

Indian Middle Class and Freedom Movement

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ABSTRACT

The Indian middle class emerged in the 19th century, focusing on Indian governance and avoiding conflict. They joined the Indian National Congress and advocated for home rule to protect their interests. The growth of the middle class was influenced by mild government, rule of law, private property security, education, and liberal employment policies. The freedom movement in India was a collaborative effort between intellectuals, the economic bourgeoisie, and the working class. The intellectual class organised the Indian people and initiated the national movement. Marxist thinkers believe the intellectual class is the base of Indian nationalism. The early freedom struggle in India focused on liberating the country from alien rule and establishing self-government. Indian intellectuals led the movement, while the British economic policy created a new class of businessmen and workers.

Keywords :- Intellectual, Middle class, Economic, Indian National Congress, Nationalism

Introduction:

The emergence of the Indian middle class, not on the line of the western bourgeoisie but in the Indian style, where there was no direct conflict between the exploited and the exploiters or the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, played the notable role of liberating the country from British rule. In the beginning, both the Indian economic middle class people and the intellectuals took the British rule as a boon for India's development. But the Indian middle class, both the intellectuals and the economically rich people, remained attached to the British so long as their interests were served. Realization came to them that their interests would be permanently safe provided home rule was established in India.

“The well-conscious and ambitious people of the middle class, realising that so long as the control of the means of production and distribution remained in the hands of the British ruling oligarch, their speedy growth in the field of trade and commerce was impossible, and they joined their hands with the freedom fighters of India.”¹ Once the native bourgeoisie joined the Indian National Congress, they adopted the watchwords like ‘Swadeshi’ and ‘Protectionism.’ What the Indian middle class wanted immediately was the home rule that could have protected their economic interests. Their argument for

self-rule was that “the economic policy of the foreign rule was dictated by the interests of the English and not that of India.”²

M. N. Roy remarked that “The intellectuals trained in modern political thought laid down the theoretical foundation for the nationalism that was still to come, but the dynamic cause behind the movement was the economic revival of the native middle class after more than a hundred years of repression.”³ Roy further mentioned that “the modernised intellectuals and the progressive trading class who had earned much money in collaboration with the British were in need of an outlet for investment of their newly accommodated funds.”⁴ Thus, both the economic bourgeoisie and intellectuals of the country joined their hands together and raised the banner to oust the British from India and establish home rule. The political development of modern India since the beginning of the 19th century may be considered as the history of the struggle of the emerging middle class, which tried to establish its own identity.⁵ Misra shares the view that “radical changes under the British rule, emanating from progress of education and advancement of technology, led to the growth of a middle class whose component parts exhibited an element of uniformity in spite of being heterogeneous and even mutually

conflicting at times.”⁶ Describing the emergence of the Indian middle class, Misra said that:

The mild and constitutional character of government and the rule of law, the security of private property and defined agricultural classes, a native system of education and a period of continued peace, an economy of Laissez Faire and a liberal policy of employment and social reforms (during the British period) introduced new relationship which tended to transform society from a basis of status to contract” and “contributed to the emergence of modern middle class⁷

It is an undisputed fact that both the class of intellectuals and the economic bourgeoisie of India joined their hands together to fight for the freedom of India. Even the working class of the country did not remain behind in the freedom movement of the country. The rich and prosperous people of India thought that their interests would be safe and protected in an independent India because the government would adopt the policies more favourable and sympathetic to the growth of the Indian economy, which would provide enough scope for the growth of capital economy in the country. On the other hand, the people of the working class felt that their economic interests would be nicely protected under the home rule. Thus, such feeling and thinking brought them together. Both were of the view that their bitter enemies were the British and their rule.

It is also an undisputed fact that it was the class of intellectuals who first politically organised the Indian people and began the national movement. Marx maintained that the national movement began in India with the rise and growth of the system of capitalism under British rule. According to the Marxists, the political struggle for freedom in India “was the culmination of the social change that started in Bengal during the second half of the eighteenth century.” It was a product of the disruption of the old economy and social order, proceeding from the growth of “market society.”⁸ The British new economic policy “created a new social class of traders, merchants, subordinate agents of the company, private British traders, middlemen, moneylenders, etc.”⁹

According to non-Marxist thinkers of India, the base of Indian nationalism is the intelligential class, not the economic middle class as it is believed by the Marxist thinkers. The economic middle came into being in India when Indian nationalism had stood on its feet. The class of intelligentsia was very much devoted to nationalism and had real conviction for nationalism because their national feeling was based on spiritual feeling while “new classes of modern bourgeoisie and a working class came into existence” with “the growth of modern industries.” Desai also shared the view that the intelligentsia class came into existence much before the existence of the “industrial bourgeoisie and led the national movement in each phase.”¹⁰

The Marxist principles of class consciousness, class conflict, and class war are the products of capitalism. When the capitalism comes to a climax, the working-class people in the industries and factories who are exploited by the capitalists obtain the awareness of the causes of exploitation and recognise the exploiters. They began to organise as a class and thereafter, indulge in conflict with their masters (employers). Thus, class antagonism takes place. In the case of India, there was no class consciousness and class antagonism in the early phase of the freedom struggle. Indian intellectuals were not a class, but they were class elites who led the freedom movement. Due to the British new economic policy, the new class of businessmen appeared, and the number of the workers in the Indian industries and factories established by the British and also by the Indian industrialists increased, but there was no sign of class antagonism. The basic and most vital question before Indians, either educated or uneducated, rich or poor, industrialists or workers, was how to liberate the country from the alien rule and establish self-government. The feeling of nationalism spread among all of them, and they all contributed to the freedom movement according to their ability and capacity.

The rich class in India emerged due to British economic policy, but they could not be called bourgeoisie in the Marxist sense. In the opinion of Anil Sen during the 1870s and 1890s, India did not

witness class consciousness or class conflict because very little economic development had taken place. In his own words,

There were keen internal rivalries, but these were between caste and caste and community and community, not between class and class. Moreover, those groups that felt a similarity of interests were themselves the product of the bureaucratic imitative that of economic change. Since these groups can be largely identified with the men educated in the western style, and since it was these men whose hopes and fears went into the building of the new associations that emerged as the Indian National Congress, a conceptual system based on elites, rather than on classes, would seem more promising¹¹

Thus, it is crystal clear that the Indian national movement could not allow class antagonism to grow in India during the phase of the freedom struggle because the Indian economy had not reached the stage where class antagonism or class war is a must. The most vital problem before the country was to oust the alien rule and establish the government made of Indians. The Indian middle class joined the Congress-led freedom movement and tried to mould the movement towards economic nationalism based on the pattern of the western countries; the working-class people became alert. During the phase of the freedom movement, the class consciousness of the working-class people had emerged. When they observed that the Indian National Congress was led by the people of the affluent class and they were more conscious about their interest in independent India, the working-class people, too, began to raise the question of their status and identity. The socialist leaders of the freedom movement provided the leadership to mould India towards becoming a socialist country. The leftist Congress leaders, annoyed at the conservative forces of the Congress joining the Congress, “applied all their efforts to capture the leadership of the labour movement as well as to break up the monopoly of the reactionary elements over the

Indian National Congress by infiltrating it and its Working Committee.”¹²

Conclusion:

Thus, the class consciousness and class conflict appeared in India a little before India’s independence when the working-class people as well as the poor people, being conscious of their future in independent India, became alert and active. Their leaders began to demand the establishment of socialist rule in independent India. The makers of the Indian constitution applied all the possible efforts to provide the interests of such poor and backward people the constitutional adjustment when they meet together to constitute a new constitution for independent India.

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