



Press Reporting

Country:	India	Issue:	Vol. XV No. 3&4
Publication:	Biblio: A Review of Books	Date:	March – April 2010
Description:	Magazine	Circulation:	
Frequency:	Every two months	Readership:	

From middle class to ‘world class’

India’s Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure,
Consumption and Prosperity

By Christiane Brosius

Routledge, New Delhi, 2010, 381 pp., Rs 795 (HB)

ISBN 978-0-415-55146-5

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In a book of extraordinary depth and range, Christiane Brosius explores a decade’s worth of shifts in the social, cultural and political identity of India’s burgeoning middle class. At first, the project seems overly ambitious, if not impossible, given that the category ‘middle class’ is notoriously difficult to define, and there is only limited consensus on how many middle classers there are in contemporary India (300 million is an often-quoted figure). However, Brosius masterfully evades this definitional quagmire by focusing not on numbers, but on the desires of those who aspire to be middle class, and the expressions these desires take.

Brosius, a professor of Visual and Media Anthropology at the University of Heidelberg, sifts through real estate brochures, lifestyle magazines, web-pages, and advertisements, collected onwards from the mid-1990s, to provide an energetic and intimate account of the longing, by a rather heterogeneous group of people both inside and outside the country, to be ‘world class’ Indians (Brosius sees

overseas or non-resident Indians—‘NRIs’—as important interlocutors in this process). Broadly speaking, Brosius’s subjects are the material beneficiaries and ideological proponents of India’s market reforms, but it is evident that what they really have in common is the desire to be part of an “imagined cosmopolitan elite” (p. 37), one that is only loosely connected to India, and then too, to its idealisation as an affluent and globally influential entity.

The specific sites of Brosius’s study are the city, media and religious practices, in which she sees the “testing grounds and stages of new lifestyles” where “new identities are contested” and “desires, pleasures and anxieties are given a face” (p. 2). Thus begins a fascinating journey through heavily-guarded shopping malls and luxury condominiums that promise clean, safe ‘world class’ living, gyms and ‘wellness centres’ that offer slim bodies and stress-free minds, extravagant, themed weddings that evoke the splendour of Rajasthani palaces and princely lifestyles, and new, ‘feel good’ religious movements that sanction the love of

consumption and the principles of self-care and self-experience. To me—an ‘NRI’ who grew up in Delhi through the 1980s and 1990s—this book speaks profoundly. I have witnessed the emergence of this ‘new India’ too, at times enthralled, but more often unsettled and repulsed. Brosius’s meticulous scholarship and steady, critical eye have lent my impressionistic observations a much-needed theoretical structure, and surprisingly, a touch more empathy.

For one, Brosius cautions against the urge to dismiss the changes we see as vulgar imitations of a Western original: “what we find in globalising India today is not just a simple replica of an original from elsewhere, but its authentic appropriation and alteration” (p. 119). This point is enlarged by her detailed study of one of India’s fastest growing and wealthiest religious organisations, the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Santha (BAPS), along with its ‘mega-site’ of worship, the Akshardham Cultural Complex (ACC) in New Delhi.

Brosius argues that BAPS’ success



and transnational visibility owe to its ability to meet the middle class "desire for a flexible, prestigious, easy-to-apply spirituality" (pp. 144-45). At ease with new media technologies—its website offers electronic 'darshan' of deities—and structured like a multinational organisation, BAPS offers a pragmatic alternative to the inconvenience of traditional Hinduism, and the ACC, to the 'backwardness' of its crowded, waterlogged temples. Reminiscent of a sprawling theme park, the ACC is

praised by devotees, both local and NRI, for meeting international standards of cleanliness and order, and for its 'world class' facilities, which include an IMAX theatre, 'musical fountains,' and restaurants serving pizza and Pepsi (one may note the ACC's resemblance to other new-age worship-complexes, such as Sathya Sai Baba's Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi, Karnataka).

Yet despite the various elements of 'Disneyisation' and use of sophisticated

technology—and this is Brosius's point—the ACC is a site where Hindu religious principles and practices are displayed and performed without apology. The IMAX theatre offers time-strapped devotees the experience of an elaborate Hindu pilgrimage, while an electronic 'boat ride' takes them on a mini-voyage of India's 'Vedic past.' ACC officials claim, furthermore, that its structure derives from the ancient Hindu code of architecture, thereby connecting the temple with "the Hindu 'golden age' of pre-Islamic India" (p. 155).

In fact, Brosius situates the BAPS/ACC phenomenon as the centrepiece of many other new formations—in the built environment as well as identities and subjectivities—that disrupt liberal-modernisation assumptions that India's bourgeois public sphere will be a replica of the West's, or that its middle class will emerge as a secular-rationalist mass. These hybrids of global and local, East and West, elite and popular challenge not only the very concept of modernity, but also "ethnocentric and colonial stereotypes of the world order" (p. 272). With extravagant wedding celebrations featuring DJs imported from the UK, belly-dancers from the Middle East and bartenders from Russia, the 'new India' ruptures the expectation that knowledge, goods and power will always flow from a (Western) centre to a (non-Western) periphery, or that Indians will always flock to the West. As Brosius notes, the new middle classes are far more committed to living in India than their more genteel counterparts of pre-liberalisation times.

And yet the 'Orientalist gaze' stands only partially reversed. India's new middle classes have embraced and reproduced selective Orientalist notions about the country, such that it was an enchanted land inhabited by luxuriant Maharajas. Such notions are at the core of a new form of nationalism—also articulated by NRIs alienated by racism in their own societies—that refuses the country's 'Third World' reputation. The endeavour, however, is not to reinvent India as a carbon copy of the West, but through the manufactured nostalgia of a glorious, opulent, Hindu past. In part belligerent capitalist and in part 'auto-

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Facade of a new shopping mall in New Delhi

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Brosius skilfully navigates these complex and interlocking changes, weaving in insights from hundreds of scholars across dozens of disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, gender studies, art history and critical geography. There is a wide-eyed intensity to her somewhat cluttered writing that renders it fresh and engaging. This is a person who knows and loves India well, and writes without a hint of condescension. Nonetheless, Brosius is sensitive to the darker side of the relentless desire to be 'world class.' Struggling to be competent consumers, the status-conscious pleasure-seekers we meet in her book submit to an oppressive regime of impression managers, lifestyle experts, vastu consultants and psychotherapists. Beauty and wellness become a moral duty, especially for women, generating a "subtle machinery of self-surveillance" that reveals "the nearly threatening idea of permanent wellness" (p. 340).

The political implications are even more disconcerting. While musty, ethnocentric views about India's positioning in the global order may have been shaken off, elite-cum-transnational aspirations of being 'world class Indians' have translated into exclusionary notions of citizenship, and of what should be preserved as 'national heritage.' Central to the creation of these new hierarchies is the sort of ahistorical Hindu nationalism one encounters at the ACC. Indeed, Brosius's book is a powerful indictment of the anti-intellectualism of the Hindu Right, and its rhetoric of 'India Shining'.

Also key to new processes of marginalisation, however, are contestations over public space. Urban middle classes, in particular, have used "dichotomies such as safety and threat, cleanliness and dirt, purity and pollution" (p. 49) to project themselves as the 'rightful citizens' of the city. As Brosius points out, such conflicts are relatively new, since leisure and solitude, as lifestyle-forms, have come to be valued and linked to public spaces only recently. The results, in any case, are palpable. Metropolises such as Delhi and Mumbai are being carved into exclusive enclaves for their managerial and technocratic elites, with the surrounding spaces deemed "allegorical no-go-zones" (p. 92), populated by 'undeserving' social groups like

slum-dwellers and beggars. The city, as Brosius suggests, is increasingly "following the patterns of a multinational corporation" rather than a state government (p. 140).

Of course, this subject is not new. Brosius complements studies by scholars such as Amita Baviskar, Leela Fernandes and Partha Chatterjee, who have examined the 'bourgeois turn' in India's cities, the rise of politically aggressive middle 'citizen groups,' and the associated privatisation and securitisation of public space. The book is also a significant addition to the broader, global literature on the 'neoliberal city,' and its driving thesis that, across the world, the attitude of public authorities vis-à-vis the urban poor is shifting from one of developmental/welfarist paternalism to one of outright rejection. Spurred on by globally connected but locally disconnected middle class groups that demand the beautification and gentrification of their cities, local governments seem more committed than ever to the purging of marginalised groups, such as squatters, hawkers, sex workers, pan-handlers. Erasing political graffiti from public spaces is another pet hobby, particularly in rich cities such as Berlin, Los Angeles and Toronto.

Indeed, given the depth of such transformations in other parts of the world, Brosius may be fairly accused of exaggerating the extent to which middle-class aspirations in India have been transformed into tangible reality. While she acknowledges that tenants of luxury residential complexes often find that "pools [are] not filled with water" and "tennis courts and children's playgrounds never built" (p.141), her rather frenetic inventory of new developments submerges the fact that these changes are actually quite fragile. There is a large gap between ferocious desire and tenuous reality that is not adequately captured in the book.

Furthermore, while Brosius dexterously exposes the mechanisms through which marginalisation occurs, there is insufficient focus on how middle-class stridency is being countered. After all, India's urban poor are numerically in the majority. Also, they comprise families, communities and social networks, and are not the isolated, abandoned individuals one sees in the Global North. It is unlikely that India's poor will shrink away without a good fight. A little more light on the moments of resistance that have fractured the desire to be 'world class' would have made this immensely rich book all the more vibrant. ■