In India since the 1990s, the middle class has expanded, but social inequality has increased and poverty still afflicts hundreds of millions of people. Economic liberalisation and economic growth in general have particularly benefited the educated, professional, urban, upper-middle class – which is predominantly drawn from traditionally high-ranking castes – whereas the majority of the population, especially the poor and low-caste, have gained much less. All this is well-known in broad terms; moreover, a lot of detailed research is undertaken among the ‘losers’: the poor, the low castes, and other socially marginal or excluded groups. Not as much research is done among the ‘winners’, however, and most discussion of the high-caste middle class amounts to generalisations based on weak theories and thin data. This lecture will examine the case of the Tamil Brahmans of south India, who have been transformed from a traditional, mainly rural, caste elite into a modern, urban, middle-class community since the late nineteenth century. Tamil Brahmans are very unusual, but partly because they are an extreme case, their transformation highlights some important features of both the complex relationship between caste and class, and the perpetuation of privileged status in a rapidly changing, contemporary society.

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