

## **Delhi, a Postmodern Vessel of Consumerism: A Critical Study of Maneesh Sharma's *Band Baja Barat***

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From the beginning of modern western philosophy till the mid-twentieth century, time has been given preference over space. And then roughly around 1960s a recognizable spatial turn in literary and cultural studies occurred. The emphasis on perceiving the world spatially was an answer to the ontological and epistemological bias which space has suffered. But this spatial advocacy is neither against historical interpretation and nor is it a substitution of spatial for historical determination. It is basically “an attempt to develop a more creative and critically effective balancing of the spatial/geographical and the temporal/historical imaginations” (Soja 12). Contributing towards this spatial advocacy, the present paper wishes to study the urban space of Delhi as a postmodern vessel of consumption of changing cultural dynamics through Maneesh Sharma's film *Band Baja Barat* (henceforth BBB).

Contemporary cities are dominated by a ‘consumer society’ in which “identity and status are acquired and social inclusion or integration is considered to be achieved through participation in consumer activity” (Smart 228). The industrial capitalist society of Karl Marx was a work-based society, a society that engaged its members primarily as producers with its focus on material issues of class and production, in contrast, our society in its “late-modern, second-modern or post-modern” stage engages its members primarily as consumers (Bauman 24). Consequently, increasing prominence is given to consumer activity and consumer choice. Individual identity and satisfaction now “appear to be less and less bound up with job, work, and career and more and more with lifestyle, consumption, and shopping” (Smart 228). This inclination towards consumption is closely linked with postmodernism. According to the French theorist, Jean Baudrillard, postmodernism is “a flow of ultra-technological images in a consumerist hyperreality across a media scape or mind screen to which we can only passively surrender” (Powell 149). Central to his analysis is his notion of *simulacra* (an image or representation) and his claim that society no longer uses reality as a referent for its representations. The distinction between the real and the simulacrum has blurred, and therefore now “the value of material goods lies not in their use but in their symbolic value” that is their images (Song

113). Interestingly, our desire to control and manipulate these images fuels consumerism.

Contemporary Delhi, essentially dominated by business-oriented Punjabi class is undergoing continual changes in ideals and values under the influence of globalization, urbanization, economic liberalization and the rise of the middle class. Weddings which were earlier a personal family affair have now acquired a consumerist potential under the hands of sophisticated wedding planners. They have become bigger than ever, almost like a corporate affair with theme weddings, destination weddings, and so on. Due to Bollywood (Punjabi) influence the ceremonies like *mehendi* and *sangeet* have become a requisite part of any wedding. The protagonist of the film, Shruti Kakkar (Anushka Sharma) knows how to materialize profit by modernizing these traditional ceremonies and satiating the consumerist cravings of Delhi-ites. With her partnership with Bittoo Sharma (Ranvir Singh), she reaches the zenith in her business and then falls back because of emotional complications with him which she dreaded from the beginning. Later, it is not their metropolitan rationality, but simple love which resolves the problem. The film depicts that with the changing cultural platter more business and marketing opportunities have evolved which cater to the altering tastes of the society. It presents an example of rise and manipulation of innovative entrepreneurships (wedding planning) in the competitive city space and culturally maps specific areas of the city such as Delhi University, Janakpuri, and Sainik farms through the protagonists' professional journey. It depicts how consumerist habits vary from class to class and from region to region proving that the effects of liberalization cannot be viewed in a homogeneous manner. Consumerist culture thus finally emerges as an inevitable condition of the city of Delhi.

The film opens with the scene at the University of Delhi, the space for ideas, freedom of expression, youthful energy, carefree attitude and dreams. This space not only introduces the audience to the protagonists, Bittoo and Shruti in the opening number- "*Tarkibein*" ("Ideas"), but also emerges as a fertile ground for dreams of young entrepreneurs like Shruti. Additionally, the four-minute number with several shots showing DTC buses, University hostels, college classrooms, cultural competitions, college playgrounds, street plays, University elections, and so on, set the mood for a youth oriented drama. Some quintessential images related to Delhi such as eve teasing and response against it by an average Delhi girl, bargaining with rickshaw pullers, Delhi Metro, running after DTC buses, and so on set the city in the background. In addition to depicting

the dressing style of middle class youth (by dressing up Shruti in casual t-shirts with a pair of jeans and a scarf or simple salwar kameez and Bittoo in t-shirts or partially unbuttoned casual, checked-shirts), their eating habits (*bread pakodas and chai* with rusks), the director also introduces the slangs that are popular among the Delhi youth (*Bhukkad*: Riff raff, *Chippad*: Cheapster, *thulla*: policeman, *Binness*: Business, *Behenji*: aunty-like). This middle-class portrayal is significant as the film studies the business potential lying in this class which is aspiring for upward social mobility.

From the very beginning Shruti is shown to be aware of the consumerist culture behind weddings. She knows that Delhi-ites love to celebrate with pomp and show. She is clear headed and focused having a thumb rule of business: “*Jiske saaath vyapaar karo usse kabhi na pyaar karo*” (“love and business do not go hand in hand”) (BBB). Shruti’s business-mindedness is the result of the fast-paced metropolitan life. Sociologist Georg Simmel noted the importance of the emerging metropolis for changing life, culture, and subjectivity in the early twentieth century. His seminal essay “The Metropolis and Mental Life” (1903) focuses specifically on the effect of the city on subjectivity and elaborates on ‘metropolitan rationality’ that redefines human relationships in terms of exchange value and turns all action in the metropolis into “production for the market” (Simmel 33). The potentially alienating effect of the metropolis necessitates that the metropolitan character reacts with his head instead of his heart. The money economy and the domination of the intellect stand “in such close integration that no one is able to say whether it was the former that effected the latter or vice versa. What is certain is only that the form of life in the metropolis is the soil which nourishes this interaction most fruitfully” (Simmel 33). Shruti is confident of her metropolitan rationality and Bittoo, being a non-Delhi-ite is learning the ways of the city. His hostel room is filled with posters of body builders, a cut out of Shahrukh Khan’s face, a broken mirror, unhinged wooden almirah, and so on, are reflection of his aimless and scattered existence. It is the Punjabi Delhi girl, Shruti, whose business sense ignites the idea of engaging into wedding planning business in the middle-class, small town Saharanpur boy. While his father ridicules his idea, “*Shaddi to naai karaye hain*” (“in Saharanpur, barbers plan wedding”) (BBB), Bittoo’s insistence that “in Delhi it’s a big business” (BBB) reflects that in contrast to the small towns, consumerism is enveloping the city space rapidly as weddings have evolved from being a pure family-affair to a market affair which can be utilized by the young entrepreneurs gifted with creativity and a keen business sense.

The consumerist culture of western society is the result of the neoliberal projects of the 1980s when all “social processes” (e.g. education, health provision, democracy) were redefined as per “the paradigm of consumption” (Anderson 147). Modernization processes such as “marketization, the decline of traditional status systems and the rise of cultural and political pluralism” made private, market-based choice central to social life (147). Indian state also experienced economic liberalization from 1980s onwards:

By the end of the 1970’s, India had acquired a reputation as one of the most protected and heavily regulated economies in the world. Starting in the mid-1970s and then later on in the 1980s, a few tentative steps were taken to liberalize the regulatory regime. In 1991, more extensive reforms followed. Since then there have been further policy changes in diverse sectors all aimed at opening up the economy to greater private sector entrepreneurship as well as to foreign trade and investment. (Kotwal 01)

Dominant economic and cultural metamorphosis was observed with the beginning of twenty-first century. Due to global influences, Indian cities and particularly metropolitan cities like Delhi observed a paradigm shift in values. Social affairs such as weddings, reflected the effect of economic liberalization and rise of consumerism in all the aspects such as match making process, engagement ceremony, pre-wedding ceremonies, bridal wear, menu, venue, photography, decoration, reception and honeymoon destination. The Sidhwani wedding (at the end of the film) displays the consumerist culture to its fullest. It is an expensive (six crore is the budget) destination wedding at a palace in Jodhpur, with a performance by film stars like Shahrukh Khan and a European honeymoon destination. It is a Bollywood style “*saat din lambi party*” (“Seven days long party”) (BBB). Such weddings illuminate the state of the cultural metamorphosis and present Delhi as an arena of high-budgeted pomp and show. They also reflect that consumerist culture is inscribed in a prescribed local space and is simultaneously affected by global trends. Menu of *Desi* and international cuisines, Cocktail parties and bachelor parties with themes ranging from traditional to western culture, shows the simultaneous effect of local and global influences in high-class South Delhi weddings.

In contrast to this full-blown image of consumerism is the traditional wedding style. A scene in the film in which Shruti and Bittoo try to convince their first client of Janakpuri to hire the couple as wedding planners, subtly talks

about the earlier style when weddings were a private affair, organized by the family members at the local street or community hall:

Client: “*Par bete hamare yahan to maame chache milke kar lete hain Shaadi. Wedding planner ka hum karenge kya?*” (“But in our families traditionally uncles get together and organize the wedding. What will we do with a wedding planner?”)

Shruti: “*Aap ye batao, aap ne kitne paise kharchne hain Shaadi pe?*” (“How much money do you intend to spend on the wedding?”)

Client: “*2 lakh... zyada se zyada 2.5 lakh*” (“2 lacs or maximum 2.5 lacs”)

Shruti: “*Vaise shaadi hogi kahan se?*” (“By the way, where is the venue?”)

Client: “*Kahan se matlab, jahan se saare mohalle ki shaadi hoti hai vahin se*” (“Venue? The same one from where the rest of the colony gets married from.”)

One of the prominent characteristic of consumerism in post-liberalization India is that it is rapidly spreading across all the sections of the society. Shruti and Bittoo succeed in their business by introducing the wedding planning business among the middle and lower middle classes of Delhi-ites. Their wedding planning journey begins from Janakpuri, a middle-class (refugee) Punjabi locality with interiors of the houses having polka dotted cups and life size pictures of Hindu Gods. Shruti understands the significance of first becoming the “*raja*” (BBB) of Janakpuri for becoming the “king” (BBB) of Sainik farms. By making themselves available to the middle strata of the society she wants to ensure that hiring professional planners, remains no longer the preserve of industrialists and stock market hotshots. Janakpuri thus becomes the arena of their first business project with minimal risk. The florist, caterer, DJ, beautician all belong to the middle class. The arrangement of the college band and local beauticians for the wedding reflects the utilization of the limited resources to the maximum level and this first wedding at Janakpuri with a constrained budget becomes a hit.

The kind of consumerist culture which West Delhi regions like Janakpuri reflect is quite different from South Delhi areas, which highlights that consumerist culture varies according to different regions (and social classes) of a city. There is a difference in consumer behaviour of Janakpuri and Sainik farms. While middle-class Janakpuri clients are shown to be casual about the services provided,

the high-class Sainik Farm clients are shown to be very particular about the details, be it the decoration with lilies or the ‘Greek God style entry’ of the groom, reflecting their interest in classical western style. These point towards a difference in consumer taste in various regions and among different social classes of the city. Thus, in place of the cocktail of bright colours and high decibel sounds of middle-class Janakpuri, high-class Sainik Farms of South Delhi are dominated by white tone (with white bungalows, white tents, white lights, and lilies) and classical sounds. Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, a mammoth ethnographic and sociological examination, unmasks the social bases of taste and argues that social class provides the basic evaluative frameworks for all cultural objects. “Our tastes are located by our education and social origin and are used to legitimize social differences and locate one’s sense of place” (Song 113).

The difference in consumer taste not only reflects class differences but also deepens it. Urban consumption accelerates social inequalities. Commodities and services are more often purchased as “an expression and mark of style, prestige, luxury and power” (Puthusseri). Chanda Narang’s client, Brigadier Brar’s anger over the use of incarnations instead of real lilies for decoration is more related to his prestige than the wedding function itself. He bombards,

Finance Minister, Health Minister, Commerce Minister...Do you know who all are coming to this wedding?” Consumption is thus not natural, it’s social (BBB). Our needs are created by society. “Consumption is not just consumption but conspicuous consumption. We display what we buy conspicuously, in order to differentiate ourselves socially. And you can’t buy just one object in order to enter a social level, you need to buy into an entire system of objects. (Powell 47)

The concept of wedding planning is even based on this logic. The wedding planners provide an entire system of services of certain quality according to the requirements of the clients. When Shruti and Bittoo plan the Sidhwani wedding they have to provide good quality services in all the fields, be it catering, decoration, reception of guest, wedding shopping, or the dance performances. They cannot compromise in any field as that can affect the social reputation of their clients. Even the display and consumption of objects takes place on the basis of cultural codes which “organize commodities into hierarchical systems of meaning based on price and prestige” (Powell 47). Shruti and Bittoo, like

other wedding planners, are aware of the nuances of this hierarchy and provide different packages such as silver, gold and platinum depending upon the social classes of their clients.

In a consumerist culture, the consumer occupies the centre stage. Shruti and Bittoo pay particular attention towards the vibrant lifestyle of their first high class client-Sonia and Pankaj (During their graduation days, the would-be groom had organized successful college fests and the bride to-be used to be a lead vocalist of her college band). They (Shruti and Bittoo) know that by blending their kitsch Janakpuri style with the high class, (supplanted with other influential factors such as technology, Bollywood and social media) they can achieve success, as Sonia and Pankaj with their current high tension and fast paced jobs want a planner who can provide a vibrant style in contrast to their monotonous and busy lifestyle. The groom's father also comments, "Both of them wear black suits and attend board meetings all day long. But when it comes to their wedding they want a kitsch one. You two are kitsch". Eventually, the Janakpuri taste triumphs over the Sainik farms. The triumph of one type of consumer culture over the other reflects the competition between classes. The graph of Shruti and Bittoo's growth is dependent on this cultural class struggle and the film proves how the spatial boundaries can become permeable and how cultures can evolve while mixing. The consumerist class struggle can form or alter the texture of different city spaces. Emphasizing on the power of class struggle for production of spaces, Lefebvre states:

as for the class struggle, its role in the production of space is a cardinal one in that this production is performed solely by classes, fractions of classes and groups representative of classes. Today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space... Only the class struggle has the capacity to differentiate.... (55)

The consumerist class struggle is based on the logic of collective identity. Instead of creating a self-identity, consumption majorly provides a collective identity. We mark ourselves as members of a tribe by using a distinctive sense of style. According to Dick Hebdige, we develop subcultures which function within the larger framework of society rather than opposed to it. Members of subcultures use the group's "style" to make a comment on the society around them while simultaneously taking part in society (441-450). Advertising and media play a crucial role in accelerating consumerism. "Advertising offers the image of the transformed self; and consumption offers the means of effecting that

transformation” (Todd 49). The repetition of advertising messages creates and reinforces cultural beliefs and values. Marketers use symbols to convey desired product images. So, when Chanda Narang advertises her themes of classic, royal and Maharaja weddings, she is already inscribing symbols into the minds of her high-class clients and dividing them into western and traditional cultural groups. In Bittoo and Shruti’s case their signature style, “Janakpuri chaap” (BBB) couple dance performances act as a symbol of their Punjabi, Bollywood style.

Towards the end of the film Bittoo and Shruti resolve their emotional conflict. Though their metropolitan rationality initially helped them in utilizing the consumerist culture of the city and made them perfect business partners, it is the acknowledgement of love from both the sides which breaks Shruti’s golden rule of Business (“love and business do not go hand in hand”) and liberates them. Finally, consumerism emerges as an inevitable condition of metropolitan cities like Delhi. The film itself portrays and promotes consumerism. It becomes a vehicle of presenting wedding planning as a norm for the consumerist society of Delhi. While many thinkers welcome consumerism “trusting in the market’s potential to eliminate inefficiencies, produce wealth, extend human freedom, open new possibilities, and unleash the potential of human creativity” (Song 109), there are others who worry about the potentially corrosive effects of the market—its potential to widen social and economic differences, corrupt various social values, exploits vulnerable natural resources and “expose the disenfranchised to greater exploitation and manipulation” (109). But consumerism is not only an economic system; it is the way our postmodern society functions. It not only places us in the society but also provides the means by which to change social circumstances. Shruti and Bittoo’s story finally provides measures of surviving in an unavoidable consumerist world.

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