

“Everything Is Not About Convenience”: State, Family, and Supermarket in Middle-Class West Bengal

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In advanced industrialized economies, planners often use middle-class understandings of how consumption does and should work to justify how costs and benefits are arranged throughout a food supply chain. This Article examines the emergence of large supermarkets in the East Indian State of West Bengal where both the category middle class and the construction of food supply chains are in flux. Via a qualitative case study of a middle-class suburb of Kolkata, the Article challenges the common argument that consumer demand drives supply and, in turn, questions the idea of middle-class consumer welfare as a stable metric that analysts can use to evaluate the transformation of food systems in India. It explores instead how supermarkets act as cultural intermediaries, attempting to connect new ideas of convenience to middle-class female sensibilities—and attempting to displace older understandings of food shopping among middle-class Bengalis as highly skilled, and often highly masculine, labor that involves intensive practices of personal service, community sociability, and, at times, local redistributive politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Currently, large retail corporations are vying to transform food systems in India: from fragmented networks of small farmers and traders, which end in the crowded local bazaar, to highly centralized sourcing networks that dramatically limit the number of market participants, and which end in the modern, air-conditioned, highly standardized supermarket.¹ To justify this transformation—including its potential effects on small producers, traders, and retailers—policy elites invoke the Indian middle class. More specifically, they describe middle-class consumers as inexorable drivers and avid beneficiaries of new corporate scale economies that are supposed to offer lower prices, greater brand variety, and the convenience of shopping under one roof. For example, Roopa Purushothaman, economist and former retail strategist, describes an exploding middle class, “funding . . . all this consumption that you are going to see . . . coming on line.”² Supermarket opponents, in parallel fashion, contest the statistical significance as well as the morality of the “‘great’ middle class, for whom malls and multiplexes are built . . . stained with the blood and tears of evicted farmers.”³

In India, as in the advanced industrialized economies of the West, policy elites thus use middle-class understandings of how consumption does and should work to rationalize how costs and benefits are arranged throughout a food supply chain. In a symposium devoted to equity in food systems, this Article explores some of the contingencies of new middle-class consumer desires for supermarkets in India and, in turn, questions their emergence as a stable or necessary “equity” metric that analysts can use to evaluate how Indian food supply chains should change. To that end, the Article makes two intertwined claims. First, it challenges the common argument that consumer demand drives supply. That is, it challenges the idea that the spread of supermarkets in India reflects market competition based on consumer demand—at least in any sort of simple or straightforward way. The Article illustrates instead how supermarket growth depends on local and state regulations as well as by political decisions that significantly are often justified, but not necessarily led, by consumer desires.⁴ Second, and relatedly, the Article illustrates how supermarkets aim to endow consumers with new social and cultural tastes—creating rather than simply satisfying new aspirational forms of class and gender identity. More specifically, it explores how in middle-class Bengali Hindu communities where men traditionally shop for fresh food, retailers link changing gendered ideas of work in the “private” sphere of the home—such as who decides

1. Amy J. Cohen, *Supermarkets in India: Struggles over the Organization of Agricultural Markets and Food Supply Chains*, 68 U. MIAMI L. REV. 19, 21 (2013).

2. GETTING 1.1 BILLION'S ATTENTION: GROWING CONSUMERISM IN INDIA (Films Media Group 2007) [hereinafter GETTING 1.1 BILLION'S ATTENTION].

3. Partho Sarathi Ray, *Will the “Great Indian Middle Class” Show Up, Please*, SANHATI (Apr. 9, 2008), <http://sanhati.com/excerpted/743> [https://perma.cc/K4ES-4Q99].

4. An argument, including its attention to gender, indebted to TRACEY DEUTSCH, *BUILDING A HOUSEWIFE'S PARADISE: GENDER, POLITICS, AND AMERICAN GROCERY STORIES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* (Univ. of N.C. Press 2010).

what food to purchase and where—to changing practices of class and consumption, that is, who populates the new “public” spaces of shopping malls and large supermarkets.

The Article thus traces how new forms of capitalism and middle-class consumption evolve through the state, market, and not least through the family. To that end, it uses a case study of an upper-middle-class suburb of Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal created by the British East India Company in 1690 and officially renamed Kolkata in 2001. The suburb, known either as Bidhannagar, named after Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy, or Salt Lake, named after the salty marshland from which it was constructed, was envisioned by its planners as a model of middle-class development. Over the course of five months in 2010, I interviewed forty-nine (self-described) middle-class households in Salt Lake about how they purchase food.⁵ I also interviewed eight municipal government officials, ten retail managers, and numerous small produce and grocery vendors about the growth of supermarket chains in the area over the preceding five years.⁶

I begin in Part I with a brief overview of Salt Lake and its upper-middle-class demographics. In Part II, I illustrate how supermarket growth in and around Salt Lake is driven by state and municipal regulations and decisions that advantage large retail stores—for reasons, I suggest, that have far less to do with satisfying consumer preferences than policy rhetoric belies. In Part III, I trace how supermarkets act as cultural intermediaries selling new ways of life as much as new commodities,⁷ including by reshaping how consumers experience values such as quality, convenience, and autonomy—values that policymakers, in turn, invoke on consumers’ behalves. Finally, in Part IV, I illustrate how supermarkets aim to engender new experiences of consumer loyalty and identity by linking these new ideas of quality, convenience, and autonomy to putative middle-class female interests—and by displacing older understandings of food shopping as highly skilled, and often highly masculine, labor that involves intensive practices of personal service, community sociability, and, at times, local redistributive politics.

5. The vast majority of these interviews were with Bengali Hindu families. Four interviews were with Marwari families (on Marwaris, *see infra* note 24 and surrounding text), and two were with professional families that had migrated from other states (a pair of physicians from Bihar and a pair of university professors from Karnataka). Many of these interviews included multiple family members and generations and spanned roughly two hours. Family interviews were anonymous. Most interviews were conducted in English; for the remainder I used translators as indicated in the footnotes.

6. I represent interviews with retail managers by general role and company, and I represent select interviews with municipal figures by general municipal position (and more senior officials by name and title). Here too most interviews were in English; any translation is indicated in the footnotes.

7. *See* Geoffrey Lawrence & Jane Dixon, *Supermarkets*, in HANDBOOK OF INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD 213, 222 (Alessandro Bonanno & Lawrence Busch eds., 2015).

I. MIDDLECLASSNESS AND SUPERMARKETS IN SALT LAKE

Salt Lake is a particularly apt field site for this study on supermarkets and middle-class consumption. After independence, government officials targeted a large expanse of marshy land on the outskirts of Calcutta as a middle-class refuge from the high population density, large-scale immigration, and intensive, if also haphazard, efforts at urban planning that increasingly characterized the city.⁸ With the investment and engineering expertise of a Yugoslavian firm, officials proposed to create “a self contained high income and middle income residential Township” that would be “self-sufficient . . . [in] urban services and systems”—especially as “compared to the ailing services of adjoining areas in Calcutta.”⁹ Officials argued, in turn, that a planned middle-class suburb would revitalize the city by “project[ing] a bold image of New Calcutta [as] . . . a burgeoning modern City.”¹⁰

Development of Salt Lake began in 1962. The area was divided into three residential sectors and two sectors for small-scale industrial and commercial activity. Residential sectors featured community and cultural centers, parks, bus routes, schools, local government offices, a stadium, and, of course, numerous food retail establishments—colloquially called “block” or “local” markets.¹¹ As the Director-General of Operations for the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority put it, “when all of [the planned amenities] have been provided, nobody in Bidhan Nagar need travel more than 1000 feet to meet his day-to-day needs.”¹²

Once designed, planners set about populating Salt Lake with middle-class Bengali families. The state government of West Bengal’s Urban Development Department retained formal ownership of all the residential, commercial, and municipal land in Salt Lake (a practice it continues to this day). It offered residents long-term (999-year) leaseholds that they could use to build homes but not sell as assets for profit.¹³ Consistent with a post-independence Nehruvian development ethos, property rights were thus cast as instruments of state-led planning rather than market-based exchange. Intended beneficiaries included men (and their families) who had served the state in various ways and/or who had lost land in Bangladesh in the war for independence. Residents could purchase allotments either through state affiliation or by participating in a government lottery. The modest fees required to purchase leaseholds meant both that the area was affordable for middle-class families squeezed out of more desirable locations in Calcutta, and that poor

8. RAKA RAY & SEEMIN QAYUM, CULTURES OF SERVITUDE: MODERNITY, DOMESTICITY, AND CLASS IN INDIA 39–42 (2009).

9. CALCUTTA METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, AREA DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY FOR SALT-LAKE TOWNSHIP (BIDHAN NAGAR) 1.4, 2.8 (1976).

10. *Id.* at 4.1.6. As is often the case, development involved displacement—fishing villagers that populated the marshes found themselves resettled in poor urban areas outside of the jurisdiction of the new municipality.

11. D.P. Chatterjea, *Bidhan Nagar: From Marshland to Modern City*, in CALCUTTA: THE LIVING CITY, VOLUME II: THE PRESENT AND FUTURE 176, 177 (Sukanta Chaudhuri ed. 1990).

12. *Id.*

13. CALCUTTA METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY, *supra* note 9, at 3.93.

families nonetheless could not participate in the lottery system. One ex-ward councilor in Salt Lake illustrates the point by explaining that domestic laborers “do not have any place [to live] in Salt Lake”¹⁴—creating what Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum have called a “‘servant problem’ for the newly suburban elite.”¹⁵

Today, Salt Lake houses over 200,000 people.¹⁶ By one rough estimate of income and housing, most families fall squarely within middle-class or upper-middle-class indicators.¹⁷ Of course, being middle-class in India is not simply about economic or income status.¹⁸ As numerous scholars have shown, “middleclassness” is a lived and heterogeneous social and cultural classification—and one that has changed over time.¹⁹ To briefly summarize one significant shift, once in Bengal, to be middle class primarily meant being educated, likely English-speaking, and having a salaried (often civil-service-oriented) profession.²⁰ Today, it also increasingly signifies being someone who can purchase middle-class goods.²¹

I asked nearly all the households I interviewed what it means to be residents of a community designed for the Bengali middle class. Only one answered in purely productionist terms, describing living among “the most educated class . . . professors, or the teachers, or people who work in the government” rather than “businessmen.”²² The vast majority, by contrast, discussed their own class self-understandings as a measure of how much they had to deliberate before purchasing consumer goods; who could enjoy consumer amenities and luxuries while shopping such as air-conditioning and status-conscious brands; and who instead understood shopping as hard *work* (perhaps also intertwined with simple pleasures like aimless conversation with other men in Sunday morning markets).

14. Interview with ex-ward councilor, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 9, 2010) (translated by Mitra Routh).

15. RAY & QAYUM, *supra* note 8, at 40.

16. GOV'T OF INDIA MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS, INDIA OFFICE OF THE REGISTRAR GEN. & CENSUS COMM'R, CENSUS OF INDIA (2011), <http://www.censusindia.gov.in> [<https://perma.cc/Q8XZ-JLKV>].

17. See ETH STUDIO BASEL, SALT LAKE CITY: AN IDEAL CITY JUST COMPLETED, http://www.studio-basel.com/assets/files/03_Salt%20Lake%20City_web.pdf [<https://perma.cc/QK6R-FMZP>].

18. On the politics of measuring the Indian middle class, see LEELA FERNANDES, INDIA'S NEW MIDDLE CLASS: DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN AN ERA OF ECONOMIC REFORM 76–86 (2006).

19. There is an extensive literature on the Indian middle class, much of which is beyond the scope of this Article. For an overview, see, for example, William Mazzarella, *Middle Class*, in KEYWORDS IN SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES (R. Dwyer & S. Sinha eds., 2005).

20. See, e.g., FERNANDES, *supra* note 18, at 5; Henrike Donner & Geert De Neve, *Introduction to BEING MIDDLE-CLASS IN INDIA: A WAY OF LIFE* 1, 3–4 (Henrike Donner ed., 2011) [hereinafter BEING MIDDLE-CLASS IN INDIA].

21. See, e.g., Donner & De Neve, *supra* note 20; see also FERNANDES, *supra* note 18, at 76–77; Henrike Donner, *Gendered Bodies, Domestic Work and Perfect Families: New Regimes of Gender and Food in Bengali Middle-Class Lifestyles*, in BEING MIDDLE-CLASS IN INDIA, *supra* note 20, at 47, 48–49; Timothy J. Scrase & Ruchira Ganguly-Scrase, *Globalization, Neoliberalism and Middle-Class Cultural Politics in Kolkata*, in BEING MIDDLE-CLASS IN INDIA, *supra* note 20, at 117, 118–20; see also MARK LIECHTY, SUTTABLY MODERN: MAKING MIDDLE-CLASS CULTURE IN A NEW CONSUMER SOCIETY 65–66 (2003) (describing urban Kathmandu).

22. Interview with household in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 28, 2010).

Many linked class to both consumption and ethnicity to explain how the demographics of Salt Lake have changed. In the last few years, Bengali families have increasingly transferred their leaseholds in Salt Lake to Marwari families who may pay a premium for what remains a formally illegal sale. Marwaris are members of an ethnic migrant community in West Bengal, many of whom have accumulated wealth from business, commerce, and merchant trading activities.²³ Some of my interlocutors expressed concern about a growing upper-class Marwari population—a shift they argued that was made particularly visible by new public practices of consumption. For example, one middle-aged housewife described the influx of Marwari families on her block—“you can see them around in the shopping malls,” she added, “they’ve made their presence felt.”²⁴

Bengali families also pointed to changing professional, in addition to changing ethnic, demographics to debate the stability of Salt Lake as a solidly middle-class space. In 2006, the state government reclaimed the industrial sector of Salt Lake (Sector V) from the democratically elected Salt Lake municipality to create an “IT hub” for domestic and multinational technology corporations. The state appointed a board of official and industry representatives that, in turn, invited private sector companies to develop services such as water, sewage, and sanitation via a user-fee regime.²⁵ Then-board chairman S.A. Ahmed explained that corporate professionals require infrastructure of a higher standard than ordinary Salt Lake residents. Currently, Ahmed added, the board is “planning, also, in a very precise way . . . how existing hawkers or vendors could be replaced with sophisticated stores, decent, aesthetic kinds of stores . . . [to] give you a decent look to Sector V.”²⁶

Given these class and professional demographics, as well as the city’s development and aesthetic aspirations, it is not surprising that supermarkets set their sights on Salt Lake. As one retail strategist told me: “Salt Lake is not the real Indian consumer, but higher middle-class people, people who travel abroad. They are used to this kind of shopping.”²⁷ In 2005, a regional supermarket, C3 The Market Place, anchored Salt Lake’s inaugural upscale shopping complex. In 2008, a national supermarket chain, Big Bazaar, built a hypermarket in Salt Lake with grocery and department store goods. Shortly thereafter, Big Bazaar opened a second store just over the municipal line on a major artery (EM Bypass). A second national chain, Spencer’s, opened in a shopping mall nearby, aiming to differentiate itself with a

23. See, e.g., RITU BIRLA, *STAGES OF CAPITAL: LAW, CULTURE, AND MARKET GOVERNANCE IN LATE COLONIAL INDIA* (2009); BARBARA HARRISS-WHITE, *RURAL COMMERCIAL CAPITAL: AGRICULTURAL MARKETS IN WEST BENGAL* 30–31 (2008).

24. Interview with household in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 22, 2010) (translated by Mona Saha). For their part, the four Marwari families I interviewed likewise described how retail development pushes middle-class families to live at a higher standard than they thought was advisable to maintain.

25. For details, see Vivek Bharadwaj, *Development of Water Supply & Sewerage Systems at Sector-V*, in PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIP PROJECTS IN URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE 28 (2009), http://vivekbharadwaj.in/public_private_partnership.pdf [https://perma.cc/3SKB-ENHJ].

26. Interview with S.A. Ahmed, IAS Chairman, Nabadiganta Industrial Township Authority (Sector V), in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 8, 2010).

27. Interview with business manager, Future Group, in New Town, Kolkata (Sept. 28, 2010).

more upmarket customer base.²⁸ But, as we shall see, even in Salt Lake the growth of supermarkets does not reflect a simple story of consumer demand—be it for new forms of convenience, low prices, or an expanding variety of branded commodities.

II. SUPERMARKETS AND THE STATE

In West Bengal, as everywhere, it is impossible to make sense of the transformations in how people buy and consume food without attention to the background regulatory rules and political decisions that structure their choices and decisions. In this case, these rules are complex if not contradictory, reflecting the myriad institutional arrangements that comprise the Bengali “state.” From 1977 through 2011, West Bengal was governed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPIM). The CPIM instituted social democratic and populist policies including, in recent years, policies to restrict supermarket growth. For example, at the state level, the CPIM limited supermarket scale economies by using a legislative licensing regime to prevent supermarkets from sourcing produce directly from farmers via private production contracts—a globalizing model of supermarket procurement that depends on a liberal legal regime of contract recognition and enforcement.²⁹

Supermarket survival, however, does not rest simply on supply-chain technology and sourcing efficiency. It also depends (among other things) on supermarket capacity to transform urban space. Here, the CPIM—at the municipal level—paradoxically attempted to facilitate supermarket growth as part of a municipal strategy to enhance private capital development. In 2007, for example, the Kolkata Municipal Development Authority, which was controlled by the CPIM, sold prime urban retail space to the Indian supermarket chain Reliance Fresh. This space, however, was already populated by a major downtown market, Park Circus, comprised of several hundred small grocery, fish, meat, and produce vendors who held long-term leaseholds purchased from the state to operate their shops. These vendors staged numerous protests and rallies that eventually prompted Reliance to cancel the sale. In my interviews, numerous Park Circus vendors made clear that their struggle was as much against the leftist state, and its growing support for private investment and capital-led development,³⁰ as it was against Reliance (one of India’s largest corporations, now in the food retail business). Vendors viewed the proposed sale of their market as an expropriation—an unjust transfer by the state from small-scale capitalists to a conglomerate—and demanded robust forms of compensation and rehabilitation.

28. I should add: in Salt Lake, there were a few predecessors to self-service grocery shopping. In 1998, a small grocery, Charnock City, opened offering specialty and imported items unavailable in local markets. A few years later, a second convenience-store sized grocery (and local chain), Arambagh’s Foodmart, opened offering frozen meats including its own line of processed and frozen chicken parts.

29. Cohen, *supra* note 1, at 57–78.

30. See generally Dia Da Costa, *Tensions of Neo-Liberal Development: State Discourse and Dramatic Oppositions in West Bengal*, 41 CONTRIBUTIONS TO INDIAN SOC. 287 (2007).

My argument in this Part, however, is not simply that market transformations (or their failures) depend on state power. Instead, my aim, returning to Salt Lake, is to explore some of the interests and justifications that motivate state actors to attempt to transform how people shop for food. In 2008, Salt Lake municipal officials began to cultivate plans to develop upscale shopping via joint ventures with private domestic investment firms. As Kolkata's largest English language newspaper, the Telegraph announced, "Bidhannager Municipality has decided to turn six of the fourteen block markets in Salt Lake into malls."³¹ These new markets—which were not in fact imagined to be as grand as malls—would include underground parking and several air-conditioned floors of retail establishments, as well as an outdoor space where small grocers and fresh food vendors could continue to ply their trade. Ex-Vice Chairman of Salt Lake Nandagopal Bhattacharjee explained that the residents of Salt Lake "are a bit well to do It is a city where you have at least 50,000 graduates."³² As such, "the requirements of the citizens have grown higher. And they want amenities at the time of marketing. They want A/C market[s], they want quality things, they don't bother for cost."³³ In other words, retail formats, he argued, should match class-based consumer preferences and desires.

But despite Bhattacharjee's description of the state acting to meet the demands of its elite citizens through facilitating and supporting market change, most plans for market redevelopment quickly stalled. The challenge was not attracting private development capital but rather consumer goodwill. Salt Lake's upper-middle-class residents, rather than embracing more upscale shopping, protested the noise and air pollution likely to accompany high-rise buildings with parking facilities. They also objected to the increased consumption of water and electricity necessary to maintain new retail formats, which, they predicted, would undermine their own supplies. The secretary of the Bidhannager Welfare Association thus summarized his constituents as "a conservative group"; that is, people who "want development but not much development."³⁴

In 2010, consumer resistance, along with opposition from small retailers, left most plans for even this sort of intermediate-scale market redevelopment on hold. To my surprise, several Salt Lake officials I interviewed described consumer opposition sympathetically. Indeed, some more generally discussed their own preferences for existing markets even as they explained that they enjoyed the experience of selectively visiting new shopping malls. As the ex-ward councilor put

31. Soumen Bhattacharjee, *Six Block Markets Eye Makeover*, THE TELEGRAPH, Apr. 15, 2008.

32. Interview with Nandagopal Bhattacharjee, Ex-Vice-Chairman of Salt Lake, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 2, 2010). In 2011, the opposition party, Trinamool Congress, ousted the CPIM at the state level. During my fieldwork in 2010, Trinamool Congress had just won the municipal elections in Salt Lake. Therefore, I indicate whether I am interviewing a then-current Salt Lake official (from Trinamool Congress) or an ex-official (from the CPIM).

33. *Id.*

34. Interview with Kumar Sankar Sadhu, Secretary of the Bidhannager Welfare Association, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 23, 2010).

it: “I need some potato right now, where do we go, to the shopping mall? It’s not that It is a must that you should have a local market in your place.”³⁵ Her assistant, a city engineer, likewise explained that he would go to the City Centre and C3 twice a month, perhaps for ice cream or frozen items, but “I’ll go to the local market maybe every day.”³⁶ These markets, he continued, “carry the everyday shopper . . . he gets the fresh vegetables, he pays once a month . . . there’s lots of reasons why people tend to go to the local market. There are people who call on the phone and have the things sent . . . [they] don’t even walk to the . . . local market.”³⁷ In other words, these officials *liked* their local markets (even as they also supported particular forms of gentrification, including select supermarket development).

Nor was it clear that large-scale redevelopment would invariably generate more revenue for the municipality.³⁸ Policy analysts routinely use the terms “unorganized” or “informal” to describe the existing Indian retail sector—terms that suggest an undifferentiated mass of vendors operating outside of formal regulatory supervision and control. But many vendors who work in Salt Lake markets are subject to various forms of state governance. Many, for example, pay to the municipality a fixed initial sum for their leaseholds, monthly rent based on square footage, and yearly license fees. As Anupam Datta, the then-Chairman in Council of Salt Lake (whose portfolio included marketing), told me, “the revenue we are generating from the local markets is quite good and satisfactory . . . it’s not that only we are generating revenues from the shopping malls and Big Bazaar and all, but from the local markets, if we take it . . . altogether then the revenue is quite high.”³⁹

Given that the current state of affairs appeals to local shoppers, including officials making policy, and provides the municipality with a steady source of income, what do supermarkets add from the perspective of municipal development? Some Salt Lake officials explained that a different set of financial and political considerations were at stake. Sabya Sachi Dutta, the then-Vice-Chairman of Salt Lake, offered the following two arguments when I asked about the development of large corporate retail chains. First, he reasoned (rather ambitiously) that “some markets have to be kept for the local residents. Okay But some [must be made] open [to multinationals]. Otherwise, I can’t bring tourist customers; I can’t bring foreign currencies.”⁴⁰ In other words, Dutta proposed that supermarkets help to

35. Interview with ex-ward councilor, *supra* note 14.

36. Interview with assistant to ex-ward councilor, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 9, 2010).

37. *Id.*

38. Although given the complex regulatory rules governing rents, taxes, and license fees, supermarkets could boost revenues for other state agencies in different ways.

39. Interview with Anupam Datta, Chairman in Council of Salt Lake, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 15, 2010) (translated by Mitra Routh).

40. Interview with Sabya Sachi Dutta, Vice-Chairman of Salt Lake, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 20, 2010).

embed Salt Lake into a cosmopolitan and high-tech globalizing economy, including through the circulation of foreign capital.

Second, Dutta implied that large corporate retail establishments create the possibilities for a new kind of modern state (one quite different from the state that governed post-independence India where officials used licensing power to channel resources to multiple government departments and bureaucrats). If Salt Lake wished to attract international business, he groused, “the whole thing has to be under . . . one roof.”⁴¹ “If I go for multinational companies—see if I call for the big houses . . . they’re not going to come . . . [if they must] get a license from one municipality or permission from one urban development [a state-level department].”⁴² Dutta thus submitted that large-scale market redevelopment requires (and, in turn, helps constitute) a particular kind of state—one that mimics the highly rationalized governance structures of corporate retail chains themselves, where political authority, like market commodities, resides quite literally under one roof.⁴³

Dutta’s arguments indicate some of the motivations that led political elites to promote policies to foster the development of supermarket chains in India. They suggest that low prices, brand variety, and convenience were not necessarily the primary reasons why some policymakers supported the opening up of India’s supermarket sector. Policy elites nevertheless continued to invoke the putative interests of a new upper-middle class to explain supermarket expansion. But, as I explore in the part that follows, retail managers know well what Salt Lake officials mostly left implicit: a new class identity must be created as much as found.⁴⁴

III. THE MARKET

Part of why the market redevelopment efforts in Salt Lake stalled—indeed part of why supermarkets in India generally are developing *far* less rapidly than retail analysts initially predicted⁴⁵—is precisely because what counts as convenience, commodity quality, trust, and efficiency is not predetermined. As such, what supermarkets have to offer consumers is not necessarily perceived as a market advantage by their users. To the contrary, supermarkets must recreate consumers with new cultural tastes and practices, in part by redefining what trust, quality, convenience, and choice mean to shoppers. To that end, the retail managers and strategists I interviewed attended carefully to how different class- and gender-based

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.*

43. *See generally* Amy J. Cohen & Jason Jackson, How Markets Make States: Multinational Supermarkets in the Indian Bazaar (on file with authors).

44. *See, e.g.*, Julien Cayla & Mark Elson, *Indian Consumer Kaun Hai?*, *The Class-Based Grammar of Indian Advertising*, 32 J. MACROMARKETING 295, 306 (2012).

45. In 2013, India slipped from the fifth to the fourteenth most attractive developing economy for organized retail expansion. A.T. Kearney, *Global Retailers: Cautiously Aggressive or Aggressively Cautious?* (2013), <https://www.atkearney.com> [<https://perma.cc/3RWF-YJNU>].

subject positions may inform how people interpret and experience these constructs on the ground.

Most of the consumers I interviewed described supermarkets as a double-edged sword for middle-class Bengali life, promising opportunities, along with anxieties, indexed by elite commodities and cosmopolitan identities. As one mother (who works as a teacher trainer) told me, “we traveled from here, say, to England, and we then got to see Swiss watches. Now, we don’t need to go all the way there, you have them here . . . Obviously, we’re looking towards the West, and we’ve decided that it’s a wonderful thing to have [shopping malls]; it’s neater, cleaner, easier shopping, you’re in air-conditioned comfort.”⁴⁶ At the same time, several families simultaneously worried that supermarkets and shopping malls would undermine what scholars have described as a “deliberately austere” middle-class Bengali lifestyle marked by values such as thrift and savings.⁴⁷ Supermarkets, many told me, feature endless displays of frivolous consumer temptations that encourage greater household spending—describing them precisely as “allegories of modernity as a fallen state.”⁴⁸ As one female college student remarked, supermarkets give middle-class families “an opportunity . . . to get hold of the thing that they might not be getting in this local market but . . . when you see many things displayed you get lured, it’s not good.”⁴⁹ Others characterized this sort of consumption as at odds with their own middle-class social sensibilities. As a retired officer in the steel industry told me, “I feel [supermarkets are] related to high status and I don’t quite like it.”⁵⁰ He elaborated, “a lot of people who come to shop in Big Bazaar get their own vehicle . . . they can walk in and spend money without thinking for a second time. See, things like that make me feel somehow that I do not belong to that category.”⁵¹ In other words, my interlocutors discussed the choice of where and how to shop for food as a way to describe class itself as a “constantly reenacted cultural project.”⁵²

Corporate retail chains attempt to exploit these class markers, ambitions, and anxieties in order to cultivate loyalty, group affiliation, and new cultural tastes, often by deploying practices of market differentiation and segmentation as a profit-making strategy. For example, an operations manager of Spencer’s Retail Limited explained that Spencer’s was named after a colonial-era European brand that invokes “high markets” not “the common man.”⁵³ The chain wishes to attract a different generation of shoppers that desires ambiance, air-conditioning, and variety. To that end, Spencer’s aims to expand consumption by de-emphasizing

46. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 15, 2010).

47. Donner, *supra* note 21, at 52; *see also* Scrase & Ganguly-Scrase, *supra* note 21.

48. Meaghan Morris, *Things to Do With Shopping Centres*, in *THE CULTURAL STUDIES READER* 391, 409 (Simon During ed., 2d ed. 1999).

49. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 3, 2010).

50. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 22, 2010) (translated by Mona Saha).

51. *Id.*

52. *See* LIECHTY, *supra* note 21, at 37 (emphasis omitted).

53. Interview with operations manager, Spencer’s Retail Ltd., in Kolkata (Aug. 31, 2010).

cheapness and price in favor of “value”—that is, the idea, the operations manager explained, that Spencer’s prices reflect “quality”—as well as by cultivating a particular discerning sensibility that appeals to the “convenience seeker.”⁵⁴

But cultivating a new sensibility of quality and convenience is its own retail challenge. Here is how the operations manager explained the necessary transition: local markets require active work: “You do not know what is the right price. You have to select things . . . You have to select the good from the bad” perhaps under unpleasant conditions (“In this rainy season, the markets are very dirty”).⁵⁵ Spencer’s, by contrast, locates the labor of shopping at a different moment in the process, with different communicative and decision-making skills required. That is, Spencer’s envisions shoppers who wish to select among predefined gradations in commodities rather than to engage in more blunt and open-ended calculations of value (Is the fish fresh? Is the price fair? Can I trust this vendor to hand me a solid commodity?). A senior business manager of Reliance Retail Limited likewise explained that Reliance Fresh would appeal to “educated” consumers who themselves “want to compare between brands, between flavors, between colors, everywhere.”⁵⁶ He offered an example: “If you are going to see a wiper [in a Reliance store], you need to have at least ten wipers, different models, different colors to offer you. Now what happens in normal retail, I go, I ask for a wiper, he gives it. . . . I don’t know whether it’s the best quality.”⁵⁷ In “modern retail,” he continued, “I can get [information about quality and price] by reading it . . . I can go shop [with] my own perception, with my own education, with my own understanding and just come out.”⁵⁸

Consumers, however, may be reluctant to experience quality through brand differentiation expressed through written information (about freshness, price, ingredients, models) on the surface of a product. For example, one young professional described how he learned to examine and press the eyes and fins of a fish shopping with his father as a child. But now, working for most of the year overseas in Oman, he buys all his food in hypermarkets where the meat and fish is packaged: “Over there, every packet has got a packaging ticket. We just try to see what package is there and try to get the latest one, that’s the only thing we can do.”⁵⁹ Back home in India—where unlike in Oman supermarkets represent only approximately five percent of the food retail market⁶⁰—he purchases meat, fish, and produce in local markets. Or to put this point another way, upscale Indian supermarkets need to create a new breed of middle-class consumers who understand quality in highly particular ways; that is, people who *want* to read a packaging ticket rather than have a tactile experience with a fish.

54. *Id.*

55. *Id.*

56. Interview with business manager, Reliance Retail Ltd., in Kolkata, India. (Sept. 17, 2010).

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

59. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 9, 2010).

60. See, e.g., *Carrefour in India: A Wholesale Invasion*, THE ECONOMIST, May 22, 2010, at 70.

Big Bazaar, for its part, tries to attract consumers by appealing more to middle-class thrift as a strategy to cultivate consumer loyalty and identity. Whether and how supermarkets lower the prices for staple foods in developing countries remains the subject of some empirical debate. Sukhpal Singh, for example, summarizes several recent studies that report higher supermarket prices for fresh fruits and vegetables.⁶¹ Bart Minten, Thomas Reardon, and Rajib Sutradhar find mostly competitive prices in supermarkets in Delhi but observe that in traditional markets, poor consumers can negotiate price discounts and gain little from supermarkets’ focus on branded and prepackaged items or bulk sales.⁶² For the middle-class consumers of Salt Lake, however, Big Bazaar uses a range of schemes and promotions—for example, free onions and potatoes with purchases over a certain amount, coupon books for shoppers who meet price targets, or “buy two get one free” discounts. These strategies are designed to undercut local markets for specific basic goods (for which consumers are especially price sensitive)—at least for consumers who can afford to purchase in larger quantities.

But it would seem that neither new quality nor new price economies alone suffice to undercut local markets when supermarkets are disconnected from the social experiences that make shopping appealing, even seductive, to many Bengalis. As one middle-aged Bengali husband told me, when I asked him to explain why he preferred his local markets:

You meet a lot of people from your locality. [The vendors] treat you like a king, lots of tea, cigarettes. . . . And they ask a lot of personal questions, like *dada*⁶³ you have shaved off your moustache, okay, *dada* you have slimmed down. . . . That helps you, you know? That’s a selling point. So instead of buying vegetables worth 200 maybe that day I have billed myself 300. . . . We don’t mind, we’ve had a wonderful Sunday morning. I love that. I have learned it from my father, my grandfather.⁶⁴

Supermarkets find they are unable to mix consumption with pleasure and affect in similarly compelling ways. As a C3 store manager told me: “[W]hen you enter, it’s very air conditioned You can move around. Nobody is there to pester you and you pick up [items yourself]. But I still feel something is missing. You know, that one-to-one interaction . . . is missing, which we, especially the Bengalis, love very much.”⁶⁵ He asked me if I was familiar with *adda*—that is, idle, careless or “unrigorous” talk often perceived as “quintessentially Bengali.”⁶⁶ Practices of *adda*

61. Sukhpal Singh, *Controlling Food Inflation: Do Supermarkets Have a Role?*, ECON. & POL. WKLY., Apr. 30, 2011, at 20.

62. Bart Minten, Thomas Reardon, & Rajib Sutradhar, *Food Prices and Modern Retail: The Case of Delhi*, 38 WORLD DEV. 1775, 1778, 1784–85 (2010).

63. A respectful term of address.

64. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Nov. 6, 2010).

65. Interview with store manager, C3 The Mkt. Place, in Salt Lake, Kolkata, India (Aug. 29, 2010).

66. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Adda, Calcutta: Dwelling in Modernity*, 11 PUB. CULTURE 109, 110 (1999).

happen in particular spaces such as markets, often over food and drink,⁶⁷ and take place predominantly (although not exclusively) among men—at least in their “modern form in public life.”⁶⁸ Indeed, numerous older Bengali men told me how they would spend mornings sitting with their contemporaries in food markets engaging in *addas* over cups of sweet milk tea. *Adda* is also a practice that Bengalis worry is being lost—suggesting, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s analysis, “an unresolved question of the Bengali present: How to be at home in a globalized capitalism now.”⁶⁹

As brokers of globalized capitalism, Indian retail strategists thus aim to translate, rather than supplant, older cultural practices and market experiences. They train supermarket employees to learn customers’ names, ask after their families and children, and generally make customers feel “known” and comfortable. And retail managers debate how to manipulate the environment to make it feel more like a “local” space. For example, at the Big Bazaar outlet on EM bypass, store managers described ongoing discussions about how to add enough noise, such as loudspeaker announcements and music, in order to make the store feel like “your own bazaar” with sufficient “hallaballa” to persuade people that “this is not a fancy place.”⁷⁰ But not too much noise. Salt Lake customers, they explained, appreciate a “calm environment.”⁷¹ The Big Bazaar inside Salt Lake decided to emphasize personal service. “We try to invite that Indian-ness,” one store manager reasoned, by employing numerous staff to assist shoppers (“Here, people are used to getting help from other people”).⁷² At the same time, they also decided to keep the store without “a lot of cacophony . . . people shouting offer[s] . . . we have understood that [in Salt Lake] people don’t like that.”⁷³ Nor does “cacophony” reflect the experience shoppers have in Salt Lake; as one of my interlocutors put it, her local markets are rather “sophisticated.”⁷⁴

Retailer managers hope that by mimicking the practices of local markets, as best as they can learn them, they will foster familiar experiences of market sociality as well as market trust. A business manager for Future Group (the corporate group that created Big Bazaar) ventured that supermarkets face a distinctively “psychological” challenge; namely, the idea that “we trust our people.”⁷⁵ Modern retail, he exclaimed, offers refrigeration and a high standard of cleanliness and

67. MANPREET K. JANEJA, *TRANSACTIONS IN TASTE: THE COLLABORATIVE LIVES OF EVERYDAY BENGALI FOOD* (2010).

68. Chakrabarty, *supra* note 66, at 111.

69. *Id.* at 145.

70. Interview with store managers, Big Bazaar (EM Bypass), in Kolkata (Sept. 29, 2010).

71. *Id.*

72. Interview with store manager, Big Bazaar (Salt Lake), in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 23, 2010).

73. *Id.*

74. She elaborated: Salt Lake vendors “would never scream out and say ‘come to me.’” Rather their attitude is more like, “It’s fine, you want to choose our shop, choose it.” Interview with household in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Nov. 24, 2010) (translated by Anwesha Majumder).

75. Interview with business manager, Future Group, *supra* note 27.

hygiene; “still you say [local market vendors are] better, what is the logic?”⁷⁶ What this business manager calls “typical Indian trust”⁷⁷ matters a great deal, several retail strategists explained, to transact items sold loose such as grains, pulses, and fresh produce whose quality markers are perceived to reflect the authority, selection, knowledge, or skill of an individual vendor. It matters less for prepackaged processed items such as oil or biscuits and foreign items such as cornflakes, where quality is understood to follow more from standardized policies and brand recognition. Still, retail managers anticipated that for some consumers no supermarket can compete with the sociality, personal service, and authority of local markets for whatever the product. As the operations manager at Spencer’s conceded with a smile; convenience, quality, selection, air-conditioning hygiene, and value notwithstanding, “my dad will never” shop at Spencer’s.⁷⁸

Key market characteristics such as brand variety, hygiene, refrigeration, and standardization were thus hardly the most important, let alone the singular, factors that retail managers identified as important to consolidating their market power in Salt Lake. Nor did they presume that low prices alone could predetermine a competitive advantage for supermarkets. Some supermarkets debated whether and how to market themselves to poorer residents who populate the outskirts of the municipality. In 2010, the Big Bazaar on EM Bypass was experimenting with a (largely unenforceable) price guarantee pegged to local markets as well as promotions to reimburse the costs of public transportation for shoppers without cars.⁷⁹ But despite incipient attempts by central Indian government officials to conflate supermarket development with the welfare of “the common man,”⁸⁰ few retailers in Salt Lake attempted to argue that supermarkets were superior to local markets because of their lower prices. To the contrary, the Spencer’s operation manager proposed that overall supermarkets “cannot be cheaper than local market. I mean, how can that be, you know? You can just match up their price.”⁸¹ When I offered the common retail refrain that economies of scale and bulk purchasing drive down prices, he agreed that supermarkets selectively benefit from these efficiencies “but not to the extent that it’s actually having a life-changing effect on people.”⁸² Rather, he suggested, supermarkets are “making life comfortable for people like us.”⁸³

76. *Id.*

77. *Id.*

78. Interview with operations manager, Spencer’s Retail Ltd., *supra* note 53.

79. Interview with store managers, Big Bazaar, *supra* note 70.

80. See, e.g., *Sonia Gandhi in Shimla: FDI Will Benefit Both Farmers and Consumers*, PRESSBRIEF (Oct. 31, 2012, 9:14 PM), <http://pressbriefin.blogspot.com/2012/10/sonia-gandhi-in-shimla-fdi-will-benefit.html> [https://perma.cc/3XVJ-H5GA].

81. Interview with operations manager, Spencer’s Retail Ltd., *supra* note 53.

82. *Id.*

83. *Id.* He also argued that supermarkets help the Indian economy as a whole through incentivizing impulse purchases and generating employment.

This idea that what supermarkets ultimately sell is comfort and convenience to people like us—a phrase I interpreted as meant to signify middle- and upper-middle-class shoppers—depends finally on a highly gendered understanding of the supermarket consumer. In the West, supermarket growth has been widely associated with female shoppers. For example, Tracey Deutsch illustrates how in post-war America, supermarket managers “argued that women liked the convenience of larger stores, but even more so they needed the refinement of clean, well-lit, and orderly stores.”⁸⁴ She traces how American chain stores transformed retailing *not* through “their insistence on structural efficiencies or their celebration of low prices, but through their linking of these things to notions of women’s autonomy, independence, and lives”⁸⁵

Indian retail managers echoed this story as they told me how supermarkets offer alternatives for women to escape the menaces of local markets. One manager at Big Bazaar, for example, explained that women liked the chain because “they feel convenient. They feel secure when they’re coming to the store. They can pick up by their own hand”—that is, they can select goods themselves rather than depend on vendor to hand them particular items.⁸⁶ Likewise, another proposed that women are “more comfortable here” because “the hygiene factor is there.”⁸⁷ Supermarkets also offer women new spaces for community and sociality. For example, the EM Bypass Big Bazaar hosts cooking festivals. Housewives are invited to bring dishes, and chefs and customers taste the food over several days with prizes awarded to their favorite female home cooks. Few readers familiar with supermarkets in the West will be surprised by efforts to link food shopping with female desires and gendered forms of household labor and domestic social life. But in West Bengal this link represents a qualitative cultural and social shift. The particularities of the Bengali case therefore bear some explication.

IV. THE FAMILY

In traditional middle-class Bengali Hindu families, men shop for food—or rather they shop for produce, fish, poultry, and meat. Male heads of households, such as fathers-in-law and husbands, traditionally purchase these fresh ingredients daily or, if not, multiple times a week for meals that include rice, fish, vegetables, and lentils cooked daily by mothers-in-law, wives, and daughters-in-law (often with the help of a domestic servant who washes, cuts, and prepares ingredients). Consider, for example, this description by a middle-aged Bengali woman (and school teacher) of who shopped for fresh food in her childhood home: “It [was] usually my grandfather, then my father, lastly my uncle, but my uncle when he got married, only then. . . . So my mother and my aunt, no they never went out, not for

84. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 4, at 8.

85. *Id.* at 44.

86. Interview with store managers, Big Bazaar, *supra* note 70.

87. Interview with store manager, Big Bazaar, *supra* note 72.

this vegetable shopping and all that."⁸⁸ This was family convention, she explained, not an unbreakable household rule:

But yes, when things were different, like when my grandfather expired, my grandmother expired, my uncle was posted outside, my father had to leave for office because the Salt Lake was being developed [he was a civil engineer working on the marshland reclamation project] and there was no [time] for him. . . . So at that particular point in time my mother had to go out, she had to. But again my father found time because he thought that was how things were done in his family and that's how he should continue with it.⁸⁹

In this household, men understood food shopping as part of their patriarchal work responsibilities (as well as their entitlements to select particular kinds of household goods) and women shopped for fresh produce only when necessary.

Middle-class Bengali Hindu women, by contrast, typically purchase dry groceries such as grains, pulses, and spices, often by bringing (or phoning) monthly lists to a preferred grocer that will deliver items to the house. And women regularly instruct men on what fresh items to procure from local vendors (vendors, in turn, purchase their goods daily from local wholesale markets, sometimes replenishing their supplies during the mid-day market break).

My interlocutors offered their own theories to explain this division of household labor, which nearly always included some mix of male pleasure and skill. Many women began by describing how their husbands, fathers, or fathers-in-law *enjoyed* food shopping (several used the word "addiction"). For example, one wife (and retired school teacher) said of her husband (a retired civil servant): "[H]e used to love shopping . . . sometimes he used to forget something he had in his mind . . . and he used to visit the shop again. And he used to love talking."⁹⁰ She continued, "He used to know the vendors by their names and if he bought something [sweet] he used to share it with them."⁹¹ A younger wife, and teacher in a Montessori school, described her husband's love of food shopping as part of what Manpreet Janeja calls "the privileged place that food occupies in the lives of Bengalis."⁹² "Most of the Bengali men," this wife began, "they are very foodie."⁹³ She explained, "Every afternoon they would prefer *machachol* and *babad* fish and rice." Selecting particular fish from the market, she explained, gives them "energy for the whole day."⁹⁴ For her husband (whose work schedule no longer permits daily shopping), food shopping is "his hobby . . . suppose Sunday early in the morning after tea he will say, 'what do I have to bring from the market, please give me the list.' I say 'I think very few things you have to bring, do not go, you can go

88. Interview with household, *supra* note 64.

89. *Id.*

90. Interview with household, *supra* note 49 (translated by Anwesha Majumder).

91. *Id.*

92. JANEJA, *supra* note 67, at 3.

93. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 9, 2010).

94. *Id.*

in the evening.’ His face, that’s his face” (making a sad face).⁹⁵ Or a thirty-nine-year-old school teacher who said of her father: “Every day, early in the morning before seven o’clock he went to the market [for] the purest fish, vegetables . . . and meat When he came back to the house he would usually tell us that this is the best banana in the market . . . [or] we will enjoy this meat because it is the best meat.”⁹⁶ She recalls learning to shop with her mother after her father had an accident. They patronized her father’s vendors and worried over their own skill: “[M]any times I have bought stale things; I am not so good like my [father].”⁹⁷

As this quotation suggests, all my interlocutors considered shopping for fresh food as highly skilled and demanding *work* at which, many also suggested, men traditionally excel. As one middle-aged husband told me:

Buying fish in Calcutta is not a joke, right? It’s really a tough job. . . . You’re paying 280 rupees for a particular fish . . . you have to know that fish, quality. How you understand that fish is fresh or how you will understand this fish is just down from the pond, you have to see, you have to know certain things of that fish . . . and initially they won’t tell you; yeah they want to push you but when you become very familiar with them, “*Dada* don’t take this fish . . . see the gills have become pinkish.”⁹⁸

Several women suggested that they did not “understand” the quality of fresh foods nearly as well as their husbands, fathers, and fathers-in-law. And parents worried that their newly professional sons lacked the know-how as well as the drive to identify high-quality items and that this made them likely candidates for supermarket shopping—as one father put it (describing his adult son with some dismay), “he goes to the market and takes what’s in the packet.”⁹⁹

At the same time, women also frequently suggested that shopping in local markets was a learnable skill for men as well as for themselves. As one mother said of her two adult sons, the elder one shops well but “the younger one doesn’t understand that much but since he’s a family man now he’ll gradually understand Since he has settled down he has to learn.”¹⁰⁰ Other women made clear that they were just as discerning as the men in their family who shopped. For example, one grandmother explained that she arbitrated the quality of shopping done by the men in her household: “Even if we don’t go for the market, you know we understand which one is good and which one is not. . . . When my son is going for the market, he’s getting the fresh one, and the good one; when I’m sending my son-in-law, then he’s getting [items that are of] not that good quality.”¹⁰¹

95. *Id.*

96. Interview with household, *supra* note 22.

97. *Id.*

98. Interview with household, *supra* note 64.

99. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Aug. 30, 2010).

100. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 3, 2010) (translated by Anwesha Mujemdar).

101. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 18, 2010) (translated by Mitra Routh).

Some women suggested that they were equally skilled as men but that gendered practices of shopping for fresh produce reflected household control by men over daily, but by no means insignificant purchases, like fish and meat.¹⁰² As a mother and full-time housewife in her midforties told me, "my husband [doesn't] allow me to go to the market because he loves [shopping]."¹⁰³ "He [doesn't] speak much at home," she explained, but he "interact[s] so much at the markets with the vendors."¹⁰⁴ But the "real story," she ventured later in our conversation, is that her husband controls the money for their household, which she described, along with his time spent socializing in the market outside rather than at home with her, as a source of much frustration. She learned to shop as a child with her mother. So "don't think," she admonished, "that as I'm not going, I can't shop. I can shop well . . . I understand, I can shop well."¹⁰⁵ Other families likewise described the shopping patterns of their childhoods as likely reflecting a traditional distinction between public/male/market and private/female/household spaces.

Retail strategists, as several explained, target women. And they do so precisely by challenging perceptions of traditional male-female distinctions. The Spencer's manager, for example, observed that elements are "changing now. Ladies have started working. They started moving out of the houses It's no more the traditional thing [where women rarely shop]."¹⁰⁶ Thus Spencer's advertisements do not feature "a typical Bengali family" but rather often images and voices of women in close proximity to shopping carts.¹⁰⁷

But despite retail advertisements suggesting new emboldened female shoppers, an uptick of food shopping among Bengali women likely suggests a story more complex than the empowerment of middle-class women against middle-class men.¹⁰⁸ Many older women I interviewed worked in schools and offices even as their husbands and fathers-in-law patronized local markets for fresh produce, fish, and meat. In fact, employment data suggests that middle-class female participation in paid work in Kolkata has *declined* somewhat in recent decades.¹⁰⁹ Anthropologist Henrike Donner observes that today many middle-class women in Kolkata explain their own withdrawal from the paid workforce by describing the need to supervise

102. Many of my Salt Lake informants suggested that food is their largest ordinary expenditure. One consultancy firm estimates that for the top six percent of the population's income earners, food comprises twenty percent of a household budget; for the next fourteen percent, food comprises thirty to thirty-five percent of the budget. Abheek Singhi et al., *The Tiger Roars: An In-Depth Analysis of How a Billion Plus People Consume*, THE BOS. CONSULTING GRP. 9, 11–12 (2012).

103. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 4, 2010) (translated by Mitra Routh).

104. *Id.*

105. *Id.*

106. Interview with operations manager, Spencer's Retail Ltd., *supra* note 53.

107. *Id.*

108. On gender inequality generally (and how it intersects with class inequality) in contemporary middle-class households in Kolkata, see RAY & QAYUM, *supra* note 8, at 16–19.

109. Henrike Donner, *Committed Mothers and Well-Adjusted Children: Privatisation, Early-Years Education and Motherhood in Calcutta*, 40 MOD. ASIAN STUD. 371, 381 n.2 (2006).

their children's education and to prepare "full Bengali meals."¹¹⁰ Donner also notes an increase among working mothers who cook time-intensive multi-course lunches and dinners. Such women, Donner argues, have responded with ambivalence to new modern forms of consumption, such as appliances and Western-style prepared and pre-processed foods, designed to ease their household burdens.¹¹¹ Donner thus concludes that although labor-saving commodities have changed female household life, food preparation understood "as the ultimate labor of love" and as female self-sacrifice persists—but now as a "modern practice . . . tied in with new intimacies," especially "focused on the mother-child bond."¹¹²

Donner's ethnography suggests some of the complex effects of economic liberalization on women and household labor. She observes a female "orientation towards the family" that includes cooking—and, I would add, *food shopping*—but now recast as a new kind of "empowered" domesticity. Arvind Rajagopal likewise describes "new types of gendered consumers" featured in recent Indian advertising campaigns.¹¹³ He explains: "The wife is now an outgoing, aggressive bargainer . . . who is nonetheless a devoted mother and full-time housewife. . . . While older power relations [of] keeping the woman in the home . . . are superseded, they are replaced by new relations emphasizing the salience of patriarchal nuclear family obligations . . ."¹¹⁴

This reconfiguration of female domestic labor to encompass regular food shopping also likely intersects with the effects of economic liberalization on men. Many families I interviewed described shifts in male employment, including more business travel and office days that begin at eight o'clock rather than ten o'clock in the morning—a leisurely hour amenable to shopping before work. They also discussed how younger men identify shopping less with sociability and fun (as one young wife put it: "[My father] loves it He goes thrice a day, and my husband goes, [but] twice a week is enough"¹¹⁵). Taken together, it would seem that women are assuming (or embracing) work less convenient, pleasurable, or important to men.

But if Bengali women today increasingly shop for food for any number of complex and overlapping reasons, what supermarkets bank on is that women will choose retail formats that offer standardized choices and self-service rather than active relational labor and negotiation. Damodar Mall, Chief Customer Strategy Officer of Reliance Retail, puts the aspiration in dramatic terms. A woman is "*propel[led]* . . . to the self-service format. She doesn't want anyone to come between

110. Henrike Donner, *Gendered Bodies, Domestic Work and Perfect Families*, in *BEING MIDDLE-CLASS IN INDIA* 47, 58 (Henrike Donner ed., 2011).

111. *Id.* at 61–62.

112. *Id.* at 62.

113. ARVIND RAJAGOPAL, *Thinking About the New Middle Class: Gender, Advertising and Politics in an Age of Globalisation*, in *SIGNPOSTS: GENDER ISSUES IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA* 57, 90 (Rajeswari Sunder Rajan ed., 1999).

114. *Id.* at 90–91.

115. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 1, 2010).

her and her choices. In a way she knows that the ‘help’ that a grocer offers comes at a price—loss of freedom. That’s why young and middle-class women are increasingly voting with their wallets in favor of supermarkets.”¹¹⁶ And even more:

What is the one place where a man’s presence is considered superfluous, what is the one place where a woman is the center of the universe, what is the one place that encourages choice, the one thing that most women in India don’t have? There are no prizes for guessing the right answer, which is the local supermarket.¹¹⁷

Mall thus pronounces the local supermarket as a space of “freedom” for women (including freedom from men).

I spoke with several women who reported that since the arrival of supermarkets, they have altered how they shop for dry groceries and processed foods, citing the factors that supermarket managers anticipate. They appreciate the air-conditioning, nicely packaged products, fixed prices and mechanized scales, lack of offensive smells, and opportunities to select items without having to converse with vendors that supermarkets offer. Sometimes while in the supermarket they add frozen poultry, fish, and meat to their baskets (depending on the store—at the time of my field research, Big Bazaar, for example, did not stock “non-veg” items). They may also include occasional fresh fruits or vegetables (especially more “exotic” ones like broccoli or red cabbage)—although most remained suspicious of the quality of supermarket produce, especially if they were prepackaged. Prepackaging, after all, limits shoppers’ ability to inspect and choose.

Several women also discussed new opportunities for recreation for themselves and for their nuclear families (mom, dad, kids together) that supermarkets make available. For example, one mother (who works as a teacher) described how Wednesday “sales day” at Big Bazaar has become a family outing:

Like I just told you about this coupon that I have from Big Bazaar . . . if I spend 200 rupees I get 2KGs of potatoes and 2KGs of onions, and so on Wednesdays it’s just not because I want to spend those 200 rupees, I want to spend the time with my daughter. So it’s like a day when I just go out, sometimes I meet my husband there, and we have a cup of coffee outside the Big Bazaar and then we’ll take in and buy some biscuits and stuff So I have a lot of onions, if you need them you can take them from me.¹¹⁸

Another described supermarket shopping as a pleasurable pastime for housewives struggling to fill empty days once their children began school:

116. DAMODAR MALI, *SUPERMARKETWALA: SECRETS TO WINNING CONSUMERS IN INDIA* (2014) (emphasis added).

117. Damodar Mall, *Modern Retail Has Ensured That It Is the Woman Who Finally Wields the Power*, FORBES INDIA (Mar. 8, 2017), <http://www.forbesindia.com/blog/supermarket-wala/modern-retail-has-ensured-that-it-is-the-woman-who-finally-wields-the-power/> [https://perma.cc/9852-PAXX].

118. Interview with household, *supra* note 64.

In today's society a woman generally becomes a mother at age of twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two. And by the time she's thirty-five to thirty-six her child is going to school and we Indians eighty percent are yet to become that careeristic . . . you know a mother in India is always sacrificing everything for the child. And then when the child starts going to school . . . husband is busy working, and the romantic days are over with, what does she do? . . . She goes shopping, that's her best alternative. . . . It's just that you want to spend some time, and you have the comfort of an AC place, you can go well dressed . . . say you go to Spencer's you check up for some little tidbits that you want to for your kids, some snacks, some this, that, little things. . . . Two and a half hours passing by is hardly anything. So then you come back home happy. Okay, I've done something, I have also been out, I have not been cooped up.¹¹⁹

For both these women, supermarkets provide a social, not simply economic, space (in ways quite distinct from the social spaces local markets provide and that are enjoyed primarily by men). But as Deutsch observes of supermarkets in mid-twentieth century America: “[M]any female shoppers found [supermarkets] satisfying. It seems unlikely, however, that their satisfaction is a useful concept in explaining stores’ success”—at least, she argues, when analyzed apart from regulations that enabled supermarket penetration including shifts in the rules governing how chain stores could compete with smaller establishments.¹²⁰

Indeed, most women I interviewed in Salt Lake described multiple and competing sets of consumer desires, and both the women quoted above continued regularly to frequent local markets, especially when they want to buy fresh groceries. Like many women who had become the primary shoppers in their families, they visited supermarkets selectively, reluctant to jettison the personal attention and service they experienced from independent small vendors. Another young mother, who freelances as a journalist (and keeps her schedule flexible to take care of her four-year-old son), recounted how she began to shop in local markets with her mother-in-law after her father-in-law became ill: “My father-in-law, he’s very smart choosing fish. He knows everything.”¹²¹ But, she continued, “me and my mother-in-law are learning . . . in that case we [are] just trusting the vendors.”¹²² “I address [the vendors] as an uncle,” she explained, “I say, ‘uncle, please tell me which one is the fresh one.’”¹²³ It’s “personal relationships,” she added, “I believe in that.”¹²⁴

Local vendors, she and many other women also insisted, care far more than supermarket employees about small sales—making it easier to complain of defects or negotiate refunds or exchanges. As another female shopper put it: “Although

119. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 29, 2010).

120. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 4, at 11; *see also* Richard C. Schragger, *The Anti-Chain Store Movement, Localist Ideology, and the Remnants of the Progressive Constitution, 1920-1940*, 90 IOWA L. REV. 1011 (2005).

121. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 3, 2010).

122. *Id.*

123. *Id.*

124. *Id.*

Big Bazaar people [attend] very cautiously to the customer . . . [T]hey attend to . . . those who are purchasing in lots. When I go to purchase one or two [of] this small thing, or very low valuable things, they're not so much interested to show me."¹²⁵ By contrast, in her local market, she explained, "Even if you are purchasing a safety pin, I quarrel with them."¹²⁶ For others, personal attention means better quality control. As one working mother told me, "In the local market this chap is looking after his stuff. So we're going to tell him, 'Can I have a little bit of that . . . ?' He's the only one that's touching the vegetables. I might take one and say, 'Oh, I don't like that.' But then, I'm going to do it a little gingerly."¹²⁷ She complained that in supermarkets, loose items often appear manhandled because, she ventured, supermarket employees do not supervise produce as vigilantly as the vendors in the local markets she frequented.

Likewise, although many women appreciated how in large retail formats numerous food and nonfood items exist "under one roof," some noted that local markets provide their own forms of convenience. For example, one (non-Bengali) university professor explained that she visits supermarkets in Salt Lake for items like olive oil and household (nonfood) goods. But her monthly grocery supplies are delivered to the house from a local grocery where her domestic servant can purchase additional items on credit throughout the month. For fresh food, she and her husband make weekly trips to the Park Circus market where, unlike the markets in Salt Lake (where most residents remain Hindu), they can purchase beef. "The meat we order [ahead] on the phone, he goes gets the fish, I get the vegetables."¹²⁸ "I must say," she added, "the fruit and vegetable sellers, meat, fish sellers, they're all very good. Even when the meat seller [says], 'Today we didn't get fresh meat because there's a strike' or fish [seller] will say, 'It's been raining, you know, my stocks [are] not good so don't [buy].' I mean you're regular customers."¹²⁹ "So you see," she reasoned, "there's no convenience in going through [the supermarket]. I can't see what's the point of C3 or anything else!"¹³⁰

Other women described how supermarkets introduce new forms of labor. As one observed, in Big Bazaar "you have to go around and check things, upstairs there's a floor, downstairs there's a floor."¹³¹ By contrast, she explained, in the local market there is just one place where she sits on a stool to supervise a grocer who organizes her items from a list. (Deutsch offers an American parallel: she reports that the sociologist Joanne Vanek deduced that between 1920 and 1960, women spent less time cooking but "the work of shopping and driving to stores had increased so dramatically that virtually no time was saved.")¹³² And, paradoxically,

125. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 22, 2010).

126. *Id.*

127. Interview with household, *supra* note 46.

128. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Oct. 5, 2010).

129. *Id.*

130. *Id.*

131. Interview with household, *supra* note 100.

132. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 4, at 199.

some of my interlocutors suggested they experienced *more* independence and autonomy in local markets. They resented the carefully trained supermarket employees “interfering into what you should choose and what you should not, and telling you a lot about it”—describing supermarket employees as more pushy than vendors in local markets.¹³³

To be sure, female shoppers recounted not only experiences of personal service and relationships in local markets but also suspicions and adversarial encounters. Indeed, for women who preferred local markets it was precisely because they offered more opportunities to be more demanding and active as consumers—even as this created uncertainty and required accommodation. When I asked one woman if she trusts local market vendors, she answered that rather than “trust” she thinks about her vendors as part of an extended family. She elaborated:

I’m not talking about this trust that you have in a bank, it’s not like that. It’s trust like a friend. So, that’s why I said it’s an extended family I just go there and tell him, “Alright give me this, this, this, this.” He might be giving me less than what I [asked], I’m not very you know, I don’t know how much is how much He adds up . . . and at the end of it, “So much! Why?”—“See! Bag is filled!”—“No!” And there’s sort of a bargain and all that and if he says “210, 215,” I say, “I won’t give you more than 200.” It’s something like that, but if you call that trust, yes it is.¹³⁴

Here, trust means the kind of iterative, back-and-forth, even apprehensive and aggressive negotiations one has with family members rather than the more passive faith one places in large anonymous institutions like banks. Another woman linked trust to class-based politics: “We have to trust . . . that they have given the right weight, the measurement is alright, and they are also taking money from us that is also reasonable.”¹³⁵ Although she knows the vendors by name and has friendly relations she simultaneously suspects that:

They are cheating me but what is to be done you know? . . . I am a needy person in my status They’re also a needy person in their category. Sometimes I think that they have taken twenty-five rupees more from me. I said okay, they are also needy, let them get it.¹³⁶

Here, price—rather than an abstract representation of market value—reflects relations among people marked by social connection, distribution, conflict, and inequality.

133. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 18, 2010) (translated by Monalisa Saha). Both men and women nearly uniformly told me that they do little comparison shopping, reporting that prices do not vary much among individual vendors. The numerous fruit, vegetable, and grocery vendors I interviewed in Salt Lake’s local markets widely concurred. Most suggested that they purchased produce from the same wholesalers at the same or similar prices—so there was little room for price variation—and some offered that they tacitly did not undersell each other. Nor do consumers bargain for particular items. Instead, they use a few familiar vendors—switching only when the day’s quality does not look good—and typically ask for a small discount at the conclusion of a bulk purchase.

134. Interview with household, *supra* note 64.

135. Interview with household, *supra* note 125.

136. *Id.*

Moreover, as this quotation suggests, some of my interlocutors understood the choice of where to shop as political, and at odds with the kinds of consumer struggles for social and economic change that would advance more of the development needs of the country.¹³⁷ Choosing to patronize supermarkets, they suggested, marked them not only as part of an aspirational cosmopolitan elite but also distinguished them from the significant percentage of India’s citizens whose unsteady lives and livelihoods require informal credit, subsidized food, and the ability to make small purchases to manage their daily needs. As one young mother told me, in the local market, with ten rupees, “we can get two potatoes, but from Big Bazaar we cannot buy two potatoes.”¹³⁸ “We are very much a middle-class family,” she reasoned, so she could patronize supermarkets.¹³⁹ “But it looks bad. We are buying from a mall and the person is starving for food. That’s Kolkata, that’s India, you know?”¹⁴⁰ That is, some of my interlocutors described how shopping in large supermarkets challenges the practices—or at least the aesthetics—of being an ethical consumer in a political environment marked by concerns about food insecurity and poverty.

CONCLUSION

In North America and Western Europe, an astonishingly small number of corporate retail chains control the overwhelming majority of food retail sales and enjoy considerable control over producers, processors, and manufacturers as a result.¹⁴¹ In the United States, such large oligopolistic chain groceries with their “everyday low prices” are understood as necessary to sustain the wellbeing of especially middle-class consumers. This assumption, in turn, has produced significant distributional consequences across class. At the turn of the century, poor urban neighborhoods featured a dense array of food vendors and peddlers. As chain stores developed and consolidated in the 1930s, they left the low-income neighborhoods that they initially targeted, with their unreliable and often difficult customers.¹⁴² They instead sought out neighborhoods with higher income earners “who shop steadily, in large quantities, and without challenging store policy.”¹⁴³ As Deutsch thus observes, before the rise of large supermarkets in the United States,

137. There is a long history of linking consumption to political activism in West Bengal (the site of the world’s most devastating modern famine in 1943). In 1959, left opposition parties gained popular support not least by leading a “food movement” that demanded that the ruling Congress party, among other things, fix the price of rice. *See* SURANJAN DAS & PREMANSU KUMAR BANDYOPADHYAY, *FOOD MOVEMENT OF 1959: DOCUMENTING A TURNING POINT IN THE HISTORY OF WEST BENGAL* xi, xi–xv (Suranjan Das & Premansu Kumar Bandyopadhyay eds., 2004).

138. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 23, 2010).

139. *Id.*

140. *Id.*

141. *See, e.g.*, MICHAEL S. CAROLAN, *RECLAIMING FOOD SECURITY* 112 (2013).

142. DEUTSCH, *supra* note 4, at 141, 223.

143. *Id.* at 223.

“simple *access* to fresh food was hardly the marker of class status” that it is today as food deserts (and high food prices) now characterize low-income urban spaces.¹⁴⁴

In India, the macro-level distributional questions and class debates are different. Critical analysts of corporate food retail describe the vast majority of India’s poor primarily not in their identities as consumers but largely in their identities as small agricultural producers, laborers, shopkeepers, and vendors. In a country where agriculture (and mostly small-scale agriculture) accounts for sixty percent of total employment,¹⁴⁵ and where retail (and mostly small-scale retail) is the second largest source of employment after agriculture,¹⁴⁶ supermarkets stand to have significant distributional effects for the millions of Indians—small farmers, traders, and retailers—whose livelihoods depend on existing food supply chains.

Of course, from a perspective concerned with the livelihood of small producers, the emergence of supermarkets in India could unfold in more or less desirable ways; supermarkets could, for example, source produce from small brokers who aggregate the goods of small farmers rather than, as analysts predict, by pivoting “retail concentration . . . into supplier concentration.”¹⁴⁷ But however supermarkets emerge in India—with whatever set of costs and benefits for different groups of producers and consumers—we should expect to hear justifications grounded in claims of market demand. And more specifically, claims of market demand made on behalf of middle-class consumers—and most especially middle-class female consumers—whose putative desires for cleanliness, convenience, standardization, variety, quality, and low prices *necessitate* large chains. One retail documentary describes this state of affairs as an already accomplished fact:

Big Bazaar has caused a revolution in consumption in India. Most retail stores used to be old markets and privately owned small shops. Shops were clustered chaotically like mazes. Prices were negotiated and unclear. Even in food shops, hygiene wasn’t properly regulated. Big Bazaar attracted people who were unsatisfied with the traditional market situation.¹⁴⁸

144. *Id.* at 222; *see also* RAJ PATEL, STUFFED & STARVED: THE HIDDEN BATTLE FOR THE WORLD FOOD SYSTEM 243–44 (2008).

145. NAT’L COMM’N ON FARMERS, MINISTRY OF AGRIC., GOV’T OF INDIA, NATIONAL POLICY FOR FARMERS 2007 (2007), <http://agricoop.nic.in/sites/default/files/npff2007%20%281%29.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/FJK7-GKZL>]. Based on 2005–2006 statistics, 41.1% of India’s farmers own less than two hectares of land and another 23.9% own between two and four hectares. DIRECTORATE OF ECON. & STAT. OFFICE OF DEP’T OF AGRIC. & COOPERATION, *Agricultural Statistics at a Glance 2011*, tbs.2.3(a) & 15.1 (2011), http://eands.dacnet.nic.in/latest_20011.htm [<https://perma.cc/3SA8-EUJB>].

146. *See* ARPITA MUKHERJEE & NITISHA PATEL, FDI IN RETAIL SECTOR: INDIA 53 (2005); Vijay Kumar et al., *Organised Food Retailing: A Blessing or a Curse?*, 43 *ECON. & POL. WKLY.* 67, 68 (2008).

147. Thomas Reardon, C. Peter Timmer & Julio Berdegue, *The Rapid Rise of Supermarkets in Developing Countries: Induced Organizational, Institutional, and Technological Change in Agri-Food Systems*, in *THE TRANSFORMATION OF AGRICULTURE: GLOBALIZATION, SUPPLY CHAINS AND SMALLHOLDER FARMERS* 47, 62 (Ellen B. McCullough, Prabhu L. Pingali & Kostas G. Stamoulis eds., 2008).

148. GETTING 1.1 BILLION’S ATTENTION, *supra* note 2.

And more:

The vegetable section [in Big Bazaar] keep[s] with the concept of high quality and cleanliness. It’s crowded with female customers who are attracted by an environment they don’t experience in their local markets.¹⁴⁹

Against this argument that supermarkets attract people—women—“unsatisfied with the traditional market situation,” I have explored some of the everyday public and private labor that sustains or, conversely, transforms how people shop for food, including efforts by supermarket strategists to shape middle-class consumer desires by equating new forms of consumerism with female autonomy, comfort, and sociability. To that end, I questioned whether and how new experiences of convenience will outweigh competing desires for personal service and shopping as active skilled labor among members of the Bengali middle class. Likewise I suggested that supermarkets offer very different ways of spending money on food. Even “low prices” has an indeterminate meaning when it is analyzed not as a fixed number but a lived practice—free onions with large purchases; buy two, get one free—in people’s lives. Thus, as one approach to studying food equity, the Article used everyday social and economic practices to complicate the policy-level claim that middle-class consumer demand (whatever this means) is its own explanation of supermarket growth and that demand-satisfaction, in turn, is therefore its own evidence of supermarket value.

Indeed, what women and men want in their identity as consumers is hardly ever exhausted by the choices provided by the market. Middle-class wives and mothers I spoke with overwhelmingly worried about the quality and safety of the domestic food supply chain, especially the pesticides, colorings, and carbides (a ripening agent) used by farmers and wholesale traders. Many described elaborate cleaning procedures—for example, soaking all fresh produce in water and soap for lengthy periods of time—and some discussed concerns such as cancer and infertility. At the time of my field research, however, retail managers expressed skepticism that this kind of interest in food safety would translate into a concrete profit margin.¹⁵⁰ And as state actors debated larger-scale and capital-intensive redevelopment, middle-class consumers, along with the myriad small retail vendors I interviewed often expressed more modest desires for better services at their local markets—that is, for simply better provision of water, sewage, toilets, garbage removal, and cleaning.

Some of my interlocutors had more imaginative—indeed, we could say more equitable—desires for mass consumption. One student in his midtwenties joined my interview with his parents to propose that supermarkets offer price discounts

149. *Id.*

150. Supermarket chains do impose private food safety standards on producers and processors when they deem it their economic interest. And a second round of field research in 2017 suggests that there is now a growing market in urban India for foods produced with fewer chemicals. Such standards, however, of course benefit people in their capacity as consumers willing to pay rather than as citizens entitled to regulatory protection.

for low-income consumers as well as commodities keyed to ethnic differences, not unlike the practices that already characterize small Indian food markets. In his words, “everything is not about convenience”¹⁵¹—which, as this Article has argued, is itself a construct that supermarket strategists aspire to monopolize as much as the material links of food supply chains.

151. Interview with household, in Salt Lake, Kolkata (Sept. 20, 2010).