

The Middle Class in India

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The Indian Middle Classes : Their Growth in Modern Times by B B Misra; Oxford University Press, 1963. Price Rs 25,

THE crucial role of the middle class in a developing country make it an important area of study for the historian, economist and sociologist. Dr Misra's book is the first full-length study of the Indian middle class on an all-India basis. Here I shall first summarise the main points made in the book and then discuss certain issues which I consider important.

Misra traces the growth of the Indian middle-classes, i.e., "the class of people which arose as a result of changes in the British social policy and with the introduction of the new economic system and industry and with the subsequent growth of new professions", from about the middle of the eighteenth century to modern times. He frequently refers to the situation before the British rule (under the Mughal Empire) for the sake of comparison.

The author's chief contention is that the factors responsible for the emergence of the Indian middle class were different from those responsible for the emergence of the middle class in the West. In the latter case, the middle class came into existence thanks mainly to the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century which brought about large-scale mechanical production as a result of economic and technological change. The Indian middle classes emerged due to the changes that occurred in the course of about 200 years of British rule largely as a result of changes in British land and legal policies followed by the introduction of Western education and technology, modern capitalist enterprise, of improved communications and commercial progress. Primarily, it is an historical survey of Indian middle class with reference to its composition, character and role.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the pre-British era. Though the institutions conducive to capitalist growth (e.g., artisan industry, occupational specialisation, a separate

class of merchants organized in guilds, a class of middle-men and also a developed money economy) were present in this era, the political and social systems were against capitalism and hindered the growth of the middle class. The king was an absolute despot and monopolized any profitable sphere of trade. (So people did not invest their money in trade. The bullion in India remained stocked in houses. It was not utilized in productive investment thereby preventing the circulation of wealth which was essential for capitalist growth. The king, who could utilize his wealth in productive investment, spent it mainly for his personal comforts.

Caste System

The caste system hampered occupational mobility and technological change. The priest and the king or the warrior caste looked down upon trade and industry. The lot of the artisan was very poor in spite of the presence of developed urban industry making fabrics and luxury goods which was based on small-scale domestic production. The artisan worked for very low wages in the 'karkhanas' monopolized by the king. The broker who acted as middle-man between the trader and the rural artisan was interested in his own profit, not in the improvement of the quality of goods. The tillers and owners of the land were not identical. The owners extracted the utmost from these who tilled the land. Thus wealth accumulated only in the higher levels. Land economy and limited education also proved to be further barriers. Caste was closely related to the law of property, which encouraged the observance of caste rules in order to succeed to one's share in the land. Thus land economy encouraged caste distinctions and hindered the growth of trade, e.g., a trader could not own land because he belonged to a certain caste. Moreover, different occupational groups had knowledge related to their field only, e.g., a trader knew commercial accounts.

Literary classes were ignorant of crafts and trade. Thus occupational specialization depended on inherited occupations and could not be adopted by the other castes. That is why limited education was a handicap. As such there was no incentive for improvement or for the expansion of the existing trade and industry.

The second part of the book deals with the changes brought about by a century of East India Company's rule which set free the process of the growth of the Indian middle-class with the advent of political stability, contractual relations. Custom was replaced by law. The British brought with them a political and economic organisation based on rational principles which ignored caste distinctions. Caste was ignored by the system of Western education as well. Increase in external trade created capital resources for industrialization.

The higher castes were the first to take advantage of the changing conditions as they already occupied higher traditional social, economic and political position. They shifted to urban centres and received education. They took to new and profitable occupations and were limited to urban centres especially to the Presidency towns because of the concentration of wealth and of educational institutions in those towns.

The rising middle-class consisted of four categories of people according to the role played by them in the new economy.

(a) The commercial middle-class of middlemen and brokers were found with the foreign companies and in the indigeneous mercantile and banking houses in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The indigo plantations gave rise in rural area? to a clerical and supervisory group of persons and a group of contractors who distributed advances and supplied the plants. Moreover a class of specialists in business administration grew with the

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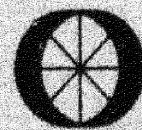
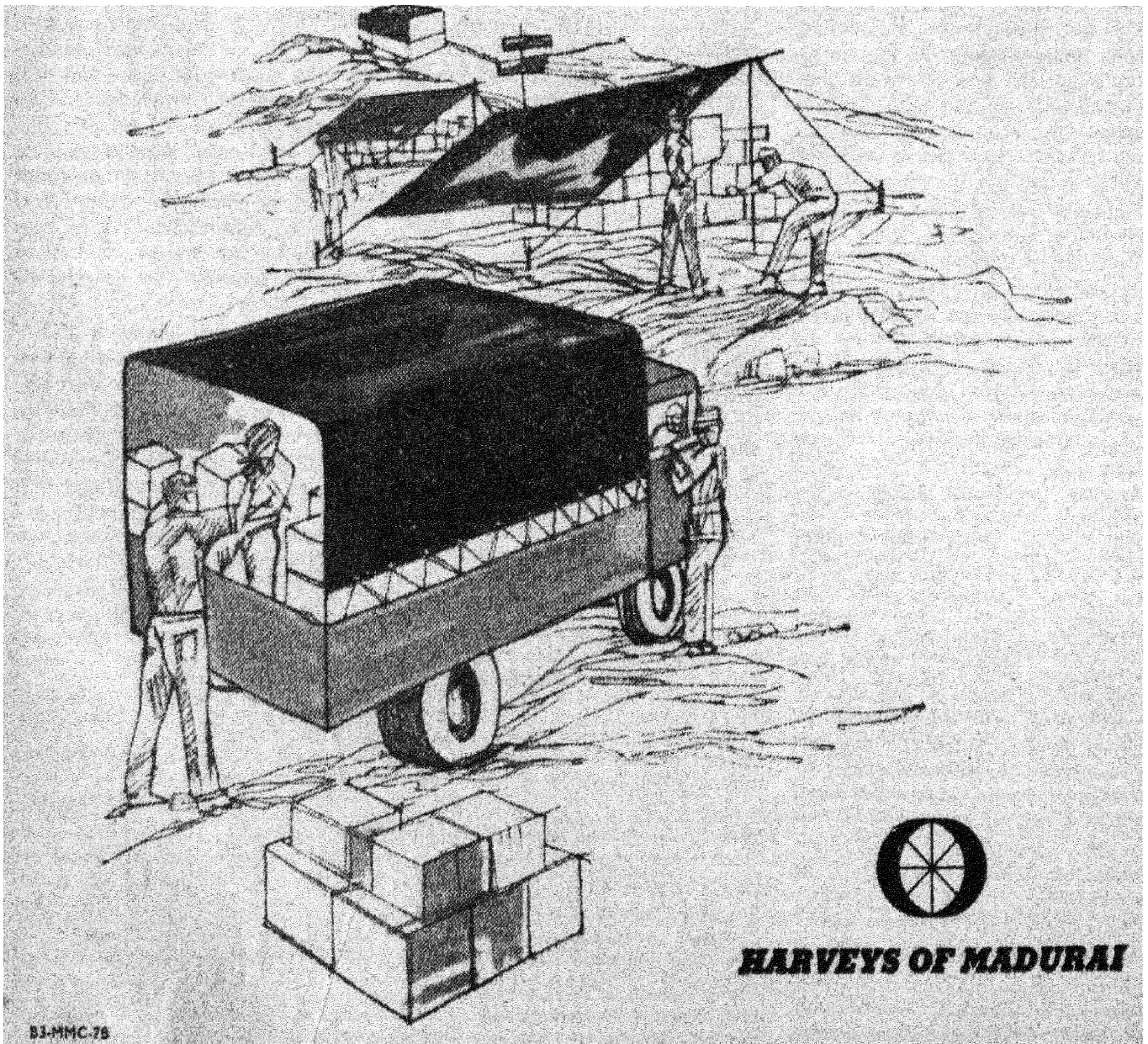
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opening up of trade, banks and the managing agency system in 1833.

(b) The money-lenders, the brokers, the banias, the agents and the creditors, i.e., the new moneyed class invested their money in land which became transferable due to the British policy. In addition, there were people who held land on lease on behalf of the indigo factory (for before 1830 planters were not permitted to buy lands of their own). The recognition of the rights of the under-tenures in 1765 also gave birth to a landed middle-class.

(c) The industrial middle class was very small because the growth of industry was very slow. The first to invest money in industry were the English Civil Servants, followed initially by other Europeans and then by some Bengalis in Calcutta and Parsis in Bombay.

(d) The educated middle class comprised of a class of professionals which emerged with the introduction of Western education and technology. The changes in the system of law gave rise to a class of lawyers. Then emerged doctors and engineers, printers and publishers. All the higher technical and administrative posts were monopolized by Europeans and Anglo-Indians.

The primary characteristic of these four groups forming the Indian middle classes was that they acquired prestige not through social status but through education, wealth and power.

The third part of the book deals with the further changes brought about in economic development, land policy, educational policy (from 1857 to 1947) which furthered the growth of the professional classes with the end of the company's rule in 1858.

The author discusses the growth of foreign trade and joint stock companies and Indian-owned banks and manufacturing industries under the policy of protection introduced in 1923. This economic development was limited largely to the urban centres.

Formerly (in 1786-1790) Cornwallis included only the zamindars in the middle class, but now the concept of the middle class included all the agricultural classes (the zamindars, peasant proprietors and resident cultivators). At this stage land policy was designed to develop

agricultural produce to feed Britain's industry. The corporate character of the villages was destroyed by partition suits as well as from the freedom with which property could be transferred by sale. The class of salaried employees and money-lenders who invested money in land grew with the expansion of commerce, thus transferring land from the cultivating community to the commercial classes.

The importance of educating Indians on a larger scale was realized but due to limited funds colleges and schools could not be opened in rural areas. They were opened only in the urban centres. The rate of progress of higher education increased in 1880 and the following decade. During this period there was shift of emphasis from higher to primary education and from urban to rural education. Curzon also saw the need of co-ordinating technical education with industrial development and thus technical schools and colleges were established. The professional classes grew rapidly. The public servants and men in the liberal professions were mainly high caste people, especially Brahmins.

Educated Middle Class

The fourth part of the book deals with the period after 1905. It is mainly a discussion of the role of the educated middle class. Their class-consciousness made them aware of their interests. They opposed any measure in favour of the peasantry and the working-class and favoured only trade and industry.

The upper middle class propagated Western ideas and the Western way of living and started reformist movements like the Brahma Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj. On the other hand, the lower middle-class comprised the dissatisfied educated people with low income, who started the revivalist movement of Arya Samaj with a view to revive the traditional religion and ideas in opposition to foreign domination, education and religion. This class started the freedom movement and brought about the Independence of India. The Congress has been equated with lower middle-class, though it was backed by upper-middle class.

The pre-British era and the period of East India Company are

sufficiently dealt with whereas the changes which were more radical and important under the British are not given in sufficient detail. Also the most important period of the rise of the middle-class and industrial development after 1905, which required a detailed discussion, has been given scant attention. Misra does not even attempt to define the term "middle-class" and his definition of the term "social class" is rather vague because all the three hierarchies of class, status and power have been confused. This happens mainly because Misra tries to evolve a new terminology.

Marx defined class in terms of the organisation of production. Ownership or non-ownership of the means of production was the most important criterion underlying the cleavage of societies into classes. Each group of men who occupied the same position in the productive system of relations formed a class. Though Marx was aware of other aspects of stratification he thought that this was the most important one. These economic differences were then carried into every major aspect of social life.

Weber made a crucial distinction between the three orders of stratification—class, status and power. The first refers to the groupings of people according to their market position. Though it is similar to the class of Marx, it is different in that it is more limited and specific. The economic differences are related to the other aspects of social life to the extent that they determine the quality of social honour, i.e. prestige. And prestige forms the basis of another system of stratification, viz, 'status' and not of 'class'. They may overlap to a considerable extent. Political power forms the basis of the third system of stratification viz. Party.

Misra defines social class as follows: "The concept of a single social class implies social division which proceeds from the inequalities and differences of man in society, which may be natural or economic. It is chiefly the economic inequality of man that influences, if it does not wholly determine, social differentiation. It arises basically from the difference of relationship which a person or a group bears to property or the means of production and distribution." "This prin-



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ciple of relationship to property is qualitative in character in that it determines the quality of social honour, or lack of in which we call 'status,'" (p 2),

Income is only quantitative in character in that it is a means to the creation of wealth. It becomes qualitative when invested in land or industry, i.e., in property, and thus changes the status of an individual or group. Otherwise it merely produces a hierarchy of prestige and power according to variations in its size. Misra proceeds further and says, "Society is thus divided into classes or groups of people joined together from motives of common economic interest, common ways of behaviour and common traits of character. Each such class forms a hierarchy of status according to the varying quality of social prestige and power expressed through the standard of living, nature of occupation and wealth." (p 3).

class and Status

Thus we find that Misra starts by defining social class in relationship to property. He admits that income is merely quantitative in character. He also makes a distinction between 'class' and 'status'. when he says that social honour is derived from the ownership of property. But when he goes further he loses sight of the distinction between the two, and brings in 'power' under 'status'. He also includes common ways of behaviour, style of living, and common traits of character in the concept of 'class'. These two criteria underly the concept of 'status'. Similarly, he has included 'power, the basis of Weber's concept of Party in the concept of "status'. Power' is distinguishable from 'prestige' and the two are not identical. During the discussion he also tends to confuse the various terms group, category with class (p 166) and at one place he even confuses caste and class (p 148).

Looking at the heterogeneous composition of Misra's middle-class, one is bound to ask, "What is the criterion governing this classification"? He has included owners and non-owners of the means of production and has also excluded some of the owners of property. It is apparent that he has not used his definition of 'social class' consistently, because the basis of it is certainly not the relationship to property as

landowners, government servants, and persons in the liberal professions have all been lumped together. On the other hand, the largest and smallest landowners are placed in other classes, though all the landowners stand in a similar relationship to the means of production. It seems that he takes income as the underlying criterion of this classification, not the relationship to the means of production. Here he uses the concept of class as evolved by Warner, C D H Cole and others. This is also evident in the classification of the middle class into two sub-classes. This sub-classification is based purely on income. According to Misra, the lower-income group (pp 366, 393) form the lower-middle class.

Even Warner's concept of class is not applicable here because the various groups forming Misra's middle class belong to different castes and do not even have a common style of living. Broadly speaking, Misra's contention, that the middle class has a common style of living, is true to some extent. But looking at the variations in customs and style of living of the various castes forming the middle class, one is bound to doubt the validity of this statement. This is primarily because he has not paid sufficient attention to caste.

Though it is not mentioned clearly, it may be inferred that he takes the members of the I C S, Englishmen and Europeans occupying senior managerial and technical posts and the big landowners as the elements of the upper class. Further he places the industrialists in the middle class. On what basis does he classify the industrialists? Obviously it is not based on the ownership of the means of production because he excludes the largest landowners. Is it based on income? If it is so, why does he exclude the largest landowners. Is he justified in placing *Talash* in the middle class? Moreover, he equates the rural population with the lower classes when he refers to the neglect of rural education, (pp 160-61). The basis of his classification of different groups into classes is not clear as exemplified in the above instances.

Arbitrary Use of Terms

Misra has made arbitrary use of the terms class, higher classes, high castes and social stratification. This

is due to the lack of conceptual definitions and the reader has to infer the meaning of these terms by himself. While discussing the emergence of the class system in India he says "land economy and limited education were both obstructive to social stratification"., (p 10). What he means to say is that the class system, not the caste system, is a system of social stratification. The latter has other aspects too.

The author has paid cursory attention to caste, though he admits that it was a very important element in the Indian society. He should have given a regional distribution of the various castes forming the so-called middle classes and examined them in relation to the new system of classes. In this context he should also have treated the growth of the middle class regionally and not considered a general discussion of its emergence enough. This would not have allowed him to ignore the South, especially Madras Presidency and Maharashtra, to the extent that he has done. He has paid more attention to Bengal and Bihar and less attention to Bombay and Western I P.

It would have been interesting to find out if the caste system was actually transformed into the class system or the same system was transplanted to the urban centres, implying thereby that there was little change in the caste system.

Misra has tried to dispose of the problem of the caste-composition merely by stating that the high castes formed the middle-class. The term "high castes" will not suffice. It is not even clear what exactly he means by this term. He classifies Kayasthas both as low caste and as high caste, (pp 53, 322, 393). This is due to the lack of an adequate framework within which to place these castes. His contention that Brahmins dominated in almost all the regions, especially in South India, is debatable. Nairs and Christians dominated in Kerala while Khatri and Aroras dominated in Punjab; Bania and Kayastha in U P; and Brahmin, Baidya Kayastha and Bania in Bengal. He has not even mentioned the Jews of Calcutta and Parsis of Bombay. Ghurye and Gadgil have also treated this problem.¹ N K Sinha has given the caste composition of some of the occupational groups in Calcutta which shows that even some lower

castes moved up after making money," The Telis of Eastern India improved their position with the acquisition of wealth. Even in Bengal some lower castes commanded prestige after acquiring wealth in the changed conditions. These castes were the Telis, Subarnabaniks and Ugrakshatriyas. Reference to Brahmins, Kayasthas and Banias, the castes which took advantage of the changed political and economic conditions are very vague indeed and do not solve the problem of caste-composition of the middle class.

The author seems to suggest that the change from the caste system to the class system was very rapid. He writes that "regardless of their original standing in society", specialists in business administration were awarded higher salary and superior status, (pp 80, 100). Was it really so? Could one command prestige by wealth and power as stated by him? This can be tested only if one has a knowledge of the "original standing" of the persons who took to the new occupations. The degree of change from the caste system to the class system can be measured only in relation to the caste system. High castes commanded prestige and wealth in the traditional social system and it was easier for them to take up new occupations. So the change would be less if they took to new occupations because they would occupy high social position in the class system similar to that in the caste system. On the other hand, change would be more radical if the lower castes raised their status in the class system by earning wealth through new occupations. This could throw light on the problem of occupational mobility which is completely ignored by the author.

Further, rural-urban contact should have been dealt with. While discussing the growth of middle-classes in urban centres, it is impossible to ignore its relationship to the rural areas. Various interesting questions can be asked in this context, e.g., who invested money in land? What was the position of the new landlords in the villages? What happened to the landowners who sold their land? Whichever profession they adopted after migrating to towns, people still maintained contact with the rural areas and the land they left behind. According to Misra, money flowed from urban to rural areas as investment in land.

implying thereby, that it was a one-way process; whereas in matter of fact the money earned from land was also invested in trade and commerce³ and also in education. As an example for the latter, it may be mentioned that the children of Zamindars of Bengal went to England for higher studies.

According to the author the growth of the middle-class was restricted to the urban areas. Nowhere does he discuss the "growth of towns" which is a very important factor in any analysis of the emergence of the middle-class.

Pro-British Approach

Misra constantly gives the impression that the emergence of Indian middle-class has been very rapid and smooth, and that all British policies encouraged trade, industry and education. But here one may question the validity of his view, because he seems to have ignored the factors which hampered the growth of middle-class. His approach tends to be pro-British and not completely objective. For instance, he overlooks the curbs introduced by Curzon in 1904 on the education of Indians, and the partiality of the British for the Anglo-Indians. He does not point out the position of those Indian craftsmen who were displaced with the end of the indigenous industry, due to the opening up of the Indian market to cheap manufactured goods from England. He does not comment on the role of these craftsmen in the emergence of the middle class and their position in the new class system.

A point on which this book does throw light is the role of Western education in the emergence of the middle-class, i.e., the role of education in bringing about social change. It bears testimony to the fact that education is an integral part of society and that the two (education and society) are closely inter-related. Change in one necessitates change in the other.

To start with, schools and colleges were opened in urban centres to impart education to people who would act as media between the government and the masses. This was essential to implement Governmental policies of land reform and law. A whole class of lawyers grew up in this context. Technical education had to be coordinated with industrial development. Thus, techni-

cal schools and colleges were opened by Curzon to train subordinate technical and supervisory staff. Later, superior Indian personnel was trained to facilitate rapid industrial expansion. With the opening up of trade in 1883 a new pattern of business was set up. The separation of mercantile from the financial branch of commercial transactions brought forth specialization in services. Thus economic and political systems necessitated a change in the system of education.

Another point highlighted in this book is that prestige could be derived from higher education and wealth, instead of social position. This was made possible by the introduction of the new educational system. Though the change in values was not radical, it was significant.

It was the educated few who propagated Western ideas and ways of living. A section of the intelligentsia also revolted against the Western ideas and ways of living and was able to mobilize the peasants and workers against the ruling government. The middle class has been equated with the Congress by Misra. When Curzon saw the danger of growing awareness of their rights among the educated he modified the system of education. The educated middle-class played a most important role in bringing about the Independence of India, changing the political system of this country. Thus education brought forth change in the political and social set-up. Change in the political and economic system was followed by change in the system of education. This resulted in the introduction of Western education and technology.

Misra seems to have made no use of the vast amount of literature available on the system of social stratification, especially class, whereas a book on such a subject required a firm grasp of this concept which has been developed and refined during the past century. This absence of sociological awareness has become a drawback even in the treatment of historical facts which happen to be the author's special field of study. Thus one constantly receives an impression that the subject has not been discussed from all angles or developed to its full scope. And this is possible if the distinctions between the three subjects of sociology, economics, and history

are broken down. instead of the three being treated as water-tight compartments,

In certain places even the historical facts are not well provided, nor are they always accurate. As mentioned earlier, he has deliberately ignored the hindrances which the policies of the British put in the way of the rising middle-class. According to Misra, the Permanent Settlement and the abolition of the customary rule of primogeniture in Bengal formed the basis of the emergence of the middle-class. This seems to suggest that the rule of primogeniture was prevalent whereas he admits in the beginning that it was not actually so. And if it was prevalent, it was applicable only to local chiefs. Otherwise the institution of joint property allowed division in land which resulted in the fragmentation of land. Thus the fragmentation of land took place even before the advent of the British. (Misra, p 49; Sinha, p 34). The British only added pace to the process by making land transferable and by the introduction of the sale laws which necessitated sale of land in default of annual rent by a certain fixed date. (Gopal, p 20). Increase in population in the rural areas was another incentive. Thus, fragmentation was not caused by the abolition of primogeniture.

The author presents contradictory historical facts. While discussing the patriarchal basis of pre-British Indian society, he states that even the largest landholders became poor in course of time due to the inheritance laws, (p 50). Afterwards he seems to contest this point by stating that the fragmentation in land occurred only with the advent of the British.

Misra equates the (im)gress with middle class interests. This has been refuted by many. Middle class people and middle class interests are two things and it is not legitimate to identify the two. And his point that lower middle class, comprising of dissatisfied educated people with low income, started the revivalist movements as well as the freedom movement, is not historically true. Firstly, the initiators and the main supporters of Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj did not belong to the lower-middle class eg. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Devendranath Ta-

gore. The fact that Swami Dayanand belonged to lower-middle class loses its significance when one realizes that his patrons and chief supporters came from the aristocratic or rich families. While going through the preface of Satyarth Prakash, one finds that it was written in the palace of Maharana of Ldaipur, who was the patron of Swami Dayanand. On his first visit to Punjab, the host of Swami Dayanand was a retired Muslim civil surgeon of Lahore and a Khan Bahadur. The largest following of these leaders might have come from the lower-middle class, but that was not true of the leaders. In fact, examples can be cited to prove that many leaders of the independence movement did not belong to the lower-middle class, as stated by Misra. To name a few, can we place the Nehrus, Aurobindo Ghose, Subhash Chandra Bose,

Rajagopalachari Gandhiji, Lala Lajpat Rai, C K Das, Vallabhbhai Patel Bhulabhai Desai, and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya in the lower middle class? The author's assumption that the lower middle class initiated the freedom movement is questionable.

A basic flaw in this book is the absence of a theoretical framework.

Notes

- ¹ D R Gadgil, "Origins of the Modern Indian Business Class—An Interim Report", International Secretariat, Institute of Pacific Relations, New York, 1959; p 16.
- ² G S Ghurye, "Caste, Class of Occupation", Popular Book Depot, Bombay, 1961; p 265.
- ³ N K Sinha, "The Economic History of Bengal" Firma K L Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1962; p 220.
- ⁴ S Gopal, "Permanent Settlement in Bengal and its Results" Allen & Unwin, 1949; p 34.

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