



# Understanding the Indian middle class with special reference to the middle class of Colonial Assam: A retrospective study

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**Abstract:** The 19th century is wonder for India as a new wave of change penetrated in the eco-political and socio-cultural field of India. The direct rule of the imperialist British gave birth to a middle class in India. This middle alias elite class imbibed by the spirit of western thought and ideology began to criticize the feudalistic and traditional system of India and thus, gave birth to renaissance and reformation movement in their societies. This is already treaded subject, despite that an attempt has been made to retread on it with a new and different look especially in Assam of colonial period. )

**Key-words:** Emulation, allegiance, appropriation, transmuted, paraphernalia, renaissance, moorings

## I. INTRODUCTION

Everywhere in the world, the middle class people play major role in a country. Hence, the question arises who the middle class people are. The controversy still persists pertaining to the exact connotation of the term 'middle class'. Generally, the middle class people are those who are neither rich nor poor. They may be divided into two groups: upper middle class and lower middle class. The position of middle class is in between the higher and the lower class. This middle class emerged out of development of economic disparity in the society.

The middle class people are found almost all the countries of the world. They play an important role in the construction and destruction of a nation. The rich becomes richer and the poor becomes poorer but those who adversely affected during this stage are the middle class people. The middle class people make the intelligentsia of a nation. They regularly read and write in the newspapers and form opinions in the light of day-to-day's achievements and failure of the government and mould the public opinion.

The people below the middle class criticize them out of jealousy and the people above the middle class criticize them because they are afraid of them. Besides this, they criticize one another on account of envy and emulation. The middle class people always face a conflict between their vain show and empty pockets with the result that they are snobs in majority. Karl Marx says that the middle class people are the unhappiest creatures in the society. They try their best to become rich and remain worried. The people below and above them oppose them tooth and nail. In consequence, there is a constant struggle in the society. In the long run, this develops in to a social problem.

The middle class people are always considered the most useful group in any society; and a country's welfare depends to a large extent on this class. If there is ever to be a social or any other movement, it is by this class.

The middle class is, essentially, urban concept which originally developed in Europe with the break-up of feudalism followed by the emergence of commercial and industrial bourgeois in the newly developed towns and cities. It emerged in the west, basically, as a result of economic and technical changes. In India, on the contrary, they emerged most in consequence of the changes in the system of law and public administration.

The 19th century is wonder for entire India as a new wave of change penetrated in the eco-political and socio-cultural fields of India. The direct rule of the imperialist British gave birth to a middle class in India. This elite alias middle class imbibed by the spirit of western thought and ideology began to criticize the feudalistic and traditional system of India; and with the association of the ruling class, they gave birth to renaissance and reformation movement in their society. In Bengal, this movement was led by the *zamindars* and officials of the East India Company. Under the aegis of Raja Rammohan Roy, Debendra

Nath Tagore, Dwarka Nath Tagore, K.C.Sen, Swami Vivekananda and Henry Derozio; this renaissance and reformation movement received tremendous impetus in Bengal. In Bombay, rich and wealthy class; and in Madras, the business class took the leadership of these movements.

Slowly and gradually, the English education expanded and as a result, a new bourgeois class comprising of engineers, doctors, lawyers and businessmen emerged in the Indian scene who had fetched messages of new age to their society. This newly emerged middle class, totally depended for their change and development on the colonial government, expressed their allegiance to the government. Indeed, the Indian middle class prior to 1919, showed their allegiance to the government as their economic life was entirely depended on the government. The newly emerged middle class understood that they were unable to throw off the yoke of the British rule and therefore, accepted their rule and demanded certain facilities from them. The Landlord Association of 1837, the Bengal British Society of 1843, the British Indian Association of 1851, the Indian Association of 1875 and the Indian National Congress of 1885 were some of the middle class organizations; and these organizations confirmed their aims and objects through prayer and petitions. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of Indian renaissance was a true supporter of British imperialism. He and his contemporaries even welcomed the British rule. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, an eminent social reformer of the 19th century also supported the British rule and believed that the British would bring peace and prosperity to the country and under their shade, reform of the society would be possible. Ram Mohan Roy and his contemporaries noticed the superstitions and prejudices that prevailed in their societies and condemned them tooth and nail. But surprisingly, they rarely criticized the exploitation and appropriation policy perpetrated by the white government on the masses. To reform the society was their primary concern and country's liberation, on the contrary, was secondary one.

The Indian middle class could not become independent due to their loyalty and slavish mentality towards the colonial government. Lock and key to the trade and commerce was at the hands of the government; and the capitalist and newly emerged class carried on their business under them by keeping good relation with them.

Towards the close of the 19th century, industry and commerce developed by the British capital gave birth to a bourgeois class in India. This bourgeois class was independent in wealth and money. But the problem was that despite having capital, this indigenous capitalist class could not compete equally with the colonial capitalists due to their bias trade policy, which finally forced them to support the independence movement against the colonial government of India.

The British administration scared of introducing higher education in India but for their administrative interest, they contemplated for the introduction of primary education. The landlords were dead-against of imparting primary education to the lower classes as this would end their exploitation and supremacy over them. So, they tried their level best to dash the noble attempt of the government to the ground. They favoured illuminating the higher classes than the lower classes and even took step for that. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was not dead-against of the primary education. But his class weakness was detected when he set framed certain rules that women education should be kept restricted to the rich and the higher caste Hindu families only.

The Indian nationalism was not the outcome of anti-imperialist struggle and because of this; the middle class had no relation with the peasant class. The middle class witnessed the distress, ups and downs of the peasant classes; despite that, they did not come to their rescue. Due to their allegiance to the government, the Indian National Congress comprising of the bourgeois class had no relation with the peasant class from the very beginning. Prior to 1919, the nationalist movement began in India was not transmuted to the war of independence. Free participation of the peasants and the labour class made the independence movement dynamic, strong and alive. The congress did away with their parochial and conservative character by freely allowing the lower class to become its member and made thus, the independent movement strong.

Assam came under the colonial yoke just after the occupation of other provinces of India. As a lately developed and emerging class, the influence of all India middle class, especially the Bengalee middle class was clear on the Assamese middle class. According to Guha, three types of influence are clear on the newly developed Assamese middle class: the spread of the British administration and its associate infrastructure; the cultural activities of the Christian missionaries, particularly the American Baptists and the direct and indirect impact of the Bengal renaissance.

The industrial revolution of England in the 18th century brought some socio-economic and political changes which gave birth to a new middle class in England. But their taste, mentality and outlook were totally different from the middle class of pre-industrial revolution era. But in India, a westernized intelligentsia had emerged among the Indians by the sixties of the 19th century and they become the torch-bearers of new modern India.

The middle class existed in Bengal even towards the close of the 18th century. On the consolidation of the British rule, the growing demand for administrative and professional skills created the urban middle class educated on western lines possessed of professional qualifications.

Up to 1860, the number of middle class was small in Assam. This class emerged as a class by the close of the 19th century and began to make its influence in the social life of Assam. Although the middle class is an urban and modern concept in Assam, they had their moorings in rural areas. Even in Bengal, many of the elite classes in the past wanted to die and live with their kith and kins in the villages. Towns and cities attracted them a little later. The Assamese middle class like the moderates was the product of the colonial age and their appearance as a class was primarily an urban phenomenon.

Anil Seal and John Broomfield termed the English educated as 'elite' and there were more tendencies among the high-caste Indians to include themselves under the banner of this group. According to Sarkar, the very use of the term 'elite' is dubious as the genuine and exclusive elite in colonial India consisted of the whites. If we accept him, then the Indian elite is not genuine elite.

The trading and commercial classes in Kamrup and Goalpara with direct contact with the European traders in the last quarter of the 18th century, the land revenue system in the district of Goalpara, the Mughal land revenue system introduced in Kamrup and the material foundation laid by the British rule in Assam accelerated the pace of development of these segments of middle class, on one hand and contributed towards the creation of this class in other parts of Assam as a distinct social entity, on the other. Among the factors, according to Kalita, responsible for the rise, growth and development of the Assamese middle class were :the increasing trade and commerce, the paraphernalia of a bureaucratic administration and courts, a new system of education based on western ideals of civil liberty, social ethics, legal procedure, notions of state and political theories and organizations, the creation of private property inland in absolute terms with the right of transfer, sale and mortgage and the introduction of the institutional devices for the collection of land revenue and the opening up of modern system of roads and communication, the railways and the tea industry.

The social roots of the Assamese middle class can be traced back to the *mauzadars* and the *vaishnava satras* of Assam. Dutta Dev Goswami (1818-1904) ,Hem Chandra Goswami (1872-1928),Pitambar Dev Goswami (1885-1962) hailed from three *satras* of upper Assam; and Abdul Mazid (1867-1924) , Ghanashyam Barua(1867-1923) and P.N.G.Barua (1871-1946) hailed from the *mauzadar* families contributed lots towards the emergence of early educated elite and middle class in Assam.

Like the Indian middle class of the 19th century, the newly emerged Assamese middle class also expressed their deep allegiance to the colonial government and wanted change and development of Assam under their tutelage. The allegiance they showed to the colonial government gave birth in their mind a colonial outlook and with such outlook, they judged their society and literature. This clearly safeguarded their class interest rather than the collective interest of Assam.

The Assamese middle class was the compound product of colonial bureaucracy, English education and tea industry. Though the three components played mutually supportive role, the social formation of the class was flexible and it was capable of absorbing newer elements.

Though the Assamese middle class was not a ruling class during the colonial period, it was able to maintain dominance over the Assamese society. Along with the middle class, another two classes emerged in the society. New industrial and commercial enterprises created new conditions and generated a new class of big businessmen and industrialists or planters who swelled the bourgeois rank. A class of labourers who were entirely dependent on wages for their subsistence, a phenomenon entirely new in the history of the region, emerged in the economy of the province.

Redundant to mention that a great wave of changes came in the socio-economic aspect of Assam just after the arrival of the British East-India Company. Money economy was introduced in place of feudal

economy based on *paik* system. Slowly and gradually, western system of education engulfed the old system of education. As a result, a new Assamese middle class emerged on the debris of old social system. The birth and growth of the Assamese middle class is the output of the British rule. The capitalist economy and education culture carried by the British gave birth to the Assamese middle class. The newly emerged middle class was comprised of two classes: one comprising of *mauzadars*, *gaon-burhas*, *mandals*, *satradhikars*, Brahmin intellectuals who resided at villages. This class welcomed and co-existed with the new social system but did not want to cut off their relations with the feudal social system. They scared of losing their social status if the feudal system met extinction. The other was comprised of magistrates, clerks, *munshifs*, doctors, lawyers, engineers, police inspectors who resided at towns. Undoubtedly, the middle class of towns were more radical than that of the villages. Western education, culture and rationalism made the minds of the middle class of towns more progressive, liberal and dynamic. But the fact is that despite having progressive and dynamic minds, this section still then stuck to the feudalistic culture of their ancestors. Therefore, the nature and character of this radical middle class of the towns also became half-feudalistic. As a result, conflict between the old and new thoughts became clearer in their mental world.

The Assamese middle class did not rise as a result of a single historical event and had passed through four stages of development: the period of gestation from the latter half of the 18th to about 1820 ; rise and growth from 1820 to 1850 ; further growth from 1850 to 1860 and again further development of expansion from 1880 to 1947

The middle class of Assam is the outcome of the colonial era but the way it emerged in the province is unlike the other provinces of India. In the process of colonization, a dependent colonial middle class was automatically and integrally created, though sick and perverted from its very birth. It was, therefore, incapable of growing in to a matured bourgeois class and leading the mass struggle with courage and conviction against imperialism.

The middle class of Assam was the direct product of the colonial British where Bengal had also a great role there. Under the shade of the British, a new Assamese middle class developed gradually in the late 19th century who was totally Calcutta-oriented located in colonial hinterland. This middle class was mainly comprised of high castes. The emergence of Assamese middle class gave to birth stiff competition between the Assamese and the *Bengalee baboos*. Unfortunately, the colonial government was little interested in educating the Assamese which delayed the process of class formation in Assam. The government served their administrative purpose by importing *Bengalee baboos* from Bengal. The Assamese middle class under such circumstances had to play a collaborative role with the colonial rulers to keep pace. However, with the emergence of national movement for independence and the growing popularity of the Indian National Congress and the consolidation of Assamese middle class in the 20th century; a large section of this class could gradually overcome this by merging the Assam Association with the Indian National Congress and thereby, abandoning its collaborative politics with the British colonialism.

### **Glossary :**

**Zamindars** : landlords, **gaon-burha** : head of the village, **baboos** : Bengalee gentlemen, **satradhikar** : head of monastery, **mauzadar** : in charge of a fiscal unit, **Assamese** : indigeneous people of Assam, **Bengalees** : indigeneous people of Bengal, **paik** : an Assamese ryot under the Ahom king, **mandals** : village surveyors in government employ, **munshifs** : judges, **vaishnava satra** : monastery of the Brahmaputra valley relating to Lord Bishnu

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