

# A Review of the Marxist Approach to the Study of Politics in India

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**Abstract – In light of their early affiliation with and later rejection of communism, Marxism and nationalism, they have often been reduced to representing an idealistic anti-Marxist strand of the Indian left of the immediate pre-independence and post-independence era. However, their case for radical democracy can and should be revised. Not only does their work run parallel to some important trends within the history of the European left and thus contributes to the history of left thinking in the early to mid-20th century, it may also have a lasting impact. In particular, the ideas they developed present a viable alternative to the descent of the Indian left into a one-sided politics of caste and provide a timely argument for a left-liberal discourse politics.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The movement for independence of India is one of the biggest mass movements in the history of the world. It saw the participation of wide sections of people under the leadership of the Indian National Congress. While the beginning of the Indian national movement is variously traced, a major consensus being the consideration of the revolt of 1857 as the first collective moment, the movement was given its mass appeal and national character under the leadership of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

The Indian national movement has been studied widely from many different perspectives. As students of social science we are aware that what we read as history depends a lot on who writes it. Thus we have apologists of colonial rule in India who interpret the Indian freedom struggle as a product of the needs of various elite groups of India to stage a „mock battle“, when in reality there was no basic contradiction between interests of Indian people and colonial rulers. The nationalist writers see it as a movement of the Indian people which emerged and strengthened as a result of growing awareness among people about the essentially exploitative character of colonialism. Similarly, we have a Marxist interpretation of the Indian national movement too, coming from a particular world view of Marxist ideas about economic class contradictions and perceptions of history.

The subject matter of this unit is how the Indian national movement is interpreted by Marxist historiographers of India. But before going to the specific understanding of Indian nationalism by

Marxists, we shall briefly attempt to understand the relation of classical Marxist thought to the idea of nationalism. In the next section, we would discuss some major contributions to the Marxist historiography of Indian national movement.

M.N. Roy<sup>1</sup> and R. Palm Dutt<sup>2</sup> were the first Indian scholars who attempted a Marxist analysis of Indian politics. Both Roy and Dutt tried to relate the political structure and movements to the structures at the economic level. They considered political process as a part of dynamic totality. Politics was not considered by both Roy and Dutt a totally autonomous process involving merely political ideology and important political personalities. Sudipto Kaviraj, while commenting on a contributions of Roy and Dutt, writes : "There was a richer sensitivity about the non-political layers of the milieu in which politics goes on. Also there was a systemic understanding of history, Looking at history not just as a random collection of unrelated and largely inexplicable events, but as a total sequence of socio-economic systems."<sup>3</sup> Thus, both Dutt and Roy emphasize the intermingling of the economic and the political process.

Dutt observed that imperialism disturbed the normal process of transition from feudalism to capitalism in India. Imperialism retarded economic development and stalemated and complicated the process of transition.<sup>4</sup> This process has also been referred to as de-industrialization by Daniel Thorner.<sup>5</sup> Dutt was also alive to the contradictory character of the process of transition.<sup>6</sup> In Kaviraj's opinion Dutt was a Marxist thinker of higher order than M.N. Roy. Roy was against analysis extremist whom he called reactionary and he labelled the moderates a

sprogressive.<sup>7</sup> However, the application of the Marxist method by both Dutt and Roy was not free of a political mindset. Both, however, prefaced the application of the Marxist method to Indian politics. Later on Nehru, J. Prakash Narian and Narendra Dev adopted a modified Marxist analysis to understand the course of Indian history and politics.<sup>8</sup>

The academic Marxist framework came much later. Kaviraj observes that political analysis from the Marxist point of view is clustered around three different paradigms.<sup>9</sup> These paradigms provide a ... radically different understanding of the class character of the Indian state, of the bourgeoisie and of the possibilities of politics. Also Marxist theory of highly differentiated both at the political and the academic levels as reflected in the various Marxist parties and groups on the one hand, and in the writings of the orthodox and the neo-Marxists in academics, on the other. Marxism in social science studies has been used both in terms of the Marxist frame in toto, and in parts, eclectically.<sup>10</sup>

The word 'Marxist' was unknown in Marx's own time. Once Marx said "All I know is that I am not a Marxist."<sup>11</sup> Marxism is a whole worldwide, a comprehensive theory of evolution embracing both nature and human society. Marx himself conceived his theoretical work primarily as a critique of political economy from the standpoint of the revolutionary proletariat, and as a materialist conception of history. This conception was developed in conscious opposition to the subjective-idealist standpoint. As such Marx shows that the state and property are a reflection of real conditions. Some of these Marxist conceptions are being challenged and revised by non-dogmatic Marxists such as P. Sraffa, J. Robinson, Maurice Dobb and Paul Baran, who have provided a Marxist critique of political economy.<sup>12</sup>

## MARXISM AND NATIONALISM

Marxism as a theoretical framework of studying societies emphasises on the material relations of production and describes various historical epochs in terms of its major contradictions based on the relations of production, called the class contradictions. Thus, within Marxist thought, the prime identity of a person is his or her class identity. As the hopes of Marx and Engels were fixed on class struggle, they did not put much emphasis on the issue of nationalism which proposes to unite people across class divisions, and blunts class consciousness.

But they could not totally ignore the historical events of the time, and interpreted various nationalist movements within Europe. While recognizing the fact that nationalist movements are mostly organized by bourgeois classes, they argued that it is a necessary step in the path towards communism, as bourgeois

nationalism is the harbinger of capitalism in feudal societies.

Marx and Engels, however, did not presume that the historically progressive nature of capitalism in relation to feudalism would automatically justify support for every national movement. Rather, they emphasised the need to politically assess the national movements in each context, to decide whether they are worthy of support or not. Thus, Marx and Engels opposed the national movement of the Slavic people, of the Serbs, Croats and Czechs, during the 1848 revolutions of Europe, arguing that these forces were counter-revolutionary for a communistic social change.

Further, their support to the nationalist movements, wherever existed, was on a strategic ground rather than on any intrinsic value that they thought to be existing in national mobilizations. Rather they believed that with the expansion of capitalism, both in Europe and around the world, the significance of nation-states and movements for national independence would be lessened. The real eradication of national oppression, according to Marx and Engels, is possible not through nationalism, but only through socialism.

In this context, the writings of Karl Marx on the 'Asiatic mode of production', and his view that despite its coercive nature, a progressive role was played by colonial rule to help India break out of its age-old stagnant village societies is crucial (Thorner 1966).

Both Marx and Engels, however, at a later stage talk about the important role played by bourgeois nationalist revolutions to bring in democratic freedoms, where a socialist revolution was not yet possible.

To deal with the national question, Soviet communist Vladimir Lenin said that we need to make a clear distinction between two periods of capitalism. The first period is a period of waning feudalism and absolutism when bourgeois democratic society and state institutions are formed. According to Lenin, during this period, the national movements are mass movements that draw all classes of the population into politics. The second period is more complex. In the second period, the capitalist state is fully formed, and is characterized by long-established constitutional regimes. This phase is also characterized by a high level of antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeois classes.

According to Lenin, to take a decision on whether to lend support to a nationalist movement or not, the second period poses more difficult challenges for a Marxist. He points out certain important questions that one must try to seek answers to, before taking any course of action. Firstly, there is a need to see

whether the people asking for nationality rights are really oppressed. Secondly, we need to ask whether a consciousness of being a nation has been formed among those who are oppressed. The existence of such a consciousness shows the actual existence of a nation. Thirdly, and most importantly, socialists must ask whether the support to such a nationalist movement would advance the interests of the working class. While asking this question, Lenin pointed out, that the leadership of a nationalist movement is invariably bourgeois at the beginning; but such oppressed bourgeois leadership, working for their own minority interest, also do have a general democratic content directed against oppression. He suggested that the *unconditional* support of the Marxists towards nationalist movements is only for this specific democratic content.

### **INTERNAL CRITICISM AND LATER MARXIST DEVELOPMENTS**

The conventional Marxist historiography of the national movement of India, which followed a narrow class approach and economic determinism, was criticised by some later set of historians like SN Mukherjee, Sumit Sarkar and Bipan Chandra. SN Mukherjee argued that Indian nationalism was a complex process with multiple layers and meanings, and cannot be understood by a reductionist class analysis. He pointed out the importance of caste as a crucial factor along with that of class, and showed that traditional languages of politics was simultaneously used with the modern ones, in organizing the national movement of India. (Bandyopadhyay 2004) Sumit Sarkar, another Marxist who is critical of Dutt's paradigm discussed above, termed it as a simplistic version of Marxian class-approach, in his book *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (1973). While Dutt talked about the dominance of „big bourgeoisie“ in the moderate phase and the dominance of „urban petty bourgeoisie“ in the extremist phase of the national movement, Sarkar showed that a clear class distinction between the two phases is difficult to establish, and was clearly non-existent at the leadership level. He further suggests that Dutt's form of Marxist interpretation has the defect of „assuming too direct or crude an economic motivation for political action and ideals“ (Sarkar 1973, 1978). In contrast Sarkar brings into fore the Gramscian categories of „traditional“ and „organic“ intellectuals to explain the leadership of the national movement in India. According to Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist activist and thinker, the „organic“ intellectuals are those who are in direct link with the people who they lead, as they themselves directly participate in the production process. A „traditional“ intellectual is, on the other hand, not directly connected either to the production process or the people who they lead, but become leaders of certain classes by ideologically taking up the responsibility of those

classes. Sarkar showed that the Indian nationalist leaders were „traditional“ intellectuals rather than „organic“ intellectuals, and despite coming mostly from the traditional learned classes, totally unconnected from the post 1850s commercial or industrial bourgeoisie in the country, were able to lead the bourgeoisie ideologically. These „traditional“ intellectuals, despite not having the bourgeois social background personally, helped push the capitalist development of the country.

### **MARXISM AND THE STUDY OF INDIAN POLITY**

A macro-structural analysis of Indian society in general and of Indian politics in particular in the early years of post-independence period was taken up by Charles Bettelheim using the orthodox Marxist framework with the help of concepts such as bourgeoisie, petty bourgeoisie, proletariat, economic base and superstructure, public and private sector, surplus value etc.<sup>13</sup> With regard to relation between state power and people two main points are highlighted by Bettelheim. Firstly the state is an instrument of repression and bureaucratic control, the form which the repression and control takes depends on class tensions, the level of development of productive forces, the standard of education, and the social conscience of different classes. The state bureaucracy and its employees also affect the functioning of the state. Since the Indian state inherited a colonial legacy, it essentially remained repressive, bureaucratic and democratic. Secondly, after independence of the state organizations were not remodelled by the new government. Minor reforms could not negate the colonial legacy. Hence, a tendency to imitate traditional forms of self-government.<sup>14</sup>

Bettelheim is also critical of the functioning of India's political parties as they adopted a more Or less European system of party model. He considers the Congress party as 'centre-left-wing-party', and further left are the socialist and communist parties, and further there are various conservative parties and personalities. However, such ideological cleavages and divides in relation to India's political Parties are not clearly discernible. Such a political divide hides the Peculiar Character of Indian political life. It conceals many feudal and semi-feudal economic and social relationships. The political parties in India must tackle the problems of state, economic control, and the agrarian problems. Again it may be added that the political scene in India has changed a lot since the late 1960's. Many of the premises and conclusions given in Betelheim's analysis need to be reformulated in the light of vastly varying regional politics and political permutations and combinations at the centre.

Recent changes in India's political economy negate Bettelheim's hypothesis about the state capitalism and centralization of economic power in the Indian state. Liberalization of the economy during the last five years in particular not only has changed the nature and meaning of India's five year plans; it has also changed considerably the character of Indian state and ideological basis of Indian politics. Public sector has become extremely weak and multinationals are substituting them. Trade unionism has become somewhat weak. Private sector is no more a polluting arena of employment. A revivalistic politics has also prospered along with liberalization of economy and weakening of the state.

In a significant essay on politics *The Dialectic: of Science and Revolution in Karl Marx*, Randhir Singh<sup>15</sup> observes that the Marxian explanation of politics requires to illuminate the character of the capitalist system as a whole in all its structured interconnections and movements-the whole through the parts, and the parts having the Stamp of the whole. This is true about the study of any social formation. Thus, Marxian 'explanation seeks a search for dialectical knowledge about politics. Marx looks at politics or the realm of the Political, within the Objective conditions structurally constituted by the prevalent mode of production at particular junction in the history of a society. However, Marx's treatment of politics remained largely untheorized by him.<sup>16</sup>

Thus according to Marxian perspective, there is no autonomy of politics. However, there is a relative autonomy of the state in a particular historical situation. But the state is not autonomous from the socio-economic structure of a class-divide society which it essentially serves,<sup>17</sup>. Randhir Singh refers to Hall<sup>18</sup> and Draper<sup>19</sup> appreciatively, and mentions that state always remains the organizer of society in the interest of the class structure as a whole. Randhir Singh out rightly rejects the non-economic or non-material or the liberal perspective about politics, because he considers politics as a phenomenon emanating from class structure and class struggle. But for Marx, politics has primacy' as was a revolutionary. 'Marx knew very well that in the absence of revolutionary politics' the structural base of society could not be changed, and he also professed that all politics will remain super structural in its essential character and outcome. Randhir Singh 'writes: "This is the base area, determined and determining choice in politics within which other more or less choices occur."<sup>20</sup> Such is the dialectics of the economy politics in the social science of Karl Marx. Thus, 'the centrality of politics is seen as revolution. The political as a whole is in the realm of the contingent, or historical balance, of social forces. The 'political' is a realm of real choices and possibilities, and hence it is devoid of certainties and predictabilities.<sup>21</sup>

## MARXISM AND THE INDIAN STATE

For an exposition of the Marxian perspective on the understanding of politics in India a number of studies of power politics and political parties vis-a-vis the Indian state and class structure have surfaced in the post-independence period.<sup>22</sup> The nature of the Indian state is double-edged because on the one hand its democratic institutions motivate the downtrodden to participate in the electoral process, but on the other hand, the elected government cannot bring about their emancipation from poverty and de-humanization. The fact is that bourgeoisie political parties and supported by the lowest sections of Indian society, and this is an irony and contradiction of the Indian political System. Contradictory coexistence of democracy and capitalism clearly comes out when one looks at the Indian political situation today.<sup>23</sup>

In recently edited four volumes T.V. Satyamurthy analyses the political dynamics of contemporary Indian State, the Indian state's economic policies, India as a civil society with special reference to political and economic demands of the mass of the Indian people, and class formation and political transformation in India.<sup>24</sup> The phenomenon of political transformation is analysed in the various essays included in these volumes in terms of the social and cultural divisions that have surfaced and the resilience of the Indian political system to overcome fragmentation and to achieve common political and economic goals. The main thrust of these volumes is to highlight the divergence between the political discourse of the ruling power elite and that of the mass of the population opposed to them.

Several political movements have been discussed which are against the increasing hegemony of the Indian state and the Congress party. The coercive character of state in particular is the focal theme of the four volumes. Having implications for greater participation of the people is power politics in India. Most of the studies highlight on the intensification of political contradictions and conflicts particularly in the post-emergency period.

It is argued that the so-called mainstream political science was concerned with the formal structures and the prescribed ways and traditional social categories. Satyamurthy observes that it ignored the dynamic ways in which castes were becoming transformed and the crucial role played by existing and rapidly emerging new classes.<sup>25</sup> Kothari the mainstream Indian political scientist practiced the conceptual and methodological straitjacket using western political science and comparative politics and development studies. By responding to the 1975-77 emergency, by radically altering his essentially structural-functional perspective, and recasting his approach to Indian politics, Rajni

Kothari highlighted the relationship between the state and democratic civil society.<sup>27</sup>

In support of the Marxian perspective, Satyamurthy argues that in contrast to bourgeoisie, mainstream political theory Marxism Offers analytical tools appropriate for an understanding of rates and degrees of change under the impact of dynamic forces.<sup>28</sup>. However, Satyamurthy criticizes the Indian academic Marxist political scientists for suffering from vulgar reductionism and formalistic jargonism and for failure to generate new insights. Thus, according to Satyamurthy, the mainstream political science has failed to recognize the ongoing dialectics between contradictory social and economic forces underlying political phenomenon, and the academic Marxist political science suffers from its general unwillingness to disentangle the dialectical method from the rigid orthodoxies of the fractured Indian communist movement.

## CONCLUSION

Like most other events of the social and political world, the interpretations of the Indian national movement are also not without contestations. In this unit, we studied just one way of looking at the freedom struggle of India. India being a plural society, and people's participation in the national movement influenced by their social-cultural and economic contexts, no matter which strand of the movement they were active in, no historiographical attempt to paint a complete and general picture of the national movement is ever completely successful. For a nuanced understanding of an event like the Indian national movement, we have to keep our minds open to acknowledge the interplay of various forms of struggle and resistance, with varied social backgrounds and differences in paths and particular goals, working at the same time, which come to be known as the Indian national movement.

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