

Romesh Chander Dutt's 'Romesh Chander Dutt- The Economic History of India Under British Rule From the Rule of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1857': A Source for Understanding the Early Nationalist Economic Perception

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Abstract - The most significant historical contribution of the early nationalist leaders was that they offered an economic critique of colonialism. The main thrust of this economic nationalism was on Indian poverty created by the application of the classical economic theory of free trade. Three names are important to remember in this respect: Dadabhai Naoroji, a successful businessman, Justice M.G. Ranade and Romesh Dutt, a retired ICS officer, who published *The Economic History of India* in two volumes (1901-03). The present paper is an effort to have a peep into the authoritative work of Romesh Dutt. Romesh Dutt was born (b. 1848; d. 1909), was a litterateur, politician and one of the greatest intellectuals of his time. He was a distinguished civil servant, spokesman of educated, political leader of a liberal school, historian and creative writer. He became president of Indian national congress in 1899. He also taught Indian history in London University. On his return from London, he served Baroda state Revenue Minister for three years. He produced valuable books on economics, history and Indian Civilization and also wrote some Bengali Novels. *Peasantry of Bengal, Famines in India, History of Civilization in Ancient India, England and India and Economic History of India in the Victorian Age. Service to the motherland was the driving force behind all his varied activities.*

Keywords - History, Economic, Civilization, Congress, Trade, Industry, Agriculture, Poverty, British, Railway, Capital, Handicraft, Society, Company, Foreign, Drainage

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TEXT AND CONTEXT

The significance of a piece of writing cannot be understood if one views it in isolation, delinked from the context in which it was written". Citing the chief aims of his work in preface, Romesh Dutt writes, "Excellent works on the military and political transactions of the British in India have been written by eminent historians. No history of the people of India, of their trades, industries, and agriculture, and of their economic condition under British administration, has yet been compiled. Recent famines in India have attracted attention to this very important subject, and there is a general and widespread desire to understand the condition of the Indian people- the sources of their wealth and the causes of their poverty. A brief *Economic History of British India* is therefore needed at the present time." (p.v). Another important context in which the text was written, Dutt's work is an important manifestation of an important intervention of middle classes in post-1857 period where these

classes acted as spokesperson for aggrieved peasantry. Two new features could be witnessed in this movement: first, we find in this period a greater awareness of colonial policies, laws and institutions among the peasantry, both tribal and non-tribal. And second, the growing involvement of the educated middle-class intelligentsia as a voice for the exploited and aggrieved peasantry. Dadabhai Naoroji's book '*Poverty and Un-British Rule in India*', Dinabandhu Mitra's Bengali play '*Neel Darpan*' and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel '*Anandamath*'. Romesh Dutt's work is one in same line.

DISSENT WITH IMPERIALISM

Romesh Dutt starts his work pondering over the grave questions of economic importance- What are the causes of this intense poverty and these repeated famines in India? How far the British manufactures ruined the indigenous handicraft and artisans employed in it? Agriculture is now virtually

the only remaining source of national wealth in India, and four-fifths of the Indian people depend on agriculture and how Land Tax Policies, Commercialization of agriculture, Cruelties of Market and British Indigo and Opium traders ruined the local economy to an extent the famines are realty and thousands of innocent people perish? The author believed that the British built Railways for two important reasons. The first was strategic, for enabling quick movement of the military guarding frontiers and fro maintaining internal order. The second was "opening up the country" for the sales of British goods in India. He starts his work with the chapter on, 'Growth of the Empire' and concludes with the chapter on the theme, 'India in the Twentieth Century' and transverse the journey of Englishmen ruining Indian Subcontinent. His conclusions had a manifestations in this statement of his, "The effort of the Parliamentary Select Committee of 1812 was "to discover how they (Indian Manufacturers) could be replaced by British Manufacturers, and how British industries could be promoted at the expense of Indian industries". With the abolishing of East India Company's monopoly of Indian trade, a new phase in Britain's economic relations with India began. Agricultural India was to be made an economic colony of Industrial England (p. 95). The main thrust of his arguments was on Indian poverty created by the application of the classical economic theory of *Laissez Faire* or free trade. He further believes that British Colonialism had transformed itself in the 19th century by jettisoning the older and direct modes of extraction through plunder, tribute and mercantilism. This turned India into a supplier of agricultural raw materials and foodstuffs to and a consumer of manufactured goods from the mother country. India was thus reduced to the status of a dependent agrarian economy and a field for British capital investment. He also suggested solution to these problems and says, "*The key to India's development was Industrialization with Indian Capital, while investment of foreign capital meant drainage of wealth through expatriation of profit.*" This '*Drain Theory*' was a key theme of Dadabhai Naoroji's analysis of this exploitation and he argued that direct drainage of wealth took place through the payment of home charges, military charges, and guaranteed interest payment on railways investment.

PARTICIPATION IN FREEDOM MOVEMENT

Romesh Dutt's book presents a complete and connected account of the colonial phase of modern economic Indian history covering the period from the battle of Plassey to the beginning of the 20th Century. It was a book which produced valuable immediate results. It strived India to look into the moral authority of Britishers to rule in India and challenged there paternalistic relationship with the India colony. It also led to the demise of moderates and rise of extremists in Indian National Congres. It future and further manifestation could be seen in Mahatma Gandhi's mass movement and a zeal for Khadi and Swadeshi. It reflects Dutt's intellect, scholarship and intense patriotism. It is an example of patriotic monumental

work in which the author dealt with manufactures, tariffs and foreign trade, railways, irrigation and public finances. Dutt's work is an important manifestation of a movement post-1857 period where the intervention of the educated middles classes and some of the European Missionaries in the Agrarian Society and Peasant Discontent. This economic nationalism developed further during the subsequent period of the nationalist movement and to a large extent influenced the economic policies of the Indian National Congress government in independent India.

REFERENCE

Romesh Chander Dutt-*The Economic History of India Under British Rule From the Rule of the British Power in 1757 to the Accession of Queen Victoria in 1857*, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., London, 1906

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