Role of the Middle Class in the Freedom Movement: Bengal Perspective

Ms. Manisha Choudhury

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Savitri Girls' College

Abstract

The contribution of the middle class to the freedom movement was immense. This class, primarily comprising educated professionals, teachers, lawyers, and government employees, played a pioneering role in spreading nationalist consciousness and modern political ideas. They actively participated in mass movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement, boycotted the British education system and professions, and played a special role in building public opinion against British rule. Initially, the middle class sought to achieve independence through reforms; however, when that proved unsuccessful, they brought forth the concept of a sovereign democratic India and transformed the nature of the struggle. The middle class was the driving force of the Indian freedom movement. Through modern political thought, increasing public awareness, and direct participation, they led the nation forward on the path to independence.

Keywords: Middle class, Emergence of the middle class, Nationalist movement, Colonial India, Freedom struggle.

1. Introduction

The role of the middle class in the freedom movement was of paramount importance. They played a vital role in the independence struggle by providing leadership, creating political awareness, and shaping national consciousness. The middle class served as the pioneers, organizers, and leaders of all political and nationalist movements. Through educational and promotional activities, they brought the ideas of nationalism and freedom to the broader section of the Indian populace. The credit for developing a love for democracy among the people belongs to this class, which attracted sharp sociologists and philosophers whose writings inspired the masses.

2. Historical Origin and Development of the Middle Class in Bengal

To understand the extent of middle-class participation in the freedom movement, it is necessary to know the historical continuity of its origin and development. The development of the middle class in Bengal was the result of a long historical process. The natural evolution of the middle class had already begun before the defeat of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah to the British East India Company at the Battle of Plassey in 1757. All symptoms of middle-class development were emerging in a traditional manner similar to Europe. With the growth of industry and the urban economy, the middle class emerged in Western Europe. The term 'middle class' was initially used to denote the newly emerging bourgeois or industrial class. Later, this term was applied to social groups positioned between industrial establishments on one side and the working class on the other. During this period, several small-scale industrial establishments appeared in various parts of Bengal. Groups of engaged cultivators, manufacturers, and traders consolidated their positions. However, due to colonial aggression, this process did not last long. The natural progression of the Bengali middle class was obstructed by the British colonial rulers.[1]

[1] Durgaprasad Bhattacharya, Growth of the Middle Class in Bengal, Calcutta, Writers Corner Publication, p. 3

3. Colonial Intervention and the Transformation of the Middle Class

At one stage, this class was deviated from its own path of development. Even before the fall of Siraj-ud-Daulah, the East India Company enlisted a group of middlemen who bought local products and sold British goods. They were known as Gomasthas. After the Battle of Plassey, their numbers grew rapidly; these local agents were representatives of the Company. They stood outside the process through which the traditional middle class was developing. After accumulating sufficient wealth, representatives of this class started their own businesses. Some of them donated large sums for social and religious causes. The Company was dissatisfied with their rise and began displaying discriminatory behavior towards them. During this time, new rules and regulations were introduced that favored British merchants and discouraged local entrepreneurs from investing capital in trade or industry. Virtually, local capital was diverted from trade and industry into purchasing zamindaris (landed estates); Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement resulted in the emergence of a new landlord class, which played a leading role in shaping the trajectory of middle-class development.[2]

The British not only established their rule over most parts of the subcontinent, but they also transformed the region's economy and politics. In addition to altering the land revenue system, they introduced a modern industrial economy to the region, restructured political and administrative frameworks, and introduced Western ideas and culture to the Indian people.[3]

4. Education, Urbanisation and the Expansion of the Educated Middle Class

By the mid-nineteenth century, the colonizers had managed to bring a large portion of Indian territory under their control. Following the success of the Industrial Revolution during this period, manufactured goods from Britain began flowing into India, expanding the volume of trade between Britain and India. They introduced railways and other services such as the postal department; recruiting personnel for these administrative institutions required a vast number of educated people. It was impossible to source them all from Britain. To meet this need, the British opened schools and colleges across various regions of India, especially in major cities like Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. Those employed in administrative jobs under the British government included independent professionals such as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and journalists. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the membership of this educated middle class steadily grew in size. Most of them were concentrated in urban centers and primarily hailed from upper-castes backgrounds.[4]

4.1. English Education and the Formation of the Middle Class

In 1837, English replaced Persian as the official administrative language. By the mid-nineteenth century, to enjoy social privileges, the local populace had to learn English for administrative communication, giving birth to a new education policy. As a result of this policy, English gained recognition as the medium of instruction in schools and colleges and became the medium of government communication.[5] Lord Bentinck's education policy of 1835 was instrumental in creating an educated middle-class society, and the introduction of English education played a pivotal role in the development of the middle class.[6]

---

[2] Mukherjee S. Awakening: The Rise of the Bengali Middle Class in Colonial Bengal. New Delhi: Oxford University Press; 2004, pp 17.

[3] Weber M. Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1978, pp 65

[4] Bagchi AK. Colonialism and Indian Economy. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010, pp 101

[5] Indian Education Commission. Report on the History of English Education in India. Calcutta: Government Press; 1920, pp 87

[6] Seal, Anil. The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968, pp 5

5. Agrarian Change and the Formation of the Middle Class

On the other hand, after the court ruled against the zamindari system under the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1859, peasants benefited partially. The Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 helped farmers acquire ownership rights over land. Furthermore, another law in 1902 assisted peasants in establishing land rights. Thus, farmers felt more secure in protecting their property rights, and through this process, an independent middle class emerged from within the agrarian community. Subsequently, the prices of their commercial produce increased, allowing them to earn additional income. This surplus income began to be spent on their children's education. Through this mechanism, the surplus of the prosperous farming class was utilized for education, leading to the emergence of a middle class from among them. Some of these newly educated youths became involved in politics, while others joined various professional fields, including administrative work.[7]

5.1. Interrelated Processes in Middle-Class Formation

Following three interrelated processes contributed to the development of the middle class:

- **Firstly,** the surplus generated through the mediation of the Company's local middlemen;
- **Secondly,** the numerical growth of an administrative and social elite from among the English-educated public; and
- **Thirdly,** the establishment of peasant land ownership rights through the legislations of 1859 and 1885.

5.2. Social Transformation and the Rise of New Middle-Class

Thus, it is evident that one reason for the rise of the middle class during British rule was the destruction of the old ruling class, and another reason was the emergence of merchants, intellectuals, and other classes. The former was due to the British conquest of India, while the latter was primarily due to the expansion of the landholding class, the intellectual group, and the Western education system.[8]

5.3. Emergence of the Service-Oriented Middle Class

Under British rule, Calcutta developed as an administrative and commercial center, leading to the formation of a service-oriented and trade-dependent middle class. As a result of British administration, the number of government employees increased, laying a strong foundation for the educated middle class.

5.4. Traditional and New Sections of the Middle Class

The middle class comprised people from various backgrounds, including intellectuals, professionals, and salaried employees. Apart from the English-educated segment, there were other sections of Indian society that could be termed middle class. The most prominent among them were small traders, shopkeepers, and independent artisans—social groups referred to as the 'old middle class' in the Western context. In India's traditional structure of social stratification, merchants and artisans always possessed a distinct social identity. As changes began occurring in the economy in response to the new administrative policies of the colonial rulers, many independent traders moved to newly emerging towns.[9]

5.5. Processes in Middle-Class Formation

The development of Bengal's middle class was the result of a continuous historical process. This class expanded during British rule as a consequence of the spread of English education, urbanization, economic changes, and social restructuring.

---

[7] Kopf DM. British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1969, pp 121

[8] Bagchi AK. Colonialism and Indian Economy. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2010, pp 15

[9] Kopf DM. British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance. Berkeley: University of California Press; 1969, pp 52

5.6. Modern Industry, Railways and the Industrial Middle Class

During the colonial era, modern machine-based industries also began to develop. In the mid-nineteenth century, the establishment of railways created conditions for the growth of modern industry in India. Colonial rulers primarily constructed railway lines to transport raw materials required for British industries abroad. Growing economic activity stimulated trade and commercial operations, and some local merchants accumulated sufficient savings to invest in modern industry. The Swadeshi Movement launched by nationalist leadership encouraged indigenous industries. Along with employing a labor force, industries also recruited skilled workers. Thus, skilled industrial employees, alongside individuals appointed to administrative positions by colonial rulers, formed a part of the newly emerging middle class.

6. Print Culture, Literature and Social Reform

In 1818, the Bengali newspaper Samachar Darpan was published. This created a forum for the educated Bengali-speaking middle class to express their views across various newspapers, thereby accelerating middle-class development. In the growth of Bengali literature, theatre, and culture, middle-class cultural identity developed and strengthened significantly. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Brahmo Samaj and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's female education movement helped foster social awareness among the middle class. People of this class were highly educated and conscious. They were vocal against the injustices and oppression of British rule.

7. Social Reform to Political Nationalism

Although the middle class in India emerged under the patronage of British rule and its members were educated in the English language and culture, they did not remain loyal to their masters forever. Members of the middle class were not only actively involved in social reform movements, but they also began raising political questions and, in the long run, challenged the legitimacy of British rule in India. It was the members of this middle class who led the freedom movement. As Pavan K. Varma has noted, the educated middle-class elite—from which all leaders of the national movement emerged—came to oppose the British in the name of the broader populace, representing Britain's own

8. The Middle Class and the Colonial State

While various sections of Indian society participated in the struggle for liberation from colonial rule, it was the middle class that took over the institutions of governance from the colonial rulers. An argument has been made that the end of colonial rule did not mean a complete break from the past; most of the institutional structures established during colonial rule continued to operate for independence under the ideals of the new administration. Therefore, the middle-class members who worked for colonial rulers did not lose much in terms of their positions within governing institutions.

9. Students and the Anti-Partition and Swadeshi Movements

Among the middle class, those who directly participated in the freedom movement included the student community. The extreme enthusiasm of students and their devoted dedication to the motherland inspired the nation in the freedom struggle. The student community of Bengal and India actively participated in the powerful anti-Partition movement. Student movements were led by Surendranath Banerjee, Aswini Kumar Dutta, Ananda Chandra Roy, Umesh Chandra Dutta, and others. Seeing the enthusiasm of students in this movement, Surendranath Banerjee noted that students actively participated in the Swadeshi movement and played a pioneering role in shaping it into a mass movement.

Many students faced police atrocities, arrests, and even expulsion, yet they did not stray from the path of movement. Some students later joined various revolutionary organizations and engaged in armed struggle, such as the Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar Party, etc. The bravery, zeal, and sacrifice of the student community helped

transform the anti-Partition movement into a mass movement, and they emerged as fearless soldiers in the future freedom struggle.[10]

10. The Middle Class as a Nationalist Vanguard

Percival Spear described this middle class as a dynamic minority forming a common vanguard of knowledge, ideas, and values. Owing to its education and relationship with the ruling class, this group assumed leadership roles in the Indian National Congress. Exposed to education and modern ideas, this class was positioned to articulate demands for self-rule, civil rights, and economic progress. National liberation movements in various parts of the world exerted a profound influence on Indian nationalists. The success of these movements inspired and influenced the thoughts and strategies of Indian nationalists, providing a broader context for their own struggle against colonial rule.

11. Colonial Discrimination and the Growth of Political Consciousness

British policies perpetuated racial myths of white supremacy, discriminatory laws, and segregation, which deeply hurt Indian sentiments. Reactive policies such as reducing the maximum age limit for the ICS examination, hosting the Grand Delhi Durbar during a severe famine, and passing the Vernacular Press Act fueled discontent against British rule.[11]

16. Political Organisation and National Mobilisation

A. R. Desai opined that as individuals and groups within this class became aware of their fundamental identity of interests, they felt the urge to organize themselves at an all-India level and initiated movements to advance their common interests on a national basis.[12]

The middle class formed political parties and organizations, raised political consciousness, and encouraged people to join the freedom movement. They supported movements financially. Many influential figures of the middle class led the independence struggle.[13]

16.1. Literature and the Cultivation of Patriotism

Literary intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, and Subramania Bharati composed patriotic songs and literature, instilling patriotic fervor among the public. Furthermore, the middle class was active in the freedom movement in various ways.

16.2. Formation of Political Organisations

Formation of Political Organizations-They established various political parties and organizations to join the movement. They authored various periodicals and literature to foster a spirit of independence among the public. They not only participated in movements but also built the foundation of the freedom movement by providing leadership and raising political consciousness.

17. The Congress and Middle-Class Leadership

The Indian National Congress, particularly in its initial years, was dominated by the professional middle class. Most active Congress members were lawyers, journalists, academics, and even Mahatma Gandhi, who is credited with transforming the Indian National Congress into a mass movement, was a lawyer. Although Gandhi successfully brought peasants and other sections of Indian society into nationalist work, the leadership of the

---

[10] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908* 45-60 (People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1973), pp 89

[11] Chandra, Bipan, *India's Struggle for Independence* 124-132 (Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1989).

[12] Desai, A. R. *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Oxford University Press, 1948. Pp. 7

[13] Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984, pp.201

Congress Party remained middle-class and upper-caste in character. According to Varma, the British felt far more comfortable dealing with the English-educated, urban-centric middle class in Congress than with the uninitiated masses.[14]

18. Conclusion

Although the middle class introduced Western lifestyles and ideas in various ways, they did not hesitate to criticize their Western masters for their faults. In India, the middle class entered the national movement as advocates of reform. When they realized that desired results were not being achieved, they altered the nature of the struggle, advocating for a sovereign democratic India. History bears witness that from the founding day of the Indian National Congress until India achieved independence, intellectuals representing the middle class remained at the forefront. Their philosophy evolved according to the needs of society. Although during the initial phase of their struggle they believed in submitting petitions to the government and had full faith in British justice, when their expectations were shattered, they adapted their perspective accordingly.

References

- Bagchi, A. K. Colonialism and Indian Economy. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Bhattacharya, Durgaprasad. Growth of the Middle Class in Bengal 3. Writers Corner Publication.
- Chand, Tara. History of the Freedom Movement in India. Vol. 1, Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1961.
- Chandra, Bipan. India's Struggle for Independence. Penguin Books, 1989, pp. 124-132.
- Desai, A. R. Social Background of Indian Nationalism. Oxford University Press, 1948.
- Hasan, Mushirul. Roads to Freedom: Prisoners in Colonial India. Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Indian Education Commission. Report on the History of English Education in India. Government Press, 1920.
- Kopf, D. M. British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance. University of California Press, 1969.
- Kudaisya, Gyanesh. A Republic in the Making: India in the 1950s. Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Mukherjee, S. Awakening: The Rise of the Bengali Middle Class in Colonial Bengal. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Palshikar, Suhas. Indian Democracy. Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Ray, Rajat Kanta. Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal, 1875-1927. Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 142-155.
- Sarkar, Sumit. The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal: 1903-1908 45-60. People's Publishing House, 1973.
- Seal, Anil. The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century. Cambridge University Press, 1968.
- Varma, Pavan K. The Great Indian Middle Class. Viking / Penguin Books India, 1998.
- Weber, M. Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology. University of California Press, 1978.

[14] Varma, Pavan K. The Great Indian Middle Class. Viking / Penguin Books India, 1998, pp.9