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CONVERSATION

'As a Method of Analysis, Marxism is as Valid as Ever'

by Sabir Mustafa

"The philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, but the point is to change it", That is what the inscription on the tomb of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery in London reads. But, as DAVID MCLELLAN, Professor of Political Theory at the University of Kent in Canterbury, Britain, points out in an exclusive interview given to the Daily Star, Marxists are still proving better at interpreting the world than changing it. Renowned author of a series of books including *Karl Marx: His Life and Thought*, *Marxism after Marx*, *Engels, Ideology* etc., McLellan, 52, has been researching into the relationship between politics and religion lately, which formed the main topic of one of his more recent books, a biography of French philosopher Simone Weil published in 1990.

Considered by many to be a world authority on Marxism, Professor David McLellan was recently in Dhaka to deliver a lecture on "Marxism in the Post-Soviet World", at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Flying directly from China, where he was on a lecture tour, McLellan talked to the Daily Star over a wide area, from the failure of the Soviet system to the continuing success of the Chinese experiment:

DAILY STAR: A while back, Cuba's Fidel Castro was saying that socialism didn't die naturally in the Soviet Union. It committed suicide or it was killed off. Is there much substance to Castro's claim? What sort of mistakes did the Soviet communists make which led to socialism's degeneration in Eastern Europe?

DAVID MCLELLAN: It seems to me that the reasons for this are largely economic. If you analyse it from a Marxist perspective as I am inclined to, you can say that the economic organisation of the Soviet Union — a command, highly-centralised economy — was very effective under certain circumstances in increasing the Gross National Product (GNP) and the productive forces.

I think the Soviet Union did precisely that in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, but then it began to encounter growing difficulties from the 60s onwards. The difficulties were connected with the fact that, although you can increase production of say, cement, iron etc, but if you want to diversify agriculture or produce the sort of consumer durables that are needed at a certain level in the progress of civilisation, a command economy is not a very effective method of doing it.

A second reason was that, undoubtedly, the Soviet Union was a poor country compared to the United States. In fact, it did not have anything like the economic resources, the actual wealth, that the United States had. But it felt, for one reason or another, that it had to maintain a level of armed forces and military preparedness that was equivalent to that of the United States. That I think caused a much larger drain on the resources of the Soviet Union.

Also, partly because of the way the economy was organised, its success in producing military equipment did not feed back into the general economic well being of the society as a whole, unlike the United States. Some people have read the US as an economy which is essentially geared to producing weapons, and that the military establishment in America is a

means of the government controlling the economy in almost in a Keynesian way. The point is I think that military expenditure in the Soviet Union did not have the beneficiary economic effects that some might argue it did in the United States.

Those are two reasons which spelt the long-term decline of the Soviet economy. And I do take the view that the political system cannot forever survive the lack of a successful economic base.

DS: How would evaluate Marxism as a theory? Do you think it was a prescription for revolution, revolutionary change and future shape of society? Or do you take the view that it was simply an analysis of history?

DM: I think in the ideas of Marx, both these things are undoubtedly there, it is both an analysis and a prescription. In Marxism, both these things are united together, inextricably intertwined, because the analysis yields the prescription. In Marx's ideas, there is no such thing as an independent analysis.

In Marxist thought, the

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only reason why you pertain to a correct analysis is because you are in the correct position. That is, you are participating in a struggle or political project to create precisely a better form of society. So in Marxist view these things cannot be divorced one from the other.

Now what has happened in the 100 years or so since Marx's death, is that these two elements have met with very different fates. It seems to me that Marx's own analysis of society is as valid, as strong and as fruitful as a method of research as it has been. Unfortunately, I can't say the same for the project

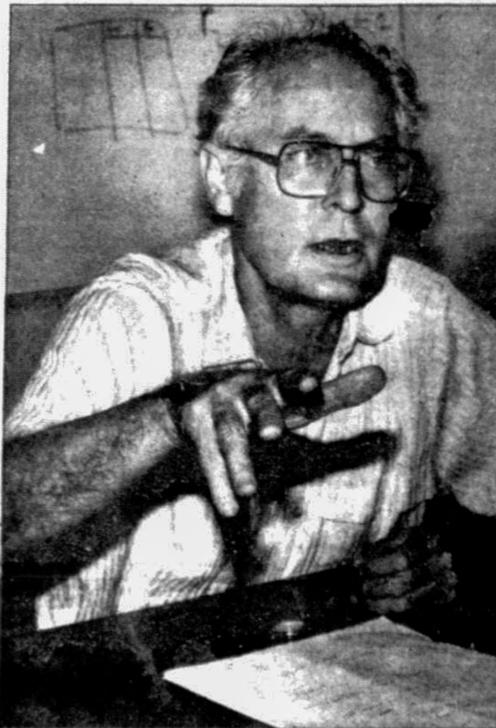
of changing society in a socialist revolutionary way.

Well, in a way it has been very successful in the sense that it has produced revolutionary movements which have been able to occasionally introduce forms of society and government which you could rightly call socialist. Unfortunately however, these societies did not manage to hold on to or continue basic socialist forms for very long.

In that sense, transforming societies in the direction of properly socialist government has not, so far at least, been successful. But that doesn't mean to say that they haven't achieved an awful lot. In the sense of raising the level of productive forces. And of course in large parts of the world, achievements in health, education, literacy and all these things, have been quite remarkable. Cuba is a good example of that.

However, there is still an enormously long way to go in terms of the vision which Marx had sketched out, of a society which was radically egalitarian, and in which the amount of wealth which accrued to individual members of society was according to

'One economic form which cannot cope with ecological threats is capitalism. Socialism seems the most promising way in which it might be possible to control threats of that sort'



tion would take place in highly industrialised societies, whereas it was in backward countries like Russia, China, Poland etc that such revolutions took place. Do you think there is any validity in the theory that it is because of this anomaly, that those revolutions failed to make the kind of progress towards communism that was envisaged by Marx?

DM: I think there is an extraordinary amount of validity in that theory. This is the view put forward partly by Leon Trotsky. Trotsky, in trying to explain the growth of bureaucracy in Russia, said

that bureaucracy thrives in backward countries.

And the reasons for this is that backward countries have an insufficiency of material resources for the citizens, and there isn't enough in the shops. People have to wait, so they form a queue. If the queue is long enough you need a policeman to make sure people stay in the queue. And this, he says in a famous passage in *The Revolution Betrayed*, is the explanation of the rise of Soviet bureaucracy. And I think there is a lot of truth in that.

In Marxist view, communism sits on the shoulders of capitalism, and therefore it

inherits, when the revolution comes, a society which is rich. The only trouble with a capitalist society is that although it is a rich society, the resources are unequally distributed and unfairly produced, but there is a lot of wealth there.

So, basically there is enough to go around all the citizens. And if there is enough to go around, then the political questions are not so important because they are not questions of life and death. We can share it, but if there is only enough food for you or me, we are liable to fight over it, and it does become a matter of life or death. Some people have to go to war.

In those circumstances of incipient civil war and all that kind of thing, the rise of an autocratic government becomes virtually inevitable. It has nothing to do with Marx, or Engels or even Lenin, it has nothing intrinsically to do with the doctrines of Marxism. It has to do with the project of trying to develop forces of production rapidly in an underdeveloped country.

More interesting but a dif-

fered extremely rapidly. Lot of people would say, that one of the reasons why Spain expanded rapidly was that under General Franco, however fascist and dictatorial it may have been, underneath it was developing all these capitalist relations of production. When the autocracy is removed, it all suddenly surfaces.

So, historically, the periods of autocratic rule acted as a kind of umbrella, like a hen on an egg, for the development of incipient capitalist relations and forces of production.

Now, some people might want to extrapolate from that to say, that in the general Marxian scheme of history where one mode of production succeeds another — feudalism, capitalism, communism — the effort to produce a socialist system in the Soviet Union was, in fact, premature.

But nevertheless, this has served a historical duty in playing the same role for the development of capitalist relations of production, namely by laying down, in a very close protected period, an infrastructure which can then become a capitalist society, just

'The Chinese have a splendid opportunity to create a kind of society which mixes certain market principles with strong commitment towards egalitarianism, and make an example of a decent society'

like western Europe or North America.

So, some people say the Soviet Union has taken a detour. That is, you are expected to go from feudalism to capitalism to communism, which is the way western Europe, America etc. are going, but the Soviet Union took a detour out of feudalism and, by rapidly developing forces of production and infrastructure for capitalist growth, it is now rejoining the mainstream of history and moving, as we all are according to the Marxian theory, towards a socialist society.

Now this is one way, if you wish to read history in a classic Marxist way, you could try

and interpret recent events as being almost expected. I think this is a bit over-generous to the Marxist view, but it is a way you could interpret things.

DS: But would that not contradict Lenin? He always said the October Revolution fitted in perfectly with the Marxist analysis...

DM: Yes, I think that is right. Trotsky did talk about the backwardness of Russia as being responsible for the growth of the Soviet bureaucracy, but he never asked himself if it was right at all to try and establish a socialist society under those circumstances.

Therefore you could say that at least Lenin should have said to himself — maybe he did say to himself, who knows, in one of his more thoughtful moments — that possibly it was a mistake to start a revolution under these sort of circumstances.

But I think, in Lenin's defence you could certainly say that he never for a moment thought — you get this feeling clearly from his writings — that Russia would be left alone to construct socialism in a single country. And that Stalin would try and demonstrate that the doctrine of socialism in a single country was in fact in tune with the Marxist vision.

What else could Stalin do but say this, when he is left alone? He's got to say something and he's got to say that it is in tune with Marxist thought.

Lenin felt — and I think Lenin is in tune with what I am suggesting is the main Marxist trend here — that the revolution in Russia would be doomed, or unimaginable as a success without being backed-up by successful socialist revolutions in Germany, Britain, France, United States and so forth. I don't think he ever conceived of a situation where he was left alone.

You could see this happening in the 1920s, when these people (communists in Russia) had to make it up as they went along, because they were faced with a situation that none of the Marxist classics had prepared them for.

This revolution in a relatively backward country was not only unsupported by the large industrial powers, but actually attacked by those imperialist powers from the West, civil war and all those kinds of things.

So, on reflection I think it would be unfair to Lenin to say that his whole project was mistaken. But it would be fair to say that the historical assumption that there would be revolutions in industrialised countries proved to be unfounded.

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Bangladesh-China Ancient Link: Role of Atish Dipankar Srijnan

by D P Barua

CULTURAL link of ancient Bangladesh with China can be traced to the remote days when it Sing, Fa Hien and Hieun Tsang visited our country. Their travel diaries gave glowing accounts of the lives of the people of ancient Bangladesh in those days. Hien Tsang's diaries are considered to be the most valuable historical documents on socio-economic conditions and state of Buddhism in the Seventh-Century Bangladesh. He studied Buddhist philosophy for several years under the guidance of eminent saint-scholar Acharya Shilabhadra, Principal of Nalanda University who was from ancient Bangladesh born in Comilla and believed to have meditated in the now-extinct Vajrasana Vihar somewhere at Sovar of Dhaka District.

The eminent Chinese pilgrims took back wealth of historical and religious literature pertaining to Buddhism to China and remarkably contributed to the forging of cultural ties between China and Bangladesh in ancient times. Chinese monks and pilgrims between Eighth and Twelfth Centuries during Buddhist Pala rule continued to visit Bangladesh for pilgrimage and also studies at the large Buddhist institutions like Somapuri Vihara (ruins found at archaeological site at Paharpur, Rajshahi) and Vikramshila Vihara, the largest University of ancient times believed to be located somewhere in Vikrampur of which Dipankar Srijnan, the most outstanding saint-scholar of Tenth-Eleventh Century was the Principal. The name of Dipankar Srijnan

evokes stories of a saint-philosopher who made his journey at his age of 60 on foot to Tibet across the snowy mountainous terrains of the Himalayas to preach Buddhism. He made remarkable contribution to Sino-Bangladesh relations in ancient times.

Besides Atish Dipankar, a number of other Buddhist saints like Santarakshita, Kamalashila and Padmasambhava from Bangladesh visited Tibet with their mission of preaching Buddhism and contributed in forging cordial links between Bangladesh and China in ancient times. The most outstanding was Atish Dipankar Srijnan who in response to invitation from King of Tibet left for Tibet in 1042 A.D.

Born in 980 A.D. in a royal family at village Vijrajogini under Vikrampur region of Dhaka District, about 12 miles from the capital city of Dhaka, Dipankar Srijnan grew in course of time as the most outstanding saint, scholar, philosopher and religious preacher of his time.

Before his visit to Tibet, he made a trip to Java aboard a merchant ship and studied Buddhist philosophy for 12 years under Guru Serlingpa who was considered the greatest scholar of his times in entire Asia.

On return to ancient India, Dipankar Srijnan for 15 years handled responsibilities of Mahaviharas like Vajrasana, Somapuri, Odantapuri, Pandita and Vikramshila. When he was the Principal of Vikramshila

Mahavihar which has the character of a University with 8000 students from home and abroad, he received an envoy sent by the king of Tibet extending him invitation to visit that country and restore the glory of Buddhism.

Account of his journey on foot to Tibet across the snowy mountainous terrains of the Himalayas amidst hazards makes an exciting story. His biographer gave a vivid description of his journey and entrance to western Tibet. The main route was from Balpa of Nepal to Manas Sarover (Manas Lake) amidst a lot of hazards including attack by dacoits. He reached western Tibet in 1042 A.D. when Prime Minister of Tibet gave him a rousing reception along with a large number of followers. Atisha (the greatest) was the title bestowed on Dipankar Srijnan by Tibetan in veneration to him.

During his stay in Tibet, Atisha fought against prevailing practices of sacrifices, esoteric rituals and many other notions passing in the name of religion and preached the doctrine of good ethical lives, morality and compassion to liberate the masses from superstitious practices. The whole of central Tibet witnessed resurgence of Buddhism as a result of Atisha's preaching and the spell of his magnetic personality. He imbued the people with basic principles of morality in the teachings of the Buddha. His book 'Bodhi Patha Pradip' which, has in recent times

been translated in English and published by the Chinese Buddhist Association from Beijing,



Atish Dipankar Srijnan

comprises the essence of Buddhist teachings. He advocated higher moral life, humility and

purity of existence, universal love, non-violence, amity and need for meditation to achieve Bodhicitta — the common name for enlightenment and compassion. This rather small book communicated the basic principles of Buddhism in simple lucid language.

Atish Dipankar succeeded in reforming the Tibetan society in his crusade against superstitious beliefs in ghosts, exorcism, adultery and many other anti-social activities. He indoctrinated them to new moral values emphasised in the teachings of the Buddha.

A versatile genius, he employed his engineering skill for construction of a dam for prevention of floods in a place named Thol. He helped in organising irrigation system in China by digging canals which led to boosting of agricultural productivity. He also wrote a few treatises on medicine for the people during his stay in China.

His preaching electrified the people of China imbuing them with a new concept of morality emanating from Buddhism. Thousands of monks irrespective of sects accepted the teachings of Atisha. It is said that even a shepherd in the plateau of Tibetan landscape used to carry a copy of his book 'Bodhi Patha Pradip' containing the message of Buddhism in simple lucid Tibetan language. To quote a scholar: 'To the monks as well as to the common people. The scholar as well as the crowd, in short the whole people of

Tibet, Atisha had brought the message of moral purity and selfless sacrifice for others, of the virtuous life and to the adherence to pure Mahayana teachings.' People found in him a saint with an exemplary nobility in character whose teachings never contradicted with deeds.

Following Atisha's teachings, his disciples moulded a new form of Buddhism in Tibet and founded the 'Kadampa Sect' based on the essence of Mahayana Buddhism. The sect gradually developed into famous Gelugpa sect (yellow sect) which became in course of time the dominant Buddhist religion of China, Mongolia and Siberian regions of Soviet Union.

After 13 years of continuous preaching from 1042 A.D. in Tibet, Atisha passed away at the age of 73 in 1054 A.D. The mortal remains and other personal effects are still preserved in Nethang Monastery, not far from Lasha. There have been very few changes in this monastery since the time of Atisha. The massive red sandal pillar of those days is its proof. Till today Atisha's begging bowl, 'Dhammakarika' and wooden stick are enshrined with veneration in a casket with royal seals.

In 1963, a Buddhist delegation from Dhaka visiting the People's Republic of China of which I was a member proposed to the Chinese Buddhist Association that a part of sacred ashes of Atisha preserved

in Nethang monastery near Lasha be presented for enshrinement in the Saint's homeland at the Dhaka Dharmarajika Monastery for strengthening cultural relationship. The proposal was accepted. However across the time-length of intervening 15 years, marked by cataclysmic events during Cultural Revolution in China and conditions in late sixties and early Seventies in Bangladesh, the proposal finally found fruition in 1978.

In 1978 President Ziaur Rahman took initiative in sponsoring a broad-based cultural delegation including a few eminent Buddhists to visit China and bring a part of the sacred ashes of Atisha Dipankar. The delegation was presented the ashes in a holy casket by the Chinese Buddhist Association amid a colourful religious ceremony in Beijing. The ashes still remain enshrined at the Dharmarajika Monastery at Kamalapur, Dhaka.

Atisha Dipankar Srijnan's numerous books believed to be nearly 100, are still preserved in the monasteries of Tibet and China as valuable religious literature while he is venerated as the Second Buddha with his image still placed in the high pedestal of monasteries of China and some other countries in Northern Asia.

Bangladesh and China are bound since ancient times in age-old ties forged by great Chinese travellers like Hiuen Tsang, Fa Hien and Hieun Tsang from China and Atisha Dipankar Srijnan from ancient Bangladesh.

The writer is Chief Editor and Managing Director of BSS