



BOOK REVIEW

Despoliation and Defaming of India
The Early Nineteenth Century British Crusade

By Dharampal

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Review: ○ Pushpa M Bhargava

IN the middle of his life, Dharampal, a participant in the 1942 Quit India movement, secretary to Meera Behn, founder of AVARD, associate of Jayprakash Narayan, and principle opponent of the Nehru dynasty, retired from active political life and attempted to uncover the true heritage of the Indian people through archival research. His work eventually resulted in the publication of a number of volumes of carefully selected documents that had been previously neglected or misunderstood.

One of his persistent aims has been to chronicle India's social and intellectual achievements during the 18th century, prior to the destructive hegemonic conquest of India by the British that proceeded rapidly and consolidated in the early 19th century. Ironically, much of his research has resulted in the publication of texts created by or for the British imperial power, and originally used by them to enhance their control of the subcontinent. This book is his most recent attempt to explain how India, at that time one of the most flourishing civilisations in the world, was reduced

to a subordinate political position by a handful of adventurers from a small island nation in the West.

As is usual with his work, most of the detailed thinking required to extract the major themes that emerge from the documents Dharampal reproduces is left to the reader. However, what distinguishes the present volume from many of his previous collections is that he has provided a more systematic and expansive introduction. In it he gives an uncharacteristically explicit perspective on the documents that summarise his deep meditation on how the Indian image was constructed and debased by the British colonial power for the past two hundred years, starting with the end of the 18th century.

Though the findings of his research continue to be controversial, Dharampal previously provided important evidence of the catastrophic consequences of institutionalised British rule on the material well being of the Indian people. One of his compelling arguments sought to demonstrate that, among other negative repercussions of British rule, the land revenue system imposed through the administrative structure of the Raj, led to unprecedented famine, depopulation, and impoverishment in many areas of the subcontinent

during the period beginning in the late 18th century, wreaking ever greater catastrophes thenceforward. The governmental structure they installed ensured that destitution remained the fate of everyone, except for a small minority of native agents allowed a modest niche in the increasingly bloated bureaucracy. Though over time the costs of empire grew exponentially, and the rent extraction mechanism became less profitable for the British rulers, the system left a damaging and lasting impact on the nation that, in many regions, continues to contribute to the devastation that is characteristic of many rural areas in India today.

The selected archival material reprinted in this volume, written by T.B. Macaulay, William Wilberforce, and James Mill, collectively amounts to clear evidence of a concerted moral, political, and cultural campaign of defamation against Indian society. The most startling realisation that remains with the reader of these texts is the awareness that most educated Indians even today have been taught to think of themselves in ways that reinforce these slanderous opinions. Dharampal makes a convincing argument that an intense

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self-hatred resulted from this sustained attack on the Indian ethos, which “began to be taken as reality not only by world opinion but by the elites of India itself.” (p.35)

Most historians trained in our universities were taught a picture of precolonial India as a fragmented subcontinent dotted with enclaves of wealth and power, acquired through the ruthless extortion of property, income, and assets of a powerless people forced to live in alarming poverty. Dharampal’s volumes, which started appearing in the 1960’s and 1970’s, presented a completely different thesis, based on primary documentary sources. This version of the Indian past was predicated on his analysis and highlighting of evidence that 18th century India had a high-yielding agricultural system providing subsistence for all groups in the rural population, further able to create a surplus enabling the support of a highly sophisticated, interdependent, and decentralised society. Dharampal disputed reports convenient to the British that asserted that the ruler’s share of the harvest was confiscatory. Instead, he published original texts derived from village accounts on palm leaf manuscripts that bolstered his conclusion that most of the revenues from harvests were distributed among all groups at the local level, with only a small proportion going to the urban elite.

A large number of intellectuals and scholars view the history of precolonial India solely in terms of indigence and exploitation. While some see the British as leading the last in a succession of devastating invasions, others think the colonizers actually represented a moderating force that inaugurated the process of modernisation and economic development in a blighted land. In neither case are these intellectuals

willing to consider Dharampal’s portrait of 18th century village India as anything other than romantic utopianism. The crude and systematic maligning of precolonial Indian culture - as illustrated in the excerpts from British writers in the volume under review - has shaped their perspective to such an extent that they are unwilling to comprehend the possibility of a highly redistributive social system predating the British invasion, dismissing the idea as the product of an ideologically motivated, revisionist agenda.

The scheme of controlling people’s minds by attributing collective deficiencies to Indians that are supposedly inherent in their biology and culture, portraying them in every medium at every opportunity as inferior, and certifying the claims of such depictions through works purporting to be scholarly, religious, and scientific, arguably provided the British with their most powerful weapon of domination.

Despite diverging in their particular areas of interest, the three British authors presented by Dharampal converge in delivering a common critique of India, asserting a supposedly self-evident divide between native and colonizer, between irrational Indian primitivism and British sophistication and supremacy. This hierarchical dialectic is not spontaneous or coincidental. It illustrates, in Dharampal’s insightful reading of the authors’ joint intentions, the power of a planned assault on the Indian psyche, arising out of the desire to justify and maintain political domination.

Among these thinkers, James Mill is particularly adept at appearing to be objective while condemning a multitude of traits he views as intrinsic to Indian society. For example, if Indians are praised for their tolerance, Mill alleges they are indiscriminate in their beliefs,

enslaved by all kinds of outdated superstitions, and weighed down by oppressive customs. (It is telling that Mills’ writings long served as the main texts used to train British East India Company administrators.) Mill’s convictions are laid bare in *General Reflections on the Hindoos*: “Should we say that the civilization of the people of Hindustan, and that of the people of Europe, during the feudal ages, is not far from equal, we shall find upon a close inspection, that the Europeans were superior, in the first place...In point of manners and character, the manliness and courage of our ancestors, compared with the slavish and dastardly spirit of the Hindus, place them in an elevated rank...In fine, it cannot be doubted that, upon the whole, the gothic nations, as soon as they became a settled people, exhibit the marks of a superior character and civilization to those of the Hindus.” (pp.178-179)

Wilberforce continued to lambaste Indian culture in a speech urging the British government to take up the “duty” of introducing the civilising mission through Christianity:

“When was there ever yet a nation on which the light of Christianity never shone, which was not found in a state of the grossest moral darkness, debased by principles and practices and manners the most flagitious and cruel?...Is it not notorious that the nations of India have, from the very earliest times, groaned under the double yoke of political and religious despotism? And can it then be maintained, that these must not have produced a proportionate degradation of their moral character?” (p.75)

As a result of implementing policy based on such biased beliefs, as well as enacting laws and building institutions structured around similar thinking, it is no surprise that the Indian

peoples' self-confidence came under such a severe siege.

In an attempt to rescue Indians from the apparently immoral and abject culture they inhabit, Macaulay, in his famous minute on Indian education, called upon the imperial administration to "make natives of this country [India] thoroughly good English scholars," with a special focus on the Indian elite; for,

"it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." (pp 201-202)

Judging by the state of our current elite, Macaulay's project of creating such a class of brown sahibs, and thus providing agents who would ensure the supremacy of the imperial perspective in successive generations, has no doubt succeeded to a great extent.

Given the influence of these prominent 19th century British theorists, the respect accorded to their opinions in shaping colonial policy, and the grave political consequences that resulted from the acceptance of so many of their statements about India, the excavation and exposure of their thought hopefully represents the beginning of a larger continuing project.

Dharampal's research is extremely relevant as a commentary on the present condition as on the past. His work highlights the ongoing effects of colonial patterns of thought, as constructed and perpetuated by Western authorities, and subsequently internalised by South Asians. According to him, it is this internalisation of "self-detestation, created by [British]

imagery, which over century led to our over-romanticising of India's ancient past on one hand, and the widespread loss of initiative, innovativeness, courage and confidence, amongst ourselves, on the other." (p.35)

Dharampal suggests that critiquing narratives of imperialism is most effective,

"when we understand the nature of these tendencies in their historical context... Our induced low or disoriented images of ourselves and the consequent continuation of institutions and beliefs...seem to be the main blocks which keep us, by now, in the long-pervading state of public and private sloth...the influence they [the British] wielded and the capacity of foresight they had was to create institutions, beliefs, and modes of conduct amongst those who ruled and managed India for Britain until 1947, and many of us still carry these views and opinions in the running of present-day India." (pp. 8,11)

In post-independence India, colonial images of the type displayed in the original texts have been appropriated and newly legitimised by India's elites in historically inaccurate ways, to lay claim to modernity and secure domination over supposedly backward (less westernised) people - replicating what the British had attempted earlier in relation to their Indian subjects.

Though Dharampal's arguments in most of his other volumes are usually complex, oblique and reflective, in this book they take on a different tone at times: a tone bordering on hortatory polemics - especially towards the end of the introduction, which is replete with rhetorical statements such as in this passage:

"The task therefore is that we try to get rid of these images imposed on us by Britain, throw them away as soon as possible, and destroy them effectively. When that can be done we need to create newer healthier images of India and transform them into reality...We would then finally get rid of our bad-dream, the 200 years of British domination of India and the demoralisation it created." (P-41)

Yet, Dharampal's strategy for subjecting colonial discourse to rigorous examination remains only implicit and opaque, since there is no blueprint offered for countering the imperial outlook on India. Nor is there an outline of a scholarly procedure or analytical technique that makes the process of arriving at a cogent conclusion transparent. Grappling with the substance of the arguments made by Mill, Wilberforce, and Macaulay is definitely necessary, but this collection is devoid of such integral analysis. Dharampal virtually avoids the core problem of addressing the fallacies and fictions embedded in each of the texts and further fails to specify a method for "getting rid of the images" created by the colonial machinery.

Another weakness of the commentary is that it presents a far too simplified version of British rule, incorporating an easy exploiter versus exploited dichotomy without interrogating the multiple sources of social decay in India, in conjunction with or even beyond colonialism. As an example, the collusion of Indian elites - who were quite central to the establishment and reproduction of the colonial systems - is scarcely mentioned or dissected. The cleavages within Indian society which delayed and limited the idea of joint defense against the ambitious new rulers are glossed over without sustained analysis.

These critical limitations cannot be mere oversights stemming from a lack of accessible material.

What sets the book apart is its insistence on a specific approach to historiography. It sets out a model of inquiry based on textual analysis - in light of the historical aims of those contesting for power - that foregrounds the imperative of carefully mining primary historical sources. Though this approach is scarcely new, the manner in which it is applied by Dharampal in his studies of India's cultural subjugation urges us to focus on the formative period of colonial rule, to consider the genesis of imperial discourse rather than concentrating on the period when it enjoyed total domination. This is a necessary exercise, if we want to understand the source of our present dilemma as a nation caught up in the colonial mindset. Dharampal's approach demands of both the historical scholar and of the ordinary reader that one confront the lessons learned about the history of India, and decide if what was received was an education or an indoctrination. If we conclude that we received a biased perspective, Dharampal offers the reader valuable reprinted materials to begin a critique of this miseducation, which has deeply influenced the politics of India today. □

Other books by Dharampal

1. *Panchayat Raj as the Basis of Indian Polity: An Exploration into the Proceedings of the Constituent Assembly.* AVARD, New Delhi, April 1962. Foreword by Sri Jayprakash Narayan.
2. *Civil Disobedience and Indian Tradition: With Some Early Nineteenth Century Documents.* Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, Varanasi, 1971. Foreword by Sri Jayprakash Narayan.

3. *Indian Science and Technology in the Eighteenth Century: Some Contemporary European Accounts.* Impex India, Delhi 1971. Reprint by Academy of Gandhian Studies, Hyderabad, 1983.
4. *The Madras Panchayat System Vol II: A General Assessment.* Impex India, Delhi, 1971.
5. *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous*

Indian Education in the Eighteenth Century. Impex India, Delhi. Reprinted by Keerthi Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Coimbatore, 1995.

6. *Some Aspects of Earlier Indian Society and Polity and Their Relevance to the Present.* Indian Association for Cultural Freedom, Pune, 1998.

Women Meet

*Women who are friends meet after many years
around the old and new names scratched on the coffee-house table.
They laugh and laugh as if to prove false what the proverbs say
about the brevity of youth.*

*Surprised, they look at one another
musing on the unprovoked laughter they though lost
after lives filled with lovers, homes, offices.
Why they meet there is a
marathon of mirth.*

*The laugh as they talk about husbands, children -
plays, poems, paintings.
They recall the girl
who used to paste those protest posters
outside the warden's room at night
and by day raise slogans against
the ill-cooked hostel food.*

*And also that other one
who would sing old songs late into the night
over cups of tea stealthily made on a heater.*

*Now even the new songs of those days are old.
But for a while old and new become one.
Even the names scratched year after year
on the table top.*

*Trying to remember some forgotten names
they ask one another
why it is that one seldom marries one's love,
and if one does why does the love vanish?*

*The answer will be some more laughter
but not unprovoked as it was in those old days.*

Nirupama Dutt