

Will middle-class **virus** finally turn **vaccine**?

Unmasking and understanding the unwitting villains behind India's continuing Covid misery and a compromised future

MIP = Middle Income People, the so-called middle class, a socio-economic stratum that falls in between the working class and the upper class (the wealthy elites). Along with the lower-income groups, they constitute India's majority non-elites – and, shockingly, the *real* reasons why India continues to remain in a quagmire of policy, economic and societal drift.

To understand what ails India's majority middle-class and, by extension, India itself, it is important to digest the following perspective:

What distinguishes India's MIP

We have identified several characteristics, which are presented below in a stream of consciousness style. Expect a little overlap -- some points are reinforced for effect. Our contention is NOT that all middle-class Indians are horrible citizens. We do recognize and salute the many honourable exceptions out there.

1) Busyness: MIP are always *busy-busy* with mind-numbing, intellect-disabling routines relating to the “rat race” – no time for anything meaningful or altruistic. India's middle class have a fear of the unknown. For long, they have played second fiddle to the elite and the over-achievers. In the larger context, they have led largely inconsequential, insignificant lives. They have stopped believing in themselves. They are caught up in the rat race, which is a rut really, and are just going through the motions of a patterned, formula-like middle-class life. That, in a sense, is a known evil. Doing something else, stepping into the unknown, calls for lot of effort and thinking. Their mind has lost that elasticity, or capability to think through deeply and consider and embrace a new paradigm.

2) Materialism: Paradoxically, India's middle class seem to have a lot of time for materialism-related life indulgences or pursuits, as well as for activities that allow them to be unconscious (insensate social media, addictive fantasy content or fiction).

3) Disconnect with the Big Picture: India's middle class appear to lack an overview, or a bird's eye view, of the larger system, and their own role in it. They seem ignorant about the symbiotic relationship between *the part and the whole*. Most people have a superficial interest in the goings-on of the world. They are very susceptible to manufactured narratives, and tend to accept wrong ideas, concepts, memes, or content at face value. They also have unconditional faith in glib-taking, promise-making, rhetoric-spewing politicians, charlatans, conmen, cheats who peddle deceptive investment schemes, products, services, ideologies, doctrines, cults. People's unrecognized presumption seems to be that there won't be any heavy price to pay, or dire consequences, for this mode of living. People are often busy with their hectic, stressed lifestyles, and hence seem to be ignorant of the system they are part of; they are not aware of the “front end” and “back end” of the society, and how the system works.

4) Cynicism and indifference: Ironically, when it comes to right initiatives, campaigns, causes, or movements, ordinary people have doubts, reservations, suspicions; they are skeptical, cynical; they are unwilling to accept anything at face value. In other words, they employ double standards.

5) Insular, passive, unininvolved attitude: Concerns like climate change, authoritarian regimes, disempowerment of masses, onslaught of life-dominating, consciousness-corrupting, self-diminishing technologies, all of which could harm even at an individual level sooner than later, are not really their concern. India's middle class don't seem to be bothered about such things or feel helpless.

6) Lack of foresight, long-term vision: India's MIP seem to nurse wishful thinking, or an irrational belief, that Doomsday is something that will happen after a very long time (maybe after several centuries). Or, they seem to have given up trying. They seem to be resigned to mankind's eventual fate in the current direction and seem to believe nothing can be done at an individual level. *Que sera sera* – what will be will be. So, why bother? Just focus on one's own personal life matters.

7) Misplaced faith in the Establishment: People seem to have too much faith in an untested, unverified view that some big, brainy, trustworthy, capable people are in control of the world, and that they will do the needful to save the world whenever necessary. So, ordinary people don't have to worry too much about big issues but continue to make merry, or focus on mundane personal life matters.

8) Irresponsible behavior: Unlike our forefathers, most of today's adults (barring exceptions) don't really seem to believe in the idea that they need to bequeath a safe planet to the future generations. Focus is on one's lifetime, and maybe their kids, if at all.

9) Naïve notions: Ordinary people believe they are being responsible and evolved citizens merely because they do the things listed in the first column of the three-column table above (like paying taxes, abiding by laws, complying with rules, **not** using plastic shopping bags or spitting on roads, planting a sapling, or supporting online campaigns like "#MeToo"). "I am doing my bit for the world. That should be enough. That will prevent the coming catastrophe." They also believe, naively, that poll promises, rhetoric, emotional speeches, marketing, and advertising messages are to be taken literally.

10) Erosion of moral fiber: There appears to be a deepening disregard for timeless values. Personal reference points for thinking, decisions and actions are being adapted to the deteriorating social settings. Tolerance for wrong things is growing by way of their conscious decision not to resist evil. Unethical compromises at a personal level are rationalized as being necessary for "practical aspects of life". People don't seem to think through how little, little compromises at an individual level will add up to systemic mess.

11) Denial: Having gotten used to the comforts and luxuries from the capitalist-driven ecosystem, India's middle class seem to be in denial. They are not willing to realize and accept

that they are part of the problem and are morally responsible to come up with a creative and timeless solution.

12) Outsourcing mentality: History shows common folks including MIP tend to expect some messiahs or saviors to appear and save them from the brink time and again. This unreasonable hope of expecting external help and outsourcing own responsibilities to someone else continues to haunt them, hence they maintain status quo.

13) Greed, fear and insecurity: Capitalism and its system of free-market economies, which stoke endless crass consumerism, have installed a wrong Operating System (values) in the middle-class mental hard-drive (mind/brain), where vices like greed (more, more, more) are reinterpreted as desirable virtues worthy of lifelong pursuit. One's self-worth is equated with how much money, wealth, glory, or fame one has earned or accumulated. Since globalization has made it possible for the 20th-century middle class to amass more than their parents in terms of absolute numbers, they believe the current system must be good, desirable, and need not be changed. They are afraid any change will end their joy ride on the gravy train.

14) Sense of entitlement and laziness: Capitalism and globalization have made it relatively easier for the middle class to access "goodies" with relatively minimal, predictable efforts (systemic formula route of *kindergarten > school > college > university > job > career > savings > investments > returns > enjoy, enjoy, enjoy*). Use of this formula, and subsequent access to "goodies" without too much of a struggle, have created a sense of accomplishment that is largely blind to other related facts (*plunder of the planet, pathetic societal systems and processes in terms of poor infrastructure, under-development, pervasive corruption; or even struggles of the under-class, abject poverty and deprivations at the lower strata of the society*). This, in turn, has created a sense of entitlement and a tendency to take things for granted. There is no more an incentive to go the extra mile, work harder, contribute to the community individually. Nor to continue to improve oneself, one's range of knowledge. Any calls for that can be neutralized with excuses like being stressed out already by the hectic rat race and the formula family life.

15) Cowardice: Owing to continual systemic disempowerment of the individual via both centralization of power (through outsourcing of personal responsibility toward the society) and reinforced messages about the smallness of an individual vis-à-vis the system, India's middle class have become cowardly – reluctant to fight the right fight, scared of consequences from the "Big Brother", or implications for a 'set' life.

16) Corruption: Middle-class people themselves are corrupt (by that we don't refer to things like taking bribes but the corruption of intellect, values, inner reference points, so forth). India's middle class explain away their corruption by blaming the larger system. They blame their perceived helplessness on the harsh realities of "practical aspects of life". Capitalism's free-market economies allow the middle class to be corrupt and yet live comfortable lives without the pricks of conscience. People have got addicted to this form of living where access to "goodies" is unhindered despite their own corruption, and their own lack of direct resistance to systemic corruption.

17) Zombification: The mental bandwidth, or brain-power (intellect), of the MIP has been compromised because of a variety of factors: poor self-esteem; long and sustained under-use of mental strengths; excessive exposure to continual subliminal messages from the System (through advertising, social roles, media content, marketing communications, so on) that tell them:

"Individually, you are a small person incapable of doing BIG things; do not attempt BIG things because life can get scary, difficult, you'll land in trouble and end up losing what you already have, what you have worked for so long. Just follow the system, just follow the formula route, just follow the herd. Do not think too much, do not stray from the beaten path. Stay the course of the herd". So, middle-class zombies merely *exist*; they do NOT truly *live*. Intellectually, they are the equivalent of the living dead.

18) Fatalism or cop-out: This is the idea that the larger system is beyond repair and redemption, and there is little an individual could do to make a positive difference to the big picture. Another idea is that he/she individually is not contributing much to the systemic mess, so can't be held responsible; and if he/she is guilty of contributing to the mess, then he/she still can't be held responsible because he/she has no choice – the System has trapped him/her, and the system is responsible for the mess, not him/her.

19) Ignorance: MIP are not fully aware of the extent of mess at the systemic level because it is not easily perceptible or visible. India's middle class have lost the ability to connect the dots and comprehend the Big Picture grimness. There is also selective or wilful blindness to facts, figures. There is vague, magical or wishful thinking that Doomsday won't happen now or in near future, or in one's own lifetime, but in some distant, distant time, centuries or millennia or aeons later. This is actually an effect of the under-use of their intellect and potential, and reflects both intellectual laziness and stunted personal growth, in terms of knowledge. The middle-class person is a semi domain-expert, and does not really have depth of understanding of any other subject outside of his/her domain or field of endeavor. (*This should not be confused with laser-like focus on identified personal priorities.*)

20) The “comfort zone” factor: A typical middle-class person is invested in his/her own domain (career, profession, or vocation) too much. “Domain is universe” – that is his/her mindset. Mind has got neurally “paired” with one’s career/profession far too much that one’s identity is linked to the associated role, to the exclusion of other roles and responsibilities as a citizen or member of a community/society. Mind’s visualization since childhood has progressed till retirement in that domain role where all psychic energy is invested in optimizing or maximizing “returns” (that is, reaching the highest possible position in one’s profession, and making as much money as possible in that line, or through investments of savings in quick high-return avenues). So, any other activity contrary to this visualized mind-track generates resistance – because it’s not the “comfort zone”. Extra efforts will be put only if such efforts (like an executive MBA course, or some sort of professional certification course, or skill learning) are seen as definitely helpful to progressing faster on the visualized mind-track. Else, not.

21) Primitive notion of citizenship: The System lulls one into believing that to be considered a good, responsible citizen at all times, irrespective of the Big Picture situation, all one needs to do is this: *cast your vote every five years; pay taxes regularly; don't litter streets or spit in public; use biodegradable shopping bags; make occasional donations, charity or perform volunteer*

work; read spiritual books and self-improvement books; attend spiritual discourses, be devout; watch devotional movies, or listen to devotional music; don't commit crime, don't break law.

India's middle-class people are only too willing and happy to play this role. Very convenient and easy.

22) Weakness for “cheap thrills”: MIP have a huge weakness for Mammon. They simply love living a “pleasure-rich” easy life, in the form of birthday parties, social get-togethers, festival functions, picnics, travel, excursions, potlucks, barbecues, shopping, investments, profits, material accumulation – basically sense-gratifications or indulgences, without an iota of idea of what kind of impact this global lust for sustained, ever-increasing consumption has on the planet as well as on the society.

23) Frog mentality: Like the frog in a bowl of boiling water on stove, most MIP are incapable of comprehending impending danger until it punches them in the face. Till the last moment, or until it is too late for any course-correction, they are happy to continue living in the only pattern they know of and are comfortable following it. The travails of Indians in the COVID-19 situation is a classic testimony to this frog mentality.

24) Integrity deficit: Most MIP lack inner sincerity vis-à-vis individual responsibility toward the System, society, or community. So, although a person may realize at a deeper level that he/she needs to do much more (like playing a proactive role, contributing/giving more, and cutting down on greed-fuelled consumption), lack of both courage and conviction (and other good traits or virtues like faith, steadfastness, discipline) ensure each person wilfully compromises at an individual level, while expecting others to do the right thing. Unless it becomes utterly shameful, untenable, inevitable, or inescapable, MIP will tend to avoid taking the plunge into game-changing Big Picture initiatives. In a sense, they don't want the Game to change – because they themselves are invested in, and content with, the Game.

25) Ego: MIP are slaves of personal likes, dislikes, bias, prejudice, a crooked mind. Ego-based preferences and calculations take precedence over commitment to, and cooperation for, noble causes and larger responsibilities.

26) “Pehle-aap” defensive streak: Individually, most MIP adopt a wait-and-watch mindset instead of displaying a sense of initiative and proactive attitude. MIP think Big Problems will give birth to born-leaders automatically, magically, out of thin air as it were. And such born-leaders will champion Big Causes, and lead ordinary people to safety yet again, sacrificing themselves in the process. India's middle class believe leadership is not for everyone. “*Big people should manage big, global-scale affairs whereas MIP should just stay put in the straitjacket of small roles that the System has trapped them in.*”

27) Risk-aversion: This is related to cowardice discussed earlier (point 15). MIP mindset is such that any perception of risk, whether real or imagined, leads to escapist or evasive attitude, and a million arguments why the perceived risk is *not* worth taking, why it is bound to fail, why it is not right; or why it is foolish or impractical. Basically, most MIP don't have the guts, the balls to do BIG things.

28) Poor follow-through: Most MIP are good at talking, talking, talking; some dare to take the first step even; but later, they lose steam, lose interest, or chicken out; they have the notorious inability or incapacity for follow-through; they can't stay committed, they can't sustain the campaign over the long term. They get distracted, discouraged, or dissuaded easily.

29) Inner conflict: Most MIP are torn *between* responsibility toward self/family *and* larger, non-family responsibilities. They assume, wrongly, that larger responsibilities are not for them to shoulder but for some “*avatar purush*”, or some personages like Gandhi, Mandela, Vinobha, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa, so on. They also think things will somehow be managed by others to avoid catastrophes; they assume they may not end up paying a huge price eventually for not taking the plunge now; they believe that the ground beneath their feet will continue to be solid and steady always for them to run their rat race, no matter what.

30) Smug contentment: MIP seem to think they are well-settled and “more than happy” in life and adopt an attitude of “*I don't see any major problem that needs urgent fixing. Things now are fine. And I am already doing my bit for the society in my own chosen way, hence there is no need to join others' initiatives that are more in tune with the current urgent needs of the larger society.*”

We could go on, but you must have got the drift by now. India's middle class need to evolve -- and quickly at that. If they don't see the writing on the wall, if they don't recognize the current model is NOT working, if they continue to expect the failed, flawed system to produce results, they will have none but themselves to blame, when the inevitable consequences catch up with them. Beware!

The MIP Syndrome

Remedies for key symptoms

Symptom: Busy-busy, hectic, stressed-out lifestyles brought about by the ‘rat race’.

Remedy: Play a fundamentally different, bigger role in societies; be willing to accept higher responsibilities relating to the community, over and above personal interests; take individual responsibility to some extent for the well-being of the community, and stop delegating it to corrupt, ineffective or flawed institutions/officials.

Symptom: Narrow, obsessive focus on self, nuclear family, job, career, and other such personal interests.

Remedy: Evince interest in the global current affairs because in a globalized, interconnected world, everything can have implications for life, even at individual level. COVID-19 is proof.

Symptom: Disconnect from the Big Picture and subtext of the System; no stake in the community; no ability or inclination to question fundamental flaws as well as the make-believe con games of those in charge of the System.

Remedy: Go beyond adopting hollow stances online on serious issues or paying lip sympathy; act directly (by participating in initiatives / campaigns aimed at changing the Game).

Symptom: Fear/insecurity – of losing things already secured; about ‘Big Brother’; of lagging others if mind’s focus is shifted to ‘non-priority areas’.

Remedy: Understand the subtext of major developments (like climate crisis, extreme sci-tech, rise of authoritarian or Orwellian states, the far right; atrocities and human rights violations; disempowerment and marginalization of masses, consumers or citizens). Evil that is not resisted proactively by the righteous will eventually devour the latter.

Symptom: Greed – for more and more of anything and everything, including other people’s attention and “goodies of a good life”.

Remedy: Realize that altruism and cooperation are intrinsic to our hardwiring as a species, and are critical for our survival and future; and the unhealthy, cut-throat competitive, egotistical streak is a relatively new selfish trait induced by the capitalism-led free market economic system.

Symptom: Tendency to overlook, ignore, not question, review or resist catastrophic or society-degrading events like GFC-2008, auto giants' scandals (Toyota, VW), oil giant scandals (BP), chemical & pharma excesses (UC, J&J, cosmetics, etc), victimization of whistle-blowers due to short attention spans, ‘rat race’, and disconnect from the community affairs.

Remedy: MIP should take cognizance of the ever-widening knowledge gap, and the utter sophistication of zombifying extreme sci-tech and 'market' forces. CDS, derivatives, valuations, funding rounds... common man hardly understands "big stuff", and it is this big stuff that has direct implications to individual well-being. So, become knowledgeable.