Chapter 18

Sustainable Consumption and Social Institutions:
Setting a Research Agenda for India

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ABSTRACT

Sustainable development has been identified as a strategic priority for both developed and developing countries. The role of sustainable consumption in addressing challenges of sustainable development is undisputed. Developing country context is complex due to simultaneous presence of hyper/over-consumption and under-consumption in different sections of society. Efforts to address sustainable consumption cover initiatives by individual consumers, business sector, governments, education and media institutions. It emerged that addressing sustainable consumption in the current times requires multiplicity of approaches, collaboration of multiple institutions and coordination, synergy and cohesiveness among various institutions. Social institutions were identified perfect fit for the purpose. This chapter intends to establish research agenda to explore possibilities for social institutions in propagating sustainable consumption in India.

INTRODUCTION

If ‘sufficient’ prosperity, distributive justice and ecological survival are the goals, business-as-usual is not an option for India. – p 87, Shrivastava 2014

India is the second most populous country in the world with its 1.3 billion population which accounts for around 18 per cent of the world’s population (UN DESA population division, 2015). The gravity of situation can be understood by the fact that “by 2050 the world population is set to exceed 9 billion, with over 95 percent of this increase occurring in developing countries like Indonesia, India, and China” (p5, Dauvergne, 2010). India is also a growing economy which was the third largest in the world in 2014, on a
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purchasing power parity basis, as its GDP was USD 7.39 trillion (World Bank, 2015). Economic growth has contributed to poverty reduction but has also contributed to the growth in inequalities (Shrivastava 2014), rising CO₂ emission and pollution levels (TERI, 2011; Hubacek, Guan & Barua, 2007) and put natural ecosystem and social and physical infrastructure under pressure (Kothari, 2014). Growth in population, income and urbanization accompanied with income disparities and unequal distribution of wealth are posing serious challenges to the sustainable development, in India and in other developing countries (UN DESA, 2013; Staniškis, 2012; Assadourian, 2010; Dauvergne, 2010; Gadgil & Guha, 1994). These issues combined with poor environmental quality, infrastructure shortage and diverse Eco-zones make India vulnerable to climate change (TERI, 2011). India has witnessed impact of climate change through the episodes of rising temperatures, uncertainty of monsoon, flooding, soil erosion and growing levels of pollution (Shrivastava, 2014).

It is also important to mention that for developing countries, economic well-being of their citizens is a must and consumption of resources is critical for economic development (Ekins & Lemaire, 2012). This means that India has to invest in its economic growth. However, India like any other developing country is continuously under international pressure to start “decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and natural resource use” (p40, UNEP, 2014) to ensure real progress towards sustainability and sustainable development.

This background indicates that for a massive and diverse country like India which is facing complex and contradictory sustainability problems, there is an urgent need for more integrative and comprehensive approaches to ensure progress towards sustainability goals. It also indicates that for developing country like India finding a balance between economic growth and sustainable development is a must. Investing in sustainable consumption may help India in finding this balance (Cohen, 2005).

On this backdrop, the main objectives of this chapter is to encourage the advancement of a research stream to explore potential of social institutions in facilitating sustainable consumption by setting a research agenda to explore various pertinent research questions in Indian context. This chapter is mainly based on the review of interdisciplinary literature from business management, sustainability marketing, education, sociology and environmental sciences. This chapter begins by providing historical background of the concept of sustainability its association with production and consumption. This section establishes importance of sustainable consumption in developing country context. In the second section, theoretical domain of consumption is explored. This part identifies individual, process and social aspects of consumption. The following section explores complexities of definitions and scope of sustainable consumption. The fourth section examines theoretical domains of approaches to achieve sustainable consumption in order to clearly establish suitability of ‘reconfiguration’ perspective for developing country context like India. In the next section, this chapter reviews the efforts of individual consumers, business sector, government, education institutions and media to understand their contribution in the growth of sustainable consumption and their challenges. This discussion leads to the sixth section where the role, limitations and possibilities for social institutions in promoting sustainable consumption is discussed. In the next section possibilities for social institutions is examined w.r.t. Indian context followed by setting a research agenda through multiple research enquiries. This chapter settles by acknowledging the potential for social organizations in promoting sustainable consumption in India and indicates that success in future is going to favour collaborations and partnerships among institutions.