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MIDDLE-CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: “HANGING BETWEEN THE HIGH AND THE LOW”

Whoever does not adapt his manner of life to the conditions of capitalistic success must go under, or at least cannot rise.

—MAX WEBER, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

To be middle-class in Kathmandu is to participate in a social and cultural dialogue about what it means to be a “modern Nepali.” But entering this new forum comes at a cost. Participants must be willing (and able) to gamble financial resources in the always shifting game of synchronized public consumption. Even more importantly, they must be willing to walk the fine—and socially unstable—line of “middleness” that cuts not only *between* the poor and the rich but also *through* the categories of “tradition” and “modernity” that a global development ideology associates with this social dichotomy. In Kathmandu the middle class are those people struggling to rescue a socially valid “traditional” Nepali morality from its associations with the provincial vulgarity of the urban poor, while at the same time attempting to define a “suitably” modern-but-still-Nepali lifestyle of moral and material restraint distinct from what they view as corrupt elite lifestyles of foreignness and consumer excess. To be middle-class is to walk this knife’s edge between low and high, tradition and modernity, and to be willing to risk the social penalties of falling away from one’s social others as they collectively debate and improvise a Nepali modernity. Viewed in this way, the middle class in Kathmandu is less a “thing” to be located in some “objective” social configuration than a new sociocultural project—material and discursive—in which members negotiate the apparent contradictions between what it means to be both modern and Nepali.

CASTE AND CLASS IN KATHMANDU

Before any discussion of class in South Asia can get underway, it is necessary to consider the equally problematic concept of caste,¹ and the relationship between these two experiential frames in local history. Although caste relations (couched in religious/ritual terms) have until recently been the dominant social principle in Kathmandu, elements of a materially based class logic have never been absent. Over the past four decades a range of socioeconomic processes have produced a shift in cultural idioms of dominance such that the logic of class has increasingly become the framing principle in the daily lives of people in Kathmandu. With the emergence of an increasingly market-oriented economy, new patterns of political life, and a world of new commoditized goods and activities, more and more of people's lives transpire in contexts where the language and practice of class, rather than caste, becomes the most meaningful conceptual and experiential frame. If caste in Kathmandu is "a highly institutionalized form of social inequality" (Allen 1993:11), class is another form of social inequality with its own institutions, logics, and practices.

Many ethnographic studies demonstrate that caste identities and caste relations have been fundamental features of everyday life in the Kathmandu valley for centuries and remain so today.² Yet especially in Nepal, caste could never be viewed as, in Louis Dumont's (1970) terms, a purely "religious" institution. Jung Bahadur Rana's famous *Muluki Ain* (Chief Law) of 1854 is a classic example of political power seeking to inscribe class privilege in caste terms. In this document the Rana autocrat inventoried all of Nepal's scattered caste and ethnic communities and then codified these groups into an overarching system of caste hierarchy (Höfer 1979).³ It is important that in the late eighteenth century—half a century before Jung Bahadur's *Ain*—visitors to the Kathmandu valley noted the relative lack of material ostentation on the part of the Nepali nobility (Kirkpatrick 1969 [1811]:212–13). In the early Gorkhali state, political hierarchies were not conspicuously indexed in material terms. Yet during the Rana era visitors expressed astonishment at the gulf of material privi-

¹ "If ever there was a Pandora's box, caste is it" (Quigley 1993:158).

² One can trace an emphasis on the experience of caste from Hodgson's early writings (e.g., 1834) through a host of mid-twentieth-century ethnographic studies (e.g., Rosser 1966) up to recent decades (e.g., Owens 1989, U. Shrestha 1990, Vergati 1995, Gellner and Quigley 1999).

³ Just as Jung Bahadur sought to clarify and fix caste ranking in his multiethnic state, at this time the British in India were carrying out similar programs of caste classification and regulation (Cohn 1968, 1984). "When the British attempted to pigeonhole castes and tribes once and for all by means of census reports, the Gorkhals did the same in Nepal with the introduction of the . . . *Muluki Ain*" (Quigley 1993:102).

lege that separated Rana elites from a relatively undifferentiated urban mass.⁴ At least since the early nineteenth century, relations of dominance could reasonably be characterized in class terms. Moreover (as I discussed briefly in chapter 2, and in detail elsewhere [Liechty 1997]) through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries class distinctions were constructed increasingly in terms of distinctive material cultures. The logic of class takes hold of imaginations as social distinction is increasingly constructed through patterns of material privilege.

Thus by 1951, even while immersed in the social idiom of caste relations, residents of Kathmandu were fully acquainted with the experience and logic of class relations. In contrast to an earlier, essentially feudal, pattern of class relations between an extractive elite and a surplus-producing (though not homogeneous) mass (M. Regmi 1978, 1988), in the past four decades more complex social relations emerged as capitalist market forces (both local and transnational) were given free rein in the city for the first time. After 1951, in the context of a rapidly expanding cash economy of salaried bureaucrats and service sector employees and wage-earning tradespeople and menial laborers (Shrestha et al. 1986:86–104), it is increasingly legitimate to speak of emerging middle and working classes in Kathmandu alongside the established (though often struggling) traditional elites.

As city residents (especially those from the upper castes) constantly observe, class has emerged as a powerful mode of social logic and paradigm for social mobility. Stories of low-caste taxi drivers with monthly incomes five times that of high-caste government officers abound as people in Kathmandu struggle to reconcile two often conflicting modes of social stratification. While some caste elites successfully translate caste privilege into class privilege, other upper-caste families struggle in vain against the erosion of their traditional cultural capital in the face of a new "democracy of goods." Caste rank is still a good predictor of class rank and lifestyle,⁵ yet the radically transformed economic climate of the past

⁴ Of course, the "urban mass" was not in fact undifferentiated. It was, and to a lesser extent still is, differentiated within the sociomoral idiom of ranked castes. Material culture played a role in distinguishing high from low groups (e.g., Nepali 1965:65). Yet because the range of material goods was limited by import restrictions, and because even those groups of relatively wealthy merchants who could afford distinctive imported goods were denied access to most of them by sumptuary laws and the unlimited rights of appropriation enjoyed by the Rana elites, material culture and consumer goods did not come into their own as a means of constructing status distinction until after the fall of the Rana autocracy in 1951. By that time Kathmandu residents had had over a century of socialization into the world of consumer-based class distinction as practiced by the Ranas.

⁵ By the mid-twentieth century much of Nepal's arable land was owned by high-caste families, even if it was often farmed by other people (e.g., Caplan 1970). To the extent that land (both inside and outside the Kathmandu valley) is still in upper-caste hands, and to the extent that land is still one of the few productive assets that Nepalis are likely to have

few decades has lowered (but by no means eliminated) the barriers to economic advancement that had, until recently, excluded those of low birth from any position of social or economic privilege. Social mobility (as easily downward as upward) is a hotly contested, but unavoidable, reality. Today Kathmandu's squalid squatter settlements include Brahman families of the highest ritual ranks (Gallagher 1991), while members of once despised and marginalized ethnic groups preside over vast transnational business empires (Gombo 1985, van Spengen 1987, 2000, Watkins 1996). In the new economic order, social mobility does not occur at the caste level; whole caste communities do not move up or down. Rather, families and (less often) individuals move into positions of greater or lesser sociopolitical power in which the language and practice of class more adequately conveys shared interests and values.⁶ As Anup Pahari argues, "The dominant social group in Nepal is increasingly . . . not a *caste*, but a *class*" (1992:54).

THE MIDDLE CLASS IN KATHMANDU

Although the term "middle class" is often used, it is a concept notoriously difficult to "pin down" in objective terms. As detailed in chapter 1, existing studies offer general insights into the composition of middle classes, what kind of values their members hold, how these people relate to processes of production and consumption, and the general roles they play in capitalist societies. But when it comes to actually describing the *experience* of a "middle class"—some sense of *lived middle-classness*, or the way in which class is actually produced and reproduced in practice—descriptive efforts typically fall short. When confronted with the complexity of everyday lives, it becomes clear that "class" as an objective analytical *category* is problematic—resisting, even defying, clear-cut definition (R. Williams 1977:112). Like pointillist paintings, class categories are best, or at least most clearly, seen from a distance. The more closely one looks at a class group, the more its boundaries dissolve and its supposedly distinguishing features blur into a haze of contrasting and conflicting detail. The concept of "class" often belies its origins in social theory by serving as a helpful analytic device, even while proving extremely slippery in "the field."

(whether in terms of agricultural production or simply rent), caste privilege is still often translated into class privilege. However, as their land is divided up or sold off, many once-prosperous upper-caste families struggle to maintain parity between their caste standing and their social prestige.

⁶ The main flaw of a recent book on entrepreneurial communities in Nepal (Zivetz 1992) is that it fails to address the current reality of emerging class stratification *within* these communities and deals only with stratification *between* them.

I encountered the same slippage between theory and practice when I tried to talk about class with people in Kathmandu. The concepts of class in general, and of a "middle class" (*madhyam barga*) in particular, were familiar to urban Nepalis. The terms appeared frequently in the local press, in the official verbiage of government policymakers, and in everyday speech. Yet when I asked people to *define* the urban middle class and *describe* its members, the answers were hesitant and often vague. Everyone agreed that a middle class existed, but there was little consensus on what it was.

Urban Nepalis most often focused on material standards of living when trying to define "middle-class." In its most stripped-down version, this definition held simply that middle-class persons were "those who have enough to eat," as one schoolteacher in his late thirties put it. Others had similar, if more elaborate, understandings of what distinguished the middle class. As one twenty-five-year-old college student explained:

I distinguish people by their way of living. If they have a car and a beautiful bungalow⁷ then they're upper-class, no? And then if they have a motor bike, and a house of their own, and, well, if things are going easily, that's middle-class. Lower-class people, they are the ones who if they don't earn today, they don't eat tomorrow.

Like the schoolteacher, this young man contrasted the middle and lower classes by focusing on the fundamental means of survival, food. For both, being in the middle class had to do with being freed from the brutal daily anxieties of basic subsistence. For these two respondents, as for others in Kathmandu, access to at least *some* discretionary income separated a local middle class from the thousands of other city dwellers who lived in grinding poverty.

For this reason it seemed likely that some reckoning of income (wages or salary, individual or family) would be a way of distinguishing class groups. Yet I found that even this was "a very tricky question," in the words of one Nepali economist. He explained that while it was fairly easy to slot the large group of fixed-income government employees into a middle class, anyone who wanted to simply associate certain income scales with certain consumer behaviors would be quickly frustrated. In his own studies this economist had found many families that, by their pooled incomes and assets, could have been ranked in the middle or even upper class. Nevertheless, "Their lifestyle is very simple. They don't raise their standard of living." Conversely, he found other families that, judging from their expenditures on a range of consumer goods, lived middle-class lives yet did so by spending "whatever they earn."

Regardless of these problems, it was clear that disposable income, as indexed in the display of consumer goods, was among the most common

⁷ Here "bungalow" means a detached suburban house.

means by which people in Kathmandu ascertained class membership. Not surprisingly, in a society where large numbers of people struggle to provide even the most basic elements of subsistence for themselves and their families, a person's clothing is often taken as an indication of class membership. I came upon one somewhat startling example of this association in an interview with a young physician employed in a large government hospital in downtown Kathmandu. This doctor had published a number of epidemiological studies in which one of the data variables was "class." Hoping to have found someone with an "objective" definition of "middle-class," I was surprised to find that he had divided the people in his studies into class groups based almost entirely on the clothing the patient (and those accompanying her/him) wore upon arrival at the emergency ward. If possible, he also collected information on occupation, but, like most people in Kathmandu, the doctor saw no problem with assigning class membership based on apparel. Although at first disappointed at such "subjective" methods of class distinction, I eventually came to realize that, to a much greater degree than in North America (where relatively few persons are on the verge of total destitution), in Kathmandu specific commodities often effectively distinguished class groups, especially the lower from the middle class.

Yet when one began to look more closely, commodity consumption was not always a clear-cut way of defining class membership, especially if one wanted to distinguish "working-class" from "middle-class" based on the distinction between wage and salaried labor.⁸ The economic situations of two Kathmandu families illustrate this problem. In the first family, a young man (from a local Newar farming caste) who had not finished high school operated a bicycle-repair business with his father. The young man, his wife and their child lived with his parents and two unmarried siblings in an ancient home that had been in the family for centuries. Here they rented the lower level to a poor family from the hills and enjoyed what could only be called a middle-class life by local standards, with television, indoor plumbing, and basic furnishings. The second family (from a higher caste) was made up of a married couple and their young child. Having completed a master's degree, the husband held a respectable but not very high-paying job in a Kathmandu NGO. This man, who had moved to Kathmandu as a young adult, lived with his family in a rented

⁸ Most Nepali government surveys (including censuses) divide urban populations into groups engaged in primary labor (agriculture), secondary labor (tradesmen and factory workers), and tertiary labor (sales, service, clerical, administrative, commercial, professional/technical, educational, etc.) (P. Sharma 1989:92). Thus, studies often divide the urban labor force into two categories—"manufacturing" and "tertiary activities" (e.g., Shrestha, et al. 1986:93)—that would correspond to the basic defining criteria of a working and a middle class.

flat in a middle-class residential area, but they had few of the standard middle-class consumer amenities. It is hard to determine the class rank of either of these two families (so very similar by most demographic standards, including monthly income): the arguably "working-class" family lived a "middle-class" lifestyle as rent takers, while the educated, salaried, "middle-class" family lived as tenants and barely made ends meet. Thus, although people often spoke of the middle class in concrete terms, trying to find objective criteria to characterize a middle class in Kathmandu was like trying to catch clouds with a net.

MIDDLE-CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: CLAIMING THE MORAL MIDDLE

While struggling to come up with a way to define "the middle class" in Kathmandu, I eventually realized that, rather than try to objectify it in a list of traits and features, I needed to look for its traces in speech and practice. I turned my attention to the ways in which people spoke and thought of themselves and others as class bearers. In this way a concept of *middle-classness* began to emerge, even if an objective definition remained elusive.

What people spoke of was a notion of *middleness*, of occupying a position *between* social others who were characterized by a variety of contrasting values and behaviors. More than a wage category or pattern of consumption, the middle class in Kathmandu is a social space where people negotiate what it means to be both Nepali and modern, a place in which to carry on a dialogue about how to wed the realities of a transformed material and social universe with powerful preexisting cultural values and discursive frames.⁹ What constitutes this sense of middle-classness is not necessarily a common lifestyle or a uniform set of values but rather a shared project of locating oneself in a new and legitimate space between two devalued social poles. This space is one separated both from the "vulgar" lives of the national elite, whose distinction lies in their emulation of a foreign modernism, and from a lower class trapped in equally vulgar lifestyles of "tradition" and poverty. The challenge for an emergent middle class is to construct a *between space* that both adopts modernity as a means of distinguishing itself from those below and morally critiques modernity as a means of separating itself from the national elite. The experience of middle-classness lies in this uneasy relationship with "the modern," one of both emulation and distancing.

⁹ Like most "modern" spaces, the "freedom" to enter this discursive space is premised on access to material resources, thereby marking it as a zone of class practice and class production.

Much of this middle-class unease seemed to be encapsulated in the remarks of a young Brahman “housewife” in her early thirties (who spoke with one of my female co-workers). Yalina, the mother of two, had some postsecondary education, and was married to a midlevel civil servant. Yalina’s remarks help to introduce a number of important strands in the debate concerning what it means to be middle-class in Kathmandu. Among these is the tension between modernity and tradition, a tension that acknowledges the legitimacy of an earlier, simpler lifestyle but also the necessity for engagement with modern goods and practices. Most often this tension is mediated through a sense of moral propriety or acceptability. Through Yalina’s comments one begins to see the contours of a space of middleness—the construction of self somewhere between old and new, rich and poor.

What kind of differences do you see between your life and your parents’ when they were your age?

Something like the way we dress is one big difference. For example, my father likes simple living. He says that one shouldn’t spend too much money on any kind of luxurious things. He thinks of how you will live tomorrow, how you will keep on surviving in the future. As for me, I think one’s living standard should be good, with proper food and housing, clean environment. I want some things to show to others, I mean to an acceptable extent.

Why not this simple living style?

That simple life was for the time of my parents. At that time life was not expensive, but today life has become so costly. It’s hard to keep up with the competition because of the many luxurious things. I mean lives are easier now, because everything has become fast. Today there are various machines, computers, gas stoves, heaters. . . . Daughters-in-law have such comfortable lives. No one has to go far to fetch water.

In Yalina’s view, the “simple life” may have been appropriate for an earlier time, but now a changed material context compels her into a different lifestyle than her parents have, in spite of her ambivalence toward these changes.

Later the conversation turned more explicitly to the connections between class and morality, starting with the issue of prostitution.

So who gets drawn into this prostitution?

It’s the low-class women who fall into this. They see others eating, wearing clothes of a high standard, and they want to do the same, but they don’t have the money so they just get entrapped in this business.

So it’s only the low-class women?

No, no. There are also high-ranking people involved in this. They have no social restraints, whereas the middle-class people are tied down in many ways by the social system. But whatever they [the wealthy] do, they are hidden, they are not exposed. And so because of their power, society accepts them, even though they may be involved in some bad business. Yet the middle-class people won’t be accepted in this [high] society. So it is the low- and the high-ranking people: they are the two classes of society where you find prostitution. The low class people do it for money, while the high ones do it for self-satisfaction.

Why do the high-ranking people get into this?

They are the ones who watch these blue [pornographic] films. The low people don’t have access to this: it’s the high ones who have everything satisfied in their lives. They have the free time, they are the ones who seek to find some new recreational things. When they look for greater pleasure, for more bliss in their lives, this is what leads them down the path of destruction.

So the high-ranking people are all doing this bad business?

No, like, I think this smuggling¹⁰ is also being done by some low-class people. I mean, it is the middle-class people who are just busy doing their small businesses, making some money, hanging between the high and the low.

In these comments social distinctions emerge clearly as moral distinctions. Yalina characterizes low-class people as those “entrapped” in immorality by their lack of money. On the other hand, high-class immorality is a more complicated matter. The upper classes have been seduced by the pursuit of pleasure. Their privilege hides them from social view and allows them to indulge in “recreational” sexuality. Middle-class people are those in between, those neither corrupted by deprivation, nor debauched by excess. The middle class is “tied down” by the “restraints” of the social order. For Yalina, like many others, the middle class is a moral community, modern but within “proper” and “acceptable” limits, “hanging between the high and the low.”

Morality tales are among the key narratives of middle-classness. Like Yalina, many other people in Kathmandu create themselves as middle-class subjects through stories that characterize those above and below as

¹⁰ Here the English word “smuggling” is used as a cover term for various forms of “shady business.”

essentially immoral. One of the most common themes in these middle-class morality stories has to do with the corrupting influence of money. One young man, a midlevel civil servant and father of two elementary-school children, spoke bitterly of upper-class people who “spend money like madmen, without considering the future of their children. It’s the children of these families who come to the schools and spread the ideas about ‘*This is the happiness. . .*’ ” Another young woman, a high-caste, master’s level student and mother of several children, more explicitly contrasted upper-class excess with middle-class morality.

They have money and just do whatever they want. That’s the kind of situation. They have parties, they go here and there, and since there’s a lot of money, there’s always a lot of enjoyment. . . . For them, they can have anything. Like money, it’s the most important thing, and they have it.

Before, in *our* time, like ten or fifteen years ago, money wasn’t so important. Then it was *honesty* [*imāndār*]. That was the main thing. [Then people said] “What is money? People should be honest.” But now, honesty is meaningless. Money buys everything. Everybody looks to money now.

From this woman’s perspective, once-unquestioned “traditional” values like honesty are now threatened by a degenerate upper class and its money-driven ethic.

More than just a way of labeling those “above” as grasping and unscrupulous, this woman’s perception of a recent turn from “honesty” to “money” as a primary value hints at another common characterization of upper-class elites as pretentious *nouveaux riches*. *Tuppa bāta palāeko* (something that springs from the top, like a shoot or sprout) is a common expression used to denigrate those whose money is not matched with an appropriate degree of middle-class civility. The phrase captures the notion of rootlessness, impermanence, shallow pretense, and inexperience—everything that is in contrast to a life of honest, middle-class achievement. Another phrase directs many of the same moral critiques at those from the lower class who would attempt to hide their true nature by affecting outward signs of wealth. *Sukul gundā* (literally, “straw-mat ruffian”) is a moniker directed at youth who, by implication, sleep on rough mats at night but sport expensive clothing by day, or in other words live beyond their means. Through stories and gossip about those who have gone beyond the bounds of “acceptable” behavior, the middle class perpetually tells the tale of its own moral propriety.

In addition to the corrupting influence of money, another common narrative strategy for producing a middle ground between those above and below revolves around stories of sexual excess and other uncontrolled

pleasures. I heard one of these middle-class tales of sexual morality in a conversation with a young (male) upper-caste doctor, who spoke of class and moral value:

When it comes to things like marriage, middle-class families are more orthodox. But the higher class and the lower class, they are not so orthodox in this way. The lower class, they want to move into a higher class, so they will do anything. So there is no moral value among them. And the higher class, they have the chance to go abroad; they have the chance to meet people. They do not have that cultural and moral value.

You know about AIDS? Well, most of the time, though it’s not officially reported, they are high-class people, because they go outside, and they have the contact.

Here again those people below the middle class are represented as desperate, willing to “do anything” to advance socially, and hence intrinsically without “moral value.” Conversely, this man (like Yalina) characterizes the “higher class” as being morally corrupted by forces from outside the community. Upper-class people can travel outside of Nepal and are thus not bound by the moral community, which is—as though by definition—local and middle-class. In this story, AIDS is recruited as a symbol of modern sexual immorality that literally marks the upper class.

Especially for women, talking about prostitution was an opportunity to talk about appropriate, moral, middle-class practices. One woman, an unmarried twenty-year-old student, explained what type of people become involved in prostitution:

I guess it is the uneducated women. They have gotten into this because of some problems they have. It is mostly the low-class people who get into this. This is what I’ve heard from talking with my friends. Some have been abandoned by their husbands, some have household problems, some have no other way to survive, so they do this.

But part of the problem with this prostitution is that, because these women are involved in that, *other women*, people with good moral character, are also looked upon badly.

Like this person, most middle-class women recognize the societal factors that might lead poorer women into prostitution. Yet at the same time they harbor a kind of unease, bordering on hostility, toward “lower-class” women whose public sexuality threatens to undermine the ideal of female sexual sobriety pursued by the middle class. Middle-class women are aware that the growing incidence of prostitution only “confirms” (in the eyes of males) the common gender stereotype about women’s “nature.”

They know that their own claims to independence (within the bounds of middle-class propriety) depend on strict adherence to sexual codes of conduct designed to counter the standard South Asian male fantasy of female sexual voracity. Thus, even while women are fully aware of what drives some into prostitution, they also know that the resulting stigma of uncontrolled sexuality threatens to subvert their efforts to construct identities as independent, modern, middle-class women. Ironically, the rise in local prostitution (largely driven by middle-class men) helps bring into relief the conflict of interests between genders within the middle class. In a sense, it is middle-class women who must “pay” for middle-class male consumer sexuality, through constant self-discipline and anxiety over sexual propriety (Liechty 1996b).

Middle-class women perceived similar threats as emanating from the sexual improprieties of the upper class. Middle-class men and women often used the word “prostitute” (*beśyā*) in stories of upper-class women whose supposed sexual activity deviated from middle-class standards of acceptability. Here I am less concerned with whether such characterizations are justified than with the narrative devices those who place themselves in the middle class use to voice their condemnations. As many of the remarks above suggest, middle-class notions of propriety are typically rooted in a sense of community: the middle class is a moral community that “restrains” its members in a sphere of “suitable” behaviors. One of the adjectives commonly used to denigrate women (usually young and well-to-do) whose social behavior is deemed unacceptable is *chārā*. Young women who wear “excessive” (“over”) makeup and short skirts, who are said to hang out in the tourist areas, or around bars and cinema halls, are called *chārā*. At best *chārā* implies “free-roving,” but its main connotation is those who function outside of social controls or norms, people who are dangerous and threatening precisely because they appear to disregard what other people think of them. Scandalous stories of elite *chārā* women help to create and naturalize a sense of middle-classness that is embedded within a self-referencing, encompassing, “restraining” moral community.

Having introduced something of the moral tone of middle-class discourse in Kathmandu—a discourse of honesty, propriety, sobriety, and acceptability—in the following sections I look more closely at some of the main themes in this middle-class project of discursive positioning “between the high and the low.” These sections focus particularly on the twin concepts of “suitability” and “necessity,” especially as they pertain to middle-class fashion practice and other dimensions of the local consumer culture.

“SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE”: FASHION, CLASS, AND SUITABILITY

Class-cultural practice is about inclusion and exclusion. In Kathmandu much of this cultural work is framed in a discourse of consumption and suitability. Consumer goods (and the economic privilege that they index) are necessary elements of claims to middle-classness, but their uses and meanings are always renegotiated through the lens of “suitability.” In stories of everything from food to fashion, middle-class people discuss the promises and pitfalls of consumerism and the need for middle-class restraint. Between “too much” and “too little” they claim “suitable” behavior and the “suitably” fashioned body for themselves, while positioning those class others below and above along a continuum from unsuitable and antipatriotic to vulgar and immoral.

Middle-class suitability is a complex construct, but it begins with the notion of moderation and betweenness. In Kathmandu stories of suitability frequently accompanied discussions of a person’s engagements with the consumer economy. For example, one particularly marked sense of middle-class suitability appeared in the remarks of a thirty-five-year-old woman, mother of one and owner of her own small tailoring business.

What do you like to do for fun [majā linu]?

Oh, sometimes we like to go eat at a restaurant and then go to see a movie. We go to the medium-sized restaurants, not the high, or third-class types. We go to a place suitable [*subhāune*] to our level—a place where we can pay the bill. We like to eat chowmein, tukpa,¹¹ and that kind of thing.

In fact, we often eat chowmein at our house instead of *dāl bhāt*.¹² Cooking *dāl bhāt* takes a lot of time, and it’s very heavy food. We like chowmein because it’s lighter.

Even more than Yalina, this woman had a very explicit sense of middle-classness and suitability. She and her husband stick to those activities “suitable” to their “level.” These remarks are like those of one high-caste woman who, no longer able to afford a domestic cook because of declin-

¹¹ A kind of Tibetan noodle soup.

¹² Literally, some kind of cooked legume (beans, lentils, peas) and rice, *dāl bhāt* is the Nepali national meal, usually eaten twice a day (midmorning and evening) and accompanied by curried vegetables, pickles, and other side dishes. Modern work schedules and time demands (especially on women) are making the traditional *dāl bhāt* meal cycle increasingly a thing of the past, or of weekends.

ing family fortunes, made a virtue of her necessity: "I really enjoy cooking and besides, [when I cook it, the food] is always *cokho* [ritually pure]." For many who work to locate themselves in middle-class culture, it is often difficult to distinguish what is *suitable* from what is *necessary*, even if in most cases middle-class choices (or necessities) are cast in tones of moral superiority.

Even more than food, the consumer domain that most frequently elicited stories of middle-class suitability was "fashion." This link was apparent in the comments of one young married woman. The daughter of a successful Kathmandu shopkeeper, in 1991 she was a part-time college student and hoped to become a college lecturer herself. When asked if she had any interest in "fashion" she replied:

Well, I'm not *that* interested in it, but naturally these days I like to dress in a moderately fashionable manner.

How come?

[Laughter] What can I say? Look at my friends at college: some of them are into makeup, and some aren't at all. I mean, it's not that makeup alone makes someone look good. One should do the makeup that's suitable [*suhāune*] to them. Being too simple isn't good. But being really vulgar isn't good either. So one should be somewhere in the middle, it seems to me.

For this young woman, the "suitable" spot in the fashion spectrum was "somewhere in the middle."

Another way that people spoke about a suitably moderate fashion practice was in terms of *kinds* of fashion. As one young woman explained: "Some people do fashion out of arrogance . . . But I'm not like that. I'm only into one or two kinds of fashion, like hairstyles, saris, things like that. Others I don't like that much." Here, by implication, fashion moderation is a matter of not participating in too many domains of stylization. One or two fashion specializations is suitable; beyond this, one enters the region of upper-class and vulgar "arrogance." By this middle-class logic of moderation, suitable fashion practice is not determined by income—*more* fashion is not *better* fashion—but by taste. Thus, even though upper-class elites may have more money, suitable fashion practice is still a matter of *knowing* what is suitable, not simply buying it.

This characterization of elite fashion practice as excess was an extremely common theme in middle-class tales of fashion suitability. Usually excess was not just a sign of elite "arrogance" but of fundamental moral shortcomings. One young woman put it in rather blunt terms.

As for style, if it's good style, I like it, but if it's over style, I think it's disgusting.

What do you mean by over?

I mean like wearing short skirts, or short-sleeved shirts—just looking at them you can tell what type [of person] they are, I mean, whether they're good or bad.

For this woman and others, "over style" meant too close to (what they understood to be) prevailing global high-fashion standards. Since these immodest (immoderate), relatively revealing styles were "bad," and since it was most often the elites who could approximate these international standards of dress, for the middle class "over style" and elite immorality went hand in hand.

If those claiming the social middle could critique elite fashion practice as extreme, arrogant, and immoral, they could also point to it as antipatriotic. Dress is one of a complex collection of elements that middle-class Nepalis (perhaps especially women) balance in their efforts to construct a class identity that is at once modern and Nepali. Dress must be both modern (that is, fashionable and thereby distinctive from the dress of the lower classes) and somehow Nepali, or at least suitable to Nepal (that is, not *too* beholden to international styles). By negotiating and claiming a suitable Nepaliness in dress, and by suggesting that elites—in their fashion practice and the (im)morality it implies—have simply sold out to other centers (and systems) of style and morality, the middle class can, in a sense, claim the nation.

This notion of national or Nepali suitability came through in the remarks of a middle-aged mother of several girls in their late teens. Although she took considerable pride in fostering responsibility and independence in her daughters, "fashion" was one area where she felt she had to exercise parental authority. When asked how she felt her childhood years differed from those of her daughters, she replied:

Now my daughters just sit around and do nothing. We used to sing songs [while working], but I have to ask them even to sing. And now there is more fashion. In our time there were only saris, and maybe *kurtā suruwāl*,¹³ but these days there are midis, frocks, pants, and whatever. My daughters don't wear pants.

¹³ *Kurtā suruwāl* is the term most often used in Kathmandu for a women's outfit that consists of a loose, long-sleeved, knee-length tunic worn over a matching pajama. Known in other parts of the subcontinent as *sarwāl-kamij* or *churidār-kurtā*, this originally North Indian garment is now a pan-South Asian fashion trend (see Nag 1991:106–7, Tarlo 1996).

What? Why not? What do you mean they don't wear pants?

I mean it's *only* pants that aren't OK. Clothes have to be *suitable*. I found that my daughters' *structure* did not look suitable, so I asked them not to wear pants. They look pretty only in *kurtā suruwāl*, but I've said *midi* is OK too.

And besides, they are grown up now, and to be in the middle [*bicmā*] in terms of fashion is good. I won't tell them this, but the fact is that in fashion, it should be suitable to one's *structure*.

It's not that I'm denying them permission to wear something. If the clothes suit and fit them, they can wear it, no problem with me. This is their idea. They are responsible for their future. My only concern is, well, if the fashion doesn't suit her, then, it's useless I think.

A bit later she elaborated further on her ideas of "suitability."

Since our country is poor I think doing fashion is OK up to the point of wearing *kurtā suruwāl*. We shouldn't be doing fashion just for show. That's no good. I like Indian fashion, because they stick to their own style, their own national dress.

If Americans wear American dress, that looks good. If we wear our dress, we look good. In other words, everybody is pretty good-looking in their own dress, not in others'. We should wear what is most suitable to us.

This woman spoke of fashion suitability in terms of "structure"—an idea that on one level had to do with her daughters' particular body morphologies and perhaps also with the fact that they are now "grown up." But at another level it was clear that their body "structure" was less an *individual* than a *national* trait. Her notion of suitability went from something applicable to "them" (her daughters) to "us"; in "our country . . . we should wear what is most suitable to us." Ironically, the "fashion" most suitable for Nepalis is Indian. Thus, for many middle-class women, that which is suitably modern, suitably "in the middle," and suitable for Nepalis, is Indian fashion.

In addition to distinguishing themselves from elites, the notion of suitability also helps those "in the middle" distinguish themselves from those below them in the social scale. While narratives of moderation, suitability, and Nepaliness help separate middle-class consumer practice from that of the elites, "doing fashion" is seen as simply inappropriate for the lower classes. When critiquing those "below" them, people claiming the middle stressed that one should be what one is. To appear to be what you are not—as when lower-class people "do fashion"—is both unsuitable and immoral. One woman in her midthirties—a teacher (with

a bachelor's degree) in a local vocational school, whose husband worked in the Kathmandu branch of an international bank—discussed the role of fashion in society:

I think it's going a little over. If someone does it in a way that's suitable [*subhāune*] to themselves, that's fine, nobody is going to gossip.

Really a person should do fashion according to their education. I mean, a person's fashion should be in line with their education and family financial means. So if a person is uneducated, and if they have nothing to eat in the house, then they shouldn't be out doing fashion. For them fashion is not good, and it's not good for society. There are people like this, who are doing fashion without having anything to eat.

Again, fashion that is suitable to oneself is fine. But here the notion of suitability has another interesting class dimension. For this woman, fashion practice is, or at least should be, an index of educational achievement, just as education is an index of a family's "financial means." Furthermore, it is the uneducated people who "have nothing to eat in the house." In this woman's mind, when poor people "do fashion," they not only deprive themselves of education but in so doing deprive society of the benefits that another educated member would bring. For the poor to "do fashion" is to squander the cash resources with which an individual could achieve *real* personal betterment and thereby advance the collective cause. A poor, uneducated person who "does fashion" is not only vulgar and irresponsible but also immoral, to the extent that her/his actions are antisocial.

Other people expressed similar sentiments in slightly different terms. For example, one woman suggested that laborers had no business "doing fashion." With an intermediate college degree, this woman was active in women's organizations and was married to a businessman. Complaining about price inflation for everything from food to clothing, she remarked, "If you have to work [*kām garnu paryo bhane*], what's the point of doing fashion? It's better to be natural." Here this woman makes the important class distinction between those who "work" (*kām garnu*), and others (such as herself and her husband) engaged in middle-class occupations, which are more often referred to in terms of "doing service" or holding a *jāgir*, or salaried job.¹⁴ By implication, those who "do work" are those engaged in wage labor or other kinds of low-paying, low-class, unskilled and/or menial work. For these people there is no point in "doing fashion." These lower-class people should be what they are; they should be "natural," not fashionable.

¹⁴ The Nepali distinction between *jāgir* and *kām* is similar to the class-based distinction between the English words "career" and "job" (Williams 1985:53).

Another way in which people claiming the middle disparaged those whom they felt to be below them socially was to associate lower-class fashion practice with prostitution. By this line of reasoning, poor women who “do fashion” are, almost by definition, prostitutes. Very typical was the response of one twenty-five-year old college student, the unmarried daughter of a local businessman. When asked the “Who?” and “Why?” of prostitution, she replied confidently:

Those who have nothing but do a lot of makeup and fashion, they are involved in this. I think most of them are from the lower classes. Maybe there are higher-class people too, modern people like the Ranas.¹⁵ But it is the lower-class people who need the money to buy fashion and do makeup. They just go into this business. They have no honor/prestige [*ijjat*]. Some have a compulsion to do this. I have seen one or two cases.

According to this young woman, and many other people, it is “lower-class” women who engage in prostitution in order “to buy fashion and do makeup.” They are the ones who, seduced by fashion and having neither money nor honor, succumb to the “compulsion” of selling their bodies for cash.

Other middle-class commentators on prostitution in Kathmandu were a bit more charitable when explaining why some women were drawn into this trade. Yet even these people rarely failed to mention “doing fashion” as one of the primary motivations behind prostitution. For example, one middle-aged woman, active in a well-known women’s social service organization, offered these remarks when asked why she thought some women went into prostitution:

It’s just like that. The reason is fashion. They need money for fashion. There are people who, needing money for fashion, will go and do this immediately.

I mean, sure, some do it for food. What else can a woman do if she doesn’t have money to buy food? Some have no one to take care of them. Some have parents and siblings to support and they can’t get enough money from other kinds of work. To eat they do this.

But still, others do it for fashion. For fashion they need money, so they do this.

Although attuned to the harsh economic conditions that might force women into prostitution, this woman nevertheless *frames* her explanation

¹⁵ See chapter 2 for a discussion of the role of the Rana family in Nepali history. While many Ranas are still wealthy and powerful, others have fared less well. Popular stereotypes of the Ranas portray them as rich, modern, and decadent.

of prostitution with strident condemnations of those people who, lacking money but desiring fashion, “immediately” leap into prostitution.

When I first heard stories of women prostituting themselves for fashion, I thought that I had come upon a particularly heinous twist in the saga of Nepal’s capitalist modernization. But as the same story was told to me over and over again—“My former neighbor . . .,” “An old classmate of mine . . .,” “A secretary at my office . . .,” “Some of my patients . . .,” “Some students . . .,” “Some nurses . . .,” “Some waitresses . . .,” “Girls from Darjeeling . . .”—I began to see this tale in a different light. I began to wonder if, when people spoke of women who turn to prostitution to satisfy desires for material goods, they were really telling a kind of *morality tale*: a tale less about the morality of the *women* than about the morality of the *goods*. This is not to say that no such cases occur—they probably do—but that for the middle-class person telling such a tale and imagining such a chain of events, the story of the “fashion” prostitute is a way of expressing anxiety over the power of the new world of consumer goods. Through tales such as these, members of the middle class express their fears of a world of alluring but somehow evil fashion goods, a world that threatens to turn daughters and sisters into prostitutes (not to mention sons and brothers into the “teens,” “punks,” and even “junkies” discussed in later chapters).

By locating the “fashion fall” in classes below and above, people “in the middle” can at once claim the moral high ground and abreact their own middle-class nightmares. Tales of middle-class suitability represent the constant reprocessing of the fundamentally contradictory relationship that the local middle class has with the modern world of goods. The middle class must simultaneously embrace and distance itself from a global consumer culture that offers a status-enhancing modernity but one tinged with immorality. Through tales of suitability and moderation, the middle class attempts to displace this consumer contradiction onto its class others above and below. Yet this narrative sleight-of-hand has to be performed over and over again in efforts to calm middle-class fears over the inherent moral instability of its consumer practice.

“TO LOOK LIKE YOU’RE GOOD-LOOKING”: THE NECESSITY OF FASHION

Along with the notion of *suitability*, people in Kathmandu constructed a space of middle-class culture through stories of consumer *necessity*. People spoke of “doing fashion” for a number of reasons, including for beauty and attraction, but above all they spoke of consumer practice, and “fashion” in particular, in terms of necessity. By speaking of the *necessity* to



3. Shopping for necklaces in old Kathmandu (Khel Tol).

consume, those who positioned themselves in the social middle could *critique* the new cultural economy of middle-class labor and consumer goods even while minimizing the taint of their own participation in consumer practices such as “fashion.”

One subject that highlighted the tensions of consumer necessity was that of middle-class women’s labor. For example, office jobs for women are typically thought to demand a certain kind of attire, but jobs for women in travel agencies and hotels are seen as particularly demanding—and potentially compromising—in terms of “fashion.” There is an uneasiness about these jobs, in which women assume highly public roles and

interact closely with a wide range of (usually male) customers and co-workers. Most men and women harbor suspicions about these “office girls,” who are often thought to be “overly” fashionable and promiscuous. Thus, when women spoke of fashion they were often careful to distinguish legitimate practice from the inappropriate extremes. For example, one college student in her early twenties noted that “Fashion is necessary if you need to look smart, like to go to the office. But of course over fashion is not good.” For her there is nothing wrong with going to the office and looking “smart” as long as one’s dress is within limits. Yet for others, office work compelled women into compromise, both sartorial and moral. Another young woman explained why some women place so much importance on fashion:

Their interest is to make themselves appear very good-looking for others. But for some people, they have been compelled to do fashion just to feed themselves. Like in the travel agencies, I’ve heard that they tell the girls, “Ordinary isn’t enough!” They are obliged to wear [high-] standard clothing or lose their jobs. They have to look tip-top. That’s why the girls who work there have to do fashion whether they can afford it or not. It’s for the boss too, you know. They have to be good-looking.

There is a certain discomfort, even among women, about women working in the public realm. Here “ordinary” fashion may not be enough, and women may be driven into uncomfortable and unacceptable situations.

Yet, for the most part, “doing fashion” and “looking good” were perfectly acceptable in other settings, as long as it remained within the bounds of respectability. When asked about *why* they personally enjoyed “doing fashion,” women had a variety of answers. One young woman from a low-caste but relatively prosperous family spoke of fashion in terms of *sokh*:¹⁶

I’ve had this *sokh* for a long time. I was doing fashion at my parent’s house [before marriage], and I still feel the desire/longing [*rahar*] to wear it when I see others wearing those fashions. It shouldn’t matter

¹⁶ The Nepali word *sokh* is often translated as “hobby,” “pleasure,” or “luxury,” though these words do not very effectively convey its meaning. In Kathmandu people often talk about an “X-doing *sokh*,” which might include something as hobbylike as stamp collecting but just as often refers to some desired way of being, either now or as a future goal. For example, young people spoke of having a “film-acting *sokh*”—a desire to someday act in films—or a “guitar-studying *sokh*,” or even a “*sokh* for becoming a doctor.” These are less “hobbies” or “luxuries” than desires or longed-for identities. A *sokh* is an innate inclination—part of a person’s individual nature—something of more significance than is denoted by the English word “hobby.” Compare Nita Kumar (1988) or Joseph Alter (1992), who translates *shauk* as “hobby” or “infatuation.” Alter notes that for some people the term

what you wear; all clothes cover the body. But I see others who look good, so I also have that *sokh*.

Why do you think people usually like fashion?

Each person has their own feeling [*bhāwanā*]. Some think that by doing fashion they'll impress the boys. Some have their own idea that, "If I wear this I'll be good-looking." It just depends. For me, I just enjoy it. It's not for showing off. Who do I need to show off to now [that I'm married]!?

This woman acknowledges that what one wears "shouldn't matter" but ends up defending her own purely personal enjoyment of fashion vis-à-vis others who use fashion to "impress the boys" or "show off."

Another young woman, a teenage student, put the necessity of fashion in slightly different terms:

I don't know why I like fashion. I just like it! But look at me. I'm not *too* [fashionable], am I? I think everyone is doing some fashion, just to make themselves look like they are good-looking and beautiful. Like for me, every few months I go to a salon to have my hair done. But just my hair, nothing else.

For this young woman and many others, the new world of fashion practice allows people to "look like they are good-looking." Through fashion one is "free" to be good-looking. Beauty, like fashion, becomes a material condition that one "does" rather than "is," a commodity aesthetic conveyed and critiqued in the public spaces of the street, the shop window, and the mass media and available in the myriad beauty salons, boutiques, and tailors' shops of Kathmandu.

It is this commodity aesthetic—the commodification of beauty—that lies at the heart of the middle-class necessity to "do fashion." In the words of one college student in her early twenties:

I don't know why but fashion has just become very important. Like, people now think that even an ugly person becomes good-looking with fashion. So there is this competition; everybody wants to be considered good-looking by others. It has really become a necessity these days. So now here, as abroad, there is the same outlook about this.

By this logic the necessity of fashion derives from the fact that it offers a kind of democracy of beauty; "even an ugly person" can become attractive. In the democratic world of middle-class fashion, no one need be

implies a kind of frivolous, narcissistic attitude, a lifestyle of desires-out-of-control (1992:327–28).

"ugly," save the poor. For those in the middle, fashion is necessary because its consumer logic equates ugliness with poverty: the absence of fashion means the absence of middle-class standing.

THE IJJAT ECONOMY

Another central narrative theme in the moral life of Kathmandu's social middle is *ijjat*, a term that has already surfaced several times in this chapter. Usually translated as "prestige," "dignity," "respectability," or "honor," the notion of *ijjat* is often the conceptual lens through which people constructing middle-class culture ascertain suitability. Yet *ijjat* is perhaps best seen, less as a mechanism for discursively producing and naturalizing difference *between* classes, than as a discourse of reciprocity *within* the middle class. Through constantly circulating stories of *ijjat* people conduct the business of deciding what it means to be middle-class, a debate that is never settled, always in the process of negotiation.

Middle-class *ijjat*, or honor, is an extremely complex determination, not least because it brings together old and new logics of prestige in competing and often contradictory hierarchies of value. Some of this complexity comes through in the comments of a college student in his early twenties, trying to describe what it means to be in the middle class.

They are given certain status above the lower castes because they follow certain traditions and values. If they say, "We won't follow these values," they run the risk of losing their *ijjat*, of being lumped with the lower groups. If they were in the low class, then, in terms of sexual matters and marriage they wouldn't have to be so strict, and they wouldn't have to follow all these [religious] rituals all the time.

They have to do all of this, but it is such a tenuous position. To jump to a higher position they don't have the resources. And if they were low-class, they could just say "Eh, why send the children to school?" But because they are in this class they have to do all these things to maintain *ijjat*, like spend a certain amount on a wedding, have a TV, send their children to school.

Calculating middle-class *ijjat* requires an intricate reckoning of caste background and orthodox religious practice as well as consumer prestige, in a host of registers from weddings to education to consumer status symbols. Just how any one person's or family's configuration of *ijjat* stacks up is difficult to determine, but it is through stories of *ijjat* that the middle class negotiates its cultural being.

Perhaps more than any other possession, the middle class is built around an economy of *ijjat*, an economy in which honor or prestige is the

central form of capital. Through its constant retelling and renegotiation, *ijjat* becomes almost tangible: it can be gained or lost, preserved or squandered. In this social economy, sexual propriety, suitable marriages, ritual observances, TVs, and education are not *ijjat* in and of themselves. Instead, they are things that *give ijat (ijjat dine cij)*; they *produce* social capital. Staking claims in this *ijjat* economy is perhaps the key move in an individual's or family's efforts to negotiate membership in the middle class.

As the young man quoted above indicated, the *ijjat* economy is never only a *moral* economy or only a *material* economy. It is always both. The construction of middle-classness is always a matter of both upholding the moral canons of sexual and ritual practice, *and* consuming the goods (from fashion to education) that act as recognized material markers of the middle class. By focusing on issues such as sexual sobriety and ritual observance, people in the social middle construct a privileged *moral* high ground which they can claim as their own. In this domain of public morality, the middle class distinguishes itself from the vulgarity of those "below" them. But by laying claim to "traditional" moral values, the middle class also distinguishes itself from those "above" who have sold out to the morally bankrupt lifestyles of affluence, pleasure, and foreignness.

The *material* domain of the *ijjat* economy is as important as the moral one in generating class distinctions. The wedding celebrations, home furnishings, clothing, and hundreds of other material accoutrements that are required to establish middle-class status effectively distinguish its members from those in poverty. These same goods also signal "modernity"—the middle class's identification with spheres of meaning wider than the strictly local ones in which those below them are trapped. Thus the middle class positions itself in a kind of moral/material modernism. In its moral tempering, this modernism at once critiques the material excesses of elite lifestyles and protects itself from critiques from below by melding its own materialism with a regimen of orthodox practices. In this way the *ijjat* economy marks out a new middle space between tradition and modernity, between local and foreign, and between high and low. In it people experiment with what it means to be both moral and modern, both Nepali and engaged with a growing world of transnational cultural forms and forces.¹⁷

¹⁷ Of course, this experimentation is never simply a matter of free choice. As I discuss in the following chapters, participation in the middle-class *ijjat* economy is always predicated on the ability to control and mobilize financial resources. Status within the middle class is part of a complex and shifting calculus determined by parallel and competing hierarchies of value and modes of cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu 1984). Yet it is money that provides access to the middle-class *ijjat* arena: without it, one "doesn't count."

Stories of social prestige and honor are neither new nor limited to any specific social group in Kathmandu. What *is* new in the local *ijjat* economy may be its degree or scale: in the modern context of changing urban class formations, vastly increased exposure to transnational cultural forces, and an exploding universe of distinction-producing consumer goods, *ijjat* becomes almost an obsession for those Nepalis striving to claim a space in the middle class. In this new context of increased social mobility (up and down) and proliferating distinctive resources, the *ijjat* economy becomes the main arena in which people stake claims to middle-class identities. *Ijgat* is the narrative idiom in which a new group of urban Nepalis seeks to establish (and constantly reestablish) footholds in the slippery terrain of an emerging middle space produced by shifting labor and economic patterns.

All of this points to the potential for anxiety in the high-stakes gamble of participation in the middle-class *ijjat* economy. While individuals, families, or groups may pursue different configurations of practice within the moral/material prestige economy, no one can ignore *ijjat* and hope to maintain a legitimate social identity above the masses of urban poor. Especially for those whose economic resources are limited and whose social status depends on various forms of social and cultural capital (education, caste), *ijjat* can become an overriding, almost crushing, concern.¹⁸ For most of Kathmandu's middle-class residents—for whom the experience of intense social insecurity is a constant reality—*ijjat* becomes an almost unbelievably powerful force.

CONCLUSION

Rather than viewing class as an existential material reality that is ontologically prior to and outside of discourse, this chapter has begun to locate the concept in the historical and cultural terrain out of which class identities and class cultures emerge. In the many ways that they articulate and enact their own interests and privileges, people in Kathmandu's social middle produce the cultural space of class, a space in which specific claims to value, meaning, and reality are lived out and naturalized in everyday practice. Thus, class is never a thing, always a process; like culture itself, class is always "in the making" (Fox 1985).

This chapter has laid out some of the historical and material factors that serve as the backdrop for projects of class production in Kathmandu. But more importantly it has begun to describe the themes and practices

¹⁸ The *ijjat* economy is the domain in which Kathmandu's middle class experiences its own "fear of falling" (Ehrenreich 1989).

around which middle-classness takes shape. Significantly, the language and practice of class does not spring uniformly from what are now globally dispersed patterns of capitalist labor relations (cf. Tagg 1988:27) but instead draws selectively and experimentally on preexisting narratives of status and value that people use to claim and contest social positions. From notions of “honesty” and “suitability” to demands for sexual propriety and religious orthodoxy, the middle class selectively employs a range of distinctly Nepali moral orders in its project of constructing a class culture. But perhaps most important is the middle-class *ijjat* economy, which explicitly ties a historically validated narrative of prestige to the increasingly vast, unstable, and therefore treacherous realm of material culture. Encompassing both moral and material elements, *ijjat* is a crucial domain in which people claim and test the boundaries of class membership and experiment with the suitability of modernity in the form of new consumer practices and consumer goods. The following chapters continue the theme of the production of middle class culture by focusing on the language, practice, and motivating force of consumerism in Kathmandu. These chapters suggest ways in which the modern commodity realm, with its rapidly growing and highly commercialized economy of signs, increasingly acts as a critical territory for the social production of class culture.

SUITABLY MODERN

MAKING MIDDLE-CLASS CULTURE
IN A NEW CONSUMER SOCIETY

MARK LIECHTY

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