

Helping the suffering – Why Indian new middle classes appear indifferent?

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A common commentary among foreign observers of present-day India is that the new middle classes in this fast-growing economy appear to be indifferent to the suffering of the large majority of the population. They do not seem to pay much attention to the fact that so many are deprived of basic human dignity due to scarcity and hunger. In this presentation my intention is to examine whether this is the case – whether the new middle classes are truly callous, indifferent and whether they object social reforms – and if so, why is it so. Moreover, I will contemplate on the possibility of a more concerned attitude and the potential role of the new middle classes in transforming Indian society into a more equitable one.

The moral condemnation of the new middle-class way of life is common among critical scholars such as sociologist Dipankar Gupta and art historian Pavan K. Varma. They lament the current situation but from different points of view: Gupta claiming that the middle classes have not modernized enough, having adopted only the surface of modernity and preserved the old hierarchical and caste-driven normative way of thinking. Varma, in turn, sees that the moral conscience of the older, nationalistic middle classes has evaporated and has been replaced by the selfish and materialist attitude of the new middle classes of new India. He attributes this to the religious features of Hinduism.

When observing the new middle-class life in urban areas such as Hyderabad, my own fieldwork area, one cannot fail to realize the callousness, at least at face value. The middle classes seem to be more interested in securing conspicuous consumption than taking an active socio-politically transformative role in society. However, if we take a look at the history of independent India before the economic liberalization of the 1990s, we realize that despite the middle classes having arguably been socially more conscious, society still remained plagued by wide economic inequities and poverty declined only very slowly until the latter half of the 1980s. This is naturally due to many reasons that cannot be described in more detail here but still, we should also note that the socially conscious attitude of the earlier middle classes did not materialize in any radical transformations in society. We could even say that despite the earlier expressions of common commitment, no real action was taken upon. Concern on the eradication of poverty and illiteracy remained a way of legitimating the elite's own privileged position more than an expression of true political commitment. This means that we cannot say that the pre-economic reform middle classes would have been 'morally good' and the current middle classes 'morally bad' as social reformers.

When discussing the socio-political role of the middle classes in India it is necessary to keep in mind that we speak of a very diverse and internally divided social phenomenon. There is no single middle class but instead a conglomerate of various different middle classes whose political roles and economic situations differ widely. For example, people having roots in the old middle classes, going back to the elites of the colonial times, those whose wealth derives from rural landownership turned into educational qualifications and urban investments, and those who come from hierarchically low castes and have benefited from the public reservation policies, have very different political agendas. They may all share a high importance paid on education and predictability of the political system, and certain shared ideas of 'civilized' ways of life, but despite these, they may not always regard themselves as coming from the same social class. The old middle

classes commonly despise the new upstarts and claim that they are particularly callous towards the poor and the needy. This may partly be the case, which reflects their need to make a clear difference between themselves and the poor below them, having so recently risen above them.

When middle-class people speak about the less fortunate in their society, they do not only use the old caste-based, ascribed, attribution to account for their own fortune and others' misfortune. A new tendency to condemn the poor as having caused their own suffering due to moral laxity, laziness and vice – achieved characteristics – has entered the discourse. However, middle classes do not seem to have much of a moral dilemma to account for their own privilege in the middle of poverty and this may reflect the enduring importance of ideas such as karma and dharma. Employing servants by all middle-class families is the arena in which the class division and privilege is most evidently played out. Most middle-class people nowadays complain about servants' character – that they have become more money-minded, demanding and less responsible and trustworthy than before. They would still prefer to keep alive the old style patrol-client relationship to the deferential and dependent servants while themselves being part of the modern labour exchange where they can sell their own expertise to the highest bidding company in the global market without paying much heed to loyalty to the employer.

When assessing the moral attitude of the Indian middle classes towards the poor and hungry in their society, we should keep in mind that middle classes have hardly anywhere been truly socially progressive forces in society. Are the privileged classes in the US, Brazil, or Finland actually much more progressive than their Indian counterparts? Do, for example, Finnish well-to-do people care much about the destiny of the alcoholics, drug addicts or the socially marginalized? People tend to think that they pay taxes so that the state will take care of such problems without themselves having to take any social responsibility of their surroundings.

It is one of the typical features of middle classes, who are dependent on regular salaries and the elites in many ways, to invest on the predictability and stability of the political system. This means certain conservative, even reactionary attitude. They do not want any fast changes, and often no changes at all, unless it means better opportunities for their own class of people. However, this tendency to rely on rule of law, control and predictability in the formally democratic country such as India means that the future of democracy appears rather safe. And as long as there is democracy, the underprivileged classes – women, labourers, the lower castes – may have an opportunity to fight for their own interests in civil society, media and the political system.

It would be patronizing to expect the better-off to 'fight for the downtrodden'. The needy and underprivileged are themselves to take the responsibility of rising to their own interests and fighting their own struggles. The middle classes can naturally support such struggles even though it is socially rather improbable that they would do so in large numbers. An instructive comparison is the strong labour union movement in Finland: none of the considerable benefits that all employees nowadays enjoy has been granted out of philanthropy, but has been a result of a long historical struggle of the labour unions, and often of the poor labouring people who have had to risk the well-being of themselves and their dear ones in the struggle for a better future.