



RESEARCH ARTICLE

USE AND THROW: TRACING THE CHANGE OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN A PERI FERAL MUNICIPALITY OF KOLKATA METROPOLITAN AREA, WEST BENGAL

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 22nd April, 2017
Received in revised form
24th May, 2017
Accepted 06th June, 2017
Published online 31st July, 2017

Key words:

Consumer behaviour,
Urban environment,
Sustainable development.

ABSTRACT

Urbanisation has become a rapid socio-economic phenomena in the twenty first century. Urbanism, or way of life of urban dwellers is the process which shapes the urban structure. Economic activities are a major part of this way of life, of which consumer behavior is a major part. It influences the urban scenario and environment in more than one way. The present study tries to assess the changing character of consumer behaviour in a peripheral municipality of Kolkata Metropolitan Area, Baidyabati, situated almost forty kilometers away from Kolkata. The study is based on data collected by primary survey and analysis of those data by qualitative and quantitative methods. The study shows how relationship between commodity and consumer has changed over the year and use and throw mentality has taken grip of a part of consumer psyche. It also shades light on how these factor, joined with a garbage management system that is trying hard to take care of more than it's capacity, creates a problem for the environment of this urban area and tries to find a way for it's sustainable development.

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Citation: Jaya Thakur and Dr. Lakshmi Sivaramakrishnan. 2017. "Use and throw: tracing the change of consumer behaviour in a peri feral municipality of kolkata metropolitan area, West Bengal", *International Journal of Current Research*, 9, (07), 55219-55225.

INTRODUCTION

Urbanisation has become a prominent socio-cultural-economic phenomena in the 21st century. With global urban population increasing from 13% (220 million) in 1900 , to 29% (732 million) in 1950, to 49% (3.1 billion) in 2005 (with a projection of 60 % or 4.9 billion by 2030 . The process of evolution of urban units, concentration of population, agglomeration of economic activity, change in the character of economic activity , the process of value addition in production through the intellectual and organizational labour, the remuneration and risk taking and providing capital, every thing is a part of this process. It's not just a term, not just a process of growth or value addition . It's a way of life. It's also a process of changing ethical values , behavioral pattern. "...urbanism, the culture or way of life of city dwellers...lifestyle patterns and behavioural adaptation influenced by one's residential and / or work environment" (Macionis and Parrillo, 2006). For example, consumer behaviour behaviour is a major part of economic activities. In urban areas it often defines the status of urbanisation. But, this process depends on a lot of complex factors that are way beyond economy.

The complex structure of urban social environment can be compared to a masonry building where each family or individual unit plays the role of a brick. So, to understand the complex dynamics of the urban environment, one must first take into account how the smallest unit of this system behaves. "Lifestyles are , of couse, much more than matters of personal choice. They reflect dimensions of social difference, often taking the form of social inequality." (Macionis and Parrillo, 2006) . Changing behaviour , thus signifies a lot of complex socio-economic factors (www.managementstudyguide.com). The present study tries to understand a few of these factors behind changing relationship of consumer and commodity in Baidyabati municipality and also tries to analyse their significance for the environment of this urban unit.

DATABASE AND METHODOLOGY

This work is mostly based on primary data which was obtained from the field through a structured questionnaire and random sampling technique was used for this purpose. Some secondary data, mostly collected from Census of India, has also been used. Different statistical techniques were used for analyzing the data and suitable cartographic techniques were used to represent them including maps and diagrams. By analyzing and interpreting them conclusions have been drawn.

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Study Area

The study area, the Baidyabati municipality, is situated in the left bank of the river Hooghly. It includes almost 2.5 square km. area and extends from 88°19'4" East to 88°20'30" East longitude and from 22°47'31" seconds North to 22°48'39" North latitude (Fig.1). It is included in Kolkata Metropolitan Area.

RATIONALITY

The study area is under Baidyabati municipality, which is the only municipality in the western part of river Hooghly directly connected to Katwa, Burdwan (through Bandel) and Tarakeswar (through Sheoraphuli), all three major points of transit from rural hinterland of Kolkata Metropolitan Area.

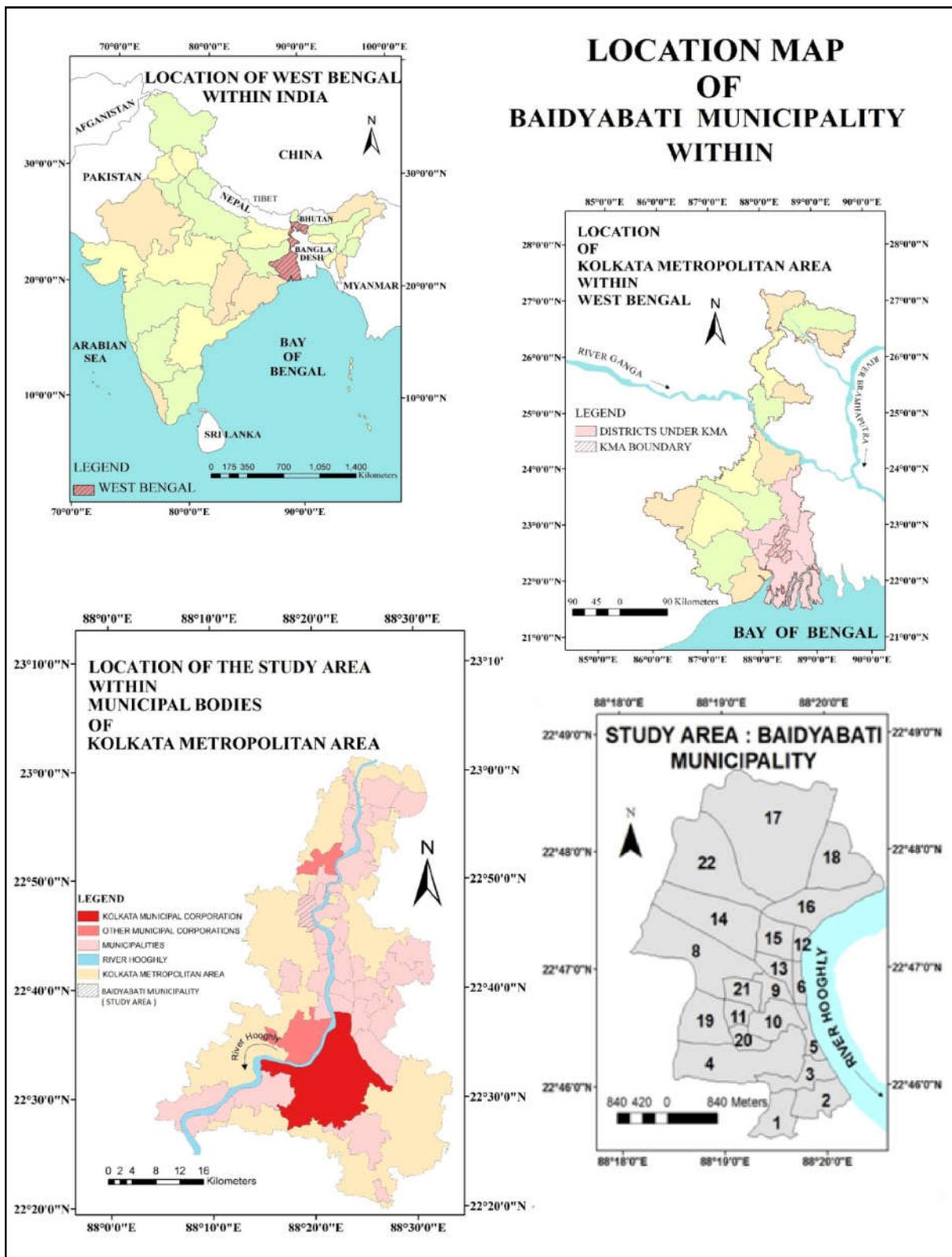


Fig. 1. Location map of the study area

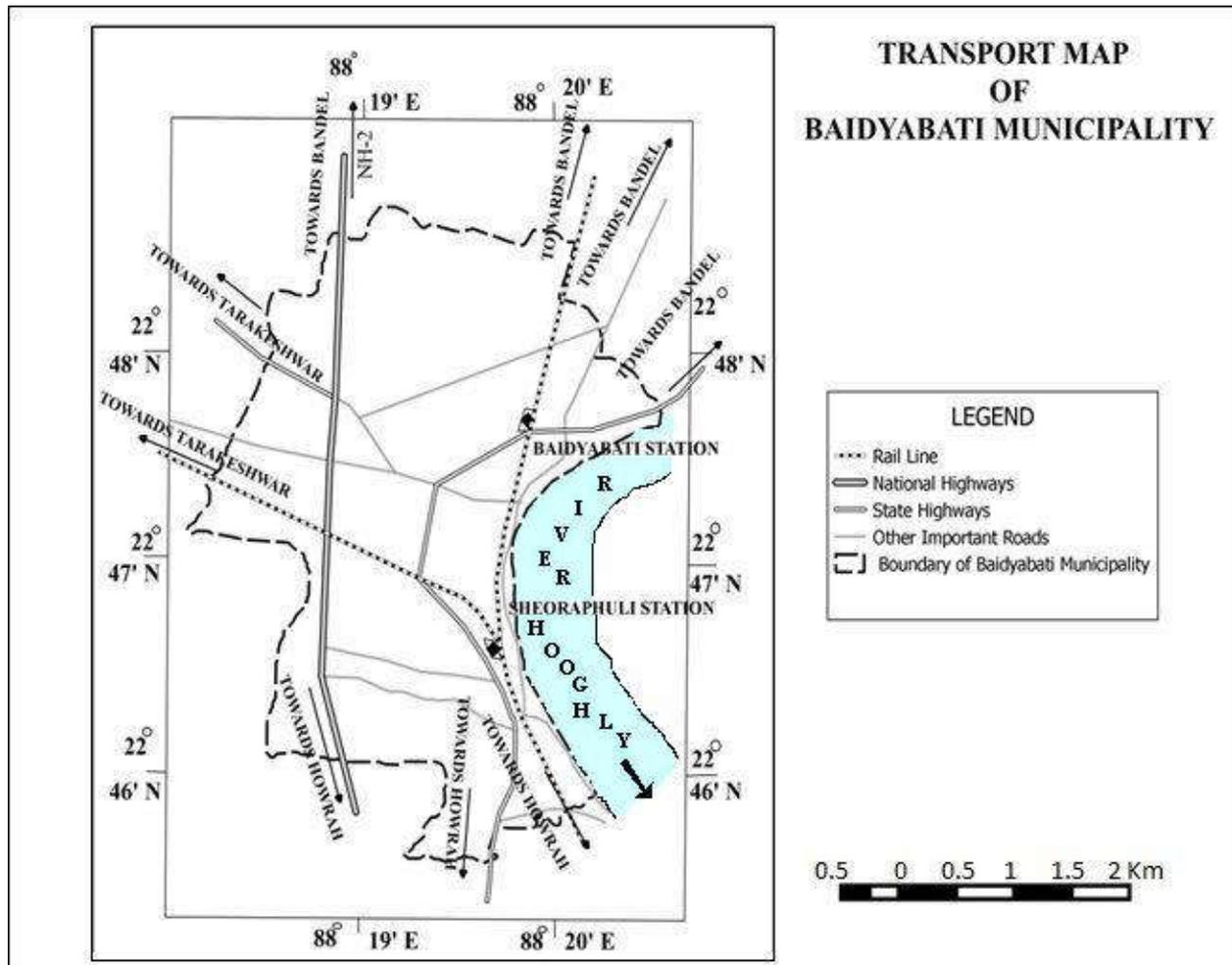


Fig. 2. Transport map of the study area

The study area is very much accessible by road from Howrah, Kolkata and Burdwan. It is within 40 kilometres of Howrah and Kolkata and within 90 Kilometres of Burdwan. From Howrah, the study area can be reached by road through the NH-2 and G. T. Road. To reach the study area from Kolkata by road, one has to take first B. T. Road, then crossing the Ganges, G.T. Road and NH-2. The area is also very close to Baidyabati railway station on Howrah-Burdwan mainline. It is within 5 minutes train journey from Sheoraphuli railway station, junction point of Howrah-Tarakeswar branch line and Howrah-Burdwan main line (Fig.2). In spite of being a part of a municipal area, the study area itself is surrounded by agricultural fields. The western part of the municipal area is covered in agricultural land, where in the eastern part, in a linear zone along the Grand Trunk Road one can find the most congested residential area with every kind of urban retail shops available. This is the very area where most of the land developing activity of this municipality is going on. The easy connectivity with the core city and the pattern of differential land use and resultant difference in lifestyle also effects the consumer behaviour in an unique way which definitely deserves a close look.

Objectives

The main objectives of the study are:

- Understanding the structure of consumer behaviour of selected group of people in the municipality under study
- Understanding the changing nature of consumer behaviour in the last twenty years in the municipality under study
- Examining how this changing trend is significant in the sustainable management of the municipal environment.

Background of the study area

The history of Baidyabati-Sheoraphuli area can be traced back to at least 500 years back. The area flourished under the Sheoraphuli royal family as a 'gunge' (a market settlement). The 'Sheoraphuli Haat' still a remnant of that. The Baidyabati municipality is actually one of the oldest municipalities of the Kolkata Metropolitan Area, being under municipal governance since 1869. The later part of the study tries to understand the 'why's and 'how's'.

Consumer and Commodity

Consumer behavior constructs an important part of consumption geography, geography of retailing and overall the economic structure of any region. Neo-classical economic principals place a lot of emphasis on individual consumer decisions. Consumer behavior encompasses a bunch of activities including:

- What people consume (These include everything they buy including diet items, clothing, housing, transportation facilities and every other kind of goods and facilities they avail for consumption).

- What are the reasons behind the consumer behaviours, in other words, what influences consumption.
- What are the significance or impact of these behaviours on the bigger picture of socio-economic, cultural and natural environment.

Until, quite recently study of consumption was not that minutely studied in Geography. Berkeley School of Cultural Geography showed interest in certain aspects of consumption, most notably, food taboos and diets. In the 1970s and early 1980s the interest of social scientists were concentrated in the consumption of one single commodity, housing. In the middle of 1980s, the concept of consumption began to broaden and after the 1990s consumption and consumer behavior became a very important aspect of socio-cultural Geography (Johnston *et al*, 2005).

There are five aspects of consumption that are considered important to social scientists

- History of changing patterns of consumption and it's significance in present time.
- How commodities hold symbolic meanings created and inveted in them by producers, advertisers, retailers and the consumers themselves, in the process creating new forms of identities for both the commodities and consumers themselves.
- The changing significance of commodities and consumption in a common global capitalist culture , where local cultures are under the threat of being homogenized and sanitized or new meanings of what is considered local are developing.
- New developing forms of saleable commodities
- Consideration of the apocalyptic post-modern pronouncements about commodities becoming more important than individual identity and that existence of human beings remain only for consumption (Johnston, R.J. *et al*, 2005).

Consumer behaviour is affected by many factors, most of which are economic. Firstly, monthly income of an individual or a family unit. This is the major source of fund that is to be used for consumption. But, in some cases source of loan or credit can also effect the consumption pattern. For example, most of the new apartments available in the newly built housing complexes of Kolkata Metropolitan Area are sold to, customers who are provided housing loan by different banks. But, Leo Tolstoy proved in his literature that human beings don't always necessarily follow logic. And when it comes to consumer behaviour, it can be said that, human psyche times goes beyond the laws of economics. In every age some commodities always signify class. For example, in India, shoes from Bata, watches from HMT (now obsolete) Raymond's suitings present a unique brand value to an entire generation. Similarly, in modern times, to own the latest model of Apple iPhone or a pair of Levi's jeans , a Chanel hand bag or may be a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes can be considered a symbol of status for a modern time cosmopolitan Indian. Depending on their economic structure they might not be able to buy them. But, they surely hold a spatial space in there consumption wish list.

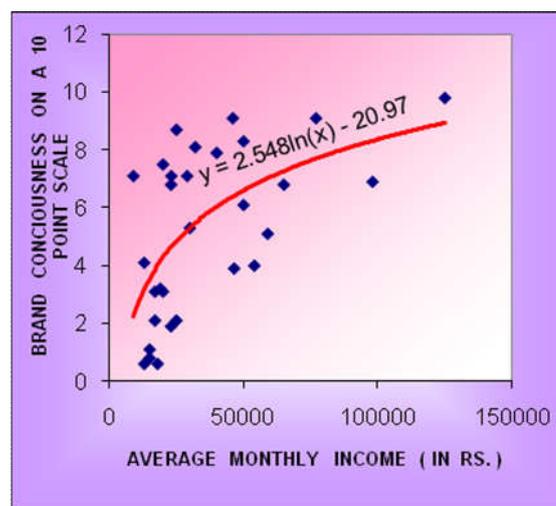
Advertising plays a major role in influencing commercial consumption of commodities. A good commercial can make or break a product, increase brand value and influence consumers

to use the commodity. For the present study, 50 families (whose average monthly income is between Rupees 15000 to Rupees 200000) were chosen randomly but purposively from different wards of Baidyabati municipality. Last two decades saw a lot of changes in peripheral municipalities of Kolkata Metropolitan Area, like Baidyabati. Baidyabati as an urban settlement predates the mother city, Kolkata, was mostly a market town with it's own urban rhythm. Baidyabati can be clearly divided into two parts. The densely built up area around Grant Trunk Road in the eastern part of the municipality and the western part, where mostly agricultural land use dominates. Or, at least, did. That scenario is changing fast as small residential units are popping up here and there as the old residential houses around the Grand Trunk Road.

There are a host of factors that control consumer behavior. They can be roughly devided into three groups. They are:

- Economic Factors – Covers factors like average monthly income, inflation, etc.
- Psychological Factors – Covers basic values, beliefs, social pressure, moral normative belief and independent personal choices.
- Options Available – Covers the choice of commodities the consumers

In the last twenty years India herself has gone through a lot of changes in the matter of consumer behaviour.

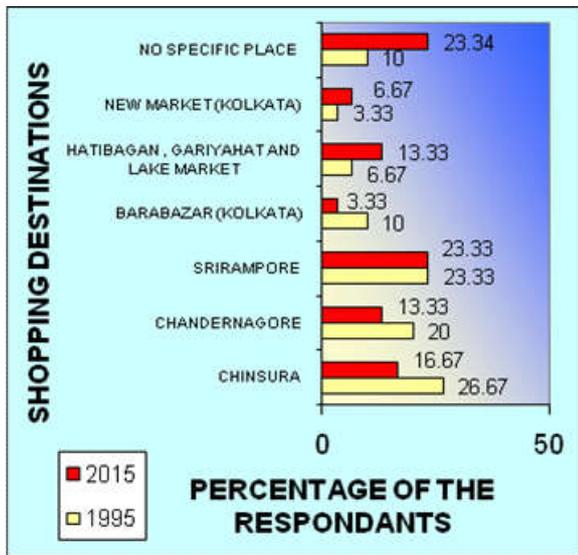


Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 3. Scatter diagram showing correlation between average monthly income (in Rs.) and brand consciousness

The economic liberation has given the consumers a host of options of commodities to choose from, if they can afford it. And, with the electronic media, the description of these products are reaching beyond the boundaries of the core metro city, in the present study, Kolkata Municipal Corporation, and reaching peripheral parts of the metropolitan area. Gone are the days when one had to journey for two hours or more to buy some chic clothing, fancy accessory or high end electronic gadgets. Today a citizen of a peripheral municipality like Baidyabati can just order those things on Flipcart or Amazon. There is also a medium positive relationship between economic status, represented by average monthly income and brand consciousness. As the income of the families increase, the brand consciousness (which has been put to a one to ten scale) also increases with Pearson's Product Moment

correlation value (r) being 0.54 (approximate) that falls in the medium positive group (+0.40 - +0.60) in the scale of correlation. The trend line shows a logarithmic relation between the two variables. (Fig. 3)



Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 4. Bar diagram showing change of shopping destination of the respondents in the last twenty years

The present study mostly gives emphasis on five commodities. They are:

- Clothing and accessories
- Electric goods
- Stationary goods and writing material
- Dolls and toys

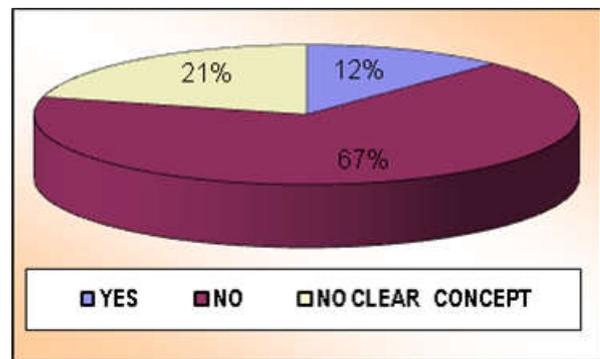
Most of the respondents used to shop for clothing items from mostly suburban markets like the ones in Chinsura or Srirampur. Or some prestigious shops from Chandernagore. A very few ventured to Kolkata. Their destination was mostly the Barabazar, Gariahat or New Market. The term ‘Shopping Mall’ was unheard of, except for in some posh hill stations, in the peripheral urban units. Figure number 4 clearly shows a shift of shopping destinations of the respondents. Twenty years ago, back in the year 1995, according to them, they did most of their shopping from suburban markets like Chinsura, Serampore and Chandernagore (26.67%, 23.33% and 20%, respectively). Only, a small part of the respondents ventured in markets of Kolkata like Barabazar, Gariahat or New Market (10%, 6.67% and 3.33%, respectively). When we look at the present scenario, we find, more and more people are being interested in shopping trendy clothes in the big city. But, one thing should be noticed, that, the most increase has been in the field of miscellaneous. With more and more options being provided to the customers, they are not bounding themselves to a particular market area. (FIG.4)

The scenario has changed rapidly as the young generation who grew up in the twenty first century rapidly joins the bandwagon of universal global middle class who wears Levi’s Jeans and eats from McDonalds, KFCs and Dominoes’. But there are also exceptions. There are still a few of the respondents who tries to continue an old traditional life style with an essence of British colonial and a hint of pre-liberalization attitude, which patronizes certain brand of

clothing (buying cloths from only certain stores in New Market or Bagbazar), accessories (“only Bata shoes are allowed in this house”) or hanging onto old nostalgic items of a bygone era (using a fifty year old HMT watch when the whole company itself has shut down and the younger kids have mobed on to new brands like Fast Track) or buying groceries from a particular shop in the neighborhood. These actions are mostly driven by personal choices and intrinsic values that influence the behaviour of this group of consumers.

The life of a commodity

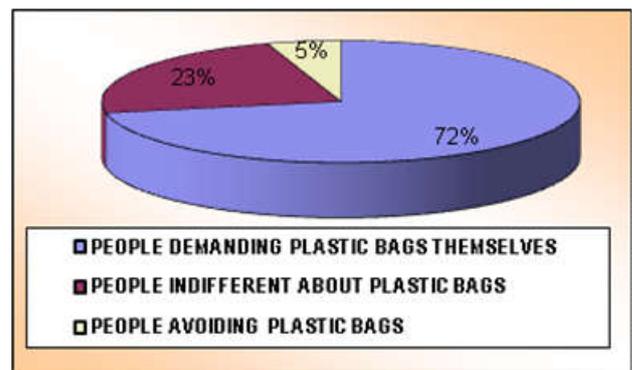
As we concentrate deeply into how the consumers are related to the commodities we see a pattern. The older generation (people above the age of fifty) who were in there prime during the 1980s and 1990s are more attached to the products they buy. One of the subjects studied used a twenty seven year old black and white television even three years ago, until it broke down completely. But, these respondent and a few others like him are a matter of fact, exceptions, which very famously proves the rule.



Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 5. Pie diagram showing the anser of the respondents when asked about there concept about sustainable development

And the rule seems to be “use and throw”. As the age of the respondents become less, they become far less attached to their commodities they use. They know that their phone or watches are not going to last a half of a century and as one of the respondents puts it, “I will buy a new model (of mobile phone) next year and sell this one on OLG or something (a buying and selling website of used goods). So, I could not care less.” The easily available finacing and easy monthly installments (EMI) has made buying electronic goods easy for the middle class whose self-categorization and social identity has improved far beyond what it was in the 1990s.

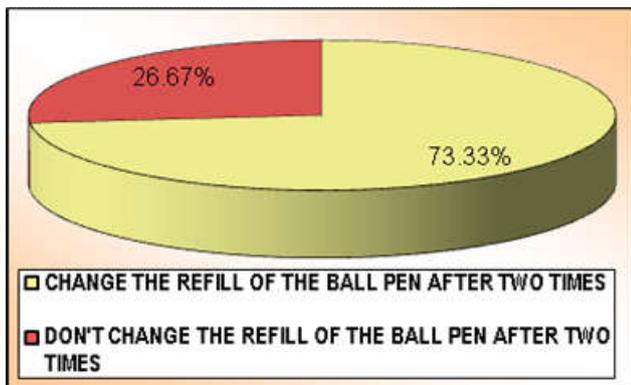


Source : Primary Survey, 2015

FIG. 6 : Pie diagram showing the behaviour of the respondents concerning use of plastic bags

But, every change has its impact on the environment. And consumer behaviour, especially over-consumption has often been linked to environmental degradation. Although, it may be a little bit over simplification, but when the customers take polythin bags from shop keepers and throw them irresponsibly leading to clogged drain and water logging every rainy season, there are some valid points linking the behaviour of the consumer in urban areas and environmental condition of urban centers.

Baidyabati has both dark and light areas in this respect 67 percent of the respondents told that they have absolutely no idea what on earth sustainable development meant (Fig. 5) A whopping 72 percent of the respondents admitted asking for and accepting polythin bags from shopkeepers even when it meant paying upto five rupees extra, 23 percent were indifferent about whether they are provided a plastic bag or not , while only 5 percent were not interested in using plastic (FIG - 6). “We are helpless. The customers keep asking for bags and get irritated when they are not provided one. Very few carry their own reusable shopping bags. We know there are other options like paper bags but plastic bags are cheap and easy to get and the customer’s favourite as they are waterproof. So, legally or illegally we have to please the customer.” After considering the environment consciousness of the customer with an example of use of plastic bags, let us consider two more examples as samples of the consumers’ attitude towards the commodity they consume. The two simple commodities considered here are ball point pens and mobile phones.

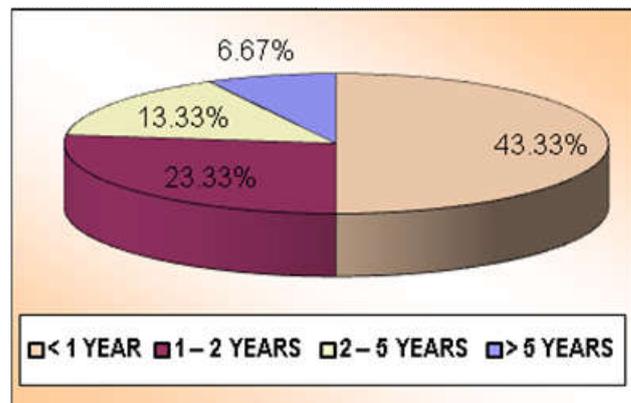


Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 7. Pie diagram showing the behaviour of the respondents concerning refilling the ball pens

During the 1980s and 1990s, the ball point pens were a coveted item for a student, especially during the exams because the ink was not water soluble. Students, teachers and academicians had their favourite set of ball point pens which they kept in their possession carefully and changed the refill of their pens with a new one throwing out the empty refill. Around the end of the 1990s a numerous number of cheap plastic ball pens started being available in the stores for mere one or two Rupees. Today the situation is that people usually throw away the whole pen instead of refilling it and buy a new one. As the study shows only 26.67 percent (Fig. of the respondents buy new refills for their ball point (regular and gel ink) pen when the refill finishes for the third time. “A Link Ocean Gel refill costs around three rupees, while a new Ocean Gel pen costs around five rupees. So, why not go for a fresh looking brand new pen for a few rupees more ?” A valid question indeed from the point of view of the customer. That is exactly what the 73.33 percent of the respondents are doing as they are not

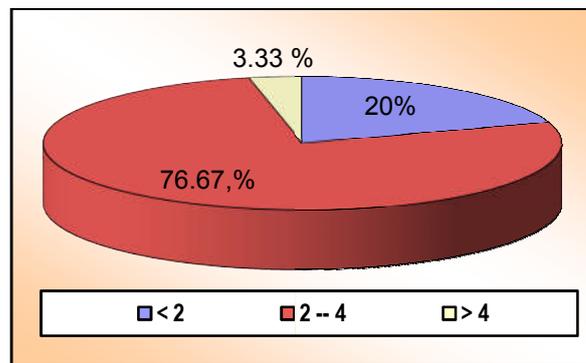
exactly interested in refilling the ball pen after the refill has finished for the third time.



Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 8. Pie diagram showing the age of mobile phones owned by the respondents

43.33 percent of the respondents informed that their mobile phone was not old than one year (Fig. 8) while , 76.67 percent of the respondents own two to four mobile phones and 3.33 percent own more than one (Fig. 9). “The old mobile phones that were in the market ten years ago were hardy and stardy. But the new ones have a lot more features. They come with internet and whatnot. The only problem is, they are far more fragile. They start having problems as soon as six months sometimes.



Source : Primary Survey, 2015

Fig. 6. Pie diagram showing the number of mobile phones owned by the respondents

Even if they stay alright after two years, the technology becomes so obsolete that the owner himself or herself wants a up-to-date device. There is no material benefit to hanging on to an old phone which breaks down every second month and needs servicing again and again. And that’s what maximum customers are doing”, said one of the owners of the retail shops selling mobile. The problem with use and throw mentality is, it creates more garbage. The World Counts website tells that every day human beings throw away enough material to fill the worlds largest container with trash within two hours (www.theworldcounts.com). Municipal Solid Waste is defined as any waste generated by household, commercial and/or institutional activities and is not hazardous. Depending upon the source, Municipal Solid Waste can be categorized into three types, namely, domestic wastes, commercial and institutional wastes and waste from recreational areas. A Solid Waste Management system focuses on the generation, storage, collection, transportation, processing and final disposal of all

kinds of wastes. This is a public necessity and a service provided by respective urban local bodies in India. Proper Solid Waste Management system requires separated collection of different wastes, called Source Separated Collection. In developed high income countries like USA, UK, Japan etc., the infrastructure to collect and process Source Separated Collection exists. But, most centralized municipal systems in India collect solid waste in a mixed form. Even the collection system is problematic. A study shows that in small cities and towns less than 50 percent of the solid waste is systematically collected (Hoornweg *et al.*, 2012).

The positive side of this picture is, Baidyabati municipality has the biggest recycling and composting facility in Hooghly district. During the 2005-6, this facility was established in the ward no.-14 of this municipality with financial help and know how from Japan. The garbage was to be divided into biodegradable and non-biodegradable bins (colour coded green and blue respectively) and then taken to be processed in the centre where the biodegradable would be turned into compost, the reusable objects recycled with the help of kabadiwalas (buyers and sellers of recycled objects). The unusable would be burnt, (which is the standard way of Indian towns to get rid of unwanted volume of urban waste, no matter how polluting for the air it is) and the ashes processed for making fertilizers. At least, that was the plan. The processing unit is still here, trying to work it's best. But, the problem of handling garbage remains in the municipality. With rapidly growing population, the amount of use of commodity increases. And with changing behaviour of the consumers, more and more, less is being used and more is being thrown.

Conclusion

“The only thing that is constant is change.” So said the great Greek philosopher Heraclitus. And trying to stop the change, clinging to age old beliefs of social human behaviour is only harmful to society. What we truly need to do is to understand the character of the changing pattern of the society.

The present study represents a very small part of the big picture with respondents belonging to mostly middle class and higher middle class community. But, it does bring to light the change in behaviour in this segment to which the respondents belong and who are considered the emerging global face of the country in the twenty first century. As consumers are having more and more options the more they want to use commodities that are more convenient to them. This search for convenience often creates a fear of compromising environmental quality. But, as said before, the wheel of axil can't be turned back to old practices which are considered more environment friendly. The trick is to take the middle road and make the consumers conscious about the implications of their behaviour. And doing that more frequently. In today's fast moving world informations come and go by the citizens so rapidly that a few cautionary posters may not do the work. The municipalities can work with NGOs and other private foundations to create an affective program make their citizens understand the nature of their own behaviour and it's implications. Thus, truly moving towards a sustainable future that no one wants to throw away.

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