

Self Invention of the Subaltern (A Study of Dharampal's The Beautiful Tree)

Abstract

Dharampal's observations in "The Beautiful Tree" do find the required impetus in similar observations made by a host of historians that has blamed Imperialism for tearing the once united India by keeping the Hindus and the Muslims apart, eventually disrupting the bonds of centuries. Here the historians are specific about the Partition and the causal factors for it. According to this perspective, the Partition of the Indian subcontinent was the logical conclusion of the 'divide and rule' policy of the British. Undoubtedly, they had hypocritically pitted the Hindus against the Muslims in India. In fact, this was a political strategy of the British:

Everything about human history is rooted in the earth, which has meant that we must think about habitation, but it has also meant that people have planned to have more territory and therefore must do something about its indigenous residents. At some very basic level, imperialism means thinking about, settling on, controlling land that you do not possess, that is distant, that is lived on and owned by others. For all kinds of reasons it attracts some people and often involves untold misery for others. (Said, 1994: 5)

Keywords: Indigenous Education, Colonialism, Historical Amnesia

Introduction

However, it is important to note that many British observers saw the whole thing quite differently. British imperialists in particular prided themselves on their fostering of the unity of India during British rule. Interestingly, they blamed primordial divisions among the Indians themselves for the division and bloodshed that marked the last days of the empire. It is here at this juncture that Dharampal's work becomes extremely significant since it exposes the undercurrent that was part of the imperialistic project. The Beautiful Tree is a revelation with special emphasis laid on complete annihilation of indigenous education in India.

'The Beautiful Tree' hence is a revisit to the pre-colonial period of India. Similar to the postcolonial works, the work engages in the present and in tandem it illuminates the image of the past. It remembers, reflects, and inscribes the past in one's consciousness. Indeed, like a postcolonial and postmodern narrative, "The Beautiful Tree" examines the monstrosities of injustice inflicted in the past and engages in discourses to awaken the desire for a more just future. In precise terms Postcolonial theory is:

A way of reading and rereading texts of both metropolitan and colonial cultures to draw deliberate attention to the profound and inescapable effects of colonialism on literary production; anthropological accounts; historical records; administrative and scientific writing. It is a form of deconstructive reading most usually applied to works emanating from the colonizers... (Ashcroft et al, 2009: 192)

Imperial Onslaught:

Dharampal firmly subscribes to the notion that, owing to the British rule, individualism of the indigenous has completely disappeared. His perception as to this is kindled by Gandhi's Chatham House speech in 1931. He refers to the decay of indigenous Indian education thus: `

I say without fear of my figures being challenged successfully, that today India is more illiterate than it was fifty or a hundred years ago, and so is Burma, because the British administrators, when they came to India, instead of taking hold of things as they were, began to root them out. They scratched the soil and began to look at the root, and left the root like that, and the beautiful tree perished. The village schools were not good enough for the British administrator, so he came out with his programme. Every school must have so much paraphernalia, building, and so forth. Well, there



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Asian Resonance

were no such schools at all. There are statistics left by a British administrator which show that, in places where they have carried out a survey, ancient schools have gone by the board, because there was no recognition for these schools, and the schools established after the European pattern were too expensive for the people, and therefore they could not possibly overtake the thing. I defy anybody to fulfil a programme of compulsory primary education of these masses inside of a century. This very poor country of mine is very ill able to sustain such an expensive method of education. (p. 348)

What is unfortunate is that the beauty of the tree had begun to fade down soon after the alien tree began to bear fruits. Dharampal maintains in his introduction to the work that Mahatma Gandhi's lengthy address at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London on the 20th of October, 1931, asserted that it was unfortunate that literacy rates had steadily declined in India in the past 50-100 years. He strongly feels that the British were responsible for it.

It seems as though it is in continuation of what Gandhiji had envisaged about the beautiful tree that Dharampal conjured up his beautiful tree. It came in to existence in 1983 with about 84 pages of text and 354 pages of documents extrapolated from various sources. The major source of Dharampal's argument gains scope in his attempt to respond to Mill's report.

Thus his efforts mainly focus on tracing the history of indigenous education in India. He holds forth that even in the early 19th century Indian schooling was more extensive than what was prevalent in England. There was no conspicuous variation in the content of the curriculum as compared to what was taught in England. In addition, the duration of study was more prolonged. His major grievance has been that a kind of general disregard in the area of indigenous education became conspicuous within decades after the commencement of British rule.

The argument Dharampal has about the indigenous education in India is aptly encapsulated in the words of S. Radhakrishnan:

"The spiritual motive dominates life in India. Indian philosophy has its interest in the haunts of men, and not in supra-lunar solitudes. It takes its origin in life, and enters back into life after passing through the schools. The great works of Indian philosophy do not have that ex cathedra character which is so prominent a feature of the latter criticisms and commentaries. The Gita and the Upanishads are not remote from popular belief. They are the great literature of the country, and at the same time vehicles of great systems of thought. The Puranas contain the truth dressed up in myths and stories, to suit the weak understanding of the majority. The hard task of interesting the multitude in metaphysics is achieved in India" (Radhakrishnan, 1999: 25)

Misconceptions and Insidious Strategies:

Another major argument that forms the platform for Dharampal's epic work is that the

beautiful tree was largely a making of Upper Caste Hindu culture. William Adam's Report has it that:

The Hindoo colleges or schools in which the higher branches of Hindoo learning are taught are generally built of clay. Sometimes three or five rooms are erected, and in others nine or eleven, with a reading-room which is also of clay. These huts are frequently erected at the expense of the teacher, who not only solicits alms to raise the building, but also to feed his pupils. In some cases rent is paid for the ground; but the ground is commonly, and in particular instances both the ground and the expenses of the building are, a gift. After a school-room and lodging-rooms have been thus built to secure the success of the school, the teacher invites a few Brahmans and respectable inhabitants to an entertainment at the close of which the Brahmans are dismissed with some trifling presents. (p. 289)

Dharampal makes it clear right in the beginning that *The Beautiful Tree* has been written to criticize British rule. Instead, he treats it as the maintenance of an effort to understand the prevailing reality of the India of this period.

It was very largely believed that the British sponsored Sanskrit and Persian colleges as well as the publication of some Indian texts or selections from them which suited the purpose of governance. But Dharampal further argues that the attempts made by the British to provide the cushion of their support to Sanskrit did not promise the retention of what originally prevailed in India as education.

In 1775, Adam Ferguson recommended to his former student, John Macpherson (temporarily to be Governor General of Bengal during 1784-85) 'to collect the fullest details you can of every circumstance relating to the state and operation of policy in India.... He observed further that 'the antiquities of the religion and Government of the Hindoos are not less interesting than those of their sciences'(p.14)

The British thus worked strategically to strengthen their hold by gradually pushing the indigenous education down. Dharampal sounds embittered when he says that the British interest was not in any way centered on the people. Their interest was predominantly focussed on ancient texts that basically served their purpose. They worked their way to coercing the people conform to what was deliberately chosen for them from such selected texts and their brand new interpretations for the same. Besides, their second priority was the christianisation of those who were quite ready for such conversions. Partha Chatterjee echoes the same in his "Politics of the Governed",

"When Europeans went overseas to found their empires, they were of course scarcely concerned about whether they were violating the sovereignty of the conquered countries. In many cases, they would declare blatantly that in those uncivilised parts of the world, there was no international law; the only law that prevailed here was the law of force and conquest" (Chatterjee, 2009: 93).

Asian Resonance

In the mean time Dharampal's *The Beautiful Tree* in this sense totally dismisses the myth that Sudras had no place in the indigenous system of education. Dharampal's replies to William Adam's audacious report that it has usually been supposed that education in India was largely concerned with the higher and middle class of society. In addition, the myth that the sudras were totally marginalised was further aggravated by the report by the Collector of Cuddapah. But Dharampal's arguments presented in *The Beautiful Tree* in fact testify to an impressive presence of the lower castes in the school system, thus perpetuating his theory that the school system was not necessarily dominated by the Brahmins.

The data from Madras regarding the number of boys and girls receiving tuition at their homes is equally pertinent. In comparison to those being educated in schools in Madras, this number is 4.73 times. Though it is true that half of these privately tutored were from amongst the Brahmins and the Vysees, still those from the Soodras form 28.7% of this number, and from the other castes 13%. (p.41-42)

The Reports: Wily and Inflated:

With regard to Leitner's researches Dharampal observes that an appreciable number of 3,30,000 pupils in the schools were found to be acquainted with reading, writing and some method of computation. Dharampal's defense here is that 35-40 years previously thousands of them belonged to Arabic and Sanskrit colleges, in which oriental Literature and systems of oriental Law, Logic, Philosophy, and Medicine were taught to the highest standards. However, in the documents produced by Leitner pertaining to education in India there is emphasis only on higher learning, especially of Theology, Law, Medicine, Astronomy, and Astrology. But what is totally missing is the teaching and training in the scores of technologies, and crafts which had then existed in India. The documents do not mention of training in Music, and Dance either.

The major cause of the lack of reference about the actually prevailing circumstances as to education in India, Dharampal says, is obviously because those who wrote on education were themselves uninterested in how such crafts were taught. Moreover, those who wrote histories of India were evidently interested in a particular technology, or craft. But what deserves a mention is that the teaching of techniques and crafts in India happened basically at home. Interestingly what goes unnoticed is that what was termed apprenticeship in Britain was more informal in India; the parents usually being the teachers. It is typical of India at that time that the particular technologies or crafts were basically the function of some specialist groups. Therefore, Dharampal asserts, any formal teaching and training in them must have been a function of such groups themselves.

However, it seems inconsequential to contemplate whether it was a meaningful comparison of the indigenous education with the 'progressive' system that had evolved in England. But Dharampal

surmises that the insistence on termination of indigenous education so as to support the English education was partly due to Adam's Report which rather dramatised the prevailing situation for education in India.

Dharampal replies that however, as Adam must have found it necessary for the British Government to be interested in the purview of both elementary and higher Indian education by also supporting it monetarily. With a view to strengthen his view point Adam, according to Dharampal, has employed all possible arguments and imagery. Frantz Fanon seconds the same in his "The Wretched of the Earth" and thus Adam's report may well be understood as being too dramatised through the following:

In the colonial countries where a real struggle has taken place, where the blood of the people has flowed and where the length of the period of armed warfare has favoured the backward surge of intellectuals towards bases grounded in the people, we can observe a genuine eradication of the superstructure built by these intellectuals from the bourgeois colonialist environment. The colonialist bourgeoisie, in its narcissistic dialogue, expounded by the members of its universities, had in fact deeply implanted in the minds of the colonised intellectuals that the essential qualities remain eternal in spite of all the blunders men make: the essential qualities of the West, of course. (Fanon, 2001: 36)

What is deplorable is that the report further stated that the survey conducted by Adam has it that the school teachers were classified on the basis of caste. Dharampal snaps a reply that the striking point from the broader survey was the wide social strata to which both the taught and the teachers in the elementary schools belonged. Of course, it was true that the greater proportion of the teachers came from the Kayasthas, Brahmins, Sadgop and Aguri castes. But it was not noticed by the surveyors that quite a number came from 30 other caste groups also, and even the Chandals had 6 teachers. In addition, Adam also comments on the incompetency of teachers and absence of printed books in schools.

The teachers consist both of young and middle-aged men, for the most part simple-minded, but poor and ignorant, and, therefore, having recourse to an occupation which is suitable both to their expectations and attainments, and on which they reflect as little honor as they derive emolument from it; they do not understand the importance of the task they have undertaken. (p. 274-78)

At this juncture, an examination of Dharampal's "Indian science and technology in the eighteenth century", reveals that most of the native skills and technologies that perished as a result of British policies were those of the Dalit and artisan castes.

A close examination of what Pramod Nayar says in his work "Postcolonial Literature – An Introduction" reveals that Colonialism implied a practice of governance the following way:

Asian Resonance

“Colonialism thus has three central features:

- (i) The governance of these non-European places by European administrators and rulers (through economic, political, and military modes)
- (ii) The study of non-European cultures by European academics, scholars, and scientists (in anthropology, literature, ‘area studies’)
- (iii) The slow transformation of native societies (through missionary work, English/European education systems, European modes of bureaucracy)” (Nayar, 2008: 4)

Hence,

Colonialism does not end with the end of colonial occupation. However, the psychological resistance to colonialism begins with the onset of colonialism. Thus, the very notion of a ‘colonial aftermath’ acquires a doubleness, inclusive of both the historical scene of the colonial encounter and its dispersal, in David Lloyd’s words, ‘among the episodes and fragments of a history still in process’. (Gandhi, 2010: 17-18)

The Beautiful Tree draws our attention to certain historical antecedents and emphasises that it was the British who declared the Vedantic Hinduism of the Brahmins of Benares and Navadweep as “the standard Hinduism”. The argument here is that, in the process, the cultural heritage of the lower castes was successfully marginalized, and this remains an enduring legacy of colonialism.

Dharampal strongly claims that an optimum schooling was being received in the pre-British ‘Indian social balance’ traditionally by persons from all sections of society. More importantly, such system had enabled them to participate openly and appropriately in the social and cultural life of their locality. Irrespective of the fact that there was equal opportunity for all to receive education during the pre-British era in India, since the 1870s the British administration made special provisions for the education (and employment) of the Muslims, and the Depressed Classes (later classified as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes), and devised an administrative category of ‘backward classes’ for providing educational concessions to the children of the groups included in this category. In addition to what Dharampal says, it is worth noticing that there were efforts for introducing primary education among Panchamas (Pariahs and kindred castes) in 1915. There was also a proposal of starting morning or evening classes for them in Hindu schools. Such strategies by the British legally initiated a system of governance on the lines of discriminatory strategies which apparently looked to be benevolently favourable. It is in this light that the significance of what Gandhiji said at Chatham House in October 1931, as put by Dharampal himself, ought to be understood and not in the literal way. Rather, the context against which he said those words does matter. He attempted to reveal the overall disruption and decline of Indian society and its institutions under British rule. Gandhiji alerts us to the fact that a great decay had set in by the 1820s.

The Alarming Historical Amnesia:

The act of recovering past legacies is part of all postcolonial writings and Leela Gandhi refers to Homi Bhabha’s words the following way:

“In his comments on Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, the postcolonial critic, Homi Bhabha, announces that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering, he writes, ‘is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present’. (Gandhi, 2010: 9)

Reflecting on Munro’s report about the success achieved through the inception of English education, Dharampal refers to 1899-1900, the last year of the nineteenth century and mentions that the number of males in educational institutions went up to 7,33,923 and of females to 1,29,068. He also wonders at the magical number as calculated by the Madras Presidency Director of Public Instruction as 26, 42,909; which thus shows an appreciable percentage of 27.8% attending any educational institution. But as per Dharampal’s perspective of the same, what clearly comes out of these comparisons is that the proportion of those in educational institutions at the end of the nineteenth century was still no larger than the proportions estimated by Thomas Munro of the number attending the institutions of the decaying indigenous system of the Madras Presidency in 1822-25. Dharampal states that the British authorities in the late nineteenth century must have been tempted to show their achievements in brighter hues and had to inevitably arrive at inflating figures. The reports with inflated statistical figures had a bearing on the status of the indigenous institutions. It may be inferred that the decay which is mentioned in 1822-25 proceeded to grow in strength during the next six decades. Dharampal mentions that during this period, most of the indigenous institutions more or less disappeared.

Dharampal rightly says that the modern Indians show a tendency to quote foreigners in most matters reflecting on India’s present or its past. Of them, one school of thought shows an increasing sense of inclination to emphasize India’s primitiveness, the barbaric and uncouth nature of the customs and manners of its people. So it may be derived from such school of thought that there has always been ignorance, oppressions and poverty which Indians are said to have suffered from. And to another school, India had always been a glorious land, with minor blemishes in its history here and there. However, it is unfortunate that due to their British-oriented education Indians have become since the past century, too literal, too much caught up with mere words and phrases. They seem to have lost practically all sense of the symbolic nature of what is said, or written. Frantz Fanon writes:

In order to assimilate and to experience the oppressor’s culture, the native has had to leave certain of his intellectual possessions in pawn. These pledges include his adoption of the forms of thought of the colonialist bourgeoisie. This is very

Asian Resonance

noticeable in the inaptitude of the native intellectual to carry on a two-sided discussion; for he cannot eliminate himself when confronted with an object or an idea. ON the other hand, when once he begins to militate among the people he is struck with wonder and amazement; he is literally disarmed by their good faith and honesty. (Fanon, 2001: 36)

Dharampal mentions the report of the collector of Bellary which is most mentioned in the published records on indigenous education. The report happens to be long and fairly comprehensive. The Collector, in his report, came out with the statement that the degeneration of education is undoubtedly attributed to the general impoverishment of the country. So in his attempt to show India in the light of extreme poverty he projected the imperialistic rule of the British as being a shelter to the diminishing economy of India. He further says that in many villages where formerly there were schools, there are now *none* and that education had never flourished in any country except under the encouragement of the ruling power.

If one wonders as to why there was such resistance from the colonizer to erase indigenous education, the answer given is one of pure audacity. Dharampal says that the question of content and the evaluation of content led to indigenous education being termed 'bad' and hence to its dismissal. Edward Said sums up the same thus:

"Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination." (Said, 1994: 8)

Much to Dharampal's rue, the limitless British hunger for revenue starved the Indian system of the very resources which it required to survive. It is unfortunate that Indian system's cultural and religious content and structure provoked deliberate attempts aimed at its own extermination. Edward Said writes:

Domination and inequities of power and wealth are perennial facts of human society. But in today's global setting they are also interpretable as having something to do with imperialism, its history, and its new forms. The nations of contemporary Asia, Latin America and Africa are politically independent but in many ways are as dominated and dependent as they were when ruled directly by the European powers. (Said, 1994: 20)

In the light of the above quoted words of Said, it may be understood that it was imperative to somehow uproot the Indian indigenous system for the relatively undisturbed maintenance and continuance of British rule. And it is the same imperative which persuaded Macaulay, Bentinck, etc., to deliberately neglect large-scale school education to establish a system of Anglicised higher education in the country; because To Macaulay, all Indian knowledge, if not despicable, was at least absurd: absurd history, absurd metaphysics, absurd physics, absurd theology:

Macaulay's pronouncement rests upon several assumptions. Knowledge is deemed the enriching possession of the 'scientific' West and must be taught to those in India, but the process is not reciprocal. An Orientalist hierarchy is asserted between a knowledgeable West and an ignorant, savage East. Thus, the education of Indians is part of a civilizing process that involves a certain *moral* improvement – it is not just a process that will heighten intellect an opinion. The education of Indians for the purposes of consolidating power is legitimized by seemingly morally just and improving. (McLeod, 141: 2010)

In fact, the total rejection of Indian culture and civilisation was left to the powerful pen of James Mill. He did it in his monumental three-volume *History of British India*, first published in 1817. Later on, Mill's *History* became an essential reference book for those entrusted with administering the British Indian Empire. Ever since it was first published the *History* in fact provided the framework for the writing of most histories of India. According to him the manners, customs and civilization of India were intrinsically barbarous. And to him, India could become civilized only by discarding its Indianness, and by adopting utility as the object of every pursuit and by embracing Christianity and by becoming anglicized. Hence, Dharampal says, the impact of his judgments on India and its people should never be underestimated.

Alienation From The Indigenous:

Dharampal laments on the serious consequences for India entailed by the deliberate uprooting of Indian education and the measures which were employed to achieve the same which eventuated in its replacement by an alien and rootless system. According to him it destroyed the Indian social balance in which, traditionally, persons from all sections of society were able to receive fairly competent schooling. Actually, the *pathshalas* and *madrassahs* had enabled the general public to participate openly and appropriately and with dignity not only in the social and cultural life but ensured participation at the more extended levels.

The perverse longevity of the colonised is nourished, in part, by persisting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and value which reinforce what Edward Said calls the 'dreadful secondariness' of some peoples and cultures. So also the cosmetic veneer of national independence barely disguises the foundational economic, cultural and political damage inflicted by colonial occupation. Colonisation, as Said argues, is a 'fate with lastin, indeed grotesquely unfair results'. (Gandhi, 2010: 7)

The colonial aftermath is so overwhelmingly felt by Dharampal that he further elaborates that it is this destruction which led to great deterioration in the status and socio-economic conditions of those who are now known as the scheduled castes. His comments on a sense of historical amnesia becoming increasingly interesting when he says that till today colonization has kept most educated Indians ignorant of the society they live in, the culture which sustains

this society, and their fellow beings. The tragedy is that for over a century it has induced a lack of confidence, and loss of bearing amongst the people of India in general.

Conclusion:

Dharampal's observation of the decaying state of the indigenous education in India which is metaphorically represented as a beautiful tree is also an attempt to recover the lost footprints. An article by Daulat Ram Gupta which is one of the documents enclosed presents an enlightening summation as regards the decline of indigenous education in India.

Dharampal thus creates a wave of thought in people to surge backwards and look up what their past had in store for them. It is a sense of historical amnesia that he is trying to stave off.

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