

6 SOCIAL CLASSES IN INDIA

- Agrarian class structure
- Industrial class structure
- Middle classes in India.

AGRARIAN CLASS STRUCTURE

Agrarian class structure in India have been shaped by long historical and politico- administrative process.

The traditional Indian society was organized around caste lines. The agrarian relations were governed by the norms of jajmani system. However, the jajmani relations began to disintegrate after the colonial rulers introduced changes in the India agriculture. The process of modernization and development initiated by the India State during the post-independence period further weakened the traditional social structure.

Caste stratification, according to some scholars, is associated with the rural and class stratification with the urban situation. Yogendra Singh has held that this statement is based on fallacy; it is not based on socio-historical evidence. Some western scholars held the view that early India was a static society, where not change but continuity was a dominant feature. But this fallacy of 'static India' hypothesis has been criticized by scholars like P.C. Joshi, Yogendra Singh, B. Cohn and Romila Thapar. Many classes like priests, feudal chiefs, merchants, artisans, peasants, labourers, etc., existed in early India. Merchants did not occupy low position in social hierarchy. The base for their mobility was their economic relationship. Their caste status did not clash with the class status. Yogendra Singh holds that the position of many castes altered over time, and wealth and property played an important role in achieving an improved status, particularly among the merchant class.

The period after 1000 A.D. saw the growth of classes of traders, artisans etc., in cities. In the Mughal period too, since a large share of village produce was taken to the urban market, the dynamism of the class structure of both the cities and villages continued. This implied not only the existence of agrarian classes in villages but also a stable class of merchants, middlemen and bankers in towns and cities.

In the British period, the policy of trade and commerce affected the artisan classes and led to their large-scale migration to rural areas. Further, the British policy of favoured treatment to the port towns, neglect of vast number of other towns, policy of taxation and many others. Socio-economic policies led to the decline of the traditional Indian economic structure as well as the class structure. The class structure in the rural arrears was also affected due to land settlement policy. At the same time, the British policies created new foundations for the emergence of a feudal agrarian class structure.

While caste continues to be an important social institution in the contemporary Indian society, its significance as a system of organizing economic life has considerably declined. Though the agricultural land in most parts of India is still owned by the traditionally cultivating caste groups, their relation with

the landless menials are no more regulated by the norms of caste system. The landless members of the lower caste now work with the cultivation farmers as agriculture labourers. We can say that in sense, caste has given way to class in the Indian countryside.

The agrarian system that evolved in the rural areas during the British regime were based either on the zamindari or the ryotwari type of land systems. The zamindari system had three main agrarian classes: zamindars, tenants and agricultural labourers. The ryotwari system had two main classes: ryot-landlords and the ryot-peasants. The agrarian class structures everywhere in India had a feudal character. The zamindars (i.e., non-cultivating owners of land) were tax-gatherers, the tenants were real cultivators (often without security of land tenure), and the agricultural labourers had the status of bonded labour. With the support of the rulers power, this highly exploitative system continued to persist till the political independence of the country, despite peasant unrest the peasant movements.

In pre-British period Agrarian class structure was based on self-sufficient village community. So there was no class structure. During British period broad category of agrarian classes emerged.

Landlords Tenants Peasant Proprietors Agricultural Working Class

After independence, comprehensive land reforms and rural development programme gave rise to the emergence of distinctive pattern of agrarian class structure independent of caste hierarchy. The abolition of the zamindari system took away the powers of the zamindars.

Yogendra Singh has referred to several trends in agrarian class structure after independence. These are:

- There is a wide gap between land-reform ideology projected during the freedom struggle and even thereafter and the actual measures introduced for land-reforms.

- This gap is the result of the class character of politician and administrative elite.
- The economic prosperity of the rich peasantry has increased but the economic condition of the small peasants has deteriorated.
- Capitalist type of lease-labour or wage labour agrarian system.
- The inequalities between the top and the bottom levels of classes have increased rather than decreased.
- Agricultural workers have not received the benefits of land reforms. The sociological process dominant in the current class transformations in the villages involves 'embourgeoisement' of some and 'proletarianisation' of many social strata.

P.C. Joshi referring to the trend in agrarian class structure has pointed out:

- The decline of feudalistic type of tenancy and its replacement by more exploitative lease arrangements.
- The rise of commercially oriented landlords.

Andre Beteille has referred to change from 'cumulative' to 'dispersed, inequalities due to changing social stratification.

However, the agrarian social structure is still marked by diversities. As pointed out by **D. N. Dhanagare**, the relation among classes and social composition of groups that occupy specific class position in relation to land control and land use in India are so diverse and complex that it is difficult to incorporate them all in a general scheme. However, despite the diversities that mark the agrarian relation in different parts of country, some scholars have attempted to club them together into some general categories.

Amongst the earliest attempts to categories the Indian agrarian population into a framework of social classes was made by following sociologists;

Daniel Thorner. He suggested that one could divide the agrarian population of India into different class categories by taking three criteria :

- First of income earned from land (such as, 'rent' or fruits of own cultivation or 'wages')
- Second, the nature of right held in land (such as, proprietary or 'tenancy' or 'share-cropping right' or 'no right at all')
- Third, the extent of fieldwork actually performed (such as, 'absentees who do no work at all or 'those who perform partial work' or 'total work done with the family labour' or work done for others to earn wages').

On the basis of these criteria he suggested the following model of agrarian class structure in India;

- (i) Maliks**, whose income is derived primarily from property right in the soil and whose common interest is to keep the level of rents up while keeping the wage-level down. They collect rent from tenants, sub-tenants and sharecroppers.
- (ii) Kisans**, working peasants, who own small plots of land and work mostly with their own labour and that of their family members.
- (iii) Mazdoors**, who do not own land themselves and earn their livelihood by working as tenants, sharecroppers or wage labourers with others.

Thorner's classification of agrarian population has been very popular. Development of capitalist relations in agrarian sector of the economic has also changed the older class structure. For example, in most regions of India, the Maliks have turned into enterprising farmers. Similarly, most of the tenants and sharecroppers among the landless mazdoors have begun to work as wage labourers. Also, the capitalist development in agriculture has not led to the kind of differentiation among the peasant as some Marxist analysts predicted. On the contrary, the size of middle level cultivators has swelled.

Utsa Patnaik conducting his study in agrarian class structure in Haryana finds out 5 classes from the perspective of labour :

- Big landlords = Live on hired labour
- Rich peasants = occasionally use family labour with hired labour

- Middle peasants = development on family labour
- Small peasants = sell their labour after finishing their domestic work
- Agricultural labourers = absolutely live on wage.

This standpoint of Patnaik is supported by **Ashok Rudra, Parnak Vardhan and Arvind Narain Das** who look into Agrarian class structure in Punjab, U.P. and Karnataka.

Katleen Gough in the study of Tamil Nadu, from the perspective of capital, finds out 5 agrarian classes:

- Big-bourgeoisie
- Medium bourgeoisie
- Petty-bourgeoisie
- Semi-proletariat
- Pure-proletariat.
- **Kotovskiy** has referred to classes like landowners, rich peasants, landless peasantry, and agricultural labourers.
- In the last two decades, some economists have referred to classes of big landholders (with 10+ hectare land), small landholders (with 2-10 hectare land), marginal landholders (with less than 2 hectares land), and agricultural labourers.
- **Ram Krishna Mukherjee** has referred to three classes in agrarian structure: landholders and supervisory farmers, self-sufficient peasantry and share croppers and agricultural labourers.

The classification that has been more popular among the students of agrarian structure and change in India is the division of the agrarian population into four or five classes :

- **Big landlords**
- **Big Farmers**
- **Middle Farmers**
- **Small and Marginal Farmers**

Landless Labourers.

At the top are the **big landlords** who still exist in some parts of the country. They own very large holdings, in some cases even more than one hundred acres. However, unlike the old landlords, they do not always give away their lands to tenants and sharecroppers. Some of them organize their farms like modern industry employing a manager and wage labourers and producing for the market. Over the years their proportion in the total population of cultivators has come down significantly. Their presence is now more in the backward regions of the country.

After big landlords come the **big farmers**. The size of their land holdings varies from 15 acres to 50 acres or in some regions even more. They generally supervise their farms personally and work with wage labour. Agricultural operations in their farms are carried out with the help of farm machines and they use modern farm inputs, such as, chemical fertilizers and hybrid seeds. They invariably belong to the local dominant castes and command a considerable degree of influence over the local power structure, both at the village level as well as at the state level. While the big farmers are more visible in the agriculturally developed regions of the country.

The next category is that of the **middle farmers** who own relatively smaller holdings (between 5 acres to 10 or 15 acres). Socially, like the big farmers, they too mostly come from the local dominant caste groups. However, unlike the big farmers, they carry out most of the work on farms with their own labour and the labour of their families. They employ wage labour generally at the time of peak seasons, like harvesting and sowing of the crops. Over the years, this category of cultivators has also begun using modern inputs, such as, chemical fertilizers and hybrid seeds. Proportionately, they constitute the largest segment among the cultivators.

The small and marginal farmers are the fourth class of cultivators in India. Their holding size is small (less than five acres and in some

cases even less than one acre.) They carry out almost all the farm operations with their own labour and rarely employ others to work on their farms. In order to add their meager earning from cultivation, some of them work as farm labourers with other cultivators. Over the years, they have also come to use modern farm inputs and begun to produce cash crop that grown for sale in the market. They are among the most indebted category of population in the India countryside. As the families grow and holding get further divided, their number has been increasing in most part of India.

The last category of the agrarian population is that of the **landless labourers**. A large majority of them belong to the ex-untouchable or the dalit caste groups. Most of them own no cultivable land of their own. Their proportion in the total agricultural population varies from state to state. While in the states like Punjab and Haryana they constitute 20 to 30 per cent of the rural workforce, in some states, like Andhra Pradesh, their number is as high as fifty per cent. They are among the poorest of the poor in rural India. They not only live in miserable conditions with poor housing and insecure of income, many of them also have to borrow money from big cultivators and in return they have to mortgage their labour power to them. Though the older type of bondage is no more a population practice, the dependence of landless labourers on the big farmers often makes them surrender their freedom, not only of choosing employer, but invariably of choosing their political representatives.

CONCLUSION

From the above studies it can be concluded that agrarian class structure in India has emerged out of multidimensional forces and their bearings in space and time.

INDUSTRIAL CLASS STRUCTURE

Industrial class structure started taking shape during British period. During British period in cities a new industrial and mercantile middle class came into being. There also emerged a new bureaucratic

administrative class. After independence industrial class took a new shape. The effects of industrialization have been

- The percentage of workers engaged in agricultural has come down while that of works engaged in individual activities has gone up.
- The process of social mobility has accelerated.
- Trade unions have organized industrial workers to fight for their rights.
- Since industrial workers maintain continued and close relationship with their kin-groups and castes, caste stratification has an affected class character
- The traditional and charismatic elite have been replaced by the professional elite.

Morris D. Morris has referred to two view points regarding the behaviour pattern of the industrial labour.

One view is the labour being short in industry, employers had to scramble for their workforce and make all sorts of concessions which weakened their hold on workers. The workers frequently returned to their villages to which they were very much attached.

The other view talks of surplus of labour available villages for the urban employment. Because of easy availability, the employers abused workers unmercifully. Since working conditions in the factories were intolerable, the labour was forced to go back to their villages. Thus, in both views, it was held that workers retained their links with villages which limited the supply of labour for industrial development. As a consequence, proletarian type of behaviour did not develop. It also resulted in high rates of absenteeism and labour turnover and the slow growth of trade unions.

Beside the above features, other features of industrial class workers were also visible.

First, the employment of women and children in industries was very limited. About 20 and

25 per cent of labour force consisted of women and about 5 per cent of children. This was because employment of women in night shifts was prohibited and children below 14 years could not be legally employed.

- Secondly, though it is argued that industry is caste blind because no single caste can provide an adequate supply of labour and because employees are uninterested in caste affiliation, yet workers did not permit the employers to employ workers of untouchable castes.
- Thirdly, large number of workers in the industries were those who had no significant claim district in which the industry was located but were returned from different districts as well as neighbouring states. There were, thus, no geographical barriers inhibiting the flow of labour into the industry. The rural social structure (joint family system, etc.) was also not a barrier to one estimate, of the total workers in any industry, about 25 per cent are local, 10 per cent come from within 100 kms of industry's location, 50 per cent from 100 to 750 kms and 15 per cent from more than 750 kms. This shows a tendency for industry hands to be drawn from increasingly distant areas. All these features explain the class aspect of industrial labour force in India.
- Analyzing the 'working class', Holmstrom has said that all workers do not share all interests; rather they share a few interests only. He has also said that it is necessary to draw a class line between the organized and the unorganized sector industrial workers.
- Joshi (1976) also has said that organized and unorganized sector industrial workers are two classes with different and conflicting interests. This can be explained on the basis of difference in four factors wages, working conditions, security and social worlds.
- The wages depend upon whether the industry is big (more than 1,000 workers), small (250-

- 1,000 workers) or very small (less than 50 workers). In 1973, West Bengal laid down different minimum wages for above three types of industries. The big industries pay much more than the small industries because of the economics of scale, unions and worker's strong bargaining position. Naturally, the interests of workers depend upon the type of industry they work in.
- The working conditions also affect the interests of workers. Workers in industries with more pleasant conditions, having safety measures and fewer accidents and less noise and monotony and fatigue, shorter hours, more space, freedom from close control or harassment, a chance of learning something more, canteens and crèches and washing rooms have different interests from those which do not provide all these amenities. As such, they work as two different classes of workers.
- Security and career chances also demarcate two classes of workers. A permanent worker has not only a job but also a career while the temporary worker is bothered more about the security of the job. The permanent worker's career extends into the future but the temporary one remains bogged down into the present. The former may plan to improve his job by learning a skill and getting promotion, the latter is terrified of losing his job if he joins a union.
- Lastly, the social worlds also divide workers in two different classes. The 'Social world' refers to differences in economic conditions, life chances, mutual aid and dependence etc. The factory workers in the organized sector have more solidarity, fewer hostility and less tensions. Their interests and ideology keep them separate from the 'outsiders'. Thus the organized sector workers form a privileged upper class.

• **Business Elite: Shadow of Industrial Class**

An entrepreneurial class or business elite started emerging in India by the middle of nineteenth century. Although prior to British rule a group of enterprising business persons and traders existed in the country but the new business elite came into prominence only during this period. Traditionally, most of the business persons belonged to the trading castes and communities. But when a new link was established between the Indian economy and that of Britain, members of some other castes also joined mercantile enterprises. As most of the business persons mainly worked as middle persons and brokers to British firms.

- These groups of business persons were primarily commercial agents and not industrial entrepreneurs. Moreover, they were located mainly in Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai regions because commercial and industrial activities were concentrated in these regions.
- The members of this group mainly belonged to the upper castes. For example, Jais, Baniyas and Kayasthas had the upper hand over others in Kolkata region, Parsis and Jains in Mumbai, and in Chennai region Chettiars controlled such businesses.

During the early part of the twentieth century the Indian industrial entrepreneurs started competing with the British. Gujarati, Parsi and Marwari emerged as the dominant groups among the business elite. Sociological studies have shown two major characteristics of business elite in India in the first place,

- Most of them are the members of traditional trading castes and in this sense there is continuity with the past tradition.
- Secondly, there has been a close link of the group with the nationalist movement in India. These features, as **Yogendra Sinha** suggests, "Influenced the role that business elite play in the modernization of Indian society".

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- The size and role of business elite has phenomenally increased after independence. It has been primarily because of the expansion of industrial activities during the last few decades.
- The industrial business groups now organized their activities on modern scientific lines and are comparable to their counterparts outside the country. Trained manager manage their organizations. Thus, a kind of bureaucratic structure has emerged giving rise to a **new class of industrial bureaucrats**.

The accelerated growth of business elite suggests a significant change in the entrepreneurial motivation of the people. The group is gradually becoming broad-based as members of the diverse social groups and castes are entering into this fold. The industrial development of the backward regions in the country is a pointer to this trend.

MIDDLE CLASS IN INDIA

- **Understanding Middle Class in Theory :** 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 economics 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.

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 differs 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 in the Weberian framework, they 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. Later sociologists have made a crucial distinction in the sociological literature between the "old" middle classes and "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.

Rise of Middle Class in India

The middle classes emerged for the first time in Western Europe with development of industrial and urban economy. 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 classes on the other i.e., the skilled professionals.

The historical context of the development of middle classes in India 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.

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 reorganized the political and administrative structures and introduced Western ideas and cultural values to the Indian people. As pointed out by **B.B. Mishra**,

- The peculiar feature that distinguishes the Indian middle classes from their counterpart 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".

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 fulfil this need, the British opened schools and colleges in different parts of India, particularly in big cities like Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

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. **According to B. B. Mishra** 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.

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. 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 independent 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. 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.

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 **Pawan Kumar 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'.

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. According to **Varma** the British too were 'far more comfortable with the English-knowing, urban-centric middle-class constituents in the Congress than with the unwashed masses'.

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 lose much in terms of their position in the institutions of governance.

Size and Composition

There are no exact figures about the size of this class during the early years of Independence.

- According to **Varma** to one estimate, its proportion in the total population was around ten per cent 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 has 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 and 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.

Background and the Growth of Middle Class 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 was 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.

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 manyfolds. 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, hostels, press, and 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. Varma has observed that

- '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'.
- 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 to 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 sector. Over the years, a new dalit middle class has thus also emerged on the scene.

THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS

The emergence of the new middle class is an interesting development in the era of economic liberalization in India. In a celebrated study of the Indian middle classes, B. B. Mishra has suggested that the members of the educated professions, such as government servants, lawyers, college teachers and doctors, primarily constituted the bulk of the Indian middle classes. He also included the body of merchants, agents of modern trading firms, salaried executives in banking and trading, and the middle grades of peasant proprietors and renters under this category. This notion of the middle class has continued for years for the purpose of examining the role of the middle class in contemporary India.

- It has been argued that in the early years of the Independence material pursuits of the middle class were subsumed in a broader ethical and moral responsibility to the nation as a whole. A restraint on materialistic exhibition in a poor country was the ideal reflector in the character of the middle class.
- Changes have, however, occurred in the basic character of this class. Pawan Varma, for example, in his book *The Great Indian Middle Class* has initiated a significant debate on the declining social responsibility of the Indian middle class. It is in this context, that the idea of new middle class has been made popular in India.
- The current culture of consumerism has given rise to the new middle class. The economic liberalization initiated in India in the 1990s portrays the middle class as a sizeable market which has attracted the Multinational Corporations (MNCs), images of the urban middle class in the print media and television contribute to the prevalence of images of an affluent consumer.
- The spread of the consumer item such as cell phones, cars, washing machines and colour televisions has also consolidated the

image of a new middle class culture. Advertising images has further contributed to perception.

- The new middle class has left behind its dependence on austerity and state protection. The newness of the middle class rests on its embrace of social practices of taste and consumption and a new cultural standard. Thus, the "newness" of middle class involves adoption of a new ideology rather than a shift in the social basis of India's middle class.
- Critics of this new middle class have pointed out the negative effects that middle class consumerism holds in the terms of environmental degradation and growing indifference towards socio-economic problems of the country. However, proponents of liberalization have projected this new middle class as an idealized standard for a globalizing India.

CONCLUSION

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 per cent of the total Indian population. Some others have put this figure at 30 per cent. 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.

