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Karl Marx and India

For a long time there was little awareness, even among leading Marxists, that Karl Marx had written extensively on India.¹ Rosa Luxemburg in her *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) and V.I. Lenin in his *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) did not know of his articles relating to India and China that were published in the *New York Daily Tribune* from 1853 to 1861, let alone his writings in manuscript which were not published until much later. Had Luxemburg and Lenin known of them, it is certain that they would have incorporated his views on colonialism more extensively in their works.

So far as we know, the articles on India, actually published in the *Tribune* under Karl Marx's signatures, became known only when after the Soviet Revolution preparations began to be made for publishing Marx's *Collected Works*. In India these became available for the first time when Mulk Raj Anand edited these articles as a Socialist Book Club Publication, No. 4, some time between 1934-1937. In 1940 R. Palme Dutt published them with a long introduction and considerable annotation (*Marx, Articles on India*, London, 1940), its first Indian edition being issued from Bombay in 1943. The analysis that Marx offered of Indian past and colonial present in his *Tribune* articles of 1853 were used as the theoretical foundation for Dutt's own very influential work, *India Today* (London, 1940; Bombay, 1946).

But even these articles formed only the initial part of a veritable corpus of *Tribune* articles which, without Marx's name being attached to them, were published till 1863. Their identification as Marx's (and in part Engels's) work came about through research in Marx's correspondence and notebooks, carried out by the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, Moscow, in the 1920s and 1930s. Out of these an important article on the Revolt of 1857 was published in Marx and Engels, *On Britain*, Moscow, 1953. But it was the two volumes issued from Moscow in 1953, viz. Marx and Engels, *On Colonialism*, and Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence*, with further material added to them in later editions, that laid out this wealth for us, and enabled us to have a wider view of Marx's knowledge about India.

This material has enabled us to obtain new light on Marx's attitude to India. The Marx that we knew from the signed *Tribune* articles had said (*Tribune*, 23 June 1853) that in view of Britain's imposition of modern conditions on India for its own profit, one should overlook its destructive and oppressive conduct. To justify this he recalled Goethe's verse about a rosebud's complaint against being destroyed to produce rose-scent. But we find from the later unsigned *Tribune* articles that when the Revolt in 1857 broke out and the news reached England, Marx forgot his own previous advice and immediately took the side of the rebels to the extent of expressly hoping for the rebels'

¹ Note prepared for the West Bengal State Committee Study Class in September 2017. This paper is not about Marx on India, that is, on how Karl Marx assessed India, its history, pre-colonial system and its state under colonial rule. It is rather about *how* Marx's knowledge grew about India and how this helped to reshape his perception of the functioning of non-capitalist or pre-capitalist economies, and of the relationship of colonialism to the rise of capitalism. As for 'Marx on India', I have already written it at length in *Marxist*, Vol. I, No.1 (1983), with its latest version in Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, New Delhi, 2006, pp. xix-liv.

success in holding on to Delhi, calling their revolt a 'revolution' and severely condemning British atrocities.²

What is interesting here is how Marx could accommodate the revolt with his own previous reading of pre-modern Indian society as "unresisting and unchanging" (*Tribune*, 8 August 1853), based largely on Hegel's assessment of Indian culture in his *Philosophy of History*. It is singular that such a characterization for the social order in India does not occur in any writing of Marx and Engels subsequent to 1857.³

Marx's extensive reading on India during the *Tribune* period (1852-63) and later provided him with a picture of the model of a precapitalist mode of production that was so different from the European feudal mode. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), only two pre-capitalist categories of social orders could be offered, those respectively of Ancient Rome and of Europe in the 'Middle Ages'. Now Marx encountered in India another kind of social order, based on neither slavery nor serfdom. As he also underlined in his manuscript notes prepared in 1857-58, now known as *Grundrisse*, this order was based on two institutions, viz., 'village community', minus communal cultivation, and a 'despotic' state ('Oriental despotism') which took in tax what amounted practically to landlord's rent. This conformed neither to the classical slave system nor the feudal form, so that Marx in the Preface to his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) puts the 'Asiatic' alongside the ancient, feudal and capitalist modes of production.

It is clear, then, that to Marx, the pre-modern mode of production in India was neither slavery-based nor feudal (the two forms recognised for Europe). But it was not a class-less mode, for Marx recognised the existence of classes within even the village community; and, of course, the vast apparatus of the despotic state contained a ruling class that appropriated the bulk of the surplus. On this matter, Hobsbawm can hardly be right when he alleges that "the Asiatic system is not yet a class society, or, if it is a class society, then it is the most primitive form of it".⁴ It stands to commonsense that a mode of production where the state collects rents as tax over a large country (like the Mughal Empire, which Marx had in mind since he extensively cited Francois Bernier, the French traveller who visited India in Aurangzeb's time) could not by any stretch of imagination have been a 'primitive' system.

The system was, of course, certainly precapitalist, and, therefore, Marx used much information relating to India in *Capital*, Vol. I, 1867, to underline how a non-capitalist system could still function without the features characteristic of capitalism. Thus craft production in India represented one level of division of labour, where the Dacca weaver could produce the finest muslin by combining his own 'inherited' skill with use of the rudest of tools, while under capitalist manufacture (prior to machinery) a more detailed division of labour led to more specialised compartmental skills and varied tools.⁵ Elsewhere he also cited the case of Indian 'magnates' employing artisans to produce

² Cf. Irfan Habib, introd. to Iqbal Husain (ed.), *Karl Marx on India*, New Delhi, 2006, pp. xlvii-xlix. All of Marx and Engels's articles in the *Tribune* have been collected in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence*, Moscow, 1959 and subsequent eds., already mentioned in our main text.

³ This statement is based on the collection of references to India in the writings of Marx and Engels that I have furnished in Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, pp. 283-291.

⁴ E. J. Hobsbawm, Introduction to Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Foundations* (extracted from *Grundrisse*), transl. Jack Cohen, London, 1964, p. 34.

⁵ Marx, *Capital*, I, tr. S. Moore & E. Aveling, ed. F. Engels, London, 1889 (photographic reprint), ed. Dona Torr, London, 1938/1945, pp. 331-32.

goods of use for them, whereby “production and reproduction on a progressively increasing scale go on their way without any intervention of capital”.⁶

Besides containing such a large non-capitalist sector, covering both agriculture and crafts, India also offered yet another contrast to the capitalist economy in the limits it set to money-use or commodity circulation: Marx wrote that in pre-modern Indian economy “it is the surplus alone that becomes a commodity, and a portion of even that, not until it has reached the hands of the state.”⁷ In other words, a ‘natural’ economy prevailed in the villages, but commodity circulation outside of them in towns and markets, while under capitalism every sector becomes subject to a commodity economy, based on the universal use of money for every transaction.

Marx thus used his information about India to better define the features of capitalism itself. But there was some thing, perhaps still more important, for which he used his increasing knowledge about Britain’s exploitation of India. Full recognition has not been extended, it seems, to Marx’s re-valuation of the process of growth of capitalism, by his theory of the role of ‘primitive accumulation’ in that process. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels had not gone beyond what political economy had till then taught, viz., that ‘Capital’ grew only through individual savings and increased trade within the country (England) and abroad, including colonies.

In *Capital*, Vol. I, Part VIII, chapter XXV, this simple narrative of the rise of capitalism is firmly, even contemptuously, rejected.⁸ There were two forcible movements contributing to ‘primitive accumulation of capital’ on a rising scale that created conditions for the rapid growth of capitalism in England. First, the expropriation of peasant lands through enclosures in England resulted in the forcible conversion of peasants into proletarians, on the one hand, while the previous forced acquisitions of church lands, etc., increased individual wealth in the form of capital on the other.⁹ This was the major internal source of primitive accumulation. The second was an external one, viz., wealth flowing into England from the colonial system, that originated with the discovery of the Americas in 1492. As Marx put it in a striking passage:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies [India and East Asia], the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. *These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation.*¹⁰

Marx goes on to substantiate his general statements here with facts illustrating the kind of plunder of the colonies that now took place, nearly one page being devoted to what the English did in India.¹¹

Despite this important formulation by Marx about the external sources of primitive accumulation, European Marxists have tended to pay far less attention to colonial plunder than to

⁶ Ibid, p. 610.

⁷ Ibid, p. 351. See also *Capital*, ed. Engels, Vol. II, English translation Moscow, 1957, p. 34

⁸ *Capital*, I, Dona Torr ed., op. cit., pp. 736-39.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 740-57, 766-68.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 773. Our italics.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 777.

the internal sources of capital formation.¹² While Marx must have been aware of Spanish plunder of the Americas and the Trans-Atlantic slave trade from an early stage of his studies, it is possible that he became aware of the importance of colonial plunder for the rise and expansion of capitalism now that from 1853 onwards he read of the continuous drain of wealth from India to Britain. Already in 1853 he had recognised that the English ‘moneyocracy’ was set to plunder India while the English ‘millocracy’ was out to seize its market.¹³ In 1859 he clearly saw that Britain’s trade deficit in 1858 with China, amounting to over £ 6 million, was being met by India’s surplus of £ 9 million with China through its exports of opium and cotton to that country.¹⁴

In Marx’s *Capital*, Vol. III, Moscow, 1959, pp. 269-70, Marx speaks of “the tribute” drawn from India by England and then (p. 577) estimates it at about £ 5 million around 1855. This implies clearly that, in his view, the process of ‘primitive accumulation’ did not stop with the establishment of capitalism in England, as Dobb seems to have assumed, but continued as a regular part of the capitalist order.¹⁵ Indeed, in later years Marx’s indignation at the size of the tribute drawn by Britain grew even greater. In a letter of 1881 to Danielson he refers to what “the Indians have gratuitously and annually to send over to England – it amounts to *more than the total sum of income of the sixty millions of agricultural and industrial labourers of India*” (italics in original).¹⁶

We, finally, come to an important element in the thought of Marx and Engels, namely, the perception that there could be an anti-colonial upsurge in India, which socialist forces in Europe would have to support. As early as 1853 Marx had visualised a time when “the Hindoos themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether”, while he also thought, as alternative, an earlier overthrow of “the British bourgeoisie” by the British “industrial proletariat” which also could end British rule in India.¹⁷ Such an anti-colonial struggle could only be organised in India by classes other than the Indian industrial proletariat (then in its very infancy). When the Revolt of 1857 broke out, Marx recognised that it originated from sepoys but involved both peasants and landlords. He had, as we had noted, no hesitation in calling it a “revolution” and a “national revolt”.¹⁸ Late in his life in 1882 in the letter to Danielson already cited, he hopefully referred to “an actual conspiracy going on wherein Hindus and Mussulmans cooperate” in India.¹⁹ Engels, obviously sharing his colleague’s views, wrote to Kautsky about the same time (12 September 1882):

India will, perhaps, indeed very probably, produce a revolution, and as the [European] proletariat emancipating itself cannot conduct any colonial wars this would have to be given full scope: it would not

¹² I have in mind the writings of Maurice Dobb, Eric Hobsbawm and P. Vilar.

¹³ *Tribune*, 22 July 1853 (Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, p. 47).

¹⁴ *Tribune*, 10 October 1859 (Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, p. 218).

¹⁵ Cf. Prabhat Patnaik, ‘Appreciation: The Other Marx’ in Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, p. lx.

¹⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence*, 1846-1895, Calcutta, 1945, pp. 340-41. The letter was originally written in English.

¹⁷ *Tribune*, 8 August 1853 (Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, p. 45).

¹⁸ See the summary of Marx and Engels’s views about the 1857 Revolt that I have presented in Iqbal Husain, ed., *Karl Marx on India*, pp. xlvii-xlix.

¹⁹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Correspondence*, 1846-1895, op. cit., p. 341.

pass off without all sorts of destruction, of course, but that sort of thing is inseparable from all revolutions.²⁰

The founders of Marxism thus saw the anti-colonial struggle in India in the light of a multi-class movement, since the colonial power oppressed and exploited the whole nation. This was a valuable insight on the part of Marx and Engels about the nature of what even in their late days, could only be a prospective phenomenon. Yet it is one that we cannot ignore now when we are called upon to assess the forces from within that propelled our National Movement.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 352.