



Early Middle Class in India

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ABSTRACT: This article tries to engage with the idea of middle class. It tries to historically trace the evolution of the Indian middle class and juxtaposes it to similar evolutionary developments of the middle class in the West. However, it limits the discussion specifically to the early middle class. The article highlights the elusive character of middle class which leads to a halo of ambiguity that gets established around the concept and identity of middle class. Nevertheless, Indian middle class has been rather inclusive constantly alluring everyone to align with it. Along with this, it also displays a caliber that is rather introspective leading to persistent self-discovery. The changes in the political structures, politics, laws and governments has also contributed to the regular reformulation of the idea of the middle class. The discussions in the article brings out economic and material, and socio-cultural basis of understanding the middle class along with the political basis to its existence.

KEYWORDS: Middle Class, India, Intermediate Class, Elusive, Plural, Distinct

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I. Introduction

E P Thompson has argued that - 'No actual class formation in history is any truer or more real than any other, and class defines itself as it materializes. Class, as it eventuated within nineteenth century industrial capitalist societies, and as it then left its imprint upon the heuristic category of class, has in fact no claim to universality'.¹ It is with such an understanding of class that I would like to engage with the idea and meaning of middle class, one that constantly defines itself according to the context along with leaving enough space for self-discovery. Today, the middle class in India has become a category to which everyone wants to align. It is an identity that has allured everyone by its benefits. Unlike the other class understandings and definitions, middle class in India is not an exclusionary category. It is an inclusive category which has been changing its own definitions over time to absorb more and more groups of people. This article engages with the transformations that the middle class in India has undergone in terms of identifying and defining itself. It specifically discusses the early ideas about the middle class. It brings the focus of the debate to the exact time of emergence of the middle class in India. It also tries to point out the difference between the causes and context that led to the rise of the middle class in the rest of the world and the causes that led to the rise of middle class in India.

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The lack of any universal understanding and unanimous agreement on the meaning of the middle class in India makes it a complicated concept to engage with. Another reason that has made the decoding and deciphering of what constitutes the middle classes more important is the failure of Marxism to decode whether this group was on the side of the exploiters or the exploited. It is because of this that E O Wright argues that the middle class is a reason for embarrassment among the scholars of class. According to him, the reason behind this is that the middle class poses a threat or a problem for the analysis of class entirely in terms of histories of class struggles, labor and capital. For Wright, the middle class was the class that sold their intellectual labor for wages.

¹ E P Thompson, "Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class Struggle without Class?" *Social History*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (May, 1978): 136.

As has been argued by Marx, middle class was called the 'ideological classes' which contributed in manufacturing 'false consciousness' and a premise for cultural legitimacy for the ruling bourgeoisie class. The middle class was considered as the bearers of cultural capital by Gouldner. They were called the new petty bourgeoisie by Poulantzas. Though, the way in which different scholars looked at the middle class varied. There was some consensus regarding the understanding of the middle class. On the one hand, middle class was seen as being different from the feudal and plebeian class in a lot of ways. On the other hand, there was also some consensus on the fact that they overlapped with the two classes in a lot of other ways. Among the various strands of meanings that have been attached to the middle class in India, the neither-nor notion of avoiding extreme ends is quite crucial. Thus, the middle class becomes neither conservation, nor progressive, neither rich nor poor, and neither left nor right. It is because of this characteristic of being able to lie in the middle that the middle class comes to represent the most popular and common values of the society.

However, this feature of lying in the middle does not help while determining class positions. As has been argued by Weber, class positions are largely determined by the material resources and skills that one possesses, especially in the market. In Weber's theorization, the petty bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia were mainly those who constituted the middle class. Scholars like Burton Stein have gone a step further to argue that there is a significant stream of thought in academia which considers the Indian middle class as a variant of the petty bourgeoisie. According to these scholars, India was a country that was in the process of incomplete transition. They termed such countries as the intermediate regimes. However, this narrative can be complicated even further by pointing out the social composition of India with a plural mix of caste, region, religion and language which play a consequential role in determining the course of politics as well as forms of identity like class positions.

For Weber, class as a category becomes more important in the capitalist and market driven economy because individuals constantly keep competing for economic gains and profits. Thus, he defines class as groups of people who share similar market situations. Similarly, Karl Polanyi's magnificent work on social relations and class based distinctions in Europe provides a good insight on the understanding of class formations. He argues that class based distinctions emerged with the development of modern day market based economies. This change in social relations which was a result of the economic developments and industrial revolution has been called a change from culture to contract by Polanyi. Thus, it was the emergence and the change in market structure that brought about changes in the social structures by giving rise to new structures. He argues that individuals are no longer recognized by their status in the social order. Individuals are identified by the kind of services they can offer to the market. Thus, we see that the understanding of class becomes exceedingly important for the understanding of a specific context. However, it is more complex than generally thought of.

To better understand the middle class it is important for us to understand how class identities build themselves through their interaction with the market. Weber plays a crucial role in carrying this discussion further. He argued that the market structure, brings about significant changes in the understanding of class. The second element that plays a crucial role is determining the range of services that one can offer to the market. Thirdly, middle class gets identified by their commitment to certain values and principles. Lastly, as has been argued by Weber, it is the pattern of consumption that determines class positions. However, according to him, there is a difference between status groups and class situations. He argues that status groups are identified and defined through specific styles of life. For him, class situations on the other hand step from one's relationship with the process of production and consumption affected one's style of life and not class position.

However, for a lot of other scholars this has been the limitation of Marxist understanding of class. They looked at class only as an economic category, ignoring all the other categories. Hence, Surinder Jodha and Aseem Prakash argue that, Marxists looked at class more as a material relationship rather than as a mental disposition.² It was rather Antonio Gramsci who provided a more constructive analysis of the middle class. He argued that middle class played a crucial role in creating as well as maintaining the dominant ideology that would regulate the social structure in society.³ It is this project that I would like to extend where class gets to be defined in broader sense rather than just being seen through a single lens. This will help us in understanding the economic transformations that take place around us. A broader understanding of the middle class also takes the practices of status building and its representation beyond the primary influence of capital and labor relations.

I would like to briefly make a mention of Bourdieu and his theorization of class reproduction which is inalienable to any study on or engagement with class formations. He has very lucidly pointed out that class identity and differentiation depend on the everyday practices and social cultures which are determined by the social and cultural too, apart from the economic. He brings three very important issues under discussion - the

² Surinder S. Jodhka, *Oxford India Short Introduction: The Indian Middle Class*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016): 13.

³ Satish Deshpande, *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*, (New Delhi: Vikings by Penguin Books, 2003): 129.

different forms of capital, everyday practices that define and refine class and the magnificent role played by culture as a set of differentiated tastes and socialization as a set of consciously differentiating practices.⁴ It is because of such a study and the successive studies that followed that one could comfortably argue that class positions and class identities are defined by a plurality of reasons and criteria. Hence, moving beyond the Marxist understanding of class is the need of the moment, because of the simple reason that Marxism failed to capture the reasons behind the emergence and the feature of the middle class. Having said that, I do not in any way want to undermine the Marxist understanding of class. What I want to propose is that class is not just determined by the modes of production and relations of production, but it is also determined by other factors like cultural practices, tastes, skills and expertise, values, manners and various other attributes that define one's identity as being different from the other and immediately sets a hierarchical undertone. It is through such a positioning that one derives agency in a lot of ways. In this context what becomes relevant is to quote the understanding or theorization of Wacquant. According to him identities, practices and life experiences that are shared by particular classes are very much a part of the making of the classes and not something like an after-thought on the existing classes.

Along with the contention over the meaning of class, there is also an unresolved dispute over the genealogical tracing of the origins of the middle class. There are numerous theorizations on the emergence of the new middle class in the west. G.D.H. Cole points out two major reasons for the growth of the new middle class in the west. According to him, the two reasons were the growth of schools and education and the spread of joint stock companies. He argues that the old middle class occupied a position in the economy because of being outside the class structure. Thus, the old middle class was neither the capitalist nor the working class. However, the new middle class was very much a part of the joint stock companies and corporations that emerged. Moreover, the middle class expanded with the growth of the service sector or what we also refer to as the tertiary sector. According to Rachel Dwyer, the term middle class first emerged in the late eighteenth century in England, even when references of people of middle station and middling sorts is found in the late seventeenth century.⁵ In this context, the middle class was considered to be an elusive term used to define what people were not. She argues that the middle class referred to those people who worked but did not get their hands dirty. According to her, others depended on the middle class for living as they provided employment since they were generally the commercial capitalists. In a word then, middle class was economically in the middle, having their own set of lifestyle and sharing ideas of liberal individualism.⁶ She, describes the middle class as a post feudal group which had various economic opportunities.

On a similar vein, Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, in their book titled '*Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe*' argue that the middle class as a social category has a long history to go back to. According to them, the middle class constantly defined themselves as distinct from the others. They are of the opinion that they did this through a value system based on a search for individual rights, protection of their possession, glorifying individual achievements, and having a culture of their own.⁷ For them, there were two conditions that can be considered conducive for the rise and formation of the middle classes in the world. The first condition came with the age of Enlightenment and the second came with the Industrial Revolution. These led to the emergence of a new social order which was distinct from the earlier and with time this group only kept expanding. According to them, it was the rise of capitalism that made the middle classes an integral part of a unitary social order. In the capitalist era the middle class does not just imply as being in-between the aristocracy and the workers but also a class that had wide range of occupational interests despite being held together by a common style of living and expected behavior. Another important feature of the middle class in the contemporary phase is its commitment to democratic principles and liberal values.⁸

However, in the Indian context, the understanding of class becomes even more problematic because of the overlapping interests and identities. It is because of these complexities that, till a few years back, middle class in India was a highly unexplored terrain. On a similar vein, Sanjay Joshi has also regretted that even when there has been constant use of the term 'middle class' it has never been deeply researched or understood which has led to the constant misuse of the term and its origin in the Indian context. Hence, this engagement with the understanding of the middle class in India becomes important.

According to Dwyer, the beginnings of the Indian middle classes can be traced to as long back to the Mughal revenue system. She argues that the Mughal revenue system was based on land being the primary unit

⁴ Henrike Donner and G De Neve, edit., *Being Middle Class in India: A Way of Life*, (New York: Routledge, 2011): 6.

⁵ Rachel Dwyer, *All You Want Is Money, All You Need Is Love: Sex and Romance in Modern India*, (London: Casell, 2000): 58.

⁶ Dwyer, *All You Want is Money*, 58.

⁷ Imtiaz Ahmad and Helmut Reifeld, edit., *Middle Class Values in India and Western Europe*, (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2014): 1.

⁸ Ahmad and Reifeld, *Middle Class Values*, 2.

through which value could be determined. Hence, the landowners became the dominant social group of people. The permanent settlement also recognized and allowed the right of the landlords to continue to collect revenue as capitalist landlords. This according to her enabled a more independent class from which much of the higher bourgeois then emerged.⁹ However, a lot of others have a different perspective on the rise of the middle class in India.

Ahmad and Reifeld through their research argue that the emergence of middle class in India has a lot in common with the emergence of middle class in European countries. Indian middle class arose out of the enterprising Indians enthusiastically responding to the new opportunities of making money that they were thrown open to. They argue that when the European traders came to India for the first time to buy Indian manufactured goods for trade in Europe, they had to depend on a group of Indian middlemen. These men became their contacts, agents and service providers and helped the European traders in understanding Indian language, customs, values and manners. These middle men also became the contact, agents, interpreters of financial matters for the European traders. Ahmad and Reifeld have argued that it was these middle men that constituted the nucleus for the formation of middle class in India.¹⁰ There were however, certain differences too that existed between the European and Indian middle classes.

These differences can be understood better if we look at what the other scholars have theorized about the early middle class in India. For example, B.B Mishra defines the growth of middle class in India as opposed to how it grew in the west. He argues that in the west, especially in England, emergence of middle class was a result of economic and technological changes. According to Mishra, the middle class in England was engaged in trade and industry. However, contrary to the developments in England, the middle class in India emerged as a consequence of the changes in law and administration and not because of economic developments. The identity of middle class in India belonged to a class of learned professionals. For him, the dominant reasons for the formation of middle class in India were India's traditional emphasis on literary education along with Britain's rule and its imperialist economy aiming at making the intelligentsia.¹¹

For Mishra, the middle class in India arose as a result of social policy changes, introduction of new economic structure and industries, introducing new professions under the British system. For him this happened around the middle of the eighteenth century. He argued that the rising middle classes consisted of four classes.¹² The first was the commercial middle-class of middlemen and brokers who worked with the foreign companies. There was a class of specialists in Business Administration that grew around this time in India. The second class consisted of the money-lenders, *baniyas*, brokers and the new agents of creditors. This class specifically referred to the new moneyed class who invested in land. The third class constituted of the industrial middle class. This class was comparatively small as argued by Mishra. The main reason behind this was that the growth of industries was slow in this period. The last class comprised of the educated middle class of professionals which emerges with the introduction of western education.

It has also been strongly argued by scholars that, to be able to comfortably administer the huge territory of India the colonial rulers needed to have indigenous bureaucrats. One of the major impact of the implementation of the colonial policy by the British lay in their decision to create loyal, local intermediaries for ruling Indian territory. One could just take a look at the 'Minute on Indian Education', 1835 by Lord Macaulay to understand the rationale behind the evolution of this intermediary class. Lord Macaulay argued and I quote him here,

'to raise up an English- educated middle class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern- a class of persons Indian in color, in blood, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population.'¹³

It is after this that select groups of people were sent to Britain to pursue education and trainings. Universities were simultaneously opened in India. Through these practices that the British engaged with, we see Mishra's argument about a new class shaping up because of the public policy of the colonial rulers standing true. According to him, the ideas and institutions of middle class social order were not unique to India nor did it grow from within India, but were rather imported to India. These ideas and institutions were implanted within the country, unfortunately without equivalent and parallel developments in its economy and social spheres.

⁹ Dwyer, *All You Want is Money*, 59-60.

¹⁰ Ahmad and Reifeld, *Middle Class Values*, 9.

¹¹ B. B Mishra, *Indian Middle Class: Their Growth in Modern Times*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1979): 14.

¹² Mishra, *Indian Middle Class*.

¹³ Lord Macaulay, "Macaulay's Minute on Education", February 2, 1835, <http://home.iitk.ac.in/~hcverma/Article/Macaulay-Minutes.pdf> (accessed July 9, 2018).

Thus, he argues that the middle class that the British wanted to produce was not the originator of new values and methods. On the contrary, in reality, they were just a class of imitators of their colonial masters.

According to Mishra, there were numerous institutions that were conducive for the capitalist expansion in India, even before the British rule. For example, there was a well-established class of merchants, artisan industry and other occupational specializations. He argues, that the money economy in India also developed early. However, these conditions were not enough. After the creation of new social relations and class dynamics by the British rule in India, a new social structure emerged. British rule facilitated the emergence of intermediaries between those who rule and those who were being ruled. This intermediary class was expected to facilitate in the smooth functioning of the administration. It was this class that was also constituted as the middle class in India then. As part of their education policy the British tried to create a class which could be compared to theirs on certain limited grounds.

Lata Mani argues on a similar opinion when she says that,

‘the middle class were the middlemen of the East India Company’s revenue and commercial transactions, the classic comprador class, benefiting from opportunities afforded by colonial rule, but ultimately constrained by the conditions of colonial subjugation. The economic and political context of colonialism meant that their empowerment as landlords did not enable their emulation of the improving English gentry as East Indian Company officials had hoped. On the contrary, they were to become a rentier social class divorced from the productive economic functions that had characterized their English counterparts. This was partly because the rise of these landed elites turned not on technological innovations, but proceeded on the backs of a peasantry made vulnerable both by the loss of their customary rights in land and by new laws which strengthened landlord control over peasant labor. At the same time, they continued to attract those whose fortunes were made through trading or money lending but who had relatively few avenues for productive investment in the commercial sector.’¹⁴

It is with such an understanding and narrative that Laundry and March’s theorization become relevant. For them, the emergence of a middle class was a decisive moment in the history of Indian nation building. It was a decisive moment because it reflected an open structure rather than a close structure of opportunity. It reflected a moment of upward mobility and achievement that were beyond subsistence. According to Laundry and March, the emergence of a middle class marked the moment of transition from an industrial society with antagonistic and polarized classes of propertied and property-less to a society which had buffering groups in the middle.¹⁵ In the contemporary times, this transformation from antagonism to having a buffering middle class has taken stronger roots.

One should however, not assume that a close affinity with the British was bringing only benefits for the middle class. Partha Chatterjee has argued that the colonial middle class enjoyed a place of subordination as well as domination. In the late nineteenth century, domination, (both political as well as economic) by the colonial elite was a lived reality. Thus, this class of middle class emerged in a relation of subordination. However, he argues that the contestation of this relation was premised on its cultural leadership over the indigenous people.¹⁶ This created an element of domination. Tanika Sarkar has made a similar argument when she argues that the,

‘middle class, bhadralok, world which situated itself below the aristocracy and dewans and banias but above the lesser fold who had to soil their hands with manual labor in countryside and towns and who tended to be lower castes or Muslim. It largely snapped its links with the older culture..., developing more refined and somewhat puritanical norms and distinguishing itself from both, the luxury and corruption of old style Babus, and the superstitious ways of the uneducated masses.’¹⁷

Thus, we see that the emergence of the middle class involved both the exercise of power as well as being a subject on whom power was being exercised. The growth of middle class should neither be seen entirely as a consequence of the growing nationalist fervour. In fact, as has been argued by scholars, the middle class formation was based on many values, norms and practices which had till then marked the collective identities of certain classes and continued to do that in the process of contemporary class formations too. Some of these values as Donner and De Neve point out are morality and respectability, gendered identities, material cultures,

¹⁴ Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debates on Sati in Colonial India* (London: University of California Press, 1998): 169.

¹⁵ Laundry and Marsh in Surinder S. Jodhka, *Oxford India Short Introduction: The Indian Middle Class*, (New Delhi: 2016, Oxford University Press): 1.

¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee, “Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonised Women: The Contest in India”, *American Ethnologist*, Vol.16, No. 4 (November, 1989): 622.

¹⁷ Raka Ray and Seemin Qayum, *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity Domesticity and Class Culture in India*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2009): 169.

and the symbolic role of family values as a marker of Indian modernity.¹⁸ There seems to be a general understanding that this class emerged around the same time that modernity got introduced. Hence, the middle class started to get closely associated with ideas of modernism. They started to be seen as an enlightened class bringing knowledge to the rest of the people.

It is these dynamics of domination and subordination along with the complexities that a culturally rich and plural country like India poses that led the middle class to evolve and define themselves as being more than just a class that emulated the British practices, tastes and cultures. Thus, scholars have argued that, the middle class that Macaulay envisioned turned out to be an intelligentsia which included a group of people who were socialized in the traditions of their parents but were equipped and educated in western modes and skills. Consequently, they invented new ideas and values from the old material that they had at their disposal.¹⁹ Sanjay Joshi agrees with this theorization and argues that the modern ways of life of the middle class was very different from that which was envisioned by Macaulay. Joshi argues that much of the power that was enjoyed by the group of men and women who claimed to be the middle class came from their claim to emulate an ideal type of modernity that had been appropriated from their counterparts in the west. However, they wanted to create an Indian version of this modernity which would be different from their western counterparts.²⁰

Apart from all these areas that managed to generate consensus as well as disagreement on the understanding of the middle class, there is another area that needs to be focused on. It is argued that there exists a wide variation in terms of the income, occupation, education, wealth and status of the middle class. It is this variation that defines middle class in negative terms or against what it is not as has been argued by Dwyer.²¹ These variations get more complex because of the plural nature of India and has led people to even question the very existence of middle class in India. According to Andre Beteille in his paper, *The Social Character of the Indian Middle Class*, before the nineteenth century, there existed numerous distinctions on the basis of class, caste, kinship. However, there was no middle class that existed. This according to him was a feature of the western countries. He also argues that, from the European point of view, it was the very absence of the middle class, which was the main reason for India being considered an oriental society. For him the growth of middle classes is a rather modern phenomenon which took place post the nineteenth century. Contrary to the opinion of Ahmad and Reifeld discussed above, Beteille warns us against looking at the middle class as opposed to or in comparison with the European middle class. For him, the Indian middle class is the most polymorphous in the world. Thus, he argues that the right way of approaching the understanding of the middle class in India is by trying to understand what it essentially wants to distance itself from and not so much about what the middle class has or lacks.

But, before we understand what the middle class wants to distance itself from, we need to understand that the concept of class in general and middle class in specific, is located at a cross-road of the political-economic-social and the cultural context. Thus, what they distance themselves from is also influenced by these sectors. Similar arguments have been put across by scholars like Satish Deshpande. He argues that class is the core and most important feature of the causal sequence proposed by the Marxist theory. What he means by this is that, what one is at the economic level shapes and determines what one experiences at the social level. And it is this that ultimately determines what one does at the political level.²² Thus, the economic, social and political are closely connected. They are influenced and in return influence each other. Thus, one can argue that economic constituents significantly determine oneself, shaping one's social experiences which finally determines their political inclinations and orientations. He considers the middle class or what he calls the intermediate class as the most important non-polar class. He too considers the middle class as a blind spot for the Marxists as well as the liberal mainstream. While sketching the genealogy of the middle class in India, he argues that for a very long time the Indian middle class has been considered quite unworthy or self-indulgence. The only mandate that the middle class in India enjoyed was to act in accordance with the people who constituted the nation. Thus, he argues that for a wide spectrum of scholarship, middle class was an average class that best represents the whole of society.²³

II. Conclusion

¹⁸ Donner and Neve, edit., *Being Middle Class in India*, 3.

¹⁹ Christophe Jaffrelot and Peter Van der Veer, edit., *Patterns of Middle Class Consumption in India and China*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2008): 15.

²⁰ Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

²¹ Dwyer, *All You Want is Money*, 59.

²² Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, 126.

²³ Deshpande, *Contemporary India*, 129.

Seen from this perspective, one can argue that since the middle class represented different gamut of people, there was a consequential element of vibrancy that it exhibited. The variance and vibrancy of the middle class in India was such that it made the process of defining it significantly difficult and rather impossible. Let us take an example to explain this. Many in India who are actually a part of the middle-middle or upper-middle class identify and consider themselves as being a part of or belonging to the category of elites. For them, the term middle class is reserved for the lower rungs of the group. This gives rise to complexities in terms of categorization. It also raises the question of how class identities in the contemporary times are rather flexible and misleading. The gradation within the middle class generates the contradiction between what one actually is and what one covertly wants to be. Thus, there arises a conflict between the real, material or actual and the desired or aspired and imagined. The terms bourgeoisie and middle class have also been interchangeably used in many contexts which only aggravates the existing contradictions. The variation in terms of the terms used to define the middle class, variation in terms of the practices that define this class and the different narratives on the reasons and emergence of the middle class makes it a complex yet intriguing idea to engage with.