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## Henrike Donner (Ed.). *Being Middle Class in India: A Way of Life*. New York: Routledge, 2011

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**Henrike Donner (Ed.). *Being Middle Class in India: A Way of Life*. New York: Routledge, 2011**

Most social observers of contemporary India mention the emergence of a “middle-class”—a byproduct of the nation’s adoption of policies of “economic liberalization” in the 1990s—as a dynamic force in India’s rise as a global player. Estimates of the size, distribution, and impact of this middle-class vary, depending in part on definitions and categories of variable markers such as “discretionary income,” education, and social identity. India’s middle-classes historically arose in conjunction with colonial rule and its introduction of new forms of education and opportunity—historically also linked to the rise of nationalist resistance to that very colonial rule. *Being Middle Class in India: A Way of Life*, looks at contemporary India’s middle class through a set of case studies drawn from several different regions of the nation that examine aspects of “middleclassness” as a “way of life.”

In their introduction, Henrike Donner and Geert De Neve review patterns of the study of something called the “middle-classes” of India—defined variously by incomes, educations, cultural affinities, and life styles. The use of the plural is deliberate, as “even the most cursory glance at contemporary India reveals that the communities and individuals described as being middle-class, in fact, differ widely not only in terms of economic position and consumption practices but also in terms of status and values” (p. 3). The volume—which grew out of a 2007 conference at the University of Sussex—focuses upon “being middle-class.” Each of the essays addresses the “lived experiences” of middle class Indians, seeking not just to review incomes and consumption patterns but to examine how diverse cultural practices, values, and identities shape those experiences. Recent scholarship has emphasized the growth of consumption and consumerism since the economic liberalization of the 1990s. Say the authors, “Today, middle-class citizens belonging to different communities share not only specific cultural traits through their involvement with formal education and commodity consumption but [also], more often than not, aspirations for a distinctly urban lifestyle” (p. 16). Modern communications and media portrayals may suggest a growing homogenization of the vastness and complexity of Indian society; however, the contributors to this volume aim at a more nuanced appreciation of the variety of elements of continuity as well as the changes that mark middle class status in India today.

All but the initial chapter offers case studies of contemporary middle-class lifestyles and experiences. In the opening essay, “Masculinity, Advertising and the Reproduction of the Middle-Class Family in Western India, 1918-1940,” Douglas Haynes describes middle-class males’ anxiety about their financial responsibilities to their families, emphasizing the males’ anxiety regarding their abilities to provide such unrelated products as life insurance, health tonics, and malted milk powders (to avoid “night starvation”) (p. 36). Employing advertising agency archives and newspaper and magazine advertisements, Haynes argues that “the development of a consumer-oriented capitalism and the fashioning of masculinity [have become] closely intertwined” (p. 42).

Henrike Donner’s “Gendered Bodies, Domestic Work and Perfect Families: New Regimes of Gender and Food in Bengali Middle-Class Lifestyles” notes continuities in the role of Bengali housewives as “guardians of tradition.” Her ethnographic account of food practices and preferences reveals that discourses of food “reproduce older, caste and religious community boundaries in the form of class-based practices” (p. 67). In this context, she says, gender roles and expectations, while incorporating new elements of the consumer society, remain wedded to traditional preferences.

Geert De Neve’s “Keeping it in the Family: Work, Education and Gender Hierarchies among Tiruppur’s Industrial Capitalists,” studies an emerging group of industrial entrepreneurs of the Gounder caste in a developing Tamilnadu center for textile production. Rising Gounders seek education and sophistication while holding on to “values and moralities that are caste-based and more rural in origin.”(p74). Dramatic socio-economic mobility over the course of two generations has meant that these actors “are very much in the process of constructing new a class-based identity for themselves” (p. 75). One striking feature here of the transformation among Gounders is that not

only are young men are pushed toward higher, even foreign, education (which is consistent with Indian socio-cultural norms that value education for males), women are also being encouraged to study—even at the post-graduate level. Additionally unusual is that Gounder families, unlike those within other communities, do not promote the study of technology in the IT fields. Their perception is that the study of IT leads to jobs that ultimately require individuals to work for others. The Gounders instead promote academic fields of study that lead to economic self-sufficiency, such as business and entrepreneurialism. Despite their forward-thinking approach to education, however, some traditional notions of gender roles nonetheless remain within the Gounder community. Specifically, there is an expectation that the daughters of Gounder families will one day be married to men from within the community and that the education of women may be more a matter of status than of ultimate economic benefit. Still, many married women in the community have risen in the management of their family enterprises. For this reason, De Neve argues that “the production of middleclassness is a cultural project—and not just a material one” (p. 96).

“Cultural Contractions and Intergenerational Relations: The Construction of Selfhood among Middle Class Youth in Baroda,” by Margit van Wessel, offers a close view of the opinions, social practices, and experiences of young people in a Gujarat city. She observes, “It means something to be young” (p. 115). However, while the young may display a material and social culture of their own in styles of clothing, consumption of goods, and language usage, they retain ties to their elders’ cultural realm in such decisions as choice of marriage partners and broader senses of responsibility for the welfare of their families.

Kolkata (Calcutta) is the focus also of the chapter “Globalisation, Neoliberalism, and Middle-Class Cultural Politics in Kolkata,” by Timothy J. Scrace and Ruchira Ganguly-Scrace. In the era of economic “liberalization,” they say, many middle-class citizens perceive their status to be declining in the face of economic pressures from above and below. The chapter examines three arenas of growing conflict and anxiety within the middle class in response to such change: (1) opportunities for access to English education, (2) increased competition for suitable employment, and (3) response to the globalization of media. Culture “appears here as the signifier for wider losses among a generation that enjoyed the privileges of secure employment, pensions and educational opportunities” (p. 136). The authors’ analysis may transcend the Kolkata stage, as similar issues bedevil the cultural politics of middle-class people elsewhere in the world.

Caroline Wilson’s “The Social Transformation of the Medical Profession in Urban Kerala: Doctors, Social Mobility and the Middle Classes” documents “the role of middle-class aspirations in accelerating the transition from state socialism to market-led development in the social sectors of health and education.” Historically, the medical profession in India was open only to members of higher status communities such as the Syrian Christians, Brahmans, and Nayyars. Now, however, ambitions for social mobility have led to initiatives among lower status communities as well, including the Ezhava (a formerly “backward” Hindu community) and Muslims, for access to the training that leads to a prestigious profession like medicine. However, many medically trained<sup>1</sup> members of lower status communities like the Kerala people have taken to migration to other parts of India and—ultimately—to the countries of the Persian Gulf to pursue opportunities within the profession. Apart from the appeal of external opportunities, the prospects of a career in medicine inside Kerala are limited at best, as although the opening of private (for-profit) medical schools in India offers the appearance of opportunity, particularly to middle-class students whose family can afford the tuition, such schools offer few authentic opportunities to women. As Wilson observes, “The privatization of medical education and the system of postgraduate education discriminates considerably against women” (p. 155). Additionally at issue, ultimately, is the prospect for medical school graduates, male or female, whose degrees may confer social prestige but whose employment

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<sup>1</sup> Most notably, nurses (who are most often women) have been among those who have migrated out from their communities to other parts of India and Persian Gulf countries.

prospects offer scant economic security; the symbolic capital of being a doctor has proven to be a “blocked currency.”

Economic resources are also closely merged in the subject of Anne Waldrop’s “Kitty-Parties and Middle-Class Femininity in New Delhi.” “Kitty-parties” are social groups of female friends who sustain a rotating saving association. All participants contribute to a pool of money and in each cycle, every participant “wins” just one time. The winner’s realized savings may be employed for household expenditures, gifts for families, or for vacation travel. The convening of kitty parties began after India’s independence: middle-class women, many of whom were residing for the first time in nuclear family households, began meeting periodically; such meetings offered the women escape from isolation, and such groups continue to provide a means for women not only to save money but also to establish social networking. Waldrop suggests that beyond the rewards of the kitty itself, the “friendship and ‘exposure’” (p. 178) the meetings provide are equally important. She concludes, “The cultural markers that are used to define middleclassness are increasingly commercialized and constantly changing, creating a sense of unease and competition. In such a setting, where keeping up to date has become a never-ending process, ... ‘exposure’ is ... highly valued” among middle-class women (p. 179).

Rachel Dwyer, a recognized authority on Hindi (or Bollywood) cinema, contributes the final chapter to this volume: “Zara Hatke (‘Somewhat Different’): The New Middle Classes and the Changing Forms of Hindi Cinema.” She utilizes Bourdieu’s argument that “taste is a part of a struggle for social recognition or status...emphasizing cultural consumption rather than production” (p. 186). She uses the public’s taste in film as an example. Half a century ago, it was a fashion among educated Indian middle classes to reject the Hindi (Bollywood) films as unsophisticated (i.e. directed toward the lowest common denominator). At that time, in scattered cinemas and film clubs, alternative or “art films,” such as those of the late Satyajit Ray, were admired, yet commercially successful movies were failures among middle class audiences. This is no longer the case among India’s current middle class. Dwyer highlights major shifts in film production and consumption, as seen both in the emergence of multiplex “hatke” cinemas showing more realistic films, and the development of localized or regional Hindi films, which find new middle class audiences, both in India and, significantly, in the diaspora.

These micro-studies reveal, in the words of the editors, that “even where [the cultural] practices [of the middle classes] differ, they are producing shared cultural imaginaries that make middle-class lives in South Asia and, indeed, beyond comparable and the space of a globalized Indian middle-class culture coherent” (p. 18). Finally, the authors have taken pains to cross-reference other chapters—a feature so often missing in volumes that are born of a conference.

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