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## **Navigating Identity: A Study of the Middle Class in Meghalaya** **Laiarihunlang L. Nonglait**

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### **Abstract**

*Middle class identity is an emerging issue in the context of Meghalaya. The emergence of the middle class in Meghalaya can be traced to the colonial period. In the post- colonial period, the middle class is further transformed as a result of modern form of education, government developmental programmes, impact of modernity, and the assimilation with the mainland people, greatly influenced the transition among the tribes. This paper seeks to draw attention towards the issue concerning the identification of the middle-class identity based on both the objective and subjective measures in Meghalaya. An empirical inquiry into the middle-class identity in the urban areas of East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya is based upon primary data.*

**Keywords:** Middle Class Identity, Meghalaya, Urban Tribes, Modernity and Social Change, East Khasi Hills District

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In Robert Solow's cover of Estache and Leipziger (2009), he writes, "there is no shortage of talk about the middle class". However, the concept of middle class has been bedeviled by issues of definition. There is a wide- ranging debate among analysts and scholars on various conceptualizations of the middle class. The research on the middle class globally is divided on its social and political impact. One strand of the literature argues that middle class can be a dynamic force for change (Lash & Urry, 1987) while others see the middle class as a powerful votary of the status quo and of traditional social and economic structures (Erickson and Goldthorpe, 1992). Class identity has long served as a key analytical concept for sociologists. Karl Marx and Max Weber, the founders of the discipline expound that individuals' interests, tastes, attitude, and dispositions are linked to their socioeconomic class position. On class identity, Weberian tradition espoused economic class position creates certain life chances, which interact with social status groups, and political parties to shape particular identities (Giddens, 1973; Parkin, 1971; Weber, 1978). This in turn has important consequences for the shape of politics, culture, and social relations. Studies on the middle class are often viewed through the lens of consumption which reduces it to a flat income category; however, this paper aims to go beyond the normative category of the middle class which is often derived from income, occupation and consumption patterns and seeks to explicate the matter of middle-class identity through the subjective categories of self- identification, aspirations and optimism of the individuals.

Korostelina (2007) defines identity as “a feeling of belonging to a social group, as a strong connection with social category, and an important part of our mind that affects our social perceptions and behaviours”. Identity is a mode of being and at the same time a becoming. There is continuity between being and becoming. In *Theorizing Modernity*, Wagner simply defines identity as “continuity of self”. He adds “in the social sciences the term ‘identity’ is used predominantly in two forms. As shorthand for ‘self-identity’ it refers to a human being’s consciousness of the continuity of her existence over time and of a certain coherence of her person .... The term ‘social’ or ‘collective identity’ expand the idea and refer to a sense of selfhood of a collectivity or.... the sense of a human being to belong to a collectivity of like people” (Wagner, 2001). In identity theory, the self is reflexive and it can take itself as an object and can categorise, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications. This process is called self-categorisation in social identity theory (Turner et al, 1987); in identity theory it is called identification (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Through the process of self-categorisation or identification, an identity is formed. In social identity theory, a social identity is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg and Abrams, 1988). A social group is a set of individuals who hold a common social identification or view themselves as members of the same social category. Through a social comparison process, persons who are similar to the self are categorized with the self and are labeled the in-group; persons who differ from the self are categorized as the out-group (Turner et al., 1987).

Class may be fundamentally about economic inequality, but as historians know economic inequality does not automatically take class forms. Class can be expressed politically and culturally as well as in economic terms. Most important here, the defence of class against identity is invariably focused on the working class or ‘underclasses. But it is very possible that ‘class’ is manifested differently in other social formations such as the middle class, which lacks a coherent economic foundation or interest. In the case of the middle class, the notion of identity is in fact helpful. Methodologically, it points to a space between the polarities of ‘language’ on the one hand and ‘structure’ on the other, which have dogged much of the historical debate about class. The middle class is seen conceptually as a mobile construct rather than a fixed category; a construct whose meanings have changed over time (Gunn, 2004).

Scholars agree that there are four commonly defined criteria for the middle class: having a high and stable income, engaging in professional or managerial occupations, having a high level of education, and being able to maintain a comfortable standard of living and consumption. The Indian academia started the discussion on the middle class in the early 1960’s with the publication of B.B. Mishra’s detailed book on *The Indian Middle Class* in 1961. The ‘middle class’ has been portrayed as a powerful social and political actor in India, particularly since the formal advent of economic liberalization in 1991. Desai notes, the Indian middle class ‘seems to have caught the public’s imagination’. The growth of a middle class is expected to play a transformative role in modernizing the Indian economy, create new pressure points on the government to tackle the vestiges of the License Raj, and enable a more propitious environment for private entrepreneurship and job creation (Fernandes, 2006). The definition of middle class in India has been largely based on income based measures (Beinhocker et al., 2007; Singh, 2005; Sridharan, 2004; Desai, 2008);

however some scholars believe income- based measures are too restrictive because they do not fully capture non- monetary dimensions of well-being such as number of income tax payers in India, share of Indians who have a college degree (Kapur, 2010), nature of employment and behavioural measures that take into account the role of social, cultural and economic forces in the construction of class identity (Fernandes, 2006).

B. B. Mishra (1961) alluded that the Indian middle classes differed from their counterpart in the West is their context of their origin. 'In the West', the middle classes emerged basically as a result of economic and technological change; they were for the most part engaged in trade and industry. In India, on the contrary, they emerged more in consequence of changes in the system of law and public administration than in economic development, and they mainly belonged to the learned profession. As the British Empire expanded in India, there was a need for a large number of educated individuals who were required to staff the various administrative institutions of the government. In order to fill this lacuna, the British opened schools and colleges in different parts of India, particularly in big cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Those educated in these new institutions of secular education were to also become a medium through whom the British planned to spread Western ideas and cultural values in the Indian society. This intention of creating a native middle class that would become the carrier of Western culture in India was expressed by Lord Macaulay in 1935. In his *Minute on Education* (1865), Macaulay expressed: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. Over the years, a new class emerged in India. Apart from those employed in the administrative jobs of the British government, they included independent professionals such as, lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists. Membership of this "educated middle class" steadily grew in size during the second half of the nineteenth century. The educated middle class possessed proficiency over the English language which represents both as a form of cultural capital as well as a structural marker of middle-class identity. The possession of such language skills can be transformed into social and economic capital in the labor market. In other words, fluency in English marks an individual with the distinction of class culture and locates the individual within the new middle class in socioeconomic terms as such linguistic skills are a necessary component for access to the new economy and skilled jobs.

Commodity consumption has assumed the shape of a public discourse that may grant access to new middle-class membership. The new middle class is distinguished by its commodity consumption from other socioeconomic categories and from the traditional middle class. Newly accessible goods have evolved into symbols of modernity and status markers that upwardly mobile individuals and families must acquire. Owning phone, branded cars and clothes typically reflect one's middle-class economic position. Apart from material consumption, the middle class in India are also distinguished by claims of cultural and moral superiority, values and norms related to meritocracy, urban beautification and cleanliness, religious morality, and moderate consumption. These discourses and practices of distinction suggest the consolidation of middle- class identity across key values seen as middle- class markers (Fernandes, 2006).

In post-independence India, the middle class was typically that of a salaried and professional class, without any direct creative involvement in trade, commerce and

industry, “short on money but long on institutional perks”. It derived its power primarily from the relative autonomy that the state enjoyed during this period and often hijacked the state apparatus and policies for its own benefits (Jodhka & Prakash, 2011). In the North East of India, traditional social and economic relations have been impacted since the British period. S. K. Chaube (1983) reasoned that the growth of the middle class in the hills of northeast India was through education. The only avenues open to this class were service and professions. The rise of the new social classes was also a result of many factors such as the migration from East Bengal and other parts of the country, expansion of educational and other institutions, demographic changes within the communities, and the state policies in the post- independence period, including the economic reforms of the 1990’s. The social classes are not exclusively social or economic groups. Their economic and social characteristics are embedded. These classes can be identified as entrepreneurs/ businesspersons/ traders, middle classes (salaried classes), and the elite (possess education, economic assets, political power), peasants, etc. The growth of the new social classes (especially the middle classes, such as teachers, lawyers, government employees) took place more in the cities than in the villages.

According to Amalendu Guha (1991), three types of influence were responsible for the development of the Assamese middle class: the spread of British administration and its associate infrastructure; the cultural activities of the Christian missionaries, particularly the American Baptists and the impact of the Bengal renaissance. In Arunachal Pradesh, the differential access to government support systems and the increasing individualization of land has led to the emergence of a class of “moneyed and powerful” persons. This new class formation among tribals in Arunachal Pradesh is happening along with the commercialization of agriculture and the nexus of market forces and the role of the government (Moyong, 2019). Andreas Kulche’s *Class Formation, Social Inequality and the Nagas in Northeast India* (2019) delves into the fact that contrary to general perceptions that tribal society is “class less”, the Nagas in Nagaland have the formation of classes. This class formation is visible in income disparities. Kulche also observed the emergence of “neo-patrimonial culture” in Nagaland. In Meghalaya, the advent of the British has created a middle class which included teachers, doctors, lawyers, writers- the educated intelligentsia, and the Christian preachers and evangelists. After the achievement of statehood in 1972, dominant numbers of the tribals began to appear in the bureaucracy and consequently the numbers solely depending on incomes from jobs in services also increased. The state by expanding the educational facilities to all sections and by providing assistance to underprivileged students also helped in the growth of an educated middle class. In the post-colonial period, the impact of education and the growth of the service sector, known as the tertiary sector were more viable in the Northeast. Banking, insurance, transport, communication, public administration and other services such as health, education, sanitation, etc, dominate the economy in the Northeast than other sectors (Pankaj et al, 2021).

### **Middle class identity among the Khasis**

The Khasis are an indigenous ethnic group of Meghalaya in North- Eastern India. They reside in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya. Khasi is a generic name given to the tribes and sub- tribes that inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. They include the Khyntiam, the Jaintias (Synteng/ Pnar), the War (Shella), The Amwi (allied to the War

Synteng in the south of Jaintia Hills); and the Bhoi (both Khasi and Pnar, inhabiting the north of Khasi and Jaintia Hills with their different sub- groups) (Bareh, 1997). The Khasi society has, today undergone tremendous changes due to the new social forces that began to emerge in the society with the advent of the British in the region. The modern middle class that sprang into existence under the British rule was a result of a series of administrative measure and social and economic reforms. These reforms of the government were actuated not by humanitarianism alone but by a self- interest to establish effective control over the Khasi and the Jaintia tribe which was reduced to subjugation in the wake of bitter resistance. In the post-independence period, the growth of the middle class is attributed to state sponsored economic development which was able to create an educated middle class interested in trade, business and public contracts (Shangpliang, 2012).

The factors which propelled the middle class amongst the Khasis are multi- factorial. After the annexation of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, the British authorities were conscious of the problems of ruling the hill tribes. In 1859, the British government decided to define their relations anew with the Khasi states. Accordingly, all the chiefs such as the Syiems, Wahadadar, Lyngdoh and the Sirdar were called upon to offer fresh engagement to the government acknowledging submission and received their sanad of appointment. They were also asked to lease their waste lands, lime quarries and mines to the government on the promise of receiving half share of the profits if they were exploited. The agreement was concluded by almost all the chiefs (Allen, 1858). The need of the alien administration to secure the assistance of the native gave rise to the first salaried class among the Khasis. In 1829, David Scott raised a body of interpreters and policemen, the burkandazs from the illiterate masses. The role of some of the interpreters, men like Lati Hat, Dewan Singh and Hate, the earliest from the tribe had been recorded in laudatory terms in the despatches of the government. The ministerial staff, however, was recruited from Bengal for the Khasis at this point of time were not educated. The growth in education the government also offered inducement to the Khasis by promoting a few of them to the highest posts as Deputy Magistrates.

Another factor which propelled the growth of the middle class on the Khasi society can be attributed to the process of urbanisation. The transfer of the Chief Commissioner's office to Shillong in 1874 coupled with the spread of education enabled the Khasis to receive greater impetus to join the government services. The growth of Shillong as an urban centre was further expanded with the development of the means of transport and communication. Overall, the primary road connectivity in the Khasi-Jaintias hills by the end of the 19th century comprised eight principal roads. Most important was the Shillong-Gauhati Road, which was opened for wheel traffic in 1877 (Hunter, 1998). As Shillong became the headquarters of the new province of Assam, the city's growing importance resulted in changes in the demographic structure. More people, especially those from the southern region who had acquired wealth from their commercial activities like limestone trade, oranges, beetle-leaf, and nuts, and several others, along with those from the plains of Assam and Calcutta, moved to settle in and around Shillong (Dutta, 1982).

The growth of education in the Khasi- Jaintia Hills was systematically initiated by Alexander Lish in 1832, whereby three schools were founded in the Khasi Hills and pupils were taught in English, Bengali and the vernacular language (Wenger). In 1841, the local

authorities entrusted the charge of education and evangelisation among the tribe to Welsh Presbyterian Mission headed by Thomas Jones effected a radical modification in the text books of the schools, in the use of dialect and in the alphabet (Morris, 1930) The spread of education initiated the emergence of the Khasi middle class through structural changes within the tribal society and transmuted traditional occupations into the modern. Therefore, education naturally became the strongest determinant of social and economic mobility, beginning with its introduction in the British period in the Khasi Hills. The introduction of formal and modern education empowered the Khasis to bring about permanent changes in the socio- economic status and cultural outlook of the people.

Virginius Xaxa (2006) on "Culture, Politics and Identity: The Case of the Tribes in India" postulated that the rise of tribal identity 'can be laid at the door of the emergence of a middle class'. The formation of this class has led to the articulation of their concerns with mores of livelihood, culture, tradition; besides the ownership, use and benefits of land and other resources that were part of the traditional tribal culture; are now taken over by "projects of modernity" by the state. In Meghalaya, the consolidation of power by the tribal elite and the tribal middle class has been heavily confined to urban areas.

Though there is a burgeoning middle class in the case of Meghalaya especially in the urban areas, however, it may be noted that there is dearth of knowledge in relation to the question of the identity of the middle class. P.N. Dutta (1983) article which sheds light on the emergence of the middle class in the Khasi- Jaintia Hills. The middle class was drawn from heterogenous elements such as the "modern Khasi farmer, landowners, traders and industrial pioneers; teachers, doctors, lawyers, writers- the educated intelligentsia, and the Christian preachers and evangelists." Dutta notes that this middle class was west oriented and educated and wielded greater influence in the society. Shangpliang's work on *The Emergence and Role of New Social Forces in Khasi- Jaintia Society: 1826-1972*, delves into the formation of the concept of middle class in the Khasi- Jaintia Society. According to her, the advent of Christianity and education were the precursors to the growth of the middle class (Shangpliang, 2012). B.B. Dutta believes that the middle class in Meghalaya are playing the role of a progressive force even though the pace of progress is quite slow because of its economic locations which have put it in antagonistic relations with the rural peasantry as well as with the non- tribals, and outsiders.

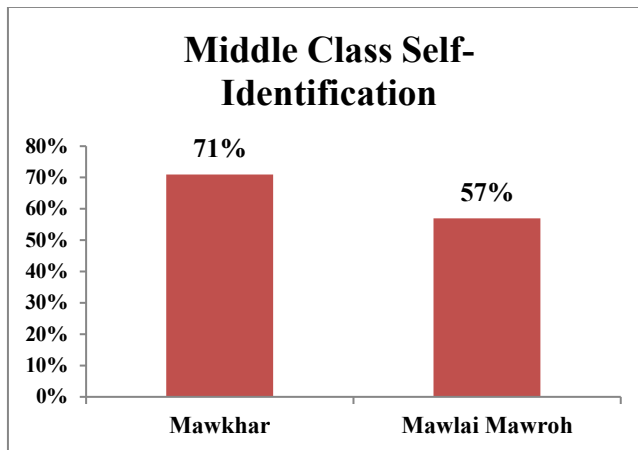
### **Methodology:**

In the present study, the focus is drawn towards the issue concerning the identification of the middle-class identity based on both the objective and subjective measures in Meghalaya. An empirical inquiry into the middle-class self- identification in the urban areas of East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya is based upon primary data. A brief schedule was canvassed for the collection of data. In this study, two localities were randomly chosen from the Shillong conglomerate of the East Khasi Hills District. An adult male or female available at the time of the survey was interviewed, where they have also, respectively, claimed to be the head of the household. Here, the head of the household is self- reported. The total survey was 190 respondents. The respondents were randomly selected. The middle-class Khasi in the present study has been drawn from different educational categories, namely 1) Doctors, 2) Engineers, 3) Advocate 4) School Teachers, 5) College Faculty, 7) Nurses, 8) Government Employees, 9) Police Officers, 10) Business Owners and 11) Bank Employees.

**Middle Class Self- Identification:**

To measure middle class identification, the survey asked the respondents: Do you consider your family to be a middle-class family? The table below indicates the middle-class self-identification of respondent,

**Table 1.1: Middle Class Self- Identification**



Since the survey is confined to the urban area of Shillong, the proportion of residents claiming middle class status is quite large. The middle-class self- identification in Mawkhar and Mawlai Mawroh accounts for 71 and 57 per cent respectively. In some cases, there are individuals who are clearly not in the middle-class category but who still identify themselves as one.

**Education:**

In contemporary Khasi society, occupational categories include the government civil service and professional like doctors, engineers, dentists, schoolteachers, college and university teachers, professors, clerks and business entrepreneurs. As per census 2011 Meghalaya Literacy rate is 74.43% of which Male Literacy rate is 75.95% and Female 72.89% which shows that there is not much variation in Literacy and education between the sexes in Meghalaya. However, in terms of residence, there is a huge variation between the Rural and Urban area in education and literacy. In rural areas literacy rate is 69.92% whereas in urban areas the literacy rate is 90.79%. Among the Districts, East Khasi Hills which housed Shillong, the State Capital and being the seat of many reputed educational institutions has the highest literacy percentage of 84.15%, where the male literacy is 84.51% and closely followed by female literacy of 83.81% (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, 2020). In the interview schedule, questions are asked on the level of education they have attained. Majority of the respondents have either secondary or higher education. We find that middle class identification tends to increase with educational attainment.

**Table 1.3: Educational Profile of Respondents**

Occupation of the Respondents	Level of Education						Total
	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduate	Post Graduate	Technical Education	PhD	
Doctor	-	-	-	-	11	-	11
Nurse	-	-	-	-	15	-	15
Engineer	-	-	-	-	14	-	14
Architect	-	-	-	-	4	-	4
School Teacher	-	-	10	15	-	-	25
College Faculty	-	-	-	8	-	3	11
Government Employee	-	1	21	13	4	2	41
Police Officer	-	-	5	7	-	-	12
Dentist	-	-	-	-	7	-	7
Business Owner	5	12	24	1	2	-	44
Bank Employee	-	-	3	3	-	-	6
<b>Total</b>	5	13	63	47	57	5	190

Table 1.3, presents the educational profile of the respondents, 33% of the respondents are graduates, 30% of the respondents possess technical education. 24.73% of the respondents are post graduates and 2.63% of the respondents had doctoral degrees. It is interesting to note that the majority of the respondents are graduates (33%), post graduates (24.73%) and many possess technical education (30%). The data above indicates a high emphasis on higher and technical education, which in turn has a direct bearing on occupation, social status and economic mobility.

**Income**

The economic status of the Khasi middle class is congruent with their entry into modern occupation. The Meghalaya Development Report, 2023, indicated the rise of more than two-fold in the proportion of workers engaged in the tertiary sector between 1987- 88 and 2021-22. The table below indicates the income distribution of the respondents.

**Table 1.2 Income Distributions of the Respondents**

Respondents' Occupation	Monthly Income				Total
	Below Rs. 50,000	Rs. 50,000- 1, 00,000	Rs. 1,00,000- 2,00,000	Rs. 2,00,000- 3,00,000	
Doctor	-	6	4	1	11
Nurse	6	7	2	-	15
Engineer	-	6	6	2	14
Architect	-	3	1	-	
School Teacher	4	19	2	-	25
Government Employee	4	27	8	2	41
Police Officer	-	8	4	-	12

<b>Dentist</b>	-	5	2	-	7
<b>Business Owner</b>	-	25	15	4	44
<b>Bank Employee</b>	-	3	3	-	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>190</b>

From Table 1.2, the income distribution of the respondents is presented. A staggering 61.05% of the respondents belonged to the Rs.50, 000- 1,00,000 category, 26.84% of the respondents are situated in the Rs.1,00,000-2,00,000 distribution and 5% of the respondents are included in the 2,00,000-3,00,000 bracket. The monthly income is largely distributed in income groups ranging between Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 2- 3 Lakh. Most of the respondents were located in the 50,000 to 1 lakh to 2 Lakh range, respectively. Among the respondents, most of them are sole earning members of their family, and their lives were organised around the incomes earned from their occupations. According to the People Research on India’s Consumer Economy (PRICE), defined a middle- person as one with an annual income of Rs. 5-30 lakh. The data above suggest that a majority of the respondents fall on the middle-income category.

**New Consumption Patterns:**

Consumption patterns and lifestyles redefine class boundaries and differentiate one economic class from the other (Tsang, 2014). In the contemporary Khasi middle class society, urbanization and new consumption patterns have given rise to interesting and novel consumption patterns. The increase in income is one of the factors that directly influence the consumer behavior and lifestyle of different income categories. The contemporary Khasi society consumption pattern range from consumption of electronic goods, automobiles, taking up a plethora of expensive health and beauty programmed to vigorously planning a vacation abroad or and weekend getaway in local resorts. It has also been observed that family outings such as going out to cinemas, hotels, resorts and restaurants have also increased significantly among the middle-class respondents. One of the **respondents** reminisced:

“When we were younger, we did have not much entertainment as it is in the present. The rise of restaurants and resorts has increased significantly. In the past we would rarely go out to eat however nowadays we often go out to eat twice a month or with a press of a button we could instantly order food online and get it delivered to the comfort of our homes.” The acquisition based consumerist culture has requisitioned new pursuits of status and prestige that translate into accumulation of capital and modern lifestyle and are the new hallmarks among the emergent Khasi middle class.

**Table 1.3: Family Income and Consumption Pattern of the Respondents**

Monthly Family Income	Family Consumption Pattern of the Respondents			Total
	HIGH	MODERATE	LOW	
Below 50000	-	5	1	6
50000 to 1Lakh	24	67	9	100
1 Lakh to 2 Lakh	10	54	8	72
2 Lakh to 3 Lakh	2	7	3	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>190</b>

In Table 1.3, the sample indicates the family income and consumption patterns. 19.9 percent belong to high income group; 70 percent to the moderate-income group and 11.05 percent fall under the low-income group.

### **Aspiration and Optimism**

The large share of respondents who identify as middle class begs the question as to whether these 'middle class' hold distinct world views. Do they have coherent views on the state and the direction in which it is travelling? Are they more aspirational and optimistic about the future or fearful and pessimistic? To answer these queries, the respondent posed these questions regarding respondents' social attitudes. These questions concerned children's social mobility, the improvement in family social status, the overall progress of the state, and the respondents' household economic situation.

Across each of these measures, those who self-identify as middle class are more optimistic- both about the status of their lives today as well as the outlook for the future. When compared to those who believe they are not middle class, larger proportions of the so-called middle class respondents believed that their children will have a higher standard of living than they currently enjoy. There is a consensus among the respondents that the state of employment in the state is somehow bleak. They encourage their children to pursue professional courses which would serve as an alternate source of employment rather than relying on government employment opportunities. In the past there was a push from parents for the children to pursue either medical or engineering courses because of the status attached to these professions. The investigator also observed that middle class parents are more flexible when it comes to allowing their children to choose their careers. The respondents also affirmed their family's social status has improved in a generation, and that the state is progressing. In the assessment of their situation of their household economic situation, the respondents' laments on the rising rate of inflation and increased household expenditure than in the previous years.

### **Discussion and Conclusion:**

The study frames the 'middle class' identity by relying on objective criteria such as income, education and consumption patterns but it also focuses on the subjective aspect such as self-identification, aspirations and optimism about the future. In the field, the researcher observed that 50 percent of the respondents when talking about class begin with statements such as "we are a society that has no class system. In our society there is no person who is rich or poor. We are all equal". However, when the question of self-identification was posed a majority of the respondents placed themselves in the middle-class category. The researcher noted in some cases although there were respondents who clearly do not fit into the middle-class category, however, they still placed themselves in the said category. Dickey (2012) noticed in her work, "that auto rickshaw drivers, masons, and occasionally cooks; too small business owners and merchants, office clerks, and teachers; to bureaucrat, doctors, lawyers, and academics from colleges or university faculties", everyone identified themselves as middle class as opposed to as 'rich' or 'poor'. This resonates in the writing of Kelley and Evans (1995),

People draw their images of class, particularly the less visible aspects of class, from their experiences among family, friends, and co-workers. Peer groups are mainly homogenous in social status, so people see themselves in the middle of the class hierarchy- this is true of

rich and poor, educated and illiterate, worker and boss in all six nations. So strong are these intimate images that they attenuate the objective facts of the social hierarchy.

On the question of the children's well-being, middle class respondents are more optimistic and believe their children will be better off in the future than the respondents are today. The effects of education have also shown to be positive and significant in defining the middle-class identity. The income distribution also supports the

The Khasis in general, have preferred and aspired for salaried government jobs, however in recent years there is a gradual shift from relying on government for employment to private sector enterprises. In conversation with respondents, there is a perhaps more flexibility in allowing their children to choose their own career; however, a large proportion of the respondents still aspire their children to join the government sector because of the stability it offers. A senior government officer summarizes this succinctly, "Although I allow my children to choose their own careers, however at the end of the day, I feel that even if they get a lower category job in government service it is more reliable and salary is being paid more regularly". Among the second-generation tribal educated respondents, there is a prevailing sense of aspiration for salaried government jobs. However, the Covid 19 pandemic has also changed the perspective of many respondents on the role of the private sector as an income generating sector. In 2022, the Government of Meghalaya also launched the PRIME (Promotion and Incubation of Market-driven Enterprises) Program. It is a comprehensive program that looks at Enterprise promotion and incubation in a holistic manner to all segments of entrepreneurs namely startup entrepreneurs, nano entrepreneurs and livelihood entrepreneurs. There is a drive to establish their own businesses among the youths of the state and to stop relying on the government for employment. This has proved to be much sought after avenue of employment among the younger people and created a new identity among the people of the Khasi tribe.

The new consumption patterns among the middle class have also increased significantly. From the data collected, 70 per cent of the respondents form the middle-income household category. The consumption pattern of the Khasis has also changed significantly. The respondents maintained that consumption patterns have changed from basic necessities to consuming luxury items. Owning of expensive assets like luxury cars, or more than one car per family, taking vacations not only to destination locations both in India and abroad, eating out in restaurants and cafes to owning a pure-bred dog has become new status symbols in the contemporary Khasi society.

The present Khasi society has borne witness to various structural and economical social changes, which can be traced back to the British colonial rule and the post-independence period. In the post-independence period, modern form of education, government developmental programmes, impact of modernity, and the assimilation with the mainland people, greatly influenced the transition among the tribes. This newly emerged middle class among the Khasis has imbibed attributes of class and social status-oriented characteristics.

The middle-class identity has been shaped by the quality of lifestyle, consumption patterns, aims and aspirations. This has not only transformed their way of lifestyle and quality of life but has also changed their ideology and thoughts, which has significantly impacted the political sphere of the state. The formation of class sections is distinctly

noticeable among the working Khasi people, especially those who are engaged in government sectors and business. This section of Khasi middle class has contributed to steering a new phase by transforming the erstwhile traditional Khasi community. The role of the Khasi middle class is more evident as intellectuals and ideologues. Remarkably, the Khasi middle class has been the main pillar of the development process and the outward expression of the people's political desire for autonomy.

The new middle-class identity is an ongoing process and it clearly represents that the Khasi society is in a transition mode which challenges the "one size fits all" paradigm which is generally applied to tribal societies across the country. The construction of the middle-class identity in Khasi society relies not only on the objective parameters such as income, occupation and consumption pattern but on the individual's subjective belief. Drawing on the findings, we find that the middle-class identification is large in the state. The aspirational middle class among the Khasis may be less ideologically driven and instead more focused on gaining social and economic status. As urbanization picks up pace and human capital levels continue to rise, we can expect the size of the aspirational middle class to continue to expand.

The middle-class identity of the Khasis is an evolving construct fueled by their unique cultural heritage, economic practices, and education level. As they navigate contemporary challenges, the resilience and adaptability of this middle class will continue to define their role in both the local and broader socio- economic landscapes. The emphasis on education, economic independence, and cultural pride remains pivotal for the Khasis, positioning them for future growth and recognition within India's diverse tapestry.

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