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Book Review: Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India

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Domestic Goddesses: Maternity, Globalization and Middle-class Identity in Contemporary India. 2008. Henrike Donner. Hampshire and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 215 pp. Figures, glossary, bibliography and index are included. \$ 99.95 (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Anne Waldrop¹

In this monograph, social anthropologist Henrike Donner sets out to explore and analyze the everyday lives of middle-class women living in contemporary Calcutta (Kolkata), India. As the author puts it, “the book deals with class in an urban environment,” (12) and uses “a bottom-up approach, which highlights the household and the family within the neighborhood as a main site of social interaction” (16). Donner is particularly interested in analyzing how globalization and the introduction of so-called neo-liberal policies in India since the late 1980s/early 1990s have affected urban women’s lives and middle-class practices. To do so, she has done extensive fieldwork over three year-long visits and several shorter stays in some Calcutta middle-class neighborhoods. Thereby she has been able to follow some key women of different ages, and their families, over a total period of ten years.

The result is a monograph about the Calcutta middle-class, which is, as Donner points out several times, one of the most well-researched and documented parts of the Indian middle-class segment in India. One may ask if there is anything new to contribute on this, and my answer is yes. The author focuses on motherhood and what it means to be a middle-class woman in contemporary Kolkata, thereby looking at the domestic sphere and at the contemporary, post-liberalization middle-class, both of which are aspects of the Calcutta middle-class that have not been researched very much.

The book consists of five chapters, plus a lengthy introduction and a brief conclusion. Of these, parts of the introduction and sections of four of the chapters have been published previously as six different articles. This may be the reason why the book in form is less of a traditional anthropological monograph and to some extent resembles a collection of articles, with Introduction and Chapter 1 functioning as the glue that binds the remaining four ethnographic chapter topics together.

The introduction deals with methodological issues, such as presentation of context and description of fieldwork, which are important for a thorough understanding of the field. More interesting, however, is the discussion of the dilemmas of doing urban fieldwork among women. Donner points out how urban anthropology largely has focused on public sites, while studies of women in India necessarily have focused on domestic, private sites. By focusing on ‘the gendered city’ or what could more correctly be termed ‘the city of women’, Donner aims to bring these two, seemingly opposite sites – the urban public sphere and women’s domestic sphere – together. In the remaining five chapters of the book, this aim is only partially reached. Just as the chapter headings emphasize the household/ private/ bottom-up/ ‘women’s room’ strand, this is also the main emphasis of each chapter. However, ‘the urbanity’ of the project is not totally lost, as it remains present in the background throughout the book. In *Chapter 1, Middle-class Domesticities and Maternities*, Donner presents theoretical debates regarding topics such as motherhood, parenting, kinship, and family-planning, which in the South Asian

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context generally are treated separately, and argues that these need to be brought together. As such, the chapter functions as a good overview of relevant theoretical debates. Donner also has, however, her own theoretical agenda. By arguing that the book is about 'making mothers' and about 'doing class' (62), Donner argues in favor of a process oriented, practice approach to class and gender and criticizes the ethno-sociological approach with its focus on cultural meaning, which has been so popular in many anthropological studies of South Asia.

In the four remaining chapters, Donner (finally) gets to the ethnography of middleclass women in Calcutta and how their lives and practices have changed with the introduction of neo-liberal policies. These chapters deal with one topic each, and are organized in a pattern according to a woman's lifecycle: Chapter 2 is about marriage; Chapter 3 is about birthing and decisions about having children; Chapter 4 is about schooling and the education of one's children; and Chapter 5 is about food and consumption. Because Donner has worked with women of different generations in the same families over a period of ten years, she has been in a position to see how mothers of teenagers have become grandmothers. She has thereby been able to analyze how these grandmothers compare their own marriage, birthing and education practices with those of their daughters or daughters-in-law.

One of *Domestic Goddesses* main strengths is how Donner shows with ethnographic detail that globalization (or neo-liberal restructuring) "is not only taking place in the economic sphere," but affects families and gender roles as well (129). For example, in the chapter on education, Donner argues that although education has been one of the marks of the Indian middle-class since colonial times, the changes that have occurred in India's economy and job market have created great uncertainty for middle-class parents regarding their children's future job prospects. Middle-class parents experience 'a need to compete' and the result is a lot of tension in families regarding what type of school to choose and what type of coaching to provide for their children. Donner brings out succinctly how mothers are viewed as key facilitators for their children's educational success, and how this again creates tension among women within joint families regarding division of work tasks. In the chapter on birthing Donner also demonstrates out how changes in the economic sphere – in this case, the proliferation of private hospitals in Indian cities during the last fifteen to twenty years – have brought with them profound changes in the intimate sphere of women's lives. Whereas women of the grandmothers' generation would move to their natal home to give birth and thereby experience the care and comfort of being with 'their own' during this time, and whereas women of the mothers' generation increasingly were forced by their in-laws to give birth at their house or in a hospital close to their house, young women today generally give birth in a nearby hospital that was selected by their in-laws. Furthermore, given a choice these women opt for elective Caesarean sections. Donner argues that the main reason for the popularity of a Caesarean section is not only that it is viewed as less painful than a 'normal' birth, but that it requires that the birthing woman rest afterward. With the shift of the place of birth from the natal home to a hospital close to the house of the affines, women lost the opportunity to rest and be taken care of by their mother and natal relatives during this difficult time. A Caesarean section, however, legitimizes a demand for rest in the in-laws house after birth. As Donner argues, by opting for a Caesarean section, women become "patients who undergo an 'operation'," and thereby "gain extended

periods of rest prescribed by their doctors” (121). So in a context where women increasingly give birth in a hospital close to their in-laws’ house, and where the general rule has been that the in-laws demand that they work hard right up until birth and take up their household duties again immediately after they return from the hospital, a Caesarean section legitimizes a period of respite for the young woman.

Domestic Goddesses is detailed, nuanced, well-researched and with an abundance of references. It brings together theoretical positions and empirical topics that generally are discussed apart and thus Donner succeeds in her aim of challenging ‘simplistic assumptions’ (89). Most importantly, by combining two strands within social anthropology that generally are kept apart, namely urban anthropology and what can be termed an anthropology of the household, this monograph contributes new, and sometimes unexpected, insights to the anthropology of India.

In spite of the long, in-depth fieldwork that the book is based on, the ethnography itself is rather sparse. In my view, there are two reasons for this. Firstly, because the four ethnographic chapters all have been published previously as articles, each of these chapters starts out with rather lengthy presentations of theories and context and ends with an analysis that frame the empirical material. Donner thus uses a lot of space to place her own findings within the research of others and qualifies her argument several places, so as not to draw any premature conclusions. Secondly, Donner has mostly chosen to present the ethnography in a ‘sociological’ manner, as examples to illustrate a general point (the exception here is *Chapter 3, The Place of Birth*). From an anthropological perspective, I wish that Donner had built up her argument more inductively, from in-depth ethnographic cases. In this way, the reader could have gotten more empirical detail and a stronger sense of the place and of the women who, after all, form the base of the monograph.

As it is, it takes time before Donner gets to her own ethnography and when she does, it is presented more as brief examples. Given the fact that the book is presented as an anthropological monograph, the sparse ethnography is the book’s greatest weakness. The sparse ethnography is also the reason why *Domestic Goddesses* as a whole would not be suitable for use in the undergraduate or graduate anthropology classroom. However, its academic strengths lie in its many references, details and insights into how globalization and neo-liberal policies have affected middle-class women’s maternal practices in urban India. Therefore, single chapters of the book would be useful in the classroom. The introduction – or the article that part of the introduction is based on – would be useful in classes on methodology for its groundbreaking discussions about urban anthropology and gender. And all four ethnographic chapters would be useful in classes on women/gender in South Asia. All in all, *Domestic Goddesses* provides new insights into the effects of globalization on Indian society with its detailed analysis of changes in middle-class women’s practices and domestic lives in Calcutta. As such *Domestic Goddesses* fills a lacuna and contributes significantly to the anthropology of South Asia.