

Marxism

Genesis

By the end of the sixteenth century the factory system was well-established in England. The hand, worker struggled in vain against machine made goods. He was forced to give up his work and enter a factory, as a worker. The new system created a lot of hardships for the workers. They

often worked for sixteen to eighteen hours a day. The textile mills did not have proper conditions of sanitation and health. Outside the factory, these workmen lived in slums and crowded localities. Since most of them had migrated to cities from small rural communities they had lost their roots. The factories separated them apart from their families and a community reducing them to almost cogs in the machine which remaining beyond their control.

The early socialists like Saint Simon, Robert Owen were horrified at these conditions. Marx was one of the most powerful thinkers who understood the havoc which early industrialization had brought about. This is clearly evident in the Communist Manifesto he wrote with Fredrick Engels. He was also keen to transform society on human lines. His search was essentially for a human social order. He brought into light the dilemmas of society working on the principles of profits, competition and laissez-faire. He pointed out that the source of misery and alienation lay in the capitalist system working on these principles.

Tenets of Marxism

The main tenets of Marxism are:

- (i) Dialectical Materialism,
- (ii) Historical Materialism,
- (iii) Class Struggle,
- (iv) Critique of Capitalism,
- (v) Revolution and Dictatorship of the proletariat,
- (vi) Emergence of Classless Society.

(i) Dialectical Materialism

Marx agreed with Hegel that history is a process but disagreed about the nature of the process. While Hegel interpreted human history in terms of the primacy of ideas and consciousness, Marx did so in terms of the primacy of the material forces. According to him, the agents of change are means of production and the mode of production.

Mode of production is the way in which means of production are used. The means are the tools or techniques by, which economic production

takes place. Human labour and organization are also examples of means. The mode is the way in which the ruling classes use their means for their own interest. The mode of production, therefore, includes both relations of production and means of production. The ruling classes use their control over means of production to exercise control over the entire social system. In A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy Marx declared that the history of society is the history of material production and of the contradiction between the material productive forces and the relations of production which arise on their basis. This contradiction is resolved through class struggle.

Marx shared with Hegel the idea that history is the working out of the dialectical relationship. Hegel's theory of dialectics remained confined to the realm of ideas only Karl Marx stressed the role of economic factors in the process of dialectics. To Marx, it is the working out of the tension between nature and man, successive social formations and competing social classes. Dialectics is a process which characterises historical change in which at any point of time one set of forces can be identified as thesis, another as , anti-thesis and the third one as the synthesis. A thesis (such as feudalism) is confronted by antithesis (such as capitalism), which is transferred to the next phase of development, through class action, to socialism (synthesis). The synthesis combines the best characteristic of both thesis and antithesis. Each stage in the process is transitional and its emergence pre-supposes that in due course it will give place to another.

(ii) Historical Materialism

It is the application of dialectical materialism to society. Like Hegel, Marx also made history all embracing context of human activity. But following Feuerbach. Marx argued that man is constituted by his desires, his work and the economic system of which he is a part. For him economic activity determines the basis of all other activities. The political system juridical ideas and moral concepts are all derived from the way in which economic activity is structured. Social existence is essentially a series of production relations corresponding to

definite mode of production. In Critique of Political Economy Marx distinguished between economic base (production relation) and the super-structure (culture, politics, philosophy, literature).

History, according to Marx, is a record of the self-development of productive forces. Each state is characterized by social formation which has its own distinct mode of production. When one social framework is replaced by another, one definite mode of production is replaced by another. In the sequence of these social frameworks, there are the primitive society, the slave society, the feudal society, the bourgeoisie and finally the classless society of the future. This will be the culmination of human progress and lead to man's complete emancipation from exploitation of man by man. Thus, with change in mode of production, social framework itself changed in the process and a new social formation comes into existence. It objectively rated to be superior to the earlier social formation because brings relations of production in line with change in forces of production.

(iii) Class Struggle

Marx emphasizes the existence of permanent condition of social conflict between economic classes (haves and have-nots). The changes in technology and specialization of functions lead to differences in status, wealth and political power. New economic classes emerge. Some own means of production, others live by them. Very soon there is an inevitable conflict between these two antagonistic classes. Marx and Engels wrote in the Communist Manifesto "All hitherto history is the history of class struggles the conflict is there because those, who own the means of production, exploit the workers poor economic condition to their own advantage. They give minimum possible wages to the workers and extract maximum possible labour. In the capitalist society the society comes to be divided into two antagonistic classes, viz. 'bourgeoisie or those who own property and the proletariat' or those who do not own any property but are much larger in number and yet, are perpetually exploited by the bourgeoisie. In course of time, the conflict becomes intense because the workers live below the level of subsistence

level. They are unable to buy goods, which the industrial system produces.

The state at a particular time is in the hands of the economically dominant class. Political power is the function of economic power. As economic power shuffles from feudal class to the bourgeoisie, the system of kingship gives way to the representative democracy which is controlled by entrepreneurs. The ideology of divine right of kings gives place to modern liberalism. The ideology is used to consolidate the domination of the dominant class on the structure of power, specially law, police and judicial apparatus. The state becomes an instrument in the hands of the economically dominant class to exploit, the working class.

(iv) Critique of Capitalism

The most enduring part of what Mill wrote specially in Das Capital was his critique of capitalism. Any other writer in its moral fervour and systematic analysis has not surpassed it. He argued that the basic contradiction in the capitalist system is that while, on the one hand, it increases interdependence of workers as a result of the development of factory system, on the other, it leads to concentration of economic power in the hands of private interests. Thus, while the organization of production is social, the distribution is private. Marx was convinced that the decline of capitalism is inevitable. What distinguishes his thought from his predecessors' is precisely the belief in the dialectical process of history.

Another drawback of the capitalist society is that it generates a pattern of immense inequality. An overwhelming majority of people suffer from poverty and want. The capitalist system is based on the toil of the workers. And yet, they are the worst victims. They are also those, who receive much less of what they produce. Some live in luxury by making others live in poverty. The only way of determining value of a thing was by calculating the labour necessary to produce it. The worker, and not the capitalist, produces the value and yet he is deprived of his share and is paid minimal wages. The capitalist takes the surplus

away from the worker. Therefore, the difference between the production value and the exchange value becomes 'surplus value' which according to Marx becomes a vehicle of exploitation of workers by the capitalists. The capitalists too, compete with each other in a headlong pursuit of profit.

One feature of capitalism is that it brings workers together and creates a sense of community in them. In the feudal period the workers lived in isolated circumstances. Goods were produced privately. A modern factory brings them together and creates class consciousness in them, finally paving way for class action leading to revolution. Initially, Marx thought that the revolution would be violent. But later, specially, after 1848, he modified his views to incorporate, the possibility of other roads to revolution. Transition to socialism would vary according to socio- economic conditions of a particular country. Marx cited the example of England where transition to socialism might be more peaceful.

The fundamental contradiction of capitalism is that while it has led to worker interdependency through the factory system, it has failed to distribute wealth in the interest of all. The socialization of the means of production cannot be combined with a system of private profit. This contradiction is best understood in the context of the characteristics of both feudalism and socialism.

(v) Revolution and Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Once the socialist revolution takes place, the power passes into the hands of the proletariat and bourgeoisie, democracy is replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is under this dictatorship that a true democracy is established for it is essentially a government of an overwhelming majority of the working class against the minority of exploiters. The proletariat would seize power to liquidate the last remnants of the bourgeoisie order by establishing state control of all means of production and by making all citizens equal participants in the new social framework.

(vi) Emergence of Classless Society

Once, the bourgeoisie is completely liquidated,

the state would wither away and a new society will be ushered in, in which there will be no state, no classes. In such a society each would contribute according to his capacity and receive according to his needs. Marx believed that the new man would naturally and spontaneously identify his own interests with the general interest in society. It must be mentioned here that beyond these Utopian ideas Marx says very little about the future society. His main concern was to produce a powerful critique of the capitalist system. He focussed our attention on the idea that the source of servitude and alienation lay in the capitalist system. Man is both an object exploited by the system and a subject who becomes conscious of his plight and servitude, and revolts against the system as it leads to monopoly capitalism, inequality, class struggle and pauperization of the masses.

Limitations of Marxism

Marx, however, did not adequately grasp the significance of nationalist and patriotic sentiments. His doctrine, in this sense, was ethnocentric. He understood some of the deeper moral issues of capitalist society. He understood classes and their conflict but had no adequate idea of other societies and their peculiar institutions and practices. These institutions and practices often cut across class solidarity. He also underestimated the capacity of capitalism to change itself. Most of the industrialised nations in the west have tended to domesticate conflict rather than develop on the lines Marx prophesied. In some of these democracies, the state itself has tended to intervene in favour of the least advantaged. In another sense, his prophecy has not come true. Marx believed that revolutions will come in the most advanced capitalist countries, whereas, in fact, they have been caused in the backward, under-developed capitalist societies.

In characterizing the state as an instrument of class domination, Marx also ignored that no state can survive for long unless it rises above the particular interests and works for wider interests of society. The state alone provides a framework for better and organized living. It alone reconciles our claims and counter-claims. In any efficiently functioning system, the particular interest must be

limited by some consideration of public good. Without it the system would disintegrate. The regulation of special interest is one of the most important functions of the state activity. In fact, Marxism did not have a theory of state. Lenin had to invent one in order to create a framework of order in Russia. Indeed, capitalist system was bad enough. And it was only with the help of political power that it could be changed, modified or replaced. It is the state, alone which can stand for the general good. A capitalist state might be replaced by a proletarian one, but all the same we do require a state in the sense of machinery entrusted with the task of coordination in society.

Lenin and Mao

The country where the first Marxist revolution took place was Russia and the ideological leader was V.I. Lenin (1870-1924). In a pamphlet *What is to be done?* (1902), Lenin repudiated the doctrine of the inevitable decline of capitalism. Marx had believed that changes in economic system would, automatically lead to changes in the super-structure of society and politics. He had declared that while handmill gives us a feudal society, the steel mill gives us a capitalist one. Lenin did not accept this doctrine. According to him, while workers were capable of trade union consciousness, they did not have the urge to develop a revolutionary agency helping them to have it. In the absence of the agency all that the workers wanted was an increase in wages through the mechanism of tradeunion activity. The revolutionary consciousness could only be brought about by a class of professional revolutionaries, the avant garde who operate from without. The class of professional revolutionaries would find its expression in the party. He, therefore, substituted active intervention of a highly disciplined party for objective forces of Marxian history.

Lenin also tried to explain why socialist revolution, as Marx had predicted, had failed to materialize in the West. In 1916 Lenin published *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* in which he argued that monopoly capitalism inevitably leads to national and international cartels of trusts and monopolies. He was convinced that

the basic tendency of the capitalist system was the same. What had happened to obscure this was the fact of acquisition of colonies by the rich countries. These countries brought raw materials from their colonies and sold finished products to them. This had led to internationalization of "surplus value" and increasing prosperity of the capitalists. The capitalists tried to share their spoils with workers of their respective countries by giving them increasing concessions in working conditions and more wages. This was an outcome of their concern for their own safety. These concessions had produced a "petty bourgeoisie" illusion among workers. It had created a false consciousness among labour leaders who had turned themselves into 'labour aristocracy,' corrupted by high wages paid to them from the outcome of the exploitation of colonies. They developed vested interests in the maintenance of the status quo.

Lenin prophesied that revolution was most likely to occur in Russia, which was the weakest link in the capitalist chain.

In China Mao Ze Dong was largely responsible for the revolution. He created peasant-based armies. Once in power, he tried to bring about basic industrialization and increase in agricultural production through collectivization. Marx had seen communism coming in the wake of advanced capitalism. Mao saw communism essentially as communization of productive process and elimination of private property. He tried to combine Marxism with specific, natural characteristics of China. His emphasis was on politicization rather than professionalization.

Tension in Contemporary Marxism

Marxism in Russia was able to create a framework necessary for the achievement of a modern state of a different nature. It was able to bring about necessary changes in the age-old pattern of society and create an industrial system leading to national growth of 8 per cent. But the state of revolutionary idea did not last long. Both Russia and China like all societies which preceded them, developed their own ruling classes obsessed with power towards greater bureaucratization and

party control. Both bureaucracy and party tried to secure to themselves certain privileges and since there is a fusion of party and the state, the former has complete control over society. Stalin abolished even intra party discussions and reserved the final right of interpretation to himself. Once the ideology was institutionalized it was ritualized and tended to be identified with status quo.

People have begun to realize that while the goals of communism had an element of nobility about them, the system as a whole failed to create an institutional mechanism against the misuse of power. Power in itself is not bad. In fact in certain situations it can be a source of positive good. Problems of poverty sometimes require active state intervention. But in the absence of proper safeguards in the form of a proper system of accountability, the leaders or the party and bureaucracy assume the sole right of decision-making, settling all problems in the name of the people and in some cases, even in opposition to them. Every attack on freedom is baptized in the name of ideology or class.

As a result the Communist Movement drifted towards a decline, which was discernible for the first time when a rift between the Russian and Chinese communists came on surface.

Soon after 1960, problems began to emanate and unpopular situations arose in the communist socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe. On the other hand, during the seventies, trend towards Euro-communism led by the Communist party of Italy adopted a reconciliatory attitude supporting parliamentary institutions and reforms rather than revolution. Rapid changes took place in Eastern Europe, as well as in China and Russia.

In China, movements for a larger democracy were launched in 1979 and 1986. In June 1989 several agitators were shot dead at the Tiananmen Square during a students' rally. In the Soviet Union reform movement initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev marked the beginning of the end of the communist movement not only in Europe but almost the world over. Ultimately in December 1991, the Soviet Union was disintegrated. The disintegration of the

Soviet Union did not mean the disintegration of the Marxist ideology itself. With the decline of the Soviet Union the communist socialist system collapsed in the European countries one after another. The economy of all these countries was in a shattered condition. In Russia, the prices of consumer goods registered a 350 fold shoot up and ninety per cent of the people were thrown below the poverty line.

Therefore, a change in the political system brought in its train a quick transformation in economy. Changing trends in the forces of marketism, openness in economies and shifting, emphasis on privatization were increasingly visible. Even in the Communist/ Socialist China, there are clear indications of liberalism and openness in economy. These developments have compelled the Marxists to give a deeper thought on the organization of social relations. Now a question is being raised whether Marxism has been a dogma for the liberation of mankind. Its relevance as an alternative ideology before the world is no more unquestioned.