

A missed opportunity

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Steady economic growth for the last 18 years has, expectedly, led to an unprecedented interest in the Indian consumption opportunity. This interest is global, and almost every significant international company has given India and the Indian market a look in recent times. While India has a long way to go on various per-capita indicators, it has done rather well in hogging the limelight when it comes to the very rich and the ultra-rich.

The number of Indian billionaires appearing on different lists such as the Forbes' has steadily increased, and when some of them end up building centi-million dollar skyscrapers as personal homes, gifting Airbuses and Ferrattis on birthdays, and having weddings that have functions spanning different continents and multiple countries, memories of the era of the maharajas, nawabs and the nizams are naturally evoked.

Stories of yesteryears when jewellers like Cartier, luggage-makers like Louis Vuitton and car-makers like Rolls Royce had their most extravagant (and audacious) customers get into circulation again. In this background, it is no surprise that most international purveyors of luxury and bridge-to-luxury products have shown an incredible interest in the Indian luxury market, believing that in the not-so-distant future, India could be the next Japan (or at least China) for many of them.

Yet, while there are many coffee-table books on the Indian rich and famous of the past and the present, and many other publications giving some glimpse into the world of luxury products such as textiles and jewellery, there are hardly any authoritative books that can trace the origin of luxury in India, understand and explain the Indian psyche when it comes to consumption of luxury goods and services, and give some glimpse into what the future may be. The closest are statistical and sometimes soulless reports from management consultants and market research organisations, and even there, barring one or two, such reports are based on popular perception rather than on-the-ground research and empirical rigour.

India by design – the pursuit of luxury & fashion (Michael Boroian & Alix de Poix) could have filled this gap, and that is, in fact, the stated objective in the preface. The foreword from Aman Nath and Francis Wacziarg, arguably amongst the most knowledgeable and most passionate in this domain in India, further whets the appetite. But then almost immediately from the first chapter onwards, the book is one of the most disappointing ones anyone could have imagined. By the time one goes through the halfway mark (something that takes tremendous effort to do so), one is left wondering who the authors had in mind as their readers.

The reader would not be an Indian since s/he would naturally know and understand much better and would have no need for a glossary which even explains Dalit, Choli, Gujarati, Hindu, or Banarsi (read: Census town in the Raipur district in Northeastern India!). The reader should not be a serious global marketer of luxury products since s/he may get mixed up reading about Belmonte & Carmichael House (both local brands promoted by the SKNL Group) in the same table as Brioni and Bottega Veneta, or about key players in the Indian retailing that include not only the Shoppers' Stop and Pantaloon but also, in the same breath, Piramyd, Ebony and Dhiraj Sons (not to mention about bringing up Emporio and UB City Malls at the same time as key players in retailing!).

The reader cannot also be fresh MBA students since they can certainly do a much better case study and SWOT analysis than what the authors have attempted to do notwithstanding their formidable and very successful professional backgrounds.

Indeed, the book senselessly and very superficially meanders from one theme to another, and one example to another without making any effort to connect or provide any insight at all. It is also very poorly researched with almost all the "intelligence" gleaned from trolling through different articles and news reports without much understanding of the context, and then through very shallow interviews with some. It is no surprise that at the end, it reminds one of a wedding feast hosted by a parvenu where the menu ranges from Indian to Chinese to "Continental" and many other cuisines currently in fashion, but then options on offer are limited to "chowmein and vegetable manchurian" and "paneer butter masala and kali daal" and "noodles in tomato ketchup, and paneer-topped pizza" making one miss even the humble burger from a McDonald's!

A country as rich in its history of luxury, having so much depth as it has in textiles, jewellery, cosmetics and perfumes, objet d'art, and even food among other categories, and with so much promise in terms of its potential in the coming decade and decades deserves a much better treatment than what India by Design... does.