is only trying one face after another to find a face of his own."



The manner in which such development impacts behaviour is now discussed. In the early teen phase, the young discard the symbols of childhood. They are explorers seeking an identity asking questions like 'What am I becoming?', and experimentative in all they do. They lead a disciplined life – in school, regimented by uniforms and fixed timings. Theirs is a world of parents and siblings as they are still figuring out friends. There is an emerging awareness of gender differences. They do get pocket money, but spends are closely monitored by parents. They begin making independent decisions while buying candy, snacks, books, fast foods and clothes and express their opinion about consumer durables.

The late teen phase provides the first step into adulthood. It is a highly expressive phase, as the youth revel in their identity and begin looking for adult symbols to signal their coming of

age. There is a sudden freedom from discipline, with the ability to dress as they like, and timings being beyond parental control. Identity is defined by belonging to a tribe, which dictates speech, dress, body language, interest and mindsets. There is a conscious search for attention from the opposite sex. The need to spend and consume heightens, and parental control over pocket money disappears. To sum up, the early teens are about **Discovering an Identity**; the late teens about a **Window of Freedom**.

We shall now describe our eight key observations about the youth of urban India.

1. “I am a freebird now”



There is more to the symbolic discarding of the school uniform – it is a rite of passage, a transformation from rigidity to flexibility in what one can do. In college, there is free time because classes are not always back-to-back. Morning college frees some up to pursue vocational training or take up part time jobs. In spite of ‘75% compulsory attendance’, it is possible to choose the classes one would like to attend. Bunking is indeed a freedom ritual.

Freedom, however, means different things to different people. When it comes to the choice of which course to pursue, all are free to choose. In terms of the place of study, there are some restrictions – all girls may not, for example, be allowed to go out of their hometown to study. The choice of clothes is entirely dictated by the family background and the city where one lives, and determined by the norms of acceptability. In large metros, however, we found that they have found a way to beat the system – they carry a change, which they wear once they are out of range of their restrictive parents! In some ways, the young are always testing the limits of freedom with their elders. Advertising for Bajaj Sunny Spice is all about exploring the world, albeit with parental approval. There is a strong desire to mix with the opposite sex, but meets varying degrees of success. As one college boy said, “When I joined college, I expected lot of *masti*. But no such thing happened !”

The learnings for us are the following. Discipline at this stage of life is self-imposed rather than dictated by an authority. “We do everything within limits,” they say. The first taste of freedom is an exhilarating experience, enjoyed whole-heartedly by boys and tentatively by girls. But they are always looking over their shoulder – for reassurance about the choices that they have made, from their parents and peers.

2. “Chalti ka naam gaadi ... zindagi” (A vehicle called Life)

For the youth, mobility is essential. Mobility takes two forms – physical and social. Physical mobility stems from the need to travel and live life in multiple spaces. It is manifest in independent, unescorted travel to college and places of entertainment. For the first time, the young travel out-of-town with friends and classmates, on holiday or ‘study-trips’. For those living in a hostel, it is about setting up an independent existence unencumbered by parents. Suddenly, owning a two-wheeler (and for the affluent, a four-wheeler), is very desirable –

and often a reward from indulgent parents. Quite a few brands of motorcycles and scooterettes are thus targeted at this group, like the Hero Ezee & Winner, and TVS Scooty. Parents feel the need to keep tabs on their mobile offspring, and cellphones enable just that – while giving the young a new symbol to flash. Social mobility stems from the stratification that appears in college campuses. A subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle classification is the norm – these could stem from the place of origin, seniority or general orientation. So you have labels like hep-cats, town-types, fundoos, geeks, GTM (Ghati-turned-Mod), BTM (Behenji-turned-Mod), and Baap. Young boys and girls feel a strong need to move ‘upwards’; each group is outwardly dismissive, but inwardly envious of the other.



This mobile generation is faced with more options than ever before, and these are enabled by a multitude of media, from career and education counselling pages in the daily newspaper to the net. Greater mobility and freedom opens up new alternatives, forcing them to evaluate those options and make choices. Before taking the plunge, youth feel the need to ‘taste’ the options, driving them to do part-time jobs. Summers are no longer for idling away and reading books. They are about gaining points for one’s CV, to be better equipped for the job market.

This has a significant bearing for marketers. This moving target has a limited attention span. Multi-tasking leads to their being frenetically active, and they are constantly experimenting with the available options, always flirting with brands. The challenge therefore is to hold them to an idea or thought, and resolving some of the confusion that the immense choice causes. At the same time, their tolerance of different point-of-view is an opportunity, that makes it possible for different identities – signalled by consumption of different brands – to coexist.

3. “I Wanna Be ...”

For the young of today, success in the chosen profession is the most important parameter in choosing a role model, with its attendant trappings of material gains. “What use is idealism in today’s world?”, they ask. Priya Tanna called it the Taking Generation, one that will take from others – their families, their teachers, their friends, far more than they would give back. The idea of a successful person would be someone who had Preity Zinta’s chirpiness and their mother’s pragmatism, their cousin’s confidence and Malaika Arora’s attitude: no single icon, but a mix and match of the desirable qualities. People like Shabana Azmi and Kiran Bedi were mentioned as heroes, but most girls didn’t actually want to be like them. “We admire them for what they have done, but please don’t expect us to be that way” was the universal feeling. More often than not, the end result is glorified and the hard work required to achieve is glossed over: “I want that lucky break”, they say. Thanks to some heroes from relatively modest backgrounds who have made it big, there seems to be a belief that success is no longer the prerogative of the privileged. Talent and the right break can indeed propel those from humble backgrounds into the orbit of fame and plenty, is the belief, as young

men in Ludhiana cite cricketers Harbhajan Singh, Mohammed Kaif and Yuvraj Singh as their icons.



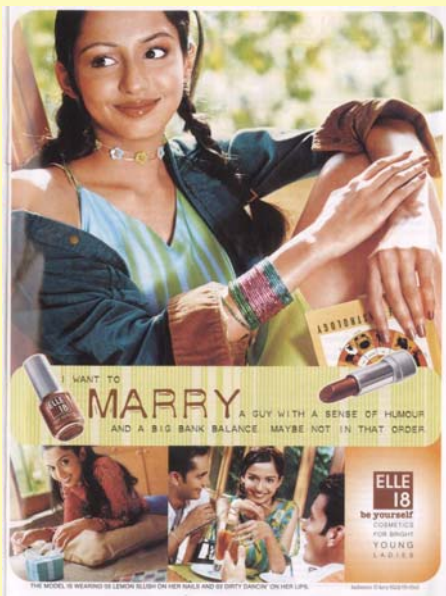
Indeed, many girls are confident that an attitude, a sense of timing and a little help from the grooming experts can help overcome one's background and ordinary looks. It isn't surprising that many young girls mention Mahua, the plump, dusky, curly-haired bandmember from the girl band VIVA! as their favourite – she provides access to a dream they are chasing. It is clear that material success, with all its trappings, is the most appealing motivator to this group. Even momentary fame is extremely desirable. The challenge for marketers and advertisers is - how can they ease the route and provide opportunities to success?

4. Love Ke Liye Kuchh Bhi Karega ? Not really ! (I'd do anything for love ? Not really !)

For all the fascination with the opposite sex, when it comes to actual interaction, young boys and girls avoid serious involvement and commitment. It comes out of a single-minded pursuit of success in one's career. The boy/girlfriend thus assumes the status of an accessory, someone to impress friends with. Hence, when an out-of-town cousin from the opposite sex, or bhabhi's sister, or jeeja's brother comes a visiting, he or she is taken around for movies and to restaurants – making the friend circle wonder. This is practicing romance and flirtation, not the real thing at all. Advertising for Elle 18 reflects this attitude, when it says, *"I want to marry a guy with a sense of humour and a big bank balance, maybe not in that order."* Overall, in most parts of the country, among most socio-economic classes, the arranged love marriages are the norm, simply because they do not rock existing relationships. Why antagonize parents when you need them all the time?

PRETTY WOMAN, ANYONE?

Hi, all beautiful females, I am 18 yrs old from Mumbai, looking for a good friendship. You must be frank in nature and should have a good sense of humour. Interested females can mail me at mudassarsk@hotmail.com



The emerging practicality in romance can be seen in real life as well as in reel life. Rani Mukherji's character realizes the futility of chasing Shahrukh in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*, and easily gives him up, and they remain good friends. At another level, a girl who cuts her finger during biology practicals quickly grabs a sheet of paper and writes 'I Love You' saying, "I'm sure there will be some occasion to give it to some boy." Fantasies about love, however, have taken a sexual colour. One only has to look at the evolution of Mills and Boon over the last few decades. The woman is now an older, stronger and more independent character, while the man is no longer rich. From touching and kissing and implied sex, the roll in the hay is now *de rigueur* by page 121. The titles have changed from 'Chateau of Flowers', 'Home is Goodbye', 'Always Yours' and 'The Other Side of Sunset' in 1971

to 'One Reckless Night', 'First Class Seduction', 'Summer of the Storm' and 'Wild at Heart' in 2000. The young echo, "There is nothing wrong in it, as long as both are clear in their heart."

5. "Mere Paas Ma Hai" (I have Mother with me)

For girls, the mother is the one who eases the rites of passage into adulthood. She is friendly, understanding, and concerned. Mother-daughter share information, discuss private matters, go shopping together; the girl's first visit to the beauty parlour is with her mother. In fact, the mother lives her own dreams through her daughter. She tries to give her daughter all that was denied to her – the opportunity for education and working; she is an ally to convince conservative fathers. Besides, the greater role of the woman in today's nuclear families allows her more say in decisions related to the daughter.

Keeping with tradition (and possibly genetics), boys remain close to their mothers. Boys would give their first earnings, even from a part-time job, to their mother. "I tell my mother about my girlfriends; she knows I smoke", said several young men. The distance between the patriarch and the son keeps the mother-son bond strong. Ultimately, possessive mothers tend to put a strain on boys' relationships with other women. "My elder brother married out of caste, so my mother keeps tabs on me"; "I liked Jaya Bachchan's role in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*. She was the ideal mother – who loved her son very much, even though she stayed with her husband."

The mother is thus an important influencer on the choices that the teenager makes. She plays multiple roles – as a figure of authority, problem solver, embodiment of trust, extension of self, and sounding board. Time to get her to join the party !

6. Can I Be "18 till I Die"?

In an achievement-oriented world, the pressures on today's youth are tremendous. For boys the pressures are greater. There is the pressure of growing up to be responsible, towards one's own family – which includes parents. "My father said – beta, today you are enjoying, nut tomorrow, if you get less marks, you will be kicked out" said one 18 year old. At the same time, from the peers, there is a pressure to be cool, to enjoy life. "You are not looked upon as cool if you don't have a girlfriend", "What are you doing this weekend?", "Char yaar, bottoms up kar dey" are just examples of the sentiment. Girls have it easier. It is her own initiative and drive that pushes her towards performance and a career, simply because, culturally, the girl is not expected to provide for her family. This affects her choice of courses – biotech, media courses are the popular education options she often chooses. With the pressure off, she has more options than a boy; since as long as she can earn enough for her indulgence and comfort, she is fine. A recent newspaper report cited that 42% of boys in the age group 15-19 actually wishes they'd be girls !

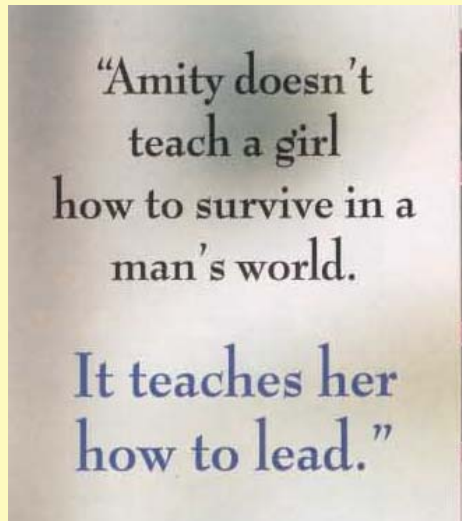
Hence, for girls, career provides empowerment and gives them the confidence to face the world. Marriage and her family are the eventual goals for the majority, but there is an



increasing significance of a career for self actualization and a better standard of living. Boys suffer from high performance anxiety, and there is a need to provide them optional paths to success and stability. Confidence as a motivation is key in both work and play spheres, and the symbols of success essential for recognition are a job and designation, a car, and finally, a home he can call his own.

7. “Beti Ko Beta Na Banayen” ... (Don’t treat your daughter like your son)

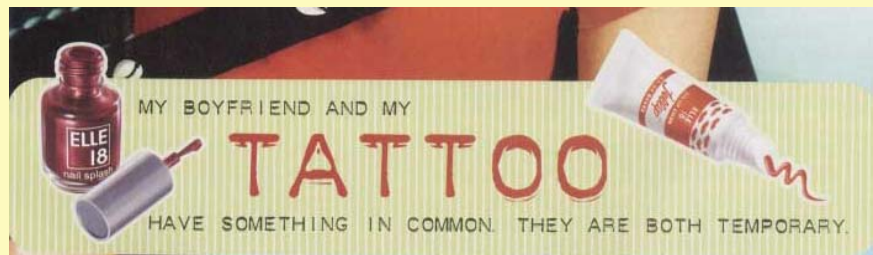
Sound advice from a manisteram women’s magazine – Vanita. Today, a girl finds comfort in her identity, accepting and taking pride in her feminine self. She defines the parameters of her performance distinctly differently from boys – she thinks she has greater responsibilities to fulfil, and more roles to perform between home and the workplace, eventually. Hence, she benchmarks herself against feminine ideals – in college, in office, a girl no longer wants to do better than the boys. She has done that. Now she wants to do better than the other, better-performing girl. The headline in an ad for Amity Business School is proof of this new drive.



Boys find themselves in a state of confusion. While on one hand, their masculinity is not allowed full expression as long as there is a father in the house, on the other, ‘caring’ is possible only once they are older, have a wife and a child. It is a crisis of identity that is accentuated by the threat from girls in the world outside home. Girls are becoming more expressive, and to boys, a threat to livelihood itself. Then, they are taking a knocking from the media. Advertisement after advertisement seems to be running down the young man at the expense of the young woman – Ponds Face Wash, Sunsilk, Everest Masala, Limca and more. The sensitive male archetype hasn’t fully taken shape, hence that is not a model to follow yet. The nub of it all is : the boy-girl competing scenario is a novel one, but might lose connect and become passe very quickly as soon as the novelty wears off. It alienates boys, and girls no longer compete against them.

8. “Phir Bhi Dil Hi Hindustani !” (After all, my heart is Indian)

For all the posturing, the majority of youth are like reverse coconuts, white and Western outside, brown and Indian at the core. Psychiatrist Achal Bhagat observes, “There is often an oscillation between extremes – the need to seek approval from the herd as well as the need for individual expression, between Western and Indian attitudes.” Hence, most experimentation with identity is superficial. Part of the behaviour can be attributed to the fear of permanent commitments at this early stage of life; part to the need to conform to a disparate set of values. So you have the same person being the cool dude at college and the



good, responsible boy at home, the low-waist jeans wearing girl who can make great tasting aloo-puri. They desire transience and reversibility in their experiences. The popularity of fadeaway tattoos – look again at the Elle 18 advertising - and hair colouring is just one manifestation of this desire. This tells us to be careful, in reading too much into the overt behaviour of today's teenagers. There is much more to it, and exploring it can be fun and enriching, all at the same time.

To sum up, one can say that young people in India are today seeking reassurance and a sense of control. Brands and communicators – including those in the entertainment business - can provide that. In a world that is largely uniform, we need to acknowledge their values, and provide a source of integrity and differentiation that lets them be recognized and valued as individuals as well as a group.
