

A STUDY OF/ON INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASS

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Colonialism (either in a settled or non-settled form) has been a common feature to the Global South. In the Indian context, a significant product of the colonial regime and its administrative policies was the middle class. An organic link can be established between colonialism and this class. However, in contemporary times, the discussion on the changing contours of the middle class has rejuvenated and has assumed significance in India as well as globally. This discussion has absorbed itself within the contemporary debates on globalization, global capitalism and social change. What are the significant factors behind these developments? Why has the middle class assumed enormous significance in contemporary times and how do we study it? In my research work, I have reviewed and analyzed the literature (debates and discussions) on the middle class, especially on the 'new' middle class; in doing so, I have assessed the range and depth of the debates taking place on this conceptual category and have located the theoretical approaches that have been used to study it.

In order to establish the context of its emergence and the contemporary nature of the Indian middle class, this paper briefly presents its intricate link with colonialism and with economic liberalization. While this debate is focused and concentrated on the discussions in India, it also outlines how international approaches have been used to study it. In doing so, it assesses the ways in which contemporary scholarship is expanding on the theories of class as designed by late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber. It then examines how the ideas of late twentieth century theorists such as Pierre

Bourdieu are integrated in understanding and comprehending the new middle class in its relationship with capitalism.

The context of the debates

The first commentary on the middle class in India came from the historian, Banke Bihari Misra (1960). He argued that the middle class did not develop prior to the advent of the colonial regime; with the introduction of an adequate economic system, new principles of government and administration, and a new educational policy, the colonial regime laid the foundations of the making of middle class in India. The sociologist, D.P. Mukerji (1958, 2002) also contends that the middle class was a product of the colonial economy and the colonial pattern of education since British rule changed the very basis of the Indian social economy (Mukerji, 2002).

However, Mukerji argues that this class did not play an integral role in bridging the gap among the populace; it created barriers among them. He argued that, a concrete result of the intimacy of British rule had led to the emergence of a 'spurious middle class' or the 'bhadraloks' who did not play any constructive role in the socio-economic revolution of the country, remained distant from the rest of its people, were divorced from the realities of social and economic life as well as endangered Indian culture (Mukerji, 2002: 23). He contends that its role had been to consolidate the colonial rule in the country in those times.

Contemporary literature on the middle class emerges in the background of the discussion on economic liberalization¹. What was the nature of this new economy and how was it related to the growth of the middle class? Economists and policy-makers deliberating on the liberalized economy have argued that the development of this new economy was related to the growth of the middle class. Inasmuch, scholars and commentators have referred this as the 'new' middle

¹ The Indian state initiated the economic liberalization programme since the mid-1980s; it came into form in 1991. Critiques have termed this as neoliberalism, a programme that dilutes the role of the state in order to enhance that of the market as the prime mover of society.

class. This class was considered to be centrally linked to this new economy as it was supposed to strengthen economic growth.

As a consequence, these economic reforms were organically related to the creation of a 'new' middle class. This middle class was thought to be the driver of this new economy through the adoption of new practices of consumption which in turn would allow for the expansion of the market; it was also suggested that this would decrease poverty. What evidence did the government give to indicate that the reforms were successful and that the new middle class was growing? The evidence was given by its data-collecting organization, National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) which gave quantitative evidence of the enormous expansion of this class. Its data indicates an enormous expansion of the middle class².

However, can size or income alone determine the nature of a particular class? By referring to various approaches on class and the middle class, sociologists and political scientists have intervened in this discussion and have critiqued these income and size-based definitions of class to suggest that qualitative attributes such as occupation, status or even ideology need to be taken into account while defining a class. Political scientist Achin Vanaik (2002) and the sociologist Satish Deshpande (2003) have been critical of income and size-based assessments of the middle class. They have analyzed the middle class from the Marxist perspective and have examined it with respect to ideology and power. As a consequence, while Vanaik contends that the middle class is a part of the ruling elite, Deshpande argues that the Indian middle class is hegemonic. Most importantly, they look at class through the lens of power and contend that the middle class derives power from ideological representations.

Using the Weberian approach, sociologist Andre Béteille (2002) attests that apart from income, the middle class is characterized by education and occupation. In this respect, he also attests that the middle class is engaged with non-manual jobs. Similarly, political scientist E. Sridharan's (2004) critique of

² The NCAER report states that the size of the middle class has more than doubled between 1995-96 and 2001-02 (NCAER, 2004:1); See National Council of Applied Economic Research. 2004. *The Great Indian Middle Class: Results from the NCAER Market Information Survey of Households*. New Delhi: NCAER.

income and size-based assessments of the middle class states that status and occupation are also important attributes of the middle class. He also suggests that occupation and status has a relationship with interests. Through empirical evidence, he suggests till the late 1990s, most of the individuals in the middle class (as defined by the NCAER) were in public sector and government employment. They were beneficiaries of state subsidies and it was not in their interest to support deregulation and consumerism. On the basis of this evidence and analysis, he questions the hypothesis that that the middle class in India would be pro-reform and thus would support it. In this respect, his critique becomes significant as it transcends the income and size-based definitions of the middle class. Furthermore, it also provides scope for integrating the intellectual debates on class as a consequence of which a discussion on the Marxist, Weberian and Bourdieuan approaches are ensued.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on capital has become seminal in contemporary studies on the Indian middle class. Several scholars have used Bourdieu in order to assess the patterns of lifestyle and sociabilities of this class. For instance, using Bourdieu's theoretical approach in the Indian context, political scientist Leela Fernandes (2007) argues that the acquisition of particular forms of social and cultural capital as well as credentials, cultural knowledge, skills and lifestyles allow middle class individuals to negotiate the new-economy segments of the labour market.

Therefore, these interventions (discussed above) indicate that in order to discuss the middle class, the intellectual debates and approaches to class and power need to be analyzed. Therefore, the next section will discuss the theoretical approaches that have been used in order to understand the Indian middle class.

Theoretical approaches to understand the middle class

Class has been a central concept for the social sciences as it has always been used in order to understand power. As a result, class has been theorized in manifold ways. However, there has been little theorization on the concept of middle class. Therefore, this paper assesses the ways in which contemporary scholarship is expanding on the theories of class as designed by late nineteenth and early twentieth century thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber as well as late twentieth century theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu in order to understand the nature of the middle class.

First of all, class has been a central concept for Marxism. Karl Marx (2010) has analyzed class in relation to ownership of the means of production. Marx's analysis of class is also an analysis of power as his theory of power is related to ownership of the means of production. As a consequence, the ruling class derives its power to rule. However, he did not analyze the concept of middle class in depth and termed it as the petty bourgeoisie. Another strand in Marxism looks at the relationship between class and ideology and thereby class, ideology and power. What is the relationship between ideology and power? In this respect, Antonio Gramsci has analyzed the role of ideology in the construction of class hegemony.

For Max Weber, class has sociological attributes through its relationship with status (Shortell, 2012). Weber argues that attributes such as status, honour and prestige attest power to classes. He further contends that class and status come together in the form of power groups or parties, which act as institutional platforms for exercising political power.

Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 1987, 2012) understands class as an ensemble of shared attributes. He goes beyond understanding class as a means of social status (as Weber has theorized) and argues that class formation is related to shared dispositions and practices (*habitus*) and capital (economic, social and cultural). Further, he argues that capital and *habitus* are displayed in the social space or the field. Class derives its power from capital and this power is manifested in the field. Furthermore, the struggle for attaining capital in this field leads to social divisions. These divisions are related to cultural capital and this in turn leads to distinctions or social exclusiveness. Therefore, Bourdieu

understands the organization of power through the practices which manifest through the process of class distinctions. Although he has never discussed the middle class in his works, his theorization on class has been used to understand the nature of the middle class by scholars all over the world.

Conclusion

Therefore, what is this middle class that we are talking about? The theoretical positions that have been discussed here do throw light on the multifaceted nature of this new middle class. However, following Marx and the later Marxists, can it be argued that the middle class does form a part of the ruling class and is hegemonic? Furthermore, it is also dependent on aspects of status such as occupation since one's occupation attests recognition and also determines whether one can belong to the middle class or not. Furthermore, scholars have also argued that its consumerist practices have enabled it to become distinctive in various ways. To a large extent, its colonial heritage accounts for its cultural supremacy as well as political dominance. However, in recent times, it has represented this power through the economy, the polity and through the sphere of culture.

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