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A Journey from the Periphery to the Core of Middleclassness

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Abstract: *The bourgeois democratic societies of Western and Indian forms always provide some free space using which an individual can move through ranks. One such movement or social mobility could be from rural lower-middleclass position to the urban middleclass position. One can leave the struggling days on the margins behind to move to the affluence and social recognition that urban middleclassness offers. The present paper is an auto-narrative of such as journey of a "refugee" child to the core of middleclass culture in West Bengal.*

Keywords*:* East Pakistan, village, childhood, refugee, education, social mobility, middleclassness.

Forewords

Jeffrey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery in their book *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India* (2007) have addressed the uncertainties that face a person in his journey to be a part of middleclass. They have argued that having the necessary education, occupation and income is not enough to qualify as a member of the middleclass; it, in addition, requires a different kind of investment, covering not only economic and social capital, but also the psychic investment of desire and discipline. The journey from the periphery to the core of middleclassness is indeed long and painful and full of uncertainties; there could thus be many successful as well as failed journeys.

There cannot be just one homogenous definition of middleclass culture or middleclassness. However, the reference often goes to the metropolitan middleclass. Defined in terms of certain level of control over economic,

social (which also includes political), and cultural capital (in Bourdieu's sense), one can identify at least three distinct categories – the petty-bourgeois, the managerial class and the intelligentsia – which might constitute the urban middleclass. My reference group here is the metropolitan intelligentsia or the intellectual class. Their material affluence, access to the highest level of education, involvement in teaching and research, will to refine wisdom, certain level of mastery over different cultural fields like literature, art, music, language skill and accent, political and social awareness, progressive ideas and ideals (the ideals of modernity), and a certain standard of living generally qualify them to be the bearers and practitioners of metropolitan middleclassness. The metropolitan middleclassness is a "dreamland" for most of the struggling youth. They toil hard for days, months and years to reach their coveted dreamland that promises to provide the security, comfort and recognition of a sort.

In this paper, I would give an autobiographical narrative of my journey from the "dominant-core" of a village society to the "margin" and then to the core of the metropolitan middleclassness.

The journey begins

I was born in January 1960 in a remote village in Bogra district of erstwhile East Pakistan. So remote was the place that we had to walk three miles towards the east to reach the nearest rail station and the same distance on the opposite direction to reach the nearest bus stoppage. We had to walk the distance on the muddy roads and cross a stream on the way both sides. Ours was a big family of 11 members, struggling economically, post land reforms (which was put in place around 1952-53), bearing a sub-infeudatory legacy. My father was matriculate (the only one among the 10 villages in the area) and a primary school head master, and my mother had primary school level education. We had seven acres of land, low marshy land and dry land put together, that produced just enough to meet our food requirements round the year. Rain and floods were the only source of water for cultivation. There was no surplus nor enough cash crop to meet the cash requirements. By the time I was 9-10, I was already learning the art of cultivation, alongside my studies. We had bare minimum clothes, had the habit of bathing in the open pond, knew the art of catching fish with bare hands, did not know the use of toilet, did not know that one has to use soap in every bath, spoke the local dialect (which I have completely forgotten now), and nursed lower middleclass ambitions. I learnt swimming as soon as I leant walking and mastered the art of climbing all kinds of trees which

were almost like my childhood companions. The shared expectation being low, and life chances being the bare minimum, I would have been happy being a primary school teacher-cum-cultivator had we stayed on in our village in East Pakistan. I did not have any exposure to the outside world and carried a baggage of complexes while interacting with harbingers of urban culture (in the context of East Pakistan in the 1960s).

Yet, we were a part of the "dominant core" of our village community. We had just enough land and cash (father's salary) to sustain ourselves. In terms of agrarian class-category, we were the non-cultivating owners, when most of the villagers had very small holdings or were landless labourers on other's field, small cultivators and sharecroppers. We had zamindary legacy. We had a *durga* mandir and our family patronized most of the religious functions in the village. Good students from neighbouring villages came to our house to take special tuitions from my father for preparation of a district level scholarship test in class V. Every elderly member of our family had some education, and we, all brothers and sisters, were doing fairly well in our school level education. Ours was one of the three families in the village that had its own pond, which was used by the fellow villagers for bath and washing. We had a mango and jackfruit orchard, which most of the other villagers did not have. Our house was at the middle of the village and the homestead was elevated (perhaps by using the excess mud amassed by digging the pond); the annual flood used to affect all the houses excepting ours. The pond in front of the house not only had its multiple functionality but also was a status symbol. The most important function of the pond was to save the women members of the family from travelling a distance for bath and washing. In the absence of the Brahmins, we were the upper-most caste in the village. The neighbouring Muslims and lower caste Hindus used to work on our land and gave us service in different other ways. My father was not a member of any political organization or any local self-government but was an important informal leader. All the village disputes were settled though *salishi* (a kind of informal litigation by the elderly members of the village community) in which my father had a leadership role. Being a part of the "dominant", playing with nature, playing with friends, I had a very happy and colourful childhood.

The escape and the fall to insignificance

The "communal harmony" in rural East Pakistan started to facture within a couple of months from the onset of the freedom struggle in March 1971. In a summer night of June, the same year, the communal lot from our Muslim neighbourhood attacked our house and looted everything we had.

We ran out for lives and took shelter in the house of a Muslim friend of my father. He gave us shelter for next three months and arranged our safe escape to India in September. The Muslim friend of my father saved us in innumerable ways, risking his position by defying pressures from the communal section of his community.

In India, we had a long period of hardship. For some months we lived in the house of our close kin at Gangarampur (now in South Dinajpur district) and then moved to our own house in January 1972. For a few of years, between 1971 and 1975, we had to manage with government ration and Rs. 200 a month (which we received as a part of our share of profit from a printing press, that was managed by our close relatives in Gangarampur, in which my father had invested some money before our migration); we were often half-fed and undernourished; the secondary needs often remained unaddressed. The near-total lack of social and cultural capital made our fights often more distressing. Our house in Raiganj, then a small sub-divisional town, was on its outskirt. It was a two-room *kutchcha* house made of tin, timber and bamboo on an 8-katha plot that my father had bought a year before our migration. The shared morale in the family was low and we were growing up uncared with fettered ambitions.

We did not have an inspiring neighbourhood in our new locale. Most of our neighbours were of East Pakistan origin and were struggling economically and socially. The "education culture" was completely absent; all my playmates were school dropouts and be easy prey to anti-social ways of life. The social degeneration of the late 60s and early 1970s was evident; the youth were largely converted into lumpens with the patronage of leaders of the Congress party. I noticed a kind of hopelessness in my youth. I was a part of it for a short spell. I took part in group clashes in late 1972, and was once beaten up badly by the hooligans of a rival group, hospitalized for a couple of days – an incident that proved to be a turning point of my life. I asked myself "What am I doing?" My family helped me out of the rot through sessions of silent counselling.

We were handicapped by two other problems. First, we did not have any social network ("social capital"), nor any access to political leaders, who could have helped us. Second, the Bengali dialect that we knew and spoke was substantially different from the one spoken in this part of Bengal. My friends in the neighbourhood and school used to laugh at me for my dialect and accent. I had to go through a very painful process of first unlearning the way we spoke and then learning a substantially different mannerism for communication. The painful process impacted my psyche and morale adversely; I picked up the habit of keeping mum for years, even when I

reached college. This hindered the natural growth of speech in my early days. Even when I became active in politics, I was always hesitant making public speeches. Third, we had to unlearn much of our past culture and learn the elements of new culture (the dress, food habit, the daily activities, bathing style, religious and social practices, a new political culture) in order to be accepted. The poor access to material, social and cultural capital kept us on the margin for many years. With shabby dress, discriminating foot wear and no pocket money I lived with inferiority complex in the company of my friends in school, college and university. In order to save money on travel I used to walk 5-6 kilometres a day to school and market and back. Living on the margin for years definitely had its toll on our collective psyche and our sense of self, something that is very difficult, if not impossible, to capture in the language of social sciences.

The rise to the core of middleclassness

The economic condition of our family started improving when we started a book shop sometime in 1975. My unemployed graduate elder brother took the initiative. He had to sell my mother's jewelry to collect the seed money. My father, I and my younger brother also did our part in the shop. I spent hours in the shop alongside my studies. By mid-1980s our economic condition improved substantially. I made a mark in my academics from school up to university and earned recognition in our local social circle. Having topped in Masters I moved to Delhi School of Economics for MPhil and PhD. It was a "matter" of pride and a ray of hope for my family that had fallen into a sudden spell of indignity and denial by then. In 1985, I got the job of a lecturer in the Department of Sociology of North Bengal University. I received Commonwealth post-doctoral fellowship to study in the University of Sussex and made a couple of short trips to Vienna and Sydney as post-Doctoral fellow, visited the some of the top Indian universities either to attend seminars/conferences or as a visiting fellow. All these experiences made my journey into both, the new social core and my transformed self much enriching. However, throughout this journey I remained shaky and nervous in sorting out my language issues, both Bengali and English. Hours spent at our shop during college days spared me moments of escape in Bengali literature and helped me in turn pick up the finer nuances of the language. But I had to struggle with English. In the first few months in Delhi School of Economics I was always gasping for right kind of vocabulary to manage daily communication, inside and outside the classroom. I was definitely feeling like a "fish out of water". On many occasions I thought of leaving DSE. During my one-year stay in Sussex

University (1991-92) I had to deliver lectures to English audience. I knew English by then, but my accent was a big issue. After joining the university in 1985, I had a difficult time mastering English to be fluent in my class lectures and seminars. Many critical comments were hurled at me by my colleagues with metropolitan background. Every hurdle or humiliation made me determined to elevate myself to a new level, to be a stronger person.

I had offers to marry someone with an upper-middleclass metropolitan core. But I consciously turned them down because I was still not comfortable in their company and culture. I was still in transition emotionally from the margin to the core; the direction of course being metropolitan middleclass culture.

Now, I think, I am mature as a teacher, and I interact with my colleagues in the metropolitan universities and global universities at ease. I have by and large sorted out my speech problem and picked up metropolitan Bengali and English accent. I do not suffer from any inferiority complex. I have my relatives and academic friends living in Kolkata and other Indian metropolises and there isn't any cultural gap I believe, as far as our sense of middleclassness is concerned. I have a house in Kolkata and I feel at home in the culture shared by the residents of the housing complex. I can communicate and interact with them at ease. My exposure to Rabindrasangeet, and my active participation in Left politics (I had the opportunity to work alongside top leaders of a leading Left party in West Bengal) helped me integrate with the urban culture in many ways.

I now feel that I have completed a difficult journey from the core of a village culture to the margin of metropolitan middleclassness and finally to the core of the metropolitan middleclassness. Thus, the movement remained two pronged, divided on one side between the rural-urban and on the other between lower class-middle class. But these often got subsumed into each other and made overlapping injunctions as well as provided rationales to finally arrive at the urban middleclassness. Finally, I have settled down into this middleclassness with all its advantages, progressiveness and petty-bourgeois opportunism and its vices. This privileged social position is something I will zealously cling to and would be worried to lose since it gives me my identity ensures the way I want to live.

Reference

Jeffrey, Craig, Patricia Jeffery and Roger Jeffery. 2007. *Degrees Without Freedom? Education, Masculinities and Unemployment in North India*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.