

Middle Class

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Since the mid-1980s, one of the more noticeable symptoms of the process of social and economic liberalization in India has been an obsessive public cultural concern with the category ‘middle class.’ Especially the English-language metropolitan media have routinely and anxiously dissected the size, scope, desires and politics of the Indian middle classes. Why should this be? In the present essay, I suggest that the figure of the Indian middle classes – whatever its sociological reality – has become one of the main idioms through which a series of contemporary concerns are brought into critical juxtaposition: the rise of Hindu nationalism, consumerist liberalization, and the pluralization/fragmentation of national politics. But I will also argue that the debate on the Indian middle classes is marked by a great deal of anxiety about the relationship between, on the one hand, normative discourses of political practice and, on the other, more corporeal and affective dimensions of contemporary public life.

Perhaps the most general story concerning the transformation of the middle class in India describes a shift, in the 1970s and 1980s, from an older, relatively coherent understanding of what ‘middle class’ connoted – classically, a Nehruvian civil service-oriented salariat, short on money but long on institutional perks – to a bewildering (and, to some, distasteful) array of new, often markedly entrepreneurial pretenders to the title.

On the level of political economy, several events and processes are usually invoked to explain this shift. These include the salary hikes enabled by Indira Gandhi's 1973 Pay Commission, the long-term effects of the green revolution, remittances from Indian migrant labourers in the Gulf, and, more broadly, the complex of reforms collectively known as liberalization. On a discursive level, the displacement of the 'old' Nehruvian middle class and its increasingly frayed nationalist-modernizing vision is often linked to a mounting illiberalism and incivility in politics, a crass new consumerism, and a disorienting fragmentation of the national imaginary.

But does it even make sense so blithely to apply the category 'middle class' to Indian social realities? Is the term not the product of a specifically European political history, and as such ill-suited to capture the dynamics of even contemporary Indian life, let alone its pre-colonial foundations?¹ As Subrahmanyam (1994) points out, on an elementary sociological level we should at least consider the fact that the term originates in societies whose class pyramid – unlike India's – actually do bulge in the middle. We may agree with Dwyer when she insists that "the modern, metropolitan Indian middle classes are very different from their western equivalents" (2000: 1). But how should we understand this difference? There is the matter of political economy. For instance, the ready availability of cheap domestic labour in Indian middle class homes impacts everything from the structure of the household economy, the gendered division of labour, and the consumption patterns of even relatively affluent families. And for all its public volatility, the Indian middle class – almost however it is conceived – remains a minority.

¹ See Bayly 1983, however, for an attempt to identify an indigenous middle class in eighteenth century North India.

Its privilege is marginal; it has never been able to establish itself as politically hegemonic in independent India (Chatterjee 1997).

Even if we accept the validity of the middle class descriptor for India, we are still left with a sense that the term is being stretched to cover a staggering diversity of socio-economic and cultural situations. An income that in smaller towns or rural areas might qualify a family as middle class will, in the major Indian cities, only be barely enough to sustain life outside the slums. Nor is income alone a reliable index to middle class status even within urban contexts. A Bombay survey of the 1990s reported that schoolteachers bringing home Rs 1200/month considered themselves middle class while factory workers earning three times that amount identified themselves as working class.² Although sometimes considered the closest thing in India to a ‘national’ class, the Indian middle classes are more divided by language, religion, and social position than any other in the world (Beteille 2001).

We may in fact do better altogether to steer clear of what that prominent critic of the Indian middle classes, Pavan Varma, has called the “measurement fetish” (Guram 1998). For no matter how frustrated we may become in our attempts sociologically to map the “reality” of the Indian middle classes, the fact remains that the category itself has become an important marker of identification, aspiration and critique in contemporary Indian public culture. The Indian middle class may be a questionable empirical entity. But the ‘Indian Middle Class,’ taken as both a performative and a discursive space (cf Liechty 2003), is most decidedly a reality to be reckoned with. The problem, then, is not so much to evaluate the sociological adequacy of speaking about the middle class in

² For a detailed discussion of attempts to define the Indian middle classes through income and/or consumption habits in the 1990s see Mazzarella 2000.

contemporary India – that can best be left to psephologists and marketing professionals.

What is more interesting is to attempt to understand how the concept structures and enables a certain set of ‘imagined Indias’ – both utopian and dystopian – to be articulated.

The story of the shift from an ‘old’ to a series of ‘new’ middle classes is not simply descriptive. Rather, it contains a series of normative positions and critiques. Perhaps the most obvious symptom of this is that the discourse on the Indian middle classes appears first and foremost in registers of paradox and contradiction. The middle classes are the main addressees of the national media and at the core of every political party’s campaigning strategies. Politicians who choose to ignore the middle classes may not always lose a crucial vote bank. But they will, as Saghal (1998) points out, make themselves vulnerable to punishment from the institutions that the middle class elites dominate and control: the judiciary, the civil service, the election commission and the media. The ‘old’ middle class in particular, while geographically dispersed, is united by its (variable) relationship to the English language, and to the educational and administrative machinery.³

At the same time, this ‘old’ middle class seems perpetually to be abdicating the political responsibility that its social centrality would impose upon it. Figures from the late 1990s suggest that Indian voter turnout in relatively well-to-do areas had slumped to 35-40%, whereas poorer and slum areas still managed turnouts in the region of 80% or more. More generally, the middle classes are increasingly coming under fire from critics who are themselves middle class – indeed, the critique of the middle class is a largely middle-class phenomenon. The middle classes are the ‘unhappy’ classes, the

³ There is some evidence to suggest that the middle classes, particularly those in the professions, are in a sense becoming *more* rather than less national, insofar as their members are increasingly marrying beyond their regional origins.

‘complaining’ classes and the ‘hypocritical’ classes. “It is the middle class that is never happy. If their children go to government schools, they complain that their teachers are bad and so is the education. If the children go to a public school, that is a private school, they complain that they are wasting their time and also spending money on drugs. Those who live in Karolbagh in Delhi or Dadar in Bombay want to live in Greater Kailash or Malabar Hill” (Dubashi 1993).

To be sure, the infinite aspirations opened up by economic liberalization and their attendant frustrations are a generically recognizable element of the consumer society. But in India, the marginal privilege of the middle classes, the historical legacy the ‘old’ middle class as a nationalist vanguard, and the extraordinary disparities of wealth and educational attainment that continue to prevail at a national level, together have the effect of amplifying the indignation that often saturates the critical discourse on the Indian middle classes. Middle class behaviour is figured as symptomatic of the social contradictions that beset Indian modernity. The severity of the diagnosis is only heightened by the implication that precisely the middle classes should know better.

The middle classes, for example, routinely complain about the corruption of politicians, but benefit disproportionately from the prevailing system. They may well loudly deplore child labour but simultaneously expect their own domestic servants to work for a pittance. They criticize the arrogance of multinationals but live lives increasingly defined in terms of their products. They will loudly insist on their rights but accept few social responsibilities. They are unembarrassed to express a longing for authoritarian rule at home but prefer, in the company of foreigners, to boast of India’s thriving democracy. They fulminate against reservations in Indian schools and jobs but

do their best to get their own children admitted under affirmative action quotas at American universities. The social concern of even the more ‘liberal’ fractions of the Indian middle classes is often dismissed as abstract, disengaged from the suffering that is all too immediately present: “This middle class, sitting easily in the air-conditioned and dimly lighted Bombay restaurants, will shed tears for the oustees of Manibeli or Tehri or the lockout-hit workers committing suicides; but at the same time will be infuriated when these harassed, molested and desperate victims of ‘development’ resort to militancy, destabilize the transport network or languish as dirty pavement-dwellers on the streets and [in] the slums of Bombay or Calcutta” (Chowdhury 1992).

One might be tempted to explain the media obsession with the middle class as an attempt to pander to the narcissism of publics that have recently emerged as booming consumer goods markets. Another, less reductive interpretation might suggest that the discourse on the middle classes involves a projection of the social anxieties that beset liberalization. One often comes across a rather simplistic critique according to which the rabid consumerism of today’s Indian middle classes exists in inverse proportion to their political engagement and social conscience. Bidwai writes: “Their internalization of the culture of consumerism is complete” (1994). This “culture” is then associated with greed, political impatience (often expressed as a longing for authoritarian government), and contempt for the less fortunate, who in contrast to middle-class self-perceptions of industriousness and decency, are invariably figured as lazy, dirty, and encroaching. In Varma’s ironic words: “They were the poor, who defiled the aesthetics of the neighbourhood, spread disease, fostered criminals, and laid claim – illegally – to already scarce municipal resources. If they could be somehow removed from vision and tucked

away in a less noticeable part of the city, it was all for the better” (1998: 106). Indeed, a zone in which the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ middle classes increasingly appear to find common cause is in an urban politics of ‘livability’ – a concern, above all, with neighbourhood order, cleanliness, and decency – a politics that loudly decries the lack of ‘civility’ that mars the modernity of the third world metropolis (cf Chakrabarty 1992; Kaviraj 1997; Virani 1999). Instead of the ‘big’ and ‘old-fashioned’ national issues of economic development, general education and poverty alleviation, the focus here is on pavement encroachments, garbage and traffic congestion.

While one should certainly acknowledge a connection between consumerist and political modes of privatization, it also seems useful to recognize that the relationship between liberalization and political engagement is a complex one, even within the boundaries of the public discourse on the middle class. To begin with, those who celebrate the rise of the new entrepreneurial middle classes (the classes with “fire in the belly”) also often point approvingly to their impatience with established forms of politics. Although, as Gurcharan Das (1992) reminds his ‘old’ middle class readers, the new pretenders might be brash and vulgar, these are people who know what they want and how to get it. Having collectively sacrificed its narrowly defined class interest on behalf of the nation in earlier decades, the middle class is now deservedly extracting its pound of flesh. Particularly the ‘new’ middle classes have transcended both “traditional scruples” and “colonial hang-ups.” Their consuming desires are at one with their political impatience. In the vaunted im-mediacy of the global market they find a model for good governance with which to counter the corruption and venality to which conventional

politics appear to have been reduced.⁴ A commentator like Das interprets this move as a healthy sign of burgeoning grass-roots civil engagement; others point to the violence against the poor that such a politics often involves, most notably in its manifestation as urban ‘beautification’ (a.k.a. slum clearance).

The middle class cult of immediation also takes the form of an apparently contradictory blend of technocratic rationalism and cultural-religious chauvinism. The 1980s and 1990s saw the cheek-by-jowl juxtaposition of Bangalorean/Hyderabadi silicone dreams with a surge in mass media-fuelled religious rioting. Many, like Khanna (1998), argue that Hindu nationalism is an atavistic aberration in a globalizing, liberalizing India, an embarrassing symptom of the insufficient modernity of India’s aspirant middle classes. This kind of claim is continuous with the conventional historiography of that pre-eminent middle class phenomenon: Indian nationalism in the late nineteenth century, which has often been explicated as a struggle between rationalist reform and religious revival. After Independence, Nehruvian modernization theory enshrined this opposition as an article of faith. And one might say that today’s discourse on the Indian middle classes embodies the difficulties of developing ways of engaging with the public and political life of religion in a way that neither dismisses it out of hand as ‘irrational’ or ‘excessive’ nor reduces it to a matter of ‘tradition.’

Some, like Arvind Rajagopal (2001), have made a case for an elective affinity between consumerist liberalization and the politics of Hindu nationalism, pointing to the conjunction of mass television publics and the commodification of culture. It certainly seems clear that the politics of religious nationalism should not analytically be separated

⁴ For a more detailed consideration of the politics of what I am calling ‘immediation,’ in India and elsewhere, see Mazzarella nd and 2004.

from a broader consideration of the commercially driven public culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Purnima Manekkar notes: “If the middle classes seemed eager to adopt modern lifestyles through the acquisition of consumer goods, they also became the self-appointed protectors of tradition” (1999: 9; c.f. Mazzarella 2003).

This guardianship of cultural tradition was not just a matter of ‘high’ textual sources; rather the 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of a powerful new mass-mediated idiom of Indianness on television and in the Hindi cinema that was at once globally savvy and often culturally conservative. Most important, as Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney have argued (Dwyer 2000; Pinney 2001), this commercial public culture is perhaps the closest thing to a truly national contemporary Indian culture, and one that brings the various middle class formations into an active – if often contested – alignment. It is also crucially just as much a matter of ‘interocular’ (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995) and ‘corporeal’ (Pinney 2001) relationships to images as it is a set of explicitly discursive ideals. In Pinney’s words: “In a nation as dramatically divided as India, there are some curious places of shared desire: the melodies of Hindi film songs, the curves of Amitabh [Bachchan’s] or Madhuri [Dixit’s] body, the vivid materiality of popular visual culture” (2001: 1).

What is at issue here is not simply the inclusiveness of this repertoire of references. The important point is that both Hindu nationalism and this shared popular culture bring a corporeal, affective density to public life. This affective density was strongly discounted within the ‘secular’ and ‘modernizing’ habitus of Nehruvian nationalism, the idiom of the ‘old’ middle class.⁵ As Soumitro Das (2000) reminds us,

⁵ Varma (1998) argues that Nehru’s refusal to take religion seriously – even as it so obviously persisted and flourished in Indian life – actually hampered the production of a fully, or authentically Indian modernity.

one of the legacies of this Nehruvian dispensation is a particular notion of political difference-management: “in Nehru’s terms, [unity in diversity] meant unity smothering diversity, or diversity expressing itself in culture and language, but steering clear of politics: you can come and do your folk dances on Republic Day, but don’t tell us you are Bodo, we don’t want to know what that is.” The rise of mainstream Hindu nationalism in the post-Nehruvian period may not markedly have increased public concern with the trials of being Bodo. But it did represent a new connection between consuming desires, rooted in the affective commitments of everyday life, and large-scale political action.

A vigorous debate on the new popular cinema of the 1990s has certainly identified many of the elisions entailed in its normative narratives of nation, gender and citizenship (Dwyer and Pinney 2001; Nandy 1998; Vasudevan 2000). But perhaps another question is of equal if not greater interest when it comes to understanding the social dynamics of the contemporary middle classes: namely the overt disjunction between the apparently inclusive pleasures of consuming desires on the one hand and the scathing dismissal, in political discourse, of upstart middle class pretenders.

A visitor to India will often be told that in the age of liberalization, Indians of all classes are no longer ashamed to acknowledge their love of Hindi cinematic melodrama, and that upscale urban youth are just as likely to flock to the latest Hindi blockbuster as they are to hanker after Hollywood productions. The self-consciously ‘glocal’ production design of the music shows on Indian satellite television is also frequently invoked as proof of a new cultural confidence, a new happy hybridity (Butcher 1999; McMillin 2003; Mazzarella 2003).

And yet the corporeal pleasures of Bollywood quickly mutate into an equally physical disgust when it comes to a discussion of politics per se. If the urban poor are at once the material support and the paradigmatic social Other to the cosmopolitan middle class, then the provincial and rural middle classes are its intimate enemies. Chief among their crimes is a refusal to transcend local concerns. From the habituated national perspective of the ‘old’ middle class, the brash upstart regionalism of a new generation of political leaders is both a political and an aesthetic affront. With a combination of anxiety and condescension, the urban intelligentsia will dismiss populist leaders like Laloo Prasad Yadav of Bihar’s Rashtriya Janata Dal as clowns or “simple-minded peasant leaders” (Thakore 1994), while assuaging their own liberalism by acknowledging that their rise to political prominence was enabled by Indira Gandhi’s excessively autocratic style of leadership in the 1970s. The determination of public figures like Samajwadi Party leader Mulayam Singh Yadav of Uttar Pradesh to do away with English as a language of state may be read either as an overcoming of postcolonial alienation or as a regressive refusal to be globally pragmatic in an age when English lessons are a booming business in China and the former Soviet Union.

Political theorists explain the rise of regionalism as an effect of the fracturing of Congress Party hegemony in the late 1960s. But in the internal critique of the middle class it signifies something more than mere parochialism. Insofar as one encounters a prevalent discourse of the decline or degeneration of an earlier middle class ideal, then what has been lost is not so much merely a national vision as a capacity for self-critical reflexivity. This reflexivity, more than anything, is often taken as the historical responsibility and the enlightened class interest of a middle class properly fulfilling its

social destiny. On one level, it is a necessary condition of the middle class as a ‘universal’ class. In it and through it the middle class, because of the specific forms of its education and the privileged institutional vantage points that it enjoys, is charged, whether in commerce or administration, with the responsibility of managing the conversion ratios between concrete particulars (people, objects, places) and abstract generalities (nation, citizenship, value). To be sure, such authority easily turns into a specifically bureaucratic kind of tyranny. And the habit of abstraction may also be at the root of the apparent indifference to immediately present suffering of which the middle classes are so often accused. But precisely because such a responsibility entails a certain critical distance towards the immediate concerns of one’s own environment – the flip side of which may ideally manifest itself as ‘social conscience’ – the middle class, as Indiresan (2001) wistfully notes, has historically also been the only habitually self-critical class.

Certainly a kind of Tocquevillian idealization of Euro-American civic culture is often held up as a disapproving mirror to the realities of Indian middle class lives. Mired in patronage, status-assertion, and personalized particularism, the political modernity of the Indian middle classes is, in this reflection, always embarrassingly incomplete. And perhaps the violent distaste expressed by the metropolitan middle classes towards their regional or ‘mofussil’ counterparts should be interpreted in the light of this oft-heard accusation. A figure like Laloo or Mulayam embodies precisely those characteristics that are most strongly disavowed within a normative figure of middle class respectability and probity. The specters of illiberalism, hypocrisy and incivility that constantly haunt the actual practices of the urban middle class elite are thus projected onto politically

‘immature’ or ‘regressive’ fractions – the mofussil middle classes, the vernacular middle classes, ‘new’ middle classes of whatever rambunctious stripe. Here, then, we see a characteristic symptom of postcolonial modernity: the very principles of universality and inclusion that are supposed to be inherent to middle class social practice instead become marks of an elite identification with a cosmopolitan ideal and, by the same token, a device of social distinction and aesthetic distaste for domestic others who conspicuously (and in fact often deliberately) fail to manifest these principles.

What is notable is that the very same affective corporeality that characterizes the ostensibly inclusive narratives and images of popular culture also infuses this visceral dismissal of provincial political pretenders. Strikingly, the two arenas in which the pleasures of affective engagement and the problems of citizenship have been brought into some kind of operative alignment are, precisely, the politics of religious nationalism and the dream worlds of mass consumerism. But the would-be critical discourse of and on the Indian middle classes continues, by and large, to equate the libidinal and the sensory dimensions of public life with incivility, immaturity, and irrationality – both in the kind of class derision that I described above and, officially, in state discourses of cultural regulation and media censorship. Claiming reflexivity but practicing distinction, the discourse on – and of – the Indian middle class is ambivalently poised in its relationship to contemporary public and political culture. By bringing its normative self-understanding into dialectical tension with its corporeal and libidinal investments, two important critical tasks might be undertaken. On the one hand, it would enable a recognition of the common ground provided by the affective identifications of public cultural imagescapes. On the other hand, this recognition would in turn allow this

common ground to be understood as a political and a social resource. Its affects and its identifications would thus not be denied or discursively marginalized as ‘irrational.’ Rather they would be taken seriously as an important elements of a collective public cultural terrain, a space of mediation in which those who would be ‘middle class’ would also find it necessary to confront their own disavowals.

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