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CONSUMER CULTURE IN KATHMANDU: “PLAYING WITH YOUR BRAIN”

There are so many changes now, even though the old generation still thinks in the same way. But now you have the changes in the fashion of clothes, fashion of people, fashion of food, thousands of kinds of fashions. All you need is money! Compared to before, now everything has changed.

—TWENTY-YEAR-OLD KATHMANDU WOMAN

Modernity has turned every element of the real into a sign, and the sign reads “for sale.”

—K. A. APPIAH, *Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?*

Chapter 3 introduced some of the cultural themes around which Kathmandu’s middle-class moral consciousness is centered. This chapter considers the role of *goods* in the ongoing process of constructing middle-classness, and particularly how groups of people both construct boundaries around themselves and debate the terms of group membership through commodity consumption and the practices that this consumption entails. In Kathmandu middle-class consciousness is inseparable from a kind of consumer consciousness. Commodities are fundamental components in the middle-class project of constructing itself as a social group. But how is it that goods can be constantly on people’s minds? This chapter explores how consumer goods have become a new social currency—a new communicative medium—for Kathmandu’s emerging middle class, and how people are drawn into, adopt, or choose to experiment with the logic and values of a new consumer materialism.

THE CONSUMER CONTEXT

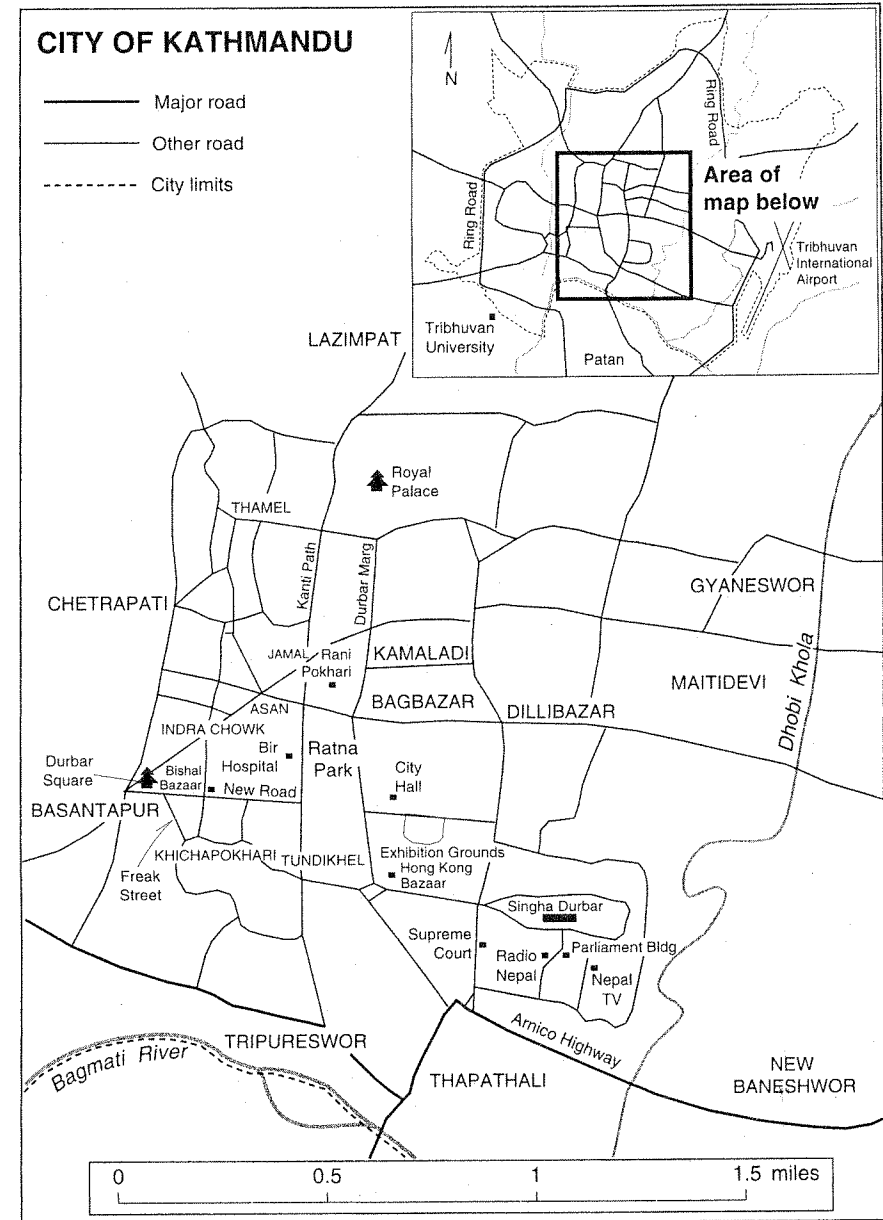
Like almost every other Third World capital city, Kathmandu is the center of not only the nation's administrative and cultural life but also its consumer market. From the vast "Hong Kong Bazaar," a tent city of makeshift stalls specializing in low-market consumer goods, mostly from India and China, to the famous "Bishal Bazaar" (literally, "Super Market"), a multistory indoor shopping mall specializing in high-end consumer goods from East Asia and Europe (and boasting the nation's first (and, until recently, only) escalator), Kathmandu is Nepal's consumer mecca. In fact, because Nepal (since 1951) has had liberal import policies, Kathmandu has emerged as one of the subcontinent's leading shopping sites.¹ Kathmandu offers a full array of modern South Asian consumer venues: from glitzy showrooms and fashion boutiques to sidewalk vendors squatting beside small baskets of Chinese hair products, the city has something to incite consumer desire in almost every heart.

Where once people simply saw new goods in shop windows or in other people's homes, now there are more and more organized channels that make it "easy" for people to buy new consumer goods. One of the most common schemes is known as the "*dhukuti* [treasury, storehouse, or cash box] system"—a kind of rotating credit club in which groups of acquaintances agree to each contribute a certain amount of money to a kitty every week or month and then either wait their turn or bid to receive the pooled capital. Although *dhukuti* credit schemes in Kathmandu are likely as old as cash itself, by the early 1990s their numbers and popularity were rising so precipitously that the commercial banking sector in Nepal actually began to complain of lost business (Uprety 1991). From housewives contributing a few rupees, to business people laying out hundreds of thousands a month,² *dhukuti* participation was extremely common across a range of ethnic and caste groups in the middle and upper classes. With the funds mobilized through these credit systems, Kathmandu consumers were buying everything from gold and real estate to motorcycles and furniture.

Smaller-scale investors in particular often directed *dhukuti* funds into another popular consumer promotion scheme known as an *upabār kārya*—

¹ Up until the early 1990s, when India finally scrapped its postindependence import-substitution regime for "economic liberalization" (that is, its markets were opened to foreign imports and capital), wealthy Indians had flocked to Kathmandu's New Road shopping district on weekend charter flights from Delhi and Bombay (Liechty 1996a).

² Some wealthy investors join up to ten *dhukuti* schemes at a time. By borrowing from one fund at relatively low rates and lending to another at higher rates, savvy investors can make good money playing on the margins—not unlike in a stock or currency trading market.



2. The city of Kathmandu

kram, or “gift program.” The “gift program” is a kind of consumer buying scheme that combines advance installment payments with a lottery. For example, someone interested in buying a steel cabinet or sofa set might join a “gift” scheme through which, after twelve fixed monthly payments, s/he is guaranteed delivery of the furniture. “Players” pay their monthly installments, and every month the scheme operators hold a lottery. A certain number of winners then receive their furniture for fewer than twelve payments, while the rest must pay in full. Everyone gets their desired commodity at more or less the market rate, but a few lucky ones get theirs at a discount. “Gift program” schemes help entice hesitant consumers into making purchases by throwing in the element of chance and possible good fortune; at worst, one only pays market price. But for “gift program” organizers, such schemes bring in huge amounts of cash to be invested or loaned at high rates of interest.³

Finally, even more common than “gift program” schemes are Kathmandu’s ubiquitous consumer lotteries. Although many offer cash, other schemes play directly off people’s desires for prestige goods by offering payoffs in the form of popular consumer items ranging from new homes, to cars and motor cycles, to televisions and refrigerators, to furniture and bicycles. Motorcycles were particularly popular lottery items. For a few rupees a lottery player might join the film heroes and urban elites riding about on the city’s streets. Entirely unregulated, there were often stories of people being ripped off by lottery scam artists (Upadyaya 1991).

Whether plastered across banners or shouted in megaphones on the streets, blaring from TV or radio, or jumping out in eye-catching ads in local newspapers, consumer buying schemes seem to be everywhere in Kathmandu. Even if many people would have nothing to do with these schemes and scams, the sheer cacophony of images and promotions that assault Kathmandu residents as they move about the city contributes to a general ethos that privileges a material realm of consumer commodities as the domain of *real* value and fulfillment. It is this atmosphere of intense consumer promotion that helps to shape middle-class consumer desire.

“WHAT WOULD YOU DO WITH TWENTY THOUSAND RUPEES?”: CONSUMER DESIRE AND “COMMODITY FUTURES”

The contours of this middle-class consumer consciousness emerged in exceptionally clear detail in responses to one question that my co-workers and I often asked: “What would you do if you won twenty thousand

³ For more on *dhukuṭi* and *upabār kāryakram* schemes in the Kathmandu valley, see Rankin and Shrestha 1995.

rupees in a local lottery?”⁴ Originally I was simply curious about what kept the hundreds of street-corner and media-based lottery games in operation. But as we accumulated answers to this question, I began to see some unusually vivid social contrasts between long-term Kathmandu residents and recent arrivals in the city. The way people responded illustrated the force of consumer goods in populating the imagination, reconfiguring desire, and structuring visions of the future.

As the location of most of Nepal’s institutions of higher education, Kathmandu is host to many thousands of young people from across the country, who come to the city to study at the postsecondary level. Although predominately from higher-caste groups, these students (almost all of them male) are often from cash-poor families and thus work in private schools or shops around the valley while attending classes. Probably the most stark contrast I encountered in all of my research was that between the answers to the lottery question given by some of the many young people in Kathmandu who had come from other areas of Nepal for education and work and those given by young Kathmandu “natives” (those born and raised in the city). The contrast came not only in what they would *do* with a windfall of 20,000 NPR but in their reactions to the very *idea* of such an occurrence.

One of my co-workers, also a student from outside the valley, interviewed a number of his student acquaintances. Among these young men from rural areas, the most typical initial response to the prospect of winning 20,000 NPR was a kind of shock or surprise. For example, one young man, a twenty-year-old studying for his intermediate college degree, when asked what he would do with the money, responded:

Hah! I don’t know . . . , I, I never thought about getting that kind of money, I mean, so unexpectedly. What would I do? Um. . . . Well, maybe I’d buy some good magazines and really good books. . . . Yeah, I’d get books on subjects where I have weaknesses in my studies.

Another young man, a twenty-year-old student from East Nepal, had a similar response:

Ohhhh! That would be a completely lucky thing! How would I know what to do with that?! I have no plan, I’m not sure. . . . But still, I guess I’d use it for my studies and also maybe for some social-service programs, like clubs. I think that would be my intention, to help where there are problems.

Another student, a twenty-two-year old from Nepal’s western Tarai region, responded jokingly with another question: “Why would I want to

⁴ In the early 1990s, 20,000 Rs was equivalent to about 400 USD.

win such an unexpected thing?! If I won that kind of money, what would I do with it?!" Eventually this young man suggested that maybe he would give some money to his family, or maybe put it away for an emergency. What seems surprising is that none of these young men had any idea of what they would do with 20,000 NPR. They *simply* had not thought about it; it was totally "unexpected": they had "no plan." Yet when pushed, or given a few moments to think, they all proposed either investing the money in their education, giving some of it away, or putting it in savings.

Some students from rural areas were more quick with answers. For example, a nineteen-year-old economics student from the eastern Tarai replied promptly, "I'd put it into a business plan. In the village area that would be enough to really do something." Similarly another twenty-two-year-old bachelor's-level student in Nepali literature responded without hesitation:

I'd invest this money in my life, in things which would give me knowledge. Like in Devkota's⁵ books and other literature. Actually, many important works [by Devkota] haven't been published. They should be, and maybe I'd invest this money in bringing these to publication. They'd help me too.

Ultimately, the most common theme in the responses of out-of-town young people, assuming they were able to get past the novelty of even *imagining* the possession of 20,000 NPR, had to do with investing the money in "things which would give me knowledge." For these students, life goals revolved around education, the primary mode of "cultural capital" that they sought to accrue.

Young people born and raised in the city had very different responses to the lottery question. Far from the befuddled amazement at the thought of having 20,000 NPR to dispose of, these urban youth had instant answers as to what they would do with the money. They immediately articulated their desires for a fairly limited range of modern consumer goods, as in the response of this eighteen-year-old Kathmandu student from Naksal:

I'd buy the latest English records. And then I'd take my friends out to some restaurant to celebrate my winning the lottery! Then, I'm also thinking about buying a new mountain bike. Mine is getting pretty beat up.

A nineteen-year-old local student had a somewhat similar response:

⁵ Laxmi Prasad Devkota (1909–59), one of Nepal's best-known and most-loved litterateurs.

Oh, I'd probably take my girlfriend here and there to restaurants, discos, that kind of place. Plus I'd buy a new mountain bike, shoes—I especially want a pair of those new-style football shoes—and other stuff like that I'd buy.

Another teenage boy, a sixteen-year-old whose father was a fairly high-ranking government official, cut straight to the point:

Hey listen, if I won that kind of money, I'd do nothing else but immediately go out and buy fashions!

One of the more intriguing answers came from a nineteen-year-old Sherpa college student who had spent most of his life in Kathmandu:

Well, first I'd go and buy things that can be bought [*kinnincha jasto cij*], like a mountain bike, some new fashionable clothes, like jeans, shoes. . . . And then I'd just go out and blow some of it on food and stuff for my friends.

For this young man, the lottery question immediately elicited the category of "*things that can be bought*," which was in turn made up of a more or less standard set of desired youth-related consumer goods. In a sense, "things that can be bought" means "commodities," and it is significant that for urban young people the lottery question set off a litany of consumer desires.

What all of these responses from urban youth indicate are minds that are ready, set, and primed for consumption. All of these young men have wants that are clearly defined and waiting at the tips of their tongues. Unlike the students from rural areas of Nepal, for whom education and "things that will bring me knowledge" were identified (after some thought) as their primary desires, for these urban young men visions of material possessions—"things that can be bought"—seemed to be swarming about very near the surface of their waking consciousnesses.

These two sets of answers have important implications for questions concerning future orientation and the "naturalness" (or otherwise) of consumer longing. The question points to significant differences between rural and urban youth, especially in the way the varying answers highlight characteristics of the modern consumer. Clearly the out-of-town young people have their own sense of future orientation; as students they are engaged in the classic bourgeois project of delayed gratification through the slow accumulation of cultural capital that can be mobilized at a later date. Yet although education is a commodity, and many of these young men were working to put themselves through college, few of them thought in terms of "commodity futures." They envisioned futures in terms of effort and achievement: education in the short run and various kinds of

professional labor in the long run. By contrast, urban young people seemed to have futures cluttered with commodities. For them the thought of 20,000 NPR quickly brought forth narratives of consumer desires, stories of “what I’d buy” and in what order. In this contrast we begin to see some of the characteristics of the “modern consumer” in Kathmandu. While everyone thinks of the future in some way, the consumer’s “commodity future” is a peculiar outlook structured around consumer desire.

These contrasting sets of comments also tell us something about the *nature* of consumer desire. Most strikingly, consumer desire seems to reside in the city. As I will explore in more detail below, consumer desire cannot be separated from the general urban consumer environment of mass media and other forms of commodity promotion. But there is an even more basic set of relationships between consumer desire and the city as the site of intensive commodification. The city is a place where money is likely to be among the dominant registers of social value and therefore consumption among the main cultural dimensions in which need is formulated and desire expressed. Thus, for the urban youth we interviewed, the thought of money activated thoughts of consumer commodities.

A number of these young people also registered an awareness of the link between *having money* and *having needs*. For example an eighteen-year-old upper-caste student from Kathmandu, who drove a taxi part-time to help support his family and his education, responded to our lottery question in this way:

If I won that much money, the first thing I’d do is take care of my pressing needs. Right now I don’t have that many needs. But you know, if you have money, immediately you begin to have other needs! They just spring up! Yeah, I’d probably go out and get a mountain bike and lots of English [music] cassettes.

Functioning with limited financial resources in a fully monetized local cash economy, this young man immediately thought of his “pressing needs,” which though few, were clearly on his mind. Yet, with a bit of reflection, he too moved on to a litany of “other needs” that “just spring up,” “if you have money.”

Along similar lines, one of the most introspective—almost philosophical—answers that we received to our lottery question came from the eighteen-year-old son of a Gurkha in the British Army. This young man had spent most of his life in Kathmandu and had attended a respectable upper-level high school. When asked what he would do with 20,000 NPR, he paused briefly before answering:

Nowadays people have a lot of needs. Money is the kind of thing that men can’t keep forever in a box under lock and key. I mean, if you

have money, money is nothing. So in that case, if I have money, I get the urge to just go out and do something really exciting/titillating [*romācat*]. I mean, this is the feeling that comes. People have *real* needs, but I’m talking about something different.

It’s like, if I had twenty thousand rupees, it would be gone in two or four days. So instead, it would be better for me to give it to people who really need it—like the poor guys lying by the side of the street. I’d like to help them. But if there are things I need, I like to get them. Right now there isn’t anything I really need, but sometimes I like to go out with my friends and buy food, feed everybody and that kind of thing, so for that I need money. I mean, money is useless unless we have needs.

Like the previous student who contrasted “pressing needs” with “other needs,” this young man distinguishes between “*real* needs” (such as the needs of the destitute) and the needs that seem to come with money. He describes the “feeling that comes” when he has money, the urge to go do something “*romācat*,” something that gives pleasurable excitement or, literally, something that gives goosebumps, or makes one’s hair stand on end.⁶ For him, having money in his hands precipitates an urge for titillating excitement, a sense of longing or need, but not “*real* needs.” For this young man and others, consumer longing does not seem to derive so much from *needs* as from simply *having money*. Somehow, money itself excites consumer needs and the longing for consumer “excitements.”

Because few families from outside the valley allow their daughters to live on their own in Kathmandu, the young women in the city’s high schools and on college campuses are, with few exceptions, from middle-class families living in the valley. The young women my co-workers and I interviewed were from these families. Significantly, unlike the young men from the valley that we interviewed, occasionally some of these young women would express surprise and bewilderment at the prospect of winning 20,000 NPR, as did this one sixteen-year-old student who had just passed her high school certification exams:

Eh, who knows?! I could only say that after having won! Really, I have never even bought a [lottery] ticket, and I’ve never thought about such a thing.

Yet her response was definitely in the minority. For the most part, young women from the city had the same reflexlike responses as did young men. To a greater extent than the men’s, however, women’s responses were characterized by a fixation on “fashion”; clothing and makeup dominated

⁶ The word *romācat* often has strong erotic overtones as well.

their consumer imaginations. Not uncommon was the rather smug answer given by an eighteen-year-old intermediate-level science student studying at a local campus:

These days, with twenty thousand rupees [*wrinkles her nose and smirks, to indicate that the sum is paltry*]. . . Well, if it's just for me, I'd buy fashions, like some nice dresses, shoes. . . . And then I'd buy food for my friends, and maybe even give some away to my brothers and to my parents.

Another young woman, a twenty-year-old intermediate student, went into a bit more detail about why she wants "fashions":

Well, I've never actually even bought a ticket, but [if I had that money] I think I would just buy things that I like. You know everybody does fashion [*fashion garcha*] these days, to make themselves good-looking. So I think I would also do the same.

For most middle-class women—and many young men—in Kathmandu, "fashion" and "doing fashion" loom large among the themes in their consumer consciousnesses.

In total these responses to our lottery question shed some important light on the little-known processes and role of the imagination in modern life (Appadurai 1996). The almost spontaneous "commodity futures" elicited by the prospect of cash suggest that urban youth—those raised in the highly commercialized and mass-mediated setting of Kathmandu—have imaginations that are, at least in part, quite literally commercialized. What sets the urban youth apart from their rural counterparts is not an orientation toward the future but the way that future is imagined. City youth had the category of "things that can be bought" firmly and centrally implanted in their imaginations. For readers from highly commodified societies (such as North America), this may seem unremarkable, but the responses of rural Nepali youth—for whom visions of cash and commodities had *not* structured their imaginations—suggest that consumer desire is not a "natural" component of the imagination. Instead, it emerges in specific historical/material contexts, where social value is increasingly distributed according to the logic and terms of a cash market economy. In the modern consumer imagination, desire is not premised on needs but on knowledge (of "things that can be bought") and, even more fundamentally, on having cash. As several of those quoted above noted, in a consumer society, needs are proportionate to cash: "[I]f you have money, immediately you have . . . needs."

If answers to our lottery question pointed to a particularly vivid consumer imagination among urban young people in Kathmandu, to what extent is this consumer materialism something new? Is materialism a

"modern" phenomenon that corresponds with the arrival of monetized economies and consumer markets? In the following section, I suggest that in Kathmandu the meaning and nature of materialism has changed with the commercial transformation of the local material culture.

THE NEW MATERIALISM

One evening during the summer of 1991, Nepal Television aired a drama about an old man whose son-in-law was disrespectful and negligent because the old man had no property to pass on at his death. Then, at the suggestion of friends, the old man started wearing a large key on a string around his neck, and before long his offspring were attending to the old man's every wish.⁷ For weeks after the program, the somewhat uneasy joke that floated around town was that the number of savings accounts had suddenly shot up in area banks! Whether or not viewers actually rushed to the bank to open accounts, the drama seemed to prod middle-class, middle-aged city residents into thinking about saving money, not to pass on to future generations, but for their own security in old age. The TV drama highlighted the commonly held perception that values once holding society and family together are breaking down as the role of money increases. While a certain kind of materialism, built around practices of accumulation and property transfer, is surely age-old, people in Kathmandu recognize a new kind of materialism in their midst, one associated with the new highly monetized economy and changing modes of cultural capital.

I was frequently reminded of differences between various modes of materialism. Middle-class adults often spoke of the consumer values practiced by their parents or grandparents, who worked to accumulate land and gold. While earlier generations also wished to live comfortably, they viewed various forms of wealth primarily as something to accumulate in order to propel future generations into more desirable social circumstances. Now, however, patterns of accumulation and forms of patrimony have shifted to better fit the realities of a new social and material logic.

Some spoke of this change in terms of new understandings of parents' obligations to their children, as well as their own rights to personal pleasure. One middle-aged woman, a mother of two, noted that nowadays people believe that parental investment comes in the form of providing education for sons (and increasingly daughters), after which children are expected to more or less take responsibility for themselves. In other words, the woman explained, the transfer of family resources occurs in a

⁷ The key implied that the old man had a cash box or safe hidden among his possessions.

different manner (in the form of education, not in traditional forms of wealth like land or gold) and at an earlier time (in the child's youth, not at the death of the parent). She said that now parents feel enormous pressure to provide the best possible education for their children and will often actually deplete the family's fixed assets to do so, but once this is done, they feel somewhat less compelled to scrimp and save for their children's sake. Instead, they are more inclined to evaluate their own living standards and pursue the comforts and pleasures they feel are their due. Yet this woman recognized that the standards of comfort her grandparents would have felt to be suitable were to her totally unacceptable. She noted that "comfort" was a completely relative notion, which hinged on an awareness of options and possession of the means to pursue them.

Another man in his early forties, who had grown up in a small town outside of the Kathmandu valley, voiced a similar realization when he said, almost as a complaint, "You know, now there are so many things to enjoy!" He explained the changing nature of materialism in terms of choices. As a child in a rural town, "fun" (*majā*) had been singing, dancing, and eating good food at festival times. He contrasted this with his present life, but even more with the lives of his two children. Now opportunities for enjoyment and entertainment cluttered his daily existence to the point of distraction, and he willingly blamed his son's poor school performance on an excess of *majā*. People typically characterized the shift from old to new forms of materialism in terms of generations, but more particularly in terms of values: the new materialism represented a trend away from the accumulation of wealth, toward the pursuit of enjoyment, even though both forms involve elements of display (whether of gold ornaments or color televisions).

By describing materialism in terms of "old" and "new," I do not mean to imply that one has replaced the other. One young woman, explaining why she saves her money to buy land, said, "Other things, if you eat it, it's finished: if you turn it on, it breaks: if you wear it, it tears. But land can't be exhausted in this way." Many people shared her view, frequently contrasting the permanence of land and gold with the ephemerality of the new goods and pleasures now available in the market. Rather than replacing an earlier consumer ethic of accumulation and permanence with a new materialism of consumer goods and enjoyment, the two coexist in an uneasy combination of logics.

This uneasy coexistence struck me one day while quizzing a friend on what constituted the ideal middle-class sitting room. I asked if this was the room where people would put their most valuable possessions on display. At this he laughed and said, "Of course not. People would never display their gold ornaments in this way!" Instead, he explained, this is where people put their television and often their refrigerator, suitcases

(to display their ability to travel), and other modern goods. His remarks pointed to two contrasting though intermingled modes of consumer logic. One is built around conservation and insurance against possible future hardships, while the other communicates participation in a rapidly expanding commoditized regime of value, in which personal status and identity are tied to the control and display of possessions.

The tension between these two consumer logics runs like an undercurrent through popular middle-class consciousness in Kathmandu. It is illustrated by a story I was told so many times⁸ that I came to recognize it as a kind of morality tale. Conveyed with a mixture of disgust and reprobation, the story tells of a man who (usually hounded by wife and/or children, depending on who tells the story) sells either gold or land in order to purchase a television, motorbike, or some other high-status consumer item. A variant of this tale recounts the drug-addicted son who, in the ultimate act of filial depravity, exchanges his mother's gold ornaments for a fix. Aside from indicating an awareness of two coexisting, even competing, modes of consumption, the moral tone of these stories points to a kind of ethical ranking of goods. Gold and land are somehow stabilizing and nurturing, tied to notions of permanence and family, while TVs and motorbikes are portrayed as almost hostile intruders into the domestic sphere, extracting resources and, not insignificantly, often associated with addiction.⁹

Again, what is "new" about the new materialism is not some sudden appearance of commodities, much less the association of identity with possessions. Commodities have been at the heart of local economies since Kathmandu's founding as a trading center in the first millennium, and even imported, mass-produced consumer commodities (from textiles to kitchen utensils) have been common in the city at least since the late eighteenth century (Liechty 1997). Rather, what is "new" is the abrupt lifting of import bans, sumptuary laws, and other consumer restrictions in place during the Rana era, the new predominantly cash-based economy, and the subsequent sudden explosion of goods and services in local commodity markets. The transformation is not a matter of essence but of scale; it is tied to an enormous increase in the quantity of commoditized forms and their sudden ubiquity in daily life.

It is this exploding domain of material consumer abundance that forms a powerfully compelling communicative medium both for constructing new modes of middle-class distinction and for carrying on the debate over the meaning of "middleness." As illustrated in the next section, most people in Kathmandu's social middle, even while recognizing

⁸ Including twice in the first person.

⁹ For other critical perspectives linking local consumerism with addiction, see chapter 9.

the intrinsic ephemerality of distinction based on consumer goods (objects which “break,” “tear,” or are “finished”), feel they have no choice but to transact in the new currency of consumer distinction.

CONSUMER ANXIETY: “PLAYING WITH YOUR BRAIN”

If people in Kathmandu speak disparagingly of the new materialism—if they sometimes characterize modern commodities as almost predatory agents—why is there such enormous pressure to participate in the new consumer culture? What drives people into a consumer economy that they themselves regard as threatening and even immoral? To begin to understand behaviors and motivations, we must keep in mind the almost overwhelming sociocultural flux that many people experience. Over the past two or three decades, many Kathmandu residents have faced a situation of fixed (or declining) resources, not only in terms of income but also in terms of social capital, where entitlements once linked to caste background are less and less assured. Add to this precarious condition the new possibilities for mobility—both spatial (in the forms of migration and suburbanization) and social (in rapidly changing socioeconomic fortunes)—and an enormous increase in the quantity of consumer goods that have become vehicles of marking and claiming distinction, and you have a recipe for intense social anxiety and instability.

To introduce something of what it means for middle-class urban Nepalis to confront a vastly transformed social and cultural order, I recount at some length conversations with two Kathmandu residents. Both of these statements capture the sense of anxiety and the experience of moral dilemma that accompany people as they move further into the new domain of commodities and values. Both statements effectively convey what Fredric Jameson calls “the misery of happiness” (1989:518), or what Arjun Appadurai has referred to as “the agonized drama of leisure” (1991:207). In other words, these people describe the trauma of living the middle-class “good life.”

When I spoke with him in 1991, Kedar was already well into middle age, had two teenage children and two occupations: as small-business owner and English teacher. Originally from Nepal’s Tarai region and a member of an upper caste, Kedar was proud of his academic achievements (he held a master’s degree) but felt financially insecure. In the course of a long conversation, talk turned to the subject of household economics, which Kedar expounded in his characteristically dramatic manner:

Here the pressure is affecting the housewife especially. Because, well, they need . . . I mean we are not in *need* of a refrigerator, but now it

is a *prestige* issue. Like me, my own TV purchasing. On my street everyone else had a TV antenna sticking out. Even I pretended about that. [I said to my family] “Why do you need that? You’re only looking at third-class Nepali programs!”

But my wife and kids, they started to go to the neighbor’s house. Every time a good program was coming, they were going and spoiling their education! So I started to wonder, what should I do?

Then I sold my gold—I mean my wife’s gold and everything—and then I bought it [a television]. That’s right! It was just like a trap. I was in a *trap*! I mean, this is the kind of thing that is happening here! And I, an educated man, was in this trap. Just imagine the others. They can’t afford to buy a TV, but now everyone needs a very *good* TV, not some low-class model. They look down on you if you have a black-and-white, or even a Gold Star.¹⁰ They say [*swaggering voice*], “Oh, I have a *Sony*!”

At this I asked where such influences were coming from?

Like the *new-rich* people here bought it, everything, right? New-rich people, I mean the Manangi people, with their illegal money,¹¹ and with that they bought *anything*. And everybody started to see that and they started thinking, “Why not in my home? Why only them?” [They said to themselves] “You are educated and you can’t buy this. Look at him. He’s only tenth-class. And he did like this, and he doesn’t have *this*. [*pointing to his head*] Use this *brain*!”

Look, I’m a good person. But what’s the use of your image if you can’t earn money? Yeah, it happened to *me*! That’s why I sold off that gold. That’s why. . . . I’m thinking, “Hey, I’m an educated person in Nepal. Its affecting *me*—then, what for others?” Well, you can imagine! They will have an inferiority complex, and from that complex you can’t survive for long. [They have to say to their families] “Oh, I can’t give you good food. I can’t give you a fridge. I can’t even give you a *fan*!” Even if you have something, you are always lacking something. You can’t fulfill everything, you know.

¹⁰ Gold Star color televisions are assembled in Nepal from Korean components and are slightly less expensive than most imported models.

¹¹ Manang is a mountainous region of West-Central Nepal whose residents have for centuries been involved in long-distance trans-Himalayan trade. In the decades following Nepal’s opening, they were able to use their trading networks and expertise to capitalize on a number of legal, quasi-legal, and illegal business opportunities. In the process, members of the community were able to amass enormous personal fortunes (see van Spengen 1987, 2000, Watkins 1996). The combination of their Tibetan ethnic background and their great wealth makes the Manangi community a “natural” whipping boy for upper-caste members of Kathmandu’s middle class, who view Manangis as a threat to their traditional forms of cultural capital.

When I asked if it was really the Manangis who were causing people to feel these anxieties, Kedar admitted that it was not so simple as that.

All around are things that make you think, "Oh, I wish that I could have that one also!" I mean, it's always playing with your brain. And whenever you get the chance, any chance—like for taking bribe money—you leave your values, and that's not a good thing. But the whole thing is coming there. [Everybody says] "Oh, my wife was pressing me on this thing, on that thing. Oh, if I only had that money."

Like my relatives: one is a customs officer,¹² and right now he has everything. My wife and my children are saying [to me] now, "See there, he's a less experienced, less famous man than you, but he has a carpet, he has a refrigerator, he has a TV. He has *everything!* He has ornaments, he has gold, and whatever he likes, he can do that."

But I told my wife, well, he's only arranging for the family. But he, look at the very cheap-class watch he's wearing. And the cheap-class clothes he's wearing. Because the government will suspect him. Got what I mean? He can't expose what he's earning [i.e., in bribes]. And *I know* what is his mental state. You don't know that. *I know* that. Always suspicion, suspicion. . . . In this way he will die, always having boozing, and this and that.

Me? I'm doing my body building.¹³ I don't have any pressure. I'm free to do anything. Which life do you like?

From his earlier statements about feeling "trapped," it would seem that Kedar was not in fact "free" of pressures to conform. Yet by drawing a sharp line of distinction between himself and his corrupted relative, Kedar clearly tied the life of consumer abundance to a life of moral compromise. There is almost a Faustian contract in Kedar's account of the customs officer driven to corruption in order to acquire consumer goods for himself and his family, and now destined to die a paranoid and "boozing" death. For Kedar consumer goods are "all around," always "playing with your brain," and challenging your sense of self-worth. "I'm a good person," "I'm an educated person"—so why are these other people better off than me? One question seemed to sum up the dilemmas Kedar faced: "[W]hat's the use of your image if you can't earn money?" Kedar finds himself in a "trap" in part because the forms of cultural and social capital he holds (especially family background and education) are losing value,

¹² In Nepal customs officers are widely believed to be corrupt and able to make big money through bribes, smuggling, and kickbacks. Stories abound of families "investing" large sums in order to acquire a job in the customs service for a son or nephew.

¹³ Kedar followed a daily regimen of calisthenics.

or at least being outpaced by a new index of value based on an economy of possessions. Kedar's comments clearly illustrate the enormous seductive powers of the new domain of consumer goods and the moral and economic dilemmas that this domain poses. But his words also contain a powerful critical dimension. The love-hate ambivalence toward the modern consumer economy that Kedar conveys in his stories of commodity desire and entrapment is a central theme in the discursive construction of middle-classness in Kathmandu.

If Kedar represents a male's point of view, how do women experience and deal with the pressures of the new middle-class consumer economy? While Kedar (and other men) frequently blamed wives and children for the pressures to succumb to consumer demands, what are the factors that compel women to enter the new world of goods?

Some answers to these questions emerge in the remarks of a young high-caste woman interviewed by one of my female Nepali co-workers. In 1991 Gita was in her early thirties, identified herself as a "housewife" (though she was still officially a student, working on incomplete exams), and was the mother of two sons, ages three and seven. Gita's comments very effectively capture the precariousness of daily existence for many people struggling to maintain their stakes in Kathmandu's middle-class culture. By local standards her extended family—some members of which occupy high positions in the civil service or live abroad—would be seen as relatively well-to-do. Yet what the family could claim in social capital and prestige was constantly threatened by the limited economic resources it could muster. Gita's anxiety focused precisely on how, as wife and mother, to maintain what she called a "standard of living" in the face of severe economic shortages.

After touching on problems that parents have disciplining their children, the conversation took an interesting reflective turn.

A decade ago the situation of children was different. Today there's less control. I feel that now the standard of living is rising. Maybe that's because people are earning more. But for us, we still have problems, troubles, hardships in living, not enough money for food. Well, [at least] we are a family, and everybody brings in a little, but still we feel hardships.

What I see now is that even lower-level people are wearing clothes the same as people in the middle class [*madhyam barga*]. Or the high-class families are wearing expensive, high-quality clothes, and the middle-class people are wearing the same things.

How are they doing this? *That's what I want to know!* It's very surprising. *How are they coming up with the money?* You see some

soldier on the street wearing pants that cost three or four hundred rupees. That's the same as his officer is wearing!

So, how does this happen?

It's hard to say how they can maintain this. Maybe they have some part-time job, or business, or wear such nice clothes only once a year.

But there's one thing that people from *our* level do. For instance, if I buy clothes for the children, they wear those only when they go out [of the house]. And then when they come back, I wash them if they are dirty. Otherwise I just put them back on the hanger, and then I have them put on other clothes that are only used when they're around the house. This is what we must do these days.

For Gita, rises in the society's "standard of living" are intimately tied to changes in consumer patterns as they relate to class. When soldiers are appearing on the streets wearing the same clothing as their officers, "people from *our* level" resort to new strategies to improve living standards, or at least put forward the appearance of having done so. Gita elaborated on the theme of maintaining public appearances by suggesting that things nowadays are different than before:

I don't think the previous generation had it like this. They just didn't care so much about clothes. They could go out [of the house] wearing any kind of clothes. At that time fashion wasn't so common, but now, now the mothers are educated, they like cleanliness, they want their children to be clean, they put them in special schools. . . . Because of all this, the changes have come. This is the reason for the changes in the standard of living. People are now willing to eat less, in order to show themselves to be of a high standard.

For Gita, education and a concern for "fashion" and "cleanliness" are all inseparable parts of being a modern woman and a modern mother. Because of these things "the changes have come," even to the point where people are willing to sacrifice food for public prestige.

How can it be that people think that wearing is more important than eating?

Well, wearing *isn't* more important than eating. We all need nutritious food. I mean, I'm not one of those who thinks spending more money on food is not good. One should eat properly, with a balanced diet, as long as it is within the budget, not going over the expenditure limit, and, if possible, having some savings.

I usually don't spend extra money. My husband does, a little. I don't go outside much, and that way I can save some money, like

what would have been spent on a taxi or something. For example, if I go outside and see a restaurant, I feel like eating! So I just try not to go out that much. That way I can save money which later can be spent on constructive things.

Like, I don't buy the cheap cotton bedsheets, because they are not colorfast. Yet, these are the cheapest ones, only one hundred rupees. So if my husband gives me two hundred rupees for buying sheets, I wait for one more month and add another hundred rupees and buy the *teri-cotton*, the better-quality ones, and then just do the sewing myself. I like the *teri-cotton* sheets; they give you a better standard of living. When they are seen, they look nice, and also they last longer, at least eight years. I feel that if I invest my money like this, I get a long time duration. In this way we can maintain a good standard of living.

In these sentences Gita suddenly launches into the language of classic economic rationalism. With budgets, limits, and savings; with investments, calculations of duration, and delayed purchasing, Gita is a housewife who has very consciously embraced economic-maximization strategies in order to "maintain a good standard of living."

Why do you think people want to show off this standard of living?

It's because . . . Now European society has come here. Everywhere there is talk about high thinking, clean environment, high standard of living. Everybody wants a comfortable life. The older generation used to just light a fire, but now [we use] gas stoves or heaters [electric cooking elements]. The main reason for wanting a modern life is so that you can have a comfortable life.

And now people are sending their children off to school. There's competition in this too. Here people are sending their children. . . . They don't want their children to have some inferiority complex. So people are trying to send [their children to school] even if they don't have the [financial] capacity to do it.

So now, in the boarding school, you'll find children from all levels of the society—high, middle, and low are all there. I was thinking that my children wouldn't have any problems if their friends were from wealthy families, but they [my children] feel poor. So for this reason, they are always suffering from this inferiority complex. They are afraid to talk to other children! So I just don't want my children to have this inferiority complex, and if we can increase our standard of living little by little, they won't have it.

Like, suppose if we don't have a cassette player and our children don't know anything about this. And then they see some other person's cassette player and we say to them, "Hey, don't touch that! You

shouldn't play with that." [If we say that] Then they're going to fear these things, and they may never learn how to use something like that.

But as for my son, *he knows* how to turn on the television, and the deck [VCR], even though I fear that he might break something in the process.

In these comments Gita begins by equating "modern life" with the comforts of modern consumer goods as well as disciplines like cleanliness. Yet these ideas are closely tied to her own class consciousness, and she soon returns to her feelings of anxiety, especially as they relate to her children, who have been thrown into the "competition" of an expensive private school. Here she admits that whereas she had thought it would be good to have her children in school with children from "wealthy families," in fact they were now suffering from an "inferiority complex" and have trouble talking with the other children. In order to save her children from feeling inferior and underprivileged, she wants desperately to raise the family's living standards. For Gita it is her parental duty not just to *own* modern consumer goods but to make sure her children know how to *use* them. She can be proud that *her* seven-year-old knows how to use a TV and a VCR.

For both Kedar and Gita, the problem is how to construct and maintain a middle-class material existence in the face of constantly upward-spiraling standards on the one hand and extremely limited resources on the other. Like a card game where the stakes are constantly being raised, it takes more and more cash outlay for people in Kathmandu to stay at, as Gita put it, "*our level*." For Kedar this had meant selling off some of his wife's gold in order to buy a TV and thereby avoid the humiliation of having his family members troop off to the neighbor's sitting room every evening. Compared with Gita, Kedar was more willing to portray the forces of consumerism as immoral. In his opinion, some people may appear to be living high, but they do so only by lowering themselves to a state of moral baseness. For Gita, however, moralizing does little to change the (perceived) reality of children stigmatized for not consuming at certain material standards. As a wife (in charge of a household) and mother (in charge of children), Gita asks, "How are [other people] coming up with the money?" Ultimately much of the burden of projecting an appropriate living standard falls on her, whether by making sure the children are changed into good clothing whenever they leave the house, resisting frivolous purchases and maximizing her returns when she does "invest" in things like bedsheets, or doing whatever she can to save a rupee here and there. As a modern middle-class woman, it is her duty to

"increase [her family's] standard of living little by little," whether she wants to or not.

"JUST LIKE A PLANT": FASHION CONSCIOUSNESS IN KATHMANDU

Perhaps the ultimate question confronting anyone who tries to describe the process of shifting cultural logics in a place like Kathmandu is, Why? Why are people "compelled" or "lured" into the consumer economy? In the comments of Kedar and Gita we have seen the beginnings of an answer to these questions. In their remarks Kedar and Gita described something of the sociology of middle-class consumerism in Kathmandu. They emphasized the competition between different groups, each of which brings a different configuration of social and economic resources into the arena of middle-class discourse. They stressed the demands and moral compromises inherent in the struggle to remain at "our level" as the criteria for determining social standing become increasingly tied to consumer modes of distinction.

But another way of exploring the question of motivation—of *why* people enter the consumer economy—is to move beyond a strictly interpersonal or intergroup perspective. Are there other means, motivations, or avenues by which a consumer logic takes hold of middle-class imaginations? Some of Gita's comments suggest that there are. For example, her fixation on clothing and, to an even greater extent, her repeated references to cleanliness, hygiene, nutrition, and comfort point to narrative components of consumer consciousness that are not simply matters of social competition but cut more deeply, to core conceptions of the *body* and even of *being*. With these signs of a new understanding of body and being, we begin to catch sight of a new consumer logic that is not just sociological but epistemological in its implications. The new cultural practice being pioneered by Kathmandu's middle class is not simply about using things to create social distinction but about reimagining what it means to be social, or about being social in new ways.

In later remarks in the same conversation, Gita provided a variety of other important glimpses into this new middle-class epistemology. Many of her thoughts on new modes of body and being were woven into stories of modernity and fashion. Having discussed the problems inherent in trying to maintain a family's standard of living in the face of inflation and declining resources, the conversation between Gita and my co-worker turned to the recent upsurge in concern for "fashion."

Are you also interested in fashion?

Sure, I'm interested in it: fashion is necessary, especially for women.

How so?

After marriage a girl's physical structure becomes a little messed up and doing fashion helps to maintain it. This is necessary. It doesn't make any difference when you're young, but after you're thirty, you should maintain your skin, your hair, your body, by doing fashion. This is for self-satisfaction and also for attraction of one's husband.

Plus, I mean these days, the children of this generation, they don't even like to walk on the streets with their parents because their parents and their own fashion are in such contrast! Today's fashion is very modern. My parents' fashion is a little bit less than that. So we don't really like to walk outside [the house] together. But if we walk outside wearing nice fashions—looking tip-top—then our children won't have that feeling.

So for older women, keeping the hair styled, either cut or keeping it long but nice, washing it with good shampoo or soap, that's good, and it's more healthy too. And makeup, and cutting and trimming, these are all necessary things. All the parts of the body, like your skin, must be taken care of, especially after you're thirty. It's just like a plant: it also needs cutting and trimming to keep it looking good.

For Gita fashion is, first and foremost, a necessity. While Gita is ashamed to walk on the streets with her own parents, she feels that by conscientiously "doing fashion" her children will be spared such embarrassment. For her the body is "just like a plant," but not just any plant. This plant must be "maintained" and "taken care of." It must be cut, trimmed, made up, washed, attired in "fashions," and kept healthy, all in order to "keep it looking good." Significantly, "doing fashion" extends far beyond clothing and makeup to encompass the treatment and presentation of the entire body. For Gita "doing fashion" is a necessity that involves an almost total self-objectification: a transformation of the body into a visual platform upon which "all parts" are turned into sites for improvement. In contrast to her parents', Gita's fashion is "very modern."

Gita went on to elaborate on her comments regarding "self-satisfaction" and "attraction."

Fashion is done for self-satisfaction and attraction, but I guess especially for attraction. I mean, women like it when someone comes and gives them a compliment. Like "Oh, your sari!" or "Your shawl, how beautiful!" Hearing that, I get a lot of pleasure. I feel bliss! Everybody feels happy when they are complimented. But if one is wearing old, mended clothes, they are always thinking about that, always worrying.

Thus, for Gita, "attraction" has to do with winning the attention and admiration of others. Likewise, "self-satisfaction" does not come from fashion in and of itself but from the compliments paid to the fashioned body. Indeed, in this kind of "self-satisfaction" the fashioned body seems to become a surrogate for the self. Earlier in the conversation, Gita had noted that "the earlier generation" was very different.

They just didn't care so much about clothes. They could go out [of the house] wearing any old kind of clothes. At that time fashion wasn't so common.

Now, on the other hand, when one wears old or mended clothing, one is prey to constant uneasiness, constant "worrying."

The conversation next turned to questions of where one learns about fashion.

Where do you learn about how to take care of your skin, hair, and all these things?

Oh, I read about all this in *Grihashoba*, *Manorama*, you know, these Hindi [women's] magazines. They tell you how to make up the face, how you can do this or that at home by yourself.

Earlier in the interview Gita had noted that she likes to read Hindi women's magazines and often buys them when out shopping. From them she learns about cooking, home decorating, and health care, in addition to makeup and clothing. She also enjoys Hindi "art films" and estimated that she has watched one thousand of them in the five years since her husband bought a VCR. According to Gita, "Indian fashion is good enough for us. I think, for fashion, if we just look at India, we don't need to look any further."

The conversation next turned to the topic of "suitability," that is, what fashion is enough, what is too much, and why. After noting that there can be competition when it comes to fashion, Gita went on to explain:

Too much of anything is bad. So fashion isn't a bad thing, if one does it according to one's own capacity. Like, foreign cream is not a must for applying to one's face. One can use local things, like potato, or lime, or cucumber. Doing fashion doesn't mean that you have to spend a whole lot or spend just a little. The point is that it should be suitable, it should suit oneself.

I mean, people shouldn't overdo fashion. Using lots of lipstick doesn't mean fashion. Or wearing a three-thousand-rupee sari doesn't mean fashion. Fashion is your style of wearing, how you match up clothes, match hairstyles, match makeup, *this* is fashion.

For Gita good fashion is not a matter of quantity. It takes money to “do fashion,” but simply having lots of money does not mean that one is automatically fashionable.

This leads Gita to her second line of reasoning; “suitable” (*subhāune*) fashion requires *knowledge*—of a particularly embodied kind. In order to “do fashion,” one must know how to “match up”: how to fit together clothes, hairstyles, cosmetics, and every other component of the fashioned body. It requires that one learn how to view and present the body in such a way that all of its parts are blended, balanced, “fashioned.” Fashions require money, but fashion *sense*—the knowledge of how to be fashioned—is something that must be acquired and cultivated. According to Gita, “*this* is fashion.” As discussed in the previous chapter, this notion of fashion “suitability” is a characteristically middle-class sensibility. That it requires some disposable cash excludes those below the middle class, but the fact that fashion knowledge is acquired and embodied helps to naturalize middle-class privilege and ensures that fashion is not only the province of the rich.

At the broadest level, the meanings attached to, or conveyed through, any particular commodity are less important than the simple fact of “doing fashion.” Different women “do fashion” differently, and often to a far lesser degree than Gita. Yet it is the *practice* of fashion—and the acknowledgment of commercially mediated standards of value—that is most significant. The practice of fashion opens up new ways of imagining oneself and one’s community in commodity terms. In short, fashion is less about having than doing. Fashion (“doing fashion”) is not a thing but a performance, and the thing performed is class.

Indeed, one of the most important channels through which regional and global fashion systems enter into local social practice is via processes of class formation. The global capitalist fashion episteme is characterized less by messages that tell people *what* to be—the battle over “suitability” is always fought locally—than by messages that suggest *how*, or by what *means*, one should be. The content and meaning of any local fashion system is always different, but the methods by which one achieves the fashioned self are broadly the same. The attraction of consumer materialism for the middle class is not simply material; it is not simply about *having* something distinctive but about *doing and being* something distinctive. For the middle class in Kathmandu, an important part of the motivational power of consumerism is that it offers not just new things but new embodied behaviors and, ultimately, a new reality. It is this new reality—the material and embodied logic of a capitalist consumer episteme—that people in Kathmandu harness to their project of naturalizing their own collective interests and constructing a middle-class space.

PRESTIGE INFLATION, CASH COMPULSION

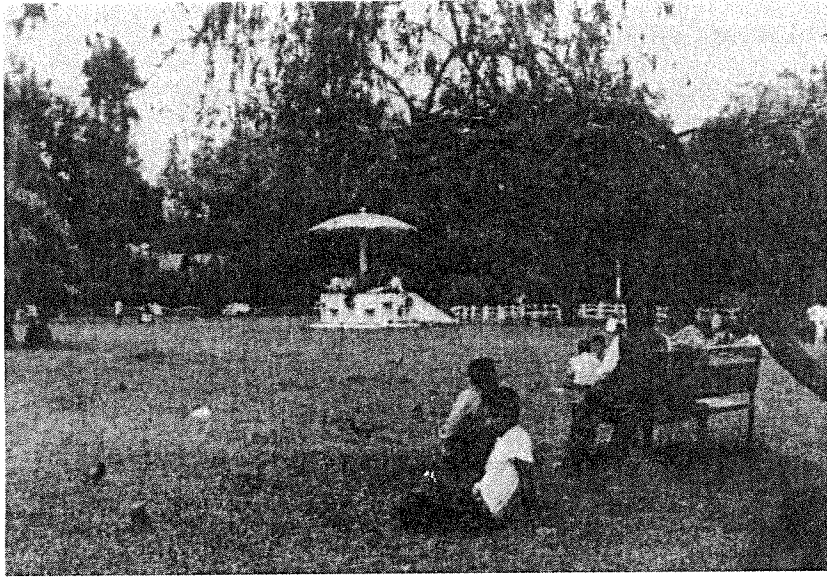
Another way of viewing the “allure” of new forms of consumer materialism is to consider the implications of local commercial and prestige economies in which cash has become an increasingly inescapable organizing factor. While cash economies are nothing new in Kathmandu, the commercialization of an ever expanding range of ritual and social functions means that the failure to generate cash now often means the failure to maintain social status and parity. When faced with the possibility of social extinction, many in Kathmandu have little choice but to embrace the commercial/consumer realm and its logics.

A popular rhyme often recited by Kathmandu locals goes like this: “While Brahmans are ruined by greed, and Chetris are ruined by pleasure, Newars are ruined by feasting!”¹⁴ As many accounts of Newar social life in Kathmandu have documented, patterns of sociality often revolve around the festivals and feast days that fill the community’s ritual calendar. At many of these events, families or individuals take turns bearing the responsibility for feeding others in their neighborhood and/or caste group and/or *guthi*.¹⁵ Because these are extremely important occasions, at which social status is claimed or maintained, sponsors will go to great lengths to ensure that their obligations are carried out in an acceptable manner. Indeed, for many people, failure to meet these obligations is tantamount to abandoning any claims to respectability in the eyes of the community.

While for many people in Kathmandu these ritual events remain important points in the annual cycle, my aim was less to study or describe them than to inquire as to how they have changed in the context of the new economic patterns, social dynamics, and material culture of contemporary Kathmandu. While Kathmandu’s prestige economy is nothing new, what *is* new is a kind of rapid inflationary effect brought about by increased cash flow and the influx of new material goods (and commercial services). In this new economy, even once-unquestioned forms of prestige, such as caste status, have to be backed up by the display of goods, as those able to adopt new consumer lifestyles threaten to subvert traditional systems of prestige altogether.

¹⁴ In Nepali, *bāhun bigryo lobhle, chetri bigryo mojle, newār bigryo bhojle!* See also Lewis 1984:337.

¹⁵ “A Newari word which means approximately a social structure or organization or establishment which is in charge of certain religious property or charitable funds. The Guthi system divides the Newars into various social groups based on religion, kin, and caste” (Hedrick and Hedrick 1972:57).



4. Passing time in Kathmandu's Ratna Park.

I met Sano Raj Shrestha in Kathmandu's Ratna Park one sunny spring afternoon in 1991. A Newar from an old Kathmandu family, Sano Raj had been born within a stone's throw of where we sat and, at age forty, was still living nearby, married, and the father of three children. Sano Raj and a friend were smoking marijuana and passing time in the park while they waited to meet two Italian tourists who had agreed to purchase airplane tickets from them. Sano Raj worked as a "broker" for a local travel agency and was paid on a commission basis for bringing in business. From this job his monthly earnings were about 1,200 NPR (about 25 USD), which he supplemented with occasional income from acting as a guide for foreign tourists and from the illegal sale of ganga and hashish. He confided that life was tough and that drinking alcohol or smoking pot "brings bliss" (*ānanda lāgyo*) when he is "feeling down" (*bor lāgyo*). From his somewhat ragged clothing, generally disheveled demeanor, and public use of marijuana, it was fairly clear that Sano Raj was among those in Kathmandu in the process of falling out of the social middle and being left behind in modernity's wake.

When I asked how he could support his family on such a small income, Sano Raj shook his head and explained, "Before, things were cheap and money was valuable, but now goods are expensive and money is worthless." For example, he complained, now a Western-style suit costs 2,000 NPR and a person can no longer wear simple shoes but instead

must buy leather shoes. Before long the conversation turned to the subject of Newar festivals. Sano Raj complained that community ceremonies were getting out of hand, dragging common people into poverty and poor people into deeper poverty. Things are bad, he said, and getting worse.

For example, one was previously obliged to invite only one's nearby relatives for most feast occasions, but now one was expected to send invitations to relatives scattered out across the valley and even beyond. With public transportation and communications devices like telephones, the number of relatives that might show up had become almost limitless! Even worse, a host could no longer provide "simple food," like beaten rice and meat dishes prepared by women in the family and served on leaf plates to guests sitting outside. Now a "respectable" or "prestigious" (*ijjatdāri*) host must serve his guests "buffet-style," that is, have the meal catered by some local restaurant that serves fancy fare and charges high rental fees for crockery, cutlery, folding chairs, tents, etc. In other words, the respectable host can no longer stage a feast by mobilizing family labor and acquiring ordinary foodstuffs either from his own land or in the local markets, where commodity transactions might be made in kind. Instead, he must mobilize *cash*, and large amounts of it.

In the same vein, a wealthy Tibetan businessman complained to me of how one of his Newar subcontractors had come to him pleading for a 40,000 NPR cash advance—an amount equivalent to a full year's salary for a well-paid government civil servant—because it was his turn to feed the people in his local *guthi* association. When the businessman asked "Can you afford it?" the man blurted out, "It is not a matter of affording!" In other words, like Sano Raj, this man was in a position where his social survival depended on his ability to generate cash and thereby keep his stake in his community's prestige economy.¹⁶ While Sano Raj had already essentially slid out of this economy, to live a life of substance abuse and shame, this Newar man was still fighting to maintain his family's place in a local prestige system that threatened to destroy him. As local prestige economies become not only increasingly cash-based but more and more extravagant in their demands, Kathmandu residents experience extraordinary pressures to embrace the wage/market economy (and the social logic of class), or risk sinking into social oblivion.

What becomes clear from these stories is that the intense commercial compulsions felt by members of Kathmandu's middle class exert their

¹⁶ Writing of the Kathmandu Newar community, Declan Quigley notes: "To be excluded from [one's *guthi*] association is tantamount to being casteless, which is an option that few Newars are prepared to consider. To be casteless means to be without potential marriage partners. . . . This is the ultimate force in the obligation to conform to the demands of . . . *guthis*. Not to do so is to jeopardize the future of one's offspring" (1993:108).

power less through their ability to somehow “brainwash” consumers than through their proficiency in feeding off of, or capitalizing on, the *social imperatives* that people face in their daily lives. Consumer goods become necessary to the extent that they become part of the social currency, narrative resources, and cultural performances that make up projects of class formation in Kathmandu. Not everyone participates with the same intensity, and even those heavily invested in the local middle-class consumer economy often articulate a sense of moral compromise as they embrace a new form of materialism. But regardless of the ambiguity in their relationships with the new material culture, all Kathmandu residents share in an experience in which personal or corporate (usually family) prestige (*ijjat*) is increasingly tied to the acquisition and display of consumer goods. Like the man who flatly insisted that “It is not a matter of affording!” everyone in Kathmandu struggles to maintain parity with those in their social communities.

CONCLUSION: CONSUMPTION AND COMMUNICATION

One of the most common themes in this chapter has been the anxiety that arises from, if not a new, then a heightened sense of social “competition”—a competition often played out in the commodity realm, thereby driving more and more people deeper and deeper into the cash economy. What I have called a kind of “prestige inflation” in Kathmandu is related to a large and rapidly growing consumer field. Even if we cannot say that “culture” is on the increase, we can certainly say that material culture is now far more diverse and conspicuous, as is a kind of “culture of the material” embedded in a host of new ideologies, ranging from “development” to “education,” and embodied practices such as “fashion.” As one man quoted above put it, “now we want so many *other* things.” Yet as another lamented, “Even if you have something, you are always lacking something.” With every new consumer delight comes another consumer anguish—a tension reflected in the deeply ambivalent attitudes toward goods in middle-class stories and practices of consumption.

Along with the increased availability and variety of material goods in the local economy come increased opportunities for consumption aimed at producing or claiming distinction. From televisions to bedsheets to “buffer-style” banquets, as more and more distinctive commodities enter a social setting there are ever greater opportunities for persons to harness these goods to their own projects of individual or group distinction. In Kathmandu a rapid influx of distinctive commodities has severely disrupted established codes of display, thereby opening up avenues for persons and groups to either stake claims in higher social categories or, more

often, raise the stakes for maintaining membership in groups to which they already belong.

These inflationary trends are especially strong when new cultural goods enter an already volatile social setting characterized by an influx of new people, a huge increase in local cash flow, and new, permeable and shifting social formations emerging out of once relatively stable and closed (endogamous) caste hierarchies. For example, in Kathmandu successful immigrant groups (or portions of them) that have arrived in the city over the past few decades—such as the Tibetans, Manangis, Darjeeling Nepalis, and Sherpas—have adopted modern material lifestyles, converting newfound cash resources into the cultural capital of modern consumer materialism. These groups pursue a relatively unadulterated strain of class/consumer politics. Yet on the other hand, the stories of Kedar, Gita, and Sano Raj illustrate how, for the majority of people in Kathmandu, more long-standing social identities linked to caste and kin remain highly relevant (to the extent that they can be used to legitimize claims to social superiority), even as these groups increasingly confront the modern pressures of class differentiation. In previous generations, a variety of leveling devices and a broad sense of corporate identity (often based on a shared mode of labor) tended to keep members of a particular caste and kin grouping at a more or less shared standard of living. But now most caste/kin groups in Kathmandu are beginning to show signs of cracking along class lines. While Kedar and Gita have been relatively successful in maintaining ties with their caste fellows within a broad space of middle-classness, it has been only with considerable difficulty. Sano Raj, on the other hand, has fallen victim to the increased costs of maintaining cultural parity with his one-time social equals.

Middle-class competition is real; it is about making and defending claims to power. But while the competition may produce “losers” (like Sano Raj), it does not really produce “winners.” In other words, the middle class is a kind of performative space characterized by constant alignment and realignment with class others, and where goods play active roles. Because many different configurations of cultural capital can become the group’s basis of an individual’s or group’s claim to status—combinations of education, job status, political power, cash wealth, business assets, caste, or what Weber called the competing “characteristics and badges” of middle-class culture (1946:188)—ranking is almost impossible. A person’s rank within the middle class shifts with context (depending on where and when one’s particular constellation of cultural capital is most valuable) and is subject to never-ending debate. Ultimately, middle-class membership is not about fixing rank but about *claiming* and *maintaining* a place in the ongoing debate.

Here again the *language* of class and consumerism is important. When people speak of “fashion,” they most often speak of it not as a *thing* but as a *practice*. Typically, the English noun is linked to the Nepali verb, as in *fashion garnu*, “to do fashion.” That fashion is less often a possession than a practice—that its importance is less in the *having* than in the *doing*—underlines the central role of consumer practice in the ongoing collective performance of middle-class culture. Hence, the consumer desire associated with “doing fashion”—and all the anxiety that it creates—is less about things, actual material objects, than about another kind of desire. Consumer desire is ultimately a desire to keep open the channels of dialogue with one’s class others, to be acknowledged as a participant in the joint production of class practice. The word “fashion” marks those consumer goods with currency in the ongoing middle-class cultural economy, but as fashions come and go, *maintaining one’s place* in that economy is the real consumer desire.

Thus, the inflationary consumer “competition” that people speak of is not intended to set “winners” *apart* from their social reference group and into some “higher” social category (à la Veblen). Rather, the necessity of consumerism is the necessity of preserving the social capillaries that link members of a social group. Here I agree with Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, who argue that consumption is at least as much a matter of intragroup reciprocity as of intergroup competition. By “keeping up with the Joneses,” people are not necessarily trying to *outdo* each other but may be simply “trying not to be excluded” (Douglas and Isherwood 1979:126). The consumer anxiety that people speak of in Kathmandu is typically less a matter of competition aimed at surpassing others and more a matter of synchronizing the categories of value within groups who share similar social and material conditions. To “win” in this competition is to maintain social parity within the space of the middle class. To “lose”—as Sano Raj and thousands of others in Kathmandu have experienced—is to be left behind, unable to meet the changing demands for membership as one’s social reference group transforms its identity standards. In this way the material performances of class (the consumer imperatives and behaviors discussed in this chapter) merge with the moral narratives of class (the stories of “honesty,” “suitability,” and *ijjat* discussed in the previous chapter) in a larger cultural project whereby Kathmandu’s middle class seeks to order society in its own class terms. In this middle-class project, *property* sets the standards of *propriety*.

SUITABLY MODERN

MAKING MIDDLE-CLASS CULTURE
IN A NEW CONSUMER SOCIETY

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