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The “New” Middle Class in India: A Re-assessment

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Introduction

This paper¹ seeks to go some way towards unravelling the impact of neo-liberal policies on class-based cultures in India. Specifically, it focuses on the experiences and worldviews of the middle classes, the class group or fraction said to have expanded greatly in recent times and to have been the main beneficiaries of the neo-liberal reforms of the Indian economy instigated in the early 1990s. In this paper, we explore two dimensions of these changes: work and discourses of efficiency; and the impact of these reforms on gender and class relations.

In terms of our analysis and research with the Indian middle class, we can summarise our arguments as follows:

- Neo-liberalism is a set of economic policies, now enacted at both national and state levels, and which are policies reliant upon the support of Indian capital and the middle classes;

¹ This paper was presented to the 16th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Wollongong 26 June - 29 June 2006. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the Conference Proceedings website by permission of the author(s) who retain(s) copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright Act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

- in this sense, neo-liberalism is part and parcel of a broader hegemonic project of re-making the Indian economy, polity and society;
- moreover, neo-liberalism goes hand in hand with major cultural changes, especially in relation to consumption, mass media, telecommunications, and the like;
- various neo-liberal policies are, nevertheless, contested by various groups (farmers, unions etc) but also individually in the sense of the negative cultural implications (i.e. sexualised advertising) are often seen as an affront to middle class culture and sensibilities;
- in addition, many of the Indian middle classes have been the beneficiaries of the previous era where they had secure government employment, pension plans, allowances and so forth whereas, under neo-liberal reforms, these employment options are fast disappearing under the rubric of “competition” – and hence, many middle class, especially the more politicised and older generation, remain sceptical as to the benefits of the new economic reforms.

In summary, our research broadly contributes to debates over the nature of Indian modernity by revealing the shifting dimensions of class cultures over the past decade, and takes into consideration the attitudes and interpretations of Indians themselves to these changes. Moreover, our research has implications for understanding the political mobilization of the various class fractions, and builds on a class analysis of contemporary Indian society more generally.

The Indian experience: Analysing the lower middle classes

In the Indian context, according to a number of authors neo-liberal approaches have become the new orthodoxy in development (Brohman, 1995; Portes, 1997; Gosovic, 2000). Chase-Dunn et al. (2000: 71) suggest the globalisation project framed by a neo-liberal ideology is now a hegemonic project that ‘celebrates the victory of capitalism over socialism and proclaims marketisation and privatisation as solutions to the world’s problems’. The resurrection and hegemony of market driven approaches identify state intervention as inefficient and counterproductive and thereby call for developing countries to privatise state owned enterprises, adopt a range of stabilisation measures to address balance of payment crises, and limit public expenditure. The deleterious effects of these policies on Asia’s poor (Scrase, Holden and Baum, 2003) and the positive consequences for the ‘new rich’ (Robison and Goodman, 1996) are amply evident. However, beyond these dichotomous analyses the ways in which local communities, classes and specific cultural groups confront, challenge or acquiesce to, advancing neo-liberal policy platforms in economic and social arenas, remain relatively unexplored. In India, the competing narratives of the supporters of the reforms (Bhagavati, 1993, Ahluwalia and Little, 1998) and their critics (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Chandrashekar and Ghosh, 2002; Chakrabarti and Cullenberg, 2003) overlook experiences of those who don’t fit neatly into the extremes of the social spectrum. Thus, it is the intention of this paper to make some contribution in this area.

As the neo-liberal reforms progress, supported as they are by vigorous rhetorical campaigns by business and government, increasing numbers of people find themselves being inexorably drawn towards the seductive discourses of the marketplace, and whether intentionally or not, have begun to replicate the language and/or the practices of neo-liberal 'life'. Thus, in contrast to the mainly strictly polarised accounts of contemporary neo-liberal developments, the research highlights the complexities and contradictions of a segment within the middle classes who have become cautiously interested in the proclaimed 'rewards' of the *New Economic Policies* yet are simultaneously sceptical of whether any personal benefits will accrue. These are people who, by and large, are confused by earlier developmentalist state-interventionist policies, while hopeful, they nevertheless remain uncertain of the veracity of the claims of neo-liberalism.

During the same period (1990s and beyond) much has been said about the growth of the Indian middle class as a consequence of the globalisation of the economy (Deshpande 1998; Kulkarni 1993; Lakha 1999). There is a great deal of interest in the lifestyles of the 'new middle class' on the basis of consumption as the new definer of group identity (see Appadurai & Breckenridge 1995, Scrase 2002; van Wessel, 2004). Indian middle-class responses to globalisation of the economy are contradictory, however: they welcome aspects of cultural globalism embodied in the media, yet they remain highly critical of the uninterrupted entry of foreign capital (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). Furthermore, there are problems of combining the lower and upper levels of the middle classes in Asia. For example, policy shifts in development, that openly support structural adjustment, have resulted in the differentiation of the Indian middle classes (Deshpande 1998). Thus, these groups should be regarded as class fractions rather than a single unified class (Sen and Stivens 1998: 15).

In our research², we are therefore concerned with studying a class *fraction* - that is, the lower middle-class.³ For the purposes of this study, lower middle class in Bengal have been defined in terms of both

² Research was jointly conducted with Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase (University of Wollongong). Aspects of this paper, data and arguments, have previously appeared in R. Ganguly-Scrase (2003; *Gender and Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4. pp. 544-566).

³ Fieldwork was mainly conducted over a four-year period (1998-2002) in Calcutta and Siliguri. We have also returned to India several times since to re-interview key informants. Using a *snowballing* method, a total 120 people were interviewed (60 per city). Among the respondents there were twenty key informants, most of whom we had known from our earlier research in the late 1980's. Women constituted 48% of our sample, while men, 52%. The overwhelming majority (85%) were employed in the formal or organized sector of the labour force, while 15% were working in the so-called *informal* sector. While most people worked in the public sector, among the formal sector workforce, about a quarter were employed by the private sector, including transnational companies such as Philips. It is important to note however, that none of our respondents had obtained employment in occupations that have consequently emerged from liberalisation. The mean household size was 4.7 persons, with only seven percent of households having more than seven residents. The types of families were roughly divided between joint and nuclear families.

a particular economic bracket and a cultural milieu. Their mean household income is just under Rs10,000 per month⁴. In cultural terms, this group forms part of the Bengali *bhadralok*; a multivalent term that predominantly means ‘respectable people’. The *bhadralok*, over the past two-centuries have been distinguished by their refined behavior and cultivated taste, but not necessarily substantial wealth and power: a change from their traditional position as a reasonably well-off, educated and cultured status group. The *bhadralok* are now a heterogeneous group and often indigent. They still privilege education for their children and attempt to maintain a veneer of their erstwhile esteemed social status by engaging in writing, music and the arts, but the economic reality of the present has meant that the penchant for cultural pursuit (the traditional status maintainer) is disappearing. Instead, conspicuous consumption has increasingly become an important determinant of status (see Scrase 1993). It is important to note that the downward mobility of the *bhadralok* began several decades ago following the partition of Bengal and is not specifically due to globalisation.

The self-ascription of informants was often couched in terms of being lower middle class. Surprisingly some even used the Bengali term *nimno moddhabitto* (lower middle class), which suggested the same classification. Striking contrast to the real poor, other terms used were ‘ordinary folk’, or ‘common folk’, or simply, ‘those dependent on a salary’. The image of a salary earner is powerful in Bengali culture, which both suggests a distinction from manual wage work as well as earnings from trading. However, it also disguises the real incomes of those civil servants who supplement their total household income by taking bribes. During our fieldwork no one claimed that they were poor, despite their lack of material wealth. On the contrary, there were subtle attempts to distance themselves from the poor.

Despite almost a decade of radical economic reform, there remains little in the way of micro-level sociological research documenting the direct, and indirect, effects of this process of economic reforms for communities and local groups. On the whole, most studies highlight a range of macro political-economic transformations taking place in India (see Bhattacharya 1999; Nagaraj 1997; Oshikawa 1999; Pedersen 2000; Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Chandrashekar and Ghosh, 2002). With few exceptions (Lakha 1999; van Wessel 1998; 2004) there is a paucity of ethnographic research on the social consequences of changing economic relations. Moreover, it is through the ethnographic method that the respondents’ paradoxical views towards liberalisation can be revealed. Our respondents were employed as clerks, lower level professionals and administrators, and in sales and service. However, sociological attempts to operationalise class derived from occupational categories and income only partially explain the position of our informants: as suggested earlier these groups are best understood

⁴ The approximate exchange rate at the time of fieldwork was Indian Rupees (Rs) 40.00 = US\$1.00. Thus, their monthly household income ranges from US\$50-200. This concurs with research delineating the 1998-2000 income levels of the middle classes in India reported in Sridharan (2004).

as class fractions. Suffice to say that neo-Weberian and neo-Marxist accounts shed some light on the social location of a marginal middle class consisting of non-manual wage earners and low-grade technicians. Ultimately however, we do not claim that any of these definitions are completely adequate in analysing class relations in Bengal.⁵

Discourses of global efficiency and sound economic management: the dynamics of a *new neo-liberal middle class work culture*

If privatisation takes place, there will be less freedom for the workers, no matter what position they hold. When the population has been nurtured on high quality food, they cannot consume just anything that is put on their plate. It will not be suitable to your health or even palatable to your taste!
(Technical officer, educational training institute)

In the Indian setting, the question that arose in the interviews was, “how is it that some workers reproduced ideologies of work efficiency, etc, often, in the face of, and in conjunction with, countervailing life-long thinking and practices”? In answering this question we found that the notions of efficiency, privatisation and deregulation (the buzz words of the neo-liberally *inspired* workplace) were rapidly gaining a particular currency as the central motifs of the everyday language and practice of workers. This language, and related practices were becoming competitive with other “known” models of operation, and was often indicative of new sets of expectations. Obviously, the discourses, and their “ways of being”, have developed a life of their own such that they have become significantly responsible for developing new understandings of how individuals should govern themselves.

From our interviews, we found that mutually suspicious views existed among public and private sector employees. Public-sector workers equated the private sector with insecurity and exploitation while some within the formal private sector assumed that their counterparts within the public sector lacked work discipline. Such perceptions were rarely grounded in experience or knowledge of the other side. While some private sector respondents’ views were largely shaped by media discourses, the public sector workers’ critiques were mainly centred on the practices of small firms that lack the protection of government employment. Beyond these extremes were a number of differing positions: the generational divide, public sector workers’ own assertions of the need to be more efficient, and the

⁵ It has been argued that in West Bengal ‘... class stratification is imbedded to a great extent within the hierarchy of castes’ (Sinha and Bhattacharya 1969: 56). More significantly, a complex interlinkage of economic position, status and caste relations and the dynamics of political power shape the formation of social classes in West Bengal. For accounts of class formation based on detailed household statistical data, participant observation and case studies, see Chatterjee (1979: 1-31) and Bardhan (1982: 73-94).

critical consciousness of highly politicised workers. The latter's worldviews were informed by class analysis and subsequently presented a critique of the ethos of market citizenship which asserts that a broader recognition of the disadvantages stemming from privatisation and deregulation- disadvantages not just personal, but also to others.

So, how are we to understand these range of views? Harvey (1990) suggests that the promotion of the work ethic, the nobility of efficiency, productivity, and so on, have been enabled through both persuasive socialisation and coercive maintenance where the State takes a pro-active role in social production. The fundamental principle involved in the dissemination of capitalist logics, such as the deployment of ideals of "efficiency" and "flexibility", is the security and maintenance of the economic system. However this was not merely ideological imposition, but legitimation through the articulation of a common value system, despite it being the values of the dominant classes (Mouffe 1981: 230). Hall (1988), in his analysis of the Thatcher years, claimed that her Government constructed a disciplinary program to foster capitalist production around ostensibly common objectives, with, in effect, ordinary workers paradoxically consenting to their own exploitation. While profoundly contradictory this governmental program was nevertheless able to construct "unity out of difference" (1988: 166). "Common-sense" was remade, wherein the terminology of the market was "normalised" and incorporated into a broader package comprising order, family values and respectability – a package that thus formed the everyday conception of what constituted the 'national identity', and as such, the 'proper' moral perspective. For Branislav Gosovic (2000: 447-8), a type of global intellectual hegemony (GIH) has become a central characteristic of neo-liberal globalisation of the 1990's. This is perpetuated through the frequent use of particular terminology and clichés that legitimise this paradigm, imbuing it with positive qualities. In the language of GIH, neo-liberal globalisation is presented as new, modern, scientific, results orientated and inevitable. Public institutions are represented negatively as inefficient, in contrast to private institutions (2000:450, 453). He further adds (2000: 452) that individuals, particularly those who are in the service of governments, may have their own reasons for not speaking out against neo liberalism, including their desire to keep their job and obtain promotions. For Bourdieu (1998), it is out of fear that workers strive to become the *most* efficient, flexible and productive worker in an organisation. These forces are universal in their affect, "... the awareness of it never goes away: it is present at every moment in everyone's mind" (1998: 82). People feel that they are replaceable; as a result there is a definite sense that people come to regard work as a privilege, "a fragile threatened privilege", and most certainly not a right (1998: 82). Finally, Beck (2001) suggests, the ideal individual worker will take responsibility for their part in the creation of an efficient and responsible enterprise: any failure is their personal responsibility. The benefit being that individuals can feel a sense of control because they are (ostensibly) 'not passive reflections of circumstances, but active shapers of their own lives' (2001: 167).

So, we can see that in India the neoliberal rhetoric of individualism, competition and marketization acts to structure middle class perceptions of what constitutes a 'good' and 'productive' worker such that even public sector employees embrace the ideologies espoused in the hope of protecting their jobs and positions. Moreover, in terms of work, a further divide is opened-up between the manual workers and those who largely work in the service sectors and professions. While manual workers, labourers and the like become increasingly marginalised by neoliberal policies, and have little political support for their plight, the educated middle classes grumble somewhat, yet also adapt to the neoliberal world by sending their children to private, English medium schools, and reluctantly support those very parties (especially the Hindu-nationalist BJP; and the Congress) that are the prime instigators of the reforms.⁶

Gender, neo-liberalism and class

The gains for women under neoliberal reforms have been regarded as resulting from an enlightened outlook of, and cultural changes within families together with a range of ongoing political initiatives. Informants often reproduced the state's rhetoric of development and modernisation, at times explicitly drawing on the Left Front government's ideological statements concerning the necessity of incorporating women in to wage labour for their emancipation. Although research shows that there is no causal relationship between women's paid employment and status enhancement (Chanana 1996; Desai 1996; Sharma 1986; Standing 1991), the view that women can be empowered through employment holds firm sway with our informants. Women particularly challenged the belief that limited family income compels them to seek employment and they frequently expressed their feeling of increased self-confidence through gainful employment. Even those who held vague ideas about liberalisation nevertheless highlighted the strides women had made in the world of work. The idea that employment is a road to independence and rejection of the notion that women only work due to economic hardship exemplify the views of young women. Often the catch-cry is, 'Whatever job she does, small or big, she should be independent and not depend on others'.

However, despite assertions of young women that it is acceptable for girls to take up any occupation no matter how insignificant, clearly in practice this is not the case. *Bhadralok* women are still confined to a restricted range of jobs. Despite the widespread appraisal of women's employment by our informants, in reality there are still only a narrow range of work options that are available to women. The crucial difference between an earlier generation and the contemporary situation for lower middle class women is the firm belief that this class fraction is taking the lead in defying the conventional stereotypical jobs that are open to women and entering these occupations. For example, the

⁶ The main architect of the neoliberal reforms in the early 1990s, Manmohan Singh, is now the Prime Minister of India.

explanations are couched in terms of ‘women in our kind of families’ are taking up previously unacceptable jobs such as medical sales representative, shop keeper and even bus driver or tram conductor. This is qualitatively different from the upper middle class women entering male dominated high status jobs.

These accounts offer some critical challenges to the notions of female dependency, which are characteristic of familial ideologies in West Bengal (see Sen 1997). They are in part shaped by the emerging images of the assertive ‘New Woman’. According to Munshi (1998: 573) advertising discourses have constructed this new persona by ‘appropriating the discourses of traditional femininity on the one hand and liberating feminist discourses on the other’. This is not to claim the demise of gender hierarchies within families. However, these representations do challenge some aspects of traditional femininity, which women in this study questioned; and they demonstrate the powerful significance of going out to work and the meaning it has for the women. Significantly, our informants do not identify personal disadvantages resulting from the earlier New Economic Policy (hereafter NEP). Instead they wished to emphasize the deteriorating condition of the household and or the absence of any gain for their families.

However, women want to separate the current economic problems their households are facing due to the NEP and their own sense of self and the future, which can only get better. They perceive themselves to be personally better off than their mothers and aunts; they vehemently reject any idea that economic policies are holding them back. This is in part due to the corporate ideology of the household. It is important to recognize this ideology. As Kabeer (1999: 460) notes, the notion of empowerment must be cognizant of the context. Despite rising wages and employment, in circumstances where the ideology of ‘togetherness’ prevail, women do not seek to be autonomous beings, separate from their households nor is such a proposition socially acceptable. Yet, if we overlook this contextual possibility, we are likely to miss the significance of transformations taking place.

Interestingly, our informants do not recognize or readily identify any specific gender discrimination or disadvantage that have come about as a result of household budgetary restrictions. For example, no girl has had her education terminated in favor of her brother. A sister has not been forced to obtain employment, while a brother remains unemployed. This however, is entirely consistent with the gender ideology of *bhadralok* families. Unlike poor families, who may have to sacrifice a girl’s education in the hope that her brother may earn a better living due to few additional years of schooling, *bhadralok* families are prepared to support higher education of daughters, as they are consistent with culturally assigned feminine qualities of greater perseverance and patience. Girls are seen as responsible. Education also acts a means of keeping control over daughters because of the

discipline that is demanded in taking up further education. By comparison if boys are bored and unsuccessful in their studies they may drop out of college. Parents are more concerned about the idleness of daughters. Yet, this is an unfortunate and unfounded fear since young women themselves are only too keen to obtain additional training in the hope of improving their employment prospects.

While a significant proportion of respondents denied any links between conditions of women's employment and economic reforms, a few pointed out that there was better scope for women in some of the new companies emerging as a result of opening up the Indian economy to the global market. It is important to remember that the respondents were not employed in any occupations that have sprung up as a consequence of liberalisation. When asked to identify anyone in their families who had gained entry into positions in transnational firms, they were unable to do so and were speaking in abstract terms. Working women generally commented that there were entrepreneurial opportunities for women such as starting a small business. Although many of them were neither self-employed or sub-contracted by private firms, nor did they wished to be, they nevertheless believed that, 'nowadays you find housewives selling saris and cosmetics. There is always something you can do, join a private firm or start a business.' It appears that such opportunities as a result of privatization are often ideological statements emanating from the images promoted in glossy magazines and in television serials and advertisements.

During fieldwork, the following short story from a women's magazine was narrated by a number of key informants. It is emblematic of ideology of women's emerging entrepreneurial acumen. The story revolves around a housewife who has been tirelessly carrying out her domestic duties and serving the joint family. One day she confides in one of her unmarried sisters-in-law about her desire to find employment. The college-educated young woman is completely dismissive of her brother's wife's quest for paid work. Undeterred by such ridicule, the woman sets out to find a job. Secretly she attends an interview one afternoon, telling the family she is going to the cinema with her friends. She is successful in her interview. When she breaks the news to the sister-in-law, the latter exclaims, 'you have no qualifications! Who would have given you a job? All you know is how to cook'. The housewife triumphantly declares, 'That's right. It is my cooking experience that has scored me this job. I have been offered the position of catering manager in a hostel. All those of years of looking after you people and managing the family budget are indeed my qualifications'. For our informants this story was also used to stress the claims that now it is possible to move beyond the dichotomy of the elite *bhadralok* women's pursuit of high status professional occupations and poor women's financial necessity.

The public visibility of women and the freedom to pursue careers are together seen as major achievements for women within their class. They, however, sidestepped any discussion of the negative

impact of neo-liberal reforms on women's lives and gender relations. Significantly, they do not see the inequalities stemming from recent economic reforms as a problem of gender inequality for their class. On the one hand the main beneficiaries of liberalisation are considered to be the upper middle class described as, 'higher sectors of society, not people like us'. On the other hand, gender disadvantages resulting from liberalisation are attributed to 'poorer sections of society'. By comparison, their own concerns are largely couched in terms of consumerism and the commodification of women. These are in relation to the new narratives of consumption through advertising in the electronic and print media, especially glossy women's magazines. Although an overwhelming majority of our respondents subscribe to daily newspapers it is important to note that not many women bought women's magazines regularly because they were simply too expensive. They did however share these magazines around and the story narrated above by informants is one such example of shared use. More than half the number of households in our sample (54%) also subscribed to cable television. The advertisements found in magazines and cable television for the most part target women as consumers, whose decision-making within the family economy, according to marketing strategists are considered to exert influence on buying choices. The aim of these advertisements is the continual creation of desires for these products and a lifestyle.

Consumption, empowerment and modernity

The image that has strongly influenced some of our respondents' desire for consumption is the ideal home, with tastefully decorated interior and furnishings. A number of women identified the pleasure they derived from the imagery of the working wife-mother whose skills in house management and artistic flair create a stylish modern home. Such an ideal of womanhood was to be admired and emulated. However, we do not wish to overstate the extent of the current influence of commercials urging women to embrace a particular ideal of womanhood and domesticity. Being instructed in the art of home making is not a new phenomenon for our women respondents. Through gender socialization women have been already inculcated with the virtues of domestic responsibilities such as cleanliness, (including ritual cleanliness) and taught the aesthetic sense of home decoration required to achieve the effect of bright clean homes. Quite a few subscribed to and/ or read women's magazines in the pre-liberalisation era and some had undertaken domestic science courses as part of their educational training. Therefore they firmly believed in the necessity for a woman to maintain good standard of housekeeping. Many were well aware of the recurrent tips on improving housework and adhered to instructions on self-improvement, such as needlework and embroidery widely covered in women's magazines in earlier times. Indeed many homes proudly displayed a wife or daughter's artistic talents in the form of embroidered wall hangings, tablecloths and doilies. Some chose to adorn their homes with craft items such as brightly printed handloom curtains, bedspreads, cushions and a range of pottery items. The furniture in living room areas consisted of chairs and coffee tables made of painted wickerwork and bamboo. These were obtained from local handicraft fairs, street stalls and markets

where they were purchased at wholesale and discounted prices. Aware of their limited budget, these respondents were relatively content with their furnishings and interior decorations.

Another distinct group of respondents emerged who desired a range of household commodities such as the latest electronic, entertainment goods and expensive furnishings that, for them, is symbolic of the 'modern' style which they considered were lacking. While advertisers have continued to capitalize on the dominant ideologies of women's domestic roles, it is the fundamental shifts in the consumption orientation relating to the home that has greatly influenced this segment of our respondents. For this group the imagined home is an arena of leisure, a space of luxury and pleasure rather than merely a space stocked with functional consumption items to alleviate domestic drudgery.

The history of Euro-American housework demonstrates that the mass marketing of domestic appliances promoted the idea of gadgets as labour saving devices (Cowan 1983; Ehrenrich and English 1978; Oakley 1976). Yet, given the large section of working women in our sample, it is interesting to note that the acquisition of domestic appliances were not high on their agenda as the labour of domestic servants renders these commodities as non-essential. For example, 86% of households did not have a washing machine nor did they particularly wish to acquire one. A number of married couples were given a mini grinder/ food processor ('mixie') as wedding gifts but rarely used them.

While the representation of the thrifty housewife in search of cheaper brands of detergents, soaps and toothpastes resonates with the experiences of many of our respondents as they struggle to maintain the household budget, the most important object of fantasy and pleasure for this group is the glamorous woman who goes shopping. Advertising discourses that promote shopping as an enabling force empowering women have captured their imagination. One respondent who was highly critical of market mediated discourses of women's emancipation argued that,

The main role model for women is the consumer role. This is especially so for married women. Did our mothers and grandmothers find their own independence by shopping? Yes I agree, just because I'm a woman why do I have to be stuck at home all day cooking and cleaning? I can go out and do a bit of shopping. To go shopping is what they show on television: how a woman drives herself to the shops. She drives on her own to school to pick up the children. This has become the dream. Previously it was a man's responsibility to go to the market, to do the shopping. Now you see on foreign programs that it is the women who do the shopping. This is the symbol of the new modern woman!

The positive image of the woman engaged in shopping and its accompanying independence is a strange inverse of everyday life. Traditional middle class sexual division of labour requires men (or servants) to undertake daily food and grocery shopping, as the market constitutes a disagreeable outside environment from which a respectable woman must be protected. Markets are indeed unpleasant dirty spaces, which most women respondents were only too happy to avoid and devolve responsibility to men. The transformation of shopping into a desirable activity for women is alluring when the experience occurs in a department store. For some respondents it is an appealing aspect of a modern life style surrounded by luxury.

Tensions persist however, regarding the ideal ‘modern’ woman: someone attempting to improve home life through consumption or the woman who is the prudent financial manager? The conflict between these two perspectives was evident in the contrasting attitudes of two sisters in law of a joint family that had recently split up into separate nuclear households. The older sister in law had entered the workforce in the early 1980s during a time of financial crisis in the family, although at the time it was unacceptable to do so. She offered a lengthy explanation:

*When I first went to work there was a lot of tension in the family ... Eventually I persuaded my mother -in- law to allow me to work. Ever since then I have continued to work. I like it very much. The world of work broadens your horizon. Why should it be that it is only men who have access to this outside world? ... Over the years we have struggled and we have managed to get a few of the mod-cons. We now have a fridge, gas stove and there is a good solid TV that my brother gave us, when he got his job as a token of thanks to my husband. We even fitted a geyser for use in the winter months when my mother in law’s arthritis was unbearable. These were not good enough for her [younger sister in law]. She insisted on splitting up and what does she do? Getting fat and watching TV day and night while the husband has to travel 5 hours a day to and from work. **Living in a fantasy world of beauty contests and glamour homes!** (original emphasis). That place is slovenly; you see unwashed utensils in the kitchen; entho-kantaⁱ (food scraps) everywhere. She is a graduate, I am told. I had suggested she do a Montessori course and get a job. That was the source of her anger. No, staying home is just an excuse to watch serials.*

(Mrs Gita M.; aged 48)

The real reason underlying the criticism of the younger sister in law was the latter’s defiance of setting up her own household. The messy kitchen was an easy target of criticism. There was limited space to set aside for dirty dishes, which was possible within the joint household.

The younger sister in law, Rinku M. countered the rather dismissive attitude of her older counterpart by arguing that it was an unrealistic expectation to go to work with two small children under the age of five. Further she did not wish to expose her daughters to the poisonous attitudes of affines, which would occur if she went to work and would have to leave the children in the care of joint family members. She retorted by adding,

She thinks she is high and mighty. The way they live in is a dump. Have you seen the kitchen? Still using the kerosene stove even though there is gas! All that fuss over not using this and that utensil. It is positively barbaric... That dreadful [squat] toilet. I was forever anxious that one of my children was going to fall down into the pan. They could have got a commode... my mother in law had terrible arthritis. I am so pleased that we separated into our own portion of the house. We are finally free to buy things of our choice.

(Mrs Rinku M.; aged 31)

Rinku hoped one day she could create a real home of her own that reflected the styles depicted in the advertisements and serials which had the 'right smart fittings in the shower and toilets'.

These contrasting attitudes play-off certain aspects of 'modern' womanhood combined with tradition against each other. They also reflect the tensions in the desire for comfort versus luxury. For Gita to be modern implies the ability to transcend the narrow confines of the home. Entering the public world of work with men signifies her freedom from the backwardness and inferiority of the interior world. Gita's disdain towards consumption beyond one's means is comfortably reconciled with conformity to dominant norms of women's domestic responsibilities. Yet, her disapproval of Rinku for daring to dream a different domestic scenario is indicative of an earlier modern attitude towards the attainment of material comfort and maintenance of a standard of housekeeping through hard work and supervision of servants and younger women. Nevertheless this implicitly female domestic realm considered to be characterized by trivia and gossip must be subordinated to the superior public sphere. Stepping outside is the symbol of the modern progressive woman, who walks side by side with men. This echoes a discourse of nationalist and socialist modernities. By contrast for Rinku freedom is attainable through consumption while stereotypically adhering to the ideal of staying at home to look after her children. The younger sister in law's pursuit of pleasure and association of freedom through the acquisition of commodities is made possible by the availability of moderately priced, mass marketed alternatives; these include mirrors and other fittings, replicas of expensive furniture and so on. It is this group which is most influenced by the glamorous 'new woman' depicted in the advertisements and serials that has attracted most attention in the studies of the media.

Media portrayal and empowerment

The images of women portrayed in these advertisements have attracted considerable criticism concerning the impact of marketization on gender relations (Chakravarti 2000; Chaudhuri, 2001; Scrase, 2002). Utilizing empowerment as a marketing strategy advertisers combine femininity with the rhetoric of feminism and frequently depict women as highly successful independent beings who are astute consumers. Chakravarti (2000) suggests that this 'new woman,' imbued with agency is a new creation marking the arrival of a 'gender-friendly globalized market'. Curiously however, popular representation of women's freedom attainable through consumptionⁱⁱ found in these advertising narratives of corporate global media interests gloss over the underlying unequal gender relations in Indian society.

In general our respondents were highly concerned about of media representations of femininity and its consequences for gender equality. As we have argued above, while many women readily challenge the idea that liberalisation policies have not had a detrimental impact on their lives, the focal point of their critique is the visual images of femininity presented particularly in the narratives of advertising. It is here that their paradoxical attitudes towards globalisation and liberalisation assume their greatest significance. Women took extreme positions and their responses were age specific. Mainly older women argue that in promoting a consumerist ideology, television portrays derogatory and shameful images of women, which can only have a detrimental impact on women's status. Women are thus reduced to nothing more than sex objects. According to a number of our key informants the commodified femininity threatens women's status subsequently disempowering them *vis a vis* men.

Women's views differ according to their various locations within the life cycle. There is a generational divide in these responses. While most women are highly critical of the media representation of women a significant proportion do not feel demeaned as a consequence of the commodification of women; they also distinguish between these portrayals and the reality of their lives. Older women view their empowerment in terms of their responsibility within the family and the space they have negotiated to assert themselves. They often felt heartened by seeing strong female characters within popular culture or the leadership of women politicians. By comparison young women regard the glamorous liberated woman as highly desirable.

Using these new images of independent womanhood young women construct oppositional narratives of freedom from traditional patriarchal norms and challenge the gender ideologies in Bengali culture. A significant number argue that television provides a social service in promoting an ideal representation of gender relations and egalitarian conjugal relationships. Their accounts emphasize the viewers' complete freedom in exercising their choice and assert the absence of negative connotations

for women in the new media. They evoke the sentiments of constructing choice and empowerment in terms of competitive individualism and consumerism when discussing the significance of the images of women portrayed in the media. While a number of young women aspire to emulate the role model of the modern liberated woman, many feel that the image and reality do not fit within the context of contemporary Bengali society. Women in their 30s are much more ambivalent in their assessment. They point out the unreality of television advertisements in depicting the lives of women. More significantly, given their class position, they emphasized the virtual impossibility of acquiring the life styles conveyed by these images. As noted earlier, these images do not radically subvert gender relations. Nevertheless they provide a scope for a degree of assertiveness and agency, which women identify with. Findings in this study reveal that women are able to negotiate a space for themselves within their families and sometimes feel ultimately vindicated. The market forces, which promote derogatory images of women, are asserted by some and evaded by others.

Towards a Conclusion

It would be incorrect to assume that our informants espouse the business and government neo-liberal rhetoric because they are deceived by ideology. Clearly they use themes of competition and deregulation in complex ways whereby they neither reject nor accept them. In other words, our respondents do not subscribe to neo-liberal ideologies in a uniform and coherent way. A number of people have internalised the state's rhetoric of global efficiency. The influences of the changing nature of policy orientation in West Bengal are crucial to understanding the responses of people in this study. Whilst remaining critical of liberalisation, many of our informants espouse the government rhetoric of work place restructuring and global competitiveness. The particular world views and lived experiences of the lower middle class show at one level an antipathy toward liberalisation and globalisation and yet, on another, they express a desire for India, and Indians, to move forward and compete in an increasingly globalised, cosmopolitan world. Indeed, as Sridharan (2004: 424-5) has written:

The post-1991 liberalisation, however, has been sustained, even if the pace of change has been slower than many advocates of reform might have liked. Indeed, unlike many other countries that have undertaken programs of economic liberalisation, India has introduced reform very gradually. At times the pace of change has been downright glacial, with India's trade and capital regimes remaining among the more restrictive in the world. This can perhaps be explained by, among other factors, the growth of the broadest middle class since the 1980s. This has had the contradictory effect of leading to a support base for liberalisation while at the same the sheer weight of public employees and publicly subsidized agriculturists in this

economic category have served to constrain the progress of certain types of economic reforms.

A major aim in this paper has been to highlight the significance of bringing together the economic and cultural dynamics of the globalizing Indian economy and its consequences for lower middle class women and men. As we have illustrated, how these changes are received, interpreted and challenged presents a complex picture. In regards to Indian women, the simultaneous and paradoxical feeling of female empowerment, and the sidestepping of the question of gender discrimination in the New Economic Policy evident in the responses, reveals the complex interplay of modernity and female subjectivity. In this instance our findings are consistent with Vina Das' (1994) exegesis on modernity and biography of women's lives that the opposition between traditional and modern institutions has played an important role in the construction of the feminine self in India. It is apparent that in contemporary urban India, the tensions and ambiguities of this process has resulted in women ensuring that they are neither too traditional nor too modern. The cultural transformation currently taking place continually subverts and appropriates discourses of female emancipation to promote a pro-woman market. These dovetail comfortably with the neo-liberal state's rhetoric of female empowerment in its structural adjustment policies. The Bengali lower middle classes project aspects of gender equality as part of their emerging 'modern' class identity. While some opportunities have risen to challenge pre-existing gender ideologies enabling women to assert their sense of self and personal agency, ultimately their challenges are contained within the confines of patriarchal ideologies of the neo-liberal state.

This neo-liberal hegemonic project in the making presents a number of dilemmas for the respondents. The minority who were highly critical of liberalisation are concerned about the shift from social citizenship to a market citizenship. For others the future is uncertain. The middle classes in India were the main beneficiaries of the state-led development over the decades following Independence. However, since globalisation and liberalisation have emerged as the new economic dogma, a segment within these middle classes find themselves slowly losing the protection of the state, especially in terms of secure employment and a guaranteed place in a higher education institution. Women in particular emphasize that they feel increasingly insecure in terms of the well being of their families, rather than for themselves. While they welcome some aspects of globalism embodied in the 'new woman,' they don't want to lose the secure safety-net provided by the state. For women, this is a double-edged sword. Many acknowledge the state support in education and employment. While along with other family members they are at times highly critical of the state, at the same time they also want to appeal to the state. The practical gains they have made appear to have been sidelined since gender equality under market liberalisation is assumed to have arrived.

Finally, the marginalisation of India's working poor and unemployed (three quarters of its population) under the neoliberal regime raises important questions about class politics and the remaking of the Indian nation. Where once the Indian working and rural masses had, theoretically at least, access to the political democratic process via voting, active unions, and a range of progressive social movements, these have slowly been whittled away or marginalised in the new political arena shored-up by rhetoric of consumer sovereignty, media manipulation, and outright vote buying by elite and powerful lobby of business groups and bureaucratic cronies. Fernandes (2004) describes a similar process of marginalisation under neoliberalism in the context of the remaking of the urban landscape of modern Mumbai (Bombay) to cater of the needs and desires of a rising, consumer driven middle class. She refers to this process "the politics of forgetting", which

... refers to a political-discursive process in which specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible within the dominant national political culture. Such dynamics unfold through the spatial reconfiguration of class inequalities. Both middle-class groups and the state engage in a politics of forgetting that displaces the poor and working classes from such spaces. The result is the production of an exclusionary form of cultural citizenship which is, in turn, contested by these marginalised socioeconomic groups (2004: 2415).

In sum, across India the neoliberal reform process has given rise to a new form of class division, reflected in not only diverse attitudes to privatising of government sectors, women's entry into the workforce, advertising, and so on, but also in relation to the spatial restructuring of urban spaces which, in many instances, become sites of class-based, cultural contestation.

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