

Karl Marx on India: A Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

This paper focuses on some of the writings of Karl Marx on India in English to indicate something of the extent of his astonishing knowledge of the subcontinent's political and socioeconomic history, and to highlight the incisiveness of his critique of British rule in India. In the process, it attempts to show Marx's (and Friedrich Engels') sensitivity as well as understanding of the plight of Indians under the East India Company's rule, and his quite overt and powerful denunciation of British excesses during the Sepoy Mutiny. In addition, the paper underscores the importance of these writings for us in South Asia, and stresses their continuing relevance in our time. It also emphasizes Marx's mastery of details of Indian history, land laws, and topography. Moreover, it accentuates the rhetorical persuasiveness with which he makes his case against British rule in India and underscores his command over English prose. The paper ends by suggesting that all postcolonial scholars dealing with the subcontinent as well as students of Marxism can benefit by studying Marx's pioneering role in critiquing British colonial rule in India.

Keywords: Marx, British rule, Sepoy Mutiny, South Asia, Said

Introduction

Growing up intellectually in the 1960s and 70s, and becoming increasingly aware of the progressive sides of politics, local and global, as well as its reactionary elements, who could remain unaffected by the extracts from a classic of Karl Marx (and Friedrich Engels') oeuvre, such as "The Communist Manifesto," or the long extracts from *Grundrisse*, or *The German Ideology*, collected in theory anthologies? It was clear to me even then that the Marx I knew had hit at some essential truths about history in his writings. Nevertheless, I am not a Marxist and activism or party politics have never attracted me; nor can I claim that I came to know a lot about Marx as I furthered myself intellectually. If, then, I pen this paper on Marx and British India, it is only because of the conjunction of a visit to a Delhi bookshop when I had already begun to think of a topic for the Marx conference¹ and coming across *Karl Marx on India*, a book edited by Iqbal Husain, former Professor of History at Aligarh Muslim University, and published under the aegis of Aligarh Historians Society by Tulika Books in 2006. The volume seemed even more attractive to me because it contained a long introduction by the eminent historian and Professor Emeritus of the same university, Professor Irfan Habib. There was something else in my mind then too – Edward Said's indictment of Marx for his "orientalist" perspective in

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Orientalism. Since that book has been seminal for me ever since I first read it in 1980, I thought: why not explore how right or wrong Said was to label Marx thus by gauging the importance of Marx's writings and assessment of India in our time for this conference? But my discovery that Marx had written the essays collected in the book in English and the fact that I was going to read a paper on him in an English department conference added another dimension to it – why not also read the essays to assess Marx as a writer of English prose?

My paper thus has five parts. In the first part, I discuss the genesis and nature of Marx's writings on India. In the second, I attempt to provide an account of his extensive, indeed, astonishing knowledge of Indian affairs of the period he focuses on. I also try to trace the evolution of his thoughts on India during that span of time in this section. In the third, I comment on his English prose style and the rhetorical strategies he adopts in the essays and reports. In the fourth section, I endeavor to highlight the incisiveness of his critique of British rule in India and his indictment of the British for the way they exploited the land and brutalized Indians in the course of their rule. I then offer my viewpoint on Said's evaluation of Marx's "orientalizing" of India and the controversy that ensued when a few leading Marxists assaulted the Palestinian-American critic for being so offensive about the fountainhead of their thought. My conclusion offers my own take on the controversy and shows how we can value Marx's writings on India. It also comes to a perspective on Said's critique of his early writings on British India.

Why, How and What Karl Marx Wrote on India

The 59 articles and pieces collected in *Karl Marx on India* were all originally published in the progressive and popular American newspaper *New York Daily Tribune* from 1853 to 1861. The book also includes a few articles written by Marx's great friend and collaborator Engels as well as excerpts from their letters relating to India. In addition, the volume has a very helpful entry on references to India elsewhere in their works compiled by Professor Habib.

Professor Husain's Prefatory Note indicates that Marx originally contributed to the *Tribune* a few pieces on India that he had written in German in 1852 but that Engels translated for him into English then. However, from 1853 onwards, his writings on India in the newspaper were his own forays into English journalistic prose and thus "constitute a separate genre among his works" (Husain xiii). In other words, they are of interest not only because Marx's writings are not otherwise associated with Indian affairs in a sustained manner as is the case here, but also because they reveal his abilities in writing English pieces for a wide readership year after year. Husain notes though that Marx hated writing them and deemed them distractions from the major works he was engaged in at that time, such as *Grundrisse* (1857), the *Contribution to Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and the first volume of *Capital* (1867), and that would eventually make him famous. But his financial state was such that apart from the money he made from his *Tribune* articles on India and

other contemporary happenings, and the support Engels provided him regularly, he had nothing much to go on that would support him and his family at this time; in other words, he wrote his Indian articles because he had to!

However, it is quite clear from a reading of the 59 pieces collected in *Karl Marx on India* that Marx wrote most of them not merely because he felt that he had to write whatever he could for money, but primarily because he is quite stirred by events unfolding in the subcontinent in the 1850s, and driven to pursue their deeper implications. It even seems likely that these events could be grist for his developing ideas about capitalism and historical change. In particular, he was attracted to the ravages wrought by British rule in India and the simmering discontent that it had caused among the people of the subcontinent until the lid came off completely in the eruption of 1857. Marx subsequently became quite absorbed in reporting and analyzing the causes and consequences of the Sepoy Mutiny and appraising the extent of English culpability in the carnage that had occurred then.

Marx's sources for his Indian articles in the *Tribune* are various. He seemed to have scoured British parliamentary papers, newspaper reports, minutes of the East India Company, historical accounts and travel writings on India. He appeared too to have gone over carefully in his British Library forays over contemporary as well as earlier economic tracts on the trade with India, speeches delivered in the House of Commons, letters he had come across on what was going on in the subcontinent, memoirs of English men who had served there or had written books on the people of India, and even translations of classical Indian texts such as *Manusmriti*. It is obvious that, along with Engels, Marx quickly grew in confidence in mastering the political, social and economic configurations and history, and even the geography and topography of India.

The *Tribune* pieces on India that Marx and Engels contributed and collected in *Karl Marx on India* vary in length and differ in the intensity of their coverage. Some are merely brief notes while others are of considerable length; some are well-written entries content to merely report on current happenings or describe the course of the war succinctly, while others are analytical and draw out the implications of what was going on in the cataclysm scarring the subcontinent. Whenever necessary, Marx provides abundant facts and figures to back up his points or make them. Whether he wants to illustrate the huge revenue earned from India by the East India Company and their expenditure on Indians, or detail the miserly attitude of its administrators who cared not a fig for the welfare of the people of the subcontinent but lived lavish lives, he has facts to back him up. At times Marx offers quite detailed accounts of the extent of the uprisings and their fatalities. On other occasions, he provides abundant statistics on the trade between England and India, or the business transactions involving opium between India and China that were profiting only the English rulers and traders, exploiting the Indian growers and doping the Chinese customers (As an aside here, let me direct your attention to Amitav Ghosh's

excellent 2011 novelistic account of the ravages wrought by the opium trade on the Chinese and the profits made by mostly English merchants in *River of Smoke*). However, to come back to Marx and his reportage on the Sepoy Mutiny in India, he presents the military aspects of the situation expertly. He comments perceptively on the different stages of the campaign and outlines graphically the tactics followed by the English in quelling the rebellion. He underscores the economic aspects of the Mutiny and the financial implications for England of the continuing campaign, probing into all the figures he could hold off. He slices open the claims of the rulers, the better to expose their greed and cruelty. In the articles written as early as 1853, he seems to be hinting at the disruptive and destructive potential of English rule; in his final contributions he appears to be saying that though the mutineers had been subdued and the country pacified, Indians were restive, and there were ample signs of resurgence of Indians fed up with the way the Company had been abusing and exploiting them. For sure, remembering that he had come so late to the subcontinent in his writings and considering that his articles on India are only marginal to his main preoccupations, one can only marvel at Marx's mastery of Indian history, finances, social stratifications and geography, and much else. Such mastery reminds me of Daniel Defoe, admittedly quite unlike Marx in almost every way, who had once boasted about himself in the third person, "He had the world at his fingertips." However, as will be clear, Marx is tonally more like Jonathan Swift in his mastery of anti-colonial satire than the self-proclaimed projector-propagandist of empire that Defoe was.

Marx as a Writer of English Prose

As I indicated above, one of the pleasures of writing this paper for me was my discovery of the power of Marx's English prose as I kept reading for it. The first thing that can be said about Marx's English prose is the clarity with which he can analyze or describe happenings in the language. But he is also quite expressive and creative in his word usage. For example, he characterizes the Conservative party politician Lord Stanley's parliamentary maneuverings as symptomatic of "these coalescent times" in the way he had "found a formula in which the opposite views are combined together" (19). Isn't that a wonderful phrase and isn't it something we could apply to the Bangladesh we live in and especially our country in election years? This phrase is from his July 1, 1853 piece simply titled "India" which he ends sarcastically by telling his readers that he intends in the next one to expose "the bearing of the Indian Question on different parties in Great Britain, and the benefit, the poor Hindoo may reap from the quarreling of the aristocracy, the moneyocracy, and the millocracy about his amelioration" (20). Now we may not have an aristocracy, but aren't the words "moneyocracy" and "millocracy" so apt for the people who dominate our economy and politics in the time we live in as well?

In fact, the heavy irony we can detect in that quote is one of the dominant notes of Marx's long pieces on India. The relatively long next *Tribune* entry of July 11, 1853, "The East India Company – Its History and Results," is full of such ironic comments

as are many of the other pieces that follow. Marx thus comments acerbically about the “sharp philanthropy” of the Company while exposing what he calls “hypocritical peace-cant” (25). He is actually bent on showing the way Indians were being exploited and the country denuded by self-aggrandizing Company officials with the assistance of their hypocritical backers in English politics. Marx, for sure, can be quite direct and devastating in his characterization of such politicians as in the next piece titled “The Government of India” where he assaults frontally the politicians skirmishing in the House of Commons on Company affairs with a sentence like the following one: “During the discussion all was thistles for the Ministry, and Sir Charles Wood [Anglo-Indian Whig politician and Member of Parliament of the British Empire] was the ass officially put to the task of feeding upon them. In addition, Sir Charles receives the crown of another Menu” [*sic*; he means Manu, the author of the Sanskrit law code] (30). Note too how scathing Marx can be when he castigates the liberal proponents of Free Trade siding with the politicians supporting the company in their aggressive policies on India. He criticizes their collusive practices thus, “The Peace Ministry, at this moment does everything to secure its *entente cordiale* with the Peace Party, Manchester School, who are opposed to any kind of warfare, except by cotton bales and price currents” (42). His characterization on Benjamin Disraeli’s slide as an orator and a man of principle by using inversion in “The Indian Question” is similarly quite devastating and unforgettable when he declares with what is almost a chiasmus that as an orator “once he succeeded in giving even commonplaces the pointed appearance of epigrams. Now he contrives to bury even epigrams in the conventional dullness of respectability” (66). Note the use of an actual chiasmus in his contemptuous description of the way the propped up Moghul Emperor was being indulged by the British for their purposes: “The present Great Moghul, even more favored than Napoleon [in captivity], finds himself able to back the disease by his sallies and his sallies by the disease” (“The Revolt in India” 105).

On other occasions, Marx writes English prose that is dispassionate and clear, as when he discusses the course of the mutiny in essay after essay, always making sure that he had data to illustrate his chief points. For his American and English readers, he makes telling comparisons when writing about India so that they can picture its problems easily as when he notes in “The British Rule in India” how “Hindustan is an Italy of Asiatic dimensions” in its varied geography and topography. However, he qualifies the statement a little later by saying “Yet, in a social point of view, Hindostan is not the Italy, but the Ireland of India,” clinching this point with an additional sentence where he states: “And this strange combination of Italy and of Ireland, of a world of voluptuousness and of a world of woes” can be traced to the religious traditions the peoples of the country are heir to (11).

In the rhetorical strategy he adopts in his assaults on the East India Company though, Marx seems to be at times in the tradition of another great thinker and fierce critic of the East India Company, Edmund Burke, whom he had quoted approvingly and at length in his critique earlier in describing “the close and abject

spirit of the bureaucracy” (36). To make this particular point, let me quote here at length first Burke describing the perfidious operations of the East India Company in India in parliament on 1 December 1783:

My ... assertion is that the Company never has made a treaty, which they have not broken. ... [Let me] recapitulate some heads – the treaty with the Moghul, by which we stipulated to pay him 260,000*l.* annually, was broken. This treaty they have broken and not paid him a shilling ... They broke their treaties with Nizam, and with Hyder Ali. (374)

And here is Marx reporting on the Company’s usurpation of supremacy in India through treachery in his 1853 article, “The Future Results of British Rule in India”:

How came it that English supremacy was established in India? The paramount power of the great Mogul was broken by the Mogul Viceroys. The power of the Viceroys was broken by the Mahrattas. The power of the Mahrattas was broken by the Afghans ... and while all were struggling against all, the Briton rushed in and was enabled to subdue them all. (46)

In other words, to Marx, the British, as Burke had also noted, are like all previous usurpers of India in that they have taken over India through acts of bad faith repeatedly, the only difference being that they have outdone them all.

I would like to provide another example of how Marx’s thinking as well as his prose style and rhetorical strategy make his Indian writings sound similar to Burke’s great speech on Fox’s East India Bill by once again beginning with the great Anglo-Irish writer and statesman’s unforgettable lines on the uniquely destructive nature of the British conquest of India

The several irruptions of Arabs, Tartars, and Persians were, for the greater part, ferocious, bloody, and wasteful in the extreme: our entrance into the dominion of that country was, as generally, with small comparative effusion of blood, being introduced by various frauds and delusions, and by taking advantage of the incurable, blind, and senseless animosity which the several country powers bear towards each other, rather than by open force. But the difference in favor of the first conquerors is this. The Asiatic conquerors very soon abated of their ferocity, because they made the conquered country their own. ... But under the English government all this order is reversed. The Tartar invasion was mischievous; but it is our protection that destroys India. (Burke 382)

What follows will show that Marx is clearly echoing Burke’s characterization of Company rule and its ill effects in India, but with a crucial distinction:

Arabs, Turks, Tartars, Moghuls, who had successively overrun India, soon became *Hindooized*, the barbarian conquerors being, by an eternal law of history, conquered themselves by the superior civilization of their subjects.

The British were the first conquerors superior, and therefore, inaccessible to Hindoo civilization. They destroyed it by breaking up the native communities, by uprooting the native industry, and by levelling all that was great and elevated in the native society. The historic pages of their rule in India report hardly anything beyond that destruction. The work of regeneration hardly transpires through a heap of ruins. Nevertheless, it has begun. (“The Future Results of British Rule in India” 46-47)

In a much later *Tribune* piece published in 1858, while describing caustically the outrages being committed by plundering British soldiers, Marx seems to be intertextually evoking the part of Burke’s speech on Fox’s East India Bill I have extracted above yet again. This, to me, is evident in the following sentence, “The Calmuck hordes of Genghis Khan and Timur, falling upon a city like a swarm of locusts, and devouring everything that came their way, must have been a blessing to a country, compared with the irruption of these Christian, civilized, chivalrous and gentle British soldiers” (176).

Like Burke, Marx sees Indian history as one where successive invaders took advantage of a divided and weak country to conquer it. The diction, kind of lists used and numbers evoked, and the rhetorical pattern are strikingly similar. One outstanding difference is that Burke is saying that all the conquerors except the English made India their own country, accepting it as their own. However, Marx states unequivocally something else that Burke does not – he sees the English as different from the other conquerors because cruel though they were and as destructive as the others, they became assimilated because they had conquered a superior civilization. In contrast, he felt the English, being superior, had unwittingly taken on a crucial role of “regeneration” of a moribund, atrophying civilization. This is a point that I will take up in discussing Marx’s essays on British India *vis-à-vis* Said’s critique of him in the penultimate section of my paper. However, now I would like to use these quotes to transit from the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of Marx’s English prose to deal fully with something that I have indirectly been hinting at – Burke’s sharp and incisive criticism of British colonial policy.

Marx’s Critique of Colonial Rule in India

In a sense, I do not need to labor the point I intend to make in this section about Marx as someone who is fiercely critical of colonization, especially of British colonialism. Most of what I commented on a little while back about his style and rhetorical strategy point at that direction as do my comments on his following Burke to a great extent in denouncing the East India Company’s continuous pillaging of Indian resources. Nevertheless, a lot more remains to be said about the extent of Marx’s censure of colonial rule in the articles Husain collected in *Karl Marx on India*, for there is much that is important there that I have not covered. For example, as early as his first article written in English in 1853, he recommends that all “legislation on

Indian affairs be postponed” until “the voice of the natives shall have been heard” (4), something he feels the present government has not been doing at all. Marx would not have the Company’s charter renewed by the government because he is convinced that all they want is “the privilege of plundering India for the space of 20 years” (5). He denounces the Permanent Settlement of 1790 and mentions repeatedly how the *zemindari* and *Ryotwari* systems thus set up are “only so many forms of fiscal exploitation in the hands of the Company” (8). Marx is convinced that even those who criticized government policy and argued for Free Trade, like the Manchester politician John Bright, was as culpable as the government of trying to ruin India because his special perspective is informed by his need to advocate dumping English textiles in a captive market.

Of special note for us here in Bangladesh in this regard is the essay “The British Rule in India.” In it Marx sets the British East India Company at par with the Dutch East India Company as far as “colonial rule” is concerned, since both had managed “to break down the entire framework” of countries they had colonized without doing anything to rebuild them (12). As proof of the British Company’s destructive policies, he turns to the plight of the weavers of Bengal, where agriculture and textiles have both been devastated by British rule. He gestures at how Europe had once received “the admirable textures of Indian labor” (13) but notes how things have changed ever since “the British intruder ... broke up the Indian hand-loom and destroyed the spinning wheel,” in the process of driving out “Indian cottons from the European market” (14).

Marx correlates the decrease of Indian textile exports with the monopoly exerted by British muslins to India and the decimation of the population of Dhaka. To quote what he says about the impact of colonization on our city and citizens at one point of history, let me quote at some length to indicate how Marx describes the outcome of the fatal embrace of British colonial policy in our part of India at that time:

From 1818 to 1836, the export of twist from Great Britain to India rose in proportion of 1 to 5,200. In 1824, the export of British muslins to India hardly amounted to 1,000,000 yards, while in 1837 it surpassed 64,000,000 yards. But at the same time the population of Dacca decreased from 150,000 inhabitants to 20,000. This decline of Indian towns celebrated for their fabrics was by no means the worst consequence. British steam and science uprooted, over the whole surface of Hindostan, the union between agriculture and manufacturing industry (14).

In the same article, Marx goes on in this intensely anti-colonial vein to detail the Company’s destruction of the social fabric of India as well as its economic ruin.

In other contributions he made to the *Tribune*, Marx suggests other causes and consequences of the British invasion of India. In the article titled “The East India Company – its History and Results,” he emphasizes how the maws of colonialism

must always devour new territories. He shows how the English nation, “having simultaneously lost their colonies in North America,” felt “the necessity of elsewhere reigning some great Colonial Empire” (23), surely an insight of great relevance even now in our age of globalization. However, reading Marx on India can be quite revealing to anyone interested in our history also because of the way he highlights the inefficiency of the East India Company’s operations. After all, he stresses, it laid waste not only to swathes of territory and not merely pauperized and often decimated the peoples of India; it also bled the British government financially. How then did it survive? For one thing, Marx points out, it did so only through bribing its government and corrupting its politicians. On the one hand, English colonization succeeded, it seems to Marx, “through a frightful system of torture” in India (590) and a successful imitation of the “Roman *divide et imperia* (60) policy in the subcontinent. At home, on the one hand, it depended on buying off politicians and perpetuating lies about their rule and in India, on the other, it expanded and held on to power through its policy of divide and rule, and unrestrained use of force.

In the series of articles he wrote on the Sepoy Mutiny, Marx emphasizes to his English-speaking readers the atrocities committed by the British army and declares unequivocally that the Indian excesses were the inevitable outcome of their colonizers’ bloodthirstiness from the beginning of their rule to the present moment. As he puts it in “The Indian Revolt”: “however infamous the conduct of the sepoy, it is only the reflex, in a concentrated form, of England’s own conduct in India, not only during the epoch of the foundation of her Eastern Empire, but even during the last ten years of a long-settled rule” (89). Marx goes on in this vein for quite a few paragraphs, as if in response to the hue and outcry in Britain to the Indian rebels’ brutality during the Mutiny. To him Indian excesses are nothing but a demonstration of the “rule of historical retribution” in which “its instrument” is “forged not by the offended, but by the offender itself” (89).

Surely, very few westerners in his time would have had the courage as well as the conviction to castigate the English as much as Marx did here. He goes on to underscore British distortion of what was going on, caustically pointing out to his readers that “it would be an unmitigated mistake to suppose that all the cruelty is on the side of the sepoy, and all the milk of human kindness flows on the side of the British” (89). Marx is bent on exposing the extent of colonial propaganda and disinformation meted out to the British reading public about Indian excesses circulated by the Company’s one-sided broadcasts. His intent is to portray, even within the brief compass of newspaper articles, the real history of British colonial occupation of the subcontinent, and the actual human costs of the war to Indians as well as to the British. He stresses the British forces’ disproportionately brutal response to the Indian insurrection, so blatantly concealed by Company-fed journalists and politicians in England, and calls attention to the extent of loot and plunder carried out by the British troops after each victory over the rebels. In a sarcastic comment

on the looting propensities of the British soldiers after their victories, Marx declares, “The Hindoo or Sikh is better disciplined, less thieving, less rapacious than the incomparable model of a warrior, the British soldier” (176).

In the later articles, while detailing the extent of British pillage after their victories over the mutineers, Marx notes the impending signs of yet another famine in Bengal. He declares that while there had been no famines until then in the nineteenth century, “in former times, and even since the English occupation” they have been “the source of terrible sufferings” (174). He even makes the East India Company and English colonization completely responsible for the Great Bengal Famine of 1770.

Marx is relentless in exposing the way the English continued their attempts to cripple India after the Mutiny in fresh ways. In a July 1858 piece on “Taxation in India,” he makes a comparative survey on the burden of taxation borne by an individual in Indian provinces with that encountered by European ones. He concludes then that the British claims of “light taxation” in the subcontinent, in actuality “crushes the mass of the Indian people to the dust, and ... its extraction necessitates a resort to such infamies as torture, for instance” (186). The bulk of revenue thus gathered, he shows, is spent on the “governing class” of the colony and their backers in England so that they can thrive and indulge themselves there. Marx feels that nothing much would change when Company rule gave way to more direct rule by the British government – one could expect more of the same extortionist, debilitating policies pursued by the colonizers – whether private or public ones.

In a series of features on the British Opium Trade to China (the real subject of Amitav Ghosh’s *River of Smoke*, I would like to add), Marx depicts the manner in which the British Empire was operating so that it could profit from and simultaneously ruin the peoples of two of its colonies, India and China. Exposing the pretensions of the oft-proclaimed civilizing mission of Empire, Marx comes up with data that reveals “the flagrant self-contradiction of the Christianity-canting, and civilization-mongering British government” (201).

In short, Marx saw no respite for Indians or the Chinese, until the British Empire crumbled from the nefarious policies pursued by the imperial forces at work. The post-mutiny situation, in his analysis, indicated a lull before another storm broke out, for to him it was only a matter of time for “anti-British passions to flame again” (205). Thus, and to sum up this section, we can conclude – Marx was consistently anti-colonial in his writings of India. We should have no doubts in our mind on that account.

Was Marx an Orientalist?

At the outset of this part of my paper, let me remind you of the lines from the 1853 article, “The Future Results of British Rule in India” that I had quoted earlier, where Marx had stated that the British, the last of the wave of conquerors of India,

represented the first one superior to the Indians. It was, he implies, because of this reason they had not only resisted being “*Hindooized*” (Marx’s emphasis), but had also unwittingly laid the foundation for Indian “regeneration ... by breaking up the native industry” (46-7). In the earlier 1853 piece, “The British Rule in India” once again depicting British rapacity, hard-heartedness and destructive actions, he had claimed that the villages thus destroyed, “idyllic” though they may have seemed, “had always been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism” (16). Marx goes as far as to claim that England had become the “unconscious tool of history in bringing about the revolution” (17). As we saw, while Burke had lamented the solely destructive tendencies of the British, to him they were unlike the earlier conquerors who had embraced a superior civilization and had been assimilated to it, for the British were untouched by India. In contrast to them, Marx felt that surely, albeit unwittingly, Britain had begun the task of recharging a moribund people and uniting a divided subcontinent.

In a piece written at the height of the Mutiny in 1857, even while damning British rapacity and cruelty, he refers to Hindu rituals of torture and self-immolation of the times as acts stemming from “a religion of cruelty” (91). It would also seem from a reading of *Karl Marx on India* that to him “India” and “Indians” could almost always be used synonymously with “Hindoostan” and “Hindu.” Witness thus his later 1857 piece on “Investigation of Tortures in India” where he unequivocally sides with the mutinous Indians trying to expel a conqueror who had continuously abused them, wondering out aloud if “the insurgent Hindoos” should be seen as “guilty, in the fury of revolt and conflict, of the crimes and cruelties alleged against them” (96).

One of the two epigraphs with which Edward Said begins *Orientalism* is Marx’s comment on the bourgeois and the shopkeeper in his *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” He reprints the quote in his Introduction to bring up the issue of representation and misrepresentation in the discursive tradition he had categorized through the title of his book. In the text itself, Said associates Marx with writers like Disraeli, Burton and Nerval who use words such as “Orient,” “Oriental,” “Oriental Despotism” as if intertextually, to “carry on a lengthy discussion between themselves” through the use of such “generalities” (102). Still later in the book, Said takes a more sustained look at Marx’s characterization of the nature of “Oriental Despotism” and the belief that England’s superior civilization would finally force a moribund society to revive after what had seemed till the Company’s conquest of the subcontinent, forever. In other words, Said suggests that even Marx had stereotyped India and Indians, and to put it in terms of the central thesis of his book, had “Orientalized” it, carrying on in the process “a romantic redemptive project” (“they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented”) rather than considering the people of the subcontinent as “human material” (154).

Was Marx essentially right in his comments or too Eurocentric and too sweeping, as Said implies? His comments on the reductive nature of Marx's Indian writings have certainly given rise to an ideological storm among Marxists, historians, and postcolonialists. Here I will have space to indicate only briefly the currents and crosscurrents generated by the storm. Committed Marxists like Aijaz Ahmed and Irfan Habib have no doubt that the Palestinian-American had misread Marx's comment. Ahmed's *In Theory* has a long chapter called "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" in which he attempts a demolition job of Said's entire critical stance, finding only his commitment to Palestine in his public position and writings on behalf of his people worthy of praise. All else, he tries to prove is methodologically sloppy and theoretically on unsound grounds. In another essay completely focused on the subject that I have been dealing with titled "Marx on India: A Clarification," but carrying forward the argument of "Ambivalence" from the previous chapter, he finds Said is too "summary" in dealing with this specific subject, too "cavalier" and too simplistic in writing about Marx. Or as Ahmed puts it, Said had fashioned "a rhetoric of dismissal" that had "no room for other complexities of Marx's thought" (Ahmed, 224). To Ahmed, Marx occupied a position "independent both of the Orientalist-Romantic and the colonial-modernist" ones (235); he was essentially unassailable at every stage!

As for Irfan Habib, the Internet has his "Critical Notes on Edward Said" where he cites Ahmed approvingly and sets out to further prove as well that, overall, Said's entire argument in *Orientalism* is too simplistic and sweeping, and methodologically unsound. His use of the quote, "They cannot represent themselves," etc. is, therefore an example to Habib of how Said had de-contextualized and therefore misleadingly reproduced Marx's essential position. Habib also makes a plea for "good robust Orientalism" which he feels will prevail over "present post-modernist fashions" such as postcolonialism. Let me add that in his long Introduction to *Karl Marx on India*, Habib refers to Said's critical position on Marx in a footnote damning it for the moment as an example of his "unhistorical attitude" (1), and directs the reader through a footnote to Ahmed's and his own paper, "In Defence of Orientalism: Critical Notes on Edward Said."

Nevertheless, in his very substantial, detailed and solidly and lucidly argued paper, "Karl Marx, His Theories of Asian Societies, and Colonial Rule," another eminent Indian historian, Bipan Chandra, evaluates Marx's writings on British India closely. He says at the outset that "Marx and Engels neither studied Asian societies for their own sake – nor had adequate knowledge regarding them" (13). He suggests that impressive though they maybe, a balanced view of Marx's developing ideas and final views about India can be arrived at only after reading his later works. Chandra further suggests that the writings of the 1850s reveal the "fragmentary and unformed character" of Marx's views on India then (14). The set notion Marx had at that time of Asian society as "stagnant, changeless" and "incapable of change from within" (17)

led to his “understanding of colonialism as performing a ‘revolutionary’ role in India and Asia” at that time (17). Marx did mean what he said about “Asiatic despotism” (28), did see Asiatic society as “basically stagnant, stationary, and changeless” (31), and did suggest that it had “no history” and “no social development” (31) in his Indian writings of the early 1850s. He was therefore very much in a western tradition that did believe such things and that had essentialized India. Chandra reminds us too that Marx did quote approvingly of the “regenerating” role of the west in India, although with the caveat that this “destructive” role should be viewed as a positive one (36). However, Chandra also reminds us that this last view was something Marx had totally abandoned later. He also points out that later in the *Grundrisse* and volume three of *Capital*, Marx would write otherwise and gesture at a more flexible, nuanced, and complete concept of Indian history and society.

Nevertheless, it is essential to note that after over 30 pages of analysis, Chandra concludes at the mid-point of his paper that “Marx’s basic notions regarding Indian society were essentially incorrect” (47). Chandra singles out Marx’s belief that “Indian society had stagnated for millennia ever since its transition from primitive communism to class society and was therefore incapable of change from within” as something “completely untenable” and something that “can no longer be maintained” (47). The remaining 40 plus pages of Chandra’s paper basically substantiate his position *vis-à-vis* Marx’s with abundant details to prove that Asian society was far from being stymied by “Oriental despotism” or unchanging for centuries. Chandra does say that though “the heart of the matter is that in India, British rule did dissolve the old economy,” he feels that it did not make the “resulting social formation ... more conducive to development” (72), whether it was the railway network that Marx felt had played a positive role, or other aspects of colonial capital development. Chandra avers that this was because whatever the British did was “guided by the interests not of ‘the colony’ but of the metropolis.” Let me wind up my summary of Chandra’s excellent and balanced essay – for he is always respectful of Marx and misses no opportunity to prove that he would have not been so sweeping and essentializing if he had seen the whole picture by shifting to Chandra’s concluding lines. He wraps up his discussion there by suggesting that though “Marx’s overall analysis of Asian societies and colonialism has proved to be inadequate ... some of his individual remarks on Asian societies and colonialism contain deep insights” that still has great relevance to students of colonialism and critics of imperialism (86).

As for my conclusion, I feel that Chandra’s essay will help us in taking up a balanced position on Marx *vis-à-vis* Said’s critique of him in *Orientalism*. Marx did misrepresent India in the *Tribune* articles he wrote in the first few years of the 1850s; however, as he did more research, he changed his views about an Indian society made moribund by “Oriental despotism” to a great extent. Perhaps he would have revised it completely had he the facts that came to light later about the dynamics of Indian history over time and the limited impact British rule had in changing India.

Said latched on to the reductive Marx he had come across in those early writings on India. He had attacked Marx not pointlessly or completely unfairly but perhaps was overstating the extent of Marx's position in the European Orientalist tradition. However, what is wrong in showing that Marx did have his blind spots in envisioning at one point of his life? And if he did, so what? For what Marx wrote about the British presence in India in the years that he had focused on is truly impressive and surely of lasting value. His indictment of British colonial rule too is total.

On the other hand, Said's scholarship may have its blind spots too and he is perhaps guilty of overstating the case against Marx as an Orientalist. But how can his account of Marx's European misrepresentation and stereotyping be completely overlooked and dismissed? To me, Ahmed and Habib seem to be blinded at times on this issue by their devotion to Marx.

I would like to end by saying that Marx on India is very illuminating and relevant for us, despite the blind spots in his vision. And so is Said on *Orientalism*, despite the blind spots he may have about Marx's position in the Orientalizing tradition. But of course there is no comparing the two. Marx will be celebrated bicentenary after bicentenary for the essential, world-changing truths he has conveyed about history and society. And Said? Hopefully, he will be remembered as the father of postcolonialism for a long, long time. Certainly, he cannot be dismissed easily even if he is no Marx!

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