

THE 'NEW' INDIAN MIDDLE CLASSES AND THE PACKAGED TOUR: COMPARATIVE PARADIGMS

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Abstract:

*The paper attempts to trace the complexities of the socio-political, economic and cultural changes in the 'new' Indian middle classes in the post-independence period of Indian history, in relation to the dynamics of liberalization and globalization, focusing on the area of travel in particular. While taking stock of the enormous and deep difficulties in classifying and delineating the boundaries of the 'middle class' as a category, the paper seeks to locate travel as one of the important elements in the conspicuous consumption that has, to a large extent, come to characterize this complex social group. The middle classes' "aspirational consumerism" of today includes foreign and domestic travel, made convenient and accessible in the form of packaged tours. The paper draws on theoretical definitions of travel that conceptualize it as a conscious enactment of individual and collective identity (including that of class), socio-cultural boundaries and applies these notions to the 'new' Indian middle classes of today, illustrating from Srinath Perur's travelogue *If It's Monday, It Must be Madurai*, examining the varied ways in which the packaged tour has become a signifier of, and for, the new Indian middle classes.*

Keywords: *Indian Middle Classes, Packaged Travel, Aspirational Class Identity, Consumerism.*

The rise and growth of the 'new' middle classes in post-independence India has arguably been one of the most prominent phenomena in the last seventy-odd years of Indian history. Their predecessors, products of the late colonial period, were identifiable as a social group through their access to English education and modern forms of employment such as the civil service. They had political assertiveness which rested its claim on their ability to represent public interests, often against colonial state power (Fernandes 2). The post-independence generations (upto the early 1980s) of this societal group, when the newly-independent nation was grappling with issues of development and economic enterprise, were largely characterized and influenced by the austerity of the nationalist-struggle era, with its legacy of unselfish patriotism and nationalistic optimism and a corresponding participatory identity in the public sphere, made possible by lingering Gandhian ideology and the Nehruvian socialist welfare state. The attitudes, values, lifestyles and consumption practices of the middle classes of these decades (as Leftist critics like Harsh Mander and Pavan Varma have highlighted in their works) had an enduring emphasis on the avoidance of waste, 'vulgar' extravagance and public display of money wealth, and an ever-present consciousness of the living conditions of those less fortunate than themselves. Somewhat in contradistinction to these near-Habermasian values was also a vestigial colonial elite legacy, that of a notional construct of the West as 'superior' (Brosius 12) and a self-conscious measuring of non-Western categories against Western models (Fernandes xxvii).

With increased opportunities for education and employment in the 1980s Rajiv Gandhi government-led liberalisation phase, the middle classes became identifiable more as a consumer-based group rather than a state-managed one (Fernandes 2-3). With India's entry in the 1990s globalisation era as a significant player in the global market, the middle classes (an estimated 300 million and growing) which form a large segment of India's burgeoning population, have been the beneficiaries of a quantum leap in opportunities for education, employment and consequently a steep increase in economic status and spending power. This in turn has led to a culture of consumerism among the new Indian middle classes,

which has manifested itself in the form of conspicuous consumption of myriad goods and services hitherto unavailable in the domestic sphere. 'Typical' middle class lifestyles dependent on modest family incomes of an earlier time have changed, to become unrecognisably opulent and aspirational in their display of wealth. Leela Fernandes, in her analysis of the changing socio-economic-political dynamics of this new manifestation of the middle classes, observes that there are conflicting perceptions of the so-called middle class image of today: one which derives its genealogy from the socialist public-oriented welfare model, and its opposite, which valorises capitalism by arguing that the relative success of liberalised economic reforms in India is largely due to the participation of the largest segment of its population, the middle classes. The most important point here, as Fernandes notes, is that both these views, while polarised in relation to the middle class ethos of today, conceptualise the middle classes as a "self-evident force of consumption and as the prime recipients of the benefits of liberalisation" (xvii). The difficulties of a realistic definition of the exact composition of the 'new' Indian middle classes of today are many, not the least of which is that the economic, and socio-cultural boundaries are constantly shifting and enlarging, to include aspirational sections of society, which is to be understood in terms of an inclusivity dependent on many other variables such as gender, religion and caste.

While there are important differentiations to be made within the various strata of the new Indian middle classes, it is possible to notice a general shift in terms of their lifestyle expenditure and a corresponding shift in ethos, which is more noticeably predicated on a materialistic value system, composed of global-standardised-use-and-throw-consumable templates. Foreign and domestic travel, which has always been an inexorable marker of the Indian middle classes, has now joined the bewildering array of consumables. The particular form in which international and local travel have become accessible to the middle-class consumer is that of the packaged tour. The paper argues that through participation in the packaged tour culture, the hypothesized 'typical' middle class emerges as a socio-political construct, by constituting and enacting its own perceived identities, class boundaries, and socio-cultural prejudices. The paper illustrates from Srinath Perur's travelogue *If It's Monday, It Must be Madurai*, the varied ways in which the packaged tour has become a signifier of, and for, the new Indian middle classes.

It has been observed that the 'new' Indian middle classes, like other social groups, have a range of classificatory practices which produce boundaries, not necessarily restricted to class, but also in terms of cultural distinctions, which often form a central part of middle class identity (Fernandes xxix, 14). These practices, mainly in the arena of consumption, have linked themselves coincidentally and strategically with late nationalistic narratives which seek to manage India's relationship with Westernisation and globalisation and led to the emergence of a hegemonic identity (Fernandes xxxii-xxxiii). Studies have traditionally identified four categories of the middle classes, i.e. as income-based groups, structurally defined groups, aspirational-cultural groups, and most importantly as products of discourse and the social imagination (Fernandes xxiv). I would argue that as a form of consumption, the site of travel via the packaged tour makes it possible for all four of the abovementioned categories to be construed as coexistent within the larger term 'middle classes'. Sightseeing and pilgrimage were two dominant motifs of older notions of domestic travel for the pre-globalisation era middle-classes, usually undertaken as a family activity, and international travel was often within the template of the once-in-a-lifetime concept with which the expense of travel, like other costly commodities (cars, houses) would be borne. The development of the tourism industry has been largely in tandem with the 'rise' of the new Indian middle classes. The conducted tour as practised in India today, as Srinath Perur points out in his Introduction, offers a conveniently packaged affordable form of both traditional as well as newer ideas of travel, in which the individual will be part of a cross-section of the various middle classes represented in the travel group. Thus, through travel, the texture of individual experience of the unfamiliar can be controlled within that which is relatively familiar, i.e. a group of fellow-travellers with similar and varying economic socio-cultural locations. It follows therefore that the experience of travel in a packaged conducted tour, and its articulation in travel writing, offer rich sites for the enactment of identity, both individually and

collectively. In the words of Tim Youngs:

Travel writing, one may argue, is the most socially important of all literary genres. It records our temporal and spatial progress. It throws light on how we define ourselves “and on how we identify others. Its construction of our sense of 'me' and 'you', 'us' and 'them', operates on individual and national levels and in the realms of psychology, society and economics. The processes of affiliation and differentiation at play within it can work to forge alliances, precipitate crises and provoke wars. Travelling is something we all do, on different scales, in one form or another. We all have stories of travel and they are of more than personal consequence (*CCTW1*).

The argument that consumerist culture has been construed by many global cultural forms as constituting a standard of progress, typified by the affluence and lifestyles of the middle class in general, is eminently applicable to the Indian middle classes of today. Although class is not, as Fernandes points out, a foundational category for defining the 'new' Indian middle classes (xxxiii), the expense of travel when undertaken by the middle classes, makes it possible to view the packaged tour as yet another globally available commodity on the one hand, and as a performance of class status through its consumption, on the other. The conducted packaged tour has emerged as a cultural motif in the discursive practices of travel, in which the middle class consumer is seen (and sees himself) as a participant not only in a 'new' India, but in the global cultural sphere as well. The rhetoric of global economic enterprise has metamorphosed the erstwhile humble packaged tour/trip into flamboyantly advertised 'products', which are developed by executives with regard to price, itinerary and comfort-levels to attract the “package-touring public”; Perur draws our attention to the readiness with which the attitudes of participants in the packaged product imbibe this corporate vocabulary (91) to fit into the new nationalistic narrative of 'progress'. Packaged travel therefore emerges as a representational practice in which “the urban middle class is delineated as consumers not just of the newly available commodities in liberalizing India but consumers of a new India that has been produced through the meanings attached to these commodities” (Fernandes 65).

William Mazzarella has identified a shift of concepts in middle class ethos from the duty of progress (associable with the Indian middle class of the post-independence pre-globalisation era) to the idea of progress through the pleasure of consumption, which he terms “aspirational consumerism” (Brosius 262). In Perur's travelogue, the packaged tours to Uzbekistan and Europe form examples of this particular aspect of middle classes' consumption of travel-as-commodity. The first mentioned tour is a specialised men-only 'product', in which Perur (as traveller-writer) finds himself with 30-odd other Indian middle class men ranging in ages of the twenties to the seventies, from Delhi, UP, MP, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Gujarat and Karnataka, in various occupations such as doctors, saree distributors, real estate dealers, government contractors for road and construction projects, a defence supplier, a transport company-owner. All of them (excepting Perur) have in common undeclared money to finance the trip, as also the assumption that the trip is solely for opportunities for sex in a foreign country, and near-total oblivion to a land so rich in cultural heritage and history. The double standards and hypocrisies of the conventional patriarchy which characterises most of the middle class family men in the group become evident in their criticism of corrupt politicians back home, while actively pursuing their determination to have illicit sex in a foreign country to which they have toured on black money, and “to enjoy”; Perur opines that this attitude extends to all such tours, in which a consumer can “enjoy absolutely and without object” (98). In the Europe tour, Perur is part of an all-Indian middle class middle aged/retired group, with a tight itinerary of not less than eight countries in fifteen days, that does not allow one to “sit in a bus for an hour without finding yourself in a different country” (23). The atmosphere inside their bus is a replica of a mini-India, replete with Bollywood songs, North and South Indian foods and sweets, not to mention regional antagonisms manifested in the North/South cultural divide and tourists dozing off while being shown the Louvre and the Vatican. This familiar atmosphere grows so much on Perur that he begins to wonder why the tourists have come at all; he realises that they

are on this tour not for discovery or exploration, but because it is a symbol of leisure and economic sufficiency. A trip such as this signals to others - and ourselves - that we are the kind of people who go to Europe on vacation. It has become a rite of passage for the middle-aged middle class, and like other rites of passage, it must be ruthlessly documented. The purpose of this tour is to generate evidence that we have been to Europe (29).

The representative power of the tour in terms of creating class status and identity for the middle class group in Perur's travelogue reflects the new Indian middle classes' aspirational consumerism which tries simultaneously to integrate itself into the fabric of new nationalism on the one hand and the global cultural ethic on the other. As Perur puts it:

It is the iconic monuments - the Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Colosseum - that give us the greatest joy since they offer the most compelling evidence of where we have been. We go not so much to see them as to confirm their existence, to reassure ourselves that "we are after all in the place we aspired to be. We see nothing in Europe. We come here with pictures in our heads, and we leave with our heads in those pictures (29).

This conscious buying into the class/status image has deep links, as Fernandes has identified, with the 'respectability' factor commonly associated with upper caste/class sections of the middle classes, in which earlier middle class identities (derived from caste distinctive- legacies of cultural capital, elements of self-reliance through education, employment and social conscience) are now reworked through a culture of commodity consumption, so much so that the thing consumed itself becomes respectable, and a marker of class status (67). Further applying this idea to middle class travel, it becomes possible to argue that the earlier legacies, with tropes of foreign travel derived from the genealogy of the colonial elites' European Grand Tour (with its connotations of world cultural educative experience), have been significantly replaced by the "aesthetic of the commodity form" (Fernandes 59), in which the more-readily-accepted notion of immediate enjoyment and pleasure at the unfamiliar, can be conveniently documented and then projected back home as a class-marker and cultural standard. This in turn leads to an understanding of domestic and foreign travel packages as simultaneously a classificatory practice that creates class boundaries, cultural distinctions and establishes "the performance of 'taste' as a cultural resource" (Brosius 14) amongst the middle classes. Since travel happens in the public sphere, it becomes part of "the politics of visibility" (Fernandes 74) that is crucial to marking out lifestyle-defined boundaries of class. Perur's humorous projection of this aspect of the packaged tour is embodied in the Bengali couple he meets on a temple tour, who he says are "hardened veterans of conducted tourism ... (who) have the air of conquest that habitués of conducted tours seem to acquire: 'We've done the North East. We've finished Rajasthan'" (18).

Cosmopolitanism as an aspirational value and identity-image among the new Indian middle classes, as Brosius points out, means not so much being part of a posited global citizenry, as having access to a globally legitimised five-star lifestyle, while being distinctly Indian at the same time (28). One of the dilemmas of the present-day new Indian middle classes, Fernandes observes, is the challenge of claiming national representativeness and cultural 'authenticity' while being simultaneously part of a globalised Western culture through consumption patterns (71). If, as Fernandes' study reveals, national icons (which used to represent the pre-globalised middle classes of yore, like the Ambassador car, or the *Times of India* newspaper) have been reimagined for the middle classes now through commodity consumption (59), then today's tourism industries' travel-packages are eminent examples. Perur's trip to Kerala's backwaters, in which he is the lone Indian in the multi-national tour group, illustrates this particular aspect; while on the beach, he is accosted by small local boys who cannot believe he is an Indian simply because he is in the company of a white fellow-tourist; he ends up an uneasy participant in the foreigners' enthusiasm for the spice walk which markets 'exotic' Indian spices which to him are part of his daily food; he relates it to the way this packaged tour has been programmed to construct and deliver "a tropical idyll" (87) for foreign tourists, but which Indian middle class tourists end up consuming in much the same ways. This form of

mimicry especially in domestic travel that constructs and projects Indian tourist destinations for Western consumption, epitomises the conflicts between the secular and the nationalistic images that have converged within the new Indian middle classes' identities. Another example is Perur's participation in a packaged walking tour to the famous Dharavi slum in Mumbai, in which he realises that the concept of "slum tourism" (139) which holds considerable fascination for Western tourists from the developed world, in which perceived squalor is actively marketed as a saleable commodity by the tourism industry in developing countries like India. As he observes slumming foreign fellow- tourists, he realises that people's homes in Dharavi are familiar to his own middle class childhood home, and that the differences are only a matter of degree:

These are middle-class homes, a world I know well: the steel vessels, the televisions, the clutter of odds and ends hoarded because they might come in use one day; the sounds of pressure cookers going off, pans being scraped with a piece of brick, clothes being rinsed by hand. These are part of my consciousness. In a sense that the foreigners on the tour cannot possibly share, I am among my own (150).

This self-realisation comes in the wake of awareness that he in his turn has been construed as a foreigner by the Dharavi inhabitants simply by the fact of his being with a tour group consisting of them. The defamiliarised gaze of the foreign tourists, which he senses, helps him locate himself as a member of a pre-globalisation Indian middle class structure.

A common element, Perur observes, to all the ten tours described in his travelogue, is a concern with preserving 'identity', "one's own" (279) in the midst of the unfamiliar and different scenes afforded by travel. This concern, I argue, is really part of larger and deeper anxieties about the complexities of middle class identities in India today, especially as these identities are increasingly linked to fundamentalist and rightwing nationalistic discourses. For the new Indian middle classes of today, consumption patterns and practices, including travel, have become significant markers through which class/caste identities, status distinctions and cultural productions are consciously and deliberately enacted. In Brosius's discussion of the condition of "middle-classness" (24), attention is drawn to Arjun Appadurai's definition of the "imagination as a key resource 'for experiments with self-making'" (23). She invokes his idea of the "imaginary as a fluid 'constructed landscape of collective aspirations'":

"The image, the imagined, the imaginary - these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the *imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy, no longer simple escape, no longer elite pastime, and "no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work, and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (qtd. in Brosius 23-24).

If consumption of the packaged-tour-as-commodity can be construed as a performative act of 'imagined identities' by the new Indian middle classes, then the above-quoted definition holds particular significance for self-making through travel by the middle classes of today's India.

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