

Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India. By Sanjay Joshi. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiv + 209 pp. Bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$29.95. ISBN 0-195-64562-6.

Reviewed by Tirthankar Roy

Fractured Modernity examines how men with little more than a formal education and literary abilities, namely, the middle class, were able to shape modes of conduct and modern politics in colonial India (1857–1947). The author, Sanjay Joshi, uses the north Indian city of Lucknow as a case study. Describing middle-class participation in the public sphere, Joshi advances three theses on the social history of colonial north India. First, being middle class was a cultural project. Second, middle-class discourse on modernity had greater autonomy and political agency than has been allowed in standard perspectives such as postcolonial historiography. And third, the discourse was full of contradictions.

Lucknow was the erstwhile capital of the Awadh state, the last of the independent states to be added to British India (in 1856). In the old order, members of a “service gentry” of court officials and literary figures drawn from Hindu upper castes and ashraf (well-born) Muslims held positions of respectability. The middle class in colonial Lucknow originated primarily in this group. But two things made it different from the older elite: western-style education and new forms of communication, such as newspapers. The former introduced ideas such as utilitarianism and bred solidarity among the products of this educational system. The latter, mainly public newspapers, which were accessible and largely uncensored, supplied the means of expression that shaped a public sphere. Through the use of such media, a group of literate men came to define a moral, cultural, and political code, and in turn, projected themselves as the new middle class.

Their rhetoric drew upon tradition and laid claim to modernity, albeit a “fractured” one that contained contradictory ideas of equality and hierarchy. Aspirations to respectability and the desire to emulate the nobility and gentry were central to their rhetoric. While placing limits on the ability of the lower classes to become respectable,

the middle-class, through its politics, often opened up possibilities of wider social involvement. New ideas of womanhood and respectability contributed to the decline of the courtesans of Lucknow, who had represented high culture in the old order but now symbolized the indolence of the nobility. Women's emancipation from the excesses of patriarchy was advocated, but so was subordination to patriarchal norms. Attempts to recover a monolithic Hinduism from multiple beliefs and practices held the potential to build bridges across castes and to become a tool of empowerment vis-à-vis the colonial state, but such attempts also showed the middle class to think differently from other social groups.

Joshi's main argument is that the public sphere is the key to understanding the middle class. An educated elite had existed in India before colonialism. The new phenomenon in colonial India was the appearance of an educated elite representing itself as the middle class and using its literary abilities to construct a public sphere and carve out its own political role. Use of the rhetoric of difference to empower itself demarcates a middle class. Joshi criticizes the "postcolonial" thesis in the writings of some of the Subaltern Studies historians, which holds that the rhetoric of difference represented a withdrawal of the middle class from a public sphere dominated by the colonists and expatriates. Far from constituting a retreat into the private domain, middle-class discourse was both political and self-directed, serving to draw the private out into the public arena.

His critique is well taken. But Joshi's main thesis—that being middle class was primarily a cultural project—appears overdrawn. The middle-class modernity that led to rethinking and debates on equality, women's emancipation, and religious and social reforms is portrayed here rather too fashionably as role-playing. In reality, literacy among women was almost certainly rising, illustrating a greater societal willingness to practice fairness. Thus, it is not just the talk about modernity, but modernity's real achievements that distinguish the new middle class from both the older educated elite and the propertied and laboring classes. In short, Joshi does not succeed in justifying his decision to neglect the actual changes taking place in middle-class lives in order to focus on rhetoric, representation, and the newspaper writings of a few articulate men. His emphasis on expression as the defining trait of the middle class has other problems too. All classes wrote political essays in British India. How do we decide where the middle

class began or ended and which voices within the middle class were representative and authentic amidst all this clamor?

That said, Joshi's analytical contribution—the critique of the “derivative discourse” thesis—remains persuasive and important. *Fractured Modernity* accomplishes even more. It is a substantial monograph on a largely unexplored dimension in the social history of colonial north India.

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