

# AN ANALYSIS OF TRENDS IN SOCIAL STRATIFICATION USING ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY ON AKSHARDHAM CULTURAL COMPLEX IN NEW DELHI

Riya Chhikara

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

## ABSTRACT

*The sociological studies deal with the society and people's interactions with the shifting trends in it. These keep emerging and transforming. The study of Indian society, with its interesting mix of class structure, and the changes brought by urbanisation has been an area of interest for many sociologists. How are cities imagined and by whom? How is the lifestyle in a megalopolis envisaged and who can afford? These are the questions that fascinate Christiane Brosius and are investigated in the book 'India's Middle Class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity' using a case-study approach.*

**Keywords-** developmental economics, middle class, Delhi, urban infrastructure, applied ethnography

The Indian landscape, in the post independent era, has culturally evolved. It has also witnessed economic expansion at a remarkable scale which can be seen in the speeding growing of the urban infrastructure. The buildings rise higher along with the aspirational heights of the Indian masses. Both of these developments become the subject matter of a wide range of disciplines. They contain within themselves, issues of developmental economics (flow of resources), scope for architectural studies (space shaping minds), mobility studies, urbanisation and globalisation. The sociological studies deal with the society and people's interactions with the shifting trends in it. These keep emerging and transforming. The study of Indian society, with its interesting mix of class structure, and the changes brought by urbanisation has been an area of interest for many sociologists. How are cities imagined and by whom? How is the lifestyle in a megalopolis envisaged and who can afford? These are the questions that fascinate Christiane Brosius and are investigated in this book using a case-study approach.

## OVERVIEW AND CONTENTS

This book, is part of the series 'Cities and the Urban Imperative' which aims to study the Indian experience of urbanisation and its cities adapting to this modernity. While other books in the series have focused on facets like housing issues in Bangalore, this book focuses on Delhi. The observations still extend generalisations to whole of India. The author looks at two prominent developments: new occupations emerging due to lifestyle changes and a prematurely born 'new

middle class', adapting to these changes. The three 'testing grounds', which take the shape of three sections in the book are: city, media and religion.

These observations mark a difference, the potential of which had been underutilised by the previous theorists, claims Brosius in the introductory passages. The sources for the research include a range of lifestyle magazines, semi structured and open interviews. A cross disciplinary flexibility, then becomes the demand for such a complex and under-exploited research area, which Brosius fulfils. Multi sited ethnography, as a grounded method of cultural anthropology is chosen aptly. It allows readers to analyse more proficiently the dynamic challenges in the contemporary urban context, posed to the anthropologists.

Sociological researches tend to study repetitive phenomena, where a pattern is visible. A single sample, therefore is not suitable for these studies. It calls for a more representative sample. Brosius pens down her ethnographic findings with a warning, a reminder for the readers that this study would fail to provide a 'generalisation'. It would not be "a systematic and all-embracing investigation of 'the' middle classes from an anthropological perspective". (pg. 2) She advises that this complexity of the 'new middle classes' requires a number of targeted inquiries. The author's approach is to exclude the sections, lower middle class, the urban and rural poor. Since the access to this imaginary is either absent or restricted in these sections, Brosius' approach to focus on the affluent middle classes is justified. This however creates conceptual gulfs in the text regarding what really constitutes the middle classes, which is only blurrier as we finish the text.

## **BELONGING TO THE WORLD-CLASS CITY**

The author begins by investigating the well circulated idea of '*India Shining*' by the media, a brainchild of the BJP (*Bhartiya Janata Party*) rally in the general elections of 2004. It connoted the modern aspirations of consumption and luxury. Brosius writes about India as the country where the 'feeling good factor' is closely tied to the optimistic aspirations and dramatic anxieties of the classes. The first part gives the readers a post structuralist insight to the market wherein the words on the billboards and in advertisements mean different dreams and seduce classes to multiple ideas of luxuries. The text introduces to the readers the capital Delhi emerging as a 'world class city' with malls and real estate designs. It is imagined as a secured 'enclaved gaze', inspired from John Urry's 'tourist gaze' where malls are 'spaces for flânerie' and shopping an experience. The 'social control effect' refers to creation of different hierarchies to the public spaces. Calling these new urban spaces as 'quasi colonies,' 'islands of a different kind,' they are paramount in creating, what Brosius calls, 'Dubaization'. Achille Mbembe's concept of superfluity wherein the 'modern' city of Johannesburg was carved out of its racial history, is very similar to how the urban citizens in Delhi generate meaning.

## A SPIRITUAL MEGA-EXPERIENCE: THE AKSHARDHAM CULTURAL COMPLEX

In the second section the author looks into what Smriti Srinivas (2008) called, 'urban religion'. The need for morality in modern selves is explored through studying the *Akshardham cultural complex* (ACC). Brosius observed that ACC is visited by a range of people with different symbolic and financial capital as well as different regional and ethnic backgrounds. The differentiation also happens 'within' the same class as the middle classes see themselves as more 'genteel' and equipped with 'high religion'. *The Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha* (BAPS) responsible for the ACC's management call it an "integrated complex of ancient Indian civilizational heritage". The ritual hierarchy of this 'quasi temple' or 'museum' is conservative in caste structure and works by separating the 'insiders' from 'outsiders'. It is interesting to read how the ritual 'element' for this complex had to be transported, like stones from Rajasthan, water in 'Narayan Sarovar' from over hundred holy rivers and lakes. The three halls in the building, *Sahajanand Darshan*, *Neelkanth Darshan*, *Sanskriti Vihar* feature not only 'darshan' or prayer, but also 'pradashan' or exhibition. This has been theorised by Raymond B. Williams, and highlighted in the book. These symbolic ritual meanings lead Brosius to term ACC as "The perfect private enclave!" (185)

## MANAGING LOVE, ROMANCE AND BEAUTY

This section engages in the experience and management of the self as the locus of pleasure and a 'good life'. Using Marx's terminology, the body has transformed from being a site of production to that of consumption and pleasure. Borrowing Hannerz's term 'expressive specialists', the author writes of two commercially booming areas, the wellness/beauty industry and wedding industry. The beauty industry, she notes has grown at a remarkable rate of 25 percent. The marriage, which was essentially a private affair has encapsulated entertaining engagements headed by these lifestyle experts. The identities thereafter undergo significant changes but not in absolute terms. The pundit, who heads the marriage rituals, is side-lined by other celebrations while the bride is expected to be on the same existing lines: respectful, abiding to the ritual. The clarion call to return to one's 'cultural roots' finely tune to the ears of the non-resident Indians (NRI), the 'new heroes', who despite their complete knowledge of Indian culture arrive at the land for a traditional wedding. The inside world of wedding halls is possessed with 'vulgar cosmopolitanism' with the import of exotic elements into 'aboriginal cosmopolitan rhetoric'. The author throughout the text attempts to make unbiased observations which are not far stretched from reality. The non-existing ritual pollution in cuisines and commensality, is reiterated by Brosius like many other sociologists in their works.

Brosius begins by arguing that a definition to "middle class" is an unconcluded project, and remains unanswered till the end pages. Rightfully so, "middle class is not a state, but a process" closely relates to what Deshpande puts as "increasingly differentiated" constituting an expanding, heterogenous category. In what was to become an investigation of urban leisure and

consumption, it misses out on other factors such as education. Education has been seen as a luxury, with school infrastructure claiming ‘world class facilities’ and international ethos. The author’s understanding of Weber’s ‘Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’ seems oddly placed in the section on Akshardham complex. The religious ethic nurtured through Akshardham temple is about displaying the wealth and not saving. The style of writing, adopted by Brosius, ranging from semi structured interviews becomes an interesting read for academicians. The book gives a fresh taste, dispensing with the need for looking into previously documented works through new empirical evidences.

## **REFERENCES**

1. Brosius, Christiane, 2010. *India’s Middle class: New Forms of Urban Leisure, Consumption and Prosperity*, New Delhi: Routledge
2. Mbembe, Achille, and Nuttal Sarah, 2008. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, Duke University Press
3. Srinivas, Smriti, 2008. *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*. Leiden, Boston: Brill
4. Urry, John, 1990, *The Tourist Gaze*, London: Sage