



## India's New Middle Class



Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform

*Leela Fernandes*

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ERA OF ECONOMIC REFORM

*Leela Fernandes*



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*For Ellie*

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# Introduction



The most striking feature of contemporary India is the rise of a confident new middle class . . . whether India can deliver the goods depends a great deal on it.

—*Das (2000)*

Harsh Gahlaut's three-month-old Hyundai Accent still smells new. But the 27-year-old is already thinking about his next car. . . . Gahlaut works up to fifteen hours a day—often seven days a week—to earn his living. It is just that he is uninhibited when it comes to spending his earnings—current or future. Consumers like Gahlaut may have existed before too but only as exceptions. Today he is [one of] a new breed of consumers sprouting across cities and among income classes.

—*Goyal (2003)*

A cadre of ambitious government officials, pricey consultants, and local high technology entrepreneurs is trying to accomplish something almost as ambitious—transforming this sleepy farm state capital into the “technology hub of northern India.” . . . As tens of thousands of service jobs continue to flow to India from the United States and Europe, small cities like Chandigarh offer even lower labor costs than India's “first tier” technology hubs like Hyderabad, Bombay, and Gurgaon, outside New Delhi.

—*Rohde (2003)*

In recent years, rapid socioeconomic changes in cities and small towns in India have sparked the local, national, and transnational imaginations of writers and political analysts. Small towns are increasingly marked by mushrooming institutes for computer training, Internet booths, and satellite dishes—symbols of India’s high-tech globalizing economy. Comfortable middle class housing colonies have sprouted up across the country and new models of cars have displaced the Ambassador, which was once an iconic signifier of middle class status. India’s larger metropolises like Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) and Bangalore now aggressively seek the status of global cities, and their urban middle classes assertively claim a national visible role as the agents of globalization in India.

This new middle class has been represented in film, theater, and the media both by traditional “Bollywood” films and by new genres of films such as Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding*, which brought the image of India’s upwardly mobile middle class to global audiences. Meanwhile, transnational views of India’s new economy have also begun to turn from celebrations of a burgeoning 250-million-strong middle class consumer market to anxieties over an educated workforce that now threatens the U.S. and European middle classes through the outsourcing of service-sector jobs.

Such changing perceptions point to the growing significance of the urban Indian middle class in local, national, and transnational imaginations of globalization in the twenty-first century. The rise of this new middle class identity has begun to shape contemporary politics in India in distinctive ways. Explaining the political dynamics of transnational processes such as globalization and answering questions about how groups resist or consent to policies of economic reforms require an analytical lens that can address the political emergence of groups such as the new middle class. A study of the rise of the new Indian middle class provides us with such a lens, one that demonstrates the ways in which an analysis of the processes, practices, and identities involved in the politics of group formation provides a deeper understanding of the sources of democratic contestation both over policies of economic reforms and over the broader trajectories of globalization such policies embody.

Consider the links between the implementation of economic re-

forms and the rise of a new middle class in contemporary India. Policies of economic liberalization initiated since the 1990s have been accompanied by an array of visual images and public discourses that have centered on a shifting role of the middle class and their attitudes, lifestyles, and consumption practices. For example, popular stories, advertising images, and news reports that detail the spread of consumer items such as cell phones, rising wage levels for the managerial staff of multinational companies, and expanding consumer choice for goods such as cars, washing machines, and color televisions have produced an image of the rise of an emerging middle class culture in India. These representations have identified the rise of this new middle class with the success of economic reform.

The growing visibility of this new Indian middle class embodies the emergence of a wider national political culture, one that has shifted from older ideologies of a state-managed economy to a middle class-based culture of consumption. While in the early years of independence,<sup>1</sup> large dams and mass-based factories were the national symbols of progress and development, cell phones, washing machines, and color televisions—goods that were not easily available during earlier decades of state-controlled markets—now seem to serve as the symbols of the liberalizing Indian nation. While earlier state socialist ideologies tended to depict workers or rural villagers as the archetypal objects of development,<sup>2</sup> such ideologies now compete with mainstream national political discourses that increasingly portray urban middle class consumers as the representative citizens of liberalizing India.

Preliminary evidence of the public impact of such shifts can be seen in public debates on the social and political implications of the rise of this new Indian middle class. Proponents of economic liberalization portray the middle class as a group that is fundamentally tied to the success of economic reforms and assert that the middle class is a sizeable market—one of India's major selling points in attracting foreign investment. Furthermore, supporters of reform have adopted consumer-based understandings of the middle class and have argued that the middle class has benefited from economic reforms through the availability of new commodities and increasing opportunities for consumer choice.

Critics of liberalization, on the other hand, often point to the negative social and cultural effects of consumerism and have condemned the middle class for its vulnerability to the excesses of consumerism. A classic example of such a reaction is the public debate sparked by the publication of Pavan Varma's *The Great Indian Middle Class* (1998).<sup>3</sup> The book launched a sharp attack on the declining social responsibility of the Indian middle class and its gradual abdication of a broader ethical and moral responsibility to the poor and to the nation as a whole. Varma argued that in the early years of Indian independence,

Material pursuits were thus subsumed in a larger framework that did not give them the aggressive primacy that they have acquired today. There was less of the feeling that one must have it all in the shortest time possible. Even the more well-to-do families felt that to flaunt their assets was in bad taste. Indeed there was a sense of slight disdain for those who lived only at the level of their material acquisitions. There were other countervailing concepts such as status and respect which had a higher priority in the scale of social values. Status, and the respect it earned, was not so directly linked to what one owned; it still had more to do with what one did or what one had achieved. Keeping up with the Joneses was somehow a less compulsive pursuit than keeping up with the image of refinement associated with a restraint on materialistic exhibitionism in a poor country—an ideal directly imbibed from Gandhi, Nehru and the freedom movement. (40)

Aside from his idealized image of earlier historical periods, Varma's commentary echoes a wider form of public moralism that has focused on the negative effects of middle class consumerism and what Rajni Kothari has termed a "growing amnesia" (1993) toward poverty. While such public critics of liberalization have tended to focus on middle class consumerism, proponents of liberalization have projected this new middle class as an idealized standard for an Indian nation that is finally competing in a global economy. Both views, while located on oppositional poles of the ideological spec-

trum, converge in their conception of the urban middle class as a self-evident force of consumption and as the prime recipients of the benefits of liberalization.

In contrast to the public visibility of the urban middle class, academic scholarship has been marked by a relative lack of sustained research on this social segment.<sup>4</sup> Existing academic research that has addressed the middle class in relation to economic liberalization has largely tended to echo the two variants of public discourses that I have outlined above. On the one hand, existing analyses have either focused on estimating the size of the middle class or have pointed to the growth of such intermediate classes as a potential base of support for liberalization.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, culturally oriented research has tended to analyze the middle class through the lens of consumption, an approach that has rested on an underlying conception of the middle class as a consumerist class.<sup>6</sup>

I analyze the political processes that result in such associations between the middle class, consumption, and a pro-liberalization orientation and then move beyond these connections and examine the internal differentiations and political practices of this new middle class. I specifically argue that an analysis of the rise of the new Indian middle class deepens our understanding of the political dynamics of economic reform in contemporary India.

Such an analysis specifically entails a shift away from the assumption that the middle class is a self-evident beneficiary or proponent of economic liberalization. Scholars writing about economic reforms and globalization have for the most part tended to assume that the middle class benefits uniformly from policies of economic liberalization. This assumption has tended to ignore important internal differentiations within the middle class.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Satish Deshpande's (2003) assertion that "if there is one class for whom the benefits of globalization seem to clearly outweigh the costs, it is the middle class, particularly its upper (managerial-professional) segment" (150) rests on a slippage between a particular segment of the urban (metropolitan) middle class and the middle class in general, which is a much wider group that includes the rural middle class and urban middle class in small towns.<sup>8</sup>

The middle class is differentiated in terms of its economic standing

in ways that make generalizations about the effects of liberalization at best premature without systematic research. For instance, the restructuring and privatization of public-sector units yield short-term costs to some segments of these middle class workforces (Sridharan 1999, 124–25)<sup>9</sup> and we cannot assume that all of these segments will transition smoothly to new-economy jobs. Furthermore, various internal social hierarchies such as caste, region, religion, and language shape the middle class. The emerging liberalizing or “new” middle class is not identical with a generalized sociological description of the middle class.

My central argument is that the rise of the new Indian middle class represents the political construction of a social group that operates as a proponent of economic liberalization.<sup>10</sup> This middle class is not “new” in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words, its “newness” does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class.<sup>11</sup> Rather, its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. At a structural level, this group largely encompasses English-speaking urban white-collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunities (particularly in private-sector employment).<sup>12</sup> However, the heart of the construction of this social group rests on the assumption that other segments of the middle class and upwardly mobile working class can potentially join it. For example, the privileged lifestyles and patterns of consumption depicted in media images are associated with individuals who can afford English-based higher education and credentials such as MBAs. Youth in the lower middle classes in small towns and rural areas may attempt to adopt credentialing strategies by refining their public speaking skills or accumulating marketing diplomas through unaccredited institutes. Individuals in the middle or working classes also may use the purchase of particular kinds of commodities and brands as symbolic strategies of upward mobility.

This potential access to membership makes the boundaries of this interest group both fluid and political in nature. As I noted earlier, estimates of the size and nature of the Indian middle class vary

greatly.<sup>13</sup> In the face of such diversity, the identity of the new Indian middle class provides a kind of normative standard to which this larger group can aspire.<sup>14</sup> The boundaries of this emerging group are fluid precisely because they hold the promise of entry for other social segments.<sup>15</sup>

The underlying claim is that individuals from varying social segments can acquire the kinds of capital (such as education, credentials, skills, and cultural resources) that can provide them with access to membership in this distinctive middle class. The result, as I will argue, is that the emerging politics of the new middle class have broader national political and material implications both for the Indian middle class and for more marginalized socioeconomic groups.

My argument is not that the effect of this rising social group is all encompassing, or that its political ascendancy is predetermined. For instance, the rise of such aspirations can have diverging political implications. On the one hand, the belief in the promise of access to socioeconomic mobility and future benefits can lead to support for reforms. For example, segments of the middle class employed in both the private and public sectors have been faced with retrenchment, job insecurity, and increased workloads. However, this is not necessarily transformed into resistance to economic restructuring if individuals believe they can still benefit from a globalizing economy through future job prospects or through the consumption of new commodities.

On the other hand, discrepancies between lived realities of the middle class or upwardly mobile social groups and the idealized representations of the new middle class can lead to frustration and opposition to reforms. Moreover, as I will argue in later chapters, the rise of this group can also exacerbate existing conflict between the new middle class and subordinated social groups. Thus, my concern is not just with the rise of this social group but also with the fissures between hegemonic representations of new middle class identity and the contradictory socioeconomic realities of those who both constitute and aspire to this group. As I demonstrate, it is precisely such fissures that produce the anxieties, responses, and practices that constitute the daily substance of contemporary democratic politics.

## Elites and the Politics of Economic Reform

The argument that I will make builds on and intervenes in a long-standing debate in political science about the relationship between the consolidation of economic reforms and political processes of democratization.<sup>16</sup> Political scientists intervening in these debates have demonstrated that economic reforms can be undertaken in the context of political democracies and have challenged earlier assumptions that political democratization necessarily produces opposition to reform.<sup>17</sup> As Przeworski (1996) and Stokes (1996a) have argued, while economic reforms create at minimum a transitional economic decline for some segments of the population, this decline does not necessarily lead to political opposition to the reform in democratizing societies. The political responses that stem from such a decline depend on the ways in which it is interpreted by various segments of the population. For instance, Przeworski (1996) notes that in the case of Poland, while economic conditions declined, the government was able to use the legacy of communism as an effective explanation for this decline. This process of interpretation, which Przeworski terms a form of “intertemporal interpretation,” is a critical factor in shaping public opinion and political responses to the policies of economic reform. In other words, an anticipation of future benefits mediates the immediacy of political opposition to the economic disruptions or deterioration produced by reforms.

I argue that it is this sense of temporality that is at play in India, in the way in which the construction of the new middle class is mediating public responses to economic reforms. Idealized images of middle class consumption signify such future benefits, to which upwardly mobile segments of the population can aspire. This analysis builds on existing research that has demonstrated the importance of the role of elites in pushing forward reform processes and in mediating the relationship between state policies and mass political responses (Chhibber and Eldersveld 2000, 354).<sup>18</sup> The rise of the new Indian middle class represents an emerging political elite that is shaping responses to economic reform.

An understanding of such processes, requires a departure from two central conceptual assumptions that underlie existing studies of

elites, public opinion, and the politics of economic reform. First, existing studies have tended to focus primarily on political elites, whether at the national or local levels<sup>19</sup>—an approach that has led to a neglect of the impact of the new middle class. Second, studies that have attempted to assess mass public responses to economic reform have either focused mainly on formal voting behavior (that is, how attitudes to reform shape electoral politics) or have sought to measure public opinion through survey research data on attitudes to reform (Chhibber and Eldersveld 2000; Przeworski 1996; Stokes 1996a). My approach calls for both a shift from an analysis of political to socio-economic elites<sup>20</sup> and, more significantly, for an examination of the political processes involved in the creation of new groups and identities that mediate consent to reform.<sup>21</sup>

What traditional studies of economic transitions often miss is that public responses to reforms may be culturally coded in ways that do not correspond to more formal kinds of knowledge or opinions either about specific policies or about the question of economic reforms in general. For instance, existing research findings suggest that (1) knowledge about economic reforms in India is relatively low, and (2) despite evidence of negative views on its effects, the question of economic reforms has not been a major mass electoral issue.<sup>22</sup> However, conflict and consent over policies of economic reform do not play out only in the formal domain of electoral politics. Moreover, perceptions of reforms are often shaped by local cultural and social meanings and practices that may fall outside survey codings of formal forms of knowledge.<sup>23</sup> For instance, as I will argue, consent and conflict over reforms often unfold through a range of middle class contestations over issues such as the restructuring of urban space, competing definitions of national culture, and identity-based conflicts.

An understanding of these forms of politics of the rising new middle class requires an in-depth interpretative approach. In other words, if we are serious about understanding the ways in which “intertemporal interpretation” shapes the political dynamics of reforms, we must understand the politics of this group in terms of a project of interpretation rather than one of pure measurement.<sup>24</sup> As we will see, the emergence of a middle class consumer identity has significant

political implications not because the middle class is a consumerist class or is following the teleological pattern of modernization of advanced industrialized countries, but because emerging consumption practices represent an important set of everyday signs and symbols through which people make sense of the more abstract term “economic reforms.”<sup>25</sup>

The most visible cultural coding of economic reforms is the emergence of consumption patterns and lifestyles associated with newly available commodities. Contestation over shifts in economic policy therefore often unfolds in the space of public culture and involves conflicts over cultural globalization (such as the threat of Westernization). Certain strands of cultural nationalism often represent negotiations over changes associated with shifts in economic policy. For example, I will demonstrate that processes of economic restructuring also unfold through the spatial reorganization of neighborhoods within cities and small towns. In this reorganization, the middle class develops new suburban aesthetic identities and lifestyles that seek to displace visual signs of poverty from public spaces. Such middle class practices provoke conflicts with the urban poor over the control of public space. For example, spatial practices produce conflicts over whether street vendors should be able to sell their wares in middle class neighborhoods in a city like Mumbai. While on the surface this might appear to simply represent a local political issue, I demonstrate that it is fundamentally linked to the rise of an assertive new middle class identity in the context of liberalization. Furthermore, street vendors represent a burgeoning working class service sector that has been absorbing workers from manufacturing sectors such as the textile industry that have experienced economic decline in the face of global competition. Such local conflicts between street vendors and middle class civic practices then are structurally, culturally, and politically linked to broader processes of economic restructuring.

Conflicts like these, which constitute the substance of daily democratic politics, usually fall under the radar of studies whose analyses of the political dynamics of reforms are based on narrower definitions of democratic politics or associational life. Chhibber and Eldersveld (2000), for instance, argue that “India, despite its democratic lineage, has not developed strong independent interest groups. Few

Indians belong to associations” (356). Such an assumption only holds up if associational life is strictly defined in terms of formal organizations—a definition that excludes an array of activities, practices, and discourses in civil society. Everyday examples of associational activity are also often overlooked because they do not appear as self-evident or explicit cases of political responses to economic *politics*.<sup>26</sup> For example, the rise of a new middle class identity begins to take the form of organized associational activity as segments of this social group form civic and neighborhood organizations in order to reclaim public space and consolidate a style of living that can adequately embody its self-image as the primary agent of the globalizing city and nation.

Such examples demonstrate that an understanding of the rise of this social group necessitates a move away from a focus that is restricted to formal electoral politics. How then do we begin to conceptualize the politics of this emerging group? This project requires an adaptation of James Scott’s (1985) reconceptualization of social movements and his call for a move away from the grand narratives of organized large-scale movements and revolutions to a focus on the everyday, informal forms of politics; or, as he puts it, “a social movement with no formal organization, no formal leaders, no manifestos, no dues, no name, and no banner” (35). However, in contrast to the peasant protests that Scott analyzes, the everyday politics of such “elite revolts” (Corbridge and Harriss 2000) unfold in distinctive ways. For instance, while Scott argues that for everyday peasant resistance, “By virtue of their institutional invisibility, activities on anything less than a massive scale are, if they are noticed at all, rarely accorded any social significance” (1985, 35), the politics of the new middle class are somewhat more contradictory. The new middle class is marked by its social and cultural visibility, yet its political role is often invisible. Meanwhile, its claims tend to be coded in terms of representative citizenship yet in practice are often defined by exclusionary social and political boundaries. Consider the example of the politics of urban space that I have outlined above. In such cases, emerging middle class civic organizations make political claims on public space by invoking discourses of citizens’ rights and public interest. In the process, middle class practices transform citizenship

into a category that is marked by exclusions based on the social markers (such as caste and class) that delineate the identities of the urban poor. The result is that the rise of this social group has broader implications for our understanding of the links between economic policies and processes of democratization.

## The New Middle Class in Comparative Perspective

The rise of the new middle class is not a political process that is distinctive to India. The significance of the new middle class in the context of economic globalization<sup>27</sup> can be demonstrated in comparative contexts in the cases of other newly industrializing countries. Various case studies in Asia, Latin America, and Africa have begun to examine the rise of the new middle class in those areas (Pinches 1999; Robison and Goodman 1996).<sup>28</sup> Such studies have drawn on two dominant approaches in their conceptualization of the new middle class. On the one hand, a central trend in such studies is the adoption of a consumption-based definition of the new middle class (Beng-Huat 2000). On the other hand, the new middle class is defined through occupational-based definitions corresponding to white-collar, professional–managerial workers (Embong 2002; Pinches 1999). Michael Pinches (1999), for example, has identified the growth of the new middle class in terms of “highly educated salaried professionals, technical specialists, managers and administrators who assume powerful positions in the running of large corporations and state agencies” (25). It is this occupational grouping, Pinches argues, that is fundamentally linked to the rise of consumer cultures in cross-national contexts.

While both elements of these approaches are important, a limitation in these conceptualizations is the association of the new middle class both with the upper echelons of white-collar work and with consumerist behavior. A comparative perspective demonstrates that the new middle class has a much greater degree of differentiation both within and across various national contexts. For instance, the expansion of white-collar work is not limited to the upper tiers of the professional–managerial workforce but also includes a much broader set of white-collar jobs (for example, secretarial–administrative jobs and wide range of occupations within the service sector).