

MARX BICENTENNIAL LECTURE

To Gain a View of the Elephant

India, History, Modernity, and Marx

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etaddhastidarshana iva jatyandhah

That is like people blind by birth viewing an elephant.

- (Shankaracharya's *bhasya* on *Chandogya-Upanisad* 5.18.1)¹

It was six blind men of Indostan,

To learning much inclined,

Who went to see the Elephant

(Though all of them were blind),

That each by observation

Might satisfy his mind.

- John Godfrey Saxe²

The ancient Indian parable of *blind men and the elephant*, popularized in modern times by John Godfrey Saxe's nineteenth century poem, has often been deployed in philosophical discourses about the nature of reality and its relationship to sense perception. It has served as a useful metaphor in many an argument about empiricist epistemology, moral relativism, cultural plurality, even religious tolerance. No such usage is intended here. My purpose in starting out with the parable is mostly methodological – how does one put together a vision of the beast based on necessarily partial observations of it.

Assembling the limbs to recover the beast does require some sort of a *model* of the entire thing. One would have to have some idea about the *whole* even before one begins to put it together. Such *pre-suppositions* do play a role in choosing what to observe and in interpreting and making use of those observations. *Theory-ladenness* of observations is a much discussed subject in philosophy of science. *Methodological*, therefore, is never entirely free of the *ontological*; the practical minded *engineer* never comes completely out of the philosophical and ideological shadows. The best one can expect to do is to be aware of the shadows and be continuously engaged in a *critical-iterative* process of taking into account their effects, hopefully diminishing through successive iterations.

The metaphor, therefore, has limitations. No investigator is entirely like the men in the parable who were blind by birth. The analogy is even weaker for an Indian who wishes to gain a full view of India and envision its possible futures. He is too profoundly and too intimately shaped by it and, in all likelihood, too deeply immersed in it to experience a *first touch*. Similar is the case of a Marxist, especially for the activist-practitioner kind, who would like to scrutinize and weigh strengths and weaknesses of the Marxist method as it is presently known and used. She

will be too familiar with and, perhaps, too attached to the theory and the method. The challenge, then, would be, in both the cases, to gain a perspective to obtain a view.

Actually, in the considerations here, there will be two elephants, one at each end of the argument. At one end will, obviously, be *India*. A full view of India is far from being a concern only of the academics. Of course there are theories galore about what India is about and how to view it, and there are unending controversies on the subject among historians, philosophers, social and cultural theorists and other varieties of scholars. But, far more consequentially, it is a matter of live political interest. ‘Imagining India’³, far from being a prerogative of the high intellectual, is a pressing and almost inescapable task for all contending forces in the political arena of contemporary India.

The main contest in the political arena is between the liberal-secular imagination of the *Indian Nation* and the illiberal-communal imagination of a *Hindu Nation*. Both strive to locate the roots of national unity in the civilizational antiquity of the subcontinent but in largely contrasting ways. The former emphasizes diversity, syncretism and tolerance as sources of the millennial continuity of the civilization and advocates their continued importance for building a modern, prosperous and progressive nation.⁴ The latter dwells on a mythological history of Hindu greatness in distant past despoiled mainly by Muslim invasions in the medieval era and proposes to restore the lost glory by fusion of aggressive *Hindutva* with a belligerent nationalism, a strong state and a ruthless breed of capitalism.⁵

The Marxist Left⁶, which has seen a rapid decline in recent years in its influence in the electoral-political arena, remains, nevertheless, an important contestant in the field of *imagining India*. It has traditionally stayed away from civilizational discourses. Its imagination of India has mostly been confined to the concept of anti-colonial, anti-imperialist nationalism and its role in bringing about a modern and unified India. It has been forced, in these times of political supremacy of an ascendant *Hindutva*, to put on display its own subscription to Indian nationalism and, at the same time, differentiate it from the sectarian and jingoistic *cultural nationalism* of the *Hindutva* camp.⁷ Earlier it was sufficient to stay within the economic and political dimensions of progressive nationalism, but no longer. Now a Marxist course is to be charted afresh through the contentious terrain of nationalism – a course that would be opposed to the *Hindutva* interpretation, keep a safe distance from the secular-liberal-bourgeois approach to nationalism and, at the same time, would not altogether neglect the cultural-civilizational dimension. Professor Irfan Habib, for example, in a recent lecture, dismisses the *Hindutva* claim that “India was a nation since Rig-Vedic times” and at the same time chastises Perry Anderson for the misleading assertion in his recent book, *The Indian Ideology*, that “India is a name given by foreigners particularly Europeans in modern times”. Habib traces the first coming together of the subcontinent to the Mauryan Empire but it was, according to him, merely a political unity of many cultures and religions and lacked characteristic unity of a nation. It had yet to give rise to a concept or sentiment of “patriotism” towards *India*. The word “Hindu”, and the word “India” derived from it, may be ancient in origin (Sanskrit, Prakrit, Greek, Persian), but the

conceptualization of India as a nation emerged later, although much before the arrival of the British. “The first patriotic poem in which India is praised, India is loved, Indians are acclaimed is Amir Khusrau’s long poem in his Nuh Sipihir written in 1318.”⁸

There are other forces, parties and movements arising from the hugely complex social and political realities of India. They may not participate in the same manner or to the same degree in the endeavour of *imagining India*. Their focus, if not their *raison d’être*, may originate in a ‘partial’ encounter with India – such as caste, region, religion, language, environment or some other specific issue. If challenged on the subject of nation and nationalism, they may subscribe to one or another of the major imaginings of India or may refuse altogether to join the issue. Many would conceptualize India as an age-old society peopled by diverse communities, but would see no reason to subscribe to the “ideology” of a unitary Indian nationhood. Despite enjoying a wide acclaim in the academia, particularly in the western academia, it is unclear if such ideas as a whole can have any significant traction in the contemporary political arena.⁹

It is not the intention here to present yet another imagination of *India*. Nor do I plan to rehearse Marxist theories of nation and nationalism.¹⁰ India is taken up, in these considerations, as an example that would, hopefully, shed some light on how the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ combine to produce the fullness of social reality and how political action is shaped by this combination. Political action is expected, in turn, to feed into the same social reality rendering it a dynamical and historical character. Marxists have not been unmindful of *social imaginaries* and their role in the constitution of various layers of the social whole.¹¹ But in the functional theorizations by the political actors, including the programme documents of communist parties, this aspect is often submerged in ‘synthetic’ articulations where it is difficult to separate the ‘analytical’ from the ‘descriptive’. Furthermore, the problem of *imaginaries* is not confined to the subject of social totality. Efforts to understand the parts or layers of social reality suffer from similar complications. Entanglement of ‘objectivity’ of social relations and ‘subjectivity’ of identity and recognition is a ubiquitous feature of caste, gender, race, ethnicity and many other social structures and phenomena. Marxist political forces have come under great deal of pressure due to what have been described as *non-class social movements*. It has necessitated many ‘add-ons’ to the main body of the political programmes. But it is difficult to decide how far to bend without breaking the back-bone of a theoretical framework built on centrality, howsoever defined, of *classes*, *class-struggles* and *modes of production*.

The other elephant, at the other end of the argument, will, then, be the *Marxist method*. This too is a beast equally hard to put together. There may even be doubts about all the limbs fitting together, and the problems may be taken to the doorstep of the first theorist of the tradition, Karl Marx himself. There is, for example, a Marx underlining the preeminence of *agency* in the famous *Eleventh Thesis* where he says, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.” There is, of course, the materialist Marx who points out in another famous passage, “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.” In the same

passage there is a hint of the structuralist Marx who locates the onset of “an epoch of social revolution” in the structural dynamics of the mode of production when “the material productive forces of society come in conflict with the existing relations of production.” This hint is reinforced in the preface to the first German edition of *Capital* Volume I where he says, “But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.” A reconciliation of apparently irreconcilable pieces, such as the *agency* and the *structure* or the *subjective* and the *objective*, had already been asserted in yet another famous passage written earlier in 1851-52, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”¹²

Are “men” of the last quotation, who “make their own history”, the same as the “men” of *Capital* who are mere “embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests”? Does the *revolutionary agency* arise fully formed from the material conditions to merely enact the structural dynamics of the objective contradictions, or is it *surplus* to the material foundations in some fundamental sense despite being *emergent* from the same foundations and the same structural dynamics? There is a long history of struggles over these and many other questions of theory and method. The ebb and flow of debates among varieties of Marxism – orthodox, Hegelian, phenomenological, structural, analytic, political, psycho-analytic, post-structural and many others – continues. We cannot hope to settle debates or even engage with all of them. The considerations here attempt to chart a pragmatic-theoretical course that would, hopefully, take us towards fashioning a more efficient ‘technology’ for coming to political conclusions and for devising political strategies for these less than favourable times.

The argument from *India* to the *Marxist method* (and back) would pass through two more sites – *history* and *modernity*. Both terms would be used in a restricted, somewhat idiosyncratic, sense. One of the principal and large-scale claims of Marxism is to offer a *theory of history*. *Historical Materialism* is taken as the canonical term for this theory. A *theory*, generally speaking, is supposed to *explain*. History, however, refuses to be contained entirely within the *realm of explanation*. As an adjective, *historical* also contains, and partly connotes, a sense of being accidental, contingent, extraneous to the systematic, as well as something *made*, at least partly, by historical agents. These are factors not amenable to causal and systematic explanation. This internal tension in the theory is resolved in two different ways in two different contexts. One move is to take it as a theory of history on an epochal time-scale – a theory of *the very long wave*. A trajectory, then, can hopefully be discerned despite the short-term fluctuations in the course. Theory is supposed to explain the long-term trajectory and not the zigzag of the short-

term. The other move can be to separate the *systematic* from the *contingent* and take the effects of the latter on the former as a kind of *environmental* effect. One can have a theory of the *system* without having a theory of the environment provided one has figured out some way, necessarily rough and approximate, to account for the environmental effects. Separating the systematic from the contingent is itself a theoretical move. One can start with an unabashed assumption about what constitutes the *system*. More plausibly one can take help from the theory of the long wave to define the *system* and throw everything else into the bin called environment. This is how the *Marxist method* will be interpreted and deployed here. In this approach, a *synchronic* theory (of the society) is taken to depend on a *diachronic* theory (of history). *Historical materialism* is applicable only to the long wave of history, but it gives theoretical tools to investigate a society at any given time.

In the progression of the argument, the other site – *modernity* – will be used in an even more idiosyncratic sense. It will be relegated mostly to the environmental bin. This will be very different from most of the treatments *modernity* receives in the theoretical literature – both Marxist and non-Marxist. It has generally been taken as a composite category that emerged from a historic rupture of long duration separating the *modern era* from the *pre-modern* one.¹³ Commonly held perceptions take this rupture to straddle both the “*revolution of facts*” and the “*revolution of the mind*”.¹⁴ Marxists, generally, consider *modernity* to be inextricably entangled with *capitalism*. A *socialist modernity* can be envisioned but only as fundamentally different from the capitalist one.¹⁵ Non-Marxist theorists – Max Weber being the canonical example, but also more recent theorists such as Ernest Gellner or Michael Mann – consider *modernity* to be standing on its own feet of rationality, individual self-hood and cognitive revolution. For them the association between modernity and capitalism is not *necessary* but *historical* – it just so happens that actually existing *modernity* is *capitalist*.

Both the Marxist and the non-Marxist camps find it difficult to gain a full theoretical grip over the slippery and multi-faceted beast that modernity is. And, further, both camps haunt each other from the sides. Many in the wider Marxist circles – from Lukacs to Habermas, but even some of the orthodox Marxists trying to incorporate non-class issues in the party documents (whether or not they are aware of their theoretical predicament) – have struggled long and hard either to befriend or to fight (or both) Max Weber’s ghost. Non-Marxists, on the other hand, have adopted Marx’s insights, often stealthily. Many of the Marxist tenets have been absorbed as *commonsense* into professedly non-Marxist theories. Among many challenges, both camps struggle to come to grips with apparent multiplicity of *actually existing capitalisms* and also of *actually existing modernities*.

The interpretation of the *Marxist method* adopted here is a pragmatic one. It adopts a definition of *modernity* primarily as a *matter of the mind*, and treats it as an *environment*¹⁶ for the *system*. The *system* is principally a *mode of production* (capitalism) and primarily a *matter of facts*. Despite considering modernity primarily as mental, this approach is very different from non-Marxist approaches. Explanatory weight is on the *material-systemic*, even as the *system* is in

vigorous interaction with its environment whose effects must be taken into account. At the same time, it is very different from most Marxist approaches. It does not implicate the *systemic* and the *non-systemic* on an equal footing in the definition of *modernity*. In fact, it goes in the opposite direction and considers *modernity* to be primarily and largely non-systemic. This theoretical move is motivated by the fact that the main object of analysis for Marxist theory is not modernity per se – the main objects are *society* and *history*. The identification of the *system* part is extracted from the *theory of history* and harnessed into the *theory of society*. It is perfectly legitimate in this scheme to consider *modernity* as part of the environment of a modern-day *system* (capitalism, socialism).¹⁷ An immediate gain is a robust explanation of the diversity of actually existing capitalisms. Capitalism as a mode of production may be same everywhere, but in different countries it lives in different environments. That is where its diversity comes from.

It can be further noted that the *environment* is not entirely created by the *system* – it is largely *given* and continues from the *past*. This approach, then, has the potential to cure many of the headaches of Marxist theory about social determination of ideas and of all life-practices. *Not everything has to be derived from the dynamics of the current system*. Marx himself may have been the source of the *base-superstructure* straightjacket that remains suffocating despite all the dialectical acrobatics. He may have said, in that famous passage, that superstructure arises out of the real foundation of the economic structure, and “with the change of the economic foundation the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed.” But let us not forget that the same Marx also said, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”

The brain of the living, which carries stuff from the past – some even from the distant past – is, then, a legitimate analytical category in a Marxist theory of society and history. It is not the sole responsibility of the existing and operative *mode of production* to completely fill the pail. The new economic foundation is always given an already full pail and it cannot empty it entirely and refill it only with its own broth.

India

“This gives us a general idea of the Indian view of the Universe. *Things* are as much stripped of rationality, of finite consistent stability of cause and effect, as *man* is of the steadfastness of free individuality, of personality, and freedom... The spread of Indian culture is prehistorical, for History is limited to that which makes an essential epoch in the development of Spirit. On the whole, the diffusion of Indian culture is only a dumb, deedless expansion; that is, it presents no political action. The people of India have achieved no foreign conquests; but have been on every occasion vanquished themselves.”

- G W F Hegel, *Lectures on Philosophy of History*, 1830-31¹⁸

“...Marx’s conception of India was by no means an edited restatement of Hegel. He did the same with the great philosopher’s interpretation of India as he had done with his dialectics; that is, he ‘inverted’ it. He had already posed the question in a letter to Engels: ‘Why does the history of the East *appear* as a history of religions?’ The religious peculiarities that Hegel saw at the foundations of the peculiarities of Indian culture were really themselves the consequences of Indian social organization, pre-eminently the

village community. This last, as Marx saw things in 1853, was the crucial institution and practically explained everything.”

- Irfan Habib, *Marx's Perception of India*, 1983¹⁹

India simultaneously evokes images of an ancient civilization, a widely and stubbornly religious society, a modern democracy and an emergent economy. Each one of these images is a fair, even if partial, representation. This elephant can be described in many ways, but, at a general level, these four terms go farther and deeper than any alternative set.

One can further notice that there is a temporal division in the elements of this description. The first two terms describe features of a millennial time-scale that have endured through centuries of different systems and regimes. The latter two, on the other hand, are of a much recent vintage. They are descriptors of the modern times and relate to the political and economic systems of contemporary India. The distinction of time-scales is indicative of the difference in the nature of processes through which history makes its way through physical time. Of course, it is not possible to skip physical time and history never jumps by a millennium or a century. It must make its way through the thickets of years and decades – sometimes even weeks or days stand out. A millennial feature must survive through the march of centuries and the trend of a century must unfold through the turmoil of a decade or a year. A key question is: how do processes of different time-scales interact with each other in the actual unfolding of history.

Our plan of investigation requires that we figure out how and why the millennial aspects remain operative, to the extent they do, in the contemporary aspects. But, for that, there must be an agreement over what those millennial aspects are. Such an agreement, however, has always been elusive. The image and interpretations of the distant past depend on the imperatives and controversies of the present. It is not a matter that can be settled once for all by objective-scientific discoveries – through excavating new sites or by finding previously unknown ancient texts, although such discoveries do help. The best one can do, in the absence of a definitive history, is to keep in mind the major approaches and controversies about ancient India while making an argument about the role of the *ancient* in the *modern*.

Four major approaches to the historiography of ancient India can be counted in the simplest sort of counting – *Orientalist*, *Nationalist*, *Marxist*, and *Postcolonialist*. Each one of these contains considerable internal diversity and can be subdivided into a long and growing list. It will not be possible here, nor will it be needed, to go into a detailed account. Our purpose will be adequately served by the simplest counting and the briefest account.

The term, *Orientalist*, although imparted a far thicker meaning by Edward Said,²⁰ is being used here in a descriptive sense, referring to those European scholars of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, known as Orientalists or Indologists, who had made India and Indian languages their area of study. This school was subdivided into two camps – those “who were sympathetic to the Indian culture (and) tended to romanticize the ancient Indian past”, and those who “became

critical of what they called the values of ancient Indian society.”²¹ Max Muller was the best known representative of the first camp, whereas James Mill, author of the *History of British India*, a highly influential book during the colonial period and a key text in the training of the colonial bureaucrats, was an example from the second. This second group also found support in the views of the famous philosopher G. W. F. Hegel who, as Romila Thapar puts it, “remarked on the absence of dialectical change in Indian history, and consequently dismissed Indian civilization as being static, despotic in its orientation, and outside the mainstream of relevant world history.”²²

The *Nationalist* historiography, which emerged in early twentieth century under the influence of the anti-colonial struggle, combined the romantic attitude towards ancient India of the first camp of Orientalists with a commitment to *modernity* characteristic of the second camp. It held that the colonial rule was the greatest obstacle in India’s path to a future of modernity and progress, and at the same time it was also the greatest obstacle in its way to reclaim its ancient glory.²³

The *Marxist* approach, like the *Orientalist* one, had its origins in the nineteenth century, but in the field of historiography as applied to India it gained the status of a major standpoint only by the middle of the twentieth century. As mentioned earlier, the Marxist emphasis has been on identifying the mode of production operative in different phases of Indian history and the principal contradictions manifesting themselves in the major outbreaks of class struggles. Marxist historiography about India is a rich, internally diverse, and, despite adverse atmosphere, a flourishing field of intellectual activity. I will not be concerned with the whole gamut of it. The concern here will be mostly with the philosophical and methodological approach and with its success or failure in explaining the effects of *ancient* in the functioning of the *contemporary*.²⁴

The *Postcolonialist* approach is one of more recent vintage. Its origins can be traced to the intellectual ascendance of *poststructuralist* theories in continental Europe in the Nineteen Sixties, and later also in the academia of the Anglo-Saxon world. Its principal focus was on critiquing the *Orientalist* historiography – in the thicker meaning imparted to it by Edward Said. It does not subscribe to the supposed universality of western *Enlightenment* values and does not see History as the playing out of some universal Reason. It does not pursue an approach of its own towards *ancient India* except that it proclaims its complete opposition to the orientalist *essentialization* of the *East* and to the colonial *reconstruction* of the Indian history and society. In the current intellectual milieu its principal debate is with the *Marxist* approach, although it has subjected the liberal-secular historiography of the *Nationalist* lineage to equally sharp critique.²⁵

In the political arena of contemporary India the main contention about how to *imagine India* may be between the liberal-secular approach on the one hand and the illiberal-communal approach of the *Hindutva* camp on the other, but this debate does not shed much light on the substantive issues, nor on the methodological issues. The debate between the *Marxist* and the *Postcolonialist* approaches, although neither of these carry much force in the contemporary political arena, are far more illuminating despite their respective shortcomings or blind spots.

The postcolonial critique of the Marxist approach invariably begins with a critique of Marx himself. Marx's writings on the non-western societies and specifically on India are numerous and extensive as he continued to grapple with the subject through most of his working life. But, in the case of India, the three articles of 1853 that he wrote for the *New York Daily Tribune*²⁶ are most famous and most frequently quoted. They are also convenient for someone who would like to show that Marxist approach falls within the *Orientalist* constellation. Let me quote the famous paragraph, long as it may be, from the first of the three articles that Marx dispatched on the 10th of June, 1853,²⁷

Now, sickening as it must be to human feeling to witness those myriads of industrious patriarchal and inoffensive social organizations disorganized and dissolved into their units, thrown into a sea of woes, and their individual members losing at the same time their ancient form of civilization and their hereditary means of subsistence, we must not forget that these idyllic village communities, inoffensive though they may appear, had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism, that they restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies. We must not forget the barbarian egotism which, concentrating on some miserable patch of land, had quietly witnessed the ruin of empires, the perpetration of unspeakable cruelties, the massacre of the population of large towns, with no other consideration bestowed upon them than on natural events, itself the helpless prey of any aggressor who deigned to notice it at all. We must not forget that this undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life, that this passive sort of existence evoked on the other part, in contradistinction, wild, aimless, unbounded forces of destruction, and rendered murder itself a religious rite in Hindustan. We must not forget that these little communities were contaminated by distinctions of caste and by slavery, that they subjugated man to external circumstances instead of elevating man to be the sovereign of 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.

It may be a fortunate thing that the foot soldiers of the *Hindutva* brigade are not likely to stumble across this paragraph in the course of their usual education and training, which would have led, if it were to happen, to another bout of lynching of yet another *tribe* (*Marx ki Aulad* a la *Babur ki Aulad*?). More pertinent to our discussion is the fact that the paragraph is taken by the postcolonialist scholars as a veritable proof of Marx himself being afflicted with the disease of Orientalism. Edward Said, the pioneer postcolonialist critic of Orientalism, takes this very article by Marx as the prime example of this affliction.

Of course, Marx is no admirer of the British either and he does not spare them. The “crimes of England” in India, “the miseries inflicted by (them) in Hindustan”, their actions “actuated by the vilest interests” and “the profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization” – none of these escape him. But he concedes, nevertheless, that the British are “unconscious tools of history” in bringing about “a social revolution in Hindustan.” He ends his first dispatch on India with a quote from Goethe,²⁸

Then, whatever bitterness the spectacle of the crumbling of an ancient world may have for our personal feelings, we have the right, in point of history, to exclaim with Goethe:

Should this torture then torment us
Since it brings us greater pleasure?
Were not through the rule of Timur
Souls devoured without measure?

This, for Edward Said, is a clear proof that even Karl Marx, despite his ability “to sense some fellow feeling, to identify even a little with poor Asia,” is clearly guilty of entertaining the Romantic and messianic redemptive project of “regenerating a fundamentally lifeless Asia”.²⁹ Said gives his verdict as follows:³⁰

The quotation, which supports Marx’s argument about torment producing pleasure, comes from the *Westöstlicher Diwan* and identifies the sources of Marx’s conceptions about the Orient. These are Romantic and even messianic: as human material the Orient is less important than as an element in a Romantic redemptive project. Marx’s economic analyses are perfectly fitted thus to a standard Orientalist undertaking, even though Marx’s humanity, his sympathy for the misery of people, are clearly engaged. Yet in the end it is the Romantic Orientalist vision that wins out...

It is relatively easy to counter the postcolonialist impulse to pronounce summary judgment on Marx. His “economic analyses” cannot be shown so easily to belong to the nineteenth century Orientalist ilk. Most certainly it cannot be done by picking, in an oversimplified manner, on a few journalistic pieces that he wrote. On this count, I can do no better than quoting from Aijaz Ahmad, who takes Said to task for his unworthy selectiveness and impetuosity,³¹

For buttressing the proposition that Marxism is not much more than a ‘modes-of-production narrative’ and that its opposition to colonialism is submerged in its positivistic ‘myth of progress’, it is always very convenient to quote one or two journalistic flourishes from those two dispatches on India, the first and the third, which Marx wrote for the *New York Tribune* in 1853...This is certainly in keeping with Said’s characteristic cavalier way with authors and quotations, but here it gains added authority from the fact that it is by now a fairly familiar procedure in dealing with Marx’s writings on colonialism. The dismissive *hauteur* is then combined in very curious ways with indifference to – possibly ignorance of – how the complex issues raised by Marx’s cryptic writings on India have actually been seen in the research of key Indian historians themselves, before the advent, let us say, of Ranjit Guha.

It is also true, however, that, despite taking postcolonialist writers to task for being cavalier and for taking unscholarly advantage of Marx’s “journalistic flourishes”, there is a certain degree of defensiveness in Ahmad and in other Marxist scholars. Marx’s language can certainly hurt not only the nationalist sentiments in the postcolonial world but also the global-multicultural sentiments of the contemporary world, or at least the intellectual-academic part of it. Ahmad points out, on the one hand, that Marx is no harsher on India than he is on Europe. On the other hand, he refers to the “contrary pulls towards the most concrete engagements” and “brilliant but flawed speculations” in Marx’s writings in the period prior to the writing of *Capital*. Let me

quote from Ahmad both these types of defenses, as they are directly relevant for my argument. In the first tack Ahmad says,³²

...the image of Asia as an unchanging, 'vegetative' place was part of the inherited world-view in nineteenth-century Europe, and had been hallowed by such figures of the Enlightenment as Hobbes and Montesquieu... the image of the so-called self-sufficient Indian village community that we find in Marx was lifted, almost verbatim, out of Hegel... Said's contribution was not that he pointed towards these facts... but that he fashioned a rhetoric of dismissal... In that rhetoric, moreover, there really was no room for other complexities of Marx's thought. For it is equally true that Marx's denunciation of pre-colonial society in India is no more strident than his denunciations of Europe's own feudal past, or of the Absolutist monarchies, or of the German burghers; his essays on Germany are every bit as nasty. His direct comments about the power of the caste system in the Indian village – 'restrain(ing) the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaving it beneath the traditional rules, depriving it of all grandeur and historical energies' – are, on the one hand, a virtual paraphrase of his comments on the European peasantry as being mired in 'the idiocy of rural life, and remind one, on the other hand, of the whole range of reformist politics and writings in India...

In the second tack on Marx's defense Ahmad moves on to more substantive aspects. He points out the objective limitations of knowledge about India that was available to Marx. More importantly he refers to the course of Marx's own development and the contrary pulls in his writings in the period prior to the mature period of 1860's onwards,³³

The period of Marx's work in which those journalistic pieces were drafted is riven with contrary pulls towards the most concrete engagements, as in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and brilliant but flawed speculations about a systematic, universal history of all modes of production, as in *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*. The drafting of *Grundrisse* – which Marx started after writing his 1853 articles on India, and which ranges from broad summations of transcontinental systems to the most minute movements of commodities – was in a way the transitional text. By the time he came to write *Capital*, the aspiration to formulate the premises of a universal history remained, as it should have remained, but the realization grew that the only mode of production he could adequately theorize was that of capitalism, for which there was very considerable evidence as well as largely adequate method, which he himself had taken such pains to formulate. It is from the theoretical standpoint of *Capital*, as much as from the empirical ground of more modern research in past history, that one can now see the brilliance, but also the error, in many a formulation about India.

Perhaps, the most authoritative and sober appraisal of Marx's views on India has been done by Irfan Habib. As a premier historian of India, who is also among the most accomplished Marxist theorists and scholars, he is better placed than most to scrutinize Marx's perceptions and theorizations about India, both in the light of the frontiers of historical knowledge and the Marxist theoretical developments since Marx. In an article written on the occasion of Marx's death-centenary,³⁴ Habib tracks the 'generalizations' Marx 'inherits' from the dominant intellectual tradition in Europe about India, especially his 'borrowings' from Hegel. Marx's passage containing his infamous assertion of India being 'a society without history' reads like a passage stolen from Hegel,³⁵

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.

Habib goes on to show how Marx ‘inverts’ Hegel in the case of India too as he had done earlier in the case of his dialectics – I have quoted his passage at the head of this section. For Marx, the peculiarity of Indian history, which appeared to the nineteenth century European intellectual eye as an absence altogether of history, was a consequence of the material conditions of Indian social life. Habib selects three key sociological-theoretical entities used by Marx to characterize the material conditions responsible for the ostensibly unchanging nature of Indian society – *the village community*, *the Oriental despotism*, and *the Asiatic Mode* – and separates in each case Marx’s errors of fact or of judgment from his valid and often brilliant insights.

The Indian *village community*, for Marx, was characterized by two key features – communal ownership of land and ‘an unalterable division of labour’ imposed by the caste system. On both counts the reality has been much more complex – more flexible and dynamic than Marx assumed. Actually he had himself realized, as evidenced from his later writings, that individual ownership of land and individual petty production had emerged even if communal ownership might have been the norm in distant past. But no one can show that Marx was altogether wrong in giving importance to these two features of the village community. Moreover, he did not equate the village community with the entire Indian society. He noticed the parasitism of the urban centers which contributed to the thwarting of the social productive forces.

Related to the issue of the village community was the issue of *oriental despotism*, which was fundamentally characterized by the fact that all of agrarian surplus was appropriated as land rent and taken away by the state, even if through a chain of intermediaries. This resulted in a *natural economy* in the village with practically no commodity exchange. Commodity economy was confined to the towns which lived parasitically on the villages. Habib goes on to show that the reality was far more complex than that, and that Marx himself was aware of it as shown by much of his later writings, especially the *Capital*. He modified his views about the ‘unchanging’ nature of Indian society as he realized that it “was clearly a developed class society, with a ruling class of surplus appropriators and a division of labour based on exchange outside the village community.”³⁶

Evolution of Marx’s views on these aspects led to ‘reconsiderations’ on what he had earlier theorized as the *Asiatic mode of production*. The Asiatic system characterized by “the surplus producing community and the rent-receiving state” was not as much cast in stone as previously assumed and it could not have been a system older or more primordial than slavery or feudalism in the historical progression of *modes of production*. Although its features were present in the Indian society, the *Asiatic mode* was not a full description of India, nor was it uniform or unchanging. As Habib puts it,

While the Indian or Asiatic society thus lost its primitive antiquity, Marx could not have been unaware of a process that he had so far assumed but to whose implications he has previously paid little attention. If in the original form the Indian community had practiced communal cultivation, then the change to individual petty production, which now was the dominant form, must represent a fundamental alteration in the very essence of that ‘unchanging’ community. A contradiction must exist, too, between communal property and individual production.

Habib moves on to considering Marx’s views on “colonialism and India” and shows amply clearly that, despite his statements about the British being “unconscious tools of history in bringing about ...revolution”, he was acutely aware of the “crimes of England” in India. He resolutely stood on the side of the Indians who were oppressed and exploited by colonialism. He denounced in no uncertain terms the colonial drain of wealth from India, both through tributes and taxes as well as through industrial “expropriation”; stood on the side of Indians in their resistance to the British rule, particularly in 1857; and, in the same article where he had talked about India’s ‘*history-less-ness*’, he interlinked the fate of the industrial proletariat in Great Britain and the ‘Hindus’ who must “throw off the English yoke”,³⁷

The Indians will not reap the fruits of the new elements of the society scattered among them by the British bourgeoisie, till in Great Britain itself the new ruling classes shall have been supplanted by the industrial proletariat, or till the Hindus themselves shall have grown strong enough to throw off the English yoke altogether.

All this, of course, is very relevant in the debate between Marxists and Postcolonialists, particularly when the latter argue that the former belong to the same constellation as the Orientalists. That is the reason Aijaz Ahmad took issue with them in the article referred above and Irfan Habib too has done so elsewhere.³⁸ It is befitting that he (Habib), after quoting this passage from Marx, ends his article with a eulogy,³⁹

If there is one man in modern history who does not stand in need of adjectives, that is Karl Marx; and what eulogy, in any case, can be adequate for this passage? In 1853, to set colonial emancipation, not just colonial reform, as an objective of the European socialist movement; and, still more, to look forward to a national liberation (‘throw[ing] off the English yoke’) attained through their struggle by the Indian people, as an event that might even precede the emancipation of the European working class – such insight and vision could belong to Marx alone.

Our main concern, however, is not with the Marxist-Postcolonialist debate per se. Our purpose in referring to this debate is to find a doorway to certain outstanding issues in Marxist historiography of India. At one level the postcolonial critiques of Marx and of Marxist approaches to India are unsustainable, if not frivolous. Conversely, Marxist critiques of the Postcolonialist approaches are well founded. But these too stay, often, at the level of the too obvious. Class and colonialism, capitalism and socialism, imperialism and nationalism, are not just examples of *grand narratives* or mere ‘discourses’, and Marxists are right on the mark when they point out that no history of the modern world can be written without according central importance to these categories.⁴⁰ In fact, no one – not even the most resolutely postmodernist, Postcolonialist or Subalternist among the historians – actually writes history of the contemporary

world without dwelling on these aspects. One must, however, ask the other question – *what else goes into the actual writing of history?*

History

“This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise and has got caught in his wings; it is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is *this* storm.”

- Walter Benjamin, 1940⁴¹

“The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.”

- Karl Marx, 1845⁴²

For a Marxist there is always an inherent tension when it comes to history – one has to look at the past, but one also has to look towards the future. And one faces a barrage of accusations while trying to strike a balance. The most obvious one is of losing *objectivity*. Roping history into the project of “changing the world”, some would say, is proof enough of being less than objective about *what actually happened*. This is not the place to rehearse all the debates about “what is history?” Everyone looks at the *past* from one’s own location in the present – present is unavoidably enmeshed in the observation and it always affects the view. And, one does not get to choose one’s location. Everyone is being pushed by the “storm...blowing in from the Paradise” that Benjamin referred to – just that the Marxists are honest and explicit about it. Irfan Habib once remarked in his debate with the Postcolonialist historians, “The subaltern scholars are happy narrators of tragedy; it is not their task to look for salvation.”⁴³ Actually, one cannot ‘read’ or ‘write’ history arbitrarily, according to subjective wishes and prejudices, especially if one is also “looking for salvation”. It will defeat the purpose if one, who is interested in “changing the world”, writes a wishful history of that world.

For a Marxist the really challenging question in this regard is the following one – what, other than *modes of production* and *class struggles* – that is, other than economy, state and the politics that plays out in the arena of these two – goes into ‘reading’, ‘writing’ or ‘making’ of history? One would expect that someone who labors in the ‘workshops of history’ would be able to give the most definitive and unequivocal answer. Unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case. Marxist historians and activists, at least a good many of them, appear to have turned, in their own ways, into wishful historians of the world they seek to change.

If asked explicitly, no one will actually say that the dynamics of the mode of production is the sole causality operating underneath the actual course of history. Numerous other factors are routinely counted, but always at a descriptive-enumerative level. They do not find a definite place in the theoretical framework itself. This invariably becomes a source of arbitrariness in

explaining or interpreting a given event or phenomenon or a given turn in the course of history. It is often forgotten that the *materialism* question – undoubtedly a burning one in Marx’s time – is now a settled one. Even the most idealists among the historians or ideologues would not deny that economy plays a decisive role in politics and together they make history unfold. Marxists are also on solid ground when they claim that the long trajectory of history, as discerned through and beyond its short term zigzags, is determined by the dynamics inherent in the material conditions of social life. But this is not enough to produce a serviceable theory of history.

Ambiguities remain even at the scale of the long wave of history. Take the example of Aijaz Ahmad’s paragraph quoted above where he contextualizes the “brilliance, but also the error,” in Marx’s judgments about India. Ahmad points out that Marx moved on from his “brilliant but flawed speculations about a systematic, universal history of all modes of production” to the more mature phase of writing *Capital* as “the realization grew that the only mode of production he could adequately theorize was that of capitalism”. At the same time, he appreciates Marx’s continued striving towards an ambitious theory of history when he says, “the aspiration to formulate the premises of a universal history remained, as it should have remained”. Each one of Ahmad’s statements in this paragraph is eminently agreeable. Yet, ambiguities arise when one puts them together to assess where Marx stood in the end as far as formulating “the premises of a universal history” was concerned.

Can we say that Marx’s attempts at having a universal theory of history of all modes of production – the theory of *Historical Materialism* to the extent he could develop – belong to his pre-*Capital* days? How does the theory of a given mode of production – the brilliant and still unsurpassed theory of *capitalism* that he developed in his more mature period – fit into a supposedly universal theory of all modes of production? And, would a theory of *all modes of production*, supposing one had that, suffice as a complete theory of history? In other words, in the very long wave of history, would it suffice to talk only of *modes*, and will it be illegitimate to talk of *civilizations* and *cultures* – of *Chinese*, *Egyptians*, or *Indians*?

Notice, also, the structure of Irfan Habib’s arguments in the article discussed above. He has shown far more authoritatively and convincingly that the pre-colonial Indian society had undergone, over the centuries and millennia prior to the arrival of the British, deep-plough changes in the *relations of production*. It was not as changeless as Marx had assumed. Habib also shows, through what must have been a painstaking survey of voluminous writings, that Marx himself was aware of the immense complexity of Indian reality and his own inadequacies regarding the knowledge of it. He goes on to say that the agenda set by Marx in his writings on India remains nevertheless a live one even today,

The reserve apparently entertained by Marx in his later years in respect of the Asiatic category did not imply that he was willing to overlook the specific features of Indian society and economy. This is clear from his objection to any designation of the Indian communities as ‘feudal’. It is also best to remember that his thesis of the union of agriculture and craft, on the one hand, and an immutable division of labour, on the other, as the twin pillars of the Indian

village economy, remains of lasting value. Furthermore, the economic historian today must ask the same questions as Marx did, about the precise implications of the extraction of 'rent' in the shape of land-tax...All these form an important legacy of ideas for Indian historians, who may thereby be inspired still more to explore the mechanics of change in a society that Marx himself had once thought, rather unjustly, to be unchanging.

Noteworthy in the structure of Habib's argument is the fact that he stays within the boundaries of the *economic*. The assumed changelessness of the Indian society is refuted by showing the changes in the *relations of production*. This would have been adequate if roots of changelessness were to be located only in the economic domain – mainly in the Asiatic Mode as Marx had earlier assumed. But how does one explain all of "the specific features of the Indian society" on this basis alone? Are there no civilizational-cultural aspects to be talked about? Or, can one say that all peculiarities of the Indian civilization arose from the peculiarities of its economic history? How does one answer Hegel when he says, "The people of India have achieved no foreign conquests; but have been on every occasion vanquished themselves", or when Marx repeats the same thing when he calls Indian history the "history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society"? Would it be answer enough to label them as *Orientalists* in the thick Saidian sense?

Let me now move on to a more recent controversy that, in some ways, has been like a replay of the earlier Marxist-Postcolonialist altercation. In this replay the place of Marx has been taken by the famous historian and Marxist theorist Perry Anderson, whereas Said's role has been played by a number of Postcolonialist-Subalternist theorists from India. My purpose, however, is not to go into the details of this altercation. In any case, Anderson has been criticized by some prominent Indian Marxists too. A review of the entire controversy will take us far from the purpose at hand. My objective is to gain further access to the role of the cultural-civilizational aspects – *the civilizational mind*, so to speak – in the accounts of Indian history and to bring into focus how this aspect fails to receive adequate attention in the standard Marxist approaches.

Perry Anderson's recent book, *The Indian Ideology*, is basically a collection of three articles on India published in the London Review of Books.⁴⁴ It is a combative book, which has drawn wide attention and generated a great deal of controversy. It has angered many among the Indian postcolonialist scholars who have reacted sharply. Three such responses have now been collected into a small but aggressive volume.⁴⁵ Another prominent Indian scholar, who is a Marxist, has reviewed the book in a well-known journal in a relatively polite manner but equally unfavourably.⁴⁶

If one manages to get past the fireworks, one may find Anderson still standing. One would still have issues with him. His is not a carefully crafted book and it is easy to find fault with him. Many of his claims can be challenged and he may be shown to be rehearsing some of the well-known follies of the Indian Marxist Left.⁴⁷ He may be shown to harbour class reductionism worthy of a run-of-the-mill Marxist, and, simultaneously, he can be accused of suffering from the history-as-the doing-of-great-men syndrome.⁴⁸ Ironically, he may be accused, at the same

time, to miss the elephant in the room – especially unworthy of a Marxist because the elephant in question is capitalism.⁴⁹

Beyond donning the mantle of an irreverent iconoclast who would like to break many of the tallest idols of recent Indian history, Anderson has raised issues that refuse to go away. He has brought three grand features of Indian history under question mark – India as a nation and the basis of nationhood in the supposedly ancient unity of its civilization, its secularity and the causes behind the Partition, and its conduct as a democratic republic after Independence. I would like to distil from Anderson's observations certain conclusions relevant for my own argument. Despite the support I am drawing from him, he may not share my opinion and may not draw the same conclusions.

Anderson may be on firm ground in asserting that the advent of Indian nationhood is a relatively recent phenomenon and the British colonial rule may claim most of the credit for putting India together. But, in support of his assertion, he did not need to dispute the existence of an ancient and, despite its diversity, a distinct civilization on the subcontinent. Nationalism may be an *ideology* that a Marxist feels compelled to deconstruct, but that did not require Anderson to get into a wrangle with Nehru and mock his grandstanding about India's civilizational continuity "for five or six thousand years or more".⁵⁰ The fact remains that a member of the cultural species found on the subcontinent could be distinctly recognized long before appearance anywhere of the idea of India.

One of the civilizational peculiarities of the Indian society has been the relationship between political rule and social life. A vigorous engagement between the two is a phenomenon of recent vintage. Historians and other scholars have noted a remarkable separation between the two domains – a disjunction that survived for millennia on the subcontinent. The social order was too stable and entrenched for politics to stir or unsettle it. The rulers, on the other hand, chose in their own wisdom to respect this separation as far as possible. Even the most powerful empires that existed intermittently on this land were marginal to everyday life. The greatest emperors could not tamper with the social order on ground. They could not even upgrade their own caste status if, in rare instances, they happened to come from relatively lower castes. Muslim rulers too acquired this political wisdom. It is noteworthy that even after six centuries of Muslim rule the subcontinent remained predominantly Hindu. Sudipta Kaviraj has summarized this peculiarity of the subcontinent as follows,⁵¹

The Islamic state saw itself as limited and socially distant as the Hindu state. Crucially, because of this, neither the Hindu nor the Islamic state employed a conception of what domination entailed that was strictly similar to modern European notions of sovereignty. In terms of their external relations with other kingdoms or empires, these states were certainly 'sovereign' over their territories; but we cannot simply assume that in their internal relation with their subjects these states exercised the familiar rights of sovereignty. It is essential to understand the difference between actual weakness of a state and its marginality in principle. The relative autonomy of the social constitution from the state did not arise because the state was weak, and would have invaded social rules if it could muster the necessary strength. Rather, it accepted a

marginality that was a consequence of its own normative principles. The marginality of the pre-modern state was a social fact precisely because it followed from a moral principle which guided the relation between rulers and subjects.

It is not surprising that the East India Company took hold of the subcontinent almost unnoticed by its people. This was the case despite occasional battles including the famed ones such as Plassey in 1757. People of this ancient civilization were not accustomed to paying too close an attention to the comings and goings of their rulers. The colonial rule too, by and large, respected this customary relationship between the rulers and the subjects. Even in the case of the *Sati* practice (burning of the widow on the pyre of the deceased husband), they intervened largely under pressure from indigenous reformers.

The interaction between the society and the colonial state became vigorous mainly after the emergence of the nationalist challenge. The status of people's engagement with politics went through a qualitative transformation after Gandhi's appearance on the political scene. He managed to call upon a people who had seldom answered a political call in their entire history. He could manage this feat because he could call up what V S Naipaul described as the "archaic religious emotions" of this civilization,⁵²

The drama that is being played out in India today is the drama that [Gandhi] set up sixty years ago . . . Gandhi gave India its politics; he called up its archaic religious emotions. He made them serve one another, and brought about an awakening. But in independent India the elements of that awakening negate one another. No government can survive on Gandhian fantasy; and . . . spirituality, the solace of a conquered people, which Gandhi turned into a form of national assertion, has soured more obviously into the nihilism that it always was.

Coming from the other end of the ideological-political spectrum, Anderson is far more critical of Gandhi than Naipaul is. He castigates the Mahatma far more sternly for crassly mixing religion with politics and for being an unreformed Hindu despite his pretensions of reforming Hinduism and despite his avowed respect for all religions. He holds Gandhi's brand of religious politics responsible for turning Congress practically into an exclusively Hindu party, for alienating Muslims from the political discourse, for sowing the seeds of Partition and for pushing Ambedkar, a consistent modernist and a relentless critic of Hinduism, to the wall. Anderson finds Gandhi more disagreeable than many of the religious politicians of twentieth century. While acknowledging his great achievements he adds,⁵³

But Gandhi's achievements also came at a huge cost to the cause which he served. The twentieth century saw quite a few leaders of national movements who were men of religion – the Grand Mufti and the Abbé Youlou, Archbishop Makarios and Ayatollah Khomeini, among others. For most, their faith was subordinate to their politics, an instrument or adornment of essentially earthly ends. In a few cases, like that of Khomeini, there was no significant distinction between the two – religious and political goals were one, and there could be no conflict between them. Within this gallery, Gandhi hangs apart. For him alone, religion mattered more than politics, which did not coincide with, but subjoined it. There was a further difference. Not only did he hold no religious office, but his religion was to a peculiar extent home-made, unlike any existing belief-system at the time. Quite how strange a pot-pourri this

was, will not be found in the industry of glozing commentary that has grown up around his ideas, adjusting them for contemporary usage in much the same way as the Pentateuch becomes a blue-print for universalism and the Quran all but a trailer for feminism.

Someone has to call a spade a spade, and it is reassuring if a Marxist does so. Indian Marxists have been endlessly ridiculed for criticising the Mahatma who remains the sole unchallengeable deity of Indian politics. Given their marginality in the Indian society and polity, especially in comparison to the Mahatma, they have by now lost all self-confidence and many of them have joined the bandwagon. Anderson is unencumbered by any such burden of realpolitik. But, this has its own pitfalls.

Even a diehard Gandhian does not swear by the actual truth content of all that Gandhi may have uncovered in his *experiments with truth*. His postmodernist admirers are, in any case, not inclined to look for substance or consistency anywhere, let alone in the Gandhian thoughts. Naipaul may have the audacity to say that “no government can survive on Gandhian fantasy” and he may be right in saying that, but that does not mean the world runs solely on truth or substance. Marxists are fond of saying that when ideas grip the masses they become a material force. How can this maxim, then, be denied to the Gandhian ideas?

There is not much point, therefore, in exposing Gandhian ideas as romantic, flawed or inconsistent. The questions, which Anderson or anyone else following the political career of *Indian ideology* must answer, lie along a different track. What made Gandhi indispensable to the mass edition of Indian nationalism? Why did people on the subcontinent, who had seldom answered a political call over the millennia, answer Gandhi’s call? Could Gandhi have called differently and still people would have answered? Was it an avoidable failure of rational and modernist leaders who could have shone the light of reason through the mist of Gandhian irrationality but chose not to do so?

Anderson seems to allude that people did not really answer Gandhi’s call in the manner it is often imagined. He claims that none of the three or four major mass movements Gandhi launched were successful in achieving what he set out to achieve. Each one of them ended in failure – having been suppressed, or withdrawn, or just fizzling out. The British were bound to depart from the subcontinent in any case. The nationalists are credited for the Independence far more than they deserve.

It is not possible, however, to take the credit away from Gandhi and, at the same time, blame him for all that Anderson blames him for. One can pin the blames on Gandhi only if one acknowledges that he was effective. One must also look at the reasons behind his effectiveness. Anderson, in the end, seems to have a rather simplistic account of what went wrong and why, and how things could have been steered along a different course. He delivers his judgement in an unequivocal tone,⁵⁴

There cannot be a genuinely secular party or state unless it is willing to confront religious superstition and bigotry, rather than truckle to them. Neither party nor state has ever

contemplated doing that, because both have rested, sociologically speaking, on Hindu caste society.

The principle implicit in this judgement is unexceptionable. There is also a hint of recognition that the barriers to implementing the principle may lie, at least partly, in the make-up of the society itself. And yet, Anderson fails to give necessary weight to this factor. He puts all the blame on the “subjective factors” and ignores the constraints of the “objective conditions”. In this respect he appears to adhere to the orthodox Marxist doctrine that people can always and in every instance be saved from their “false consciousness”, or rescued from the “hegemony” of the ruling classes, if the “revolutionary agents” tried hard enough and did not themselves succumb to the ruling ideology.

The roots of the problems that Anderson attributes to the Indian ideology go far deeper than mere ideology. It is not very relevant to figure out whether Gandhi was truly and authentically the experimenter with truth he claimed he was, or he was just an astute politician – whether his own inner make-up was of the same cloth as the Indian mind or he fashioned a deliberate religious-political vocabulary that resonated with the Indian mind. The relevant part is that he could successfully stir the depths of this ancient civilization and extract a political response. He had access to the Indian mind – not only to its conscious part but also to its unconscious layers, so to speak. This did not mean that he could have called them in any other way and they would have responded. Even a Gandhi could not have outweighed what I would call the *Indian Unconscious*. This object is far weightier than standard Marxist theories of *ideology*, *false consciousness*, or *hegemony* reckon.

There has been a long history of enormously rich debates and of theoretical innovations in the field of Marxist theories of history. Perry Anderson has been a key figure in all this during the past half century and he continues to operate at the frontiers of theory. He has made important contributions along both the main tracks of debates within Marxist historiography – the *transition debate* (the transition from feudalism to capitalism in Europe, but in general about the transitions between different stages of society) and the *structure-agency* debate (the structuralism-voluntarism debate in which Edward Thomson was the other major interlocutor).⁵⁵ His three essays on India appear to be analogues of Marx’s journalistic writings on India, and just like Marx he cannot be judged merely on the basis of such writings. Yet, questions do arise, just as they did in the case of Marx. Why does such an accomplished theorist-scholar come to such simplistic conclusions when he descends from the Marxist high theory to something as concrete as contemporary India? This question cannot be answered by calling him a typical Marxist-Orientalist or accusing him of being afflicted by a British or a colonial *ideology*, as some postcolonialist scholars have done.

The answer has to be sought in the gaps or inadequacies that remain hidden within theories and come to light only when confronted with a concrete or live piece of reality. To be sure, theory is not meant to be mere *description*. At the same time, in case of a complex reality such as an entire

flesh-n-blood society or civilization, it can never be a complete and final explanation of everything that goes on. But it has to be upfront about it. It is supposed to stick its neck out and take the risk of its gaps or inadequacies being exposed. Arguments and polemics are meant to be an exercise in attack and defence, but they are also meant to lead to adjustments, corrections and introspection. It is legitimate for Aijaz Ahmad to deride the postcolonialist theorists for being in a hurry to prove that Marxism is nothing more than a “mode-of-production-narrative”, but he also has to show how that is not the case. He, or Irfan Habib, or any one of us, will have to show what else is to be added to the skeleton of the theoretical structure in order to make it function better as an explanation – necessarily an approximate but successively a better explanation of the complex reality at hand. It is all the more necessary for those who, beyond the explaining, must also keep “looking for salvation”.

I have not promised a new and improved Marxist theory of history. That would be beyond the scope of a lecture and, in any case, way beyond my competence. But I have promised to make a pragmatic proposal about how to make sense of contemporary India in its broadest outlines. That requires how to make sense of history, and, in particular, to figure out, in an admittedly sketchy manner, how does the *ancient* remains operative in the processes of the *modern*. It is with that purpose in mind that I have taken this idiosyncratic course through Indian history. Before I put things together I need to deal with another topic – *modernity*. And my treatment of this vast and even more controversial topic will be equally idiosyncratic.

Modernity

Post-modernity may or may not arrive, but one thing is certain. *Modernity* has become an intensely contested terrain. There is great deal of ambivalence among Marxists about it – it is never easy to decide whether it is to be defended more than criticised or vice versa. Some of this ambivalence – but not all – is inherited from Marx himself. A key source of the conundrum lies in the relationship between modernity and capitalism. They are conjoined at birth, and that puts Marxists in a quandary.

There are contradictory currents in the intellectual Atlantic. As the ideological climate in the western academia has turned against modernity, it has affected the Marxist theoretical atmosphere too. Critique has begun to outweigh support. As mentioned earlier, Frederic Jameson, for example, has argued against abstracting modernity away from capitalism and advocated the concept of a *singular modernity*. Ironically, many in the postmodernist circles have moved the other way and given concessions to modernity through a concept of *multiple modernities*.⁵⁶ In the non-western world, in any case, Marxists have been historically and more naturally *collectivist* Marxists and now increasingly they are *communitarian* Marxists. Critique of modernity comes much more easily to them.

My argument favours a process of abstraction in which *modernity* is separated from *capitalism*. This abstracted modernity is not a flesh-n-blood thing, just as capitalism as a “mode of

production” is not by itself *an actually existing capitalism*. Such an abstraction is implicit in, and an integral part of, the Marxist method. This abstracted and conceptual modernity is a very *thin* object. It has just two bones, so to speak – *Reason* and the *Individual*. Of course, most of the postmodernist attack on modernity has been through trying to break these two bones. We cannot rehearse all the philosophical arguments here, and there is no need to. One may just say that the methodological strategy of starting out with a thin concept of *Reason* and *Individual* does not require their *immaculate conception*, nor does it force a subscription to Cartesian dualism. Conceding that they are socially constructed (although not entirely) and changeable (although not reversible) does not threaten to undo this strategy.

Theoretical waters get muddied also by the fact that capitalism, being far more *energetic* than any previous mode, did bring about a much greater *differentiation* of the social reality. A separation between the *system* (economy; state; formal institutions, laws and rules, etc.) and the *rest of the society* (culture, customs, religion, tradition, way of life, personal sphere, etc.) becomes a palpable reality under capitalism. Of course, separation does not mean being disconnected. These two large spheres are enmeshed in each other through a thousand strands. The most important mechanism of connection operates through the *competitive electoral democracy* – I will come to that shortly. Here the relevant point is that the methodologically necessary abstraction to separate *modernity* from *capitalism* gets confused with the actual separation between the system and the rest of society brought about by capitalism. The latter is taken as a part of the capitalist strategy, if not a deliberately created illusion altogether. The standard Marxist argument, then, begins to weigh against this separation. Modernity, we are warned, is predominantly a systemic need and a cultural-ideological logic of capitalism; *Reason* is nothing but the *instrumental reason* subservient to capital; *Individual* is nothing but a prop in the ideological superstructure of bourgeois liberalism glorifying selfishness and defending private property. It becomes counter-intuitive, then, for a Marxist-activist to think that modernity can be abstracted from capitalism and that it can incorporate emancipatory values relevant even for higher stages of humanity.

I should dispel any impression that the proposal to see modernity as something not limited to and not exhausted by capitalism is a fresh proposal. Many Marxists have argued along similar lines. Javeed Alam, for example, has this to say,⁵⁷

I take ‘modern’ to be historically embodies form of the Enlightenment, seen as a conglomerate of philosophical outlooks. The purpose of putting the word in quotation marks it to indicate that what we normally term ‘modern’ is only one of the plausible forms but the one that became entrenched in conjunction with capitalism; hence I shall use *entrenched modernity* or Modern to suggest that all that is imaginable under the term ‘modern’ is not exhausted by what we have as the embodied form.

I take it, therefore, that there was in the knowledge that emerged in the modern era a *surplus left untapped after what got embodied*; let me refer to this by the term *unembodied surplus*.

The main point of my proposal is to deploy this well known separation into making sense of India and to indicate how it points towards a need to rework political strategies. Modernity's *unembodied surplus*, to use Javeed Alam's term, may be more relevant for envisioning post-capitalist civilizations, although not entirely irrelevant for the purpose at hand either. More important in the case of contemporary India, however, is how the *embodied* part is contaminated by a powerful presence of *pre-modernity* – how the *ancient* continues to operate in the *modern*. But, before I come to that, let me have another small theoretical digression.

As mentioned earlier, the ghost of Weber continues to haunt Marxist theory. Whether explicitly or implicitly, the intellectual trajectories of major Marxist theoretical currents – Hegelian Marxists and their descendents (Lukacs, Gramsci, Frankfurt School, Habermas), Phenomenological Marxists (Merleau-Ponty, Sartre), and Structuralist Marxists (Althusser and followers) – all bear testimony to this fact. The bone of contention is the relationship between the *economic* and the *political* (together the *systemic*) on the one hand and the *cultural-social* and the *religious* (together the *civilizational*) on the other. The prevalent *commonsense* in the arena of Marxist theory is such that any emphasis on the *civilizational* in making sense of history is taken as scaling down the explanatory weight of the *systemic*. This is considered as yielding to Weber. This commonsense need to be modified and this anxiety need to be dispelled.

Weber, undoubtedly, was an antagonist of the theoretical framework of Marx and a lifelong theoretical crusader against it. He came to view the history of civilizations from the other end. Modernity was the key category for him and capitalism was its accidental offspring. History of religion was, for him, the larger arena in which the origins of modernity had to be searched and located. He studied non-European societies and eastern religions not for constructing an overarching theory of civilizations (an impossible task in his view), but for shedding light on the European civilization and for spotting the elements responsible for the advent of modernity and capitalism in Europe rather than elsewhere. Weber may have had issues with the Marxist ambition to uncover the laws of history. He may not have believed in any kind of causal determination of history, not even in the vaguest or the most approximate sense and not even on the longest time-scale. But his scepticism about the Marxist theoretical project is not a disproof of its tenability or productivity. Marxist approach remains both tenable and productive. Actually, rather than being on the defensive, it can make use of some of Weber's insights or findings. Weber cannot overthrow Marx, but Marx can employ him as his under-labourer.

One can, therefore, rest assured that abstracting and separating modernity from capitalism is perfectly legitimate as a Marxist theoretical move. Furthermore, considering the advent of modernity as the most profound development in world history does not necessarily make one a Weberian. Achin Vanaik, for example, while holding on to the standard Marxist view that “*capitalist industrialization per se... constitutes the fundamental process of modernity*”, sums up possible attitudes to modernity as follows,⁵⁸

One of the key questions in the historical discussion of modernity has always been whether it is industrialization that happens to be capitalist, or *capitalist* industrialization *per se* that constitutes the fundamental process of modernity as it unfolds. Marxists such as Perry Anderson and Robert Brenner correctly insist on the latter view. Theorists of power, including Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann, hold to the former view – as indeed do theorists of rationality and of cognitive transformations as the driving force of modernity, such as Max Weber and Ernest Gellner. But all these six figures would subscribe to what Gellner called the ‘Big Ditch’ view of a profound and decisive *rupture* created by the advent of modernity in the trajectory of specific societies and in the process of world history itself.

Vanaik does warn against the pitfalls of abstracting modernity from its capitalist character. In a footnote to the paragraph quoted above he writes,⁵⁹

In the Indian context, Gandhians and neo-Gandhians like the anti-modernist Ashish Nandy... hold a similar view of modernity as industrialism-rationalism, abstracting from its capitalist character. The ‘enemy’ is thus science, rationality, and western materialism. Mahatma Gandhi saw colonialism as flowing from western materialism rather than from capitalism.

It may, however, be noted that the anti-modernist attitude of Gandhians and others does not necessarily result from a methodological abstraction of modernity from capitalism. One can separate modernity to attack it, but one can also separate it to uphold it. In fact, the latter is the methodological as well as political approach that is being advocated here – *separate modernity from capitalism to uphold the former and attack the latter*.

Modernity occasions a great deal of controversy in India. There are worries that it is not taking roots in the Indian society, or the roots are not deep enough, or that modernity itself is getting mutated into something spurious or disagreeable. There are complaints from the other side about a pristine culture being disfigured and an indigenous form of life being colonized. I will not join that controversy here, although I will not make any special effort to conceal my dispositions. My objective is to make some sense of the contemporary politics in India, and my premise is that existing explanations are not satisfactory. In particular, my concern is with that set which attempts to understand the intricacies and the vicissitudes of Indian politics through concepts such as *false consciousness*, *ideology*, *hegemony* or *superstructure-lagging-the-base*. I do not entirely reject any of these explanations, but, in my reckoning, they do not seem to suffice.

The method of abstraction that separates capitalism from modernity also assigns them separate locations in the conceptual map of social reality. Capitalism is a *mode of production* and resides in the *system* space, whereas modernity, at least in its abstracted form, is *cultural-habitual-cognitive-ideological* and it is not as easily localizable as the *system*. It may live everywhere and affect everything including the system part, but as a part of my methodological strategy I will be concerned mostly with its residence in the *rest of the society* (the part of the society that remains after the system has been abstracted away). In this sense, my main concern is not so much with modernity *per se*, but more with the space or the location where it is supposed to reside. For example, if modernity does not fully occupy that space (which will always be the case though in varying degrees), what else lives there? How do all the occupants of that space interact with the

system part? This is where politics comes into play. In a society where the system part is constituted by capitalism and modern democracy, the non-system part – the rest of the society along with the social mind, so to speak – gets dynamically connected to the system part most effectively through the political processes of *competitive electoral democracy*. In case of India, where, as we have discussed above, robustly popular politics was missing for millennia and the masses remained largely aloof from the comings and goings of their rulers, this has been a watershed moment.

General notions of politics invariably emphasise the active element. Politics is, first and foremost, an intervention by a political agency into the political and the economic system and more generally into the structure and the mind of the entire society. The famous Bismarckian aphorism that defines *realpolitik* (“politics is the art of the possible”) does allude to the role of conditions in determining what is possible, but the emphasis still is on agency. While such an emphasis is necessary and appropriate, it also runs the risk of underrating the weight of “objective conditions”. As I have noted above, Anderson, in his critique of the supposed carriers of *Indian Ideology*, succumbs to this risk.

The problem does not stop at this underrating. It is further compounded by how the “objective conditions” are defined. In the understanding prevalent in the Marxist camp, and more generally in much of the progressive movements, the social mind (including the *cultural unconscious*, so to speak) does not figure the way it should. Among other things, this results in overvaluing the role of the active element in politics. It is like holding a belief that anything is possible provided the revolutionaries were ready for it. The masses by definition are always ready for revolution. If they appear to be holding on to ideas and practices that are harmful to their own interests and inimical to their own emancipation, the blame is to be put on *false consciousness*, *hegemony* of the ruling classes, or on succumbing to the enchantments of *ideology*.

A puzzling aspect of many newly liberated postcolonial countries, as noted by the famous political philosopher Michael Walzer, promises to shed further light on the functioning of the *ancient* in the *modern* via competitive electoral democracy. In a recent book, *The Paradox of Liberation – Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, which contains the text of his Henry L. Stimson Lectures at Yale,⁶⁰ Walzer takes three countries – Algeria, India and Israel – which, in his opinion, were all liberated from “foreign rule”⁶¹ and started out on a secular and emancipatory course. But all three succumbed to religious counterrevolution following a remarkably similar timetable. He unveils the paradox as follows,⁶²

Initially, at least, this is a success story: the three nations were indeed liberated from foreign rule. At the same time, however, the states that now exist are not the states envisioned by the original leaders and intellectuals of the national liberation movements, and the moral/political culture of these states, their inner life, so to speak, is not at all what their founders expected. One difference is central to my analysis, and I will keep coming back to it: all three movements were secular, committed, indeed, to an explicitly secular project, and yet in the states that they created a politics rooted in what we can loosely call fundamentalist religion is today very

powerful. In three different countries, with three different religions, the timetable was remarkably similar: roughly twenty to thirty years after independence, the secular state was challenged by a militant religious movement. This unexpected outcome is a central feature of the paradox of national liberation

Walzer is also aware that not everyone acknowledges the existence of this paradox. He takes two prominent exemplars of “paradox denied” – the Marxist perspectives and the Postcolonialist theories. As a left-leaning liberal philosopher “sympathetic to both socialism and liberalism” he finds the Marxist approach “the more appealing, the more challenging, and the more usefully wrong of the two.” Describing the Marxist denial he says,⁶³

The Marxist account holds that religious beliefs and the fiercely defended identities that these beliefs produce are examples of false consciousness, that they are not usefully engaged with the “real world” of contending social classes and don’t serve the needs of oppressed men and women. The liberationists fail to overcome these beliefs and identities because their own nationalism is similar in form: it is also an example of false consciousness, it draws on the same primordial ideas and emotions, and it fails, like religion, to serve the needs of the oppressed. Whatever the pretended opposition of nationalism and religious revival, these two reinforce each other, and they make for a narrow, parochial, and chauvinist politics.

Walzer takes Perry Anderson as a representative example of the Marxist perspective, who, in his opinion, “has developed the most subtle version of this argument”. He also finds it helpful that Anderson too selects for analysis countries – India, Israel and Ireland – that are “only a little different” from his own selection. But he is not convinced by the Marxist argument and sums up his disagreement as follows,⁶⁴

The Marxist project failed or, at least, has not yet succeeded. The liberationists have not been pushed aside by the emergence of the masses as a mature political force. Nor have they been replaced, in the absence of the masses, by the revolutionary vanguard of the global proletariat. And even if that replacement had occurred, the vanguard militants would have encountered the same problem that the liberationists did: they would have found themselves at war with the very people whose interests they claimed to advance. Indeed, their war might have been more intense since it wasn’t only the religious feelings but also the national-cultural commitments of ordinary men and women that the vanguard militants could not or would not acknowledge.

As far as Postcolonialist writers are concerned, Walzer is wary of engaging with them at any great length. He finds himself in agreement with Amartya Sen who says that some of the postcolonialist arguments “involve elaborate conceptual compositions and estimable intricacy of language and are not breathtakingly easy to penetrate (even armed with a dictionary of neologisms, on the one hand, and courage, on the other.)”⁶⁵ The substance of the postcolonialist argument is, in any case, not very helpful in figuring out an alternative course that the national liberation movements could have taken. It puts the entire blame on modernity’s door that came riding the colonial ships and despoiled the pre-modern paradise. It is best to quote Walzer once again,⁶⁶

Postcolonial writers, by contrast, see the two [nationalism and religious revival] as specifically modern creations. They stress, with a kind of romantic nostalgia, the “‘fuzzy,’ syncretistic,

reciprocal, and overlapping character of pre-modern religious identities” and argue that the monolithic and exclusive religions that foster zealotry are the products of colonial rule—which the liberationists do not challenge so much as perpetuate. Indian nationalists appropriate “characteristically Western forms of disciplinary power.” That Hindu militants compete with them to exercise this power can’t be surprising.

Walzer is brilliant at elucidating the paradox of liberation. But he stops short of offering a resolution. At the end of the book he asks for patience and persistence, because national liberation, “like any other form of liberation, is a very long process”.⁶⁷ One gets a feeling that he could have done much more. Hints towards a resolution lie within his own text. It hasn’t escaped him, for example, that the main vehicle of religious counterrevolution has been a creation of the liberationists themselves – namely, *modern electoral democracy*. The traditionalists successfully challenge the modernists using that very instrument which was forged by the latter to serve the emancipatory goals of modernity. One could notice the irony and move on. But one could also pause and notice something that has the potential to explain the paradox.

Modern democracy in a largely pre-modern society sets the stage for a curious play of what I would call *Depth Politics* – borrowing the term from *depth psychology* that refers to the psychoanalytic approaches to therapy. These approaches take the Freudian *Unconscious* into account and deploy it in the therapy. *Depth Politics* arises when a modern political and economic system arrives in a civilization that has existed for centuries and millennia and hasn’t had a sustained engagement with modernity so far. Invariably, it is a tumultuous affair and requires wide-ranging adjustments on both sides of the *modern-traditional* divide. By the time things begin to settle down, neither the actually existing *modernity* nor the still living *antiquity* are recognizable to an eye accustomed to their canonical forms.

Both Walzer and Anderson could have given more weight to the conditions under which the subjective forces of national liberation were acting in the anti-colonial struggle and in the immediate aftermath of Independence. They could have easily seen why Gandhi had the upper hand in the national movement and why he was the ‘chosen one’ when it came to harnessing this ancient and passive civilization into the modern chariot of nationalism. By design as well as by his own inner make-up, Gandhi had, unlike any other competitor for leadership of the national movement, a privileged access to the *Indian Unconscious*. He was the *analyst* as well as the *plumber* of the depths of the Indian mind.

What is disconcerting in the case of Perry Anderson is plain tragic as well as comical in the case of the Indian Marxist left. There are continuing debates about how and why the leftist revolutionaries missed the chance to lead the Indian masses and turn a mere national liberation into a full-fledged deep-plough revolution. The self-flagellation goes on because of the underlying assumption that mistakes by the “subjective forces” were the only reason why the leftist revolutionaries failed in the task assigned to them by history.

Gandhi's was the first and the classic example of *Depth Politics* on the subcontinent. By calling up the "archaic religious emotions" he stirred the depths of the *Indian Unconscious*. He mobilized the Indian masses in the service of a modernist cause without demanding that they should themselves become modernised. This route was not available to the Marxist left, or for that matter to Nehru, Ambedkar or Subhash Chandra Bose.

The Nehru era lasting a decade and half in the immediate aftermath of Independence was an interlude for *Depth Politics*. A modern state was crafted by a modernist leadership that did not need to seek fresh approval from the Indian people. Elections to the parliament and the state assemblies were held regularly, but the time had not yet come for a vigorous and competitive electoral democracy. Riding on the prestige of the national movement, Nehru and his Congress party easily won the elections without any need to dip their hands into the *Indian Unconscious*. Politics was largely confined to the domain of the political and the economic system. This kind of politics is significantly different from *Depth Politics*.

With a gradual decline of the Congress hegemony and erosion of its monopoly over political power, electoral democracy, during the post-Nehru era and more so in the post-Indira decades, became increasingly vigorous and competitive. This has given rise to forces that can call up once again the "archaic religious emotions", with the difference that the new callers lack Gandhi's authenticity or the lofty purpose of a national liberation. Hands must be dipped once again into the *Indian Unconscious* in order to defeat the competitors to state power and to deploy the state into the service of neoliberal capitalism and naked corporate interests. A vigorous electoral democracy has become a vehicle for what Walzer calls a religious counter-revolution.

It is not the case that only evil can come out of the play of *Depth Politics*. Rise of religious sectarianism and fundamentalism and fomenting of riots and mob violence are not the only fruits to be harvested. Robustly competitive electoral politics can also react back on the social structure and the cultural mind to produce positive results. Oppressive social structures, customs and ideas have been challenged, diluted and destabilized by the processes of electoral democracy. It is in this sense that some scholars have talked about India's *Silent Revolution*.⁶⁸ If it is possible to dip hands into the *Indian Unconscious*, it should also be possible to begin rewiring it.

The Indian Marxist left is yet to acknowledge the existence and the political weight of the *Indian Unconscious*. Obviously, it is far from devising *technologies* for rewiring it. This is not the place to work out the details of *depth political strategies* that the left must forge. But the first step would be to acknowledge the problem. It is not simply a matter of new terms and nomenclature. The point is that there has been an elephant in the political room and the left has refused to take notice. This elephant cannot be described by limbs such as false consciousness, hegemony or ideology. That would at best be a superficial description.

The problem cannot be solved by parody-like solutions either. One should not simply rush to unleash new cultural movements or to put all efforts into the social movements in order to begin rewiring the civilizational mind. Such a rewiring can be best accomplished through *Depth Politics* itself. Of course, the left will have to handle this politics very differently from the way Gandhi did and obviously very differently from the diabolical forces that have used this politics to reach the seats of power today. This is a pressing and formidable challenge for the Marxist left in India.

Marx

Marx has been present throughout these considerations and he does not need to be contained in a separate section. Instead, what I will do in this section is to summarize and reiterate salient features of the Marxist method as they emerge, hopefully, from these deliberations. I will conclude by indicating some pathways that, in my opinion, open up for reworking the political, and also the larger, strategies.

First step is to make a creative use of the tension that exists within Marxist theory between *Marxism as a theory of history* and *Marxism as a theory of capitalism*. It is often taken as a tension between *Early Marx* and *Later Marx*. In the history of a person it may just be a matter of how much he could have completed in a lifetime – actually a very difficult lifetime. More important is to realize that Marxist theory contains two large and separate, although interconnected, *research programmes*, so to speak. These two programmes are methodologically supportive of each other.

As a *theory of history*, it focuses on the very long range of human history and more specifically on the *transitions* between its different stages. At this level it is both a philosophical standpoint and a theory. The philosophical standpoint comes out of a conviction, supported by historical evidence as well as political practice, that a long-term trajectory of history can be gleamed and abstracted from the rather violent zigzags of actual history. At the other level it is a *theory* but in a qualified sense. It is a theory of the abstracted long range history and not of the actual zigzags of history. As the research programme develops it is expected to become more and more serviceable as a theory, but one cannot expect that it will ever become a serviceable, let alone a complete, theory of actual history with all its zigzags. In this sense, *Historical Materialism* is a philosophical standpoint and it is also the starting point of a research programme towards a theory of history.

As a *theory of capitalism* and more generally of a given mode of production, Marxist theory is more of a theory in the regular sense, but still with some qualifications. It is not a full theory of *actually existing capitalism*. At least that is not the case to start with. It starts out with a theory of an abstracted entity – capitalism as a mode of production. The method of abstraction is suggested by the *theory of history*. Historical materialism, which considers the dynamics of the *mode of production* as the central causality driving the long course of history, is methodologically roped

into a strategy of abstraction in the study of a given society. The diachronic theory of history supplies theoretical tools for a synchronic theory of society. The mode of production, or the principal mode of production as a society may simultaneously contain many modes, is abstracted from the actual society. The theory starts out with theorizing this abstract mode. But, in order to move towards a full theory of the society, other aspects that were abstracted away at the starting point must be brought in. It is not necessary, and usually it will not be possible, to theorize these other aspects of society in the same way one has theorized the mode of production. The shape of a theory is primarily determined by the object of the theory. Theory of one thing cannot be imitated to create a theory of a completely different thing.

The Marxist framework suggests that the mode of production along with the political-legal superstructure that arises from it and is closely linked with it – together called *the system* – is taken as the core of the overall social structure, but it is a core that lives in a given *environment*. This environment is in close interaction with the existing system but it is not entirely a creation of this system. Many elements of this environment have had their origins in distant past. They may get modified in interaction with the system and reproduce themselves in continuously altered forms, but they do not lose their existence altogether and do not get dissolved into the inner dynamics of the system. Many such elements last much longer than the system, even if in mutated forms.

This is not a rephrasing of the *base-superstructure* framework. The *base* constituted by the *relations of production* may give rise to – as Marx said – its own legal and political *superstructure* and also to the corresponding “definite forms of social consciousness”, but this is far from being the sum-total of a society. Much of the society falls outside the *system*, and this acts as the environment to the system. If the environment is not amenable to full theorization, the *system-environment* interaction will have to be examined more *empirically*. It is not unusual to have an analytical theory of a system and an empirical approach to the effect of the environment on it. It can be described as a partly open complex system in which the dynamics of the system operates in continuous interaction with the environment. Biological organisms including the human body are canonical examples. Social systems are much less organic compared to biological organisms and their separation from their environment may not be as clearly delineated, but the analogy is not altogether misleading.

An important methodological point to note is the following. Marxism, at least in some of its variants, has inherited from Hegel his insistence on dealing with the *totality*. That is a key feature of *dialectics*. Everything is internal to the totality – all forces and all strands of causalities are immanent. This may be useful in dealing with relatively more homogeneous totalities. If one looks at history in the really long run one may treat it as the unfolding of immanent causalities. But the same strategy may not work when one is dealing with an internally differentiated object in which the constituents are well separated even if mutually interacting, and relatively stable even if changing. The strategy of treating it as a system living in a given environment may be more suitable in this case. History in its very long run is a very different kind of object from the

Society that has to do the daily living. The latter is more of a differentiated complex object in which much of complexity arises from mutual interactions of phenomena whose characteristic time-scales are very different from each other. This is why *Historical Materialism* is not entirely the same theory as the *Marxist theory of capitalism*, although both are related and help each other methodologically.

These methodological issues are of practical importance for a Marxist who would like to deal with something as concrete and alive as *India*. There has been an unfortunate schism in this regard between the theoretical and the practical concerns. Theoretical concerns have been largely confined to academic and intellectual Marxist circles. Of course, practical concerns will always be alive mostly through the practitioners, but it matters what kinds of theoretical understanding they possess and put to use. There is a lot to be said and pondered over on that count, but this is not the place for that.

There should be little doubt that the *system* part of the Indian society is *capitalist* and *largely modern* – largely because the formally modern legal-political structure is affected by the environment in which the system lives. The shape of politics, in any case, is not determined entirely by the nature of the system. In a modern capitalist system with competitive electoral democracy the most important part of the political arena is the interface between the system and its environment. This is the arena of what I have called *Depth Politics*. Through this the society is managed in such a way that the State retains its popular and democratic legitimacy and continues with the systemic need to serve the interests of capital.

The standard expectation of the Marxist practitioner, driven often by a theoretical misunderstanding, is that class struggle will appear in its manifest forms – largely driven by the economic class interests of the working people. If the course of contemporary history appears to be temporarily lost in the maze of struggles driven by non-class issues, the structural crisis of the capitalist system will bring it back sooner or later to the main road of explicit class struggles. In the mean time one has to keep the relationship with the masses of working people close and live through whatever it takes. Such is roughly the standard understanding and it results in making the practitioner walk on the two legs of *dogmatism* and *populism*.

The tremendous internal restructuring that capitalism as a system has undergone in the post-second-world-war world has itself changed the prospects and manifest forms of class struggle. Other non-systemic changes make the situation even more complex. We cannot go into all that here except saying, rather cryptically, that class struggles in future will be recognized more by their consequences and less by their forms or participants. This does not mean one does not prepare and strategize for class struggles. How to do that is an immensely important topic but a separate debate.

In the light of the crucial importance of *Depth Politics* in the political arena one key factor needs to be underlined. It is clear that, for a Marxist, *capital* is the principal adversary in the system

space. One part of the strategy is driven by this central reality. What should be the guiding principle for the strategy as far as the non-system part – what we have called the *environment* – is concerned?

Modernity is the key word here. Marxists should be the most consistent and most resolute fighters for the emancipatory values of modernity, more so in societies like India. All cobwebs of ideas of the postmodernist and communitarian kinds should be cleared away. The trend in the movement has been in the opposite direction. Modern values are often identified as being liberal bourgeois and attacked; regressive pre-modern values are often tolerated or upheld because they are the integral to the lives of the masses. Marxists, in any case, cannot hope to become popular by tolerating or adopting those values. There are far more authentic representatives of those values available to the masses in the political arena.

Revolution is primarily structural. At the *material-foundational* level it is primarily a *revolution of facts*. The job of organizing a revolution, however, is primarily a *matter of the mind*. Revolution of facts begins with a revolution of the mind. The latter affects a small part of the society to begin with. But it is revolution nevertheless. That was the teaching of the legendary Marxist who led the October Revolution, who talked about the role of the *vanguard*, and whose statue was recently broken in Tripura.

Shallow optimism walks on the false legs of dogmatism and populism. Deeper optimism comes from facing realities as they are and finding ways to deal with them. Left must get off its false legs and grow real ones. Knowing the pathways within the *Indian Unconscious* will be of immense help in accomplishing that.

¹ As quoted in Hans Henrich Hock, “Philology and the Historical Interpretation of the Vedic Texts”, in Edwin F. Bryant and Laurie L. Patton (eds.), *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History*, Routledge, London, 2005, p. 282

² In Martin Gardner, *Best Remembered Poems*, Dover, New York, 1992, p. 150

³ Title of a well-known work on India by a scholar influenced by Collingwood, Foucault and Edward Said; Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2000 (1990)

⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru stays the standard bearer of this camp. Gandhi, despite being Nehru’s mentor and despite his status as the supreme leader of the national movement against the British, falls short of the liberal-secular ideals and runs the danger of being appropriated by the illiberal-communal camp, although only after ‘suitable’ and invariably drastic distortions and elisions. For an example of Nehru’s admiration of the ancient Indian civilization one can see, Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India*, Jawaharlal Nehru memorial Fund, New Delhi, 1981 (1946), especially, Chapter 3, *The Quest*, and Chapter 4, *The Discovery of India*, pp. 49-135

⁵ Savarkar coined the term *Hindutva* to denote a civilizational-territorial concept of a Hindu Nation. Golwalkar introduced the notion of cultural holism and propounded a thesis of national strength based on cultural purity and reversal of the “degeneration” brought about by modernity, democracy and mass society. Two ‘canonical’ texts of this camp are: V. D. Savarkar, *Hindutva*, Veer Savarkar Prakashan, Bombay, 1969 (1922); M. S. Golwalkar, *We, or, Our Nationhood Defined*, Bharat Prakashan, Nagpur, 1947 (1939)

⁶ The term is often taken to denote the largest among the communist parties, the CPI (M). But here it is meant to denote the entire spectrum of organized left belonging to the Marxist tradition despite its irreconcilable internal divisions.

⁷ See, for example, Prabhat Patnaik, “Economics and Two Concepts of Nationalism”, *Peoples Democracy*, 2015, retrieved from http://peoplesdemocracy.in/2015/0618_pd/economics-and-two-concepts-nationalism

⁸ Irfan Habib, “Building the Idea of India”, Lecture delivered at Aligarh Muslim University on October 07, 2015, retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/IdeaofIndiabyIrfanHabib/Building+the+Idea+of+India_djvu.txt

⁹ Theorists of the post-structural-post-modern inclinations, including the postcolonial and post-Marxist kinds, hold variously to such ideas. The internationally reputed Subalternist group of Indian historians is one such example. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, OUP, Delhi, 1986; and *Nation and Its Fragments*, OUP, Delhi, 1995

¹⁰ For a brief but comprehensive survey of Marxist theories of nationalism, see Achin Vanaik, “Marxism and Nationalism”, Acharya Nagarjuna University, 2017

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, for example, was a pioneer in deploying a version of this concept (*imagined political communities*) in his understanding of nationalism. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London, 1991 (1983)

¹² All quotations of Marx taken from, Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1978 (1972): p. 145 (*Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845); pp. 4-5 (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 1859); p. 297 (*Capitol*, Vol. I, 1867); p. 595 (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852)

¹³ The usual list of characteristic features of modernity includes both the material-systemic aspects, such as mode of production (capitalism), democracy, legal-institutional framework etc., and the ideological-cultural-cognitive aspects, such as science, secularism and other ideas pioneered by European enlightenment. Charles Taylor, for example, begins his book, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, as follows, “From the beginning, the number one problem of modern social science has been modernity itself: that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution).” Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2004, p. 1

¹⁴ Jonathan Israel uses these terms in his history of European Enlightenment and emphasizes the importance of the “revolution of the mind” as a critique of Marxist approach to history which, in his view, puts the entire explanatory weight on the “revolution of facts”. In my interpretation of the Marxist approach (very different from Israel’s, but different from many Marxists too), Marxism accords seminal importance to the “revolution of mind” in the unfolding of the general revolution. Ideas of a few gain wider acceptance in society paving the way for the general revolution that ends in the “revolution of facts” (replacement of one mode of production by another). Israel has partly summarized his several volumes on the history of Enlightenment in a shorter book: Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2010

¹⁵ Marxists, such as Perry Anderson and Robert Brenner, hold that the advent of modernity appears separable from that of the mode of production (capitalism) because of the nature of capitalism itself which brought about a separation of the *economic* from the *political*. In their opinion, the mode of ‘capital accumulation’ and the mode of ‘power accumulation’ are inextricably linked. See, Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, Verso, London, 1974; Robert Brenner, “The Social Basis of Economic Development”, in J. Roemer (ed.), *Analytical Marxism*, CUP, Cambridge, 1984.

Frederic Jameson goes so far as to propose that capitalist modernity should be taken as the only possible modernity. This would imply that socialism would be a break both from capitalism and from modernity. Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London, 2002

¹⁶ The other environment is the literal one – Nature itself. Thus, *relations of production* – the determinants of the nature of the *system* – open to two different realms at their two ends. At one end, the opening is to Nature, including the natural endowments of the human individual, (this opening operates primarily via what are known as *productive forces*), and at the other end it opens to the *rest of the society* (society after subtracting the *system* part) that includes the *mental* and the *cultural*.

¹⁷ In principle, the roles can be reversed. If one is interested, instead, in a theory specifically of *modernity*, the *system* can be treated as a part of the environment of modernity.

¹⁸ G W F Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, Batoche Books, Ontario, 2001, p. 159

¹⁹ Irfan Habib, “Marx’s Perception of India”, in *Essay’s in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, Tulika, New Delhi, 1995, pp. 18-19

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin, London, 1995 (1978); Said’s usage of the term is more theoretical-ideological than merely descriptive, and his approach falls within the constellation of *postcolonial* approaches to Indian history.

²¹ Romila Thapar, “Ideology and the Interpretation of Early Indian History”, Lecture delivered at Cornell University, 1974, reprinted in Thapar, *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 3-20

²² Romila Thapar, *ibid.* p. 7, referring to G W F Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, London, 1974 (1837)

²³ Nehru, though not a professional historian, was an exemplar of this approach. Gandhi had a more complex position. He was a determined critique of modernity and did not envision a modernist future for India, although he was decidedly anti-colonial. See endnote 4 above.

²⁴ For a brief but succinct description of the Marxist approach to ancient India, see Romila Thapar, the section on “Marxist Histories and the Debates They Generated” in *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*, Penguin, London, 2002, pp. 22-26

²⁵ See endnotes 9 and 20 above. There is an irony and a paradox in the postcolonial approach: while combating the orientalist essentialization of the East it ends up asserting its own version of the East being essentially *different*. As Robert Brenner puts it, “their project is undermined by their paradoxical acceptance of an essentially liberal-Whig interpretation of the bourgeois revolutions and capitalist development in the West, which provides the foundation for their fundamental assertion of the *difference* of the East.” (Robert Brenner, In advance praise for Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, Navayana, New Delhi, 2013). For the postcolonialist side, see also, in addition to the references in endnotes 9 and 20, Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002 ; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2008 (2000). For a critique of the postcolonial theory, see Vivek Chibber, *ibid.*

²⁶ Marx wrote regularly for the *New York Daily Tribune* during 1851-1861. These writings fill most of the six volumes of the Marx-Engels Collected Works (Volumes 12 – 17), and among other topics these writings cover India, China, Russia, Indonesia and on many aspects of the non-western societies. Even on India there are more than 30 articles. But Marx’s two dispatches of 1853 (the first and the third) have become the most famous and often quoted ones on India. For a comprehensive review of Marx’s writings on non-western societies, see Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010

²⁷ Karl Marx, "The British Rule in India", June 25, 1853, *The New York Daily Tribune*, reprinted in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the National and Colonial Questions: Selected Writings*, edited with an Introduction by Aijaz Ahmad, Left World, New Delhi, 2001, p. 65

²⁸ *ibid.* pp. 65-66

²⁹ Edward Said, *ibid.* pp. 154-155

³⁰ *ibid.* p. 154

³¹ Aijaz Ahmad, "Marx on India: A Clarification", in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, London, 1992, reprinted by Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1996, p. 222

³² *ibid.* pp. 224-225

³³ *ibid.* pp. 241-242

³⁴ See endnote 19. The article originally published in the journal, *The Marxist*, Vol. I, No. 1, Delhi, July-September 1983, is reprinted in Habib's *Essays in Indian History*. Its revised and updated version was published as the Introduction to Iqbal Husain (ed.), *Karl Marx on India*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2006

³⁵ Karl Marx, "The Future Results of British Rule in India", August 8, 1853, *The New York Daily Tribune*, reprinted in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On the National and Colonial Questions: Selected Writings*, edited with an Introduction by Aijaz Ahmad, Left World, New Delhi, 2001, p. 70

³⁶ Irfan Habib, "Marx's Perception of India", Introduction to Iqbal Husain (ed.), *Karl Marx on India*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2006, p. xxxi

³⁷ Karl Marx, "The Future Results of British Rule in India", *ibid.*, p. 73

³⁸ See, for example, Irfan Habib, "Problems of Marxist Historiography", *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, Tulika, Delhi, 1995

³⁹ Irfan Habib, "Marx's Perception of India", *ibid.*, p. liv

⁴⁰ See, for example, Aijaz Ahmad, "Postmodernism in History", in K N Panikkar, Terence J Byres, and Utsa Patnaik (eds.), *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 440-477

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Volume 4, 1938-1940, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 392

⁴² Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1978 (1972), p. 145

⁴³ Irfan Habib, "Problems of Marxist Historiography", *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, Tulika, Delhi, 1995, p. 7

⁴⁴ Perry Anderson, *The Indian Ideology*, Three Essays Collective, Delhi, 2012

⁴⁵ Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Nivedita Menon, *The Indian Ideology: Three Responses to Perry Anderson*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2015

⁴⁶ Prabhat Patnaik, *Modern India sans the Impact of Capitalism*, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XLVIII, No. 36, September 7, 2013

⁴⁷ See, for example, Sudipta Kaviraj, “The Curious Persistence of Colonial Ideology” in Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj, Nivedita Menon, *The Indian Ideology: Three Responses to Perry Anderson*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2015, pp. 106-155

⁴⁸ Nivedita Menon, “Perry Anderson and the British Ideology”; Partha Chatterjee, “There is an Indian Ideology, But it’s Not This”, both in *ibid.*, pp. 13-105

⁴⁹ Prabhat Patnaik, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ Perry Anderson, *ibid.* p. 12

⁵¹ Sudipta Kaviraj, “On the Enchantment of the State: Indian Thought on the Role of the State in the Narrative of Modernity”, *The Trajectories of the Indian State: Politics and Ideas*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2011, p. 50

⁵² V. S. Naipaul, *India: A Wounded Civilization*, Vintage, New York, 1973, p. 159, as quoted in Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation – Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2015, p. 21

⁵³ Perry Anderson, *ibid.*, pp. 19-20

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, p. 121

⁵⁵ His two extended works as historian fall along the first track; see, Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism*, New Left Books, London, 1974; and *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, New Left Books, London, 1974. The Structure-Agency debate was more explicitly a theoretical debate. See, Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, New Left Books, London, 1980

⁵⁶ See for example, “Multiple Modernities”, *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol 129-1, 2000. Charles Taylor, a premier theorist of *multiculturalism* and although not a postmodernist in the strict sense, has been a key figure in a globally influential project on *multiple modernities*.

⁵⁷ Javed Alam, “Modernity and Its Philosophic Visions”, in K N Panikkar, Terence J Byres, and Utsa Patnaik (eds.), *The Making of History: Essays Presented to Irfan Habib*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, p. 405

⁵⁸ Achin Vanaik, *Hindutva Rising: Secular Claims, Communal Realities*, Tulika, Delhi, 2017, p. 8

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 25, footnote 8

⁶⁰ Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation – Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2015

⁶¹ The case of Israel would require heavy qualifications if it were to be taken as an example of liberation from foreign rule. Walzer is aware of the problem, but this issue is not relevant for our purpose.

⁶² Michael Walzer, *ibid.*, pp. xi-xii

⁶³ *ibid.*, pp. 70-71

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, p. 85

⁶⁵ Amartya Sen, as quoted in Walzer, *ibid.* p. 72

⁶⁶ Michael Walzer, *ibid.* p. 71. The quotes within the quote are from an article by Chandra Mallampalli, “Evaluating Marxist and Post-Modernist Responses to Hindu Nationalism during the Eighties and Nineties,” *South Asia Research* 19:2 (1999)

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, p. 133

⁶⁸ Christophe Jaffrelot, *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2003
