

Title—Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India

Author—Ranjit Guha

Year—1997

Categories: Politics, Theory, Colonialism, Power

Place: Colonial India

Time: 1800-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Guha's book is concerned with conceptualizing the role of power and hegemony in colonial India. He seeks to answer the questions: what is colonialism and what are the specific lineaments of colonial power? What is the relationship between the British metropolitan state and its colonial interaction(s) in the peripheries? Who has the right to write the history of subjugated and subaltern people? Guha claims that the British in India constituted a monolith, and their historiography was entirely colonialist in the sense of stressing the differences between themselves and the inferior 'other.' The book is a compilation of three already published interrelated essays. The first essay argues that power in colonial India consisted of the interaction of dominance and subordination—each of these, in turn, consisted of two interacting elements. For dominance, coercion and persuasion, and for subordination, collaboration and resistance. The second essay focuses on the limitations of indigenous elite control of nationalist campaigns, because the relations between them and the masses bore considerable similarity to the gulf between the British and the populace. The third essay examines the attempts in Bengal in the nineteenth century to develop a genuinely Indian historiography of India, as well as an explanation of why this historiography ultimately failed to challenge the fundamentals of the British Raj. Importantly, he notes that elite dominance without hegemony has been an Indian cultural and social tradition since ancient times.

Guha claims that what is missing in Indian colonial and nationalist historiography is the story of the organic, class consciousness of the Indian masses who constituted an autonomous domain of anticolonial and antibourgeois politics of their own. He argues that resistance movements formed the true history of the Indian people, even though they were systemically betrayed by elite nationalist leadership and brutally suppressed by colonial power. Overall, Guha seeks to explain why the Indian colonial state and its successor, the nationalist state, have failed to represent the Indian people. He posits that the universalizing tendency of capitalism inevitably required the Western ruling elites to derive their power of dominance from the democratic, economic, moral, and cultural consent of the citizens, obtained through persuasion—i.e. the Western states were hegemonic in nature. The reversal of the Western historical process in India by the colonialists not only limited the universalizing scope of capitalism in India and inhibited the natural formation of an indigenous Indian cultural bourgeoisie. According to Guha, the British caused the birth of Indian nationalist bourgeois elites. The Indian National Congress represented the political and cultural interest of the Indian elite bourgeois class artificially created by colonialism. The absence of the elite-persuasion of the Indian masses throughout the career of the Indian nationalist movement defeated the historical possibility of the rise of a common historical block of all Indians against colonial dominance.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Elite dominance without hegemony has been an Indian cultural and social tradition since ancient times in Indian history
- The colonial state in India was fundamentally different from the metropolitan British state in that it was based on a non-hegemonic structure of dominance in which coercion outweighed persuasion
- No persuasive moral or cultural tool to substitute the religious communalism ignited by the elites by subaltern class consciousness