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Restructuring the New Middle Class in Liberalizing India

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Introduction

The policies of economic liberalization, initiated in India in the 1990s,¹ have been accompanied by a set of public discourses that have increasingly begun to debate the character of the Indian middle class. On the one hand, proponents of economic liberalization portray the middle class as a sizeable market that should attract multinational corporations. Idealized images of the urban middle class in the print media and television contribute to the production of images of an affluent consumer, who has finally achieved the ability to exercise choice through consumption. On the other hand, critics of liberalization often point to the negative social and cultural effects of consumerism and condemn the middle class for its vulnerability to the excesses of consumerism (Varma, 1998). Both views, while located on oppositional poles of the ideological spectrum converge in their discursive production of the urban middle class as the site of commodity consumption and as the recipients of the benefits of liberalization.²

Public discourses in India, for instance, produce an array of images which depict the urban middle classes as the primary beneficiaries of economic reform. Such discourses are contained in idealized images of urban middle class consumption in print media and televisual advertisements and corresponding public discourses that identify economic liberalization with new opportunities for the middle classes to exercise consumer choice. Such processes have been particularly acute in metropolitan urban centers such as Mumbai (Bombay). Contemporary Mumbai, characterized by an economic transition which has included the growth of the financial industry, the corresponding decline of the industries such as textiles in the manufacturing sector, and local state policies of economic liberalization which have actively sought foreign investment, provides a striking instance of the new "global city" (Sassen, 1991). In this context, Mumbai's middle classes appear to denote an ideal typical example of the rise of the "new middle classes" in liberalizing India.³ Thus, in the mid-1990s, at the height of the boom period of economic reform in India, public discourses focused on the rising urban culture of consumption in Mumbai. Popular stories about the spread of consumer items such as cellphones, sharp rises in wage levels for the managerial staff of multinational companies, and the expansion of consumer choice for goods such as cars, washing machines and color televisions have produced an image of the rise of a new middle class culture in the context of liberalizing India.

While recent studies on the effects of liberalization in India in the 1990s have begun to debate and demonstrate the potential negative effects on social groups such as the industrial working class and rural social groups,⁴ less attention has been paid to the socioeconomic effects of liberalization on the middle classes. Academic studies and public discourses which have focused on the middle classes have concentrated on the cultural and moral effects on the middle class such as the rise of a culture of consumerism, the growing indifference of the middle classes to rural and urban poverty (Kothari, 1993; Karma, 1998) and the potential threat of excessive westernization.⁵ While such analyses point to a significant shift in the national political culture that has accompanied the economic policies of liberalization in the 1990s, they in fact rest largely on an assessment of the "new rich," the section of the middle classes that has increasingly been serving as the symbol of the benefits of liberalization in comparative contexts (Robison and Goodman, 1996; Pinches, 1998). Less attention has been paid to the actual socioeconomic effects of economic liberalization on the middle classes beyond the realm of consumption. A more comprehensive assessment of the effects of the economic policies requires an analysis that begins to address the structural socioeconomic shifts for the middle classes. Given the public circulation of idealized images of the benefits of economic policies of liberalization for the metropolitan urban middle classes, an assessment of the implications...

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Introduction

The policies of economic liberalization, initiated in India in the 1990s,¹ have been accompanied by a set of public discourses that have increasingly begun to debate the character of the Indian middle class. On the one hand, proponents of economic liberalization portray the middle class as a desirable market, that should attract multinational corporations. Idealized images of the urban middle class in the print media and television contribute to the production of images of an affluent consumer, who has readily achieved the ability to exercise choice through consumption. On the other hand, critics of liberalization often point to the negative social and cultural effects of consumerism and condemn the middle class for its vulnerability to the excesses of consumerism (Girija, 1995). Both views, while located on *oppositional* poles of the ideological spectrum converge in their discursive production of the urban middle class as the site of commodity consumption and as the recipients of the benefits of liberalization.

Public discourses in India, for instance, produce an array of images which depict the urban middle classes as the primary beneficiaries of economic reform. Such discourses are centered in idealized images of urban middle class consumption in print media and television advertisements and corresponding public discourses that identify economic liberalization with new opportunities for the middle classes to exercise consumer choice. Such processes have been particularly acute in metropolitan urban centers such as Mumbai (Bombay). Contemporary Mumbai, characterized by an economic transition which has included the growth of the financial industry, the corresponding decline of the industries such as textiles in the manufacturing sector, and local state policies of economic liberalization which have actively sought foreign investment, provides a striking instance of the new "global city" (Sassen, 1991). In this context, Mumbai's middle classes appear to denote an ideal typical example of the rise of the "new middle classes" in liberalizing India.² Thus, in the mid 1990s, at the height of the boom period of economic reform in India, public discourses focused on the rising urban culture of consumption in Mumbai. Popular stories about the spread of consumer items such as cellphones, sharp rises in wage levels for the managerial staff of multina-

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While recent studies on the effects of liberalization in India in the 1990s have begun to debate and demonstrate the potential negative effects on social groups such as the industrial working class and rural social groups,³ less attention has been paid to the socioeconomic effects of liberalization on the middle classes. Academic studies and public discourses which have focused on the middle classes have concentrated on the cultural and moral effects on the middle class such as the rise of a culture of consumerism, the growing indifference of the middle classes to rural and urban poverty (Kothari, 1995; Kumar, 1998) and the potential threat of excessive westernization.⁴ While such analyses point to a significant shift in the national political culture that has accompanied the economic policies of liberalization in the 1990s, they in fact rest largely on an assessment of the "new myth" construction of the middle classes that has increasingly been serving as the symbol of the benefits of liberalization in comparative contexts (Robson and Goodman, 1996; Pichler, 1998). Less attention has been paid to the actual socioeconomic effects of economic liberalization on the middle classes beyond the realm of consumption. A more comprehensive assessment of the effects of the economic policies requires an analysis that begins to address the structural socioeconomic shifts for the middle classes. Given the public construction of idealized images of the benefits of economic policies of liberalization for the metropolitan urban middle classes, an assessment of the implications of this economic transition for the urban middle classes in a city such as Mumbai provides an important measure of the implications of such policies.⁵

Economic reform has produced a set of contradictory effects for different segments of the urban middle classes. Drawing on a case study of the Mumbai middle class, I analyze the structural dimensions of the middle class in an effort to shift the focus away from idealized images to an examination of the actual material effects of liberalization on the Indian middle class. This article provides a qualitative empirical view of changing labor market characteristics of segments of

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