

**The Emergence and Growth of the Bengali Middle Class in Colonial
Bengal: A Historical Review**

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Abstract:The middle class is a fundamental element in the modern social structure. The middle stratum is considered a pivotal social group in the class structure of any society or state. The impact of the middle class in the development of the socio-economic and political conditions and context of every country is paramount. This class emerged in the social system of Bengal at a historical juncture when society was breaking away from the old traditional feudal and agrarian social structure and rushing towards the modern colonial social structure. The emergence of the middle class in Bengal throughout the British colonial period from the mid-18th century to the first half of the 19th century was a complex and long historical process. This class emerged not only as a social class but also as an economic, intellectual and political class and has had a long-term influence on the history, economy, society, culture and politics of Bengal in the subsequent period, which is equally active in the present day. By means of their active and sustained involvement with modern Western education and institutions, they played a decisive role in transforming Bengal rigid traditional society into a rational and progressive societal framework. This article primarily sheds light on the historical context behind the emergence and growth of the middle class in colonial Bengal and the role of this class in education, social reforms and politics in the following period.

Keywords: Bengali Middle Class, British Colonial Administration, Social Reforms etc.

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Introduction

Until the prior colonial period to the first half of the British colonial period, the historical social structure of Bengal was predominantly centered on the landlord and his subordinates. But the onset of British rule in Bengal and multiple steps taken by the British authorities, initiated a radical change in the administrative and economic structure of Bengal. As a result, a new

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educated professional-based conscious class emerged in Bengal, who were called the middle class. The emergence of this class was an epoch-making event. "The middle class basically refers to the class of society whose population is located between the upper class (high income) and the lower class (low income) in terms of economic, social and cultural status and plays an incredibly significant influential role in society".¹ The middle class is not only an economic class but also a social, cultural and intellectual class. People of this stratum are largely economically stable and give considerable importance to education. They always strive for their own dignity and respect in social and cultural matters. Most importantly, they have the highest sense of political awareness and the role of this class of people is deemed highly significant in any crisis moment of state or society. "In their professional lives, they are involved in multiple professions covering business, teaching, lawyers, doctors, police, journalists, administration and so on. Considering these numerous individuals also call the middle-class Professional Class".² The pivotal factor behind the emergence of the middle class in Bengal was undoubtedly the British colonial rule.

Methodology

Qualitative methods have been used systematically in this research. This research paper has been conducted based on data collected from both primary and secondary sources. As primary sources, various administrative and education-related government documents, reports, contemporary newspapers, memoirs of the government during the British colonial period have been reviewed. In the case of secondary sources, numerous historical books, journals, reports, etc. have been carefully reviewed and necessary information has been collected. In this case, information has been gathered mainly from the Dhaka University Library and the Bangladesh Asiatic Society Library.

Objectives of the study

- 3.1 To analyze the historical context of the growth and development of the Bengali middle class in colonial Bengal.
- 3.2 To investigate how the Bengali middle class shaped education, social reform activities and political consciousness in colonial Bengal.

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Literature review

Bengal District Gazetteers 1876-1930 published by the Government of Bengal (describes economic and social information of various districts, especially information related to the peasant society and lower-class jobs), *Settlement Reports of Bengal 1793-1940* published by the Revenue Department, Government of Bengal (explains information about farmers and taxes, land ownership, background of the origin of the middle class), *Reports of the University of Calcutta, 1857-1930* (provides information about the admission statistics of students and their social status, as well as information about the relationship between the middle class and Western education) and *Education Commission Report* (Lord Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education, 1835) published by the Government of India (provides a clear explanation about the introduction of modern Western education and the consequent emergence of the middle class) etc. have been used as primary sources in this research work. In addition, various contemporary newspapers (*The Bengal Gazette*, *Bangobasi*, *The Statesman*) and personal documents and memoirs (*Dwarkanath Tagore's Letters, 1820-1846*, *Ramesh Chandra Dutta, Memoirs (1850-1910)*) provide detailed information about the lifestyle, sense of awareness, mental and cultural foundations and reform movements of the middle class. Relevant information has been collected with great awareness from the mentioned primary sources and used in the present research work. There is long list of historical research books regarding Middle Class of Bengal, including "*The Emergence of the Middle Class in India*" by B. B. Misra, "*Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*" by Bernard S. Cohn, and "*Ideology and Empire in Eighteenth-Century India*" by Thomas R. Metcalf. These books provide valuable information about the colonial social structure and the historical basis of the middle class, its intellectual and cultural rise, and subsequent ideological basis in education, social reform, and Bengali cultural life, which have certainly played a pivotal role in this research work. Additionally books name "*The Bengal Renaissance*" by Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, "*Culture and Society in Bengal*" by Sumit Sarkar, "*The Making of Modern India*" by Ramachandra Guha, "*India in the World Economy*" by Tirthankar Roy, "*Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital*" by Sugata Bose, "*Bengali Madhyabitta*" by Vinay Ghosh, "*Opaniveshik Banglar Samaj*" by Sumit Sarkar, etc., explain in detail the historical context of the emergence of the Bengali gentry (middle class), the development of the

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professional middle class in the colonial economy, and the social and psychological history of the middle class. All secondary sources mentioned have helped in completing the present article properly by providing valuable information.

The emergence and development of the Bengali middle class

The rise of Bengali middle class in colonial Bengal undoubtedly constituted a pivotal transformation in the modern Bengal history. It represents a key historical turning point in the intellectual, economic, political and social history of modern Bengal. Middle class is not only a social class. It simultaneously considers an economic and intellectual class. The emergence of the Bengali middle class was not merely the emergence of a new social class but was the combined result of British colonial rule, the emergence and spread of modern Western education, introduction of press, growth and development of Urbanization, rise of modern Professional class, radical changes in the economic and administrative structure led by British colonial rule and so on. A comprehensive analysis is elaborated upon in the subsequent section in depth.

British colonial rule and administrative reconfiguration

British colonial rule was established in Bengal with the defeat of Siraj-ud-Daula, the last independent Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, in the Battle of Plassey on June 30, 1757. Through colonial rule, along with the shift in political power in Bengal, there were radical changes in the administrative, economic and social structure forever. "A range of government departments, revenue offices and courts were established in the administrative centers of big cities like Calcutta, Dhaka and Chittagong".³ To collect revenue and manage the legal system and administrative activities properly on behalf of the British colonial government, a cluster of local employees (educated in Western education) was needed. Hiring locals at low wages reduced administrative costs which was the main concern of the East India Company's officials. Therefore, Western education was first introduced in India with the aim of recruiting them to lower-level positions in their administration. Via them, the first middle class emerged in colonial Bengal. "They basically worked as a bridge for communication between the colonial ruling class

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and the local population".⁴ People employed in these professions enjoyed a stable income, an urban lifestyle, and social status and ultimately laying the foundation for the first middle class in Bengal's history. Administrative jobs played the largest role in establishing the social status and economic foundation of the middle class.

Introduction of Western education

In the pre-colonial period, the indigenous education system was prevalent in Bengal. For Muslims, it was Madrasa-centric and for Hindus, there was Chatuspadi Tole. Basically, religion-centric education was provided here. The British colonial government was the first to introduce Western education in this country. The East India Company was a commercial company. The only objective of the company was to maximize profits. "The company's officials were the first to introduce Western education in this country to reduce administrative costs and employ Indians in lower-level jobs in the administration and create a group of educated clerical class loyal to the British government".⁵ In this regard, the famous statement of Thomas Babington Macleay (a member of the British Parliament and a member of the Council of the Governor-General of India) is worth mentioning- "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern- a class of persons, Indian in blood and color but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect".⁶

Western education has played a decisive role in the formation of the middle class in Bengal. The educated population, along with involving themselves in administrative jobs, also acquired knowledge regarding modern Philosophy, Science, Geography, History, rationalism, etc. through which a new intellectual group was born. The middle class was not only a social class. It was also an economic and intellectual class. In 1834, the government made English language compulsory for employment, which led to a desire for Western education. "Through the Charter Act of 1813, the British government directed the East India Company to spend one lakh rupees annually for the development of education in India".⁷ Subsequently, Western education spread rapidly in the country. Numerous educational institutions including Hindu College, Dhaka College, Calcutta University, Madras University were established. As a result, an educated, modern, intellectual middle class was born. By means of Western education, they foster their

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intellectual abilities as well as economic development through employment, which endows them social prestige. In the following year, this new class emerged as the most influential class in society.

Permanent settlement and reforms of land revenue system

The British East India Company was a commercial company and consequently had no experience in governance. Therefore, in its efforts to govern Bengal, the company's officials conducted diverse experiments, particularly land administration was a fertile field. In 1793, the Governor General of Bengal, Lord Cornwallis, introduced the permanent settlement in the land revenue system. By virtue of this, the land revenue was fixed forever, and the zamindars were granted ownership of the land. "As a result of the permanent settlement, various professions including Naib, Gomasta, Moktar, Accountant, Kanungo, Lawyer emerged to ensure smooth administration of land revenue. These positions ensured employment for Western-educated urban and semi-urban officials and employees, who were the backbone of the early middle class".⁸ To solve several land-related issues, the requirement for multiple professions regarding judges, lawyers, moktars, and peshkars expanded. People's concern in Western education accelerated to get jobs in these positions. A large amount of money accumulated in the hands among a cohort of people in the 18th century by doing business or working with the East India Company. As a result of the Sunset Act of Permanent Settlement, when many zamindars failed to pay their tax to the British colonial government, their zamindari was auctioned and sold. On this instance, this new wealthy class bought the land of the traditional zamindars. This system broke up the old traditional zamindars authority and gave rise to a new class. Although they were mainly involved in the rural economy, they gradually became accustomed to the urban lifestyle. Zamindar left the villages and started living in the cities, and in the absence of the zamindar, a class of literate intermediaries emerged who took over the management of the zamindari in the absence of the zamindar. They later played a pivotal role in the formation of a professional middle class".⁹

Urbanization and development of city-centered economy

The contribution of Calcutta city to the emergence of the middle class in Bengal is undeniable. The emergence of the middle class is deeply intertwined with urbanization. "Owing to multiple

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factors for instance, the development of transportation system in the 18th century especially the introduction of railways, expansion of trade and commerce, spread of Western education, employment opportunities, etc. numerous cities including Calcutta, Dhaka, Murshidabad emerged in Bengal during the colonial period, where there was an urban-centered lifestyle and all the elements of modern life were present".¹⁰ As a result of urbanization, cities developed as administrative centers. With the establishment of revenue offices, various government departments, courts, commercial institutions, schools, colleges, and hospitals, the demand for accountants, lawyers, doctors, teachers, administrative officers, and employees and clerks increased. Consequently, people associated with all these professions emerged as an educated middle class came into being in the Bengali society.

Rise of Professional Class

"The formation of professional class at the time of the colonial period is inextricably connected to Western education and the rise of educated middle class".¹¹ The professional class refers to those who have educational qualifications, certificates or licenses, and professional qualifications. People in this stratum provide services based on specialization with salaried employment and social status. "To run the colonial administration, numerous administrative centers including Calcutta, Dhaka, Chittagong, Murshidabad, Burdwan were established, where there was a high requirement for professions like teachers, doctors, lawyers. People were educated in Western education and as a result got jobs in all these professions and later established in a professional class".¹² They primarily built their status in society based on their own qualifications instead of their birth certificate. People of the professional class predominantly drive city-centered lives and have a knowledge-based mentality. They actively participate in political discussions. Many individuals refer to this professional class as the middle class. This class is not only a social class but also an intellectual class. The urban lifestyle of the professional class performed a decisive role in building their cultural identity.

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Advent of printing press and the development of intellectual consciousness

Undoubtedly printing press is a crucial component to disseminate knowledge and shape public consciousness. In the 18th century, printing press was first introduced in the Bengal (Sreerampore Mission Press, Calcutta Press, Dhaka Press). The introduction of printing press generated a new space for the establishment of knowledge and self-service in the Bengali society, which played a fundamental role in the emergence of the middle class. "Through printing press, all types of booklets, periodicals, newspapers were widely accessible and consequently knowledge was no longer confined to the elite and religious groups as before but came within the reach of the commonly educated people of society".¹³ This new emerging readership was exposed to Western education, philosophy, rationalism, modern science and gained awareness of social and political issues. The educated literate cohort later laid the foundation for a conscious intellectual middle class.

The emergence of the middle class in Bengal was not due to a predominant factor but was the byproduct of a multidimensional historical process. The middle class emerged in the nineteenth century as a continuous result of a coordinated process of administrative, economic, social, cultural, political and educational changes. It played a far-reaching role in the subsequent socio-economic and political history of Bengal.

Middle Class in Education and Social Reforms Movement

The primary foundation for the emergence of the middle class in colonial Bengal was Western education. Education and social reform activities were strongly linked to this class. Being educated in Western education, they logically understand the necessity of the natives to be educated in Western education. In continuation of this, a considerable number of educated Bengali modern men who emerged from this middle class made a substantial impact to the domain of education. They emphasized the spread and expansion of Western education in the Bengal language. In this regard, the contribution of Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1831) (as the first modern Indian man) is memorable. "In 1817, he founded Hindu College with the joint

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efforts of David Hare and Radhakanta Deb to spread Western education, which afterwards evolved into Presidency College in 1855 and Presidency University in 1857 and later the time this University was the hub of the Renaissance organized in Bengal in the following period".¹⁴ He appealed to the British authorities to spend the annual 1 lakh taka allocated for education in Bengal by the East India Company on Western education.

"Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) is also a Bengali who is notable in this regard. In 1851, when he was the Principal of Sanskrit College, he opened the college to all students, including Brahmin students, which was a rare event at that time".¹⁵ He introduced Western education besides traditional Sanskrit learning. He opened education to the public, which was a rare event at that time and promoted modern rational thinking and social reform ideals. He undertook an effort to expand education from the elite to the public. His tenure contributed largely to transforming Sanskrit College from an exclusively traditional institution into a hub of modern, rational reform centered educational institution. His contribution to the field of education, regarding the simplification of Bengali prose, the expansion of women's education, and the formulation of caste identity, was undeniable. He established more than 50 modern schools in different places in Bengal.

Keshab Chandra Sen (1834-1884), who belonged to the middle class of Bengal was a prominent Bengali social and religious reformer played a decisive role in introducing Western education in Bengal. He established many educational institutions including the Brahma Balika Shikshalay and the Brahma Balak Vidyalaya. Basically, he acted as a bridge between Indian religious thought and modern reform movements.

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) was a fierce and vehement unionist, a modern thinker and a very popular teacher among the students at Hindu College. His followers were collectively called Young Bengal. "Through his teaching, he started practicing free-thinking, rational attitude and critical perspective, which played a crucial role in the intellectual development of the middle class of Bengal".¹⁶ The progressive youth known as Young Bengal later played an active role in social and cultural reforms. Krishna Mohan Bandyopadhyay, Tarachand Chakraborty, Parichand Mitra, Ramgopal Ghosh were among the Young Bengal group. In 1828, the Academic Association was established on his initiative. Through this, an attempt was made to establish rational discussion and conscious perspective among the educated

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young society. He promoted free thinking, rationalism, social reform, intellectual debate, modern Western education and ideas. Alongside, he criticized superstition, orthodoxy and harsh caste practices.

In addition to education, this class also played the most pioneering role in reforming the superstitious society of the time. Raja Rammohan Roy started a movement against the cruel and barbaric practice of Sati. The practice of Sati refers to the cruelest custom prevalent in Hindu society for a long time, where when a woman's husband died, she was burned on a pyre along with her husband. "As a result of his rational thinking, reformist writings, and continuous contact with the British authorities, the British authorities banned the practice of Sati in 1729. On 4 December 1829, Lord William Bentinck (Governor-General of British India) banned the practice of Sati through the *"Bengal Sati Regulation (Regulation XVII)"* and declared it's as illegal and punishable by law".¹⁷ It was first implemented in the Bengal Presidency and later in the whole of British India. By virtue of this, Bengali Hindu women were saved from an inhuman, cruel, and brutal practice.

"On 26 July 1856, the *"Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act"* was passed during the rule of Governor General Lord Canning, under the leadership of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar legalizing widow remarriage".¹⁸ Therefore, women were freed from the social and family burden and given the right to reshape a new life. It opened a new era for the protection of women's dignity and rights in the social sphere. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also developed a social movement against child marriage and polygamy. He argued based on scriptures that polygamy was an injustice to women and was not permissible according to Hindu scriptures.

The middle class used newspapers and magazines published in the contemporary period as effective media in all their social reform activities with significant accomplishment. Samachar Darpan and Sangbad Kaumudi were particularly prominent newspapers in this regard, where collective awareness was generated by means of continuous writing regarding social prejudices, injustices and the need for education. Through all these publications, the middle class initiated an intellectual class who supported the social reform movement. Above all, the middle class played a leading and guiding role in the spread of education in Bengal and reformed activities opposing social injustices and prejudice.

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Role of the middle class in the development of political awareness

In all social frameworks, political consciousness initially emerges on the midst of the middle class. In the 19th century, the British colonial rule, the emergence of modern Western education and printing press, the modern administration and legal framework developed a sense of political awareness within the Bengali middle class. The writings of John Locke, Bertrand Arthur William Russell, Karl Marx and proper knowledge of modern concepts such as democracy, nationalism, freedom, liberalism, rule of law, equality, etc. had a profound impact on their psyche. Subsequently, a sense of political understanding arose amongst them. "In the first half, they did not want the end of British rule. They demanded reforms within the colonial administration".¹⁹ They were moderate and loyal reformists. Expanded participation of Indians in the administration, reduction in land revenue rates, and protest the oppression of indigo farmers were their core demands in the initial stage. At this juncture, meetings with the governor, sending memoranda, organizing meetings and committees were the main means of conducting political endeavors. The British India Association, the Bengal British India Society were first established on the initiative of this class. "Public opinion was established through continuous writings in newspapers such as Samachar Darpan, Sangbad Kaumudi, Sangbad Prabhakar, Hindu Patriot, Somprakash, Tattwabodhini criticizing British colonial policies, social injustice and prejudice and social discrimination".²⁰ Through newspapers, the middle class demonstrated the capacity to bring politics out of the confines of the aristocracy and into the center of discussion of the educated mass people. Gradually, a sense of political awareness arose among this class of mass people. They began to speak out about their right to independence, sovereignty and self-government. As a result of their political consciousness, the Indian National Congress was established in 1885 as the first political party in the Indian subcontinent. Almost all the leaders who led the nationalist movement against British colonial rule in the following year in Bengal derived from the middle class. Prominent political leaders who emerged from the middle class include Surendranath Banerjee, Dwarkanath Gangopadhyay, Anand Mohan Bose, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel (Sardar Patel), Rajendra Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari, Subhash Chandra Bose, Rash Behari Bose, Bipin Chandra Pal, Aurobindo Ghosh, Desh Bandhu Chittaranjan Das, Lala Lajpat Roy, Sarojini Naidu and so one.

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The contribution of all these leaders in the anti-British nationalist movement in India is remarkable. Consequently, of their collective movement, the British colonial government was forced to withdraw its ruling power from India and subsequently almost two hundred years of British colonial rule ended in this country in 1947, and the sun of independence rose ultimately. So, emergence of middle class in Bengal altered its history forever!

Conclusions

The middle class which emerged over the period of the British colonial period was simultaneously a social, economic, intellectual and political class. Following the establishment of British colonial rule in Bengal after the 18th century, completely new opportunity regarding Western education, trade and commerce, professions, administration, town and cities, printing press generated a new group emerged separate from traditional elites. This class did not originate owing to one exclusive cause but was the consequence of a long-term, multidimensional, continuous historical process of the colonial regime, which can be characterized as a product of colonial modernity. The multiple initiatives initiated by the colonial government facilitated the emergence of a new middle class, which eventually led a nationalist movement in opposition to them. As a result of their movement, the British colonial government was ultimately forced to conclude its nearly two hundred years of colonial rule and India secured its independence. Therefore, the emergence of the middle class in Bengal is indisputably a historical chapter and perfumed a decisive rule in the following social, economic and political history in colonial Bengal.

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