

SOME THOUGHTS ON “**SOCIAL SAFETY NETS AND INSTITUTIONS IN PRE COLONIAL INDIA**”

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1. There is a popular view that traditional or pre colonial India was a paradigm example of social hierarchy based on Varna and caste that excluded large sections of society from dignified Socio-cultural life
2. It is generally argued that whatever may have been the ills of colonialism, it was progressive in so far as it ushered in a social revolution unprecedented in Indian history. It is claimed that only after the British rule that many sections of Indian society gained entry into schools or temples or were able to move about in public places without fear of molestation or could wear upper garments or footwear.
3. This portrayal of Indian society did get challenged during our independence movement though a number of well meaning social reformers did share some of the Orientalism/colonial/western views of India.
4. We are in a better position to understand pre-colonial, especially pre-British Indian society, thanks to a great effort by Dharampal, who from around mid 60's till his death in 2006, almost single handedly marshaled archival data to present a contrary picture.
5. Dharampal converted a disadvantage of his to advantage by drawing a picture of pre colonial Indian society from the archival data left behind by British officials, travelers and scholars. In many instances, British official descriptions were reinterpreted by him to prove his point that Indian society even around the time that it fell to the British East India Company was vibrant and largely functional.
6. Dharampal's archival research shows that peasant cultivators in India paid only 1/6th of the produce as rent or tax to their rulers; that about 40% of the land was exempt from any rent or tax (variously called mafee, manyam, inams etc.); that even during Mughal rule, the exchequer receipts were only a fraction of the estimated revenue, as a major part of the revenue was spent/assigned locally to a variety of individuals/institutions/functions (Bazee Zameen and Chakeeram Zameen); that there were a number of villages known as Samudayam villages which paid revenue collectively and often rotated land among cultivators; that there was no absolute ownership of land and that almost everyone had a legitimate share in the produce of the land; that the

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rulers were never sovereign/ultimate owners of all land including forests, common land; that artisans and craftsmen such as carpenters, potters has a legitimate right over village resources such as fallen trees or clay; that water tanks were managed by local communities and repairs undertaken routinely by contributions of labor/money from each family, etc., In other words, villages were truly self governed or republics in some sense.

7. Right to food was a basic right recognized in all our scriptures and held as the highest Dharma, that one's right to food was not conditional upon one's contribution through one's labor, that rulers considered it their utmost duty to feed the hungry, that temples and gurudwaras kept their kitchen fire burning almost 24x7, that sharing food was a high virtue. Dharampal's archival data shows that chatrams or choultries were constructed across the length and breadth of the country, under various rulers to provide food for pilgrims and travelers.
8. Dharampal's discovery of very rich data of about 2000 villages in the chengalpattu district(1760-65) when the entire area was held by the British as jagir from the nawab of arcot should be viewed as conclusive proof of the elaborate nature of the distribution of agricultural produce among people, institutions, functions, both local and supra local. In fact, what some sociologists have called 'Jagmani system' appears to be a crude caricature of a very extensive, elaborate and sophisticated sharing of produce. In my view, the chengalpattu data is comparable to the best welfare state of the modern times.
9. Dharampal's work on indigenous education (The Beautiful Tree) similarly questions our widely held view that education of masses is a post British, especially Macaulay's contribution. Thomas Munro's survey of indigenous education in Madras presidency, shows students from shudra and castes below them formed a majority. This was especially so in all the Tamil speaking districts of the presidency. William Adam's survey of Bengal and Bihar in 1830's provides confirmation of Thomas Munro's observations about the wide spread nature of indigenous school education. In fact, Adam's report created a huge controversy by talking about one lakh schools in Bengal of 1830's.
10. It is obvious that colonial policies were responsible for large scale disruption and disorganization of Indian society. The net result was erosion of norms of dignity of our people and institutions. To cite a few instances; Manyams/ Inams that formed nearly

40% of all cultivable land were reduced over a period of 50-60yrs that resulted in many temples, chatrams, schools and water tanks getting neglected. Srirangam temple that supported over 3000 people engaged in a variety of functions was cut to size in less than 50yrs such that nearly all of them were turned out of temple service. Since many of them had known no other vocation other than serving the temple, they were reduced to beggars over a period of time. Mysore state which had 29000 tanks in an area of about 30000 sq miles (Major Sankey's report) could not maintain them owing to non-availability of funds and the general breakdown of institutions. So the story goes for many other welfare/infrastructure facilities.

11. Rethinking social safety nets in contemporary India should draw upon lessons from our colonial past. It is suggested that all is not lost because many of our indigenous ways are still capable of coming into their own if only we remove the obstacles in their way. The experience of a number of those who have succeeded in water conservation planting trees or health or education should tell us the way forward. It seems there are lessons that we could learn from a careful study of our ordinary people's ways of thinking and doing.