

II • ENCODING CLASS

The Indian middle class, sometimes referred to by the acronym *NMC*—or new middle class—has been analyzed as crucial to social, economic, and political life in contemporary India. Already important for its demographic dominance in government positions and presenting a normative model for good citizenship, the Indian middle class is newly important for its leadership in privatizing the Indian economy. In other words, what is “new” about middle-class Indians today is their orientation toward the market and their preference for defining themselves through commodity cultures and privatized pleasures rather than through government service. Theorists have rightly pointed out the new hegemony of this class, for the way it transmits to other classes a model for being globally Indian.

But what is missing in these discussions is a sense of the social significance of being a middle-class Indian. In other words, the category *NMC* is taken too literally, as if classes are best described as discrete units that make up a social whole, complete in themselves and without contradiction (except between classes). Even when it is clear that, according to income, buying power, and commodity ownership, the middle class in India is stratified, this translates in existing literature into making further distinctions among “upper” and “lower” layers of the middle class itself. Though this approach can bring into relief aspiration to membership in the middle class, it tells us very little of how it feels, what it means, and how one becomes a middle-class Indian.

Part I of *Encoding Race, Encoding Class* tracks the multiple ways Indian IT workers are racialized in global corporate software economies—as needed but unwanted migrants, as laboring bodies suited to particular kinds of work, and as sources of creative content for the creation of new value. Programmers both make use of and answer back to these forms of racialization by trying to climb the corporate ladder and by refusing the particular worker subjectivity that a cognitive office demands. Part II investigates how these workplace routines are sewn into practices of creating class affiliations. The opposition of Indian IT workers to work regimes in the office is elaborated in ways of inhabiting the Indian middle class.

By shifting the description from the category of the new Indian middle class to the question of being a middle-class Indian, I also argue that class is better thought of as a process than as a category. As such, establishing membership in this class is unfolding and continuous, while being a middle-class Indian may require negotiating between competing and conflicting ideas of middle-classness itself.

In the next three chapters, I explore how the programmers who are the protagonists of this story negotiate their loyalties to work, consumer patriotism, and family—all possible frameworks through which the new Indian middle class may be defined. Short-term programmers move toward what I have been calling *eros*, or a vision of the good life that is not wholly captured by any of these frames but at the same time does not directly contravene them. I hope to show thereby that while diasporic subjects are often thought of as living “in between” home and abroad, in this case it might be more accurate to say they are innovating new understandings of home and abroad, leisure and work, consumption and saving. In this way, their habitations of the Indian middle class are informed by and are in response to a much more general reorganization of life and work we tend to call “neoliberal.”