

M. A. Sociology Semester II, Paper I (Modern Sociology thought)

Unit I – Karl Marx

Topic – Alienation in Capitalism

(Prof. Sangeeta Pandey)

Question- Clarify Karl Max's concept of Alienation

Karl Marx was the first sociologist who used the concept of Alienation as a powerful diagnostic tool for sociological inquiry. The notion of Alienation is central to Marxian thought. According to Marx Alienation dominates every institutional sphere in a capitalist society be it- religion, economy or polity. Among all of these Marx sees its predominance in the work place. He explains the process of Alienation in the domain of work. In his book Das Capital Vol. 1, he describes Alienation “ ...as a situation in which the creations of workers appear alien to them. Such creations are seen as independent from their creators and are invested with the power to control them.....”. The English word ‘Alienation’ comes from Latin word ‘Alienare’ which means – ‘ to remove’ or ‘take away’, ‘to estrange’. Thus the feeling of having no belongings in the surroundings, of being a stranger or sense of loneliness is termed as alienation. Workers see themselves as prisoners of market forces over which they have no control. They are at the mercy of the periodic booms and depressions that characterize capitalist economies. Marx in his book- Das Capital vol I explains in detail the process of Alienation which goes on in a capitalist society. For Marx, the history of mankind is a history of class struggle on one hand and on the other it is also the history of increasing Alienation of man. Karl Marx in Early writings (translated and ed, by T.B.Bottomore 1964, page 124) writes-“Alienation appears not merely in the result but also in the process of production, within the productivity activity itself.....If the product of labour is alienation, production itself must be active alienation.....”. Marx believes “ Religious alienation as such occurs only in the sphere of consciousness, in the inner life of man but economic alienation is that of real life.

Alienation in the domain of work has a four- fold aspect:

1 – Man is alienated from the object he produces.

2 – He is alienated from the process of production.

3 – He is alienated from himself.

4 – He is alienated from the community of his fellows.

In Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 Marx wrote “ The object produced by labour, its product, now stands oppose to it as an alien being, as a power independent of the producer.....The more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself.....”.

Thus when the worker is alienated from the object of his labour and the process of production he becomes alienated to himself and his creativity. He is unable to develop many sides of his personality. Work becomes external to the worker. It is no longer a part of his nature. As a result of Alienation, work in capitalism is reduced to mere labour. The individual does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. “ In work (the worker) does not belong to himself but to another person.....”. The work process seems like suffering to the worker. He is estranged from his strength i.e. his creativity and the feeling of powerlessness takes over. Finally the alienated man (worker) is also alienated from human community from his “species being”, from “human life itself”. Thus the process of alienation develops the feeling of powerlessness, meaninglessness. rootlessness and isolation in workers and leads to despair and personality disorganization.

Summary points

For Marx

1 – Alienation is not only a concept but a real picture of Capitalism.

2 – It reveals the exploitative nature of capitalistic society in 19th century.

3 – In Capitalism work is reduced to mere labour.

4 – Fruits of labour accumulate in the hands of (Capitalist) Bourgeoisie and the worker becomes even poorer.

5 -Worker is alienated from-

(1) the product he produces.

(2) the production process.

(3) from himself.

(4) from his community

6 – Worker is estranged from his 'creativity' and thus also from his 'human nature'

7 – The psychological effect of alienation is – 'A sense of powerlessness'.

8 – Marx sees alienation as the primary cause of de-humanization.

References

1 – Masters of Sociological thought by Lewis A. Coser.

2 – Early writings edited and translated by T.B. Bottomore 1964, Page 164-169

3 – Agarni Samajshastri Evam Adhunik Samajshastriya Siddhanta- Dr. Sangeeta Pandey