

The Demographic Basis of the ‘Middle Class’ in Maharashtra, 1900-1950

Neeraj Hatekar, Abodh Kumar, Rajani Mathur

The middle class is often seen as the backbone of the market economy as well as democracy. However, the concrete processes through which the middle class takes on shape are still rather ambiguous. This paper argues that a key to the emergence of the middle class lies in the historical process by which some groups underwent a demographic transformation: delayed age at marriage, lower fertility and higher degrees of human capital formation as compared to other social groups. This paper examines in particular how a quintessential middle class community, the chitpavan Brahmins of Maharashtra, underwent a transformation in the age at marriage for women, between 1900 and 1950 in Maharashtra, and links it to larger ideological concerns over and above the usual material forces that shape demographic behaviour. The paper points to the importance of ideology and culture in understanding long term processes of demographic change that are often neglected by formal and ahistorical accounts in neoclassical models of demographic behaviour.

Introduction

Middle classes are to be central to the process of economic transformation in a variety of ways. In one view, the middle class gives rise to entrepreneurs who have capacity for delayed gratification and who give rise to productivity improvements for the rest of society (Acemoglu and Zilibotti 1997). In another view, it is the “middle class values” of accumulation and thrift and their emphasis on human capital accumulation that are central to economic growth (Doepke and Zilibotti 2005, Doepke and Zilibotti 2007). The third is the favourite view of the business press: the middle class as a large consumer market.

Since the process of economic reforms, the rise of an ambitious middle class in India has been commented upon from many quarters (Das 2000, Goyal 2003, and Rhode 2003). However, when and how did this class come into being in India? Was there always a middle class? If not, when did such a class emerge as

Neeraj Hatekar, Professor, Centre for Computational Social Sciences, University of Mumbai, Vidyanagari, Kalina, Santa Cruz (East), Mumbai 400 098, India. email: neeraj.hatekar@gmail.com
Abodh Kumar, Faculty, Symbiosis Centre for Management and Human Resource Development, Pune, India.
Rajani Mathur, Faculty, Department of Economics, SIES College of Arts and Science, Sion, Mumbai, India.