



Karl Marx's Theory and the Lessons Learnt.

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I. Introduction:

Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) was a great social thinker. He is best known for his passionate attack on capitalism, but he also presents us with serious philosophic and cultural arguments. Marxian theory begins with the simple observation that in order to survive, man must provide food and material objects. In doing so, he enters into social relationships with other men. From the simple hunting band to the complex industrial state, production is a social enterprise. Production also involves a technical component known as the “forces of production”, which includes the technology, raw materials and scientific knowledge employed in the process of production. Taken together, the forces of production and the social relationships of production form the economic base or infrastructure of society. The other aspects of society, known as the superstructure, are largely shaped by the infrastructure. A major change in the infrastructure will therefore produce a corresponding change in the superstructure. Marx maintained that, with the possible exception of the societies of pre- history, all historical societies contain basic contradictions which means that they cannot survive forever in their existing form. These contradictions involve the exploitation of one social group by another. This creates a fundamental conflict of interest between two social groups as one gains at the expense of another. This conflict of interest must ultimately be resolved since a social system containing such contradictions cannot survive unchanged.

Some of the key features of Capitalism (according to Marx):

Commodities, Use-value and Exchange-value:

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, presents itself as ‘an immense accumulation of commodities’, its unit being a single commodity.

A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (Marx, 1887). The need that a commodity fulfills is the use-value of that commodity. On the other hand, “exchange value, at first sight, presents itself as a quantitative relation, as the proportion in which values in use of one sort are exchanged for those of another sort, a relation constantly changing with time and place” (Marx, 1887).

Production and Profit: The essence of people's lives is the process of production, since for Marx, human life involves before anything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other material things. To meet these contingencies of life, production is necessary. But as production satisfies one set of needs, new needs arise and encourage alterations in the ways that productive activity is organized. The elaboration of productive activity creates a division of labor, which, in the end, is alienating because it increasingly deprives humans of their capacity to determine their productive activities. Moreover, as people work, they are exploited in ways that generate private property and capital for those who enslave them in the form of surplus value which is extracted by the bourgeoisie named as ‘profit’.

Labour Theory of value: What makes raw materials into something that can be sold for more money? According to Royce (2015), all commodities have something in common, by which their relative worth and exchange-value is calculated. The one common property they all share is that they are the products of human labor. The final price of a commodity is the amount of labor required by the average worker, under normal conditions, to manufacture that product. However, the value of the commodity created by labor power is not the same as the value assigned to labor power in the capitalist system.



Industrial Reserve Army: Since the law of supply and demand does not apply in the usual sense for labor power, the thing that guarantees that the “price” of the labor power remains roughly constant is, according to Marx, something called “industrial reserve army”. It is the huge pool of the unemployed people desperately looking for jobs. The workers (proletariats) can’t demand a higher salary as they are in fear of losing their job. So, if employment rates and wages go up, the capitalists (bourgeoisie) will respond with various measures that ensure the industrial reserve army is replenished

Alienation: For Marx, work – the production of goods and services holds the key to human happiness and fulfilment. Work is the most important, the primary human activity. In his early writings, Marx developed the idea of ‘alienated labor’. At its simplest, alienation means that man is cut-off from his work. As such, he is unable to find satisfaction and fulfilment in performing his labor or in the products of his labor. Goods are no longer a part of the individual who produces them. Unable to express his true nature in his work, he is estranged from himself, he is a stranger to his real-self. Since work is a social activity, alienation from work also involves alienation from others. The individual is cutoff from his fellow workers.

Commodity Fetishism: In his later writings, instead of alienation, Marx used the concept of “commodity fetishism”. For Marx, capitalism was an economic system in which exchange values completely overtake use values. In the sense, that even if a thing has a use value, it will not be produced in a capitalist society unless it has exchange value, i.e. unless there is someone willing and able to pay a price for it. In a capitalist world, one begins to see a commodity having value in itself and we devalue the contribution of those who made the commodity. Labor power itself becomes a commodity. Human beings and human relationships also become commodified in capitalism. Commodity fetishism is an extreme form of “Alienation” induced by the structures of commodity-exchange in a capitalist society. A Fetish is for Marx: is an object invested with supernatural powers by those who worship it.

Marx holds that the commodities that are exchanged in a capitalist economy are invested with similar magical powers and an illusory autonomy.

The Future Society as envisioned by Marx:

Marx predicted that capitalism would spread worldwide. He also argued that it would be characterized by constant, rapid unceasing change. He saw capitalism as a necessary step for progressing to the next stage – socialism. This is because, overall, technological innovations under capitalism made life more comfortable, when compared to the conditions under previous modes of production.

However, Marx believed that power must be wrested away from the few so that a good life could be fully enjoyed by everyone. Marx called for a worker’s revolution: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Workingmen of all countries, unite!” - Marx and Engels in The Communist Manifesto.

Failure of Marxism

A large number of jute mills were established by the British in the banks of the Hooghly River (presently the belt extends from Belghoria to Naihati region). At one time, the industries flourished due to a huge demand of jute products in the market (i.e. high exchange value of jute products) resulting in a large surplus production which was accumulated by the industrial capitalists. The workers were given minimal wages and hence they were forced to live in slums with poor living and sanitary conditions. Hence the workers began to form trade unions to unite and demand for higher wages.

During the last decade, the demand of jute goods in the market fell down drastically leading to progressively less surplus production. On the other hand, the workers through trade unions began to demand for higher pays and increased the frequency of labor strikes. Unable to meet the higher demands of workers and looking at the lower exchange value of jute products in the market, the industrial capitalists began to shut down or temporarily suspend the works of the jute mills.

Hence the ideas put forth by Marx regarding exploitation of industrial proletariats by the bourgeoisie seem to hold and even the “class struggle” began to take shape through the formation of trade unions. But ultimately, the trade unions diverted their focus to immediate increase in wages and frequent strikes, leading to closure of the industry. So, viewing from such a perspective, the seeds of class struggle didn’t mature into the tree of



socialism, but rather culminated in a pre-mature death. This is not only in case of jute mills but also the same case in case of other factories.

II. Conclusion:

Marx's theory starts with three crucial concepts – use-value, exchange-value and surplus value. The surplus value is extracted by the capitalist class in the form of profit. To explain the 'secret' behind profit, Marx used the concept of 'Labor theory of value'. The industrial proletariats are given minimal wages and the reason why they can't demand greater wages is the existence of something called 'industrial reserve army', which is nothing but the vast pool of the unemployed workers. He also introduced the concept of 'alienation' and further developed it into 'commodity fetishism'. It implies that the workers are alienated from the produced product as well as alienated from their fellow people and from their oneself. In a capitalist mode of production, the goods are 'fetishized' or worshipped by the capitalists and the contribution of labor power behind those goods is un-recognized.

We also analyzed Marxist theory in the context of labor relations in jute mills of Greater Calcutta region of West Bengal. In our brief analysis we saw that initially the labor relations evolved according to Marxist theory, but finally we saw that the situation didn't get to the point where Marx had envisioned.

Yet, Marx's theory is one of the best philosophies in the world. "The goal of social theory Marx implicitly argues, is to use humans' unique facility to expose those oppressive social relations and to propose alternatives. Marx's entire career was devoted to this goal" (Turner, 1987). We have to understand it in the context of the conditions prevalent at that time. But this theory has its own drawbacks. A classless society, no property ownership is a utopian idea which could not be materialized even in the communist countries like China, Russia, Cuba etc. And to conclude in the words of Bottomore (1965), Marx's theory for the past eighty years has been the object of continuous criticism and firm defence. This observation remains true even today.

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