

Making it: Reality Television and Middle Class Aspirations in India
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The very recent film *Slumdog Millionaire* is emblematic of many important issues in present-day India: social class, changes in the expectations and culture of the youth, and game shows. Its popularity has made all academics who study contemporary India happy, as it gave many people a connection to the culture. There is a scene toward the end, just before the final event, in which an old woman says to Jamal, “go win for all of us” – “us” being the poor and marginalized in society. Jamal thinks about the final question that the slimy host has asked him, and the tension is palpable. It is literally as if he has won for all the underdogs, the slum-dogs, the disregarded, the disaffected.

Audiences swept the film to victory in award show after award show. Everyone was excited. The film won because it is in keeping with the *Zeitgeist*, or at least the spirit of the times before the recession. Someone who wasn’t supposed to win, won. Quiz shows, even silly ones, are really set up for middle-class educated people. “What are the names of the three Musketeers” is a middle-class question.

What explains the appeal of such game shows with the almost non-existent chances of winning, and what keeps the audiences tuned in week after week? These are general questions which can be asked about all sorts of shows. *Survivor* has its own passionate viewers. The Indian viewer has a certain sort of attachment to these shows which tells us about the new expectations of the Indian youths.

One keen observer has noted that in each country, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire* plays out differently. For example, in post-Soviet Russia, chaotic and anarchical, they had to take away the option to “ask the audience the question” because the audience deliberately used to give the wrong answer: the audience did not want the contestant to win.

India has been fodder for academic (and non-academic) articles on inequality, the women’s movement, and workers’ rights; the hype about India’s possibilities is hard to support, but these game shows with their sense of possibility are especially attractive.

These are talent shows, not quiz shows: competitions, such as the *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa Challenge*, which is a singing show. The second is *Indian Idol*. (There is also *Iranian Idol*, *Afghanistan Idol*, *French Idol*, and more.) This show highlights not just singing, but also performance. These shows are hokey and contrived but capture something about aspirations.

- 1.) These talent shows are seen as a newly legitimate means to upward mobility.
- 2.) The Indian audience votes not only for the most talented but for the underdog.
- 3.) Marginalized populations throughout India have seized on these shows to prove their worth and to integrate themselves.

In the twentieth century, the Indian middle class didn’t really have an inheritance to look forward to (other than perhaps their mothers’ jewels) but what they did have was the best

education that money could afford. Middle-class Indians knew they had to do well in school: this was the only means of upward mobility. Indian institutes of technology (IITs) produced Silicon Valley executives: if you passed the exam to get in, your future was secured. Even in the 1970s there were 100,000 people who competed and only 1,000 who made it.

Kaplan Tutorials have an equivalent in Indian tutorials such as Rubric's Rostrum. If you were a girl, upward mobility could also come with marriage, but education was necessary as well.

But what did it mean to "make it"? It meant something different then than now. Then it meant a secure public-sector government job. One received a pension, stability and safety: security but not spendable income. These forms of security applied to government and bureaucracy of course, but also to teaching and to some of the private sector. R. K. Leshman developed a cartoon character for Indian newspapers called "the Common Man" who sports distinctive hair and glasses and looks vaguely puzzled (below). Leshman once said that his Common Man sits and experiences rises in the costs of living, scams, water shortages, power failures, etc. as a confused bystander, not an active player. For example, there is a famous comic with The Common Man watching India's Minister of Electricity giving a speech about electric progress ... by lantern-light (below).



Another cartoon featuring an apartment so small that the family dog must wag his tail only vertically illustrates nicely the image of the typical urban middle-class Indian home.

After 1991, the new middle class was different. This middle class's power derived not from the state but from the private sector, which became the main generator of jobs. The worker in this sector had less security than his parents did, but more spendable income. The range of jobs also dramatically increased. There were fewer government jobs, more spendable income, an increasing gap between the rich and poor; however, overall incomes were growing alongside inequality.

But the new middle class is focusing not on the gaps in equality but on the fact that the economy is growing and on their aspirations. These are very successful Indian business owners and corporate managers. Many are international players: for example, the Indian company Tata now owns Jaguar and Land Rover. The CEO of Pepsi is Indian, who has succeeded globally. Salman Rushdie "made it." Vikram Chandra, and at Oscar time, their favorite music producer Arrahman got two Oscars. But at the same time there is not enough drinking water or electricity in India, and among women, half cannot read or

write; plus, farmers are committing suicide. The media depiction of the middle class is interested in producing pictures of prosperity, Burger King, fashion shows, golf, big shops full of shiny televisions for sale, etc. But the real middle classes are more accurately pictured like this: traffic jams and a family of four riding a Honda Hero moped. At this moment global culture beams into every home, with its stories of success. But large segments of the world population, certainly including much of the Indian population, do not acquire this.

India is incredibly diverse, culturally, religiously, and otherwise. Christianity came to India in the 1st century AD, and the first non-Middle East Jewish and Zoroastrian populations. The diversity of India is so vast that schools take it upon themselves to promote “Unity in Diversity.” India has 14 official languages plus English; Hindi is spoken as a native language by only 30% of the population. India boasts 28 states and hundreds of languages. It’s not hard to feel marginalized in India unless you come from the heartland of north India, whether you are Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Jain. The northeast of the country is considered extremely marginal, as is Kashmir at the top. Secessionist movements often think of themselves as not physically part of India.

What binds this vast and diverse nation together?

- 1.) Democracy, specifically elections. The poor vote disproportionately high, unlike in the United States, and they dress in their best outfits to vote.
- 2.) The game of cricket is the second unifying thing. It is an extremely serious practice in India. Indian captains’ effigies were burnt when they lost.
- 3.) Bollywood. No one has a higher face recognition than Hindi stars. Almost all Hindi movies are musicals. Actors dance and lip-sync songs. The songs often sell the film. When people in *Indian Idol* compete, they are not competing to be the next greatest pop star but to be an actor in Bollywood.

Everyone knows Indian pop songs. The music unites generations. The only reason people from Kashmir or the Northeast know Hindi at all is because of these songs. These films are also a unifier of class, across vast inequalities of wealth. *Indian idol* is derived from *American Idol* which is derived from *British Idol*. You compete and people either text message in or call in; those with the least votes drop out and the rest move on. These calls and text messages cost money. Voting for winners in television talent programs is new in India; TV itself arrived only in the early 70s.

The majority of these participants come from small towns -- not Calcutta, Bombay, Delhi, or Madras. Some contestants come from those cities, but most from little towns; insignificant towns with populations of less than a quarter million. These people believe you no longer have to be good at school to “make it.” You only need to be good at singing. But the chances of “making it” this way are smaller than the chances of “making it” into a top level technical school .

It’s a newly recognized path to success. The old Middle Class consisted only of bystanders. The new Middle Class is more composed of players. Parents are much more hands-on in India than they are here. When the shows are being taped, the parents are in

the audience. Some move to the town where the show is. Often parents are given a chance to talk. Since India doesn't really have a welfare state, the child's future is also the parents' future as the parents don't have social security to rely on: the parents are just as desperate that their children "make it."

Parents are asked to talk about the children on TV and do so. Contestants and parents tell stories of overcoming adversity. One child speaks of her autism, another of her husband's death. Judges dole out paternalistic advice: Get married. Make up with your parents. The audience gets a sense of the personalities. The most underdog personality is the one the audience votes for. Those who have suffered the most should be rewarded the most. People who sing well but are too rich cannot win. All the rich get booted off first, all the women second. The ideal winner is a young man from the lower middle classes. Last season on one of the shows, a woman who worked as a telephone operator making 13 dollars a month whose mother was a very impoverished domestic worker, was finally eliminated. The audience wept, the judges got to their feet.

This season's winner was a young woman whose husband had suffered very considerable brain damage. He was in the audience daily, holding their infant. Her competitor was also a very good singer, who was hip and young, lived in Bombay and spoke English almost better than Hindi. But the audience voted for the poorer one: in voting for her, the audience voted for her life story. Until this season, no woman had won Indian Idol. You have to perform, not just sing, on Indian Idol: if you are a woman, you have to be a bit sexy, so the women kept getting eliminated. In the last two seasons, the judges lectured the audiences about their sexism. This season, when asking for votes, a married contestant made a plea: vote for me, to show that women do not have to give up everything when they get married.



A generation ago, no respectable middle class parent would let their daughter dance or wear revealing clothing on stage. Now the parents will their daughters to succeed, and now finally believe their daughters can make it on their own. They still want their daughters to marry, though. When these girls go home, they are feted as celebrities. They are not seen as slutty girls wearing tight clothes on stage. Saurabhee (left) is an example. She comes from the Northeast, arguably the most marginalized part of India, consisting of parts of North Bengal and several other areas. This region was integrated into India quite late and has many indigenous and tribal groups there. Its inhabitants also look more East Asian and can be mistaken for Chinese. There is little industry there, and lots of little secessionist movements. Hindi movies are one of the key links to the rest of the country.

Last season, Prashant, a police constable of Nepali descent, pleasant enough looking and a good singer, was not really one of the best singers; yet there ensued an amazing campaign urging people to vote for him. Sending an SMS costs money. On the Nepal side of the border, money was being raised to send SMS cards across the border into India so the Nepali folks in India could call in and vote. The Nepalis in India do the menial jobs: they are cooks, watchmen, and carry weights.

When he won, songs were written about his victory. Today he is the mascot of the Gokalan separatist movement. His musical success brought a political awakening to the Nepali folks in India. The Northeast has collectively decided that this is the way India will give them their due. They powerfully remind people of their importance and existence. These give a glimpse to the aspirations of the new middle class.

