Marx and Ambedkar: Reflections on the Dialectics of Indian Emancipation

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CASTE AND THE ASIATIC MODE OF PRODUCTION

If Lenin had said that without understanding Hegel it was impossible to understand Marx in the context of the international proletariat revolution, then one can say in the Indian context that without understanding caste, it is impossible to understand India. The understanding of the dynamics of caste is the clue to the understanding of Indian history, its dominant ideology: Hinduism, and the mode of production in India with special reference to the Asiatic mode of production that Marx highlighted not only in his Grundrisse, Capital, and The Ethnological Notebooks. According to Marx the caste based: idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they had restrained the human mind within the smallest compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget that the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable piece of land,... communities were contaminated by caste and slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances, that it transformed a selfdeveloping social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, ...²

How does one understand such a reading? Should one say, following Edward Said that Marx the great humanist fell prey to the practice of Eurocentric hegemony, just as Eurocentrism had devoured Hegel and Goethe?³ Or is Marx's reading an accurate reading of the structures in dominance of Indian society, and these structures are not to be confused with a reading of an 'Indian feudalism', but have to be located in the Asiatic mode of production, the stand that Marx (but not the Marxists) held, and that caste is the deciding factor of this Asiatic mode? That caste is the basis of Indian society is a fact examined by thinkers as diverse as Hibert Risley, John Nesfield, Emile Senart, Max Weber, Louis Dumont, DD Kosambi, EMS Namboodripad, MN Srinivas and Sharad Patil. That the social process of caste, and all its terrible superstitions and ramifications expressed through the dialectics of varna-jati is both the basis and an evil of Indian society, was not only recognized by Marx but also the talwars of the anti-caste movement—Jyotirao Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. The anti-caste revolution remained the leitmotiv of their radical politics.

For Phule and Ambedkar, the rebellion against the caste system is of central importance. With them, one has a radical re-reading of Indian history, a radicalism that would put them in direct opposition to the Orientalist and Brahmanical phantasmagorical account of India. How both Phule's and Ambedkar's understanding of Hinduism is radically different from the romantic versions of Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Gandhi, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Aurobindo is evident in the fact that the former were to tear it down from its roots—caste had to crumble, along with it the superstitious spiritual superstructure created by the Brahmans. The 'notion' that the Brahmanical elites had constructed not only from the middle and late nineteenth century but since time immemorial, would be dissolved in its fragments. 'Hindu' history would fall under this subaltern deconstruction, a blow that Brahmanical Hinduism would never recover from. It is in this critique of caste oppression and the radical reading of Indian history that revolutionary Marxism enters the scene of the Indian revolution. Revolutionary Marxism is bent on understanding the process of caste in India and the radical subaltern account of Indian history.

In Phule's account of Indian history, the Brahmins who had paved the Sudras, ati-Sudras and Mechas (i.e., the lower castes and the Muslims) as the demonized 'other' are themselves deconstructed as the hostile other—the proto-Brahmanical 'other' that came from Iran and destroyed the 'authentic' Indian civilization.⁴ Brahmanical history would cease to have the firm and solid foundation that it aspired for. It would be exposed as being neither nationalist

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nor people-oriented. On the contrary, Phule would reveal the imperialist and inherently tyrannical nature of Brahmanism. The thesis that Phule would create would be the foundation of the anti-Brahmanical movement. It is from this basis that the contemporary subaltern anti-Brahmin movement in India emerged. Ambedkar arrived on the scene of Indian history with this Phulean legacy. Though Ambedkar did not fully endorse Phule’s historical critique, especially on the ‘Aryan’ question and the origins of the problem of the subjugation of the subaltern classes in India, differing in the historical analysis of the critique of Brahmanism, both critiques went on to form an epistemico-politico alliance in the subversion of Hinduism and the caste question.

In the tenth mandala of the Rg Veda, the master text of Hinduism, the myth of creation is depicted where the Brahmins are depicted as emerging from the mouth of god-cum-primeval ‘man’—Prajapati ('The Lord of Beings') later to become Brahma, who existed before the creation of the universe—the Rajanya (the later Kshatriyas) from the hands, the Vaishyas from the thighs and the Sudras from the legs. The varna system is first depicted in this text. It becomes a sort of an ideological signifying apparatus to justify later caste stratification and the social-politics of purity, pollution and exclusion. The first question that emerges is: what is varna? What is its etymological meaning and how would philology classify the term ‘varna’? The second question relates to the process of jati and the historical linguistic analysis of this term. The third question relates the processes of varna-jati with the Marxist idea of class struggles with special analysis of the Asiatic mode of production. For the clue to the analysis of caste stratification, a comparative study between the Rg Veda and the Avesta is necessary in order to find the nature of the tribal and class conflicts, as also to find why the Iranians did not produce caste but the Indians did. This implies a comparative study in the ideological apparatuses of the Indians and the Iranians.

What one needs is a scientific analysis on the relation between caste in India and class formations, and the location of caste in concrete historical economic modes of production. What seems to be hitherto missing is the disjunction between the analysis of caste and the Asiatic mode of production. Whilst the question of the Asiatic mode that emerged in the twentieth century was restricted to the question of the hydraulic system and the oriental state, the question of caste seemed to be missing from this framework of analysis. The debate on the Asiatic mode was severely restricted if not curtailed by the Stalinist state capitalist bureaucrat-MN Konkin (1906–39) being one victim, presumably killed in Stalin’s infamous purge, and secondly not sufficiently touched upon by non-Soviet scholars. Karl Wittfogel’s Oriental Despotism: A Study of Total Power and later Krader’s analysis, turned out to be defective. What has largely happened is the tendency for a moralistic reading of Marx’s Asiatic mode of production, claiming that Marx’s usage of ‘Oriental despotism’ was extremely uncharitable towards non-European societies. This moralistic reading would not only devour the ex-leftist turned renegade Wittfogel, but also Edward Said and the Indian Marxists who championed the term ‘Indian feudalism’. Marx was not interested in the mere morality of nations and civilizations, but in an accurate study of the modes of production. There is a fallacity in claiming that Marx was a European fellow traveller of Hegel and Co., a view championed by Said’s Foucaultian reading of the West’s encounter with the East. Said should have waited for Foucault’s ‘What the Iranians are Dreaming About?’ where Foucault praises the politics of Ayatollah Khomeini, the butcher of democracy and the communists, as ‘political spiritualism’.

When Marx talked of the idyllic non-changing system in India he was referring to the caste system—a system that, according to Ambedkar, is devoid of rationality—a system according to Marx where there are ‘self-sufficient communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed, spring up again on the spot and with the same name—this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness of Asiatic societies, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economic elements of society remains untouched by the storm-clouds of the political sky’. It is on this site that the critique of the Asiatic mode and Hinduism appear—Marx and Ambedkar now form a concrete alliance. This critique claims that there are multiple monadic Robinson Crusoes based on small property and patriarchal family labour where not only is rational cultivation but also the material and spiritual production of wealth is dwarfed; and that social life is fascinated with the totems and taboos of purity and the fetish of endogamy and social exclusion. In this varna-jati dominated mode of production there is no possibility of the instrumental rationality of capitalism, leave alone the critical reason of communism. Yet Marx’s analysis should not be confused with Hegel’s schematization of civilizations, where the Indians are rated along with the Chinese and the Persians, below European civilization. Hegel was Euro-centric, Marx was a humanist and an internationalist; his motto being ‘nothing human is alien to me’ (Nihil humanum a me alienum puto). Marx never condemns people and civilizations, he studies modes of production.

It is to this question of caste that scientific attention must now turn, for it is the decoding of the caste-class question that will understand Indian history as well as define the question of the Indian revolution. Whilst the communists in India have taken the lead in being the vanguard of class struggles and protests against caste oppression, violence against
women and minorities, the caste question persists to be eluding their radical politics, so as not to fracture the hegemony of the ruling classes in India. Unless this dialectic of caste and class is not exposed, even the bourgeois democratic revolution is not possible, leave alone the socialist revolution.

The question of caste is the most degenerate structure regressing the democratic process. It is from this site that one can understand the dominant mode of production along with the understanding how: (1) patriarchy in India arises, (2) as also the repression and retardation of an authentic capitalism in India (for capitalism needs free labour as its prerequisite in contrast to the caste based hereditary unfree labour), and (3) the emergence of the neo-fascists Hindutva RSS as well as the Islamists Tablig-e-Jamaat and the Jamaat-e-Islami. That caste is a living reality and does not die with the growth of capitalism has to be understood. The biggest threat caste poses today is Hindutva fascism of the Sangh Parivar. It ought to be understood that fascism is far more complex a phenomena than what the Comintern under Stalin's reactionary leadership and Dmitrov understood in the late 1920s and the 1930s. The classical definition of fascism coined at the thirteenth 'Enlarged Executive of the Communist International (ECCI) Plenum on Fascism, the War Danger, and the Tasks of the Communist Parties' went thus: 'Fascism is the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital.' Whilst it is most certainly decaying finance capital that had turned violent, and which propelled the First Imperialist War and the formation of the anti-communist fascists in Italy, Germany and Spain. What was missing from analysis was the study of the remnants of the German gens (as Marx reminded Engels in 1868 with a quotation from Caesar: 'The Germans always settled as kinship groups and not as individuals'). This survival of the rural Germanic gens did play an extremely counter-revolutionary role in Germany. The same is happening in contemporary India—the caste system is being propelled along with the geopolitics of imperialism to create a fascist political system in India. The ruling political elites, i.e., the Congress, as Ambedkar prophetically summarized in 1940s, will not go for a social reform, but will give the process of social reform to the rank reactionary and fascist Hindu Mahasabha. That the Brahmin 'democrat' is in no state to be progressive and no state to change the morbid caste system should be recognized, probably because the Brahmin is stuck up in the age-old fetish of the eternal recurrence. Hindu philosophy has no idea of progress; unlike their Indo-Iranian counterparts—the Zoroastrians for whom the idea of progress (Spenta) is central to their world-view. Caste is the social structure whose superstructure is the ideology of anti-progress and the eternal recurrence. The real study of the caste system has to take place, for caste has not disappeared with capitalism but co-exists with it.

Why is this so? For one, the growth of capitalism is not according to an ideal type logic where some type of neat class system in 'pure form' develops, a purity that is free from caste structures or other disturbing elements. When Marx talks of 'pure form' and understanding social processes that occur in 'most typical form and most free from disturbing influence', he is implying a methodology that is able to pry into the 'cell-form' of society. This pure form exists in reality at the level of the cell-form. The cellular pure form is always combined with the chaotic form. The dialectics of the abstract and the concrete is the movement from the cellular pure form to the chaotic bodily form.

Raising the question of social formations and modes of production has necessarily to be analysed at the empirical level that is free from all ideological disturbances. Most certainly one cannot impose the model of the transformation of feudalism to capitalism of Western Europe onto India. One cannot have what Marx called a 'ready made system of logic' that can be randomly applied anywhere. To raise the question thus of class and caste in India, has thus to transcend any a priori metaphysical assumptions. Unfortunately the communist movement had not only the intrusion of upper caste leaders but even the stalwart of the early communist movement was a revisionist, SA Dange, who applied a Platonic methodology in the analysis of India making evident the Brahmanical bias of an alleged leftist, who glorified Vedic society by claiming that the abominable sacrifice, the Yagña, is actually a mode of production. Secondly, the dependence on mechanical materialism in contrast to the dialectical materialism of Marx necessitated the domination of the teleological view of history: the idea that history is governed by iron laws independent of human will, where all history is said to follow a predetermined course—from primitive communism to slavery, feudalism, capitalism culminating with some inexorable force in communism. That Marx refused to abide by such metaphysical mechanics is evident not only in the Grundrisse and Capital, but also in the Ethnological Notebooks and his correspondence with the Russian Narodniki revolutionaries: '... the capitalist economic system emerged from the womb of the feudal economic system... In that history 'all revolutions are epoch-making that act as levers for the capitalist class in course of formation; but, above all, those moments, when great masses of men are forcibly torn from their means of production and of subsistence, suddenly hurled on the labour market. But the basis of this whole development is the expropriation of the peasants, England is so far the only country where this has been carried through completely...but all the countries of Western Europe are going through the same development'.

What, asks Marx would the analysis of 'this historical sketch' have on non-West European countries? It means firstly to transform the peasants into proletarians and then being caught in 'the whirlpool of the capitalist economy'.

But Marx warns that it is not possible to fragment the base-superstructure, thus opening the path of a reductionist and teleological misinterpretation of Marxism. Economicism was born in the proletariat movement. The Mensheviks, the social democrats and the Stalinists are the exemplary economists and teleologists. Social democracy today is caught in the binary of economic reductionism and political idealism. They cannot pose the caste problem. Why is this so?

From whence does economicism emerge? Poulantzas said that economicism is an effect of the abandonment of mass struggle and internationalism. One has to transcend this fossilized and mechanical methodology in order to pose the question of class and caste in a scientific manner. Economicism neither reveals the mechanism of class nor caste. Economicism is vulgar economics whilst Marxism is a critique of political economy. The Aufhebung of economism thus becomes an imperative. Just as the international mechanical social democrats split the base from the superstructure in India, we are faced with the splitting of the questions of caste from class struggle. This has been the tragedy of the Indian revolution.

In contrast to economism, we move into the subterranean regions of history with special reference to the debate of the modes of production in India and the questions of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft that first Marx and then German sociologists had raised at the end of the nineteenth century. That India even in the twenty-first century, is a bewildering combination of communities, is a fact. Caste is not a mere pre-capitalist remnant, but a living organic socio-economic structure. These socio-economic structures are also realized as 'communities'. That these 'communities' are compatible with modern class formations is also a fact. How these numerous communities are related to the historical conjecture of class struggles, remains to be seen. For this one has to go into the site of the great revolution in the sciences that Marx had performed. For the first time in history, 'the great moving power' (to borrow Engels' phrase) of history was seen in the dialectical clashes between the sites of forces of production, relations of production and the ideological superstructure. It is these ever-mobile clashing sites, which form the motor force of history. In these clashes, the economic, political, scientific and ideological sites, both condense and displace creating the seismic shifts that cause the changes in historical modes of production. In the 1859 preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx highlights the mechanisms of history.

Now it is in this unsurpassable terrain of history that the question of history itself emerges. The argument to be held is that Marx foresaw multi-linear histories, incorporating distinct Asiatic modes of production. History is not a single teleological process emerging from a primitive communism that marches into slavery, feudalisim, capitalism and socialism; but world histories emerge from multiple 'primitive communist' sites leading to Greco-Roman slavery on the one hand, and on distinct Germanic mode, African, American and the Indic and Slavic Asiatic modes, on the other. It is from this Asiatic mode that caste as a hereditary, occupational, hierarchical and endogamous group formation emerged. It is in this Asiatic mode where caste plays the handmaiden to Indian history. The point is to understand the pre-Rg Vedic Indus civilization, what mode of production existed with the Rg Vedic people, the development of Indian society, and what the statement of varna fragmentation suggests in the purusa sukta of the Rg Veda. Irfan Habib suggests the 'original statement for the four varnas, is more a description of social classes than
of castes: the rajanyas, aristocracy, the brahmans, priests, the vis, people at large (mainly peasants), and the sudras, springing from the dasyus, servile communities. There is no hint in Vedic times of either a hereditary division of labour or any form of endogamy. The varnas thus initially presaged very little of the caste system that was to grow later. The first question that emerges: when do these classes metamorphosise into castes? And what is the relation of varnas to the hierarchical caste system? How would both varna and caste be extinguished? There are two important issues emerging: the historical analysis, that of the Asiatic mode of production and caste (along with the question: is India really capitalist, will it ever be); and the role of caste in twenty first century India.

With regards the question of capitalism and caste, it should be emphasized that caste implies the restriction of the individual and the free movement of labour, whilst capitalism necessarily is based on 'free' labour. India where the capitalist market thrust on it by colonialism, has a complex social formation bound to the caste based proprietorship Asiatic Gemeinschaft. There will not be a fully developed capitalism with a capital/wage labour antagonism, but as Marx suggest proprietors or 'members of a community, who at the same time work. The aim of this work is not the creation of value—although they may do surplus labour in order to obtain alien, i.e., surplus products in exchange—rather, its aim is sustenance of the individual proprietor and of his family, as well as his total community. The positing of the individual as a worker, in this nakedness, is itself the work of history. This brings into mind Rosa Luxemburg's argument that the capitalist centre necessarily needs non-capitalist peripheries in order to realize the former's surplus value:

Capital accumulation as the historical process develops in an environment of various pre-capitalist formations, in constant political struggle and reciprocal economic relations. How can one capture this process in a bloodless theoretical fiction, which declares this whole context, the struggle and the relations, to be non-existent? ... Capital accumulation can take place in so far as customers can be found beyond capitalists and workers, in which case sales in non-capitalist strata and countries are the pre-condition for accumulation.

Trotsky likewise had remarked that, 'the most primitive economic forms are combined with the last word in capitalist technique and culture.' Uneven development of capitalism and unequal exchange (albeit in combined form) now necessitate the existence of caste and the pre-capitalist sectors of the global economy. Caste then is not only a pre-capitalist remnant but also an active agent in the global accumulation of capital. Secondly, the violent imperialist nature of capital accumulation brings in the political compradors like right wing organizations that are active in recreating primordial identities (whether Hinduva, Tablig or the neo-conservative born-again Christians). In this case the anti-caste democratic revolution will have an entirely different perspective, involving direct struggle against not only the local ruling classes but also imperialism as well. It is from this terrain of the Asiatic mode and capital accumulation in the age of late imperialism that one proceeds into the overdetermined character of Marx's idea of mode of production in order to understand how Marxism is necessarily dialectical and anti-reductionist. Firstly, an economic mode of production combines a number of social formations. Secondly, the elements of the base and superstructure (family, religion and state) are also classified as modes of production, albeit particular modes of production which fall under the laws of private property and alienation. Thirdly, the site of relations of production is also complex and multi-layered involving the following:

1. Historical forms of ownership of means of production, the balance of forces and the conjuncture of class struggles.
2. Type of economy, natural or commodity, caste and class: value, exchange-value, money, capital accumulation and surplus value. Surplus value as 'unpaid labour' is the great idealized signifier of commodity production.
3. Alienation (Entfremdung), reification (Verdinglichung) and fetishism (Fetischismus), where alienation implies loss, dread and terror (reminding one of Freud's analysis of Unheimlich ('The Uncanny' or unhomeliness), reification is literally 'thingification' or the de-personification of humanity and the personified of the 'thing' (signifying the character of commodity production), and fetishism is the morbid attachment to the existing-nonexisting-strangled object.
4. 'Real individuals' and 5. The human essence (das menschliche Wesen).

It is from this site that one can view the non-reductionist nature of historical materialism. Those who claim that Marxism has no space for caste and those who claim that Marx reduces everything to 'class' are absolutely mistaken. It is from this site of class-caste in the age of global capital accumulation that the critique of casteism can emerge. The annihilation of caste is not an act that emerges from the writings and enforcements of legal codes. Nor does the annihilation emerge from creating primordial identities and nativism that is to oppose an imaginary phantom of Brahmanism, but to actively engage-disengage real Brahmanism, the Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses in India (which are yet governed by the pura sukta notion of exclusion and hegemony) and the concrete accumulation of capital. Otherwise an inversion of Brahmanism will then be an inverted Brahmanism. Why is one making such a statement? Because
there are possibilities of an illusionary anti-Brahmanism (disjoint from history and estranged from the concrete mode of production) which functions within the varna framework, where an alleged subaltern caste claims a 'lost' (or estranged, even 'castrated' in the psychoanalytic sense) kshatriya status. In such a framework, the varna framework is retained, even in its estranged-castrated form. The point is to subvert the caste system, but then as Phule and Ambedkar had reminded us, one has to overthrow Hinduism itself; and as the revolutionary Marxist dialectic goes, one must annihilate capitalism and imperialism itself. The march towards the annihilation of caste has now become a long march.

**ENTFREMUNG, MORALITY AND PRE-MODERN DIFFERENCE**

Marx's concept of Entfremung (alienation) that he claimed to be the motor force of the onto-genesis of global class histories and which reaches its full blown form in the modern capitalist mode of production, nestles in a very strange way in Indian history, especially reflected in the ideological state apparatus of Hinduism. Entfremung as estrangement and the terrible loss, signifies schizoid splintering and manifests itself as the pre-modern difference of the pursu sukta and the caste laws of Manu. Hinduism for the Indian subalterns, is probably the only religion that is based on the ontological inequality of caste. Entfremung as estrangement and the terrible loss, signifies schizoid splintering and manifests itself as the pre-modern difference of the pursu Sukta and the caste laws of Manu. Hinduism for the Indian subalterns, is probably the only religion that is based on the ontological inequality of caste. Entfremung as estrangement and the terrible loss, signifies schizoid splintering and manifests itself as the pre-modern difference of the pursu sukta and the caste laws of Manu. Hinduism for the Indian subalterns, is probably the only religion that is based on the ontological inequality of caste. 

In contrast to this genealogy of birth and ranking by blood descent (something that fascinated not only Manu and the Brahmins but also Nietzsche and later the Nazis), Kant claimed that: morality consists in the relation of all action to the making of laws whereby alone a kingdom of ends is possible. This making of laws must be found in every rational being himself and must be able to spring from his will. The principle of his will is therefore to perform an action except on a maxim such as can also be a universal law, and consequently such that the will can regard itself as at the same time making universal law by means of its maxim....

Now morality is the only condition under which a rational being can be an end in himself; for only this is it possible to be a law-making member in a kingdom of ends. Therefore morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality, is the only thing which has dignity.34

We get an immediately contrast: the...
morality of the secularized autonomous individual as an end and not as a means, and the tribal onto-theological dharma of the herd—to consider humanity never as an end but always as a means. It is at this juncture that one understands the dilemma of the dharma of the Asiatic mode of production and the dharma of the despot (thus Oriental despotism). If one has to argue for a secularized, modern nation, then one has to discard despot and for that, as Ambedkar passionately argued one has to abolish Hinduism itself. But how is this subversion and annihilation possible? Cornelius Castoriadis has argued that reason, individuation, autonomy and democracy emerge from the settings of the Greek polis and despite the reactionary sabotaging of Heidegger's 'end of philosophy', it remains the central concern of the Greco-Western project. It is this Greco social structure that enabled the emergence of real, secularized philosophy, distinct from the mythology of the gods.

Now it is not the case that other world systems did not produce philosophy as philosophy. That world revolutions are international, de-territorialized and not confined into any restricted space is well-known. The thesis of the emergence of real philosophy from Greece is of importance, but one cannot forget, as Samir Amin has argued, how the three international revolutions of the universal idea of humanity that broke out: the first starting with Zarathushtra, Buddha, the Hellenistic Greeks, Confucius, early Christianity and Islam; the second being the European Enlightenment; and the third being Marxism and the international communist movement.

In the Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel had said that there is a sharp line of demarcation lying between the sites of the mythological and the philosophical. To philosophize means to reason with a critical mind. Mythology is the stage of the 'mind' of world history, existing in the stage of infancy. Philosophy emerges only with due maturity. For Hegel, the oriental world lies in the realm of the mythological, whilst the occident has the powers of philosophical reflection. Philosophy as such emerges with the Greeks. Whilst Hegel could be critiqued as an example of the Orientalist consciousness that began probably with Herodotus running up to Heidegger and Karl Popper, making an absurd claim that the 'East', as if it had no philosophy; the running battle between the mythological and the philosophical is real and does continue even in present times. For the Indian subalterns, the Brahmins are mythological, and there is no possibility of reason being drummed into their heads.

Marxism emphasizes on the scientific and the reasoning of critical philosophy, and locates the mythological as the 'return of the repressed'. It thus involves a humanist subversion of the same. The mythical is akin to Marx's reading of Hegel's philosophy as the 'estranged mind'—of the world thinking itself within its self-estrangement—i.e., comprehending itself abstractly. The caste struggles in India are embodied in myths and countermystics, each attempting to subvert the other, each attempting at hegemony. If the caste struggles in India are embodied in myths and countermystics, each attempting to subvert the other, each attempting at hegemony. If the pursu sukta embodies a myth of proto-Brahmanical hegemony, there are parallel subaltern myths. It is in this parallel political economy of myth making that the subalterns are able to attempt to destabilize Brahmanical hegemony.

Consider Phule's counter-mythology: If the Brahmins were created from the mouth from where was the mother of the Brahmin created? Or are the Brahmins motherless? And what about the Europeans? If the Brahmins were created from the mouth, then the mouth becomes a womb for the Brahmins. But then when the mouth turned into the Brahmanical womb menstruates then how did the Brahmanical mouth-womb absolve this pollution? And if creation emanates from the bodily difference then each of these estranged parts are to be affixed with vaginas in order that procreation to take place, and the period of menstruation for Brahma increases. It is well known that Savitri was Brahma's wife. Why, then, did he take upon himself the cumbersome responsibility of carrying the foetus in his mouth for nine months, and also of giving birth to it and bringing it up—subsequently? It appears very strange indeed! Three of his (four) mouths were free from this encumbrance. How then did the impotent Brahma like such childish game of make-believe?

If we call him impotent, then how could he seduce his own daughter—Saraswati (the goddess of wisdom)? That is why he was known as Brahma the daughter-seducer! Because of this vile deed he is not worshiped anywhere.

If Brahma, indeed had four mouths, then he ought to have had eight breasts, four navels, four urethras and four anuses. The libidinal economy reading of the Unheimlich of Brahmanism destabilizes it. The mythological games of the self-procreating estranged Brahmin are exposed. Hinduism is a game, but not a philosophical 'game for nothing' (to borrow Althusser's phrase from a different context). It is a game for something and a nothing, a 'religion (that) is at once a religion of sensualist exuberance, and a religion of self-torturing asceticism; a religion of the Lingam, and of the Juggernaut; the religion of the Monk, and of the Bayadere. So far, it is in this heterogeneity and contradictions that the Hindu system finds pride in. When an Indian calls himself a 'Hindu', it is this very spuriousness and vacuousness that is qualified. The term 'Hindu' itself emerges from the gaze of the 'outsider' (their 'brother Aryan', i.e., the Iranians) and metamorphosizes itself into something quite different from what the brother 'outsider' suggested, as well as what the Indian self demanded. So what is this genealogy of this estranged gaze? From whence did this emerge? It is well-known that the Persians probably first qualified the Indians as 'Hindus'; the
Zoroastrian *Vendidad* is probably the first text that qualifies the Indians as 'Hindus'. Thus, it is in the Persian Parthian period that the term 'Hindu' emerged. Later Persio-Arabic writers continued this historical-geographical usage. But when the upper class-caste elites in the middle of the nineteenth century used this term, the contradictions inherent in it became apparent. The battle for hegemony and counter-hegemony also started whereby the Phule-Ambedkar politics formed a non-negotiable alliance against Hinduism. If caste has to go, so does Hinduism. There can be no Hinduism without caste, just as there could be no morality with Hinduism. Hinduism is slave morality and here the slaves are in a state of rebellion. The subaltern slaves are not enamoured by Nietzsche's master morality, rather Hegel's dialectic between master and slave fascinates them, because in this dialectic, it sees the Brahmin's macabre dance taking centrestage, but also understands that the rebellion is waiting in the wings. The slaves want unity, not difference. Civil war against this *Unheimlich* difference has begun. Only thing is that it appears not to be quite visible. To transform the not so visible into visible, is the task for history.

**MYTHS AND COUNTER-MYTHS**

If Brahmanical hegemony is veiled in a myth, so too are the counter-myths of the subaltern castes. The Mahars, the lowest ranked of the castes even in the hierarchy of the 'untouchables' have a myth of creation which depicts their 'fall'. Unlike the Biblical myth, which states the fall of entire humanity, the Mahar myth recounts the fall of the Mahars. Like the Biblical myth, it has the taboo of eating forbidden food at its epicentre. There were four cow born brothers, according to this myth, who were asked by the mother how they would treat her after she died. The first three said that they would worship her; the fourth said that he would bear her inside his stomach, just as she had borne her children. This fourth child of the cow becomes the exemplary sinner and the ancestor of the carrion eating Mahars, for it is he who puts the dead cow in his stomach.

But if there was the myth of the fall there was also the myth of the Mahars as the vanquished tribes, subjugated by the Brahmins. Mahar leaders had used other forms of folklore to stimulate caste pride in the fellow Mahars: that the Mahars are the original inhabitants of Maharashtra destroyed and enslaved by the invading Aryans. Kisan Fagoji Bansode, an early Mahar leader, mobilized the Mahars on this issue and in 1890 Gopal Baba Walangkar, a retired Mahar soldier, drew a petition under the banner of *Anarya Doshparikarakham* ('The Non-Aryan Group for the Removal of Wrongs'), demanding re-admission of the untouchables in army. Eleanor Zelliot claims that the early claim of a noble pre-Aryan status is passed over for a *Kshatriya* status. Ambedkar would later in life (1948) in *The Untouchables* bring the thesis that the Mahars were former Buddhists who were defeated by the deceiving Brahmins in the fourth century AD. The heroic image entered the Mahar consciousness. Later, the Mahars had a heroic leader in Ambedkar and by 1956 (the year of his death), a new ideological discourse, Buddhism.

By independence the subaltern classes had a new identity, not the unclean untouchables, nor the sinning-guilt ridden 'fallen' carrion eating cow child, or the innocent Harijan, Gandhi's children of God. The break that Ambedkar made instilled the subalterns with a different subject position itself. It is the understanding of this new subject position that is of great importance.

Lenin had said that capitalism and imperialism signify multiple subject positions, each non-reducible, and that the rights of oppressed nations (and minorities) for self-determination is of central concern for the world communist movement. The central concern is democracy—the rights of all people for self-determination, not only labour or the proletarian, but all people. It is this idea of 'all people', which has to be understood, the idea that Marx had summed up in his statement—the human essence (*das menschliche Wesen*).

**DAS MENSCHLICHEN WESEN**

Just as caste and the Asiatic mode of production are under-theorized in Marxism, so too is the philosophy of Marx's humanist *das menschliche Wesen*. It was left to Althusser, the guru of structuralism in France, who castigated this radical idea in *For Marx* as an ideological remnant of a bourgeois fiction invented possibly by Ludwig Feuerbach. What was needed, so Althusser suggested, is an 'epistemological break' whereby a 'scientific Marx' would appear from a young and heady humanist Marx. One must openly speak of a 'theoretical anti-humanism'.

What seems at one point is a French philosophical justification of a Slavic Stalinist misunderstanding and murder of Marx. But this misunderstanding will create the earlier philosophies and ideologies that not only Marx, but also Kant, Hegel and Feuerbach had transcended. One has to go through the secularist and humanist revolution of the European Enlightenment. The idea of society, society as such, arises with this definite idea of the human, the human as such. Yet one must point out that Marx's humanism is not to be confused with the pre-Marxist usage whether in Rousseau, Voltaire, the French materialists and Utopian socialists. Marx's *das menschliche Wesen* relates itself to the historical origins and mechanisms of Entfremdung, private property and commodity production. It thus stands in direct opposition to reification (*Verdinglichung*) or the becoming of the human into a thing. For Marx, modern capitalism has reified humanity into a commodity, the grandmaster of this thingification game. The human has
become a Ding an Sich. What now concerns us is how this reified thingification functions in pre-capitalist societies, especially with caste and patriarchal stratification—how humanity not only bows down before Hanuman the monkey, but believes in the legal code of poring molten lead in the ears of human beings and cutting out their tongues when humanity comes in front of the Holy Vedas, and burning widows alive. Hinduism for the Indian subalterns is practical anti-humanism. Anti-humanism in India follows in the brutal fascist form of extermination of people. It is also carried out in innocent ‘esthetic’ form. Coomarswamy, the guru of Indian spiritualism glorified sati as the ‘proof of the perfect unity of body and soul... of devotion beyond the grave’, that celebrates the ideal of womanhood and seeking ‘eternal heaven’.

If this is not despotism, then what is it? But Marx does not contrast Oriental despotism with a heroic and rational West, but with a devouring colonialism. Marx contrasts Asiatic despotism thus with European despotism. Both function within the domain of the estranged human essence. Now this idea of the estranged human essence remains a pivotal philosophic germ in Marx’s critique of all class societies. History, i.e., history as such, or histories of class societies, are governed by the dialectic of the estranged human essence and the struggle to appropriate this human essence. So we have the alienated human essence and the transcendence (Aufhebung) of this estrangement that defines the humanist parameters of Marx’s dialectical and historical materialism. This dialectic of estrangement is directly woven within the historical materialism of the forces of production, relations of production and the ideological superstructure dialectic.

That the estrangement of the human essence is directly related with both, class exploitation and caste dehumanization, is obvious. What the European Enlightenment and the French revolution did was to uproot feudalism and its ideologies from its roots and instead put ‘man’ at its epicentre of discourse. What now applies to world history (and not local histories) are the Rights of ‘Man’, not the morbid rights-rites of purity, pollution and the creation of a terrible fascist superman. For the Brahmin, like Nietzsche and the fascists, man has to be overcome; for Marx and Ambedkar humanity has to be recalled and embraced. The early Mahar leader Wangkar had said that what matters are the ‘proper rights of humanity’—humanity is manuski in Marathi. What India has done is to forget ‘man’. Caste is the forgetfulness of ‘man’. If Phule understood this, Ambedkar had to live through this caste dehumanization—living as if the entire ages of caste history of his dehumanized people.

Ambedkar was right when he exclaimed that ‘man’ is not an economic being—that ‘man’ does not live by bread alone.6 The idea of labour as the ‘essence of humanity’ (Wesen des Menschen)7 that Marx drew in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, is not to be confused with purely economic labour. Marx instead had the concept of the ontology of labour, which Georg Lukács was later to work on:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s Phänomenologie and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence (Aufhebung) of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of labour (Wesen der Arbeit) and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man’s own labour. The real, active orientation of man to himself as a species-being, or his manifestation as a real species-being (i.e., as a human being), is only possible if he really brings out his species-powers—something which in turn is only possible through the co-operative action of mankind, only as the result of history—and treats these powers as objects: and this, to begin with is only possible in the form of estrangement (Form der Entfremdung).58

It is important to draw on the Buddhist notion of Dukha in Marx’s analysis of alienation, reification and fetishism. According to Ambedkar, sorrow emerges from class conflicts.59 Probably the relation between Dukha and Marx’s Entfremdung has not been studied sufficiently. Entfremdung as alienation is not the ‘fall’, but the entry into the terrible and unholyman class-caste stratified Unheimlich world. Alienation, reification and fetishism are the notions whereby both caste and class can be both decoded in theory and transcended in praxis. For Marx, the transcendence (Aufhebung) of Entfremdung is of fundamental importance—the strategies of the transcendence of private property, class and caste histories, patriarchy and the construction of communism is bound intrinsically to the transcendence of this Entfremdung. For Ambedkar, the transcendence of the sociology of Dukha is of vital importance. Phule’s deconstruction of the devouring estranged Brahmin and Ambedkar’s social reformation follows from this deeply philosophical notion of transcendence of Entfremdung-Dukha. Otherwise an inversion of Brahmanism would be an inverted-Brahmanism; and an inversion of Entfremdung-Dukha would imply an inverted estrangement. One does not want the return of the repressed; it has to be transcended once and for all.

Class and caste are not two ‘things’ whereby comparative analysis and formal alliances can be made on the principle of the ‘either/or’ formula. Rather they are to be understood as social processes; and like capital have to be read as a social relation—and not as the damned thing, but how the social relation is expressed through things.

In contrast to the damnation of humanity as thinghood, Marx’s notions of
species-being and the human essence stand as the philosophical keys to the theory and praxis of communism. Both the species-being and the human essence signify classlessness. Marx's critique of all class societies is predicated on the philosophical reasoning of these two ideas. When one says: reason with the human essence, one is talking of an internationalist perspective of Marxism (a point that the communist parties in India forgot after Stalin's reactionary 'socialism in one country')—which should have been 'capitalist restoration in Russia' and the later dismantling of the Communist International under pressure from the Western imperialists. The human essence bent towards classlessness is necessarily an internationalism. Presently, all progressive forces in Asia need to articulate an Asian Soviets, castest class societies is predicated on the human essence, one is talking of an analyzing classlessness.


5. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Who were the Shudras? How they came to be the Fourth Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society, Bombay: Thacker & Co., Ltd., 1946.


'The Brahman was his mouth, both his arms was the Rajanya made.
The thighs became the Vaishya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.'

It is in this hymn of the primeval man that the hegemony of the Brahmin is constructed. A. L. Basham says that the order of nature in Hinduism is not dependent on the gods, but on the Brahmins who by 'magic of the sacrifice' maintain nature. The Brahmins are more powerful than any god or earthly king and by using the magical ritual could turn the sacrifice against his patrons and destroy them. The Wonder that was India. A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub-Continent before the Coming of the Muslims, New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 2001, p. 241.

7. Ambedkar held contrary to Kosambi's "Marxism and Ancient Indian Culture", in History and Society: Problems of Interpretation, Bombay: University of Bombay, 1989, p. 77; Nripendra Kumar Dutts Origins and Growth of Caste in India, vol. I, London: Kogan Paul, 1931, p. 21 and later Romila Thapar's A History of India, vol. I, New Delhi: Penguin, 1996, p. 38, that varna is not 'colour' and proceeded to borrow from my friend Dastur Bode's interpretation of the Avesta to imply an idealist usage of the same (thus making varna equivalent to religion and ethics) in Who were the Shudras? Why did Ambedkar do so? A probable reason is that he did not want the caste question to be confused with the race one, both which he had experienced first hand, the former in India the later as a student in the USA.

Ambedkar was also against the race inspired view of early Indian history inspired by the orientalists. In fact, Ambedkar blamed the Brahmins for accepting this racist view because they believe in 'the two nation theory' (ibid., p. 76) and their own imagined 'superiority', where they—the Brahmins, the representatives of the Aryan race rule over the rest of the Hindus—the alleged non- Aryans (ibid.). Max Weber in The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism, Glencoe, Ill: The Free Press, 1958, was also against the explanation of the caste system from the race theory—from 'race psychology', the 'blood', or the 'Indian soul' (p. 124). More information can be obtained from the early Avesta or the Catus of Zarathushtra which has most uncharitable views on the RigVedic people whom Zarathushtra found to be lies and violent, that were destroying the incipient agricultural and pastoral economies, both as Gherardo Gnoli in Zaraster's Time and Homeland. A Study on the Origins of Mazdism and Related Problems, Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1980, p. 186, claims to exist at the times of the Catus. Gnoli suggests that the struggle was between the Atharvashtra/Kshatriyas and the vastryo-fsuyan/Vaicsyas (ibid.). How the Indians produced this strange and perplexing caste system is of great importance. The Iranians also had a three tier class system; the atmavams, nathastas and vastryo-fsuyas, and Iranian tradition attributed this tripartite division to Yima, though there is no evidence of a caste system evolving from this.


9. Irfan Habib claims that Marx's idea of the element of the 'unchanging' in the Asiatic mode was unjust, and that Marx's idea of the village community was 'highly idealized'. See Irfan Habib, Essays in Indian History, Towards a Marxist Perception, New Delhi: Tulika, 1997, pp. 35, 234.


12. Karl Marx, "Confession", in Eric Fromm,


15. Actually the conflict between the progressive force (Spenta Mainyu) and the regressive force (Anga Mainyu) is the leitmotiv of Zarathushtra, the struggle that inevitably culminates in absolute goodness—the restoration, or renovation (Frasho-Keretz).


23. Irfan Habib, Essays in Indian History, Towards a Marxist Perception, p. 165.

24. Ibid., pp. 471-472.


29. Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844.


40. Ibid., p. 3.

41. Ibid., p. 3.

42. Ibid., p. 3.


45. B. T. Anklesaria, (ed.), Pahlavi Vendidad, Mumbai:The K. R. Cam Oriental Institute, 2002 depicts the land of the ‘Hindus’ thus:

The Fifteenth of lands and places, I created the best, I Who (my) Ohrnanz, was that which was the Hapt-Hindukans:

[Its being Hapt-Hindukans is that it has seven chiefs. Why do I say this, that is seven rivers? For that is evident in the Avesta:

(Avc) ‘From the Eastern rivers towards the Western river.

There in men who thus says: “Every clime has One”’—They speak, “Gana-Minuy”, full of death, counter-created.

In opposition to it, (the) abnormal renunciation.—(It is very oppressive), and (the) abnormal heat.—(It is more than paunam).


47. Ibid., p. 57.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., pp. 59, 72.


51. Ibid., pp. 13, 28, 32-34, 32 n., 37-39, 47, 168, 185, 192 n., 244, 249, 257.

52. Ibid., p. 229.


55. Eleanor Zeitlin, op. cit., p. 57.


58. Ibid.


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