

Contested Capital

The expansion and transformation of Asian economies is producing class structures, roles and identities that could not easily be predicted from other times and places. The industrialisation of the countryside, in particular, generates new, rural middle classes which straddle the worlds of agriculture and industry in complex ways. Their class position is improvised on the basis of numerous influences and opportunities, and is in constant evolution. Enormous though the total rural middle-class population is, meanwhile, it remains invisible to most scholars and policymakers. *Contested Capital* is the first major work to shed light on an emerging transnational class comprised of many hundreds of millions of people.

In India, the ‘middle class’ has become one of the key categories of economic analysis and developmental forecasting. The discussion suffers from one major oversight: it assumes that the middle class resides uniquely in the cities. As this book demonstrates, however, more than a third of India’s middle class is rural, and 17 per cent of rural households belong to the middle class. The book brings this vast and dynamic population into view, so confronting some of the most crucial neglected questions of the contemporary global economy.

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Contested Capital

Rural Middle Classes in India

Maryam Aslany



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They embrace the God that consumes them.

—Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942)

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| <i>List of Figures and Maps</i> | ix |
| <i>List of Tables</i> | xi |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i> | xv |
| <i>Foreword</i> | xvii |
| <i>Acknowledgments</i> | xxi |
| Introduction: The Problem of the ‘Rural Middle Class(es)’ | 1 |
| 1. Trajectory of the Indian Middle Class: Its Size and Geographical Variations | 11 |
| 2. In Search of the Rural Middle Classes: From Village Stratification to Rural Household Variations | 41 |
| 3. Marx: Capital, Labour and the Rural Middle Classes | 65 |
| 4. Weber: Marketable Capital, Status and the Rural Middle Classes | 115 |
| 5. Bourdieu: Cultural Capital, Self-perception and the Middle-class Identity in Rural India | 164 |
| Conclusion: Understanding the Rural Middle Classes | 203 |
| <i>Appendices</i> | 211 |
| <i>References</i> | 272 |
| <i>Index</i> | 288 |

Figures and Maps

Figures

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 1.1 | Factors contributing to ‘middle-class-ness’ | 22 |
| 1.2 | Income levels across the population: All-India, Urban and Rural (2011–12) | 25 |
| 1.3 | Illustration of relative index decomposition (2011–12) | 30 |
| 1.4 | Categorisation of All-India population into seven classes (2011–12) | 31 |
| 1.5 | Middle classes: rural/urban distributions (2011–12) | 35 |
| 1.6 | Occupational categories of rural classes in India (2011–12) | 36 |
| 3.1 | Changes in the main source of household income, by sector (1993–2012) | 79 |
| 3.2 | Distribution of land in Rahatwade and Nandur (in acre) | 86 |
| 4.1 | Transformation in the housing style of the rural middle class in Nandur | 133 |
| 4.2 | Residence of a middle-class family in Nandur | 133 |
| 4.3 | Typical old style of housing: residence of a farmer in Rahatwade | 134 |
| 4.4 | Typical style of housing of the majority of Dalit agricultural labourers | 134 |
| 4.5 | Lorenz curve for household income distribution between and within different caste groups in rural India (2011–12) | 155 |
| 5.1 | Residence of a Dalit agricultural labouring family in Nandur | 187 |
| 5.2 | Residence of a Dalit agricultural labouring family in Nandur | 187 |
| 5.3 | Residence of a Dalit agricultural labouring family in Rahatwade | 188 |
| 5.4 | Living room of a self-identified <i>lower-middle-class</i> family in Nandur | 188 |
| 5.5 | Living room of a self-identified <i>middle-middle-class</i> family in Nandur | 189 |
| 5.6 | Living room of a self-identified <i>middle-middle-class</i> family in Nandur | 190 |
| 5.7 | Living room of a self-identified <i>middle-middle-class</i> family in Nandur | 190 |
| 5.8 | Living room of a self-identified <i>middle-middle-class</i> family in Rahatwade | 191 |
| 5.9 | Living room of a self-identified <i>upper-middle-class</i> family in Rahatwade | 191 |

x Figures and Maps

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| A3.1 | Graph illustrating the persistence of caste inequalities in occupational patterns in rural India (1993–94 to 2011–12) | 216 |
| A4.1 | Annual household income distributions in rural India (2011–12) | 218 |
| A4.2 | Annual household income distributions in urban India (2011–12) | 219 |
| A4.3 | Annual household income distributions on logarithmic scaled axes in rural India (2011–12) | 220 |
| A4.4 | Annual household income distributions on logarithmic scaled axes in urban India (2011–12) | 220 |

Maps

| | | |
|-----|--|----|
| 2.1 | Map of Rahatwade village | 49 |
| 2.2 | Map of Gāvāta (main village) and Kamble Basti in Rahatwade | 50 |
| 2.3 | Map of Nandur village | 55 |

Tables

| | | |
|------|--|----|
| 1.1 | Calculating the size of the middle class based on relative monetary definition (2011–12) | 20 |
| 1.2 | Fixed monetary estimation of the size of the Indian middle class | 21 |
| 1.3 | Household groups based on main source of household income (2011–12) | 23 |
| 1.4 | Income groups: All-India, Urban and Rural (2011–12) | 24 |
| 1.5 | Calculation of housing component (2011–12) | 27 |
| 1.6 | Categorisation of non-labouring households: All-India (2011–12) | 28 |
| 1.7 | Classification of non-labouring households: All-India (2011–12) | 28 |
| 1.8 | Calculating the scores and weight of indices: All-India (2011–12) | 29 |
| 1.9 | Proportions of identified classes: All-India (2011–12) | 30 |
| 1.10 | Categorisation of classes: characteristics, All-India (2011–12) | 32 |
| 1.11 | Calculating the size of all classes: All-India (2011–12) | 34 |
| 1.12 | Distribution of classes in rural India (2011–12) | 35 |
| 1.13 | Self-identification and class (2011–12) | 37 |
| 2.1 | Rahatwade and Nandur: some basic characteristics | 46 |
| 2.2 | Land and home ownership and access to basic amenities in Rahatwade | 48 |
| 2.3 | Land and home ownership and access to basic amenities in Nandur | 52 |
| 2.4 | Caste compositions of Rahatwade and Nandur | 56 |
| 2.5 | List of caste groups in Rahatwade | 56 |
| 2.6 | List of caste groups in Nandur | 57 |
| 2.7 | The two-cluster classification of households | 61 |
| 3.1 | Changes in the main source of household income, by sector (1993–2012) | 78 |
| 3.2 | Distribution of land in Rahatwade (2014–15) | 85 |
| 3.3 | Distribution of land in Nandur (2014–15) | 85 |
| 3.4 | Class structure in villages (capital, labour, surplus and accumulation) | 89 |
| 3.5 | Classification of households in Rahatwade | 91 |
| 3.6 | Classification of households in Nandur | 91 |

xii Tables

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 3.7 | Classes in Rahatwade: composition and characteristics | 105 |
| 3.8 | Classes in Nandur: composition and characteristics | 106 |
| 4.1 | Changes in the economic condition of non-labouring households over the last 10 years (2015) | 130 |
| 4.2 | Occupational classification of households in Rahatwade and Nandur | 137 |
| 4.3 | Distribution of annual household income among different occupational categories in Rahatwade | 138 |
| 4.4 | Distribution of annual household income among different occupational categories in Nandur | 138 |
| 4.5 | Caste affiliations among the labouring households in Rahatwade | 147 |
| 4.6 | Caste affiliation among labouring households in Nandur | 148 |
| 4.7 | Occupational distribution among caste groups in rural All-India (2011–12) | 149 |
| 4.8 | Descriptive statistics for socio-economic variables among different caste groups in Rahatwade | 151 |
| 4.9 | Descriptive statistics for socio-economic variables among different caste groups in Nandur | 152 |
| 4.10 | Distribution of land ownership (irrigated and dry combined) among Marathas in Rahatwade | 153 |
| 4.11 | Income distribution among the non-labouring Maratha households in Rahatwade | 154 |
| 4.12 | Caste composition of classes in rural India – percentage (2011–12) | 157 |
| 5.1 | Is your household a middle-class household? | 174 |
| 5.2 | Self-identified class distributions of households | 175 |
| 5.3 | Vehicle ownership among Rahatwade's self-identified classes | 195 |
| 5.4 | Vehicle ownership among Nandur's self-identified classes | 195 |
| 5.5 | Possession of domestic appliances among Rahatwade's classes | 196 |
| 5.6 | Possession of domestic appliances among Nandur's classes | 196 |
| 5.7 | Possession of communications devices among Rahatwade's classes | 197 |
| 5.8 | Possession of communications devices among Nandur's classes | 197 |
| 5.9 | Social media use in Rahatwade | 198 |
| 5.10 | Social media use in Nandur | 198 |
| 5.11 | Possession of sofa set among Rahatwade's classes | 199 |
| 5.12 | Possession of sofa set among Nandur's classes | 199 |
| A1.1 | Non-farm occupations in Rahatwade | 211 |
| A1.2 | Non-farm occupations in Nandur | 212 |
| A2.1 | Distribution of main source of income among different caste groups in urban India (2011–12) | 213 |

| | Tables | xiii |
|------|--|------|
| A3.1 | Distribution of main source of income among different caste groups in rural India (1993–94) | 214 |
| A3.2 | Distribution of main source of income among different caste groups in rural India (2004–05) | 215 |
| A4.1 | Distribution of annual household income by caste category in rural India (2011–12) | 217 |
| A4.2 | Distribution of annual household income by caste category in urban India (2011–12) | 217 |
| A4.3 | Distribution of annual household income by caste groups in rural India (2011–12) | 221 |
| A4.4 | Distribution of annual household income by caste groups in urban India (2011–12) | 221 |
| A4.5 | One-way ANOVA in rural India | 222 |
| A4.6 | Linear regressions: relationship between income in logarithmic scale and caste (categorical) | 223 |
| A4.7 | Linear regressions: relationship between income (dependent variable) and caste, highest level of adult education, education of head of the household, area of land owned and social network | 225 |
| A4.8 | Linear regressions: relationship between income (dependent variable) and highest level of adult education, education of head of the household, area of land owned and social network (to compare the reliability of the two models, this model excludes caste) | 226 |
| A5.1 | Descriptive statistics for socio-economic variables among different caste groups in rural India (2011–12) | 228 |
| A5.2 | Descriptive statistics for socio-economic variables among different caste groups in urban India (2011–12) | 230 |
| A6.1 | Caste compositions of identified classes in urban India (2011–12) | 231 |
| A7.1 | Caste compositions of classes in rural Maharashtra – percentage (2011–12) | 232 |

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|--|
| ALDH | Agricultural Labour Days Hired-in |
| ALDS | Agricultural Labour Days Sold-out |
| ANOVA | analysis of variance |
| BKU | Bharatiya Kisan Union |
| CI | composite index |
| CMC | comfortable middle class |
| CSDS | Centre for the Study of Developing Countries |
| DTs | De-notified Tribes |
| E&TC | electronics and tele-communications |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| HDPI | Human Development Profile of India |
| IBM | International Business Machines Corporation |
| ICPSR | Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research |
| IHDS-I | India Human Development Survey-I |
| IHDS-II | India Human Development Survey-II |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| LC | lowest class |
| LMC | lower middle class |
| NALD | net agricultural labour days |
| NCAER | National Council of Applied Economic Research |
| NSS | National Sample Survey |
| NT | Nomadic Tribe |
| OBCs | Other Backward Classes |
| PCA | principal component analysis |
| PCP | petty commodity production |
| PCPs | petty commodity producers |
| PMC | Professional and Managerial Class |
| RCC | reinforced cement concrete |
| SCs | Scheduled Castes |

xvi Abbreviations

| | |
|-----|-------------------------|
| SLC | second lowest class |
| SMC | straddling middle class |
| STs | Scheduled Tribes |
| SD | standard deviation |
| UC | upper class |
| UMC | upper middle class |

Foreword

While the term ‘middle class’ has been in currency for almost 300 years, its definition – and thus its size – has always been bathed in vagueness, ambiguity and controversy. Just as the concept of class itself has been the subject of a series of mutually incompatible theories, the question of what might constitute the middle of an economic distribution or a social hierarchy has until now never been resolved by the sizeable industry devoted to it, other than in arbitrary ways. The peculiarities of the statistical evidence that might clarify the concept have made identifying middle classes, let alone comparing them, very difficult. And people have their own views about their class positions: their self-identifications can challenge those of the researcher.

In spite of these difficulties, the importance of what the concept denotes is indisputable, and has several equally indisputable dimensions. One dimension of ‘middle-class-ness’ involves culture – expressed in particular kinds of housing, social networks, leisure pursuits, style, and aspirations. The hope of upward mobility within the middle class focusses the longing to enjoy a swathe of services, notably health and education, to achieve competences and forms of security, and – in the view of many commentators – to develop and protect an illiberal politics of techno-authoritarian management.

Middle class culture also calls for a certain level of discretionary income – though the range of incomes considered to denote ‘middle-class-ness’ by scholars varies greatly. For India alone in the last decade this range has varied between an annual household income of US\$ 4,300 in rupee equivalents, to one of US\$ 27,000. Middle-class-ness may also be measured as the median expenditure group in a distribution of household expenditure; or identified by occupations – though here too there is a huge and debated range of occupations considered by analysts to be middle class.

Aspirational goods and services give rise to a politics of provision and consumption, of acquisition and defence of the status goods expressing discretionary income. The provision of such goods entails vast investments in the

xviii Foreword

massification of formerly luxury commodities and services, and in the privatisation of facilities, places and spaces.

A further dimension of the middle class is the desire to escape and dissociate oneself from the (lack of) choices of occupation and lifestyle forced on (ever more precarious) manual labourers. This gives rise to tense power relations not only between those who are included, and those who are excluded, but also between exclusivism as a principle of middle-class politics, and the patronage/trusteeship/‘speaking for society as a whole’ which middle classes are often seen as upholding.

However the middle class is defined, India has contributed conspicuously to its world-wide growth. Whether its middle class is Deutsche Bank’s estimated 40 million people or McKinsey’s 600 million, India may well be home to a fifth of the world’s total. Much has been written about India’s middle class, suggesting it is shot through with distinctive barriers to entry and mobility rooted in the differentiating politics of caste, ethnicity, region, religion and patriarchal control over education, income and wealth.

Above all, the middle class has been assumed to be urban – until this book arrived. *Contested Capital: Rural Middle Classes in India* demonstrates that this assumption is false. In fact, as Maryam Aslany argues, about a third of India’s middle class is rural.

India’s rural economy remains overwhelmingly characterised as a labour sponge of last resort, a repository of poverty with agriculture as the dominant source of livelihoods. And despite decades of evidence of increasing rural inequality (and thus of increasing rural income and wealth), of rural consumption patterns imitating metropolitan ones and of the expansion of the non-farm economy into agrarian regions, debates in political economy and rural sociology about capitalist transformations have made scant mention of the possibility that a rural middle class or classes was emerging. The same is true for village studies. Classes occupying niches between the polar classes of capital and labour have appeared as awkward rather than central in demographic and analytical terms – whether in relation to the peasantry and petty commodity producers, or to merchants and commercial capital. Even in Kalecki’s controversial theory of intermediate regimes, taken up by K. N. Raj, in which the ruling class is seen as composed of ‘peasants and lower middle classes’, and as being numerically powerful enough to make accommodative state-capitalist arrangements with ‘upper middle classes’, the middle classes are seen as urban. In this book, Dr Aslany has rectified this glaring neglect.

Hers is an ambitious and original contribution in a number of ways. First, given that there is no theory of everything, no single story, and that pluralism is the order of the day in the 21st century, it has required the development of evidence

to enable the interpretation of the rural middle class from the perspectives of not one but three great founding fathers of social theory: Marx, Weber and Bourdieu. She has honed hermeneutical skills to trace a nuanced history of ideas that are sometimes inconsistent and unclear even at their points of origin. She has then translated delicate theoretical ideas into schemes and practices for field research, and has drafted, tested and delivered novel and demanding questionnaires. She has completed a unique piece of field research over an 18-month period in two Maharashtrian villages, which have a range of rental arrangements and forms of petty production, wage labour, and commercialised agricultural inputs and marketed surpluses, and most importantly, emerging industries at their peripheries.

Second, she has developed methodological and analytical skills not just for interrogating these theories but also for applying mixed methods for handling large national data bases, quantitative field evidence, qualitative case material and social profiles. This approach is transferable. It enables comparisons at different scales, just as it provides the empirical base for comparisons between the theories through which we understand rural economies.

Third, she has made a substantive contribution to our knowledge of rural transformations through the heterogeneity, fluidity and churning of the elements that form rural middle classes. She has traced the interweaving of oscillating and emergent class positions in agriculture, industry and ancillary professional services, the social ramifications of education and caste in rural economic diversification and the fascination of the rural living room as a significant site of class distinction.

This book will open up new research. It will encourage comparisons and contrasts between a range of theories about class. It will also invite comparisons of the trajectories of middle class formation in Maharashtra with those of other states and indeed other countries whose agrarian and non-agrarian rural economies have developed differently, and in which policy regimes for rural development diverge. From now on the 'rural middle class' will have to be factored into the analysis of agrarian change and rural development.

In this highly original and inter-disciplinary book, Maryam Aslany has addressed an enigmatic phenomenon that is difficult to grasp analytically and has been overlooked by many. She has mainstreamed into rural development a neglected class and its class relations, combining intellectual elegance with a determination forged through curiosity and the inspiration of fieldwork.

Enjoy, criticise and develop the research pioneered here.

Barbara Harriss-White

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