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Chapter six

Subaltern consciousness and populism: two approaches in the study of social movements in India

The sociology of social movements is a growing edge of the discipline in more recent decades. However, studying tribal and peasant revolts or movements was a dominant tradition both in the history and in the ethnography of India for quite some time. The pioneering accounts on the Bhumiij revolts and the Kol insurrection in Chotanagpur by J.C. Jha,¹ Kalikankar Datta's work on the Santal insurrection,² B.B. Kling's study of the 'Blue Mutiny'³—the indigo disturbances (1859-62)—in Bengal, and Ravinder Kumar's on the Deccan riots (1875),⁴ come to mind almost immediately. The tradition continued even thereafter. Studies on the Tanabhatat or the Birsa Munda and his movement,⁵ the Rampa rebellion of 1924 and of course Sunil Sen's study⁶ of the sharecroppers' struggle in Bengal must also be mentioned additionally. Similarly, studies by Majid Siddiqi⁷ and Kapil Kumar⁸ on the agrarian/peasant revolt led by Baba Ramchandra in Pratapgarh and Faizabad districts of Oudh have notably continued the same trend in more recent years. The list is only illustrative and not exhaustive.

If one looks at the approaches or frameworks of analysis in the studies mentioned above, then, barring Ravinder Kumar, who has used the framework of class analysis meaningfully in studying the anti-moneylender Deccan riots, most of the other pioneering studies are either pure histories or ethnographies of tribal/peasant protest movements. Rarely have the researchers gone into conceptual discussions and they have not found it necessary to use or examine any of the prevailing theoretical-analytical paradigms.

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Notable exceptions to this are the studies by Siddiqi,⁹ Kapil Kumar,¹⁰ Gyanendra Pandey,¹¹ and Dhanagare¹² who have started an important debate on the precise linkage between the peasantry and the Indian National Congress, and Gandhi in particular. However, the middle peasant thesis (like that of Eric Wolf and Hamza Alavi)¹³ and Barrington Moore's¹⁴ hypothesis on the role of commercial agriculture as a factor conducive for peasant mobilization have been thoroughly examined by only a few of the studies referred to above.¹⁵ This is not to underrate the value of other studies. Most of them have brought to light enormous source material which otherwise would have remained unknown to the present generation of social scientists. Their accounts are the most authentic reconstructions of the peasant revolts in India in the 1920s and 1930s, but most of them belong basically to narrative history or ethnography. Some of them, like Siddiqi, Pandey and Kapil Kumar, do identify and probe the historical conditions that facilitated the progressive development of consciousness of the insurgent peasantry or tribals who were the main actors of those movements. However, barring exceptions, such studies seldom transcend specificity and are rarely inclined to get into questions of theory and generality as if they are irrelevant to the history and sociology of social movements.

Only one example of this tendency should suffice to stress the point. Suresh Singh's work¹⁶ on the Birsa Munda movement, which has produced abundant evidence of the strong millenarian elements in the Birsaite movement, makes no reference to the concept of 'millenium' at all.¹⁷ To a certain extent, Stephen Fuch's study on the Indian aboriginals has gone into the millenarian movements among Indian tribals under the influence of Christianity, but only superficially. Similarly, the notions of 'primitive rebels' and 'social banditry' introduced by Eric Hobsbawm,¹⁸ have not been used fruitfully by any researcher of tribal and peasant revolts or insurgencies until Ranajit Guha and his colleagues launched the 'subaltern studies' approach in a big way. Getting immersed in the depths of the micro-level reality and not rising above it in order to enter the realm of theorization and conceptualization was the tendency

characteristic of the mainstream sociology and social anthropology as well as of history and ethnography that we in India received as a part of the imperialist legacy for the social sciences. The need to identify and evaluate the relevance of such paradigms, at least the neglected ones, is therefore an urgent task that cannot be overemphasized.

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to only two of these potentially useful analytical paradigms for studying tribal/ethnic movements or peasant revolts in India. These approaches have unfortunately remained neglected at least by the mainstream sociology and social anthropology in India. It is high time we took cognizance of them and entered into paradigmatic dialogue.

Subaltern studies

An important approach to the study of tribal/peasant movements has been enunciated by Ranajit Guha and his historian colleagues in India and abroad. Broadly designated as 'subaltern historiography', this approach seeks to restore a balance by highlighting the role of the politics of the people as against elite politics played in Indian history. Thus, 'elite' and 'people' are viewed as binary domains to constitute a structural dichotomy. Adherents to this approach argue that the elitist historiography, whether of the neo-colonialist or of the neo-nationalist variety, has always overstated the part the elite has played in building Indian nationalism, but it has failed to acknowledge, far less properly interpret, the contributions made by the people (masses) on their own, independently of the elite.¹⁹ Parallel to the domain of elite politics there always existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society but the 'subaltern' classes and groups constituting the masses of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in the town and country—the people.²⁰

Subaltern historiography treats 'people' (subalternity) as an autonomous domain that originates neither from elite politics nor depends on them. Therefore, whereas the mobilization in the domain of elite politics is achieved vertically, in that of subaltern

politics it is achieved horizontally. Guha, however, does admit that given the diversity of its social composition, the ideological element in the subaltern domain is not uniform in quality and density and at times such diversities lead to pursuit of sectional interests, economic diversions as well as sectarian splits that tend to undermine the horizontal alliances in this domain. Therefore, Guha also clarifies that the two domains have not been sealed off from each other but often overlapped mainly because the elite domain always tried to mobilize and integrate them but primarily to fight for elite objectives; however, the subaltern masses managed to break away from the elite control and put their characteristic stamp on campaigns initiated by the elite groups.²¹

The whole thrust of subaltern historiography is on reconstructing 'the other history', i.e., history of people's politics and movements and their attempts to make their own history. As a brilliant demonstration of how the 'other history' could be constructed Guha has offered us a study of the peasant insurgency in colonial India.²² Somewhat, in the din over the polemical aspects of the concept of 'subalternity', the deeper insights and distinct analytical approach Guha's own study has offered have been lost sight of. The study provides us with a useful framework for studying social movements in general and tribal/peasant insurgencies in particular. It is, of course, anchored in subaltern historiography for understanding the complex phenomena of peasant or ethnic protest movements—or at least a significant part of it—in contemporary India. It is one of those serious pieces of social science scholarship which has raised many theoretical and methodological issues that must not only be acknowledged but also debated seriously.

While analyzing the tribal and peasant insurgencies in colonial India, Guha makes no secret of the fact that his approach to the study of social movements basically forms a part of the general tradition of scientific Marxism—but a variant of it quite obviously deduced from Gramsci's formulations²³ that are refreshingly original and hence intellectually very stimulating. With all the candidness that is often associated with a Marxist, Guha believes that the task of historiography is to interpret the past in order to

change the present world and that such a change involves a radical transformation of consciousness. He, therefore, warns social scientists and activists not to view peasant or tribal insurgents merely as 'objects' of history but to treat them as 'makers' of their own history—endowed with a transformative consciousness of their own.

In spelling out his 'subaltern' approach Guha naturally hits out at the conventional discourses on peasant/tribal insurgencies which hitherto have served in the colonialist historiography as merely an apology for 'law and order'. Those attempts to understand insurgent movements were simply aimed at 'counter-insurgency' to prevent their occurrence in future. The sense of history was thus converted by the conventional discourses into an element of 'administrative concern'.²⁴ At the same time Guha is equally critical of orthodox Marxist historiography for its failure to recognize the role of pure spontaneity in history. His target is clearly set on all those recent peasant studies (i.e., studies on peasant movements including revolts or insurgencies) which have emphasized 'organization', 'leadership', and 'ideology' as the key elements in the formation of rebels' consciousness and have tended to treat the insurgencies as 'pre-political' phenomena.²⁵ Guha observes that those who do not recognize the first glimmer of consciousness in apparently spontaneous and unstructured movements of the peasant or tribal masses and often brand them as 'pre-political', commit a serious error of judgement.

Are the peasant and tribal insurgencies in colonial India 'pre-political' or 'political' phenomena? To Guha the term 'pre-political' is as misleading as it is value-laden; it helps us the least in understanding the experience of such movements in colonial India. Tribal or peasant insurgencies have to be understood in the backdrop of the attempts of the colonial state to revitalize landlordism and to promote parasitic landlordism. The peasant and tribal tenantry rebelled against *sarkari*, *sahukari*, and *zamindari* oppression to which they were subjected. The uprisings of Bhumi, the Kol insurrection, the Santal revolt of 1855, the indigo disturbances of 1859-62, and the Deccan riots of 1875 in the nineteenth century

come to mind almost immediately. The subaltern insurgents were then trying to break and destroy the then existing structure of power relationships.²⁶ Hence, the insurgents' action was no less political than the politics of the liberal reformist struggles of the 'no-rent' or 'no-tax' variety under the banner of the Congress or the Left-wing insurrectionary struggles of peasants (such as the Tebhaga or Telangana struggles) of the twentieth century in India. Guha, however, admits that none of the basic elements (i.e., leadership, aims, programmes and ideology) of the insurgencies of the 1793-1900 period (roughly from the Rangpur uprising to the Birsa Munda movement) could compare in *maturity and sophistication* with those of the *historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century*²⁷ (emphasis added). Thus, he too accepts the fact that the twentieth century movements of the peasantry and tribals have been qualitatively different and decisively *more advanced*—which hopefully refers to the level of consciousness, organization and ideological articulation. If the argument is that the difference between the two sets of movements that we designate 'pre-political' and 'political' is to be seen essentially in relative degrees and not in absolute terms, then one can have little disagreement with Guha. But if he is suggesting that such a qualitative difference does not exist then it is difficult to agree with him. Those who treat the nineteenth century peasant or tribal insurgencies as 'pre-political phenomena' would also agree that just because the sporadic and spasmodic revolts failed to rise above localism, sectarianism and ethnicity does not take away from them either their essentially political character, or their significance in history.

Guha's main objective in studying insurgencies of the colonial period is to show how patterns of subordination and insubordination have run on parallel tracks throughout the colonial history of India, and how affirmation of domination or resistance, or insurgency and counter-insurgency have reinforced each other. It is not difficult to see the influence of Hobsbawm's works²⁸ and also of George Rude²⁹ on Guha's study. Guha has abstracted certain common forms and general ideas in the rebels' consciousness. These forms—in all six—are: 'negation' (implying formation of

negative identity), 'ambiguity', 'modality', 'solidarity', 'transmission' and 'territoriality'. He draws his evidence to construct these paradigmatic forms from various peasant and tribal movements of the 1793-1900 period studied extensively by anthropologists, ethnographers and historians. Since Guha's framework has a heuristic value in studying a variety of tribal/ethnic or peasant movements it is necessary to deal with these six forms at some length.

The first elementary form of peasant or insurgent tribal consciousness is 'negation' which connotes that the rebel's identity is first found by him not in his own properties, but by the diminution and negation of those of his superiors. Such a negativity may not be a fully developed class consciousness; but taking a cue from Gramsci again, Guha regards negativity as the first glimmer of that consciousness.³⁰ Accompanied by the ability to discriminate friends from foes, negation often results in selective violence only against the perceived enemies. The *jaqueries* in France, the peasant wars in Germany³¹ and also the famous Luddite machine-breaking riots or Captain Swing type movements in England during the early phase of the Industrial Revolution³² portrayed the same negativity in which violence spread by analogy and transference.³³ In the Indian context, peasant and tribal insurgents often reversed or rejected the homological relations in feudal society; all traditional forms of respect, dress, writing, language-styles, etc., were turned upside down. These were insignia symbolic of the exclusive preserve of feudal monarchies, nobility from which the subaltern were always debarred. The rebel's defiance of these structural rules (acts of inversion) was thus a negative assertion of his identity and consciousness.³⁴

The second form—'ambiguity'—in Guha's scheme draws on the basic difference between 'crime' and 'insurgency', although the two have often been used synonymously in colonial historiography. To Guha, crime tends to be an individualistic or small group-oriented, but secretive or conspiratorial, action. In contrast, insurgency has a mass character which manifests publicly. The two acts derive from two different codes of violence, but since in the overt

form the acted violence may be similar, there is an ambiguity in violence as an internal or integral part of insurgency.

'Modality'—the next elementary aspect—is a logical extension of the public character of tribal or peasant insurgencies. Drawing on the episodes of the Pabna riots (1873), the Santal *hool* (1855) and the Deccan riots (1875), Guha shows how by electing 'rebel-nawabs' and the like, the insurgents truly searched for an alternative source of authority. It is often formalized by the general body of insurgents through ritual presentation of *nazranas* which marks validation and sacrilization of the rebel violence as a public service.³⁵

In the actual autonomous process of mobilization, the pull of primordial loyalties or sentiments of kinship, ethnic community ties and co-residence often play a significant part. However, Guha has stressed the fact that 'it was only rarely that the mobilization of an insurgent peasantry or a tribal group adopted so explicitly a religious form in colonial India as one might expect'.³⁶ The observation—both sweeping and hasty—is actually falsified by Guha's own evidence on the 1857 Mutiny and of course on the Birsa Munda movement which clearly showed the religious overtones of their agrarian distress coupled with ethnic identity.³⁷ Moreover, if Guha had carefully looked at the Moplah insurgencies from 1830 to 1921³⁸ then he would have certainly qualified his claim regarding the strikingly 'secular' modality of such peasant or tribal uprisings.

It is true that no narrowly conceived economic interpretations can possibly explain some of the forms in which the rebel activity manifests. Guha has asserted that when subaltern sections resorted to burning, wrecking and destroying, the considerations of economic gain did not figure very prominently. But can this modality (relating to non-economic orientation) be stated as a general law? Is economic rationality absent totally in the insurgent's action and is it always overwhelmed by motives of power as exclusively as Guha suggests? How else do we account for the umpteen instances of plunder of goods and looting of cash by the Kols in Chotanagpur and by the Santals, the details of which have been furnished by Guha himself?³⁹ The plunder and loot are

far from incidental acts of negativity or inversion but can certainly be tinged by it. Tribal or peasant insurgents do not simply aim at destroying the cultural insignia and symbols of power but they also care for economic gains if and when opportunities come their way. In glorifying and sentimentalizing the insurgents' actions, as Guha does, it is not always necessary to deny them their normal attributes of robust practical wisdom and economic rationality as the colonialist historiography often did. Quite paradoxically, Guha is caught in the same fallacy that his subaltern approach aims at demolishing.

In contrast to plunder and destruction as a modality, killings and bloodshed tend to be a rarer phenomenon and hence must not be treated as the principal feature of insurgent behaviour. Guha argues: 'It is in fact counter-insurgency which makes killings as its principal modality.' The rarity of bloodshed in peasant or tribal insurgencies has been attributed by Guha not to their compassion but to their failure to overcome the inhibitions of the old semi-feudal culture and the spiritual conditions of their subalternity.⁴⁰

'Solidarity'—the next form in which the peasant or tribal insurgent's self-consciousness manifests itself—signifies separation of his own identity from that of his enemies. Although this form overlaps with negativity considerably, Guha has made two important points here. First, the quality of 'collective consciousness' (*à la* Durkheim) varies from one phase of insurgency to another. Secondly, class 'solidarity' and other solidarities (i.e., those emerging from ethnic, religious, caste or filial ties) are not mutually exclusive; rather 'these overlap as they did in most of the peasant uprisings or ethnic movements before 1900 because the dye of the traditional culture had not yet washed off the peasant/tribe consciousness'. This is what Guha characterizes as the duplex character of insurgency⁴¹ in which sometimes class and religion are intertwined (e.g., as in the Moplah uprisings) and sometimes ethnicity and class identities get fused as is best illustrated by the case of the Birsa Munda movement.⁴² In fact, Guha goes a step forward and argues that the Kol and Birsa rebellions stand apart from the rest of the tribal uprisings in the nineteenth century in that class



solidarity had triumphed over ethnicity in those cases more decisively than in any other tribal uprising. Of course, Suresh Singh, whose evidence has been used by Guha, has himself not attempted a clear-cut analysis of the Birsait movement. Thus, Guha claims that the rebel consciousness in those instances projected well beyond the sense of tribe or caste.⁴³

The solidarity of the rebel peasant or tribal manifests in chastisement of traitors. 'Active collaboration is sired by insurgency no less than is rebel solidarity itself. Thus, solidarity and collaboration (betrayal) close on each other in a figure of perfect symmetry. The rebel's hostility to traitor is thus an articulation of the rebel's own class consciousness',⁴⁴ which is similar to the identity being defined negatively.

In 'transmission' as a form/aspect of peasant or tribal insurgency, Guha deals essentially with the patterns of spread of insurgency. Through iconic and symbolic signs or even rumours, other subaltern sections/groups are also contacted and drawn into uprising. Whether the rebels organize prayer meetings, beat their drums, flutes or horns, distribute branches of *sal* trees, or a fiery torch, or whether they distribute *chapatis*, *tel* (oil) or *sindur* (vermillion powder), all these were the most effective instruments of this transmission in the Kol, the Santal and the Birsait movements, in the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, and also in the Moplah rebellion of 1921.⁴⁵ What is significant is that in this transmission by verbal codes or through visual signs, the ideology of class struggle is invariably mediated by religion because Guha believes that the politics of rebellion or tribal insurgencies are almost always expressed in sacred idioms as they are very effective in arousing mass support.⁴⁶

Lastly, 'territoriality' is that aspect or form of peasant/tribal consciousness in which insurgents get bound by blood ties (consanguinity) on the one hand and by local bond (contiguity) on the other. A sense of belongingness to a common lineage and to a shared habitat overlap with one another. Thus, ethnic space and physical space notions are constituents of territoriality. Guha has stressed the fact that even this consciousness has often transcended

the limits of ties of either blood or habitat or both. Therefore, the 1857 Mutiny could spread far beyond the heartland of the Doab region as well as Oudh.⁴⁷ In this context Guha has criticized S.C. Roy and many other anthropologists who failed to see through the anti-colonial content of the tribal revolts or peasant movements in India and who thereby have helped to perpetuate the myth that tribal/peasant insurgency was nothing more than a demonstration of ethnic antagonism against the *diku* (i.e., outsider)⁴⁸ and that peasant movements were nothing but 'disturbances' that created law and order problems for the colonial administration. But in one sense, the ethnic antagonism—expressed in idioms like *diku*—is also a way of redefining 'imperialism' as 'internal colonialism': a point missed completely by Guha.

The common forms or patterns of peasant/tribal insurgents' consciousness are made up not only of elements and tendencies which are mutually consistent but also those which clash and conflict with one another. Guha does not visualize the common form in which the rebels' consciousness manifests as a generality that is external to the subject or that is a *sui generis* phenomenon, nor is it any abstract quality of insurgency discovered by pure abstraction and reflection: Rather, it is what permeates and includes in it everything particular. Hence, Guha's framework consists of 'abstracted elementary forms' that are firmly rooted in the concrete foundation of facts drawn from the nineteenth century peasant/tribal insurgencies. Therefore, the impact of Durkheim on Guha's analytical framework is more apparent than real. Like formal sociologists (George Simmel and others) Guha does not fall into the trap of reification—a standard error in any formal analysis. Instead his sight is fixed on the insurgent Kols, Santals and Birsait movements; it is these rebels' consciousness which Guha has analyzed and it is the deep historical meaning of their insurgencies in colonial India to which his study draws our attention.

The subaltern approach, at least the form in which Guha has demonstrated its use in his own study⁴⁹ of peasant insurgencies, as stated earlier, draws heavily on Emile Durkheim's notion of 'elementary forms', or George Simmel's concept of 'forms' of

interaction. In substance, however, the subaltern studies approach as it developed in India clearly represents a synthesis of four major streams within contemporary Marxism: (i) First and the most obvious of these is Gramscian Marxism which emphasizes the role of pure spontaneity of the action of subaltern masses in history in general and under a hegemonic state in particular. For theoretical justification, conceptual/analytical tools, and also for abstractions of general explanation, the subaltern approach draws obviously on Gramsci. (ii) No less obvious is the influence of Trotskyite-Marxism, particularly in terms of consciousness (i.e., necessary as opposed to contingent consciousness). Guha's subaltern studies approach treats consciousness the way Trotsky did. For Trotsky, objective theoretical positions reigned supreme and these must be judged objectively, rather than shifting them pragmatically, as the Stalinist politicians often did, by twisting their theoretical pronouncements guided by personal power ambitions or political motivations.⁵⁰ Following Trotsky then, the subaltern approach to history considers the role of party, strategies and tactics as important, no doubt, but not as prior to 'necessary consciousness'. (iii) The third Marxist stream which Guha's own approach draws inspiration from is represented by Eric Hobsbawm, George Rude and E.P. Thompson, who through their studies,⁵¹ have shown the indispensability of the material force and actors of history. (iv) And finally, in terms of the directions in which subaltern struggles develop, or the forms in which they manifest, Guha and his associates have clearly tended to model their arguments on the lines indicated by the 1968 Paris uprisings (i.e., the massive student and youth protest that finally brought the downfall of Charles de Gaulle), the Latin American movements—particularly the experience of Che Guevara in Bolivia and the like. It is a blend of these four traditions in contemporary Marxism that Guha's subaltern studies approach to history represents.

The 'subaltern studies' approach earned critics as fast as it gained a following, particularly among young historians from both India and abroad, though not so much among other social scientists. These historians have focused their attention on peasants, workers

and other subaltern elements, in an attempt to show how their protests have been spontaneous and traditional and yet far more radical in their methods of resistance, sometimes even in their goals, than the elite and middle-class dominated nationalist movement in India was. Above all, in conformity with Ranajit Guha's contention, these studies, the results of which are now available in a series of five volumes,⁵² also argue that such spontaneous movements were independent of the nationalist leadership which often tried to control them if possible, or even to suppress and subvert them whenever necessary.⁵³

Critics of the 'subaltern studies' approach have attacked precisely the whole notion of 'autonomy' of the subaltern consciousness. Irfan Habib and many others have questioned the validity of such an attempt to study subaltern groups and their protest movements in isolation from other parallel political processes. A struggle or a protest movement that appears to be autonomous, is in reality preceded by several changes in the consciousness of its principal participants. Such changes often emanate from wider political processes, including the elite politics which the subaltern approach followers have decried. In the Indian context the interface between the national movement led by the Indian National Congress and the grass-root level protests and resistance movements is too significant to be ignored, because the latter was a prime source of ideas for the former.⁵⁴

Another major difficulty with the subaltern studies approach pertains to the lack of precise meaning and scope of the concept of 'subalternity' as an analytical category. In a separate note on 'the term by Guha'⁵⁵ he admits that the composition of this category is not homogeneous. The term is more residual in its connotation as it includes practically all non-elite sections of the people. Guha treats the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich and upper middle peasants as all belonging to the category of 'people' or 'subaltern classes'. But then he has left it to individual researchers to investigate, identify and determine the specific nature of subalternity by situating it historically. With this rider, it should be possible to consider *adivasis* (tribals), untouchables or

dalits, sharecroppers, and agricultural labourers, as well as other marginalized sections with specific ethnic, non-class characteristics (caste, religion, clan, language or regional identity of a minority group) as 'subaltern classes'. But then by no stretch of imagination can the class outlook and interests of these immiserized and marginalized groups be compatible, let alone identical, with those of the lowest strata of rural gentry, the rich and upper-middle peasantry whom Guha treats as the ideal components of 'subalternity'.

More importantly, the subaltern studies approach to historiography in a way confines itself preferentially to the colonial period, though not all the adherents strictly do so. In addition to this, at least by implication, the approach is applicable only to those mass mobilizations which took on the insurgent character, and hence it is inapplicable to those tribal/peasant or any other protest movements which were not truly insurgent in character. This again, by implication, severely restricts the scope of Gramscian formulations. If, however, members of the 'subaltern studies' group (or maybe school) insist that the concept should be used for studying only the insurgent responses of the people during the colonial period, then the approach excludes all those ethnic/tribal, peasant, or any other protest movements which are not necessarily insurgent in character but which can be called as 'revolutions of rising expectations'.

If the contents of the 'subaltern studies' series are subjected to a closer scrutiny, then not all contributors have conformed to the definition specified in Guha's initial note. For example, Arvind Das,⁵⁶ in his account of the East Champaran Kisan Sabha in Jharkia and the landgrab movement in Bihar in general, has essentially dealt with the agrarian movements of the poor and landless peasants in the 1960s and 1970s. In the context of Masaurhi (1970-75) again it is the struggle of the agricultural labourers of Harijan castes that he has discussed.⁵⁷ There are many other studies on agricultural labourers' or jute-workers' struggles which, strictly speaking, do not fit into the rigid definitional ambit of 'subaltern classes' as drawn by Guha. Another example is David Hardiman's study⁵⁸ on the Devi movement among the tribals of Gujarat, which too does

not fit into the 'subaltern studies' strait-jacket.

Even if we accept 'subalternity' as a generic conceptual category, which is to be defined and situated historically (which would theoretically make it an open category to include practically any class or stratum of a society), still other ambiguities remain. The most important one relates to the proximity of this concept to 'insurgencies'. Some of the studies in the subaltern series have, of course, dealt with movements—protests/mobilizations—which are not insurgent in character. Since neither in its scope of applicability nor in terms of the basic properties of 'subaltern' behaviour the concept of 'subalternity' suggests any specific boundaries, its status as a scientific concept remains rather doubtful.

In our opinion, more useful than the concept of 'subalternity' is Ranajit Guha's framework consisting of six forms or aspects of insurgents' consciousness for all those interested in studying social movements in general, and ethnic/tribal and peasant movements in particular. The value of Guha's paradigmatic forms remains undiminished regardless of whether we accept or eliminate the 'subaltern' concept from his framework. The only limitation of Guha's paradigm lies in its restricted applicability or suitability for studying only those movements which took on an insurgent character, because his 'elementary aspects' spell out precisely the basic properties of the insurgent's action. A large number of ethnic/tribal movements, or more recent farmers' movements in India from the 1950s, are left out because they did not develop necessarily along the insurgent syndrome.

The identity formations of ethnic/tribal groups, peasantry, or even among minorities and their political expressions in contemporary India present a wide spectrum. They range from the nativist movements like the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra (which is nativist, but not radical),⁵⁹ or movements for assertion of regional/sub-regional identities such as for a separate Vidarbha⁶⁰ or Telengana⁶¹ state on the one hand, to the Jharkhand movement in the Chotanagpur district of Bihar,⁶² and many other 'sons of the soil' movements⁶³ which have sometimes taken on insurgent, militant or even terrorist forms, but have most of the time sought to pursue their

demands within the constitutional framework of India and by accepting its legitimacy as well as the liberal democratic means. Some of these movements, or at least a fraction of them, have raised secessionist demands questioning the very legitimacy of India as a nation-state. However, most of these contemporary movements come fairly close to what T. Di Tella has called 'the revolutions of rising expectations' which are often unleashed by developmental imbalances resulting from the modernization process in the Third World. The most striking example of this is the farmers' movements that have gathered momentum in different parts of India since the mid-seventies to demand remunerative prices for farm produce. Ideologues of these movements argue that while agricultural productivity has risen phenomenally as a result of the Green Revolution—and its subsidized inputs—agricultural profitability has declined sharply due to non-remunerative prices. The Bharatiya Kisan Union movement in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh, the Shetkari Sanghatana in Maharashtra, or the Rajya Rayatha Sangh in Karnataka and the like belong essentially to this category of protest movements. Ernesto Laclau⁶⁴ has tried to develop a proper framework for studying such movements, which he characterizes as 'populist movements'. In our view, we in India ought to examine Laclau's attempt to theorize on 'populism' more seriously, since it is directly relevant for understanding the complex phenomena of contemporary movements—whether farmers', ethnic, tribal or regional.

Interpretations of populism

Laclau has mentioned four basic approaches to an interpretation of populism. For the first approach, populism is a typical expression of a determinate social class and hence it is both a movement and an ideology at the same time. For example, the Russian Narodnik populism in the nineteenth century was no more than a peasant ideology; the North American populism in 1895 was an ideology and mobilization typical of a society of small farmers opposed to urban life and big business; and the more recent Latin American mobilization of urban masses is an ideological-political expression

of a petty bourgeoisie or of marginal sectors.⁶⁵ In this approach a type of populism is established by its class base or class combination.

The second conception of populism treats it with a theoretical nihilism, as if the concept is devoid of any content. For example, Peter Worsley⁶⁶ argues that it is difficult to specify common crucial attributes that are present in all movements that are usually characterized as 'populist'. Hence, populism is not an analytical category but a datum of experience.⁶⁷ But despite its conceptual imprecision or indefiniteness, populism has gained more and more respectability in the social sciences.

According to the third approach, the difficulties in the term could be overcome by restricting it to characterization of ideology only, and not of a movement. As an ideology, the main properties of 'populism' are: (i) its ingrained hostility to the *status quo*; (ii) mistrust of traditional politicians; (iii) appeal to the people or masses and not to specific classes as such; and finally (iv) its anti-intellectualism.⁶⁸ Such a peculiar ideological nexus gets formed and adopted by social movements that differ widely in their social origins as well as in their aspirations. Though useful, this approach helps only in studying or describing the 'form' but not the content of social movements, because a simple characterization of populist elements or behavioural forms would say nothing of the role such a movement plays in a determinate social formation in a spatio-temporal context.⁶⁹

The fourth conception of populism is derived from functionalist theory. Its argument, to put it in its simplest form, would run as follows: when aspirations, guided by culturally defined goals, are kept constantly rising, but are not matched by adequate institutional means to fulfil them, such a situation creates different forms of adaptation on the part of individuals to the social structure. All forms of adaptation other than 'conformist' behaviour are considered in the functionalist paradigm as 'deviations' or aberrations.⁷⁰ Populism in this functionalist perspective would be seen as an aberrant phenomenon produced by 'the asynchronism' of the processes of transition from a traditional to an industrial



society'.⁷¹

Drawing from the comparative assessments of the European and Latin American experience, G. Germani has formulated a theory of populism.⁷² Germani also treats populism as a product of a transitional stage between traditional and industrial societies in which features of advanced stages correspond to a backward stage. This constitutes 'asynchronism'. Co-existence of these two would mean that modernization in one will provoke change in the others, but not necessarily in a modern direction. Populism combines these two opposite tendencies in two forms—the demonstration effect and the fusion effect. The former refers to widespread diffusion of habits, mentalities and styles that correspond to a more advanced stage in backward areas. In the latter form (i.e., the fusion effect), ideologies and attitudes corresponding to the advanced stage are reinterpreted in a backward context, which in turn reinforce the traditional features. Populism, therefore, seeks to achieve mobilization and integration, change and *status quo* at the same time.⁷³ In other words, populist movements are anti-*status quoist* and *status quoist* at the same time. And this blend of change as well as stability orientations, when pursued simultaneously through ideology, constitutes 'populism'.

Another Latin American scholar, Torcuato Di Tella has defined 'populism' as a political movement which enjoys the support of the masses of the urban working class and/or peasantry, but which does not result from the autonomous organizational power of either of these two sectors. It is also supported by non-working class or non-peasant sections upholding an anti-*status quo* ideology. Hence, to Di Tella, social classes are present in populism but not necessarily as classes. A peculiar ideology achieves the separation of the class nature of participants and their forms of political expression, which, in our view, is truly happening in the phenomenal growth of farmers' movements all over India in more recent years. Populism in this sense is the 'revolution of rising expectations' responsible for the asynchronism.⁷⁴ Hence, three essential features of populism are stressed by Di Tella: (i) an elite committed to mobilization of masses appears on the scene—an elite

that is imbued with an anti-*status quo* ideology; (ii) mass mobilization generated by rising expectations; and (iii) an ideology with a widespread appeal. What is, however, important is that the roots of these three features are sought in the transition or 'asynchronism'.⁷⁵

In the ultimate analysis, although classes appear in populist movements but not as classes, the meaning of the ideological elements identified with populism has to be sought in the social structure. And these structures refer back again to the class nature of populist movements. Di Tella's formulations thus suggest that to a higher degree of development would correspond more of a 'class' and less of a 'populist' organization. This amounts to saying that populist experiences or movements are likely to be less frequent in capitalist societies than in peripheral countries due to different levels of development. Laclau has, however, contested this point since 'developed-underdeveloped', 'traditional-modern' or 'agrarian-industrial' dichotomies are used by Di Tella as prior paradigms for defining 'populism'.⁷⁶

The confusion over the concept of 'populism' is largely due to two opposing tendencies among analysts of such movements or populist phenomena: (i) either to specify the class nature of specific populist movements, and then to treat class contradictions as the fundamental structural moment for discerning political and ideological features; or (ii) to differentiate between class determination of superstructures and the form of existence of classes at the level of these superstructures. Orthodox Marxism theorizes superstructures as reflections of production, and makes class consciousness the basic constitutive movement of class. Gramsci, and following him Laclau, abandon this reductionist way of defining classes as antagonistic poles of production relations. They argue that: (i) classes exist at the ideological and political level in a process of articulation and not of reduction; (ii) that articulation requires non-class contents—interpellations and contradictions which constitute the raw material on which class ideological practices operate. Thus, the ideology of the dominant class, precisely because it is dominant, interpellates not just the members of that class but also members of the dominated classes, and thereby their

potential antagonism is neutralized; (ii) the levels of political and ideological superstructures must be conceived in the form of articulation and not of reduction; (iv) therefore, populist discourse refers primarily to 'people' or masses, though class as historical agent of the people's interests is very much present there; and finally (v) people/power bloc contradictions are distinct from a class contradiction. Populist movements express primarily the former,⁷⁷ and they arise in a specific ideological domain. The dialectical tension between the 'people' and 'classes' determines the form of ideology.⁷⁸ The Gramscian impact on Laclau's theoretical formulations on 'populism' is too evident to need any further elaboration of his analytical framework.

The potential

Having looked at the 'subaltern studies' approach and 'populism' as a conceptual tool it is necessary to assess their potential as useful frameworks for studying social movements—including ethnic/tribal, and peasant movements in India. To us, heuristically more significant than the concept of 'subalternity' in the alternative approach to historiography advocated by Ranajit Guha, are the six paradigmatic forms (suggested by him) in which insurgent consciousness manifests. For studying protest movements of peasantry and ethnic/tribal groups in general, and their insurgencies in particular, Guha's forms are invaluable; they suggest what questions a researcher ought to ask while studying any insurgent phenomenon, and how to interpret and interconnect seemingly disparate sets of data in order to reconstruct the nature of consciousness of the insurgent people whom one has chosen to study. This framework consisting of Guha's six paradigmatic forms, could be usefully employed in studying ethnic/tribal and peasant movements, but mainly of the insurgent variety, without making much *ado* of the concept of 'subalternity' *per se*. It is not being suggested here that the concept ought to be discarded outright. However, its extensive usage in specific historical contexts inquired into by the contributors to the *Subaltern Studies* series has not in any way minimized either the extent of ambiguities it is ridden with or the

polemics associated with it. On the contrary, it has become increasingly difficult to use the term 'subalternity' with conceptual precision or a common meaning structure as the body of research literature on subaltern issues keeps growing.

Guha's paradigmatic forms too, though useful, have some obvious limitations. They are useful for studying insurgent movements only. Naturally, non-insurgent protest movements would remain outside the pale of his paradigm. Moreover, these forms in themselves are not fixed or determinate, and would require continuous renewal in the light of fresh research material; finally these forms in themselves do not constitute an explanation as to why a given movement or insurgency assumes certain of these forms and not others.

It is here that the concept of 'populism', and the framework that Laclau and other Latin American scholars have suggested for studying 'populist movements', could possibly provide us with directions for inquiries into contemporary peasant/farmers' movements, ethnic/tribal movements, or movements for assertion of regional, ethnic or minority identities, which are becoming less and less insurgent in character and are acquiring the form of 'populism'. i.e., 'revolution of rising expectations'. In these movements 'people' or masses and not 'classes' seem to be getting united against the *status quo* establishment, and such a unity or solidarity is apparently achieved through ideology despite the presence of one or more dominant classes operating within such populist formations.

The precise linkages between masses and classes, the nature of populist ideologies and the type of inter-class unity these ideological interpellations achieve, and the role such populist movements play in a determinate social formation or in a given mode of production, are some of the issues that could be taken up for inquiry in the context of contemporary social movements—more particularly peasants'/farmers' movements or ethnic movements in India. Guha's framework of the six forms of 'subaltern' consciousness, and Laclau's formulations on 'populism', which have regrettably remained neglected in the mainstream sociology

and social anthropology of movements in India, could provide us with some directions for future inquiry.

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