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# The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India

Leela Fernandes

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**Summary. Policies of economic liberalisation have been accompanied by discourses on the rise of the new middle class in India. The newness of this Indian middle class is marked by changing consumption practices and lifestyles. The visibility of the urban middle classes sets into motion a politics of forgetting with regard to social groups that are marginalised by India's policies of liberalisation. The politics of forgetting refers to a political-discursive process in which specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible within the dominant national political culture. Such dynamics unfold through the spatial reconfiguration of class inequalities. Both middle-class groups and the state engage in a politics of forgetting that displaces the poor and working classes from such spaces. The result is the production of an exclusionary form of cultural citizenship which is, in turn, contested by these marginalised socioeconomic groups. The article draws on original qualitative field research conducted in Mumbai (Bombay).**

Policies of economic liberalisation initiated in India since the early 1990s have been accompanied by an array of images centred around consumption practices and wealth generated by the 'new' liberalising middle class. The 'newness' of this Indian middle class is a cultural characteristic that is marked by attitudes, lifestyles and consumption practices associated with commodities made available in India's liberalising economy. This production of the new Indian middle class parallels comparative trends in the construction of the 'new rich' (Beng-Huat, 2000; Robison and Goodman, 1996) as a social group that is the prime beneficiary of globalisation in contemporary Asia. The construction of such a category, in effect, marks the potential benefits of globalisation for emerging market-oriented contexts in nations such as India. This middle class is the visual urban embodiment of globalisation that appears to dispel fears that places in late-industrialising nations like India will remain forgotten on the routes of capital movements.

The growing cultural visibility of the new Indian middle class marks the emergence of a wider national political culture in liberalising India. This visibility represents a shift from older ideologies of state socialism to a political culture that is centred on a middle-class-based culture of consumption. Middle-class consumers represent the cultural symbols of a nation that has opened its borders to consumer goods that were unavailable during earlier decades of state-controlled markets. This political culture entails a shift from earlier ideologies that idealised poverty alleviation and asceticism

*Leela Fernandes is in the Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, 89 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA. Fax: 732 932 7170. E-mail: lfernand@rci.rutgers.edu.* *Research for this article was supported by an American Council for Learned Societies/Social Science Research Council International fellowship. The author is grateful to Itty Abraham, Mustapha Pasha and Douglass Haynes for comments on an earlier version of this article presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual conference. The article benefited from comments and discussions with Sharit Bhowmick, Tim Bunnell, Ruthie Gilmore, Yong-Sook Lee and Peter Reeves.*

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to a set of national discourses that highlight the visibility of emerging élites such as the new middle classes. While state socialist ideologies tended to depict workers or rural villagers as the archetypical citizens and objects of development (Gupta, 1998) in the early decades in post-colonial India, mainstream national political discourses increasingly depict the middle classes as the representative citizens of liberalising India.

The growing visibility of the new Indian middle class has resulted in what Indian scholar Rajni Kothari (1993) has referred to as a 'growing amnesia' towards poverty and the poor in liberalising India. The visibility of the urban middle classes sets into motion a politics of forgetting with regard to social groups that are marginalised by India's increased integration into the global economy. The politics of forgetting in this case does not refer to processes in which particular places or nations are left out of economic globalisation. Rather, it refers to a political-discursive process in which specific marginalised social groups are rendered invisible and forgotten within the dominant national political culture. The politics of forgetting, in this sense, is not merely an inadvertent process of particular locations being left out of economic globalisation. It is a political project that seeks to produce a sanitised vision of the economic benefits of globalisation. This is not an uncontested process. In practice, the hegemonic role of the liberalising middle class co-exists with and is challenged by numerous forms of political mobilisation of marginalised caste and class groups in contemporary India. The politics of forgetting thus continually rests on more active processes of exclusion that are in turn contested by these marginalised groups. The process of forgetting is a political-discursive process in which dominant social groups and political actors attempt to naturalise these processes of exclusion by producing a middle-class-based definition of citizenship.

The dynamics of this politics of forgetting in contemporary India unfold through the spatial reconfiguration of class inequalities and distinctions at the local level. As Doreen Massey has noted "phenomena such as globalisation" can be understood as "changing forms of the spatial organisation of social relations. Social relations always have a spatial form and spatial content" (Massey, 1994, p. 168). Drawing on this approach, I focus on the ways in which the linkages between middle-class identity, economic restructuring and the politics of forgetting can be understood through local forms of spatial politics and contestations unfolding in urban India. These spatial practices are technologies for the production of a vision of a liberalising India that centres on the visibility of the new Indian middle class. I begin by analysing the spatial politics of middle-class identity. I examine the ways in which cultural practices of consumption and lifestyle are linked to broader processes of the restructuring of urban space in cities such as Mumbai.

The production of middle-class identity is linked to a politics of 'spatial purification' (Sibley, 1995), which centres on middle-class claims over public spaces and a corresponding movement to cleanse such spaces of the poor and working classes. It is the active nature of this politics of purification that underlies the political project of 'forgetting' subordinated social groups such as squatters and street vendors. This process represents an emerging dimension in Indian politics, one in which middle-class individuals and social groups now consciously claim that the Indian middle class is a distinctive social group with its own set of social, political and economic interests that must be actively represented. This assertive middle-class identity is articulated both in public discourses as well as in a range of cultural and social forms such as the development of new urban aesthetics and assertive claims on public urban space as well as the emergence of new civil and community organisations.[1]

I argue that such forms of local spatial politics point to the production of an exclusionary form of cultural citizenship in which the urban Indian middle classes are con-

structed as consumer-citizens in liberalising India. A central aspect of my argument is that the production of this new form of cultural citizenship is linked to the changing relationship between state and capital in the context of economic restructuring. In contrast to approaches that assume that policies of economic liberalisation are associated with a retreat of the state, I point instead to an approach that focuses on the restructuring of the state. Thus, while India's policies of economic liberalisation have led to the retreat of the state in some areas of the economy, the state continues to play an important role in the management of liberalisation. In particular, I will examine the ways in which state practices participate in the production of the middle-class-based model of cultural citizenship.

My analysis builds on recent research that has questioned the presumption of distinct boundaries between state and civil society (Migdal, 2001; Mitchell, 1991). As Joel Migdal has argued, the state can be thought of both in terms of an image of a unified, distinctive entity and in terms of

> the practices of a heap of loosely connected parts or fragments, frequently with ill-defined boundaries between them and other groupings inside and outside the official state borders (Migdal, 2001, p. 22).

As I will argue, state practices are engaged in political processes of spatial purification and the production of a new middle-class-based vision of the Indian nation. This analysis will contribute to recent research, which has focused on the centrality of the state in shaping urban politics and development strategies in comparative contexts (Evans, 2002). The state is, as I will demonstrate, an integral part of the politics of visibility and forgetting that are unfolding in liberalising India.

The article draws on field research, which I have conducted in Mumbai (Bombay) in 1996 and 1998–99. Mumbai, one of India's major metropolitan cities and an aspiring 'global city' (Evans, 2002; Sassen, 1991), is a central locus for the politics of visibility and forgetting. Mumbai brings together a number of important and often contradictory social, economic and political trends. Historically, it has been a central area of destination for rural migration producing significant urban pressures typical of large cities in developing countries. It was a centre of the textile industry, one of India's oldest manufacturing industries and a site of significant organised labour activity. It has witnessed a significant rise in religious nationalist activity mainly through the Shiv Sena party. Finally, it has long been associated with a form of urban middle-class cosmopolitanism that has been intensified and become representative of wider national trends. As Darryl D'Monte has noted, city planners, corporations and state agencies have continually expressed the desire to transform Mumbai into a global city such as Singapore or Hong Kong (D'Monte, 2002, p. 31). Mumbai thus provides an important case for analysis of spatialised politics in India.

The research involved approximately 50 qualitative interviews, together with ethnographic observations, archival and newspaper research. Qualitative interviews were conducted with three primary groups of people. First, interviews were conducted with advertising executives at leading Indian and multinational firms and journalists of new publications such as consumer-oriented magazines. Secondly, interviews were conducted with recruitment agencies that specifically target urban middle-class employment and union officials in the banking and insurance sectors. Finally, a series of interviews was conducted with a cross-section of graduates of an educational training institute. These sets of interviews both provided insights into patterns of consumer behaviour, employment and income, as well as in-depth qualitative understanding of individual attitudes and perceptions. This article draws primarily on archival and newspaper-based research as well as on an interpretive analysis of spatial conflicts that occurred during the course of my field research. While I have analysed the discursive and labour-market (employment-related) dimensions of this research elsewhere (Fernandes, 2000a and

2000b), I draw out some of the broader patterns of these dimensions in my analysis. In addition, I draw on examples from relevant interviews and conversations, which capture broader trends that my research has uncovered.

## The Boundaries of the New Indian Middle Class

The new Indian middle class represents a specific social category that has emerged in the context of economic policies of liberalisation that were initiated in India in the 1990s. This social group refers to a culturally constructed category. The boundaries of this middle class are defined by practices of consumption associated with newly available consumer goods in liberalising India. Advertising and media images have contributed to the creation of this image of the liberalising middle class as a social group that has transcended the limits of state protection and austerity associated with Nehruvian and Gandhian visions of the Indian nation. The new middle class is a social group that embodies a cultural standard associated with the globalising Indian nation. The consumption of commodities such as cell-phones, colour televisions, washing machines and cars forms some of the status markers that distinguish this social group.

This middle class is not new in a structural sense. It refers to particular segments of the professional middle classes, particularly those associated with new economy jobs such as the services sector and information technology. However, the social basis of these segments is not new as they draw from segments of the traditional urban middle classes. For instance, while in the pre-liberalisation period public-sector banks may have been considered prime jobs, foreign banks or multinational companies would now be choice jobs for urban professionals entering the job market. The 'new middle class' thus does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population who are attempting to enter the middle class. Its 'newness' refers to a discursive process of production of an image of the Indian middle class rather than the entry of a new social group to this class. The political significance of this category can be seen in the form of national public discourses that have debated the impact of the culture of consumption associated with this class. The new middle class has—for example, become an important symbolic arena for national debates on the impact of globalisation (Varma, 1998). Critics of liberalisation have condemned the emergence of a Westernised consumerist culture that is visibly associated with this class. Meanwhile, proponents of liberalisation have sought to deploy the new middle class as an idealised standard that other social groups can aspire to.

The new middle class is primarily characterised by such discursive processes. This social group is marked by the political and shifting nature of the boundaries that define it. At one level, the idealised representation of this group in media images and public discourses draws on English-speaking urban professional segments of the middle classes who are benefiting from new employment opportunities and rising salaries in private-sector companies. However, the heart of the construction of this social group rests on the assumption that other segments of the middle classes and upwardly mobile working classes can aspire to this idealised representation (Mankekar, 1999).

The actual nature and size of the Indian middle classes vary greatly. For example, income-based definitions include both the rural and urban middle classes and include groups such as farmers, shopkeepers and small traders. In the face of such diversity, the identity of the new Indian middle class provides a kind of normative standard, which this larger group can aspire to. Thus, the boundaries of the new middle class are fluid precisely because they hold the promise of access. In other words, the underlying claim is that other social groups can acquire the social capital that can provide them with access to membership in this distinctive middle class. The result is that the emerging politics of the new middle class has broader political significance for the identity-forma-

tion of Indian middle classes. Such transformations in the cultural identity of the middle classes, in turn, have specific material and political consequences that set into motion the politics of forgetting of those social groups that are marginalised by economic liberalisation.

## Restructuring Urban Space: Class Politics and the Materiality of Middle-class Lifestyle

A cornerstone of discourses on the new Indian middle class has been constituted by the changing status markers of this social group. Indeed, the public cultural representations of this social class appear to be borne out by new social and cultural practices. Consider for instance, the sphere of leisure, a critical social space for the production of such social distinctions. The leisure and entertainment industry witnessed significant growth in the 1990s. Indeed, if large dams and steel plants were the icons of Nehruvian India, it might appear that entertainment enterprises—ranging from bowling alleys, ice-skating rinks, and video parlours to restaurants, malls and amusement parks—are being promoted as the icons of the new India of the liberalising middle class. The proliferation of leisure and other service-sector-related industries has contributed to a growing public and social focus on questions of lifestyle. The significance of this construction of 'lifestyle' as an autonomous socio-cultural sphere of activity must be understood in terms of the broader processes of socioeconomic restructuring. Let us consider this process in the context of contemporary Mumbai.

There is perhaps no better instance of an Indian metropolitan city that appears to fit images of the new middle class than the city of Mumbai. The expansion of the services sector and the leisure industry has included a growing bar and restaurant culture. In contrast to smaller restaurants and Irani shops, which have catered to working-class and lower-middle-class individuals, the city now boasts a wide range of upmarket bars and restaurants. Dining out, in this context, has become a status marker of the new middle classes. Consider the following example of the transformation of a local restaurant, which an advertising executive described to me as an instance of the ways in which the production of this lifestyle shift is encoded in wider processes of urban restructuring..

> It's a little seafood restaurant. It's a Manglorian restaurant. In 1991–1992 Mahesh was this crumby little place with the downstairs where they served food with *thalis* and upstairs was air-conditioned ... but I liked the place. When you're eating and drinking you don't care what's around you. What happened was Mahesh got discovered by the yuppies. You had bankers coming in and lawyers. I haven't been to Mahesh in 3 years because the Mahesh that is there now is quite different. There's the guy who takes the order he wears a bloody suit ... that's not the mahesh I know. What happened to Mahesh? It was a reasonably good place but discovered by the yuppies ... if you look at Mahesh as a brand with a very hip yuppie crowd they made the place an 'in' place (advertising executive).

This anecdote is part of a much broader pattern involving the restructuring of urban space in contemporary Mumbai.

At a surface level, this process appears to embody a conventional pattern of gentrification. Exorbitant real estate prices in south Mumbai, the heart of the city, have increasingly pushed middle-class individuals into suburban areas. The result has been the production of new and distinctive forms of suburban cultural and social communities. In what are now considered upmarket suburbs, neighbourhoods in areas such as Bandra and other western suburbs[2] have witnessed the growth of upmarket restaurants, shopping enterprises and movie theatres. New trendy movie theatres in the suburbs, for instance, depart from the traditional fee structure of regular theatres. While regular theatres provide different scales from expensive 'balcony' seats to cheaper seats at the bottom level of the theatre, such theatres offer only a

flat higher price for all seating. The pricing system effectively keeps out poorer working-class or even lower-middle-class individuals from such theatres.

Meanwhile, these wealthy suburbs have also witnessed the growth of a new club culture of what are called 'upmarket' clubs. This club culture is of course not new to the city and in fact stems back to colonial times when private clubs were introduced by the British. In the post-independence period, these clubs became the preserve of upper-class and upper-middle-class Indians. In addition, a number of older social clubs, such as the Islam Gymkhana and the Catholic Gymkhana, also represent middle- and upper-class community-based social and cultural spaces. What is new then is not the presence of exclusive membership-based clubs for the reproduction of class distinction, but the expansion of such social spaces as well as the stark increases in membership fees.

The expansion of such socio-cultural spaces for the changing lifestyles of the middle classes in liberalising India rests on the creation of a new urban aesthetics of class purity. Historically, in contrast to modern urban cities in the advanced industrialised countries, metropolitan cities in India did not develop into strict class-segregated spaces. While cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Calcutta have certainly reproduced spatial distinctions between wealthier, middle-class and poorer, working-class neighbourhoods, such distinctions have historically been disrupted by the presence of squatters, pavement-dwellers and street entrepreneurs such as tailors, shoe repairmen and hawkers. These street entrepreneurs and pavement-dwellers were generally located in the wealthier neighbourhoods in order to provide services to their middle- and upper-class residents. Given the high level of poverty and the dependence of middle-class families on working-class labour for household work (ranging for instance from *dhobis* (washerwomen and men) and sweepers, to cooks) the class-based management of urban space in contemporary India developed in patterns distinctive from the advanced industrialised countries (Katznelson, 1981; Kaviraj, 1997; Seabrook, 1996). Patterns of workplace–residence separation that have historically characterised advanced industrialised countries such as the US cannot, for instance, provide the conceptual means for analysing the experiences of pavement-dwellers who perform services for the middle-class neighbourhood where they reside.

The invention of the new middle-class lifestyle has been increasingly interwoven into the creation of an urban aesthetics based on the middle-class desire for the management of urban space based on strict class-based separations. This desire for socio-spatial segregation cannot of course be viewed as an outcome causally produced by the policies of liberalisation in the 1990s. Historical analysis has pointed to similar dynamics in early 20th-century urban India (Gooptu, 2001). In more recent times, seeds of this shift in the management of urban space have been present in earlier events such as the coercive demolitions of squatter settlements associated with Sanjay Gandhi and the Emergency period in the mid 1970s (Tarlo, 2003).

In addition, processes of spatial purification have also involved state strategies designed to cleanse the Indian nation of unwanted immigrants from Bangladesh. In such cases, constructions of class impurity have converged with xenophobic constructions of 'illegal' Muslim immigrants in the discourses of Hindu nationalist organisations. Consider for example 'Operation Pushback', a government campaign in Delhi in the 1990s designed to return forcibly alleged illegal immigrants to Bangladesh. As Sujata Ramachandran has argued, such immigrants living primarily as slum-dwellers in Delhi were characterised as threatening infiltrators invading the Indian nation-state (Ramachandran, 2002). Moreover, such spatial politics have not been limited to states governed by conservative Hindu nationalist parties. For example, similar tactics have been deployed by West Bengal's long-standing Left Front government through its 'Operation Sunshine

Drive' which targeted hawkers' stalls in Calcutta. While this politics of spatial purity has been contingent on broader historical processes, the imposition of such spatial class-based norms has been transformed by the discourses of the new middle class. Let us consider this transformation through an examination of local neighbourhood beautification programmes.

### The Politics of Beautifying Neighbourhoods: State Power, Civic Culture and the New Middle Class

A significant example of the transformation of local spatial practices is the case of beautification projects undertaken by resident associations and civic organisations in various neighbourhoods in Mumbai. Such projects have begun to constitute a new civic culture for the middle classes in liberalising India. This drive to 'clean up' the city has been centrally constructed around class-based discourses; the drive to clean up the city, in effect, becomes inextricably linked with an attempt to purge the city of the poor. As Jeremy Seabrook has noted

> The former Sheriff of Bombay had a vision of tree-lined boulevards, fountains and playgrounds. There will be no slums. The streets will be clean with wide pavements unencumbered by hawkers. People will stroll through pedestrian plazas. The night will be brilliant with majestic buildings and fountains (Seabrook, 1996, p. 48).

This vision in fact captures the aesthetic of the civic culture of the middle classes in liberalising India—one that attempts to manifest the image of the new Indian middle class by cleansing the urban city of any sign of the poor or poverty. The boundaries of this civic culture rest on the attempt to produce a form of class-based socio-spatial segregation. This process of cultural-spatial purification represents an important underlying foundation of the politics of forgetting.

The politics of forgetting, in this case, is not simply an expression of the private desires of middle-class individuals. It is a political project that centrally involves the exercise of state power. Let us examine the role of the state in the restructuring of urban space. The beautification drive in Mumbai has not been limited to private civic organisations of the middle classes, but has also represented official policy of the local state government's Cultural Affairs ministry. This drive has aimed at 'cleaning up' public spaces and land such as beaches, promenades, *maidans* and other public areas. For example, in the affluent suburb of Bandra, one such project spearheaded by Cultural Affairs Minister Pramod Navalkar focused on developing a jogging strip with plants and seats on the seaside promenade.[3]

While such projects appear to be part of a broader public drive for sanitation involving a cross-section of local areas across the city (*Bombay Times*, 1998b), the boundaries of the 'public' constituted by such beautification drives have in fact been dependent on the politics of socioeconomic class. Consider the following description of the beautification and clean-up drive of Chowpatty, one of Mumbai's most well-known beaches

> Yes, its possible—to now take a relaxing walk along the Mumbai coastline at Girgaum chowpatty. Finally, the sand looks and feels like sand. Years of neglect and unsuccessful cleanliness drives later, the city's most famed beach is free of muck, debris, urchins, beggars, lepers and hutments, thanks to state culture Minister Pramod Navalkar. The entire 1km stretch of the beach has been bulldozed and cleaned, illegal slums removed, fishermen relocated and dustbins installed (Sharma, 1998).

In this discursive construction, which is an instance of a broader set of public discourses, urchins, beggars and the residents of hutments are viewed as interchangeable with the "muck and debris" which must be "cleaned up".

What is particularly significant in such class-based discourses is the role of the state

in producing and defending the boundaries of such middle-class claims to an unfettered access to public space. Thus, as part of the Chowpatty beautification drive, plans were also developed to ensure that the relocated poor would not re-enter the beach. These plans included the construction of a 120-foot-high watchtower and a permanent presence of two policemen (Sharma, 1998). Middle-class civic culture in this context becomes the terrain for the expansion and exercise of state power.

An analysis of such local state practices has wider significance for debates on questions of urban sustainable development. Peter Evans, for example, has argued that state–community collaboration provides a critical means for moving towards a model of 'urban livability' (Evans, 2002). The case of Mumbai demonstrates that local state practices contribute to the creation of exclusionary models of community that can lead to narrow definitions of livability that actively exclude marginalised social groups. This convergence between the exercise of state power and the production of a middle-class civic culture through the management of public space has been most visibly evident in political conflicts between the state, middle-class civic organisations and hawkers and their unions. Increasing pressures on urban space have in recent years produced significant conflicts between hawkers, street entrepreneurs who sell a range of wares (Bhowmick, 2002b) and middle-class civic organisations demanding greater access to public street space.

The state agency involved, the local municipal corporation, Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), has found itself in a conflicted position. Unlike the hutment-dwellers and 'beggars' that were driven away from public spaces such beaches and *maidans*, Mumbai's hawkers have been formally organised into unions and have been able to wield more political influence in the contest over public space in streets and neighbourhoods.[4] In addition, the BMC has also used an official system of daily charges as well as an unofficial system of bribes for unlicensed hawking as a financial source.

In an attempt to mediate between the hawkers' unions and civic organisations, the BMC has attempted to develop a plan that will manage claims to public space through the creation of legal hawking zones. However, such plans have also produced significant political conflicts as both hawkers' unions and civic organisations contested the plan both in negotiations as well as through legal avenues. For instance, several middle-class and residents' and citizens' associations put forth legal challenges to the BMC's zoning plans in order to prevent hawkers being relocated to their neighbourhoods (Devidayal, 1998a). Meanwhile, a 'citizens' forum for protection of public spaces', representing 50 'citizen organisations', filed legal petitions to prohibit hawkers from operating in residential areas and near major public areas such as railway stations, hospitals, educational institutions and places of worship.

Middle-class activity in the form of these citizens' groups and media representations of the issues largely produced a construction of hawkers as a threat to the civic culture of the middle classes (Bhowmick, 2002a). Such discourses focused on the 'hawker menace' as a threat to a wide array of middle-class interests, including inconvenience, sanitation, fears of social disorder and the threat of declining real estate prices for residential areas marked for relocating hawkers. In the process, discourses of citizenship and public interest have converged with the interests of the middle classes.

## The Structural Dimensions of the Politics of Forgetting

The social construction of middle-class lifestyle in this context is not constituted by private individual tastes and preferences, but as a political project of class formation that rests on the production of socio-spatial boundaries that can effectively resist the encroachment of the poor and working classes. In other words, the restructuring of urban space is not merely a result of changing

attitudes and preferences. Rather, such changes in fact embody wider processes of global restructuring that have been unfolding through policies of economic liberalisation. In his discussion of processes of gentrification in the US, Neil Smith has cautioned against deploying a "consumer preference model" (Smith, 1996, p. 108) which reduces explanations of wider processes of urban restructuring to an effect of individual choices and middle-class demand. As he argues

> to explain gentrification according to the gentrifier's preferences alone, while ignoring the role of builders, developers, landlords, mortgage lenders, government agencies, real estate agents—gentrifiers as producers—is excessively narrow (Smith, 1996, p. 57).[5]

Local spatial practices in Mumbai, in fact, reflect wider structural shifts in land usage and the real estate market. These shifts are often embodied in stark visual and spatial forms. For example, Mumbai has witnessed the construction of luxury apartment complexes often targeted at wealthy 'NRIs'—non-resident Indians residing outside India. Meanwhile, rising real estate prices have also accelerated the shift from older declining manufacturing industries such as the Bombay textile industry, one of India's oldest manufacturing industries, to new economy industries such as the services sector and media enterprises. The 1990s, the first decade of India's new economic policies, produced steep speculative rises in Mumbai's real estate. As Jan Nijman has argued

> The partial opening up of Mumbai's market in the first half of the nineties meant that the market had to find the 'right' price of Mumbai real estate. The 'right' price was escalating upwards due to the much talked about scarcity of office space in the city in combination with rapidly increasing demand, an equally popular topic of conversation. The search for a stable market was complicated by the entry of global capital, because now Mumbai was now not only compared with places such as Delhi or Pune, but also to New York or Hong Kong. Thus, when Nariman point became as expensive as Manhattan and five times as expensive as Bangalore, who was to say that was not 'normal'? (Nijman, 2000, p. 580).

Mill owners have found it more financially lucrative to sell land used for textile mills rather than to try and revive sick mills in the face of strong international competition (D'Monte, 2002). The transition was vividly evident to me during my fieldwork as I went to conduct a series of interviews with journalists for a new consumer magazine targeting the new middle classes. The offices were housed in a textile mill converted into office space. Meanwhile, as I made my way to the offices, what was once a section of the mill was being used as a television studio.

Such shifts from manufacturing to service industries have also served to skew the benefits of India's new economy towards the new middle classes and away from the working classes. As one public commentator put it

> The transition from a manufacturing to a service sector economy is being hailed as a sign that Bombay is maturing into an international city. But it has left mill labourers and the rest of the working class bewildered. The service sector demands skills that they simply do not possess. 'All these jobs have been created in this area, but hardly any of them have gone to mill workers or their children. Do you think these people want to become copy writers?' asks Meena Menon, an organiser of Girni Kamgar Sangarsh Samiti (Mill Worker's Struggle Committee) (Fernandes, 1996, p. 21).

According to one estimate, employment in the textile industry has dropped from 250 000 in 1980 to 57 000 in 2000 (Saran, 2000). The structural contradiction in this process is that unemployed mill workers are often forced to turn to alternative forms of employment such as hawking in order to support themselves (Devidayal, 1998b).[6]

However, as we have seen, middle-class-based definitions of the service industry have served to construct hawking as a threat to the social order rather than as an integral consequence of processes of restructuring that have been unfolding in liberalising India. The restructuring of public space in liberalising India is thus not merely an effect of middle-class desire, but is also an aspect of new strategies of state-led development in the context of liberalisation.

Liberalisation, as I have been arguing, has not led to the decline of state intervention as is often assumed, but to a shift in the nature of the exercise of state power and the emergence of new forms of collaboration between the state and private sector. For instance, the state-led beautification projects such as the chowpatty project were carried out with financial support from the corporate sector. Surveillance of such 'beautified' public spaces has also been carried out by private security firms. Meanwhile, the local state government has also attempted other projects of privatisation, such as the attempts to privatise public municipal gardens and a controversial attempt to demolish Mumbai's Aquarium and replace it with a new elaborate underwater aquarium to be constructed though a joint venture with a Singapore-based firm—a change that was estimated potentially to raise entrance fees from Rs (Rupees) 4 for adults to Rs 140 per person (Deshmukh, 1998a). Furthermore, in the state's anti-hawker drive, the BMC employed private guards to evict illegal hawkers from public places, a tactic that was used for the first time in the BMC's history (*Asian Age*, 2001; Bunsha, 2002).

A clear pattern that runs through the state strategies deployed in the management of urban space is one that restructures the space in ways that cater to the wealthier segments of Mumbai and to the lifestyles of the new Indian middle classes—for instance, by transforming spaces to cater to joggers. Proposed plans to restructure parks and *maidans* have involved the drawing of clear social boundaries through the construction of gates in order to control access to what were once accessible public spaces. In one such plan, for instance, the BMC developed a Rs 6 000 000 beautification project that would transform one of Mumbai's most well-known *maidans*, Shivaji Park, by constructing seven gates, 'VIP' parking, tiled jogging tracks and elaborate fountains and pavilions (Karkaria, 1997).

While such proposals have often been met by resistance and legal challenges from local residents and from some organisations opposed to such state-led projects of urban restructuring, they nevertheless reveal the ways in which the lifestyle of the new Indian middle class is not merely a symptom of private individuals responding to advertising and media images but a broader political process that involves the interests of both the state and capital. The exercise of state power in this context does not take an external form that is protecting or catering to a predefined set of interests of the middle classes. Rather, it is inextricably engaged in the production of the new Indian middle class—a social category that is materially produced through the restructuring of urban space in contemporary Mumbai.

The politics of spatial restructuring begin to point to the ways in which the boundaries of the new middle class are contingent on the reproduction of older social inequalities such as social class. The invention of the new Indian middle class, as I have been arguing, is part of a broad process of cultural and economic globalisation that has been set in motion through the economic policies of liberalisation in the 1990s. These spatial practices are technologies for the production of a vision of a liberalising India that centres on the visibility of the new Indian middle class. The management of liberalisation, in effect, occurs through the production of the boundaries of this category, boundaries that are simultaneously constructed through a politics of distinction from and a politics of forgetting of the poor and working classes. The state's policing of urban space represents this political project of managing the disjunctures and transitions of liberalisation through the production of a purified middle-

class culture that can represent the globalising Indian nation.

### Negotiating Liberalisation: India's Middle-class Consumer-citizen and the Politics of Forgetting

The politics of lifestyle and spatial restructuring, which I have been analysing, point to the ways in which the cultural production of the new Indian middle class produces specific forms of material-spatial exclusion of segments of the working classes and urban poor. Such processes signify and begin to intersect with and shape broader patterns of middle-class politics that attempt to naturalise such exclusions into a politics of forgetting. This politics of forgetting is embodied in the emergence of a normative civic culture that is based on the construction of a form of consumer-citizenship. In effect, the consuming-liberalising middle class is transformed into a generalised form of cultural citizenship, one that is marked by a shift from workers' rights to the rights of the consumer. Let us examine the political dynamics of such a shift.

Consider the following instance of public political discourses on workers' activity that occurred during my fieldwork in Mumbai. On 6 October 1998, the Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) workers, led by well-known labour leader Sharad Rao went on a three-day strike in order to press for various demands including a higher bonus and better medical facilities for workers. In the context of economic liberalisation—which has been accompanied by a growing defensiveness of labour unions, particularly in public-sector industries such as the banking and insurance industries—the strike represented a visible counter-example of the political strength of labour. The strike which mobilised workers of the BEST buses, a central mode of transport for both middle-class and working-class individuals, crippled bus services across Mumbai. According to one estimate, out of a total of 3201 buses, only 3 were on the road on the first day of the strike (*Bombay Times*, 1998e) and media reports concurred that the strike was near-total. In a measure of the political power of labour leader Sharad Rao, one report noted that "Only one other person has been able to bring the city to a halt in the last two decades—Sena chief Bal Thackeray" (Barucha and Singh, 1998), referring to the notorious leader of the Shiv Sena party. While the BEST Corporation attempted to use legal means to subvert the strike by getting the industrial court to stay it and declare it illegal, the success of the strike was evident with the Shiv Sena mayor agreeing to an increased bonus after only two days.

In this series of events, public discourses in the mainstream media are significant for an understanding of middle-class politics. Such public discourses were predominantly centred on the consumer-oriented implications of the strike. With headlines such as "Mumbaiites are Held to Ransom" and "Strikes—We've Had Enough!", the English-language print media catering to the new middle class presented a vivid construction of the strike as an anti-middle-class, anti-consumer event. Consider the following narrative

> The 'strike' appears to be a recurring phenomenon in Mumbai. As strikers justify their grievances and authorities refuse to bow down to pressure, the common man bears the brunt of the impasse.
>
> He finds himself torn between two warring sides, one that displays lack of public conscience and the other, which gives incompetence and indecisive administration a new name. The list of public woes is predictable: if the motormen strike the common man will stand in serpentine queues to reach office, if BEST goes off the road, he will travel in crowded trains or shell out extra cab and auto fare. If auto rickshaws agitate he prefers to walk, if banks are closed, he'll borrow ... His amazing capacity to be patient is commendable even in the face of unscrupulous people who want to make a fast buck out of this desperation.

> The public apathy has made the trade union, which has no conscience, even stronger. "The threat has grown", says leading consumer activist, M. R. Pai (Deshmukh, 1998b).

The narrative presents an example of the transformation of the middle classes into the figure of the Indian consumer-citizen, the new 'common man'. This figure represents an innocent victim of an ineffective government on the one hand and greedy, lawless unions on the other. Both unions and the government in this representation embody the corruption and incompetence of the political system.

The representation points to a wider pattern of middle-class anger at what Thomas Hansen has described as middle-class perceptions of a "plebianization of the political field" where, as he notes

> From the 1960s onward, the public construction of politics has increasingly been transformed towards that of an "immoral vocation," a site of unprincipled pragmatism, corruption, nepotism and greed—in brief, as the profane antithesis to the sublime qualities of the cultural realm. This transformation reflects the changes in social backgrounds and cultural habitus of elected representatives and party activists. Middle-class politicians have increasingly been replaced by those drawn from peasant communities and lower-caste groups, and their style, language and social practices are decidedly more "rustic" and "plebian" than those of the preceding generation (Hansen, 1999, p. 56).

This frustration of the middle classes at what they perceive as a political field that caters to the poor and working classes at the expense of middle-class interests lies at the heart of the production of the consumer-citizen in the context of liberalisation.

Discourses of social disorder and political corruption echoed through all of my interviews and informal interactions during my fieldwork and were targeted at both the poor and lower-caste communities as well as perceived cultural and political élites. As Hansen has suggested, middle-class individuals would produce a construction of the decline of public and civic standards because of the social disorder produced by the poor and working classes. As one middle-class public-sector employee put it "These people [pavement-dwellers] will never change. Even if you give them a free house they will sell it and go back to the footpath". Such constructions of the poor centred around two main elements. The first dimension of the narrative rests on a notion that the poor choose their poverty and are essentially unwilling to work in order to gain social mobility.

A second dimension in this narrative rests on a frustration with middle-class perceptions of excessive state support for the poor and working classes. The reference to free housing refers to attempted local government schemes to build low-income housing for pavement-dwellers being displaced by the processes of spatial restructuring. Middle-class individuals whom I interviewed, ranging from white-collar professionals to small business owners would consistently insist that taxi drivers and domestic workers earned more than they did and simply chose to live in slums. Such attitudes are not isolated examples, but are manifested in middle-class community-based activism. As Das has noted

> Outfits of 'citizen' groups (representing small and exclusive groups of middle and upper classes) are now intervening in the housing sector. Their strategy is to oppose those policies of the government relating to the campaign to the right to housing, upgradation of slums and protection against eviction. These groups and the leadership influence the media too; they campaign in the press against the interests of the slumdwellers. In the recent past, many such groups have organized campaigns in the press to oppose government policy to recognize the residential rights of slum-dwellers and the right to rehabilitation of those who are evicted by the

> development programmes of the state (Das, 2003, p. 208).

These examples of political activity point to the ways in which segments of the urban middle classes are organising against what they perceive as a state that caters excessively to the poor and working classes.

Middle-class frustration and anger cannot only be understood as a question of socio-cultural anxiety, but must also be contextualised in relation to the articulation of middle-class interests. Consider the following response of a journalist from a consumer-oriented magazine, as I discussed my interest in interviewing members of his staff for a book on the Indian middle classes

> Anger. The major feeling is anger. You can call one chapter 'anger'. The middle classes are two per cent of the population and they are not being represented. There is no representation. The interests of the middle classes are not being represented by politicians.

As another staff member added in clarification, the "politicians may be from middle-class backgrounds but middle-class interests don't shape their policies and agendas". Such anecdotes are not isolated examples. They underlie the attitude of emerging middle-class organisations. Consider for instance the comments of the general secretary of one middle-class citizens' group, the Chembur Citizens' Forum

> In fact, it is a matter of shame that the administration is more concerned about illegal hawkers than about tax-paying citizens. People, especially those belonging to the middle-class have put up with this kind of high-handedness far too long. But not anymore (Balakrishnan, 2001).

It is this middle-class anger and the corresponding question of the representation of middle-class interests that lie at the foundation of the emerging consumer-citizen in liberalising India.

The middle-class consumer-citizen is in effect the new 'common man', victimised both by a corrupt and ineffective political system on the one hand and the supposedly privileged and protected poor and working classes on the other. The production of the consumer-citizen as the new 'common man' in the national public discourses of the new middle classes points to the ways in which the production of consumer-based identities in the context of liberalisation has rested on a politics of distinction between the middle classes on the one hand and the poor and working classes on the other. This politics of distinction between the middle and working classes is of course a historical phenomenon that is not causally produced by liberalisation. However, the creation of the new middle-class identity which I have been analysing has intensified these processes. For example, in earlier decades in post-colonial India, strong levels of unionisation amongst middle-class employees often produced a normative political culture focused on workers' rights.

Critics of the Indian trade union movement have argued that the focus of a great deal of unionism on the more privileged white-collar and middle-class public-sector unions weakened the public legitimacy of Indian trade and diverted energy away from less privileged particularly informal-sector unions (Chatterji, 1980; Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987). Writing in the late 1980s, Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph described the "islands of privilege" among organised-sector workers and argued that "disproportionate organization and mobilization of white-collar professional and skilled labor reveals that organized labour has elected to follow the path of least resistance" (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987, p. 266). Such criticisms have been important as they have pointed to the historical blindness of unions to the structural inequalities and hierarchies between workers (Fernandes, 1997).

However, what critics of unionised middle-class and white-collar workers have often left unanalysed is the wider socio-political meaning of the production of the identity of the middle classes as *workers* rather than consumers. The production of such an ident-

ity, I suggest, represents an important factor in the production of a national political culture, which maintained a public normative interest in questions of poverty and workers' rights. The proposed restructuring of the public sector can be viewed not merely as a process with significant effects for the Indian economy, but also as a process that shapes wider political trends. To point to this significance is not to engage in an antiquated defence of overstaffed, inefficient public-sector units, which serve as vivid figures in the current Indian public imagination. The political significance of the restructuring of public-sector, middle-class workforces is easily caricatured in terms of irresponsible unions struggling to uphold the privileges they have gained from outdated economic policies. What I am suggesting instead is that the significance of this restructuring must also be understood in terms of the resulting reconstitution of democratic civic life—that is, through the production of a normative civic culture based on notions of the rights of consumer citizens rather than the rights of workers. It is this shift from the identity of the middle classes as workers to that of consumers which captures the politics of forgetting in liberalising India.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the politics of forgetting in contemporary urban India unfold through a complex set of processes which centre on the invention of a new sociocultural category of the new Indian middle class. The production of this social group points to a central paradox in understanding the ways in which a politics of forgetting operates in urban India. On the one hand, the new Indian middle class represents a visible embodiment of the potential benefits of globalisation, a visibility that disrupts the possibility that late industrialising nations such as India might be forgotten in contemporary processes of globalisation. On the other hand, the political dynamics of the new Indian middle class rest on a political project of forgetting the urban poor and working classes. The result is that the conception of a politics of forgetting cannot be viewed merely as a process where particular localities are excluded from globalisation, but as an active political process that involves processes of exclusion and purification. In particular, this political process is embodied in a series of spatial practices at the local level in cities such as Mumbai. Such processes of spatial purification are an integral part of the middle-class-based political culture in liberalising India in which marginalised communities can be overlooked.

The exercise of state power is an important political force in this political project. At one level, the state is often fragmented and conflicted as it oscillates between responding to the organised demands of middle-class communities on the one hand and workers' organisations such as hawkers' unions on the other. At another level, the state actively participates in attempting to produce a middle-class-based vision of a beautified, globalising city in which signs of poverty can be forgotten in both spatial and political terms. Such an analysis holds broader insights as recent research has pointed to the importance of state–community co-ordination in attempts to promote 'urban livability' and sustainable development in comparative contexts (Evans, 2002).

My analysis of the politics of forgetting in contemporary Mumbai suggests that both state practices and exclusionary definitions of community and citizenship produce visions of urban development that exclude poor and working-class communities. Such questions of livability and development are fundamentally shaped by the emergence of a model of consumer-citizenship that seeks to displace the political claims of marginalised social groups to resources such as jobs and housing. However, as we have seen, such processes remain contested by the groups that are forgotten within the political culture of liberalisation. This contestation continually disrupts the naturalised sense of the project of forgetting and highlights the more coercive aspects of exclusion and purification of this process. The politics of forgetting is thus bound to

remain a partial and contradictory process that interrupts the claims of the new Indian middle class to idealised visions of a globalising Indian nation.

## Notes

1. Such dynamics can also be seen in advanced industrialised countries (for historical examples, see Coheen, 2003; and Ryan, 1997).
2. The western side of the suburbs (for instance, Andheri west or Santa Cruz east) tend to be considered the upmarket side, while the eastern side tends to house working-class and lower-middle-class neighbourhoods (for instance, Andheri east or Santa Cruz east).
3. For further details, see *Bombay Times*, 1998a, 1998c, 1998d; and *Times of India*, 1998b. In this context, the spatial manifestation of cultural purity is not simply a class-based project aimed at cleansing the public of its poor and homeless, but also one that reproduces strict gendered ideologies with the objective of purging the public sphere of state-defined elements of 'sexual deviance'. Due to confines of space, I limit myself in this article to a discussion of class politics. I discuss such gendered processes in Fernandes (2001).
4. The Bombay Hawkers Union is estimated to represent 120 000 hawkers (see Dixit, 1998). Shiv Sena leader Bal Thackeray opposed the BMCs' plan and some Shiv Sena leaders were said to have been concerned that the anti-hawker drive would produce Sena losses in local assembly elections (*Times of India*, 1998a).
5. For instance, local state policies designed to address problems of squatters (for instance, by building housing to replace squatter settlements) have generally benefited builders rather than the squatters themselves. For a discussion of such dynamics see Das (2003).
6. Note that textile production has been reorganised and shifted to informal-sector production units outside Mumbai in rural areas in Maharashtra and neighbouring areas. For a historical analysis of the powerloom industry in western India, see Haynes (2001). For a discussion of the survival strategies of retrenched textile mill workers, see Bhowmick (2001).

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