

D.D. Kosambi Contribution to Marxist Historiography

By Ramesh Kamble*

D.D. Kosambi is a one of greatest Indian Marxist historian, trend setter, prolific writer, an extraordinary scholar, his works on different areas of Indology, Kosambi was far from being an ivory tower scholar, and his intellectual activity was deeply rooted in and greatly inspired by needs of the people around him. He was the first among the pioneer of the Marxist school of thought. He was a brilliant and innovative Mathematician, apart from his more popular work on numismatics and genetics, Kosambi worked on path geometry, exploring the foundations of general relativity. He also worked on statics infinite dimensions, computing and probabilistic, number theory. He successfully applied mathematics to history. D.D. Kosambi and shifting paradigm in Marxist school of Indian historiography. Remarkably, even Marxist historian, who holds up D.D. Kosambi as a model, In the Marxist scheme of history, the Soviet was the ideal state and Marxist is an ideal philosophy and polity.

Marxist historiography is a school of historiography influenced by Marxism. The most important elements of Marxist historiography are the centralised of social class and economic constraints in determining historical outcomes. Marxist historiography has made contributions to the history of the working class, oppressed nationalists and the methodology of history from below. The major aspect of Marxist historiography has been an argument is the nature of history as dialectical. This can also be stated as the relative importance of subjective and objective factors in creating outcomes.

Karl Marx (Das Capital and other writings) referred all historical results to social-economic causes, chiefly to the effort of the masses to obtain a livelihood, an effort developing into a class war between rich and poor, the haves and the have-nots, this is the economic or materialistic interpretation of history in history making.

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Mandell M. Bober's analysis issues in the verdict: "**Marx's theory is impotent to account for historical processes and the reason is that it fails to ascribe sufficient weight to the non-economic processes in history**".

Conceptual framework of Historiography

Historiography is the 19th century discovery. Prior to that historians adopted a non-critical approach, limiting the scope of men, events and institutions: interpreted historical happenings in the light of religious and moral principles and the grains of historical facts were liberally mixed with legends, fables and mythologies. Writers who identified history with research in the 19th century used the word 'history' on the ground that the Greek word 'historie' stood for inquiry or investigation. They made a distinction between 'historiology' and 'historiography': the former referred to the study of the past and the latter meant the narration of the story of the past. "Historiography is an ill-starred word", lamented G.J. Renier. Sir Charles Omen considered it as "**the art of dealing on paper with past events**". In laymen language Historiography is not history. It is the history of historical writings.

It is the history of history! In other words, historical heroes and historical happenings are not the subject matter of historiography. On the contrary, it is concerned with the art and craft and science of historical writing. It is not a chronological-descriptive-narrative account of men and matters but a graphic-interpretative-evaluative study of historical accounts. The historians, his treatment of history, the method adopted by him, his style of writing, his attitude, approach, philosophy and problems constitute the core of historiography. The nature, concept, content, scope, theory, practice and value of history are its focus. In shorts, historiography is the history of historical thought and writing.

Historiography has emerged as an independent historical discipline on its own right. Its object of knowledge is historical reality. It is a systematic, scientific and orderly study of the evolution of historical writing. It is a professional body of historical knowledge of ideas, theories and concepts which seek to explain the growth of human society and an understanding of the its development. Like Geography, Calligraphy and Choreography, Historiography is a distinct discipline and a branch of study.

D.D.Kosambi was born in Goa in 1907. He had his school education in his native place Kosaban and higher education at Harvard, U.S.A. He taught Mathematics in Benaras, Aligarh, Pune and at the Tata Institute for 15 years. This Mathematician-turned historian was a multi-linguist knowing English, French, Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Pali and Arabic. He had his academic training in mathematics, history, anthropology, archaeology and numismatics. He applied his vast and varied knowledge to re-interpret the ancient past of India.

His Works:

D.D.Kosambi was a prolific writer with a difference. His variegated works include: *An Introduction to the study of Indians History, The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline, Exasperating Essays: Exercises in the Dialectical Method, and Myth and Reality : Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture.* He had also published several research papers and articles. R.S.Sharma, Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, D.R.Chanana, Bipan Chandra and Satish Chandra are some of the leading Marxist historians of India.

Marxist Historiography

D.D.Kosambi is a Marxist historiography. He defines history as **"the presentation, in chronological manner, of successive developments in the means and relations of production"**. This definition is the essence of Marxian economic interpretation of History. In the absence of reliable records and a credible chronology Kosambi interprets ancient India on the Marxian criteria that means of material production determine social organization and social change. In other words, he differentiates historical periods according to significant changes in the means and relations of production. Wars, religious movements and feudal system are subjected to Marxian dialectical method. He applies the comparative method and inter-disciplinary approach to interpret myths, the Indus civilization, Aryan Conquest, Rise of Buddhism and Jainism and so on.

Trend Setter: D.D.Kosambi has profoundly influenced Indian Historiography. His modified Marxian theoretical framework suits well to re-interpret the major social changes in ancient India. He demystified legendary tradition. His novel approach has left an indelible impact on a group of historians. However, his study is criticised as mono-'peppered', explanatory, one sided, biased and historical changes cannot be explained in the terms of economic factors alone. Moreover, his views on the Aryan theory, Aryan conquest and diffusion of Aryan culture are not favoured by Romila Thapar and R.S.Sharma. Nevertheless, the fact remains that D.D.Kosambi is a trend-setter in Indian historiography. "His conclusions remain a set of valuable hypotheses which future researchers will do well to test in the light of data available through diversification of sources". He "set an example of purposeful research into the problems of past".

D.D. Kosambi Contribution to Marxist Historiography

D.D.Kosambi was a man with a Renaissance type of versatility. He had a wide range of knowledge without sacrificing depth. He was a Mathematician, Statistician and polymath who contributed to genetics by introducing Kosambi's map function. He did pioneering works in numismatics and in compiling critical editions of ancient Sanskrit texts. Above all, he was an outstanding Marxist historian.

D.D.Kosambi's great contributions to the Indian historiography, Indology, Philology, the study of religions, historical materialism and our understanding of caste in Indian history. While most essays deal with D.D.Kosambi the historian, the final essay presents a detailed scientific, historical and mathematical analysis of the essays. The essays are neither allergic to nor adulatory about Kosambi's work, but seek to present a balanced and critical appraisal, as well as updating our knowledge with the current thinking in the field.

In the meanwhile, his intellectual journey had taken Kosambi much

farther afield. From Sanskrit which he had mastered, it was a natural progression to ancient Indian history, the social setting of Sanskrit literature. In history writing, Kosambi is credited with having wrought a revolution through his redefinition of the nature and scope of history. For one thing, he dismantled the entrenched notion of fixed periods. Ancient, Medieval and Modern periods of Indian history. For another, he designed an integrated methodology for harnessing diverse sources. In his famous and seminal essay which he labels a 'note' entitled 'Combined methods in Indology.' He criticized the prevalent practice of placing sole reliance upon linguistic sources. Rather 'the linguistic study of the problems of ancient Indian culture would be more faithful if supplemented by an intelligent use of archaeology, anthropology, sociology and a suitable historical perspective.' Accordingly, he supplemented his archival sources by extensive fieldwork.

Conclusion

D.D. Kosambi profoundly redefined the message that Marxism had for historians. What set him apart from others who applied Marxism to Indian history was his determination to maintain, indeed increase the standard of rigour in his factual and textual research, for Marxism dealt with a far more extensive area than the one over which research had conventionally been conducted. Guided by the basic thesis about how social evolution occurs, he rejected the view that India had ever passed through a phase of slavery; rather it was the construction of caste society that happened here. The reasons for his acceptance of a stage of feudalism spanning the period from that of the Guptas to the Mughals are most interesting.

References

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