

Chapter 12

The Political Economy of Lifestyle: Consumption, India's New Middle Class and State-Led Development

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Abstract This essay analyzes the political economy of lifestyle that frames middle class consumption in post-liberalization India. The essay argues that the new middle class in India is part of a state-led project of development rather than an expanding consumer group that has naturally been produced by economic growth. Economic liberalization in India operates through two disparate but simultaneous languages of economic development and economic growth. On the one hand, state, non-governmental organizations and World Bank sponsored projects produce narratives of sustainable development that primarily target subaltern social groups. On the other hand, state-led and global policies of economic liberalization deploy celebratory languages of middle class consumption as a sign of the success of such policies. These narratives of middle class consumption and subaltern sustainable development are part of a singular set of state developmentalist strategies in the post-liberalization period. This role of the state suggests that the politics of sustainability will require more than attitudinal shifts amongst middle class individuals. The essay concludes by analyzing possibilities for cross-class alliances between subaltern groups and sections of the middle classes that the state cannot successfully incorporate into this new middle class model of development.

Keywords Caste · Consumption · Development regime · English speaking middle class · State

Images of a prosperous, consuming Indian middle class have now become commonplace in both domestic cultural representations in India as well as in international political rhetoric on India's booming globalizing economy. Such ideological, cultural and discursive practices produce a normative conception of the new Indian middle class as an opulent social group whose growing consumption capacity both symbolizes the benefits of liberalization and serves as the engine for driving liberalization forward (Lakha, 1999). Such changes have produced a spate of public and

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scholarly attention to middle class consumption (Rajagopal, 2001b; Varma, 1998). However, despite this focus on middle class consumption there has been relatively little conceptual work that has linked middle class consumption in India with existing debates on sustainability and sustainable development. This article attempts to address this gap through an analysis of the political economy of lifestyle that frames middle class consumption in post-liberalization India. The political and discursive linkages between specific representations of new middle class lifestyles and the ongoing liberalization of India's economy point to both the significance as well as the limits of conceptions of consumption in understanding questions of sustainability, globalization and inequality.

Existing studies of middle class consumption in India have tended to reinforce a consumer preference model of analysis¹ – one that has addressed the relationship between economic change and consumer aspirations and behavior. While such research has yielded valuable insight into questions of subjectivity and cultural change, there is a greater need for an understanding of the systemic relationship between consumption and the restructuring of state developmental regimes under liberalization.

A focus on the relationship between the middle classes and state developmental strategies can begin to provide the conceptual tools that relink middle class consumption with questions of sustainability. Economic liberalization in industrializing countries such as India for instance operates through two disparate but simultaneous languages of economic development and economic growth. On the one hand, state, non-governmental organizations and World Bank sponsored projects produce narratives of sustainable development that primarily target subaltern social groups (particularly in rural areas). On the other hand, state-led and global policies of economic liberalization deploy celebratory languages of middle class consumption as a sign of the success of such policies. The seemingly discrepant narratives of middle class consumption and subaltern sustainable development are in fact part of a singular set of state developmentalist strategies in the post-liberalization period. As I argue in this article, consumption paradoxically both signals and conceals the relationship between the new liberalizing middle class and the current state developmentalist regime. My analysis seeks to conceptualize the new middle class in India as part of a state-led project (and problem) of development rather than as an expanding consumer group that has naturally been produced by economic growth. This interested role of the state suggests that the politics of sustainability will require more than attitudinal shifts amongst middle class individuals. At another level, a recognition of the specificity of the state managed new middle class also opens up alternative possibilities for cross-class alliances particularly with large sections of the middle classes that the state cannot successfully incorporate into this new middle class model of development. State and public constructions of and strategies towards the new liberalizing middle class both conceal and manage inequalities and contradictions within the middle classes. However, persistent internal fractures within the middle classes

¹For a critical discussion of a consumer preference model approach see Smith 1996.

and the tensions between such fractures and dominant narratives of new middle class lifestyle are important factors in understanding the political obstacles to and possibilities of developing cross-class movements and models of sustainability. I address these issues in this article through a primarily interpretive argument that is based on empirical research I have conducted on the rise of India's new middle class (Fernandes, 2006).

12.1 Conceptual Questions: The Middle Classes and Consumption in India

Consumption has become a central issue in contemporary debates and discourses on India's middle classes. Public rhetoric on the size of India's middle classes (now estimated as 350 million in public discourse in India) has largely centered on the potential consumer market that this group represents for both Indian and multinational businesses.²

The visibility of new consumption practices (with newly available consumer goods such as cell-phones and cars) and the sharpness of the contrast between such conspicuous consumption and the relative restrictions on middle class consumption in earlier periods in the twentieth century have intensified the association between the middle classes and consumption in liberalizing India. This association has been consolidated by the self-identification of large sections of the middle classes with new patterns of consumption. Middle class individuals thus point to the availability of new commodities as a sign of India's economic success and explicitly link their own personal identities and socio-economic potential to the consumer choices available under liberalization.³

The visibility of such changing consumption patterns has produced an expanding literature on the middle classes and consumption in India. Such scholarship has focused on three central, interrelated areas of inquiry. First, a significant trend in contemporary research is to use income and consumption data as a means of measuring the middle classes (Sridharan, 2004). Such research has been important in providing a set of parameters with which to identify different segments of the middle

²This is seen in the practices and data collection methods of survey data on middle class consumption collected by various market research firms. The most well known is the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) which has collected detailed income and consumption data on the middle classes. While the NCAER data provides useful parameters that aid in the measurement of the middle class, as I have argued elsewhere, such survey techniques are in themselves also representational practices that have contributed to the image of an expanding consuming middle class.

³This is particularly the case with sections of the urban middle classes that identify with a new middle class identity associated with liberalization. However, it is not limited to urban or more privileged sections of the middle classes. See for e.g., Jeffrey, Jeffrey and Jeffery 2004 on rural and dalit middle classes. For less privileged sections of the middle classes, consumption becomes a strategy of upward mobility; it is also a means that individuals use to accumulate social capital in order to try and gain access to new economy jobs.

classes and in providing a picture of differences in wealth (measured in terms of the possession of particular assets) between different social segments in rural and urban areas (Bose, 2003; Rao, 1994, 2000). A second scholarly trend, has largely addressed the study of the middle classes through empirical and theoretical analyses of the media. Given the visibility of new patterns of middle class consumption, such research has focused on media technologies (such as the role of advertising and television images) in shaping middle class identities (Juluri, 2003; Mankekar, 1999; Mazzarella, 2003; Rajagopal, 2001a). This focus on the media is linked to the third approach a wider conceptual focus on public culture as a central site for identifying and analyzing middle class identities (Appadurai, 1996; Breckenridge, 1995). Studies in comparative contexts have illustrated the distinctive historical role that the middle classes have played in the public sphere (Joshi, 2001). Research in the Indian context has focused in particular on the realm of public culture as the central site for middle class activity and much of the research in this field has tended to associate public culture with practices or identities that are linked in some way to various forms of consumption. While the first trend has focused more on questions of measurement, the second two approaches have shed light on everyday practices and middle class identities (Donner, 2004; van Wessel, 2004). This research has proved particularly fruitful in addressing the dailiness of middle class life, questions of middle class subjectivity and the dominant representational practices that shape these subjectivities. In the Indian case, this research tends to associate new consumption practices with the expansion of privatized spaces and the expanded role of private capital that stems from policies of economic liberalization.⁴ The result is an implicit tendency to locate consumption as a site of individual, privatized strategies that are shaped by these processes of privatization.⁵ What tends to be concealed in this context is the way in which consumption itself is part of a state-led development regime.⁶ The value of a project that seeks to connect the study of middle class consumption and lifestyle with debates on sustainability is precisely that it compels us to ask questions about state-led development regimes.

The argument for an analysis of the relationship between middle class consumption and state-led developmental regimes raises two immediate questions. First, what is at stake in discursive narratives that rests on a naturalized association

⁴Research on other parts of Asia has paid more attention to the role of the state. See for example case studies in Sen and Stevens 1998 and Embong 2002.

⁵At a methodological level, such research tends to focus primarily on particular sites that are explicitly associated with consumption (for example various forms of print or visual media or sites of consumption such as shopping malls, fast food restaurants, leisure parks). A broader problem is the conflation of India's middle classes with consumption and with elite behavior. Such a conflation misses other definitional aspects of the middle classes and also misses substantial socioeconomic variation that exists within the middle classes. I address this in Fernandes 2006. While consumption is often associated with the middle classes, there is also a research agenda which focuses on consumption and poverty. See for e.g., Jha 2007; Kumar and Aggarwal 2003.

⁶The point is not of course to argue that private capital is not important but to refocus attention on state practices and interests.

between the state, development and socio-economically marginalized groups?⁷ Or put another way, what can be gained by moving away from a naturalized assumption that the rural and urban poor are the primary object of state development policies and instead conceptualizing the middle classes as the primary object of state development policies?⁸ Second, what are some of the distinctive features that characterize this relationship between the middle classes, consumption and India's new state-led development regime?

Consider first, the languages of development that have been produced in the context of economic liberalization in India since the 1990s. Public rhetoric on economic liberalization has centered primarily on the expansion of the middle class. India's "new" middle class is new in terms of a new dominant ideological and cultural identification with such policies of liberalization. However, the social composition and structure of this new middle class under liberalization is not sharply different from the pre-liberalization middle classes. For example, upper tiers of the middle classes that are benefiting from reforms and the intermediary layers of the middle classes that are attempting to gain access to new economy jobs are still largely the upper caste, English speaking middle classes that previously benefited from state employment and state subsidized higher education. What is new then is an intensified identification between this new middle class and the presumed consumer benefits of the economic reforms.⁹ There are numerous examples of this identification. Public representations in advertising and the media continually produce and reinforce this identification. Middle class individuals point to the existence of new consumer choices and consumer goods as a sign of the benefits of reforms regardless of whether their personal economic situation has improved (Fernandes, 2006). Political critics and proponents of liberalization both base their debates on question of middle class consumption (either celebrating or decrying the impact of middle class consumerism). It is worth emphasizing that this kind of public middle class consumer identity is relatively new in India. Historically, for instance, the strength of white collar and public sector unionism in India led significant sections of the middle classes to conceive of their public, political identity as workers rather than consumers.¹⁰

Such public discourses tend to depict this emerging (and expanding) new middle class identity as a natural outgrowth of economic liberalization. By arguing for an approach that addresses the relationship between this new middle class and the question of development, my objective is to note that this new middle class is in fact partly produced by specific state developmental policies. Consider first the discursive construction of this new middle class identity. Elected officials and politicians have actively participated in the often inflated public rhetoric on the size of

⁷For general approaches that address the discursive dimensions of development see Escobar 1994.

⁸See Chatterjee 2004 for a theoretical formulation that reproduces this dualistic narrative.

⁹This is an identification which first became publicly articulated under Rajiv Gandhi's regime. However, its real political force has intensified since the reform period in the 1990s.

¹⁰On the state of public sector workers under liberalization see Ganguly and Scrase 2001.

India's middle class and on the vast potential consumer market of this group. Prime Ministers from across the ideological range have specifically deployed a narrative about India's expanding middle class as a central platform in governmental efforts to market India's reforms and to draw in private capital. This has ranged from Rajiv Gandhi's early rhetoric on India's middle classes in the 1980s to the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) prime minister Vajpayee to more recent rhetoric from current prime minister Manmohan Singh. Prime Minister Singh's speech delivered in Saudi Arabia reflects the conventional narrative that has generally been deployed,

Today, India's economy is on the move. For three years, we have witnessed growth rates of between 7.0% and 8.5%. A growing market, with a large middle class, abundant raw materials, highly trained and skilled manpower, especially in the field of science and technology, is thirsting for new investment (Singh, 2006).

Such discursive strategies are an element of the Indian state's strategies in promoting its policies of economic reforms. Rob Jenkins has written persuasively about the ways in which Indian politicians and governmental elites were able to push through the first generation of reforms in the 1990s using a range of informal strategies and institutions, particularly at the local and state level (Jenkins, 1999). While Jenkins focuses on the hidden nature of this process, what he calls "reforms by stealth," (Jenkins, 1999, p. 172) middle class consumption has in fact operated as the public discursive face of state strategies of reform. The expansion of middle class consumption, in effect, is a cornerstone of the discursive practices that have characterized state policies of liberalization that have been initiated since the 1990s.

This narrative of middle class consumption co-exists with the language of sustainable development that is conventionally deployed in policy responses to rural poverty and marginalized socio-economic groups.¹¹ In particular, this language can be found in World Bank sponsored projects that have been initiated in partnership either with the government or private non-governmental organizations. Consider for example the World Bank's support for new development ideas through its "India Development Marketplace" competition. The competition, designed to encourage grassroots innovation, specifically focuses on sustainable rural development. The discourse of development is explicitly coded through a conflation of sustainability, grassroots development and local village life. As the Bank's depiction of the 2007 session put it, "Many of the participants were dressed in traditional attire from across the country. Folk singers and dancers added to the color and rural flavor of the event" (World Bank nd).

The contrast between such depictions of traditional rural life with images of modern middle class consumption, of course, echo longstanding historical constructions of the modern and traditional. More significantly, such discourses invent two separate economies and portray the middle classes and subaltern social groups

¹¹ Sustainable development is also of discussed in relation to environmental sustainability but rarely in relation to the middle classes.

as discrete objects within each realm in contemporary India.¹² The middle classes inhabit an economy which is defined by the retreat of the state and growth fueled by the expansion of consumption. Subaltern groups such as the rural poor are located within state economic development which is marked by the need for sustainability and limits on consumption.¹³ The effect of these dual narratives is twofold. On the one hand, this juxtaposition between the middle classes and subaltern groups obscures the role of the state in shaping current policies of liberalization. As the new middle class acts as the central visible agent that has been created by liberalization and that consequently supports such policies, state practices of “reforms by stealth” are facilitated.¹⁴ On the other hand, since such discourses dissociate the middle classes from state-led development, shifts of state resources and developmental priorities and policies from the urban and rural poor to the middle classes can also occur by stealth.¹⁵

My analysis thus far has sought to outline some of the broad strokes of these official discourses. This is not, of course, to suggest that there are no counter-discourses or tensions within these narratives. Consider for example, a recent speech in which Prime Minister Manmohan Singh presented a “Ten Point Charter Social Charter” for inclusive growth to the Confederation of Indian Industry (Singh, 2007). Singh specifically addressed the question of growth and consumption, noting that

The time has come for the better off sections of our society – not just in organized industry but in all walks of life – to understand the need to make our growth process more inclusive; to eschew conspicuous consumption; to save more and waste less; to care for those who are less privileged and less well off; to be role models of probity, moderation and charity.

The speech went on to describe the social unrest that would potentially arise from rising inequalities, noting that

The electronic media carries the lifestyles of the rich and famous into every village and every slum. Media often highlights the vulgar display of their wealth. An area of great concern is the level of ostentatious expenditure on weddings and other family events. Such vulgarity insults the poverty of the less privileged, it is socially wasteful and it plants seeds of resentment in the minds of the have-nots.

Such rhetoric evidently points to recognition of intensifying socio-economic inequalities and the role of consumption practices in making such inequalities visible. On this front it represents a departure from celebratory discourses on middle

¹²For work that examines the historical invention of “the economy” as a distinct realm see Mitchell 2002.

¹³This is of course a subnarrative in which this middle class fueled economic growth allows the state to respond to problems of poverty. This idealization of middle class oriented development is not limited to India. See for e.g. Mead and Schwenninger 2002 for an array of writings by economists and analysts who make a case for global middle class oriented development.

¹⁴The state is thus seen in a more passive role as merely responding to demands from elites and middle class constituencies.

¹⁵This can be seen for instance in increasingly assertive middle class demands on local municipal council resources. Note however this is also not new to the post-liberalization. Middle class claims on civic and urban development resources have a long history stemming back to the colonial period.

class consumption Nevertheless, such rhetorical recognition of inequality does not disrupt the structure of the two dualistic languages that I have outlined as it continues to portray consumption as an individual choice. A conception of consumption as an individually-based or subjective set of practices continues to displace the role of the state. I have sketched out these discursive strategies precisely in order to provide the context for my argument that current research on consumption in India must extend its current focus on individual subjectivities and cultural practices within new “market-related” sites to an understanding of the ways in which middle class consumption and lifestyles are related to a new regime of state-led development in the post-liberalization period. Current research which tends to implicitly associate “neo-liberal” India with a move from the state to market practices inadvertently reproduce the discourses that I have outlined above.

12.2 India’s New Developmental Regime: The New Middle Class and the Politics of Lifestyle

India’s new middle class is specifically associated with a shift in national political culture that is associated with the post-1990s liberalization period. This social group is specifically associated with a cultural and political outlook that has embraced liberalization and rejected the state-managed economy associated with the early decades of Indian independence. In both public discourses and academic research the old middle classes are associated with a strong form of state dependency while the new middle class is associated with the choices and opportunities of private sector employment. The Nehruvian state and subsequent regimes in the first decades of India played a central role in materially creating and shaping the middle class through state subsidies for higher (and English language) education and through the promotion of public sector employment. The expanded Indian state itself was a primary source of employment for middle class Indians, thus intensifying this middle class dependency. Conventional portrayals depict the new middle class as a social group that is now tied to the expansion of private capital and new economy jobs rather than the old state-dependent middle class. The political and cultural entrepreneurs that publicly speak for this social group (whether in the media or through more typical forms of associational life such as newly emerging civic organizations) also explicitly argue that the new middle class embodies this kind of break from past dependencies on the state. My discussion of the relationship between middle class consumption, development and the state questions this narrative of the shift from the old state-reliant middle classes to the new privatized middle class at the discursive level. While the relationship between the new middle class and the state has been restructured, state-middle class linkages remain a cornerstone of the developmental regime in the post-liberalization period.

In order to untangle this relationship between the state and the new middle class, it is necessary to first consider the role of the state in shaping economic reforms in

India. Segments of the state in India have played an active role in supporting India's successive waves of economic reforms. This active state promotion of reform has been particularly evident at the local state governmental level as state governments have actively sought foreign investment.¹⁶ This pro-reforms orientation of the state has been consolidated as governmental elites have developed socio-economic interests that are tied to liberalization. State elites have stood to financially benefit from processes of privatization and the expansion of state-private capital joint ventures through both official and unofficial practices of corruption. As Jenkins has noted, writing about the initial phase of reforms in the 1990s,

There are two crucial lessons from this story. First, there are ample reasons to believe that politicians have recognized that liberalization need not spell the end of their influence over key decisions. And second, that the process of implementing these decisions- because it is characterized by improvisation, which can mask corruption – is a vital contextual feature (Jenkins, 1999, p. 96).

This confluence of interests has continued in subsequent generations of reform and has led to a broader restructuring of business-state relations. However, the state has continued to play a significant role in shaping and overseeing India's economic trajectory (Chibber, 2003; Kohli, 2004; Sinha, 2005).

In the context of this new developmental regime, the state has also remained a central agent in shaping the material dimensions of new middle class formation. Consider for instance the realm of consumption. As I have noted earlier, changing consumption practices are associated with a politics of lifestyle that is the most visible marker of India's new middle class. This emerging politics of lifestyle is not, however, a socio-cultural phenomenon that has arisen purely as a function of changing consumer preferences on the part of individuals or simply because middle class individuals are responding to new global images and lifestyle practices. The politics of new middle class lifestyle is a central component of state-led liberalization. This political economy of lifestyle is specifically structured by local state strategies of urban redevelopment that promote new middle class oriented models of urban life. These strategies center on the question of land usage and highly lucrative financial deals that benefit both local state officials and private developers. Such practices further illustrate the role of the state in facilitating privatization through both official and informal/extralegal practices – for instance by allowing the sale of textile mills in Mumbai despite legal restrictions and working in partnership with private capital to develop new middle class oriented infrastructure (such as shopping malls, jogging strips, and elite residential complexes). Such strategies are not simply examples of state responses to middle class consumer based demands. Rather, they represent a set of practices and policies that engage in the material production of new middle class lifestyle. Such processes point to important historical continuities in between the state-managed middle classes of the Nehruvian period and the new middle class

¹⁶While there has been variation in the success of these efforts this has been the case regardless of the ideological bent of the party in power (and has included the Left Front government in West Bengal). On state governments and reforms see Sinha 2004.

in post-liberalization India and caution us from assuming that new middle class politics and identities necessarily represent a sharp break from the past. This new middle class continues to be shaped by the economic policies of the state and continues to benefit from this state-subsidized model of urban middle class lifestyle.

My objective in this analysis is not to present the new middle class in India as a passive object that is devoid of agency. The urban redevelopment strategies that I have outlined have been accompanied by a range of new middle class practices and forms of civic and associational life in which new middle class groups have made assertive demands on the state (for example in conflicts with street vendors and demands for urban beautification programs) (Fernandes). These emerging civic groups have thus seized on these new economic and political opportunities to pressure the state for support. However, the point I am trying to emphasize is that the state in this context is an invested actor and not simply a neutral entity responding to middle class interest groups (or managing competing constituencies when subaltern groups contest these developmental strategies).¹⁷

The imbricated nature of this relationship between the state and the new middle class holds important implications for any search for alternative, sustainable forms of development in India. At one level, this invested nature of the state suggests that any political attempt at linking the question of sustainability with new middle class practices will require more than attitudinal shifts amongst middle class individuals. A political project of sustainability in effect becomes more daunting because it cannot evade the role of the state. However, at another level, a recognition of the specificity of the state managed new middle class also opens up alternative possibilities for cross-class alliances particularly with large sections of the middle classes that the state cannot successfully incorporate into this new middle class model of development.

12.3 Political Responses and Internal Fractures Within the Middle Classes

India's new middle class represents a dominant socio-political identity that is often at odds with the socio-economic realities of large sections of the middle classes. The political construction of the new middle class as a consumption driven group that automatically benefits from liberalization rests in uneasy tension with both members of the new middle class who are tracked into lower tier segments of new economy

¹⁷This state-middle class relationship also has important implications for our understanding of contemporary democratic politics. In contemporary election campaigns in India for eg politicians formulate agendas designed to appeal to socio-economically marginalized groups. New middle class rhetoric has condemned these state supports and has focused on the "politics of votebanks" that have captured the state and neglected middle class interests. Such political rhetoric relies on the invisibility of the state subsidies of middle class oriented development that I am emphasizing. Hence the twin narratives of middle class growth versus state led subaltern development provides an ideological basis for middle class claims of exclusion.

jobs as well as with segments of the middle classes that are unable to gain access to these thriving sectors of the economy. Empirical data reveals that it is still largely upper caste English speaking elite tiers of the middle classes that make up the top tiers of this new liberalizing middle class (Fernandes, 2006; Fuller & Narasimhan, 2007; Upadhyay, 2004). The acquisition of various forms of social capital such as education, English skills, aesthetic and cultural knowledge and historical inequalities such as caste, religion and region produce rigid forms of distinction between different segments of the middle classes (Bourdieu, 1984). For instance, the Muslim middle classes and newly emerging dalit middle classes have not had equal access to upper tier white collar middle class employment. Recent data shows that two-thirds of professional and higher degree holders in urban areas are from an upper caste Hindu social background (Deshpande, 2006: 2439). Given the significance of technical and professional education in the formation of the new middle class and its ability to successfully access new economy jobs, such data point to the social exclusions based on caste and religion that are encoded within this social group.¹⁸ Large sections of the middle classes continue to rely on state employment and have not been incorporated into new middle class oriented strategies of development (Ganguly & Scrase, 2001; Sridharan, 1999; Sridharan, 2004). Old and new regimes of state-led development thus continue to overlap in ways that provoke tensions between different fractions of the middle classes.

Consider, for instance, social conflicts over demands for caste-based reservations in education and employment (Deshpande, 2006; Yadav & Deshpande, 2006; Mehta, 2006; Mohanty, 2006). Contemporary politics in India has been characterized by sharp public debates on state reservations for subordinated caste groups in state educational institutions and government service.¹⁹ In recent years, this debate has extended to the question of reservations in the private sector (Kumar, 2005; Thimmaiah, 2005; Thorat, 2005). The rise of this debate encapsulates the tensions between the state's competing developmental projects. At a surface level, the current Congress-led coalition government's role in opening up the political and policy space for private sector reservations cannot be dissociated from a basic electoral calculus.²⁰ However, at a deeper level, the current Congress-led coalition government is faced with the problem of managing the strains of a liberalizing economy that has not provided opportunities for middle class individuals who are continually exposed to an undelivered promise of access to new middle class membership. The

¹⁸On Caste see Sheth, 1999b. Gender is a more complex factor as middle class women have been able to gain entry to new economy jobs. However, these women would still come from more privileged caste backgrounds and they are often tracked into lower tier work such as the call center industry.

¹⁹The most visible case was the conflict over the Mandal Commission report and the upper caste middle class backlash against the VP Singh government's move to implement the recommendations.

²⁰As Kumar notes, the Congress-led government in Maharashtra introduced a bill on affirmative action that includes private sector reservations for dalits before the 2004 assembly polls (2005, p. 803).

Congress-led government's rhetoric on caste reservations in the private sector represents a state strategy designed to incorporate (albeit in largely limited and symbolic ways) these segments of the middle classes within its new middle class-oriented developmental regime.²¹

Such conflicts point to the internal fractures that exist within India's middle classes and caution against a conflation between the middle classes and elites. However, while large segments of the middle classes may indeed not benefit from economic reforms, this does not necessarily mean that these class fractions will necessarily oppose reforms. Consider for example the question of middle class consumption. While demand for consumer durables has expanded significantly since the 1990s, actual patterns of middle class consumption do not necessarily replicate the kind of repeat consumerism that is evident in advanced industrialized countries. The purchase of consumer goods like cars and washing machines remain a major household financial decision and average middle class households do not engage in repeat purchases (for example by routinely changing brands or models). However, a consumer-based identity has begun to shape middle class practices and attitudes in ways that move beyond the narrower English speaking urban base of the new middle class. Individual middle class households strategically deploy consumer goods in order to achieve social mobility. Meanwhile, middle class individuals view the potential promise of consumer ownership of goods as a sign of national progress.

Recent processes of privatization have had important political effects as they have weakened this middle class relationship with worker or union identities. In more recent years, left oriented political parties have on occasion attempted to develop or deploy cross-class consumer oriented identities by linking middle class frustration with rising prices to the economic marginalization of subaltern groups.²² However, such attempts have not produced significant or lasting political possibilities. Rather, as I have noted earlier, middle class associational life has focused on

²¹ The proposals for reservations were of course met with strong resistance from the private sector. Prime Minister Singh asked the private sector to voluntarily invest in training and technical education for youth from less privileged backgrounds. More recently, a joint task force of ASSOCHAM (Associated Chambers of the Commerce and Industry of India) and CII (Confederation of Indian Industry) task force set up by the government is formulating a Code of Affirmative Action for all companies affiliated with Assocham and CII.

²² In the 1990s, the most significant cross-class movement was the culturally exclusivist brand of Hindu nationalism that emerged. This movement was able to effectively deploy anti-Muslim sentiment in ways that linked middle class political conservatism and economic liberalism with the political unrest and anxieties of the urban poor and lower middle classes. This xenophobic nationalism was also able to manage conflicts within the movement between the pro-liberalization orientation of the BJP and the protectionist "swadhesi" leanings of the RSS. See Hansen 1999 and Fernandes and Heller 2006. However, the Congress return to power in the 2004 elections reflects in part a political result of the economic frustrations of sections of the middle class as well marginalized socio-economic groups. The Congress consistently used strong economic populist languages in its campaign and electoral data shows some shift in middle class electoral support from the BJP back to the Congress. The token attempts at caste reservations in the private sector seem to represent the congress' recognition of the precarious contradictions between this populist promise and the inequalities intensified by its economic policies

an exclusionary form of new middle class consumer identity. For instance, middle class organizations have focused on reclaiming urban space from the urban poor and making demands on the state for financial for neighborhood development and beautification programs (Harriss, 2005). While such political orientations naturally have led scholars and political critics to condemn this intensified form of middle class elitism, it is critical to disentangle this new middle class political orientation from the broader variation in middle class interests. For instance, there is a strong paradox between growing new middle class support and reliance on privatized services (ranging from education to municipal services, such as water that is delivered to new housing complexes) and the broad socio-economic interests of the middle classes (Kapur & Mehta, 2004; Kapur & Ramamurti, 2005). The starkest example is of course the case of education. Post-independence state policy has continually favored middle class interests by emphasizing financial support for higher education over primary and secondary school education. Such policies have both created and expanded India's middle classes. These state policies have allowed sections of the middle classes that have had the technical and educational skills to take advantage of new economy sectors and global niches in outsourcing and become the social basis of India's new middle class.²³

12.4 From Internal Fractures to the Possibility of Cross-Class Alliances

The question that arises then is whether the internal fractures within the middle classes point to the possibility of cross-class alliances in support of alternative models of development. The emergence of cross-class alliances are a longstanding characteristic of Indian political and social history. In earlier decades, the traditional dependence of large segments of the middle classes on state employment promoted left-oriented and labor-based forms of cross-class alliances as middle class individuals were incorporated into public sector unions.²⁴ The most recent instance of effective cross-class mobilization is located on the opposite end of the political spectrum in the form of the right wing Hindu nationalist movement. Studies of the rise of this social movement (and the related rise of the Hindu nationalist political party Bharatiya Janata Party) in the 1990s have pointed to the success of the movement leaders and organizations in using religious based and chauvinist anti-Muslim rhetoric to forge cross-class alliances between the urban Hindu middle classes and lower-income and lower middle class segments of the population (Hansen, 1999). Such culturally based appeals have been particularly potent in facilitating cross-class protest politics and movements. Zoya Hasan has further

²³For data on education and state policy see Rudolph and Rudolph 1987.

²⁴This varied by region (see Dasgupta, n.d.) and as many critics have not also biased union activity towards the interests of more privileged workers (particularly neglecting workers in the unorganized sector).

argued that inequalities between sections of the middle classes have also led to important changes in national patterns of political participation as sections of the middle classes shifted their support from the Congress party to regional political parties. Thus, she argues that inequalities based on language have produced political and socio-economic divides between the English-speaking and vernacular (Hindi-speaking) middle classes and led the Hindi-speaking middle classes to challenge the cultural-political primacy of the new middle class (Hasan, 1998).

The disjuncture between new middle class politics and middle class interests raises the possibility of a political space for alternative cross-class alliances.²⁵ Examples of such alliances have not been limited to right-wing culturalist movements but are also evident in social movements that have linked urban middle class activists with questions related to sustainability and forms of economic development that can benefit both the urban and rural poor. On the environmental front, one the most well publicized movements has been the movement to stop the building of the Narmada dam in western India because of the costs to the land and livelihoods of poor villagers. While, the movement ultimately did not prevent the government from moving ahead with and expanding the project, it nevertheless represents a highly successful case of a cross-class movement that linked both middle class activists with rural villagers and domestic activists within India with a broader transnational movement (Khagram, 2004).²⁶ Regardless of the relative success or failure of this particular movement, it points to the broader fact that India's democratic political system has historically allowed middle class non-governmental organizations and cross-class social movements to flourish. While, as John Harriss has noted, there has recently been an increasing pattern of middle class non-governmental organizations conceiving of middle class interests in exclusionary ways that pit the middle classes against the poor and working classes, there nevertheless remains a longer and wider history which includes cross-class alliances between sections of the middle classes and the urban and rural poor. The challenge in building on this history will be to disentangle the dominant ideological construction of new middle class identity from the more varied social and economic interests and practices that actually characterize India's middle classes. As Lange and Meier have noted, even amongst the upper tiers of the new middle class (highly qualified employees) survey results show that 15–35% of this segment reflect an openness to ecological and international environmentally-oriented discourses (see all Lange & Meier Chapter 1 in this

²⁵This remains a possibility not necessarily a likely possibility. The case of the American middle class provides an ideal typical example of a social group that has acted politically in ways that have undermined its own interests. Current debates on the lack of health care and employment for middle class Americans foregrounds this. However, contemporary political rhetoric that is effectively projecting these problems onto marginalized social groups such as undocumented workers from Mexico underlines the ways in which cultural nationalism and middle class conservatism are readily deployed as a cross-class response to socio-economic anxieties.

²⁶The limits of the movement again underline the importance of addressing the role of the state. The movement was able to successfully pressure the World Bank to withdraw funding for the project but was less successful in pressuring the Indian government to stop or curtail the project.

volume). The task of linking middle class practices with a project of sustainability is thus a political task rather than one of overcoming fundamental barriers linked to a predetermined middle class civic culture or set of socio-economic interests associated with this social group. This endeavor requires reorienting the discourses and project of sustainability towards a cross-class project of sustainable growth rather than one that must target the rural and urban poor through development. An initial survey of the academic literature indicates that such links have yet to be made even within academic discourse as there is no body of literature that links the study of India's middle classes with the question of sustainability. However, India's political and social history of cross-class middle class activism (that is distinct from the more exclusionary forms of new middle class civic organizations focused on beautification and class-based conflicts over public space) can potentially provide the organizational basis for new political languages of cross-class environmental sustainability. Given that sections of the middle classes may grow alienated from a heavily consumerist-oriented new middle class identity that does not conform to their socio-economic experiences and practices, there is also a viable material basis for such political discourses and movements to emerge. However, the challenge within the realities of contemporary Indian politics will be for organizations, social activists and political entrepreneurs to develop strategies to ensure that such alienation is not diverted instead to culturalist movements such as the Hindu nationalist or other forms of movements that have historically capitalized on a more exclusivist politics of middle class reaction (Fernandes & Heller, 2006).

12.5 Conclusion: Sustainability and India's New Middle Class

The dominant trends that characterize India's new middle class suggest significant obstacles to a broader project of sustainable development. The linkages between this new social group and the current regime of state-led development also illustrate that the development of a cross-class approach to sustainability requires more than changes in individual middle class consumption attitudes and practices.²⁷ The divergent narratives of sustainability and consumption in effect largely displace the focus of sustainability debates from this state-managed new middle class model of development to rural development schemes for marginalized communities. Meanwhile, new middle class rhetoric on and demands for urban livability converge with state urban redevelopment strategies that are consistent with this model. Thus, it would seem that the possibility of developing a more broad-based project of sustainability rests on the more daunting task of disentangling the "new" middle class from the middle classes. Nevertheless, the long history of cross-class social movements and activism within India's democratic framework of politics provides the potential for

²⁷The importance of state-middle class linkages in shaping developmental strategies is not new or unique to the Indian case. Comparative research in a range of empirical research has demonstrated that state conceptions of sustainability often favor middle class oriented models of development. See for instance case studies in Evans 2002.

the creation of alternative languages of sustainability that can help build coalitions linking sections of the middle classes and the urban and rural poor.

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