

The 'Emerging' Middle Class: Role in the 2014 General Elections

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and the live and throbbing rogue state that actively participates in the project of annihilating *by* caste across lines of party and ideology – caste is the unifying ideology and the fundamental logic of governance.

The road that we leave behind is soaked in the blood of victims and built through generations of servitude, and the road that lies ahead is blocked by caste. This takes me to the heart of

Ambedkar's assertion that the only road to freedom, life and indeed humanity is the annihilation of caste – for us all, because violence and the habit of impunity dehumanises the dominant – not only the perpetrators and their cohorts but also the nonchalant bystanders and the distant, studiously indifferent viewers – and annihilates entire classes of vulnerable peoples in full public view with impunity.

## The 'Emerging' Middle Class Role in the 2014 General Elections

RAVINDER KAUR

This article is a look at the subtext of the transition from the politics represented by the United Progressive Alliance government to that represented by the Bharatiya Janata Party. On another level, an ethnographic reading of the voters' mood before the polls in parts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showed calm confidence and clarity in looking at the choices before them; few of them were emotional about the step they were about to take. Narendra Modi's catchy slogans were on the lips of many but this was no emotional wave; it was more like contracting a new service provider to see whether he would deliver.

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Beyond the immediate nitty-gritty of the Bharatiya Janata Party-National Democratic Alliance's (BJP-NDA) spectacular win in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, it is important to understand the socio-economic changes that help explain this outcome and what it means for the future. Was it simply the acute mismanagement of the economy by the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) II or the numerous scams that blighted it that turned the tide in favour of Narendra Modi's BJP? Or was it the general sense of dissatisfaction beginning with the mass protests (not yet movements) against corruption or gender crime? Or was it, as some have termed it, the modern, imaginative and thorough "marketing" of Modi that was successful in seducing the middle-class voter? More importantly, did Modi's promises to revive the economy, build infrastructure, create jobs, root out corruption, i.e., deliver a reversal of jobless growth, resonate with large sections of the population?

Before I address the subtext of the transition from the politics represented by the UPA to those represented by the BJP, I present an ethnographic reading of the voters' mood based on a trip I undertook in a small swathe of Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh (UP) in early May. Proceeding from Patna, taking in a rally by Modi and Paswan, another one by Nitish Kumar and a short meeting with Laloo Prasad

### NOTES

- 1 I am reluctant to call her Nirbhaya, because that was the name of a kerosene stove that kept bursting whimsically and killing newly married middle class women in the late 1970s and early 1980s – the Nirbhaya deaths of another kind and time.
- 2 B R Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 21: 18, <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/>, accessed on 16 June 2014.
- 3 B R Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 22: 25, <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/>, accessed on 16 June 2014.
- 4 B R Ambedkar, *The Annihilation of Caste*, 23: 4, <http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/ambedkar/web/>, accessed on 16 June 2014.

Yadav, and then continuing on to Varanasi and Allahabad, sitting in at rallies addressed by Mulayam Singh Yadav and his son Akhilesh Yadav, stopping in homes in villages, small towns, at shops and dhabas (highway eateries) along the way, I formed a sense of how people of diverse socio-economic, caste and religious backgrounds were thinking about the elections. One of the things that unequivocally stood out was the pervasive "name recognition" that Modi had managed to achieve. In these areas, dominated by Yadavs, Muslims, Jatavs, Thakurs, brahmins, Bhumihars and other caste identities, people may not have known the various parties or even party symbols but they knew that one name – Modi. It was interesting, though, that many older or illiterate persons knew only the symbols and had no clue of party names and knowledge of the *kamal* (lotus, the BJP's symbol) was especially pervasive.

### Knowing Modi

They had heard of him; they had heard of the success of development in Gujarat (it is interesting to see how impressions are formed – our drivers on the trip including a Muslim from Varanasi stated that they had driven in Gujarat and that the roads were much better and that they did not have to pay *ghoos* (bribe) for road tax; others we met had gone to Gujarat as migrant workers and had come back with money in hand and they wanted him to work his magic in their state too. They wanted change – of that they were very sure – and at this point of time, the possibility of change was represented only by someone called Narendra Modi. As one man said, "*ab ki baar rotipalatni hai*" (we have to flip the chapati this time).

The other big takeaway from these travels was the conspicuously missing figure of the Congress Party. Here, where regional parties such as Mulayam's Samajwadi Party (SP), Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Nitish's Janata Dal (United) (JD-U), and Laloo's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) have dominated the scene, together with a BJP presence alongside, the Congress had been losing ground steadily. Yet, for a national party, its lack of presence was palpably noticeable. Not a single individual mentioned the Congress being anywhere in the reckoning and it seemed almost natural. Apart from one village and the shop fronts of a small town, one did not see the Congress symbol of the hand anywhere. Defeat for the Congress was in the air even before the election began and its lacklustre campaign reflected that the party too had accepted it.

### Seeking a New 'Service Provider'

Economic circumstances seemed to have improved in the areas of Bihar and UP we travelled in. *Pakka* houses were being built next to the original *kachcha* ones. Motorcycles, rather than bicycles (the shift is a crucial indicator of changing aspirations) stood in or near most homes, testifying to a measure of economic improvement. The majority of the people were well-clothed apart from one settlement of extremely backward castes (EBCs) in Bihar where children ran naked, either due to the heat or lack of clothing. Most people were confident and talked easily about various topics; there was especially a confidence about one's power and right to vote governments in and out. Modi too was to be tested; if he did not perform he too would be out. Thus despite the feeling that people had got sucked in by the Gujarat model propaganda, the voter citizen was nuanced in why she or he was willing to give him her vote this time. They claimed that change was needed and that they would wait and see how he performed "*kuch kar ke dikhayenge ya nahin*" (will he do something) and if, down the line, they were not happy with his performance then, they would try out the next party or person the next time.

At one level, it was the calm confidence and the immense clarity with which people were looking at the choices before them; few of them were emotional about the step they were about to take. Yes, Modi's catchy slogans were on the lips of many, even schoolchildren, "*Is baar, Modi Sarkar*" "*Har har Modi, ghar ghar Modi*"; but this was no emotional wave; it was more like contracting a new service provider to see whether he would deliver. Were the appearance of enthusiasm something to go by, then at a Arvind Kejriwal (chief of the Aam Aadmi Party-AAP) rally outside Varanasi, we saw the equal enthusiasm with which schoolchildren ran around having a field day with *jhadus* (broom, AAP's symbol); it was merriment on a hot summer day, reminding me of quidditch games from the Harry Potter novels.

But going back to the voters, clarity was reflected in people's understanding of the difference between an election for Parliament and choosing a government at the centre and the legislative assembly elections or choosing who would rule the state. In Bihar, Nitish had clearly established a sound track record of developmental improvements, the effects of which had percolated down to the local level. There was no bad mouthing of Nitish; yet people were very clear that they were not going to vote for him in the general election. Most said they would bring him back in the assembly elections. It seemed that the Muslims preferred to go back to a corrupt out-on-bail Laloo over voting for a Nitish whose government had been in partnership with the BJP. Hindus of several castes were upset with Nitish for having detached himself from the BJP.

Despite this clear understanding of the distinction between national and state level elections, it was not as if only this logic prevailed. In Bhadohi in UP, where the candidate was a brahmin woman, Seema Mishra, the Muslims were voting for her because she was the SP candidate while most Hindus made it clear that had the candidate not been this particular one they would rather have voted for Modi. The woman's father had been a three time MLA and was known to be very responsive to his constituency. People argued that it was she and her family

who would be there for them in time of need. Rationality demanded that they support a candidate whose family they had had experience with over their desire to vote for Modi. And, of course, it goes without saying that in this landscape of predominantly caste-based voting, the brahmins would find a brahmin candidate acceptable over and above a "Hindu" candidate of the Hindu party, the BJP. The Modi wave, however, triumphed, and the candidate lost.

### Not the Same Old

Yes, Hindu consolidation did take place even among some dalits and Other Backward Classes (OBCs) (the dalits of Gautam Budh Nagar near Greater Noida were overwhelmingly favouring Modi and the BJP with a transparently expressed support for a "Hindu" party – an identity that would likely afford higher social status to upwardly mobile groups) but as we saw from the Bhadohi election, the Hindu vote too remains fragmented by caste, class and region. The election results show that the Muslim vote in these areas did consolidate against the BJP; yet, the arguments here too were interesting and not bland ones of a unilateral fear of Modi.

Despite a BJP leader having declared that all those who did not vote for Modi would be sent to Pakistan and an atmosphere of fear having been generated, a Muslim family I talked to in Saidabad outside Allahabad gave a different perspective. The man had a barber's shop while the women of the family were engaged in rolling beedis at home and a son was away working in Malaysia. The large joint family was eager to talk politics and the man said "Why should we be afraid of Modi? He cannot throw us out of this country – we are as much citizens here." Without being asked, he continued "we will try him out, why not?" Although his views might simply have been bravado and a way to deflect the question about who he and his family would vote for, the important point was that he was completely aware of the details of the discourse around "Muslims and Modi" during these elections.

The women claimed that everyone these days was educated and everyone would go out to vote. In another Hindu-Muslim

village about 60 km from Allahabad, as I was chatting with Muslim men and women, a group of young boys listened avidly to our conversation. It turned out that they too were extremely knowledgeable of the politics of this election; on being asked how, they said they read newspapers, watched television and listened to elders talking politics. They also felt Modi would be the winner. Most people would hesitantly remark, not wanting to give away their own preference, that there was a Modi *hawa* (wave). A taxi driver in Delhi was far more explicit “*Modi ko PM banana hai*” (we must make Modi the PM) which made me recall that months back in my local market I had noticed a booth being set up distributing materials which said “Modi for PM” – the campaign machinery thus extending down to the micro-level. A Muslim from Varanasi told me that he would not vote for Modi and that Muslims would not vote for Modi as he represented a communal party and was tainted by the Gujarat riots. But at the same time he added that if anyone could transform Varanasi from the slum and gutter it had become, it was Modi. Thus there was trepidation in the Muslim camp and yet at the same time the hope for economic betterment and opportunities.

### Women Too

In a small town in Ara, Bihar, as I chatted with women tending to their shops selling home-made *mithais* (sweets), a woman informed me that she had been deserted by her husband and that he had remarried. Reconciled to her fate, she had returned to her parental home and was given a room to live in and earned her own living. She said that she had two daughters who were both now married. She belonged to the Madheshi caste (honey collectors) and said that she had made her own decision in the polls (voting had already taken place in this location). A similar neighbouring shop had a family consisting of a man, his wife and a young daughter at work. The daughter, speaking for the mother indicated that her parents might have voted differently. Talking with many families, it was apparent that while the women may listen to the men, they were no longer

following a patriarchal diktat; voting this time was the outcome of discussion in the family. But what was most heartening in this and many other locations was seeing many, many bright-eyed girls in school uniforms. A Muslim woman in village Kharchana near Allahabad claimed that daughters of the village did not vote and that they would vote in their in-law's villages. Thus both social adulthood and political citizenship, it seemed, came only after marriage for some women.

Another noticeable change alongside was that the dais at many a political rally now had women seated among the male politicians. While at one rally, the candidate was the woman herself, in many others they held other political positions and spoke in support of the candidate, pointing to the greater participation of women in active politics, signalling a “coming out of purdah” in these parts.

Purdah or the face veil itself was surprisingly far less visible in these parts of Bihar and eastern UP; women mixed freely in shops, roads and villages even though the men still grabbed the public speaking role. In a shop near Hajipur outside Patna (Ram Vilas Paswan's constituency), I chatted with two Hindu women who were running a beauty parlour plus a tailoring shop. Despite being entrepreneurs and earners the two sisters-in-law (their husbands being brothers) were shy and said that their husbands who were away working in Mumbai would guide them as to who to vote for. But they too had heard of this man, Modi. Muslim women at Mulayam's rally strongly voiced their opinions on the forthcoming elections; feeling constrained about having to vote for a non-performing Mulayam, they demanded jobs for their daughters.

### Emerging Middle Class

The parts we travelled in – winding our way from Patna to Varanasi, passing through Buxar and Ara with a side trip to Allahabad – and the people we stopped to talk to could be sociologically characterised as being dominated by what I will call the “emerging middle class”, one among several layers of the middle class. Rahul Gandhi too thought he was targeting this particular class

when he characterised them as the NRMBs – Not Rich, Not Middle Class, Not Below the Poverty Line” – but it seems he got the sociology of it all wrong. This class, indeed, is one of India's “middle classes” and perhaps the hungriest for change and a secure future. Being a striving class, holding on dearly to its newly gained status of being not-poor and preventing a slide back down into the ignominious BPL (below poverty line) category, explains many of its choices and strategies. Incidentally, the size of the emerging (or new) middle class has been growing since Rajiv Gandhi's time in the 1980s, swelling further in the last 15 years.

This class is providing, demographically speaking, one-third to nearly half of India's current population. And a very substantial proportion, about 30%, of the voting age population is below 30 years of age. Having newly gained some sort of education, the hope for a non-rural, non-agricultural future, with a desire for jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities – whether in the private or the public sector – is key to this demographic. Taking loans from parents or from other sources, its youngsters are willing to set up small enterprises, hoping to find success and economic stability. This is also a generation that believes in flaunting material possessions such as decent clothes, motorbikes and reasonably up-market cell phones. Its young men and women everywhere were carefully groomed, displaying an assertion of choice and identity.

### Claim to Being Middle Class

The key character of this class is that it is middle class by “self-ascription” – they are middle class because they imagine a middle class life and identity for themselves. They read Modi's message of development – *achhe din aane waale hain* (good days are going to follow) – as opening the door to writing their own secure middle class future. In place after place, one heard that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) wages are too low for the men who can find daily jobs that earn them much more; this partly explains the higher participation rates of



women in the programme. Additionally, those who got the work were expected to put in few hours if any at all; the number of people on fake muster rolls has risen steadily in the later phases of the programme. The MGNREGA work is welcome as additional income but not at the cost of real incomes or social status. The rural elite who capture the programme distribute patronage and siphon off a significant amount of the funds without toiling in the sun while building nothing. The emerging middle class is not a catchment for this programme. It wants to be seen doing something economically and socially more meaningful. Thus the Congress's strategy to capture the vote of this class was deeply flawed – the promise of various in-principle rights with weak delivery mechanisms did less to lure citizens than Modi's messaging of the success of the Gujarat growth model.

### Modi's Vote Bank

Was this the class that voted for Modi? And if so, how can one characterise it better? It is obvious that such a class (and perhaps the rung immediately above it) has begun to cut across caste, region, religion and ethnicity. On the one hand, reservations have unsettled past caste-class equations and led to the rise of significant middle classes among dalits, lower OBCs, north-eastern hill tribals and other ethnic groups. On the other, small-holders among upper castes have seen economic decline and joined the ranks of the less secure – some social scientists are calling the newly economically insecure individuals and social groups a "precariat" – those who lead economically precarious lives. In India, where the formal sector of the economy constitutes barely 10%, one could argue that anyone without inherited wealth or a bankable education would be part of the precariat – cutting across various social divisions.

This precariat middle class, which includes the emerging middle class, employs several strategies of birthing, educating and marrying progeny in its efforts to climb higher up the class ladder. Having firmly joined the ranks of what demographers call "replacement level fertility" or two children per family, the

smaller-sized family has become its mantra. Reflecting its "look away from agriculture and towards towns and cities" policy, this class prefers a family of one or no daughters. Hence, it is a class that sex selects avidly, especially in the northern and central parts of the country but increasingly and worryingly so, even in parts of the south and the east. Its family composition choices over the last two decades have resulted in a crash in the child sex ratio, resulting in large numbers of "missing girls". Finding sons as a more viable economic proposition than daughters, the emerging middle class invests heavily in the former's education, even if they show less promise. Daughters "water the other's garden" so the less invested in them the better. A girl should get enough education to ensure, with the help of a generous dowry, the "purchase" of a good groom who would reward the family with valuable social connections.

Having no daughters and only sons is even more helpful to an emerging middle class family as it would minimise outflows and maximise inflows of wealth and consolidate the family's economic fortunes and position in the middle class. If lucky enough to have a son or sons as first births, such families rarely seek a daughter, putting an immediate stop on further child-bearing. In such families, a single daughter might be endured while two would not be tolerated and modern technologies are quickly resorted to ensure the desired and correct sex composition of progeny. Rural to urban migration is also key to this class's upward mobility strategies. Jobs and marriages are both oriented towards migration to peri-urban or urban locations and social capital becomes the important factor to this movement. The recent re-districting in many states has added to the diversity of urban spaces which are the natural habitat of the emerging middle class.

The social conservatism of this class is matched by its political and religious conservatism. Members of this class are likely to have active religious lives – visiting temples, holding *havans* (making offerings into a consecrated fire) and celebrating multifarious fasts and feasts – all with the express goal of securing family fortunes, economic and personal,

from being buffeted by economic or social shocks. Hence the immense proliferation of astrological rings on men's fingers and the sprouting of numerous small shrines in and around neighbourhoods and settlements, increasing contributions to neighbourhood temples, and the rising frequency of participation in religious yatras (pilgrimages). It is a class that yearns for the well packaged and easily consumable religious and philosophical wisdom of the Ramdevs (Baba Ramdev, the yoga guru) and other maudlin religious leaders.

Politically, Modi's appeal for this class has lain in his promise of a brighter economic future and socio-economic security (the "stable" middle class too has been suffering in an economy in which education does not guarantee their children decent jobs). As consumers of nationalism, the new middle class – many of whose members would be aiming for the lower tiers of the armed forces – find an appeal in Modi's strongman stance on foreign relations – that he would safeguard the nation and be able to fulfil the promise of competing economically with China. (As a Delhi taxi driver said to me, "Modi won't put up with severed heads of Indian soldiers unlike the former defence minister Antony, and Pakistan and China won't want to mess with him".) Further, he would ensure an Anna Hazare type of corruption-free, morally upright governance. His technocratic model of development thus appeals across the broad spectrum of the middle classes but faces opposition from a minority of the middle class intelligentsia, schooled either in elite non-engineering educational institutions or outside the country. The social scientist has as yet little idea of how the emerging middle class thinks of the lofty ideals of secularism and gender rights which have long taken root among the upper middle classes. It finds it easy to accept the logic of an uncritical majoritarianism in various matters. It is a class that is struggling to find the right balance between embracing middle class morality and the comfort zone of being a consumer citizen – goals which were earlier beyond its reach. Modi's promises point to a road map towards both.

It is important, however, to underline that social classes are always in flux as they mould themselves away from those below them and towards those above them. Economically comfortable classes become socially more progressive through self-reflexivity and education. Classes are thus the products of their embedding in material conditions but individual members belonging to a class are not simply prisoners of these conditions but actively engage in fluid imaginaries of

being middle class, which vary with where they stand at a particular juncture. Generational shifts are central to new imaginaries and we are certainly in the midst of one. Marx's comment on the conservatism of the middle class failed to realise its Janus-like character – in fact it combines both conservative and liberal tendencies within its multiple folds. Much of the social character of the emerging and lower middle classes does not appeal to the urban intelligentsia

schooled in western education; the latter are fearful of their power to shift the political balance towards what the BJP represented in the past. What this fear misses out on are the checks provided, not so much by our much depleted institutions, but by the creative ways in which new generations populating the bulging emerging middle class engage with the India handed down to them. In doing so, they will want more and not less freedom.

## Is There a Case for an Environmental Regulator?

SHIBANI GHOSH

One stated agenda of the new government is a commitment to addressing business concerns by smoothening the path to environmental clearances for projects and lowering transaction costs. The Supreme Court had earlier directed the central government to set up an environmental regulator at the state and at the centre. But do national and state regulators provide an effective alternative to the current institutional structure?

**A**mong the most contentious legacies of the Manmohan Singh government was its approach to environmental clearances. For several years now serious questions have been raised about the quality and the integrity of the environmental clearance process under the environment impact assessment (EIA) notification 2006. The process has evoked strong criticisms from both civil society and industry. Civil society concerns have included inadequate impact assessment, poor public consultation, lack of transparency and credibility, insufficient independent appraisal and lack of post-clearance monitoring. Business has complained of protracted and unpredictable decision-making processes. One of the stated agenda of the new government is a commitment to addressing business concerns by smoothening the path to environmental clearances for projects and lowering transaction costs. However, in attempting this task, it does not start with a blank slate but both a historical legacy of flawed processes, and a recent Supreme Court judgment.

There is a substantial body of literature criticising the effectiveness of the environmental clearance process in achieving its stated objective of environmental protection.<sup>1</sup> The resultant demands for reforms have varied in nature and extent – ranging from a complete overhaul to

piecemeal or incremental revisions. A significant subset of these demands has been those relating to institutional restructuring. Even the government has acknowledged deficiencies in the process and expressed intent in introducing (limited) institutional reforms. Yet, other than a few peripheral changes, the institutional structure under the EIA notification has remained much the same since it came into force.

More recently, these demands are echoed in judicial pronouncements. In July 2011, the Supreme Court in the *Lafarge Umiam Mining Private Limited vs Union of India & Ors (2011)* case had directed the central government to set up an environmental regulator at the state and the central levels that would appraise project proposals, enforce environmental conditions included in environmental clearances and impose penalties on polluters.<sup>2</sup> The government was given six months to set up the new institution, but it did not comply with the apex court's order. Instead, when the issue of non-compliance came up for hearing in late 2013, the government contested the need for a regulator stating that an "appropriate mechanism" is already in place, and therefore it is not necessary to appoint a national regulator. It added that the direction in the *Lafarge* judgment to set up a regulator was only a guideline, and therefore the government was not under an obligation to implement it. The government's position was a bit disingenuous. In 2009 and 2010, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) had itself designed proposals for institutional restructuring citing various inadequacies in the current set-up.<sup>3</sup>

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