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The State and Role of the Middle Classes in India

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According to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* the Middle Class is defined as that "class of people who are between upper and lower including professional and business workers. The *American Heritage Dictionary* is a little more precise: "The members of society occupying an intermediate social and economic position between the laboring classes and those who are wealthy in land or money". Perhaps a more reliable fix would be an NCAER study arising from a survey carried out in 1994 cited in Pavan K. Varma's *The Great Indian Middle Class*. "...titled the 'The Consumer Classes'. The survey revealed that the Very Rich comprise about six million people or a million households. Below them, the middle class consists of three segments : the Consuming Class accounting for thirty million households or 150 million people, the bulk of whom could be in the market for all kinds of consumer durables; the Climbers, consisting of fifty million households or 275 million; and the Aspirants numbering another 275 million.

From the dictionary meanings one can conclude that we are either some kind of a bridge between two other classes or the class is like the stuff that goes between two slices of bread to make a sandwich! According to the NCAER survey the middle class is like three people who are climbing the mountain – the first being the one who has reached the peak which let us assume represents a comfortable life; the second who is very likely to reach the peak and the third who is contemplating the climb ! All three are right.

If we take the meaning as a bridge between classes , that would apply to the pre-independence position. The sandwich analogy would apply to the state of the middle classes between 1957 to the early eighties and the NCAER survey to the current position which began in the early nineties...

Where do this 400million plus (not counting the Aspirants) people who comprise the middle class live. It would be reasonable to assume that 80% of them live in the cities and the remaining 20 in the small towns in the hinterland of these cities. It was not always so. In the early years of this century the middle class were mostly small landowners. My

father and his brother for instance came from a village in the deep south in search of a job. This was in the early 'twenties. They married and between them they had 6 offsprings. This is how the middle class grew in the towns and cities. Migrate, marry and multiply. This process accelerated as the years went by.. For that matter, so was the case with the poorer classes – the landless labourers, the unskilled. Bombay has the unenviable record of having Asia's largest 'shantytown' . It has many of the characteristics that Jeb Blount describes Vidigal(see 'In Praise of Shantytowns' SPR No.5 1999). If he were to visit 'favela' Dharavi he would be surprised to see the similarities! Except perhaps that unlike Vidigal, Dharavi has a middle class neighbourhood.

The cities were merely only temporary abodes - for a career and to earn money. This was so at least in the earlier part of this century. When schools closed for their annual vacation we (I will use the term 'we' as I consider myself and my family to be part of the middle class) returned to our villages (or to our 'native place' as we call them) every year. The joint family in our ancestral home came alive for an average of a month each year. On these annual visits we generally tended the land, looked into the yields of paddy or whatever it was that we cultivated; carried out repairs to our ancestral home and at the end of 30 days, returned to the city. And when we retired from service we returned to our 'native place', leaving behind our progeny in the city. Most of us were 'in service' meaning thereby employed in some government department or the other or in some commercial establishment. In the early years of this century - at least until 1947, those of us who occupied clerical, secretarial or junior managerial positions were from the south; the traders, shopkeepers, businessmen from the west and north of India. But wherever it was we came from, the annual return to our roots was more or less the same. We continued practising our religious obligations as ordained by our religion and caste. Arranged marriages were the rule, love marriages the exception and inter-religious or inter-caste marriages very very rare. Those who dared defy tradition invited societal ostracism. One other factor that needs to be noted is the fact that the middle classes generally belonged to the upper castes.

It was on the whole a placid, uneventful and well ordered period for the middle class in the early part of this century, say, till the early thirties. But storm clouds were gathering though it was not evident at that time. The Second World War seemed far away their only impact on our lives being rationing of almost everything - from cloth to kerosene. As a teenager I recall standing almost every day in well-disciplined queues. But rationing was well administered and there were no real shortages, hence no complaints of consequence. Imported non-essential goods from talcum powder to table cloths were in plentiful supply. The law and order situation was under control. The freedom movement led by a moderate liberal leadership comprising lawyers, journalists and professionals, did not disturb, too much, the even tenor of our life.

And then came a man called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi known to the world as Mahatma Gandhi, the 20th century's great apostle of peace and non-violence. And the storm was on us. The urban middle class was sucked into the movement in one way or the other. There was, by no means, a unanimous acceptance of Gandhiji's leadership, and, more importantly, his method of non-violent non-cooperation. In many middle-class families there developed differences of opinion among its members. In most cases the elders were not in favour of Gandhi while the younger responded with fervour. The older generation preferred the *status quo* with a gradual movement towards freedom. The younger wanted the British to quit - at once. The support to the freedom movement from the middle classes in the cities and the landed farmers in rural India was at best lukewarm. In British India the middle classes, with a few hiccups here and there, kept the wheels of the administration running and helped in maintaining law and order. I would also not be wrong in saying that they viewed those who responded to Gandhiji's call, at best, as people who had nothing better to do and, at worst, as trouble-makers ! This attitude was to cost them dearly in free India as we shall presently see. But the 'bridge' phase was ending.

With freedom came the problems. I will not, in this article, go into the trauma which embittered the middle classes in the northern states for they had lost their possessions and in many cases even their families in the holocaust that followed the partition of India. In

the troubled days following the partition the middle class it was, with their large numbers in the various departments of the administration, that ensured the continuity of administration.

They had a champion in the person of a man, Sardar Patel by name, who was India's Deputy Prime Minister, a landed farmer and a lawyer with a flourishing practice who gave up everything and responded to Gandhiji's call. He was middle class all the way and above all a man of iron will. He had the ability and organisational competence to rein in Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's marxist predilections. But he did not live long. He died less than four years after independence. And not long after the travails of the Indian middle class (the 'sandwich' phase) had began.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru a Fabian socialist who was greatly impressed by the 'Soviet experiment' of rapid industrialization and collective farming (he was to call Stalin a 'man of peace' when that monster died) had little sympathy for the landed farmer (the kulak) or the middle class. Through a series of land ceiling acts even the small landed farmer was deprived of a large part of his lands. Soon we found that we could no longer go to our 'native place' each year because we had no land to tend and after a while not even the house where the family could gather.

Our troubles were only just beginning. As we belonged to the upper castes legislation enforcing affirmative action made it difficult to get entry into institutions of learning and entry into government service became highly restricted. The situation reached such alarming proportions that Delhi was rocked by riots when middle class youth took to the streets to protest legislation expanding reservations.

As fixed income earners we found our incomes shrinking with increasingly high levels of taxation. The question of tax avoidance which is not quite the same as tax evasion simply did not arise because tax was deducted at source. At one time tax levels reached a peak of 60% of our salaries.

For the Middle Classes the first forty years of free India were a struggle for survival. They had little or no time for participation in public affairs in any meaningful manner.

This is when the middle class started looking around for greener pastures. We got our children to turn away from government service to seek careers in manufacturing and in technology particularly computer technology. A majority of Indians in the Silicon Valley are from the middle class. They prospered. Meanwhile the Indian economy was heading for disaster and economic reforms became inevitable.

Came the opening up of the economy and we found ourselves being wooed by companies with a variety of goods which we only saw in advertisements in foreign journals and newspapers or in showrooms when some of us had an opportunity to travel overseas. The multinationals rushed in with their wares enticed by the prospect of 200 to 300 million customers. It soon became aware as the author of the 'Great Indian Middle Class' points out that indeed there was an Indian middle class but 'it is the middle class of a poor country. Its numbers have grown and so has its purchasing power..but it still is far removed from the fast growing middle class of even a country like Poland... where almost all middle class households have at the very minimum a TV, a washing machine and a VCR...'.

The middle class has been accused of becoming consumerist, of hankering after material goods etc. But the thirst for a item like a washing machine or a microwave oven is understandable because today in urban India both husband and wife have to work to make both ends meet and such goods make life that much easier.

As I tried to imply, earlier in this essay, in the middle class's main preoccupation to merely survive, they showed relatively little interest in politics and public affairs. But the emergence, in recent years, of large numbers of voluntary organisations in various areas of civil society, including some to compel elected representatives and the bureaucracy accountable, is indicative of the fact that the middle classes see an opportunity in the present fluidity in the country's politics on the one hand and the open market on the other, an opportunity to call the shots at least in so far their class is concerned.

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