Marxism

Politics: from polity, polis.

It sees society as a political unit. Anything that concerns the life of the polity is ‘political’. Humans are political animals.

October Revolution (Russian Revolution): 1917-18

Maxim Gorky’s *The Mother* (1906) – Good literature according to the official Soviet standpoint because it was a good example of socialist realism where the proletarian + peasant struggle under the leadership of the Bolsheviks was presented ‘truthfully’.

Material = that which has physical existence; from ‘matter’

Hegel (and all idealists) argued that the world (and matter) emanates/originates from ideas. Karl Marx stood Hegel on his head and argued that **everything starts from matter**.

Art/literature is the product of the material conditions of the people's lives. It emanates from the lived realities.

Usually the dominant class/ruling class/elite exert great dominance upon a community’s ideologies, ideas of right/wrong, prestige, value etc.

e.g, Classical music and arts belonged to the upper/elite classes and hence always enjoyed prestige. But folk music and arts, which belonged to the common people (and the vast majority), did not enjoy this prestige.

Among other things, Marxist critics look for expressions of class consciousness and class conflicts in works of art.

Some important concepts:

• Commodification

• Conspicuous consumption

• Dialectical materialism

• Base and Superstructure: Base = economic/material conditions; Superstructure = culture, arts, legal system etc.

Althusser: 'Just as the base determines the superstructure, the superstructure determines the base, too.' That is, there is a dialogical/dialectical relationship between the base and the superstructure. This is a radical departure from the Classical Marxist position (including the Soviet) according to which the base mechanistically determines the superstructure.

Thus, neo-Marxian and/or New Left thinkers reinterpreted and extended many of the traditional, rigid concepts regarding society and history. These later positions are not mechanistically determinist, unlike in the classical Marxist or the Soviet conception of socio-historical forces and phenomena.

Marxism (and Marxist literary criticism) is concerned with social stratification (layers/strata) and issues of social justice. In the last 150 years, Marxism has influenced all areas of social sciences and humanities. It has helped focus attention on issues of class, socio-economic exploitation, race, gender etc.

In Indian thought, the materialist tradition goes back at least to Charvaka/Lokayata, Ajivikas et al.

**Base and superstructure**

According to Marxism, the economic/material conditions of life are the base and all the rest (social customs, rituals, beliefs, education, media, legal system, all our cultural activities etc.) together form the superstructure.

According to classical Marxism, the base determines the superstructure in a mechanistic, determinist manner. In this view, the superstructure does not affect/influence/determine the base.

But later Marxians like Althusser reinterpreted the base-superstructure relationship in a radically different manner. According to this interpretation, the superstructure affects the base in a similar manner, from top to bottom. That is, there is a dialogic relationship between the base and the superstructure where they profoundly affect each other.

The writings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Gramsci are central to Marxist thought. Influential literary and cultural critics include Georg Lukac, Christopher Caudwell, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, many members of the Frankfurt school et al.

Frederic Jameson, Raymond Williams as well as historians like E P Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm et al are also important figures in the development of the Marxist paradigm through their radically insightful interpretations of economic and cultural phenomena.

The Frankfurt School’s enquiries should necessarily be seen in their historical context as anguished search for dignity in a world/Europe racked by two World Wars, Nazism, Fascism, Stalinism etc. The School was part of the Institute for Social Research of Frankfurt’s Goethe University; after the Nazis forced it to close down in 1933, it was re-established in the US, in Columbia University.

Althusser, his disciple/collaborator Pierre Macherey et al are counted among post-structuralist Marxists.