

Globalization and the De-nationalization of Indian Middle Class

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The most remarkable feature of the Indian middle class (IMC) today is that it has become extremely self-absorbed. There was a time, before and immediately after independence, when the English knowing people in the country saw themselves as a bridge between their less fortunate brethren on the one hand and scientifically and economically advanced countries on the other. Not anymore. Globalization has provided the IMC with an opportunity and a pretext to decouple itself from the rest of the country. The decoupling however is not complete. The onus of propelling Upper India into a global orbit still rests on the emaciated shoulders of the Lower India. As the irrepressible American film-maker Sam Goldwyn would have put it, IMC has opted to include itself out.

In the early days of the British rule over India, the number of British officers was small and they had a genuine interest in, and desire to interact with, the natives. However, as the British grew in number and power, their attitude changed to that of contempt and aloofness. Evolution of IMC has proceeded along similar lines. In the years immediately after independence, the middle class was still compact, its cultural distance from the elected representatives was small, and there was idealism in the air. The middle class considered itself to be duty bound to use its privileged position for the common good. Over the decades, as the middle class numbers have swelled, it has become more and more self-centred.

Caste constitutes the single most important factor in all aspects of Indian life. Caste situation is far more complex in North India than in South India. There are three major caste ensembles among the Hindus: Upper or forward Castes; Other Backward Classes (OBCs); and Scheduled Castes (SCs). (Use of terms like Upper and Lower is merely indicative; that is why they are written with the initial capital letter) These groupings are not monolithic. Within them there are structures, hierarchies and rivalries. Authentic break-up data in general is not available. The only complete data comes from the 1931 census. In the post-independence censuses so far only SCs (and Scheduled Tribes, STs) have been enumerated. According to the latest (2001) figures, SCs are 16 % of the total population (and STs 8%). Since the Hindus constitute 80% of total population, this means that 20 % of Hindu population is SC. The percentages of Upper Castes and OBCs are anybody's guess. Figures of 30% for the Upper Castes and 50% for OBCs have been quoted, but many maintain that OBC numbers are not that high.

The British were able to rule over India for close to two centuries with relative ease because they forged an alliance with the Upper Castes, especially the Brahmins. Consequently, the Upper Castes came to occupy dominant position in education and (modern) employment as well as in public life. The spirit of the times is summed up in a

popular award-winning 1954 Hindi film *Jagriti* (Awakening) where a poor (low-caste?) physically handicapped boy lays down his life to reform a rich spoilt boy who is the son of a zamindar (landlord). There has been steady erosion of the Upper Caste dominance in public life and education since then, though through different trajectories.

Normal electoral dynamics has politically empowered castes which though numerically strong were marginalized earlier. It has now become extremely profitable to have a caste vote bank – based political outfit, led by a caste man. Such outfits are not sensitive to issues of governance the way big parties are and therefore enjoy great bargaining power.

India enjoyed a long spell of political stability because Indian National Congress could forge a coalition of three distinct vote banks: BBC (Brahmin-Bania Combine), SCs and Muslims. It was of course led by the Upper castes.

After many elections, the populous North Indian state of Uttar Pradesh again has a single party government. It is a development of historical significance. The recipe is the old Congress one except that the coalition is now led by a Dalit rather than a Brahmin. Adjusting to new realities, the Brahmins have reluctantly joined in a subordinate position to enjoy fruits of power and to protect the interests of their caste brethren who dominate government service.

Political emergence of the OBCs in North India is a new phenomenon. Loss of political clout by the Upper Castes is made the more unpalatable by the deliberately offensive posturing by the OBCs and SCs. To make the situation more complex, the recently aroused OBCs maintain an uneasy relationship with those above and below them in the traditional hierarchy. The dominant castes among the OBCs have a clash of ego with the Upper Castes and conflict of agro-economic interests with the SCs. In fact it is the historical failure of OBCs and SCs to share political power in North India that even now gives the Upper Castes a role bigger than their actual numbers would suggest.

It is easier to tolerate a kick in the posterior than on the stomach. The Upper Castes would have reconciled to the loss of political power had it not been accompanied by shrinkage of educational and employment space for the benefit of the OBCs. This process is known as Mandalization, after the caste surname of Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal who chaired the Second Backward Class Commission, which submitted its report in 1980. The report was precipitously implemented in 1990.

The Constitution of India (1950) provided for 22.5% reservation for SCs (15%) and STs (7.5%). Now, another 27.5% reservation has been added for OBCs. Thus only half the seats are available in the general quota. What makes the matters worse for the Upper castes is that candidates from the reserved categories are eligible for a general merit seat if they qualify, without eating into the quota which others can use. Thus space available to the Upper Caste youth in the class-room has drastically shrunk. While the Upper Castes in the past were rightly made to feel guilty for the maltreatment of the SCs over the millennia and to atone for it to the extent possible, reservation for OBCs is seen as usurpation. An outcome of the OBC onslaught is that the Upper Castes have clubbed all reserved categories together and desensitised themselves to the needs of first-generation learners from among the hitherto marginalised classes. The government has baulked at excluding the creamy layers from both the OBC and SC categories, even though it is a well established fact that within these groups some castes have prospered at the cost of others.

Coincidentally or otherwise, the socially significant process of Mandalization began about the same time as globalization in India. If globalization had not taken place, it is very likely that Mandalization would have eventually produced a new equilibrium state in which the Upper Castes would have willy nilly accepted a diminished role consistent with their actual numbers. Globalization has disrupted this social process in the sense that the Upper-Caste dominated IMC has opted to effectively distance itself from the new mainstream and attach itself to the West. No wonder then that of all the aspects of globalization the ones that have appealed the most to the IMC are a West-inspired life style and education unencumbered by considerations of social justice.

As long as the students and teachers both were drawn from the same social segment, namely Upper Castes, state education was extremely good value for money. The class room today is more representative of the population in general. As a consequence, the state has retreated from education, leaving no hope for first-generation learners of today except for the brightest. More seriously, the state has also abandoned agricultural education which does not attract private funding. The consequences of this are all too obvious. Large numbers have made the education system rejectionist rather than enhancing. Good quality education is now in the private sector meaning, more expensive than before, but still the preserve of Upper Castes. As a first step, students can go abroad. The next stage will be to invite foreign universities to set up campuses in India. You often hear talk of Harvard and MIT's being brought to India are often mentioned. Nobody talks of the success of American state universities and the need to emulate them.

The number of Indian students abroad has increased significantly. In 1998-99, a total of 37842 students enrolled in US. Five years later, in 2002-03, the number stood at 74603, an increase of 100%. The figure for 2008-09 stood at 103260. As the executive director of US educational foundation explained in the pre-meltdown era, "Students who do not gain admission in India's premier institutions see the US as an alternative". Unlike the situation a generation ago when students went abroad for post-graduate and doctoral studies on scholarship, Indians are now enrolling in foreign countries for basic degrees and diplomas and are being financed by their parents back home. The economic meltdown and the consequent small dose of protectionism have arrested the trend to an extent.

The number of Indian students in Australia went up from 30,000 in 2004 to 97,000 in 2009. In UK the number doubled in the ten year period 1999-2009, figure for 2009 being 19,205. These countries however stand apart from US. The main attraction for most students going to UK and Australia is not the degree but the possibility of working. Having cheap labour on student visa, rather than on work permit, suited the host country during boom times.

Today's Indian economy is intrinsically not strong enough to maintain its ever-expanding ambitious middle class at high consumption levels. This can be done only through the services sector, where the money flows in from abroad, mainly USA. While it is a welcome addition to Indian economy, the fact remains that it benefits only the English-knowing young men and women, mostly drawn from the existing middle class. The service sector does not provide a passport to first generation learners to enter middle class the way manufacturing and government service sectors did or the former can still do.

India TV these days is showing an interesting commercial. A girl from a lower middle class aspires to become a cyclist champion and promises her mother a big house. Her

kid brother tells her: There is no money in cycling. If you want money, play tennis. The girl does not give up and fulfils her dream. She starts using a skin-whitening cream. Prettier, she is hired by a big company as a brand ambassador!!

Emergence of a de-nationalised middle class

We are witnessing the emergence of a new young people-dominated class, which we may dub Denationalised Middle Class (DMC). If this class were asked to choose between a national award like Padma Shri and a US visa, there can be no doubt that it will opt for the latter.

DMC is carrying out a multi-stage exercise to establish its identity and acquire legitimacy. First, it is setting itself apart by describing the other, contemptuously referring to the general rural background and poor English language skills. A popular cricketer (Sehwag) is dismissed because his father keeps buffaloes in his backyard. Another (Kaif) is condemned because he could not speak a single sentence of English correctly. Contempt for the “Hindi medium types” is matched only by contempt for the language itself. One wonders if there is any other country where such inelegant and ungrammatical language is spoken as the Hindi on our TV and FM radio channels.

In early years, the brown memsahib, in imitation of the White original, deliberately spoke grammatically incorrect Hindi with the ayas, nannies and domestic servants to preclude the possibility of the common language’s acting as a social leveller. The DMC has devised a clever stratagem to solve its language problem. It has co-opted the Mumbai street slang with its obviously connection with the romanticized underworld. The borrowing is through the Hindi movies. Sanjay Dutt mouths a tougher screen rendering of this slang, while Shahrukh Khan represents the cuter version.

Bombay slang is one of the elements that go into defining DMC as an entity. Additionally, there are global inputs such as SMS and Internet jokes. Earlier one could depend on Bushisms, but unfortunately no new international butt has emerged yet. There is a flourishing local industry churning out bilingual, Hindi-English, jokes and ditties.

The way a culture tells its jokes can provide valuable insights into its mindset. It has been said and rightly so that the number of original jokes in the world is very small. How the joke’s basic idea is contextualised and embellished tells us a lot about the narrators as well as their audience. We have already mentioned that earlier the IMC acted as a bridge between its compatriots and the outside world. In accordance with this role, whenever it came across a Polish, Irish, Scottish or Jewish joke, it would absorb its essence; apply its mind to think of a local context; and retell the joke in a local setting. But now if there is a joke on the Internet about a Texan and a Mexican at the expense of the latter, it will be narrated as such. Their villains are now our villains.

There is a reassessment of old popular cultural elements. Most are being rejected, such as famed film singers of yesteryears, Kundan Lal Sehgal and Muhammad Rafi. There is ridicule (“You may find it laughable that in earlier times, orchestra comprised only tabla and harmonium”), or condescending acceptance (“Sachin Dev Burman is an example [of a film music director] that one could be trendy even in a dhoti”); or mutation as represented by catchy old songs, mostly by Asha Bhosle, literally being sexed up for video.

Identity alone is not sufficient; there must be legitimacy also. When sitting in your own country, you are doing work called off-shore, pretending to be somebody else and

putting on a false accent, it is not surprising that the legitimacy comes from the Western connection. Since a whole lot of computer-based jobs are being outsourced to us, as a token of our gratitude we are outsourcing to the US the task of providing national heroes.

An India sports-person does moderately well in international events. A person of Indian origin wins recognition or administrative position in their host country. Honours, genuine and dubious, are bestowed on the Indians by the West (beauty titles, Oscar nominations, film jury membership, mention in the Time/Newsweek magazines). Hindi films find non-NRI audience in the West. An Indian slang word enters an English dictionary. All these call for celebration, because they enhance the De-nationalized Middle Class' sense of worthiness.

Even the uniquely Indian institutions are being redefined as an exercise in reverse off-shoring. Now the Hindi film industry has been given an imitative name (Bollywood), making Hollywood the reference point, and asked to win Oscars. The dynamic and success-oriented Hindi film, with its hand firmly on the peoples' pulse, has always lived by its own rules.

A successful Hindi film *Masoom*, made in 1983, borrowed the idea from *Man, Woman and Child* by Erich Segal, but not the denouement. In the novel, the family shuts its door on the husband's love child. But the Hindi version very cleverly shows the married couple with two daughters so that the love child, a boy (a cute one at that), can continue the male line. The 1963 Billy Wilder film *Irma La Douce* (1963) had a fairly successful run in India. But when it was made into a Hindi film (*Manoranjan*, 1974), it flopped. While the Indian viewers could enjoy the frolicking of Parisian prostitutes, they do not want their own to have any sense of job satisfaction. Similarly, when the successful Hollywood film *The Indecent Proposal* (1993) was faithfully made into Hindi as *Sauda* (1996), the film flopped because the male-oriented Indian audience was not ready to accept the idea of a husband's renting out his wife. But when the story line was changed in *Judaai* (1997) to let a woman rent out her husband, the film did very well.

In the Hindi films of the 1960s and 1970s, the foreign-returned young man wore suits, smoked a pipe, wore a hat, acted like a villain and eventually got thrashed by the hero. Alternatively, he wore half-pants, acted like a buffoon and happily became the hero's sidekick. A foreign-returned young lady did not plait her hair, wore boots, and screamed "shut-up" at everybody. If she remained like this, she died. Only if she redeemed herself by discovering her Indian-ness did she get the hero. Contrast this with the recent blockbuster *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) in which the custodians of Indian values are the NRI hero and heroine. India as a setting for the film is quite irrelevant except to showcase the Indian young man as a petty crook who wants the virtuous heroin as a visa for settling abroad and having fun.

Where does *Slumdog Millionaire* fit into this scheme? There is a delicious irony in its commercial and critical success. Here is a movie with Mumbai-based story, Indian actors and Hindi dialogues which has won as many as eight Oscar awards. And yet Upper India is not happy. That the present-day subjects of Her Majesty have made a movie about the former subjects has been duly noted. If the interest which the West is taking today in India's underbelly had been taken two hundred years ago, there probably would have been no underbelly. The issue however is not so much the West's current interest in Lower India as its perceived betrayal of its former ally, the Upper India. When the globalization-era Indian

upper crust seeks an Oscar for a Hindi movie it is to legitimize its own denationalization. If a British film on Mumbai slums is multiply honoured, it is a subtle indictment of the Indian non-slum. It is noteworthy that in the movie the slum kid knows about Benjamin Franklin's image on a hundred-dollar bill but not about Mahatma Gandhi's on a thousand-rupee note. The quiz master (the Anil Kapoor character) gives an insider tip to the slum kid. It is remarkable that the boy instinctively recognizes the deception, and succeeds by acting contrarily.

As an astronomer, I have been particularly struck by recent attempts at creating pseudo-mythology (as distinct from pseudo-science). Traditionally, solar eclipse has been considered to be an ill omen. Consistent with its grandeur, its effect has been taken to be large scale; on armies, kings and kingdoms, etc. In recent times, pseudo-scientific basis has been sought to be provided by postulating that the Sun emits harmful radiation during an eclipse (as if it knows it is being eclipsed). And yet, its effect was still very general (e.g. on pregnant women). The recent eclipse saw the emergence of a new mythology, that is relating the ill effect of an eclipse to the birth sign. Somehow the eclipse should affect me differently than you! New jobs are paying well, but there is no job security. Consequently worship of the outermost geocentric planet Saturn (Shani) has increased. Construction of new malls and multiplex cinemas is well known; Shani temples are part of the same boom.

As a tribute to the spending capacity of the DMC and a concession to its thoughtlessness, many erstwhile national newspapers are vying with one another to become DMC house magazines, revelling in trivialization of issues, mindless clichés, stupid bilingual puns, wordplay and prurience. The ever-increasing irrelevance of the IMC has been arrested to an extent by two institutions: higher judiciary and the electronic media. Given the abdication of responsibility by the legislature and executive alike, the Supreme Court and High Courts are increasingly taking on extra-judicial responsibilities. Time is in fact ripe for India to contribute a new term to the world lexicon, judiciocracy, meaning government by the higher judiciary.

Since the middle class has had hardly any role in the installation of democratically elected governments, the politicians had in the past tended to view the print media with disdain, treating it as a mere pinprick. Mrs Indira Gandhi, for instance, was very contemptuous of India's English language press, which often criticized her but could not impact voting patterns. The emergence of the electronic media however has changed the situation. Television has anointed the middle class as the commentator and the critic. The political class must now hire the cleverness, wit and sophistry of the middle class for coping with the new media. The middle class' sensitivity to the Western public opinion has had a positive fall out also. India cannot afford to perpetuate or condone aberrations that would give it an international bad-boy image.

Indo-Europeanism

The philosophical basis for the defection of the middle class to the West was created 200 years ago in the colonial context. The British could build an Empire in India and run it with relative ease because they were able to acquire legitimacy for it at the very outset, thanks to the discovery of Indo-European linguistic commonality. This is a political correct phrase from today's self-conscious lexicon. In its time the commonality was interpreted in purely racial terms. Indo-Europeanism provided the British with powerful means of

“connexion and reconciliation” not with all Indians, not with all Hindus, but with upper-caste Hindus.

That the Kurds and Pathans spoke languages that were related to Sanskrit, Greek and Latin was not mentioned. That most Indian Muslims were converts was ignored. That there was no clear-cut ethnic division between upper and lower castes was glossed over. The legitimacy thesis went like this: Upper-caste Hindus and Europeans came from the same racial stock. Indo-Aryans had had their period of glory in the remote past; it was now the turn of their European brethren to rule and dominate. Needless to say the thesis was enthusiastically accepted by the upper-castes. Even the 19th century Mohandas Gandhi subscribed to this thesis. He became the Mahatma only when he jettisoned this thesis, stopped appealing to the British good sense and instead chose to put the Western civilization on the defensive on moral and ethical grounds

Colonialism may have ended but the thesis was never laid to rest from the Indian side.

Edward Said’s work, though seminal, is area-specific. The first lab for orientalism was India and not the Middle East. I would like to define orientalism more generally as “ideological and operational paradigm consciously created by the West to define and describe the East in such a manner as to facilitate and justify its control”. Orientalism would be confrontational in the Muslim world but was seductive, persuasive and interactive in India, where it took the form of Indo-Europeanism. Whenever an Indian scholar did well, he was described as having overcome the prejudices of his race. His Upper-Caste status was emphasized, which made him one of us. They were all examples of the success of the Western mission to improve the natives. The natives were proud to have been thus improved and praised.

Recently Prof. Chen Ning Yang who won the 1957 Nobel physics prize jointly with a fellow Chinese observed: “Before 1957, only Hideki Yukawa of the eastern world had won the Nobel prize, if scholars from India were excluded as India and Great Britain had a long history of interactions.” Scholars from India was an exaggeration, because only one Indian C.V. Raman had by then won the prize. It is interesting to note that he does not include Raman in the eastern world. Reference to India’s long history of interaction with England is of course to the racial connection.

Thanks to Indo-Europeanism, Indians do not feel competitive towards the West the way the Chinese do. Indeed, the Indians can rejoice at the Western scientific accomplishments by pretending to sense them in their own ancient texts. As the US-backed services sector (as distinct from the manufacturing) expands and as the West-based NRIs grow in numerical and economic strength, India feels more and more comfortable with a peripheral role in the Indo-European-dominated world.

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