DYNAMICS OF RURAL AGITATION

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Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat, Kheda District 1917-34.
by David Hardiman

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THE richness of historical detail with which David Hardiman has woven his narrative would amaze even the most hardened empiricist. But there is something about the style which sustains one's interest even when the going is slow. When one sifts the detail, there emerge two central themes which seem to have guided the author in his research, namely, the textures of social differentiation and of mass mobilisation. Although social stratification subsumes economic differentiation, it means going considerably beyond it to reference groups which form the basis of social action. Hardiman is fully alive to this problem. The questions implicit in his work would consequently read something like this: What were the crucial social divides in Kheda district? What social groups were mobilised by the Congress? How much of a Gandhian archetype was Kheda? What was the pattern of mobilisation, and from where was the impetus derived? For instance, Dhanagre, Siddiqi and Pandey see the dynamic of rural agitation as flowing from two diametrically opposite sources: the movement from above was organised

chiefly by the Congress intelligentsia and was generally a rich and middle peasant affair; the movement from below was relatively independent of the Congress, at least in origin, was more violent and largely a poor peasant affair Others have seen the logic of mobilisation in patron-client terms and in a constitutionalist perspective. What factors assisted and what factors hindered the process of political mobilisation? In this context, Hardiman's extensive treatment of *patidar* hypergamous and *gol* networks and *baraiya* banditry are both fascinating and enlightening.

Hardiman has 'completely rewritten' his doctoral thesis and has substantially altered some of its rather puzzling formulations, for instance his equation of superior *patidar* with rich peasant and lesser *patidar* with middle peasant, although his evidence indicated that a prosperous capitalistic peasantry was crystallising not in the superior but in the lesser villages. He was unduly contemptuous of Weber in his thesis, as evident in his modified treatment of the *patidars*. Although he nowhere refers to Weber, Hardiman's description of the *patidars* comes very close to the Weberian ideal-type of a status-group. They are no longer a middle peasantry as such, although the majority of the *patidars* were subsistence rather than rich peasants — but then rich peasants by definition always constitute a small minority. Hardiman has apparently abandoned his former position reluctantly, for again and again he points to the affinity between lesser *patidars* and subsistence peasants. His subsistence argument is based on a dubious computation in which the amount of land owned by *patidars* in two villages is divided by the total number of the families. Such computations take no account of operational holdings, or supplementary occupations like dairying (and this in a district which was the origin of the Amul movement), and equates the average with the typical. Hardiman has, moreover, failed to make the very useful distinction between the middle peasantry of subsistence and the middle peasantry of commercialisation.

The crucial social divides in Hardiman's framework are not landlord, rich peasant, poor peasant, middle peasant and landless labourer, but elite, *patidar* and *baraiya*. The class situations of the three groups are fairly clear. *Patidars* were rich, but mainly subsistence, peasants. The *baraiyas* were generally poor peasants and labourers, although some were rich peasants as well. Hardiman's 'elites', however, remain somewhat nebulous. Since the concept of 'elite' has been used in a number of different ways, he could at the very least have specified the sense in which he was employing it. But let me not labour the point, for such labelling controversies all too easily degenerate into verbal jugglery. The question, as Humpty Dumpty put it, is not whether a word can mean so many things but which meaning is to be the master, that's all. By 'elite' Hardiman means the upper rungs of the landed, administrative trading and cultivating groups, generally concentrated in the seven superior *patidar* villages of Bhadran, Dharmaj, Karamsad, Nadiad, Sojitra, Vaso and Virsad. The 'elites' traditionally provided leadership to *patidar* society, as these villages stood at the apex of an intensely hierarchical and hypergamous social network. Hypergamy was the mechanism through which they controlled the lesser *patidars*. Although the superior *patidar* villages participated in the national movement, they did not constitute the storm centres of rural agitation. The elites, moreover, inclined towards constitutional rather than agitational politics. However, their position as a composite 'power elite' was gradually eroded as the lesser *patidars* increasingly attained structural independence by constituting their own endogamous marriage circles or *gols*. As their social dependence on superior *patidars* lessened, they could bypass the traditional elites and spearhead the national movement in Kheda district.

Social control through hypergamy did not altogether cease. For instance, there was a tendency for agitation to radiate outwards from affected superior *patidar* villages to surrounding lesser *patidar* villages with which the former had matrimonial links; and conversely, when agitation failed in a superior *patidar* village, surrounding lesser *patidar* villages generally capitulated as well. However, it was kinship relationships between equals, represented by institutions such as *gols* and caste councils, which kept the *patidars* knit closely together in the familiar Bardoli style. Hardiman's evidence points to

some important differences between the Bardoli and Kheda models, although the two are generally bracketed together. The Gandhian stranglehold over Kheda was less certain, for spinning and non-violence never really caught on and national education very soon began to languish. Moreover, much greater local and village level initiative is in evidence in the Kheda case. When the village leaders decided to refuse their land revenue, even Gandhi was unable to dissuade them. When Gandhi tried recruiting in Kheda, the outcome was an unmixed failure. Thus, contrary to Dhanagre's generalisation, Kheda furnishes a good example of a rich and middle peasant movement which was both violent and from below!

The second major theme in Hardiman's work relates to the pattern of mobilisation, and this he has handled superbly. In his doctoral work Hardiman had bent backwards to interpret his evidence in such a way so as to validate the Wolf-Alavi thesis on middle peasant leadership in rural agitation. He has now abandoned this, since his evidence shows that the Congress base comprised *patidars* which included both rich and middle peasants. At this point Hardiman makes a rather curious observation about the sequence of rural agitation. The initial thrust of the movement came from the richer *patidar* villages (for instance Limbasi and Navagam in 1917), it then spread to the middling *patidar* villages (Hardiman's evidence is inadequate to sustain this interesting speculation) and finally to the low caste and poor *baraiyas*. The 1971 movement in Kheda petered out in the wake of a wave of social banditry in which the *baraiyas* raided the villages of their exploiters, forcing the nationalistic *patidars* to turn to the government for protection.

Hardiman's findings are entirely consistent with the now widely held view that the Congress rural base was derived, neither from the upper caste landed aristocracy, nor from the lower caste poor and landless peasantry, but from a middle caste rich and middle peasantry. The success of such movements depended on the passivity or active support of the low caste, poor and landless peasants. The inability of the *patidars* to control the *baraiyas* constituted the chief weakness of the Congress movement in Kheda right up to 1930. Such a pattern of mobilisation explains much of the logic of post-independence reforms and agrarian politics, for Congress victory meant victory of this intermediate stratum. As Hardiman points out, the organisational strength of this section tended to be greatest where there was a rough correlation between class and the reassertion of communal solidarity, as among the Jats of western U.P., the Kurmis of Awadh and the Bhumihars of Bihar.

David Hardiman has produced an interesting and well researched book. What is particularly striking is an anthropological orientation, evident in his treatment of hypergamy and *gols*, which is unfortunately lacking among historians of Indian agrarian society. It is undoubtedly a valuable addition to the growing number of studies on nationalism in India which take a locality as their point of reference.

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GRADUALIST REFORM

T.K. Moulik

Authority, Priority and Human Development by Jyotindra Das Gupta

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THERE is a common adage in American academic parlance, 'publish or perish'. The theory justifying this saying is that the compulsion for publishing makes it probable that only some publications will be worthwhile in terms of new ideas and innovations. It is perhaps too tall a claim to say that gradualist reform as a strategy for human development is anything new or innovative. It is an oft-beaten track among academics, administrators and politicians, particularly after the Second Great War. Neither is it novel to undertake political analysis of development processes at different epochs in human history. In fact, the politico-economic debate on the development process between Marxist and non-Marxist theorists is well known. The debate has simply intensified in the last few decades, with the advent of the 'cold war' and 'spheres of control' between the superpowers on the one hand, and a widening gap between the developed North and under-