The Crisis of Bengali Gentility in Calcutta

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The concept of 'gentility' in a particular social sphere because it covers many, vague concepts.' The term 'gentleman' however is purely English and it has been taken over unchanged in other languages. The complex of notions associated with 'gentility' belongs to all historic times and peoples, the sentiments expressed therein varying in intensity and relative importance. With the increasing democratisation and 'de-distantiation' of different social strata, gentility is tending more to be identified with some ethical and cultural values. 'Gentle' itself derives from the Latin gens, the genitive gentis meaning family or breeding. The gentleman, therefore, must be well-born, and once a gentleman one is always a gentleman. This point is reluctantly conceded by Henry Peacham, one of the earliest theorists of gentility (The Compleat Gentleman, 1622. Ed by G S Gordon, Oxford, 1906), who laments that drinking, swearing and whore-mongering were no bar to gentility. No procession or work is genteel when it is practised 'manually.' This has been elaborated by Veblen in his Theory of the Leisure Class and is well-known to students of sociology. The sentiments associated with occupation are very violent and increase in intensity in earlier historical periods. All through historical times menial labour has been a bar to gentility, and, with few and transitory exceptions, manual labour also. Saint-Simon relates that the nobles of Louis XIV in camp before Lille preferred to go hungry rather than lift bags of rice from their wagons.

Salaried pecupatign for historical reasons are more genteel than free professions. Writers and artists have had to overcome this barrier to gain admission to gentility. The taboo on gainful employment is best exemplified in discriminations against merchants. Merchants were completely barred from the feudal and ancient nobility. In modern capitalist democracies there is an increasing tendency to regard wealth accruing from successful business enterprises as an achievement. And achievement, distinguished ability and notable public service have ever been royal roads to the acquisition of gentility. In modern society literature and the arts are roads to gentility or the basis of this 'achievement' principle.

These are, more or less, material criteria of gentility, in so far as they are directly or indirectly associated with the gaining of material or economic status. There are some non-material criteria also. For centuries the western world has been assiduously cultivating the theory and art of manners and polite language in connection with gentility. Then the problem of dress is also there. Moralists have contended that 'clothes do not make the man' but Shakespeare was a greater realist than the moralists when he said, 'Apparel oft proclaims the man'. At least it proclaims a 'gentleman'. And dress, therefore, is an important item in the paraphernalia of gentility. It has an economic basis also.

The Genesis of Bengali Gentility

This broad enumeration of the criteria of gentility is necessary because they are applicable to Bengali gentility also. 'Bengalis are historically and inseparably associated with gentility in India, particularly in modern India. Bengalis outside Bengal are commonly called 'Bangalee Baboos'. The origin of Bengali gentility goes back to the early period of British rule. The modern Bengali baboos' or gentlemen emerged some time in the last quarter of the eighteenth century as banlas, mutsuddls and dalals or agents of E. I. Company's merchants and 'interlopers' and as munshis, de-wunns or sarkars of English administrators.

The story of their evolution, quite a long one, need not be told here. That is not relevant to our Immediate theme. What is relevant is that most of the ancestors of the old Bengali genteel families were 'upstarts' in the light of the 'birth'
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and estate' criteria and that they had no great difficulty in acquiring the status of gentility by mastering the art of money-making. The social 'elitists' in the new urban milieu of Calcutta were definitely changing by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the criterion of 'achievement' in wealth and education was gaining strength. As the scope for education and money-making was greater in Calcutta in early British days, the accession to the middle classes was also greater in Bengal. The problem of middle-class gentility has, therefore, acquired a unique historic importance in Bengal.

Post-War Changes

What was historically important in the nineteenth century is now becoming an increasingly complex socio-economic and cultural problem in the mid-twentieth century. Though the middle-classes had been both horizontally and vertically expanding for well over a century in Bengal, the contours of Bengali society were more or less clear and well-defined till the beginning of the second World War in 1939. Of course, the new urban social mobility, generated by various socio-economic forces, was resulting in ever-shifting social stratification and promotion and demotion of classes in Calcutta, that is, in Bengali society. But the speed of vertical mobility in the urban society of Calcutta was much less in pre-1939 days than it was in the war years and than it still is in the post-war years.

The reason is that all the channels of vertical circulation of individuals in Calcutta society were almost fixed for long range social equilibrium in the 1920s and 1930s. The prices were more or less stable, and incomes and income groups were also stable. The pattern of consumption, expenditure and the range of satisfactions of the Bengali middle-classes were more or less uniform over a fairly long period. The classical laws of Diminishing Returns and Marginal Utility were still operating 'immutablely' over a limited range of middle-class consumption-units, and problems of substitutability and the shifting or sliding of satisfactions were not present to create complications in the concept of gentility.

These were the golden days of Bengali gentility, in the sense that the chance of rising and falling a treat distance in the vertical direction was then much less in a slowly changing society than it is today amidst complete social fluidity. The social scale and the paraphernalia of gentility are all rapidly and constantly changing, and it is becoming increasingly difficult for different income groups of the Bengali middle-classes to keep pace with that change, particularly in urban centres like Calcutta. Bengali gentility is facing a really critical situation. And it has been made worse by the heavier influx of persons from provinces outside Bengal in search of gainful employment and occupation in Calcutta, and of several lakhs of Bengali refugees from East Pakistan, largely, concentrated in and around Calcutta. They have made the situation almost 'impassable'.

The economic competition is becoming harder day by day for Bengalis in Bengal and at the hub of it, in the city of Calcutta, the Bengali middle-classes are being pushed through the borderline of gentility towards the working-classes. Even there the competition is formidable, perhaps more formidable than what it is in the wide arena of diverse middle-class occupations. Middle-class gentility, moreover, is no less a psychological than an economic factor. And as the frontier of gentility is changing and its scale is ascending, the struggle for climbing up to it and for preserving the status quo as well as becoming keener day by day. The crisis of Bengali gentility is therefore not only economic. It has social and psychological crisis also, with all its ramifying consequences.

Economic Status

Let us now measure up the actual depth of the crisis by some available facts and figures. Since 1939-40, war-financing and other economic factors have brought about significant shifts in the income-groups with their resultant repercussions on the social structure. Calcutta being one of the most important centres of these income-changes, they had their due effects on the socio-economic structure of Bengal. These changes can best be illustrated by reference to national income statistics and statistics relating to social accounting. The required data are not available for this period. Even limited studies of income-tax revenue on a provincial basis have not been attempted.

All-India returns, however indicate that between 1938-39 and 1948-49, incomes of Rs 100,000 and over increased by 562%, incomes between Rs 50,000 and Rs 100,000 increased by 451%, between Rs 25,000 and Rs 50,000 by 270%, between Rs 15,000 and Rs 25,000 by 234%, between Rs 10,000 and Rs 15,000 by 228%, between Rs 5000 and Rs 10,000 by 205%, and Incomes up to Rs 5,000 by 143% ('How Indian income groups changed since 1938-39' - Employers Association of Calcutta). Though the greatest ascension is in the top group, it should be noted that the increases in the various groups must have been due to the push-and-pull process of gradual polarisation during the period. Obviously such income-changes occurred in Calcutta also among different groups of Bengali middle-classes. Quite a segment of them was pushed upwards although a larger segment was pushed downwards. In this tension, it was but natural that the standard of income of Bengali gentility should shift upward, resulting in the bitter struggle for those who were being constantly pulled down.

The report of an enquiry into the family budgets of middle-class employees of the Central Government conducted in 1946 revealed that employees were running deficit budgets as usual. The income and expenditure were not balancing and the deficit was varying from Rs 15-7 per family in Delhi, Rs 31-2 in Madras and Rs 41-6 in Bombay to Rs 46-5 in Calcutta (Para xii of the Report). This report also revealed that a large majority of these middle-class families had to incur debt and the extent of indebtedness is in terms of the percentage of families was 40 in Delhi, 64 in Bombay, 68 in Madras, and 76 in Calcutta (Table xxx of the Report). It is evident that the struggle of the middle-classes was keenest in Calcutta and the Bengali middle-classes, in particular, were seriously affected by it. This is also one of the most important reasons why 'trade unionism' developed among middle-class employees all over India in war-time and the post-war years and why Calcutta became one of its storm-centres. Possibly the Bengali middle-classes took the most
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active part in the movement, and as the findings of 'the Government!: Enquiry committees showed, they had ample reason for doing so.

In the Struggle for Jobs

This is one side of the picture, possibly less grim than the other. Almost all income-groups of the Bengali middle-classes are facing 'unequal' and, in some cases, unjust' competition in their own capital. Calcutta, with others hailing from other parts of India, in quest of jobs and business. This has been high lighted in a survey of unemployment, conducted by the State Statistical Bureau of the Government of West Bengal in 1953. According to this Report, among the total, middle-class family units of Calcutta the Bengalis constitute as much as 77.8% as against 11.6% Hindustani-speaking. What is significant is that these 77.8% Bengali middle-class families contribute 90.7% towards unemployment while the 11.6% Hindustani-speaking families contribute 4.7% and 4.4% other Indian families 2.1%, 3.3% South Indian families 2.1%. Including all classes and speaking approximately, Bengalis have 20% less employment than the average, Hindustanis 35% more than the average, South Indians 20% more and other Indians 10% more. In the case of the middle-classes, while the Bengalis have about 5% less employment than the average, the Hindustanis have 35% more, South Indians 35% more, and other Indians 28% more than the average.

Another important factor is that the total number of 202 thousand women seeking employment in Calcutta, as many as 16.2 thousand are Bengalis; and the majority of them belong to middle-class families. In the case of other language-groups, most of the women employment-seekers belong to the working classes. The middle-class female population in Calcutta and the five adjacent towns of Tollygunge, Behala, Baranagar, South Dum Dum and Howrah City is about 775.4 thousand, of whom 681.3 thousand are Bengalis. Among the Bengalis again, 189.5 thousand Bengali women are middle-class refugees (about 28%). About the desire for some sort of employment among these middle-class women the Report says: 'It shows that, generally speaking, the desire for some gainful occupation largely depends in the economic pressure. But it noticeable that the decline is not as sharp as in the case of all women, in whose case the percentage declined from 63.0 in the Income-group of Rs 150 to 23.4 in the income group of above Rs 700, whereas in the case of unmarried girls, the percentage declined from 63.9 to 33.3.

This probably indicates that the reasons for desire for gainful employment amongst these unmarried girls are not entirely economic'. (Survey of Unemployment in West Bengal. 1953, Part III, p 6). This is an important observation, though its sociological significance has not been brought out in the Report for not being within its defined scope. It is one of the most important trends in the middle-class Bengali society of Calcutta: having direct relation to the problem of gentility. We shall come to this later.

The Nature of the Problem

The foregoing facts, though not adequate, indicate that some important forces are operating in the Bengali middle-class sector in Calcutta, creating new problems for different income-groups within it and pressing for new ways and means for their solution. The forces are primarily economic, but their secondary non-economic consequences are far-reaching. The ascending income-groups have been constantly raising their standards of domestic expenditure, introducing new items into their family budgets and new elements into their pattern and concept of living, thereby altering the traditional conception of gentility also is forcibly shaping it. For example, the average rent of middle-class residential houses in Calcutta has increased by about 100% while the average desire for living in a standard good house has also become widespread. In pre-war days a middle-class family of the Rs 3000-5000 (annual) income-group could not think of paying a monthly rent of Rs 75-100, which a large number of families of this Income-group do pay today, chiefly because a good house is as essential an item of good living today as good diet. The standard of housing is directly related to the concept of living. A 'drawing room' for visitors and a separate room for adolescent boys and girls were not needed by the average middle-class family in pre-war days because parents or heads did not feel the necessity for having them for good living. That need is felt today by 'educated' middle-class families, not necessarily because they are having increased incomes but chiefly because of their new outlook.

with relevant facts from Bengali middle-class budgets of today and compare them with those of twenty or thirty years ago. Unfortunately no such data are available, because no survey or enquiry about middle-classes, as far as I know, has been made till now in Bengal or in any other part of India, from the point of view of this change in the concept of living. Hence I have no alternative but to speak from close observation of the social life and behaviour of Bengali middle classes in Calcutta. As we are concerned here mainly with the prevailing social trend, it is hoped that there will be no wide discrepancy between the results of such observation and statistical surveys.

Changing Pattern of Expenditure

The middle-class pattern of expenditure has been changing since war-years all over India, particularly at all important urban centres, owing mainly to significant shifts in the incomes of different groups of middle-classes. Calcutta is one of those important centres where the Bengali middle-classes are chief actors on the changing social stage. Not only are changing incomes economically reflected in the pattern of expenditure, but the changing concept of living and gentility also is forcibly shaping it. For example, the average rent of middle-class residential houses in Calcutta has increased by about 100% while the average desire for living in a standard good house has also become widespread. In pre-war days a middle-class family of the Rs 3000-5000 (annual) income-group could not think of paying a monthly rent of Rs 75-100, which a large number of families of this Income-group do pay today, chiefly because a good house is as essential an item of good living today as good diet. The standard of housing is directly related to the concept of living. A 'drawing room' for visitors and a separate room for adolescent boys and girls were not needed by the average middle-class family in pre-war days because parents or heads did not feel the necessity for having them for good living. That need is felt today by 'educated' middle-class families, not necessarily because they are having increased incomes but chiefly because of their new outlook.

825

July 6, 1957
July 6, 1957

The rate of change differs at different levels of society, in proportion to the consciousness and desire for that change. This consciousness and desire are greater in all middle-class strata, irrespective of their income-variations, because it is traditionally associated with the 'sense' of gentility swaying the middle classes. It has, therefore, a tendency of vertical diffusion among different middle-class income-groups, creating strong psychological complexes of inferiority in the lower groups and resulting in increased efforts for climbing upward. That is why a Bengali middle-class family in Calcutta, having an average monthly income of Rs 300, is seen sometimes paying with much difficulty a monthly rent of Rs 75 and bearing an average cost of Rs 25 for the 'best possible' education for a child in standard schools.

The attitude to diet and dress also is perceptibly changing among the Bengali middle classes in Calcutta. Dress costs more not only because department-und-chain stores are introducing ever-new fashions and styles and advertising them successfully to seduce their 'patrons', but also because Calcutta is increasingly becoming a national (in all-India sense) and international stage for the exhibition of dress and because Bengalis are swayed easily by new attractions. Diet is changing because its scientific nutritional value is now a subject for study in 'domestic science' and 'hygiene' in girls' schools: and naturally when these school-girls become wives and mothers, they try not only to 'balance the budget' but also to 'balance the diet' even tending to upset the former balance.

Social and personal recreation and holidaying are also being listed in middle-class budgets as regular items of expenditure, because the new concept of gentility demands them as stub. Above everything, what is called the 'cost of children' has of late been enormously expanding because of the growing consciousness among middle-class parents that in the rearing of children their status of gentility is ultimately reflected.

The New Reality

The changing concept of gentility, is, therefore, a new reality which the Bengali middle-classes are facing in Calcutta today. It is inevitably giving a sharper edge economic struggle because what ever may be the importance of the non-material criteria of gentility, there must be an adequate economic base for the social operation of the concept. This is the reason why the desire for gainful employment among unmarried middle-class Bengali girls is not 'entirely economic', as has been observed in the Unemployment Survey Report of West Bengal Government previously mentioned. It would be more correct to say that the desire though not 'apparently' economic, is 'entirely' economic In reality. The mystery dissolves when the 'economic concept of the statistician is supplemented by the 'gentility' concept of the sociologist and the latter is accepted as a social reality. Not only unmarried girls, but quite a large number of married women also are seeking gainful employment today among Bengali middle-class families in Calcutta in order to keep up this changing standard of gentility. The desire for gainful employment among unmarried girls may also partly be due to their growing consciousness of economic freedom, a consciousness of extreme social importance, not always adequately reflected in economic statistics.

Another important fact, worth mentioning in this connection, is that the so-called 'proper' time to marry is also changing mainly owing to the constantly expanding expenditure of the married and single alike. The unmarried are faced with the possibility of losing their status of gentility if they do not conform, in a period of ever-increasing expenses, to a rising standard of living. The notion of 'immorality' of marrying without the 'means' of supporting the family is shifting the 'proper' time to marry to an ever-advancing age, resulting in late marriages and in many cases, to forced celibacy. This is creating serious complications in the Bengali middle-class society today, which are also not adequately reflected in statistical surveys.

The economic struggle of Bengali middle-classes is becoming harder day by day in the city of Calcutta for various reasons enumerated before. Members of the classes are being elbowed out of many independent fields of economic activity and patronage and also lack of the patience necessary to survive excessive competition in those fields. They are, therefore, falling back more and more on 'salaried services'—a field already overcrowded—where, as the Unemployment Surveys showed, they are not fairly represented in Calcutta. Grievances, mixed with a sense of frustration, are therefore daily mounting among them and leading, there almost irresistibly, towards (the political left). With the illusion of gentility vanishing before them, they are increasingly feeling the need of an alliance with the working classes in realising their economic demands.

But the tradition of gentility is very hoary in Bengal and it is very difficult for the Bengali middle-classes to shake off that tradition and merge themselves with the working classes. They are, therefore, found to swing from right to centre and to left in the political field at surprisingly short intervals. It appears from their social and political behaviour that greater truth lies in their struggle for holding on to the changing status of gentility and standard of living than for realising any ideological dream or political millennium. In that struggle for gaining and maintaining the status of gentility, the Bengali middle-classes have survived many shocks and shifts since the early nineteenth century, but none so grim and frightful like today's. As the ever-widening horizon of middle class gentility is daily receding before them, they are intensifying their desperate struggle on all fronts by all possible means to reach that horizon.

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