Introduction
The problem with sustainable development today is that fairly early on, economists defined development and well-being in terms of the individual freedom and right to consume. Not only did the individual need to be able to consume, he/she had to maintain the capability in a sustained manner, over a period of time and covering a diversity of goods available in the market not just those providing for the Basic Needs of food, clothing and shelter - what we in India call roti kapda aur makan. Within such an understanding, poverty began to be seen as an inability or a failure to consume over and above the bare, physical requirements for subsistence. The political economy consequently also had to establish consumption as a developmental goal, with the nation-state having the institutional capacity to provide diversity and stability in the market for human consumption to take place at an optimum level. On the international plane, not surprisingly, given this theoretical understanding, general levels of consumption in society began to measure where a country was placed on the development scale. Most importantly, to come out of the poverty trap, countries had to be in a position to provide their citizens, ever-increasing levels of consumption, seen as a standard human aspiration for people the world over. The growth of prosperity also meant the ability to buy safety or risk insurance of various kinds given the environmental hazards of a highly sophisticated, urban material environment. Those least free to consume within maximum choice levels, were condemned to expect a greater inability to ward off risks, whether natural or man-made, which wealthy countries could afford to pay for after having met their normal consumption needs. Countries like India consequently were seen as poor and polluted because they consumed less resources and not necessarily only the other way around!
Today, when resource depletion, CO2 emissions and global warming stare us in the face, the worry for the developed world has of course been how to reduce the adverse impacts of their modern history - that which has favoured an optimal consumption activity. But even more importantly, the worry has been how to prevent the developing world which counts for the majority of the globe's human population, from going down the same path, now openly acknowledged as "environmentally disastrous". The whole movement for Sustainable Consumption and Production consequently, was at the heart of the development debates that took place at the Rio Summit in 1992, where poverty eradication and social progress was for the first time linked to "..effective protection of the environment and delivery of prudent use of natural resources in the context of international development and population growth" (DEFRA 2003:12)(Italics added).

UNEP's 2002 Global Status Report on Sustainable Consumption and Cleaner Production had earlier voiced these concerns:
"..growing disparities in levels of consumption between rich and poor countries; growing disparities in levels of consumption within developing countries and total growth in consumption of resources (particularly water, food and energy) in developed countries such that benefits from technical eco-efficiency improvements are being overwhelmed".

On the disparities between rich and poor, the Report had this to say:,
"..overall consumption of the richest fifth of the world's population is nine times that of the poorest fifth... 'scaling up' current Western patterns of consumption as the basis of development for, say, China or India, is simply not a realistic option unless the risk of catastrophic collapse of the global ecosystem is considered acceptable. Not only do the rich nations currently consume the lion's share of natural resources, but it is the poorest countries that are least well equipped to deal with the consequent environmental damage."

The commitment of the developed countries towards their global responsibility of ensuring the well-being of developing countries and the world environment, economy and community cannot be denied. But the well near impossibility of its achievement equally cannot be denied because 1) the framework of commodity production and consumption has spread worldwide in the global economy, making it increasingly difficult to control or manage and; 2) the possibility of reversing patterns of growth set into motion in developing countries are dim. Indeed, any reversal, of the associated
growth in patterns of consumption and natural resource use will be viewed as an infringement of the basic principle of equity on which modern political social and economic arrangements are formally based.

The urgency of dealing with this dilemma is evident when we consider the monumental environmental costs of increased resource use in the developing economies when located in a developmental cycle context. The NIC’s are at present at the bottom of their growth spiral. The projected rate of growth, even for a country like Turkey, stands at 5 per cent plus per annum. Clearly we have to plan now for these increased impacts, and in visionary new ways. But how? Here let it be said that in the context of the changing global scenario, India is critical to the Sustainable Consumption Debate because consumption in India is definitely growing whereas in most parts of the world it is stationary. Further, India has 16% of the world’s population but only 2.4 % of the planet’s land mass. The GDP growth rate for India is 5% per annum, which means it is set to double in 15 years. The retail sector is India is growing at a whopping 400%. Consumption is going to grow in per capita terms as well because consumption is seen as a right and is welcomed by the people as a delayed but much desired arrival in India. Any attempt to restrain consumption will be seen as a denial of a right and as a suffering imposed on one because of the excesses of others - the advanced nations!

At the same time, even though consumption is going to grow, India is not in total danger of continuing to imitate industrial society, even in its mistakes. The resource-use efficient technologies of the west such as ICT and Telecommunications, it is well known, are already being aggressively tapped by the Indian and Chinese economies. Equally, the empirical evidence of thousands of services, which may be environmentally sustainable, is already there in the emerging contexts. It does not need to be salvaged from a forgotten past. In India, cultural norms have instituted practices, which are not just resource effective in their transaction mechanisms of sharing, pooling, re-using etc but also in their effective quantitative reduction of energy use. In short, consumption is certainly going to grow in India but it is not necessarily just a quantum growth in consuming patterns familiar to the West, which is the source of worry. The type of consumption practiced too may constitute a problem or alternately provide some innovative solutions. The Sustainable Consumption Debate in India must consequently begin with an understanding of “why people buy” and not just act as one of the many
stakeholders in sustainable production in the advanced nations - an information service to make the public aware about their right to choice, labelling, regulation of products and the like.

In India, we need to look at consumption in the face, de-link it from the psychological or utilitarian rationales for spending behaviour and relate it to the socio-cultural context in which it is embedded. Consumption will then be seen as a cost and not a gain in the achievement of social objectives, larger than the purely economic. Hicks long ago argued for what PSS and de-materialisation is saying today - people consume to achieve some benefit. If that benefit can be met not by a product owned individualistically and in an exclusionary way; but through a sharing or leasing or service transaction between individuals or groups, which works within the context of their aspirations, then consumers have no problem (Douglas 1982). Viewed in this light existing initiatives in India towards low energy consuming, low cost production and services must be explored for their possibilities as sources of innovation rather than viewed only through ‘cleaner production’ (CP) coloured glasses. To take only one example, the example of the wallahs or traditional service providers to be found in India today, new ones continue to be added to the list all the time. For instance the older kabari-wallah (garbage man), press-wallah (clothes ironing man) and pheri-wallah (hawker) to be found even in villages, has over time been supplemented with the more urban bijli-wallah (electrician), dabba-wallah (food delivery man) and even cable and computer-wallah! Clearly these services cannot be dismissed as a hangover from India’s past. To rush to replace the wallahs with more contemporary and ‘cleaner’ service production systems would be misguided in its intentions. Whether pushed under cover of modernisation theory, development planning or a more sophisticated, expert environmentalism, all these measures fail to consider the possibility of learning from the wallahs. Examining the sustainability of traditional services within their own life context provides us with a model and not just a reform measure. The wallahs need urgently to be inventoried and studied as a prototype for PSS solutions worldwide.

The pervasiveness and sheer size of the informal service sector in global terms, in India, Brazil, Turkey and China, raises fundamental questions about the validity of existing PSS solutions, which have emerged from a very specific organisational context - that of modern western manufacture. The industrial separation of work from life and
consumption from production is alien to the \textit{wallahs}. By operating \textit{outside} its framework, the wallahs keep alive the possibility of design innovation within the service sector and help bring the consumer back into its theoretical ambit. The \textit{wallahs} model consequently, is more democratic and disruptive even than Life Cycle Thinking and needs to be kept open as an experimental option for sustainable development.

In per capita terms, the \textit{wallahs}' service system was not designed to merely reduce the ecological cost of escalating production but to preempt it, by removing the very need for more products and high, energy use in human society. A single press-\textit{wallah}'s family for instance services from 50 to 100 households per day, doing away not only with the individual ownership of irons but also the high energy costs of multiple consumption. The research priority in India consequently, is to tap that prior environmentalist thought and innovation, embodied in the \textit{wallahs}’ practice, and make it available universally. In this way, India can help construct an alternate scenario for sustainable consumption, one that emerges from the local context but does not stay restricted to it in its implications.

This is also in line with the thinking of sociologists such as Ward and Shove who argue that it is the \textit{invisible} daily practices of clothes care, hygiene, food consumption and housing particularly in its infrastructural aspect of heating, water provision, building materials and the like which make an enormous difference to the quantum of consumption in a particular culture. The conspicuous consumption debate raised by Bourdieu and earlier Veblen, remains valid of course within the Indian context where goods get attached to status objectives (Jackson & Michaelis 2003). But this is not the whole story even under fast changing market conditions in developing nations. Consumption is embedded in society and peoples customary actions and practices. It is this which made it possible even for the President of the wealthiest nation George Bush to declare recently that the American way of life is "not negotiable", whatever its environmental implications. Jimmy Carter before him only needed to appear on TV wearing a sweater \textit{inside} his home, for the reverse message to have costly political effects! In India, on the other hand, even though the government is committed to consumption through the election promises for the provision of more infrastructure to its citizens; austerity drives under its aegis are not unknown at all. Most of these even in the past, notably under Prime Minister Morarji Desai sought to control customary
rather than absolutely new market behaviour. For instance, even today there is a limit to the number of guests a citizen is permitted to entertain at the traditional feasts associated with a child's wedding. The giving or taking of dowry at a child's wedding is in fact a criminal offence. Harsh intervention into private holdings of gold, very dear to the Indian people, has been given up as a means of raising public capital. But official circulars continue to declare the giving and taking of Diwali (a festival celebrating God Rama's return home after exile) gifts, a form of corruption not to be indulged in by any public servant. Yes, commodification has occurred in India and is advancing at a hectic pace but why in areas bound strictly by custom?

Unless we understand the location - whether household or community, and the site and context of goods and services in peoples' lives and life-cycle contexts, and how they are used to social purpose we cannot hope to change consumer attitudes towards them. Clearly there is need to understand consumption in India as a social activity occurring within a knowledge universe which is highly classificatory and competitive in nature. In this view it is the household budget studied through an entire life time which is important. Consumption is not only to do with the consumption of the rich or the middle class in Indian society or to do with India alone! If we take object life-cycle trajectories, landfill data and per capita consumption figures into account then Indian data opens up a possibility for evolving a theory of human consumption without which no sustainable consumption project or agenda is possible to achieve, except in a superficial way.

References:
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