

The Indian Middle Class

— Its Future

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THE middle class in India, as elsewhere in the world, is a much-maligned group of people. Members of this class are abused and slandered by political extremists, both of the right and of the left. The reason is that the middle class refuses to toe the line: Members of this class are self-centred: they are unwilling to sacrifice their deeply ingrained sense of personal integrity and self-sufficiency. They would perhaps subscribe to a diluted kind of social solidarity or even anarchism provided their own basic scheme of values was left untouched. Not infrequently they have an innate suspicion of idealistic experiments. They are inclined to roam backward and forward, but they would never go out of their tether which is their own particular view of life. And at the end of their going forward and backward in moments of stress, they only succeed in sticking to the status quo. This is a mentality which exasperates extremists. Thus, the middle class is described as a reactionary class. And people talk about the decay of this class and indulge in a lot of wishful thinking.

Heterogeneous

The middle class is always a mixture of heterogeneous elements. That is why the impact of social and political change may undermine the stability of certain elements but actually strengthen the position of others. Rot may set in within a certain sector of the middle class. But the class as a whole does not decay, because other and more vital elements grow and redress the balance. It is usual to include in the middle class the middling size entrepreneur in industry and trade, the simple producer of goods, such as the artisan and the farmer, the small shopkeeper and tradesman, and the official and the salaried employee. If we take these broad groups it is quite easy to see how heterogeneous the middle class is. And since the economic interests and incentives of these groups are not identical, their power of adaptation and resistance to a given change will not be the same. Let us see how during the last few decades these classes have maintained or lost their position relatively to one another and whether only certain

elements of the middle class, rather than the middle class as a whole, have been showing signs of degeneration and decay.

In Europe, A Spearhead

In India the modern middle class has shown the conditioned reflexes of an abnormal growth induced by foreign rule. In the West, the Burghers in the towns who formed the solid core of the middle class, were the spearhead of the economic revolution which destroyed feudalism. They were a militant class with the sturdy independence of a new class which fashioned a new society. It played off the other social classes, the nobility, the peasantry, the rising capitalists and the working class against one another to strengthen its position and aligned itself against the one or the other according to circumstances to maintain what it understood as the social balance. This has involved this class in a long struggle the issue of which even now is not clear. But this struggle has sharpened its reactions and moulded its peculiar attitude and sense of values.

In India, An Abnormal Growth

In India the order of events has been different. The British rule created a new feudal class in place of the old, authentic feudal class which had struggled against the rising British power. This new class again was composed of new elements that had enriched themselves as agents or employees of British merchants and traders who found in India a vast field for profitable enterprise, particularly because there was no sharp distinction between governing and trading in those early days. Thus a new class which spilled over from the port towns and other centres of British power to the countryside came into existence to serve as the intermediary between foreign merchants and traders, on the one hand, and the masses of people, on the other, in the joint venture of economic exploitation. This upper class created by the British gradually found itself related to the new middle classes in the descending order of wealth and influence.

These new middle classes, no doubt, consolidated their position in the

urban and rural society as stable elements. But their role was not that of Burghers in the West. They were essentially feudal elements with feudal traditions and attitudes. It was by accident that some were in the countryside and others in towns. All were linked in the feudal chain which the rising British power was interested in preserving. But it must be said that the British system of law created contractual relations and a field for individual enterprise, although economic enterprise was based largely on predatory exploitation of the masses of the population. Thus, that vital element of the middle class which is concerned with simple production of goods, i.e., the artisan and the farmer, steadily lost ground. The small shopkeeper and tradesman gained ground in the atmosphere of a commercial civilisation. The official and salaried class gained considerably in power and influence, because it was allied to British commerce or British administration. The middle sized entrepreneur in industry and trade also had a chance so long as he fitted himself into the new hierarchical economic order which rested on the supremacy of the foreign ruler and the foreign trader,

Lacks Vital Elements

The middle class in India thus grew as a parasitic class devoid of the vital elements like the independent farmer and the self-respecting artisan. A time was bound to come when the inherent economic instability of the Indian middle class could not but create a crisis. The most numerous elements of this class were people with inadequate intermediary interests in land as rent receivers, who had to supplement their income by urban occupations either in the professions or as salaried employees. Owing to the poverty of the country and lack of industrial development, the chances of employment were not expanding as fast as the number of men seeking employment. Owing to the growing depression in agriculture the income of this class as rentiers was also dwindling fast. With the recent disappearance of landlordism this element of the middle class has now become exclusively dependent upon urban occupations. Inflation

during the two wars seriously undermined its economic strength, The Great Depression between the two wars sapped its economic vitality. This element of the middle class actually found the ground slipping from under its feet. To crown all the Partition destroyed whatever economic strength and resiliency it possessed in spite of the vicissitudes of the last few decades.

Led National Movement

This section of the middle class has joined hands since the beginning of this century with other classes in the community in the nationalist movement. In fact the lead came from the urban middle class which had felt most the cramping influence of British rule. Within this class the hard core of nationalist resistance developed amongst people who had become partially uprooted from the soil and yet regarded shop-keeping, trading and manual work as degrading occupations out of a sense of feudal contempt for these occupations. They naturally assigned a higher value to literature and art and revivalism in general which inspired our nationalist movement.

If one were to trace the history farther one would be tempted to point out that during the period of the second world war and the years following the Partition this section of the middle class has become more unstable. While the class of small merchants and traders and independent producers like the skilled artisan and the farmer have gained in relative economic prosperity, the lot of the salaried employees, with the exception of those in the higher ranks of government service, has now become desperate, particularly in view of the additional burden of maintaining unemployed and unemployable relations who have joined them as refugees.

Present Crisis

The economic and moral crisis through which the middle class has now been passing in India has raised serious doubts and misgivings about the future of this class. All predictions about the future of a class are not only difficult to make but are apt to go very seriously wrong. A class in a class-ridden society has very tenacious roots. It has a knack of absorbing plenty of shocks and is not seriously shaken by the ordinary pressure of circumstances. But it does change its character and adapt itself to the basic changes in the social environment. Hence the future of the middle class has to be fore-

cast in terms of how it is expected to fit into the changing society in India.

The middle-class has not been properly understood either in this, or in any other, country. There are persons who think that the members of the middle class are just lackeys' of the propertied classes or feudal elements. It is said that they are under the economic grip of the richer classes in society. Therefore, they have a stake in the existence and stability of these classes. But, so runs the argument, with the increasing concentration of wealth and economic power, the middle class is economically pauperized and is gradually reduced to the level of the working class. So long as it is able to maintain its snobbish respectability it tries its best not to align itself with the working class. But when pauperization reaches an extreme limit this class just disintegrates and cannot but be merged with the working class in the final struggle for a classless society.

Holding the Balance

Things just do not happen in this way. Those who forecast the future of the middle class in this way do not care to see whether what really happens to the middle class fits into their theory. Life being a series of compromises, social life does not follow the pattern of polar opposites which appears so neat and attractive in theory. The fact remains that while class conflicts go on, the middle class stands always in the middle to hold the balance.

Now, a class holding the balance is intensely disliked by extremists. The bourgeois is the worst enemy of the communist, for the communist knows that the bourgeois works for stability, and so long as he is allowed to function he contradicts in himself the polarization of social forces and the formation of only two opposite classes ready to fight each other to a finish. But while the middle class refuses to join the working class as a militant group, it is not a class members of which can be correctly described as lackeys of capitalists. In fact this class sees a good deal to resent in the present economic order, and, if things are squarely put to it, would go very far indeed in trying to check the excesses of a materialistic and capitalistic civilisation. Unfortunately those who speculate about the future of the middle class fail to see that this class is vital enough not to lose its balance in the conflict of social forces.

Is the middle class, then, a class of people who, consciously or unconsciously, are just opportunists? Has this class a positive character of its own? There are extremists who say that the middle class combines in itself the worst of both the worlds. The members of this class do not have the grit, the realism and the capacity for manual work which one associates with workers and peasants. They also lack the initiative and enterprise of the capitalist class.

We are told that the middle class represents decadence of life and culture in modern communities. It may be stolid, but has too much of 'small town' spirit in its attitude to life. On the other hand, those whom the middle class is supposed to serve as their lackeys' think that the worm after all cannot really turn, and, therefore, they need not bother about the future of this class. Thus, the middle class is slandered and underrated by extremists in both the camps who want the middle class to be merely a camp follower if it is more sensible and is able to make a choice of its lifetime. But I would submit that these extremists ignore history and have failed to grasp the positive role of the middle class.

Curbed Feudalism

As I have already said, the middle class in the course of its history has fought feudalism. In India it has not fought feudalism in the way it has done in Europe; but it has curbed the excesses of feudalism through its influence on administration and the making of laws very largely because it has been the repository of religious learning and moral enlightenment. In the West the middle class has fought capitalism as well and has aligned itself with the feudal class or the working class according to circumstances. At the same time it has fought the working class in alliance with its opponents. But this kind of behaviour may not be, described as mere opportunism. The middle class in the West has wanted to survive in a social order which should ensure opportunity for self-employment for independent ownership of property for the sake of self-employment. Naturally the modern capitalistic society which squeezes out the small man who wants to be his own employer is the enemy of the middle class. Similarly a socialist society which also destroys the independence and initiative of the small man seeking self-employment cannot also be a kind of society

which the middle class will welcome. If we bear in mind these basic attitudes of the middle class, it will be quite clear that this is not just a reactionary and decadent class. It has positive ideals and attitudes which distinguish it from other classes and which unconsciously influence the members of this class all the world over.

In India the absence of industrial revolution and the exigencies of British rule created a middle class which has forgotten its historic role and has lacked the initiative and enterprise of a virile class. British rule created a middle class the members of which fitted into the feudal set-up as subordinate rent-receivers and functionless owners. It also created an urban middle class consisting of clerks, bureaucrats, professional people and petty middlemen in business. Fortunately, this class received modern education which eventually proved a revolutionary force. The contribution of this class to our cultural renaissance and political freedom has been very impressive indeed. It has suffered and struggled for the sake of social and political ideals. But the time has now come when it must develop the basic attitudes of the middle class in other parts of the world if it is to survive economically as a socially significant class. I have always felt that Mahatma Gandhi's programme of economic reconstruction held the key to the realization by the Indian middle class of its effective role of holding the balance between the conflicting economic forces in modern industrial societies. Gandhiji raised self-employment of the small man to the level of a spiritual ideal. He laid emphasis on the development of individual initiative and enterprise, on manual labour and on constructive and creative work. He very clearly saw that the Indian middle class must save itself by ceasing to be either a parasitic class engaged in what he called unproductive work, or a class which is compelled by economic necessity to lose its soul and be used as an instrument of exploitation by others.

Economic Privation

The urban middle class is now passing through a crisis of economic squeeze and privation. We must also remember that it is a vocal class and can influence public opinion. Its economic distress has created a psychological and moral crisis. The danger now is that the economically unstable urban middle class may seek compensation primarily by featuring moral, religious, racial, patriotic and

'social' issues. Peeling economically inferior, the middle class asserts itself on a non-economic plane. Being individually unimportant, the middle elements seek collectively to rise to a state of significance by basking in the reflected greatness of institutions, organizations and personalities. Hence we see the ugly manifestations of psychological malaise like chauvinism, jingoism, provincialism, fraternalism, hero worship, faddism and styles. There is clear evidence that the urban middle class in India is treading a dangerous road. What can really rescue it is robustness of its own outlook and increasing awareness, on the part of the government, of the danger inherent in the slow disintegration of this class. Let us remember that German fascism was born out of post-war inflation which had squeezed and demoralized the German middle class.

Urban and Rural

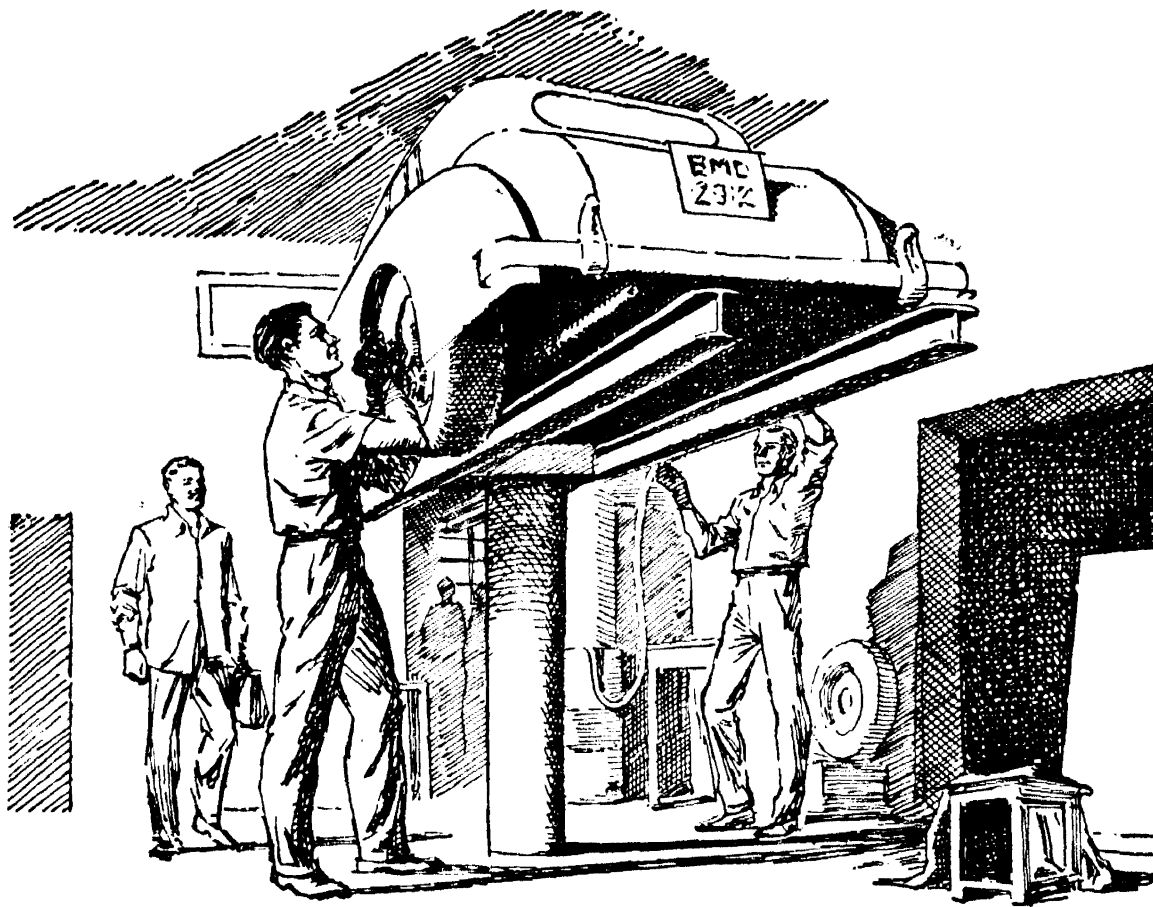
When one thinks of the future of the middle class, however, one must not ignore the emergence of a fairly strong rural middle class in India in recent years. This class is politically conscious and forms the backbone of rural society. It has become so powerful that no political party in the country dare impose economic burdens or disabilities on this class. This is a class which has been developing on the lines of the Western middle class with its ideal of self-employment for the small man. Its weakness, however, is its tendency to exploit the still smaller man. The future of this class is, in my opinion, very bright. Indeed the disintegration of the small urban middle class will not perhaps merit so much attention in a democracy as the welfare of the rural middle class.

Hence it stands to reason that the future of the urban middle class can be assured if it can align itself with the rural middle class to which it once belonged in the past. If the urban middle class can get rid of its preference for sedentary occupations and soft jobs and ceases to be merely a class of automatic brain workers, if it can outgrow its class prejudices and its attachment to tradition, if it can learn to respect the dignity of labour it can still meet the challenge of the times and perform its proper function in society. Otherwise its economic instability will spell its ruin. Its attachment to tradition and to the so-called cultural values of which this class is so proud will merely lead to frustration and moral chaos if its economic foundation resting on self-employment is undermined by the pressure of economic forces. At the same time I must say that it is the moral tone which this element has imparted to the changing social life in India which can sustain the middle class as a whole and, with it, the very basis of civilized existence in this country. The middle class will fall to pieces if it is to depend only on the interplay of economic interests. The farmer desires high commodity prices. The artisan desires low commodity prices. The public official favours high salaries. The small shopkeeper and tradesman favour low taxes. As regards wages and social policies the salaried employees have the interests of those who are given work. But the small capitalists have the equally definite interests of those who give work. The economic interests of the different sections of the middle class are not only different but also opposed to one another.

Gandhiji's Advice

It is, therefore, on the plane of higher values that the middle class can have real cohesion and avert disintegration although the economic and cultural base of its operations has to be different. Gandhiji understood this complex problem, and he also showed the way. Broaden the base of the middle class by joining the ranks of the simple producer of goods, the artisan and the farmer, the vital elements of the middle class which, in an economically backward country, are also the really stable elements. Otherwise you cannot stop the rot. This was his advice to the middle class that fought for freedom under his banner. Nobody has, to my knowledge, given better advice based on solid historical and sociological sense.

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