

## THE PRIVILEGES AND ANXIETIES IN THE LIVES OF CORPORATE PROFESSIONALS IN DELHI-NCR

*Sayantika Palit*

*Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), School of Social Sciences (SSS),  
Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India*

---

**Received: 04 May 2018**

**Accepted: 09 May 2018**

**Published: 19 May 2018**

---

### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper looks at the privileges and anxieties in the lives of white-collar corporate professionals in Delhi-NCR. They enter the corporate sector owing to their social and cultural capital. A closer look at the composition of the workforce in this sector points to the exclusion of the vast majority of marginalized castes and communities. However, using a qualitative approach, this paper highlights that lifestyle and consumption requirements create inconsistencies and anxieties in the lives of these people in the context of inflation and insecure nature of contemporary work.*

**KEYWORDS:** *New Middle Class, Consumption, Privileges, Anxieties, Work*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is a rising 'New Middle Class' (Fernandes, 2006) in India which is a heterogeneous group that is characterised by the importance they attach to professional education, salaried jobs, upward mobility and consumption patterns which sets them apart from those below them in the social hierarchy and also distinguishes them from the 'old' middle class of mostly government job holders in pre-liberalised India. Within the new middle class, the white collar corporate professionals are products of the 1990s economic reforms which opened India to the global market that was followed by setting up of several national and multinational firms in the various metropolitan cities.

In India, the services sector contribute more to the GDP<sup>1</sup> compared to manufacturing and there is greater FDI<sup>2</sup> in the service sector. 'Knowledge economy' (Drucker, 1969) is key to the service sector which rests on information revolution. Companies survive by being ahead of its competitors and this is done by research and development, knowing what customers want and then equip themselves to deliver. According to planning commission annual survey data (2016-17), there has been a significant growth in the service sector businesses which made up almost 60% of India's GDP.

---

<sup>1</sup>Gross Domestic Product

<sup>2</sup>Foreign Direct Investment

## SCOPE OF THE PRESENT PAPER

My research sample mostly consists of migrants who had moved to the capital city in search of professional education and/ or salaried work. When I say 'work', I mean salaried work in the organized sector. To be specific, these professionals are into executive and managerial posts within the corporate, service sector and have been in their current profession for five years and more. It takes a lot of effort, especially for those from humble families to maintain the kind of lifestyle that goes with the image that has been created of the professionals in the popular imagination so as to be appreciated by their peer groups. In this paper, I have discussed their anxieties and struggles which go hand in hand with their privileges. Understanding them offers us insights into contemporary urban life in general.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been an overall shift in the sociology of work from industrial production to consumption and its effect on social relations. In the kind of service economy that shapes the economic functioning of the most nations of the world today, production and consumption need to be seen together as two processes that occur almost simultaneously. My work is informed by the following theorists:

According to Baudrillard (1998), modern western culture is a 'consumer culture'. He defined consumption as an activity that acts as a basis for social groupings and as a means to acquire membership in them. Post the Great Depression and the Second World War, consumption has become not a just personal indulgence but civic responsibility in order to improve the standard of living for all. It is not just consumption of products and services, but consumption of signs and symbols that designate a certain kind of lifestyle. The same arguments can be extended to the new Indian middle class who are engaged in white collar professions for whom consumption is not just one of the avenues of leisure and to unwind from hectic work-life, but it helps them project a certain kind of lifestyle in their work and social circle.

Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that consumption is a social and cultural practice for establishing difference at an individual and group level, where demarcations are maintained through tastes and choice of lifestyle. It is taste and consumption of a certain kind that determines social status and reproduces social class. The individual taste stems from what he calls 'habitus' which is inscribed on the body and is influenced by socio-cultural conditions.

Brosius (2010) in her work on India's new middle class and its forms of leisure and consumption practices in urban India looked at the complexities of the lifestyle of the upwardly mobile post liberalization. Through ethnographic observation and analysis of research material, she looks at new social formations and aspirations, modes of consumption and ways of being in contemporary urban India.

Srivastava (2015) traced the emergence of a new middle class in Asian countries, particularly India as the inevitable result of economic reform. In India, the 'New' Middle class is seen as a departure from the 'old' middle class of the pre-globalized India. The newness is characterized by the production of a new cultural image that rests on different kinds of consumption practices and new ambitions around education, employment, and leisure. He argues that along with the commodity consumption this class has also been studied as the main recipient of material benefits of jobs under globalization.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

My research draws from Anthony Giddens' (1991) theory of the relationship between modernity and self-identity in which he argues that the self and the emergence of new mechanisms of self-identity are shaped by the institutions of modernity. However, the author argues that the self is not a passive entity, determined by external influences. The private and interpersonal aspects of the lives of people have a relationship with structural aspects such as work and social class, though it is not a one-way causal relationship. Ulrich Beck (1992) on similar lines has argued that in the framework of modernity, if one has to understand relationships and intimacies, one has to look at factors such as work and money. They are inherently tied to one another.

## **OBJECTIVE**

To understand the qualitative relationship between work and lifestyle in terms of aspirations, consumption and the resulting anxieties that creep in.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The issues I have looked at call for understanding the subjective experiences of people, their perceptions, aspirations and their daily-life based negotiations which require a qualitative approach. I have looked at certain aspects of their lives, the ways in which they make meanings of their professional and personal lives. In terms of methodology, I have drawn from the anti-positivist traditions in the social sciences:

Weber's (1946) idea of 'verstehen' or interpretative method - Weber argued against the objective and value-neutral methods of the 'positivists'. He instead argued that all social phenomena can be studied by reducing them to their individual constituents because it is only individuals who think and act. To him, the individual interpretation was an important aspect of research. The central questions of my research make the study qualitative, inductive and exploratory in nature.

## **METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION**

A combination of ethnographic observation across different spaces; semi-structured interviews, and narrative interviews have been used. These tools place importance on the individual and his/her interpretation of reality. Use of these different techniques helps in balancing depth and width of qualitative information. Observation has been conducted in respondents' offices, homes and leisure spaces such as malls, restaurants, cafes and indoor informal gatherings.

## **SAMPLING**

I have used Non-probability purposive sampling using snowball technique. It is purposive because as a researcher I had to decide on who my potential respondents could be depending on criteria such as research objectives, respondent profile required, their willingness to participate and availability. Snowball technique enabled me to identify one respondent based on the research criteria and then I asked him/her to help me identify other potential respondents till sufficient sample size was reached. It was a challenge to get corporate professionals to participate in qualitative depth interviews because of their time constraints.

## DISCUSSIONS

The class of urban, corporate, white collar professionals is privileged, have had access to good schooling, college education and other material resources. They mostly belong to upper and middle castes and their families are either middle or upper middle class. Their 'social' and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1984) enables them to make an entry into the world of corporate work. It is a 'closed' space by which I mean that the vast majority are unable to find an entry, sometimes even if they may be professionally qualified. In my own fieldwork, for instance, only 3 out of 40 people I interviewed were from marginalized castes. Their parents were beneficiaries of the reservation system and they were among the privileged few who could go to a private school and later took admission in institutes that offer campus placement opportunities. The rest belonged to the upper caste, middle-class families whose parents were either in government jobs or small businesses.

*'The corporate sector's response to the proposal (for reservation policy or quota in the private sector) was unequivocally negative on grounds of promoting meritocracy. Indian corporate sector seems to deny the fact that caste plays any role in the labor market in India while the truth is that the suitability of a candidate is rarely judged on formal qualification alone. The candidate's family background is an important consideration, the chances of a Dalit or a Muslim candidate for being called for interview for a job in the corporate sector were significantly lower than others with exactly the same CV'* (Jodhka, 2008, pp. 185).

However, not all is well with this world. Their jobs are far from secured, irrespective of designation and experience, their personal lives are no haven, their work-schedule is hectic and a few of them find their work meaningless. They have pressure to maintain their lifestyles and not falling from their current position. Inflation and rising consumption habits make them vulnerable to unreasonable demands made by their organization. For instance, people work longer hours in private jobs and these organisations are not regulated by central or state government rules. Research data has revealed that working over 65 hours a week has become a norm and not an exception. Often employees do not get leave on all declared public holidays.

In some instances, investing in a home has been one of the biggest decisions in their life and they have planned their career and marriage around this. Rising inflation and the pressures of repaying loans urged several respondents to choose marriage partners who earn at par or more, thereby reinforcing class and caste endogamy. Majority of my respondents had gone for arranged marriages. In such marriages, the family background, the income of the prospective groom and bride and the overall social status is closely examined and are important filters for selection.

One of my respondents Akhilesh, 31 years old, who has worked in both India and the Middle East echoed similar concerns. He hails from Saharanpur in U.P, belongs to a middle-class family where both his parents are teachers. He admitted that he feels lonely at times as he does not have close friends living in the same city. He said that his primary aim in life at the moment is to earn, save and invest in property. He wants to buy a house and only then can he possibly consider marrying. When asked why he thinks so and how he plans his life in the near future, he said:

*'Why would any girl from an educated, middle-class family want to marry me? I don't even have a house of my own. I don't have expensive furniture. If I want a girl of similar educational background, I need to have a much higher bank balance! Money matters a lot... Unless two people are earning well, at least one earning more than 1.5 lakhs a month, it is difficult to survive in Delhi.'*

The 21st century capitalist neoliberal economic structure has made the availability of loans and EMIs<sup>3</sup> easy for all kinds of products, be it a house, a car or any consumer durables. This has made consumption easier and one of the most distinctive ways of differentiating themselves from those below them. It is common for professionals in their 30s to have a house of their own owing to such provisions. As a result, a few of my own respondents had booked houses under various private real estate building projects in NCR years ago but have not yet got possession because some of the projects were stalled post-2008 global recession. In the current age of inflation and with projects being stalled, it has become difficult for some families to manage expenses. Some of the projects were stalled for different reasons – Liquidity crunch, fund mismanagement, corruption, unsold inventory, etc. Nearly one million apartments, worth about \$130 billion, in and around New Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore supposed to be completed between 2012 and 2015 remain unfinished<sup>4</sup>. Families with money stuck in these projects have less to spend on other things, doubling the pressure on monthly expenses and savings.

In the last few years, there have been thousands of instances of loss of jobs in India. Over 60,000 employees in software industry were laid off in 2016-17. Some of it was faced by people I met or mentioned by them as having occurred in their organization which tends to add to their fear of possible loss of the job in a volatile work-market. The degree of inconvenience they face is dependent on a host of factors like their own income, parents' financial position, ownership of property and other forms of assets. When things fall apart, people adopt different strategies to remain afloat. But it often results in them neglecting their health and overworking or taking on additional work for increased income.

34 year old Varun had lost his job in 2015 due to downsizing in his e-commerce company in Gurgaon. He started applying for work to different companies, even for profiles that would pay him less; the desperation lasted for a few months. In the meantime, the monthly household expenditure at first was met by his previous savings. After a few months, he urged his wife to look for a job who had left it to take care of their child. She finally managed to get a job but in a different city. She moved, alone, to avoid complete resettlement of the family. She did not take the child with her as they were not in a position to hire a full-time maid while she would be at work.

The husband took care of the child while his parents were called in for help. During this time, she would be on skype almost the whole day with her family so that she could see all that was going on in the house and constantly kept giving instructions around domestic work and childcare to her husband. She was torn between her responsibilities at work, to provide a substantial income for the family and was always missing her child. They moved back together when her husband found another job. He had to settle for lesser pay and had to adapt himself to the needs of the new role he had obtained for which he was not fully equipped. She came back and could no longer afford to discontinue her job.

*A huge percentage of women agreed that in today's era it was really difficult to support a family in one salary. That is why most of the women admitted that they would still work furthermore if the income of their spouse was sufficient for their family. They could also take up long working hours if they would get full day care of their children. Women yearn for ideals such as equal treatment and organizational support that would promote them into the organization's top posts based on merit. Although they accepted that women have larger roles and responsibilities to play in their life, they believe that these roles and responsibilities should not act as barriers to their involvement in the organization. Women have to face major challenges both at workplace and family. Maternity leave policies were one of them. Maternity leave policies*

---

<sup>3</sup>Equated Monthly Instalments

<sup>4</sup> Sourced from the online media mentioned in the bibliography

are not favorable in most of the organization. The legal provisions are not adhered to in private sector (Chauhan, 2010, pp. 191).

## CONCLUSIONS

Moments of crisis such as loss of job, lack of promotions over a long period of time are handled using different coping mechanisms, most common being working couple sharing expenses. Generally, if one partner pays the home EMI, the other takes care of the car EMI, if any and monthly household expenditure. Any inconsistencies in their work-life and salaries cause an imbalance in their current lifestyle and inter-personal relationships. The overall neoliberal economic structure, nature of contemporary work and in some cases, the real estate inconsistencies make the lives of these people more complicated than one would imagine. One can see them powerless in many situations offered by contemporary urban life. This further reduces the possibilities of numerical and qualitative growth of this class in terms of movement from lower middle to middle and upper middle segment within the prevalent class structure. It is important because a growing middle class stands for hope for classes below them.

## REFERENCES

1. Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*, California: Sage Publications, 1998.
2. Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage Publications, 1992.
3. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
4. Brosius, Christiane. *India's New Middle Class: Urban Forms of Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*, New York: Routledge, 2010.
5. Drucker, F. Peter. *The age of discontinuity: Guidelines to our changing society*, New York: Harper and Row, 1969.
6. Fernandes, Leela. *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform*, Michigan: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.
7. Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, London: Stanford University Press, 1991.
8. Jodhka, S. Surinder. "Caste and the Corporate Sector". *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*. Vol. 44, No. 2, pp. 185-193, 2008.
9. Srivastava, Sanjay. *Entangled Urbanism: Slum, Gated Community and Shopping Mall in Delhi and Gurgaon*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015.
10. Weber, Max., Mills C. Wright and Gerth Heinrich, Hans. *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.
11. Kumar, Navtan. (August 9, 2014). *The Sunday Guardian [Online]*. Available: <http://www.sunday-guardian.com/investigation/ncr-residential-projects-get-delayed-the-most>

12. Taneja, Mansi. (January 26, 2016). *Business standard* [Online]. Available: <http://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/delivery-of-1-5-mn-houses-delayed-builders-face-buyers-ire-116012500435>

