

Dharampalji—Some Reminiscences

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I was working in Yavatmal, the neighbouring district of Wardha during 1995-97. Dharampalji, as usual, asked me what the dominant community in that place is. I told that it is substantially populated by *banjaras*, classified for caste benefits as nomadic tribe. Dharampalji immediately responded, “Oh, they were the transporters. The original occupation of this community was to move goods on the back of their animals from one place to another. After the railways came they lost their occupation”. Then he went on to give a detailed account about them. His knowledge of such matters, particularly on the dislocation and disturbance of life during the British rule was astounding.

Speaking of nomads, I may add that for about ten years I worked in rural parts of Central Maharashtra (Marathwada and Berar) There were regular seasonal movements of thousands of graziers (pastoral nomads) from Rajasthan, Kathaiwad etc through this territory going further up to Northern Andhra and further. This, I learnt, was only a trickle of what used to be. In bygone days these nomads moving with their vast cattle was an intrinsic part of rural economics and culture. The entire drylands covering Rajasthan, Gujarat, Western MP, Maharashtra should have had such nomads in crores. However, there is hardly mention of them in a standard book on Indian Economics or in our five year plan documents.

I once asked Dharampalji what needs to be done for India to go forward as a nation. He said that the State should withdraw from many areas it has trespassed into. “Leave the activities to the local institutions or groups. They may make mistakes in the beginning, but it will possibly give them also ability to solve their problems. The *creativity* of our people will increase.” He was also of the view that one should not stretch too much on equity issues. What we should endeavour is for a ‘common minimum’ for all. As I understood, it meant that one should start with a common minimum and go on raising the bar rather than start from the other end of attempting to reduce inequalities.

I once asked him how communities or societies can retain their identities and withstand the assault of globalization or onrush of ‘latest’ technology with all its implications. He said communities can choose “they can say that it is not required here”, although he did not elaborate. The case of Singapore comes to mind where even though families can afford to own two cars and be like other countries, still they have consistently chosen to be a public transport oriented city. I suppose there are many such examples in contemporary world. This is a good area for scholarly study!

Dharampalji had great faith in the creativity and capacity of ordinary Indians. In the PPST Congress held in Madras (December 1995) there was a Daily News Bulletin covering developments of the previous day. In the first two days the discussions and lectures were well covered, but news about the many stalls and the entrepreneurs was overlooked. Dharampalji, who was very appreciative of the stall participants, pointed out this lacuna and the oversight was rectified in next issues. I vividly remember two interesting stall participants. One was Dr. Labshankar Shukla from Rajkot who practiced ayurvedic dentistry. He removed the decayed molar teeth of patients without

any anesthesia in a painless manner by manipulating some nerves near the neck. Stunning! Another was a medical man from Andhra who popularized what he called ‘oil pulling’ (an unusual phrase!). Basically he promoted gargling of the mouth with *til* (sesame) oil in morning as a health practice. Interestingly, a renowned *til* oil producing company in South India has now taken on this idea and selling oil in satches for ‘oil pulling’.

Dharampalji had strong views on caste and the functional role it played in our society. In fact he said that the correct name should be ‘*kula*’ and *kula* is always in the context of a particular location. He felt that it was because of this institution, we could preserve our sciences and technical skills. He has written about a rail journey he made in the early 1960’s, from Agra to Delhi. The co-passengers, typical villagers, were returning home after a long pilgrimage to various places. They were from one area but from different castes. Dharampalji asked them whether they did not have any problem traveling together. ‘Don’t you know that there are no caste differences when one is out on a pilgrimage?’ they tell him. It was an unforgettable incident for him. Thus, as one understands, caste was not a static or ‘frozen’ matter but varied according to context and location.

Dharampalji told me that it is wrong to think that Indians are not organized. ‘We are organized, but in a different way’. He said that the British did a great damage by introducing a system of law recognizing only individuals and ignoring communities. The modern Indian state also recognizes only individuals and ignores (at least legally) communities and groups. This actually makes the individual weak and the State strong, as individuals cannot match the power of State while negotiating.

He gave great importance to regions and locations. He felt that the child should know the world by first knowing the little world around him and then his knowledge should spread outwards in concentric circles. This ‘rootedness’ was very important for him. In fact in conversations he would appreciate a contemporary politician who may not know good English and less capable in the modern sense, as against another politician who is modern, suave but an implant without much grass-root support. He felt that such politicians would compromise the country’s interests.

Dharampalji, as is well known, was very skeptical of books by Western authors about India. He repeatedly said that we should know how the West looks at us and their plans. He advised me to read US journals like ‘Foreign Affairs’ to know their mind. He felt that right from Plato’s days the West has been more politically suave and smarter. However, he was very appreciative of one book ‘Imagining India’ by Ronald Inden (1990). This book, a tough read, is full of insights and says caste is a form of citizenship.

Since I happened to be in Goa, I got a set of his Collected Works published by Other India Press, even before it was formally released. The unofficial first copy, so to say. I shared this happy development with Dharampalji when I met him last. He said that it is good that the books have come out. But more important is that the ideas and thoughts should be ‘carried forward’. They should not end with his writings.
