

## IN THE NAME OF THE PUBLIC: THE MIDDLE CLASSES AND THE STATE IN LIBERALIZING INDIA

*En nombre de lo público: las clases medias y el Estado en una India liberal*

Leela Fernandes\*  
Independent Scholar

<b>Keywords</b>	<b>ABSTRACT:</b> This article analyzes the political dynamics of middle class claims of representativeness of the public interest in contemporary India. Drawing on research in the post-liberalization period, the article examines the ways in which the “publicness” of the middle classes produces a distinctive relationship between this social group and state power. In the process, the middle classes both become a vehicle for the exercise of state power and are able to benefit from this relationship. Middle class claims on the public interest allow this social group to shape governmental responses and policies. This allows this social group to gain indirect access to state power and access to material resources. An analysis of the publicness of the middle classes is critical for an understanding of the nature of socioeconomic inequality. The article draws on a case study of urban governance and water resources in contemporary India and is based on qualitative research and fieldwork.
Inequality State Water Public interest	
<b>Palabras clave</b>	<b>RESUMEN:</b> Este artículo analiza la dinámica política de las pretensiones de la clase media de representar el interés público en la India contemporánea. Basándose en investigaciones realizadas en el periodo posterior a la liberalización del país, el artículo examina las formas en que el «carácter público» de las clases medias produce una relación distintiva entre este grupo social y el poder estatal. En el proceso, las clases medias se convierten en un vehículo para el ejercicio del poder estatal y pueden beneficiarse de esa relación. Las reivindicaciones de las clases medias sobre el interés público permiten a este grupo social dar forma a las respuestas y políticas gubernamentales. Esto permite a este grupo social acceder indirectamente al poder estatal y a los recursos materiales. El análisis del carácter público de las clases medias es fundamental para comprender la naturaleza de la desigualdad socioeconómica. El artículo se basa en un estudio de caso sobre la gobernanza urbana y los recursos hídricos en la India contemporánea a través de investigación y trabajo de campo cualitativo.
Desigualdad Estado Agua Interés público	

\* **Correspondence author / Correspondencia a:** Leela Fernandes. – leelaf16@gmail.com – <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2224-0884>.

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The middle classes are marked by a theoretical ambiguity that continues to unsettle both scholarly and public understandings of this social group. In contemporary India, this ambiguity stems in part from the vast internal differentiation within the middle classes. Social differences based on caste, religion, gender and ethnicity shape middle class formation in complex ways. Such differences intersect with socio-economic variation based on income, generational wealth and urban-rural and regional location. This differentiation sits in uneasy tension with the promise of upward mobility that haunts all depictions of the middle classes. The promise of mobility is shaped by an idealized historically and culturally specific image of what the middle classes should look like. For instance, the twentieth century Nehruvian image of a middle class shaped by public sector employment has given way to a twenty first century post-liberalization vision of an upwardly mobile consumer-oriented urban middle class. Social scientists writing about India's middle classes have increasingly grappled with the tension between such normative ideals of middle-class identity and the empirical differentiation by sophisticated methods of measurement and classification (Aslany 2019; Krishna and Bajpai, 2015). However, while such quantification projects can provide informative empirical data, they miss the political import of the definitional ambiguity of the middle classes. The significance of the middle classes stems from their normative ideals even when such ideals are dissociated from the empirical size and wealth of this social group.

The middle classes have played a central role in shaping political, economic and cultural life in comparative contexts (Dejung, Motadel and Osterhammel, 2019; López-Pedrerros and Weinstein, 2012). In particular, the middle classes matter because of their historical claims of public representativeness that are associated with idealized images of this social group. For instance, in comparative contexts, such claims of representativeness have historically taken the form of the middle classes serving as the embodiments of ideals such as national identity, democratic values and upward mobility associated with capitalist growth (Lipset, 1963; Owensby, 1999; Stivens, 1998; Sumich, 2018). This article analyzes the political dynamics of such claims of representativeness in contemporary India. Drawing on research in the post-liberalization period, the article examines the ways in which the "publicness" of the middle classes produces a distinctive relationship between this social group and state power. In the process, the middle classes both become a vehicle for the exercise of state power and are able to benefit from this relationship. Middle class claims on the public intersect with the post-liberalization state's interests in new urban-centric models of economic growth. The result is that the upper tiers of the urban middle classes gain indirect access to state power and access to material resources. An analysis of the publicness of the middle classes is thus critical for our understanding of the nature of inequality and the distribution of public resources in contemporary India.

The dominant identity of the middle class and the association between the middle classes and the public interest is shaped by complex historically specific processes and a wide array of actors. In the twentieth century colonial period in India and in the early decades of independence, a range of middle-class organizations such as civic organizations, newspapers, educational institutions and of course nationalist organizations such as the Congress party sought to represent the public interest (Joshi, 2001). This article focuses on how this role of the middle class is reshaped in the post-liberalization period in India. India's policies of liberalization were accelerated since the 1990s and the public role of India's middle classes has been shaped by a complex set of discourses. Various actors including politicians, government officials, businesses, marketing and advertising firms, media outlets and

members of the urban middle classes contributed to the making of a new middle-class identity associated with economic liberalization (Fernandes, 2006). Policies of reform in the 1990s were publicly associated with new forms of prosperity and characterizations of a “new India” (D’Costa, 2010). Reforms were associated with an embrace of globalization that offered the middle classes a newfound prosperity and pride in new consumption practices and lifestyles. Both the Indian state and the upper tiers of the urban middle classes contributed to the making of this new identity and projected it as an aspirational social ideal in India. The state was invested in this new identity because it projected the benefits of economic reforms that it implemented. The upper tiers of the middle classes celebrated new consumer goods and the wealth associated with new private sector employment.

In practice, this new middle-class identity is a dominant ideal that does not easily map on to vast socio-economic variation within the middle classes. The definition of the middle classes in India depends on the kind of measures that are used. In terms of income, middle income social groups can range from white collar workers in urban areas to relatively well-off farmers in rural areas. In terms of education, the middle classes with higher education now also include both urban and rural residents. The differentiation further increases if the lower middle classes are accounted for since this category includes a broad array of occupations from small shopowners to clerical workers. Finally, broader middle classes also include new entrants to middle class status from less privileged castes and socioeconomic backgrounds. Such social groups may strategically use education as a means of upward mobility but may be in precarious socioeconomic positions (Jeffrey, 2010). In the face of this differentiation, the new dominant identity of the middle class in liberalizing India is more homogenous as it is centered on the upper caste, English-speaking, wealthier segments of the urban middle classes. In the post-liberalization period this upper tier of the middle class has been employed in the private sector and is associated with conspicuous consumption practices in metropolitan cities. For instance, sections of the middle classes that once worked in the upper tiers of public sector employment (such as within the prestigious Indian Administrative Service) have now moved to high paying private sector work. It is this dominant segment of the urban middle classes that has played a central role in shaping public discourses and conceptions of the Indian public interest.

This article examines the ways in which the construction of the post-liberalization urban middle classes as a new public ideal has shaped state governance and contributed to the redistribution of resources in ways that benefit the urban middle classes. I engage in this analysis through a case study of urban governance and water resources in contemporary India. The article draws on in-depth empirical research including historical, local, national and global archival policy materials as well as qualitative interviews and field site visits that I conducted in Chennai between 2016-2018. The archival work and interviews were based on access to original materials (documents and interviews) in local government water bureaucracies in the city<sup>1</sup>. As one of India’s major metropolitan cities, Chennai provides a critical and representative site of broader national patterns regarding water governance. In the post-liberalization period, governmental authority over water has been centralized

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<sup>1</sup> This research and the arguments of this article are based on my book, *Governing Water in India* published in 2022. In this book I illustrate how state institutions produce the unequal distribution of water resources in the post-liberalization era. This article draws out these implications for our understanding of the middle classes in India. Arguments on the middle class are also based on qualitative research (field work, policy analysis and discourse and textual analysis) and writing that I have conducted on the middle classes since the 1990s.

through urban governance in metropolitan cities such as Chennai. Cities have become key nodes of power for the post-liberalization state in India (Brenner, 2004). Meanwhile cities are also the central socio-spatial sites for the urban middle classes. There is thus a convergence of interests between state interests and the interests of the urban middle classes. The state and liberalizing urban middle classes engage in a shared production of a middle class-oriented conception of the public interest. Long-standing historical conceptions of the public representativeness of the Indian middle class are reshaped in liberalizing India in ways that structure the distribution of public resources in unequitable ways. The argument is presented in four sections. The article begins by providing an overview of the historical processes that shaped middle class claims of being representative of the public interest in India. It then provides an overview of patterns of urbanization that are shaping changing conceptions of the public in the post-liberalization period. The article then turns to the case of water resources and examines changes in urban governance and state approaches to the distribution of public water resources in the post-liberalization period. The article then uses the case study of water governance to illustrate the creation of a middle-class conception of the public interest in shaping state authority in metropolitan cities in liberalizing India. There is, as the case study reveals, a convergence of interests between the post-liberalization state emphasis on urban governance and the dominant interests of the urban middle classes that shapes the unequal distribution of public water resources.

This study of contemporary India informs broader debates on inequality in the context of economic reforms and globalization. In particular, the article points to the importance of understanding the complex relationship between the middle classes and the state in shaping inequality. At one level, this relationship is a discursive and ideological relationship as the state and upper tiers of the middle classes produce a conception of the public interest that is rooted in city based models of economic growth. At a second level, this shared conception has material consequences that produce forms of governance that deepen the unequal distribution of resources. The article thus makes two central contributions. It underlines the importance of studying the middle classes in order to understand deepening socio-economic inequality in the context of policies of economic liberalization. This entails an understanding of the complex and interactive relationship between the middle class and the state.

## 1. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MIDDLE-CLASS CLAIMS ON THE PUBLIC

Claims of the public representativeness of middle class identity cut across national and cultural contexts. The promise of access through upward mobility and the quality of “averageness” (neither poor nor wealthy) have shaped this characteristic of the middle classes. The aspirational possibility of access allows this social group to act as a norm for the poor and working classes. Meanwhile the notion of “middleness” allows the middle classes to distinguish themselves from the wealthy and claim to be representative of society’s common public interests. These features of middle classness in India are shaped in distinctive ways by the historical specificities of colonialism and post-colonial nationalism and developmental policies.

Historians of India have illustrated the ways in which dominant ideas of middle class identity and respectability became central to conceptions of national identity in India. In his classic

formulation, Partha Chatterjee (1989) argued that with British dominance over the material realms, the “inner” cultural and religious spheres became a key site for the emergence of an Indian national identity. Such dominant conceptions were rooted in gendered Brahmanical conceptions of middle class respectability. While differentiation within the middle classes always unsettled these dominant conceptions (Joshi, 2001; Sarkar, 2001), they nevertheless constructed the middle classes as an embodiment of a set of national ideals. Thus, even while the size of the middle class in India was relatively small (Misra, 1961), this social group made claims of representing the public in ways that far exceeded questions of quantification. As Douglass Haynes (1991) has shown, such claims allowed the middle classes to gain both power and access to material resources. For example, middle classes gained access to social and political power in the colonial period through education rather than industrial development (Misra, 1961). Drawing on their social status, the educated middle classes engaged in associational activities and municipal politics to claim public civic power (Haynes, 1991). These claims were reworked in the late twentieth century nationalist movement. While Gandhi’s expansion of the nationalist movement sought to include a broad array of social groups, the two central nationalist organizations, the Congress and the Muslim League, drew on the leadership and ranks of the middle and upper classes.

The middle class orientation of Indian nationalism was reconstituted in the new independent nation-state in the second half of twentieth century. While Prime Minister Nehru and the Congress party deployed languages of socialism, many of the policies of the post-colonial state had a distinct middle class orientation. For instance, the state’s education policy was oriented toward subsidizing higher education rather than expanding primary and secondary school education (Rudolph and Rudolph, 1987). Furthermore, the expansion of state economic investment through public sector employment meant that the post-colonial state played a central role in both materially expanding and reproducing the middle class. Thus, the Indian middle class was predominantly dependent on the state for both employment and for social subsidies such as education and public sector employment. Large segments of the middle classes thus became the managers that administrated the state’s developmental policies and the embodiment of the state’s ideals of secular developmentalism. Social scientists grappled with this imbricated relationship between the state and the middle classes by focusing on the rentier nature of the middle class. In his canonical text, economist Pranab Bardhan (1984) conceptualized the middle class as one of India’s dominant proprietary classes that was extracting public resources for its own self-interest. Bardhan argued that India’s expanded public sector created what he described as “vast amounts of subsidies implicit in the overmanning at different levels of public bureaucracy” (ibidem: 62). He further argued that: “By managing to direct educational investment away from the masses, they have been able to protect their scarcity rent, and by acquiring license-giving powers at various levels of bureaucracy some of them have increased their capacity to multiply their rental income” (ibidem: 52). From such a perspective, the middle class claims of public representativeness were not purely a rhetorical claim of representing the national public but a discursive strategy that had material effects. Public resources were, in effect, diverted from less privileged socioeconomic groups to India’s middle classes (Bardhan, 2001).

In the twenty first century post-liberalization period, this relationship between the state and the middle classes has been restructured. In terms of size, public sector employment has oscillated between decline and stagnation. As Nagaraj has noted, “after more than two decades of economic reforms, in 2012-13, the public sector’s share in GDP stood at 23%



(2 percentage points less than in 1991), employing 17 million workers (two million less than in 1991)" (2015: 42). Meanwhile public sector employment has also become less secure as it has been shaped by processes of informalization (Nagaraj, 2017). Nevertheless, large sections of the middle classes have still sought public sector employment even as private sector employment became the status symbol of upper middle class privilege (Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase, 2009). What has changed in the post-liberalization period is the ways in which claims to represent the public have shaped middle class access to public resources.

In twenty first century India, the middle class-state relationship has been shaped by post-reform patterns of urbanization and the increasing significance of urban governance. New middle-class visions of urban development have often meant that infrastructural development and resources have increasingly begun to benefit the urban middle classes in the post-liberalization period. Such transfers of resources from the poor to the middle classes can encompass a wide ranging set of examples, from the use of space through evictions of street vendors or squatters to the transfer of groundwater from rural areas for urban consumption. The "rentier" nature of the middle class has thus become a more complex process that involves indirect modes of appropriation of public resources in the context of the changing relationship between the state and private capital in the post-liberalization period. The appropriation of resources through dominant models of urban development may, for example, occur indirectly through state support of private industry (through public-private partnerships). An understanding of the middle classes thus requires a deeper understanding of urbanization, urban governance and the allocation of public resources.

## 2. URBANIZATION IN POST-LIBERALIZATION INDIA

India's patterns of urbanization are shaped by contradictory characteristics. While India has been experiencing growing patterns of urbanization in the post-reforms period, the rate of urbanization has not outpaced comparative contexts. India's urbanization rate has for instance been far less than that of China. According to one estimate, "In 1950, India was a more urban nation than China (17 percent of the population lived in cities, compared with China's 13 percent). But from 1950 to 2005, China urbanized far more rapidly than India, to an urbanization rate of 41 percent, compared with 29 percent in India" (Dobbs and Sankhem, 2010: 1). India's portion of urbanized population is also less than many nations in Asia and Africa (Mohanty, 2016: 13). Nevertheless, the most recent census of India of 2011 indicates that this figure marks the first time that the absolute increase in population in urban areas has been greater than in rural areas since independence. Government estimates suggest that India's growing urban population now comprises 31% of the population. Analysts expect urban per capita GDP to continue to grow at steady rates (Dobbs and Sankhem, 2010; United Nations, 2022). What is more significant, however, is not simply the rate of urbanization, but the growing centrality of urban governance and urban-centered state policies in liberalizing India.

Urban governance represents a critical arena for an understanding of the redistribution of state power (Brenner, 2004). The conception of the public has increasingly been shaped by the emergence of the new model of city-based economic growth that has been characteristic of the post-liberalization period and that is now embodied in governmental programs

such as the Smart Cities Mission. The irrigation-driven strategy of the early decades of developmentalism that was linked to food security needs has now been replaced by a form of growth which is largely driven by new economy sectors such as the services sector and information technology that are concentrated in metropolitan cities and their surrounding urbanizing areas<sup>2</sup>. For example, according to the Ministry of Finance's *Economic Survey of India* the services sector contributed almost 66,1% of its gross added value growth in 2015-2016<sup>3</sup>. While recent trends show increasing processes of urbanization with the growth in the number of small towns and urbanized locales, this growth has tended to be shaped by patterns of spatial concentration.

Government of India census definitions of urban areas distinguish between statutory towns, census towns, and urban agglomerations and outgrowths<sup>4</sup>. A measurable portion of urbanization in the past decades has taken the form of an expansion of new census towns —areas that continue to be administered as rural areas even as they are presented as evidence of expanding urbanization—. In 2011, 2553 census towns (that were formally classified as villages in 2001) accounted for 26-29,5% of urban growth in the last decade (Pradhan, 2012:10). While the urban population is estimated at 31,1% of the population, there is considerable variation in this process of urbanization. Urban populations are still concentrated in a smaller number of towns. 70% of India's urban population is estimated to be concentrated within 468 towns (towns with a population over 100.000). This concentration is intensified when larger metropolitan cities are taken into account. 53 towns/urban areas have a population that is over a million and these major urban centers comprise 42,6% of the urban population (160.7 million people). While there has been a growth in small towns, metropolitan and larger cities are concentrated centers of urban life, wealth and economic growth.

These patterns of urbanized concentration shape governance in contemporary India in distinctive ways. They produce a kind of incipient centralization that has been taking root in post-liberalization India despite the rhetoric of decentralization and privatization that has been the distinctive feature of economic reforms. These modes of centralized urban governance stem from the increasing social, economic and political power of metropolitan city centers and the dominant social groups within them. These new hierarchical patterns of urbanization reconfigure ideas of the public interest and are in turn woven into the fabric of state power in the post-liberalization period. In the context of such spatialized patterns of urban growth, conceptions of "the public" have increasingly been shaped both by the growing political and economic power of cities and by the political assertiveness of the urban

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<sup>2</sup> View for an overview: <http://statisticstimes.com/economy/sectorwise-gdp-contribution-of-india.php>. Last access: 25/08/2017.

<sup>3</sup> View: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=136868>. Last access: 25/08/2017.

<sup>4</sup> The ambiguity inherent in the classifications of census towns and urban agglomerations and outgrowths point to the definitional complexities of "the urban". Urbanization is a process that is more fluid than dichotomous conceptions of "rural" and "urban" India or that more bounded conceptions of "the city" might suggest. In practice, "urban" and "rural" communities, ways of life and forms of occupation may often co-exist. This feature of urbanization is shaped by much longer historical trends that have often blurred the lines between rural and urban life. For instance, labor migrants in India's older manufacturing industries (such as jute and cotton textiles) have always historically retained strong ties to their villages of origin. Such migrants have often reproduced rural forms of associational and cultural life within civic and city spaces (in addition to influencing their villages of origin through remittances). This blurring of rural and urban life has also occurred through processes of middle class migration both within India as well as through significant patterns of return migration for e.g. in relation to migration to the Middle East.

middle classes in the post-liberalization period. The impact of such reconfigured middle class conceptions of public interests can be seen through the case study of governance over water resources.

### 3. URBAN GOVERNANCE AND THE CASE OF WATER

An analysis of the growing centrality of urban-centric modes of governance illuminates the ways in which conceptions of the public are being reconfigured in contemporary India. Governance of water in India has been shaped by principles of decentralization and privatization. National policy frameworks on water governance have adopted global models of reform that have advocated for these principles. Conventional debates on economic liberalization therefore often focus on the question of privatization. For instance, public debates over water sector reforms in India often splinter into political positions in opposition or in support of privatization that do not capture the complexities of state power. Consider some of the broad patterns of private and public control over water resources. Research on changes in the control over water has demonstrated that there are some cases in India that can serve as examples of straightforward forms of privatization. Examples of overt forms of privatization include the privatization of rivers in India such as the privatization of a river in Chhattisgarh through the lease of a stretch of river to a company (Cullet 2009, 48). Or to take another well-known example, the rapid expansion of soft drink and bottled water industry produced a high profile court battle to ban Coca Cola and Pepsi products in Kerala (Aiyer, 2007).

A closer analysis of patterns of privatization in India shows a more complex configuration of the relationship between the public and private control of water resources. Consider the case of public private partnerships (PPP), one of the key dimensions of the new global-national model for water governance in India. Trends do show an increase in the establishment of water sector PPP projects in India. By 2011, the World Bank estimated that there was a gradual growth of such projects with 5 million in urban areas receiving water from institutional arrangements involving private sector participation (2011: 6). While such patterns of privatization are discernable in the water sector in India, they are shaped by a complex reconfiguration of state power and conceptions of the "public good". The Indian state (at both the levels of central and state government) remains the main actor with control over water resources. This authority of the state over water resources has been backed by the Supreme Court where a 1997 decision reinforced the conception of water as a public trust, where the "state as a trustee is under a legal duty to protect the natural resources. These resources meant for public use cannot be converted into private ownership" (Cullet, 2009: 43). What has shifted in this context is not the role of the state but the state's orientation towards a post-liberalization conception of the public that foregrounds the needs of metropolitan cities.

In the late twentieth century, the planned economy of India's state rested on the intensive extraction of water resources in pursuit of India's developmental goals. Water needed to be harnessed in pursuit of the state's goals of achieving food security and accelerating industrialization. Large dams were not just the symbols of the Nehruvian modernist vision but the material infrastructure that embodied the state's approach to water, irrigation, and



agricultural development (Dubash, 2002; Frankel, 2015). As Navroz Dubash has noted, from 1950 to 1997, “nearly 4/5ths of public expenditure was for irrigation” (2002: 4). In the post-liberalization period, the state has increasingly shifted its focus away from irrigation to the drinking water needs of metropolitan cities and to industrial needs. This shift has been intensified by unregulated urbanization driven by residential and industrial development. In effect, there has been a shift from the twentieth century developmental model that foregrounded agriculture to the post-reforms focus on a city-based model of globalization.

The state under changing political regimes has sought to promote city based development through programs such as Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) and the Smart Cities Mission. The JNNURM was established by the Congress-led government. The mission spanning 2005-14, included water and sewerage infrastructure as a central dimension of its focus; nearly 60 percent of the spending by JNNURM was in the water and sewerage sector (Tiwari and Nair, 2011: 240). While the BJP-led government discontinued the JNNURM after it came to power in 2014, it replaced the initiative with a new five-year plan, under the framework of the Smart Cities Mission for the period 2015-20. The Smart Cities Mission also incorporates water and sanitation infrastructure as a primary component for funded projects. The Smart Cities Mission requires cities and small towns to compete for the funds in ways that deepen the power of larger metropolitan cities.

This shift towards a city-centric conception of development has had significant implications for the ways in which the Indian state conceptualizes the public interest and the corresponding right to access water resources. At one level, the idea of the public trust has been shaped by emerging hierarchical and spatialized conceptions of the public sphere in India. The public good is increasingly identified with specific, dominant representations of metropolitan middle class citizens. Processes of institutional reform transform the boundaries and meanings of the categories of “public” and “private” that reinforce state power and rework societal inequalities and exclusions in more complex ways that exceed a more static conception of privatization (Bear and Mathur, 2015). Such changing conceptions undergird the kinds of inequalities and exclusions that both constitute and are reconstituted by the remaking of state power in liberalizing India. Such changes have been reshaping conceptions of the public interest in ways that privilege the claims of wealthier groups in metropolitan cities over water resources. The longstanding historical relationship that has produced an underlying relationship between the state and the public trust of water is reshaped by this changing conception of the public good in the post-liberalization period.

#### 4. RECONFIGURING THE PUBLIC TRUST OF WATER: INDIA’S MIDDLE CLASSES AND URBAN GOVERNANCE

India’s post reforms city-centric model of development is exemplified through a thick set of public discourses and forms of civic associational activity in urban contexts. Urban upper middle class citizens have become the new normative citizen in this era as they have increasingly become national symbols of the new liberalizing India (Fernandes, 2006). The implementation of economic reforms in the 1990s were accompanied by a set of public discourses that centered on an expanding and changing middle class. This “new” middle class was depicted as the engine of social and economic change that symbolically marked a shift

from a state managed economy to an Indian nation that had embraced globalization. This image of the liberalizing middle class was produced by a wide range of actors and in a diverse set of socio-spatial sites. Politicians, government officials, businesses and market research firms were focused on projecting this idea of the middle class as a sign of the benefits of policies of economic reform. The state also used projections of a large expanding middle class consumer market as a rhetorical tool to attract foreign investment. Political parties across the ideological spectrum supported this reform agenda. The “new middle class” was thus in part a creation of the state. However, this was not simply an image imposed on the middle classes. Significant sections of the upper caste and upper tiers of the urban middle classes also proactively embraced this ideal. These elite tiers benefitted from high paying new economy jobs, for example, within information technology (Radhakrishnan, 2011) and from the ability to acquire newly available consumer goods that flooded the market as import restrictions were lifted. Both the state and the urban middle classes engaged in a shared focus on middle class consumption practices as the visible sign of this new middle-class identity. Economic reforms were associated with middle class prosperity and middle-class prosperity was in turn associated with national prosperity.

The discursive production of this new middle-class identity had both political and material effects. Privileged sections of the urban middle classes embraced this identity and this in turn shaped the substantive nature of middle-class civic behavior. Writing about civic life in New Delhi, Amita Baviskar (2020) has argued that civic associational life that has focused on environmental issues has increasingly taken the form of what she has termed “bourgeois environmentalism”. Ideas of cleaning up the city have become intertwined with urban elite conceptions of a city that is cleansed of the urban poor (Fernandes, 2006). Consider for instance, the material effects on the allocation of water resources in contemporary India. The right to water resources has been shaped by such exclusionary conceptions of the public<sup>5</sup>. In times of water scarcity, media-saturated public spheres in metropolitan cities place immense pressures on local governments to prioritize the needs of more privileged metropolitan residents. The public discursive sphere and civic associational activities have thus provided critical points of access and political pressure (Coelho and Raman, 2013; Dasgupta, 2015). These forms of political pressure are backed by the growing power of urban water utilities in the allocation of water resources.

The identification of “the public” with urban middle class interests has shaped the unequal distribution of water resources in systemic ways. Recent research has demonstrated a growing transfer of water resources from rural to urban areas or towards industrial development (Janakarajan *et al.*, 2007; Punjabi and Johnson, 2018). While irrigation remains the primary sector in terms of overall water consumption, the growing significance of urban-led growth is in the process of restructuring the distribution of water resources in significant ways. The shift from the developmental state’s promotion of the rapid expansion of agricultural productivity to address food security in the early decades of independence to an increasingly city-based state strategy of economic growth has intensified the competition for water resources between different sets of users ranging from industries to farmers to the

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<sup>5</sup> While this essay has focused on the case of water, such middle-class conceptions of the public can be seen in other cases. See for example Sunalini Kumar’s analysis of how the state attempt’s to clean up Delhi’s urban public transport system reproduced a middle class conception of public interests and citizenship in ways that harmed working class residents (2012).

drinking water demands of various social groups in urban and rural areas (Ballabh, 2008; Joy *et al.*, 2008).

The government provision of free water is often inadvertently directed towards the benefit of relatively privileged consumers who have access to piped water supplies and the ability to pay for water. This intensifies both inequities of access to water and skews the distribution of public resources toward wealthier urban groups. Consider for instance the Aam Aadmi Party's political promise to provide free water in Delhi in the 2014 elections that marked its first major electoral success. The provision of water in Delhi requires the long distance transportation of water from groundwater sources in other locations that could in effect serve to reinforce an extractive relationship in the name of equity. According to some past estimates, as much as 70-80% of water subsidies in India do not reach the poor (Foster, Pattanayak, and Prokopy 2003; McKenzie and Ray, 2009).

Similar patterns of extraction are evident in Chennai, one of India's largest metropolitan cities that is located in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. Chennai provides an important case study for an understanding of the governance of water in India. Historically, the city (formerly known as Madras) was the site in which the colonial government developed its bureaucratic approach to water governance (Ludden, 1979). In the postcolonial period, the state of Tamil Nadu exemplified national patterns of water governance that emphasized water intensive agricultural production that were the basis for India's modernization program known as the Green Revolution. Finally, in recent decades both the city and the state have mirrored national policies of economic liberalization by successfully seeking out foreign investment. Chennai is one of the main locations for major industries such as information technology and the automobile industry. The result is that Tamil Nadu has become one of the most urbanized states in the country and the city of Chennai encapsulates national patterns of urbanization and inequality in metropolitan cities in India.

The combination of water intensive agriculture and high patterns of urbanization and industrialization has placed significant strains on water resources. Chennai has experienced severe periods of water scarcity with droughts becoming more severe in the context of climate change. In June 2019, Chennai became a global symbol of drought as the city went dry and water had to be transported in via trains. While international news reports focused on climate change, Chennai's problems have been caused by unplanned and rapidly expanded processes of liberalization. Increasing land prices have led to the unregulated sale of agricultural lands for industrial and residential development. This in turn has led to building on water bodies. Chennai's IT corridor was built on wetlands and new residential development geared towards India's upper middle classes have damaged the city's floodplains. Growing industrial investment has further exacerbated the stresses on the city's water supply. New governmental construction has also been built in ways that have depleted or damaged water bodies (Fernandes, 2022).

The state government of Tamil Nadu has implemented global models of institutional reform in order to address the governance of water. The government implemented the Tamil Nadu Water Resources Consolidation Project through a \$282.9 million loan funded by the World Bank from 1995-2004<sup>6</sup>. The project was one of only three projects set up in states that

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<sup>6</sup> View: <http://projects.worldbank.org/P010476/tamil-nadu-water-resources-consolidation-project?lang=en&tab=overview>. Last access: 24/04/2017. The total project cost was \$491 million.

sought to implement the Bank's new integrated water resources management approach in the early stages of liberalization in India. These institutional reforms, in effect, became the complement to the state's broader policies of economic liberalization (Fernandes, 2022). The regulatory reforms, in effect, provided the mechanisms that supported India's new urban and middle class centered model of economic liberalization. Consider for example the ways in which such reforms shaped the state's management of water scarcity in the city and state.

In the context of competing demands on increasingly scarce water resources, the city's major water utility, Metrowater, has addressed these challenges by extracting groundwater from rural areas and peri-urban areas and transporting the water to Chennai (Butterworth *et al.*, 2007; Janakarajan, 2004). These processes of extraction are encoded within dual state legislation (Fernandes, 2022) on the regulation of groundwater resources. The regulation of Chennai's groundwater was separated out from the regulation of ground water from the state of Tamil Nadu. While groundwater extraction was well regulated in the city (leading to the restoration of many over-extracted sources), legislation invested the Tamil Nadu state government with the "power to develop, control, regulate and administer the groundwater in the State"<sup>7</sup>. This segregated legislation has facilitated the extractive relationship between the city of Chennai and neighboring towns and villages. Metrowater has continually expanded its own direct use of well fields in the metropolitan area as well as its reliance on groundwater supplies from peri-urban and rural areas. The legislation thus encoded the expanding power of Metrowater and the primacy of city drinking water needs. This legislation in effect enshrined the state-middle class relationship in liberalizing India as serving the drinking water needs of middle-class residents was prioritized over the livelihoods and drinking water needs of poorer communities in rural areas and small towns. These patterns of the state-led extraction of water to serve urban middle class residents and city needs have been further intensified by the middle-class reliance on private water markets. The public utility provides limited water supplies (most cities in India do not have 24 hour 7 days a week access to piped water supply). Middle class residents thus must purchase water from private tanker companies that also rely on groundwater extraction.

The case of water provides an important example of the ways in which urban middle class conceptions of the public in post-liberalization India have real material effects. The state reallocates water resources from rural areas and marginalized peri-urban communities in order to serve the public need for drinking water. However, this conception of the public is marked by hierarchy, exclusion and extraction. Similar patterns of class inequality have been noted in the cases of major metropolitan cities such as Mumbai (Gandy, 2008) and Bengaluru (Dasgupta, 2015). This dominance is intensified both by the socio-cultural power of larger cities and by the financial weakness of small urban areas (Mohanty, 2016).

The reconfiguration of the developmental state does not of course mean that rural and urban locations are uniform spaces. Patterns of urbanization are shaped by the dominance of a small number of metropolitan cities. Contestations within urban environments and between rural and urban contexts stand to deepen longstanding inequalities within urban and rural areas that structure access to water. McKenzie and Ray (2009) for example have demonstrated a national relationship between asset wealth and access to water.

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<sup>7</sup> Tamil Nadu Groundwater (Development and Management) Act, 2003, <https://www.casemine.com/act/in/5a9ccdf34a932653478130aa>, reproduced by casemine website. Last access: 07/12/2021.



Meanwhile a wealth of scholarship has shown how inequities of caste, gender and class have structured access to water and have deepened local and regional conflicts over water resources (Anand, 2017; Joy *et al.*, 2008). There are thus deep-seated historical inequalities that have complicated conceptions of public access to water. The conceptualization of water as a public good has never been self-evident and becomes more complicated as post-liberalization ideals of the public good are now increasingly shaped by visions of an urban middle class oriented model of development. For example, in Rajasthan in one case, Rajputs (a dominant caste in Rajasthan) in one village forced Dalits to pay while in other villages Dalits were excluded (Cullet, 2009: 167)<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, as I have noted, the middle classes are a differentiated social group and do not benefit equally from access to the privileges associated with the dominant conceptions of metropolitan cities.

Patterns of extraction and inequality have also produced spaces of resistance to middle class conceptions of the public right to drinking water. Take for example the case of Bengaluru (Bangalore), Karnataka, the city known as India's information technology capital. In Karnataka, drinking water resources from the Cauvery Basin are channeled to Bengaluru at the expense of smaller urban and rural localities (Saldhana and Rao, 2015: 301). As Saldhana and Rao have argued:

"farmers from Mandya and Mysore in Karnataka, who have vehemently objected to the release of Cauvery waters to downstream Tamil Nadu during droughts, have begun targeting the supply of water to Bangalore [Bengaluru] in protest. Farming communities from Chamalapura in the Kabini watershed (a tributary of Cauvery in its upper reaches) have also demonstrated similar diversion of water away from farming and drinking water requirements by successfully blocking the proposal to set up a massive 4,000 megawatt (MW) coal fired thermal plant". (2015: 297)

As with the case of Chennai, this extraction of water for the metropolitan city has been institutionally embodied in the growing centralized authority of Bengaluru's municipal water utility, the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewage Board (Dasgupta, 2015). The supply of drinking water from the Cauvery River to Bengaluru has been structured through this "highly extractive, centralized and financially indebted enterprise" (Goldman and Narayan, 2019: 102). As Saldhana and Rao note, in some cases water distress has led to violent acts of resistance against such processes of extraction. In one case of a peri-urban community south of Bangalore, communities have blown holes in Cauvery pipelines taking water to Bengaluru. According to Saldhana and Rao, these communities "argued that they had no other option as agencies had not delivered on the promise of assured drinking water supply for decades" (2015: 298). Such moments of resistance unsettle the dominant middle-class conceptions of the public welfare that have been entrenched in post-liberalization India.

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<sup>8</sup> Cullet also provides a useful analysis of the complex impact in terms of class inequality according where the poorest are indirectly affected by cost-recovery principles. As he notes: "They are unable to pay for them and do not benefit from them but are also not threatened and therefore have no reason to oppose them at the outset. In principle, their existing sources of drinking water will be maintained by the panchayat which now has the mandate to repair all existing water infrastructure. In practice, however, existing patterns of political and economic power at the local level may lead to emphasis being put preferentially on repairing the infrastructure that benefits mostly the rich rather than the hand pumps and wells used mostly by the poor in the future. The poor would then be directly and dramatically affected by the new framework for delivering drinking water." (2009: 157).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Indian middle classes have become a hyper visible object of public fascination and academic study in the post-liberalization period. Public discourses —ranging from media discourses in India to market research firms— have been preoccupied with the middle classes as an expanding consumer group. Social scientists writing about India’s middle classes have sought to examine the cultural practices, civic associational activities and identities of the middle classes as well as grappled with empiricist questions of the quantification of the middle class. This article has sought to shift the focus to the question of the relationship between the middle classes and the state. The power of the middle classes in India rests on discursive claims that the middle classes serve as the embodiment of the public interest. These claims have historical roots that can be traced back to the colonial and nationalist periods. However, they are reformulated in distinctive ways in the post-liberalization era of the twenty-first century. The claims of representativeness do not rest on the empirical size of the middle classes but on a historically produced normative claim that the middle classes serve as the ideal-typical citizens of the nation. It is the very theoretical and empirical ambiguity of the “middleness” of this social group that shapes this normative claim. In the post-liberalization period, both the state and the middle classes participate in the conception of a normative conception of an urban middle class-oriented “public”. For the state, such a conception provides a discursive rationale for its policies of economic reform. On the one hand, the middle classes serve as evidence of the benefits of economic reforms. On the other hand, this middle-class oriented conception of the public interest is central to new models of city centric economic growth promoted by the reforms. Meanwhile, the upper tiers of the urban middle classes have embraced this conception of the public as it has provided them with access to state power and material resources. The result is that the public discursive image of the Indian middle classes plays a central role in shaping conceptions of publicness that reproduce inequalities and the unequal distribution of resources in the post-liberalization era.

This article has used a case study of the governance of water to illustrate *how* the new post-liberalization ideal of a middle-class public has influenced state governance and shaped the allocation of water resources in ways that benefit the urban middle classes. In particular, the article used original archival research and fieldwork conducted in the metropolitan city of Chennai to demonstrate this pattern —one that is typical of metropolitan city-centered urban development in contemporary India—. In this pattern of resource distribution, the state reallocates water resources from rural areas and marginalized peri-urban communities in order to serve the public need for drinking water of urban dwellers in Chennai. This redistribution to urban residents is in turn structured by socio-economic inequality within Chennai. The case of water allocation in Chennai shows us how middle-class oriented conceptions of the public have material effects that structure the allocation of resources in unequal ways. An understanding of such processes is critical for an adequate understanding of how socio-economic inequality is produced in the post-liberalization period. In particular, the article has shown the significance of studying the complex and interactive relationship between the middle class and the state in order to understand deepening socio-economic inequality in the context of policies of economic liberalization in India.

The relationship between the state and the middle classes in shaping the distribution of resources in contemporary India raises broader questions for comparative research. The case

of contemporary India illustrates the need for more systematic research on state-middle class linkages in shaping economic policies and in structuring the distribution of public resources. Such a research agenda is central for a full understanding of the reproduction and deepening of inequality in the context of policies of economic liberalization. This includes research on segments of the middle classes that may not be benefitting from dominant conceptions of the public interest. The power of the middle classes is such that the aspirational dimension and the definitional ambiguity of these groups may produce consent from some segments of the middle classes to economic policies and modes of governance over public resources that may not in fact benefit them. The theoretical and empirical interrogation of such questions enriches our understanding of the state, inequality and the distribution of public resources.

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