

The indian middle class history essay



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Is there something known as the Indian middle class? How does it manifest itself in everyday India? Illustrate through Santosh Desai's *Mother Pious Lady*.

It is very tough to explain the contours that define the Indian middle class. Being in the middle is not a easy thing always as there are two conflicting forces that keep on pulling this middle towards itself. One is the rich, upper class, the elites whose lifestyles symbolise the new dawn of the country. The other is the seemingly poor, lower class which is routinely dismissed as the underbelly. But in India's case, there definitely exists a middle class which is thriving and is a growing force for every aspect of the country – society, culture, politics, market and even cinema. Santosh Desai, through his book *Mother Pious Lady*, shares this sentiment as he reflects on how the middle class has been negotiating with the seemingly innocuous but defining changes in their culture, thinking and lifestyles. This essay, through some anecdotes from Santosh Desai's book and insights of some other thinkers, aims to emphasize the fact that something like a middle class is very much a part of India's structure and manifests itself in every day India.

For the current generation, the concept of a middle class seems to be a fairly recent one. But then probably, the middle class was always there in the Indian history in some way or the other. A proto-middle class existed in India much before the British period, consisting of petty officials, shopkeepers, master craftsmen, priests and scribes. But they were not a middle class in the modern sense. Soon, the ideas of Industrial Revolution found their way into British India as well. Social values were transformed by the efforts of reformers like Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. At the same

time, the growing use of the English language provided access to technological, political and cultural innovations of the West. Thus, the Indian middle class was born.[1]

After independence, started the process of formation of a new lifestyle and image for the middle class – the existing middle class of before independence; gained more resources for themselves and moved into the position of the new elites of the new, independent India. With the growth of public sector jobs in the 50's and 60's, came about the growth of a new middle class. As Sanjeev Sanyal puts it, “ In turn, it created a whole generation of middle-class children who grew up together in housing colonies and with a shared experience – Chitrahaar on Doordarshan, the Fiat or scooter that was replaced by the Maruti 800, and the unending sequence of exams”.

It also led to a culture of sharing with each other. Sociologist Shiv Visvanathan provides an insight, “ What made the middle- class of the time different was the way it wove together scarcity, memory and boredom. The public sector socialism of the time with its ritual of ration cards created a world of limits. One did not starve but one subsisted on little. The one thing socialism created was the world of boredom as a commons. One shared each other's boredom.”

The 70's and 80's gave a shape to the faint contours of the middle class which had risen in the 60's. The culture of the middle class was now also more consumption based and provided the image of the “ middle class” which we now seem to identify with. Santosh Desai describes these pangs of

growing consumption through anecdotes on how sending a 2-word telegram was all it took to convey well-being, how stainless steel utensils acted identifiers of a certain modernity that was newly acquired. Raja Menon provides another insight, “ Families moved into quarters designated Type 2 A, 14B/43 of Phase 1. All appliances-a radio, B&W TV, a stereo, refrigerator and mixie-were displayed in the drawing room and the whole neighbourhood dropped in to watch Chitrahaar”.[2]

The 90’s are heralded as the era of the middle class which the marketers chased. Liberalisation opened up new avenues for the middle class. When India opened up in 1991, the big attraction for marketers – both national and global – was the “ big Indian middle class” estimated to be anywhere between 300 to 400 million and growing.[3]

Anuradha Goyal documents the pangs of transition for the moderate 80’s to the ambitious 90’s for the middle class, “ They (middle class) lived in their own world where they had enough for their basic needs but nothing for their desires. Then came the famous economic reforms of early 90s and it changed the Indian middle class forever.

People in the upper echelons of the society probably always had everything, and for the people in the lower rung things have still not have changed much except probably a mobile phone in the hand. But the middle class suddenly had more resources than they were used to. They could now afford to buy houses at a much younger age, cars almost at the beginning of their work lives, clothes and shoes without waiting for a wedding to happen in the family. Psychologically, for people who grew up in 70s and early 80s, the

change was tremendous, while their growing up was in the era of scarcity they landed up in the era of abundance without really making a proportionate effort. They embraced the change but also had to deal with their roots that lie in another age. As a class they also became the focus segment for many product and service offerings. They were not used to and had to learn to deal with this sudden attention”.

During the 90’s and beyond, the level of middle class got a raise, a raise which was quite different from that of the upper or lower class. As Madhukar Sabnavis puts the query, “ In any society, people want to move up in life and there is continuous push for every group to move up. Simultaneously, the people on the top have the urge to do better to distance themselves from the rest. So, to define a middle class by income earned is always possible. And to affix a number to it is equally easy, once the arithmetic is done. But is this actually the middle class and what’s special about this class? Why is this group so special to everyone – sociologists, marketers and administrators? “

Economically, the 90’s defined the middle class in terms of its earnings and the subsequent spending or to say differently, the consumption. This new middle class worked hard to rise from the bottom, bringing with it a nouveau-rich mentality that some Indians consider vulgar. Today, India’s middle class is one of the largest in the world, equal in some estimates to the population of the United States.

The economic reforms started in the early 1990’s have spurred an annual growth rate exceeding 7%, with especially rapid growth in the middle class. Projecting that growth rate into the future, India’s income will double every

ten years. Within a generation almost 50% of India's people could become middle class and poverty could diminish to 15%. In line with this growth, the Indian middle class is developing an appetite for telephones, cars, televisions, clothes, refrigerators and other consumer goods.[4]

This economic rise of the middle class also gave a new direction to the cultural mores which have now come to define the middle class in India – Sabnavis again gives an insight, “ Once unshackled, it's not surprising that the Indian middle class felt liberated to enjoy and spend in the last two decades. Integrity is a relic of the Gandhian/scarcity era. “ Means justify the ends” has always been the Indian principle of living – Krishna and Chanakya are the cultural icons of this. Jugaad has always been part of our lives”.

No doubt, words like ‘ jugaad’, ‘ fixing’, ‘ contacts’ have invariably crept into the lingo of the average middle class guy. Another quite peculiar identifier of this new middle class culture has been the fixation with English. Puts Vikram V. Garg[5],” Knowledge of English, together with mass media and the internet puts middle India in a very interesting position. It is in some sense, ‘ pre-western’. The combination of comfort with English, combined with the relatively liberal political and media environment of India, is resulting in a huge American influence on this middle class. Also contributing are the increasingly strong people to people links between America and India. The middle class is thus developing aspirations that are in line with this psuedo-western mindset. It seems that for now these aspirations are mostly consumerish and professional, not political”.

But the most defining feature of this middle class has been the fact that despite moving up the ladder in the consumption chain, it has not lost view of its “ traditions” which does appear contrasting but is the path chosen. Says Rowena Robinson, “ The modernity of the middle class does not enter the realm of the mind. Perpetuating patriarchal and hierarchical notions and reaffirming stereotypical gender roles are seen as commitment to tradition. Being liberal is epitomised as consumption and spending”. [6]

Santosh Desai also emphasizes on a related aspect in Mother Pious Lady. He analyses this through the term “ ritual reality” – “ The penchant for symbolic action finds its pinnacle when it comes to finding a method to punish inaction... the institution of the suspension is an inspired one... Most suspensions are lifted... and often with retrospective effect... Overall, it seems to reflect a lack of belief in the ability of any person to materially alter the world through individual action... we place thinking on a higher pedestal over action, seeing the latter as a ‘ lower’ order activity compared to the former”.

Another way to see this middle class is through the silver screen. The depiction of middle class in films has kept pace with the changing aspirations of the middle class itself. As Alam Srinivas puts it, “ Nationalism is not just about geographies, politics and social upheavals. It’s also about economics, in the context of the evolution of the middle class-the intellectual-ideological force behind the nation-building exercise. Over decades, as various pressures transformed it, the middle class forced the country to alter its socio-politico-economic vision. And Hindi cinema has, through the decades, tracked all these changes”. [7]

Madhava Prasad refers to a certain tendency in popular Hindi cinema of the late 1960s and early 1970s. He says that this set of films ‘...was addressed to the subject, the individual in society, faced with the struggle for existence, the locus of desires, fears and hopes’[8]. He refers to this as ‘ the middle class cinema’.

The cinema of 1970s – 1980s reflected the middle class as a section of society in transition and in that transition, going against the system and leading to a resultant angst – “ the angry young man” image as a symbol for the same – films like Zanjeer, Deewar, Laawaris, Shakti.... Films like Ardha Satya and Aakrosh showed the undirected middle-class anger, discontent and confusion during those days in the 1970s and 1980s.

The rise of economically empowered middle class in the 1990s gave a new image to be projected by popular media. In an article ‘ World Cinema: Bollywood forced to go mainstream?’ Iain Ball says -“ The highly educated middle and upper classes in India, once embarrassed at being ‘ westernized’ and for speaking and thinking in English, are feeling confident in their sense of identity – and their language – for the first time. There’s a whole audience one can target that wasn’t there 10 or 15 years ago. This is a new money class”.[9]

As Neha Chadha points out, “ This also explains the sudden emergence and dissemination of a certain set of images that not only repeatedly appear in Hindi cinema but also float all around us on television, newspapers, hoardings, posters, etc. and create a matrix, of which we have now become a part. All sorts of consumer items fill the frame – cars, phones, television

sets, microwave ovens, designed interiors – and increasingly they became a part of the narrative and sometimes even became the very tools to carry the narrative forward. This larger trend of media images that surrounds us is an ever-expanding universe of merchandise, shopping malls and the new media, and each, in its own way, ‘naturalizes’ this image culture”.[10]

Thus emerged a new romantic form which was definitely different from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was definitely not situated in the middle class. The romantic cinema of the late 1980s and early 1990s was about the urban youth who spend incessantly on food, clothes and entertainment, an image which continues to be projected even now.

As Santosh Desai describes it, “” The Hero of today is changing, albeit slowly. His clothes are more normal and he woos his woman less roughly, but in many ways he is the same. As a society we still need our Heroes (sic) to do six impossible things before the first song in Switzerland. He must not appear ordinary, for we still have too much of that commodity going around in our own lives.”

As Chadha reasons, “ Even though the middle class exists in an enormous number as the principal consumers of these films, it is visually absent in them because it now begins to identify itself with a different class – this identification occurs at the level of aspirations. Hence the paradox, the middle class can now not be associated with these images even though they could afford these objects or the lifestyle shown in these films”.

It is precisely this middle class that is the focus of Santosh Desai’s book, *Mother Pious Lady*. Desai dips into the world of media, Hindi films, relatives

and jobs to paint a very accurate picture of India prior to liberalisation and in the early period after it. There are uncanny observations about the way Indian middle class has gone about living its life during this time.[11]

For example, he offers an interesting insight about women travelling in DTC buses which some 20-22 years back, was the preferred mode of travel for the middle class – “ The bus would wait for her arrival if needed to and the crowd would part to allow her to sit in the seat reserved for her. The relationship with the driver was never remotely improper; there was rarely any conversation or even an overt acknowledgement; it remained an unspoken pact between the driver and his muse”.

Desai offers his take on the changing aspirations of Indians, the dilemmas that come along with sweeping changes post liberalisation, and the historical baggage we carry. “ What we called middle class values were in reality nothing more than the whole protocol of actions we developed to deal with insufficiency with dignity and grace... A comrade of our needs, an enemy of our desires, this ‘ tightness of hand’ was accompanied by a value system that sought to minimise the acknowledgement of the role that desire played in our lives”.

He documents the huge shift the middle class has seen – from stainless steel to the postcard, the blue used to whiten our clothes, the all-important crease in the trouser, unannounced (now unthinkable) visitors, the Bajaj scooter, the thali, even the pickle. “ Money used to be hard to come by, but joy wasn’t”

The Maruti, which has been a symbol of the middle class living for quite some time, has been described by Desai like this – “ For most of us, who

were born in the middle class only to die there, the car was a border we could not imagine crossing ... the Maruti compressed the promise of consumerism... and... flung the doors of aspiration wide open...”

The auto rickshaw, which is also a symbol of middle class transport, has been very amply described – “ The auto’s appeal comes from its ability to provide a real luxury; it offers us the power of individualised motorised transport. When one hires an auto one is placing a value on one’s own time. Rather than wait for public transport, an auto is hailed and one’s precise destination is reached. The autorickshaw’s implicit deal with us is that while it gives us this wonderful luxury, in return it strips everything else in the experience that could remotely reek of luxury ... It is both deeply comforting and dissatisfying. It captures the variable and uneven nature of life in India that is not too poor to have no choices, yet not so affluent that it can take life for granted ... It reaffirms and gives substance to the Indian belief that life may be hard but there is always a way”.

The politics of speedbreaker are also a feature of his analysis, “ We may or may not build great roads, but we sure know how to build great speedbreakers ... The speedbreaker exists to defeat the purpose of the road. Motorised traffic became possible because of the macadamisation of roads and the speedbreaker is tarmac’s revenge on itself ... But there is a larger need that drives us to put up so many of these speedbreakers. At some level we are afraid of speed and the distance that gets created between those speeding and the rest of us. The speedbreaker is the political front, the battle line that marks the tussle between those with the means to speed and the others...”

Desai on those ubiquitous “badges” carefully bestowed on organizers at puja mandals and Lions Club felicitations: “The badge is a quasi-uniform converting disconnected people into a cadre. The badge converts a lower division clerk into an officer bristling with disappointment... and a housewife into a despot with untrammelled powers.”

What’s the way ahead for this thriving, captivating middle class? Desai discusses how the Indian middle class is emerging from the folds of its past, thereby requiring fresh analysis. This transition, is still ongoing the middle class will become a stronger social force five years from now, with a more nuanced worldview.

Rajdeep Sardesai documents this insight, “The middle class, especially the more affluent sections, have dramatically shifted their priorities and become more self-centred than ever before. A credit card induced, acquisitive culture has meant that tomorrow is dispensable, what matters is the here and now. As long as an endless cycle of consumption is not significantly altered, there seems little empathy for the daily wage labourer who is struggling to survive. Double digit inflation is just a statistic, not a overwhelming concern”. [12]

Finally Madhukar Sabnavis has this prediction for the middle class, “As India evolves, it appears the middle class, as we have known it in the second half of the 20th century, is disappearing. Across India, people are looking to better their lives materially and moving up the acquisition chain – demanding more, wanting better products and living richer lives. Indian cultural values, however, will not disappear as people move up. Desire and

values can and will coexist and it's important for sociologists to accept it and live with it rather than bemoan it".