

HENRIKA DONNER. *Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008. Pp. 230. ISBN: 978-0-7546-4942-7.

Donner's book is an ethnography about middle-class women's understandings and experiences of economic change through transformations of family life in Kolkata. Her research took place during a period when India's economic reforms opened the country to new media and employment opportunities as well as the influx of consumer products.

The book explores women's ideas, practices and experiences of marriage, childbirth, reproductive change and their children's education. The story she weaves through these separate but interlinked themes is one of Kolkata middle class women as dedicated to motherhood amidst globalization. Well-educated women leave their jobs after marriage in order to care for their children. Their main task is now to coach their children to excel at school from an early age and to prepare them to take advantage of the new opportunities of globalized economy. They choose to build their middle class identity through, for example, their preference for caesarean deliveries when giving birth. Donner argues that the caesarean delivery distinguishes the middle class from the low class woman. They are markers of class and affluence, since they are 'clean', and convalescence takes a considerable amount of time which the low class woman in opposition to the middle class one does not have. She also analyzes how women can carve a personal niche for themselves in their husband's families by taking on ascetic practices such as becoming vegetarians.

Donner argues that patrilocal residence, arranged marriages and lifelong unions still constitute normative discourses and are often reinvigorated, but at the same time the increased significance of privacy, conjugality and individualism among urbanites supports new socialities and gendered identities. Donner's conclusions, however, emphasize homogeneity of family ideals and women's dedication to their families. Yet studies have also demonstrated a real trend of growing multiplicity of family practices in urban India: although arranged marriages constitute a majority, there is a growing trend towards nuclear families, love marriages and divorces. I would have also wanted to read a more detailed description of middle class marriage rituals, gift giving and gift categories.

My random observations from Kolkata middle-class support Donner's views but I have seen a greater variety of middle-class life patterns there: women do also opt for careers, get divorced and remarry. Within the working classes of the city, among whom I have conducted systematic research, I found fluidity of gender roles. Comparing Donner's conclusions with my research with rural women in West Bengal shows surprisingly that it is, although rarer, more acceptable for rural women to opt for a public job after marriage. Whereas Donner's informants have witnessed a decline in public sphere jobs, increased investment in rural education has created more jobs for educated rural women.

Every study of a metropolis like Kolkata can only offer a partial view. Donner chose to focus on the women whose lives, according to Donner's own words, come very close to the norm of committed motherhood and whose family circumstances are not particularly problematic. It would have helped to assess Donner's view of the city if she had provided a more detailed description of her research materials instead of just noting that she collected a huge quantity of data from a wide range of persons in the two neighbourhoods. As Donner notes, Kolkatans often have clear ideas about the differences between the cultures

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of the different parts of the city. Donner studied a central and a southern neighbourhood in the city but she does not comment much on the differences she found. Donner's new research focuses on call centre workers in Lokata, and it is interesting to see if she finds new patterns there.

Donner makes a major contribution by identifying and establishing the domestic sphere as the key site of the remaking of the Indian middle-class in the contexts of globalization, post-liberalization and neo-liberal ideologies. As Donner argues, the overbearing role of the study of consumption in literature on middle class obfuscates the fact that actual work goes into the transformation of a commodity or a service into a resource or upward mobility. She points out that a focus on motherhood and gender roles in relation to class brings us back to debates about work, consumption and the household, and the fact that class is not constituted in the public sphere through occupational choice and youth culture, but is crucially reproduced in households through women's quotidian work or kin work.

She also demonstrates with clarity other blind spots anthropology has developed through its own lore. As Donner points out, urban fieldwork is often considered problematic in comparison to work in more remote places because the fieldworker is not considered adequately displaced in a city. Yet in the case of West Bengal, it is much easier to enter a field in rural areas than in the urban middle class neighbourhoods where families carefully guard their privacy.

As a pioneering study, *Domestic Goddesses* does not answer all the questions. It will be interesting to see how she theorizes practice and globalization based on her new study on call centre workers—this present study cites practice theories but does not develop them.

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