

THE SPIRIT OF CONSUMERISM AND CHANGE IN SOCIO-CULTURAL SPACE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RURAL AND URBAN AREAS IN WEST BENGAL

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India is going to be the third largest consumer economy, after the United States and China. In India the largest proportion of these consumer items are grasped by the middle class. Researchers argue, in South Asia as well as in India consumption has come to be a critical arena of middle-class identity. This scenario of consumption is going to be more or less similar both in urban and rural India, which is not widely investigated especially in the context of micro level study. West Bengal which is one of the important states of India in the milieu of consumption pattern is not an exception of that. This article focuses on a micro-level study in some rural and urban spaces of West Bengal. With the help of secondary data and empirical research, this article tries to compare the consumption pattern of urban and rural middle-class households. The article is divided into three parts. The first section examines the changes in middle-class culture, from its archetypal form to a 'culture of consumption'. The two subsequent sections deal with the changes in consumption pattern of middle-class households both in rural and urban setting and have also tried to explore their world view in relation to consumption. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, this article attempts to explore the gap between urban and rural middle-class households following their nature of consumption and its changes over time.

Introduction

Contemporary society in India can be identified by its growing craze of consumer culture due to the increase of disposable income in the hands of a huge middle class. According to Pandey (2009), this expanding proportion of middle class has been created through India's rapid economic growth, which is the consequence of the neo-liberal economic reforms. Neo-liberal economic reforms were

initiated during the early 1990s and had changed the thrust of India's economy. On one hand it helped the Indian economy to grow at an accelerated speed, and on the other hand, it opened up Indian markets and unleashed a new regime of consumption (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016). Leela Fernandes (2006), in her study has claimed that the withdrawal of restrictions on the import of consumer entities has made virtually everything available in the local market, which has raised a new socio-economic class, centred on its 'culture of consumption'. In India this culture of consumption is mainly practiced by the middle class (Pandey, 2009).

Analysing the 55th round of NSSO data, Pandey said that (2009), the Indian middle-class forms 46 % of its total population, and consumed 82 % of its total consumption. Along with Leela Fernandes (2006), many other researchers Appadurai and Breckenridge 2005; Oza 2006; Liechty 2003) rightly argue that, in South Asia and specially in India, consumption has become a critical arena of the middle-class identity. This scenario of consumption is more or less similar in both urban and rural India. As per the market research of *The Economic Times*, in many cases rural India has crossed the share of urban consumers because of its larger share of population. The renowned financial planner Arun Thukral (2018) in his article, "India's Consumption Story: Why you just can't ignore this opportunity", has said that in the financial year of 2018 the annual consumption growth in urban India stood at 8.6 % while the rural consumption grew to 9.7 %. The India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF) (2019), also notes that the fast-moving consumer goods sector in rural India is worth 29.4 billion US\$ and estimated to reach to US\$ 100 billion by 2025.

In contrary, Hnatkowska and Lahiri (2012:28) argue that the rural-urban consumption gap is noteworthy and has widened with time. In this context, we must mention that most of the studies (Bhalla, 1995; Bhagat, 2005; Baxi, 2011; Roy, 2011; Kumar, 2014; Mor and Sethia, 2018), conducted on this topic take into account the poor people or the wage earners. This results in a huge consumption gap. Another problem related to those studies is that most of them are focused on macro-level observations and have neglected the micro-level aspects. In light of this backdrop, this study focuses on micro-level findings in selected rural and urban areas of Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal. This state is

well known for its larger section of non-poor population and consumption pattern. To compare the consumption pattern of rural and urban spaces this study has chosen the middle class as a target group because the similarities between rural and urban culture are directly related to the culture of consumption and this culture of consumption is the social identity of middle class in both rural and urban areas. In this perspective, Pandey (2009) has argued that the middle class is bound with a specific lifestyle throughout the world. Therefore, their lifestyle and culture will not be very different in urban and rural spaces. Their ability and eagerness to perform consumer culture both in rural and urban areas is gradually blurring the traditional boundaries between rural and urban spaces. In this context, the selection of the middle class as a target group is more relevant to notice the changing socio-cultural space in rural-urban areas.

The study tries to analyse the pattern and process of converging rural and urban culture through the lens of consumerism. It also tries to unfold the function of the middle class in this changing socio-cultural space. This article is based on both secondary data and empirical findings. The secondary data has been used to understand the broader patterns of growth of consumer culture. To understand the ground level reality, the study uses empirical findings. Through the field survey this study has observed middle class households located in four villages (Galsi, Jaugram, Mandalgram and Kusumgram) and in Burdwan town and have been surveyed following a semi-structured questionnaire.

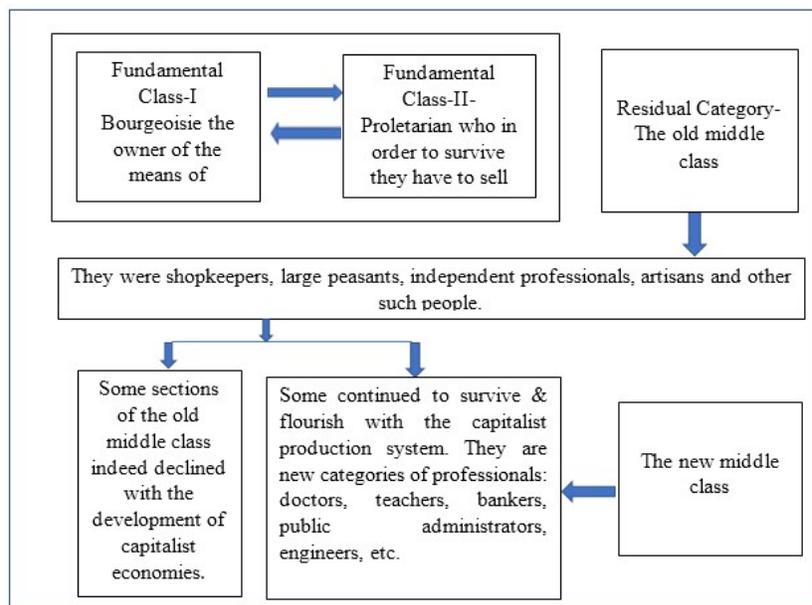
The study has been developed on the basis of three sections. The setup of this article is as follows. In the introductory part this article tries to develop the core argument, that, in India the culture of consumption is becoming a very important social phenomenon both in urban and rural India. Therefore, this culture of consumption becoming vibrant among the middle-class households. The article then tries to establish the relationship between the middle class and 'the culture of consumption'. Throughout this section, the article is trying to explore the changes in middle-class culture from its archetypal culture to a 'culture of consumption'. In its next section, this article attempts to focus on those spheres of consumption which have become the victim of consumerism. In its final division, this article tries to establish that the consumption

pattern of middle-class households and the need for them to maintain their social status is almost the same both in towns and villages.

Cultural Transformation of Middle Class: From 'Archetypal Culture' to 'Culture of Consumption'

Before discussing the compulsion of middle class for culture of consumption it is very important to look at their history. In India, the emergence of this class was associated with western style of secular education, industrial economy and the new administrative system introduced by the British colonial rulers during the 19th century (Wright, 1979). According to Ahmad and Reifeld (2018), British rule aimed to create the middle-class as an imitator of western culture and not as the originators of new values or methods. Thus, British educational policies created a different type of class within Indian society to fulfil their self-interest. They were the old middle class. They had specific ideology and cultural outlook. Their self-centeredness and desire for job security shaped the middle class into government servants (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Emergence of New Middle-class



Data Source: Developed by the Researcher from the Literature Review

After independence, due to these processes of educational and economic development, the size of the middle class started to expand. Thus, the educated and well-off middle class of independent India appeared as the 'new middle-class', having 'British or the western cultural values and the desire for consumer culture (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016:30–34). Thus, the highly educated and cultural middle class of nineteenth century (Giddens, 1973) turned into the materialistic middle class of independent India (Fernandes and Heller, 2006:500). The test of culture is antiquated and the new pointer of identifying the middle class is income. This income-based identity of middle class has transformed the 'archetypal culture' of middle class into the 'culture of consumption' in Urban India.

A distinctive feature of post independent development was urban-centrism (Datt and Sundaram,2008). The urban economy, particularly its service sector, has been growing quite steadily. The expanding service economy has increased the number of salary-earning middle-class people in the urban areas. On the other hand, economic development in rural areas in the post-independence period was agriculture centric (Datt and Sundaram,2008). Beside this, the strong caste-based occupation system in rural areas did not allow the unprivileged caste to move into another occupation within the rural society. They were forced to practice low-skilled, risky and unprofitable jobs (Samanta, 2002). As a result, the share of middle-class people was very small in rural areas, which caused a huge rural-urban gap in terms of income, occupation, education and consumption.

Hence, policy makers realized that only agricultural development and modernization are unable to alleviate rural poverty. Therefore, the approach of rural development switched over to the Integrated Rural Development or IRD (Samanta, 2002). Project Land Reform was one of them. Project Land Reform played an important role in the upsurge of agricultural production. In one hand this upsurge income allowed a large proportion of farm income to be invested outside of agriculture, generated local entrepreneurs and extended the scope of the non-farm economy (Berdegue et al. 2008)). On the other hand, the descendants of land holders were forced to adopt different professions other than agriculture, which eventually diversified the rural economy

(Bandyopadhyay, 2007).

In the decade of the 1990s India made a structural change in its economic policy in the form of economic reform (Datt and Sundharam, 2008). Economic reforms opened up various sectors of economy which eventually diversified urban livelihoods in addition to rural livelihoods. A new diversified economy and occupational pattern have raised the rural disposable income irrespective of caste and class. This increase in income helped a lot in the emergence of the rural non-poor population (Christiaensen, Weerdt and Todo, 2013). Consequently, the expansion of education and development in rural infrastructure transformed their lifestyle. Villagers are unwilling to remain peasants, both economically and socio-culturally. They started to imitate urban culture of consumption (Ahamad and Reifeld,). Thus, a new socio-economic class has emerged in rural areas (Pingali and Rosegrant, 1995). Fernandes (2006) has termed them the 'neo rich' of the rural society and Kwatra (2019) has called them the 'rural middle class'. With time, the new middle class, both in rural and urban areas, evolved and acquired some generic characteristics. These newly acquired characteristics have blurred the wide differences between the urban and the rural middle classes (Nelson, 2019).

In this context, Hnatkowska and Lahiri (2012), in their study 'The Rural Urban Divide in India' depending on various NSS reports of different years have shown that the consumption gap between the rural and urban has declined effectively from 1983 to 2005 throughout India. However, all these are macro level studies. To uncover the ground-level reality, this study focuses its observation on the consumption patterns of the urban and rural middle-class households in the areas under study. To uncover the gaps in the pattern of consumption between rural and urban areas, four indicators of primary interest have been used: housing and housing amenities, education and schooling, access to health services and use of luxury items.

Consumption Patterns of Middle-class Households

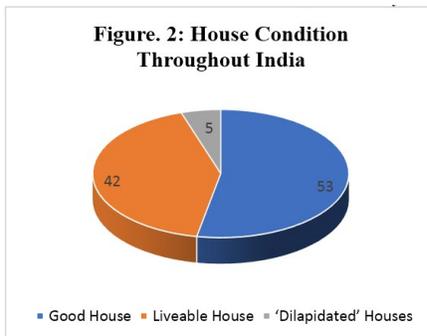
Patterns of consumption often create a wide gap between urban and rural areas. However, this patterns of consumption in the post-economic reform period since the 1990s have actually served to rapidly reduce the gap that lies between these two spaces. In this

context middle class has played an eminent role. The cultural middle class of both the areas has now become the 'materialistic' middle class. Jodhka (2016), has called them the *consumer par excellence*. They are not only the *consumer par excellence*, but they are also willing to pay a little extra for quality (Murphy et. al., 1989). This level of consumption has helped them to be 'counted in society' (Dickey, 2012:226). It implies a 'style of life' (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016). To acquire dignity in society, the middle class depends on some 'critical consumption' practices. Sometimes they go beyond their affordability to consume something such as for housing and education. Except housing and education, they are willing to pay more for better health services and energy consumption. To examine this pattern of consumption of the rural-urban middle-class households, this study focuses on specific indicators which are required to maintain their life-style.

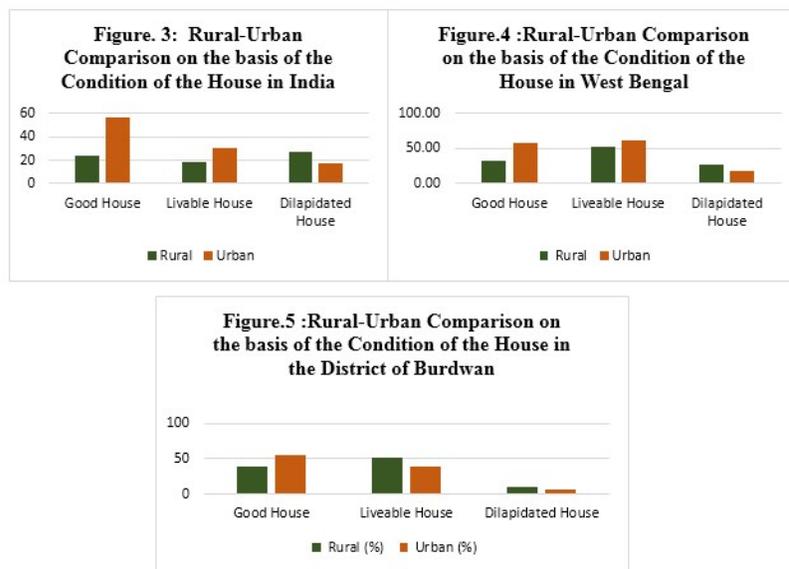
Housing

Most of the people in India have a clear impression of what cities, towns and the countryside look like. Their impression has mainly been shaped on the basis of the housing pattern. The term 'rural' always bears images of unmetalled or kutcha houses. They have simple structures that are designed to provide residential facilities only. However, when housing is considered, it incorporates not only the residential facilities, but the quality of the house as well. In this section, this study has discussed the quality of houses both in the rural and urban areas with respect to the type of the structure of houses and the condition of the houses, with special reference to the type of kitchen.

Figure. 2: House Condition Throughout India



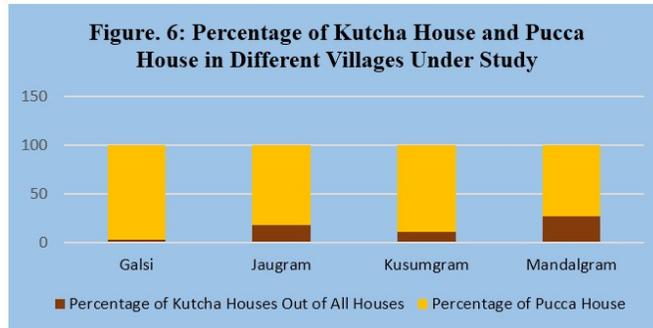
The condition of the structure of the house is depicted in Figure 2. It denotes that at the all-India level, majority of households live in good houses. While 42 % households live in 'liveable' houses, and 5 % of households, that is, around 13 million households live in 'dilapidated' houses. In the case of rural-urban comparisons, the urban scene is brighter than rural in India as well as in West Bengal and in Burdwan District (Figure. 3, 4, 5).



Data Source: House listing and Housing Census Data, Census of India, 2011

Like the condition of the house a huge disparity can also be found between rural and urban areas in case of building material. In the district of Burdwan 50.91 % and 49.09 % houses are registered as the pucca house and kutcha house respectively¹. This Kutcha houses are very frequent in the rural areas. However, this image is not so prevalent in many villages of Bengal. For instance, data collected from Gram Panchayat of four study villages show that a very small percentage of kutcha houses are present in rural areas (Figure 6). Though in this case PMGAY, the modified form of IGAY has played an important role but the role of rural middle class is also not a negligible factor in this regard. During the time of field study this study has found that middle-class people live in good houses both in the urban and rural areas. Their houses in the rural areas are also constructed as decoratively and fashionably as

those of the urban areas (Photo plate 1 substantiates the fact). The middle-class people are over possessive about their houses as it asserts their status in the society.



Data Source: Gram Panchayat, The of Socio Economic and Caste Census, 2016

Plate.1: Housing Pattern of Middle-class Families in Rural (a, b, d, e) and Urban (c) Areas



Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

Basic Amenities within Houses

The different characteristics and the quality of the middle-class houses in the urban and the rural areas have been examined in earlier sections. Housing conditions alone cannot depict the whole picture without considering other amenities like drinking water facility, type of kitchen, and so on. This section discusses those basic amenities available within houses, and based on this, we attempt to throw light on the rural–urban gap.

Kitchen types

The NSSO data 65th round (2008-2009) on ‘Housing Condition in India’ were used in a report of National Institute of Rural Development Hyderabad (2014). The report provides information that, in terms of a separate kitchen and quality of the kitchen, rural India lags far behind the urban areas. In rural India 54.7 % households have no separate kitchens while in urban India it is 37.3 %. This report also discloses that rural–urban disparity is more pronounced in the case of separate kitchen without water tap. In case of separate kitchen with water tap, only 4 % of rural households are registered in this category, whereas this number is 32 % in urban areas. The above data set projects that the overall difference between the rural and the urban according to their kitchen type is very sharp.

Nevertheless, this rural–urban gap on the basis of the nature of kitchen started to vanish when the study came to focus particularly on the middle-class households. The inelegant and unsophisticated kitchens in the rural areas have revolved into well-ventilated and trendy kitchens. Plate 3 substantiates this transformation.

Plate.2: Transformation of the setting of Rural Kitchen



Setting of a Kitchen, Eleven Years Ago
in Kusumgram



Setting of the Kitchen of the Same
household at Present (Kusumgram)

In both the areas modern kitchen equipment like mixer-grinders, chimneys, microwave ovens, refrigerators, induction ovens and other innovations have lightened the labour needed in the kitchen. However, when the kitchen space is being considered, the kitchens of rural middle-class households are far better than that of the urban middle-class households.

Plate.4: Comparison of Kitchen Space



Spacious & Fashionable Kitchen Setting in Rural Area

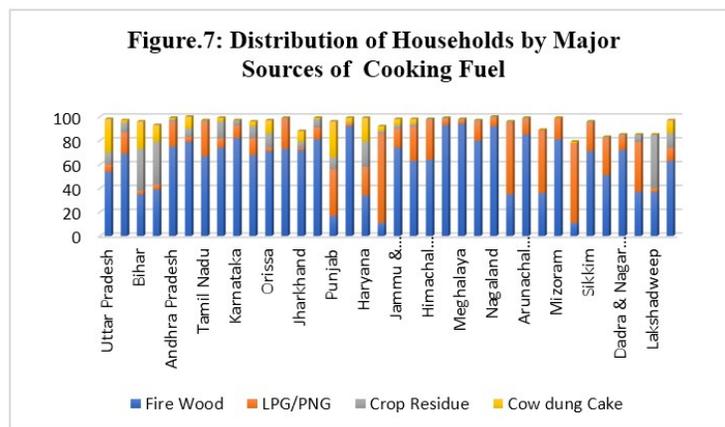


Congested Kitchen Setting in Urban area

While the kitchens in rural areas are wider and bigger, the kitchens in urban areas are congested as their space has to be adjusted within a specific square footage. So, the kitchens of middle-class households in rural areas are healthier than those in urban areas. Plate 4 shows a comparison between the space of kitchens in rural and urban middle-class households.

The Fuel Used for Cooking

Indian households use various types of biomass fuel (firewood, cow dung, crop residue) along with the different modern type of fuels (kerosene, LPG/PNG, electricity, etc.). Despite rapid urbanization, about 85 % of the households of India use primitive fuels (Pachuri and Spreng2002). The access and the utilization of fuel for cooking varies in different regions of India (Joon et. al., 2009). State-wise fuel use pattern displays that in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Orissa, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Assam, Tripura, Meghalaya and Nagaland, households still depend predominantly on conventional biomass fuels like cow dung, firewood, crop residue and so on (Figure.7).



Data Source: Census of India, 2011

If the rural-urban energy consumption pattern is observed then the divide appears to be very extreme. According to the 61st round of the NSS report (2004-2005), 84 % of rural households in modern India still rely on the traditional biomass sources as the primary cooking fuel (Joon et al., 2009:1509). The Census data of 2011 also shows that the use of firewood, cow dung cake, crop residue is still predominant in rural areas (Table 1).

Table 1: Distribution of Households by Source of Cooking Fuel

Source of Cooking Fuel	2001			2011		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Firewood	52.5	64.1	22.7	49	62.5	20.1
Crop Residue	10	13.1	2.1	8.9	12.3	1.4
Cow Dung Cake	9.8	12.8	2	7.9	10.9	1.7
Coal/Lignite/Charcoal	2.1	1.1	4.6	1.4	0.8	2.9
Kerosene	6.5	1.6	19.2	2.9	0.7	7.5
LPG/PNG	17.5	5.7	48	28.5	11.4	65
Electricity	0.2	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.1	0.1
Biogas	0.4	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Any other	0.6	0.8	0.2	0.5	0.6	0.2

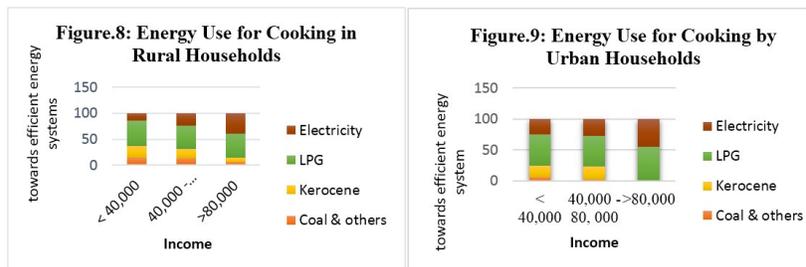
Data Source: Census of India, 2001 & 2011

Table 1 shows that more than 50 % of the households in rural areas were still dependent on primitive types of fuels even in 2011. Though the use of LPG connections has flourished dramatically in the rural areas, rural India is still far behind than that of the urban areas. In the urban areas, there are two dominant fuel types: LPG and kerosene. In contrast, all middle-class households irrespective of being urban and rural, use LPG. From Figures 8 and 9 it is evident that LPG/PNG is the major source of cooking fuel both in rural

and urban areas. It is also evident from the same figures that the nature of cooking fuel used by different households is directly related to the economic condition of the households.

The empirical evidences stated above illustrates that households in both rural and urban areas are switching towards the cleaner and efficient energy system, which establishes the concept of energy ladder, which was introduced by the renowned American researcher Kirk Smith in 1990. According to this concept when a country becomes wealthier, the use of domestic energy sources also starts to change simultaneously (Paunio, 2018). This change follows a step by step process which is the main concept of the energy ladder. According to this one-way process, with the advancement of household income, efficiency of the fuel also progresses. According to the directives of the energy ladder, globalization has created the 'neoclassical consumer' (Kroon et al., 2011) which implies that households will move towards more sophisticated energy practices with the increase in household income. The central theme of the energy ladder is the replacement of one fuel by another (Heltberg, 2005). Joon et al. in their study (2009) also noted the process of 'inter fuel substitution' at the household level and specified that the process of fuel switching, from biomass fuel to cleaner and efficient fuel is a one-way process which is driven by the level of household income.

The micro-level data also reveals that most of the households rely on more than one source of fuel to mitigate their daily domestic energy requirements. The reliance on multiple sources of fuel ensures their energy security (Goldemberg, 1995:50-60). which substantiates the fact that the former energy system is not totally replaced but is rather devitalized by the latter. This process of energy transmission generally follows a hierarchical path, from solid to liquid (from coal to kerosene) and from liquid to gas (from kerosene to LPG/PNG). However, the ground level survey depicts that households may not follow the proper hierarchical order and skipping of steps has also been found in the pattern of fuel practice. This step jump is more frequent in urban areas than in rural areas.



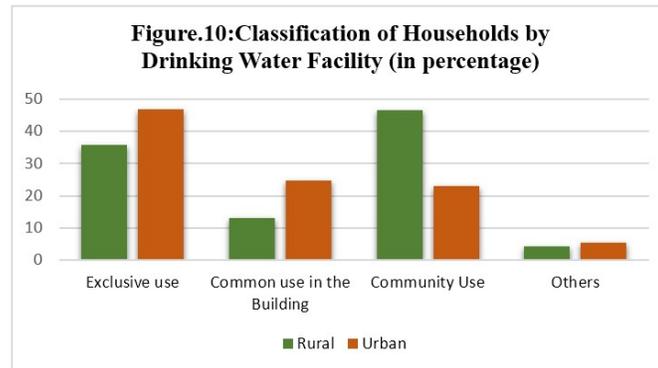
Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

Major Sources of the Drinking Water

The rural–urban divide is very high for the level of access of drinking water, although in recent decades rural areas have experienced improvements in the access of it (Kumar, 2014: 127-148). The four major sources of drinking water have been registered in Census of India (2011) as wells, hand pumps, tap water, and others. Analysing the NSSO data, a study of the ‘National Institute of Rural Development’ in Hyderabad has observed that in India, tap water is the principal source of drinking water. Near about 44 % of the households depend on this source. State-wise dependence on tap water shows that Himachal Pradesh has maximum proportion of household’s dependent on tap water (89%) and Bihar has the lowest (4.4%). In the milieu of urban and rural comparison, 54.7 % of rural households depend on tube wells or hand pumps, while 74 % of urban households use tap water as their major source of drinking water.

Apart from the sources of drinking water, nature of access to drinking water also shows a wide disparity among states, as well as among urban and rural areas, which is depicted in Figure 10. An observation on the access of drinking water shows that a major proportion of households (46.7%) depend on community access while 35.7 % households access water solely by personal means for their own household. Analysing the NSS data in urban and rural areas, it is observed that urban areas have higher proportion (47%) of exclusive access of water, in contrast to the rural areas where 43 % of households had exclusive water access.

Figure. 10: Classification of Households by Drinking Water Facility (in percentage)



Data Source: According to the NSSO 65th Round (July 2008 – June 2009), collected from the study of National Institute of Rural Development, Hyderabad

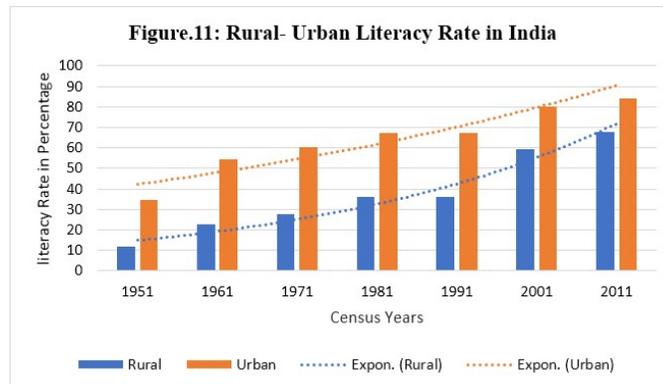
The Census and NSSO data portray a wide variation among the states and also depicts an extreme gap between rural and urban areas as a whole in terms of access to water. However, this rural–urban gap shows a new turn when the comparison is conducted among the middle-class households. From the field survey, it is evident that middle-class households irrespective of urban and rural areas use tap water as the only source of drinking water. Another interesting fact is that most of them are not dependent on the government provided tap water; rather they rely on personal tap water or pump water. The percentage of households using government provided tap water is higher in Burdwan town than in the villages under study. In this town, middle-class households who live in rented houses generally consume water supplied by the Burdwan municipality. Purification of drinking water with a modernized purifier is another trend among middle-class households in both the areas. However, this trend is higher in urban areas rather than in rural areas.

Literacy and Education

The rural–urban gap has always been found to be sharpest in the attainment of education (Hnatkowska and Lahiri, 2012: 3). The disparities between rural and urban are wider in the matter of student enrolment, drop-out rate, and children out of schools. Analysing the DISE data, a well-known professor Arun Mehta of the Department of Educational Management Information System

(EMIS), in his study 'Student Flow at Primary Level' (Mehta, 2007) has also depicted this scenario of rural–urban disparity. According to the DISE data set, the percentage of un-enrolled students from the age cohort of 6–10 is 6.74 % in rural areas and 1.08 % in urban areas. In the age cohort of 11–14, these figures are, 4.61 % and 1.02 % in rural and urban areas respectively, showing the wide pattern of discrepancy between the level of attainment of education in urban and rural areas.

Not only in the matter of enrolment, but in case of drop-out ratio as well, rural India is far ahead of the urban areas (Mehta, 2007). Nevertheless, this rural–urban gap has sharpened with the pace of time. Hnatkowska and Lahiri in their study in India (2012:12), have calculated the relative education gaps for different birth cohorts and proved that the wide difference between rural and urban areas indicates a significant trend of convergence between rural and urban in the pattern of attainment of education. Census reports (from 1951–2011) also show a pattern of convergence between rural–urban literacy rate (Figure 11).

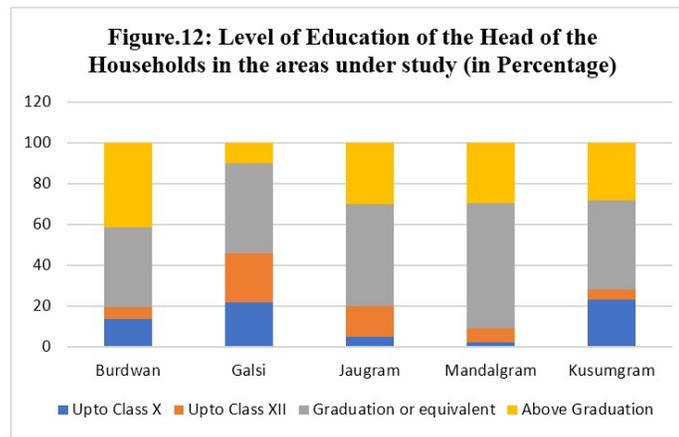


Data Source: Literacy and Education, Census of India, 2014

The above figure shows consistent improvement of literacy rate over a period of time. Though a gap still persists between rural and urban areas, it is insignificant. This has become possible on account of the significant rise of overall education level throughout India. The Government of India has initiated a number of programmes to attain the goal of Universalization of Elementary Education. Among these programmes, the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) is the most current one. The SSA programme has proved itself a successful one, as it has been able to reduce the rural–urban

gap in the proportion of literacy rate from 20.9 % in 2001 to 16.3 % in 2011 (Figure 11).

The rural–urban gap seems to be invalid when the educational pattern of rural and urban middle-class households is taken into consideration. The micro level data collected from the areas under study substantiates this fact. The level of educational attainment subscribes that Burdwan town as well as all the villages under study have higher levels in the attainment of education. Hence no major differences have been found among them (Figure 12).



Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

The cause for this pattern of educational similarities among the rural and urban middle-class households is deeply ingrained in their origin. The Indian middle-class arose in the colonial age supported by the conventional educational system. From that historical age they have cherished conventional education and culture. Their focus towards education established them in the contemporary society as middle-class. The same picture still continues in modern middle-class society, and the extension of the same ethos is seen in rural areas as well.

Linguistic Fondness

The rural and urban middle class are not only similar in relation to their educational attainment, but they also nurture similar conception in the extent of medium of education. The empirical data gives a picture of this pattern of similarity. More than 78 % parents in rural areas and 94 % parents in urban areas prefer

private English-medium primary schools for their kids. In the matter of secondary education this percentage is 38 and 73 % in rural and urban areas respectively. For the middle-class community, English is not just a language; it is an essential tool to achieve a better social position (Jodhka and Prakash, 2016). Ganguly and Scrase in their study (2009) have pointed out the importance of English to the middle-class group and mentioned that 'English is not only important in getting better job, it is everywhere in social interaction. If you can't speak it, then you are nobody.' English is a very crucial language for the middle-class community, as their emergence is entrenched in the western-style education system, introduced by the British colonial rulers.

Fernandes (2006:621) argued that, in recent days, due to the ingenuity of 'hybridized form of globality', English is acquiring an unprecedented place among the youths of middle-class households. In this case the realm of audio-visual media is also playing a significant role. In her study, Fernandes has also mentioned that the use of English words by non-English speakers is specifically a middle-class phenomenon which expresses their affection towards the English language. Their fondness and submission for the English language has spread out the avenues of privatization system in education.

The Mushrooming of Privatization in Education

To fabricate a class comparable to them in India, British Government replaced the contemporary 'indigenous education' ('*pathsalas*' and '*maktabs*') of India by so-called 'modern education' of Britain. They implemented a government-controlled and centralized education system to supply man-power in their government establishments. During the period of the 19th and 20th centuries, this government-aided education system was involved only in man power creation, to fulfil the requirement of educated Indians who could read and write English. This group was regarded as middle-class people during that period (Kantha and Narain, 2003). In the 18th century they were the first who were benefited by the colonial education system and emerged as the key intermediary class in India embodying 'western education' and a culture of 'Indian-ness' (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009). Their penchant for learning English opened a new door of opportunities

within the government services to the middle-class (Waldman,2003). As a result, the middle class emerged as English-educated government servants during the colonial period in India, as well as in Bengal.

In the 19th century, the left-front government of West Bengal withdrew English from the primary school curriculum (Acharya, 1982). Nevertheless, it was reinstated as a subject at the primary level due to 'public demand'. From that time government primary schools started to become less popular among middle-class families in West-Bengal [56]. Eventually this situation led both the urban and rural middle-class parents to prefer private educational institutions. The emptying of government schools was emblematic of the privatization of the education system. From 2011 to 2016 the number of government schools in West Bengal has increased from 79,323 to 82,444. On the other hand, the number of private schools has increased from 10,277 to 12,719 in West Bengal. The rate of increase is higher in government sponsored schools than private schools. Although the rate of increase in the number of students in different government schools saw a decline (-1942,750), private schools have experienced an increment (487,269) during the same period of time (Kingdon, undated). In West Bengal, the dominance of private English medium schools is seen both in rural and urban areas in case of primary and secondary education. Data collected from the field survey reveals this scenario (Figure, 13 and 14).



Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

From the above figure it is clear that various non-government primary schools have become the choice of parents, which substantiates the dominance of privatization in the education system. As a result, the mushrooming growth of private schools can be observed not only in the towns but also in the rural areas.

With the help of Census data and empirical study, this study has tried to establish this fact (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of Public and Private Schools

Study Areas	Pre-Primary & Primary Schools						Middle-Secondary & Senior Secondary Schools					
	Public			Private			Public			Private		
	2001	2011	2019	2001	2011	2019	2001	2011	2019	2001	2011	2019
Galsi	12	12	12	1	1	4	8	8	8	0	0	1
Jaugram	6	6	6	0	0	3	2	2	2	0	0	0
Kusumgram	12	12	12	1	1	5	3	3	3	0	0	0
Mandalgram	10	10	10	2	2	2	5	5	5	0	0	0

Data Source: Census Data, and S.I Office of the selected Study Area

In West Bengal the government primary schools are facilitated with incentive schemes, such as MDM, 'Kanya-Sree', 'Sabuj-Sathi', free uniform and free textbook for a section of girl students, and so on. In spite of these initiatives, private schools are becoming the first choice for middle-class parents. Some of them argue that private schools deliver better quality of education than the government schools.

Apart from the major reason, that is, quality education, a range of other reasons were also mentioned by some of the parents. For example, in Burdwan 91 % parents said that private schooling would make their children strong and fluent in English, along with other parameters for their overall development. The other attractions of private schools seem to be the extra reference books and subjects taught in those schools. But the major driving force behind the growth of private schools is the desire to learn English. Table 3 lists the reasons for the preference of private schools.

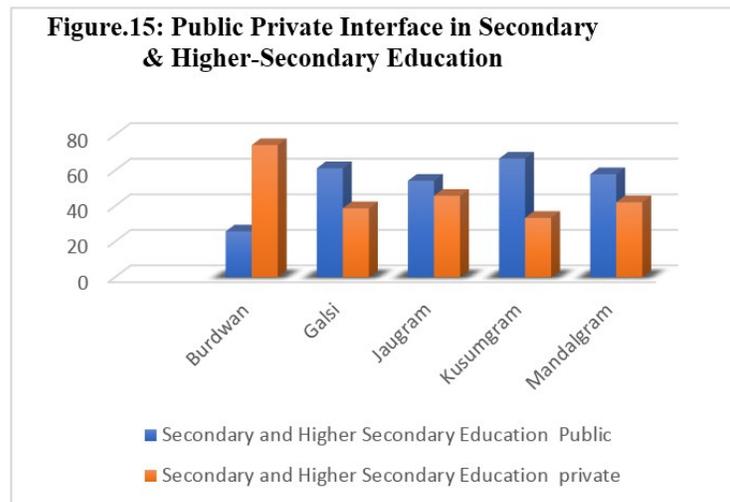
Table 3: Preference of Private Schools (in %)

Name of the Study area	Better Education	English learning	Good Pedagogy	Bus Facilities	Extra Books and Subjects
Burdwan	62	91	56	22	70
Jaugram	78	86	12	8	59
Galsi	81	95	25	3	80
Mandalgram	82	93	17	11	62
Kusumgram	90	97	9	15	75

Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

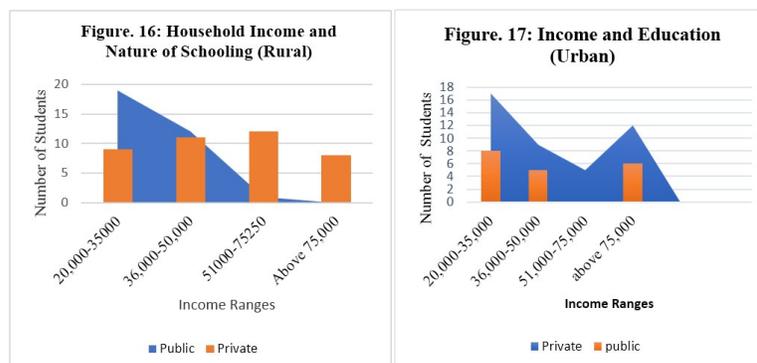
Among all the reasons, the desire for learning English has the highest average value for favouring private schools in Burdwan as well as in other villages. The lower rate of enrolment in government secondary schools is also corroborated by the secondary school data shown in Figure 10. The reason for a smaller number of rural

students being enrolled in secondary and higher secondary schools is due to unavailability of private English medium schools at secondary and higher secondary level. In this case, many students from middle-class households are availing the scope of English medium secondary and higher secondary schools in the nearest town of Burdwan or the city of Durgapur.



Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

The schooling system can also be examined from an economic perspective (Rana et al., 2003). Many parents sending their children to government schools had the desire to enrol their children in private schools. When they were asked, more or less 80 % of the parents replied in the affirmative, even though they have pointed out the high cost of schooling in the private sector and the lack of private schools in rural areas as a reason for not choosing private schools for their children. In rural spaces, there is a direct relationship between family income and availing private schools for education. However, the scenario for urban spaces is quite different. Figures 16 and 17 show the distribution of households according to income ranges and school types. The dominance of private English medium schools for imparting primary and secondary education both in rural and urban areas has raised questions about the quality of education in the government schools in both these areas. The middle class are somehow losing their reliance and faith on these schools.



Data Source: Field Survey, 2018-19

Health and Health Infrastructure

Being healthy also becomes a part of consumption culture, which can be attained through visiting health clinics frequently. Visiting fancy corporate or private hospitals for routine medical examinations and clinical tests is becoming a social status in large urban centres, but what is the scenario in Indian villages? After all, 70 % of India's population lives in rural areas and only one-fifth of its hospitals (including private hospitals) are located in rural areas. Rural India has only about half the number of dispensaries. As per the report of the National Commission on Microeconomics and Health & Family Welfare, Government of India (2005), there are only 0.36 hospitals for every one lakh (0.1 million) people in rural areas, while urban areas have 3.4 hospitals for the same number of people. Despite the presence of 380 recognized medical colleges which produce nearly 44,000 medical graduates every year, the shortage of doctors in rural areas still persists. As a result, people living in rural areas do not have sufficient access to medical services, which depicts a wide rural-urban disparity. With the help of empirical data this study reports the findings of rural-urban differences and similarities in health concerns and access to medical services. The specific objective of the study is to identify and describe the health awareness and infrastructure access issues of rural and urban middle-class households.

This analysis discloses that all the four villages under study face disadvantages in obtaining access to health care. The PHCs (Primary Health Clinic) located in rural areas do not provide even

X-ray or blood testing facilities, which constitute part of the basic healthcare services for urban dwellers. Villagers have no access to any specialized medical care like gynaecologists, paediatricians, orthopaedists and others. However, this circumstance does not disconcert the middle-class people of rural areas regarding their health awareness. For their health issues they are totally dependent on super specialty private hospitals in metropolitan cities. Although it is inconvenient, they rely more on these urban health care services. Both the rural and urban middle-class households prefer private nursing homes to public hospitals.

Throughout the discussion of the section, 'Consumption pattern of the middle-class households', this study has observed the changes in the access of basic amenities, such as housing pattern, sources of electricity and drinking water. The other two important services, i.e., education and health services have also been examined from the view of the middle class, both in rural and urban areas. From this pattern of consumption, it can be opined that access to such basic services is very crucial for the middle-class community as it provides them with material comfort and a certain standard in society. Due to this consumerist attitude of the middle class, rural spaces are experiencing improvements and the rural-urban gap is gradually becoming negligible. This consumerist attitude of the middle class has yet another impact too; that is, they have become the victims of consumerism. This consumerist victimhood is discussed in the following section.

The Victim of Consumerism is the same both in Urban and Rural Areas

The last indicator of interest of this study is the notion of materialistic consumerism of the middle-class community in rural and urban India. In many literary texts (Pandey, 2009, Jodhka and Prakash, 2016, Banerjee and Duflo, 2008) the middle class is labelled as the 'Consumer Class'. Ganguly and Scrase in their study named the middle class 'Consumer Junkies' (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009). In recent years India has been experiencing a consumer revolution. The rapid economic growth of India is the fundamental motive of this consumer revolution. A report published in *Hindu Business Line* stated that in India over the years of 1999–2000 the total personal consumption expenditure stood at Rs 7,20,932 crores

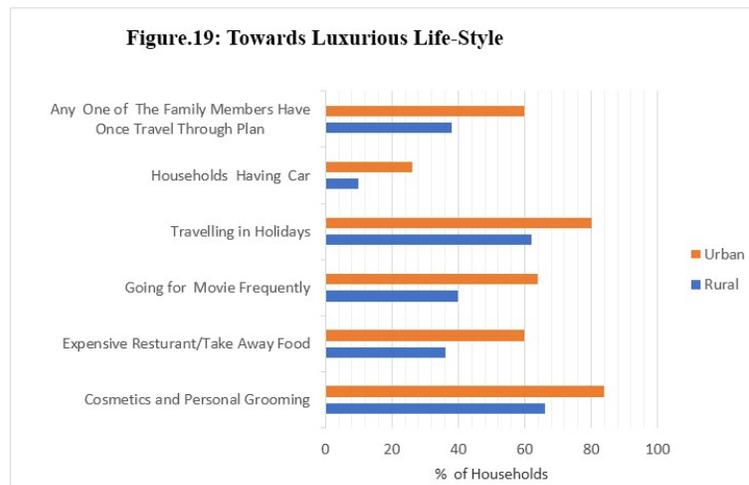
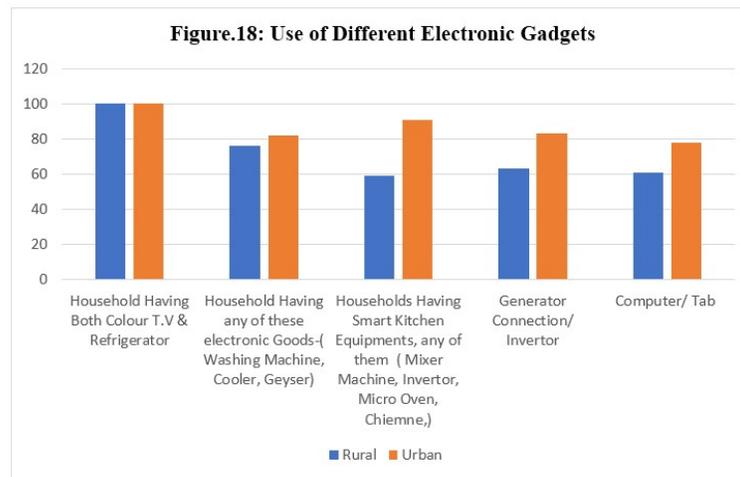
(7,209,320 million). On the other hand, the 55th round of the NSSO data identified that, of this total consumption expenditure, 17 % (Rs 1,25,217 crores, or 1,252,170 million) was consumed by 62 million people belonging to the 'upper middle-class'. Nearly 25 % of total consumption (Rs 1,77,137 crores, or 1,771,370 million) was accounted for by 179 million people (17% of the total population) belonging to the 'lower middle-class' (Appadurai and Breckenridge, 2005). That means 23 % of the total population has consumed Rs 3,02,534 crores (3,025,340 million) or 42 % of total consumption (Pandey, 2009).

Higher level private income and expenditure accompanied by population growth (though to a lesser extent) are encouraging this ascent in consumption. In 2005, private expenditure in India reached nearly Rs 17 trillion, which was more than 60 % of India's GDP. According to Pandey (2009:15) this private spending will reach Rs 70 trillion in 2025. Along the way, in 2025 India will be the home of about 583 million middle-class households, eight times greater than the present number (50 million people), with disposable income within Rs 200,000 to 10,00,000 in a year. By then, many households of rural India will join this sphere of the middle class, thereby shifting the rural-urban consumption pattern.

In rural areas this shift in the consumption pattern is noticeable in present days also. Hnatkovska and Lahiri in their study through chronological data from 1983 to 2010, have proved that the consumption gap between rural and urban was wider in 1983, however it became noteworthy in 2010 (Hnatkovska and Lahiri, 2012). While computing the various rounds of NSSO data (from 1994-95 and 2006-07), Roy said that in case of the rural middle class the limit of consumption expenditure has increased for education, clothing and durable goods (2011, p.12). Mor and Sethia, (2018) through their study have also proved that rural consumerism is more or less a reflection of the urban consumption pattern. To reveal the ground reality of rural-urban consumption patterns, this study has collected data on the level of consumption of durable goods at the household level. The study results show that the craze for consumerism has become optimum both in rural and urban middle-class households, which is a major cause for the cultural similarities of these two spaces.

The collected data captures the lifestyle aspects of rural and

urban middle classes and their world view regarding consumerism. The urge to purchase and consume basic luxurious consumer items, such as colour television, computer, refrigerator, A.C, car, and so on has become irresistible, and these are items on which middle-class people of both rural and urban areas spend a major portion of their disposable income. Figures 18 and 19 show the rural-urban consumption pattern on luxury items.



The previous figures clearly show the previous figures clearly show that maintaining a luxurious lifestyle has become a priority among middle-class households. The obsession is almost the same

in both the areas. Sometimes, to support this trend of consumerism and to maintain their social position, middle class households go beyond their means (Ganguly -Scrase and Scrase, 2009). Often this creates pressure on middle-class families. To review the burden of consumerism upon the middle-class households, their trend of everyday practice with luxurious goods was closely examined. Thus, when the researcher asked such households, "Are you obsessed with buying of luxury consumer items?" most of them answered in the affirmative. Next, we asked, "What prompts you to afford consumer luxury items?" They answered that the desire of affording a cosmopolitan lifestyle and the enticing advertisements of luminous and swanky consumer products usually prompted them to buy those items. After this question, the researcher asked, "Has your income increased in the last two years?" Most of them (82%) acknowledged that their income has substantially increased. On the contrary, when they were asked, "Has your family income increased enough in relation to your cost of living?" a majority of them (69%) answered "No" (Figure 20). They were then asked, "Do you face any kind of financial pressure to buy such consumer goods?" To answer this question a great number of the respondents irrespective of rural or urban space acknowledged it in the negative. All these answers, it indicates their wide circumstantial habituation and surreptitious obsession towards luxurious goods in one hand. On the other hand, it also reflects that, tempting advertisements published in mass media compel the middle class to continuously participate in the consumer market. These confessions of the respondents collected during the field survey prove that the middle class of both the areas, rural and urban, are prone to consumerism and become victims to it.

Conclusion

This article has examined the pattern of the rural–urban divide in terms of consumption pattern in some selected rural and urban areas of West Bengal. This study found a sharp and significant trend of convergence in the housing pattern, fuel use, educational attainment levels, and in accessing health services between rural and urban areas. Specifically, shrinkage in agrarian jobs in rural areas accompanied by the diversification of the rural economy causes a comprehensive societal change. As a result, rural societies

are becoming culturally more similar to large urban agglomerations and in this aspect the contemporary middle class is performing an eminent role. From the field observations, it can be also concluded that the contemporary middle class is heterogeneous in nature, consists of people belonging to different income groups and castes but they are bound by a collective lifestyle both in urban and rural areas. To acquire this lifestyle, they emphasis on quality education and invest in furnishing human capital (Goldthrope, 1963). To secure their social status, they rely in the culture of consumption. Globalization, which breeds consumerism, entices middle-class families regardless of urban or rural spaces. In this case television and the internet play an imperative function. Salzman opines that due to the largest commercial television markets, rural Indians are entering the age of consumerism *en masse* (2007). The spirit of consumerism has also developed a cash-based economy within village community. This cash-based rural economy is driven by the rural middle class, as they have enough money in their pockets to participate in the consumer market. Thus, the accumulation of consumer products has created a new class climate which is exactly like urban culture (Johnson, 2001) and this has led to the reduction in the overall disparity between rural and urban areas, especially in terms of culture and lifestyle.

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