Doing Gender vs. Doing Modernity:
The Dilemma of Indian Middle Classes

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Introduction

India's economic growth in early 21st century coupled with increasing incorporation in global consumer culture has generated great interest in the contemporary Indian middle class. This middle class is envisioned to have left behind the austerity of an earlier era to embrace a consumer centered marketplace of goods, services, ideas and ideologies (Fernandes, 2007; Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009; Jaffrelot and van der Veer, 2008; Varma, 1998). At the same time, whether this effusive embrace of modernity extends to restructuring of gendered domains remains questionable and a number of studies suggest that modernity is often redefined in a way that precludes substantial gender transformation (Derne, 2003; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003; Liechty, 2003).

In some ways, this duality dovetails with the duality identified by M. N. Srinivas (1977). Writing in 1977, Srinivas noted the interplay between Sanskritisation and modernization in shaping the status of women in Indian society (Srinivas 1977). In this paper, I argue that this dilemma continues to shape women's lives in modern India. Past two decades have seen substantial changes in the lives of Indian families, including growth in incomes and increases in education. However, this upward mobility also forces new choices—in particular whether to continue to embrace traditional markers of social status, which involve clinging to and even enhancing gendered behaviours that portray an image of modesty and high culture, or to embrace

modernity with its disruption of traditional gender schema; the choice ultimately boils down to weather to prioritize doing gender or to prioritize doing modernity.

Doing Gender

Over the past two decades, feminist scholarship has become increasingly sophisticated and explored a variety of approaches understanding gender inequality. One of the more promising areas of work stems from the works of ethnomethodologists who tend to focus on the way gender is displayed or enacted through day to day actions of individuals. Goffman (Goffman, 1976) first articulated this perspective in his discussion of "gender display" where he argued that men and women engage in a highly stylized mode of interaction where presence or absence of symmetry can indicate deference or dominance. This concept was further elaborated in a provocative paper by West and Zimmerman, titled "Doing Gender," where the authors argue that gender is a powerful ideological device which shapes choices and limits actions based on the actor's sex and leads individuals to consistently act in a way that produces gendered behaviours in day-to-day interactions between individuals (West and Zimmerman 1987). In a subsequent article titled "Doing Difference," West and Fenstermaker (West and Fenstermaker 1995), expand their arguments about enactment of gender to enactment of differences based on a variety of forms of inequality, particularly class and race.

In spite of the initial promise, this approach has drawn considerable criticism from long-term practitioners working in the area of race, class and gender. Collins acerbically points out (Collins et al. 1995), "recasting racism, patriarchy and class exploitation solely in social constructionist terms reduces class, race and gender to performances, interactions between people embedded in a never ending stream of equivalent relations, all containing race, class and gender in some form, but a chain of equivalences, devoid of power relations,"

So one might ask, does research on enactment of gender have any usefulness for researchers interested in inequalities based on power relations between dominant and subordinate groups in a society? This paper argues that, conspicuously visible gendered behaviors

serve to signal superior class status in a highly stratified society like India in a way that strengthens both gender and class inequalities. An interesting aspect of applying these concepts to India is that a lot of work on race-class-gender intersection in the United States has focused on double or triple oppression for women in subordinate groups; with India, the focus is on subordination of women in the dominant group and maintenance of caste and class hierarchies via this subordination. Moreover, these conspicuous gendered behaviours also help to sustain generational hierarchies creating two classes of citizens within the household.

Doing Modernity

While research on gender performance in service to caste mobility (Srinivas, 1977) or nationalist identity (Chatterjee, 1989) has received considerable attention, a focus on "performing" modernity is relatively new. Srinivas alluded to the disjunction between Sanskiritsation and Westernisation where growing modernity associated with higher education may lessen the pull of Sanskritisation, replacing it with the pull of modernity. It was left to Appadurai to present a framework in which neither the East nor the West hold sway, but rather linked by electronic communication and mass migration, people in diverse geographic terrains live in a shared imagination creating a dispersed cosmopolitan impulse (Appadurai, 1996). Without privileging any geographic location, he suggests that global cosmopolitan culture is a work of imagination and "a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global in their practices of the modern" (Appadurai, 1996, p.4).

The past two decades of economic changes in India have created an unparalleled space for this cosmopolitan impulse. As political ideology has moved beyond the Nehruvian imagery of a non-aligned nation, steadfast in its self-imposed isolation to visions of a sleeping giant waking up to take its rightful place in the global marketplace, it has created space for embracing modernity in a variety of domains including the personal. Economic growth has led to rapidly expanding incomes among workers in the modern sector and has increased their consumption aspirations—both for material

and cultural goods produced in a global marketplace (Das 2002; Varma 1998).

Whether this embrace of a global modernity extends to gendered spaces is perhaps the crucial question we must explore. The fragility of the economic transformation may well play a role here. Although snapshots of Indian economy reveal growing incomes in the hands of modern service sector workers and trickle down growth of incomes for lower middle class occupations like drivers and shopkeepers serving them (Desai 2007), these are hardly new middle classes in a structural sense. Most of the individuals occupying these positions are not new entrants to the middle class status, rather these are people moving from older occupations to newer occupations that have gained prominence due to the liberalization of Indian economy. Thus, the extent to which they embrace modernity, particularly in gendered arenas, remains an open question (Ravinder Kaur, 2014).

In an intriguing analysis of Indian middle classes, Derne (2003) notes a variety of ways through which globalization has enhanced rather than diminished male privilege and left the boundaries between male and female spheres intact. This suggests that it is important to explore the contours of gendered behaviours empirically rather than assume *a priori* that the imperatives of modernity will sweep away the gendered basis of social stratification and doing modernity will triumph over doing gender.

Contending Cultures

As we begin to contrast the power of gendered basis of social stratification performed through highly controlled and ritualized gender displays against the lures of modernity, we can draw on interesting insights from the new sociology of culture. In a highly influential article, Ann Swidler (1986) laid out the schema for cultural disruption. Drawing on Skocpol, she offers an interesting analysis of conditions under which social transformations take place (Swidler 1986):

"To understand culture's causal role in such high-ideology periods, we need to consider ideologies in a larger explanatory context. Coherent ideologies emerge when new ways of organizing action are being developed. Such ideologies often carried by social

movements, model new ways to organize action and to structure human communities. These ideological movements, however, are in active competition with other cultural frameworks- at the least in competition with common sense and usually with alternative traditions and ideologies as well. Explaining cultural outcomes therefore requires not only understanding the direct influence of an ideology on action. It also requires explaining why one ideology rather than another triumphs (or at least endures). And such explanation depends on analyzing the structural constraints and historical circumstances within which ideological movements struggle for dominance." (Swidler ,1986, p. 280)

For the present purposes it implies that we need to clearly outline contending perspectives, their anticipated effects on bahaviours, and then identify structural conditions for the triumph of one over the other. Above sections have outlined two contending scripts, namely, doing gender vs. doing modernity. These scripts might shape Indian women's, particularly middle class women's behaviours. We further suggest that whether one triumph over the other depends on the social contexts in which women and their families are embedded.

Gender in modern India has been highly politicized through caste and religion based social movements. While this is not a new phenomenon stretching back to the debates around sati (Mani, 1990) and struggle over women's sexuality during partition (Das, 1996). In recent decades this politicization has taken a new turn around abolition of religion specific family laws and implementation of a uniform civil code (Sarkar and Butalia, 1995; Sunder Rajan, 2000). Households that are strongly embedded in religious and caste networks may find it harder to emphasize modernity and may instead choose to focus on greater gender performance that confirms with the ideology of a traditional and modest womanhood. In contrast, families that are somewhat removed from these networks may have greater flexibility in their choices.

Research Questions and Operationalization

The discussion above has identified several key questions that hinge on performance of gender vis-à-vis performance of modernity and whether it varies by the degree to which households are embedded

in religious and caste networks. However, a variety of studies have noted multidimensionality of gender (Desai and Andrist, 2010; Kabeer, 1999; Narayan, 2006; Presser and Sen, 2000). Hence, it is important to clearly identify the dimensions of gender we expect to be relevant to the question at hand. In this paper, I choose to focus on intra-household relationships that reflect women's agency vis-à-vis other family members. These behaviors are also often signaling behaviors that signify households' adherence to a certain cultural script. Specifically, I focus on three aspects:

- **Need for Permission to Go Outside the Home**: Number of items for which women require permission from husband or other household members to go outside the home. These include: (1) local health center; (2) visiting friends and relatives in the village or town; (3) to go to a kirana shop; and (4) to go short distance by bus or train. When women (almost) never go to these places, we mark them as requiring permission.
- **Ability to Go Alone to these Places**: Regardless of whether they need permissions or not, whether they can go alone to the above-mentioned places. This variable, like the one above, is a simple count ranging from 0 to 4.
- **Primary Decision Making Power:** Number of decisions in which the respondent is a primary decision maker. These include: (1) purchasing an expensive item; (2) how many children to have; (3) what to do if the respondent falls sick; (4) whether to buy land or property; (5) how much money to spend for a social function; (6) what to do if a child is sick; and (7) whom should her children marry. This index ranges from 0 to 7 and includes both minor and major decisions.

These dimensions reflect a range of gendered behaviours. Needing permission to go to commonplace locations as kirana (grocery) shop reflects a social milieu in which women's agency is constrained through day-to-day interactions within the household. Inability (or unwillingness) to go alone is far more constraining, particularly when it comes to visiting places like health center and friends and relatives. In contrast, authority in decision-making reflects both

powers within the household as well as importance of any given decision in the household's economic context. This is a particularly crucial test of our argument. When households are financially able to undertake minor expenses involved in taking a child to a doctor or to make decisions regarding social gifts and other expenses, we would expect it to be far more likely that women will have greater decision making authority than where these decisions impose serious strain on household finances.

I have also argued that structural conditions may well shape these decisions and households which are closely embedded in caste and religious community may be more likely to constrain modernity. In order to examine this, I have constructed a variable that denotes household membership in caste or religious organization. While households may be closely embedded in these networks without actually being members of any association, but associational membership is a definite marker of their embedednes.

India Human Development Survey

Much of the research in this area has come from qualitative studies whose contextual richness and depth is often not matched by breadth and ability to generalize across social groups and regions. This paper seeks to fill this niche by examining social class variation in a variety of gendered outcomes using data from India Human Development Survey (IHDS) of over 40,000 households spread across 33 states and union territories. The IHDS was conducted in 2004-5 and again in 2011-12 and involves a household level interview about income and employment of various household members and an interview of never married women ages 15-49 about intra-household gender relations as well as a variety of other dimensions of their lives.

For this analysis, I focus on 28,998 married women who are currently living with their husbands. These women are ages 15 to 49 and come from diverse segments of the Indian society. Descriptive statistics for our sample are presented in Table 1. State wise distribution of the sample is shown in Table 2.

The primary focus of this analysis is to see how intra-household behaviours vary across different income segments. In order to examine

TABLE 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean
Gender Indicators	
No. of Places where Resp. Needs Permission to Visit	3.07
No. of Places where Respondent Can Go Alone	2.64
No. of Domains in which Respondent is Primary Decision Maker	1.14
Household Annual Income (Excluding Respondent's Wages)	
Lowest Quintile* (upto Rs. 30740 annual household income)	0.19
2nd Quintile. (Rs. 30741-Rs. 52956)	0.20
Middle Quintile (Rs. 52957-Rs. 86470)	0.20
4th Quintile (Rs. 86471-Rs. 156450)	0.20
Richest Quintile (Rs. 155451+)	0.20
Respondent is Employed Outside the Home	0.28
Respondent's Own Education	
No education	0.39
1-4 std	0.07
5-9 std	0.32
10-11 std	0.10
Higher secondary and some college	0.07
College gaduate	0.05
Husband's Education	
No education	0.32
1-4 std	0.08
5-9 std	0.31
10-11 std	0.12
Higher secondary and some college	0.08
College graduate	0.09

* Households are divided into five equal segments, hence the term quintile. Bottom 20% of the households have annual income less than Rs. 30740; top 20% have income greater than Rs. 155451. These cut offs are chosen based on the distribution of the income in the sample

Member of Caste or Religious Association	0.15
Place of Residence	
Metro City	0.08
Other Urban	0.24
Developed Village	0.30
Less Developed Village	0.38
Caste/Religion	
Forward Caste	0.19
OBC	0.36
Dalit	0.23
Adivasi	0.08
Muslim	0.13
Christian, Sikh and Others	0.02
Age of the Respondent	34.14
Number of Children	2.44

Sample: 34851 Married women ages 15-49 living with husband.

this, I have divided the sample in five income groups. Additionally, the analysis also controls for caste/religion, place of residence, state of residence, age, and number of children and respondent's as well as her husband's education.

The results presented in this paper control for women's participation in wage work and her income is excluded from the calculation of the family income. However, in results not presented here, this analysis has been repeated for full household income, including the respondent's own wages and the results are extremely similar.

Results

Results from multivariate regression[1] for each of the dependent

[1] Regression is a statistical measure that attempts to determine the strength of the relationship between one dependent variable and a series

TABLE 2: Statewise Distribution of the Sample Proportion

Variable	Mean
Jammu & Kashmir	0.01
Himachal Pradesh	0.01
Uttarakhand	0.02
Punjab	0.02
Haryana	0.02
Delhi	0.01
Uttar Pradesh	0.14
Bihar	0.07
Jharkhand	0.04
Rajasthan	0.05
Chhattisgarh	0.03
Madhya Pradesh	0.05
Northeast	0.01
Assam	0.03
West Bengal	0.09
Orissa	0.04
Gujarat	0.05
Maharashtra, Goa	0.10
Andhra Pradesh	0.08
Karnataka	0.05
Kerala	0.03
Tamil Nadu	0.07

variable are presented in Tables 3-5. For ease of interpretation we present predicted probabilities for each outcome where the values of all other variables are held at their means and only income levels are

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of other changing variables (known as independent variables). It allows us to look at the relationship between household income and gendered behaviours while holding the impact of other factors such as education, age, place and state of residence constant.

allowed to vary. The variables included in these analyses are shown in Table 1. In addition a dummy variable[2] for state of residence is also included. In each table, we evaluate income differences in outcomes at two levels, probability of not making any decisions, needing permission to go to all 4 listed places and probability of not being able to go alone to any of the 4 listed places. These are the most gender in egalitarian outcomes; at the other end, we predict most egalitarian outcomes where women make decisions in all 7 areas, can go without permission to all 4 listed places and never need an escort. These are just two sides of the same coin but due to nonlinearity in the model, exact magnitude of the impact is different at different ends of the spectrum. In making these predictions, I hold the values of other variables like respondents' and husband's education, respondent's age and number of children, place of residence and state of residence constant.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows the predicted values in women's ability to move around their neighbourhoods and a short distance by train/bus without permission. As we compare different income groups, we see a consistent decline in women's control over their own movement. Whereas about 56% women from lowest income strata need permission to go to all of the four listed locations, this proportion rises to 60% for women from the highest income group. While this decline is consistent across income groups, it becomes statistically significant as we move from 3rd to 4th income quintile which suggests that women in top 40% of the income distribution are the most disadvantaged. We can see a similar pattern for the outcome where women never need permission but here the difference between different quintiles is not statistically significant, possibly because so few women enjoy this complete freedom.

2   In controlling for a set of mutually exhaustive categories it is common to create a set of variables, commonly referred to as dummy variables, which take value of 1 for each category of interest with one of the categories serving as a reference category. The 33 states and Union Territories are divided into 22 categories, combining some of the small states/UTs with neighbouring states. Uttar Pradesh is the reference category against which other states are compared. Thus, the analytical model contains 21 variables indicating the state household resides in.

TABLE 3: Predicted* Probabilities for Need Permission to Go to Four Listed
Locations, Results from Ordinal Logistic Regressions

	Model 1	Model 2 – Income/Caste Assn. Membership Interactions	
		Not Member	Member of Caste Assn
	Predicted Prob.	Predicted Prob.	Predicted Prob.
☒ **Need Permission for All 4 Locations**			
Lowest Quintile	0.556	0.552	0.580
Second Quintile	0.573	0.572	0.584
Third Quintile	0.587	0.581	0.622
Fourth Quintile	0.600	0.602	0.592
Richest Quintile	0.603	0.591	0.651
☑ **Never Need Permission**			
Lowest Quintile	0.079	0.080	0.072
Second Quintile	0.074	0.075	0.071
Third Quintile	0.070	0.072	0.061
Fourth Quintile	0.067	0.066	0.069
Richest Quintile	0.066	0.069	0.055

* Predicted values from Table 1. Holds value of wife's Employment,
husband's and wife's education, urban residence, caste/religion, state of
residence at mean values
☒ Gender Negative Outcomes
☑ Gender Positive Outcomes

In Model 2, we interact with those who have membership in
social and religious organisation and predict the same freedom of
movement for women from households with and without these
social connections. Results suggest that women from households that
are members of these traditional organizations are far more likely
to need permission to go outside the home than other households.
More importantly, this difference is larger for the upper income

households. Holding all other variables at their mean value, women from non-member households in the highest income bracket need to ask permission to go to any of the listed places with a probability of 0.59 while the probability for member households is 0.65 and it is a statistically a significant difference.

TABLE 4: Predicted Probabilities for ability to Go Alone to Four Listed Locations, Results from Ordinal Logistic Regressions

	Model 1	*Model 2 – Income/ Caste Assn. Membership Interactions*	
		Not Member	*Member of Caste Assn*
	Predicted Prob.	*Predicted Prob.*	*Predicted Prob.*
☒ **Cannot Go Alone Anywhere**			
Lowest Quintile	0.114	0.110	0.130
Second Quintile	0.113	0.110	0.131
Third Quintile	0.114	0.111	0.132
Fourth Quintile	0.115	0.112	0.133
Richest Quintile	0.121	0.117	0.139
☑ **Can Go Alone to All of the 4 Listed Locations**			
Lowest Quintile	0.419	0.427	0.380
Second Quintile	0.419	0.426	0.379
Third Quintile	0.418	0.424	0.377
Fourth Quintile	0.416	0.422	0.375
Richest Quintile	0.402	0.410	0.363

* Predicted values from Table 2. holds value of husband's and wife's education, urban residence, caste/religion, state of residence at mean values
☒Gender Negative Outcomes
☑Gender Positive Outcomes

Similar pattern is repeated for the other two dependent variables in Tables 4 and 5. The probability that women cannot go alone to any of the listed locations is 0.11 for the bottom income quintile and rises to 0.12 for the top quintile. The probability that they are free to go alone to all four locations drops from 0.42 in bottom quintile to 0.41 in the top income quintile. Women from households that are

TABLE 5: Predicted Probabilities for Respondent Being Primary Decision Maker, Results from Ordinal Logistic Regressions

	Model 1	Model 2 – Income/ Caste Assn. Membership Interactions	
		Not Member	*Member of Caste Assn*
	Predicted Prob.	*Predicted Prob.*	*Predicted Prob.*
☒ **Not a Primary Decision Maker in Any Listed Areas**			
Lowest Quintile	0.503	0.500	0.520
Second Quintile	0.552	0.549	0.569
Third Quintile	0.557	0.555	0.574
Fourth Quintile	0.594	0.591	0.610
Richest Quintile	0.609	0.605	0.624
☑**Primary Decision Maker in All 7 Listed Areas**			
Lowest Quintile	0.038	0.039	0.036
Second Quintile	0.032	0.032	0.030
Third Quintile	0.031	0.031	0.029
Fourth Quintile	0.027	0.027	0.025
Richest Quintile	0.025	0.026	0.024

* Predicted values from Appendix Table 3. holds value of husband's and wife's education, urban residence, caste/religion, state of residence at mean values
☑Gender Positive Outcomes
☒Gender Negative Outcomes

connected to caste and religious associations are less likely to venture out alone, especially for the top income bracket where this difference is statistically significant.

Table 5 estimates the same models for the respondent being the primary decision maker for 7 different kinds of decisions. Results show that a majority of women are not likely to be primary decision maker in any domain and this lack of authority is greater for upper income women than for the lower income women. In the bottom quintile, predicted probability of women not being primary decision makers in a single domain is 0.50 but this rises to 0.61 in the top income quintile. This is really striking because several decisions involve household expenditures such as purchasing a major item, visiting a health center or social expenditure. One would expect that in upper income households these would be more commonplace decisions and women will have greater flexibility. The fact that they do not is a testimony to women's lack of power in upper income households.

Discussion

I started this paper with a discussion of choices women and their households make between using gender performance—often involving women's absence from public spaces and deference to ritualized behaviours—on the one hand, and performing modernity in which these ritualized displays are considered passé on the other. With rising income and incorporation into a cosmopolitan culture, these choices are more stark for upper income households than for lower income households.

Our results show that for each of three sets of behaviours we studied, gender performance is consistently privileged over the performance of a cosmopolitan modernity. Women from upper income households are characterized by their engagement in conspicuous performance of deference and segregation. This focus on gender display for higher income women is particularly stark when they belong to households which are closely connected to caste and religious communities.

The interesting aspect of the results presented above is not that Indian women engage in ritualized gendered behaviours. This has

been well documented for India by a variety of scholars and even more importantly, there are few societies that are free of gender displays. As literature around the world documents, modernity replaces one form of gender display with another. However, what is striking about these results is that this performance of gendered behaviours emphasizing deference and modesty is not ubiquitous, rather that it intensifies as we move up the economic ladder. This also is not a new finding in itself—the Sanskritization thesis was built around this phenomenon. However, the fact that it persists even during an era of rapid economic growth and increasing globalization is noteworthy. Appadurai (1996) identified the invasion of mass media as a key element for disrupting established patterns and creating a new public culture. However, although 60% of the surveyed households own a television and in 75% of the households women frequently watch television in their own or a neighbour's home, this incorporation in global mass media seems to do little to change their worldview, possibly because very few programs contain messages that would disrupt existing gender ideologies (Derne, 2003).

So far in my discussion, I have stayed focused on the gender display aspects of the domains I have studied. However, the implications of these displays for women's empowerment and wellbeing cannot be ignored. When women are not free to decide when to seek medical care for themselves and their children, must ask permission to go to a health clinic, and cannot go there unaccompanied, this retards their ability to get appropriate health care in a timely manner. Thus, regardless of whether these gender displays are *meant* to disempower women or not, they effectively do disempower women and this disempowerment is greater for middle class women than for lower income women. Moreover, in addition to strengthening gender hierarchies, these behaviours also strengthen generational hierarchies.

Poverty constrains many choices for women from lower income groups but they are somewhat protected from the overarching umbrella of gender inequality by a variety of factors. Women from lower income families are more likely to work, more likely to participate in local government and NGO activities and are more shielded from gender displays designed to enhance family status. In contrast, women from upper income households experience

considerably greater restrictions on their physical movements and authority within the household.

This is a somewhat paradoxical observation. Although financial resources should offer wider choices to women from upper income women, in effect their choices are far more restricted in a context that encourages gendered behaviours emphasizing deference to husband and older family members and modesty in interaction with the external world. Moreover, external conditions that might mitigate this hold—employment and lessening importance of caste and religious networks—remains out of reach. Data from National Sample Survey show declining female employment, particularly for educated women (Desai 2013) and the sway of caste and religious networks in modern civic life seems to continue unabated. This is unlikely to result in immediate changes in ritualized gendered behaviours even as India's incorporate in global economy continues apace.

It is important to note the definition of middle class in the above discussion. I have primarily focused on broad categories, comparing women in top 20% of household incomes with those in lower quintiles. Given the striking heterogeneity in the Indian middle class, this group contains a broad spectrum of occupational categories and is not limited to highly educated groups in privileged positions. It is possible that performance of modernity may well be emphasized in the top 1-5% of Indian households. But these elite households are well out of the bounds of what one might call "middle classes" and do not form the focus of this paper.

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