



Anjali's Prospects: Class Mobility in Urban India

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In 1985, I took my first research trip to Madurai, a large city in southern India. After moving into an apartment in a downtown neighborhood, I started walking through the nearby streets, wondering how I would ever get to know my neighbors. In this densely built part of the city, brick and plaster houses are constructed wall-to-wall, and doors open right onto the street. Through those doors, I could sometimes glimpse passageways that led back to other homes. Late one afternoon, in front of such an entryway, I saw a group of children playing. A small boy and girl called me over, and all the children crowded around asking me to take their picture. The mother of the boy and girl heard the clamor, looked out, and invited me in. I followed her into their one-room house, which was long and narrow and ran along the street. There were several similar homes in the compound, all linked by a single roof, adjoining walls, and a central courtyard.

Anjali and Kumar, the two children, turned out to be seven and five years old. Their father was out working that day, driving a cycle rickshaw, and their three older siblings were still on their way home from school. From that day on, over the next fifteen months, Anjali and Kumar taught me Tamil proverbs and stick games and movie plots, and were delightful companions. We have remained close. Each time I return, we smile over a favorite photograph of the two children sitting on a windowsill in my old apartment, reading a picture book together. Then they pull down another photo from the same time, in which I am typing field notes for my dissertation, and they point out that back then my hair was long and braided, as a woman's should be. All of our lives have changed since then. I have short hair and a college teaching position and a child of my own. Anjali became the first person in her family to go to college, and then she became a computer graphics designer. With the wages that she and her siblings make, her parents have been able to pay off old debts and buy a television. But Anjali's father was injured recently and can no longer drive a rickshaw, and as his children marry and start to use their earnings for their

own new households, his family's hard-won financial security becomes threatened. At the same time, his wife is trying to arrange Anjali's marriage. Yet despite all these changes in our lives, most of us are living out predictable life cycles and circumstances. The only one of us whose material circumstances may eventually be substantially different from her parents' is Anjali.

In both the United States and India, myths of upward class mobility are common and important. In both countries, most families actually maintain similar socioeconomic circumstances from generation to generation (e.g., Featherman and Hauser 1978; Driver and Driver 1987: 39–52; Rao 1989: 24; Béteille 1991; Solon 1992; Conley 1999). Movement out of the lower strata is especially difficult. Yet many of us know someone whose class is dramatically different from his or her parents', and in India there is other anecdotal evidence to support the myth. For one thing, economic circumstances often do vary within a single generation. As in Anjali's family, household income can rise and fall significantly according to how many children are employed, while daughters' marriages or family members' illnesses can require huge expenditures that deplete savings and increase debt for years. Changes like these are usually cyclical. Recently, liberalization of the Indian economy has created potentially longer-term social change. Loans for small business enterprises are now more easily acquired, newly available consumer goods serve as investments as well as signs of class achievement, and new technological sectors provide a host of skilled jobs. All of these changes appear to have contributed to noticeable growth in the Indian middle class since the mid-1980s (Kulkarni 1993; Mankekar 1999: 8–9, 75–76). Nonetheless, upward class mobility remains elusive for most people.

Class is one of numerous systems of hierarchy that shape everyday life in India. Social hierarchies such as class, caste, gender, and age help a person determine, among other things, how to interact with other people—how to act toward and speak to them, what responsibilities might be had for them, and what kinds of help might be requested from them. Of course, like any other system of rules, these are frequently broken or manipulated; but they are followed more often than not, and they help people know what their ideal behavior should be—at least according to a particular set of rules.

Of these different forms of hierarchy, class has arguably received the least attention from scholars, and is often ignored in favor of caste. Caste is a form of rank that, like class, has social and economic aspects, but also carries ritual implications. It is embodied—embedded in the substance of people's bodies—and is passed on from parents to children. While caste provides a group membership that people retain throughout their lives, class standing can change both upward and downward. Although statistically there is some correspondence between class and caste rankings—

people of higher castes *in general* are wealthier than people of lower castes—there are numerous exceptions. There are many people like Anjali (who belongs to the high-ranked Pillai caste) who are high-caste but not wealthy, and many lower-caste people who are economically well-off.¹ There is no straightforward correspondence between class and caste rankings, and any person can at least theoretically be or become a member of any class.

Class is one of the most salient idioms of identity in contemporary India, especially in urban areas, and wealth and education provide two of the most direct means to social and political power (Kumar 1988; Dickey 1993; Kapadia 1995; Fernandes 1997). Furthermore, class is recognized as a potent social force by Madurai residents. All of the people I interviewed during my research in 1999–2000 and 2001 said that class had a greater impact on their life opportunities than did caste. Such impressions are a sign of the salience that class holds in the everyday lives and imaginations of urban residents.

One reason that class is so significant in urban life is that class standing, unlike caste membership, is highly visible. This makes it an important indicator of social position in the relatively anonymous setting of the city. Unlike villages and small towns, where families have generally known one another for generations, and where the number of castes to be identified is relatively small, in more urban areas it is difficult to judge caste accurately by looking at or speaking briefly with a person. Many symbols of class, on the other hand, are immediately evident upon meeting someone, including clothing, hygiene, speech, manners, and movement, and sometimes education, occupation, and housing. If you speak for a while with people or visit their homes, you may also learn which books and newspapers they read, whether they drink tea or coffee, how they decorate their homes and what kinds of consumer goods they display, what kind of cooking fuel they use and which vegetables they cook with it. All of these are signs of class.

Such symbols are important to understanding the nature of class because class is both an economic and a symbolic system. By this I mean that economic and symbolic factors work together to produce an individual's class. In my view, class derives not only from income, material assets, and occupation—the economic sources that usually come to mind when we think of what determines our class—but also from such cultural and social “capital” as education, consumption habits, fashion, and ways of speaking (see also Bourdieu 1984; Caplan 1987: 14; Liechty forthcoming; Ortner 1991: 170, 1998: 3–4; Tolen 2000). As I have argued elsewhere (Dickey 2000: 467), what makes class a distinct form of hierarchy, and not just a variation on caste, is its more fundamental basis in economic power, combined with the status markers that financial resources can produce—such as education, honor, and conspicuous consumption—which themselves become sources of economic power.

My argument runs counter to most sociological and anthropological

theories about class, which generally view economic factors as fundamental to class, and symbolic features either as derivative of economics or as irrelevant to class per se. Most of these theories derive from the work of Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx argued that the mode of production determines a society's economic base, which in turn determines its legal and political superstructure (with the latter including all the “cultural” elements that I refer to as symbolic) (Marx 1994a, 1994b). Weber, on the other hand, divided economic and symbolic factors between two types of social stratification, class and status. He argued that class standing is determined by the market value of property, skills, and services, while symbolic forms of identity are much more relevant to a person's status group, which is defined by its “style of life” (expressed especially through consumption) and ranked according to level of honor (Weber 1968). While both these writers and their followers recognize the impact of symbolic aspects of culture on class to some extent, the notable difference in my approach remains that I view these symbolic aspects as themselves playing a *fundamental* role in producing a person's class. The value of examining symbolic and material features together is demonstrated by Anjali's case.

What is the locus of class? Put another way, where does a person's class come from? I contend that, in India, the family is the source of an individual's class.² This argument counters some of the only other discussions of the locus of class in India, such as those by Karin Kapadia (1995) and Selvy Thiruchendran (1997), both of whom argue that class is an individual phenomenon and must be defined for each person separately from the family. Kapadia, for example, argues that family members in the same household can be of vastly different classes, since in her assessment class derives from occupation and education, which can vary widely within each family (Kapadia 1995: 251–252). This is a provocative argument that, among other things, helps to highlight the widening gap in the opportunities available to women and to men, but it does not isolate the locus of class effectively.

I contend that the family serves as the source of an individual's class in two ways. First, other people judge an individual's class standing by looking at the individual's family, using signs such as family members' occupations, education, housing, and consumer goods. Second, it is primarily the family that provides and decides upon the resources and opportunities available to each individual (Béteille 1991). Family members share a pool of material resources, and the family head makes decisions about how to divide those resources. Family members also play a large part in deciding how much education individual members receive, and which if any jobs or careers they should aim for. Finally, each generation passes on cultural and social as well as economic “capital”—including knowledge, values, and social networks—to the next generation (Peace 1984, Béteille 1991: 16–19).

Unlike most other urban residents, Anjali appears poised to move up in class standing. How might this happen? How does class mobility occur in urban India, and how secure is it? The story that Anjali tells helps to answer these questions. It reveals the importance of education, the role that family plays in passing on class and making decisions that affect its members' class, and the role that both symbolic and economic features play in determining a person's class and the chances of improving class standing.

What is Anjali's class? Most visitors from affluent foreign countries, along with well-to-do Indians, would look at Anjali's family and judge them to be poor. They would probably base their judgments on the parents' occupations and education, on the size of the family's house, and on the work the children do. But Anjali's family, like other people of similar means in Madurai, do not view themselves as poor. They describe themselves as "in the middle" (*naṭuttaramānavarka!*) or, using the English word, "normal."³ (Although the Tamil term "*naṭuttaramānavarka!*" is similar to the U.S. English phrase "middle class," in Madurai this category denotes a position of significantly less financial security than it usually does in the United States.) They use indicators such as the children's education, types of food eaten in the household, the family's financial security and debts, family members' clothing and neatness, and the sturdiness and location of the housing. According to their categories, people who are poor, for example, have only enough money to buy food and other necessities for a single day at best, live in cheaper housing (made of mud, metal sheets, or cardboard), eat fewer meals and less nutritious and high-status food, have less education, and have almost no "modern" consumer goods such as cassette players, televisions, or refrigerators. Some of the difference in our respective judgments lies in varying perceptions of the status of occupations, and some of it lies in uneven knowledge of which signs to use and how to discriminate between what seem to outsiders to be fine gradations but are in fact significant cultural distinctions.

When I first met Anjali and her family, Anjali was in the third grade and very interested in reading and in language. Her parents, like most parents without much money, decided how long to keep their children in school by balancing each child's interest and success in school against the expenses of sending them there. They were also typical in seeing education as the single most important factor in improving their children's chances for the future. Educating children is expensive, however. Private schools are popularly viewed as providing the best education and the strongest chances of succeeding on standardized examinations (which will eventually determine entrance to and scholarships for postsecondary educational institutions), and the fees for these schools can be extremely high. Even government schools, which do not charge high fees, still require additional expenditures on uniforms, books, paper, pens, and other school supplies. In addition, children who attend school cannot work for the small

wages that in some families are crucial for meeting housing, food, and medical expenses.

Anjali's family's income was small, but it was enough to get by on without sending the young children out to work. Anjali in particular was very interested in studying. She eventually completed secondary school, a relatively high level of education. Her parents had studied only through the fifth grade, but had educated all of their children through the ninth to twelfth grades. It is rare for a daughter to receive more education than her brothers (her sister, for example, finished the tenth grade and then married a doctor's assistant and moved to another city), but from the tenth grade onward, Anjali began hoping to go to college. She told me, "I was interested in studying computers. I wanted at the minimum to finish a degree. I thought that at least I should study, since no one else in the family has gone to college. And my older brothers told me that they would help since I was their only younger sister." When she finally told her parents, however, they resisted.

A.: They said, "We don't have the money—how can you possibly go to college?" So after completing +2 [the final year of secondary school], I went to take a typing course. My parents had said, "All right, go ahead and learn typing. We will support that." The director at the typing center asked me—he said, "You have a tough situation. There is a job open here. Would you like to work while you are studying?" So I took the job typing and was able to study for my B.Com. [bachelor of commerce] degree.

S.: Your parents didn't continue to say you couldn't study?

A.: No. Because I was so interested, they said, "Okay, you can study. We will adjust [financially] and help you."

Anjali was able to cover most of the costs of her studies with her typing income, and her parents accommodated the loss of her income toward other household expenses. She worked full-time, and completed her entire degree through a three-year correspondence course from the university. She would work at her job all day, study at home in the evenings while the rest of the family was socializing in the same room, and then get up early in the morning to attend two hours of "tuition" (tutoring) with dozens of other students in the nearby home of a university professor, before going to her job again. Anjali said that the time in a day was "just exactly long enough" to fit everything in. She did find studying difficult. It wasn't just that she had no quiet place to read, but also, as she said, "There was no one at home who could teach me; they are all uneducated." No one could help her study, or empathize with the problems and pressures she faced in finishing a college degree.

Anjali was interested in working with computers, and her parents

agreed that the computer field was promising for her future career and marriage prospects. After finishing her B.Com. Anjali took a six-month computer certificate course that taught her the rudiments of computer hardware and software. This training makes her part of the growing but still tiny minority of computer-literate people in Madurai. With it she obtained a position two years ago in a small graphics design office near her home, where she was taught to create the calendars, business cards, and invitations produced by the company. When I saw her a year into this work, Anjali confided that her dream was to obtain a degree in computer programming, work for a technological firm, and eventually run her own business, but her family's limited economic resources, as well as their lack of the social contacts that are so crucial to gaining placement in competitive professions (cf. Bêteille 1991: 19 and *passim*), appeared to prevent her from taking any of these steps.

Anjali's position gave her family an additional Rs. 1,000 per month. It also placed her in a social environment that would have been inaccessible if she, like most other women of marriageable age, had stayed at home after finishing her education. The office on the floor above hers holds a small videography business specializing in wedding and party videos, and down the corridor is a computer and Internet center. She has made close friends with people her age working in these offices. Puri, who works next door, has taught her how to find affordable stylish clothing and to groom her hair in new ways. Both women are close friends with Murugan, one of the videographers. Until recently, such a friendship with a young man was unheard of for proper young women. Anjali's work has given her a new sophistication, which derives not just from her contact with computers, but also from her knowledge of fashion, casual friendships with men her age, a confident way of speaking, and an awareness of the world outside her family and neighbors. She is experimenting with modernity, an important element of a higher-class image (Hancock 1999: 25–27; Mankekar 1999: 48–49, 74–89).

Anjali's arrival at this point has not simply been an individual accomplishment; it has required the joint efforts and support of her family members. Her parents kept all their children in school through high school, despite their difficult financial circumstances. Anjali's parents and elder brothers had the authority to say whether and what she could study. They allowed Anjali to go on to college and get computer training because they felt these courses would be good for her intellectually and economically, and because she was able to finance her studies by working full-time. They too contributed financially. Anjali herself was an agent in this project, persuading her parents to let her study, working full-time as she carried a full courseload, and shouldering the pressure of a college education largely alone. Her family was willing to support her because of her academic interest and success, but also because her education and computer-related ca-

reer give the family prestige and enhance Anjali's prospects of making a "good" marriage. Through everyone's efforts, Anjali has gained the education, work skills, sophistication, modern sensibility, and even social connections that could make her eligible to join a higher class.

In the meantime, with Anjali and her three brothers working, her family had become more comfortable financially. For a brief period, her mother—who manages the household finances—felt secure enough to stop worrying about how to make ends meet. She paid off debts, put money aside for her eldest son's wedding, and began to consider what kind of groom to find for Anjali.

But then Anjali's father was seriously injured. One day about six months after Anjali began her new job, her father had picked up a heavy parcel from an office for a delivery and was carrying it down several flights of stairs. He slipped on a step and the box struck him on his upper spine. That night he began to have seizures. His frightened family rushed him to the Government Hospital, which offers free care to all patients. When they arrived, however, they found there was a strike at the hospital, and felt forced to take their father to a private clinic. X-rays there showed nerve damage that required surgery in order to avoid paralysis. Because like most Indians Anjali's family has no medical insurance, they knew they would be liable for all medical costs. The surgery alone amounted to well over a year's income for any member of their household, and X-rays and medications were also prohibitively expensive. But as Anjali said, "We thought, 'We have to get him treatment even though it means going into great debt. Our father has to be there for us.'" Without telling their father, they used the money that had been put aside for the eldest son's wedding, sold the mother's jewelry, and borrowed the rest from neighborhood moneylenders at the high rate of 10 percent interest per month.⁴ According to Anjali, the physician they consulted was shaken by the extremity of their circumstances and would not charge them for his or his clinic's services. He cautioned, however, that they would have to pay the surgeon, "otherwise he will not come." This same surgeon, Anjali said, would have treated her father "for free at the [Government] Hospital, but because he treated him outside, he wanted Rs. 15,000" before he would begin the surgery. Currently one person's wages—a third of the household income—go to pay off the interest and principal on the loans each month. Their father has recovered somewhat, but he is unlikely to work in the future.

Anjali is twenty-three, older than most unmarried women of her caste and class. Marriage, which is almost always seen in India as an alliance between families rather than a romantic partnering of individuals, is a key point at which family statuses are negotiated, effected, and displayed to the social public. Anjali's parents had decided to delay her marriage until after her oldest brother's so that they could augment her dowry with the money the new daughter-in-law would bring.⁵ Now her brother has been

married, but the money his wife brought offset only a small portion of their father's medical expenses. Anjali's parents are now looking for a husband for her at a time when they have not only lost the father's income, but have also incurred significant debt.

Searching for a groom is always a complicated business of finding the best combination of a "good" family (one that is sufficiently respectable, financially secure, and good-tempered) with a "good" son (someone who has the proper personality, job prospects, and horoscope), and then attempting to provide the dowry that such a family demands. Dowries vary according to caste and the earning potential of the groom, but in general they represent a very large outlay, usually at least five years' worth of income among the middle classes and mid- to high-level castes. Anjali's parents hope to find her a "government servant" (a member of the civil service or other branches of the government), or at least a business owner. These positions are a large step up from Anjali's father's occupation as a rickshaw driver, and the class standing of such men's families is ranked much higher on the local scale. Anjali is educated, sophisticated, and personable enough, however, to attract a family with such a son.

I asked Anjali about the differences between these types of grooms.

S.: When I was talking with your mother about your marriage, she said that your life would be better with a husband who has a government job. What would the differences be between marrying someone with a government job and someone with his own business? Do you know what I mean?

A.: Yes. For a person employed by the government, things [i.e. his salary and position] can only improve, they can't get worse. And after retirement, he will get a pension and all that. If he dies suddenly, his children or wife will be given a position. They will get a pension. Throughout their lives, there will be something [i.e., some income to rely on]. For someone in business, sometimes things will be good, sometimes there will be losses. When they lose money, they can't look after the family. It will be hard. So people prefer government jobs.

I asked Anjali whether her parents would look for a groom of their own class, or perhaps of a lower or higher class. Whereas most people I interviewed said that parents prefer to find grooms from families of similar means so that their daughters will be comfortable in the social setting of their new home, Anjali replied, "My parents will look for a little higher level. They'll think, 'So far she has lived in hardship. At least her life could be different after her marriage.' They will do that with the hope that at least after marriage, I can be comfortable compared with the hard life I have led so far." I asked, "Won't it be hard for you to live in such a place?" She answered philosophically, "I will have to change to fit with the way they are. That's all. It will be a bit difficult in the beginning. But I can observe what

they are like, and I can change." This is the stock response of young women as they prepare for marriage in an unknown household, but in Anjali's case it also evokes the difficulty of adjusting to the material surroundings, consumption practices, manners, and social assumptions of people raised in a different class. As Tamils say, she would have to learn to "move" in such company, speaking and dressing and behaving appropriately.

As Anjali points out, government servants in India have secure employment for life; they are also guaranteed a pension and a position for a child or spouse upon the employee's death or retirement. Yet government servants ask for such high dowries—in the Pillai caste that Anjali's family belongs to, 20 "sovereigns" of gold jewelry (160g, 5.5 oz.) and Rs. 15,000–20,000 in cash, according to Anjali's mother—that such a groom may be out of reach for her family. Families of young men who have their own businesses ask for about half of these amounts, still a huge expense for a family whose primary wage-earner made Rs. 1,000 per month when he was working, and which has no savings remaining. Yet if Anjali could marry someone with financial security, she would not have to worry about poverty herself, and she might eventually be able to help her parents and her siblings. Given Anjali's skills and the immense security such a marriage could bring her, the step is worth taking if at all possible. Before her father's injuries, with five household members working and her brother about to be married, this goal seemed realizable. Now, it feels farther off, but remains something they still work toward.

Recently the family made another decision that keeps Anjali's prospects open. When Anjali's employers decided to move their business across town, Anjali suggested to her parents that they get a bank loan to open her own design business in the old office. Anjali had plenty of experience both with design and with managing the company's daily affairs, and those skills, along with the advantage of retaining the same office—and therefore the same customer base—made her confident that she could run a successful business on her own. She could also employ her brother Kumar, whose screen-printing skills would add to her output. When I last saw Anjali and her family, they had refurnished the small office, completed most of the arduous process of securing a bank loan for computer equipment, and obtained a new computer from one of Anjali's old classmates who sells computer hardware. The classmate's father happens to be the manager of the bank where Anjali's family has applied for the loan, and as he knew that his father had already promised to provide the loan, he was thereby assured that the purchasing price would be forthcoming. In the meantime, Anjali's mother had stopped talking about finding a groom. When I asked why, she said they were waiting to get the business well established because they hoped its income would substitute for a portion of the dowry. In the meantime, Anjali and her two unmarried brothers will continue working, and every rupee left over from household maintenance and loan

repayment will be put toward the rest of her dowry—at least until another emergency strikes.

In the United States, middle- and upper-class people tend to think of class mobility as an individual endeavor. If you work hard enough at getting an education or earning a living, you can get ahead. In India, the vision tends to be one of group effort: if you educate your children and pick the right careers and then the right marriage alliances for them, their lives will improve and so might yours. Through a combination of joint financial effort, careful strategizing about Anjali's education and career, effective use of social networks, and Anjali's own talents and drive, Anjali's family seems poised to attain this ideal.

At the same time, the family's own history shows how difficult reaching this point is. Simply *maintaining* current resources can become impossible when illness strikes, or when a wage-earner dies or is incapacitated, since there are no "safety nets" of health and disability insurance, retirement plans, or even low-interest loans. Such events can immediately wipe out a family's savings in cash and assets, and plunge them into debt. Even children's marriages can increase financial hardship, since they may remove wage-earners from the household, and daughters' weddings often require an extremely high outlay of cash and goods. Expensive marriages also bring honor to the family, by demonstrating the family's resources and indicating the type of people willing to create an alliance with them; but like the losses incurred by illness or unemployment, they reduce the savings and other financial capital available to the family for making other long-term investments or for providing a safety net when other tragedies strike.

Anjali's potential gains have also been limited by her family's lack of cultural and social, as well as economic, resources. Their lack of experience with higher education, for example, made Anjali's college experience more challenging than many of her peers', and their lack of contacts in prestigious professions and institutions limits Anjali's ability to obtain a high-status and lucrative career.

Even education, that most vaunted social, cultural, and economic resource for upward mobility, is itself insufficient as a means of entering a higher class. A degree must be accompanied by other symbolic attributes that make one a proper member of a higher class. To be seen as an appropriate addition to a civil servant's or business owner's family, Anjali must adapt her dress, grooming, speech, and manners. She has already been able to learn much of this as a result of her education—by reading, by learning about computers, and by adapting to the social environments she has observed among fellow students at "tuition" and her peers at work. People in Madurai frequently ridicule those who use their money or educational attainments to act "high-class" but retain the values and behaviors of the

lesser class in which they originated. If Anjali does marry into a higher-class family, she will have to continue to mold herself into the proper image.

Moreover, she will be viewed by friends and acquaintances as a member of a higher class not merely because of how she presents herself—although this will suffice for casual encounters—but primarily because of the circumstances and image of the family she has married into. Before her marriage her natal family has determined her class, and as a married woman her marital family will provide the context by which others will judge her. Thus Anjali's class standing, like other people's, comes from her family in two ways: her class is judged on the basis of her family's circumstances, and the opportunities she has to change or maintain those circumstances are determined and decided upon primarily by her family members rather than by Anjali herself.

Even with the economic opportunities provided by the contemporary Indian economy, upward class mobility remains difficult to achieve because of the barriers to financial security faced by lower- and middle-class people. When class mobility is realized, education, family contributions and status, and the acquisition of both symbolic and economic criteria are critical to its achievement and maintenance. Anjali's family provided financial and emotional support that have allowed her to gain an education and other symbolic attributes of a higher class status. Anjali and her parents may be able to consolidate these gains through marriage with a more socially prestigious and economically secure family. Whether they are finally able to overcome the odds against her long-term upward mobility, however, remains to be seen.

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NOTES

1. These exceptions also appear at the aggregate level. The Nadars, for example, have a low ranking in the caste system but are one of the wealthiest groups in Madurai, while Brahmans, the highest-ranked caste, are not among the very wealthiest castes. On the other hand, the lowest castes do tend to be the poorest ones.

2. By family I refer specifically to a person's family members who live in the household and to other members who may live away but still make regular finan-

cial contributions to the household. I do not include the larger extended family of kin who live separately and do not contribute financially to the person's household.

3. People of Anjali's family's socioeconomic standing and higher generally use a three-part model of class, including poor people, middle people, and wealthy people. Poorer people usually employ a two-part model, composed of poor people and rich people. Because all of these class categories include people with a wide range of socioeconomic circumstances, when Anjali wants to be precise she qualifies her family's "middle-class" ranking by saying they are "between the low rank and the middle rank."

4. Lower-interest loans from a bank are generally available only to government employees and others who have the necessary social connections. In addition, because they require a long application process and are targeted for specific needs, such as business equipment or housing finance, they are not useful for emergencies.

5. There are two components to what is popularly referred to as "dowry" in India (*varataṭciqai* in Tamil). The first includes gold jewelry, cooking vessels, and other gifts of household items bestowed upon a daughter. The other consists of cash, jewelry and other gold items, and large consumer goods given to the groom and/or his family. Giving the second type of dowry is illegal in India, but the practice is almost universal (see Caplan 1984).



Seven Prevalent Misconceptions about India's Caste System

1. *The caste into which one is born determines one's occupation.* False: People in the same caste engage in (and historically have engaged in) a wide variety of different occupations. Confusion arises from the fact that according to the mythical "varna" system of the idealized law books, everyone is supposed to carry out occupations that match their "varnas." The mythical "varna" system and the actual caste system are two very different things.
2. *Caste designations are changeless.* False. There are many historical instances of castes changing (or trying to change) their caste names and behavior in order to receive advantageous treatment. Some of these efforts have succeeded; others have failed. There also are instances of caste groups moving to a different area and being given a new caste name in that area, for example, "chettiar" (merchant), "brahman" (priest), "pahari" (mountain people), etc.
3. *Castes relate to each other in mutually accepted hierarchical patterns.* Frequently false: In any given locality some castes are likely to differ from other castes in their perceptions of what the "correct" local hierarchical patterns are. Disputes regarding the "correct" local hierarchy occur (and have occurred) frequently.
4. *Everyone called by the same caste name is related to everyone else called by that same caste name.* False: Castes are assigned names by other castes living around them. Labeling coincidences frequently occur. Thus there are numerous castes, some of whose members perform priestly functions, that are called "brahmans" by those around them. However, they are not related to all other castes that are called "brahmans." Similarly there are castes that are called "patels," "deshmukhs," or "rajputs" (honorific civil titles) by those around them that are not related to all other castes called "patels," "deshmukhs," or "rajputs." Similarly, there are numerous castes, some of whose members make (or did make) pots, that are called "potters" by those around them that are not related to all other castes called "potters." Every "Gandhi" is not related to every other "Gandhi," etc.
5. *Castes are uniquely Hindu.* False: In India castes exist among Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Muslims. Frequently the rules about marrying within one's caste and avoiding interactions with other castes are as strict among Christians, Jains, etc., as they are among Hindus.

6. *Hinduism legitimizes preferential treatment according to caste.* Occasionally false: Throughout history, movements have appeared within Hinduism denouncing preferential treatment according to caste (see some of the Hindu devotional bhakti movements, groups like the Lingayats, and certain Hindu philosophers and intellectuals, e.g., Mahatma Gandhi). Throughout history, movements have also appeared on the Indian subcontinent denouncing Hinduism's preferential treatment according to caste (see Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc.).

7. *Castes have been abolished.* False: India's constitution declares that "untouchability" is abolished and anyone discriminating against "untouchables" can be prosecuted. However, India's constitution says nothing about abolishing castes. Similarly in the United States discrimination on the grounds of race or gender has been declared illegal. However, the U.S. has no laws abolishing race or gender.

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PART FOUR



Practicing Religion

The "world religions" of Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism as well as Christianity and Judaism have long found a home in South Asia.¹ Perhaps it is this flowering of so many religious traditions that have led many westerners to imagine that South Asia is a very "spiritual" place. For many middle-class Americans and Europeans, as well as Asians, the practice of yoga, meditation, and other "eastern" traditions has been promoted as a healthy, spiritual alternative to our harried, anxiety-filled and materially overwhelming lives. That is, South Asian religions have, since the nineteenth century, been structured by westerners in opposition to capitalist values and economic culture. However, looking at the practical religious experiences of residents of the region, it turns out that material well-being, politics, power relations, and the violence these sometimes entail are also aspects of South Asian religious life. The intertwining of religion with politics and economics can be discerned in even the briefest outline of the histories of these religions in South Asia.

What today we refer to as "Hinduism"² is practiced by the majority of Indians and Nepalis as well as by a large minority of Sri Lankans. Hindus trace the roots of their religion back at least 3,500 years to a set of Sanskrit texts called the Vedas. The Vedas, which include mythology, ritual instruction, magical formulas, philosophy, and criticism, formed the basis of what is often referred to as Brahmanical Hinduism. Brahmanical Hinduism took the form of "orthodox" or "orthoprax" sacrificial rituals performed and controlled by Brahman priests, who, for the most part, were the ones who wrote, read, and studied the Vedas. These Brahmans were considered to be the highest class in a four-class (*varna*) system that some see as the beginnings of what is now commonly called "caste." Davis (1995: 12-16)