

MATERIALISM AND THE INDIAN BOURGEOISIE

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The author was one of the first few intellectuals who reacted to the October Revolution and founded the Marxist movement in India in the early twenties. He broke ideologically and politically with Stalinism, in the late thirties. Today he considers Trotskyism as contemporary Marxism-Leninism.

One of the very significant facts about modern Indian society is the extremely slow rate at which rationalist ideas and scientific materialist culture are spreading even among the educated strata of the people. In spite of the fact that rationalism and materialism, both as philosophies and movements, came into existence about two centuries ago in Europe, India, which has already evolved a modern bourgeois society and has organic political, economic, and cultural contacts with the European countries, continues to remain almost an invulnerable fortress of religio-mystical and obscurantist ideologies inherited from her medieval feudal past. It is true that, even in the European countries, rationalism and materialism are minority philosophico-ideological currents since the capitalist ruling class is afraid of and consequently sabotage the spread of rationalist and materialist ideas among the masses whom it exploits lest their spread among these masses may expose the irrational and un-historical nature of the capitalist social structure in its present stage of its decline and thereby accentuate their will to overthrow it. It is also true that the European bourgeoisie extensively utilizes the press, the radio, the school, the church, and other levers of moulding the views of the exploited classes, to inoculate them with religious and non-religious irrational conceptions and emotions such as would narcotize their growing will to challenge the social system which engenders increasing material and cultural poverty for them, and reconcile them to their class slavery under capitalism. Even during the period of anti-feudal bourgeois democratic revolutions when the European bourgeoisie, a historically progressive social class at that time, was engaged in a historic battle against the outmoded feudal social system, and was evolving, through its ideologues, rationalist and materialist conceptions of Nature and Society as ideological weapons to combat medieval superstition which hallowed feudalism even, during that rising ascending phase of capitalism, the European bourgeoisie felt a class fear of the exploited masses and recognized the necessity of maintaining religion as "the opium of the people". This class need of the bourgeoisie became articulate through Voltaire, when even that audacious critic of medieval religion observed, "If there is no God, it is necessary to invent Him for the masses".

Nevertheless, the fact remains that, in European countries, the bourgeois intelligentsia (Bacon, Hobbes, Locke and others in England; Holbach, Helvetius and others in France) did evolve anti-religious, anti-idealistic and materialist philosophies (though suffering from adulteration of elements of idealism). These philosophies have constituted a permanent and integral part of modern European culture. Further, on the basis of increased knowledge of the natural world through the advance of natural sciences and of the social world, through both historical research as well as the generalization of the practice of class struggle in the contemporary capitalist society, Marx and Engels, outstanding ideological leaders of the proletariat, enriched, deepened and made scientific, the materialist philosophy evolved by their bourgeois predecessors, the materialism of the eighteenth century Europe. Marx and Engels evolved the philosophy of dialectical materialism, which is the synthesis and generalisation into a world outlook of all scientific knowledge, achieved by humanity through practice, of the

natural, social and mental worlds during its existence hitherto.

In India, though a bourgeois society, a bourgeoisie, and a bourgeois intelligentsia emerged and developed, no strong bourgeois rationalist or materialist philosophical movement, even as a minority philosophical current, has grown. An overwhelming proportion of the Indian intelligentsia is immune from any "contamination" of the materialist or even rationalist ideas. The Indian intelligentsia in the mass subscribes to religio-mystical philosophy inherited from pre-modern past India. Incredible as it may seem, a section of it has even live faith in pseudo-sciences as palmistry and astrology.

Almost all outstanding bourgeois intellectuals who work in the field of politics, economics, sociology, philosophy, or natural sciences, are idealists, God-believing. Very few among them have succeeded in liberating themselves from the ancient superstition of the God-idea or have built up a healthy scientific materialist world outlook.

However, though bourgeois materialism has not struck its roots in the soil of Indian society, dialectical (proletarian) materialism is steadily spreading among those intellectuals who have accepted Marxism and are identified with the camp of the proletarian struggle for the establishment of a socialist society. Thus, not bourgeois but proletarian intelligentsia is determined historically to lead the struggle against all medieval superstition and religio-mystical philosophies which are rampant in contemporary India. Just as, in the material sphere, the Indian bourgeoisie repudiated the task of liquidating survivals of feudalism and imperialism (foreign capital invested in India) but seeks compromise with the latter, in the philosophico-cultural sphere, the bourgeois intelligentsia has repudiated the task of combating and extinguishing inherited unscientific and socially reactionary philosophies inherited from the pre-capitalist feudal past, and even endeavoured to regalanize those philosophies (Tilak, Gandhi, Aurbindo, J. C. Bose, and others). It becomes the historical task, in the sphere of culture, of Marxists or proletarian intelligentsia to campaign against those reactionary philosophies of the early pre-capitalist epoch.

The non-emergence of organized powerful rationalist and materialist philosophical movements in India is due to a variety of historical reasons. We will enumerate the chief among these.

First, India, till recently, was directly under British domination. The Indian people felt a natural and healthy hostility against this domination. This hostility, however, instead of being restricted to the economic and political domination of India by a foreign nation, was wrongly extended to whatever pertained to the foreigner. An antagonistic attitude was taken not only towards the foreign ruler but also towards the culture of the foreign ruler. Now, rationalist and materialist culture originated in Europe as a cultural weapon of the European bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudalism. It was created by the intellectual vanguard of the bourgeoisie. Bourgeois rationalist and materialist culture (bourgeois because it considered the bourgeois social system as ideal and immutable, and further, moved within the categories of bourgeois conceptions of the physical and social world) was historically a higher culture than the historically preceding feudal culture. This was the specific contribution of the progressive West European bourgeoisie of the ascending phase of capitalism to the cultural advance of humanity.

The bourgeois leaders of the Indian nationalist movement like Tilak, B.C. Pal, Ghandi, and others, however,

misidentified and confounded the domination of the country by a bourgeois foreign nation like the British with the bourgeois culture of the latter which was historically higher than the inherited feudal Indian culture. They not only condemned "western" domination but also "western" culture which had, within it, valuable scientific elements. They crusaded not only against the foreign rule but also against the superior culture of the foreigners.

This hostility to the foreign rule and the resultant uncritical aversion to the rationalist and materialist western culture felt by the Indian intelligentsia, nourished on the preachings of Tilak, Pal, Ghandi, and others, prompted a good section of it to idealize the backward culture of pre-modern India. It dreamt of a modified revival of ancient Indian culture, its twentieth century edition. This recoil from the rationalist and materialist culture of the West, because it was evolved by a nation which had enslaved and dominated the Indian people, was one of the main reasons why this historically higher culture did not rapidly spread among the patriotic Indian intelligentsia, why even the educated classes remained impervious to its appeal, why the Indian nationalist, instead of assimilating that culture and using it as a weapon against the reactionary ideological inheritance in the form of a mass of mind-deadening superstitions and religious mysticism, actually revelled in day dreams of resurrecting the culture of India's hoary past. He became a national chauvinist in the cultural field declaring that the Indian people armed with the inherited spiritual culture (the religio-mystical culture), the product of their backward feudal phase of existence, will be the cultural leader of contemporary humanity.

National slavery under a western power instigated the patriotic Indian intelligentsia to idealize the backward culture of India's feudal past and made it disorient from the historically higher modern bourgeois culture of the west. The Indian intelligentsia, mainly bourgeois in bulk, apart from the class reason, recoiled also from Marxian materialism which, though it was critical of the bourgeois western culture, had however its genesis in the European social soil.

The second principal reason why, in spite of the development of a capitalist economy and a bourgeois society (basically bourgeois in spite of some feudal admixtures) in India, rationalist and materialist philosophies did not spread among the Indian bourgeoisie or the bourgeois intelligentsia, was the historical weakness of the bourgeoisie and their resultant fear of a socialist revolution of the proletariat which might endanger the existence of the bourgeois social system.

The English and the French bourgeoisie and bourgeois intelligentsia, the pioneer of rationalist and materialist philosophies, developed during the epoch of rising capitalism. In England, Bacon, Locke, and Hobbes were the principal architects of the materialist philosophy which, though it suffered from idealistic errors, was in essence materialist. In France, Holbach, Helvetious, Diderot and others were the heroic founders of the rationalist and materialist thought. The new philosophy was the new world outlook of the rising bourgeois society and was the ideological weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie for its victory over feudalism and its own further development.

In France, the pioneers of the new rationalist and materialist philosophies were the ideological inspirers of the titanic rational (historically speaking) social phenomenon known as the French Revolution which blasted away all reactionary feudal social and political institutions and freed the mind of the French people from the Catholic Christian superstition. The new philosophy was supported by the rising socially and economically powerful class of society viz. the bourgeoisie (the class of enterprising merchants and manufacturers). This class found in rationalism a strong weapon to fight the Christian Church which enslaved the

human mind in the prison of irrational social conceptions such as the Divine Right of Kings, the eternal validity of the decadent feudal system (which stifled the expansion of trade and manufacture), the sacrosanct character of the privileges of the feudal nobles and which, above all, tried to strangle the enterprising and inquiring impulses of man to explore the world and reach a scientific understanding of that world so necessary for the advance of bourgeois trade and industry. The bourgeoisie needed, for the expansion of their trade and manufacture, the development of natural sciences (their use for navigation, for the improvement of technology etc.), the increase of scientific knowledge of the world, the liberation of the people from irrational taboos which feudal religion imposed on them. The bourgeoisie adopted rationalism, even materialism, as its powerful ideological artillery to storm the heights of superstition which the Church spread among the people to make them accept the existing feudal social system.

Thus, the rising French bourgeoisie in its own interest countenanced nationalist and materialist philosophies which the bourgeois intelligentsia evolved and used them as ideological class weapons against the feudal society and the feudal religion. They needed the growth of natural sciences for the improvement of transport and technology so vital for the expansion of trade and manufacture. Feudal society based on a dominant stationary agrarian mode of production obstructed the development of natural sciences and persecuted all scientific endeavour. Since the advance of natural sciences demanded a materialist approach to the world, the French bourgeoisie adopted rationalism and materialism as its philosophico-ideological weapons to combat religio-idealistic philosophy of the official feudal society.

Further, the social and political superstructure of the feudal society subserved the class interests of the feudal nobility. This superstructure impeded free expansion of new productive forces (trade and manufacture). The French bourgeoisie, therefore, supported also bourgeois rationalist ideas evolved by the intelligentsia to expose (exposed within the limits of bourgeois criticism) the irrational character of the feudal social and political institutions based on such principles as birth, divine origin of kingship, sacrosanct character of the autocratic feudal state.

Thus Europe became the birth place of powerful rationalist and materialist philosophies in the bourgeois phase of social development.

The bourgeoisie, however, was also an exploiting class, exploiting the working masses on the basis of its class ownership of the modern means of production. As bourgeois society, after supplanting feudal society, further developed, the class antagonism between the exploiting bourgeoisie and the exploited proletariat (social manifestation of the basic contradiction of the capitalist economy viz. between the social character of production and individual appropriation) came into greater and greater relief, and the class struggle between these two fundamental classes of bourgeois society, with some zigzags, increasingly sharpened.

The ruling bourgeoisie now needed crude religion as well as refined idealistic philosophy to chloroform the spirit of discontent growing among the working masses. The proletariat was beginning to subject the capitalist social system also to rationalist criticism. It was feeling not merely class inequalities (rampant in the feudal society) but also class distinctions as irrational. It was challenging not only feudal property but also bourgeois property. The proletariat, through its intellectual vanguard, was formulating a proletarian rationalist and materialist class criticism of bourgeois society as the bourgeoisie, through its intellectual vanguard, had formulated in the past, a bourgeois rationalist and materialist criticism of feudal society.

With the growing danger of the socialist working class movement to the capitalist social system, the European

bourgeoisie began to retreat from rationalism and materialism, became pious, churchgoing, and "God-believing", and increasingly strengthened and supported religious and non-religious idealistic philosophies. As Engels remarks:

"The workmen of France and Germany had become rebellious. They were thoroughly infected with socialism... Nothing remained to the French and German bourgeoisie as a last resource but silently drop their free thought... one by one scoffers turned pious in outward behaviour, spoke with respect to the Church... The French and the German bourgeoisie had come to grief with materialism. Religion must be kept alive for the people... that was the only way and the means to save society (bourgeois) from utter ruin".

After its entry into the declining phase of capitalism (imperialism) when the working class movement has assumed formidable proportions and the socialist danger to capitalism has been accentuated, the European bourgeoisie has become still more religious and idealistic in philosophy. While a very small proportion of the bourgeois intelligentsia is ideologically *declassed* and has gravitated to the camp of the most advanced type of materialism viz. (Marxist) dialectical materialism, its great section has moved away to idealism and mysticism. Nevertheless, it must be recognized that the European bourgeoisie, impelled by its class interest, did in the earlier phase of its existence, play a historically progressive cultural role when it developed rationalist ideas and a materialist (though mechanistic) world outlook.

The Indian bourgeoisie and the bourgeois intelligentsia have, however, no glorious materialist tradition in philosophy. From the very inception of their existence, they have held and propagated religious or non-religious idealistic views.

The political leaders of the Indian bourgeoisie like Tilak, Gandhi, and others or its philosophical representatives like Aurbindo, Pal, Radhakrishnan, and others have been staunch antimaterialist in philosophy. They have subscribed to such unscientific conceptions as God, intuition, "Inner Voice" and others.

We have previously mentioned one principal reason for this disorientation from materialism of the Indian bourgeois intelligentsia viz. its error of confounding the domination of India by a western nation with the materialist culture which emerged in the West.

We will enumerate other principal reasons for its anti-materialist recoil.

Materialist philosophy emerged as the generalization of the knowledge of the physical world acquired through the growth of natural sciences. Natural sciences themselves developed rapidly in Europe under the impetus given by the needs of trade and technology on which the bourgeois economy was based and expanding.

In India, though a capitalist economy developed, the productive forces on which it was based (industrial technology, transport and others) were not the product of the endeavour of indigenous scientists or technologists. It was not the bourgeois intelligentsia of India who evolved modern natural sciences or invented modern technology. It was the bourgeois intelligentsia of modern Europe which accomplished this.

The Indian bourgeoisie only transplanted the engineering and scientific knowledge as well as technology (machinery etc.) from Europe where they originated. They created a capitalist industry and economy in India on the basis of the creative achievements of the European bourgeoisie.

Due also to this historical reason, bourgeois materialism did not originate in India.

The other and by far the most significant reason why

modern materialist philosophy neither emerged in India nor was it accepted by the Indian bourgeoisie and the Indian bourgeoisie in the period during which it was born and developed.

As we mentioned previously, even the European bourgeoisie which had a materialist tradition retreated from materialism as soon as the socialist danger to the capitalist social system was unfolded. In India, such danger for capitalism exists from the very outset.

Due to the low development of the productive forces of Indian society (their normal development being obstructed by capitalist Britain) and further due to the exploitation of the Indian masses by both foreign and Indian capital as also by Zamindars, moneylenders, and others, these masses lived in conditions of abysmal poverty. The democratic and socialist danger to the capitalist-landlord system was, consequently, perennial and grave in India from the very early phase of capitalist development.

The Indian bourgeoisie has, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, felt the basic need of maintaining religion as a spiritual prop of the system from the very beginning. It dared not adopt materialism as a philosophical ideological weapon in its limited struggles against imperialism or native feudalism during any phase of its existence.

The political and philosophical leaders of the Indian bourgeoisie have therefore been consistently anti-materialist. The whole socio-economic capitalist-landlord structure is so exploitative that it cannot stand even minimum rational inquiry. Religion becomes more than ever necessary to reconcile the masses to it. The leaders need not, of course, be conscious of the class motif behind their religious and idealistic world outlooks. They believe in those unscientific philosophies impelled, in final analysis, by the exigencies of class survival (the basic interest of a class), by the constant threat of a socialist revolution.

It is, therefore, that materialism is spreading only among socialist intelligentsia who represents the historical interests of the working class and participate in the latter's struggle to replace the capitalist-landlord system with socialism.

The Indian bourgeoisie and its intelligentsia are inveterate antagonists of materialism. The bourgeoisie finances liberally all programmes of religious revival and resuscitation of India's spiritual culture though adapting it to the needs of the bourgeoisie.

In Europe, in the initial phases, the bourgeoisie financially aided the spread of rationalist and materialist ideas. In India, it finances anti-materialist and anti-rationalist movements. This is one of the reasons why these movements advance at a slow tempo in India.

The bourgeois intelligentsia of India is denied the glorious role of being the pioneer or the protagonist of scientific materialist philosophical ideas and the organizer of mass movements against religious superstition. It lacks a vital intellectual indignation at the whole complex of superstitious practices which form the normal life of an Indian. It, in fact, in social life, generally adapts itself to these.

The European bourgeoisie, though an exploiting class, due to historical circumstances, advanced human culture by helping the materialist campaign against religion and idealistic philosophy. The Indian bourgeoisie, due to different historical circumstances in which it lives, conserves these unscientific ideologies.

It is the historical privilege of Marxist proletarian materialists to achieve a cultural renaissance in our country. The whole phase of bourgeois materialist development will be shipped over in the field of culture. From the preponderantly obscurantist and religio-mystical feudal philosophy a leap will be taken to the philosophy of dialectical materialism.