The Peasantry and Nationalism in Late Colonial India

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Peasant Nationalism

The concept 'peasant nationalism' was employed by Chalmers Johnson in his book, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power*,[1] in which he questioned the socialist character of the Chinese revolution. The Chinese and Yugoslov Communist movements, according to him, could best be understood as a form of nationalism. The Chinese Communists were swept into power on a wave of mass nationalism following the Japanese invasion in 1937. Their success during the war period was in marked contrast to their experiences in the decade preceding it. The Communists toned down their social radicalism and concentrated on the anti-Japanese movement, and this accounted for their popularity.

According to Chalmers Johnson, an elite nationalist movement, by which he implies a 'movement' limited to the intelligentsia, may never possess a mass following (he cites the case of nineteenth century nationalism among central European intellectuals and the early phases of nationalism in the colonies); that, later, a mass nationalist mobilisation may unseat an existing nationalist elite and install its own leadership; or that elite nationalists may guide and control the subsequent development of mass nationalism. In Chalmers Johnson's view, China provides the classic example of how a mass nationalist movement, led by a counter-elite—the Chinese Communist Party—unseated a previously-installed nationalist elite. According to this model, the Indian case provides a good example of how elite nationalism guided and controlled the development of mass nationalism.

Chalmers Johnson's 'elite model' methodology, however, hampers his perception of the social content of nationalism, just as the Marxian obsession with class conflict often blinds one to the process by which party elites crystallise. The preoccupation with the displacement of one elite by another—through war in this case; a great deal of space in the book is devoted to a description of the war through which the Chinese Communist Party elite displaced the old elite—makes him oblivious to the distinctive social models which different elites might represent. For him, nationalism is a purely political phenomenon devoid of social content. But the Chinese Communist Party was not simply just another elite; there was a manifest difference between the nationalism of the Kuomintang and that of the

[1] Chalmers Johnson, *Peasant Nationalism and Communist Power*, London, 1972.

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Chinese Communist Party, for the latter, in addition to opposing imperialism, represented dissimilar class interests—i.e., those of poor and middle peasants.[2] The significance of the social content of nationalism is apparent as soon as we ask why different patterns of national revolution occurred in the colonial countries. Why was it that a nationalist elite was able to guide and control the development of mass nationalism in India, but could not do so in China?

The Kuomintang could not integrate mass nationalism because of its link with the old feudal order in China. The Congress in the United Provinces, on the other hand, could do so, not because it was revolutionary like the Chinese Communist Party, but because it could accommodate 'radicalism' (anti-taluqdari propaganda; 'no-rent', or advice by local militants to pay less than what Gandhi had asked the raiyats to, etc.) within its nationalist mantle. It could do this because, among other reasons, it was not organically tied to the taluqdars in the way the Kuomintang was to the warlords—even though the more conservative Congressmen did not want to alienate the taluqdars. In both China and India, the anti-imperialist movement, as it filtered downwards, came to be linked with the anti-feudal one; and where the Congress, like the Kuomintang, tried to delink the two, it very nearly lost its social base. The case of the Kisan Sabha movement in south Bihar illustrates this point nicely; the extremely conservative agrarian policy and practice of the Bihar Congress very nearly led to a rupture between the Congress and the peasant movement.

In Bardoli, U.P. and south Bihar, the peasants do not seem to have turned to nationalism simply on account of any abstract notion of belonging to a 'nation'; it would also be misleading to see their response in terms of a revolt against a dependent economy. Primarily, they reacted against the most visible effects and conditions of the socio-economic system in which they were placed. In both Bardoli—where the patidars confronted the colonial state directly, unmediated by an intermediary class—and in the United Provinces—where the government followed a blatantly pro-taluqdar position in keeping with its Oudh policy—nationalism struck deep roots in the countryside. In south Bihar, on the other hand, where the raiyats confronted an intermediary class, and where the Congress was unwilling to carry on the class war (indeed, it tried to suppress it and paper over contradictions between zamindars and raiyats) it was the Kisan Sabha and not the Congress which became more influential among the peasantry. Erich Jacoby's findings in Southeast Asia led him to conclude that what made many millions, in the villages of that part of the world, rally to the nationalist cause was the identification of the nationalist cause with the claim for land.[3]

[2] Mark Seldon, *The Yenan Way in Revolutionary China*, Cambridge, 1971; Carl E. Doris, 'Peasant Mobilization in North China and the Origins of Yenan Communism,' *China Quarterly*, No. 68, 1976, pp. 697–719; Lucien Bianco, *Origins of the Chinese Revolution, 1915–1949*, Stanford & London, 1971.

[3] Erich H. Jacoby, *Agrarian Unrest in Southeast Asia*, Bombay/London, 1961.

It was vague expectations of this sort which attracted the peasantry to the nationalist credo (except in the select Gandhian strongholds like Bardoli, Kheda and Champaran). This constituted, in the essence, what we have termed peasant nationalism.

It was the social radicalism of the Chinese Communist Party itself, and the ability of the U.P. Congress to tolerate such radicalism (perhaps on account of a strong 'left' within the U.P. Congress), which largely explains the success of these parties in their attempts at peasant mobilisation. To put it differently, the peasantry was attracted to nationalism because it saw in it a panacea for its own problems. It often interpreted nationalism in its own terms. For many peasants in the U.P. during the Civil Disobedience movement, 'no-rent' and nationalism came to mean much the same thing. When Mr. Brailsford toured some villages in the U.P. where the name of Gandhi had spread like wildfire, he asked the villagers if they thought that Swaraj would improve their lot, 'Yes,' they shot back promptly, 'it will mean that we shall have to pay next to no rent.'[4] Gandhi would have shuddered at such a conception of Swaraj. Where the nationalist leadership was reluctant to face these social and economic problems—in China and in Bihar—the peasantry was drawn towards an alternative leadership.[5]

Class and Peasant Society: The Problem of Definition

At this stage, it is necessary to make a few clarifications regarding the concept 'peasantry'. It has been defined in numerous ways,[6] but we shall use it in the sense that Chayanov did,[7] with some important modifications. Chayanov saw the peasantry as a specific type of social and economic organisation, the rationality of which he traced to the consumption needs (not subsistence needs—the consumption level not being a biological but a historical and cultural category) of the family farm. Chayanov did not take what Eric Wolf calls the 'rent fund' into account while analysing the dynamic of peasant production. But we can neither afford to ignore this factor nor consider it as constant, since the quality of the rental is a function of power relations, which can vary considerably over time. In our scheme, therefore, the logic of production on the peasant family farm is determined by its replacement costs (which includes Wolf's 'ceremonial' category) and the rent fund. Chayanov went on to show how categories like 'rich', 'middle' and 'poor' in peasant society are transient categories, being related to the family cycle.

[4] *Leader*, 10 December 1930.

[5] Chapter IV of the author's unpublished M.Phil dissertation, 'The Congress and the Raiyat: A Study of Three Agrarian Movements, 1928-40,' Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 1980.

[6] See T. Shanin ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Penguin, 1971; Eric Wolf, *Peasants*, New Jersey, 1966.

[7] A.V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy*, ed. by D. Thorner, B. Kerblay and R.E.F. Smith, Illinois, 1966.

While the opposition Chayanov draws between the peasant family farm and the capitalist enterprise producing for profit is largely acceptable, we must diverge from Chayanov's conception in two important respects:

1. We can dispense with the process of cyclical and multi-directional mobility—for which it is always very difficult to find adequate proof— although some may consider it central to Chayanov's formulations. Peasant society, therefore, is one in which the logic of production is derived from the consumption needs of family farms. Some peasant households may, indeed, be slightly more affluent than others—i.e., the consumption pattern may be unequal—but there are structural constraints on the consolidation of a rich peasant class in pre-capitalist societies: the (unintegrated) nature of the market which makes for local cycles of glut and scarcity; the presence of a strong landlord class; the internalisation of a specific rationality. Though this is nowhere made explicit, one feels that such a conception of peasant society is implicit in Kula's work.[8]

2. With the integration of these societies into the expanding capitalist market, a process of permanent differentiation begins. The peasantry begins to get sharply differentiated into:

(a) rich peasants, or the emerging rural bourgeoisie. This may indeed be a very long-drawn-out process, as rationality does not change within a short, specified period of time. As this independent stratum gets drawn further and further into the vortex of the rapidly extending market, the spheres in which more economically rational choices can be made are also enhanced. The extension of the market thus has a feedback logic of its own, modifying and transforming peasant rationality.

(b) Middle peasants, or the consumption-oriented Chayanovian peasants, striving to survive in the new context.

(c) The poor peasants, or the disintegrating middle peasants, in the process of being depressed into the ranks of the emerging rural proletariat.

At a certain point of differentiation, 'the peasantry', as a concept, ceases to exist because conflicts within this section outweigh what all peasants have in common against outsiders. The peasant community, or what is left of it, will now, in fact, represent the interests of a group of kulaks within it rather than of all its members. Thus, peasant politics are transformed into rich farmer politics. But, prior to this process of sharp differentiation, peasants have been known to act politically with little trace of internal differentiation, as in Russia in the 1920s and Peru in the 1960s.[9]

[8] Witold Kula, *An Economic Theory of the Feudal System: Towards a Model of the Polish Economy, 1500–1800*, London, 1976.

[9] E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Peasants and Politics,' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, No. 1, 1973; T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society—Russia 1910–1925*, Oxford, 1972; R. Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*, London, 1977.

Within this broad frame of reference there can be, and have been, considerable historical variations—particularly in the structure of traditional societies, the manner in which capitalism has intruded and developed in the countryside, and the forms in which social consciousness have been articulated. Thus, under certain conditions, there might be a conscious effort by rural capitalists to retain peasant forms of enterprise and thereby exploit the ability of peasants to curtail consumption.[10] A number of sociologists have pointed to the multiplicity of roles obfuscating clear-cut class consciousness. We may extend this argument and assert that, time and agin, countervailing tendencies have emerged which have tended to reverse the process of rural class formation. In backward countries, demographic explosion coupled with job insecurity and absolute impoverishment may lead even a fairly organised and cohesive rural proletariat to desire land and the life of a middle peasant.[11] Apart from all this, there is, of course, the notorious capacity of the middle peasant, observed by Kautsky long ago, to survive the capitalist onslaught under certain circumstances.

In the specific case of India, there appear to have been at least two fairly distinct tiers below the non-cultivating high-caste Rajput and Brahmin landlord. This three-tier classification is not new. Daniel Thorner had resolved the Indian agrarian structure 'into three principal groups'—malik, kisan and mazdur.[12] In addition to landlord and peasant, we have the upper-middle 'cultivator caste' raiyat from castes like the Ahirs and Kurmis in north India and the Vellalas, Kallas and Padayachis in south India. But this category might also include sections of the impoverished expropriatory and coparcenary Rajput and Brahmin communities. The lower untouchable marginal peasants and agricultural labourers would include the Kamiyas and Halis of north India and the Paraiyas of south India. There is now ample evidence to show that there was a substantial group of 'bonded labourers' in pre-British Indian society,[13] whose access to land was institutionally restricted.[14] To speak of any form of traditional peasant solidarity and culture which derives from similarity in existential conditions is, therefore, problematic.

But the Chayanovian ideas on peasant society may still be meaningfully

[10] Eric Wolf, *Peasants, op. cit.*, p. 16; Martinez Alier, 'Peasants and Labourers in Southern Spain, Cuba and Highland Peru,' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. I, 1973–74; Benoy Bhushan Chaudhury's numerous articles on the process of commercialisation of agriculture in Bengal appear to point to a similar pattern in India.

[11] Martinez Alier, *Labourers and Landowners in Southern Spain*, London, 1971.

[12] Daniel Thorner, *The Agrarian Prospect in India*, New Delhi, 1956. p. 9 (1976 edition).

[13] Dharma Kumar, *Land and Caste in South India: Agricultural Labour in Madras Presidency during the 19th Century*, Cambridge, 1965. The main evidence, however, is scattered in the numerous early Settlement Reports prepared by British officials in India.

[14] There are indications that this three-tiered picture of agrarian society was part of the rural people's perception of themselves. For instance, in Gaya, there were 'traditionally' three classes of people: the Sukhvas (wealthy landlords), Khusvas (well-to-do cultivators) and Chasi (labourers). *District Gazetteer, Gaya*, 1957, p. 111.

applied to Indian society. The middle tier—tier II—certainly seems to approximate the traditional peasantry. Its position in society was of course substantially different from that of its European counterpart in that, while it was an exploited class, it was, at the same time, itself an exploiting class in its relationship with tier III. But this apart, it appears to have possessed many of the characteristics attributed to the Chayanovian peasant.

Class and Peasant Society: The Problem of Participation

The basic thrust of peasant nationalism in China came from the middle and poor peasantry and, as such, it represented, primarily, their demands. It would seem that the concept is of limited applicability to India since, as Dhanagre, Siddiqi, Pandey, Stokes and others have reminded us, the Congress in rural areas was a rich peasant party. Even so, this is different from saying, as Eric Stokes[15] explicitly does, that the peasant movements in U.P., Gujarat and Bihar were rich peasant ones. A failure to make this crucial distinction would be tantamount to equating a movement with a party. Dhanagre, Siddiqi and Pandey have all drawn attention to what Pandey calls an 'alternative stream' in nationalist politics—the groundswell coming up from below—often instigated by, but also often independent of and almost always consciously restrained by, the Congress party.

The crux of the matter is, that on account of the unevenness of social and economic development in different parts of India, it is difficult to generalise about peasant movements which were integrated at different stages into the national movement. The situation in Bardoli was quite different from that in the U.P. In fact, even the situation in Agra, located in the western U.P., differed in crucial respects from that in Rae Bareli. The British Indian government frequently indicated its awareness of these crucial differences. It was certainly alarmed by what was happening in Bardoli, but it was also sceptical of the Congress' ability to 'Bardolise' the U.P., where the Congress was not only engaged in a battle with the Government but was also trying to keep its own cadre in check.[16]

Bardoli, Kheda and Champaran were Gandhian pocket boroughs, so to speak. Here, the crystallisation of a composite and cohesive group of rich peasants had, apparently, reached a relatively advanced stage. In Bardoli, the cotton-growing patidars were the mainstay of the movement. A corollary of this stage of class formation was the decline of the paternalistic relationship between tiers II and III. Tier III—agricultural labourers or halis as they were called—was also integrated into the movement, but it was a distinct social

[15] Eric Stokes, 'The Return of the Peasant to South Asian History,' *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, pp. 265–89, Cambridge, 1978.

[16] Chapters two and three of the author's unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, 'The Congress and the Raiyat,' *op. cit.*

group which initially kept aloof and was drawn in through a conscious effort on the part of the Congress, in the face of patidar opposition. According to Dhanagre, this was one of the lessons the Congress learnt from the Kheda satyagraha.[17]

The patidars had internalised the Gandhian or official perspective of nationalism, complete with khadi, spinning wheels, Gandhi caps and non-violence. But this does not appear to have been the case in the U.P. or in south Bihar, where the social texture was different. It is true, of course, that a substantial peasantry was crystallising here too. The second half of the nineteenth century was what Stokes has called 'the heyday of the rich peasant'.[18] A section of the peasantry took advantage of the construction of roads, railways and other communication links (which facilitated accurate price quotation), of price equalisation and inflation, commercialisation, the expansion in the demand for certain commodities, the Pax Britannica, etc., and managed to retain a good proportion of the surplus. The U.P. and Bihar districts we have taken up for study were all subject to this process, but here, it was at a relatively primitive stage compared to Bardoli. Regional specialisation was less developed in the U.P. and Bihar, for neither of these regions had such a highly commercialised crop as cotton. Moreover, there was one important non-economic countervailing force obstructing the accumulation of surplus among a section of the cultivating community: the very presence of a strong class of landed proprietors, which tended to become more oppressive as it entered a phase of crisis and as the traditional value system—the paternalistic ties binding tiers I and II—tended to break down. The effect of this factor was strongest in the Oudh districts of Rae Bareli and Barabanki.

If Stokes and Charlesworth[19] are to be believed there were countervailing tendencies even on the economic plane. They argue that, from the beginning of the twentieth century, the emerging rich peasantry entered a phase of crisis resulting in a levelling process. Neil Charlesworth has pointed out the less reliable rainfall, increasing labour costs and, above all, the Great Depression which lay behind this levelling process. The monetary transactions of the rich peasants being greater, they would actually be hit by depression in prices (their rent fund and their debt were higher, they used more hired labour and, of course, their consumption pattern must have been more diversified). We need more evidence of this 'levelling', but if it were at work it would further explain why the peasantry tended to act together in these movements. This issue, however, is problematic, for there is the diametrically opposite view that the depression, in fact, exacerbated the process of differentiation on account of its unequal effect on different strata.

[17] D.N. Dhanagre, *Agrarian Movements and Gandhian Politics*, Agra University, 1975.

[18] E. Stokes, 'The return of the Peasant to South Asian History,' *The Peasant and the Raj*, pp. 265–89, *op. cit.*

[19] Neil Charlesworth, 'The Russian Stratification Debate and India,' in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 1979.

After all, as E.P. Thompson[39] has reminded us, classes are not merely the product of objective economic determinants, but are also the product of the human relations of subordination and domination which people similarly placed in a social and economic context experience over time. These relationships develop through a process of struggle—struggle over surplus, struggle to retain the customary way of living, struggle for new rights and struggle for hegemony. This is important. A class does not first come into existence, then identify the exploiting class and subsequently come into conflict with it. Rather, it comes into being through a process of struggle, developing, in this process, forms of organisation and modes of self-perception as a class, distinct from, and opposed to, other classes. Since this is a long and continual process, what is crucial is not whether a class exists or not, but levels or degrees of class formation. Such a conception of class will explain not only the economics of the class, but its politics as well.

In our period, the struggle between landlord and peasant over rental and other dues was the chief determinant of rural experience and social consciousness, in at least two of the three areas on which we have focused, and the political struggles of the period bear this out. The conflict inherent in the landlord-peasant relationship was escalated in the twentieth century, as the landed proprietors entered a phase of crisis, due chiefly to the secular tendency for prices to rise, accrual of occupancy rights, fragmentation of estates, mismanagement and, perhaps, new tastes. This, in turn, increased the burden on the cultivating community. The weight of this burden may have been unequal, for there was, everywhere, a section of the peasantry which was in a stronger position to defend its rights and take advantage of the extension of the market and the rise in prices. It was, above all, the perception of this burden which was undergoing an important transformation, as old forms of authority declined and the system became, to use Andre Beteille's term, more and more disharmonic. The rapid growth of nationalism in rural areas was, as we shall see, an important element of this transformation.

The abolition of zamindari and of the colonial State radically transformed these determinants, thereby altering the whole context of rural experience and social consciousness. It is possible that one of the consequences of this was a sharper process of class formation within the peasantry; on the other hand, it is also possible that as the middling peasants got more and more entangled in the web of commercialised farming, the conflict between the low caste labourers and a fairly composite rural cultivators' lobby became the most important rural issue of our time.

But this was still in the future. For our period, it will not suffice to take a purely conjunctural view of the agrarian movements and describe the participation of most sections of tier II in the anti-imperialist and

[39] E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth Century English Society, Class Without Class Struggle?' *Social History*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 1978; *The Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1963, preface.

anti-landlord movements as part of the formation of a 'class bloc' of rich middle and poor peasatns. This would, to my mind, be ahistorical, for the supposition would be that these classes had crystallised and then formed a bloc. This is quite different from saying that 'the peasantry', as a social and political force, was still quite strong. Such a conclusion by no means denies the existence of stratification, the seeds of conflict and the process of class formation within the cultivating class; it merely places these developments in a historical continuum. Again and again, we come across 'the peasantry' acting together with little trace of internal class division, with both the 'rich' and 'poor' peasants becoming shadowy, hidebound creatures, as in Russia in the 1920s, when the predicted Kulak counter-revolution failed to materialise, and in Peru, in the 1960s, in spite of manifest major economic differences within the cultivating group. An economistic conception of class will not provide the explanation for this phenomenon.

The fact that tier II tended to participate in these movements with little trace of internal class differentiation, even in the Gandhian pocket boroughs, emerges from all the books on peasant movements which implicitly treat the peasantry as a group.[21] Even the nationalists and the communists[22] of the time tended to treat the peasantry as a relatively undifferentiated group. The sources looked at by the author lead to similar inferences based on the following observations:

1. There is little trace of indentifiable sections of the peasantry being more active than others except in a purely geographical sense; but, even geographically, the backward tracts do not seem to have lagged behind the more developed ones. Since the chief source is Home Department files, including some police reports, one would expect that the government would play up disunity within the movement, as it tended to do in respect of the Congress movement as a whole. There are, of course, references to the social boycott of those who paid rent, worked on the fields of taluqdars or had anything to do with the government machinery. It is possible, however, that this weapon was used against agricultural labourers and marginal peasants (tier III) who, as we have noted, were generally marginalised within the national movement. Sumit Sarkar's study of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal tends to corroborate such a conclusion.[23] But we have been unable to gather adequate evidence on this issue.

[21] G. Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926–1934—A study in Imperfect Mobilisation*, Delhi, 1978; M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India: United Provinces 1918–22*, New Delhi, 1978; S. Gopal, *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Biography*, Vol. 1, Chapters IV and XI, London, 1976.

[22] N. Bhattacharya, 'The CPI and the Peasantry 1935–40,' M.A. seminar paper (unpublished), Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

[23] S. Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1907*, pp. 316–35, New Delhi, 1973.

2. Several references to entire villages being deserted on account of zamindar and government offensive during the Depression years.[24]

3. While it is undoubtedly true that some demands typical of the rich peasantry—raising the price of sugar, moratorium on debt, etc.—were also included, the grassroots level appeals made by activists were such that they would appeal to all sections of the raiyats vis-a-vis the landlords; rent reduction, culminating in no rent and zamindari abolition, and occupation of the landlord's bakasht land being the chief of these appeals. Moreover, moratorium on debts would appeal to the poorer sections as well, since they were indebted—in Bihar, indebted to the richer agriculturalists. High prices, too, except for the typically rich peasant crops like sugarcane (Sahajanad Saraswati took up the issue of cane prices)—but sugarcane could also be grown by poor peasants in a context of dependent agriculture—would appeal to all rural sections, since all peasants had to sell a part of their produce in order to clear their monetary obligations, notably rent.

Dhanagre, Hardiman and Charlesworth are among the historians who have ventured to generalise about the differential participation of rich, middle and poor peasants. It is worthwhile to confront their arguments with the evidence in some detail. Dhanagre[25] makes a distinction between Gandhian movements (Champaran, Kheda and Bardoli) and peasant struggles in the United Provinces. While the latter were conducted in areas where the tenant-landlord conflict complicated the anti-imperialist struggle, the former were carefully chosen arenas where the question of internal class conflict could be burked and a fairly prosperous peasant group provided a safe social base. These were mainly raiyatwari areas, except for Champaran which, according to Dhanagre, was more of a political legend than an agrarian movement. In the non-Gandhian prototype areas there were, in the main, two types of movements: poor peasant (for instance, the U.P., 1920–22) and rich and upper-middle peasant (like the agrarian movement in Oudh in 1930–32). In such areas, as in the Gandhian strongholds, the Congress drew its strength chiefly from the latter: thus, while the 1920–22 movement emerged independently of the Congress, the 1930–32 movement could not be distinguished from the Civil Disobedience campaign.[26]

These are interesting conclusions and one cannot quarrel with the first of these: that the typically Gandhian peasant movements were organised in areas where there was a rich peasant class and where internal class relations were relatively harmonious. It was with an eye to this that Gandhi changed the venue of his intended satyagraha in 1922 from Kheda to Bardoli.[27]

[24] Home Department Pol., Files No. 33/XI/31, 33/24/31 and 63/1931; *A.I.C.C. Papers*, File No. G.140/1931 (National Archives, New Delhi and Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, Delhi); *Agrarian Distress in the United Provinces, Being the report of the United Provinces Congress Sub-Committee, 1931*, p. 88.

[25] D.N. Dhanagre, *Agrarian Movements and Gandhian Politics, op. cit.*

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, V. 22, p. 340, p. 395; D. Hardiman, 'Peasant Agitations in Kheda District, Gujarat 1918–34,' unpublished thesis, Sussex, 1975, (in NMML).

A comparison between the works of Shirin Mehta[28] (on Bardoli) and Hardiman (on Kheda), on the one hand, and the works of Pandey (on the U.P.) and Hauser[29] (on Bihar), on the other, clearly indicates that while the Congress was perfectly at ease in the former areas, it was not quite sure of itself in the U.P. and Bihar and, at times, tended to lose the initiative in these cases. It is now a widely held view that the Congress rural base was derived neither from the upper caste landed aristocracy (tier I of rural society) nor from the lower caste poor and landless peasantry, but from a middle caste rich and middle peasantry; and that Congress victory meant the victory of this intermediate stratum which was the chief beneficiary of the post-independence land reforms like the Jats of western U.P., the Kurmis of Oudh and the Bhumihars of Bihar.

It is when we move on the Dhanagre's second and, from our point of view, more important set of generalisations that the problem arises. It is true that, during the 1920–22 movement, the Oudh peasant initially turned not to the Congress but to the colonial State for succour,[30] and that, in 1930–32, the movement was a Congress affair from the very beginning. But this had probably less to do with the thrust of the two movements coming from different social strata, than with the changing perspective of the U.P. peasantry, a perspective which was certainly cultivated consciously by the Congress. The raiyat perspective had changed from peasant monarchism to peasant nationalism.

Let us follow Dhanagre's analysis of the rural class structure more carefully. He constructs a logical framework as to who the rich, middle and poor peasants are, but even this logical framework is unconvincing because his criteria are income and area of land held—these are also Hardiman's criteria though he also gives equal importance to status, e.g., 'lesser' and 'superior' patidars—and not differences in production relations. This apart, his framework is logical rather than historical; without the experiential dimensions of class formation, which we must place alongside its economic determination to which we have referred above, we shall never be able to explain the politics of any class.

Not only is Dhanagre's conception of class ahistorical (= class as structure), but his whole argument appears to rest on the assumption that the 1930–32 movement was a rich and upper-middle peasant affair because only these peasants are affected by a depression in prices. The richer raiyats were adversely affected by the depression, as Stokes and Charlesworth have argued, but from this it does not follow that the poorer raiyats were less affected, particularly in a context in which all agricultural groups were tied

[28] Shirin Mehta, 'The Bardoli Satyagraha 1928,' unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of International Studies, JNU.

[29] W.Hauser, 'The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, 1929–42,' unpublished thesis, Chicago, 1961 (microfilm, NMML).

[30] G. Gopal, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV.

to the market through rental and debt obligations. A fluctuation of prices on this scale must have severely affected all sections of rural society.

I have taken up Dhanagre's argument in some detail because he has, at least, posed the problem of internal stratification within the peasantry and the political participation of different strata, even though his work is, both analytically and empirically, a little weak. I quite realise the difficulty of establishing explicit mediations, while demonstrating the participation of different strata in peasant movements in this period, on account of the nature of our sources—though, even here, to the limited extent that Dhanagre has attempted to do so, his evidence appears to contradict his conclusion.[31] But I feel that even his inferences are unacceptable.

The consequences of the insurmountable problems flowing from the categories used in the sources are also evident in David Hardiman's work on Kheda district.[32] However, Hardiman makes a number of astonishing logical leaps in his doctoral thesis to validate the Wolf-Alavi theory[33] that, with the spread of capitalism in the countryside and the polarisation between rich peasants (whom he equates with capitalist farmers here, but not in the main body of his work) and the rest of the peasants, the initial thrust of the peasant movement comes from the middle peasantry.

Hardiman begins by rejecting Weber in favour of a Marxian class approach.[34] In almost the same breath, he prefers the superior-lesser patidar distinction to class distinction in the interest of precision, for detailed statistics on landholdings are not available. As a matter of fact, his description of the patidars comes very close to the Weberian ideal type of a status group. The records tend to concentrate on cultural divisions, and so he prefers cultural distinctions to imprecise class distinctions.[35] Hardiman promises to sort out this apparent logical inconsistency later but never succeeds in doing so.

In his area, there are seven superior and one hundred and fifty lesser patidar villages. The patidars became large-scale commercial farmers, growing highly commercialised crops like cotton and wheat, thereby exploiting to the full the new opportunities under British rule.[36] The lesser patidars, in particular, grasped the implications of such a cash economy remarkably quickly and became superior agriculturists.[37] In the 1920s and 1930s, many lesser patidars left for East Africa and the money which flowed

[31] The figures he cites for those arrested during the 1930–32 movement show that poor, rather than middle and rich, peasants preponderated. Dhanagre, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

[32] D. Hardiman, 'Peasant Agitations in Kheda District 1918–34,' *op. cit.*

[33] Eric Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1971; Hamza Alavi, 'Peasants and Revolution,' in Gough and Sharma eds., *Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia*, New York, 1973.

[34] David Hardiman, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[37] *Ibid.*, pp. 159–61.

back financed the construction of tube-wells, processing plants for agricultural produce and general land improvement.[38] The superior patidars acquired modern education and joined the services, to a greater extent than the lesser patidars.[39] The few statistics he produces show that superior patidars had a greater tendency to be non-cultivating landowners as well.[40]

It is apparent from these generalisations that, if one is to look for an emerging rich peasantry, one must turn to the lesser patidars. At one point, Hardiman explicitly states that they exploited the baraiyas (agricultural labourers) in a capitalist manner.[41] Yet, he concludes that the majority of the patidars in superior patidar villages were landlords and rich peasants, while the large majority of patidars in lesser patidar villages were middle peasants. In a word, the superior patidars were rich peasants and landlords, and the lesser patidars were middle peasants. Although the latter were not a class of middle peasants as such, Hardiman asserts that they tended to act in the class interests of the middle peasantry.[42] Hardiman has substantially altered some of his formulations in his book, but the lesser patidar-middle peasant equation has apparently remained unchanged.[43]

The tenor of the argument is rather puzzling. Hardiman's statistical exercises do little to clarify the confused picture. He cites the following figures for Petlad taluka:

Category	*Land Held*	*Percentage of Landowners*
Rich peasants	Over 25 bighas	6
Middle peasants	5–25 bighas	50
Poor peasants	Less than 5 bighas	44

Apart from the question of the empirical validity of this exercise (since 23 per cent of the landowners rented out part of their land, the size and distribution of this part could substantially alter his figures, if they were expressed in operational holdings), it is evident that Hardiman makes the same error as Dhanagre in his definitions of rich, middle and poor peasants. (The logic of this confusion leads him to equate landlords with rich peasants.) In point of fact, his own evidence suggests that lesser patidar society was one in which a rich peasantry was crystallising. Hardiman has asserted that, but nowhere shown how, the lesser patidars represented the interests of a middle peasantry, i.e , they were opposing the onslaught of agrarian capitalism; if anything, his own evidence points in the diametrically opposite direction.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 302.
[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 59–61.
[40] *Ibid.*, pp. 317–18.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 318.
[43] D. Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat, Kheda District 1917–34*, Delhi, 1981.

In making an interesting distinction between 'the middle peasants of subsistence' and 'the middle peasants of commercialisation', Neil Charlesworth[44] appears to be alive to the historical dimension of rural class formation. He suggests that the theorists of the middle peasant thesis really mean the middle peasant of commercialisation (those peasants who have been integrated into the growing web of commercial relationships), when they point to the middle peasant lead in agrarian agitation in twentieth century India. The middle peasant of subsistence increasingly becomes a marginal force on account of the onslaught of commercialisation and agrarian capitalism. In the Kheda, Champaran and Bardoli movements, it was the middle peasants of commercialisation who were in the van.

The middle peasants of subsistence may be expected to take the lead in the early stages of commercialisation, which, in the case of India, meant the second half of the nineteenth century. Charlesworth explains the relative absence of middle peasant-led revolts (a dubious generalisation) in terms of the cushioning effect of the favourable economic climate—rising prices, sluggish population growth and rise in per capita production—which resulted in upward mobility. When the subsistence middle peasantry survived and came under threat, as in the 1920s and 1930s in the backwater regions of U.P. and Bihar, such peasant disturbances did break out.

What Charlesworth has, in fact, done is to define the term 'middle peasant' in such a way that it comprises the relatively less prosperous section of what we have termed rich peasants. His argument stated in our framework would run thus: in Bardoli, the less prosperous section of the emerging rich peasants provided the thrust of the 1928 satyagraha. This may well have been the case, but Charlesworth's own evidence is insufficient to sustain this generalisation. He seems to include even the kaliparaj, who held small plots of land on rent, among the middle peasantry of commercialisation. But the latter was part of an altogether other tier of rural society.

The Congress and Peasant Nationalism

To date most of the work on Indian nationalism, with a few notable exceptions, has tended to view the movements from above, through the spectacles of the nationalist intelligentsia. Thus the questions they have mostly asked are something like these:

1. What led the former collaborators of the Raj to combine to oppose it?[45]

[44] Neil Charlesworth, 'The Middle Peasant Thesis and the Roots of Rural Agitation in India, 1914–1947,' *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. VII, No. 3, April 1980, pp. 259–80.

[45] This is the point of reference of a set of historians whose genre of historiography has come to be characterised as 'the Cambridge School' of modern Indian history. A. Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1968; C.A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics—Allahabad 1880–1920*, Oxford, 1975.

Or, what led former admirers of British rule to become increasingly disillusioned with it?[46]

2. What was the nature of the alliance—'the blocs'—forged during the national movement? These blocs are seen at the party or intelligentsia level and not at the grassroots, at the actual class, level.

3. How did the nationalists effect mass mobilisation in the cause of nationalism? S. Gopal, for instance, shows how Nehru's better understanding of the peasant problem, towards the end of the 1920s, integrated the peasant movement in the U.P. into the national movement. During the peasant movement of the early 1920s in the same region, the Congress focused on non-economic issues and could not harness peasant discontent, for nationalist ends, in a long term manner. In fact, the Congress' attitude implied 'informal collaboration' with the government: Nehru tried to keep the peasants in control, preached landlord-tenant unity and accepted the arrest of radical peasant leaders. In 1930–32, however, Nehru had a better understanding of the peasant problem and insisted on bringing in economic issues. Swaraj no longer meant merely charkha and khadi.

These questions are certainly meaningful; but it is time to ask other equally significant ones, if we are to study the logic of post-colonial development against the backdrop of the nationalist experience, if we are to go beyond a history of the national movement from the perspective of the intelligentsia that led it, to the histories of the different social classes that participated—or did not participate—in it. How did different sections of Indian society perceive colonial rule? What led them to join the national movement? To what extent were their expectations realised, and how did this affect political affiliation, and the nature of conflict and control, in the post-colonial period? Were there substantial differences between Congress nationalism and the grassroots vision of 'New India'? Or was the hegemony of Gandhian nationalism as complete as it appeared to be in Kheda and Bardoli? In our frame of reference, the significant question is not whether the raiyats supported the Congress but why they did so: was it on account of their adherence to some abstract conception of Indian nationhood, or was it in the hope that their choice would have a crucial bearing on their own social situation? And so we are back to the problem posed in Section I: the problem of the social content of nationalism—what nationalism implied for different sections of society.

The perspective of the nationalist intelligentsia has been studied quite extensively, and so we shall dwell on it but briefly. We need not altogether reject the concept 'collaboration' with respect to the intelligentsia, though we must certainly alter its content. The British did need collaborators to rule India, from the lowest administrative levels of the Raj, through landowners

[46] Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*, New Delhi, 1966; 'Elements of Continuity and Change in Early Nationalist Activity,' *Studies in History*, Vol. 1, No. 1.

and local notables, to the English-educated bureaucrats.[47] This is the most convincing part of Anil Seal's work. We may go further and say that even the early intellectuals, a part of the intelligentsia, 'collaborated' with the British, since many of them considered British rule providential. They may, therefore, have contributed to the dissemination of colonial ideology.

Although they certainly collaborated in the 'functional' sense, for the British would have found it very difficult to administer such a vast empire—far vaster than the mother country—with such an economy of resources without their cooperation, at the level of ideas, however, the ideology of colonialism buttressed British rule. According to Seal, this collaboration was conditional, but the only conditions he takes into account are jobs, status and council entry. The 'conditions' of the bargain, however, extended beyond such immediate gains. The intelligentsia, or at least an intellectual stratum within it (and in the course of time this section succeeded in hegemonising the rest), had a distinct social and political perspective, which the British had not reckoned for. On account of this perspective, it could never be accommodated through a collaborative mechanism at the purely loaves and fishes level, for their expectations extended beyond the acquisition of bureaucratic perches to the conviction that British rule would transform Indian society on the pattern of Britain.[48] In a sense, therefore, the intelligentsia did see in Britain the image of their own future. This functional collaboration broke down in the ultimate analysis, not because there was not enough government patronage to go around, but because, by degrees, the intelligentsia realised that it was impossible for the British to transform India on the lines they envisaged; in point of fact, the colonial rulers were actually hindering this development. The reaction of the intelligentsia to British rule is a story of gradual disillusionment on the social, cultural, political and, above all, economic planes. The Orientalists had felt a genuine need to learn from Indian culture; the Evangelists and Utilitarians turned this creed on its head and, insisting that it was India that must learn from Europe, they took up 'the white man's burden'. But as time went by, it became apparent that not only were the British toning down their talk about raising India to the level of Europe, but they were also asserting that this could not in fact be done. The Asiatics were dismissed as the 'lesser breeds without the Law', (Rudyard Kipling, 'Recessional'), as incorrigible sub-humans it was a hopeless task to try to retrieve. The British were the representatives of a belligerent and superior civilisation, and had the moral right to rule India permanently, a conviction shored up by the growing technological superiority of the West and, above all, by the growing popularity of social Darwinism. The process which led to this 'New Conservatism'[49] came as a shock to the innocence of the Indian intelligentsia.

[47] A. Seal, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–11.

[48] See K.N. Panikkar, Presidential Address, *Indian History Congress*, Aligarh, 1975; Bipan Chandra, *Rise and Growth*, *op. cit.*

[49] F. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence*, Princeton, 1967.

At the political level, too, the educated Indians soon realised the illusory nature of their hopes. The spirit of the Queen's Proclamation of 1858—that 'British subjects of whatever race or creed will be freely and impartially admitted to the offices in the service of the crown'—seemed to have a tinge of irony. They were in fact to be excluded from the higher offices of state and from positions to shape their own political destiny. The Viceroyalties of Lytton, Ripon, and Curzon were eye-openers in this regard.

But it was their disillusionment at the economic plane, described so lucidly by Bipan Chandra,[50] which really lifted the halo of beneficence and enlightened paternalism from the Raj. It now showed its true colours, as racially biased, politically authoritarian and economically exploitative. No matter what alluring employment opportunities may now be given, the intelligentsia became more and more 'seditious', a process hastened and intensified by the economic and political integration of India which spawned the concept of Indian nationhood.

During the Gandhian phase of nationalist agitation, functional collaboration at the lower, village levels also tended to break down, with the merging of 'elite nationalism' and the agrarian movements. This breakdown apparently had less to do with the disillusionment of patels, kotwals and patwaris (collaborators at the lowest administrative level of the Raj, according to Seal) with British rule, and more with the pressure exerted on them (chiefly through social boycott) by the agrarian movement. At least this is what happened in both the Gandhian pockets and in the United Provinces.

We have had occasion to make a distinction between parties and movements. This distinction is apparent in Pandey's work on the U.P.[51] in which he asserts that there were two distinct streams in Indian nationalism. According to him, the peasant movement in the U.P. cannot be explained in terms of a simple pattern of mobilisation from above. While the presence of the Congress was, without doubt, a major source of inspiration for popular revolt, there seem to have been two different processes largely independent of one another: there was, thus, a stream of popular politics which was alternative to that represented by Gandhi and the Congress. It was not bound down by legalism and constitutionalism. It often showed evidence of horizontal mobilisation cutting across lines of faction and caste. And, in the period of struggle against foreign rule, it appears to have been marked by a fight for more fundamental changes—with the masses attacking their local overlords as well as the agents of an alien Raj who together upheld an absolute and oppressive social system. This concept of two independent movements is not of course entirely new, as it can be traced to the works of the two brilliant Indian Marxist theoreticians, M.N. Roy and Rajani Palme Dutt,[52] who saw the Indian national movement in terms of a triangular tussle

[50] Bipan Chandra, *Rise and Growth*, *op. cit.*

[51] G. Pandey, *op. cit.*

[52] M.N. Roy, *India in Transition*, (first published 1922) Bombay edn., 1971; R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, Bombay, 1947

involving British imperialism, the Indian bourgeoisie and 'the masses'. The modern Subaltern school has however made considerable advance over Roy and Dutt, as it is firmly rooted in social history and social anthropology. A lucid and comprehensive historiographical exposition of this 'History from Below' school has been made by Sumit Sarkar in his fascinating S.G. Deuskar lecture (1980) on Indian history.[53]

Pandey's general conclusion that, while the presence of the Congress stimulated popular revolt, the Congress could not control the dynamic produced by its own actions, indeed was often frightened by it and sought to suppress it, is readily acceptable; but, in terms of emphasis, Pandey tends to under-stress the element of interaction between the two movements, the way they tended to sustain each other, as his own evidence strongly suggests. Pandey's emphasis is made evident by his use of terms like 'independent movements'. It was, after all, the Congress which carried the nationalist message to rural areas, and peasant radicalism in the U.P. was almost universally conducted in a nationalist idiom, even though it often tended to go beyond the Congress programme. In Bihar, massive rallies were organised in support of the Congress even at the peak of the Kisan Sabha movement.

This is apparent from the nature of the alternative bases of power sought to be set up during these movements despite official Congress opposition.[54] The nature of the counter-authority is revealing. The groundswell from below did not simply endeavour to replace the infrastructure of the Raj by traditional forms of authority, as in 1857, but by singularly modern forms, almost invariably in the name of the Congress. This is significant. As Max Harcourt[55] has observed, the 1942 'rebels' of eastern U.P. attempted to set up a kind of modern government either in the name of the Raj's local administration, or alongside it as a parallel government; in either case it was in the name of the Congress. In the U.P., during the Civil Disobedience movement, the government complained that Congress thanas, tahsildars and panchayats were being set up and that the functions of the police and the magistracy were being usurped.[56] The shift from traditional forms of paternalism to nationalism is apparent in these instances.

The setting up of such forms of counter-authority, which began as early as during the Non-Cooperation movement in the form of the Volunteer

[53] Sumit Sarkar *'Popular Movements, and 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a 'History from Below'*,' CSSS, Calcutta, 1983.

[54] B. Josh, Indu Agnihotri, *et al.*, 'The Non-Cooperation Movement, June 1921–February 1922 and its Withdrawal,' *Indian History Congress*, 1975. Even Nehru opposed the setting up of these centres of power. See Home Department Political, File No. 33/24/31 (National Archives, New Delhi).

[55] Max Harcourt, 'Kisan Populism and Revolution in Rural India: The 1942 Disturbances in Bihar and East United Provinces,' in D.A. Low ed., *Congress and the Raj: Facets of the Indian Struggle 1917–47*, London, 1977.

[56] Home Department Political, Files No. 33/XI/31; 33/24/31 (National Archives, New Delhi).

movement,[57] may not have been very widespread (though it was reported that there were seven hundred Congress panchayats in Rae Bareli alone), but they were merely the culmination of a more universal process of the crisis of authority, of which the government was acutely aware, and which it described as the spread of criminal tendencies and lawlessness[58]—i.e., a disrespect for governmental authority, on the one hand, and a tendency to look increasingly towards the Congress as counter-authority, on the other. Indeed, such was the strength of this counter-authority that some conservative newspapers reported that the Congress was attempting to set up 'Soviet Raj' in the U.P., and that Sardar Patel was experimenting with 'Bolshevism' in Bardoli.[59]

This phenomenon raises some fundamental questions regarding the nature of the state in colonial India. Colonial society was not like Tsarist Russia—to which Gramsci referred—where 'the State (= political society in this context) was everything, civil society was primordial and gelatinous,'[60] but it did, particularly in the rural backwaters, have something in common with it, in that civil society, though developing, was relatively backward, and local institutions still had state functions.

> In the ancient and medieval State centralization whether political, territorial or social (and the one is merely a function of the other), was minimal. The state was, in a certain sense, a mechanical block of social groups, often of different race; within the circle of political military compression, which was only exercised harshly at certain moments, the subaltern groups had a little life of their own, institutions of their own, etc., and sometimes these institutions had State functions which made the State a federation of social groups with disparate functions not subordinated in any way—a situation which in periods of crisis highlighted with extreme clarity the phenomenon of dual power . . . the modern State substitutes for the mechanical block of social groups their subordination to the active hegemony of the directive and dominant group, hence abolishes certain autonomies, which nevertheless are reborn in other forms, as parties, trade unions and cultural associations.[61]

It is only with the development of a modern communication network, civil society and the representative State, that the State, with its tremendous resources, both coercive and (increasingly) ideological, becomes centralised, so to speak, and acquires the meaning associated with the modern State.

[57] B. Josh, Indu Agnihotri, *et al.*, *op. cit.*

[58] Home Department Political, File No. 33/24/31 (National Archives, New Delhi).

[59] *Hamdard*, June 21 1931, quoted in Home Department Pol. File No. 33/XI/31; *The Times of India*, July 3 1928 (NMML, Delhi).

[60] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, New York, 1971.

[61] *Ibid.*, p. 54 ff.

Birkenhead, Secretary of State for India, was alive to this problem. 'We rather pride ourselves,' he wrote in 1923,

> on allowing political agitators plenty of rope to hang themselves, but I very much wonder whether among an ignorant and incredulous people it is wise . . . it may be all very well in a civilised country where the power of Government is well recognised and its resources are visible at every turn. But in a continent like India where government is remote, where troops are never seen in the greater part of the country and where the police—though feared—are feared as private enemies rather than as instruments of government—in short where the government is seldom seen and never heard—what is the plain man to think when month after month he is incited to break the law, and does break the law, and nothing happens to anyone?[62]

Thus, localised power tended to take on the functions of a State, and estate agents, talatis and patels were feared more than any abstract entity like the State. When the Congress, through organised campaigns of social boycott which enjoyed genuine popularity, put pressure on these officials to resign or isolated them, the impact on the peasants was tremendous. The general feeling in Bardoli was: what can the government do to us when the patels and talatis are on our side?[63]

Similarly, during the Civil Disobedience movement in Rae Bareli, Barabanki and Allahabad districts, social boycott was used against police witnesses, chowkidars, mukhiyas, and even sweepers. Social boycott included prevention from using common wells, refusal of credit by banias, of haircuts by barbers, etc. Pressure was also put on government officials like shahnas, sapurdars and qurq amins to prevent them from executing court decrees and sales of attached property. In Bardoli, government officials were completely dependent on the organisers of the satyagraha for supplies. 'Only perhaps those who have lived in Indian villages for a number of years,' remarked the *Times of India* correspondent,

> can have a clear idea how terribly effective such boycott can be. The third degree methods of the American Police are nothing compared with the social boycott of an individual of a family in an Indian village. No one is allowed to go to his house. Neither he nor any member of his family can go to the village temple. He cannot get his supplies locally and his life can be made miserable inside three days. If he emigrates to another village, the word will quickly be passed around and the treatment he gets at his new place will be infinitely worse.[64]

[62] Home Department Political, File No. 197/1928 (National Archives, New Delhi).
[63] *The Times of India*, July 5, 1928 (NMML).
[64] *Ibid.*

The disrespect for local governmental authority and officials—the 'state', as it were—was, apparently at least, an indication of the consolidation of the Congress. Government weakness was counterposed to Congress strength. The Congress was emerging as an embryonic state, increasingly feared by the Government. In the struggle for hegemony in the emerging civil society, it was the Congress which appeared to be winning and the colonial government to be losing. In the U.P., Congress volunteers and local militants organised peasant meetings, vigilance groups, fined zamindars and dissenters and decided disputes. In Bardoli, the government's dread of 'the white-capped volunteer' nicely illustrates the dual state situation as it were. This was one of the major problems associated with the Gandhian phase of nationalism, and the files of the British Indian government are scattered with numerous memoranda on how to nip the emerging counter-authority in the bud. We referred to Birkenhead's advice to Irwin on this topic and his advice also indicates one of the alternatives widely adopted, recourse to terror. But terror is always a two-edged weapon, possessing the germs of both escalation and control.[65]

Is the emergence of the Congress as counter-authority at the grassroots level in some areas synonymous with Congress hegemony? That the raiyats accepted Congress leadership and provided it with a mass base is clear; that they had internalised the Congress or Gandhian intellectual universe (Bardoli and the other select Gandhian pockets being the exception which go to prove the rule) is less certain. It would be foolhardy to generalise about the nature of peasant consciousness in colonial India, without a base of good anthropological studies. However, it may well be that their reason for supporting the Congress was based on their conception of what the Congress was and would be, rather than on what it, itself, claimed to be or represented. This explains why the agrarian movement in the U.P. tended to go beyond the limits imposed by the Congress leadership, on the one hand, and why this 'radicalism' was articulated through Congress symbols, on the other. This is why I have been compelled to employ the term 'peasant nationalism'. When one points to the growing strength of the Congress in the rural areas, or talks of 'bourgeois liberal' hegemony in the national movement, one must take care to ascertain whether what is really meant is domination or hegemony.[66] How can we account, otherwise, for the nature of social consciousness—the weakness of liberalism and the emergence of parochial tendencies in contemporary rural India? The crux of this problem is the extent to which participants at the grassroots level were merely fighting for

[65] See Douglas Hay's significant essay, 'Property, Authority and Criminal Law,' in Hay, Thompson and Linebaugh eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree, Crime and Society in Eighteenth Century England*, London, 1975.

[66] I am indebted to Neeladri Bhattacharya for this enlightening distinction. Sumit Sarkar has tried to explain peasant participation in the national movement in terms of Gramsci's concept of 'Passive Revolution,' Sumit Sarkar, *Popular Movements op. cit.*, pp. 71–73.

local grievances and the extent to which they were becoming aware of the larger social unit and identifying themselves with a national anti-imperialist party; or was it simply that, as nationalism filtered down, it became identified with basic economic and social grievances, like the question of landlord authority in Oudh and south Bihar?

The form agrarian protest took in Bihar differed in crucial respects from the form in Bardoli and the U.P., even though it bore a closer resemblance to the latter. The satyagraha in Bardoli was a highly centralised campaign, tightly controlled by the Congress, which ensured that it was non-violent in character. In the U.P., on the other hand, the agrarian movement during the truce was organised by 'local Congress militants' and was localised in certain villages where landlord-tenant relations were particularly embittered. Though largely spontaneous, as in Bihar, some degree of formal organisation was attained at the village level. This was in evidence in the systematic use of social boycott against uncooperative cultivators, labourers and village officials. Agrarian violence during the Kisan Sabha movement, however, was of a more elemental, jacquerie variety. The Mahal or estate appears to have been the unit of action, and, though we find a close fit between Kisan Sabha meetings, propaganda and rural storm centres, it is still unclear, from our as yet limited sources, whether local Kisan Sabha leaders actually led or organised the looting of crops and physical attacks on the landlords' men and indeed on the landlord himself. Where such a definite connection emerges—as at Reora and Barhaiya Tal—agrarian unrest took on something of the U.P. colour. But one suspects—and it is in this respect the movement in the U.P. differs significantly from the Kisan Sabha agitation in Bihar—that there was a greater undercurrent of elemental and spontaneous outbursts, very often violent, which though inspired by the presence of the Kisan Sabha, was outside its control. This emerges quite strikingly from some of the slogans current in the two areas at the time. Whereas in the U.P. the slogan went *pith par danda, hath par jhanda*, the Bihar slogans indicate a more offensive posture: *lagan loge kaise, danda hamara Zindabad*.[67]

We end on a note of caution: to what extent can we generalise from the examples we have taken? The penetration of the national movement was certainly on the upswing in the 1930s and 1940s—but to what degree was it accomplished in fact? When the All India Kisan Sabha was formed in April 1936, Sahajanand Saraswati realised that there was insufficient local depth to sustain a movement of the Bihar sort on a national scale. Not only was economic development geographically very uneven, but so also was political development and integration. These factors would have to be considered in our assessment of the national movement as a social movement. This question, which needs empirical validation, has so far been consigned to the

[67] Alok Sheel, *op. cit.*, Chapter IV.

backwaters of historical research, as constitutional bickering, all-India politics, agrarian structures and simple narrations of how the Congress acquired a peasant base in some regions have received maximum attention. More detailed work needs to be done on rural social history, if this question is to be answered with any degree of certainty.

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