



book review

Lessons from the Communist Manifesto

by Venkatesh Athreya

A World to Win: Essays on the Communist Manifesto; LeftWord Books, 1999; Pages viii+148, Rs. 50.

NEARLY a decade ago, in the wake of setbacks to socialism in Eastern Europe and in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the subsequent break-up of the USSR, ideologues of global capitalism proclaimed 'the end of history', with the implication that capitalism had defeated socialism, once and for all. Towards the end of the decade, the global picture does not appear so rosy for these ideologues. In 1998, the 150th anniversary of the publication of the Communist Manifesto saw not dependency but the revival of energies and optimism among the votaries of socialism, in sharp contrast to the doomsday predictions of the early 1990s.

More important, however, recognising the grave challenges facing the socialist project, Marxist movements and scholars have also sought to reflect on the Manifesto critically, in the context of contemporary global capitalism, to draw appropriate lessons for theory and for political practice. The book under review is the outcome of one such exercise. It brings together the essays of three eminent Indian social scientists of Marxist persuasion, reflecting upon various aspects of the Manifesto in the current context. Prakash Karat, a leading Marxist intellectual and member of the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), has edited the volume and written an introduction to it. The Manifesto is a remarkably influential document. A political tract written for a specific purpose at a particular historical juncture, it had appeared in 544 editions in 35 languages even prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917.

There have been countless editions in numerous languages since. Only the Koran and the Bible have seen more editions than this far younger text. By any reckoning, the Manifesto has been most significant in the making of the modern world. Professor Aijaz Ahmad, in his contribution, focusses on three aspects of the Manifesto: its assessment of the revolutionary potential of the bourgeoisie, the Marxist conception of 'laws' of history and the nature and role of the proletariat. He draws an insightful distinction between two different roles of the bourgeoisie as a 'revolutionary' class: an objectively revolutionary role, having to do with constant revolutionising of the methods of production, and a subjectively revolutionary role, involving the creation of a modern, secular, representative state. The

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Manifesto, being a short and terse pamphlet, fuses these two roles into one. While the bourgeoisie may have played a revolutionary role in the overthrow of the feudal economy and polity in the 19th century Western Europe, the emergence of the working class as an independent political force changes the role of the bourgeoisie dramatically.

Applying this insight of Gramsci and Lenin, Ahmad provides the following assessment of the role of the bourgeoisie in India: "Instead of a 'revolutionary' bourgeoisie, we have something of a permanent, pre-emptive counter revolution, which only goes to show that in a society such as the one we have, even the tasks of a bourgeois revolution cannot be fully carried out except within a socialist transition" (page 33). Discussing the Marxist conception of 'laws' of history, Ahmad distinguishes between two kinds of laws: those that are fundamental and immutable throughout the life of the capitalist mode of production and those that can be more properly called 'laws of tendency', not to be read teleologically.

The drive towards greater class polarisation, increasing globalisation of the capitalist relations of production and the indispensability for capitalism of a bourgeois state would be examples of the former, while the tendency for the rate of profit to fall would be an example of the latter. While bringing out the remarkable strengths of the Manifesto as a document of lasting relevance, Ahmad also makes some important critical remarks. Contrary to the expectations set out in the Manifesto, colonialism as part of the global expansion of capitalism has sharpened rather than diminished national specificity and identity. The theoretical edifice of the Manifesto has proved inadequate to deal with the drastic changes in the structure of colonialism which occurred in the second half of the 19th century. The incredible pace of social and economic change, characteristic of the capitalist mode of production and so clearly articulated by Marx; itself implies that "... an immense new theoretical labour is required to understand the world as we now have it" (page 42).

Finally, Ahmad reminds us that

"...the fact of immiseration itself does not produce a consciousness of class unity. For that, the domain of consciousness has to be addressed in the very forms in which it experiences the world, and those forms are social and ideological in nature" (page 47). Professor Irfan Habib describes the Manifesto as "... a splendid monument to the confident belief of Marxism's founding fathers that it was for thinking men, not blind 'matter', to rise and overthrow the existing order" (page 51). He emphasises that the proposition that all written history is the history of class struggles "... represents the core of the materialist conception of history, and the basic premise on which any Marxist historiography can be constructed" (page 53). Habib makes a further point: Marx's subsequent writings show clearly that he did not "seek any exceptionalism for areas outside Europe" as far as the logic of class struggle as the motor of history was concerned (page 58).

As Habib points out, the Manifesto's description of the rise of capitalism is seriously incomplete, inasmuch as the role of primitive accumulation is not recognised. Marx developed his brilliant thesis of primitive ("primary", "original") accumulation of capital later and set it out with great clarity in the first volume of Capital. Thus, the "... forcible expropriation of the peasants and colonial peoples (as against the simple conquest of rural and colonial markets) do not appear in the Manifesto..." (pages 63-64). In a balanced summing up, Habib notes that its limitations notwithstanding, the relevance and value of the Manifesto have only grown further in today's context. In the face of setbacks to socialism in recent years, "... The working class of all countries needs to be rallied to the cause of socialism still more urgently..." (page 66). But he also points out that this requires that "... Marxist theory should be closely and critically grasped" (page 67). Professor Prabhat Patnaik, in a very insightful essay on the Manifesto, makes several critical observations.

He recognises that the Manifesto "... vastly enhanced the appeal of socialism by converting it from a mere dream to an imminently realisable historical

project" (pages 70-71). But it had several limitations: it covered a very limited terrain, namely the 'advanced' countries of Western Europe; it visualised a pure proletarian revolution; it focussed only on capitalism, and that too as a closed system, "... in isolation from colonies, from imperialism, from the international economy (including inter-capitalist relations)" (page 72). Patnaik points out that imperial exploitation of colonies played an important role in preventing the social explosion in advanced capitalist societies that the Manifesto anticipated. Pointing out that Marx and Engels became very sensitive to these issues in the years that followed the publication of the Manifesto, with Marx visualising an uprising in India even before a worker's revolution in England, and Engels remarking on the connections between England's exploitation of the whole and the bourgeoisie of the English working class, Patnaik nevertheless concludes rather harshly that: "The unified theory of the Manifesto (including its perception of praxis) therefore was barren in terms of its revolutionary outcome" (page 73).

Tracing subsequent theoretical developments and highlighting Lenin's contribution, Patnaik discusses at some length the nature of Marxian theory itself. Given its essential focus on revolutionary practice, which itself changes societal conditions and thereby creates the need for fresh theorisation, Marxian theory cannot be a closed system. It is, rather, "... a phenomenon that is in a continuous process of reconstruction" (page 76). Equally important, such theory is at all times necessarily incomplete. An example of an important dimension of 'incompleteness' in Marxist theory is the question of the nature of interaction between capitalism and colonies, which, in Patnaik's words, "remains an area of silence of Marxist theory..." (page 77, emphasis added). While continuous reconstitution of Marxist theory is thus required along with the recognition of its 'non-finality' and essential openness, it must be emphasised that such reconstitution is built around a core, which itself is enriched by the process of reconstitution.

That core of Marxism can be located in the Manifesto, and has been enriched by the subsequent work of Marx, Engels, Lenin and later Marxist practitioners. Patnaik makes the point that such reconstitution of Marxism is occurring constantly, "... for otherwise Marxism would have been dead by now" (page 78). However, his assertion that "... The remarkable recent innovations introduced by the Communist movement in the form of decentralised planning and the Panchayat system amount to a reconstitution of Marxism" (page 78) is far too terse and needs elaboration and substantiation.

In the last two sections of his essay, Patnaik traces the emerging global capitalist crisis and its implications for the Third World. He notes that globalised finance capital: (a) has eroded the basis for significant state intervention; (b) is a major cause of crisis and stagnation in world capitalism; and (c) places the Third World in acute economic and political crisis. In particular, the operations of globalised finance capital lead the Third World countries to "... a palpable loss of sovereignty..." (page 84). This implies the curtailment of democracy as well, with demands for 'presidential' forms of government, for fixing the minimum tenure of Parliament and so on.

Also, with all ruling parties succumbing to the dictates of international finance capital, the electorate has little choice whenever elections are held. Finally, the crisis of the economy provides a fertile soil for the growth of communal and divisive forces. Patnaik concludes that the only alternative to such a combination of economic crisis and social strife, accompanied by erosion of national sovereignty and of democratic rights, is the revival of the socialist project.

In his view, "Such a revival would certainly bring about a new unified theory appropriate for its tasks. And the dazzling insights of the Communist Manifesto would certainly go into 'the making of such a new theoretical unity' (page 86). Prakash Karat, in his introductory essay, highlights the need to understand properly the nation-state as an arena of class struggle in the current

era of globalised finance capital. Pointing out that currently the bourgeois-landlord ruling classes in most Third World countries "... have abandoned the quest for a relatively autonomous development of capitalism within their countries" (page 6), Prakash Karat argues that "the nation-state and its mechanisms cannot be left to be wielded by the domestic ruling classes to implement the dictates of international finance" (page 7).

Noting that the aggravation of national and ethnic/religious divisions helps imperialism, Karat argues that the Left should counter this: "The Left cannot aspire for national hegemony unless it doggedly builds a democratic movement which incorporates and guarantees the rights of ethnic and religious minorities" (page 9). Karat draws attention to the fact that even while the size of the working class, globally and in India, has not diminished, its composition and internal structure have changed. Pointing out that the working class in India remains divided on caste and ethnic lines, Karat observes candidly: "Very little attention has been paid to the formation of class consciousness by ideological and cultural intervention to supplement the political-organizational activities" (page 10). He also makes the important point that "... it is necessary that the working class party take up the gender specific issues of proletarian women along with the class exploitation they face."

Without women workers being an integral part of the movement, the Manifesto's aim of the immense majority led by the working class winning the 'battle of democracy' is inconceivable" (page 11). Finally, Karat notes that the Communist movement in India has withstood the global crisis of socialism in recent years and wields significant political influence (with membership in Left parties running to 1.5 million and that of Left-oriented class and mass organisations running to between 55 million and 60 million). Yet, "... there is a neglect of theory and inadequate attention is paid to the resources which can go into strengthening theoretical work" (pages 12-13).

The book has a very interesting note on the publishing history of the Manifesto in Indian languages, besides the text of the Manifesto as well as the preface to the English edition of 1888 by Engels. This book launches the series of LeftWord Books and is dedicated to the memory of one of the tallest Marxist practitioner-theoreticians of the 20th century, E.M.S. Namboodiripad. It is a most worthwhile and timely publication.

Courtesy of Frontline

impression

Book-buying This Summer

By Sarah Siddiqui

"Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed and some to be chewed and digested." - Francis Bacon

WHILE the pleasurable task of reading may have vanished or been delegated a lesser priority because of modern day pressures cited as one of the excuses, Francis Bacon certainly drove home the message when he said the above. For what could be a better time to catch up on lost reading than the terrifying possibility of an endless summer staring you in the face with hot days and nights sapping your energy, rendering you incapable of

doing much other than reading. And for all the time one has in these two long-winded months, one may as well succeed in chewing and digesting hundreds of books.

Thanks to the retinue of bookshops specializing in second-hand books, one does not have to spend huge amounts of money and yet acquire tons of books - from old classics to contemporary fiction and non-fiction. If you are frugal with your pocket money and want to spend it on books capturing the essence of old times or places then there is no better place than the Khor Garden or the old Tit Bit bookshop in the heart of

Saddar. I could not believe my luck when on one such book excursion I came across a dusty old copy of Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Bird*. I was taken in by the poignant portrayal of unfulfilled love between Maggie, the novel's sole protagonist and the Priest. I am reading the same author's *A Creed for the third millennium*.

Marcelle Bernstein's *Body & Soul* deeply affects the parable of religious decay as it tells a beautiful story revealing the truth about private turmoil with faultless visual images. I could not help but develop an immediate empathy with

Anna who is Sister Gabriel.

Being an avid collector of information on Nostradamus and his famous predictions, I was quite excited when I came across 1984, the numerically titled book of a prophetic nightmare as seen by George Orwell in 1949. It's on what this world would be like in the year 1984.

The year may have deluded us but many signs can still be witnessed today. The negative utopia created by Orwell surpasses the sadly accurate prophecies of the sixteenth century astrologer and physician whose clairvoyance could not stop the early powers of

twentieth century from wreaking havoc on millions via the two world wars.

This Orwellian imagery lays the foundation leading up to atomic cataclysm which the author predicted would destroy the world in 1984. For me, the economic implication of developing thermonuclear weapons is not lost because there remains a negative correlation between vying to achieve military strength and economic stability in the case of developing nations where aggressive neighbours force such countries to compromise the economic well being of their citizens.

This brings me to Jean M. Auel's *The*

Clan of the Cave Bear, a breathtaking epic of a woman's struggle for survival, of a primitive clan's dependence on her as their saviour.

As a student, I have discovered Paul Scott's painstaking effort in the shape of *A Division of the Spoils* which is the fourth book in his Raj quartet. It is an historically accurate and unbiased version and the casual reader may not be able to pick up subtle praise for Muslim leaders. However, the information that one may get from this book is valuable.

Courtesy of The DAWN Group

reflections

Futuristic Vision of Aldous Huxley

By A S M Nurunnabi

ALDOUS Huxley was fascinated throughout his career by the idea of Utopia, the society in which change has settled down into a state of perfection. In his last novel, *'Island'*, he saw it as a benign perfection in a peaceful and ecologically aware society guided by mystics. But in his much better known novel *'Brave New World'*, published three decades before in 1932, he saw it as a malign society controlled by technocrats whose aim is complete happiness, but in whose hands happiness is equated with the total absence of freedom.

'Brave New World' is both fantasy about the future and a satire on resent trends. And in both roles it carries

conviction because of the expert and convincing handling of detail to create a plausible world.

The society of the future is a parody of Plato's republic, with a small group of World Controllers ruling five castes of subjects, devoid not merely socially but biologically, since they have been conditioned to their future tasks in the bottle where they were bred. To preserve happiness, the World Controllers discard everything that might provoke either thought or passion. There is no need for violent or overt repression. If they do become discontented, there are always drugs to waft them into the heavens of restorative illusion. Thus the Controllers are able to govern with a

softly firm hand. Those over-brilliant individuals who do not fit the established pattern are allowed to indulge their heretical notions in the intellectual quarantine of exile.

The daily lives of the conditioned inhabitants of the brave new world are passed in a carefully regulated pattern of production and consumption. Huxley also shows the hidden perils of any attempt at a perfect society. The novel *'Brave New World'* is a brilliant utopia-in-reverse where the somewhat synthetic quality of the characters seem appropriate to the fantasy vision of the future that is Huxley's warning to modern man.

One of the most unexpected turns of literary fortune during the century has been the sharp decline in the repute of Aldous Huxley, who, in the 1920s and even the 1930s, appeared to be one of the most important modern writers.

It was not that Huxley's novels, viz. *Crome yellow*, *'Antic Hay'*, *Those Barren Leaves*, *'Eyeless in Gaza'*, After many a summer's and Time must Have a Stop! Fell into total neglect, for they are still reprinted, but their standing in comparison with say those of Huxley's friend and contemporary D H Lawrence has fallen so notably that Huxley appears as minor novelist of limited scope rather than a major novelist which, on the strength of his book

like *'Eyeless in Gaza'* and 'point Counterpoint', many of his contemporaries imagined him to be.

In his notable novel *'Brave New World'*, Huxley has drawn three main characters namely, Bernard, Helmholtz and the youngman designated as savage - all of them create a minor rebellion by interrupting the distribution of a drug named soma among the lower grade of subjects. Bernard and Helmholtz are exiled to join those who have shown themselves unreliable. The savage is forbidden to join them, because the Controllers wish to continue the experiment of the brave new world, particularly in subjecting him to the process of 'civilisation.'

poem

There Was A Tree by Zakaria Chowdhury

There was a tree full of foliage
And shelter to many a singing bird
And soothing to my eyes and ears
And pleasing to my soul

There was a tree that embraced the sky
And let my mind fly
I loved it
as if it was part of me

One fine morning
The tree fell victim
to the sawing-sword
Of the soldiers of development

With the tree
A part of me is gone
Who is there to replace it?
By what surgery?