
UNIT 27 MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA

Structure

- 27.0 Objectives
- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 The Concept of Class and Middle Class
- 27.3 Middle Classes in the Western Countries
- 27.4 Middle Classes in India
- 27.5 Rise of Middle Classes in India during the British Rule
- 27.6 Politics of Middle Classes during the Freedom Movement
 - 27.6.1 Middle Classes in India after Independence
 - 27.6.2 Size and Composition
- 27.7 Growth of Middle Classes after Independence
- 27.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 27.9 Key Words
- 27.10 Further Readings
- 27.11 Specimen Answers to Check Your Progress

27.0 OBJECTIVES

After having read and studied this unit you will be able to:

- provide the concept of middle class;
- compare middle classes in India and western countries;
- describe the rise of middle classes in India;
- discuss politics of the middle class; and
- growth of middle classes after independence.

27.1 INTRODUCTION

The process of development or modernization being experienced in our country is not confined to the economy alone. It is leading to some fundamental changes in the social structure of the Indian society. As the process of change unfolds itself, new social groups and categories of people emerge on the scene. The institutionalization of the democratic system of governance based on adult franchise and the introduction of a secular constitution has transformed the traditional structures of power relations at different levels of social organization.

The last five decades of economic development and democratic governance have also transformed the structures of social stratification in India. The earlier system of domination and subordination based largely on the principles of caste hierarchy and ownership of agricultural land has given way to a different kind of power structure. Though the caste and the ownership of agricultural land continue to be significant, particularly in the rural areas, they are no more the exclusive determinants of social stratification in India today. A new set of power elite has emerged in India during the last fifty years or so. Similarly, we can observe the emergence of new social categories and occupational groupings of people.

Box 27.01

The social structure of Indian society has for long been viewed in the framework of caste system. However, the development of a new urban economy and the changes experienced in agrarian relations in the recent past have, in a sense, made the institution of caste less significant, if not redundant. Thus, in order to understand the nature of emerging power structure and the new system of social stratification we need a different set of conceptual categories. Some sociologists working on the subject have suggested that we should move from the “caste” framework to that of “class”. Some others have however argued that though the old system of hierarchy has changed, caste still continues to play a determining role in matters of status differences in the Indian society. However, for a balanced understanding of the contemporary Indian society, we need to use both the concepts — class as well as caste. It is in this context of the changing structures of social stratification that the emergence of middle classes in India should be understood.

27.2 THE CONCEPTS OF CLASS AND MIDDLE CLASS

The concept of class has been one of the most important categories in the Western sociology. There has been a long tradition of looking at the Western society through the conceptual framework of class. The classical sociological thinkers, Karl Marx and Max Weber, have written a great deal on the concept of class. Class was the most important category for Marx in his analysis of the Western society and in his theory of social change.

Marx’s model of class is a dichotomous one. It is through the concept of class that he explains the exploitation of subordinate categories by the dominants. According to Marx, in every class society, there are two fundamental classes. Property relations constitute the axis of this dichotomous system — a minority of ‘non-producers’, who control the means of production, are able to use this position of control to extract from the majority of ‘producers’ the surplus product which is the source of their livelihood. ‘Classes’, in the Marxian framework, are thus defined in terms of the relationships of groupings of individuals to the ‘means of production’. Further, in Marx’s model, economic domination is tied to political domination. Control of means of production yields political control.

In this dichotomous model of class structure, the position of the middle class is only transitional. The middle classes for Marx were the self-employed peasants and the petty bourgeoisie. They were so described because they continued to own the means of production they worked with, without employing wage labour. Marx predicted that these middle classes were destined to disappear as the capitalist system of production developed. Only the two major classes, proletariat or the working class and the bourgeoisie or the capitalist class were significant in the Marxian framework of class relations.

The other theorists of class have assigned much more significance to the ‘middle classes’. Foremost of these have been sociologists like Max Weber, Dahrendorf and Lockwood.

Max Weber, though agrees with Marx that classes are essentially defined in economic terms, his overall treatment of the concept is quite different from that of Marx. Unlike Marx, he argues that classes develop only in the market economies in which individuals compete for economic gains. He defines classes as groups of people who share similar position in a market economy and by virtue of this fact receive similar economic rewards. Thus, class status of a person, in Weber’s terminology, is his “market situation” or, in other words, his purchasing power. The class status of a person also determines his “life chances”. Their economic position or “class situation” determines how many of the things considered desirable in their society they can buy.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Explain Marx’s dichotomous model of class structure in about ten lines.
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- 2) Theorists that have assigned much significance to the middle classes include :
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Though, like Marx, Weber also uses the criteria of property ownership for defining classes, his theory provides a much greater scope for a discussion of the middle classes. He agrees with Marx that the two main classes in capitalist society are the property-owning classes and non-property owning classes. However, Weber does not treat all the non-property owning individuals as belonging to a single class of the proletariat. The “class situation” of the non-property owners differ in terms of their skills. Those who possess skills that have a definite ‘market value’ (for example, doctors, engineers and other professionals) are rewarded better than the unskilled labourers. Thus, their “class situation” is different from that of the working class and it is they who, in the Weberian framework, constitute the middle classes. Further, unlike Marx, Weber does not see any tendency towards polarization of society into two classes. On the contrary Weber argues that with the development of capitalism, the white collar ‘middle class’ tends to expand rather than contract.

The later sociologists have tended to follow the Weberian line of thinking in their discussions and studies on the concept of middle class.

A crucial distinction is made in the sociological literature between the “old” middle classes and the “new” middle classes. The term “old” middle class is used in the sense in which Marx had used the term “petty-bourgeoisie” i.e. those who work with their own means of production such as traders, independent professionals and farmers. The term “new” middle class is broadly used to describe the skilled or white-collared workers/ salaried employees and the self-employed professionals. Even though they do not own the means of production they work with, they are distinguished from the unskilled blue-collar workers. Their incomes being much higher than that of the blue-collar workers, they can lead a lifestyle that is very different from that of the working class.

27.3 MIDDLE CLASSES IN THE WESTERN COUNTRIES

Historically speaking, the term middle class was first used to describe the emerging class of bourgeoisie in Western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During the initial phase of development of the industrial economy, the bourgeoisie (the new class of merchants and industrialists) stood between the gentry (land owning classes and the aristocracy) on the one hand and the poor working classes on the other. As the industrial economy developed further, the land owning gentry declined and the bourgeoisie — consisting of the big industrialists and financiers — emerged as the ruling class. The term middle class began to be used for the independent small traders, professionals and artisans who stood in between the bourgeoisie on the one side and the working class on the other. These classes grew in number with the development of towns and increasing urbanization that accompanied the development of industrial production. The direct trading between consumers and producers became more and more difficult with growth of big towns and cities. These groups were later called the “old middle classes”.

The emergence of “new middle class” is attributed to the further expansion of industrial capitalism and the rise of big corporations with large and complex organizational structures. G.D.H. Cole, a well-known sociologist, attributes the birth of the new middle class to two important developments in the Western economy. First, an increase in the number of public schools and spread of education. And secondly, the spread of joint stock companies. These developments fostered large-scale enterprise and brought into existence a new class of salaried managers and administrators. Lockwood, another sociologist, also attributed the rise of the white-collared salaried class to the developments of corporate capitalism and the emergence of big organization.

Activity 1

Go to a housing complex and try to identify houses belonging to different classes. Make notes on houses with different types of people and jobs. Which would you say belong to the middle class and why? Compare your notes with other students in the study centre.

The crucial difference between the “old” and the “new middle classes” is their position within the economy. The old middle classes occupied that position by the virtue of their being placed outside the polar class structure. They were neither part of the capitalist class nor of the working class. The new middle classes, on the other hand, did not enjoy any such autonomy. They were part of the big organizations. Their intermediate position came from their place inside the industrial economy. Their growth occurred because of the new demands of modern industry that required the services of a large number of specialists, professionals, technical and administration skills. The “new” middle classes further expanded with growth of the “tertiary” or the servicing sector of the economy. Along with urbanization and industrialization, a large number of tertiary industries, such as banking, insurance, hospitals, hotel, tourism and the mass media developed. These servicing industries employed skilled labour and professionals. The proportion of this segment has been consistently increasing in the total working population in most of the Western industrialized countries. The Western experience seems to have proved Marx wrong. Though the “old” middle classes seem to have declined in strength, the size of the “new” middle classes has been expanding.

27.4 MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA

As we have seen above, the middle classes emerged for the first time in Western Europe with the development of industrial and urban economy. We have also seen that the term middle class was initially used to describe the newly emerging class of bourgeoisie/ industrial class. And later on the term was used for social groups placed in-between the industrialist bourgeoisie on the one side and the working class on the other i.e. the skilled professionals.

The historical context of the development of middle classes in Indian is quite different from that of the West. It was in the nineteenth century, under the patronage of the British colonial rule that the middle classes began to emerge in India. Though they emerged under the patronage of the British rulers, the middle classes played an important role in India’s struggle for independence from the colonial rule. During the post-independence period also, the middle classes have been instrumental in shaping the policies of economic development and social change being pursued by the Indian State, Hence the need to understand the middle classes, their history, their social composition and their politics.

27.5 RISE OF MIDDLE CLASSES IN INDIA DURING THE BRITISH RULE

The British colonial rule in India was fundamentally different from all the earlier political systems and empires that existed in the sub-continent. The British not only established their rule over most parts of the sub-continent they also transformed the economy and polity of the region. Apart from changing the land revenue systems, they introduced modern industrial economy in the region. They reorganised the political and administrative structures and introduced Western ideas and cultural values to the Indian people. As

pointed out by the well-known historian of the Indian middle class, B.B. Mishra, the peculiar feature that distinguishes the Indian middle classes from their counter-part in the West is the context of their origin. 'In the West', the middle classes emerged basically as a result of economic and technological change; they were for the most part engaged in trade and industry. In India, on the contrary, they emerged more in consequence of changes in the system of law and public administration than in economic development, and they mainly belonged to the learned profession"(Mishra, 1961:v).

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the colonial rulers had been able to bring a large proportion of Indian territory under their rule. It was around this time that, after the success of the Industrial revolution, industrial products from Britain began to flow into India and the volume of trade between Britain and India expanded. They also introduced railways and other modern servicing sectors such as the press and postal departments. A large number of educated individuals were required to staff these administrative institutions. It was not possible to get all of them from Britain. So, in order to fulfill this need, the British opened schools and colleges in different parts of India, particularly in big cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Write a brief note on middle classes in India. Use five lines for your answer.

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2) Write a short note on the rise of the middle classes in India after Independence. Use five lines for your answer.

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Those educated in these new institutions of secular education were to also become a medium through whom the British planned to spread Western ideas and cultural values in the Indian society. Those educated in these institutions were to not only work for the British but they were to also think like them. This intention of creating a native middle class that would become the carrier of Western culture in India was expressed quite openly by Lord Macaulay in 1835. In his Minute on Indian education, Macaulay said: 'We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect (as in Varma, 1998:2).

Over the years, a new class emerged in India. Apart from those employed in the administrative jobs of the British government, they included independent professionals, such as, lawyers, doctors, teachers and journalists. Membership of this "educated middle class" steadily grew in size during the second half of the nineteenth century. They were mostly concentrated in urban centres and largely came from upper caste backgrounds. By 1911, there were 186 colleges in different parts of India with 36,284 students. This number went up to 231 and 59,595 respectively of colleges by 1921 and students and by 1939, there were 385 colleges teaching 1,44,904 students (Mishra 1961:304).

Box 27.02

Some families even sent their children to England for higher education. Apart from returning home with foreign degrees, they also brought with them the new ideas of “liberalism” and “democracy” that had become popular in the West after the French Revolution. Thus, they became carriers of not only the British cultural values but also of the modern ideas of freedom, equality and democracy. Many of them began to critically examine the Indian culture and initiated process of reforming “old” and “outdated” social and cultural practices. The social reform movements that emerged in different parts of India during the nineteenth century, were all led by these newly educated middle class individuals.

Apart from the English educated segment, there were also other sections of the Indian society who could be called the middle classes. The most prominent among them were the petty traders/shopkeepers and independent artisans, the social groups that were called the “old middle classes” in the Western context. Merchants and artisans had always been separate social strata in the traditional structure of social stratification in India. We can easily identify separate castes of merchants and artisans who were an organic part of the village communities. As the economy began to change in response to the new administrative policies of the colonial rulers, many of the merchants moved to newly emerging towns and cities and became independent traders. This process was further accelerated during the post independence period.

Though limited in its significance, the modern machine based industry also began to develop during the colonial period. The establishment of railways, during the middle of the nineteenth century, created conditions for the growth of modern industry in India. The colonial rulers constructed railways primarily for the transportation of raw materials required for the British industry overseas. However, once the railways were established, the British also invested in the local industry such as plantations. The growing economic activity gave boost to trade and mercantile activity and some of the local traders accumulated enough savings and began to invest into the modern industry. The swadeshi movement started by the nationalist leadership gave a boost to the native industry. Apart from giving employment to the labour force, this industry also employed white-collared skilled workers. Thus, along with those employed in administrative positions by the colonial rulers, the white-collared employees of the industrial sector were also a part of the newly emerging middle classes in India.

27.6 POLITICS OF MIDDLE CLASSES DURING THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Though the middle classes in India emerged under the patronage of the British rule and their members were all educated in the English language and culture, they did not remain loyal to their masters forever. Members of the middle classes not only became actively involved in social reform movements, they also began to raise political questions and in the long run they came to question the legitimacy of the British rule in India. It was the members of these middle classes who provided leadership to the movement for independence. As Varma points out, ‘The educated middle-class elite, which provided all the leaders of the National Movement, came to oppose British rule in the name of the most advanced bourgeois democracy, represented by Britain itself’ (Varma, 1998:21)

Activity 2

Talk to some freedom fighters in your locality. Do they feel that the middle classes were the creation of the Britishers. If so, why? Compare your findings with other students in the study centre.

The Indian National Congress, particularly during its initial years, was dominated by the professional middle classes. A majority of the active members of the Congress were lawyers, journalists and educationists. Even Mahatma Gandhi, who is known to have transformed the Indian National Congress into a mass movement, was a lawyer and

typically belonged to the professional middle class. Though Gandhi was able to bring peasantry and other segments of the Indian society into the fold of the nationalist movement, the leadership of the Congress party remained middle class and upper caste in character. The British too were 'far more comfortable with the English-knowing, urban-centric middle-class constituents in the Congress than with the unwashed masses' (Varma, 1998:13)

27.6.1 Middle Classes in India after Independence

Though different sections of the Indian society had participated in the struggle for freedom from colonial rule, it was the middle classes that took over the institutions of governance from the colonial rulers. It has been argued that the end of the colonial rule did not mean a total break from the past. Much of the institutional structure that had developed during the colonial rule continued to work the independence within the ideology of the new regime. Thus, members of the middle class who were working for the colonial rulers did not loose much in terms of their position in the institutions of governance.

27.6.2 Size and Composition

There are no exact figures about the size of this class during the early years of Independence. According to one estimate, its proportion in the total population was around ten percent (Varma, 1998:26) and like middle classes in other societies it was not an undifferentiated monolith. It had its unifying features, both in ideology and aspiration, but within this broadly defining framework it had its segmentations in terms of income, occupation and education. Apart from the middle classes, on the lower side, of were the vast majority of the agricultural poor, peasants and the landless. Unskilled and semi-skilled manual workers, skilled manual workers, petty clerks and employees such as postmen, constables, soldiers, peons were also outside the middle class domain. At the other end of the scale, the upper classes of the Indian society were the rich industrialists and capitalists, the big zamindars and members of the princely families. In between these areas of exclusion, middle classes constituted mostly of officers in the government services, qualified professionals such as doctors, engineers, college and university teachers, journalists and white-collared salaried employees in the private sector. In terms of income, the middle classes are also generally middle income groups. But income as such is not the only defining criteria. For example, a well to do illiterate petty trader could not be counted as a member of the middle class. Thus, more than income, it is education that was considered the common feature of the middle class in different parts of India. This middle class, during the initial years after independence, was also united by a certain ideology, a commitment to development and nation-building. Knowledge of English too was an important characteristic of this class.



Middle classes often live in relatively modest dwellings and congested surroundings

Courtesy: B. Kiranmayi

27.7 GROWTH OF MIDDLE CLASSES AFTER INDEPENDENCE

India's independence from the colonial rule marked the beginning of a new phase in its history. The independent Indian State was committed, in principle, to democratic institutions of secularism, freedom, justice and equality for all the citizens, irrespective of caste, creed or religion and at all levels — social, economic and political. To achieve these ends, India embarked upon the path of planned development. Plans were chalked out for the development of agricultural, industrial and the tertiary sectors of the economy. There were an overall attempt to expand the economy in all directions. The government of India introduced various programmes and schemes for different sectors of the economy. The execution of these programmes required the services of a large number of trained personnel.

Box 27.03

To fulfil increasing demand for trained and skilled personnel, numerous institutions, engineering and medical colleges, technical and management institutes and universities were opened in different parts of the country. On the one hand these institutions fulfilled the growing demand for trained personnel and on the other they provided opportunities to new upwardly mobile groups to fulfil their aspirations for education and social mobility.

Apart from the increase in a number of those employed in the government sectors, urban industrial and tertiary sectors also experienced an expansion. Though compared to many other countries of the Third World, the growth rate of the Indian economy was slower, in absolute terms the industrial sector grew many folds. Growth in the tertiary sector was more rapid. Increase in population, particularly the urban population, led to a growth in the servicing industry. Banks, insurance companies, hospitals, hotels, press, advertisement agencies all grew at an unprecedented rate, giving employment to a large number of trained professionals.

The next stage of expansion was in the rural areas. Various development programmes introduced by the Indian State after independence led to significant agricultural growth in the regions that experienced Green Revolution. Success of the Green Revolution technology increased productivity of land and made the landowning sections of the Indian countryside substantially richer. Economic development also led to a change in the aspirations of the rural people. Those who could afford it started sending their children not only to English medium schools but also to colleges and universities for higher studies. Consumption patterns also began to change. 'Material goods hitherto considered unnecessary for the simple lifestyle of a farmer, began to be sought. And lifestyles as yet remote and shunned were emulated' (Varma, 1998:95). A new class has emerged in rural India that partly had its interests in urban occupations. The process of agrarian transformation added another segment to the already existing middle classes. In ideological terms, this "new" segment of the middle classes, was quite different from the traditional middle classes. Unlike the old urban middle classes, this new, "rural middle class" was local and regional in character. The members of the rural middle class tended perceive their interests in regional rather than in the nationalist framework. Politically, this class has been on forefront of the movements for regional autonomy.

Another new segment of the middle class that emerged during the post-independence period came from the dalit caste groups. Government policies of positive discrimination and reservations for members of the ex-untouchable/ Schedule castes enabled some of them to get educated and employed in the urban occupations, mostly in the servicing and government sectors. Over the years, a new dalit middle class has thus also emerged on the scene.

27.8 LET US SUM UP

Though the middle classes have always been among the most influential segments of the modern Indian society, they were never as prominent and visible as they became during the

decade of 1990s, after the liberalization process of the Indian economy began. Introduction of the new economic policy and increasing globalization of the Indian economy brought the Indian middle class into new prominence.

The process of globalization has also generated a lot of debate about the actual size of middle classes in India, their consumption patterns, and the pace of their growth in the years to come. It has been claimed that the size of middle classes has grown to 20 percent of the total Indian population. Some others have put this figure at 30 percent. Though a large number of Indian people still live a life of poverty, it is the middle classes that have come to dominate the cultural and political life in India today.

27.9 KEY WORDS

- Domination** : To exploit, and be superordinate. Used in Marxist literature to describe the class which owns the means of production.
- Dichotomous** : Refers in stratification literature to the two class model of Marx,
- Property Relations** : The relations which arise (antagonistic or other) out of one class owning means of production and the other one being employed as wage workers by the class which owns the means of production.

27.10 FURTHER READINGS

Giddens, A. (1980), *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, London, Unwin Hyman.

Mishra, B.B. (1961), *The Indian Middle Class – Their Growth in Modern Times*, Bombay, Oxford University Press.

27.11 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The model forwarded for class structure is a dichotomous one. This means he views the structure of society as an exploiting class and an exploited class. Thus property relations are basic to this model. A relatively small production extract the surplus product from the workers classes for Marx are thus defined in relation to means of production. Further control of means of production implies political control of means of production implies political control. In this model the middle classes have only a transitional role, and comprise the self-employed peasants and the petty bourgeoisie — neither of these employed wage labour though they owned means of production, and Marx felt that they would disappear over time.
- 2) i) R. Dahrendorf
ii) D. Lockwood.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) In India middle classes emerged fundamentals as a consequence of changes in the system of law and public administration. Further they mainly belonged to the learned professions Educational institutions and industrialization by the British in India also meant the rise of a middle class.
- 2) It was the middle class that manned the institutions of governance from colonial rulers. Thus there was a sort of continuity from the past. The total proportion of the middle class in the population has been estimated as ten percent. On the other hand were the poor and unskilled and the rich upper classes. Middle classes after independence constituted mainly government officers, doctors, engineers, university teachers all of whom had a moderate income alone.