



MARXIST PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORICAL MATERIALISM OR ECONOMIC INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

ANANDKUMAR P. SHAH

Associate Professor in Political Science
M.N. College, VISNAGAR
Dist – Mehsana, Gujarat, India

RAJESHKUMAR J. PATEL

Associate Professor in History
M.N. College, VISNAGAR
Dist.-Mehsana, Gujarat, India

Karl Marx was highly influenced by Hegel's philosophy of history. Marx agreed with Hegel that history represents a continuous and logical evolution. But he believed that this evolution was not due to any metaphysical causes. This evolution was rather the product of material conditions of human life. In other words, for Marx, the motivating force in history was not anything as abstract as Spirit or Idea or Thought but rather the relations of men in the process of production. He agreed that history does move by contradiction and conflict. But the actors in the cosmic drama are 'real' events in the ordinary, empirical sense; not in Hegel's special, ideal sense.

In their actual social life, men enter into definite relations of production of material things. These relations are independent of their will or ideology. The aggregate of these productive relations constitutes the economic structure of society which is the real basis on which a social, juridical and political superstructure stands. In other words, the mode of production of the material means of existence determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life. To quote Marx, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness." He further says that consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life process.

Thus, the materialist conception of history starts from the principle that the mode of production is the basis of every social order. In other words, the division of society into classes is determined by "what is produced, how it is produced, and how the product is exchanged." According to this conception, therefore, the ultimate causes of all social changes and political revolutions are to be sought not in the minds of men, but in the changes in the mode of production and exchange. In other words, they are to be sought not in the 'philosophy' but in the 'economics' of the period concerned.

As discussed above, the social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces, men change their mode of production. And in changing their mode of production, they change all their social relations. Thus, the hand-mill gives us society with the feudal lord, whereas the steam-mill gives us

society with the industrial capitalist. In the process, the class which has control over the means of production also possesses a control over political and social life of the society. For example, during the age of feudalism, all the institutions and social ideologies were framed according to feudalism. When capitalism came into existence, the entire morality, ideals and institutions changed accordingly.

Let's have a little deep insight into this process of historical change. The dominant economic class owns and controls the means of production and distribution. Their enormous wealth generates leisure activities such as writing, drawing, playing, worshipping, etc. These activities intellectually justify their dominance in the society. Culture, therefore, is interpreted by Karl Marx as "the ideas and institutions by which a society rationalizes the hegemony of the dominant class." Thus, the ruling ideas of any culture are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations. In other words, the dominant material relations are recognized as ideas in each respective culture.

Cultures, however, also rise and fall in history. Hence, human history can be explained by its technological innovation and the social structure based on the division of labour and division of property. On the basis of the change in the relations of production, Marx has divided human history into various stages such as :

- (A) **Age of Primitive Communism** : In this stage, the institution of property had not taken birth and man had no knowledge even of agriculture and cattle-breeding. He survived on hunted animals and fruits. In this stage, each individual loved the other, and they divided among themselves whatever they got.
- (B) **Age of Slavery** : The cultivation of land and cattle-breeding started. Certain people were the owners of the land and certain others were slaves. The slaves produced wealth and the masters enjoyed the fruits of the slave's labour.
- (C) **Age of Feudalism** : During this age, big land-lords were the owners of the land and, in place of the slaves, poor farmers cultivated the land. They, however, were not the owners of the land and their overall condition was not much better than the slaves. They were under the complete control of their feudal lords.
- (D) **Age of Capitalism** : During the Industrial Revolution, new and sophisticated machines were invented in Europe. The capitalists established big industries with the help of their capital. Millions of labourers worked in these factories. They got meagre wages and the capitalists pocketed the surplus value called profit.

Each successive historical stage, thus, represents a higher level of productive technology, starting from hunting and farming to the modern commodity production. Each successive stage also represents a new, more sophisticated division of labour.

Let's now examine Marx's analysis of modern capitalist society. Marx says that 'Labour' is the basis of value and no other factor of production can create a new

value. The profit, therefore, should go to the workers. Instead, it is pocketed by the capitalists. In order to produce more goods at a low price, the capitalists introduce modern technology. A modern firm manages with fewer workers and therefore more and more workers become unemployed. Thus, the capital is concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, while the poor becomes more and more poor. This leads to the rise of class-struggle between the Haves and the Have-not : the exploiters and the exploited. Marx clearly prophesized that since the workers are in huge majority as against the capitalists, they will certainly win in this class-struggle.

Thus, Marx's analysis of capitalist society is purely based on materialistic point of view. A number of terms and phrases used by him such as 'value', 'surplus value', 'profit', 'division of property', 'division of labour', 'mode of production', etc. are the clear indicators in this regard. To Marx, the material condition of life is the only factor responsible for change, and not Idea, Spirit, Intellect, Religion, Politics or anything else. He has also very ably defined the manner in which capitalism advances towards it's own decay. He says : "the capitalist system enlarges the numbers of workers, brings them together into organized groups, makes them class-conscious, supplies them with means of communication and co-operation on a world-wide scale, reduces their purchasing power, and by increasingly exploiting them, arouses them to organized resistance." Capitalism, thus, creates the conditions for greater productive effort and, at the same time, lays the groundwork for snatching it by the community at large.

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