CHAPTER - II

CONCEPTUALISING THE MIDDLE CLASS:
PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

The term 'middle class' is a much debated, much maligned and a much used term utilised by various scholars to interpret social formations from various perspectives. In common parlance the term 'middle class' seems to refer to an urban phenomenon. However, the question of the 'middle class' as Poulantzas states,

"stands not only at the centre of current debates on the class structure of the imperialist metropolises, but also of debates on the dominated and dependent 'peripheral' formations.... It has ... assumed a decisive importance, both in the imperialist and in the dominated social formations...." ¹

It has certainly become a very important aspect of the Marxist theory of social classes, because most structural functionalist theories attempt to use the term middle class to show that the Marxist concept of social class is inadequate today even in the capitalist countries because the occupational structure of society is changing and instead

¹. N. Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op. cit., p. 193.
of the decline of the middle class, as Marx had predicted, a new middle class is rising which does not fit in with the classical Marxist conception of class.  

It will not be out of place here, therefore, to first make a survey of those theories of the middle class which attempt to nullify the Marxist theory of social classes. One can agree with T.B. Bottomore that the two main classes in a society, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, can be identified easily, but the boundaries of the middle class cannot be defined so easily, and it is this fact that has led to so much controversy and confusions in defining the middle class.  

We have discussed in Chapter I how class has been defined in various ways by various groups of scholars to suit the needs of particular social formations. In the same way the term middle class has also gone through a wide range of attempts at definition. G.D.H. Cole, whose work on classes and the middle class is quite often used to support the view that the nature of classes is constantly changing in

society, concludes that there can be no permanent classes in a society. As Cole defines it classes are not sharply definable groups... but are aggregations of persons around a number of central nuclei... and a group of persons nearest to one nucleus belongs to one class. Further, Cole holds that it is not necessary that every person in a society be assigned to a class. Proceeding from this practically non-definition of class he says that the term "middle class implies the notion of a society divided into classes and at least suggests a division into three-upper, middle and lower..." In Cole's definition the middle class in the industrial capitalists who "came to form, on a national scale, a conscious middle class, or at any rate the economic nucleus of such a class." The interesting point to note in Cole's work is that he seems to have lost sight of this definition of the middle class when he went on to identify the main groups which compose the middle classes in "Great Britain and ... in most advanced countries of the West." Cole's work is of some importance to our analysis here mainly because of his categorisation of the groups which make up the middle class. The groups mentioned by Cole are

5. Cole for instance is supported by Andrew Grant, Socialism & the Middle Class (London, 1958).
7. Ibid., p. 62.
8. Ibid., p. 83.
9. Ibid., p. 94.
very closely followed by B. B. Misra in his book on the
Indian Middle Classes, and in any discussion of the middle
class in India, Misra must find a place. Misra's book is in
fact the first major work on the India 'middle class', and
whether his views on class formation are acceptable or not
it must be granted that he makes an attempt at locating the
middle classes in Indian society. While doing this he leans
heavily on Cole's work on class structures and the groups
which he lists as composing the middle classes in Great
Britain and the more advanced countries of the West. One
point which must be emphasised here is that Cole clearly
states that his concept of the Middle Class:

"fits best... a highly industrialised coun­
try at a middle stage of capitalist deve­
lopment such as Great Britain had reached
during the second half of the nineteenth
century, or in a quite different way, a
rural structure, based on a mingling land­
lordism with large and small scale farming.
It fits much less well either most forms
of relatively primitive society, or the
types of society in which feudalism and
industrial capitalism are intricately
intermingled." 12

It is evident from this that Cole's middle class categories
derived ostensibly from his concept of the middle class are
not suitable for an underdeveloped colonial economy like

10. B.B. Misra, The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth
in Modern Times (New Delhi, 1973).
12. Ibid., p. 32.
that of India under British rule because India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was neither highly industrialised nor a rural structure as Cole had specified. It is, therefore, difficult to comprehend how Misra could have used Cole's categories in toto to represent the Indian situation. Moreover, both Misra and Cole belong to that genre of social theorists who develop elaborate frameworks which are only to be forgotten at the time of actually analysing a social phenomenon. Thus, like Cole, Misra seems to have forgotten while categorising the Indian middle classes his own words that "the members of the educated professions, such as government servants and lawyers, college teachers and doctors constitute the bulk of the Indian middle class," and his groups comprising the middle class in India include the industrial bourgeoisie, the commercial bourgeoisie and the landed aristocracy. Misra further states that the "ideas and institution of a middle class social order" are not indigenous to India but are imported from

13. The development of India as a colonial economy unleashed very different forces in Indian society and brought about a political, economic, and social order distinct from Great Britain or highly industrialised societies of the West. For a further development of this point, see, A.R. Desai, Social Background of Indian Nationalism (Bombay, 1976); R.P. Dutt, India Today (Calcutta, 1970); C. Bettelheim, India Independent, (New York, 1968).
Europe. Thus in using the term middle classes Misra does not either conceptualise the middle class nor tries to arrive at a scientific definition of the term. There is, in fact, a total confusion in his work, beginning from his concept of class which according to him is an economic concept to his idea of the middle classes, which he describes on Cole's lines as the bourgeoisie which includes a vast cross-section of Indian society ranging from bureaucrats to farmers to various fractions of the bourgeoisie.

We will discuss presently that the middle class is distinct from the bourgeoisie and that it has a separate class entity combining in it the economic, political and ideological components which are the pre-requisites for class determination, and therefore it is the middle class and not middle classes as Misra called it.

Misra's classification of the middle class is therefore not acceptable for our analyses here, although a section of what we shall call the middle class, is included in Misra's list of the Indian Middle Classes mainly because the groups which he mentions span across such a wide segment of

16. Here Misra refers to the British policy of creating a group of administrators who would be British in everything except blood and colour. See, Ibid., pp. 10-11.
17. Ibid., p. k.
Indian society that it perforce must include some true middle class elements. The groups which he calls the middle classes - the commercial middle class, the industrial middle class and the landed middle class would, in our concept of class, be fractions of the bourgeoisie and feudal elements. This contention of ours could in fact be substantiated by Misra's own economic data which show that the "commercial middle class" and the "industrial middle class" were actually the owners of the means of production and, therefore, were certainly not middle class. Thus Misra does not really define the middle class. He has merely lifted Cole's model and applied it to the Indian situation. Although Cole has not been mentioned in the pages of Misra's work yet so blindly has he followed Cole that some of his groups of the middle classes are identical with those of Cole's even to the extent of being similar in language.\(^\text{20}\)

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 70-146.
\(^{20}\) One example from Cole's and Misra's works will clarify this point. "The members of the principal recognised professions; whether salaried or working as consultants and remunerated by professional fees; including medical men, lawyers, ministers of religion, officers of the armed services, the upper ranges of the teaching profession and the upper and middle ranges of the artistic and industrial profession" (C.D.H. Cole, *Studies in Class Structure*, op.cit., p.95); "The members of the principal recognised professions, salaried or otherwise, such as lawyers and doctors, lecturers and professors, the upper and middle ranges of writers and journalists, musicians and artists, religions preachers and priests" (B.B. Misra, *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times*, op.cit., p.12.)
We have shown earlier that Cole's industrial bourgeoisie is not the middle class because bourgeoisie and middle class are two separate conceptions. Misra's idea of the Indian middle classes is not really the middle class but the rising Indian bourgeoisie.

Cole's and Misra's works are thus totally unscientific in their treatment of materials and, therefore, lack a clear theoretical conception of class and middle class. They fail to perceive class in its totality but see it only as an economic category based on income or as mere occupational groups. There are other studies also of the middle class which regard the middle class merely as an economic category. For instance, C. Wright Mills in his work on the American Middle Class regards only the white collar workers as belonging to the middle class (the new 'middle class' as Mills calls the white collar workers) and thus his concept of class is conterminous with occupational groups. It is true no doubt that white collar workers do form the biggest chunk of the middle class today, but to conceptualise the middle class it is not enough to merely take an economic category, like the salaried workers and call them the new middle class. The class position and the class consciousness of the middle class must be properly identified to arrive at a definition of the middle class.

There are still other sociologists who try to circumvent the issue of class and confuse the concept of the middle class by trying to draw up theories of elite. 22 Sociologists, and political scientists like C. Wright Mills, H.D. Lasswell, and Raymond Aron have followed up the elite theories of Pareto and Mosca to suit the concept of political power in the post 1950 period. 23 The idea of elites, as T.B. Bottomore also shows 24 was originally drawn up as an alternative to the idea of social classes, and the elite theorists later tried to refute the Marxist theory of social classes through their theory of ruling elites. However, the originators of the elite theory, Pareto and Mosca, had clearly stated that there are elites in every stratum of society and every group in the society had its own elite. It is, therefore, evident from their writings that the elite is not a class, but merely a fraction of a class. There could be a bourgeois elite and a proletariat elite (the labour aristocracy) and there could also be a middle class elite. But this does not imply that those elites are outside of or parallel to class formation.


They are merely fractions of a class, and 'Marxism... admits the existence of fractions, strata and even social categories.... But this in no way involves groupings alongside, marginal to or above classes, in other words external to them....' Therefore, in a scientific class analysis of society the elites will become fractions of the classes to which they belong and not a separate class entity.

In the period following the writings of Wright Mills and others who were trying to revive elite theories, a new group of sociologists emerged who tried to diffuse the whole Marxist conception of social class and class struggle by developing the theory of 'embourgeoisement'. This theory was based on the fact that with the rapid growth of capitalism certain superstructural changes had taken place in bourgeois society, and there was a fast increase in the number of non-productive wage earners like office workers, commercial employees and bank workers i.e.

25. N. Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op.cit., p.198.
all those categories which fall within the popular name white collar workers. The rapid growth of these white collar workers, or the 'new' middle class, had brought about, the embourgeoisement theorists said, a loosening of class boundaries and therefore also of class struggle. These theorists sought to prove that this 'new' middle class had no specific class position of its own and that it was either a part of the bourgeoisie or of the working class. What part of the middle class would fall into the bourgeoisie and what part into the working class was to be determined by factors like power, authority and status and their economic position was important only in so far as its effect on power, authority and status. This theory therefore tried to totally undermine the concepts of bourgeoisie, working class and class struggle. Dahrendorf had explicitly stated these ideas when he wrote that:

"The emergence of salaried employees means in the first place an extension of the older classes of bourgeoisie and proletariat. Both classes have become, by these extensions, even more complex and heterogeneous than their decomposition has made them in any case. By gaining new elements, their unity has become, a highly doubtful and precarious feature. White-collar workers, like industrial workers, have neither property nor

27. For a detailed discussion of this See N. Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op. cit., pp. 193-197.
authority, yet they display many social characteristics that are quite unlike those of the old working class. Similarly, bureaucrats differ from the older ruling class despite their share in the exercise of authority. Even more than the decomposition of capital and labour, these facts make it highly doubtful whether the concept of class is still applicable to the conflict groups of post-capitalist societies. In any case, the participants, issues, and patterns of conflict have changed, and the pleasing simplicity of Marx's view of society has become a nonsensical construction.28

Thus Dahrendorf criticised the Marxist concept of class formations in bourgeois society and arrived at the conclusion that in the highly developed capitalist societies class polarisation was not taking place as Marx had predicted. By denying a specific class position to the 'new' middle class, and making them part of the working class and bourgeoisie Dahrendorf has tried to prove that class boundaries and class unity of the proletariat and bourgeoisie have become extremely loose.

Similar criticism of the Marxist concept of class in bourgeois society were voiced by the American Sociologists, Seymour Lipset and Reinhardt Benedix and the French...

Sociologist, Raymond Aron. However, in order to make a proper evaluation of the criticism levelled at Marx by sociologists like Dahrendorf, Lipset and Raymond Aron, one must keep in mind the fact that the Marxist theory of class analyses the social reality in its totality and does not see it in fractions of status groups, political power or economic authority. Therefore, "the division into classes precisely means both from the theoretical and methodological point of view and from that of social reality, that the concept of social class is pertinent to all levels of analysis; the division into classes forms the frame of reference for every social stratification."30

Other sociologists like C. Wright Mills (who, as we have discussed earlier identifies the middle class with the white collar workers), also do not regard the middle class as a separate class but consider its conditions more akin to the condition of the working class. Their contention is that both the wage earning white collar workers and the working class do not own the means of production

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30. N. Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op.cit., p. 199.
and that while the working class sells its labour power the white collar workers sell their services, and therefore, they both belong to the same class category. But, here it is necessary to point out that there is a clear distinction between a wage earner and productive labour and as Marx had written, "Every productive labour is a wage earner, but every wage earner is not a productive labour." This makes it clear that merely the fact of lack of the ownership of the means of production and the earning of wages does not make a white collar belong to the working class, because the former's labour is not productive labour. Only that labour is productive labour which produces surplus values and:

"... labour performed in the sphere of circulation of capital, or contributing to the realisation of surplus-value is not productive labour; wage earners in commerce, advertising, marketing, accounting, banking and insurance, do not produce surplus-value and do not form part of the working class (productive labour). It is only productive capital that produces surplus-value." 32

From the above arguments it is, therefore, evident that the middle class is neither the working class nor is it merging with the proletariat and bourgeoisie. A scientific

32. N. Foulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op. cit., p. 217.
analysis of the social reality and social classes will prove that the middle class does have its own class position in the society no matter at what level of capitalist development that society may be in. What then is this class position and the class composition of the middle class?

The term middle class is of quite modern origin and it came into common use only by the 1840s. Before that, more particularly in the late eighteenth century the term 'men of a middle condition', 'middle rank' and 'middling classes' were generally used to describe the groups of people between persons of 'rank' and the 'common people'. These groups were always considered to be of an indeterminate nature and so gradually the specific word 'rank' came to be replaced by the word class which could better define the position of these groups. After the mid-nineteenth century when Marx's definitions of social class and historical development began to make their impact on the existing methods of social analysis, the concepts of class, bourgeoisie, working class, and middle class also came to specify definite social groups in definite modes of production. The term middle class then came to be viewed as basically

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33. For a history of the development of the term middle class See R. Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (Glasgow, 1977).
consisting of various "social groups which occupy an intermediary position between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie."\textsuperscript{34} By middle class, Marx had meant the small independent producers and independent professional men, and he had clearly used the term in the singular and not in the plural. "The lower middle class, the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisans, the peasant, all these fight against the bourgeoisie to save from extinction their existence as fractions of the middle class...."\textsuperscript{35} (emphasis added). Thus in a bourgeois society the middle class can be equated with the petty bourgeoisie, which group while preserving some of the characteristics of earlier historical development also specifies a particular category in the society.

Marx, while writing about the middle class or the petty bourgeoisie had analysed the existing social reality in the industrialised societies of nineteenth century Europe. However, with the development of the means of production and the rapid growth of capitalism, changes began to take place in the capitalist social formation, and these changes helped the critics of Marx to argue that Marx's theory of class and class struggle was inadequate to understand the

\textsuperscript{34} S.N. Nadel, \textit{op. cit.}, p.87.
complex reality of advanced industrial society. One such complex phenomenon, the critics pointed out, was the growth of the new 'middle class'. This new middle class consisting of "office workers, supervisors, managers, technicians, scientists and many of whom are employed in providing services of one kind or another... manifested the greater complexity of social stratification in modern industrial societies", and it, therefore, posed "difficulties for Marx's Theory". The actual fact is, however, that if one clearly understood the economic, social, ideological and political dimensions of the Marxist concept of class, the class analysis of the advanced capitalist countries would not pose any problem, and the growth of the new middle class would not mean that Marx's prediction of class polarisation had been proved wrong. The difficulties for Marxist theory were created by the bourgeois sociologists, like the structural functionalists, who, as we have discussed in Chapter I earlier, with their status-quoist theories tried to disprove the dynamics of social change as enunciated in class analysis. They based their study of society on status groups and social stratification instead of on social classes and class differentiations, and they used the term class to mean either mere

37. Ibid., pp. 23-24.
economic categories or status groups. With such a concept of class it would indeed be difficult to analyse, on scientific lines, social change in any society.

One point however, must be taken into account here, that there is a gap in Marxist theoretical writings in relation to the development in the developing and underdeveloped countries. The fault is of course not of Marxist theory as such but of those theoreticians and scholars, who, in the hundred years after Marx's death should have developed a clear scientific theoretical approach to analyse developments in these countries. There can be no argument about the fact that class relations and class struggle are the basic determinants in the historical development of these underdeveloped economies. But "it is... clear that the classes involved in these relations are in some major ways different or of different importance from those in advanced capitalist-societies..."38 It should also be mentioned here that not only the relations and importance of various classes may be different but even the character of certain classes may be different in conditions of underdevelopment or external capitalist domination. Thus, the importance of the middle class, as we have shown in our

38. R. Miliband, Marxism and Politics, op. cit., p. 29.
introduction to this work, is of a different nature in
India and particularly in Assam, from that in advanced
capitalist societies. It is true that Marxist theories
were primarily formulated in and for a bourgeois/capita-
list context and therefore have to be adapted to the very
different conditions included in the idea of underdevelop-
ment; but the main Marxist theoretical formulations for
the determination of classes in bourgeois/capitalist societ-
ties will be by and large the same even for the underdevel-
oped countries because those formulations are based on
scientific definition of class which views class as a total
entity. Therefore, while determining the class position of
the middle class in underdeveloped countries it is possible
to follow the main lines of class analysis in advanced/capi-
talist countries.

Proceeding from this basis it can be stated that
the conceptualisation of the middle class that developed in
Colonial economies like that of India will be similar to
the conceptualisation of the middle class in advanced capi-
talist countries, for after all, colonialism is but an
extension of capitalism. It is no doubt true that the term

petty bourgeoisie is more familiar than Middle class in Marxist circles, and it is also true that the term middle class or middle classes, as has been used by bourgeois social scientists, is unscientific because it is founded on an unscientific concept of class. But this in no way means that in a scientific class analysis of society the term middle class cannot be used and in fact, the term has been used in the Manifesto of the Communist Party to specify the various fractions which comprise the middle class.

The fractions of the middle class or petty-bourgeoisie mentioned by Marx - the small-scale producers and owners, the independent craftsmen and traders - are threatened with extinction with the development of capitalism. This petty-bourgeoisie has been called the 'traditional' petty-bourgeoisie by Poulantzas in his book Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, to distinguish it from the wage earning groups - the managerial staff, bureaucrats and other service employees - which grew with the development of capitalism. This 'new' middle class Poulantzas has called the 'new' petty-bourgeoisie. It is new only in the sense

42. Refer N. Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, op. cit.
that it is not faced with the threat of extinction as
capitalism grows but is destined to grow even further with
the extension of capitalism. The question that immediate-
ly arises at this point is, how can two social groupings,
the traditional petty bourgeoisie and the new petty-
bourgeoisie, which are so different in economic relations,
belong to the same class i.e. the petty-bourgeoisie?

To find a scientific answer to this question one
must again recall that in a social analysis based on the
Marxist concept of class, the definition of class is based
not merely on economic determination but engulfs the entire
gamut of political, social, and ideological determinants.
Therefore, "if certain groupings which at first sight seems
to occupy different places in economic relations can be
considered as belonging to the same class, this is because
these places, although they are different, nevertheless have
the same effects at the political and ideological level." The
traditional petty bourgeoisie and the new petty-bourgeoisie
no doubt have different economic relations but even
in this difference they have one thing in common - they
belong neither to the bourgeoisie nor to the proletariat.

43. Refer Ibid., p. 209.
44. Ibid., p. 206.
Although this is entirely a negative criterion and it cannot be converted into a positive one by merely looking at it from the point of view of class polarisation, yet this exclusion from the two basic classes in society... indicates even at the level of economic relations, the outline of their places, which are reaffirmed by the political and ideological relations."\(^{45}\) For the structural class determinations of any social group in the society the ideological and political relation have to be ascertained side by side with the relations of production. These ideological and political relations are even more indispensable in determining the class position of the petty-bourgeoisie, particularly in providing a foundation for the common class membership for the traditional and new petty-bourgeoisie and in grasping the relationship between the new petty-bourgeoisie, the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat. This of course does not mean that ideological and political relations are not important for the class determination of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but in the case of the petty-bourgeoisie these are more important because the traditional and the new petty-bourgeoisie not being at the centre of dominant relations of exploitation... undergoes a polarisation that produces very complex distortions and adaptations.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., p. 206.
of the political and ideological relations in which it is placed. This importance on the ideological and political relations in the case of the petty-bourgeoisie should not also be taken to mean that the class determination of the petty-bourgeoisie poses a difficulty for the Marxist criteria of economic determinism. The only reason why they have to be stressed in this case is because "classes are only determined in class struggle" and the ideological and political situation of the petty-bourgeoisie within the capitalist social order determines its place in the class struggle within that order.

Although the new petty-bourgeoisie occupies a different position from that of the traditional petty-bourgeoisie, so far as economic relations are concerned, yet where the ideological effects of their economic relations are concerned there is an analogy. The petty-bourgeois ideology is similar in the case of both the new petty-bourgeoisie and the old petty-bourgeoisie. It is this common ideological effects of their different economic positions which lead to a similarity of class positions of the two groupings of the petty-bourgeoisie. It can therefore,

46. Ibid., p. 207.
47. Ibid.
48. For a complete discussion of the form of petty-bourgeoisie ideology, see, N. Poulantzas, Ibid., pp. 290-296.
be said that "these two groupings both form part of the same class, the petty bourgeoisie." But it must be remembered that the petty-bourgeoisie is not a class like the two basic classes of the capitalist mode of production, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, and it does not have the unity which these classes have. For instance, the relationship between the traditional petty-bourgeoisie and the new petty-bourgeoisie is not like the relationship that exists between the commercial capital and the banking capital of the bourgeoisie. Yet the two groupings of the petty bourgeoisie can be said to be belonging to one class precisely because classes are determined in class struggle only, and in the polarisation of class struggle the traditional and new petty-bourgeoisie occupy the same place vis-a-vis the bourgeoisie and the proletariat.

It is this intermediate class, the petty-bourgeoisie, consisting of the traditional and the new petty-bourgeoisie, with which we shall be exclusively dealing with in our analysis of socio-economic developments in Assam in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As we have mentioned earlier the term petty-bourgeoisie is more commonly used, particularly in Marxist circles, but the use

49. Ibid., p.94.
of the term middle class is more suitable for our analysis of Assamese society because it has the advantage of encompassing both the traditional petty-bourgeoisie that Marx wrote about, and the new petty-bourgeoisie comprising the new wage-earning groups that developed in the later decades. Also, in the study of historical development of the Assamese society the term middle class has come to have some popular connotations, and it has been widely used to identify certain important forces in the Assamese society. These forces have played a very crucial role in the socio-political-economic developments of Assam. It is, therefore, imperative that the exact class position of this middle class in Assamese society be determined in order to assess the importance of the role of various forces in the historical development of Assam. In order to do this it is necessary to undertake a proper class analysis of Assamese society by making a scientific analysis of the socio-economic developments in Assam in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. The introduction of British Administration in Assam in the nineteenth century brought about a whole series of changes in the historical development of Assam. To comprehend fully the impact of British Colonial policies, and the emergence of new classes in Assam, it is absolutely
necessary that the cracking up of the existing socio-economic formation in Assam under the first onslaught of colonial rule is analysed in its entirety.

In the next chapter therefore, we shall, as the first step to the study of the Assamese middle class as conceptualised in this chapter, examine how, with the introduction of new British economic policies, the old order in Assam began to crack and finally tumbled down to give place to a new colonial socio-economic order.