

BOOK REVIEW

***Beyond Consumption: India's New Middle Class in the Neo-Liberal Times.* Edited by Manish K Jha and Pushpendra. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 290pp. ISBN 9781032250137. Rs. 995.**

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The idea of the new middle class has been of mounting academic interest among the researchers since the inception of liberalisation in the 1990s. The various segments of this class, and its intersection with the issues of class, caste, financial possibilities, gender, religion and regional setting mark the 'newness' of this burgeoning section of the middle class. The free movement of international capital facilitated by the New Economic Policy of India in a globalised setting, accompanied by technological advancements has given impetus to the consumerist consciousness in lifestyle choices, anxieties and aspirations of the middle class. This growing trend of middle class and the attending issues find eloquent expression and representation in the literary narratives of the contemporary times by a host of young writers. The growing body of contemporary narratives in the post-millennium explore the diverse cultural, social, political, and financial potentials of this class in a metropolitan setting.

Into this oeuvre of new writing, *Beyond Consumption: India's New Middle Class in the Neo-Liberal Times* makes a new intervention and advances scholarship. The volume consists of 14 chapters under the rubric of four broad sections—Social Mobility

and the Making of New Middle Class; Middle Class, Urban Poor, and the Migrants: A Complex Interface; Middle Class in the Regional Landscape; and New Middle Class: Exploring Technology, Identity, and Spaces.

The preliminary^{1st} chapter, “Contextualising India’s new middle class: Intersectionalities and social mobility”, serving as a general introduction, interrogates the politics of new middle class lifestyle through the change in consumption practices such as admission in English medium private schools, investment in housing, cars, and so on. The chapter provides an overview of the gallery of ideas presented by the various contributors in the individual chapters, thereby laying down the background of the work.

Part I, consisting of 3 chapters, titled “**Social mobility and the making of new middle class**,” explores the various implications of the growth of the middle class in India and uncovers the complex politics of caste, religion and gender, with focus on how social identities and socio-economic expectations and experiences of this class are shaped by caste. Chapter 2, “Risk, trust, and social networks: A study among middle-class Nair families near Technopark, Kerala”, foregrounds the blurring of economic heterogeneity and asymmetry mediated through the participation of the Technocrats with a case study from Kerala. The next chapter, “Muslim middle class in India: Size, diversity, and correlates”, demonstrates the reasons impeding the social mobility and ascendance of the Muslim community to the NMCs through an in-depth statistical analysis of the demographic details. The 4th chapter, “Dalit desires, middle-classness, and the city of Surat”, examines the challenges and problems faced by the Mahyavanshi Dalit community of Surat for their spatial and upward social mobility through the medium of education from English medium schools, adaptation to metropolitan consumerist lifestyle, marital and residential setup, food habits, and so on.

Part II, consisting of 3 chapters, titled, “Middle class, urban poor, and migrants: A complex interface” particularises the dynamics of power operational among the various segments of the new middle class. The 5th chapter, “The middle class and migrant:

Contention in the city”, unveils the apathetic and insensitive attitude of the new middle class towards the city’s poor and the migrant by rendering them invisible and unwanted, pollutants of the society in the face of an international crisis like the COVID 19 pandemic. In chapter 6, “In the pursuit of middle-classness: Exploring the aspirations and strategies of the urban poor in neoliberal Delhi” the urban poor’s aspiration for upward social mobility to attain the capital positioning of the middle class in the society is projected. The various strategies that aid in such a transition like attainment of English medium education, developing computer skills are also talked about in this chapter. Politicizing the screams of the rape victim in Manjula Padmanabhan’s play *Lights Out* is what constitutes the crux of the 7th chapter, “Politics of dark rooms and neurotic urbanity through Padmanabhan’s *Lights Out*”. It exhibits the city’s exclusionary middle-class politics that feeds on ostracization of one class by another in the name of beautification and development of the metro space thereby reinforcing the us/them binary with the lower sections of the society.

Part III, consisting of 4 chapters, titled “Middle class in the regional landscape” talks about the diminutive growth towards social mobility and the internal dynamics that come into play due to the asymmetrical social order of the middle-class population in North-eastern India and Kashmir. Chapter 8, “The Kashmiri middle class and its everyday politics”, exposes the complex infiltration of neoliberal consumerist practices of the Kashmiri new middle-class interweaved with everyday politics of communal tensions and gender rigidities. Chapter 9, “Of imported SUVs and buying ‘The Last Supper’ in Milan: ‘New middle class’ and its crisis of hegemony in India’s Northeast” deals with the post-liberalisation socio-economic transformations, assertion of students’ politics through various movements, the State’s hegemonic control, the development of consciousness of the new entrants of this class and their heterogenic social composition with Assam as a case study. Memory, identity and domestic space problematize the idea of ‘thresholdness’ in Chapter 10 titled, “The ‘Threshold People’: Narrating middle-class lives in neoliberal Kolkata”. Contrary to the

other chapters in this volume, the 11th chapter, “Doing good, being political: Middle class *bhadralok* narratives from neoliberal India” embodies the conflict between the left-wing notion of collective good for the society and the promotion of self-interests advocated by consumerism and individualism in neo-liberal times by highlighting an attitude of resistance towards consumerist practices.

Part IV, consisting of 3 chapters, titled “New middle class: Exploring technology, identity, and spaces” focuses on the gendered position of the women in a technologically advanced yet patriarchal setup. The 12th chapter, “‘Cyborgs’ or ‘House Elves’? WhatsApp mothering in a Greater Mumbai suburb”, sheds light on the reinforcement of the culturally sanctioned, ideologically governed, gender roles of women as a care-giver, nourisher and cultivator of good qualities, by monitoring the activities of children through WhatsApp. Chapter 13, “Work-from-home for Bangalore’s new middle-class women: No Future ‘workplace’ for women?” moves beyond the mainstream discussions of the new middle-class women towards her gendered positioning in the intersections of digital labour, capital and patriarchy in the pre-covid work-from-home scenario where women are fraught with the conflicting roles of a mother, household care-giver and IT professional in the context of Bangalore. The last chapter, “‘The One-Dimensional Man’: Unravelling identity of a new Indian subject”, explicates the disruptions within the class and the constant hegemonic State control of the BJP to introduce the perfect idle class subject.

Within the growing body of middle-class consumer culture writings in a post-liberal society, the book’s strength lies in a holistic study of the complex politics of caste, gender and religion that shape the rising population through socio-economic changes. Examining the various employment patterns, labour processes and market economy, the volume situates the middle-class experiences under diverse discursive and consumerist practices. The various contributors bring in empirical data to make an interdisciplinary study of the class, ranging from survey-based case studies to ethnographic statistics. However, the volume under represents the populace from the semi-urban and township backdrops and simply

highlights a metro-bred class with white-collar jobs and English-medium education. Although the volume focuses on liberalisation as a catalytic agent towards transformation of the old middle-class, the various cultural and social transitions faced by each religious and regional community is not properly stressed upon. Furthermore, the experiences of the tribal communities from across the country and their aspirational movement towards social ascendancy to secure a middle-class positioning is not explored in this volume. The volume could be targeted as a scholarly deliberation towards students, researchers, faculty members and the general public who are interested in the sociology of globalisation in a post-millennium setting.