

Indology and Marxist Hermeneutics

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1. Introduction

Although Indian civilization has been one of the most extensively researched fields in the Western Humanities departments, it remains one of the most misinterpreted subjects. Scholars have applied various theories and methods to study this ancient field. However, often their analyses and interpretations fail to do justice to this complex tradition. In the name of “scientific objectivity”, they have often applied their own subjective bias. In this paper, I endeavor to demonstrate how the theories of Marx have misinterpreted Indian culture.

2. Foundations of Marxism

Many of the earliest researchers to venture into Indology were Marxist historians. For instance, from the 1850s on, Karl Marx carefully studied India as a colonial country where diverse forms and methods of colonial rule had been practiced. He also took interest in India because she still retained, to a certain degree, relations peculiar to primitive communal society (Marx 2001). He also studied the freedom struggle of India (Marx 1986). The first major Indian scholar to apply the Marxist theories to Indology was D. D. Kosambi (Kosambi 1956). His study of Indian culture marked the first major application of Marxism among the Indian scholars (Kosambi 1962). He was one of the co-founders of the Mecca of Indian Marxists, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Let us examine how Marxist scholars have applied their ideology to Indology.

Whereas the foundation of Marxism is materialism, in Indic traditions religion is a fundamental ideology of every sphere of life, sociology, culture, politics, economics and even family life. Therefore, any scholar based solely on Marxism can hardly study a tradition rooted in religion, especially if one does not take the Paul Ricoeur approach. Marx was an atheist, a rationalist and is claimed to be a liberator of the human race from the opium of the religion, its occult superstitious spell, as well as its fear of other worldly forces and exploitative alliance with the economic establishment (Parameswaran 1987). He said: “The imaginary flowers of religion adorn man’s chains. Man must throw off the flowers, and also the chains.” (Marx 1948)

Marx’s observations on religion should be understood in the context in which he made them. From his various writings, it can be clearly seen that he had made a study only of the Semitic religions, with which he had ample contact and opportunity to study. In the book “K. Marx and F. Engels on Religion (Second Impression Foreign Language Publishing House, Moscow)”, one will find the authors giving copious references to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, but there is not a single reference to Hinduism and only a casual, passing reference to Buddhism. Whatever knowledge Marx had about Hinduism and Buddhism was not the result of his original study, but he seems to have taken as his starting point, the descriptive elements in Hegel’s interpretation of the Indian civilization. Hegel saw in the ideology of the Hindu culture, a pantheism of ‘Imagination’ expressed in the universal deification of all finite existence and degradation of the Divine, a deprivation of man of personality and freedom. Marx too similarly speaks of ‘murder itself (being) a religious rite in Hinduism – a brutalizing worship of nature (Habib 1983).

Interestingly, Hegel himself had flawed understanding of the history of Indian culture and religion. He had only a limited number of authoritative sources at his disposal; and he was not a person with an open mind, capable of sympathizing with all alien ways of thinking with loving understanding, but was an armchair scholar, inclined to abstractions, interpreting the outside world according to his pre-conceived pattern. Therefore, whatever he was able to say about India turned out to be extremely inadequate, resulting in a distorted picture. Although his portrayal of India had some well-observed details, it shows that he had ventured upon a task, for the fulfillment of which he had not possessed the pre-requisites (Glaser 1973).

Marx opposed religion because he believed that religion was contrasting to science and that it hindered the scientific progress. According to him, “history of religion is the history of fight against the development of scientific thought.” This charge may be true of medieval Christianity but the case is entirely different when it comes to Indian religions. In India, science and religion have always co-existed under one generic name Vidya, with a subtle distinction being drawn between ‘Para Vidya’, spiritual knowledge and ‘Apara Vidya’, secular knowledge. Another reason Marx condemned religion was that the institutionalized religions that he knew were organized on a hierarchical basis. Such religions had become closed systems wherein their followers had no right to question or to choose. In contrast, Indic religions are not strictly organized religions and give complete intellectual and theological freedom to their followers. Unfortunately, Marx could not separate religion from priest-craft and therefore attacked religion. Marx studied religion from books which he interpreted according to his understanding of them, and applied his analysis of history to them. Unlike his contemporaries Max Muller and

William Jones, he did not have any knowledge of Sanskrit language and hence could not read the original texts but had to depend on others' interpretations. While the Indic religions are based on direct realization, Marx did not have any such experience or even any contact with anybody having such experience. Based on Judeo-Christian notions, Marx considered religion to be born out of one's helplessness and fear. He considered religion to be a myth promising a better life later on, the alleged reward for sufferings on the earth. In contrast, Indic religions are not based on any fear or helplessness. Hinduism teaches that happiness and immortality are to be realized within one's own itself, not to be found in the after life. According to Radhakrishnan, Marxism has become a faith with its uncritical supporters (Radhakrishnan 1948).

3. Misinterpretations of Marxism

Marxism has developed some historical framework based on European history which is applied to Indian and other cultures inappropriately. This distorted hermeneutic exercise has given them a flawed view of reality. This obsession with fitting into the data to their pre-conceived model led to the ultimate failure of their theories. Marxist scholars have divided the history of India in three major periods: Ancient time, medieval time and modern time. They already have the pre-conceived notions of these three periods and applied them to the Indian history also. Some examples of misinterpretations are as under.

Marxists assert that India never existed as a single political unit and it were Mughal kings and British who united India as a country for the first time. This notion is still popular among post-modern scholars. According to Marx, India and other oriental countries were quite undeveloped in the ancient times. Surprisingly, he turned a blind eye

on some of the huge Indian empires of Maurya, Chalukya, Gupta dynasties who ruled India for over two to three centuries. For instance, the whole Indian subcontinent is described as the field of conquest by the universal monarch (*chakravartikhetra*) in the *Arthashastra* (IX.1). By the fourth century C.E, the prayerful invocation of rivers while bathing enumerated them from all parts of the subcontinent (*Brahmapurana*: 70, 30-35), and the centers of pilgrimage embraced the whole of India (Bhattacharyya 1953).

According to Marxist scholars, in the ancient India, there was no concept of religion. There were superstitions, illusions, ideas of sensual pleasures and begging tendencies in some arbitrary blind faiths. In his Marxist book, “India from Primitive Communism to Slavery”, Shripad Amrit Dange (1949) portrays India as a primitive society. People were barely developed to be able to use bullocks in farming. In the five higher phases of Communism, Krishna is shown to barely reach up to the third level to prove the undeveloped Indian society. Another Marxist scholar Benedetto Croce (1966) mentions that religion, ethics, culture, and marriage institution are products of the disciplined society of modern period and were absent in the ancient India of Vedic period. According to Marx, there was no intellectual element in those faiths. Surprisingly, he completely ignored the works of some of his Western predecessors and contemporaries such as William Jones and Max Muller.

Without adequate knowledge of Sanskrit and other Indian languages Marx and his followers misinterpreted important Vedic terms. For instance, Yajna (the sacrificial rite) is defined in the following way. ‘Ya’ means to gather, ‘J’ means to take birth and ‘Na’ is the suffix added to it. Therefore, *Yajna* is defined as to live together in the tribes and to procreate together in a community. Also *Brahma* is interpreted to mean commune. Based

on these meanings, Marxists have concluded that Vedic people were primitive tribal communities. However, Raimundo Panikkar (1980) has criticized such translation attempts and has opined that only the person who really speaks the language, that is, who is fulfilled in it, can be a genuine translator. Another noted translator of 108 hymns of Rig-Veda asserts that translators are painters rather than photographers and painters make mistakes.

Shripad Amrit Dange (1949) quotes a Sanskrit verse from the Brahman scripture and interprets it in the following way to explain the chronology of ancient times. Before Vedic period, in Satya Yuga, people were in nomadic stage (the word *Charan* shows that). Later in the Treta Yuga of Vedas, they settled in tribes and started community farming, tribal procreation without marriage institution (based on the *Uttishthat* word). After that in the Dwapar Yuga, community farming developed into the agriculture based on possessive rights. Land owners hired slaves and exploited them (based on *Sanjihaan* word). The last era is Kali Yuga which has the most developed machines, industrial development and hence will bring the ultimate comfort and prosperity (based on *Shayaan* word). Thus, preconceived Marxist hermeneutics were applied to ancient Indian history giving rise to distorted portrayal.

Similarly, the sexual relationship is also interpreted in Marxist chronology. A statement from Bheeshma from Mahabharata is quoted to show that the man-woman relation developed in the following chronology. Sankalpa is completely random sexual relations among men and women in the Satya Yuga. Sansparsha is sexual relations except among the same caste men/women in the Treta Yuga of Vedas. Maithun is periodical marriages in the Dwaapar Yuga. Dvandva is modern marriage in which women are given

more conservative role but men are free from any restrictions. Men treat women slavishly in the Kali Yuga. People used to live in the tribes without any notions of family. Human relations such as brother-sister, husband-wife were absent and only form of relation was mother-child.

4. Response to Marxist Misinterpretations

The first work of some importance on ancient Indian history written with a Marxist approach was by Dange (1949). Interestingly, its flawed approach was rejected by another Marxist scholar D. D. Kosambi in these words: “This painfully disappointing work is full of fundamental errors of fact and of reasoning that fill the book from cover to cover with endless confusion.” In Kosambi’s view “Because of the caste system, India had helotage not slavery. Thus Dange’s very title was wrong, for his sources contain neither primitive communism not slavery” (Kosambi 1949). Unfortunately, later scholars including Kosambi either repeated the same flawed hermeneutics of Dange or adopted similar approaches and produced similar defective works. A major problem with the Marxist analysis is the consistent omission of the data that did not fit their theories. One glaring example is their continued ignorance of the textual evidence from the Vedas that indicate a highly advanced society. Some such glimpses from Vedas are as follows.

The farming in the Vedic period was not community based but was based on individual ownership. Everybody was suggested to wear three pieces of weaved cloths. Gold and silver designer-jewelry is mentioned in the Vedas. Also mentioned is manufacturing of ornaments (Griffith 2003: 28). Music and other forms of art seem to be highly developed in the Vedic period (Griffith 2003: 124). The knowledge of eclipses, advanced number system and calendar system also existed in that period (Griffith 2003:

82). Botany and Ayurveda medical system was developed (Griffith 2003: 144). There is mention of around 500 different kinds of flowers which are now extinct. The concept of marriage was present in Vedic period. Relations of brother-sister and husband-wife were present (Griffith 2003: 110). Moreover, there is a discussion whether a widow should marry her brother-in-law. Vedic Sanskrit was highly advanced language, definitely not of nomadic primitive people as mentioned by Marxists. There are 200 words for fire, 400 words for water, 800 verbs for motion and 16000 words for animals. Various kinds of weapons and instruments are mentioned in the Vedas (Griffith 2003: 51).

All the above textual evidences mentioned in the Vedas can be easily verified. However, Marxists were already convinced to prove the undeveloped society in the Vedic ancient India. Two other Marxist books: “*Origin of family, private property and state*” (Engel 1945) and “*Marxism in National Colonial Question*” (Stalin 1935) show the Marxist agenda of distorting and destroying the indigenous history and tradition of a country so that Marxism can be proved to be the superior ideology. In championing the cause of Marxism, they denounce and denigrate anything which glorifies the native culture. This was the strategy based on which Marx and his other followers have written the commentaries on Indian historical traditions. Due to this reason, they have looked at the past with their subjective bias, not dispassionately.

Benedetto Croce (1966) in his book “*Historical Materialism*” mentions that the origin and development of everything is based on materialistic need. Based on this theory, Marxist scholars have deliberately attempted to label every ancient tradition into the categories of materialism. Therefore, the social institutions like Varna system is seen with the lenses of class war and exploitation of lower castes by the higher castes.

Although the historic evidences have proved that the present caste system is the product of British colonization of India in last couple of centuries (Dirks 2001). Similarly, spiritual philosophers such as Shankara are also alleged to misguide the lower class of people with the ideas of devotion and faith to appease the higher class. Marxist approach has tried to establish the socio-economic factor as a mantra to explain every facet of Indian history and culture. The fact that Marxists had become dogmatic and mechanical in their analysis was criticized by D.D. Kosambi, who is regarded as the pioneer among Indian Marxists. Their application of dialectical materialism to the interpretation of Indian culture is grossly mechanical rather than critically discerning (Goyal 2000).

According to the Marxist scholars, Indian history is just a series of successive invasions. But even a cursory study of the several periods proves this observation to be superficial. Another Marxist myth is that Asiatic societies have been unchangeable. However, even from the materialistic perspective, Indian society has had massive changes. For instance, the distinction between the stage of food-gatherers and that of food-producers stands completely shaken by the excavations at Kalibangan where evidence has become available of plough-farming having been known in India as early as 2500 BCE. Similarly, India does not seem to have ever had a classical slave economy in the same sense as Greece and Rome had. Indian economy never depended on large-scale chattel slavery, which according to orthodox Marxism inevitably produced the feudal stage of history. And whatever loose kind of feudalism there may have existed in India, it cannot be said to conform to the orthodox Marxist definition. Similarly, the Varnas in ancient India cannot be identified with the economic classes of Marxism. Indeed, the concept of social class, which is a key component of Marxism, has invited many

theoretical objections, and its application to all periods of history has not always proved fruitful. In fact, there is no adequate evidence available of any conscious class struggle in India (Goyal 2000).

Noted Sanskrit scholar Daniel H. H. Ingalls (1965) had also identified the flawed Marxist hermeneutics applied by Marxist scholar D. D. Kosambi. Ingalls rejected Kosambi's application of the Engels' and Plekhanov's theories of the class origins to Indian art and literature. In the six to seven centuries of India's history from the end of the Gupta dynasty to the coming of Islamic invaders, there arose no new social class of note. In obedience to the theory of Engels, there should not have been any significant art during this period. But those are precisely the greatest periods of art, not only in poetry but in painting, sculpture, architecture and philosophy. Therefore, any foreign hermeneutics cannot be applied to any ancient tradition with a subjective bias. Ingalls concludes that the path to a proper understanding of Sanskrit literature must begin with Sanskrit literature itself. In finding one's way one must seek guidance from the scholars versed in the tradition who can understand and interpret it. If one is finally to condemn any tradition it must not be done by a foreign theory which Indian authors never professed, but by the principles of mood and suggestion which they claimed to follow. After one has in mind clearly what the texts mean and what their authors were seeking to achieve one may go on to compare the general principles of Sanskrit texts with those set forth by Aristotle etc. It is at that point that one may take into account the differences of social structure between ancient India, Greece and modern Europe. Those differences might have played an important role in bringing about the variation of character among

different literatures. But the path of the critique of texts must begin with the texts, not with the theories of society.

5. Conclusion

With particular reference to ancient Indian history and culture, all different aspects of human life – religious, political, social, economical and cultural – should be studied as different facets of one organic reality, each of them studied in its relation with others and not in isolation from each other. Moreover, all human institutions cannot be forced to follow the same line of development everywhere. The laws of social change are by no means as predictable as the laws of physical change. The exclusive emphasis which the Marxist approach places on the means and relations of production is likely to present Indian history and culture in a wrong perspective. For instance, it would tend to eclipse or misrepresent what has been generally regarded as India's peculiar glory and her particular contribution, namely her richly varied religious philosophies.

Religion has, at the great turning points of history, been the chief instrument of ideological revolution. The Marxist denigration of religion as a whole, is therefore, invalid. In view of this, it is indeed difficult to digest such gross generalization such as that the Bhakti movement, which comprised the religious experience and aspirations of a large part of Indian population and which provided a remarkable stimulus to artistic and literary creative activity during almost two millennia, owed its success to the fact that it suited the feudal ideological perfectly and the Gita is no more than a manual for feudal relations.

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