

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Marxian Perspective: Historical Materialism

Welcome back to the class. We are now moving into the fifth week. And in the last class, last week, we started our discussion about Indological approach. How Indological approach was one of the very early and one of the important approaches used by scholars to make sense of Indian society. And we had a discussion about some three four very important people belonging to that particular school, especially G.S.Ghurye and Iravati Karve. And then we also discussed two other people, D.N. Majumdar and Ramakrishna Mukherjee. Because these are the important people, the pioneers who laid the foundation of sociology in its early times. And now in the fifth chapter, we are moving into another very important perspective that is Marxian perspective. And if you look into the influence of Marxian perspective in India or in Indian academia, we can see that Marxian perspective was much more powerful or much more dominant in history rather than in sociology or in anthropology. And there are many reasons for that.

And we will discuss those reasons. And also, we will discuss a couple of people who kind of used a Marxian perspective to make sense of Indian society, including say D.P. Mukherjee and A.R. Desai. But before that it is important to know what exactly is this Marxian perspective. And Marxian perspective has been used widely across the globe to study about the transformations of different societies, the social structure, the transformations. And so, Marxian perspective offers a very, very powerful framework to understand how to make sense of the society in which one lives. So, it is important that you gather or you develop an adequate picture or adequate understanding about what is this Marxian perspective and what is, what was Marxian idea about social change, what was Marxian idea about the very structure of society, how did he visualize society, what was the philosophical and ideological foundation of Karl Marx in his imagination about society and why that it was so important, so popular, why that it was capable of inspiring so many people across generations, across the regions for several generations.

Because Marx had a huge following among the academics, among the scholars cutting across the regional or linguistic or religious divide and Marxism as a framework was

important and it is still important. So, it is important that we try to understand what is this Marxian perspective. So, that is what we are going to discuss in this class as well as in the coming class. In this class we are trying to look at his larger philosophical understanding of Marx about society and in the coming class we are looking into his theory of social change. And these frameworks will help you to understand the specific trajectory that this particular framework took in the context of India.

Why that it was used rather more in the discipline of say history rather than say in sociology or in economics. So, I have titled it as Marxian perspective, historical materialism. So, we need to begin with what are the kind of philosophical ideas of Karl Marx behind his prescriptions. So, Marx had both an empirical theory of history and a speculative philosophy of history. The former which had come to be known as historical materialism is a set of micro sociological generalizations about the cause of stability and change in societies.

The latter largely of Hegelian inspiration offers a scheme of interpreting all historical events in terms of their contribution to realize the end of history in both sense of the term. So, it is a very fundamental argument that you know Marxian theory or Marxian thought has two dimensions. One is it is an empirical theory of history which is based on very specific empirical analysis of what exactly happened in the past. So, unlike many other scholars, many other scholars of his time, many other philosophers of his time who kind of provided an armchair explanation about the past as well as about the future. What Marx did was a very rigorous systematic analysis of the past by looking into the exact incidents that happened, exact epochs that passed by and exact processes that happened in the history.

And so he took a very rigorous historical analysis to understand the society but without being happy with that he went, he goes one step further and to provide a kind of a speculative philosophy of history. So, that is heavily influenced by people like Hegel or even that was the most important feature of that particular time. Every philosopher would actually predict what would be the course of human action. So, Marx also took part in that whole exercise. He also has a kind of a prescriptive, kind of a speculative philosophy of history.

He predicted that what would be the nature of human race, what would be the nature of human civilization and what would be a contribute to kind of realizing the end of history, end of history in both sense of the term. So, end of history, he says that end of history in the sense that human beings capable of creating their own history will be materialized when they reach the ultimate state of communism. And this is whole larger process of human civilization, other civilizations also will have to follow this similar kind of

argument. So, the latter largely Hegelian inspiration offers a scheme for interpreting all historical events in terms of their contribution to the realizing the end of history. So, based on materialist conception of the world, human history as a history of human labor and class struggles.

So, this is a very, very important argument where he has a series of debates with Hegel and especially with Hegelian idealism. I am not going into that, but we have very elaborate discussion on that in another course. So, Hegelian idealism kind of argued or it is based on the assumption that it is a human ideas that really propel a society from one stage to the another. So, he gives primacy to human ideas, and it goes into the and then believes that these human ideas are capable of bringing in actual changes, it is not the matter. The matter out there is not real, what is real is a kind of an ideas that in your mind.

So, Hegel would argue that the European societies were able to progress much, so they were able to develop much mainly because their ideas were much, much better, they had advanced much in terms of their ideas. So, that is a part of a much larger complicated argument, but I am just making it look very, very simple and then broad. But on the other hand, Marx and a host of other scholars of his time, while they agreed kind of, they agreed in principle about a kind of a dialectical theory that Hegel had brought in. Actually, Hegelian theory is known as the dialectical idealism, where he argued that the ideas enter into a kind of a dialectical process, there is a thesis, there is an antithesis and this dialectical process between these two gives rise to another state called as the synthesis and the synthesis also has these antithetical ideas and due to this dialectical process, it goes to the next level. So, a Hegelian dialectical idealism has these two elements combined together or two arguments combined together that social change is possible only through a dialectical process and second is that it is ideas that actually propel human change or human progress.

On the other hand, Marx along with a number of other scholars at the time, they disagreed fiercely with Hegel for giving primacy to the ideas and they argued that it is not the ideas but it is a matter that is most important. The changes happened, they agreed with Hegel in terms of his argument about this dialectic's method, dialectics as a method. So, they argued that there is a dialectical process taking place, but this dialectical process is happening not in the realm of the ideas but in the realm of the matter. So, that is a kind of a very brief summary of the major debate that took place between Hegel and Marx about dialectical idealism and dialectical materialism. So, based on materialist conception of the world, human history as the history of human labour and class struggle.

So, Marx would argue that the history of human society is nothing but the history of

human labour and the class struggle and these are the real things. It is the human labour that distinguishes human being from other animals and the history of human existence is the history of labour, human labour and the kind of a class struggles that emanate from that. He explained through the framework of dialectics inspired by Hegel, that is what we just discussed and explained the past predicted the future. So, he used this dialectical, you know, historicism or dialectical materialism. Dialectical materialism is mainly because he is using the dialectics basically to explain the transformations happening in the material realm and he explained the past and predicted the future as well and we all know about how Marx predicted the future.

He predicted the collapse of capitalism as a system, he predicted the revolution and then he predicted its transformation into a socialist and a final communist society. And he argued that in communist society the state will wither away, it will be a classless society, it will be a dictatorship of the proletariat. So, all those grand predictions but we know it has, none of it had come true and provided a host of conceptual tools to understand process of labour, social structure, social change and so on. So, it is important that we are familiar with each of these things basically to understand how scholars developed Marxian framework. Material factors, especially the production and reproduction of existence through labour are the driving power in people's lives.

Similar point that we discussed, it is not the ideas, it is not the ideas that are driving social change, but it is a kind of a consequence of production and reproduction of existence through labour is a driving power in people's life. The problems facing any society are inseparable from the organisation of the labour process. So, labour process is the fundamental feature of any society, how people enter into the realm of product, into the realm of production and how are people related with each other, what are the rules regulating them, what are the different structures that they represent. So, these are some of the very fundamental areas of concern in the Marxian scheme of things. Marx states, life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life.

It is a very important argument. To understand any society, it is necessary to grasp the labour process, the ways in which people transform nature through work. Labour fundamentally shapes people's identities, their sense of who they are. So, the Marxian theory is unlike any other philosophical stance, puts forward the centrality of the labour and its consequences of labour into other, consequence of labour in developing other aspects of human life. Human history is the process of people producing their material lives.

Labour produces a definite mode of life and human nature is dependent on the material conditions of production. The labour process is socially organized in distinct ways in

different societies. So, this again the central argument that human history is the process of people producing their material life. You need to look at human history, not say through the perspective of a particular king or an emperor or through the lineage of kings, that could be important but more important was the kind of a material base, how was labour organised, what kind of production happened, what were the kind of mechanisms of distribution, what were the kind of social organisation that supported the kind of a productive system or a production system in that particular society. So, labour produces definite mode of life.

You are the kind of life that you lead in a particular epoch is a direct product of the kind of a, of the labour. And human nature is dependent on the material conditions of production. So, this is again and again, it is repeated because basically to drive home the argument about the centrality of production in Marxian scheme of things. Every type of productive system presupposes a set of social relations as well as a particular approach to mastering nature. The reproduction of a people through labour is not accomplished by isolated individuals but by members of a society.

So, he argues that every productive type, productive systems, for example, he in his very famous categorization, he talks about tribal society of primitive communism, then he talks about slavery, then he talks about feudalism, then he talks about capitalism and then he believed that this capitalism also will be replaced by a state of communism. So, each of these things he says it presupposes set of social relations as well as particular approach to nature of, approach to mastering the nature. And each of these distinct forms are not only about, not only merely about producing your economic goods but also it has much larger implications about how you organize yourself, how do you master the nature and how do you take the whole society into your own control. The reproduction of a people through labour is not accomplished by isolated individuals. So, he does not believe that it is the creative mind of an individual that brings in these transformations, but it is a much larger structural transformation.

As arrangement of labour becomes more complex, a division of labour emerges. The division of labour distributes the conditions of labour, the tools, and materials into different unequal groups. And this again mentioned by different scholars including Durkheim and others who argue that when human society becomes more complex, when you have more people, when you move from a kind of a hunting gathering and into more settled forms of human life, the division of labour will increase, and division of labour will also produce different kind of a strata of society or different classes of society. It promotes a more efficient economic system that allows a surplus to be created beyond that is needed for subsistence. When a surplus develops, one group can live off the labour of another akin to the master's domination over the slave.

So, he is arguing that when you have division of labour and when you, especially once you invent something called as agriculture or cultivation, then what happened? You will be assured of your food security till the, for a particular year. You are able to cultivate, a group of people will be able to cultivate, and that cultivation will be able to give you food security for a whole year. And you are kind of basically freed from the everyday exigency of going to hunt and then gather for your daily subsistence. That he says will produce a set of people, the surplus due to agriculture and cultivation will produce a people who will be able to live off their, the leave off the labour of other people and then will be able to do other things. And he argues, this is the way in which Marx argues as the class emerges.

So, classes arise when surplus of goods produced by the division of labour can be controlled by a minority of people. Any community in which an elite possesses the surplus is an unequal society. Further, the ways in which a ruling group extracts the surplus from another class provides insight into the type of inequality and exploitation generated in the society. So, every society especially other than the most primitive hunting gathering society, Marx argues is subsisting on this whole mechanism of controlling this, the surplus. And who gets to control the surplus and who gets to enjoy the surplus will actually provide you a very interesting framework to understand the social organization of the society.

It is a very interesting argument. In a slave society, the slave master, he subsists on the surplus created by the slaves. And that really tells you about the kind of a relationship between the slaves and the masters in a very, very specific context. This inequality results in the growth of antagonism which will ultimately lead to social conflict and the whole society will move to the next level where again the same dialectic will take place until the era of communism where the state will wither away, and a classless society will take shape. So, this is his scheme of things. So, every such specific stage is what he calls it as mode of production.

Slavery is a mode of production, feudalism is a mode of production, capitalism is a mode of production. So, in each of these stages, Marx argued on the basis of the historical evidences that there is a conflict will emerge because this, each of the system has contradictory tendencies within that and that will lead to a kind of a dialectical process, a conflict will take place and from conflict the society will move to another state, to another state, to another state and finally to a stage of communism where the state will wither away and a classless society will be formed. And this is a kind of a oversimplified or a kind of a diagrammatic presentation of Marxian understanding of social structure and base. Marx conceived of society as constituting base and a superstructure, and the base is

nothing but the economy. It is nothing but the economy, it is a material base on which the entire edifice is built and this superstructure or the edifice is composed of almost every other aspects except economy.

It is a very, very, ofcourse quite controversial but also very insightful argument that every society is built on the material basis, the way you produce, the way you consume, the way you distribute, defines and determines your life. So, it is a, every society is built on its economic base and that he calls it as a realm of production, or he also calls it as a mode of production. So, on this base is the superstructure built and the superstructure, it is composed of your politics, your nature, your governance, your law, your literature, your ethics, your ideology, social norms and so on. So, he would say that a society characterized by say slave, slavery and in slave society your politics will be of a different kind, your law will be of a different kind, your literature will be of a different kind, your ethics will be of a different kind, your ideology will be of a different kind. And if you replace the slave with that of capitalism, then all other things will change because they are, these things according to Marxian scheme, they are a kind of a product of your economic base.

The primacy of the economic, it is the core, is the core idea of his materialistic perspective, the primacy of the economic as we mentioned. By economic he means specifically the organization of productive activity, how people come together to satisfy their needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Marx calls this economic assemblage the mode of production. So, how do people come together and then meet their basic needs? How do they procure food? How do they procure shelter? How do they procure clothes? And in more advanced societies, how do they procure more wealth for other activities? And this particular exercise, he calls it as a mode of production, and he argues that this really holds the key of the social structure as well as social change. As human beings we make our lives and express ourselves through labor, through our collective interaction with the nature.

Unlike non-human animals, Marx observes, we must consciously produce our means of subsistence. In the study of human history therefore the process of production is the appropriate starting point. So, this is again a central point, I repeated it several times, that Marx believes that the unique ability of human beings to labor. The human beings are the only species in the world who are capable of producing certain things by using tools and through different forms of labor. And this unique ability he says is the fundamental feature, fundamental building block of a society and it must be seen as the appropriate starting point.

So, unlike non-human animals, Marx observes, we must consciously produce our means

of subsistence. Now, this is again his overall argument in the scheme of things. I will just make it clear so that the subsequent discussions will be clearer to you. So, this mode of production, Marx divides it into two. One is relations of production, the other one is forces of production and the force of production is further divided into means of production and labor power.

So, this mode of production as we discussed, he talks about three or four important features, important types. One is the primitive communism, second one is slavery, third one is feudalism, then fourth one is capitalism and then he predicted it will be followed by a communist mode of production. So, these are the four and of course there are quite a lot of controversy, lack of clarity about it. He talks about Asiatic mode of production, which is something very interesting, we will discuss that in the coming classes.

So, this is his overall scheme of things. So, let us see what it means. So, mode of production generally denotes a discernible economic order, one defined by the manner in which human mobilize the labor necessary to fulfill their basic needs. The mode of production is generally denotes a discernible economic order, one defined by the manner in which human beings mobilize the labor necessary to fulfill their basic needs. This is exactly the same thing and several different modes of production have appeared throughout history, including slavery, feudalism and capitalism. And mode of production is composed of two factors, forces of production and relations of production, the one which we saw.

Relations of production is the social framework within which economic activity is carried out. It is very interesting point. So, in the relations, in the mode of production, one important category is the relations of production, it is about the social framework within which economic activity is carried out. So, what does it mean, a social framework? It talks about the kind of a social arrangement. What is the kind of a social arrangement between different groups of people who are involved in the entire process of production? For example, in a feudal society, who are the people who are involved in economic production? And mostly in feudal society, we understand it is agrarian based society, agriculture is the most important activity.

So, in the agriculture itself, what are the classes that we will be able to deserve? So, one group of people will be the lords, the other group of people would be the serfs who are a part of that. Or similarly, in a system of slavery, there will be masters and then there are slaves. So, looking into a capital society, there are people who own the capital according to Marx the bourgeois and then the proletariat who really work for them. So, how the social framework within each of these activities carried out is what Marx calls it as relations of production. And the force of production, it has two components, one is means

of production and the labour power.

And means of production includes land, tool, machinery and raw material. Any raw material that is required in the process of production is what is called as means of production. Whether it is land or tools or machinery or the raw material. And labour power indicates varying forms of productivity according to the skills, expertise, and technical know-how of the workforce, heavily dependent upon technological advancements. So, we know that the labour power of a person who works with his physical force is very different from a person who works on a computer or a person who works as an accountant or a person who works in say advertisement industry or that of a doctor or that of a lawyer.

So, what a person is capable of producing either through mental, physical or creative activities is what actually defines the labour power. So, each mode of production creates the entire configuration of a society endangering a definite mode of life. So, Marx would say that each of these modes of production would create a specific mode of life. And what individuals are, Marx asserts, depends on the material conditions of production on what they produce and how they produce. In transforming the natural world through labour, individuals also transform themselves, changing their own nature, developing new powers and ideas, new modes of intercourse, new needs and new languages.

So, each of these distinct stages, each of these new distinct modes of life, it is so pervasive, it is not only about what do you do with your economic system, economic production, but also it spills across, it spills over into your other important domains. On the basis of this economic structure, partly due to the power of the dominant class, there arise a corresponding legal and political superstructure and the forms of social consciousness. So, this is what Durkheim says, on the basis of this interaction, partly due to the power of the dominant class, there arise a corresponding legal and political superstructure, which is a product of this economic structure in the base and a form of social consciousness. The cultural beliefs and social institutions making up the superstructure, according to Marx, includes, including the state itself, typically function to stabilize the relations of production, promote the interests of the dominant class and lend political and intellectual support to the existing economic system.

So, this is a very, very, very fascinating argument of Marx. He would argue that the superstructure that is built on a particular mode of production will invariably, it will invariably support the dominant class of the form of production. It is a very provocative argument, very, very fascinating argument. He would argue that the dominant ideas of any time would be the ideas of a dominant class. It is a very, very popular statement by Marx. The dominant ideas of any epoch will be the dominant ideas of the, it will be the

ideas of the dominant class.

So, each, so the state itself will typically function to stabilize the relations of production, promote the interest of the dominant class, and lend political and intellectual support to the existing economic system. So, this existing system will be kind of producing its own protection, its own legitimacy, its own legitimation through the work of law and governance and political system. It is from this German ideology, his work. The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. That is the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has the control at the same time over the means of mental production. So, that thereby generally speaking the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subjected to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expressions of the dominant material relationships. The dominant material relations grasped as ideas. So, it is a very, very incisive argument that how the ruling ideas are actually meant to protect the ruling class.

And the dominant group will find ways to give legitimacy to their ideas through the systems and through the institutions of politics and then other state. So, that is why Marx kind of concludes or the very important argument that it is not consciousness that determines life but the life that determines consciousness. So, this is the, he goes back to his materialist conception again. The argument that it is not the consciousness that determines life. It is not the ideas that determine life but it is the, but the life that determines consciousness.

That every epoch, every specific mode of production will produce specific form of ideas. And these ideas are the reflection of your social, the economic and the social reality and not the other way around. It is not that you have certain ideas and by implementing these ideas you create a new society. It never works that way according to Marx.

Marx argues the transformation within society in the material sphere. It happens because of the dialectical process in the processes in the realm of production and as a result it produces concomitant ideas which in turn work to justify this particular economic order. So, this is his overall theory of historical materialism, and he proposes it as a universal theory. So, when you look at how a Marxian framework was used to study Indian society also, we need to keep this in mind that how Marx understood the Indian society. And Marx understood every human society on the base of the superstructure and that base, but he of course has taken into account the kind of regional differences and that is why he talks about Indian society or rather larger Asian society as something very distinct. He speaks about an Asiatic mode of production as something that is different from that of the

other universally formed other forms of production.

So, that is another point of discussion. So, we will stop here and in the coming class we will discuss Marxian notion of social change and that is also something important to understand how Marx was made use of by the scholars in India to make sense of social change that was happening in India especially from the colonial to the post-colonial times that we will discuss in the coming class. Thank you.