

# *The Pleasures and Anxieties of Being in the Middle: Emerging Middle-Class Identities in Urban South India\**

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## **Abstract**

Recent economic changes in India have coincided with a dramatic change in the concept of a ‘middle class’ in the south Indian city of Madurai. Whereas previous sets of class identities were overwhelmingly dichotomous (for example, the rich and the poor, or the ‘big people’ and ‘those who have nothing’), the middle class has now become a highly elaborated component of local class structures and identities. It is also a contested category; moreover, its indigenous boundaries differ from those most often used by scholars, marketers, or policy-makers. Drawing from research over the past decade, this paper examines local definitions of ‘middleness’ and the moralized meanings ascribed to it. Whilst being ‘in the middle’ is a source of pride and pleasure, connoting both achievement and enhanced self-control, it is simultaneously a source of great tension, bringing anxiety over the critical and damaging scrutiny of onlookers. For each positive aspect of a middle-class identity that emphasizes security and stability, there is a negative ramification or consequence that highlights the precariousness and

\* Because this paper draws from a decade of research, it has benefited from the help of a large number of people. Here I want to thank the most direct contributors. This paper was first presented in 2004 at the University of Iowa Workshop on Lived Experience, Mediated Representations and Rapid Economic Growth: South and East Asia, 1980–2000, where Whitney Kelting and Santhi Hejeebu provided extensive critiques that were fundamental in my early revisions of the work. Susan Bell has read multiple drafts and discussed the research at length with incisive insight, and an anonymous reader for *Modern Asian Studies* raised provocative questions that helped me to develop discussions of the relationship between class and caste. P. Velraj and R. Revathi provided substantial field research assistance. Others who provided major support of various kinds include Trudy DeLong, Marion Dickey, Stephanie Dickey, Ward Dickey, A. Dinakar, Pamela Edgerton, Robert Gardner, Premila Paul, R. P. Nair, Arun Raja Selvan, and Thangam Srinivasan. Grants for fieldwork and writing have been provided by the American Institute of Indian Studies (1999–2000 and 2008–2009), the National Endowment for the Humanities (2000), and Bowdoin College.

potential instability of middle-class life. In exploring each of these aspects, I pay attention to the explicitly performative features of class identities. I conclude by considering the epistemological and experiential insights we gain into the construction of emergent class categories by focusing on self-ascribed identities and their performance.

## Introduction

What does it mean to view oneself as a middle-class person in urban India? The ‘middle class’ has been portrayed as a powerful social and political actor in India, particularly since the formal advent of economic liberalization in 1991. As Desai notes, the Indian middle class ‘seems to have caught the public’s imagination’.<sup>1</sup> Yet we know little about how the middle classes see themselves and how they experience their lives as middle-class people. It may even be argued that we know little about who these middle-class people are, given the epistemological as well as ethnographic gaps in scholars’ understandings of India’s urban middle classes.

In Madurai, a city in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu, residents view the middle class as a desirable place to be. Those who see themselves as middle-class also talk about their class position, however, as a markedly uneasy and unstable place. Their accounts emphasize the *centrality* of the middle class—at once a position of social visibility and worth, a stage on which to be judged by critical spectators, and a site that simultaneously avoids, buffers, and is caught between behavioural extremes—and this location contributes greatly to both the pleasures and the anxieties of being a middle-class person. Yet while middle-class people use the metaphor of place, as I have just done, there is little stasis in their descriptions of class experiences; rather, they emphasize the continuous need to perform behaviours that will support their claims to class standing. Thus, as the growth of India’s middle class is lauded and its economic, political, and ideological power is trumpeted, the view from the ground is less sanguine.

In this paper I examine the meanings and experiences ascribed to being in the middle class in Madurai, drawing from research carried out between 1999 and 2009. I focus on the accounts of people who

<sup>1</sup> Sonalde Desai, ‘The Middle Class’, in Kaushik Basu, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Economics in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 345–347 at p. 345.

*call themselves* ‘middle class’—a somewhat different set of people than those whom analysts include in this category, since many of those who claim middle-class identity in Madurai fall below the lower boundaries of objective definitions. My attention to subjective identities is a result of how I came to the topic. Although I have studied class relations and identities in Madurai since 1985, I was sceptical of the early fanfare over the growth of the Indian middle class. Despite the increased visibility of this class in India’s national imaginary, as well as in media representations by other nations whose governments and manufacturers were eager for a liberalized Indian economy, reliable statistical documentation of middle-class growth took years to appear. Over time, however, I became persuaded of the significance of the middle class by a different kind of evidence: the increase in the number of Madurai residents who identified themselves as middle class.

Between 1985 and 1987, when I carried out research on class and film-watching in Madurai, I met almost no one who identified themselves as middle-class or who even recognized such a category. This was due in part to my social networks, which were concentrated in lower-class neighbourhoods, but it also reflected the scant recognition then given to an intermediate class by the majority of the population. Several years later, whilst doing research on domestic service relationships in 1991–1992, I interviewed a number of people who recognized the middle class as part of Madurai’s class structure. All of these individuals saw themselves as either middle or upper-class, and they were overwhelmingly English-speakers. On the other hand, those who described themselves as poor (almost all of whom spoke only Tamil) still recognized only two class categories in the city: the poor and the rich, or ‘those who have’ and ‘those who do not’. By the time I returned in 1999, however, even poor people spoke of a class structure that comprised at least three parts, one of which was a middle class. Moreover, for the first time I heard many Tamil-speakers refer to themselves as *naṭuttaramānavarkaḷ* (middle people) or as belonging to a *naṭuttara kuṭumpam* (middle family), terms that had not been part of everyday speech in 1991–1992. These ‘middle class’ and ‘middle people’ identifications have continued in use since the late 1990s.

Such observations suggest that the middle is a much more widely recognized class category than it was in the early 1990s, and that more people identify with it than in the past. In short, ‘middle classness’ has become socially more significant, and culturally more elaborated, over the past two decades in Madurai. Few, if any, objective features of income, occupation, education, consumer goods, housing, or leisure

practices, however, can be used to define the middle class in Madurai. Indeed, because of my focus on self-ascribed identity, this ‘middle class’ is even more heterogeneous than the Indian ‘middle class’ that others have described as fragmented and divided.<sup>2</sup> The only features that unite middle-class people in Madurai are their claim to the identity, the types of indicators they use to substantiate that identity, and the striking behavioural and attitudinal ramifications that attend it.

Sherry Ortner has noted that ‘we may think of class as something people are or have or possess, or as a place in which people find themselves or are assigned, but we may also think of it as a project, as something that is always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired’.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, I take class to be not only a determining structure<sup>4</sup> but also a process that produces and is produced by interactions of individuals’ and groups’ economic, cultural, and social capital.<sup>5</sup> These different forms of capital derive to some extent from one another, but none is entirely reducible to any other.<sup>6</sup> I am interested in both the routine and the monumental practices by which capital is produced, but in this paper, I focus especially on the former. As Herring and Agarwala note, ‘at the micro level, where all of us live, are the day-to-day practices through which classes define and reproduce themselves’.<sup>7</sup> These ‘micro-level’ practices have great impact on the more singular events that affect class and life chances in urban India, such as educational decisions, marriage negotiations, and occupational choices. Class is not the only source of power in Madurai, as I discuss below, but it is a primary determinant of respect and of the distribution of social, cultural, and economic resources.

<sup>2</sup> Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003); Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller, ‘Hegemonic Aspirations: New Middle Class Politics and India’s Democracy in Comparative Perspective’, *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 4: 495–522 (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Sherry Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of ’58* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke, 2003), pp. 13–14.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Herring and Rina Agarwala, ‘Introduction’, *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 4: 323–356 (2006), p. 325.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Forms of Capital’, in John G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1986); Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming*.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Minna Säävälä, ‘Low Caste but Middle-Class: Some Religious Strategies for Middle-Class Identification in Hyderabad’, *Contributions to Indian Sociology (n.s.)* 35, 3: 293–318 (2006), p. 303.

<sup>7</sup> Herring and Agarwala, ‘Introduction’, p. 347.

Listening to middle-class people talk about their lives quickly creates an awareness of the extent to which these people see themselves as performing an identity. I view their identity construction as ‘performative’ not in Butler’s sense of performativity, in which identities are naturalized and made real by reiteratively acting them out,<sup>8</sup> nor in Turner’s sense of the reflexive self-observation occasioned by social dramas,<sup>9</sup> but—going back further in social science theory—in line with Goffman’s notion of the dramaturgical. In this perspective, people, all with greater and lesser degrees of self-consciousness at different times, merge ‘selves’ with the ‘masks’ of social roles and, with consequences that are central to my analysis, see themselves as *acting* a part. The accounts of people in all class positions in Madurai reveal a direct attention to themselves as more or less secure or anxious actors, and to others as their evaluating audience. Middle-class people describe an even more heightened sense of being on a stage than do people of other classes. As in Goffman’s discussions, there is a sense of both ‘cynical’ and ‘sincere’ performances, and especially a sense of the ‘fragility’ of performance.<sup>10</sup> This sense of being an actor—and of having an audience—is key to the precariousness expressed in subjective accounts of class.

As I have noted, the set of people who *call themselves* middle-class overlaps only partially with those people whom analysts have conventionally identified as middle class. In particular, even where analytical definitions are nuanced and precise, and differentiate carefully between, for example, the ‘new’ or ‘new-rich’ or ‘transnational’ middle class and the ‘lower’ or ‘local’ portion of this class,<sup>11</sup> the set of self-identified middle-class residents of

<sup>8</sup> See especially Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Victor Turner, ‘Liminality and the Performative Genres’, in John J. MacAloon, ed., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* (Philadelphia: ISHI, 1984), pp. 19–41. See also Louisa Schein, ‘Performing Modernity’, *Cultural Anthropology* 14, 3: 361–395 (2006).

<sup>10</sup> See especially Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Revised Edition (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 19, 56, 252–253.

<sup>11</sup> Examples include Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love: Sexuality and Romance in Modern India* (New York: Cassell, 2000); Deshpande, *Contemporary India*; Steve Derné, ‘Globalization and the Making of a Transnational Middle Class: Implications for Class Analysis’, in Richard P. Applebaum and William I. Robinson, eds, *Critical Globalization Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 177–186; Leela Fernandes, *India’s New Middle Class* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006); Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller, ‘Hegemonic Aspirations: New Middle Class Politics and India’s Democracy in Comparative Perspective’, *Critical Asian Studies*

Madurai includes many people who fall below the lower limits of these definitions of middle class ('lower' in terms of occupational rank, income, material property, education, consumer goods, or dominantly valued cultural capital). (Those at the upper end of the middle class, however, correspond closely with the upper limits of analysts' categories.) It will also become clear that those at the high and the low ends of the spectrum in Madurai do not agree that all the others belong. Despite this lack of correlation with analytical categories and the lack of local consensus on who properly belongs in the middle class, those people who identify themselves as such report a highly consistent set of criteria for middle-class membership, and of experiences resulting from their class identity.

There is a large literature debating the effects of liberalization in India, though little of it, until recently, has drawn upon ethnographic evidence. Thus while numerous studies assess the effects of liberalization on the middle class and other groups or categories of Indian society, only a few analyses draw extensively from the opinions of middle-class people themselves,<sup>12</sup> or examine the nature of middle-class people's responses to economic liberalization.<sup>13</sup>

38, 4: 495–522 (2006); John Harriss, 'Middle-Class Activism and the Politics of the Informal Working Class: A Perspective on Class Relations and Civil Society in Indian Cities', *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 4: 445–465 (2006); C. J. Fuller and HariPriya Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals and the New-Rich Middle Class in Chennai (Madras)', *Modern Asian Studies* 41, 1: 121–150 (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Examples of those that do so include Rajni Kothari, *Poverty: Human Consciousness and the Development of Amnesia* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Zed, 1995); Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *India: Development and Participation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Anjan Chakrabarti and Stephen Cullenberg, *Transition and Development in India* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Desai, 'Middle Class'; and Barbara Harriss-White and Anushree Sinha, eds, *Trade Liberalization and India's Informal Economy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> For examples of those that do so see Leela Fernandes, 'Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* XX, 1 & 2: 88–104 (2000); Fernandes, *New Middle Class*; Timothy J. Scrase, 'Television, the Middle Classes and the Transformation of Cultural Identities in West Bengal, India', *International Communication Gazette* 64, 4: 323–342 (2002); Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, 'Paradoxes of Globalization, Liberalization, and Gender Equality', *Gender & Society* 17, 4: 544–566 (2003); Margit van Wessel, 'Talking about Consumption: How an Indian Middle Class Dissociates from Middle-Class Life', *Cultural Dynamics* 16, 1: 93–116 (2004); and Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy J. Scrase, 'Hegemony, Globalisation, and Neoliberalism: The Case of West Bengal, India', in Richard Howson and Kylie Smith, eds, *Hegemony: Studies in Consensus and Coercion* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 184–200.

Middle-class Madurai residents' reactions to the economic changes over this period are mixed. The predominant experiences they report are not the sort usually measured in studies of liberalization. The accounts of Madurai residents document shifting sets of economic possibilities in their lives. They also suggest how complicated the impacts of economic changes may be on a sense of well-being. Examining these accounts reveals the ways in which everyday life experiences are shaped by socioeconomic structures and histories, as well as emerging class identities. While numerous scholars agree that new middle-class formations are underway in India, this focus on local definitions of class identities suggests why we need to re-imagine different ways of learning about class, which class contours are most relevant in specific communities, and what consequences for everyday lives are involved in the emergence of new class formations. This paper is hardly a rejection of previous approaches to class—as will become clear, I rely on a number of theoretical models and types of data to understand the processes impinging on lives in Madurai—but it is an invitation to consider what else we may learn by examining emic categories and local perceptions of class identities and differences.

The following section provides brief overviews of the impacts of economic liberalization in India and of scholarly representations of the Indian middle classes. I then move to Madurai residents' own definitions of the middle class, the self-images they construct, and their accounts of the good and the bad of middle-class life. In conclusion I consider the insights we gain into the construction of emergent class categories by focusing on self-ascribed identities and their performance.

### **Economic liberalization and the middle class in India**

The timing of the perceptual shifts I have outlined in Madurai—the new consensus that a middle class exists, the impression that the middle class is growing, and the frequency with which people identify themselves as middle class—coincides directly with changes in the Indian economy introduced in the 1980s and developed extensively in the 1990s. Liberalization prompted a number of changes that have affected members of the middle class, most of them related to consumption and employment. Loosened import restrictions have allowed a wider range of consumer goods, and changes in banking policies have made loans and thus durable capital investments far

more available to middle-class people.<sup>14</sup> Opening the economy to foreign investment and foreign corporations has created new types of private-sector employment in India, including prestigious managerial and information technology positions as well as lower-level service positions. Public-sector salaries were raised substantially in 1997, while personal income tax rates have been reduced.

India's middle classes are frequently portrayed as the primary beneficiaries of these economic policies, largely due to their growing purchasing power and the simultaneous increase in the quality and availability of the consumer goods for which they constitute the major market. Yet despite the significant increases in measures of national wealth, including GDP and GNI per capita,<sup>15</sup> the benefits of economic growth have been more narrowly distributed than is often assumed. Some members of the conventional middle class (including civil servants, professionals, and business owners), primarily its wealthiest segment, have benefited financially from liberalization policies. This group has been widely showcased as proof of India's successful modernization and globalization.<sup>16</sup> As several analysts have noted, however, the effects of liberalization have in fact been mixed for middle and lower classes alike.<sup>17</sup> For example, many public sector enterprises, such as life insurance and banking, have been privatized, making quintessentially secure middle-class jobs vulnerable to the uncertainties of private sector employment. And recent data indicate that, while education levels are rising and the pay in some white-collar jobs is higher, the actual *number* of these jobs has not shown

<sup>14</sup> Most middle-class people previously had to rely on extremely high-interest loans from local moneylenders for major expenditures such as motorcycles, new houses, business equipment, and dowries. In Madurai, local moneylenders typically charge 10 per cent interest per month; on very short-term loans, the rate can be as high as 10 per cent per day.

<sup>15</sup> World Bank, 'India at a Glance', [http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/ind\\_aag.pdf](http://devdata.worldbank.org/AAG/ind_aag.pdf) (2008) [accessed 20 April 2011]; World Bank, 'India, Development Indicators', [http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports/ViewSharedReport?REPORT\\_ID=9147&REQUEST\\_TYPE=VIEWADVANCED&WSP=N&HF=N/CPProfile.asp](http://ddp-ext.worldbank.org/ext/ddpreports/ViewSharedReport?REPORT_ID=9147&REQUEST_TYPE=VIEWADVANCED&WSP=N&HF=N/CPProfile.asp) (2008) [20 April 2011].

<sup>16</sup> See Leela Fernandes, 'Nationalizing "The Global": Media Images, Cultural Politics and the Middle Class in India', *Media, Culture & Society* 22, 5: 611–628 (2000); Fernandes, 'Restructuring'; Salim Lakha, 'The State, Globalisation and Indian Middle-Class Identity', in Michael Pinches, ed., *Culture and Privilege in Capitalist Asia* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Jayati Ghosh, 'Gender Concerns in Macro-Economic Policy', *Economic and Political Weekly* 29, 18: WS-2–WS-4 (30 April 1994); Kothari, *Poverty*; Fernandes, 'Restructuring'; Desai, 'Middle Class'; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 'Hegemony'.



any significant growth, resulting in increased competition for more lucrative positions.<sup>18</sup> The ambiguous, and ambivalent, effects of liberalization policies are reflected in the everyday tensions reported by middle-class people in Madurai.

### Characterizing the middle class

Estimates of the size of India's middle class (or middle classes) vary from 50 millions to 350 millions (roughly 5 per cent to 35 per cent of the population), though there is growing agreement that the higher figures are greatly exaggerated.<sup>19</sup> Size and composition depend on how the middle class is defined and which data are used to measure it.<sup>20</sup> The wide variety of characteristics used by analysts to identify an Indian middle class include income, durable property and assets, occupation, structural position (typically, relation to the means of production), consumption ability and/or expenditure, cultural and social capital, and attitudes.

John Harriss provides an unusually detailed delineation of the Indian urban middle class. Because of its useful precision, and because Harriss's approach to the concept of class coincides generally with mine, his description helps to highlight the contrasts with the contours of the group of people who self-identify as middle-class in Madurai. Harriss argues that the urban middle class

includes increasing numbers of highly paid professional people, managers and executives, white collar workers, and intellectuals—and the mass of petty traders and producers, as well. . . [It comprises] those disposing of significant cultural capital—which may consist of particular types of *identities* (in terms

<sup>18</sup> Desai, 'Middle Class'. Using data from the National Sample Surveys, Desai notes that 'among 30- to 50-year-old men with higher secondary and college education, the likelihood of obtaining a white-collar job was about 0.73 in 1983, but it had dropped to 0.43 by 2000; the comparable likelihood for women dropped from 0.38 in 1983 to 0.24 in 2000' (Desai, 'Middle Class', p. 346).

<sup>19</sup> For example, Achin Vanaik, 'Consumerism and New Classes in India', in Sujata Patel, Jasodhara Bagchi, and Krishna Raj, eds, *Thinking Social Science in India: Essays in Honour of Alice Thoner* (New Delhi: Sage, 2002), pp. 227–235 at p. 228; Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, p. 134; William Mazzarella, *Shoveling Smoke: Advertising and Globalization in Contemporary India* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 264–265.

<sup>20</sup> For the difficulties of measuring the middle classes in India with existing data, see Desai, 'Middle Class', p. 345; Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, pp. 132–133; and E. Sridharan, 'The Growth and Sectoral Composition of India's Middle Class: Its Impact on the Politics of Economic Liberalization', *India Review* 3, 4: 405–428 (2004).

of caste, community, or region) and *competences* (educational, linguistic, or other social skills—usually including a facility in English)—and who have some property or relatively well-paid salaried or professional employment, and who are consequently generally somewhat better off than the majority of people in Indian society.<sup>21</sup>

I used a similar working definition of the middle class in my own research on domestic workers and their employers in the early 1990s. I argued in addition that ‘domestic service itself provides one of the clearest markers of class distinctions. The ability to hire servants is a sign of having achieved middle- or upper-class status’.<sup>22</sup> Employing domestic workers is no longer, however, a defining feature of middle-class standing or identity in Madurai. This shift provides a telling indicator of the changes in class boundaries. In the socioeconomic gap between people who can afford to *employ* domestic workers and those whose economic insecurity requires them or their family members to *become* domestic workers, lie a large number of people who most likely saw themselves as poor in 1991, but who may see themselves as ‘middle class’ or ‘middle people’ now—although they still cannot afford to employ servants. These people are not accounted for in most definitions and analyses of the middle class, even those as inclusive and finely detailed as Harriss’.

Who, then, makes up the middle class in Madurai? Having come to this question by hearing people talk about themselves and others as middle class, my purpose is to gain a sense of what it means to see oneself as a middle-class person in a period of recent economic change. To begin to answer this question, I will first examine other hierarchies that affect class, local class terminologies, and the range of people who call themselves middle class, and then explore more closely how these people define the middle class and differentiate it from other classes.

Madurai is a city of approximately one million residents, a market centre for the surrounding agricultural region and for other trade, and the administrative centre for the district. It has some light industry, but lacks the heavy industry found in other South Indian cities such as Coimbatore or Tiruppur, and the information-technology firms of Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai. It is generally seen as more conservative and less modern than these cities, whose

<sup>21</sup> Harriss, ‘Middle-Class Activism’, p. 447.

<sup>22</sup> Sara Dickey, ‘Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India’, *American Ethnologist* 27, 2: 462–489 (2000), p. 466.

urban infrastructures, job opportunities, entertainment, fashions, and diverse populations make them more cosmopolitan and sophisticated. Madurai is also, however, viewed as more ‘advanced’ than its surrounding villages, and most of its residents would like to be seen as modern people. Its location on local scales of modernity shapes the operative signs of class distinction in the city.<sup>23</sup>

Class identities and relations in Madurai will also vary somewhat from those in other Indian cities because of their specific interactions with other sources of power and identity, particularly political ties and caste. Party allegiance and other political connections may improve access to jobs, to financial resources (such as contracts or social service programmes), and to organized physical force. More central to the present discussion is caste, or *jāti*, which—like class—operates simultaneously as a form of identity and a system of hierarchy and inequality. *Jātis* are hereditary and endogamous. Except in rare cases, neither a person’s caste, nor that caste’s relative ranking, can be changed within a person’s lifetime. Although caste and class are somewhat overlapping hierarchies, they are viewed locally as distinct systems of ranking. Within small-scale communities such as neighbourhoods and schools, most people know each other’s *jāti*, but the markers of caste are less visible than those of class, and class is often more relevant in everyday urban interactions.

Nonetheless, caste relates to class in diverse ways. Recent studies document the enduring, albeit imperfect, correlation between a family’s caste and class rankings.<sup>24</sup> Caste is relevant to my discussion of class in this paper for several reasons. These include its impact on members’ attitudes toward consumption and on the value placed on education, the historical privileges of and discrimination against particular castes that continue to affect access to education and occupations, and the ability (or inability) of caste identity to compensate for downward fluctuations in class standing.

<sup>23</sup> Thus the key criteria by which young men in Bangalore’s entry-level information technology positions distinguish themselves (for example, data entry versus software development, or employment by Indian versus multinational firms) are rarely relevant in Madurai (Nicholas Nisbett, ‘Friendship, Consumption, Morality: Practising Identity, Negotiating Hierarchy in Middle-Class Bangalore’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (n.s.), 13, 4: 935–950 [2007], p. 947). Coimbatore residents who had moved to the city from Madurai remarked on the comparatively sophisticated level of fashion and technological consumption used to establish class standing throughout their new city.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Deshpande, *Contemporary India*; Desai, ‘Middle Class’.

Caste groups vary in their attitudes toward consumption—such as which kinds of consumer goods and practices are most valuable and prestigious, and particularly the extent to which those goods and practices should be displayed and enacted in public and at home. The standard characterizations of individual castes' consumption practices are in the realm of stereotypes, but they were expressed both by members of the castes themselves and by outsiders. Brahmans, for example, who rank at the top of the caste hierarchy—but on the whole are somewhat below the top of the Madurai class structure—are said to avoid public display of their wealth and to have muted tastes in personal and domestic fashions. Some sub-castes of the Chettiars, a high-ranked caste and one of the two wealthiest communities in Madurai, are stated to display their jewellery and expensive fashions in abundance at weddings, but often to skimp on luxuries in their homes and in daily life. Thevars put much of their wealth into their daughters' dowries, especially in gold, and some people said that Thevars' public dress and grooming may make them appear to be lower in class than they actually are.

Different castes also tend to value education differently. Brahmans, for example, have a long history of extensive education, having been incorporated early on into British colonial administration; and Nadars, who rank very low in the caste system, have used education since the nineteenth century to improve their economic circumstances and their overall social standing (originally by establishing their own schools, since they were not allowed to study with higher castes). There is also continuing evidence that caste affects effective access to education. Dalit children continue to be markedly discriminated against by teachers in some schools,<sup>25</sup> and schools established by specific castes often give preferential admission or scholarships to students of that caste.

Caste also appears to affect access to occupations that differ on the prestige scale. Whilst most people in Tamil Nadu do not carry out their caste's 'traditional' occupation (if they ever did), occupations can be associated with castes in statistically significant ways.<sup>26</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan have argued that Brahman men and women work in software and other high-status institutional technology in numbers that are highly disproportionate to their presence in the state's

<sup>25</sup> Sonalde Desai and Veena Kulkarni, 'Changing Educational Inequalities in India in the Context of Affirmative Action', *Demography* 45, 2: 245–270 (2008).

<sup>26</sup> Sonalde Desai, 'Caste in 21st Century India: Competing Narratives' (n.d.), unpublished ms. in author's possession.

population.<sup>27</sup> In Madurai, some Chettiar sub-castes tend to specialize in business (as do many Nadars) more than other castes, and Dalits are said to hold almost all of the municipal sanitation jobs (which come with the benefits of government positions but also with the stigma of polluting and dirty work). These tendencies are important, in part because they suggest that entry into or exclusion from some occupations is affected by caste, even when education is controlled for (because certain castes are read as inherently more suited for the work, because they have or lack appropriate cultural and social capital, or because they are predisposed to push their children towards certain occupations);<sup>28</sup> it is also important to note, however, that people of all castes work in a wide array of occupations, just as each caste in Madurai contains members who range from the impoverished to the wealthy.

Not surprisingly, caste standing also affects the extent to which people emphasize their caste or their class identity in making prestige claims in given social situations. The ‘stability’ of caste means that upper-caste, middle-class people can anchor some of their prestige claims in *jāti*, using caste to compensate if they experience downward-class mobility. (This may account, for example, for the relative lack of class anxiety found by Fuller and Narasimhan among middle-class Brahmans in Chennai.<sup>29</sup>) People whose caste is low but who belong to the middle- or upper-class can foreground symbolic markers of their class rather than caste identity, both in new social situations (where caste may not be known) and in longer-term social settings where caste is known or assumed.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> C. J. Fuller and HariPriya Narasimhan, ‘Information Technology Professionals’ and ‘From Landlords to Software Engineers: Migration and Urbanization among Tamil Brahmins’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, 1: 170–196 (2008).

<sup>28</sup> See for example Harriss, ‘Middle-Class Activism’, pp. 248–249.

<sup>29</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, ‘Information Technology Professionals’ and ‘Landlords to Software Engineers’.

<sup>30</sup> A Pallar (Dalit) acquaintance who is a highly educated professional told me in 1999 that he often used his class as a shield to prevent people asking about his caste or discriminating against him on the basis of it. In 2009, he described his family’s recent move from a small rented home to a large, luxurious house they had built in a new neighbourhood. He commented that although all their new neighbours would have ascertained his *jāti* before he and his family moved in, they nonetheless ‘have a good opinion of us. . .everybody smiles and says “good morning”’ because his home is the largest in the neighbourhood. He hosts neighbourhood association meetings, and the primarily Thevar and Pillai members drink water and coffee there (though he has never offered them a meal). He concluded, ‘When you belong to a higher class, with a good education, a good appearance, owning a house and a car, dressing neatly,

Finally, caste also affects class through its influence on the symbolic attributes used to perform and critique class identities. The ideals of the middle class that I discuss below—including moderation, deliberation and decency—are historically associated with the upper castes. Now they are held by lower-caste members of the middle class as well. Similarly, upper-caste stereotypes of the lower castes as dirty, uncontrolled, and irrational are applied by middle- and upper-class people of all castes to the poor.<sup>31</sup> Thus hegemonic high-caste ideals continue to inflect class attitudes, values, and practices. Caste prejudices, stereotypes, and attitudes have become widely euphemized and adopted as class ones. As Fuller has argued, ‘class distinctions are constructed in cultural terms in all modern capitalist societies, and in India the language and practice of caste provide the most potent and pervasive terms’.<sup>32</sup> Yet while these attitudes may be selectively adopted from hegemonic high-caste values, they are now clearly *middle-class* values and are shared broadly across people who identify themselves as middle class, regardless of their caste.<sup>33</sup>

In this paper, I include caste as one aspect of speakers’ identity because of its significance for the experience of class. Of the caste names that appear, Pallars and Nadars have a relatively low rank in the Madurai caste hierarchy; Yadavas, Thevars, and Acaris are near

having an English education, that builds up your image. That very active overt [caste] discrimination cannot be enacted in that instance’.

<sup>31</sup> See Dickey, ‘Permeable Homes’, for examples.

<sup>32</sup> C. J. Fuller, ‘Introduction: Caste Today’, in C. J. Fuller, ed., *Caste Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 1–31 at pp. 16–17. Mary Hancock makes a similar point in emphasizing the mutual interaction between caste and class identities. She asks, for example, whether Brahmans in Madras (Chennai) are perceived as educated and well-off because they are Brahmans or because most of them are middle-class. Hancock argues that since class is ‘a cultural as well as an economic formation that encompasses competing meaning systems, modes of self-attribution, discourses of distinction (such as taste), and forms of consumption’, and ‘insofar as [caste] derives from and is reproduced through these cultural practices’, caste and class have to be seen ‘in dynamic interaction’ with each other (Mary Hancock, *Womanhood in the Making: Domestic Ritual & Public Culture in Urban South India* [Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1999], p. 46).

<sup>33</sup> Not all high-caste ideals have become middle-class ones. For example, vegetarianism (which in Madurai is practised mostly by Brahmans and by sub-castes of other high *jātis* such as Pillais, though not by all the upper castes) is not an ideal of the middle class, nor are orthodox Brahmanic purity practises. Rather, emotional and material containment and rational deliberation are emphasized in middle-class discourse. Perhaps this is due to the contemporary emphasis on consumption in the establishment of middle-class standing, and the application of hegemonic values to a practice that, although necessary, could easily slip into the stereotypical ‘excess’ of the wealthy if not controlled.

the middle; and Naidus, Pillais, Chettiars and Brahmans are high-ranked castes.

Class categories in Madurai have been in flux since the early 1990s. Moreover, they vary according to the language being spoken. In Tamil, current class categories include *ēlai makkal*<sup>34</sup> (poor people) or *illātavarkaḷ* (people who have nothing); *naṭuttaramānavarkaḷ* (people in the middle) or *naṭuttara kuṭumpam* (middle family); and *paṇakkārarkaḷ* (monied people), *vacatiyānavarkaḷ* (people with resources or luxuries), or *periyavarkaḷ* (big people).<sup>35</sup> The class categories used today by English speakers are typically ‘lower class’, ‘middle class’, and ‘upper class’. When greater specificity is required, gradations such as ‘upper middle class’ are also utilized. Unless stated otherwise, I use ‘middle class’ and ‘middle people’ interchangeably in this paper even though the two terms have slightly different lexical referents. That is, because terminology depends on the primary language of the speaker, and because people fluent in English tend to be higher class than people who are not, those who call themselves ‘middle class’ will on average be invoking a slightly better off group or category than will those who call themselves ‘*naṭuttaramānavarkaḷ*’. The concepts are sufficiently close that, for the purposes of this work, they can be examined as near equivalents; both denote a class defined by contrast with an upper and a lower class, and most importantly, ‘middleness’ is assigned the same behavioural and attitudinal features regardless of which term is used.

The residents I spoke with who identified themselves as middle class or middle people ranged from autorickshaw drivers, masons, and occasionally cooks; to small business owners and merchants, office clerks, and teachers; to bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, and academics from colleges or university faculties. These people represent a wide range of circumstances in terms of assets, security, and social respect.

<sup>34</sup> The Tamil terms in this paragraph are transcribed in their literary Tamil forms. Later in the paper, speech is transcribed with the colloquial Tamil forms used by the speakers. *Paṇakkārarkaḷ*, for example, is usually spoken as *paṇakkāraṅka*.

<sup>35</sup> By 2008 there was also an increasing tendency to differentiate between *paṇakkārarkaḷ* as those who have established wealth in property (usually land and/or gold), and *vacatiyānavarkaḷ* as those who own significant consumer goods—often acquired with loans—but do not have durable wealth. For a discussion of the nuances of various class terms, and of indigenous concepts of class itself, see Sara Dickey, ‘Conceptualizing Inequality: Class and Its Relevance in Urban South India’ (n.d.), unpublished ms. Säävälä describes a similar set of local class categories in Hyderabad, albeit one in which the middle group is designated less precisely (Säävälä, ‘Low Caste’, pp. 302–303).

When they explained why they saw themselves as middle class, and how they differed from people of other classes, however, they not only used similar criteria to one another, but also focused on almost the same variables as analysts do—although they did not always agree with analysts (or with one another) on the values of those variables. Differences of opinion about who belonged in the middle class most often centred on occupation, education, assets, and consumer goods. For example, a man named Paul, a principal of a small but prestigious school, quipped that an autorickshaw driver could at best be a ‘middle-class wannabe’. Paul, who with his wife owns a house, a domestic-model car, and a motorbike, and sent their children to an exclusive private school, added that owning goods such as ‘a television and a metal bureau’ was insufficient to raise a person out of the lower class. Instead, in his view, such standing required substantial housing in the right kind of neighbourhood and the right kind of education for one’s children. But some others who call themselves middle class (such as the autorickshaw driver, videographer, or medical transcription students quoted later in this paper) would state that anyone who owns a car can only be a member of the privileged upper class. Thus the category is a contested one; but not only is there agreement that occupations and consumption practices can place people outside of the middle class, the boundaries themselves (which vary predictably depending on the speaker’s relative location within the middle class) are neither arbitrary nor highly elastic.

Instead, as the following accounts demonstrate, class standing is defined by a family’s economic and social security, its distance from wealth on the one hand and from mere survival or subsistence on the other (‘wealth’ and ‘subsistence’ being, however, relative terms), the uses to which any discretionary income is put, and the ways in which individuals use the ‘goods’ they acquire—in other words, how well they perform middle-class identity. Middle-class people stated that members of the upper class have substantial assets, including family wealth, capital, and other property, whereas middle-class people have a monthly income (or, in some cases, a reliable daily wage) and perhaps a small amount of property, and the poor at best have daily wages and sufficient earnings for a day’s expenses. Such material differences were most notable, however, for the moral and behavioural characteristics that attended them. One of the first points to emerge below will be the moralizing themes that predominate when middle-class people talk about how all the classes *differ*: the ability of middle-class people to consume with moderation and deliberation, in



contrast with the excessive acquisition, instantaneous gratification, and greed that characterize the rich, and the general inability to consume that typifies the poor. In order to look more closely at how the middle class is defined, I turn to conversations with two women who identify themselves as middle class but who are at opposing ends of the spectrum.

Parvathi, a 36-year-old doctor and member of the Pillai caste, distinguished the classes for me succinctly by explaining, ‘The higher class has money and wants to know what to do with it, the middle class has to search for money to get something, and the lower class cannot find the money even if it wants to get those things’. Laughing at the sharpness of these distinctions, she expanded, ‘Here in the middle class, you have to plan everything, you wait for the money, and you say, “Okay, I’ve got this amount, okay, I’ll spend it this way”. But there [in the upper class], they don’t have to plan everything. Whatever they want, they get it that instant. And here we’re different from the lower class, because unlike them, we can get what we want’.

Jayanthi, a Naidu woman of 65 and a recently retired cook,<sup>36</sup> made more detailed distinctions. Jayanthi had moved across class lines in her life, having lived in severe poverty for a number of years after her husband died at a young age, before she and her four children finally found steady employment. She described the classes to me this way:

Well, rich people [*paṇakkāraṅka*], nowadays they go everywhere, they go out everywhere. Because they have resources [*vacati*], wealthy people will take a car, they’ll take an autorickshaw. They have money. So that’s how they’ll travel. Middle class people [*naṭuttaramānavaṅka*], they’ll have to think first—‘Can we go in a car? Do we have that much money? If we have that much money, perhaps we should buy something else. We could spend it on something we need at home’. They’ll think about that. Poor people [*illātavaṅka*] won’t even be able to have the choice. Rich people don’t have to deal with any of that. They have money coming in from everywhere, so they don’t have to think about it. . . Rich people won’t bother themselves thinking

<sup>36</sup> Typically, domestic workers are seen by themselves and others as archetypes of the lower class. Occasionally, however, as individuals they may become members of the middle class. This is most likely in the case of cooks, especially those who work full-time for a wealthy household. If they are women, they usually also have another household member who has full-time employment with an occupation and income that provide sufficient economic means and status to merit a middle-class identity.

about anything at all. They're pompous, Sara. Middle people don't have that attitude. They're more simple.

Parvathi and Jayanthi underline the middle class's ability to acquire necessary commodities through careful planning and deliberate spending. They contrast this with the immediate gratification enjoyed by the rich, and with the inability of the poor to acquire desirable goods regardless of their aspirations or strategic planning. Middle-class people are not wasteful or profligate; instead they deliberately sacrifice certain choices for others. On the other hand, there is no question that they *can* make those choices. Unlike the poor, they have literally earned the ability to consume beyond mere subsistence.

As these points suggest, consumption choices and tastes signify not only the limits on resources, but also the values and attitudes of the people making those painstaking decisions. As Jayanthi said approvingly, middle-class people are more likely to make 'simple' choices than to display the thoughtless excess of the wealthy. This idea was echoed by others I spoke with, who emphasized similarly the 'plainness' and 'ordinariness' of middle-class people. These characteristics of simplicity, plainness, and ordinariness form a cluster of related attributes that are used to depict and to judge the middle class. Simplicity and plainness are tied not only to a lack of pretension, arrogance, and excess, but also to 'decency' and 'neatness'. In turn, all of these attributes mark a middle class person as 'ordinary' or 'normal'. In Tamil, English terms have been adopted for almost all of these attributes,<sup>37</sup> with the exception of the Tamil word *sātāraṇam*, which means common, normal, or ordinary (that is, not inferior, superior, or otherwise extraordinary). An autorickshaw driver named Kannan (a Thevar man married to a slightly higher-caste woman) said, when I asked him his class (*takuti*), 'We are normal [*nārmalā irukkirōm*]. We eat three times in a day, but we don't eat or dress lavishly. We have no ostentation [*āṭamparam*]'. Thus in their location between excessive

<sup>37</sup> Individual Tamil speakers' lexical incorporation of terms that originated in English is in part a form of cultural capital tied to modernity and class. The use of these terms rather than Tamil semi-equivalents may also, as Laura Ring argues for Karachi, suggest that the English terms also capture and represent concepts that were less prevalent or salient before their use became common. See Laura Ring, *Zenana: Everyday Peace in a Karachi Apartment Building* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. 83–85.

wealth and utter lack of resources, these middle-class people represent themselves as ordinary people.<sup>38</sup>

A related normative feature that was often assumed to distinguish middle-class people from those below them (or to mark entry into the middle class) is that of being ‘decent’. Decency is usually explained by contrasting it with its opposite. For example, my young videographer friend Murugan, from a Nadar family, told me that a person who is not decent is someone whose ‘clothing is dirty, unironed, torn, and unwashed, and whose hair is unoiled. They have no neatness [*nītnas illāma iruppānka*]’. While the concern about appearing ‘decent’ in public was more marked in the lower middle-class, women and men at all levels of the middle class talked about the importance of their everyday clothing being presentable (clean and unwrinkled and fairly new, if not necessarily fashionable), neatly arranged, and modestly covering the body.<sup>39</sup> Neatness and cleanliness are key middle-class values in other realms as well. For example, Renganathan, a 50-year-old advertising company manager who is a member of the Chettiar caste, explained that ‘the neatness of the home indicates whether a family is middle class and modern. That is the measure here. If a person is neat, then they are modern’. Cleanliness and orderliness are standard middle-class civic and domestic concerns, and are often cited by middle-class people as distinguishing them from the urban poor.<sup>40</sup> All of these features of plainness, ordinariness, decency, and cleanliness—tied by nodes of order, self-presentation, and modernity, and directly linked to the definition of middle-classness as self-disciplined and moderate—are essential aspects of how middle-class people describe themselves as a whole, and how they aim to present themselves at home and in public to one another. These values and their enactment underlie both the pleasures and the anxieties of being in the contemporary middle class in Madurai, and are reflected in the accounts below.

<sup>38</sup> Ordinariness does not mean the majority or even the mode, however. My own observations of the city’s population strongly suggest that people who identify as middle class remain in the minority of Madurai’s population.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the link between decency and modesty, see Sara Dickey, ‘Still “One Man in a Thousand”’, in David Blamey and Robert E. D’Souza, eds, *Living Pictures: Perspectives on the Film Poster in India* (London: Open Editions), pp. 69–78 at pp. 76–77.

<sup>40</sup> See also Hancock, *Womanhood*; Ann Waldrop, ‘Gating and Class Relations: The Case of a New Delhi “Colony”’, *City & Society* 16, 2: 93–116 (2004), p. 97; Harriss, ‘Middle-Class Activism’, p. 458; A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days There Was No Coffee: Writings in Cultural History* (New Delhi: Yoda, 2006).

### The good and the bad of being in the middle

People who see themselves as middle-class report a consistent set of attitudes about what it is like to live in that class and to reproduce their class standing. The positive aspects of being middle class include having sufficient income flow and assets to live beyond a mere survival level and to partake actively in a consumer economy; to thereby be seen as ‘counting’ in Madurai society; and to be in the culturally valorized position of moderate ‘middleness’. The negative sides include the intense scrutiny of behaviour by social onlookers; the need to perform a consumerist class identity with limited financial means; the excessive pressure to work and earn sufficiently to finance this consumption; the consequences of performing inadequately and the fear of downward-class mobility; and conversely, the fear of harm from envy and the evil eye that results from upward-class mobility. For each positive aspect that emphasizes security and stability, there is a negative ramification or consequence that highlights the precariousness and potential instability of middle-class life.

It is hardly surprising that being middle class in a population whose majority is impoverished is experienced deeply—both corporeally and cognitively—as good. It means being able to take part in practices that require economic or cultural capital and enhance one’s reputation in the local community, to participate in a consumer economy that is heralded in many public media, and to locate oneself in a position of moderate middleness that is socially and aesthetically desirable. To be middle class is to be *central* in numerous ways. While there are negative aspects to that centrality, its positive senses include being seen as an ideal normative citizen and viewing oneself as the norm, being central to public discourse and political policy,<sup>41</sup> and avoiding behavioural extremes on either side of a moral middle.

#### *Visibility, counting, and citizenship*

To buy and display goods and to possess the knowledge to use them appropriately is to partake in consumption practices that both commercial media and government rhetoric represent not only

<sup>41</sup> Fernandes, ‘Restructuring; Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, p. 130.

as pleasurable but also as crucial signs of a desirable modernity. Mankekar notes that in India in the mid-1980s,

postcolonial modernity became increasingly articulated in terms of consumerism. In television's discourses, modernity was frequently equated with, and expressed through, consumerist aspirations and desires: consumerism itself became an index of modernity. The family, henceforth conceived as a unit of consumption, would acquire a modern lifestyle, and the nation, through the boost consumers would give to the economy, would also 'develop' and thus become modern.<sup>42</sup>

As Rajagopal has observed, the pre-liberalization nationalist credo of 'Be Indian Buy Indian' has since become 'To Buy Is Indian'.<sup>43</sup> Good citizenship thus requires the kind of consumption that will demonstrate to the world that India is a modern nation.

In Madurai, there is a parallel reward for the proper consumption of certain goods and practices at the individual level: being recognized as a person with substance. Certain kinds of consumption make a person 'count' in society by making that person 'visible' to a spectatorial public.<sup>44</sup> The reverse situation, to lack, and therefore be unable to deploy certain consumer goods in public, makes a person simultaneously pitiable and socially invisible. In Tamil, *pāvam* means both a pitiable person and the act of sinning, both of which are associated with poverty.<sup>45</sup> In 2004 I asked Murugan what would happen if he and his friends (all in their twenties and thirties) went out without looking 'decent'—in other words, being unable to afford presentable clothing or lacking the cultural capital to wear it appropriately. Murugan said, 'If you're standing across the road from us, you'll think, "Poor things, they are suffering" [*pāvam, kaṣṭappattirukkānka*], and we mustn't have people think that way'. I asked, 'If you are suffering, why shouldn't anyone know?'

<sup>42</sup> Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> Arvind Rajagopal, 'Thinking About the New Indian Middle Class: Gender, Advertising and Politics in an Age of Globalisation', in Raji Sunder Rajan, ed., *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post-Independence India* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 57–99 at p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> See also Tulasi Srinivas, 'Flush with Success: Bathing, Defecation, Worship, and Social Change in South India', *Space and Culture* 5, 4: 368–386 (2002); Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), pp. 140–145.

<sup>45</sup> In some other parts of Tamil Nadu, where the term for poor person is *pāvakkāran*, the connection is even more direct.

Moving unselfconsciously between the perspective of the observer and the observed, he answered, 'They'll respect us less. If someone is suffering, no one respects them. We dismiss them, we think they are low'.

Fundamentally, a person has to be decent in order to be accorded respect, but beyond this, certain material signifiers closely associated with the middle class are required for acquiring social substance and visibility. In recent years, for example, a cellphone has been a consistent sign of middle class membership; now, as cellphones and calling plans have become less expensive, particular *types* of cellphones are required for differentiating social standing. Renganathan, the advertising company manager, talked in 2005 about why he needed a cellphone:

Because I'm in marketing, I need a mobile phone. I may receive calls at any time. But frankly, owning a mobile has become a fashion, a status symbol. Like a car—if you are rich, you have a car. If you are middle-class, you have a two-wheeler. And you also have a mobile phone, whether you have any reason to get calls or not. You need a certain brand, a colour monitor, all that. It means you are modern, and then people will respect you. Only if you have these things you are *recognised*. You *exist*, for them. Otherwise you are not recognised, you don't exist.

Sekaran, a 40-year-old linguistics professor who is Pallar, said in 2009 that to lack up to date goods such as expensive cellphones means that 'you don't get people's attention, you don't get their respect, and then you are just like a small insect crawling around'. To lack decency and consumer goods is to be unrecognized and invisible—a status likened to human non-existence—while to display them is to make a claim to a social presence. To represent oneself as middle-class, then, is to make assertions about counting as a person in both the city and the nation.<sup>46</sup>

It must be stressed that not only goods but also *practices* are key to consumption. One consumption arena frequently highlighted by

<sup>46</sup> My friend Darshini, who made similar observations about the function of cellphones, commented even more ironically on the significance of another recent status indicator, the consumer loan. In 2004, she noted, 'A person's status is now determined by loan eligibility. If you don't have it, it is a shame—it means you don't have proper employment. It used to be that taking out a loan was very shameful. Banks used to be for savings. Now they are for loans. Debt used to be a stigma, and now it is prestige'. Darshini, a Nadar, is a tutor and a struggling small business owner.

middle-class residents is the performance of domestic rituals. As Säävälä says of the middle class in Hyderabad, ‘religious observances are an important aspect of deriving distinction from monetary means’.<sup>47</sup> Family rituals such as first birthday rites, girls’ puberty ceremonies, and wedding celebrations aim to enact middle-class standing by demonstrating the financial means necessary to carry out the ritual (including the costs of ritual supplies, religious specialists, and food and gifts for guests). They also display families’ knowledge of current trends in ritual, entertainment and food fashions, and of the technologies used to record events. Rituals may also be used to prove a family’s community standing or influence by attracting high-status guests, including politicians, community leaders, and family members who are wealthier than the hosts.<sup>48</sup> Like the possession and appropriate use of consumer goods, the staging of rituals can be used strategically in bids to be recognized by extended family, neighbours, or larger communities as belonging to a certain class.

*The rightness of the middle*

Finally, middle-class emphases on simplicity and ordinariness, controlled spending, and the lack of excess help explain another sense of ‘rightness’ about being middle-class. It is not simply that such standing connotes respect and worth in a society in which socioeconomic success is valued, and in which being securely middle class puts one above most other city residents in a class hierarchy. More than this, the comments above reveal that ‘middleness’ itself is valued. The *relativity* of middleness is highly significant: it is neither high nor low; it is not extreme in any way.

Early in my research in 1999, as I began to hear more about the *natuttaramānavarkal*, the middle people, I asked Jayanthi to tell me what the word meant. She said,

They are neither extremely rich nor extremely poor. They’ll say they are in the middle. The middle doesn’t fall on this side or on that side; it’s right in the centre. For example, when people come to ask for my second daughter

<sup>47</sup> Säävälä, ‘Low Caste’, p. 303.

<sup>48</sup> See Säävälä, ‘Low Caste’; Francis Bloch, Vijayendra Rao, and Sonalde Desai, ‘Wedding Celebrations as Conspicuous Consumption: Signaling Social Status in Rural India’, *The Journal of Human Resources* XXXIX, 3: 675–695 (2004).

for a marriage, other people will tell them that we neither have a lot nor are poor, we are in the middle. So, it's a good word.

Sara: In what ways is it good?

Jayanthi: It's a word without differences. People use it with affection. Saying someone is in the middle doesn't sound the way it does when you call someone high class or low class [it does not carry the pejorative connotations of those terms].

There is rightness and satisfaction at being in the centre, at avoiding extremes in both directions.<sup>49</sup> This view is consonant with a dominant and historically high-caste ideal that elevates gentleness, tolerance, reason, moderation, and control of emotions and bodily desires over the gratification of physical needs, expression of strong emotions, roughness and violence, impulsiveness, and extremes of all kinds. In South India, moreover, these oppositions are part of a broader set of themes in which coolness/passivity and hotness/activity are linked to cosmological principles (the passive male principle of *purusha* and the active female principle of *prakriti*), gender (male and female), and associated foods, colours, and states of health and illness.<sup>50</sup> All these characteristics are used to explain the moral superiority of the middle class, and to express a sense of almost aesthetic pleasure at being in the middle. It is interesting to note that, although the middle class is for many people a new social identity, and certainly one that connotes modernity, its protagonists have appropriated a much older social code to express its moral superiority.

While middleness is a source of pride and pleasure, however, it was just as often cited as a source of tension and difficulty for people in the middle class. I often heard that middle-class standing comes with a higher set of behavioural expectations than are placed on the lower class, but that these expectations must be fulfilled without access to the financial and social resources that the upper class commands. Such claims reflect the tensions of middleness and the negative aspects of centrality—the sense both of being caught in the middle and of being on stage, surrounded by a highly judgmental social audience.

<sup>49</sup> See Liechty, *Suitably Modern*; van Wessel, 'Talking about Consumption'. Nicholas Nisbett ('Friendship') also describes the confluence of relational and moralizing aspects of middle-class identities among young men in Bangalore.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Dennis McGilvray, *Symbolic Heat: Gender, Health & Worship among the Tamils of South India and Sri Lanka* (Middleton, New Jersey: Grantha, 1998).



*Scrutiny and constraints*

To understand this perception of being squeezed and scrutinized in the middle, I now move to a more extensive examination of consumption. Many of the goods that communicate class standing in Madurai operate at the most mundane levels. Vegetables, cooking fuel, beverages, and newspapers, for example, are all sorted into finely graded scales that are interpreted as revealing the class level of their consumers. In addition, more durable consumer goods also communicate aspects of the user's identity in ways that are germane to future social and economic interactions. These goods range enormously, and include items such as radios, televisions, metal bureaux, upholstered furniture, bicycles, motorbikes, cars, jewellery, luxury saris, telephones, computers, houses, vacation homes, and trips abroad. In Tamil, these durable goods are referred to as *vacati*, a term often translated as 'convenience'—a meaning that is fitting in this context—but which can also denote symbolically significant commodities, or 'resources' or 'means' more broadly.<sup>51</sup> *Vacati*, especially in the sense of key consumer goods, are 'potent class signifiers'.<sup>52</sup>

Like other items of contemporary consumption, *vacati* must be acquired constantly as fashions and technologies change. Moreover, the knowledge of how to use them must also be attained, making it necessary to demonstrate and reproduce group membership continuously, and creating repeated opportunities for failure in performance.<sup>53</sup> (This point is equally true of practices such as domestic rituals.) Whilst the use of consumption to create distinction has a centuries-long history in South Asia,<sup>54</sup> contemporary consumption differs in the breadth of consumer goods available, their accessibility to

<sup>51</sup> See Rachel Tolen, 'Transfers of Knowledge and Privileged Spheres of Practice: Servants and Employers in a Madras Railway Colony', in Kathleen M. Adams and Sara Dickey, eds, *Home and Hegemony: Domestic Service and Identity Politics in South and Southeast Asia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 63–86 at pp. 70–71, for a revealing discussion of the nuances of *vacati* in Chennai.

<sup>52</sup> Tolen, 'Transfers of Knowledge', p. 80.

<sup>53</sup> See Liechty, *Suitably Modern*.

<sup>54</sup> See, for example, Paul Greenough, 'Nation, Economy and Tradition Displayed: The Crafts Museum, New Delhi' in Carol A. Breckenridge, ed., *Consuming Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1995), pp. 216–248 at p. 221; Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, *The Sari* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, p. 99; Mytheli Srinivasan, 'Emotion, Identity, and the Female Subject: Tamil Women's Magazines in Colonial India, 1890–1940', *Journal of Women's History* 14, 4: 59–82

a wider range of consumers, and the more finely nuanced distinctions that they enable.

The significance of consumption to middle-class identity, as well as the burden imposed by the responsibility of proper citizenship, were reflected in the comments of Madurai residents. To explore the importance and the obligations of consumption, I turn to a discussion with a group of young people who are at the heart of the economic changes creating a 'globalized' service sector in India. They were training in the year 2000 for employment in medical transcription, then a growing field in India. Foreign firms were beginning to take advantage of India's sizable educated and English-speaking labour force, its relatively low wages, and the recent openness to foreign enterprise, by outsourcing service components of their businesses to India. In order to try to avail themselves of similar opportunities, this group of young adults had enrolled in a certificate programme in medical transcription at the Centre for Entrepreneurial Development (then affiliated with Madurai Kamaraj University).

The medical transcription instructor at the Centre for Entrepreneurial Development had asked me to talk to her class of about 20 students, to help them become more familiar with an American-English accent. After speaking to the class, I invited the students to visit me and talk further. A couple of weeks later, six of them, four women and two men, came to my home and we spent several hours talking (though mostly in Tamil) about a variety of topics concerning India and the United States. These students were all in their twenties. They were from families that had been in the middle class for at least a generation, were unusually well educated, but were located (as their parents' occupations and their identification of middle class boundaries suggest) near the centre of the middle-class spectrum.<sup>55</sup>

(2003); Venkatachalapathy, *In Those Days*; Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>55</sup> Their educations, parents' occupations, and (where applicable) spouse's occupations were as follows. Amu had recently completed a B.Sc. in Chemistry and was planning to enter an M.Sc. programme in Agriculture. Her parents owned a jewellery store. Janaki, Amu's sister-in-law, had a bachelor's degree in Commerce. Her father had been a small businessman, her mother was a housewife, and her husband worked in his father's business. Priya, whose father is a travel agent and her mother an accountant, had a B.A. in English. Kumarasamy, the son of a retired teacher and a housewife, had a B.Sc. in Chemistry and an M.A. in English. Lalitha, the daughter of a building contractor and a housewife, had a bachelor's degree in education and was married to a contractor. Rajendran, whose family owned a stationery store and other enterprises, had a B.A. in English and a Post-Graduate Degree in computer

They all identified themselves as middle-class, and came to a consensus that being middle-class means having a monthly income, owning a small amount of property (such as a house), and having a two-wheeler (a scooter or a motorbike). When I asked whether one could be in the middle class and have a car, they said immediately, 'No, that is upper class'.<sup>56</sup>

When I asked the students why they wanted to work in medical transcription, the two men answered, 'To eat'. After some delayed laughter, the students said that the degree would give them opportunities in a new field that has many openings, quick placement, and good pay. I then asked whether, given their educations, other good jobs might be available without this transcription course. They were vociferous in denying this, and their answers revealed much of their vision of the middle class's predicament.

They explained that in Madurai, the highest salary they could get from the types of jobs for which they already qualified, such as teaching or engineering, would be Rs. 1500/month (at a time when the small apartments or houses they lived in could be rented for Rs. 1000–1500/month). Medical transcription, on the other hand, would pay Rs. 3500 'plus perks', and more with experience. Here is how they described their situations:

Priya: We've studied so much, we ought to be able to get a good job.

Kumarasamy: Nowadays everyone has studied—it's compulsory. But there aren't any jobs.

Lalitha: And even if you work, you don't earn anything. There's no income. The jobs are a lot of work, and the income is very low [*vēle nereya irukkum*, income *koreyā irukkum*].

Rajendran: If we had a different job [other than medical transcription], we would work 10 hours per day, and even then make only 1500 rupees a month.

applications. Except for Rajendran, who was a Nadar Christian, all were Hindu and members of middle to upper castes: Amu and Janaki were Chettiar; Priya, Acari; Kumarasamy, Yadava; and Lalitha, Naidu.

<sup>56</sup> The 2001 Census of India Housing Profile for Tamil Nadu lists the availability of specified assets in urban households as follows: transistor radio, 50.5 per cent; television, 60.7 per cent; telephone, 19.9 per cent; bicycle, 46 per cent; scooter, motorcycle, or moped, 23.6 per cent; car, jeep, or van, 3.7 per cent; and 'none of the specified assets', 21.6 per cent (Government of India, *Census of India 2001*, 'Housing Profile, Tamil Nadu' (2003), [www.censusindia.gov.in/Census\\_Data\\_2001/States\\_at\\_glance/State\\_Links/33\\_tn.pdf](http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Census_Data_2001/States_at_glance/State_Links/33_tn.pdf) [accessed 15 June 2011]).

Lalitha: Even if you have a good education, if you have only one job, and there's only one person working, you really suffer. You have to have some kind of thing on the side.

Rajendran: Nowadays in Madurai, if a person has only one job, he can't make it. You have to work two or three businesses on the side. Part-time jobs. Take my father, we have a stationery store, on the side he works as an agent for a real estate agency, and then we have started a meat shop. We have looked after three businesses.

Sara: What would happen, then, if you didn't work all those jobs?

Rajendran: If you don't do all that work, and if you [still] want to be in the middle class, you don't eat. Really, you can't stay in that status. You'll have to change, you won't be able to buy things, you will feel very bad [*manacu kaṣṭamā irukkum*, your heart/mind will suffer]. 'But look, they don't have money, the children are starving', that's what people will think. Right now, we're doing okay. We are ordinary [*nammatān ārtinēri mātiri irukkōm*].

Thus, despite their educations and their parents' assets, these young people feel that they cannot maintain middle-class standing with only one job and only one family earner. In their minds, the jobs simply are not available, and they were turning to a new field in the hope of beating others to what they perceived as a wealth of positions.<sup>57</sup>

From the only half-joking comment about the necessity of this job for subsistence, to the description of how they will be pitied—and demoted—socially, the images these young people invoked portray the sense that they cannot 'survive' in the middle class without an occupation like medical transcription (or, alternatively, without three traditional middle-class positions). When Rajendran says that 'you don't eat' if you want to stay in the middle class without such employment, he suggests that it is at some level imaginable to give up food in order to keep a flat, a two-wheeler, good schools for one's children, fashionable clothing, and the right household appliances—that is, the necessary signs of the middle class. This is a performance that is, in Rajendran's view, an empty front. When Rajendran and the others associate starvation with the lack of middle-class resources (an association that also appears in the opening joke and in Rajendran's

<sup>57</sup> A year later, Lalitha was the only one of these students to have attained a related position, teaching medical transcription in a women's college. By 2008, none of the former students had become employed as transcribers. Lalitha had by then entered the civil service in Delhi—but she attained the position because of her English skills and her brother-in-law's connections, not because of her post-baccalaureate credentials.

evocation of pitying onlookers), they exaggerate, but they make a poignant point in doing so. They suggest that if they cannot buy what they need to maintain their standing, they will be written off as if they are poor and pitiable. The consumption of commodities is deemed to be as crucial as the consumption of food. These students imply that in their social world, if they cannot acquire and maintain the visible signs that legitimate middle-class standing, they will become as socially invisible, insignificant, and despised as the poor. Clearly, these images carry strong emotional resonance for these young people.

Thus one of the difficulties often complained of is the seeming impossibility of making ends meet in a middle-class household even when its members have strong educational credentials and good jobs. The long hours of work required for this struggle are a hardship. Compounding this stress is the continuous public scrutiny of one's position. When people spoke of what it is like to be middle-class, they often focused on the acute pressures they felt from belonging to a distinctly recognized and closely scrutinized group. While people in many different social groups and categories (castes, occupations, and religious organizations, for example, as well as classes) feel constrained to behave in particular ways because of the judgments of watchful communities, middle-class people identified these constraints more vociferously than anyone else I spoke with. Furthermore, such complaints were voiced by middle-class people from a broad range of castes and economic circumstances.

Munusamy, a Thevar man who works as a clerk in a small office, complained that upper-class and lower-class people have great leeway in their behaviour: both can do whatever they want, and 'no one says anything'—the former because they have power, and people let them do as they wish; and the latter because no one cares what they do.<sup>58</sup> The 'middle people', however, must do everything just right. They cannot drink in public, they must wear clean clothing, and they must marry within their caste, because otherwise 'everyone will talk about them'. In his mind, and in the views of many others, middle-class people are held inordinately responsible for performing dominant social mores. Whilst the poor are excused because they do not count, and the wealthy are excused because their money and power make them less susceptible and less accountable to social judgments, the

<sup>58</sup> See van Wessel, 'Talking about Consumption', p. 114, on similar views in Baroda.

middle class feel the pressure of having to do things right. These students' comments reflect the pressure to be proper citizens as well. While national media link this performance to the consumption of modernity, here we see that just as the middle-class must be modern consumers—spending, as the local model goes, on modern goods but with moderation—so they must behave in accord with the dominant values of modernity (proper hygiene and clothing) and moderation (thus neither alcohol in public nor the disorderly behaviour it leads to).

Srinivasan, a young Brahman factory clerk who had temporarily migrated to Sri Lanka in the 1990s to help his natal family gain a tentative foothold in the lower middle-class, by 2000 had married into a more comfortably middle-class family that runs a small elementary school in the Madurai suburbs. Contemplating the upcoming rituals that he needed to carry out for his young daughter (rituals that should have been paid for by his father, who could not afford to contribute), Srinivasan said, 'When you are poor, you don't do these things, and when you are wealthy, you have the money to make it easy. But in the middle, there are all these expectations to show that you belong where you are, and it is very hard to be able to afford to do everything right'.

The medical transcription students had similar laments. Like Srinivasan's complaint, theirs emphasize the need to reproduce class through proper performance. Here is what they said, for example, about dowry:

Kumarasamy: If you're upper-class, giving a good dowry is no big deal, because you have lots of money. On the other hand, if you're lower-class, you don't face the problem because that group doesn't ask for a big dowry. But in the middle class, it's a big problem. Dowry demands are high—money, gold, scooters, refrigerators—and we don't have enough money to meet these demands without huge trouble. It's a big problem. We suffer a lot. But the wealthy people[...]

Janaki (cutting in): Whatever problems they have, they can solve them.

Lalitha: While the lower class stays within its limits.

The middle class feels pressed to stretch beyond its limits to provide the dowry and gifts required for a respectable marriage, while imagining that the people above and below them have demands that fit comfortably within their resources. While they in particular must reflect the morality of their society by enacting its behavioural codes, they feel they possess insufficient means to meet the exceptional responsibilities demanded of them.

*The fear of losing status*

Another anxiety felt by the middle class is the fear of downward-class mobility. To some extent, this fear reflects the economic shifts that have long been faced by most lower-middle-class (and poor) families throughout the domestic cycle. Often, for example, family resources increase when children become wage-earners after their educations end, for as long as they remain co-resident in the household. Once they leave the household, however, family income can drop dramatically. There are other ways to lose crucial wage-earners as well, particularly through accident and illness (since medical and life insurance are largely unavailable) and retirement (pensions are rare, especially outside of government employment). But even where households have enough assets to weather economic difficulties, the sense of precariousness remains acute.

Although evidence suggests that most families now in the middle class have not experienced significant downward-class mobility in recent generations, there can be real economic consequences to households and/or individuals for failing to perform middle-class behaviours properly. One of the landmark sites for confirming class standing is marriage arrangements, when families state publicly that they are willing to create alliances with one another.<sup>59</sup> Middle-class people with unmarried children often spoke about the need to control household members' public behaviour in order to create an image that would be salutary when marriages were arranged. These ideas underscore both the social value of decency and the concept of a watchful community. Two college faculty members in their twenties, one a Brahman and one a Nadar, each with a college lecturership in social work, gave me lengthy descriptions of the kinds of expectations their middle-class neighbours had about proper dress and comportment for women of their age. When I asked these professional

<sup>59</sup> See also Bloch, Rao, and Desai, 'Wedding Celebrations', p. 677. In general, people prefer to marry their children into families of similar or slightly higher class standing. See Sara Dickey, 'Anjali's Alliance: Class Mobility in Urban India', in Diane P. Mines and Sarah Lamb, eds, *Everyday Life in South Asia*, Second Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 303–324, for a discussion of the role of class in selecting spouses. Class is not the only criterion used in marriage arrangements, but a variety of evidence—including oral histories I have gathered, changes in newspaper marriage advertisements in recent decades, and shifts away from kin-based preferences in marital arrangements (see for example Karin Kapadia, *Siva and Her Sisters* [Boulder: Westview, 1995], Chapter 3)—indicates that it is increasingly important.

women why their neighbours' opinions were so important to them and their families, they said that these opinions would weigh heavily at the time of their upcoming marriage arrangements, when prospective spouses' families would ask acquaintances about their character. 'Acceptance in the neighbourhood will gain you acceptance in your future household', one of them explained. In another instance, two Chettiar women of the Nattukkottai sub-caste (a community with a history of philanthropy) told me that, whenever possible, they avoid attending gatherings at a local Chettiar social 'club' because they would be asked to donate money for the organization and its projects. It was not the cost of the donation *per se* that concerned them, but the fact that if they failed to give the right amount of money each time (it had to be a dauntingly large amount, but not so huge as to seem above their standing), people would speak badly of them, making it difficult to maintain the social image that they need in order to find suitable marriage partners from the Nattukkottai Chettiar community for their remaining children. It was better to avoid such situations entirely than to risk attracting public criticism.

Schools and colleges are another crucial arena for the production of class futures. In addition to producing a great deal of cultural capital, they can also be significant sources of social capital. Classmates become the social networks that may secure a job, and teachers can provide assistance or pose obstacles in career searches. My research assistant Revathi, a young Brahman woman, described one instance in which her college classmates were affected by teachers' judgments. Girls who were on scholarships would try to prevent the teachers from knowing their financial situations, Revathi explained:

At college they are daily nagging us for Rs. 50—for functions, lunches at competitions, farewell money, birthday parties for seniors. It's compulsory—you can't say you won't give. If a girl says, 'I can't donate, I come from a poor family', the teachers will say, 'So why do you want to go to college, why don't you go get a job, or go get married?' The girls' friends will help them, and then the girls pay their friends back later when they can earn some money.

In order to be treated as deserving an education and job recommendations, a girl must act as though she has middle-class resources. Like Rajendran, Revathi emphasizes the importance of presenting a surface that the actor 'knows' is insubstantial artifice, yet is prerequisite to gaining the social and cultural capital necessary



for earning the economic capital that helps stabilize a middle-class role.

Economic, social, and cultural capital interact in numerous settings. Onlookers must be compellingly convinced and persuaded of one's class identification. This may especially be true in a newly emerging class for which the material and processual indicators are in great flux. The need to convince others of where one stands—which may indeed be less of a pressure for the poor and the rich—is especially acute among the different layers of the middle class, and perhaps most so among those whose families lack certain forms of social and cultural capital (such as conventional middle-class jobs for two or more generations, tertiary education, and/or high caste). Qualitative studies of the middle class in South Asian cities reveal that many members of the middle class report such anxiety,<sup>60</sup> though some do not (such as the information technology professionals studied by Fuller and Narasimhan,<sup>61</sup> among whom unassailable educational credentials were more significant in determining status than was consumerism, and a large number of whom were Brahmans). But for most people in the middle, the performance of class is 'a delicate, fragile thing that can be shattered by very minor mishaps'.<sup>62</sup> Such points highlight how both dignity and class standing are affected by the judgments of a relevant community. In the accounts reproduced here, that community includes neighbours, kin, classmates, teachers, potential business partners, and civic organizations.

The awareness of others' critical gaze is heightened by these actors' consciousness of their own roles as social spectators. Murugan and Rajendran evoke the pitying-and-critical audience most explicitly. In much middle-class discourse, the poor serve as a cipher of what the middle class, more or less insecure in the economic moorings and cultural production of their standing, fear they could become. Whilst the poor have a negative presence because of their social invisibility (their non-existence), they simultaneously stand as a substantive reminder of what the middle class must work to avoid becoming.

<sup>60</sup> Melanie A. Dean, 'The Modern Eye: Reversals in Evil Eye Prophylactic Form and Function in Contemporary Tamil Nadu, India' (n.d.), unpublished ms. in author's possession; Dwyer, *All You Want*; Fernandes, *New Middle Class*; Liechty, *Suitably Modern*; Mankekar, *Screening Culture*.

<sup>61</sup> Fuller and Narasimhan, 'Information Technology Professionals'.

<sup>62</sup> Goffman, *Presentation of Self*, p. 56.

*The fear of envy*

Paradoxically, anxiety can also be created by upward-class mobility, and discussions of this anxiety also invoke the watchful attention paid to class. Just as middle-class people perceived themselves to be under exceptional scrutiny for the behaviour that helped them maintain middle-class standing, so they felt deeply and dangerously scrutinized when they prospered. When a person achieves something uncommon for her status, or something unusual among her peer group, she may fear the impact of others' envy. In South Asia, envy is known to harm a person who possesses a coveted good or quality, regardless of whether such harm is intentional. Focusing on, admiring, complimenting, or desiring something that is attractive or appealing can draw misfortune to the bearer or owner of the good or quality, or to the object itself; this casting of a harmful look is referred to in English as the 'evil eye' and in Tamil as *kaṇṇūru* or *kaṇ tiruṣṭi*. It has been argued that envy is felt between status or structural equals, not between those who are hierarchically dissimilar.<sup>63</sup> Thus, in these accounts, while servants may talk about how pleasurable it would be to enjoy the privileges of their employers, such privileges are in accord with the station of their superiors, and thus the desire for such luxuries does not constitute envy and does not cast the evil eye.<sup>64</sup> Pocock contends that the evil eye 'is most to be feared when those who should be equal are not so in fact'.<sup>65</sup> When a peer or near equal achieves something out of the ordinary, desire and its ramifications become a concern, and people who advance within their social reference group feel threatened by others' envy.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Lindy Warrell, 'Conflict and Hierarchy: Jealousy among the Sinhalese Buddhists', *South Asia XIII*, 1: 19–41 (1990); David Pocock, 'The Evil Eye', in T. N. Madan, ed., *Religion in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 50–62; Bambi Chapin, 'Mobilizing Envy: Sinhala Models of Emotion and Relationships in Conflict' (n.d.), unpublished ms. in author's possession; Dean, 'Modern Eye'.

<sup>64</sup> Pocock, 'Evil Eye', pp. 52–53; Chapin, 'Mobilizing Envy'. Although I agree that people do not experience their structural inferiors' desire for higher-status goods as envy, I take some exception to this argument in terms of the evil eye. That is, there is evidence that a harmful gaze can come from any source, regardless of hierarchical closeness or distance. It is for this reason, for example, that caregivers mark babies' faces with smears of black grease, and owners place stuffed figures on new buildings, in order to deflect the evil eye that can be brought on by admiring observers.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 62.

<sup>66</sup> See also Säävälä (2004), p. 313.

In Madurai, I heard about worries of the evil eye from middle- and upper-class people who had experienced both small and large improvements in their material or social circumstances. Many middle-class people said that fear of the evil eye would be unlikely among the poor, who were deemed to have too few resources to be jealous of one another, though I am sceptical of this view. (The possession of ‘resources’ and ‘advantages’ is far more relative than the typical middle-class view admits.) Nonetheless, the new opportunities for mobility provided by economic liberalization (such as loans, investments, and capital accumulation) that enable people to enter and rise through the middle class, and the media images and political rhetoric that promote the accumulation of goods now crucial to a proper middle-class life, may make this broad swathe of people especially subject to envy. Envy comes about when people do not play their proper roles in the hierarchy—in other words, when they get ahead of those whom they are supposed to be like—and peers are highly attentive to such deviations in the often close quarters in which urban people reside and work. Thus unusual achievements must be hidden from the eyes of neighbours, co-workers, and sometimes extended family members.<sup>67</sup>

Two examples demonstrate the fears that can develop around upward-class mobility. In the first case Anjali, a Pillai woman then in her early twenties, had been the only one of seven siblings to gain a college degree. Her ailing father had been a bicycle rickshaw driver, and he and his wife struggled to enable all their children to study through to at least the 10th grade, itself a significant achievement.<sup>68</sup> With the help of her older brothers, Anjali had convinced her parents to allow her to complete a correspondence course for her bachelor’s degree while working full-time as a typist in a nearby office. After graduation, Anjali went to work as a computer graphics designer for a family firm on an adjoining street. When the company’s owner

<sup>67</sup> Melanie Dean documents the recent use of *kaṅ tiruṣṭi* prophylactics themselves as signs of distinction. The conspicuous display of these prophylactics to ward off harmful gazes indicates possession of sufficient *vacati* to require such deflective devices, and thus ‘the need to protect oneself from envy is itself taken as a sign of social status’ (Dean, ‘Modern Eye’).

<sup>68</sup> India-wide, most people of Anjali’s age cohort did not complete the 10th standard (the lower level of secondary school) even in urban areas. According to the Demography and Health Surveys (DHS) household survey data, in 1992–93 the median years of schooling for urban 15–19-year-olds in India was 9.2 (International Institute for Population Sciences, *National Family Health Survey (MCH and Family Planning), India 1992–93* [Bombay: IIPS, 1995], p. 49).

decided to move the business to his own home several miles away, Anjali's parents were unwilling to allow their unmarried daughter to travel such a distance for work, but they did decide that she could take advantage of a new low-income loan programme and open her own computer graphics design company. Anjali's family lived in a compound of seven single-room homes that share a common courtyard, latrine, and bathing area. It is difficult to keep family affairs private in this setting, and when I visited them in 2001, they used whispers whenever speaking about their new business plans. Once Anjali attained the loan, however, all their neighbours came to know about her ambitious plans. Just days before the opening of her new business, she was knocked down in the street by a cyclist and broke her right wrist, making it impossible for her to use a computer keyboard. She told me that the accident must have been caused by the evil eye—since bicycles rarely knock people down, and when they do, such a fall never breaks a bone. She was certain that an envious neighbour had caused the harm, in this case maliciously.<sup>69</sup>

Here, the social reference group is Anjali's nearby neighbours. More dispersed peer sets can be equally attentive. Raman, a Brahman doctor, had a heart attack in his forties, several years after he and his wife Usha had built a new hospital and a large new house. Although Raman was not involved in politics, he had become well connected to many of the powerful politicians and bureaucrats in Madurai, who patronized him as one of the few cardiologists in the city. Although Usha dismissed the idea, Raman's mother was concerned that her son's heart attack had been caused by others in their social set who were jealous of Raman's marked professional and economic success. Usha did believe that their peers—other doctors and their families, and other successful professionals with whom they socialized—had watched Raman's rise closely to see whether he made any mistakes on his way. Whether it was neighbours or a more dispersed social network doing the watching, in both cases, the dangers of envy arose because Anjali and Raman began to stand out from their peers. Where they had previously been relatively equal to others in these communities, Anjali and Raman gained greater resources (education, a government loan, a new business and potential income in Anjali's case; greater income, success, political connections, and professional stature in Raman's case) than those who considered themselves their peers.

<sup>69</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Anjali's upward mobility, see Dickey, 'Anjali's Alliance'.

Thus, at least from one perspective, the anxious instability inherent in middle-classness derives from the two sides of a performative coin: failure to perform well enough means falling in class, but performing too well creates harmful enmity. The possibility of losing a foothold in the middle class constantly looms, and so do the hazards of upward-class mobility. Such feelings of insecurity cannot be measured by standard indicators of downward-class mobility; indeed many are at most tied only indirectly to the objective risk of falling in class. They result instead from the energy it takes to keep up, to prevent envy, and to negotiate the tiny daily judgments by others as well as the more massive ones. Underlying all the accounts in this paper is the awareness that having a proper job and a sizeable income is not enough to maintain a middle-class position. Those who wish to stay in the middle must secure their class standing by convincing their audience that they deserve the role.

### Conclusion

Class has a great impact on people's everyday lives and long-term life-chances in Madurai—for example, on the dignity and respect they claim and are accorded in their extended families, neighbourhoods, schools, jobs, and on the streets; on the material ease with which they move through the city, the physical comfort of their homes, and the frequency with which they eat; on the status-producing value of the knowledge and goods they can acquire; on the occupations they can help their children prepare to take on; and on the marriage alliances they can negotiate for their children. Whilst class is not the only source or determinant of opportunities or influence, it is a highly significant one. As Herring and Agarwala have argued, 'Class determines what people must do, what they have the freedom to do, what they cannot do. It structures the realm of choice...Defining that choice matrix reveals a structure of freedoms, capacities, and compulsions: i.e., the class structure'.<sup>70</sup>

A person's place within this structure is flexible rather than static. In Madurai as elsewhere, class is a continuous process of re-making an identity and convincing others of its validity. If this sounds like a superficial or inconsequential aspect of a system that fundamentally

<sup>70</sup> Herring and Agarwala, 'Introduction', p. 325.

shapes people's lives, the accounts provided here argue otherwise. Class location is unstable not simply because major financial losses or gains can precipitate a change in standing; rather, class positions must be accepted by others, and onlookers (both intimate and anonymous) must be persuaded of them on a continuing basis. Much of this reproduction requires the performance of proper class behaviours such as language, consumption, ritual practices, public comportment, and hygiene. Madurai residents 'in the middle' emphasize their sense of being on a stage where their choices are scrutinized and judged every day. The ambiguity of middle-class boundaries, the newness of many of the class fragments, and the ongoing changes in signifiers of class underscore the fact that maintaining a class identity is a *process*, one that for many families and individuals requires significant work, effort, commitment, and sacrifice.

The accounts recorded in this focus on subjective identities also highlight the *relational* nature of class. It is produced in interaction; a successful class identity is both claimed and ascribed. Being in the middle class may feel especially precarious because of the emphasis on enacting a role that, even when highly 'interiorised' (to borrow Hacking's term)<sup>71</sup>, must be seen as authentic by others. There is always some risk.<sup>72</sup> Assessments can pass fleetingly—as in the glance given by a seatmate on the bus—or they can rupture a moment or a life, as when a professor tells a student that her family is the wrong sort to attend college, when interviewees for a multinational information technology position are turned away because of how their clothes are arranged and their English is accented, or when a bride's family declines to make an alliance with the kin to whom she has been promised since childhood because the intended groom did not pass his medical school examinations. All serve to alter or reinforce a person's worthiness, opportunity, and belonging within a class.

In Madurai, many more people now call themselves middle class than did two decades ago. The many internal divisions among this group provide a reminder not to read their shared perceptions as a sign of homogeneity; yet they also set the group's common views and experiences in clearer relief, since these similarities are the

<sup>71</sup> Ian Hacking, 'Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman: Between Discourse in the Abstract and Face-to-Face Interaction', *Economy and Society* 33, 3: 277–302 (2004), at p. 299.

<sup>72</sup> See Säävälä, 'Low Caste', for a detailed discussion of the risks encountered by one family in using domestic rituals for upward mobility.

more notable for the self-ascribed middle class's diversity and for its divergence from conventional definitions of the middle class. Descriptions of what it means to be middle class reveal a deep ambivalence about circumstances. The middle connotes security, respect, and a deep sense of rightness. There is pleasure to be found in being centred between extremes. There must also be gratification in seeing oneself—or at least one's idealized image—reflected in television, newspaper, and magazine advertisements that depict happily consuming, modernizing, thriving middle-class families as the Indian ideal. There is also, however, the burden of expectations placed on the middle class: the constraint that is applied to spending also refers to keeping one's actions in check, never making mistakes, and always performing to one's class image properly. Added to this is the burden of finding the resources to finance the consumption that is utterly fundamental to upholding this image. Middle-class people must garner these resources at a time when, in their perception, acquiring sufficient income means that more household members must work, and often they must hold multiple jobs. Many find it difficult to find the jobs for which their educations have prepared them.

Roles, in Goffman's sense, shape who we are, and we become some of them. But to the extent that we recognize them as performances, we can easily be open to doubt about whether we are *really* what we portray ourselves to be. Without taking the performance metaphor too far, it seems reasonable to argue that such self-doubt may be especially prevalent when social life is seen as so explicitly performative as in Madurai. People in the middle do not spend every moment thinking of themselves as acting or as taking on a role that is artificial. And yet they are highly aware of the critical audiences around them. They describe themselves responding to these audiences, anticipating them, and hiding negative evidence from them. In presenting themselves 'neatly' and 'decently', taking on multiple jobs or training for new ones in order to gain the means to acquire and display signifiers of middle-class standing, hiding signs of growing or waning resources, people who wish to be seen as middle class are trying to perform that class in a way that will be accepted by onlookers. In so doing, they hope to gain the rewards of relative dignity, social networks, and everyday security that are accorded people in different sections of the middle class.

It may be that the wide spread of middle-class values, behaviours and desires supports many analysts' contentions that the (conventional)

middle class serves to disseminate a dominant ideology, and that the porousness of the lower boundary of the middle class helps to inculcate those hegemonic values,<sup>73</sup> or that middle class involvement in the politics of hegemony functions in part ‘to forge internal unity within the highly diverse fragments of the middle class’.<sup>74</sup> As I have suggested, it may also reflect the continued (or new) hegemonic role for upper-caste values. There is certainly evidence in the accounts presented in this paper of the reproduction of hegemony through values and practices (for example, the emphasis on hygiene, order, moral comportment in public, and proper citizenship). But ethnographic support for these arguments would require finer attention to the processes of absorbing and rejecting such values than I have available here. We must also keep in mind, as Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase demonstrate systematically in West Bengal, that espousal of such values represents a more complex process than simply a ‘uniform and coherent’ subscription to neo-liberal ideologies.<sup>75</sup>

Instead, this paper demonstrates the recent spread and development of a class identity, and the attributes of value, security, danger, and precariousness that attend living with and reproducing that identity. The pleasures and the anxieties of being in the middle exist in tension alongside each other. While this could be said of any class in Madurai, ‘middleness’ today is both structurally and culturally constructed to heighten the good and the bad of being in the centre. The common features of local middle-classness highlight this tension. On the one hand, the distance from and centrality between the poverty of mere survival and the excess of wealth imply material and moral comfort. To ‘count’ as a person on the social stage, to reside in the moderate middle, and to claim regard as fundamentally decent and ordinary are all desirable. The pleasures of being in the middle are all about social, economic, and cultural security. On the other hand, the negative aspects of the middle have to do with the insecurity of maintaining this position in the face of critical social judgments, unstable signs of membership, and inadequate financial means—the stressed resources of performance.

<sup>73</sup> See for example, Deshpande, *Contemporary India* pp. 129, 139–142; Leela Fernandes, ‘The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India’, *Urban Studies* 41, 12: 2415–2430 (2004), p. 2418; Fernandes and Heller, ‘Hegemonic Aspirations’, p. 501.

<sup>74</sup> Fernandes and Heller, ‘Hegemonic Aspirations’, p. 496.

<sup>75</sup> Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, ‘Hegemony’, p. 196.



There is some disjunction between scholarly and native categories of the middle class. Including attention to local identities enhances an understanding of how changing economies and class processes shape everyday lives. Finally, we must consider the possibility that ‘naming has real effects on people, and changes in people have real effects on subsequent classifications’.<sup>76</sup> If, in performing middle-class identities, people who would be denied class membership by some city residents nonetheless demonstrate a sufficient command of key class values and styles to convince others, they may also succeed in expanding the categories of who is ‘ordinary’ and who ‘counts’. As carefully defended as these concepts are in any highly hierarchical community, shifts in their content can reveal alterations in the processes by which classes are formed, challenged, and maintained.

<sup>76</sup> Hacking, ‘Between Michel Foucault’, p. 280.