



EDITOR

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Reading

CRITICAL HISTORY, CONTESTED MEANING, AND THE GLOBALISATION OF SOUTH ASIA

Subaltern Studies

CHAPTER 1.4

Subaltern Autonomy and the National Movement*

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ALTOGETHER NINE essays have been included in this volume: David Arnold, 'Bureaucratic recruitment and subordination in colonial India: The Madras constabulary, 1859-1947'; Ramachandra Guha, 'Forestry and social protest in British Kumaun, 1893-1921'; Swapan Dasgupta, 'Adivasi politics in Midnapur, c. 1760-1924'; Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's movement in Malda, 1924-32'; David Hardiman, 'From custom to crime: The politics of drinking in colonial South Gujarat'; Gautam Bhadra, 'Four rebels of eighteen-fifty-seven'; Bernard S. Cohn, 'The command of language and the language of command'; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing historiography'; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Invitation to a dialogue.' Considerations of space prevent me from critically reviewing all of them. I would prefer to concentrate on the essays dealing with a major theme of the 'subaltern' historiography: popular protest movements and their relationship with the wider political movements of the time.

Since the contributions of Arnold and Cohn do not belong to this genre, I would only briefly indicate their arguments. Arnold does deal with a subaltern group—the constabulary constituting the 'bottom

*Based on Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian history and society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. x+383.

tier of the bureaucratic hierarchy' and performing 'the most menial policing duties in return for the lowest scales of pay.' In material terms they 'shared in the poverty and exploitation of the subaltern classes.' The colonial state sought to 'discipline' them, but failed to establish a complete institutional and ideological control over them. This made possible occasional protests against their lowly position. They even formed unions for the purpose. However, they seldom questioned the authority of the colonial state. Their collective action could not become 'a basis for wider solidarity with other subaltern groups,' for they used their limited powers derived from the state for their own selfish ends. Illegal exactions and bribe-taking alienated them from the rural and urban poor and 'aligned them more closely with the wealthier and more powerful classes who could purchase or command their services.' They were not 'collaborators' with the imperial government as they did not subscribe to its objectives. This, however, did not make them friends of the people, since, though an 'exploited' group, they were also 'exploiters'; 'the oppressed were also oppressors.'

The vastly erudite and well-argued essay by Cohn seeks to explain the reason why the British were keen on learning Indian languages after they had established their political domination in Bengal and other parts of India. Cohn also shows how the specificities of the learning process had wider cultural implications unconnected with the immediate aims of the learners. It was the command of languages, Cohn argues, which provided to the masters precise knowledge of the subject race—its material resources, manners, customs and laws. Knowledge was power. It 'was to be the instrumentality' through which the masters 'issued commands' and collected ever-increasing amounts of information. 'This information was needed to create or locate cheap and effective means to assess and collect taxes, maintain law and order, and it served as a way to identify and classify groups within Indian society. . . . The vast world that was India had to be classified, categorised and bounded before it could be hierarchised' (pp. 283-4). Knowledge was all the more vital initially since the Company's government decided to 'adapt our regulations to the manners and understanding of the people . . . adhering as closely as we are able to their ancient uses and institutions.'

The British conquest of India was thus also 'a conquest of knowledge.' However, the process of learning Indian languages had its own rules, its compulsions. The British tried to comprehend the strange world that was India using their own forms of knowing and thinking. Apart from anything else, the Europeans inevitably adopted the rules governing the structure of their own languages. Over the years developed comparative philology which 'in turn supplied the scientific model for the comparative study of law, religion and society.' The Europeans were now 'prepared to give to the Indians the greatest gift they could give anyone—the Indian would receive a *history*.'

Of the remaining essays the last two form a group apart—'discussions' rather than analysis of any specific historical theme. Dipesh Chakrabarty answers criticisms of some earlier 'subaltern studies.' His exposition is, as usual, remarkably lucid. It is all the more convincing since he seldom condescendingly responds to the critics. He mainly asserts the position of the 'subaltern' historians. However, from the point of view of the historiography of popular protest movements he contributes a new argument (which, at least, was not as explicitly made as he has done here). The persistence of the primacy given to economic factors he would associate with the 'popular revival' in the 1970s of the 'Nehruvian (Marxist-nationalist) critique of colonialism' (p. 370). Early nationalists sought to understand India's poverty, and not the poor, and blamed the poverty on colonialism. A considerable number of the writings in the 1970s and later on popular movements were essentially neo-nationalist. The movements were explained in terms of an 'inexorable economic rationality.' Even where popular protest was articulated in religious idioms, it was explained away merely as a matter of form which only obscured, it was argued, the essentially economic content of the protest.

The 'theoretical intervention' by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is as abstruse as Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'discussion' is lucid. She examines some postulates of the 'subaltern' historiography in the light of recent advances in linguistics. However, she addresses readers as a specialist would talk to a small coterie of specialists. Since the present reviewer does not belong to this charmed circle, he feels it would be foolhardy of him to try to glean any pearl from the depth of this bafflingly obscure piece of composition.

The five remaining essays deal with popular protests in different parts of colonial India. We first take up the contributions by Guha, Dasgupta, Sarkar and Hardiman, all of them examining, among others, a common theme: the nature of the autonomy of subaltern movements in relation to the nationalist movement of the time.

Guha's theme is the intensification of peasant protest (1893–1921) in Kumaun against the encroachment by the colonial state on the forest rights of the peasantry and against practices such as forced labour (*utar*) which the enforcement of the new forest laws necessitated. Guha's study of the encroachment is an excellent piece of research. We are, however, more concerned with the protest movement. Two aspects of it need to be re-examined: How did the gradual radicalisation of the movement occur? How do we explain the 'absence, comparatively speaking, of violence, certainly of physical violence' (p. 96)?

Guha identifies the major elements in the radicalisation process during the years 1920–2. Forced labour ceased to be the primary issue of the movement. Retrieving the lost forest rights now became the dominant aim. The rebels had, perhaps for the first time, the vision of a 'free India.' The organisation of the movement was suitably oriented to the radical aims. Guha thus comments on this organisation and on the nature of its relation with the contemporary nationalist movement: 'While this unity and sense of purpose necessarily made their actions political, the politics of the peasantry was clearly not derivative of the politics of urban nationalism. Apart from a hazy perception of Gandhi as a saint whose qualities of heroic sacrifice were invoked against the powers of government, the *utar* movements had little in the nature of an identification with the Congress as such' (p. 87).

Guha does not quite explain the radicalisation. 'Enhancement of the customary services' in the recent years scarcely explains why the radical tone in the movement became most pronounced in the year 1920–2. (We wish his note on the Kumaun Parishad, an 'association of local journalists, lawyers and intellectuals,' which had a leading role in the movement, were more elaborate. What was the nature of its links, particularly the key figure Badridutt Pande's relations, with the Congress organisation and movement of the time?) The evidence that Guha cites seems to be inconsistent with his conclusion. It is true

that 'urban nationalism' did not have the initiative in organising the Kumaun movement. The question to decide is whether the widespread political ferment at the time affected the movement at all. The ferment is, of course, not the same thing as the role of a specific group of individuals. The Kumaun peasants might also have interpreted in their own way the political message that created the ferment. However, if its source lay outside the peasant society, it would be worthwhile to identify the way the ferment affected the peasant politics.

The idioms in which this politics was now articulated were strikingly new. For instance, at the crucial gathering of over ten thousand at a local fair Badridutt Pande passed on a message from Gandhi that he would come and save them from oppression as he did in Champaran. It was at the fair that peasants firmly resolved not to provide *begar* any longer and to combine for the restoration of their lost forest rights. 'Slogans in praise of Mahatma Gandhi and "Swatantra Bharat" and cries that the government was *anniyayi* (unjust) rent the air.' Incendiarism, that is, setting forests on fire, now became part of a 'systematic campaign.' Guha had not cared to explain such new forms of peasant protest. The bland formulation that peasant politics 'was clearly not derivative of the politics of urban nationalism' precludes consideration of their possible links with the nationalist movement of the time.

How to explain the near-absence of physical violence? Large-scale violence to property did occur. Guha does not tell us why the absence of only one form of violence needs to be explained. (We get an impression that he tends to assume the absence of violence of any kind as a form of protest.) His explanations of the phenomenon do not quite convince. He relates it partly to the absence in Kumaun of 'an intermediate class enjoying a vested interest in land,' 'a culturally distinct buffer class, as the Hindu zamindars were to the tribals, between the body of cultivating proprietors and the state,' and partly to the 'distinctive history of peasant protest' of the pre-British days which the practice known as *dhandak* exemplified.

Guha's assumption is that the extent of violence is correlated to 'different forms of domination.' One may argue that the absence of an intermediate landed class in Kumaun did not mean the absence

of domination altogether. The new forest administration, 'the affirmation of state monopoly,' did represent a stable structure of domination. More significantly, violence could occur even in the absence of the domination of an intermediate landed class. (The Santal revolt of 1855 first broke out in the Damin-i-Koh, where such a class was non-existent.) Normally, tribal protest turned violent mainly when the tribals realised, under specific circumstances, that the colonial state (often its local representatives) had gone over to the side of their adversaries, so that they had nothing to expect from it towards redressing their grievances. Needless to say, this perception *alone* did not lead to an organised tribal movement.

Dhandak, the typical collective peasant protest in pre-colonial Kumaun, directed primarily against specific wrong-doers and rarely against the authority of the king, had two major forms: defiance of their authority and an appeal to the king to remove them where the peasant initiative was not enough to make them mend their ways. This form of protest did not perhaps persist. It was devised under specific historical conditions, particularly a firm belief of the people that the king would either tame their oppressors or altogether remove them. Guha does admit that 'its socio-cultural idiom was predicated firmly on the traditional relationship between the *raja* and *praja*' (p. 84). The new power structure was hardly compatible with such a belief.

Swapan Dasgupta's conclusion that the tribal politics in the Jungle Mahals of Midnapur was far from the 'exclusive handiwork of Congress politics' is indisputable. However, he does not seem to have made up his mind as to how exactly the tribal politics was related to the Congress politics. The assertion such as the following is unequivocal: 'Élite politics in Midnapur has thus only a very tenuous connection with the autonomous mobilisation of this particular section of the subaltern. Adivasi insurgency belonged on the whole to another domain of politics' (p. 135). (By 'élite politics' Dasgupta presumably means the Congress politics.) He also makes qualified assertions. To the question he asks (in connection with the resistance of the tribals to the Midnapur Zamindari Company): 'If Congress did not introduce "politics" to the Adivasis, did it merely appropriate their autonomous

political initiatives?' his answer is as follows: 'The answers are not clear-cut' (p. 126).

In fact, his narrative of the 'first wave' of tribal resistance to the Midnapur Zamindari Company (MZC) proves beyond any doubt that the so-called elite politics was scarcely peripheral to the resistance. He finds a continuity between the *hat* (country market) looting of 1918 and this resistance (1921–2). He would even suggest: 'The events of 1918 are central to our understanding of subsequent events, especially the politics of nationalism . . . there is sufficient justification for believing that there was an already existing subaltern consciousness which was seized upon, appropriated, and of course in certain cases advanced by the elite' (p. 124). As a conscious activity of tribals, *hat* lootings, sporadic, isolated and often spontaneous, qualitatively differed from the organised resistance to the MZC, an infinitely more formidable enemy than the petty shopkeepers and traders in essential commodities whose demand of an abruptly increased price infuriated the tribals. Dasgupta did not come across any 'recorded instances of popular agitation against the MZC' prior to 1921–2. And he has the following explanation to offer: 'Overawed perhaps by the MZC's power, the Santals did not act in the same idiom upon which Birsa Munda, for example, had drawn. Their awareness of their own condition and the power relations responsible for it was not enough to activate them.' Dasgupta does admit the cruciality of the role of the Congressmen in the organisation of the opposition to the MZC: 'In this respect Congress propaganda, fuelled by thriving rumours of the impending collapse of the British Raj, provided the necessary stimulus' (p. 127).

Yet Dasgupta would accuse the Congressmen of not consistently upholding the tribal cause. Indeed he would even conclude: 'On other occasions the role of the Congress seems to suggest a *conscious subversion* of autonomous adivasi initiative' (p. 128) (emphasis mine). He cites just a single occasion. Even that does not establish his argument. The occasion was as follows. While the Santals 'were collectively reasserting lost traditional rights as a conscious political act of insurgency,' Roy, an active Congress worker there, 'was intent on negotiating with the District Magistrate and the MZC.' Roy's motive, according

to Dasgupta, was 'to ensure Congress supervision over the labour process to make landlordism more humane.' He does not provide any evidence whatsoever in support of this crucial assertion. On the contrary he himself points out that the District Magistrate's 'attempt at a compromise failed due to the intransigence of Roy. Roy in fact pressurised the MZC to come to terms with the Congress on the latter's terms.' How did, then, Roy 'consciously' subvert the autonomous Adivasi initiative? What does 'Congress supervision over the labour process' actually mean? Dasgupta has only perfunctorily dealt with such questions. The manner in which Congressmen came to be involved in the specific tribal struggle implies that the Congress politics there had ceased to be 'elite politics,' in the sense in which he understands it.

It is true that the Congress role in the 'second wave' of the movement (beginning sometime in August 1922) was much less decisive. However, the Congress continued to be associated with it. The Congressmen, on Dasgupta's own admission, 'did not alienate themselves from the tribal people.' During a Congress worker's trial 'not a single Santal or anyone else came forward to serve as witness for the prosecution.' Following the arrest of a prominent Congress leader 'the Adivasis destroyed the MZC office.' Yet Dasgupta sees 'only a very tenuous connection' of the Congress politics with the tribal movement there. This seems to be an instance of a tension between the *idee fixe* of a historian and his compulsion not to ignore the historical data he handles.

Tanika Sarkar's is an illuminating study of ambiguities in the consciousness of a subaltern group—immigrant Santals in Malda, mostly sharecroppers. (The story of the Santal movement against landlords, which forms an important part of the study, is the context in which the ambiguities become intelligible.) Recurrence of religious revivalism movements among tribals in different parts of British India is by now a well-known phenomenon. So is the decisiveness of the influence of Hindu ideas on some of them. The originality of Sarkar's study of the Santal revivalism movement is that she points to striking ambiguities in its ideology.

The influence of Hindu ideas on the leader, Jitu, and his 'Sannyasi

Dol' was far from peripheral. The leader and his followers were actually Hinduised. The Santal movement of the time (1926-32) 'seemed, at least on the surface, to amount to a rejection of the Santal identity in an endeavour to raise their status through integration with the same Hindu society that had always oppressed them' (p. 149). One of Jitu's followers openly proclaimed: 'We shall not keep either Santals or Muhamadans any longer.' The Hinduisation process was occasionally understandably associated with use of force. Naturally certain aspects of the hierarchical Hindu caste system strongly influenced the ideology of Jitu and his followers. For instance, they aspired to the *jal-chal* status (so that high caste Hindus would accept offer of drink from them without fear of pollution). Hinduisation also probably largely accounted for Jitu's 'contemptuous references' to the lower castes and the untouchables. Jitu's strong antipathy towards the Muslims was also partly due to the communal preachings of the Hindu Mahasabha at the time.

However, the Hindu influence did not go far enough. Indeed, the distinctively Santal identity constantly reappeared in Jitu's perceptions and deeds. For instance, conversion to Hinduism did not necessitate abandonment of the traditional Santal worship of spirits (*bongai*). The usual Santal festivals and celebrations, based on the Santal notion of pleasure, were retained throughout. Jitu's message was addressed exclusively to the Santals. It was communicated too in the Santali language. More significantly, the message essentially derived from Jitu's perceptions of the roots of the Santal subordination. He would repeatedly tell the Santals that they would soon regain their *Desh* (homeland) where all 'intermediate layers of authority created by the colonial government' between the common Santal and the village head would disappear.

These apparent ambiguities in the consciousness of the Hinduised Santals are explicable. Conversion to Hinduism was not merely a matter of substituting one religious faith for another. It was largely motivated by a sincere conviction that it was an essential precondition for the coming of the millennium. The practice of keeping pigs and fowls was abandoned not just because the Hindus considered it unclean. Jitu believed that revitalisation of the Santal culture and religion through this abandonment would make the Santals a match for

their adversaries. The new *jal-chal* status was a means of the appropriation of the symbols of status of the caste Hindus, and would thus make them feel equal to their enemies. The religious revitalisation movements of the Santals are inseparable from their continuing political struggle.

This phase of the religious movement of the Santals should not, however, be regarded as a continuation of such movements earlier. The Santals did come under Hindu influences before, but they were not formally Hinduised. Nor did they think it a matter of pride to call themselves Hindus, to the extent of rejecting their Santal identity. They were then hardly keen on finding a place for themselves in the Hindu caste system; Hindu influences only reinforced their search for an enduring Santal identity.

Hardiman's essay divides into two distinct parts. The longer one convincingly shows how the intervention by the colonial government in the production and distribution of 'drinks' tended to force the poor tribals of south Gujarat to abandon the increasingly expensive drinks and to shift to cheaper but impure stuff (made not of the traditional ingredients such as the juice of certain trees or of certain flowers). The tribals did not allow this to happen without a protest. Its usual form was not opposition to the strangers connected with the new apparatus of colonial control, but 'illicit' distillation and smuggling. An activity, which in the tribal consciousness had nothing whatsoever to do with the commission of a crime, appeared now as a crime. The second part analyses the changing attitudes of the tribals to drinking. This seems to be more significant from the point of view of the 'subaltern' historiography. Drinking for the tribals was not just a way of finding an escape from the stresses produced by a hard day's work. It 'occupied a central place in their culture' (p. 173). 'In all spheres of their life, drink had positive associations. It was a food of the gods which possessed an element of divine power; it set a seal on negotiations and legitimised family ceremonies; it enhanced the pleasures of social gatherings and public festivities; it provided succour during times of scarcity. Drink . . . lubricated the whole cycle of life of the peasants' (p. 177).

However, under the altered conditions created by the intervention of the colonial authority the tribals themselves tended to regard

drinking as an evil, associating with it their ever-increasing indebtedness to the Parsis and the consequent immiseration. Hence attempts were made within the tribal society itself to persuade the tribals to get rid of the evil. Even before British rule some well-to-do families gave up drinking 'in the belief that this would raise their status in the wider society.' It was presumably an effect of the influence of the Brahmanic culture in which 'abstention from spirituous drinks was considered a great virtue.'

The temperance movement in the tribal society from about the last quarter of the nineteenth century basically differed from such isolated individual acts of renunciation. Now entire communities undergoing a process of pauperisation became involved in it. Fairly widespread movements appeared in the years 1905-6. The most organised one (known as the Devi movement) occurred during the Non-Cooperation Movement, but did not survive its withdrawal by Gandhi. An 'influential class of upwardly-mobile Adivasis' sought to prevent the movement from flagging. But the old tribal mores largely reasserted themselves. Hardiman has not adequately explained this significant phenomenon. In an earlier essay on the Devi movement (included in volume III of *Subaltern Studies*) Hardiman identified as one of the primary impulses behind the movement a collective will to appropriate the symbols of ritual status of the dominant groups in order to undermine their cultural domination. Why did this will weaken and disappear before long?

Adivasis 'felt that drinking was a part of their culture, a custom hallowed by tradition, something indeed which was a part of their very identity' (p. 222). This explanation is only partly tenable. Other tribal societies did jettison customs 'hallowed by tradition,' once they were convinced that the renunciation would help them retrieve their lost independence. (Needless to say, the whole of a tribal community could not be persuaded to the new style of life. Hence the continuing conflict in the tribal society committed to a new culture and ethical code.) The sense of identity and communal solidarity need not necessarily have derived from one continuing tradition. It could have multiple roots, since the tradition by itself did not preclude exposure to new cultural influences, which might have created a more enduring

sense of solidarity. It would be tautological to say that the tribals returned to their old practices, just because they were 'hallowed by tradition.'

Gautam Bhadra rehabilitates four little-known rebels of the 'Mutiny': Shah Mal (a small landlord), Devi Singh (a cultivator belonging to a substantial peasant community), Gonoo (an ordinary cultivator of Singhbhum) and Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah (an itinerant preacher). He rejects the usual élitist bias in the traditional historiography of the Mutiny and seeks to refute one of its central assumptions that 'the mass of the population appeared to have played little part or at most tamely followed the behests of the caste superiors' (p. 230). He concentrates on the people's perception of alien rule and of the wide-ranging implications of the Mutiny, and on the independent initiative of the people in organising local rebellions against the Raj.

The most remarkable part of the essay is his explanation of how relatively 'ordinary' rebels came to lead the popular rebellions. The crucial factor was the pervasive popular belief that the mighty British Raj, which represented in the people's consciousness a formidable instrument of repression, had irretrievably collapsed. It was now time for the people to take the initiative which had for long been denied to them. Creation of an alternative structure of authority and power embodied this initiative and also the people's aspirations. Anger against exploiters was formerly often expressed in the form of sporadic crimes. Violence, now collectively organised and sustained by the new authority structure, was designed to achieve collective aims. However, the rebels' vision ranged far beyond their immediate grievances. The remote past was now recalled. This revived communal memories, which had often little relevance to the contemporary reality. The leader here was carrying out the will of the people and not imposing his will on the people.

In at least one case, that of the maulavi, the people's choice of the leader had much to do with his extraordinariness. Bhadra infers the 'ordinariness' of the maulavi from his limited 'learning' and command over Arabic and Persian. This was hardly a measure of his stature as a leader. Bhadra's references to contemporary assessments of the Maulavi point unmistakably to the sources of his moral authority: 'his

holy character' (p. 266); 'the Mahomedans had great faith in him as an inspired prophet' (p. 267); his troops 'believed in his invulnerability, even after a bullet . . . smashed his thumb' (ibid.), and they also believed that 'his Whip and Handkerchief possessed magical qualities' (ibid.). Other leaders were scarcely adored in this manner.

It is refreshing to find 'subaltern' historians handling strikingly original themes. The present reviewer has, however, some reservations about their treatment of the question of 'autonomy' of subaltern movements. Some studies included in the present volume show that the rigidity of the first formulation on the theme still persists. Subaltern movements did, understandably, have their distinctive elements. However, the distinctiveness might not necessarily have derived from their autonomy. On the other hand, persons formally associated with 'élite politics' could be involved in subaltern movements in such a manner that the élite politics ceased to be so. It would be worthwhile to investigate how the content of the so-called élite politics could be thus significantly altered.