

call themselves 'middle class'—a somewhat different set of people than those whom analysts include in this category, since many of those who claim middle-class identity in Madurai fall below the lower boundaries of objective definitions. My attention to subjective identities is a result of how I came to the topic. Although I have studied class relations and identities in Madurai since 1985, I was sceptical of the early fanfare over the growth of the Indian middle class. Despite the increased visibility of this class in India's national imaginary, as well as in media representations by other nations whose governments and manufacturers were eager for a liberalized Indian economy, reliable

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

Sherry Ortner has noted that 'we may think of class as something people are or have or possess, or as a place in which people find themselves or are assigned, but we may also think of it as a project, as something that is always being made or kept or defended, feared or desired'.³ In a similar vein, I take class to be not only a determining structure⁴ but also a process that produces and is produced by interactions of individuals' and groups' economic, cultural, and social capital.⁵ These different forms of capital derive to some extent from one another, but none is entirely reducible to any other.⁶ I am interested in both the routine and the monumental practices by which capital is produced, but in this paper, I focus especially on the former. As Herring and Agarwala note, 'at the micro level, where all of us live, are the day-to-day practices through which classes define and reproduce themselves'.⁷ These 'micro-level' practices have great impact on the more singular events that affect class and life chances in urban India, such as educational decisions, marriage negotiations, and occupational choices. Class is not the only source of power in Madurai, as I discuss below, but it is a primary determinant of respect and of the distribution of social, cultural, and economic resources.

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

³ Sherry Ortner, *New Jersey Dreaming: Capital, Culture, and the Class of '58* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke, 2003), pp. 13-14.

⁴ Ronald Herring and Rina Agarwala, 'Introduction', *Critical Asian Studies* 38, 4: 323-356 (2006), p. 325.

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

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Listening to middle-class people talk about their lives quickly creates an awareness of the extent to which these people see themselves as performing an identity. I view their identity construction as 'performative' not in Butler's sense of performativity, in which identities are naturalized and made real by reiteratively acting them out,⁸ nor in Turner's sense of the reflexive self-observation occasioned by social dramas,⁹ but—going back further in social science theory—in line with Goffman's notion of the dramaturgical. In this perspective, people, all with greater and lesser degrees of self-consciousness at different times, merge 'selves' with the 'masks' of social roles and, with consequences that are central to my analysis, see themselves as *acting* a part. The accounts of people in all class positions in Madurai

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Economic liberalization and the middle class in India

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

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

India's middle classes are frequently portrayed as the primary beneficiaries of these economic policies, largely due to their growing purchasing power and the simultaneous increase in the quality and availability of the consumer goods for which they constitute the major market. Yet despite the significant increases in measures of national wealth, including GDP and GNI per capita,¹⁵ the benefits of economic growth have been more narrowly distributed than is often assumed. Some members of the conventional middle class (including civil servants, professionals, and business owners), primarily its wealthiest segment, have benefited financially from liberalization policies. This group has been widely showcased as proof of India's successful modernization and globalization.¹⁶ As several analysts have noted, however, the effects of liberalization have in fact been mixed for middle and lower classes alike.¹⁷ For example, many public sector enterprises, such as life insurance and

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

Characterizing the middle class

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

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

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

of caste, community, or region) and *competences* (educational, linguistic, or

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

Class identities and relations in Madurai will also vary somewhat from those in other Indian cities because of their specific interactions with other sources of power and identity, particularly political ties and caste. Party allegiance and other political connections may improve

Caste groups vary in their attitudes toward consumption—such as which kinds of consumer goods and practices are most valuable and prestigious, and particularly the extent to which those goods and practices should be displayed and enacted in public and at home. The standard characterizations of individual castes' consumption practices are in the realm of stereotypes, but they were expressed both by members of the castes themselves and by outsiders. Brahmans, for example, who rank at the top of the caste hierarchy—but on the

population.²⁷ In Madurai, some Chettiar sub-castes tend to specialize in business (as do many Nadars) more than other castes, and Dalits are said to hold almost all of the municipal sanitation jobs (which come with the benefits of government positions but also with the stigma of polluting and dirty work). These tendencies are important, in part because they suggest that entry into or exclusion from some occupations is affected by caste, even when education is controlled

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

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

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

Class categories in Madurai have been in flux since the early 1990s. Moreover, they vary according to the language being spoken. In Tamil, current class categories include *ēlai makka!*³⁴ (poor people) or *illātavarka!* (people who have nothing); *naṭuttaramānavarka!* (people in the middle) or *naṭuttara kuṭumpam* (middle family); and *paṇakkārarka!* (monied people), *vacatīyānavarka!* (people with resources or luxuries), or *periyavarka!* (big people).³⁵ The class categories used today by English speakers are typically 'lower class', 'middle class', and 'upper class'. When greater specificity is required, gradations such as 'upper middle class' are also utilized. Unless stated otherwise, I use 'middle class' and 'middle people' interchangeably in this paper even though the two terms have slightly different lexical referents. That is, because terminology depends on the primary language of the speaker, and because people fluent in English tend to be higher class than people who are not, those who call themselves 'middle class' will on average be invoking a slightly better off group or category than will those who call themselves '*naṭuttaramānavarka!*'. The concepts are sufficiently ci13.1glahef.9(g2(u

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

Instead, as the following accounts demonstrate, class standing is defined by a family’s economic and social security, its distance from wealth on the one hand and from mere survival or subsistence on the other (‘wealth’ and ‘subsistence’ being, however, relative terms), the uses to which any discretionary income is put, and the ways in which individuals use the ‘goods’ they acquire—in other words, how

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

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

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

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

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

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

The good and the bad of being in the middle

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

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

Visibility, counting, and citizenship

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

⁴¹ Fernandes, 'Restructuring'; Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, p. 130.

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

postcolonial modernity became increasingly articulated in terms of consumerism. In television's discourses, modernity was frequently equated

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

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

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

Sara: In what ways is it good?

Scrutiny and constraints

They all identified themselves as middle-class, and came to a consensus that being middle-class means having a monthly income, owning a small amount of property (such as a house), and having a two-wheeler (a scooter or a motorbike). When I asked whether one could be in the middle class and have a6s6s

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Lalitha: While the lower class stays within its limits.

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

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

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

Economic, social, and cultural capital interact in numerous settings. Onlookers must be compellingly convinced and persuaded of one's class identification. This may especially be true in a newly emerging class for which the material and processual indicators are in great flux. The need to convince others of where one stands—which may indeed be less of a pressure for the poor and the rich—is especially acute among the different layers of the middle class, and perhaps most so among those whose families lack certain forms of social and cultural capital (such as conventional middle-class jobs for two or more generations, tertiary education, and/or high caste). Qualitative studies of the middle class in South Asian cities reveal that many members of the middle class report such anxiety,⁶⁰ though some do not (such as the information technology professionals studied by Fuller and Narasimhan,⁶¹

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

⁶³ Lindy Warrell, 'Conflict and Hierarchy: Jealousy among the Sinhalese Buddhists', *South Asia XIII*, 1: 19-41 (1990); David Pocock, 'The Evil Eye', in T. N. Madan, ed., *Religion in India*

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

Here, the social reference group is Anjali's nearby neighbours. More dispersed peer sets can be equally attentive. Raman, a Brahman doctor, had a heart attack in his forties, several years after he and his wife Usha had built a new hospital and a large new house. Although Raman was not involved in politics, he had become well connected to many of the powerful politicians and bureaucrats in Madurai, who patronized him as one of the few cardiologists in the city. Although Usha dismissed the idea, Raman's mother was concerned that her son's heart attack had been caused by others in their social set who were jealous of Raman's marked professional and economic success. Usha did believe that their peers—other doctors and their families, and other successful professionals with whom they socialized—had watched Raman's rise closely to see whether he made any mistakes on his way. Whether it was neighbours or a more dispersed social network doing the watching, in both cases, the dangers of envy arose because Anjali and Raman began to stand out from their peers. Where they had previously been relatively equal to others in these communities, Anjali and Raman gained greater resources (education, a government loan, a new business and po hisel Tei's busc.3(as)-4e;89.6(b5eater)-277.6(bus42.8289

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

Conclusion

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

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

⁷⁰ Herring and Agarwala, 'Introduction', p. 325.

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

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

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

middle class serves to disseminate a dominant ideology, and that the porousness of the lower boundary of the middle class helps to inculcate those hegemonic values,⁷³ or that middle class involvement in the politics of hegemony functions in part 'to forge internal unity within the highly diverse fragments of the middle class'.⁷⁴ As I have suggested, it may also reflect the continued (or new) hegemonic role for upper-caste values. There is certainly evidence in the accounts presented in this paper of the reproduction of hegemony through values

