

Leela Fernandes.

India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform.

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A popular image of South Asian modernity is now hegemonic. It is intimately tied to India's explosive, urban growth brought on by globalizing policies of economic liberalization. Dynamic, youthful, and impossibly pretty middle-class professionals laugh carefree billboard smiles into ubiquitous mobile phones as they cavort through playgrounds of shiny glass malls, private cars, alcohol, fitness centres and luxury condominium high-rises. An enticingly easy image, it is propagated by hybrid forms of local, state and privately driven development which extol the possibilities of potential access for all. It is also an image just as eagerly, if also uncritically, gobbled up by the North as evidence that free-market policies of de-regulation and privatisation do indeed make "us" and "them" better. But, as Leela Fernandes examines in her recent book, this singular and idealized image is far too simple. Scratch the surface of the socio-political present in India, and the contexts of the new middle class reveal themselves as far more complex and less self-evident than we are led to expect. They always are.

India's New Middle Class is nothing if not timely. Daily we are bombarded in the media by the economic, social and ecological significance of a rising, consumer-driven Asian populace bent on living the good life to the naturalized and impossible standards we in North America and Europe have set for the planet. Hundreds of millions clamour across India and China for the hallmarks of cosmopolitan and globalizing identity: mobility, security, luxury and choice — all inhering in the phantasms of stuff. But, as Fernandes points out early on, the markers of today's version of Indian modernity are very different from those of Nehru's awaking nation. Then it was socialist: dams, planned cities, industry and factories. Today it is consumerist: cell phones, washing machines, colour TVs, cars, trips abroad and designer brands. Something new is afoot, and it is as much agential as it is symptomatic.

The newness evidenced in this consumptive turn is not, as Fernandes claims, simply that of numbers, nor of emergent structures. The new middle class, as she argues in her first chapter, has its roots in the colonial character of the invented English educational policies of the 1830s. English now, as then, is still the predominant form of mobile social capital. Indeed, the middle class today are part of a larger historical continuity. But, it is the specificities unique to the present middle class forms of social, political and economic agency which, as Fernandes argues, shape the politics of liberalization in India. Hence, the "new" in her title refers to the "ideological and cultural shifts associated with neo-liberalism" (p. 208) which are "processes of production of a distinctive social and political identity that both represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization"(p. xviii).

For Fernandes, the new middle class is not an epiphenomenon defined by, and completely at the whims of the market, but a social group integral to producing the state-led strategies of market restructuring. Gone is a simple binary opposition between state and market. Middle class agency is constituted by a range of state and private strategies which are mutually interdependent and productive. As she shows in some significant detail throughout the book, models of civic development are promoted when they conform to, and help create a middle class imagination of civic life premised on the centrality and continuity of the consumer-citizen.

Since the mid-eighties, when liberalized policies began to emerge in defining the new India, the new middle class has embodied “a self-image as the primary agent of the globalizing city and nation” (xxiii), associated with high-tech, managerial efficiency and global economic competitiveness (p. 35). But far from being a homogenous and politically unified social group, the new middle class in India shapes, and is shaped by the nation in ways that are as conflictual and contestatory as they are often politically invisible. Less important to Fernandes are ballots and opinion polls. More important to understanding the shaping of Indian politics are the “fluidities of potential convergences, the interplay and conflicts between the new middle class and broader matrices of social differentiation” (p. 220). Contestations over urban space, definitions of national culture, suburban aesthetic identities and lifestyles, and spatial practices of exclusion and participation are the stuff of her genealogical analysis: what and where a mall is built; whether a street vendor is allowed to sell his goods in a middle class neighbourhood; what kind of house you live in; whether Pepsi communicates national pride; how a new American styled suburban interior can be both modern and definitively “Indian” at the same time; how civil society associational activities and related discursive practices in the media link the middle class with state power. Fernandes effectively shows that addressing socio-economic and political processes like these, which determine access to a form of consumer-citizenship, will more effectively represent how the new middle class has come to embody the aspirant horizons of the liberalizing Indian nation.

Her book thus valiantly attempts to steer a critical middle path between the two seemingly divergent disciplinary camps of political economy and post-colonialism. Arguing that the postcolonial has for too long been wrapped up in culturalist myopias of hybridity, identity and difference, she steers her analysis to the “symbiotic relationship between structure and discourse that underpins the dynamics of class formation” (p. 221). Yet, she argues that while the postcolonial can be re-invigorated by return to structurally oriented discourses, so the tired, traditional emphasis on the Indian political elite and mass opinion data can also benefit from a theoretical approach attuned to the social construction of group identity, ideology, and narrative productions of political dominance.

Fernandes thus weaves qualitative ethnographic and interview data with archival and quantitative data alongside discourse and interpretive analyses of print advertisements, and media campaigns like the (in)famous “India Shining” campaign, in an attempt to capture the fluid, symbolic, structural and political boundaries shifting economic policy in India (p. 29). Chapters on the historical roots of the middle class, the problematics of framing a vast and diverse social group, the effects of labour restructuring in the new transnational economy, the material restructuring of urban space, and consumerist forms of democratic citizenship each shed nuanced light on the enormously difficult task of representing how the liberalizing nation is setting about re-imagining itself through new signs and symbols of commodity participation.

The book is especially good in revealing the vastly divergent experiences which today count as middle class. The young woman struggling to get by on her own in Mumbai in an unstable and poorly paid call centre job lives a very different life than the idealized white collar IT professional who packs his car with wife and son for a weekend trip to the sea. The former far outnumber the latter, however much the state sponsored and private development campaigns advertise otherwise. Good too is Fernandes’ explanation of how the new middle class turn increasingly to individualized labour, education and health care strategies, rather than to a collective or electoral politics, to deal with increasingly complex liberalization structures. As she argues, these shifts evidence the power of an emergent normative model which privileges the figure of the autonomous rational actor implicit in the contemporary structure and distribution of social and economic capital (p. 114). This is not

insignificant, for it is precisely through strategies of protecting this perceived autonomy that processes of exclusion are made intrinsic to the contemporary workings of Indian democracy.

A caveat about the book's style: there is none. If academic writing is to aspire to a formulaic template into which is thought and analysis is repeatedly and increasingly forced in both monograph and journal publishing, then Fernandes' book is an exemplar of rote, unreflexive and declarative repetition. This criticism is not unimportant, for one of the strengths of much of the postcolonial analysis that Fernandes critiques is its reflexive suspension, within interpretive and stylistic creativity, of the academic hubris of representational objectivity. "Writing differently" is also a project of attempting to think differently in ways which stylistically foreground the inter-relationship of observer and observed. As Gayatri Spivak has reminded us repeatedly, questions of social justice are not to be divorced from issues of literary and hermeneutic form. Fernandes and her editors would have done well to attempt to break up the book's formulaic monotony with an inkling of "culturalist" flourish. As it is, the book reads as a monotone and uniform repetition of academic "journal-ese". We need less of this, not more.

That said, Fernandes' book provides a detailed redact of the intimately intertwined cultural and economic forces shaping contemporary Indian politics. It will appeal to scholars interested in the political economy of the South, and in globalization and consumer politics more generally, for its observations are as pertinent to India as they are to the economic and cultural forces of which we are all a part.

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