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India in World History

Down to the British regime, India had no written history. The kings and emperors who ruled over their principalities and empires engaged chroniclers who produced literary works which are partly historical and partly fictitious. The process of delving deep into such literary material and separating history from fiction is a laborious task requiring stupendous effort on the part of a large number of specialists in various intellectual disciplines. The British made a departure from this practice and produced some works for use in schools and colleges which attempted to reconstruct the past of India from the early pre-historic period.

The history that came to be evolved under these circumstances happened to share with the earlier works of royal and imperial chroniclers one characteristic feature: like the latter sang paeans of praise for their lords and masters under the garb of writing authentic history, the former made the glories of their masters the centre-piece of history. The only difference was that the lords and masters of the earlier 'historians' were Indian, while the latter had foreign rulers as their 'benefactors'.

India before the British arrived on the scene was 'uncivilized'; the British came and gave the Indian people enlightenment and culture; India is going forward from progress to progress—such was the essence of 'Indian History' as reconstructed under the British regime. Generations of boys and girls studying in schools and colleges had to study books which listed the 'benefits' derived by the Indian people from British rule. The earlier rulers and emperors like the Mauryas the Guptas and the Mughals were of course mentioned; 'some facts' concerning their times were given; but all this was done with a view to

'proving' how primitive those kingdoms and empires were compared with the 'glorious' and 'benevolent' rule of the British Empire 'over which the sun never sets'.

The resentment against this mode of dealing with Indian history began to spread far and wide among the Indian people when they developed within themselves the new consciousness of modern nationalism. The very consolidation of British rule which, for the first time in history, brought the entire sub-continent under one political rule and which, furthermore, created a new educated middle class, developed the organs of the modern press, etc., created a growing sense of rebellion against British rule. As in other fields of intellectual discipline, this sense of resentment against foreign rule expressed itself also in history, creating generations of nationalist historians who undertook painstaking research and brought out facts to show that India in the ancient and medieval periods was superior in every respect to the British Islands of those days. Some of the outstanding leaders of the freedom movement themselves became well-known historians. A new nationalist school of Indian historians thus started developing, side by side with and in opposition to, the British historians.

While correctly repudiating the anti-Indian thrust of British historians, however, the nationalist school too gave an unscientific and distorted view of history. As opposed to the British historians who condemned the entire pre-British past of the Indian people, the new nationalist historians—bourgeois historians to call them by the correct name—dismissed the entire pre-Aryan history of the Indian people as 'the dark age'. Those who lived in India in that distant past, they claimed, were so backward and uncivilized that they were more or less sub-human; then came the Aryans who brought with them the great and glorious Vedic culture that civilized the then uncivilized people of North India; they then moved towards the South, thus civilizing the entire sub-continent.

This 'history' no doubt served the requirements of the ruling classes belonging to the upper castes of Hindu society. That, however also helped the British overlords, since it showed that

while in the ancient epoch, the Indian people were civilized by the Aryans, they and their successors were not sufficiently civilized, so that they too had to be civilized—a job discharged with credit by the British. The two 'schools of historians' supplemented each other, indicating the common interests of the ruling elite—the British and their Indian subordinates.

II

This entire 'theory' has now been exploded by the archaeological discoveries made over 60 years ago in Harappa and Mohenjodaro which lie in the present state of Pakistan. They show that, long before the Aryans came to and started occupying one part of India after the other, there existed a society and civilization in India which was superior to what was brought by the Aryans. While the Aryans were still in the stage of food-gathering, without yet having a developed agriculture and settled abodes, the people who built the cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro, whose remains were unearthed in the early 1920s, had already developed agriculture and led a civic life, their society had been divided into classes and they had even begun developing their own script.

How the two cities came to be built and then ruined; how the Harappa-Mohenjodaro civilization (or *the Indus Valley Civilization* as it is known since the area covered by it was in the Indus valley) arose and was destroyed; whether the act of destruction was done by the Vedic Aryans, or whether the civilization decayed and died because of some internal factors—these are still undecided questions, requiring still further painstaking study and research. The fact, however, is undisputed that the history of the Indian people did not begin with the entry of the Aryans from outside. The people who inhabited this area of the sub-continent had, in fact, developed their own civilization and culture, superior to those of the Aryans with their Vedic civilization and culture.

This conclusion is further reinforced by the fact that even in the subsequent phase of Indian history, when post-Aryan society started rapidly developing, two parallel streams of Indian culture

developed at the same time—the Aryans in the North and the Dravidians in the South. It is worth noting that, while the successors of the Aryan immigrants developed a refined language (Sanskrit) for the use of the intellectual, administrative and other allied pursuits of the many spoken dialects (*Prakrits*), so did the Dravidians develop their own elite language, (Santalamil) out of the several spoken dialects of this region (*Kodum Tamils*). Just as the epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and so on narrated the heroic exploits of the leaders of Aryan tribes who subjugated non-Aryan tribes, so did the epic works of Sangham literature (*Silappatikaram*, *Patittupattu*, etc.) which sing the stories of the kings and emperors of the South. Facts concerning them and the discoveries made at Harappa and Mohenjodaro led to the emergence of a school of South Indian history which advanced the 'theory' that the South in ancient India was far more developed than the North, that the North subjugated the South by sheer force and deceit.

These various, seemingly contradictory 'theories' of Indian history would baffle an ordinary reader but need not cause worry to a truth-seeking student of history. For, the science of the evolution of the species elaborated by Charles Darwin, of the development of human society discovered by Lewis Henry Morgan and of historical materialism whose broad outlines were drawn by Marx and Engels, enable us to have a fairly correct view of how human society evolved from ancient times and what role India played in the process. Without going into the details, we may, therefore, sum up the broad outlines of Indian history as part of world history.

Firstly, as discovered by Darwin, the species called man progressively evolved from his predecessors, the last of them being the ape who was only one step below the earliest human being.

Secondly, as pointed out by Morgan, having transformed himself from ape to man, the latter began to develop further. The earliest types of human beings had to struggle against nature and, in the process of that struggle, evolve what may be called a social and family life. This in its turn went through

various modes of production, various patterns of social and individual life. Man thus passed through several millennia before he evolved into the modern man.

Thirdly, as was pointed out by Marx and Engels—and this was the signal contribution of the two co-authors of historical materialism—the modern human being in the process of his evolution developed the powers of subordinating nature to his requirements. This enabled a minority to live at the expense of the majority, thus giving rise to the contradiction between a minority of exploiters and the majority of the exploited: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society’, they said, ‘is the history of class struggles.’ (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*).

Fourthly, at this stage arose the institution of the State, which arose out of society but stood above it; which, in other words, *resolved* the contradiction between the exploiting minority and the exploited majority in the interest of the former.

Fifthly, from the information available so far, the state which came to be formed for the first time in history was that of Egypt which was over 5,000 years ago; next came the state of Babylonia, nearly 4,000 years ago. Then came India, closely followed by China, both over 3,000 years ago. It is, however, yet to be found out whether the ruins of the Indus Valley civilization, unearthed recently, predated the states of Egypt and Babylonia and whether the people who built the Indus Valley civilization had means of communication with those who built the Egyptian and Babylonian civilizations. It is, in any case, uncontestable that the people of the Indus Valley civilization were more advanced than the Aryans who invaded the areas covered now by parts of Pakistan and parts of the Indian Union; the former, as noted earlier, had already developed agriculture and built cities, had the rudiments of a written script and had divided themselves into classes of an exploiting minority and the exploited majority. The latter, on the other hand, were still living a nomadic life, moving from place to place and living on foods gathered by hunting, by plucking fruits, etc.; they were yet to

develop agriculture and start living a settled life. They, however, had started developing class society in its most rudimentary form in the sense that groups of them were commanded by leaders or *rajas*.

Sixthly, the entry of Aryan tribes into India coincided with a revolutionary change in the socio-economic life of the people; as in many other parts of the world, so in India too, people learnt to mine and work iron. This was of tremendous importance, since it helped the development of farming, handicrafts, navigation, etc. It enabled the people of the area covered by the Aryan migration to clear thick jungles, reclaim land for cultivation, cutting down thickets, uprooting trunks, digging canals, etc. These improved methods of production formed the basis of a new civilization whose outlines can be gathered from the *Vedas* and their subsequent development into the *Upanishads*, epics like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and so on.

It is, therefore, not incorrect to say that the entry of the Aryan tribes made a big change, helped the development of a new civilization in India. It is, however, incorrect for the advocates of the ‘theory’ of Aryan superiority to claim that civilization and culture in India began with the Aryans. The fact, on the other hand, is that there was a pre-Aryan civilization in the Indus valley—a civilization even more advanced than that of the Aryans when they started coming into the sub-continent. Furthermore, whether directly related or not to the people who built the Indus Valley civilization, the people in the southern part of India, the Dravidians, had already been in the process of independently developing their own civilization. The best and most convincing proof of this is that, parallel to the elite language of the North (Sanskrit) there developed the elite language of the South (Santamil).

Equally fallacious, however, is the ‘theory’ of Dravidian superiority advanced by another ‘school of historians.’ A comparison of the classical works produced in Sanskrit and Santamil would, for instance, show that the former is far richer, far more versatile. The arts and sciences had so developed in the North that the classical works in Sanskrit stand comparison

with the Greek and other foreign works of the same period. This cannot be said of the Tamil literature of the epoch.

It may also be noted that the social organization based on caste division which itself evolved out of the Aryan *Chaturvarnya* was transplanted to the entire South and, together with the religious lore, the arts and sciences developed in the North became the common property of the North and the South. The socio-cultural life, in other words, was common to the two parts of India, complementing each other.

III

This raises the following questions : what lies at the root of the peculiar socio-economic order which evolved in India after the Aryan invasion. How does it differ from the social order that evolved in Europe and most Asian countries ? How did this peculiar system become the common feature of the North as well as of the South of India ?

The answer obviously is that, as distinct from Europe and most of the other Asian countries, the division of society into an exploiting minority and the exploited majority assumed in India the form of four *varnas* to begin with, and then of the multitude of castes which in their turn proliferated into innumerable sub-castes. Out of the original four *varnas*, three (the Brahmin the Kshatriya, and the Vaisya) formed the 'upper' castes of society, while the fourth (the Sudra) constituted the overwhelming majority of the toilers. Continuous and unceasing development of the productive forces, the ever-increasing quantity of the product appropriated by the 'upper' castes, the technical advances taking place uninterruptedly leading to more and more specialization—these lay at the root of the emergence of 'upper' and 'lower' castes. This, therefore, was not a negation but a *specific Indian form* of the division of society into classes.

Such a social order, *caste in form but class in content*, played the same role in India as slavery did in ancient Greece. Let us recall Engels' analysis of the role played by slavery in ancient

Greece :

It was slavery that first made possible the division of labour between agriculture and industry on a large scale, and thereby also Hellenism, the flowering of the ancient world. Without slavery, no Roman Empire. But without the basis laid by Grecian culture, and the Roman Empire, also no modern Europe. We should never forget that our whole economic, political and intellectual development pre-supposes a state of things in which slavery was as necessary as it was universally recognized. In this sense we are entitled to say : without the slavery of antiquity no modern socialism. (Engels, *Anti Duhring*, Moscow, 1975, p. 207)

It should be added here that not only the ancient European states of Greece and Rome but the earlier Asian states of Egypt and Babylonia too were based on some kind of slavery. Even the Indus Valley civilization of pre-Aryan days in India had slavery of a sort, as is clear from the pattern of house construction in the remains of the Harappa and Mohenjodaro cities. That slavery of one form or another was not unknown for those who developed the Vedic civilization would be clear from the references to *dasyus*, *dasas*, etc., in the classical works of that civilization.

The *Varna*-caste order evolved in the days of Vedic civilization, however, was different from other forms of slavery, it being inseparably connected with the beliefs and practices of the Vedic religion. Instead of direct and open coercion enforced by the state machinery as in the classical form of European and Egyptian slavery, the *Varna*-caste form had the authority of the religious scriptures : people belonging to all castes and sub-castes were made to believe that it was ordained by God that the majority should submit to the minority in this life and that they would be compensated by the pleasures and happiness which are in store in the next birth. There was, therefore, an element of voluntary submission in the Indian form of slavery, or the superior-inferior relation of castes and sub-castes, which was absent in classical slavery.

The form of Indian slavery which thus came to be evolved in the *Varna*-caste order had one advantage for the owning classes : it prevented the outbreak of slave revolts which shook and very nearly toppled several empires and kingdoms in Europe and Asia. Although brutally suppressed in the beginning, these slave revolts finally succeeded in ending the division of society into owners and slaves. The slave-owning society however was replaced by a new system of class division and oppression—that of the serfs and their masters.

In India too, the class which may be considered equivalent to the slaves, the majority belonging to the 'lower' and 'untouchable' castes, resented their inferior status and the denial of their rights as human beings. However, since *class division* took the form of *caste division* and since it had been sanctified by religious laws, the incipient revolt of the 'lower' and 'untouchable' castes found expression in the birth and development of new philosophical and religious orders. Fierce battles were fought by the *Charvaka*, *Lokayata*, *Sankhya* and other schools of philosophy against the spiritual philosophy of the establishment. In practical life too, dissident sects like those of the Jains, the Buddhists, etc., gave expression to the protest against Brahmin domination over society.

Later on, when caste division with its superior-inferior relationships came to be consolidated, nobody within the Hindu fold being permitted to go out of the caste or sub-caste into which one was born, foreign religious denominations that made their appearance, either through the Muslim conquerors in the North or through the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traders who came to the coastal towns in all parts of the country, became so many ways of escape for the 'lower' and 'untouchable' Hindu castes ; here were doors open before them to escape the sufferings imposed on them by the rigorous caste system. This made it possible for the revolt of the exploited majority being contained not only within philosophical debate and the formation of new religious orders in Hindu society but in large-scale conversions from Hindu to other religions.

IV

This is of special significance for Kerala : over 40 per cent of the population in the state is, as is known, non-Hindu in religious beliefs. It is unbelievable that all of them came from outside, or are descendants of those who came from outside. The overwhelming majority of non-Hindus are obviously those who came to be converted from Hinduism to other religious beliefs.

Among those who were thus converted, the majority naturally came from the 'lower' and 'untouchable' castes for whom conversion appeared to be a way out of their 'low' social status. It is, however, not a fact that no conversion took place among the 'upper' castes. Almost the entire community of Syrian Christians and a large number of the better-off Muslim families take pride in their high-caste Hindu ancestry, claiming that their forefathers were converted from the highest castes, the most respectable and richest families. This is understandable because the rigours of the caste system were suffocating to many who belonged to the higher castes but could not practise the customs and manners obligatory to the 'high-born' ; they too like a far larger number from the 'lower' and 'untouchable' castes, embraced Christianity or Islam.

Unlike in Kerala where Islam and Christianity (together with the Jewish faith) was brought by the trading community who settled themselves in the coastal towns, Islam was brought to the North by successive groups of armed invaders from the Islamic countries. Like the Aryans and other earlier invaders, the Muslim invaders too settled themselves here, absorbing the socio-cultural life of the local people to a certain extent, and making the local people absorb some elements of their socio-cultural life.

This mutual absorption of each other's socio-cultural life was all the more true of Kerala where the followers of non-Hindu religious communities came not as armed invaders but as traders. The fact that a large number of Hindus, including several from high-caste families, got converted to Christianity

and Islam, made the two religious communities absorb elements of "un-Christian" and "un-Islamic" socio-cultural life. This explains why, unlike in the North, there is no trace of any bitterness between Hindus and non-Hindus in Kerala. Even British historians interested in narrating the stories of Hindu-Muslim conflicts in pre-British India could not include Kerala in their list till Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan entered the Malabar region in pursuit of their British enemies.

The entry of Islamic invaders into North India and Christian-Islamic traders into the South and other coastal regions, however, disturbed the calm surface of the *varna*-caste society which came to be consolidated in the centuries following the Aryan invasion. The two religious communities could not of course, destabilize or uproot the essentially Hindu *varna*-caste society. Far from eliminating the inferior-superior relation of Hindu castes, the non-Hindu communities came to be considered 'castes outside the *varna*-caste society'. This gave an appearance of co-existence of Hindu, Muslim and Christian religious communities, each adopting an attitude of toleration towards the other two.

But beneath the surface, the soil was being prepared for the development of hostile relations on the basis of religious ideology which made it obligatory for the devout Hindu to consider the Muslims and Christians as *mlechchhas*. The Muslims and Christians too were obliged to look upon those who followed non-Muslim and non-Christian religious faiths as *kafirs* and *infidels* respectively. The soil was thus prepared for religious conflicts when the socio-political system is subjected to pressures and strains of one kind or another.

It was against this background of social conflicts and political destabilization in society, when the *varna*-caste order as its centre, that the foreign capitalists beginning with the Portuguese and ending with the British came to India as traders but entered into political and military deals with the ruling chieftains fighting against one another. As Karl Marx wrote in his article on *The Future Results of the British Rule in India* :

Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moguls, who had successively overrun India, soon became *Hinduized*, 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 Hindu civilization. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society. The historic pages of their rule in India report hardly anything beyond that destruction. (Marx, *On Colonialism*, Moscow, 1978, p. 82)

India, however, is no exception. Though there may be differences in details, a host of countries in Asia had the same experience of successive waves of conquerors establishing their domination, forming their kingdoms and empires, but in the process being absorbed in the pattern of life and culture developed by the original inhabitants, while in return they exerted their influence on the life of the original inhabitants. Only in modern times when the European companies started subjugating these countries, first through trade connections and then politically, did a new type of conquerors arise who were alien in every sense of the term. There was, thus, something common to all these countries, while of course India had its caste-based social and family organization which demarcated it from every other country—Asian and European.

Karl Marx in his writings on India, China, Persia and other Asian countries, as well as in his narration of the development of capitalism in the world, tries to give an explanation of what is common for Asia or the Orient—the latter term including some African countries like Egypt. After making a painstaking study of the history, economy and polity of these countries, he noted :

There have been in Asia, generally, from immemorial times, but three departments of Government : that of Finance, or the plunder of the interior : that of War, or the plunder of the exterior and finally, (the department of Public

Works. Climate and territorial conditions, especially the vast tracts of desert, extending from the Sahara, through Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary, to the most elevated Asiatic highlands, constituted artificial irrigation by canals and waterworks the basis of Oriental agriculture. As in Egypt and India, inundations are used for fertilizing the soil of Mesopotamia, Persia, etc.; advantage is taken of a high level for feeding irrigation canals. This prime necessity of an economical and common use of water, which, in the Occident, drove private enterprise to voluntary association, as in Flanders and Italy, necessitated, in the Orient where civilization was too low and territorial extent too vast to call into life voluntary association, the interference of the centralizing power of the Government. Hence an economical function devolved upon all Asiatic Governments, the function of providing public works. This artificial fertilization of the soil, dependent on a central government, and immediately decaying with the neglect of irrigation and drainage, explains the otherwise strange fact that we now find whole territories barren and desert that were once brilliantly cultivated as Palmyra Petra, the ruins in Yemen and large provinces of Egypt, Persia, and Hindustan; it also explains how a single war of devastation has been able to depopulate a country for centuries, and to strip it of all its civilization. (Marx, *ibid.*, p. 37)

Marx, therefore, drew the conclusion that, like slavery and feudalism which succeed each other, the latter being followed by capitalism in Europe, Asia came to evolve a socio-economic order which he called 'Asiatic'. This formulation made by Marx has become a point of serious debate among scholars. Some of them make the term the basis of their study of every single country in Asia, while others virtually deny the very concept, maintaining that Engels never used it, Marx too did so only once, etc.

It should, however, be noted that, for Marx, the term 'the Asiatic society or mode of production' was not a substitute for the concrete analysis of society and its evolution in individual

Asian countries. To take one instance, Marx who in his writings points to the absence of private property in land as an important element of the Asiatic mode of production, wrote as follows in a letter to Engels on June 14, 1853 :

As to the *ques ion of property*, this is a very *controversial* one among the English writers on India. In the broken hill-country south of Krishna, property in land does seem to have existed. (Marx, *ibid.*, p. 315)

It should be noted further that, apart from 'Asiatic society or mode of production', India shares with several other oriental countries, extending from China in the east to Arabia and Egypt in the west, some common features of historical development.

Firstly, like them, India had developed, in the earliest epoch of history, i.e., the pre-Christian millennia, a civilized society which grew into kingdoms and empires. The Orient or Asia was, in other words, ahead of the Occident in developing human civilization ;

Secondly, all these countries had, in the earliest epoch of history, one or other form of slavery—in the form of *varna*-caste society in India.

Thirdly, Oriental slavery of the early historical epoch was not replaced by feudalism of the western type.

Slavery, however, went through transformations of some type in all these countries. In India, for instance, the *varna*-caste system of the earlier epoch developed into a socio-political system in which a highly stratified, caste-sub caste net work in the village community provided the basis over which a despotic administration came to be built.

Fourthly, in these transformations an important role was played by foreign invasions and conquests, resistance to them, formation and fall of kingdoms and empires, etc. These,

however, did not affect the village community below. Making a specific reference to India, Marx wrote, 'All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid and destructive as the successive action in Hindustan may appear, did not go deeper than its surface.' (Marx, *ibid*, pp. 36-7)

Finally, a heavy blow was struck to this socio-political order not because the centralized political-administrative machinery was destroyed but because the socio-cultural life built in the village communities below on the foundation of natural economy was uprooted. The military arms wielded by the foreign adventurers would have been powerless had it not been fortified by the market force of purchase and sale which was the mission of the foreign companies.