CHAPTER 1

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If we except the great protagonists of the soviet revolution, there is no personality in the history of worker's movement whose person and work have aroused greater interest than Gramsci's.¹

Though not very familiar till about 1950 to non Italian readers, the writings of Antonio Gramsci have had a global impact. Today he is rated as one of the most original, innovative and influential Marxist thinkers. The quotation given above reveals how influential the life of the person itself was to the workers. Talking about the writings, though written at the most difficult and painful times, they exhibited the creative, intellectual capabilities of a revolutionary theoretician. Some commentators however have even branded him as the critic of Marxism due to his efforts to break away from the classical Marxian tradition. In classical Marxism, the objective material conditions were given prime place, as Karl Marx even

defined society purely in terms of economics and principles of materialism. Gramsci's theoretical originality revolves around his attempt to establish human subjectivity as a core element of Marxism. Consciousness in all its manifestations was conceptualized as the automatic reflection of 'deeper' economic and social process. Within the framework of historical materialism, he tried to accord consciousness an independent and creative role.

There were a number of factors responsible for such a move to break away from traditional Marxism. They are like the growth of reformism within western working class, the outbreak of the First World War (revealing as it did the fragility of proletarian internationalism), the failure of the socialist revolution to spread outside Russia, the crushing defeat of the post-war rebellions in Germany and Hungary, and the subsequent rise of popular right wing movements. This series of psychological and physical defeats led to grave doubts about the theoretical foundation of revolutionary action.

As claimed by many thinkers, Gramsci's life itself was of a great influence on the movements of the proletariat and on the
life of many thinkers. It is worth mentioning a biological sketch of the most significant part of his life here. Antonio Gramsci was born in 1891 in the small town of Ales in Sardinia, in a poor family. His parents’ hope of giving good education to the children suffered a setback when the father was suspended from his job on suspicions of peculation and was sentenced to imprisonment. Gramsci’s mother brought up the seven children on her meager earnings as a seamstress. Antonio Gramsci was not blessed with good health due to the malformation of the spine, which made him hunch-backed and barely five feet tall. The internal disorders and severe nervous complications which recurred in adult life were also responsible for his premature death at the age of 46.

Though Gramsci was admitted to school in 1898, there were interruptions for a couple of years at the end of his elementary schooling, as he had to go to work. But his father’s release from jail enabled him to return to school. Though it was comparatively a bad school, the literate home background managed him to pass the examinations to enter the senior school. Gramsci’s elder brother, Genarro, who returned from military service, was a socialist militant himself. It was Genarro
who introduced Gramsci to politics. He used to send socialist pamphlets to his younger brother at home. An equally formative influence was provided by the wave of social protests that swept Sardinia which was brutally repressed by the troops from the mainland. The form taken by the repression, both military and legal, gave a great impetus to the cause of Sardinian nationalism, and it was to this cause that Gramsci first adhered. These lessons received from the homeland in these early years had tremendous influence on his later life. In 1911 he won a scholarship for poor students from Sardinia to the University of Turin. The scholarship grant was miserably inadequate and sicknesses such as cold and malnutrition played havoc with Gramsci’s already precarious health. Despite his talent for philology and linguistics, he was eventually forced to abandon his studies. The growing political commitment was another important reason for his leaving the studies.

There are four distinct phases in Gramsci’s political life and thought— phases which represent different theoretical priorities and responses to the political world. The initial one, spanning 1914 to 1919, comprised the formative years of his intellectual and political evolution. It was during his years at
Turin University that Gramsci first came into serious contact with the intellectual world of his time. He was introduced to the particular brand of Hegelianised 'philosophy of praxis', a term best known today in connection with Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (in which it is used partly for the sake of deceiving the censor), was introduced into Italy by Antonio Labriola. Labriola's ideas, particularly on the interpretation of history, were extremely influential, but mainly in intellectual circles and often in a distorted form, which accentuated their latent idealism at the expense of their materialist base. Rodolfo Mondolfo was another Italian socialist thinker who was popular in his time. His main contribution to Marxism lay in his attempt to drive a wedge between the "philosophical" Marx and the more empirical Engels. On the whole, however Gramsci shows himself critical of Mondolfo and continued to reassert the substantial Marxism of Labriola.

However, the one thinker who had been much more influential on his political thought was Benedetto Croce. Croce was much more of a philosophical and cultural influence than others. Looking back on his student days, Gramsci was to describe himself self-critically as having been in his youth,
“tendentially Crocean”, and many of his early articles have a distinct Crocean ring about them. However, later, in his prison writings there is substantial criticism of Crocean philosophy on its relation to Marxism. Gramsci’s articles and reviews during this period (most of which appeared in the socialist newspaper, *Avanti*) express a deep concern with the cultural and spiritual conditions of revolution, together with a messianic desire to inculcate the proper consciousness into the workers through intense educational activity.

The second phase covers a series of movements relating to the industries. In May 1919, Gramsci and a small group of Marxist intellectuals started *L’Ordine Nuovo* (literally, *The New Order*), a journal designed to give theoretical expression and practical direction to the increasingly militant struggle of the North Italian workers. Using *L’Ordine Nuovo* as his vehicle, Gramsci, with the aid of his colleagues worked out his well known factory council theory, with its anti-centralist and anti-bureaucratic bias. At this juncture, his philosophical idealism yielded to a more recognizably Marxist position concerning the role of the economic structure. There are also two related changes in his approach: (i) more emphasis on the self education
of the workers, and (ii) a greater personal commitment to concrete political organization. Class consciousness, he now believed, would arise as a spontaneous product of the workers' 'conciliar' activity. The task of the revolutionary party, therefore, should not be to tutor the proletariat but to promote the formation of the strong political unity within the class (party). Italian Revolution was actual at this point of time, according to Gramsci.

The years of 1921 to 1926, from the founding of the PCI (Partito Communisto Italiano) to Gramsci's arrest and imprisonment, marks the third phase of his career. During this time, he gradually came to see the process of revolution as a much slower one than had seemed to be the case earlier with the humiliating collapse of the council movement. It became plain that the autonomous activity of the masses was by no means sufficient for the overthrow of capitalism. In consequence, Gramsci turned his attention to the party and its vanguard role. Much of his energy in this period was devoted to everyday organizational problems and factional turmoil within the PCI and the Comintern. Indeed he spent much of 1922-3 in Moscow, and by 1924 he assumed the leadership of the Italian party. Not
surprisingly, his writings during these years were directed to the concrete exigencies of political strategy and tactics.

The last phase in Antonio Gramsci’s political life is the most important one in his theoretical development. This is a period of confinement to a number of Fascist prisons. Soon after his arrest in 1926, Gramsci planned an immense labour of research and meditation, designed to set his active political experiences within a wider historical and philosophical framework. Despite obstacles, he went on to execute a great part of his self-assigned task. Between 1929 and 1935, he filled 32 note books with close to 3,000 pages of handwritten notes covering a vast range of topics. These notes were the culmination and synthesis of his political experience and practice till 1926. His extensive study of Croce and polemical writings and critique of the Fascist ideology helped him to evolve his own world view and develop his philosophy of praxis. He articulated his views on politics as an autonomous science and on the role of the intellectuals in it. In discussion with his fellow prisoners, he stressed the role of the party as the organic intellectual of the working class, and the need of the militant organization capable of combating the strategy and
tactics of the Fascist state. He also insisted on the political need of creating a Constituent Assembly to win allies against the ruling class, and thus pave the way for the eventual victory of socialism. He maintained that the victory of the working class and the defeat of fascism could be found in the historical process, that is, through a Marxist analysis of the real forces operative in the society. And it is this thesis that sharpened his theory of historic bloc and of hegemony.

In prison, Gramsci read anything he was allowed to receive voraciously. Access to Marxist texts was restricted by prison censorship, and he was forced to supplement his reading of the originals by reference to commentaries and critiques. When he could not read books, he read magazines and periodicals, thus keeping in touch with cultural developments while at the same time using his reading as material for a critique of bourgeois ideology and of the confusion and backwardness of Italian intellectual life under fascism. He wrote copiously, filling his notebooks systematically in a small, crabbed and curiously precise hand, transcribing quotations and practicing translation as well as developing his own thought.
He also wrote letters to immediate friends and relations, to his children and to his mother and sisters in Sardinia. These letters are an extraordinary document of human tenacity and are justifiably considered as one of the classics of modern Italian literature. They are buoyed up constantly by an urgent desire to communicate information, ideas, projects or simply affection. Most striking of all is the sense they give of continuing perseverance in the face of deprivation and physical suffering. Gramsci had little to rely on except force of will and the knowledge of belonging, even during this period of isolation, to a revolutionary movement. It was for this latter reason above all that, when in prison, he obstinately refused any privilege of special treatment that could possibly imply recognition of dependence on favours granted by the regime, but instead fought tooth and nail for his exact legal rights as a political prisoner.

This aspect, that is, the prison life of Gramsci and the resultant classic, the Prison Notebooks is the phase which any socialist should consider as the 'most victorious', not because of the suffering inflicted on him due to imprisonment, but the conviction, the commitment to what he believed in. He chose to make prison life, secluded as it was from other activities, into a
valuable opportunity to deliberate and write on themes that concerned political philosophy. This phase of Gramsci’s political life evokes comparison to Mahatma Gandhi’s and Nelson Mandela’s long stretches of imprisonment under tyrant regimes. Gandhi, for instance, for the sake of the freedom of India from British imperialists, involved himself in a series of movements (all of which was non-violent), as a result of which he was imprisoned. Every time he was imprisoned, he made the best use of it, for deep self-analysis and meditation, and wrote a series of letters to relatives, leaders and other followers. The other aspect which is involved here is the element of self-restraint. Both, Gramsci and Gandhi, had the opportunity of giving to the wishes of the opponents, that is, choice of being a part of the other which would have got them released and let them enjoy special privileges. But this strong belief/commitment about the principles they adhered to, gave them the courage to scorn all possibilities of deviation from the moral path they chose for themselves.

The last phase in Gramsci’s political life witnessed the theoretical explication of many aspects of his political philosophy. One of the important themes/concepts on which
Gramsci spent his valuable time and energy on 'hegemony'. Drawing experiences from Comintern tradition, he redefined the term 'hegemony' by stressing on cultural and intellectual factors. Gramsci’s stress on cultural and intellectual factors underlies his celebrated doctrine of 'hegemony' or ideological ascendancy. He saw in a way that no previous Marxist had done that rule of one class or group over the rest of the society does not depend on material power alone; in modern times at least, the dominant class must establish its own moral, political and cultural values as conventional norms of practical behaviour. This is the essential idea embodying 'hegemony', widely accepted as the basic theoretical point of departure for Gramsci’s Marxism.

Gramsci’s prison views on hegemony, on the moral and cultural legitimacy of political rule, enabled him to furnish novel solutions to three problems which have plagued the Marxist thought and behaviour for well over half a century. First, why is there a gap between Marxist theory and proletarian practice? In other words, why have western industrial workers not taken the path set out for them by the Marxists: why have they not become the grave diggers of capitalism? Second, how
do we close this gap, by what means can a revolutionary party increase its support and eventually attain power in the highly developed societies of the West? The third broad question is: why have Marxist societies not succeeded in establishing 'the realm of freedom' envisaged by Marx and Engels? These questions which are broad and general cannot be taken up here for discussion exhaustively, but Gramsci has directly or indirectly answered them in his writings in prison.

In this thesis entitled "Political Philosophy of Antonio Gramsci," basically I raise two questions: (a) can Antonio Gramsci be considered as a neo-Marxist?, and (b) what kind of Marxism does he propagate? This first question, however, is not placed in this thesis for a direct answer, though the question is encountered indirectly. The problem posed is, in my mind, not out of context at the wake of several controversies relating to the political philosophy of Antonio Gramsci, that is, some considering him as a Marxist and others considering him simply as a critic of Marxism. At this juncture my effort is placed as a serious attempt to settle this dispute among Marxists and neo-Marxists. My answer to the question is not direct, as I make an attempt to analyze the reminiscences of Marxist tradition in the
\textit{Prison Notebooks} by looking into three of Gramsci’s vital concepts such as hegemony, intellectuals and praxis. None of these concepts truly has a genesis in Gramsci but in the earlier Marxists, mostly in the Cominterns, taking a journey of change through a long period before reaching Gramsci. In the chapters to follow, I try to check and find out the interpretation of the earlier thinkers, nuances and differing interpretations, different concepts attained and also new connotations they all attained under the penetrating analysis of Gramsci.

The concept of hegemony, generally understood as ‘domination’, originated in Russia before passing through a long path to reach Europe. What kind of a domination is this? Can any regime of domination be called hegemonic? In Gramsci it seemed to have much more than this ‘dominance’ as a ‘connotation’ which is Comintern in character. Hegemony, today, is a hot currency among the socialist thinkers of Europe and Asia. Different political developments in Asia make it a relevant concept to be deliberated upon. What are the issues attached to this concept? Is dominance only one-dimensional, that is, achieved through force? Undoubtedly domination is possible through force. Can such a regime that achieves
hegemony with an iron hand be called hegemonic, then? It could have been called so, had it been a few decades earlier. But with the changes in time the approach too has been transformed with the arrival of Gramsci. His is a novel approach to this social and political problem. He brought in the concept of 'consent' into the arena of regime, obviously the consent of the ruled. The implication attached to the new connotations is seriously analyzed in the first chapter of this dissertation. The natural/normal queries relating to this concept revolve round the question, 'what are the conforming behaviours to be called as necessary to the formation of consent?'

Gramsci understands civil society as an arena where 'hegemony' has to be looked for. This too is a novel approach. 'Dominance' is related to coercion and the regime. If so, then, hegemony should naturally be concentrated on the political arena. But Gramsci places civil society as the arena of hegemony and political society (state) as the location of coercion.

Gramsci, talking about the political society, aims at achieving the goal, that is, the integral state. It is an all-
inclusive, integrated state, where the civil society and political society are at unity. Gramsci's concept of 'historical bloc' has relevance here which it is nothing but the unity of the base and the 'superstructure'. The base is the ensemble of relations as prevalent in the society, in Marxian terms the materiality; the superstructure is the civil society and the political society. The concept of historical bloc is constituted of many other sub-blocs within itself.

There are inconsistencies relating to explanations on themes such as state and civil society. Critics raise objections relating to this. However, in my attempt to defend the objections to Gramscian thought, the above criticisms are fended off, as superficial. The aim which is the integral state however is the modern state which is the aim of any socialist thinker. It is the ultimate location of hegemony.

'Consent' is not simply attained for the regime by the rulers; it is earned by instilling in the ruled, faith and hope. How can this be done? Who are the confidence builders? In its crudest form, the confidence builders are the group of deputies/representatives called intellectuals. The concept of
'intellectuals' is discussed in the third chapter. They are considered as the organizers and articulators of hegemony. What are their different roles? Are they simply to build confidence in the ruled? They have a number of other functions to perform, both internal to the class they belong to, as well as external to itself. A class consciousness, the subjective elements peculiar to Gramsci's political philosophy, is what distinguishes Gramscian philosophy from the classical Marxian tradition. The 'homogeneity' of a class is the result of the role performed by its intellectuals.

Intellectuals are of two different kinds – 'organic' and 'traditional'. There is also another division made among the intellectuals, called 'rural' and 'urban', depending on the geographical locations where they reside. Intellectuals work on the subjective elements among the ruled to win their consent and have the hegemonic regime. Intellectuals work with the weapon of ideology. What is this weapon? Is this something different for Gramsci from what Karl Marx had conceived of? Role of the intellectuals becomes easier if the state apparatus is under the control of their class. State apparatus is made use of by the class in power to build hegemony for their own regime.
But it is a big task to reach to the stage of controlling the state apparatus. In a capitalist society, bourgeois intellectuals have an easier task as the state apparatus has been under their control. How about the intellectuals of the proletariat class? Their task is larger and more difficult, and so the concept of a political party has relevance here. A section entitled, 'Intellectuals and Political Party' in this thesis, has a detailed discussion on the mutual relationship between the two.

Another concept which is truly Marxian is called 'Praxis'. The phrase 'Philosophy of Praxis' has a distinctively Marxian flavour. However, the literal meaning of the term 'praxis' is 'practicality', relating to an activity closely linked to thoughts or ideas. 'Putting something into practice' is the simplest meaning of this phrase. However, in Gramsci it has serious implications. It is a unity of theory and practice. In *Prison Notebooks*, the section entitled 'Philosophy of Praxis' asks the question 'what is philosophy?' Gramsci answers this question and tries to understand critical philosophy through the critique of spontaneous philosophy. Gramsci treats all men as philosophers but separates professional philosophers from the
others because they have a specific role to perform. The unity of theory and practice is also a historical necessity.

Criticisms commonly raised against the political philosophy of Antonio Gramsci, that it contains elements such as historicism, immanentism and that it has emphasis laid on subjective elements of experience etc. are responded to by defending Gramsci from a variety of points of view. The element of class consciousness is important and this is typical of Gramsci.

The second and final question raised is regarding the kind of Marxism that is adopted by Gramsci. Gramsci's political philosophy is undoubtedly based on the theoretical assumptions of Karl Marx, but it is different from the classical Marxist tradition as his philosophy is more (i) humane, (ii) ethical and (iii) democratic. The concluding chapter will highlight the distinction that exists between Gramsci's political philosophy and classical Marxism.

The present dissertation is an attempt at affirming the thesis that Marxist socialism, as one of the most powerful socio-economic theories in history, can survive the test and changes of
time through varieties of interpretations and varied historical experiments. One criticism that is staunchly leveled against Marxism in general is that its prediction of the ultimate fall of capitalism is doomed to failure as capitalism is destined for inventive victories of survival through self-correction. However, my thesis albeit indirectly, applies this line of argument also to Marxism and its historic victories and instinct to survive through new interpretations as offered by Antonio Gramsci and new experiments as done in some states of India. There is even evidence of Chinese communism going capitalist by opening its economy to world market. One unsaid belief running right through my thesis is the conviction that Marxism is ultimately humanism. Since the death of Karl Marx, the plight of the working class enormously improved all over the world. Every aspect of human thought, imagination and their expressions, religions and cultural organizations began to wear not only the democratic spectacles but also the socialist ones.

The cardinal emphasis of this thesis is the ethical, humane and democratic elements that Gramsci so convincingly brought to revolutionary Marxism, often blamed for unwanted, inhuman bloodshed and suppression of individual freedom behind the
iron curtain. However, his influence was not confined to mere politics; Gramsci's writings influenced literature and culture, and the way people thought about socialism in Europe. The example of Pier Paolo Pasolini, who wrote poems, essays and stories influenced by the theories of class struggle in the works of Gramsci, is ample evidence to the above fact. This is tribute enough to the man who died at the young age of 46!

It is suggested that all reworkings of Marxism and Marxian themes (the ones we have in India are of special relevance in this connection; the South Indian state of Kerala is singled out as having the first democratically elected Communist Government in power!) will find in Antonio Gramsci a treasure-trove of insights, hints and pointers. The charm of socialism is not dead. There are even views that it is better for the spirit of Marxism to look for, not in Russia, Eastern Europe or China, but in France, Italy, the Scandinavian countries and, in some respects, even in India. In fact, all government policies and constitutional provisions the world over that provide for the welfare of the working class and the poor have a typically socialist spirit behind them. Such is the spirit of Marxist-
socialism that Antonio Gramsci's writings have heralded. This indeed is a Marxism beyond Marx.