

## Unit 15

# The Middle Class

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### Learning Objectives

After studying this unit you will be able to:

- » explain the concept of class;
- » discuss the concept of ‘middle class’;
- » outline the evolution of middle class in India;
- » describe the link between modernity and the middle class in contemporary India; and
- » discuss the values related to family, marriage and status of women amongst the middle class.

## 15.1 Introduction

Analysis of the middle class in contemporary capitalist society has been lacking in systematic discussion. This is also the case in a society such as India. There has been an ongoing debate on what constitutes the middle class in India. However, a comprehensive understanding of the middle class in India is still far from complete. In this Unit, we endeavour to understand the concept of ‘middle class’ in India in contemporary times. We have divided this Unit into four sections. In the first section, we discuss the concept of class from various perspectives following which, in the second section, we focus on the definition of middle class and its evolution in India. The third section will be devoted to understanding the middle class in contemporary India. The fourth section explains the values related to family, marriage and kinship amongst the middle class; and in the final section, we bring the discussion to a conclusion.

## 15.2 Concept of Class

Before entering into any theoretical discussion on what constitutes the middle class and whether India has a middle class, it becomes pertinent to understand ‘class’ as a concept. Right from the time of classical thinkers, myriad viewpoints on ‘class’ have been put forth. Karl Marx defined social class as an aggregate of persons who perform the same function in the organisation of production. In Marx’s theory, social classes in different historical periods are given different names such as freeman and slave, patrician and plebian, lord and serf, guild master and journeyman, oppressor

and oppressed. Classes are distinguished from each other by the difference in their respective positions in the economy (Bendix & Lipset, 1967: 7). Since social class is constituted by the function which its members perform in the process of production, the question arises why the organisation of production is the basic determinant of social class. Fundamental to this theory was Marx's belief that work is man's basic form of self-realisation. Stating the four aspects of production, Marx propounded that these explain why man's efforts to provide for his subsistence underlie all change in history. Following from this, Marx asserted that the fundamental determinant of class is the way in which the individual cooperates with others in the satisfaction of his or her basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. Other indices such as income, consumption patterns, educational attainment or occupation are so many clues to the distribution of material goods and of prestige symbols (ibid:8). Interpreting Karl Marx's viewpoint, Lipset and Bendix explain that the income or occupation of an individual, according to Marx, is not an indication of his class position i.e of his position in the production process. Marx believed that a man's position in the production process provided the crucial life experience, which would eventually determine the beliefs and actions of that individual.

As Marx saw it, the organisation of production provides the necessary but not a sufficient basis for the existence of social classes. Taking the examples of bourgeoisie and proletariat, Marx illustrated the manner in which he envisaged the emergence of a social class. Put simply, Marx viewed social class as a condition of group life, which was constantly generated by the organisation of production. He went on to elaborate that the existence of common conditions and the realisation of common interests are only the necessary, not the sufficient bases for the development of a social class. Only when the members of a 'potential' class enter into an association for the organised pursuit of their common aims, does a class in Marx's sense exist. Marx did not simply identify a social class with the fact that a large group of people occupied the same objective position in the economic structure of a society. Instead he laid stress on the importance of subjective awareness as a precondition of organising the class successfully for the economic and the political struggle. Marx felt that the pressures engendered by capitalism would determine its development in the future. Subjective awareness, in his view, was an indispensable element in the development of the social class and this would arise with growing contradictions inherent in capitalism.

Writing on Marx, Erik Olin Wright points out that although the former did not systematically answer the question 'What constitutes a class?', yet most of his work revolves around two problems: the elaboration of abstract structural maps of class relations and the analysis of concrete conjunctural maps of classes as actors (Wright, 1985: 6). From the abstract structural account of classes comes the characteristically polarized map of class relations that runs through most of Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production in *Capital*. In contrast to this, the conjunctural political analyses are characterised by a complex picture of classes, fractions, factions, social categories, strata and other actors on the political stage. Elaborating on this further, Wright argues that the distinction between class structure and class formation is a basic, if often implicit, distinction in class analysis. Class structure refers to the structure of social relations into which individuals enter which determine their class interests (ibid:9). Class formation on the other hand, refers to the formation of organised collectivities within that

class structure on the basis of the interests shaped by that class structure. Put simply, if class structure is defined by social relations between classes, class formation is defined by social relations within classes, social relations which forge collectivities engaged in struggle.

Taking the cue from Marx, Max Weber made classifications such as ‘classes’, ‘status groups’ and ‘parties’ based on distribution of power within a community. He defined ‘class’ as when 1) a number of people have in common a specific casual component of their life chances in so far as 2) this component is represented exclusively by economic interests in the possession of goods and opportunities for income and 3) is represented under the conditions of the commodity or labor markets. In Weber’s theory, class situation is ultimately the ‘market situation’ (Weber, 1946). He goes on to elaborate that the factor that creates class is unambiguously an economic interest and only those interests involved in the existence of the market.

Joseph Schumpeter states that there are basically four problems that beset the class theory in Sociology. In doing so he takes into account the scientific rather than the philosophical, and the sociological rather than the immediate economic. The four problems are: 1) There is the problem of the nature of class and as part of this problem, the function of class in the vital processes of the social whole. 2) Problem of social cohesion – the factors that constitute every social class. 3) The problem of class formation – the question of why the social whole has never been homogeneous revealing organic stratification. 4) This problem is wholly distinct from the series of problems that are concerned with the concrete causes and conditions of an individual determined, historically given class structure.

Class, as defined by Schumpeter, is more than an aggregation of class members. A class is aware of its identity as a whole, sublimates itself as such, has its own peculiar life and characteristic “spirit”. However, a noted phenomenon is that class members behave towards one another in a fashion characteristically different from their conduct towards members of other classes. They are in closer association with one another; they understand one another better; they work more readily in concert; they close ranks and erect barriers against the outside; they look into the same segment of the world with the same eyes, from the same viewpoint, in the same direction. Social intercourse within class barriers is promoted by the similarity of manners and habits of life, or things that are evaluated in a positive or negative sense, that arouse interest. Classes, once they have come into being, harden in their mould and perpetuate themselves, even when the social conditions that created them have disappeared.

Pointing to the history of the term ‘social class’, Stanislaw Ossowski argued that from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, class has been an interesting subject for sociologists. He considers two specifying versions of the concept of ‘class’.

- a) Social class is seen as a group distinguished in respect of relations of property. This is basically the economic version of social class.
- b) The class system is contrasted with group systems in the social structure in which an individual’s membership of the group is institutionally determined and in which privileges or discriminations result from the individual’s ascription to a certain group. This is the result not of birth

or an official document such as title of nobility but is the consequence of social status otherwise achieved.

In various social systems one can observe two or more coexisting types of the relation of class dependence. Three assumptions which appear to be common to all conceptions of a 'class society' can be stated in the following manner:

- 1) The classes constitute a system of the most comprehensive groups in the social structure.
- 2) The class division concerns social statuses connected with a system of privileges and discriminations not determined by biological criteria.
- 3) The membership of individuals in a social class is relatively permanent.

Out of myriad ways of understanding class, one can elicit three or four such characteristics. They are by no means of equal importance in the history of social thought.

- 1) The vertical order of social classes: the existence of superior and inferior categories of social statuses which are superior or inferior in respect of some system of privileges and discriminations. Accepting such a class structure would mean class stratification.
- 2) Distinctness of permanent class interests.
- 3) Class consciousness – involves not only class identification but also a consciousness of the place of one's class in the class hierarchy, a realisation of class distinctness, class interests and possibly of class solidarity as well.
- 4) Social isolation – the absence of closer social contacts: social distance. In the US, according to this definition, a social class is the largest group of people whose members have intimate social access to one another. A society is a class society in respect of this characteristic if there exist within it distinct barriers to social intercourse and if class boundaries can be drawn by means of an analysis of interpersonal relations. Not only is social isolation involved but also the effects of this isolation and the effects of differences in the degree of access to the means of consumption.

These class criteria are not independent of each other. Given the fact that these characteristics are interdependent, Ossowski concludes that there could be various definitions of class. The pertinent question at this juncture is how do we define middle class in India in general and in contemporary times in particular.

### 15.3 Concept of the 'Middle Class'

The problems which the middle class pose for the social scientist are typically metropolitan in character and nationwide in scope. C. Wright Mills states that a city's population may be stratified in the following manner: a) objectively in terms of such bases as property or occupation or the amount of income received from either or both sources. Information about these bases may be confined to the present or may include b) extractions, intermarriages and job histories of members of given strata. Subjectively, strata may be constructed according to who does the rating: c) each individual may be asked to assign himself a position, d) the interviewer may intuitively rate each individual or e) each individual may be asked to stratify the population and then to give his image of the people on each level.

Citing Dahrendorf (1959: 51-57), one finds that four different positions can be identified regarding the class situation of the new middle class. In the first position it is held that since most middle class occupations have been structurally differentiated from what were previously ruling class occupations, so the new middle class is an extension of the existent capitalist ruling class (Bendix, 1963). In the second position it is held that the middle class is really much closer to the working class because both groups do not own the means of production. Any identification with the ruling class is merely false consciousness that will disappear once the middle class comes to realise their class interests to be coincidental with the working class (Klingender, 1935 & Wright Mills C., 1956). A third position is that there is no such thing as the middle class but instead there are two different groupings with opposed interests, bureaucrats with ruling class authority and white collar workers with a proletarian class situation (Dahrendorf, 1959). Finally there is a position where it is maintained that the middle class is in a structurally ambivalent situation (Lockwood, 1958).

Elaborating on the growth of the middle class, John Urry argues that Marx's account of the rise of the middle class was in terms of a growing surplus that demanded a class or classes to consume more than they produced and an increasingly complicated industrial structure which needed non productive functionaries to service it. In 'Theories of Surplus Value', Marx goes on to argue that as capitalism develops there is an expansion of the middle class. Taking the cue from Marx, Urry propounded that a historical analysis of the growth of the middle class has illustrated that with the market structure there has been the development of a highly significant middle class which does not own the means of production but is a powerful favoured status situation in the structure of workplace relationships (Urry, 1996: 255).

Like Marx and Weber, most modern sociologists use economic factors as the basic criteria for differentiating social classes. Anthony Giddens identifies three major classes in advanced capitalist society. They are upper class based on the 'ownership of property in the means of production', a middle class based on the 'possession of educational and technical qualifications' and a lower or working class based on the 'possession of manual labour power'. These classes, in Giddens's opinion, are distinguished by their differing relationships to the forces of production and by their particular strategies for obtaining economic reward in a capitalist economy. Another viewpoint regarding class is the functional perspective whereby functional requirements of society determines differential occupational rewards. An alternative explanation is that power is a determinant of occupational rewards.

This is a very basic understanding of the concept of the middle class drawing our attention to 'middle class in India'. First and foremost, it becomes significant to delve into the evolution of the middle class in India.

#### **Reflection and Action 15.01**

Read carefully the section on 'middle class' in India. Observe your own family and your immediate neighbours. Write a report of one page on "Me and My Class" where you state, to which class you think you belong and why? Discuss your report with other students at your Study Centre and your Academic Counsellor.

## 15.4 Evolution of the Middle Class in India

B.B. Misra (1961) in his seminal work on the middle classes in India had concluded that institutions conducive to capitalist growth were not lacking in India prior to the British rule. Pre-British India did witness an Indian artisan industry as well as occupational specialisation and additionally a separate class of merchants. The guild power remained purely money power unsupported by any authority of a political or military nature. The British rule resulted in the emergence of a class of intermediaries serving as a link between people and the new rulers. In Misra's viewpoint, there was a fundamental revolution in social relations and class structure in India. The emergent class of intermediaries was the middle class that continued to grow in strength and prosperity with the progress of foreign rule. Significantly, the establishment of trading relations followed by the rule of the British East India Company set the stage in the creation of this class. Furthermore, as part of their educational policy, the British attempted to create a class comparable to their own to assist the former in the administration of the country (Misra, 1961:10). The aim of the British was to create a class of imitators and not originators of new values and methods (Ahmad & Reifeld, 2001:8).

As Pavan K. Verma points out in his work on the middle class, from the circumstances of their origin and growth, the members of the educated class such as government servants, lawyers, college teachers and doctors constituted the bulk of the Indian middle class. This middle class, in Verma's opinion, was largely dominated by the traditional higher castes (Verma, 1998: 27). Ahmad and Reifeld argue that in its formation and the role played in history, the Indian middle class bore close resemblance, at least in some parts, to its European counterparts (Ahmad & Reifeld, 2001). Like their counterparts in Europe earlier, some of the entrants to commercial activity either as agents or independently in the 17<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century amassed great wealth and acquired social status far beyond what they could aspire to have in the structure of economic relations in the traditional society. But alongside, differences existed, too. While the European middle class was independent, the Indian middle class was under foreign rule. Initially, the middle class helped in the establishment of British power and promotion of European commerce and enterprise in India. It was only after the 'Mutiny' that it began to assume the political role of competitor for power with the British. With the passage of time, the competitor role adopted by an important section of the middle class came to dominate over that of a collaborator and this continued till the very end of the Raj. Ahmad and Reifeld conclude that from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian middle class had come to pose a serious challenge to the continuance of the British power. It was instrumental in arousing national consciousness and giving a sense of unity as a nation to the people (Ahmad and Reifeld, 2001:10).

Sanjay Joshi, in his study of the making of the middle class in colonial India, attempted to explain why traditional sociological indicators of income and occupation cannot take us very far in understanding the category of middle class. Though the economic background of the middle class was important, the power and constitution of the middle class in India was based not on the economic power it wielded, which was minimal, but on the ability of its members to be cultural entrepreneurs. Being middle class was primarily a project of 'self fashioning' (Joshi, 2001: 4). Joshi articulated that the definition and power of the middle class, from its propagation of modern ways of life,

heterogeneity was an attribute of the middle class. The rapid expansion of a new middle class in India during the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its increasing influence in many parts of the public sphere constitute one of the most important changes in India's contemporary history.

**Box 15.01: Rural and Urban Middle Class**

According to Yogendra Singh (1991), if we compare the rural middle classes with the urban, we find one major similarity. The rural middle classes have ideological affinity at one level with the urban middle classes as both of them share conservative and narrow utilitarian ethos. But the rural middle classes also harbour, on another level, intense antagonism and conflict with the urban middle classes, entrepreneurs and professional groups.

The antagonism and conflict has arisen due to certain historical reasons. The process of development in agriculture has after a period of time slowed down due to structural technological stagnation. He believes that even the so called rich peasants have over the past few years confronted the prospect of downward mobility in terms of social and economic status due to unfavourable price policy, stagnation in agriculture productivity, fragmentation of landholding due to rise in population and non-availability of other avenues of employment for their youth. He says that this post-Green Revolution under-development in agriculture further reinforces the alienation of middle classes in rural areas from the urban and industrial middle classes. This fact has been a setback to their level of aspiration which had seen its peak during the Green Revolution phase.

Andre Beteille writes that the middle class is not only very large but also highly differentiated internally to such an extent that it may be more appropriate to speak of the middle classes than of the middle class in India, stresses upon the heterogeneous nature of its social composition (Beteille, 2001: 73). The recent shifts in the economic policy in favour of privatisation, liberalisation and globalisation have generated a wide interest in the middle class, its size, composition and its social values. Andre Beteille views middle class in India as part of a relatively new social formation based on religion, caste and kinship. In Beteille's opinion, middle class values in India are difficult to characterise because they are still in the process of formation and have still not acquired a stable form (Beteille, 2001:74). As such, they are marked by deep and pervasive antinomies meaning contradictions, oppositions and tensions inherent in a set of norms and values.

Public discussion of the middle class in the last 10 years has been driven largely by media. There is hardly anything substantial in the structure of the middle class in the sociological literature. The discussion of the middle class values is constrained by the absence of reliable and systematic data on the size and composition of the class. Estimates of its size vary from under 100 million to over 250 million persons. There is no single criterion for defining the middle class (Beteille, 2001: 76). Occupational functions and employment status are the two most significant criteria although education and income are also widely used. The new middle class, according to Beteille is not only defined by occupation but also by education. In India, the origins of the middle class derive not so much from an industrial revolution or a democratic revolution as from colonial rule. In the last 50 years, the middle class has grown steadily.

Commenting on the growing middle class, Gurcharan Das (Das, 2000) stated that although the middle class is composed of many occupations, commerce has always been at the center- as the businessman mediated between the landed upper classes and the labouring lower classes. The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed an entrepreneurial surge in the last decade after 1991 and the expansion of the middle class in the last two decades after 1980. After growing at a rate of 3.5% a year from 1950 to 1980, India's economic growth rate increased to 5.6% in the decade of the 80s. It climbed further to 6.3% in the decade of 1990s. In these 2 decades the middle class more than tripled. Between 1998- 2000, \$2.5 billion in venture capital funds have come to India (McKinsey's studies have shown that there is a direct correlation between the availability of venture funds and the proliferation of business start ups). Writing about this middle class, Das argued that as a result of changing trends, a new kind of entrepreneur has emerged in India (Das, 2000:195). As Gurcharan Das notes, although the reforms after 1991 have been slow, hesitant and incomplete, yet they have set in motion a process of profound change in Indian society. It is Joseph Schumpeter who coined the term 'entrepreneur'. Contrary to earlier times, the new millionaires today are looked up to with pride and even reverence. For they are a new meritocracy – highly educated entrepreneur professionals who are creating value by innovating in the global knowledge economy.

The emergence of a sizeable middle class in the last decades is widely regarded with hope by the modernisers and fear by the traditionalists as the single most important development in the ongoing transformation of Indian society (Kakar). According to a survey by NCAER the middle class grew from 8% of the population in 1986 to 18% in 2000 which is about 185 million. It appears that for many modern sociologists of India, the emergent middle class is a harbinger of modernity but the question of great relevance is how does one define modernity. Can one define the middle class as modern, based on material progress or is the middle class ethos to be analysed in a more deep rooted manner with regard to the basis of formation of social relations among people who constitute the middle class. In the subsequent section, the focus will be on understanding the rising middle class in contemporary India and whether we can define it as modern, traditional or as Beteille (Beteille, 2001) labels it, as 'transitional'.

## 15.5 Modernity and the Middle Class in Contemporary India

We live in modern times – times that are witnessing rapid changes in the technological, economic, political and social realms. Microwaves, DVDs, palmtop computers, cloning, genetic manipulation and so on all appear to corroborate how much more technologically advanced contemporary society is in comparison to the society of the past. Today's world appears to be peculiarly dynamic, a world which is in the process of constant change and transformation. According to Marshall Berman, to live in a modern world is to live in 'a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish' (Berman 1988:15). Essentially, modernity signifies the destruction of past forms of life, values and identities combined with the production of new ones. One of the major outcomes of this has been the emergence of 'consumer culture' or 'consumerism' whereby culture is constructed through consumption, not just production. Consumer culture is bound up with central values, practices and institutions that define modernity, such as choice, individualism and market relations. Primarily this

consumerist ideology involves a process of innovation, of constant turnover and novelty. Extending viewpoints of scholars such as Simmel (1972) and Campbell (1987) to present times, it can be stated that along with money making, consumption of goods has become an end in itself. Fundamentally both of these represent a break from tradition. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we witnessed consumer culture reaching its apogee in the West. Within this contemporary consumer culture, what has developed is a 'lifestyle' connoting individuality, self-expression and stylistic self-consciousness (Featherstone 1991:86).

Most often, the terms 'consumption' and 'consumer culture' are used interchangeably, but a sociological analysis reveals a definite distinction between the two. Two important features that distinguish consumer culture from consumption are:

- a) Constant turnover of commodities with emphasis being laid on newer and changed versions of goods. One consumes not because one needs something but to be in fashion.
- b) A generalised consumption – it does not remain confined to the upper echelons of society but becomes all pervading.

In modern consumeristic societies, people are no longer locked in their respective positions. Lifestyles can be and are improved upon constantly. Moreover, it becomes a generalised phenomenon with all classes of people being subjected to a surfeit of images and signs because of advertising and being active participants in consumer culture. What is present is essentially, 'fluidization of consumption' i.e. freeing up the previously static and relatively fixed spatial and temporal dimensions of social life (Lee 1993:124-133). Also consumption is viewed as a stage in a process of communication i.e. an act of deciphering and decoding. What is required is to be able to move from the primary stratum of meaning, which one can grasp on the basis of ordinary experience to the stratum of secondary meanings that is the level of meaning of what is signified (Bourdieu 1979:2). Therefore, in a modern society there is a strong tendency for social groups to seek to classify and order their social circumstances as well as use cultural goods as means of demarcation and as communicators that establish boundaries between some people and build bridges with others (Jameson 1991:XX of Introduction). The process by which taste becomes a process of differentiation leading to creation of distinctions between different categories of goods and between social groups is an ongoing one. Contemporary Western societies have been witnessing, what Mike Featherstone refers to as the 'doubly symbolic aspect of goods'. Symbolism is not only evident in the design and imagery of production and marketing processes, but the symbolic association of goods may be utilised and renegotiated to emphasise the differences in lifestyle which demarcate social relationships (Featherstone 1991:86). This leads us to conclude that a critical aspect of a modern consumer society is the presence of an open system of stratification with avenues of upward mobility being available to all.

“Rather than reflexively adopting a lifestyle through tradition or habit, new heroes of consumer culture make 'lifestyle' a life project and display their individuality and sense of style in particularity of assemblage of goods, clothes, practices, experience, appearance and bodily dispositions, they design together a lifestyle.”(ibid.: 86)

goods, is able to destabilise the original notion of use or meaning of goods and attach to them new images and signs which can summon up a whole range of associated feelings and desires (Featherstone 1999:274). This, in turn, results in impulsive purchase of newer and latest versions of products. In fact, the commodity becomes the primary index of the social relations of modern capitalist societies. Modern societies experience the reflexivity process at both the institutional and personal levels that is decisive for the production and change of modern systems and modern forms of social organisation (Giddens 1991:1).

True modernity cannot be defined only in terms of material progress. In order to be able to get a comprehensive view of whether or not a social order can be called modern, we need to view it through a larger prism, that of the kind of interpersonal relationships existing among people. Modernity confronts the individuals with a diversity of choices in all spheres of life. Universalism, achievement and individualism are the important ingredients of a modern social order. This affects the most personal and intimate aspects of individuals including self-identity. As the ties of tradition are loosened and compulsiveness of repetition disappears, new opportunities are created for individuals in society. The availability of more options implies that people have to make more decisions. Choices are not restricted to consumer items alone but extend into all realms of personal lives of people. This allows individuals to negotiate about conditions of all social relations, norms and ethics that would form the basis of relations between men and women, between friends and between parents and children. Tradition no longer constitutes the basis of individuals' decisions and actions.

Following from earlier discussions whereby it has been reiterated that the pace of growth of the middle class has been accelerated by changing economic policies in the post liberalisation era in India, it becomes pertinent to analyse whether the material progress in India, more so in the case of the middle class, is witnessing commensurate changes in the values and attitudes of those belonging to the middle class to label them as 'modern'. In a research study undertaken among the urban populace of a metropolitan society such as Delhi (Chandra, 2003), one of the primary objectives was to precisely gauge the level of modernity existing among those belonging to the middle class- upper and lower. To begin with, a class has been defined in terms of income, occupation and quality of dwelling area. Those living in a metropolitan centre such as New Delhi appear to be modern in terms of dress and eating habits. But a more profound issue that needs to be thoroughly investigated is whether a modern ethos is visible in the attitudes of people at a deeper level. It is by analysis of the basis for the formation of interpersonal relationships among individuals, that one can make an attempt to categorise the middle class as 'traditional', 'modern' or maybe 'transitional'.

The affluent consumers, those belonging to the upper class and upper middle class seem to indulge in a rapid turnover of products in order to differentiate themselves from the masses as well as maintain commonalities with their own kind. For most of the super rich consumers, irrespective of age and sex, possession of the latest consumer durables as well as non-durables connotes being technologically updated and in fashion. They are positively inclined to wearing designer labels and eating out. Acts of consumption are taken as critical indicators of a modern status by them. Even in the upper middle class, possession of durables such as air conditioners, television sets, computers and the like are viewed as necessities in the contemporary age.

Throughout the research, it was discernible that this group of respondents want to emulate the affluent in their preferences but is unable to replace the goods at the same pace as the rich do because of financial constraints. Significantly, the upper middle class are also buying consumer durables of international brands in the post liberalisation era. On the whole, they appear to be as fashion conscious as the affluent. In fact, apparently the upper middle class are choosing clothes and places for eating out that enable them to categorise themselves with the elite.

#### Reflection and Action 15.02

Do you think you are a modern person? What do you think constitutes modernity in your opinion? Think about it and write an essay of about two pages on “Why I am a modern person?” or “Why I am not a modern person?” Discuss your essay with other students at your Study Centre.

On the other hand, the lower middle class respondents are unable to participate in consumer culture due to lack of adequate resources. Although the politics of culture of consumption has still not trickled down, yet there is a definite change in their patterns of consumption. It is quite important to take note of the fact that even those belonging to the lower middle class are changing their consumption patterns in their endeavour to be categorized as ‘modern’. This has been facilitated by a number of exchange schemes. However, while purchasing durables and non-durables emphasis is laid on the utilitarian aspects and the price of the required product. In clothes, the younger generation are choosing cheaper imitations of the original designer labels as they are affordable. The concept of ‘eating out’ is catching on. What differentiates them from the upper and upper middle classes, is that they do not eat in expensive restaurants.

#### Box 15.02: The Great Indian Middle Class

The Indian middle class is not just growing at a rapid pace, it has also become the segment driving consumption of “luxury” goods like cars and air-conditioners, according to a survey by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

While the middle class, which the survey defines as households with annual incomes between Rs. 2 lakh and Rs. 10 lakh at 2001-02 prices accounted for barely 5.7% of all Indian households in 2001-02, it already owned 60% of all the cars and Acs in the country and 25% of all TVs, fridges and motorcycles.

Read that with the projection that the middle class will account for 13% of India’s population by 2009-10 and you can see why the NCAER sees huge growth potential in the market for cars and mobikes. The study predicts that the market for cars will grow at 20% a year, while bikes will clock growth of 16% per annum till 2009-10.

Fridges and colour TV makers can hope to cash in on the boom too, with projected growth rates in the range of 10% to 11%. The market for radios, electric irons, bicycles and wrist watches too will grow, though by a more modest 7-9% a year.

On the flip side, black & white TVs, scooters and mopeds may be hit, with the report suggesting that demand for these goods will actually decline.

The projected consumption boom isn't just restricted to urban India. On the contrary, the survey suggests that the urban market for some relatively low-end products will be saturated by the end of the decade, while rural demand picks up. As a result, 80% of radios, 65% of colour TVs, 48% of mobikes, 40% of scooters and 33% of fridges will be owned by the rural populace by 2009-10. Indeed, the projection is that with rural incomes rising, even the demand for cars will grow in the villages to the point where the country-side will account for 11% of all cars by the end of the decade. The survey - The Great Indian Middle Class-categorises the population into four income groups. The "deprived" are those with household incomes below Rs. 90,000 a year and they constituted just under 72% of all households in 2001-02. By 2009-10, that share will be down to 51.6%, says the survey.

The next step up the income ladder consists of the "aspirers" – those with annual household incomes between Rs. 90,000 and Rs. 2 lakh. This category constituted a little under 22% of all households in 2001-02, but is likely to rise to 34% by the end of the decade.

The "middle class" households numbered 10.7 million in 2001-2; by 2009-10, they're expected to rise to 28.4 million. "The rich too are growing in numbers," points out Rakesh Shukla, senior fellow and head of the survey team, NCAER. From 0.8 million in 2001-02, they're expected to grow to 3.8 million by the end of the decade.

"While the number of crorepati families was 5,000 in 1995-96, they increased to 20,000 in 2001-02. By the end of the decade, there'll be 1.4 lakh such households," says Shukla. Also, most of the deprived (85%) and the aspirers (60%) will be concentrated in rural areas by the end of the decade, while three-fourths of the rich and two-thirds of the middle class will be found in cities.

The report is based on extensive surveys covering three lakh households across 858 villages and 660 towns and cities all over India. It covered a list of 20 durables, seven consumables and a host of services including mediclaim, life insurance and credit cards. (TOI, N. Delhi, June 24, 2005)

Thus, on the whole, it can be concluded that with changing economic policies in India, the middle class is witnessing a metamorphosis in their consumption patterns but consumer culture is still in its nascent stage in urban India. Rather than becoming an all-pervasive phenomenon, consumption is still in terms of differences. Therefore consumerism has yet to evolve. It is quite evident that material progress is taking place, albeit at a slow pace but most importantly, it is imperative to delve into the kind of social relations those belonging to the middle class are entering into, to understand whether they are modern in the strict sense of the word.

With regards to formation of interpersonal relations, it is found that the middle class as Andre Beteille writes, is still in the process of formation and have still not acquired a stable form (Beteille, 2001:74). As such they are marked by deep and pervasive antinomies meaning contradictions, oppositions and tensions inherent in a set of norms and values.

## 15.6 Values Related To Family, Marriage and Women's Status Amongst the Middle Class

Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marriage is considered an important traditional social institution that all are supposed to enter into. Choices available with individuals, specifically women, are very few as marriage and motherhood are taken to be the ultimate goals. A woman's identity is seen to be largely dependent on her marital status.

Marriage is still seen as a way of life through which an individual entered adulthood in both upper and upper middle classes of urban India, who outwardly appear to be modern. Although marriage is considered essential for both men and women, yet in the case of women, adherence to the social norms becomes more rigid. In the context of remaining single and unmarried, women seem to have a limited choice. In other words, men have more options as they could choose to remain single but women, by and large, do not enjoy such freedom.

Particularistic criteria continue to provide the normative basis for the formation of intimate relations among people across all classes. Although arranged marriages, whereby parents choose the prospective mates for their children are the preferred form of marriage, in the upper and upper middle classes, certain changes are observable. Semi-arranged marriages, in which individuals choose their own life partners but marry only with the consent of their parents, are also taking place. In such marriages, inter-caste and inter-religious marital alliances are being tolerated, albeit conditionally. Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian marriages are still taboo. The main reason cited for disapproval of such alliances is the higher probability of mal-adjustment between spouses because of religious differences leading to breakdown of ties. Other than these exceptional cases, a majority continue to subscribe to the traditional value system with emphasis being laid on marriages taking place within the same caste and religion. However, certain changes have occurred from previous generations as the prospective mates are allowed to meet once or twice before the finalisation of the marital unions. In the lower middle and lower classes, there is strict adherence to social norms. Wedding ceremonies are performed in a traditional way. Choices available with individuals are very few. In case of the lower middle class, such values and norms are comparatively more deep-rooted. Certain ambiguities are quite evident in the attitudes of those belonging to the middle class as they seem to be more open to change while responding to the same queries in questionnaires but adopt a more traditional viewpoint while narrating their life histories without being too conscious during in-depth interviews. Such contradictions are inherent in the set of social norms and values upheld by them.

Furthermore, the stereotypical roles of man being the 'breadwinner' and woman the 'nurturer' are perpetuated. In the upper and upper middle classes, certain changes are observable. There is 'superficial emancipation' as women are choosing clothes that are in tune with the latest in the world of fashion. Nonetheless, they do not have complete freedom to decide on matters related to their occupations and marriage. Since marriage and motherhood are considered to be the most important goals, all decisions have to be in consonance with these. Women, in the upper class, are not encouraged to be gainfully employed as that is taken to reflect a poor status of the families that they belong to. Vocations with flexible timings are subscribed to making

it convenient for them to complete their primary tasks of home management and therefore not facing any form of role conflict.

Although women in the upper and upper middle classes in the contemporary age appear to be more autonomous compared to those belonging to the previous generations, they are still considered to be appendages to men. Only in the realm of the size of the family, the former seem to have as much say as the latter. In the upper middle class, parents lay emphasis on their daughters excelling in their studies just as they would wish their sons to. However, emphasis is not laid on higher education as that is taken to be a hindrance in getting good matrimonial matches. A harmonious marital relationship is seen to be dependent on women occupying a sub-ordinate status to men.

In the lower middle class, also, women appear to have limited choices in the sphere of education. Education is considered important in order to enable them to be better wives and mothers. Significantly, most women are gainfully employed but they are compelled to join the work force to meet the economic needs of the family. Women are essentially expected to remain within the domains of their households and cater to the needs of their families. This is viewed as a natural phenomenon. Women do not have absolute freedom to decide on matters concerning selves. Thus, it is quite apparent that women in the middle class, both upper and lower are still not self-determining individuals. Social roles continue to be defined in accordance with traditional expectations.

Also, while forming friendships, particularistic norms continue to play some role as such relationships are usually based on class similarities i.e. with similar economic background and value systems.

Thus, it is quite interesting to note that in contemporary times, the middle class in India has not acquired a stable form and cannot be labeled as 'modern'.

## 15.7 Conclusion

At the outset, there would be a strong tendency to state that the middle class in urban India is modern, based on the fact that materialistically, there is a marked change, albeit slowly. While there is no denying the fact that consumer culture has still not taken a well-entrenched form in India, yet it must be conceded that consumption patterns of the urban Indian middle class is changing. Overt symbols such as cars, electronic goods, designer clothes are being used to portray progressive attitudes and supposedly modern status of individuals. However, to define class in terms of economic status alone will not be an adequate representation of the class situation in India. In this Unit, we have tried to bring out the fact that the basis for formation of social relations is an important criterion for understanding the middle class in India. Middle class in India cannot be defined as being completely modern. Modernisation is not just about possessing the latest electronic appliances and being technologically updated.

Rather it needs to be visible in the attitudes of people that come into effect in their social relations with others. Modernity brings in its wake new forms of social interaction. In the context of the urban middle class in India, lack of modernity is perceptible in most realms of the personal lives of people with social relations continuing to be embedded in traditional

expectations, norms and mores. Essentially, those living in this cosmopolitan city appear to be grappling with the difficult alternatives of tradition and modernity. Normative patterns and value orientations are still particularistic, ascriptive based and patriarchal. Choices in interpersonal relationships are socially controlled. Furthermore, social conditioning perpetuates reactions and thinking along expected lines that underline the predominant codes of a male dominated society. We are in no way suggesting that Indian middle class has not progressed at all. As Dipankar Gupta argues “though the past is in our present, it is not as if the past in its entirety is our present” (Gupta 2000: 206). Metamorphosis is taking place which is why people are appearing to be ambivalent in their thinking as is evident while conducting research amongst them on these aspects. Modernity brings in its wake contradictions and ambiguities in the minds of people as options available with them expand manifold. This phenomenon is being experienced by the urban middle class of India. Therefore, one can conclude that the social order is in a transitional stage with the traditional value system still being predominant in the tradition-modernity continuum.

## 15.8 Further Reading

Beteille, Andre 2001 In *Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe*, (ed.) by Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, Social Science Press, New Delhi.

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