

India's middle-class dilemma

Gareth Price on the growing distrust between the haves and have-nots

India has undergone remarkable change in the past few decades. Dramatic economic and population growth has seen millions of people move from rural to urban centres. Villages have expanded into towns and towns into cities. A middle class has emerged, several hundred million Indians have seen lifestyles improve immeasurably and wealth is displayed more conspicuously than ever before.

Western attention is often fixated on India's economic growth. But alongside this economic success story social tensions between 'tradition' and 'modernity' are also emerging.

Two events in December 2012 – the re-election of Narendra Modi as chief minister in Gujarat, and the horrific rape and murder of a student in Delhi – highlight the impact of these changes, and how urban middle-class opinion is often at odds with the political leadership.

That Modi was re-elected for a third term is itself an achievement in a country where 'anti-incumbency' is part of mainstream political discourse. Frequently described as India's most divisive politician, Modi has tried to shift from being a firebrand proponent of Hindutva (the Hindu conception of society espoused by his party, the BJP) to being the man who has brought development and order to Gujarat.

His electoral success has made him a possible BJP prime ministerial candidate to challenge Sonia Gandhi's Congress Party in 2014. But as a national politician, Modi remains hamstrung by his unattractiveness to Muslim voters, who make up 20 per cent of the electorate. In 2002, about a thousand Muslims were killed, and a hundred thousand moved into relief camps, during riots in which the state administration was accused of complicity.

Modi has gradually shifted his appeal to being an efficient manager, and this change has found electoral resonance

within Gujarat. He is probably the Indian politician who most directs his message to urban middle-class Indian aspirations. While his claims on the extent of Gujarat's economic success vis-à-vis other Indian states can be challenged, he has stood for election, and won, for his economic competence.

His politics are clearly illiberal by most measures. But he taps into a desire for order commonplace among urban Indians. One of his selling points in the recent election was that, since 2002, there have been no communal riots in the state. These worries are not dissimilar to evocations of the fear of the mob in Victorian England. Those who have succeeded in taking advantage of new economic opportunities are generally most fearful of those that have been left behind.

Fear has been demonstrated by the strength of public reaction to the attack on a young student in Delhi in December. The attack has hit a nerve, and the outpouring of anger, following similar demonstrations against corruption, reflects a broader sense that India's institutions and its politicians are out of touch with (urban middle-class) public opinion.

For India's political class this presents difficulties. India is one of the few countries in the world in which the poor are more likely to vote than the rich. While the urban middle class may be vociferous, elections are more frequently determined by the poor – who want to see the benefits of growth – than the rich. Consequently, successive

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Indian governments have portrayed their country as being in a race for economic growth. But as the benefits of economic growth begin to trickle down, the beneficiaries prefer order to the free-for-all that drove the growth in the first place.

The attack on the student in Delhi reinforced several urban middle-class complaints, most notably that the police are incompetent and politicians out-of-touch. But the tendency to blame politicians negates society's responsibilities.

The government can quickly change administrative procedures: moves to speed up rape trials, and to ensure that there is always a female officer on duty in police stations are positive initiatives, and send a signal of intent. But changing social attitudes is a much harder process.

In the longer term, the challenge will be for India to tackle a Catch-22 situation in which it has got itself stuck. Better-off Indians avoid paying taxes because they believe that the state fails to deliver and that its functionaries are corrupt. Instead, many communities pay for security guards for protection. In turn, the state then lacks the resources to deliver services, including law and order. If a way could be found to channel the middle-class demands for a better functioning and less corrupt state into a new social contract between the state and its citizens, both could benefit.

In the absence of a new social contract, economic growth may serve to entrench differences.

Politics in Gujarat exemplifies a less tolerant approach to addressing the tension between tradition and modernity. While this may resolve conflict in smaller areas, such an approach is unlikely to succeed in India as a whole given its vast array of different linguistic, religious and ethnic groups.

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