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Middle Class Stagnancy and Challenge to the same as seen in *Ebong Indrajit*

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Abstract: The Middle class is superimposed between the elites and the disadvantaged sections of society and has to maintain a certain way of living. They show reluctance to take part in socio-reformation works. They are scared to bring in changes as it would disrupt their way of living. It takes an indomitable spirit and courage to wake up from this stage of stagnancy and stand for change. This is what is done by Indrajit in the play *Ebong Indrajit*. This paper would highlight the state of the middle-class section as shown in the play and how the protagonists and some of the other characters aim to break away from the same.

Keywords: Stagnancy, socio-reformation, change, indomitable, courage.

The Basis of the Middle-Class

Middle class forms an interesting juncture in society, with its definition varying across countries and times. They form the binding force of a nation and have a huge importance over the economic and political functioning of a nation. They evidently promote their self-interests to a great extent, which makes them resistant to the changes around them.

As per economic criteria set by the World Bank, the middle-class daily wage is set between US \$10- US \$100, making them control a significant section of a country's economy- they form the major working class and as of 2009, 50 % of the world's population is comprised by the middle class. From the pre-independent era to the modern time period, their average income as well as their population has increased significantly over the years, with an expenditure of US \$2-US \$10 per day, as per the findings of Mumbai University. (Roy 32)

The Marxian Concept of Class is also quite important to understand the position of the Middle-Class in society. As per Marx, they have self-owned businesses and they have some amount of property of their own, but not like the capitalists. They are well spread, cutting across geopolitical boundaries. He termed them as "Petty Bourgeoisie". Marx had the belief that they would either disintegrate or get accumulated within the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, but it's evident that it did not pan out that way. Instead, they have grown on to



create a space of their own and exert a certain influence in society (Marx's Theory of Social Class and Class Structure).

The spread of the industrialisation played an important role in the evolution of the Middle Class. The spread of industries had a great impact on the economic conditions and it opened up markets for trade, coupled with colonising missions by Imperial Powers. This led to the rise of middle classes –they emerged as a major consumer of market goods, with which they could now compete against the aristocrats and attempt to imitate their way of living.

The rise of the middle class eventually influenced the writers of the contemporary and the preceding eras, especially 18th century, to create works for this section of society, as they demanded a writing different from that of the aristocrats and that would suit their tastes as well as act as a reflection of their lives.

Context of Badal Sircar's Works

In the Indian context, the rise of middle-class is associated with the colonial masters. The groundwork was laid down by Macaulay, by proposing English as a method of teaching in educational institutions. They needed people who would carry out the orders of the Company officials and hence it gave rise to a middle-class section, the educated youths. They came in contact with the European education, global outlook, which influenced their ideology and thought process and it enabled them to form a lifestyle of their own and some of them eventually went on to take part in the freedom struggle as well (The Emergence of Middle Class).

The youths, majorly from middle class, who took part in the struggle to envisage a free India, an ideal nation where there would be good opportunities for work and equality for all, eventually got disillusioned with the Nehru Regime. The poverty, corruption had left them disillusioned about the future (Pal 1).

These are some of the reasons which have made the middle-class youths resistant towards widespread reforms. Their contribution towards national development is quite significant, but are absent regarding moral refinement of society. This aspect can be found in the works of Badal Sircar in greater detail.

Badal Sircar's plays had an influence of the theatre of the absurd. The term was coined by Martin Esslin in 1960 to determine an alternative form of theatre. This alternative style of theatre emerged from the trauma and the after-effects of World War I and II. The spiritual essence had broken down completely over the time, especially in 1950s-60s. Wars had destroyed everything, rendering human lives meaningless amidst all the



rubble. This essence was captured by the practitioners of Absurd theatre. The characters, plotline or the dialogues show this aspect of meaninglessness and unfulfillment. Their words, action occurs in a circular movement – having no perfect beginning, middle and end. The question of existence bothers man – a sense of nothingness creeps in, which is evident in the plays of Beckett like *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame* and other playwrights like Ionesco and so on (What is Theatre of Absurd?).

The repetition, unstructured way of dialogues is a microcosm of the broken society at that point of time and there is a plot, where not much is happening, hinting at our unstructured psychological thoughts, about the cyclical pattern of thinking we find ourselves in.

Badal Sircar's play *Ebong Indrajit*, although written for a proscenium theatre, it formed the basis for the concept of his third theatre. Several of the concepts that he used in *Ebong Indrajit*- most notably the feature of audience-actor interaction, minimalist design, issues concerning social causes would become the premise of his argument for the third theatre.

In order to arouse questions in the mind of the people and make them receptive towards changes, through his third theatre, he shifted to open air theatre and a direct connection to the audience – by making them a part of the dramatic process in order to make the play closer to reality. He considered Proscenium to be money-minded form of art and through third theatre, he eliminated this requirement and aimed for an intermixing of Village and City Theatre style, but aloof from economic considerations. The Language, Story setting reflects to an extent the Absurd Theatre principles, especially *Ebong Indrajit*, having circular pattern of dialogues or following a continuous pattern, but majorly the language of his plays was based on the dialect of the common man and considered audience as an advantage which the other visual representations lacked (Kundu 28).

This paper would aim to address how *Ebong Indrajit* represents the Middle Class and their rigidities and how it tries to provide solution of this stagnancy through the means of social crusade.

How *Ebong Indrajit* represents the Middle Class and their rigidities?

Ebong Indrajit, the play by Badal Sircar written in 1960s, captures the essence of the Bengali Middle-class culture existing at that point in time. The socio-political context plays an important role regarding the

functioning of the middle-class section at that point of time. In the play, the character of the writer describes this population as:

WRITER. According to the census of 1961, the population of Calcutta is 2,92,12,891. Of them about two and a half per cent are graduates. They are known by different names. They are the middle-income group, although within that group there is enough disparity of income. They are the intellectuals, although if they really relied on their intellect, they would die of starvation. (Sircar 6).

This is quite correct. They are keen observers of society, but are not willing to get their hands dirty while trying to clear the scum of society. It might feel justifiable to some extent, keeping in context of the catastrophe that was going on around the people- be it the aftereffects of the World Wars causing economic and socio-cultural disruptions, especially in the case of India. The war and its aftermath affected Britain greatly; they eventually had to pull back their operations from the country, causing widespread political changes and eventually shaping the destiny of our country. But it brought its fair share of problems as well – most notably partition, which had a huge impact on everyone's lives.

Loss of identity, homes and coupled with the issue of refugee crisis took a toll on our country, after all, never in the world people had seen migration on such a wide scale. The Nehru Government faced difficulty in fulfilling its promise of providing a nation with welfare for all.

The country at this point saw unemployment, droughts along with economic crisis (Pal 2). This was true for Bengal as well- all those problems were evident in this part of country – be it the division of India Bangladesh, Direct Action Day, Hindu Muslim Riots and later the refugee crisis regarding Dandakaranya, leading to the Marichjhapi conflict. Hence, one would wish to look for stability, especially the middle class. They adopt stability to safeguard their interests, but in this process, they turn a blind eye to the social evils and corruption around them and become self-centred.

This is quite evident for all the characters in *Ebong Indrajit*, except Indrajit, Writer and the lady. Amal, Vimal, Kamal as well as Indrajit form the middle-class intelligentsia. But Indrajit is different from his peers in a lot of ways. The Writer calls them up from the audience and during his interaction with them rightly segregates him from the others, as derived from this instance: "You must have another name. You have to have" (Sircar 4). He does not accept his identity of Nirmal.

They start off as regular batch of students, who like any other students are playing, answering questions in school, gossiping about common topics like films, cricket and others. They, being a part of middle-class section of society, have a limited viewpoint towards life but from the formative years itself, Indrajit did develop certain thoughts, which made him stand apart from his peers (Shukla 135). A Sense of Repetitive dialogues or cyclical dialogues appear on several occasions- be it the viva in class or exams or in office, showing a repetitive pattern, the middle class has found themselves stuck into – birth, career, marriage, kids, retirement, with absolutely no time for looking around the society and making an attempt to change its process of functioning.

The Writer, who can be considered an alter-ego of Indrajit, comments regarding the ordinariness of the lives of the middle class in the line: “I do know a couple of them. A few like us. But they won’t make a play” (Sircar 4). They are not someone who can be used as an inspiration, as they prefer to stay inside their shell.

All are self-centred in nature, for instance Kamal is looking forward for a better opportunity in business, which he explains to the Writer, “I am involved in a business deal. If it clicks, I’ll be able to kick my job, insurance, everything” (Sircar 43) or Amal looking for a new place of work as the old one did not offer him promotion. He is vocal only when he is denied a promotion. Later on, after these characters have aged significantly in their lives, they are now concerned about their future, like Vimal is investing in a property in order to spend his old age with peace and comfort. In other words, by following this repetitive cycle of life of security, they have become assimilated within the system, letting go of their revolutionary instincts, as evident in the circular motion dialogues, where they initiate a debate on issues affecting society, but they fear of speaking out against injustices and return back to their own self-centred talks, as seen in this instance:

KAMAL. Power corrupts...

AMAL. Politics is dirty...

VIMAL. Just concern yourself with your own work.

KAMAL. If I am alive, all is well.

AMAL. There has been no promotion.

VIMAL. The living quarters are terrible (Sircar 47).

In case of the other characters as well, be it the Auntie and the other ladies, they too have entrapped themselves in this middle-class, ritualistic mentality, they cannot relate to the antics of the Writer, about what he is writing or why is not following the norms of society, especially regarding marriage, which is important for the progression of their class. Regarding this the Writer responds to auntie,

WRITER. Why should you always sleep in the night?

Why should you always try to be right?

Why should you live? Why should you die?

Everybody does it! That's why, that's why (Sircar 36).

This instance specifically points out the repetitive pattern of living and how we have forgotten the way to challenge such antics. Thus, *Ebong Indrajit* captures middle class mentality, and their reluctance to go against the norms of society.

How *Ebong Indrajit* provides a solution of this stagnancy through the means of social crusade?

The middle-class stubbornness was seriously challenged by Indrajit in this play, providing the much-needed motivation for the middle-class section through his actions to challenge this downfall and take necessary steps to rise above the occasion and bring changes in the society.

In *Ebong Indrajit*, through the character introductions, the character of the writer makes it quite clear that Indrajit alias Nirmal is different from others and he has a story to tell, which would be different from the other guys from his community. Indrajit is currently hiding as he has been defeated in his attempt of creating an alternate reality, where one has justice and the freedom to challenge the decaying customs and be independent from all aspects that limits the expression of man. Currently, he is trying to fit into the mainstream society, but for a limited point of time. This interaction then proceeds to the narration of his childhood, where he is initially just like his peers – Amal, Vimal and Kamal, taking interests in the banal everyday affairs like love interests, cinema, taking part in school activities and so on. The interesting point is that during the repetitive course of dialogues – especially during school exams and viva, Indrajit takes up a different position in comparison to them – be it a teacher and other positions to show his difference from others.

He is the one to promote an alternative set of action – through his love relationship with the lady Manasi is revolutionary in nature. Their relationship is a taboo, although it is not something quite encouraging, but their

relationship questions the constructs made by the dominant sector in the society. We tend to strictly adhere to the same, without questioning about its existence, in order to avoid trouble, wrath and the uncomfortable revelations associated with it.

Their conversations reveal a lot about the thought process of Indrajit. He is the one to point out the evils done to the widowed lady by her in-laws or child labour. He is bothered by such turn of events, to which others turn a blind eye to. This is a criticism of the middle class, who refrains from looking at things if it does not support their interests. All the corruption around him made him say to Manasi:

INDRAJIT. If I hadn't tasted the fruit of knowledge I could have gone on living in this paradise of your blessed society of rules. Now I can only batter my head against the wall (Sircar 23).

He can now no longer stay confined within the derogatory, patriarchal customs of society and has to find an alternative way of living. As the play progresses, this kind of thought starts developing within him.

But, this alternative way of thinking came at a cost. It prevented the career progression of both Indrajit and Writer – the Writer did not succeed in establishing himself as a successful playwright, as he tried to write a play which is different from the existing theatrical norms of the times. The play of Writer, like Sircar's play has no middle, beginning and an end and people faced difficulty in comprehending the same, people passed jibes and remarks at him (Sircar 3). But he remained firm on his opinion. People wrote a lot about the labour classes, but his play was different from others - it was on the middle class and the characters who dared to break the norms. Hence, his act of creating the play exposed the hollowness of existing norms, where one is self-centred and are unable to bring in any action to cause revolution in society. His work can be considered as a sort of revolution against authority, which forms the central premise of Sircar's concept of third theatre.

In case of Indrajit, he changed jobs, he resisted from tying himself down in the rat race of promotion, savings and wanted to explore all options. This is quite a stark reaction, considering the times he was in – the 1960s, the period of economic disturbances. This is a medium through which Indrajit challenged the existing mind set of the Middle-class Bengali community. Through his actions, he is prompting others to change their outlook towards life.



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But, due to the rigidity of the society, he could not progress much. Others went ahead of him, securing a bright future for themselves by becoming managers, businessmen and what not. But in this process of progress, they have turned a blind eye to the society, which Indrajit refrained from doing.

He might not have achieved success, instead suffered from an existential crisis, by emphasizing existence over essence (Lavine 328). He tried coping with the same by marrying a different Manasi or trying to fit in as Nirmal. But he did not accept defeat and instead attempted to redo the same, which is an important step to bring in changes in society. His task is repetitive, like that of Sisyphus but it is important to keep trying. He says to Manasi, "There's life. Man's life. And I am one among a million" (Sircar 49). This shows the fact that he sees himself different from that of others. He is defeated, but he, like Writer is willing to continue this hustle. They know they have to keep trying, as long as they continue to live, as this effort of challenging the barriers would keep them alive and the monologue, especially the last scene where Indrajit, Manasi and the Writer hold their hands together and address the audience directly, they sort of break the fourth wall. It is important so that the people seek awareness from their actions and implement the same in their lives as well and here their last act of walking together on "The endless road" (Sircar 60) becomes a motto for the struggles that they need to keep on doing to fulfil their social crusading mission.

Thus, *Ebong Indrajit*, through its characters challenges the power authority, norms and the middle-class stagnancy and shows instances of how positive changes can be ushered in the society through social reformation.

Conclusion

In this paper, a discussion was attempted on middle class stagnancy with the help of *Ebong Indrajit*. The middle-class evolution in the global and Indian context was traced, about the East India Company and its educational policy which started the middle-class culture in Bengal and also how the middle-class evolved globally.

Next, a background discussion on the context of writings of Badal Sircar was attempted as to what influenced his writings. His social dramas and comedies bore a reflection of the social changes and his realistic dramas captured the angst of the youth, their existential crisis coupled with the failure of government, resulting in catastrophes.



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A discussion was done to analyse the cause of middle-class stagnancy in this play. In *Ebong Indrajit*, Amal, Vimal and Kamal, who opted a way of life of safety and security and following the established norms of living, unlike Indrajit who dared to challenge those norms outright. He suffered setbacks, so did the Writer but they managed to keep their perseverance and continued to challenge society and its stagnancy, which is key for survival.

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