

# Locating the past in its silence: history and marketing theory in India

Rohit Varman

*Department of Marketing, Indian Institute of Management Calcutta,  
Kolkata, India, and*

Hari Sreekumar

*Department of Marketing, Indian Institute of Management Tiruchirappalli,  
Tiruchirappalli, India*

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The paper aims to argue, while examining the history of marketing theory in India, that the discipline is ahistorical, serves large business interests and is shaped by hegemonic Western knowledge.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The primary sources of data were the marketing doctoral dissertations, working papers, teaching material and research publications produced in the top management schools in India from the 1960s up to the present period.

**Findings** – The historical review reveals that the marketing theory in India is characterized by dependence on the West and elision of the country's rich business history. It further shows that the discipline in India focuses on research problems and issues which are more appropriate to a Western context, and remains detached from local realities. Moreover, the discipline is characterized by a narrow managerial orientation.

**Research limitations/implications** – Findings from the paper will be of value to researchers who wish to understand the Indian marketing thought.

**Practical implications** – Findings from the paper will be of value to academics and policy makers who wish to create more independent and contextually informed and sensitive management programs.

**Social implications** – The paper reveals the extent to which the education and institutions in India are influenced by the West, and aims to motivate academics and policy makers to understand local knowledge and ways of knowing.

**Originality/value** – The main contribution of this paper is to show that the marketing discipline in India has been ahistorical and is shaped by hegemonic Western knowledge.

**Keywords** India, Evolution of marketing, History of marketing theory, History of marketing education, History of marketing thought, Postcolonial theory, Corporate hegemony

**Paper type** Research paper



If history is, as Carr (1961, p. 35) has eloquently argued, “a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past”, then the formal academic discipline of marketing in India has been characterized by an absence of ahistorical engagement. Studying the history of a discipline helps in relating theories to their genealogies (Domegan, 2011). Scholars have

observed that to gain a better understanding of marketing theories and practices, researchers need to understand their origins, the contexts in which they were developed and the uses to which these were put (Hunt, 2011; Shaw and Jones, 2005). Yet, there is a lack of commitment among marketing researchers in India to delve into the past, and this commentary aims to show that the discipline in India has been ahistorical. This lacuna in the discipline exists in spite of a rich tradition of historical writings in the country. We interpret the silence on its past as a result of India's location at the periphery of the global capitalist system and as a postcolonial society, and specifically in the nature of the origin of management education in India.

### Dependent institutions, theories and devices

Although the Indian Institute of Social Welfare and Business Management, Calcutta (now Kolkata), was the first management institute in India started in 1953, the most significant part of the origins of formal education and research in marketing can be traced back to the establishment of the Indian Institutes of Management at Calcutta and Ahmedabad. These institutes, commonly referred to as the "IIMs" were established in 1961 by the central and state governments. In the next few years, Jamanalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies at Mumbai was started in 1965 and Xavier Labour Relations Institute at Jamshedpur, which was founded in 1949, started its Business Management program in 1966. The Indian Institute of Management at Bangalore was established later in 1973. Though many more IIMs and management institutions were subsequently established, the IIMs at Ahmedabad, Bangalore and Calcutta are instrumental in shaping the nature of marketing education and research in India.

The IIMs at Ahmedabad and Calcutta were established with the collaboration of Ford Foundation. The institute in Ahmedabad had an initial collaboration and mentorship arrangements with Harvard Business School and the one in Calcutta with the Alfred Sloan School of Management (IIM Calcutta, 2012). The objectives of these collaborations with the US universities were clearly to ensure that teachers and teaching in these new institutions were guided by the business school model prevalent in that country. In a letter written on July 8th, 1960 to B.C. Roy, then Chief Minister of West Bengal and the first Chairperson of IIM Calcutta, Humayun Kabir, the central Minister of Scientific Research and Cultural Affairs clearly pointed out:

The Ford Foundation have offered that they would be willing to help in the following three ways:

- (1) Finding for at least the first five years top-ranking experts from abroad who would come as whole-time teachers in these institutions.
- (2) Providing fellowships to enable Indian teachers of these Institutions to go abroad for further studies and observation tours.
- (3) Finding the necessary funds for building up the Libraries of these Institutions. Since almost all books will have to be from abroad, this amount will be entirely in foreign exchange (IIM Calcutta, 2012, pp. 18-19).

Under this arrangement, the Sloan School deputed two of its faculty members John Enos and Peter S. King as consultants for the Marketing area at IIM Calcutta (2012, p. 45). As a result of these mentoring arrangements, it was no surprise that, "IIM Ahmedabad, nurtured by the Harvard Business School embraced the case method. IIM Calcutta on

the other hand, initiated by MIT's Sloan School had an analytical focus" (IIM Calcutta, 2012, p. 87).

A large scale import of books from the USA under the aegis of Ford Foundation meant that from the very early stages a dependence on the teaching devices from the West became entrenched. For example, Lakshmi Mohan (IIM Calcutta, 2012, p. 113), one of the earliest teachers of Marketing in India, shared his dilemma over prescribing Kotler's text book to his marketing class in 1965:

When I started reading Kotler's book, the work I did in Hindustan Lever enabled me to connect the concepts and principles in the book to the real world. I could tell the students, this stuff from Kotler relates to USA business but it applies in India as well! That is how I could crack the problem of designing the syllabus.

This narrative of Mohan underpins two important elements in the early years of marketing thought in India that subsequently got further reinforced. First, in the absence of disciplinary writings in India, there was a clear dependence on the USA for teaching philosophies and material. In this process, the two US universities and Ford Foundation were particularly instrumental in shaping the disciplinary agenda. Second, the marketing thought in India was guided by the prevailing business institutions in the USA as they were captured in popular texts such as that of Kotler. Although the structures of the two economies were different, the dominant model imported from the USA primarily attended to large corporations. Thus, Mohan is able to relate some of his experiences of working for Levers in India to Kotler's text, but does not delve into the overwhelming presence of small/medium manufactures, agriculture and informal service economy in the country.

It must be added that several management scholars of the early years were conscious of the problems of dependent epistemic structures. For example, Sinha cautioned:

Our early phase of collaboration with the Alfred P. Sloan School of Management of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology made our programme of management decisively American in orientation [...] we have so far traced the route to universality through the limited historical experience of the West (IIM Calcutta, 2012, p. 193).

Similarly, Matthai (1980, p. M-69), one of the first Indian marketing instructors, identified the need to connect to local issues and almost wishfully asserted that the umbilical cord with the USA had been severed:

In so stating the objectives management educationalists were developing a philosophy of how to use their skills in response to the nation's needs. Such a response would not have been possible if our scientists had thought only in terms of the foreign contexts in which they had learnt these skills. In this sense the character of management education that has evolved is not a foreign transplant, nor is it merely a foreign adaptation, but represents the creation of Indian minds dedicated to working on the problems of their own country.

Despite these concerns and assertions, we find that much of the research produced by the top business schools continues to borrow theoretical constructs and research problems from the West. Theoretical arguments, and even examples and illustrations, often do not engage with the Indian context. The Amero/Eurocentric approach to theory development causes researchers to focus on problems that are current in Western management literature but of limited relevance to the Indian context. A large part of the analysis of the Indian cultural context is done through frameworks developed in the

West, such as Hofstede's framework, CETSCALE and SERVQUAL. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1999) observe that national intellectual fields can have "passeurs" or carriers who de-historicize concepts that have been developed in particular societies and contexts and propagate them. In a similar fashion, the research communities in marketing in India serve as translators and conduits to transfer management theories and concepts from primarily the USA, and sometimes from Europe to India (Varman and Saha, 2009).

### Discourse of modernity and forgotten history and institutions

As a result of the dependence on the West, Indian marketing, thought from the 60s, developed a tendency to not engage with its institutions that were different from those in the West. Marketing theory in India has primarily revolved around large private corporations in the country. This neglect is driven by a specific discourse of modernity as it has prevailed in this context. After gaining independence in 1947, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, India embarked on a project of large scale industrialization. This project was believed to be India's path to modernity and progress. In this discourse, large corporations were viewed as a panacea to the problem of socio-economic backwardness.

Management education was seen as an important part of the discourse of modernity. Westfall and Boyd's (1960) writing on marketing systems in India identifies several domains in need of modernization. They propose that "marketing is probably the least developed aspect of the Indian economy", and suggest that "modern techniques" are needed to improve the system (Westfall and Boyd, 1960, p. 11). However, as we have shown, this dawning of modernity did not produce a free and liberated academic space. Instead, we are reminded of Chatterjee's (1997, p. 14) observation that, "history of our modernity has been intertwined with the history of colonialism". And, rather ironically, marketing thought in India fails to live up to the call for an alternate trajectory of modernity, given by Chatterjee (1997, p. 14):

Somehow, from the very beginning, we had a shrewd guess that given the close complicity between modern knowledge and modern regimes of power, we would forever remain consumers of universal modernity; never would be taken seriously as its producers. It is for this reason that we have tried, for over a hundred years, to take our eyes away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become the creators of our own modernity.

Chatterjee in offering this interpretation was conscious of the resistance offered during the Indian independence movement to the project of Western science that was brought in by the English. As Prakash (1999) has richly elucidated, the idea of science exported to India by the English was challenged and resisted by some of the nationalists with their emphasis on the long-standing tradition of Hindu science. Unlike the project of British science, the idea of American marketing did not see a similar resistance in India.

In the process of accepting marketing theory from outside, the newly converted marketing academics proceeded to neglect the history of India's markets and businesses. This created an oversight of the past and silence on marketing by a large set of players in India, such as small entrepreneurs, artisans, traders, informal sector service providers, small retailers and farmers, who did not conform to the prevailing institutional arrangements in the USA. One of the most important commercial institutions of the past that continues to dominate the contemporary Indian context is that of bazaar. Several economic historians have observed that the rise of corporations in

the Indian context were intrinsic to bazaar trade (Barly, 1983; Kudaisya, 2011). Ray (2011, p. 5) argues that, “it is well known that the modern Indian business class, which controls large-scale industry today, sprang from the merchant communities involved in bazaar trade and banking”. These bazaars operated for centuries with their own systems of *hundi* or credit instruments and *arhat* or commission agents (for detailed analyses see Jain, 2011; Ray, 2011). Moreover, *Gaddi*, which literally means a seat, is an allegory for a conventional firm and is an important site of trade in a bazaar. A *gaddi* would consist of a large cushion reserved for the *seth* or the trader and several small ones for his clerks and sub-clerks, who collectively participated in commercial transactions from early morning to midnight in bazaars (Taknet, 2011). Similarly, there were unique organizational forms such as indent firms which were mercantile houses that brought Indian buyers in touch with foreign manufacturers by receiving indents from Indian merchants and charging commissions for transactions. Ray (2011, p. 18) clarifies that an indent firm was not a mere international broker:

[...] the smaller bazaar dealers who distributed the imported goods had no credit, and upon arrival of goods they would sometimes refuse to take all the packages, though willing to take a part which they needed immediately. The indent firms would in such cases clear through customs the goods they had already sold on commission, place them in warehouses and release them in small lots, thus minimizing the risk of the foreign manufacturers in dealing with bazaar dealers.

Furthermore, these bazaars were not static or premodern arrangements, but were architecturally different from the marketing institutions in the West, as Ray (2011, p. 7) observed:

[...] the bazaar appeared to be “unorganized” by the Western standards of organization which prevailed in exchange banking, foreign trade and factory industry, but it commanded its own complex and sophisticated form of organization finely adjusted over centuries.

From its inception, marketing as a formal discipline has largely ignored the institution of bazaar that continues to account for the largest set of transactions in almost every sector of the consumer economy in India. In the process, the discipline has also glossed over some important historical categories that continue to strongly influence markets in India. One such category is of merchant communities that control Indian markets. Kudaisya (2011) has observed that commercial activity in India has historically been dominated by merchant communities such as Baniyas, Marwaries, Khattris, and Parsis. Writings in India in the domains of economic and business history have actively accounted for the role of communities and their socio-cultural contexts in shaping markets in the country (Tripathi, 2011). These communities were not merely divided along the caste lines, and the idea of merchant community in the country was much broader and worked through its own notions of morality, trust, justice and honor. As Bayly (2011, p. 117) insightfully reported:

[...] forms of arbitration, market control, brokerage, neighbourhood communities, and above all conceptions of mercantile honour and credit breached caste boundaries, however constructed, and imposed wider solidarities on merchant people.

However, the scholarship in marketing has remained silent on these alternate institutions, markets and moral economies.

### Corporate handmaiden and elision of the underprivileged

The research problems and issues examined by Indian marketing researchers are generally rooted in the marketing management and consumer behavior schools. [Shaw and Jones \(2005\)](#) define the marketing management school as focusing on the practice of marketing from the seller's perspective, while consumer behavior looks at why people buy, think, feel, and act and at the ways to persuade consumers. For example, out of the doctoral dissertations, we examined from IIMs, none looked at macro issues concerning marketing's impact on society. All of the dissertations studied topics that considered marketing as an organizational function, and studied marketing-related issues from a shareholder perspective.

Most research papers and working papers from IIMs also reflect managerial concerns of profit maximization and largely ignore consumer welfare and societal issues. This closely resonates with [Tadajewski's \(2010\)](#) observation that much of marketing theory in the USA reflects its narrow corporate interests. We examined more than 100 research articles and working papers in the marketing domain, published by IIMs. Out of these research articles and working papers, only a few reflected an explicit concern for consumer rights and welfare. Even among this small subset of research articles, we found managerial concerns being voiced. For example, [Sele \(2006, pp. 95-96\)](#), in a paper on marketing ethics, states:

India, China or Brazil are considered the new growing markets and are designated to generate additional profits in the long run, which are difficult to achieve in saturated Western markets [...] the market entry of MNCs in developing countries is taken for granted.

While ostensibly talking about marketing ethics, the author takes for granted the neo-imperialist notion that India and China are markets meant for MNCs to exploit ([Varman et al., 2011](#)).

Even in domains where consumer welfare or subaltern interest is explicitly involved, the findings are often filtered through the hegemonic corporate lens, and local contexts are abstracted out or silenced in the research. For example, there are papers, MBA and executive training courses on the Bottom of the Pyramid (BOP). In these, BOP interventions are seen as simultaneous means of poverty alleviation and corporate profitability. The problems of poverty faced by the poor are not sufficiently examined, and the BOP concept is celebrated as a route to empowerment for subaltern groups. [Varman et al. \(2012\)](#) illustrate that profit-making motives pursued by corporations using the BOP concept can often conflict with the interests of subaltern stakeholders, and exacerbate their problems. These interpretations of the subaltern scenario are not sufficiently taken into account in the marketing thought in the country.

In conclusion, Indian marketing did not have a formal status as a discipline until the establishment of the IIMs in 1961. In the absence of a sufficiently long-time period for analysis, we have not been able to discern the emergence of any distinct schools of thought peculiar to Indian marketing. Instead, we have used our archival research to uncover broad themes that are reflected in the discipline of marketing in this context. Marketing thought in India borrows heavily from the concepts and frameworks developed in the West. The marketing research community in India takes on the role of translators and instead of being knowledge-producers, act as "knowledge-peddlers". As [Bourdieu and Wacquant \(1999, p. 41\)](#) state, "Cultural imperialism rests on the power to universalize particularisms linked to a single historical tradition by causing them to be

misrecognized as such". We further found a disconnect between the past and present commercial institutions in the country and marketing theorization. The discipline remains silent on the long history of markets and marketing practices in India and primarily confines itself to narrowly defined problems that concern large corporations. As a result, marketing thought in India appears to be marked by an absence of "Indianness" in it and is still in search of its historical moorings.

## References

- Barly, C.A. (1983), *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870*, Oxford, New Delhi.
- Bayly, C.A. (2011), "Merchant communities: identities and solidarities", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 100-121.
- Bourdieu, P. and Wacquant, L. (1999), "On the cunning of imperialist reason", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 41-58.
- Carr, E.H. (1961), *What is History?*, Penguin.
- Chatterjee, P. (1997), "Our modernity", available at: <http://ccs.ukzn.ac.za/files/partha1.pdf> (accessed 6 March 2013).
- Domegan, C. (2011), "Co-authoring tomorrow: on how past marketing knowledge enlightens future marketing theory", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 495-498.
- Hunt, S.D. (2011), "On the intersection of marketing history and marketing theory", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 483-489.
- IIM Calcutta (2012), *Citizens and Revolutionaries: An Oral History of IIM Calcutta*, Rupa, New Delhi.
- Jain, L.C. (2011), "Indigenous credit instruments and systems", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 52-61.
- Kudaisya, M.M. (2011), "Introduction: business history in twentieth century India", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 11-28.
- Matthai, R.J. (1980), "The organization and the institution: management education in India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 15 No. 22, pp. 69-72.
- Prakash, G. (1999), *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Ray, R.K. (2011), "Bazaar: 'Pulsating Heart' of the Indian economy", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 3-48.
- Sele, K. (2006), "Marketing ethics in emerging markets – coping with ethical dilemmas", *IIMB Management Review*, Vol. 18 No. 1, pp. 95-104.
- Shaw, E.H. and Jones, D.G.B. (2005), "A history of schools of marketing thought", *Marketing Theory*, Vol. 5 No. 3, pp. 239-281.
- Tadajewski, M. (2010), "Towards a history of critical marketing studies", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 26 Nos 9/10, pp. 773-824.
- Taknet, D.K. (2011), "The Gaddi: an indigenous firm", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 62-64.
- Tripathi, D. (2011), "Marwaris: from 'community' to 'class'", in Kudaisya, M.M. (Ed.), *The Oxford India Anthology of Business History*, Oxford, New Delhi, pp. 135-142.
- Varman, R. and Saha, B. (2009), "Disciplining the discipline: understanding postcolonial epistemic ideology in marketing", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 25 Nos 7/8, pp. 811-824.

- 
- Varman, R., Saha, B. and Skalen, P. (2011), "Market subjectivity and neoliberal governmentality in higher education", *Journal of Marketing Management*, Vol. 27 Nos 11/12, pp. 1163-1185.
- Varman, R., Skalen, P. and Belk, R.W. (2012), "Conflicts at the bottom of the pyramid: profitability, poverty alleviation and neoliberal governmentality", *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 31 No. 1, pp. 19-35.
- Westfall, R. and Boyd, H.W. Jr (1960), "Marketing in India", *Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 11-17.

### Further reading

- Parikh, D. (2006), "Profiling internet shoppers: a study of expected adoption of online shopping in India", *IIMB Management Review*, Vol. 18 No. 3, pp. 221-231.

### About the authors

Rohit Varman is a Professor of Marketing at the Indian Institute of Management Calcutta. His research interests are broadly in the fields of critical marketing and consumer culture theory. He has published his research in several journals that include *Journal of Consumer Research*, *Journal of Retailing* and *Organization Science*. He serves on the editorial boards of *Journal of Macromarketing* and *Consumption, Markets and Culture*. Rohit Varman is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [rohit@iimcal.ac.in](mailto:rohit@iimcal.ac.in)

Hari Sreekumar is an Assistant Professor of Marketing Area at the Indian Institute of Management Tiruchirappalli. His research interests are in consumer culture theory and history of marketing. He is also interested in consumption behavior among poorer migrant consumers.

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)



Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.