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A Social-Cultural Perspective of the New Middle Classes in India: An Introduction

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Abstract

One of the most significant countenances of South Asian modernity is New Indian Middle Class and their Culture. This earlier Indian middle class was committed to both traditions and modernity in an anti-colonial sense and consistent in serving the high intellectual and bureaucratic positions in a state-governed welfare economy and secular nation-state. After 1990s liberalization, the NMC became the focus of attention due to its socio-economic mobility, socio-cultural and political influence and consumer potential. The purpose of the present article is to demonstrate that the emerging NMC is relatively an unexplored and comparatively new contextual urban reality and a group which is fluid and still emerging. Through an analysis of the NMC and its economic and socio-cultural distinctiveness, the article shows its emergence and ongoing transformation on the backdrop of the mid-1980s and the 1990s neo-liberalization. It is to be understood that the class or classes, under concern is/are assumed to be less aware of class in traditional theoretical sense, rather more aware of their images of perceivable/embodied 'culture(s)' or 'lifestyle(s)'. In this paper author try to review the history and the emerging issues within the broad subject in a way that will be discernible to the larger target audiences.

Keywords: Neoliberalization, New Middle class, professionals, middle class predicament and development.

I. Introduction

Madhukar Sabnavis asserts that the big Indian middle class is anywhere between 300 to 400 million and growing. By all reasonable estimates, the Indian middle class is bigger than the entire population of many nations. The middle class especially the new middle class which is categorized on the basis of income, social status, education level, occupation, and consumerism has significantly emerged as a powerful, influential and dominant class in urban India and largely determines India's economy, polity, culture, education and social relationships. There is no unanimity in understanding the NMC as it is contemporary, fluid and still emerging. The contours of the NMC are increasingly perceived as a class-in-practice, which is marked by its economic mobility, politics and the regular practices through which it reconstructs its affluent position. The recent urbanization, globalization, and postmodernism have significantly influenced the NMCs in transforming their culture, religious beliefs, and overall socio-economic and cultural dimensions. So, the present attempt is portraying an outline to render the history, growth and characteristics of new Indian middle class over the century.

The present paper is an attempt to understand the NMCs and their present sociological as well as religious reality in relation to socio-cultural implications. To provide clarity towards understanding the NMC various definitions, spiritual nature, upward mobility, and NMCs distinct characteristics have been assessed. Further, it also attempts to articulate its recent cultural and religious shifts. The present effort is a compendious review of the new Indian middle class.

I.1 The Emergence of the NMC: History in Perspective

Middle-class has been an important historical and sociological category in modern India. The middle class in India originated at the intersection of colonialism, democratic state and (capitalist) economic development. The impetus for this came from the British colonial rule. Over the two centuries of their rule, they introduced the modern industrial economy, secular education, and a new administrative framework. The British opened schools and colleges in different parts of India, particularly in the colonial cities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. By 1911, there were 186 colleges in different parts of India with 36,284 students. This number went up to 231 and 59,595 respectively by 1921, and by 1939, there were 385 colleges teaching 144,904

students. Apart from those employed in the administrative jobs of the British government, they included professionals like lawyers, doctors, teachers, and journalists etc. Within the framework of a mixed economy, the private sector also played a small but crucial role in the economy. In the organized private sector, 1.7 million workers were added between 1960 and 1970. Compared to the public sector, the growth in employment during the next decade was sluggish, and only half a million workers were added. Through its control over the bureaucratic system, the middle-class often hijacked the state apparatus and policies for its own benefits. The higher bureaucracy also derived its power from the model of economic development India adopted after independence, where, following the Soviet model of socialist economics, the Indian state was directly involved, albeit along with the private sector, in different sectors of the economy. Quite like its ancestor, the colonial middle class, this newly emerging class also had its contradictory dispositions. With the institutionalization of electoral democracy, economic development (industrial and rural) and, perhaps most importantly, affirmative action (reservations) policies for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the state-run educational institutions, jobs, and legislative bodies, broadened the social base of the middle class. These emerging segments of the middle class provided leadership and voice to the historically marginalized categories of Indian people. The third moment of the Indian middle class begins in the 1980s, with the decline of the Nehruvian state, social and political churning, the rise of the new social movements around questions of rights and identities, the rapidly changing global political economy and the economic reforms accelerating the speed of economic growth. This period also witnesses a paradigm shift in the discourses on the Indian middle class. The "new" middle-class begins to be increasingly defined and discussed in terms of its consumption behavior, constituting the social base of the market-led capitalist economy. However, the lens of consumption as the defining feature of the middle-class tends to reduce it to a flat income-group category. The category of middle-class is broader than the income-group category. Thus, the middle class also needs to be understood analytically, in terms of its role in relation to the state, market and the civil society; the role it continues to play in articulating socio-economic and political interests of diverse communities. While this conceptual elaboration restricts the numerical strength of the middle class, it expands the analytical frame to understand the interaction of the middle class with the state, market and civil society. Accordingly, we will first look at the middle-income groups and their relationship, position, and roles in the labor markets.

I.2 The NMC: Concept and Various Definitions

The NMCs are categorized in several different ways by different scholars and sociologists. Dahrendorf explaining this group notes that there is no word in modern language to describe this group, for they are a group that is no group, class that is no class and stratum that is no stratum. They are located somewhere between at least two other classes, one above, one below it. In other words, more generically, the middle class has attained a place between upper and lower classes. Today, the middle class is defined and expressed in various terms. Bibek Debroy in Indian Express defines states: The middle class' is an over-used expression and difficult to pin down since it is defined not just in terms of income. Using income, one way of defining a middle class is in terms of how much of income is left over for discretionary expenditure, after paying for food and shelter. For a few others, the middle class/es are those who have emerged because of such social mobility and Status Attainment.

I.3 The NMC Categories

According to B.B. Misra, the middle class has an occupational interest but bound together by a typical style of living and behavior pattern and stand for democratic values which they express in their social and political conduct. Moreover, the NMCs are classified into different groups or categories by different sociologists. Bhagavan Prasad divides NMC's into four groups using occupation: 1. Salaried persons, including administrative employee, postal and other institutional and government officials; 2. Independent professions like medical practitioners, lawyers, armed forces officers, teachers, artists, actors, journalists, and other consultants; 3. The non – salaried such as those involved in entrepreneurial or business activities like a private business, directors in business firms; 4. Retired persons and widows from wealthy families. Income, social status, consumerism, and lifestyle are a few other key criteria used to categorize the NMCs in India. Furthermore, the NMC

comprises of people from all spheres of social structure though Hindus percentage is on the higher side compared to other social groups. According to Sudeshna Maitra, Muslims and Christians form a more substantial segment of the lower class (18% and 11% respectively) than the middle and upper classes (15% and 4% of the middle class and 10% and 4% of the upper class). The recent economic developments are significant for Christians too as sizeable portion made substantial socio-economic progress during the last two-three decades.

II. The NMC Characteristics

The NMCs are recognized on the basis of their earning, majorly derived from the higher and middle castes. In contemporary globalization era, dual-earning couples have increased among the NMC. Besides, the increasing percentage of women and youth representation in private and IT-related sector is observed, who are increasingly global in their lifestyle and overall outlook. It is not surprising then that the NMCs are evolving themselves in modernity, socio-economic developments, and western/modern culture with a greater emphasis on education, consumerism, and new global work and business partnerships. Here are a few key characteristics of the NMCs:

II.1 Proficient in English

Today, India is perhaps the second most significant English speaking country after the USA. According to Gurcharan Das, English is avidly embraced by the newly emerging middle classes; this new popular idiom of the market is rushing down the socio-economic ladder. Indeed, English is considered a sure path for upward mobility and success. The NMC, mainly, the IT and related sector professionals, are increasingly seen to aspire international job opportunities and immigration to the developed countries and have developed a global worldview while adopting some technological advancement and advanced language skills and expertise.

II.2 Increasingly Consumerists Lifestyle and Identity

The NMC is increasingly identified especially as a Consuming Class. Indicus Analytics Research of Wall Street Journal states the consumption power of NMC's in India: By market size, the largest new middle-class markets are in the main cities, with Delhi in the first place, followed by Mumbai, Ahmadabad, Bangalore, Chennai, Kolkata, and Pune. There are also other attractive markets that are on the second rung and whose middle class spends between Rs.5, 000 crores, and Rs10, 000 crores a year. The NMCs are perhaps the most significant consumers of high-end goods such as cars, air conditioners, designer clothes, computers, mobiles, gadgets and much more. Today consumption has become their lifestyle and identity.

II.3 Technology Savvy: 'Knowledge Class'

The NMCs are also called as 'knowledge class' because of their specialized, advanced education and technological expertise and much more. Their dependence on technological gadgets like mobile phones, internet, laptops, iPod, tablets, etc. is exceptional and proves how this class is conversant, learned and exposed to new and modern technology. The Indian IT industry has become the new great white hope of the Indian middle class. IT entrepreneurs and professionals are considered new middle-class heroes. Das even proposes that India can leapfrog the industrial age while embracing information technology that can drive India's economic growth and transform the country.

II.4 Aspirational and Career Oriented

The NMCs perspective about overall life is increasing money centered. What Robert Wuthnow has written about American middle class categorically applies to the NMCs in India. He states: The distinguishing feature of the middle class is its obsession with work and money. This is not to say that the poor and wealthy are uninterested in either; many of the poor are gainfully employed and desperately concerned with making ends meet, and many of the wealthy have earned their riches and work hard at protecting their investments. But the middle class is fundamentally defined by its pursuit of careers, the preparation of its children to participate in the labor market, and the close connection between its material well-being and its

values. The NMCs, their upbringing, and enculturation have tuned them to the single-minded pursuit of material success and career growth for the acquisition of a comfortable lifestyle, more wealth and prestige.

II.5 More Globalized than Localized

The NMC undoubtedly favor economic liberalization and globalization and considers it to develop the economy and individual prosperity. The NMCs maintain professional lifestyle, are fast-paced, demand a modern and western standard of living and have a keen global perspective. Most of the NMCs are exposed to global culture, modern worldviews, international education, consumer products, and market economy, thus are increasingly globalized. Besides, they are well connected with the world through media, electronics, and technology. Incidentally, the NMCs are emerging as a transnational and a global phenomenon. Their immigration and aspiration to follow western and modern culture, fashion, and lifestyle are remarkable. However, in such cultural and socio-economic globalization, segments of the NMC seem to balance between global and local realities while keeping tightrope balance between new and old, modern and traditional.

II.6 The NMC Culture and Society

The NMC culture is an amalgamation and melting pot of cultures, mingling global and local cultural and political influences. Though the modern culture is evolving, below the surface it is flawed by caste, Indian traditions and culture especially in marriages, family relationships, work ethics, politics, and mainly government and public services. The NMCs social life is primarily determined by occupation and profession, economic status and lifestyle. However, urbanization, globalization and Western influences are fostering individualism, inter-caste marriages, live-in relationships, and much more. This has led to noticeable shifts in thinking patterns, family and spouse relationships, lifestyle and cultural norms. Cities much like the rest of India maintain a tight-rope balance between modernity and age-old Indian customs and traditions. However, urban spaces are gradually losing their old culture and tradition bit by bit. Moreover, although the NMCs are economically self-sufficient and enjoy a good life with a relatively stable income, health facilities, luxuries and so forth, they have deeper personal, family and work-related needs that usually go unnoticed. Stress levels are high in urban life, loneliness, competitiveness, relationship crisis, and failures, spiritual and emotional struggles, health issues, frustrations are some of the areas where the NMCs find themselves in need of love, support, and care. The increasing rates in divorce and suicide, family breakdown, youth-related issues, old age issues, child care, the high cost of living and medical and work-related stress are some of the crucial issues that majority of the NMCs face.

II.7 The NMCs Worldviews

The NMCs worldviews are different from other classes and are changing rapidly due to various factors. L.W. Bryce asserts that urbanization brings cultural change in the ways of thinking, lifestyle, and the point of view. The NMC has changed over the years though there are tension and some continuity of old traditions, beliefs, and lifestyle.

II.8 The NMCs Shift towards Secularism and Pragmatism

The NMCs who are predominantly English educated, often in private and even international schools and colleges, are profoundly impacted by the western, scientific, secular and enlightenment ideologies and worldviews. Consequently, this has had far-reaching influence on the NMCs political consciousness, religious beliefs, gender relationships, and other such perspectives. Moreover, segments of the NMC who are secular are primarily concerned with the matters of this world as they strive to bypass religion. Besides, it is a process which brings gradual changes in the thinking and practices of people who are seen among the NMCs who are more exposed to secular ideals and practices. In this respect, the NMC has undoubtedly become more secular although not all segments of it and not in equal measures. The NMCs who are influenced by western education and modernity are also exposed to liberal, secular and rational concepts, and morals.

According to Robert B. Talisse, Scott F. Aikin, the terms pragmatism or pragmatic is usually used to denote: ...a commitment to success in practical affairs, to getting things done. A pragmatist is hence bargainers, a negotiator, a doer, rather than a seeker of truth, a wanderer, or a thinker. Likewise, is the way of life for most of the NMCs and they tend to judge everything from that perspective. What appeals to intellect is only accepted as most of them tend to evaluate everything by relevance and applicability to their felt needs and aspirations.

II.9 The NMCs Spirituality and Religious Diversity

Urban India represents a multitude of spiritualities and Indian sects along with other religions, cults, and religious groups. It is evident that religion has a prominent place and plays a vital role in many cities in India. However, Hinduism is dominant. It is generally perceived that in cities people are not religious, however, the NMCs though not very religious in strict terms, they do adhere to their religious faith and spirituality. It has been observed that in recent times, the NMCs prefer to be referred to as spiritual rather than religious. In the quest to become spiritual they are in search of spirituality which will cater to their felt needs, provide solutions for their questions and miraculous provision to their aspirations. Religion has significant appeal and reverence amongst Indians. Family life and its socio-cultural and religious practices influences and shapes the child's development in cognizance of self-identity, god and society and continues to have an influential role in the family set up. Today, a large number of religious, cultural, philosophical and spiritual institutions and various ideologies are practiced by the NMCs along with their traditional Hindu faith and temple worship. The different sacred places like Sri Satya Sai Baba Ashram, the ISKCON temple, OSHO ashram, Yoga centers, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living and many such centers have also become famous destinations not only among the NMCs but for people from all over the world. Raj Gandhi argues on the popularity of religion in cities contending, it is futile to argue that religion is disappearing from Indian cities. These and many other neo-Hindu movements are reviving traditional Hinduism as well as creating a renewed interest among Hindus both in India and several other countries.

II.10 NMCs and Anubhava Phenomenon

In the contemporary scenario, almost all religions seem to be promoting experiential religious aspects. In the case of Hinduism, while presenting a profound belief of such anubhava-experiential spirituality among Hindus, Hofer states: Traditional Hindu religiosity emphasizes three sources of authority in discovering the religious truth: Srti or ancient writings; Yukti or rational thought; and the most important Anubhava or experience. The purpose of using srti and yukti is only to get to one's own anubhav and only then, Hindus believe, do they know the writings and teachings are true...An Indian seeker will commonly want confirmation through visions, miracles, answered prayers and healings. The NMCs being pragmatic and seekers of religious vitality and anubhava longs for some Divine anubhava in their life, career, business, family and so forth. To experience the reality and divine power of God even the NMCs perform various rituals, poojas, and bhakti, besides, following various gurus, pilgrimage, holy bath, and several such religious things. Thus, we may construe that the Hindu faith is being redefined and has not lost the influence among the NMCs. The popularity of neo-Hinduism and guru movement among the NMCs is noteworthy to indicate that Hindu faith endures flourishing although the methods of worship and teachings have undergone several changes over time. However, their reasoning and rationality, secular and pragmatic nature and openness are indicative.

III. Concluding Remarks

The size of the NMC has significant implications as they play a vital role in India's economic growth and sustainability. Indeed, they constitute a sizeable portion of the global workforce, particularly in IT and related industries that have enhanced their identity, influence and global-local exchange. In addition to the above, the NMC growth and their increasing consumption habits, economic mobility, substantial political attentiveness, national and international exchange, and socio-cultural influence have assigned them a significant place in the Indian and global society. Hence, it is crucial to understand the NMC on the backdrop of globalization and its ongoing transformation. The government and other entities need to take note of this growth

narrative and these changing dynamics. In the wake of contemporary liberalization and economic reforms, the NMC is highlighted as upwardly mobile, consumerist and well do class who live comfortable and even lavish life. Such widespread understanding about the NMC is true and certainly applies to upper tiers of the NMC. Although the pragmatic, consumerist, and self-centered identity of the NMC remain intact, their shift towards philanthropy, even though just beginning to grow, is a welcome change. Holistic development of the NMC would require a common vision, partnership, and a comprehensive approach while crossing religious and socio-cultural variances and boundaries. In the contemporary scenario, the NMC seems to be both, an active agent and yet at times apathetic to socio-political issues and challenges. In such a situation, it will be interesting to guide them and see in what manner they progress and participate in broader socio-political discourses and developments. The NMC are capable of educating and inspiring the society about civic and democratic rights and accountability while bringing reformation to the nation at large. The results will depend on whether this NMC merely emerges as an economically upwardly mobile, consumerist, pragmatic social construction or as a self-conscious and sensitive democratic force, articulating and representing the interests of society, including the masses. Today, the NMC in India is in a critical state of transition. The NMC family has received specific benefits through such shifts; however, it has enormously altered the traditional and functional role of women, family planning, while distressing the family dynamics and affecting children and elderly at home. Although a section of it is upwardly mobile and comfortable, others are not. Overall, the NMC face numerous issues and challenges. Moreover, when it comes to issues such as freedom of speech, individual rights, gender equality and privileges, right to education, women's equal representation in the workplace, corruption-free governance, philanthropy and much more, the NMC uphold and stand for such values. These values and attitudes need to be actively proliferated in the social fabric of society even if one's level of response may vary. The study suggests that the NMC is poised to become the crucial segment of the urban population in India. Globalization in India will continue to appeal to the consumerist, 'glocal and upwardly mobile' NMC. Its influence on the NMCs economic, cultural and religious domains will further challenge NMCs global movements, national/state political and moral pursuit and ideals, and social dynamics. It is not surprising then that the NMC has captivated the local as well as the global imaginations of sociologists, academics, policymakers and political analysts. Globalization has initiated a wide range of developments, and its overall transforming impact on the NMC's future religiosity and cultural aspects remain to be seen. However, it is certain that religion will strive to revitalize itself through modernizing and transforming itself while reinventing its historical roots and counteracting the globalizing forces. Consequently, with the growing middle class populace and its economic, educational and global connectedness, NMCs is embarking on political, cultural, and religious restructuring and economic progression. Globalization and the neo-liberalism policies while advancing the NMCs are increasingly shaping and influencing the Indian society. We need to understand the change dynamics which are propelling the social change in India. Globalization in India will continue to appeal consumerist, 'glocal and upwardly mobile' NMCs. Its influence on India's economy, culture, and religious domain will further challenge Indian societies/nations global movements, national/state political and moral pursuit and ideals, and social dynamics.

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