

The Marxist Concept of Man

K. MATHEW KURIEN*

The problem of man, his past, present and future, the unfolding of his destiny in relation to his increasing control over the forces of nature and his attempts to create a new society, has assumed great significance for people belonging to various ideologies and faiths.

Marxism provides an integrated view of man in relation to society. Unlike many other philosophies, in Marxism problems of the individual man are not considered in the abstract, in isolation from his social relations.

The basic concept of Marxism, in relation to man, is that man is 'the ensemble of social relations'. Man is a social being; in his interaction with his fellow human beings, society in general, and in his attempts to control the forces of nature, man graduates as man. In other words, man is a social product. The man of life and blood is both an 'individual' and a 'social being'. It is unrealistic to create a dichotomy between man and society, except in the sense that a particular form of social organisation in a given historical situation may come into conflict with man's goal for his fuller development.

The Marxist concept of man has been misunderstood by many, and distorted by many. The Marxist philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism, the principle that the economic base of society, the mode of production, determines in a fundamental sense man's destiny, has been vulgarised by some scholars as 'economic determinism', implying that the individual human being has no freedom of self-expression and action.

It would be absolutely wrong to equate the Marxist position that 'man is the ensemble of social relations' with 'fatalism'. Marxism has nothing to do with fatalism. Marxism does not negate the creative abilities of individuals and their initiatives and independent action. What Marxism insists is that the unfolding of human personality takes place only through concrete historical processes as man participates in changing oppressive social structures and in controlling the forces of nature. The social environment, the nature and growth of productive forces and the character of class society determine the social consciousness of individual human beings. In this real sense man himself is a social product.

Marx's concept of man is often distorted by some writers as a narrow concept of 'economic man'.¹

* Dr Kurien is Senior Professor and Director, Indian Institute for Regional Development Studies, Kottayam.

¹ This is the title used by Perry LeFevre in his study of Marx. See his book, *Understanding of Marx*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia.

The term 'dialectical and historical materialism' is often wrongly used by opponents of Marxism to mean 'material interest or motivation for more and more material gain and personal comforts.'

The term 'materialism', as opposed to idealism, is to be understood not in terms of psychic motivations but in terms of the philosophic view of the primacy of matter in motion. Materialism refers to a philosophical world view which negates 'idealistic' views about the universe and the process of change or motion.

The 'materialistic' interpretation of Marx has very little in common with the idea that materialistic or economic motive is the main driving force for human beings. In fact, Marx openly disagreed with such vulgar and mechanistic interpretations of 'materialism'. He differentiated between two types of human drives: constant or 'fixed' drives, for example, hunger, sex etc., 'which exist under all circumstances and which can be changed by social conditions only as far as form and direction are concerned,' and 'relative' drives which 'owe their origin only to a certain type of social organization.' The pursuit of maximum economic gain has never been referred to by Marx as a 'fixed' drive. On the contrary, his writings clearly indicate that he considered it as an aspect of human nature which has been the product of acquisitive class societies, particularly the capitalist society.

The materialistic interpretation of history is based on a profound understanding of human history in motion, the ever-changing processes of social development, the transition from one social formation to another, man actively participating in the creation of history.

Two ideas are basic to Marxian understanding of the dynamics of historical change. First, change is due to the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. Second, the development of man and society throughout history is characterized by man's struggle with nature and against oppressive social structures. *Marxism affirms that it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.*

Marxism understands man as a complex social being, with possibilities of good and evil, both the traits being imbibed by him from social practice and from the inherited values of society. At the same time, Marxism underlines the possibility, and indeed the need, for changing the evil conditions of his existence. Man can change the conditions which envelop him by his active participation in social transformation. In his attempts to transform society, man transforms himself.

The criticism that Marx gave man a passive role in the historical process is unfair and uninformed. In fact, Marx emphasized the active, creative role of man in history. 'While external conditions do make man, man also makes his external conditions.' The important point, however, is to understand the dialectical relations or the dynamic interconnections between man and society, between man and his environment.

The relation between man and society was ably described by Marx thus: '...the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.' Man develops as a social being. Social life is the basis on which the individual man develops his consciousness as a social being. Even religious sentiment is a social product—the product of a false consciousness.

Marxism rejects all theological propositions relating to human nature which are based on the concepts of 'original sin' and 'congenital selfishness'.

In this connection we may examine the position of Reinhold Niebuhr. For him, what is wrong with man is that man is a sinner. He sees man in terms of his relationship to God; that is, sin is a theological category. Man's condition as a sinner (as distinguished from the fact that he commits particular 'sins') is 'man's unwillingness to acknowledge his finiteness.'²

It is argued by some writers that Niebuhr's view of what is wrong with man is very close to Kierkegaard's in many respects—in the writings of both, what is wrong with man is that man is a sinner.³

Reinhold Niebuhr states:

However much human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs, they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an imagination, which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence. Human society will never escape the problem of the equitable distribution of the physical and cultural goods which provide for the preservation and fulfilment of human life.⁴

Niebuhr is, of course, not representative of all Christian theology. We may examine Catholic, Eastern and other schools of theology. Catholicism insists, broadly, that man's nature is twofold: he is neither flesh nor spirit, but a compound of both. 'It is his function to be a bridge between two worlds, the world of sense and the world of spirit ...'⁵ The theological proposition of Augustine on the subject is based on the categories of 'human sinfulness' and 'divine sovereignty'. St Gregory of Nyssa, who may be treated as an example of the Eastern school of theology,

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1949, p. 118.

³ Perry LeFevre, *Understandings of Man*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, p. 122.

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, SCM Press, London, 1963, p. 1.

⁵ Christopher Dawson, 'The Nature and Destiny of Man,' in Guthbest, ed., *The Supernatural*, Sheed and Ward, London, 1954, p. 57.

... saw the freedom of man as the central element to which everything was to be related, and therefore looked for the same freedom in the very essence of God, and so sought for *common ground* between God and Man.⁶

Marxism not only rejects all theological concepts of man; it also rejects the existentialist position. Communists have criticised existentialist philosophy as an 'invitation to people to dwell in question of despair.'⁷ Sartre's defence is that

... existentialism, in our sense of the word, is a doctrine that does render human life possible; a doctrine, also, which affirms that every truth and every action imply both an environment and a human subjectivity.⁸

Sartre, of course, denies the charge that existentialist philosophy over emphasises the evil side of human life.

One may state, along with Sartre, that there are two kinds of existentialists. Jaspers and Gabriel Marcel, who are professed Catholic Christians, come under one category—Christian existentialists. The second category is existentialist atheists which includes Heidegger, Sartre and so on. The common point between these two categories is their belief that *existence* comes before *essence*—or that 'we must begin from the subjective.' Atheistic existentialism, of which Sartre is a representative, declares that

... if God does not exist there is at least one being whose existence comes before its essence, a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. That being is man or, as Heidegger has it, the human reality...⁹

Sartre and the atheistic existentialists assert that they put the responsibility on man for 'what he is'. 'Thus, the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders.'¹⁰ However, it may be stated that the Marxist concept of man differs in its essentials from the existentialist position.

The Evolution of Humanist Traditions

Many idealistic philosophers insist on the 'irreconcilable contradictions' between the Marxist-Leninist concept of historical materialism and humanism. Their arguments relate to the so-called dichotomy between historical materialism and values of human personality and

⁶ T. Paul Verghese (now, Metropolitan Paulose Gregorios), *Freedom and Authority*, CLS-ISPCK-LPH, 1974, p. 61.

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, Methuen, London, 1949, p. 23.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

individual freedom. The attempts of socialist countries to build up collective and communal forms of social organisation are counterposed to the ideal of the flowering of individual personality.

It is important that we make a clear distinction between 'individualism' and 'individual freedom'. Repudiation of 'individualism' should not be confused with suppression of individual freedom. Subjecting the individual's acts to social good is not a negation of individual freedom because any free action by individuals which negates social good is not sustainable as part of civilised action. The abstract concept of 'humanism', that is, the concept of human individuality and freedom devoid of social necessity is not only sterile but positively harmful. The repudiation of such an abstract concept of humanism does not mean the negation of humanism in general.

Humanism as a concept is linked with the question of man's place in the universe, his past, present and future. Man is a complex bio-social being. Man enters into a multiplicity of relationships with other members of the society and thus develops material, social and cultural linkages with other people. Such relationships assume different dimensions relating to psychological, moral, legal, family, socio-economic and political ties. It is obvious, therefore, that the problem of humanism and the concept of man in general have to be studied in a scientific manner and in a historical perspective. In particular, against the backdrop of the enormous strides made by science and technology, we need a scientific solution of the problem of man—the central problem of humanism.

The Marxist-Leninist theory of humanism starts by treating man as a worker, a creative being, and as such, the highest of all *values*. It finds expression in practical revolutionary struggle and activities designed to achieve free and comprehensive development for all members of society, to establish genuinely human relations among people, nations and countries.

Many writers have attempted to present a dichotomy between the young Marx and the mature Marx. But a careful reading of the writings of the young Marx will show that there is a genuine inter-connection and evolution of thought.¹¹

The free and full development of human personality will be possible only in a new social order in which all the means of production are socially owned, where production and distribution processes are designed not for narrow personal interests, but for the social good. By raising the social and political consciousness of members of the society, a deliberate attempt will be made to effect a unity between public and private interests, unity between the society and the individual.

¹¹ Loyal D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, New York, 1967.

Marxism did not evolve from nowhere. It has deep roots in the humanist legacy of the past; it takes into account all that is good in the human heritage, basic moral standards evolved in the people's struggle against all forms of social oppression.

Humanism before Marx did take into account some of these basic moral values—the value of man as an individual, the moral principle that one should stand always for the rights and dignity of human beings, enlarge their freedoms, liberate them from all forms of slavery, bondage and oppression, and the moral precept that individuals should strive for the happiness of all mankind.

Though humanism became a developed way of thinking only with the emergence of progressive bourgeois thinkers of Western Europe—in the process of the struggle against feudalism—we find humanist traditions in earlier social formations as well. In mythology we find symbolic expression, in Prometheus, of 'the selfless champion of freedom and human happiness.' In early Christianity, in the first century A.D., during the period of struggle against slavery and against Roman power based on slave ownership, there was a powerful movement for liberation and the upholding of human rights.

As Engels wrote:

Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of the slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome.¹²

Since Christianity arose in the wake of such social ferment, it was natural that in its early form it contained a revolutionary, democratic, and humanist spirit. The human hope of salvation from slavery and exploitation, hope of a new Kingdom on earth underlines such a humanist spirit. But as the Christian Church became part of the ruling elite, the principles of humanism were absolutised and idealised and were robbed of their revolutionary and dynamic content. One of the reasons why the humanist traditions of early Christianity could not survive was the fact that such traditions were embedded in mystical forms and ideas, to be actualised only through divine intervention and the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

The concept of equality among human beings, propagated by Christianity, and indeed even by early Christianity, was based on the understanding that all people were equally sinful before Almighty God. As the Christian Church became part of the powerful political structures, quasi-humanist ideas, abstract concepts of universal all-reconciling love, patience and meekness developed; and they were used as powerful ideological weapons by the ruling classes to domesticate the oppressed people. In different periods in the past, and even today in many parts of the world, the organised Christian Churches use their interpretations of Christian theology to domesticate the oppressed—

¹² Frederic Engels, 'On the History of Early Christianity,' *Marx and Engels On Religion*, Moscow, 1966, p. 281.

by declaring 'all vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either the just punishment of original sin and other sins or trials that the Lord in his infinite wisdom imposes on those redeemed.'¹³ In the anti-feudal movements throughout the middle ages, concepts of freedom and equality were put forward by the leaders of the movements of peasants, artisans and urban poor. Such early ideas of humanism often expressed themselves as *heresies* and had great historical significance.¹⁴

A good example of such peasant and plebeian uprising is the uprising in Northern Italy in the early fourteenth century movement led by Dolcino. The rebels attacked feudal monasteries and estates and wanted "to put into practice by revolutionary means the ideals of the 'apostolic brothers' and to set up communities based on equality and common ownership."¹⁵ The movement was ultimately crushed by the superior forces of Pope Clement V.

It is important to note that many peasant revolts against feudalism were also explicitly revolts against the then prevailing theological positions of the Christian Church—against ideas of postponement of human happiness to the next world, ideas of submission in relation to masters, passivity, and so on. This active revolutionary struggle uplifted the common folk, nourished their sense of dignity and liberated them from many superstitions that belittled the men of toil and gave them a sense of spiritual and moral inferiority.¹⁶

Bourgeois Humanism

It was with the development of capitalism that the concepts of humanism received a substantial impetus. The rising progressive bourgeoisie attacked feudal modes of production and feudal values. This attack against feudalism, in turn, was linked with the anti-feudal struggles of the peasantry. The need of developing capitalism was for an unrestricted supply of manpower—workers not bound by traditional or personal allegiance as under feudalism. This implied the acceptance of the principles of 'equality of people before law'. The rapid growth of scientific knowledge cut at the very roots of superstition and decadent values which kept working people under cultural bondage.

During the period of Renaissance, bourgeois humanism acquired added strength and vigour. The bold defence by leaders of the Renaissance of human values meant the rejection of religious tutelage. This naturally led to a total denial of the supernatural.

It proclaimed the cult of man and the human reason, expressed invincible faith in man's tremendous creative potential and

¹³ M. Petrosyan, *Humanism: Its Philosophical, Ethical, and Sociological Aspects*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1972, pp. 18-19.

¹⁴ For example the *Lollard heresy* among the peasants and other rural poor in 14th century England.

¹⁵ M. Petrosyan, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

gradually evolved its own philosophical, sociological and ethical conception in its war on theology and scholasticism.¹⁷

The advanced thinkers of the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, through their writings, narrowed the 'domain of the divine' and extended the 'domain of man'. The struggle launched by outstanding thinkers such as Nikolaus Copernicus and Giordano Bruno for the acceptance of scientific truth, in fact, meant a direct attack on the feudal churches' attitude to life. The bourgeois thinkers of the seventeenth century in England and in other countries further developed humanist ideas.

On the Renaissance, Engels wrote:

It was the greatest progressive revolution that mankind has so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants—giants in power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning. The men who founded the modern rule of the bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations.¹⁸

No doubt, the transition from the feudal system to the bourgeois socio-economic and political system was a big step forward in the journey towards a truly humanist society and the assertion of human personality. A secular, anti-theological concept of man developed as part of this transition from feudalism to capitalism. However, in the period of the decay of capitalism, in the wake of the rise and fall of imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism, the humanist traditions originally developed by the bourgeoisie are being negated. In the present historical epoch, capitalism and imperialism are obstacles to the further enlargement of humanism. Only a revolutionary transformation from capitalism to socialism can create the socio-economic and political conditions conducive to the growth of a truly humanist society free from oppression and exploitation and a society in which the cultural, moral and spiritual values of man will receive the fullest expression.

The criticism that man has no place in the materialistic interpretation of history, as propounded by Marx, Engels and Lenin is baseless. The criticism that Marxist philosophers in the period after Lenin have ignored the problem of human personality — a criticism made by thinkers such as Adam Schoff — is exaggerated, if not totally incorrect.

It would not be wrong to state that Marxism began with the problem of the individual man and has maintained continued interest in the problem. But one who looks for an exclusive and abstract treatment of the problem of humanism in Marxian terms will be disappointed. For, Marx, Engels and Lenin did not consider the problem in isolation. They deliberately refused to pose the problem of the individual, the meaning and purpose of man's life and other related issues, in the abstract. They evolved an integrated view of man and the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁸ Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, Moscow, 1966, p. 21.

problem of humanism, as part of the general question of the emancipation of the working people from bondage, the struggle for the creation of a new society, the role of working people as the creators of history, their role in society, their freedoms, rights, dignity and the conditions necessary for the flowering of a truly human personality.

Engels explained why Marx and he were compelled in their struggle against the idealist philosophers to stress the importance of the economic aspects of human life and social development :

We had to emphasise the main principle *vis-à-vis* our adversaries, who denied it, and we did not have always the time the place or the opportunity to give their due to other elements involved in the interaction.¹⁹

‘Alienation’ of Man

One of the key concepts in Marxism which has relevance to an understanding of the Marxist interpretation of salvation is ‘alienation’. The central theme of this concept is man’s predicament in experiencing the world and himself passively, as the subject separated from the object. Man, instead of experiencing himself as the acting agent in relation to other human beings and in relation to nature, finds that he is estranged from all of them. The world, including himself and others, appears alien to him. Even the objects of his own creation appear alienated from him, as something standing above and against him.

The theological understanding of ‘alienation’ is, basically, the estrangement between God and man. It is sometimes related to the ‘fall of man’ and ‘original sin’. Marxism negates all such theological propositions. As Marx wrote, ‘Theology explains the origin of evil by the fall of man: that is, it assumes as a fact, in historical form, what has to be explained.’²⁰ Marxism, on the contrary, proceeds from concrete realities. It does not analyse any phenomenon on the basis of ‘assumed’ facts.

Religious estrangement, that is the assumed estrangement between God and man, ‘occurs only in the realm of consciousness, of man’s inner life.’²¹ But, as Marx pointed out, ‘economic estrangement is that of real life; its transcendence therefore embraces both aspects.’²²

Marx wrote: ‘It is true that labour produces for the rich wonderful things—but for the workers it produces privation. It produces palaces—but for the workers, hovels. It produces beauty—but for the workers, deformity.’²³ Again, ‘The worker becomes all the poorer the more he produces, the more his production increases in power and range. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. With the increasing value of the world of things proceeds, in direct proportion, the devaluation of the world of

¹⁹ Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Moscow, 1965, p. 418.

²⁰ Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 55.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

men.'²⁴ Thus one dimension of the problem of alienation is that 'the object which labour produces—labour's product—confronts it as something alien, as a power independent of the producers.'²⁵ In other words, it is the alienation in respect of the worker's relationship to the products of his labour.

The second dimension of the problem is the alienation of the act of production itself. Labour is external to the worker. The worker's activity belongs to another. It is not his spontaneous activity. It does not belong to his essential being. It is the loss of his self.

...In his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker, therefore, only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself.²⁶

A third dimension or aspect of estranged labour is the alienation of man from his species being. Marx pointed out:

It is in just that working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. . . In tearing away from man the object of his production, estranged labour tears from him his species being.²⁷

The alien being is not nature, not God, but man himself. In a capitalist society the root cause of alienation is the power of the exploiting class on labour and the products of labour. Private property in the means of production creates the conditions for the alienation of the workers. Labour and the production of labour belong not to workers, but to men who own the means of production. 'If the worker's activity is a torment to him, to another it must be delight and his life's joy. Not the gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man.'²⁸

Marx made a distinction between the sense of 'possessing' or 'having' and the sense of 'being'. Private property has made us 'so stupid and one-sided' that we consider an object as ours only when we 'possess' it or when it is 'used' by us.²⁹ The value system based on private property has blunted our human sense to such an extent that we have an object only when it is owned in the form of capital or other tangible form, only when it is directly possessed. The concept of 'having' has even penetrated human relations. The caricature of human relations in a capitalist society, between parents and children, between husband and wife and so on, are permeated by chauvinistic 'possessive love' characteristic of the possessive instincts of private property.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The positive transcendence of private property is, therefore, the key to 'the positive transcendence of all estrangement' and therefore is 'the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man'. Communism is 'the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e., human) being—a return become conscious and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development.'³⁰

Communism is '... the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species.'³¹

Marxism attaches crucial significance to the liberation of workers from servitude, from the bondage of private property, not because Marxists are concerned only with their liberation. In fact, Marxism assigns a leading role to workers for the emancipation of the entire society. In the words of Marx,

... the emancipation of society from private property, etc., from servitude, is expressed in the political form of the emancipation of the workers, not that their emancipation alone was at stake but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation—and it contains this, because the whole of human servitude is involved in the relation of the workers to production, and every relation of servitude is but a modification.³²

Man, as a social being, makes his own history. He is his own creator. Man gives birth to himself in the process of social interaction, in the process of history. 'The essential factor in his process of self-creation of the human race lies in its relationship to nature, and hence himself'. Thus, it is futile to look for 'salvation' beyond the confines of man, society and nature. 'Salvation' or liberation is man's own enterprise; he is capable of liberating himself through his struggle against nature and through the revolutionary practice of changing oppressive socio-economic and political structures.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*