

A TALK WITH PC

The Unexplored Marx

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THE MANDARINS OF A K Gopalan and Ajay Bhavans might have forgotten Paresh Chattopadhyay (PC). Well, he could mingle with no more than a few hundred people during his brief sojourn in Kolkata from December 2011 to early February 2012. But he is no new-comer to the readers of *Frontier*. This scribe remembers his pieces *Associated Labour—Alternative Labour* in Autumn Number, 1995 and *Remembering The Tiananmen Democrats (1989-2009)* in Autumn Number, 2009 not to speak of various other theoretical contributions. Prof Chattopadhyay did his doctorate on the French Classical Political Economy from the University of Paris (Sorbonne) and the degree conferred on him was not a mere 'University Doctorate' but a 'State Doctorate'—the highest in France—in the Economic Sciences.

Prof Chattopadhyay is now teaching in the Dept. of Political Economy at the Quebec University in Montreal. He is currently a member of the workshop (werkstatt) of the ongoing projected 15-volume 'Historical-Critical Dictionary of Marxism (Historisch Kritisches Wörterbuch Des Marxismus) being published under the sponsorship of Insitut Fur Kritische Theorie, INKRIT, Berlin where he is a fellow. He is also a guest research fellow of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (BBAW in German acronym). One cannot forget the fact that due to his command over the German, French, Spanish and other European languages and extensive reading on Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourg in their original manuscripts he has been invited as the only Indian 'Marx' scholar by the editorial board of MEGA to read, re-read all the versions of Marx-Engles books and manuscripts with side and footnotes for publication of the MEGA which is publishing 114 Vol. Complete works of Marx and Engels of which 59 volumes had already come out. During many a tete-tete at his temporary residence in the city and on occasions when he deliberated over many issues concerning Marx, distortions of Marx and 20th century socialism, this scribe could elicit from the erudite scholar some concerned issues which follow.

His scholarly fame is mainly due to a treatise "THE MARXIAN CONCEPT OF CAPITAL AND THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE : ESSAY IN THE CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY" (praeger-1994). He is presently working on his second book 'SOCIALISM AND COMMODITY PRODUCTION' forthcoming from BRILL and the lead article, amongst such others, for the 'HANDBOOK ON COMMUNISM' (OUP).

—'You said that Revolution did not require a Marx to take place. Revolution would happen 'Marx or no Marx'. If that be your proposition then how and where the question of leadership enters the picture? Moreover, does not your proposition smack of the theory of Historical Inevitability and no action required by the proletariat?'

Confronted with such a question, the eightyish Marx scholar smiled his serene smile and said : “on the contrary, leadership of the revolution evolves from the labouring people themselves, not from a group (basically intellectuals), unelected and unrecallable by the workers, and far removed from the real process of production, the locus of capitalist exploitation. Marx thought that the consciousness of revolution arises from the workers themselves through their own experience of struggle for life. For example, when the great 1917 uprising of Russia occurred resulting in the founding of the labouring peoples’ self-governing organs the Soviets -there was almost nobody who knew even the name of Marx. The tragedy occurred precisely, when a revolutionary party, claiming to be Marxist, and substituting for the labouring people, put a complete brake on the whole soviet movement by seizing political power in the workers’ name, independently of and at the back and over the head of the congress of ‘Soviets’, precisely the workers’ organs of self-rule.”

On historical inevitability of the socialist revolution, the learned professor replied with the same sureness of one who has arrived, thus: no, there is no inevitability (automatism) in what I hold. But Marx repeatedly pointed out that a social revolution requires certain conditions - objective and subjective, created by the contradiction of capital itself including its grave-diggers -without which all efforts for ‘exploding’ a society would be pure ‘Donquixotism’.

Coming back to the *tete-a-tete*, this writer’s next query was ‘rightly or wrongly, there is a feeling that your overemphasis on Marx relegated the other important questions like the actual happening of the revolution in the background. Do you agree?’

The professor’s immediate reply came pat : “My political thinking has evolved through several stages. Still a university student, I wrote a laudatory paper in a Calcutta newspaper on the so-called Stalin constitution of 1936 which had impressed me as a very democratic constitution.

I had little knowledge of what was going on in that land in reality. On further studies and reflections I found what *Dr Zivago* in Pasternak’s great novel had said about the 1936 constitution : ‘was not meant to be applied’.

However, I remained a firm Leninist and Maoist. Then I read Bettelheim’s 4 volume book “Class Struggles in the USSR” which was theoretically and factually very rich. Then I began to rethink Lenin and Mao. At the same time, I started to read very carefully the works of Marx and Engels. Further on, with my Marx study, I gradually discovered a whole different world which had little to do with the 20th century socialism. In this rediscovery, I must acknowledge the help that I received from the writings of great ‘Marx’ scholar, Maximilien Rubel—arguably the greatest since David Riazanov. In particular, I discovered an unknown Marx simply soaked in humanism, for whom the working class revolution against capital is a profoundly human and revolutionary self-emancipating act of the oppressed. The victorious outcome of this revolution is what Marx called socialism (identically, communism) which is, in Marx’s alternative formulation, an association of free individuals or the republic of labour, in which, the instruments

of oppression and repression such as state, commodity production and wage and salary system should be completely absent.”

These were further strengthened not weakened, by the party state. ‘While talking about Marx in his pristine purity some distinctions must be made between the philosopher Marx and Marx the scientist, which reminds one of the debate in the late 60’s and early 70’s of the last century on young vs old Marx’.

“I do not believe that there is any gap between the ‘young’ and the ‘old’ Marx. To be convinced about what I am saying it is sufficient to compare Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) and his master work *Capital* in its different versions (1857-58 to the late 1870s). This requires very careful, persistent reading of the relevant texts. This is what I have been doing over many years, going back to the author’s original (mostly German) texts, greatly helped by the ongoing republication of the Marx-Engels’ complete works’ (MEGA in the German acronym). As regards the philosopher and the scientist Marx, this much can be said that after *German Ideology* there is no extensive discussion by Marx on philosophy and I hold again that there was no break in the continuity from the young to the old Marx.’”

The next question was an obvious one : How do you view the role of varied official (and also unofficial) Indian Marxists?

The professor answered succinctly : “Calling a party, communist or claiming to be one does not mean that the party is communist.

I can say here something only about the Indian communists. As far as I know the leaders of these parties have come from the radicalized intelligentsia and did not arise from the ranks of the working class, and they have been far away from what Marx calls the immediate or direct process of capitalist production. Hence, according to the criteria of the *Communist Manifesto*, these communists cannot be considered as workers. Consequently, it is not possible to call them communists.’ □□□