

THE ROLE OF MIDDLE CLASS IN FREEDOM STRUGGLE OF INDIA-A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Indian peasants began to show a remarkable growth of political consciousness. *Kisan Sabhas* were organised which propagated political awareness among Kisans in the remote rural areas. The Middle classes in their folds included several categories of people which included intelligentsia, professionals, salaried class people, etc. These classes played their own significant role in national freedom struggle. In 1885, when Indian National Congress came into existence economic leaders of India considered their economic programmes effective enough to protect their interests and found no danger to Indian industry from khaddar programme of the party. On the other hand, they financed Congress party so that it could pursue its programme with vigor. The capitalist class on the whole felt that economic and political consciousness which Congress party was bringing in India for political freedom of the country from British rule was in its interest. They favoured Gandhian philosophy of class harmony and his views about capitalist trusteeship of the property. Dr. Tara Chand in his History of Freedom Movement in India has said that, "The credit of spreading national consciousness among the masses of the people organizing national liberation movement and ultimately emancipating the country from foreign rule must go to this class." The whole process would have been very fast but it slowed down because of heterogeneity of middle classes.

KEYWORDS- MIDDLE CLASS, PEASANTS, Dr. Tara Chand, Jawaralal Neharu, Subhas Chandra Bose, Small Scale workers, Laborers.

1. Introduction

Middle Classes and Freedom Struggle:

Indian society was already divided mainly on caste basis when Britishers came to India. With their coming social change became fast and new social classes emerged. A process of social transformation started, which resulted in confusion in society.

But with that emerged national outlook. The Indian politically upper class was replaced by the foreigners. Indian capitalism began to develop and British economic policy began to be criticised. Indian traders and business companies began to adhere to its own economic interests.

As was natural under the circumstances Indian proletariat class also appeared in the society which was poverty ridden and exploited. Its rank swallowed because of the emergence of middle class. After the end of First World War organised strikes and trade union movement also started in the country.

Indian peasants began to show a remarkable growth of political consciousness. *Kisan Sabhas* were organised which propagated political awareness among Kisans in the remote rural areas. The Middle classes in their folds included several categories of people which included intelligentsia, professionals, salaried class people, etc. These classes played their own significant role in national freedom struggle

2. Rise and Growth of Classes in India:

Since times past Indian society has been divided in three classes, the rich, poor and the middle class. But this division was not in focus because caste system was deep rooted in our social and economic system.

Brahmin, Kashtriya, Vaish and Shudra were four castes and status and position of each person was decided on the basis of caste to which a person belonged. Caste decided not only his social but also his economic status.

The Britishers after coming to India tried to establish a new type of social, economic and political system unknown to India. Thus, basic changes began to come in the existing system and new classes began to come to the fore-front.

The result was that due to various factors combined together the old existing order began to yield. Though age old caste system tried to resist the new order but succeeded only partially. Indian society now began to divide itself and new groups began to emerge.

These differed on the basis of education, profession, wealth and occupation. In several ways, however, changes were not fundamental. But out of these changes middle classes began to emerge, which subsequently played an important role in national struggle for freedom.

These new classes which resulted in the transformation of Indian society emerged both in the rural and urban areas. In the agrarian areas British government created zamindars, a class of peasant proprietors, agricultural labourers and modern class of merchants and money-lenders where as in the urban areas emerged modern class of capitalist, industrialists and modern working class engaged in mining, industry and transport, petty traders and shop keepers who were linked with modern capitalist economy.

It was, however, newly emerging middle class that performed a vital and dynamic role in the society for taking it in the new direction and accelerating the process of freedom struggle and national movement. It was this middle class which was responsible for developing new hopes and concepts of political conduct.

Dr. Tara Chand in his History of Freedom Movement in India has said that, **“The credit of spreading national consciousness among the masses of the people organizing national liberation movement and ultimately emancipating the country from foreign rule must go to this class.”** The whole process would have been very fast but it slowed down because of heterogeneity of middle classes.

Several factors were, however, responsible for the emergence of national outlook in social classes, of which the middle class was an integral part. One such cause was that these classes became an integral part of a single national economy of India and began to live under the single state.

There was community of interests. A.R. Desai is of the view that, “As the individuals and groups comprising this class became conscious of the basic identity of interests, they felt an urge to organise themselves on all India scale and started movement to advance their common interests on a national basis.”

3. Rise and Role of Upper Class in India’s Freedom Struggle:

The old system of Indian polity received a serious set back under the influence of British rule and far-reaching social, economic and political changes began to take place.

It was gradually becoming clear that those who failed to move with the changes would sooner or later be eliminated. Caste bonds began to lose grips and those who were hitherto not engaged in trade and commerce became traders and entered the field of commerce.

They thus became fore-runners of emergence of new upper class. Politically oriented upper layer of Indian society had by now practically disappeared and had been replaced by British oligarchy. Newly emerging classes tried to have control over country’s economic resources under the protection of British domination. By the year 1905 native upper class became sufficiently conscious of its interests.

Professional classes now wanted to replace few Britishers who were monopolising medical, legal and other professions in India. So was the desire of the industrialists who had to fight against commercial discrimination of the Britishers.

Indian upper class representing various interests now developed a sense of economic nationalism and demanded a fundamental change in economic relations between Britain and India. Indian business instead of policy of *laissez faire* wanted greater government participation in business.

Indian businessmen now began to form their organisations with a view to protecting and promoting their interests. These included Bombay Mill Owners Association; Indian Tea Association; Indian Merchant’s Chamber; Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, All India Organisation of Industrial Employees, etc.

In 1885, when Indian National Congress came into existence economic leaders of India considered their economic programmes effective enough to protect their interests and found no danger to Indian industry from khaddar programme of the party. On the other hand, they financed Congress party so that it could pursue its programme with vigor.

The capitalist class on the whole felt that economic and political consciousness which Congress party was bringing in India for political freedom of the country from British rule was in its interest. They favoured Gandhian philosophy of class harmony and his views about capitalist trusteeship of the property.

In Gandhian philosophy they saw protection of their interests against working classes. Because its economic interests this class which consisted of old class of traders and money-lenders as well as land-lords on the one hand and certain classes which emerged because of British rule on the other now wanted to throw off the alien rule so that national freedom could bring economic freedom from British rule in India as well to their advantage.

Because of trading and upper classes support to Indian National Congress and their favourable inclination towards freedom struggle government began to pay some attention to professional bodies of traders and those otherwise created by upper classes, but that was only marginal.

Since their demands were not being met and their economic interests were not being protected to the desired extent and to their satisfaction upper classes now began to turn their attention towards national movement. They now began to cherish hope that free India would adopt sympathetic policies towards them.

4. Middle Class and Freedom Struggle:

After its emergence middle class played an important role in India's freedom struggle. This class came into existence in a meaningful way when British rule began to stabilise itself. One reason for its emergence was destruction of old ruling class whereas another was rise of such groups as businessmen, intellectuals and others.

The former was because of British conquest of India whereas the latter was primarily because of growth of land holding classes and intellectual groups and western education system.

In fact, middle class in India emerged because British rulers in India had no adequate economic and political systems and wanted to transplant their own systems and principles of government as well economic organisation with such modifications which suited mainly to their own interests and partially to local conditions.

Middle class in India during East India Company days comprised of intermediaries who served in various capacities e.g., money changers, auxiliary servants, etc., when the Company was expanding its business. It consisted of number of groups, which performed different functions in connection with commerce and administration.

The composition of this class, which first appeared only in the urban cities, was as follows:

Composition of Middle Class(es) in Urban and Rural Areas:

As said earlier urban middle class consisted of several groups. These included clerks, assistants, non-manual workers, upper range of secondary school teachers, social and political workers, merchants, agents and proprietors of modern trading firms, executives of whole-sale trading, manufacturing or financial concerns; the members of principal recognised professions; **lawyers, doctors, lecturers, middle level writers, journalists, and professors; vast majority of salaried executives, students engaged in higher level education; holders of middle grades of proprietary tenures of land, small holders of estates; higher salaried officers of wide group of institutions, certain categories of rural entrepreneurs, well to do shopkeepers and officers in joint stock concerns and main body of civil servants and other public servants. It will thus be seen that the middle class comprised of various majority of persons having different interests and belonging to various groups.**

They helped in the integration of Indians into a nation and in the words of A.R. Desai, **"They were the pioneers, organisers and leaders of all political national movement. They brought ideas of nationalism and freedom to wider and wider sections of Indian people, through educational propaganda work which included great sacrifice and sufferings."**

The credit goes to the middle class for developing love for democracy in the minds of the people and it was from this class that historians, sociologists and philosophers came out who inspired the people through their writings.

Progressive intelligentsia which belonged to this class was responsible for assimilating western democratic culture. **Dr. Tara Chand** is of the view that, **"National movement in India was an expression of the conflict between the middle classes of two countries; one aspiring for wealth and influence, the other already in possession of them."**

The middle class though initiated western way of life and its thinking in many ways, yet it did not hesitate to criticise western masters for their acts of omissions and commissions.

Middle class in India took part in the national movement as champion of reforms, of course, taking into accounts its own interests but when it found that desired results of were not being achieved it changed the nature of struggle and gave the idea and pleaded for sovereign democratic India.

History is a witness that since the days of inception of Indian National Congress till India won her freedom intelligentsia that represented the middle class was in the fore front.

Their philosophy went on changing, as per needs of the society. Whereas during early stages of their struggle they believed in making representations to the government and had full faith in

British sense of justice subsequently when their hopes were dismayed, they changed their views accordingly.

Middle class in India believed, at the time of formation of Indian National Congress that the organisation would protect their interests. The extremists under the leadership of Bal-Lal-Pal made the Congress organisation of the masses.

These middle class leaders prepared a good ground for Gandhiji's struggle for freedom. They made the organisation mass based. They pushed the philosophy of Liberals to such background that subsequently that could not pushed forward.

5. Working Classes and Freedom Movement:

Though the role of working classes in country's freedom struggle has not been fully appreciated by our historians and others, yet their role was in no less significant. These classes both in the rural as well as urban areas contributed positively in national struggle for freedom.

After the coming of **East India Company**, the traders followed consistent and persistent policy of exploitation of Indian resources, both manual and material, thus, reducing Indian masses to absolute poverty.

Economic policies of both the East India Company and thereafter that of the British Crown in no way benefited the working classes. Benefits of British government's policies, if any were reaped only either by the British rulers or industrialists or to some extent by native moneyed classes. The artisans, peasants and landless labourers were the least to be benefited. On the other hand, they were maximum sufferers.

As small-scale and cottage industries were ruined because of industrial policy of British government, with those who were running these industries swallowed the ranks of the working classes. When employment opportunities were thus decreasing, the population of the country was rapidly increasing.

This further more increased the number of working classes, Dr. Tara Chand is of the view that, "**The policies of the government were, on the whole, unhelpful for the economic development and in fact, were mostly injurious to the cause of increase in production and national income.**"

Because of British economic policies the masses were being oppressed by want. When cottage and small-scale industries were mined pressure on agricultural land also increased. It could not provide employment and food to surplus man power engaged on it. It had to shift to urban areas for search of employment as workers.

Their demands included fixing of working hours, weekly rest day, compensation for injuries, etc. The workers organised themselves and **formed Bombay Mill Hands Association with Lokhande as its Founder President.**

During First World War and the period that followed the workers in India were economically the worst sufferers. They organised strikes in various parts of the country, particularly in major industrial towns.

The workers now started extending support to national movement. As a manifestation of their support they raised their voice against **Roualatt Act**. They responded positively and favourably to the efforts of **N.M. Joshi and Lala Lajpat Rai**, who in 1920 founded All India Trade Union Congress. They joined demonstrations organised by Indian National Congress to boycott **Simon Commission in 1928**, though under their own flags.

The government was so alarmed by the association of workers with the national movement being run by the Congress that it passed Trades Disputes Act and also issued an ordinance to check the activities of the workers. It was this ordinance which subsequently became **Public Safety Act of 1929**.

With the help of these measures workers right to go on strike was restricted and government got powers to deport those who in its opinion were undesirable elements. Several trade union leaders were also rounded up.

In 1940, the workers got involved in the issue of India's joining Second World War at the instance of British government. M.N. Roy founded Indian Federation of Labour which favoured rendering support to British government in war against Fascism. New trade unions also came into existence.

These included **Indian National Trade Union Congress, Hind Mazdoor Sabha and United Trade Union Congress**. These working classes organisations and unions were in their own way but very significant participating in country's freedom struggle.

Rural Areas and Working Class Movements:

It is not that only urban working classes were contributing in country's freedom struggle. Significant contribution was also being made by rural working classes as well. Before the outbreak of first world war rural working classes in India did not show much political consciousness. These were also not much aware about the activities of Indian National Congress, which were confined to urban areas.

In 1917, C.R. Das, however, forcefully pleaded that our political agitation was lifeless, and soulless force and our agitation unsubstantial without our taking into consideration the conditions of rural population of India which was both poverty and disease stricken.

Not much after him another prominent Congress leader Lala Lajpat Rai also showed his concern about the peasants of India when he said that it was really worker in India who was being exploited by the classes which were in possession of means of production and distribution.

Workers movements received momentum and drew the attention of Indian Congress when Mahatma Gandhi took over the leadership of the Congress. The peasants and workers of India were also inspired by Lenin's philosophy of 'Land to the Tillers of the Soil'.

The workers of Bihar responded enthusiastically to **Gandhiji's** first experiment at **Champaran and Kheda**. The peasants exerted their rights at Rai Barielly, Sultan Pur, Malabar and several other places where they were inspired by the message of Gandhiji that the peasants should boldly and dauntlessly fight for their cause.

The peasants and workers in the rural areas undoubtedly established that they were politically conscious when in large numbers joined Gandhiji's sponsored non-co-operation movement. **Prof. A.R. Desai** is of the view that the peasants of India interpreted the political struggle for Swaraj in terms of a struggle against heavy land taxes and by showing their sympathies with support to the non-co-operation movement.

When Gandhiji suddenly decided to withdraw the movement, the zeal of peasants of India for freedom of India found another channel. They organised Kisan sabhas in several Indian provinces. In 1928, Kisan Sabhas of U.P. and Bihar presented a joint memorandum to the All Parties Conference presided over by **Moti Lal Nehru**.

The Kisans of India responded very favorably by joining in large number Sardar Patel's All India Kisan Congress. It was this Congress which under the leadership of **Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel** put up a powerful struggle against British rule in India.

It rendered full co-operation to the Congress and extended its organisation all over India. It was because of it that Congress could show impressive results in the elections held in 1937.

Middle classes can feel proud of their contribution in freedom struggle and in country's political emancipation and advancement. Middle, working and even upper classes of Indian society in their own saw that India was freed from British yoke. These organised themselves in various groups, associations and Sabhas and their collective efforts succeeded in 1947, when India became a free nation.

6. Peasants' Movement and Freedom Struggle:

There was perhaps no section of Indian society which did not participate in country's freedom struggle and peasants were no exception to it. It was this class of society which in the country silently suffered all oppressions and miseries. It was deeply sunk in poverty and was unaware of the use of scientific methods of cultivation and harvesting. On the other hand, due to unawareness production was low.

These Sabhas discussed social and political problems including such serious political issues as **Swaraj**, boycott of law courts and use of **swadeshi**. The peasants now began to realise that they were suffering because they had no organisation of their own.

They also lacked class consciousness and had no ability to struggle for achieving their rights. The peasants began to forge ahead when Jawahar Lal Nehru championed the cause of workers and peasants and appreciated their role in freedom struggle.

He strongly supported **Ekta Andolans** of the peasants. He lauded them for facing all sufferings with courage against pressures both from landlords and the government. Then another reason for their coming to focus was the role of Communist International which in 1920 adopted an agrarian programme which called upon all communists all over the world to support peasant movements.

These included **Jaya Prakash Narayan, Indu Lal Yajnik, N.G. Ranga and Swami Shahjanand**. But after some time **Prof. Ranga** felt that official Congress had failed to stand by the peasants. At Lucknow session the Congress issued a manifesto which provided for securing complete freedom for Kisans from economic exploitation and the achievement of full political and economic power for peasants.

The manifesto also included in it abolition of zamindari system, reduction of rent revenue and right to permanent cultivation for the peasants. Because of efforts and interests of **Jawahar Lal Nehru** in peasantry in the Congress party election manifesto of 1937 sufficient attention was paid to the problems of the peasants.

Promises were made about land reforms, rent and revenue system. Promise was also made for providing relief to small peasants immediately by substantially reducing agricultural rent and revenue. It also promised scaling down of rural debts and providing cheap credit facilities to the peasants.

The result was that during the elections of 1937 the Congress got unexpected support from the peasants. In 1938, session of the Congress held at **Haripura**, it was decided by the Congress because of the efforts of **Subhash Chandra Bose** that peasants have a right to have their separate organisations, which was a real tribute to peasant's movements.

7. CONCLUSION

After **World War I political consciousness** came in workers who also tried to organise themselves against exploitation and oppression of the employers. They were now ready to make their own contribution to freedom struggle. For this consciousness several causes were responsible.

One important cause responsible for this was that working classes were now sure that country's freedom was very essential for ending their exploitation. Unless India was free their oppression and exploitation could not end.

Then another cause was that during the course of war myth of white superiority on the battlefield and its invincibility had been fully exploded. Indian soldiers had developed not only new consciousness but also new awareness. They now stood for racial equality. In addition, it was time when the middle class intelligentsia also stood for improving the conditions of working classes.

National leaders like **Lala Lajpat Rai and Dewan Chaman Lal** drew the attention of the government and the masses to the deplorable conditions of working classes and laid stress on organizing them so that country's freedom struggle became broad based.

They wanted to make workers as an integral part of freedom movement. They, therefore, felt the need and necessity of organizing the working classes not only on regional but also on national basis.

A Home Rule movement was started in the country. Siva Rao is of the view that. **“Never before in Indian politics there had been a movement so wide spread and carrying so much intensive propaganda by all the methods known in the west.”**

As a result of all these factors combined together, trade union activity started in the country. A good number of trade unions were organised in big towns of the country which also organised strikes in various establishments.

The workers now demanded redressed of their economic grievances. Freedom struggle began to be linked with trade union movement. Lala Lajpat linked capitalism with militarism and imperialism.

All India Trade Union Congress was formed in which **Lala Lajpat Rai and V.V. Giri played a leading role. B.P. Wadia** desired that Indian Labour movement should be organised on Indian lines and made an integral part of national movement.

Whereas trade union leaders in Congress party wanted to take trade unionism in a particular direction, the Communists wanted to take it altogether in another direction.

The Ninth session of **INTUC** which was held in December, 1928 which was attended by Jawahar Lal Nehru, was dominated by the Communists. It adopted a resolution on **Labour and Future Constitution of India**. It clearly showed the increasing influence of Communists in trade union activities in India.

It was at Jharia that it was decided that AITUC should affiliate itself to Third International at Moscow but refused to associate itself with AICTU which resulted in the leaving of **V.V. Giri and N.M. Joshi AITUC**. But the communists lost their influence on AITUC when they annoyed the Congressmen by criticizing Gandhiji's Civil Disobedience movement.

They left that in 1930-31 and formed a separate organisation called Red Trade Union Congress. Because of this split the influence of AITUC somewhat reduced and its work also suffered a setback. But the Communists continued their activities which aimed at controlling trade union movement in India.

It was with this objective in view that in 1933 at Cawn Pur meet of AITUC, the Communists agreed to join action on certain specific issues. But as the time passed and differences widened in 1945, the followers of Gandhiji and Nehru at the initiative of Sardar Patel and G.L. Nanda formed Indian National Trade Union Congress.

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