

Note from the Editor

Middle Class in Bangladesh

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Not much is available by way of serious research on the nature, composition or even the definition of the middle class in Bangladesh. But the importance of research on the middle class in Bangladesh has been keenly felt by some sociologists, chiefly among them was a senior friend and colleague, Professor Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, the Former Vice Chancellor of the Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), who passed away on December 30, 2010. His reason was simple: the middle class that we knew and were a part of has changed radically and we must document this. During his last days he was planning a research project with some of us but we never got to the real work.

Recently, in relation to another issue, that of where in the social hierarchy can we place the poor after they graduate from poverty, that I got an opportunity to look at the literature on the middle class, the result of which is an article on the middle class and the World Bank published in the *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* (Volume 11, No. 2). But the question of Bangladeshi middle class remains unresolved. I have hinted at the current situation in the article, but obviously, much research is needed there.

One of the very basic issues that I had occasion to discuss with Professor Chowdhury was *when does one become a middle class person?* That was the theme of the published article too. Is it through wealth or the income levels, is it education or occupation, or is it inheritance and tradition? But in most of our discussions we ended up favouring the notion that *one becomes a middle class person when one acquires "middle class values"* and in this he would agree with me that in Bangladesh it takes "three generations of educated-urban living" to acquire such values and traits and we would often test our hypothesis on persons and families we knew and pretty much found a strong correlation between our assumption and observations, statistically significant or not.

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It will be difficult to define precisely what we meant by such "middle class values" but that is what the "urban educated" middle class represented until about the mid 1970s. It was a combination of certain Western values, learnt from the colonial masters, like being on time, having afternoon tea, or having read the classics in literature, able to communicate in English and refined Bengali; values and traits acquired by being in the professions requiring high level of education (like professor/teacher, doctor, lawyer, engineer etc.) or being in the government officer cadre, who were, indeed, trained to act and think in

certain ways. These were all added to the sophisticated tastes and values deemed proper for a “*Bhadralok*”, a genteel person, or a “Bhadra Paribar”, a genteel family, as the family had a lot to do in inculcating the middle class values.

This *Bhadralok* culture is similar to the upper-caste Hindu culture that originated among the educated professionals in the colonial administration and the absentee landlords residing in Calcutta (Kolkata), beginning in the early 19th century. Besides being highly educated, well read in both the local and European arts, literature and the sciences, the *Bhadralok* was also expected to be “modern” in attitude and, perhaps, secular in outlook. Kind of a hybrid, set between the Western, mainly English, culture and refined Hindu upper caste values. They ushered in what is often termed as the “Bengali Renaissance”. The *Bhadralok* was often addressed as the *Babu*, which later became a rather derogatory term. The *Bhadralok* or the *Babu* represented the middle class Bengali culture, although many of the *Babus* were wealthy enough to be counted among the upper class.

Somewhat contrasting to this, the Muslims from East Bengal were seen as “*Bangal*” meaning rustic, more as a derogatory reference to their peasant background and to distance them from the *Bhadra* culture of the Hindu middle class. But certain Western values and refined tastes gradually formed among the newly educated Muslims towards the end of the colonial times, particularly among the government officials. These were not much different from those of the Hindu *Bhadralok* and in the post colonial era (1947 onwards), these set the tone for a *Bhadra* Muslim family. Education in the English medium, particularly for higher education, refined language, avoidance of the local or regional dialects and accents, Western values combined with respect for local (East Bengal) culture and retaining the basic tenets of the Muslim culture, without overdoing the Muslimness, became the hallmark of the “middle class values” that we were referring to. This was distinct from the Muslim culture of North India or Pakistan, distinct enough to seek a new identity in the creation of Bangladesh, as well as different from the Hindu caste prescriptions. It was more secular and tolerant of other religions and ideas and more progressive and modern in outlook.

Urban living was a precondition in the sense that the necessary exposure to acquire these traits was available primarily in the urban centres like Dhaka or the larger district towns where many of the government officials were stationed in rotation. Also, because these towns housed the major colleges and high schools, imparting basic Western education. And to a far lesser extent than the Hindu *Bhadralok* culture, this culture also permeated to the village level, among the few educated families there as most urban educated people retained some contact with their rural homes for a couple of generations at least. But a clear cut distinction was made between the traditional rural and modern urban cultural values. Often a derogatory term “*Khat*”, meaning farm, was used to identify the ones fresh from the rural areas, or retaining of rural values and traditions, almost in the same manner as the Hindu *Bhadralok* would use the term “*Bangal*”. Professor Chowdhury was particularly offended by another derogatory term used to

identify those from the more remote parts as “Mofossil”, meaning from backwaters, or “mofo” for short, backward, incapable of change or progress.

So that, just by acquiring wealth or income, or even an education, one did not automatically turn into an “urban educated middle class” person, since one might retain much of the rural traits, remain a “Khat” or “mofo” for a considerable amount of time, incapable of changing or acquiring the said middle class values. It was in a study¹ of mine in the 1970s, where I concluded that it is the third generation of education and urban living that turns one into a fully urbane person, rids one of the traces of “mofo” or “khat” elements. I argued the same for the middle class values as well, that *just by living in an urban centre, or acquiring the wealth or income, or even education does not make one a middle class person.*

3

The origin of this middle class we were referring to can be traced to the late nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth century when some well to do Muslim peasants began sending their children to schools and by the 1950s and 1960s (third generation) this became the dominant class in the Bangladeshi society and was largely responsible for the independence movement of the country. They were educated in similar schools and colleges, set up by the colonial administration and often privately funded by Hindu landlords, and eventually some went to the only university in the country, the University of Dhaka (the earlier lot went to the University of Calcutta). Education remained for them the only vehicle for upward mobility as it secured for them the government jobs and other professions like law and teaching, and to a lesser extent medicine, engineering etc. Whatever little business was done by the Bangladeshi people during these days did not usually qualify one to the status of “educated middle class” as business was considered to be a lowly job (similar to the status given to it by the Hindu Bhadrak, who considered the business people as representing a lower caste), although officials in banking and insurance, largely because of their education and shared values, often qualified.

But after the independence of the country, in 1971, the scenario altered rapidly. A number of changes took place almost simultaneously, considered in the historical time period, that, I presume, distorted the composition and the character of the middle class substantially, if not radically. First, the middle class of the 1960s was suddenly at the helm of state authority. Initially the Awami League, with one foot still in the villages, and later the military, a somewhat more Westernized group in its attitude and more urban in character, with its supporting civil bureaucracy, attained control over the economy and the polity. Through a process of nationalization and then privatization of the industries and commercial enterprises that were state owned or left behind by the West Pakistanis, a portion of the middle class began to transform itself

¹ “Religiosity of the Sociology Students of Dhaka University”. *The Dhaka University Studies*. 40 (June) 1984. Pp. 60-89.

into a new group of “moneyed” men discarding their middle class post. Hence, a section of this middle class with access to the state power, directly or indirectly through association, acquired resources, including disinvested factories and businesses, to propel them to the “upper class” in terms of wealth and control over state power. Over the next few decades they have only consolidated their class position further and, along with a hoard of other new entrants, are on their way to crystallizing as an “Upper Class” proper.

It may be noted here that in the pre-independence Bangladesh there really was not much of an “upper class” in Bangladesh. A handful of “moneyed families” with investments in business and industries were known but they were not treated as an “upper class” proper nor were they given the high status or honour. The highest status/ honour within the country (East Pakistan then) were accorded to the top government officials and professionals. In any case, these families owned little in comparison to the wealth of the notorious “22 families” in West Pakistan, who were seen as controlling the resources as well as the state power of the country (Pakistan) then and, therefore, the “upper class”, in reality, resided in West Pakistan.

However, the acquisition of state power has, since independence, continued to offer access to the economy, as more and more of the people close to state power, both in the urban and rural areas, change their fortunes for the better, hence the scramble to become “party workers” and so much feud within and among political parties. With each change in government a new group of people attain access to the resources of the country and a new set of people get the opportunity to change their fate. Most, if not all, of this group are fresh from the rural areas or from the lower classes but do acquire wealth in quick pace to move to the newly forming middle and upper classes. Many change their fate almost overnight and stories of “rags to riches” abound in the country. But hardly a few of these with access to the state power today are from the *older middle class* (except for the ones noted above), for the simple reason that *the older middle class is no longer residing in the country*.

4

Partly because of the political uncertainty, but largely because of the opportunity that presented itself and because of easy access to a passport and visa, which previously had to be gotten from West Pakistan, and the relaxing of visa restrictions in some countries like the USA, Canada and Australia, hoards of the educated urban middle class just availed the alternative to leave the country for a better life abroad. Education was the primary capital that allowed these middle class teachers, doctors, engineers and even many government officials to go for “higher studies” and then apply for residency in those countries. Anyone who could secure an admission to a university programme and some funding left the country.

But, unfortunately, few returned. In 1976 September when I left for higher education, by the only outgoing weekly BOAC flight from Dhaka, I was in company of 41 other young graduates, all newly appointed

lecturers from the three public universities, going for their PhDs. Only two, including myself, returned! And that set the tone for the next couple of decades to come, which translates into the mass exodus of the middle class I am referring to. They had the resources, skills and the often the airfare to make the trip while the opportunity itself supplied the motivation for leaving the country. And the numbers only increased exponentially as more and more relatives could be “sponsored” by the new Bangladeshi residents in those countries.

The process has not abated much and the current estimates of expatriate Bangladeshis vary between 8 and 10 million. Though a large majority of these are the lower class working people going to the Middle East and East Asia on a temporary basis, a large percentage of them are also from the dwindling old middle class residing in the USA, Canada, Australia and a host of other countries, including even in the African and Latin American countries. Today, nearly all urban-educated middle class families from the 1960s, either wholly or a substantial segment of the family, are residing in some foreign country.

Someone recently commented on a very interesting aspect of this migration. Among the lower class, the migrants leave their families in Bangladesh, increasingly in the urban centres (more about this later), and the men go to work in the Middle East or East Asian countries sending money home for maintaining the families. The opposite, seems to be true of the upper and middle class people today. The men, mostly upper class but a section of the middle class as well, including some government officials, stay and work in Bangladesh to earn and send huge amounts of money abroad to maintain their families there. A huge community of “Bangladeshi Begums” (wives) has recently been reported residing in Toronto, Canada to facilitate a richer and safer life for their children. Presence of such major clusters of Bangladeshi migrant families is also known in other major North American cities. Thus, while the poor workers earn money for the country the upper classes drain the country of that wealth!

In any case, a substantial portion of the erstwhile middle class has gone missing from the country. Many more of that group can today be found in New York, Los Angeles or Toronto area than in Dhaka city. In New York City alone the estimate of the Bangladeshi population varies from 100,000 to 200,000 of whom over 50% of the 25 years or above population have bachelor or higher degrees¹. That itself will be a group comparable in size, if not larger than the whole of the middle class population in Dhaka in the 1960s. This may sound like an exaggeration but the point is that the old urban educated middle class population of the 1960s was a small one and is largely gone today and are living abroad, taking with them those values that made them the middle class in the first place. I often feel that this exodus of the middle class is largely responsible for the absence of a strong and fully functioning “civil society” in Bangladesh today resulting in much of the crises of the society and polity over the years.

¹ Wikipedia

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Of course, that does not by any chance mean that the whole of the middle class has gone missing from the country. On the contrary, the number of those belonging to the middle class, if measured by income or wealth, has only soared in the last few decades. With all kinds of businesses, industries and commercial enterprises making up a major portion of the GDP, and the access to many governmental contracts for the “party men”, the number of people with large incomes and or accumulated wealth has increased phenomenally in Dhaka and in other major cities. Along with these there is also a group, particularly from the rural families, who are educated in the newly established schools, colleges and universities, many of whom are holding urban jobs or small businesses with incomes that would put them in a middle class income bracket regardless of their education or location.

Add to these the families of “expatriate working class” who are living in the cities of Bangladesh. Many receive substantial income from the husband abroad and send their children to good schools, often to English medium schools. Also, so much “black” and ill-gotten money is in circulation that successive governments had to offer opportunities to “whiten” these. These ill-gotten fortunes have put many, often first generation urban and even uneducated ones, to not only the middle but even in the upper class brackets. If we leave out the top 10% and bottom 20% of the income earners of the country the middle 70% earn nearly two thirds of the national income¹. This money has put a lot of people in the middle class bracket.

The actual numbers, or even a reasonable estimate², would be hard to come by but they, in their millions, not necessarily in the professions like teaching, medicine, engineering or law, comprise the middle class in Bangladesh today. Many working in multinational corporations, local banks and financial institutions, managers in the numerous garment factories and their outlets, tourism and related industry, working in the arts and the media, both electronic and print, officials in the numerous NGOs and donor agencies and by far the largest group who claim to be “business men” or “entrepreneurs” including many medium to large traders, shop owners and small scale industrialists identify themselves as the middle class. Indeed, those previous professional groups would be a scant minority when compared to the vast number of “businessmen”, which was not even considered a middle class occupation earlier, and the other current managerial level occupations, so that this “new middle class” is in sharp contrast with the earlier “educated urban middle class”.

¹ <http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/bangladesh/income-distribution>

² A recent BIDS study puts the number at 20% of the population with a definition that, “A person belongs to the middle-class category when his/her income ranges between \$2 and \$3 per day” (The Daily Star, November 06, 2015). The absurdity of such World Bank sponsored definitions has been demonstrated in the ‘middle class and the World Bank’ article noted earlier (Volume 11, Number 2, of the *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*).

An attempt may be made here to classify these in terms of at least three categories: 1. **Middle Class of Professionals** (doctors, engineers, lawyers, artists and media personalities etc.¹); 2. **Salaried Middle Class** (government officials, professors, college and school teachers, executives in banks, corporations and NGOs, managers in factories and buying houses etc.); **Business Middle Class** (entrepreneurs, retailers, traders, shop owners, small scale industrialists etc.). These may be further subdivided into upper and lower middle classes depending on income and the accumulated wealth and assets and or access to the state power, for example those of the officers in the military and the police and the elected officials of all categories because of this access to power usually command greater resources. The upper or lower limits of income of this **new middle class** will be difficult to define without empirical data. The upper middle class will gradually merge with the upper class and the lower middle class will, similarly, be difficult to separate from the working class, if such a class can be distinguished from the lower class. Even street vendors or taxi drivers are known to have incomes higher than school teachers and low level executives. Hence, income or wealth in this fast changing scenario is more likely to complicate rather than define the issue.

As I pointed out above, this new middle class is largely first generation urban as is noted from the phenomenal growth of the urban population in the last few decades. Population of Dhaka city quadrupled in the past 25 years. Most among these are also first generation educated. Likewise, most government officials are also first generation urban, as was also true of earlier times, but many of these are first generation educated too. Although they do get trained like in the old days, they are no longer the torch bearers of the middle class values. A substantial number of the second generation urban and educated would surely be among this middle class but it will be hard to get, in any sizable number or percentage, the third generation educated-urban among this huge lot. These new entrants to the middle class, the first and second generation urban and educated, some not even educated, are the ones we, Professor Chowdhury and I, used to refer to as NOT belonging to the middle class, they are yet to acquire the middle class values that we set as the basis of entry into the middle class.

Ironically, though, many of these second generation, even first generation, urban or educated ones, largely because of abundant disposable income, have either lived abroad for a while or have visited relatives abroad and /or visited other countries as tourists and may actually be well versed in this or that aspect of the Western or other cultures. Indeed, much more so than the middle class of the 60's had access to. And thanks to the phenomenal expansion of the media and the internet, they are, perhaps, far better acquainted with the world today than any one from the 60s. Yet, and these are my personal views (and those of late professor Chowdhury), they are not sophisticated enough or have acquired, or inherited, the middle class values, though some may actually overdo certain aspects of it.

¹ Many doctors and engineers are also found in salaried government jobs

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Language is the most important element of a culture and the use of sophisticated language formed a much noted aspect of the middle class values but the language most of these new middle class speak today is just a variant of the heavily accented localized Bangla they used to speak in their rural homes and not the standard (*promito*) Bangla used in the '60s. Even if you walk the corridors of the University of Dhaka your hearing senses will be affronted by dialects of unidentifiable varieties, spoken very loudly and fast paced. In a majority of the class rooms, including the humanities and social sciences, district, or sub-district level variety of accented Bangla and not English is the unofficial medium of instruction in all public and many private universities. Language spoken on the streets is another matter, I often feel that I am in a different country hardly able to follow the language some people speak.

Thanks to the assault of the Indian media, Hindi is understood and even spoken by some, particularly among the upper class-and upper middle class who invite Indian cultural personalities to their homes for exclusive renditions and communicate with them in Hindi, thereby announcing to the world of their cultural "sophistication". Children, thoroughly exposed to the Indian media, freely mix Hindi with Bangla and the English they learn in English medium schools. In a recent review of job applications of nearly 500 candidates I noted at least 70% of the applicants voluntarily put Hindi as the third language in the language proficiency column in their CV, even though no language proficiency was asked for. And the students of Dhaka University laid their lives fighting against Urdu in this country!

Contrast this with the knowledge of English language. There are today two groups among the educated section, one, by far the larger group, from the Bengali medium of instruction in schools through university with very poor knowledge of English and the other from the English medium schools with heavily accented, often incorrect, usage of the language, but spoken fluently, and solely in most cases, even at home. For those from the Bangla medium the world of higher learning is practically closed. A few do read Bangla fiction of the popular kind but that's about all of their readings since they cannot read English, even if they have access to, as in the huge collection of English books in the university libraries, but also because there is very little of anything available outside of fiction in Bangla language.

However, being educated has little to do with the command over English. In my experience in class room after class room, both in public and private universities, I found hardly any student who reads a story book, let alone anything else! Reading is rarely taken up later in life amid the struggle for survival. Bookstores, if they are any indication of education, are a rare sight even in Dhaka city and those which do exist do highly profitable business in poor quality "note books" and photo copies of text books, but nothing beyond. One may find a few copies of popular fiction in the used book stores, left behind by "foreigners", but of the sciences, arts and literature, philosophy, history, or politics and economy, sociology or psychology are simply non-existent. So that my acceptance of an educated person as "one who knows

everything from Plato to Pluto”, is a far cry in this veritable abode of ignorance. One may have heard of Pluto from the media but definitely not read Plato these days.

There are currently over one hundred and forty universities in the country and more than half of them are situated in Dhaka, including more than one university in one building or more than half a dozen on one street. Most of these are privately funded and attract students of the upper and middle class families. Other than a few specializing in engineering or medicine, all the rest of the 100 or so private universities teach “business” to the larger majority of the students. The business majors in these private universities often exceed 80% of the total enrolled students. Let alone the arts, even the basic sciences are not taught in any of these private universities because they are not revenue earning subjects. Most of these private universities have some “general education” courses to cover the sciences and language or literature but students just need to pass a few courses in these. They are not required to attain any *knowledge* of these subjects, because they will all be seeking jobs in business organizations like the banks, where they, supposedly, do not require the knowledge of the arts and the sciences! Contrast this with the study of business subject in the past, up to the 1970s, when only a few less meritorious students, who could not qualify for the science group or the arts group, would be asked read these subjects. University of Dhaka would admit only about 30 students a year to the Department of Commerce!

Public universities do teach the sciences and the arts and a few students try to get a good education but by and large, education today has become degree (diploma) oriented and their lack of knowledge of English severely curtails their genuine interest in learning. Recently I sat in an oral examination of over 200 Sociology Master’s students and asked them what books they had read as a prelude to further questions. To my horror, all, including the “best” of the students, shamelessly confessed that they had not read a single book (in all their Bachelor’s and Master’s years), largely because they cannot read English books and almost all sociology books available in the library are in English. They read the short handouts given by their teachers or “notes”, originally compiled by students ages ago and later shabbily translated into Bengali, handed down through the generations. The situation is not very much different in other disciplines either. That is the limit of education for most students in both public and private universities today. You just need to pass and who needs books for that!

You need to pass to get a degree and you need a degree to get a job. Unfortunately the job market is very restricted for these students from the public universities. Other than the few good ones who aspire to and finally go abroad or get a job in teaching due largely to their personal initiative or ingenuity, including establishing personal alliances with the power on campus, the rest have just one job opening, that of the government jobs. Many of the better or higher paying jobs in the private sector these days require the knowledge of English and they cannot compete for these with the students from the English medium private universities. The other way to get access to a good job would be “connections” in the job market,

which they also lack as most are fresh from the rural areas and/or belong to the lower middle or lower class.

And this is very important for us here. Although it is tricky to demarcate the classes in the absence of a proper study, it is not too difficult to see that there has been a visible shift in the class locations of the students of the public universities vis-à-vis the private universities. To avoid the numerous problems plaguing the public universities, including, though not limited to political troubles, which translate into long periods for graduation, many middle class (call them upper middle class, if you like) and most upper class students enroll in private universities. This is also because they can afford the very high tuition and fees and is often seen as an alternative to studying abroad, particularly for the girls. Many of these students had previously gone to the English medium schools where high tuition is also the cutting point. On the other hand, the majority of the students in the public universities are either from the lower middle class or lower class backgrounds. A considerable number of boys and girls from the middle and upper classes, particularly the ones from the English medium schools, do go abroad for higher studies too. The ones of the lower classes have to depend on a handful of scholarships, which are difficult to come by especially in the absence of “connections”. These distinctions result in continued separation in the job market as noted above. So that we have an upper middle class in private universities with only business education and a lower middle class in public universities with a diploma earning education and getting muddled in politics, both totally lacking in the kind of education that used to shape the middle class values in the earlier days.

7

Of the middle class values, being secular and modern in outlook, with tolerance for other ideas and ideologies, is paramount. Being Muslim was a defining character of the old middle class values in Bangladesh and one's religiousness was never in doubt, nor did one question another. The religiosity of the new middle class today, if anything, appears to be stronger both in beliefs and ritualistic expressions and definitely there are many more devout ones now as mosques overflow to the streets during Friday prayers. This is further witnessed in the dress patterns of women as more and more of them are found taking up the all covering *Burka* or *Hijab*. The numbers would be as high as 50% percent or more of the women present in a given location.

The old middle class men used to dress in slacks and shirts as a regular day to day wear and often *Panjabi* and Pajama, particularly on cultural and religious occasions, while *lungi* and vest at home was the norm. Suit or blazer was rarely worn and only on selected occasions by a very few. But the new middle class, keeping in tune with the global trends appear to be more comfortable in blue jeans and T-shirts on all informal occasions. Formal dresses, particularly at the executive levels include suits or blazers with tie on shirts and slacks. For the youth, jeans seem to be the preferred dress for all occasions. Middle class women always dressed in moderate sophistication, mostly *Shari* even at the college and

university levels and definitely after marriage while at younger age they would wear *Shalwar* and *Kameez*. On the other end, among the upper-middle class and the upper class proper, slacks, blue jeans, Western skirts and T-shirts or tank tops are not uncommon either. However, by and large the new middle class women, young and old, wear the North Indian or Pakistani style of *Shalwar* and *Kameez*, often competing for the latest in Bollywood fashion, and colour their hair in the various hues of red, hence, gone are the days of *Shari* and black hair, about which poems and songs were composed.

Besides refined language, a few other items like music and songs, particularly Tagore songs, became the identifying mark of the Bengaliness of the middle class culture. Indeed, Tagore songs became the rallying focus for the independence movement. Listening to the request programmes for songs on Dhaka and Kolkata radio stations formed a part of the daily routine in the pre-liberation days. Hindi songs from India and Urdu movies from West Pakistan were for the lower class, rickshaw pullers etc. not up to the middle class taste. Bengali movies from Dhaka studio and Kolkata (until they were banned after 1965 war with India) formed a regular part of the entertainment calendar along with English movies both from USA and UK which were released in Dhaka simultaneously with other major world cities. Staging drama and holding cultural functions on major occasions like the Bengali New Year or 21st February was a common feature in all parts of the city, with communities vying with each other for better presentation. "Community Halls", constructed in every locality, housed these functions. Being members of a sporting or cultural club and or community library was an essential part of the middle class youth culture.

Few today have any connection with these activities. Sports is off the table as far as the Dhaka city youth are concerned for the simple reason that there are literally no play grounds for games. The national cricket team is largely composed of players from outside of Dhaka whereas in the past cricket used to be played and was popularized in Bangladesh primarily by the middle class youth of Dhaka city. Movie going is highly restricted to a few selected places for the middle class with hardly any Bangla movie on show. Hindi movies and Hindi serials on television have captured the new middle class audience of Bangladesh today, as have the Hindi songs and Bollywood style dancing in wedding parties. For the upper middle class and upper class, hosting an Indian celebrity singer or dancer or attending functions by one such "Star" in the posh hotels is a mark of "class". Similarly celebration of the New Year on the midnight of 31st December or Valentine's Day rivals the celebrations of Bengali New year and Pohela Falgun (1st day of spring). These celebrations become so rowdy, including incidents of sexual assault, that the government has been forced to ban outdoor programmes after dark on the New Year's eve in Dhaka and restrict movement to and from the the upper class residential areas and the diplomatic enclave. It is today difficult to find the Bengaliness of the culture or the values of the middle class in any of these.

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Yet, the middle class life flourishes in Dhaka as elsewhere in the country. There are many times more to be placed in this social category than would have been possible a couple of decades ago. They do follow a life style far richer than most of the middle class of the earlier days. They have more disposable income than was possible earlier; lots of people have lots of money, often illgotten or black money¹. Practically all who could be in a middle class bracket possess material goods like, TV, freeze, computers or top of the line cell phones, tablets and laptops. Owning a radio was the limit in most homes in the 1960s. But many today own cars and “luxurious” apartments and a large number send their children to the hundreds of costly English medium schools all across the country, in the 1960 there were only half a dozen English medium schools in Dhaka and Chittagong with tuition comparable to the Bengali medium institutions. Eating out with family and friends is a regular part of their life as is the shopping spree during the festivals. Many spend holidays abroad, at the very least go to the Cox’s Bazaar beach. Dance parties and hanging out with friends in costly restaurants or spending hours on the cell phones and on the “Face Book” are what defines the young of this middle class today. So that in terms of the middle class lifestyles they are not very far from other middle classes in other countries. Yet, some crucial ingredients seem to be missing.

The middle class values, of being modern and secular, and of being tolerant of other ideas and ideologies, of being “educated” or the culture of education, of the sophistication that comes with knowledge and simple living, of the language that is spoken with clarity, of the culture that one takes pride in, of the heritage that matures after many generations are missing from most. In place of the “educated urban middle class” today we have a middle class that is hardly educated and largely rural in character. *Essentially, it is the rural middle class that has taken up residence in the urban centers.*

Yet, the number of theater goers is on the rise and the crowd at the classical music or *Rabindra Shangeet* renditions grows larger. Art galleries do fill up, though with the nouveau riche mostly, while younger generations do return after completing their studies abroad. And, perhaps, they are all writing a new chapter of values for this “new middle class”. The old values we, Late Professor Chowdhury and I, thought one acquired only after three generations to become middle class, may now be obsolete, as is true of that old middle class itself.

Nazrul Islam

¹ National Board of Revenue (NBR) reports that the professionals, primarily the doctors, lawyers and high school teachers are the greatest dodgers of taxes as they do not report their true income. See <http://www.bd-pratidin.com/last-page/2016/11/06/182617>. Few, if any, in the small business bracket pay income tax and the corruption among the government officials is rampant. (Bangladesh is ranked as one of the top countries afflicted with corruption.)