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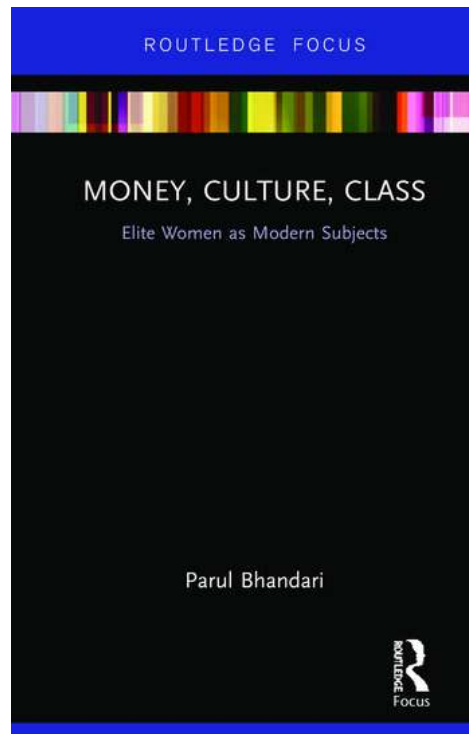
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Parul Bhandari. 2019. *Money, Culture, Class: Elite Women as Modern Subjects*. London: Routledge Focus. 98 pages.

1 In *Money, Culture, Class*, Parul Bhandari, Associate Professor of Sociology at Jindal Global Business School, introduces us to the world of Delhi's elite housewives. Bhandari follows Shamus Khan (2012) in defining the elites very simply as those who have a "vastly disproportionate control or access over resources." The resource Bhandari is primarily concerned with is money. She focuses not on a political or intellectual elite, but on a particular segment of Delhi's economic elite—super-rich business families, that is, families with thriving businesses who live in posh areas of Delhi, own many cars, travel abroad frequently, and host opulent parties. Drawing on interviews with elite Delhi business-family housewives and interactions with them at events such as kitty parties and weddings, Bhandari argues that they do not passively reproduce status but rather actively define elite culture.



- 2 In the introduction, Bhandari situates her work within Sociology's "affective turn." By attending to "the constant interplay between interest and affect" (p. 2), Bhandari hopes to elucidate the meanings that women attach to objects of luxury as they create elite cultures and gender identities through consumption. She is concerned with the social meanings of money, as it is used to articulate status, class boundaries and appropriate femininity. She is also concerned with the affect surrounding consumption—the pride and entitlement, the vulnerability and anxiety that elite Delhi women express as they seek to distinguish themselves from others through consumption.
- 3 The three empirical chapters explore three aspects of elite lives—fashion and travel, weddings, and spirituality and religion. In the first of these chapters, Bhandari highlights elite Delhi housewives' sensitivity "towards the importance of their bodies as carriers of status and language of exclusivity" (p. 14). Through matters of hair, makeup and handbags, Bhandari reveals distinct micro-categories of class that exist within the elite. The wives of Delhi business tycoons perform their membership in a global elite by having not just the money, but also the cultural capital, to quickly acquire a highly sought-after designer handbag while lesser women languish on the waiting list (p. 25), or to shun popular holiday destinations such as Rome and Venice in favor of the Amalfi Coast, Santorini and Monaco (p. 30).
- 4 Elite Delhi housewives distinguish themselves not only from other elites but also from the middle classes through fashion and travel. In Chapter One, we read about someone being urged to buy property in London because this is "the hallmark of being rich." The alternative—staying in someone's house for an extended period while on holiday—is declared "very middle-class" and "a bit desperate" (p. 34). Bhandari's research participants are particularly eager to distinguish themselves from middle-class Indians

while travelling abroad as they experience racism when their wealth is not readily apparent. In the words of Aarti, “you have to act your class even when outside of India so that people don’t think of you as some regular middle-class Indian” (p. 41).

- 5 The second empirical chapter illustrates how this global elite status is balanced with more specifically Indian elite sensibilities in the context of weddings. Bhandari describes a wedding that involves a Bollywood singer and a foreign dance troupe, a *mehendi* (henna) function and a cocktail party, a DJ playing both Indian and international songs, and a *lehenga* (skirt and blouse and scarf) but in the more “international” colors of off-white and gold rather than the more “traditional Indian” red. She argues that this melding of Indian fineries and rituals with global sensibilities aims to “create something ‘new’ and ‘Indian,’ yet global and unabashedly elite” (p. 53). While competition between elites is a theme that cuts across the first two chapters, the second chapter highlights that elite housewives distinguish themselves not just on the basis of their wealth, taste and social networks, but also on the basis of their morality and humility expressed through hospitality.
- 6 The third empirical chapter explores this theme of morality as a domain of elite distinction in the context of spirituality and religion. Through a growing interest in gurus and through extravagant and novel celebration of religious festivals, elite Delhi housewives construct piety, gratitude and humility as central to elite culture and appropriate femininity. Religion and spirituality are also an arena for the airing of anxieties about loss of status. For example, Bhandari describes a *satsang* (chanting of hymns and collective prayers) hosted by one of her participants, where elite housewives divulged their struggles and anxieties relating to business, marriage alliances, and heirs.
- 7 Across these three chapters, the agency of elite Delhi housewives is evident in their blurring of the boundaries between domestic and business worlds. They suggest spouses for their children that create strategic alliances between business families. They snub or flatter business contacts through the quality of gifts they give and the transport and accommodation they provide at weddings. And they strengthen networks with businessmen and bureaucrats by organizing lavish celebrations of Hindu religious festivals.
- 8 The accessible style of this book and the minimalist approach to citation make for an engaging read that is likely to have appeal beyond academia. However, prioritizing accessibility has limited the scope for interrogating (dis)continuities between Bhandari’s and research and other studies of elites. In the introduction, Bhandari states that she places her work “in conversation” with Rachel Sherman’s (2017) ethnography of elite New York housewives. The elite Delhi housewives Bhandari spoke to expressed some of the same anxieties about privilege and concern to be seen as “good people” that Sherman describes of elite New York housewives. However, the Delhi housewives were more invested in conspicuous consumption, more open about their wealth and less moralizing about their use of money. They expressed a pride in glamour and extravagance at odds with the “unease” that Sherman associates with New York elite housewives. The reader’s understanding of elite Delhi business-family housewives could have been strengthened by further discussion of this comparison beyond the introduction. For example, Bhandari notes that a “discourse on charity” (p. 82) was absent among the Delhi housewives with whom she interacted but does not explore what this tells us about the attitudes of this specific sector of the elite towards their

privilege. Bhandari's ethnographic material has the potential to make an important contribution to debates currently central to the sociology of elites about conspicuously opulent versus "ethical" low-profile lifestyles (e.g., Farrell 2020; Mears 2020), but these connections are not explored in *Money, Culture, Class*.

- 9 As Bhandari notes, very little research has been conducted with elite women in India, and *Money, Culture, Class* is an important contribution in this regard. However, in India (and elsewhere) the boundaries between the middle classes and the elite are blurry. Only the wealthiest 5–10 per cent of India's population is considered reasonably secure in material terms, spending the equivalent of at least \$10 per day (Meyer and Birdsall 2012; see also Ferry, Naudet and Roueff 2018). Thus, many who self-identify as middle-class and live middle-class lifestyles by global standards have "elite" levels of wealth relative to the rest of the population. This is reflected in the title of Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray's edited volume on class in India, *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, and is a key theme in another important edited volume on this topic, Surinder S. Jodhka and Jules Naudet's (2019) *Mapping the Elite*.
- 10 The elite Delhi housewives with whom Bhandari conducted research engage in many discourses and practices described in literature on the Indian middle classes. They draw on moral discourses of moderation to distinguish themselves from excessive others, something often identified as a central tenet of middle-class culture in India and elsewhere (Dickey 2012). Wives of Delhi business tycoons distinguish themselves from other elite women who engage the services of a professional stylist every time they leave the house. They express pride in their ability to get a good price on designer handbags through their knowledge of exchange rates and taxes. They boast about buying inexpensive clothes in local markets in Greece, and getting their clothes tailored at a reasonable price even though they could afford extravagant saris from top designers. Many sectors of the South Asian middle classes strive for a modest and restrained "modernity" distinct from elite lifestyles, which are perceived as excessive and foreign (Liechty 2003). It is striking, then, that Bhandari's participants, who would be perceived as excessive and overly Westernized by many who identify as middle class, and who themselves identify as elite, engage in similar discourses and practices.
- 11 Another similarity is Bhandari's observation that the maintenance of elite class boundaries is intricately intertwined with discourses and performances of appropriate femininity. The elite housewives Bhandari spent time with "expressed disdain towards women who decided to work outside the home, claiming that this decision was motivated by selfish interests, whereas in fact, taking care of family members is a far more demanding and difficult task" (p. 5). However, for many female Indian professionals prioritizing family over work is central to notions of appropriate femininity and appropriate Indianness (Fuller and Narasimhan 2008; Radhakrishnan 2011; Upadhyaya 2005; cf. Ballakrishnen 2021). Such themes have also been explored in relation to urban middle-class housewives who balance the demands of cosmopolitanism and consumer citizenship with expectations of "traditional" self-sacrifice and devotion associated with the "Indian" wife and mother (Donner 2008; Donner 2011). Scholars have long noted the centrality of Hindu religiosity to notions of middle-class femininity (Chatterjee 1993) and Bhandari's participants too "appropriate the space of the religious and spiritual to assert their femininity in a way that is more appealing to domestic traditions" (p. 86). Like many more middle-class Indians (Nanda 2011), Bhandari's elite Delhi housewives follow gurus who appear to sanction

consumption and the accumulation of wealth. She writes that the ways of life and philosophy of a spiritual leader who is particularly popular among her participants enabled them “to occupy both spaces of spirituality and materiality, charity and extravagance, without having to choose between the two” (p. 73).

- 12 In the introduction, Bhandari notes strong similarities across class boundaries and acknowledges that this is a theme not addressed extensively in the book. The ethnographic material presented in *Money, Culture, Class* hints that it is a different scale of resources rather than dramatically different discourses and practices that distinguish elite from middle-class culture. Drawing on the literature mentioned above to develop this into a deeper argument regarding the definition of “elite” would be a welcome contribution to understandings of class in India. Ideally, this would entail a deeper interrogation of inequality too. Bhandari states clearly that she is not analyzing the reproduction of inequality in this book, but the absence of caste from the discussion of marriage, as well as the absence of Hindu nationalism from discussions of religion are problematic omissions.
- 13 Nevertheless, the accessibility of this text does not prevent the raising of important questions. *Money, Culture, Class* prompts us to ask whether class differences are more a matter of gradient than sharp boundaries and whether gendered and (religious) nationalistic discourses and practices are central to producing class cultures across a wide range of gradients.

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