

Of People and Self-Governing Society

[Paresh Chattopadhyay, renowned Marx-scholar of International repute was recently in Kolkata. Nityananda Ghosh spoke with him about different aspects of Marx debate. Part of the interview was published in the Bengali Daily *Ekdin*. This is the second interview with PC. The first one was published in Frontier's March 11-17 issue. Excerpts:]

NG : How did you associate yourself with Marx-scholarship?

PC: Before taking up the study of Marx—in other words, reading Marx's original writings—I was engaged in reading the followers of Marx or works of Stalin, Lenin and Mao for a period during my student days. I was mesmerized particularly by the words of Lenin and Mao. At the end of that phase, I took up the study of Marx and Engels. The more deep I went into the works of the latter, the more increasing hiatus I found between them and the self-proclaimed followers (of Marx and Engels). Specially, works of Marx opened a new window to me.

NG: As far our knowledge goes, you are perhaps the only Indian who went through the original text of Marx in German, in other languages too. Will you tell me about your experience in this?

PC: I have read works of Marx in three languages, German first, later French and then English. I had learnt mainly German and French of my own. Later, my stay in Germany and France for a short period and visit to the two countries from time to time, mixing with people of those countries and conversations thereof helped me enrich my knowledge of two languages. Besides that, I had a personal yearning towards study of languages. I studied Spanish and Italian too. And for publication of my book, I had to learn Russian, although not having read in Russian for a long period, my grasp over the Russian language gathered rust.

NG: After the fall of the erstwhile Soviet Russia, a question arose both here and abroad, as to whether ideas of Marx were not applied in the countries including Soviet Russia where socialist states were established (State Revolution). Will you say something elaborating on this?

PC: Actually in those countries in the name of socialism came party-state which had an irremovable difference with the ideas of Marx. The thunderous declaration of Marx at the First International (1864)—"self-emancipation of the working class is the TASK (WORK) of the workers themselves. It remains unimplemented to date. What took place was capture of power by a small coterie and that was described as the victory of workers' revolution. This victorious coterie was not elected by workers. And the workers had no right to recall. So what happened was substitution of one ruling class by another. And their wage-slavery remained intact. Truly speaking, 'socialism' in the Twentieth Century was a pathetic tale of pre-history of human society. Such coterie never give up the power voluntarily. In the absence of free elections, they can't be disempowered by peaceful means.

NG: You said there was civil society in the pre-Marxian era but the order of post-Marx era is human society.

PC: No, I have never said any such words. Maybe, my words remain opaque. What I have said is Marx called the materialism before him (or until the Feuerbach's perception of materialism) as 'old materialism' and his (also Engels') materialism as 'new materialism' (*Tenth thesis on Feuerbach*). The outlook of 'old materialism' is 'civil society' or (actually, the words are the same—*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft* and Hegel perceived them as synonymous). On the other hand, the new humanism in its outlook covers the entire human society. Or in other words, 'old materialism' left out people outside the citizens. Citizens mean the bourgeoisie. This differentiation took place in the great bourgeois revolution of 1789 in the famous declaration of the victorious class of the bourgeoisie—'Rights of Man and Citizen'. Here citizens did mean the newly victorious class, the rest were common human beings only. Young Marx in various works discussed this significant difference.

NG: You have tried to bring together Marx's theorization—workers' self authority or self-activity—and world famous poet Rabindranath Tagore's *sammilito atmokortitwa* ('Self-governing Society'). Will you kindly elaborate this point?

PC: The momentary goal of Marx's 'self-activity' is self-earned liberation of workers—male and female. The perspective of Rabindranath Tagore's 'sammilito atmokortitwa' is apparently greater. No particular class, but common men and women, was in his mind. It has to be kept in mind that Rabindranath's idea, stated in his "Swadeshi Samaj" (patriotic society), took shape in an environment of British imperialist rule in the early Twentieth Century. If read attentively, it will be evident that ultimately, the two ideations of Marx and Rabindranath are essentially the same. In the subsequent years, Rabindranath told of self-activity to the dwellers of Sriniketan without class array.

NG: How do you explain M N Roy's Radical Humanism with the humanism of Marx?

PC: My perception is not clear on this. And my acquaintance with works of M N Roy is not satisfactory. As such, it would not be judicious on my part to opine on this.

NG: You stated revolutions where workers take the vanguard role those who lead them are no workers. But the question is who will make workers literate or conscious in a backward country like India or other backward countries of the Third World where most of the workers are illiterate.

PC: In backward countries the numbers of workers—male and female—comprise an insignificant portion of total population. Like the remaining sections, they too are considerably illiterate and deprived of access to education. Moreover, a mammoth part of the country is superstitious, lacking faith in self-power with belief in Guruism, Avtarism and Destinyism. In such case, workers' revolution is meaningless. There the struggle is to be against pre-capitalist relations and for setting up an order of democracy encompassing the society. There the

principal task of an intellectual or intellectuals is to spread education and campaign for scientific outlook among the people and convince them clearly that Destinyism and Avatarism stood on their lack of faith in their self-power.

We get the quintessence of this idea in the works of Rabindranath—(I am telling from my memory) Esi sab moodha mlan mooko mukhe ditey habe-bhasha/ ei sab shranto shushks bhagna buke dhvaniya tilite habe asha/ Dakia bolite habe / Jar bhaye tumi bheeto se anyay bheeru toma cheye / jakhani janibetumi takhani se pawlaibe dheye / pawtho-kukkurer mawto sankoche santrase jabe mishe (Free tr- These dumb, mute and deaf mouths have to be given power to speak / those fatigued, frail and broken hearts are to be injected hope / They have to be beacons and be told, /'The one you are afraid of is more coward than you for in justice/ The moment you wake up, he will flee like a street dog in shame and terror'). I have not come across such words in writings of any Marxist. My humble opinion is that protestor intellectuals should base their work in this collective self-power, not as campaigners of a particular ideology, nor giving political leadership as unwanted brokers. [If I remember well, The lyric of, Internationale composed by an anarchist and communard of Paris Commune of 1876 read— There is no god, no Caesar, no tribune to save us. Workers, we are our saviors. When the bourgeois revolution of 1789 was in its peak in 1792-93 this slogan used to be published in a 'left extremist periodical'—"Those who are in front of us appear to be larger since we have bent down our knees. Come, let us stand up."]

NG: We know you have faith in Marxism but is it possible to practice it in this country of diversity comprising many nationalities as well as multi-national, multi-ethnic communities?

PC: The answer to this is linked to my previous reply. The pre-capitalist garbage is huge and this overburden is to be removed through long term educational relations. Extensive Education, expansion of scientific outlook and struggle against superstitions have to be organized, through many small initiatives. The role of progressive intellectuals is crucial in it. To be victorious in this struggle, examples in developed countries in the past have to be cited in the campaign. Mankind's distresses are not due to sin of previous life, distresses are not scripted on the forehead. The answer to your question lies in proper arousing of faith in the self-power of mankind.

NG: What's your assessment of Indian communists?

PC: It would not be right to count my opinion much. But perhaps it can be said there is little difference between Indian communist leaders and their counterparts in other countries, given the perspective of their political activities. □□□