

What Marx really meant by saying ‘From the Realm of Necessity’ ‘To the Realm of Freedom’?

BOOK REVIEW

Essays in Indian History by **Irfan Habib**; published by Tulika, New Delhi Rs. 195.00

I ‘Matter and Mind’ in history:

The above title is one of the sections of the essay entitled *Problems of Marxist Historiography* of the above book. Instead of reviewing the entire book, which is a collection of numbers of essays written at different times, we are reviewing in this issue, the part which is subtitled ‘Matter and Mind’ in History, as, this part, we think, is the guide the whole book to.

The fundamental debate in philosophy revolves round the primacy of matter or mind. In contrast to idealism materialism holds that first there is matter. Professor Habib, in his essay under review writes that in course of the development of society and human beings, at a certain definite stage, i.e. at the stage of communism, a qualitative change would come and the ‘idea’, ‘thought’, ‘mind’ would gain ascendancy over matter, replacing the primacy of matter. In support of this pedantic conclusion, Professor Habib drags Marx to the witness box by quoting his lip from the ‘realm of necessity’ to the ‘realm of freedom’ would be ‘unbridled freedom’_ bound by no external power called ‘necessity’. Professor Habib writes:

“...I feel convinced that Marx believed that ideas would be attaining continuous greater importance. When he spoke of future as one where mankind marches ‘from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom’ I feel convinced (IN SPITE OF ENGELS’ UNFORTUNATE GLOSS ON ‘freedom as the recognition of necessity’) that Marx LOOKED FORWARD TO IDEAS at last GAINING ASCENDANCY OVER MATTER; not by any spiritualist exercise BUT BY THE ABUNDANCE OF MATERIAL WEALTH, which communism would ultimately produce” (All emphases supplied). What are the conclusions to be drawn from the above quotation? They are:

(a) At a certain definite stage of the development of society ‘mind’, ‘idea’ would take the position of primacy replacing matter through evolutionary development of ascendancy of ‘ideas’, it means that philosophical idealism would replace dialectical and historical materialism.

(b) Marx’s theory from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom is an unbridled freedom NOT fettered by any power.

(c) Engels’ ‘freedom as the recognition of necessity’ is nothing but rubbish.

(d) Abundance of material wealth in communism is the cause and primacy of ‘idea’ is the effect. We are now in a position to plunge into the debate. But before doing so, we like to dispel some misconception about Engels’, which is likely to be generated from professor Habib’s irresponsible remarks.

The vile attack on Engels is not a new one. It has rather become a regular feature of the people known as ‘neo-Marxist’. It began in Italy immediately after the death of Marx. Counter posing Engels to Marx became a favourite tactics of the ‘neo-Marxist’ in order to make the present confusion more confused. Their accusations against Engels are: Engels often led Marx into

‘erroneous judgments’, to assume ‘wrong position’. “The bad Engels has seduced a good Marx” etc. as if Marx was of lesser intelligence than Engels. Silly, to say the least.

In fact, Engels and Marx had to divide their work in spite of their lifelong partnership. Marx was mainly engaged in the analyses of the economics of capitalism. Engels had to specialize in other – especially the area of natural science. Though both of them worked independently in their respective areas, not a single issue was published until both approved it. Marx-Engels correspondences are the incontestable proof of this. Communists of the world recognize the role of both the individuals. Both of them had made their vital contribution either separately or jointly. The contribution of Marx and Engels is known as Marxism. Belittling one is nothing short of belittling both and Marxism.

Let us now enter into the debate.

II. The Role of Ideas

Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin have always regarded the role of ideas, especially the role of advanced ideas as crucial one. Otherwise, how can Marx say: “ideas become a material force once they have gripped the masses?” This very line of Marx signifies the vital role of ideas. Why do the communist parties untiringly try to indoctrinate the working people, disseminate communist ideology, class solidarity, proletarian internationalism etc? While recognizing and correctly practising the great role of ideas, communists, at the same time, should not forget the reality of the relations between nature and society. Marx saw the relation between nature and man as a dialectical process as it existed where men exert (their) will.

Of course idealism in the sense of ‘Adarshabad’ (without philosophical sense), not in the philosophical sense of Bhavbad (with philosophical sense i.e. Idealism) will be revived in the era of communism. And this ‘Adarshabad’ is: of which Lenin said, “everybody of us are for everybody not for only kith and kin”.

III. Relations Between Nature and Man:

Describing the dialectical relation between nature and man Marx said:

“Labour is in the first place a process in which both man and nature participate and in which man on his own accord starts, regulates and controls the material reactions between himself and nature. He opposes himself to nature as one of her own forces setting in motion arms and legs, head and hand the natural force of his body in order to appropriate nature’s production in the form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the EXTERNAL WORLD and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway.” (Marx: Capital; vol. I; pp. 173-174; all emphases supplied)

Possibly professor Habib flattered himself exorbitantly on account of human victory over nature and thus concluded that at a certain definite stage of human development man and his ideas would take the position of primacy replacing the primacy of external world which exist quite independently of man’s will and desire.

Engels warned us not to be “flattered too much on account of human victories over nature. For each such victory, nature takes its revenge on us.” Describing its revenge, Engels said:

“Each victory it is true, in the first place, brings about the result we expected, but in the second and third places has quite different unforeseen effects which only too often cancel the first. The people who in Mesopotamia, Greece, Asia Minor and elsewhere destroyed the forests to obtain cultivable lands by removing along with forests the collecting centres and reservoirs of moisture,

were laying the basis for the present forlorn state of the Alps. They used up the pine forests of the Southern slopes while they had no inkling that by doing so they were cutting at the very roots of the dairy industries in their regions and they had still less inkling that they were depriving their mountain springs of water for the greater part of the year and making it possible for them to pour still more furious torrents on the plains during the stormy seasons.

Those who spread the potato in Europe were not aware that with these farinaceous tubers they were at the same time spreading scrofula. Thus at every step we are reminded that we by no means, rule over nature, like a conqueror over a FOREIGN PEOPLE, like someone STANDING OUTSIDE NATURE BUT THAT WE WITH FLESH, BLOOD AND BRAIN BELONG TO NATURE, AND EXIST IN ITS MIDST, and that we have the advantage over all other creatures of being able to LEARN ITS LAWS AND APPLY THEM CORRECTLY.” (Engels’ Dialectics of Nature; 2nd edition; Moscow, 1977; P. 181. All emphases supplied).

So, man must learn the law of Nature so that he may apply it in a more rationalistic way, ‘correctly’. The knowing and applying it correctly is the ‘recognition’, ‘appreciation’ of “necessity”, which is denounced by Professor Habib as “Engels’ unfortunate gloss”.

IV. Marx on Freedom of Necessity:

What Engels said exactly about “Freedom and Necessity”? Engels said:

“Freedom is the appreciation of necessity.... Freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards a definite ends.” (Engels’ Anti-Dühring, New York; 1939. P. 125).

According to Professor Habib this is Engels’ “unfortunate gloss” and in spite of this gloss, Professor Habib, in order to prove himself more Marxist than Engels said, that “Marx looked forward to ideas at last gaining ascendancy over matter” (Problems of Marxist Historiography; P. 4) meaning Marx differed with Engels and stuck to his point that the freedom would be an unfettered one bounded by no law.

Let us see what Marx said on freedom and necessity. Marx said:

“... THE TRUE REALM OF FREEDOM, WHICH HOWEVER CAN BLOSSOM FORTH ONLY WITH THIS REALM OF NECESSITY AS ITS BASIS.’ (Marx: Capital, Vol. III, Moscow; 1986. P. 820. Emphases supplied).

This time Professor Habib appears to be more Marxist than Marx himself.

It is clear now that both Marx and Engels arrived at the same conclusion that no “true freedom is possible without recognition, appreciating the realm of necessity as its basis”; that there can be no ‘unbridled freedom, unfettered by any external forces’.

V. “Abundance of Material Wealth is the cause of Freedom”:

Professor Habib said, as we have already seen that “Marx looked forward to idea at last gaining ascendancy over matter, not by any spiritualist exercise, but by the abundance of material wealth which communism would ultimately produce” (Emphases supplied).

But Marx “looked forward” quite differently. Marx, on the contrary, said:

“... In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour, which is determined by necessity and mundane consideration, CEASES. This is the very nature of things that lies beyond

the sphere of ACTUAL MATERIAL PRODUCTION.” (Marx: Capital, Vol. III; Moscow, 1986; P. 820. All emphases supplied)

We are afraid that Professor Habib miserably failed to grasp the idea behind Marx’s “realm of freedom.”

Under communism where the realm of freedom will “blossom forth” the social relation between people will lose their material shell. They would no longer appear as material relations, between people or as social relations between things, but will become what they really are DIRECT RELATIONS between people engaged in “associated social labour” (Marx). As a result the economy will lose spontaneous character.

Engels describing the communist society pointed out that once society can establish its domination over the means of production, anarchy of social production is replaced by planned, conscious organization. The condition of economic life “which environ man and which have hitherto ruled man, now come under the domination and control of man, who for the first time become the real, conscious lord of nature, because he has now become master of his own social organization. The lord of his own social action, hitherto standing face to face with man as lord of nature, foreign to, and dominating him, will then be used with full understanding and so mastered by him.” (Engels: Anti-Dühring; Moscow, 1959. P. 390-91. Emphases supplied).

And this is the “realm of freedom”.

VI. Conclusion:

Professor Habib’s dream of freedom is:

In the communist society it is not the objective condition but man will play the decisive role in the development of society where mind will take the position of primacy replacing matter. Professor Habib’s essay under review is not “towards a Marxist perception” as he claims, but towards a degeneration of Marxist perception.

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(See Notes on ‘Necessity’ and Afterwards)

Note on “Necessity”

What is meant by ‘necessity’ in Marxist philosophy?

All phenomena of nature and society that are law-governed and exist independently of man’s will or desire are called ‘necessity’. Necessarily, it is obligatory to accept it. Hence this acceptance is a necessity. At the same time man wants freedom from this necessary obligation or obligatory ‘necessity’. But that freedom can only be achieved - NOT BY REFUSING to accept as obligatory - BUT by knowing and applying those laws correctly.

Thanks to the development of social science particularly natural science man now has reached INTO THE REALM OF FREEDOM BUT not in the position of freedom itself. That human beings are a part of the nature, the question is: whether the part will be in a position to control the whole or not? (We must not put forward any question of influencing the whole by any part in this context). So long mankind fails to arrive at that point man’s freedom CAN NOT be ‘unbridled’ one, cannot be independent of external laws.

This, in gist, is ‘from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom’ of Marxism.

Afterwards:

Toward a Marxist perception or Toward a degeneration of it?

Professor Irfan Habib is widely acknowledged and respected to the world as a scholar researcher being the author of three volumes of *Peoples’ History of India*. Of late he has engaged himself in researching Marxism itself, particularly, what Marx really meant by writing “from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom”. After a laborious endeavour Professor Habib has come to the final conclusion in which he writes:

“I feel convinced (in spite of Engels’ unfortunate gloss on ‘freedom’ as the recognition of ‘necessity’) that Marx looked forward to IDEAS AT LAST GAINING ASCENDANCY OVER MATTER, not by any spiritual exercise, but by the abundance of material wealth which communism would ultimately produce.” (Irfan Habib: *Essays in Indian History*. Under the sub title ‘Mind and Matter’ in *History*, in ‘Problems of Marxist Historiography’, first published in *Social Sciences, Madras*, Vol. 16 No. 12, December 1988, reprinted in his book in 1933; p. 4. All emphases are supplied).

What is the real meaning of the above quotation of Prof. Habib?

The meaning of the above quotation is: the primacy of idealism, inter alia philosophical-Idealism, would take its root replacing Historical and Dialectical Materialism in communism.

This is a monstrous conclusion. But the wonder of wonder is neither a single ripple nor a single comment on Prof. Habib’s conclusion has been made by any shades of Marxists since 1988 and Prof. Habib remains where he was. We are afraid that Prof. Habib not only failed to grasp the idea behind Marx’s ‘realm of freedom’ but also tried to put his own theory on this subject, which is nothing but a popular feature of petty-bourgeoisie explanation like him as a Marxist one and thereby, instead of getting a clear idea from the writings of Marx, shows his knowledge on Marxist literatures by obvious wrong quoting the authors and by drawing a conclusion from the blues.

The present writer, as an apologia, likes to say that he only came to know about Prof. Habib’s debatable paper only in 2002. He again went through the works of Marx and Engels on the relations between man and nature. Due to a massive heart attack he could not complete his paper on Prof. Habib’s anti-Marxist conclusion.

In this context we are taking privilege to draw another subject. The paper under the heading ‘Problems of Marxist Historiography’ says, “We know more and better than Marx and Engels” etc. Thus he dismisses outright Engels and hereby Marx. He calls Stalin a ‘half-baked Marxist’ and remarks that his ‘Historical and Dialectical Materialism’ is nothing but ‘deterministic’. So we find Prof. Habib has also used the weapon viz. ‘I know more and better than our predecessor’ (here Marx) and thus used language befitting his profession against Engels and Stalin to let us conclude that his ‘Problems of Marxist Historiography’ is NOT Marxist at all. Yes, it is his creation only in this connection. In this context it may also be said that this weapon is used not only by Prof. Habib, rather it is a vicious trend of the petty-bourgeois ‘Marxists’ known as neo-Marxists which we witnessed first immediately after the death of Marx and again after the death of Lenin and which in fact taking opportunity of a critical time of Marxism launched a new attack on Marxism.

Allow me to memorize my own experience. Our late respected great ‘Kakababu’ (Com. Muzaffar Ahmed) sent me to Sylhet the then head quarter of Surma Valley branch of the party.

M.N. Roy together with his wife Mrs. L.N. Roy and Hari Kumar Chakraborty (a famous Bengal Revolutionary) came to Sylhet also. At that time Roy was demanding a constituent assembly for India under the British Raj. I wrote an article criticizing Roy's demand of constituent assembly and that article was published in monthly Ganashakti under the editorship of respected Somnath Lahiri. As such the Surma valley branch of the party selected me to confront Roy and his party. At that time it is to be noted that Roy was welcomed as an anti-imperialist by the party but condemned as an expelled member from the Comintern. On this occasion the Surma valley branch of the party arranged a meeting in the public library hall of Sylhet where the representatives of Router and Associated Press and others were invited and they came. During my talk with Roy and Mrs. Roy queried about my age. I answered and she found that I was a mere child of two or three when Roy was engaged in the Mexican Revolution. Enraged she told me – how dare you confront such a revolutionary as M.N. Roy? I replied that I have consumed Roy's experience going through his all writings including his 'My Defence' (on the subject his arguments against the allegation brought by the then Comintern and which Stalin did not approve). I can see far better standing on his shoulder and other experiences I gathered from my own way. Hearing me Mr. Roy was highly satisfied together with others.

So, one may see that Marxist Historiography does not dismiss outright with the help of 'I know more and better than our predecessors' but acknowledges and recognizes their contributions. Take the example of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Marx acknowledged gratefully the searches of the sources of 'Surplus' from Aristotle to Ricardo, even utopian Robert Owen. Lenin acknowledged the contributions of Kautsky and Plekhanov in spite of his sharp criticism against them. Stalin acknowledged the great and revolutionary roll of Trotsky during S.S. Potemkin rebels strike. He also acknowledged the merit of Mao in spite of his sharp criticism of Mao. So we may correctly draw the conclusion that the 'Problems of Marxist Historiography' is no problems at all to the Marxists though it may be a problem to a neo-Marxist like Prof. Habib et al.

The present writer would fervently request the readers of all shades of Marxism to comment on both the papers of Prof. Habib's and his. Silence is not, in all cases, golden.