

# Reading Karl Marx on India

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Who knows, how many things we say will be ridiculed by the coming generations!

(F. Engels, *Anti-Duhring*)

Karl Marx's observations about Indian history, Indian people, and culture make an interesting reading. He was an extraordinary scholar, but his knowledge had limits and was not free from serious prejudices. Going closely through his writings about India is a very educative exercise, especially for social science scholars.

In the heydays of Marxism, most of the writings and commentaries in India about Marx and Marxism emanated from the Marxists. They a priori sympathized with the thought one way or the other, having a spirit of political activism to bring about the revolution as Marx had predicted. So, they always read and presented all Marxist ideas in a way to make the readers sympathetic to them. Thus, a liberal amount of misreading and misrepresentation was inherent in their approach. Non-Marxist Indian scholars, on the other hand, hardly ever analyzed Marx's thoughts about India. This gap has been a major drawback in the current Indian social science scholarship. As a result, Indian students, teachers, and the common intellectuals did not have complete or even adequate information about what Marx thought about the Indian civilization.

The Marxist historians, due to their political-ideological urges, omitted to provide complete information on any given subject. A most interesting example of this can be seen in their presentations of Marx's views on India. Perhaps no Indian Marxist writer or historian underlined the fact that Karl Marx hated Hindu religion and tradition, even without knowing it. It was not due to his avowed atheism. He considered Hinduism so degenerate and hateful that he censured the British Indian rulers for not

giving Christian missionaries a free hand in their work of converting Hindus and destroying Hinduism. Karl Marx scolded the British rulers on this score:

did they [the British], who combated the French revolution under the pretext of defending "our holy religion", not forbid at the same time, Christianity to be propagated in India, and did they not, in order to make money out of the pilgrims streaming to the temples in Orissa and Bengal, take up the trade in the murder and prostitution perpetrated in the temple of Juggernaut?<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Marx not only wanted a massive expansion of Christianity in India but also believed that the famous Jagannath temple was mainly a center of 'murder and prostitution', and that the British rulers of India did not allow the European Christian missionaries to spread Christianity, only because they had an ulterior motive to make money from the temple 'trade'.

This is not the only example, to see how strange, and ignorant were Marx's observations about Hinduism. There are many comments in his writings about India indicating that he did not have even a basic knowledge of the Hindu philosophy, customs, or traditions. His comments on Hinduism raise instant doubt about how many such baseless conclusions he might have had about the past and present of the world that informed his 'scientific' theory of social progress. Karl Marx's knowledge of Hinduism was based on the writings of the Christian missionaries. His comment on the Jagannath temple quoted above reproduces the missionary propaganda.

To take another example, criticizing the self-sufficient village societies of India Marx again berate Hinduism. He believed that the very self-sufficiency of the Indian villages prevented progress and made revolutionary change impossible. In his views, it was the 'undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life' in village societies of India, which 'rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan'. In his words:

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These little communities subjugated man to external circumstances, that they transformed a self-developing social state into never changing natural destiny, and thus brought about a brutalizing worship of nature, exhibiting its degradation in the fact that man, the sovereign of nature, fell down on his knees in adoration of Hanuman, the monkey, and Sabbala, the cow.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, another concept of Marx about India that remained largely ignored was his evaluation of pre-British India. He believed that the Hindus were slaves to the Muslim rulers before the arrival of the British. On this point, the prevalent views of the Indian Marxists run quite contrary to what Marx posited. For decades Indian social scientists in general have been propagating the concept of 'composite culture' during the Mughal rule in India, wherein the Hindus and Muslims were not much separate communities but jointly shared the fortunes and miseries, that they both were rulers and ruled during the Mughal period. But Karl Marx had just the opposite conclusion. He believed Hindus were as much the exploited community under the Muslim rulers as they were under the British later on. Marx, unlike the Indian Marxists, did not distinguish between the Mughals and the British rulers as 'native' and 'foreign'. He considered both foreign to the Indians. Interestingly, this is the fundamental point on which the current political discourses of the Indian Marxists rest.

Therefore, it is amusing to find that Karl Marx himself seems to be firmly against the Indian Marxists who insist on calling the Mughal rule in India as native and normal, with nothing foreign or atrocious about it. However, Karl Marx wrote, comparing India with Italy:

Just as Italy has, from time to time, been compressed by the conqueror's sword into different national masses, so do we find Hindustan, when not under pressure of *the Mohammedan, or the Moghul, or the Briton*, dissolved itself as many independent and conflicting states as it numbered towns or even villages. Yet, in a social point of view, Hindustan is not Italy, but Ireland of the East. And this strange combination of Italy and of Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes, is anticipated in the ancient traditions of *the religion of Hindustan*. That religion 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<sup>3</sup>.

It is worth noticing that Marx not only categorized 'Mohammedans', Mughals, and British as foreign rulers to India but also mentioned only Hinduism as the 'religion of Hindustan'. He was fully aware of the presence of a sizable Muslim population in India and yet described the Indian character as a Hindu character. At the time Marx wrote it, the last of the Mughal emperors were alive and Marx had also mentioned about him. In his writings Marx has several times referred to Muslims

in India - both Muslim rulers and commoners, but only in the context of certain events or circumstances, but as a group separate from the Hindus.

For instance, quoting from a speech delivered by the British statesman and writer Benjamin Disraeli about India in the British parliament in July 1857, Marx enumerates the mistakes committed by the East India Company. In this context, he noted that the "forcible annexation of Oudh brought the East Indian Government in conflict not only with the Hindus but *also* with the Mohammedans"<sup>4</sup>. This points to the difference between the political approaches of the two communities towards the East India Company Government. One also perceives from it that, generally speaking, Hindus and Muslims had different views and approaches towards the prevailing polity.

Referring to the characteristic of the sepoy revolt of 1857 Marx wrote, "Mussulmans and Hindus, renouncing their mutual antipathies, have combined against their common masters"<sup>5</sup>. It is similar to what Sir Syed Ahmed noted about the revolt of 1857, that the Hindus and Muslims could become united because they served in the same platoons. Sir Syed referred to this unity with regret, indicating that such unity between Hindus and Muslims was not normal. That is why the unity proved momentary and fragile. Karl Marx noted the same. "The religious dissensions between the Hindu and Mohammedan sepoys", according to him, was also one of the reasons for the failure of the revolt<sup>6</sup>. As Marx noted, even the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah II as the supreme commander of the revolting sepoys was a helpless act as they could not find a better one. Nor the emperor like the revolting sepoys<sup>7</sup>. But, to enforce the fable of 'composite culture', the Indian Marxists grossly exaggerate the symbol of the Mughal emperor being the commander of the sepoy revolt.

In fact, as to the identity of India, Marx unambiguously refers to it as Hindu without exception. It may be debatable whether Marx regarded Indian Muslims as foreign to the Indian society or he accepted them as a part of the Indian/Hindu society culturally. In many places, his comments indicate that Muslims were different from the Hindus not only in their beliefs, behavior, and political approach but also in nature. Both Marx and his close associate Friedrich Engels have used the words 'Indian' and 'Hindu' as synonyms, which can be read as they included Muslims also in it. Perhaps he regarded Muslims as a part of the Hindu society from a broad cultural point of view. In one place Marx has clearly stated that Islam got Hinduised in India because the Hindu culture was superior. He wrote:

Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moghuls, who had successfully overrun India, soon became *Hinduised*, the barbarian conquerors being, by an eternal law of history, conquered themselves by the superior civilization of their subjects. The British were the first

conquerors superior, and, therefore, inaccessible to the Hindu civilization.<sup>8</sup>

Here, once again Marx referred to Indian culture as Hindu culture in absolute terms. At the same time, he also clearly accepted it as superior to the culture of the Muslim invaders. These observations of Karl Marx also characterized the Islamic rule in India. Therefore, the so-called positive contribution of Islam to India resulting in some composite culture and other fables, propagated by the Indian Marxist historians, are contrived material. At least this is the case because of the words of Karl Marx himself.

Thus, Marx himself testified, though unwittingly, that any commendable phenomenon of the Mughal period in India was thanks to the native Hindu culture, not any Mughal or Islamic contribution. He was nearer to the truth than his eminent Indian followers. After all, one may observe, why a 'composite culture' did not flourish in Arabia, Iran, Central Asia, or any other place where Islamic rule was established. Several celebrated Muslim thinkers like Maulana Hali (of *Musaddas*) or Allama Iqbal (of *Shikwa*) have repeatedly emphasized that the world-conquering march of Islam collapsed in India because it got 'contaminated' with Hinduism. A range of Indian Muslim thinkers have ruled that all sorts of Hindu influence weakened Islam. It became tolerant, and a believer in peaceful co-existence with other religions, verily a 'kufr' in Islamic terminology. Iqbal, therefore, categorically observed that a liberal *Sufi* tradition was but a decline of Islam.

Further on, Marx's approach to India was quite similar to what the British rulers and historians had. That is an approach that Indian Marxists regularly taunt as 'imperialist'. The British expression is famous that India is not a country or nation but merely a 'geographical entity'. But interestingly, Karl Marx also shared this view. In his own words "the geographical unity of what is called India."<sup>9</sup>

Writing on the course of the establishment of British rule in India Marx opined in detail about Indian history and its characteristics:

A country not only divided between Mohammedan and Hindu, but between tribe and tribe, caste and caste; a society whose framework was based on a sort of equilibrium, resulting from a general repulsion and constitutional exclusiveness between all its members. Such a country and such a society, are they not the predestined prey of conquest? If we knew nothing of the past history of Hindustan, would there not be the one great and incontestable fact, that even at this moment India is held under British thralldom by an Indian army maintained at the cost of India? India, then, cannot escape the fate of being conquered, and the whole of her past history, if it be anything, is the history of the successive conquests she has undergone. Indian society

has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society.<sup>10</sup>

Once again it shows that Marx did not doubt the Muslim rule in India being the rule of foreign invaders and not of native Indians. His writings about India were not casual comments in the course of writing about some other topic. There is a whole book containing his essays on India. Marx and Engels had been watching India for nearly twenty-five years beginning from the year 1853 AD. Over time, they never revised their views about Indian history.

Another question, no less relevant to the subject is: if British writers were criticized for calling 'India a geographical entity' why Karl Marx was not held at fault for saying the same thing? Today all Marxists in general condemn globalization as a sort of imperialist design. But one finds Karl Marx's futuristic formulation in a similar vein. The idea of a few people in control of the economic system of the entire world was projected as progress without hesitation. In his essay 'The Future Results of the British Rule in India' Karl Marx wrote, "When the market of the entire world and the modern powers of production" shall have been "subjected to the common control of the most advanced peoples, then only will human progress will cease to resemble that hideous pagan idol, who would not drink the nectar from the skulls of the slain."<sup>11</sup> If this is not an imperialist, arrogant assertion what else is it?

Yet another interesting example of the Marxist historians expurgating and tailoring the ideas of Marx himself is the evaluation of 1857 as the 'Sepoy Mutiny' or the 'War of Independence'. As already noted, Marx and Engels wrote regularly and in detail about the British rule in India from the year 1853 to 1858. They continued to be concerned about Indian events even twenty years later. In the eighteen-seventies, Marx wrote 'Notes on India history'<sup>12</sup>. From what perspective Marx and Engels wrote about the Indian sepoy revolt in 1857? Because of their fundamental approach of class interest and class analysis, which class they sided with: with the British rulers or with the revolting Indian sepoys? It is necessary to think over it separately as it provides another great difference between the views of Marx and those of the Indian Marxist historians who presented Marx's ideas about 1857 in an entirely misleading form, again, to suit the frequently changing lines of Marxist politics in India.

In 1957 a centenary volume entitled *Rebellion 1857, A Symposium* was published to commemorate the sepoy mutiny by P C Joshi, a former General Secretary of the Communist Party of India. It contained articles by thirteen Marxist scholars. Some prominent contributors were K

M Ashraf, Talmiz Khaldun, P C Joshi, Gopal Halder, P Shastiko, etc. Till that time, it was a 'sepoymutiny' for the Indian Marxists. So much so that calling it 'the First War of Independence' was considered 'gross exaggeration' and 'uncritical nationalism', and those doing so were known as writers serving petty self-interest. Thus, till 1957 the Marxist historians talked of 1857 as a mutiny.

But two years later, the Russian Marxists in Moscow termed the great event 'The First Indian War of Independence'. Since then, the attitude of the Indian Marxists also changed accordingly. They gave up their old refrain and started claiming credit for 'being the first' to refer to 1857 as the War of Indian Independence.

However, a most interesting question from the point of view of writing history remains. Did Karl Marx also refer to the 1857 revolt as the War of Indian Independence? Going through the writings of Marx and Engels on the subject provides a negative answer. Writing from 1853 onwards continuously Marx or Engels never referred to 1857 as a freedom struggle. They not only termed it just a sepoymutiny, as the British called it but also had complete sympathy with the British rulers during the entire course of the battles involved. Karl Marx was fully aware of the oppression by the British rulers over the Indian people. Yet he welcomed it, quoting the great poet Goethe, saying:

*Should this torture then torment us  
Since it brings us great happiness?  
Were not through the rule of Timur  
Souls devoured without measure?*<sup>13</sup>

Because Marx believed that the British were performing a progressive role in India by destroying the 'semi-civilized', 'semi-barbaric' Indian Hindu community. Although his evaluation appears contradictory at times. For instance, quoting George Campbell (1824-1892), a British officer in India and later a member of the British Parliament he writes, "The great mass of Indian people possesses a great *industrial energy*, is well fitted to accumulate capital, and remarkable for a mathematical clearness of head, and talent for figures and exact sciences." Again, quoting approvingly the Russian writer Prince Alexei Dmitriyevich Saltykov (1806-1859) who traveled in India, Marx writes that even the common people in India are "more subtle and adroit than the Italians."<sup>14</sup> (A D Saltykov, *Letters sur l'inde*, Paris, 1848). It is, therefore, questionable: how can a society full of such people be called 'semi-civilized' and 'semi-barbaric' by the same author, Karl Marx? Perhaps it was imperative for Marx's preconceived notion to regard Asian societies as backward and fit for destruction as compared to the more industrialized Europe, in the Marxist schema of social progress.

Whatever that be, it is indisputable that despite the scientific, economic prowess, creativity, and other abilities of the Indian people Marx believed the destruction of the Indian socio-economic structure was necessary for a 'revolutionary and socialist' progress of the world. Explaining this stand Marx steadily defended the British, by famously saying:

The question, therefore, is not whether England had a right to conquer India, but whether we should prefer India conquered by the Turk, by the Persian, by the Russian, to Indian conquered by the Briton.

England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating – the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.<sup>15</sup>

The above two sentences represent an ideological superstition, which led to the destruction of millions of people and unprecedented material wealth in many countries in the entire twentieth century. The superstition implied that for the global socialist-communist revolution of the future, forcible destruction of the present social orders and people was imperative, and active cooperation for the same was necessary.

It is essential to note and appreciate that without such a strange ideological faith no human mind could accept the destruction of a vast humanity and material wealth on such a horrible scale as done in Soviet Russia, Eastern Europe, China, or Cambodia. The blind belief that prompted Karl Marx not only to accept but to welcome the destruction of Indian society by the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century also made his Russian, Chinese, Cambodian, Latin American, and African followers self-assured to destroy millions of their people in the hope that they were 'laying the foundation' of a new, 'progressive, scientific' and the prosperous society for which killing of millions of innocent people was not a matter of any serious concern.

So, by his ideological construct, Marx not only campaigned against the sepoymutiny of 1857-59 in India but also firmly sided with the British in his analyses and evaluation of British rule in India. In describing the events of the sepoymutiny, Marx and Engels condemned those British commanders who were committing mistakes, causing harm to British troops, and thus were unsuccessful in dealing with the mutinying Indian soldiers.

In September 1857 Engels suggested a war strategy to the British to strengthen their position, "If Agra cannot be held, there must be a withdrawal to Cawnpore or Allahabad; the latter *to be held at all costs* since it is the key to the territory between the Ganges and the Jumna."<sup>16</sup> Similarly, at one place Marx also advised the British that to 'maintain the English rule in India' they

should not worry about Delhi. "Delhi was a point of no strategic significance at all. Historic tradition, in truth, endowed it in the eyes of the natives with a superstitious importance..."<sup>17</sup> At one place, Engels recommended a 'court-martial' for Charles Windham for his mistakes during an encounter with Indian soldiers in Lucknow and Kanpur and be 'shot' as punishment.<sup>18</sup>

In all the battle descriptions Marx and Engels used the word 'enemy' for the mutinying Indian soldiers. They sided with the British with the aim of, in Marx's own words, 'maintaining English rule in India.' They had no sympathy for the Indian rebels. Instead, they ridiculed the rebels now and then. Engels wrote that the 'conduct of the insurgents' was 'contemptible' and "The sight of the redcoats struck them everywhere with panic."<sup>19</sup> According to them, after the defeats at Delhi and Lucknow these insurgents were destined to become "dacoits or robbers and find the inhabitants of the country as much their enemies as the British themselves."<sup>20</sup> It is a significant observation, indicating the real situation of the mutineers.

In another instance, Engels observed that the revolting Indian soldiers 'lacked courage and obstinacy'. The advance of British soldiers unnerved them. As a result, "the 'British bayonets' have done more execution in any of these onslaughts on panic-stricken natives than in all wars of the English in Europe and America put together."<sup>21</sup> Meaning, in all such battles and skirmishes whenever the British soldiers advanced with their bayonets the Indian rebels became nonplussed, panic-stricken, and were killed without resistance in such huge numbers! In their descriptions, Marx and Engels used negative and derogatory epithets for the Indian rebels. Despite such observations, Indian Marxists later propagated the theory that it was Karl Marx who first referred to the 1857 revolt as the 'First Indian War of Independence'.

The fact is that Marx always sided with the British in every matter whether political, moral or strategic. It is a different argument that through it he hoped for the fulfillment of creating an industrial society in Asia, to help a global socialist revolution. As the history unfolded, it proved to be all mere imagination.

Reading Karl Marx, or the history of any such ambitious political ideologues, points out the huge negative contribution any ideology of envisioned world transformation makes to the minds of its adherents. Marx, as also his famous followers like Lenin, Stalin, and Mao, has been called a messiah of the downtrodden, emancipator of the exploited mass, etc., but gladly supported mass extermination and brutal torture of millions of ordinary, innocent people all over the world! To what end? To bring about an imaginary future society

with a supposed final well-being for all. This was and is the evil influence of ideology. It inevitably corrupts the minds of its adherents. Any ideology tends to help acquire this attitude. Beginning with suppressing plain truths and common sense, to uphold and propagate its specific, imaginary, pre-fixed conclusions. The rest of the evil consequences follow on its own accord.

Having a life-long experience of the Marxist-Leninist ideology and its unfolding for decades in Russia (erstwhile Soviet Union), the great writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, summarized thus:

Ideology – that is what gives the evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honours. (*The Gulag Archipelago*, I/4)

## Notes and References

1. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (written on July 22, 1853). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 30.
2. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India" (written on June 10, 1855). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 16-17.
3. Possibly Marx meant a person indulging in luxuries. One meaning of Bayadere is a bright colorful cloth, the other is a dancing girl of East Indies. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India" (written on June 10, 1853) Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 12. Emphasis added.
4. Karl Marx, "The Indian Question" (written on July 28, 1857) in Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 42. Emphasis added.
5. Karl Marx, "The Revolt in the Indian Army" (written on July 17, 1857) in Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 33
6. Karl Marx, "The Revolt in India" (written on Oct. 30, 1857) in Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 92.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (written on July 22, 1853). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 26-27. Emphasis in the original.
9. Karl Marx, "The Revolt in the Indian Army" (written on July 17, 1857) in Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 32
10. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (written on July 22, 1853). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 26.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
12. Karl Marx, "From 'Notes on India history'", Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 154-59.
13. Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India" (written on June 10, 1853) Marx, Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-59* (Moscow, 1988), Sixth printing, p. 17.
14. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (written on July 22, 1853). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 29, 30.
15. Karl Marx, "The Future Results of the British Rule in India" (written on July 22, 1853). Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 26.
16. Letter written by Engels to Marx, dated Sept. 24, 1857, in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 161. Emphasis in the original.
17. Karl Marx, "The Revolt in India" (written on Sept. 29, 1857), in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian war of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 83-84.
18. Fredrick Engels, "Windham's defeat" (written on Feb. 2, 1858), in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian war of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 109.
19. Fredrick Engels, "The Capture of Lucknow" (written on April 15, 1858), in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian war of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, p. 114.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 110.
21. Fredrick Engels, "Details of the attack on Lucknow" (written on May 8, 1858), in Marx and Engels, *The First Indian War of Independence 1857-1859* (Moscow 1988), Sixth printing, pp. 116-17. What great killings!