

# **Staying Cool, Looking Good, Moving Around: Consumption, Sustainability and the ‘Rise of the South’**

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The nature of global development has changed substantially over the past three decades in step with the intensified globalisation of capitalism and its imperatives of growth and expanding consumption. Most significant is the ongoing shift in the balance of the global economy towards the South in general and the East in particular. As the ‘Rise of the South’ materialises, a number of emerging economies are moving beyond their roles as factories of the world and are turning their focus towards expanding domestic markets. The emergence of high-consuming middle classes in these countries represents a profound challenge for global sustainability. When coupled with the as-yet unsuccessful efforts to constrain the consumption in the mature capitalist countries, rising global consumption constitutes one of the greatest challenges to sustainable development. Neither development theory nor sustainability policy has adequately acknowledged surging global consumption. How do we best understand the changes behind the dramatic increase in consumption? Drawing on social practice theory as well as the political economy of capitalist development, this article analyses the social and environmental dimensions of increasing consumption in the South, using India and Vietnam as case studies.

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Today, the world faces two crucial challenges related to consumption: a large proportion of the world's population does not have the capacity to meet its basic consumption needs; and a small proportion consumes far too much. With the continued 'rise of the South', the size of the latter category is sure to increase in the years ahead, which will in turn reduce resources available to the socio-economically disadvantaged. According to the UNDP (2013:13), the 'rise of the South' constitutes 'a dramatic rebalancing of global economic power', propelled by substantial and sustained growth in countries of the South (and Asia in particular). As a corollary of the intensified globalisation of capitalism and its twin imperatives of growth and expanding consumption over the past three decades, these new emerging economies now play crucial roles in both meeting *and* fuelling a rapid growth in demand for energy and natural resources (Hansen and Wethal 2015a). And while economic growth in most emerging economies has so far been dependent on high consumption levels in foreign markets, their domestic middle-classes are now growing rapidly: the UNDP (2013) expects that by 2030 a full 80 per cent of the global middle class will be located in the South and will account for 70 per cent of world consumption expenditure. This reflects the triumph of capitalism globally as well as the resilient embracement of development in less developed countries as a 'catch-up process' with the high consumption economies of the mature capitalist countries (Payne and Philips 2010; Hansen and Wethal 2015b).

From a sustainability perspective, this makes the study of changing consumption practices in the South a crucial area of academic inquiry, and calls for a deeper understanding of the social, economic and cultural processes implied in these changes. Given that the mature capitalist economies in the North have failed to reduce their carbon emissions and resource use by means other than industrial outsourcing (McNeill and Wilhite 2015), the prospects of rapidly changing consumption practices in the 'rising South' present obvious challenges – yet in our view, it remains a curiously underdeveloped area of investigation. In this article, we seek to understand the processes underpinning growing consumption in the South. How is consumption in the rising South changing in a context of rapid development? How is economic development implicated in everyday practices? And what are the broader implications of increasing consumption?

The article is organised as follows: We first introduce the relationship between consumption, capitalist development and sustainability. We then present the overall trajectory of economic development and consumption in Vietnam and India. As we elaborate below, these countries are interesting for comparison for several reasons. Both adopted socialist models for socio-

economic development after independence and insulated themselves from the global capitalist system until the 1980s; by 1990 they were both relaxing their insular policies and liberalising aspects of their economies. While these two countries may not be fully paradigmatic of the broader shifts occurring in the rising South, we argue that our comparative view constitutes a fruitful prism through which to engage empirically with crucial sustainability challenges that are of a more general nature. The economic reforms that opened these economies provide an interesting window for comparing and contrasting how local practices change in the encounter with transnational capitalism. We focus on the consumption of three sets of commodities – airconditioning, beauty products, cars – that, in combination, allow the consumer to realise important socially valued goals, namely to stay cool, look good and move around.

### **Consumption, Capitalist Development and Sustainability**

Consumption in the modern world is primarily served by capital and capitalism, and these must therefore figure prominently both as material and cultural categories in the study of consumption. Mainstream economics is neither equipped to deal with the political structures and power that affect consumption, nor to capture the importance of socio-cultural contexts of everyday practices. A broader view that embraces the political economy of capitalism is therefore essential (Fine 2002: 5). Paradoxically, consumption research and research on the political economy of development have advanced with little direct interaction. In development research, consumption is often touched upon, but is seldom a central point of inquiry. Consumption usually enters the picture as a measurement of poverty (e.g. household consumption expenditure) and inequality (e.g. the Gini index), or as a crucial factor in economic growth (consumption as demand). Or it is analysed – in both laudatory and critical terms – as a goal in modernisation processes. Rostow's (1960) analysis is among the most well-known. To Rostow, 'the age of high mass consumption' was the end-point of the development/modernisation processes that all countries should go through. In contradistinction, the so-called post-development school saw development as a process leading to global, cultural homogenisation or westernisation, wiping out cultural particularities and replacing them with Western consumerism. The outcome was, to critics such as Sachs (1992: 4), a worldwide simplification of architecture, clothing, and daily objects and the standardisation of desires and dreams occurring deep down in the cultural imagination.

This line of reasoning has lost popularity as it has become evident that different societies produce their own modernities – even if the first movers of industrialisation have undoubtedly had significant power in scripting what it means to be developed. But capitalism as such does not require homogenisation. Specialised at producing large quantities and varieties of goods, the capitalist production system has the ability to adapt to local demands. Indeed, homogenisation and heterogenisation may be seen as two different dimensions of globalisation working in tandem at different levels: homogenisation at the structural-institutional, and heterogenisation at the expressive-symbolic (Ram 2004).

‘Consumption research’, in turn, has usually not had to engage with questions of ‘development’ because the main focus has been on affluent societies, that is, on societies that were already seen as developed. Nonetheless, there are a number of significant exceptions (e.g. Wilhite 2008 on India; Nguyen-Marshall et al. 2012 on Vietnam). What these accounts share is an ethnographic, bottom-up approach to analysing consumption and social change, giving weight to the ways that cultural practices change or persist in contexts of rapid economic development.

In our analysis of the effects of the integration of capitalist political economy in Vietnam and India, we draw out the particularities and uniformities in consumption and development. Rather than taking an over-deterministic view of change centred either on the economic power of capitalist political ideologies and agents, or on the powerful scripts for change embedded in modern technologies, we use social practice theory (with roots in Bourdieu’s work and recently applied to studies of consumption by Shove et al. 2012, Sahakian and Wilhite 2014, and others) to frame an approach that regards agency/power as distributed between the globalising capitalist political economy – with its liberalised markets, commodities, and imagery/marketing on the one hand – and the experiential knowledge embedded in local socio-economic practices and ways of doing things/culture on the other. In other words, our deployment of social practice theory provides a vehicle for relating changes on the ground to changes in the political economy of consumption. Before examining changes in practices related to how people cool their homes, dress, and transport themselves, we briefly introduce the economic reform processes in India and Vietnam.

## **Consumption and Development in the Rising South: India and Vietnam**

The early phase of expansive globalisation after WWII – and increasingly so with the neoliberal turn in Europe and the US from the late 1970s – was characterised by a massive shift of manufacturing from Europe and North America to Latin America and Asia, thus initiating a period in which consumption in the North was fuelled by cheap labour and production costs in the South. While this contributed to job creation and economic growth in several Asian countries, the dependence on fickle global markets and rapid changes in consumer demand in other parts of the world was one important reason behind a shift towards prioritising domestic consumption.

While India and Vietnam are usually compared to China, and not to each other, the comparison makes good sense for a number of reasons. Both are former colonies of European empires – albeit with different colonial trajectories – and gained independence around the same time (India in 1947, (North) Vietnam in 1954); their great national heroes of liberation – Gandhi and Ho Chi Minh respectively – espoused norms of frugality that would remain socially important in the post-independence period; they share a history of socialist national projects, even if they too vary substantially in form; they embarked on important economic reforms in the mid-1980s which accelerated greatly from around 1990, that is, more than a decade after China; they have almost exactly the same level of GDP per capita and similar overall export structures (Hansen and Wethal 2015b: 266); and the benefits of capitalism has effectively been sold in both countries, official Vietnamese state rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding (Hansen 2015a).

After independence, India embarked on a process of state-led development rooted in a mixed economy in which new investments in a number of areas – e.g. heavy industry, mining and telecommunications – were reserved for the public sector, while many other domains of economic activity were shared with the private sector. Centralised planning and import-substitution industrialisation were intended to free the economy from external and metropolitan domination, and the central state closely regulated all private industrial investments. In practice, this was achieved through a complex (and increasingly corrupt) system of licenses which came to be known, derogatorily, as the license-permit-raj. The liberalisation of the Indian economy began in the mid-1980s, when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi began to envision and encourage a new consumption-driven Indian political economy; it gathered pace after 1991 when a liquidity crisis and looming default led India to seek a loan

from the IMF and adopt a structural adjustment programme. Yet reforms were pursued beyond those demanded by IMF conditionalities and were, later, intensified as a result of a conscious political strategy on the part of policy-making elites and domestic political interests to overhaul the state-led model of development whose day, they felt, had come. The reform process has been piecemeal and carefully sequenced so as to allow officials to manage its negative effects through negotiations and compensation. Generally, uncontroversial reforms – deregulating industrial investment, devaluation, trade liberalisation – were undertaken first, and more controversial ones postponed for later (Kennedy 2014: 17-50). The general thrust has been pro-business rather than pro-market (Kohli 2012), and while reforms have undoubtedly produced new social inequalities, they have also created a large middle class and a new and dynamic consumption economy.

Vietnam embarked on economic reforms after the 6<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party in 1986. In the face of crisis in the Soviet Union, surging rates of inflation, a trade embargo by the West and limited development assistance, the reforms were seen as vital both for the development of the country and the survival of the Communist Party (Masina 2006). Officially the goal of *doi moi* (usually translated as ‘renovation’) was to develop a ‘market economy with socialist orientation’, although little socialism survived in practice (Beresford 2008). *Doi moi* consisted of gradual reforms towards a market economy, originally with state-owned enterprises as central agents. Land reforms through de-collectivisation of agriculture, a gradual opening up for private enterprises and a strong focus on regional and global political and economic integration and export-led growth were crucial components. *Doi moi* also brought a rapid increase in the availability of goods and the purchasing power to acquire them, and with the progress of reforms more emphasis has been put on developing a domestic market for Vietnamese products both to reduce imports and to limit dependence on foreign markets. In a radical break with the more orthodox communist past, the need for economic growth has led to high levels of consumption being accepted and even encouraged as integral to modern Vietnam (Vann 2012). Although growth in Vietnam has been considered ‘remarkably pro-poor’ (World Bank 2002: vi), social inequalities have grown significantly (see Taylor 2004). Rural poverty thus co-exists with an urban middle class with significant purchasing power, and often with strong ties to the state (Gainsborough 2010).

The economic outcomes of the reform process in both countries share key similarities that go beyond the creation of a new middle class and a domestic market. At the aggregate level we notice a rapid increase in growth. Vietnam was one of the fastest growing economies in the

world over the two last decades, with an average of 7.3 per cent annually between 1990 and 2010 leading to an almost quintupling of per capita income (JDPR 2012). The Indian economy has also grown rapidly since the 1990s, registering an approximate annual growth rate of 7 per cent since 2000.

At the level of overall household consumption expenditure, India and Vietnam have similar scores, with respective average annual per capita increases of 5.8 per cent and 5.7 per cent between 2000 and 2012 (World Bank 2014). Growth is also reflected in the aggregate surge in energy consumption over the past 30 years. In Vietnam, oil consumption tripled between 1990 and 2000 and nearly tripled again between 2000 and 2013. Annual energy demand has grown by an average of 13 per cent over the past decade, and by 2030, energy consumption and energy-related greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions are expected to double and triple, respectively (EIA 2014). India was the world's fourth largest energy consumer in 2011, and primary energy consumption more than doubled between 1990 and 2012. Towards 2040, India's energy demand is expected to grow at 2.8 per cent per year.

While these aggregate figures indicate growth in economic volume, consumption, and energy use, they tell us little about how changes in the overall political economy of growth and development have interfaced with everyday consumption practices. To bring this out, we turn to our three comparative case studies of consumption practices related to cooling, beauty and mobility. The cases demonstrate that while changes in consumption exhibit parallels and partial similarities across national contexts, they are not homogeneous outcomes of capitalist transformation and can only be fully understood through a lens that accommodates socio-cultural practices.

### **Staying Cool: Air Conditioning**

While the US has traditionally been the world's major AC market, Asia is rapidly catching up, with China expected to eclipse the US's rate of AC ownership by 2020. Air conditioning bears potentials for enormous changes in home cooling practices in Asian homes and in the amounts of electricity needed to support them. A regime of building practices similar to those that swept the Southern US, Japan and Australia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is taking hold in India, brought about by building entrepreneurs, the cement industry, banks, and public policies liberalising markets for air conditioners (Wilhite 2008, 2009). This new building- and comfort

regime has limited cooling choices for middle class householders by privileging electrified air conditioning and bringing with it a cooling transformation which has an alarming globalising homogeneity.

Wilhite's (2008) research in Kerala in south India revealed a major transformation in house building in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Earlier, the construction of elite and upper caste homes was done mainly by members of the Viswakamos, or artisan caste (Gopikuttan 1990: 2085). These building artisans deployed design and construction principles that included geographical orientation of both the plot and the house to accommodate prevailing breezes, the placement of windows and doors to reduce solar gain and facilitate drafts, as well as the use of shading and porous construction materials to facilitate ventilation. Wood was the main building material for upper caste houses. Middle and lower caste houses were constructed of mud, unburned bricks, laterite, bamboo, straw and leaves (Harilal 1986).

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the role of the Viswakamos in house construction began to decline. Several interrelated developments contributed to this. Indian elites shifted their interest towards Anglo-Indian housing designs, which during that period also incorporated natural cooling principles. Another development involved new public regulations that demanded blueprints, cost assessments and the submission of written plans for new buildings, as well as site plans and fee breakdowns, all of which had to be certified by architects and engineers. Government loans were authorised only on the recommendations of formally trained construction engineers. Building entrepreneurs used unskilled labour whenever possible. Less costly, pre-fabricated materials from other parts of India (and abroad) increasingly replaced local materials. These developments all contributed to the elimination of climate-adapted building principles from building construction (Gopikuttan 1990).

From the 1970s, the favoured materials used in middle class housing construction were cement, plaster and burnt bricks, all of which have poor thermal properties in hot and humid climates. In a survey of middle class homes in Kerala's state capital Trivandrum in 2002, over 84 per cent were built with these materials and indications were that this would continue (reported in Wilhite 2008). One of the greatest contributors to heat gain was the concrete roof. Concrete is a very poor thermal performer because it collects and transmits heat into the house. Traditional roofs had been built with climate-friendly thatch and later with clay tiles that also allowed air flow and heat exhaust. The coming of piped-in water and electricity favoured concrete in wall construction, and as kitchens and bathrooms moved into the house, the need



for metals, plastics, pipes and wiring in the walls and floors of houses increased. In 2002, 84 per cent of homes in the Trivandrum survey had concrete roofs, up from 48 per cent for Travancore (the most southerly of the kingdoms subsumed into Kerala) as a whole in 1941 (Gopikuttan 1990).

Concrete structures and standardised designs were the perfect receptacle for air conditioned comfort. Prior to 1991, foreign AC manufacturers were inhibited by high prices and luxury taxes. In 1991, there were only three or four Indian manufacturers selling air conditioners in Kerala, and to buy an air conditioner, one had to contact a dealer and place an order. This changed rapidly after 1991 when restrictions on transnational companies were relaxed. Both competition and new tax policies led to a gradual drop in prices between 1991 and 1996. The price fell further after 1997, when the excise tax and other import restrictions on air conditioners were eliminated, and then again in 2001 when air conditioners were removed from the luxury goods category. Also, the interest rates on product loans decreased. Financial institutions today require only a small down payment and some even offer interest free payments over a 24-month period. Lower prices and lower monthly payments make air conditioners affordable for many middle-income families. There are now more than 20 major air conditioning brands on the market, offering hundreds of different air conditioning models.

For those who have the resources to build a new house, there are very few building entrepreneurs or architects today who build houses amenable to passive cooling. This is noteworthy given that one of India's most famous architects, Laurie Baker, is known especially for his design of houses that can be cooled without airconditioning. Baker achieved Indian and worldwide attention when he designed and built the buildings that would house the Centre for Development Studies (CDS) in Trivandrum, one of Kerala's important universities, using local materials, unfired bricks and light cement, as well as incorporating arched windows and doors. But the Baker design never took hold as an attractive middle class design, despite Baker's reputation.

Today, urbanisation in India continues at an increased pace, with new townships comprised overwhelmingly by concrete and steel high-rise buildings popping up on the periphery of all major Indian cities. The real estate economy is probably the fastest growing and most lucrative sector in India today and attracts both domestic and foreign finance capital (Sampat 2014: 146-166); and in the new peri-urban townships air conditioned multi-storey apartment buildings is the norm. This has greatly contributed to air conditioning sales growing at 20 per

cent per year, the same rate as in China (Rosenthal and Lehren 2012). As Indian families adjust to air conditioned living, new practices develop that lock out the outside environment and lock in the cooled air. Doors and windows remain closed, life moves from gardens and front porches to enclosed living rooms. This has obvious practical advantages for comfort and health: It keeps the cool air in and pollution and mosquitos out; it makes it easier for a child to focus on studies, and for the parents to sleep. But it comes at an enormous energy and environmental cost. And it changes the nature of neighbourhood social interaction as people withdraw into sealed apartments.

In Vietnam wide-spread use of air conditioners is a recent phenomenon. Statistics (GSO 2002, 2012) show that the use of air conditioners got off to a slower start than other technological amenities such as telephones, refrigerators, TVs, computers and water heaters under *doi moi*. As late as in 2002 the national average was one air conditioner per 100 households (GSO 2002). Since then, Vietnam has seen an explosion in air conditioner ownership. By 2012 the national average had reached 11.5 per cent, while almost one-third of urban households owned an air conditioner (GSO 2012). The air conditioner market is expected to grow at a rate of close to 8 per cent annually the coming years (Research and Markets 2012).

A range of factors have contributed to the spread of air conditioning. As in India, market liberalisation, greater availability, and a reduction in prices have been crucial, as have new building practices and increasing comfort demands. Air conditioners are no longer considered luxury items and are not subject to luxury tax, although they are still subject to a special sales tax of 10 per cent (PwC 2014). The change from luxury item towards 'normalisation' is evident in how the air conditioner has quickly acquired a position as a 'must-have' for Vietnam's emerging middle class, for most of whom it would be unthinkable to build a house without one. In Hanoi, Hansen asked a young female professional whether the air conditioner was something that Hanoians desired today. She answered that everyone in Hanoi had at least one air conditioner (the real number being about one-third) because the city gets so hot. What was changing, she explained, was that hers and many other households now had one in each room.

Since the vast majority of the Vietnamese middle class reside in cities, the air conditioner is mainly an urban phenomenon. In rural areas only 3.2 per cent of households have an air conditioner (GSO 2012), and the ownership of air conditioners is around three times higher in 'special class cities' (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) than in other urban areas (GSO 2011).

Augmented use of air conditioners, along with lack of green spaces and increased traffic, contribute to ‘urban heat islands’ in Ho Chi Minh City, where temperatures get up to 10 degrees higher than in surrounding districts (Eckert and Waibel 2009). This increases the allure of conditioned comfort in a city already known for its hot climate.

Rimmer and Dick (2009) find that Southeast Asian cities have moved away from adjusting to the climate towards altering it through the use of air conditioning. Along with this, the middle classes have been pulling away from the uncertainties of public space towards the comfort of controllable indoor spaces: ‘[Middle-class people] live in air conditioned houses in gated communities, travel in private airconditioned vehicles to airconditioned offices and shopping malls’ (Rimmer and Dick 2009: 46). This trend is also emerging in Vietnam, where avoiding the heat is seen as an important reason to acquire a car; and large, air conditioned supermarkets and malls have been rapidly growing in numbers and popularity.

The increased international presence in Vietnam also contributes to the proliferation of air conditioning, in terms of meeting international standards for office spaces and expatriate housing, but most importantly through the development of Vietnam as a major tourist destination. A study conducted for the Australian Government (2012) found that 97 per cent of hotels and 58 per cent of offices in Vietnam used air conditioners; and air conditioning accounts for by far the highest share of electricity use in the hotel sector (Trung and Kumar 2005).

While traditional Vietnamese houses built for natural conditioning and adaptation to the climate can still be seen in rural areas, and particularly in mountainous areas dominated by ethnic minorities, they are much less common in urban areas, where concrete houses and high-rise concrete, steel and glass buildings designed for air conditioners are the norm. With rapid urbanisation, similar trends to those in India are visible and so-called ‘New Urban Areas’ have been and are being developed around Hanoi and HCMC (Hoai Anh Tran 2015). In the booming real estate economy, profits for the investor rather than low energy consumption for the inhabitant are the primary goal. As Rimmer and Dick (2009: 145) summarise, natural ventilation, assisted by ceiling fans, only served the purpose so long as ‘investors were prepared to pay a premium on capital cost to construct the additional space required for the high ceilings and perhaps courtyards and verandas.’

There are, however, movements that promote more sustainable building practices. As with India’s Baker design, the famous Vietnamese architect Vo Trong Nghia has received

international acclaim for his ‘green housing’ projects, including the use of natural ventilation and traditional building materials such as bamboo (CNN 2015). The Vietnamese government is also implementing a series of energy efficiency initiatives for energy-using technologies, including air conditioners (Prime Minister of Vietnam 2011); and in 2008 it launched the Vietnam Green Building Council, with the goal of promoting green buildings around the country (Ostojic et al. 2013). But compliance with this is voluntary, and ‘green buildings’ certainly represent a novelty rather than a new norm. This is perhaps not surprising for a country that until recently was very poor. As Earl (2009) points out, the national energy policy in Vietnam has so far concentrated on delivering energy to its entire population rather than on promoting energy conservation in cities. With Vietnam now facing significant energy challenges, this may change.

Despite significant contextual differences, the overall trends in post-reform Vietnam and India are similar. Changes in the availability of materials, building technologies, and public regulation; the diffusion of commercial business principles in construction; the use of less expensive, mass-produced materials; urbanisation; a big real estate economy; and new ideas about what constitutes a modern dwelling, have paved the way for air conditioning. Having rapidly become a ‘normal’ rather than luxury product for the middle classes in both countries, the expansion of the market is expected to continue.

### **Looking Good: Cleanliness, Beauty, Dress**

Cleanliness, beauty and dress have been lucrative targets for commodification in post-1991 India. For Hindus, cleanliness is intimately related to godliness. Neither one’s body nor one’s home will be inviting to the gods, nor will personal communication with gods be possible, if house and body are not clean. Traditionally, cleaning has been accomplished mainly with water and manual work involving brooms, clothes and brushes. Soap has not been seen as a necessary supplement to achieve cleanliness, but this scarcity of soap in Indian cleaning practices constituted a huge market potential for soap manufacturers and retailers. The association of soap with good hygiene has been promoted in government information campaigns, through international development organisations such as the World Bank, and by both transnational and Indian companies. Many of the timeworn discourses for selling soap in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century North America have been brushed off and repackaged in Indian advertising. Soap is associated with cleanliness and cleanliness associated with artificial

smells. Perfumed soaps have been heavily marketed – in advertising, subjects such as ‘B.O.’ (body odour, invented as a target of soap by Lever Brothers) and ‘germs’, which in Western advertising are posed as colonising bathrooms and kitchens, are set up as targets for soap. World Bank sponsored ‘hand washing’ campaigns, not surprisingly using the soaps retailed by transnational soap companies, have been conducted all over India. The ‘fragrance’ market, consisting of perfumes, perfumed soaps and body creams grew at 15 percent per year in India in the 2000s. And in South India, modern bathrooms have increasingly become ‘showplaces’ and indices of status mobility in Hindu middle class homes (Srinivas 2002).

Soaps are also marketed as beauty items. Skin health and colour are important in Asian countries where ‘whiteness’ has long been regarded as a key criterion of personal beauty. Fuelled by economic growth and increasing wealth, ‘white skin’ has increasingly emerged as a central desideratum of consumer culture in affluent Asia, and skin whitening and lightening products have recorded dramatic growth rates during the past two decades (Li et al. 2008: 444). The classical Indian cosmetic ideal has been fair skin, with little or no facial colour, and oiled hair (rather than shampoo). White skin is considered a mark of class and caste, as well as an asset. It is not only considered beautiful, but also connotes purity, cleanliness and happiness. While women in South India would traditionally use bathing with turmeric as a skin lightening technique (Li et al. 2008), Indian women have already from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century used powders, creams and treatments to lighten their skin. Skin lightening is highly commercialised – the mass market whitening pioneer was Hindustan Unilever’s ‘Fair & Lovely’, launched in 1975, but after 1991 Indian and transnational soap and cosmetic corporations have come up with a wide range of fairness powders, creams and oils. These are some of the most heavily advertised on Indian television, and advertisers have most often shown people with dark skin – mostly women, but increasingly also men – as having problems when it comes to finding jobs, getting married and generally being accepted by society (Picton 2013). The ‘whitening industry’ today is thus a massive one: India’s whitening cream market reportedly swelled from USD 397 million in 2008 to USD 638 million four years later; and skin-lightening products account for upwards of 85 percent of the country’s facial moisturiser (*NY Daily News* 2013). The products available vary enormously in price and quality – some are very affordable, some very expensive; and some contain steroids and harmful bleaching agents. Although multinational companies such as L’Oreal, Lancome and Clinique are rapidly making inroads into the Indian market (Picton 2013: 91) it is telling that

the vast majority of ads use Indian models or celebrities to promote their products. As Li et al. (2008) note, it is Indian celebrities that are the dominant body ideals for Indian women.

In matrimonials, a preference for a 'fair bride' with 'wheatish' complexion remains a recurring theme. Beauty parlours, which have been around since the 1970s, offer 'fairness treatments' based on chemical bleaching of the skin, most of the clients being women of marriageable age. And having at least a facial lightening treatment before one's wedding is now considered a must among the middle class. Among younger women, the use of Western cosmetics such as lipstick, nail polish and shampoo is also growing (Wilhite 2008). And for the elite, new five star wellness hotels, clubs, and spa resorts offer new settings in which to feel and look good (Brosius 2011: 309-322).

Clothing is close to the body and for women regarded as a bodily practice that communicates both beauty and morality. For married women, the Indian moral has traditionally been associated with the *sari*. The quality of a *sari* and the way it is carried gives myriad small hints to the class and caste status of the wearer. For young women, it has become increasingly common for girls to wear jeans and a blouse; albeit one that covers both the shoulders and the back. As women approach marriageable age a new hybrid dress form, the *churidar-kurta* is popular because it uses Indian material and design yet is also daring and indicative of the modern Indian woman by revealing body shape. Middle class men have, in contrast, unambiguously adopted western-style ways of dressing, with trousers and shirts. Men's clothing has less to do with propriety, and more to do with class connotations expressed through conspicuous consumption, something which is visible in men's concerns with brands, especially in shirts (Saavala 2010: 125-129).

Fashion and clothing are visible manifestations of the changes Vietnam has gone through. This is nowhere as evident as in the career of the female version of the *ao dai*, the 'traditional' Vietnamese costume. Unlike the *sari*, the *ao dai* is not usually worn in everyday situations, although it has been popular as a school uniform. With influences stemming back to Chinese imperial days, the *ao dai* in today's tight-fit shape emerged as a rather daring French-Vietnamese colonial hybrid (Leshkovich 2003). With communism, particularly the French-inspired version became politically controversial as an example of bourgeois decadence, in turn making it a symbol of authenticity and a form of public protest against communism in the Vietnamese diaspora (Lieu 2013). With reforms the female *ao dai* experienced a revival and has become highly popular in the tourist and fashion business. Interestingly it is the tight-fit

hybrid version that has been revived, now promoted as a national symbol, simultaneously materialising ideals of beauty through being presented as accentuating the particular grace, tactfulness and femininity of Vietnamese women (e.g. *Tuoi Tre News*, 2013).

The classical feminine ideal in Vietnam was deeply influenced by Confucianism and its 'Four Feminine Virtues': *cong, dung, ngon* and *hanh* (labour, appearance, speech, and behaviour). A clean, tidy, and careful self-presentation was the ideal, and beauty in the conventional sense was as much about personality and productivity, not just physical appearance (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004). These virtues were challenged by the socialist revolution and the French and American wars, during which the Communist Party sought to mobilise women and create 'the new socialist woman', encouraging them to break away from the rigid Confucian family ideology and serve the cause of national liberation (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 52). Today, the contrast between the ideal socialist woman's 'peasant uniform' and current ways of dressing is extreme. Contemporary Vietnamese consumer culture involves a plethora of fashion magazines, shops and advertising (Drummond 2004), and beauticians, manicurists and hairdressers have experienced rapid growth (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004). As Leshkovich (2012: 105) explains, by the 1990s Vietnamese urbanites were replacing the old revolutionary slogan of 'enough food, warm clothes' with a new motto: 'delicious food, beautiful clothes'. In the new economy, new liberties for identity and hierarchy formation through consumption have emerged. This has included, importantly, much greater pressure on particularly women to look good. A nice appearance is expected in the urban labour market, and women are also expected to look good to maintain the 'happy family' (Leshkovich 2012; Nguyen-vo 2010). As Nguyen-vo (2010: 50) puts it, with *doi moi* a new masculinist sexuality has been unleashed, and 'concurrently, a new middle- and upper-class feminine sexuality is also being shaped in relation to consumption'. This notwithstanding, government-led family campaigns emphasising 'harmonious' and 'morally sound' families has in many ways revitalised Confucian values (Rydstrøm 2010). For Vietnamese women, as in India, this includes a responsibility for taking care of the family and keeping the house tidy – not to please the gods, but to be considered a respectable and dutiful daughter-in-law.

The importance of new fashions to many urban Vietnamese women marks a stark contrast to the traditional idea that women should 'maintain a neat and humble physical appearance in all situations' and under no circumstance 'expose her real financial condition through her attire' (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004: 50). But 'appearance' is a complicated matter, particularly for young women who marry and move in with their family-in-law, where they may be forced to

conform to traditional Confucian virtues. Too much emphasis on physical appearance could risk disdain from the family, or be taken as a sign of laziness. Yet even here reform-induced changes are under way, and the older generation now shows a greater degree of understanding of the importance of new ways of dressing and ‘appearing’ in the modern job market (Ngo Thi Ngan Binh 2004).

As in India, beauty products represent a very large market. Beauty has been increasingly commercialised as multinational companies have spearheaded the promotion of fashion and beauty aids to women, and the beauty market today is dominated by large, global corporations. According to data from the Ho Chi Minh City Chemical Cosmetics Association, the average revenue from cosmetics during the period 2009-2011 was around USD 130-150 million, of which more than 90 per cent came from foreign cosmetic companies. Beauty aids for women are fiercely marketed, and a survey conducted in the mid-1990s found that around two thirds of the women spent somewhere between 40 and 60 per cent of their income on clothes and cosmetics (Fahey 1998). Even many among the working class in Ho Chi Minh City spend upwards of one fourth of their earnings on branded body products (Nguyen-vo 2004).

Whiteness is a central part of the new beauty ideals and business. Vietnamese women go a long way to cover their bodies when on motorbikes or in the sun to avoid tanning. Being tanned is generally more acceptable for a man, and is often seen as a sign of masculinity; but for women, white skin is the ideal and a sign of high class, femininity, purity and sophistication. As in India, this has led to a rapid growth in the market for a variety of whitening products (Nguyen Bich Thuan and Thomas 2004). In a supermarket in Vietnam today it can be hard to find even a single skin product that does *not* claim to include some kind of ‘whitening formula’. The whiteness ideal is currently being reinforced in repackaged form through the proliferation of a new popular culture inspired by developments in Korea and Japan. Korean ‘K-pop’ is particularly popular and has inspired the development of a Vietnamese equivalent, ‘V-pop’, spearheaded by all-boy or all-girl groups with coordinated dance moves similar to Western ‘boybands’. The singers are all beautiful, young, fashionable – and very white. And their popularity is mirrored in the frequency of styled hair, often entirely or partly bleached or dyed, and fashionable clothing among young Vietnamese urbanites.

## **Moving Around: Cars**



Intrinsically connected to the modern history of industrialisation and capitalist development, the car was for long seen as a revolutionary harbinger of mobility and individuality. Today it has, for obvious reasons, increasingly become a powerful symbol and agent of environmental unsustainability in environmentalist circles (Hansen and Nielsen 2014). Yet in the rising South, the private car remains as popular as ever. Car ownership rates are widely projected to increase with economic growth (e.g. Medlock and Soligo 2002); in China, 23.5 million new cars hit the road in 2014; India added a more modest 3.2 million cars (OICA 2015), still a very large number in absolute terms. Cars are eminently practical for getting around comfortably, coolly and cleanly. But in addition to the practical advantages over other transport options, people use cars to make statements about themselves and their families (Wilhite 2008: 127). The car ‘materialises personality’ (Sheller 2004: 225), projecting to the public how we like to see ourselves, and how we would like others to see us. Cars convey and connote images of status, wealth and social standing in public spaces in a manner in which perhaps no other commodity can (Hansen 2014).

In Vietnam, the motorbike was for long the main aspirational good, and the most visible manifestation of *doi moi* is probably the large number of motorbikes in the streets. In a single decade, Vietnam changed from a country of bicycles to motorbikes, and today motorbike ownership is on average greater than one per household (GSO 2012). There are many reasons for this radical shift in mobility, involving top-down political economic processes of trade liberalisation as well as illegal imports from China (Hansen 2015b). But, importantly, seen from the street level the motorbike has offered an affordable and more convenient substitute to the bicycle. Today, the motorbike is absolutely vital to both the everyday life of most Vietnamese and the functioning of the Vietnamese economy. But, increasingly, the car has started to take its place, even if very high taxation and protectionist import policies combine to make cars very expensive. It is certainly still possible to impress people with a motorbike – ‘luxury’ motorbikes such as the Vespa are very popular – but a car is one of the main indicators of success in the new economy. While Chinese cars are associated with cheap and bad quality, and thus not worth the considerable investment car ownership involves, German cars evoke completely different associations, even if buying a Mercedes Benz, a BMW or an Audi may cost the equivalent of a life-time’s income of the average Vietnamese worker. But car ownership conveys the image of someone who knows good quality and is capable and ready to pay for it, both to business partners and potential marriage partners (Hansen and Nielsen 2014: 75).

At the same time, a car provides safety and comfort. A motorbike is fast, but relatively dangerous, something that the high traffic casualty levels in Vietnam bear witness to (Short and Pinet-Peralta 2010). Riding a motorbike with no protective shield encapsulating the driver means being exposed to weather conditions such as intense heat and sudden monsoon rains. While certainly a strong status symbol, the allure of the car is thus also connected to its direct use value. The car allows the new Vietnamese middle class to stay safe, cool, dry and clean while moving around, compensating for the inconveniences of car-driven mobility in urban Vietnam, including infrastructure often unsuited for cars and the notorious lack of parking space. Being inside a car also allows you to stay white without protective gear, and to avoid ruining a nice appearance through dust, dirt and motorbike helmets. In Hanoi the car is even frequently seen as a ‘healthy’ transport option, allowing the driver to close the windows, turn on the air conditioner and escape the high levels of pollution in the streets (Hansen 2015b). The car also allows for new household practices for the middle class, such as bulk shopping at modern supermarkets and taking the family on weekend trips. These factors are vital in order to understand why car ownership rates are expected to rapidly increase in Vietnam in the coming years, potentially strengthened by aims to develop the domestic auto industry (Hansen in press), and why the flexibility and convenience of the motorbike seem to be losing ground to the comfort and safety of the car.

The car performs a comparable dual role in India, indexing social identity and status while also providing safety and realising socially valued ideals. In the era of state-led development, restrictions on import, a tight licensing regime and price controls meant that two domestic companies – Hindustan Motors and Premier Automobiles – consolidated their grip on production and came to form a duopoly in the Indian car market that lasted until the late 1970s, when the liberalisation of the car industry began. In 1993, the passenger car segment was completely delicensed, and since then the Indian market has witnessed a veritable explosion in the number and variety of vehicles available, ranging from the ultra-cheap domestically produced ‘people’s car’, the Tata Nano, to larger passenger cars and SUVs of both foreign and domestic make, to imported luxury vehicles (Nielsen and Wilhite 2015). At the same time, sustained economic growth over a long period has transformed the car from a luxury item only affordable for the very rich into a ‘possession in the imaginable consumption horizon of many middle-class families’ (Saavala 2010: 192). Today, the car has thus unambiguously replaced the motorbike as the preferred means of middle class mobility

(Wilhite 2008: 122) and has emerged as the new ‘totem’ or ‘marker asset’ of upper middle class status (Krishna and Bajpai 2015: 71).

The car’s standing as a marker of middle class status is expressed in everyday life in a variety of forms. Among neighbours, for example, the presentation and staging of social position is essential so that, when people create set-ups for photos that they put on display in their homes, the car is often a favoured motif – even if the car belongs to a neighbour or a passer-by (Saavala 2010: 191-192). Similarly, a car, highly visible in driveways and on the roads, is a perfect means to project a family’s social identity. A family that now buys a car not simply does so for practical purposes, but above all in order to position themselves in relation to those who, for example, only have a motorbike (ibid. 120). And for people wanting to make an impression in business circles, being seen as someone able to afford a car may override even the need to invest in a house. This marks a radical departure from traditional middle-class ways of living in which acquiring ‘a respectable house’ was perhaps the most important investment a family would make.

Yet as in Vietnam, the popularity of the car cannot be explained only with reference to its symbolic value. In addition to providing superior safety, having a car is practical and helps the owner realise socially valued ideals of comfort and cleanliness. The choice of when, why and for how long to travel is, with a car, no longer subject to the vagaries of often crowded and uncomfortable public transportation; respectable and car-owning ‘middle-class citizens’ are spared awkward and unpleasant situations of close, physical proximity with society’s lower orders on hot, crowded busses (Saavala 2010: 117-118); and one is less impeded by the heavy monsoon that tends to make travel by bicycle or motorbike difficult and unpleasant at certain times of the year. In addition, it offers protection from the heat and sun, as well as from noise and air pollution. The air in the larger Indian cities is heavily polluted; not a single Indian city conforms to the permissible WHO-levels of suspended particulate matter; and given that outdoor air pollution is the sixth most dangerous killer in South Asia (Anon. 2015: 9), the advantage of the private car is obvious.

The car in the rising South is far from ‘just another white good’ (Wells 2010). It remains embedded in conceptions of development and modernity; a powerful symbol of status, wealth and affluence; an object of desire and eminent practical value; and a key means through which to realise a clean and comfortable middle-class life (Hansen and Nielsen 2014: 77-78).

## **Consumption Transformed**

In this article, we have sought to relate changes in three specific sets of consumption practices to changes in the broader political economy of capitalist development in post-reform India and Vietnam. In both countries, a new urban middle class has emerged and grown up with an affluence that was unheard of just two generations ago. The transition to capitalism has introduced new commodities, lubricated markets and opened for new forms for social performance through the ownership and use of goods. The former middle class social ideal of frugality is rapidly being laid to rest.

We have deconstructed practices related to home comfort, beauty and mobility to illustrate the changing social and material landscapes of consumption that have emerged in India and Vietnam over the past 25 years. Each of these spheres of everyday activity have been subject to rapid commercialisation as both foreign and domestic corporations have sought to pry open new spaces for their products in globalising and deregulating markets. As a result the consumption of beauty products, soap, air conditioning, and cars have grown rapidly. Yet, as we have seen, the dynamics of growing consumption of these items differ. Air conditioners come as a component in a new building regime consisting of building designs, materials and commercial building principles that are not liveable without mechanically cooled air. This regime is structuring (literally and figuratively) an entirely new form of indoor comfort. As the new buildings built for air conditioning emerge, demand for alternative designs that retain natural cooling is diminishing as air conditioning becomes a social identifier of middle class comfort.

New beauty and cleanliness products are used in homes and on bodies, the presentation of which are deeply anchored in local knowledge/culture; yet international beauty norms are contributing to the emergence of new beauty consumption practices which are strongly influenced by a desire to satisfy the demands of both local and globalised ideas about body and beauty. The result is a new hybridised beauty that ideally expresses both the old and the new. The use of scents and colours in cleanliness and beauty supplement the desirability of fair skin in both Vietnam and India; and this new hybrid is a lucrative and growing market for transnational and local companies.

The car is at the center of perhaps the most powerful of all globalising practices. It has been the icon of modernity for a century. For nation and national economy, its production is equated with development. For the owner and user, it literally encapsulates the moving family

in a privately controlled, insulated module that is loaded with social significance. Inconveniences such as traffic jams and parking problems seem to make no dent in the practical, flexible and symbolic advantages of using it to move the family from home and out onto the urban stage.

Vietnam and India are only two examples of countries with growing middle classes and rapidly growing consumption. From a global environmental sustainability point of view, the biggest problem remains the high and increasing consumption levels in the global North; but 'emerging middle classes' in the South are rapidly catching up. We hope that the analysis in this article underscores the importance of engaging in research on consumption patterns in the South in order to better understand the challenges of global sustainability as well as start thinking about appropriate policies to meet these.

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