

Commerce and Quick Commerce as Catalysts of Behavioural Transformation

Mr. Rajat Umrey

Assistant Professor, LAW, INCT University

Abstract

Over the past decade, India has witnessed a transformative shift in consumer behaviour driven by the rapid expansion of e-commerce and the emergence of quick commerce platforms. This paper explores the evolution of Indian consumer mindset and preferences from the early stages of internet-enabled retail to today's instant-delivery ecosystem. The study traces the journey from the late 2010s, when digital commerce was limited to metropolitan consumers, to the present era where Tier II and Tier III cities are equally driving online consumption. The analysis examines key enablers of this transition—affordable smartphones, democratized internet access through the entry of Reliance Jio in 2016, rising disposable incomes, and the proliferation of consumer-credit instruments. These factors have collectively redefined how Indians perceive value, convenience, and trust in digital transactions. Furthermore, the paper analyses how this behavioural shift has influenced corporate strategies, supply-chain logistics, and product offerings. By assessing both demand-side behavioural changes and supply-side adaptations, this study highlights the broader socio-economic implications of India's digital-commerce revolution and argues that this evolution is both empowering and conditioning for the Indian consumer psyche.

I. Introduction

The last decade has marked a fundamental transformation in the Indian consumer market. Once dominated by traditional retail channels and physical marketplaces, consumption patterns in India have increasingly migrated to digital platforms. From the early stages of e-commerce in the late 2010s to the present-day phenomenon of “quick commerce”—where goods are delivered within 10 to 20 minutes—the evolution has been nothing short of revolutionary.

This transformation represents not merely a technological advancement but a cultural and psychological shift in consumer behaviour. Indian consumers today expect immediacy, transparency, and variety—traits that were once secondary to price sensitivity and brand loyalty. According to recent industry estimates, e-commerce now contributes a significant share of India's total retail spending, marking a paradigm shift from the cash-driven, trust-based local markets of the past to a digital-first consumption model. *See infra Part II.*

This paper investigates the factors that have enabled this transformation and examines the behavioural shifts across different demographic and geographic segments. By doing so, it provides insights into how digital commerce has reshaped the expectations, decision-making processes, and emotional frameworks of Indian consumers.

II. Historical Context: The Rise of E-Commerce in India

E-commerce in India began as a niche experiment. Early players relied heavily on cash-on-delivery (COD)

to overcome trust deficits, as Indian consumers were hesitant to pay online for unseen products. The period between 2010 and 2015 can be characterized as the “trust-building phase,” where convenience and competitive pricing attracted early adopters, primarily in metropolitan cities.

The turning point came around 2016 with the entry of Reliance Jio, which drastically lowered the cost of mobile data and brought millions of new users online. This democratization of internet access created fertile ground for e-commerce to expand beyond urban centres. Concomitantly, improvements in logistics and digital payments—facilitated by platforms such as the Unified Payments Interface (UPI)—created an ecosystem that enabled scalability and efficiency. *See infra Part III.*

The subsequent years saw exponential growth in e-commerce penetration, aided by government initiatives like Digital India. By the early 2020s, e-commerce had evolved from being a convenience to becoming an integral part of everyday consumption. The Covid-19 pandemic further accelerated adoption, normalizing digital transactions across age groups and income segments.

III. Drivers of Transformation

In order to understand the evolution of Indian consumer mindset, it is essential to examine the key enablers behind the shift.

A. Smartphone Penetration and Digital Access

India’s smartphone user base has surpassed 700 million, making mobile devices the primary interface for commerce. Affordable data plans and app-based interfaces have transformed mobile phones into virtual marketplaces, empowering even rural consumers to engage in digital shopping. The ready availability of mobile apps and mobile optimised websites has made the shift from offline to online far more seamless. This proliferation of smartphones has changed not only access but also the *mode* of consumption: shopping no longer requires visits to storefronts; instead, it happens in the palm of one’s hand, in transit, or during leisure time.

B. The “Jio Effect” and Internet Democratization

The 2016 launch of Reliance Jio marked a historic moment. By reducing data costs by over 90 per cent and bundling free access to many users, the service brought tens of millions of first-time internet users online. This unprecedented access bridged the digital divide and redefined how consumers discover, evaluate, and purchase products.

More importantly, this digital access *equalised aspiration*: for the first time, Tier II and Tier III city consumers had the same visibility into products, trends, and lifestyle imagery as those in metro cities. The democratisation of internet access thus went beyond connectivity—it created fertile ground for a new digital consumer identity.

C. Rising Disposable Income and Aspirational Consumption

Economic liberalisation, coupled with job creation in service and IT sectors, has increased disposable income. More importantly, aspirations have risen, particularly in Tier II and Tier III cities. E-commerce platforms, by offering exposure to premium brands and lifestyle products, have catered to these emerging aspirational classes.

This shift is significant: whereas earlier consumption was more need-based (necessities), the present Indian consumer is engaging in *identity-based consumption*. Ownership of a premium smartphone, a branded appliance, or imported accessory is linked to self-perception, status, and lifestyle.

D. Access to Consumer Credit and Financial Inclusion

The availability of credit cards, EMI options, “no-cost EMIs,” and “Buy Now, Pay Later” (BNPL) schem-

es has reduced the psychological barrier to high-value purchases. Where previously the act of spending large sums online for unseen goods may have seemed risky or strained finances, these instruments allow consumers to defer payment or spread cost—thereby changing purchasing dynamics. Consequently, consumers are now more comfortable buying premium products—ranging from smartphones to gold coins—without physical inspection or immediate full payment, marking a major shift from earlier trust models.

E. Convenience and Instant Gratification via Quick Commerce

The advent of quick commerce (q-commerce), characterised by delivery times of 10–20 minutes, has redefined consumer expectations. The combination of technological efficiency and urban logistics has created a behavioural norm where immediacy is expected, not exceptional. According to Bain & Company, in 2024 more than two-thirds of all e-grocery orders in India were placed via quick commerce platforms, and q-commerce is forecast to grow over 40 per cent annually through 2030. *See infra Part II above.*

Quick commerce compresses the cognitive gap between desire and possession, turning consumption into a reflex rather than a considered decision.

IV. Changing Consumer Behaviour and Mindset

Indian consumers have transitioned from **price-conscious buyers** to **value-seeking participants** in an experience-driven marketplace. Several key behavioural shifts can be identified:

A. Trust Shift: From Experiential to Systemic

Previously, Indian consumers relied heavily on tactile evaluation (‘seeing is believing’). The physical act of visiting a store, touching the product, negotiating, and paying cash was central. However, digital commerce has shifted this trust model. Today, trust is anchored in platform policies (returns, reviews, seller ratings) rather than mere physical inspection.

The modern Indian consumer has internalised this systemic trust: reviews, social proof, influencer endorsements, and platform guarantees now play a pivotal role in purchase decisions.

B. Information Symmetry and Value Transparency

Digital marketplaces force price visibility and information parity. Consumers compare, cross-check, and rely on peer reviews before purchase. The modern Indian consumer is both emotionally aspirational and rationally analytical—a fascinating duality. They seek discounts and offers but are also willing to pay premiums for convenience, speed, or eco-friendly options.

This results in an informed consumer mindset: purchases are no longer just about price, but about *value*—which includes brand experience, delivery convenience, platform reliability, and digital trust.

C. From Planned to Impulsive Consumption

Quick commerce has reshaped the notion of planned versus impulsive purchases. Many consumers now outsource even routine replenishments (groceries, personal care) to digital platforms, trusting algorithms or subscription models to remember their preferences.

Moreover, the immediacy offered by q-commerce means that the decision point and fulfilment occur almost instantly—reducing deliberation and enhancing impulsiveness. This shift has altered consumer patience, loyalty, and tolerances for delay.

D. Platform Citizenship and Ecosystem Affiliation

Consumers now identify with platforms (e.g., subscriptions, loyalty tiers) rather than just one-time transactions. Being a member of a digital ecosystem turns purchasing into a *relationship-based affiliation*.

For many Indian users, being a member of Amazon Prime, Swiggy One or Blinkit's loyalty program is a lifestyle choice. This reflects a shift from transactional behaviour to relational or identity-based consumption.

E. Generational Convergence and Geographic Expansion

While younger urban consumers adopted online shopping earlier, even older consumers—once hesitant—are now increasingly comfortable purchasing high-value goods online, driven by ease of payment, trusted platforms, and efficient returns. Meanwhile, digital commerce is no longer confined to metros: Tier II and Tier III cities are witnessing rapid adoption. For instance, one report noted that Tier 3 cities accounted for over 50 per cent of Diwali online-shopping orders in a recent festive cycle. This geographic and generational convergence further underscores the scale and depth of the mindset shift.

V. Business Adaptations and Ecosystem Evolution

The evolution of the consumer mindset has compelled businesses to adapt their strategies, operations, supply chains, and product offerings accordingly.

A. Supply Chain Innovation and Micro-Fulfilment

Corporations have restructured their logistics to meet new expectations. Distribution centres are now often located inside urban clusters (dark-stores or micro-fulfilment centres) to enable near-instantaneous dispatch. The supply chain has become a *behavioural chain*—designed not just to deliver goods efficiently, but to sustain the illusion of endless immediacy.

For example, q-commerce leaders in India target tens to hundreds of dark stores across metro clusters to ensure sub-30-minute delivery windows.

B. Product and Packaging Evolution

E-commerce and quick commerce have required a rethink of packaging (for transit safety), SKU design (for smaller baskets), and digital-first product configurations (lighter, shipping-friendly). FMCG brands now experiment with digital-only SKUs and special packaging tailored for e-commerce channels. Marketing too has shifted: rather than only mass broadcast, firms now deploy data-driven personalisation, algorithmic recommendations, and influencer-based storytelling.

C. Omni-Channel Integration and New Channel Strategies

Retailers no longer view online channels as supplementary—they are strategic pillars. The omni-channel approach—seamlessly integrating online and offline experiences—is essential to remain competitive. Brick-and-mortar chains are launching their own fast-delivery offerings; online marketplaces are opening experience centres or pick-up hubs.

This approach recognises that consumer mindset is now hybrid: they may research online, purchase online, but still expect physical touchpoints where needed.

D. Monetisation and Business Model Shift

As the sector matures, platforms are shifting from scale-only growth to profitability and sustainable unit economics. Reports suggest India's quick commerce sector recorded a gross order value of US\$ 7.4 billion in FY 2024-25, and firms are exploring new revenue streams like subscription tiers, advertising, and higher-margin own-brands.

These adaptations reflect the recognition that consumer behaviour is now more habitual, not just opportunistic—a basis for longer-term business models.

VI. Broader Implications and Future Outlook

The behavioural shift in consumer preferences has implications which reach far beyond retail, touching upon manufacturing planning, employment patterns, data-privacy norms, and urban logistics.

A. Socio-Economic Implications

The transformation of consumption in India reflects wider socio-economic change. Access to digital commerce, credit, and fulfilment services has empowered more households to participate in consumption beyond necessity—enabling aspirational upward mobility. At the same time, this raises questions about sustainability, credit risk, and over-consumption.

B. Ethical, Labour, and Environmental Concerns

Quick-commerce business models raise concerns: the labour model relies on gig work, the logistics draw on dense fleets, and environmental implications (packaging waste, short-haul trips) are significant. Moreover, the speed-driven model may condition consumers toward hyper-gratification and reduce patience or endurance.

Further, small traditional retailers face competitive pressure—raising questions of inclusion for digitally unskilled vendors and reliance on large platforms.

C. Future Consumption Models

The evolution suggests that categories that have traditionally remained offline—such as automobiles, real estate, and luxury goods—may increasingly explore digital-first or hybrid models. The consumer mindset which now expects transparency, speed, and convenience will push legacy sectors to innovate. AI-driven personalisation, predictive replenishment, and subscription ownership models (rather than one-time purchase) are likely to shape the next decade. Rural and semi-urban markets remain the next frontier, and firms that address affordability, infrastructure, and trust gaps will lead.

D. Research and Theory Implications

From an academic perspective, this evolution challenges traditional consumption theory which emphasised rational decision-making and delayed gratification. In India, we now observe a hybrid of impulsivity enabled by technology and rational evaluation enabled by information symmetry. This suggests a new theoretical framing: the *digital-consumer reflex*, where immediacy, trust in platforms, and ecosystem belonging drive behaviour.

VII. Conclusion

The evolution of India's consumer behaviour reflects more than the growth of e-commerce—it embodies a socio-economic transformation. From cautious cash-based buyers to confident digital consumers, India's journey demonstrates how technology, access, and aspiration can collectively reshape market psychology. The intersection of e-commerce and quick commerce has not only redefined purchasing patterns but also recalibrated corporate strategy and national economic narratives. The next decade will likely witness further convergence of technology, logistics, and behavioural science—ushering in a new phase of *digitally empowered consumption*.

In sum, this evolution is both empowering and conditioning—it liberates choice and access, while concurrently disciplining desire into immediacy and expectation. The Indian consumer revolution thus stands as both a second liberalisation and a new behavioural regime.

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