



The New Pakistani Middle Class by Ammara Maqsood

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Pakistan's rising middle class makes up a critical section of the country's population, demonstrating pronounced variations in the economic, social and political spheres. '*The New Pakistani Middle Class*' is Ammara Maqsood's ethnographic debut during her doctoral dissertation in Anthropology, at the University of Oxford opening numerous aspects of the country's middle class, its evolution since Pakistan was founded and its experience with the notion of a '*modern – progressive nation*'. Her book specifically focuses on how this rising urban middle class in Pakistan has immersed with Islam and the appearance as a progressive nation. Her work examines how the new middle class has/is developing Islamic identities by attending Quranic schools in contrast to the old middle class in Lahore.

The book starts off with laying the foundation for the upcoming chapters - a discussion of the construction of modernity amongst the old established middle class in the post-independence era. The second chapter goes on to discuss the contrast in the old and new middle-class, as the new middle class becomes engrossed in self-piety and the interaction with Islam in everyday life. Thus, the third chapter discusses the materialisation of Quran schools and religious courses to give a more knowledgeable and customised narrative of Islam. The last chapter, as mentioned before, discusses Islamic consumerism culture and how it's juxtaposed with the desire by a Global Muslim citizen. The conversation highlights the concerns that the Muslim world is facing in defining themselves on a global scale.

Maqsood spent months interviewing women who belonged to the "*new middle class*" through their "*piety practices*". She not just examines what it means to be Islamically religious but also the meaning of being modern - that is argued to be a very different "*modern*" to what it used to be for the established middle class in the 1950's/60's. One of the main focus of the book lies in the "*struggles and aspirations*" of the new middle class portrayed through new forms of piousness, therefore interlinking how piety is what defines this new class.

Pakistan's presence in the international eye is dominated by perceptions and views of religious extremism and violence. To understand these narratives it is pivotal to recognise how local class politics shapes the international narrative. Therefore, Maqsood focuses on life in contemporary Lahore, where she unravels these narratives regarding religious extremism to portray how central they are for understanding competition and the quest for identity amongst the Pakistani middle class.

Maqsood's analysis underlines the significance of the colonial state and consequently employment with the state and involvement in the public/social sphere in colonial and postcolonial notions of respectability and status. She further highlights the different trajectories of urban life post-independence that increased the access to the state, expansion of the private sector to the middle class, the consequences of Ayub Khan's industrial and modernization policies. The author gives a critical analysis of her personal nostalgia of Pakistan in the 1950's and 60's amongst the traditional middle class. These narratives of the past entail the removal from memory of pervasive inequality and state repression, the equation of a particular class-based experience with urban experience and the 'slippage' between nostalgia for a particular type of urban life with a moral vision in the context of religious violence in contemporary Pakistan (Tassadiq, 2017).

In reference to Maqsood's work, traditionally, the middle class in Lahore has managed to assert its socioeconomic position in the hierarchy by making their way up to a certain income threshold and dominating the political, social and economic scene. For this traditional middle class, their identity of being a Muslim was reliant on being 'modern' with heavy western influence. On the other hand, the new middle class challenges the established status of the old middle class by mobilizing certain beliefs of modernity, development, and morality. This encompasses education, socio-economic and material advancement. Such as, consumption, homeownership, and connections with the global Muslim community (ummah). Prominently, it comprises of moral self-representation based on adherence to *asl* (real) Islam separated from sectional division, extremism/violence and decreed well-suited with modern life (Tassadiq, 2017).

The religious moral self is thus personal as it is used to differentiate oneself from the traditional middle class that is believed to have forsaken Islam in its desire for westernization as well as the poorer working class that is seen as blindly following rituals such as those practiced at

shrines. The author further discusses, how the traditional middle class dismisses the visible piety practices of the new middle class as being a product of Zia's islamisation program and rising Wahhabi-ism to be the reasons of religious extremism in the country. The new middle class however, constantly distances itself from extremism and violence by following *asl Islam* and direct engagement with the Quran.

Focusing on different religious gatherings specifically regarding females and also in terms of consumption activities such as home décor, Islamic banking, choices of burka, religious music, etc. Maqsood unravels present trends in religiousness that challenge fundamental notions of 'modernity'. Though set in Lahore, Maqsood's findings take us to West Asia, Iran and India talking about growth and Islamic consumerism capitalist behaviour, especially during the holy month of Ramadan as well as religious study circles (*dars groups*). The book appeals to its readers who try to understand how the Muslim middle class in different parts of the world is struggling to form a strong self-identity in today's modernising world.

Through the course of the book, principles of modernity are restructured by the author as the reader steers through these shifting perceptions. The old middle class longs for a time pre 'Islamisation' in General Zia-ul-Haq's time, whereas the new middle class proclaims its modern status through its associations with the global Muslim population (Muslim ummah). The traditional/old middle class may see the new middle class as 'regressive', associating it to the flareups in religious violence. However, the new middle class tries its best to defy these opinions by accentuating the significance of Islam in its everyday lives as well as modern-day science. Even though the ongoing contrast between the traditional vs. the new middle class might get confusing, Maqsood gives a clear account of the factors that have shaped the new middle class – higher levels of urban population, rise in religiosity, and materialisation of a global economy remodelling the 'status quo'.

The book further discusses the issues that the new middle class is facing after the events of 9/11 where it struggled to find the right balance between its own religion and modernity, and the need to understand their religion deeper to challenge stereotypes. Not just on an international scale, but also the issues the new middle class has started to face locally due to increasing population rate, lack of employment opportunities, ill-planned urban development, inflation, political turmoil has added to its struggle to survive significantly. Further, Maqsood discloses several emerging trends common across South Asia, such as the contrast in the shift

in respective piousness amongst Pakistan's middle class to reformism in Kerala, India; where the Muslim part of the middle class affiliate religious reformism with a modern stance through promoting education.

Overall, the author presents a revitalising viewpoint, with a well-researched analysis on a segment of class which lacks proper research as well as its perception within the local and international sphere. The varying identities that are discussed regarding the middle class help the reader comprehend how to define the course of economics and politics in Pakistan as it overlaps with intensifying pious tendencies within Muslim society.

Critique: It is interesting to take into account the middle class in Pakistan, that has been defined by numerous newspapers in terms of income and consumption patterns (number of motorcycles/washing machines owned) whereas some estimates consider the middle class to be around 38% of the population (Zaidi, 2018). There are general estimates circling around what the middle class or other classes might mean, however, classifying them and estimating them remain an exceedingly puzzling task. Maqsood identifies the colonial middle class to have been “*educated in colonial schools, and children of more affluent families sent to universities in Britain, including Oxbridge and the London Inns of Court*” (Maqsood, 2017) However, this was a minute percentage of the population. Zaidi (2018) critiques Maqsood's work due to the lack of research and reading on modern and colonial era South Asian texts that would give a much thorough understanding of the middle class under colonialism. Zaidi takes us back to colonialism times when the author is predominantly discussing the 50's/60's even though, yes, a research gap is present.

References

- Maqsood, A (2017). *The New Pakistani Middle Class*. Harvard University Press.
- Tassadiq, F (2018). *Review of The New Pakistani Middle class*. Journal of South Asian Studies.
- Zaidi, A (2018). *Class, State and Islam in Pakistan*. Economic and Political Weekly.