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"DOING FASHION" IN KATHMANDU: CLASS AND THE CONSUMER PUBLIC

> There is a prior and pervasive kind of reasoning that scans a scene and sizes it up, packing into one instant's survey a process of matching, classifying, and comparing.
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> —MARY DOUGLAS AND BARON ISHERWOOD, *The World of Goods*

> Now even babies are wearing foreign clothing! You really can't even compare then and now, there are such differences.
>
> —TWENTY-TWO-YEAR-OLD KATHMANDU WOMAN

> There is no way out of the game of culture.
>
> —PIERRE BOURDIEU, *Distinction*

The two previous chapters described how middle-classness is constructed through a range of narrative practices and how consumer behaviors take center stage in the cultural performances through which people enact the new realities of a local commercial culture. This chapter shifts focus to consider middle-class culture as *public* practice. Through the language, practice, and materiality of a local universe of fashion, the middle class in Kathmandu lays claim to new public spaces and uses these as zones in which to perform, naturalize, and literally embody its own class privileges.

PUBLIC PATRONAGE IN THE RELIGIOUS IDIOM

Mounted on the wall in the courtyard of one of Patan's most magnificent multitiered "pagoda-style" temples is a peculiar inscription.[1] Among the

[1] Patan is Kathmandu's adjacent sister city.

most recent additions to a series of inscriptions that record pious donations to the temple by generations of wealthy benefactors, this inscription is unusual not in its content but because it is in English, not the formal Nepali or Sanskritized Newari most often used for temple records. Although undated, the inscription records a donation probably made sometime in the first half of the twentieth century. Because it was in English, and its location on the wall seemed to indicate that it was among the last donations memorialized in this manner, this inscription struck me as a particularly interesting historical artifact. The gifts of the proud patrons hark back to a tradition of public giving rooted in centuries of local practice, but the language employed seemed to signal an uneasy recognition that new modes of public discourse and prestige were on the horizon. Now more or less dilapidated, and maintained precariously through donations from UNESCO and the German government, the temple stands surrounded by carpet factories and multistoried concrete homes, the new monuments of local prestige.

The indologist Jan Pieper noted that in Kathmandu "The Newar consume communally whatever wealth they have been able to accumulate. . . . Newar cities are so rich in temples and public resting places (*patti*) and votive structures, for the construction and maintenance cost was raised from [public] contributions" (1975:68). Even if these practices were no longer in place when Pieper wrote of them, there is nevertheless a wealth of inscriptional and other historical evidence to support Todd Lewis's contention that "Formerly the characteristic way to spend excess wealth was through the conspicuous patronage traditions" (1984:588). The wealth of medieval and early-modern religious architecture documented so meticulously by scholars[2] bears witness to centuries of public patronage.

This built environment points to a mode of social existence in which religion was the primary idiom or arena for public life. This is not to suggest that social process was propelled by some set of benevolent, pure religious motives, but rather that religion formed the conceptual frame in which other domains of life were articulated. For example, Kathmandu businessmen today speak of a time when their grandfathers pursued business objectives similar to their own but through different means. In those days entrepreneurs were expected to take active roles in community ceremonial events as sponsors, hosts, and participants. Similarly, the community expected businessmen to register both their merit and their social standing through public donations ranging from gold butter lamps to temple repairs to gifts for priests. Businessmen now speak of how, in earlier days, anyone who chose *not* to participate in this public religious arena

[2] See, for example, Slusser 1982, and Levy and Rajopadhyaya 1991.

was likely to become more or less invisible in the community, have little opportunity to forge or maintain business contacts, and have few avenues available for social or political advancement. In this society religious values and practice formed the medium within which practically all forms of social transaction—including trade and finance—transpired. As the temple inscriptions illustrate, religious piety (in the form of donations) was a mode of public display and a means of converting economic into cultural capital.

While in past centuries the modes and means of public life in Kathmandu were performed in a religious idiom, the basic logic of that practice was not so different from that of today. One way to illustrate this point is to dig deeper into the details of Rana-era public practice. As introduced in chapter 2, and discussed in detail elsewhere (Liechty 1997), over the past several centuries Kathmandu's political isolation by no means implied total cultural isolation. This suggests that neither public consumption patterns nor local business practices in nineteenth-century Kathmandu should be seen as "pure" or autochthonous expressions of "local culture." For example, long before Nepal's "opening" to the world in 1951, people in Kathmandu were well aware of a range of modern mass-produced commodities. European and Indian textiles and other consumer goods had been imported into Nepal for centuries. By the early twentieth century, commercial interests were actively promoting tea consumption throughout the hill region, and Nepali soldiers returning from two world wars brought with them tea-drinking habits, as well as a hankering for such basic consumer commodities as soap and tooth powder. But far in excess of their own firsthand experience as consumers of modern commodities, Kathmandu residents also had for centuries been observing what the Rana and royal families desired as consumers. From luxury autos to Paris fashions, people in Kathmandu were fully aware of a universe of consumer goods that existed beyond their reach.

For the most part these consumer goods were kept in the hands of the ruling elite. Through a combination of travel and import restrictions, as well as sweeping sumptuary laws, the elite ensured that public and private consumer behaviors were tightly regulated. Many Kathmandu residents still remember when even the few commoners who could afford to acquire Western-style clothing were forbidden to do so. Others recall that few would have been foolish enough to wear such clothing even if allowed, for fear of attracting the "evil eye" (as one acquaintance sarcastically put it) of the Ranas. Because the Rana elite recognized no distinction between state and private resources, members of ruling families were free to confiscate property, and even women, from local families (Lewis 1984:42). Throughout the nineteenth century and into the early part of the twentieth, a number of Kathmandu Newar families amassed fortunes

transporting commodities between Calcutta and Lhasa via Kathmandu (Lewis 1993), but lived in constant fear of having their resources levied, impounded, or simply appropriated.[3] Wealthy merchants appeared before the Ranas in simple clothing and lived in relatively modest homes, even though they often controlled valuable real estate in Calcutta and Lhasa.

While on the surface Kathmandu may have appeared to be a proto-, even pre, capitalist society, with a noncommercial consumer culture, in fact this state of affairs was anything but natural. The Rana state's extractive authority helped to minimize the potential for unimpeded local capital accumulation and transformations in consumer practices, even though some in Kathmandu were able to amass capital outside of Nepal.[4] The religious ethos that pervaded Kathmandu's local economy into the early twentieth century, and its relatively simple commodity culture, were "real" to the extent that they reflected a certain mode of sociality and a certain set of community-oriented values. But by the end of the Rana regime, the sociocultural context of Kathmandu was already deeply influenced by competing consumer values and logics of prestige. While the ruling elite pursued social strategies based on an almost hyperdisplay of distinctive consumer goods (Liechty 1997), the mass of Kathmandu's commoners were restricted by decree and necessity to a prestige economy that maintained earlier patterns of public charity. The early-twentieth-century votive inscription rendered in English captures some of this tension by both continuing a community- and state-sanctioned mode of public consumption and hinting at new but forbidden modes of distinction.

Fashion: Adornment and Artifice

Although modern consumer fashion practice in Kathmandu has its roots in nineteenth-century elite patterns of public consumption and display (see chapter 2), it is only after 1951, with the unimpeded growth of a local

[3] One businessman from a long-established Newar trading family maintained that Jung Bahadur's visit to England in 1850 (Whelpton 1983) was funded by a special tax extracted from Kathmandu Newar merchants, as was the construction of Chandra Shamsher's magnificent Singha Durbar. I have been unable to directly confirm this in published accounts, though P. S. Rana describes the palace as having been built largely by pressed labor and using appropriated materials (1995:162).

[4] When the Lhasa-Calcutta trade collapsed after the Chinese invasion of Tibet, a number of Kathmandu trading families were able to transfer capital resources in Calcutta in the direction of new business opportunities, including tourism, in Kathmandu. In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Calcutta was the heart of the South Asian tourist industry, and after the fall of Tibet, several Kathmandu families were able to segue into the tourist trade in Kathmandu via already established Calcutta holdings and business contacts.

middle class, that fashion has become the public practice par excellence in Kathmandu. The emergence of fashion as a narrative and performative force is an important trend in the ongoing development and shifting logics of public practice in Kathmandu. Through talking about and "doing fashion"—fashioning selves and bodies in dialogue with their class others—the middle class constructs a new "outside," or public, domain and claims this new public space and publicness as its own.

The challenge of dealing with the concept of "fashion" lies in distinguishing what is new from what is not. How can we describe "modern" fashion practice in Kathmandu without implying that various forms of stylization and bodily objectification have not existed for millennia? One way is to use Georg Simmel's notion of "adornment" as a common thread from past to present, while asking how the qualities of that thread may change with time.[5] The question becomes, How does the nature and meaning of adornment change?

Simmel stresses both the personal and social dimensions of adornment.

> Adornment intensifies or enlarges the impression of the personality by operating as a sort of radiation emanating from it. . . . The radiations of adornment, the sensuous attention it provokes, supply the personality with such an enlargement or intensification of its sphere: the personality, so to speak, *is* more when it is adorned. [Adornment allows] the mere *having* of the person to become a visible quality of its *being*. (1950:339–40, italics in original)

Thus, it is in commanding "sensuous attention" and in enlarging and intensifying the personality's "sphere" that adornment becomes a means of communication. Adornment is social practice; it is the "being-for-the-other which returns to the subject as the enlargement of his own sphere of significance" (Simmel 1950:432). The adorned body is the social body ("the being-for-the-other"), though the *social meaning* of adornment practice is historically contingent.

Like identity, adornment is simultaneously about distinction and identification; it is used to set individuals and groups *apart* from some and to signal *sameness* with others. For centuries Nepali elites have appropriated foreign clothing styles (often with accompanying sumptuary prohibitions on the general populace) (Liechty 1997) in efforts to display their "distinctive" power. By the early nineteenth century, Nepali men of the elite class were beginning to adopt Western-style clothing; paintings and photographs from the beginning to the end of the Rana era depict

[5] Like Simmel I use the term "adornment" in its broadest sense, to include not just jewelry and body markings but also all items of apparel.

men in heavily westernized costume, while women's attire was most often North Indian,[6] though occasionally showing European influences.[7]

The adornment practices associated with Kathmandu's non-elites—until recently, largely the urban Newar community—while also distinctive, are perhaps more fruitfully seen as communicating identification *within* groups than as promoting distinction *between* them. Bronwen Bledsoe's work on "jewelry and personal adornment among the Newars" (1984) is a valuable introduction to the "social implications of adornment" in Newar communities around the Kathmandu valley. Bledsoe discusses the uses and meanings of jewelry or ornaments (*gahanā*) as well as practices of decoration or beautification (*siṅār*, n.; *siṅārnu*, v.t.), or marking (*lakṣyan*, n.). Although Bledsoe's account of Newar adornment practice would no longer describe many urban Newar women (not to mention women of other caste/ethnic backgrounds), it nevertheless serves as a useful ethnographic "benchmark" against which to gage contemporary practice.

At the risk of minimizing the aesthetic and affective dimensions of adornment practice, for my purposes I will focus briefly on the more functional elements of Bledsoe's account. In her analysis Bledsoe stresses both the dimension of male control over women through adornment and the role of adornment in signaling transformations through different stages in life. In particular I am interested in highlighting Bledsoe's suggestion that "traditional" adornment is largely "a token of women's standing in proper relationship to husband and society at large" (1984:87). In the traditional cycle of life stages and transforming rituals—from adolescence to old age—adornment often signifies a woman's relationship with men, whether fathers, husbands, or sons. For example, widows abandon all jewelry, although with time they may resume wearing simple pieces and even "a fair amount of gold . . . if one has sons" (Bledsoe 1984:67). Again, leaving aside adornment's role in displaying economic standing, its religious meaning, and the sensual pleasures it may bring its wearers, the point here is that adornment has been an important element in signaling a woman's social status vis-à-vis her family and the broader society.

In Kathmandu in the early 1990s, women also spoke of adornment's role in designating *types* of women, though often in the context of describing how earlier forms of differentiation were now made with less frequency. For example, one twenty-year-old woman spoke of how she felt "fashion" practice had changed from earlier generations:

> They had a lot of fashion back then too, I think. Like, my grandmother always says that today's people can't do makeup as the old generation used to. They had their fashion at that time. They said you should put *koṭhi* [beauty marks] here and there. They could make *alak* [curled hair], even though beauty parlors didn't exist at that time. They learned about it themselves, and the clever ones learned it easily.
>
> Yes, they used to do all kinds of makeup. But now, what's the difference between married and unmarried [women]? They both use exactly the same kind of makeup! There's no difference.

What is significant about this young woman's remarks is that she recognizes that "makeup" itself is nothing new, although its meaning has changed; the social function it once had of distinguishing married from unmarried women is gone. Another woman, in her late twenties, had some related comments:

> Before, people used to wear lots of ornaments [*gahanā*], but today people have more clothes, do more makeup. I mean, before, people used to pass through the years with one or two sets of clothes. But now we have so much fashion.

In this woman's opinion, the emphasis of adornment practice has shifted from gold ornaments toward clothing and "makeup," which she equated with "fashion". Significantly, for her "fashion" implies not just a *kind* of clothing or "makeup" but an *amount*: before, people had mere clothing, but now they have "so much fashion."

Her remark that people previously would have had relatively few sets of clothes corresponds with ethnographic observations from the 1950s that describe attire in Kathmandu as relatively uniformlike. For example, G. S. Nepali notes that dress was "a mark of distinction" both between different ethnic groups and between different "social and economic strata" within the Newar community. But Nepali stresses that "distinction is made not by the variation in the items of garments [which were relatively uniform], but by their mode of use and colour" (1965:65). In other words, distinction was not signaled by different styles or cuts or items of clothing but in relatively subtle (though meaningful) variations in the fabric and trim of similar garments. Even setting aside economic factors that would have limited how much clothing a person owned, in this cultural milieu the wide variety of clothing styles that characterize contemporary "fashion" would have made no sense.

In addition to describing trends away from relatively elaborate ornamentation and uniform clothing toward more emphasis on "makeup" and clothing variety or quantity ("fashion"), Kathmandu women in the early 1990s also spoke of changes in the sexual/erotic meaning of clothing. As

[6] See, for example, the photo in White (1920:279).

[7] For example, plate V in Wright (1972 [1877]:28,29), entitled "A Rani or Nepalese Lady of High Rank," depicts a Rana woman wearing a sari *over* a billowing hoop skirt. Other outstanding collections of photographs (mostly portraiture) from the Rana era include Landon 1928, P. P. Shrestha 1986, Sever 1993, and von der Heide 1997.

discussed in more detail below, questions of decency and "suitability" are very much alive today, especially in regard to women and Western clothing. Yet this is by no means new. The advent of more "revealing" styles in clothing, especially women's clothing, has been an issue for decades. For example, as the Indian-style sari became more and more common in non-elite circles, it brought new problems with it. One Chetri woman in her late forties described her experiences as a young woman with changing styles in sari blouses:

> At that time we used to wear a uniform at school, but at home we wore saris. Of course, we would always wear a full blouse, at least up until I was about fourteen or fifteen. About that time the three-quarter blouse[8] started coming in, and I liked it, so I made one. But I couldn't even bring myself to come down to the courtyard [of my own home] because of shyness [*lāj*]! I got used to it; but then, four or five years later, the *half*-blouse came in, and that too I wore, but for many days I was too embarrassed to even leave my house!
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> So gradually this has all changed. It just depends on one's own opinion. There are some who even today can't wear that kind of blouse. But I feel that we have to keep pace with today's fashion.

Whereas G. S. Nepali could say that among Kathmandu Newars during the late 1950s "The principle involved in the wearing of [women's] dress seems to be to cover the body completely" (1965:66), this "principle" was already beginning to change in the face of "fashion," at least *outside* of the Newar community.

This woman's experience with changing styles in sari blouses points to another common theme in the comments of women and men who contrasted contemporary fashion with what they understood to be earlier adornment practices. Changes, and even cyclical changes, in style were often associated with "fashion." When describing how things were different now than they had been when she was a child, one woman in her thirties noted:

> For one thing, at that time there was not much fashion. I mean, at that time fashion wasn't so expensive. Now it has become very expensive. And now you see the fashion is returning; it is going in circles. Take pointed shoes, for example; they had those fifty years back, and now again you are finding them in the market. I think every generation has their fashion, but it's not the same. Like now, actually, fashion is always moving around into many different styles.

[8] When speaking of sari blouses, "full," "three-quarter," and "half" refer to the amount of midriff coverage.

This woman acknowledges that "every generation has their fashion" but still insists that something unique is going on today. The main difference has to do with quantity and therefore expense. While using the same word—"fashion"—to describe styles of the past and present, this woman suggests that the very nature of fashion practice has changed greatly in recent times.

Another factor contributing to changes in adornment practice is law. Along with the fall of the Rana regime in the early 1950s came the abandonment of sumptuary laws that had guaranteed the Ranas exclusive rights to certain clothing styles, especially Western fashions. Memories of these restrictive laws are still alive even in the minds of people too young to have had personal experience of them. Women in particular often associate "fashion" with "freedom." For example, one thirty-year-old married woman noted:

> Today people want to show that they are free. Before, they couldn't. They weren't so free. At that time, maybe the Ranas had fashion, but they didn't let anyone else show it [*dekhāunu*]. Today everyone has the freedom to show fashion, so we see it everywhere.

In Kathmandu, the classic middle-class construal of "freedom" as "freedom to consume" takes on a different meaning; modern consumer practice has to be seen in light of a past in which even those with resources were simply not "free" to consume. Against this background, the consumption of "fashion" becomes, at least potentially, a quasi-political act.

These brief glimpses into the history of local adornment practice suggest that adornment is a theme that links past with present, but its *meaning* is always changing. An earlier system of adornment served to position individuals within family and society. The emphasis on ornamentation and particular kinds of marking helped locate a person within a local universe of meaning, to signal his or her sexual/marital status, social standing, ethnicity, or place of residence. As commodities, ornaments made of precious metals also signaled the *amount* of wealth a person or family possessed.

What these women describe as contemporary adornment is also about *amount*, although in modern fashion practice the commodities being accumulated are very different. While gold is rapidly converted into other material resources, a modern commodity associated with fashion loses its value not only with use but as fashions change. Both the commodity itself and its meaning are eminently perishable. The new mode of adornment is a part of a new mode of commodity consumption tied more closely to mass production and cash economies. In the European context, Roland Barthes distinguishes premodern adornment from the modern "fashion system" by noting that at one time "the length of [a dress's] train

exactly signaled a social condition." Clothing was "an ensemble of signs" such that "in former ages, costume did not connive at function, it displayed the artifice of its correspondences" (1983:268). Similarly, with the arrival of "fashion" in Kathmandu, we witness a shift away from clothing-as-fetishized-object toward clothing-as-fetishized-commodity.

In other words, clothing (and other adornment) is increasingly less about the explicit marking of social categories (livery, royal garb, sumptuary restrictions, ethnic, marital, or caste indicators) and more about a new regime of commercial signification that denies any clear-cut social function for clothing in favor of a consumer aesthetic of newness, pleasure, and even progress. As argued below, the modern "fashion system" in Kathmandu still signals "social condition," but these social meanings are often hidden behind reasons and rationalizations that mask fashion's "infidelity" (Barthes 1983:273). In Kathmandu, as the *overt* social meanings of adornment—perhaps best embodied in Rana-era sumptuary laws—disappear, adornment practice is more and more couched in other rationales. From the imperatives of "modernization" (*bikās*) that justify women's "keeping pace with today's fashion," to the middle-class values of equality and individual achievement ("now everyone has the freedom to show fashion"), contemporary adornment practice in Kathmandu is increasingly embedded in the artifice of new, thoroughly "modern" values and discursive systems. It is through this artifice that the structures for a new form of "natural" public practice take shape.

Film and Fashion

How do shifts in public adornment practice like these come about? Where does a new "fashion consciousness" come from? Surely the most frequently cited culprit is film.[9] Already by the late 1950s, G. S. Nepali could point to the "introduction of the cinema [as] one of the contributory factors for bringing about a new trend in the style of dress in Nepal" (1965:68). Likewise, the people that my co-workers and I interviewed almost unanimously spoke of the film industry (whether approvingly or otherwise) as the source of fashion inspiration. Not surprisingly, film also figured prominently in the accounts people gave of changing practice in recent decades. Indeed, film and fashion are so intimately linked in people's minds that it is worth laying out some of the most common themes in this association.

[9] Chapter 7 considers the roles of other media (radio, television, magazines) in these processes.

For many people the arrival of cinema in Kathmandu marked the starting point for modern fashion practice. One of the most detailed accounts I heard came from Hari, a man in his late forties. Though born in the Tarai, Hari has lived in Kathmandu since the mid-1960s, when he came to the city to study. Having grown up next door to a cinema hall in Biratnagar, Hari was an avid movie fan and, as a boy, consciously styled his life after what he saw in the films. All of this made for quite a shock when he arrived in Kathmandu, where cinema-going was still in its infancy.[10]

> At that time—I mean, when I came from my home town to here—the people were very innocent. They didn't know anything about what is the fashion. Especially here in the valley, the Newars—oh! they were *so-o-o* innocent! They were ashamed even to look at us, because we were proud [of how we looked], and they knew that we were influenced some from India. At that time everybody I met was very simple: no pickpockets, no thieves, none of that.
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> But slowly, like when I went to see a movie here . . . Well, at that time only the Rana people were doing the fashion, because they had good money. And so they would come with all this fashion to see this lousy cinema hall. Because there was no other entertainment, and the public thing, you know. They were coming all this fashion this and that, and they were staying up in the balcony, and we were seeing them from below. Oooooo! [*Looks up with a face of fawning admiration*] And they were claiming that they were not copying fashion from Bombay [as we were]. "We are copying this fashion from *Paris*!" [they said].

Ironically, at this time the cinema hall was a place where one could see fashion both on the screen and on the bodies of the wealthy Rana socialites ensconced in the balcony. More than in the 1990s, Kathmandu cinema halls were at that time places to see and be seen, places to see other places and other classes.

But there was more to popular fashion education than just going to the cinema. According to Hari, before the "jean revolution" there was only a "very slow change." Yet "when the jeans came," things started to pick up. In Kathmandu the "jean revolution" coincides with the arrival of tourists, and especially young tourists in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Up to that point, the few Western tourists in Kathmandu were mostly late-middle-aged, wealthy, and comfortably sequestered in one or two relatively posh hotels.[11] Yet with the arrival of younger tourists, including the so-called hippies, more and more foreigners began to hit the

[10] See chapter 6 for a brief history of cinema and cinemagoing in Kathmandu.

[11] See Peissel 1966 for an account of the early hotel trade in Kathmandu.

streets. A whole new sector of "budget-class" tourist businesses sprang up which in turn began to spread tourist dollars to a much wider segment of the local economy.[12] As Hari explained:

> From that time [on] people had money, and afterward there was no [one] class to do the fashion. Everybody can do the fashion; everybody can wear jeans.
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> Before this, people worried about their dress only during some festivals or some marriage ceremonies. They needed the very good or very clean clothes. But they didn't know what is the teri-cotton, what is the gaberdine, what is the really good-quality cloth.
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> But it is from *that* period, when the jeans came, that they got fashion. And movies, that was one of the things. Like in Indian movies, they are doing, like the hero always wearing the fashionable things, and *they* are giving the fashions here for the middle class, and the lower-middle. Like *what* Amitabh Bachchan is wearing, *what* Mithun Chakraborty is wearing[13] . . . The youngsters over here, they want to do *here*.
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> So first was the Hindi [cinema], and *still* it's affecting. For everything from talk, to manner, the way [*strikes several chic poses*], and like this. Otherwise [before cinema], it was completely village-type, these people here. At that time, the tourists were appreciating this place very much, the Kathmandu valley.

Although Hari feels that cinema is the main factor in transforming dress and fashion, the story is incomplete without mention of tourism: "when the jeans came"—both the clothes and the tourists who wore them—cash flow and the availability of new commodities increased.

Another way that people in Kathmandu link media with fashion is in terms of the media-induced fads or fashion phases that wash over the city at periodic intervals. By chance my second visit to Kathmandu—in the late 1970s—coincided with what people identified as the first non–South Asian fashion wave. Up to that point, aside from a few elites and other marginal types, most fashion-minded people in Kathmandu took their cues from the styles portrayed in Hindi films.[14] By the time of my visit,

[12] See Liechty 1996a for more on the development of budget tourism.

[13] Bachchan and Chakraborty are Hindi film stars.

[14] By most accounts, aside from introducing blue jeans, Western tourists in Kathmandu during the 1970s did not have a very wide impact on popular styles in the city. Very few Nepalis entered into the full "freak" lifestyle or wore fashions associated with the young tourists. Of those that did, some were actually Nepalis from Darjeeling who were already very cosmopolitan and had themselves been attracted by Kathmandu's tourist scene. For more on relations between Nepalis and tourists in Kathmandu, see Liechty 1994:193–98 and Liechty 1996a.

however, video film technology had arrived in the form of American "disco" films, and "Saturday night fever" had already reached epidemic proportions. As in the United States, flowing hair, "bell-bots," and enormous platform shoes were de rigueur for many young men in Kathmandu.

What is significant about Kathmandu's "disco wave" is the fact that it was closely tied to the arrival of video technology. With "video parlors" sprouting like mushrooms in the late 1970s (see chapter 6), for the first time a broad cross-section of Kathmandu residents had access to Western films. By all accounts, the initial demand for these Western films—along with Indian and East Asian ("kung-fu") films also available on video—was enormous. School children cut classes to see them, and fortunes were made overnight, before government regulations and the spread of VCRs into private homes cut into the "video parlor" trade. When video arrived, Kathmandu residents had already been exposed to waves of young Western tourists, but it was only with general access to Western mass media that the first Western youth fashions took hold.

This link between media consumption and clothing fads suggests that the meaning and allure of modern fashion is intimately tied to the mode of its presentation and representation. Fashion becomes meaningful—and thereby potentially attractive and emulative—primarily in the mediated contexts (here cinema) *in which* it is represented. Commercial media render fashions meaningful by situating them in image worlds into which the viewer can project the fashioned self and others. By the late 1970s people in Kathmandu had seen at least a decade of Western youth fashions—ranging from the "mod" to the hippie-esque—that were, from the Nepali perspective, no more inherently bizarre than the disco fashions of John Travolta. What disco films provided, that resident westerners did not, was an entire sphere of signification within which a certain fashion fit. Clothing became the material signifier for a whole range of referents from disco music (also commoditized) and youth identities to particular styles of sexuality, gender display, and freedom. With disco films (and disco cassettes) came a new imaginary space (which took its place alongside those produced by Indian films and their associated fashion commodities) in which people could experiment with other ways of being.

These observations have important implications for understanding how media consumption is tied to the consumer imagination. The story of disco films and disco fashions in Kathmandu points to ways in which commercial media construct spheres of signification around commodities (here "fashions"). These are complex auras of meaning that bring together a range of identities, ideas, behaviors, and commodities—for example, youth, freedom, dance, fashions, and music—that are conflated to form an imaginary unity. Western clothing styles themselves, though frequently worn by young tourists on Kathmandu streets, did not "cap-

ture the imaginations" of local young people nearly so much as cinematic representations of these same fashions were able to do. Although earlier fashion practice in the city had been inspired by Indian cinema, Kathmandu's "disco wave" provides a particularly clear illustration of the power of media representations, by showing how the mere presence of consumer goods is not enough to inspire consumer desire: to generate demand, fashion goods require auras of meaning that transcend their mere functionality, and the media are crucial channels for this modern consumer signification.

Following the "disco fever" fashion phase came a succession of other clothing styles influenced by Western movies. Acquaintances described a "Western wear" phase that followed on the heals of disco in the early 1980s. Denim jackets, bandannas, and boots became popular as young men fixated on heroes like Clint Eastwood and others in the "cowboy" film genre. Next came the Michael Jackson "Thriller" wave, with zipper-bedecked jackets, wet-curl perms, and "break dancing." Other pop stars, like Boy George and Madonna, also passed through the local image scene—becoming more and more unrecognizable with every graphic redeployment on clothing, posters, and stickers, until their images show up as blurry blobs on the sweaty T-shirts of poor day laborers and are identifiable only by their English captions.

While it is easy to link Indian, Western, and East Asian films to certain broad patterns of fashion practice, simply citing these links does little or nothing to answer questions of how and why they are forged. The sections that follow turn to these questions of how people participate in fashion and the implications these practices have for the construction of new public spaces and the privileging of a new class culture.

"Fashion Happens": Means, Motivations, and Media

One question my co-workers and I asked whenever conversations turned to the subject of fashion was, "Why do people do fashion?" Most responses followed the basic lines of this one, given by twenty-four-year-old woman:

> If one person does fashion and others see it, they think [to themselves], "Oh, how nice I'd look doing it too!" So they say, "Yes, I'll do it too!" In this way, fashion happens.

With money, and personal interest, "fashion happens." But how?

Part of the answer is tied to how and where people learn about fashion. Like the woman above, many people learn about it just from seeing others. "Whatever's going around, that's what I wear. Like, I used to wear [skirts] above the knee, but now, below; it's today's fashion," remarked one eighteen-year-old student. Another woman, married and in her mid-thirties, remarked, "I don't go searching for new fashions [in shops]. I just have made [by a tailor] what I see on the streets, what I see others wearing. But even so, I don't like these new fancy-style ***kurtā-suruwāls***. They make me look like a real slob [*bhyātlaka*]!"

Although there are more and more ready-made clothing stores in Kathmandu, items there tend to be priced out of the reach of all but tourists, expatriates, and local elites. Middle-class women and men are more likely to have their clothing made at any of the hundreds of tailor shops scattered across the city and its suburbs. The ready-made shops more often provide the prototypes for less costly tailor-made garments.

Women occasionally spoke of making their own clothing but they almost always made a distinction between "clothing for inside" (i.e., the house), which they made by themselves, and "clothing for outside," which they had tailor-made. One twenty-year-old student brought up this topic while listing some of her favorite pastimes:

> Well, I like things like cooking, knitting, sewing clothes. . . . I mean clothes for *outside* [the house] I have made *outside* [by a tailor], but the clothes I wear here in the house I make myself.
>
> *How do you choose what kinds of clothes to have made?*
>
> I learn about these things from, like, the "filmfares,"[15] [other] magazines, and just from seeing what other people are wearing.

Thus, clothing for wearing *in public* is often explicitly distinguished from clothing for "in the house." Public clothing is more likely to be made "outside" and to be modeled explicitly after images in the public realm: images from mass media and designs seen on the street. On the other hand, clothing worn at home is often strictly for that space alone and may be homemade. The tailoring and fashion trade in Kathmandu is intimately linked to this sense of an "outside" or public domain, in which public images are often mass-mediated.

Certainly the most important channels through which fashion consciousness moves are the mass media. When talking about films and film magazines, people repeatedly brought up the subject of fashion. For example, in a discussion of popular films, my co-worker asked one nineteen-year-old Newar student, "What makes a film good?" She replied thoughtfully:

[15] *Filmfare*, published in English and a variety of Indian languages, is one of India's oldest and most popular film magazines. However, at least in Nepal, "*filmfare*" has become a generic term for practically all film magazines. For more on film magazines, see chapter 7.

Well, there's singing, dialogue, acting, and dressing; these things make a film good.

What do you mean, dressing?

I mean I have a special interest in dress. I like mostly the simple kind of dress. I don't like to look over [too fashionable]. [I like] things like the jean-pants of the Western style and *kurtā suruwāl* of India.

For her the clothing styles conveyed in films ranked as one of the key factors in what made a film "good." Fashion was among the prime attractions of the cinema. Similarly, another unmarried Newar woman in her early twenties described why she liked to read *Filmfare*:

I read it because it's my *sokh*.[16] I look for new clothing designs, and fashions in this [magazine]. I basically want to see it to find out if there's anything new in there!

For this woman, reading (or at least looking at) film magazines is part of her *sokh*—a kind of elemental desire—for keeping up with "new clothing designs, and fashions." From conversations like these, it seemed that for many people in Kathmandu it was almost impossible to disengage interests in film, film magazines, and fashion. The boundaries of each seemed to blur into the others so as to make an interest in one inseparable from interests in the rest.

This connection between films, film images, and fashions was one that seamstresses also made frequently. Indeed, the tailoring trade in Kathmandu seemed to be intimately tied into the world of filmic fashions. Women in particular often spoke of going to tailor's shops where they would peruse collections of posters and postcardlike pictures of Indian film heroines as well as stacks of fashion catalogues from India, Europe, and North America.[17] Said one woman, "At Namuna [a popular New Road tailoring establishment] they have catalogues and we can just look for the styles we want and take them from the catalogues." Just as often, seamstresses spoke of clients bringing in their own fashion pictures. One self-employed seamstress in her late twenties said of her customers:

They'll bring a catalogue or magazine to show, or a photo card of some film heroine and show that. I had one woman come in here a while back who had four or five kids, and even *she* had this photo of

[16] See chapter 3, note 16, for a discussion of "sokh."

[17] These catalogues were sometimes fashion collections put out by particular designers, though the European and American catalogues often consisted of a more or less random collection of mail-order brochures, ranging from old Sears catalogues to brand new books from upscale French and Italian department stores.

5. Seamstresses at work in a women's clothing shop, Thapathali, Kathmandu.

a film heroine. She asked me to make her a dress just like that one. Even *she* wanted to copy the heroine!

According to seamstresses, the magazines that women bring to their shops include not only film magazines but also a range of glossy Indian magazines aimed at women: *Mayapuri*, *Grihashobha*, *Femina*, and *Manorama*, among others.

While seamstresses often assist their slightly older clients in negotiating the maze of stylistic differences arrayed in catalogues and film-star cards, children and younger women and men are more likely to have very clear ideas about fashion and to demand that the tailor or seamstress replicate these. This trend comes through clearly in the comments of Nirmala, a middle-aged seamstress who had been making clothes in Kathmandu for more than a decade. Her remarks summarize many of the recent trends in fashion practice and highlight her perceptions of how it has changed over the years.

It's mostly the sixteen- to twenty-year-old girls who like the new designs in clothing. They make up most of my customers. I get a lot of girls with a lot of money.

The sixteen- to twenty-year-olds, these are the ones who determine the new designs and styles. I mean, as soon as they see a new

design, they'll come in and ask me to make it. It doesn't matter how much it costs. They only care about wearing the new designs, not about the money.

Like, if they see a heroine in a film with some kind of new dress, immediately they want a dress like that. In fact, they don't care much for the catalogues I've got in the shop. They watch the films! As for me, I don't even have to go to the films to know the new styles! They come and tell me, and that's enough. From that I can make it!

Like right now [1991], the most common dress [that girls ask for] is from the film *Maine Pyar Kiya*.[18] Also these days, a lot of girls are wearing the loose, umbrella-cut *kurtā-suruwāl*. And then of course, the Punjabi-style *kurtā-suruwāl* never goes out of style. It's always the same, evergreen.

For both Nirmala and her clients, new fashions and mass media seemed to live a kind of symbiotic existence:

> After watching a film, people know the new styles automatically. And of course educated people can also learn this from magazines, ones like *Manorama* and *Grihashobha*, these Hindi magazines. New things are given in them. I also watch these magazines for new fashion.

For many in Kathmandu, films and magazines are essentially the exclusive channels for the creation of "fashion," the apparent means by which "fashion" is both produced and disseminated.

Continuing on the theme of her largely youthful clientele, Nirmala also made a number of interesting observations about how fashion consciousness had developed since the time of her childhood.

> There are many differences! Twenty years ago boys wore any old kind of clothes. They didn't even know what fashion was! But now, even little kids come into my shop saying, "Sew me a punk-style shirt!" or "Make me a big [baggy]-style shirt!" I mean, really little boys are in here saying, "No, this isn't what I want. Make the pocket *here*, make *this* style of cuff, make *this* collar!" I mean, there is *this much* difference between then and now!
>
> The older generation used to just follow along with the clothes they always had, with what was always common. They could not have cared less [*matlab chaina*] about it! But now even little girls will come asking for some special *kurtā-suruwāl* of this or that design. I guess they need all these different designs now . . . [*Shrugs.*]

[18] A 1989 Hindi film with a title that translates to "I have Fallen in Love." For details see Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1999:490.

> Of course then, also, before, they [young people] didn't go walking around [outside the house] all the time. But now you see them walking around, group after group, going to films, going to restaurants, to shops. I mean, before, they didn't even know what things were eaten![19]

Even allowing room for exaggeration, this is a powerful account of perceived change. A generation ago, people could not have "cared less about" fashion; now, even young boys and girls come to her shop preoccupied with the stylistic subtleties of cuffs and collars. Earlier generations wished to have what "they always had," what was "always common." But now, for some reason, young people seem to "need all these different designs." Nirmala proposes that perhaps this new "need" has something to do with the fact that the young people are out on the streets, "group after group," going to films, restaurants, and shops. Indeed, it is in the new public spaces of the shopping districts, cinemas, campuses, and restaurants that "doing fashion" becomes a need. For Kathmandu's middle-class, public space is the space of fashion, and film (in tandem with other allied commercial media and commodities) is a key component in the formation of a public fashion consciousness.

Fashion Practice: Class Culture

For members of Kathmandu's middle class, "doing fashion" is not a luxury but a necessity. Indeed, attention to, or even a preoccupation with, fashion was almost a defining feature of the middle class. In the city's streets, campuses, and offices, people were almost hyperattentive to dress and demeanor, which were read as an index of an individual's "home" or "family condition" (*gharko sthiti*). In different ways, the equation of fashion practice with class practice is a common theme that runs through hundreds of the interviews my co-workers and I conducted.

A teacher at one of Kathmandu's postsecondary campuses explained how he distinguished children of "higher families" from the majority of middle-class students.

> You can see, even among the youngsters at campus, there is a part—there is a different class. If you go there, you can see that. Some are there in cheap clothes, just throwing something on, like the Americans do. [They say,] "Eh! Who *cares*?!" Because they *know* the fashion.

[19] She means that, before, young people did not even know what foods were the fashionable or "in" things to eat.

> But then there are the others [who boast], "Oh yeah, I *just* got it, you know. My father brought it from [the] *States*," and on and on like this. Big deal, right? Well, these middle and lower families, they try their level best to buy *good* clothes. They want to look very nice, to have a good personality, and all this.

For this teacher, what distinguishes upper-class students from the bulk of middle-class students is a certain (perhaps cultivated) indifference, a kind of lackadaisical disdain for appearances. These students "*know* the fashion"—they have nothing to prove—and their families' financial security allows them to "just throw something on." On the other hand, the rest of the students try hard to look good. The *in*security of middle-classness breeds a kind of focused earnestness about dress and the need to boast about new acquisitions. For them, proper clothing is a "big deal" and constitutes an important part of their claims to membership in the urban middle class.

Some who practiced fashion celebrated the role it played in their lives, as did this young married woman:

> Fashion is a necessary thing. It's a must! One shouldn't just sit and do nothing with fashion. You should be active! I mean, fashion isn't only makeup. Fashion is needed to complement your natural strengths. And besides, even little things have now become fashion, wouldn't you say?

Now that just about every thing has caught the fashion bug—has become the object of fashioning—fashion has become a necessity. She chose to actively appropriate fashion and use it to "complement" her "natural strengths."

Others claimants to middle-classness welcomed the fashioning of life with less enthusiasm. For most people the necessity of fashion was a new fact of life: a new, and often unwelcome, reality that could not be avoided. One young woman compared modern fashion with traditional ornamentation.

> It is like a new kind of ornament [*gahanā*] these days—for the girls. They say that it is a must these days. If you wear worn clothing, people will call you crazy! People say that fashion introduces the person, says who the person is. Being well dressed is a sign of being civilized [*sabhya*]. I think that's why people want to do fashion.

Although adornment has probably always functioned to say "who the person is," now people scorn the new commercial, and "civilizing," discipline of ever-changing fashion only at the risk of being called "crazy."

Other women spoke of modern fashions much less favorably as compared with styles from the past. One young married woman complained that complying with the dictates of fashion made her feel like a prostitute.

> According to our religion [*dharmako anusār*], it's written that women shouldn't be prostitutes, dancers, and all this. But just for society I have to wear makeup: lip stick, eye makeup, fancy clothes, . . . or else they'll all say, "Eh! What a hillbilly [*pākhe*] she is! She doesn't even know how to properly use the things she has!" So for society's sake I have to look *cute* [*ciṭikka pārera*] whenever I go out walking.
>
> Before, women didn't care about this and any decent clothing was acceptable. Then, even patched clothes were all right for going out. But in our time, now we can't even wear something a little worn, because we're afraid of what people will say about us.
>
> Even my husband notices this, so you can be sure others will notice too. He's worrying about his prestige [*ijjat*]; so if I don't do all this stuff, he'll lose his prestige.

Though she feels uncomfortable (even sinful) getting made up and dressed up every time she leaves her house, nevertheless, "for society's sake" and in order to preserve or enhance her husband's social prestige, this woman bears the burden of making herself "look cute" through fashion.[20] Before, "any decent clothing was acceptable," but now she must dress up, for fear of "what people will say."

In the interviews we conducted it was also very common for people to preface their remarks on fashion practice with some acknowledgment that such behavior was frivolous or inappropriate in the Nepali context. But these comments were almost always followed by some qualifier to the effect that, in spite of its frivolity, doing fashion was a social necessity. Speaking of what he thought about fashion, one twenty-year-old college student said:

> Let me recite one quotation from Gandhi: "Plain living, high thinking." Well, even though I have this kind of feeling from Gandhiji, still, in these days we have to live according to the times. This [fashion] is our obligation [*kartabya*]. If I don't do it, I won't be able to fit [*namilne*] into society.

"Plain living" may have been good enough for Gandhiji, but now one is "obliged" to "live according to the times."

Another young man, an eighteen-year-old, was extremely ambivalent about fashion, although acknowledging it, as one of his strongest personal interests (*sokh*):

> Yes, I really have a lot of *sokh* for fashion. But when I talk about fashion in a place like Nepal, there are problems, because when some-

[20] See Ewen and Ewen 1982:105–7 on middle-class women as "vicarious consumers," or a woman's obligation to publicly demonstrate her husband's "ability to pay."

thing, in the name of fashion, goes ahead of everything else, it just disguises other things. I mean, having fashion go ahead of real needs is simply foolish. And we have that condition now. Here, day by day, we are bending more toward Europe.

So I personally like fashion, but behind this *sokh* we have very poor economic conditions. Compared to Europe, our condition is very backward, valueless. On the one hand, I'm really attracted to new fashions, but on the other hand, in my mind, I get an uncomfortable feeling about this fashion because of our economic condition.

Here, if a person goes to another's house, the first thing they look for is what the person is wearing, and they immediately base their respect on this. Only later, after talking, maybe they'll learn about the person's practices and behavior, and maybe they'll base their respect on that. This is what I mean about why we now have to respect, or pay attention to, fashion.

These days an ordinary person—even a peon—if they go somewhere suited and booted, with a tweed coat and tie, if he goes to the [government] minister's office, even *he* will be immediately respected. But if the same person goes without this, he'll be stopped at the door. I mean, this is why so much depends on fashion. Fashion is like this.

There is almost anguish in this young man's account of fashion. He feels viscerally the fundamental contradiction between the reality of Nepal's crushing national poverty and the insistent demands of a local middle-class consumer culture. The consumer excess embodied in fashion practice is as unconscionable as it is unavoidable. As *many* others did in our interviews, he recounts the tale of the peon, "suited and booted," at the minister's office to illustrate why nowadays in Kathmandu no one with aspirations to social standing can afford to ignore fashion's dictates.

The same kind of distress was apparent in the comments of a young woman, an intermediate-level student in her late teens. From films and film magazines the conversation turned to the topic of fashion.

So, what about this fashion? What do you think about it?

Look, Nepal is a poor country, with no raw materials. Everything has to be brought in from the outside, and now everything is becoming more and more dear. So now, in this situation, people are doing all this fashion! But what can we do? In some ways, fashion has become necessary. I mean, *even your own relatives* will ignore you, or pretend they don't know you, if you're not looking fashionable! These days, if you do fashion, even though there's no money and nothing to eat in your house, people will consider you to be a rich person.

Yes, that's right! People just want to show off by doing fashion. Being arrogant, some people go abroad and bring back all this stuff from foreign countries. There are people who import all these things from overseas. I think the whole system should be eliminated.

Again, for this young woman, fashion is inappropriate for Nepal, but socially "necessary" nonetheless. But there is an interesting class dimension as well. Part of the problem with fashion, she complains, is that even a person with "no money and nothing to eat" might be mistaken for "a rich person." Through fashion even the poor can impersonate the rich. On the other hand, she hints that it is the elites—those "arrogant" people who "go abroad" and bring back foreign goods—who are responsible for the "whole system," which seems to threaten stable hierarchies with a new democracy of consumer goods. The fashion system creates an anxiety that leaves those in the social middle with no choice but to follow its demands.

Having indicated earlier in the interview that she herself pursued certain kinds of fashion, the same young woman defended herself when asked why she participated in a system that she personally thought should be "eliminated."

As for me, I don't do *real* fashion. All I do is try to be about equal with my friends, since they are all doing fashion. Really, this is how most everyone is doing fashion.

Here perhaps is the central reason for why many people "do fashion." Unlike a few who might be said to, in this woman's words, "do *real* fashion," most people in Kathmandu, rather grudgingly and with various degrees of anger and anxiety, try to maintain cultural parity with their friends. In this sense, fashion practice—as a communicative mode—is class practice; it is a new performative medium through which people attempt to synchronize their lives with those of others. In this way fashion integrates the new middle class, less around a set of agreed-upon goods or styles than around a shared practice or mode of consumption.

Fashion was also a very important part of how middle-class people in Kathmandu imagined themselves as members of a larger, even global, movement. Through fashion people could imagine themselves as members of a transnational fashioned class, while distinguishing themselves from their lower-class compatriots, urban or rural. For example, one young man, a twenty-year-old college student with relatives in the British army, when giving his opinion about "fashion," noted:

I like it because it's really according to fashion that people are able to move [*calnu*], to get on with their lives. Without it they're looked at

> with contempt. As in other big cities, we have a lot of concern for fashion here in Kathmandu, I mean, compared with the rest of Nepal.

For this young man it was fashion that simultaneously linked him to the modern world—the "other big cities"—and separated him from "the rest of Nepal." Through fashion he could identify both with other fashionable people in the city and with a transnational urban fashion scene. For him fashion linked the local middle class with a global culture of modernity.

How to "Count" in Kathmandu

If "fashion" is a social necessity for the Kathmandu middle class, what is the fate of the unfashioned in the city? One of the more telling epithets that I heard in Kathmandu was *tyo mānche gandaina*. Directed at a porter, construction worker, hill villager, or sidewalk hawker, the phrase means literally, "That person doesn't count" and has connotations very similar to the English expression. When a person "doesn't count," s/he is out of the game, beyond the purview of the rules and expectations that apply to those who "do count." In Kathmandu the phrase designated someone so peripheral and plebeian that they did not have to be dealt with in a serious manner. These people "didn't count" because they had not (or could not) enter their stakes in the local game of middle-class status negotiation. Unlike those who *did* count, they were nonentities in the urban "prestige" (ijjat) economy.

In the eyes of the middle class, many of Kathmandu's residents fall into the category of those who "don't count." Typically these are people from outside of Kathmandu who have come to the city to find work or pursue education. They rent rooms or squat on public lands, while trying to subsist at the bottom of the city's meager wage economy. Others who "don't count" may belong to one of the extremely low-caste groups that have lived on the city's periphery (both socially and geographically) for centuries. Leather workers, butchers, sweepers, and others of "low" occupational-caste origins still, as a rule, encounter enormous barriers to social advancement.

When it comes to determining who counts and who does not, fashion is the name of the game. In the display and negotiation of status and prestige, fashion—and the consumer lifestyle generally—is the most alluring and ubiquitous contest in the city. At the most basic level, "doing fashion" serves as a kind of gatekeeping device for the middle class. Without a certain disposable income, many in Kathmandu are unable to stake a claim to middle-class membership, because they are unable to display a fashioned self.

Perhaps not surprisingly, members of these lower or socially peripheral groups looked at fashion with contempt and/or longing. For example, one young man, a poor (though upper-caste) twenty-year-old student from a rural hill village, did not mince words when commenting on the fashion trends among his fellow students:

> I really hate the fashion situation here in Kathmandu. Yes, I know, I'm from the village, but that's my opinion. I guess every person has their own ideas.

For others fashion is, more or less, a nonissue. In one interview an unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman described how she spends her money. Originally from an extremely poor hill district north of Kathmandu, she came to the city looking for work. In 1991 she worked as a cleaning woman in a one-star tourist hotel and lived with an aunt in a poor, low-caste neighborhood. Her monthly salary was less than 25 USD. When asked what her money goes for, she replied:

> I have to eat, ride the bus, and buy clothes. With that the money just disappears. But I like different fruits a lot, and sometimes I buy some momos [Tibetan dumplings] in a restaurant.
>
> *What kind of clothes do you buy?*
>
> I usually just wear this Punjabi style *kurtā-suruwāl*, just the ordinary one. Of course, I like to look in the catalogue, but I like to wear the simple ones.
>
> *What about decoration* [siṅārne] *or* makeup?
>
> I don't put anything on my face. Well, I *do* have one lipstick that I sometimes use. I paid eight rupees for it. And I've never had anything done to my hair.

For this woman "the money just disappears," and what little discretionary income she has typically goes for special foods. She likes to look at fashions in the tailor's catalogues but prefers the "ordinary" and "simple" styles. As for the single cosmetic item she owns, she knows exactly what she paid for it and rarely uses it.

Most poorer men and women are aware of fashion but recognize clearly what excludes them from it. For example, one eighteen-year-old woman from the ritually low Newar barber caste, spoke of the connection between fashion and money. After her mother died, her father had remarried and left the city, leaving her and several siblings dependent on aging grandparents. She dropped out of school and in 1991 divided her time between housekeeping and garment piecework from which she earned seven or eight hundred rupees (about 18 USD) per month. Having talked

about how she enjoys films and film magazines, she was asked what she thought about "fashion."

> Actually, fashion doesn't make any difference to me. I just wear what I have. To do fashion, I would need more money. I don't have that kind of money. When I need a new outfit, I spend maybe two or three hundred rupees.
>
> *Why do people think* fashion *is so important?*
>
> Maybe to make themselves look beautiful: maybe that's why they stress this.
>
> *Do you have any desire to do* fashion*?*
>
> Sure, I have the desire to do it, but I have to think of my situation. If I had piles of money, of course I'd spend it on fashion, on clothes.

For this young woman fashion was simply irrelevant. She was fully aware of its presence around her and wished to take part in it, but recognized that for someone in her "situation" fashion just "doesn't make any difference." Like the previous woman, she is mainly focused on basic survival.

While the lives of most young women from poorer families revolve around the home (whether by custom or necessity), young men from the lower class are much more likely to spend their time outside: working, looking for work, or just hanging out. For them the pressures to conform to group standards, especially in terms of dress, seem to be greater than for poor women. One such young man was a twenty-four-year-old from a Newar farming family on the outskirts of the valley. A former heroin addict and street hustler in Kathmandu's tourist district, his parents had married him off in hopes that new responsibilities would bring him down to earth. Now the proprietor of a tiny vegetable shop, he had given up heroin for hard alcohol, lived in a rented room in Kathmandu, and occasionally sent money back to his wife and child, who still lived in the outlying village from which he had come. Part of his problem was regularly seeing his old friends on the streets, a subject that came up when he was asked what he thought of fashions in Kathmandu.

> Yeah, sure I'm interested in all that [fashion stuff]. I like to be at the same standard [level] as my friends, like with clothes and all that. Like, if you're wearing something—pants, coat, or whatever—then I also want to wear it. But it should be within my capacity. If it's not, how can I do it? If I have money, sure I'll wear it.
>
> *So how do you do* fashion*?*
>
> Hah! I live in a rented room. How am I supposed to do fashion?!

6. Shoppers and vendors in the heart of old Kathmandu (Asan Tol).

In many ways this man's last comments say a great deal about who "counts" and who doesn't in Kathmandu. The divide between those who pay rent and those who do not often closely approximates the line between the middle class and those below, who "don't count" in the game of fashion and prestige. Few people have the financial resources to both pay rent and buy fashions.

When talking about fashion practice as delineating some "line" between classes, we must remember that fashion—as a means of embodying class—is more than clothing, shoes, makeup, and hairstyles. As Gita (chapter 4) observed, "all parts of the body" are subject to fashion. Or, in the words of another woman quoted above, "now everything has become a fashion"; all dimensions of life are capable of being fashioned. Being fashionable is about more than simply *what* you have; it is also about *how* you use it, how you carry it off. Demeanor, comportment, and manners are also clear indicators of whether or not an individual "counts."

This lesson was reinforced for me one afternoon while sitting on the steps of a temple overlooking a crowded street in the heart of old Kathmandu. From this vantage point, a Nepali friend and I were scrutinizing passersby, he trying to educate me in a few of the more elementary rules of distinguishing social types by clothing and comportment. Having been informed that for men the "safari suit" was a very "*ijjat rāckne*" (prestigious or prestige-ascribing) outfit, I pointed to a man in a safari suit walk-

ing down the street and asked if he would be considered a "prestigious" (*ijjatdāri*) person. At this my friend rolled his eyes. No: because of the way this man walked (shoulders forward, slightly hunched over) and the *ṭopi* (Nepali cap) on his head, he was obviously someone of recent rural extraction. As the man came nearer, we realized that he wore rubber sandals on his feet—a dead giveaway of someone living in poverty. Footwear, my friend explained, is one of the clearest indicators of a person's *gharko sthiti*, his home or family condition. Anyone leaving his home without proper shoes and socks probably did not care about, nor deserve any, ijjat. As for safari suits, it was not just the clothing but the total effect that counted. With the right shoes, comportment, hairstyle, and accessories, such as a briefcase or, better yet, a motorcycle, a safari suit could be *very "ijjat dine"* (prestige-giving).

By the end of the afternoon I realized that a Kathmandu native could recognize the stiff-legged shuffle of an Indian (or Tarai Nepali) or the bent-knee strut of a person from the hills, from a distance of a hundred meters. The way a woman moved her arms while walking or a man carried packages on the street might indicate either city or rural origins. One's speech—volume, vocabulary, accent—and hand gestures gave hints about one's education, caste, regional origins, and general degree of urbanity. Finally, the cut, fit, and fabric of one's clothes, not to mention how up-to-date the styles were, were also taken into account almost instantaneously by my Nepali acquaintances. As one of the young men quoted above lamented, in Kathmandu "the first thing they look for is what the person is wearing, and they immediately base their respect on this." Comportment and demeanor were equally important for determining middle-class status. Indeed, these embodied features of class practice—"the imperceptible cues of body *hexis*," in Bourdieu's terms (1977:82)—make social barriers difficult to transcend, even though fashion seems to offer prestige for cash.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that "finishing schools" have begun to sprout up around the valley, offering students (mostly women between the ages of fifteen and thirty) lessons in walking, talking, and etiquette, in addition to beauty advice (clothing and makeup). One school offers to "develop social graces, etiquette and personality, dancing and exercising prowess and also improve [students'] communicational abilities." "No more embarrassment, no more holding back, the price is rupees 5,000.[21] Worth it, if you want a new YOU!" In short, if you "want to make yourself more presentable . . . the Finishing School is your choice."[22]

[21] A sum equal to roughly half of Nepal's average annual per capita income.

[22] Quotations taken from an "institutional profile" of Kathmandu's New Era Finishing School published in *Teens* (Kathmandu) 1(7) (December 1991):28–29.

7. Street children and middle-class pedestrians eye each other on a Kathmandu sidewalk.

While some are willing to commoditize middle-class knowledge by selling fashioned selves in the market, others bitterly resent these commercial inroads. Selling embodied social graces is perhaps most threatening to those people in Kathmandu's middle class who lack significant social and economic capital beyond their own middle-class bodies. For most, though, pursuing and presenting a fashioned self is an inescapable fact of modern life, a new channel in which people play out what is surely an age-old desire to "be about equal with [one's] friends."

Conclusion: The Middle Class, Fashion, and the Public Sphere

In Kathmandu, as in other late-twentieth-century modern places, fashion is a distinctly public phenomenon. Fashion practice aids the middle class in its efforts to stake out its own cultural territory, a consumer space of commodified objects, services, and information that largely corresponds to new forms of public space. Fashion clothes the public persona while in public spaces: on the streets, in shops and restaurants, in schools and on campuses. People in Kathmandu's middle class constantly speak of fashion as something for *outside* the house (*ghar bāhira*), a space that the unfash-

ioned body enters at the risk of being counted among those that "don't count." In this new public space, one finds both public goods (commodities that all are "free" to consume) and public bodies: bodies produced, or fashioned, through consumption for public display. By transforming public space into a commoditized zone, and then claiming legitimate (moral, modern, honorable, patriotic) consumer practice for itself, the middle class claims public space as its own legitimate class domain.

Kathmandu's "New Road" (Nayā Saṭak) is a new public space par excellence. Laid out along a line of destruction, where the city was literally rent apart by the great earthquake of 1934 (B.J. Rana 1935), New Road is the only wide, multilane thoroughfare in old Kathmandu. Lined with four-or five-storied buildings housing mostly upscale retail shops, New Road is a highly visual and visible modern canyon (sun-filled by day, neon-illuminated by night) cutting through the bedrock of old Kathmandu that lies behind New Road's fashionable commercial facade, a large area of dimly lit, narrow alleyways, tiny, dark shops, and multistory homes enclosing hidden courtyards.

From the outset, New Road was designed to be the city's modern commercial center. New Road hosted the city's first public cinema hall (now demolished), some of its first hotels and restaurants, and its first indoor shopping mall. New Road, with a few adjoining streets, still constitutes Kathmandu's major commercial district, housing most of the city's businesses that specialize in consumer electronics, prerecorded video- and audiocassettes, imported clothing and shoes, upscale custom tailoring, camera equipment and photo developing, and a host of other modern consumer goods and services. The sidewalks are crowded with well-dressed Nepali shoppers, Indian tourists in the city for shopping excursions, beggars, and hawkers. Poor Nepalis in from the hills or the Tarai come to New Road to ogle the tall buildings, colorful lights, and busy traffic, or to cluster around shop windows displaying electronic goods or photo-developing machines, set up so as to provide a public spectacle. New Road is a public space designed for the display and consumption of modern commodities.

While New Road is a new kind of public space, other public spaces have been a feature of Kathmandu's urban landscape for millennia. Neighborhoods are typically centered around public squares that feature market spaces, shops, and public buildings such as temples and shrines. Veranda-like public rest houses called *pāṭis*—constructed in generations past as pious acts of public charity and now mostly in advanced states of disrepair—abound throughout the city. These old public spaces and buildings frequently serve as venues for the religious processions, festivals, and public rituals that dot the annual calendar. These spaces were, and still are, also used communally for drying grain, washing clothes,

bathing, playing, chatting, and engaging in various types of small-scale local craft production, such as producing and drying ceramic wares.

To the extent that these old venues still exist in Kathmandu, there remains a sense of public space as communal space. These communal spaces are largely *productive* spaces: spaces for the production of day-to-day life (at public water taps, vegetable markets, rest houses, and temples) and, in a sense, spaces for the production of community, through everything from gossip to formal ritual. This is the kind of public space to which people in Kathmandu refer when they talk about how formerly one could go about publicly wearing just about anything.

By contrast, the new public spaces are largely spaces of and for *consumption*: like New Road, they are spaces for consumption of consumer displays and display of consumer goods. Here one's body becomes a public body, open to the scrutiny of passersby, who plot its position on the fashion axes of suitability and moderation. As one recently married woman put it:

> Before we decide on what clothes to wear, we have to look at the neighborhood. I mean, it depends on the place I am. You have to look to see what people are wearing. Around here everyone is so competitive [*ek-se-ek*] that you wouldn't even know anymore that most of us are daughters-in-law![23] So it's according to the place.

The new public spaces dictate what kind of clothing one wears, or at least *should* wear; those who fail to conform "don't count." Similarly, high school and college students complain about classmates who now come to campus "dressed as if they were going to a party or something." Whether in offices, schools, hotels, restaurants, or shopping arcades, the new public spaces are commercial, or commercialized, spaces for the consumption or display of commodities.

Indeed, the new public spaces are the spaces of the new middle class: the expansion of one parallels that of the other. The new public spaces are spaces of, by, and for the new middle class. To the extent that the middle class is removed from productive processes, it adopts consumption as its mode of identity production. For the middle class, the new public spaces are spaces for the display and negotiation of claims to middle-class membership, and the consumption of "fashioned" commodities is a key element of this practice. In a sense, "fashioning" or "doing fashion" *is* the productive work of the middle class. In "doing fashion," the middle class

[23] Previously, a young, recently married woman would have been expected (or required) to wear very simple, inconspicuous clothing, befitting her low status within her husband's extended family.

produces itself and its cultural existence from the raw materials of consumer goods.

Earlier modes of adornment practice in Kathmandu signaled linkages between individuals in the local social realm; adornment practice oriented individuals and groups within a local public. Yet significantly, even though contemporary fashion is a local practice—part of a local project of class formation—its resources, whether material or imagined, are often not local products. Thus, while the class-building project and its meaning are local, its orientation is translocal. Indeed, Kathmandu's middle class often produces its own local consumer public in terms of a translocal, usually mass-mediated consumer culture. Compared with an earlier form of largely productive and locally referencing public culture and public space, Kathmandu's new middle-class publicness is a more universal, and indeed *universalizing*, public domain. Its significant social "others" are no longer only others of local difference (as in a local ethnic/caste hierarchy) but others of imagined universal sameness (within a now global commodity realm and consumer class). Within Kathmandu's middle class, fashion consciousness and practice are not simply parts of an identity of local differentiation but also gestures or signs of global identification.

Thus, Kathmandu's middle-class public is local even as it draws on translocal resources to ideologically and materially construct itself. But if commodity consumption links class production in Nepal to larger transnational forces, it does so less via *transferred meanings* than shared *cultural practice*. From a transnational perspective, fashion practice in Kathmandu is not about "foreign influence" as much as it is the expression of a global cultural logic that harnesses goods to the interests of an emerging local middle class. In this light fashion is less about "westernization" than about class production. In the culture of fashion in Kathmandu, the links with structures of transnational capital are less at the level of shared meanings and more at the level of shared practices through which a new local middle class imagines itself.

SUITABLY MODERN

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