

CAST(E)ING MARKETING STRATEGY IN INDIA

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Abstract- Indian society is heavily characterized by the dominance of caste and religion. Many social practices take these factors into account. But, they remain in the blind spot region for Indian marketing. Lack of proper understanding of the phenomenon, fear of possible negative reactions and lack of relevant data are cited as some of the reasons. It is suggested that proactive and professional action from the marketing fraternity may be the right leads in this area.

Index Terms- Religion, Caste, Indian Marketing.

Marketing is basically a social phenomenon. India, being a large society offers a huge kaleidoscopic view of such a phenomenon. If one asks any sociologist to describe Indian social identity and caste and religion would invariably appear high in their profile. Surely, there must be very strong historical, cultural and social reasons behind it. However, Indian marketers are almost always shy of utilizing caste and religion related variables in describing, analyzing or strategizing their markets. This fallacy requires explanation and due rectification.

Most of Indian people live in the caste and religion reality. They are born into it, learn to behave around its several norms and experience its various effects on their personal and social lives. They often think and talk about it. Groups of thinkers and activists do also spring around them. Some of them try to nurture and perpetuate them and some try to subside or even uproot them. The experiences of caste and religion are so widespread that almost no part of our living space remains untouched by them. Our literature, media, social norms, folk tales, artifacts, food habits and cultural symbols etc. are all full of caste and religious effects.

Caste and religion in India is all pervasive. Of course, it happens in varying degrees and forms. Indian consumption habits and preferences, social norms, taboos and customs, occupational divisions have all got clear reflections of the caste and religious contours of the society. Even laws of the land take cognizance of these. In fact, it is not just the legislation but even the so called impartial judicial machinery is not untouched by caste and religion syndrome. For example, ex chief justice of a high court Justice S.S. Sodhi¹ describes the caste system creeping into the judicial system as:

"The four main castes in the legal fraternity were Brahmins, Kayasthas, Thakurs and Banias. What later proved very useful was the chart given to me by the acting chief justice, Justice V.K. Khanna, specifying the caste of each of my colleagues in the bench."

While everybody experiences caste and religion, two types of people reflect upon it more professionally and seriously. The first ones are the academicians

who try to dissect the issues under the sociological and economic microscopes put on high pedestals. They take various angles to take shots about this favorite target. They often take the macro view in which castes and religions are the grand super structural outcomes of the basic socio economic and other ground realities working in the society. They have readymade theories to explain and support their conclusions. Quite often, they hardly provide any practical solutions for the long term or short term.

The other set of people are the vigorous actors in the game of caste and religion. Some of them, like the politicians and religious leaders, are generally too eager to cash in the currencies of their respective interests. Hardly any election analysis or forecast in India remains devoid of caste and/ or religion based calculations. Politicians have learnt the simple rule that dividing their constituencies on the bases of caste and religion fetches highest electoral efficiency.

But, make no mistakes. It would be wrong to assume that caste and religion are only distortions and play no positive role in the society. The intellectual aspects of religion help in fulfilling the spiritual needs of the man. The operational parts of religion shape the much needed cultural contours of the society, provide contents to personal and social behavior and act as the rock solid beacons for the people when confused by the complex realities of the world. Similarly, caste provides social cohesion, identity and functional conveniences of group living. The advantages of caste and religion are definitely many more and justify their continued existence.

As a management professor and consultant, I often try to assess marketers' positions towards this issue. It is very surprising to notice the peculiar responses of marketers whenever they confront the issues towards caste and religion. Sometimes, I put a simple proposition of considering segmentation of their markets by caste and religion besides the usual demographic, socio-economic and life style etc. parameters. Practicing executives of different vintages and positions, fresh and young marketing students and marketing academicians do all react with

initial disbelief, disgust and shock. Their typical statements are: How can you ever think of such an idea? I shall never practice or recommend it. It is unethical. It is against the law. The government shall not allow it.

They rationalize their abhorrence to the idea through various means. One common comment is that inclusion of caste and religion in their marketing planning would further increase the already existing chasm between different caste and religious communities. Other responses relate to the notions of morality, being anti social or against existing public policies etc.

Marketing, whose purpose is to understand the customers and facilitate exchanges with them can not afford to ignore the fact that caste and religion are important determinants of their behavior. However, most surprisingly, Indian marketers have generally adopted ostrich kind of innocence towards this important aspect of Indian society. Thus, for example, it is extremely rare to see the association between the caste and religion of the customers and their other characteristics. In fact, most of the market research instruments do not include these items, at all. Only political marketing may be an exception to this general practice.

Why do marketers ignore the caste and religion of customers, at least formally?

First of all, they fear that they may touch the social or political sensibilities by even looking at this aspect. They want to play safe without getting into any noncommercial debate much less get entangled into it. The deep roots of caste and religion in the society are perceived by marketers as dangerous mines in the marketplace. Unfortunately, instead of developing well informed understanding about the caste and religion phenomenon and its marketing implications, marketers turn a blind eye towards it. Thus, by treating it as a high risk strategy they forego this solid opportunity of connecting with their customers.

Another weak argument put by the marketers for not using these variables is that of possible increasing the chasm among members of different castes and religions. But, the same argument can be applied for looking at the customers through any other variables like income, occupation, gender, life styles etc. as well.

Many marketers do also speak about the moral or ethical guilt that the use of such issues in their formal

course of activities shall evoke. They are quite convinced that even if these issues are quite prevalent their direct considerations shall be sinful. Some marketers take shelter in the secular character of the constitution and resultant public policies.

Indian marketers suffer with the shortage of marketing data. Caste and religion data and their connections with marketing relevant variables are even greater casualties. Somehow, the marketers believe that caste and religion effects are confined to only certain areas of human activities like festivals, religious practices, religion prescribed food habits like vegetarianism etc. Since caste and religion shape the basic values and beliefs of their members their effects can be felt across all aspects of consumer behavior. Therefore, marketers of almost all products are affected by it directly or indirectly in varying degrees.

What do marketers need to do?

Marketing's avowed objective is to satisfy consumer needs. Therefore, it is obvious that such important parameters of consumers can not be ignored by the marketing fraternity any more. Instead they will have to look at the role of caste and religion in a positive way. They should understand the sensitivities of their customers towards them. They should explore the relationships of these variables with the consumer behaviors in the market. Then, they should take proactive and positive steps to meet the customers' needs even better. Such actions would only bring them closer to their customers rather than distancing them. However, the intention marketers of serving their customers need to remain noble of problem. The more the marketers become aware about its need and hence start demanding these data the vendors shall start providing them.

Some of the sensitive marketers and producers have understood this fact and incorporated this fact informally. For example, the sets of a good Indian film portraying the artifacts, customs, styles and many other nuances of the caste and religion of the characters involved add that magical realism to differentiate it from the rest. Or, a good fiction

REFERENCE

- [1] pp. 88-89, Justice S.S. Sodhi, "The Other Side of Justice", Picus Books, an Imprint of, Hay House Publications (India) Pvt. Ltd., 2007

