

Middle Classes, Moving and Staying in Mumbai

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Asian cities are experiencing growth in middle-class populations, including in large metropolitan cities like Mumbai in India.

What characterizes Indian middle-class families and the processes of becoming middle class? And does migration matter for families' social mobility?

Brief Points

- Becoming middle class in Mumbai is perceived as connected to working hard, having a good education, getting a salaried job, as well as having the right connections.
- Internal migration to Mumbai as a destination city is well established. Many people come in search of work and become 'Mumbaikars'.
- Mumbai played a key role as a 'transit hub' for migration from India to the Gulf states, especially in the 1970s and 80s.
- This city brief offers insights from the ERC-funded project, Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Social Mobility in Asia.

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Urban Middleclassness

India is one of the fastest growing economies globally and boasts one of the largest middle classes in absolute numbers, despite it comprising only about a third of its population. Middle classes account for more than half of the population in Indian metropolitan areas, such as in Mumbai, India's financial capital and most populous city.

While there is no universally applicable definition of 'middle class', or what it means to be middle class, increases in middle-class populations are evident across urban Asia. These (new) middle classes live in rapidly expanding cities and contribute significantly to the global economy. This makes it important to understand who constitutes the middle classes, what their aspirations are and what contributes to their upward social mobility.

This backdrop is key to exploring what characterizes the 'middle classes', and what it means to be and become 'middle class' in Mumbai, from an individual perspective too.

What does it mean to become and be 'middle class', what are their aspirations and what contributes to their social mobility? We explore these questions among Mumbai's middle classes, and whether migration matters in this context.

Migration Rhythms Data

To better understand how middle-class residents of Mumbai perceive being middle class, and how migration might matter, the MigrationRhythms project conducted a household-based survey in 2023. The survey is representative of lower to middle middle-class residents (N=504) of three areas in the Mumbai Suburban District (Andheri, Chembur and Borivali).

The project also included family history interviews with 29 families (43 interviewees) in Mumbai, who shared their families' experiences of being and becoming middle class, and related migration histories.

Perceptions of Middleclassness

What do middle class 'Mumbaikars' think about being middle class in the city? Respondents' perceptions offer an insider

snapshot of what being middle class may look like in urban India.

Our survey respondents were 25–79 years old (55% women and 45% men). They had varied educational backgrounds (about 60% had completed at least an undergraduate education) and occupations.

Respondents were asked whether they agreed/disagreed with statements about middleclassness. Fig. 1 shows responses to three of these statements. 75% think that sending children to private schools is typical of belonging to the middle classes. This reflects the emphasis middle classes place on education to secure their future and also the prevalent idea that private schools provide a better education than public schools. In India, almost half of school enrolment is in private schools.

Motorbike ownership is also seen as a marker of middleclassness by two-thirds of the respondents. They are fuel-efficient, easy to manoeuvre in traffic and cost less than a car. Perceptions concerning home air-conditioners are split. Only a little more than half of the respondents think having an air conditioner in your home is typical of being a middle-class household in Mumbai. This may reflect financial prudence and frugality, where an air conditioner might be considered a non-essential commodity.

Perceptions about what constitutes middleclassness in specific urban contexts encompass varying views of socio-cultural markers.

The survey also aimed to capture perceptions about 'becoming' middle class, or what the respondents consider as important to improve one's living standards in Mumbai.

As Fig. 2 shows, a majority of respondents (80%) consider being well educated and having a salaried job as key to becoming middle class. The two are also linked, where education paves the

If you are middle class in Mumbai...

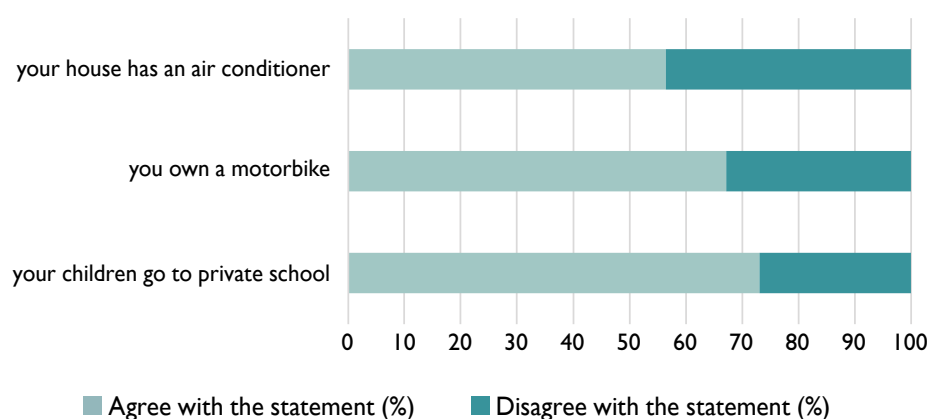


Fig 1: Perceptions about being middle class. Source: MigrationRhythms survey (2023).

To become middle class in this city...

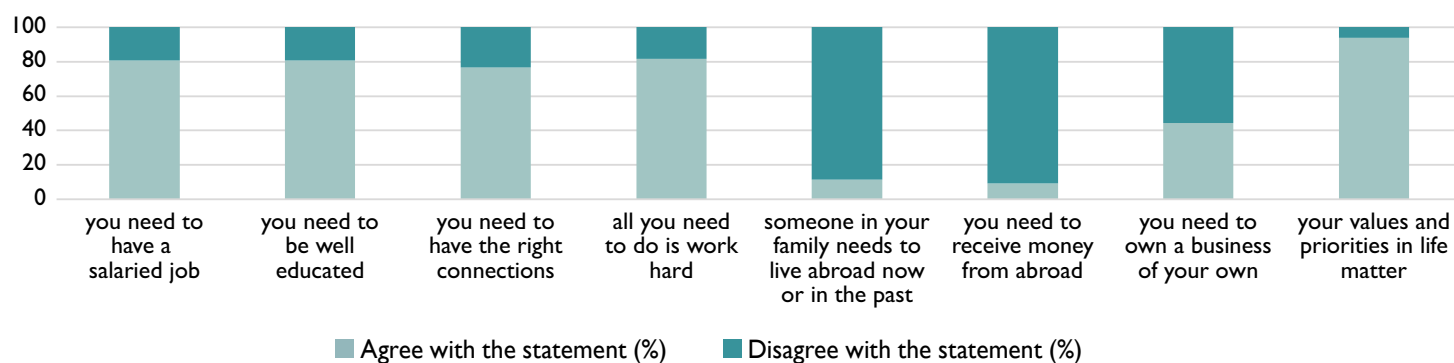


Figure 2: Perceptions of becoming middle class. Source: MigrationRhythms survey (2023).

way for acquiring a stable, salaried job offering hopes of financial security. This is important for middle-class households who often do not have other safety nets, such as inherited money or large savings.

More than 80% of respondents agreed that ‘all you need to do is work hard’ – reflecting the conviction that there are no short cuts. However, more than three-quarters also agreed that ‘you need to have the right connections’. In other words, ‘social capital’ matters. Our respondents’ perceptions reveal a view of upward social mobility as complex, with different possible pathways to becoming middle class.

Strikingly, almost all respondents agreed that ‘your values and priorities in life’ are important to becoming middle class, indicating the emphasis placed on these intangible dimensions.

Less than one in ten respondents perceive international migration or receiving money from abroad (remittances) as necessary to improving one’s living standards. This should be understood in relation to Mumbai’s nature as primarily a destination city for internal migrants, over a long period of time.

Plural Middle Classes

These survey responses resonate with findings from our qualitative interviews with middle-class families in Mumbai, who also emphasized the importance of education, employment and owning assets as a marker of middleclassness.

As one 28-year-old male interviewee shared, being middle class is about being secure:

“Who can you call middle class? The one who has two people to earn. Their education is also good. (...) Children are studying in English medium. (...) They have a TV, a fridge. All this comes under the category of middle-class.”

The importance of education and stable employment also comes up frequently in interviews such as in the interview with a 32-year-old woman with a salaried job:

“Education plays an important role because if they don’t have education then they don’t earn their [living].”

Interviewees recognize that their current middle-class lifestyles are made possible by their education and jobs.

The importance of having assets, especially a house of one’s own, was also stressed by interviewees. For example, a man in his mid-thirties, who is working and pursuing a part-time post-graduate degree, says:

“They should have their own house, doesn’t matter if it’s on loan but it should be their own.”

The salience of housing, and modes of financing and ownership, were a key topic in Mumbai. Often in relation to this, interviewees reflected on the importance of values, such as budgeting, saving and working hard.

Moving, Leaving and Staying: Does Migration Matter?

Our data shows that many respondents have some history of moving. There is also intergenerational mobility, with respondents’ children, parents or grandparents having moved to or from Mumbai at different points in time, and for various reasons. While recognizing that India is a major source country of international migrants, and Mumbai a destination more than just a transit hub, the survey sought to capture different

instances of internal and international movement.

48% of the respondents were born in Mumbai, while 51% were born elsewhere in India, and about 1% outside India. 40% of those born in other parts of India were from outside of the state of Maharashtra, where Mumbai is located, indicating strong interstate migration to Mumbai. This pattern is further strengthened when looking at the birthplace of interviewees' parents and grandparents, which shows a similar story.

Mumbai was a hub for international migration departures until the late 1990s. People came to Mumbai from other parts of the country to migrate to the Gulf countries. Mumbai thus also became the destination for those who could not fulfil international migration aspirations.

Throughout, Mumbai was and is a destination for people who come to the big city with hopes of securing their future. While there are families who have lived in Mumbai for generations and have no migration history, the vast majority of families do have experiences of migration in their past. We find that Mumbai is both a destination for internal migrants, and a place people either pass through or return to, in conjunction with international migration.

These backgrounds suggest that moving, staying and leaving are potentially significant factors in understanding the changing living standards and socio-economic characteristics of middle-class

families in Mumbai. These are intertwined with matters of wealth, fortune and caste, but also as our data show, education and hard work.

Aspiring to Move or to Stay?

Moving and staying can also figure in the future aspirations of middle-class families in Mumbai. The survey did not ask about aspirations in general, but whether respondents *expected* to migrate elsewhere in the next five years.

Of the respondents, 75% did not expect to move out of Mumbai, while the rest saw themselves moving elsewhere in the next five years. This included returning to places of previous residence, or moving to other urban areas within India, or moving abroad, either within Asia or beyond.

In our family history interviews, the aspiration to move was also reflected upon, including in relation to international migration, as shared by a man in his forties:

"My father brought me here, so my next aspiration is that I go abroad somewhere."

The reflections of a 29-year-old man echoed a more complex reality of decisions to move or stay:

"There is certain amount of passion that is required, certain amount of hustle that people talk about is required from you to be in this city. Today, I have experienced that and also realized that I am not a big fan of that

hustle. I don't want it to last for the rest of my life.

Thus, we find that migration – and staying – play various roles in how families in Asia become middle class, often as part of longer family histories of internal and international migration, in search of 'a good life'. Aspirations to stay or migrate also stem from the ability not only to attain but also to maintain a 'good life', now and in the future. ■

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Further Reading

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THE PROJECT

Migration Rhythms in Trajectories of Upward Social Mobility in Asia (MigrationRhythms) investigates connections between migration and the growth of middle classes in Hanoi, Karachi, Manila and Mumbai. The project is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) (Grant agreement No. 94840, 2021–2026). www.prio.org/migrationrhythms

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