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Science, Society and Philosophy in India

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It is a great pleasure and privilege for me to associate myself with a programme arranged in memory of the late Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya:

Debirprasad was a pioneer- I would rather put it, the pioneer-in the application of Marxist theory to the problems of Indian philosophy. He had before him another pioneer of Marxist theory in India, D D Kosambi. Kosambi and Chattopadhyaya together made a big change in theoretical thinking. This was followed by a host of historians like Romila Thapar, R S Sharma and several others.

I am not a specialist in any of these disciplines. I am a political activist. But being a political activist of the Indian working class, I had to acquaint myself with all the disciplines-philosophy, Political Economy, History, Political Science, Aesthetics, etc. I have learnt a lot from my dabbling into the academic subjects and it is from this point of view that I have to offer a few remarks.

I would not confine myself to the subject which has been thrown open to discussion in this seminar, philosophy and Science in India. My rather would be Science, Society and Philosophy in India from ancient days to July 10th, 1994.

This is the scope of my talk. Why? As I told you. I am not an academic scholar but a political activist. I believe in the Marxist proposition that, while philosophers through the ages have interpreted the universe in various ways, the point is to change it.

Marx was a towering intellectual who made big contributions to the Science of human progress, but he was also a practical revolutionary activist. He through his theoretical writings tried to understand the world, through his practical activities, he was trying to change the

world.

I do not claim that quality of Marx in relation to theoretical writings. My understanding of theory is secondhand. I have not made any original study. On questions of Indian Philosophy, I have learnt from Kosambi, Debiprasad, etc. on Indian history, I have learnt from Marxist Scholars beginning with Kosambi, Romila Thapar, R S Sharma and others. On political Economy, I have learnt from a host of Indian Marxist scholars.

But I have learnt mostly from my practice and this practice raises before me, and should raise before you, the question of what is the present and future of India?

I would not go today into current political but I would certainly raise the question which Pandit Nehru raised once: "Whither India?" where is India going?

He raised that question in the early 30's. I am repeating the question in 1994. raising that question now, I see before me several perspectives of which one is what is called the revivalist.

Revivalism means India of the Upanishads, India of the Vedas, that is the real India. After that, it is said, came Islamic India, Christian (British) India and Marxist India. All these are alien theories. Only the Hindu way of life is Indian.

This is a theory which does not stand at the level of theory alone but is applied in practice. Practice which was seen earlier in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and recently in the demolition of Babri Masjid, in the threatened demolition of the mosques in Mathura and Varanasi and the mosques in 3000 other places. This according to me is anti-Indian. Those who propound this theory claim that they are propounding Indian theory. My contention is that this is an anti-Indian theory. Why?

India has a composite society, composite culture. This land being inhabited by a host of religious communities, castes in Hindu society,

tribes, linguistic, cultural groups etc, it is a land of unity in diversity. Now to raise one of these factors to the pedestal and say that this is India, is according to me anti-Indian. This is the conclusion that I have arrived at after 60 years of active political life as a left politician and it is from this point of mine that I look at problems of Indian philosophy.

When I do that, I repeat the question raised by Debiprasad, did India have a tradition of materialism in ancient days? Until Debiprasad wrote his famous book Lokayata, the impression prevailing among us, created by foreign scholars and Indian scholars as well, was that, while Europe always has been materialistic, India has ever been idealist. This theory was demolished by that single work of Debiprasad's Lokayata.

When I read that book nearly 40 years ago, a light was thrown into my thinking. India too had a materialist past. Like Greece, Rome and other European civilisations, Indian Society too in ancient days witnessed the struggles between idealism and materialism. This is substantiated not only by Lokayata but by a number of other works by Debiprasad. What is living and what is Dead in Indian philosophy is an expanded and updated edition of Lokayata, going into details on materialism in ancient India and its class roots.

Where does materialism arise from/where does idealism arise from? Where does the struggle between them go on? Why was materialism defeated in ancient and medieval India? One has to trace all this to class struggle.

Debiprasad points out that materialism was created by the working people who were working on nature and therefore had intimate understanding of the various phenomena of nature. So their world outlook is materialistic.

On the other hand, there is a small minority which, in ancient Greece were the slave-owners, but in India it is called the Dwijas. The Brahmins, the Kshatriyas and the Vaisyas are the Dwijas. They are the exploiting classes. They have no living connection with the phenomena of nature. So their world outlook is speculative. It is out of this that philosophical idealism arose.

As for the common people, not only the people who work with their hands but also with their intellect, they are intimately connected with nature, therefore, they developed materialism. And the two come to conflict with each other.

Just as the owners and slaves came in confrontation with each other in ancient Greece and Rome, so did the Dwijas and Shudras in India. Among the Dwijas themselves, in the beginning it was the Kshatriyas who dominated, then it was the Brahmana. In any case there is this Dwija domination over society.

And it is due to this Dwija domination that materialism was defeated and idealism flourished that materialism was defeated and idealism flourished in India. It was thanks to this dwija domination, or rather resistance to it, that materialism arose. This in a detailed manner is explained by Debiprasad in his two major works Lokayata and What is living and what is dead in Indian Philosophy and further elaborated in a number of other works, like Science and Society in ancient India

So the struggle between materialism and idealism existed in ancient India as much as in ancient Greece. But the course of history was different in the two countries. In Greece the struggle between the two classes, the struggle between the two ideologies, ended in the revolutionary replacement of the old slave society by feudal society and this feudal society in its turn was replaced by capitalist society. In other words, the revolt of the slaves against the owners, followed by the anti-feudal revolts, were the characteristic features of Europe.

In Indian on the other hand, these revolts or revolutions did not take place. But, in the very first struggle between the owning classes and the working classes, between the Dwija and Shudras, the latter were defeated. The working people were defeated by the exploiting classes. With the defeat of the working people and the victory of the owning classes, whatever existed of materialism was also defeated. Idealism became dominate. What is the evidence?

There is no evidence of actual armed clashed between the owning

and the working classes and the defeat of the latter. But there is evidence of ideological conflict between the two classes and that evidence is the India-wide spread of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddhism and Jainism were manifestations of the revolt of the Shudras against the domination of the Dwijas. For a time Buddhism appeared to be prevailing over Brahminism. But, it was defeated. Buddhism, which spread to several other countries like China, and other countries was defeated in the land of its birth.

Because the owning classes, the Dwijas, were in control of what Debiprasad called the Lordly power and holy power, i.e. the Kshatrias and the Brahmins who together were able, at the ideological level, to demolish Buddhism and other forms of materialism. It is not only Buddhism and Jainism but Samkhya, Charvaka, all these were the philosophies and ideologies of materialism, the philosophies and ideologies of the working classes. They were defeated, annihilated and even the works of materialism are not available now.

As a matter of fact, if you want today to have any inkling of the Charvaka and other systems of materialist philosophy, you can get it only through the works of their opponents. Sankara, for instance, quote a number of passages from the Lakayata and other works of the materialists. For what? For demolishing them. What is called Purvapaksha. He quoted extensively from the writings of the materialists, but these writings themselves are not available. Extracts of what he considered necessary are quoted and then demolished. Purvapaksha is followed by Sidhantha Paksha. Purvapaksha is first given and then demolished. That demolition is called Sidhantha Paksha. Purvapaksha is given only to assert the Sidhanthapaksha. In this form, many of the writings of the Lokayatas, the Charvakas and other materialists are available now.

Probably, Buddhist classics are available in other countries. I am told that, in Tibet, there is a big collection of Buddhist writings. Nobody has been able to make a study of them. It is in any case a fact that not only at the level of theory but at the level of social practice, Buddhism was a major movement. It spread throughout the country. But it was defeated in ideological battle by a host of idealist philosophers among whom the most towering individual was Sankara. With Sankara's demolition of Buddhism, the materialism that existed in Ancient Indian came to an end.

As the historian of ancient Indian science P C Ray, put it, Sankara's victory over budhism was the beginning of intellectual stagnation in the country. Till then, there was vigorous struggle between materialism and idealism which ended in the victory of idealism over Budhism. This demolition of materialism meant an end to all original thinking, end to the battle of ideas. That was why, from around 8-9th century A D Indian Society, Indian science, Indian Arts, Indian Literature—all these started stagnating.

Take the case of literature. Instead of the old brilliant works of Kalidasa and other men of classical literature in Sanskrit, literature became so formalised that there is not life in it. The defeat of budhism at the hands of idealism perfected in Sankara's philosophy thus meant that the intellectual life of the country became stagnant.

The consequences of this stagnation of the intellectual life of the society, which arose from the victory of idealism over materialism, was that group rivalries among the people, among the ruling classes, became increasingly strong. And, as Marx put it in his well-known articles on India, everybody was against everybody else and in came the Briton." As Marx pointed out, the intellectual stagnation in society, leading to socio-political disintegration of the country, led to the coming of the foreign ruler.

But, the foreign rule has two sides. As Marx put it, it had two roles to perform. One was destructive, destroying the old, destroying the caste society destroying of caste society. That they did to a large extent. They however had before them a constructive role as well, i.e., building a new society. That role they did not play. That is why Marx said, that the tragedy of Indian people is that they lost their old world without getting a new one.

But, although we did not get a new world, Marx himself says the seeds of the new world were being sown. These are the modern democratic movement, the freedom movement, and then out of the freedom movement arose a new philosophy, a lot of political activation. Rammohan Roy in Bengal, Phule, in Maharashtra Sree Narayan Guru in Kerala and lot of others became the new intellectuals, who threw new ideas amongst the people.

It is out of this that an Indian political economy arose. As early as in the 1860s, a group of intellectuals arose, Dada Bhai Nauoroji, Ranade and so on. They were the pioneers of political economy for India. They were also the pioneers of the modern democratic political movement. These are the manifestations of the development of what Marx considered the seeds of the new society being sown on Indian soil after the British domination became a reality. It is because of this that the modern movement arose.

Out of this, new socio-economic and political philosophers came into being. Gopal Krisna Gokhale, Tilak, Gandhi etc. They were the originators of the new philosophy, a carrying forward of the ancient Indian philosophy to modern times. There was, for instance, the towering intellectual vivekananda, who though a Swami Formally, was a political revolutionary. He said that the ages of the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and the Vaishya are over. Now the age of the Shudras is opening. The age of Shudras means, in modern Marxian language, proletarian rule. I do not know, whether the Swami himself was conscious of that but he could see that something new is coming. That new is the coming up of Shudras. This was the outlook with which Phule, Sree Narayana Guruet developed their militant socio-cultural movement. They however had no living contact with the political freedom movement. Tilak and Gandhi together, of course along with several others, developed the new philosophy, which gives expression to the peoples' aspirations for the creation of new society. The aspiration of the Daridra Narayan.

By the early 1920s' the Indian people had become a political force. The new society however had been developing even before that when Lok Manya Tilak was arrested and the Bombay working class went on a political general strike. An incident which was hailed by Lenin as the coming of age of the working class, a new India. The earlier movement had other classes, other sections of the people in the freedom movement but the general strike of the Bombay working class in protest against the arrest of Lok Manya Tilak brought the Indian working class into the freedom battle.

That however was confined to one city, Bombay, at the time, it was confined to one issue-the arrest and incarceration of Lok Manya Tilak. But a decade later, the working class in India had brought into

existence its first All-India organisation. All India Trade Union congress and together with it, Communist groups in several parts of the country. Dange in Bombay, Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, Singaravelu Chettiyar in Madras, these were the pioneers of communism in India. The communist groups organised by these pioneers together with the formation of All-India Trade Union Congress, showed that the working class had come on its own. Of course as part of the freedom movement, but independent of the middle class, the working class, though still under the bourgeois leadership, thus came as a class in itself and for itself.

From this time onwards, a new philosophy started developing. A new philosophy in developing which the predecessors of my generation played a big role for a decade, after which we joined them. And I am proud to declare that, during the last sixty years, my generation added not only to the Practise but also to the theory of Marxist philosophy, political Economy, Sociology political science Aesthetic etc. this is putting into practice of the Marxist concept of changing the world along with understanding it. This is how we can develop.

So I would look society, science and philosophy in India as a continuity. The continuity often breaks, but there is a continuity. That continuity is that the Indian People are coming up on their own. That is why I said we have to come to 1994 and have a perspective of the 21st century.

In this we see that the India people have developed in an all-sided manner. They have developed their own philosophy. That philosophy is not Hindu philosophy, it includes hindu philosophy nut it includes Muslims philosophy, it includes Christian philosophy, it includes finally Marxian philosophy. All these are parts of the Indian philosophy. This is the view we have been propagating against the view of the Hindutva fraternity, according to which it is only hindu philosophy, Vedic philosophy, that is Indian. Now they have started Vedic mathematics also. Everything is sought to be taken back to Vedic times.

We certainly respect Vedic times, we are proud of our past Vedic culture. But we are also conscious of the fact that Vedic culture had serious limitations. That was why India which was equal to or even ahead of Europe in ancient times lags behind in modern times.

One of the limitations of Vedic culture I can give from my own personal experience. I had to spend six years of my boyhood in learning Rigveda. Learning in fact is not the proper word for it. I did not understand what it means. I was made to repeat word by word. That is why I said repeatedly that those six years when I was made to repeat the mantras of Rigveda by heart, were six wasted years in my life. These are parts of the Vedic tradition which have to be broken.

Rigveda is of course a part of the treasury of our cultural heritage. I am only sorry that I was not taught, when learning it by heart, what Rigveda means, what it conveyed? Only recently a friend of mine brought out an eight-volume work of annotations in Malayalam of Rigveda, so these treasures, we cherish as part of our culture. But part of our culture is also the fact that Vedic texts have been made into a dogma. Vedic texts are not used to enlighten the minds of the people but to enslave them. This tradition has to be broken. When this tradition is broken, we will have to develop the Marxist philosophy, new political economy and so on.

This is the message that Debi Prasad conveys in his works. that is why his works are treasures not only for the Marxists, but for all those who are interested in the study of our culture. So it is a pleasure and privilege for me to associate myself with this seminar. I have tried to profit from the study of his works and I have tried to use them as he himself used them in his life time-to change the Indian Society, to fight all that is reactionary, all that is outdated in the so-called Hindutva culture. This is the substance of what I have to convey to you.