

NOTE

Of Consumerism and Violence

Bharat Jhunjunwala writes :

A student of Virginia Tech Institute in America massacred 32 teachers and classmates before killing himself. Parents of Cho Seung-Hui had migrated to the United States when he was eight years old. Cho, it seems, did not like the consumerist society in which he lived. Before the massacre he sent an e-mail to the media in which he asked his rich classmates: "Your Mercedes wasn't enough, you brats? Your golden necklaces weren't enough, you snobs? Your vodka and cognac weren't enough? All you debaucheries weren't enough? Those weren't enough to fulfill your hedonistic needs?" The American society does not tolerate people challenging the mainstream. It seems Cho had failed in his attempts to make girl friends. He took revenge of the failure by this killing. "Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and impaled upon the cross," he asked and added, "I die like Jesus Christ to inspire generations of the weak and defenseless people." Clearly Cho did not like materialist culture which had no place for the weak.

The United States is power No 1 today. Most countries are emulating it. India is also promoting the sale of Mercedes cars and foreign liquor in keeping with American values of consumption as the end of life. Import duties on liquor have been reduced recently under pressure from America and Europe. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh wants Indians to have access to the same goods as the western people—colour TVs, cars and computers. India should, then, also be ready to have incidents like the Virginia Tech massacre is—because consumerism and such violence go hand in hand.

The violence prevalent in the US is inherent in its theory-. Americans believe that a newborn's mind is like a clean slate. He is 'free' to give his life a direction that he may like. Thus if the media promotes consumerism then young people are encouraged to indulge in cars and liquor. Consumption is seen as expansion of one's personality. One who has tasted more varieties of liquor is considered to be more 'developed' than one who has not. Americans believe that there is no inner anchor in the mind that would make people happy with less consumption. The human mind is like a bird that is free to fly in any direction, they say, and not like a kite that is held firm in a particular direction. But Cho did not agree. He found this consumerism to be hollow and took revenge. It matters not whether this dislike was due to his failure to make girl friends or out of a deeper discomfort with the consumerist ideology.

Unending consumption is the logical result of ignoring inner tendencies. Indeed, some persons may have inner tendencies of consumption. They may be happy in America. But America leaves no space for those having other tendencies. They are forced to be measured on consumerist scales which they do not like. Thus individuals like Cho rebel.

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