
UNIT 22 MARXIST APPROACH

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22.1 INTRODUCTION

Marxism is a dominant presence in the field of Indian historiography in the post-independence period. A lot of historians either come directly within its fold or have been influenced by it in certain degrees. It has also influenced most of the trends of Indian historiography in some way or the other. It is, therefore, not possible to give a comprehensive account of all the trends in it and the historians associated with this stream of historiography. However, in this Unit, we will try to cover some of the important trends and provide information about some important historians within Marxist tradition in Indian historiography.

22.2 BEGINNINGS

The two books which heralded the beginning of Marxist historiography in India were *India Today* by R. Palme Dutt and *Social Background of Indian Nationalism* by A.R. Desai. *India Today* was originally written for the famous Left Book Club in England and was published by Victor Gollancz in 1940. Its Indian edition was published in 1947. In the preface to a new edition of the book in 1970, the author was aware of its limitations and realised that it 'can now only be regarded as a historical work of its period, constituting a survey from a Marxist standpoint of the record of British rule in India and of the development of the Indian people's struggle, both the national movement and the working class movement, up to the eve of independence, as seen at that time'. Despite its limitations, however, its position as a foundational text of Marxist thinking on Indian history has not diminished over time. It comprehensively covers most aspects of Indian society, economy and politics under colonial rule. It applies Marxist analysis to various developments in the colonial economy, to the problems of peasantry, to the national movement and to the communal problems.

It, at many levels, reinforces the nationalist criticism of the economic impact of colonial rule in India. Although strident in its criticism of the colonial rule, it looks at colonialism as both a 'destructive' and a 'regenerative' force, following Marx's own comments on this issue. However, Dutt is quite categorical that this 'regenerating' role of colonialism was rather limited and the situation has been reversed in his own times :

‘Today imperialist rule in India, like capitalism all over the world, has long outlived its objectively progressive or regenerative role, corresponding to the period of free trade capitalism, and has become the most powerful reactionary force in India, buttressing all the other forms of Indian reaction.’

Dutt squarely holds colonialism and capitalism responsible for the poverty of the country. The process of plundering the resources of the country started quite early and was responsible for funding the capitalist development in Britain and other countries of Europe:

‘The conquest of India by Western civilisation has constituted one of the main pillars of capitalist development in Europe, of British world supremacy, and of the whole structure of modern imperialism. For two centuries the history of Europe has been built up to a greater extent than is always recognised on the basis of the domination of India.’

Dutt divides the entire period of imperialist rule in India into three phases, a periodisation which, with certain modifications, has now become conventional, particularly among the Marxist historians. The first phase belonged to the merchant capital ‘represented by the East India Company, and extending in the general character of its system to the end of the eighteenth century.’ Then came the domination by industrial capitalism ‘which established a new basis of exploitation of India in the nineteenth century’. The third phase is that of financial capitalism which started in the last years of the 19th century and flourished in the 20th century.

The phase of merchant capitalism was characterised by the monopolistic hold of the East India Company over the Indian trade. This was facilitated by its increasing territorial control from the second half of 18th century. Apart from this monopolistic control, Indian wealth was also plundered directly by the colonial state and privately by the servants of the Company. The massive wealth transferred through this plunder made the Industrial Revolution possible in England. This started the search for a free market for the products of English industries. Thus India had to be transformed ‘from an exporter of cotton goods to the whole world into an importer of cotton goods’. The monopoly of the East India Company had to be abolished now and this was achieved in phases and after 1858, the rule of India was transferred to the British Crown. This started the process of turning India into an uninhibited market for the British goods.

After the First World War (1914-1918), a new stage of imperialism was inaugurated in India. Although the older forms of getting ‘tribute’ and seeking India as a market British goods still continued, there was now an emphasis on capital investment in India. According to Dutt, it was clear that ‘by 1914 the interest and profits on invested capital and direct tribute considerably exceeded the total of trading, manufacturing and shipping profits out of India. *The finance-capitalist exploitation of India had become the dominant character in the twentieth century*’. He further talks about the ‘stranglehold of finance-capital’ and its rising volume and concludes :

‘Modern imperialism . . . no longer performs the objectively revolutionising role of the earlier capitalist domination of India, clearing the way, by its destructive effects, for the new advance and laying down the initial material conditions for its realisation. On the contrary, modern imperialism in India stands out as the main obstacle to advance of the productive forces, thwarting and retarding their development by all the weapons of its financial and political domination. It is no longer possible to speak of the objectively revolutionising role of capitalist rule in India. The role of modern imperialism in India is fully and completely reactionary.’

Another area of Dutt's concern was Indian nationalism. On the revolt of 1857 his view is that it 'was in its essential character and dominant leadership the revolt of the old conservative and feudal forces and dethroned potentates'. This is a view which is supported even today by several Marxist historians. Thus it is only from the last quarter of the 19th century that Dutt traces the beginning of the Indian national movement.

The premier organisation of this movement was the Indian National Congress which was established in 1885. According to Dutt, although the Congress arose from the 'preceding development and beginnings of activity of the Indian middle class', it was brought into existence through British official initiative as a safety-valve. In detail Dutt writes about the role of Hume and his alarm at the impending rebellion. Hume then contacted the officials of the colonial government and pleaded with them to help establish the Congress to stall the insurgency against the British rule. Dutt is, therefore, sure that :

'the National Congress was in fact brought into being through the initiative and under the guidance of direct British governmental policy, on a plan secretly pre-arranged with the Viceroy as an intended weapon for safeguarding British rule against the rising forces of popular unrest and anti-British feeling.'

However, it soon grew out of its original subservient nature due to pressure of populist nationalist feelings. Thus, from 'its early years, even if at first in very limited and cautious forms, the national character began to overshadow the loyalist character'. It gradually became a strong anti-colonial force and started leading people's movement against colonial rule. Dutt based his analysis of nationalism on its varying class base over the years. Thus 'in its earliest phase Indian nationalism ... reflected only big bourgeoisie – the progressive elements among the landowners, the new industrial bourgeoisie and the well-to-do intellectual elements'. Then rose the class of the urban petty bourgeois who made its aspirations felt in the years preceding the First World War. It was only after the War that the Indian masses – peasantry and the industrial working class – made their presence felt.

However, the leadership remained in the hands of the propertied classes who were quite influential in the Congress. These elements were against any radicalisation of the movement and, therefore, tried to scuttle it before it could become dangerous to their own interests. He is particularly harsh on Gandhi whom he castigates as the 'Jonah of revolution, the general of unbroken disasters ... the mascot of the bourgeoisie' for trying 'to find the means in the midst of a formidable revolutionary wave to maintain leadership of the mass movement'. Thus the Non-cooperation Movement was called off because the masses were becoming too militant and a threat to the propertied classes within and outside the Congress :

'The dominant leadership of the Congress associated with Gandhi called off the movement because they were afraid of the awakening mass activity; and they were afraid of the mass activity because it was beginning to threaten those propertied class interests with which they themselves were still in fact closely linked.'

A similar fate befell the Civil Disobedience Movement which was 'suddenly and mysteriously called off at the moment when it was reaching its height' in 1932. Dutt thinks that this dual nature of the Congress could be traced to its origins :

'This twofold character of the National Congress in its origin is very important for all its subsequent history. This double strand in its role and being runs right through its history : on the one hand, the strand of co-operation with imperialism against the "menace" of the mass movement; on the other hand,

the strand of leadership of the masses in the national struggle. This twofold character, which can be traced through all the contradictions of its leadership, from Gokhale in the old stage to his disciple, Gandhi, in the new ... is the reflection of the twofold or vacillating role of the Indian bourgeoisie, at once in conflict with the British bourgeoisie and desiring to lead the Indian people, yet fearing that “too rapid” advance may end in destroying its privileges along with those of the imperialists.’

This was the foundational statement of Marxist historiography on Indian National Congress, the leading organisation of the Indian national movement, for quite some time to come. Most of the subsequent works of the Marxist historians on nationalism were in some measures influenced by it.

A.R. Desai’s book, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, has been a very popular book and several editions and reprints of this book have been published since its first publication in 1948. It has also been translated into many Indian languages. It is another thoroughgoing account of the colonial period and the rise of nationalism from a Marxist perspective. As Sumit Sarkar writes in the ‘Foreword’ to a new edition in 2000 :

‘For fifty years, it has served generations of students all over the country as an introduction to modern Indian history, and one which for many also provided a highly accessible illustration of Marxist historical method’.

In a single volume this book provides us a synoptic account of the various aspects of economy, society and politics of colonial India. It particularly focuses on the rise of nationalism in India. Desai traces the growth of the national movement in five phases, each phase based on particular social classes which supported and sustained it. Thus, in the first phase, ‘Indian nationalism had a very narrow social basis’. It was pioneered by the intelligentsia who were the product of the modern system of education. Desai considers Raja Rammohan Roy and his followers as the ‘pioneers of Indian nationalism’. This phase continued till 1885 when the Indian National Congress was founded. It heralded a new phase which extended till 1905. The national movement now represented ‘the interests of the development of the new bourgeois society in India’. The development in the modern education had created an educated middle class and the development of the Indian and international trade had given rise to a merchant class. The modern industries had created a class of industrialists. In its new phase, Indian national movement ‘voiced the demands of the educated classes and the trading bourgeoisie such as the Indianization of Services, the association of the Indians with the administrative machinery of the state, the stoppage of economic drain, and others formulated in the resolutions of the Indian National Congress’.

The third phase of the national movement covered the period from 1905 to 1918. During this phase ‘the Indian national movement became militant and challenging and acquired a wider social basis by the inclusion of sections of the lower-middle class’. In the fourth phase, which began from 1918 and continued till the end of the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1934, the social base of the national movement was enormously enlarged. The movement ‘which was hitherto restricted mainly to upper and middle classes, further extended ... to sections of the Indian masses.’ However, according to Desai, the leadership of the Congress remained in the hands of those who were under the strong influence of the Indian capitalist class :

‘It was from 1918 that the Indian industrial bourgeoisie began to exert a powerful influence in determining the programme, policies, strategies, tactics and forms of struggle of the Indian national movement led by the Congress of which Gandhi was the leader.’

Two other significant developments during this period were the rise of the socialist and communist groups since the late 1920s, which tried to introduce pro-people agenda in the national movement, and the consolidation of communalist forces which sought to divide the society.

The fifth phase (1934-39) was characterised by growing disenchantment with the Gandhian ideology within the Congress and further rise of the Socialists who represented the petty bourgeois elements. Outside the Congress various movements were taking place. The peasants, the workers, the depressed classes and various linguistic nationalities started agitations for their demands. Moreover, there was further growth of communalism. However, according to Desai, all these stirrings were not of much consequence and the mainstream was still solidly occupied by the Gandhian Congress which represented the interests of the dominant classes.

These two books, particularly the one by R. Palme Dutt, laid the foundations of the Marxist historiography on modern Indian history. The next break came with the writings of D.D. Kosambi that we will discuss in the next section.

22.3 D.D. KOSAMBI AND PARADIGM SHIFT

Romila Thapar credits D.D. Kosambi (1907-66) for effecting a 'paradigm shift' in Indian studies. According to her, such paradigmatic changes had occurred only twice before in Indian historiography. These were done by James Mill and Vincent Smith. James Mill, whose book *History of India* (1818-23) set the parameters for history-writing on India, was contemptuous towards the Indian society. He considered the pre-colonial Indian civilisation as backward, superstitious, stagnant and lacking in most respects as a civilisation. He was an unabashed admirer of the British achievements in India and relentless critic of pre-British Indian society and polity. He divided the Indian history into three parts – the Hindu, the Muslim and the British. This division, according to him, was essential to demarcate three different civilisations.

Vincent Smith's *The Oxford History of India* (1919) provided another break in Indian historiography as it avoided the sharp value judgments and contemptuous references to the pre-British period of Indian history contained in Mill's book. He instead tried to present a chronological account of Indian history and focused on the rise and fall of dynasties.

Kosambi viewed history completely differently. For him, Mill's religious periodisation and Smith's chronological accounts of dynasties were of no value. He believed that the 'Society is held together by bonds of production'. Thus he defines history '*as the presentation, in chronological order, of successive developments in the means and relations of production*'. This, according to him, is 'the only definition known which allow a reasonable treatment of pre-literate history, generally termed "pre-history"'. He further argues that history should be viewed in terms of conflict between classes :

'The proper study of history in a class society means analysis of the differences between the interests of the classes on top and of the rest of the people; it means consideration of the extent to which an emergent class had something new to contribute during its rise to power, and of the stage where it turned (or will turn) to reaction in order to preserve its vested interests.'

He describes his approach to history as 'dialectical materialism, also called Marxism after its founder'. However, Kosambi was flexible in his application of Marxism. He argued that 'Marxism is far from the economic determinism which its opponents so

often take it to be'. He further asserts that the 'adoption of Marx's thesis does not mean blind repetition of all his conclusions (and even less, those of the official, party-line Marxists) at all times'. He, instead, considered Marxism as a method which could be usefully applied for the study of Indian society and history.

The paucity of relevant data for the early period of Indian history was one factor which prompted him to analyse the broad social formations rather than small-scale events. He thought that the use of comparative method would balance out the absence of reliable historical sources. He, therefore, adopted an inter-disciplinary approach in his studies of Indian society. This enabled him to view the reality from various angles in order to get a full picture of it. These ideas are evident in his four major books : *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), *Exasperating Essays : Exercises in the Dialectical Method* (1957), *Myth and Reality : Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (1962) and *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (1965).

Kosambi's non-dogmatic approach to history is clear when he rejected two key Marxist concepts – the Asiatic Mode of Production and Slavery – as inapplicable to ancient Indian society. Although he accepted the concept of feudalism in Indian context, he denied the existence of serfdom. According to him, it would be more rewarding to view the early Indian society in terms of the transition from tribe to caste. He argues that the 'pre-class society was organised ... into tribes'. The tribes were small, localised communities and 'for the tribesman, society as such began and ended with his tribe'. The beginning and development of plough agriculture brought about a radical change in the system of production. This destabilised the tribes and the clans and gave rise to castes as new form of social organisation. This was an extremely crucial development. Kosambi writes :

‘THE ENTIRE COURSE OF INDIAN HISTORY SHOWS TRIBAL ELEMENTS BEING FUSED INTO A GENERAL SOCIETY. This phenomenon, which lies at the very foundation of the most striking Indian social feature, namely caste, is also the great basic fact of ancient history.’

Kosambi tried to relate the intellectual and cultural production with the prevailing social and economic situation. Thus, according to him, the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita* can be understood only with reference to the feudal society in which it originated. It, therefore, preaches the ideology of the ruling class which emphasised 'the chain of personal loyalty which binds retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king or emperor'. Similarly, he considers the Bhakti movement as preaching a sense of loyalty to the lord which, in the earthly sense, translates into loyalty and devotion to the rulers. His detailed study of the poetry of Bhartrihari, the 7th-century poet, reflects a similar approach. He describes Bhartrihari as 'unmistakably the Indian intellectual of his period, limited by caste and tradition in fields of activity and therefore limited in his real grip on life'. In his study of the myths, he contended that they reflected the transition of society from matriarchy to patriarchy.

22.4 THE FEUDALISM DEBATE

As we have seen in the previous section, D.D. Kosambi argued that, contrary to Marx's own statements and to those of several Marxists, the Indian society did not witness a similar progression of various modes of production as happened in Europe. He said that the slave mode of production was not to be found in India. He also rejected Marx's own schema of the Asiatic Mode of Production as inapplicable to India. He, however, thought that there was the existence of feudalism in India, even though he conceived it differently. He was aware that the medieval Indian society was quite different from that of Europe. One of the important characteristics of European feudalism, i.e., manorial system, demesne-farming and serfdom, were not to be found in India. But he explained it as a result of the

non-existence of the slave mode of production in the preceding period. He further differentiated between two types of feudalism in India – ‘feudalism from above’ and ‘feudalism from below’ :

‘Feudalism from above means a state wherein an emperor or powerful king levied tribute from subordinates who still ruled in their own right and did what they liked within their own territories – as long as they paid the paramount ruler.... By feudalism from below is meant the next stage where a class of land-owners developed within the village, between the state and the peasantry, gradually to wield armed power over the local population. This class was subject to service, hence claimed a direct relationship with the state power, without the intervention of any other stratum.’

Kosambi’s lead on this issue was followed by R.S. Sharma who made a comprehensive study of feudalism in India in his book entitled *Indian Feudalism* (1965) and in various articles. According to him, there was a decline in trade and increasing numbers of land grants to the state officials in lieu of salary and to the Brahmans as charity or ritual offering in the post-Gupta period. This process led to the subjection of peasantry and made them dependent on the landlords. Almost all features of west European feudalism, such as serfdom, manor, self-sufficient economic units, feudalisation of crafts and commerce, decline of long-distance trade and decline of towns, were said to be found in India. According to R.S. Sharma, the most crucial aspects of Indian feudalism was the increasing dependence of the peasantry on the intermediaries who received grants of land from the state and enjoyed juridical rights over them. This development restricted the peasants’ mobility and made them subject to increasingly intensive forced labour. The decline of feudalism also took the same course as in west Europe. Revival of long-distance trade, rise of towns, flight of peasants and development of monetary economy were considered to be the main processes responsible for the decline of feudalism in India. In this schema, the process of feudalisation started sometimes in the 4th century and declined in the 12th century.

This view of the medieval Indian society and economy has been questioned by several historians who argue that the development of the Indian society did not follow the western model. They further argue that such a model of development cannot be universally applied to all societies. Harbans Mukhia, in a thought-provoking article ‘Was There Feudalism in Indian History?’ (1981), questions these arguments at several levels. He begins by arguing that there is no single, universally accepted definition of feudalism. It is because feudalism was not a world-system. In fact, capitalism was the first world-system and, therefore, all societies before that had their own peculiarities and profound differences from each other. Thus feudalism ‘was, throughout its history, a non-universal specific form of socio-economic organization – specific to time and region, where specific methods and organization of production obtained’. Mukhia defines feudalism as ‘the structured dependence of the entire peasantry on the lords’. Such a system was specific ‘to Western Europe between the fifth or the sixth century and the fifteenth. Feudalism also developed in its classic form in eastern Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth century and possibly in Japan during the Togukawa regime in particular’. He considers feudalism as a ‘transitional system’ which :

‘stood mid-way in the transition of the West European economy from a primarily slave-based system of agricultural production to one dominated by the complementary classes of the capitalist farmers and the landless agricultural wage-earner, but in which the free peasantry also formed a significant element.’

On the basis of this definition of feudalism, Mukhia now argues against the concept of feudalism in India. He says that even in Europe the relationship between long-distance

trade and the growth or decline of feudalism is not clear. In fact, the trade had differential impact on various European societies. While at some places, as in west Europe, it led to the dissolution of feudal bonds, in east Europe it provided the lords with the power to reinforce and revitalise the feudal ties. In any case, Mukhia argues, it is not sure that there was a very significant decline of trade and towns in early medieval India. Secondly, while in Europe feudalism developed and declined due to changes at the base of society, in Indian case the reason for the emergence of feudalism is seen as the land grants from above. According to Mukhia, it is difficult to accept that 'such complex social structures can be established through administrative and legal procedures'. About the most crucial aspect of feudalism – the dependence of peasantry on the landlords – Mukhia thinks that there is no evidence to prove it in Indian case. He argues that even though the exploitation of the peasantry might have increased, there is no evidence to prove that there was any 'extraneous control over the peasant's process of production'. He thinks that 'forced labour in India remained, by and large, an incidental manifestation of the ruling class' political and administrative power rather than a part of the process of production'. He concludes that the 'primarily free peasant form of agricultural production gradually evolving from post-Maurya times, thus characterized the agrarian economy of ancient and medieval India'. In such a scenario there was no possibility of a feudal system of production in India.

Several of Mukhia's arguments were criticised by Marxist and non-Marxist scholars in this field. Although there was an acknowledgement of the significance of the questions he raised, criticism related to his concept of feudalism, his understanding of the west European experience, his interpretation of Indian history and, particularly, his notion of a free peasant production in India.

R.S. Sharma, in his response, wrote an essay entitled 'How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?' (1985). While accepting the fact that feudalism was not a universal phenomenon, he argues that this was not true of all the pre-capitalist formations. Thus 'tribalism, the stone age, the metal age, and the advent of a food-producing economy are universal phenomena. They do indicate some laws conditioning the process and pattern of change'. He, therefore, thinks that there was feudalism in India, even though its nature was significantly different. According to him, 'Just as there could be enormous variations in tribal society so also there could be enormous variations in the nature of feudal societies'. He questions the very notion of peasant's control over means of production, particularly land. He maintains that there were multiple and hierarchical rights in the land with the peasant almost always possessing the inferior right. In the areas where land grants were given the grantees enjoyed much superior rights :

'On the basis of the land charters we can say that in the donated areas the landed beneficiaries enjoyed general control over production resources. Of course they did not enjoy specific control over every plot of land that the peasant cultivated. But there is nothing to question their control over the plots of lands that were directly donated to them by the king, sometimes along with the sharecroppers and weavers and sometimes along with the cultivators.'

He further argues that, contrary to Mukhia's arguments, forced labour was also prevalent in many parts of the country. On the basis of various evidences, he asserts that there was feudalism during the early medieval period in India which 'was characterized by a class of landlords and by a class of subject peasantry, the two living in a predominantly agrarian economy marked by decline of trade and urbanism and by drastic reduction in metal currency'.

Irfan Habib introduces another significant element for identifying the predominant mode of production in any social formation. He argues that although the social form of labour defines a particular mode of production, it cannot be considered as the sole determinant.

Thus although 'Wage-labour remains the basic form of labour in socialism, but this does entitle us to identify the capitalist and socialist modes'. Similarly, petty peasant production may be found in several social formations. Therefore, another crucial element should be taken into account and that is 'the form in which the surplus extracted from the producer is distributed'. Although Habib is doubtful about the existence of feudalism in pre-colonial India, he considers Mukhia's arguments a little far-fetched. He thinks that Mukhia's points about the existence of a 'free peasantry' and 'relative stability in India's social and economic history' are untenable. Such conclusions, according to him, 'presume a rather idyllic picture of pre-colonial India ... for which there is little justification'. In his opinion, 'there were just as intense contradictions here as anywhere else; but that these were different in nature and consequence from the contradictions leading to capitalism in Europe'. Moreover, he rejects the idea of 'exceptionalism' in Indian context. It was also a society with deep internal contradictions, a stratified peasantry and class exploitation.

Burton Stein praises Mukhia for raising an important question, but he points out several inadequacies in Mukhia's arguments. According to him, only the absence of serfdom may not determine the absence of feudalism in India because several other characteristics existed. With focus on south India, he argues that these characteristics were local control and private legal jurisdiction of various powerful men, the existence of independent warrior groups which claimed tributes and weak state forms. Secondly, he also questions Mukhia's proposition about the 'relative stability' of pre-colonial Indian society and economy. Such a notion about stability assumes that for two thousand years there was no change in the means and relations of production. This worries Stein: 'This is indeed stability, not "relative", but quite absolute, a position which ought to trouble him as an historian; it troubles me!' On the role of the state, he rejects the notion of a centralised and bureaucratic state. Instead, he forwards the concept of 'segmentary state', a state whose power was limited. So far as the 'free peasantry' is concerned, he puts more emphasis on peasant collectivities having a mastery over productive forces. He questions the notion of free 'individual peasants as productive agents'. In this sense of collective peasant production and the segmentary, Stein thinks that the period from the 10th to the 17th centuries may be said to be a single social formation in south India.

In his response to these criticisms, Mukhia sticks to his point that capitalism was the first world-system and all the earlier systems were specific to regions and 'did not possess the internal dynamism that would give them the hegemony' over the world. Only most general features such as agrarian economy and surplus appropriation through non-economic coercion could be common about various pre-industrial societies. But it does not take the specificities, such as production process and social organisation of labour, into account. He reemphasises his concept of a 'free peasantry' in pre-colonial India 'whose process of production was free of extraneous control'.

We, therefore, encounter a wide variety of interpretations of the medieval Indian society by the Marxist historians who differ quite significantly from each other. In the course of this debate we also come across the rich variety of Marxist interpretations relating to medieval Indian history.

22.5 INDIAN NATIONALISM

In the earlier section (22.2) we discussed the views of R.P. Dutt and A.R. Desai on Indian nationalism. They analysed it as a movement which was mostly dominated by the bourgeoisie. Although various classes, including the peasantry and the working classes, participated in it, its basic character remained bourgeois. This view of national movement remained quite common among the Marxist historians for quite some time. However, over the years, several Marxist historians began to disagree with this paradigm

for understanding Indian nationalism. Bipan Chandra mounted a major critique of this view and this criticism became more comprehensive over the years. In his very first book, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1966), he pleaded for according certain autonomy to the ideas as significant vehicle of action and change. Even though he accepts that 'social relations exist independently of the ideas men form of them', he feels that 'men's understanding of these relations is crucial to their social and political action'. Moreover, he argues that the intellectuals in any society stand above the narrow interests of the class in which they are born. It is 'sheer crude mechanical materialism' to sort out the intellectuals only on the basis of their class of origins. It is because the intellectuals are guided 'at the level of consciousness, by thought and not by interests'. Thus the Indian nationalist leaders were also, as intellectuals, above the interests of the narrow class or group they were born in. This does not mean, however, that they did not represent any class. They did represent class interests, but this was done ideologically and not for personal gain. As Bipan Chandra puts it :

'Like the best and genuine intellectuals the world over and in all history, the Indian thinkers and intellectuals of the 19th century too were philosophers and not hacks of a party or a class. It is true that they were not above class or group and did in practice represent concrete class or group interests. But when they reflected the interests of a class or a group, they did so through the prism of ideology and not directly as members, or the obedient servants, of that class or group.'

On the basis of his analysis of the economic thinking of the early nationalist leaders, both the so-called moderates and the extremists, Bipan Chandra concludes that their overall economic outlook was 'basically capitalist'. By this he means that 'In nearly every aspect of economic life they championed capitalist growth in general and the interests of the industrial capitalists in particular'. This does not mean that they were working for the individual interests of the capitalists. In fact, the capitalist support for the Congress in the early phase was negligible. Nationalist support for industrial capitalism derived from the belief of the nationalists that 'industrial development along capitalist lines was the only way to regenerate the country in the economic field, or that, in other words, the interests of the industrial capitalist class objectively coincided with the chief national interest of the moment'. Thus, Bipan Chandra abandons the instrumentalist approach espoused by Dutt and Desai. This was a major change in perspective in the historiography of the Indian national movement.

However, despite this change in perspective, Bipan Chandra remained anchored to several points within the paradigm developed by R.P. Dutt. In an essay presented at a symposium at the Indian History Congress in 1972 and published in his book *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (1979), his arguments come remarkably close to the traditional Marxist perspective developed by R.P. Dutt on Indian nationalism. In this article entitled 'Elements of Continuity and Change in the Early Nationalist Activity', he still criticises the narrow perspective which dubs the nationalist leaders as bourgeois in an instrumentalist sense that they were following the commands of the capitalists. In his opinion, the early nationalist leaders were trying to unify the Indian people into a nation. Their basic objective was 'to generate, form and crystallize an anti-imperialist ideology, to promote the growth of modern capitalist economy, and in the end to create a broad all India national movement'. This view corresponded with the perspective developed in his earlier book on economic nationalism.

But there were other points where his arguments resembled those of Dutt and Desai. Firstly, he interprets the 'peaceful and bloodless' approach of struggle adopted by the nationalist leadership as 'a basic guarantee to the propertied classes that they would at no time be faced with a situation in which their interests might be put in jeopardy even temporarily'. This understanding of non-violence was the same as that of Dutt and Desai.

Secondly, the relationship between the Indian masses and the nationalists always remained problematic. For the moderate leaders, the masses had no role to play. Even the extremists, despite their rhetoric, failed to mobilise the masses. Although the masses came into nationalist fold during the Gandhian period, they were not politicised and the lower classes of agricultural workers and poor peasants in most parts of country were never politically mobilised, 'so that the social base of the national movement was still not very strong in 1947'. And even when they were mobilised, the masses remained outside the decision-making process and the gulf between them and the leaders was 'unbridged'. According to Bipan Chandra :

'Above all, the political activity of the masses was rigidly controlled from the top. The masses never became an independent political force. The question of their participation in the decision-making process was never even raised. The masses were always to remain ... "passive actors" or "extras" whose political activity remained under the rigid control of middle class leaders and within the confines of the needs of bourgeois social development. Herein also lay the crucial role of the way non-violence was defined and practised by Gandhi.'

Thirdly, the nationalist leaders in all phases of the movement stressed that the process of achievement of national freedom would be evolutionary, and not revolutionary. The basic strategy to attain this goal would be pressure-compromise-pressure. In this strategy, pressure would be brought upon the colonial rulers through agitations, political work and mobilisation of the people. When the authorities were willing to offer concessions, the pressure would be withdrawn and a compromise would be reached. The political concessions given by the colonial rulers would be accepted and worked. After this, the Congress should prepare for another agitation to gain new concessions. It is in this phased, non-violent manner that several political concessions would be taken from the British and this process would ultimately lead to the liberation of the country. On the basis of his analysis of the social base, the ideology, and the strategy of political struggle, Bipan Chandra concluded that the nationalist movement as represented by the Congress was 'a bourgeois democratic movement, that is, it represented the interests of all classes and segments of Indian society vis-à-vis imperialism but under the hegemony of the industrial bourgeoisie'. This character remained constant throughout its entire history from inception to 1947. Even during the Gandhian phase, there was no change. In fact, according to Bipan Chandra, 'the hegemony of the bourgeoisie over the national movement was, if anything, even more firmly clamped down in the Gandhian era than before'.

In a later book, *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (1988), Bipan Chandra has decisively moved away from the views of Dutt and Desai on Indian national movement. In this book, co-authored with some other like-minded scholars, he applies the Gramscian perspective to study the national movement. Most of the propositions regarding the Indian National Congress developed in the earlier quoted article are now dropped or revised. The Congress strategy is no longer seen in terms of pressure-compromise-pressure. It is now viewed in terms of Gramscian 'war of position' whereby a prolonged struggle is waged for the attainment of goal. As Bipan Chandra puts it :

'The Indian national movement ... is the only movement where the broadly Gramscian theoretical perspective of a war of position was successfully practised; where state power was not seized in a single historical moment of revolution, but through prolonged popular struggle on a moral, political and ideological level; where reserves of counter-hegemony were built up over the years through progressive stages; where the phases of struggle alternated with "passive" phases.'

This struggle was not overtly violent because the nationalist leaders were seized of the twin agenda of forging the Indian people into a nation and to undermine the colonial hegemony. Through their prolonged struggle they wanted to expose the two important myths about the British colonial rule that it was beneficial to the Indians and that it was invincible. The Gandhian non-violence is also to be considered in this light. According to Bipan Chandra,

‘It was not ... a mere dogma of Gandhiji nor was it dictated by the interests of the propertied classes. It was an essential part of a movement whose strategy involved the waging of a hegemonic struggle based on a mass movement which mobilized the people to the widest possible extent.’

The national movement was now conceived as an all-class movement which provided space and opportunity for any class to build its hegemony. Moreover, the main party, the Congress, which led ‘this struggle from 1885 to 1947 was not then a party but a movement’. He criticises the various schools of historiography on India for their failure to address the central contradiction in colonial India which was between the Indian people and the British colonialism. Although he still considers that ‘the dominant vision within the Congress did not transcend the parameters of a capitalist conception of society’, he has made a clear break from the conventional Marxist interpretation of the Indian national movement and it appears that any study of Indian nationalism has to take his views into account.

Sumit Sarkar is another Marxist historian who is critical of Dutt’s paradigm. In his first book, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908* (1973), he terms it as a ‘simplistic version of the Marxian class-approach’. Contrary to the assertion by Dutt that the moderate phase was dominated by the ‘big bourgeoisie’ while the extremist phase by the ‘urban petty bourgeoisie’, he thinks that ‘a clear class-differential between moderate and extremist would still be very difficult to establish, and was obviously nonexistent at the leadership level’. According to him, this version of Marxist interpretation suffers from the ‘defect of assuming too direct or crude an economic motivation for political action and ideals’. He instead prefers to analyse the actions of the nationalist leaders by using Trotsky’s concept of ‘substitutism’ whereby the intelligentsia acts ‘repeatedly as a kind of proxy for as-yet passive social forces with which it had little organic connection’. He also uses Gramscian categories of ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals. According to Antonio Gramsci, the famous Italian Marxist activist and thinker, the ‘organic’ intellectuals participate directly in the production-process and have direct links with the people whom they lead. The ‘traditional’ intellectuals, on the other hand, are not directly connected with either the production-process or the people. However, they become leaders of particular classes by ideologically resuming the responsibility of those classes. According to Sarkar, the leaders of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal ‘recruited overwhelmingly from the traditional learned castes, and virtually unconnected after the 1850s with commerce or industry ... may be regarded perhaps as a “traditional” intelligentsia in Gramsci’s sense’. This view is quite close to that of Bipan Chandra in which he emphasises the role of ideology in the formation of the early nationalist leaders. Sumit Sarkar, however, considers that even though the nationalist leaders were not directly linked with the bourgeoisie, they ‘objectively did help to at least partially clear the way for the independent capitalist development of our country’. He emphasises this point further in his article ‘The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism’ (1985). Here the objective stance of the Swadeshi Movement in favour of the bourgeoisie gets transformed into direct intervention by the bourgeoisie and the subjective position in the interests of the capitalists by the leaders of the Civil Disobedience Movement. By studying the social forces involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement and the developments leading to the Gandhi-Irwin pact, he concludes that there was ‘the vastly enhanced role of distinctively bourgeois groups, both in contributing heavily to the initial striking power of Civil Disobedience and ultimately in its calling off’. He qualifies his

statement by saying that Gandhi was ‘no mere bourgeois tool in any simplistic or mechanical sense’ and that he can hardly be considered as ‘a puppet’ in the hands of the capitalists. He, however, insists that the Gandhian leadership had ‘a certain coincidence of aims with Indian business interests at specific points’ and ‘an occasional significant coincidence of subjective attitudes and inhibitions with bourgeois interests’.

22.6 INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: DEBATE ON INDIAN RENAISSANCE

The role of the intellectuals in shaping the public opinion and leading the people is beyond doubt. What is more contentious is the extent of their influence and the reasons for this limitation. One such phenomenon which attracted wide interests among both the Marxist and non-Marxist scholars was the ‘Bengal Renaissance’ which is sometimes equated with the ‘Indian Renaissance’. It is because a cluster of contemporary intellectuals became associated with various movements of ideas mostly derived from western sources. Since the colonial presence in Bengal had been the longest, we find there the earliest manifestations of such interests among the local intelligentsia and their thoughts had countrywide influence over the years. The point which is under debate is the nature of this intellectual movement which is named after the Italian intellectual experience of the 15th and 16th centuries as the ‘Renaissance’.

Among the Marxist historians Susobhan Sarkar was the first to analyse ‘this flowering of social, religious, literary and political activities in Bengal’. In his essay, ‘Notes on the Bengal Renaissance’, first published in 1946, he declared that the ‘role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of India is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance’. This ‘modern’ movement arose because the ‘impact of British rule, bourgeois economy and modern Western culture was first felt in Bengal’. Thus the modernity brought into India by the British ‘produced an awakening known usually as the Bengal Renaissance’. It generated such intellectual force that ‘For about a century, Bengal’s conscious awareness of the changing modern world was more developed than and ahead of that of the rest of India’.

Such a rosy picture of the 19th-century intellectual activities has now been seriously questioned. The concept of Bengal, or Indian, Renaissance has come under criticism. The critics point out that, unlike the European Renaissance, the range of the 19th-century intellectual ferment was rather limited and its character was rather less modernist than was earlier assumed. The ‘traditionalist’ and ‘modernist’ dichotomy cannot be applied as the so-called ‘Renaissance’ intellectual was a deeply divided personality. The break with the past was severely limited in nature and remained mainly at the intellectual level. Most of the intellectuals did not have the courage to implement even at their own individual levels the principles they preached. And those, like Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, who publicly campaigned for their ideals faced continuous failures. In most cases, the same traditional scriptural authority was sought to derive sanction for their policies and practices against which the intellectuals launched their ideological struggle. Moreover, this intellectual movement remained confined within an elitist Hindu framework which did not include the problems and realities of the lower castes and Muslims. The social forces, which could have given the ideas a solid base and moved them in the modernist direction, were not present. The colonial power remained the ultimate guarantee for the implementation of the reforms proposed by the thinkers. However, the colonial state was not much interested in taking radical measures for the fear of alienating the traditionalists who formed the great majority. This led to frustration among the enthusiasts for the reforms and the movement in general retreated and declined by the late 19th century. Some of the Marxist historians who have criticised the concept of the ‘Renaissance’ in Indian context are : Barun De in the articles ‘The

Colonial Context of Bengal Renaissance’ (1976) and ‘A Historiographic Critique of Renaissance Analogues for Nineteenth Century India’; Asok Sen in his book *Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones* (1977), Sumit Sarkar in his articles ‘Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past’ (1975), ‘The Complexities of Young Bengal (1973), and ‘The Radicalism of Intellectuals’ (1977), all the three articles now collected in a book *A Critique of Colonial India* (1985); and K.N. Panikkar whose various essays on this theme from 1977 to 1992 have been collected in the book *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony* (1995).

22.7 OTHER TRENDS AND HISTORIANS WITHIN MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

As we have pointed out earlier in the ‘Introduction’ it is impossible to deal with the Marxist historiography on India in full detail within the space of this Unit. We have so far covered a few trends and the ideas and historians associated with them. Now in this section we will briefly discuss some other trends and historians.

In the study of early India, there are several historians working with Marxian methods. R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, D.N. Jha, B.D. Chattopadhyay and Kumkum Roy are some of them. Their researches have enriched our understanding of ancient India. We have already discussed Sharma’s book on *Indian Feudalism*. Apart from this, his study of the lower castes of ancient India, *Sudras in Ancient India* (1958), his work on various topics such as marriage, caste, land grants, slavery, usury, and women contained in his *Light on Early Indian Society and Economy* (1966), his *Material Culture and Social Formation in Ancient India* (1983) and *Urban Decay in India* (1987) are the books which enormously enrich our understanding of ancient and early medieval periods.

Similarly, Romila Thapar’s works on early India have expanded the scope of historical research related to the period. She has approached the ancient period from several angles and debunked several myths and stereotypes associated with it. Some of these myths related to Oriental Despotism, the Aryan race, and Ashoka’s non-violence. Her several books, like *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (1963), *Ancient Indian Social History* (1978), *From Lineage to State* (1984) and *Interpreting Early India* (1992), have increased our knowledge of early Indian history in a refreshing manner.

The history of medieval India has also attracted a fair number of Marxist historians. Nurul Hasan, Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib and Athar Ali are some among them. They have studied the medieval Indian society, polity and economy in detail. Among them, the works by Irfan Habib are particularly remarkable in the range of scholarship and imagination. His study of the Mughal economy, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963), has acquired the status of a classic. In this book, he argues that the basic contradiction in the late medieval period was between ‘the centralized ruling class (state) and the peasantry’. But there were other contradictions also between the state and the zamindars, between the untouchables and the rest of the society and between the tribes and the encroaching caste peasantry. Among all these, Habib argues, the ‘drive for tax-revenue may be regarded as the basic motive force. Land revenue sustained the large urban sector; but the pressure for higher collection devastated the country, antagonized zamindars whose own shares of surplus was thereby affected, and drove the peasants to rebellion’. This book on medieval Indian history was followed by other important contributions in the form of *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (1982) and his edited book, *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol. I* (1982). Apart from these, his several books and articles, including *Caste and Money in Indian History* (1987), *Interpreting Indian History* (1988), and *Essays in Indian History : Towards a Marxist Perception* (1995), explore and comment on various periods of Indian history.

The Marxist historians have written on several aspects of modern Indian history and the colonial economy. Apart from these, we can find a significant number of the Marxist historians in the fields of peasant history, labour history and social history.

22.8 SUMMARY

The Marxist historians have contributed enormously to Indian historiography. In all field of Indian history, whether we divide it by periods or by topics, the Marxist historians have made significant contributions. In several areas, their works have changed the course of historiography. The Marxist historians do not form a monolithic bloc. As we have seen in our discussion of several trends, there are wide divergences of views among the Marxist historians. However, there are certain common elements among them.

The history of the dynasties was replaced by the history of the common people. More emphasis was now given to the study of economy and society in preference to the political history. The study of broad social and economic systems such as feudalism and colonialism were undertaken and the social, economic and political changes were considered not in the light of the actions of individual statesmen, but in terms of the working out of economy and conflicts between classes. At the level of methodology, Kosambi's works introduced an interdisciplinary approach to history which encompassed literature, archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, numismatics and statistics. Moreover, the Marxist historiography has made interpretation and explanation more important than narration or description.

22.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a note on the Marxist historiography of Indian nationalism. Discuss the differences between various Marxist historians on this issue.
- 2) What is the role of D.D. Kosambi in the development of Marxist historiography in India?
- 3) Write a note on the conflicting views on 'Indian Renaissance'.

22.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1956, 1985).

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