

Introduction

The Problem of the ‘Rural Middle Class(es)’

Granted, nothing raises the academic red flag faster than the concept of the middle class.

—Diane Davis, 2004

The epistemic ambition of defining, once and for all, the ‘real’ boundaries of the middle class is doomed to failure because it rests on a fundamentally mistaken conception on the ontological status of classes: the middle class does not exist ready-made in reality.

—Loïc Wacquant, 1991

On my second visit to Rahatwade, a small village in western Maharashtra, in May 2015, I am talking, through my research assistant, with a group of men, a meeting arranged by the Village Panchayat. They are curious about my work, bemused to hear of my academic interest in their village. I tell them: ‘I am here to visit middle class households.’ The little of the village that I had seen did not register in my head as qualifying, categorically, to have any middle classes from the conventional theoretical perspectives. So, I threw the question out to them: ‘I was wondering if there are any middle-class families in this village? I would like to talk to them.’ The village guide’s response surprised me. He looked around at the group of men, hands outstretched, and said, ‘Don’t worry about that madam. We are all middle class!’

This book explores the formation and trajectories of India’s rural middle class(es).¹ Studies of the middle class are almost exclusively confined to urban contexts. This is particularly the case in developing countries, where it is assumed that cities, not the countryside, host the process of middle-class formation, effectively eliminating from view large numbers of rural households. Rural societies are rarely analysed in middle-class terms. There are theoretical reasons

2 Contested Capital

to explain this. Most influential social theorists, such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tönnies and Émile Durkheim, assumed a clear social distinction between ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ societies, which in turn created ideal categories that made it possible to theorise the similarities and contrasts between pre-industrial and modernised industrial societies.² While cities were assumed to be the chief sites of economic growth, industrial development and modernity, the rural world, embodying something primordial, represented a community that, by virtue of its isolation from the urban-based practices of capitalist development and experiences of modernisation, was considered to be classless by definition, bounded by kinship ties, family lineages, personal networks, and relative isolation.³ For example, Marx, drawing on colonial reports, popularised the notion of Indian villages as self-sufficient economic units impenetrable by the capitalist mode of production, and described occupations within villages as divisions of labour within a community, rather than class positions. For Marx, the economic landscape of Indian villages remained untouched over time, making the Indian countryside a classless society, characterised as static and economically self-sufficient.⁴ Similarly, referring to a component of the division of labour, namely the artisan, Weber agreed with Marx that the stability of the Indian village economy was secured by a fixed payment in kind, and not production for the capitalist market, which in turn made ‘class’ an irrelevant analytical concept in rural India.⁵

Successive generations of rural development scholars held a strikingly similar visualisation of rural societies. For example, for many, categories of peasantry came to convey a meaningful vision of rural life because they retained within them certain economic, social and cultural relations that, by virtue of their characteristics, protected rural producers from being consumed purely by the accumulation objective. Those who began to view the rural world in class terms limited their categorisations to a polarised class structure, confined to the agrarian bourgeoisie and landless and near-landless agricultural proletariats. Scholars who considered middling types, analysed them in terms of ‘peasantries’, ‘petty bourgeoisie’ or ‘petty commodity producers’, and in later writings ‘intermediate classes’, without any remark on middle-class formation, as though a different set of cultural, social, market and productive relations rules the rural life which makes the term ‘middle class’ an irrelevant analytical conception.⁶

In India, from the early 1980s until the early 2000s, the study of the Indian middle class, in both city and countryside, was largely ignored due to the influence of subaltern and postcolonial studies, which had an adverse impact on the use of ‘class’ as a category of analysis. The development of Indian historiography and other social sciences was, to a great extent, shaped by the influential Subaltern

Studies emerged in 1982 by a group of historians working on South Asia.⁷ The Subaltern Studies series had a considerable impact on the study of class in Indian society. Class analysis was pushed into the background as scholars such as Gyan Prakash called for post-foundationalist histories of India, intended to free scholars from the concepts associated with a more straightforward political economy approach, which were thought to rely on essentialised (western) categories of analysis not applicable to the Indian context.⁸ Moreover, the subaltern studies collective, and the scholars of postcolonial studies it inspired, gradually moved further away from class analysis. Most notably in the mid-1980s, when Edward Said wrote an introduction to *Subaltern Studies V*, the collective took, in keeping with broader trends in the social sciences, a linguistic turn.⁹ Vivek Chibber suggests that the pervasive decline in class analysis across the social sciences since the 1990s was particularly acute in the field of South Asian studies, in which the influence of poststructuralism/postmodernism has been most pronounced. The decline in Marxist analysis was, in many ways, inevitable and was part of broader trends in social science. However, the severity of its decline in South Asian studies was a symptom of it never having a strong foothold in the first place. Chibber points out that South Asian studies is one of the few fields in which senior professors and younger scholars are able to agree on their hostility to class analysis.¹⁰ Particularly, in the Indian context, numerous other analytical categories – such as ethnicity, gender, race and perhaps most significantly caste – came to overtake the explanatory ground that class could occupy.¹¹ Their dominance and popularity left in their wake a dearth of scholarship on class in India.

However, despite this paucity of studies of class in the last two decades of twentieth century India, in recent years, a comparatively limited body of scholarship on the Indian middle class, particularly the ‘new middle class’, has emerged. This can be divided into two broad categories. First, the Indian middle class has been examined as an income-based or structurally defined class whose economic opportunities are derived from resources such as managerial authority or the possession of scarce occupational skills, which contrasts with the working class whose labour is reduced to the commodity form.¹² Second, central in representations of beneficiaries from economic liberalisation, this new middle class has been defined as an aspirational cultural class, which is often the product of public discourse. In this account, the middle class is the class most dependent on the ownership and control of cultural capital – social identity, competence, and excludability of others – as well as the mechanism for reproduction, transmission across generations, or inheritance of these resources. Differentiating its position from the rest of the population by translating its cultural hegemony into the

4 Contested Capital

language of legitimisation, the middle class produces and maintains a dominant ideology through particular aesthetic means, that regulates the social structure, and the other social classes aspire to consume this ideology.¹³ However, this developing body of scholarship does not look beyond the boundaries of urban India.

On the other hand, among development scholars who study the Indian countryside, none really offer accounts in which the notion of ‘middle class’ is employed. In studies of Indian villages, sociologists and anthropologists have primarily devoted their attention to caste and kinship, gender and marriage, migration and the agrarian transformation. Similarly, political economists – whose studies are devoted to patterns of livelihood and changes in occupational patterns, agrarian change, non-farm economy and class formation – have omitted consideration of middle-class formation in Indian villages. The rural middle class has completely skipped the attention of scholars of various disciplines.¹⁴

In the subsequent chapters, I take to task this conceptual bias and demonstrate the existence of India’s rural middle class, which was revealed in field research in the context of emerging industrialisation in close proximity to rural areas. I then examine its composition, characteristics, and the everyday world and social identification of its members. However, the question of how to probe the development of the rural middle class requires an exploration of who or what constitutes the middle class and how to draw boundaries around it. These are known to be among the most ‘contentious’ and ‘intractable’ issues in contemporary sociology.¹⁵ Studies of the middle class are confronted with conceptual complexities. There is considerable debate over what constitutes the middle class, not only in terms of contested theory but also in different global contexts. The boundaries of this class, however defined, are fluid – in turn, reflecting the fuzzy meaning of the term ‘middle class’, and indeed ‘class’. Its slipperiness in large part is the result of the variety of definitions based on wealth, income, occupation, consumption, aspirations and identity. Further complications arise when we throw in diversification and informality that characterise the rural economy, which makes the middle class a constantly moving and unstable category, whose size, composition and characteristics can alter dramatically with changes in the economy and across time and space. Furthermore, as this study reveals, the rural middle class is a class that straddles two ‘contradictory class locations’, to borrow from Erik Olin Wright – a class that holds elective affinities, as well as disparities, with both capital and labour, making the task of studying it even more haunting.

Three major traditions of class analysis follow from the writings of Marx, Weber and Bourdieu, which conceptualise classes on the basis of, respectively, productive

capital (relations of production); social and marketable capital (market situation); and symbolic and cultural capital (accumulation of knowledge and appropriation of cultural awareness). These traditions are simultaneously complementary to, and their followers in constant debate and disagreement with, each other about conceptualising 'class'. Moreover, beyond the problem of outer boundaries, there are important internal variations within the middle class. Many Marxist scholars deal with the problem of the middle class by denying its existence altogether, enforcing the simple polarisation of class structure. Those recognising the middle class as a class in its own right tend to define it as an unproductive class, situated between the *proletariat* and *bourgeoisie*, and see its internal differentiations on the basis of relations of *exploitation*, and the extent of ownership of productive capital, or opposing its class 'position', to that of labourers or capitalists, or between the 'old' and 'new' middle classes. Those writing within the Weberian tradition rely on relations of *domination*, and define the middle class on the basis of control of marketable capital such as properties, skills and credentials, while recognising its internal distinctions on the basis of status privileges and the differentiated 'situation' in property and the labour markets. Those inspired by Bourdieu differentiate the middle class by its control and ownership of cultural capital and its physical embodiment. Within this tradition, the class cleavages are produced and reproduced through the hierarchically differentiated nature of taste and *habitus*, a socially constituted system of transposable dispositions that motivates one's perception, conception and expression.¹⁶

Empirically, deciding who belongs to this class on the ground (during the field research) is often the result of the subjective notions of researchers, whose classifications are based on their perceptions, or usually on a single indicator or a theory, in turn, failing to address the multi-dimensionality of its 'type', 'composition' and 'characteristics'. This methodological insufficiency is perhaps due to the theoretical slipperiness of the concept and ambiguity over where the boundaries should be drawn. In practical terms, this raises the question of how to locate the middle class(es) in a given locality and time. Loïc Wacquant suggests that the only way to study the middle class is through a focus on subjective struggle or the self-construction of middle-class identity.¹⁷ Anthony Giddens, on the contrary, points out the *absence* of class identity or consciousness among the middle classes, suggesting middle-class individuals lack a clear conception of class identity, and as such he rejects the subjective definition of its members.¹⁸ The turn to poststructuralist analysis has put additional confusions over boundary drawing by introducing serious but valid questions about the relative worth of subjective versus objective definitions of the middle class.¹⁹

6 Contested Capital

There is of course more than one way to study the middle class, and in my view, favouring one theory or definition, or even a discipline, over another, is far from satisfactory. Critical pluralism is useful in overcoming this methodological pitfall and the conceptual murkiness. To do this, I develop a three-part analysis, drawing on the perspectives of the three major class theorists – Marx, Weber and Bourdieu – to offer three related, but theoretically distinct, accounts of the formation of India's rural middle classes. The selection of three theories (as opposed to one) provides a solution to the problem of capturing the conceptual difficulties of the term 'middle class', enables its heterogeneity to be explored empirically, and facilitates a holistic examination of its composition. Furthermore, it was indeed possible to witness, even within one village, the various forms of relations of production, market situations, social relations, symbolic and cultural distinctions, aspirations and identity, all of which constitute a specific kind of middle-class privilege, making each theory operationally relevant, which in turn led me to reject the single theoretical perspective. This is not to say that I have completely ignored self-perception and the local language of middle-class-ness. From the beginning, I was mindful that it is possible that my theoretically identified middle classes may not see or talk about themselves in similar class terms. This possible definitional dichotomy raised and enabled a critique of ethnocentrism in social class theory. Therefore, besides unfolding the untold story of their making through the languages of the three class theorists, my aim in the subsequent chapters is to also find the linguistic silences, and allow rural middle class voices to tell a parallel story about their making and trajectories.

In what follows, I look into the formation of rural middle classes through an extensive case study of two villages. The arguments of this book spread over five empirical chapters that draw on a mixed methodology designed to grasp the various sets of classificatory practices that produce class boundaries through each theory. Each chapter develops from four types of fieldwork data, collected from 490 households – a total population of 2,905 – in villages of Rahatwade and Nandur in western Maharashtra, from April 2015 to September 2016. The data includes two rounds of quantitative socio-economic household surveys, and two rounds of in-depth qualitative semi-structured interviews.²⁰ Overall, Chapters 3 and 4, on Marx and Weber, are primarily the result of the two rounds of household survey. These chapters are interspersed with qualitative interviews relating to economic transformation at the village and household level. This combination of data enabled the validation of the prescriptive theoretical findings by taking into account the voices of participants. Bourdieu's approach to social classes as a theoretical framework has different implications for knowledge which rejects

an inflexible definition of class membership. Following this, Chapter 5 is largely the fruit of qualitative interviews piloted with self-identified middle classes.²¹ Interviews sought to employ Bourdieu's approach in the form of a heuristic device, to capture the symbolic and cultural markers in rural India, and were primarily related to self-identification, middle-class status, aspirations and the ways in which middle-class boundaries are produced through mechanisms of social and cultural visibility and excludability of others. In addition to my detailed local field research, the book augments three levels of Indian political economy surveys at the All-India level: *Human Development Profile of India*, 1993–94 (HDPI); *India Human Development Survey I*, 2004–05 (IHDS-I); and *India Human Development Survey II*, 2011–12 (IHDS-II). This was to develop the central arguments and to provide a general understanding of the broader structural changes in rural India since 1991, in the context of which the rural middle class has emerged.²² This contextual knowledge made possible an understanding of how findings from a micro-study of two villages relate to broader socio-economic transformations at the macro-level.

Chapter 1 reviews the literature on the middle class, with a particular focus on the Indian middle class. Through statistical analysis of the IHDS-II (2011–12), it provides one of the most systematic estimates of size of the Indian middle class, and offers a careful examination of its composition. Additionally, it underwrites a significant finding, for the purpose of this book, which is the discovery of the rural middle class, laying the foundation for what is to follow.

Chapter 2 introduces readers to Maharashtra, and offers a detailed analysis – relevant as background to this research – of the internal arrangement and socio-economic structure of field-sites. Given the vastness of rural India, a systematic selection of sample villages, which were likely to host middle-class households, was of crucial importance. To make this chapter particularly useful for academics and postgraduate students who may wish to undertake village studies, I briefly present a structured method for the selection of sample field-sites.

Chapter 3 extensively engages with various ways in which Marx and his legatees dealt with the concept of 'middle class'. It then enquires into the understanding of the dynamics of agrarian change, labour relations and various modes of accumulation that exist in rural India, to elucidate paths to rural capitalism, and the rural class structure in the current phase of industrialisation, when households can simultaneously belong to a variety of classes-in-themselves. The analysis of household data through a Marxian framework enables us to see how the many attempts to identify agrarian classes all provide an incomplete analysis of class formation in the contemporary phase of rural industrialisation. To compensate

8 Contested Capital

for this shortfall, a composite analytical instrument is developed that draws on Marx's notion of the ownership of the means of production, labour relations and modes of accumulation of surplus to identify seven distinct economic classes, including rural middle classes in India.

Chapter 4 characterises the rural middle class from a perspective influenced by Max Weber's conception of 'life chances', which determine classes in the labour market. It shifts the analysis from an exploitation-centred concept of class to one that is based on the concept of domination to examine class formation through occupational mobility and skill differentials. The primary focus is to discover the diverse ways in which rural households seek upward social mobility in the class hierarchy and negotiate their entry into the middle-class skilled-labour market. Following Weber's discussion on the economic effect of the caste system, it then scrutinises the ways caste relations intervene in the labour market, revealing important caste cleavages relating to patterns of class formation in rural India.

Chapter 5 analyses the formation of the rural middle classes from a perspective influenced by Bourdieu. The fundamental difference, for the purposes of this chapter, is that Bourdieu is critical of abstract conceptualisations, and his studies of class are primarily drawn from empirical investigations. Bourdieu was concerned with symbolic representation, in the realms of culture, art, literature, science and language. Using Bourdieu's approach in the form of an experimental method, this chapter puts forward suggestions on productive ways in which this sociology of class can be applied to the rural Indian context. Prompted by a discussion of interior design and 'living rooms' in rural Rahatwade and Nandur, I aim to unpack how middle classes seek social and cultural visibility, and pursue distinction from lower classes, through particular aesthetic means, spatial and cultural strategies, and the language of middle-class-ness. Although it is difficult to grasp the meaning behind certain forms of consumption in two small villages analytically, my overall attempt has been to unravel the 'economy of cultural goods' in rural India.²³

In the brief concluding chapter, I aim to demonstrate how critical pluralism is useful in social sciences. Following an overview of some of the central empirical findings of the book and the contributions they make to theories of class, I briefly outline the ways in which the three theories are both complementary to, and at times in contrast with, each other, highlighting the fluidity of 'capital' as an analytical concept.

To sum up, the formation of India's rural middle class rests on a complex, and often contradictory, set of processes that began unfolding with growing industrialisation in the periphery of some villages after the introduction of economic liberalisation. Although still in the making, this class will come to play

an important role in economic, social and political landscapes of India, through its social and cultural influence, political prominence, and impact on processes of socio-economic exclusion and unequal access to resources. As economic activities in villages are evolving towards industrialisation, theories of class and stratification become ever more useful for understanding the underlying causes of systematic class inequalities and their social, economic and cultural implications. It is indeed possible that the rural middle classes see their economic interest, political allegiances and commitments, and claims on the state as distinct from the urban middle classes. At the same time, their influence might translate into a different combination of demand for industrial and agricultural policies than those of rural elites or the rural poor, which can shape the economic and development planning of the state.²⁴ Furthermore, the sheer persistence of the use of the term ‘middle class’, by the state, scholars of various disciplines, media, and the general public, indicates that this class points to a social phenomenon of persisting significance and we are unlikely to succeed in studying any societies without it. By focusing on urban middle classes to the exclusion of the rural, development scholars gloss over a class that is important for our understanding of forms and practices of rural capitalism, agrarian transformations and rural economy and society.

Notes

1. I use ‘middle class’ in the singular when referring to the concept or category, and ‘middle classes’ in the plural when referring to a group of households or individuals.
2. The theoretical reason to explain absence of rural middle class studies is explained by Diane Davis in her examination of middle classes in East Asia and Latin America. See Davis (2004).
3. See Davis (2004).
4. Karl Marx never visited India and his ideas about Indian villages were based on colonial reports, written in the *New-York Daily Tribune*. See, for example, Marx (1853).
5. For Weber’s perspective on Indian village economy, see Weber (1958).
6. See Bardhan (1998), Basile (2009), Harriss-White (2003, 2010), McCartney and Harriss-White (2000). These studies have drawn their inspiration from Kalecki’s theory of intermediate regimes, taken up by K. N. Raj. See Kalecki (1972).
7. The term ‘subaltern’ in social science originates from Antonio Gramsci (1971), and became a term applied to those in subordinated social groups.
8. See Prakash (2000).
9. Edward Said wrote a foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*. See Said (1988).

10 Contested Capital

10. On the decline of class analysis, see Chibber (2006).
11. Deshpande suggests that the significance of ‘new social movements’, which mobilise around issues such as the environment and the rise of identity politics, also bear no relation to the concept of class. He argues these trends in writing about South Asia ‘have certainly deepened the crisis of class concept and amplified the long-standing complaints about its inadequacies’. See Deshpande (2003: 125).
12. Fernandes and Heller have provided an examination of the middle class in the labour market, in which the middle class is defined as a class that generates its income from exclusive acquisition of marketable skills and credentials. See Fernandes and Heller (2006).
13. For example, see studies by Brosius (2010), Deshpande (2003), Fernandes (2000, 2006, 2011), and Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2009).
14. Except for Davis (2004), who broadly looks into the rural middle classes in East Asia and Latin America.
15. See the sociological work of Abercrombie and Urry on the theory of class, based on a distinction between Weberian and Marxist approaches, Abercrombie and Urry (1983).
16. See Bourdieu (1977: 86).
17. See Wacquant (1991).
18. See Giddens (1995).
19. See Davis (2004).
20. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) suggest that the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a better and deeper understanding of any social group, in this case the rural middle class, than a single approach. This is because, they argue, quantitative findings are primarily motivated by the concerns of the researcher (in this case using preselected variables which enabled identification of the rural middle class within the three theoretical frameworks), while qualitative data reveals more subtle features of their characteristics which might not be evident from quantitative findings alone, and can therefore validate the quantitative findings by taking into account the voice of the participants. For discussion on using mixed methods, see Creswell and Plano Clark (2007, 2011).
21. The analysis of the first round of survey revealed that in Rahatwade 90 households and in Nandur 93 households self-identify as middle-class households. A detailed account of the sampling method for semi-structured qualitative interviews is provided in Chapter 5.
22. The IHDS-I and IHDS-II are publicly available through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR), located at the University of Michigan. The HDPI is not publicly available but was accessed with permission through the National Council of Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi.
23. See Bourdieu (1984: 1).
24. See Davis (2004).