

Tryst With Socialism

A Peek into the History of
International Communist Movement

R. Arun Kumar



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FOREWORD

The history of the communist movement is indeed an enduring tribute to the unquenchable thirst of the human spirit that seeks to soar unbound, throwing asunder all shackles that confine and restrict the realisation of complete liberty and emancipation. Marxism as a world outlook, a creative science is itself, as Karl Marx had repeatedly pointed out, a product of accumulative experiences of human endeavour. The evolution of scientific socialism and its emancipatory ideals continue to attract the human spirit to carry forward the struggle to change the social order into one where there is no longer any exploitation of man by man or nation by nation. Understanding this history, learning from its experiences and understanding its lessons is, thus integral to this ever yearning human endeavour for liberty and freedom in its most comprehensive sense.

This history has been often documented and continues to remain a source of inspiration for future struggles of humanity. However, a need has arisen for a succinct presentation of this history to carry forward the threads of continuity to achieve this emancipatory ideals. This short version by R. Arun Kumar is an effort to meet this need.

This volume should serve as an essential reading for all of the new generation that has today emerged in a world where the countervailing forces of socialism that emancipated humanity by creating the first socialist state that liberated millions of people through the process of decolonisation, which can only be possible following the defeat of Hitler and fascism by the Soviet Red Army in the World War II and by the

subsequent socialist revolutions of China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc. that took away nearly half the world out of imperialism's orbit, does not exist in that form as it did in the 20th century, shaping the contours of human civilisation.

This account traces the hopes that have been re-ignited in the 21st century. The global protests against the worst economic crisis of capitalism; against imperialist wars of occupation and aggression and against the growing miseries being mounted on the vast mass of the working people around the world, particularly the politically advanced, progressive and anti-imperialist forces of Latin America are once again tellingly demonstrating the truth that capitalism can never be either crisis free or exploitation free. However, even in the times of its worst crisis, capitalism never collapses automatically. In fact, it emerges as Marx had said, from every crisis, stronger by intensifying class exploitation and oppression. Capitalism needs to be overthrown. This responsibility lies on the shoulders of the working people led by working class party to convert every moment of capitalist crisis into a revolutionary situation for the overthrowing of capitalism. It is this capacity of the working class under the leadership of the communist party – the Leninist subjective factor that needs to be strengthened to accomplish the task of true and complete human liberation.

This volume will surely contribute in strengthening our understanding of the rise and ebb of the international communist movement which in turn should contribute to the strengthening of the subjective factor in contemporary times.

Sitaram Yechury

14.03.2013

I

THE BACK GROUND

“Man is born free, and every where he is in chains...”

– *Rousseau, The Social Contract*

From times immemorial, the condition of human beings remains an important concern. The questions – where did they come from? What is their role? What is their relationship with the nature? What are the relations between one another? and how to better their future? – were not just philosophical concerns. These questions, in fact influenced the way they conducted. The quest to understand the various social relations and change these relations for better, shaped the entire flow of history. The struggle to break the chains of bondage is both an ideological struggle and a 'physical' struggle involving various sections /classes of people. It is ideological because, they had to first understand the relations between the ruler and the ruled, demystify them and inspire people into a physical combat to change those relations. This is what Marx meant, when he initiates the Communist Manifesto with the lines: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”.

Human beings become free only when they act under their own free will without being enslaved and alienated. Marx states,

“A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself”. The struggles for freedom were never the same across time and space. They varied because human beings are products of their times: “circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances”. The growth of trade, commerce and manufacturing gave an entirely new dimension to these struggles.

The advent of Industrial Revolution, with the advances made in production had a profound impact on the entire human history. The capitalist mode of production emerged way back in the 16th century. The first period in its history, the period of manufacturing, lasted almost two centuries during which the rate of development was extremely low. The long 'incubation' phase of machine production, brought about an industrial revolution in the Great Britain in the 1760s, in France at the end of the 18th century and in the US after 1810. Industrial revolution, was above all a revolution in production techniques. Manual labour was replaced by mechanised labour giving birth to a factory system of capitalist production. It set the stage for a rapid growth of productive forces in capitalist society. It led to the emergence of large-scale machine industry, greater social division of labour and the emergence of new cities and industrial centres.

The main social outcome of the industrial revolution was that capitalism was established as a socio-economic system with two main antagonistic classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Proletariat class is the first social class in the entire human history which has got 'nothing to lose'. This is in fact, a truly 'revolutionary' event in the world history. Many great minds of the times were concerned by these events. A section of them could not comprehend the changes and were nostalgic of the era that was slowly, but surely being transformed. They riled the new society and this was reflected in the literature.

Many of the peasants who had lost their lands were transformed into industrial workers. Small manufacturers were eaten up by the large industrialists. Machines were blamed for their loss of livelihood. They gave vent to their anger on the machines and this movement was popularly called as the 'Luddite' movement. In the 1760s and 1770s, the English workers levelled their wrath on the machines and factories. The movement of Luddites emerged also in France, Germany and other countries and at times assumed mass proportions. They failed to realise that it is not the machine, but the one who owns the machine who is responsible for their misery.

It is in this period that the momentous French Revolution took place in 1789. This is a bourgeoisie revolution against the feudal and absolutist regimes of that period. The bourgeoisie not only wanted many hands employed in the fields to run their nascent industries, but also political clout to back their growing economic power. The bourgeoisie viewed these feudal regimes as obstacles to the development of capitalist relations. The transition from feudalism to capitalism was a result of severe class battles and numerous bourgeoisie revolutions. These revolutions were joined by broad popular masses – the peasants, the urban poor, the working people. The third estate (classes involved in production and trading) representing the advanced productive forces was obviously victorious in this struggle and could gain important political and economic gains. The bourgeoisie class was placed at the centre of social development. State power was used by the bourgeoisie to rapidly develop its wealth by confiscating the lands of both the nobility and church.

The bourgeoisie after successfully seizing power, ditched the other classes, mainly the proletariat, which stood by it in the revolutionary struggle. Immediately after coming to power, in 1791, it adopted the Chapelier Law banning strikes. But that did not stop the

working class struggle in France. In 1795 Paris workers staged two large-scale uprisings to defend their rights. Both uprisings were suppressed, but they produced a deep impression on all progressives in the country. As we notice, during this period Luddite actions were slowly being replaced with strikes. Targeted against the employer, the strikes were becoming an increasingly popular and effective weapon in the class struggle. In spite of this, the workers had neither a clear idea of the goals of the struggle nor organisations which could lead their struggle. They put forward only economic demands like a shorter working day, higher wages, better working and living conditions and so on. They could feel the exploitation, but not understand it. They did not see the need to wage a political struggle for a radical change of their position in society, for emancipation from capitalist oppression and exploitation. Moreover, the workers' actions were limited to certain factories or to a particular region. The working class did not yet develop the consciousness to organise mass action in a whole industry, not to mention 'nation-wide' actions.

II

AGE OF IDEAS

As we have seen earlier, in the late 18th and the early 19th centuries, with the industrial revolution slowly gaining pace, the society witnessed many significant changes. The old feudal order with the church, nobles and the gentry was being replaced by the emerging capitalism. This is a period when people were discussing the lost days of chivalry, morals, the easy paced life and the new benefits emerging from the scientific and technological advances. Vast amounts of literary works emerged reflecting this moral dilemma. Concerns about the squalor, deprivation and poverty too arose. There was a huge debate: what is this change, is it necessary, who is benefiting from it and how to better the society. This is a period that saw the emergence of Voltaire, Rosseau, Thomas Paine, Kant, Hegel, Charles Darwin, Adam Smith and many other great social scientists. It is in this period that the Communist Manifesto too appeared and warned about the spectre looming large over the entire world.

1. UTOPIAN SOCIALISTS

During this period, along with the antagonism between the feudal lords and the burghers, there was the general antagonism between the exploited and the exploiters, the rich idlers and the poor workers. It was this very circumstance that made it possible for the representatives of the bourgeoisie to put themselves forward as representing not one special class, but the whole of suffering humanity. Moreover, the emerging capitalists needed wage-labourers to run their factories and this made them address the demands of the peasants and the poor workers. The demand for equality was no longer confined to the political rights,

but was extended to the social conditions of individuals. It is in this background that the 'three great Utopians': "Saint-Simon, to whom the middle-class movement, side by side with the proletariat, still had a certain significance; Fourier; and Owen, who in the country where capitalist production was most developed, and under the influence of the antagonisms begotten of this, worked out his proposals for the removal of class distinction systematically and in direct relation to French materialism", appeared.

None of the three utopians represented the proletariat class. To their credit, they too did not claim to work for the emancipation of one particular class. As they themselves claimed, they worked to emancipate the entire humanity at once. They had characterised the bourgeoisie world as irrational and unjust. They began their active 'political life', when there was disappointment reigning among the people with the failure of the promised happiness after the great Revolutions – French and American included. The inequalities between the rich and poor had widened, instead of decreasing as was promised by the philosophers of 18th century like Rousseau, Voltaire, Paine, etc. It was in this period of disappointment and general gloom that in 1802, Saint-Simon's Geneva letters appeared; in 1808 appeared Fourier's first work and on January 1, 1800, Robert Owen undertook the direction of New Lanark.

This is also a period when the contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat were still in the nascent stage. Modern industry that had taken its birth in England, did not yet fully develop in the 'Continent' and other parts of the world. The conflicts between the workers and the capitalists, as we had seen earlier, were 'crude' and developing. That is the reason why during the French Revolution, the '*sans culottes*' (those who have nothing), were not able to decisively impact the course of the Revolution, though they too had their moments during the 'Reign of Terror'. It is in these circumstances that the utopian socialists propounded their ideas. They had proposed to cleanse the society of all its wrongs using reason. They tried to perfect the social system with the example of some model experiments that they had carried out. The new society that they were propagating was a society that did not evolve from the existing society as a result of the actions of the existing classes of that time. It was a product of imaginations of their brains and obviously had severe limitations on their projects and ideas. However, this does not

mean that the Utopians had no contribution to make in the advancement of the understanding of human miseries and the means to struggle for putting an end to them.

Saint-Simon was the product of the great French Revolution. He was 30 at the time of the Revolution and was deeply influenced by it. He developed his intellectual outlook and understanding of the society in this background.

Saint-Simon characterised the antagonism of the French society of those times as that between 'workers' and 'idlers'. Workers for him, were not just wage-workers, but also the manufacturers, the merchants and the bankers. The idlers, are not merely the old privileged classes but all those who were not involved in production or distribution and lived on their incomes. He came to the conclusion that the non-possessing classes do not have the capacity to govern the society. According to him, science and industry, united by a religious bond is to perform this duty. He opined that 'all men had to work', which is indeed a revolutionary statement at that time. Similarly, in 1802 itself he recognised the French Revolution as a 'class war'. In 1816, he declared that politics is the science of production and in a way foretold the concept of political economy, the absorption of politics by economics. An important limitation among his ideas is that he did not look at the oppressed workers to carry out his plans for social transformation but believed that this would be done by the manufacturers, bankers, scholars and artists who are convinced of his doctrine.

Robert Owen was another Utopian thinker who is famous not only for his 'radical' ideas, but also for his practical methods. Robert Owen was an industrialist and was thus in direct contact with the workers. While most of his class saw only chaos and confusion and the opportunity to make the most of those times, Owen saw in it an opportunity to put into practice his social theories. From 1800 to 1829 he had conducted various social and educational experiments designed by him to help the workers and their families come out of poverty. Among the steps he had initiated at that time were: reducing working hours, employing no children under 10 years of age, introducing free primary education and relatively hygienic working conditions. He tried to eliminate theft and drunkenness by persuasion rather than punishment. By these experiments, he showed

End of Preview.

Rest of the book can be read @
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