

# Contributions to Indian Sociology

<http://cis.sagepub.com/>

---

## Youth masculinity, 'style' and the peer group in Tamil Nadu, India

Constantine V. Nakassis

*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 2013 47: 245

DOI: 10.1177/0069966713482982

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://cis.sagepub.com/content/47/2/245>

---

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Contributions to Indian Sociology* can be found at:

**Email Alerts:** <http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

**Subscriptions:** <http://cis.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

**Reprints:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

**Permissions:** <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

**Citations:** <http://cis.sagepub.com/content/47/2/245.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 20, 2013

[What is This?](#)

# Youth masculinity, 'style' and the peer group in Tamil Nadu, India

Constantine V. Nakassis

---

*This article examines young men's concepts of status in urban Tamil Nadu, India, focussing in particular on their concept of 'style'. The article shows how young men experience their position in the life cycle as between childhood and adulthood, and how this liminality mediates their concepts of status. In particular, I focus on the construction of the youth peer group as in distinction to, and transgressive of, the forms of adult respectability, propriety and authority from which young men are excluded by virtue of their age. I show how the peer group is marked by a productive tension between transgression and self-differentiation, and reciprocity, intimacy and peer pressure. The article then turns to two kinds of source material for young men's performances of status: English-Tamil slang and counterfeit global brands. I show how the tension between, and negotiation of, the mandates to status-raise and status-level in the peer group transform and revalorise these signs of status. The article concludes by arguing that while from afar, such youth practice seems to be negotiating globalisation, modernity and tradition, a close analysis of peer-group dynamics shows that youth practice is more centrally concerned with peer-group status negotiations.*

---

**Keywords:** youth, status, globalisation, brands, slang, Tamil Nadu

## I

### *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

In academic and lay discussions of cultural globalisation, one recurrent axis of debate has turned on the question of homogenisation and heterogenisation (Robertson 1995, 2001; Tomlinson 1997). This dualism is often

---

<sup>1</sup> For Tamil diacritics, I follow the University of Madras Tamil Lexicon. All personal names are pseudonyms.

---

Constantine V. Nakassis is at the Department of Anthropology, The University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA. Email: cnakassi@uchicago.edu

---

**Contributions to Indian Sociology** 47, 2 (2013): 245–269

SAGE Publications Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC

DOI: 10.1177/0069966713482982

resolved such that globalisation neither homogenises nor heterogenises but does both: globalisation is ‘negotiated’. This replays older debates regarding ideology/power and resistance, agency and social structure and individual and society (see Mazarella 2004: 348ff; Mosse 2003). Discussions of youth culture in South Asia (e.g., Brown and Larson 2002: 12–13; Jeffrey et al. 2008: 16; Liechty 2003; Lukose 2009; Rogers 2008) have similarly engaged this debate, often framing the issue by looking at how youth negotiate ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’, as well as globalisation and liberalisation, in their everyday practices. In this vein of thought, youth culture can be seen as a hybrid and contested terrain, a privileged index of the contours and extent of cultural globalisation (Lukose 2009: 62).

In this article, I show how a close analysis of young Tamil men’s concepts and performances of status—youth concepts of ‘value’ and social prestige—reveals a different picture. I argue that even though such youth practices do indeed unfold through both ‘global’ and ‘modern’ idioms (e.g., the English language, Western brands) and tropes on ‘traditional’ masculinities (e.g., the *periya āl* ‘big man’ or ‘adult’, the *rowdy* ‘thug’), what is being negotiated are youth’s own particular concepts of status and the anxieties surrounding them. Young men’s concepts of status and masculinity turn on notions of difference and exteriority from what youth call ‘society’ (or *camūkam*, *camutāyam*), and for that reason, they borrow from and playfully perform, and deform, signs which are seen as indexing such difference, whether they be so-called ‘modern’, ‘global’ or otherwise. What I show, then, is how the sociality that takes place in the youth peer group problematises the very notion of sameness and difference upon which analyses of cultural globalisation depend. As a liminal space, the peer group is a kind of laboratory for the production of new social value, performatively transforming objects from without it (e.g., global brands or English) into uncanny social forms (e.g., counterfeit brands, mixed English–Tamil slang) which, while construable under the rubric of the global–local, betray an excess of meaning and value which cannot be reducible to these terms.

### **Where and with whom I worked**

In what follows, I draw on over two years of ethnographic fieldwork among Tamil youth in the cities of Madurai (a city of about one million people)

*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, 2 (2013): 245–269

and Chennai (the state's metropolitan capital).<sup>2</sup> This research mainly took place among college youth. I did ethnographic research in five liberal arts colleges (three in Madurai, two in Chennai), living in three different college hostels (two in a Madurai college, one in Chennai). The colleges ranged from semi-elite autonomous colleges (drawing on a more middle- and upper-middle-class student body across a range of caste groups, though with a relatively higher amount of mid- and upper-caste students) to a struggling government college (drawing on a more lower- and middle-class and caste student body). The class and caste distributions in these colleges reflect recent shifts in higher education (Fuller and Narasimha 2006; Jeffrey 2010; Lukose 2009). The liberalisation of higher education and the subsequent shift of the so-called 'creamy layer' to engineering institutions has meant that liberal arts colleges have increasingly been attended by more first-generation college students, students from lower class and caste backgrounds, and students from rural areas. This was borne out in the diverse backgrounds of the students in the colleges I worked in, college hostels I stayed in, and peer groups with which I socialised.

In this article, I focus on lower-middle- and middle-class young men in mid-tier autonomous colleges, though the dynamics of their peer groups is by no means particular to these youth (though the source materials of their status and gender expressions often are), as I have discussed elsewhere (Nakassis 2010). But more than as a demographic category, I am interested in the discursive category invoked by the lexical items glossable as 'youth'—*iḷaiñar*, *pacanka*, *vāliban*, teenager, youngster, boys or youth. This category, as it is understood in Tamil Nadu today, is historically recent (see Liechty 1995, 2003; Nandy 2004 [1987]; Sarawathi 1999 for other areas of South Asia), located at the intersection of discourses of life cycle and age hierarchy; institutions of the home, schooling and marriage; and, since economic liberalisation, particular kinds of mediated discourses (e.g., youth-oriented marketing, film, television and other mass-media programming) (see also Lukose 2009: 13; Osella and Osella 1998, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> While there are differences between the kinds of status expression and concepts of status between these two cities, the colleges I worked in had a wide variety of students from all over the state. In this article, I describe a way of talking about and negotiating status, age and gender in the peer group that is common across these ethnographic locales. For more discussion of the Chennai colleges and their differentiation of concepts of status ('style' vs. *gettu*) by social class and college (see Nakassis 2010).

As a cultural and discursive category, ‘youth’ is multiple and contested, and only ever inhabited in partial ways. Below I focus on one reflexive understanding of this category—captured by the youth idiom of ‘style’—and its place in the life cycle. This is not a description of how *all* young people experience *youth*, or of the singularity of this age category. Indeed, for reasons linked to their quick integration into the workforce (especially for lower class individuals) or into the kin or community group (especially for highly orthodox families, or for women, as I discuss in section II), many young people have little to no experience of ‘youth’ in the sense discussed in this article. However, for the young men that I worked with, this category is highly significant. These are youth who can and do explicitly identify with this age category and who, through their peer group activity, attempt to perform and inhabit it.

## II

### *Youth masculinity, liminality and ‘style’*

At a tea stall on the main drag outside of our Madurai college, early on in my fieldwork, a group of my third-year hostel mates and I congregated for a nightly ritual of post-prandial tea and tobacco. Hanging out at their ‘top’, we slowly sipped on tea, passed around cigarettes bought on credit (a testament to their status as daily customers) and chatted about the goings on in the college. Trying to get them talking about what ‘youth’ meant to them, they deflected my rather blunt approach, and instead complained about the excessive rules of college and home. The restrictions of the home, hostel and college treat them like children (*cinna pacanka*, literally, little boys)—immature, dependent, afraid, indecisive and without the faculty and ability to fend for themselves. And yet, they are not, they insisted. Nor were they *periya āḷunka* (adults, literally, big men), not that they particularly would want to be. As Kumar, one of the students laughingly mused, ‘At this age, who wants all that responsibility?’ I persisted, if you are not, cannot be, nor want to be adults or kids, then what? They smiled and began rattling off what a ‘mature youth’ was all about, offering up stereotyped, and often enacted, examples of college life: drinking at the local Tasmac (government bar), secretly carrying on love affairs, aimlessly wandering around (*ūr surratu*) and ‘time-passing’ (Jeffrey 2010), doing ‘fashion’ and ‘style’, skipping out on class to go to the movies, and getting in fights with rival cliques. These are all what mature college students do, they explained.

*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, 2 (2013): 245–269

This conversation itself was an instance of what we were talking about. Lazily time-passing as the minutes dangerously counted down to the hostel curfew, collectively living on money they may or may not have had in their pockets, they nonchalantly puffed away on shared cigarettes (a 'bad habit' frowned upon in the college), facing the open street, as if hoping a professor or known adult relative might walk by. These were performances of transgression, and thus of youth masculinity, though more for each other than anyone else. (Indeed, if a professor or elder kinsperson did appear, the cigarettes and bravado would quickly disappear.<sup>3</sup>) But what made them intelligible as such? And what were they performing and distinguishing themselves against?

As their initial deflection indicates, to these young men, being a 'youth' meant being neither a *cinna paiyan* nor a *periya āl*. Their performances and figurations of youth masculinity, on that day and others, elaborated on this dual difference, reconverting liminality in the life cycle into alternate norms of youth status. This liminality was not just a rhetoric of these young men but was conditioned by the real and imagined discursive and institutional proscriptions and prescriptions that they felt themselves pushing up against, what they generally talked about as the reified agent 'society': the kin group and the caste group, and more abstractly, statusful male adults who set the rules for legitimate social interaction and their proxies.<sup>4</sup> Often times, for these youth, the college administration filled this role.

In this understanding of the life cycle, young men's in-betweenness is often expressed and experienced as a being outside of 'society'. While children and adults are within the fold of 'society', young men flit on and flirt with its peripheries. While children are contained by the school and the home, and adults head households and other institutions, young men—either in college or in the workforce—are on the margins of both.

<sup>3</sup> Such transgression is not rebellion (Juluri 2002). Tamil youth's cultural practices are not generally about generational strife, but about exteriorised alterity within the life cycle. This is why the concept of 'youth' in Tamil Nadu largely is not figured as the liberation of a generation *per se* (cf. Bucholtz 2002), but as biding one's time in a liminal life stage until one is authorised to join the next age set.

<sup>4</sup> In my discussion, neither 'adult' nor 'society' should be taken as descriptions of how such entities exist in the world as such, but how they must be taken to work by young men so that their own activities and experiences are intelligible to them. Indeed, I do little to unpack what one could possibly mean by 'society' as an analytical construct useful for describing social life. Instead, I use it as a placeholder, as young men themselves use it, to explicate youth sociality.

While children are dependents and adults have dependents, these young men aver their attachment to the home, and yet do not have the resources to support themselves or others. More than just liminal or exterior, they are also excluded. As non-adults, young men are unable to participate in kin group and household decisions, caste politics and other activities which presuppose access to adult status economies of *mariyātai* (respect), *kauravam* (prestige) and their associated indexes (e.g., dependents, patronage, owning land, sporting a big moustache, wearing a *veṣṭi*) (see D. Mines 2005; Osella and Osella 1998). These are the concerns of statusful men, or *periya āluṅka*. This exclusion is, more to the point, a hierarchical subordination of youth to adults, as reflected in prescribed asymmetrical honorific address and related deference behaviour.

Liminal, exterior and excluded in their speech and practice, young men consider themselves as the inverse image of the *periya āl*, the responsible and controlled adult who upholds and enforces 'society' and 'culture', who speaks indirectly and wisely with *mariyātai*, who is responsible not just for himself but for his dependents, and is thus fully entwined in 'society' (D. Mines 2005; M. Mines 1994; M. Mines and Gourishankar 1990). Youth also figure themselves as the inverse image of the *cinna paiyan*, the 'child' who cowers before and aligns with the authority of adults and 'society', and thus, is contained within it. Young men are understood to be callous to the demands of family, 'society' and 'culture'; they are self-centred and self-indulgent, bold, fearless and careless, quick-tempered and unreflective, direct and crude in their speech and action (see also Jeffrey et al. 2008: 191).

And yet, such liminality also implies that young men, by inhabiting that space of non-adulthood and non-childhood, are through such inversions, like 'big men' and 'little boys'. This redoubled difference–identity is diagrammed by the ways in which young men attempt to reclaim forms of masculine status through the idiom of 'style', and how it is mapped onto the notions of 'maturity' and 'immaturity'.<sup>5</sup> 'Style', as I discuss below,

<sup>5</sup> While I focus on the concept of 'style', concepts like *gettu* and *tōraṇai* are relevant as well. A similar analysis can be applied to these concepts, though the semiotic registers which instantiate them are different, as are the class- and gender-linked figures of personhood indexically invoked by them. Also relevant to 'style' is the image of 'Super Star' Rajinikanth, the popular Tamil film actor. While ultimately my analysis of 'style' in this article is consonant with Rajinikanth's celebrity image, for reasons of space I will not take up his image and youths' re-animations of it here. See Nakassis (2010) for more discussion.

crystallises and diagrams youth's liminality, functioning as the register through which young men's ideas of status comes to be expressed and negotiated as a double distancing from childhood and adulthood.

'Style' was the answer to the questions: Why are your jeans ripped? Why are you wearing sneakers today, it's over forty degrees centigrade?! Why do your shirts have wild colours and brand names on them? It was the answer to why someone had a goatee beard or was clean-shaven, why one had grown out one's hair or shaved it off, why one smoked or drank, rode the bus on the footboard or roof, or even fell in love.<sup>6</sup>

To 'do style' is to show oneself to be different and unique, as an individual foregrounded from the background of the peer group. As youth often explained, 'style *ṇṇā taṇiyā teriyaṇum*' (to be, or do 'style', you have to be visible/individuated [from the crowd]). 'Style' is about getting attention from others. It is about 'attracting' others (*kavarkkiratu*). Anything 'style' is an ego-focal index, 'Look here!' As youth explained, 'when you walk by, people should turn their heads and look at you'. 'Style' demands attention. It flouts norms of ostentation in public (Dean, this issue), offering one's body for public scrutiny, presuming the status necessary to be *seen* in public (M. Mines 1994) even as, or precisely because, one does not have the necessary *mariyātai* to be recognised otherwise (see Dickey, this issue).

In that sense, 'style' transforms concepts of respect by appropriating objects of value from alternative and exterior frameworks of status. Anything associated with upper-class elites or foreign or Tamil media (e.g., music television veejays, Hollywood films, Tamil film heroes like Rajinikanth<sup>7</sup>) is potentially resignifiable as 'style'. Fashions from North India, from America, from Singapore are 'style'. English, spoken or written on clothing,

<sup>6</sup> We might compare 'style' to Lukose's (2009: 66–71) discussion of the Malayali youth concept of *chethu*. In contrast to *chethu*, 'style' cannot be reduced to just a form of 'commodified masculinity', as Lukose (ibid.: 66) glosses *chethu*. While it is the case that 'style' includes commoditised signs (like brands, English, etc.), it also includes other things, such as whistling in the theatre, loving girls and wearing the same shirt at the same time as your friends. These are all 'style' because, as I show, they index exteriority, they individuate and foreground the user, and they are transgressive of adult propriety. And while some commodities can perform this function, they are not the only way that such interactional work can be done.

<sup>7</sup> Cinema in Tamil Nadu is itself seen as transgressive of 'society' and 'culture'. In addition to the cinema hall as a social space where norms of 'society' are temporarily bracketed, Tamil films with their transgressive depictions of fashion, love and sexuality and vigilante justice (Dickey 1993: 130–33) present youth with a ready source register for 'style' (among other reasons, see Nakassis 2010).



is 'style'. Western brands, real or duplicate, are 'style' (see section IV). In this sense, 'style' is also about projecting class and spatial mobility. To do 'style' is to index social spaces outside the neighbourhood, hometown or state, and thus figuratively invoke higher social strata and utopic exterior lands.<sup>8</sup> But 'style' is also linked to the underground or marginalised (e.g., the rowdy), making it not simply a straightforward index of class-linked youth subjectivity. In both cases, to do 'style' is to make a claim to authority through some *other* regime of value, one that transgresses respectability and propriety. It is to reconvert exclusion and hierarchy into performable youth emblems of status. 'Bad habits' like smoking, drinking, fighting and *sight aṭi*-ing (ogling), teasing (*kalāykkiratu*) and loving the opposite sex attempt to stake out—for one's peers at least—a space of authority in distinction to that of adults and other youth. They transgress, performing a fearlessness which, read as 'maturity', marks those who avoid 'style' as 'little boys'.

'Style', however, is also playful and whimsical, hedging on its own transgression through its near absurdity. As a Madurai college professor at a middle-tier college bemoaned with a chuckle after scolding a fashionable middle-class student for entering his office with 'stylish' ripped jeans, long-hair and an earring, 'everything and anything today is "style"; there is no rhyme or reason in it'. 'Style' is about stretching norms as far as possible, going to the edge of reason, verging on madness (*kirukku*), to attempt to make the non- and extra-normative one's own. Under the concept of 'style', deviation from the norm is contained and made sensible. To own transgression, to co-opt the authority of something else where only non-sense and unintelligibility existed before, is 'style'. As such, 'style' presents itself as all form, no substance, all surface, no meaning. To this extent, 'style' was often seen as childish by adults (or conservative youth who disapproved of such excesses), as revealing an immaturity of judgement and a lack of self-discipline.

While the idiom of 'style' is used to describe the activities of both young men and women, doing 'style' was particularly problematic for young women. 'Style', and by extension the very age category 'youth',

<sup>8</sup> This is revealed in the complementary term of non-status: 'local'. 'Local' has multiple meanings, referring to things of low value, things that are low class and things that are non-global. 'Local' figures the slum as the metonym for all that which contrasts with 'decency'—a middle-class notion (Dickey, this issue)—and 'style'—a youth notion.

is masculinised in Tamil Nadu. Indeed, while young men's transgressive enactments of 'youth' are implicitly condoned and thus encouraged by parents and college administrators, they are strongly proscribed for young women. The double standard of 'youth' is reflected in the following proverb that one middle-class Maduraite in my Chennai hostel relayed to me. As part of an inter-generational bad cop–good cop routine, his grandmother used this saying to justify his mischief (*cēṭṭai*) to his mother:

*pacanka viṭṭukkullē iruntā keṭṭuppōyituvānka.*  
*poṇṇunṅka viṭṭe viṭṭu veliyē pōnā keṭṭuppōyituvānka.*

If boys are kept inside the house, they'll get spoiled.

If girls are allowed outside of the house, they'll get spoiled.

In addition to mapping youth masculinity vis-à-vis notions of interior and exterior space, this proverb highlights why women can only problematically engage with 'youth' culture. Young women, and their chastity (*karpu*) in particular, are treated as extensions and emblems of a nested set of social interiorities: HOME < KIN GROUP < CASTE GROUP < 'TAMIL CULTURE' (Anandhi 2005; David 1980; Niranjana 2001: 48–55; Reynolds 1980; Rogers 2008: 90; Seizer 2005). By this logic, exteriority and the threats that lurk outside the home—as captioned by, among other terms, 'style'—are threats to women's honour and the social groups they stand in for. By contrast, interiority, and the home in particular, is a feminising and emasculating space for young men. For my male friends, as they emerged out of childhood, the imperative was to be in public space, outside of the gaze of the kin group, and thus by implication to roam around (*ūr surratu*) and do 'mischief' (Jeffrey et al. 2008: 94, 179; Lukose 2009; Nisbett 2007; Osella and Osella 1998, 2000).

Lakshmidēvi, a friend's lower-middle-class older sister, for example, complained to me that her son, who was in his first semester of college, was not getting good marks. I jokingly asked if he was cutting class and going to the movies instead. 'No', she seriously replied, 'at least if he were doing that, there would be some *'vīram'* (masculinity, heroism) in it. He would be doing what other kids his age do, getting more mature by bucking authority'. As it was, she was worried because he stays inside the home with her instead. While that was fine when he was a kid, at this

age it troubled her. He was supposed to transgress. He was supposed to experiment with forms of exteriority. He was supposed to do 'style'.

### III

#### *The interiority of the college peer group and 'over style'*

As I have suggested, the ideology that enables the intelligibility and performativity of 'style' turns on the repudiation, or bracketing, of figurations of (adult) 'society'. In particular, as I discuss in this section, it turns on bracketing those forms of hierarchy which are seen to underwrite (adult) 'society'.<sup>9</sup> In a very real sense, the condition of possibility to be, and to socialise as, a youth means disavowing hierarchical difference, to be outside of it, as it were, if only ever temporarily.

This came out in a conversation about caste with Vignesh, a middle-class student at a Madurai college. Vignesh explained that in the college, caste was not observed. Caste was something that happened out there (-and-then) but not here (-and-now). In the college, one was free to socialise with whomever one wanted, regardless of class, caste or religious community. He did not even know his friends' caste, he insisted. Without missing a beat but with an air of regret, Vignesh went on to say that he fully expected to have to orient himself to caste after marriage. Growing up meant growing into caste. There was no choice, he noted rather matter of factly, 'because that is how society is here. It makes you observe caste. After marriage we all have to go inside society/caste' (*kalyāṇattukku appuram camūkattukku!!ē pōkaṇum*). Whether or not Vignesh's account of caste in the college or post-marriage life is accurate, he, like the other youth that I worked with, understood himself, *as a youth*, to be outside of caste and adult 'society'. Moreover, this exteriority to caste organised his social interactions with his peers. As he noted, it was proscribed, and in bad taste, to explicitly align with or even to talk about caste in the peer group. Caste and community were always deferred, never us, here, or now.

Consider a conversation between two (lower-)middle-class Chennai friends, one backward-community Christian and one forward-community Hindu, discussing the place of communal identity between friends.

<sup>9</sup> These hierarchies include age, kin, caste and class, but not, often, gender or language (see Nakassis 2010). Nevertheless, even such hierarchies—and in particular, gender—are more muted than outside of the college and, in some peer groups, explicitly bracketed and disavowed (Nakassis forthcoming).

**R:** Religion *nī* Christian, Christian-*le itu nañantiruccu, atu nañanturuccu. Eeee! Etukku? Namakkupiraccanai tñēvarutu.*

**S:** *Āmā atu teriyāta vishayan-kaḷai patti pēcamāṭṭōm.*

**R:** *atuvum ivanum vantu* total Christian-*leyē uḷḷa ellāmē teriyātu. Enakkum Hindu patti avalō teriyātu.* <makes a clicking sound with his mouth> So *araikuraṭiyā tñ nammaḷē ukkāntirukkōm nammaḷe vantu pēci nammaḷukkullayē sanṭai vantā nammaḷukku tñē* waste. . . . *Atu tñ namma eppayumē* friends *ṇṇā* ‘Hi *maccān eppadi irukkure? Vīṭle eppaṭi irukkān-ka?*’ *Avalō tñ.* Religion *namakku tēvaiyē illai eppōtumē.*

**R:** Your [S.’s] religion is Christian, in Christianity this happened, that happened. Eeee! What’s the point? It’s just going to make problems.

**S:** Yeah, we don’t talk about things that we don’t know about.

**R:** He doesn’t know everything about Christianity. I also don’t know that much about Hinduism. <makes a clicking sound with his mouth> So, if we sit down and talk about all these things that we don’t know that well, and we get in a fight, it’s a waste for us. . . . That’s the thing, if we want to keep being friends (then it’s) ‘Hi *maccān*,<sup>10</sup> how are you? How is everyone at home?’ That’s all. We don’t ever need religion.

All such disavowals are, of course, ideological (which is not to say that they are not also real). Caste and community did matter in these youth’s lives. They pervaded their home lives, their ability to move through public space and even the college campus itself (particularly at the level of administration).<sup>11</sup> And yet, or rather precisely because of that fact, such distinctions had to be kept at bay. Youth sociality depended upon

<sup>10</sup> *Maccān* is a kin term (classificatory brother-in-law, cross-cousin) that is used between young men who are close friends. See Nakassis (forthcoming) for in-depth discussion of such cross-kin tropes of address. Also note these friends’ use of non-honorificating, intimate third-person (*ivan*) and second-person forms (*nī*, *VRB-e*) indexing equality and intimacy.

<sup>11</sup> During the time of my fieldwork, there were a number of explicit caste conflicts between dalit and Thevar students in the law college of Chennai, as well as at various government colleges in southern Tamil Nadu. Such conflicts, however, did not spill over into the colleges where I worked, though students were relatively sensitive about issues of caste, a fact which registered by their avoidance of the subject altogether.

bracketing such hierarchies. If and when caste inserted itself in such peer group interactions, it was always as a disruption to what these young men understood as how youth sociality in the college was *supposed* to work (see also Jeffrey 2010; Nisbett 2007).

The disavowal of an adult order of things—be it models of adult respectability or hierarchies of age or caste—was the very ground for how young men interacted with each other. This was itself shaped, and inscribed, through the ideological and institutional organisation of the college. The colleges where I worked organised youth in ways that suspended hierarchy and deferred adulthood (all the while attempting to move such youth towards both), thus constituting spaces where transgression and experimentation with alternate norms of status and authority unfolded. Such suspension simultaneously created egalitarian spaces of peer pressure, conformity and intimacy: the peer group.<sup>12</sup>

College was a very particular kind of space for many of the youth with whom I lived and worked. While schooling partially provided a non-kin space where youth could socialise independently of kin and caste logics, college was seen as a space totally detached from both (Beteille 1993 [1991]; Sharma 1986). It was a space where ‘youth’ and its stereotyped romances of freedom and transgression—largely experienced by these young men through popular college-based films (Nakassis and Dean 2007)—were expected to be played out. It was a place to do all those things you could not do at home or in school, be it trying out new fashions, growing out your hair, piercing your ear or falling in love. The college was seen as, and to that extent often was, a space for the creation of, and experimentation with, new identities and modes of sociality (Lukose 2009; Parameswaran 2001, 2002). As Stephen, one of my Madurai roommates, put it regarding fashion: ‘when we get to college, no one knows us. We can do whatever we want. A lot of guys go crazy with fashion’.

Institutionally, the college organised young men in ways which encouraged such sociality and experimentation. The liberal arts colleges where I worked organised students by department and year, creating cohorts

<sup>12</sup> Such peer groups are egalitarian, not in the sense of being equalitarian—that is, where all individuals are equal—but in that (a) institutionally perduring and ascribed forms of hierarchical status are (temporarily) bracketed (see Flanagan 1989: 261 on ‘egalitarian’ as always elliptically modified by ‘relatively’); and (b) the group abides by an ideology of egalitarianism (ibid.: 248).

where age hierarchy was transduced into year difference.<sup>13</sup> With very few exceptions, one does not take classes with students of other years or other departments. Further, in hostels, one likely lives with one's year-mates. Such age cohorts are further institutionalised by college rituals of 'ragging'—hazing rites where 'freshers' (first-year students) are forced to give excessive deference to 'seniors' (students in years above them). Part of ragging entailed the proscription on freshers from doing anything considered statusful in the college (wearing brands, going to the movies, smoking, drinking, etc.), that is, anything that was 'style' (Nakassis n.d.). Such rituals not only converted age hierarchy into year hierarchy (thus reinscribing adult hierarchies within the student body), they carved out a particular space for age-neutralised peer interaction within which egalitarian sociality, or that which approached such sociality, could be experienced.

In such age-neutralised spaces of non-kin sociality, flaunting the norms of 'society' through transgressive performances of 'youth' became possible and, more importantly, desirable. It was within one's college peer group that most youth rites of passage were first experienced as a group, be it roaming the streets late at night after the 'second show' (the last film show of the evening), one's first cigarette or beer (Nisbett 2006, 2007) or experiments with new forms of fashion or language (Lukose 2009).

Such peer groups were also, most importantly for our discussion here, spaces of intense intimacy, reciprocity and peer pressure. This intimacy was linguistically expressed between peers through symmetric dishonorification (curse words, 2nd person singular forms and verb-final particles like *tā*), as well as the use of cross-kin and affinal terms typically reserved for actual kin (Nakassis forthcoming). This intimacy was also expressed through reciprocal sharing of food, notes, clothing, cigarettes and other kinds of property, and physical displays of homosocial intimacy—holding hands, running one's fingers through each others' hair and sleeping in the same bed. Outside of the peer group, all the above are normatively contained within the caste and kin group (e.g., sharing the same plate is reserved for caste-mates; sharing property, using kin terms, feeding each other and sleeping in the same space are reserved for kin). While norms associated with 'proper'

<sup>13</sup> This varies by college. In the Chennai government college that I worked in, department was less important than 'bus route' (those who rode the same bus to the college). And while this introduced some differences in how youth peer groups worked, for the purposes of the argument of this article, the dynamics were the same. Nakassis (2010) provides a more detailed discussion of the bus route and its concepts of youth status (*gettu*).

behaviour (*murāi*) attempt to regiment such intimacy and contain it, youth peer groups bracket and transgress these (hierarchical) lines by figuratively replicating them within the peer group.<sup>14</sup>

Note the inherent tension. On the one hand, as differentiated from ‘society’ qua normative authority, the peer group licenses and mandates the transgression of adult authority and the trappings of *mariyātai*. It is such constant status-raising displays which define, in large part, the very space of the peer group. The peer group is that space where one can engage in such figurations of status and performances of transgressive ‘style’. On the other hand, as differentiated from ‘society’ qua hierarchy, the peer group is a space of status-levelling intimacy, egalitarianism and reciprocity. Caught between the push and pull of status-raising and status-levelling (themselves metonyms of the larger social order within which these youth are liminal and excluded), performances of youth masculinity and status in the peer group walk a thin line. Youth are constantly negotiating such performances, navigating the imperative to self-differentiate from one’s peers without alienating those very same peers through implying hierarchical difference. Indeed, much of students’ casual conversation, gossip and teasing is about whose ‘style’ is acceptable and whose is excessive or *kirukku* (crazy), who is statusful and who is showing off or trying too hard.

Put another way, successfully displayed signs of ‘style’—which as we saw above, figuratively re-animate adult forms of hierarchically-inscribed status—cannot be taken literally. They can never bring exteriority too close, nor can they get too close to adult forms or logics of status. This is precisely because of the precariousness of such displays. ‘Style’ always risks tipping over into what these same youth dubbed ‘over style’. It is continually troubled by the possibility of being too much.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, as I observed many times over, excessive status-raising always elicited explicit status-levelling from one’s peers. As one middle-class

<sup>14</sup> Adults often find such physical and linguistic intimacy disturbing and insulting precisely because it crosses the lines drawn by ‘society’ and violates *murāi* (also see Nisbett 2007; Osella and Osella 1998, 2000). Not unexpectedly, much of this intimate youth activity is studiously avoided outside of the peer group (Rogers 2008: 91). Parents scold young men for their fashion, their loose use of intimate physical and linguistic behaviour and physically punish them for ‘indecent’ behaviour like drinking, smoking or loving.

<sup>15</sup> This is reflected in the elaboration of the concept of ‘style’ in ambivalent terms that hint at its excess—‘*bantā*’ (excessive showing off, prestige), ‘scene *pōturatu*’ (literally, putting on a scene [from a film]), ‘film *kāṭṭuratu*’ (literally, showing a film), ‘*paṭam pōṭuratu*’ (literally, putting on a film/picture), ‘build up *paṇṇuratu*’ (building [oneself] up; a

student studying in Madurai told me, using a youth saying: ‘over *bantā uṭambukku ākatu*’ (too much showing-off/status-raising is bad for the body). Excessive ‘style’ can literally result in ‘fetching some slaps’ from one’s peers. Such status-levelling is routinised in youth peer groups through the constant teasing of and gossiping about those who do ‘over style’, as well as through status-inverting humour, circulating ‘treats’<sup>16</sup> and even physical confrontation (see section IV). Such interactional strategies aim to reconstitute the peer group as an egalitarian space free of perduring modes of status-hierarchy, where the constant attempts by young men to status-raise are kept in check. One result is that among the youth with whom I worked, anxieties of ‘over style’ and being seen as uppity, boastful and arrogant (*talai ganam*, head weight) either created relatively class-homogenous peer groups (where default consumption habits had relative parity) or, just as likely, class-neutralised peer-group performances (where consumption practices were made to have relative parity) (Nisbett 2007). I return to this point in the discussion of brands and English below.

And yet, even as the logics of adult hierarchy were bracketed within peer groups through this negotiation of ‘style’, it was often liable to be reinscribed between peer groups. As we noted above regarding ragging, for example, the limits of ‘style’ and ‘over style’ were often reckoned relative to one’s year. ‘Style’ performed by juniors was liable to be seen as ‘over’ by seniors (and could trigger confrontation between juniors and seniors), while over-the-top displays of ‘style’ were the prerogative of seniors. Similarly, ‘style’ was also often reckoned relative to class difference, though this was commonly filtered through ideologies of personhood, culture and place, rather than operationalised through explicit appeals to class as such (Nakassis 2010). Foreigners, foreign returns, North Indians and Malayalees—who all

---

reference to the ‘build up’ sequences preceding the hero’s appearance in a film)—as well as straightforwardly disparaging terms—‘over style’, ‘over acting’ or ‘over action’, *biku paṇṇatu*’ (to condescend, act better than [someone else]), ‘*talai ganam*’ (literally, head weight), ‘head weight’ (arrogance). Note how the ambivalent figuration of ‘style’ is linked to tropes of visibility and, in particular, to the re-animation of filmic heroes, a fact which belies a more general ambivalence about the ‘mass’ popularity of cinema.

<sup>16</sup> After one has benefited some significant status-raising event (e.g., a birthday, winning a prize, job promotion, securing the love of a girl, a marriage engagement) one is expected to ‘treat’ one’s peers (e.g., by buying them sweets, dinner, movie tickets and most commonly for young men, alcohol), thereby self-status levelling and redistributing the accrued status to one’s peers. The treat is a kind of trope on adult modes of patronage through transgressive rites of youth solidarity.



tended to be richer than the overall student body in the colleges I worked at—were seen as able to do ‘style’ easier, and more acceptably, because it was part of the ‘culture’ of their ‘place’. Alternatively, within the college, differences of class were often projected onto departmental distinctions, a fact that followed from the different tuition costs of various departments. For example, students from departments whose tuition was more expensive, such as commerce and visual communications, were more likely to be seen as ‘stylish’ than, say, economics and history students.

While these assumptions certainly set particular defaults for the evaluation of performances of ‘style’, they were not (and I would argue, could not be) absolute. As I observed, poorer students, rural students and students from less-prestigious departments could just as well be seen as ‘style’ within and outside of their peer groups. As was clear from my observations of students over the course of their studies, ‘style’ is an interactional achievement that cannot be simply reduced to perduring sociological categories like social class. This is because evaluations as ‘(over) style’ are perspectival and relative to the (communicative) social relations—which are themselves constantly shifting and under negotiation—that hold between the performer of ‘style’ and his audience. Thus, the ‘style’ of students from stereotypically rich departments or ethno-linguistic groups was just as often evaluated by students outside of those groups as being ‘over’ (excessive), weird, arrogant, showing off or boastful. Conversely, ‘stylish’ students from stereotypically poorer groups might be negatively typified by those in stereotypically richer groups as immature and childish (i.e., trying so hard to have lost a grip on a sense of taste or appropriateness), or as simply out of sync with their perceived (class) background or ‘culture’. Within both groups, their own ‘style’ would be seen as acceptably status raising. In such cases, ‘style’ and ‘over style’ mark the fluid and continually negotiated boundary that defines the peer group itself, diagramming not simply distance from an adult order of things, but through that diagrammaticity, the limits and spaces of youth intimacy and solidarity itself.

#### IV

#### *Negotiating English and brands in the peer group*

In the following pages, I look at how the productive tension between status raising and status levelling, ‘style’ and ‘over style’, plays out in lower- and lower-middle-class young men’s usage of two semiotic registers: English

and brands. The majority of the young men with whom I worked had limited command of and access to such registers. I show how anxieties surrounding excessive status raising mediate how such statusful signs are used in the peer group. In particular, I show how the play between 'style' and 'over style' constitutes the peer group as a productive space, a space where exterior social forms are appropriated, re-purposed and re-functioned, where normative adult values are disavowed and reinscribed, and where both are re-valourised and rendered uncanny, diagramming the multiple desires and anxieties that stem from youth's liminal placement within a larger order of things (cf. Hebdige 1979).

### **English-Tamil slang**

Affording job opportunity, global mobility and the impression of education and upper-class background, the use of English is 'style'. English projects exteriority. It makes you visible. As one Madurai student noted, 'if you don't know it, even a dog won't turn to look at you'. In contrast with high register Tamil—which commands *mariyātai* among 'big men' (*periya ālunka*), emblematised in the Dravidian politician protecting 'Tamil culture' (Bate 2009)—and colloquial 'local' (or regional) Tamil—which is seen as 'normal' or 'indecent'—English is used as a status-raising register in youth peer groups. Young men attempt to incorporate English, to whatever extent they can, into their peer-group interactions.

But using English as an ego-focal index of youth status is precarious. Indeed, the most common kind of teasing among youth regards English use. Youth often ridicule individuals who use a 'foreign' accent (i.e., American or British) when speaking in English or in Tamil (often by parodying their mispronouncing of the shibboleth of 'correct' Tamil pronunciation, the retroflex frictionless continuant 'ɻ' in the name of the language, Tamilɻ). Such individuals act like they were 'born in London', or had 'just gotten off the plane from America'. Such a person is a 'Peter' (verb: 'peter (v)uṭuratu', showing off through English, being a Peter). Here, the English name Peter is a metonym for the derided persona invoked through such speech.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to accent, using English words not yet standardised as loans in colloquial Tamil can also be the grounds for teasing. In a peer group

<sup>17</sup> In fact, English usage is such a pervasive mode of status-raising that youth often used the phrase 'peter (v)uṭuratu' to simply mean showing off.

where no one speaks English fluently, code-switching or code-mixing is immediately greeted with teasing; and if such English usage is seen as excessive—that is, more than the others in the group can (under)stand—it is met with explicit and disparaging commentary. One common rejoinder to a student who speaks in English is: ‘A, B, C, D, E, F, G . . . *enkaḷukkum teriyum*’ (We also know our A, B, Cs [so no need to show off]). At functions where a (youth) speaker is using ‘too much’ English on stage, audience members will invariably yell out ‘*Tamille pēcu!*’ (‘speak in Tamil!’) (also see Lukose 2009: 187).

One of my middle-class Madurai roommates, Stephen, spoke excellent English. However, except to me and two other students who were from outside of the state (and who didn’t speak fluent Tamil), he rarely spoke in full English in the hostel. This was precisely for the reason that speaking in English, even when comprehensible to his peers, would lead to their annoyance. Only when he and I were alone, or in conversation that did not interest others, would he switch into English.

Inversely, in a group where everyone speaks English at a particular level, someone who speaks English at a lower competency will also be teased, not simply as ignorant, but as trying to project a level of status that he cannot back up. In either case, the issue is that English usage always presupposes a level of status as a condition of its use and evaluation. If that level of status exceeds either the peer group or peers’ assumption of the speaker’s status, then that individual will be teased mercilessly until he stops. What one finds among students, then, is a desire, in fact an obsession, with speaking English accompanied by a paralysing insecurity, a shyness and fear that one’s English will either be too good or not good enough (Rogers 2008: 85; Lukose 2009).

In the Madurai hostels that I lived in, the force of the insecurity and fear of humiliation surrounding English use in the peer group was such that even when everyone in the group publicly admitted their fears to each other and resolved to speak in English, they were physically unable to. The minute someone began to speak in English, everyone would involuntarily start laughing, shutting the mouth of the speaker. Conversation would switch into Tamil instead.

Code-switching into English could even constitute an insult to one’s interlocutor, provoking physical confrontation. One particular incident in a Madurai hostel in which I lived involved the negotiation between two freshers about who was to put away the cricket equipment. (They

had been ordered to do so by the third-year students). While the students were unequal by social class, by the logic of the egalitarian peer group there was no principle (e.g., age or year) by which to resolve who should put the equipment away. Hence, their verbal negotiation in Tamil of the ‘You do it’–‘Why should I do it? You do it’ variety. This quickly escalated into verbal conflict, the breaking point being when the richer and more English-fluent of the two switched into English. Construed as an addressee-focal insult rather than ego-focal status-raising—that is, implying that the other student was a lower status ignoramus—the so-insulted student hit his interlocutor, now combatant, over the head with a mirror, in effect status levelling him through physical blows.

This tension between status raising and status levelling regarding English in the peer group had a number of effects on how English was used in peer groups. First, because almost everyone in the college wants to but cannot speak in English, there is a tendency to use English words when speaking Tamil (code-mixing) but the avoidance of clause and sentence level constructions in English (code-switching).<sup>18</sup> Students pepper their Tamil with English words, and much of youth slang is derived from English. As one student explained in Tamil, after trying to initiate in English with me in vain (everyone explicitly told him to stop with the English), ‘there is nothing wrong with the sentence “Scissors-*e koṭu*. Paper cut *paṇṇaṇum*” (Give the scissors. I want to cut paper)’. It conveys some knowledge of English and thus is ‘style’. Further, its use will not exclude one’s peers. ‘But saying “Give the scissors, I want to cut paper” will elicit teasing because it is *bantā*, because it is trying to show that you are the *periya āl* of the group (which one’s peers reject)’.

Second, as using English words that are unknown to most of the populace runs the risk of teasing, there is a push towards using English words that are just at the edges of intelligibility, that is, words that might be familiar to a few but not all members of the peer group. Words known to all do not have status-raising potential while words known to none invite censure. Third, there is a tendency to gloss English words with their Tamil

<sup>18</sup> Full English speech is associated, for most students, with their encounters with adults in the college: classroom lectures, the speeches of college officials and job interviews in the placement cell (see also Lukose 2009: 186). Thus, while English is usable as statusful behaviour at the word or phrase level, its full-blown use indexes formal contexts associated with adult authority.

equivalents. In effect, one ‘mentions’ the English word, hesitantly status-raising, while at the same time ‘using’ the Tamil gloss of the English (thus pre-emptively countering any possibility of teasing). By doing this, one can do ‘style’ without leaving anyone out.

Finally, words and phrases that are primarily interactional in nature and have minimal informational content are favoured: greetings and departures (‘Hi’, ‘What’s up?’, ‘Good morning’, ‘Bye’); ritualised interactional moves and phatic communications (‘How are you?’, ‘Did you eat?’, ‘Okay[-vā?]’, ‘Isn’t it?’, ‘Yeah, I know’); and discourse linkage words (‘but’, ‘suppose’, ‘so’). Such words are status-raising (i.e., are ego-focal) but do not exclude anyone from the conversation (i.e., are not alter-focal). This is because their meaning is easily recoverable from context without any knowledge of English. Such usage manages contradictory imperatives to raise status by speaking English but not to raise status too much by making excessive use of English.

### **Counterfeit global brands**

A second salient register through which young Tamil men do their status work is branded clothing and accessories. In Madurai and Chennai colleges, young men’s bodies are adorned by global brands like Diesel, Tommy Hilfiger and Ferrari, among many others. Such brands are ‘style’. They index exteriority through their participation in the imagination of Western aesthetics, by figuring themselves as coming from abroad, and by invoking fashionable figures of exterior personhood (foreigners, non-resident Indians, urban elites, television personalities, film stars). They are also seen as visually appealing, sartorially transgressive and extra-ordinary, and thus individuating of the user (Nakassis n.d., 2012).

But what is so interesting about the use of branded forms by lower-middle- and middle-class young men is their indifference towards the brands they adorn themselves with. While they readily and eagerly consume branded forms, in their peer groups they do not particularly know or care what the brands are, where they are from, or what they ‘mean’. It is enough for such youth that the branded forms are like brands, even if not brands. Curiously, then, in their peer groups the youth I worked with were not concerned at all about questions of brand authenticity. But why? If the brand is an index of exteriority and differentiation from ‘society’, and to that extent can do ‘style’, why aren’t lower-middle- and

middle-class youth concerned about the authenticity of branded items in their peer groups?<sup>19</sup>

Such indifference towards brand identity and authenticity makes sense precisely because while branded forms are 'style', trying to pass off a duplicate as 'real' or consuming (authentic) brand commodities *as* authentic is 'over style'. That is, evaluating branded forms as authentic or inauthentic, and not just as aesthetically pleasing and 'stylish' (qua vague indexes of exteriority) is to potentially convert (figurative) ego-focal indexes of status raising into (literal) alter-focal indexes of status lowering (i.e., as hierarchically ranking peers by socio-economic class). To wear branded forms qua authentic brands is to be seen as uppity or showing-off, as pretending that you are the *periya āl* when you are not. When the peer group cannot bear such levels of status raising and still maintain its egalitarian composition, wearing branded forms qua authentic brands risks transgressing the limits of the peer group's consumption norms, and thus chances envy, jealousy and possible ostracisation from the group.

Even those who could consume authentic brands by their class position often avoided doing so (or ignored or denied the fact that they did), preferring counterfeit brands instead. One of my middle-class Madurai hostel roommates, the brand-knowledgeable Yuvaraj, did just that. As he explained, 'if in the college no one cares about (real, authorised) brands, why would I spend nine-hundred rupees on one "company" piece of clothing when I can get three or four (counterfeit) shirts? Among friends, everyone knows that no one has "real" brands'. When he did discuss authentic brands, Yuvaraj always couched the value of such goods not in their status-raising potential but in their 'quality' and 'durability'. This discourse of quality was, while true, a kind of deflection, a disavowal of both the ego- and alter-focality of the branded good through the fetish of its inherent quality as a useful, but not statusful, object.

While the authentic brand in the peer group problematically functions as a status-raising sign, the duplicate branded form is acceptable precisely because it is functionally ambivalent: it status raises and status levels at the same moment, thereby negotiating the demands of the peer group. Similarly, youth's blasé attitude towards brands qua brands and duplicates

<sup>19</sup> Elite and upper-class youth are, of course, often concerned with authentic brand items given that in their peer groups authentic brands are so highly presupposed that using a duplicate is stigmatised as low class.

qua duplicates coupled with their eager interest in branded forms of either authentic or duplicate origin as aesthetic, 'stylish' objects, resolves this tension by refusing to reckon branded forms as literal class-indexing signs.

This is not to say that youth do not want or use authentic branded items as such, nor is it to say that they cannot tell the difference between 'real' and 'fake' branded goods for, of course, they can. Rather, it is to suggest that for these lower-middle- and middle-class youth, the anxiety about status levelling within the peer group functions as a counter-force which re-analyses branded forms within a larger aesthetic of exteriority and not as instances of brands as such. It defers the issue of 'real' versus 'fake', thus allowing branded forms to function as 'style'. Hence, brand indifference with respect to authenticity is a kind of deference to one's peers. Analysing branded forms under this aesthetic of exteriority allows one to do 'style' without doing too much 'style'. It allows one to perform difference through sameness, to differentiate one's self while still being part of the group. This is materialised in the known counterfeit, a branded form denuded of authenticity so as to function as doubly-voiced sign of non-hierarchical, youth status.

## V *Conclusions*

In this article, I have shown how young men's peer groups and the negotiations of status that take place within them are governed by a logic of differentiation from and exteriority to those hierarchies within which they are liminally situated. This logic is shaped by youth's position in the life cycle and by their reflexive understanding of that positionality. As we saw, young men's status negotiations play out through 'modern' forms associated with 'globalisation', as well as 'traditional' forms and concepts of status associated with Tamil 'society'. I argued that this was not because youth are negotiating modernity, tradition, globalisation or liberalisation as such, but because they are negotiating the tensions and anxieties surrounding peer-group performances of youth masculinity and status, in particular, the peer group's constitutive tension between status raising ('style') and status levelling ('over style'). Finally, I showed that the navigation of these dual mandates results in the re-functioning and material transformation of those semiotic forms which come within their orbit. The peer group, in this sense, is a space whose liminal logics work

*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, 2 (2013): 245–269

on objects, rearticulating their social values in ways that are not easily reduced to the logics which govern their circulation more widely. What youth speak and wear are not quite English and global brand garments. They are something different, something in excess of.

In conclusion, I have hoped to show what Tamil youth practice looks like from within the peer group, and how this is quite different from the 'global' view from afar. To read such youth cultural practice and its hybrid signs of status as negotiating 'tradition', 'modernity' or 'globalisation' is to read such youth culture allegorically. In some instances, like social scientists, youth themselves may re-analyse their own experience and anxieties in precisely this way. Certainly, some do some of the time. In my research, however, young men were only very rarely concerned with globalisation, tradition or modernity as such. Such concerns were tangential to their everyday social projects and the regimes of intelligibility and schemas of value which gave meaning to their social action. Instead of framing Tamil youth masculinity and status in terms of how young men negotiate, resist or receive abstract macro-processes like 'globalisation' (or 'ideology', 'culture' or 'power'), I have asked how youth variously use and re-function signs to do some, often mundane, interactional work in the peer group. Just as a carpenter does not negotiate with his hammer but uses it to do work, youth use signs of modernity, tradition and globalisation to do their own work.

### *Acknowledgements*

Pieces from this article were presented at the annual AAA meeting (Philadelphia, PA, 12.05.2009) and at the Michiganian workshop (01.14.2001). Thanks to Dimitri Nakassis and Llerena Searle, who lent their critical ears more than once; and to Julie Cousin, Luke Fleming, Rebecca Pardo, Susan Seizer, Ritty Lukose, the editors of *CIS* and two anonymous reviewers for providing useful feedback. The research for this article was funded by the American Institute of Indian Studies.

### REFERENCES

- Anandhi, S. 2005. 'Sex and Sensibility in Tamil Politics.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 40 (47): 4876–77.
- Bate, Bernard. 2009. *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aesthetic*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Béteille, Andre. 1993 (1991). 'The Family and the Reproduction of Inequality.' In *Family, Kinship, and Marriage in India*, edited by Patricia Uberoi, 435–51. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

*Contributions to Indian Sociology* 47, 2 (2013): 245–269



- Brown, B. Bradford and Reed W. Larson. 2002. 'The Kaleidoscope of Adolescence: Experiences of the World's Youth at the Beginning of the 21st Century.' In *The World's Youth: Adolescence in Eight Regions of the Globe*, edited by B.B. Brown, R.W. Larson and T.S. Saraswathi, 1–21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bucholtz, Mary. 2002. 'Youth and Cultural Practice.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31: 525–52.
- David, Kenneth. 1980. 'Hidden Powers: Cultural and Socio-Economic Accounts of Jaffna Women.' In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by S. Wadley, 93–136. Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.
- Dickey, Sara. 1993. *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flanagan, James G. 1989. 'Hierarchy in Simple "Egalitarian" Societies.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18: 245–66.
- Fuller, Christopher and Haripriya Narasimhan. 2006. 'Engineering Colleges, "Exposure" and Information Technology.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 (3): 258–62.
- Hebdige, Dick. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Methuen.
- Jeffrey, Craig. 2010. 'Time-pass: Youth, Class, and Time among Unemployed Young Men in India.' *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 465–81.
- Jeffrey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery. 2008. *Degrees without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Juluri, Vamsee. 2002. 'Music Television and the Invention of Youth Culture in India.' *Television & New Media* 3 (4): 367–86.
- Liechty, Mark. 1995. 'Media, Markets and Modernization: Youth Identities and the Experience of Modernity in Kathmandu.' In *Youth Cultures: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by V. Amit-Talai and H. Wulff, 166–201. London: Routledge.
- . 2003. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lukose, Ritty. 2009. *Liberalization's Children: Gender, Youth, and Consumer Citizenship in Globalizing India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Mazzarella, William. 2004. 'Culture, Globalization, Mediation.' *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33: 345–67.
- Mines, Diane. 2005. *Fierce Gods: Inequality, Ritual, and the Politics of Dignity in a South Indian Village*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Mines, Mattison. 1994. *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and Individuality in South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mines, Mattison and Vijayalakshmi Gourishankar. 1990. 'Leadership and Individuality in South Asia: The Case of the South Indian Big-man.' *The Journal of Asian Studies* 49 (4): 761–86.
- Mosse, David. 2003. 'On Binaries and Boundaries.' In *Regional Modernities: The Cultural Politics of Development in India*, edited by K. Sivaramakrishnan and A. Agrawal, 329–37. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Nakassis, Constantine V. 2010. 'Youth and Status in Tamil Nadu, India.' Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania.
- . 2012. 'Counterfeiting What? Aesthetics of Brandedness and BRAND in Tamil Nadu, India.' *Anthropological Quarterly* 85 (3): 701–22.

- Nakassis, Constantine V. Forthcoming. 'Suspended Kinship and Youth Sociality in Tamil Nadu, India.' *Current Anthropology*.
- Nakassis, Constantine V. n.d. 'Brand and Brandedness in Tamil Nadu, India.'
- Nakassis, Constantine V. and Melanie Dean. 2007. 'Desire, Youth, and Realism in Tamil Cinema.' *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 17 (1): 77–104.
- Nandy, Ashis. 2004 (1987). 'Reconstructing Childhood: A Critique of the Ideology of Adulthood.' In *Bonfire of Creeds: The Essential Ashis Nandy*, 423–29. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Niranjana, Seemanthini. 2001. *Gender and Space: Femininity, Sexualization and the Female Body*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Nisbett, Nicholas. 2006. 'The Internet, Cybercafés and the New Social Spaces of Bangalorean Youth.' In *Locating the Field: Space, Place and Context in Anthropology*, edited by S. Coleman and P. Collins, 129–47. New York: Berg.
- . 2007. 'Friendship, Consumption, Morality: Practising Identity, Negotiating Hierarchy in Middle-class Bangalore.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 13 (4): 935–50.
- Osella, Caroline and Filippo Osella. 1998. 'Friendship and Flirting: Micro-politics in Kerala, South India.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4 (2): 189–206.
- Osella, Filippo and Caroline Osella. 2000. *Social Mobility in Kerala: Modernity and Identity in Conflict*. London: Pluto Press.
- Parameswaran, Radhika. 2001. 'Feminist Media Ethnography in India: Exploring Power, Gender, and Culture in the Field.' *Qualitative Inquiry* 7 (1): 69–103.
- . 2002. 'Reading Fictions of Romance: Gender, Sexuality, and Nationalism in Postcolonial India.' *Journal of Communication* 52 (4): 832–51.
- Reynolds, H.B. 1980. 'The Auspicious Married Woman.' In *The Powers of Tamil Women*, edited by S. Wadley, 35–60. Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs.
- Robertson, Roland. 1995. 'Globalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity.' In *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson, 25–44. London: SAGE Publications.
- . 2001. 'Globalization Theory 2000+.' In *Handbook of Social Theory*, edited by G. Ritzer and B. Smart, 458–71. London: SAGE Publications.
- Rogers, Martyn. 2008. 'Modernity, "Authenticity", and Ambivalence: Subaltern Masculinities on a South Indian College Campus.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 14 (1): 79–95.
- Saraswathi, T.S. 1999. 'Adult-Child Continuity in India: Is Adolescence a Myth or an Emerging Reality?' In *Culture, Socialization, and Human Development*, edited by T.S. Saraswathi, 213–32. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.
- Seizer, Susan. 2005. *Stigmas of the Tamil Stage: An Ethnography of Special Drama Artists in South India*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Sharma, Ursula. 1986. *Women's Work, Class, and the Urban Household: A Study of Shimla, North India*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Tomlinson, John. 1997. 'Cultural Globalization and Cultural Imperialism.' In *International Communication and Globalization*, edited by A. Mohammadi, 170–90. London: SAGE Publications.

