

Karl Marx on India: An Assessment (Part I)

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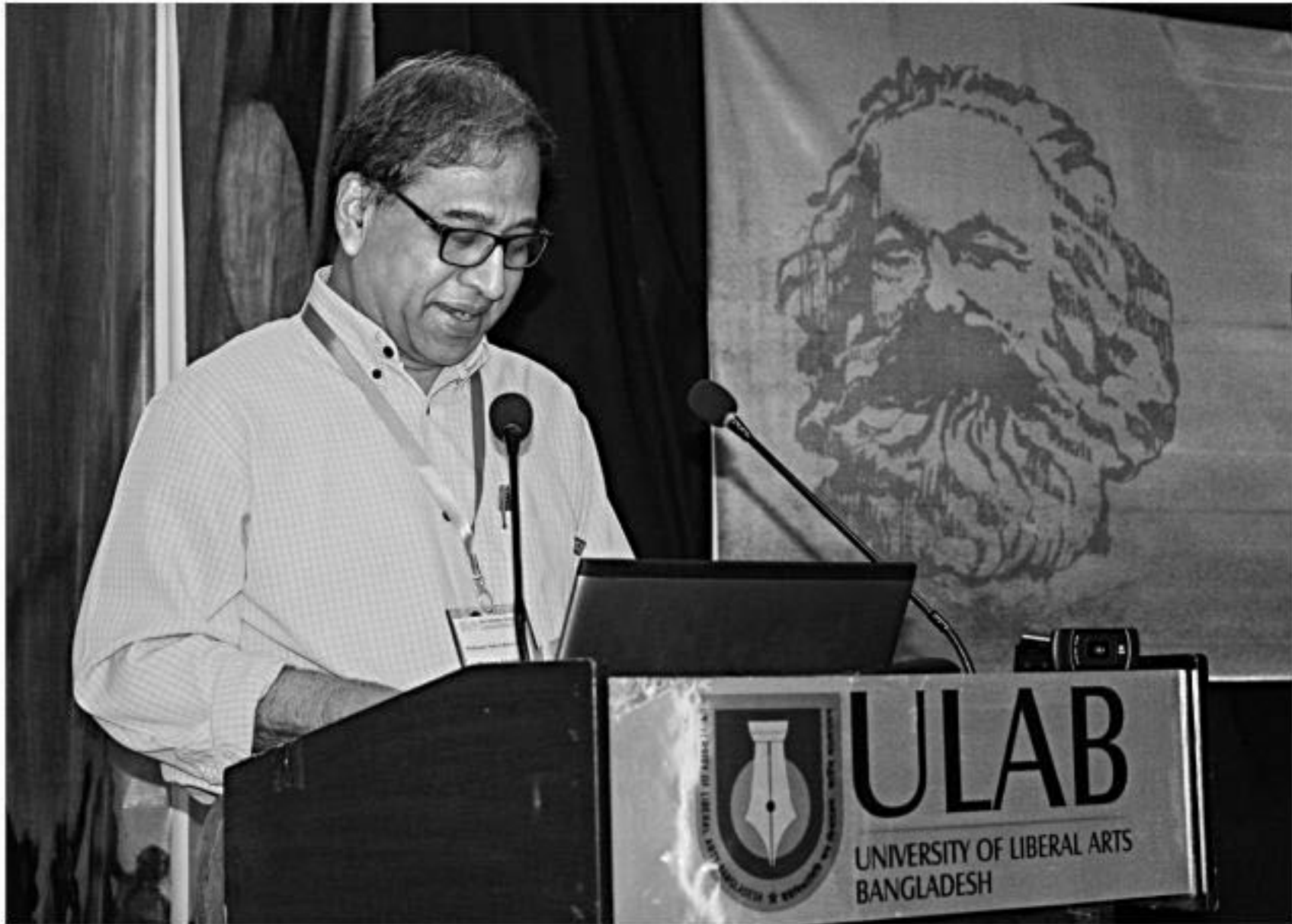
Introduction

In a Delhi bookshop this October, I came across *Karl Marx on India*. Edited by Iqbal Husain, former Professor of History at Aligarh Muslim University, and published under the aegis of Aligarh Historians Society by Tulika Books in 2006, the book attracted me too because it contained a long Introduction by the eminent Aligarh historian, Professor Irfan Habib. There was something else in my mind as well as I leafed through the book—Edward Said's indictment of Marx's "orientalist" perspective in *Orientalism*. Since Said's book has been seminal for me ever since I first read it in 1980, I thought, why not explore how right or wrong Said was to label Marx thus by gauging the importance of Marx's writings and assessment of India?

Why, How and What Karl Marx Wrote on India

Professor Husain's Prefatory Note indicates that from 1853 onwards Marx wrote on India for the *New York Daily Tribune*. Marx's writings are not ordinarily associated with Indian history; nor are he viewed as a writer of English prose, and yet here he was writing about the subcontinent in the language for a wide readership year after year! Husain notes though that Marx hated writing these *Tribune* pieces and deemed them distractions from the major works he was engaged in at that time such as *Grundrisse* (1857) and the *Contribution to Critique of Political Economy* (1859). But his state of finances was such that apart from the money he made from his *Tribune* articles on India and other contemporary happenings, and the support Engels provided him, he had nothing much to go on to support him and his family then; in other words, he wrote his Indian articles because he had to!

Clearly though, the 59 pieces collected in *Karl Marx on India* were written by someone stirred by events unfolding in the subcontinent in the 1850s, and driven to pursue their deeper implications. It even seems



likely that these events were grist for Marx's developing ideas about capitalism and historical change. In particular, he was attracted to the ravages wrought by British rule in India and the simmering discontent that it had caused among the people of the subcontinent until the lid came off completely in the eruption of 1857. Marx thus became quite absorbed in reporting and analyzing the causes and consequences of the Sepoy Mutiny and appraising the extent of English culpability in the carnage that had occurred then.

The *Tribune* pieces on India that Marx and Engels contributed collected in *Karl Marx on India* vary in length quite a bit as well as differ in the intensity of their coverage. Some are only notes while others are of considerable depth as well as length; some merely report current happenings or describe the course of the war succinctly while others are analytical and draw out the implications of what was going on in the cataclysm scarring the subcontinent. However, whenever necessary, Marx provides abundant data to back up his points or make them. Whether he wants to illustrate the huge revenue earned from India by the East

India Company and their expenditure on Indians, or detail the miserly attitude of its administrators who cared not a fig for the welfare of the people of the subcontinent but lived lavish lives, he has facts to back him up. Marx offers quite detailed accounts too of the uprisings and resultant fatalities. On other occasions, he provides abundant statistics on the trade between England and India, the transactions involving opium between India and China that profiting only the English rulers and traders, exploiting Indian growers and doping the Chinese customers.

In his reportage on the Sepoy mutiny in India, Marx presents the military aspects of the situation expertly. He comments perceptively on the different stages of the campaign and outlines graphically the tactics followed by the English in quelling the rebellion. He underscores the economic aspects of the Mutiny and the financial implications for England of the continuing campaign, probing into all the figures he could hold off. He slices open the claims of the English rulers, the better to expose their greed and cruelty. In the articles written as early as 1853, he seems to be hinting at the disruptive and destructive potential of

English rule; in his final contributions he appears to be saying that though the mutineers had been subdued and the country pacified, Indians were restive. To him, there were ample signs of resurgence of Indians fed up with the way the Company had been abusing them.

Marx as a Writer of English Prose
But the first thing that struck me as I read *Karl Marx on India* was Marx's mastery of English prose and the force and clarity with which he can could articulate going-ons in India in the 1850s in the language. For example, he characterizes the Conservative party politician Lord Stanley's parliamentary maneuverings as symptomatic of "these coalescent times" in the way he had "found a formula in which the opposite views are combined together." Isn't that a wonderful phrase and isn't it something we could apply to the Bangladesh we live in now and especially our country in its election year? This phrase is from his July 1, 1853 piece simply titled "India" which he ends sarcastically by telling his readers that he intends in the next one to expose "the bearing of the Indian Question on different parties in Great Britain, and the benefit, the poor Hindoo may reap from the quarreling of the aristocracy, the moneyocracy, and the millocracy about his amelioration." Now we may not have an aristocracy, but aren't the words "moneyocracy" and "millocracy" so apt for the people who dominate our economy and politics in the time we live in as well?

Indeed, the heavy irony we can detect in that quote is one of the dominant notes of Marx's long pieces on India. The relatively long next *Tribune* entry of July 11, 1853, "The East India Company—Its History and Results" is full of such ironic comments as are many of the other pieces that follow. Marx thus comments acerbically about the "sharp philanthropy" of the Company while exposing what he calls it "hypocritical peace-cant" since he is actually bent on showing the way

Indians were being exploited and the country denuded by self-aggrandizing Company officials with the assistance of their hypocritical backers in English politics. Observe thus Marx's witty characterization on Benjamin Disraeli's slide as an orator and a man of principle in "The Indian Question": "once he succeeded in giving even commonplaces the pointed appearance of epigrams. Now he contrives to bury even epigrams in the conventional dullness of respectability." **Marx's Critique of Colonial Rule in India**
Marx is consistently critical of British colonialism. He would not have the Company's charter renewed by the government, because he is convinced that all they want is "the privilege of plundering India for the space of 20 years." He denounces the Permanent Settlement of 1790 and characterizes the *zeminadari* and *Ryotwari* systems thus set up as "only so many forms of fiscal exploitation in the hands of the Company." Marx is convinced that even those who criticized government policy and argued for Free Trade like the Manchester politician John Bright was as culpable as the government of trying to ruin India because his special perspective is informed by his need to advocate dumping English textiles in a captive market.

Of special note for us, here in Bangladesh is the essay "The British Rule in India." As proof of the British Company's destructive policies, he turns to the plight of the weavers of Bengal, where agriculture and textiles have been devastated by British rule. He gestures at how Europe had once received "the admirable textures of Indian labor" but notes how things have changed ever since "the British intruder...broke up the Indian handloom and destroyed the spinning wheel," in the process of driving out "Indian cottons from the European market."

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Spoilers Alert: Meghnadhbhadh Rahasya Revealed

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Anik Dutta's 2017 movie *Meghnadhbhadh Rohoshy* is a clever evocation of *naخالgia*. Fifty years after the Naxalbari movement, the movie revisits the revolutionary moments when some young talented students took up arms against the landed and urban propertied classes. Imbued with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideologies, these activists dreamt of a classless society, only to be brutally shattered by the ruthless State agencies. Naxalbari in Siliguri under Darjeeling district was the ground zero of a long drawn out movement led by Charu Majumdar. Many stories have been written and many movies have been made in both West Bengal and South India depicting the nuanced reality of this left struggle.

What began in 1967 as a movement of indigenous people's rights to cultivate their land became a regional site of ideological conflicts against the backdrop of the Sino-Soviet rift. The Maoist adaptation of Marx inspired a new generation of leftist activists to put theory into praxis. The events dominated the public imagination through the works of writers who saw the best having all passionate intensity, and the worst lacking convictions (apologies to WB Yeats). Mahasweta Devi's "Hajar Churashir Ma" is a classic example where a young revolutionary Broti (symbolically resonating 'promises') is shot dead by police and his corpse is tagged as 1084. Broti's mother Sujata laments how her son's identity is effaced. Samares Majumdar's *Animesh* series, especially *Kalbela*, brings out the romance surrounding the Naxalites. Anik Dutta's film dares to re-engage with the historicity by embracing multiple perspectives and agencies.

The filmmaker's deconstructive mode is evident in the title where he uses 'under erasure' to cross out 'kabya' and insert 'rohoshya.' Michael Madhusudan Dutt's epic, *Meghnadhbhadh Kabhya*, is famous for its glorification of Meghnad, the son of the villain Ravana. Dutt is inspired by Milton's *Paradise Lost* where Satan is portrayed sympathetically. The Indian epic points out betrayal as the main theme that leads Rama's brother Lakshman to kill an unarmed Meghnad

through the help of Bibhishan. Anik Dutta makes the mythical narrative available in a popular discourse by presenting the epic as a "Whodunnit? howdunnit? whydunnit?" mystery subgenre.

Central to the movie is a former Naxalite, an award winning sci-fi writer, Asimava Bose who now resides in the UK. The frame narrative begins with a story that (we later learn) Asimava is currently writing involving the anti-British Swadeshi Movement in 1936. The frame shifts to Oxford in 2016, where someone receives a mail containing a copy of *Meghnadhbhadh Kabhya*. The next frame shifts to Gautam Halder's stage performance, *Meghnadhbhadh*. The dance drama transports the audience to a mythic time with carefully chosen passages to remind them that they are about to enter a 'Madhu-Chakra': the Romantic notion of a poet as a bee that gathers honey from different sources with a possible pun on the Circle of Madhusudan's oeuvre. The plot then moves to the launch of an award-winning book in Kolkata in December 2016.

During the session, we learn that the leftist leftie author Asimava Bose is now a right-handed writer. His physical orientation is suggestive of his political shift. The author of, *The Big Bong Theory*, downplays his involvement with the Naxalite movement by saying, "at that time everyone got a little involved." As the plot unfolds, we get introduced to Asimava's second wife Indrani—an actress and a social worker. She is assisted by someone called Janaki. Indrani has a daughter from her previous marriage—Buli. Indrani has a film director friend Kunal. Asimava's first wife is paralysed, and together they had a musician son called Hrik. It is Hrik who has introduced Asimava to his translator Elena. Asimava's Kolkata house is looked after by a distant relative called Bulu, whom Asimava calls a "bloody parasite." Asimava's westernized friend Nikhilesh uses his painter/curator facade to camouflage his involvement in art-smuggling. And there is a little-magazine editor called Badal Biswas who leads a secret life in

underground politics.

The movie attains its dialectics through some deliberate pairings. There are two of everything. Asimava has two wives: His first wife Hrik's mom is old, paralyzed and wheel chair bound, while his second wife has earned her fame through her film, *Shiri* (suggesting moving on for moving up). There are two children: one biological and the other step. There are two 'pimps' from two different classes: Nikhilesh is an art smuggler and Bulu rents out the house to dodgy customers. The two classes are distinguished by their locations: The upper class drinks in the living room whereas Bulu and his male 'lover' steal whiskey to drink in the kitchen. There are two secret activists: Janaki and Badal.



There are good cops and bad cops. The metanarrative presents a story within a story; one that shows Asimava writing a confession in a Bankim like style using *shadhu* bhasha in his effort to defamiliarise his narrative. The spatial setting moves between England where independence is seen as a distant dream and India where freedom is still illusory in an independent country. There are even two 'Marx' in the movie. Asimava's house has a Marxism poster that features the American comedian Groucho Marx with a cigar. The kitsch makes no secret of Asimava's attitude towards his ideology that he once championed. The wounds of Old Marxism are scratched when he is unsettled by the news of an

attack on a Police van. His old Comrade Sirajul, in contrast, has the poster of Karl Marx in his room. Sirajul and Asimava have opted for different routes. According to Sirajul, as revealed to Indrani and Kunal, Asimava was nothing more than a 'political hobbyist' who had a Romantic notion of the Naxalite Movement.

The mystery deepens when Asimava starts receiving coded threats with reference to Michael Madhusudan's epic, forcing him to confront his past when he ratted out one of his comrades to earn a safe passage to England. The guilty feeling torments him. Asimava tries to tell his side of the story in fiction with a therapeutic purpose. Asimava, as an expatriate writer living in a foreign

convictions, were betrayed.

Asimava tells Janaki that he had given away information about her father only to protect himself from third degree torture that had crippled his left arm. He was promised that the police would not harm Indrajit. By that time, Asimava too had become disillusioned by the prospect of the Marxist-Maoist movement. Because the movement lacked any central coordination, the movement unleashed unprecedented anarchy losing popular sympathy. Yet the Naxalite movement still today occupies an uncanny zone in the Bengali psyche with its promised output of a land without any exploitation.

However, Naxalite is a movement that separated families, ripped societies open from inside. In Satyajit Roy's "The Adversary," for instance, we have seen one brother being pitted against the other. The older brother has sympathy for his younger Naxalite brother. But he realizes that the cause has become bigger than the individual; the younger brother is so insignificant that he becomes a mere agency of carrying out somebody else's instructions. He loses his identity and agency in the process.

Anik Dutta's movie is alive to the nostalgia about the Naxalite movement. It not only adds some human faces to history but also explains some serious ideological issues in popular terms. One may wonder why Janaki is investing so much of her time and energy in executing revenge on the person who betrayed her father than on the system responsible for the killing of her father! Does it mean Janaki has accepted the historical fact that the system cannot be changed? The turncoat handicapped Asimava is the target as he epitomizes the conscience that has got used to being compromised and complacent. He is the symbol of a failed political dream. His retreat therefore can be a treat for the new generation of activists who can ask "jano ki" – do you know your story, your history?

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