



The Politics of the Middle: Re-centering class in the postcolonial

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Introduction

Some of us . . . well I like to call us ‘Midnight’s Children’², meaning we grew up around independence, and got political at that time. Some people call us Gandhians, and that is a bit of a conflict with this younger generation.

Geeta reminisces with me one afternoon in her large office, among the shady lanes of southern Chennai. As a seasoned political activist, a matriarch of urban civil society, an English-educated professional, and a Brahmin, Geeta’s comment is evocative of the shifting contours of class politics in urban India. On the one hand, reference to “Midnight’s Children” can be interpreted as nostalgia for a past era of nationalist politics. On the other hand, the ‘younger generation’ to which Geeta refers is a nod to the increased political presence of a ‘new middle class’ as important players within urban civil society. Thus the ‘politics of the middle’ serves as a metaphor for the intersections between older and newer forms of elite political power, as well as the ways that ‘middle-class-ness’ has emerged as an important political category. This paper focuses on middle class political formations as they are articulated through personal reflections on social, political,



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² *Midnight’s Children* is the title of the 1981 novel by Salman Rushdie. *Midnight’s Children* is an allegory of the struggles of the newly independent Indian nation and is considered one of the classic works of postcolonial literature.

and cultural change in urban India. In doing so the paper contends that class politics, and particularly emerging forms of middle class political participation are important to the postcolonial story. The paper goes on to advocate for a theory of class that accounts for the interaction between political and economic restructuring as well as the more ethnographic, personal ways in which class identities are expressed, imagined and performed.

Middle class political formations have recently earned critical attention within academia as the 'new' Indian middle class has become an increasingly relevant economic, cultural, and political category. Scholars of the new Indian middle class show us that class relations in urban India are produced out of multiple and overlapping processes including: the restructuring of urban labor and land markets (Banerjee-Guha, 2006; D'Costa, 2003), the proliferation of global commodities and consumer culture (Fernandes, 2004; Liechty, 2003), as well as the persistence of culturally and historically specific structures of caste, class, and gendered inequalities (Fernandes, 2000; Radhakrishnan, 2008; Rajagopal, 1999). These amalgamations have important implications for the material condition of Indian cities. For example, recent work draws attention to the middle class neighborhood associations, urban task forces, and civil society groups that have become increasingly active in remaking India's urban spaces (Arabindoo, 2005; Bhan, 2009; Fernandes, 2004; Harriss, 2007; Nair, 2006). Much of this work highlights the ways in which middle class political activism has set out to remake Indian cities in ways that exclude marginal groups, reproduce classed and propertied interests, and support capital accumulation (*ibid*).

This focus on the production and reproduction of class structures in the context of urban India represents something of a departure from the influence of postcolonial studies within South Asian social theory (see Fernandes, 2006: 22). The postcolonial critique which held that Western conceptions of class were unsuited to the Indian context led many postcolonial scholars to focus on cultural practices and to often ignore class as an important element of postcolonial identity. As a tool for debasing and rethinking old conceptual categories, postcolonial studies have shied away from traditional class analyses, and instead focused on the more cultural construction of class and class identity. However more recent work has asserted that middle class political formations are under-theorized within the postcolonial literature, even representing a place that postcolonial studies forgot (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). This critique is intensified in the context of increasingly aggressive, exclusionist, and at times fascist forms of identity politics that have become a persistent feature of Indian democracy over the past two decades (Hansen, 1999; Sarkar, 2000). The importance of more structural forms of inequality, and the increased frequency with which cultural claims are used to

actualize and justify material exclusions has led some commentators to express a concern with postcolonial studies' (anti)political project³.

Without dismissing the seriousness of this criticism, postcolonial theory has the potential to bring important perspective to bear on class analysis. Recent work exemplifies the potential of postcolonial approaches to generate analyses that are both politically grounded and, which take seriously the material implications of postcolonial "politicocultural" formations (McFarlane, 2008a; see also McFarlane, 2008b; Gregory, 2004; Meyers, 2006). Much of the discussions of postcolonialism in Geography emphasizes the potential for postcolonial critique to expose, deconstruct, and debase the discursive and ideological legacies of colonialism and to 'hear' or recover the experiences of the colonized (Jacobs, 1996; Nash, 2002; Sidaway, 2000: 594). The importance of uncovering untold or subjugated histories also offers up the possibility of research methods that lay outside the Western traditions of historiography and the production of authorized narratives. In the context of middle class politics in India, this approach proposes looking to the more everyday, ethnographic, and lived ways in which class structures articulate with political identities.

But any presupposition of 'class structures' presents a conceptual slippery slope, as is highlighted by a post-structural account of class. As part of the introduction to a recent edited collection, *Class and its Others*, Gibson-Graham et al. (2000) argue, in true post-structural fashion, for an understanding of class as constructed. However this claim is not left empty as they go on to advocate for a class analysis that incorporates the fluid, constructed nature of the category, as well as the importance of economic relationships and exploitations between producers and laborers. In a similar vein, Fernandes and Heller (2006) have described the new Indian middle class as a "class in practice" to argue that this class is characterized by political practices and cultural strategies that reproduce economic privilege⁴. All this suggests that class structures and identities weave together economic, political and cultural processes. In the context of postcolonial urban India, an awareness of the multiple ways that class comes into being enables an analysis of the cultural and political practices that go into the performance and negotiation of class identity, as well as the ways these practices articulate with a shifting political-economy. Such an approach helps navigates a path between purely economic characterizations of class that focus on income and occupation, and the exclusive focus on cultural capital as the warp and woof of the Indian middle class. This paper attempts a similar navigation by focusing on the ways in which new and old

³ This critique reflects the particular history of postcolonial thought in the South Asian context, particularly the influence of a more post-structural Subaltern Studies that emerged in the 1980s (see Sarkar's critique of Subaltern Studies, 1993; 2000; and response from Chakrabarty, 2000). Much of this critique has expressed concern that the 'post-structuralist turn' in subaltern studies has authorized an "uncritical cult" of the popular, a charge which takes on new meaning in the context of the rise of Hindu political fascism (ibid; Brass, 1993).

⁴ For a similar argument in the context of a Kathmandu middle class see Mark Liechty, 2003.

class categories are expressed and negotiated through contemporary forms of middle class political participation. By engaging with ethnographic, individual reflections on the transformation of class identity the paper also highlights age and generational difference and divergence as important, but often ignored aspects of middle class political formation.

The Politics of the Middle in Chennai

In 2007 I travelled to Chennai India to undertake a research project which explored middle class political identities. I was particularly interested in the 'new' Indian middle class as a group which was both materially and discursively tied to economic liberalization and globalization. The liberalization of the Indian economy in 1991 (and arguably well before then) has had far-reaching structural impacts on India's urban economies (Khilnani, 1999; Fernandes, 2004). One of the most visible of these effects has been the increase in foreign direct investment into Indian cities, and the growth of new forms of employment, particularly information and communication technologies and other 'new economy' work. As idealized participants in this 'new economy', the image of a new middle class touts the benefits of economic liberalization and the promise of globalizing markets. Rapidly expanding commodity markets and advertising campaigns aimed at the middle class present an image of a homogenously affluent, globally connected, modern, and youthful class (Fernandes, 2006). Yet despite all this rhetorical hype, scholars of this class have been careful to point out the difficulties in applying traditional class analysis to the new Indian middle class. Fernandes and Heller (2006) suggest that this difficulty is the result of a less institutionalized relationship between property and the wage labor form in the Indian context. This means that Indian middle class cohesion does not derive solely from property, and is highly dependent on forms of education and cultural capital (ibid, 2006: 504; see also Deshpande, 2003). In the Indian context this type of capital is comprised out of particular identities (caste, community, or regional) as well as particularly competencies (English proficiency, education, and social connections) (Harriss, 2006)⁵.

But over the last two decades, the elite premium on certain forms of cultural and political capital has been confronted with the expansion of education as an economic strategy, new competition within government employment, and the political mobility of low caste and other minority groups (Jafferlot, 2003; contrast

⁵ South Asian historiography has emphasized how particular forms of knowledge and skill-sets became valorized through the production of indigenous elites as civil servants and employees during the colonial period (Chatterjee, 1993, 2004; Corbridge, and Harriss, 2000). After independence, these same elites remained intimately connected with the state either through the industry supporting policies of the post-independence period, their ability to command the cultural and material resources of the state, and because of their privileged positions as senior level government officials (ibid; Fernandes, 2000). As a result, a particular type of cultural capital has remained crucial to the ways in which elites consolidated political and economic power in post-independence India⁵

with Jeffrey et al. 2008). For a class so dependent on exclusive access to education and government jobs, these developments have created significant anxiety about protecting status privileges (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 504). Moreover, as the ability of the urban middle classes to secure their interests via privileged access to state power has diminished, the basis for middle class political power has shifted from the state towards the market (ibid, 2006: 503). These developments have engendered new political strategies that reflect a preference for market solutions, and the need to patrol the imagined and material boundaries of class privilege. A starting point for research, then, was the impression that middle class politics are in a state of flux, and that this moment of transformation deserves attention.

An initial round of questionnaires and interviews with middle class professionals compounded this interest in middle class political transformation⁶. This early research highlighted the ostensibly 'a-political' nature of the new middle class, particularly the renunciation of electoral and party politics. When asked the question, "What does it mean to say that someone is 'into politics'?", the recurrent sentiment was that those who were political were dishonest, corrupt, and ineffective:

He/She wants to make money for them and their many more generations to come. A secured life where the bureaucrats, police and official machinery are all at your disposal. You are above the law because there is not even a single instance in the history of our country for convicting a corrupt politician. (Survey Data, 03/28/2008)

One who brags about his Party's Ideals.. but fails to follow them himself, and twists them to suit his needs. (Survey Data, 04/04/2008)

What did emerge from this questioning was the celebration of less State involvement in urban development, management, and governance. From non-governmental organizations to public-private partnerships, to wholesale privatization, it seemed that middle class professionals had lost faith in state-led development, and had turned toward different approaches. While 50% said they were not involved in politics because of lack of time, and a further 43% said that the stigma associated with party politics detracted them from involvement, a majority 54% indicated that if they were to be involved in politics, they would do so via non-governmental forms, as opposed to only 19% who said they would participate in party politics either through electoral support or more formalized political party membership. Thus initial research suggested that less formal modes

⁶ For this initial sample, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 15 informants, all of who worked in Information Technology sectors. Forty-nine informants were contacted via the software professional list serves for alumni of several Indian technology institutes and universities completed online, multiple-choice questionnaires. Ninety percent of respondents were between the ages of 17-34, 73% were in full time salaried employment, and 83% had achieved at least a Masters Degree.

of political involvement were important to middle class political participation. This finding supported the claims laid out by others who argue that civil society and non-governmental groups are central to emerging middle class political identities (Harriss, 2005; Arabindoo, 2005; Fernandes and Heller, 2006; Nair, 2006). Together these insights prompted a renewed focus on civil society as an important site for the formation of middle class political identity

One important incarnation of middle class civil society in urban India is the non-governmental organization (NGO). NGO has been deployed to describe a vast range of organizational forms. From village level co-operatives, to transnational solidarity movements, to puppets of the institutions of global governance, NGOs have become an omnipresent feature of development politics in the South (see Mercer, 2002). But the term NGO can be very specific as well. In Chennai, India, a whole host of non-governmental organizations have emerged to tackle issues of urban governance. While there are untold numbers of other NGOs who concern themselves with various livelihood issues in Chennai, these groups are often far less visible and less vocal in the larger debates about how the city is growing and changing. When it comes to urban politics in Chennai, there is an exclusive “NGO scene” (see also Arabindoo, 2005). A peruse of the English-language dailies in Chennai underscores the close-knit nature of scene, as the same NGOs and NGO leaders appear time and again as commentators to controversial development plans, authors of op-ed pieces, and in accounts of public or town meetings and consultations. No greater than a dozen discreet NGOs have become important players in urban politics in the city, most of which are staffed and run by middle class urbanites who desire a voice in the future of the city. Other scholars have described a similar terrain of exclusive, yet influential NGOs, Resident Welfare Associations and Urban “Task Forces” in cities like Bangalore (Nair, 2006), Mumbai (Zerah, 2007), and Delhi (Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2007). What these groups often share in common is a narrative of state failures and corruption, and a desire to create an ordered and clean city, free of civic woes like solid waste or pollution, visible poverty, and neighborhood or roadway congestion. These political concerns are often discursively contrasted with the political concerns of the urban poor who make demands for (undeserved) basic amenities and who occupy urban space at the margins of legality (Benjamin, 2008; Coelho, 2005; Harriss, 2006). The discourse of urban order that gets espoused by middle class NGOs also resonates with notions of sanitation and containment that sought to order the colonial city (McFarlane, 2008a). There is more than a little irony in the realization that many of these battles over urban space are waged in the former residential enclaves of colonial administrators that now serve as the exclusive neighborhoods of India’s urban upper-middle classes (Arabindoo, 2006).

But this irony also begs the question, what is new about this politics? Both during and after British colonialism, Indian civil society functioned as an important domain for the reproduction of class privilege and co-option of state power

(Chatterjee, 2004; Sen, 1999). In the years following independence, numerous civil society organizations were formed around Gandhian ideals of morality and service to the nation. These organizations were also important locations from which the cultural and moral superiority of elite nationalists was asserted (ibid). The ashrams and voluntary associations that represented these forms of civil society have been described as the predecessors to the middle class NGOs of today (Sen, 1999). Thus when Geeta brands her generation of activists “Midnight’s Children” and “Gandhians” she is alluding to this bygone era of Indian civil society. The “conflict with the younger generation” can be read as a tension between older forms of civil society premised on exclusive access to state power buttressed by elite claims to cultural capital and class privilege, and a newer form of elite civil society that draws their power from a politics of economic liberalization and appeals to the lure of the market. While it is this shift that has captured the critical attention of scholars of the Indian middle class, we know much less about the ethnographical dimensions of this process. In Chennai, the transformation of civil society is often expressed in terms of a generational divide among those who consider themselves ‘Midnight’s Children’ and those who identify with a new urban politics.

This generational divide was evident in comparison between six different NGOs who were active in urban development politics in Chennai. Two of the NGOs shared an organizational structure that consisted of a younger generation of NGO activists, who staffed the organizations, and an older generation of advisers, trustees, and founders who offered ideological leadership and who had better contacts and respect among the institutions of the local state. But the other four NGOs were markedly different in their organizational structure, with less of a generational hierarchy, and in fact, very few older, ‘seasoned’ activists in leadership roles. The staff and leaders of these NGOs were predominantly young professionals who had either left their ‘day-jobs’ to do something more meaningful, or who volunteered on a part time basis, while remaining in professional, salaried employment. Comparisons between the two types of organizations revealed diverging political aspirations and strategies, and suggested that the latter may in fact represent a new and emerging type of civil society organization. For instance activists working in these ‘new style’ NGOs expressed a preference for including non-state and private sector actors in devising innovative development solutions. For instance, in a presentation about a public-private partnership in transportation, one NGO leader commented,

In 1991 the economy began opening up and people got richer and once you get richer people realize they have options. Ya know, you don’t have to go in a sweaty bus. You don’t have to walk through garbage on the footpaths. People like me. So what has happened is the private sector has come in, and they can deliver you cars, they can deliver you computers, they can deliver you cell phones. And the government, very

sadly because of the neglect of city governments, finds it very difficult to deliver with the rising expectations of urban populations.⁷

This approach was contrasted by the approach of the former two NGOs who utilized their professional credentials and elite connections to move the machinery of the State. When asked about the approach of one of these older NGOs, one informant remarked, “our organization, we prefer litigational strategies, you know, going to court.”

What was perhaps most interesting was the reflections from activists within these different organizations about the changing role of middle class political participation. In one interview, the respondent told me that civil society in India was on the verge of being “awakened”, and went on to elaborate,

Take me, I went away to do my postgraduate studies, in the US, and I came back and saw the challenges, from the government and the state of the cities. I thought, we middle class guys, we are educated and we can come up with *new approaches*.

If these new-style NGOs articulate a new approach, something of the nature of the ‘old approach’ is revealed in the following statement from another NGO activist. When asked about how his organization was different the informant commented,

We do our homework. It’s easy to sit out here and complain, and that is an important first step in a society, like checks and balances, but then we need solutions.

Another informant offered a more definite periodization to his critique of previous approaches,

When I was younger, people would protest, raise slogans, it was the political culture of that time . . . people were idealistic after all these national heroes . . . but the police would come and disband them and that would be it, nothing. We don’t raise slogans, we prefer to get things done.

As a new middle class becomes politically active, their personal accounts of this transformation are revealing. These accounts highlight the complex interplay between class as an economic structure and class as a cultural process. Comments about “we middle class guys” suggest that the new middle class continues to draw on the cultural resources- education, English-language skills- that have been so vital to the reproduction of class difference in the colonial and postcolonial periods.

⁷ See conference video: <http://www.um-smart.org/resources/conference/cherubal.html>

But reference to “new approaches” also alludes to the reality that traditional bases of economic and political power for the middle classes- a command of state resources and political influence- is in question. Reflections on generational differences, or ‘old and ‘new’ style politics, are examples of the more personal ways in which people make sense of this shift.

Conclusions

Interviews with NGO activists in Chennai shed light on Geeta’s initial remark about “conflict with a younger generation” and about the difference between “Gandhians” and those who “get things done”. The statements of a younger generation of NGO activists, taken alongside Geeta’s reflections highlight the profoundly ethnographic and personal ways in which people experience political and economic change. But the emerging practices of political participation via civil society also show how class is being reconfigured around economic liberalization and a preference for market solutions to development. The ways in which middle class civil society groups work to encourage and at times even facilitate private sector involvement in urban development are examples of the complimentary links between a “new Indian middle class” and the politics of economic liberalization that have been described by scholars of the Indian middle class (Fernandes 2006). In this context, civil society has become an important outlet for the (re)production of classed interests. This has in turn changed the tone of urban civil society, wherein disillusionment with state-led development and anxiety about protecting class privilege have spawned a politics of exclusion and privatization in many Indian cities. It is in these new political forms that both cultural and economic basis of class formation reside and where the Indian middle class is revealed as a “class-in-practice” (Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

This focus on class formation as it is rooted in structural transformations is an important correction to an earlier period of postcolonial studies that neglected the practices and material conditions of class inequality. Postcolonial approaches should endeavor to take class seriously, not only because of the persistence of structural inequality on the Indian subcontinent, but because class identities are an important framework through which people enter onto the stage of urban development politics. This paper has utilized ethnography to capture some of the ways in which class identities are articulated with political identities. As such the paper advocates a postcolonial approach that is attuned to the more personal experiences of class as they are articulated with recent histories of economic and political restructuring, as well as the legacies of colonial and postcolonial forms of domination and subordination. Such an approach could generate exciting, politically grounded critiques of the ways class is being operationalized, reproduced, and reworked in an urban politics of the present.

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