

Some Aspects of Earlier Indian Society and Polity and their Relevance to the Present --

A presentation based on the three talks delivered by Dharampalji in Pune in 1986.

Shri. Dharampalji (1921-2006) was a Gandhian Historian and Thinker who through intense archival research pertaining to the 18th-19th century India showed that the society and polity of India, including its sciences, technologies and industry, was in a functional and flourishing state till as late as the beginning of 1800.

In these talks delivered in 1986, he narrates his story in terms of (i) what made him get into serious archival research on pre-British India, (ii) what his essential findings were and how fundamentally different they were from the commonly believed ones, (iii) why were these truths about our past not known more widely among our educated classes, (iv) what is the present state of our polity and society, (v) what could be some directions forward for us as suggested by these findings.

This presentation briefly summarizes his talks along these five points.

I. What took Dharampalji to the Archives?

- For about 20 years after Independence, Dharampalji was involved with the problems of rural reconstruction, as well as with questions of rebuilding of a new India.
- One of the discoveries he made was that the villagers still attempted to solve their problems through their own ancient institutions and processes, rather than through the newly introduced statutory government ('sarkari') panchayat system.
- But as these institutions and processes did not have either legal validity or the necessary resources, it led to a deadlocked situation in the rural development work.
- It is facts like the above which made me realise that most of us had completely lost touch with the reality of our country and its people.
- We did not think that they probably had their own thoughts, their own ways, their own priorities etc - we assumed that they were like a blank slate on which we, the architects of the new India, could write what we wished, including the laws, regulations, procedures and plans which we were administering. And when we failed in writing on it what we wished, or in giving such writing any permanence, we felt unhappy and more often angry with these countrymen of ours.
- This is what made me realise the need to know more about our people and our society prior to the British take over, and hence my interest in archival records, starting from the government archives in Madras.
- The choice of mid-18th to early 19th century (1740 – 1830) period for my archival explorations - I treat it as a sort of benchmark point for the understanding of Indian society and polity prior to the British take over. Also the availability of detailed records by the British for around this period.

II. What did Dharampalji find in the Archives about pre-British India?

For over 20 years starting from the mid-1960s, Dharampalji spent all his time and resources in the Archives of Madras, Kolkata, Delhi, Mumbai and London trying to find the causes of what he was observing about the villages of India.

His findings are summarised below under 5 heads.

1. The political economy of our villages – social and fiscal arrangements.

British survey (1760s to 1770s) of about 2,000 villages of the Chengelpattu District of Tamil Nadu revealed --

- Most of the tax on produce of the village (coming to about 25 – 40% in all) was paid directly to the providers of the various supplies and services to the village.

There were around 45 such supplies and services directly paid for, which included:

Temples & Priests, Police, Irrigation, Accounts/Records keepers, Land owners, Corn-measurers, Oil suppliers, Water Pandals, Carpenters & Blacksmiths, Potters, Goldsmiths, Barbers, Washerman, Doctors, Snake doctors, Cow keepers, Gardeners, Scholars, Dancing girls etc.

- There were also villages (manyam villages) whose cultivators paid their tax not to the public authority but directly to the assigned institutions and functions.
- The share that went to the apex state was very small (often nil as in the case of manyam lands), typically around 5 %. (This was the same value during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Jahangir). *In Britain it was 50-80%.*
- Supremacy of the village community over land and its use, with the rights of the actual cultivator being permanent and hereditary as decided by custom and practice. (*The British started scrapping this from around 1790.*)

Fiscal and social arrangements were distributed and not centralised – perhaps providing the basis for Mahatma Gandhi’s concept of “Oceanic Circles” to be made the basis for the organisation of our society, polity and state .

2. Schools and Education

Survey on education carried out in 1822–1825 in the Madras Presidency:

- 11,575 schools with 157,195 students; 1,094 colleges with 5,431 students respectively. A significant number were studying at home too.
- School Enrollment figures (5-10 years) : Overall- 22%; Brahmins- 19%; SC/ST s- 15% . Sudras and castes below them formed 70%–80% of the enrollment.
- Over 25% of the boys of school-age were attending schools
- In Malabar district 1,122 Muslim girls and 3,196 Muslim boys were in school. (In 60 years of British rule, proportion of Muslim girl students came down to about 1/3rd of this)

Bengal Survey around 1790:

University of Navadweep in Bengal around 1790 : 1,100 students and 150 teachers .

Out of the 2,524 students studying in the institutions of sanskritic learning, the largest number 1,424 were studying Grammar, 378 Logic, and 336 Law. Other subjects: Literature, Mythology, Astrology, Lexicology, Rhetoric, Medicine etc.

Education was widespread, and available irrespective of gender, caste and religion.

3. Sciences, Technologies and Practices.

- Mathematics and Astronomy: 15th- 18th century practices in the Kerala region were often on par with , or superior to, what then obtained in Europe (calculation of the value of Pi, etc).
- Industries and practices: Textiles, Iron & Steel, Chemicals and Dyes, jaggery and sugar, ship building, architecture and construction, irrigation systems, river and road transportation compared – all these comparable to what prevailed elsewhere in the world.
- Manufacture of iron and steel in India since ancient times, and famous world wide for its world-wide superiority. (Damascus Sword). Even around 1800 the industry was widespread and flourishing, with around 10,000 furnaces around 1800; and each with a capacity of about 20 tons annually. Light and could be moved by bullock carts.
- That 18th century India produced artificial ice by freezing water in places like Allahabad.
- Universal practice of inoculation against small-pox (till banned by the British around 1802)
- Plastic surgery continued to be practiced in late 18th century India
- Indian agriculture had a productivity nearly double of that in Britain in 1800, using sophisticated tools, implements and practices (such as the drill plough). A set of the agricultural implements was sent to from Madras Presidency, to see how implements then used in Britain could be improved.

These were taken from British records on Indian S&T , most of which were in the form of Reports by their experts to be sent back to England to see how they could help improve the corresponding British tools and practices.

4. Quality of Life of ordinary people and the nature of the polity.

- The living standards of the ordinary people seems to have been appreciably higher than that of similar classes in Britain around 1800.
- Quantity of food grains consumed did not vary much across the classes, though quality was better for the higher classes.
- Wages in Chengalpattu during 1780–1795 was Rs.7.50 per day (at 1975 prices), while it was only Rs. 2.50 in 1975.
- Salary differentials: Tipu's highest paid officer Rs.100/- per month; wage labourer Rs.4/- per month.

(For comparison: British Collector Rs.1500/- per month; member of Governor's council, Rs. 8000/-)

- There existed a certain simplicity and frugality at the top levels of the society. The British complained that the Hindu rulers spent very little on themselves, and they gave away their wealth for purposes of charity, scholarship, culture, entertainment, building of chatrams for the stay of the pilgrims, etc.
- People were aware of their rights , and when these were violated, they took recourse to protests, dharna, traga or to peasant movements, to even what in modern usage may be called civil disobedience.
- When a protest occurred, the authorities took it be a legitimate expression of the political process and were ready to review the disputed action through a dignified dialogue between the populace and the political authority.

Broad conclusions from the above findings of Dharampalji:

The society and polity of India was in a fairly flourishing state even as late as the 1750s, and in many areas until around 1800, in remarkable conformity with what Mahatma Gandhi had believed all along.

III. Why is this picture of our polity and society not known widely among the educated Indians?

Erasure of collective memory is a part of colonisation ,and the British were masters at it.

- Britain had a clear plan for India, which was the same they used in their own country, in Ireland, in North America, Africa, Australia etc. These have been stated very bluntly in passages such as

“.. a barbarous country must be first broken by war, before it will be capable of good Government, and when it is fully subdued and conquered, if it be not well-planted and governed after the conquest, it will soon return to the former Barbarism.”

“... you have to suppress that spirit of rebellion and insubordination in them, and bring them to a state of subjection. They must feel indebted to our beneficence and wisdom, and hence they must feel solely indebted to our protection.....”

- There was one difference in the case of India though. Due to various reasons specific to us, it was impossible to adequately colonise it with people of European stock , and the path of destruction and disruption they adopted here was a little different. More sophisticated political, legal and economic devices were used here
- They were primarily concerned with the drawing of the maximum possible tribute from here. For this *they had to smash the earlier framework of Indian society and polity*, and give it such new structures which India could neither comprehend nor master. This seemingly half-done job of dismemberment was to make India a permanent source of surplus-value, a supplier of raw materials (both in materials and men), a market for certain types of British manufactures.
- Two things happened in India at the level of knowledge and its promotion during the British rule --

1. Traditional Indian scholarship withdrew itself from the arena of social affairs, and, to the extent it could under the very adverse new circumstances, wholly immersed itself in the sacred texts or ritual.

2. The British began to establish a new knowledge elite in India brought up on a very selective British educational and cultural content. This elite only knew and believed what they had been taught by this selective British system. They started believing that India has always been sunk in superstition, ignorance, misery, and wretchedness.

It is this mindset of our elite that has prevented us from seeing our past the way Dharampalji has revealed to us, as well as expanding and building upon it further.

IV. Our present state

- A very small section of our population became alienated from their own civilisation and people, and started living like foreigners in the innumerable civil lines, military stations, and the enclaves of India's metropolises and other major cities.
- This can be seen practically in every *district headquarters*, where the governmental officer-core of about 200–400 persons (the Collector, the Magistrate, the Police Commissioner etc) lead lives which have little to do with the community they are supposed to serve. It is this officer elite who uphold the might, power and grandeur of the Indian state in their areas, mostly filling the generality of citizens with a sense of fear.
- The Indian state has yet to wake up to the fact that it is not a colonial state any more; that it is not ruling a hostile people; that it in fact is amongst its own kith and kin; and that only to the extent these kith and kin feel a kinship with it, will it have legitimacy, as well as inner confidence and strength.
- The main function of the Indian state seems to be to look after its decision-makers and the vast army of those who are expected to implement the decisions. Instead of the state existing for the people, it is the people who are seemingly permitted to exist for the convenience of the state.

Some instances of this :

- The totally unnecessary, senseless and wasteful practice of transfer of official and other personnel from place to place – a practice the British introduced due to their fear and distrust of the local population.
- Large scale construction and maintenance of real-estate for its own use has become the major function of the Indian state at all levels, and more so at the national level.
- The unnecessary load which the state, *more so the central state*, has accumulated over the years and which it refuses to shed, even when many of its the functions can safely, and also more effectively, be performed at more local levels. *The imbalance in terms of power and resources has become increasingly manifest between the government at the national level and the governments in the state.*
- Refusal of the central state to reduce its load and distribute a substantial portion of the resources at its disposal to lower levels *is stopping it from becoming stronger and more efficient.*

V. What we should be attempting

- We should stop trying to 'catch up' or 'bridge the gap' with the West, since, in reality, one does not ever catch up with anything or anyone – those who are moving according to their volition have no need to catch up with anyone else.
- What one has to do is to aim at getting *several paces ahead* of the West. In our own time, Gandhiji did just that, and for at least 20–25 years the British power was kept mostly on the defensive.
- We have to create a new conceptual frame for the functioning of our society and polity, and that such a frame has to have a *brilliance of some kind for the rest of the world*.
- To achieve better functioning, it may be necessary for India to opt for different and even contrary options in different spheres and for different tasks --
 - Encourage and promote recourse to older institutional forms, linkages, technologies, etc., essential for making India's people and talents come into their own.
 - Master modern theories and their products, and innovate and improve upon them, as maybe needed to secure an equal place for India in the world.

This will enable the indigenous talent and priorities to borrow what they wish from elsewhere, to internalise what suits them within their own frame, and resolve the contradictions of these diverse ways without serious turmoil.

When this has happened, whether it was the indigenous which governed Indian life, or it was the adopted and internalized which did so, would only be of academic value.