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Note Towards a Marxist Perception of Indian History

In this Note, an attempt is first made to present to an audience well-versed in Marxist theory the main problems that have arisen during the development of Marxist historiography from Marx's time onwards. The second part is concerned with the major findings of Marxist work done on Indian history so far, as well as with the problems that are being debated. In the third part four major historical themes are identified where further work may be greatly helpful to the pursuit of the policies and goals of the Party.

MAJOR FORMULATIONS OF MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

For those who joined the Communist movement in 1940's or 1950's or even later, the major introduction to the main principles of Marxist historiography was usually obtained from J.V. Stalin's essay, 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism', written in September 1938 for the *History of CPSU (B), Short Course*, and reprinted in the various editions of his *Problems of Leninism*. While this essay with its rich selection of quotations and logical organization summed up the essence of Marxist

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world-outlook, yet because it was, after all, a summary, it tended to overlook many complexities, variations and nuances. This was especially true of its treatment of the historical part and especially of 'modes of production'.

It is, therefore, desirable to devote some space to how Marx's own views on History were developed and enriched from the 1840's onwards. The *Communist Manifesto* (1848) gave an outline of the development of capitalism and its mode of exploitation; there was in it naturally little on pre-capitalist forms, though there was the well-known emphasis on class-struggles as a constant element in all history. ("The history of all hitherto-existing society is the history of class-struggles.") There were, however, two notable elements lacking in the description of History in the *Communist Manifesto*: (1) the evolution of capitalism was not seen as essentially based on *expropriation*, of peasants and artisans internally, and of colonial peoples externally. It was only in *Capital*, Vol.I, published in 1867, that this very important insight was added, under the rubric of 'Primitive (or 'Primary') Accumulation'; and (2) The *Communist Manifesto*'s context was almost entirely confined to Western Europe, to whose peoples it was initially addressed. But Marx's own studies of India in 1853 and again in 1857-58 (especially in connection with reports for the *New York Tribune*) made him think that the pre-capitalist social organization in Asia could have been very different from that in Europe, given the existence of the Indian village community and the 'despotic' state, based on tax = rent equivalence. Thus when in January 1859 he wrote his Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, he added the "Asiatic" to "the ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois [i.e. capitalist] modes of production." His sentence here does not make it clear whether he regarded the Asiatic mode of production as the earliest (earlier than "ancient"?) (as Hobsbawm interprets it in his introduction to Marx, *Pre-capitalist Formations*), or a mode prevailing outside of Europe. That the latter was the case seems to be the more likely alternative, since in his 1853 articles on India, Marx regarded the pre-British regime in India as of a nature or structure fundamentally different from that of pre-capitalist Europe.

A major question that arises from the Preface to *the Critique* relates to the sense of the term 'mode of production'. Marx, perhaps, had no intention of setting a rigid succession of distinct 'modes of production'

(slavery – feudalism – capitalism) even for Europe: he himself uses the qualifying phrase, ‘in broad outlines’, while giving his short list of the modes. It is interesting that in the penultimate chapter of *Capital*, I, written only eight years later, he uses the word “petty mode of production” for a system where commodities are produced mainly by petty producers (artisans and peasants), who are “expropriated” as capitalism takes root and grows. While exploring an important phenomenon which is of significance for us in India as well, when we consider the impact of colonial “de-industrialization” (see below) — Marx does not let mere terminological rigidities stop him from identifying “modes” other than those which he listed in 1859.

Some years before his death in 1883, Marx began to give a great deal of attention to what is now called Prehistory. He saw in it as the period before humanity was able to produce a surplus, i.e. more than what was required for the primary producer’s subsistence. It was, therefore, a period before class-exploitation began and so was in a sense ‘primitive communism’. Its importance for Marx lay in its showing that social institutions like family and state have all arisen later and are thus part of the evolution of class societies. Engels put these ideas together in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884).

As the socialist movement began to assume a global character, especially after the Soviet Revolution of 1917, Marxists were faced with the problem of addressing the variations observable in the histories of various peoples and cultures outside Europe, while calling upon all of them to adhere to a single revolutionary cause. The temptation was, therefore, strong to argue that all peoples had had similar histories, passing through an identical line of successive modes of production, viz. primitive society–slavery–feudalism–capitalism, which in essence meant overlooking suggestions in Marx’s own writing about the ‘Asiatic’ and ‘Petty’ modes of production. This position was formally adopted in the Soviet Union after the ‘Leningrad Discussions’ of 1931 and is reflected in Stalin’s essay of 1938 on Dialectical and Historical Materialism. Chinese Communists had already adopted this scheme, although in China the rise of ‘feudalism’ tended to be dated much earlier than the time of arrival of feudalism in Europe (whereas European feudalism had its beginnings in the period 6th-9th centuries AD, the authoritative *Outline History of*

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China, edited by Bai Shouyi, 1980 (English transl., 1982), holds that the transition from slavery to feudalism was completed about 1000 years earlier, around the rise of the Qin dynasty, late 3rd century BC).

Such a universalist scheme inevitably raised the question of identifying the essential element in the feudal mode of production. To Marxists it could only be the form of the labour process, namely, serfdom. Related to this was also the question whether feudalism could embrace commodity production. If serfdom and non-commodity production (production for use) were both strictly seen as core features of feudalism, then both had ended in Western Europe by 1400. If so, how could European Marxists treat the English Civil War of 1640 and the French Revolution of 1789 as anti-feudal bourgeois revolutions? These questions formed the core issues in the debate *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (so titled in the published volume), initiated by Paul Sweezy's critique of Maurice Dobb, 1950, and concluding in 1953. Though such a conclusion was not drawn by any side in the debate, it does seem obvious that, going by Marx's definitions, the period between 1400 and 1789 in Western Europe was largely that of "the petty mode of production", with social and political power concentrated in the hands of money-rent receiving landowners and trade-controlling merchant-capitalists. This implies that capitalism proper, with its specific labour-form, wage-labour, arose not out of feudalism but well after the overthrow of the feudal order. This greatly weakens the simplistic assumption among many Marxists that, unless a country first had feudalism, it could not on its own develop any "sprouts of capitalism".

In the late 1950's and 1960's there was a revival of interest in the existence of the 'Asiatic' Mode; but later it tended to appear in a new garb, under the rubric of "Tributary Mode of Production", a designation first used by Samir Amin and then by Chris Wickham and others. While this designation captures the "tax-rent" equivalence (the basic relationship involved in surplus-extraction), it leaves out of consideration the form of labour-process, so that it could conceivably include even a society based on serf-labour, while, on the other hand, the Mughal Empire or Imperial China, with little known occurrence of serfdom, could also qualify for it. For the moment, there seems little agreement among Marxist historians in this area, and we have to leave the question as one that is still unresolved.

There are two points on the theoretical plane that need here to be mentioned, as they relate generally to Marxist historical method. One was mainly raised by Mao Zedong through his insistence that every historical situation can be seen as composed of, or affected by, a number of contradictions (such as, say, conflicts of interest between various classes); and we have to establish those contradictions which are the more critical, or decisive in terms of consequences. (See his essay, 'On Contradiction', 1937). Such an analysis of specific contradictions is as important for deciding the Party's practical policy in a given situation as it is for interpreting historical events and circumstances of the past. The second is the one emphasized by Gramsci, the Italian Communist leader and thinker, in his *Prison Notebooks*, about the error of determinism (which, incidentally, is present to some degree in Stalin's essay of 1938 above cited), and the importance, on the contrary, of ideas and deliberate human action. One must recognize that the primacy given to "productive forces" is not simply a case of the primacy of matter over mind. All productive labour implies the use of the producer's mind and skill; and machinery, the basis of capitalist production, could not have come into being without the preceding scientific revolution in Europe. The fall of socialism in USSR and Eastern Europe could not similarly have taken place without a reverse for socialism in the realm of people's minds; and why this happened needs to be investigated as much as the contradictions that arose within socialist economies.

Today, therefore, we need to examine historical problems with far greater regard for complexities than was the case with Marxist histories written in mid-20th century, like A.M. Pankratova's *History of the USSR*, 3 vols., or Morton's *People's History of England*, despite their undoubted merits. Yet, complexities should not lead us astray from our major concerns with the nature of the means of production, systems of class-exploitation, the forms and consequences of class-struggles, and the reigning ideologies and their influences on the social practice of the various classes. These concerns must remain central, however large the canvass.

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MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN INDIA

It is, perhaps, true to say that the first major Marxist work on modern India was R.P. Dutt's *India Today* (1940, 1946). R.P. Dutt took Marx's articles of 1853 as his starting point and made extensive use of the grievances against British rule in the economic and political spheres raised by nationalist spokesmen, from Dadabhai Naoroji onwards, to draw a detailed picture of Britain's exploitation of India. The book then gave a narrative of the National Movement, in which its bourgeois leadership, including Mahatma Gandhi, was heavily criticized for its acts of omission and commission, its readiness to compromise with British imperialism and failure to mobilize the masses even when opportunity beckoned. While some of RP Dutt's formulations need to be reviewed, the importance of the work as an ideological weapon for Indian Communists cannot be underestimated. Moreover it corrected the CPI's tilt towards the Pakistan demand in the most persuasive manner.

S.A. Dange's *India from Primitive Communism to Slavery*, 1949, embodied an attempt to show how ancient Indian texts offered evidence to sustain Engel's *Origin of the Family, & c.* It was an exceptionally weak work, but it had the merit of provoking a long review from D.D. Kosambi in which he insisted that Marxists must make use of the critical method in analysing sources and pay proper attention to the historical contexts and archaeological evidence.

In 1952 was published EMS Namboodiripad's *The National Question in Kerala*. It was a careful study of the society of the region, its specific features and the emergence of the national movement in Kerala and the struggles of the exploited and the oppressed. While describing the economy of Kerala as "feudal-colonial", Comrade EMS paid much attention to the caste system, and saw "the struggle for the equality of all castes" as a necessary prelude to "the struggle for economic and political democracy". In many ways it remains a classic work.

A major break-through for the Marxist understanding of ancient Indian history came with D.D. Kosambi's *Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956). Kosambi avowedly proclaimed his allegiance to the Marxist method, but he insisted that the periodization scheme in which slavery preceded feudalism could not apply to India. The

basic mechanism of exploitation in India was really caste, and the constraints it imposed were those of 'helotage' or semi-servility, that was neither slavery nor serfdom. He further argued that feudalism in India began to be established in India from the 4th century AD onwards, marked by a process of de-urbanisation and decline of trade, rather than by the rise of serfdom. Kosambi envisioned two processes, 'Feudalism from above' and 'Feudalism from Below', which really described the processes of political formation. Kosambi's work was marked by a direct use of sources and much insightful observation, though a number of suggestions by him (like absence of the plough in the Indus Civilization) have not been justified by later research. He tended to stress the role of religion as a factor that moderated the intensity of class struggle in ancient India, and perhaps assumed far too much of deliberate design in the role of Brahmans in forming (as distinct from theoretically codifying) the caste system.

Kosambi's work was followed by that of R.S. Sharma, whose early major works *Sudras in Ancient India* (1958) and *Indian Feudalism* (1965) carried forward Kosambi's work. The first book is mainly descriptive but contains much material relevant for a Marxist analysis of the caste system. The other work treats Indian feudalism, in the footsteps of Kosambi (and Sweezy) essentially as a system of production for use, and so marked by a decline of towns and trade. But he also collects data to suggest constraints on peasant movement making the peasants akin to semi-serfs. Finally, more than Kosambi he searches for peasant uprisings and finds one in that of Kaivartas in Bengal. In subsequent publications he both elaborated and defended his position. B.N.S. Yadava, D.N. Jha and K.M. Shrimali, and others have generally followed his main theses on feudalism in their work, while Suvira Jaiswal in a collection of essays, entitled *Caste, Origins, Functions and Dimensions of Change* (1998) has important insights on the caste system's early history.

Debiprasad Chattopadhyay attempted a study of ancient Indian philosophy from a Marxist point of view in a well-known work *Loṅyāta: A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (1959). Here the effort to relate particular religious beliefs to particular historical situations, like 'mother-right' to pre-hunting societies (were there ever such communities, since human beings had always scavenged or hunted before the rise of agriculture?) may not always be convincing, but the

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study remains a pioneering work of great importance.

Irfan Habib's *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963; revised 1999) quarried the rich documentary material available for the period in an effort to establish the main methods of surplus-extraction and the main features of class structure. He concluded that the main exploiting class was the ruling nobility; that the *zamindars* stood forth as junior co-sharers, the peasantry was highly differentiated, with the village community as an instrument of sub-exploitation; and finally that the caste system ensured the presence of a large population of landless labour. The surplus entered circulation in the form of commodities; and so the 'natural' economy was confined to subsistence needs within the village. The pressure of revenue led to an agrarian crisis, which generated peasant revolts. These last often came under zamindar leadership, or assumed a religious garb. Such a picture was closer to Marx's Asiatic Mode with allowance made for commodity production, and limited landed property, and the existence of class struggle in one form or another. What such a mode should be called is open to question. (Here it may be useful to read the essays in D.N. Gupta (ed.), *Changing Modes of Production in India*, 1995: it has a useful Bibliography as well.)

Marxist historians have been greatly interested in the economic impact of colonialism. Bipan Chandra comprehensively examined the early nationalist critiques of British economic exploitation of India in a magisterial work, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1966). He, along with Tapan Raychaudhuri, engaged in a significant debate with Morris D. Morris, the US scholar who denied that any process of de-industrialisation had taken place. Amiya K. Bagchi later on studied the process in Eastern India (essays now collected in his *Colonialism and Indian Economy*, 2010). As for the Tribute, or drain of wealth from India to Britain, Utsa Patnaik and Amiya Bagchi (the latter's work summed up in his *Perilous Passage*, 2006), have made important theoretical and statistical contributions towards understanding its scale and consequences. B.B. Chaudhuri's *Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal, 1757-1900* (1964) is a comprehensive study of the impact of colonialism on the agriculture of an important region. (See also Irfan Habib, *Indian Economy under Colonialism* (1858-1914) in the People's History of India series.)

The National Movement has received much attention from

Marxist historians, and it is not possible here to survey their studies of its various phases and regional forms. For a narrative that takes into consideration various aspects of interest to Marxists one may mention Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India (1885-1947)*, pub. 1983. E.M.S. Namboodiripad's *History of the Freedom Struggle* (1986) is a major effort after R.P. Dutt's *India Today*, of forty years earlier, to survey the entire history of the National Movement and appraise the tactics and strategy of its leadership.

There has been another aspect of the work of Marxist historians, which needs to be mentioned. This is the defence of the scientific method and resistance to communal and chauvinistic distortions of History. Here strictly professional scholars as well as liberal historians are often on the same side as we are. While the doyen of Marxist historians, Professor R.S. Sharma, has been a leading figure in this struggle, Professor Romila Thapar through her writings has made a signal contribution to the presentation of a rational approach to our history. The role of the Indian History Congress also deserves to be recognized. The struggle is not only important for the political reason that communalism has to be opposed at all levels, but for the equally valid reason that the Marxist approach cannot flourish without History being investigated on rigorously scientific lines.

There are various spheres in which Marxists are in debate with opposing ways of perceiving history. A critique of some of the rival schools and the issues on which the debate has been (or should be) joined are discussed in the article 'Economics and the Historians', already published in the *Social Scientist*.

SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS OF INDIAN HISTORY

These problems are here identified from the point of view of the current political and ideological work of the Party.

The first problem is that of **Caste**. Today casteism is undergoing an ideological revival. While in the case of the depressed and other backward castes there is some justification for such forms of assertion as building imaginary caste histories, such assertion is also present in other castes. For instance Banyas in northern India have built up a "history" of Raja Agrasen and put up his equestrian statues in many towns. It is important, therefore, that while contesting such imaginary

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histories Marxists should be able to present a cogent historical perception of the caste system.

It is important to stress that the caste system is not simply an extension of a natural division of labour: it is a mechanism of exploitation of the toiling people, who are kept mutually isolated and hierarchically differentiated so as to remain divided and disunited. Just like gender inequality, the caste system is not linked to any particular mode of production but has subsisted under different modes of production in India. The main beneficiaries have not been the Brahman priests, who in time became its codifiers and interpreters, but the ruling classes to whatever ethnic group religion or caste they belonged. There is no proof that Buddhism in actual practice offered any obstacle to the observance of caste customs and identities in worldly life. This is largely true of Islam as well, where theological disavowals of caste are mainly a modern phenomenon.

While the problem of caste is confined to India, the question of the **repression of women**, found all over the world, probably since the time class-exploitation first began, has not received as much attention as it needs from Marxist historians. The discussion seems to have been confined most generally to the origins of patriarchy in prehistory, about which, by the nature of the evidence, little can be said with certainty. The links between gender repression and ideological (or psychological) hegemony of the dominant class over the oppressed classes (men of even the most oppressed classes feel they are masters over women, while women of marginally higher classes still look down upon women of classes below) have not been investigated. In India where the battle for women's full equality with men is so important for the Left Movement, it is necessary to promote interest in women's history as part of the narrative of the exploitative systems of the past and present.

In pre-modern societies **peasant revolts** formed the major form of class struggles; and these have been studied in much detail in China, Russia and Western Europe. But in India, partly for reason of the nature of historical sources, little is known about them. It is only rare that the revolting peasants' specific demands and grievances can be known, as through the remarkable inscriptions set up by peasants and other oppressed communities during their revolt against the Vijayanagara Empire in the 15th century in three districts of

Tamilnadu, most recently studied by Y. Subbarayalu and N. Karashima. In many revolts peasants' participation is established, but often enough caste or religious colouring or ambitions of the leaders from higher groups obscure their class grievances. Even in 1857 where the peasants' role proved so important, their demands are seldom put into rebel proclamations. It is, therefore, a possibility that peasant's class consciousness was generally so much weakened by their caste and religious identities or clan loyalties as even to escape expression. There seems little doubt that attention needs to be paid to the complexities in the formation of class-consciousness among the peasants, leaving apart the role of economic differentiation within peasants, which was also present in pre-colonial societies.

The **National Movement** has to be a major point of focus for us, since many ways of understanding the contemporary reality of India have their roots in how that movement is interpreted. From at least the early 1920s, the Communists began to state their positions on actions of the nationalist leadership, and one way to look at the National Movement is to view it in the light of those contemporary critiques. One must, however, remember that the Party was small until after 1939, and its experience and influence were both limited. Moreover, the international guidance, mainly through the Comintern, often changed stances. Lenin apparently had a far more favourable view of possible alliance with bourgeois nationalism than had M.N. Roy. Stalin's declaration that the positive phase of bourgeois nationalism like the Kemalist revolution was over, also exerted considerable influence on Communists' perception of the role of the nationalist leadership. In hindsight it is possible to argue that for the success of the anti-colonial struggle, a multi-class alliance was always necessary; and much rested perhaps not so much on the necessity of such an alliance as on the mutual concessions among the antagonistic classes that such an alliance required. There is also the allowance that has to be made for levels of mass consciousness. The position in this respect after World War II was quite different from that prevailing twenty-seven years earlier, after World War I. Gandhi's 'charisma', of which EMS speaks, essentially came from decades of hard work and his 'constructive' programme among the poor, not just from successful public relations. Without overlooking strategic and tactical errors, such as the Quit-India movement of 1942, we may still reconstruct a

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history of the National Movement, as may enable us to use its legacy in speaking up for safeguarding India's independence and for commitment to the fundamental promises made to the Indian people in the Karachi Resolution of 1931.

It needs to be clarified that, owing to the very nature of the issues being debated, some of the points raised here are largely tentative, and deal with matters to be investigated rather than with conclusions already reached through historical work by Marxists.