

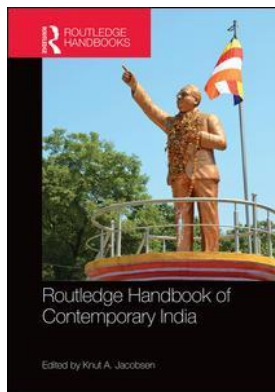
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INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASSES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Leela Fernandes

Introduction

In recent years, India's middle classes have emerged as a central socio-economic and political force in contemporary India. In the wake of policies of economic liberalization that began in the 1980s and have accelerated since the 1990s, Indian and global public discourses have focused on the size and economic force of India's middle classes. Market research firms have touted the middle class as a lucrative consumer group while political leaders have portrayed India's middle classes as the public face of India's economic potential (McKinsey Global Institute 2007). Social and cultural critics have decried the elitism of the middle classes and the threat of rampant consumerism in a country still grappling with poverty and inequality (Gupta 2001). Political parties have increasingly sought to attract middle-class voters in ways that could potentially change future electoral calculations. Thus, in the 2014 elections, Narendra Modi was effectively able to appeal to what he called India's 'neo-middle class' (BJP 2014). In the midst of these layered trends, India's middle classes remain one of the most over-debated yet under-studied social groups in contemporary India. The realities of the lives, identities and politics of India's vast middle classes bear little resemblance to the heightened public rhetoric about this group.

This chapter will present an overview of some of the complexities and contradictions that shape India's middle classes. India's middle classes are characterized by considerable internal variations based on factors such as socio-economic standing, caste, religion and region. Such variation makes any attempt at generalizing about the nature and behaviour of India's middle classes at best a flawed enterprise. Yet this diversity coexists with a distinctive publicness to middle-class identity – where public and political discourses produce and make claims about a uniform middle-class identity with common interests. Such claims stem from the historical relationship between Indian nationalism and middle-class identity and have been accentuated and reworked in the post-liberalization period. The result is a paradoxical relationship between political claims regarding a singular middle class and a differentiated social group that ranges from very elite English urban upper-middle classes to lower-middle classes that struggle to maintain their socio-economic status. The chapter analyses this paradox and argues that the tensions produced by such fractures within the middle classes play an increasingly central role in shaping contemporary politics in India. The chapter is

organized in four sections. The first section presents the historical context and theoretical problems that shape contemporary debates on India's middle class. The second section examines some of the key dimensions of the post-liberalization middle class. The third section examines the political implications of the fractures within India's post-liberalization middle class. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of future directions for research on India's middle classes.

Defining India's middle class: conceptual questions and historical factors

Contemporary discussions of India's middle classes are fraught with conceptual ambiguities regarding the precise boundaries that mark this social group. Some of these ambiguities are not specific to India and stem from the relative absence of theoretical attention and depth that has been paid to the middle classes in comparative contexts. Marxian and neo-Marxian theoretical work on the category of class has tended to dismiss or neglect this social group in part because of the relative lack of attention that Marx paid to the middle class. In Marxian conceptions, the middle class is either conflated with the bourgeoisie or conceived of as a petty bourgeoisie that was without a social basis or a class that would ultimately become proletarianized (Marx and Engels 1848). Meanwhile, Weberian conceptions of class have resorted instead to conceptions of stratification based on income and status as measurements of middle-class location (Weber 1978). Contemporary studies of India's middle classes have tended to implicitly reflect these divergent conceptual streams. Social science scholarship has attempted to use income and consumption data to provide more precise and accurate measures of middle-class membership (Sridharan 2004). More anthropological scholarship has resorted to culturalist analyses of consumption and status as markers of middle-class distinction¹ and status (Lukose 2009; Mazzarella 2003). Meanwhile, post-colonial approaches have sometimes reverted to conceptions that have absorbed the middle classes into homogeneous conceptions of a bourgeois or elite social group (Chatterjee 2004).

The conceptual difficulties of grasping India's middle classes are further complicated by the historical legacies of colonialism that have shaped the formation of this social group. In the first comprehensive attempt at providing a systematic analysis of the complexities of middle-class formation in India, B. B. Misra's classic study provides an entry point into the distinctive historical characteristics of India's middle classes (1961). As Misra's work indicates, British colonialism limited Indian industrialization and the corresponding expansion of an industrial middle class. Furthermore, a British system of using managing agencies to organize industrial development in India also restricted the growth of an Indian administrative core within the industrial sector (Misra 1961: 14). The result was that India's emerging middle classes relied primarily on education as a means of access to employment and economic power. This form of access, of course, was intertwined with existing forms of socio-economic power such as caste, religion and landownership. The colonial Indian middle class was thus marked by high degrees of uncertainty produced by its dependence on the colonial state for employment and the limits on its economic power in the context of the colonial political economy of India.

This sense of uncertainty was expressed and managed through various forms of public political and cultural expressions. As historians have shown, middle-class identity was expressed through public discourses of respectability, moral regeneration and social reform (Joshi 2001; Sarkar 2001). Such forms of expression were then reworked into the emerging nationalist politics of the Congress Party and Muslim League. Middle-class

claims of moral and cultural superiority were intertwined with emerging forms of politics in which the upper tiers of the middle classes claimed to serve as the ideal of representative citizenship. Thus, for instance in a range of local civic life, associational activities and municipal politics, the middle classes were able to use their resources of language and education to claim public civic power (Haynes 1991). These middle-class conceptions of 'public' interest were fundamentally based on a politics of difference and exclusion as they rested on socially segregated conceptions of urban civic order that viewed the poor as threats to hygiene and safety (Gooptu 2001). This tension between middle-class claims of representing the universal and public interests of the nation while reproducing a politics of differentiation and exclusion has been one of the critical factors that has shaped the nature of the Indian middle classes in contemporary India.

This brief historical sketch is not intended as an exhaustive or comprehensive picture of the historical formation of India's middle classes. Rather, it seeks to provide a sense of historical context that can highlight significant continuities between early dynamics of middle-class politics and contemporary debates on India's post-liberalization middle classes. Such continuities provide a useful caution against the tendency to assume that contemporary debates mark a self-evident break from the past. As the next section will demonstrate, the post-liberalization middle classes in contemporary India continue to grapple with the tensions between their claims of public representativeness on the one hand and the politics of difference (both in terms of differentiation within the middle classes and differences from subaltern social groups). The Janus-faced nature of the colonial middle class that sought to represent the Indian nation even as it produced exclusions of caste, gender and religion thus continues to shape this social group in the contemporary period.

The post-liberalization middle class

Contemporary political and public discourses are marked by highly inflated forms of rhetoric about the nature of India's middle classes. With the advent of policies of economic reforms in the 1990s, public discourses – from politicians, media outlets, businesses and marketing and advertising firms – centred on the change in the nature of India's middle classes. This depiction of change turned on questions of both substance and size. At a substantive level, the initial policies of reform in the 1990s were publicly associated with new forms of prosperity. Reforms were associated with an embrace of globalization that offered the middle classes a newfound prosperity. This prosperity was marked both by highly paid employment in new economy jobs such as information technology (Radhakrishnan 2011) as well as the ability to freely consume newly available consumer goods. In the early 1990s, media discourses were thus rife with rhetoric about a new middle class that was now free to break from the old restrictions and state dependency associated with Nehruvian state socialist ideologies and Gandhian moral norms of austerity (Fernandes 2006).

The purported change in the nature and character of the Indian middle classes has been accompanied by widespread public and academic debates on the size of this social group. In the early years of reforms in the 1990s, political and business leaders and mainstream media discourses presented sharply inflated figures of a large untapped middle-class consumer market comprised of between 100–300 million individuals. While some of the inflated rhetoric subsided when large segments of the middle classes did not in fact exhibit the kind of mass consumerism that had been anticipated in such discourse, rhetoric on the size of India's middle classes continues to shape contemporary conceptions of this group. Global and Indian market-oriented research firms such as the McKinsey Global Institute and the National

Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) continue to create estimates of the size of India's middle class that are in the millions and continue to predict a rapid growth in this size in future years. Thus, in a recent estimate, the NCAER has estimated the current size of the middle classes as comprised of 160 million individuals and has predicted the size will increase to 267 million by 2015–2016 and to 547 million by 2025–2026 (*Economic Times* 2011).

Attempts to estimate the boundaries of India's middle classes based on household income and consumption patterns are an integral part of any endeavour at understanding the post-liberalization middle class. The opening up of the Indian market and the availability of new consumer goods has produced a significant rise in consumption levels. This has been further intensified by a proliferation of media and public discourses that have constructed a 'new middle-class' identity that is associated with new consumption practices, lifestyles and status distinctions associated with new economy white-collar jobs. Indeed recent consumption data does show evidence of the ownership of new consumer items (see Table 15.1). Thus, for example, recent data show that 53.2 per cent of households own a mobile phone (with a higher level of 64.3 per cent of urban households owning a mobile phone) and 47.2 per cent of households own a television (with a much higher percentage of 76.7 per cent of urban households). However, such data must be contextualized with the nature of consumption practices in India. The purchase of consumer goods remains a significant household decision and middle-class families do not necessarily participate in patterns of western consumerism associated with the practices of repeat purchases of new brands or models of household items. Meanwhile the data indicates that only 4.7 per cent of households and a higher level of 9.7 per cent of urban households own a car (a more significant consumer purchase). This is an increase in 2001 estimates, which showed that 2.5 per cent of households owned a car and 5.6 per cent of urban households owned a car (Fernandes 2006: 81) but remains a relatively small percentage of households. This must be added to the fact that household income and asset ownership data does not provide sufficient contextual information of the nature of the household structure, level of indebtedness and factors of generational wealth or poverty. There are for example sharp differences between urban upper-middle class families that can engage in brand-related consumerism and middle or lower-middle class families that may strategically purchase consumer goods for an entire joint family household or for the purposes of using such a purchase as a marker of middle-class status.

The cautionary note necessary when interpreting changes in consumption patterns and asset ownership is underlined by the fact that data about middle-class consumption is shaped by the political and discursive strategies that shape the quantification projects of large market-oriented firms such as the NCAER and McKinsey Institute. Since the 1990s, the NCAER has for instance been both a leading source of data on consumption and household

Table 15.1 Households by possession of assets (%)

<i>Asset</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>
Television	47.2	33.4	76.7
Computer/laptop (with internet)	3.1	0.7	8.3
Computer/laptop (without internet)	6.3	4.4	10.4
Telephone (mobile only)	53.2	47.9	64.3
Car/Jeep/van	4.7	2.3	9.7

Source: Census of India, 2014

income and a political actor that has shaped the construction of middle-class identities. The NCAER for instance has used categories such as ‘consuming class’ and ‘aspirants’ that have built in normative assumptions that associate income-based social groups with middle-class aspirational identities (Fernandes 2006: 76). Such data may thus participate in the creation of a consumer-based middle-class identity as much as it reflects an objective measure of middle-class status defined by household income.

The complexities of attempting to ‘measure’ the middle class through quantitative data based on income and asset ownership reflects a deeper point regarding the way in which we understand the boundaries of the middle classes. Middle-class identity in many ways is defined by a kind of productive ambiguity. The nature of this social group rests on the fact that it is defined by two paradoxical characteristics. On the one hand, middle-class status is defined by the promise of access to membership – the aspirational promise of upward mobility for individuals within the middle classes (that for instance want to move from middle to upper-middle class status) and between classes (the promise of upward mobility for subaltern social groups seeking middle-class membership). On the other hand, middle-class status is fundamentally defined by an exclusionary politics of distinction. The ‘middleness’ of this class contains within it a sense of relationality in which its identity is defined by a demarcation both from the very rich as well as from the poor. Given that large sections of the middle classes are often more economically fragile and thus susceptible to anxieties of falling in social or economic status, middle-class identity is often built on carefully crafted distinctions based on lifestyle, status markers and claims of cultural and moral superiority. Such distinctions rest as much on internal differentiation within the middle classes as they do in relation to other socio-economic groups. The middle classes are thus the product of a politics of classification. Segments of this social group seek to police the boundaries of middle-class identity even as other segments contest and attempt to redraw these boundaries. It is this sense of uncertainty and fluidity that is missed by attempts to reduce the study of the middle classes to measurable questions of size based on household income or consumption.

This politics of classification has become particularly weighty in the post-liberalization context of contemporary India. In the initial phases of liberalization (both in Rajiv Gandhi’s early appeals to a consuming urban middle-class identity and in the early period of liberalization in the 1990s), public and political rhetoric in India was saturated with euphoric claims of a new middle-class identity. This new middle-class identity was identified with the promise of an expanding consumer class that I have been analysing as well as with highly paid new economy jobs in the private sector (particularly in rapidly growing sectors such as Indian firms in the services and information technology sector as well as more broadly in multinational companies). The newness of this middle class, however, provided a misleading sense of access associated with India’s liberalizing economy. In practice, the segments of India’s middle classes that have benefited most from liberalization and from new economy jobs are the upper tiers of the English-educated urban middle classes. The newness of this middle class thus rested on a shift of this segment of the middle classes from well-paid and secure employment in the public sector to highly paid jobs in the new economy sector. Segments of this social group have in fact benefited significantly from jumps in private sector salaries and have been able to participate in the consumption of newly available consumer goods.

The implications of India’s policies of economic liberalization for the broader middle classes in India have been more complex and varied. Members of the middle classes have sought to use individual strategies to try and gain benefits from the new economy sectors. Thus, individuals have sought to accumulate various forms of social and cultural capital – ranging from smaller tactics of gaining computer skills, English training and knowledge

about cultural styles (such as dress, speaking accents) to strategies of gaining credentials such as MBAs. Urban middle-class youth have been able to gain access to disposable income through employment in the services sectors and call centre jobs (Patel 2010). However, while such strategies have allowed individuals to gain some benefits particularly from service sector jobs, they have not necessarily produced structural access to broader segments of the middle classes (Fernandes 2006). Segments of the middle classes with access to top-tier educational institutions continue to fill the high-end segments of new economy jobs. Access to new economy jobs continues to be structured by historical inequalities of caste and religion. Research on India's highly successful information technology industries has shown that access to new economy jobs in places such as Bangalore has been highly restricted to upper-caste Hindus (Radhakrishnan 2011; Upadhyaya 2007). While Muslims in India tend to represent a significant portion of India's urban population, both governmental reports and academic research have documented the growing political and economic marginalization of large segments of the Muslim community (Gayer and Jaffrelot 2011, Sachar Report 2006). Local ethnographic research has shown that while Dalits and Muslims use a variety of strategies such as education to gain access to middle-class status, members of these communities often experience long-term unemployment (Jeffrey *et al.* 2007). Education provides some forms of socio-cultural status but does not necessarily transform into economic access to employment.

India's middle classes in the post-liberalization period are thus characterized by a high degree of internal differentiation. The actual growth of asset ownership has often mistakenly led both public discourses and academic scholarship to conflate the middle classes with either elites or with the upper tiers of the English-speaking urban middle classes (Mazzarella 2003). In fact, large segments of India's middle classes live with high degrees of economic fragility or anxiety. New entrants to middle-class status such as Dalits who may have trouble gaining access to employment struggle both with the stability and meaning of middle-class status. Meanwhile, larger sections of rural and middle classes that may be more economically stable struggle with the anxieties of preserving their status in the face of socio-economic competition over jobs and education or in the face of basic economic pressures such as inflation. Thus, for instance, according to a survey by the Associated Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Business Standard, 2003), middle-income groups in major metropolitan cities hit by inflation in addition to rising costs in fuel, health and education, saw their household savings decline by 40 per cent in the three years between 2010 to 2013. The survey showed a general decline in consumption for middle-class families in general and a decline in basic food consumption in lower-middle class families.

The discrepancies between the promise of middle-class wealth and status and the material inequalities that shape middle-class life have begun to shape the political behaviour of the middle classes in distinctive ways. The Indian middle classes have historically engaged in a politics aimed at differentiating their socio-cultural identity from subaltern social groups. This dynamic has continued in the contemporary period. Thus, in the context of the economic anxiety, the middle classes have mobilized in different ways in order to preserve their interests. New entrants to middle-class status have pressed the state for access to employment and education while the upper tiers of the middle classes have often engaged in a politics of backlash against state policies such as caste-based reservations. As contemporary scholarship has demonstrated, the rise of movements such as the Hindu nationalist movement and the Bharatiya Janata Party rested in part on an urban-middle-class backlash against a Congress government that they perceived as 'pandering' to Dalits and Muslims (Hansen 1999). Meanwhile, as Zoya Hasan has convincingly demonstrated, the rise of regional political parties and oppositional movements can also be understood in

part in relation to the socio-economic frustrations and political demands of the vernacular, rural middle classes (Hasan 1998). The politics of India's middle classes have thus played a central role in shaping some of the central trends in contemporary India. An analysis of the politicization of India's middle classes thus provides us both with a deeper understanding of this social group as well as an understanding of some of the central factors that are currently shaping contemporary political trends in India.

The politics of India's middle classes in contemporary India

In recent years, a number of well-publicized events have seemed to mark the emergence of a distinctive form of middle-class politics in contemporary India. This form of politics is intertwined with a growing sense of middle-class resentment against state governance and institutions that the middle classes perceive as failing to represent their interests. Several significant examples of this form of politics have emerged in recent years. Anna Hazare's high profile anti-corruption movement capitalized on middle-class frustrations with political corruption by invoking a much older historical middle-class self-identification as a social group that seeks to occupy a pure, apolitical realm. This sense of moral purity characterized historical conceptions of a middle-class sense of cultural superiority. More recently, in contemporary India the middle classes have viewed the expansion of democratic participation and political mobilization of subaltern groups as a threat to civic order (Hansen 1999). Hazare's anti-corruption rhetoric thus both captured a real sense of middle-class dissatisfaction and located his oppositional tactics on a longstanding middle-class antipathy towards democratic governmental institutions. A second example of this form of anti-institutional politics is a longstanding middle-class resentment of a democratic state that this social group perceives as having been captured by subaltern social groups. For instance, significant segments of the middle classes embraced an 'anti-entitlement' sentiment in the run up to the 2014 national elections (Hasan 2013).² Finally, a third significant example of middle-class resentment was illustrated in the mobilization against the brutal Delhi gang rape of a middle-class woman (Singh 2013). While women's organizations participated actively in the protests and focused on questions of violence against women, key themes that shaped the dominant public narratives of the protest were a sense of middle-class anger against state failure and strong demands for law and order including calls for the death penalty for rape. The rhetorical strategies of the protests thus intersected with the underlying pattern of a more generalized middle-class frustration with failures of governance.

Such political dynamics reflect an underlying paradox that has shaped the relationship between the middle classes and the Indian state. On the one hand, the Indian middle classes have in many ways been historically produced by and dependent on state policies. Thus, for instance, significant governmental investments in higher education directly contributed to the expansion and strength of India's middle classes and during the early decades of the post-colonial period India's middle classes were primarily dependent on state employment – whether in the public sector or in arenas such as civil service employment. Indeed, despite the growth of new economy jobs, sizeable sections of the middle classes continue to rely on state employment (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase 2009) and middle-class competition over reservations in education reflect the continued role of the state in supporting the middle classes. On the other hand, large segments of India's middle classes have increasingly been driven by perceptions of a state that primarily caters to lower castes and classes. This middle-class sense of grievance at entitlements being provided to such marginalized social groups is at odds with this pattern of state entitlements being provided to the middle classes. This

paradox is further heightened by the fact that, as I have argued earlier, the economic fragility of large segments of the middle classes means that such segments in fact demand more state support. The significant internal socio-economic differentiation within India's middle classes shapes and intersects with such political paradoxes.

The 2014 elections in India provide a central example of the political complexities of India's middle classes. In both his political platform and campaign rhetoric then candidate and now Prime Minister Narendra Modi displayed an astute ability to capitalize on the political and socio-economic contradictions that lie within the middle classes. The deployment of the category of 'neo-middle class' in both the BJP party manifesto and in campaign narratives invoked both this sense of differentiation and the general sense of middle-class economic anxiety. The manifesto for instance characterized this social group as

a large middle class with immense understanding, talent and purchasing power. In addition, a whole new class has emerged. Those who have risen from the category of poor and are yet to stabilize in the middle class, the 'neo-middle class'. This class needs proactive handholding. Having moved out of poverty, their aspirations have increased. They want amenities and services of a certain standard. They thus now feel that Government facilities and services are not up to the mark, and hence resort to the private sector for things like education, health and transport. This is obviously costly, putting the neo-middle class into a daily dilemma. As more and more people move into this category, their expectations for better public services have to be met.

BJP 2014: 17

The manifesto, and this newly constructed 'neo-middle class' identity effectively wove together the economic fragility of large sections of the middle classes with both a post-liberalization aspirational identity as well as the historical reliance (and desire) of the middle classes for state supports. Thus, the manifesto turned to a call for strengthening the public sector and the government provision of 'educational scholarships and educational facilities, medical insurance and quality healthcare services, middle-income housing and efficient public transport systems' (ibid.). These promises coincided with clear signals that a Modi-led government would forge ahead with accelerated policies of economic liberalization.

In this endeavour, the BJP and Modi in particular were able to weave together a political narrative that would appeal both to the upper tiers of the urban middle classes who have directly benefited from liberalization and the much larger segments of the middle classes who have struggled economically. Modi was further able to personally embody this narrative through his rhetorical style where he effectively stood for the aspirational new entrant to middle-class status (signalling both his caste identity and prior socio-economic disadvantages) even as he took on the role of the efficient CEO (chief executive officer) prime ministerial candidate that had once been projected onto Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The significance of this political crafting of a middle-class identity lies in the fact that in contrast to earlier elections where middle-class voter turnout has been relatively low, the middle classes served as a swing group (shifting to support to the BJP) in ways that affected the outcome of the 2014 elections. The success of this identity as an electoral strategy does not, of course, mean that such an identity can automatically manage the very real economic inequalities *within* India's middle classes. The promise being made to India's 'neo-middle class' in many ways echoes the promise of the new middle class in the early euphoria of the 1990s. However, it does reinforce the growing socio-economic and political significance of India's middle classes and the need for ongoing and sustained research on this complex social group.

Future directions for the study of the middle classes in contemporary India

In recent years, there has been a significant rise of both scholarly and public interest in understanding India's middle classes. Prior to this, academic research on the middle classes was largely limited to historical studies of middle-class public activities in the colonial and nationalist period.³ The growing political significance of the middle class and the complex differentiation that characterizes this group is such that there is a need for much closer and systematic study of India's middle classes. Significant gaps in current scholarship include a closer examination of regional variations in middle-class formation and practices particularly in under-studied regions of the country including those such as the north-eastern region that are often left out of narratives of India's economic trajectories. Such research is already beginning to emerge in various institutions in India.⁴ However, an adequate understanding of India's middle classes and their impact in contemporary India will also require more than individual studies of particular segments and sections of this group. Given the diversity of the middle classes, it is an easy task to illustrate the uniqueness of particular social segments of this group as well as to contrast these segments with idealized images of the middle class that are shaped by the media and by political rhetoric.

An understanding of the impact of India's middle classes requires analyses that hold in tension both the contradiction and interrelationship between dominant narratives and internal differentiation. It is this dynamic that underlies the politicization of this social group, including the heightened political assertiveness and frustrations that have emerged since Indian independence and intensified in the post-liberalization period. India's middle classes, as this chapter has argued, cannot be reduced to a problem of measurement or to easy narratives about consumerism and elitism. The political force of the middle classes lies in a productive and messy ambiguity that shapes the boundaries of this group. This ambiguity is idealized through the promise of access and aspiration for new entrants even as it is mired in a politics of inequality and exclusion. In the midst of this uncertainty, individuals and social groups attempt to survive, adapt to and contest the unwieldy and weighty border that seeks to contain 'the Indian middle class'.

Notes

- 1 Such work has often drawn on Bourdieu's conception of social capital (1984). However, the culturalist reading of Bourdieu (that underplays Bourdieu's key understanding of class structuration and reproduction) places this work closer to Weberian conceptions of stratification.
- 2 This anti-entitlement sentiment comprised an attitude that the Congress government provided too many benefits to subaltern social groups and that such groups (such as the poor, Muslims and lower-caste groups) were dependent on a kind of entitlement culture.
- 3 Key exceptions to this include early work by Misra (1961) as well as work on caste and class by sociologists such as André Beteille. For recent work on the middle class see Beteille 2002.
- 4 For a range of such work see Lobo (2015).

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