

WOMEN AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT : A CASE STUDY OF LOWER MIDDLES CLASSES IN INDIA

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1. Introduction

The emergence of a global market economy has brought about significant social and cultural change in the Asia-Pacific region. India has pursued a policy of economic liberalisation since the mid-1980s, which was a dramatic reversal of earlier policies of protecting domestic industrial capital. Growing social inequalities as a consequence of global integration of the Indian economy have been noted by a number of social scientists (Singh 1993, Panini 1995, Vanaik 1993). In particular gender disparities in the liberalisation process are of great concern (Acharya 1995; Sen 1996; Swaminathan 1998). This paper examines the experiences and perceptions of the lower middle classes in West Bengal, India towards globalisation and economic liberalisation. I focus on the lower middle classes because they utilise notions of gender equality as an important marker of the construction of their class identity. More significantly, while much has been said about the expansion of the middle class in India as a consequence of the globalisation of the economy, they remain a highly differentiated group. Although there is a shared cultural milieu among the middle class, those within its upper stratum have accrued disproportionately higher benefits than the lower segments. Since the formulation of liberalisation policies it is widely understood that the privatization of public sector enterprises, reduction in investment in public sector units and lower government expenditure on poverty eradication programs have hurt the interests of women. Yet, my study¹ reveals that women themselves do not perceive their situation to be detrimental to their lives. Instead they considered themselves to be more empowered compared to an earlier generation of women. The paradoxical nature

of gendered identities among the lower middle classes in West Bengal is considered in detail in this article.

In the first section of this paper I discuss some of the key aspects of the process of the liberalisation of the Indian economy, especially in relation to widening gender inequalities. This will be followed by a critical account of the narratives of my informants. Despite almost a decade of radical economic reform, there remains little in the way of micro-level sociological research documenting the direct, and indirect, effects of this process of economic reforms for communities and local groups². My study is thus concerned with the lived experiences of those who are directly affected by the vagaries of economic liberalisation and globalisation in India.

The IMF derived structural adjustment programs were implemented in India and in July 1991 the New Economic Policy (NEP) was formulated. West Bengal developed its own NEP in 1994. The current economic reforms aim at liberalising the economy from various bureaucratic regulations and controls that are said to have stifled growth³. Making the economy more efficient through increased market orientation is the major goal of the reforms. The central strategy is to secure a greater share of the global market in industry, trade and services through increased productivity. This is in marked contrast to the post independence developmental strategy of self-reliant economic growth and the rhetoric of 'socialism'. Under the 5-year plans the government played an interventionist role in industrialisation through the public sector, which assumed the 'commanding heights' through licensing and regulatory mechanisms. The new market oriented state ideology and economic reforms are confusing to many people. This was particularly the case in West Bengal, which has been ruled by a coalition of left political parties since 1977, dominated by the Communist Party of India, CPI (M). Initially opposed to market reforms the Left-Front government has now become vociferous in its attempt to attract foreign transnational corporations into the state. At this juncture, I wish to point out the significance of the left parties in West Bengal, particularly its influence in the cultural domain. I shall return to this point shortly when considering the public debates concerning gender equality.

Policies of economic liberalisation seemingly have done little to redress gender inequalities (Upadhyay, 2000; Arora, 1999; Dewan, 1999). An influential volume prepared by the Centre for Women's Development Studies (2000) shows that not only do these policies affect various classes differently, but also affect men and women differently.

Reflecting upon the implications of liberalisation for women, Ghosh (1996) suggests that women will bear the cost of economic restructuring. Although she calls for the urgent need for data, she herself does not provide concrete evidence. Sociologists have drawn attention to the negative impact on women. For example,

The new economic policy has affected women both directly and indirectly. The unorganized sector is the biggest source of female employment. The threat posed to employment opportunities by multinational corporations as well as trade liberalization will seriously jeopardize the availability of employment opportunities for women in this sector. The agro-processing industry, where women work in large numbers, is being taken over by Kellogg, Pepsi Cola, Nestle, General Foods and so on. Import of modern technology will lead to the cutback in low skill jobs for women. The overall economic development has increasingly excluded women from productive employment, pushing them into marginal occupations and has increasingly marginalized women (Mathew, 1995, 67 : 68).

While Dalal (1995) argues that the present policies encourage displaced rural women workers to migrate to overcrowded urban areas, Basu (1996) suggests that moves towards privatization and a market economy will weaken the already insufficient infrastructure in relation to services for rural women.

It seems however, that market liberalisation and structural adjustment policies can have a contradictory impact on women when we explore the cultural terrain. While new forms of inequality result from economic reforms, there may be other opportunities for greater independence. Omvedt (1997) contends that when considering women's rights within Indian families' analysis must transcend the state/ market dichotomy, in which the latter is invariably negatively evaluated. She argues that in light of democratization of gender relations within the family, effects of structural adjustment on women has not been as much of a burden as its opponents would claim. In relation to Bengali women, the most relevant comparable cultural experience is that of neighboring Bangladesh. Feldman's (1992) study of women workers in export-processing enclaves in Bangladesh shows that women from rural middle-strata families were able to gain employment opportunities, which were previously denied to them. This opportunity challenged the traditional prohibitions on female mobility that were 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 required a reinterpretation of family status. Agarwal (1992) argues that the ability of women to draw on extra

familial resources goes towards enhancing their bargaining position within the household. Focusing on regional patterns of gender relations in India, she emphasizes the mediating effects of cultural processes as well as the various coping strategies of households with different assets. Therefore when considering how economic changes have shaped gender relations and people's responses class differentials and cultural specificity are of paramount importance. In the foregoing analysis the specificity of the lower middle class in West Bengal is considered.

I had entered the field assuming that the growing gender inequalities stemming from the impact of the new economic policies to be self-evident. However, during fieldwork, my preconceived ideas were challenged. Against the overwhelming evidence on the negative impact of economic liberalisation, I found that women do not perceive themselves to be the victims of the New Economic Policy. Instead they emphasize their own sense of self-worth and advancement of women's everyday lives. Such an apparent paradox stems from the ongoing constructions of gender equality. These notions have been shaped by colonial and postcolonial debates on the emancipation of women, which I discuss later in the paper.

2. An ethnographic account of economic reforms in West Bengal, India

The remaining sections of this paper explore the narratives of my informants. They are based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with low-ranking salaried workers and their families in Calcutta and in Siliguri in North Bengal. I began my fieldwork some two years ago. There were twenty key informants. Between September 1998 and April 1999, a further 120 people were interviewed (60 in each city), utilising a snowballing method. Females constituted 52% of our study, while males were 48%. The overwhelming majority (75%) were employed in the formal or organised sector of the labour force, while a quarter was working in the so-called informal sector.

This research is ethnographic and qualitative in nature. This approach enables me to explore the complexity of social relationships through the process of an intense participation in the everyday life of the people being studied. The strength of ethnographic research lies in the richness of the feedback, observations and responses of the 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, doubts have been raised concerning the adaptability of the method of long-term fieldwork in a single location in an era of globalisation (Appadurai, 1996; Stoller, 1997). In other words to what extent is it possible apply this methodology – originally designed to study relatively isolated and bounded communities- in a globalising world where the cultural boundaries are porous? To redress this methodological problem, Marcus (1995) has drawn attention to the emergence of multisited ethnographies in the world system. Its imperatives allow participation and observation that cut across dichotomies of the local and the global, in which the latter "...is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations rather than something monolithic or external to them". In exploring the complex effects of neo-liberalism, globalisation and local politics on the consciousness of those who confront these processes, the approach taken inevitably led to comparisons across different locales, resulting in a multiply situated ethnography. The two sites, which became significant, were Calcutta and Siliguri.

Permeability of cultural boundaries notwithstanding (Ganguly-Scrase, 1993), we were interacting with people who were widely dispersed and they did not have many ties with each other. And yet they had a strong sense of social identity of belonging to a particular segment of Bengali society, namely the lower middle class. I elaborate below on the nature of this segment that could be described as lower middle class.

The town of Siliguri in North Bengal presents an interesting contrast to the metropolis of Calcutta, particularly in terms of the uneven impact of globalisation. It is a vibrant frontier town where there has been a considerable influx of migrant Bengali populations amidst a largely diverse tribal population both in the pre and post partition periods. As migrant communities, Bengalis in North Bengal have had to grapple with questions of identity and this has made them more attuned to issues of Bengali-ness, particularly in this era of heightened cultural globalisation. In addition, historically Siliguri has been a major centre of both official and black-market trade in various foreign consumer goods from Thailand via Bangladesh and from Nepal. Finally, in comparison to Calcutta, Siliguri has had little in the way of industrial production (with the exception of the tea industry located around Siliguri) or infrastructural development.

3. Socio-economic background

This study is not concerned with analysing the working class or the very poor in India under liberalisation. All the evidence points to the fact that the very poor have not benefited at all from economic liberalisation (Singh 1993; Acharya, 1995; Panini 1995). Instead, it is concerned with studying a class fraction - that is, the lower middle-class. It is important to bear in mind the problems of lumping together the lower and upper levels of the middle classes in Asia. Firstly, ideological and policy shifts in development to structural adjustment has resulted in differentiation of the middle classes in India (Deshpande 1998). Secondly, while the lower middle classes in Western Europe and North America are increasingly becoming proletarianized, even lower levels of these strata in contemporary Asia may regard themselves very differently. Therefore these groups should be regarded as class fractions rather than a single unified class (Sen and Stevens, 1998 : 15). There are also further implications for the emerging identities of the various fractions of the middle classes given that class formation is a gendered phenomenon (Crompton & Mann, 1986, Acker 1999).

For the purposes of my study, I have defined the lower middle class in Bengal in terms of both a particular economic bracket and a cultural milieu. Their household income ranges from Rs2000-8000 per month⁴. In terms of culture, this group forms part of the Bengali bhadralok⁵. Their self-ascription was often couched in terms of being lower middle class. Indeed, their use of the Bengali term *nimno moddhobitto* suggested the same classification. Presenting a striking contrast to the real poor, other terms used were 'ordinary folk', or 'common folk', 'people of limited means' or simply 'those dependent on a salary'⁶. During our fieldwork no one claimed that they were poor, despite their lack of material wealth. On the contrary, there were attempts to distance themselves from the poor in subtle ways.

This group is of particular significance given the elasticity of the category middle class, which is said to have expanded greatly and thus have become a beneficiary of the structural adjustment reforms to the economy and industry⁷. Over the past decade much has been said about the growth of the middle class in India. The unswerving faith in liberalisation policies as the solution to the overall improvement for standard of living of the population underpins the state's rationale for forging ahead with the economic reforms. Our findings have challenged the notion of a homogenous Indian middle class as being

the undoubted beneficiaries of New Economic Policies. We have shown that the lower middle classes remain both supporters of NEP yet sceptical of whether any benefits will accrue to them (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase 1999; Ganguly-Scrase 2000).

The group we studied were largely white-collar, salaried persons. Although some of those interviewed may not have been earning even Rs1000/month, due to underemployment, their total household income, as we stated above, was between 2000-8000/month. Mostly they were clerks, lower professionals and administrators, and sales personnel. In neo-Weberian terms, following the sevenfold (seven scales) stratification model developed by British sociologists Goldthorpe & Hope (1974), 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) – in their terms, the “lower white collar classes”. In neo-Marxist terms, following the writings of Erik Olin Wright (1985), they may be seen to be in a contradictory class location - semi-autonomous, professional employees laying somewhere between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie. I utilise these categories to specify the occupational characteristics of our respondents in terms of their market capacity and thereby show their location within the modern economy. Ultimately however, I do not claim that any of these definitions are completely adequate in analysing class relations in Bengal.

4. Findings

Within lower middle class families the sea change that has shaped the lives of girls and women are 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 in the present generation compared to that of the past. However, improvements in the spheres of education and employment are regarded as being independent of economic reforms. Moreover, while readily admitting that liberalisation may not have benefited women in particular, they emphatically deny that women have been disadvantaged by it. Their views reflect notions of gender equality that are incorporated into the public discourse and popular media.

In the foregoing section I shall briefly visit the historical aspect of the debates on public visibility of women and their participation in

employment. These debates surrounding the emancipation of women have played an important role in the making of an Indian modernity. Under colonial rule the status of women was a measure of civilization. Low status of women signified the inherent inferiority of the colonised subjects. The 'woman question' therefore occupies centre stage in anti-colonial nationalist discourses as well as in post-colonial developmentalist narratives of nation building.

Public discourse in the nineteenth century, particularly the views of social reformers centered on two opposing categorisation: labour force participation of poor women and widows and upper class women's employment in high status professions. While the former could be tolerated because it was an absolute necessity, the latter was not only desirable, but also a moral obligation, a sense of public duty. For the rest, women's entry into the workforce signalled a loss of respectability. This was not only for the women themselves, but it also meant a loss of familial status. These oppositions are crucial for examining the ethnographic context our informants because they do not fit either class category.

For the most part of the last one hundred years there has been a well-defined opposition between poor women as objects of pity if they have to work and the idea that respectable women don't work outside their homes. A slight twist to this prevailing dichotomy appeared after partition in 1947. This period marked the end of Colonial rule; the partition of India that ensued created immense social dislocation. Massive influx of refugees from the East Bengal flowed in to West Bengal, particularly to the metropolis of Calcutta. It was during this period that economic hardships "forced" bhadralok women from refugee families to go out to work. This image became particularly compelling in popular fiction (Bandyopadhyay 1958; Kar 1956; Mitra, G, 1957; 1969; Mitra, N., 1962, Sanyal 1958). There are numerous stories of genteel women starting to go out to work, being ostracised, and their attempts to reconcile family honour, domestic duty and family survival⁹. While attempts were made to deal with the changes taking place in families in the years following Independence, by and large these accounts were more about evoking sympathy for the women rather than critiquing the dominant ideologies of domesticity and female dependency.

An exception to this dichotomy in the debates on women's public role was the discourses of the left and the labour movement. These do have a great deal to say about the place of both bhadralok women and working class women. Given the importance of left politics in the

history of nationalist struggle in Bengal, these contributions could not be characterised as marginal. Nevertheless, public acceptance of these views was not widespread. However, since the 1970's political parties of the left, (the Communist Party of India CPI (M) as dominant partner) have been in power, wielding a considerable degree of influence in shaping public debate. The idea that women's participation in the public world of work and politics is crucial to their emancipation has been promoted during the twenty-year rule of the Left Front Government. It goes without saying that drawing women into wage labour has been an important ideological issue. Feminist interventions in these debates in India have clearly demonstrated that there are no universal prescription that women's paid employment would ensure status enhancement (however defined) and have cautioned against causal relationships (Sharma 1986; Desai 1996; Chanana 1996). Yet, the ideological forces of the discourses of empowerment via employment cannot be underestimated. The New Economic Policy itself is replete with the rhetoric of female empowerment (Bagchi 1999 : 368 : 370). Additionally, "female empowerment" central to development discourses has also been influential in the public domain. Interestingly, attitudes of women in this study are framed by the confluence of the ideas of the left along with emerging consumer discourses of the woman exercising choice, which have become prominent since the formulation of new economic policies.

I now turn to a selection of views that typifies the sentiments of men and women in our study.

In all the responses the common theme is women's advancement. For men it is a recognition of improvement and a sense of pride that my wife goes out to work or my daughter is doing well in her studies and the hope that she will be well placed in a good job. These are subtly linked to ideologies of consumerism. For women it is renewed confidence and a sense that paid work brings autonomy. One of the crucial markers of emerging class identity among this fraction of the middle class is the desire for the public visibility of women and their relative freedom to pursue careers. Certain gender constructs are also utilised to distance themselves from the poor. While the loosening of restrictions on physical mobility are seen as hallmark of modernity, any attempts to restrict women's access to education constitute proof of "backwardness". In the words of a Muslim man, "who keeps women at home these days? Only the most backward section of our community". These sentiments were also expressed in schedule caste 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 notably prominent in the public arena.

In trying to identify how the economic reforms had affected women and uncover people's understanding the responses invariably denied that a link between female employment and the NEP could be established. If I tried to suggest that perhaps there was going to be fewer opportunities for women, it had the opposite effect. For example typical comments were as follows:

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.

In education these days girls are doing better than boys are. 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 6, Machine operator for the Office of the Labour Commissioner)

Noted below are extracts from some of the case studies.

case study 1

Male, aged-31
Marital status: Married.
Education: BA, Post Graduate in journalism.
Income-Rs. 6500-7000.
Occupation: Upper Division Clerk in a Government department.
Household composition 5 persons: self, mother, wife, child, and brother
Number of persons working in the household -2
Total household income: Rs. 11,000

According to Mr A,

I don't see any specific links with women experiencing disadvantages or improving women's opportunities directly as a result of liberalisation. Higher the 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 SAPs.

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 emphasized the need to educate their girls.

case study 2

Woman aged 42

Marital status: married

Education: Appeared in BA (did not complete).

Income: Rs.4800.

Occupation: Senior Sales assistant in a government emporium

Household composition: (5 persons): self, husband, 2 sons,

mother-in-law Number of persons working in the household: - 2

Total household income: Rs.11,600

Mrs B says,

I don't know a great deal about structural adjustment. When economy was liberalized, 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 better position of women in society..... I love working, my colleagues are really wonderful.

case study 3

Female, 19 years old

Marital Status: Single

Occupation: Telephone Assistant in ISD booth.

Income: Rs 700 per month

Education: secondary

Household composition 3 persons -self, mother, cousin.

Number of persons working in the household: 2

Household income-Rs.2,100.

Miss C is emphatic:

I want every woman to stand on her own two feet. She should not be dependent on any one. Whatever job she

does, small or big, she should be independent and not depend on others...

Jobs as a road to independence and rejection of the notion that women only work due to economic hardship exemplify the views of young women.

However, even though this young woman mentioned above asserts that it is acceptable for girls to take up any occupation no matter how insignificant, clearly in practice this is not the case. Bhadrak women are still confined to a restricted range of jobs. Despite the widespread appraisal of women's employment by our informants, in reality there are still only narrow ranges of work options that are available to women. Indeed, employment in the formal sector (which my informants alluded to) has diminished as a result of structural adjustment policies (Upadhyay 2000). Be that as it may, the crucial difference between an earlier generation and the contemporary situation for lower middle class women, is the firm belief that this class fraction is taking the lead in defying the conventional stereotypical jobs that are open to women and going in for these jobs. For example, the explanations are couched in terms of "women in our kind of families" taking up previously unacceptable jobs such as medical sales representative, shop keeper and even bus driver or tram conductor. This is qualitatively different from the upper middle class women entering male dominated high status jobs.

These accounts offer some critical challenges to the notions of female dependency which are characteristic of familial ideologies in West Bengal¹⁰. They are in part shaped by the emerging 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 does not imply the demise of gender hierarchies within families. However, these representations do challenge some aspects of traditional femininity, which women in this study questioned; and they demonstrate the powerful significance of going out to work and the meaning it has for the women. Significantly, our informants do not identify personal disadvantages resulting from the NEP. Women perceive themselves to be personally better off than their mothers and aunts; they vehemently reject any idea that SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs) are holding them back. They want to separate the current economic problems their households are facing due to the NEP and their own sense of self and the future, which can only get better. This is because our informants do not recognise or readily identify any specific gender discrimination or disadvantage

that have come about as a result of household budgetary restrictions. For example, no girl has had her education terminated in favour of her brother. A sister has not been forced to obtain employment, while a brother remains unemployed.

While the overwhelming majority denied any links between conditions of women's employment and economic reforms, a few pointed out that there was better scope for women in some of the new companies emerging as a result of opening up the Indian economy to the global market. However, they were speaking in abstract terms and were unable to identify anyone in their families who had gained entry into these positions.

For my informants, the public visibility of women and the freedom to pursue careers are both seen as major achievements for women within their class. They, however, sidestepped any discussion of the negative impact of neo-liberal reforms on women's lives and gender relations. Significantly, they do not see the inequalities stemming from NEP/ economic reforms as a problem of gender inequality for their class. Rather, their concerns are largely couched in terms of consumerism and the commodification of women. These are in relation to the new narratives of consumption through the marketing mechanisms of the privately owned media, mainly the electronic media, and also the glossy magazines. I want to add here that not many women bought these magazines regularly because they were simply too expensive. However, a number of families in our sample did subscribe to cable TV. These advertisements target women as consumers, who are to some extent buyers of these goods as well as creating desires.

The images of women portrayed in these advertisements have attracted considerable criticism concerning the impact of marketisation on gender relations. These new images usually depict women as successful, high-powered women. Their confidence lies in their ability to become discriminate buyers. Such images grant a new agency to women and it signals the creation of what appears to be a pro-woman globalised market. According to Sangari & 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 the woman as consumer and creates implicit social consent for the commodities provided by the globalised market (Bhattacharya, cited in : Sangari & Chakravarti (1999 : xviii).

Women I talked to took extreme positions and their responses were age specific. Mainly older women argue that in promoting a consumerist ideology, television portrays derogatory and shameful images of women that can only have a detrimental impact on women's status. Women are thus reduced nothing more than sex objects. The following comments are from an older married woman in her late forties and a young unmarried woman in her early twenties, respectively :

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 is very vulgar. Women are often shown semi-nude. If these were censored it would be much better appreciated.

And :

Some times they show women in the 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, lot 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 within some sections of the women's movement in India as well as scholarly debates. For example a recent article on Structural adjustment programs and gender concerns argued,

The uninhibited use of beauty contests and modeling to advertise products have in effect meant projecting women as sex objects in an unprecedented manner in India...In the present phase of liberalisation, 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 where the woman's body has already come to be seen as a commodity for consumption, it is becoming even more difficult than earlier to obtain justice" (Arora, 1999, 349 : 351).

My informants remain critical, but they separate these portrayals and the reality of their lives.

Women's views differ according to their various locations within the life cycle. While most women are highly critical of the media representation of women they do not feel demeaned as a consequence of the commodification of women. Older women view their empowerment in terms of their responsibility within the family and the space they have negotiated to assert themselves. They often felt heartened by seeing strong female characters within popular culture or women political leaders. By comparison young women regard the glamorous liberated woman as highly desirable.

Using these new images of independent womanhood young women construct oppositional narratives of freedom from traditional patriarchal norms and challenge the gender ideologies in Bengali culture. A significant number argue that television provides a social service in promoting ideal representation of gender relations and egalitarian conjugal relationships. Their accounts emphasise the viewers' complete freedom in exercising their choice and assert the absence of negative connotations for women in the new media. While a number of young women aspire to emulate the role model of the modern liberated woman, many feel that the image and reality do not fit in the context of contemporary Bengali society. Women in their thirties are much more ambivalent in their assessment. They point out the unreality of television advertisements in depicting the lives of women. More significantly, given their class position the virtual impossibility of acquiring the life styles conveyed by 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 behavior. 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 a scope for a degree of assertiveness and agency which women identify with. The simultaneous and paradoxical feeling of female empowerment and side-stepping the question of gender discrimination of the New Economic Policy evident in the responses reveals the complex interplay of modernity and female subjectivity. As Vina Das (1994) notes in her seminal article on 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, women make efforts to be neither too traditional nor too modern. The distinctions, ambiguities and conflicts between tradition and modernity show that while women may challenge some constraints they generally reproduce the hegemonic codes (Puri 1999). Women in this study were able to negotiate a space for themselves within their families and sometimes felt vindicated. One woman who had some involvement in an autonomous women's group and now approaching retirement 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. The critiques presented by some feminists on market forces promoting derogatory images of women seem exaggerated when compared to the responses of women.

5 Concluding Remarks

The findings of this paper suggest that cultural transformation currently taking place has successfully subverted and appropriated discourses of female emancipation to promote a market that appears to be attuned to the hopes and desires of women. These dovetail comfortably with the neo-liberal state's rhetoric of female empowerment in its structural adjustment policies. The Bengali lower middle classes project aspects of gender equality as part of their emerging 'modern' class identity. While this has enabled women within this fraction of the middle class to assert their sense of self and personal agency, ultimately their challenges are contained within the confines of patriarchal ideologies of the neo-liberal state.

Finally these findings pose a number of significant challenges for a sociology of contemporary India. It shows the complexity of globalisation at the local level. Evidently the changes taking place indicate that globalisation is far from being a homogenous process. Ideas are appropriated and reconfigured according to local dynamics. Therefore the often asked question whether globalisation yields a greater propensity towards 'Westernisation' or Western modernity is not meaningful. Rather there are multiple modernities emerging in the Asia-Pacific region. In the Indian experience, gender figures prominently in the this process. For example, it is clear that there are differential responses to global media images from women

of different ages. Older women are highly critical of sexualized images, whilst embracing the portrayal of women in positive leadership roles. By contrast young women actively utilise the glamorous femininity of fashion models and pop stars to challenge traditional female roles and assert their position within a hierarchical, authoritarian family structure.

The implications of my research highlight the contradictory outcomes for women as India is further integrated into the global market economy. The scope for further research lies in the exploration of the ensuing relationship between modernity and markets and its consequences for various social classes. Undoubtedly the impact on the middle class has been uneven. The extent to which globalisation will lead to the empowerment of women, requires thorough investigation.

6. Endnotes

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² On the whole, most studies highlight a range of macro political-economic transformations taking place in India (see, for instance, Bhattacharya, 1999, Lakha, 1994, 1995; Singh 1993). With few exceptions (Lakha, 1999, Van Wessel, 1998) there remains a paucity of ethnographic research on the direct social effects of such economic relations.

³ For a detailed discussions see *Social dimension of Structural adjustment in India*, 1991.

⁴ The approximate exchange rate is Indian Rupees Rs. 40.00 = US\$1.00. Thus, their monthly household income ranges from US\$80-320.

⁵ The term is multivalent but means most of all "respectable people". The *bhadralok* were distinguished by their refined behavior and cultivated taste, but did not necessarily have substantial wealth and power. They emerged as a new social group in the late 18th century in Bengal. They 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 not coterminous with caste or class (Mukherjee, 1975).

⁶ The image of a regular salary earner is a powerful one in Bengali culture, which both suggests a distinction from menial wage work as well as earnings from trading. However, for our purposes, it also disguises the real incomes of some civil servants who supplement their total household income by taking bribes.

⁷ For a critique of the expansion of the Indian middle class and the conceptual problems associated with defining this category, see Lakha (1999, 263 : 265).

⁸ It has been argued that in West Bengal " ... class stratification is imbedded to a great extent within the hierarchy of castes" (Sinha & Bhattacharya, 1969, : 56). More

significantly, the formation of social classes in West Bengal is shaped by a complex interlinkage of economic position, status and caste relations and the dynamics of political power. For accounts of class formation based on detailed household statistical data, participant observation and case studies, see Chatterjee (1979, 1 : 31) and Bardhan (1982, 73 : 94).

⁹Most poignant film made on that theme during that era was *Mahanagar* or the Great City by the widely acclaimed Indian director, Satyajit Ray. It depicts the everyday life of a *bhadralok* family in hard times, whereby the beautiful housewife goes out to work, selling Singer sewing machines. She has to work because the husband is unable to find work.

¹⁰ For details of ideologies of domesticity in Bengal, s. Sen 1997.

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