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BY

D. D. KOSAMBI

"INDIA from Primitive Communism to Slavery" by S. A. Dange; People's Publishing House, Bombay 1949; pp. xix+181, Rs. 4-8-0.

This painfully disappointing book by one of the founders of the Communist Party of India would not have been worth reviewing, but for the fact that to let such a performance go unchallenged would bring Marxism into disrepute. The author's distinguished services to India's proletariat and his being in jail both when the book was drafted and when it was published do not condone the fundamental errors of fact and of reasoning that fill the book from cover to cover with endless confusion. The present review is meant to be constructive.

Marx and Engels made it a point to acquaint themselves with every new discovery of note in science. If they gave such great publicity to Morgan, it was not because they had read nothing else, but because Morgan's theory explained so much that had remained obscure and disconnected. If we look upon Dange's models (besides Engels) we find a striking emphasis upon a narrow section of the emergent Indian bourgeoisie. He follows in actual fact the worthless conjectures made by Tilak, Rajwade, Kunte, *after* criticizing the Indian bourgeois intelligentsia in a needlessly prolix introduction. These are his "vedic scholars", though he might have found some real scholars like Velapkar, even among Mahārāṣṭrians. No matter what information about another branch of the Aryans could have been gathered from Avestan sources, Dange cites only one, the Vendidad, and then at second or third hand from Tilak's miserable "Arctic Home in the Vedas" (p. 82). The same work may have inspired the irrelevant reference to the usefulness of fire in long Siberian winter nights (p. 38) unless we are to understand that the vedic Aryans were in the habit of retiring to Siberia for the night. Dange seems not to have realized how thoroughly this particular

bourgeois influence saturates his own thinking. The outstanding characteristic of a backward bourgeoisie, the desire to profit without labour or grasp of technique, is reflected in the superficial "research" so common in India; it would be pathetic to find it also in the writings of one who has suffered for his belief in Marxism.

In noting, quite correctly, that British histories of India are coloured by the national, and class prejudices of their writers, Dange forgets that most of our source material was first collected, analyzed, arranged by foreign scholars. To them we owe the critical method, the first publication of authoritative texts, and archaeological exploration—digging up the past not with the pen, but with the spade. As for class prejudice, Dange fails lamentably to note that it also colours very deeply the Sanskrit documents which he believes to be the best sources for historical investigation. "The chief feature of the Hindu system of looking at history, or in fact the whole universe, is that it considers history as being not static but always moving and changing" (p. 34). But the four *yuga* names which he offers in evidence mean throws of dice and not ages of mankind in the earliest sources. The chief feature of the supposedly dynamic "Hindu" treatment of history is the obliteration of all historical content; otherwise we should not have to glean conjectures so painfully from a mass of contradictory legends which alone survive the "Hinduization". What we know of Aśoka and the Guptas comes not from Hindu literary sources but from their own inscriptions—read by Prinsep and Fleet; the Hindus had managed to forget even the script. If Dange finds it worth while mentioning Justice Ranade and N. C. Kelkar (with respect!), could he not have spared a few sentences for European and American orientalists, particularly for the great line of German Indologists from Grassmann to Lüders? They were thinkers who approached Indic studies with insight, understanding, sympathy, critical systematization.

The results of sadly inadequate basic preparation are evident on every page; a detailed criticism would mean rewriting the whole book twice over. It must be pointed out to the author and his friends that incarceration has been made a regular excuse by the new Indian bourgeoisie for foisting much shallow writing upon the Indian public; Jawaharlal Nehru himself heads the list.

Misprints and defects of style might be passed over. The mistaking of *gens* as the plural of *gen* (p. 41, 82, 181) is more serious; "fantast" (p. 33) should refer to a person; levirate (p. 63) "with other men" is a worse slip, like the identification of "stonehenge" (p. 45) with an enclosure to protect the whole commune, cattle and all. This planking down of words in any sense or no sense at all becomes progressively worse, and indicates loose thinking: "*Brahman is the commune of Aryan man and yajnya is its means of production, the primitive commune with the collective mode of production.*" (p. 40, Dange's Italics). This is so wildly improbable as to plunge into the ridiculous. All R̥gvedic uses of *brahman* can be, and the greater part must be, explained as referring to prayer or the priesthood, while *yajña* is the fire-sacrifice. A ritual cannot be a "mode of production", though ancient man must have understood magic and ceremonial as helping to increase production. On p. 47 we get an etymology of *yajña* as *ya+ja+na* = "They gather together and beget," which is too silly for comment, apart from the dangerous authoritarian tendency disclosed.

When Engels utilized Morgan's discovery, he was well acquainted with the contemporary store of archaeological and anthropological knowledge, as well as European history from inscriptions and literary sources. In writing on India, Dange is aware that there exists a pre-Aryan population and perhaps that the survivals of matriarchy and tribal society can be found only among the least Aryanized of these. But with an exclusiveness that would have gratified any follower of the late Adolf Hitler, he restricts himself to the Aryans. Again, he is aware that there were Aryans outside India but sees no need to pay them any real attention. For him (as for Tilak, Rajwade and the rest), the Vedas and the Mahābhārata suffice to prove almost anything, with a little imagination and false etymology. Even in the Mahābhārata, he confines himself almost entirely to the Sānti-parvan, of which no critically edited text is available as yet; and a glance at the properly edited parvans (from which he could have taken much useful material) would have shown him how badly such a critical edition is needed before drawing any conclusions from the epic. There exists a study of the Aryans

(again not known to Dange) by a first rate archaeologist, V. Gordon Childe, who developed into a Marxist simply because dialectical materialism explained his evidence better than any other approach. Archaeology alone can supply any reliable data for the study of ancient cultures, particularly those that have left no contemporary, legible, written records. It is a completely materialistic approach, for it tells more than any other method as yet at our disposal about the actual tools of production utilized by many sections of mankind in the remote past, historical or prehistoric. Ancient written sources are to be trusted in direct proportion to their concordance with archaeological evidence, which means nothing to Dange. The fully developed kinship terminology of the Aryans shows that they had passed beyond the purely matriarchal stage of social organization *before* they separated for their various migrations. They first appear as a marginal people attacking highly developed civilizations; their chief contribution seems to have been better military organization and a new type of language. In the near and middle east, they displace the rulers of old civilizations without fundamental change in the means of production. In Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean, they wreck Minoan and Mycenaean cultures, but absorb some important cultural elements, as has been shown so brilliantly by George Thomson in his recent study on the prehistoric Aegean, following up his penetrating analysis in "Aeschylus and Athens". Of course, Thomson, uses the full mechanism of archaeological reports and literary criticism, along with his profound knowledge of Marxism and anthropology. In Egypt, we find the Daniwna (possibly Danaans or Dānavas) depicted among prisoners of war; a dynasty or two later there appear kings of Egypt with names like Shashank which would have a sound familiar to Aryan ears; but there is no change in the organization of Egyptian society. What happened in India? Did the Aryans bring a primitive commune into an empty wilderness?

Dange notes the discovery and excavation of Mohenjo-Daro in Sindh (p. 3) only as a mere curiosity, of no importance for his own study of the Aryans in India. As a matter of fact, it must completely reorient the study and interpretation of

vedic culture, for the fully developed city of such magnitude, with all its high technique and the complex social organisation thereby implied, is certainly not vedic; its demonstrable antiquity does not allow it to be interpreted as post-vedic. If we wish to study the oldest Indian communities, the fact has to be faced that those of whose antiquity and means of production we have any certain knowledge have passed far beyond the primitive, into civilization. If the study is to be restricted to Aryans, we must at least mention this earlier civilization which the Aryans could break up because they knew, as the Indus valley people did not, the use of the horse and of iron. The Mohenjo-Daro people; had trade relations with Mesopotamia, as shown by archaeological finds both in India and abroad; some Aryans also had contact at an early period with Mesopotamian culture or its offshoots and successors. So, we are already well past primitive communism and have to face great complications when attempting to extract history from vedic liturgy or epic myths. What must be noted — as Dange of course has not — is that the vedic references to fortified strongholds and cities of the black Dasyus, destroyed by Indra, begin at last to have a meaning. The three-headed Tvāṣṭra of vedic tradition cannot be unconnected with the three-headed creatures to be seen on Mohenjo-Daro seals. Our Aryans did not succeed to power without destroying the older civilization, and we must therefore look for the effects of this destruction upon the conquerors as well as the conquered. Even in the older portion of the R̥gveda we hear of warfare between Sudās and the “ten kings”, in part at least a civil war among the Aryans. It does not take long for the non-fighting portion of the victors to be depressed (along with the greater portion of the vanquished) in a newly developed social scale, especially when racial differences are present. Such differences are clearly indicated by the word for caste, *varṇa*, which means colour; for Dange’s facile pseudo-Marxist explanation, the *varṇa* is a later development, with division of labour. Did some of the exploited change their skin colour with retrospective effect? As a matter of clearly observable fact, we have some form of the coercive mechanism — the state — visible in the vedas, which implies some form of class division as well, whether fully

crystallized or not. The formation of the Śūdra caste, into which a large portion of the Dasyus were thrust, *prevented* the development of real slavery in India. The word for slave is *dāsa*, in older times equivalent to Dasyu, later to house-servant or bondsman; never to a chattel-slave bought and sold like any animal for heavy labour in the fields or mines. Even Diodorus Siculus notes with approval the (idealized) slaveless Indian society. From the Greek point of view this was quite correct as was, from the Indian, Buddha's remark (Assalāyana-sutta of the Majjhimanikāya) that in Yona, Kamboja, and countries beyond the frontier there were only two castes: Arya (= free) and Dāsa (slave), of which the Arya could become Dāsa and conversely. *Because of the caste system, India had helotage, not slavery.* Thus Dange's very title is wrong, for his sources contain neither primitive communism nor slavery. Of course, he makes no attempt to explain why caste should be a feature of the Indian Aryans alone, not of any others. For him, it suffices to read the class war into the Bhagavad-gītā.

All this is not to say that Marxism does not apply to the study of ancient Indian culture. It can be most effective if properly utilized. Matriarchy did exist, though not among the Aryans at a time it would suit Dange to have it; the time element means very little in his book, chronology being immaterial for him. We know a good deal about the actual working of Indo-Aryan tribes, in particular the Vajji or Licchavi group; but not from the Vedas and not at an early stage. These oligarchs, whose name at least continued for a thousand years with honour, are extra-vedic *vrātyas*, which shows that Dange's source material is as defective as his analysis. But he is so anxious to identify the general stages set out by Engels that one can find atrocious mis-statements on almost every page. "The R̥gveda mentions a big feud between the Deva-*Ganas* and the Panis. The latter had stolen the cattle herds of the Deva-*Ganas*, whose leader in this war was a woman Sharama. She leads the Devas through rivers and forests and finds the Panis, and war ensues" (p. 87). The reference is presumably to R̥gveda x. 108. The (not particularly old) hymn merely reports a dialogue between the Panis and Saramā (not Sharama), who claims to be nothing more than

the messenger of Indra demanding the return of the cows; there is no mention of the "Deva-gaṇa," and the *devas* are themselves not on the scene at all. Traditional comment makes Saramā a (divine) bitch sent by Indra to track down the missing cattle, and in fact *sārameya* means hunting-dog. Nothing is said of a female or any other leader of the *devas* in war or peace, except Indra and possibly Brhaspati. The most charitable interpretation that I can place upon this sort of "historical" writing is that Dange has not troubled to read his own sources.

Marxism is not a substitute for thinking, but a tool of analysis which must be used, with a certain minimum of skill and understanding, upon the proper material. Interlarding groundless conjectures with quotations from Engels does not suffice. For the book under consideration, the poor documentation, habit of passing off secondary references unverified (and unverifiable), poor grasp of the material, and absence of logic in interpretation make it impossible to rely upon any of the author's statements as regards the history of India.