

# **Marxist Historiography**

(Written by Aniket Alam for a Workshop on Marxism; Ranikhet, 2014)

This brief introduction will be divided into the following sections. First, it will define history and historiography; second, it will talk about Marx's main ideas and concepts about history and discuss what it means to add the qualifier "Marxist" to historiography; third it will delineate the main features and components of Marxist historiography; finally in the fourth section, it will describe some aspects of the emergence of Marxist historiography in India.

## **History and Historiography**

History as a modern discipline emerged in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, picking up on many different strands from ancient Greek, Roman and medieval Christian thought. For our purpose, what is important to note is that this modern discipline of history was a recounting of the past with "man" at the centre of the story. This was a break (one could say, advance) from the earlier conceptions of "history" where the central figure in the story of the past was either "god" or a "divine purpose", of whom humans were at best an extension. In the modern conception of History, human beings (or man as it was said) were the organising principle of the narrative. However, the modern historians of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries still did not have an understanding of change, or where they did, they could not explain why it occurred. Change was either seen as a "disturbance" from the "normal" which was a stable, steady state of human society organised around a set of moral, religious values. Alternatively, change was seen either as an expression of divine will, "man" being its vehicle, or it was seen as the consequence of the actions of great "men".

Thus history as a modern discipline remained on weak foundations, unable to understand or explain the central feature of its study – the passage of human beings through time.

Hegel was perhaps the first person who provided a substantial theory of change through time based on the theory of dialectics. But this dialectics depended on a supernatural power/God and history was merely the outcome of the world spirit's attempt to know itself. Karl Marx, who adopted and adapted Hegel's philosophy, provided a firm philosophical and methodological foundation to history by basing the theory of dialectics on a foundation of materialism. This was a major methodological advance since it allowed us to understand the past in a way which would also explain it to us. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the term historical materialism became popular among most Marxists to describe Marx's conception of history. Let us look at the main features of this conception.

## **Materialism**

Materialism asserts the priority of matter in explanations of natural and social reality. In the study of history, this means that understanding the material world in which human beings survive has to take precedence over understanding the intentions or ideas which activate human actions. Materialism is

an old philosophical position with great variety in its different expositions. For our purpose, it is sufficient to know that Marxist materialism does not reject the importance of ideas and concepts; what it claims is that ideas and concepts cannot exist without matter, whereas matter can exist without ideas or concepts. To illustrate this, mind cannot exist without a brain, but a brain can exist without a mind, or sight cannot exist without eyes but eyes can exist without sight.

In the study of society over time (another way of defining history) the materialist position means that we have to first start with the basic physical facts of life. The Earth and all its features which are necessary for life to exist and grow, the biological structure which has basic requirements to survive and thrive, the human relations needed to reproduce life. As Fredrick Engels put it,

According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the final instance, the production and reproduction of immediate life. This, again, is of a twofold character: on the one side, the production of the means of existence, of food, clothing, and shelter and the tools necessary for that production; on the other side, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social organisation under which the people of a particular historical epoch and a particular country live is determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of the development of labour on the one hand and of the family on the other.

Thus for Marxism, the understanding of history begins from understanding the material conditions in which human life is produced and reproduced, both biologically and socially. It means looking at how human beings reproduce and continue the species over generations; how do they procure food and who procures it; who eats what and how; how do human beings clothe themselves; how do human beings find or build shelter; etc. From these and similar questions come other questions of what social relations do human beings get into to do these things; what do these social relations do and what do they hinder; how do these social relations affect the material conditions themselves and what impact do they have on the human beings involved; etc.

You will notice that the flow of questions starts not from ideas, or rules and laws, or religious and moral commands. Rather the flow of questions starts from the basic building blocks of life and then proceeds to ask “higher” questions. Further, it makes the particular event dependant on the general features of the world in which that even takes place. So, as an illustration, a war and the victory and defeat of its participants is not to be explained merely by the greatness or bravery of the victor or the incompetence or cowardice of the loser (or for that matter not to the divinity of the victor or the sinful character of the loser). Rather, to understand who won and who lost, or for that matter why at all did they fight, it is necessary to look at social relations, economic structures, etc from which emerged the combatants. It is necessary to understand that if society does not produce a surplus then there can be no wars, whatever may be the intentions of the people involved. So the questions to be asked by the historian are: how did those societies reproduce and produce their needs; who did what; how was the surplus generated; how was this surplus distributed within society; how was society structured so that this surplus could be produced, and then distributed in that particular way; who benefitted and who lost; how was this division/distribution of surplus legitimised; etc. It is from asking these and similar questions that it is possible to understand why wars (as a generic form of dispute resolution) emerge; in fact, it enables us to understand why disputes emerge in the first place within society.

There are two things to keep in mind here. One, this does not deny the role of individual actions, brilliant ideas and even coincidences and luck in the course of historical events. All it does is to underline the fact that these cannot exist outside the material conditions in which those humans who have these ideas, do these actions and face their fate, live. Two, it will be evident to many of you that this is not really very “Marxist” but would be shared by most modern historians. This is partly true and the reason is that much of the advances of “Marxist” historiography, as well as the general methods of understanding society, are today commonly accepted and are an integral part of not just history but the social sciences in general. This does not mean that “Marxist” historiography has dissolved in common knowledge, all this means is that some of the basic materialist foundations of historiography which Marx and Engels postulated have become common to the social sciences. The particular methodology of Marxism – the combination of materialism and dialectics – remains distinct.

To return to our discussion of materialism, I want to emphasise the point that Marxism was perhaps the first philosophy or *weltanschauung* (view of life; world view) which gave a rigorous causal and methodological primacy to materialism. Marx argued that it was not possible to understand social relations nor the ideas which caused these social relations to come into existence unless one first identified the material conditions in which these social relations emerged.

Some critics (as well as votaries) of Marxism claim that this implies a strong determinism (that all human actions are entirely determined by material causes, and ideas and intentions play no real part); that this means that Marxism argues that all ideas and actions are fully explained by material conditions of life. Thus to understand a piece of literature all one needs to do is to identify the type of society in which it has been produced and locate the class position of the author and that will explain everything.

This does not, however, seem to be what Karl Marx was arguing about historical determination. Some of the confusion prevails since Marx never laid out his methodology in precise terms (like PhD students are asked to do today), nor did he write detailed expositions on history or politics, like he did on the economy. There are a few places where Marx and Engels do write out their conception of history. The two most important places where the Marxist understanding and methodology of history are given are in the *Grundrisse*, specially in the sections on pre-capitalist economic formations and in Fredrick Engels’ *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and State*. Both these are compulsory reading for anyone who wants to understand the Marxist conception of history. There are other places where Marx’s understanding of history comes through and it is possible to glean out the methods that Marx employs. The following passage, which is taken from the preface Karl Marx wrote for his book *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, is perhaps the best short introduction, in Marx’s own words, of his conception of History.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into

conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production. No social order is ever destroyed before all the productive forces for which it is sufficient have been developed, and new superior relations of production never replace older ones before the material conditions for their existence have matured within the framework of the old society.

Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation. In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.

The brevity of this passage, while helpful, makes it difficult to flesh out a full theory of history. However, to understand why the Marxist conception of history does not lead to determinism and to get a full sense of the insight that this historical understanding contains, it is necessary to also look at the other, methodological, component of Marxist history: dialectics.

### **Dialectical understanding**

The word dialectics comes to us from ancient philosophy, both Greek and Indian, where it was used to refer to a system where two opposite positions were argued out with the help of logic and rationality to reach towards the truth. It was revived in modern times by Hegel who developed his theory of dialectics to overcome the problems to understanding and explaining the world which were thrown up by dualism (or what we today, fashionably, call the binary). How does one resolve the conflict between idea and matter, between thought and action, etc; which comes first, which is primary and which is secondary, which is cause and which is effect?

Hegel's dialectics, by suggesting that these were not two different states of being but different expressions of the same thing, sought to resolve the dead-ends of dualism, while also providing a theory of historical movement, of change and transformation. He explained that the an idea already contains in itself the seeds of its own refutation; and the refutation builds on the strengths of the original idea and in the contestation between these two is found a higher truth, or a more evolved idea. The original idea could not find self-realisation without engaging with its refutation and it was

only in the struggle between the idea and its refutation that both were subsumed by a greater idea. Thus, nothing in the entire creation is ever, can ever be, in a state of rest. It is always in a state of motion, evolving into something else, something which contains elements of its previous state(s) but is entirely new too.

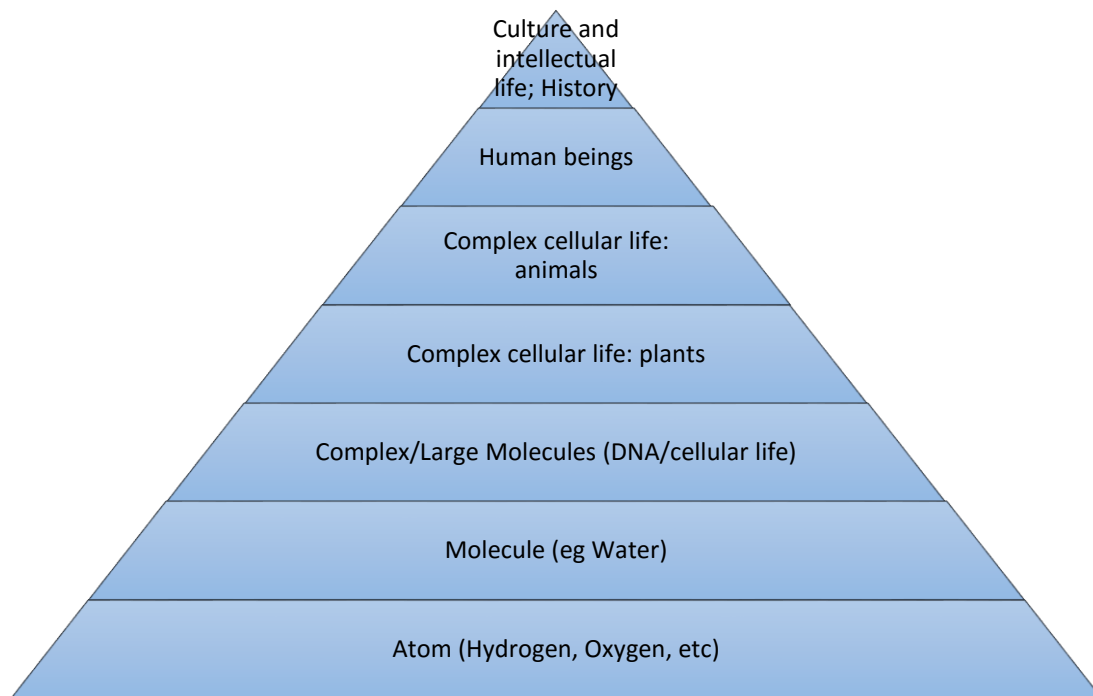
Hegel did not exactly use these words but this was, in a simplified form, his radical new proposition which revolutionised how we could look at the world, understand it and explain its various features.

Marx was deeply influenced by Hegel's dialectics but equally deeply troubled by the idealist foundations. In the famous words, which many of you would have heard or read, Marx attempted to turn Hegel's dialectics "on its head" – he put matter prior to the idea. For Hegel the "world spirit" thought up the world and then could only realise his thoughts by turning them into the opposite of thought, that is, into matter. And subsequently it was this dialectics between idea and matter which moved the world's history. For Marx, on the other hand, matter did not need an idea to exist. It existed prior to any idea. But for Marx, matter itself was an expression of dialectics in its original state since matter could not exist without motion. In its very being, matter (which is stable by definition) was motion (which is unstable). It was the dialectics between this that led to the "evolution" of matter into higher forms of matter, more complex matter.

Marx's postulation that matter does not require an "idea" to explain itself and that matter contains within itself the seeds of dialectics provided a more solid foundation to dialectics than Hegel. This was because for Hegel one had to make a first, a priori assumption that an idea existed which could find self realisation only by expressing itself in its opposition, ie matter. However, Marxian dialectics did not require any a priori assumption of such sort nor did it ask us to go beyond what we already know – that matter exists and that it exists without any "idea" to move it. Not only did Marxian dialectics not require us to make untested, and untestable, assumptions, it also explained the existing world – both natural and social – in ways which were more complete and logically elegant. With the benefit of hindsight, one can say today that Marx's theory of dialectical materialism anticipated much of the theories of Physics of the 20<sup>th</sup> century where at its most elemental it is difficult to define matter either as substance or energy, it is both at once. In a classic illustration of dialectics itself, Marx's conception proved to be a higher form of the idea which developed through a contestation with the original.

Today, dialectics is popularised by the thesis -> anti-thesis -> synthesis formula; which is not incorrect but is often liable to be misunderstood. It must be remembered that the dialectical understanding of motion is that the "thesis" is itself the "synthesis" of a previous dialectical movement and that within itself it contains the elements of its anti-thesis, and that a struggle between these two gives "birth to" (a metaphor often used by Marx himself) the next synthesis. Each level is a higher form of existence of matter than the previous form; and while a higher form negates the previous form, it does not efface it, rather it contains the essence of the previous form inside itself. Let us take an example. An atom is composed on more elemental matter – protons, electrons and neutrons, which themselves are composed of more elemental matter/energy. The atoms in themselves are a new higher form of matter but contain their building blocks of matter and yet are more than merely a sum of their constituents. Similarly, atoms combine to form molecules which have a character of their own that cannot be defined only as a sum of the atoms which constitute it, yet the atoms remain. Molecules can come together to form large chains which are also known as DNA which have a character of their own which cannot be explained by their constitutive molecules alone, even if they continue to contain the latter.

And each level of existence of matter, contains its previous levels of matter yet cannot be explained only in terms of those. Let us show this graphically.



What dialectics helps us understand is that atoms remain at every level as we go up in complexity of matter. However, it is insufficient to understand the law of motion of matter at the atomic level to explain the laws of motion of matter at the higher levels; thus the laws of motion of matter at the atomic level operate at the level of, say, plants and animals, but are insufficient to explain how plants are formed and how and why they exist. Similarly, the understanding of complex cellular life of animals is insufficient to explain to us hows and whys of history, even if they continue to operate at their level of matter even in history (as do the laws which control atoms). In other words, it is not incorrect to state that human beings are a collection of atoms but the laws of which govern the movement of atoms are grossly insufficient to explain how the human body works; and similarly, it is not incorrect to state that society is a collection of human bodies but equally, the biology which governs human bodies is grossly insufficient to explain the movements of history. Yet, human history cannot operate outside the bounds set by the laws of motion of atoms or of the laws of motion of animal life, even if neither physics nor biology can explain history to us. Thus, unfortunately, we cannot have flying carpets and reincarnations, even if we can “think” of them.

This understanding, which may well seem (once you have waded through the heavy philosophy) commonsensical today is basically a legacy of the dialectics which has been bequeathed to us by Marx. The reason we have spent so much time discussing dialectics is that it is the core, the heart, of the Marxian understanding of the world and unless one grasps it properly it would be difficult to understand Marx’s conception of history.

What this discussion of dialectics helps us do is also understand how there is really no conceptual break between the natural world and the human world and that they are bound together in a common explanatory grid. History works within the bounds set by “lower” forms of the existence of matter and yet is not entirely determined by them. In fact, as you will notice in the pyramid illustration we have used above, as we keep moving up the chain of the evolution of matter, the intensity of determination keeps reducing. Thus the laws which govern the movement of matter at the level of the atom (and sub-atomic levels) are almost “iron-clad”; matter will behave exactly the same everywhere. As one moves up to molecules the laws become that much more probabilistic; atoms will combine in certain forms with greater variance; the laws of chemistry are less “universal” than the laws of physics. The possibility of exception emerges in chemistry. When we move to life forms, however basic like DNA,

the laws become even less universal. After all, life as we know it exists only on one planet of our known universe. Exceptions become much greater in the laws of biology and the combination of cells need not lead to the same result every time, as say the combination of protons, electrons and neutrons invariably lead to an atom.

The strong determinism (the antecedent conditions could cause no other event) of the atomic level of matter is slowly weakened to a soft determinism by the time we approach human culture and intellectual life, or history. In fact, the range of exceptions becomes so wide and its field of operations become so inclusive of all human actions that it may well be possible to state that the exception becomes the rule. Thus historical laws may well be seen as tendencies and trends. However, this is a very contentious subject and various Marxists have strongly held, and often diametrically opposed, views on how strong is the force of determinism in Marx's conception of history. In his own writings, and those of Engels, there are different "strengths" of determinism employed when discussing historical developments. If in the first few pages of the *Communist Manifesto* or in the passage from the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, which is quoted above, Marx and Engels display a fairly strong determinism in history – where one social formation necessarily prefigures the next, in other writings like *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and in the writings on Russia in his later years, Marx and Engels show a far weaker determinism and allow for a greater play of exceptions and coincidences. Historical laws, in these latter listed writings (they are not necessarily chronologically later), become more like trends and tendencies, often strong but never coming close to determinism. Even among later Marxists, Rosa Luxemburg's pithy "socialism or barbarism" (building on Marx's statement in the *Communist Manifesto*) or Antonio Gramsci's assessment of the various trajectories of the revolution offer a more open ended historical movement than do the "inevitability of socialism" slogans which have come to be associated with the Bolsheviks and their legates.

We need not go into the intricacies of determinism but before we move on it will be useful to remember that dialectics, when grounded on materialism, provides us with a theory of history which does three things; one, it does not ask us to make any a priori assumptions of the first cause, two, it provides us with a theory to understand causation in history without necessarily reducing it to determinism, and three, it enables us to link understanding with explanation. The last means that the move from knowledge to practice is contained within the same theory; that it allows for theory to become practice.

To recapitulate, history or human life over time is merely a particular form of the motion of matter. History can only be understood dialectically and that too only when the primacy of matter is maintained in the explanatory matrix. While history cannot be explained by the laws and rules governing lower forms of matter, it cannot also exist outside the boundaries created by them. However, one does need theories and generalisations (even if one calls them laws) which are particular to this form of the motion of matter, and the theory which emerges from Marx's philosophical innovations is termed, most commonly, Historical Materialism.

### **Class and Dialectics in History**

For Marx, the single greatest dialectical opposition in history has been class. Classes are a particular form of stratification to emerge in human society. Classes stratification is based on the control over the surplus produced in society. In societies where no surplus is produced, there will be little stratification of any sort and surely no class division. As soon as society starts producing a surplus in the goods for human consumption, questions arise over its control and distribution. The distribution of the surplus creates classes – those who control the surplus and those who produce it but do not control it. Initially, the surplus is small and in forms (food and basic commodity) which make it difficult

to store over time or use across space. Also, the first surpluses emerge in societies which were egalitarian and where all produce was consumed equitably. Thus the first appropriation of surplus by a sub-set of that society (one class) is not easy. It involves either physical violence or a large amount of subterfuge; often a combination of both. The need for physical violence and subterfuge (which is often couched in terms of religion) feed into one another and often it becomes difficult to differentiate one from the other. Coercion / physical violence and subterfuge become self-perpetuating over a period of time.

What this means is that coercion and subterfuge, which emerge from the needs to appropriate and control the social surplus by one particular class, get a life of their own. Eventually, they are not dependent on the existence of surplus; rather the very existence of the structures of coercion and subterfuge create conditions for the production of surplus and its appropriation by certain classes. Human beings are now born into society which is structured by class divisions which are kept in place through a combination of coercion/violence and subterfuge/obfuscation which now appear to people as the norm; the normal condition of life. It now appears that the structures of coercion and subterfuge create the class divisions of society; the products of human thought appear to produce the material conditions which sustain them. The idea appears to be primary to action. It was Marx's crowning achievement that he managed to work through many millennia of inverted thought and show us the obfuscation which made thought primary and matter secondary. Surplus and the conditions of its production, existence and distribution are now hidden because all this is now normalised. Class hierarchies, the giving of surplus by the producers to the appropriators, are the norm, the proper, just way of organising society. Any deviation from this is an attack on the just order of the world, on the norm and those who deviate from this norm, from this just order face penalties, often harsh.

Yet, the objective conditions of existence meant that people had to part with what they had produced for no good reason other than coercion and subterfuge, i.e. subjective reasons. The contradiction between the objective conditions of exploitation and oppression and the subjective conditions which normalised these erupted frequently in class struggle. All the coercion and subterfuge has historically never been enough to prevent people from opposing the appropriation of surplus from them. The mass of the producers struggled against the taking away of what they had produced with their labour. Marx was the one who identified this as the core of history. It was the oppositional struggle of classes that provided human society with the motor of movement. This is made very clear, even if a bit polemically, in the first few paragraphs of the Communist Manifesto. Let me quote these well-read passages.

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.

Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

In the earlier epochs of history, we find almost everywhere a complicated arrangement of society into various orders, a manifold gradation of social rank. In ancient Rome we have patricians, knights, plebeians, slaves; in the Middle Ages, feudal lords, vassals, guild-masters, journeymen, apprentices, serfs; in almost all of these classes, again, subordinate gradations.

The modern bourgeois society that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.



Our epoch, the epoch of the bourgeoisie, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other — Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.

From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang the chartered burghers of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie were developed.

The discovery of America, the rounding of the Cape, opened up fresh ground for the rising bourgeoisie. The East-Indian and Chinese markets, the colonisation of America, trade with the colonies, the increase in the means of exchange and in commodities generally, gave to commerce, to navigation, to industry, an impulse never before known, and thereby, to the revolutionary element in the tottering feudal society, a rapid development.

The feudal system of industry, in which industrial production was monopolised by closed guilds, now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of the new markets. The manufacturing system took its place. The guild-masters were pushed on one side by the manufacturing middle class; division of labour between the different corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labour in each single workshop.

Meantime the markets kept ever growing, the demand ever rising. Even manufacturer no longer sufficed. Thereupon, steam and machinery revolutionised industrial production. The place of manufacture was taken by the giant, Modern Industry; the place of the industrial middle class by industrial millionaires, the leaders of the whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeois.

Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. This market has given an immense development to commerce, to navigation, to communication by land. This development has, in its turn, reacted on the extension of industry; and in proportion as industry, commerce, navigation, railways extended, in the same proportion the bourgeoisie developed, increased its capital, and pushed into the background every class handed down from the Middle Ages.

We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.

Here one can identify the dialectical movement and the grounding in materialism. He explains in these short paragraphs how the modern bourgeois society emerged out of the previous social formation of feudalism. He gives a short description of the class struggles – the contending classes, what was their material grounding and what were their main characteristics – and shows how class struggle defined the social formation. What is also evident in this description is that each social formation has the seeds of the next social formation within itself. It is the outcome of the class struggle which defines whether, and if so how, this contradiction will be resolved and what the new social formation that emerges will be.

While class struggle remains the central motor of history, that is not the only contradiction which exists in society. There are various other contradictions which exist and often play a decisive role in historical events; the contradiction between town and country, the contradiction between different religious leaders and political/military leaders, the contradiction between agriculture and pastoralism, etc.

### **Modes of Production**

However, class struggle remained the primary motor of history since it embodied within it the contradiction between the forces of production and the relations of production. The term forces of production refers to the combination of the means of production (tools, technology, etc) which a

society has combined with the labour power at the available levels of skill. So in one society it would be a wooden plough pulled by human beings, in another it would be an iron plough pulled by oxen or horses and in another it would be a tractor driven by hydrocarbons. The term relations of production refers to the social relations which organise production; is the wooden plough pulled by human beings who are themselves owned by the owner of the plough and the land on which the ploughing is being done; does the person pulling the plough own the produce or is s/he working for someone else; how is the surplus which is produced taken from the direct producer; by religious obligations, by loot and plunder or by a tax? These define what the relations of production are. The relations of production help work the forces of production to produce the surplus and then help the ruling class appropriate it from the producers. However, the relations of production – the coercion and subterfuge we discussed earlier – both enable the forces of production to exist and work but also simultaneously inhibit it from reaching its full potential. New relations of production, which can not only help the existing forces of production reach their full potential but also can help transform them into a higher form exist in rudimentary form within the older relations of production. This is what Marx is explaining in the passage from the Communist Manifesto above.

Based on this understanding, Marx and Engels divided history (as was known to them in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) into the following modes of production or social formation – the slave society, feudalism and capitalism. In the slave society, production was mainly carried out by slaves who were owned by their masters in the same way as other means of production in the farm or workshop. All the produce, other than what was needed for keeping the means of production (which included the slaves) in working condition, was taken by the master for his own consumption and for exchange with other goods. Such relations of production could not lead to good productivity as the producers were overworked, underskilled and had no motivation to work other than the fear of the whip. Much of the surplus expropriated in such a society also had to be spent on keeping the direct producers in check and there was no motivation, either for the slaves or for the masters to increase productivity.

Feudalism emerged when direct producers were given some rights to the land and implements of work even though s/he was not really free to do what they wanted. Producers – whether peasants or workers in artisanal manufacture – were tied to their lords. The peasants were tied to their feudal lords and their patch of land while workers were attached to guilds and guild-masters. The producers had to give a share of their produce – often the larger share but a share nonetheless – to their lords or masters in return for protection and membership of the community, both of which were the basic conditions which allowed the peasants and workers to produce. Under capitalism, the producers are legally free individuals who only sell their labour power “on their own free” will to earn wages to buy food, clothing and shelter.

If in a slave society appropriation of the surplus was only through direct coercion, in capitalism it is entirely “voluntary” and hidden. The surplus value which is appropriated from the workers is hidden and what the worker gets in wages appears to be a legally valid openly agreed to recompense for the work put in. There is no direct coercion on the workers, unless s/he breaks the “agreement” entered into with the owner of the means of production – the capitalist.

### **Lessons from a Mistake**

Marx's schemata of historical progression also had other social formations, that of the tribal and the Asiatic mode of production. Both of these were less rigorously defined than slavery, feudalism and capitalism, the latter being the main focus of their studies. However, the tribal mode of production (or the pre-historical) was one where classes had not yet fully formed and social surplus was both small and sporadic as well as not appropriated by one particular class. It was out of tribal society that class society emerged.

The Asiatic mode of production, on the other hand, was a class society. The idea of this was taken from Hegel himself who considered the Asian civilisations to be very distinct and different from the European ones. For Marx the Asiatic mode of production was one where the State was powerful and social classes were relatively weak. This was because agriculture – the mainstay of pre-capitalist societies – was dependent on major irrigation works which could only be built, managed and controlled by an organisation like the State. His ideas of Asiatic societies and their forces of production and relations of production were based on his readings of ancient Egypt, Babylon as well as India and China in (what we would today periodise as) the late medieval and early colonial periods, about which he read in British colonial documents. According to this conception, Asiatic societies get much less rain and depend on agriculture producing a surplus only if there is irrigation and water management on a large-scale. Significantly, there was no dialectic at work in this society as the “motor of history” – class struggle – was weak, given the weakness of social classes. In a strange way, Marx’s conception, taken from Hegel, denied dialectics in non-European “civilisations”.

The Asiatic mode of production idea was wrong on the counts of both historical evidence as well as dialectical logic. Marx and Engels abandoned the idea within about a decade of writing about it and their later works on history – like *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and Marx’s writings on Russia – give ample proof that they did not consider it correct. The idea has survived into the present times, surprisingly kept alive by historians who are otherwise anti-Marxist, and Marxist historians, particularly those from India have played a crucial role in destroying the intellectual legitimacy of the Asiatic mode of production theory.

However, even this mistake of Marx (and Engels) has some instructions for us about the Marxist conception of History.

One, it debunks the idea that Marx postulated a uniform and universal “model” for the entire world without exception. It is clear that even at the earliest, Marx was suggesting that different parts of the world will have different historical trajectories. The existence of the Asiatic mode of production as a form / stage in the historical process suggests that the slavery -> feudalism -> capitalism route was only a historical trajectory for those countries which had become capitalist then or were showing signs of that transformation (ie parts of Europe).

Two, it shows that for Marx it was not just the dialectical relations within society which were significant as determinants of the historical movement but even geographical features could play a determinate role. That he has been accused of geographical determinism (and not without reason) in this suggests that for him historical movement was not only based on economics and that he was open to other possibilities; that non-economic factors could well play a decisive role in historical materialism. This is a lesson which perhaps most followers of Marx have ignored in their efforts to exorcise the demons of the Asiatic mode of production; economic factors have been accepted without critical scrutiny by most Marxists as the only material basis for historical movement.

Three, Marx’s postulation of this theory and then abandonment shows how Marx did not consider his schemata to be fixed or “sacred”; if evidence was available to the contrary, he was happy to revise it. Thus there is no fixity to the slavery -> feudalism -> capitalism trajectory, which is often supposed to be a marker of Marxist history. What remains at the core of Marxist historiography is the assertion of materialism and dialectics. Everything else remains open for critical scrutiny.

Even in the case of Europe and the development of capitalism there, Marx, over the years of study and struggle, came to the conclusion that the schemata he had drawn out in the earlier years was open to exceptions and revisions. His most famous revision came on the question of the development of capitalism in Russia where he warned “Marxists” about a mechanical copying of his historical trajectory of slavery -> feudalism -> capitalism. I reproduce a typically sharp response from Marx on

this issue which fleshes out how he was warning against taking his historical divisions too literally and asking for the application of the methods of materialist dialectics to the study of history.

...what application to Russia can my critic make of this historical sketch? Only this: If Russia is tending to become a capitalist nation after the example of the Western European countries, and during the last years she has been taking a lot of trouble in this direction – she will not succeed without having first transformed a good part of her peasants into proletarians; and after that, once taken to the bosom of the capitalist regime, she will experience its pitiless laws like other profane peoples. That is all. But that is not enough for my critic. He feels himself obliged to metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances in which it finds itself, in order that it may ultimately arrive at the form of economy which will ensure, together with the greatest expansion of the productive powers of social labour, the most complete development of man. But I beg his pardon. (He is both honouring and shaming me too much.) Let us take an example.

In several parts of *Capital* I allude to the fate which overtook the plebeians of ancient Rome. They were originally free peasants, each cultivating his own piece of land on his own account. In the course of Roman history they were expropriated. The same movement which divorced them from their means of production and subsistence involved the formation not only of big landed property but also of big money capital. And so one fine morning there were to be found on the one hand free men, stripped of everything except their labour power, and on the other, in order to exploit this labour, those who held all the acquired wealth in possession. What happened? The Roman proletarians became, not wage labourers but a *mob* of do-nothings more abject than the former “poor whites” in the southern country of the United States, and alongside of them there developed a mode of production which was not capitalist but dependent upon slavery. Thus events strikingly analogous but taking place in different historic surroundings led to totally different results. By studying each of these forms of evolution separately and then comparing them one can easily find the clue to this phenomenon, but one will never arrive there by the universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being super-historical.

It is unfortunate that Marxist history has come to somehow often be associated with precisely such a “universal passport of a general historico-philosophical theory”. We will end our discussion of Marxist historiography here and turn our attention now to the work of Marxist historians

### ...in India

Historians in India had to struggle against the twin obstacles of colonial and religion based interpretations of history which were not just dominant, but hegemonic. Some efforts had been made earlier to break the colonialist interpretations of Indian history. The British colonialists were the first to bring the “modern” tools and perspectives of history to the study of Indian history. They made a major contribution by defining and identifying evidence both textual and archeological, classifying the textual sources, bringing chronological rigour to the past, and introducing methods of generalisations

which were open to public scrutiny and critique. However, there were major methodological and political infirmities in this historical perspective. The first person who wrote a modern history of India was James Mill whose 1817 publication *The History of British India* became the template for periodization of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and Modern periods. It put in place an understanding of history based on the actions of great men who were defined by their religious identity and the role of the English in civilising India.

The traditional conception of history was one defined by the periodization based on yugas or the Hijri calendar. In the former, the entire purpose of history was to deny change and movement in time, the past being merely a story of events ordained by god(s). In the latter, history was a story of man's actions on earth but all towards stating how the subject of history (the great man) had followed the edicts of god. Nationalist history, which started being written by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by various Indians who wanted to contest Mill's rationalisation of colonialism as a civilising mission, did much to debunk that at the level of facts but could not really challenge its theoretical and methodological foundations. Rather, it was combined with various bits from the traditional conceptions of history to create a political narrative where the British colonialists did not in fact come on a civilising mission.

It was not until the emergence of Marxist historiography in India that it was possible to repudiate the colonialist historiography both politically as well as theoretically and methodologically. This was because Marx had left behind some very fascinating writings on India under colonialism; even when he laboured under the false Asiatic mode of production idea and was dependent on British colonialist documents for sources. His most significant insights were that British rule would, at once, mercilessly destroy the extant political economy as well as lay the foundation of a new one. Colonialism would, in pursuance of profit for British capital, end up uprooting traditional social, cultural and intellectual life; a process which would be marked by unprecedented suffering of people in India. However, it would also succeed in laying the conditions which would provide these very people with the tools to build themselves new social, cultural and intellectual lives which would help them stand up to colonialism and eventually help them emancipate themselves. It was the application of dialectics to the condition of colonial plunder where he could identify, in the same instance, both extreme degradation and oppression as well as the seeds of regeneration and independence. Some of the exact predictions of Marx did not come true but the general trend he identified, and it is important to repeat that he was the first to ever do so, did come to fruition for the most part.

The earliest Marxist history research and writing in India based itself on these insights of Marx to critique colonialism and can be traced to Rajni Palm Dutt and Jawaharlal Nehru.

RP Dutt was born of a Bengali father and Swedish mother in England and lived his life there as a lifelong member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. In the late 1930s he wrote the book *India Today* which was the first attempt to systematically analyse India under colonialism using the tools of historical materialism. It was path breaking since it analysed contemporary India as a part of a world colonial empire and which made an attempt to understand the national movement through a study of India's colonial political economy and the emergence of the new social classes. It consciously based itself on Marx's writings on India from the 1850s.

Nehru's *Discovery of India* used the materialist method to analyse the past and foregrounded class struggle as an explanatory factor. While Dutt's work was meant to give a historical sense to the working class movements in India by linking them to the larger global history of imperialism and capitalism, Nehru's attempt was to bring about a sense of national unity among the people of India by suggesting that there was a common history which bound them together; and that this history was not very different from the history (in its basic foundational features) of other parts of the world.

However, the first formal history of India written using the tools of Marxist historiography was by Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi. He was a mathematician who is, perhaps, now remembered more

for his writings on history. He was a versatile person who was well versed in Sanskrit and Pali, in the different natural sciences, apart from mathematics, and in the theories of social sciences. He brought all of this into the study of ancient societies of India. His first work in history was *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* which was published in the mid-1950s. This was followed by *Myth and Reality* in the early 1960s and *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India* some years later.

These books changed the way history was written; not just in India but globally; not just among Marxist historians but for anyone who wanted to research on the past even if s/he was anti-Marxist. Apart from his personal genius, the reason Kosambi became such a beacon of history writing was because he remained rigorously Marxist even while combining the insights of a wide range of disciplines into the study of the past. His practice as a historian was living proof of how Marxist methodologies could be seamlessly integrated with the most insightful academic insights from different disciplines. Whether it was the use of statistics, the study of geography and palaeontology, the use of linguistics or the textual analysis of ancient scripts, the insights of anthropology or the analysis of oral history, Kosambi seamlessly wove them together to tease out the economic, political, social and cultural conditions of people who lived thousands of years ago.

Thus, the more important question is not who was king, nor whether the given region had a king, but whether its people used a plough, light or heavy, at the time. The type of kingship, as a function of the property relations and surplus produced, depends upon the method of agriculture, not conversely. What was the role of caste in breaking up tribal groups to annex them to society? Where did the metals come from? When did commodity-exchange crops like the coconut become important; what relation did they have to communal and private land-holdings? Why have we no large-scale chattel slavery in the classical period no proper serfdom in the feudal? What is the reason for the survival of the Mesolithic rites, continued worship of stone-age gods even today among all classes? These questions have at least to be raised, their answers worked out as far as possible, if one adopts the new approach [Marxist historiography] Dynastic changes of importance, vast religious upheavals, are generally indicative of powerful changes in the productive basis, hence must be studied as such, not dismissed as senseless flickers on the surface of an unchanging substratum.

His greatest contribution remained that he showed how a rigorous application of the Marxist method was the best way to critique the mistakes of Marx and set history on a firmer foundation. Kosambi also laid the ground for Marxism becoming so hegemonic, at least for a few decades, in the discipline of history in India.

The reason I am stressing the role of Kosambi is that he showed how Marxism could throw light on not just economic and social history, it could also be a powerful tool to understand culture and religion as well as link the various aspects to each other. His class analysis of the legend of Krishna and explanation for the popularity of the Bhagavadgita, his exploration of the mother-goddess and his ability to get stones from pre-history to speak about the periods cultural history were such major advances that no historian, even if s/he was antithetical to Marxism, could ignore it. Kosambi, through examples of writing history, opened up the entire field of Indian history to modern methodologies; that he did this with a Marxist perspective meant that he could offer insights which were unavailable to other perspectives of academic history. Kosambi showed by example what could be done. Kosambi showed by example what could be done by the adoption of materialist and dialectical methods to interpret the past. It was like a moment of epiphany for the discipline of history in India.