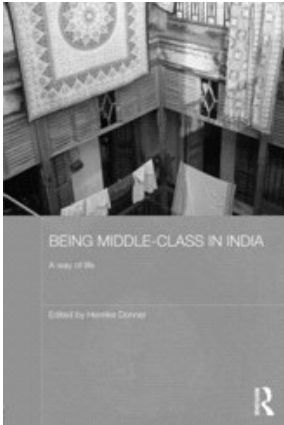


## BOOK REVIEW

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### **Being Middle-class in India: A way of life**

**Edited by :**

**Henrike Donner**

(London: Routledge), 2011

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This volume comprising an introduction by Henrike Donner and Geert De Neve and eight papers on various aspects of middle class culture in contemporary India is based on an interdisciplinary conference ‘Explorations of the Middle Classes in South Asia’ held in July 2007 at the University of Sussex. The various authors identified by paper in the review below provide an analysis of how the “middle class” (which is itself a term subject to interpretation as noted by some of the contributors) in India has evolved over time and particularly, since India’s economic liberalization in the early 1990s. The authors focus on a number of regions of India and the book emphasizes the differences in conception of the middle class even across regions given the diversity and historical cultural distinctions that have shaped the evolution of the group in those regions.

The Introduction provides an overview of the volume and the two authors mentioned above begin by noting the difficulty of even delineating the category of “middle class” in India, especially given the many

changes that have occurred in the post-liberalization era. It is noted that the early conception of the category can be traced to its colonial roots as the main driver of progressive change and that early research on the middle class focused on caste, migration and urbanization patterns after Independence and the educational and occupational choices of the group. But, the authors point to the “invisibility” of the middle class category in academic research after the 1980s possibly because of the fact that conceptions of class generally gave way to concerns about the nation state and nationalism, generally. This has led to the absence of much writing on “the culture of the middle class, its lifestyles, and consumption habits, political views and domestic arrangements in post-Independence India”. The current volume represents one of the efforts to correct this and it focuses extensively on how these aspects have changed in post-liberalization India across several regions and communities. An interesting point made by the authors is that until liberalization, “middleclassness” meant an exclusive focus on public servants and the

professional class (lawyers, doctors, employees of private firms etc.) with little attention to business communities, for example. The Green Revolution with the attendant increase in wealth among rural communities followed by economic liberalization has led to the growth of Hindu nationalism and has led to greater status and claims for political influence by previously underrepresented groups which in turn has led to a more homogenous conception of the “middle class” across regions and groups in India beyond just the “old” middle classes. This is, of course, not to say that differences do not occur across regions because of language, religion and ethnicity and several chapters in the volume do focus on these differences but the authors also contend that there are commonalities in “middleclassness” across the country and these “play out in relation to consumption patterns, gender relations and women’s autonomy.” The authors refer to the papers in the volume as “case studies” and they are mostly based on detailed research often incorporating participant observation over extended periods of time.

The first paper in the volume by Douglas Haynes focuses on a historical (1918-1940) view of masculinity, advertising and the reproduction of the middle class in Western India. To this reviewer who comes from the academic discipline of marketing, the paper presents an interesting analysis of how early advertising helped in the forging of “a modern and middle class masculinity” between the First and the Second World Wars – a period of time during which large businesses in India began “to formulate more sophisticated advertisements geared towards generating a consumer base among the educated employees of the colonial administration and private companies.” The focus of this advertising was upon ideals of “modern conjugality” promoting the heterosexual bonds between husband and wife while “holding husbands solely responsible for the biological, economic and social reproduction of the nuclear family”, which was becoming central to the

self-definition of the middle class. The paper analyzes advertisements for three commonly promoted products/services in that period of time – Insurance, Horlicks (a malted milk powder) and Tonics. As can be seen from the themes promoted in these advertisements, the central aim of the advertiser was not so much to promote conspicuous consumption as to raise an anxiety about male obligations towards the family. Even when advertisements were directed towards women and children, the concern was mostly about how women could take better care of their children or make themselves more attractive to their husbands further emphasizing the importance of the nuclear family in the emerging middle class consciousness in Western India, a region which often led other parts of the country in social trends.

The remaining seven papers in the volume focus on contemporary trends in middle class life in post-liberalization India describing various regions and communities to show both cultural/regional differences in how the middle class manifests itself across these areas/groups but also how there are some commonalities that reflect the expanded view of today’s middle class beyond the “elitist” view of the group that prevailed in the early days after independence. Henrike Donner, in her paper on the role of gender and food in contemporary Bengali middle-class lifestyles notes that given the strong traditions of the middle class in the state which dates back to the independence movement and before, the Bengali house-wife continues to be the “guardian of tradition” and while husbands and children may eat meat both at home and in restaurants (including Western fast food outlets), the family meal prepared by the women would still be largely vegetarian (sometimes even excluding fish which is traditionally an integral part of Bengali cuisine). It is also observed that Bengali married women continue to practise an austere lifestyle and dress traditionally in saris and are less likely to

work outside the house. The paper by Geert De Neve on a newly formed group of wealthy industrialists in the southern Indian town of Tiruppur provides a contrasting view of how the middle class there is very different from that in Bengal because it dates mainly to the 1970s and to the growth of the garment export trade in which Tiruppur specializes. The Gounder community which is dominant in the city mainly operates family businesses but given its recent success and exposure to the world, the men are often educated outside of the area and have often studied abroad. Women on the other hand, while also increasingly educated locally, tend to join the family business and today work outside the house in important positions. Given the closely knit community in a single town and its surroundings, marriages are still largely arranged and “marrying locally makes it easier to combine the demands of modern business with the reproduction of family status through rituals, visits and celebrations.”

In her description of how middle class youth in the western Indian city of Baroda view themselves, Margit van Wessel emphasizes that these youth inhabit a culture of their own in terms of clothing styles, consumption patterns and language and yet, do not construct their own cultural universe as separate from that of elders. So, while these youth challenge tradition and authority, they do realize the importance of inter-generational responsibilities and for this reason, in decisions like the choice of marriage partners, whether they choose their own partner or submit to the traditional arranged marriage approach, they are acutely aware of their responsibility to serve their elders and to take care of their parents. Timothy J. Scrase and Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase in their analysis of globalization, neoliberalism and middle-class cultural politics in Kolkata point to some of the unique effects of the expansion of the middle class and how the lower middle class in the city tries “to redress their declining status in the face of increasing disparities within the

middle classes.” While the lower middle class sees many positive aspects of the new media, they are concerned about some of the challenges posed by the media to the feminist struggle and to their “Bengaliness” with the increasing importance of both English and of Hindi programs. There was also some concern about the emphasis on individualism which seems to promote business proprietors, entrepreneurs and professions and runs counter to the lower middle class preference for collective action.

The last three papers in the volume focus on three specific views of the middle class as they emerge from an analysis of the medical profession in Kerala, the practice of kitty-parties among middle class women in New Delhi and of changing forms in Hindi (Bollywood) and regional cinema. Caroline Wilson in her paper on the medical profession in Kerala notes that with the general expansion of the middle class, there has been a corresponding increase in the number of people in Kerala and elsewhere who aspire to professional qualifications in medicine and engineering with the former being considered generally more prestigious than the latter. It is also noted that while previously, the medical profession was generally open only to the more affluent communities (Nairs, Christians etc.), opportunities have now opened up for formerly excluded groups such as Muslims and the lower caste Ezhavas. Of course, the limited employment potential within the state has meant that a number of medical graduates have migrated to the developed countries of the West and more recently to the Gulf. For those who remain within the state of Kerala, most have to stay in the public health system and their rewards are considerably less in relation to the investment in time and money to acquire their qualifications. While young doctors continue to have high symbolic capital and male doctors, particularly, can command high dowries in marriage, the majority of young doctors, and especially female doctors would find it hard to

justify their investment in their qualifications given that newer industries such as information technology can provide very attractive remuneration further reducing the medical profession's status and income.

Anne Waldrop's paper on kitty-parties in New Delhi describes the practice of urban middle class women meeting periodically to participate in a social networking exercise over a meal where they also have a drawing from a "kitty" which is a pool of money to which each of the women has contributed. While the practice dates back to the 1940s and 1950s, in recent times, it has taken on a more social and feminist importance than the "forced savings" aspect of the original kitty party. It is now seen as a socially acceptable way for middle to older aged housewives to get away periodically from their lonely lives to meet with their peers and exchange cooking tips and other information such as information about children who may be available for marriage etc. The actual money collected by any individual housewife at a particular meeting of the group is employed mainly for household purchases, gifts for husbands or for travel with them for vacation thus providing another social rationale for participation in the kitty party. The final paper on Hindi (Bollywood) and some other regional films by Rachel Dwyer looks at the evolution of Indian cinema where traditional Bollywood cinema was rejected by the old middle classes as "commercial" and directed towards lower middle class sensibilities but in recent times has developed a genre called "hatke" or multiplex cinema which has a different style, content and is aimed at a metropolitan, elite group of Indians. These films reject the typical melodrama of Bollywood films and have more of a realist narrative. Simultaneously, there has been growth in a narrower, localized form of Hindi cinema which is often developed directly for video/CD distribution and is directed at the low end of the market. While there are clear distinctions across these genres of Hindi cinema and their appeal may vary to some extent across classes in society, the cultural appeal seems broadly

towards the middle classes and with the greater distribution through the digital format and the general growth in the middle class, their reach is likely to increase.

### **Summary**

While the volume does not have a concluding section from the editors and the various papers also explore too many different aspects of middle class life in India to summarize in brief, the papers as a whole provide a fascinating picture of how a large and diverse country like India is evolving in terms of its middle class. Economic liberalization in the early 1990s has clearly expanded the ranks of India's middle class and with the anticipated continuing opening of the market to external influences, it is certain that the papers in this volume provide only a snapshot at a point of time and the subject will provide continued opportunities for research in the coming decades. From the point of view of this reviewer who comes from a narrow perspective of the applied academic discipline of marketing, the papers provide an insightful look at major changes in the characteristics of a developing country's middle class population. For this reason, the volume should be of interest not only to social scientists but also to practitioners of marketing and advertising.

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### **Authors' Profile**

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