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Obsession with Ghar, Paisa and Gadi: Consumerism in Popular Punjabi Songs

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INTRODUCTION

The aspirations of the Indian Middle Class, emerging post the 1991 economic reforms, have seen a paradigm shift. The traditional Prince on a white horse has been replaced by a Prince in a BMW. This new class, with a distinctive social and political identity, is characterised by visibility, visuality and performativity (Brosius 2010). It has become a well established fact that the new Indian middle class is the poster child of conspicuous consumption and indulgence (Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006; Varma 1998). The values that were earlier frowned upon, like exhibitionism, have now been normalised to the extent that they have become an integral part of the society, reflective in modes of popular culture. Though many scholars have explored this dimension, sufficient attention has not been accorded to the state of Punjab in particular.

Punjabi pop music, short for popular music, has seen its beginnings in the efforts of Non-Resident Indians, thereby explaining its influence from hip hop and Latin music. Seeing the rising materialism post the reforms, it does not come as a surprise that popular Punjabi songs are reflective of the same. These songs represent the ‘Punjabi dream’, formulating the imagination of the new Punjabi middle class person (Appadurai 1986).

The present study hypothesises that a relationship exists between the content of popular Punjabi songs and the rising phenomenon of consumerism, and associated materialism in Punjabi culture. These songs reflect the extent and the nature of materialism prevalent among the Punjabi middle class, particularly the young generation. The songs further perpetuate the phenomenon of their own genesis by imparting consumerist values and influencing the minds of Individuals.

The Punjabi consumerist society is centred around the 'Feel-good' factor or in the terms of Gerhard Schulze, *Erlebnis*, which broadly translates to 'experience' in English. When Amar Arshi sings 'Kala Chashma' (2016), he is not only talking about a pair of black sunglasses, rather these glasses have numerous associations attached, namely, beauty, status, class and in the Punjabi lingo *swag*. The consumerist gene has become embedded in our DNA, thereby transforming our identities, relationships, conception of love and success.

The rise in exhibitionism in the Punjabi middle class also gets reflected in the Punjabi obsession with the dream of going abroad (popularly to Canada) and getting to 'play in dollars' (Gupta 2022). It's evident in social relations as the present day Heer-Ranjha have evolved to have a transactional relationship. "Buy a Jaguar first, then get as much love as you want", are the sentiments of a lover in the song 'Jaguar' (2016) by Sukh-E.

With lyrics like *Ik week, Ik jean* (translated to one week, one jean) (Jaguar, Sukh-E), Punjabi popular songs show the capacity to portray the humongous appetite of the Punjabi middle class for consumer goods. Considering Punjab's rich cultural history of music and poetry, it becomes highly relevant to analyse the current phenomenon of consumerism through the prism of popular songs.

This paper is divided under three sections which comprise categories for analysis, namely, Self-Identification, Conception of success, Love and relationships. Lastly the paper concludes with the limitations of research and areas of interest which can be taken up in the future.

I. CONSUMERISM IN POPULAR PUNJABI SONGS

1. SELF-IDENTIFICATION

The creation of the self is an integral part of a consumerist society. The goods one buys and consumes, the places where one resides and works, etc are all utilised in the process of 'carefully' constructing a sense of self that is to be projected to the society at large. Consumerism becomes a collective activity, a form of neo-tribalism (Todd 2011: 48), as products symbolise one's membership to a particular section of the society, existence of shared beliefs, lifestyle practices

and so on. The act of self-care becomes attached to a higher class prompting individuals to run after the ideal of a 'beautiful life'(Schulze 1992: 40) or the duty to 'Give your life a good taste' (ibid.: 34) which becomes deeply associated with performativity (Liechty 2003), that is, the act of caring for the self needs to be visible and widely known.

In the song 'Love Dose' (2014) by Yo Yo Honey Singh, the female protagonist, played by Urvashi Rautela, is seen exiting a shopping complex, carrying loads of shopping bags, in a very extravagant attire. The appearance of the female shows that she has put in effort to care for herself - she has used hair products, is wearing expensive clothes, has make-up on and is wearing sunglasses. These acts combine to speak about her status and desirability in society. The song portrays the idea that one needs to indulge in goods, and related experiences, to guarantee a place in the new middle class. It's not just about what you do but how you do it that matters as well. An experience is curated out of a visit to a shopping mall that involves self-pampering and requires one to wear proper attire, not just anything, to fit in with the ambience of the mall.

In the music video of the song, the female protagonist has a slim figure and a 'desirable body' (Munshi 2004) which reflects the pervasiveness of the global beauty standards. The middle class is utilising beauty as a tool for social mobility. Consequently, we are witnessing increased fetishization of the women's body. Fulfilling the duty of self-care, one becomes compelled to indulge in activities like going to a gym, beauty parlour, spa, etc. The only way to achieve both internal and external beauty is through material goods and activities, requiring significant investment, tightly tying together leisure and consumption.

Places of residence also become matters of conscious decision. In the song 'Naah' (2017) by Harrry Sandhu, a line goes - 'Saari duniya te, kehndi banglay pe gaye soneya', which translates to 'Everyone in the world, She says, has bungalows'. Residing in high-rise buildings or big bungalows is considered a status-symbol. Further the song 'Lamberghini'(2018) by The Doorbeen, glamorises the idea of driving to Model Town which becomes the 'it-place' for the Punjabi middle class youth. There is a similar obsession with possessing big expensive cars.

The image of the hyper-masculine Jatt is associated with violence (guns and weapons), alcohol, drugs and expensive cars. The mentions of Patiala peg, vodka, daaru, afeem have become recurrent in Punjabi songs (W. Archana 2017). The tractor has turned into an important 'status symbol', with increasing demand for 'luxury high-powered tractors'. These aspects together have resulted in allegations of 'distortion' of the Punjabi culture and have been seen to encourage the Punjabi youth to take up violence (Tuli 2022).

This rigorous process of identity-building is seen as a result of the middle class confidence and anxiety emerging post the economic reforms. The increased upward mobility threatens the place of the new middle class which struggles to retain its identity through the politics of segregation. Another view terms the Punjabi materialism as a mode of escape, resulting from low self-esteem (Gupta 2022).

2. CONCEPTION OF SUCCESS

Today in place of dams (the Nehruvian conception), the symbols of development have become skyscrapers, high-rise buildings, golf courses, posh residential colonies and so on. The middle class is at the centre of this growth. They live in a bubble (Zhigang 2004) full of luxury goods and world-class lifestyles, cut off from all deprivation in the world. Many Punjabi music videos show foreign locations and expensive resorts, as a symbol of upward mobility. An example can be found in the music video for 'Love Dose' by Yo Yo Honey Singh, which shows the protagonists walking through a posh shopping complex with expensive cafes, like *Caffe Concerto*.

In the song 'Brown Munde' (2020) by AP Dhillon, broadly stating the worldwide growth of the Punjabi community, the singer considers himself successful when he drives a lambo truck, wears Balmain jeans, drives in a G class Mercedes and casually travels to LA and Cape Town. He has struggled and now has bags full of cash. A clear change in mindset, considering the communitarian character of the Punjabi society, is visible in the lyrics - Oh Yaar Bhave Thode Aa, Jakke Hi Jode Aa, which translates to - though our friends are few, we are doing good.

The opening scene for the song ‘Amplifier’ (2009) by Imran Khan shows the singer driving through the fields of Amsterdam in an expensive car, projecting the idea on the consumer that one needs to show off branded goods. The song makes references to the grandeur of having black leather seats, AC cars and going on world tours. The car is a status symbol for the singer. In a 2023 study conducted by LPU, it was found that 30.2% of the respondents found costly vehicles, branded clothes and luxury houses to be symbols of success. It also signals towards the *swag* of indulging in the clubbing culture. The idea of *swag* has become very deeply interlinked with success in the minds of today’s Punjabi middle class. Celebration has become an integral part of acquiring success, linking to the idea that one needs to show off what one has, such that ‘Enjoy’ has become the new buzzword (Jain 2001).

3. LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Lifestyles and social relationships are mutually impacting each other. The locations for socialising have changed to ‘hot cafes’ and posh shopping areas. The idea of celebration and the culture of gifting has become integral to maintaining relationships. There is a grand celebration for every birthday, anniversary and jubilee. The tradition of kitty-parties has emerged as sites for status production (Papanek 1979; Sharma 1986).

The song ‘Lehanga’ (2019) by Jass Manak shows a boy and a girl who are in a relationship. The girl complains that the boy is not spending enough on her. The song, sets the tone, opening with the lyrics-

Ikko heel de naal
Main kateya ek saal ve
Mainu kade taan lai jaaya kar
Tu shopping mall ve

In a single pair of shoes
I have spent one year
At least take me out some time

To the shopping mall

The girl does want an emotional connection but at the same time, considers materialistic goods as a sign of love and affection by the guy. She wants expensive dresses (lehenga), shoes, hair highlights and so on. These constitute her *nakhre* and *demandan* (demands). The idea of a spending culture, supported by the rise in disposable incomes, is evident in the lyrics, *Ehne paise dass tu kithe lai ke jaane aan*, which translates to - Where will you take all this money you've got?

The song 'Prada' (2019) by The Doorbeen presents to the listeners a girl demanding a prada item, failing which she refuses to date the guy. The precondition to be able to date her is to buy her the branded item. The obsession with the brand is evident in that the name 'prada' is included in the chorus/hook of the song, repeated multiple times. The girl declares that if he is unable to carry out her wishes, she'll find some other guy who can. The song further finds mention of heels from Paris, handbag from LA, black sunglasses - to name a few.

In the song 'Obsessed' (2023) by Riar Saab and Abhijay Sharma, the protagonist finds the girl compatible based on the fact that the girl is wearing a Gucci belt and he, himself, has put on a new kurta. He also starts the song (and assumingly, the conversation) with the line that he owns high-end vehicles. In the song, 'Naah' by Hardy Sandhu, we see a relationship that is highly transactional in nature. The demands are of ornamental goods like *jhumke* (earrings) to *juttis* (sandals), dresses, etc.

The changed mechanisms of impressing a girl are apparent in the lyric 'Jitne paise aapki ladki ek mahine mein udati hai, ek hafte mein meri gaadi utna tel khati hai' from the song 'Love Dose' by Yo Yo Honey Singh. Throughout the song, the guy is very conspicuously stating his assets. Hence, the societal location of the parameter of attractiveness becomes noticeable. The video shows the attractiveness associated with 'ghar, paisa and gadi'.

A large degree of pompousness and extravagance has come to be associated with weddings. The song 'Aaj sajeya' (2021) by Goldie Soheli is a wedding song. The video to the song represents the new conditions of holding a 'beautiful' wedding - extravagant mehndi ceremonies, bridal

photographs, bachelorette parties, large number of guests and having a wedding planner organise the entire event (Brosius 2010). Thus, a wedding has now become an act of display of one's class.

CONCLUSION

It has become apparent that popular Punjabi songs, having the target audience of the middle class, are representative of the pervasiveness of consumerism in the Punjabi society. The globalised market has opened a large ambit of choices for the middle class, heralding an era of 'aspirational consumerism' (Mazzarella 2003), wherein the individual has broken free from the shackles of state planned development. The present consumerist society exercises control over the self and others in the form of mobile gaze and panoptic surveillance respectively, which functions in tandem with the fear prevalent among the middle class.

Simultaneously these songs carry the potential to impact individuals and encourage a culture of extravagance. They are a form of learning for the aspirational middle class that hopes to emulate the lifestyles being projected in the songs. This is bringing forth attention to the negative consequences of the Punjabi *balle balle* and self-congratulatory culture, which is being referred to as an internal mortal threat (Gupta 2022). The lyric - Phir kaam aunde uthe jatt (from song Jatt by Garry Sandhu), which translates to Jatts are most suitable there, is an example of such a culture.

There are a number of possible areas of research that can be explored moving forward. Firstly, an in-depth analysis into the nuances of *swag* should be undertaken. The concept has numerous ramifications for the current state of Punjabi society with its association with self-aggrandisement, consumer culture and so on.

Furthermore the differences in the conception of the new middle class woman in Punjabi and a broader Indian imagination can be explored. The new Indian middle class woman is portrayed as a strong character who is independent and in control of her life decisions. However, the representation of women, in popular culture, in Punjab is that of a woman who is dependent on others for fulfilment of her demands, thus creating the idea of *nakhre*.

The paper suffers from the following limitations. Careful emphasis needs to be placed on understanding that the popular Punjabi songs are based on a narrative and have shown extremely sexist representations of Punjabi women. Though pop songs act as a window into the popular beliefs and practices of the Punjabi middle class, all extrapolations need to be examined with scrutiny to prevent wrongful derivations.

The paper attempts to interpret characteristics of Punjabi middle class and accompanies it with explanations from studies conducted on the Indian Middle class, post 1991 reforms. However, differences in general characteristics, due to regional differences, are visible in the broader conception of women between both the narratives. Furthermore, it should be understood that just like the Indian middle class that is not a homogenous group (Misra 1961), the Punjabi middle class is highly heterogeneous and subsumes many differences.

Word Count: 2530

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