Based on ethnographic research, this book explores the ways in which elite women use and view money in order to construct identities – of class, status, and gender. Drawing on their everyday worlds, it tracks the intricate and contested meanings they attach to money. Focusing on weddings, travel, and spirituality, Parul Bhandari delineates the entitlements and privileges as well as the obsessions and vulnerabilities that underlie the construction of class, the shaping of elite cultures, and the curating of femininity. As such, this book offers an innovative account of the interplay between money, modernity, class, and gender.

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Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects
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*Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects* has a broad yet particular purpose. It explores quotidian claims made on the *modern* – understood as idea and image, practice and procedure – as part of everyday articulations of modernity on the Indian sub-continent. Here, the category-entity of the *subject* has wide purchase. It refers not only to social actors who have been active participants in historical processes of modernity, but equally implies branch of learning and area of study, topic and theme, question and matter, and issue and business.

The series addresses such modern subjects in a range of distinct yet overlaying ways, focusing on capital and class, culture and power, gender and identity, politics and privilege, nation and narration, design and dominance, aesthetics and authority, and science and subjectivities – in everyday and institutional arenas.

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Money, Culture, Class
Elite Women as Modern Subjects

Parul Bhandari
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Series editor’s foreword

Saurabh Dube

It is a pleasure to write this foreword to the second title in the Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects. In what follows, I shall first introduce the series and then turn to the book.

The series

Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects has a broad yet particular purpose. It seeks to explore quotidian claims made on the modern – understood as idea and image, practice and procedure – as part of everyday articulations of modernity on the Indian sub-continent. Here, the category-entity of the subject also has wide purchase. It refers not only to social actors who have been active participants in historical processes of modernity, but equally implies branch of learning and area of study, topic and theme, question and matter, and issue and business. The series attempts to address such modern subjects in a range of distinct yet overlaying ways.

Questions of modernity have always been bound to issues of being/becoming modern. These themes have been discussed in various ways for long now.¹ For convenience, we might distinguish between two broad, opposed tendencies. On the one hand, over the past few centuries, it is the West/Europe that has been seen as the locus and the habitus of the modern and modernity. Such a West is imaginary yet tangible, principally envisioned in the image of the North Atlantic world. And it is from these arenas that modernity and the modern appear as spreading outwards to transform other, distant and marginal, peoples in the mold and the wake of the West. On the other hand, such propositions have been contested by rival claims, including especially from within Romanticist and anti-modernist dispositions. Here, if the modern and modernity have been often understood as intimating the fundamental fall of humanity, everywhere, so too have the aggrandisements of an analytical reason been countered through procedures of a hermeneutic provenance.
Needless to say, these contending tendencies have for long each found imaginative articulations, and I provide indicative examples from our own times. The work of philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor and historians such as Reinhart Koselleck and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht have opened up the exact terms, textures, and transformations of modernity and the modern. At the same time, they have arguably located the constitutive conditions of these phenomenon in Western Europe and Euro-America. In contrast, anti-modernist sensibilities have found innovative elaborations in, say, the ‘critical traditionalism’ of Ashis Nandy in South Asia; and the querying of Eurocentric thought has been intriguingly expressed by the scholars of the ‘coloniality of knowledge’ and ‘decoloniality of power’ in Latin America. These powerful positions variously rest on assumptions of innocence before and outside Europe and the West, modernity and the modern.

Engaging with yet going beyond such prior emphases, recent work on modernity has charted new directions, departures that have served to foreground questions of modernity in academic agendas and on intellectual horizons, more broadly. I indicate four critical trends. First and foremost, there have been works focusing on different expressions of the modern and distinct articulations of modernity as historically grounded and/or culturally expressed, articulations that query _a priori_ projections and sociological formalisms underpinning the category-entity. Second, there are the studies that have diversely explored issues of ‘early’ and ‘colonial’ and ‘multiple’ and ‘alternative’ modernity/modernities. Third, we find imaginative ethnographic, historical, and theoretical explorations of modernity’s conceptual cognates such as globalisation, capitalism, and cosmopolitanism as well as of attendant issues of state, nation, and democracy. Fourth and finally, there have been varied explorations of the enchantments of modernity and of the magic of the modern, understood not as analytical errors but as formative of social worlds. These studies have ranged from the elaborations of the fetish of the state, the sacred character of modern sovereignty, the uncanny of capitalism, and the routine enticements of modernity through to the secular magic of representational practises such as entertainment shows, cinema, and advertising.

_Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects_ engages and exceeds, takes forward and departs from such concerns in its own manner. To start off, its titles address the queries and concepts entailed in earlier explorations of the modern and recent reconsiderations of modernity by focusing on a clutch of common and critical questions. These issues turn on the everyday elaborations of the modern, the quotidian configurations of modernity, on the Indian sub-continent. Next, rather than simply asserting the empirical
plurality of modernity and the modern, the cluster approaches the rou-
tine, even banal, expressions of the modern as registering contingency,
contradiction, and contention as lying at the core of modernity. Further,
it only follows that our bid is not to indolently exorcise aggrandising rep-
resentations of modernity as the West, but to prudently track instead the
play of such projections in the commonplace unravelling of the modern
in India today. Finally, such procedures not only recast broad questions –
for instance of cosmopolitanism and globalisation, state and citizenship,
Eurocentrism and Nativism, aesthetics and authority – by approaching
them through routine renderings of the modern in contemporary South
Asia. They also stay with the dense, exact expressions of modernity yet all
the while attending to their larger, critical implications, prudently thinking both
down to the ground.

In keeping with the spirit of the series, all its titles stand informed
by specific renderings – as well as focused rethinking – of key cate-
gories and processes. Let me provide two exact instances. In different
ways, concepts and processes of power and politics alongside those
of community and identity variously run through the Focus Series on
Modern Subjects. Here, neither power nor politics are rendered as sig-
nifying solely institutional relations of authority centering on the state
and its subjects. Rather, the bid is to articulate these as equally embody-
ing diffuse domains and intimate arrangements of authority and desire,
including their seductions and subversions. Actually, as parts of such
force-fields, state and government, their policy and program might now
assume twinned dimensions in understandings of modern subjects. Here
can be found densely embodied disciplinary techniques toward form-
ing and transforming subjects-citizens, where such protocols and their
reworking by citizens-subjects no less register the shaping of authority
by anxiety, uncertainty, and alterity, of the structuring of command by
deferral, difference, and displacement.

At the same time, the series approaches community and identity as mod-
ern processes of meaning and authority, located at the core of nation and
globalisation. This is to say that instead of approaching identity and com-
munity as already given entities that are principally antithetical to modern-
ity, this cluster explores communities and identities as wide-ranging
processes of formations of subjects, expressing collective groupings and
particular personhoods. Defined within social relationships of production
and reproduction, appropriation and approbation, and power and difference,
emergent identities, cultural communities, and their mutations appear now
as essential elements in the quotidian constitution, expressions, and trans-
formations of modern subjects.
The book

Over the last two decades, there has been a critical rethinking of that staple of sociological (and political) studies, the elites. Such shifts in sociology have been accompanied by connected efforts in related disciplines. These have turned, for instance, on anthropologies of elites. They have extended to new histories of capitalism. Further, such developments have been shored up, at large, by contemporary reportage accounts, themselves based on authorial observation and the ongoing archive of public and private transactions. None of this should be surprising, especially in the wake of the raging rampages of the 1%, and the prurient and critical interest in them, across the world.

Parul Bhandari’s *Money, Culture, Class: Elite Women as Modern Subjects* draws on some of these terrains of the study of elites, and itself intervenes in the formidable force-fields of the lives of elites. Beginning with a minimalist definition of elites as those who bear enormously disproportionate access or control over resources of different description, the book focuses on elite housewives and their articulations of the resourceful properties – and recursive propensities – of money in the heart of India’s capital, Delhi (old and new). Here, the lives of such elite women are approached ‘not through ready optics of unbound opulence, conspicuous consumption, and reproduction of inequality, important as these are, but as [involving] protagonists and players shaping elite-ness, class, and culture’.

This is to say that at stake are much more than pre-scripted actors who readily reproduce already-established rules surrounding class-fractions, and easily replicate always-given expectations turning on boundary-maintenance. Instead, we are in the face of women subjects who bring their own effects and affects to dynamics of gender and elite-ness, class and culture – as ‘shaped by seductions and enticements of the modern (fashion, travel)’ and reworkings of ‘the processes and meanings of modernity (consumption, spirituality)’.

It only follows that Bhandari explores such processes as not all of a piece, but as necessarily contradictory and contested ones. This is crucially registered by her acute attention to the discrete expressions and distinct meanings ‘attached to the different uses of money by elite housewives, including buying property, consuming culture, and organising religious practices’.

All of this should establish the clear fit between this series and Bhandari’s book. Yet, there is more to the tie-in between the work’s nature and the mandate of *Routledge Focus on Modern Subjects*. The book is based on 18 months of imaginative and sensitive ethnographic fieldwork. If this showcases Parul Bhandari’s capacities as a fieldworker and ethnographer,