# HEGEMONIC ASPIRATIONS

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## New Middle Class Politics and India's Democracy in Comparative Perspective

**Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller**

ABSTRACT: This article uses an analysis of the rise of India's New Middle Class (NMC) to develop a class analytics of democratic politics in India. The article locates the politics of India's democracy within the framework of comparative class analytics and integrates class analysis with the politics of caste, religion, and language. The article develops two central arguments. The first is that the dominant fraction of the middle class plays a central role in the politics of hegemony. These hegemonic politics are played out both as attempts to coordinate the interests of the dominant classes and to forge internal unity within the highly diverse fragments of the middle class. But rather than producing the classical pattern of liberal hegemony (in which the ruling bloc actively elicits the consent of subordinate classes) in India these projects have been marked by middle-class illiberalism, and most notably a distancing from lower classes. Second, we argue that the contours of the NMC can be grasped as a *class-in-practice,* that is, as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position. Sociocultural inequalities such as caste and language are an integral part of the process of middle-class formation. We argue that the NMC is a tangible and significant phenomenon, but one whose boundaries are constantly being defined and tested. The hegemonic aspirations of the NMC have taken the form of a politics of reaction, blending market liberalism and political and social illiberalism.

Studies of contemporary Indian politics have traditionally been dominated by a narrative of Indian exceptionalism. Indian politics, according to such exceptionalist arguments, has been characterized by the politics of cultural identity such as caste, religion, and ethnicity rather than the politics of class.[1] Such arguments have overlooked the salience of class analytics for an adequate understanding of the workings of democratic politics in India today. This article seeks

to move beyond the conceptual limitations of exceptionalism in two ways. First, we locate the politics of India's democracy within the framework of comparative class analytics. Second, our analysis moves away from an opposition between the politics of class and the politics of caste, religion, and region.

The comparative literature identifies two democratic paths to substantive democracy. The classic liberal trajectory is associated with a strong and hegemonic bourgeoisie and the social democratic trajectory (and its more redistributive outcomes) has been linked to the formation and organization of a cohesive working class.[2] The bourgeoisie in India has never achieved hegemonic status,[3] and working class formation has been weak and fragmented. Instead, any account of distributive politics in India must bring the middle class into focus. Not only has this class played a critical role in managing the ruling bloc (which includes the bourgeoisie and landed interests), but it has also been an important actor in its own right. If social scientists largely neglected or underestimated the role of the middle class during the Nehruvian period of state developmentalism, the middle class today is routinely inflated into an amorphous mass defined by its own worldview or consumption patterns.[4]

In this article, we ground our analysis of middle class politics in two arguments. The first is that the middle class, and in particular the dominant fraction of the middle class, plays a central role in the politics of hegemony. These hegemonic politics are played out both as attempts to coordinate the interests of the dominant classes and to forge internal unity within the highly diverse fragments of the middle class. But rather than producing the classical pattern of liberal hegemony (in which the ruling bloc actively elicits the consent of subordinate classes) in the Indian context these projects have been marked by middle class illiberalism, and most notably a distancing from lower classes. Second, we argue that the well-known difficulties of defining the middle class can be overcome in part by focusing on the specific class practices through which it reproduces itself.[5] Because the middle class derives its power from cultural and

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1. See for example Rudolph and Rudolph 1987.
2. Reuschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Luebbert 1991.
3. We use hegemony in the traditional Gramscian sense to refer to a specific type of class domination that relies on eliciting consent from subordinate groups (more so than on coercion) through a "political-ethical" project that is effective because it resonates ideologically with the "common sense" of the masses and because it is materially grounded, and specifically that the interests of the dominant group or bloc are "concretely coordinated" with "the general interests of subordinate groups." Gramsci explicitly contrasts the material interests of a hegemonic class (or bloc) with dominant classes that act in accordance with their "narrowly corporate economic interest." See Gramsci 1972, 182.
4. Social science analyses have tended to neglect the role of the middle classes and have focused primarily on state-capital-bourgeoisie relations. See Chibber 2003; Kohli 2004. Exceptions to this include Bardhan 1984 and 1993 and Deshpande 2003.
5. For a useful critical discussion of attempts at measuring the middle classes, see Deshpande 2003.

educational capital, it actively engages in hoarding and leveraging its accumulated privileges and in reproducing social distinctions.[6] In the Indian context this implies that caste and other cultural attributes (most notably command of English) become critical assets in the continuous struggles that define class fractions. Sociocultural inequalities and identities (such as those based on caste and language) are an integral part of the process of middle class formation. The result as we will argue is that patterns of middle class illiberalism are strongly shaped by such inequalities and exclusions.

We develop both these arguments through an exploration of the rise of India's new middle class (NMC) in the context of policies of economic liberalization. The past two decades have witnessed a significant reconfiguration of class forces marked in particular by the ascendance of a NMC that is conventionally portrayed as the natural carrier of India's intensified embrace of economic liberalization. Public commentators, media images, and academic analyses have depicted this NMC as a consumer-based group benefiting from economic reforms. This narrative not only naturalizes and oversimplifies the NMC relationship to liberalization (and implicitly modernization) but also exaggerates and essentializes its internal coherence. We argue that the NMC is a tangible and significant phenomenon, but one whose boundaries are constantly being defined and tested. Further, we contend that the contours of the NMC can be grasped only as a *class-in-practice,* that is, as a class defined by its politics and the everyday practices through which it reproduces its privileged position. This conceptualization moves away from a static opposition between structural and political/cultural/ideological processes. While theoretical and comparative works have attempted to move beyond such oppositions, conceptions of class in India have often implicitly reproduced such dichotomies. Studies of the middle class, for example, have alternated between purely culturalist definitions and economistic measures based on income and occupations.[7]

At a macro level, the NMC has been forged at the intersection of liberalization and a political context marked by organized political challenges from below, that is, the increased political assertiveness of other backward castes that Yogendra Yadev has dubbed the "the second democratic upsurge."[8] The hegemonic aspirations of the NMC have taken the form of a politics of reaction, blending market liberalism and political and social illiberalism. On the one hand, the dominant fraction of the NMC projects itself as the central agent in In-

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6. The contrast between the bourgeoisie and the middle class is worth emphasizing. The bourgeoisie has structural power that translates into political power in ways that make it less necessary for this class to mobilize visibly and politically in order to reproduce itself. Its strategy of reproduction is driven by the systemic logic of capital accumulation. The middle class is characterized by a higher degree of structural complexity and uncertainty and exists through itself, that is, through the practices through which it reproduces itself.

7. For culturalist approaches, see Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001b; for economistic approaches at measuring the middle class, see Sridharan 2004.

8. Yadav 2000.
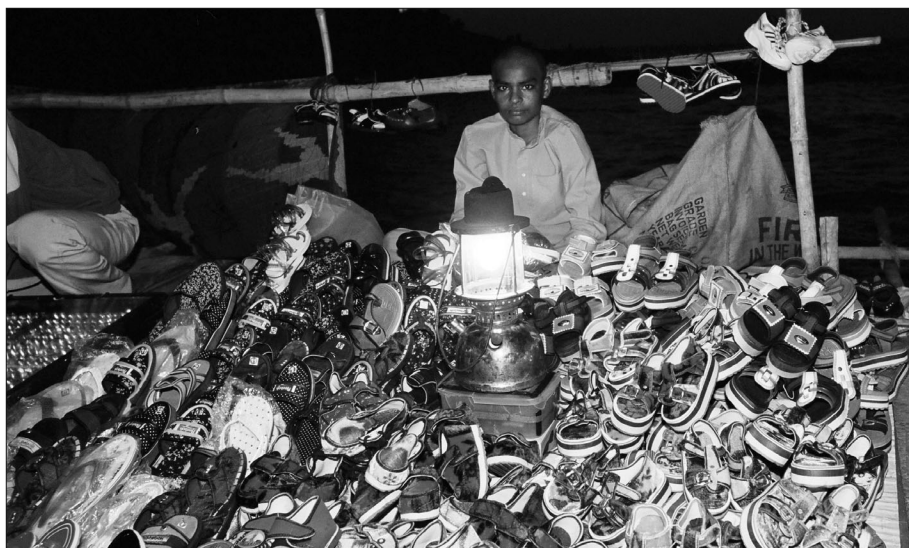
Stall of a merchant near the dam of the Haji Ali mosque, Mumbai. The central role the new middle class plays in the politics of hegemony is marked by "middle class illiberalism" and most notably by a distancing from India's lower classes. (ILO/Crozet M. 2002)

dia's drive to open and modernize its market economy. On the other hand, significant segments of the middle class have played a key role in the rise of Hindu nationalism. The ideological and social basis of Hindutva is far too historically complex to be simply equated with the NMC. Yet the consolidation of Hindutva as a political movement marked both by the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress Party's periodic attempts at courting a Hindu nationalist vote[9] cannot be explained without reference to the political reconfiguration of the middle class. From its fairly limited traditional support base in trading castes, the appeal of Hindu nationalism has spread rapidly into the ranks of the broader middle class over the past two decades. We argue that Hindu nationalism has resonated with large sections of the Hindu middle class because its doctrines of nationalism and cultural essentialism provide an ideological frame for NMC self-assertion as well as a political response to newly mobilized lower class constituencies and their varied claims for incorporation.[10]

It is this relational dynamic that underscores both the limitations of the hegemonic project that the NMC attempts to represent and the inherent contradic-

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9. The Congress has adopted what analysts have called a soft Hindutva approach in recent electoral campaigns. The Congress has also tried to use appeasement and a management of competing religious nationalist groups: see, for example, Rajiv Gandhi's attempt to manage the Ayodhya movement by granting permission to build the temple near the site and his well-publicized mismanagement in the Shah Bano case.

10. Our discussion of Hindu nationalism focuses on the Hindu middle classes because we are concerned with dominant segments of the middle classes that are attempting to draw the ideological and material boundaries of a hegemonic project; for historical discussions of the Muslim middle class, see Hasan 1997.

tions of middle class politics. Both the unifying discourse of Hindutva and the modernist NMC claims are belied by exclusionary social practices through which the middle class constitutes itself. In the next section we explore the politics of Hindu nationalism as a more general expression of middle class reaction.[11] In the following sections we analyze a range of practices through which the fractions of the NMC deploy, combine, and convert cultural and social capital to leverage their privileges in the new economy. We point in particular to the importance of inequalities such as caste and language in fields such as education and urban space to illustrate such exclusionary practices. Through this analysis we seek to demonstrate the mechanisms and strategies of capital conversion involved in the process of NMC formation while simultaneously pointing to the historical durability and structured nature of class inequality.

## India's New Middle Class: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective

The middle class has always been a category that defies definition. In the Indian context, the particularities of India's developmental trajectory and the sheer heterogeneity of cultural and social formations make the middle class an even more elusive object of analysis. Yet no class has been more central to India's fortunes than the middle class, and any understanding of the post-liberalization period calls for coming to terms with how this class is being transformed even as it is being preserved. Conventional class categories that posit a relatively unmediated relation between structural position and politics, between economic interests and ideology, are clearly inadequate to the task. What is required instead is a set of class analytics that give greater attention to the actual mechanisms through which structure and agency are linked. This set of analytics must in particular shed light on three problematics. First, rather than impute political and social forms from an economic position, it is essential to explain how the economic and political interests of the NMC have in fact been aligned. Second, because classes are forged rather than given, we can only speak of a class as a historical agent if we can demonstrate that for all its diversity of material and social interests the NMC has some political cohesion. Third, and directly following this last point, it is necessary to explain the actual practices through which this class differentiates itself from other classes and through which its internal fractions are defined.

Both structurally and historically, the middle class occupies an intermediary position that has discomfited conventional class analysis. Because it does not

11. Such a comparative perspective is especially important in order to avoid the exceptionalist tendency to view Hindutva as a phenomena particular to India. In fact this politics of middle class illiberalism does not have to take a religious nationalist form and can take the form of a secular illiberalism. This is true both in the Indian context as well as in comparative contexts where middle class illiberalism has centered around political reactions based on race, ethnicity, and nationality (as seen in contemporary middle-class responses to immigration in the United States).

occupy either of the categorical and binary structural positions of the bourgeoisie or the working class (productive assets vs. no productive assets) analysts have assigned the middle class a "contradictory class location"[12] and emphasized the liminal and contingent nature of its interests. With the understanding that class boundaries are constructed and contested, we would broadly identify the middle class as the class of people whose economic opportunities are not derived primarily from property (the bourgeoisie) but rather from other power-conferring resources such as organizational authority or possession of scarce occupational skills. In contrast to the working class whose labor is reduced to the commodity form, the segments of the middle class who earn a wage or a salary have skills that are specific to their class position (and not as such readily accessible to the working class) and have the capacity to reproduce the relative scarcity of those skills either by securing institutional sanction (legal recognition of credentials and administered returns to scare skills) or otherwise hoarding the skill through social networks and gatekeeping. Given the centrality of cultural and educational capital to the middle class, its fortunes are very much dependent on the outcome of what Bourdieu calls classification struggles.[13] The petty bourgeoisie, that is, small property owners (including independent farmers) and merchants, do not fit this definition neatly. However, since their property is rarely sufficient to provide material support for the next generation, the class practices of the petty bourgeoisie often mimic those of the middle class proper. More specifically, precisely because this fraction has some economic capital, it is in a position to acquire educational and cultural capital.

Though it is not our purpose to map the complexities of the middle class, it is useful to delineate three basic strata within the Indian middle class. The dominant fraction consists of those with advanced professional credentials or accumulated cultural capital who occupy positions of recognized authority in various fields and organizations and whose interests are closely aligned with the bourgeoisie. The petty bourgeoisie is a middle category enjoying some material independence, but nonetheless aspiring to dominant fraction status and thus most often engaged in emulating the practices of the dominant fraction. This fraction includes small business owners, merchants, and rich farmers. The third, and the most numerous, are the subordinate middle class fraction of salaried workers who have some educational capital, but do not occupy positions of significant authority over other workers. This fraction includes middle- and lower-level employees that include public and private sector clerical staff and office workers, and various low-authority professions such as teachers and nurses.

The NMC is not "new" in terms of its social composition (that is, new entrants to the middle class). Rather its newness is characterized by the ways in which this fraction has sought to redefine middle class identity through the language of liberalization. This dominant fraction presents itself as the social group that

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12. Wright 1985.
13. Bourdieu 1984.

embodies the benefits and virtues of liberalization. This process is most visible in new consumption practices and public discourses in the English-speaking media (for instance, most starkly evident in a growing public assertiveness and debate on the nature of the Indian middle class).[14] The self-assertion of this dominant fraction interacts in complex ways with the other middle class fractions and the broader social differentiation that actually characterizes the Indian middle classes. At one level, the cultural and social barriers between the subordinate and the dominant fraction are significant, and are aggressively enforced by the dominant fraction. At another level, this NMC identity also becomes a standard against which the aspirations of other fractions of the middle classes are measured. In this respect, to treat the ambiguity of the term "middle class" as a mere definitional problem for scholarly analysis would be to miss the productive political significance that this ambiguity holds for the middle classes. Such ambiguities allow the NMC, as bearer of the liberal ethos of opportunity and mobility, to hold out the promise of inclusion to other aspiring social segments even as it reconstitutes the subtle hierarchies and exclusions that anchor its class position. Thus while NMC identity is shaped by a fairly narrow segment of the middle classes, the implications of this identity are much broader. Insofar as the dominant fraction plays the leading ideological role in the politics of hegemony, most of this article focuses on the agency of this fraction.

From a historical perspective, to understand the politics of India's NMC — and specifically to explore the affinities between market liberalism and sociopolitical illiberalism that this social group represents — we have to begin, as Corbridge and Harriss do, by examining the crisis of the Nehruvian modernist project.[15] The ruling bloc represented by the Congress substituted a passive revolution for a classic bourgeois revolution.[16] In the absence of a hegemonic bourgeoisie that could go it alone, planning and incremental reforms replaced a full-blown assault on the old dominant classes and a thorough transformation of property relations. This placed the dominant fraction of the middle class, which had already accumulated significant educational and cultural capital in the colonial period, in a strategic position. As is often the case in peripheral economies, the middle class came to play an inordinately large and influential role given the functional requirements of extended state management (both in terms of state-directed industrialization and social reform) and the heightened political-ideological tasks of securing legitimacy in a socially diverse and fragmented liberal electoral democracy. Among others, Kaviraj and Bardhan concluded that the Nehruvian middle class (the "bureaucratic-managerial-intellectual" elite for Kothari and the "professional class" for Bardhan) played a central, distinct, and self-expanding role in the dominant class coalition of the Nehru period.[17]

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14. See Varma 1998.
15. Corbridge and Harris 2000.
16. Chatterjee 1993.
17. Kaviraj 1988 and Bardhan 1998.

From this pivotal role, the middle class developed distinctive political claims that elevated their class interests to the universal interest and laid claim to a leading role within the ruling hegemonic bloc within the newly founded Indian nation. Drawing on its historical leadership during the nationalist movement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the middle class claimed for itself the twin pillars of Nehruvian legitimation — secular nationalism and technocratic management. With its emphasis on rationality, meritocracy, and progress, the ideological project had hegemonic pretensions in Gramsci's sense that it sought to construct "an organic passage from the other classes into their own, i.e., to enlarge their class sphere 'technically' and ideologically," in contrast to the conception of "a closed caste" that marks traditional ruling classes.[18] However, though this ideological project was successful in terms of nation building, the Nehruvian ruling bloc never successfully consolidated hegemonic power on three counts. First, even as its organic intellectuals forged a coherent ruling ideology of constitutionalism, high modernism, and developmentalism, it could not build and sustain a lasting material compact with subordinate classes. Patronage was substituted for redistribution, labor incorporation was limited to a small segment of the working class, and agrarian reform — with notable regional exceptions — was never fully carried through. Second, the imperatives of managing an unruly dominant class coalition precluded precisely the economic-transformative projects — and most notably the disciplining of capital — that would have created the material base for hegemony. Indeed, as the dominant proprietary class whose specific capitals — organizational authority and credentials — depended directly on the state, the middle class was centrally complicit in fueling — and as Bardhan emphasizes, managing — the conflictive rent-seeking interests that inhibited capitalist transformation.[19] Third, and most critical to understanding the politics of the NMC, the very political logic of the passive revolution — to contain social conflict — proved impossible in the context of electoral democracy.[20]

The effects and failures of the developmental state and the competitive logic of mobilization eventually triggered new social claims from below, and in turn new state responses. If the Nehruvian state failed in its transformative projective, its interventions nonetheless had molecular effects that with time have eaten away at dominant-landed caste orders.[21] Not only did the grip of local elites weaken, but new political entrepreneurs emerged both from outside the middle class as well as from new aspirants and entrants to middle class status from subordinated caste groups. These political entrepreneurs mobilized a range of subordinate groups.[22] The Congress dominated state that followed the Nehruvian period oscillated between attempts at incorporating these groups into rent-seeking politics (the politics of "votebanks" in the language of Indian

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18. Gramsci 1972, 260.
19. Bardhan 1984.
20. Chatterjee 1993, 214.
21. See Frankel 1979; Corbridge and Harriss 2000.
22. See Hasan, 1998.

politics), on the one hand, and exclusionary measures that catered to dominant upper caste middle class fractions, on the other. The most extreme examples of the latter dynamics of exclusion was Indira Gandhi's Emergency, which received, at least initially, widespread support from the middle class.[23] In fact, many of the contemporary NMC practices that attempt to produce an exclusionary civic culture cleansed of the urban poor (a point we turn to below) were prefigured in Sanjay Gandhi's use of authoritarian state practices to cleanse squatter settlements through forced demolitions.

These failures, however, should not detract from our central point. The middle class not only occupied a key functional position in the ruling bloc, but it has also played a decisive ideological role. Thus, if in economic terms the middle class pursued its narrow self-interest through rent-seeking, in ideological and political terms the middle class claimed to represent the national interest as the visible agents of the Nehruvian ideology of developmentalism.[24] Our analysis seeks to further develop an understanding of the broader political implications that this middle class "assertion without consolidation" of hegemony holds for an understanding of democratic politics in India. This role has, we argue, both continued and been transformed with the rise of a NMC identity in the post-liberalization period.

The continuity lies in the intermediary role of the middle class and the specific logic of its class practices. First, as Satish Deshpande has argued, "the middle class is the class that *articulates* the hegemony of the ruling bloc."[25] Second, as we show in the next section, the middle class continues to secure its position through the strategic deployment of social and cultural capital. The change lies in the scope and the logic of the hegemonic project. The focal point of middle class structural power (especially the dominant fraction) has shifted not only from the state to the market, but also from playing an auxiliary role in the market to playing a leading role. India is unique in the periphery in having integrated itself into the global economy through global sourcing of services.[26] With the rapid rise of the information economy and the shift in the valorization process of capital from production to innovation, design, branding, coordination, and other knowledge-intensive functions, a pattern clearly reflected in the service-intensive composition of growth in the Indian economy, the dominant fraction of the middle class occupies a strategic position in India's new economy. This shift in the material base of the economy (which affects both the bourgeoisie and the NMC) coupled with the rapid realignment of organized political forces over the past two decades, has given rise to an entirely new infrastructure and discourse of hegemony. With the proliferation of satellite television and the

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23. Vanaik, 2002. Opposition to the Emergency from segments of the middle class was, of course, strong. The point however, is that aspects of the Emergency, particularly developmental aspects such as slum demolition and family planning, invoked middle-class models of developmentalism and civic order.
24. Khilnani 1997; Deshpande 2003.
25. Deshpande 2003, 139.
26. Kohli 2006.

expansion of the advertising industry, the media have come to play a much more prominent role in shaping identities. Television and advertising images have produced an NMC identity that is associated with consumption practices of commodities made available through market liberalization. These images differ significantly from earlier decades in the Nehruvian period (particularly given the state control of the television in this period) when the scope of television and advertising was much narrower and public images were associated more with state advertising campaigns for policies such as family planning.

The political project of the NMC represents an opportune alliance of market-oriented commercial and professional interests eager to exploit new market opportunities and socially conservative elements protecting a range of status privileges. The later element clearly corresponds to the dominant fraction, while the former roughly aligns with the petty bourgeoisie and the subordinate fraction, two fractions eager to preserve and leverage the social and cultural advantages they hold over subordinate groups. These fractions most clearly started to merge politically in the reaction to Mandal as upper caste groups came together to oppose extending reservations to OBCS (Other Backward Castes).[27] There have been of course significant regional variations,[28] but by the early nineties a new alignment of middle class fractions had clearly emerged. Yogendra Yadev and his colleagues summarized this logic in their analysis of poll data from the 1999 13th Lok Sabha election. Noting that the BJP represented the formation of a new social bloc, they commented:

> The new social bloc is formed by the convergence of traditional caste-community differences and class distinctions. It may be an exaggeration to say that the BJP represents the rebellion of the elite, but it is nevertheless true that its rise to political power has been accompanied by the emergence of a new social group that is defined by an overlap of social and economic privileges.[29]

Indeed, this reflects a central trait of the middle class. Since its power does not derive primarily from property but rather from education and cultural capital, it is particularly dependent on the need to protect status privileges. These dynam-

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27. Vanaik 2002, 231.
28. In Kerala with its long history of Communist Party mobilization or Tamil Nadu with its anti-Brahminical movements the BJP has made limited inroads. And while the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPIM) hierarchy in West Bengal has reproduced upper caste dominance, the party has built linkages between middle-class, working-class, and rural interests. Clearly, varying regional class configurations have produced alternative political trajectories that coexist with the broad national patterns analyzed in this article. In Kerala and to a lesser extent West Bengal and Tamil Nadu, redistributive class coalitions, born to varying degrees of social movements, have effectively linked lower-class demands to state policies. It remains to be seen how and to what extent liberalization will change such processes. In Kerala, the CPIM has promoted democratic decentralization as a specific response to liberalization. See Heller 2005.
29. Yadav 1999.

ics have contributed to the intersection between middle class politics and the agenda of Hindutva.

The middle class' flirtation with Hindu nationalism has a long political trajectory reaching as far back as Hindu revivalist movements during the colonial period to the more recent — but critical — formation of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). As others have argued, the Sangh Parivar's carefully constructed Hindutva ideology is symptomatic of middle class conservatism.[30] This conservatism is not an essential quality, but rather a relational and contingent one. The embrace of Hindu nationalism most clearly represents a defensive response to the growing independence and assertiveness of lower classes that began with the decline of the Congress's electoral dominance. Long contained and subdued within the Congress Party's passive revolution, the second democratic upsurge has mobilized new claimants to modernity and new modes of claim making. In response, the Congress resorted to periodic strategies of appeasing Hindu nationalist sentiment and played a role in the early dynamics of the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1980s. In both its timing and normative substance (family, order, hierarchy) the rise of Hindu nationalism is also quite clearly a response to the rapid socioeconomic change that has accompanied the transition from state developmentalism to liberalization. Indeed, when viewed comparatively the Indian case appears to replicate a pattern familiar to comparativists — social and economic disruption feeds directly into the traditional sources of middle class conservatism: preoccupation with cultural purity, order, stability, and discipline, inflected most notably by status anxieties.

Comparative political scientists and sociologists have long acknowledged the critical political role that middle classes play in great transformations. If Eric Wright can place the middle class in a contradictory class location, we argue that its historical role is inherently contradictory. Historically, middle classes have been notoriously fickle vis-à-vis democracy. If middle classes helped usher in formal democracy, rejecting the status privileges of pre-democratic orders, they have also drawn the line at empowering those that would threaten their own privileges. And as Polanyi has emphasized, under certain historical conditions, market liberalism and political illiberalism find each other, typically through the agency of the middle class. In his magisterial comparative study of interwar Europe, Gregory Luebbert provides a configurational picture of middle class politics.[31] Luebbert explains the liberal, social democratic, and fascist trajectories of the period by linking each to a specific class configuration defined in terms of both a general balance of class forces and the degree of organizational coherency of different classes. The key trigger in all cases is the entry of the masses into politics with the expansion of universal suffrage and the labor movement. Luebbert shows that where middle class internal consolidation occurred at an early state (England, France, and Switzerland), the middle class was able to preempt more autonomous and militant forms of working class organization that

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30. Hansen 1999; Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Jaffrelot 1996.
31. Luebbert 1991.

emerged elsewhere in Europe by making selective concessions to labor. The resulting *liberal hegemony* allowed for a strengthening of democracy and capitalism, but at the expense of a more assertive and independent working class. On the other hand, when modernizing, market-oriented middle classes were internally divided, the response to a rising working class was an opportunistic alliance with conservative elements, be it the Roman Catholic Church or the family peasantry (Italy, Germany, and Spain). This alliance of town and country, one might add, was made possible by the success with which urban-based middle classes were able to nurture mass bases of support by tapping into paternalistic, hierarchical, and militarist traditions and social structures.[32] Latin Americanists have painted a similar picture of middle class reaction. When corporatist structures proved inadequate to the task of containing the working class, the bourgeoisie, with significant support from urban middle classes, restricted or simply dismantled democratic institutions. Diane Davis has recently provided a new perspective on how we understand middle class support for authoritarian growth regimes by showing how the South Korean developmental state was rooted in an alliance between technocratic elites and the middle class, including the rural middle class.[33]

For all the complexity of these configurations, a few points can be distilled. First, as the key intermediate class of modern capitalism, the middle class is pivotal to political outcomes and can support reaction or revolution. To paraphrase Brecht, it's not the working class, but the middle class that is radical. Second, depending on the conjuncture, a well-formed middle class can coordinate its interest with subordinate classes as in cases of liberal hegemony, or it can side with reaction. The later response is crucially conditioned by the internal cohesion of the middle class and by what alliances it can make. In this conjunctural moment, politics and ideology take center stage, and any analysis must take note not only of the organizational forms of middle class politics (such as its control of civil society, and of political parties) but also of the specific historical forms, social identities, and ideas that middle class politics can seize upon.

In contrast to the cases of authoritarian (or democratizing) states in Latin America and interwar Europe, India represents a stable liberal democracy. An analysis of middle class politics in India nonetheless helps highlight the effects that a conjunctural reconfiguration of class forces has on the substantive nature of democracy. In the Nehruvian period, the middle classes cast themselves through the mantle of the nationalist movement and as the leaders of state-led developmentalism. In the current period of market liberalization, the dominant fraction has faced new challenges in producing a unified identity for both the middle classes and for the nation. The complexities and crosscutting pressures of political allegiances split by caste, religion, and class has called forth a NMC politics, and most notably a new disposition toward democratic institutions. If Indian democracy has assuredly crossed an irreversible threshold of consolida-

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32. Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992.
33. Davis 2004.

tion (in Linz and Stepan, electoral democracy is "the only game in town"[34]) NMC politics today are fundamentally reshaping and restricting democratic practices and norms.

We argue that the politics of the NMC has taken an illiberal turn not because the middle classes are essentially reactionary or drawn toward Hindu nationalism. Rather Hindutva provided a mechanism for the NMC to incorporate the subordinated middle class fractions within a unified nationalist project. Specifically, the cultural politics of Hindutva provided a unifying political frame that did not disrupt the dominant NMC interests in the benefits of liberalization or its interests in reproducing existing hierarchies such as caste and language. While Hindutva has intersected with the political imperatives of the NMC, *both* religious nationalist and secular forms of illiberalism have enabled the NMC to manage its paradoxical need to produce order and unity amongst its fractions, on the one hand, while preserving its dominance through the reproduction of hierarchy and exclusion, on the other. The rise of the Hindutva movement and the crisis of the Nehruvian project provided a political opportunity for the NMC to reassert itself at a time when the middle classes increasingly began to view the Congress as a party that had been seized by subordinated groups such as the OBCS and Muslims.[35]

## Political Illiberalism and the New Middle Class

The forging of the NMC represents a reworking of the role of the middle class and the ideology it articulates for the ruling hegemonic bloc. The project is both transformative and grounded. The transformative element elevates the middle class as the carrier of India's modernizing aspirations. It is the project of globalization, technological mastery, competitiveness, and striving, and it is manifested in the rhetoric of newness. But such a project falls short on two counts. First, it has only a limited capacity for forging unity within the middle class. Only some segments of the middle class have fully benefited from globalization and the lower segments of the middle class — the subordinate fraction — find themselves in a much more precarious position, including those in the public sector whose interests are directly threatened by liberalization.[36] It is thus not surprising that local strategies of groups such as the Shiv Sena and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) family organizations have often successfully tapped lower middle class frustrations particularly when it comes to unemployment. To take just one example, the recent Hindutva agenda of the Shiv Sena should not obscure the fact that the Sena's initial rise to power was based on anti-migrant (South Indian) sentiments of unemployed lower middle classes in Maharashtra. Similar "sons of soil" movements have emerged in other regions.[37] Second, in a country of India's inequality and diversity such a transformative project necessarily fails the hegemonic test of eliciting consent from below. The

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34. Linz and Stepan 1996.
35. Hansen 1999.
36. Sridharan 2004; Fernandes 2000.
37. See Katzenstein 1979.

BJP appears to have maximized its electoral support at a quarter of the population. Pragmatically then, the middle class articulates hegemony — that is, tries to extend support beyond its dominant fraction — through a more culturally grounded ideology that takes the general form of a nationalist-organicist ideology. This is characterized first and foremost by the construction of an organic whole — created through juxtapositions to demonized others — and asserted through an essentialized cultural unity that misrecognizes internal differences of class and other social cleavages.

At first view, Hindutva and liberalization would seem to be odd bedfellows. Yet as we have seen, the marriage of a conservative ideology with the market is the historical norm when a liberal hegemonic project is foreclosed. The Indian middle class is itself enormously diverse, and under the impetus of accelerated globalized consumption, subject to increasing fragmentation. Indeed, survey findings show that white-collar workers and BJP supporters have mixed views of liberalization (in no small part because large swaths of the middle class remain dependent on state employment or subsidies) and yet as Sridharan notes still support the BJP because of "class identification and aspiration."[38] The consumer sovereignty so often portrayed as the marker of the middle class rests on a social logic that reproduces and intensifies social differentiation (for example, by associating consumption practices with differences of caste, class, and language) and has limited socially integrative capacity. Hence the attraction of an essentialized culture that identifies common roots in traditional and familiar structures of family, community, and religiosity. [39] This construction of middle class identity serves a dual purpose: even as it forges a cohesive middle class identity rooted in a singular identity, it simultaneously denies the salience of caste/class/communal cleavages and the social reality of pervasive inequality.[40]

The intersection between middle class politics and this particular form of political illiberalism can been seen in the concrete practices of the Hindutva movement. Here the Sangh Parivar has played a critical role in systematizing, packaging, and diffusing the new identity and the boundaries of exclusion. On the one hand, the standardization and centralization of the many "small traditions" of a plural Hinduism into a sanctioned, authorized narrative of a single Great Tradition of Hinduism has been the work of the VHP. On the other hand, against liberalism, organicism secures a cultural core by denouncing pluralization as a form

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38. Sridharan 2004, 423.
39. Scholars of popular culture have analyzed the ways in which advertising images and television programming encode representations of middle-class identity with symbols that invoke idealized representations of family order and Hindu identity. Rajagopal 2001b.
40. The middle class presents itself in universalistic terms even as its own practices reproduce various social hierarchies. When middle class discourses (in the media, for instance) specifically speak of caste or religion they do so by naming subordinated social groups as "special interest." Caste, for instance, only becomes visible when the term is invoked by subordinate social groups making demands through reified bureaucratic categories such as SC and OBC. It is rendered invisible or misrecognized in the politics of the middle classes.

of vulgarization. Specifically the edification of Hinduness and its association with education, self-discipline, and moral rectitude is portrayed as threatened, and indeed polluted, by the encroachment of Muslims and untouchables on the public domain.[41] Hindutva becomes then not only an act of unification, but also one of purification in response to the plebianization of culture, space, and politics of the second upsurge.[42] And it is precisely through this kind of ideological production of difference that a class can be imagined: "an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class."[43] The different fractions of the middle class are thus drawn together through juxtapositions to others and new imagineries of a shared civilization that reaffirm core cultural values. Such practices have been most acutely represented by new visual practices such as the screening of television productions like the Ramayana and by strong Hindu nationalist discourses surrounding India's successful nuclear tests.[44] Finally, the selective appropriation of global culture — technology and science, but not Western values or tastes, "computer chips not potato chips" — glorifies the universal significance and modernity of Indian culture while preserving its essential heritage. The seemingly contradictory impulses of exclusionary nationalism and globalization (from Ram Rajya to "India Shining") are reconciled by affirming the essential and inviolate character of Indian civilization. This fusing of core values and progress provides a basis for integration in a rapidly changing world and provides comfort and even a rallying point to conservative lower middle classes.

The marriage of market liberalism and political illiberalism that characterizes NMC politics is not limited to the politics of Hindutva — it also takes the form of an antipolitics. This form of antipolitics constitutes a form of social illiberalism as it allows a naturalization of "the market" to enable the reproduction of various forms of socioeconomic inequality. The rise of market liberalism, as Polanyi showed, is marked by the liberal myth of the spontaneous and self-regulating market.[45] In India, the English-language media, market research firms, iconized businessmen and pro-liberalization politicians[46] have all actively produced, per Bourdieu, neoliberalism as *doxa*, "as an economic and political orthodoxy so universally imposed and unanimously accepted that it seems beyond the reach of discussion and contestation."[47] Liberalization is routinely presented as a natural, apolitical process of unleashing the power of the market and diminishing the role of the state. This doxa in turn construes all forms of distributive politics as not only inimical to the efficiency of the market, but as venal and self-interested. In an economy where 93 percent of the labor force is in the unorganized

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41. Hansen 1999.
42. Ibid.
43. Bourdieu 1984, 77.
44. See Rajagopal 2001a.
45. Polanyi 1944, 35.
46. Rudolph and Rudolph 2001.
47. Bourdieu 2001, 11–12.

Middle-class neighborhood in Delhi. "No class has been more central to India's fortunes than the middle class and any understanding of the post-liberalization period calls for coming to terms with how this class is being transformed even as it is being preserved." (Courtesy: Jan Breman, from *The Poverty Regime in Village India,* Oxford University Press, forthcoming 2007)

sector, the business press and multilaterals routinely denounce unions and labor laws for overprotecting workers. Meanwhile, the NMC supports privatization of education despite the fact the large segments of the middle classes depend on public education (state funded higher education has been a significant support of the middle classes) and the fact that primary and secondary school education has lagged behind in quality and access for most of the postindependence period.[48] And at a time when the World Bank recently found that 47 percent of Indian children are underweight, the public food distribution system has been rolled back.[49] The breathless abandon with which the English-language media trumpets India's growth is accompanied by increasing disdain for the role of the state and politics and a high modernist impulse (fed by multilaterals) to insulate necessary social and economic policy in the hands of technocrats (i.e., economists) far from the messy world of politics. This form of antipolitics has had significant implications for the substantive workings of democratic politics. As new actors (from previously subordinated groups such as the lower castes) have entered political society and claimed the unredeemed normative claims of a constitutional democracy (e.g., equality of treatment, basic rights), the middle class has increasingly debased politics and the new lower class/caste politicians as dirty, dishonest, corrupt, criminal, and vulgar.

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48. See Rudolph and Rudolph 1987.
49. The figure is for 1998/99. Gragnolati et al. 2005, 1.

While, the BJP electoral defeat in 2004 clearly signals the limits of the Hindutva hegemonic project, there have nevertheless been important shifts in national political culture and in the dynamics of democratic practice. While much of the commentary on the BJP has focused on the electoral arena, Hindutva is first and foremost a social movement operating in the interstices of civil society, and here its effects remain profound.[50] The Sangh Parivar has sponsored or captured a vast array of organizations including schools, women's self-help groups, cooperatives, labor unions, and neighborhood associations. This has not only lead to the communalization of civil society, but also to new forms of clientelism and the reaffirmation of patriarchal authority and caste hierarchies.

This fragmentation and verticalization of associational life strikes at the heart of the pluralism and associational autonomy that anchor the normative ideal of democratic life. We are reminded once again that much as associational life can promote horizontal ties, it can also become the conduit through which reactionary elites or authoritarian regimes mobilize support. The effects of the communalization of civil society have been profound. Interpreting polling data collected by Center for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) during the 2004 election, Datar notes that even as pundits were interpreting the election as a vote for secular politics, the data underscored how much "public debate and opinion has undergone a change in the last decade or so. There has been a shifting of the middle ground of the debate in favour of majoritarian sentiments."[51] Datar goes on to report that "more people had heard about the Godhra incident than about the massacres that followed."[52] And the survey data also revealed that near two thirds majorities believe that each community should have its own family law (66 percent), that intercommunity marriage should be banned (63 percent), and that there should be a ban on religious conversions (65 percent).

## The New Middle Class and the Durability of Caste

While we have analyzed the intersections between middle class politics and the Hindutva movement, the NMC is not reducible to the politics of Hindutva. The politics of NMC illiberalism is also characterized by the production and reproduction of social hierarchies and distinctions that are produced through everyday micro-level practices.

We draw here on Bourdieu's analysis of how class structures are constantly reproduced through an "economy of practices."[53] Our purpose is not to provide a comprehensive analysis of the logic of class practices in India, but rather to provide some illustrations on how a focus on class practices brings back the critical insights of class analysis in a context where class formation remains in flux and where the traditional anchors of class analysis — property and the wage labor form — are not nearly as institutionalized an in advanced capitalist societ-

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50. See Basu 2001.
51. *The Hindu,* AE-2, 20 May 2004.
52. Ibid.
53. Bourdieu 1984.

ies. This lack of institutionalization of social property relations — most obviously manifest is the sheer size of the informal sector (93 percent of the workforce) and the importance of informal networks in all factors markets — heightens the significance of the array of practices through which middle class fractions deploy their respective capitals.

Bourdieu's treatment of class is based on the three related concepts of the habitus, the field, and capital. Habitus is the intimate social context in which individuals acquire certain skills, demeanors, cultural competences, and dispositions. The field is the formal or informal setting (a profession, a discipline, a subsystem) in which different capitals are deployed and valorized. Economic, social, and cultural capital are specific assets that reside in individuals and classes. Class fractions accumulate, combine, and convert their capitals in order to maintain and/or improve their social position. The struggle to accumulate and deploy capitals is situational and relational — it takes place in a specific field that is governed by its own rules, laws, and recognized competencies, and in strategic orientation to other social groups.

A first observation is the manifest relevance of habitus in the Indian context to shaping life chances. Due to the continuing practice of caste endogamy, primary socialization in India still confers very significant intergenerational transfers of individual dispositions and competencies. By the same token, caste — which in every respect is simply one of the more manifest and codified expressions of habitus — remains a powerful source for reproducing difference. Just how deeply inscribed caste remains in the cultural competencies and dispositions of individuals is revealed by an experiment conducted by Hoff and Pandey:

> Children from different castes were asked to complete simple exercises, such as solving a maze, with real monetary incentives contingent on performance. The key result of the experiment is that low-caste children perform on par with high-caste children when their caste is not publicly announced by the experimenter but significantly worse when it is made public.[54]

When understood as an expression of habitus, caste is no longer a premodern identity — an ascribed subjectivity destined to be swept aside by modernity — but rather a mechanism through which the continuous struggle between classes to reproduce their respective bundles of capital is organized. To borrow Charles Tilly's language, caste is a categorical inequality that helps to do the organizational work of reducing the transaction costs associated with the joining or deployment of resources.[55]

We emphasize the role of the habitus in shaping class practices for three reasons. First, it helps expose the static treatment that definitions of the NMC invariably produce. Whether the emphasis is on its new occupational structure or new patterns of consumption, a focus on these dependent variables masks the

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54. Cited in World Bank 2006, 8.
55. Tilly 1998.

host of practices through which these outcomes are generated (and constantly reconfigured). Second, in contrast to conventional economic sociology that gives embeddedness of economic activity an almost benign (the social capital literature) or functional character ("the non-contractual elements of the contract") an *economy of practices* gives central place to power (and specifically the initial distribution of resources) and to the strategic actions through which the borders and contours of classes are maintained. Third, recognizing the role of habitus not only links cultural practices to material outcomes, but also explodes the tradition/modernity dichotomy. Even as the NMC vociferously celebrates the status equality of a market society, its many fractions actively deploy caste, community, and kinship to defend their social position.

A focus on the practices of producing and deploying cultural distinctions helps explain two observable paradoxes. The first and the clearest, is that even as liberalization unleashes the discourses of merit, ability, achievement, and mobility and the world is said to become flatter, the fractions of the NMC deploy their positional assets with ever greater assiduousness and the logic of class struggle relentlessly delivers inequality. Contrary to the "commonsense" middle class wisdom that caste matters less in urban areas, a careful analysis of the latest round of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) data found that caste inequalities are more pronounced in urban than in rural areas.[56] A second paradox points to the difference between classes. Much of the commentary on subordinate politics has focused on the explosion of identity-based mobilization and the increasing saliency of caste, leaving the impression that it is the subordinated groups that have brought caste back in. Narratives of a modernizing India portray everyday caste practices of exclusion and endogamy as relics of "backward areas," the poor and the uneducated. The first assertion of course glosses over the obvious caste agenda of the BJP; the second assertion raises an interesting empirical question: which class has the greater volume of distinctions to deploy and the greatest interest in leveraging those distinctions? As Bourdieu argues, if the tastes and preferences of the lower classes are a function of necessity, the tastes and preferences of the dominant class are carefully cultivated as sources of power.

## Class in Practice: Language, Caste, and Education

The concept of habitus draws attention to the intersecting forms of social capital and hierarchies that NMC power is built on. Historically produced forms of inequalities such as caste, language, and religion shape the resources, practices, and identities of the post-liberalization NMC in significant and enduring ways. Such historically produced social distinctions have provided particular social segments with varying forms of resources that they have attempted to use to preserve or raise their social standing. Historical continuities underline the significance of both temporality and agency in the reproduction of what seem like immutable social structures. If the habitus explains the stock resources that the

56.   Deshpande 2003, 115.

NMC disposes of, the concept of field and of capitals explains the changes in the practices and strategies of the NMC. We examine this dynamic through the example of the way in which education serves as a central field for the conversion of resources of caste and language.

Human capital, rather than property, has long been the asset specific to India's middle class. The acquisition of an English education represented a primary means for entry to the colonial middle class, a new elite social group that was emerging distinct from and in an uneasy relationship both with traditional elites as well as with other less privileged segments of the middle classes, particularly the vernacular, lower middle classes. The very first claims made on modern education in colonial India were cast in terms of the universalist, rationalist, enlightenment discourse of the British state. However, as Chopra points out, "the educational field in colonial India was also shaped at the moment of its inception by a majoritarian — Hindu, specifically Brahmanical and upper-caste, middle class and above, educated, English-speaking — discourse…that clearly represented and privileged the interests of certain social groups, those who formed the vanguard of the nationalist movement."[57]

When India became independent, 55 percent of the members of the provisional parliament were urban professionals.[58] The conception of education that emerged in India was carefully aligned with middle class cultural capital. Higher education in the medium of English rather than primary education was emphasized, and the substantive focus on science and technology directly serviced the various segments of the middle class. The credentialization of the highest state offices (IAS) on the basis of broad, liberal, and classical education guaranteed that the state nobility would be upper caste. The myriad of cultural capital selection mechanisms that govern access to quality higher education in any class society are compounded by caste and the exclusivity of English. The educational field in India represents a prototypical instance of opportunity hoarding. Myron Weiner has carefully documented how the attitudes and dispositions of upper caste bureaucrats and politicians are directly responsible for India's failure to universalize quality education.[59] In the Nehruvian period, the tension between the egalitarian promise of democracy and the practices of educational inequality were in part resolved by simply equating middle class interest with the national interest. "[T]his [educational] privilege has been sanctioned and endorsed by the state in the *name of the nation* since scientific and technological education have been historically understood as leading to economic prosperity as well as social progress."[60] The rapid proliferation of private schools and in particular the mushrooming of a multitiered system of private engineering and medical colleges marks a new stage in the composition of the middle class.

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57. Chopra 2003, 434.
58. Kapur, citing Rosenthal 2006, 12 .
59. Weiner 1991.
60. Chopra 2003, 438. Emphasis in original.

The question of access to education, specifically English-language education, has continued to shape NMC formation in ways that are distinctive to post-liberalization India. The acquisition of English-language skills represents a critical means that various segments of the middle class use to preserve or gain access to NMC membership. Meanwhile, this link between language and middle class formation has been intensified by globalization as an expanding private sector and global processes of outsourcing have consolidated the importance of English language skills. Segments of the middle classes that have historically had access to English-language education have been poised to convert this capital into new forms of mobility in a liberalizing labor market.

Such NMC strategies of social capital accumulation and conversion have been further complicated as the politics of caste has intersected with language and education. The OBC challenge to upper caste dominance in higher education has triggered a classic conversion strategy.[61] As the grip of the middle class on tertiary public education has been loosened by the second democratic upsurge, and as liberalization has devalorized some fields (Indian Administrative Service (IAS; public enterprises) and valorized new fields (IT, marketing, financial services, commercial law) marginal educational advantage is now being secured in the market (including abroad), and the value of a public education is being downgraded. The growth of the service sector, and of specific niches within that sector that have accompanied liberalization, have changed the conversion rate between economic, cultural and educational capital.[62] The premium on technical education has increased, as has the premium on English, especially de-indigenized English. Domestically, middle class fractions mobilize all their social and cultural capital to secure access to the best schools, including schools abroad that carry a particularly high return on cultural capital.[63] They also, as Kapur has recently shown, have fully leveraged the mobility and fungibility of their capital assets to a historically unprecedented degree by migrating.[64]

The exclusivity of this strategy is clear: only 1.3 percent of surveyed households in India have immediate family abroad, yet one in four urban households reports global networks, and while rural areas have almost no ties abroad, the richest rural households are more likely to have ties abroad than poor rural households. Kapur also estimates that fully 70 percent of the Asian-Indian population in the United States is high caste. The compounding effects of capitals is finally reflected in Kapur's finding that those with tertiary education are 42 times more likely to migrate than those with primary education.[65]

If the global economy does indeed mark a shift from territoriality and place to networks and flows[66] and from production to branding,[67] then the differential

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61. Bourdieu has made precisely this argument about class and the recalibration of academic credentials in France.
62. Chopra 2003, 439.
63. Cited in ibid., 437.
64. Kapur 2006.
65. Ibid.
66. Castells 2004.

distribution of cultural and social capital between classes in India portends a hardening of social exclusions. This trend is underlined by preliminary evidence of the continued salience of caste inequality in shaping NMC employment. While there has been a significant shift in the caste composition of the middle classes,[68]caste continues to play a central role in shaping the NMC. The reliance of subordinated caste groups on state policies and state employment in gaining access to middle class membership has consolidated the upper caste composition of middle class private sector employment that is associated with the NMC.[69]

## The Local Politics of Democracy

A practice-oriented approach to the politics of the NMC exposes the extent to which politics in India is being reconstituted far beyond the realm of formal electoral politics. Studies of electoral politics in India point to a reduced role for the middle class in favor of subordinate social groups. Levels of middle class electoral participation in recent elections have been relatively low.[70] Meanwhile, the discursive and organizational field of politics has shifted dramatically with the upsurge of groups such as the OBCS.[71] However, the political significance of the NMC lies in a range of local political practices that operate below the surface of electoral politics. Consider the case of local conflicts over urban space. Metropolitan cities have witnessed growing political conflicts over public space. Local state governments, middle class organizations, and the urban poor have increasingly been battling over scarce urban space and corresponding models of urban development. The growth of civic organizations represents an emerging trend in which the NMC has begun to assert an autonomous form of agency as it has sought to defend its interests against groups such as hawkers (street vendors) and slumdwellers.

Local spatial practices are an instance of a broader range of strategies, associational activities, and everyday politics that shape middle class civic culture. Such practices exemplify a broader pattern in which civic life in contemporary India is reconstituted through the intensification of social exclusions and hierarchies. Examples of local spatial practices include the case of "beautification" projects undertaken by middle class civic organizations and local state officials in cities such as Mumbai, Bangalore, Delhi, and Calcutta and middle class citizen drives to remove street vendors from local neighborhoods and public city spaces.[72] In such cases, though middle class demands are made through representative claims of citizenship, they in effect represent class projects of spatial purification. For instance, middle class activity in the form of such "citizen's groups"

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67. Harvey 1990.
68. Sheth, 1999a and 1999b.
69. Sheth 1999a.
70. Jaffrelot 2000.
71. Hasan 1998.
72. On Calcutta, see Roy 2003; on Delhi, see Harriss 2005 and this volume; on Bangalore, see Heitzman 1999; on Mumbai, see Fernandes 2004.

and media representations of such issues have largely produced a construction of hawkers as a threat to the civic culture of the middle classes.[73] These discourses have focused on the "hawker menace" as a threat to a wide array of middle class interests, including inconvenience, sanitation, fears of social disorder, and the threat of declining real estate prices for residential areas marked for relocating hawkers. Such associational activity begins to provide specific organizational mechanisms for the political representation of the NMC. Several middle class and residents and citizens associations have put forth legal challenges to zoning plans in order to prevent hawkers being relocated to their neighborhoods. These practices represent a growing set of middle class demands on the state that are being exerted outside the realm of electoral politics and party politics.[74]

Such local examples reveal micro tactics that hint at much broader changes in how the NMC engages the state and its strategic response to the increasing political assertiveness of subaltern groups. Increased lower class electoral participation and independent political organization (most notably the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP]) has translated into a much greater presence within the state itself. Representation of Scheduled Classes (SCs) in Class I category positions in the federal bureaucracy grew from 0.53 percent in 1953 to 10.77 percent in 2000.[75] As the social composition of the state has expanded, however, its powers have eroded. Not only has the boundary of allocative power shifted with liberalization from state to market, but the public sector has been downsized and the share of organized sector employment — that is, forms of employment within the purview of state protection and regulation — has fallen.

This hollowing of public authority has also been accompanied by what might be called a de-representation of politics, as the middle class has shifted its political practices from representative structures to making representations through civil society structures. Solomon and Bhuvaneshari make a similar argument for Bangalore (the poster child of the Earth-Is-Flat discourse). As land has become scarcer and more valued, municipal governance structures have been centralized and the mode of intermediation has shifted in favor of middle class interests. In what they describe as *governance via circuits*, "hi-tech firms lobby the State government levels and interact with powerful parastatal institutions to access land and high quality infrastructure. The richer groups in planned neighborhoods of South Bangalore press the government via senior bureaucrats to rid their streets of accumulated garbage.[76] In sum, social capital (in Bourdieu's sense of the term) displaces representation.

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73. Bhowmick 2002.
74. Note that this type of exclusionary middle-class claim on democratic process can also be seen more broadly in public interest litigation. This form of litigation has been a preserve of NMC politics because it requires knowledge of courts, legal connections, English skills (laws are often not published in the vernacular), and technical skills — the kinds of social and cultural capital we have argued is central to middle-class formation and politics. Thanks to Ron Herring for pointing this out.
75. Kapur 2006, Table 1a.

## Conclusion

This article has used a relational and comparative class-analytic approach to understand both the politics of India's NMC and the impact that this *class-in-practice* has had on the substantive nature of India's democracy. As is true of many developing economies, the middle class has played a critical role in Indian politics, most notably in forging the ideology of the dominant bloc. The fragmented nature of dominant classes in India and an arrested economic transformation that has failed to incorporate the lower classes (the passive revolution) has precluded a classic path of liberal hegemony. Instead, we have argued that patterns of middle class illiberalism have set significant limits on the workings of substantive democracy in India. We have focused in particular on the ways in which the politics of this class have both intersected with the politics of Hindu nationalism, on the one hand, and with ideological support for liberalization, on the other. If a great deal of attention has been devoted in the literature to analyzing how the rise and limits of Hindutva has played out in Indian politics, less attention has been paid to the ways in which Hindutva embodies the illiberal politics of the middle classes. This form of middle class reaction, situated at the confluence of accelerated marketization and rising lower class demands, represents a conjunctural pattern of comparative significance. We have also argued that these illiberal politics also take varying forms that rest on the reproduction of social inequalities such as language and caste in secular spaces such as education and urban space. Caste and religion are not essentialized or exceptional characteristics of India's middle classes — they are forms of inequality and differentiation that typify middle class politics and practices.

Our argument of course is not that the Indian middle class is intrinsically illiberal. Our purpose rather has been to analyze broad national patterns that emerge at particular historical conjunctures. However, as we have noted earlier, the regionalization of Indian politics means that there are important variations that depart from the configurational patterns we have outlined and present alternative possibilities for middle class politics. Having said this, the politics of India's NMC holds broader implications that transcend local variations. Viewed comparatively, an analysis of middle class illiberalism provides an important caution in the face of public discourses on the NMC both in India and globally that are rife with a rhetorical celebration of the cultural and economic ascendancy of this class. Given the crosscutting strains that high levels of political mobilization and demands on the state place on Indian democracy, the nature of middle class responses is a crucial force that will continue to shape the nature and direction of democratic politics. This force has resurfaced most recently, as proposed caste reservations in educational institutions have once again woven together middle class interests and anxieties, caste politics and inequalities, and (inadequate) state responses in a passionate debate on the substantive direc-

76. Solomon and Bhuvaneshari 2001, 108.
77. See Mehta 2006 and Yadav and Deshpande 2006.

tion of Indian politics.[77] Regardless of the specific outcome at hand, the politics of the NMC is certain to influence this political context through a dynamic set of class politics that belie conventional narratives of Indian exceptionalism.

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