

A GREAT THINKER OF 20th CENTURY – ERICH FROMM

Ampashayya Naveen

Though not as popular as Bertrand Russell, or a Bernard Shaw or a Sigmund Freud or a Karl Marx, 'Erich Fromm' was one of the greatest thinkers of 20th century. He was essentially a 20th century man. He was born in Frankfurt, Germany on 23rd March 1900 – the turn of 19th century, lived for 80 years and breathed his last in 1980. He was born into a cultivated and religious milieu. After an extensive study of psychology and sociology at the University of Heiderberg, Frankfurt and Munich, he obtained psycho-analytic training at the Berlin Psycho-analytic institute. Although unlike many analysts, he had no medical training, Fromm began clinical practice in 1926 which he was to continue for the rest of his life.

Along with a handful of other analysts, Fromm became interested in the possibilities of combining the insights of Freud and Marx. This seemed impossible in the beginning. Freud himself believed that trying to combine his theories of Psycho-analysis with the revolutionary ideas of Marx was not only dangerous for the Psycho-analytic movement but also psychologically naive. At the same time, for communists psychoanalysis represented the ultimate in "Bourgeois Individualism". But for Fromm and many of other likeminded intellectuals of those days it was possible. These people who combine Freudian ideas and Marxist ideas came to be known as 'Freudo-Marxist'. They believed that psychoanalysis could supplement Marx's notion of psychology by explaining why the victims of irrational authority and exploitation so readily acquired to their fate. Psycho-analysis is the jargon of Marxism would provide the missing link between economic base and the cultural superstructure.

Though a follower of Freud in the beginning, Fromm became increasingly critical of Freud's theory of the instincts especially the concepts of 'libido and the death instinct'. Fromm also rejected the Freud's theories of 'oedipus complex' and 'infantile sexuality'. But Fromm was in agreement with Freud's theory of unconscious and its overall influence on the behavior of an individual. So along with many others of Fromm's thinking, who was described as neo Freudian. The basic difference between both of them was that Freud emphasized the instinctual part of Man in deciding his behavior and Fromm emphasized the cultural factors in a given society. Fromm developed what became known as the cultural school in a psycho-analysis in which the influences of social structure on personality formation was studied.

From 1940 onwards Eric Fromm started writing a number of books discussing the contemporary problems of European society. His first book 'Escape from Freedom' also known as fear of freedom which was published in 1942 established him as a writer of great repute. A number of other books like 'The Same Society', 'Art of Love', 'Anatomy of Destruction' discussed some of the vexing socio-psychological problems in a scientific way and offered solution to them. Some of Fromm's ideas as found particularly in 'The Same Society' and 'Art of Love' are very much relevant to this day to all the societies of the world.

First question he asks in his 'The Same Society' is: Are we same? His answer to this question is in the negative. In spite of several achievements like 90% literacy rate, raise in per capita income, modern equipments like Radio, TV, movies and News papers etc. Man's mental maturity is yet to be achieved. Eric Fromm says " But instead of giving us the best of past and present, literature and movie, these media of communication supplemented by advertising fill the minds of men with the cheapest trash lacking in any sense of reality with sadistic fantasies which a half way cultured person would be embarrassed to entertain even once in a while". But the minds of everybody young and old are thus poisoned. We go on blissfully to see it that no immorality occurs on the screen. Any suggestion that the government should finance the production of movies and Radio programs which would enlighten and improve the minds of people would be met again with indignation accusations in the name of freedom and idealism.

In this book *The Same Society*, Fromm discusses extensively the man's position in capitalist society in 20th century. As man becomes a cog in the huge machinery called capitalism, he loses his identity and totally alienated from all spheres of life under capitalism.

Fromm says "Science, Business, Politics have lost all foundations and proportions which make sense humanly. We live in figures and abstractions – since nothing is concrete nothing is real. Everything is possible factually and morally. Science fiction is not different from science fact; night mares and dreams from the events of next year. Man has been thrown out from any definite place where he can over loose and manage his life and the life of the society. He is driven fast and fast by the forces which originally were created by him. In this wild whirl he thinks, figures busy with abstractions more and more remote from concrete life".

Fromm says that capitalistic society alienates man from his social surroundings. To quote him again on the problem of alienation, he says "By alienation is meant the mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as alien. He has become, one might say, estranged from himself. He doesn't experience himself as the centre of his world, as the creator of his own acts – but his acts and their consequences have become his masters whom he says or whom he may even worship. The alienated person is out of touch with himself as he is out of touch with any other person. He, like others, had experienced as things are experienced with the senses and with common sense but at the same time without being related to oneself and to the world outside productively". Like this, Erich Fromm in this book makes a bitter condemnation of capitalistic societies and then suggests ways and means to achieve a same society. For creating a same society, mental health of the individuals in the society is absolutely necessary. Then what is mental health ? Erich Fromm reply is: "Mental health is characterized by the ability to love and create by the emergence from incestuous ties to clan and social, by a sense of identity based on one's experience of self as the subject and agent of one's powers by the group of reality inside and outside of ourselves, that is by the development of objectivity and reason". One's ability to achieve mental health and the way in which one does so, depends to a small extent on individual fallouts but is largely a question of what a society makes possible. 'The Same Society' is a bulky book containing 355 pages. It is impossible to give a comprehensive analysis of this book in this column. I have given only a small glimpse of this great book whose contents are very much applicable to our present day Indian society of Globalization, Liberalization and Privatization. Another book of Fromm which impressed me deeply is 'The Art of Love'. It reads like a beautiful poem analyzing various facts of love like mother's love, father's love, brother's love, erotic love and love of God. Young men and women of present day India should read this book to understand and experience the complex intricacies of love. This book Art of Love should be made a Must Read Book to all the college going students of this country.