

Definition of the Indian Middle Class

I will try and define middle class India in the context of modern day. I feel that it is a very ambiguous term. Class structures keep evolving over time, and it is very difficult to define a concept of this magnitude in concrete terms.

According to the Deutsche Bank Research, 15th February, 2010, the middle class is but a small segment of India's overall population. A lot of attention has been bestowed on the India's middle class in the recent years, hence it is extremely important to keep a proper perspective on its size and potential purchasing power. There is no official number of the middle class, but it is estimated that there are around 30 million to approximately 300 million middle class populations in India. Even if we use the most generous estimates of the group's size, the middle class comprises less than 30 percent of the population. Thus, the rich and the poor combined far outweigh the Indian middle class. The importance of the middle class lies in the fact that it is the fastest growing segment of the Indian population.

Some Vignettes From Santosh Desai's Mother Pious Lady That Really Got Me Thinking...

Recycling & Hand-Me-Downs

This is a quintessential character of any middle class family. Just as Santosh Desai himself rightly points out. As kids, I remember, our mother used to buy clothes and shoes that were two sizes bigger to my brother and me, so that we grow into them. Now, what with liberalization, globalization and proliferation of the Indian economy, it seems like everybody is on a roll, and the Indian middle-class is graduating into a new value system where recycling and hand-me-downs have no significance. I remember how every single object in the house was recycled-from a glass-jar in which Sunrise coffee was packaged to the extra button on a new pair of trousers. Every Diwali, when my house witnesses a massive cleaning marathon, I am surprised to see the most amusing thing come out of my mother's Pandora's Box. Here, I see a difference in the attitude of the fathers and the mothers of the family.

Value For Money

This is one value all of us have, almost, learnt, living in a middle class family. The concept of 'Buy 1 Get 1 Free' works wonders in India, because we attach so much importance to value for money. If you ask me personally, I think the real reason why India had flourished in the past, and is on the way to glory now, is because we attach a lot of importance to value. Value means different things to different people. Even though money is the yardstick to measure the value that we are deriving out of a product, what it essentially satiates is our emotional quotient. We love the triumphant feeling of getting a lemon free with a dozen that we are already buying. We love it when we win a free

camera with a purchase of a swanky laptop. If there was one quality about the great Indian middle class that I would like to preserve, and pass on, it would be the baton of the value for money ideology.

Our Summer Holidays

We middle class Indians just love the summer holidays. For us it is not a vacation only for the child going to school but for the parents, brothers and sisters and more often than not grandparents too. We visit our relatives in faraway lands and simply love the experience, not to mention the immense pleasure we derive from the journey of the train. For us travelling is not just about the destination but more about the exclusive experience that comes with it. From tea in "kulhar", to the chips-wala, ordering lunch, dinner, and breakfast, the white sheets on the seat, the conversation with the fellow passengers, the noise and chaos and most importantly the view from the window, all of it makes it worthwhile and adds so much of spice to life.

Our Concept Of Private Spaces

We do not lure for private spaces. Believing in sharing and caring, we share everything with family, friends and neighbors. All the kids sleep in one room and share every space with each other. We are comfortably settles with all the amenities we have.

It is us who maintain the maximum semblance with Indian culture. We have morals and principles of our own to which we adhere very closely and dearly. Our morals also bring to us religious outlooks. And end of the day, we are a little religion minded. By this, I don't mean that we like to celebrate all the religious festivals in a highfalutin way, but the celebrations still exist, upholding the value of our great religious texts and leaders. The rich spend pots of money in the making of temples and donating so that they can secure a seat in heaven. They do this for fame, popularity and reverence, but not because they have an inclination towards religion, or are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the society.

The Dark Side

But there is a dark side too. In the earlier days of the British raj in India, the number of British officers was small. They also had a genuine interest and desire to interact with the natives. As British numbers and power increased, their attitude changed to that of aloofness and consternation. The Indian middle class evolution has also proceeded along similar lines. In the years immediately preceding independence, the middle class was a compact lot; its cultural distance from elected representatives was small, and there was idealism in the air. The middle class considered it a fundamental duty to use its privileged position for the common good. Over the decades, as middle class numbers have proliferated, we have become more and more self-absorbed.

All our work takes place by using 'sources' and 'contacts'. This is how we 'negotiate' or 'bargain' in the professional world. One kin whispers to another about the possibilities of 'managing' or 'adjusting' something according to his requirement. We openly use connections to gain favors, employment, and benefits. In fact, this is rampant among the middle class and it rarely generates an over-whelming response by anyone! Whether it is a government office or a corporate house, we first find out who the 'best' person is to be approached-in terms of religion, caste, friendship- and then get our work done.

Modernization

Indian middle class has never had the powers that it is enjoying now. We are becoming vocal in our thought and attitude. We choke under the regulated old economy and demand that economic controls should be loosened so that goods are available freely in the market. We want education for our children that prepares them for a professional life ahead, preferably in the private sector instead of the traditional sinecures in government offices. We build our well-appointed brick houses in exclusive urban, plush neighborhoods, and surround our abode with high walls that shield us from the lesser mortals. This process, over the course of some fifty odd years, results in a modernizing, exuberant India, with an audacious display of the class divide.

The New Breed

We are the new educated and talented breed making India shine globally in all arenas. There has been a huge transformation in our lifestyles and also desires. The evolution of the middle class has led to increased disposable income which has made this class the largest share of the consumer market. It is already receiving significant attention from the companies and marketers. The Indian middle class continues to climb the economic ladder and the composition of their spending has changed significantly.

The Much Talked About "Joint Family"

The beauty about the Indian [HYPERLINK "http://lifestyle.iloveindia.com/lounge/joint-family-in-india-228.html"](http://lifestyle.iloveindia.com/lounge/joint-family-in-india-228.html) culture lies in its age-long prevailing tradition of the joint family system. A major factor that keeps all the heterogeneous members, cohesively united in peace and love in the joint family system is the significance and magnanimity attached to this protocol. This feature is very unique to Indian middle class families and very special. Manners like touching the feet of elders as a sign of respect, speaking in a respectful and dignified manner, taking elders' advice before venturing into any new project, respecting elders with all our heart, etc are some values which every Indian parent will imbue in their children from the beginning. The head of the family cares for each and every family member equally, and treats everybody as the same. All of us work cohesively and harmoniously to solve a dilemma faced by any member of the joint family. This is the magic of the Indian middle class that keeps us free of worries, and ecstatic and satiated even in today's extremely competitive milieu.

The Big Fat Indian Wedding

Weddings today are not only an auspicious ceremony of the coming together of two individuals but also a hullabaloo, pomp, show and paparazzi of sorts. It's not only the upper strata of the society who indulge in such kind of grandeur, but the middle class and upper middle class has also shown a promising trend in the arrangement of marriages. Discotheques, pre-marriage cocktail parties, bars, lavish banquet halls and multi-cuisine dinners are a normal sight in a typical middle class wedding today. Along with all this, there is this sense of competition between families and friends, and everyone wants to make sure, that his wedding is the best in the his social group.

Our Modern 'Mentality'

The weakest area of our modern life is that of associations that are not ascribed to. Professional relations rarely transform into deep friendships and, if they end up blossoming, they are strictly bound between the confines of status and gender. The average male shies away from the least of interactions of any sort with his female colleagues. When our families meet, we choose our acquaintances strictly on the basis of sex and status. These are the dividing lines. If a single professional woman (and modern India has many of these and few single men) tries to establish friendship with a male colleague, only heaven knows what hell she will go through. She can be tolerated within the threshold of the professional arena, but will rarely be admitted into the sacredness of the home.

In other words, the middle class Indian tries to escape from modernity of the mind. Freedom terrifies us because it demands individual responsibility. We find solace in collectivity. Collective responsibility, based on caste and status, offers an irresistible security. Female modernity often challenges his patriarchal authority, opening up the frightful nadir of sexual choices.

The mentally modern is the most frightening of all type. It means we are only modern where money is concerned. We are allured to shop in Shoppers' Stop and Select City Walk Mall. We want to frequent Greater Kailash in Delhi and Brigade Road in Bangalore. Our only yardstick to measure modernity is jewelry, clothes, i-pods, cars, LCDs, and which locality we live in. Women no longer wear a sindur and a mangalsutra, challenging the middle class patriarchy. We have become very 'liberal' in our spending pattern, and have become a slave to modern consumption. The modernity of the Indian middle class can be easily called the 'pocket modernity', owing to the fact that it is symbolized by the mobile phone or the remote control. It is controlled and hand held. Its powers are graspable, quite literally. Its best feature is that it requires no fine tuning of the mind. Pocket modernity is also politically conservative and economically and socially exclusive. It feeds our middle class conservatism, side by side pitching its sales talk at Indian culture and family. It is not at all surprising that that the great Indian middle class can offer the most willing ear to the Hindu sanctity, whose cultural organizations aim to

preserve national symbols as the sacrosanct womanhood, and whose political organizations encourage privatization, disinvestment, and an enhanced entry of transnational and multinational companies.

... And Now We Are Here...

We Are On the Verge of Extinction

We are like the great Indian Rhino! We, the Indian middle class, have a rough and tough exterior; however we are also topped with a great inborn tendency that leads us towards extinction. The middle class of yesterday is already extinct. Anyone who has kept a track the middle classes' mass movement to 'The land of Great Opportunities' as part of the 'geek' generation will definitely vouch for that.

We Are A Very Ambitious Lot

Our middle class homes are no longer populated by lungi-clad, newspaper-reading and not-so-ambitious salary-earners. That middle class has already disappeared, well, almost. They have moved to the new rich classes. They have acquired the money which have given them an enormous amount of purchasing power. Of course, not all of us (the new rich ones) owe our modernity and plush-ness to the American dollar. We also have a powerful new generation of merchants who have made it big without any phoren money.

Our Value System

The source of the money-power that the newly-acquired middle class have, may be anywhere, but the basic characteristics of that power and influence that money brings is different from what it was in the good old days. Our value system too has undergone a rapid metamorphosis. It has lost some of the stiffness of the previous values. We are talking about the values that are now more individual-centric (friends, job, gizmos) than family or community-centric (status, class, gender). Is it a good thing or a bad thing? We have to decide.

Our Faith in Religion

Religious faith has not gotten diluted in our middle classes. We continue to have faith in our minds. However, the methods of worship have undergone drastic changes with the passage of time. Yesterday, devotee would have spent several hours, waiting arduously, to have a glimpse of his Lord. Today, we will not shrink from spending a couple of thousand bucks as bribes to jump ahead of the queue. The middle classes who have just acquired some new money have evolved their own idiosyncratic value system, or so it seems! This value system enables us to blend traditional mores with modern way of life born out of newly earnd affluence!

Our Views Towards Rituals

Our ethical values suffer from blurredness. There has also been a significant decrease in the obsession with pujas and yagyas. We have not that we have become less religious or more materialistic. But the structural rigidity of the ritualistic behavior of the earlier generations has gradually disappeared. 'Nominalism' or a token adherence is the order of the day. Here I would like to point out that rituals are still being followed in marriage conjugations. These rituals are still a must for no father would deem complete a son's marriage without the traditional 'saatphera'. We neither understand nor tolerate the significance of the cumbersome and elaborate ritual prescribed in the shastras. But we still feel that the marriage is incomplete without the punditji chanting those sonorous chants evoking the gods. Our faith in the ritual is not cent percent, but is just a token of acknowledgment for the tradition.

Our Pursuit of Material Prosperity

Even when it comes to the matter of pursuit of materialistic superfluity, we, the great Indian middle class, have evolved our own value system which is an interesting concoction of practical morality apt to the times and traditional values sanctioned by religion. Our highly ambiguous and ambivalent attitude, which is an atypical middle class patriarch who thinks it is completely all right to pay a lump sum amount of money part of the admission fee for his son's engineering seat in. On top of this, we support our actions by saying that this is how the world functions, and it is foolish be be a lone Lord Rama in a world driven by the black, corrupted economy. We feverishly argue in the second air conditioned train bogie that the country has gone to the devils because of the evils of corruption, while we ourselves indulge corruption.

Our Attitude Towards Corruption

Our attitude towards corruption is highly ambivalent and also very debatable. An outsider may suspect that we talk from the moral high ground whenever we ourselves are victims of corruption in public places. Our reluctance to bribe stems out not because of altruism but because of our own perception of intellectual superiority. When it comes to grabbing or cornering a few of the benefits we are not averse to bribing ourselves, a fact which we conveniently forget. As a matter of fact, in the initial phase of our ascent on the ladder of material prosperity, we had indulged in some palm-greasing ourselves.

Our Perception Of The Caste System

We have always been confused between religious sanctions and social morality. Through the centuries our Indian society has been mixing up religion with ethics. Whereas religions like the Islam have been very monotonous, Hinduism has been quite eclectic, and has incorporated in itself the occasional changes in the social morality, which has been taking place in the light of social turmoil. This is more apparent in the cultural and sociological behavior of the middle class. In the constant disillusionment

that takes place between ethics and religion, we, the middle class, have been trying to reconcile changing social mores with unchangeable religious principles, through centuries. We see a dilution of ethical standards in the evolution of the modern day middle class, and this stems out of the aforementioned confusion.

So Now, What We Really Want Answer To Is This...

...Are we really becoming extinct?

I really think so. According to the middle class definition, we are the middle-income groups who form the commonest denomination in any civilized society or the world. When we say that the middle class is disappearing, what we are trying to expound on the fact that the earlier middle-income groups are vanishing. Of course, it is a truism to express that in the place of the fast-disappearing old middle classes; a new class of people from the low-income groups will emerge and replace them. The only visible difference will be in the pace with which the new middle classes will ascend to the rich. We shall foresee this transformation in the next generation.