

DISCUSSION PAPERS

Some Thoughts on Consumption Patterns

Shekhar Singh

Dis/E@F/2001



RaAG

Research, Assessment and Analysis Group

Scripted in June 2001, while on the faculty of the Indian Institute of Public
Administration, New Delhi.

Sketch on cover by Pratibha Pande



INDIAN WILD BOAR *Sus scrofa*

1. There is a need to distinguish between individual consumption patterns and the consumption patterns that are adopted and promoted by institutions and systems.
2. This is despite the fact that there is a strong linkage between the two. They foster each other.
3. It is desirable to adopt frugal consumption patterns for at least three reasons:
 - i) To promote environmental sustainability.
 - ii) To check financial corruption.
 - iii) To promote socio-economic equity in society.
 - iv) To promote, in many cases, physical and mental health.
4. The arguments linking consumption patterns to environmental sustainability are well known and do not need to be repeated here.
5. It can also be credibly argued that one of the strongest motivations for 'rent seeking' behaviour is the disparity between the lifestyles and consumption patterns people aspire for and those that their legitimate incomes allow.
6. Observing the exorbitant lifestyles of others, exposure to the advertising and marketing strategies for luxury goods and the lack of an ethic of frugality contribute to the development of excessive needs and material aspirations.
7. The inequities in society are further aggravated when the system starts working at satisfying the luxury demands of a few, necessarily at the cost of the many. The observance of such inequitable lifestyle patterns also aggravates social tension and a sense of disillusionment in the system.
8. Human requirements can perhaps be divided into basic biological and socio-psychological needs, and acquired physical and socio-psychological needs.
9. Basic biological needs are reasonably well defined and include the food, clothing, shelter etc. required for a healthy life. Though basic socio-

psychological needs are less well defined and could differ from society to society, they ordinarily have a cultural and historical basis.

10. Acquired physical needs are irrelevant to a healthy life and, often, militate against it, especially when manifested in unhealthy food choices, lack of physical exercise, artificial and unhealthy living and work environments, etc.

11. Similarly, acquired socio-psychological needs are essentially irrelevant to the psychological well being or the social functioning of an individual. They are often acquired or promoted with some other agenda, for example to promote commercial interests or to promote snobbery and elitism. In some cases it can also be an attempt to mimic, or seek the acceptance of, individuals or social groups that are perceived to be superior.

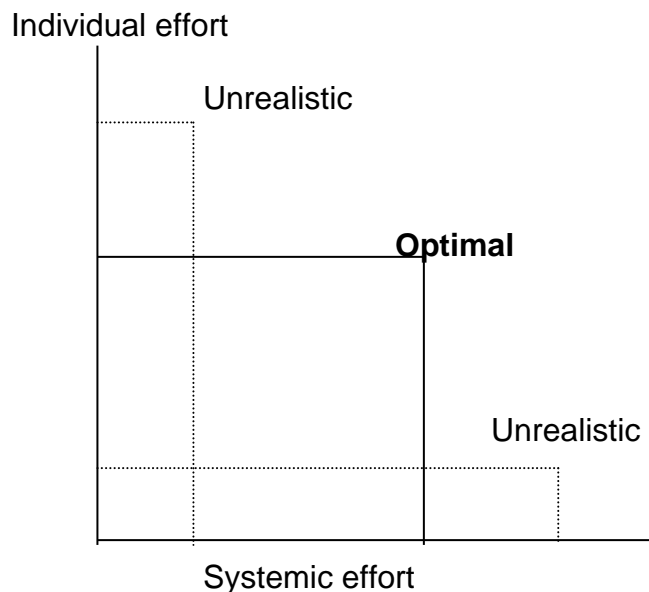
12. Of course, this does not mean that all that exists in ones own society is necessarily good and all that exists in other societies is necessarily bad. In fact, the need to maintain and promote social and cultural diversity must be balanced against the need to socially evolve. Therefore, positive values and practices must be appropriately adopted, wherever they are found. The problem is in determining what are positive values and practices. There is also the problem of mindlessly copying things that others do, without even being aware of the adverse impacts these might have on oneself and ones society. This happens even when these adverse impacts are obvious in the host societies.

13. Therefore, it must be the object of any enlightened society to promote lifestyles such that they manifest only basic needs and only those acquired needs that actually help the society to evolve. This would be the path to environmental sustainability, and mental, physical, moral and spiritual health.

14. It must also be accepted that individual freedom of choice is a recognised universal value and, though not an unlimited right, it is nevertheless an important right in a democracy.

15. Consequently, an enlightened society will not seek to impose upon its members patterns of living and consumption that are considered to be healthy. It will attempt to create the sorts of conditions and circumstances whereby its members are inclined to make rational choices while exercising their right to choose. (As a warning, we should remember the former communist states where a socialist order has been replaced, once state pressure was removed, by consumerism which is unparalleled.)

16. To do this, the issue of appropriate consumption patterns must be approached from both the perspective of the individual and that of the system. In general, it can be argued that unless both optimally contribute, the task of establishing a society that consumes rationally would be very difficult, if not impossible.



Focussing on the individual

17. Essentially, an individual needs three things in order to make rational lifestyle choices:

- i) The understanding and awareness of the advantages of a frugal lifestyle, both to the individual and to society: to see frugality as a value.
- ii) The motivation to pursue this value.
- iii) The ability to live by the value (having a real choice to do so).

18. To promote understanding and awareness, it is essential that the issue of lifestyles, consumption patterns and frugality as a value be discussed at all levels and especially at the school level. However, it must be ensured that such a discussion neither degenerates into a dogmatic statement of a particular perspective, thereby alienating the individual, nor becomes a 'subject' like many others, to be learnt by rote and then forgotten after the exams.

19. In addition, it is important that the media, especially the electronic media, also promote a discussion on this issue. Data and statistics, where relevant, should be used to establish the impacts of different types of life-styles, both on the individual and on society. Essentially, innovative and interesting methods of raising awareness about these issues must be developed.

20. All this might help people to understand the merits of frugality but, for many, something more might be needed to inspire and motivate them to practice even relative frugality, especially given all the factors pulling and

pushing them in the other direction. Here, prominent personalities, especially political and bureaucratic functionaries, must lead by example. As long as famous and powerful people work out of plush offices, live in palatial houses and live, and are seen to enjoy extravagant lifestyles, the message to the nation is clear. The link, in the minds of the people, between power, success and luxurious life styles must be broken by example.

21. Here, a special responsibility rests with teachers. They must also, by example, demonstrate the desirability of simplicity. Of course, as things stand, most of them cannot afford to live any other way. However, as long as they project this as an imposition rather than a matter of choice, the right message will not get across.

22. There must also be an effort to publicise the right sorts of paradigms. For India, Gandhiji is the most obvious one, but there are many other famous and successful men and women who lived simple lives, by choice, and were happy doing so. These paradigms must become a part of the collective consciousness of the nation.

23. Unfortunately, much of the media also projects the wrong sorts of lifestyle values. Films and television programmes often celebrate luxurious and wasteful lifestyles. Getting rich is often projected as the real measure of success. Power is shown as a means to enjoy exorbitant lifestyles even if it is at the cost of the taxpayer. As censorship is not a real answer, the only option is to involve the media world must in this debate so that they can find their own solutions to the dilemma.

24. Having made the individual aware of the value of simplicity and even motivated him/her to live frugally, we must create the sorts of conditions where the individual is able to do so. The society must provide real and practical options and the system must support rather than oppose simplicity in lifestyles. For this, the system has to be examined.

Focussing on the System

25. Many excellent suggestions for systemic change have already been provided in the note circulated by Dr Mashelkar. I add a few to the list.

26. However, it must be remembered at the outset, that the economic model we have adopted, especially with the elements of globalisation and liberalisation, inherently promotes consumption and waste. In the current model, a country that cuts down its consumption and waste risks economic depression. Therefore, systemic changes need to be made at very fundamental levels.

27. However, to move the economy and the society in a direction where such fundamental changes become possible, various specific measures can be initiated.

28. Transport Sector. In general, transport sector policies must support public transport and discourage private transport. However, in cities and towns, there must be a move to encourage the use of cycles and of non-mechanised transportation. The two major impediments to the use of cycles in Delhi, for example, is the absence of cycle tracks, making cycling a high risk activity, and the high levels of air pollution on the road. The government can immediately have constructed cycle tracks along all the major roads in cities, even at the cost of reducing the road width available for motorised transport. It can also make some congested areas – like major market centres – accessible only by cycles or by pollution-free public transport. This could also result in there being a booming cycle rental industry where people could hire cycles and do their shopping or travel around areas where private vehicles are not permitted. We can learn much from the Chinese in this regard.

29. Energy Sector. We must focus in a major way on demand side management. To start with, fiscal incentives should be given so that the use of energy efficient bulbs and lights became universal.

30. Design of buildings must be such that adequate daylight comes into rooms and there is no need for artificial lighting during the day. Suitable building bylaws should be formulated and enforced.

31. Similarly, in hot areas, buildings should be so designed, that they do not require air-conditioning all the time. Adequate know how is available in Indian architectural traditions.

32. Energy consumption norms for various processes and products must be specified and tax penalties imposed on those that do not comply with the norms. The energy used for a product must also be mentioned on products in a manner that the consumer can understand.

33. There must be a concurrent education of the public on the advantages of promoting energy efficient production by appropriately exercising their choice as a consumer.

34. The real financial, economic, social and environmental costs of energy production should be charged from consumers and subsidies should be avoided. Where necessary, socially disadvantaged classes can be helped in other ways to compensate for high energy-costs.

35. The implementation of demand side management and energy conservation should be a requirement from the energy sector and the sanction of new generation capacity should be dependent on the achievements that the particular agency has had in achieving energy conservation. Clear targets and co-relations must be established.

36. Much greater stress on, and investments in, the solar energy sector is required.

37. Hire purchase schemes and advertising for power intensive luxury items should be banned and all such items should be levied an energy tax.

38. To prevent power theft in urban areas (reportedly 40-50% in Delhi), especially as theft leads to wastage and excessive consumption of power, meters should be fixed that measure the power input into colonies, especially well to do colonies, and industrial areas. Where the billing is less than the power consumed by a colony or an area, the balance should be charged from the colony or the area collectively. This would ensure local pressure, and vigilance, against power theft.

39. Advertising. Advertising and marketing of consumer goods is perhaps among the main reasons for the rapid growth of consumerism. The availability of easy finances through hire purchase schemes encourage people to spend more than they can afford and not only promotes consumerism but also leads to under expenditure in essential areas like education, food etc.

40. A nation cannot, on the one hand, hold up frugal lifestyles as a value and, on the other, allow, even encourage, rampant promotion of consumerism through advertisements and other marketing strategies. Advertising strategies are insidious and often use subliminal methods to create a demand for goods that are non-essential and even harmful, under the guise of informing the public about the merits of different brands. Therefore, advertising and marketing of luxury goods, especially those that are environmentally unsustainable, harmful to the health or otherwise anti-social, must be regulated. This is in keeping with the policy towards liquor and tobacco advertisements.

41. Finances. Fiscal incentives and disincentives play a very large role in helping people to exercise rational choices. An assessment of goods and services should be done on the basis of their environmental and social impacts from 'cradle to grave'. Access to public sector funding, to social resources, to subsidies and low levels of taxation must be determined on the basis of how benign a good or service is, based on this test.

42. Similarly, the access of individuals to credit must also be determined on this basis.

43. Water. Water resources must also be frugally and equitably used. This is especially critical for urban centres and industry. For domestic use, there must be an effort to promote water cisterns with variable flow function (for liquid and solid waste), underground sumps to store rainwater from roofs of houses and buildings and the recycling of water for use in toilets and in lawns and gardens. There should be a phased programme to create these systems in existing houses and colonies and bylaws that ensure that all new colonies and houses have these facilities.

44. Water use standards must be prescribed for goods and services and water tax imposed on those goods and services that do not conform to standards. As in the case of energy, various other measures, including the regulation of water supply to industries dependent on their record at recycling must be established. Water efficient technologies must be promoted and fiscal incentives and taxation used appropriately.

45. Goods and services that use water must clearly indicate their per unit use of water and the public should be made aware of the standards and the advantages in promoting water efficient goods and services.

46. Science and Technology. State patronage and fiscal incentives must be predominantly focussed on the development of technology that is resource efficient or that performs needed functions in a manner that is environmentally and socially friendly. Some priority areas could be:

- Solar energy
- Environmentally friendly transportation
- Energy saving devices
- Water saving devices
- Energy efficient and healthy cooling and heating systems
- Organic soaps, dyes, and replacements for toxic chemicals in common use
- Organic and integrated pest management systems
- Healthy alternatives to popular aerated drinks and junk foods
- Intensive cultivation technology for species of trees, grasses and other plants in high demand
- Cost effective methods for assessing carrying capacity and environmental impacts
- Bio degradable and energy efficient packaging materials
- Improvements in recycling technology
- Retrofit technology that can help make even old technologies environment friendly
- Technologies for measurement, regulation and monitoring that would facilitate enforcement of the various rules and bylaws aimed at controlling waste and environmental destruction
- Communication technologies that would facilitate the debate on consumption patterns and lifestyle choices

47. Planning. Given the changing role of the Planning Commission over the last decade and its relative marginalisation, it might be a good idea to convert it into a national commission for sustainable development. The Commission could have the explicit responsibility of focussing on issues relating to consumption patterns and sustainable development and to assess the schemes and activities of various central ministries and state departments from this perspective. They could control a certain percentage of the budget that could be selectively used to promote sustainable development and consumption patterns. Even if the Planning Commission is not willing to change its mandate, perhaps a separate commission would be worth considering.

