

## A BITTER PILL OR SWEET NECTAR?: CONTRADICTIONARY ATTITUDES OF SALARIED WORKERS TO ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION IN INDIA\*

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*The intensification of the globalization of the Indian economy over the past decade has dramatically influenced social life in India, both economically and culturally. This paper presents, and accounts for, the contradictory but critical attitudes towards liberalization held by the lower middle classes in Bengali society by documenting localized responses to the globalization of the Indian economy. Based on recent fieldwork among lower middle class salaried workers in West Bengal, this paper has two main aims. First, it examines whether policies of economic liberalization have provided an overall improvement in the standard of living for lower-income workers and their households. Our findings show that an overwhelming majority universally condemn policies of liberalization for serving the needs of a wealthy minority; they themselves have not materially gained. Second, we explore the complexities of cultural globalization, especially in terms of the dramatic changes to Indian television. On the whole, the free flow of information engendered through global media was positively evaluated, albeit at times they took a critical view of the culturally inappropriate foreign influences.*

### INTRODUCTION

In the last decade or so, numerous social scientists have begun to explore

\*Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Third Asia-Pacific Regional Conference of Sociology, Cheju National University, South Korea, 4-6 February, 1999; and at a conference presentation held in August, 1999 at the South Asia Research Unit (SARU), Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Western Australia, on the topic of 'Regional Responses to Global Economic Change: West Bengal and Bangladesh'. This research was funded by an Australian Research Council small grant and sponsored by the Faculty of Arts, Charles Sturt University. We wish to acknowledge several colleagues who provided invaluable support, critical comments and hospitality whilst conducting this study. They include: Prof Ranajit Bhadra and Dr Mita Bhadra, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of North Bengal; Dr Anjan Ghosh, Senior Research Fellow, Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta; and Assoc Prof (Dr) Amrit Srinivasan, School of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT-Delhi. We are grateful to our informants for their generous participation in this project. Lastly we acknowledge the critical comments and helpful suggestions of an anonymous reviewer, and the patience and support of Prof. Chang Kyung-Sup.

the increasing social, political, economic and cultural interconnectedness across the globe. In short, they have been keen to theoretically account for the process now commonly referred to as globalization. Key theorists such as Giddens (1990), Harvey (1989), Robertson (1992) and Sklair (1995) write extensively on the way in which the modern world is characterised by time and space compression and point to the increasing commodification of daily life and the mediation of social relationships through the market. Within the Asian region, the effects of globalization were dramatically highlighted by the somewhat reluctant ratification of the 1994 GATT agreement thereby lifting protective trade barriers and exposing vulnerable and particular industries, services and markets to the vagaries of rapidly changing global markets. In this light some writers remain largely convinced that local (national) and global forms of social inequality either will become greater (MacEwan, 1994) or will be reinforced (Walker, 1988).

India has pursued a policy of economic liberalization, since the mid-1980s, which was a dramatic reversal of earlier policies of protecting domestic industrial capital. In July 1991, the first comprehensive statements of policy on this issue were formulated. International lending institutions such as the IMF and World Bank advocated policy prescriptions of trade liberalization and export led growth. In response, the Indian government's structural adjustment policies have proposed reductions in public sector employment, limitations on agricultural subsidies, denationalization of banks and insurance companies and reductions in public expenditure.

India, and West Bengal in particular, presents a complex and interesting site for analysis. After achieving political independence in 1947, along with the rise of an indigenous bourgeoisie, India initially was able to pursue a path of planned development. Prior to Independence, West Bengal (current population around 70 million) enjoyed relative strength as an industrial and agricultural center. Significantly, Calcutta, the state's capital, was also the capital of British India until 1912. However, since 1947 West Bengal has been relegated to an inferior industrial and economic position. This was largely due to three main factors: central government neglect; absence of a Bengali capitalist class; and overt class conflict.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>As the capital shifted to Delhi, Calcutta's loss of its political pre-eminence contributed to the failure to attract industry to this region. Later West Bengal, still the most industrialized state at Independence, dropped to number four in terms of state rankings. It has been argued that the central government discriminates by limiting the granting of industrial licenses to West Bengal. Despite being the largest urban agglomeration, Calcutta does not receive grants equal to that of Delhi despite the fact that it faced a massive influx the refugees from East Bengal after partition (in 1947) and again after the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. In addition,

Significantly, since 1977 West Bengal has been continuously controlled by a Left-Front coalition led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). This has compounded the Center-State problems, as well as capital labor relations, especially as West Bengal has strong industrial unionization and peasant organizations at the village level. Moreover, the Left Front Government has been marginalized from the mainstream of national policy formation in India. (see Kohli, 1987).

More recently, following liberalization in 1991, the Left Front government has attempted to attract foreign multinational corporations to develop joint venture industries. A number of export processing zones also exist in West Bengal. However, in comparison to some other states, there has been very limited interest in foreign investment in West Bengal. In contrast, other cities and states are thriving by openly courting foreign software and technological corporations. For instance, Bangalore and Hyderabad, in Southern India, are two cities whose rapid development is largely attributable to the expansion of the computer and software industries.<sup>2</sup> These recent developments signal the increasing globalization of Indian industries, its economy and, as we shall show below, its cultural industries.

A number of studies have shown that the globalization of the economy already is beginning to have a profound effect on political and social life in India (see, for instance, Bhattacharya, 1999, Lakha, 1994, 1995; Singh, 1993). On the whole, these studies highlight a range of macro political-economic transformations taking place in India. However, with few exceptions (Lakha, 1999, McCarthy, 1994), there remains a paucity of ethnographic research on the direct social effects of such economic relations.<sup>3</sup> The Indian State, and supporters of economic liberalization, so far have assumed, rather than proven, that globalization will lead to an overall improvement of lifestyle and living standards for people. It is timely now to consolidate our

the elite of Bengal (the *bhadralok* — see discussion below) have been prominent in politics, education and the bureaucracy rather than as industrialists and capitalists and thus have not been in the position to attract capital to the state. Interestingly, the majority of industrialists in West Bengal today have their origins from outside the state, especially from Western India. Finally, class conflict and class consciousness, together with a well-organized and highly unionized labor force, have been perceived by foreign investors as unattractive for developing new export industries.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates is reputed to be a close friend of the Chief Minister of the state of Andhra Pradesh, of which Hyderabad is its capital and where an enormous “software city” is under construction. Bangalore is considered to be the “silicon valley” of India, and is attracting numerous software corporations, and highly skilled staff, to high paid employment.

<sup>3</sup>See the regular articles on various macro level, largely political-economic analyses of recent economic reforms in India in the noted journal: *Economic and Political Weekly*.

theoretical understanding of globalization by moving toward more empirically-based and tested assumptions of the effects and outcomes of the globalization process on individuals, families and communities within Asia.

In the first section of this paper we discuss and account for several key aspects of the process of the liberalization of the Indian economy. In particular, we make the case that despite almost a decade of radical economic reform, there remains little in the way of micro-level sociological research documenting the direct, and indirect, effects of this process of economic reforms for communities and local groups. Our study is thus concerned with the lived experiences of those who are directly affected by the vagaries of economic liberalization and globalization in India. In so doing, we reiterate the observations of Dirlik (1997), among others, who argues that the localization side of the globalization coin remains largely complex and contested.

The second section of this paper presents a critical account of the narratives of our informants. Two key areas are explored. First, broad responses and opinions in regard to economic liberalization and structural adjustment are presented. While there is a general concern with these economic changes, most felt that something had to be done to improve the Indian economy so that it could compete internationally. The second area explored is in relation to cultural transformation. A distinct division emerged in response to the cultural threat posed by a globalized mass media. In explaining these contrasting views, we provide an analysis highlighting the complexity of cultural fragmentation among the Bengali middle class.

#### GLOBALIZATION, ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION AND INDIA (1991-1999): AN OVERVIEW

The Indian example is of special interest due to complex geo-political alliances and the presence of an indigenous bourgeoisie which has enabled it in the past to benefit from the political space provided by the Superpower rivalry, receiving increasing assistance for its ambitious industrial projects. Chronic problems of the Indian economy, embodied in the under-utilization of capacity, lack of demand and lack of investment necessitates the opening up of new markets. Thus the desire to open up and institute economic reforms are not merely an outcome of the dictates of the IMF and World Bank (*India Today*, 1992), but also concur with sections of the Indian capitalist classes.

There are deep divisions in Indian society regarding these neo-liberal prescriptions. Trade unions have radically opposed many of the reforms, while

political parties have played an ambivalent role.<sup>4</sup> Recently the insurance and patent bills have led to much public debates concerning the efficacy of official economic policy.<sup>5</sup> There have been a number of violent protests against the uninterrupted intrusion of external capital in the insurance sector and the dominance of multinational companies in the manufacture and distribution of pharmaceutical and agro-technical products, which threaten the nation's economic sovereignty. Those opposed to foreign sponsorship of economic growth have been quick to point out that in the post-reform years the overall rate of growth has been lower; this holds true of the farm and industrial sectors (Mitra, 1998). Thus the opponents have drawn attention to the failure of the free market mechanism to yield satisfactory results for the Indian economy.

Some social scientists have considered the implications of economic liberalization and forecast that marginalized groups will be adversely affected (Acharya, 1995; Vanaik, 1993). In particular, it has been argued that economic liberalization and marketisation will reinforce asymmetrical gender relations (Sen, 1996; Ghosh 1996). Yet, these are predictions, based on experiences of the poor elsewhere in the developing world (Booth, 1994), rather than actual case studies. In other words, sociological discussions of economic liberalization in India focus on class polarization in general terms, rather than on empirical evidence. For example, it is argued that:

... market forces will polarize classes in both agricultural and industrial sectors. The growing global demand for vegetables, fruits and flowers as Indian agriculture links up with international agri-business and the consequent shrinkage of the area under food crops is inimical to the interests of the poor who will be made to pay higher prices for their daily food requirements. The poor will become poorer and whereas the rich farmers will attain prosperity because of their linkages to the global market (Panini, 1995: 54).

There are important issues that deserve mention. First, such generalizations abound without solid evidence. Second, if there is any data, it is purely

<sup>4</sup>At times however, the rhetoric and real positions of major unions have varied considerably. The larger unions, which are aligned to parties in government, support reformist policies. When those parties are in opposition, those same unions are either negative or ambivalent to liberalization.

<sup>5</sup>These bills concern two key issues. The Insurance Bill proposes the privatization of the national insurance company (The Life Insurance Corporation of India), the largest in India, and the opening-up of the Indian economy to foreign insurance companies. The Patent Bill deals with the foreign ownership of Indian scientific and natural resources, inventions and design.

economistic.<sup>6</sup> There is no account of what the responses are from those that remain affected — the various salaried workers in cities and towns.

The process of market reforms has been underway in many parts of the world. In the Indian context there has been some documentation of the growing inequalities due to the implementation of liberalization policies. According to the National Council of Applied Economic Research study of some 300,000 households, wealthier households have grown and benefited from liberalization at a more rapid rate when compared to poorer households (Natarajan, 1999).<sup>7</sup> In other words, their research shows that while there are proportionately less poorer households in India now than before economic reforms in 1991, richer households are reaping a far greater monetary reward over the corresponding period, with their household income rising dramatically. Such discourses are replete with references to the expansion of the middle class (Kulkarni, 1993; Chakravarti, 1995, Natarajan, 1999).<sup>8</sup> They tend to reproduce the claims of the state on the benefits of liberalization. However, once again, these descriptions are largely economistic and so omit to document and analyze the actual social and cultural significance of these economic reforms.

In the foregoing discussion we briefly highlighted the contradictory outcomes of liberalization. This becomes apparent when one considers in more detail the experiences of the rural poor and women working in certain export industries. For instance, it has been argued that the living conditions of the rural poor in India can be indirectly improved by providing greater employment opportunities in rural areas (a so-called “trickle-down” effect). According to Omvedt (1993), some farmers have actively supported liberalization since it promotes labor-intensive sectors of the economy and contributes to overall rural development. The more prosperous and entrepreneurial farmers, for example, have managed to take advantage of government subsidies and extended their farming activities into areas like cut-flower export to Europe, aquaculture farming, the growing and export of grapes and other non-indigenous fruits to Europe, and the growing of potatoes and other cash crops for foreign agri-business multinational corporations (Panini, 1995: 55). The removal of both price controls and restrictions on trade, resulting from liberalization, would offer incentives to increase agricultural productivity, which in turn would increase employment oppor-

<sup>6</sup>See footnote 2, above.

<sup>7</sup>Note, however, that according to that study, the terms “wealthier” and “poorer” refer to households with annual incomes over Rupees 500,000 (US\$12, 500) and less than Rupees 50,000 (US\$1250) respectively.

<sup>8</sup>Kulkarni, V.G (1993), in particular, is emphatic about the “middle class bulge”.

tunities. Yet, while undoubtedly certain sectors of the rural economy have prospered, large sectors of the “backward” classes and castes<sup>9</sup> remain extremely hard-hit by inflation, contraction in secure rural employment, the virtual impossibility of entry into lucrative export markets, continual poor levels of literacy, health and living standards, and overall social and political marginality (Ganguly-Scrase, 1997).

Similarly, policies of economic liberalization seemingly have done little to redress gender inequalities over the past decade. Reflecting upon the implications of liberalization for women, Ghosh (1996) suggests that women will bear the cost of economic restructuring. Although she calls for the urgent need for data, she herself does not provide concrete evidence. Sociologists have drawn attention to the negative impact on women. For example:

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

It seems however, that market liberalization and structural adjustment policies can have a contradictory impact on women when we explore the cultural terrain. While new forms of inequality result from economic reforms, there may be other opportunities for greater independence. Feldman's (1992) study of women workers in export-processing enclaves in Bangladesh shows that women from rural middle-strata families were able to gain employment opportunities which were previously denied to them. This opportunity challenged the traditional prohibitions on female mobility that were shaped by Bengali culture and a variant of Islamic doctrine, which in the past severely limited women's access to education and employment. This has also required a reinterpretation of family status. Agarwal (1992)

<sup>9</sup>“Backward” classes and castes are a large and mixed category of persons with unclear boundaries. They are terms used to describe poor peasants, the landless and the rural poor and applies to those who are of low caste origin. It also includes the official Indian government ranking of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. For a detailed discussion see Beteille (1992).

argues that the ability of women to draw on extrafamilial resources goes towards enhancing their bargaining position within the household. Focusing on regional patterns of gender relations in India, she emphasizes the mediating effects of cultural processes as well as the various coping strategies of households with different assets. Of critical importance are class differentials and cultural specificity.

The evidence from Latin America (Murphy et. al, 1997), the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 1997) and Africa (Ould-Mey, 1994; Clark, 1997) certainly lend support to the notion that market reforms instigated over the past decade or so greatly benefit the rich and marginalise the poor. However, what is interesting sociologically is the condition of the lower middle class — those who perhaps have the potential for success since they possess a degree of education and various professional and technical skills.

In light of the above discussion, it is important to examine the extent to which globalization has led to fundamental changes to the lives of Indian salaried workers in terms of their household incomes, consumption patterns and cultural tastes. As Geschiere and Meyer (1998: 601) have noted, the ambiguities of globalization "... calls forth urgent challenges, not merely on the level of theory but also with regard to a better understanding of actual global entanglements". This is particularly crucial to research in India as much of the current academic discourse surrounding cultural change is couched in vague terms or remains far too generalized.

A typical account of the cultural impact of globalization via the influence of satellite television is as follows:

Much of the change in India's cultural ethos has emanated from the urban middle class's changing values which in turn, were transformed by exposure to Western media, especially television ... There is discernible change in sexual mores. Dating practices, following Western values, are much in vogue. There is slow rebellion taking place in major cities against rigid arranged marriages. There is also experimentation in dating techniques; the notion of free love is getting in vogue; and divorces are taking place with rising frequency. Relationships outside marriage are present, even in rising numbers for both men and women. One also sees rising scales of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. There is a high incidence of sexually transmitted disease, HIV positive infection, and AIDS. One finds increasing awareness now of safe sex, use of condoms and unabashed advertising for it ... In a land traditionally known for frugality, idealism, dharma, karma, transcendentalism, vegetarianism, religious tolerance and ahimsa, we find a clear break (Sharma, 1996: 310-11).

At best, these are simplistic formulations and, at worst, wild speculations. One could equally argue that the resilience of Indian culture is such that it can easily adapt to change without experiencing devastating consequences. While scholarly reflections on social change are important, they urgently require grounding in empirical research.

#### AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNT OF ECONOMIC REFORM AND GLOBALIZATION IN WEST BENGAL, INDIA

The remaining sections of this paper explore the narratives of our informants. They are based on participant observation and in-depth interviews with low-income salaried workers in Calcutta and in Siliguri in North Bengal. We began our fieldwork some two years ago. There were twenty key informants. Between September 1998 and April 1999, a further 120 people were interviewed (60 in each city), utilizing a snowballing method. Females constituted 52% of our study, while males were 48%.

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

#### *Socio-economic Background of Respondents*

As we stated earlier, our research is not concerned with analyzing the working class or the very poor in India under liberalization. All the evidence points to the fact that the very poor have not benefited at all from economic liberalization. Instead, it is concerned with studying a class fraction - that is, the lower middle-class that we have defined in terms of both a particular economic bracket and a cultural milieu. Their household income ranges from Rs2000-8000 per month.<sup>10</sup> In terms of culture, this group forms part of the Bengali bhadralok. This group is of particular significance given

the elasticity of the category middle class, which is said to have expanded greatly and thus to have become a beneficiary of the structural adjustment reforms to the economy and industry.<sup>11</sup>

The group we studied were largely white-collar, salaried persons. Although some of those interviewed may not have been earning even Rs1000/month, due to underemployment, their total household income, as we stated above, was between 2000-8000/month. Mostly they were clerks, lower professionals and administrators, and sales personnel. In neo-Weberian terms, following the sevenfold (seven scales) stratification model developed by British sociologists Goldthorpe and Hope (1974), this group forms part of Class II (lower professionals; technicians; lower administrators; small business managers; supervisors of non-manual workers) and Class III (clerks; sales personnel) — in their terms, the “lower white collar classes”. In neo-Marxist terms, following the writings of Erik Olin Wright (1985), they may be seen to be in a contradictory class location — semi-autonomous, professional employees laying somewhere between the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie.

We utilize these categories to specify the occupational characteristics of our respondents in terms of their market capacity and thereby show their location within the modern economy. Ultimately however, we do not claim that any of these definitions are completely adequate in analyzing class relations in Bengal.<sup>12</sup> While class definitions remain contentious in the Indian context, particularly due to its intersection with caste and due to numerous regional differences, within Bengal one cannot discuss class formation without reference to the *bhadralok*.

### *The Bhadralok*

The lower middle class in Bengal belong to the social category of the *bhadralok*. Locating the lower middle class within cultural hierarchies of Bengal necessitates an elaboration of the *bhadralok* in Bengal. They are an

<sup>10</sup>The approximate exchange rate is Indian Rupees (Rs) 40.00 = US\$1.00. Thus, their monthly household income ranges from US\$50-200.

<sup>11</sup>For a critique of the expansion of the Indian middle class and the conceptual problems associated with defining this category, see Lakha (1999: 263-5).

<sup>12</sup>It has been argued that in West Bengal “... class stratification is imbedded to a great extent within the hierarchy of castes” (Sinha, and Bhattacharya, 1969: 56). More significantly, the formation of social classes in West Bengal is shaped by a complex interlinkage of economic position, status and caste relations and the dynamics of political power. For accounts of class formation based on detailed household statistical data, participant observation and case studies, see Chatterjee (1979: 1-31) and Bardhan (1982: 73-94).

important component of the civil society. The *bhadralok* were the traditional literati, drawn from the upper castes of pre-colonial Bengal. The term is multivalent but means most of all “respectable people”. The *bhadralok* were distinguished by their refined behavior and cultivated taste, but did not necessarily have substantial wealth and power. An opposite category was the *abhadralok* (non-*bhadralok*) or to use a more derogatory term, *chotolok* “lowly people”. In this paper we are not concerned with this latter category.

The *bhadralok* attained their socio-political pre-eminence under British rule, since they were the first to gain modern education and enter civil service. Their occupation also gave them a measure of wealth. A major characteristic of the *bhadralok* came to be their aversion to manual labor. In 19th century colonial Bengal *bhadralok* dominance became evident, and *bhadralok* influence in education, social reform and literature was widespread. However, forever feeling that they were excluded from real bureaucratic and decision-making political power by the British they developed anti-British nationalism alongside of their acceptance of modernity (see, for instance, McGuire, 1983; Mukherjee, 1975). By the end of British rule in 1947, the *bhadralok* in Bengal were economically eclipsed (since they had paid little attention to entrepreneurial pursuits) by the traditional castes of Indian merchants and money-lenders from the provinces of Punjab and Rajasthan (Buruma, 1986: 70).

Changed from their original position for two centuries as a reasonably well-off, educated and highly cultured status group, the *bhadralok* are now a heterogeneous group and often indigent. Many may live in poverty or be underemployed. They still seek education, above all, for their children, and attempt to maintain a veneer of their once high social status by engaging in writing, music and the arts; but the economic reality of the present has meant that the penchant for cultural pursuit, the traditional status maintainer, is fast disappearing. Instead, often to their disadvantage, conspicuous consumption of material goods is increasingly becoming an important determinant of status attainment throughout India (see Scrase, 1993). Against this background, there is a further distinction between *abhijat* (refined; aristocratic) *bhadralok* and *sadharon* (ordinary) *bhadralok*. These categories in themselves do not embody static elements but have continually changed over time and are being redefined. The differences in their current cultural milieu is reflected in their responses below.

## OVERVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

On the whole there were no great differences of opinion between regions

(i.e. the rural city of Siliguri and the urban metropolis of Calcutta).<sup>13</sup> This relates to our contention that, when we refer to the metropolitan/provincial divide that shapes the differential attitudes towards liberalization, we are referring to a socio-cultural space rather than geographical space. We return to this point later in the paper. No radical differences between the views of men and women were found. However, there were differences based on age. Young people did not formulate clear views on the detrimental impact of North American cultural influences. Nor were they able to elaborate on the economic changes. Many felt their personal incomes did not permit them a great deal of purchasing capacity. Moreover, none were heads of households and therefore did not have many responsibilities. While the number of people between the ages of 25-30 expressed that they did not have much in the way of disposable income, they did not have much responsibility either. They could spend it all on themselves. Some were saving up for a television or a music system for their own house for when they marry.

All respondents strongly emphasized the decline in their living standards, pointing to inflationary prices of daily essentials. Despite increases in salaries nearly everyone pointed out that their wages had not kept pace with the rising costs of living. However, only a small minority established a link between their economic well being and the policies of economic liberalization. Most respondents refer to the “general economic climate” rather than specific free market policies. Only 20% of the respondents actually knew about Structural Adjustment Policies (SAP) and their significance.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Note that this research is ethnographic and qualitative in nature. It is convention when presenting such data not to quantify all responses in terms of percentile, fractions etc. In any event, it remains statistically insignificant, with a sample of 140, in a state with some 70 million people, to even begin to talk in percentile terms. The strength of ethnographic research lies in the richness of the feedback, observations and responses of our informants and interviewees together with our observations as researchers in the field. For detailed discussion see the classic guide to ethnographic research edited by Ellen (1984).

<sup>14</sup>Significantly, the impact of the Asian economic crisis in India has not been as drastic as in other Asian economies. There was a series of sudden and dramatic price rises in commodities and utilities during the middle of 1998. Also, many public sector undertakings are classed as “sick” (i.e. losing money and not performing to reasonable expectations and requiring constant government prop-up). However, the prices of daily essentials have come down slightly since 1998. This partly explains why there isn’t wide spread understanding of what SAP really means. Afterall, we are dealing with people who have some education, most read the papers and yet they don’t blame the World Bank or IMF for their troubles. Why? We would say that for this class fraction the consequences of SAP have been gradual. For instance, no one who has a government ration card has lost it. For low income people, government subsidies on essential items remain in place. Comparatively few in the state sector have lost their jobs, compared to the situation in other East Asian economies. Yet, the threat of sackings looms

Such persons were generally well educated (i.e. graduate and above), professionally employed and in government service.<sup>15</sup> They were also older, being above the age of thirty-five. This small minority of respondents clearly identified the opening up of the economy as the decisive factor in the general economic decline. For example, as one respondent related:

As a result of liberalization onions and potatoes were exported. This was done to earn foreign exchange. This led to the rise in these food items. It would have been unthinkable in the old regime. The domestic market would have been protected. Now the focus is on the export market.

I have some relatives who are into farming. Now, they are not getting the prices. If mangoes are targeted for the export market, then mango growers should surely get a better deal, but that is not happening. We have relatives who grow rice and vegetables, but they have not benefited. It is the middlemen who are the beneficiaries. The exporters have gained.

A few argued that there were no links between the economic policies and their present circumstances, while one woman indicated that her condition had improved, but it was unrelated to government policy.

On the whole most people did not see major personal benefits from liberalization. The greater availability of consumer goods was not highly praised. Most felt that even if they had initially viewed the notion of liberal-

large. The story is somewhat different for the private sector. One respondent was a duty manager for a major national airline but lost her job due to downsizing. She is now working in a position, which pays much less, but she remains optimistic about getting something better in future. Her optimistic outlook is exemplary of the new generation compared to the views of the older generation. The older generation grew-up in the shadow, as they saw it, of a "socialist" freedom struggle. They generally will defend the state and are suspicious of private capital. Largely anti-colonial and nationalist-oriented they thus feel disenchanting with liberalization, whereas younger Indians seem more open to the new state ideology of a free market and widespread economic reforms.

<sup>15</sup>Ironically, many of our respondents who are critics of liberalization are employed in the West Bengal state government service. Although a Left-Front coalition, which since 1977 has been led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI-M, the Left-Front has been at the forefront of the various state governments attempting to attract national and foreign transnational corporations into the state. Thus, these employees remain critical of liberalization on the one hand, especially because of price rises etc, yet on the other hand espouse the rhetoric of the supposed benefits of SAP - work efficiency, the need to compete and to increase output, and so forth. In a sense, therefore, these workers are espousing the Left-Front government's ideology which, in the end, may be against their material interests. For a critical overview of the Government of West Bengal's industrial policy under a liberalizing regime, see Das Gupta (1995); for an analysis of liberalization and SAP which sees it as principally in ideological terms, see Diwan (1995).

ization positively, it did not bring them any benefits. Those who were more politically or ideologically committed, emphasized the overall negative side of liberalization. They coincidentally also had a degree of involvement in trade union activities.

The highly politicized nature of civil discourse in West Bengal influences the views of the respondents. While some were vague about the policies of liberalization and their impact on their own lives, they nevertheless had strong opinions on the privatization of enterprises and the entry of foreign multinational corporations (hereafter, MNCs). Most people were opposed to their entry and opposed to foreign corporations having the upper hand in terms of ownership. They were well aware of the flow of profits out of India and in any case did not want ownership of more than 48%. They remain unconvinced of the MNC's claims of investment in West Bengal. A small minority did feel that injection of foreign capital would definitely improve the conditions in West Bengal. However, they did not believe that MNCs would provide the much-needed infrastructure, such as highways and transport.

Those who hold a firm opinion concerning liberalization are also those who are/will be directly affected by privatization and competition from foreign corporations. As a category of workers they are generally drawn from the nationalized banks and public sector enterprises. Government employees such as clerks and teachers are yet to be affected (in the sense that their jobs are not threatened). Those working in semi-government organizations are cynical about the rhetoric of privatization and do not believe that private ownership will result in increased efficiency or improved conditions. As a project officer in this sector argued:

Our company is already privatized. How much more can you do? We are operating like a private company for all intent and purposes. We earn for ourselves. We will find people working here till late at night, on holidays. We do not clock off like the government servants.

However, by privatization if you mean proprietorship, I really can not see any benefit. We have not had any retrenchments. We are trying to fully computerize our organization. That will put a few people out of their present jobs, but we will absorb them in other areas. Actually, this organization has a shortage of manpower. Some branches are made up of one or two people. We need to increase our staff.

On the whole it was repeatedly emphasized that multinational corporations were merely trying to penetrate the Indian market, rather than invest in the

long-term benefit of the population. Most people said that the focus was on consumer and luxury goods rather than industrialization, something they felt would be needed to benefit Indians.

The greater availability of, and access to, a range of consumer goods were not treated as a benefit. Clearly there is a correspondence between consumerism and income. Those with low incomes are simply not in the position to purchase a diversity of products. It is evident that the desire for consumer goods is frequently attributed to “others” and rarely admitted for themselves. There is an ambiguity that while some regard themselves as “victims” of consumerism (especially those with the purchasing capacity), some respondents point to the foolishness of being influenced by advertising.

In my family there is the desire to purchase all goods of comfort. The wife wants a washing machine and so on. Let's take this new house I am building, it has to have all the “mod cons” (modern conveniences). Since my brothers have built houses, we have got to be better than them. We have to have something to out-do them. This desire, this mode of thinking, was not there in our youth. I would even say with certainty that ten years ago people did not think this way. This way of thinking has come about in the past five years or so.

I am not forced, but I am a victim of consumerism. At the moment there is a dispute in my family as to what brand of TV we should buy. Should it be Samsung or Sony? There is never any question about buying Indian made. I am not a technician, but I think BPL [Indian brand] is quite good. Not my son. [For him] it has to be foreign. Is the quality necessarily good? No, it is merely advertising.

Another respondent exasperatingly put it this way:

Can consumers really know that this pen, which is locally made, is better than an imported one? They are just going to look at the advertising and say, “Ahh! A Japanese pen. Must be good”.

In contrast to the negative aspects of the global integration of the Indian economy, the cultural dimensions of globalization were viewed in a positive light. Despite reservations about advertising and its powerful influence on spending and consumer choice, an overwhelming majority welcomed the opening up of the electronic media, especially cable and satellite television, and generally have embraced the free flow of information, albeit with a critical view of the culturally inappropriate foreign influences. As one person

summarized:

The only positive side of liberalization since 1991 has been the electronic media. It has really opened up. It was not like that before as far as I can remember. TV used to be entirely one sided. It was just the government view, it was their mouthpiece. It is not like that now. I watch a lot of TVI [Indian independent cable network]. That gives you a wider overview of what is India. You can not just look at the metropolitan cities and say this is India. TVI tries to show you the complexity and diversity of Indian life.

At a personal level I have benefited from access to cable and other information. I talked about TVI before. Then there is CNN, BBC and there is a variety of sources of news and current affairs which is a welcome change from the old Doordarshan.<sup>16</sup> They can not window dress anymore. Now we can know a great deal about what is going on around us. In contrast to this information, we also get so much vulgarity.

A number of people indicated that they became far more informed of social and political issues through independent media. For example, one man in his late thirties put it in the following way:

In the past there used to be a man and a woman just reading the news. That is all you got. There was no discussion and hardly any elaboration. This has changed dramatically with the introduction of cable. There are alternatives. These are the positives.

I was not going to get cable. I got it just for a month when the world cup was on.<sup>17</sup> Then I started watching all the documentaries and current affairs, and I really got hooked.

Currently much controversy surrounds the influence of the programs on cable television due to their "foreignness". We therefore explored its perceived impact on Bengali culture. Some respondents expressed their concern that the images of life-styles portrayed would potentially threaten Bengali culture. As one woman argued:

Every culture has its own way of thinking, their own morals, dhan-dharana (cultural values/ways of thinking), their own unique ways. These are being destroyed. Those values about which we prided ourselves are under threat. I do not know what you would call it, be it Western, be it modern; these values are threatening our culture. Now let

<sup>16</sup>*Doordashan* is the government-run television network.

<sup>17</sup>The popularity of cricket in the subcontinent is well known. However, soccer is also extremely popular in Bengal, as it is in Europe, if not more so.

me be very specific. There are many good cultural values of the West from which we can learn. If we can adopt the positive aspects, then it is good. However, we seem to only copy the negative ones. We seem to be more attracted to them.

Curiously, however, it was only 35% who regard foreign influences as detrimental. The majority point-out the resilience of Bengali culture which is able to withstand the negative influences:

The Western influence is not that great on our culture that we cannot counteract it. We have a culture that is very deep-rooted, especially in Bengal. People laugh about us; say that we still make a fuss about Tagore even sixty years after his death.<sup>18</sup> We get worked up about Nazrul.<sup>19</sup> We are not really that influenced by the Western media, but I have noticed that outside Bengal, especially Delhi and Bombay, its influence is quite big. Maybe their culture is not as developed or strong as ours, so they do not care much. Perhaps in Bombay it is a film-based culture anyway. Their own culture is quite weak. Similar to us, in the South, they are very proud of their identity and they do not want to imitate the West.

Negative influences were described by the Bengali notion of *apa-sanskriti*, meaning undesirable culture or simply “pop-culture”. They regarded mass culture with great disdain. Such an outlook stems from the perception of the debased nature of mass culture. Constitutive of an aesthetic judgment, this view is somewhat analogous with the Frankfurt School’s thesis on the culture industry and its critique of the rise and negative cultural impact of popular and mass culture from the 1930s (Adorno, 1991).

What is interesting about the views on content of various cable television programs is that there are also a number of Indian channels. Ironically, it is these channels that respondents were most critical of. Most people contended that it was not the “Western” influences per se, but the crass consumerism of the Bombay (“Bollywood”-style)<sup>20</sup> television programs, which were considered to be a harmful influence on children and youth. Thus, the pejorative label *apa-sanskriti* is not simply directed at North American cultural imports.

<sup>18</sup>Rabindranath Tagore, the famous Bengali novelist and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature.

<sup>19</sup>Nazrul Islam, noted Bengali poet and revolutionary, whose writings in the first half of the twentieth century inspired the Indian freedom struggle, especially in Eastern India.

<sup>20</sup>Bollywood, an amalgamation of “Hollywood” and “Bombay”, refers to the more sensationalist and populist style of film making and television drama, especially soap operas, in India.

Furthermore, some went as far as to speak of distinctions between “Western” and “modern”. Modernity was equated with technocratic and scientific rationality, while “Western” was frequently associated with morality and values, particularly those pertaining to family life and kinship. The acceptance of the public world of governance and science and the rejection of cultural values are traceable to the long-standing engagement with western modernity among the *bhadralok* since the 19th century. As Chatterjee (1993) points out in his historical account of the anti-colonial nationalism of the Bengali *bhadralok*, attempts were made by them to adopt certain aspects of western rationality (liberal tolerance, secularism and so forth) while the cultural domain of the home and family was largely left alone. There was thus a clear distinction between a public, more liberal tolerant culture and a private, traditional or conservative lifestyle.

Although at times the terms “Western” and “modern” were conflated, some respondents went to great pains to distinguish between modernity and consumerism. Westernization was seen as negative when it was associated with individualism and consumerism. As one middle-aged man explained:

There was a story I read when I was a child. It went something like this: “that to be really happy or to ensure happiness, one should spend one’s formative years, early years, in Japan, one’s adult working life in the West and one’s twilight years, old age, in India”; the moral of the story being that old age and wisdom is valued in our culture. That one could be assured of comfort and assistance in your old age. Unfortunately we have become so selfish and self-centered. This, “me, me, me” attitude is largely an outcome of foreign media influences. It is having an influence on young people. The self-centered nature of youth outlook, the idea that “I should get everything” is really a product of a consumerist Western influence. Gross violence in foreign films is also a negative influence. Violence seems to be a “must” in Western films. Not all Western films I know. What I mean is the commercial Hollywood-type foreign films that dominate and also other Western TV programs.

Unlike many contemporary social commentators, our respondents were not opposed to change. They recognized the inevitability of change, but felt that they should have some control of the direction of change that was taking place.

I suppose there is a two-way traffic in all this information flow. Outsiders have come to know our outlook, our ideas and values. So ultimately my main argument is that you can not keep your doors closed.

You have to open up. It would be an impossibility to remain un-intergrated in a global world. You cannot stop liberalization. However, you have to keep certain controls. Who will keep this control? Who will maintain a check? It has to be the national government. Who else can do it? People? I am not saying that it is impossible. People can oppose an open door policy. They can mobilize in the face of a great force as they did during the freedom struggle. However, we have to remember that it did not happen spontaneously. It took great leadership. There is no such leadership or visionaries now. So the issue of people opposing liberalization and being successful is doubtful.

A distinct division of opinions emerged in response to the cultural threat posed by globalized mass media, especially cable television. The moral anxiety can be linked to the socio-cultural background of respondents. The genesis of this distinction can be traced to the specificity of the cultural formation of status groups in Bengali society. They have their historical roots in the emergence of the *bhadralok* in Bengal, which was outlined earlier.

#### THE BHADRALOK AND APA SANSKRITI

As noted above, the transition from an emphasis on refined behavior as a marker of one's *bhadralok* status to one of gaining material wealth and conspicuous consumption is an important signifier of changing *bhadralok* culture today. This change may be understood in terms of the global promotion of a "culture-ideology of consumerism".<sup>21</sup> Consumption occupies a unique place in contemporary capitalism. Its all-pervasive images are able to raise people's aspirations despite their lacking in actual power to purchase the commodities. Such images have enabled our respondents to enter a world of virtual consumption. They may simply gaze at these items today, but they expressed their wish to be able to purchase them some day in the future. A telling response, exemplifying the views of many of those interviewed, comes from a young woman aged twenty who works as an assistant in an ISD booth:<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>We borrow this term from Sklair (1995) who outlines the way in which global capitalism is reproduced through a variety of transnational practices and is maintained by the promulgation of a culture-ideology of consumerism.

<sup>22</sup>These are micro-sized offices, often no more than nine square meters, consisting of one or 2 telephones with STD and international subscriber direct dialing (ISD) facilities. A booth usually has one assistant who is responsible for collecting the charges and payment. It is mostly staffed by young people with high school qualifications and who live locally. These enterprises are very common in all cities in India, where two or more of them can be found in each neighborhood. They have sprung up to service the needs of consumers who generally do not

I feel sad that I can't buy what I want. I like to decorate the house with some nice furniture like you see in the magazines. Because of my economic circumstances, I can't do that. That hurts me a lot. I'd really like a dressing table and a display cabinet. Also it would be nice to have a VCR and all of those nice things for the house. Yes, my heart's desire is to be able to buy these things.

Although at present many people's dwellings were often no more than a two-roomed flat, consisting of a minimum of modern amenities, their imagined household would constitute many of those consumer items seen in magazines or on television. Among our respondents the creation of desire promoted by the ideology of consumption has led to some tensions. There remains a paradox between an antipathy toward permissive sexuality and the desire for consumer goods constructed by the media and advertising.

At this point, it is worth considering a particular term to describe this above-mentioned paradox — *apasanskriti*. For some, *apasanskriti* is clearly derived from consumerism; in essence, it means mass or popular culture. For others, the term is used to refer to the loss of modesty and lack of respect for authority. For the provincial *bhadralok* it signifies a rising tide of permissiveness. They equate it with "western culture" which is seen as detrimental. In contrast, for the metropolitan *bhadralok*, the unabashed consumerism itself is regarded as harmful.<sup>23</sup>

While those with an identifiable cultural disposition of a particular literary and political outlook reflected an aesthetic stance of cultural openness, others found the explicit sexualization to be an affront to a Bengali sensibility and felt that children were particularly vulnerable to these influences. As one female bank teller with two children commented:

have a private phone due to the high costs or delays in getting a new connection. Nevertheless, they occasionally do communicate with friends and relatives in distant places or use them for business reasons. Many households in India have chosen not to have ISD dialing facilities as they feel they have no need for it. However, in Calcutta, there is a popular perception (based on some extreme instances of receiving high bills) that having an ISD connection will lead to piracy of telephone lines by unscrupulous persons. As a result, ISD booths continue to be popular and remain a lucrative business.

<sup>23</sup>The unease against consumption and the notion of a subsequent shallow, meaningless society emerging from it, has been reported elsewhere in India (see Van Wessel, 1998). However, the sources of metropolitan *bhadralok* critiques differ from the middle class fears of consumption that Van Wessel reported in the Western Indian state of Gujerat, in that the latter are based on their own perceived essential Indianness. In contrast, discourses informing the views of the metropolitan *bhadralok* largely stem from the traditions of a left intellectual culture prevalent in West Bengal. Within this milieu an emphasis on humanist and internationalist orientations can be found.

Children are imitating a lot from TV. Even in the villages children try to dress and behave like the way it is on TV.

They really do not have any maturity or sense. In comparison with city kids, a lot of village kids are doing bad things like having sexual relations with a boy before marriage and the girls get pregnant and then they have an abortion. This is happening more in the villages nowadays.

While the genteel, more refined, *bhadralok* were not greatly concerned about apasanskriti, or the undesirable influences of mass culture, others were worried about declining morals, particularly among the working class. A typical comment was:

Even those people who come to work for you are wearing fancy clothes and lipstick. They work in domestic service in the daytime, but at night they get dressed up and hang about with boys. You do not recognize them at night-time. These things they have learnt from the television. They did not learn it from books. They have no educational background or awareness that we should not be behaving this way. There is no control at home.

By contrast, the refined *bhadralok* held differing viewpoints on the impact of the global media. They were also a highly educated group. Many were critical of the paternalistic attitudes of self-styled culture gurus. They emphasized that they were tired of those who demeaned others' capacity to select what they wanted to view. Some were keen to stress the positive elements of a globalized mass media:

It is difficult to say what the overall impact of foreign media [will be]. On the cultural front perhaps a little bit; whatever you call it, "mass culture", there is a bit of impact of that on the young. Otherwise I do not see a problem. Information-wise, it is good. Discovery channel is really superb. There is usually a lot of discussion about it afterwards. You see there is always a negative side to everything. It all depends on the viewer. If you just watch the movies, then you gain nothing, but if you scrutinize and have a mix of entertainment and information, then it is fine. As far as small children are concerned, they get hooked on the cartoons. Some kids are fascinated by the Discovery Channel.

We can conclude this section by pointing out that there are contradictory trends emerging in the light of globalization and the influence of a consumer-oriented life promoted by liberalization, and fueled by pre-existing tensions within the metropolitan/provincial cultural divide in Bengali soci-

ety. However, these tensions and differences mainly apply to the older generation. Younger people, in contrast, did not think “Bengali civilization as we know it” has ended simply because of the advent of a globalized mass media and liberalized economy. Some remain more or less ambivalent to cultural change while other youth are critical of certain aspects, such as the sexualized portrayal of women in many advertisements and on many entertainment programs (i.e. music videos).

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Overall, in this paper we have sought to explore, and account for, the varied localized responses to processes of globalization. Due to a paucity of grounded, ethnographic research, we have emphasized the subjective aspects to globalization as experienced by those who are directly in its path — the lower middle class salaried workers. We have shown that, in many respects, globalization is an uneven and sometimes, contradictory process, which stands in contrast to the view that globalization is an homogenizing process.

A number of key findings have emerged from our study. First, although income levels have risen for the lower middle classes, their purchasing power has remained relatively stagnant due to high inflation and high interest rates. Second, there has emerged easier access to credit for this group, yet this has come at the expense of monthly repayments and high interest rates which they feel traps them in the cycle of consumerism and debt. Third, this group has a greater desire to purchase consumer goods but their aspirations are not met due to debt concerns. Fourth, most welcomed the opening-up of the electronic media. However, concerns were raised about not only culturally and morally inappropriate foreign content, but equally they were critical of the unabashed individualism and blatant consumerism of much Indian programming. Finally, a good number of our respondents emphasized the great resilience of Bengali culture to non-Bengali cultural images and influences. Thus, economic liberalization in India has a contradictory effect on the lower middle classes. Despite the greater availability of consumer goods in the market, and improved electronic entertainment and global information, many in the study were skeptical of the social benefits, ambiguous toward the supposed material rewards and government propaganda, and highly suspicious toward the idea that foreign investment will improve infrastructure development in West Bengal.

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