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Ten Hurdles -- 'I's -- That Middle-Class People Must Overcome

Although this essay is about the vast majority of non-elite middle-class people of India, this will probably apply to all ordinary citizens who constitute the majority in any country.

For long, “I”, or the ego, or the egotistical, arrogant, selfish, brash, mindless aspect of one’s being, has been called humankind’s biggest enemy.

The “I” can manifest slyly in many ways, under the radar in darkness, hence difficult to “catch”, unless brought under the light of consciousness proactively and courageously.

The “I” has particularly become a pandemic, a deadly or killer social ‘disease’ among the world’s middle-class non-elite majority, especially so in India.

While a well-regulated, managed, subdued or cultivated “I” is said to be beneficial to oneself as well as others, in reality, the “I” manifests usually in negative, internecine ways.

The “I” as it manifests among ordinary middle-class, non-elite Indian citizens has wreaked havoc on the nation for several decades now, crimping the talented middle-income group’s entrepreneurial energies, enterprise, drive, talent and potential.

The middle-class people have become their own worst enemies. In the process, they have unwittingly become the real villains behind India’s under-developed status for decades.

And as long as the “I” remains active and strong, India’s fate, and Indians’ fate, will remain sealed in an unopened envelope of untapped potential.

Here’s how the “I” manifests among India’s middle-class people. Herein also lies not only insight but the key to open the door to a better future.

How to open that door? The path to a better future is riddled with **ten “I” hurdles**. Simply overcome, clear or jump over them. As simple as that. Just cast or toss these 10 “I”s aside.

1) Individualism: Rather, “hyper-individualism” would be a more apt term to describe this negative trait prevalent among India’s middle-class people.

The sense of “I” or ego (as in misplaced, unfounded individuality powered by irrational arrogance and unjustifiable pride) is the bane of middle-class people at an individual level. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen wrote a book whose title is “*The Argumentative Indian*”.

We love to argue for no reason. We indulge in oneupmanship and bullying if we can get away with it. We suffer from “tope” syndrome and tunnel vision and one-track mind.

We resist the need to view an issue dispassionately from multiple perspectives. Each one of us imagines oneself to be some sort of superhero or super-achiever without facts (real-life achievements) backing up such claims of the ego inside the head.

This individualism powered by ego prevents us from being objective, dispassionate, humble, fact- and truth-oriented. Instead, it creates self-deceptions and 'delusions of grandeur'. Mindless individualism manifesting in the form of selfishness, self-centredness prevents us from making genuine progress in life, and from evolving as a person to a higher plane.

It traps or straitjackets us in a socioeconomic box or bracket. It enslaves us to ego's preferences, priorities, likes, comfort zone, the known, the familiar. It repels change and prefers stagnation, status quo, complacency, stasis, slow-burn. It makes us play it safe, or be risk-averse, defensive in our outlook. It creates a closed mind that is not open to possibilities, opportunities.

2) **Indifference:** A most horrible consequence of hyper-individualism, indifference is the mind's way of shutting out what the ego interprets as a threat or challenge to selfish interests, personal preferences of one's comfort zone – the known and the familiar – or as demand on time/mind's attention in relation to insignificant or inconsequential issues (from the ego's perspective).

Generally, focus is good; but when such sharpened focus becomes obsessive and fixed on selfish interests even when it ought to be shifted to bigger issues, the bigger picture, everything else appears like a nuisance, botheration, disturbance, invasion, imposition or intrusion.

And then, indifference sets in. Indifference or insouciance alienates one from others, the community and the ecosystem, disregards the interconnectedness principle and violates the fact of interdependence that underpins our very existence. When a fundamental is violated, one will pay a very heavy price eventually.

A particularly detestable form of indifference / insouciance is 'everyday diplomatic filth', which, in this digital age, takes the form of selective attention, just to appear friendly and polite. So: in a chat or instant-messaging app like, say, WhatsApp, you receive several messages on different topics. You bestow your attention on, and respond to, only inane, sensational, fascinating, seemingly profound or trivial messages, 'sweet-nothings', 'feel-good' content, and careless whispers.

But, either consciously or unconsciously, you remain indifferent to (or deliberately ignore) messages about society, community, nation, etc, which you fear might stir your conscience, spur 'second thoughts' on serious, fundamental or existential issues, necessitate your action, participation, contribution or involvement that would *NOT* result in immediate personal gain, advantage or benefit, or may make a demand on your time, attention, energy or money that you want to reserve entirely for your own selfish interests and pursuits.

3) **Intolerance:** Because of individualism and indifference, any persistent efforts of others to elicit interest in Big-Picture goings-on are rebuffed through intolerance, inability to reach agreement or consensus on crucial issues.

The divisive “Us” versus “Them” mindset takes strong hold in the mind. When intolerance takes extreme forms, it could, in association with other factors, lead to violence, murders, wars, genocides, or resistance to good change via non-cooperation and impatience.

“My way or the highway” attitude grips the personality.

4) **Ignorance:** Selfishness, self-centredness create excessive, obsessive focus on self, job, career, nuclear family, small inner circle of “like-minded” friends/colleagues (rather friends with same or similar vices, habits, addictions or value system), to the exclusion of everything and everyone else, creating walls of exclusivity that stop knowledge and awareness from informing and enriching one’s consciousness.

As a result, ignorance, especially of cosmic principles of interconnectedness and interdependence, and of the symbiotic relationship between the part and the whole (or the individual and the community / society / environment / Nature), sets in.

This in turns leads to ignorance of the Big Picture, larger systems. And when systemic flaws deepen and head in the direction of an implosion or explosion, ignorance will keep one from becoming knowledgeable and well-informed.

And during tipping-point moments at the cliff edge, ignorance and herd mentality lead to wrong decisions or bad choices.

Typically, ignorance is a consequence of excessive focus on oneself, one's nuclear family, household, domain (job / career / profession / vocation), and the 'small inner circle' of 'like-minded', same-feather "friends"/"relatives".

And in this age of super-specialization and super-super-specialization, "I am the universe", "Me and my family are the universe", "my field is the universe", "my circle is the universe" type of misconceptions are prevalent.

For example, these days, a "doctor" is no more than an "expert" on one particular organ in a human body. He considers that particular organ alone in a patient to be his concern. His/her knowledge of the organ may well be top-class, in-depth, inside-out (or not). But, these days, he/she goes about his/her job without factoring in the particular organ's interconnectedness and interdependence with other organs as well as the whole body and even other bodies. Worse, the wisdom that relief from symptoms is not the same as health, recovery, cure is lost due to ignorance. And due to ignorance, the knowledge that mental health and physical health are deeply connected, and that a doctor's 'personal connect' with the 'whole being' of the patient, marked by empathy, personal chemistry, compassion and a sense of shared humanity is disregarded. Shame!

And this shame applies to each and every profession, not just the medical field, and not just to one culture, region, geography, religion or civilization.

Except a bit of domain knowledge, super-saturated selfishness, and some superficial, hazy bits of information on key subjects, most middle-class people are ignorant, and not at all knowledgeable, of so-called weighty issues or serious topics that are nevertheless going to have serious implications and impacts on their personal health, personal life, family, personal finances, job, career, community, society, nation, environment and planet as a whole -- their very future and existence.

Yet, most middle-class people 'choose' to remain ignorant about the most important topics/subjects of our times: climate change; rise of authoritarian/totalitarian regimes; rise of post-truth, populist, rhetoric-happy conmen and charlatans in the guise of strongmen/dictators; rise of inhuman, dehumanizing, dangerous technologies; widening socioeconomic inequalities; the coming together of evil-minded corporates and State ("corporate State"); brightening prospects for post-apocalyptic dystopian states; environmental meltdown; lethal 'killer' combination of information technology, biotech, finance and governments; rise of cryptocurrencies and even digital currencies as legal tender...

The true implications of these developments are lost on the 'ignorant' middle-class people because they have become excessively selfish, egotistical and zombie-like.

5) Intransigence: Middle-class individuals become hardened persons over a period of time in terms of mindset, and approach to life and living – rigid, obstinate, stubborn, adamant, recalcitrant, always refusing to behave differently or to even consider changing their attitude toward something. This is particularly virulent when they deal with fellow middle-class people (peers) who are "not like us" or "not like-minded".

This eventually will come back to haunt one because by preventing one from extending cooperation and support, intransigence weakens movements, campaigns or initiatives for positive change. And when the Big Picture scenario decays and implodes under its own weight of systemic flaws that were not fixed in time through proactive embrace of change, then even those who were / are intransigent will perish for sure.

6) Idiocy: When middle-class people focus excessively, obsessively on selfish interests and self-centredness and self-absorbed lifestyle, then the grip of evil capitalism-shaped socioeconomic system on their psyche tightens, resulting in crass consumerism, dumbing down through populist discourse, rhetoric, media narratives, entertainment.

People become zombies or automatons in spite of higher education. They also become powerless, helpless – totally disempowered as individuals by the larger system.

Combined with ignorance, idiocy results in mindless conformism, fear-based compliance, and insecurity- or anxiety-ridden greed for undeserving stability and continuity.

That is, even when the whole building is (or set on) fire, and is burning down (or is being burnt down), middle-class individuals who have become selfish idiots continue to think only in terms of their own flat / apartment, and refuse to act in ways that can first save the whole building.

The Western type of profit-driven, reckless, unsustainable capitalist model of socioeconomic system of the last 150+ years, spawned by the Industrial Revolution, has run its course, and is dragging the planet and the humanity toward a cliff edge.

Yet, the majority middle-class people, who are the victims along with the downtrodden and the oppressed, appear not a bit concerned or scared. Why?

Most middle-class people appear to think they are actually the beneficiaries of a flawed capitalist system, and hence prefer the status quo of capitalism. Therefore, they resist or sabotage (or don't support efforts for) change that would be positive / better for the whole, not just parts. They fancy themselves as people just one step, or a few short steps, away from becoming / joining / accepted by the elites. And they actually believe they belong *there*. Such pseudo-elite middle-class jokers-cum-rascals can be easily recognized. They can be broadly classified under the following categories:

- Psychopaths / sociopaths masquerading as leaders in various roles (low-level politicians, administrative heads, CEOs, CXOs of small-time companies, soul-less scientists, heartless fund managers, ruthless section supervisors, merciless 'bosses', manipulative local-level 'gurus', etc)
- Climbers of the socioeconomic ladder who misuse soft skills (interpersonal charm, soft-spokenness, external polite behavior, agreeable demeanor, gentle countenance, smile-marked face, table manners, etiquette, terrific sense of attire / makeup) and have 'understood' the current flawed system, and have reconciled themselves to the convenient notion that "this is life", and so have mastered to 'game' or 'ride' the flawed system. Hence, having learned to sleep with the enemy, the Devil, they don't want any change
- Addicts / slaves of 'vices' / enjoyers of 'cheap thrills' or pleasures or indulgences who are able to do all that because of (not in spite of) the flawed system
- Complacent, risk-averse, play-it-safe individuals characterized by mediocrity and absence of pursuit of excellence
- Extremely selfish, insular individuals who think the whole exists for the part(s), so they also believe it is the legitimate right of individuals to live off community, society, environment and planet like parasites
- Merit-less fellows who have benefited more than they deserve and who still want more (and more and more of everything); they want to get ahead of even meritorious people by hook or by crook (mostly using wrong / foul / unethical means), even if that imperils the whole itself . . . and who rationalize it by way of untenable concepts like "survival of fittest", "new age, new mores", "c'est la vie", "life is unfair, difficult, tough, rough"

- Those who have an unfair and undeserving advantage over others because of loopholes at social customs or policy level, and hence want to perpetuate the "privilege", usually by resisting / sabotaging change that can transform the flawed system, expose them, be positive for the whole society at a big-picture level but not-so-good for those who would lose their undeserving "privilege" that has not been earned properly.

7) **Indolence:** This means “avoidance of activity or exertion; laziness.” That is, even when change is for one’s own good, and positive for community, the primitive brain’s / ego’s absolutist, context- and nuance-blind interpretation that “all change is bad” is accepted by a middle-class person unquestioningly.

Because, at the subconscious level, there is a neural association that “work not directly related to selfish interests” and “work not producing instant personal gratification / pleasure / comfort / gain / profit / benefit” as per preconceived, desired or hoped-for expectations is “pain”.

So: “Avoid pain” = “Avoid work”. Which means, a middle-class person avoids even that “work” which can save his/her life.

The converse of this is equally true. Any pleasure, addiction, mindset, attitude, strategy that has become outdated, dangerous, and could eventually result in pain / destruction / death is still persisted with, or continued to be indulged in.

That is the destructive power and adverse effect of indolence.

8) **Introvertedness:** Maybe because of external forces’ conquests and humiliating rule for centuries, or maybe because the post-Independence rule of the Indian elites has been horrific, or maybe because they subverted democracy, and made a mockery of institutions, perpetuating dynasties and feudalism, majority middle-class people have all become introverted vis-à-vis community.

This introvertedness gets accentuated by loaded messages and secret subliminal conditioning through media and entertainment content, and by the mega scale of institutions vis-à-vis Lilliput-like individuals.

So, the ordinary middle-class educated person has low self-esteem, low self-confidence, a defensive approach to living, a play-it-safe mindset marked by a risk-averse, low-profile attitude.

All this has made a middle-class Indian introverted, shy, reclusive, small-minded, with no self-belief.

A typical middle-class Indian, if hypnotized and made to speak, will probably confess to a sense of insignificance, disempowerment, smallness, hopelessness.

All these are not brought out into the light of consciousness. Instead, the ego is allowed to cover these up through make-believe, pretense, impostor-like behavior, bombast, hyper-individualism, false pride, arrogance, show-off posturing, myths of self-importance, delusions of grandeur, self-

deceptions, basking in others' reflected glory, indifference, apathy, evasiveness, mediocrity, lack of pursuit of excellence, getting caught up in rat race and busy-busy hectic routines.

These in turn lead to insecurity, anxiety, stress, fear, cowardice, which spark greed for undeserving stability, continuity.

9) Inefficiency: All the factors discussed above result in inefficient allocation of financial, mental, intellectual, philosophical and spiritual resources to individual matters and community affairs.

The surrender of intellect through learned idiocy induced by the larger ecosystem makes one helpless, and one is forced to accept lack of transparency and accountability in the larger system.

So, a middle-class person pays various taxes, but can't hold anyone responsible or accountable for corrupt use of government revenues.

There is a glaring discrepancy or inefficiency in the ratio and proportion by which one's personal (financial, mental, intellectual, philosophical and spiritual resources) resources are allocated or distributed toward individual interests and community matters.

Even in terms of time and physical energy, middle-class people's involvement and participation in community, on which they depend directly, has become indirect and thus inefficient. This malaise -- lack of efficiency -- spills over into even personal life and job and relationships.

This inefficiency is the direct cause of the degeneration of Indian society and Indian democracy. At an individual level, the middle-class individual believes he / she is accumulating assets and prospering somehow, slowly but surely, in spite of the all-round mess in society.

But, this is not an achievement but symptomatic of an inefficient person who lands in a ditch, but keeps on digging it deeper and deeper, without having a detached, objective, dispassionate overview of the Big Picture.

10) Insularity: Individualism and the rest of other "I"s create insularity. "No man is an island" -- so goes a saying. But the middle-class Indian citizen insulates himself / herself and his / her family from the dynamics and mechanics of the larger community / society. Or at least imagines that he / she is successful in doing so.

But can an individual / family truly isolate or insulate oneself from the positive or negative effects of the community / society, of which they are part? Doesn't insularity, which is an inefficient way of dealing with community, eventually weaken and short-change the very community without which an individual / family can't exist?

Can a leaf, flower, fruit or branch exist if it insulates itself from the nourishing parent that is the tree? And, don't all leaves together help sustain the tree? Isn't the leaf-tree relationship symbiotic?

***Let's overcome or
clear these
10 hurdles,
toss them aside,
and build a
New India,
shall we?***



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