What I present here is part of my ongoing PhD work on “middle class”. I am at a stage where I have finished my fieldwork and trying to grapple with what I have got through my exposure to the field. So this is actually a work-in-progress paper.

Before beginning with the paper, I would like to have a few words about the site I am exploring to arrive at some understanding of the contemporary “middle class” in India—that is West Bengal which is an eastern state of India, where Bengali is the primary language spoken. Its economy mainly based on service sector and agriculture, with low industrial production and currently one of backward states in terms of human development index. Kolkata is the capital of the state where I conducted my fieldwork, earlier known as Calcutta, one of the three principal presidencies set up by the British apart from Bombay and Madras. West Bengal came into existence as a state of India in 1947 when the then existing region of ‘Bengal’ was divided into East Bengal and West Bengal based on religious grounds during the Partition, with East Bengal later becoming present Bangladesh. West Bengal is one of the few states, in fact the only state apart from Kerala, which has been under a Left front rule. The left front government was in power till 2011, continuously for a period of 34 years, before the current Trinomool Congress government came into power.

It is important to mention here that Bengal figures prominently in the historiography of South Asia, specially during the colonial phase, and some studies such as by Andrew Sartori (2008) for example have tried to understand the ‘historical configuration’ that produced Bengal’s privilege as the historiographical centre. The privileging of Bengal has been mainly in terms of a claim to its unique political history and Bengal as being representative of a certain model of ‘high culture’, a tendency which showed gradual decline since the post-independence period.

When we talk of Bengali middle class, (Bangali Madhyabitto) a term that is closely equated with it is the ‘bhadralok’, literally translated as the ‘gentlefolk’, again a term largely having its origin in the colonial context. There is a tendency to use the word ‘bhadralok’ to represent the ‘educated middle class’, which are, in fact, closely overlapping categories. Also, there is a pre-eminence of the bhadralok or the educated Bengali middle class in most of the early studies on the Indian middle class in the 1960s dealing with the emergence of ‘middle class’ in India, seen mainly as a product of the colonial period. Interestingly, when we talk of middle class in Bengal, what we have in the existing literature is actually about the prominence of the Calcutta middle class right from the colonial period.

Highlighting the role of the Calcutta middle class in shaping the socio-political history of the region Partha Chatterjee says

..the Calcutta middle class ..has been generally acknowledged as having played a pre-eminent role in the last century and a half in creating the dominant forms of nationalist culture and social institutions in Bengal. It was this class which constructed through a modern vernacular the new forms of public discourse, laid down new criteria of social respectability, set new aesthetic and moral standards of judgment and, suffused with its spirit of nationalism, fashioned the new forms of political mobilization which were to have such a decisive impact on the political history of the province in the twentieth century. (Chatterjee, 1992: 40-41)
If we are to trace the emergence of this class as a prominent force in Bengal, the first major landmark is usually seen as the much-celebrated early nineteenth century ‘Bengal Renaissance’, under the leadership of Bengali intellectuals like Rammohan Roy, the glorification around which has received criticism in retrospective analysis by scholars like Sarkar (1997) as well as Chatterjee (1997). According to Chatterjee however, the middle class in Bengal failed to emerge as a hegemonic force during Renaissance and the subsequent period of nationalist movement until the first half of the twentieth century when “...radical sections of the middle-class political leadership actively sought to forge organized links with the working class and the peasantry, both within and outside the platform provided by the nationalist struggle.” (p. 19)

Given the hegemonic presence of the Calcutta middle class in Bengal, I chose Kolkata as one my principal sites of investigation. I conducted in-depth interviews with 30 Bengali respondents, who self-identified themselves as belonging to “middle class” and who were engaged in various extra-professional associational spaces—be it of the formally political, cultural or the civil society form. Most of them were academicians or public sector employees, apart from a few students, who had permanent secure jobs and had experienced considerable economic mobility over the recent years as mentioned by them. Care was taken to maintain variety in terms of their gender, caste, religious background and age-group. But before beginning with these narratives I would like to read a few excerpts from a Leftist Bengali writer commenting on the contemporary Bengali middle class:

*The new generation of the middle class...particularly consists of those who consider material possessions are the gateway to social position...this is quite a revolution. For, in olden days, the middle class had a Calvinistic halo. Those belonging to this class did not posses substantial wealth, but so what? They had an honourable place in society: they possessed knowledge, they possessed imagination, they cultivated the arts, they were without the instruments of persecution and oppression of other social classes. None could nevertheless ignore them: there was an implicit recognition that, were they not around, the wheels of progress would come to a dead stop.*

*Globalization has been a great non-civiliser, especially in this segment of the world. The middle class has refurbished its identity.*

--Ashok Mitra, ‘The New Middle Class’, *the little magazine*, July-August, 2000

The author is a veteran Marxist economist who develops a trenchant critique of the changing Indian middle class in this essay, published in a national level magazine. It is a critique of the transition of the distinctive markers of the middle class: from non-material (possession of knowledge, creativity, a concern for wider society etc.) to material possessions. There is a claimed denigration, a slippage and a critique of that. There is a previous ‘ideal’ moment in the imagination which is perceived as ‘better’. ‘Globalization’ is noted as the turning point in this transformation. Interestingly, my narratives voice similar concerns and anxiety as expressed by the author. My narratives show a concern and a critique that the ‘middle class’ is going through a transition because of the impact of certain all-encompassing forces variously identified as ‘globalization’ and/or ‘liberalization’---something they are not very happy about. There is a sense of discomfort with the ideologies and values that these processes supposedly promote. Here often they invoke a language of ‘exceptionalism’ about Bengal as distinctive from the rest of the nation. There is a sense of nostalgia, a sense of losing the distinctiveness as ‘Bengali middle class’ in the face of globalizing and liberalizing forces.

Thus, unlike what scholars working on Indian middle class like Deshpande (2003) and Fernandes & Heller (2006) point out the middle class here does not seem to represent any ‘smooth transition’
from the phase of ‘development’ to ‘liberalization’. These scholars talk about how the Indian middle class represent the interest of the ruling bloc and how at least a section of the middle class (the new middle class) has retained their role in the politics of hegemony. Deshpande says: “Having consolidated its social, economic and political standing on the basis of the developmental state, this group is now ready to kick away the ladder it no longer needs” (Deshpande, 2003: 150). Fernandes and Heller (2006) also argue on the same line.

Given the historical importance of a hegemonic status of the middle class in Calcutta, specially in a post-colonial context, the contemporary anxieties and critique presented by the respondents seem to be interesting because they present a contrasting picture to the ‘smooth transition’ argument. However it is important to point out that the respondents selected for the purpose of the study do not seem to represent the ‘new middle class’—not on the basis of a change in occupational grounding¹, neither as an shifting idea of the middle class². In fact the study has been designed to focus on this group, because of the abundance of contemporary studies already working with the ‘new middle class’.

Based on a reading of the narratives, I try to show that the ‘middle class’ here engages in a politics of hegemony that is precisely making it difficult for the ‘smooth transition’ possible. These people invoke a regional hegemonic language to participate in a politics of hegemony, not through transition, but with a thrust towards maintaining status quo.

A critique of particular hegemonic ideologies

For most of my respondents, ‘liberalization’ and/or ‘globalization’ is a problem because they are promoting consumerism as opposed to a previously existing ‘middle class restraint’; individualism as opposed to a collective life; homogeneity as opposed to uniqueness.

Soumitra Bera, 54 years, teaches at the Calcutta University, is active in Left politics mainly through his writings and participation in discussions and talk-shows etc. He comes from a family which has been involved with Left politics. For him, ‘neoliberalism’ is a problem because it promotes ‘rootlessness’ and ‘consumerism’ so much so that consumer identity becomes the only identity. He goes on to speak about his own deep aversion for display of wealth and invokes an idea of ‘middle class restraint’ as a desirable value. He says:

_If you come to my house you will realise that though I am not Sanyasi (hermit/saint) but I won’t spend 30 lakhs for buying a flat³... All I need is a flat to lead a middle class lifestyle having security. I have no fantasies to show off to anyone that the wall of this room is of this marble. If I see that if I give 100 rupees or 1000 rupees to my son, he is not buying a single book then I will be a little worried about his priorities. Once one my colleagues told me that if he had 20,000 rupees then he would spend a night in the Taj Hotel⁴. Believe me, I don’t have any such ambitions. It doesn’t make any_

¹ Most scholars working on ‘new middle class’ take up the newly emerging growing service sector occupations as the occupational basis to identify this group. Many define them in terms of an upward mobility, changed lifestyle, consumption pattern as compared to a previously existing middle class.
² Fernandes (2006) for example takes the ‘new middle class’ as representing a new identity, more than any emphasis on its changing structural location.
³ i.e. an apartment
⁴ The Taj Mahal hotel, which is a chain of five-star hotels set up by the Tatas
sense! If anyone wants to call it as traditional middle class restraint (madhybitto shongjom)... s/he can. I have no objection. But I guess it’s good to have this kind of hesitation. 5

Subhro, who is of 22 years, is a student of Presidency College and a member (lyricist) of a Bengali music ‘band’ formed about 4/5 years ago. He says that he does not formally belong to or support any political party. However he is a supporter of Independents’ Consolidation which is apolitical students’ association in his college. For him, ‘liberalization’ is a problem because it has taught him to be more individualistic and the concept of ‘collective life’ erodes in the process. He also thinks, it has also led to an inability to ‘think’.

Invocation of a language of ‘protest’

Adhir Shome (55 years) is a journalist, writer and ex-editor of a well-known children’s magazine which used to be edited by Satyajit Ray for a long time. He mentions that he is not committed to any particular political ideology and believes that it is important to have an ‘objective. neutral’ position on social issues, a space that allows one to speak against the dominant ruling bloc:

If we try to look the society from a neutral position (nirapeksha jayga theke samaj-take dekhhbar chesta kori) ...Though that neutral position is also a position ...what happens in our country, and specially West Bengal, is that, when there was Left front or CPM government, if you speak against them, you would be labelled as a Trinomool. What is happening today, if any comment against Trinomool or the government is made, then one is labelled as a CPM...Without being a slave to anyone, a maid-servant to anyone, if we can look at the society, and if we can convey that through radio, television, literature, cinema etc...that would be very useful.

Nilima Ray, 47 years, a teacher in an English medium school, is a lead artist of a theatre-group which is directed by her husband and has been active for the last 15 years. Her narratives are interesting in the way it brings out the ‘contradictions’ of the middle class. She mentions how personally she has always been attracted towards a space of ‘protest’, and how she conceived of theatre as one such space. At the same time, she voices out her sense of disillusionment with the fact that now she has realised that it is a ‘rhetorical’ protest that they make as part of theatre-art and most artists fail to imbibe those values in their own lives.

Manab is 21 years old and associated actively with the Left students’ wing at his college. He points out the while the general tendency is for the young generation to stay away from politics, he feels it is most important to be involved in active politics and this is exactly what he means by going against the ‘flow’. Interestingly, unlike others, for him, neoliberal ideology and consumeristic orientation is not a problem and he finds no contradiction with his Left ideological commitment. When asked about how he plans to counter the ‘flow’ which, in his case, seems to be a generational tendency, he says, it is precisely through politics and drawing more and more people into it.

Thus, whatever may be the variation in what they identify as ‘mainstream’/ ‘flow’ somewhere there is a tendency to invoke a language of ‘protest’ (protibaad). The middle class is ideally imagined to be having a distinctive voice of ‘protest’ to counter this ‘flow’

5 The translations from Bengali has been kept as literal as possible, to attempt to give a feel of the tone as spoken in Bengali. Use of English words by the respondents has been kept intact.
Invocation of a discourse of ‘exceptionalism’ about Bengal

There is a discourse of ‘exceptionalism’ of Bengal invoked in these narratives woven around the themes of existence of a space for protests, contestations and dialogues with the ruling power; existence of a concern for the well-being of the society, including a concern for the poor and the powerless—and the middle class having something to contribute to these spaces and concerns. Sometimes these are credited as the achievements of the Left ideological sway, but not always.

Mr. Ganguly, who is a govt employee and used to be previously associated with the Left, says

Sǒmewhere there has to be a concern/thought for the wider society...whether I can actually do something or not is different. If this concern is gone..then things will collapse. I am hopeful about Bengal..at least since we have a long heritage of protests, movements So I hope some reversal will happen.

Invocation of the past as a ‘better’ moment

There are several instances in the narratives when the past is proudly recalled as a moment of glory and a sense of nostalgia holds strong. In many cases, the past is used as a case to emphasize on the distinctiveness of the ‘Bengali middle class’, such as the so-called ‘Bengali renaissance’, or the heritage of ‘protests and movements’ in Bengal, in which the Bengali middle class had a prominent role to play in their imagination.

Nandini Chakraborty, 67 years, is a retired professor of Political Science, an active member of CPI and its women’s organization and works on various social issues. It is interesting to see how the description of a time of turmoil is yet presented in a positive light with the assertion that it was precisely the ‘struggle’ of the time which culminated in ‘creativity’ as well as a holistic concern for the well-being of the society. She begins with a narration of her childhood days in the 1970s, her specific family background having stalwarts of Left political lineage, which indirectly contributed to her own ideological leanings in the later years. She spontaneously quotes from a poem by Sukanto Bhattacharyya, a well-known poet and contemporary of Tagore who died at a very young age and holds a special place in the Bengali literary world being remembered for his rebel socialist thoughts:

“Can you tell me why rich people will ride a car

And poor people will be driven over by the car?”

...The Bengal famine happened then in Kolkata. Then the women leaders of Kolkata like Renu Chakraborty etc had opened ‘Langar’....It was a period of turmoil. But as they say new creations come out of debris. At that time bombs were being thrown over Calcutta. And within all this, is being created ‘Naba Jiboner Gaan’ (Songs of New Life), IPTA’ movement etc. All the Bengali literary persons formed the ‘Pragati Lekhak Sangha’ (Progressive Writers’ Association). Sombhu Mitra, Bijon Bhattacharyya wrote ‘Nabanna”...At that time when Fascism led by Germany and Japan was expanding, all the liberal minded artists, literary figures (sahityik), like Roma Rolland, Rabindranath they were making anti-fascist organizations. ...This was the time we went through during our childhood.

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6 Free cooked-food distribution centres operational during famine
7 Indian People’s Theatre Association, a Left theatre group first formed in 1942
8 The first hugely successful play by IPTA directed by Sombhu Mitra and first staged in 1944 on the theme of Bengal famine of 1943
In her narratives, the past is presented as a contrast to the present to make a point about generational difference—that there is a loss of ‘social sensitivity’ or ‘samajik chetana’.

Interestingly, the invocation of past is not something restricted to the older generation. Even in case of young people like Subhro the invocation of the past becomes important to emphasize on his current ‘political consciousness’/‘rajonitik bodh’. In quite a contrast to the perception of Ms. Nandini about the young generation, Subhro throughout shows concerns for social inequality. He proclaims that he is the “son of the Naxalbari”, simply because the Left ideology of concern for equality appeals to him. It is very interesting that somebody born in 1990s will invoke a place in West Bengal from where the Naxalbari movement, a radical Maoist movement first started in 1967. Certainly it is the ideological thrust of the movement, as recuperated from written/oral materials that has appealed him to describe himself and to talk in this fashion.

**Distinction within the ‘middle class’: ‘intellect’ as a marker**

In many instances there is distinction drawn from other sections within the ‘middle class’/‘Bengali middle class’ and here the basis of distinction is the ‘intellect’. Adhir Shome, for example, has a problem with categorizing himself as “middle class” because he believes that though economically he may belong to “middle class” if one considers his intellectual standing he is definitely not “middle class”. He makes a differentiation between “madhya-bitto” and “madhya-chitto” (while ‘madhya’ means ‘middle’, ‘bitto’ means ‘wealth’ and ‘chitto’ refers to ‘intellect’/‘mind’) According to him, in case of many the two categories collapse, in his case, he cannot definitely fall into the latter category. Through his narratives, while talking about various works, including film-making, magazine editing etc, what emerges as signalling the importance of ‘intellect’ is his uncompromising stance towards protecting the freedom of an ‘artist’, a commitment to his purely artistic sensibilities without thinking about the commercial aspect of the demand, raising a voice of ‘protest’ against social injustice.

In these narratives, how is the ‘Bengali middle class-ness’ being constructed? How is it being ideally imagined in terms of certain non-material indicators? For this section, it is important to have a ‘critical’ mind and intellect as opposed to purely material possessions—a tendency perhaps traceable to the re-framing of the self-identity of the ‘new middle class’ emerging in the late 19th century colonial Bengal as a product of specific socio-economic changes. Joya Chatterjee (1994), points out how the ‘bhadralok’, earlier largely dependent on land ownership, as the basis of their distinction, came to reap the benefits of Western education and describe themselves as the ‘shikkhito madhyabitta’ (educated middle class) towards the end of the 19th century. She says: “An aristocracy of wealth had begun to transform itself (at least in its own eyes) into an aristocracy of culture.” (Chatterji, 1994:12)

It is important to speak against certain hegemonic ideologies, such as neoliberalism because according to them, it promotes values such as ‘individualism’, ‘consumerism’. Thus, the way they apparently counter hegemony is actually to speak in a language that idealizes specific values such as that of a ‘collective life’, a simple life devoid of material excesses and show-off and so on. It is important to speak in a language of ‘protest’—to create opposition against the ‘flow’. What they identify as ‘flow’, however, varies, which may range from ideologies of ‘neo-liberalism’, tendencies towards consumerism, to a supposed ‘ depoliticization’. Most often than not, it is a rhetorical protest as part of particular political ideology, or of particular art-form. It is important to portray a kind of ‘social sensitivity’ or a ‘political consciousness’, going beyond their formal political commitments, which mostly concern issues of poverty and social injustice. To create distinction based on these
particular markers is thus the invocation of a hegemonic language of a region which reflects the ideological sway of the Left for a very long time.

The invocation of the past to establish a glorified heritage of Bengal as a region and a sense of slippage now, perhaps makes sense if we place Bengal within the wider context of its relation with the national politics. We are dealing with a region, which has seen a transformation from having a prominence vis-a-vis the rest of the nation from the colonial period through the years of nationalism to an increasing marginalization in period of post-independence. In fact the process of dissociation from the national politics started since the mature phase of nationalist struggles. As pointed out by Kohli (1990) Bengal carved out a different path for itself by refusing to be a part of national politics led by Gandhi, an increasing appeal of a ‘radical’ politics to the middle class Bengalis ultimately culminating in the establishment of the Left front government in 1977 under a elite middle class leadership, and increasingly came to be marked by ‘etatism’, and a politics based on fuelling ‘regional nationalism’. (Kohli, 1990; Chatterjee, 1997) Also, it was a region marked by the absence of emergence of any Bengali capitalist class in the post-independence period. (Chatterjee, 1997) In such a scenario, Partha Chatterjee (1997) points out it was the new moral ethic that emerged in the late 19th century, in which “social respectability was based not on birth or wealth but primarily on education”, and culminated with the formation of the Left front government, which gave legitimacy to the Bengali middle class. However, he goes on to argue on how this moral legitimacy is under a threat in the current context in the face of dual developments of an altered market-based economy and overall commercialization of entertainment.

The ‘Bengali middle class’ thus is an interesting case to show the different trajectories the ‘middle class’ takes in building up and cementing hegemony. In this case, there seems to be a drive towards critiquing change, not because the change is against their immediate material interests, but because it fundamentally transforms the way distinction of the ‘Bengali middle class’, given its historical specificities, continues to be imagined, based on non-material as opposed to material indicators. Unlike what Deshpande says, rather than kicking away the ladder, here the sense of anxiety seems to spring from a perception that the ‘ladder’ is being taken away from them. Thus, ‘crisis’ becomes a narrative trope in this case because they show reluctance to take part in a politics of hegemony through transition but invoke the regional hegemonic language to participate in a politics of hegemony to maintain status quo.