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Author: Dr Talat Ahmed

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Reflections on the Asiatic Mode of Production in India

This essay emerges out of a deep frustration with the extreme polarity of debates within historiography with respect to thinking about pre-colonial, pre-capitalist societies outside Europe. Among South Asian historians in particular there have been longstanding vexed debates over the relevance of Karl Marx's conception of history, particularly his method of periodisation: how Marx analysed various different epochs of the human past through the concept of 'modes of production'. Here Marx defined social formations in a linear fashion through analysis of varying forms of exploitation and appropriation of a surplus from producing groups, and the resulting process of socialclass formation. Since the 1960s for example, both Marxist and non-Marxist South Asian economic historians have fiercely debated definitions of 'feudalism' and the idea of an 'Asiatic mode of production', as well as discussing the extent to which these two modes of production are comparable or essentially quite different, discussions that culminated with the publication of *The Feudalism Debate*, in 1999.¹ Scholars such as DD Kosambi, Ram Sharan Sharma, Irfan Habib, Dineshchandra Sircar and Harbans Mukhia have made important contributions to these debates.²

One longstanding issue of contention in such debates relates to Marx himself, and non-Marxist historians have longed maintained that Marx's model of linear development is, at best, an ideal type and at worst, a Eurocentric periodisation of history that does not in any way correspond to Indian developments. The traditional British colonial periodisation of Indian history divided it into three or four broad categories: (1) prehistory, (2) ancient, (3) medieval and (4) modern, for this neatly corresponded into Ancient = Hindu, Medieval = Muslim and Modern = British. Much of Marx's own writings on India seem to reinforce notions of the essential backwardness of non-European societies and the sense that a modernising zeal only arrived in India with British colonial conquest in the eighteenth century. In 1853 for example Marx used the unfortunate term 'Oriental despotism', and in general was rather scathing and dismissive about what he saw as 'unchanging, timeless village communes'.³

Moreover, Marx's later concept of the 'Asiatic mode of production' also stressed how a powerful state had prevented any development and so gave the impression that stagnation was somehow inherent in these societies in a way it was not for European feudal societies. Post-colonialist scholars – together with others - have unsurprisingly attacked Marx for this reason, noting the obvious semi-racist

¹ Harbans Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate* (New Dehli, 1999). Most of the essays in this collection were published previously in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*.

² See Ram Sharan Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* (New Dehli, 1980) and *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation* (Hyderabad, 2001); Dineshchandra Sircar, 'Indian Landlordism and European Feudalism' in *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems of Ancient and Medieval India* (Dehli, 1974); Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History* (New Dehli, 1995); Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956). See also Chris Harman, 'The rise of capitalism', *International Socialism*, 102 (2004), pp. 53-86.

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works (MECW)*, 12 (London, 1979), p. 127. In 1957, Karl Wittfogel famously made much of Marx's use of the phrase 'Oriental Despotism' to try and understand the development of Stalinist Russia in a problematic fashion. See Karl A. Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (New York, 1981).

connotations that seem to give succour to the contention that ‘oriental’ cultures were a stagnant, changeless, despotic cesspit.⁴ In Marx’s defence, he had never been to India and was reliant on low-grade sources from colonial officials.⁵ Moreover, if Marx is criticised for thinking of India as essentially timeless and unchanging, it might be recalled that so did Gandhi. Nonetheless, the conclusion that seems to flow ineluctably from Marx’s concept of an ‘Asiatic mode of production’ is therefore that modernisation in such societies can only come about with the arrival of imperial powers, and that there is something unique and inevitable about capitalism breaking through in the West. This essay will not deny the problematic and controversial nature of Marx’s notion of an ‘Asiatic mode of production’, but will attempt to demonstrate why it still remains a concept worth reflecting on by historians of South Asia. Firstly, we will focus on Marx himself, and discuss how there was nothing unilinear about his mature understanding of modes of production. Secondly, we use pre-colonial India as a case study for exploring the usefulness of the ‘Asiatic mode of production’ as a tool for historians today.

Karl Marx on Modes of Production

When looking at modes of production we are dealing with a concept which plays an important if contentious role in Marxist historiography, one that for Marxists is fundamentally central to any serious attempt to try and understand the ‘totality’ of the human past. Unfortunately, some Marxist historians have interpreted the concept in a quite simplistic manner.⁶ This has meant that many non-Marxist scholars have seen the concept as signifying everything they think is wrong with historical materialism: a schematic subdivision of the whole of human history into rigidly defined stages, the development of which is determined mechanically by a limited set of economic forces, driving each mode of production ineluctably to its predetermined successor stage in a teleological fashion until the arrival of socialism.

In reality, Marx’s own theory of historical change and use of modes of production is far more considered. Marx was no kind of technological or economic determinist – for him, people are the active and conscious makers of history, not merely its passive victims and indices. As he famously stated in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

⁴ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978).

⁵ Marx relied heavily on the writings of François Bernier on India, Thomas Stamford Raffles on Indonesia, Mountstuart Elphinstone’s *History of India* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*. It is also worth noting Marx’s ideas on contemporary India changed, especially after the Indian mutiny. See Marx’s articles for the *New York Tribune* in July 1857, *MECW*, 15 (London, 1986), especially pp. 298, 306-307, 354-55.

⁶ This was particularly the case with those inspired by Stalin’s crude technological or productive force determinism, whereby – as Stalin put it in 1938 – ‘first the productive forces of society change and develop, and then, depending on these changes and in conformity with them, men’s relations of production, their economic relations, change’. Quoted in Paul Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History* (Manchester, 2006), p. 98.

The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.⁷

The young Marx and Engels developed this theory of history through the critique of German philosophy and ideology in the 1840s, with its popular belief that 'ideas, thoughts, concepts produce, determine and dominate men, their material conditions and real life'.⁸ Marx's central contention behind his 'materialist conception of history' instead stressed that 'it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.'⁹

For Marx, a mode of production refers to a distinctive way of producing things – how humans have historically entered all sorts of co-operative social relations out of necessity to produce things in order to survive, produce and reproduce throughout history. A mode of production is firstly a combination of the productive forces - such as human labour power and the means of production (tools, machinery, land, materials, technology) - and the relations of production (the types of class and property dynamics that govern society's productive assets). As Marx famously wrote in his 1859 Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*,

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto.¹⁰

Marx's short statement here can be and has been taken as scriptural authority for a stress on the dominance of political economy and a mechanical application of how social change occurs. However, as Eric Hobsbawm once pointed out, since human beings have consciousness, the materialist conception of history is the *basis* of historical explanation but not historical explanation itself.¹¹ As Marx himself continued in the 1859 Preface,

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short,

⁷ Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (London, 1970), p. 96.

⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', *New Left Review*, 143 (January-February 1984), p. 42. The quotation is Hobsbawm's translation of a passage from *The German Ideology*.

⁹ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (London, 1977), p. 47.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1981), pp. 20-21.

¹¹ Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', p. 43.

ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out.¹²

Marx's concept of a 'mode of production' was usefully defined by Eric Hobsbawm as 'the aggregate of the productive relationships which constitute the economic structure of a society and form the mode of production of the material means of existence'.¹³ Whatever the social relations of production are, and whatever other functions in society they may have, the mode of production constitutes the structure which determines what form the growth of the productive forces and the distribution of the surplus will take, how society can or cannot change its structures, and how, at suitable moments, the transition to another mode of production can or will take place. It also establishes the range of superstructural possibilities. As Hobsbawm argued, the mode of production is the base of our understanding of the variety of human societies and their interactions, as well as of their historical dynamics. The mode of production is not identical with a society: 'society' is a system of human relations between human groups.¹⁴ Consequently, a 'mode of production' serves to identify the forces guiding the alignment of these groups - which can be done variously in different societies, within a certain range.

Do modes of production form a series of evolutionary stages, ordered chronologically or otherwise? There seems to be little doubt that Marx himself saw them as forming a series in which man's growing emancipation from, and control over, nature affected both the forces and the relations of production. But in the same 1859 Preface, Marx argued the anatomy of civil society had to be sought in political economy. Equally, economic changes relating to productive techniques do not stand independent of wider social and cultural factors. Recent Marxist scholarship has further demonstrated the explanatory and imaginative power behind Marx's analysis of modes of production.¹⁵ The actual transformation of one mode into another has often been seen in causal and unilinear terms: within each mode, it is argued, there is a 'basic contradiction' which generates the dynamic and the forces that will lead to its transformation. The contradiction thesis rests on Marx's metaphor of the 'base' and 'superstructure' in which an ultimate clash results between the economic productive base and the fetters of oversized, parasitic state institutions that drive society forward or backwards.

Against crude determinism, Hobsbawm suggested a more fruitful way of using Marx's base and superstructure metaphor. Firstly, that the basic elements within a mode of production, which tend to destabilize it, imply the *potentiality* rather than the *certainty* of transformation, but that, depending on the structure of the mode, they also set certain limits to the kind of transformation that is possible. Secondly, that the mechanisms leading to the transformation of one mode into another may not be exclusively internal to that mode, but may arise from the conjunction and interaction of differently structured societies.¹⁶ In this sense all development is *mixed*

¹² Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁵ See Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, 2010). Anderson demonstrates how Marx's later writings had a multilinear concept of world developments.

¹⁶ Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', p. 47. For more on base and superstructure, see Chris Harman, 'Base and Superstructure', *International Socialism*, 32 (1986), pp. 3-44, and Duncan Hallas, 'Comments on Base and Superstructure', *International Socialism*, 34 (1987), pp. 125-27.

development. Instead of looking only for the specific regional conditions which led to the formation of, say, the peculiar system of classical antiquity in the Mediterranean, or to the transformation of feudalism into capitalism within Western Europe, we ought to look at the various paths which led to the junctions and cross-roads at which, at a certain stage of development, these areas found themselves.

This approach makes it easier to explain the coexistence of societies which progress further on the road to capitalism and those which failed to take that road. But it also draws attention to the fact that the evolution of this system is itself a mixed evolution: that it builds on pre-existing materials, utilising, adapting but also being shaped by them. Historical capitalism, did not only make use of the remnants of forced labour it inherited from its predecessors, but re-created systems of forced labour on an enormous scale (such as chattel slavery in the Atlantic world and indentured labour). 'Free' wage labour under capitalism does not replace all other forms of exploitation, but develops hand-in-hand with bonded labour in the same internationally operating enterprises, sharing many of its features. In order to understand how these different forms of exploitation can contribute to a single overriding systemic logic, one has to define the mode of production building on Marx's own mature and considered understanding in its full richness.

Marx on the Asiatic Mode of Production

In Marx's early writings he wrote about the progression of human societies and outlined four modes of production: primitive communism, ancient/slave societies, feudalism and capitalism. Marx's view here - which comes through strongly in *The Communist Manifesto* (co-written with Frederick Engels in 1848) - was strongly focused on the history of European societies. After 1848, with the failure of the European revolutionary wave, Marx found himself in exile in London. In the 1850s and 1860s Marx turned to look at China and particularly India, where it was clear that his earlier model of human development did not quite fit. In the previously quoted 1859 Preface, Marx now introduced an 'Asiatic mode of production' for the first time: 'In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society.'¹⁷

Influenced by Hegel, Marx pondered the question why the history of the East appeared as the history of religions. Reading François Bernier's accounts of his travels through the Mughal Empire in the seventeenth century, Marx felt he had arrived at the answer. In 1853, in private correspondence with Engels, who was then in the process of studying Arab and biblical history, Marx noted

Bernier rightly considers that the basic form of all phenomena in the East – he refers to Turkey, Persia, Hindustan – is to be found in the fact that *no private property in land existed*. This is the real key, even to the Oriental heaven.¹⁸

As Engels replied,

¹⁷ Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 21.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Correspondence, 1846-1895* (London, 1934), p. 66.

The absence of property in land is indeed the key to the whole of the East. Here lies its political and religious history. But how does it come about that the Orientals do not arrive at landed property, even in its feudal form? I think it is mainly due to the climate, together with the nature of the soil, especially with the great stretches of desert which extend from the Sahara straight across Arabia, Persia, India and Tartary up to the highest Asiatic plateau. Artificial irrigation is here the first condition of agriculture and this is a matter either for the communes, the provinces or the central government.¹⁹

Marx, taking into consideration Engels' additional findings, now noted in his reply to Engels,

The stationary character of this part of Asia - despite all the aimless movement on the political surface - is fully explained by two mutually dependent circumstances: (1) the public works were the business of the central government; (2) beside these the whole empire, not counting the few larger towns, was resolved into *villages*, which possessed a completely separate organisation and formed a little world in themselves...²⁰

Unlike Gandhi, who romanticised the notion of self-sufficient village communities, Marx was scathing. He noted how the Asiatic system had made man the unresisting tool of superstition, enslaved it beneath traditional rules, and deprived it of all grandeur and historical energies. The result was an undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life. He argued that the Asiatic system had been the solid foundation of oriental despotism that had 'restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass' and was based on 'caste and slavery'.²¹

In his *Grundrisse*, written between 1857-58 and not published until fifty years after his death, Marx continued working with this basic model of Asiatic society and clearly distinguished the Asiatic, Ancient and Germanic forms of pre-capitalist property. For example, he wrote, 'In the Asiatic form (at least, predominantly), the individual has no property but only possession; the real proprietor, proper, is the commune— hence property only as communal property in land'.²² Similarly,

Amidst oriental despotism and the propertylessness which seems legally to exist there, this clan or communal property exists in fact as the foundation, created mostly by a combination of manufactures and agriculture within the small commune, which thus becomes altogether self-sustaining, and contains all the conditions of production and reproduction within itself. A part of their surplus labour belongs to the

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 70.

²¹ *MECW*, 12, pp. 127-28, 132.

²² Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1973), p. 484. For more on the *Grundrisse*, see Eric Hobsbawm's introduction to the first English translation in 1964, 'Marx on pre-Capitalist Formations', reprinted in Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism, 1840-2011* (London, 2011), pp. 127-75, and Marcello Musto (ed.) *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later* (New York, 2008).

higher community, which exists ultimately as a person and this surplus labour takes the form of tribute.²³

Regarding public works in Asia, Marx noted,

The communal conditions of real appropriation through labour, *aqueducts*, very important among the Asiatic peoples; means of communication etc. then appear as the work of the higher unity – of the despotic regime hovering over the little communes.²⁴

Therefore, we find in the *Grundrisse* all the features of the Asiatic system as described by Marx in his articles on India. In 1858, a year after the Indian rebellion, Marx wrote on the controversy stirred up by Lord Canning's proclamation over the annexation of Oudh that the British Government had confiscated proprietary rights in the soil. This stirred up a debate in Britain about the nature of the claims to landed property made by the *zamindars*, *talukdars* or *sirdars*. One side maintained that these were real private property holders, while the other maintained that they were to be considered as mere tax-gatherers. Marx stated that the latter view was based on a 'more thorough study of the institutions of Hindostan' and was also confirmed by the results of the Bengal settlement.²⁵

Marx's comments are not necessarily an attempt at a full, coherent explanation but more as an observation that Indian society had undergone a different historical development and therefore the driving force of such a society had to be understood differently. He outlined a theoretical account of societies where the ruling class collectively exploited an oppressed class, which itself was engaged in collective production. He suggested that this was a transitional form between primitive communism and a fully-developed class society. The central features of Marx's 'Asiatic mode of production' can therefore be summarized as follows:

- A strong, centralized state
- The importance of irrigation with hydraulic water projects
- Revenue collected through taxation. This is how surplus was expropriated, and so something to be seen in contrast to the experience of feudalism in Europe, which was characterized by private property relations in terms of land and surplus taken in rent and kind.

Aside from his characterization of a strong centralized bureaucratic state, the key defining feature here then for Marx relates to the relationship between the exploiters and exploited, which due to taxation not rent is seen as different from classical feudalism.²⁶

²³ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 473.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 473-74.

²⁵ Karl Marx, 'Lord Canning's Proclamation and Land Tenure in India', *New-York Daily Tribune*, 7 June 1858.

²⁶ For more discussion of the Asiatic mode of production, and guides for further reading on Marx's theorisation of this concept, see Anderson, *Marx at the Margins*, pp. 270-72; Anne M. Bailey and Josep R. Llobera (eds.) *The Asiatic Mode of Production* (London, 1981); Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*, pp. 110-18; and Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, I (New York, 1977), pp. 515-71.

The Case of Pre-Capitalist India

With this definition of the 'Asiatic mode of production' in mind, it can be seen that early and medieval India does not in any shape or form correspond to Marx's picture. Early Indian society was anything but changeless and timeless – as has been demonstrated by modern Indian economic historians, including many influenced by Marxism. So Ram Sharan Sharma in his pioneering book *Indian Feudalism* (first published in 1965) provided an impressive account of how developments in pre-capitalist India were not wholly dissimilar to the political economy of pre-modern Western Europe. Sharma argued that from Gupta and post-Gupta times, ie. from the third to sixth century, there were certain political and administrative developments that tended to 'feudalise the state apparatus'.²⁷ The most significant feature was the practice of granting land, cultivated and uncultivated, to religious and secular donees and particularly to the priestly Brahmin class. We can see evidence of this in the *dharmaśūtras* (the first of four documents outlining religious and legal duties of priests) and the didactic portions of the Epic and the *Puranas* (dated from the third to fifth century), early Hindu, Buddhist and Jain religious texts containing genealogies of kings. The *Anusasana Parva* of the *Mahabharata* devotes a whole chapter to praising the act of making gifts of land.²⁸ Even with secular donees, though, there is little epigraphic evidence land grants are indicated by titles for functionaries such as *bhogika* and *bhogapatika* demonstrating that the official was to enjoy the land.²⁹ Donees had certain rights over the land: most grants to temples forbade the king's soldiers from entering the gifted land and neither could government officials interfere with any administrative aspect. Administrative rights were perhaps given up for the first time in grants made to Buddhist monks by the *Satavahana* ruler *Gautamiputra Satakarni* in the second century. Though the king retained control over most revenue, from the fifth century onwards, at the time of *Pravarasena II Vatataka*, the ruler gave up control over most sources of revenue which included, according to Sharma, 'pasturage, hides and charcoal, mines for production of salt, forced labour and all hidden treasures and deposits'.³⁰

It was not only revenues that were handed over; control over the inhabitants of gifted land was also surrendered to the beneficiaries. Sharma points out that in the *Rastrakutas* dynasty from the seventh to tenth century in south western India, religious donees were given great coercive and administrative powers including the right to punish criminals, and try criminal cases as well as civil matters. This transformed the gifted land and village along with its inhabitants and income practically into 'independent pockets' within the kingdom. So according to Sharma, the practice of giving land grants in the Gupta period gave rise to 'brahminical feudatories', who performed administrative functions not under royal authority but independently of it.³¹ The priestly class and temples were granted land and revenues in return for the spiritual services they provided for the kings. In return, the brahmins invented fictitious family trees for ruling groups, tracing their ancestry to the Solar and Lunar dynasties and stressing their divine powers. In this way religious benefices provided legitimacy for ruling families.

²⁷ Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, p. 1.

²⁸ *Mahabharata*, Book 13.

²⁹ From *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, quoted in Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, p. 12.

³⁰ From *Select Inscriptions*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2. See also *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

These grants created powerful intermediaries who exercised considerable economic and political power. In these gifted areas, the transfer of village inhabitants resulted in a subject peasantry, which in turn led to the extension of forced labour. Priestly intermediaries needed their land cultivated and since they were not going to do it themselves they had to use peasants from the gifted land. On top of that grants from the Gupta period in central India show that peasants had to render labour service – *visti* - to the king. They also show that inhabitants had to obey the donees meaning that donees could commandeer impressed labour.³² There was also forced labour from artisans as early law books required artisans to give one day's work per month to the king in lieu of taxes. This meant that artisan and handicraft activities were confined to the countryside as artisans were allotted to villages, big estates or temple establishments. This led to restrictions on the free movement of peasants, artisans and merchants. The use of forced labour is also referred to in the *Kamasutra of Vatsyayana*, this was not for use by the king but by the village headman who could extract labour services from peasant women for cleaning, filling up granaries and working in the fields. Here the role of the village headman, brahminical feudatories, powerful intermediaries, in pushing the practice of working the fields was extended and put to wide and effective use in bringing barren land into cultivation from the fifth century onwards. This class of subject peasantry had to pay rent in cash, kind or labour to landlords. This shows how new exploitative relations of production could lead to a development of new forces of production, suggesting how such societies could be dynamic and so akin to many European feudal societies.

Peasants under the donees were in servile position – it was free peasants who lost in status, as they had to pay several new taxes which Sharma believes were comparable to feudal dues in Europe. This included forced contributions of money and supplies to royal troops and officials who passed through villages in the Gupta period. These forced contributions provided for the needs of the army and state. This tended to raise the position of royal troops and officials as another class of intermediaries and so further lower the status of free peasants.³³ From the fifth century onwards, there was the growth of obligations of another category of intermediaries – *samantas* – a term applied to conquered kings or chiefs who were reinstated on condition of paying tribute and homage. In this regard Samudra Gupta's conquests led to the establishment of feudal relations and set the pattern for his successors. Sharma cites the *Pallava* inscriptions from South India as evidence to show how *samantas* had to provide military service and troops to the overlord. Other services included presenting daughters to conquerors as well as providing sons and princes to be trained in imperial traditions and having wives attend court at festive occasions. The position of the *samanta* was akin to that of the vassal in medieval Europe. In India secular vassals helped lords by governing fiefs and in this way they were linked to the lord not only militarily and administratively but also socially.³⁴

In 1979, Harbans Mukhia, a historian of medieval India, challenged this analysis in a famous paper asking 'Was There Feudalism in India?'³⁵ He argues feudalism in Europe was a dynamic system marked by technological advances, the development of the productive forces and the complete subjugation of the peasantry, all of which was lacking in India. For Mukhia, feudalism as a mode of production

³² Ibid., pp. 38-40.

³³ Ibid., pp. 41-42.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 39, 18-23.

³⁵ This was published as Harbans Mukhia, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8, (1981), and republished in Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate*.

rests on serfdom, and by serfdom he means serfs performing unpaid labour on land belonging to the feudal lord. In Europe the peasants' dependence on the lord was structured in the production process, so the lord controlled, even if only partly, the use of labour time for production on the peasants manse (their own plot). Mukhia states that this structured dependence of the entire peasantry, excluding the stratum of allodialists, allows us to understand the dynamic nature of feudal society in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries and its decline in the fourteenth as a result of peasant resistance.³⁶ For Mukhia the nature of production in Europe meant for most of the year peasants were doing very little apart from at harvest time. In these short periods there was a great demand for manual labour, which in turn conditioned some other aspects of early feudal society. If scarcity of labour at crucial points was to be overcome, it was necessary to make more intensive use of soil fertility and develop labour-saving devices. This, Mukhia argues, encouraged agricultural development as new production techniques were introduced, such as increased use of fertiliser, use of horses and new crops. As peasants had to give labour time to the feudal lord it encouraged them to accept new methods using less labour. Therefore he concludes that both the feudal lord and the peasant had an interest in new production methods. So feudalism in Europe was a dynamic system and this dynamism was structured in the production process.

Mukhia goes on to argue that this dynamism then laid the basis for differentiation amongst the peasantry, with some emerging as farmers who employed less well-off peasants as wage labourers. When peasant rebellions occurred in the fourteenth century they were led by peasants who were determined to defend the gains they had made as a result of the emergence of a new mode of production in the countryside. In this view feudalism was a clear advance on the previous mode of production based on slavery and its dynamic nature opened the door for rural capitalism.

By the end of the fourteenth century the failure of the feudal reaction had become apparent. From the beginning of the fifteenth century Western Europe began to recover its basis of strength. The ground for this recovery had been prepared by the preceding 'crisis' that had undermined much of the economic and social system which had become outmoded by its own tremendous onward movement. The attainment of the abstraction of capitalism was yet a long way off. But the movement had been set firmly in its direction.³⁷

So for Mukhia European feudalism developed essentially as changes at the base of society took place.

India on the other hand was very different for Mukhia as the establishment of feudalism is attributed to the actions of the state in granting land in lieu of a salary. The result of this is that there is no direct dependence of the peasant on the lord, thus there is no serfdom, no dynamic to the society and therefore no feudalism. Mukhia conceded there was increasing exploitation of the peasantry in medieval India but not their dependence on feudal lords. Dependence here refers to the 'extraneous control over the peasant's process of production' and in this the critical element was 'the diversion of at least a part of the peasant's labour from his own process of production

³⁶ Harbans Mukhia, 'Was there Feudalism in Indian History?' in Harbans Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate* (New Dehli, 1999), pp. 36-39.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

to that of the lord'.³⁸ Forced labour has existed in India but not, states Mukhia, for the purposes of production. What makes India very different from European feudalism, apart from the absence of serfdom, is that its agrarian history has been characterized predominantly by a free peasantry. By this he means that peasants paid taxes to the state, or to people who were given positions by the state but they had no real power to compel the peasant to do anything. So Mukhia asserts that due to the absence of serfdom there was no pressure on the peasantry to change or advance productive methods, no interest in developing new techniques and therefore no real qualitative change in society. With the exception of the noria and the Persian wheel, he believes there has been no real advance in the means of agricultural production. This did not mean there was an absence of conflict in medieval India but this would have been over the 'distribution and redistribution of the surplus rather than over a redistribution of the means of production, which had changed the face of the medieval European economy'.³⁹ These conflicts could be resolved internally as is evidenced by the fact that when the Mughal Empire collapsed Mukhia states it was a certain class of *zamindars* that were the main beneficiaries and not a new class or system emerging. This leads him to conclude that there was very little tension in medieval India to allow for the development of the bourgeois system of production, because this lack of tension did not produce feudal relationships.

Mukhia makes some valid points about feudalism in Europe, but whether serfdom is the key way of defining this system seems a little questionable and his assertion that there was very little development in medieval India, which must cover a span of a thousand years, also seems suspect. His critique can be questioned on a number of points. Feudalism in Europe was not characterized just by serfs doing labour on the lords' land. In many parts of Europe serfs paid rent in kind and, later, money rent was the norm. In other words the serf was not free to leave the land in order to escape such obligations. In Western Europe peasants were compelled to work on their landlords' land as well as their own, but this should not be taken as feudalism. Peasants who paid heavy rents in cash and kind and those who provided rent as well as labour, were in reality, as servile as those who only supplied labour. This form of subjection was present in the early medieval Indian social structure.⁴⁰

Mukhia argues that in India the peasantry had some autonomy as they controlled the means of production, but this does not mean there was a free peasantry, or that the peasant had control over their labour time or the fruits of that labour. As Indian historian Romila Thapar explains landlords expropriated much of the surplus as revenue for hiring out land. From the seventh century onwards peasants who cultivated the land were in effect tied to the land and they had to hand over a fixed

³⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁴⁰ Mukhia's originally suggested feudalism could only be defined on the basis of labour rent, but this does not concur with Marx's own observations and theorisation of how feudalism developed in Western Europe. For Marx, labour rent was just one means through which the labour of the European peasantry was expropriated by feudal lords. This was a point recognized by Sharma, and later stressed by others including Chris Wickham and the Turkish Marxist Halil Berktaý. Mukhia accordingly dropped this distinction and moved to another, that between rent and revenue. For more on this, see Ram Sharan Sharma, 'How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?' in Harbans Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate* (New Dehli, 1999), pp. 84, 105; Chris Wickham, 'The Uniqueness of the East' in Harbans Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate*, (New Dehli, 1999), p. 114; and Halil Berktaý, 'The Feudalism Debate: The Turkish End – "Is Tax-vs.-Rent" Necessarily the Product and Sign of a Modal Difference?' in Harbans Mukhia (ed.) *The Feudalism Debate*, (New Dehli, 1999), pp. 267-68.

share of their produce to the landowner who sent part of this revenue to the king.⁴¹ Thapar also cites epigraphic evidence from *Chauchan* history – a Rajput dynasty in north India from the eighth to the twelfth century which mentions many varieties of taxes levied at the peasantry: taxes to temple authorities and taxes in addition to basic and land tax. This coupled with an obligation to provide free labour increased the power of what she terms feudal intermediaries and ‘reduced the cultivators to a condition of hopelessness’.⁴² Thapar’s evidence taken alongside Sharma’s insights into economic as well as extra-economic coercion is not that dissimilar to the practice of the manorial rights of European feudalism. As Cherubini has noted, the lord served as judge over the inhabitants of the village for minor infractions. There were also instances of local lords sentencing law breakers to death or imposing corporal punishment. This was practised in central and northern Italy where imperial power was weak and in southern Italy during the conflicts between the monarchs and the barons, who were winning greater political power in the fifteenth century.⁴³ This is perhaps why Sharma’s observation that these political and judicial rights, which were not economic, allowed the beneficiaries to exploit more effectively the peasants living on their estate is pertinent. In fact far from labour services being central to European feudalism, the French Marxist historian Guy Bois has argued that what made the distinctive change solidifying feudalism as a system in around the year 1000 in Europe was the settling of former slaves on individual family plots where they were more productive than slaves working collectively on large tracts of land.⁴⁴ It was this provision of individual plots which led to the dynamism of the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, which questions the claim that the origin of the land system of medieval India was different to that in Europe.

The notion of an essentially changeless and timeless India is also challenged by the picture that we have of technological advance as peasant cultivation developed widely. Irfan Habib has noted the growth of urban markets stemming from the rise of towns in the sixth century which was bound to lead to the extensive cultivation of market and industrial crops. These developments required more intensive and skilled labour, something that large farming units could not provide. Their methods did not fit the changing situation as they became uncompetitive and obsolete. Only the peasant family unit with its farming capacities could take advantage of the changing circumstances.⁴⁵ Habib’s work suggests that the system did not arise out political-administrative measures but from pressures to advance productive methods. This shows what we have is a crisis in productive relations, which may not be unconnected with changes in the mode of production so hinting at a dynamic to the system previously ignored.

Mukhia’s claim that the Indian medieval system did not encourage technological advance is not sustainable when one considers the expansion of states that took place throughout the Gupta, post-Gupta and Mauryan periods, let alone the later Delhi Sultanate and Mughal Empire.⁴⁶ This would not have been possible

⁴¹ Romila Thapar, *A History of India, Vol. 1* (Dehli, 1990), p. 242.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 246-48.

⁴³ Giovanni Cherubini, ‘The Peasant and Agriculture’, in Jacques Le Goff (ed.) *The Medieval World* (London, 1990), p. 126.

⁴⁴ Guy Bois, *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: The Village of Lournard from Antiquity to Feudalism* (Manchester, 1992), pp. 117-21.

⁴⁵ Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, pp. 121-22.

⁴⁶ Particularly the Middle kingdom of India – over some 1500 years from *Shahi* dynasty centred in Kabul valley from the third to the ninth century and the *Rashtrakutas* in the Deccan from the early eighth to tenth century.

without great agrarian expansion, which led to the emergence of priests, officers and administrators. This could not have happened without considerable changes in the mode of production. Sharma identified some key changes and advances in agricultural production. Like Mukhia, he notes the importance of the Persian wheel for lifting water in rural expansion. So the *Kasyapa's Krsisukti* text proscribes three methods of raising water: by men, oxen, and elephants. In addition there are detailed instructions in the *Brhatsamhita* of *Yarahamihira*, the *Agni* and *Visnudharmottara Puranas* referring to agricultural techniques that meant better seeds and crops were produced. There was knowledge of seasons based on meteorological observations which was quite advanced for the *Krsi-Parasala*, as well as the increasing knowledge and use of fertilisers, compost, iron and irrigation facilities which were developed and expanded. The types of cereals increased such as rice, wheat, lentils and fruits and vegetables.⁴⁷ All this would suggest an enormous increase in agricultural production. Kosambi makes the point that the first evidence for the coconut on the eastern and western coasts comes from the first century before and after Christ. These were cash crops and so would require relatively advanced production techniques. He explains how tank and bund irrigation greatly extended cultivation and improved cropping.⁴⁸ In general, there is ample evidence of slow but cumulative technical change in agriculture during the medieval period in India. Habib points to technical advance in India until about the seventeenth century, when cities and weaponry were as advanced as Europe and there were fairly sophisticated 'merchant capitalist' traders.⁴⁹

There was also development of the means of production, with the adoption of many of the same innovations that took root in medieval and early modern Europe. Irfan Habib has pointed out that the Indian subcontinent had developed to the same general level in making elementary machines as Western Europe by the seventeenth century. The building of the Taj Mahal in the mid-seventeenth century utilised the skills and techniques of craftsmen from right across Eurasia, while the Indian textile industry used looms and spinning wheels essentially the same as those used in sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century Europe. There was a massive growth of markets, of trade, of craft production (for example, in the eighteenth century India sold much more to Europe than vice versa) and of urbanization.⁵⁰ The direction of economic and social development in India was then not fundamentally different to that in Europe. This was because of considerable similarities in both the relations of exploitation and the productive forces. The direction in which Indian and west-European economic development was heading was the same. There were considerable differences in speed of development. But these differences existed on just as great a scale between different regions within both Europe and India.

It was the impact of the political superstructure reacting on the economy that brought the development to an end across wide swathes of northern India. The monarchy followed a policy of moving its officials from area to area every few years so as to stop them establishing independent local roots which would give them the ability to resist central control. But this meant the officials set out to enrich themselves as quickly as possible at the expense of the local people, showing little concern about sustaining, let alone increasing, the productivity of the land under their control. According to Habib, the flow of agricultural products to the markets of the cities was not matched, as in parts of Europe, by a flow of manufactured goods from

⁴⁷ Sharma, 'How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?' pp.102-103.

⁴⁸ Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, pp. 255-56, 281.

⁴⁹ Habib, *Essays in Indian History*, pp. 195-98.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-15.

the cities to the countryside, where some could have contributed to increasing output.⁵¹ The resulting limitation to the domestic market could also help explain why the machines used to make goods in the cities of seventeenth-century India were generally made of wood, while metal was used in Europe. By the end of the seventeenth century the weaknesses in agriculture were reducing the productive resources of the Mughal Empire as a whole and leading to rebellions and civil wars, which further sapped productive resources. The break-up of the old superstructure might, in time, have led to an unlocking of the indigenous forces pushing towards capitalist or semi-capitalist forms of production. But something else intervened first. The merchant capitalists of the still dynamic region of Bengal saw the easiest way to protect their trade as backing the emerging political power of the British East India Company.

Finally, when thinking about the historic transition between ancient to capitalist societies, we need to remind ourselves that feudalism was not one single event in Europe – and that there was no ‘big bang’ in the year 1000 that led to its arrival fully formed and intact in Europe that year. Just as capitalism has not developed evenly, uniformly across the globe, it did not even develop like this in Europe, so feudalism was not experienced as one singular formation. There were a myriad of differences between Italy, Prussia, Russia and England, Scotland, France. Developments occur within feudal society but in a contradictory manner so they can be resisted, adopted and adapted.

Conclusion

The transition towards capitalism was then a very complex and very long historical process, full of contradictions and extremely uneven, but one which encompassed the whole world, with interconnections between Africa, Asia and Europe. What held development back in Asia was not the innate backwardness of Indians but a strong and very parasitic state, getting fatter and essentially sterile with no interest in innovation. The fetters of what Marx called the superstructure held back any meaningful innovation in the development of the productive forces, the economic base. What allowed capitalism to break through in Western Europe was the relative backwardness and weaknesses of medieval Europe in comparison, which gave an emerging bourgeois class the political and economic space to manoeuvre and organise for a revolutionary breakthrough.

Does this mean there is a different dynamic or different mode of production at work here then?⁵² The evidence presented in this essay suggests not, for the increased importance of the state in India as against the individual landlords in Europe did not stop there being some remarkable similarities in the trajectories of late-medieval and early-modern India and Europe—especially when you take into account the backwardness of much of Europe until the beginning of the twentieth century. The differences that do exist do not then arguably need the whole conceptual apparatus of

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 227.

⁵² In 1973, Samir Amin in *Uneven Development* (New York, 1976) relabelled the Asiatic mode of production the ‘tribute-paying’ or tributary mode, and this approach has been developed by Chris Wickham in two important essays, ‘The Other Transition: From Ancient World to Feudalism’, *Past and Present*, 63 (1984) and ‘The Uniqueness of the East’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 12 (1985). Subsequently the debate has been taken up by others including John Haldon in *The State and the Tributary Mode of Production* (London, 1993) and Jairus Banaji, *Theory as History: Essays on Modes of Production and Exploitation* (Leiden, 2010). For some discussion, see Blackledge, *Reflections on the Marxist Theory of History*, pp. 115-19.

a different mode of production to explain them. As the Turkish historian Halil Berktaý has pointed out, 'Each [feudal] society is not just the feudal mode but also its entire superstructure, which, moreover, comes into being as a concrete historical reality through a specific process woven by innumerable hazards, and each such society thereby also incorporates elements of the soil on which it arises.'⁵³

The central question is whether there is a fundamentally different dynamic to a society where the peasants are exploited through taxes rather than rents. The Palestinian-born Marxist Tony Cliff once noted 'Spinoza was right when he said "definition is negation", but not all negations are definitions' - in other words, a definition should be more than just a description.⁵⁴ It should point to the determining content of the thing defined. In the case of a mode of production, this means for Cliff 'the economic laws of motion of the system...its inherent contradictions and the motivation of the class struggle'.⁵⁵ This means one cannot deduce the character of the mode of production simply from 'the mode of appropriation or the mode of recruitment of the ruling class'.⁵⁶ Otherwise you would have to conclude that there were two different modes of production in feudal Europe: one where the individual feudal lord was the exploiter, the other where the role was played by the collective institutions of the medieval church.

The tendency to see Marxism as 'Eurocentric', crude, simplistic and epitomised by vulgar economic determinism remains an enduring current of contemporary intellectual thought. This essay suggests a return to reading or re-reading some of Marx's original writings and locating them in their concrete context can shed fresh light on examining historical developments. Marx's own method of inquiry, particularly his analysis of modes of production, illuminated a richly complex set of developmental paths from antiquity to contemporary socio-political formations. As Eric Hobsbawm once noted,

If we wish to answer the great question of all history—namely, how, why and through what processes humanity evolved from cave-man to cosmic travellers, wielders of nuclear force and genetic engineers—we can only do so by asking Marx's type of questions if not accepting all his answers. The same is true if we wish to answer the second great question implicit in the first: that is, why this evolution has not been even and unilinear, but extraordinarily uneven and combined.⁵⁷

This essay has examined uneven and combined development in early and medieval India, building on Marx's work, for his method allowed him to grapple with developments outside Europe, not as some sort of exotic deviation but as a historical reality that had to be explained. Marx was limited by the tools he had at his disposal, and was certainly mistaken with respect to many aspects of early Indian society. Non-Marxist historians such as Harbans Mukhia and some Marxist historians like Irfan Habib have rejected the Asiatic mode of production with the best of intentions, in order to counter the colonialist perception of inherent Indian backwardness. Yet

⁵³ Berktaý, 'The Feudalism Debate', p. 289.

⁵⁴ Tony Cliff, 'The theory of bureaucratic collectivism: a critique' [1948], in Tony Cliff, *Marxist Theory After Trotsky: Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (London, 2003), p. 156. Cliff commented on the Asiatic mode of production in Ygael Gluckstein [Tony Cliff], *Mao's China* (London, 1957).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁵⁷ Hobsbawm, 'Marx and History', p. 48.

Mukhia's own account of pre-capitalist India presents an almost 'unique' path of development. This paradoxically concurs with the notion of an Indian exceptionalism which fails to capture the very real and significant changes across an enormous timespan which have parallels with historical developments in Western Europe. Habib, on the other hand, does take account of substantial technological and productive advances, but unfortunately does not fully integrate his empirical evidence with Marx's theoretical conceptualisation of modes of production. Indeed, both historians feel that formulations such as the 'Asiatic' and 'feudal' modes of production are unhelpful and unnecessary for explaining pre-modern Indian history. Both therefore fail to grasp fully the central dynamic identified by Marx whereby clashes between one element of the mode of production with another can lead to enormous transformations in how people organise their lives and livelihoods. Even though Marx's concept of the 'Asiatic mode of production' might not be applicable in its full entirety with respect to India, in fundamentals, Marx's analysis and understanding was remarkable. Marx's theorisation of 'modes of production' should not therefore be dismissed out of hand as a 'western' or 'Eurocentric' construct but a concept of critical importance for helping us to understand the vital dynamic of social change and social transformation in human history.

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