

Denationalised middle class: Global escape from Mandal

Rajesh Kochhar

Globalisation has prevented Indian upper castes from accepting a diminished role and status consistent with their actual numbers. Aspirations of an Indian middle class that revels in emulating the west are costing India dear and glorifying trivia in an unprecedented fashion.

Globalisation has allowed the Indian middle class (IMC) to divest itself of any sense of 'noblesse oblige' that it may have nurtured earlier, declare autonomy and adopt a lifestyle that mimics the one in economically advanced countries. In the colourful words of American movie-maker, Sam Goldwyn, the IMC has opted to include itself out. The phrase is apt because the burden of catapulting the IMC into a global orbit still rests on the emaciated shoulders of Indian society and economy.

In the early days of British rule over India, number of British officers was small and they had a genuine interest in, and desire to interact with, the natives. As British numbers and power increased, their attitude changed to that of contempt and aloofness. The evolution of the Indian middle class has proceeded along similar lines. In the years immediately after independence, the middle class was still compact, its cultural distance from elected representatives was small, and there was idealism in the air. The middle class considered itself to be duty bound to use its privileged position for common good. Over the decades, as middle class numbers have swelled, it has become more and more self-absorbed.

Coincidentally or otherwise, globalisation in India has been accompanied by the socially more momentous process of Mandalisation, involving transfer of political power to the numerically strongly but hitherto marginalised (in north India) middling caste groupings known as other backward castes (OBCs). This transfer of power is made all the more unpalatable by deliberate offensive posturing by hitherto suppressed or ignored caste groups. Mandalisation involves reservations in government jobs and more importantly in professional colleges. Hierarchies of the governmental system, seen as a worthy substitute for the earlier rigidities of the caste system, have turned topsy turvy; and the space available to the upper castes in class rooms has also drastically shrunk. If globalisation had not taken place, it is very likely that Mandalisation would have eventually produced a new equilibrium state in which the upper castes would have willy-nilly accepted a diminished role and status consistent with their actual numbers. Globalisation has disrupted this social process by providing a way out. Upper-caste dominated middle classes have decided to decouple from mainstream India and to attach themselves to the west. No wonder then, of all the aspects of globalisation, the possibility of quota-free education in India and abroad and access to foreign consumer brands has appealed to the IMC the most.

Global aspirations of IMC are costing India dear. In the last seven years, there has been a tremendous increase in governmental salary and pension bills to the detriment of national savings and investments. In addition, there are ever increasing levels of corruption. The number of Indian students abroad has increased significantly. In 1998-99, a total of 37,482 students enrolled in US. Five years later, in 2002-03, the number stood

at 74,603, an increase of 100 per cent. As the executive director of US Educational Foundation explains, “Students who do not gain admission in India’s premier institutions see the US as an alternative”. There are other countries like Australia which are attracting more and more Indian students. Unlike the situation a generation ago, when students went abroad for post-graduate and doctoral studies on scholarship, Indians are now enrolling in foreign countries for basic degrees and diplomas and are being financed by their parents at home. Where does the money for education outside the low-cost, reservation-dominated government sector in India and abroad come from?

We are witnessing the emergence of a new young people-dominated class, which we may dub as denationalised middle class (DMC). If this class were asked to choose between a Padma Shri and a US visa, there can be no doubt that it will opt for the latter. The DMC is carrying out a multi-stage exercise to establish its identity and acquire legitimacy. First, DMC is setting itself apart by describing the ‘other’. (Sehwag's father keeps buffaloes in his backyard. Saif cannot speak a single sentence of English correctly). Contempt for ‘Hindi medium types’ is matched only by contempt for the language itself. One wonders if there is any other country where such inelegant and grammatically incorrect language is spoken as it is on television and radio, especially FM channels.

The next stage involves assembling elements that will go into defining DMC as an entity. To begin with there are global inputs: short messaging system (SMS) shorthand, SMS and internet jokes, and invented ‘bossisms’. From the home turf comes the co-option of Mumbai street slang. (Sanjay Dutt mouths a tougher screen version of this slang, while Shahrukh Khan represents the ‘cuter’ version). Extant cultural elements are selectively being rejected (Sehgal and Rafi); ridiculed (“You may find it laughable that in earlier times orchestra comprised only tabla and harmonium”); adapted (“S D Burman is an example that one could be trendy even in a dhoti”); or mutated (catchy old songs, mostly by Asha Bhosle, being ‘sexed’ up for video).

Identity alone is not sufficient. There must be legitimacy also. If you are doing offshore work while sitting in your own country, or putting on a false accent under an alias, it is not surprising then that legitimacy for DMC comes from the west. Every time an NRI wins recognition in his or her host country or honours, genuine and dubious, are bestowed on the Indians in the west (beauty titles, Oscar nominations, film jury memberships, *Times/ Newsweek* cover photo), or Hindi films are patronised by the general population in the west, DMC’s own sense of worthiness is enhanced. As a tribute to the spending capacity of the DMC and as a concession to its thoughtlessness, many erstwhile national newspapers are vying with each other to become DMC house magazines, revelling in stupid bilingual puns and clever wordplay. Never before, since the days of the much-maligned Muhammad Shah Rangeela and the Avadh Nawabdom, has stupidity been so valued and trivia so glorified. Positive trends in economic indicators may make one feel good. But in the long run what future can a country have if it is disowned by its own middle class?