

**Title:** Friendship, Consumption, Morality: Practicing Identity, Negotiating Hierarchy in Middle Class Bangalore

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**More details/abstract:**

This article examines the shared social and cultural practices of a group of young middle-class men in Bangalore. In examining the changes between two generations of Bangalore's labour aristocracy, it highlights the role of friendship in providing a space for the negotiation of hierarchies, both old and new. Core concerns within the text include: the centrality of consumption within middle-class identity; the transient nature of egalitarian youth culture; the impacts of new forms of labour and capital; and the resulting new forms of hierarchy. Where there has been a tendency in wider middle-class discourse to moralize on materialism, practices of consumption and narratives of morality appear here not as mutually exclusive but, in their reference to the social and economic changes associated with Bangalore's role as a commercial and technological hub, as increasingly overlapping.

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**Friendship, Consumption, Morality : Practicing identity,  
negotiating hierarchy in middle class Bangalore**

**Nicholas Nisbett**

## ***Introduction***

A recent review of anthropological research on youth cultures suggests that traditionally, anthropological work on youth has tended to concentrate on the transition from youth to adulthood; the rites of passage and periods of adolescence which result in youth being defined primarily *in relation to* adulthood, or as a set biological stage (Bucholtz 2002). The cultural construction of youth and the existence of youth cultures (as in youth-youth cultural practices) have only recently become the focus of anthropological study – influenced partly by the Birmingham school of cultural studies (*ibid.*), but moving away from the idea of youth culture as a sub-culture of a greater cultural whole. This is not to say that youth cultures, like any cultures, exist in isolation of the societies in which young people are growing up. It is only to say that what young people get up to together and how they experience the world must be taken seriously as an object of anthropological study which is not subsumed into what we see *a priori* as its structuring principles. Following Bourdieu, we could say that one's *habitus* as a young person is derived from one's family and upbringing in a particular society, but then acts as a generative set of principles upon which quite different social and cultural forms can be subsequently produced (Bourdieu, 1990:53, see also Harker et al., 1990:12).

Within South Asian media representations and, to a lesser extent, anthropology, young people are receiving an increasing amount of attention. The 'discovery' of youth culture has coincided with new possibilities for production and consumption brought by economic liberalisation. Young people, often the most

visible aspirants to a new middle class consumerist lifestyle, are seen to embody the hopes and desires of the sub-continent, as they struggle to obtain the requisite consumer products and enter the new forms of labour which enable this consumption (and the associated symbolic capital - cf. Freeman 2000). The way in which youth are seen at the heart of the consumerist project is aptly illustrated by William Mazzarella's (2003) work with Bombay advertising agencies, for example, in which global and national advertising agencies work to project an image of the global consumer onto Indian youth (an only partly successful venture which reveals the ways in which Indian youth remain agents in their own imagining – *ibid.*230-242).

Mark Liechty has gone so far as to label his young informants in Kathmandu as a “*vanguard* of an emerging middle-class consumer culture” (2003:37). For Liechty, the emergence of a distinctive youth culture, is “not simply a by-product of a larger middle class cultural project; it is in fact the constantly honed tip of the wedge that opens up the cultural space of middleness and constitutes the middle class as a domain of consumerism and consumer subjectivity.... Constituting youth as consumers is the same as constituting middle-class subjects: producing “youth” *is* producing the middle class” (*ibid.*).

Current debates within the anthropology of the Indian middle classes have begun to question the central role accorded to practices of consumption within the self-definition of the middle classes (Van Wessel 2004), and by implication, the idea of a youth vanguard leading the way in defining middle classes identity via their practices of consumption. The centrality of consumption within post-liberalisation

images of the middle class (Fernandes 2000) has perhaps led us to disregard the central role of morality in middle-class identity, writes Van Wessel (*ibid.*), whose middle class informants in Baroda moralise specifically against the flagrant materialism which has become the hallmark of the consuming classes, just as they participate in it themselves.

This paper explores these concerns of middle class identity, consumption and youth culture by drawing on fieldwork with a group of young, middle class male friends in Bangalore. An industrial and commercial city of around six million people in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, Bangalore has aroused a great deal of global attention due to its position as a key global hub in the networks of capital, skilled and unskilled labour, ideas and technology, which form the IT industry in India. As a city whose image seems to embody the optimistic modernity of 'India Shining' (the narrative of neo-liberal high-tech growth espoused by the BJP in their 2004 election campaign), it makes for a good starting point for those wishing to interrogate the norms and practices of the newly assertive middle classes and those young people for whom the promises of India Shining seem tantalisingly within reach.

Bangalore's role as an industrial and hi-tech capital of software production and outsourced employment is never far from middle class strategies of identification and social reproduction – yet this paper is not so much about IT culture and the struggle to find a job, as a middle class youth culture in which the capital derived from a software or BPO job<sup>1</sup> is ever present.

The fieldwork referred to here took place in Bangalore between November 2001 and November 2002, December 2004 and December 2005-January 2006 and began with the rather broad intention of investigating the social and economic impacts of ICT use, IT knowledge and IT employment. As part of this strategy, I started exploring cybercafés around the north and centre of the city, as spaces of access to the internet which I presumed would be used by the wider middle classes. In one cybercafé, I met a group of friendly young men who spent their days hanging out there, who were happy to have me hang around myself and conduct fieldwork. The cybercafé was one of several which cater to a mixture of local residents, college students, school children and passing workers in an area I have called Lakshminagar<sup>2</sup>: a suburb of Northern Bangalore forming a border between the old British cantonment and the new areas that have quickly grown up to the north of the city in the post-independence decades. The fieldwork here quite quickly transformed into an ethnography based on this group of young male friends from a variety of locales around North Bangalore, rather than an ethnography of the cybercafé itself. These wider lives of these middle class men, their forays into the worlds of consumption, drinking, dating, internet chatting and IT training and employment, became the central focus of my research.

It is worth pointing out that a focus on friendship carries its own set of concerns and ethnographic limitations. The vast majority of my time was spent hanging out with this friendship group on their own terms and in their own time, rather than a more traditional study of the various communities from which they were drawn. But this experience does tally well with comparative work on youth cultures – a youth existence defined partly by its existence as set apart from the spheres of

family and work, is not unusual (e.g. Corrigan 1979, Chambers et al 1998:7, Ruddick 1998:343, Chopra 2004, Osella & Osella 1998). This may partly explain why youth friendship has been a neglected area of study within South Asian anthropology, subsumed under more pressing concerns of caste, kinship and community (Froerer 2006). This paper follows existing work on masculine friendship in examining the ways in which the culture of youth friendship traverses these other societal structures. To return to the theoretical concerns with youth cultures, youth friendship practices are examined here as both generated by and *generative of* the urban middle class culture of Bangalore.

## ***North Bangalore's Middle Classes***

Mark Holmström (1976) worked amongst the public and private sectors of Bangalore's 'hi-tech' industries in the 1970s. His informants, considered in the literature as a 'labour aristocracy' or an 'industrial elite' (ibid.:4, Breman 1999:28), could well have been the fathers of many of my informants, who were similarly employed in these public and private factory settings in and around the old cantonment areas of North Bangalore. Bangalore's entry into the software and BPO sectors have certainly brought about changes in the lives of my informants and their families, but when comparing housing situations, levels of consumption and even educational strategies for mobility and reproduction, there are some key continuities between these two generations of North Bangalore's (industrial) middle classes.

Bangalore has long been a twin city, centred either on the old trading hub of the *Pete* (City) or the British built lines of the cantonment. These quite distinct areas attracted different populations – with the non-British areas of the cantonment drawing in a large number of rural migrants from nearby Tamil-Nadu to work in the military installations and related trades. Bangalore's story has continued to be linked to this trading and military role in the post-independence era, but has added a number of both informal and formal industries, the latter of which have benefited from the location in Bangalore of a number of prestigious research and scientific institutions. Whilst the latest entrants to this industrial mix, the software and BPO industries, have helped give Bangalore its global and national fame; the continuing role of the older industries, particularly textiles, must be emphasised in



providing employment for the vast majority of the formally and informally employed (Benjamin 2000:40, Heitzman 2004:175).

My informants' fathers' occupations centred mainly on the public and private industries in North and East Bangalore with military contracts such as Hindustan Aeronautics Limited or Bharat Electronics Limited. Other fathers not employed either directly or indirectly by the military, were working for large employers such as ITC (Tobacco & now several other sectors) and BSNL (the state telecom operator). Two fathers ran their own businesses; one was the cybercafé owner and the other was a tailor. One father was an 'auto' (rickshaw) driver. One of the mothers had previously worked at a pharmaceutical company, and none of the other mothers had been formally employed.

These young men were generally not following their fathers into the same occupations and companies, though this was not because of any strategy of wanting to escape their family backgrounds. Some had made repeated attempts to gain entry into their fathers' companies, but in the cuts associated with the era of liberalisation, many of these companies were not recruiting. David's father, who now owned the cybercafé, had even been made redundant from the large electrical company he worked for. Companies which *were* recruiting, especially the big public sector companies, were attracting considerable competition for places. Even having a relative on the inside of the company and the payment of a large bribe are no guarantee of getting one a job, despite popular discourse to the contrary (see Parry 2000); only one of the group of friends had succeeded in following his father into one of these companies. The advent of the software and

BPO industries, the large number of software jobs which were created around the millennium to fix the 'Y2K bug' and the ease of finding BPO jobs in the years after, had combined with this slow labour market in other fields to turn my informants away from the occupations of their fathers to these new and promising fields.

There *has* been a change in the educational qualifications between the generations, with the current generation being more likely to hold degrees, particularly in the high status subject of engineering. One could argue, however, that some trends today are a continuation of the qualification inflation begun in the 1970s (Holmström 1976:39). My informants were all English-medium educated to at least 10<sup>th</sup> standard (16+), the majority of them had obtained their pre-university certificate (18+) and over half of them were graduates (mostly in engineering). All of them had taken software courses or hardware courses at private tuition centres in the previous two to three years. My informants' fathers, on the other hand, like Holmström's informants, were generally not graduates. In fact, in all but one or two cases, these young men were the first generation of their families to have received a university education. But many of their fathers had a technical diploma of some sort - and Holmström similarly writes of the existence of many "private institutes" alongside the government run industrial training institutes (ITIs), who would "prepare fee-paying students for similar certificates [to the ITIs] or diplomas and for qualifications in textile technology, automobile engineering, typing, shorthand etc" (1976.:10). As with the IT institutes today, these private industrial institutes led to a over-supply in technically trained workers and an inflation in entry level requirements for basic jobs - an SSLC pass

(Secondary School Leaving Certificate) required for nearly any factory and a preference for "men fresh from training institutes, with a diploma or certificate" for skilled jobs<sup>3</sup> (ibid.:39). In today's climate, the SSLC pass has inflated to a degree and it helps that the certificate or diploma is from a recognised IT training provider. But in other respects this is a similar strategy of educational mobility. The change, then, is only in the qualification inflation and the particular skill set required for the new industries.

Housing situations have in all but one or two cases not changed a great deal since Holmström described "[t]he typical factory worker's apartment":

a two room apartment, with floors of polished red concrete, electric light, sometimes a separate tap and lavatory, but often sharing with a few other families - of mixed caste, language and religion - living on the same courtyard. Almost every house has a radio; usually a chair or two, though meals are eaten on the floor; sometimes beds; and sometimes an electric fan, a sewing machine, a cooker using bottled gas, and other modern appliances. There is not much room or privacy: accommodation is plain and clean, the neighbourhood generally healthy and peaceful - certainly not a slum

ibid.:74

One or two families had moved out to more spacious, three room (two bedrooms and a hall) houses in planned developments near the ring road, but for the majority, especially those living in industrial worker's colonies or older parts of

Bangalore such as Shivaji Nagar, this two room description is still the norm, with the addition perhaps of a lavatory or bathroom. The changes have occurred in the levels of consumption to which families have access – aided, in part, by the access to capital and, importantly, credit, gained by their sons and daughters working in the software and BPO sectors (which I detail below). The collection of durable goods detailed by Hölmstrom has therefore increased and will now include the addition of any or all of: TVs; stereos playing VCDs; tables and chairs; telephones; refrigerators; scooters; motorbike and, (in one case only), a PC.

Holmström's description here of 'sharing with other families – of mixed caste, language and religion' is important, as it reveals even in the 1970s a willingness to mix amongst Bangalore's industrial workers. My informants were mainly second or third generation migrants to Bangalore from rural areas in Tamil Nadu (one family from rural Karnataka) – the group was thus largely Tamil and came from low to mid-ranking groups including both Christians and Hindus; the latter of either Mudaliar or scheduled caste background. As I will go on to describe below – this willingness to mix was prevalent not only in the composition of the friendship group at the cybercafé, but in their attitude towards the hierarchy of caste – explicitly denied, followed openly only within family marriage practices and in their attitude towards the upper castes and the elites. Caste or religion were not becoming irrelevant to these young men's lives, but then neither were they the primary structuring principles. Caste, religion and family background fed into wider hierarchies of capital within Bangalore which were experienced (at this stage of these young men's lives) within the context of the friendship group and the peer-group practices which I go on to examine in the rest of this paper.

## ***Shared friendship practices in the formation of middle class masculinity***

### ***Shared time and space – ‘timepass’***

Whether in an Indian or a global setting, it is not unusual for groups of friends, particularly young men such as my informants, to be found hanging around internet cafés, socialising with each other just as much as they are spending time online (Wakeford 1999, Miller and Slater 2000:72-75, Odero 2003). In India, young relatives are often employed to look after a cybercafé for their fathers or uncles, matching the financial capital of their elders with the cultural capital of their IT knowledge and expertise<sup>4</sup>. David, then, was employed to run his father’s cybercafé and was helped throughout the day by his friends. This gave his group of friends access to a non-elite public space where they could hang out away from the parental gaze. Whilst time spent online was certainly an important part of their lives, especially for the internet-mediated courtship which filled much of their time (ibid.), it is the ‘offline’ activities that I focus on here, which played an equally important role in the formation of middle class masculinity within an all-male peer group.

In 2001, this group of friends had all finished their education, but many of them had yet to find employment and none of them were married. Without work or conjugal responsibilities they were left with a lot of time on their hands to engage in ‘timepass’ (simply killing time) (c.f. Osella & Osella 1998:191). A typical day of timepass, for example, is illustrated in the daily routine of Karan, a 26 year old

Tamilian engineering graduate, who, in 2001, was yet to find a job, and spent most of his days at the cybercafé with his friends.

Karan and his family, second generation migrants descended from a rural *Mudaliar* family, had been living for around three years in a spacious three room house (two bedrooms, a 'hall', a small kitchen and bathroom), in a new 'layout'<sup>5</sup> on the border of the new ring road. Karan's father would leave each morning for his job as a 'line inspector' in a large government electrical firm, whilst Karan's sister, having just obtained a job in a call centre, would be arriving back from work when Karan got up in the morning, usually quite late. His mother would have breakfast prepared for him which he would sit and eat whilst watching music and film TV channels (either Tamil film channels or the English language MTV and Channel V). He would spend most of the morning at home, perhaps going out to run an errand for his mother. After lunch he would drive down to the cybercafé on his family's old Bajaj scooter, usually arriving just after David, who would be taking over the running of the business that day from his father. Over the course of the afternoon, a core group of four or five friends would be hanging around outside drinking tea and chatting, one or two would be inside browsing and other friends, and friends of friends, would show up to visit, browse, chat and smoke. Whilst browsing, emailing and chatting online took up a large amount of time, (particularly for Karan – see Nisbett 2006:133-141), probably more of the group's time was spent outside: chatting, smoking, drinking tea, fooling around, playfighting and lounging about with their arms around each other. Sometimes they would stay on into the late evening, after David's father had returned, but on many evenings they would go and meet up with others returning from work, at a

small *hotel* (snack bar) on the edge of Shivaji Nagar, where they would continue to smoke, drink tea and coffee, and maybe have a *dosai* or a *vadai*, before going home to their parents for dinner.

Time spent with families, then, was mainly limited to mornings and evening mealtimes. The majority of their time was spent in the company of friends, either throughout the day or, in the case of those who worked, at evenings or weekends. They would rarely hang out with their friends at home, usually just going round to pick them up or drop them off on the way to the cybercafe. They were living much as the young men of the Malayali "*college culture*" described by the Osellas, where "in the absence of external structures or validation for their passage towards manhood, the boys turn inwards to the peer group" (1998:191). In both the Keralan and Bangalorean contexts, peer group activities are a primary outlet for the performance of masculinity outside of the family environment, or other "external structures" such as school, work and the state (ibid.).

### ***Shared consumption and 'treating'***

Alongside the time and space they shared together, members of the group were expected to share possessions and capital, as well as spend time in shared consumption of food, tea, cigarettes and alcohol. Rounds of tea and cigarettes would be bought at the cybercafé from the local tea stall – not necessarily in order, but by whoever had the money at the time. Clothes and watches would be swapped on an almost permanent basis and more treasured possessions, such as the newly acquired motorbikes and mobile phones (see below), would be

borrowed from day to day as friends required (again, closely echoing the situation in Kerala described by Osella & Osella 1998:191).

This kind of group egalitarian spirit is often understood as an important constitutional element in the practice of male friendship. It accords with comparative work on friendship and egalitarian ideals, where it is implicitly acknowledged that:

inequality, understood here as differences in material means and often as well in social status, will fundamentally harm a voluntary relationship built strongly on affection, loyalty, intimacy and mutual support.

Barcellos Rezende 1991:80

It is in the sharing of time, food and drink that such differences are most explicitly rejected (see e.g. *ibid.*, Papataxiarchis 1991:17, Vale de Almeida 1996:53, Osella & Osella 1998:191). This rejection of hierarchy is particularly important in the Indian context - performed explicitly in public by the coming together of groups of friends from different castes and communities. The sharing of foods, cigarettes and drinks at the cybercafé, where a cigarette, for example, will be passed from the mouth of one friend to another, further underlines this rejection of exterior societal norms of hierarchy and ideas surrounding polluting substances passed through the sharing of food.

The group egalitarian ethos was most apparent in the practice of *treating*, which occurred when one of the friends had sudden access to money, such as on finding



a new job or on the occasion of a birthday or some other good news. It could apply to food and soft drinks, but more often than not, it would mean an afternoon or an evening's drinking in a local bar, restaurant or *dhaba* (the latter, a kind of pubjabi roadside restaurant found all over India, would not serve alcohol, but waiters can usually be sent to buy liquor and beer from a local 'wine shop').

As Vale de Almeida has remarked: such alcohol-fuelled shared company is a key factor in the performance of masculinity, allowing men to talk together in a 'non-responsible, non-accountable way', where '[a]lcohol can allow for and stimulate sentimentality' and allow men to exhibit 'emotions normally classified as feminine, such as love, charity, pity, compassion and nostalgia' (1996:53). In this case the social space created in the bar or *dhaba* and by the shared consumption of alcohol enabled a range of emotions and sentiments to be shared between the friends – from problems with girlfriends, to those of family, jobs and money.

Occasionally, as happened on one occasion during my fieldwork, the group would all go off together on a 'booze-trip'; escaping the family environs for a weekend on an excursion to a local beauty spot, staying in a cheap hostel and spending a lot of money on alcohol. Again, here they were participating in another key facet of middle class youth or 'college culture'. Visiting local tourist destinations such as Nandi Hills, Hogenekal or going further afield to Goa and Kerala, one can often see similar groups of young men engaged on such a 'trip' (see Osella & Osella 2002:121). In this respect, they are sharing in the practice of their more elite counterparts, such as the young men depicted in the popular Hindi film *Dil*

*Chatha Hai*, who escape the responsibilities of the city for a period of partying and chasing women in a lush Goan resort.

***The impact of new capital on shared styles of consumption***

Emulation of the Bombay or Chennai elite's 'college culture films has been made easier by the availability of capital in Bangalore since the growth of the software and BPO sectors. When I arrived in 2002, only one or two of the group of friends had managed to find jobs within Bangalore's software and BPO sectors. By the time I left and when I first returned in December 2004, many of the core group of friends and members of their extended friendship network had found work in these industries (mainly in data processing/inputting, one or two in call centres and one in software production). The difference that such jobs made purely in terms of material wellbeing for themselves and their families, and the related possibilities for both individual and group consumption, became readily observable.

The wages alone were considerable. Data processing jobs, at the bottom of the IT hierarchy, would pay between 8,000 to 10,000 rupees / month. In one case, this was to double a family's income, whilst in another, it more than quadrupled it. Whilst many families were thus provided with financial security by their son's (and in many cases, daughter's) access to these new jobs, the extent to which families came to depend on these salaries varied. David's father, for example, the cybercafé owner, told me that he hadn't expected David to contribute to the household expenses when he left his job at the cybercafé in 2004, to work in a technical support post in a call centre, earning around 12,000rs / month. His father

pointed out that most of David's income was in fact going towards paying off his multiple vehicle loans: an 80,000rs Bajaj Pulsar (advertised as 'definitely male') and a 200,000rs Hyundai Santro.

Excess income in families who didn't need the money was thus responsible for money filtering firstly to the individual and then to the friendship group. The transformation in the consumption styles and general demeanours of both individuals and the group more widely was therefore considerable. Such transformations are probably best exemplified by one of the friends who was one of the first to gain a job in a data processing BPO company: a 24 year old Tamil man named Vikki.

Vikki's grandfather had originally come to Bangalore to stitch uniforms for the British army. One of Vikki's paternal uncles found employment in Hindu Aeronautics LTD (HAL) and the other as an auto driver, whilst Vikki's father got a job in the army, as an electrician. Vikki's father had passed away two years prior to my initial fieldwork, leaving Vikki, his mother, brother and sister to fend for themselves on an army pension of 3,500rs. His brother managed to find employment with his mother's brother, who worked in a Maruti car showroom and the family let out their two storey house to tenants, moving into a '*sheet house*' (corrugated iron roofing) to save money. The combined income from the two floors of the house (1000rs each), the pension and Vikki's brother's work (4,500rs) added up to 9,500rs. Vikki's job in data processing was to boost this income by a further 8,500rs, thus nearly doubling it.

I had met Vikki on one of my first visits to the cybercafé. He had been lolling around outside, smoking a cigarette. His friends told me that he wouldn't take part in the questionnaire I was using at the beginning of my research, as he didn't use the internet. 'This guy', they said, 'only smokes and boozes'. The next time I saw him, however, he had secured his job at the BPO company. He turned up on his brand new 100cc Yamaha motorbike, only two days old, wearing a new shirt, new trousers and a new mobile phone attached to a fake *Tommy Hilfiger* belt. No longer the joker, even his poise seemed to have changed as he watched his friends admire his new bike - '*better mileage than the Splendour*', I was proudly informed. His friends were later able to recite exactly how much each of these items had cost; the phone, for example: 6700rs, the trousers: 300rs.

Much later in my fieldwork I was to go with Vikki to the office of a loan company, a subsidiary of the multinational GE Loans, to pay the final instalment on a loan for a 26" colour TV that he had taken out when he started his job. He told me that his motorbike had also been acquired through a loan at the same time. For someone like Vikki, then, his data-processing salary means that consumption is opened up on two levels : the capital he receives in his salary; and the capital that becomes accessible to him in the form of bank accounts, credit cards and loans as a member of the salaried class.

But the benefits of someone finding a job in the IT related sectors were not just limited to the individual. Because of the way in which styles and goods are circulated amongst peers, the group as a whole was able to gain access to the possibilities for consumption enabled by IT jobs. Vikki and others' early

employment in these new industries allowed their friends to assume the look of the newly IT-employed even before the majority had found jobs in these sectors. Whilst those without access to money were not able to purchase items directly for themselves, the sharing of such items within the group enabled them a part in the creation of the embodied image of the young Bangalorean IT worker. Friends gaining early access to such opportunities were therefore only to increase the aspirational stakes to participate within these new middle class spheres of production and consumption, which formed part of the hype surrounding the IT and outsourcing industries in Bangalore.

The motorbikes and the mobile phones, conspicuous items of consumption reflecting the rapidly growing markets of post-liberalised middle class India, are on proud display on the bodies of young middle class people, not only in Bangalore, but amongst middle class people throughout India and South Asia. Geert De Neve's informants in Tamil Nadu's textile industry employ similar props in their performance as modern men and upwardly mobile factory owners (2004), whilst in Lahore, "a good car, a cellular phone, western style shades" (Walle, 2004:104) are the expectations of conspicuous consumption to which the successful family man must aspire. The experience of this group of friends in Bangalore, would appear to show that *direct* access to the means of capital which enable this consumption, is not necessary to participate within it.

## ***Shared moral discourses in middle class identity***

### **Consumption or morality in middle class identity?**

The extent to which shared access to capital and consumption was part of these young men's lives resonates with much of the recent work on the Indian and wider south Asian middle classes which stresses the role which consumption has come to play in the post-liberalisation era (Osella & Osella 2000, Fernandes 2000, Liechty 2003, Mazzarella 2003). But this appears to make for a contentious comparison with Van Wessel's middle class informants in Baroda, who explicitly reject the centrality of consumption and moralise against the new consuming or materialistic ethos (despite their remarkable propensity to acquire all of the 'essential' items of a middle class household - 2004:95-96). However, the fact that Bangalore's youth go in for particularly flagrant and visible forms of consumption when compared to Van Wessel's middle class typically older informants should be no more surprising than the fact that London's urban youth sport flash mobile phones and expensive trainers whilst middle class ladies from Cheltenham<sup>1</sup> do not. Consumption in either case is an embodied marker of status – whether in the addition or the lack of a mobile phone, Nike trainers, a Sari and gold jewellery, or a twinset and pearls. The established middle classes are always more likely to moralise against the materialistic urges of the newly-moneyed – and there is certainly a lot of new money circulating amongst the liberalisation era Indian middle classes.

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<sup>1</sup> A 'respectable' and wealthy English town.

Speaking to those at the top of the IT elite about the changes occurring in India, one of the most common anecdotes would be about how someone's driver, cook or maid has suddenly acquired a mobile phone. There is a dual discourse articulated here – the marvel and pride that *these people*, could have acquired something so symbolic of India's (assumed) hi-tech future, mixed with the disquiet that they have rapidly caught up in a high tech sphere considered the preserve of the elite. Van Wessel's real contribution to the debate on the middle classes is not, then, to question the centrality of consumption in middle class distinction, but to underline the importance of shared moral narratives, which a focus on the practice of consumption alone may miss.

Shared moral values amongst my informants were revealing of the relational nature of middle class status (Caplan 1987) and give an indication of middle class orientations towards the poor and the elite which, because of the deliberately self-referential nature of their peergroup centred lives, I was not able to witness in terms of daily contact with other social groups. The three areas in which my informants explicitly moralised together, then, were in relation to 'girls', work and, as I wrote above, drink.

### ***Moralising gender***

I have written elsewhere of the way in which gender relations were of key import in the formation of these young men's masculinity, as part of their friendship practices, and in their structuring role of both online and offline space (Nisbett 2006:131-142). None of the young men were married in 2002, but discourses about the young women / 'girls' they were dating, however, were a key way in

which both gender and class relations were articulated. Karan, for example, moralised against the actions of the kinds of scantily dressed ‘high class girls’ that one would see entering the bars, pubs and clubs of the city centre, telling me that they were all ‘call girls’. He and his friends would similarly joke about the status of girls working in call centres, playing on the words ‘call girl’ and ‘call centre girl’. When I went with Karan on a date to meet some young women from an elite Bangalore girls school, in his subsequent narrative of the date, he was quick to dismiss them as ‘dirty girls’ and tell me that the school had a reputation for ‘girls who would have many boyfriends’ (incidentally, his choice of venue for this date, one of a new breed of trendy coffeeshops dotted around India’s metropolitan centres, was at the same time revealing of the intersection of gender and class status in courtship practices.

### ***Moralising ‘booze’***

The group’s views on the consumption of alcohol and their choice of location to go *boozing* involved a similar narrative of middle class status. They tended to shy away from the pubs and bars frequented by the IT elites in the centre of Bangalore, as they were still too expensive to frequent on a regular basis. They found the local bars, restaurants and *dhabas* both more affordable and more welcoming. Below these, however, would be another level of drinking dens – from roadside liquor and arrack stalls to less salubrious backroom bars in poorer areas, which were clearly off-limits to this group of men with middle class moral sensibilities.



Once, whilst staying with Karan's grandmother in Chennai, I took him to a backroom bar I had previously visited (with a fellow anthropologist) near to Marine beach. As the following passage from my fieldnotes reveals, Karan was quick to assess this as quite the wrong sort of place:

Karan took one look inside and decided that he didn't want to be there. It was a room above a wine shop, no sign for a bar. Inside there were tables, chairs, beer [spilt] on the floor and food [dropped] on the seats. The crowd was also a fairly noisy one. Karan said outside that this was not a good place to go to, that these people were not good people and would be talking erotic [vulgar] Tamil, that would rub off on him. He said he could find us a better place.

Attitudes towards alcohol more generally, however, were morally ambiguous.

Public consumption of alcohol is frowned upon in many Indian middle class families, but it seems to be implicitly accepted by many families that adult males will engage in this practice. In this context, as the young men were not married and not yet householders, their parents would have frowned upon their consumption of alcohol and their *boozing* was therefore an activity they kept to themselves. As a result, *Boozing* would occur generally in the afternoon and evenings – most of the group were expected to be home for dinner between 9 and 10 at night. They would not talk openly about arranging to go *boozing* on the phone at home – the cybercafé was thus an ideal place to meet and arrange such trips.

*Boozing*, however, is a more acceptable activity amongst Bangalore's middle classes than it is in say Chennai, where many of the cybercafé group had relatives and where drinking is restricted to darkened 'permit rooms' and backroom bars

such as those described above. Bangalore's reputation for pubs, trendy bars and clubs forms part of its cosmopolitan middle class image and drinking a beer is as much a part of the middle class image as owning a flash new motorbike or a car. In taking part in *boozing*, my informants were thus weighing the stricter middle class morals of their parents' generation and the more visible display of middle class alcohol consumption on view in Bangalore's more elite middle class public spaces.

As slightly illicit behaviour, discouraged, if not forbidden, by their parents, their shared participation in this activity was also further fortifying of the *fellow feeling* (Loizos & Papataxiarchis 1991:17) of their middle class masculine friendship. This again draws parallels with other work on other middle class youth in South Asia – such as Walle's work with young men in Lahore, Pakistan, where “[a] man gains prestige by breaking certain social, juridical and religious norms, but this becomes relevant only in male-male social relations” (ibid.100-101). Walle contrasts the importance of drinking as a disapproved of, but quite public display of masculinity described in Greek ethnography, with the secretive nature of illicit masculinity in Pakistan, acted out in private amongst friends. As in Lahore, the cybercafé friends kept their illicit activities (smoking, drinking, women) within the arena of friendship, knowing, however, that performance of such activities would bring them prestige amongst their peers.

### ***Moralising work***

Whilst these moral values would not all have been shared with their parents', it is in their attitude to work and their employment status where they were most in line

with their parent's moral outlook. As in many middle class contexts (Caplan 1987, Varma 1998, Das 2002, De Neve 2006), shared values based upon education and hard work were seen as definitive of middle class status amongst my informants, who would talk about struggling against their middle class backgrounds, to succeed against the odds, without falling down into the mire of poverty below, or through resorting to the dubious morals of the elite, above. This came out clearly in my discussions with several of them as to why they had settled for jobs in data processing centres rather than the software production in which many were trained, emphasising that coming from middle class families, they had to make the most of the opportunities presented to them. Vikki, for example, explained that he had taken a job below his qualifications because of his 'family background'; after having worked hard for a computing degree and studying a programming language at a local IT institute:

*Actually, after finishing my graduation, many of my friends gave me suggestions that you do some courses in this institute, you do Java, Java is good actually, so you may get a job, so I started doing Java. Once I finished Java, the field was very down, and they were looking out for 2 years, two and a half years experience people... ok? I had no experience, so I tried to keep on trying as a fresher, no-one gave me a job. So I started out, I needed a job, that's all, whether it's IT or anything, I needed a job because of my family background. So I joined this company.*

### ***Hierarchy revisited***

Vikki's linking of the need for a lower-status BPO job because of his 'family-background' is revealing of a new hierarchy that was beginning to emerge within the software and BPO industries in Bangalore and slowly starting to assert itself

amongst this group of friends. The challenges this provokes to an egalitarian friendship structure returns us to those earlier debates regarding friendship and hierarchy and the transient nature of many youth friendship practices.

According to the Osellas, the transgression of societal norms of hierarchy and gender within male friendship practices in Kerala are “*highly temporary, limited and idealised*” (Osella & Osella 1998:202, my emphasis). One reason for this is that the “...subversion [of hierarchy] often takes place within frameworks which may leave underlying principles tacit or unexamined or allow them to creep back in” (ibid.:202).

Important in the Keralan context is the way in which teasing works as a negotiation of hierarchy amongst young friends and between the sexes (1998:197 - contrasting with previous arguments treating teasing as a means of reinforcing hegemony). This was also the case in Bangalore. Scheduled caste and dark-skinned Ravi was constantly teased about his skin colour, whilst Mudaliar caste Karan was sometimes referred to as ‘LG’, meaning ‘loose *gowda*’ – a reference to his tendency to fly off in a rage like a rural landowner. More often than not, however, teasing would revolve around people’s possessions and wealth. Karan’s family may have been wealthier than most, but he was mocked for his family’s ancient Bajaj scooter. Another friend, Richard, may have had been the only one to gain access to a government job in a military firm, but he was teased about his tiny one room family house (which slept four) in Shivaji Nagar.

Whilst the egalitarian period of friendship was not to last unbroken for this group of young friends in Bangalore, there are, however, some key differences between their Keralan counterparts and themselves. The Osellas describe, for example, an incident where one young (high status Nayar) friend refuses to enter another (low status Izhava) friend's house to take water, even though his mouth is filled with petrol after siphoning some from another motorcycle (Osella & Osella 2000:230). This was not the case with the Bangalore friends, who would not only share cigarettes, food and alcohol in public, but who would be invited into each others' houses at times of ritual celebration. A mixed group comprising myself, two Christians, one Mudaliar and one scheduled caste member of the group were invited, for example, on the occasion of the Ganesh festival to take *prasad* in the house of Karan, himself a Mudaliar. They were served by Karan and his mother. This same group of friends would talk about going to eat at the house of Ravi, another scheduled caste friend, whose mother was the 'queen of non-veg. cooking'.

But whilst teasing revolving around caste status was never allowed to progress to explicit caste discrimination as it did in the Malayali example, it was hierarchy with regard to employment and income which was eventually to end the cycle of treating and sharing between the group members, and with it the friendship group.

On returning to Bangalore briefly in December 2004 and then again in December 2005/January 2006, I was surprised to find that the group had split quite acrimoniously. Initially, the split had been between those who were and weren't gaining access to Bangalore's new employment opportunities in software and

BPO. A group of those who had found employment in a data processing centre began to meet more regularly to go *boozing* together. When I arrived in December 2004, this group had already begun to form a separate friendship group from the others. Even when their friends had caught up with them in data-processing or call centre jobs, many of this new group had found themselves advancing further up the IT/BPO hierarchy – from low level data processing and call centre jobs, to better paid, higher status jobs with software services companies. Much lower down the employment hierarchy from the coveted multinational IT jobs, they were still sufficiently advanced to give some members of this group access to salaries of 20-25,000 rs and upwards. Members of the original group with lower paid data entry jobs and jobs in other industries (including, for example, one working in a products design firm, another in his uncle's air freight company) were simply unable to keep up. Resentment followed, with those left behind complaining that their friends 'thought too much of themselves' now they had these 'big jobs'.

Such feelings reveal that new hierarchies are appearing within the new sectors of Bangalore's economy which do not draw primarily on the distinction of caste or community. Whilst there may be convincing arguments why the upper ends of the industry are dominated by older elites drawn from the higher castes, this did not appear to be the case amongst my Bangalore friends at the lower ends. Those gaining the better jobs in software companies included Christian, Scheduled caste and Mudaliar members – and likewise those friends who felt they had been left behind. Hierarchical distinctions were occurring instead between those employed in companies which are ranked according to software and non-software, voice or

data, technical contact or customer service, multinational and national, foreign client or Indian clients. Such new hierarchies form part of a wider project of distinction being undertaken by Bangalore's middle classes, where access to the new opportunities afforded by the software and BPO industries has become an important component of social distinction.

## **Conclusion**

This paper began with the assertion that young people have been neglected within South Asian anthropology perhaps because it is assumed that youth cultural practices are generated by much stronger norms present in wider society. One of the objectives here has been to argue that we must consider youth cultural practices as both *generated by* and *generative of* middle class culture and not only structured by wider concerns within south Asian scholarship of (for example) caste, class and kinship.

This has not been to argue for some form of radical separation occurring between one generation and the next, or even, as Mark Liechty would have it, that young people can be seen as a kind of middle class cultural vanguard (2003:37). This research has highlighted some clear continuities between this generation of IT aspirants and their fathers' generation of formal sector workers (Holmström 1976). Both sons and fathers, for example, aspire(d) to increase their educational capital in order to find a salaried job and both resort(ed) to an ever-growing number of private institutes as the means by which to achieve this. Similarly, the kinds of mixed community friendships examined here would not have been out of place in the mixed industrial communities of the 1970s (Holmström 1976), where wider hierarchies were already somewhat collapsed, though not, of course, completely dissolved (*ibid.*).

The cybercafé friends experienced and negotiated these hierarchies within the space of the friendship group and the shared time, space and practices that this



entailed. Whilst these shared practices were often an explicit rejection of the more established hierarchies of caste and community, the friendship group over time had also to adopt and adapt to the social stratification resulting from new forms of hi-tech labour in Bangalore and the ensuing but differential access to capital. Where B eteille is correct in stressing the family as one of the critical spaces in which social reproduction occurs (1991:16), this should not lead us to neglect another social sphere which is similarly nurturing of social reproduction. The friendship group, however temporal, is a well established sphere for the negotiation of identity and status amongst the middle class youth examined here.

The central themes of this article have thus revolved around this transitory but important role played by friendship in creating a space for the key practices that are generative of middle class identity, namely: the circulation of capital (material, cultural and symbolic); the articulation of moral discourse; and the negotiation of hierarchy. Practices of consumption and narratives of middle class morality appear not so much as mutually exclusive but, in their reference to the social and economic changes associated with Bangalore's role as a commercial and technological hub, increasingly overlapping.

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## **Note on Contributor**

Nicholas Nisbett's doctoral research at the University of Sussex was concerned with the impacts of internet use and IT related employment amongst middle class men in Bangalore. He is a Visiting Research Fellow in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sussex.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> 'Software and BPO' are used as a rather general way of referring to the range of opportunities on offer in Bangalore's IT sector - which range from high level software development, to software services, to call centre contact handling, to data processing and so on. For a full history of the development of the Indian IT industry, see Athreye (2003).

<sup>2</sup> A pseudonym, as are the names of my informants in this paper. Other place names are real.

<sup>3</sup> Although Holmström writes that an "SSLC failure" was acceptable in some circumstances as "it shows that the students stayed the course until the examination, which is something of a lottery anyway" (ibid.:38).

<sup>4</sup> See Curtain (2002) for more on this within the policy literature.

<sup>5</sup> The Bangalore Development Authority purchases new land for development and provides basic infrastructure, leaving people who acquire particular plots in these new 'layouts' to build their own properties. These plots are generally very hard to get hold of.