

BUDDHA AND MARX: A PHILOSOPHICAL COMPARISON

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This paper compares the main doctrines of the Buddha and Marx. Even though they might have several outward differences, they show profound doctrinal similarities inwardly. The prime motive was the cessation of human suffering, for which they discovered the path of human emancipation named “Dhamma” and “Marxism.” Both doctrines were founded not on emotions or philosophical speculations but on sound epistemology. Thus, Marx claims scientific status for his doctrines; Buddha declares that the dhamma is verifiable (ehipassika). Both of them adopted the middle approach to the prevalent philosophical contradictions during their times, like “matter and spirit,” “idealism and realism,” “theory and practice,” etc. The author contends that the comparative study of Buddha and Marx would be mutually enriching for both Buddhism and Marxism.

List of Abbreviations: Aṅguttara-Nikāya (A); Dīgha Nikāya (D); Majjhima Nikāya (M); Saṃyutta-Nikāya (S); Sutta Nipāta (Sn); Dhammapada (Dh)

I. Introduction

Even though a comparison of the Buddha and Marx may seem incompatible at first appearance, if we immerse in the depth of the subject, we find profound doctrinal similarities between them. Both developed their ideas during the transitional phase of societal transformations; both were social revolutionaries; both shook the foundation of existing social order; both dismissed the concept of God, eternal self, or any other ultimate reality. The impact of both crossed the boundaries of their birthplace; both attracted a wide range of audiences. Both of them advocated the perfect balance of theory and practice. Both revolutionized the way of human thinking. Both were firm believers in evolution and change. Both were the most excellent combination of brain and heart. The ultimate aim was to cease human suffering, though they called it by different names. Anyone who has studied the Buddha and Marx would not be surprised by the statement of U Ba Swe, the Burmese Buddhist Marxist:

In the beginning, I was a Buddhist only by tradition. The more I study Marxism, however, the more I feel convinced in Buddhism...for any man who has deeply studied Buddhism, and correctly perceived its tenets there should be no obstacle to becoming a Marxist (quoted in Strenski, 1980, 10).

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Like Marxism, the prime focus of Buddhism is this genuine world. Thus, it is said that the *dhamma* is “visible here and now, immediately effective, inviting inspection, onward leading, to be experienced by the wise” (*dhammo sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opanayiko paccattam vedītabbo viññūhi*, M I.37). For the Buddha, *dhamma* should be practically relevant and beneficial (see the parable of the arrow, M I.134; and the parable of the raft, M I.429). Therefore, *dhamma* is fully realized in its practice, and without implementing it into practice, it would be fruitless.

Similarly, when Marx says, “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (*Theses on Feuerbach*), he parted himself away from all the speculative philosophies of the time. For him, philosophy should be realized in its “praxis.” Thus, he says: “All the mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and the comprehension of this practice” (Marx in *Theses on Feuerbach* quoted by Althusser, 2005, 161). Marxism is the “theoretically and practically revolutionary philosophy” (Ibid., 14) that is “philosophy of social action; more specifically, a theory of social revolution” (Hook, 1933, 20). The chief feature of Marxism is its emphasis on “praxis”; for Marx, the theoretical idea that cannot be transformed into practice is meaningless.

Buddha and Marx indeed have several differences, evident as they came from very different socio-political and cultural backgrounds, and a gap of more than two thousand years exists between them. However, on the doctrinal issues, they are compatible. They have the same revolutionary spirit, scientific temperament, internationalist approach, and anti-dogmatic attitude.

II. On the Causes of Human Sufferings

Out of the four noble truths, the first is recognizing and accepting *dukkha* (suffering). Buddha ignored the irrelevant metaphysical questions; instead, he offered a practical solution to end the miseries of human life. Therefore, Buddha started preaching *dhamma* by recognizing that the world is full of suffering (*dukkha*). However, the meaning of *dukkha* in Buddhism is comprehensive and implies “deeper ideas such as ‘imperfection,’ ‘impermanence,’ ‘emptiness,’ ‘insubstantiality’” etc., with the “ordinary meaning of suffering” (Rahula, 1959, 17). The concept of *dukkha* is so profound in Buddhism that several scholars accused Buddhism of being a pessimistic religion. But the truth is that

Buddhism is neither pessimistic nor optimistic. If anything at all, it is realistic, for it takes a realistic view of life and the world. It looks at things objectively (*yathābhutam*). It does not falsely lull you into living in a fool’s paradise, nor does it frighten and agonize you with all kinds of imaginary fears and sins (Rahula, 1959, 17).

For the Buddha, the four noble truths (*ariya sacca*) are “not merely epistemological or rational truth” (Kalupahana, 1992, 85); instead, it is a practical guide to traverse the path. *Dukkha* is the reality of life; it should not be mystified. *Dhamma* does not approve of any metaphysical speculation. It is, for this reason the Pāli canon uses the

statements like “all this is suffering” (*sabbam idaṃ dukkhaṃ*), never “all is suffering” (*sabbaṃ dukkhaṃ*)” (Ibid., 48). Only those “who does not look for any mystery” (*akiñcana*) and grasp the things “as they have come to be” (*yathābhūta*)” (Ibid., 59) can progress on the path of *dhamma*. Running away from the truth would not be beneficial; thus, the Buddha presented the truth as it is, without any covering or coating.

Similarly, Marx, before proposing a model for a classless communist society, described the realities of a class-based society. For Marx, showing the truth was the primary condition for preparing the exploited class to struggle for emancipation. He described the horrors of capitalist society so powerfully that his writings agitated all the orders of society; of course, different groups get agitated for different reasons. Nevertheless, for marginalized groups, his doctrines became a liberating weapon.

According to the Buddha, individuals and society are responsible for human suffering. On the one hand, the greed and selfishness of some people is the reason behind human suffering. Thus, it is said: “In this world, when one is overwhelmed by this vile craving that tenaciously clings to the senses, sorrow spreads like wild grass” (Dh 335). Such a person causes harm to society and himself: “By craving for wealth, the greedy harm themselves and those around them” (Dh, 355). “A person driven by fierce craving is like a spider caught in his own web” (Dh, 347). However, on the other hand, the Buddha does not deny the role of the individual in his sufferings (*dukkha*). When the Buddha was asked whether the man was responsible for his suffering (S II.20), he chose the middle position. Thus, depending on the circumstances, the cause of human suffering may be individual, society, or both.

Similarly, Marx also recognizes both social and individualistic causes of human suffering. For him, the existence of “classes” in society, “division of labor,” greed for more and more profit, “accumulation of capital,” capitalist exploitation, the monopoly on ‘means of production,’ “alienation,” etc., are some of the social causes of human sufferings. Moreover, the inability to grasp these realities due to bourgeois ideological propaganda resulting in a lack of class consciousness among the exploited classes may be considered the individualistic cause of sufferings.

Buddhism is far from individualistic, as some scholars believe. The foundation of *saṃgha* (monastic order) based on democratic spirit, continuous engagement with all the social groups, emphasis on resolving the dichotomy between *saṃsāra* and *nibbāna*, etc., proves that the Buddha disapproved of selfish individualism. Neither *arhat* nor *bodhisattva* ideal ignores social concerns: while *arhat* performs *kusala* (good) actions even after *nibbāna*, the *bodhisattva* is even ready to quit *nibbāna* for benefit of beings. Thus, the Buddha advised *bhikkhus* to develop *metta bhāvanā* (loving-kindness) toward all beings: “Just as with her own life/ a mother shield from hurt/ her own, her only, child,-/ let all-embracing thoughts/ for all that lives be thine” (Sn, 149).

Similarly, social concerns are always predominant in Marxist ideology; thus, “work for humanity” was Marx’s advice to his comrades. Marx disapproved of any individualism. He shows a revolutionary path that goes to communism, which favors universal brotherhood and comradeship. In Marx’s communist society, no one can

exploit another; no one would be discriminated against. Society would be the sole possessor of 'means of production; no one would be a master, and no one would be enslaved. Both Buddha and Marx were also the champions of individual and social freedom.

III. On Methodology

Buddhist theory of knowledge lies mid-way between rationalism and empiricism, conception and perception, reason and experience, idealism and realism, etc. Therefore, the Buddha criticized the *takkikā* (reasoners, logicians) "who base their knowledge on reasoning and speculation" (Jayatilleke, 1963, 205). Reasoning does not guarantee truth (MI, 520), nor is experience and evidence. Buddhist position lies in the middle of rationalism and empiricism.

The Buddha would indeed refute the Hegelian dialectical method if he were present. Hegel's 'dialectical approach' leads him to "absolute idealism"; for Hegel, "world [is] nothing but logic," but "In the Buddhist view there is besides logic, a genuine reality which is neither negative nor is it dialectical" (Stcherbatsky, 1932, 460). Unlike Hegel, for the Buddha, there is no ultimate reality; everything is relative.

Although Marx got inspiration from the Hegelian dialectical method, he did not adopt it blindly. Unlike Hegel, Marx applied it "primarily to human history and society" (Hook, 1933, 75). Thus, Marx argues, "Hegel fell into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought" (*Grundrisse*, 1973, 101). For this reason, Althusser accused Hegel of stealing the "reality of objects" (Althusser, 2005, 77). For Marx, however, "the real subject retains its autonomous existence" (*Grundrisse*, 101-02). Thus, Marx reached the same conclusion by adequately handling the dialectical method, like the Buddha's. Like the Buddha, he neither denied the "ideas" nor the "reality"; instead, he overcomes this dichotomy by connecting them both.

IV. On Materialism

In India, the materialistic school of thought existed even before the Buddha. Thus, during the time of the Buddha, they were well known. The Pāli canon talks about them on several occasions (see D I.34-5; S II.20; S III.98). Most agree that only 'matter' is the ultimate reality of the universe. The Buddha does not recognize an eternal soul, a God, or any other such supernatural power, so he agrees with materialists. However, he has different views on several other issues like *kamma*, *nibbāna*, free will, etc. Although the Buddha was much nearer to the materialistic approach, he disapproved of its annihilationist definition put forward by its theoreticians: and thus refuted both the theories like eternalism (*sassatavāda*) and materialism (*ucchedavāda*) (S II.20; S III.99). Thus, he disapproved the statements like "all exist", "all does not exist", "all is unity", "all is plurality" etc., (S II.77), instead, he chooses the middle position between these extreme views.

In the Pāli canon, there are several references in which Buddha's contemporary accused him as a materialist, labeled him as an "annihilationist" or "abolitionist" (A IV.182), and misrepresented him by saying: "he teaches the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existing being" (M I. 140), but the Buddha denied all these. Buddha's doctrines were quite distinct from his contemporary materialists, as *nikāyase* indicate. Buddha's relations with them may be compared with Marx's relations with other materialists.

Similarly, in Western philosophy, the doctrine of "materialism" is as old as "idealism," but Marx's materialism was novel. The early materialist philosophers "took a physical, chemical or biological approach to cultural life" (Hook, 1933, 113); thus, in this way, they "reduce the social to merely a complicated effect of non-social" (Ibid., 115). However, "dialectical materialism is a materialism of its own kind, which is quite different from the materialism of natural sciences" (Kautsky, 1909, 118). Marx and Engels considered "old materialism" as "predominantly mechanical," "non-historical," and "non-dialectical" (Lenin cited in Lasker, 1946, 20). Marx was not ready to accept the mechanical relation between men and their environment; thus, he "pronounced crushing judgment on all mechanical materialism which regarded man's sensation and thought as the passive automatic result of the impact of the environment upon the animal organism" (Hook, 1933, 37, 79). As is evident, Marx's materialism was quite different from the materialism of Epicureans and Feuerbach.

Marx not only turned Hegel "upside down," but he also turned the whole of the philosophy, whether idealistic or materialistic, upside down. It must be admitted that both the terms "materialism" and "idealism" have metaphysical connotations since the "ism" of both was supported merely by logic; every "logic" can be countered by anti-logic; there is no empirical evidence to support both "ism." However, the scientific nature of Marxist theories implies that it is different from both 'materialism' and 'idealism' as both the terms are of metaphysical origin.

Before Marx, most of the 'idealist' and 'materialist' types of philosophers were playing in the realm of logic and epistemology, that is, speculative philosophies. Marx's materialism is founded on the sound basis of historical knowledge and is scientific and progressive. Countless materialistic philosophers existed before Marx, but his "historical materialism" was novel and unique. Thus, Gramsci argues that "great conquest in the history of modern thought is mainly the 'concrete historicization' of philosophy and its identification with history" (Gramsci, 2015, 446). By this approach, Marx has revolutionized human rationale and human actions.

V. Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) and Historical Materialism

The problem of "materialism" versus "idealism" is an eternal debate in both Eastern and Western philosophy, as the history of philosophy proves. As far as the Buddha and Marx are concerned, they resolved this dichotomy by choosing the middle way. Both agreed that "sense observation" and "reason" contribute to knowledge. For the Buddha, "dependent origination" (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) is like the synonym of *dhamma*. One can imagine the significance of this doctrine by the Buddha's statement: "One who sees dependent origination sees the *Dhamma*, and one who sees

the *Dhamma* sees dependent origination” (M I.190). For Kamalaśīla, it is the “chief jewel” of the Buddhist philosophy (cited in Stcherbatsky, 1932, 119). The “dependent origination” consists of twelve factors (*dvadasaṅga*) rooted in the past, present, and future. The Pāli canon represents this formula in the following manner:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (“*Imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imassa uppādā idaṃ uppajjati. Imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*” S II.96).

It is not merely a metaphysical formula but related to this very world (*samsāra*) and its complexities. It provides the proper understanding (*sammā dīṭṭhi*) to see the interconnectedness between things, individuals, and societies, thus helping to grasp the dynamic motion of the worldly phenomenon and the pattern of society. The term “*paṭiccasamuppāda*” implies that every moment is “conditioned (*paṭiccasamuppantia*) as well as conditioning (*paṭicca samuppada*)” (Rahula, 1959, 54). Everything is “causally produced” (Nāgārjuna’s *Kārika* 24.19 cited by Kalupahana 1986 in ch. 4, note 95); For Śāntirakṣita, “The essence of reality is motion” (Stcherbatsky, 1932, 82). Therefore, everything changes; no static, permanent, or eternal reality exists.

Further, the “dependent origination” recognizes the multifariousness of causes and conditions: when several factors are combined, they produce a particular result. Thus, the term “dependent origination” also implies “combined” origination (Stcherbatsky, 1932, 127). The *Nyāyabinduṭīkā* of Dharmottara emphasizes the plurality of causes: “Nothing single comes from single, from a totality everything arises” (loc. cit.). According to famous Buddhist commentator Kamalaśīla, “every moment has its own totality of causes and conditions owing to which it exists” (cited in Stcherbatsky 1932: 81-2), and the existence of multiple causes for a particular phenomenon makes it unique and specific. However, Vasubandhu states that no one can identify a particular phenomenon’s causes and conditions (Ibid., 129-30); thus, he warns against metaphysical speculation.

During the time of the Buddha, both strict determinist (*sabbaṃ pubbekatahetu*, A I.173) and chaotic indeterminist (*sabbaṃ ahetuappaccayā*, loc. cit.) types of doctrines were current in the air, but Buddha refuted both. The doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) does not approve of both types of extreme views (S II.17). The same kind of situation was also faced by Marx; both “idealist” and “materialist” philosophies with either absolutist or nihilist approaches were popular during his time, but he neglected both of them as ‘historical materialism’ contradicts both.

Now, coming to Marx’s “historical materialism,” the method used by Hegel in the realm of “ideas” was taken to the realm of society and history by Marx. Stalin argues, “Historical materialism is the extension of the principles of dialectical materialism to the study of social life” (cited in Lasker, 1946, 69). Nevertheless, society comprises complex networks; it cannot be analyzed like a mechanical system. However, Marx’s views on history are often distorted by several historians (Hobsbawm called them vulgar-Marxist), willingly or unwillingly: they have a natural tendency to ignore all other deciding factors of history except economic, thus

reducing Marx merely to an “economic determinist.” However, as Hobsbawm argues, it must be remembered “the essential characteristic of Marx’s historical thought that it is neither sociological nor economic but both simultaneously” (Hobsbawm, 1998, 202).

It must be admitted that “historical materialism” is the “most widely misunderstood” concept of Marx (Hook, 1933, 105). It is “capable of several drastically different readings” (Bernstein, 1981, 434), which can be witnessed in Marxist and anti-Marxist writings. Like the Buddha’s teachings, Marx’s doctrines developed in various directions; some go far away from Marx himself. Like the teachings of the Buddha, Marxist doctrines were also mystified. Thus, absolutistic and metaphysical tendencies began to appear in it. What Marx said about Hegel and Feuerbach was ignored, and “Historical materialism” is confused with the “vulgar” type of materialism, which Marx would have certainly disapproved. Now, “mythical language of the inevitability” (Hook, 1933, 33) began to appear in it. Furthermore, this “disguised natural necessity” transformed the revolutionary philosophy of “praxis” into “astronomical socialism” (*loc. cit.*), and “a corresponding shift occurred from Marx’s naturalistic activism to a simplified materialism called dialectical but in really mechanical” (Hook, 37). Thus, he is often represented as a rigid materialistic philosopher who firmly believes in “economic determinism,” “class struggle,” and “historical inevitability,” etc. It must be admitted, however, that Marx himself was not responsible for developing these fatalistic tendencies. Commenting on such deviations, Labriola argues, “neither Marx nor Engels would ever have asserted in the abstract that communism must come about by an unavoidable necessity” (cited in Croce, 1914, 11); therefore, “a little of the blame for the teleological and fatalistic misunderstandings fall on Marx himself” (cited in Croce, 1914, 10). Marx’s scientific approach cannot allow such things; it must be remembered that he was a crusader against such philosophical mystifications and speculative ideas. Historical materialism is a scientific effort to grasp the pattern of historical development; it does not allow soothsaying or prophesies about history.

Marx never overlooked the specificities and complexities involved in historical development, nor did he ignore the role of human beings as active participators (see Grundrisse, 85; Hook, 1933, 119,133). For Marx, historical materialism only means that the “material condition of life, taken as a whole, primarily determines the changes in human thought” (Laski, 1926, 58). However, it does not mean that other factors are non-existent. Any absolutist tendency is contrary to the scientific spirit of dialectical materialism. Marxism does not allow any monism or eclecticism because: “Marxian monism would mean that history is nothing but economic activity—the most monstrous distortion ever fathered upon a critical thinker... Some ‘Marxists’ believe this but Marx never did” (Hook, 1933, 132-3). Engels had also commented on this issue in a letter written to J. Bloch, in which he clarified that “historical materialism” is not “economic determinism”:

According to the materialistic conception of history, the determining element in history is ultimately the production and reproduction in real life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. If therefore somebody twists this into the

statement that economic element is the *only determining one*, he transforms it into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase (cited by Williams 2017: 350).

For Marx, the subject matter of historical materialism is “always what is given, in the head as well as in the reality” (*Grundrisse*, 106). Therefore, Marx’s “historical materialism” should not be confused with “vulgar” materialism. Marx’s thought is free from the obscurities and mysticism of ‘materialism’ and “idealism.” Gramsci, one of the most original Marxist thinkers, grasped Marxist thought in its true essence in his concept of “historical bloc” (a term taken from Georges Sorel). In this “historical bloc,” “material forces” are “content,” and “ideologies” are the “form”; though this dichotomy has only theoretical value, they cannot be separated practically as they are intertwined (Gramsci, 2015, 377). They cannot exist without each other: “material forces would be inconceivable historically without form and ideologies would be individual fancies without material forces” (*loc. cit.*). Negating any of them leads the whole discourse into speculative philosophies and metaphysical abstractions without any fruitful conclusion. Marx based his doctrines on the concrete foundation of history; he analyzed the ‘past’ to identify the connecting threads between historical events. More than this, he never claimed anything.

Historical materialism is not a static model; it is a dynamic approach to understanding the pattern of historical development. Commenting on the term “historical materialism,” Gramsci argues: “One should put the accent on the first term ‘historical’ and not on the second term, which is of metaphysical origin” (Gramsci, 2015, 465). For Marx and Gramsci, history is not merely a narration of past events; understanding the evolutionary course of society as a whole is its true essence. Further, Marxism is an endeavor to understand history in its continuum and actively participate in it. Thus, it is “realized through the concrete study of past history and through present activity to construct new history” (*Ibid.*, 427). Whether individual or society, they are the product of both past and present; they are stages of historical evolution; they do not arise from the vacuum. Thus, for Gramsci, “man is historical becoming” and in “every age there has been past and present” (*Ibid.*, 446); “Every man is descendant of every king and every slave that ever lived” (Gibran, 2006, 224). We can better evaluate them as a part of the journey or as a stage. Society traverses the path of historical progress with specific rules or patterns; outwardly, some disorder, anarchy, or disruption may appear, but inwardly, they have hidden co

In one sense, history is a “continuation of natural history” (Childe, 2016, 7). Hobsbawm also appreciates the “unity of past, present, and future” as the chief feature of history (1998: 29). History is an effort to understand the evolutionary stages of civilization. Marx’s greatest contribution was that he provided a model in the form of “historical materialism” to understand history in its true essence.

VI. Matter and Spirit

The debate on “matter” and “spirit” is eternal in the history of philosophy. “Materialist” and “idealist” philosophers engaged in this futile debate for centuries. Nevertheless, the Buddha and Marx resolved this issue by connecting “matter” and

“spirit.” For the Buddha, “mind and body” (*nāmarūpa*) and consciousness (*viññāṇam*) mutually depend on each other (D II.56; S III.58; M I.260). Thus, Buddhism does not recognize any eternal, unchanging “consciousness” free from this material world. Therefore, he does not indulge in speculative philosophies like whether “the soul is the same as the body” (*taṃ jīvaṃ taṃ sarīraṃ*) or “the soul is one thing and body another” (*aññaṃ jīvaṃ aññaṃ sarīraṃ*) (M I.426). Usually, he did not like to provide answers to such meaningless questions (*avyākatas*); according to him, these questions do not help someone to live a better life; thus, these are irrelevant and fruitless.

Marx’s most famous statement: “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness” (in the preface, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx, 1904, 11); and, “When reality is described, a self-sufficient philosophy [*die selbständige philosophie*] loses its medium of existence” (*German Ideology*, 43), means that he wants to connect “ideas” with ‘reality. For him, this distinction has no practical value; his approach was quite similar to that of the Buddha.

Thus, for Marx, both ideas and reality are interconnected. For him, “men are the producer of their conception, ideas,” etc., and “ideas or consciousness is directly *interwoven* with material activity” (Marx, 1998, 42) [Italics mine]. Here, Marx is neither negating the “ideas” nor “consciousness” but merely connecting them to reality. Both the “idealist” and the “materialist” philosophers thrive on the dichotomy of “matter” and “spirit,” but Marx, guided by his dialectic intellect, refused to accept this boundary. The term “interwoven” in Marx’s above statement implies that Marx has the same position as the Buddha on this issue. [cf. *nāmarūpa* or mind-body or mentality-materiality or psychophysical entity of Buddhism].

VII. Man and Nature

Generally speaking, two views were prevalent among the ascetic philosophers during the time of the Buddha about the relation between man and nature. One is that man is entirely incapable in front of nature (*niyatīvāda*); the other is that man is entirely free from nature (*yadr̥cchāvāda*) (see Brahmajāla Sutta of *Dīgha-Nikaya*). This strict determinist view is modified further as *svabhāvavāda*, which says that “since everything is due to inherent nature, the effort is useless” (*Buddhacarita*, 9.58 cited in Jayatilleke, 444). As any absolutist view would contradict the Buddhist theory of causation, the Buddha rejected all these extreme views and chose the middle position between “strict determinism” and “chaotic indeterminism.” For the Buddha, both men and nature have a mutual relationship, and both are capable of impacting each other. Thus, the Buddha recognized free will, but it is “the freedom inside the limits of necessity” (Stcherbatsky, 1932, 134) or “freedom to move without transgressing the boundaries of causation” (loc. cit.). As per the Buddhist philosophy, “There can be nothing absolutely free, physical or mental, as everything is interdependent and relative” (Rahula, 1959, 54).

Marx’s historical materialism gives equal importance to both man and nature. According to Marx, although “men are not free to choose their productive forces,”

they are free to act on what is given them (cited in Lasker, 1946, 314). Therefore, Marx asserts in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Man makes his own history, but he does not make it out of the whole cloth; he does not make it out of conditions chosen by himself but out of such as he finds close at hand. The tradition of all past generations weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living. (Marx, 1907, 5)

Man and nature have a two-way relationship: “act and react upon each other” (Watson, 1921, 121). Marx’s recognition of this two-way relationship is immensely significant. It is for this reason that Plekhanov considers the statement: “Acting on external nature, man changes his own nature” as the “essence of the whole historical theory of Marx” (Plekhanov, 1947, 146). Thus, Marx was far from determinist; he was a firm believer in the agency of human actions. It is impossible for a revolutionary who believes in the philosophy of “praxis” to believe in determinism. Therefore, he accepts Vico’s thesis: “human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter” (Capital I.15, footnote, 493-94). Marx parted himself from naturalist materialism, which “excludes the historical process” (*loc. cit.*). Further, during historical progress, man gradually attained a more decisive role in front of nature.

Thus, Marx was well aware of the complexities of the superstructure; therefore, he argues that although “material transformations” of society “can be determined with the precision of natural science,” “ideological forms” cannot be determined in the same way (in the preface of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx 1904: 12), because superstructure is “very complex, not only because of its diversity but also because it is always historical” (Williams, 2017, 349). Kautsky admits, “There is a reciprocal action between the economic basis and its spiritual superstructure” (1909: 185). For Hobsbawm, “basis and superstructure” means a “model of a society composes of different ‘levels’ which interacts” (Hobsbawm, 1998, 195). Thus, “superstructure” is not the passive reflection of “basis” nor unidirectional. It is a dynamic model that provides deep insight to understand the intricate pattern of society, its mechanism, and its evolution.

VIII. Dhamma and Ideology

Although the term “ideology” is a vague and muddy concept, for practical purposes, its definition may be accepted: Ideology is a “sets of beliefs formulated in an attempt to develop ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ solution to the social and political problem” (Kinloch cited by Fine and Sandstrom, 1993, 23). In this sense, *dhamma* may be taken as an ideology as it offers a practical solution to the problem of human suffering. Thus, Buddhism recognizes the role and power of ideology. The *dhamma* consists of theory and practice; in other words, it is a plan of action backed by an influential theory.

It is said that Buddha was initially hesitant to preach the *Dhamma* as he thought that *Dhamma* was “deep” and “difficult to grasp.” However, after Brahma’s

convincing argument that the world would perish if *Dhamma* were not delivered, he became ready for preaching (D II.36; S I.136; M I.167). It is not merely a coincidence that *dhamma* preaching is termed as the *dharmacakkappavattana* (the turning of the wheel of *Dhamma*); it is said that “incomparable wheel of *dhamma* set rolling by truth finder” (M III.28-9) which means that *Dhamma* is for action (A III.86-7). Only knowledge of “way” is insufficient; it should be treated (M III.4-6). Thus, the *Dhamma* is compared with a raft (Sn 21; D II. 89) meant to cross over “not for purpose of grasping” (M I.136).

In Buddhism, it is believed that the “root of all evil is ignorance (*avijjā*) and false views (*micchā diṭṭhi*)” (Rahula, 1959, 3). *Dhamma* is a remedy discovered by the Buddha to extinguish this *avijjā*. Thus he ordered *bhikkhus* “to wander abroad for the good of the many, for the welfare and happiness of devas and humans” (D II.48). Buddha criticized those who learn *dhamma* only for acquiring argumentative skills and defeat opponents in debates (M I.134). Thus, he says: “Inspired by theories, you come to controvert; you sought to match the cleansed, but cannot compass it” (Sn 834). Thus, the Buddha compared *dhamma* with the teacher (D II.154-6) and charioteer (S I.33), which means that *dhamma* helps in the attainment of the goal: the cessation of *dukkha* (suffering).

Those who want to retain the status quo would be frightened by Marxism and Buddhism. Thus, the Buddha said that someone may be frightened by hearing that Tathāgata or his disciple is “teaching the *dhamma* for the elimination of all standpoints, decisions, obsessions, adherence, and underlying tendencies, for stilling of all formations, for the relinquishing of all attachments, for the destruction of craving, for dispassion” etc. (M I.136). The Buddha presented the truth as it is, without any covering, as it was the only way to shatter the foundation of deep-rooted dogmatism and a vast net of ignorance. Nevertheless, facing such truth is not always easy; one may be frightened by it: “So I shall be annihilated! So I shall perish! So I shall be no more! Then he sorrows, grieves, and laments, he weeps beating his breast and becomes distraught” (M I.137).

Whatever the nature of “ideology,” Marx never denied its existence; he merely demolished false speculative philosophical assumptions formed around it by idealist philosophers and analyzed it from a social-historical perspective. Ideology is “indispensable in any society,” and “only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies without ideology” (Althusser, 2005, 232, 235). Ideology can be used to liberate and enslave revolutionaries and reactionaries by the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Ideology plays a dynamic role in historical development, whether progressive or digressive. Lenin’s phrase “without ideology no revolutionary action” (cited in Althusser, 2005, 168) clearly expresses ideology’s active and functional role in the course of historical development. Marx only denied the independent existence of “ideology,” which means that “devoid from real history, abstract ideas have no sense” (Marx, 1998, 42, 43). Gramsci, agreeing with Marx, argues that ideology is a “specific system of ideas, need to be examined historically” (Gramsci, 2015, 376). Althusser, who thoroughly worked on the concept of “ideology,” says that ideology is a “system of representations but in the majority of cases these representations have nothing to do with consciousness” (Althusser, 2005, 233). Moreover, what is

“consciousness”? Marx says in *The German Ideology* that “consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being and being of men is their actual life-process” (Marx, 1998, 42). Here, we see that Marx does not deny the existence of “consciousness” but links it to “actual life process” and emphasizes the interconnectivity and special relationship between them.

In a class-based society, ideology is used as a tool, with covert and overt agendas, to achieve, preserve, destroy, or construct something, whatever the circumstances demand. Indeed, “the more civilization advances the more it is compelled to cover the evils it necessarily creates” (Engels, 2010, 216). Here, ideology is used to distort and falsify reality and cover up all society’s injustices and discriminations. It also creates the illusion that victims of hierarchical society fail to realize the real cause of their sufferings.

The ideology, which is “pseudoscience” and “pseudo-philosophy,” can be used to make people subservient and conformist (Arendt, 2017, 446, 604, 615). However, its “pseudo-ness” does not lessen its effectiveness, as history and contemporary times prove that sometimes irrational, incoherent, and even superstitious thoughts may be transformed into powerful movements backed by countless people. Nazism, Fascism, and several other nationalistic and sectarian movements were classic examples of this phenomenon. Thus, Kosambi argues that the “ideas (including superstition) became a force, once they had gripped the masses; they supply the forms in which men become conscious of their conflicts and fight them out” (Kosambi, 2014, 10). It means that when an “idea” is transformed into an “ideology,” it acquires an active functioning role that can be used or misused for specific purposes. A particular “ideology” is not always backed by those who were the beneficiaries; sometimes, its power comes from the victims of this ideological game. Ideology is not static; it requires continuous readjustment and restructuring with changing historical circumstances to retain its effectiveness. As Machiavelli says, “the nature of people is variable and whilst it is easy to persuade them, it is difficult to fix them in that persuasion” (Machiavelli, 25). Here, the role of “ideology” comes into play. When sub-ordinate groups recognize their position, they may refuse to remain in that position and begin to resist and organize. At that time, few concessions were given to them, and evaluating, assessing, and synchronizing the “ideology” became necessary as per circumstances. For example, Indian religious history is the classic example of this phenomenon: From Vedic times to the contemporary time of Hindutva, we see several ideological adjustments, changes, and transformations, though retaining its hierarchical and non-egalitarian structure intact. All the theories of *avatāra*, bhakti, non-duality, etc., were developed in Hinduism to address resistance from heterodox movements.

However, It must be remembered that ideology cannot always be imposed forcefully. Its propagation requires strategy and tactics, which may be sophisticated, crude, barbarous, cunning, or deceitful, as per circumstances. Marx argues that ruling classes propagate their “ideas” so that most sub-ordinate classes accept them as representing their aspirations (Marx, 1998, 68-9). Ideological propaganda may influence and impact subjugated masses to such an extent that sometimes, they may become a staunch supporter of a system that is the very cause of their subjugated position. It shaped and transformed sub-ordinate groups so that they willingly

submitted themselves to the ruling apparatus. As Durkheim says, “institution may impose them upon us, but we cling to them, they compel us, and we love them; they constrain us, and we find our welfare in our adherence to them” (cited in Schmid, 1981, 59). Due to the constant and continuous ideological propaganda, all the irrationalities, foolishness, and absurdities of “ideologies” may look rational and coherent, and all the injustices, discriminations, inequalities, and sufferings of subordinate masses were accepted as business as usual. According to Foucault, the “normalization” of such relations became a “great instrument of power” (cited in Robinow, 1991, 196). Manipulation of the masses became easy through this type of “normalization,” so it is not strange why the ruling classes spent so much on propaganda through the media and so on. Trotsky argues that “social regime remains stable as long as the ruling class is capable, by means of state, of imposing its will on the exploited classes” (Trotsky, 1973, 99). Even though Trotsky was right, it must be admitted that the phenomenon mentioned above does not always need force, power, and aggressive means; the ruling classes act more shrewdly. Gramsci analyzed this issue brilliantly in his *Prison Notebooks*. While analyzing the concept of “Hegemony,” he uses two terms, “state” and “civil society,” as a theoretical model to describe the ruling mechanism, though he also recognizes their indistinctness (Gramsci, 2015, 210-216).

By continuous ideological warfare, ruling classes made subaltern groups so pliable that they easily gave “consent” to their “hegemony.” Further, “this consent is historically caused by prestige (and subsequent confidence), which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production” (Gramsci, 2015, 12). For example, this is what happened and is still seen in most of the Third World Countries: even after the beginning of democracy and universal suffrage in these countries, winners of this system were those who are the descendants of preceding higher castes or classes. The accumulated power and prestige of their previous generations put them in an advantageous position in comparison to other groups; thus, they become “new rulers,” this time legitimized by democracy. Foucault analyzed class-based society in terms of “power relations” and argues that power is “exercised from innumerable points in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations” (Foucault, 1978, 94). Thus, according to Foucault, Society cannot be compartmentalized as two warring camps alone; it has many complexities. It is, for example, what most of the European communist parties experienced during the 1940s, when “working class” unity began to shatter due to differences based on language, race, culture, religion, nationalities, etc. Further, Foucault employed the term “thought process” instead of “ideology” in his explanation of “power relation.” Thus, he emphasizes the dynamic nature of this term: “Thought is no longer theoretical. As soon as it functions, it offends or reconciles, attract or repel breaks, dissociates, unites or reunites” (Foucault quoted in Reiss, 1998, 79). His description of the “thought process” is not different from the true spirit of “ideology” of Marx and Gramsci.

Although the ideology has no independent existence, it creates the illusion of independence by “alienating” itself during historical progress. During the social crisis, when society was deeply divided along class lines, ideology came to the scene with

its full-fledged power. Continuous propaganda, indoctrination, and forgeries are essential to maintain the ruling apparatus in such critical times. It is true that “the control of opinion is the foundation of government, from the most despotic to most free” (Chomsky, 2003, 7), and if this is effectively done, no other talent is required to secure the regimes. Anyone can realize this by merely looking at the ruling mechanism of fascist, authoritarian, or any other type of ruling apparatus.

To falsify realities, it is also necessary “to teach the people not to think and make judgments” (Pasternak in *Doctor Zhivago* cited in Judt, 2006, 165), and “the facts must be altered. Thus history is continuously rewritten, this day to day falsification of past is necessary to the stability of regime” (Orwell, 1949, 210). We can see the uses and abuses of Ideological propaganda in several reactionary movements like Nazism and Fascism (Hobsbawm, 1995, 106, 118; 1997, 106; 2012, 137). By looking at the role of ideology, it can easily be understood that “in ideology, the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, conformist, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or nostalgia” (Althusser, 2005, 234).

For Marx, “The ideas of ruling class in every epoch is ruling idea”; the ruling class “among other things rule also as thinkers, as producer of the ideas of their age” (Marx, 1998, 67). Marx’s statement mentioned above can be easily verified by analyzing the language and literature of any historical era. Thus, not only “ideas” and “ideologies” but also “ideologues” create the illusion of their independence, but they are not. They are not only bound to their class and society but also to their time and history. Thus, Marx says, they “do not spring up like mushroom out of ground; they are product of their time, their nation” (cited in Reiss, 1998, 81). For Marx, ‘intellectuals’ are the “manufacturer of public opinion” (cited in Reiss, 1998, 79); thus, they are an integral part of the modus operandi of the ruling class: Rulers need their help to operate their apparatus, and they are ready to obey and serve them.

For Gramsci, “Intellectuals are dominant group’s deputies exercising the subaltern function of social hegemony and political government” (Gramsci, 2015, 12). Every social group that wants to play a prominent role in the course of history must create their own “organic intellectuals” and “conquer ideologically the traditional intellectual” (Ibid., 10). Dominant social groups secure their hegemony through manifold strategies, sometimes through rigidity and confrontation, and sometimes through flexibility and assimilation. Assimilation of rival ideas and individuals, after modifying and transforming them, is less troublesome but more effective. Thus, intellectuals may be employed to break or retain the status quo. It is for this reason that Zhdanov (Politburo arbiter of the Russian Communist Party in 1947) declared: “Philosophical front ... must furnish the new intellectual weapons needed by world’s worker for their final struggle with capitalist imperialism” (cited in Corbett, 1949, 45). It was also Gramsci’s intention when he argued in favor of “ideological struggle” before the final attack on the capitalist state, which he termed a “war of position” and “war of maneuver,” respectively.

IX. On History and Historiography

Although both the Buddha and Marx were not historians, their views scattered in the vast literature may be helpful for historians. Both of them simultaneously kept their eyes on past, present, and future. Thus, the Buddha linked the preaching of the *dhamma* with the past, present, and future (see D III.130). As the Buddha did not believe in any revelation or supernatural knowledge, he mainly relied on historical knowledge to elucidate his point in *dhamma* preaching. He argues that it is for the destruction of metaphysical speculations about the past and future, he “laid down four foundations of mindfulness,” and it is said that a contemplating monk should consider “body as body,” “feeling as feeling,” “mind as mind,” and “mind-object as mind-object” (D III.141). Thus, the Buddha demands a greater degree of objectivity (*yathābhūta*) in knowledge.

Thus, on several occasions, the Buddha employed his historical knowledge to prove his point or to correct the false views of others. For example, when an arrogant casteist Brahmin Ambaṭṭha disrespected the Buddha, and when he was questioned about his conduct, he justified it by saying: “For those shaven little ascetics, menials, black scouring from Brahma’s foot, with them it is fitting to speak just as I do with the Reverend Gotama” (D I.90). Then the Buddha crushed his haughtiness about his caste and lineage, not by any philosophical argument but by historical facts: “According to those who remember the ancestral lineage, the Sakyans were the masters, and you are descended from a slave girl of Sakyans” (D I.92).

When the Buddha claims that he has “knowledge of past lives” (D III. 134), he does not claim any supernatural knowledge, only historical knowledge. The Buddha does not recognize any such knowledge that facts cannot verify. Thus the Buddha rejected the Brahmanical claim that they are the sole possessor of the truth and says: “Just as a file of blind men go on, clinging to each other, and the first one sees nothing, the last one sees nothing- so it is with the talk of these Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas turns out to be laughable, mere words, empty and vain” (D I.239-40); they are teaching a path that “they do not know or see” (loc. cit.). There is no place of blind faith in Buddhism. Thus the Buddha says that an inquirer of knowledge “should make an investigation of the Tathāgata to find out whether or not he is fully enlightened” (M I.317). Therefore, “come and see” is the Buddha’s message, not “come and believe” (Rahula 1959: 9). The Buddha’s teaching is well-proclaimed (*svākkhāto*), visible here and now (*sandiṭṭhiko*), timeless (*akālika*), inviting inspection (*ehi-passiko*) (D II.93; A.III.258).

Unlike his contemporaries, the Buddha does not claim supernatural knowledge about the past and future. For the Buddha, “this *samsāra* is without discoverable beginning” (S II.185). Thus, without giving any speculative ideas about cosmology, he only described the evolutionary process under the boundaries of “dependent origination.” Therefore, it is said that “there comes a time” when this world would “contract” and “after a very long period, this world began to expand again” (D III.84) since all “conditioned phenomena” are impermanent, unstable, and unreliable (A IV.100). This evolutionary process leaves material traces on its path; thus the Buddha argues that persons “would leave behind a stack of bones, a heap of bones, a pile of

bones as large as this Mount Vepulla, if there is someone to collect them and what is collected would not perish” (S II.185). It is not a coincidence that in Indian history, early Buddhist literature shows better historical understanding than their contemporary sects; perhaps Buddha’s scientific approach may have been the main reason behind this.

Similarly, as stated above, Marx was not a historian in a modern academic sense, but no one can deny his influence on modern historiography. It must be admitted that history and historiography during the twentieth century developed under the shadow of Marx; he became indispensable in any academic discourse concerning historiography. In the realm of history, his importance lies in his “methodological approach” (Hobsbawm, 1998, 221). On the bicentennial celebration of Karl Marx, Amartya Sen wrote an article in *The Indian Express* (May 5, 2018) in which he quotes Eric Hobsbawm:

In the Pre Namier days, Marxists regarded it as one of the chief historical duties to draw attention to the material basis of politics. But since bourgeoisie historians have adopted what is a particular form of ‘vulgar materialism’, Marxists had to remind them that history is the struggle of men for ideas as well as the reflection of the material environment.

This statement should be a guiding principle for historians. Marxism is not merely a theoretical system discussed by academicians alone; for a substantial time, it remained an influential movement backed by millions of people who dreamed of a just and better society and successfully formed revolutionary regimes in several countries. However, here, historians must be cautious because often well-popularized views about Marx may not represent his true essence. For this reason, Hobsbawm argues that the “chief value of Marx for historians today lies in his statements about history, as distinct from his statement about society in general” (Hobsbawm, 1998, 195). Thorough studies of the ‘past’ and dialectical approach are the backbones of Marxism. He revolutionized historiography through his profound methodology. History for him was a continuous stream flowing from “past” to “present” and then to “future.” His approach was revolutionary and progressive. Thus, he says: “The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past; it can draw that only from the future. It cannot start upon its work before it has stricken off all superstitions concerning the past” (Marx, 1907, 7).

As far as historiography is concerned, “historical materialism” is the best model discovered up till now to understand history. Nevertheless, before applying this model, we must be capable enough to grasp its true essence. Marxist historiography broadens the area of historical studies from a narrow political field to a larger social field; it should not be stopped here. It must include all the deciding factors of history, and this is what can be accepted from any scientific and progressive “doctrine.”

Marx was a revolutionary and firm believer in “activities of men” in given historical circumstances. Taking Marx merely as an “economic determinist,” several historians also distorted the historiography; for them, history is confined merely to economic activities alone, and all other aspects of human activities were a passive

reflection of it. However, “Marxism is far from economic determinism, which its opponents often take to be. For that matter, any intelligent determinism must discuss ‘conditions’ rather than ‘causes’ and take full cognizance of historical development” (Kosambi, 2014, 10). For Marx, “history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims” (quoted in Reiss, 1998, 49). Here ‘activity is not the economic activity alone, but it encompasses all the spheres of human activities. Life and its history are versatile; it must not be reduced to one aspect alone. For Marx, history is not merely recording past events; he analyzes the past to trace the evolutionary course of historical progress. It must be admitted that “all the living forces, men as well as plants, the nation as well as individual have in common certain qualities” and “follows laws that are not always visible” (Humboldt cited in Reill, 1994, 356, 359). History is an effort to grasp these “common qualities” and “laws”; it does not mean, however, to accept the law of “historical inevitability.” Thus, Gramsci argues that “historical process ... has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory” (quoted in Said, 1998, 25). History is a dynamic process that can be realized only in its continuity, and historiography should recognize this. Henri Pirenne once told Marc Bloch, “If I were an antiquarian, I would have eyes only for old stuff, but I am a historian therefore I love life” (Bloch, 1953, 43). A scientific study of the past can demolish fallacies and misconceptions about the present; thus, historians should have eyes on both the past and present. In the words of Bloch, he/she must be able “to join the study of dead and of the living” and “faculty of understanding the living is the master quality of historian” (Bloch, 1953, 43, 47). History is not merely a collection of “dead facts” of the past and jumbling them chronologically without discerning the connecting thread between them. Thus, based on views expressed by the Buddha and Marx, we may argue that historians must keep their eyes on the past, present, and future; historiography must reflect this.

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