

Karl Marx on Globalisation – A Revisit

(A Talk by Chitta Behera in the Group Discussion on 'Relevance of Karx Marx's Communism in the era of Globalisation' held on the occasion of 192nd Birth Anniversary of Karl Marx at the meeting hall of Project Swarajya, Bakharabad, Cuttack, Orissa in the evening of 5th May 2010. Chaired by its Convenor Mr.Ramesh Ali Besant, the Group Discussion was attended among others by Mr.Annada Ray, Mr.Baishnab Parida, Prof.Basant Mallick, Mr.Rabi Hussain Gandhi, Mr.Akshay Das, Mr.Jugal Nayak, Mr.Rabi Behera, Advocate Mr.Khirod Rout, Mr.Govind Bhagwan and Mr.Tapan Samal)

Friends,

Before I venture to touch upon today's theme proper, I would like to place my reservations on the very epithet 'Great Philosopher' used in the banner of the meeting to describe Karl Marx (1818-1883). As a matter of fact, Marx neither was a philosopher, nor did he like himself to be described as such. In 'Eleven Theses on Feuerbach' (1845), where Marx succinctly formulated by way of aphorisms his standpoint on basic questions that chased the history of philosophy all through, in contradistinction to both idealism and materialism, the last, that is, the eleventh thesis maintained, "*The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it*". Here Marx sought to strike a radical break with the whole lot of philosophers, no matter which school any member of them belonged to, precisely for the reason that the business of any philosophy was a scholastic one i.e. to interpret the world, whereas his mission, nay, his point of departure was a practical one i.e. to change the world, through 'practical human-sensuous activity' the very expression used in Fifth Thesis. To make the point further clear and beyond a shade of doubt, Marx's collaborator Fredrick Engels (1820-1895) in his polemical treatise 'Anti-Duhring' (1978) observed, "*... modern materialism is essentially dialectic and no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences. As soon as each separate science is required to get clarity as to its position in the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things, a special science dealing with this totality is superfluous. That which still, independently, survives of all former philosophy is the science of thought and its laws- formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the positive science of nature and history.*" (***Anti-Dühring or Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science, Chapter-1 Introduction- General***). It needs to be remembered that to Marx and Engels 'ideology' like 'philosophy' carried 'false consciousness' (***Letter from Engels to Franz Mehring 14 July 1893***). Thus they wanted an ultimate end to both philosophy and ideology, which have been as such rendered superfluous thanks to the emergence of dialectics- the universal laws of motion; and any lingering life, if extended to them, would only obstruct free, harmonious and coordinated growth of disciplines. Under the circumstances, to portray Karl Marx as a philosopher or an ideologist is to miss the quintessence of the new, path-breaking, all encompassing method of dialectics that he so zealously pioneered to establish to study society or science and is therefore patently un-Marxian.

The next objection that I wish to register before moving on to today's theme proper is directed against the use of the very word 'Marxism' by the previous speakers like so many do the world over to describe the new, revolutionary line of thinking propounded by Marx and Engels. As a matter of fact, neither Marx nor Engels did ever use this word to represent their new standpoint. Rather, as Communist Manifesto (1848) showed, the word 'communism' was invariably used to denote the classless and stateless society that would ultimately usher in as a culmination of the dialectical movement of the existing class societies, and a 'Communist' is he or she who is a partisan to the cause of historically inevitable emergence of a classless and stateless society. As regards Marx's method of enquiry into any phenomenon of social or natural world, they had termed it simply dialectics albeit opposite to that of Hegel (***Afterword to the Second German Edition of Capital, Vol-1, 1973***). I shall therefore refrain from using the ideologically loaded expression 'Marxism' and instead stick to simply what Marx said on this or that particular subject. To me there is no Marxism, but simply Marx.

Now coming to the topic at hand let me first reiterate it for a special reason- '*Relevance of Karx Marx's Communism in the era of Globalisation*'. The framer of the topic seems to have thought that the era of globalization is a recent stage in the history of capitalism, which was unknown to Marx. But informed readers of Marx and Engels know pretty well that though the very word 'globalization' didn't occur as such in any of their writings they were very much conversant, nay, articulate about its features, drives and processes that had already shaped out and were further unfolding before their very eyes across the world. They frequently used the expressions like 'world trade', 'world market' and 'free trade', which, as we shall just see, carry connotations similar to that of today's globalization. The current 'globalization' may therefore be conceived as an advanced, deepened and expanded process of the very world trade which Marx and Engels frequently analysed and critiqued in their numerous works. In order to do justice to Marx and Engels, I would therefore propose to rephrase today's topic to read '*Relevance of Karl Marx to current phase of Globalization*'.

How do we define Globalization? In a nutshell, it is M(3m); M stands for Mobility, and 3m stands for money (capital), material (raw material and machinery) and man (labour). Thus Globalization means mobility of capital, material and labour across the globe. In ancient and medieval epochs, there occurred too movement of these essential elements of production across the countries and continents through trade or conquest. In this sense, one might say that globalization has ever been in existence since the people of a particular region exchanged their valuables with that of another in lieu of precious metal or other valuables. But what distinguishes the modern bourgeois epoch from the preceding epochs is the compulsion and consequent inevitability of accelerated trade and commerce across the national boundaries, without which no nation can survive, let alone prosper or flourish.

In view of the constraint of time, I would, for today's purposes, refer to only two seminal works by Marx & Engels, authored in the closing days of 1847, but published in early 1848- ***Communist Manifesto Feb 1848*** and ***On the Question of Free Trade, 9 Jan 1848*** which preponderantly bear on the phenomenon called globalization. The first work helps us understand the kind of globalization that was current during their time, and the second one informs us on the position taken by them on the issue of Free Trade, which as already mentioned, is essentially synonymous with today's globalization.

“Modern industry has established the world market, for which the discovery of America paved the way. The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part. The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals; it has conducted expeditions that put in the shade all former exoduses of nations and crusades. The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form, was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind.

“The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere. The bourgeoisie has, through its exploitation of the world market, given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. To the great chagrin of reactionaries, it has drawn from under the feet of industry the national ground on which it stood. All old-established national industries

have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrowmindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.

“The bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of commodities are the heavy artillery with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image”. (Communist Manifesto 1848, Chapter-1 Bourgeois and Proletarians)

The above excerpts from Communist Manifesto must leave no reader in doubt about the heyday of globalization that was stridently unfolding in mid-19th century, which Marx and Engels graphically portrayed in the above passages. Notwithstanding the long lapse of about 162 years since Communist Manifesto was published, today's globalization hardly differs from the one presented there in respect of essentials. And it is crystal clear that Marx and Engels took note of the revolutionary potential of the capital not only to destroy archaic and petty divisions based upon religion, tribe, caste, birth and rank etc within a nation, but also to demolish manifold barriers between the nations across the world.

Now, let's move on to the next important question, i.e. what stand Marx and Engels took on their contemporary brand of globalization. Before I deal with it by way of a reference to Marx's well known speech '***On the Question of Free Trade***' (***delivered before a Public Meeting of Democratic Association of Brussels on 9 Jan 1848***), let me clarify that Free Trade at that point of time meant removal of protectionism i.e. tariff barriers to pave the way for untrammelled trade between the nations, which otherwise means unrestricted world trade, or in today's parlance, globalization.

Most of Marx's above mentioned speech aimed at exposing the illusions of advance and well being that the Free Traders held out before the public in general and workers in particular. According to him, the Free Trade, though likely to cheapen the consumables for the workers in the short run shall dampen their wage rates and ruin their overall conditions in the long run. At one stage of his talk Marx quotes in extenso the speech made by Dr. Browning a British MP and a passionate Free Trader to the House of Commons in 1835, to corroborate the point that free trade also wrecked havoc to the well established and prosperous industries in the colonies including India.

"I hold in my hand the correspondence which has taken place between the Governor-General of India and the East-India Company, on the subject of the Dacca hand-loom weavers.... Some years ago the East-India Company annually received of the produce of the looms of India to the amount of from 6,000,000 to 8,000,000 of pieces of cotton goods. The demand gradually fell to somewhat more than 1,000,000, and has now nearly ceased altogether. In 1800, the United States took from India nearly 800,000 pieces of cotton; in 1830, not 4,000. In 1800, 1,000,000 pieces were shipped to Portugal; in 1830, only 20,000. Terrible were the accounts of the wretchedness of the poor Indian weavers, reduced to absolute starvation. And what was the sole cause? The presence of the cheaper English manufacture.... Numbers of them dies of hunger, the remainder were, for the most part, transferred to

other occupations, principally agricultural. Not to have changed their trade was inevitable starvation. And at this moment that Dacca district is supplied with yarn and cotton cloth from the power-looms of England.... The Dacca muslins, celebrated over the whole world for their beauty and fineness, are also annihilated from the same cause. And the present suffering, to numerous classes in India, is scarcely to be paralleled in the history of commerce." [Speech in the House of Commons, July 28, 1835]

Towards the close of his talk, Marx reasons as follows: *"To sum up, what is free trade, what is free trade under the present condition of society? It is freedom of capital. When you have overthrown the few national barriers which still restrict the progress of capital, you will merely have given it complete freedom of action. So long as you let the relation of wage labor to capital exist, it does not matter how favorable the conditions under which the exchange of commodities takes place, there will always be a class which will exploit and a class which will be exploited. It is really difficult to understand the claim of the free-traders who imagine that the more advantageous application of capital will abolish the antagonism between industrial capitalists and wage workers. On the contrary, the only result will be that the antagonism of these two classes will stand out still more clearly".*

Marx goes on further, *"Gentlemen! Do not allow yourselves to be deluded by the abstract word freedom. Whose freedom? It is not the freedom of one individual in relation to another, but the freedom of capital to crush the worker. Why should you desire to go on sanctioning free competition with this idea of freedom, when this freedom is only the product of a state of things based upon free competition? We have shown what sort of brotherhood free trade begets between the different classes of one and the same nation. The brotherhood which free trade would establish between the nations of the Earth would hardly be more fraternal. To call cosmopolitan exploitation universal brotherhood is an idea that could only be engendered in the brain of the bourgeoisie. All the destructive phenomena which unlimited competition gives rise to within one country are reproduced in more gigantic proportions on the world market".*

Lambasting the well known Comparative Advantages theory of international trade advanced by David Ricardo (1772-1823), Marx held that behind its glib talk of equality and freedom of nations it would ultimately enrich those advanced countries which specialize in manufacture by virtue of their technological superiority, while pushing downward the backward countries that specialize in the cultivation of raw materials. In the said talk, Marx comments, *"... we are told that free trade would create an international division of labor, and thereby give to each country the production which is most in harmony with its natural advantage. ... One other thing must never be forgotten, namely, that, just as everything has become a monopoly, there are also nowadays some branches of industry which dominate all others, and secure to the nations which most largely cultivate them the command of the world market. Thus in international commerce cotton alone has much greater commercial than all the other raw materials used in the manufacture of clothing put together. It is truly ridiculous to see the free-traders stress the few specialities in each branch of industry, throwing them into the balance against the products used in everyday consumption and produced most cheaply in those countries in which manufacture is most highly developed. If the free-traders cannot understand how one nation can grow rich at the expense of another, we need not wonder, since these same gentlemen also refuse to understand how within one country one class can enrich itself at the expense of another".*

From the foregoing passages that carried a strident criticism of free trade, one may hasten to surmise that Marx must have chosen protectionism over and against free trade in the above mentioned public meeting of Democratic Association of Brussels. But that was not to be. He ultimately voted for Free Trade against Protectionism. His logic ran, *"Do not imagine, gentlemen, that in criticizing freedom of trade we have the least intention of defending the system of protection. One may declare oneself an enemy of the constitutional regime without declaring oneself a friend of the ancient regime. Moreover, the protectionist system is nothing but a means of establishing large-scale industry in any given country,*

that is to say, of making it dependent upon the world market, and from the moment that dependence upon the world market is established, there is already more or less dependence upon free trade. Besides this, the protective system helps to develop free trade competition within a country. Hence we see that in countries where the bourgeoisie is beginning to make itself felt as a class, in Germany for example, it makes great efforts to obtain protective duties. They serve the bourgeoisie as weapons against feudalism and absolute government, as a means for the concentration of its own powers and for the realization of free trade within the same country”.

As to why did Marx finally voted for Free Trade, the concluding words of his talk make it abundantly clear, *“But, in general, the protective system of our day is conservative, while the free trade system is destructive. It breaks up old nationalities and pushes the antagonism of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to the extreme point. In a word, the free trade system hastens the social revolution. It is in this revolutionary sense alone, gentlemen, that I vote in favor of free trade.”*

It is interesting to note that though Marx would ultimately vote for Free Trade, he was not allowed to speak in the Free Trade Congress held at Brussels at the end of 1847. As reported by Engels, “Marx requested a slot to speak, but the Congress closed before his name came up on the lists. Instead, he delivered his speech to the Democratic Association, of which he was a vice-president”. What could be the reason? Perhaps the official protagonists of Free Trade, who organized the Congress, were more afraid of Marx’s biting criticism against Free Trade than they were happy about his ultimate vote in its favour.

However, according to Engels, ‘Marx’s speech, although not delivered, contains the very best’ on the controversy around Free Trade versus Protection (***The Free Trade Congress at Brussels, by Fredrick Engels published in Northern Star, 9 October 1847***). The extracts from Marx’s draft speech which Engels appended to his article ‘The Free Trade Congress at Brussels’ had the following to say by way of conclusion, *“We accept every thing that has been said of the advantages of Free Trade. The powers of production will increase, the tax imposed upon the country by protective duties will disappear, all commodities will be sold at a cheaper price. And what, again, says Ricardo? “That labour being equally a commodity, will equally sell at a cheaper price” — that you will have it for very little money indeed, just as you will have pepper and salt”*. A little afterwards Marx continued, *“Is that to say that we are against Free Trade? No, we are for Free Trade, because by Free Trade all economical laws, with their most astounding contradictions, will act upon a larger scale, upon a greater extent of territory, upon the territory of the whole earth; and because from the uniting of all these contradictions into a single group, where they stand face to face, will result the struggle which will itself eventuate in the emancipation of the proletarians”*.

While it is none of my intentions to read Marx and Engels of 1847-1848 into today’s discourse on free trade a.k.a. globalization, I feel however impelled to suggest a course that ought to sound Marxian in the contemporary context. The workers need to be candidly told that while globalization would bring about an eventual ruination of their overall condition, it is on the whole supportable, because firstly it represents the future while protectionism belonged to the past; secondly protectionism is no less exploitative; and thirdly and most importantly, it accelerates social change and removes thereby all intermediary, petty and anachronistic barriers between the classes within a nation and between nations across the globe. At the same time a Marxian approach would demand of its adherents to extend solidarity to each and every movement of resistance by the very workers, who might be adversely affected by the overwhelming onslaught of free trade from any quarter of the globe. Then only ‘social revolution’ as envisaged by Marx would receive a boost leading to ultimate deliverance of the working population from the yoke of capitalism.