

ADVENT OF THE TRANSNATIONAL MIDDLE CLASS INDIANS

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The recent discourse on Indian media and popular culture indicate trends towards the tide of 'transnational identities'. In this context one may argue about the 'end of nation-state' given the rise of the transnational linkages and construction of identities which also confront the existing notions of class boundaries. This paper seeks to address the impact of popular culture in the construction of a transnational middle class identity, in an era of globalization of communication and its subsequent impact on the discourse on culture and consumption.

India which began its journey as a modern democratic nation, supported Nehruvian discourse of state socialism, that laid emphasize on the state-led development, is yet to come out of the dichotomy of social equality vs growth debate. Recently the Indian middle class which has been at times been portrayed as a conscience keeper and perceived as an antidote to any kind of bloody class revolution, given the existence of an uneven socio-economic order, has generated lot of interest in terms of their representation in the existing popular culture.

It was felt that the early harbingers of communication, holding positions in the government, devoted very little time to the official communication machinery, while Gandhi himself had been a great communicator during the freedom movement. Robin Jeffrey states that, Gandhi and his adherents paid scant attention to tapping the potential of exploring films and radio in conveying the message of the nation to its ordinary populace. He argues that,

“innovation in these spheres came primarily in films and from men and women with backgrounds in commerce and courtly entertainment”¹

This assumes importance as many states had realized the significance of the radio and television, and use of newspaper and films for promoting the objectives of the state had received great attention. The pre 1991 era which also was reminiscent of the Indian state’s control over information and broadcasting was replaced by an increasing marketization of media which ironically seems to have airbrushed majority of Indians, especially the marginalized sections inhabiting India’s countryside. This is a significant shift in the state discourse as, “for the last 150 years, westernized, middle class Indians have learnt to look at the first approach – the one which orients the needs of the culture to the needs of the state – as the very epitome of political maturity, achievement and development”.² Hence in other words popular culture has an inbuilt cultural component which seeks to influence the audience and legitimize state actions, in the long run.

The Indian middle class has made inroads into the popular memory through a series of interventions confronting the state apparatus leading to some events being occupying prime space in popular culture. A classic case could be the token activism as displayed in films, wherein their role in public affairs, are projected as symbolic gestures of civic citizenship. Deshpande argues that we have no position to take in the matter when he states that “It is as simple as the Hindi commercial film happens to be; hence our propensity to use it. Anyway the greater and the smaller gods of the Bollywood heavens, like our mythological gods themselves, descended to our earth to tell us what our dharma kartavyas (moral duties) are.”³

The Indian middle class, which is accused of being socially and political dormant has registered sporadic presence protesting against issues that affect them which is attributed to the ‘Rang De Basanti-effect’. The Anna Hazare movement and its impact also stressed upon the fact that the middle class could no longer be ignored. This has been vindicated by the impact of the

¹ Jeffrey, Robin, *The Mahatma didn’t like the movies and why it matters*, Global Media and communication, Sage publications, Vol.2 (2):206-207, 2006.

² Nandy, Ashis, *Culture, State and the Rediscovery of Indian Politics*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol.XIX, No.49, P- 2078, 8 December 1984.

³ Deshpande, GP, *Thou Shall Not Forget Thy Duty*, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol XLIV No. 20, May 16, 2009.

protests and candle light vigils in protest following a brutal gang rape in December 2012, in New Delhi.⁴ These developments are matched by the process of localization, responding to the middle class aspirations and the challenges confronting them, in the age of satellite television and 24/7 mode of media system.

Conspicuous Consumption

The revolutionary zeal as displayed in the film 'Rang De Basanti', brought the rising youth power and the fighting spirit to various multiplexes and TV screens, with the tacit approval of the market forces that determines the present consumption pattern, of the Indian middle class. A film which affirmed the rise of an awakened generation, ensured that the message percolated across the nation with suitable taglines that implored the youth to express themselves and adhere to the mantra of consumerism by urging them to hold their heads high while drinking coco-cola in order to celebrate youth, through various brands like LG handsets, Berger paints and use of an exclusive clothing of Provogue inspired by the 'revolution' on celluloid. It is estimated that such consumerism and appropriation of values to invoke revolutionary zeal, civic citizenship incurred an expense of Rs. 10 crores for the publicity for the film, an enormous amount the Indian film history.⁵ While it is debatable, if the film offered a conservative outlook in terms of internalization of violence and respond to the menace of corruption, in an age that is marked by the evolution of cosmopolitanism and transnational middle class youth platforms with MTV-inspired youth discourse.

The film certainly seeks to reverse the timeframe and seeks to amalgamate the middle-class ethos with a bourgeois nationalism with a sense of acceptable notion of social activism. It seeks to recontextualise the notion of a 'quintessential Indian nation' in the popular conscious, and berates the political class for its alleged nexus with corruption and nepotism reminiscent of the overwhelming process of the global capitalistic order. However it conveniently seeks to emphasize on the pivotal position by bringing the urbanized middle class at the epicenter in

⁴Kundu, Kunal Kumar, *India's middle class comes of political age*, January 29, 2013, http://www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/OA29Df01.html, accessed on December 24, 2013

⁵ *The 'Rang De Basanti' marketing revolution*, <http://www.indiantelevision.com/release/y2k6/feb/febrel37.htm> , Accessed - 30 October 2013.

negotiating with the crisis confronting our nation and bestows upon them the historic responsibility to ameliorate the nation of its ills. Ironically it obliterates the possibilities of having a broader canvas akin to a rainbow alliance that could give representation to the working class and the marginalized groups of our countryside, while it was termed as a nationalist film highlighting the relevance of a generation that has awakened and seeks to chart out a new course outside its hitherto comfort zone.

Reclaiming the Diaspora

In Indian popular cultures the 'nation as family' clearly refers to the common perception of about the Indian middle class, the only group that is visible in the post 1991, in popular culture in terms of representation or in terms of highlighting their aspirations through the institutions of marriage, state and the new category that has captured prime space in the social and political discourse, ie, the Indian Diaspora.

In this context one may also find that the representation of the Indian diaspora in Mumbai cinema (Hindi films produced in Bollywood) has undergone interesting shifts over the last two decades. The middle class politics to a great extent has influenced the representation of the Indian diaspora and there is a qualitative shift in addressing the issues concerning one's 'homeland' which also marks a clear departure from its traditional observations. The notion of being a deserter in the films of 1970s, bereft of the symbiotic link with the motherland has transformed into a model Indian since the 1990s. The NRI is reclaimed as an achiever whom the fellow-Indians look up to as an object of emulation and this changing scenario also showcases the nonresident Indian as a morally superior, "a better human being who despite living in the individualist and antithetical environment of the capitalist West, remains firmly rooted in Indian traditions, thus also ostensibly facilitating an 'ideal' synthesis of spiritualism and capitalism".⁶ The Mumbai film industry has emphasized on the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) since the last two decades and with their linkages to economic, technological and ideological trends including liberalization.

⁶ Christiane Brosius and Nicolas Yazgi, *'Is there no place like home?': Contesting cinematographic constructions of Indian diasporic experiences*, Contributions to Indian Sociology, SAGE Publications, Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore, 41(3), P-358, 2007.

The Pravasi Bhartiya Diwas of the NDA regime tapped into these sentiments and acknowledged by the Indian state. The Diaspora is now a global citizen, straddling between different continents and at the same time reclaimed by the middle class as a role model. The conception of Indian Diaspora and the perception of the Indian state have undergone significant changes since the last two decades.

The Indian state has negotiated with the claims of the Diaspora with normative definition of nationalism to a construction of broader principles that create conditions for citizenship beyond national boundaries. The recent initiative to grant voting rights to Non resident Indians (NRI) is significant point to the issues involved.

This is a qualitative shift from the earlier portrayal of the India Diaspora whose departure from their native land was contested and were persuaded to return, reminiscent of the return of the prodigal son.⁷ This discourse has undergone a change in the last two decades, when the notion of global Indians, were reclaimed by the nation (a middle class manoeuvre) targeting successful personalities, especially in the west as someone organically linked to India. Hence in other words identity used to be a value and now it is sentimentality. Late Yash Chopra's films vindicate these notions of nationalizing the global discourse and products, seeking to claim the migrant, who has been proclaimed as a blood brother, and "has therefore ceased to be a symbol of the 'Other' and has become instead the prototype of the new Indian, globalized and modern, but always a nationalist at heart. The fact that he belongs to the nation is constantly underlined through the use of the possessive pronoun before the words 'country', 'India' or 'Hindustan' and, despite going through all types of ordeals, his 'Indianness' is always reaffirmed at the end of the film"⁸.

The Indian Middle Class while inclined to ascribing to a past epoch, has tried to nationalize the global images and signs in the present order. Some of the events across the globe like the project of political reaction in India in wake of the racial tensions in Australia and

⁷ Manoj Kumar's films, *Purb Pashchim* and others deal with alienation and invocation of return to homeland, that symbolised purity and an antidote to westernization and cultural pollution.

⁸ Therwath, Ingrid, 'Shining Indians': *Diaspora and Exemplarity in Bollywood*, South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal, 4 | 2010 P-6, <http://samaj.revues.org/3000>, accessed on November 19, 2014.

similar developments had a cascading effect in the national domain. At the same time the media representation projects an alliance, which the Middle Class seeks to build, transcending national boundaries, with the dominant global culture.

Class Interests

Neelam Srivastava highlights the same concern when she states that, “When the film came out, Indian critics dubbed it a ‘class hit’, and a film for the ‘thinking viewer of the multiplexes’ rather than for a mass audience. The Bombay film industry draws a rather patronizing distinction between distinct viewing publics, the ‘classes’ and the ‘masses’ (middle class versus working class). This socioeconomic classification, based on class, caste, geographical location, education and occupation is modeled on a developmentalist idea of the Indian population”.⁹

This leads us to reexamine the vital role played by the middle class as a distinct social group that has shaped and as well as internalized the model of modernist national development, which it seeks to consolidate through the present discourse generated by the popular culture. The advent of liberalization, privatization and globalization has also witnessed the resilience of the Indian middle class in terms of it emerging as an agent and also as also a targeted audience of nationalist discourses of development as well as of specific state policies.

It was only during the widening gulf which persisted in spite of growing representation of the disposed section in the power structure, when politics transformed from an agenda to serve the masses to a lucrative form in pursuit of private gains and monopoly. This was also the phase when it was opined that the middle class elites drifted away from the domain of the the Nehruvian state, and sought some kind of reinvention of India. It was a decisive moment while the conventional mode of understanding has been confined to the inevitable conflict between ‘capital’ and ‘labour’ that are the moving forces in ushering in changes in the present modern societies. The drifting away of the middle class is also attributed to the middle class who were the principal architects and supporters embracing the new liberal order and imbibing the norms

⁹ Srivastava, Neelam, *Bollywood as National(ist) Cinema Violence, Patriotism and the National-Popular in Rang De Basanti*, Third Text, Routledge, Vol. 23, Issue 6, November, p.708,2009.

of economic liberalism at the beginning of the 1990s, when attempts were explored for alternative social and political models that assured them of defending the existing order and check the emasculation of the Indian polity and society, in wake of threats emanating from below.¹⁰

Given the diversity of the middle class, which is not a monolith entity, and is polymorphous, as described by an eminent sociologist Andre Beteille, who states that the middle class orientation to inequality is competitive and not hierarchical in contrast to the old order which was determined by primordial identity - birth and location in the hierarchy. While at the same time he cautions that, “It must not be forgotten that a competitive system generates inequality even where the competition is fair, and in India it is not particularly fair. People use the advantages of family, kinship and caste to push ahead without much consideration for the cost to others or for the rules of the game. An expanding middle class has an ugly face and its members often appear as callous and self-serving to those who are attached to the traditional order in which individuals remained in the social positions assigned to them at birth”.¹¹

An India which is at the cusp of a new order, and perceived by many strategists in think-tanks as an emerging power, that seeks to compete with the other powers has also witnessed a calibrated attempt to present a homogenous image of the nation, resulting in periodic denial of the existence of the various groups in the bollywood masala films. This observation stands vindicated in context of the debate on exporting poverty, wherein a foreign film has been made on the lives of people inhabiting India’s slums. A nation where popular culture has been dominated by the idiosyncrasies of the new rich class, the beneficiaries of the liberalization of the economy and by the number of billionaires in the country, urging its populace to emulate their success stories, was confronted by the success of “*Slumdog Millionaire*” a largely British made film, based on an Indian story with Indian crew. The film generated enough controversy wherein nationalist grammar was invoked as it was seen as another attempt of the western world to fossilize the pre colonial image of India and its inhabitants. While the larger issue was of the

¹⁰Harriss, John, *The onward march of the new ‘Great Indian middle class’*, The Hindu, 15 August 2007 <http://www.hindu.com/af/india60/stories/2007081550681800.htm>, accessed on November 12, 2013.

¹¹Beteille, Andre, *The Indian middle class*, The Hindu, 05 February 2001, <http://www.hindu.com/thehindu/2001/02/05/stories/05052523.htm>, accessed on November 12, 2013.

western image of the orient, as a journalist remarks, “So what then explains the critical hosannas and the popular appeal of Slumdog across the Western world? Simply put, it is the success of a story set in a clichéd perception of India. This is not just about poverty — it could have been eastern mysticism, hysterical religiosity, crime, conflict or corruption, or even global security threats emanating from this part of the world — all easily grasped by the West, thanks so selective media coverage of the region”.¹²

At the same time popular culture have increasingly endorsed the attempt to invoke an indifference vis a vis the others in its discourse, which scholars like Ashish Nandy attribute it to the shift from pluralism, a process endorsed by the Indian state’s action, retreating from its origin, which was earlier designed and legitimized by a diverse range of cultures. He states that, in the present context, “The new culture of the state has come to depend more and more on the expanding on the expanding pan-Indian, urban, middle-class culture, serving as an emerging mass culture. This mass culture is not the central tendency of the diverse popular cultures of different regions of India but an identifiable, will-bounded culture like that of an American-style melting pot.”¹³

The argument that popular culture seeks to cater to the tastes of the middle class, ever since they emerged as an important constituency of the market for the booming consumer goods, and that it merely seeks to respond to the socio-economic challenges and the cultural crises confronted by them during the post liberalization era, which has also resulted in the privatization of the air waves. The common refrain is that the era of uncompromising consumerism of today is also juxtaposed to the Indian middle classes holding disproportionate space in public policy and discourse in governance, in contradiction to their political engagement.

Leela Fernandes gives an assessment of the prevailing public discourses, wherein the consumption pattern practiced by the middle class and the depiction of their lifestyle serves as a yardstick differentiating themselves from the traditional middle class, whose social mores were determined by the socialism of Nehruvian state and the Gandhian notion of austerity. She defines

¹²Rajesh, Y P, *Danny, David, Freddie*, The Indian Express, 20 February 2009, <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/danny-david-freddie/425322>, accessed on November 12, 2013.

¹³ Nandy, Ashis, *The Political Culture of the Indian State*, Hasan, Zoya (ed) Politics and the State in India, P-71, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

the present scenario as, “This heightened visibility has transformed the new middle class into an object for the projection of political, cultural, and ideological assumptions from a range of actors.”¹⁴

On the other hand it is vehemently argued that one has to embrace the grammar of globalism to secure space and legitimacy as, “To globalise itself, Hindi cinema perforce also had to be transformed into ‘Bollywood’. Very brief news items in editions of Indians newspapers in late July this year have conveyed the two-fold news that the veteran actors, Naseeruddin Shah and Om Puri, have expressed umbrage at this term, and that Bollywood has now been accepted by Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, following the example of the Oxford English Dictionary, as a word in the English language. Once the West has conferred recognition on a social or cultural phenomenon, it then gives it a name: what is peripheral or transient becomes pucca.”¹⁵

Commentators have termed this as a ‘Mental Exit’ which tantamount to rejecting the institution of state whilst inhabiting within its territorial confines. This is manifested through various actions ranging from imploring the state and at times seeking to subvert the system to evade responsibilities and duties and attempt to legitimize their imperviousness towards the legal institutions. Hence the nation exists in fragments in popular culture and the city is a manifestation of numerous gated communities with their own management of their own security, access to basic resources and means of entertainment. The home insulates them from the general vagaries of life and their ability to snap the chord with the nation, gets replicated across the nation.¹⁶

This is evident in the depiction of an insular world as highlighted in some of the popular films, which also proclaim Indian (Hindi) films responding to new realities and catering to the ‘lived experience’ of the middle class. The film *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* which has been projected as a new-age *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, another film, which caught the attention of the middle class, in terms of deriving consent for an opulent consumption and unapologetic

¹⁴ Fernandes, Leela, *India’s New Middle Class*, University of Minnesota Press, P-30, 2006.

¹⁵ Lal, Vinay and Rajan, Gita, *Ethnographies of the Popular and the Public Sphere in India*, South Asian Popular Culture, Routledge, Vol. 5, No. 2, P-88, October 2007.

¹⁶ Deb, Sandipan, *The Exit of the Middle Class*, 11 July 2013, <http://www.livemint.com/Opinion/vslJbi0RTC3Z2WNlddaLL/The-Exit-of-the-Middle-Class.html>

demeanor towards ostentatious celebration. While the film deals with individual ambitions, alienation from native land and dislocation, what contrasts it from others is the opulent celebrations and indulgence of capital and consumption, portrayed with a modicum of ordinariness. The consumption pattern is seen as an innate in the social settings, while emphasizing on human emotions and celebration of life.¹⁷

Conclusion

The notion of Indianness is primarily derived from two developments; viz a shared sense of history which includes a belief in broad civilizational unity and the consensus evolved in the Constituent Assembly debates on citizenship and cultural pluralism. The framers of the Constitution drew up the guidelines which paved the way for recognition of individual rights and the recognition of their membership of groups and communities through process of accommodation and integration. M.N.Srinivas observed that, “Consumerism is an important characteristic of the middle classes and it is spreading to other sections of society. The urge to become part of the middle class is now widespread, cutting across religion, language and caste....sections of castes want very much to become part of the middle class and once it happens, education, professions and lifestyle, become indicators of status putting caste in the background”.¹⁸

So one may argue that the determination to usher in India into the globalised economy from a ‘license Raj’ is also reflected in the Bollywood too, which has embarked on a journey to globalize itself. While the present popular culture is confronted by alternative media system, which seeks to question the middle class discourse in nationalizing the global. The Middle Class representation seeks to target the state through popular culture for appropriate allocation of resources and also negotiate with the global mediascape in seeking a fair share of their representation.

¹⁷ Pal, Deepanjana, *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani is a new-age Hum Aapke Hain Kaun*, 01 June 2013, <http://www.firstpost.com/bollywood/movie-review-yeh-jawaani-hai-deewani-is-a-new-age-hum-aapke-hain-kaun-830767.html>

¹⁸ Srinivas, M.N., “An Obituary on Caste as a system”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 February 2003, www.epw.org.in.

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