

## BRITISH ADMINISTRATION AND THE INDIAN MIDDLE CLASSES: MUTUALITY AND ANTAGONISM

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### ABSTRACT:

*The pre independence era in the Indian history has seen the emergence of different equations between the various stake holders. It saw the emergence of specific relations between the various sections in Indian society, between the subjects and the rulers and between the rulers and the various classes and communities. There emerged an equation also between the rulers and the instruments of subjugation on the one hand and between the instruments of subjugation and the masses on the other hand. For the purpose of this work, of particular interest is the relationship between the British administration and the Indian middle classes. The middle classes provided the mediating link between the British and the Indian masses. The Indian Political elites formed a section of the upper middle classes. They provided leadership to the masses as a class of Indians forming part of the ruling elite and also led the struggle for freedom. This paper tries to explore the symbiotic relationship between the British administration and the middle classes. It also tries to explore the antagonistic aspects of this relationship. In other words it tries to probe how far the middle classes and the political elites owe their emergence to the British rule and how far the British rule owes its sustenance to the political elite. It also explores the role of middle classes in providing leadership to the masses in the national movement and further impetus to the freedom struggle which ultimately led to the end of the colonial rule in India.*

**KEY WORDS:** *middle classes, colonial rule, political elites, interdependence, administration.*

### INTRODUCTION

The pre independence era in the Indian history has seen the emergence of different equations between the various stalk holders. It saw the emergence of specific relations between the various sections in Indian society, between the subjects and the rulers and between the rulers and the various classes and communities. There emerged an equation also between the rulers and the instruments of subjugation on the one hand and between the instruments of subjugation and the masses on the other hand. For the purpose of this work, of particular interest is the relationship between the British administration and the Indian middle classes. The middle classes provided the mediating link between the British and the Indian masses. The Indian Political elites formed a section of the upper middle classes. They provided leadership to the masses as a class of Indians forming part of the ruling elite and also led the struggle for freedom. This paper tries to explore the symbiotic relationship between the British administration and the middle classes. It also tries to explore the antagonistic aspects of this relationship. In other words it tries to probe how far the middle classes and the political elites owe their emergence to the British rule and how

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far the British rule owes its sustenance to the political elite. It also explores the role of middle classes in providing leadership to the masses in the national movement and further impetus to the freedom struggle which ultimately led to the end of the colonial rule in India. Both the interdependence and the discordance between the British rule and the middle classes have been explored.

### **Emergence of middle class and British rule**

With the advent of British in India, the political and social system of the country took a turn. The British imported their own form of govt. and administration in India. Their arrival is also marked with the introduction of capitalism in true sense in India. It is argued among the scholars that British education system and their capitalistic development in the country led to the emergence of middle class in India.

During the rule of East India company, certain conditions were aroused which helped in middle class growth especially after charter act of 1813 when a decent share of expenditure was allocated to education. And Christian missionaries were allowed to propagate their ideas among Indians. In charter act of 1833, trading monopoly of East India Company was abolished. The company created a way for minimal state interference, constitutional character of government and social reforms. The development in the field of technology and infrastructure, large scale production and new forms of employment created conditions conducive to the growth of middle class in Indian society. Such an atmosphere clubbed with other factors such as open trade, activities of Christian missionaries, opening of schools and colleges etc. helped in the creation of modern middle class based on money economy and western education.

B.B. Mishra writes in this context, "These constituted the various nuclei for the growth of the modern middle classes on the basis of money economy and western education. New functional groups aroused with an increase in the size and variety of business. They included e.g. engineers and overseers, technicians and supervisors, managers and inspectors, deputies and assistants"

A category of middle men emerged in commercial field who worked as agents to mercantile and banking houses. There were shroffs who were employed as cashiers by the company because they had specialized knowledge of currency. There were some other forms of middlemen known as Paikars and dalals who worked as agents. They charged commissions as agents. These categories of brokers and agents were appointed by the British indiscriminately and constitute a part of rising commercial middle class. The cotton industry especially in Bombay helped in the growth of industrial middle class. Large scale production of raw cotton in western India was responsible for it. Ship building industry also provided the ground for the growth of industrial middle class(Mishra 1961).

Apart from this, the landed middle class grew during the British period with the revenue laws of the British. The British erected a strong political authority on zamindars and defined the rights of under-tenures. Land revenue settlement was done for a period of 30 years during William Bentinck(1828-35). During his tenure many other reformist steps were taken which proved very much favourable for the growth of Indian middle class. For example he employed Indians in the company services that were available at cheaper rates as compared to the English. This provided job opportunities for the English educated Indians. He made lower services available to the Indians. He introduced three grades of

judicial services in which Indians were included. The highest of these services was that of 'Sadar Amin' and his salary was to be Rs.750 per month.

“Another regulation was passed in 1831 under which respectable Indians were to be appointed in zila and city courts. They were to be called 'Munsifs', were to get fixed salaries and could decide court cases upto the value of three hundred rupees”(Chhabra, 2005, p.61). Through these legislations, the British got manpower out of this class without which it would not have been possible for them to sustain and rule in India.

The British made structural changes to Indian Economy which changed the picture on the whole. Agriculture was commercialized during this period. Specialized crops were grown for sale in national as well as international markets. Commercial crops like cotton, jute, groundnut, oilseeds, sugarcane, tobacco etc. were grown. This trend was also seen in plantation sector i.e. in tea, coffee, rubber, indigo etc. this process of commercialization of agriculture was no doubt forced for Indian peasants but it benefitted the intermediaries. Thus these sections of middle class who were associated with agriculture production and trade were benefitted by agriculture exports, rise in prices etc. the new land and property rights introduced by the British proved disastrous for the rural population and helpful for the newly emerging middle class. The modern industry is a legacy of British in India. Most of the modern industries were British owned but some of the cotton textiles and jute industries were came to be owned by Indians in the nineteenth century. Although these industries suffered from many drawbacks yet they helped in the rise of industrial capitalist class and working class. The Indian traders and moneylenders emerged as the Indian bourgeoisie who provided loans to agriculturists and facilitated state in collection of revenue. The Indian traders helped in carrying agricultural products for exports.

Various scholars opine that the present day middle class has its roots in British education system. It does not mean that earlier India had no education system, however it was rather imperfect and irregular. Warren Hastings founded a college at Calcutta in 1772. Also Lord William Bentinck founded a medical college at Calcutta. A commission was appointed under Lord Macauley's chairmanship under Bentinck's rule. He forwarded his views by saying that English education would provide British with cheap Indian clerks. In his minute on Indian Education Macaulay said, “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 its intellect.”

Such a policy met with great success. This success manifested itself even in the revivalist movements of 19<sup>th</sup> century which were led by English educated Indians from middle and upper classes. Bentinck supported English education for raising a class of persons who would be Indian in blood and color but English in taste and opinions or in short Indians with modern western minds. 'Woods Despatch' of 1854 is the bench mark in the history of education system in India. The purpose of this dispatch was to create a class of Indians capable of holding offices under company rule. With the adoption of English education system, the number of English educated Indians increased. By 1880s the total number of English educated Indians was approaching the 50000 mark. The number of those studying English went up fairly from 298000 in 1887 to 505000 in 1907. On the other hand circulation of English language newspaper increased from 90000 in 1885 to 276000 in

1905. University education was started in 1857 by setting up of Bombay madras and Calcutta Universities. Despite the considerable efforts done by British to provide higher education to the Indians, still the number of English educated remained in minority. Caste remained an important factor in acquiring English education for Indians. Hindus were in large proportion of English educated than Muslims. Among Hindus, Brahmins were in majority in Madras and Maharashtra; Kayasthas and Baidyas were in majority in Bengal and Aggrawal, Aroras and Khattris were in majority in Punjab. As the spread of education was different among caste and communities, it created community and cast consciousness among the people. this feeling paved the way for creation of various groups such as Muslim League in 1906, non Brahmin movements in South India in 1916. Self respecting party, Dravid Munnetra Kazhagam, Akali Dal in 1920. The British had their own self interest in disseminating English language in India. Creation of English educated class of natives was beneficial for British in many ways. First of all, such natives would remain loyal to the British and would provide their services to the British in case of any contingency. Secondly, this class with English lifestyle would provide market for English goods. Above all, this class of Indians would create cheap servants for the British and would also possess knowledge of the local conditions. Thus they shall serve as a link between British and the Indian masses. Some scholars use the term 'elite groups' for English educated Indians defined basically by their upper caste status. In this regard Sarkar (1983) writes, "...thus 84.7% of Hindu College students in Bengal came from three bhadrakal castes of Brahmins, Kayastha or Vaidya in 1883-84. Brahmin students predominated in Madras, Bombay or Poona, Kayasthas were prominent in UP...19<sup>th</sup> century intelligentsia diligently cultivated the self image of a 'middle class' (madhyabittasreni), below the zamindars and above the toilers". Thus we can say that the present day middle class has its roots in Govt. services and professions of law, education, medicine, journalism and the like. It was not only the middle class which benefitted from the British, in fact the British also strengthened their presence in India through the middle classes. The middle class helped the British in terms of the much needed human resources. The British did not have sufficient manpower and resources to integrate the administrative and legal machinery. It was the middle class which provided the British a much needed resource base upon which they built a nationwide administrative network. Also the presence of Indians in the political, administrative, legal and economic framework provided legitimacy and credibility to the British rule.

In this regard the acceptance of the formation of Indian National Congress by the British and also support in its establishment as a political entity representing the Indian opinion can be cited as an example of the interdependence between the British rulers and the Indian middle classes.

The political associations of pre-congress period were dominated by educated middle class i.e. lawyers, teachers, doctors etc. They were middle class professionals who formed these associations and forwarded their agenda before British. Some of these associations were poona Sarvajanik Sabha (1870), Indian Association (1876), Madras Mahajan Sabha (1884), presidency association (1885). The ground for the formation of congress was already prepared. However it was A.O. Hume who is credited with

formation of Congress as he mobilized and unified the leading intellectuals of those times under one roof of Indian National Congress in 1885. The prominent among the nationalists leaders were D.E. Wacha, Pherozshah Mehta, W.C. Bannerjea, S.N. Bannerjea.

However the relationship between the British rule and the Indian middle classes was not confined to this mutual interdependence. It was natural that the educated and self respecting Indian middle classes were bound to assert themselves against the inherently oppressive and elitist British rule. The presence of alien rulers in the form of British was too large a factor to be ignored in the rising wave of nationalism. The enormous role played by the Indian National Congress in leading the Indian masses towards independence best represents the antagonistic aspect of the same interdependence.

### **Mobilisation of masses and Fuelling the freedom struggle**

Establishment of colonialism led to the dissemination of British culture, ideology and religion in India. It seemed as if it was the failure of Indian civilization. This situation was perceived as a challenge to Indian culture. Thus an attempt was made by newly emerging middle class or western educated Indians for bringing reforms in social institutions. These intellectuals got awareness from the contemporary developments in the west. They came to know about the transformation brought about in the west by their western counterpart through the movements like Renaissance, Reformation and Democratic Revolution or Reforms. Although Indian middle class was not the product of Industrialisation but it emerged as a result of government services or professions like law, education, journalism, medicine etc.

The middle class of colonial India provided leadership to Indian masses, be in the field of social reforms or igniting the nationalist feelings among people in colonial India. It was only English educated class which was able to understand the nature of British rule and got aware of the happenings around the world. The importance of this section was emphasized by Amrit Bazar Patrika of 9 December, 1869 in such a manner; "Middle class ('madhyabitta') people are always considered the most useful group in any society. Our country's welfare depends to a large extent on this class. If there is ever to be a social or any other revolution in this country, it will be by the middle class. All the beneficial institutions or activities that we see in our country today have been started by this class".(Sarkar,2005)

The intellectual class provided the reform movements with the ideas of rationalism, universalism and humanism. Thus they became able to analyse the traditions with rationalistic approach e.g. Ram Mohan Roy refused to accept the infallibility of Vedas, Swami Vivekananda goes to the extent of saying that the scientific method should be used to justify religious beliefs. Akshay Kumar Dutt gave medical opinion against child marriage. Aligarh movement focused on the reconciliation of Islamic teachings with the needs of the modern times. The perspective of the reformers was universalistic and humanitarian. The social reforms were brought about not only in the field of religion but also in language, literature, art, philosophy etc. thus the educated middle class lead India in various fields such as revitalization of traditional knowledge and culture. Modern Indian history is replete with the names of enlightened individuals who lead the reform

movements. The prominent among them were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Jyotibha Phule, Gopalhari Deshmukh, K.T. Telang, B.M.Malabari, D.K.Karve, E.V Ramaswami Naicker and B.R. Ambedkar etc.

The reformers used English and Indian languages to reach the masses through media and served as a link between British Government and the masses as a consequence of which rich literature on patriotism was produced in India during this period. These movements spread all over the country.

### **Reformist legislation and middle class**

The ideas of liberty equality and justice were imported by intellectuals to India. Thus with their persistence efforts various administrative measures were taken by the British in the field of social reforms. The regulation of 1829 was passed during the period of Lord William Bentinck for abolition of sati. Govt. declared practice of sati (burning alive of widows) as illegal and punishable. This was the effect of indefatigable efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The Hindu Widows Remarriage Act was passed by the British in 1856 which legalized the marriage of widows. Ishwar Chander Vidyasagar and D.K. Karve (in western India) made efforts to to get this legislation passed. D.K. Karve is also credited for opening the Indian Women's University in Bombay in 1916.

Child Marriage was prohibited by the passage of 'the Native Marriage Act (or the Child Marriage Act ) in 1872. Although it had limited impact yet it was a considerable effort. In 1891, Age of Consent Act was passed which forbade the marriage of girls below the age of 12. Sarda Act of 1930 increased the age to 18 and 14 for boys and girls respectively.

### **Rise of Nationalism**

The leadership role provided by the intelligentsia or the middle class in the Indian struggle for freedom is very hard to overstate. They awakened the masses against the British rule. They played a significant role in arousing nationalist feelings among people. The British introduced modern education system which gave Indians an exposure to western thoughts and ideas. The educated elites who took up professions like law, medicines etc. visited England for higher education. "This ever expanding English educated class formed the middle class intelligentsia who constituted the nucleus for newly arising political unrest. It was this section which provided leadership to the Indian Political associations".

Several newspapers in English as well as vernacular were started to spread the ideas of democracy, rights etc.

The form of expression of the ideas and thoughts of intellectuals was literature especially in regional languages. Thus a lot of patriotic literature was produced in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. This literature helped in unifying the masses where essays, novels, poems and drama enriched the Indian literature. They also helped in awakening the Indians about their rich heritage and culture and created nationalist feelings.

It was through the efforts of the intellectuals that the true nature of the British rule was exposed to the people. The economic exploitation of India by the British was best exposed by 'Drain of wealth' theory propounded by Dada Bhai Naoroji. R.C. Dutt's 'Economic

History of India' (1901-03) presents a well documented economic critique of British Rule in India. He explained Indian Poverty as an outcome of British policies, destruction of handicrafts and excessive revenue burdens on India. This step proved very fruitful in the rise of nationalist feelings among people and made them vigilant about the exploitation of the country in the hands of the British. They created a public opinion that British rule was major cause of India's poverty.

The antagonistic aspect of the relationship between the British rule and the Indian middle classes manifested itself during the revolutionary activities in the last decades of 19<sup>th</sup> century and also in the formation of political association conscious of the interests of the Indian masses. This aspect strengthened throughout the national movement beginning from the Swadeshi movement through the revolutionary activities of the second phase and through all the Gandhian movements towards the achievement of Independence.

### **CONCLUSION**

Summing up the relationship between middle class and colonial rulers we can say that this class was a product of the new administrative and economic set up which was in place due to the British policies. The educated got employment in Revenue, Police, Justice and other departments. Emergence of Middle Class was facilitated by modern education and consequent work opportunities available in offices set up for commercial, administrative and other purposes by the colonial government. Thus the conceptual and political boundaries of Indian Middle Class rested on mediation between colonial rulers and colonial subjects. The relationship premised on subordination to the colonial power but providing cultural leadership to indigenous people.

The middle classes provided the British with much needed human resources in order for them to strengthen their rule in India and the British rule in turn helped the Indian middle class in its expansion and growth by way of the economic and administrative policies. To this end it was a relationship based on mutuality between the two, however the antagonistic aspect of this relationship was manifested in the struggle for independence which was led mainly by the middle classes against the colonial rule. Although the middle class owes its origin to British rule however it is this class which constructed a path for the devastation of the colonial rule.

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