

CHAPTER 6

The Middle Class

during British Rule

During British rule many English medium schools and colleges were established. By 1900 there were thousands of English educated teachers, lawyers, doctors, journalists and government officials. These educated, relatively well-off Indians came to be known as the middle class. They lived mainly in cities and towns.

Despite the opportunities available to them, the Indian middle class still remained in some ways

lower class than the British. They all had to face many common problems which they tried to overcome through a collective struggle.

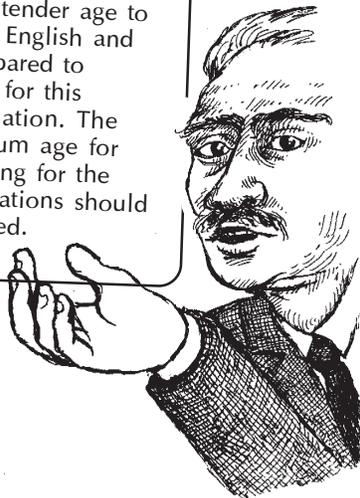
Many of these educated middle class people got together in 1885 to form an organisation called the Indian National Congress. They tried to direct the attention of the government towards their problems and the problems of other sections of Indian society through this organisation.

We do not get Equal Opportunities for Government Jobs

The educated people pointed out the shortcomings in the selection procedure for government jobs, saying it was discriminatory.



All senior officers in the government are British. On the one hand, the government says anyone can sit for the competitive examinations and become an officer. On the other hand, it has made it difficult for us Indians to even appear for these examinations. Do you think it is easy for an Indian to sit for an examination that is held in London? These examinations should be held in India as well as London.



The maximum age for appearing for these examinations is 19. It is just not possible for an Indian at this tender age to master English and be prepared to appear for this examination. The maximum age for appearing for the examinations should be raised.

Discuss the importance of the above two demands. Do they seem justified to you?

Are we not Equal Human Beings?

The educated people criticised the discriminatory behaviour of the British. They put forward many examples of such discrimination.

“The British don’t even consider us equal human beings,” they said. “To all appearances, all are equal in the eyes of the law. But if a Britisher commits a crime, Indian judges cannot punish him, while British judges can sentence Indians.”

“We also see that a Britisher usually gets away with a lighter sentence than an Indian for committing the same crime.”



“In government service when an Indian officer is due for promotion, it is the British officer who is promoted instead.”

“In railway coaches, hotels, cinema halls, parks and other public places there are signs such as, ‘For the British only’, ‘Dogs and Indians not allowed’ etc. How can we stomach this insult?”

“We are, at least, well to do and educated. The British behave even worse with poor, uneducated Indians. They beat their Indian servants at the slightest pretext, even to the extent of killing them. They even shoot their servants over trivial matters, yet nothing happens to them.”

The Indians did not have the same opportunities as the British to get ahead in life and live with respect. They resented such discrimination. Especially those educated middle class people who were striving to become the equals of the British began to speak out strongly against discrimination.



Indians serving a British couple in the 1800's.

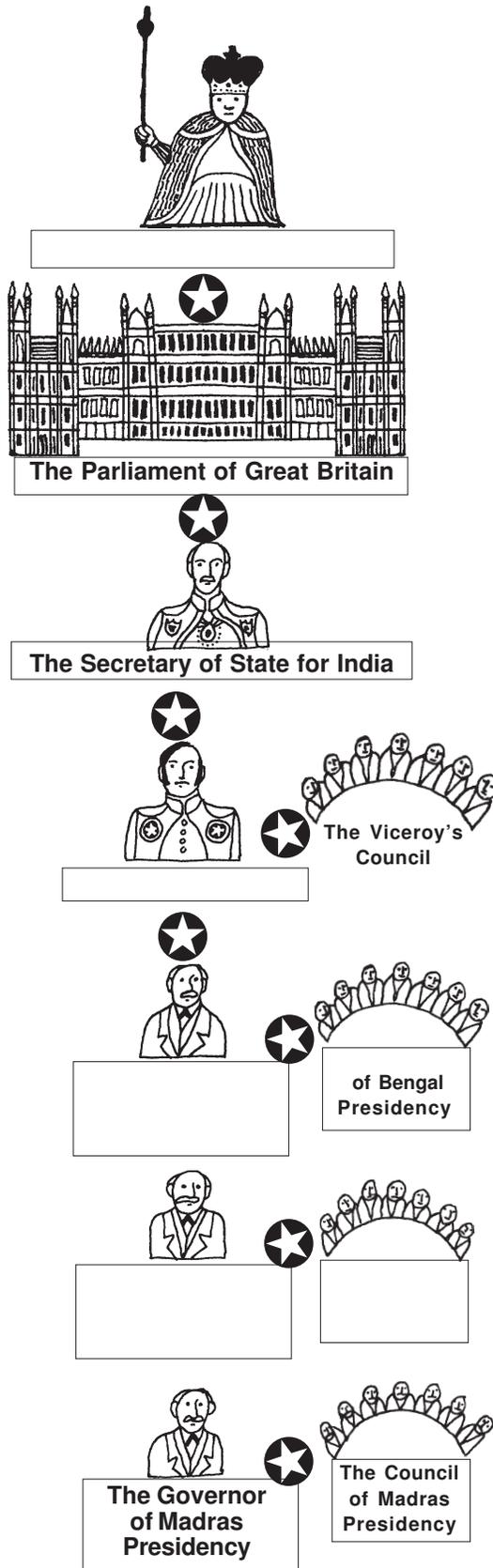
The educated people also began questioning the way the administration was run. Let’s see how India was governed during British rule.

The British System of Administration in India

India was part of the British Empire. Hence the Queen of Great Britain was our queen and the people of India were her subjects.

The Queen of Great Britain and the British Parliament and Government ruled over India. However, it was not possible to rule India directly from Britain because India was so far away. So the responsibility of governing the country was given to a few officials. The highest official was called the Secretary of State for India. He lived in Britain.

The Hierarchy of British Rule in India



The highest official living in India to look after the administration was called the Viceroy. He was responsible for British rule in India.

But it was not possible for the Viceroy alone to pay attention to all issues, take all decisions, and implement them. To help and advise him there was a Council. The members of the Council were important British officials.

In order to run the administration of such a vast country, the British had divided their Empire in India into three parts: the Bengal Presidency, the Madras Presidency and the Bombay Presidency. A Governor was appointed in each presidency, and a Council was formed to aid and advise each Governor. The main government officials of these presidencies were members of these Councils.

Fill in the boxes in the diagram on the left to label each level in the hierarchy of British rule.

Participation of Indians in the Administration of India

In the beginning the British officials ran the entire administration. But after the Revolt of 1857, the British government began to think that if it did not include Indians in running the administration, the people of India would not accept British rule and would keep revolting. That is why in 1861 a rule was made that in the Councils of the Viceroy and the Governors, apart from the British, other people would also be included as members and some of the members would be Indian. Thus, apart from officials, some Indians and British traders, mill owners and plantation owners began to be made members of the Councils.

The educated people of India were not at all satisfied with this rule. They would say:

“Indians have no doubt been included in the Councils, but this is only a token. The largest number of members in the Council are in any case still British!”



Motilal Nehru

“We do not want that the Viceroy or Governor should choose the members of the Council as they please. The members of the Council should be elected by the people.”

“Besides, the Indians who are in the Council can make no big difference because the Viceroy is the one who appoints and dismisses the members. Thus, he selects only those Indians who will support the British government.

“The Viceroy has made many Indians - rajas, nawabs, their divans and zamindars -members of his Council. These people do not understand the miseries of the common people of India nor do they complain to the British government in the interests of the people. What is the use of their being in the Council?”



Chittaranjan Das



Surendra Nath Bannerjee

People pointed out that, “In Britain the members of the parliament are elected by the citizens of Britain. They become representatives of the people. This is a very good thing. The people of India should also get this right to elect their representatives and express their views to the government through them. Only then will the real problems of the people be listened to and solved.”

Many members of the Congress such as S. N. Bannerjee, Motilal Nehru, C. R. Das and others raised these issues with the British government.

If you were the Viceroy of India, could the Governor of Madras Presidency tell you what to do?

If you were the Governor of Bengal Presidency and the Queen of Britain said you should construct a new monument in Kolkata, would you have had to follow her orders?

How were the members of the Councils chosen?

What shortcomings did the educated people see in the membership of the Council?

What suggestions did they have to remove these shortcomings?

If you were a British member of the Viceroy's Council at that time, how would you feel about the different methods of selecting members of the government in Britain and in India?

Now suppose you were a member of the Indian middle class at that time. Would you agree with the opinions of the above British member? Give reasons.

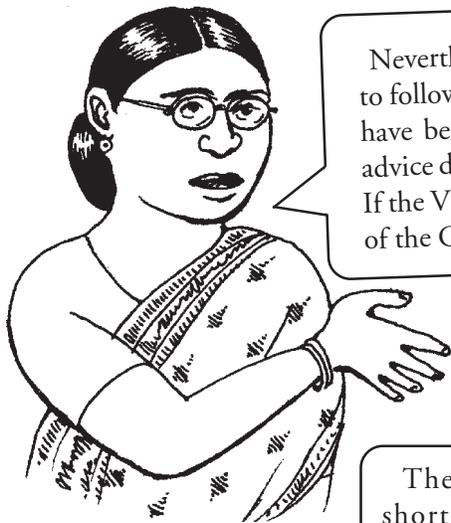
The Rights of the Council

The educated people of India also raised questions on the ways in which the Councils worked. Let's find out what these questions were.

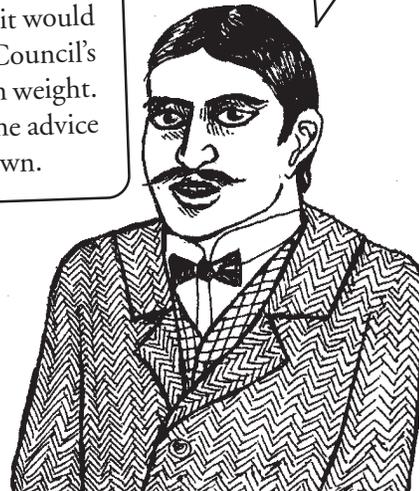


Even if the number of Indians in the Councils is increased, of what use will that be? The Council does not have any right anyway. The only job it has is that if the Viceroy or the Governor puts something for discussion in the Council, the Council discusses it and gives its opinion.

If the members of the Council want to initiate a discussion on any topic, they have to ask for the permission of the government. If the Governor or the Viceroy refuses, then the members cannot discuss that issue. Of what use is such a Council?

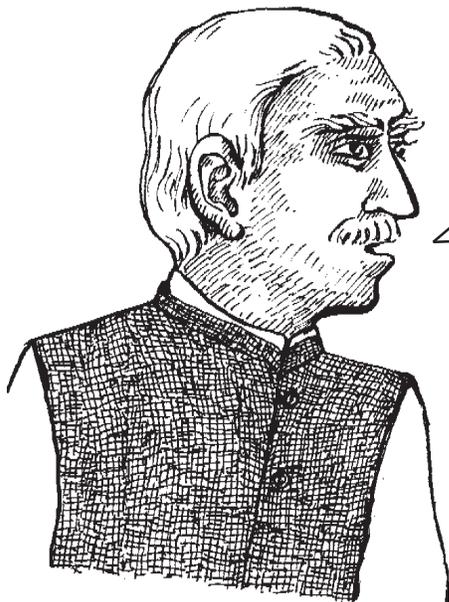


Nevertheless, if the government was bound to follow the advice of the Council it would have been of some use. But the Council's advice does not have even this much weight. If the Viceroy wants he can reject the advice of the Council and decide on his own.



The most serious shortcoming of the system is that the members of the Council cannot raise any question on the budget of the government. The government obtains money by taxing us and then spends it according to its own will. The money is ours! It should compulsorily take our opinion on how much will be claimed in taxes and on what it will be spent.

In what ways was the Viceroy able to control and dominate the Council? Discuss and explain.



The Government of the People

From this we can understand how discontented the educated people of India were with the way in which the British ran the administration. They wanted that just as the government of Britain was answerable to the people there, the government in India too should be answerable to the people of India.

In the beginning some educated people hoped that the British would teach Indians how to form and run a responsible government. But this hope was lost very soon and people came to understand that although the British did talk of the development of the people of India, they ruled only for the development of their own empire.

Britain was ruling India for its own interests, and not in the interests of Indians. That was why it was not possible for the British to give a full share in the administration to Indians.

As a result of the pressure exerted by the educated Indians, some administrative changes were made from time to time. In 1861, 1892, 1919, and 1935, laws were made that marginally increased the participation and rights of Indians in the administration.

But during this time it had become clear that if the government had to be run in the interests of the Indian people, first India would have to be free from British rule. So people began fighting for self-rule and built up the National Movement to overthrow the British Empire and establish a free nation of Indians.

After Independence

Based on your experience and knowledge, discuss which of the problems raised by the educated people of the middle class have now been solved. Do Indians now get full opportunities for jobs? Who has control over the government of the country?

Exercises

- 1. During British rule why was it difficult for Indians to obtain government service?**
- 2. In what ways was there discrimination between the British and the Indians?**
- 3. What prevented Indians from exercising control over the British government in India?**
- 4. If the Council of the Bombay Presidency asked the Viceroy's Council to provide funds to construct a new railway line from Bombay to Pune, would the Viceroy's Council have to agree?**
- 5. If the Secretary of State for India asked the Viceroy to build a new railway line from Kalka to Simla, would the Viceroy have to agree?**
- 6. The people of India wanted to have a say in their own governance. Why was this not possible without independence?**

