

Comments on Prof. Subhoranjan Dasgupta's proposals

A. 'Marxian Literary Debates and Discourses'

Prof. Dasgupta's proposal titled 'Marxian Literary Debates and Discourses' seems to be an extension of my work *Bengal Marxism: Early Discourses and Debates* which took the period from the mid-1930s to the early 1950s as its time-frame. I am glad that Prof. Dasgupta proposes to understand the Marxian aesthetic discourses and debates of Bengal going much beyond my time-frame and extending it up to the late 1970s. The questions that preoccupy him have always been the most important questions in Marxian aesthetics – the social moment of a work of art, the demand made by the communist party and also the indispensable autonomy of the artist. A related question is the question of content and form. These questions have always been reflected in the Marxist appreciation (or denigration) of arts on the one hand and their demand for 'revolutionary utility' from the artist on the other (or at least some utility for the Marxist scheme of things, even if Revolution is not on the agenda). Of course, there is a contradiction here – I mean a contradiction between the two functions of the Marxian aesthetics – 1) appreciation and 2) demand. But Marxian aesthetics has always lived with this contradiction. In different historical contexts, however, Marxists have engaged with these questions differently. Differences are there between individual communist theorists too. Marx never formulated a congealed aesthetic system. Thus Marxian aesthetics was not a single aesthetic tradition, but a collection of a number of theories, often incommensurable with each other.

The period that I studied was mostly the Stalinist period, when Marxist politics was being dominated by Stalin and its aesthetics by Zhdanov. Stalinism meant a sort of vulgar materialism, which is known as 'economic determinism'. It argued that culture is just a superstructure on the economic base, as mind is secondary to matter. Stalinism was also a kind of historicism in a very unilinear sense – thus revolution was considered not as a matter of people's conscious control over history, but something that would come inevitably and naturally in keeping with the laws of nature, so to say. The aesthetic corollary of this was Zhdanov's

which threw a large part of the literature of the past and the present into dustbin as decadent 'bourgeois literature', and called for propagandist and proletarian literature with easy forms, etc. Those days, they talked a lot about 'socialist realism'. This was a self-contradictory concept. Based on a deterministic theory of direct superstructural reflection of society, it asserted that the art of bourgeois society *is* a reflection of its economic decadence and the art of socialist society *ought* to reflect socialist reality. So on the one hand, it was a representational reflection theory of literature and on the other hand, a utopian conception. This was surely an uncomfortable combination.

Towards the end of the period of my study though, the influence of the Chinese struggle and Mao Zedong was also felt and this seemed more practical on the questions of acceptability of 'bourgeois art'(based on the argument that the bourgeoisie had two faces – a progressive face and a reactionary one), recognized the autonomy of artistic creation, and so on. These two different views - Zhdanovism and Maoism - clashed and led to a lot of debate in Bengal.

Indeed, in Bengal, Marxian aesthetics was very contentious aesthetic tradition from the beginning. There was never much theoretical interpolation of Marxist aesthetics here (just as there was no theoretical interpolation of Marxist ideology). But there were differences between the hard-liners and the soft-liners. Their differences sharpened after the end of the Second World War and acrimonious debates took place among Marxist aestheticians more particularly during 1948-50, the 'Ye azadijhutahai' phase, when the party was banned too. The tradition remained more or less contentious even after this period. I am glad that Prof. Dasgupta is going to study this and to show what it led to in terms of both politics and cultural practices.

Despite the political reversal, the aesthetic stand persisted. Thus the dominance of Zhdanovism had its reverberations heard even in the post-Stalin years., that is, the Marxists continued to scent vested interests of the bourgeoisie everywhere and had a tendency to dictate artistic creativity. Prof. Dasgupta's work will surely probe these reverberations. But this is not all. He starts his proposal referring to Western Marxism, which I find very significant. Western Marxism,

Frankfurt School in particular, gradually made its mark in the world Marxist discourses, after the War and particularly in the post-Stalin era. The question is - How influential was it in Bengal? I am sure this will be a major concern of Prof. Dasgupta. Gramsci became a major influence in social sciences from the early 1970s, starting from Sumit Sarkar's *Swadeshi Movement*. But what about its influence on the Marxist aesthetic discourses? I am sure Prof. Dasgupta will try to reveal this.

Though on the whole the Marxian aesthetic tradition of Bengal looks quite bigoted, there were some sane voices within it from the very beginning. I am glad that Prof. Dasgupta is going to pay special attention to Bisnu Dey, who, according to me, was the most enlightened literary critic among the Bengali Marxists and yet who was considered as a 'Trojan horse in the camp of progress' by most Marxists (Indeed he has not found the place due to him even in such an excellent compilation as that of Dhananjay Das mentioned by Prof. Dasgupta). Bishnu Dey has a huge significance to my mind and let me explain this. An alternative search for revolutionary dynamics in arts became important in the world Marxian aesthetics since the time when the retreat of Revolution became a reality. The question that now seemed most vital was – the possibility of an effective ideological change within social conditions that are not revolutionary. This is indeed a question that remains relevant for the Marxist agenda even today. Bengali Marxists have not bothered much about this question. But Western Marxism gave much thought to this. Though perhaps this led to their preoccupation with cultural matters, which has been criticized, this also meant a certain sophistication at the theoretical level. Gradually Western Marxists took up a position towards a conception of radical needs for a humane transcendence of the alienation of social life. Humane values thus seemed more important to them than the political stance of the artist and the autonomy of the role of art was recognized too. Bishnu Dey was the only Bengali Marxist to my knowledge, who had anticipated Western Marxism in this regard, that too long back. I did deal with Bishnu Dey in my work. But Prof. Dasgupta has a much bigger scope of doing so, because his time frame is much broader.

I am sure the Naxal period is particularly interesting in the matter of aesthetic discourses and debates. It witnessed an intense revolutionary mood. But what was its aesthetic ramification? (And this question acts as a bridge between the two proposals of Dasgupta.) The tendency to throw away the past literary heritage, the entire Renaissance heritage for that matter, as an embodiment of bourgeois decadence (that is the legacy of the ultra-leftist phase of 1948-50), showed up strongly during the Naxal period. Saroj Dutta alias Sasanka is an example. But funnily, there remained a big gap between theory and practice of art. Saroj Dutta, influenced by the ideal of 'socialist realism', decried despair and despondency expressed in literature; but himself wrote poems full of despair and despondency. So things were rather complex in reality.

But not only what happened amid the Naxal movement, the legacy of the Naxal movement in aesthetic thinking is likely to be interesting too. We know about the great impact of the movement in the field of social sciences. Take the reassessment of the Bengal Renaissance, for example. The Naxals followed the iconoclasts of 1948-50 in their idol-smashing; and one may rubbish this as unthinking and foolish. But this made some sensitive and serious scholars revise the general starry-eyed admiration of the Bengal Renaissance, as became evident very soon in the volume *Ramomohun Ray and the Process of Modernization of India* edited by V C Joshi. I would refer particularly to the articles by Sumit Sarkar, Asok Sen and Barun De. They did not indulge in ultra-leftist sectarianism, but had a critical and yet balanced approach which showed solid database and solid reasoning. So alongside generating an extremist political bias among some people, the Naxal movement must have generally stirred the consciousness of the intelligentsia in general and perhaps this was too some extent reflected in aesthetics too. Prof. Dasgupta, I am sure, will uncover this.

I also welcome Prof. Dasgupta's proposal of 'selecting appropriate quotations from the texts and organizing these according to the thematic patterns'. I am sure this will be very meaningful and useful to scholars and others who are interested in Marxian aesthetics and how it was applied in Bengal.

I am also glad that he proposes to concentrate on the discourses of theatre, for example the differences between SambhuMitra and UtpalDutt. Progressive Bengalis remained passionately engaged with the medium of theatre for a long time and hence this should be another very interesting aspect of the proposed research. I would also request Prof. Dasgupta to pay some attention to the discourses in the fields of music and pictorial arts, if possible. This will give us a more rounded view of the subject.