

Social Roots of the Italian Renaissance Residual Part

Presented by
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11. A New Society and Traditional Morality:-

(a) The 'Italian Renaissance' born newly emerged society was far different from the ideal of Medieval Theologians.

Respect towards poverty, describing 'glittering wretchedness' as a prime feature of wealth and not acknowledging any merchant as trustworthy- all these cemented the mentality of the said theologians.

(b) On the other hand, Italian merchants had created such a world , where tradition ethics was not being recognized as an utmost principle to abide by. They began to live in a **distinctly flexible as well as dangerous society** where **keeping pace with continuous changes** became more acceptable than **sticking to archaic tradition.**

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A shipwreck, drastic fall in exchange rates or dishonesty of a partner – all these sudden dangers became part and parcel of their daily life. They started to take these kind of abrupt challenges in a daily basis and waiving them off became their primary duty.

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A contemporary poem can describe this scenario lucidly...

**“A single day, from dawn to dusk
Can bring them either boom or bust
No other trade, no other way
Of life so makes men fortune’s prey”**

(C) But most of the **commercial elites** were not unaware of the hidden conflict between **traditional morality** and **steps taken for economic survival**.

Majority of them took the path of repentance in order to create an image to be acceptable to both of the confronting (traditional and new) ideologies. **Providing dowries for poor girls, reducing rate of the interests which they had already demanded** and accepted became their necessary obligation.

(d) By early of the fifteenth century, two major changes jointly reshaped the merchant-dominated contemporary society.

Firstly, The new scholarship of the humanists gave birth to some **commercial elites with a middle way.**

Secondly, these newly emerged elites did not oppose traditional mentality in a outright manner but they started to **propagate their new ideology through highlighting on contemporary literature, drama etc.**

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Ethics and Politics by Aristotle, four consecutive dialogues; **On the Family by Leon Battista Alberti (begun in 1432)** were the contemporary literatures on which those of the said **'liberal commercial elites'** banked upon.

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“Some people ...think that these occupations, which we shall call mercenary, are never quite clean, never untainted by considerable fraud. They say that ugly intrigues and false contracts are frequently involved.... Those who thus dismiss all mercenary activities are wrong, I believe.... Wealth, if it is used to help the needy, can gain a man esteem and praise.....”

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This above mention excerpt from the writings of Alberti clearly shows us that, many of the **contemporary poets, novelists, dramatists** tried to make a **bridge** between **traditional morality** and **activities related to attain economic prosperity**. They wanted to **justify** this **contemporary economic surge** (activities to gain profit)**with the principle of medieval morality**.

Needless to say, this very character of their literary works attracted those **moderate commercial tycoons** who grabbed the opportunity to highlight on these writings without any late.

(e)Merchant class :a secular occupation:-

Sixteenth century intellectual John Calvin was an ardent propagator of Protestantism, which stresses on capitalism and its capability to create a secular atmosphere within the realm of economic activities.

Though there was no direct connection between the changing notion of contemporary commercial elite and writings of Calvin but we can assume that, the journey to restructure the entire merchant community as secular , which had already been started from early part of 15th century, had got an acceleration thorough various literature of that time. During 16th century the merchant class discovered the writings of Calvin and acknowledged them as their intellectual counterpart .

(f) Direct conflict between Traditional Aristocracy and New Socio- Economic ideas:-

- Although '**moderate commercial elites**' accomplished to create a bridge between **Tradition** and **Newness** and in some cases, **affluent merchants with academic excellence succeed** to enter in the **enclave of nobility**, the situation was more or less static.
- The nobility still had been retaining prestige and status and on the other side, **merchants** occupied an **honorable but median position** which was never at par with the traditional noble class.

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Basically, contemporary society was segmented into three categories, like:-

- (1.) Gentilshommes, Seigneurs, Princes**
- (2.) Merchants**
- (3.) Unskilled manual Labors, Peasants, Artisans, Retail Traders.**

(g) Emergence of Bourgeoisie Morality:-

During later half of the 15th century, Italy witnessed an emergence of a new ideology, called- '**Bourgeoisie Morality**' which was completely opposite to that of the '**traditional Mentality**'.

Before this, few **commercial elites** tried to justify their **economic activities** by enlisting themselves within the arena of **already existed traditional morality**. But, now, there remained no question of juxtaposition/assimilation. Contemporary traders now had created a new ideal for themselves which was very much **exclusive** in nature.

(h) Salient nature of Bourgeoisie Morality:-

- This very morality **added positive value to productive work**. Not, disrespect, but **idleness became the great sin**.
- The newly born bourgeois **started to practice thriftiness and determined to spend less than his earnings**.
- **Protestantism created a base for the proliferation of this morality** and with the help of this ism **an individual bourgeois started to plan his life rationally in order to gain utmost worldly success**.

(i) Position of Women under the new enclave of Bourgeoisie morality:-

- Society had created some new criteria for women to get married. **First of all, her lineage** became most important factor for her to get a rich merchant as her spouse.
- **Secondly, admittance of paying adequate amount of dowry** from the end of her maiden family was necessary.
- **Thirdly, her physical beauty** was an important point to accept her as a bride of an affluent bourgeois.

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- Even **contemporary religious sermons** also did not spare them alone. It vehemently blamed women for **enticing men to plunge into sin**. Besides, these religious scriptures denounced them for **'wrong' use of elegant clothing, cosmetic etc.**
- **Civil code of law** was introduced to teach them about the method of wearing **shoes, cloths and jewels** .

Conclusion:-

- So the 16th century **merchant class became more fluid** than earlier times.
- Choosing trade and industry based economic activities as occupation had now regarded as a **medium of elevation in the social hierarchy.**
- Beside continuing their trading activities, **some traders started to put their profit into land, urban, real estate and government bonds.** This very tendency to change profit into investment became more popular among grandsons of merchants who no longer wanted to stick to the uncertainty connected with trading activities.