

The Middle Class in India: An Overview

RITA KOTHARI

Sai Paranjape's acclaimed film *Katha* (1983) shows the protagonist Rajaram Pushottam Joshi living in a chawl in Bombay in India of the 1980s. Dressed in a half-sleeved shirt and slightly shapeless trousers, he missed his first bus to work almost every single day. The city transport bus required a passenger to muscle his way on board, brutally elbowing aside anyone who got in the way. But Rajaram was constrained by his own norms of civility and fairness. So he got left behind at the bus stop, along with an old toothless woman — two timorous souls who would not, or could not summon up the aggression and ruthlessness demanded by metropolitan life.

The visual imagery returns to the spectator as Rajaram goes through several comic-tragic travails; the mockery he evokes by putting up a Hindi (not English) name-plate on his door, his ineptness at wooing a girl or an employer, and his overall belief that it was alright to live in middle-class housing. The middle-class-ness forms the fulcrum of this essay which aims to highlight the various discourses around this human condition and maps the field to raise questions that remain unasked and unanswered.

I

To my mind, Rajaram was one of the last members of a vanishing class that made do with what it had, lacking in the aspiration, the drive and the inventiveness, and more importantly, the desire to be elsewhere. As a Brahmin with enough education and respectability for a safe and secure job, he was member of the middle class. However, in films, made barely a decade after *Katha*, Rajaram was replaced and forgotten, consigned to the dustbin of an era barely remembered. What we encounter instead, starting with the onset of the 1990s, the decade marking India's entry into the global market through the economic reforms of 1991 — are young(er)

Indians. Hailing from small towns (*Bunty aur Babli*, 2005), or 'old' middle-class families in Bombay (*Rangeela*, 1995) and Delhi (*Oye Lucky! Lucky Oye!*, 2008) and (*Khosla Ka Ghosla*, 2006). Raring to redefine themselves, they represent the expanding middle class. Shedding what they do not want (clerical jobs, restrictive circumstances) and eagerly embracing all that India after liberalisation had to offer (money, the English language, brand names, career opportunities) they stand out by their desire to do well.¹

The class they represent is 'the darling of the official discourse and policy makers' and one that 'sets the terms of reference of Indian society' (Jaffrelot and Van der Veer, 2008 : 19). In the city of Ahmedabad where I live, this class is the addressee for whom the new flyovers are built, and hoardings announcing posh houses with attributes such as 'real aura' and 'truly elite' and 'sheer solace,' put up to seduce them into the fantasy of belonging to a middle class that is not just Ahmedabadi, or Indian, but global.²

The characteristics outlined above are used to both identify and define what the marketers and sociologists have called the 'new middle class.' Its newness and growing visibility "embodies the emergence of a wider national culture, one that has shifted from older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class culture of consumption." (Fernandes, 2007). Hatcher notes that "It is connected in complex ways with the South Asian diaspora, sharing spiritual truths and habits of consumption throughout a web of global trade, travel and entertainment...Freed from the need to labor, and flush with capital, this middle class expresses and defines itself in the marketplace"³

The size of this class is debatable and its exact definition contestable. Like 'poverty,' the 'middle class' is perceived differently in different countries at different levels of economic development. Some observers have

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applied a rich-world concept of the middle class to the developing world.⁴ An overwhelmingly economic dimension informs most discussions on the middle class in contexts of business, market and media. Surveys by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) and income cut-offs suggested by scholars such as Sridharan (2004) on the one hand, and market research techniques focussing upon consumable durables. Ravallion on the other, contests the size.⁵ But they tell us little about the middle-class world that might privilege one thing over another. Why would hiring a cook not mean a more legitimate entry into a certain socio-economic sphere than buying an air-conditioner? What makes a product a better index than services? How does owning a car say more than enrolling one's child in an English medium school? Even those who claim not to make assumptions about the middle class as an already formed group, persist in using "ownership of durable goods" as a signifier of the existence as well as expansion of the middle class (Maitra 2009).

However, I draw from Brosius's compilation of figures that point to the following data:

The annual growth rate of millionaires in India from 2000 to 2005 is among the highest in the world (accompanied by China, Argentina and Kazakhstan), averaging more than 15 per cent. By 2006, an estimated 83,000 millionaires lived in India; by 2008, India reached 141,000 In 2004 the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER) published a report entitled 'The Great Indian Middle Class' and estimated that in 2010 almost 4 million households will belong to the 'near rich' to 'super rich' category.⁶

The middle class draws attention for several reasons ranging from its collusion with state-driven development of which it is the chief beneficiary to its right wing Hindutva politics, its virulent attitude towards affirmative action, and its sheer size (the putative 350 million) and potential for redirecting global economy. Some of the enduring concerns in the middle class owe to a view much prevalent today that countries which have a larger middle class tend to have higher growth rates; that this class is the backbone of the market economy as well as of democracy. The middle-class habit of capital accumulation and savings also creates opportunities of leisure, consumption and entrepreneurial activities. Of particular interest, at least in India and China of the last twenty years, is the middle-class consumer whose demand for consumer goods pushes overall income levels of the countries.⁷

II

But is there 'a' middle class? Or does it exist only in language, a reification achieved through negation – by

being neither upper nor lower strata of society? Would the middle class of a developing world also be a middle class in the developed West? Such questions assail all those who are engaged with middle class-ness, refusing to take for granted it as an a priori phenomenon, a self evident truth. Joshi (2010) very rightly points out that most scholars (number crunchers as well as social scientists) who use this category treat the middle class as an already understood social group, sometimes dividing it into smaller sub-groups based on economic resources or status. Scholars and journalists alike treat 'the middle class' as a fully formed, sociologically bounded, category defined primarily by economic indicators, ignoring the extent to which social classes do not simply 'emerge' but are 'made.' It is productive to bear in mind, says Joshi, there is no particular moment when the middle class is finally made, rather much like most other social formations, it is always in the making.⁸

A view that this term only be comprehended when context-specificity is accounted for, allowing us to speak of it in its plural forms has gained currency in contemporary scholarship (Joshi 2010, Scarse 2002). However what remains common to the many views regarding India's 'old' and 'new' middle class, including the ones that question such binaries is that the middle class is a phenomenon of the capitalist era. The phrase was first used in Great Britain, by the end of the 18th century, to designate those 'who have some education, who have some property and some character to preserve' and would not apply to a feudal economy.⁹

Among the early and foundational books on the middle class was B.B.Misra's *The Indian Middle Classes : Their Growth in Modern Times* (1961). According to him the growth of the Indian middle classes from about the middle of the eighteenth century to modern times – is in the main a story of the social policy and changes that occurred in the course of about 200 years of British rule, largely as a consequence of Western education and modern capitalist enterprise, reforms and legal administration.¹⁰ Commenting upon the Indian situation, Misra says:

Institutions conducive to capitalist growth were not lacking in India before British rule. A money economy had developed in India at an early period of her history. Merchant guilds, hundis, operations...however the guild power in India remained purely money power, unsupported by any authority of a political or military nature. It collapsed as soon as the king found it convenient to call in the aid of priestly and knightly elements. The limitations arising from the existence of caste, the foundation of the Hindu caste system, were no less menacing to a merchant guild.

In spite of the potential of a middle class bourgeois development therefore (because priests and kings continued to be superior) the

*immobility of the caste organisation and general despotism precluded such a development. They could not go beyond caste orders; and form a generalised class. Moreover the caste system was related to law of property and since land constituted a more or less exclusive means of livelihood, except for the artisans who in part earned their living from handicrafts...society was divided into fixed status groups. There were intermediate categories as well but no middles classes of the type we understand.*¹¹

The strongest impulse governing this formation was that of the British imperialist agencies to form a class of intermediaries in India, reflected in Macaulay's oft-quoted desire to create '...a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect' (1835). Exposed to a western-style education, a generation of what pejoratively came to be called 'brown sahibs' brokered relations between India and the West; now resisting, now succumbing, and at times 'synthesising' the two. It is in their 'cultural entrepreneurship' that Joshi urges to look for the 'middleness.' He argues that middle class-ness was central to a variety of undertakings in colonial India including politic related religion, gender, caste, reform and of course, nationalism. In contrast to the marketeers' perception of this as a consumptive class, the middle class in colonial India was not a social group that could be classified as occupying a median position in terms of standard sociological indicators of income, consumption, or status. In fact many representatives of this class hailed from the upper strata of Indian society and although many of them needed to earn for their living, their ancestors had traditionally served the rulers and big landlords. Their interventions in a public sphere, albeit facilitated by the British, were the hallmark of a class that emerged in the nineteenth century.

Meanwhile, what began as a drive to create a class through English education, also embraced in the course of time technological changes and advancement of industry, land reforms and urbanisation, leading to the inclusion of many other groups such as merchants, agents and proprietors leading us to a conceptualisation as comprising both propertied and non-propertied class. Misra's inclusion of both intellectuals and property owners resonates with the Weberian definition of the middle class. Weber differentiates the propertied from the non-propertied class, but within the former he distinguishes the large proprietors from the 'petty bourgeoisie' and among the latter, the working class from the 'intelligentsia,' which does not own property but has skills. In the Weberian reading of the class structure, the 'petty bourgeoisie' and the 'intelligentsia' are certainly the mainstays of the middle classes (see Misra and Markovits in Joshi, 2010).

Meanwhile, Markovits draws our attention to a glaring gap in discourses regarding the middle class. According to him, the 'brown sahib' narrative has unduly dominated our understanding of the middle-class in India. Where are the merchants in this, he asks? He demonstrates how the class formed through English education and the one formed through changing economic and commercial contexts such as the rise of port cities, depletion of opportunities in princely states, influx of migrants, new industry etc have historically appeared unconnected, although the roots for both go back to colonial India. The two narratives also represented two different worlds that had little to with each other. In Markovits' words: "the mercantile world of India in the pre-independence period, in spite of its own great internal diversity, remained largely separate from the world of the English educated middle classes which were more conspicuous and influential, politically and culturally."¹²

If such was the case in colonial and the first few decades of postcolonial India, there is clearly a shift now. Bound by conspicuous consumption and cultural practices that legitimized their own centrality to political and economic discourses in India, the two merge especially in the period after economic liberalisation. The variegated view expressed by Misra fifty years ago is replaced by Pavan Varma's (1998) undifferentiated and monolithic 'Great Indian Middle Class,'— a generalisation that makes an easy basis for him to mourn its apolitical, consumerist and self-absorbed role in contemporary India. It is useful to see that even in the past the middle class formed through colonial education wielded power and influence, but evoked suspicion even in the past, albeit for slightly different reasons.

III

The historical material on the middle class is expressive of some suspicion about its authenticity, which is now reinvented as suspicion about its ability to think beyond itself. Joshi's edited volume is particularly useful in this regard. Through a range of different essays, it shows how, through the ages, the arrogation of centrality and representation that particular class took upon itself. This is reflected below in Pherozeshah Mehta's words: "It is because the masses are still unable to articulate definite political demands that the functions and duty devolve upon their educated and enlightened compatriots to feel, to understand and to interpret their grievances and requirements, and to suggest and indicate how these can best be redressed and met."¹³

The resonances this carries for the present moment are not hard to miss. At the same time, the stated claim of

the middle class representing the masses' interest, already specious in the past, appears to have further diminished, and its inauthenticity now comes not from being a 'microscopic minority,' but an excluding majority.

A section in Joshi's book focuses upon how the middle class was viewed in colonial India by the masters who allegedly created it, and also by some of its own members. Citing the farewell speech of the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava in 1888, Joshi shows how in order to refute demands made by the newly formed Indian National Congress for greater representation of Indians in the colonial administration, Dufferin stressed the illegitimacy of the middle class as a representative voice of India. Without using the term, Dufferin pointed to "a microscopic minority of educated Indians" who could not be expected to represent India's tremendous diversity.¹⁴ How the British could have represented this diversity remained an unasked question. In contrast to Dufferin's cavalier attitude, Aurobindo Ghosh made a more direct attack: "I mean those of us who have got some little idea of the machinery of English politics and are eager to import it into India along with cheap Liverpool cloth, shoddy Brummagem wares, and other useful and necessary things which have killed the fine genuine textures. ..And if I were to describe that class by a single name, I should not hesitate to call it our new middle class."¹⁵

Elsewhere, Nehru refers to them as "dèclassè intellectuals" who were of no help when India's morale was sinking. It paved a path for Gandhi, who despite being a well-to-do bania, overcame the self-absorption of his class and became an architect of an authentic politics.¹⁶

Simultaneously with his disparagement of the middle class, couched in varying terms, Joshi also alerts us to voices that upheld this class as a carrier of Enlightenment and modernity, a view contested by Bayly by considering possibilities of precolonial public spheres in India. Arguing that India did not learn the values of individuality, rationality, and social communication only from colonial education, Bayly describes the form of cultural and political debate which was typical of North India before the emergence of the newspaper and public association. (see Bayly 2009). Meanwhile, the historic charges against the lack of authenticity of the middle class, are overlaid by charges of consumption in recent times, and also "an inescapable desire to escape the rest of India." (Krishna 2006)

IV

Scholarship after 2000, that is in recent years, points to a shift from sweeping generalisations about the middle

class to micro-studies focussing upon particular strands that constitute it. The variance in both quantitative and qualitative studies, the struggles to define from "income to membership to terminology" (Brosius 2010) have led some to focus on the middle class as an arena of social behaviour, of negotiation between wants and desires, histories and futures. For instance, Scrase (2002) examines the impact of economic reforms on cultural identities in West Bengal and employs ethnographic methodology and narratives to show how cultural identity is being "transformed, resisted, or reinterpreted."¹⁷ The transformation processes are built upon pre-existing hierarchies and world views, so that the *abhijat bhadrak*'s responses may differ from those of the *sadharan bhadrak*, illustrating factions within the middle class. Hatcher argues that flowing from the middle class is a particular blend and brand of Hinduism manifest in "temple building, ritual practices, contemporary guru and self-realisation movements, or popular iconography."¹⁸ Potdar seeks to explore relationships between the middle class in India and user generated contents and attends to the evolving nature of languages (s) and form(s) of expressions that reflect a changed dynamic between collective selves and digital milieu. Potdar stresses upon the middle class as a "social agency, as one that has shifted from the use of technology to its appropriation."¹⁹ Brosius, mentioned earlier, draws from Bordieau's concept of 'distinction' that shapes habitus, capital and cultural production. Taking urban forms of leisure, pleasure and consumption in the city of Delhi, Brosius provides a rich narrative of the symbolic contests that the new and urban middle class in Delhi appear to go through. Patricia Oberoi's study of the cultural practices of the middle class played out through food, weddings and other 'pleasures of the nation,' relies upon consumption as the leitmotif of the middle class.²⁰ Less known in the allegedly academic circles, but a finely tuned and humane study on the middle class is a collection of essays by Santosh Desai (2010).

Desai is not concerned with the middle class's lack of responsibility or its failure to abide by secular values, nor is he interested in counting heads to sell white goods. However, his acute observations on the middle class, as an insider looking from within, provides food for thought to people of different (if not antithetical) persuasions. Desai looks at the quotidian—a zone that helps him examine how consumption is not new, but its demands are different; how public-owned conversations through open postcards have given way to more individual conversations through text messages; how the institution of marriage has not changed as an arrangement between social units, but the need for fair complexion and money

has gone up, and so on. Change and continuity in Desai's essays do not emerge as distinct and chronologically marked entities, but silent and coded experiences yet to find a language.

All this, however scattered, has helped uncover the middle class as a verb, a performance and predicament bound with negotiation in some form or the other. There is a lot more to be done, especially in terms of the many linguistic and regional diversities within the middle class, the rural middle class that remains conspicuously absent, the middle classes' relationship with India's different languages, the absence of the tribals in the sphere and imagination of the middle class, and a range of cultural practices that we have not yet found a name for, but may well be common (only?) to the middle class(es).

NOTES

1. See Rita Kothari, "English Aajkal : Hinglish in Hindi Cinema" in *Chutnefying English : The Phenomenon of Hinglish*, eds. Rita Kothari and Rupert Snell. Penguin India (forthcoming)
2. See Christiane Brosius, *India's Middle Class : New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*. Routledge India, 2010.
3. Brian Hatcher "Bourgeois Vedanta : The Colonial Roots of Middle Class Hinduism" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 75 : 2. (2007), p.301.
4. Martin Ravallion, "The Developing World's Bulging (but vulnerable) Middle Class" Policy Research Working Paper 4816. The World Bank Development Research Board, 2009, p.17.
5. Ibid., p.4.
6. Brosius, *New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*, pp. 2-3.
7. Christopher Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer eds. "Introduction," *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*. Sage India, 2008, pp. 11-34
8. Sanjay Joshi, ed. *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, 2010., pp. Xv-lvi
9. Christopher Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer., *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*, p.11.
10. Sanjay Joshi, *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, pp.36-37.
11. Misra, B.B. "The Middle Class of Colonial India : A Product of British Benevolence" in Joshi, *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, p. 38.
12. In Joshi, *The Middle Class in Colonial India*, p.124.
13. Ibid., p.11.
14. Ibid., pp.3-9.
15. Ibid., p.12.
16. Ibid., p.18.
17. Timothy Scrase, "Television, the Middle Class and the transformation of cultural identities in West Bengal, India" *The International Journal for Communication Studies*, Volume 64 (4), 2002, p. 324.
18. Ibid., p.300.
19. Ashutosh Potdar, "User generated contents and urban middle class," *Mashing Up Culture* eds. Eva Hemmungs and Maria Ryman. Proceedings from the Counter Workshop, Uppsala University, May 13-14, 2009, p.82.
20. In Christopher Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer, *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*.

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NEW UNDERSTANDING OF INDIAN SOCIETY: ENCOUNTERS WITH SOCIOLOGY

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ISBN: 978-81-7986-070-0

Rs. 995/-