**POLITICAL ABSTENTION IN THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS,
THE RISE OF POPULISM AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF
RENT**

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ABSTRACT:

The Indian middle class witnessed a reconfiguration in its composition after the failure of the secular nationalists in their method of development and redistribution of resources. This reconfiguration used cultural and religious fundamentalism in the form of Hindutva as its instrument to assert their right to access the resources and strive towards a non-State centric redistribution. However, this new middle class, which was mainly conversing in the vernacular and had its base in the smaller urban areas, was also faced with the assertion of the lower class identarian groups. In such a situation, a large section of the urban Indian middle class shied away from taking part in the electoral process citing moral crises of the corrupt secular English speaking elite on one hand and the lowly criminal nature of the lower class political assertion on the other. Taking hints from the works of Christophe Jaffrelot, I would try to argue in this paper, that non-participation of a major section of the urban middle class was a manifestation of securing the rechanneled and partially redistributed rent legitimised through the instrument of Hindutva. This has led to increased persona-centric populist narratives from the mid-1990s to the present times with efforts to undermine parliamentary democracy (which is associated as an institution of the immoral secular nationalists). This in turn, I would try to argue by the end of this paper, has again assisted in concretising the very rent-seeking practices and patron-client political relationships that the new middle class had initially opposed to rise to political prominence throughout the late 1970s and 1980s

KEYWORDS:

Secular Nationalism, Cultural Nationalism, Hindutva, Congress Party, BJP, Liberalisation, Rent, Urbanisation, Middle Class, Other Backward Classes (OBC)

1. INTRODUCTION: THE POST-COLONIAL INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS

Post-colonial India, in its early decades, saw itself being governed and administered by a middle class which was highly educated and trained in Western thought, ideas and, values which were initially shaped during the educational policies and state employment policies of the State in the colonial period. Led and inspired by Nehru's brand of socialism and state-centric development, these nationalists who put an emphasis on secularism, were instrumental in the economic development of the country. As Leela Fernandes says,

"In the early decades of independence, the state contributed both directly and indirectly to the expansion and consolidation of middle-class interests in a number of ways. The Nehruvian state-interventionist model of planned development consolidated the relationship between the developmentalist state and the middle class through a complex field of ideological, discursive, institutional, and economic practices and policies."¹

An upper section of this middle class positioned themselves favourably with respect to the State and gained many socio-economic benefits along with specific forms of political capital.

"The intersecting relationship between the state, political economy, and the middle class was further consolidated and expanded through the growing significance of public enterprises in the Nehruvian model of development. The model of planned development that was established led to rapid growth in public-sector employment."²

This rapid growth in public-sector employment and the gaining of political capital, as mentioned by Fernandes, was completely based on rent and in the form of very strong patron-client relationships. This was a stabilised form of the political-economic organisation from independence to the at least the late 1980s. One argument of its sustainability can be the following as provided by Elsenhans,

"Rent is a type of income which is limited because, in itself, it is not productive but depends on restrictions on production. As long as it is used for acquiring products from privately organised entrepreneurs instead of being used by the state for state organised production, for example on pre-capitalist estates and slave plantations, it will create entrepreneurs who will strive to make a profit. As long as the proportion of spending remains biased towards rent rather than towards mass incomes, the number of entrepreneurs who are motivated to struggle against the state will remain limited"³

The innate consumerist nature of the middle class and its desire to draw on the luxuries of modernity were antagonistic to this rent-seeking form of state-centric economic development. This antagonism revealed the failure of the secular nationalists by the late

¹ Fernandes Leela, "The Historical Roots of The New Middle Class". In *India's New Middle Class-Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.2006), 20

² Ibid.23

³ Elsenhans Hartmut, "Middle Classes and New Cultural-Identitarian Political Movements: Perspectives". In *The Transformation of Politicised Religion-From Zealots into Leaders* edited by Hartmut Elsenhans, Rachid Ouassia, Sebastian Schwecke and Mary Ann Tetreault, (Surrey,UK, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited. 2015), 157

1970s and early 80s and led to a gradual reconfiguration of the constitution of this middle class.

“The political expression of this failure varied in ways that were contingent on intersecting structures of inequality and culturally based languages of protest. However, at a broader level, they reflected the political strains of the state-managed model of development. It is this middle-class frustration stemming from the overextended politics of state-management that has led to an increasingly assertive and visible middle-class role—one that has specifically been manifested through the rise of a new middle-class identity in liberalizing India.”⁴

In the next sections, I briefly explore the cases of this failure of state-centric development, the cultural tools for reconfiguration and its consequences on the electoral process (vis-a-vis the middle class) and the rise of populism.

2. THE FAILURE OF THE SECULAR NATIONALISTS AND THE RISE OF THE NEW INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS

The rise of cultural tools of protest, mainly in the form of Hindutva, among the newly reconfigured rising middle class at least since the middle of the 1980s is not due to a rise in religious cultural consciousness among the people. Rather, it is founded on the loss of capacity among old secular state classes to bind social forces in their political project through clientelism maintaining a continuity in the class alliances.

“The secular state classes had recruited themselves from the same middle classes which now become prominent in the new larger and more powerful cultural-identitarian movements. The rise of these new movements is the result of excluded segments of the middle classes becoming more powerful and vociferous because of the loss of resources, hence clientelist power, as well as the moral standing of the increasingly failed secular state classes.”⁵

State led industrialisation projects of the secular nationalists had given initial hope to the poor and marginalized of the country for improvement in their condition. However, there was limited resources and lack of jobs with respect to growing demographic numbers. Elsenhans argues that,

“The choice of purchasing the most modern technologies – a strategy to spend the scarce rent efficiently, which promised to quickly raise production – limited the provision of jobs for unskilled labour and created relatively high incomes for a limited number of skilled workers. The extension of market relations to the unregulated labour markets for the many who were not employed by the public sector, and the rationing of the access to the limited number of jobs in ‘government’ by political connections, created a widespread suspicion of government corruption. An increasing number of marginals with previous links to pre-capitalist networks of solidarity in the villages were increasingly shed off in the ‘traditional’ sectors of the economy. The increased surplus production following the weakening of the traditional systems of redistribution transformed them into marginalised, jobless, and resourceless poor in the cities. In a way, they became economically superfluous because of costing more than they were able to produce.”⁶

⁴ Fernandes Leela, “The Historical Roots of The New Middle Class,” 27

⁵ Elsenhans Hartmut, “Middle Classes and New Cultural-Identitarian Political Movements: Perspectives”, 143

⁶ Ibid. 145

After caring for the poor initially through many schemes and policies, the government due to strain in resources only spent on those whose support was of utmost necessity and curtailed all benefits for the others. Metropolitan urban groups came to be favoured heavily and the ones left out cried foul and accused the ruling classes of an ‘urban bias’ and of being in charge of rent collection.⁷

This failure in redistribution of resources by the secular nationalists and the corruption of the rent-collecting system made the new middle class grab on to the opportunities provided by the liberalisation of the economy. They gradually started to rely on the market for social status instead of political participation which in turn led to the decrease in the capacity of the developmental state in its interventionist capacity. Liberalisation also facilitated a middle-class discourse which was centered on consumption, economic reform and ‘merit’. This discourse has been almost removed from electoral contestation by almost all political parties.⁸ I echo Schwecke’s argument that,

“the allocation of state-controlled resources which characterised middle-class dominance in the Nehruvian period proved insufficient to maintain this status for an enlarged bourgeoisie. In the process, the Indian bourgeoisie was reconfigured, with a substantially larger and more influential part of it shifting to market-based strategies of ensuring their socio-economic status. In turn, the Indian bourgeoisie has become increasingly capitalist in the Schumpeterian sense, though its entrepreneurial character is strongly related to the ability to gain (expensive) formal education and create networks of information which facilitate the incorporation into an economy in which the most dynamic sectors are dominated by high-value service professions.”⁹

The religious-cultural tool of Hindutva aided the reconfiguration of the new middle class and its welcoming of liberalisation as a unified and strong force of assertion among the enlarged bourgeoisie against the dominance of state-centric secular ideals. In the next section, I explore the role of Hindutva in the reconfiguration and the challenges it faced from the rise of identarian movements by the Other Backward Classes.

3. CONFIGURATION OF THE NEW INDIAN MIDDLE CLASS-HINDUTVA AND THE RISE OF THE OTHER BACKWARD CLASSES

The new enlarged Indian middle class which came into shape after the failure of the old state classes was comprised of social groups like the Banias (traders) and professionals who spoke mainly in Hindi or in vernacular languages like Gujarati and Marathi. The professionals were mainly lower ranked employees in the public sector or struggling individuals in the very limited private sector. They had their bases both in major urban metropolises and also in sub urban, rural and small towns. The Banias too asserted themselves in the small towns and suburban areas. Along with the new non-English speaking professionals, the Banias became claimants to a share of the resources that liberalisation was successfully promising them; which the rent-

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Schwecke Sebastian, “The Trivialisation of Hindu Nationalism and the Reconfiguration of the Indian Bourgeoisie”. In *The Transformation of Politicised Religion-From Zealots into Leaders* edited by Hartmut Elsenhans, Rachid Ouassia, Sebastian Schwecke and Mary Ann Tetreault, (Surrey,UK, Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 45-46

⁹ Ibid.54

collecting system of the old state middle classes had kept them away from. Hindutva was the tool of claiming these very resources. I second Schwecke on his argument that,

“In the small-town milieu which comprised its area of strength, Hindu nationalism was able to draw on co-optation by market forces and, eventually, managed to create local civil society networks which buttressed its influence even in times when it failed to gain more widespread support at state-level or national politics. This pattern holds even today, as the example of the local unit of the BJP in Aligarh at a time of vastly reduced influence in the politics of Uttar Pradesh illustrates. There, the predominant position of its core constituency in the local market economy facilitates the co-optation of poorer sections of society through networks of both caste (primarily the two locally important Bania castes) and (Hindu) religion which generate support through employment opportunities both within the city and in the National Capital Region. This, in turn, is reinforced by Hindu nationalist influence in the local degree colleges and the closest state-level university at Agra with its various outlets in the area.”¹⁰

The cultural identitarian movement led by the Hindu nationalist BJP and its family of socio-religious Hindutva organisations, had made a dramatical shift from strands of Gandhian socialism in their political agenda to liberal economic nationalism by the end of the 1980s, opposing the ‘over-regulation’ of the Indian economy.¹¹ This ‘over-regulation’ had created massive unemployment and rent scarcity. The political rise of many social strata as a result of this could not be co-opted into the political system anymore. At this moment,

“The BJP simultaneously began to shift its economic agenda in accordance with middle class interests: from a focus on moral economy and economic nationalism which were utilised to express demands for greater incorporation of its core supporters in the system of rent allocation towards liberalisation which was now needed to protect and advance the socio-economic status of Indian middle classes. The shift in middle-class economic interests from maintaining control over rent allocation to selective dismemberment of the rentier economy necessitated a corresponding reinterpretation of the Hindu nationalist economic agenda by the BJP.”¹²

The Indian middle-class attempted to break away from political control and its immoral practices and establish itself on the basis of meritocracy and technocracy, riding on the waves of Hindu nationalism. However, they were also faced, at this juncture, with the rise of the Other Backward Classes, who too initiated identitarian movements at the failure of the elite secular nationalists in the redistribution of resources and the consequent rent scarcity.

The OBC or Other Backward Classes (OBC), which is mostly consisted of the lower castes (Shudras) of the varna system benefitted least from the clientelistic politics of the secular state classes, represented by the Congress Party. Their under-representation since Independence was taken up through the issue of quota politics by the Janata Dal. As Jaffrelot points out,

“It proved to be doubly effective since, first, it emancipated the OBCs from the hegemonic strategy of the proponents of kisan politics-mainly the Jats whose interests did not fully coincide with that of the OBCs and, secondly, it contributed to getting an OBC vote bank crystallized after the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report, the most

¹⁰ Ibid.42

¹¹ Schwecke Sebastian, “Ideology and political practice of Hindu nationalism”. In *New Cultural Identitarian Political Movements in Developing Societies The Bharatiya Janata Party*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 69

¹² Ibid.

important decision ever made in the framework of the "quota politics." For the first time, lower-caste people have started to vote en masse for leaders belonging to their own milieu."¹³

The BJP led Hindu nationalist movement saw this as a challenge. As Jaffrelot puts it, the BJP and its Hindutva family experienced a struggle between 'Sanskritisation' and "social engineering" in order to appropriate a large number of OBC voters and leaders. (Jaffrelot OBC 107) He further says that the challenge was strengthened by the lack of a common identity as a result of historical categorizations among different groups which were highly influenced by Sanskritisation. The reservation policies and the report of the Mandal Commission report served as a strong common ground for the OBCs to come together and posit themselves as a strong political force.¹⁴

I would argue that the "social engineering " by the BJP was nothing other than an effort to secure its share of redistributed resources that it was gaining after liberalization. The middle class which was riding on the BJP and its allies associated lower-caste political expression with criminalism, debauchery and other illicit activities. A large section of this middle class also, I would further argue, was of the opinion that report of the Mandal Commission and reservation policies had ensured political patron-clientelism in these OBCs with regard to employment and access to higher education. This was seen in bad light, as it went against the meritocratic and market-oriented ideologies of the middle-class. This gradually led the complete loss in faith in the political system and its institutions by a large section of this middle class and led to them shying away from the electoral process. I explore the detailed causes of this abstention in the next section.

4. POLITICAL ABSTENTION FROM THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

Christophe Jaffrelot opines that the shying away of the new Indian middle class or its anti-parliamentarian inclination was not only due to its closeness to the Hindutva forces, which had traditionally been a supporter of an authoritarian presidential system of governance and had repeatedly attacked the western influenced institutions of parliamentary democracy as underperforming, but also in its faith that meritocracy and technocracy would be emancipatory for the country.¹⁵ The hopeless failure of the secular nationalists and the stagnating criminalized politics of the OBCs was the underlying reason for the lack of interest in the electoral process among the middle class. "This is a clear indication of the development of a new political culture that believes more in managers than in parliamentarians. This shift is not unrelated to economic liberalization and the growth rate of the economy, which is attributed to a more managerial style of conducting public affairs."¹⁶ Jaffrelot further says that,

"A core element of this socio-political culture lies in the typical middle-class value of individual *merit* and the correlative rejection of positive discrimination—the recurrent setting to fire of 'the corpse of merit' in anti-reservation protests is the most pictorial illustration of this

¹³ Jaffrelot Christophe, "The Rise of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1 (Feb., 2000), 106

¹⁴ Ibid.108

¹⁵ Jaffrelot Christophe, "Why Should We Vote?": The Indian Middle Class and the Functioning of the World's Largest Democracy". In *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China* edited by Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter van der Veer, (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London, Singapore: Sage Publications, 2008), 36,59

¹⁶ Ibid.42

correlation. Now, the defence of merit, which occupies the front row in the middle-class repertoire, is well in tune with the hierarchical ethos of the upper caste Hindus. This is due to the fact that positive discrimination is largely based, in India, on the criterion of caste and, indeed, this major feature of the upper caste middle class worldview became prominent during the Mandal affair in the early 1990s. But this is also due to the elective affinities between the upper castes' ethos and the middle-class value system."¹⁷

The abstention in the electoral process through voting which became prominent in the urban centers was not homogenous and ubiquitous in terms of loyalties to political parties. The reality was much more nuanced. I would argue that a section of the middle class who were Congress voters earlier, had stopped going to the vote banks with the rise of the Hindu nationalists as they were ideologically antagonistic even though they were beneficiaries of the reconfiguration. At the same time, there was a section of technocratic BJP within this middle class who did not vote due to their lack of general faith in the functioning of parliamentary democracy. This is the same group which vociferously demanded an iron-fisted presidential type or military rule in the country for the development of the country. It would be really interesting to analyse through further empirical research if this section of the middle class played any role in the fall of the Vajpayee government in 2004 through abstention and laid the founding stones for a general atmosphere in the country of brazen persona-centric Hindutva populism.

5.CONCLUSION: POPULISM AND THE POLITICS OF PATRONAGE-A REINFORCEMENT OF RENT

The demand for a stronger system of governance and administration in the form of an authoritative presidential system or an army rule guided by 'merit' and corporate like professionals grew in intensity throughout the 2000s after its emergence in the mid-1990s. Hindutva, which was seen as a muscular tool, was used to achieve this end. Though it requires much more empirical research for substantiation, I would opine that this political absention by the section of the middle class in the electoral process expressed in its unwillingness to co-operate with various other social classes in the functioning of the political system in order to maintain and protect its share of the redistributed resource after liberalisation culminated in the failure of the Vajpayee government which in turn led to an anxiety over parliamentary democracy over the 2000s; as a consequence of which the persona-centric populist politics of Narendra Modi in Gujarat became the much-desired alternative. As Jaffrelot has shown in his analysis of Modi's hatrick win in the Gujarat elections of 2012, these sections of the urban middle class went back to the polls only after a strong and muscular political figure was established, who fed into their consumerist and technology consuming economically liberal and incrementally prosperous reality. The vote base of the BJP increased rapidly to never before figures. Interestingly, these voters also included earlier voters of the Congress and the OBC parties, which is evident in the near absence of lower caste representation of OBC parties in the Gujarat assembly and the fast decay of the Congress. Modi's populism was also catering to the urban middle class only and his emancipatory and development plans were heavily in favour of urbanisation (metropolis, suburban, small town). There was a heavy ignorance of the rural countryside and its inhabitants.¹⁸ I would echo Jaffrelot's analysis and extend it to the

¹⁷ Ibid.45

¹⁸ Jaffrelot Christophe, "Gujarat Elections: The Sub-Text of Modi's 'Hatrick'—High Tech Populism and the 'Neo-middle Class'" *Studies in Indian Politics*, 1(1), (2013), 80-83, 89-93

scenario at the national level in and around the general elections in 2014 when Narendra Modi was elected as the Prime Minister of India.

Thus, I have attempted to show that the political abstention in the electoral process of a huge section of the urban middle class inadvertently led to the rise of a brazen persona-centric populist cult which was able to co-opt and appropriate not only a humongous majority of the Indian Middle Class but also of certain crucial sections of the Other Backward Classes and of the earlier secular elite in his promises of rapid liberal economic development and bold political assertions at both the national and global level. I would conclude that this co-option and appropriation is nothing else than the strong re-establishment and return to the patron-clientelistic mode of political functioning with Modi and his entrepreneurial industrial, business and political associates acting as the great patrons. The various populist policies undertaken by Modi in Gujarat earlier and at the national level from 2014 till the present times has completely ignored the poor and downtrodden, it has been increasingly urban-centric and it has favoured and privileged those in the urban middle class who have political connections to the BJP. In short, the urban middle class finds itself today in the same rent relationships that it had initially vehemently opposed to its path to political and economic prominence since the late 1970s, throughout the 1980s into the 1990s. Thus, rent has been reinforced, possibly more intensely than ever before by the populist policies of Modi and has been successful in maintaining the continuity of the rent-seeking practice.

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