



## An advaitic critique of Marxism and its inner limits

Marx said that philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. Advaita responds that when the interpreter awakens, the world does not take long to change. Marxism is not wrong in seeking justice; it is merely incomplete in believing that justice can arise without awakening

**FIRST Column**



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I return from an intense, heartwarming tour of Kolkata, a city whose warmth embraced me again.

I spent a fortnight walking its lanes, speaking in its historic halls, signing books in its beloved bookstores, speaking with morning walkers at Rabindra Sarobar about Tagore and Camus, and listening to adda that still carries the old fire. Kolkata is alive with literature, music, argument, and a rare human gentleness. Yet one also notices the quiet scars that history leaves behind: whispers of a bygone ideological season whose fragrance, and at times its constraints, still linger in the air.

Bengal's middle class today leans heavily towards government-linked jobs. The energetic private-sector youth, ubiquitous in cities shaped by enterprise, are relatively fewer here, one outcome of decades of aspiration shaped by an ideology that distrusted competition and risk. One cannot miss the sight of abandoned factories and hand-pulled rickshaws.

Bengal's reality is shaped by the trauma of Partition, the freight-equalisation policy, long central neglect, and decades of ideology that shaped not just policy but imagination. Ideology as the primary influence invites an Advaitic understanding.

### Where Marxism Begins: With the Collective, Not the Individual

Marxism begins by declaring that liberation is a social project. Individual freedom, it argues, is shaped entirely by class relations; the worker under capitalism experiences a false freedom constrained by forces beyond his control.

Advaita sees a fundamental flaw in this approach. Yes, material conditions shape consciousness. But liberation does not belong to groups, because suffering does not belong to groups. Suffering is always personal. Awareness is personal and so is insight. No crowd has ever woken up; only individuals do.

Marxism asks you to begin with class consciousness; Advaita with consciousness itself. Marxism names your outer enemy; Advaita the one within. Marxism says bondage arises from property relations;



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Advaita says it springs from ignorance, independent of what you own.

A society that shifts the onus of liberation entirely from within to outside is bound to keep seeking villains, revolutions, and structural replacements. Every such search ends in disappointment because the seeker's own inner centre remains unexamined.

### Class Consciousness: The Collective Ego

Marxism instructs individuals to see themselves primarily as representatives of a class. You become a worker, a bourgeois, a petty bourgeois: not an individual with a being of your own, but a product of economic relations.

Advaita sees this as the enlargement of the ego.

The personal ego says, "I am this body." The collective ego says, "I am this group." Both are illusions that bind and blind. Class identity is not awakening; it is only a change of costume.

Some of the finest Marxist thinkers, Gramsci and Lukács, hinted that the collective we might, under rare conditions, become a mirror in which the individual glimpses the whole. Advaita insists that even this glimpse remains second-hand until the individual uses the mirror to see the seer.

Many young people can fluently speak of class struggle but rarely examine their

own inner struggle. They diagnose exploitation but not their own fear or insecurity. When an ideology teaches you to study society but not yourself, to analyse the world yet avoid asking "Who am I?", vision becomes distorted.

### Economic Reductionism: The Marxian Error on Utility

Marx defined use-value as the ability of an object to satisfy needs. But he never deeply examined need itself.

To see the real worth of anything, you must know its full cost: the damage it causes, the labour it exploits, and the inner bondages that make you crave it.

A worker can be as unconscious in consumption as a capitalist is in ownership. Ignorance, not class, determines exploitation. Proletariat and bourgeois both suffer

from lack of seeing. That seeing must extend beyond economics. Culture, religion, and morality are not mere shadows of production; they cast human bondages as powerfully as the factory floor.

Marx saw culture, religion, law, and morality as products of economic relations, secondary to whoever owns the means of production. But the social structure is far more than production systems. People die for nations, preserve traditions, and sacrifice for faith or family, none of which follows the logic of class interest. Bondages are not just material; they arise

from tradition, religion, and belief.

The sense of self arises from conditioning deeper than economic position, for consciousness-shaped by culture, memory, and fear-drives human bondage and suffering. Economic conditions matter, but they are not the deepest. Avidya appears outside as society and economics; the real Maya sits within as Aham-vritti. External violence and exploitation are only symptoms of inner darkness.

### Systems Do Not Liberate Minds: The Real Revolution Is Inner

Bengal offers a window into what happens when a system claims to liberate people without addressing inner clarity. Marxism promised a worker's paradise, but what followed was a culture where suspicion replaced creativity and resignation dulled resolution.

Capitalism too conditions and distorts the mind, turning attention into a commodity and desire into an endless treadmill that now fuels the climate catastrophe. However, true competition is not the jungle's law but the play of inner freedom: to act, fail, learn, and offer one's work without fear or greed.

The absence of incentive is not enlightenment; it is often only resignation. You can change rulers, rewrite laws, or redistribute capital, but if the mind remains conditioned, the new system soon collapses into the old.

Marxism still attracts the young because it rightly names exploitation and inequality but misdiagnoses their source. It blames ownership instead of desire, class instead of consciousness, and hierarchy instead of ignorance.

This half-truth breeds moral outrage that feels like clarity and revolt that feels like purpose, yet without self-understanding it only recreates the same world with new slogans. Marxism assumes that if capital is redistributed, human nature will change. Advaita says the opposite: without inner clarity, only appearances change.

Greed remains greed even when it waves a red flag. Fear remains fear even when it claims to speak for the masses. Domination remains domination even when it calls itself revolution. Remove the capitalist and the party-state becomes the new one; remove the elite and another rises from the ashes.

The Advaitic critique of Marxism defends not capitalism but clarity. If greed remains, capitalism will exploit. If fear remains,

communism will oppress. If desire remains, every system will be misused.

No system can redeem an unconscious mind, and outer change without inner seeing merely rotates power. A real revolution begins when a person examines the structure of her own desire, not merely society's structure: when she asks not "Who owns the factory?" but "Who owns my being?"

### Kolkata as a Mirror, and a Vision

Whoever has sat in a College Street coffee house overhearing loud arguments about Sartre and Satyajit Ray, heard temple bells mingle with the sounds at dawn, been hugged by strangers after a talk, knows that Kolkata loves the sublime. On my last day, as participants of my Gita Samagam program burst into a spontaneous uproar of Ekala Chalo Re and the auditorium reverberated with hundreds of voices demanding one liberation, I found myself dissolving in the moment.

Bengal's inner tapestry remains colourfully vibrant. What did fade, for a while, was touch with reality, for charming visions often make one lose sight of the inner.

Time may show that the ideological season left Bengal richer. A renewed realism is returning: slowly, unevenly, joyfully. Young Bengalis are launching sustainable startups, filming vegan commentaries on phones, writing code in Salt Lake, rediscovering the fearless creativity that once produced Tagore, Ramanujan, and Satyajit.

If Bengal's youth reclaim their individuality, it will not be by rejecting their collective memory but by adding a new chapter born of direct seeing, not ideology. The same soil that nourished Vivekananda and Ramakrishna can nourish a generation compassionate and enterprising, rooted and free, collective when it serves society, individual when it serves Truth.

Marx said philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. Advaita responds: when the interpreter wakes up, the world doesn't take time to change.

Marxism is not wrong for seeking justice. It is incomplete in believing justice can come without awakening. When awakening does come, whether in a Dakshineswar temple, a Russian factory, or a Wall Street floor, one sees that every great outer revolution begins with the courage to challenge one's inner structures.