

South Asia

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India's middle class comes of political age

By Kunal Kumar Kundu

NEW DELHI - Indian society is undergoing a fundamental change, the effect of which seems to have caught politicians unaware. A rising number of young people, combined with increasing literacy levels, rapid urbanization and the Internet revolution, has changed the lives and aspirations of all the people - but especially the middle class.

Long considered politically insignificant, India's middle class is now out on the streets, protesting against issues that affect them. Call it the *Rang De Basanti*-effect. A hitherto voiceless middle class, led by the educated youth, suddenly seemed to have found its voice and is relishing the discomfiture of an establishment that, thus far, has been too used to muzzling voices of reason.

Rang De Basanti, a film directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, focused on social change and was released in India on Republic Day - January 26 - 2006. It was a critical and commercial success and won numerous awards. The film dealt with corruption in the defense establishment. It portrays a tale where the innocent lives (of Indian Air Force pilots) are lost because of the devious ways of corrupt ministers and politicians, and then shows public anger forcing the judiciary to act.

The Jessica Lall murder case also attributed to the public activism inspired by this movie. On April 29, 1999, model Jessica Lall was fatally shot inside a New Delhi restaurant, which was packed with about 300 of the city's glitterati. The killer was Manu Sharma, son of an influential politician. The case dragged on for seven years during which many witnesses were influenced through money and power.

On February 21, 2006, (nearly a month after the release of *Rang De Basanti*), the Delhi High Court acquitted Manu Sharma and his friends due to "lack of evidence". This led to massive public protests (similar to those depicted in the film) and, following a reopening of the case, Sharma was finally convicted.

The urban middle class (led by young people) was out on the streets in full force last year when self-styled Gandhian activist Anna Hazare launched his agitation against corruption. Although the government managed to wriggle out of the situation, the clear discomfort etched on the faces of the powers that be made one thing very clear - the middle class could no longer be ignored. This has been reinforced by the impact of the protests and candle light vigils in protest following a brutal gang rape last December in New Delhi.

A crucial factor that has helped the amorphous middle-class evolve into a force with a united voice is the rapid spread of social media. The rise and rise of social media could have as much impact on worldly ways as the invention of the wheel. So politicians can ignore it only at their peril.

According to the Internet And Mobile Association of India (IAMAI), the number of Internet users in India as of June 2012 was 137 million, which translates into a penetration level of 11.4%, up from a level of less than 1% a decade back. By December 2012, the number of users is expected to have shot up to 150 million, a large segment of which use the Internet for social networking.

Of 34 million Internet users in urban India surveyed recently by IMAI, 87% use the Internet for email, while 67% of users access it for social networking. According to Internet World Stats, India has 62.7 million Facebook subscribers as of December 2012, which translates into a penetration level of 5.2% of the population.

In "Arab Spring" countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen, protests and action plans were organized through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, while YouTube was used extensively to let the world know of the protests and their intensity.

Not that the Anna Hazare movement or the massive protest against the Delhi rape suggest an "Indian Spring".

The Arab Spring was a manifestation of pent-up anger against dictatorial political systems, while India is a vibrant democracy, however deeply entrenched fault lines of corruption are in public life, and however lackadaisical and corrupt law enforcement agencies and the judiciary are.

A bigger question is - how has a politically insignificant segment of the population suddenly transformed itself into a potent force of change? For starters, there's strength in numbers.

According to a report by National Council for Applied Economic Research's Centre for Macro Consumer Research, India will be a country of 53.3 million middle-class households by 2015-16, which implies that approximately 267 million people will fall into this category.

By 2025-26, the number of middle-class households in India is likely to more than double to 113.8 million, or 547 million individuals. In terms of percentage, the Indian middle class constitutes about 15% of the population today, up from 5.7% in 2001-02, and by 2025-26, they will account for 37.2% of the population.

What helps is that the country is young and will continue to remain so for some time to come. As per the 2011 census, more than 50% of India's population is below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35. It is expected that, in 2020, the average age of an Indian will be 29 years, compared to 37 for China and the US, 45 for Western Europe and 48 for Japan.

The coming of age (in terms of political consciousness) of India's middle class could be a game changer. While India's poor continue to be voiceless and exploited, the rich and the powerful use politics to their advantage. It is India's middle class that is the custodian of India's conscience.

While India's middle class has so far been selective in their protests, the issues that lead them take up the cudgel show their clear preference for increasing accountability from politicians, bureaucrats and keepers of law.

When economists talk about a desperate need to usher in second-generation reforms in India, they imply the need to move out of the quagmire created by rampant corruption and lawlessness - issues the middle class is now forcefully voicing their concern about.

This awakening could just be the beginning of a process that ensures India - the nation and the economy - breaks out of its shackles with all citizens granted the right to lead a life of respect and dignity.

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