GLOBALISATION AND THE MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA

The social and cultural impact of neoliberal reforms

Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase and Timothy J. Scrase

ROUTLEDGE

Globalisation and the Middle Classes in India

This book fills an important gap in the existing literature on economic liberalisation and globalisation in India by providing much-needed ethnographic data from those affected by neoliberal globalisation. On the basis of the ethnographic fieldwork and interviews, it reveals the complexity of the globalisation process and describes and accounts for the contradictory attitudes of the lower middle classes. The authors challenge the notion of a homogeneous Indian middle class as being the undoubted beneficiaries of recent neoliberal economic reforms, showing that while the lower middle classes are generally supportive of the recent economic reforms, they remain doubtful about the long-term benefits of the country's New Economic Policy and liberalisation. Significantly, this book discusses and analyses both the economic and cultural sides to globalisation in India, providing much-needed data in relation to several dimensions including the changing costs of living; household expenditure, debt and consumerism; employment and workplace restructuring; gender relations and girls' education; global media and satellite television; and the significance of English in a globalising India.

Globalisation and the Middle Classes in India will be of interest to scholars and students working in the fields of sociology, social anthropology and development studies, as well as Asian studies – in particular studies of South Asia and India – and globalisation studies.

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Wollongong, NSW, Australia

Abbreviations

BPO	business processing unit
CPM (or CPI-M)	Community Party of India, Marxist
EL	economic liberalisation
EOU	export-oriented unit
EPZ	export-processing zone
GIH	global intellectual hegemony
IGO	international governmental organisation
IIT	Indian Institute of Technology
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
MNC	multinational corporation
NEP	New Economic Policy
NSS	National Sample Survey
PRA	participatory rural appraisal
SAP	structural adjustment programme (or policy)
TNC	transnational corporation

1 Globalisation, structural adjustment and the middle classes in India

Themes and issues explored in this book

> At the workplace there are growing problems. People have forgotten how to lead a systematic peaceful life. Everywhere there is chaos. All sorts of troubles are everywhere. Prices have sky rocketed. Life seems to have become very complicated. People were not like this before. People were different, they were peace-loving. But now there is a different sense, a different feeling. I don't know how to explain this clearly, but . . . it's a feeling I have that we are going through a great change.
>
> (Nilanjan, male, aged 42, technician)

The main theme of this book is one which is discussed widely in business and academic circles and in the popular media but, apart from a number of economic and political studies and macroeconomic analyses, remains largely under-researched in the sociological and social anthropological literature. This book is about change – the dramatic social and cultural change that has swept across India over the past 15 years and has affected all levels of society. The impacts of the two great precursors of this change – economic liberalisation and globalisation – have, of course, been felt not only in India. Across the world, all societies, to varying degrees, have had to grapple with global capital's forced restructuring of jobs, and the various impacts on national cultural industries, local and national politics, and ultimately on people's hopes and aspirations, their day-to-day survival, and their plans for the future. In essence, this book is sociological. It provides a detailed, ethnographically informed, empirically grounded account of the social and cultural impacts of liberalisation and globalisation. It does so principally by analysing the lived experiences and viewpoints of the people themselves. Thus, our major aim is to understand and relate,

in their own words, the diverse ways in which middle-class people have been affected by the social and economic changes over the past seven years in India.

Our book investigates what we found to be one of the great myths of the opening up of the Indian economy since 1991 – that economic liberalisation has resulted in a massively expanded, homogenous mass of wealthy, Indian middle classes who have been the principal beneficiaries of liberalisation, profiting immensely from the new opportunities for education, jobs and consumption. Liberalisation is a mythical 'El Dorado', where new opportunities abound and fortunes are to be made, a myth largely promulgated by the commercial media, private enterprise and politicians alike. Take, for instance, the cover page headline of New Delhi's CNN magazine (Cam News Network Today) from April 2005 (24): 'Middle Class Might!':

> The burgeoning middle class is now powering the engine of economic growth, empowered as they have been by economic liberalisation, fanned by MNC operations, newer job options and an unprecedented boom in the service sector of the economy. Mores have changed from savings to instant gratification, and young couples are buying houses even before they get married, spending time out in restaurants and thinking nothing of buying with loaned money, things considered Epicurean by their parents.

Many contemporary, popular magazines, such as *India Today*, are regularly filled with similar 'good news' stories about the past decade of a 'booming' Indian economy, how it has become a consumer paradise, with opportunities for youth and unending business prospects and profits. We compare the celebratory, media-hyped views to those told to us by our informants. Mr Burman is in his early fifties; we caught up with him after work and went back to his house for a 'cup of tea and a chat' about life as it is today for him and his family of three. He is an office worker in a government enterprise and is nearing retirement. His house, government-provided quarters, and amenities are simple and basic. For all intents and purposes he is middle class, but his world view is far from the exaggerated views of 'money, profits and success' of the past decade:

> When we entered this service it was nothing. The PAs [personal assistants; basic level clerks] were not considered human. They did not have any human dignity. After 1978 the pay went up dramatically. We got in a month what we might have got in an entire year.

> This did make a difference. Through political agitation we got some benefits. We are satisfied with very little. We want to live comfortably with human dignity. This does not mean luxury goods. If the essential commodities are a reasonable price, I would be more than happy; and I am happy with my income. However, nowadays, even if we get an increase of 5000 rupees a month we would not be satisfied because of the way we now desire things.
>
> If I compare myself with a day labourer who toils outside, my conditions are terrific. I perhaps really work only two to three hours in a day. What about them? Why should the conditions be like this? I am a privileged person in comparison with most people in our country. I do not want anything more for myself.

This view captures the essence of the sentiments felt by most of the people we studied – educated and well read; sympathetic, indeed humanistic (although sometimes paternalistic) towards those less fortunate; and perceptive about the changes taking place in the society.

We contend in this book that the past decade and a half has brought few real benefits in the lives of many of the middle classes. Rather, for many families, their lives have been made more difficult due to rising prices, inflation, increasing debt, increasing competition for jobs and housing, and a marked decline in overall living standards. While opportunities have undoubtedly increased for them, so too, we find, have their levels of personal and financial stress. Thus, the major finding of our study is that there is a stark contradiction between the rhetoric and reality of structural adjustment and globalisation for the middle classes. Surprisingly, many we talked to perceive the possibility for a better future for themselves and their children. What is particularly striking about this optimistic vision of the future is that they consider the past, state-led, bureaucratically controlled development to be largely a failure and so for them, things can only get better. The paradox that is revealed is that it was precisely the middle classes in India who were the main beneficiaries of state-led development over the decades following independence. Yet, over the past 15 years, a segment of these middle classes has been finding itself slowly losing the protection of the state, especially in terms of secure employment and a guaranteed, higher education place for their children. Ironically, it is cosmopolitanism and globalism that they welcome, yet they do not want to lose the secure safety-net provided by the state.

The ambivalence of the middle classes to the reforms to the economy since 1991 is examined here by exploring the ways in which the structural causes of reforms and their discursive understanding of them are

mediated. Our informants perceive globalisation as an amalgam of social, cultural and economic outcomes resulting from an 'opening-up' of the Indian economy to the global market. For our purposes, then, the contemporary phase of globalisation and economic liberalisation is considered as two sides of the same coin. As Stewart and Berry (1999: 151) assert, 'both conceptually and empirically it is impossible to differentiate globalisation and liberalisation completely'. Importantly, while cultural globalisation is perceived positively by our informants, they remain doubtful about the long-term benefits of the new economic policy (NEP) and liberalisation. Therefore, in this book we discuss and analyse both the economic and cultural sides to globalisation in India, and provide much-needed data on several dimensions, including the changing costs of living; household expenditure, debt and consumerism; changes to and satisfaction with employment and workplace restructuring; gender relations and girls' education; reactions to and effects of global media and satellite television; and the significance of English in a globalising India. We concur with Geschiere and Meyer (1998: 601) who argue that the ambiguities of globalisation raise 'urgent challenges, not merely on the level of theory but also with regard to better understanding of actual global entanglements'.

The remainder of this chapter provides the initial background and develops an analytical framework for the study. We present and evaluate some of the current, anthropological research and critiques of neoliberal globalisation. We also clarify why the middle classes were selected to be studied and highlight the significance of this class fraction. We provide general background to the current economic change taking place in India, emphasising several key aspects of structural reforms. We then explain our fieldwork and the positive aspects of ethnographic analysis which has provided us with both rich and complex data. Last, we present a range of demographic data and general background information on our respondents and informants.

Economic liberalisation and neoliberal development: anthropological insights and critique

Globalisation conceived as an expansion of a neoliberal market economy is central to the discussion in this book since market and trade liberalisation have been the cornerstones of the globalising process in India. 'Globalisation' is as fluid as the myriad ways in which it is manifest. It has been defined as 'changes in the density of international and global interactions relative to local or national networks' (Chase-Dunn *et al.*, 2000: 79). Within this definition are the sub-divisions of

economic globalisation, which promotes 'greater integration in the organisation of production, distribution and consumption in the commodities of the world economy', and political globalisation, which 'is conceptualised as the institutional form of global and interregional political/military organisations' (ibid.: 80). Globalisation is also commonly defined according to the Washington Consensus or the globalisation project as, 'a now-hegemonic, neoliberal political ideology that celebrates the victory of capitalism over socialism and proclaims marketisation and privatisation as solutions to the world's problems' (ibid.: 77). It is this ideology that both forms the operating ethos of international development institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and is the central tenet of neoliberal development. Gosovic (2000: 447, 448) has argued that a type of global intellectual hegemony (GIH) became one of the major characteristics of neoliberal globalisation of the 1990s. This hegemony is perpetuated through the frequent use of particular terminology and clichés that legitimise this paradigm, imbuing it with positive qualities. In the language of GIH, neoliberal globalisation is packaged as new, modern, scientific, results oriented and inevitable. Any questioning of this paradigm is dismissed as old-fashioned. We look at this ideological aspect of neoliberalism more closely in Chapter 4.

Neoliberal development advocates the loosening of government regulation and control of central economic activities in favour of market forces, which, it is assumed, will self-regulate the economy and distribute wealth across the population. Proponents argue that increased economic growth benefits the entire nation and eventually trickles down to the lowest strata of those societies. 'Furthermore, the trends toward faster growth and poverty reduction are strongest in developing economies that have integrated with the global economy most rapidly, which supports the view that integration has been a positive force for improving the lives of people in developing areas' (Dollar, 2005: 147). A related assumption of neoliberal development is that all nations are moving in the same direction and that globalisation is a converging force, bringing nations and its people closer together in a positive and productive way.

An important aspect of how neoliberal development is implemented hinges on the structural adjustments that come to developing nations as a 'conditionality' of loan packages from the IMF or international aid from the World Bank. As writers such as Easterly have pointed out, the list of conditionalities on Third World governments is well known: 'reduced budget deficits, currency devaluation, reduced domestic credit expansion, freed controlled prices and interest rates, reduced trade barriers, increased privatisation and deregulation of the market'

(Easterly, 2001: 3). From this point of view, development efforts that support the structural adjustments and public accounting measures required by the IMF and the World Bank may be a bitter pill to swallow initially but, in the long run, will bring about development beneficial to the nation and its people. Where structural adjustment has not led to long-term benefits, this is generally explained by the lack of systematic policies on the part of local governments (Banerjee and Munger, 2004; Colman and Okorie, 1998). Notwithstanding such explanations, a vast literature of empirical data suggests that the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the IMF and the World Bank have led to increased economic hardship (Goldberg and Pavenik, 2003; Hathie and Lopez, 2002; Hilson and Potter, 2005).

Even within the pro-globalisation and neoliberal development camp, it is clear that economic growth has not necessarily brought about an equitable distribution of wealth across populations and that 'one of the most contentious issues of globalisation is the effect of global economic integration on inequality and poverty' (Dollar, 2005: 145). In an effort to mitigate the persistent problems of Third World nations, certain terms of development, namely poverty and inequality, have been recast in the neoliberal discourse. Poverty is no longer regarded solely as a lack, or want, of material things. Instead, it is now predominantly regarded as the product of the social relationships between those who have and those who have not (Appadurai, 2004). Moreover, in the language of neoliberal development and its main proponents, namely the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme, the heart of poverty alleviation lies in effacing unequal hierarchies through the microprocesses of capacity-building and empowerment as well as through the macroprocesses of structural adjustments (World Bank Poverty Report, 2003). Thus, 'development' is now widely seen, by policy-makers and governments around the world, as the process of building liberal capitalist institutions, competitive markets, liberal pluralist democracy, and open and egalitarian civil society institutions (Brett, 2000).[1]

Observed in these terms, one aspect of development focuses on counter measures to powerlessness, namely empowerment and participation. This shift in terms can also be seen in the way that development theory appears to have moved in a full circle. In the 1950s, anthropological experts were displaced in favour of economists. Now, anthropology is once again being embraced. Development approaches have started to veer away from their immediate ancestry in economics and political science into the discipline of anthropology, with its historical focus on the individuality of cultures and the value of indigenous knowledge.

Moreover, anthropological approaches provide the basis for the ethnographic techniques that inform the practice of participatory development. This last aspect is seen most clearly through participatory rural appraisal (PRA), a methodology that seeks to facilitate change by eliciting the active participation of local people. Yet, however strongly PRA resonates with the 'warm and fuzzy' notion of 'local participation and cultural diversity' (Nelson and Wright, 1995), it comes as little surprise that it has, for the most part, been coopted into neoliberal development through both discourse and an uneven handling of the methodology in the field.

According to Mohan and Stokke (2000: 254), many of those who work within non-government agencies have come to a sad awareness of the fact that while they may help to bring about many microachievements, the power structures responsible for the inequitable distribution of resources in the first place remain largely unchallenged. Instead of reimbursing developing countries for the damage that has been done as a result of free market policies, the way in which aid is administered complements these neoliberal agendas (Petras and Veltmeyer, 2002: 288). Neoliberalism becomes normative, in that it imposes new norms for development based on 'rational' market principles and thus 'regulates' and imposes conditions for community progress. In doing so, it legitimises the role of 'experts', who come to dominate or impose 'plans' for 'progress and development'. In this revised developmentalist system, the poor become 'accountable' for both the successes and failures of local development agendas and plans. However, local knowledge is often ignored due to existing power relationships and conflict in the locality (based on gender, age, family conflicts, etc.; see Pottier *et al.*, 2003). This is one of the myths of 'community' – i.e. that all in a town or village equally share in its politics. The most damning observation is that preferencing notions of 'social capital' inevitably ignores power; and thus we find that in many disadvantaged communities, people are in fact disempowered by 'the experts' (see Miraftab, 2004). Extending this argument further, local people, 'citizens' if you will, are now understood primarily as economic, 'rational' consumers, before they are considered for their social attributes, such as their cultural and traditional norms. From this perspective, structure, in the form of institutionalism, is seen as the balance for the opposing views of individuals governed either by 'rational choice' or as 'social beings'. Therefore, institutionalising participation by upholding desirable neoliberal characteristics, such as 'responsibility, ownership, cooperation, and collective action' is actively promoted (Cleaver, 1999). Locating the critique back in its effects on local people, 'participation as empowerment' is seen as

an appropriation of individual agency (Green, 2000). Green's analysis exposes the paradox of participatory development, which is that the poor do not have the capacity to bring about social change by themselves but instead must enter into existing structures of power in order to effect social and personal transformation.

The foregoing discussion highlights how neoliberal development has established itself as the hegemonic discourse at the level of international institutions, national governments and, to some extent, local communities. The power of this discourse rests on an unfailing belief in the ideology of the market (Dilley, 1992) and through the cooption of concepts, such as 'empowerment', which nonetheless require local beneficiaries to react and behave in certain market-oriented ways. Importantly, we see later, in Chapter 4, the ways in which our informants have accepted the discourse of neoliberalism and rationalised 'reform as beneficial and necessary' as it applies to their jobs and workplaces.

The power of neoliberal discourse also rests on the assumption that globalisation and neoliberal development are manifest solely through the concept of convergence. To counter the notion that globalisation is a converging force, some theorists have maintained that it is more accurately defined according to disjunctures (Appadurai, 1996) and divergences (Arce and Long, 2000). In terms of neoliberal development, this requires looking 'at both the complicity and activities of international development institutions as well as how local actors contribute to the elaboration of global modernities' (Arce and Long, 2000: 49). The perspective of divergence 'demythologises the metatheoretical languages of development (modernisation, dependency and institutional theories)' (2000: 50) and instead refocuses attention on localised articulations of development. As we argue throughout this book, these articulations find their concrete forms in the lived everyday realities of the local citizenry who must negotiate the policies of neoliberal development and economic restructuring.

The complexity in this range of arguments suggests that the commonly expected 'gap' between policy and practice (Crewe and Harrison, 1998), found in the failure of either SAPs or participatory initiatives, not only highlights the continuing importance of the 'language of development' in maintaining the status quo,[2] but also the necessity of going beyond the strict dichotomy of 'global versus local' to focus instead on the nuanced interplay among the various actors in the development arena. To this end, Marcus's (1995) celebrated article on multi-sited ethnography highlights the importance of ethnographic practices in cross-cutting the dichotomies of global and local, thus

destabilising the distinction that influences and effects flow unidirectionally, from global to local.[3] Instead, Marcus argues that a multi-sited ethnography leaves open the interpretation of influences, simultaneously constructing the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects even while it constructs aspects of the system (of neoliberal development) itself. Therefore, in the 'clash of cultures', new hybrids are created that transcend our interpretation of their constituent elements. For this creation, Marcus posits a methodology that is

> designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection amongst sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography.
>
> (Marcus, 1995: 105)

Several examples illustrate the strength of Marcus's method. In his work on how planned development is constructed, David Mosse (2005) describes the processes by which the policies of neoliberal development, conceived in distant head offices, are negotiated in the field sites of underdeveloped countries, focusing on a development project in Tamil Nadu. Projects are often defined according to 'success' and 'failure', but far from merely criticising policy that pay little heed to local realities, Mosse argues for understanding the processes by which the project is made, unmade, protected, elaborated and promoted by various actors, and concludes that policies often followed direct action, not vice versa. In a similar vein, Murray Li (1999) and Williams (2004) point to the negotiation of spaces around planned development projects in Indonesia and India. In another example that elucidates multi-sited ethnography as 'following the object', Long and Villarreal (1998) trace the many and varied paths of cornhusks as they make their way from production sites in rural Mexico to consumers in the United States. Along the way, cultural identities are located and marked according to the values placed on the commodity; in different settings, similar studies have been carried out by De Boeck (1998) and Miller (1994). In response to the hegemony of neoliberal discourses of development, several works have questioned the fruitfulness and even validity of this train of thought. Dilley (1992) points out that it is necessary to articulate threads of conversation and rhetoric that represent the other to the hegemonic discourse. In Taussig's (1980) informative study, he elaborates this counter-discourse of development, as articulated by local actors, by highlighting the 'unnaturalness' of capitalism and money in

its ability to grow and extend like a living being. Examining the dominant discourse of environmental development, Leach and Fairhead (2000) posit that forest and social history are represented in ways that exclude local knowledge. In their ethnography, they explore how the discourse is experienced and interpreted locally.

Notably, a multi-sited ethnography of development not only focuses on the subaltern site, providing us with an understanding of the middle ground as it is experienced locally, but also emphasises the construction of processes at the dominant site. To this end, Lewis *et al.* (2003) provide an account of organisational culture in multi-agency rural development projects, finding that a range of cultures exists even within the hegemony of agencies. This account challenges overly simplistic homogenising accounts of the West, or of domination. Likewise, Peck (2004) explores the construction of neoliberalism through in-depth interviews with members at the core of the neoliberal project in Washington, London and Europe. Through extensive periods of fieldwork, by understanding the 'community', following the 'policy discourse', or tracking the commodity through multi-sited ethnography, an analysis emerges that does not rely on a strict dichotomy between modern and traditional, global and local, developed and under-developed, but rather accounts for both (or all) through a detailed understanding of the interplay of related historical and experiential factors.

The middle classes: the socio-economic background of informants

As noted above, we set about exploring the impact of neoliberal globalism and economic reforms on the lives of the middle classes; but who, exactly, constitute the 'middle classes' to whom we refer? Sociologists have criticised the elasticity of the category 'middle class' under the liberalisation of the Indian economy (Lakha, 1999) and have noted the differentiation of the middle classes (Deshpande, 2003). In rapidly changing societies, it may be useful to think about these groups as class fractions rather than as a single, unified class (Sen and Stivens, 1998: 15). We maintain that the upper and lower ends of the middle classes cannot be conflated. For the purposes of our study, we largely researched people who can be classified as 'the lower middle class', and this category in Bengal can be defined as belonging both to a particular economic bracket and a cultural milieu. Among those that we studied, average household income at the start of our fieldwork in 1999 was just under Rs. 10,000[4] per month but during the course of our research that figure nearly doubled. Within cultural hierarchies of Bengal, this group

forms part of the Bengali *bhadralok*. Significantly, across India, in each region or state, one finds clear class hierarchies interceded by cultural nuances defined by ethnicity, culture and education. Hence, we argue that many of our findings concerning the formation and expression of class-based cultures in West Bengal can be similarly examined in other regions, but with notable ‘cultural twists’ and local nuances.

In Bengal, *bhadralok* is a term that is multivalent but means, above all, ‘respectable people’. They constitute civil society. The *bhadralok* are distinguished by their refined behaviour and cultivated tastes, but not necessarily by substantial wealth and power. They emerged as a new social group in the late eighteenth century in Bengal and were the first to gain entry into urban professional occupations. Although originally linked to upper castes in contemporary Bengali society, they are a distinct status group, in the Weberian sense, which is coterminous with neither caste nor class (Mukherjee, 1975). While for two centuries the *bhadralok* were reasonably well off, educated and a highly cultured status group, they are now a heterogeneous group and often indigent. They still seek education above all, especially for their children, and attempt to maintain a veneer of their once high social status by engaging in writing, music and the arts. However, present economic realities mean that educational achievements and cultural pursuits, traditional status symbols, are now insufficient to maintain their status. Over the past decade or so, the entrepreneurial and moneyed upper middle class has expanded in West Bengal and so, as in other major urban centres of India, conspicuous consumption has become an increasingly important determinant of status. Our informants constantly pointed out that they are not well off, that they feel increasingly under financial pressures and that their lives are far removed from the lives of the entrepreneurial and upper middle class, the ‘new rich’ of India. Moreover, the key elements of middle-class cultural capital are being redefined along with the changing economy. Increasingly, financial capital is used to purchase an English-medium private education and to send a child abroad for university education, and so to build one’s stock of cultural capital. In contrast, many of our respondents’ life trajectories have been associated with the downward mobility of the *bhadralok*, which began several decades ago following the partition of Bengal and has been exacerbated by neoliberal reforms. Many had struggled through education to obtain secure employment in the public sector, but now they increasingly feel that they are being squeezed out.[5]

Our respondents were clerks, lower-ranking professionals and administrators, sales and service personnel (see Table 1.3 on p. 26). However, sociological attempts to derive class from occupational

categories and income are only partially successful at explaining the position of our informants; these groups are best understood as class fractions. Neo-Marxist accounts (Wright, 1985; Wright *et al.*, 1989) shed some light on the social location of a marginal middle class consisting of non-manual wage earners and low-grade technicians: they may be seen to be in a contradictory class location – semiautonomous, professional employees situated somewhere between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie. Others have referred to these groups as 'lower white collar classes'.[6] We use these categories to specify the respondents' market capacity, given the significance of that capacity in defining the emerging middle classes. We were particularly concerned to document their consumption and household survival strategies, which subsequently revealed their limited household budgets. However, we also recognise that complex linkages between economic position, status and caste relations, and the dynamics of political power continue to shape the formation of social classes in India, and so we do not claim that any fixed definitions are going to be completely adequate in analysing class relations.

When we first began thinking through the complexity of 'middle class', we relied on the self-ascriptions of our informants. Historically, they self-identified as belonging to the middle class, yet some specifically referred to themselves as 'lower middle class'. Indeed, when describing themselves in that way, they mostly expressed themselves in English, although some used the Bengali term *nimno moddhobitto* (lower middle class) to depict their neighbourhoods. This occurred especially when they intended to describe their surroundings in a self-deprecating way or to signify a fall from grace. We believe this to be a significant departure from other studies of emerging middle-class groups carried out in recent years, which forms the central distinguishing feature of our study. Presenting a striking contrast to the real poor, other terms that our informants used were 'ordinary folk', 'common folk' and 'people of limited means'. They clearly do not belong to the emerging 'new rich' of Asia (Robison and Goodman, 1996; Pinches, 1999). People invariably described their situation, or their lifestyles, as 'normal' although in the context of Indian social hierarchies they are in fact relatively privileged. What is distinctive is their subtle awareness of internal class divisions and their distanciation from the wealthy or rich. Some simply described themselves as 'those dependent on a salary'. The image of a regular salary earner is a powerful one in the Bengali cultural context, suggesting a distinction from both menial-waged work and earnings gained from trade. However, it also disguises the real incomes of those civil servants who supplement household income by taking bribes. During

our fieldwork, no one claimed that they were poor, despite their lack of material wealth.

Neoliberal reforms in India

Throughout the 1990s, IMF-derived, SAPs were implemented in India. In July 1991, the NEP was formulated in India; West Bengal, which has been ruled by a Left-Front coalition since 1977 (dominated by the CPI-M), developed its own NEP in 1994. In a dramatic reversal of policies protecting domestic industrial capital, economic reforms were introduced, aimed at liberalising the economy from various bureaucratic regulations and controls said to have stifled growth.[7] Making the economy more efficient through increased market orientation is the major goal of the reforms. It was in the NEP that the first comprehensive statements of policy concerning structural reforms to the Indian economy were formulated. Among the key changes proposed by the structural adjustment policies in India were reduced public sector employment, limitations on agricultural subsidies, denationalisation of banks and insurance companies and reductions in public expenditure. The causes and consequences of the NEP shift and subsequent economic liberalisation in India are much debated. In many respects, there are two very different narratives about the political economy of liberalisation in India since 1991. To its advocates, liberalisation has been a sorely needed remedy to an uncompetitive and unwieldy interventionist system that was restricting the capacity of Indian industry to grasp the opportunities presented by a globalising market (Bhagavati, 1993; Ahluwalia and Little, 1998). The move towards greater export-earning capacity and foreign investment in areas that the state would be best to stay out of has the capacity to free up resources in order to put them into more urgent areas of priority, such as rural infrastructure and human development. Agricultural production will become more efficient and competitive, and the greater emphasis on market forces should reduce the corruption flowing from the rent-seeking state. The devolution of fiscal responsibility towards the states that has been increasing since 1994 will lead to greater potential for raising revenue and more efficient use of resources. This version asserts that up until this point, the strategy has been well managed politically and economically, so that necessary measures have been introduced in a way that has been sustainable. The near consensus among most of the major parties illustrates that the reform process is successful.

To its detractors, liberalisation represents nothing short of surrender to imperialist forces and, in the case of the Left, the comprador domestic

bourgeoisie (Chakrabarti and Cullenberg, 2003; Chandrashekhar and Ghosh, 2002; Corbridge and Harriss, 2001). Those on the Left argue that the indiscriminate entry of imports leads to deindustrialisation and the loss of agricultural markets. Similarly, the opening up of areas of national interest to competition cripples much of the progress that has been achieved in the rural areas. The reduction of subsidies has crippled the incomes of farmers, reducing agricultural employment, and vast areas not attractive to capital have slipped further behind those more attractive for investment opportunities. Further, they assert that the ongoing privatisation of important public goods excludes many from access to essential services. These processes have led to growing inequalities between states and classes, fuelling greater social tensions and political instability. The failure of the 'Third Front' forces to present a viable electoral alternative is not merely a reflection of the fractured and opportunistic nature of Indian political coalitions; rather, it is also fundamentally about the economic conditions that constrain any government in a world increasingly dominated by finance capital.

Part of the reason that these two narratives are able to coexist is that the many processes associated with liberalisation have affected different sectors in different ways. Further, despite the protestations of the Left Front, there is no genuinely broad, that is to say national, political will to halt the process. As Jenkins (1995, 1999) argues, this is because the timing and sequencing of reforms have been done so that coalitions of advocates have been built along the way. Significantly, these political coalitions of support have been built in such a way that 'acceptable' reforms have been instituted quickly, while difficult elements have been instituted in piecemeal fashion, so that resistance has been minimised. This is 'reforming by stealth', according to Jenkins. His analysis is particularly interesting for its perspective on how federalism has allowed the centre to push reforms onto the states, especially where state governments have had to be supportive of reform as more of the burden for attracting foreign investment, private funds for transport and infrastructure reforms, etc. has fallen on them (Jenkins, 1999; Saez, 2002). Perhaps the best and most comprehensive summation of the various perspectives on the causes and consequences of economic liberalisation is to be found in the recent work of Corbridge and Harriss (2001). Their perspective is similar to that of Chandrashekhar and Ghosh (2002), in that they see the impetus for reform as coming from powerful classes within society as much as the outcome of certain contradictions and limitations in the historical process of state-led development. The process of liberalisation became even more complex after 1994, marking a qualitatively different stage in the

liberalisation process, according to Pedersen (2001). In the era of the 'second generation of reforms', attention shifted to the need for the states to undertake liberalisation. For West Bengal, this policy shift was articulated in the New Industrial Policy and the revamping of the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation (see also Damachis, 2001; McLean, 2001). International call centres, expansion of seaports and transport facilities, attracting multinational corporations, the growth of IT hubs are all characteristic of the new Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). Additionally, major urban redevelopment is also underway and integral to the Left Front government's industrialisation plans.

Over the past few years, however, the Left Front has faced great difficulties in reconciling its electoral loyalties, ideology and the perceived necessities in an era of liberalisation. The growing schism between its ideological predilections and the reality of its economic problems has resulted in two different criticisms. On the one hand, those favouring the continuity of state intervention fear that a policy of unrestricted imports would lead to deindustrialisation and the loss of agricultural markets; instead they point to the problems of open competition derailing much of the progress that has been achieved in the rural areas. On the other, critics such as Chakrabarti and Cullenberg (2003: 235–44) argue that the defence of the pre-reform Indian economy – particularly state enterprises in the name of self-sufficiency and freedom from foreign interference – is indefensible from a Marxist perspective, and dismiss the position of state enterprises as the political space of effecting change to 'socialism'. However, such an abstract and sterile debate between the advocates of 'market socialism' and 'correct' Marxist analysis misses the very important point of what aspects of state intervention in development might mean to people as a vehicle for achieving equality and social justice (see Frankel, 1997).

Fieldwork and methodology: towards an ethnographic account of economic reforms in India

As our principal aim in this book is to explore the experiences and personal understandings of the Indian middle classes experiencing neoliberal reforms and globalisation, we embed their voices in our analysis as much as possible. The narratives told in our accounts are derived from participant observation and in-depth interviews with them and their families. The study is based on periods of intensive as well as intermittent fieldwork conducted between 1999 and 2006 in and around outlying areas and suburbs of Kolkata, and the town of Siliguri in North Bengal. When we commenced our fieldwork, there was a general

feeling of optimism about liberalisation among the middle classes. Just over eight years had passed since the NEP was implemented. We attempted to gauge middle-class responses to it and the effects it was having on their lives. For us, the past seven years of research have been a journey, charting their everyday experiences, dreams and disappointments. Both as individuals and as a team, we were participant observers in a variety of settings including the workplace, family residence, children's recreational activities and even holiday travel. Additionally, two field assistants were involved in conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews. We use some of this data to present snapshots of household survival strategies and responses to a range of changing circumstances. Using a snowballing method, a total of 120 people were interviewed (60 in each city). Of the respondents, there were 20 key informants, most of whom we had known for over a decade from our previous research in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Women constituted 48 per cent of our sample. Respondents came from both joint and nuclear families. The great majority (85 per cent) were employed in the formal or organised sector of the labour force, while 15 per cent were working in the so-called informal sector. While most people worked in the public sector, among the formal sector workforce, about one quarter was employed by the private sector, including transnational companies. It is important to note, however, that none of our respondents had obtained employment in occupations that have specifically emerged as a consequence of liberalisation; on the contrary, some within the private sector were retrenched and others compelled to accept voluntary redundancy. Despite their general optimism about liberalisation, working-age children within the households have not fared much better than their parents. The only exceptions are a couple of young people who secured work as call centre workers and one engineer-*cum*-management consultant. The latter is the most successful among our respondents' children. Yet her success is attributed largely to a particular trajectory: she had studied outside the state of West Bengal and married her class mate who works in the same field. Having secured employment in Mumbai almost immediately after graduation, the couple experienced rapid success in the world of work and finance.

The research we undertook for this book is ethnographic and qualitative and, despite almost a decade and a half of radical economic reforms, there remains little in the way of microlevel sociological research documenting the direct and indirect effects of these economic reforms on communities and local groups. On the whole, most studies highlight a range of macro-politico-economic transformations taking place in India (e.g., see Chakrabarti and Cullenberg 2003; Chandrashekhar and

Ghosh 2002; Corbridge and Harriss 2001; Fernandes 2006; Oza 2006; Pedersen 2001). With some exceptions (edited volume by Assayag and Fuller 2005; De Neve 2006; Lakha 1999; Srinivas 2002; van Wessel 1998, 2004), there are few published ethnographic accounts of the social consequences of changing economic relations in India. The significance of the ethnographically informed studies on the middle classes and economic reform has been highlighted elsewhere. Some of these important studies include: O'Doherty's study of the Brazilian middle classes (2002); Pusey's detailed interviews with middle-class Australians (2003); Newman's (1999) study of downward mobility in the USA; and in Nepal, Liechty's (2003) ethnography of new, middle-class consumers; and Rankin's (2004) study of the Newars, a middle-class merchant community. Apart from references cited earlier in this chapter to ethnographies and critiques of neoliberal development, several country case studies of ethnographic reflections of market liberalisation can be found in the volume recently published by Dannhaeuser and Werner (2006), although it does not focus solely on the middle classes.

In our view, it is through the ethnographic method that the respondents' paradoxical views of liberalisation are best revealed. We were able to explore the complexity of social relationships through intense participation in aspects of the everyday lives of the people being studied. Throughout this period, the contradictions between what our informants claimed or believed and what they actually did became apparent. Although both of us were engaged in the overall study and co-wrote all chapters, Tim Scrase was largely responsible for researching the impact of global media, including audience research, and Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase undertook the research among women workers. The majority of our respondents working in Kolkata live in the surrounding suburbs and towns, and travel long distances by train each day. By regularly joining them on these journeys, we were able to become involved in discussions with women and their friendship groups, and with male office workers, and had opportunities to explore complex issues such as the significance of SAPs, the NEP and privatisation. The journeys were an invaluable means of gaining people's trust, eventual acceptance and entry into their family networks.[8]

Our ability to interact with people in this study was constrained by the patterns of the working lives of couples. We were present in their homes mostly during evenings, Sundays and holidays. On various occasions, we were warmly invited to join important religious ceremonies such as *annaprasan*s and Catholic Confirmations, and we attended the occasional wedding. In some instances, we were also privy to negotiations in marriages. Meeting people near or at their

workplaces generally posed no difficulties, especially in large organisations. We usually met during lunch breaks, which also gave us the opportunity to meet informants' colleagues. Yet, repeated visits caused some bemusement. Suspicions grew as rumours spread of a management tactic to 'catch out' people who were allegedly not doing their jobs properly. We visited some people after work and on weekends as well. Informants were engaged in highly charged moral discourses about the changes happening around them; for instance, for a number of parents, the influences on children and young people brought by cable television and globalised imageries were troubling. Kleinman (1999: 413) suggests that an examination of such perceptions necessitates that the ethnographer engage with 'the ordinary, everyday spaces of moral process in a local world'. While we deployed this individual-centred, subjective approach to ethnography when dealing with the private spheres of families, the study was also coupled with examinations of broader processes.

The strength of ethnographic research lies in the richness of the feedback, observations and responses of informants and interviewees, together with our observations as researchers in the field. However, in recent years the notion of privileging the locality in the ethnographic method has come under considerable scrutiny; in particular, the adaptability of long-term fieldwork in a single place in an era of globalisation is under question (Appadurai, 1996; Stoller, 1997). Marcus (1995) has drawn attention to the emergence of multi-sited ethnographies in the world system as a way to redress this methodological problem to which we referred earlier. In light of the theoretical shifts in understanding the processes of globalisation and neoliberalism, an ethnographic account of development allows for a deeper understanding of how development is ultimately effected. As Marcus and Fischer have written:

> Ethnography must be able to capture more accurately the historic context of its subjects and to register the constitutive workings of impersonal political economy and economic systems on the local level where fieldwork usually takes place.
>
> (Marcus and Fischer, 1986: 39)

Through extensive periods of fieldwork, by understanding the 'community', or following the 'policy discourse', an analysis emerges that does not rely on a strict dichotomy between global and local, but rather accounts for all these complexities through a detailed understanding of the interplay of related historical and experiential factors.

In exploring the multifarious effects of neoliberalism, globalisation and local politics on the consciousness of those who confront them, our approach inevitably led us to comparisons across different locales. In this respect, we regard our work as a contribution to the emergent body of qualitative globalisation research described as 'global ethnography' (Burawoy *et al.*, 2000). Here, the main aim is to problematise the day-to-day lives of people in the context of the global forces that shape and reshape their social and cultural spaces. The permeability of cultural boundaries notwithstanding, we interacted with people who were widely dispersed, have few ties with each other and yet articulate a strong sense of belonging to a particular segment of Bengali society, namely, the lower middle class. It is not surprising that they readily couched their social location in terms of class categories. The language of class is a salient feature of public discourse in West Bengal, compared with the preponderance of the language of caste elsewhere in India. Thus, we have attempted to analyse our informants' self-understanding of social location processually, through their everyday practices and discursive repertoires. The dynamic interplay between structures of inequality and the meanings that people assign to class structures and relations frames our analysis.

The setting

The two sites that became most significant for our research were Kolkata and Siliguri. In Kolkata, our informants reside in the older neighbourhoods of North Kolkata, housing cooperatives and government flats in Salt Lake, and in the relatively newer surroundings of Jadavpur and Santoshpur (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2; and book cover). Some of those living in larger, joint family arrangements lived, by needing greater space, on the outskirts of Kolkata and Siliguri, and in older, free-standing houses. About one-quarter of all respondents rented their accommodation and also lived in modern flats, but a few of the renters have, in fact, rented for many decades under West Bengal's infamous, and antiquated, rental guarantee laws.[9] What was notable in terms of residential dwellings generally was that, in comparison to the middle classes in the USA, Australia or Europe, our informants have a relative lack of residential space and have little access to community open space. Apartment complexes were generally four to five stories, and many belonged to cooperative housing societies which had built, and now managed, these complexes. Typical of apartment complexes built 30 years ago was the lack of general maintenance. Many of the buildings looked grubby and in need of painting. Cement rendering was

severely cracked in places, and informants constantly complained about difficulties and costs in ensuring general upkeep and cleanliness of their complexes. Most of the cooperative housing complexes did not have lifts, making mobility difficult for older, disabled or injured persons.

A closer look inside apartments reveals a lot about the lives of our informants and the spaces they reside within. Many of the flats or apartments, although they may have been three bedrooms and with five to six household members, measure only 60–80 square metres (or 650–800 square feet). For instance, Alok, aged in his early fifties, works for the local government as a salaried medical officer. He and his wife Sucharita, who has a master's degree but is only intermittently employed, live in a cooperatively built two bedroom flat of about 70 square metres. There is usually at least one extra person staying in this flat every night. Their complex is four stories high and was built in the early 1990s. We see from the photos (see Figures 1.1–1.5) that space is at a premium and that facilities are quite basic. For example, the lounge and dining area measures 18 square metres, with the refrigerator, visible in the foreground, occupying a section of the dining space. The kitchen (Figure 1.4) is only about 4 square metres in size. Typical of most households is the use of a bench-top gas burner which runs on bottled

Figure 1.1 Housing complex.

Figure 1.2 Lounge area.

cooking gas. In the bedroom (Figure 1.5) we see a recent, relatively expensive addition – a home computer, and this room measures about 12 square metres. The floor is made from concrete mosaic, an extremely common flooring system used in almost all modern apartment blocks built in India. The main bedroom has a small en suite bathroom, and from Figure 1.5 we can gauge the size of the second bathroom, which is only about 1 metre wide by 2 metres in length.

Apart from being cramped and noisy, basic water connections were inadequate and intermittent for most homeowners. There were numerous complaints about inadequate power supplies, with the inevitable load-shedding occurring usually during the hottest parts of the day in summer. Many housing complexes, though, had invested in portable generators which, it must be said, temporarily resolved the power problems but added to the local air and noise pollution. As we have noted, a significant proportion of our respondents were commuters, living in the outlying suburbs of greater Kolkata and so spent vast amount of time travelling to work on cramped, and extremely hot and uncomfortable, busses or trains.

The town of Siliguri in North Bengal presents an interesting contrast to the metropolis of Kolkata, particularly in the uneven impacts of

Figure 1.3 Dining area.

globalisation. It is a vibrant frontier town with a diverse tribal population, into which there has been a considerable influx of migrant Bengalis in both pre- and post-partition periods. As migrants, Bengalis in North Bengal have had to grapple with questions of identity, which has made them more attuned to issues of 'Bengaliness', particularly in an era of heightened cultural globalisation. In addition, historically Siliguri has been a major centre of both official and black-market trade in a variety of consumer goods from Thailand, via Bangladesh and from Nepal. Finally, compared with Calcutta, Siliguri has had little in the way of industrial production (with the exception of the tea industry located around the district) or infrastructural development. Despite the regional differences, cultural responses to globalisation are not shaped by geographic location. Siliguri is a regional town, but still most people lived in apartments.

Figure 1.4 Kitchen.

Figure 1.5 Bedroom.

Summary of demographic data

In this section, we provide some basic details about the people in our study. Forty-five per cent of those we interviewed were females. As Table 1.1 indicates, respondents' ages ranged from 20 to 64 years, with the majority (65 per cent) aged 25–44.

Table 1.1 Age of respondents

Age range	*Frequency*	*(%)*
20–24 years	17	14
25–34 years	42	35
35–44 years	36	30
45–54 years	15	13
55–64 years	3	2
Undeclared	7	6
Total	120	100

In terms of religion, the majority (82 per cent) described themselves as Hindu. There were six Muslims and three Christians; the rest declined to declare any religious affiliation. However, religious sentiments never emerged in discussions about the impact of neoliberal globalisation: there were no religious scapegoats for the economic and social problems that they faced. For those who are Hindu, only 14 per cent belonged to the highest caste, Brahmins. The most common caste indicated, Kyastha (31 per cent) is the most common of the wealthier, higher-ranking castes in Bengal (Table 1.2).

We have attempted to provide as accurately as possible the figures on the caste affiliations of respondents. Unlike in other parts of India, where people do not hesitate to discuss caste position, the Bengali *bhadralok* do not generally broach this topic in polite company. Therefore, a number of indirect questions and hypothetical scenarios were posed to elicit answers. Since caste endogamy is commonly practised in arranged marriages, one effective strategy with those in arranged marriages was to inquire about a woman's maiden name, a question which did not generally offend. To ascertain the classification, these were then compared against matrimonial columns in newspapers, where specific caste preferences were noted. Even then some of the ambiguous responses could not be verified. For example, Mrs Ray mischievously noted 'well, you know that anyone who is not a Brahmin is a Shudra, don't you?' It was not entirely clear whether she was a Brahmin or not, her maiden name being Choudhuri. Both Ray and Choudhuri

Table 1.2 Respondents' caste

Caste	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Brahmin	17	14
Kshatriya	4	3
Baidya	4	3
Kyastha	37	31
Vaishya	14	12
Mahishya	6	5
Non-high born other/Shudra*	12	10
Scheduled caste	6	5
Subtotal	100	83
N/A	20	17
Total	120	100

* Includes some artisanal and agricultural castes who through patronage and education in previous generations were able to attain *bhadralok* status.

could be either Brahmin or non-high-born as these were occupationally derived names not associated with a specific caste. Therefore, we have preferred to use the category 'non-high-born' instead of the usual Shudra. Another interviewee, Mrs Dan (whose natal family was Bakshi, also one of the generic occupational groups), clearly indicated that she was not high-born, by highlighting the insignificance of caste:

> Our cook is a Brahmin lady. Some old-fashioned Brahmins would perhaps consider us low caste, but her high caste is of no value to her [implying middle-class income]. Such things don't mean anything nowadays. In our *para* (neighbourhood) everyone interacts with everyone. We don't know whose caste is what and we don't care.

Other than exacting marriage negotiations in some cases, caste did not feature in their day-to-day interactions. The displays of social distance were framed in terms of class rather than caste. Therefore, we did not persist in pursuing the question of caste when the answers were unclear. Through our informants we were able to find the Scheduled castes affiliation of six people. All had been able to access white-collar employment in the public sector through the reservation quota. Overall, at least half the Hindus belong to the higher castes, thus pointing to the strong link between higher caste status and middle-class affiliation.

In terms of marital status, 35 per cent were single, 57 per cent married, four people were divorced and five were widowed. As we might

Table 1.3 Respondents' occupations

Occupation	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Teacher	6	5
Admin/management	14	12
Clerical	46	39
Sales/stores	12	10
Service	15	12
Technical/trade	15	12
Private tutor	1	1
Other (retired; student)	11	9
Total	120	100

imagine, amongst the middle classes, nearly all (78 per cent) were employed in 'white-collar' professional occupations, with another 12 per cent in trades and technical areas. This is illustrated in Table 1.3.

Of those working, 70 people were employed in the government sector; five were working in semi-government jobs; 27 were in formal, private sector companies; and a relatively high number (15 per cent) were working in informal (i.e. not officially registered) private businesses.

We also enquired about educational achievements: overall, only 7.5 per cent held a postgraduate qualification, but a high number, 46 per cent, had completed a university or college degree. Another 39 per cent had secondary school qualifications, and only a few people had mid-level, secondary school completion. As the reader of this book will notice, many of the comments made to us over the years were extremely lucid, critical and well argued. Our informants had a keen interest in current affairs, read widely and enjoyed theatre performances and attending the annual Kolkata book fair (*boi mela*). To all intents and purposes, most families were very well educated and middle class.

In terms of household composition, the majority, about 70 per cent, lived in households with three, four or five family members. Sixteen per cent came from households of six or seven members and the rest were scattered in the range – from single households to one member living in a household of 16! What was particularly interesting about household composition was the support given to other family members not resident (approximately 55 per cent). We elaborate on this in Chapter 2. Among the homeowners (70 per cent), relatively few (7 per cent) actually had a home mortgage, and only eight people owned another property.

It was difficult to ask direct questions about earnings, although the

Table 1.4 Total household income

Income range (rupees per month)	*(%)*
0–5000	10
5001–10000	22
10001–15000	48
15001 or more	20

salaries and allowances of government employees are widely known. Nevertheless, we did ask about numbers of household members earning an income and found that 42 per cent of households had one earner, 37 per cent two earners, and 16 per cent had three members who regularly earned an income. Table 1.4 details household income ranges, with most of these figures collected during 2001–2003 (thus, we must allow for wage increases and price hikes since 2004).

It is notable that many people we talked to complained to us that, though the Pay Commission had approved salary and allowance increases, their department had yet to implement the new rates. We observed cases where employees in one branch of a workplace had indeed received the new pay increases, while exasperated others in a different branch were still to see any sign of the increase. Still, when we asked whether personal income had increased over the past five years, 76 per cent said 'yes'; more crucially, however, when asked whether their salaries increased along with the cost of living, an emphatic 80 per cent of respondents answered 'no'. This finding is particularly significant when we examine in more detail matters of consumption and spending in the next chapter. Importantly, seeing costs going up and their incomes and spending power diminishing sways many people's opinions about the perceived benefits of liberalisation.

The snake and the curse: perceptions of structural adjustment and liberalisation

> Only a handful have gained from this so-called economic liberalisation. **It is not ordinary middle-class people (*madhyabittya, chaposha*)** like **us** who have gained, but **those who are a level higher than us; it is they who have benefited.**
>
> (Mrs Mitra, aged 45, Lower Division Clerk)

The process of examining the lived realities of neoliberal India led us to inquire about the myriad interpretations of the economic reforms and

the quotidian understandings of globalisation. In light of the main ideas being debated in both scholarly and public domains, how did they perceive the changing nature of Indian society? In the foregoing section we have largely relied on the accounts of those aged over 35. This is not to say that young people's views were inconsequential, but while their experiences are examined throughout this book, our rationale for focusing on those over 35 years of age is because younger people had limited familiarity of the pre-liberalisation era, and they were unable to make meaningful comparisons.

In the initial stages of fieldwork we were particularly interested in following some of the clearly articulated views about the various dimensions of globalisation and liberalisation, including SAPs or the NEP. The ideas about globalisation and liberalisation that emerged mainly concerned the global market, electronic media or, more simply, foreign goods entering India, free from the restrictions imposed during the previous 'license raj' era.[10] However, we were determined to know whether people had clear views about actual state policy. To elicit respondents' awareness of policies of liberalisation we tried to find out their level of engagement with the topic.

> You ask me about SAPs! Most people wouldn't know what that means. I say '*Arebaap! shaap, na abhi-shaap*?' I have never benefited from any structural adjustments and my friends are losing their jobs! What is our future, I ask you?!
>
> (Mr Sen, aged 53, office clerk)

Mr Sen's comments capture the essence of the views of people in this study towards neoliberal economic development in India over the past 15 years and the implementation of a number of SAPs. Although not directly affected by the SAPs, they perceived that the widespread economic and policy reform had the ultimate agenda of privatising public sector enterprises and opening up the markets to free trade and competition. The 'snake and the curse', this section's subheading, refers to the metaphorical description of the SAPs. The wry commentary using the Bengali pronunciation, SAP is often referred to as *shaap* which, on the one hand, refers to a snake, more specifically, a poisonous snake – signifying danger, something to mistrust or to fear. On the other hand, it also refers to a millennial curse, as in *abhi-shaap* – a blight on both the land and its people. Like the snake, as Mr Sen went on to elaborate, the architects of the SAP were devious and its poisonous effects were destroying the fabric of society. We also found that it is a more than apt metaphor to describe the range of contradictory world

views, fears and outlooks on the future expressed by the people in our study. Uncertainty lays ahead for those bitten by the poisonous snake. This anxiety, a fear of the future especially for his family, was expressed by Mr Chatterjee:

> I am not sure about the future of my children, given the current political and economic situation. We are trying our best for our children. We will try our utmost even if it means going without and half starving ourselves. Even then, I am really uncertain about what will happen to them. What opportunities will they have in this new world? There is so much competition. There is so much unemployment. I cannot see a positive future for them . . . In our office we just have one computer. As yet there have not been any retrenchments. But what will happen in the future? I do not know. Will there be any jobs in the future for my children even if they learn computing?

A great majority of our informants felt that they had not benefited from the reforms. Yet, their interpretations of the nature of the liberalisation process differed considerably. Unlike those who articulated views that drew links between liberalisation policies and their personal circumstances, a significant proportion of respondents (28 per cent) had no understanding of liberalisation policies.

From Table 1.5 we can see that 40 per cent of the respondents took an interest in talking about these issues with friends and family, whereas 33 per cent never broached the subject with anyone. However, this does not imply that they were unaware; as one informant accurately observed, 'you still feel the consequences, even if you can't explain why'. He pointed out that although he was very interested in this topic, he was rarely able to discuss it with his friends, family or colleagues since he had a very stressful job that afforded him little

Table 1.5 Discuss economic liberalisation issues with family, friends or colleagues

Extent of discussion	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Discuss often	31	27
Sometimes	16	13
Never	40	33
No understanding of liberalisation policies	33	28
Total	120	100

Table 1.6 Public awareness of liberalisation policies

Type and source of awareness	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Critically aware through media/and other sources	7	6
Aware through hearsay	12	9
Unaware	70	59
Don't understand policies	31	26
Total	120	100

time to chat at work with fellow workers. Additionally, his friends were completely uninterested in political-economic issues. Respondents also distinguished between self-understanding and public awareness (Table 1.6).

Only 15 per cent of respondents believed that there was widespread understanding of these issues in the wider society. Consequently, some lamented that reforms had not proceeded according to the original plans of its architect, Dr Manmohan Singh, the current prime minister who was formerly the finance minister. For example, those who were initially optimistic and supportive of the NEP felt that reforms were not being implemented properly because of opportunistic opposition political parties who had capitalised on public confusion and misunderstanding about the positive outcomes of globalisation. These views have become well entrenched among a section of the middle classes subscribing to the ideologies of the project of liberalisation as beneficial in the long run. They stand in stark contrast to those of Mr Sen, outlined earlier. Among this group, the main reasons for embracing liberalisation were twofold: first, a belief that the protectionist economy had failed; and second, a belief that gains had been made in consumption.

Describing his support for liberalisation, a man aged in his late thirties noted:

> We needed to liberalise long ago. Take that damn nuisance Licensing Policy – that should have been got rid of ages ago. I don't know why this was not happening for so long. Finally it is gone! The ceiling on MRTP has been removed. That is a good thing. Our style of economy did not develop a good infrastructure. This was needed. All these years we have just had the Birla [Indian–owned] monopoly. Within the whole economy, the car industry did not flourish. Now there are foreign cars in the market. Birla is sure to close down.

Although some acknowledged that their conditions have not improved in any remarkable way, they nevertheless felt that a closed economy had prevented technological innovation in Indian industries. Consequently, it was thought that these days, they are able to purchase good quality consumer goods which were previously beyond their means. The association between liberalisation and consumption is examined in greater detail in the next chapter; suffice to say here that liberalisation has allowed consumer-oriented lifestyles and introduced the concept of 'choice'. However, some people described themselves as having neither benefited nor slid backwards. Instead, they considered themselves to be 'going sideways'. This sentiment was expressed in number of households. One of our informants coined the term 'consumption switch' to signify the pattern of spending on electronic and white goods that were cheaper, but simultaneously cutting back on other items in order to maintain the family budget.

We also found a prevalence of mixed feelings about the opening up of the economy to the global market. Even though they firmly believed in the need to liberalise, they also asserted that a balanced approach to the project of consumer-mediated liberalisation was necessary. A woman in her mid-thirties with a postgraduate degree in journalism noted:

> There has been a concerted effort to create an attraction towards consumer goods. That has been very effective. But, the prices of a number of essential commodities have become sky-high. This should not have been allowed to happen. The government should have ensured that there was a balance. The cost of medicine has gone up. This should not happen either.

In contrast to the feelings of those who rejoiced at the possibility of the Birlas making losses or leading to innovations in Indian products, others dreaded job losses due to the entry of imported goods:

> I didn't think liberalisation, especially trade liberalisation, was going to be a good thing. The reason is that the entry of foreign goods will destroy local industry. If you put imported cars against our cars, they don't look very good. People then want to buy foreign cars. This may be good for the consumer. The imported car looks good. Who is going to buy an Ambassador [car]? The car industry will be destroyed but what about the workers in the car industry? Their livelihood will be gone. I don't really understand politics. These policies are perhaps beneficial

> for the entire nation. But in my humble opinion, I can only see job losses.

Others were disdainful about the widespread use of imported goods. As one woman remarked with deep sarcasm:

> There haven't been any economic improvements, except that now we consider ourselves blessed that we can use more foreign goods ('*Amra bideshi jinish baebohar kore nijeke dhonno mone kori*'). Nothing else.

A mixture of foreboding as well as confusion also existed in many families as they witnessed both positive and negative outcomes among their extended kin and friends. Within the same networks of family and friends there were retrenchments and redundancies for some, while younger family members in the same firms were able to secure employment when the industry was revived.

Those who were sceptical about globalisation argued that because of the lack of awareness among the general public, governments were able to forge ahead with policies that were not in the interest of a majority of Indians. These competing perspectives highlight the issues raised by Jenkins (1999), which we discussed earlier. The coexistence of opposing narratives was reflected in people's responses. Similarly, the new market-oriented state ideology and economic reforms were the cause of confusion to many people. Some of the ideological dilemmas and tensions within the Left Front were also shared by some of our informants. However, according to Pedersen (2001), the policy shift in 1994 was as much rhetorical as anything. Indeed, the Left Front had been openly attempting to woo investors to the state since 1979, on mutually advantageous terms. Still, the contradictions in this stance were evident, since throughout the 1980s the Left Front had consistently mobilised against the liberalisation policies attempted by the Rajiv Gandhi government. To Pedersen, the real change evident in the NIP was that the Left Front was now openly advocating economic development using market forces. These shifts were gaining currency amongst a certain section of the public sector workers in our study. While remaining critical of liberalisation, especially the price rises, they also espoused the supposed benefits of SAPs, work efficiency, the need to compete and to increase output, and so forth. In a sense, these workers have begun to reproduce the Left-Front government's ideology. These debates are considered in more detail in Chapter 4, where we explore the ways in which our informants negotiate the threats of privatisation.

Table 1.7 Opportunities from economic liberalisation (n = 106)

Opportunities offered	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Better lifestyle	8	9
Mixed outcomes	6	6
Benefit confined to higher classes	18	17
No	70	68
Total	106	100

In terms of other benefits of neoliberal reforms (Table 1.7), less than 15 per cent of households reported experiencing any substantial improvement in their economic circumstances, and 17 per cent clearly opined that benefits accrued to the wealthy. The figures in Table 1.8 show that families for whom there was significant deterioration together with those whose situations remained stable constituted 85 per cent of our sample.

An overwhelming majority emphasised the decline in their living standards over the years, pointing especially to inflationary prices of daily essentials. Despite increases in salaries, nearly everyone pointed out that their wages had not kept pace with the rising costs of living. Some argued that unless there was a substantial increase in per capita income, liberalisation would be a policy failure for India. By comparison, a few argued that there were no links between the economic policies and their present circumstances, while one woman indicated that her condition had improved, but it was unrelated to government policy. A small minority identified the opening up of

Table 1.8 Situation improved or deteriorated (n = 109)

Nature of improvement/ deterioration	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Improved slightly	16	15
No change	73	67
Deteriorated slightly	14	13
Deteriorated considerably	5	4
Deteriorated greatly	1	1
Total	109	100

the economy as the decisive factor in the general economic decline. For example,

> As a result of liberalisation onions and potatoes were exported. This was done to earn foreign exchange. This led to the [price] rise in these food items. It would have been unthinkable in the old regime. The domestic market would have been protected. Now the focus is on the export market. I have some relatives who are into farming. Now, they are not getting the prices. If mangoes are targeted for the export market, then mango growers should surely get a better deal, but that is not happening. We have relatives who grow rice and vegetables, but they have not benefited. It is the middlemen who are the beneficiaries. The exporters have gained.

The greater availability of consumer goods was not highly praised; arguing that even if they had initially viewed the notion of liberalisation positively, respondents asserted that it did not bring them any benefits. Those who were more politically informed emphasised the overall negative side of liberalisation. They coincidentally also had a degree of involvement in trade union activities.

The highly politicised nature of civil discourse in West Bengal has influenced the views of many people in our study. While some were vague about the policies of liberalisation and their impact on their own lives, they nevertheless had strong opinions on the privatisation of enterprises and the entry of foreign multinational corporations (MNCs). Most people were opposed to foreign corporations having the upper hand; they were well aware of the flow of profits out of India and in any case did not want ownership of more than 48 per cent. They remained unconvinced of MNCs' claims of investment in West Bengal. A small minority felt that an injection of foreign capital would definitely improve the conditions in West Bengal, however, they did not believe that MNCs would provide much-needed infrastructure such as highways and transport.

Those who held firm opinions about liberalisation are also those who are or will be directly affected by privatisation and competition from foreign corporations. As a category of workers, they generally work in nationalised banks and public sector enterprises. Government employees such as clerks and teachers are yet to be affected (in the sense that their jobs are not threatened). Those working in semi-government organisations were cynical about the rhetoric of privatisation and did not believe that private ownership will result in increased efficiency or improved conditions. As a project officer in this sector argued:

> Our company is already privatised. How much more can you do? We are operating like a private company for all intent and purposes. We earn for ourselves. You will find people working here till late at night, on holidays. We do not clock off like the government servants. However, by privatisation if you mean proprietorship, I really cannot see any benefit. We have not had any retrenchments. We are trying to fully computerise our organisation. That will put a few people out of their present jobs, but we will absorb them in other areas. Actually, this organisation has a shortage of manpower. Some branches are made up of one or two people. We need to increase our staff.

On the whole, it was repeatedly emphasised that multinational corporations were merely trying to penetrate the Indian market rather than invest for the long-term benefit of the population. Most people said that the focus was on consumer and luxury goods rather than industrialisation, something they feel is needed to benefit Indians.

In contrast to the negative aspects of the global integration of the Indian economy, the cultural dimensions of globalisation were viewed in a positive light. Despite reservations about advertising and its powerful influence on spending and consumer choices, an overwhelming majority welcomed the opening up of the electronic media, especially cable and satellite television. Throughout this book we attempt to portray cultural tensions, the general level of middle-class uncertainty and anxiety about their economic futures, their family's survival, and the future of the country, all of which concern them.

Our study found no great regional differences in the world views of the respondents. This relates to our contention that, when we refer to the metropolitan/provincial divide that shapes the differential attitudes towards liberalisation, we are referring to a sociocultural space rather than a geographical one. We return to this point later, in Chapter 6. No radical differences between the views of men and women were found. However, we did find age-related differences. Younger people, as mentioned earlier, did not formulate clear views on the detrimental impact of North American cultural influences. Nor were they able to elaborate on the economic changes. Many felt that their personal incomes do not permit them a great deal of purchasing capacity. Moreover, none were heads of households and therefore had few responsibilities. While the number of people aged 25–30 stated that they had little in the way of disposable income, they did not have much responsibility either. They could spend it all on themselves. Some were saving up for a television or a music system for their own house for when they were married.

Illustrative of the distinctions between the world views of older and younger people is the case of a young woman who was a duty manager for East West Airlines but lost her job due to downsizing. She is now working in a position which pays much less, but she remains optimistic about getting something better in future. Her optimism is exemplary of the new generation compared to the views of the older generation. The older generation grew up in the shadow of a nationalist freedom struggle and were influenced by the modernist ideologies of the 'socialistic' pattern of planned development. They generally defend the state and are suspicious of private capital. Largely anti-colonial and nationalist-oriented they thus feel disenchanted with liberalisation; whereas younger people are more open to the new state ideology of a free market and widespread economic reforms.

Chapter outlines

Chapter 2 details patterns of consumption and expenditure. Inflationary pressures felt by families are accounted for and we make comparisons between rising costs and salary increases. We also analyse the different pressures on earning and non-earning members within the family in their struggle to manage household budgets, and the various strategies that they have devised to ensure household survival. Constant advertising of various consumer products results in a certain degree of household tension when it comes to making major purchasing decisions, especially about the choice between Indian and non-Indian high-cost consumer goods such as televisions. Finally, we outline the dilemmas concerning debt and financial entrapment, especially as credit is now more easily available.

Chapter 3 examines the apparent paradox between feelings of empowerment and the reality of the overall negative impact of structural adjustment policies on women in India. It is widely understood that the privatisation of public sector enterprises, reduction in investment in public sector units and lower government expenditure on poverty eradication programmes have harmed the interests of women. We had assumed that the growing gender inequalities stemming from the impact of the new economic policies were self-evident. However, during fieldwork, our preconceived ideas were challenged. Against the overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of economic liberalisation, we found that women do not perceive themselves to be the victims of the NEP. Instead they emphasise their own sense of self-worth and the advancements in women's everyday lives. The focus of this chapter is the significance of women's agency in light of their class position. It

thus analyses the gendered nature of the culture of class, a perspective that was developed in the earlier work of Ganguly-Scrase (2003) and also expanded recently in Donner (2006) in her study of middle-class women in Kolkata, whose views and experiences are 'shaped by gender-specific discourses on the public sphere and shared communal histories as well as class-based notions of respectability' (ibid.: 141). Side-stepping any discussion of neoliberal reforms on women's lives and gender relations, the concerns of informants were largely couched in terms of consumerism and the commodification of women. Older women view their empowerment in terms of their responsibility within the family and the spaces they have negotiated within which to assert themselves. They often felt heartened by seeing strong female characters in popular culture or women political leaders. In comparison, young women regard the 'Western' liberated woman as highly desirable and aspire to emulate her. However, many feel that the image and reality do not fit in the realities of contemporary Bengali society.

In the context of work and employment, Chapter 4 examines the critics and supporters of privatisation, deregulation and globalisation. The Left Front government's vociferous attempts to attract transnational corporations and foreign investment to the state are examined. Further, we provide an account of how the shifts in policy orientation have influenced public debate in West Bengal. Comparing and contrasting those employed in organised (both public and private) and unorganised sectors we pay particular attention to how the nature of their employment shapes their views on the globalisation of the Indian economy. Ambivalence and contradiction are evident in many of the views presented to us. Additionally, an important contrast emerged based on age: older people in general feel disenchanted with liberalisation and were invariably strong defenders of the state, while younger people more readily embraced free market ideologies and widespread economic reforms. Respondents on the whole projected a view of strategic self-interest, in a way presenting justifications for the need for changes and improvements in their workplaces, and thus subtly taking on board the ideology of neoliberal reform.

Turning to the cultural impact of liberalisation, Chapter 5 describes and accounts for the continued support and popularity of the English language. It shows how globalising forces have led the Indian middles classes to see a distinct social advantage in maintaining English proficiency for several reasons: first, it increases the educational, social and cultural ties between India and the West; second, it raises the possibilities for migration; third, it assists in doing business with both Western transnationals and large national corporations, in the

increasingly unregulated and internationalised Indian economy. English language proficiency, on the whole, is seen in pragmatic terms – a prerequisite for winning a well-paid job and a secure future. The popularity of the English language was challenged, however, when in the early 1980s the Left-Front government in West Bengal sought to abolish the teaching of English in primary schools in favour of Bengali as the sole language of instruction. This language struggle persisted until 1999 when finally the Left Front reversed its policy. As we argue in this chapter, the Indian middle classes seek to maintain their cultural hegemony precisely by adopting the cultural logic of globalisation to their advantage; that is, English is a significant 'global' language and must be taught to their children. The various viewpoints interwoven throughout this chapter highlight the hegemony of English and also how lack of proficiency in it can psychologically demean and exclude people from the fruits of a globalising India.

Chapter 6 canvasses views and debates about the influences of a growing commercial, globalised mass media in India.[11] The analysis and discussion are framed by an exploration of the autochthonous Bengali concept of *apasanskriti* meaning undesirable mass culture or crass popular culture. While most generally welcomed the growth of the commercial media in India, both 'Bollywood' and certain Western images and programmes are seen as harmful and tactless, particularly when they concern women's modesty and sexualised gender images. Young people are seen as particularly vulnerable to unsavoury images portrayed on television. We also explore questions of modernity and westernisation: 'modernity' was equated with technocratic and scientific rationality, while 'Western' was frequently associated with non-Bengali morality and values, particularly those pertaining to family life and kinship. Significantly, we find that while a quite liberal, tolerant public culture prevails in middle-class Bengal, the private world of the family retains many aspects of traditional moral and hierarchical principles. In the final chapter, we review the major findings of our study and consider the complexities of analysing the middle classes in globalising, neoliberal India.

Notes

1 We expand and develop the idea of neoliberalism as hegemonic in Chapter 4 below.
2 For more on the development discourse, see Escobar (1995), Sachs (1993) and Ferguson (1990).
3 We adapt the multi-sited ethnographic method for our research and expand on this later in this chapter.

4 The approximate exchange rate during fieldwork was Indian rupees (Rs.) 40.00 = US $1.00. Thus, their monthly household income ranged from US $250 to US $500.

5 We expand on the cultural distinctions and nuances within the *bhadralok* in Chapter 6.

6 In the neo-Weberian stratification model developed by Goldthorpe and Hope (1974) following the sevenfold (seven scales), this group forms part of Class II (lower professionals; technicians; lower administrators; small business managers; supervisors of non-manual workers) and Class III (clerks; sales personnel).

7 For a detailed discussion, see *Social Dimension of Structural Adjustment in India* (1991).

8 To protect personal identities of informants, we have used pseudonyms throughout this book.

9 Needless to say, because their rent had hardly ever increased, their apartments and buildings were in a dilapidated condition.

10 Literally the 'rule of license', the term 'license raj' came to signify the era of a closed Indian economy dominated by tariffs and a strict licensing regime. The term was a playful extension of the notion of the 'British Raj'.

11 William Mazzarella's (2003) ethnography of the Indian advertising industry is especially informative here about globalised, neoliberal marketing and the making of the Indian consumer.

2 Victims of consumerism

Consumption and household survival

Introduction

> I am not forced, but I am a victim of consumerism. At the moment there is a dispute in my family as to what brand of TV we should buy. Should it be Samsung or Sony? There is never any question about buying Indian-made. I am not a technician, but I think BPL [an Indian brand] is quite good. Not my son. For him it has to be foreign. Is the quality necessarily good? No, it is merely advertising.

In this chapter, we focus on the social impact of neoliberal reforms by providing details and explanations on patterns of consumption and expenditure. In Bengal, cuisine rules, and even though particular foods such as fish and meat are high cost items, still a relatively high proportion of middle-class people spend their disposable income on food. But this trend is changing swiftly. Inflationary pressures felt by families are accounted for and we make comparisons between rising costs and salary increases. We also analyse the different types of pressures on earning and non-earning members within the family in their struggle to manage household budgets and various strategies they have devised to ensure household survival. Constant advertising of various consumer products results in a certain degree of household tension when it comes to making major purchasing decisions. Finally, we consider what people felt were luxuries, and what are becoming luxury consumer items. What becomes evident throughout this chapter is a general, realistic attitude of 'one should not go beyond one's means', showing a relatively reserved approach to consumer spending, especially on what are seen to be frivolous, unnecessary items that are a waste of one's hard-earned money. The family, its security and survival, above all, are privileged.

Middle classes and consumerism

In recent years, there has been a consumer revolution in India. The markets are full of a wide range of products, locally manufactured and imported, to satiate the cravings of even the most avid, consumer junkies. For the middle classes, consumption – the acquisition of material objects and cultural capital – is one of the key aspects that defines their social standing, constitutive of their rank on the hierarchy of order and privilege. For those more reserved, we may expect to see their financial resources directed at shoring up their children's education, to buy better quality food, and to be spent on books and other 'high' cultural pursuits. Those less shy will undoubtedly engage in conspicuous consumption, displays of wealth and privilege for the public gaze; displays of one's class privilege, as it were. In some contexts, consumption – the art, skills and practice of shopping – has come to define the essence of being a modern consumer citizen (Beng-Huat, 2003). Examining consumption thus opens the door to fundamental debates around the twin elements of class formation and cultural practice. Liechty (2003: 30–1) succinctly puts it this way when he writes:

> For class and consumption to be understood as 'mutually constitutive', 'consumption' needs to be seen as involving much more than simply the act of purchasing some product. To be sure, a person's or group's access to financial resources (money) fundamentally determines their ability to arrive at the 'point of purchase': the reality of socioeconomic inequality is the bedrock on which class-based consumer cultures are built. But the act of buying is only one 'moment' in the cultural process of consumption . . . Who wants what? When do they want it, and why? What do people do with the goods they acquire? . . . goods become a kind of social currency that is transacted in middle-class life.

As we would argue, it is by closely examining everyday middle-class practices, by analysing their world views in relation to consuming and shopping, for instance, that one is able to better comprehend the constitution of Indian middle-classness in a particular time and place, at a particular historical juncture.

To be middle class is about protecting one's social position, one's privilege, trying to move up, but at all costs avoiding any downward shifts in social mobility; of not 'falling down' (Newman, 1999). Embedded in the narratives that follow, a strong sense of caution in regards to expenditure permeates, and indeed raises the issue of both financial

restraint and self-control, and the morality of consumerism itself; consumerism, being 'consumerist', for many is an attack on the very essence of middle-class values. As we see in some of the narratives below, the act of consuming is a moral act where all sorts of opinions, warnings and belittling remarks abound, where people are criticised for 'wanting to show off'. This moral construction of the middle class is evident in many countries undergoing a neoliberal, consumer revolution, and we see remarkable similarities between, for instance, Brazilian and Indian middle-class critiques of consumerism (O'Dougherty, 2002: 43):

> Whereas the home and education were constantly upheld in extended conversations, unqualified consumption was not. Although all informants except two said they liked or loved to shop, they repeatedly censured Brazilians for being 'consumerist'. One young woman said, 'Brazilians are very consumerist, aren't they? They like to have nice clothes, dress well. The house is falling down, right, but they need clothes.'

Thus, the outlook emerging around middle-class consumption reveals the cultural politics of consuming; a nuanced, but nevertheless revealing form of politicised expression that defends one's status and morality at the expense of others. For many, the lack of financial resources is inverted to become a badge of middle-class honour, where one can proudly boast of being free from the burden of 'consuming for the sake of consuming'. In India, it is what separates the 'old' middle-class way of thinking, from the 'new' – those who are satisfied with their lot, and what the state provides, and those who desire more. In some instances, it is a generational division, as explained by van Wessel (2004: 97) in her study of the middle class of Baroda:

> In local understanding, those individuals characterised as 'old thinking' – that is, elders of the previous generation – made do with whatever they had and aspired to; no more than that. Nowadays the attainment of upward economic mobility and the adjustment of one's life towards those goals are the norm. Moreover, many feel the pressure to conform to this norm. The issue is, for them, not just a matter of desiring pleasure but of needing in order to become or remain a social equal to others . . . As Dharmesh [an informant] notes, middle class status demands levels of consumption and practices that are in tune with 'the times', meaning that one must maintain the higher standard of living that upward mobility and the availability of new consumer goods have made 'normal' . . . to have

> a refrigerator is that guests 'notice' if they don't get ice in their water when they come to visit. The 'noticing' is a matter of (d)evaluation.

Hence, we see that the middle class is in part defined by their consumption, but this is a process that is contested and contradicted at various levels. At the most basic level, one can only consume what one can afford, although we recognise that the recent explosion in credit cards and access to loans has somewhat skewed this proposition. We asked people if they really thought 'Liberalisation has led to more choices to buy goods?' and surprisingly only 32 per cent said 'yes'. In contrast, 52 per cent said 'no' and 16 per cent said they were not exactly sure. What comes through in the tables and narratives below is the sense that financial pressures and inflation strongly determine their consumer choices and so, despite liberal economic reforms and more goods being in the market, if one does not have the money one can simply not acquire new goods, whether they wish to or not. Many, as we see, make rational decisions about limited resources.

Salaries and the cost of living

When we asked 'Has your income increased in the last five years?' an overwhelming 80 per cent of wage earners acknowledged that their income had indeed increased, with wage rises facilitated, in part, by the recommendations of the Pay Commission. On the basis of their responses, we calculated the average amount of salary increase during 1996–2000 to be in the order of Rs. 1500 per month. However, what was important to also ask was whether their salary had increased in relation to cost of living?

As Table 2.1 shows, most people's experiences suggest that increased incomes did not enable them to adequately sustain the households' living standards. The rise in cost of living and inflation had negated the gains. To describe their declining living standards, our key informants and the numerous others we interviewed repeatedly used the idiom of life being a continuing struggle, despite the moderate rise in incomes:

> Our incomes have gone up. So has the cost of living. The dearness allowance [to cover inflation] that I get is really not enough to meet rising cost of living. In the private sector, there is not even that. It is really hard and for those in the private sector, *life is a constant struggle* (emphasis added).

Table 2.1 Salary increased in relation to cost of living (n = 110)

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes	10	9
No	95	86
Mixed response	5	5
Total	110	100

While the above comment recognises the relative advantage of the public sector, others clearly noted that their disadvantage stems from their location within a particular class fraction: 'anyway, we have to struggle to manage within our income. After all, we are a *lower middle-class family*. Naturally, therefore, we have to struggle' (our emphasis). The main reasons underlying the pressures in maintaining their standard of living was growing expenses relating to the upkeep of teenagers in families and diminishing incomes due to retirement. In some households, the income had fallen as the main breadwinner had retired. It was not uncommon for a widowed woman to experience prolonged delays in accessing her husband's retirement funds. In other cases, looking after elderly ailing parents or severely ill children placed serious constraints on their living standards. One woman explained that she had to give up her regular job and take on less paying, but flexible employment in order to look after a seriously ill sibling:

> Five years ago, I had a permanent job as a secretary-cum-chief administrator in a Tea company. I had a reasonably good salary. The perks were excellent. For example, the company covered the rent. Since I was at home, I got an allowance instead. I also got a holiday travel allowance (L.T.C). We also had a rule in our office that married people got two children's education paid for up to graduation level. We also got very good bonuses. I don't get the perks and bonuses that were part of the permanent package. But I had no choice but to take up this freelance job because my sister needs constant care.

There were some people who had shifted from working in small private firms to the public sector. Others had been working casually in large formal sector enterprises. They generally evaluated their transition experience in very positive terms, especially noting the rise in salaries.

Yet even their experiences showed that in real terms the financial gain was very limited. There was one case of a lower division clerk, whose salary had in fact gone down as a result of this shift. Mr Chakraborty described his situation in the following way:

> In the last five years my income has not increased. Instead it has gone down. I used to work at Pearless in the accounts section in a part-time capacity. However, since I took up this job here, my income has gone down by about 1500 rupees. I gave up my previous job because I had to go to various locations to do my work. It was inconvenient. That's why I gave up. Even though cost of living has gone up and my salary has gone down it's not so bad because I'm living as a bachelor in a joint family set-up. If I lived on my own, I would have been in trouble. I'm getting married soon and a bit worried about the financial situation. Anyway my present job is in the government sector and you can't pick up any private work while working for the government. That's the rule.

Compared to the formal sector workers, most small business people experienced a decline in their earnings. One man running a garage repair shop noted that:

> Our business has dropped off considerably. We used to make about 10,000 rupees per month a few years ago. Nowadays, with Maruti [a motor vehicle], the system is that if you get new spare parts, you go directly to the dealer. We repair all sorts of cars, but not heavy vehicles like lorries.

In general, small entrepreneurs complained that they were unable to put up their prices. A typical remark was, 'even if prices go up I can't put up my fees. I have to charge the same price for at least 2–3 years. In the meantime the cost of living goes up.' By contrast, others in niche markets felt the situation was quite manageable. An enthusiastic young beautician noted:

> We have increased our clientele. Lot more people seem to want to have beauty treatments and are interested in personal grooming. We have kept our rates very modest. However, this area has expanded. So we have more clients. We have kept up more or less. The costs of goods for the business have increased and I have had to increase our prices. Compared to a few years ago, naturally my income has increased!

While a significant proportion of salaried workers obtained pay rises, employees in the informal sector were critical of what they perceived as belligerent public sector employees demanding frequent pay rises:

> My earnings have not kept up with the cost of living. However, if we get into issues such as pay rises demanded by the unions in the organised sector, I can't support that because if the employer closes up shop I will become the loser. So, I don't want to destroy the delicate balance we have between employer and employee. I need an income.

Among those few who acknowledged that the pay increases led to a better standard of living, the experiences of only three households can be attributed to the gains of the new economy. In the remaining families, it was simply due to increased number of earning members or the move to urban white-collar employment. Highlighting the latter, a young woman explained the dramatic changes in lifestyle and evaluated the opportunities in a very positive way:

> Oh, it is definitely better now! I can buy the things I want. Back in Koochbehar, I used to do private tuition, and also had to work in the fields. I did not have any stable income five years back. I have got this job only one and a half years ago. My income is quite good. I am still unmarried. So I do not feel the pinch of escalating prices.

On the one hand, young people were not under the strain to enhance the family's pool of income, on the other hand, it was not possible to realistically compare their current status with the financial situation prior to five years. Most were not married and had a different lifestyle. Some were beginning to realise the need to save for the responsibilities of married life ahead, while others were entering a stage of life when their contribution to the family's income pool was beginning to increase. Regarding this topic, 32-year-old Kajal made the astute observation:

> Previously I was able to keep my own earnings, I can't do that now. I contributed less to our family earlier. Now I put in more. Other expenses have gone up. So, overall I can't say the salary increase has compensated for the expenses.

Throughout this section, we have highlighted that most people in our

study considered the decline in their standard of living. However, it would be inaccurate to deny the rising expectations and desires. One 38-year-old female designer accurately summed up the current tensions surrounding incomes and lifestyles:

> Yes, *but* with increases in income your lifestyle also changes. If you maintain the same lifestyle as before then I guess I would have managed better. So it is partly my fault (original emphasis).

Household survival

Only a minute proportion of respondents received support from their kin on a regular basis (2 per cent) (Table 2.2). This applied to the least affluent households in our study. An example would be assistance for a younger brother's monthly tuition or medical expenses for the chronically ill. Other cases were divorced women who received regular maintenance for their children from their ex-husbands.

Table 2.2 Receive financial assistance from kin (n = 111)

Type of assistance	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes, unspecified	3	3
Receive regularly	2	2
Receive intermittently	4	4
Receive when required	19	17
No	83	74
Total	111	100

On the one hand, well-to-do respondents did not feel the need to ask relatives since they were able to rely on their savings. On the other hand, one-fifth of respondents indicated that they had help from kindred in times of need. This is consistent with those who felt it was relatives who helped them in times of crisis; the idea of reciprocity was strongly felt.

It was not common for married women to receive financial assistance from their natal families. However, some were able to secure help, especially if such families were in a position to do so, though there was a degree of embarrassment attached to asking. One informant explained:

> I mean, I can get it whenever I need, but I usually make a point of not asking very often. Everybody in my family is well placed. My

> father used to be a Professor of Bangla [Bengali]. He gets a considerable sum as pension. Moreover, my elder brothers live in foreign countries. Since the financial status of my family is quite sound, I can get help from them at any point of time, if I need it.

In comparison with the 20 per cent of respondents turning to their kin in times of crisis, the overwhelming majority (74 per cent) preferred to seek the assistance through formal structures, such as their Provident Fund and cooperative banks. Other avenues were close friends or colleagues, or even a loan from the employer on an informal basis. As one man emphatically declared: 'Never! Are you crazy? I have some savings. In an absolute emergency I may approach the proprietor, *but never relatives*' (original emphasis).

There were several examples of immense generosity of workmates towards seriously ill people. This included raising funds for hospitalisation, major operations, and other financial assistance for the family while the person was out of work. This applied not only to the case of the person afflicted by the illness, but also when similar calamity had befallen their spouse or child. Besides the Provident Fund, there were additional interesting cases of self-help that emerged. One woman had recently joined and bought shares in a women's credit cooperative society. In a time of crisis, she will be able to get a loan from them. Currently there are 2000 members and they expect to grow. Another young man had become passionate after witnessing how his brother was helped by his colleagues when he was ill. They had collected donations from his workplace and visited him frequently, bringing along the funds. This inspired Gautam to put forward a plan in his own workplace:

> Since we are a semi-government organisation I have proposed that we set up a fund that everyone contributes to. We can draw from this fund in times of crisis. This is under consideration at the moment.

Well over half of the people in our study supported others beyond their own households. This included members of the joint family, distant relatives, friends and even outsiders. For some, this meant regular contributions (16 per cent), compared with those (7 per cent) who gave only whenever they could afford to do so and yet others (9 per cent) who were able to give when a request was made to them (Table 2.3).

The phenomenon of helping strangers is most noteworthy, though it cannot be regarded as unusual. A number of people were involved in

Table 2.3 Support for non-household persons (n = 112)

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
No	50	45
Yes, unspecified	26	23
Regular	18	16
Intermittent	8	7
Upon requirement	10	9
Total	112	100

volunteering activities such as sponsoring orphans or looking after indigent students. In general, members of the religious minority groups were directly involved in their respective established religious organisations, with the exception of one Muslim man who had studied in a Ramakrishna Mission school and was now actively involved in some of its relief work. Others contributed to the activities of associations such as Bharat Sevasram. On the whole, however, most people's volunteering was related to the needs of the local area, such as the East Calcutta Welfare Association. There is a long history of volunteering among the people in our study.

For most in our study, access to resources was limited to their salaries. It was difficult to ascertain the information on additional sources of household income due to the suspicion generated by this line of inquiry. Take the following interchange between co-author (Tim Scrase) and an upper division clerk in a government enterprise; this exemplifies some of the difficulties in eliciting a clear response:

'Parimal': Do you want an official or an unofficial response?
Tim: Whatever you prefer.
Parimal: (laughs) Yes, I do have another source of income. Do I have to disclose it?
Tim: Well, it's your choice. If you don't want say, that's OK . . .
Parimal: You want to publish this in black and white?
Tim: No!
Parimal: Surely you must understand. I am a government employee. You can't hold other jobs.
Tim: Yeah, of course, I understand.
Parimal: I am engaged in computer hardware. That is my second source of income. However, I am not prepared to disclose the amount of earnings.

Tim: *Thik achhe* (That's fine). I appreciate that you have mentioned it anyway. Hardly anyone ever does!

Some were quite candid about some of their colleagues taking bribes. This applied to civil servants, including the police. We are unable to provide any solid evidence on this matter. However, in the case of building contractors this was an open secret, especially when we mentioned that we were planning to purchase a new apartment in a block that was under construction. Through many prolonged interactions we came to know about the business ventures of people that supplemented their regular income.

In a few cases there was an added advantage of accessing an income either in cash or in-kind (i.e. food grain; fruit) generated by joint family assets. The figures in Table 2.4 confirm that 14 per cent were able to do so. Nine people had an income from an independent business. Only three of these business ventures belonged to the joint family.

The most common household survival strategy was pooling of resources. In joint families, individual members, while retaining small amount for their personal expenses, usually handed over their income to the head of the household, namely father, an older brother or a widowed mother:

> Our salaries are handed over to my mother. She organises the entire household budget, allocates money to pay bills. We have a huge expense for my younger sister. She is seriously ill. Medication alone costs about Rs. 3000 per month. If we want something more for ourselves, we usually ask my eldest brother.

Table 2.4 Sources of income other than salary or proprietorship

Sources	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes, unspecified	8	7
Yes, farm produce	7	6
Yes, rental income	9	8
Yes, additional business	9	8
No	78	63
N/A or don't know (i.e. student, dependant)	9	8
Total	120	100

In some cases, employment reasons have led to the formation of a nuclear family structure. Yet, the contributions to the joint family were nevertheless still maintained. As one of our informants explained, far from being a necessity for the joint family's survival needs, it was emotional attachment as well as perceived obligation:

> We have a joint family of 11 members living in Bankura district. My mother, two older brothers, their wives, their children and the family includes us. We three brothers are still considered as part of the joint family. So, I contribute. My mother is totally dependent on us. I contribute to the maintenance of that family. It is not as if I have to send money every month. There is an understanding in the joint household. We have farming land and there are regular expenses.

In contrast to other cases when the joint family set-up dissolved, especially after the death of parent(s), married siblings formed their own nuclear households. Despite this, as we noted above the responsibilities towards members in the joint family continue, such as responsibility for unmarried siblings; that is, a younger unmarried brother or sister who is living in the nuclear household of a married couple. Commitments to contribute towards maintenance of that family, such as the payment of electricity bills, municipal tax or school fees were shared by the various married siblings.

Many people were responsible for looking after distant relatives and even friends. As the following comment highlights:

> As you know, Animesh's (my husband) aunt (his father's sister) is ill; she has cancer. Her financial condition is not very good either. So we contributed to the expenditure towards chemotherapy. However, all this doesn't happen on a regular basis. It is not a fixed kind of expenditure; it comes up only occasionally. But we have to help someone or the other almost every month. It is like this; either he gives or I do.

Therefore, besides the archetypal patrilineal joint family, other patterns of how extended family responsibilities operate can be found in the following statement:

> The nieces and nephews are studying at the college level. One of the nephews does some electrical work. He knows a bit in that area and sometimes does a bit of work in the film industry. Another nephew,

> he is the son of my eldest sister and has lived with us since he was a child. His parents have a shop and he looks after it sometimes, but doesn't really earn any money. One of the nieces is at Women's Christian College in Kalighat, the other two are at Jogamaya Ashutosh College. They all have minor tutoring jobs and meet their own personal expenses. But we all chip in for different things at different times.

These intricate and extensive practices are predicated on the belief regarding the notion of reciprocity. One of our informants explained that although at times he felt the weight of financial hardships, he would turn to his uncle who has property, from which he currently generates substantial income. 'If necessary, he will let us live there', which in turn might generate a livelihood as well as relief from having to pay rent.

Similarly some married women helped out their natal families, as the following conversation with Mrs Das illustrates:

Mrs D: I have an unmarried sister. I have to help her to some extent.
Question: Yes, you were talking about your sister.
Response: I have a younger sister, who lives in my parental home. I have to help her at times.
Q: So you don't do it regularly?
R: I help my mother regularly.
Q: How often do you give money to your mother?
R: Oh, it is not a very big sum; it's a small amount, but I give it every month.

There were some extreme instances of older married women working simply to look after their natal families. Being the eldest in the family Mrs Karmakar felt obliged to shoulder the responsibility. She said:

> My whole reason for working is to support them. My father is dead and I have a younger sister. She is not yet married. I have an older brother. He also has his own family to look after. Together, he and I support my mother and sister. I don't even contribute towards my own household. My husband looks after us. My salary goes towards my natal family.

An underlying, looming shadow of financial pressure pervades the lives of many of our informants. Their concerns extended to their families

and kin. As wages rise, so does inflation even more and the wages and other income never seem to adequately meet the needs of households. In the next sections, we turn our attention to the actuality of the rising cost of living and examine the strategies and other ways people deal with their pecuniary problems.

Daily living and price rises

> *Nobody bothers to think how people from the lower middle class are surviving these days*. The government hardly bothers about us, due to which it has become very difficult even to maintain our lives. But still we live on; we have to manage in some way.
>
> (Sheela, divorced woman aged 53; our emphasis)

In their perceptions, the day-to-day costs and expenses for most people were increasing, some exponentially so. When we first undertook our research, we asked about the prices of various goods and services, and whether people felt that these prices were going up, remained the same or had actually went down (Table 2.5).

The data clearly show an overwhelming number of respondents thought that prices for most goods and services, including the items fundamental to running a modern household like energy, fuel, food and medical expenses, have risen either moderately or heavily. There was only a small proportion who felt prices of some items had actually declined. But even so, in the case of onions, for example, the decline may have been signalled because they were so highly priced in their recent memory (i.e. coming down slightly from a very high base). Nevertheless, we can see that two-thirds of people still saw onions as having increased excessively in price.

The general perception among people and disseminated in the popular media was that the liberalised Indian economy, with its emphasis on export-led growth and reduced price regulation and lower tariffs, had led to all sorts of price hikes, artificial shortages and hoarding practices. There had been numerous scandals and rumours circulating about the price of onions, for example, with onions supposedly being hoarded in large, refrigerated warehouses. The price of cooking oil also skyrocketed, mainly due to the rumours of it being of dubious quality and so only the 'guaranteed' high quality oil should be purchased in the market. Gautam was adamant when he explained:

> You have black marketeering. The way mustard oil prices went up was a totally fraudulent affair. The price was Rs. 40. All of a

Table 2.5 Cost of daily essentials, 1999–2000

	Slight increase (%)	*Moderate increase (%)*	*Heavy increase (%)*	*No change (%)*	*Gone down (%)*	*Total (%)*
Food items						
Rice	10.7	51.2	38.1			100
Wheat flour	21.6	47.3	28.4	2.7		100
Edible oil	6.0	14.3	79.8			100
Meat (mutton)	4.8	17.5	74.6	3.2		100
Fish	39.7	37.0	11.0	12.3		100
Chicken	30.1	46.6	16.4	6.8		100
Pulses	24.6	50.8	18.5	6.2		100
Milk	57.6	27.3	6.1	9.1		100
Sugar	24.2	51.5	18.2	6.1		100
Potatoes	4.5	14.8	45.5	26.1	9.1	100
Onions		7.9	64.0	20.2	7.9	100
Chillies (dry)	22.7	28.0	17.3	24.0	8.0	100
Tomatoes	25.4	22.5	18.3	23.9	9.9	100
Green vegetables	33.3	50.0	9.5	7.2		100
Bananas	29.5	42.6	6.6	19.7	1.6	100
Mangoes	12.8	38.3	42.6	2.1	4.3	100
Oranges	22.2	55.6	13.0	5.6	3.7	100
Papaya	21.7	52.2	2.2	21.7	2.2	100
Spices	12.5	60.0	27.5			100
Ghee	4.0	32.0	64.0			100
Tea	20.3	25.0	43.7	4.7		100 (*6.3% N/A)
Coffee		9.3	34.9	2.3		100 (*53.5 % N/A)

Other Items						
Toiletries	6.9	44.8	46.6	1.7		100
Detergent	6.4	59.6	34.0			100
Clothing	12.3	43.2	43.2	1.2		100
Medical	9.3	17.4	68.6	4.7		100
Transport	23.5	34.6	40.7	1.2		100
Electricity	8.3	19.4	68.1	4.2		100
Phone	18.2	31.8	9.1	38.6	2.3	100
Gas/Fuel	9.5	27.0	61.9	1.6		100
School fees	12.0	20.0	40.0	28.0		100
Uniform	23.8	33.3	19.0	23.8		100
Books	14.8	18.5	63.0	3.7		100
Stationery	4.3	34.8	52.2	8.7		100
Children’s school lunch	9.5	33.3	42.9	14.3		100
Movies/theatre/other	14.9	34.0	48.9	2.1		100
Newspapers	6.9	5.6	4.2	33.3	50.0	100
Magazines	24.4	53.3	4.4	15.6	2.2	100

> sudden, Delhi issued a warning. Then the Minister in West Bengal also warned that 'don't use mustard oil'. The businessmen had it all planned. The political leaders need their support. Without them they can't buy votes. So, instead of doing something about catching unscrupulous businessmen, the prices climbed to Rs. 70. This is all hoarding and black marketeering. When there are sufficient stocks of mustard, prices cannot go up. We didn't export mustard, why should it go up then? The crisis was an artificial creation.

Similar to Gautam, a number we conversed with over the years were highly sceptical of the reasons provided for continual price rises (Table 2.6), but inevitably blamed the government and greedy businesses. But, they also projected a 'what can I do about it?' viewpoint, having little faith that the free market, or government intervention for that matter, will actually lead to cheaper prices.

The reasons for the price rises, as we have indicated earlier, varied among those we discussed this with. Most people, despite some having a strong opinion on the matter, were generally a bit confused, especially when they were told repeatedly that the economic reforms were going to make things cheaper. Indicative of a restrained, somewhat thoughtful explanation was that presented by Sharmila:

> Firstly, I think it is due to the rise in population numbers. Secondly, the amount of production does not meet supply. These are the main reasons. Due to natural disasters and calamities such as floods, a lot of crops have been destroyed. Also we have had to bail out those people who are in trouble. Therefore to recoup the expenses, there have been price increases.

Table 2.6 Causes of price rises

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Supply and demand	29	24
Black market	4	3
Hoarding	3	2
Global economy	16	14
Political corruption	29	24
Government waste	12	10
Combination of factors	25	21
No response	3	2
Total	120	100

A few were able to relate a far more, incisive, politicised view, such as the following from Somnath (31-year-old male):

> There are different reasons for different types of goods. Potatoes went up because of the scandal over cold storage godowns [warehouses]. Medicines and the price of powdered milk have gone up since the signing of the GATT agreements. The Patent Bill is another factor. Gas has gone up because there are no more subsidies. You can't always get it either. So we end up getting it in the free market. It costs more. If you have free market, the cost will be high.

And another, similarly incisive view from Debdas, who works in the same office as Somnath:

> In the case of non-food items, competition from multinationals is a factor. Multinational companies charge very high prices. So, indigenous [Indian] companies also use this as an excuse to increase their prices. It is a strange paradox because their [indigenous companies] excuse is that if you don't increase the prices people will think that the quality of their product is inferior. Rising cost of materials is also another factor.

Illustrative of a 'mixed' response, which in particular is focused on food, is the following comments by Polly (a 58-year-old Christian woman whose husband is retired). We had just been shopping with her at the local market, and she was clearly frustrated and angry at the high prices being touted to her, so perhaps her view was a little skewed:

> [T]here is no need for the prices to have gone up so much. There are a lot of lies being told. For example, it was rumoured that all the onions in the market have rotted away. Bang! The prices went up by 30 rupees. Then we were told that we could not get rice any more. There was a lot of rain and crops were destroyed. So the price of rice went up. Then there is a rumour that all the potatoes are going to Bangladesh. So the prices of potatoes became 10 rupees. Potatoes that were very cheap now became expensive and we have to pay the price. Then there is the wedding season and everyone is hoarding fish. Fish becomes extremely expensive. So what has not gone up, tell me?

On another occasion, we were fortunate to have been invited to the Haque's home. Zakia was preparing the Sunday lunch for her family of

five and complaining bitterly how the price of spices was going up all the time. Fish and meat, staples for her family, were only occasionally eaten. We broached with her the reasons she felt for the price increases when her husband, Akbar, suddenly butted in, adding:

> *In simple terms, the government's finance department has not planned for any relief for people like us – the middle and lower middle class*. Those of us who are in the unorganised sector, our numbers are high. Numerically we make up a large part of the population. No one has given us a thought. Do our salaries increase like the bureaucrats of the Central and State governments? Budgets are planned according to their salary increases. Indexation occurs with them in mind. Financial planning happens with the estimated price rises and the government being able to recoup their costs through taxation. It is always the middle class who pays for it. The burden is always on them. *If you are upper class or upper middle class, you can withstand the sudden increases. But if you are middle class or lower middle class, then price increases affect you more because you are spending a greater proportion of your income on food and other items*. The lower you go on the economic scale the harder it is (our emphasis).

A number of people struggled to articulate clear reasons for price rises. They tended to feel disempowered and alienated by the political process and the market system they were now living in. We managed to meet Rita one day after she had spent ten hours at her workplace. She is a 35-year-old divorcee who works in an informal, shoe-making business as a designer, but often has all sorts of other duties ranging from sales to bookkeeping. Her monthly pay was low in comparison to the others in our study, and she has no job security or benefits. We asked her whether she knew why prices seemed to be always going up:

> Political instability has been the main factor for rising prices. Whether the party in power is 'good' or 'bad' is not the issue. That can be resolved afterwards. What we need is some stability and continuity to implement whatever program. The second reason is the arrival of multinationals. This has meant that a section of the middle class has found employment in these companies and they are earning huge amounts. Their lifestyle is having an influence on others like us, particularly the images used in advertising. So partly our expectations and aspirations have gone up. The ads place a lot of pressure on us consumers. Well, I'm not really making the link

> with this and price rises, am I? (laugh) I can't explain it, exactly. But there is an influence and a link. There are goods in the market and you are being enticed to buy them. The sellers set their price and if you can't afford it, you feel left out.
>
> It is not as if production has gone down. No, not at all. Things are being hoarded, so prices have been artificially kept high. Here the government has to step in immediately, but unfortunately it doesn't do its job. Everyone knows this. If you read the papers, it is all exposed. You know it, but nothing happens. Well, no wonder – perhaps the hoarders are the ones who finance the politicians! The public can never know fully, of course, as to why action was not taken against a certain thing, black marketeers, or hoarders. My point is, this has happened. We are facing these problems and the government has the responsibility to deal with it and to have some control, some checks and balances.

In late 2005, we caught up with our key informants. One of the issues we were keen to follow up was the matter of price rises, especially as the inflation rate in India had surged since 2005, and was officially well over 5 per cent annually, and heading higher. We managed to collate and tally up their responses and opinions about some of the more recent price rises and what has increased or decreased. These data are presented in Table 2.7.

Interestingly, compared to the earlier data on prices that we have presented (Table 2.6), there are stark similarities in that almost all prices of goods and services have increased either moderately or heavily. Significantly, increased market competition, reduced tariffs, and other economic reforms have not brought down prices and the general cost of living for the majority of our informants. Rather, life is a continual financial struggle just as it was for them five years previously. There were a few instances of recent price decline – newspapers, telephone, clothing and detergent. For most informants, many food items had showed a moderate, upward price movement. Some prices, though, were particularly dependent on market supply and season, certain fruits, for example, and so fluctuated wildly. The government, together with the process of globalisation, was seen as the source of problems. Gita, a young school teacher, explained the recent price rises in very much layman's economic terms:

> Suppose in business – if capital diminishes, debt increases. The situation in our state is like that. Our state has come to such a stage that the surplus money is being extracted from people like us, from

Table 2.7 Cost of daily essentials, 2005–2006

	Slight increase	*Moderate increase*	*Heavy increase*	*No change*	*Gone down*	*Amount increased/ decreased (Rs.)*
Food items						
Rice	✓					1–2 /kg ↑
Wheat flour		✓				2–4 /kg ↑
Edible oil		✓				5–6 /kg ↑
Meat (mutton)		✓				10 /kg ↑
Fish				✓		↑ ↓ (as per supply)
Chicken		✓				10 /kg ↑
Pulses			✓			6–25 /kg ↑
Milk	✓					2 /kg ↑
Sugar	✓					2 /kg ↑
Potatoes		✓				3–4 /kg
Onions				✓		
Chillies (dry)			✓			40 /kg ↑
Tomatoes			✓			5–6 /kg ↑
Green vegetables				✓		↑ ↓ (as per supply)
Bananas				✓		↑ ↓ (as per supply)
Mangoes				✓		↑ ↓ (as per supply)
Oranges		✓				2–4 /kg ↑
Papaya			✓			5–10 /kg ↑
Spices		✓				
Ghee		✓				
Tea				✓		
Coffee				✓		

Other items						
Toiletries				✓		
Detergent					✓	
Clothing					✓	
Medical		✓				
Transport				✓		
Electricity				✓		
Phone					✓	More competition
Gas/fuel			✓			Scarce supply
School fees			✓			Depending upon medium of schools
Uniform		✓				
Books			✓			
Stationery		✓				
Children's school lunch		✓				
Movies/theatre/other			✓			↑ variable
Newspapers	✓					50 paise ↑
Magazines					✓	↓ (no. of pages are reduced)

> the general public. Besides, there are various other reasons. *If I am not mistaken, the reason is globalisation.* As a result of globalisation . . . suppose a new product has come onto the market. We did not have this particular high quality item before. In order to produce at this quality, its price has gone up automatically. Because of foreign competition, prices have gone up.
>
> Suppose Pepsi, which has the manufacturing cost of only one rupee, the rest of it, may be four to five rupees goes to the government of India, and the balance is going to those outside of the state. Therefore, if we accept that – our capital is decreasing slowly – our state's money is decreasing ultimately. Where does the state's money come from? It is from ordinary people. So, one issue is, how can we reduce the price of our own goods? Then there is another side. Our state money is going outside. One item, which costs only one rupee, we are paying eight rupees in the market for it! (our emphasis)

A strong sense of the unfairness of the system was evident in many responses to our questions concerning price increases and fluctuations. Ultimately, the common adage 'one must cut your coat according to your cloth' permeated most people's thoughts and underpinned their spending decisions.

Restricted spending

> We are vigilant about the educational expenses for our son. We can't cut back on education. We don't buy anything unless we absolutely have to. We put our priority on our son's education. All other expenses come secondary.
>
> (Lipika, 42-year-old sales employee)

So far we have seen that middle-class salary earners tended to be under severe financial stress to cover their weekly household expenses. By necessity, they therefore had to employ strategies to restrict or cut back their spending. Table 2.8 provides data in regards to the issue of restricted spending. Only 20 per cent indicated that they had not changed their spending patterns. This is in stark comparison to 76 per cent that either cut back, exercised caution or ceased purchasing particular items.

What we found generally was an affirmation that one should be rational and frugal about one's spending. It was not uncommon, for example, to be told: 'We are very frugal. So, we don't spend much on

Table 2.8 Stopped or cut back purchase of consumer goods

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Stopped consuming some items	2	2
Cut back on consumption	44	37
Exercise caution when shopping	17	14
Both – stopped and cut back purchases	30	25
No change in shopping habits	24	20
No response	3	2
Total	120	100

anything. We don't live beyond our means. Also, there are only two of us and our needs are limited.' Similarly, another respondent explained: 'when the price of onions went up, we just stopped buying them'.

When it came to specific shopping choices, the findings revealed a certain hierarchy existed amongst the sorts of things that were cut back or which they ceased to purchase totally. It was not uncommon to buy meat (goat) less frequently and to get cheaper cuts of fish. Prawn meat was seen as especially outrageous in price and considered a luxury by many (see also next section). Other food items that were restricted in buying, or rationed, were certain spices, cooking oil, snacks and takeaway food. Books had become very expensive and so people resorted to visiting libraries more often or hunting around for bargains and sales. Wooden items, furniture, for example, were also mentioned by some as becoming particularly expensive. The prices of cinema tickets, too, were becoming excessive and, in fact, the expenses for a family outing – going to a museum, a fair, the theatre – when tallied up (entrance fees, snacks, transport) became only an annual event, rather than a regular occurrence. For Lily, whose household income is very low in comparison to others, the choices are for much cheaper items:

> Soap and toothpaste have gone up a lot. We used to use Lux, but now we use Lifebuoy. We used to buy Colgate, now we buy Babool. The ticket prices for the movies have gone up. If it is a hit film, it'll be quite high and three times the price if you have to buy it in the black market. We usually go to Hindi movies. My friends and I rarely go to a Bengali film. We buy the newspaper everyday. We also buy *Anandalok* [Bengali tabloid magazine] regularly. We sometimes get the Puja issue. We have to buy things like towels and that. In the winter time you need shawls. We don't buy these every year,

> every few years. There are also bed sheets or curtain material you must need.

Education was, though, an expense that was least likely to be rationed. It remains a high priority, and so families frequently forego 'luxuries' in order to ensure their children's educational needs are maintained:

> Our three-year-old child has started kindergarten. The fees are very high. This is really fashionable these days. We didn't go to school before the age of five. Nowadays the competition is very tough and it's as if the parents are enrolling in school. You have to chase up admission, get forms. Newly married couples are in a state of terror about what will happen to their future offspring, whether they will get into the *right school, a good English medium school.* They have to get into the right kindergarten so that they can get into the right school. At my daughter's kindergarten they have already asked me where I want to send my daughter. I told them South Point or Carmel [elite, high fee, English medium] (our emphasis).

We mentioned that schooling was seen as a necessary expense, and one for which many sacrifices would be made to ensure educational success. Generally, though, what did people own, what did they desire, and what sorts of pressure did they face to buy consumer goods?

Consumer goods

> What is happening with liberalisation is an attempt to change your views with consumerism. If I compare consumer goods to my income, I have to be cautious. If my income does not go up, I can't buy the desirable goods. It is an individual thing. If I want this, I've got to cut back on that. I have to go by what my budget permits me to do.
>
> (Dilip, male aged 35)

In a typical middle-class household, there were the standard consumer items present. Yet, what was revealing was that, in comparison to the majority of all households (all social classes) in developed countries, the proportion of households that did not have, for example, a refrigerator (44 per cent not owning) seemed relatively high. In Table 2.9, we note that just one half of the respondents owned a gas stove. Most of those residing with extended families in semi-urban, ancestral homes prepared their meals on a coal (charcoal) burning, and sometimes kerosene,

Table 2.9 Household consumer goods owned

Item	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Gas stove	59	50
Television	103	86
Refrigerator	67	56
VCR	6	5
Stereo/CD player	37	32
Washing machine	17	14
PC	4	3

stove as this was cheaper and established family practice over the generations. Moreover, there are fewer problems with smoke in a semi-urban environment, than in a crowded apartment block. A high proportion owned a television, but in saying this it should be noted that a number of households only had a black and white television as they could not afford, and for some people did not desire, a colour TV. Refrigerators were an expensive item, and 56 per cent of households owned one. Only 14 per cent had an automatic washing machine, and fewer still owned entertainment equipment such as a stereo combination CD player, a VCR or a personal computer.

Enquiring as to what people desired, the most common response was household furniture and electrical goods (see Table 2.10). Many electrical items like CD players, VCRs and PCs were being imported from South Korea and China and entering the market, both the legal and the black market, quickly and at a cheaper price. A motor scooter was also a desirable item for 13 per cent of respondents, whereas 16 per cent were actually satisfied with what they owned. One of the few to have commented on the issue of foreign-made electrical goods, their availability post liberalisation and their quality and appeal, Ajit (aged 33) observed:

> People nowadays can buy many foreign-made things. Because India could not produce highly sophisticated goods, we depended on foreign countries for parts, etc. We had to pay high taxes on imported items like a Sony TV. Now average people can afford to buy some [imported] goods. Black marketing is a bit more controlled . . . Even if India produces many of the goods, which it did not make before, the quality is still not as good.

Finally we consider whether there was much pressure felt to actually purchase various consumer goods. Overall, 31 per cent acknowledged

Table 2.10 Additional consumer goods desired

Item	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Furniture & electrical goods	57	48
Residential property	4	3
Motor scooter	16	13
Combination of the above	18	15
Satisfied: nothing extra	19	16
No response	6	5
Total	120	100

Table 2.11 Family pressure to buy consumer goods?

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes	19	16
No	71	59
Slight pressure	11	9
Moderate pressure	1	1
Great pressure	6	5
No response; N/A	12	10
Total	120	100

that there was pressure to various degrees and 59 per cent 'no', they did not feel pressurised whatsoever (Table 2.11).

Nikhil, aged 42, is one who feels the pressure greatly due to his limited income as a low-wage government employee. When we asked him about pressure to consume, and on balancing the budget, he offered up the following:

> Actually I look after the household budget. I am the earner, so I look after the budgetary matters. It is like the government and its planning commission that handles the pay scales! My salary is like that. If I hand over the salary to my Mrs [colloq. 'wife'] and say 'here is Rs. 200 and you do the shopping', she will try to balance the budget. This will be a great strain. She might be too cautious or she might overspend. I am the earner and if I give her the money for the household expenditure, it is like keeping her under the thumb. It is manipulation. I have been looking after finances for a long time, I have an idea how much things costs. I try to save her from this mental pressure.

> I feel the pressure sometimes because my income is fixed. I don't have any extra income and I have to maintain my expenses accordingly. It is like limited land and population growth. The land in India is finite, but the population continues to rise. India can't expand its borders. My income is like that. It remains a fixed entity. There may be extra expenses. We don't live in the jungle; we live in a human society. There are always family functions or celebrations of some sort coming up and we have to contribute. At times this becomes a bit excessive.

Rita, whom we mentioned earlier in this chapter, explained the personal pressure she felt when it came to buying a colour television:

> Colour TV is really a luxury. I was compelled to buy it at a time in my life – I can't go into the personal details. If I had not bought it on loan, it would have been better. To be rid of the debt would be better. A fridge, I think, is essential. I can only shop once a week. I have to go to work and the children are at home. So for me, it is really a necessity. Eventually, it was a big financial sacrifice for me; I had to get it.

She also raises the issue of personal loans and other forms of credit. During the earlier phases of fieldwork, not many people mentioned credit and the levels of debt they had. Few who had houses or apartments actually had an outstanding mortgage. But over the years, we quickly noticed how credit cards and 'quick approval' loans were entering the market, particularly after the freeing up of various financial regulations. Especially for younger couples, they frequently mentioned how banks were willing to lend the requisite funds for housing or to travel abroad for a university education. Also, many parents were making preparations to do just that; that is, to send their children abroad for higher education.

Pleasures of consumption: the luxuries

> Washing machine, vacuum cleaner, these are luxury items for us. But you will find in a lot of middle-class households like ours people are buying many fancy things. We may have a hole in the roof tiles, but you must have a colour TV or a washing machine or telephone. These add to the electricity bills. Yet people get them because they want to express a sense of gratification or that some people think that to be important in society, you have to have these.

> That is an expression of their tastes. But I find this to be unsuitable for me. I have to live according to my means.
>
> (Mr Mukherjee, aged 54)

> Luxury is a very relative term. If you need a car for work purposes and you can afford it, then it is not a luxury. Luxury to me is anything that you can't afford.
>
> (Mrs Dasgupta, aged 49)

Here we see recognition of what, for some, the consumption of luxuries symbolises; it is a waste of money and a quick way to gain status. And, as the second quote showed, luxuries are simply things which one can't afford. What did people think luxury items were? There was seemingly in the market an explosion of goods and choices and the middle classes were the very targets of much of these over-advertised consumer products. In Table 2.12 we can see listed the range of items, with the most clear-cut answer being 'a combination', meaning that many respondents listed together travel, restaurant food, a motor scooter and so forth.

As we mentioned earlier, the idea of what luxuries were, and general responses, varied greatly. There were those who explained it like this:

> I think a motorbike is a luxury good and the same goes for wearing costly perfumes. Buying a pair of shoes worth Rs. 1000 is luxury again, since you can buy shoes for only Rs. 200. Colour television is also a luxury item in my opinion. Although I use these items, they

Table 2.12 What are luxury goods?

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Cosmetics/personal grooming	14	12
Expensive restaurant/takeaway food	5	4
Entertainment	3	2
Extra/unnecessary clothes	5	4
Ornaments/jewellery	1	1
Household furniture/electrical goods	13	11
Travel/holidays	3	2
Motor scooter	12	10
Combination of above	53	45
No response	11	9
Total	120	100

> are proportionate to my salary. I'll give you an example, I watch black and white television, which serves my purpose; I wear shoes worth of Rs. 200. As they say, I cut my coat according to my cloth.

And this:

> What are luxuries in a middle-class family you ask? Say a TV, a fridge and a phone? Everyone has them; it is necessary to have a phone. A tape recorder. If there is a good song that has been released, you go out and buy a cassette. This happens a lot of the time. Luxury in a middle-class family is going out to eat in an expensive restaurant, or to buy very expensive fashion shoes, or to have their own car. If I want to go somewhere and I don't want to go to in a crowded bus, I want to take a taxi or I want to hire a car, then these are luxuries.

Satyajit is quite highly educated and very fond of reading, the arts and plays, and music of all kinds. But he, too, was finding things difficult to afford, and noted that even books were becoming luxuries:

> Other things like books and monographs. I am interested in folk music and literature. So, I used to collect a lot of documents, rare monographs on this topic. Some imported research books are also beyond my reach now. Novels, paperbacks are still OK because you can always get them from the library. Newsprint has gone down in price, but books are more expensive now; cassettes too.

For others, luxuries were clearly related to food:

> When we are out and my son asks to eat some expensive snack, I have to tell him to have Rasgulla or Sandesh [local sweetmeats] instead. It is not really for health reasons that I prevent him, it is really my pocket I'm thinking about. He asks for a soft drink and I remind him that he has a bottle of water. After he has asked me on the fourth or fifth outing then I might be able to buy him a drink. We are not really in the habit of eating out. It is quite common to have snacks as soon as you go out, to have chowmin [Chinese noodles] or an egg roll. People didn't used to do that before. Nowadays it is quite customary (*reoaj hoe geche*). However, we try to avoid it.

Or, as another man commented, which was regularly repeated to us by

many others: ‘We can’t even think of buying prawns, it is beyond our means.’

Another luxury item frequently mentioned was travelling. The vast majority of respondents explained their love for travel as one of life’s great pleasures, but which increasingly features as a luxury which many, disappointingly, could no longer afford. For government employees there is a holiday travel allowance, which enables many people to go on long journeys to faraway parts of India. Despite this benefit, it is increasingly becoming difficult to afford. Asim works in the postal service as a clerk. As he puts it:

> Oh! Luxury items? One such thing is travelling. We can go travelling only if it fits into our annual budget, though in my case, we get some help from my office. There are things like LIC and LFC [various benefits], which help us. So we have the whole year at hand. It is not possible to travel only with the government’s money. It pays for our journey by first class rail. But we have to have some money in our hands for the purpose of spending properly, taking good accommodation, or having good food, or for shopping. Under such a circumstance, travelling turns out to be a matter of luxury.

Another government worker told us: ‘Another matter is going away. We used to get away a couple of times each year; now we may only go away once per year.’ So the common Bengali middle-class practice of ‘getting away’ for the weekend, to go to the countryside, to get to a hill station, or to visit relatives, and so forth was fast disappearing as an option for many.

And, we see a poignant and telling response from one low-income respondent, where the idea of ‘luxuries’ was completely baffling as such a concept is not even considered in her day-to-day living:

> We are lower middle-class people. We can’t even think of the concept of luxury. After marriage, I do not have any luxury. Because as a working woman I know the market situation and I can’t tell my husband to give me a Rs. 5000 ornament. It is impossible if you have a [low paying] job like mine.

And, for another woman, ‘The life we lead is devoid of luxuries. We don’t buy any luxury goods at all, only the bare essentials.’

In 2005, we again broached the topic of luxuries but this time asking what they thought had become, or was becoming, luxuries (since 1999/2000). We see their general views reflected in Table 2.13. The main

Table 2.13 What have become luxury goods?

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Cosmetics/personal grooming	14	12
Expensive restaurant/takeaway food	25	21
Entertainment	8	6
Extra/unnecessary clothes	23	19
Ornaments/jewellery	1	1
Household furniture/electrical goods	1	1
Travel/holidays	16	13
Motor scooter	1	1
Combination of above	21	18
No response	10	8
Total	120	100

changes we noticed were in regards to their views of restaurant and takeaway food, the idea of extra or unnecessary clothes, and travel and holidays. In fact, their views were more clear-cut than previously about these items becoming luxuries.

Sheela, below, sees a range of things that are becoming luxuries. She points to the 'indiscriminate' usage of certain items, needless shopping, and widespread advertising, and clearly portrays the idea of the need for personal control over one's spending habits. Her tone was also quite moralistic:

> What's become a luxury? Clothing items are quite unaffordable. Home decorating items, the extensive use of electricity. It would not be correct to say that any of these are luxuries as such, but what has happened is that you cannot use these items indiscriminately. For example, running the electric fan all day. It would be a luxury to have them running in all the rooms. You have to limit its usage. If you use it extensively, then it becomes a luxury. Same goes for gas. You have to think of clever ways to cut back. Because of widespread advertising there are enticements to consume a more expensive brand of soap or perfume. What I tend to do is use a cheaper brand. I am not brand conscious. Just because somebody else has bought something and the idea that I have to have it as well does not apply to me. I have to live according to my means. There is a difference between keeping clean

> and being tidy and buying whatever your neighbours are buying. If you just go out and buy because somebody else has it, then it is a luxury.

Mrs Dhar works as a Lower Division Clerk at the Reserve Bank of India, a job she obtained on compassionate grounds when her husband died suddenly a few years ago. She works in the economics division of the library, mainly checking out books to students at the loans desk. Her personal and financial circumstances certainly influence her perceptions of luxuries:

> Prawns are now an absolute luxury. We went on longer trips and holidays previously, which we can now no longer afford. However, we are not prepared to give up our once a year holiday. The trips are now shorter and all of us cannot go together as we did previously. My daughter and son might go and I would stay with the grandchildren or I might take the grandchildren on a trip and they would stay at home.

Another woman pointed to the high prices for good quality clothing, and how this now affects her consumer choice:

> Particularly good quality clothing. I might think to myself that I want a really nice silk *kurta* [blouse], but I am unable to afford it now. In other words I can't buy things that I desire (*amar pachanda moto jinish kinte parchina*). Instead I have to buy something of a lower quality.

For Biswajit, food, particularly fish and prawns which are intrinsic to Bengali cuisine, has definitely become highly priced and a luxury item in his opinion. There are six members of his household, and so he is feeling the pressure:

> Take, for example, king prawn. We used to buy it at Rs. 100 per kilogram. Now the price is somewhere between Rs. 400–500 per kilogram. This specific item is being exported. As a result king prawns become scarce in our local market. Whenever it is available in the shops, it's too expensive. So we had to drastically change our habit of eating king prawns. The same thing happened to our local fish such as carp (*ruhi, katla*) or tilapia (*nilotica*). The high price of these fish has changed our consumption patterns. We hardly ever buy them now.

The high cost of many food items, where they are now considered luxuries, is also changing the recreation habits and extent of hospitality that can be provided by many families:

> Meat has become very expensive. Also, we used to invite people a lot to our home, for dinner or lunch. That has become a [financial] strain. So, we don't invite people much, especially when our favourite foods like goat meat have gone up so high.

So, from these interviews we can clearly see the influences and impact of neoliberal reforms are having the reverse effect: rather than encouraging thoughtless spending and consumption, it is leading at least one segment of the population to seriously reevaluate their spending behaviours, and their cultural practices more generally.

Conclusion

The greater availability of, and access to, a range of consumer goods were not seen to be a great benefit of economic reforms. Clearly, though, there is a marked correspondence between consumerism and income. Those with lower incomes are simply not in the position to purchase a diversity of products. It became evident that the desire for consumer goods was frequently attributed to 'others' and rarely admitted for themselves. To engage in conspicuous consumption was generally frowned upon. Middle classness, the making of middle-class culture, was thus continually defined and redefined by the morality of their cultural practice – refinement, reservedness, politeness, education; the very essence of *bhadralok* values and culture.

There was an ambiguity apparent in that, while some came to consider themselves as 'victims' of consumerism (especially those with limited purchasing capacity), others pointed out the foolishness of being influenced by advertising:

> In my family there is the desire to purchase all goods of comfort. My wife wants a washing machine and so on. Let's take this new house I am building; it has to have all the mod cons. Since my brothers have built new houses, we have got to be better than them. We have to have something to outdo them. This desire, this mode of thinking, was not there in our youth. I would even say with certainty that ten years ago people did not think this way. This way of thinking has only come about in the past five years or so.

Another respondent, holding up a ballpoint pen, exasperatingly put it this way:

> Can consumers really know that this pen, which is locally made, is better than an imported one? They are just going to look at the advertising and say, 'Ahh! A Japanese pen. It must be good.'

In conclusion, what matters most for the majority of people we talked to is simple daily survival, good quality housing and food, and a solid, English-medium education for their children. These are fundamental; the rest of the goods – the consumer products that provide entertainment, or the new furniture, the scooter or the holiday – these are, for most, seen as luxuries that, while they would be nice to own or partake in, are only to be purchased if the family budget allows. Certainly, many felt pressure to consume and were bemused by the levels of consumer hype and media advertising, but it seemed to us that many more were realistic about their own economic circumstances. In countering the consumerist ideology, 'one must exercise caution' seemed to be the main lesson to be learned from our interviews, but whether this remains the case as India progresses with its open market, consumer-driven free market policies, remains to be seen.

3 Gender, empowerment and liberalisation

Introduction

In this chapter we focus on the paradox between women's feelings of empowerment and the reality of the overall negative impact of neoliberal policies on women. Our study reveals that globalisation of the economy is not perceived as having a negative impact on gender relations at the level of the household. In particular, women now consider themselves to be more empowered than the previous generation. Negative elements of the New Economic Policy (NEP) are associated with the aspects of household survival rather than gender differentiation. We argue that these paradoxical views stem in part from the constructions of gender equality that have been shaped by colonial and post-colonial debates about the emancipation of women. In the first section of this chapter, we present some of the important issues for gender relations in the global economy and discuss how the liberalising process in India has shaped gender inequalities. This is followed by a critical account of the narratives of our informants.

Global market reforms can be both empowering and constraining for women. Two major contrasting approaches prevail in India in the analysis of the impact of liberalising processes on women. A number of writers describe growing gender inequalities under the NEP (Arora, 1999; Dewan, 1999; Kalpagam, 1994; Kapadia, 2002; Sen, 1996; Swaminathan, 1998; Upadhay, 2000). Their main concerns include the feminisation of poverty, reduced employment opportunities in the formal sector and inadequate protection in the workplace. This contrasts with other studies that explore feminine desire and subjectivity precipitated by consumerism in a globalised economy (John, 1998; Mankekar, 1999; Munshi, 1998). The latter studies, which link emergent femininities to practices of consumption, focus on the significance of images of femininity mediated by global media corporations, and are primarily

concerned with upper- and middle-class women. Both of these sets of analyses overlook the experiences of people who do not neatly fit into the extreme ends of the social spectrum. In this chapter, we reiterate our central concern to highlight the specificities of the world views and experiences of the lower middle classes who thus far have been neglected in scholarly debate, and thereby shed some light on the gender aspect of liberalising processes.

Gender and globalisation: some critical issues

Walby (2000) argues that in order to understand the twenty-first century globalisation, we must consider the processes of both globalisation and modernisation, which have had complex and contradictory effects on women. Modernisation has changed gender relations as a result of women's entry into the public sphere. For some groups of women, modernisation has reduced inequalities and enhanced their educational and employment opportunities. However, decreased reliance on their husbands and fathers and the rights that accompanied modernisation have been endangered as a result of neoliberal globalisation. Women's rights to education, gainful employment and health are all under threat as a result of government cutbacks in these spheres (Babb, 2001; Kingfisher and Goldsmith, 2001; WIN News, 1997). Feminist engagements with globalisation comprise competing trends: while some contend that globalisation can only be countered through global resistance movements, others argue for increased state intervention and protection in order to resist globalisation (Bergeron, 2001). In recent years, feminist literature has been criticised for its neglect of post-colonial women's movements and failure to recognise the ways in which 'Third World Women' are agents and activists (Basu, 1995). Alternative positions have challenged the view of the market as a natural and inevitable force and advocate imaginative roles that women can play in shaping economies (Bergeron, 2001). We argue then that globalising processes work in contradictory ways: for example, the transition to a market economy in China shows that women's rights to work and labour protections that were guaranteed by the socialist state are now being eroded. At the same time, more occupational choices have arisen in women's professional lives, enabling them to move out of the passive roles they occupied previously, under the centrally planned distribution of employment (Einhorn and Yeo, 1995: 193–204). Such inclusionary and exclusionary processes of gendered globalisation are increasingly prevalent (Afshar and Barrientos, 1999: 1–17). Examining the relationships between market liberalisation, women's labour and gender ideology,

Moghadam (1999: 128–53) argues convincingly that women's participation in the global economy and national labour forces can serve to interrogate and modify gender relations and ideologies. This process is vividly illustrated in Freeman's (2000) ethnography of women engaged in offshore data processing in Barbados, which highlights the meaning women assign to the transformation taking place in their lives.

In view of the competing debates over the gendered aspects of globalisation and liberalisation, we focus particularly on women's denial of the negative impacts on their own lives. Although such responses are to be expected given the women's specific class locations, it raises the spectre of liberalisation as the harbinger of women's emancipation. Our findings show that women do not perceive liberalisation as beneficial yet also deny that they have been disadvantaged by it. These responses may be understood in the context of changing gender relations, as a result of both women's own changing perceptions and the post-colonial state's interventions in the spheres of education and employment. However, we concur with Bannerjee's (1999) hypothesis that despite these changes in the globalising economies of Asia, capital has rarely challenged existing patriarchal traditions; rather it has harnessed them for its own benefit. It is here that the intersections of globalisation, gender and modernity assume their significance. The relationships between gender and modernity invariably raise questions about women's status. Recent theoretical insights into modernity and female subjectivity in India show that women are assigned a measure of modernity sufficient to reinforce rather than challenge hegemonic gender roles (Avashti and Srivastava, 2001; Das, 1994; Puri, 1999; Sunder Rajan, 1993: 1999: 5–8). By exploring the ways in which women have been recast within post-colonial state narratives of gender equality and empowerment, we consider the potential of these narratives to enable women to expand their opportunities and disrupt hegemonic codes.

The contradictions between women's perceptions of empowerment in West Bengal and the realities of the NEPs can be understood to a certain extent if we consider the ideologies that underpin the role of the state in women's employment. Since 1970s, the state's promotion of women into the workforce has been accompanied by ideologies that associate employment with female empowerment. Regardless of their ability to usher in real change, notions of female empowerment are now part of standard government vocabulary at both the national and state levels. The reasons underlying the paradox between the effects of liberalisation on women and women's perceptions of empowerment become even clearer if we consider that in recent years global media corporations have relentlessly propagated the imagined liberties of

consumerism through the use of enabling images of women, without confronting underlying unequal gender relations. By 1996, approximately 40 international and domestic cable channels such as CNN, BBC and Star TV were available in India (Oza, 2001). Neoliberal ideologies have become significant in presenting choice and empowerment in a framework of competitive individualism and consumerism. As is shown later in this chapter, women evoke these sentiments when discussing the significance of the images of women portrayed in the media.

Liberalisation, NEP and gender equality

As noted at the outset, policies of economic liberalisation (EL) have done little to redress gender inequalities. A volume prepared by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (2000) shows that not only do these policies affect various classes differently, but also they affect men and women differently. Kapadia (2002) notes that liberalisation and 'adjustment' measures result in insecure and poorly paid work, highlighting the state's failure to reduce women's traditional disadvantages in the labour market, which places them at the bottom of the labour hierarchy. Trade liberalisation policies have attempted to integrate women into the global economy, particularly through export-processing industries and the expansion of export-processing zones. However, their job security is threatened by the prohibition on unionisation, and decentralisation through subcontracting (Dalal, 1995). According to a major study based on the 55th round of the National Sample Survey (NSS) (Mukhopadhyay, 2003), export-orientation and/or deregulation in the domestic production sector have created a high demand for female labour. Bannerjee (2002: 44) makes the counterargument that policies of aggressive export promotion have done little to expand women's job opportunities. Chakravarty's (2004) study of the garment industry under the NEP illustrates the class-specific nature of gendered employment opportunities. She found that although women are concentrated in lower skilled jobs, they are also present in higher positions such as 'designers and supervisors' in six out of seven sample firms.

Globalising processes work in contradictory ways. Evidently, market liberalisation and structural adjustment policies may have a conflicting impact on women on the cultural terrain. While new forms of inequality result from economic reforms, there may be other opportunities for greater independence. Mukhopadhyay's (2003) analysis of the NSS data was supplemented by 114 household surveys of 594 people in an export-processing zone (EPZ) and an export-oriented unit (EOU) in Sonepat, Haryana and Noida, Uttar Pradesh. She found that many of

the women believed that working has improved their self-worth, their position in the family and their power to make decisions. Omvedt's (1997) analysis of women's rights in Indian families in an era of liberalisation is also instructive: she contends that given the democratisation of gender relations within the family, the effects of structural adjustment on women have not been as much of a burden as its opponents claim. In our view, the most relevant comparable cultural experience for Bengali women is that of neighbouring Bangladesh. Feldman's (1992) study of women workers in export-processing enclaves in Bangladesh shows that women from rural, middle-strata families have been able to increase their employment opportunities. This challenges the traditional prohibitions on female mobility shaped by Bengali culture and a variant of Islamic doctrine, which in the past severely limited women's access to education and employment. This has also forced a reinterpretation of family status. Regional patterns of gender relations in India show the mediating effects of cultural processes as well as the various coping strategies of households with different assets (Agarwal, 1992). Therefore, class differentials and cultural specificity are of paramount importance when considering how economic changes have shaped gender relations and people's responses. We now turn to analysing the specificity of gendered world views and experiences of the lower middle class in West Bengal.

Ideological influences: public debate and popular media

Within lower middle-class families, decisive factors that have shaped the lives of girls and women include access to education and a lessening of the restricted physical mobility of the past. Women and men of all ages refer to the better opportunities for women of the present generation. However, improvements in the spheres of education and employment are regarded as having occurred independently of economic reforms. Moreover, while they readily admit that liberalisation may not have benefited women in particular, respondents also emphatically deny that women have been disadvantaged. Their views reflect notions of gender equality that are incorporated into public discourses and popular media. Their assertions as individuals correspond strongly with the possibilities debated within the public realm.

Debates about the public visibility of women, their participation in employment and their subsequent emancipation have occupied centre stage in anti-colonial nationalist discourses as well as in post-colonial, developmentalist narratives of nation building. We identify several distinct narratives in Table 3.1. These include the social reform and

Table 3.1 Public discourses of gender equality and women's emancipation (nineteenth century to early twenty-first century)

Social reform and nationalist discourses	***Independence and partition***	***Left Front Government/CPM***	***Consumerism and advertising***
Poor women's work as a necessity for survival	Massive social dislocation	Women encouraged to participate in wage labour struggles and politics	The 'new' empowered woman
Upper-class women's work Moral obligation and duty – desirable	Respectable 'genteel' women forced to enter the workforce		
Work outside the home undesirable for all other women	Powerful imagery in popular fiction – public debate evokes sympathy for women, but does not challenge ideology of domesticity		
Left and labour movement Importance of paid work for women's emancipation	***Modernising ideologies of the Indian state: education, development, etc.***		***Rhetoric of 'empowerment' in the NEP***

19th to mid-20th C.____ 1947 ________ post-1960s ______________ 1985 ____ present

nationalist discourses of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, narratives of independence and partition during the mid-twentieth century, ideological pronouncements by the Left Front Government/CPI (M), particularly since the 1960s and 1970s, and finally, the consumerist and advertising discourses of the past decade. However, our informants do not perceive each of these as unitary systems of ideas; rather their responses echo these ideas as contradictory set of themes, often incorporating various elements from different discourses.

Public discourse in the nineteenth century, particularly the views of social reformers, centred on two opposing categorisations: the labour force participation of poor women and widows and the employment of upper-class women in high status professions. While the former could

be tolerated because it was a necessity, the latter was not only desirable, but also a moral obligation, a public duty. For the rest, women's entry into the workforce signified a loss of respectability for the women themselves and a loss of status for their families. These oppositions are crucial to an examination of the ethnographic context of our informants, who fit into neither of these class categories.

Exceptions to the dichotomy in the debates about women's place in the public sphere are found in discourses of the Left and the Labour movements, and in the First Plan Document on Women, formulated in 1939 (see Chaudhuri, 1996). Given the importance of Left politics in the history of the nationalist struggle in Bengal, these contributions were significant. Nevertheless, public acceptance of these views was not widespread until the 1970s when political parties of the Left came to power and began to reshape public discourse about the emancipation of women. Empowerment through employment has been the general developmentalist agenda of the post-colonial state, irrespective of the ideologies of various political parties. Nowadays, while neoliberalism has replaced developmentalism, the empowerment of women remains a critical component of its rhetoric.

The attitudes of our respondents are framed by a confluence of the ideas of the Left with the emerging consumer discourses of a woman exercising choice that have become prominent since the formulation of the NEP. Although effective empowerment requires a move beyond an individual's own outlook to individual and group capacities to initiate social change or influence social attitudes and behaviour, it is not surprising that some people couch the language of empowerment in terms of individual choice, given how the notion of the individual has been relentlessly propagated through advertising in recent years. For those who are not actively engaged politically, feminist and other discourses of collective advancement appear overly abstract. For our respondents, the commitments to collective endeavour refer more to workplace changes than to broader social change. This may be contrasted with their perceptions of 'women's advancement', which are increasingly influenced by individualist orientations.

Employment and empowerment

The theme that typifies the sentiments of most respondents is 'women's advancement', which, while expressed in many different ways, is seen primarily as residing in a woman's entry into the world of work. For a man, it is recognition of improvement and gives him a sense of pride that 'my' wife goes out to work, or 'my' daughter is doing well in

her studies and hopefully will find a good job. These sentiments are subtly linked to ideologies of consumerism. Women are emphatic about their renewed confidence and take the attitude that paid work brings autonomy. A working mother of an 18-year-old daughter summed up the link between women's work and freedom in the following way:

> Generally, what you see nowadays is that there are more women in the workforce than there were before. Many more women can be found in small firms and in private companies. Most women are eager to get some kind of training for the job market. Young women, after completing their education, readily join a computer training centre or a small firm, anything they can lay their hands on. They try to get basic training in a lot of fields. *Every girl wants to be independent* (original emphasis). No one wants to sit at home. Whether this is as an outcome of liberalisation, I can't say. Perhaps we could say that this yearning by young women to be independent, to join the workforce has happened at the same time as liberalisation policies have been implemented.
>
> (Mrs Juthika D, aged 44, senior sales assistant in a government-sponsored handicrafts store)

One of the crucial markers of emerging class identity among this fraction of the middle class is a desire for women to be publicly visible and have relative freedom to pursue careers. A typical response was as follows:

> I don't know whether women have benefited from policies or not. But the women's lot has improved. They have come forward, entered the workforce, etc. This is a good sign. In every government and non-government organisation women have entered in great numbers. This wasn't the case before. They were not visible in great numbers. Women have entered every field. This is very good. Previously women thought that they had to be confined at home. All there was for them was *shongsar, ranna banna* (household duties and cooking). Now they are working for their own advancement and the families have gained too.

Maintaining a contrast between the present and the past, respondents frequently used the expression *egie aasha* or 'coming forward' to indicate progress. Recalling her own experience, a widowed woman in her late forties explained the changes in the following way:

> Compared to the past, the situation of women entering the workforce has improved a lot. Previously those who were just at home

> are now working, like myself. Young women aren't sitting at home, hoping to be provided for. Women are going out to work. In our youth, it was expected that the wife would stay at home and look after the home and family. Now the circumstances have changed a lot. The opportunities for women working have improved.

Similarly, a divorced woman, also in her forties, observed that:

> Certainly, progress has been made! Women are coming forward [*egie aashche*] in the field of education and work on par with men. This has been [necessary] in our country. Today's women are much more advanced than those 20 years earlier. If parents have two sons and even one daughter, they would try to educate the daughter to the same level as the sons. This is a very good attitude. Earlier, if a daughter was born to them, parents used to think that they would give her some minimum education, and then get her married. But now such thoughts don't exist.

Women's lack of opportunities and their rising consciousness as a result of participation in the outside world of work are now common sense. Young people routinely make statements like this:

> Women have started to consciously think about themselves; they have begun to obtain more knowledge about the external world, unlike earlier when they hardly used to step over the threshold.
>
> (Woman police constable, aged 23)

While the loosening of restrictions on physical mobility is seen as a hallmark of modernity, any attempt to restrict women's access to education constitutes proof of 'backwardness'. Certain gender constructs are also utilised to distance themselves from the poor. In the words of a Muslim respondent, 'Who keeps women at home these days? Only the most backward section of our community and of course poor people!' These sentiments are also expressed in scheduled caste[1] families. From the life histories of older women, we found that a few decades earlier, the same group distinguished itself by confining women within the household as a mark of respectability, in opposition to the elite *bhadralok* women who were prominent in the public arena. A number of women recollected the tensions and hardships they faced when they first entered the workforce.

Our respondents' attitudes are shaped and reshaped by the competing debates on women's work in the public domain. For most of the last

100 years, there has been a well-defined opposition between poor women as objects of pity – since they have to work – and respectable women who do not work outside their homes. Stuck between these conflicting ideologies, women have continually struggled with the dichotomous messages and attempted to reconcile them in their daily lives. Referring to Table 3.1, we find that a slight twist to the prevailing dichotomy appeared after partition in 1947. This period marked the end of colonial rule; the ensuing partition of India created immense social dislocation. Great numbers of refugees from East Bengal flowed into West Bengal, particularly to the metropolis of Kolkata. During this period, economic hardship 'forced' *bhadralok* women from refugee families to enter the paid workforce. This image became a particularly compelling one in popular fiction (Kar, 1956; Mitra, 1957; Mitra, 1963). There are numerous stories of genteel women forced to seek work, being ostracised as a consequence, and struggling to reconcile family honour, domestic duty and family survival.[2] While attempts were made to deal with the changes taking place in families in the years following independence, by and large, these accounts evoked sympathy for the women rather than criticised the dominant ideologies of domesticity and female dependency. Many older women talked about the significance of these novels for contemporary times, emphasising that these issues are finally being discussed within their families, aided by the open discussions occurring in the mass media.

Perceptions of gendered liberalisation

We had entered the field assuming that the growing gender inequalities stemming from the impact of the NEPs would be readily acknowledged. However, this preconceived idea was continually challenged. Against the overwhelming evidence of the negative impact of EL outlined in the earlier part of the chapter, we found that women do not perceive themselves as the victims of the NEP. Instead, they emphasise their own sense of self-worth and the advancement of women's everyday lives, continually emphasising the difference between the present and the past. For example, a woman aged 30, who had been retrenched from a private airline company, but had found employment elsewhere stated that:

> In the past only women in poorer circumstances went to work. Now women from all walks of life are working. Now everyone wants to do something. I think the circumstances for women's work and their career prospects have improved. Previously not many women

> were in the workforce. Now more women want to work. They want the freedom. They don't want to depend on anyone. There have been tremendous improvements in women's education and employment. Because women want to work, education becomes very important. Every girl wants to stand on her own two feet.

Our attempts to identify how the economic reforms have affected women and explore how this is understood met with responses that invariably denied a link between female employment and the NEP (Figure 3.1). This is implied in a number of the comments cited above. Our suggestions that there might be fewer opportunities for women elicited disagreement, sometimes vehement denials. The reasons for this can be understood to a certain extent if we consider the ideologies that underpin the role of the state in relation to women's employment. The idea that women's participation in the public world of work and politics is crucial to their emancipation has been promoted during the past three decades under the Left Front Government in West Bengal.

Although we have shown that the exceptions to the dichotomous debates on women's public role were always present in discourses of the

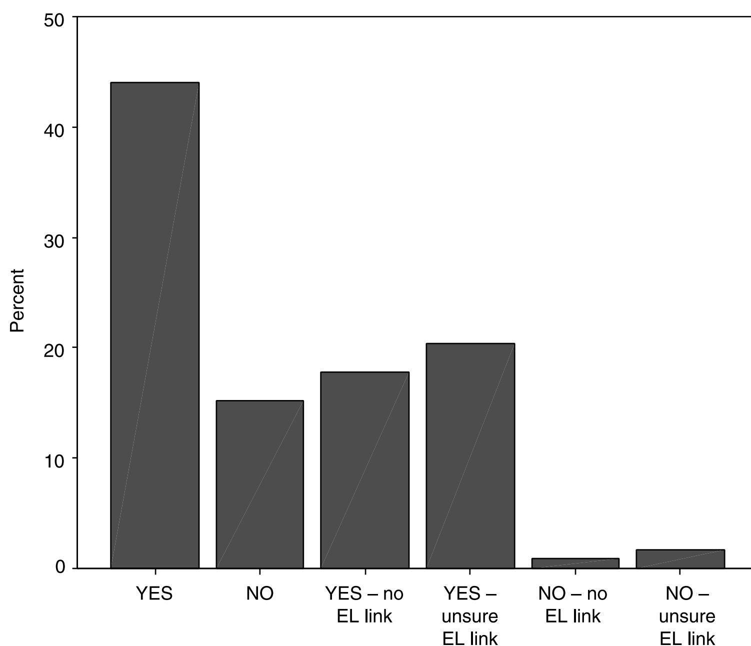

Figure 3.1 Women benefited under liberalisation (n = 118).

Left and the Labour movement, public acceptance of these views was not widespread until the latter part of the twentieth century. Since the 1970s, political parties of the Left have been in power and shaping public debates. Empowerment through employment is not confined to the Left Front, but is also part of the general developmentalist agenda of the post-colonial state. 'Female empowerment' is now a key term in the state's lexicon of development issues relating to women. Despite the failures to implement real changes, governments and NGOs continue to deploy the term (Rozario, 1997). Similarly, the NEP is replete with the rhetoric of female empowerment (Bagchi, 1999: 368–70; Mohanty, 1995), a notion that has become influential in the public domain.

At this stage, it is worth asking whether our respondents have a clear understanding of the various dimensions of globalisation and liberalisation, including SAPs and the NEP. We have already shown, in Chapter 1, that respondents demonstrated some awareness of liberalisation policies, whether it was a clear articulation of specific policies, or simply a generalised understanding of the opening-up of the Indian economy to the global market, removal of subsidies on essential items as the economy was being adjusted or privatisation of public enterprises and utilities. Although 16 per cent of respondents never broached the subject with anyone, this does not mean that they are unaware of it. Also discussed in Chapter 2 was that, despite many people's personal interest in the topic, they rarely have the opportunity to discuss these issues with others, mainly because of their own friends', family's or colleagues' lack of interest. Respondents also distinguish between self-understanding and public awareness, asserting that there is no widespread understanding of these issues in society. We found that, in general, respondents are sceptical about the economic benefits of liberalisation rather than conscious of its negative outcomes for women.

An overwhelming majority (82 per cent) of respondents argue that women have made considerable gains. However, they hold differing views as to whether the gains have occurred independently of economic reforms or not. Notably, nearly 40 per cent asserted that women have advanced in their everyday lives but also simultaneously claimed that this could not be linked to globalisation or EL. The following comment from a father of four daughters is typical:

> I don't really see a connection between economic liberalisation and advantages or disadvantages for women in employment. In the field of employment, there have been a lot of improvements for women. Women have more freedom to pursue careers. These are general social improvements that have happened for women's employment.

> *This would have happened regardless of economic liberalisation* (our emphasis). In education these days girls are doing better than boys. If you look at *madhaymik* [middle school certificate] results, more girls have gained first divisions, compared to boys. How can you link that with liberalisation?
>
> (Male, aged 65, recently retired from the Office of the Labour Commissioner)

Similarly, a man in his early thirties, working as an Upper Division Clerk in a Government department, said that:

> I don't see any specific links with women experiencing disadvantages or improving women's opportunities directly as a result of liberalisation. The higher education, the greater the opportunities for women. When structural adjustment took place, there may have been some clauses for 'gender sensitivity'. But how that has affected women directly, I don't know. There are definitely better opportunities for women, but it is not related to economic reforms. If you look at the brief period of liberalisation, I haven't noticed any improvement in the education of girls. But if you look at the general trends, people have emphasised the need to educate their girls.

Although men and women put forward remarkably similar viewpoints, in vociferously denying the link between NEP and women's employment, they give different explanations. Arguing in favour of women's advancement, men tried to identify concrete opportunities that have come about regardless of liberalisation, whereas women attributed it to their own rising consciousness. The subtle distinctions between men's and women's attitudes are apparent in the following comments. From a married man in his mid-thirties:

> Let me put it this way. Opportunities for women have opened up a bit more. You can't link it to liberalisation policies. The quotas for women for positions, in parliament – all these cannot be linked to liberalisation policies, but they have happened during the period of liberalisation. More women are recruited in the private sector. Women are more efficient and employers like them.

This may be contrasted with the comments of a married woman, aged 38, who worked as a postal clerk:

> Some people with high-demand skills have definitely benefited from

> liberalisation. However, we have to look at the general benefits for women; it is not enough to only look at its economic aspects. We have to look at the social aspect, the social consciousness that has arisen within ourselves. One advantage on the personal front is the feminist movement. I mean, we women have benefited from the positive aspects of the feminist movement. . . . a number of things never existed in families, but now they do. Some such changes have taken place in case of families, on the social front – I mean, within the society. And we do enjoy its consequences.

To support their claims, men opine that women are preferred employees because they are more compliant; women interpret this as 'being keen' and 'making greater effort'. Men frequently turn to indices of 'advancement', whereas women say that this is beside the point; to them, the social recognition and status are more important than the actual opportunities. Indeed, women respondents were often at pains to show that in West Bengal, where employment opportunities for all young people are extremely limited, it is meaningless to talk about better opportunities for girls. Nevertheless, they emphasise that young women are more eager to find jobs than young men.

As already mentioned, when we tried to suggest that there might be fewer opportunities for women as a result of liberalisation, our respondents generally disagreed with us, sometimes vehemently. At other times, they conceded that despite the rhetoric of women's empowerment attributed to growing opportunities, the reality is quite different:

> In my case I haven't seen any increasing opportunities. Women have learnt to become more independent compared to the past. You don't see women sitting around at home in any social class in society. They have either learnt a skill or got a trade. From this point of view, you could say that there have been improvements. I don't think this can be linked to the government's new economic policy.
>
> (Beautician, aged 21)

Only a notable minority (15 per cent) of all respondents rejected outright the idea that women have made gains since the economy was liberalised, although one-third of this group had no idea what these policies were in the first place.

The gains for women are generally regarded as being the result of enlightened outlooks and cultural changes within families, together with a range of ongoing political initiatives. Informants often reproduce the state's rhetoric of development and modernisation, at times

explicitly drawing on the Left Front Government's ideological statements concerning the necessity of incorporating women into wage labour in order to effect their emancipation. Although research shows that there is no causal relationship between women's paid employment and status enhancement (Chanana, 1996; Desai, 1996; Sharma, 1986; Standing, 1991), the view that women can be empowered through employment holds firm sway with our informants. Women, in particular, challenged the belief that limited family income compels them to seek employment, and they frequently expressed feelings of increased self-confidence acquired through gainful employment. Even those who hold only vague ideas about liberalisation stressed the strides women have made in the world of work. The following comments from Mrs. B, a married, working woman in her early forties, whose total household income is Rs. 8000, illustrates some of these sentiments:

> I don't know a great deal about structural adjustment. When the economy was liberalised, we felt that we would be able to get some foreign goods, like cosmetics. Nothing more. Improvement due to liberalisation? You must be joking! The situation for women has improved a lot in the last couple of years. In fact women have gained entry into a lot of the higher, prestigious posts. It is women who have advanced more than men. Work gives women freedom. I'm not saying that women are necessarily getting more jobs than men, but it is good to see more women in the workforce. It is definitely an indication of [the] better position of women in society. I love working; my colleagues are really wonderful.

Support for the idea that employment is a road to independence and rejection of the notion that women only work due to economic hardship exemplify the views of young women. Despite her meagre personal income of Rs. 1400 and a total household income of only Rs. 4200, a 19-year-old woman working as a telephone assistant in an ISD booth claimed emphatically that:

> I want every woman to stand on her own two feet. She should not be dependent on anyone. Whatever job she does, small or big, she should be independent and not depend on others.

Similarly, Priya, although a world away in her high-income call centre employment, conveyed the idea that what mattered most was a woman's intrinsic capacity to perform well in a job rather than the status assigned to that position:

> [A woman has] capability, you are fit for any kind of job, doesn't matter if it's a secretarial job, it's a hotel job or a call centre, it does not matter.

However, though these women assert that it is acceptable for girls to take up any occupation no matter how insignificant, clearly in practice this is not the case. In reality, *bhadralok* women are still restricted to a limited range of jobs. Even Priya's claim, noted above, is contradicted by the reality of her friends' work options. She readily admits:

> Umm, my friends they are mostly in the teaching profession. Actually they prefer a teaching [position] because according to their relatives it's much safer for a girl. [That's] normal thinking for people.

It seems that the crucial difference between earlier generations of lower middle-class women and later ones is the firm belief that this class fraction is taking the lead in defying conventions about what jobs are available to women by entering occupations that were previously off-limits to them. Respondents discussed this in terms of 'women in our kind of families' taking up previously unacceptable work such as medical sales representatives, shop keepers, even bus drivers and tram conductors. This is qualitatively different from upper middle-class women entering male-dominated high status jobs.

Education

We found similar patterns in attitudes to education for girls in that, in the minds of the *bhadralok*, education remains a key variable for success in employment. This was always a firmly held belief in the case of sons, and is now being extended to daughters. Parents frequently encourage girls to study so that they will be better equipped to enter the workforce. Such expectations were previously lacking among lower middle-class families, as one of our respondents described above. Nowadays, female education is not only a source of pride for parents, but also a safety net, insurance against a daughter's failed marriage or widowhood. In case of the latter, there are provisions for state sector employees to take over their husbands' posts provided they are suitably qualified; a number of our widowed respondents were in this position.

Respondents universally commended the successful efforts of both central and state governments in promoting girls' education. A few teachers acknowledged the disparity between the state's aim of promot-

ing girls' education and the reality of their low participation in rural areas. However, they attribute this to poverty rather than the unwillingness of parents to send their children to school. Indeed, they emphasise the high level of awareness among the poor of the benefits of education, often drawing on anecdotal evidence from their domestic helpers. Table 3.2 shows that while some want to disentangle economic reforms from impacts on girls' education, just over half of our respondents felt that there have been improvements. Often such perceptions had no concrete basis and stand in sharp contrast to the forecast negative effects of neoliberal policy prescriptions on girls' education (CWDS, 2000; Ghosh, 1996).

Challenging convention

These accounts offer some critical challenges to the notions of female dependency that are characteristic of familial ideologies in West Bengal, and throughout much of India.[3] They are in part shaped by images of the assertive 'new woman'. According to Munshi (1998: 573), advertising discourses have constructed this new persona by 'appropriating the discourses of traditional femininity on the one hand and liberating feminist discourses on the other'. This is not to claim the demise of gender hierarchies within families.[4] However, such representations do challenge some aspects of traditional femininity and demonstrate the powerful meaning that going out to work has for women. Significantly, our informants did not identify personal disadvantages resulting from the NEP. Instead, they emphasised the deteriorating conditions of the household. In Chapter 1, we showed that most respondents felt that their economic conditions have not improved since the NEP was implemented. Despite real increases in salaries, they face financial difficulties due to the rising cost of living.

Table 3.2 Improvement in girls' educational opportunities resulting from EL

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes	59	51.8
No	9	7.9
Yes – not linked to EL	16	14.0
Yes – unsure of EL link	27	23.7
No – not linked to EL	1	0.9
No – unsure of EL link	2	1.8
Total	114	100.0

These difficulties are due in part to the corporate ideology of the household. It is important to recognise this ideology; as Kabeer (1999: 460) notes, the notion of empowerment must be cognisant of its context. Despite rising wages and employment opportunities, in circumstances where the ideology of 'togetherness' prevails, women do not seek to be autonomous beings, separate from their households, nor is such a proposition socially acceptable. If we overlook this contextual possibility, then we are likely to miss the real significance of the transformations taking place.

Women want to keep separate their households' current economic problems due to the NEP, and their own sense of self and the future, which can only get better. They perceive themselves to be personally better off than their mothers and aunts. The specificity of the lower middle-class context is evident in our informants' failure to identify gender discrimination or disadvantage resulting from household budgetary restrictions. For example, no girl has had her education terminated in favour of her brother's. A sister has not been forced to obtain employment while a brother remains unemployed. This is, however, quite consistent with the gender ideology of *bhadralok* families. Unlike the poor, who may sacrifice a girl's education in the hope that her brother will earn a better living after a few more years of schooling, *bhadralok* families are prepared to support higher education for daughters as it is consistent with the culturally assigned feminine qualities of perseverance and patience. Girls are seen as 'responsible'. Education is also a means by which to maintain control over daughters, because of the discipline that is required by higher studies. By comparison, if boys are bored and unsuccessful in their studies they may drop out of college. Parents are more concerned about the idleness of daughters, though this is an unfounded fear. As Mrs Jukhika D's comments (noted earlier) illustrate, young women themselves are keen to obtain additional training in the hope of improving their employment prospects.

While a significant proportion of respondents deny any links between women's employment conditions and economic reform, a few pointed out that there is greater scope for women in some of the new companies that are emerging as a result of the opening up of the Indian economy to the global market. Here, we want to distinguish between making a successful career through the traditional path of acquiring higher education, and the rhetoric of unlimited opportunities under liberalisation. We noted in Chapter 1 that in our study there was only one case of spectacular success. This was Indrani, who had obtained employment in a multinational company having studied engineering, followed by a Masters degree in business management. We rarely saw her during the

course of our fieldwork as she was studying in Hyderabad and later moved to Mumbai for work. Her parents kept us informed with great pride about her rapid promotions. However, it is worth noting that in the first few years of our fieldwork, aside from Indrani, we found no-one who was employed in an occupation that has sprung up as a consequence of liberalisation. When we asked people to identify anyone in their families who had gained entry into positions in transnational firms, they were unable to do so; they spoke on the topic in abstract terms. This began to change somewhat in the last three years, when a handful of young women (and young men) had found work in BPOs (Business Processing Units), known commonly as call centres. In three of these families, parents felt vindicated by their decision to invest in an English education for their children. Despite earning large amounts of money, relatively freed lifestyles and positive appraisals in the early years, most girls eventually abandoned their employment due to the unreasonable work demands and the ensuing ill health. Polly, aged 23, returned home to Siliguri. Excessive weight gain from eating unhealthy foods during odd hours, coupled with the loneliness and boredom of being away from home and family led her to return. She had been a dancer and was unaccustomed to the sedentary nature of the work.

We now turn to considering two cases that typify the trajectories of the working children of our informants, and which also reflect the predicaments of women's work under liberalisation in lower middle-class households. Among the two young women who have continued with their work in BPOs include Priya and Sevanti, but their experiences have been radically different. There is tremendous pressure on the 24-year-old Sevanti, as she is now the only earning member of her family. Her father lost his job when Philips closed its manufacturing operations at its Taratolla plant. Being from a Christian background, she had had greater exposure to English than other Bengali girls of similar class backgrounds. This facilitated her securing a job in a call centre. Since she did not complete school, her future employment prospects are limited. We also found that although she speaks English, it is quite flawed. The following conversation, which was conducted in English, illustrates the peculiarity of English usage as well as the tensions of call centre work. It is also indicative of the class differences in BPO employment for women.

Ruchira: Did your parents agree immediately to let you take that job or were there any objections?

Sevanti: Mummy, mummy was little bit cribbing, you know, like: what is this? What time, and then you will come back so

late in the night, the car's not there, and then are times when I came a little bit late and they really got panicked for that. What's has happened, where is she, usually she comes back by 3 o'clock, 3.30 and why is she so late? It was a big deal but right now they've come to know my timings and all, what time I'll be back.

Q: Does anyone else have a bad opinion?

A: This kind of work?

Q: Yes.

A: Neighbours.

Q: Is it . . .?

A: Very bad. Because they think, they think that this girl goes, you know, around evening and returning back home from where so late at night because they don't really know the calls, the hard work. I believe the researchers, whatever, like the job researchers, this was what was written that the most tedious [she means tiring] jobs – the first job is the pilot and second job is the call centre job. So I believe the most amount of stress is taken in the call centre jobs. So these people think that we have a gala time and then come to work and that's the reason that we get a lot of money.

Q: Why do you reckon this happens?

A: That is because there are most of the non-Christian crowd there – Punjabis and Marwaris – a very rich crowd. And their entire salary is their pocket money.

To this Sevanti's sister added,

> They are able to live a lavish life. Absolutely. Most of their money goes to discos and all that. So they see the call centre as that route. They don't see the very few who are handling homes like my sister. They don't see that.

Call centre work has not presented Sevanti with any opportunities for promotion. Instead, she has changed from one BPO to the next. Euphemistically titled 'customer care executive', her current position in telemarketing is in the third call centre she has worked in. By contrast, Priya is the most successful of the call centre workers, and is a quintessential example of women's expanding opportunities.

Priya, aged 23, is an only child. She was sent to a Bengali-medium school because her father was unable to afford the fees for an English-medium school, due the medical expenses incurred for treating her

mother's illness. After her mother passed away, father and daughter became close; he was determined to do the best he could to provide her with an education. With the support of relatives and friends he tried to ensure that she would not go without and encouraged her in every facet of life. With this type of socialisation, Priya developed a strong-willed personality so that she is able to tackle any barriers in her career path. She graduated from Kolkata University and is now studying for a Masters in Mass Communication from Sikkim Manipal University. A family friend who is a human resources manager of a major international hotel helped her to get a job at the Taj International Hotel. Then she moved to the Park Hotel, and then took up her current position as a trainee for WIPRO. When we met again recently in forum, the most popular mall in South Kolkata, she appeared with a fashionable new hair cut, dressed in jeans and black T-shirt; it was difficult to recognise in her the pig-tailed teenager we had known several years earlier. During our conversation, the 'can-do' attitude of the emerging 'new woman' appeared several times.

Working women among our respondents generally commented that there are entrepreneurial opportunities for women, such as starting a small business. Although many of them are neither self-employed nor sub-contracted by private firms, nor wish to be, they nevertheless believe that 'nowadays you find housewives selling saris and cosmetics. There is always something you can do, join a private firm or start a business.' It appears that the notion that such opportunities are a result of privatisation is most often merely an ideological statement, emanating from the images promoted in glossy magazines, television serials and advertisements. One woman had toyed with the idea of starting a beauty parlour, but in the last two years had not even got around to preparing a business plan in order to approach a bank for a loan.

The following short story from a women's magazine was narrated by a number of key informants. It is emblematic of the ideology of women's emerging entrepreneurial acumen. The story revolves around a housewife who has been tirelessly carrying out her domestic duties and serving the joint family. One day she confides in one of her unmarried sisters-in-law about her desire to find employment. The college-educated young woman is completely dismissive of her brother's wife's quest for paid work. Undeterred by such ridicule, the woman sets out to find a job. Secretly she attends an interview one afternoon, telling the family she is going to the cinema with her friends. She is successful in her interview. When she breaks the news to the sister-in-law, the latter exclaims, 'You have no qualifications! Who would have given you a job? All you know is how to cook.' The housewife triumphantly declares,

'That's right. It is my cooking experience that has scored me this job. I have been offered the position of catering manager in a hostel. All those of years of looking after you people and managing the family budget are indeed my qualifications.' Our informants also used this story to underscore the claim that now it is possible to move beyond the dichotomy between elite *bhadralok* women's pursuit of high status professional occupations and poor women's financial necessity.

For our informants, women's public visibility and their freedom to pursue careers are together seen as major achievements for women within their class. They continue, however, to side-step discussion of any negative impacts of neoliberal reforms on women's lives and gender relations. Significantly, they do not see the inequalities that stem from recent economic reforms as a problem of gender inequality for their class. On the one hand, the main beneficiaries of liberalisation are considered to be the upper middle class, described as 'higher sectors of society, not people like us'. On the other hand, gender disadvantages resulting from liberalisation accrue to 'poorer sections of society'. By comparison, their own concerns centre around the consumerism and commodification of women so apparent in the new narratives of consumption told through the marketing mechanisms of media corporations, mainly the electronic media and the glossy magazines. Although the great majority of our respondents subscribe to daily newspapers, it is important to note that not many women buy women's magazines regularly, simply because they are too expensive. They do, however, share these magazines around and the story just narrated is one illustration of this sharing. More than half the number of households in our sample (54 per cent) also subscribe to cable television. Advertisements in magazines and cable television for the most part target women as consumers who, market strategists believe, exert influence on household consumption because of their decision-making role within the family economy. The aim of such advertisements is the creation and recreation of desires for certain products and lifestyles.

Consumption, modernity and empowerment

One image that has strongly influenced some of our respondents' desire for consumption is that of the ideal home, with tastefully decorated interior and furnishings. A number of women spoke of the pleasure they derive from the image of the working wife-mother whose skills in household management and artistic flair create a stylish, modern home. Such an ideal of womanhood is to be admired and emulated. However, we do not wish to overstate the degree of current influence of

commercials urging women to embrace a particular ideal of womanhood and domesticity. Being instructed in the art of homemaking is not a new phenomenon for our women respondents. Through gender socialisation, they have already been inculcated with the virtues of domestic responsibility[5] such as cleanliness (including ritual cleanliness), and have been taught the aesthetics of home decoration required to achieve the effect of bright, clean homes. Quite a few subscribed to or otherwise read women's magazines in the pre-liberalisation era and some had undertaken domestic science courses as part of their education. They firmly believe that a woman must maintain a good standard of housekeeping. Many are well aware of the current tips on improving housework and followed the instructions on self-improvement, such as needlework and embroidery, which were widely covered in women's magazines in earlier times. Indeed, many homes proudly display a wife's or daughter's artistic talents in the form of embroidered wall hangings, tablecloths and doilies. Some choose to adorn their homes with craft items such as brightly printed hand-loomed curtains, bedspreads, cushions and a range of pottery items. The furniture in living room areas consists of chairs and coffee tables made of painted wickerwork and bamboo, purchased from local handicraft fairs, street stalls and markets at wholesale or discounted prices. Aware of their limited budgets, these respondents are relatively content with their furnishings and interior decorations.

However, another distinct group of respondents emerged, of those who desire a larger range of household commodities, including the latest electronic entertainment goods and expensive furnishings that, for them, symbolise the 'modern' style they believe they lack. While advertisers have continued to capitalise on the dominant ideologies of women's domestic roles, the fundamental shifts in consumption relating to the home have greatly influenced this segment of the lower middle class. For this group, the imagined home is an arena of leisure, a space of luxury and pleasure, rather than merely a space stocked with functional items to alleviate domestic drudgery.

The history of Euro-American housework demonstrates that the mass marketing of domestic appliances promoted the idea of gadgets as labour-saving devices (Cowan, 1983; Ehrenreich and English, 1978; Oakley, 1976). Yet, given the large section of working women in our sample, it is interesting to note that the acquisition of domestic appliances was not high on their agenda because the labour of domestic servants renders these commodities non-essential. For example, 86 per cent of households did not have a washing machine nor did they particularly wish to acquire one. A number of married couples had

received a mini grinder/food processor ('mixie') as wedding gifts but rarely use them.

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

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

The positive image of the woman shopping, with her concomitant independence, is a strange inversion of everyday life. The traditional, middle class, sexual division of labour requires men (or servants) to undertake daily food and grocery shopping, as the market constitutes a disagreeable outside environment from which a respectable woman must be protected. Markets are indeed unpleasant, dirty places, which most women respondents are only too happy to avoid by devolving the responsibility to men. Shopping can be transformed into a desirable activity when it occurs in a department store. For some respondents it is an appealing aspect of a modern lifestyle, steeped in luxury.

Tensions persist, however, between the ideal 'modern' woman as someone who attempts to improve home life through consumption, and she who is the prudent financial manager. The conflict between these two visions is evident in the contrasting attitudes of two sisters-in-law in a joint family that had recently split into separate nuclear households. The older sister-in-law had entered the workforce in the early 1980s, during a time of financial crisis in the family, although at the time it was unacceptable to do so. She explained:

> When I first went to work there was a lot of tension in the family . . . Eventually I persuaded my mother-in-law to allow me to work. Ever since then I have continued to work. I like it very much. The world of work broadens your horizon. Why should it be that it is only men who have access to this outside world? . . . Over the years we have struggled and we have managed to get a few of the mod-cons. We now have a fridge, gas stove and there is a good solid TV that my brother gave us, when he got his job, as a token of thanks to my husband. We even fitted a geyser for use in the winter months when my mother-in-law's arthritis was unbearable. These were not good enough for her [the younger sister-in-law]. She insisted on splitting up and what does she do? Getting fat and watching TV day and night while the husband has to travel five hours a day to and from work. *Living in a fantasy world of beauty contests and glamour homes!* (original emphasis). That place is slovenly; you see unwashed utensils in the kitchen; *entho-kanta*[6] (food scraps) everywhere. She is a graduate, I am told. I had suggested she do a Montessori course and get a job. That was the source of her anger. No, staying home is just an excuse to watch serials.
>
> (Mrs Gita M., aged 52)

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

The younger sister-in-law, Mrs. Rinku M., countered the dismissive attitude of her older counterpart by arguing that it is unrealistic to expect to go out to work with two children under the age of five. Furthermore, she does not wish to expose her daughters to the poisonous attitudes of affines, which would occur if she went to work and left the children in the care of family members. She retorted by adding:

> She thinks she is high and mighty. The way they live is a dump. Have you seen the kitchen? All that fuss over not using this and that utensil. It is positively barbaric . . . That dreadful [squat] toilet. I was forever anxious that one of my children was going to fall down into the pan. They could have got a commode . . . my mother-in-law had terrible arthritis. I am so pleased that we separated into our own portion of the house. We are finally free to buy things of our choice.
>
> (Mrs Rinku M., aged 31)

Rinku hopes one day to create a real home of her own that reflects the styles depicted in the advertisements and serials, with the 'right smart fittings in the shower and toilets'.

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

Media portrayal and empowerment

The images of women portrayed in these 'new woman' advertisements have attracted considerable criticism for their impact on gender relations (Chakravarti, 2000; Chaudhuri, 2001; Rajagopal, 1999; Scrase, 2002). Using 'empowerment' as a marketing strategy, advertisers combine femininity with the rhetoric of feminism and depict women as highly successful, independent beings who are astute consumers. Chakravarti (2000) suggests that this 'new woman', imbued with agency, is a new creation marking the arrival of a 'gender-friendly globalised market'. According to Sangari and Chakravarti (1999: xviii), 'New relations are thus being made between consumption, pleasure and culturally specific notions of femininity.' Others also point out that the squeeze on the

purchasing power of the great majority of people is glossed over by the ubiquity of the image of woman as consumer, creating an implicit social consent for the commodities provided by the globalised market (Bhattacharya, cited in Sangari and Chakravarti (1999: xviii)). Popular representations of women's freedom attainable through consumption remain a conundrum for feminism. The process of 'commodity feminism' arguably undermines the radical potential of feminist critiques of gender relations by incorporating and repackaging feminist ideals in ways that reproduce conservative values (Goldman, 1992). Recent explorations of sexuality and gender in a popular Bengali magazine suggest that it may be 'useful to look for spaces of rupture in popular culture . . . to destabilise who the reader might be and how they might react' (Basu, 2001: 182). The debate raises important questions about how our informants 'receive' these images.

The women respondents' concerns about media representation of femininity and its consequences for gender equality deserve further exploration. As we have argued above, while many readily challenge the idea that liberalisation policies have had no detrimental impact on their lives, the focal point of their critique is the visual images of femininity, particularly as presented in advertising narratives. It is here that their paradoxical attitudes to globalisation and liberalisation come into sharp focus. Women take opposing positions and their responses are age-specific. Mainly older women argue that in promoting a consumerist ideology, television portrays derogatory and shameful images of women, reducing them to nothing more than sex objects, and that this can only have a detrimental impact on women's status. A married woman in her late forties stated:

> In the past you didn't have such brazen representations. Most of us were used to radio and TV was simply an extension of it. We tried to imagine it in our minds. Now you have a visual image. If these programs were a bit more reserved, then it would have been better. In a lot of cases, the clothes people wear on these programs or in advertisements [are] very vulgar. Women are often shown semi-nude. If these were censored, it would be much better appreciated.

Some younger women sounded remarkably similar; for example, an unmarried woman in her early twenties said:

> Sometimes they show women in this kind of clothing. I don't really like that. I mean, I think, how can women demean themselves like this? There are men, a lot of men who see this and derive pleasure.

> Yes, lots of girls also think that what they are doing is OK. But when my girl friends get together we talk about these things and we don't think this is applicable to us. We don't think women should be shown like this. These portrayals are quite shameful for women.

Such views are also echoed in some sections of the women's movement in India, as well as within scholarly debates. For example, a recent article on SAPs and gender concerns argued:

> The uninhibited use of beauty contests and modelling to advertise products have in effect meant projecting women as sex objects in an unprecedented manner in India . . . In the present phase of liberalization, when women have become both primary targets and vehicles of consumerism, their meaning as well as content and spread has assumed extremely threatening proportions . . . in such contexts . . . the woman's body has already come to be seen as a commodity for consumption.
>
> (Arora, 1999, 349–51)

According to a number of our key informants, this commodified femininity threatens women's status, disempowering them vis-à-vis men. Many remain critical of media representations of women, but they also distinguish between these portrayals and the reality of their lives. In Chapter 6, we analyse responses to sexualised images and our respondents' critiques of these representations in terms of their impact on family values. Here, we focus on women's views, which differ according to their location in the life cycle.

There is a generational divide in the responses to images of commodified femininity. Although those below the age of 25 years made up only 14 per cent of our total sample, girls made up nearly 60 per cent of the youth. Among the total number of women, 18 per cent were aged under 25. While most women are highly critical of media representations of women, they do not make them feel demeaned. Older women view their empowerment in terms of their responsibility within the family and the spaces they have negotiated within which to assert themselves. They often feel heartened by seeing strong female characters in popular culture, or the leadership of women politicians. In comparison, young women regard the glamorous liberated woman as highly desirable.

Using the new images of independent womanhood, young women construct narratives of freedom that oppose traditional patriarchal norms and challenge the gender ideologies in Bengali culture. Anita,

aged 27, offered the following explanation for the varying role models made available to young women by cable television. She is married to a man with a different linguistic and religious background from her own, and recently accepted a demotion in her job subsequent to her husband's transfer to Kolkata. In her view,

> There have been quite a few changes as a result of cable. People are more outgoing now. They have learnt a lot. Now women are more advanced. Before they just used to keep quiet and stay at home. Now they know a lot about themselves and the outside world. Women can be whatever they want to be. There has been an impact on men as well. Men are much more open now. Previously if they wanted to tell a woman something they weren't able to either sexually or emotionally. Now they don't hold back. Women are more open as well, now they know everything. Previously if they didn't like something about a man they weren't able to say so. Now they say things which could not be said before. Older generation and the younger generation are much more open towards each other. Now we can discuss everything, any topic. Cable TV has enabled us to do this. Because of cable TV we have been able to open up a lot more.

A significant number of women argue that television provides a social service in promoting an ideal representation of gender relations and egalitarian conjugal relationships. Their accounts emphasise the viewers' complete freedom to exercise choice and insist that there are no negative connotations for women in the new media. While a number of young women aspire to be the modern liberated woman, many feel that the image and reality do not fit the context of contemporary Bengali society. Women in their thirties are more ambivalent in their assessment, pointing out the unreality of television advertisements' depiction of women's lives. More significantly, given their class position, they emphasise the virtual impossibility of acquiring the lifestyles portrayed in these images. As a divorced woman in her late thirties explained:

> Creating a certain image of the woman was always there in ads. In the 60s, it was an image of one kind and in the 90s it is another. It does play a role in promoting the ideal woman. I can't speak for Bombay or Delhi, but in Bengal these images are quite unrealistic, whether it is the outfits the women are shown in or their behaviour. What we see on these ads has nothing to do with the real lives of women. Maybe a young teenager will try to imitate the roles for a few days but it does not apply for the majority of women.

As noted earlier, these images do not radically subvert gender relations. Nevertheless, they provide scope for a degree of assertiveness and agency with which women identify. Women in this study were able to negotiate a space for themselves within their families and sometimes feel ultimately vindicated. While some women argue that market forces promote derogatory images of women, others deny that is the case; at times they celebrate the new images.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have highlighted the significance of analysing together the changing economic and cultural dynamics of the globalising Indian economy and their consequences for lower middle-class women. How these changes are received, interpreted and challenged is a complex matter. The simultaneous and paradoxical feelings of female empowerment, and side-stepping of the question of gender discrimination in the NEP evident in the responses, reveal the complex interplay of modernity and female subjectivity. In this instance, our findings are consistent with Vina Das' (1994) argument, concerning modernity and biography of women's lives, that the opposition between traditional and modern institutions has played an important role in the construction of the feminine self in India.

It is apparent that in contemporary urban India, the tensions and ambiguities of this process have resulted in women ensuring that they become neither too traditional nor too modern. The cultural transformation currently taking place continually subverts and appropriates discourses of female emancipation to promote a pro-woman market. These dovetail comfortably with the neoliberal state's rhetoric of female empowerment in its economic reforms. The lower middle classes project aspects of gender equality as part of their emerging 'modern' class identity. In the encouraging context of ongoing debates about women's visibility in the public domain, new spaces have opened up for women within this fraction of the middle class, where they can renegotiate their identities. Women consider that overcoming restrictions previously imposed on their mobility, and denial of paid employment by their families, are the most profound transformations to have occurred in their lives. Entering the world of work has allowed them to gain self-confidence, respect and autonomy. Yet, while some opportunities have arisen to challenge pre-existing gender ideologies, enabling women to assert their sense of self and personal agency, ultimately their challenges are contained within the confines of the patriarchal ideologies of the neoliberal state.

Women stress that they feel increasingly insecure about the well-being of their families, rather than about themselves. While they welcome some aspects of globalism embodied in the 'new woman', they do not want to lose the security of the safety net provided by the state. Women's attitude to the state is ambivalent: while many acknowledge its support for education and employment, along with other family members they are, at times, highly critical of it. Yet, they also want to appeal to the state when necessary. One woman activist approaching retirement age remarked with bitter irony that positive, assertive, strong images of 'the new woman' mediated by television advertisements and serials have done much more to raise awareness about gender equality than the women's movement has been able to do. However, she added that it is becoming much more difficult to mobilise around gender issues since it is assumed that gender equality has arrived along with economic liberalisation.

Notes

1 Scheduled castes are the listing of India's disadvantaged in the Constitution of India. They include castes and tribes, initially listed by colonial authorities, whose ritual rank and occupational status in the pre-colonial social order were 'polluting'. After independence, these groups were identified in a schedule at the end of the Constitution for the purpose of taking affirmative action in their favour. The list is revised periodically.
2 The most poignant film made on this theme during that era was *Mahanagar* (*The Great City*), by the widely acclaimed Indian director, Satyajit Ray. Based on the novel of the same title, the film depicts the everyday life of a *bhadralok* family in hard times, in which the housewife goes to work as a sales girl, selling Singer sewing machines because her husband is unable to find work.
3 For details of ideologies of domesticity in Bengal, see Sen (1997).
4 Advertising strategies deployed to co-opt feminist rhetoric are not a peculiarly Indian phenomenon. Sometimes referred to as commodity feminism (Goldman, 1992), such strategies dislodge the radical potential of feminist critiques of gender relations by incorporating and repackaging feminist ideals so as to maintain conservative values. Global advertising campaigns such as 'Just do it' by the Nike corporation are exemplars of commodity feminism's active involvement in generating and circulating images of the empowered 'new woman' while simultaneously masking unequal gender relations within and between nations (Carty, 1997; Cole and Hribar, 1995; Goldman and Papson, 1998: 143–4).
5 We use the term responsibility rather than duty or task since most middle-class women would not be expected to engage in the actual sweeping, dusting or mopping.
6 Residues of food not wiped clean are not considered merely unhygienic. According to Hindu upper caste practices, upheld in some *bhadralok* households, they are ritually polluting.

4 Discourses of global efficiency and the dynamics of new workplace culture

In this chapter we examine our respondents' experiences and attitudes to the changing nature of work under neoliberal globalisation. We present narrative accounts that embody government ideologies of work efficiency, and we explore the contradictory attitudes of this middle-class fraction that remains supportive of the new economic policy yet is sceptical of whether any benefits will accrue to them. The influences of the change in economic policy orientation in West Bengal are crucial to understanding these responses. While remaining critical of liberalisation, many of our informants espouse the government rhetoric of workplace restructuring and global competitiveness. Unlike on the subject of gender, there is little discrepancy here between the world views of women and men concerning the overall changes in workplaces under liberalisation. Instead, there are clearly articulated generational differences.

We begin by considering some of the critical scholarship on the role of neoliberal ideologies in shaping the subjectivities of workers that provides a useful backdrop to understanding the responses of people in this study. Why is it that some workers reproduce ideologies of work efficiency, often in the face of, and in conjunction with, countervailing lifelong thinking and practices? We found that notions of efficiency, privatisation and deregulation are rapidly becoming central motifs in the everyday language and practice of environments such as the workplace. However, this phenomenon has not developed automatically, and it certainly had help from both governments and international bodies such as the IMF and the World Bank, whose views are relentlessly propagated in the generally pro-liberalisation media. From these influences, the discourses have developed a life force of their own, such that they have become significantly responsible for the emergence of new understandings of how individuals should govern themselves.

Neoliberal reform and hegemony

Harvey (1990, 2005), among others, suggests that the promotion of the work ethic, the nobility of efficiency and productivity, and so on, has been effected through both persuasive and coercive means. In this view, the state takes an active role in social production. The inculcation of particular ideologies of the workplace is linked to the interests of a power bloc formed between the owners of capital and the political class. The fundamental principle involved in the dissemination of ideologies of capitalist logics, such as the propagation of 'efficiency' and 'flexibility' and so on as ideals, is the security and maintenance of the economic system. However, this is not merely a case of the imposition of such ideologies, but the articulation of a common value system, through the incorporation of ideological elements from other social groups (Mouffe, 1981: 230). While the dominant class may incorporate elements from other classes and class fractions, they do so in a way that maintains their own dominance. Through this hegemony, they are able to legitimise certain ideologies.

As per Stuart Hall's (1988) analysis, the most spectacular example of a hegemonic project in the form of state activism in promoting capitalist relations of production and the construction of an 'appropriate' workforce was the Thatcherite project. According to Hall, the discursive articulation of common objectives embodied in this programme was aimed specifically at disciplining people for capitalist market solutions, paradoxically with their 'consent' – the strategy of connection with ordinary people. Despite being a highly contradictory approach, it was nevertheless able to construct 'unity out of difference' (1988: 166). 'Common sense' was remade, wherein the terminology of the market was 'normalised' in combination with the disciplinary themes of order, family values and respectability – a package that formed the everyday conception of what constituted the 'national identity'. From the point of view of naturalising workplace discourses of efficiency, this neoliberal hegemonic project constructed a popular morality. This was the development of a 'practical material-ideological force' that has a language which maps out social reality clearly and unambiguously (ibid.: 143). Stressing the inherent morality of efficiency and flexibility, the message for workers was suffused with their common issues and problems. The wisdom of the nation was entwined in notions of efficiency in the workplace; to reject this would be amoral. Many of our informants deployed similar moral discourses of hard work in the service of the nation, which resonate with earlier narratives of anti-colonial nationalism.

We noted in Chapter 1 Gosovic's (2000: 450, 453) idea of the rise of a type of global intellectual hegemony, which represents public institutions negatively, as inefficient, in marked contrast to a positive image of private institutions. He adds (ibid.: 452) that individuals, particularly those in the service of governments, may have their own reasons for not speaking out against neoliberalism, including a desire to keep their job and obtain promotions. Bourdieu (1998) discusses the insecurities that are treated normatively in the paradigm of globalisation and play a significant role in the institutionalisation and adoption of particular market discourses into the language and actions of workers. The growing unemployment and casualisation of the workforce have shaped the actions and responses of many workers, breaking down resistance and setting worker against worker. In the light of these market articulations and indeed, out of fear, workers strive to become the most efficient, flexible and productive workers in an organisation. These forces affect everyone, whether employed or not; 'the awareness of it never goes away: it is present at every moment in everyone's mind' (ibid.: 82). People living under globalisation constantly feel that they are replaceable; as a result, there is a definite sense in which people come to regard work as a privilege, 'a fragile threatened privilege' (1998: 82) and most certainly not a right.

Fear of retrenchment is ever present for some of our respondents. However, what struck us most was the growing prominence of a political rationality that is geared towards producing a principle of personal responsibility. Here, the strategy of replacing old-fashioned regulatory techniques with techniques of self-regulation (Lenke, 2001) is relevant. Moreover, as Beck (2001) suggests, the ideal individual worker will take responsibility for his or her part in the creation of an efficient and responsible enterprise. The 'price' of individuality means taking personal responsibility for any failure or misfortune. The benefit is that individuals can now feel a sense of control – 'not passive reflections of circumstances but active shapers of their own lives, within varying degrees of limitation' (ibid.: 167).

These competing perspectives offer some insight into the reasons for our respondents' espousal of the rhetoric of efficiency. However, the most salient feature of their acquiescence is the technocratic solutions that underpin market discourses. Technocratic solutions have a degree of appeal among our respondents because of the latter's familiarity with the modernising discourses of rational planning characteristic of developmentalism in post-colonial states, regardless of political ideology. Therefore, the Left Front's pragmatic embrace of market solutions, which are now being reconfigured as 'rational' progress towards better

developmental outcomes, appears to our respondents as part of a continuum, not a radical departure. Similar market-oriented solutions to development have been embraced by most progressive parties in India. More significantly, as Hann (2002) has demonstrated in his ethnographic accounts of transitional economies, it is equally important to recognise the meaning that socialist ideologies have in the aspirations of ordinary people, the significance of their emancipatory rhetoric and practical benefits. Suffice to say that for many people in West Bengal, the CPI (M) has been a symbol of some remarkable transformations and a catalyst for others (Lieten, 1996). These conflicting approaches to planned development are reflected in the narratives of our informants.

Contrasting outlooks

Public and private sector employees have mutually suspicious views of each other. Public sector workers equate the private sector with insecurity and exploitation, while some within the formal private sector assume that their counterparts in the public sector lack work discipline. Such perceptions are rarely grounded in experience or knowledge of the other side. While the views of some respondents working in the private sector have largely been shaped by media discourses, the public sector workers' critiques are, by and large, focused on the practices of small firms that lack the protection of government industrial relations policies. Beyond these extremes are a number of differing positions: the generational divide, public sector workers' own assertions of the need to be more efficient and the critical consciousness of highly politicised workers. The latter's world views are informed by class analysis and consequently present us with a critique of the ethos of market citizenship, insisting on a broader recognition of the disadvantages stemming from privatisation and deregulation – disadvantages not just for the self, but also for others. These conflicting sentiments are explored below.

Privatisation

Figure 4.1 and Table 4.1 below demonstrate that an overwhelming majority of respondents dispute that privatisation can bring many benefits to people in West Bengal.

This view is directly related to their attitudes to the nature of the private sector. A significant number of people (17 per cent) argued that privatisation will lead to job losses and contribute to growing unemployment. Further, they recognise that the advantages of the

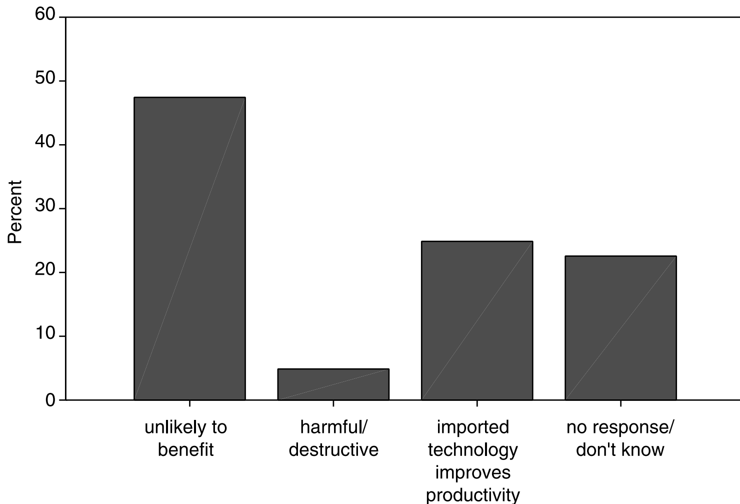

Figure 4.1 Advantages of privatisation (n = 120).

privatisation of a state enterprise are confined to those in managerial, professional and 'high tech' positions.

For many lower middle-class people, 'private' is synonymous with small firms. Located within the so-called informal sector,[1] such companies offer low salaries, little or no job security, and lack any well-founded labour protection laws. Insecurity and uncertainty in these organisations form the basis for respondents' denials of the benefits of privatisation. The majority of those employed in the 'unorganised' sector are not aware of the work practices of transnational corporations (TNCs) or even large private companies like the TATA Corporation (India's own multinational, which provides numerous benefits

Table 4.1 Disadvantages of privatisation (n = 77)

Reasons	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Fewer government jobs = higher unemployment	13	16.9
Informal sector = lower pay/less training	12	15.6
Lack of job security/entitlements	46	59.7
No disadvantages	6	7.8
Total	77	100.00

to its workers). Many government employees are similarly unaware of employee benefits offered in large corporations, other than the high salaries offered to upper-level professionals. If these employees lose their jobs, then it is likely that they will end up working in the unprotected, small-scale private sector. Although the senior executives we spoke with often bemoaned the lack of qualified skilled labour, our respondents had not considered this training as an option for their children's future. Among lower middle-class households, white-collar work in a secure government job continues to be much coveted. Given their current levels of education and skills, the alternative is manual unskilled work – the only marker of status differential with the poor. Such deeply ingrained social and cultural meanings also underlie their reasons for slighting privatisation. Family perceptions of such enterprises as low status point to a preference for government positions, which are considered to hold special status. They appeal for continued government intervention, without which they fear job losses. Some are well aware that given their level of education and training, it is unlikely that they would gain entry into positions in major companies or TNCs.

Our respondents repeatedly emphasised the safety nets offered by government employment. Not only is private enterprise characterised by insecurity, but it is also inherently driven by the profit motive. In contrast, government organisations are seen as more humane. Respondents often compared the callous attitude of the private sector with the compassionate nature of the state. Although it is young people who most readily embrace privatisation and positive views of the private sector, when directly confronted with some of its deleterious effects, they become its most trenchant critics. As a young police woman noted:

> In the police department, if I work I will definitely receive my wages, whereas a private firm can be closed all of a sudden. Then the payments are stopped; there are clashes between labour and the owners in private firms. It makes me furious when we get complaints from the daily wage earners that they are turned out without payments by the owners.

A striking metaphor was used to describe the shift towards privatisation. One informant likened it to loss of access to nutritious food. He noted:

> If privatisation takes place, there will be less freedom for the workers, no matter what position they hold. When the population

has been nurtured on high quality food, they cannot consume just anything that is put on their plate. It will not be suitable to your health or even palatable to your taste! The shift toward privatisation is similar. The conditions will be psychologically damaging for the whole workforce and [for] the individual.

(Technical officer, educational training institute)

The metaphor of blood donation was applied to the public sector, wherein public servants are considered as blood donors. Its demise implies society's denial of their contributions. A junior reference assistant at the National Library made this pointed remark:

> We cannot privatise everything. For example, those who donate blood to save [the] lives of others, it is unfair to let them go without acknowledging their contribution. Similarly, this place is giving every drop of blood to create the brain power of tomorrow. That is, it is preparing the future generations. At first glance, it may not seem financially feasible since this process costs a lot of money, doesn't it? But its future rewards are unquantifiable.

A number of binary opposites characterise respondents' evaluations of state and private enterprises: while the former are typified by universal rules and exist for the benefit of all, the latter are entirely driven by profit motives, leaving workers to the vagaries of owners and managers. Other oppositions are represented in Table 4.2.

On the one hand, our informants' positive appraisals stand in marked contrast to the arguments that characterise the developmental state as oppressive. On the other, neoliberal conceptions such as the idea of working for profit, or of government enterprises being 'profitable', is anathema to many of our informants, who see government service as a public duty. Like those appealing to its reservation (affirmative action) principles, our respondents stake their claims to the public sector,

Table 4.2 Perceptions of state and private enterprises

State	*Private*
Impartial	Personality driven
Neutral	Arbitrary
Merciful	Authoritarian
Freedom	Surveillance
Benefit all	Benefit only profit earners

which they hold in deep regard. Their identities are tied up with working in it. Parents continually reinforce the importance of the public sector to their children. The objectivity and open-minded nature of government bureaucrats are compared with the personal whims of employers in private enterprise. From the perspective of low-ranking clerical employees, personal vendettas of owners and managers in private enterprise are a key concern. The following were typical remarks from respondents:

> In a government organisation there are universal rules and regulations that apply to everybody. In a private organisation you are under the constant surveillance of the owner. If you make a mistake in a government organisation, the officers are impartial. They will examine the situation and will judge accordingly. They will not have a personal vendetta against you because you made a mistake. Nor will they do you special favours because you happen to be in their good books.
>
> (Male, 31, clerk, state university)

> Someone is always looking over your shoulder. I suppose we are relieved of that kind of authoritarian outlook in a semi-government and a cooperative set-up.
>
> (Woman, 48, purchasing assistant, textile cooperative)

> In private organisations you can sack an employee according to the proprietor's whim. It may have nothing to do with the performance of the employee. In government jobs unless you have done anything illegal, you cannot be got rid of like that.
>
> (Woman, 51, lower division clerk, Reserve Bank of India)

> They overwork you in a private firm according to their whim. In government service you get promoted according to merit. In private enterprise, if they like you, they'll promote you. If they don't, you are stuck.
>
> (Male, 34, library clerk)

Asserting that IMF clauses on adjustment are farcical, a number of key informants argued that economic liberalisation is a policy choice engineered entirely by powerful classes and that the government of the day implemented it in an undemocratic fashion. However, others countered the claims that citizens are being excluded from decision-making processes by arguing that the reforms have not been implemented

according to the original plans. These conflicting perspectives are primarily determined by the respondents' locations in public and private sectors. Optimistic about liberalisation, a number of formal private sector workers feel that the ethos of hard work and efficiency inherent in the private sector should prevail among government employees. In short, the latter's current misery is attributed to their own failings. Such unforgiving attitudes are partly the result of those expressing them never having worked in a public institution and is further reinforced by relentless media commentaries on state inefficiency.[2] They are also consistent with the growing call for workers' 'self-responsibility'.

In recent years, positive appraisals of private enterprise for its dynamism, initiative and offer of incentives have captured the public imagination and come to dominate public opinion. Employees are extolled for the virtues of punctuality, diligence, dedication and enthusiasm. The public sector is portrayed as its obverse: bureaucratic and unproductive; its workers lethargic. Among our respondents, advocates of private sector efficiency included workers from large private corporations, private school teachers and a small number of highly qualified civil servants, and young people in general. The popularly held opinions concerning government employees, particularly their tendencies to 'skive off' were universal among our respondents from the private sector. More often than not, preexisting disdainful attitudes towards public sector workers underpin their assumptions. Typically, they were from genteel social backgrounds and had neither worked nor intended to work in the public sector. The following case of a tertiary educated single woman in her mid-thirties most vividly illustrates some of the preconceived ideas.

A young woman, Tulika, currently works as freelance project worker. Her average estimated annual income is Rs. 60,000, of which she sets aside Rs. 5000 per month. The family income is over Rs. 30,000 per month, which is well above the average income of our respondents. However, we have included a lengthy account of her views because they are illustrative of the views of households whose incomes have risen and who typify the middle-class supporters of liberalisation that the media promotes relentlessly. This family's fortunes have indeed improved, but their condition was far from comfortable in the past. Fifteen years ago, when Tulika was in her early twenties, the family faced a calamity, losing the heads of the family to untimely deaths. Both her father and his elder brother died suddenly. As the eldest child, it was left to Tulika to find employment. As she explained, 'My mother said to me, "Try to find a job – something in the technical area, perhaps. The other children are still studying. You've got to do something".' The following lengthy

account of a conversation with Tulika exemplifies the derisive attitudes of a section of the middle classes towards the public sector:

Question: So, what did you do? Was there any chance of a government job?

Response: Never! I was going to sit for the West Bengal [government service] entrance examination. But then . . . well, I looked at the government offices. They are filthy; dirty files everywhere; filthy walls, betel nut spit–stain[s] on the walls. Horrible! It is the opposite in a private firm. Clean offices, nice neat reception area. People are polite. No, I've never been interested in getting a government job.

Q: Do you still feel the same way?

Response: Most definitely! You go and stand there and no one even asks you to take seat. It is like they are doing you a favour. It is their job to help the public – aren't they public servants?

Q: What about your friends and other family members? Do they have a different opinion about government employment?

Response: Most of my friends are in the private sector, in the corporate sector, in newspapers. In their opinion privatisation is a good thing. In this country people don't work in the public sector; there is a lack of a work culture. What a strange thing! I mean you draw a salary and you don't want to work? Every day there is this meeting, that rally. Hopeless.

Q: Do you know many people that go to protest rallies? Would you say this would be a majority of workers?

Response: Er . . . yes, only a minority . . .

Q: How do you think privatisation has affected the rest? Most of the population doesn't work in the public sector.

Response: How do you mean, the rest?

Q: I mean those people who don't have a regular salary, like, you know, the entire informal sector.

Response: Yes, some people work in casual jobs, part-time jobs. They work until 6 in the evening. And then from 6 onwards, they might have another job. Yeah, it's like that.

Q: Do you feel we tend to get upset when we see government workers taking it easy? Maybe they got jobs at a time when you could get a government job. Do you ever see anything like that in the private sector?

Response: No, no. Inefficient people just won't be able to get in. A

> person might be interviewed several times. There will be an IQ test. I've seen this with my own eyes. Forget English or shorthand or keyboarding skills. That is just taken for granted. Then you will have your interview. The panel will be very fussy, very selective about whom they get. In government service you sit for the PSC or WBSC. That's it. I am not talking about high-ranking posts, just ordinary jobs. After you are selected, there is no accountability.

While such a negative predisposition towards government employees is often reinforced by populist opinions and explains the hostile attitudes of some respondents, it is worth noting that even some of the more reticent and self-reflective respondents were also highly critical of the idleness of government employees. For example, a devout Christian for whom working hard is a moral imperative explained:

> the indiscipline that you find among government employees is completely absent in our workplace. Whenever I had had to deal with workers in government departments, whenever I've had to go to a government office, I have observed that they are always *fanki marche* (bunking off). The tendency for *fanki mara* is highly prevalent among them. We cannot imagine that kind of behaviour here. To be here for nine hours and doing nothing is unthinkable. They are doing this day after day. We cannot even sit around for one minute.
>
> (Male, mid-thirties, senior technical assistant, large private corporation)

When asked whether he believes this to be true of all government organisations, he replied, 'No, naturally not. But there are some offices [that do] not have any work-culture whatsoever.' Older state employees made similar criticisms of their own colleagues; a technical officer in the public sector, in his early forties said: 'The biggest problem with government employment is the opportunity for *fanki mara*. You can't do that in private enterprise!'

To immerse oneself in one's work is a badge of honour for private sector employees. Derisive of their counterparts in government service, many are at the same time resentful of the security they enjoy. These contradictory sentiments were ever present in our interviews. For example, when a clerk in a small accounting firm within the informal sector extolled the virtues of the private sector, we inquired whether there were many advantages in the private sector. He simply said,

> I don't notice any such advantage. Rather, I feel that a government organisation is better that way; it offers more security, more benefits than private organisations. However, maybe *there are benefits for people who hold very high positions. For us, there are none* (original emphasis).
>
> (Accounts assistant, 38)

Here, the point is clear that the benefits of liberalisation have not accrued to those at the lower ranks; rather, there is a cynical recognition that the real beneficiaries have been the business proprietors, entrepreneurs and those in the higher professional positions or in jobs that have expanded in the new economy (i.e. computer sales, marketing and management, etc.).

While private sector workers dismiss their public sector counterparts for lacking the qualities of diligence and punctuality, they are aware of their own exploitative conditions and become resentful. Some are embittered by the shabby treatment they have received from their own firms. Despite their praise during formal interviews for their own firms, some spoke in private about pending insecurities, particularly in transnational corporations that were experiencing a global downturn, pressure to relocate, restructure and rationalise. Employees in one transnational corporation had been living with uncertainty for the past three years. The corporation's global strategy has been to transform the company by gradually shutting down some of its large manufacturing units, to sub-contract out production elsewhere, and for the parent company to be more involved in marketing its products. The management had not informed the employees of the full details of their future. During our fieldwork, most workers relied on the print media for information. At that time, there was speculation that an Indian company would take over. Stunned by the new developments, workers were anxious about whether they would retain their jobs and existing benefits. (Apart from attractive salaries, workers currently enjoy a number of entitlements – medical benefits, LDA, free lunch, crèche, transport allowance and company transport service for workers.) For them, it was unthinkable that such a 'solid' company, for which some families had worked over two generations, faced the threat of closure. Rumours about the take-over created disquiet about whether the new management was committed to honouring workers' existing entitlements and conditions.

Contradictory attitudes towards the public sector also prevail among teachers in private schools. While they continually assert the superiority of their institutions over government schools, they were

anxious to downplay the insecurities of their own jobs. Similar inconsistencies exist among public sector workers. A minority claimed that their colleagues are idle. Therefore, they felt that privatisation could be a good way to enforce diligence. Some well-qualified workers remain ambivalent about their colleagues, implying that public sector workers do not work as hard as they should. Their ambivalence stems from their self-confidence as well-trained employees who feel immune from the threat of retrenchment. Since they entered their posts through rigorous competition, they are quite sanguine about retaining their jobs, but also mindful that many would lose their jobs if the sector were privatised. Unlike most workers in government organisations, who are opposed to privatisation because of their collectivist leanings, this group maintains an individualistic and technocratic approach to achieving efficiency in the public sector. However, they acknowledge that full privatisation would be detrimental to the vast majority of the population. For example, a number of administrative and clerical workers in the postal service believe that partial privatisation is desirable in order for the postal service to become more competitive. However, while courier services could be privatised, it is essential to keep the price of postage stamps low for the general public. Similarly, a number of respondents from Doordarshan[3] who were its vigorous defenders for its important role as a sociocultural institution – welcomed the technological innovations, which they feel would enhance the professionalism of their divisions. Ideological influences of self-regulation are very strong among this group. We will consider further their adherence to the neoliberal ethos of self-responsibility later in this chapter.

It is evident that experiences within given work settings have shaped the outlook of employees. Since these were largely value orientations that are difficult to quantify, we specifically explored the experiences of respondents who had initially worked in the private sector and then joined the government service. They compared the two sectors and found that private sector work was monotonous and offered no freedoms. Freedom is highly valued by many people. The absence of autonomy and freedom in private enterprise lies at the heart of their criticism. But theirs is also a moral critique, directed at the profit motive that drives private enterprise, which is always prone to rationalisation and staff cut-backs.

Many of our respondents were keen to point out the qualitative differences between the two sectors. These are regarded as special conditions that money cannot buy. Accordingly, they argue that privatisation will not necessarily improve efficiency. Table 4.3 shows the distribution

Table 4.3 Privatisation improves efficiency of organisation (n = 86)

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes	14	16
No	41	48
Don't know	6	7
N/A	25	29
Total	86	100.00

of attitudes towards privatisation as a means to improving the efficiency of an organisation.

Some departments, such as education and health care, exist for the public good and should not be privatised. In general, their views are characterised by a collectivist orientation: they believe not only that privatisation is detrimental to the self, but also, more broadly, that others will suffer from it.

The following comment from someone who had moved from the private sector to the public sector challenges the commonly held view that the public sector lacks a culture of work:

> There is a usual assumption that in the government sector there is no work culture, but if you look around here everyone is deeply involved in their work. You won't even find this kind of commitment within a private firm. No, I'll never want privatisation.

Another respondent currently working in a government job was previously employed in a private company. He denounced the private sector in the following way:

> Listen, I was in a scientific organisation before I came here. Things were very different to this place. Everything was run for a commercial purpose; for a profit . . . Certainly progress can be made, but you can't apply the same ethos in government. You just can't engage in any risk-taking activity. You have the fear that this belongs to the government and you can't do as you wish.

Similarly, a laboratory technician in an educational institution was highly critical of privatisation:

> No, I don't think privatisation will benefit common people. To run an educational institute takes huge amount of funds. If the

> government doesn't fund it, do you think the private sector will? I don't think so.

As public sector employees, they defend its continued existence. Table 4.3 shows that only one in eight respondents feels that privatisation will improve the efficiency of government organisations. Although some respondents acknowledge the deficiencies of government departments, they are dismissive of charges of inefficiency and lack of a work culture. Instead, they argue that the shortcomings are trivial and we should not focus on them. More significantly, they challenged the bogey of privatisation that is often paraded as a punitive threat to discipline work forces. One informant surmised 'If this place is privatised, there is no guarantee that it would be more efficient or that people would work more.' To most low-ranking government employees, poor management is responsible for inefficiencies, not workers. They argue that it is innovative management practices rather than privatisation that enhance the efficiency of an organisation. The onus on managers to enhance an organisation's efficiency is considered in the final section of this chapter. In general, public service respondents are emphatic that government departments should not be judged according to private sector performance measures since some key institutions and utilities cannot be privatised. Their main concern is that once privatised, these economic assets will be sold off to TNCs at cheap rates – a recognition that it is not beneficial to common people. Their fears appear to be well founded, as is demonstrated by the cases of privatisation of utilities in other parts of the world (see Beder, 2003).

The militancy of workers, the lack of a work culture and consequent failure to attract foreign investment are familiar themes that receive a great deal of media attention in West Bengal. Dispelling some of the myths surrounding the notoriously bad labour relations, Banerjee *et al.* (2002) show that since the 1980s, work-days lost through strikes are low compared with other states. While Datt (2002) shows that more days were lost due to lockouts than strikes, Pedersen (2001) suggests that inadequate infrastructure rather than labour militancy is responsible for industrial stagnation and lack of investment. However, these arguments are of little help to the people who face the threats of retrenchment or have been retrenched already.

Foreign investment and infrastructure

According to Winslow (1995), the decreasing faith of development planners in centrally-controlled economies and government-led pro-

grammes to achieve economic growth and development have led to a renewed emphasis on government support of industry through infrastructural investment in roads and electricity generation. That is, while neoliberal policy prescriptions emphasise privatisation of economic assets and limit government intervention, they also advocate much-needed investment in infrastructure to bring about their desired outcomes. Utilising these principles, Bajpai and Sachs (1999) have evaluated the progress that Indian states have made in reforming their economies to encourage private investment in infrastructure. Although their approach overlooks the political and class dimensions of investment, their neoclassical typology shows a mixed report card for West Bengal. In their view, the state has undertaken the necessary reforms in the industrial sector, but has performed poorly in the power sector and in tax reform. They classify West Bengal as an intermediate performer in terms of growth, lagging behind southern Indian states.

Intense public debates have continued on investment and infrastructure. Our respondents remain unconvinced that TNCs will make any investments that will benefit Indians. They remain suspicious of privatisation and foreign capital. In other words, in accordance with their nationalist perspective, they want foreign investment to be favourable to Indians but also are highly sceptical that this is possible (Figure 4.2).

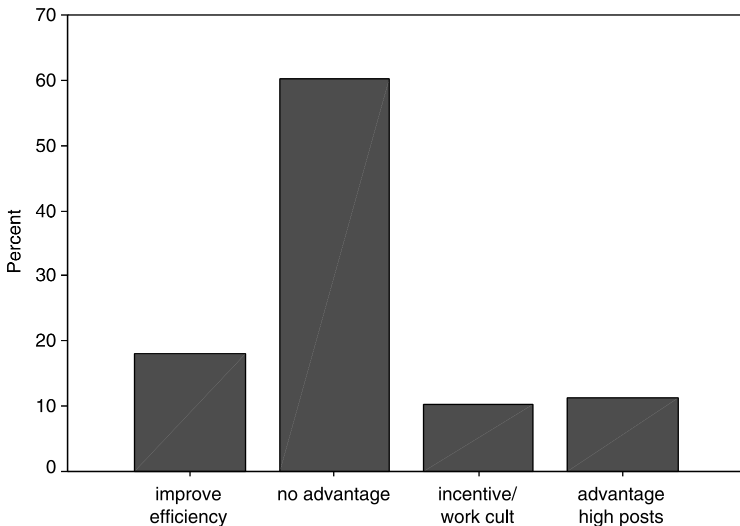

Figure 4.2 West Bengal conditions improve through more foreign investment.

While our respondents' views reflect anti-colonial attitudes, especially among the older generation, there has been a considerable shift in views that have come to dominate public discourse, which in turn have crept into everyday life. There have been two such remarkable shifts that reflect the schisms of the Left Front. The first is the necessity of SAPs; the second is the view that reproduces the rhetoric of efficiency, only this time in relation to the state. The arguments that SAPs will redress the balance of payments crisis are widely accepted. Many of our respondents argued that although inherently just and rational, bureaucratic state procedures might be cumbersome compared with the speed of private enterprise decision-making. Even those opposed to privatisation on ideological grounds nevertheless urge that government organisations should become efficient.

Work efficiency

The ways in which workers internalise and reproduce the rhetoric of efficiency became most apparent when we interviewed a number of workers in a newly established training and research institute, set up with government funding. Currently, it has an autonomous status, and it is envisaged that ultimately it will become self-funding. We were particularly interested in this organisation since it is a new endeavour and many of its clerical and technical personnel were recruited from experienced private and public sector employees. While many of the public sector employees were on secondment (deputation) from other divisions, the private sector employees had all resigned from their previous posts. The experience and attitudes of these workers provide an insight into the ways in which workers have internalised and reproduce the rhetoric of efficiency.

Most of the clerical and technical workers expressed a generally positive view of the organisation and their own career mobility within it. One of their favourite preoccupations is the efficiency of government organisations in order to be viable. This view is held by many workers who are at pains to assert that 'their' organisation is the most efficient. This is a markedly different view from those who say that the performance of government departments should not be evaluated according to private sector criteria.

Respondents deployed the language of managerialism as important to enhancing efficiency while rejecting privatisation. Frequently used terms to describe the qualities that individuals and their co-workers possess were 'flexible' and 'embracing strategic changes'. In general, they are apprehensive about the negative social consequences of

liberalisation, and fear that privatisation will result in large-scale retrenchment. Yet they advocate the imposition on government employees of the kind of strict work discipline that is common in private enterprise. A commonly expressed sentiment was, 'No, I don't want privatisation. But I want people to work as if it was a private organisation.' A project officer remarked:

> We are operating like a private company for all intents and purposes. We earn for ourselves. You will find people working here till late at night, on holidays. We do not clock on and off like some government servants.

The ideal is simultaneously to increase manpower and to maintain efficiency through the use of technology, although respondents were divided about its impact on the workforce. While some believed that unemployment would increase, others were optimistic about retraining and employment generation. A postal clerk explained his vision:

> I think instead of privatising it, we should use more of the latest technology, so that we can provide best service to the public. For instance, we could take up courier services. If we could provide such services, the public would turn to us in a greater numbers. For this, we have to boost our infrastructure.

Ultimately, most hope that the state will develop appropriate policies to stave off privatisation. Yet, their main defence is that they have acquired the necessary qualities of being strategic and efficient.

Hegemony and strategic self-interest

The dilemma for many respondents is that they highly value the freedoms allowed in the public sector, but are concerned about the abuses of these very privileges. Many respondents fear that without the work ethic, they will face closure. On the one hand, there is a realisation these days that publicly owned enterprises should be profit oriented and operate like the private sector. On the other hand, people criticise this new ethos of 'market citizenship'. As noted above, many are concerned that elements of the public sector cannot be privatised.

The logic of respondents' reproduction of the rhetoric of global efficiency lies in the pervasive influences of the ideologies that associate 'efficiency' with 'privatisation'. Their legitimacy arises from their articulation with liberalisation policies, especially the valorisation of efficiency, which incorporates ideological elements from various powerful groups. Here Gosovic's (2000: 450, 453) notion of global intellectual

hegemony and its negative portrayal of public institutions as inefficient in contrast to private institutions has particular resonance. It is easy to see how people have internalised the state ideology of global efficiency, particularly the young, because of the terminology and clichés deployed in the public domain to propagate it. Yet, as Kagarlitsky (1996) has shown, official ideologies no longer really convince anyone. It is rather that alternatives to the dominant ideologies are neutralised and dismantled by those in power. Thus, any counter-ideologies filter through in such fragmented ways that they do not propose a genuine alternative. Some of our respondents and key informants expressed their disenchantment with liberalisation only in private.

However, it would be incorrect to assume that our informants espouse government rhetoric because they are deceived by ideology. They use themes of competition and deregulation in complex ways, whereby they neither reject nor accept them. In other words, our respondents do not subscribe to neoliberal ideologies in a uniform and coherent way. Some may hope to gain a few advantages from them even though this hope may be illusory. Such strategic self-interest is combined with a shift in political rationality, increasingly focused on the notion of individual responsibility. Their acquiescence in self-regulation is partly effected by the reconfiguration of earlier discourses of the self-sacrifice, hard work and rational planning necessary for nation-building.

Generational divide

Just as there are generational differences in gendered embrace of neoliberalism, age-based differences prevail in attitudes towards government services. Mores associated with privatisation have permeated more broadly among youth. Their positive attitudes to the privatisation of government enterprises stem from the decade-long public debates about government inefficiency, the concomitant declining support for the Left Front's ideology in urban areas and the contradictory messages from elders within their own families. During fieldwork, we found that despite older people's fierce defence of the public sector and suspicions of foreign capital and privatisation, they remain highly critical of the laziness of workers in government organisations. Many frame their critique in terms of an erosion of the work ethic within their own generation and point to the commitment of younger people to work hard, often drawing on the experiences of their own children.

Young people routinely incorporate the language of efficiency and the much-needed 'work culture' among public sector workers into

their everyday conversations. Oft repeated remarks included, 'I think privatisation is good. You can work hard and you will be rewarded'; 'government organisation is good too, but I have no problems with privatisation'; 'you can genuinely work in private enterprise'; and 'people committed to hard work can get job satisfaction in private organisations – it does not happen in government jobs'. Some were quick to point out the casual atmosphere in government offices compared to their previous experience in the private sector: 'in my previous job I was fully immersed in my work. Here you get a lot more leisure.' Others were eager to show that 'see, you are able to interview me here. This would not have been possible in a private organisation!' Ria, a young teacher, noted most severely:

> [I]n the private sector if anybody, having a commitment to work, has the intention as well as the capacity – then he can do so. This attitude is positively a disadvantage in a government organisation!

Ironically, the evangelical Christian school at which she worked pays less than a government school and she was very critical of the light-hearted approach of students to her subject (Bengali) and the lack of serious intellectual debate among teachers. Yet, she proudly declared that she was among a cohort of teachers recruited for their dedication to hard work and accepted the continual surveillance in the school:

> If I compare us with a government organisation – there is no work culture at all in government offices. This is not the case here . . . They always monitor what we are doing. Everybody does it, they oversee it.

Such statements reverberate with deeply-rooted parental and familial influences of hard work and just rewards.

In contrast to older workers' anxieties about uncertainties and fear of job losses, young people are not perturbed by the prospect of workplace restructuring or closure. As a young receptionist confidently explained, she could easily obtain employment elsewhere:

> We were told six months prior to the closure of the East West airlines. It was not a shock to me. We were told; we knew well ahead. Then a lot of us tried to get jobs in other airlines. I got a job with the Royal Jordanian airlines. But it had odd hours and I was already married. So I didn't take it up. Then I looked around and found this job.

Despite recognising the failure of the airline to pay her the three-months salary owed to her when she was retrenched, she was not embittered and felt optimistic that greater opportunities would appear in future. Similar sentiments prevailed among the call centre workers who have remained in their jobs. For example, Prithviraj, who had joined his company two years ago and moved up to the position of team leader, feels that the future holds unlimited possibilities.

Arguably, it is among the youth that the Left Front's own ambiguities come sharply into focus. We identified a number young people from rural areas who are firm supporters of the CPI (M). One of our young informants, living away from home in a hostel, introduced us to fellow workers and college students. From these interactions and interviews we found that while sharing the generally optimistic attitudes of urban middle-class youth to liberalisation, some believe that a cautious and gradualist approach to privatisation is necessary. Others ideologically opposed to privatisation reproduced the discourses of efficiency.

The following case of a 23-year-old probationary library assistant reflects the typical sentiments of young people. It is Suranjan's first job in government service. For the previous three years he had worked in a number of private libraries on a casual basis, and in a video and audio library. As he was interested in library science, he volunteered in the local library in his village. While working full-time, he began a course in librarianship. In his current job it was more than his youthful enthusiasm that led him to conclude that his 'goal is to provide a quick service to the readers. I'm trying to reorganise the library. It has been in shambles for a long time.' His views affirm the emerging entrepreneurial spirit among employees in some government departments. He echoed the views of senior staff in this newly established educational institution:

> They say that people in the government sector don't work and therefore you have to privatise. That is necessary in some organisations, to develop and to become more efficient. We are already efficient. We work hard.

At his hostel, we found Suranjan regularly engaged in heated debates on liberalisation, especially with economics students. He gave a textbook explanation of liberalisation in positive terms, while maintaining that it is not proceeding properly.

> Manmohan Singh was very pro-liberalisation. With the exception of some key sectors, he just wanted to forge ahead with economic

> reforms, he was pro-free trade. He had also emphasised the development of infrastructure. The idea of competition in the marketplace and criticisms of the licensing policy convinced me. . . . Successive governments haven't really formed any cohesive ideas about economic liberalisation. One minute they are saying this and the next minute something else. They are procrastinating. This creates confusion in the public mind.

His friend added another popular opinion, particularly prevalent among the youth:

> I don't think protectionism worked very well because it resulted in monopolies. The quality of goods didn't improve. Now we have competition, so we have access to high technology and quality goods.

Role of management and efficiency

According to most of our informants, poor management is responsible for 'sick industries'. Many attribute inefficiency to poor management rather than the alleged absence of a work culture among employees, arguing that privatisation itself will not solve the problem of public enterprise inefficiency.

Responses differed according to whether people generally hold individualist or collectivist views. Those who claim to be already efficient tend to reproduce neoliberal ideologies emphasising the importance of individuals being responsible for the success of their organisations. This is markedly different from the collectivist perspectives, which rest a general critique of liberalisation on a platform of anti-privatisation. While militant employees' critiques are consistent with their political orientation, the responses of some highly unionised, unskilled employees reveal a curious sentiment: On the one hand, their identification of the 'class enemy' embodied in the capitalist class seems only to apply to private enterprise and on the other hand, they maintain a deferential attitude to public sector managers. We have already alluded to the importance that low-ranking employees attach to the role of management in creating efficiency in an organisation. They consider that management in the public sector is in possession of superior knowledge and higher education.

The differing assessments of managers in terms of their 'superior knowledge' refer to techniques of management. Modern management techniques include the ability to effect and maintain rationality through

expert knowledge, and yet remain sympathetic to the needs of employees. This managerial model is compatible with furthering the interest of capital while simultaneously averting conflict between capital and labour. Although the relationship between capital and labour is inherently antagonistic, it occurs within a diversity of labour processes. Capital also needs worker cooperation, creativity and commitment. According to Thompson (1990), this encouragement needs to be more than a material lure or ideological coercion. It appears that in some of the publicly owned enterprises in West Bengal, bureaucrats highly skilled in managerial techniques have been particularly effective in eliciting the consent and cooperation of employees by obscuring the antagonistic relationship between management and workers. This was evidenced by the acquiescence of both those subscribing to the ideologies of managerialism and some militant workers. The latter most emphatically noted that the success or failure of an organisation is dependent on talented managers who can negotiate good relations with workers to bring about the best outcomes. They firmly believe that in all organisations, staff and management are intimately bound together and that a good manager has the capacity to 'manage change' by introducing innovative practices to enhance efficiency.

At times, respondents expressed a highly respectful attitude to managers and bureaucrats. This is in part due to *bhadralok* reverence of education and knowledge. Many high-ranking officials in government departments are drawn from the Indian Administrative Service, and such employment is highly respected and valued among the Bengali middle class (as it is in most of India). Therefore, the comparison that some respondents drew between it and formal private sector enterprises is that although the latter may offer better pay, managers are whimsical and personality driven, whereas public sector officials are stable and rational, and therefore worthy of respect. Alongside their general contempt for private enterprise, they noted the lack of talent and decision-making power among its managers. Contrasting the rational actions of public sector managers with the profit motives of private enterprise, they also challenged popular perceptions of wastage in government. Some typical responses included:

> Those who are in charge in government have the knowledge and the requisite qualities to run a complex organisation. This is lacking in private enterprise. You just can't wake up one morning and decide that you are going to have a lockout or close a college because you are running a loss. In private enterprise you're here today and gone tomorrow.

and

> In private enterprise you might be in this office for a year and then moved to another. So, you try to squeeze the best deal, you take short cuts. In government you have to follow rules and regulations and can't do as you please. In private enterprise a new fellow comes, he prepares a budget, creates a new strategic plan. In two years he is gone and another chap comes along and makes a new plan. So, what happens to the plan that was already in place, the money that was invested and the work that is already underway? You stop what has been done and you start again. What a waste! In government organisations even when the MD has left and a new one comes, he will carry out what is in place.

It might be noted here that since a significant proportion of our respondents were unaware of the management practices in large private corporations, their appraisal of private sector managers is distorted. Contrary to the popular perceptions of our respondents, managers in large private firms are no less qualified and are drawn from similar social backgrounds as the public sector managers who are held in high esteem by our respondents. State bureaucrats and CEOs of large private corporations are likely to have done their training in the same prestigious educational institutions. Indeed, management firms such as Tata Consulting Services have been at the forefront of providing the necessary expertise to corporations, especially transnational firms, since liberalisation. Yet, it is worth noting that respondents in large corporations did not praise their management, even though they spoke at length about the advantages and benevolence of corporations that provide medical benefits, transport, child care, schooling and other benefits.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have examined the ways in which people give meaning to notions of efficiency and how they struggle with the contradictions that emerge as they navigate the terrain between government rhetoric and the reality of their own lives. A number of people in this study have internalised the state's rhetoric of global efficiency as it has moved along a continuum from earlier state discourses of modernisation and scientific rationality. A major reason for talented managers being able to solve their problems is their firm belief in the modernising discourses of techniques and rationality. For some, the transition from

scientific socialism to scientific managerialism was made possible by the processes of modern education and political socialisation.

Ultimately, this chapter has shown that an essential and ongoing tension exists between the state and labour, especially in the urban areas. The state must ideologically convince segments of the urban middle classes of the benefits of privatisation and of the state's renewed vigour for liberalisation. However, neoliberal reforms presuppose an individualistic, entrepreneurial spirit, which, in comparison to other states, has not been strong in West Bengal. Moreover, many informants see the benefits of collective action and unionisation, a view strongly and commonly held despite political allegiances. In the final analysis, the government's attempts to implement workplace change are regarded suspiciously, as a means by which to undermine worker's rights and remove their state protection, a protection fought for and won over several decades.

On one level, the particular world views and lived experiences of the lower middle class show an antipathy towards liberalisation and globalisation and yet, on another, they express a desire for India, and Indians, to move forward and compete in an increasingly globalised, cosmopolitan world. Economic liberalisation is by no means accepted dogma. There is much and various evidence of deep dissatisfaction, frustration and mistrust of the process.

Notes

1 In his ground-breaking article, Breman (1976) argues that the informal sector cannot be analytically separated from the formal sector as an economic compartment or labour situation. He demonstrates that the two sectors are not mutually exclusive, but are part of the totality of the productive system. For our purposes, the distinction between employment in these two sectors stands only in so far as formal sector workers are protected by labour legislation, while the rights and benefits of those engaged in the 'unorganised' sector are limited. We might call the latter an 'unprotected' sector.
2 See McLean (2001).
3 National Television network.

5 Culture of power

The hegemony of English in a globalising India

Introduction

> English is not only important in getting a better job, it is everywhere in social interaction. If you can't speak it, then you are a nobody.
>
> (Rekha, 31-year-old female clerk)

> English is an international language. You feel humiliated if you can't speak English. People think you are dumb.
>
> (Ali, 39-year-old male accounts officer)

In this chapter, and the next, we turn to the socio-cultural impacts of globalisation on the lives of the middle classes. This chapter explores the impact of English in a globalising India, and we examine closely the role of English language proficiency in defining and shaping middle-class culture and the opportunities that may arise. It is without doubt that, since the days of British colonial rule, English has been the language of domination, status and privilege in India. The hegemonic colonial project in India was to create and maintain a class of administrative officers, clerks and compliant civil servants to carry out the task of ruling the vast and expansive sub-continent. Essential to the creation of this 'colonised subjectivity' (Viswanathan, 1989) was the development and acquisition of a British-style education, conducted principally in English, and which allowed for an emerging middle class to form, develop and then socially advance. English thus became the language of the educated middle classes in India. It served to maintain an externally imposed hegemony while facilitating the perpetuation of a caste and class-based domination by the indigenous elite.

The rise and place of English in India have been discussed in several key writings (Kachru, 1983; Mishra, 2000; Trivedi, 1995; Viswanathan,

1989) and it is not the aim of this chapter to go over this ground to any great extent. The narratives of our informants that frame the analysis in this chapter reflect the transition of the Indian middle classes as subjects under colonial domination to subjects negotiating globalisation. Like the two responses cited above, English is recognised as an important global or international language, essential for professional employment and, significantly, a key component of the cultural capital of middle-class Indians. For many, shame and humiliation await those who fail to fulfil their middle-class destinies of gaining a university degree, proficiency in English and well-paid professional employment. Lacking effective social power and high levels of wealth, the middle classes attempt to retain aspects of cultural capital to mitigate the negative effects of economic liberalisation and cultural globalisation. Thus, as a significant cultural resource, attaining English language proficiency is an imperative goal for the middle classes. This is borne out in our discussion and analysis of the teaching of English controversy in West Bengal that began in the early 1980s and continued until its resolution in 1999. This policy, and its aftermath, clearly illustrate the way the middle classes seek to retain control of cultural capital in the face of declining economic power.

The early impact of English in India

It was in March 1835 when a member of the Supreme Council in India, Lord Macualey, brazenly declared that the task of the British in India was to 'do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (1919: 16). In essence, the colonial superiority of Western civilisation was to be filtered down to a newly created 'middle mass' by way of the education system and mediated by the English language. In other words, the economic subjugation of the Indian sub-continent was to be reinforced by the concomitant hegemonic project of British colonisation – to create a willing and culturally servile class of administrators, clerks and other civil servants (the middle classes) who could skilfully and professionally administer the country. There were two consequences of this linguistic shift to English. First, it resulted in a further social and cultural division in India which led to 'the linguistic stratification of Indian society, further separated the elite classes from the lower castes and classes, and divided the urban populations from the rural' (Parameswaran, 1997: 24). Second, it led to the inculcation and absorption of Western liberal values of liberty, individuality

of mind and spirit and freedom of thought – ironically, the essential ideological bases for the later independence struggles in India. Significantly, as Chatterjee (1993) points out, the Bengali bilingual elite, many of whom were to become the future leaders of Indian nationalist struggles, retained their Bengali language and customs at home, while functioning confidently in the 'foreign tongue' of English in the wider, public sphere of work and politics. In other words, there was already emerging among the elite a strategic, cultural and political usage of English.

Since independence from British rule in 1947, English continued to be taught in schools across the country. For most post-colonial states, the colonial language policies and approaches to education have continued relatively unchecked and fundamentally serve the interests of both the West and the indigenous elite (Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). Apart from the mother tongue, 1950s onwards, English remains the key language desired, learnt and mastered by the sons and daughters of both the Indian elite and the civil servants and professional employees. English was also taught in most state schools but due to a lack of resources, well-trained teachers or motivation by parents, the majority of students failed to gain proficiency. Moreover, the English curriculum and textbooks were found to be poorly constructed, stereotypical and hegemonic and, coupled with a hierarchical and underfunded formal education system, served to reproduce class-based inequalities in the school system (see Kumar, 1989; Scrase, 1993). Hence, the language divide between those proficient in English and those who were not was a mirror image of broader class and spatial divisions in India. Simply put, the elite and urban professional classes more or less mastered English; the urban and rural poor, the farmers, the local traders and merchants and most businessmen did not. This situation remained relatively unchanged until the mid-1980s with the expansion and opening-up of the Indian economy. In summing up the experiences of British rule and a British-based education system, one 37-year-old informant wryly noted:

> The idea that English should be taught from the beginning has become entrenched because the [education] system was established by the British. They ruled us. They have left now, but we continue to follow their system. Not just that, we also continue to maintain the infrastructure, the buildings, property rules and regulations. It is not just a matter of preserving some historical remnants; we are simply following their path, uncritically. The division of English medium and Bengali medium was a system created and established

> by foreign rule, with a particular purpose. Nowadays education is a business enterprise. I don't even want to go into the details of getting admission at school or college. At every level money and politics reigns supreme.

At least for this person, there is a fundamental awareness of both the social impact of the British in terms of fundamental institutional changes, and also a sense of disenchantment with the once worthy ideal of 'a pursuit of an education' becoming now a material pursuit, a commodity as it were, based on one's ability to pay high fees or have political connections to gain entry into the elite schools and colleges. And it is this very commodification of education which has, in turn, been accelerated by the globalisation of the Indian economy, and the high demand for many professionals to have an overseas degree and job experiences.

Language wars

Over the decades, the CPM in West Bengal have been guided by a belief that broad-based social justice initiatives such as mass literacy, political empowerment, the elimination of women's oppression and improved health status can be met through the imposition of 'appropriate' primary and non-formal education. In this context their educational approach, at least for the vast rural masses and urban poor, in many ways resembles the analysis and prescription for 'democratic' education (or *concientisation*) outlined by the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire in his influential book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). For many of our informants, growing up as teenagers in West Bengal during the CPM's formative years in power, they directly encountered the government's 1981 policy decision to officially abolish the teaching of English as a compulsory language at the primary level of schooling. Basically, learning English at primary school was seen as inappropriate for the majority of children and therefore teaching it was a waste of government resources. Conversely, this decision was a direct challenge to the middle classes who recognised the advantages of English proficiency in a nation that was becoming more internationalised and, significantly, because knowledge of English preserved their relatively higher social status. Despite drawing on many international studies on second-language interference to support their argument for the abolition of teaching English to young children, the CPM failed to harness full public support especially since the middle classes demanded the continuation of English teaching in state schools.

In Kolkata, a loose coalition of middle-class parents, teachers and intellectuals stood firm in their opposition to the government's newly enacted policy. Despite numerous protests, the withdrawal of their children from school, and other protest measures, the policy continued although, over the interceding years, it had only met minimal success. There was widespread non-compliance, for example, with the policy by state school teachers, most of who are ironically CPM party members. Many schools continued to teach English and the government simply turned a blind eye (see Scrase, 1993: 41–4). The policy, it seemed, was more an ideological commitment to social justice, to secure populist votes rather than being an enforced policy principle. As one informant cynically observed: 'The government says, "This is for the people. We are doing this for the people – the ordinary folk." This is vote buying rhetoric!'

At the time this policy was enacted, there were numerous protests and disquiet expressed, especially from the urban middle classes who saw their children being disadvantaged because of this policy. A 35-year-old male office worker puts it this way:

> I think the government made a serious mistake. No matter how much we shout in the street about not needing English, in the end English is still there! If you go to school you have to learn English. So, why ignore the inevitable? You have to write a letter in English. You apply for a job and it has to be in English. We were kidding ourselves if we said that we didn't need English! Getting rid of it in the early years of school was a blunder. It put so many students at a disadvantage. They couldn't compete. They [the government] ruined the future of these children. They destroyed their foundation of a language. They neither learnt it well at the primary level and they fell behind at the higher level. Did the government get rid of it at the higher level? No, sir. Not there.

And another critic, Nirmala, a woman in her mid-forties who works in a government-run emporium as an office administrator, commented:

> English should have been introduced from the start. Otherwise children fall behind and they can't stand up to the competition. People like us, **average middle-class people** think that it is better not to send children to a government primary school, instead get the children enrolled to any nursery school, where English is taught. Keep them in that system until they are in Class VI, then they will have developed a base in English (our emphasis).

> English is essential for further education. In any foreign firm, an employee has to know English. It is a must. Without English, Bengali alone will not take you anywhere. You must know English well.

And another younger man, aged in his early twenties, provided the view that

> I think we should have English taught right from the start. Children will have better opportunities that way. In my village I have seen people enrol their children in some sub-standard English-medium kindergarten. These problems could have been avoided if English was available from the start in primary school.
>
> English is an international language. More than 50 per cent of all important documents, serials and periodicals in our country are published in English. We can't ignore this fact.

Vehement, middle-class opposition to the policy can be seen as a strategic reaction to the impacts and changes wrought by globalisation: the middle classes saw their interests in maintaining their monopoly in education and in gaining well-paying, professional jobs – jobs which are increasingly becoming globalised. As Bharati, a 52-year-old woman, cynically remarked: 'No matter how much the government claims that for official purposes, you don't need English. But you try to fill out a form. It is in English. Literacy itself is equated with English!' Importantly, there is a global rising popularity of English, driven largely by economic and cultural globalisation, and this phenomenon is evident in a range of countries and regions – from Malaysia (Mandal, 2000) and Sri Lanka (Punchi, 2001) to the Nordic region (Brock-Utne, 2001) and Africa (Bgoya, 2001).

In defending its actions, the CPM maintained that its English language policy was for the good of Bengali culture and society as a whole in that everyone will have the opportunity to learn their mother tongue (i.e. Bengali) unhindered by second-language acquisition problems. Besides, they argued, what need is there for the vast majority of rural and/or poor Bengalis to learn English? Despite the government's efforts at promoting the Bengali language, English has nevertheless increased dramatically in popularity in India from the early 1980s. Apart from the class position of the speakers (largely upper and middle classes) and their consequent social and political influence, there was the continued proliferation of the teaching of English in various schools and colleges, and the mushrooming of spoken-English institutes and

private English-medium schools (many of dubious quality) continued at a rapid pace, particularly in urban areas. Moreover, the spread of English in India continues by way of television programmes and advertisements, and the high demand for English language speakers in professional employment, as call centre personnel, telecommunications, marketing and business and the like. As one of our informants, a 34-year-old male, bluntly pointed out: 'you are worth nothing in the job market without good command of English!'

Continued pressure on the government, especially from the politically influential, urbanised middle and upper classes, led to the CPM to reverse its policy in 1999. After a special committee was formed in 1998 to investigate the teaching of English at Primary level in West Bengal, headed by Professor Pabitra Sarkar (a CPM ally), it was decided that English language learning would be formally reintroduced into state (government) primary schools to be taught class III onwards from the year 2000. Significantly, economic liberalisation and globalisation were two of the main reasons cited for justifying the reversal of this policy. In the words of the committee: 'The opening-up of the country's economy to foreign multi-national and trans-national corporations as a precondition for economic liberalisation, has also contributed to the high profile of English which it enjoys' (Sarkar Report, 1998: 35). Furthermore, the Report (ibid.: 21) notes that 'Due to economic globalisation and the expanding operations of the transnational corporations, as with the faster speed of technology transfer, the role of "business English" has received a boost'. In this context one informant, Rajeshree, a female bank teller aged in her forties with two children, emphasised the importance of both spoken and written English, and noted that English can open up doors in terms of higher education placements and jobs abroad. Importantly, she recognises that children should learn English from an early age:

> It is important to know English. We know how to read and write, but are not very adapt at speaking. So it is crucial that children learn it at an early age. I will teach them Bengali at home, but they must learn English at school. It is quite apparent that there are so many good students in West Bengal. However, when they compete on an all-India basis for jobs, they miss out because this [their English] is not good. They have good credentials, good grades. When they go to interviews, their spoken English is really poor, so they do not get the jobs. Both my children are in English-medium schools. I want my children to study abroad. We never had many opportunities. My daughter is very interested in computers. If she

> wants to go abroad, she should be prepared for it. We are educating her that way. We are doing our utmost.

In acknowledging the influence of cultural globalisation, the Sarkar committee also describes how it has bowed to the increasingly demanding aspirations of a growing, largely urbanised middle class, with powerful middle-class aspirations, 'fed, fostered and often swayed by the dream-peddling fares and advertisements of the print and electronic media' (ibid.: 33).

When we asked our informants whether English should be taught from Class I onwards, an overwhelming 95 per cent answered in the affirmative, a clear rejection of the government's policy.

In her assessment of the policy, and its ultimate failure, Damayanti Datta (1998) pointed to the inconsistencies and misreading of the cultural history of Bengal which led the government to abolish the teaching of English in the first place. She basically argues that since the nineteenth century English has served to strengthen the Bengali language rather than diminish it. Moreover, the argument that teaching English at the primary level interferes with literacy in the mother tongue does not add up when, in 1991, there were 11 states (including Kerala) with higher literacy levels than West Bengal and where English was taught at an earlier stage than in West Bengal.[1] She concludes her article by writing:

> History tells us that English forms an inalienable element in the constitution of the public sphere of modern Bengal. That the Bengalis could manage to reap profit out of English under colonialism and still gloriously develop their own mother tongue for two centuries shows that it is futile to pose English as the 'great enemy of the people'. To break the idioms of provincialism and connect to the globalized world order the Bengalis are once again ready to enter another round of negotiated transaction.
>
> (Datta, 1998: 12)

This dispute highlights the way in which government policy ultimately bowed to the influences of a highly motivated, educated and politically organised and mobilised middle class. In a globalised, post-colonial world, there is an individual pragmatism emerging out of the choices offered in a liberalising Indian economy. For the Bengali middle classes, it is the maintenance of cultural resources – formal education and English – established and handed down to them by the British all those years ago, which is essential to their social position. Thus, while globalisation in many ways is rendering them economically marginal in

comparison to the new entrepreneurs and upper middle classes, the lower middle classes conversely can maintain their relatively higher status positions through a range of other opportunities offered by globalisation, especially the increased demand for English language proficiency. Similar to the arguments outlined by Bourdieu (1984), the processes of class and cultural re-configuration in India reflect the situation in which a subtle, nevertheless distinct, differentiation emerges between the various class fractions and their cultural practices together with their mobilisation of cultural resources, or 'cultural capital'. Importantly, this process is not exclusive to India but is a pattern reproducing itself throughout the countries of Asia.

Indian education and the challenge of globalisation

So far we have seen that the decision to abolish the teaching of English at primary level in West Bengal was largely a failure, and brought into sharp focus the politics of education in the context of a globalising India. There are now innumerable published studies which show that the many and varied effects of globalisation are felt at national, regional, local and individual level, and where time–space compression has heightened reflexive thought and action at all these levels (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989). Increasingly, individual decisions to act are based more and more upon decisions made by one's government, the policies of a neighbouring state or those of some global governing body such as the United Nations. In India, we can investigate these three interconnected, and uneven, dimensions of globalisation and their intended and unintended consequences for education.

In the first instance, the Indian government has rapidly developed its technological industrial infrastructure to meet the growing demand for high-tech goods and services, especially in the information technology businesses and related industries. These goods and services are to meet both local and international needs. As a consequence, there is great demand for highly trained and skilled workers in these industries. The globalisation of high-tech industries is part and parcel of the new international division of labour in which, because of reduced transport costs and a reduction in trade barriers and other restrictions, Indian workers are now producing for a globalised market.

Increasingly, therefore, education in India is turning more towards providing the skills necessary for employment in these well-paying and rewarding jobs. One need only consider the strong competition for the relatively few places available in the prestigious IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology). The downside of this expansion of opportunity, however,

is the burgeoning of private fee-paying colleges and a reduction, in real terms, of government funding in research and in the resourcing of public universities. This latter trend can be seen in the context of a liberalised economy. As Shukla (1996: 1348) writes: 'The research base of most Asian economies is weak and is not getting strengthened on account of the trends of liberalisation of the economy and the ideology of capitalism and the market as against state regulation.' Access, too, remains an issue as those in urban areas have a distinct advantage in gaining admission into the more prestigious courses, and better-resourced institutions. Thus, the urban middle classes maintain their advantage in gaining admission and subsequent employment in the advanced technological industries.

In the context of political globalisation, the rise of Western-styled democratisation (with the demise of the state socialist economies), the advent of new political movements and the increasing influence of international government organisations (IGOs) pose challenges, both direct and indirect, to Indian education at various levels. Where once India had relatively stable economic, political and cultural relations with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, it now finds itself forging new alliances with the states of Western Europe, the USA and the Pacific. Educational and technological exchanges between Eastern Europe and India have virtually been abandoned as increasingly Indian students look to the West for their higher education. This has led to the intensification of the so-called 'brain-drain' phenomenon.

International governmental organisations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have dramatically increased in both number and significance since 1945. Further, David Held (1991) argues that states are increasingly ceding power to these organisations in terms of their policies on trade, laws and in their responses to ecological and medical (e.g. AIDS) crises. This state weakening, or disetatisation, is a direct consequence of globalisation, and impinges directly on education and the teaching process, in that increasingly reflexive individuals see themselves more than ever before as global citizens, rather than as atomised individuals bounded by the constraints of time, tradition or locality. Increases in social reflexivity engendered by globalisation have strengthened the claims of, or even given rise to, movements whose members make claims on governments for equality of opportunity and the right to cultural autonomy. This has consequences for education. Shukla (1996: 1349) writes:

> The demands of ethnic identity and plurality conflict often with modernity's urge to equality, freedom and individuality. The place

> of women, the position of those lower down in the traditional social structure (e.g. caste), are all at issue here. Feminist and civil rights movements and the struggle of submerged groups (tribals, lower caste people in India and comparable groups elsewhere) call for the revision of syllabi and the organisation and distribution of education, to which education and the state respond only partially.

Thus, as seen in the context of the globalisation of the Indian economy, the controversy over education policy at state and national levels, together with the teaching of English policy at the primary level in West Bengal, are significant issues for the middle classes.

The importance of English

For our informants, therefore, we needed to know what they thought about the role, and indeed necessity, for learning English. During periods of fieldwork, we could not but notice the growing number of small, after-hours English language coaching schools and tutoring centres in the various neighbourhoods. Moreover, there are a plethora of newspaper advertisements for private coaching in English, and informants spoke of the competition to get their children enrolled in high quality, English-medium schools. Kanika Datta (2006: 13) notes, for instance, that:

> Economic liberalisation has certainly changed attitudes, but that is yet to trickle down to the important business of providing quality education. Like so many business schools of doubtful provenance that proliferate in abundance in response to the explosion in demand, English-medium schools have become all the rage. Most of them charge extortionate fees to provide the rudiments of English literacy rather than a meaningful grasp of the language.

English, indeed, has become an important commodity and in Table 5.1 we set out the main reasons offered to us. We see that middle classes were most likely to, in fact, provide several reasons for English language proficiency, including the fact that it is a national and global language, and also because it provides success in employment and education.

Illustrative of the practical necessity for having a good command of English in India, and because it is an important national language and can open job opportunities, Subhas, a lower level administrator aged 34, exasperatedly puts it this way:

> We need English because we're a huge country. You can't expect that you're going to stay in West Bengal forever. If you speak Bengali who will understand you in Madras? Our common language has to be English. We may speak Hindi, but the Tamils won't. So, we have to have English. Without it you will miss out every time. So what if you have got a degree? You may have an MA or an MSC, all in Bengali, but when you get an interview in Delhi, what are you going to do? Who is going to give you a job? You're worth nothing in the job market without good command of English!

Table 5.1 Importance of English (*n* = 110)

Reason	*(%)*
Global language	5
National language	12
Success – employment	16
Success – education	12
Access and communication	5
Begin late primary – too late	7
Combination of above	43
Total	100

The following dialogue illustrates some of the problems that arise for those who do not have a great command of English:

Question: What is your opinion regarding the reintroduction of English from primary school onwards?

Response: I approve of it.

Q: Why so?

R: Normally children used to learn the English alphabet in Class 1 and were asked to compose letters on passages in English by Class 6 or 7. This is a very difficult thing. This leads to various problems.

Q: When were you taught English?

R: At Class 1.

Q: Could you explain what problems you have faced?

R: I face a great deal of problem at my workplace. Firstly, my knowledge of English is limited. Secondly, I was taught the alphabet and then within a short time, I was asked to write passages and letters. So I have developed a fear for the subject, mainly because I was taught it very late. If I'm

taught the alphabet today, and asked to write essays in that language on the next day, I would certainly try to avoid it, and develop a fear for it, but if children are taught English from a very early stage, they will become more confident about it.

Q: But are you learning English now, separately?

R: No. I mean, well . . . some English is required in official work. However, one needs to write at least a few paragraphs in English. While writing the Higher Secondary examination, even if one knows the passage by heart. In the job, we get enough practice in English. Moreover, in our kind of jobs, the required educational qualification is Secondary School or completion of class 7. So not too much of English is required.

Q: What exactly is English required for? Say, for instance, we are Bengalis. Both of us will understand Bangla. Why is then English necessary?

R: English is necessary insofar as jobs are concerned. Nowadays, all exams including those for the Public Service Commission jobs, etc., set their questions in English. In order to be able to answer them, one needs to know English. Bangla would do well in daily conversation, but not in case of jobs.

In this case, Aditi works as a police officer and so would not necessarily use English in day-to-day conversation, but she nevertheless points to the fact that written English is certainly a requirement of her job, and even more so if she applies for promotion to senior administrative roles.

Dilip, an older man aged 60, emphasises the importance of both spoken and written English, and the view that English can open up doors in terms of higher education placements and jobs abroad. He presents a typical, pragmatic view, particularly from a parent who wanted the best for his son:

> You study engineering or medicine, you have to have English. I did not put my son in an English-medium primary school. That was my choice. He went through Bengali medium and switched to English medium in secondary school. He went to City Commerce College after that. Although my son was in Bengali medium at the primary level, he has not done badly in picking up English. That was because he was learning English from the beginning. They should be taught side by side. My wife and I thought that he should know

> both. If he went outside [of Bengal] it would be essential to know English. He must know his mother tongue as well.

Ali, aged 40, is also concerned for his children's future careers and his support of English in the curriculum Class I onwards is convincing:

> This is a good thing. It should have been done a long time ago. It is very important for children's future careers. Although I was a believer in the 'Bengali first' policy, I have changed my mind. Being exposed to English from the beginning is best.
>
> In the world of work English is absolutely important. To succeed in your career English is a must. Our politicians say that: 'English is not essential. Your opportunities aren't going to be closed off because you can't speak English. That all transactions can be in Bengali.' The reality is different! THEY don't have to struggle to get a job. WE do! Among my friends, a number of them were disqualified (from a job) on the grounds that their spoken English was poor. They met all other criteria. English is an international language . . . If someone asks you a question in English and you can't answer, you feel bad about yourself and your sense of worth is diminished.

For some of our informants, who came from more well-off middle-class families, the support for English was just as strongly felt. The following response is from Amit, a project officer in a semi-government organisation aged in his mid-thirties. His daughter, only 6 years old, is sent to Loreto School, one of Kolkata's more exclusive girls schools. He is determined to do the best for his child, and an English education is seen as providing the most opportunity:

> My child is going to an English-medium school. I went to an English-medium school. The main reason is that, if we go outside of West Bengal, is there an alternative other than to communicate in English? English is universal. Bengali schools are equally good and I am not one of those Anglicised people who make a point of rejecting Bengal. My aim is to prepare my child for the best opportunities. The child is at Loreto, which is a really good school.

Ajoy, an accounts officer in a semi-government organisation, has a similar view to Amit's, in that he sees the distinct social advantages to be gained from English language proficiency. Although neither he, nor his wife, went to an English-medium school, they are keen to help their daughter at home to excel in English.

English should be taught at primary level. The government's initiative was a complete flop. Most students were unable to learn English properly if they started at Class 6.

My child is learning English since Kindergarten. The primary section taught English from the start. I help her out with tenses, writing paragraphs. Now if she were to start learning the alphabet at Class 6, she would have been in trouble. It is also more 'natural' to start learning from the start.

The strength of opposition to the policy of abolishing English is particularly felt by younger people. Anju is 28 and is an under-employed graduate who has been working as an assistant in an ISD (telephone/telex) booth for the past eight years. She sees herself as a victim of the policy that abolished the teaching of English at the primary level. She feels that she has been disadvantaged as she cannot converse in English. Her cultural role models are not the educated Bengali *babus* (opinionated intellectuals) and writers, but rather the MTV hosts, celebrities and actors, and the hip, cool 'Hinglish'-speaking generation of Pepsi, Coke and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Ironically, she can hardly follow what is being said or sung on MTV or ZEE TV, nor follow the lyrics.

We are so weak in English. People all around us don't have a grasp of the English language. In my view if English was introduced from the start, it would be very beneficial. To get a firm grounding in English you have to start right at the beginning. You don't teach the alphabet at Class 6! Our generation didn't get this, but the next generation when they learn English from the beginning, they will be better off. English is very important in the world of work.

Few were willing to show outright support for the government and its teaching of English policy. Debdas is a 45-year-old male, employed as a clerk at a regional university, and holds generally critical views on most things political. In stark contrast to the younger Anju, he feels that he has benefited greatly from the policies of the CPM. Importantly, too, he points to the role of cultural capital (educated parents, home support, etc.) in fostering educational success.

We had English in our curriculum. Then it was removed. Did we learn good English when it was compulsory? Ninety per cent of my colleagues cannot speak English, even though it was compulsory in their schooling. People learnt good English because of their family

> environment, because of the additional support they received, not because it was taught at school. You look at our professors; their children speak English because they themselves know English. Especially the mothers introducing [their children to] English [at home] at primary level. For the average person, it will not benefit them in anyway. In fact, it will just foster a sense of failure. Lots of children are scared of maths for the same reason. Their parents cannot help them. So they get stuck. Education should not create a sense of failure. In the old days there were the exceptional students who managed to succeed in English despite not having the supportive environment. I think that will continue to happen. Those who are exceptionally bright, they will continue to excel. However, as for mass education, there is no place for English.

Debdas' colleague, Ganesh, aged in his early fifties and who works as a registrar's secretary in the university, was also generally supportive of the CPM's education policy decision. His view reflects more of a sense of national pride, that it should not be so important to learn English simply because English is a dominant international language.

> There are so many countries in the world where they do not speak English. Are they backward, tell me? We in the Commonwealth countries, were ruled by the British. In non-Commonwealth countries they go about their business in their own language. They do not feel compelled to learn English. In this country, however, there are double standards. There is the rhetoric of using the mother tongue at all official levels. The reality is that English still dominates. So parents feel that they have to teach their children English. If they do, there are lots of avenues for them. They can learn English via private education. I do not believe that English has to be compulsory in primary schools. There should not be a feeling that if I do not learn English, I have not learnt anything. Now, if I want to go to France then I must enrol in French language classes to learn at least some rudimentary French to get by. But French should not be made compulsory in the hope that I must go to France one day. Similarly there should not be any compulsion to learn English. In Kolkata University nowadays, they have introduced Bengali in their Law Faculty. I have seen some of my son's text books. They are excellent. Now if someone wants to present their case in court in Bengali at the High Court. What is the harm in that? Now, you might say that it is going to take a very long time to reverse a 300-year-old practice.

> In our society, if we can speak English, it is a source of pride. I do not know of any other culture where speaking English elevates their status. It should not be like this. For those who wish to learn English, there are plenty of opportunities. It is, however, not necessary to be part of mass education.

One of the few, outright supporters of the CPM's position was Subrata, whose view represents a fairly rigid CPM party line – that English is an important and significant language but must be taught only after literacy in the mother tongue is achieved. It should be noted that he is the union representative at his office and thus presents a clearly articulated political view:

> I am personally opposed to the teaching of English at primary level. Education is about values, the teaching of humanism. To make us more human. It does not matter which language you teach that in. The child learns best in its native language, not in English. This does not mean I am anti-English.
>
> English is necessary. As I said before, you cannot keep your doors closed. Undoubtedly English is the dominant language and the language of power. English should be taught later once the child is literate in his/her own language.

Observations in the daily press, by various commentators, however, revealed the folly of short-term populist policies, by various state governments, not just in West Bengal. For instance, Datta (2006: 13) in a critical newspaper piece comments that

> True, the burden of responsibility for the decline in standards of English education lies with the state governments. Local populist chauvinism in the seventies and eighties drove English out of the compulsory curriculum of state schools, subordinating it to an optional second language at the high school level. This sometimes created comic situations. In West Bengal, for instance, Shakespeare was interpreted for school-leaving children in Bengali. The impact of the Left Front government's policy, now reversed, was brought into sharp relief in the eighties and nineties as a growing number of young job seekers found themselves trapped in a state in which economic opportunity was steadily shrinking.

A view, clearly echoed by the young Anju in her criticisms, and by Rinku, aged 27, is that:

> Some of my friends went to English-medium schools and they fared much better than me. Those who try to pick up English later find it very difficult to catch up. If you know English you get access to a lot more information. You need English because it is everywhere! I have to know English because some of my clients don't know Bengali.

Conclusion

We have argued in this chapter that globalising processes have led the Indian middle classes to see a distinct social advantage in maintaining English proficiency by increasing their educational, social and cultural ties between India and the West, raising the possibilities for immigration and also for facilitating business in the increasingly deregulated Indian economy. The struggles over English, the language wars, were clearly established during the long period of colonialism, with the establishment of the British system of education and the subsequent employment of the educated Indian middle classes in the civil service and in private enterprise. The problem of the language divide, as a reflection and extension of broader social class and cultural division, is not just specific to India. As Parameswaran (1997: 27) observes:

> The English question in India is not one that can be resolved easily – India's situation with regard to English is shared by many post-colonial nations across Asia and Africa. Since our independence from the British, the rise of English in India is intertwined with the consolidation and increase of urban Westernized upper-class elites, the growing transnational economy, the strong presence of an English-educated elite at the national level, the weak interventions of the Indian government to redress power imbalances, and private corporate and business structures that ensure the continued vigour of English.

The cultural politics of education in India is indeed part and parcel of the broader political struggles over scarce and valued resources. English language proficiency in a globalising India is an essential component of one's cultural baggage, a resource that can eventually open doors into the world of professional employment in India and abroad. For the middle classes, English is a resource that must be defended and maintained at all costs.

The analysis of the English language controversy raises a number of broader, direct and indirect implications for education policy-making.

First, the controversy exemplifies the continued, and active, monopolisation of schooling by the middle classes and elite. English language proficiency forms an essential component of one's stock of cultural capital which must be acquired, maintained and passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, the implementation of radical educational policy can be, at times, a major political and strategic process. Second, the controversy exemplifies the fact that globalisation fosters unequal educational outcomes in local environments (localisation) and so maintains an educational divide. While one class seeks to harness the social advantages of an internationalised education, proficiency in English and attending university, the other measures success purely in terms of attaining literacy. Third, governments may provide basic education, new schools, improved facilities and so forth but cannot provide cultural capital. All else being equal, marginalised groups still lack the essential cultural capital necessary for future success. Fourth, the responses from our informants emphasise the way in which English is recognised as a *lingua franca*, the dominant global language of culture, entertainment, technology and business in the new millennium. Conversely, we are witnessing the slow devaluation of local, mother-tongue languages and the challenge is to reconcile these two competing processes. We have seen too that English proficiency is a virtual prerequisite for those wishing to work in new 'smart' industries like call centre work and in the business process outsourcing (BPO) sectors. Yet, at the same time, by vigorously promoting English, governments are, by default, reproducing many of the cultural problems of the colonial past.

At a more general level, the politics of English in India also raises several theoretical issues in regards to middle-class cultural politics. In their wide-ranging book *Cultural Politics*, Glenn Jordan and Christopher Weedon outline in their introductory chapter (1995: 3–22) the range and scope of issues and themes surrounding the concept of 'cultural politics'. Framed by an acknowledgement of the persistence of class, race and gender inequalities, cultural politics views 'culture' as both a contested category and contested space, involving power at several levels – individual, social, and institutional – and hence leads to a broadening of our understanding of the ways that meanings, subjectivities and cultures remain contested and challenged. The subsequent discussion in the book essentially describes how privileged individuals and classes suppress marginal cultures and how, in the cultural and social cracks and spaces that appear, various marginalised groups and individuals are able to undermine the dominant structures. The question we can ask at this point is: 'But who, exactly, is marginalised?'

Interestingly, for the lower middle classes in India, despite their objectively higher economic position, they nevertheless perceived themselves to be victims of globalisation, particularly in terms of economic pressures, diminished job security and employment options, and increasing (moral) concerns over the cultural fabric of Bengal (and India) being eroded by Western consumerist values and sexualisation, especially due to impact of the media and advertising.

In examining whether economic liberalisation has offered opportunities for a better lifestyle, one informant provided a telling response:

> Only a handful have gained from this so-called economic liberalisation. It is not *madhybittya chaposha* (ordinary middle-class people) like us who have gained, but those who are a level higher than us; it is they who have benefited (emphasis added).

Here, we see evidence of both a relativisation of class position and an inversion of their superior economic place. As Bourdieu (1987) describes, the most profound cultural struggles now take place between those who hold the most economic capital (the dominant fraction of the dominant class) and those who hold the most cultural capital (the dominated fraction within this class). Just like the vast majority of rural Indians and urban poor, there too is a sense of both economic and cultural decline felt across the lower middle classes.

Note

1 This observation concurs with a range of international research findings. For instance, Smolicz and Nical (1999) demonstrate that that Filipinos, for example, can be literate in their first language and still be fluent in English. However, we acknowledge that there are competing debates about this in the international languages scholarly journals.

6 Globalised media

Television and its impact on middle-class morals, culture and identity

Introduction

> Youth tend to imitate a lot of clothing, behaviours and demeanour they see on TV. In terms of lifestyle, many youth feel frustrated because the lifestyle portrayed is only attainable by the rich. Most youth may not be able to afford designer clothing, but they will buy the cheaper imitation on the footpath. One thing I've noticed is boys wearing earrings. They try to imitate many things on TV. But our society is still fairly strict so that they may be told to take it off by their parents if they carry on like that. So, there are still many constraints. The attitudinal change among the youth is the 'I don't care' type.
>
> (Ranajit, 33-year-old married male)

> Our Bengaliness is disappearing among young people. Young people are less inclined to appreciate Bengali music and they definitely are not reading as much as the previous generation. Compared to my daughter, my grandchildren do not have the great passion for reading, especially Bengali novels.
>
> (Ashima, 51-year-old widowed female)

The above-mentioned two quotations epitomise the concern that the Indian middle classes have regarding the impact of television on their everyday lives. Satellite television, as a prime conveyor of globalised, consumer modernity, brings with it both the pleasure of screening and viewing many and varied programmes but equally is, for many, an assault on their middle-class sensibilities. But why? Are not the Indian middle classes cosmopolitan or liberal enough to take on board the images and messages that they may not always agree with? The central theme of this chapter is to explore the impact of mass media on Indian

middle-class culture and identity. We contend that the world views of informants reveal the extent to which media, specifically television and popular magazines, create and shape a newly defined, consumer, middle-class citizen of India. In particular, we examine a range of interrelated themes which repeatedly arose in discussions and interviews: the impact of 'Bollywood' film cultures; the sexualised portrayal of women in advertising and the way satellite and cable television programmes, especially music videos and certain advertisements, impact on established Bengali cultural patterns. Informants' narratives reveal that while a public, more liberal tolerant culture prevails, the private world of the family nevertheless retains many aspects of traditional moral and hierarchical principles. Moreover, determined by both gender and generational divide among the middle classes, there are divisions of opinion about the social impact of television which we explain in terms of the history of middle-class cultural formation in Bengal since colonial times. Significantly, as in the previous chapter, we argue that the struggle to preserve middle-class culture and identity in the face of great social change highlights the way in which cultural politics is at the core of middle-class opposition to neoliberal reforms and, moreover, these cultural struggles take place as much within the relative privacy of the home, as in the public sphere of the street, the workplace or the tea shop. In other words, while neoliberal reforms have inexorably changed social and economic life, their indirect impact through globalised-induced, cultural change has also been an affront to middle-class morals, culture and identity.

Visual colonialism: modernity and consumerism

There is no doubt that the media are significant carriers of the ideals of the 'new', liberalised India and in so doing promote the ideology and practices of consumer modernity – the act of purchasing the goods that define one's newly acquired wealth, or else reinforcing one's superior middle-class status. Elsewhere in Asia, consumption is what sets apart the 'new rich' from the rest of the population (Beng-Huat, 2000); it is where social differentiation is manifested in various, particular forms – from housing styles and vehicles, to fast food and children's education. Just as in the rest of Asia, 'Media images produce a vision of the Indian nation based on an idealised depiction of the urban middle classes and new patterns of commodity consumption' (Fernandes, 2000: 612). Of course, it is the peculiarities of these new forms of consumption in, and between, the various middle classes in the nation, that is of interest. For what is seen as 'modern' and 'progressive' for some

may indeed be seen to be a cultural assault on the senses for others (van Wessel, 2004).

In exploring the general issue of modernity with our informants, some were at pains to distinguish between 'western' and 'modern'. 'Modernity' was equated with technocratic and scientific rationality, while 'western' was frequently associated with morality and values, particularly those pertaining to family life and kinship. The acceptance of the public world of governance and science and the simultaneous rejection of western cultural values are traceable to the long-standing engagement with western modernity among the *bhadralok* since the nineteenth century. As Chatterjee (1993) points out in his historical account of the anti-colonial nationalism of the Bengali *bhadralok*, attempts were made by them to adopt certain aspects of western rationality (liberal tolerance, secularism, and so forth) while the cultural domain of the home and family was largely left alone. There was thus a clear distinction between a public, more liberal tolerant culture and a private, traditional or conservative lifestyle. Significantly, a clear gender demarcation emerged where women were expected to continue to be the bearers of tradition and to uphold the virtues of the family and the home. The colonial state thus reinforced traditional gender segregation, differing gender roles and a fundamental private/public distinction. To this we can add Nehruvian visions of modernity in the process of nation-making which informs their understanding.

Although at times the terms 'western' and 'modern' were conflated, some respondents went to great lengths to distinguish between modernity and consumerism. Westernisation was seen as negative when it was associated with individualism and consumerism. As one middle-aged man explained:

> There was a story I read when I was a child. It went something like this: 'that to be really happy or to ensure happiness, one should spend one's formative years, early years, in Japan, one's adult working life in the West and one's twilight years, old age, in India'; the moral of the story being that old age and wisdom are valued in our culture. That one could be assured of comfort and assistance in your old age. Unfortunately we have become so selfish and self-centred. This, 'me, me, me' attitude is largely an outcome of foreign media influences. It is having an influence on young people. The self-centred nature of youth outlook, the idea that 'I should get everything' is really a product of a consumerist Western influence. Gross violence in foreign films is also a negative influence. Violence seems to be a 'must' in Western films. Not all Western films I know.

> What I mean is the commercial Hollywood-type foreign films that dominate and also other Western TV programmes.

Some informants, like the gentleman below, were equally critical of westernised images promulgated via cable television and advertisements – these were seen as negative when they are associated with individualism and consumerism. As one man in his late thirties explained:

> One of the negative influences of cable is the excessive desire for consumer goods, compared to our time. People are more career-minded, but not necessarily as a result of cable. In the past the capacity to desire something was limited. Our *chaibar aasha* (capacity to desire) was limited and we asked for very little and our eagerness for wanting things was limited. Now even 10–12-year-olds constantly want this and that. Their eagerness to want things is immense.

Similarly, another older informant commented: 'The self-centred nature of youth outlook, the idea that "I should get everything" is really a product of a consumerist western influence.' Needless to say, parental concern over advertising featured as a main problem of television. They also emphasised the loss of innocence, often comparing their own experiences and that of their older children:

> The greatest influence is on children. They see the advertisements on TV and they say, buy me this and that. They don't know what is good or bad. They just want it. At that age we did not know things, which they know as a result of TV.

Unlike many contemporary social commentators, our respondents were not opposed to change. They recognised the inevitability of change, but felt that they should have some control of the direction of change that was taking place:

> I suppose there is a two-way traffic in all this information flow. Outsiders have come to know our outlook, our ideas and values. So ultimately my main argument is that you cannot keep your doors closed. You have to open up. It would be an impossibility to remain un-integrated in a global world. You cannot stop liberalisation. However, you have to keep certain controls. Who will keep this control? Who will maintain a check? It has to be the national government. Who else can do it? People? I am not saying that it is

> impossible. People can oppose an open door policy. They can mobilize in the face of a great force as they did during the freedom struggle. However, we have to remember that it did not happen spontaneously. It took great leadership. There is no such leadership or visionaries now. So the issue of people opposing liberalisation and being successful is doubtful.

A distinct division of opinions therefore emerged in response to the cultural threat posed by globalised mass media, especially cable television. The moral anxiety can be linked to the socio-cultural background of respondents. The genesis of this distinction can be traced to the specificity of the cultural formation of status groups in Bengali society. They have their historical roots in the emergence of the *bhadralok* in Bengal, which was outlined in Chapter 1.

For these informants, these 'contradictions of consumption' (Edwards, 2000) are seen to be foreign-derived and a blight on the moral fabric of Indian society. Liechty distinguishes three types of modernity in relation to the media and social change in Nepal: state modernism, consumer modernity and, third, 'the experience of modernity' defined as 'the lived experience of people at the point where state modernism and consumer modernity intersect with both old and new patterns of social organisation and opportunities on the one hand, and the realities of limited resources and unequal power on the other' (1995: 168–9). The media in India too play a powerful role in defining, or more accurately re-defining, what it means to be modern. In particular, the consumption of Western consumer goods, and hence conspicuous consumption, is an all-important signifier of one's attainment of 'modern' status. Kelsky (1999: 244) defines the conscious, real and symbolic ingestion of the fruits of modernity as a process of 'performing modernity'. In India, as everywhere, consumption is now an important delineator of citizenry – it defines one's status and levels of success. Consumption and modernity thus go hand in hand. Central to consumption is its promotion in various media. This can be understood in terms of the global promotion of a 'culture-ideology of consumerism' (Sklair, 1995).[1] Its all-pervasive images are able to raise aspirations despite lacking in actual power to purchase the commodities. Such images have enabled our respondents to enter a world of virtual consumption. They may simply gaze at these items today, but they expressed their wish to be able purchase them some day in the future. A telling response, exemplifying the views of many, comes from Lipika, a young woman aged 20:

> I feel sad that I can't buy what I want. I like to decorate the house with some nice furniture like you see in the magazines. Because of my economic circumstances, I can't do that. That hurts me a lot. I'd really like a dressing table and a display cabinet. Also it would be nice to a have a VCR and all of those nice things for the house. Yes, my heart's desire is to be able to buy these things.

Although at present many people's dwellings were often no more than a two-roomed flat, consisting of a minimum of modern amenities, their imagined household would constitute many of those consumer items seen in magazines or on television. Among the respondents the creation of desire promoted by the ideology of consumption has led to some tensions within the family, especially between parents and their children. It is important to remember, as we have outlined in Chapter 1, that most respondents were not opposed to change but they nevertheless felt that they should have some control of the direction of change that was taking place.

The fact that the extensive number of cable or satellite channels in India are now indigenous, locally owned and operated is of particular significance when interpreting the criticisms raised above. Among our informants, the majority had a cable connection, as can be gauged from Table 6.1.

And, of those who subscribe to cable television, they had access to at least 20 channels, with many having much more, as we see in Figure 6.1. According to Batth (2003). approximately 60 per cent of television households in India in 2002–2003 had a cable and satellite connection, which was a slightly higher proportion than our figures for the same period of time. The reason for this lower figure in our study is in part due to parental anxiety over their children's access to unsuitable programmes, and also because of interference with their school studies.

Despite reservations about advertising and its powerful influence on spending and consumer choice, an overwhelming majority welcomed

Table 6.1 Cable television connections

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Yes	63	53
No	45	37
No – but watch elsewhere	9	8
No response	3	2
Total	120	100

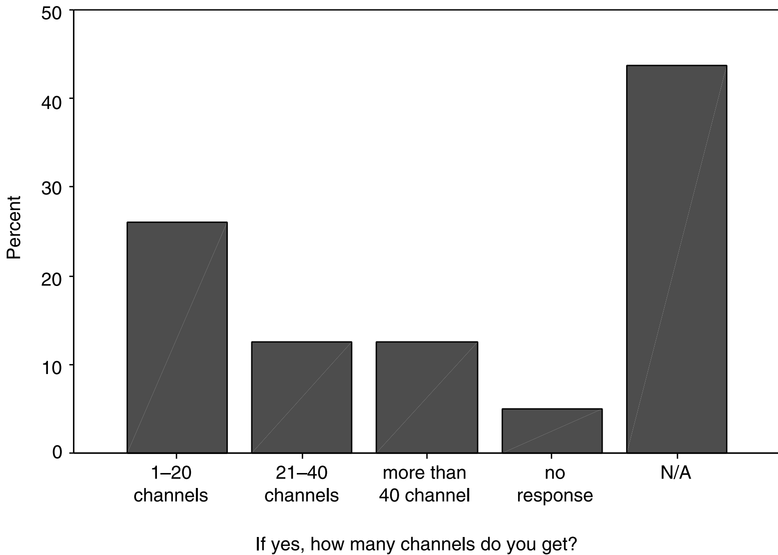

Figure 6.1 Cable television channels (subscribed).

the opening up of the electronic media, especially cable and satellite television, and generally have embraced the free flow of information. As one person summarised:

> The only positive side of liberalisation since 1991 has been the electronic media. It has really opened up. It was not like that before as far as I can remember. TV used to be entirely one-sided. It was just the government view, it was their mouthpiece. It is not like that now. I watch a lot of TVI [Indian independent cable network]. That gives you a wider overview of what is India. You cannot just look at the metropolitan cities and say this is India. TVI tries to show you the complexity and diversity of Indian life.

Oft repeated remarks were made about the opening up of the electronic media in India which has offered real alternatives to the once state-dominated media scene. For instance,

> At a personal level I have benefited from access to cable and other information. Now there is CNN, BBC and there is a variety of sources of news and current affairs which is a welcome change from

> the old Doordarshan.[2] They cannot window dress any more. Now we can know a great deal about what is going on around us.

Although a diverse range of critical print media have existed for a long time in India, a number of people highlighted that they became far more informed of social and political issues through independent visual media due to its ease of access. For example, one man in his late thirties put it in the following way:

> In the past there used to be a man and a woman just reading the news. That is all you got. There was no discussion and hardly any elaboration. This has changed dramatically with the introduction of cable. There are alternatives. These are the positives.
>
> I was not going to get cable. I got it just for a month when the World Cup was on. Then I started watching all the documentaries and current affairs, and I really got hooked.

The opportunities to view sporting programmes featured as a major reason for acquiring cable connection. The following comment typifies the views of many people, young and old, men and women:

> Sport is the best thing about cable. I am a great sports fan. I could not afford to go to a match, but I can always watch on cable. The coverage is better than what we got on Doordashan.

The influence and persuasiveness of cable and satellite television are without question. Prior to the 1990s, when most Indians with television had only the government-run stations, television was seen to be poorly produced and considered boring. It was no doubt informative, yet compared to the resources of the privateers in the international broadcasting industry, with their global links to bring viewers international sport, concerts and dramas and serials, Indian television could not compete in the entertainment stakes. How the influence of global television is measured by our informants is addressed in the following sections dealing with identity and gender. But first, we consider the nuanced formation of Bengali cultural identity.

Identity, the *bhadralok* and *apasanskriti*

In attempting to explain the negative influences of television, many of our informants repeatedly emphasised the Bengali notion of *apasanskriti*. Translated *apasanskriti* is a complex term which essentially refers

to 'crass' forms of popular culture, or undesirable mass culture. They regarded mass culture with great disdain, an outlook which stems from the perception of the debased nature of mass culture. Their view mirrors in certain ways the Frankfurt School's thesis on the culture industry and their critique of the rise and negative cultural impact of popular and mass culture from the 1930s (see, e.g. Adorno, 1991).

Running through most of the older informants' narrative accounts of television was an inherent elitism, a sense that Bengali culture was superior and that eventually the Hindi or Bollywood influences would wane. While young children were considered vulnerable, the feeling was that eventually older youth would come to appreciate their own Bengali cultural qualities and standards. A 35-year-old, divorced woman put it this way when she said:

> Toddlers who have merely learnt to speak have Hindi on their lips. They sing the songs of Hindi films. The impact on teenagers is different. It has to do with their clothing; idol worship of movie and pop stars. With young adults the impact is different yet again. It has to do with a certain attitude.

Informants were thus able to distinguish high and low culture – high culture being the arts and literature (intrinsic to *bhadralok* culture) whereas low culture (*apasanskriti*) pertains to television and other populist forms of entertainment. Television generally is perceived to have no cultural virtue except for the educational programmes and documentaries, current affairs and news programmes. For adults, children and young people were largely seen to be vulnerable to the images of consumption, violence and sexuality (i.e. *apasanskriti)*. Take the following exchange:

Question: What sort of impact do you think foreign/Western programmes are having on Bengali culture?

Response: If you watch the serials then you'll find a lot of influences. The way we behave, the clothes, the fashion, even the way young people talk. They are influenced by the Bombay channels, the cable channels.

Q: Do you think some of these foreign programmes should be restricted or censored?

R: These are satellite channels so there are child lock devices. But there should be some mechanisms on *apasanskriti* also.

Young people generally did not share this view, apart from their concern

with the frequently sexualised image of young women in advertisements, which we will consider later.

We have defined *bhadralok* as essentially the cultural category that can be used to define the Bengali middle class. Two further terms are appropriated to delineate this term: *abhijat* (refined; aristocratic) *bhadralok* and *sadharon* (ordinary) *bhadralok*. Table 6.2 summarises the differential responses of the two categories of *bhadralok*. These differences closely parallel a metropolitan/provincial divide.

We can define the *abhijat bhadralok* as those who hold more liberal humanist values, are culturally open and internationally aware and concerned and are cosmopolitan in outlook. In contrast, *sadharon bhadralok* tend to hold more conservative moral values, are provincial-minded and show a strong concern for the supposed moral decline of Indian society and a decline in Bengali culture, customs and language.

It is worth noting here that similar 'culturalised', middle-class divisions and fractions are found in other regions of India, and in other nuanced contexts in South Asia such as Nepal (Liechty, 2003) or in Gujarat (van Wessel, 2004). In her analysis of the middle class of Baroda and their attitudes towards consumption, for instance, van Wessel (2004: 12) writes:

> . . . members of the middle class in Baroda define middle class identity in terms of moral and cultural superiority of in relation to higher and lower classes . . . Ideas about the moral qualities of consumption, ideals of the merits of abstinence from material culture and of family solidarity are thus drawn from collectively held notions about those topics, but only to construct and sustain individual identities, not larger entities like the middle class or the nation.

Table 6.2 Differential attitudes of the *bhadralok* towards *apasanskriti*

Abhijat/metropolitan	*Sadharon/provincial*
apasanskriti = commercial culture – shallow or crass	*apasanskriti* = permissiveness
critical of unabashed consumerism	uncritical of consumerism
Western (negative) = individualism	Western (negative) = moral decline or a threat to Bengali values
Western (positive) = not a threat to Bengaliness/Bengali values	Western (positive) = consumerism
Critical of liberalisation (no economic benefit to self or India)	Critical of liberalisation (inflation/cost of living)

For some of our informants, *apasanskriti* is clearly derived from consumerism, while for others it is the loss of modesty and respect for authority. For the *sadharon bhadralok* it signifies a rising tide of permissiveness. For them it is equated with 'western culture' which is seen as detrimental, whereas for the *abhijat bhadralok* the unabashed consumerism itself is regarded as harmful. The unease with consumption and the notion of a subsequent shallow, meaningless society emerging from it have been reported elsewhere in India (van Wessel, 1998). However, the sources of metropolitan *bhadralok* critiques differ from the middle-class fears of consumption that van Wessel (1998) reported in the western Indian state of Gujarat, in that the latter are based on their own perceived sense of 'Indian-ness'. In contrast, discourses informing the views of the metropolitan Bengali *bhadralok* largely stem from the traditions of a left-intellectual culture prevalent in West Bengal. Within this milieu an emphasis on humanist and internationalist orientations can be found.

While those (*abhijat bhadralok*) with an identifiable cultural disposition of a particular literary and political outlook reflected an aesthetic stance of cultural openness, others (*sadharon bhadralok*) found the explicit sexualisation on television (in music videos, in advertisements and in serials) to be an affront to a Bengali sensibility and felt that children were particularly vulnerable to these influences. Many of our respondents have repeatedly emphasised this theme in various contexts in relation to media images. A typical response was:

> Children are imitating a lot from TV. Even in the villages children try to dress and behave like the way it is on TV.
>
> They really do not have any maturity or sense. In comparison with city kids, a lot of village kids are doing bad things like having sexual relations with a boy before marriage and the girls get pregnant and then they have an abortion. This is happening more in the villages nowadays.

They were not just concerned with issues of sexualisation and the vulnerability of children to 'inappropriate' images, but were likewise worried about declining morals, particularly among the working classes, who were perceived to be lacking the ability to distinguish between right and wrong. A female bank teller highlighted her anxiety in the following way:

> Even those people who come to work for you are wearing fancy clothes and lipstick. They work in domestic service in the daytime,

> but at night they get dressed up and hang about with boys. You do not recognise them at night time. These things they have learnt from the television. They did not learn it from books. They have no educational background or awareness that we should not be behaving this way. There is no control at home.

In contrast, the *abhijat bhadralok* held somewhat differing viewpoints on the impact of the global media. They were also a more highly educated group. Many were critical of the paternalistic attitudes of self-styled 'culture gurus' who constantly bemoaned the demise of the moral fabric of Indian society. From their liberal-humanist perspective, they emphasised that they were tired of those who demeaned others' capacity to select what they wanted to view and some were even keen to emphasise the positive elements of a globalised mass media:

> It is difficult to say what the overall impact of foreign media [will be]. On the cultural front perhaps a little bit; whatever you call it, 'mass culture', there is a bit of impact of that on the young. Otherwise I do not see a problem. Information-wise, it is good. Discovery Channel is really superb. There is usually a lot of discussion about it afterwards. You see there is always a negative side to everything. It all depends on the viewer. If you just watch the movies, then you gain nothing, but if you scrutinize and have a mix of entertainment and information, then it is fine. As far as small children are concerned, they get hooked on the cartoons. Some kids are fascinated by the Discovery Channel.

Middle-class accounts of television and its perceived social and cultural impact on Bengali culture thus reveal distinct differences between the *abhijat* and the *sadharon bhadralok*, with the latter group showing a tendency towards moralising and projecting their fears on the 'moral dangers' of television (and hence the moral decline of Indian civilisation) onto their children, women and the working classes.

It is significant to point out that the pejorative label '*apasanskriti*' is not only directed at North American or other Western cultural imports. As Ali, a 39-year-old male explained:

> As far as Bengali culture is concerned, there is so much *apasanskriti* being foisted upon us by the Bombay-*walas*. You can't have it both ways. We want everything and we want everything on TV to be good. That is not possible . . . For children, as I said before, it

> (*apasanskriti*) is imitating the clothing and speech and style of Bollywood stars, their dancing and prancing style.

In summary, an overwhelming majority welcomed the globalisation of electronic media, embracing the free flow of information, albeit with a critical view of the 'culturally inappropriate' foreign influences. As one person summarised: 'Now we can know a great deal about what is going on around us. In contrast to this information, we also get so much vulgarity.'

The impact of 'foreign' film and media cultures on identity

The perceived harmful influences on children and youth not withstanding, there is now a hybridisation (and globalisation) of the film music, and genre, where it now incorporates elements of rap, Latin American and Black American sounds. This shift in Bollywood film content has led Ray to see these changes in terms of the 'MTV-isation' of Hindi film culture and Indian popular entertainment more generally (Ray, 2000: 172–3). And this shift may also signal another important element in making Bombay film culture more appealing and unique to foreign audiences (including Indian audiences).

This globalisation of television in India has led to the increased localisation of media product (see McMillan, 2001). Based on this increased demand, especially for sports and indigenous language programmes, and the sheer popularity of music videos and Bollywood films, the rapid rise and financial success of cable television in the 1990s coincidentally forced the once-staid and conservative state-run network, *Doordarshan*, to broaden its programming and appeal (see Ray and Jacka, 1996). Thus, while there is a certain degree of reticence concerning the influence of Bollywood and Hindi language, and film culture on Bengali middle-class culture more generally, its dominance and sheer mass appeal make it irresistible to cable and satellite networks of India.

In a significant finding from our research, for many of our informants references made to 'foreign' influences come to mean both non-Bengali and non-Indian. What is interesting about the views on content of various cable television programmes is that there are also a number of Indian channels. Ironically, it is these channels that respondents were most critical of. Most people contended that it was not the 'western' influences per se, but the crass consumerism of the Bombay (Bollywood style) television programmes which were considered to be a harmful influence on children and youth. For example, a middle-aged woman

expressed her criticism in terms of what she saw as the 'Bollywood-ification' of Indian society:

> It is the Bombay 'Bollywood' culture whose influence is more strongly felt than Western culture . . . for the vast majority it is the world of Hindi cinema, which has been there before, but which is much more pervasive because it enters your home through the television . . . The sphere of influence, the impact is mainly to do with clothing, ways of behaving, ways of speaking and attitude. This is being felt across all ages among young people from toddlers to young men and women.

Currently, much controversy surrounds the influence of the programmes on cable television due to their 'foreignness'. We therefore explored its perceived impact on Bengali culture. For instance, one middle-aged man commented:

> Hindi programmes have come to dominate us. The use of Bengali has gone down. If you look at the sign boards you see more of English and Hindi. In some places people have tried to wipe it off and have written over in Bengali . . . They force you to show Hindi films as if Hindi is our language. There have been some dubbing in Bengali on TV, on some of the popular programmes. Even they have been cut back. So Hindi continues.

And yet another informant felt a direct impact, even threat, on his Bengali identity:

> There are lots of ads in the media which try to entice us to change our Bengaliness. Even if we don't want to, we are being tempted. Some people try to remain conventional, trying to preserve their individual Bengaliness and others want to be advanced or modern.
> (Asim, a 23-year-old Bengali male)

The underlying irony in this observation, of course, is the unintended association of Bengaliness with cultural backwardness; yet, at another level, this young man keenly observes the dichotomies of tradition and modernity. 'Whether one can maintain one's traditional Bengaliness in the modern nation' has been an ongoing debate and continues to be reconfigured under liberalisation. Narrative accounts of informants reveal tensions that exist between the maintenance of their stable cultural identities, based on traditional notions of 'Bengali-ness', gender

roles and age-based authority on the one hand, and the varieties of consumerist and western and non-Bengali images that appear with regularity on television on the other.

We asked those who felt the impact of foreign programmes on their culture was detrimental to explain their reasons and they presented a number of answers. These are detailed in Table 6.3.

The majority gave the reasons that Hindi language, along with western influences on dress and behaviour, were too influential, especially on youth and their children. Some felt that there was a paucity of Bengali programmes, and only a few felt that television was too consumer oriented. Rina, aged in her mid-thirties, says:

> On cable it is mainly in Hindi or English. Sometimes I feel we are becoming Hindusthani. Everything is in Hindi. There is too much of it. All the time Hindi programmes are shown. We see it all the time. I mean, it is as if our mother tongue is not part of the universe.

Some we interviewed felt sure that they could gauge the influences, even down to specific localities! Narendra, aged 37, observed some of the common stereotypes of Kolkata neighbourhoods:

> Yes, at least 60 per cent of people are being influenced. They imitate foreign dress. Their behaviour and attitudes are also being changed by cable television. If you do a survey among people in North, South and Central Kolkata, you will notice that people in the South are more influenced than the other areas. In Ballygunge, Dhakuria side, the situation is very different and the western influence is much more noticeable. By comparison the descendants of the ancient Zamindari [landed gentry] families living in North Kolkata still maintain their traditional way of life.

Table 6.3 Negative impacts of foreign television programmes

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Hindi detrimental to Bengali language and culture	15	23
Negative influence of foreign, westernising behaviour/ dress	21	32
Combination of above reasons	13	20
Lack of Bengali programmes	10	15
Too consumer oriented	5	8
Sport obsession	1	2

Expressing her concern that the images of lifestyles portrayed would potentially threaten Bengali culture, one woman hedged her bets by arguing for selective adoption of western cultural elements:

> Every culture has its own way of thinking, their own morals, *dhan-dharana* (cultural values/ways of thinking), their own unique ways. These are being destroyed. Those values on which we prided ourselves are under threat. I do not know what you would call it, be it Western, be it modern; these values are threatening our culture. Now let me be very specific. There are many good cultural values of the West from which we can learn. If we can adopt the positive aspects, then it is good. However, we seem to only copy the negative ones. We seem to be more attracted to them.

Curiously, however, 41 per cent regarded foreign influences as detrimental whereas the majority pointed out the resilience of Bengali culture which they felt was able to withstand the negative influences:

> The Western influence is not that great on our culture that we cannot counteract it. We have a culture that is very deep-rooted, especially in Bengal. People laugh about us; say that we still make a fuss about Tagore even well over 60 years after his death.[3] We get worked up about Nazrul.[4] We are not really that influenced by the Western media, but I have noticed that outside Bengal, especially Delhi and Bombay, its influence is quite big. Maybe their culture is not as developed or strong as ours, so they do not care much. Perhaps in Bombay it is a film-based culture anyway. Their own culture is quite weak. Similar to us, in the South, they are very proud of their identity and they do not want to imitate the West.

The discrete reference to the 'pure' cultures of the South accords with an orientalist vision of an authentic unadulterated traditional India; it compares favourably with the cultures of the north and west, 'tainted' as they are by 'foreign' or outside influences by a succession of invasions. In contrast, the cultures of the South are perceived to still encompass the values and culture of 'traditional' Hindu India, where temple dancing and devotional singings are highly valued artistic pursuits. Additionally, accounts such as these reveal the fragility of notions of a 'national culture'. In this context, Barker (1999: 68) writes: 'Any given national culture is understood and acted upon by different social groups in divergent ways, thus governments, ethnic groups, classes and genders may perceive it differently.'

In considering the impact of foreign or western programmes on Bengali culture our research showed that Bengali culture remains resilient. As we have argued so far in this chapter, in the context of cultural representation on television (electronically media-ted culture) 'foreign' comes to mean both non-Bengali and non-Indian. Acknowledging the globalisation of Indian society, one woman keenly observed:

> Yes – there is a degree of influence on Bengali culture. But that doesn't mean other cultural pursuits have disappeared such as writing, poetry, plays – these are still going strong. Speaking in Bengali language, our modes of interaction (*chaal chalan*) our values, morals (*niti-riti*) those have not disappeared. What we have lost or are in the process of losing could have been lost whether we had cable or not. This is the global age. 'Global' is the slogan. The impact of all cultures is being felt in all countries . . . The sphere of influence, the impact is on clothing, ways of behaving, ways of speaking and attitudes. This is being felt across all ages among young people from toddlers to young men and women.

For adults, children were largely seen to be vulnerable to the images of consumption, violence and sexuality. Yet, the youth in our study – apart from the sexualised image of young women – were largely unconcerned with the influences of global television. They had a more or less 'no care' attitude and could absorb cultural change. In this final section we consider another significant, moral concern regarding sexuality and immodesty.

Selling sex: television and women's immodesty

A distinct division of opinions emerged in response to the cultural threat posed by globalised mass media, especially cable television. We found that the representation of gender is central to the construction of class identity. In Chapter 3 we noted women's concern over the sexualised imagery of their gender. Here we interrogate further these standpoints, particularly in relation to advertising and serials. The influence and persuasiveness of cable and satellite television are without question. Prior to the 1990s, when most Indians with television had only the government-run stations, television was seen to be poorly produced and boring. Yet, despite its entertainment value, criticisms of the way women are portrayed come from both male and female informants, young and old alike.

As Table 6.4 indicates, almost two-thirds of informants actually

Table 6.4 Levels of satisfaction with portrayal of females on television

Response	*Frequency*	*(%)*
Satisfied	11	9
Dissatisfied	76	64
Mixed response	21	17
No response	12	10
Total	120	100

stated that they were generally dissatisfied with the portrayal of females on television.

The general response of our informants indicates that a sense of moral anxiety pervades their consciousness and this can be linked to the socio-cultural background of respondents, which were discussed under the rubric of metropolitan/provincial cultural divide among the middle classes. Many informants were extremely dissatisfied with the portrayal of women on TV, but for varying reasons. While some young women felt demeaned by the images, a number of older woman complained of the way advertisements simply used women's bodies and sexuality to sell products. The following comment illustrates their exasperation:

> In many items advertised there is no connection between the product and the woman. Why do you need a woman if you are selling *Dulal Biris*?[5] The same goes for shampoo ads. Is there a need to show a woman walking around in jeans? This can be shown in a much more aesthetic way.

Older men, too, contended that the way women are portrayed on television is shameful and degrading to all Indian women. Some typical comments were as follows:

> Now look, it is definitely pleasing to see a beautiful woman, but if she is portrayed as half-naked, then I don't like. Men my age don't appreciate this kind of image of a woman.

And,

> Some women have begun to wear very revealing clothes as a result of seeing these [sexualised] images on TV. Clothing, which is unsuitable and would be unimaginable in a Bengali middle-class

> family is shown. There are some women who wear these types of clothing, like wearing jeans and a T-shirt in a very revealing way. You feel embarrassed even when you pass these women in the street.

Extreme dissatisfaction with the portrayal of women on TV applies largely to people over the age of 35, regardless of their gender. While television was seen to be negative in its demeaning portrayal of Indian women, others saw it as having no great influence, at least in terms of women's advancement:

> Women have come forward a lot in terms of cultural and economic advancement. They are a lot more independent and self-reliant. They try their very best to be independent by taking up tutoring jobs, etc. You wouldn't have generally seen this sort of effort before. But this is nothing to do with the influence of television. Undoubtedly in terms of education and culture, things have become better for girls. Previously we would have thought that if a girl went anywhere after school she would turn out to be bad. That kind of mentality is not there any more. Girls have ample freedom.

Interestingly, however, two of our key informants pointed to the potential for women to question their social situation and social standing and felt that television could play a positive role in terms of advancing women's social position:

> They can follow positive role models from some good serials. Sometimes we talk about these issues with friends around us. Today we see that families are splitting up. I don't really know the reasons for that. However, we have certain expectations about the relationships between parents-in-laws, which if you ask more women, they will be able to tell you in greater detail.
>
> Generally for women in Bengali families there is no world beyond the husband, children and the family. They are not expected to think beyond that. But when they see a television programme which questions these ideals, naturally it creates confusion in their minds. An alternative scenario is created and they think, 'Is this right or is this wrong?'

Further, a few respondents pointed to the potential for women to question their social situation and social standing and felt that television could play a positive role in terms of advancing women's social position.

A number of young married women remarked that the different role models portrayed in soap operas was enabling for them. They argued that it allowed men to 'open up', show emotion and express their feelings. This in turn was helpful in openly discussing and strengthening their relationships with their husbands. Undoubtedly the soap operas cover these issues extensively. However, it is a remarkable twist to earlier narratives of romantic heroes present in Indian novels or films. When asked why they found the plethora of romantic novels to be of little value, many confessed not having time to read or going to the movies. Moreover, many of the traditional romantic stories were focussed on the pursuit of love before marriage, there was little in the way of therapeutic value in post-marriage problems.

Some serials and soap operas were praised for the positive role models portrayed – professional, educated woman who can make independent choice. As this middle-aged man explains:

> There are serials on TV which women watch. I think women are now confused. They see an event that is quite unrealistic in our lives, but they see it and ask themselves, is this possible? Even if it is something that no one does, it certainly raises issues and has an impact.

And, for this middle-aged woman, there are some positives for younger girls:

> The idea was that if a girl or even a boy stayed out, parents would be furious. It was considered to be a sign of the children 'going to the dogs'. These days parents don't fuss. It is not an automatic assumption that if a girl is not at home, then she is a bad girl. She may be at her friend's house. She might be staying overnight. I have noticed this change of attitude both with my mother and my mother-in-law. They don't make an issue of it. Such a change has probably come about as a result of the programmes on cable, because these sorts of issues are often raised in the serials they watch.

Moreover, some informants even made the observation that these types of programmes can lead to oppressed or dominated women questioning their marriages, their role as housewife and mother, or the general family and household dynamics. Despite this optimism, Chakravarti (2000: WS-15) makes the point that the televised portrayal of family tensions and relationships between husband and wife are 'carefully crafted and deployed in highly controlled statements; her little struggles serve

to merely provide a catharsis for herself and her female viewers rather than upturn the system in any way'.

On the whole, however, informants were not very critical of the actual nature of gender relations portrayed in the advertisements and serials. In terms of advertisements, for example, this is in part due to the ways in which advertising has carefully repackaged these relations – the advertisements do not fundamentally challenge traditional power relations between men and women (Chakravarti, 2000). Subsequently, the respondents' criticisms centre primarily around the aesthetics of representation. Economic liberalisation has reinforced, rather than broken down gender stereotypical representations on television. Yet, although there has been a subtle shift in representation of women, the underlying message of obedience and adherence to one's 'natural role' as wife and mother remains. As Rajagopal (1999: 91) explains, in the context of television advertisements:

> The wife is now an outgoing, aggressive bargainer who is nonetheless a devoted mother and full-time housewife; or the daughter-in-law now outsmarts her mother-in-law in her knowledge of detergents but is primarily concerned with getting her husband's shirts clean. While older power relations – keeping the woman in the home, or subordinate to her mother-in-law – are superseded, they are replaced by new relations emphasising the salience of patriarchal nuclear family obligations over those of the extended family or community.

Similarly, Munshi (1998) argues that feminist struggle is subverted by the marketplace, consumerism and the media so that women's struggle remains 'posited *within* traditional structures of patriarchal hegemony and does not become a disruptive force from *without*' (1998: 573; original emphasis). These complex constructions of interpretations and intersection between, gender, sexuality and consumption thereby force us to re-think the nature of gender and modernity in an economically liberalised, globalising India. While we have alluded to many of these debates in Chapter 3, in this chapter we have focused on how the specific nature of women's cultural identities are being shaped by various media portrayals and stereotypes.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have analysed the differing views of the middle classes regarding the impact of globalised, satellite and cable television.

Importantly, globalised media has also forced the Bengali middle classes to reconsider their culture and its place in contemporary India. We argue that there has been a significant transformation of middle-class cultural identity in West Bengal brought about by globalisation and the influence of a consumer-oriented life promoted by economic liberalisation.

We have demonstrated that there are contradictory trends emerging in the light of globalisation and the influence of a consumer-oriented life promoted by economic liberalisation and globalisation and fuelled by pre-existing tensions within the metropolitan/provincial cultural divide in Bengali society. First, however, these tensions and differences mainly apply to the older generation. Younger people, in contrast, did not think 'Bengali civilisation as we know it' has ended simply because of the advent of a globalised mass media and liberalised economy. Some remain more or less ambivalent to cultural change while other youth are critical of certain aspects, such as the sexualised portrayal of women in many advertisements and on many entertainment programmes (i.e. music videos).

Second, there is an ongoing, largely symbolic, struggle to maintain Bengali cultural identity. Satellite and global television is perceived as a potential cultural threat yet, conversely, (older) Bengalis remain convinced of the inherent security of their language and customs. 'Foreign', as we pointed out before, is seen both in terms of non-Indian and non-Bengali. This therefore raises important questions as to the nature of identity *vis-à-vis* the state and various cultural institutions. In many ways, our research shows that cultural identity formation (and re-making) are a fluid process, where one mobilises an identity to fit a particular circumstance. In many ways, we see our respondents as negotiating globalisation, and in so doing see themselves as not necessarily victims to the process.

Third, there is an ongoing tension in terms of the control of women's sexuality and roles. Television is replete with images of sexual permissiveness, especially in advertisements and music videos. Yet, while the tastefulness of such images were questioned, what we found uncritically accepted is the assigned role of wife and mother, the bearer of Bengali family tradition and honour. For instance, it was not the fact that the young wife in the soap advertisement was washing the clothes, it was the fact that she was immodest in her dress that was the criticism directed at these types of advertisements. Thus, an underlying persuasiveness of gender inequality remains.

Notes

1. Sklair (1995) details the way in which global capitalism is reproduced through a variety of transnational practices and is maintained by the promulgation of a culture-ideology of consumerism.
2. *Doordashan* is the government-run television network.
3. Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Bengali novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.
4. Nazrul Islam, noted Bengali poet and revolutionary, whose writings in the first half of the twentieth century inspired the Indian freedom struggle, especially in Eastern India.
5. *Biris* are an indigenous cigarette in India.

7 Conclusion

Indian middle-class lives in the era of neoliberal globalisation

> In the future, the middle class, families like ours, will disappear. People will either move up into the upper class or they'll get absorbed into the lower class. We'll become like Bangladesh!
>
> (Mrs M. Das, aged 46, librarian)

The essence of this book has been to uncover, as the subtitle declares, the social and cultural impact of neoliberal reforms on the lives of the Indian middle classes in a particular time and place. For the most part, for want of finer categorisation, the people we interacted with and wrote about can best be described as lower middle class, that segment who mostly earns a living from wages and salaries, in established professional occupations such as clerks, teachers and technicians. No one we interviewed over the years defined themselves as poor, and they were adamant that their lives were materially better than the great majority of those living in the state of West Bengal. We found these people, on the whole, to be sympathetic and humanist, but many adhered to deeply ingrained traditions, superstitions, attitudes and stereotypes. Mrs Das forewarns, however, of a continuation of the social polarisation that has occurred over the last decade, which will eventuate in the withering away of the middle strata of Bengal until there are only a chosen few left to reap the benefits of liberalisation.

The cultural traditions of the *bhadralok*, their privileges, have formed and solidified over the decades, even centuries, and are reinforced by status demarcation and social closure. Mostly, they all wanted their children to marry other middle-class children from relatively similar social backgrounds. For those who had transacted arranged marriages, intra-caste unions took place, with all their attendant ritual practices and with suitable matching horoscopes. Despite the rhetoric of the modern 'new woman' with endless lifestyle choices, most families maintained conventional gender roles. In this sense, many of

the informants were deeply 'traditional' and conservative in their general outlook. At the same time, there were those whose children married across caste and in one atypical case, even across religion. The uncovering of these 'exceptions to the rules' highlights the significance of our ethnographic research. Like most social groups, they are deeply flawed and contradictory, but we fundamentally disagree with Dipankar Gupta's (2000) opinion of the Indian middle class as being 'shallow consumers' and 'misplaced modernisers'. To us, it really depends on which middle class one is referring to, from which social location, from what cultural and ethnic situation they originate, and in what historical period. On this point, we are reminded of the succinct argument of Lila Abu-Lughod (1991: 152–3) when she writes:

> [T]he problem with generalization derives not from its participation in the authoritative discourses of professionalism [in anthropological writing] but from the effects of homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness it tends to produce. When one generalizes from experiences and conversations with a number of specific people in a community, one tends to flatten out differences among them and to homogenize them. The appearance of an absence of an internal differentiation makes it easier to conceive of a group of people as a discrete, bounded entity . . . who do this or that and believe such and such.

Hence, we emphasise the necessity to avoid over-generalisations of the Indian middle classes. Equally, in particular instances and in relation to particular attitudes, we have demonstrated striking similarities between the middle classes in other parts of India, such as Gujarat (van Wessel, 2004), in other parts of South Asia, such as Nepal (Liechty, 2003), and even in other very different global contexts, such as Brazil (O'Dougherty, 2002).

There are in India, therefore, acknowledged regional and cultural specificities; in our case, among the Bengali middle class, the *bhadralok*, elements of which have been a relatively powerful social, cultural and political force for more than two centuries. Yet the 'elements' we worked and lived with over the years were not so well connected, not so privy to the intimate goings-on in the ruling CPM, and had few powerful '*dadas*' (political power brokers) who could get them out of a financial or legal fix at the snap of a finger. Many held a general world view of a fundamental humanism and wished for the future betterment of Indian, and Bengali, society. As Varma (1998) noted, the writing is indeed 'on the wall' for the future of the Indian middle

classes, and Indian economic and social development itself is under immense pressure; our informants, in various expressive and meaningfully rational ways, sensed this uncertain future and were cognisant of its challenges. Under such threatening circumstances, they do what most middle classes around the world do – secure their financial resources, make rational consumer choices, invest and save, secure a good education for their children, and look after their family and kin as much as possible.

We have already referred to several important studies, in the preceding chapters, debating the size of the Indian middle class, providing a history of the Indian middle classes, and analysing their political influences and voting behaviours. Our book is a cautionary tale against overestimating the size of the middle classes and generalising about their strengths and influences. It has not been our intention to discuss the micropolitics and social history of Calcutta or, for that matter, Bengali homes and neighbourhoods. Again, significant recent studies have done just that (Chatterjee, 1997), with some authors in particular focusing on the impoverishment and marginality of the poor in rural towns (Rogaly *et al.*, 1999; Ganguly-Scrase, 2001), and others looking more closely at marginality caused by state-sponsored, neoliberal reforms and urban redevelopment in the metropolis of Calcutta (Ray, 2003). What we have argued, though, is for the importance, indeed centrality, of a micro-level analysis of the impact of neoliberal globalisation as it affects ordinary, working people's lives – how it shapes their opinions, structures their actions, and ultimately determines their nuanced, class-based cultural and social reproduction. In other words, it is through understanding the multifarious impacts of neoliberal reforms on people's daily lives that we are better able to comprehend the macro, global neoliberal reform agenda itself – both its causes and consequences.

Driving our treatment of neoliberalism in this study has been a desire to understand the ways in which it has become normative; in other words, how the ideology of neoliberalism underpins people's day-to-day actions. How do the lower middle classes respond to the challenges when their institutions, mainly the state-sponsored workplaces and generous employment benefits, come under sustained pressure to reform? A part of the answer to this puzzle lies in the narrative accounts of challenges and change: informants attempt to 'negotiate globalisation' – they see themselves as not necessarily victims of the process and feel that they can actively manipulate aspects of the changes taking place. We saw this clearly in Chapter 4 when, in many workplaces, rather than lose hope, people instead embraced the ideology of

neoliberal reform, rationalised the radical reform agenda and changes mooted as a 'necessary evil' which would lead to overall improvement of their workplaces and a betterment of their lives. Here we see how, although neoliberal globalisation challenges their morals, ideals and cultural values, the hegemony of neoliberalism plays out – its core values are subtly incorporated and the lower middle classes are left little choice but to see it as 'beneficial'.

Economic liberalisation, we argue, then, is by no means an accepted dogma, and in various ways our study reveals fundamental dissatisfaction with the processes. Just as the working classes and peasantry remain marginal to the process of globalisation, so do the lower middle classes, principally because their aspirations are not matched by material gain. As Biplab, one of our oldest friends and key informant, exclaimed:

> You cannot stop liberalisation. However, you have to keep certain controls. Who will keep this control? Who will maintain a check? It has to be the national government. Who else can do it? People? I am not saying that it is impossible. People can oppose an open door policy. They can mobilise in the face of a great force as they did during the freedom struggle. However, we have to remember that it did not happen spontaneously. It took great leadership. There is no such leadership or visionaries now. So the issue of people opposing liberalisation and being successful is doubtful.

We have also considered economic liberalisation and its impact on education and schooling. There is the intrinsic relationship between a command of English and future, professional employment, a relationship forged in the colonial history of India and reinforced by the dictates of a globalised economy. English proficiency mitigates the ill effects of liberalisation, with its increased competition and control of the workforce, and endows a person with a significant social advantage by securing his or her cultural capital.

Finally, in terms of national 'development', we have revealed how some people remain committed to the notion of consumer-driven modernity, but for many, their moral opposition to cultural globalisation is couched in terms of the demise of 'Bengaliness' – the loss of their language, customs, traditions and 'appropriate' behaviour – rather than in terms of the costs, quality or country of origin of a particular consumer good. In the face of an encroaching consumer-driven and consumerist mass media, the lower middle classes engage in a largely symbolic struggle to maintain their *bhadralok* ideals. Yet, even here, our

discussion of the nuanced interpretations of new media and consumer images revealed deep divisions based on provincial attitudes and overt moralistic overtones; others, by comparison, were simply unconcerned, and looked down upon those who were. Ultimately, it is by revealing such peculiarities and nuances of people's everyday lives that we can better comprehend the impacts of neoliberal globalisation on middle-class reproduction in India.

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