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Introduction

(1)

THIS BOOK attempts to provide a panoramic view of tribal and peasant struggles in India during the colonial period. It is not a source book, but the readings give an insight into various sources, some of which are rare documents, not easily available and have acquired the character of archival importance.

Recently, a number of books and articles have been published on peasant movements in India.¹ They deal with various categories of struggles in different parts of the country launched by various sections of the agrarian population through different periods of British rule. Some of the books and articles give excellent detailed accounts of specific struggles. However, there is no work which provides an all-India picture of tribal and peasant struggles which took place during various phases of British rule. Nor do we find an account, which portrays the historical development of these movements during this period, which can reflect the varieties of forms and methods adopted by these movements. Similarly, there is no systematic analytical work which examines these struggles from the point of view of delineating the roles of specific sections and classes of the rural population which took leadership, provided guidance, raised specific issues and elaborated various forms of mobilization and struggle.

The present volume, through its arrangement of selections and sectional introductions, endeavours to sketch such an outline. In the absence of a comprehensive, historical account of tribal and peasant movements, a work attempting such a perspective and delineating the historical development of these movements, will hopefully prove valuable for a proper appraisal of agrarian movements and their contribution to the nationalist movement in India.

The choice in highlighting particular movements (and omitting others) was made with a view to exploring the inner dynamic of the various social movements that emerged, revealing the methods adopted, levels of involvement of various sections, types of alliances and conflicts, ingenious devices adopted for mobilization, organizational innovations and forms, changing nature of issues around

which struggles were launched and the nature and types of leadership which emerged in the course of agrarian struggles. The present work is thus an endeavour to provide a perspective of the dialectical development of the agrarian movement in India during the British period.

(2)

The volume is also prepared to subserve a number of other objectives. There is a widely held assumption even among a large section of the academicians and students of rural India, that unlike its counterparts in other countries, the Indian peasant has been passive, fatalistic, docile, unresisting and bogged down in the quagmire of superstitions and other-wordly fantasies. Various explanations have been projected to uphold this belief. It is my view, based on a considerable survey of the agrarian situation in India, that this assumption is wrong and requires to be refuted. The Indian rural scene during the entire British period and thereafter, has been bristling with protests, revolts, and even large scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages and lasting for years.

The present volume has been prepared to highlight the fact that rural India has been a theatre of varieties of struggles involving various categories of rural population during the entire period of British domination. This provides enough evidence to refute the prevalent assumptions of a 'passive' peasantry.

(3)

Literature on peasant agitations, peasant struggles, peasant revolts and rebellions in other countries of the Third World is available on a fairly extensive scale.² We now have useful accounts of such struggles from Latin America, some countries of Africa and South East Asia. Similarly, there are a number of studies portraying the significant and important role played by the agrarian poor in the Russian, Chinese, Yugoslavian, Cuban, Vietnamese and other revolutions which broke through the capitalist-colonial or semi-colonial framework, bypassed the bourgeois phase of social organization and transformed those societies into non-capitalist, social formations. In fact, during and after the Second World War, the peasantry in a large number of colonial and semi-

colonial countries participated on a massive scale both in the national liberation struggles to overthrow imperialism, and to counteract the brazen intervention by these powers, either to reconquer the territories or subject them to newly evolved forms of indirect domination.

Thus, while vivid, comprehensive accounts of peasant struggles have come to light from other countries, there is almost a total neglect by scholars in systematically studying the agrarian movements and struggles which took place in India—the most populous, most comprehensively and systematically ruled country by the then most powerful colonizing power—Britain. In fact, scholarship both of the west and of independent India, managed to gloss over this aspect of the agrarian history of India. Operating under the 'modernization' syndrome, and evolving an a-historical structural-functional approach, they conducted rural studies in a manner wherein peasant struggles were treated almost as a non-issue. Rural researches focussed on various kinds of surveys of villages, of the operation of the caste system, on the impact of land reforms, on Community Development, Panchayati Raj, elections, and the impact of technological inputs, basically accepting the postulates of the post-independence rulers who were developing the Indian union on the basis of a capitalist mixed-economy. For scholarship, the historical epoch of British domination and its impact on rural Indian society was outside the scope of its research. In fact, for these scholars, the rural population was treated as 'traditional', to be modernized by the new rulers in consonance with their major assumptions of 'development'. For them tribal and peasant struggles were considered as disfunctional, anomic, and disintegrative phenomena, obstructing the rapid and smooth development of the capitalist path since independence. In short, the established scholarship, with few exceptions, treated tribal and peasant struggles as a law and order problem.

This is evidenced by the fact that while there are hundreds of studies which are described as village studies, there is not even a simple enumerative document listing the tribal and peasant movements, both during British period and Independent India.

The entire scholarly exercise of Indian and western scholarship supported massively by the Indian State and international organi-

zations and academies, successfully diverted attention from conducting methodically, large scale studies of the vital and crucial theme of the deepening and widening struggles launched by various categories of the rural population which played a significant role in weakening the foundations of British colonialism in India. This also prevented scientific studies of the increasing resistance organized by various sections of the rural populace, who are being subjected to subtle, varied and complex forms of exploitation, oppression and repression in the post-independence period.

It should be acknowledged that a small group of historically oriented radical social scientists and Marxists is attempting to counteract this lacuna in scholarship. These researchers are trying to focus their studies on tribal and peasant struggles during the British and post-British period. This endeavour however is diffused, scattered and concentrates on specific episodes and movements. Except for the pathbreaking effort by Kathleen Gough (reproduced in the present work) nobody to my knowledge has ventured to analyse the struggles of various strata of rural population in a total historical context. I have given my reasons for this in the sectional introductions. The present volume, as pointed out earlier, is specially prepared to highlight the urgent necessity of further study on the question of the role of the peasantry. By organizing the material in historical order, and attempting to provide explanations in sectional introductions, I have tried to draw a sketch, however elementary, of this phenomenon in its overall matrix. I consider such an exercise very necessary for a very important practical reason. Without a proper comprehension of the tribal and peasant movements in their overall context, it will not be possible to evolve a correct strategy and tactics for shaping these movements as a part of the larger struggle to end the evolving exploitative and oppressive, socio-economic order and to replace it by a non-capitalist, socialist, socio-economic formation in India.

(4)

India was considered the brightest jewel in the British crown. India a country of continental dimensions was subjected to the most systematic and forceful transformation process by British colonizers to suit their needs. They reduced this complex and

historically one of the few continuously enduring precapitalist civilizations into a classic colony of the British empire. Unfortunately a systematic analysis of the British impact on India is still not available. The massive literature delineating this impact portrays segmental pictures of the impact of various measures adopted by the British, on different facets of rural life.

A synthesis of the British impact on reshaping the socio-economic framework, class configuration as well as Indian political administrative and cultural life of rural India is still not available. Jawaharlal Nehru³, Dr K.S. Shelvankar⁴, and Rajni Palme Dutt⁵ endeavoured to evolve such an outline. The present author has also tried to capture the overall impact in his *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*.⁶

The credit for the first serious attempt to assess the overall impact of British rule in India, goes to Marx who hinted at the double mission of this rule—one destructive and the other positive. However, after the emergence of the independent Indian union, an intense debate has been launched particularly among various sections of Marxists to reappraise the nature of the transformation that took place in India under British rule. This debate has great relevance in shaping the programmes and policies for action launched by various Communist and Marxist parties.

The issues round which this debate is carried on can be formulated in following manner:

1. Characterization of the socio-economic formation which emerged during the British period.
2. Nature of the dominant mode of production generated by the British impact on India.
3. Nature of changes generated by the British as consequences of adopting measures such as the introduction to private property in land; new modes of revenue collection; transformation of land and asset into commodities; enforcing change in the objective of production; introduction of commercialization in agriculture, ushering in a novel principle of governance, based on a rule of law, a bourgeois legal framework and an administration composed of a hierarchy of offices, constituted of Imperial, provincial, and local units and further composed of Class I, II, III employees and other categories founded on the new principle of recruitment, promotion and retirement.

4. Whether the British expropriated political power from kings, feudal lords, nobles and others or created new feudal classes and shared power with them.

5. Whether the British introduced a bourgeois economic system, without facilitating a capitalist mode of production in agriculture or adequate industrialization of the country or perpetuated and strengthened the feudal and semi-feudal mode of production as the dominant mode.

6. Characterization of the strata and classes such as zamindars, with a chain of intermediaries such as tenants, sub-tenants, share croppers, bonded labour, and agricultural labourers in zamindari areas and the categories like absentee owners, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants, agricultural proletariat, and others in Ryatwari areas, emerged as a direct consequence of the policies and measures adopted by the British rulers.

7. Characterization of working conditions in rural areas which appear to be precapitalist in the sense of non-free labour, but operating and serving the capitalist world market, not unsimilar to slave labour in southern U.S.A. or indentured and bonded labour which emerged in the process of proletarianization and pauperization in a large number of colonial countries.

How does one describe a peasantry which is indebted and bonded and which in the context of pauperization and proletarianization in colonial countries, provides extremely cheap labour, and is subjected to super-exploitation, in forms reminiscent of descriptions provided by Marx in *Capital* (in the chapter on primitive accumulation)? Should this labour be designated as indicative of a feudal and semi-feudal mode of production, or a type of labour, which assists expansion of the sphere of the capitalist mode of production? Should this mode of exploitation be described as initiating and strengthening feudal and semi-feudal relations of productions for keeping colonies backward and thereby creating feudal and semi-feudal allies, or should it be considered as a peculiar way in which a capitalist socio-economic formation was ushered in without the capitalist mode of production being made dominant in the agricultural sector?

8. Characterization of the type of socio-economic formation which has emerged in India, after independence. Is it a neo-colony, a peri-

pheral capitalism, a satellite formation or a backward capitalist social formation?

9. Characterization of the nature of the state which has emerged after independence and which has been reshaping the economy and society of India on the basis of a 'mixed economy'.

10. Nature of the revolution that is sought to be brought about in India. Whether it will be National Democratic, Peoples' Democratic, New Democratic or Socialist Revolution?

11. Method of making Revolution: peaceful, realized through parliamentary path, using extra-parliamentary methods as mere pressure techniques to accelerate the pace of the parliamentary path of struggle, or a forcible smashing of the power of the ruling class basically via extra-parliamentary militant class and mass struggles.

12. The class which will be the leader of the revolution, the classes which will ally with the leading class, will remain neutral or act as an enemy against whom revolutionary movements will have to be directed.

Views held about the issues indicated above are not merely academic discussions. They determine strategies, shape policies, organize actions and frame approaches towards different sections of the rural population. Holders of different views ranging from Gandhian to Marxist, are locked in tense battles to implement their concept of transformation.

The present volume attempts to bring together information about the various agrarian struggles launched by the holders of different views, and described by the architects of the movements, as well as their evaluation of these very struggles when they subsequently split into different parties or became independent. It also includes descriptions and evaluations of some of the struggles by scholars specializing in this aspect of study.

(5)

The debate going on in India around the issues indicated above is not restricted to that country, alone. It is a part of the great debate going on around the world about the 'revolutionary potentiality' of various sections of agrarian populations in different

types of struggles going on largely in the underdeveloped world.

The massive participation of various sections of the agrarian population, particularly rich, middle, and poor peasantry as well as the agrarian proletariat in various types of struggles in colonial and semi-colonial countries, have raised a number of crucial issues which are discussed in academic circles in various countries and international forums.

We will restrict our discussion to only three concepts which are germane to our theme. The first concept is 'revolution'. Concepts like 'peasant rebellion', 'peasant revolt', 'peasant protest', 'peasant guerilla warfare', 'peasant movement' etc. also need to be properly defined. The term 'peasant' is also variously used. In fact a prominent section of scholarship is trying to restrict the term 'peasantry' to a specific section of the agrarian population, and have started designating entire societies as 'Peasant Societies'.

The concept 'Revolution' is being used in such stereotyped, ambiguous, jargonized manner that it loses its heuristic value. Douglas Deal in his very thought provoking article reviewing the discussion on 'Are Peasants Revolutionary?' defines the word 'Revolution' as suggested by Perez Zagorin. 'Revolution is any attempt by subordinate groups to bring about, by violent means, a change in (1) government (i.e., personnel) or policies (2) regime (i.e., form of government), or (3) society (i.e., social structure, system of property relations, or dominant values), whether this attempt is justified by reference to past conditions or as an unattained ideal.'

The attempt by Douglas Deal to define 'revolution', itself reveals how many categories are subsumed under this concept even by him, making the definition vague, connoting large varieties of peasant struggles, which are not aimed at a structural transformation of social order, nor a transfer of power from one class to another.

The term 'revolution' is used even to describe political upheaval which changes personnel of the government, (the term would deprive the concept of its essential characteristics). Marxism has provided a very fruitful definition of revolution by pointing out two crucial elements—change in property relations, and transfer of power from one class to another. In this context it has given a clue towards defining revolution, which in recent times has taken two forms,

viz., bourgeois-democratic revolutions and socialist revolutions. Marxism has also pointed out that in the context of colonial and semi-colonial countries, bourgeois revolution or colonial revolution meant national liberation struggles from foreign rule, establishment of a bourgeois regime to launch an independent bourgeois socio-economic order, sometimes described as completing the task of the bourgeois democratic revolution. The concept of socialist or proletarian revolution is made clear by defining it as a revolution, wherein bourgeois property relations are overturned and political power is transferred from the bourgeoisie to the proletariat.

During the imperialist phase of capitalism and particularly after the great socialist October Revolution in a backward, predominantly peasant country, an acute controversy has been going on about the nature of revolution which would complete even the bourgeois-democratic tasks. Can the bourgeoisie initiate development which can lift the economy and social order from colonial underdevelopment to even a bourgeois type of development experienced by advanced capitalist countries, or has the revolution to be a socialist one, even in order to complete bourgeois democratic tasks.

Whatever the discussions and differences among Marxists, the major criterion adopted by them to define Revolution still appears to me heuristically the most scientific and fruitful one. It helps us to locate the role of different sections of rural population in a struggle for bringing about a revolutionary transformation of society.

One of the peculiar developments that had taken place in colonial and the semicolonial countries particularly after the October Revolution, with regard to nationalist movements to secure freedom from imperialism, deserves careful attention.

The fear that the masses of the Third World may overthrow even the indigenous bourgeois-landlord classes in the process of overthrowing imperialism, and thereby usher in a Socialist Revolution, has led the national bourgeois and the bourgeois intelligentsia to evolve a compromising 'transfer of power' from colonialism to independence. This path of compromise is generally characterized by bargaining and negotiating with imperialism backed by varieties of reformist pressure struggles, wherein the exploited

and oppressed classes and masses are often pressed in the service of 'nationalism' to build up pressure, but not permitted to take to the road of radical and revolutionary class and militant mass struggles which may operate against the local exploiters, and may lead to the overthrow of the very bourgeois-landlord-rich farmer leadership along with the overthrow of imperialism. The pressure movement, may take violent forms, but even in unleashing the violent forms, the bourgeois leaders of these movements ensure that the exploited poor and propertyless sections do not carry this struggle against local exploiting classes. In fact, this leadership carefully regulates the movement, gives a definite direction to it, carefully chooses allies, and even presses into service the poor and propertyless, who are carefully harnessed to specific forms of struggles which are withdrawn as soon as they get out of hand. The Indian subcontinent encompassing India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Burma, which were part of the administrative unit of the British Empire, provide a classic illustration of the operation of this path of bargain and compromise backed by pressure to secure freedom from British rule.

Under the leadership of Gandhi, the most astute, farsighted and most consistent architect of this path, the Indian National Congress followed this 'non-violent' road to compromise and with all its subtle manoeuvrings, enabled it to secure a transfer of power from the British rule and stave off the possibility of the subcontinent following the other militant path of revolutionary class and mass struggles.

It is my submission that adequate attention has not been paid to the consequences of following one or the other path. The withdrawal of direct rule of imperialism and the nature of development after independence, particularly with regard to various sections of the rural population has its roots in the subjugation of the rural population throughout this period of its politicization—firmly guided and controlled by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress.

Inadequate recognition of this phenomenon, has created great confusion in discussions of the peasantry as a revolutionary class. The concept of revolution needs clarification, because when a pangeyric assessment of the revolutionary potential of the peasantry is projected, it is not clear as to the type of revolution to which this

potential is related. Similarly when the discussion about the role of peasantry is carried on with regard to anti-colonial, anti-imperialist national movement, it is not clear whether one discusses this role in the context of a nationalist movement taking to the path of bargain, backed with pressure, where various sections of the rural people are pressed in the movement, without being permitted to take to class struggles against local exploiters or it refers to the role of peasantry in the context of a nationalist movement wherein the leadership adopts the path of militant class and mass struggles, based on the exploited and oppressed rural strata developing their own strength and fighting power, and in the process sharpening class struggles against local exploiters and oppressors. This volume attempts to clarify the differences between revolution, rebellion, revolt, protest and other forms of agrarian struggles. This point has been rightly emphasized by a large number of scholars such as E. Wolf⁸, Shanin⁹, Douglas Deal¹⁰ and others¹¹. This differentiation is vital because it will indicate whether the various forms of struggles are oriented to secure reform and partial demands or a structural transformation of society. Similarly it will give us an idea whether the specific form of struggle helps to augment the bargaining strength of the native capitalist landlord classes against the imperialists and thereby reduce the movement to a pawn in the bargaining procedure, or whether the struggle is a genuine force which will prepare the peasantry for a revolutionary social transformation of property relations and state power.

(6)

Similarly, a proper clarification is necessary as to who should be characterized as peasants from the various categories of agrarian population in a society. This is all the more necessary to assess the role and potentiality of various sections of the agrarian population in different phases and types of revolutions.

As rightly pointed out by Douglas Deal, certain types of peasants will revolt under certain conditions and circumstances. 'The task of measuring their revolutionary potential (in a qualitative sense) thus involves the analysis of peasant participation in specific revolutions: one must discover who revolts, why they revolt, and what their actions amount to in the short and long run. And if the

behaviour of peasants in response to revolutionary stimuli around the world is to be fully understood, their failure to rise, their messianic lunges, sullen withdrawals, obeisance to paternalistic superiors and their explosions of fury spent in vain must also be thrown into relief.¹²

A section of outstanding students of agrarian society are attempting to define the peasantry in a very limited sense. Teodor Shanin, representing this school of scholarship, defines this position. 'The peasantry consists of small agricultural producers, who with the help of simple equipment and the labour of their families produce mainly for their own consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to holders of political and economic power.' He further clarifies the implication of his definition by stating that, 'such a definition implies a specific relation to land, the peasant family farm and the peasant village community as the basic units of social interaction, a specific occupational structure and particular influence of past history and specific patterns of development.'¹³ A massive body of literature has emerged which has assumed that peasants constitute that section of rural population constituting 'small-scale agriculturists mainly occupied with family subsistence and the rendering of obligations to landlords and states.' In fact, on the basis of the acceptance of this definition, entire theoretical models of societies are being built which are characterized as 'peasant societies.' However, it is my submission that defining peasants in this manner, irrespective of the context of whether they belonged to the 'Asiatic', slave, feudal, colonial capitalist, capitalist or non-capitalist socialist societies, creates considerable confusion about various categories of the rural population, with regard to their position, role and future, particularly in the context of capitalist, colonial and emerging non-capitalist societies during the last two to three hundred years. Such a definition does not clearly reveal the qualitative impact and differentiation that takes place in the agrarian arena, as a result of the impact of the capitalist system through an expansion of the market, changed objectives of production, commercialization, introduction of a capitalist type of private property in land resulting in the vital process of differentiation within the agrarian population—resulting in the emergence of rich, middle and poor peasants, a massive process

of pauperization and proletarianization creating a qualitatively new category of agricultural proletariat, which as Wolf rightly points out cannot be described as 'peasant', and which is clearly a consequence of the impact of capitalist penetration in rural areas. Douglas Deal has very succinctly pointed out the difficulties involved in the limited definition with regard to examining the position, role and the nature of participation of various strata of peasants in the development of struggles in rural areas.

'More troublesome and numerically significant are the rural proletariat, who work on haciendas, plantations, capitalist farms, and plots of better-off peasant proprietors; they may be permanent or casual day labourers but they can earn a money wage and are normally landless. Wherever there is population pressure on land in a suitably commercialized economy, this proletariat will exist in one form or another and may include, as part-time members, poor peasants with less than subsistence holdings who are driven to seek a supplementary income in order to survive. This proletariat's existence heralds the development of capitalism in the countryside as some or most of the peasants lose their land to larger and more commercially inclined owners responding to national and international market forces. Indeed, this process of proletarianization has itself been one of the major causes of agrarian revolutions in the modern world. Whatever their differences, the fortunes of landless labourers and peasant cultivator are so intertwined as to render absurd the examination of each group without the other.'¹⁴

This approach neglects the dialectical process of stratification and variations which develop within the peasantry as a result of capitalist development and the possibility or otherwise of various sections to improve their conditions within the framework of that social order. In the context of the Indian situation, this approach obscures the role and future of various sections of the rural population in the context of the type of society which has developed in India.

I strongly feel that the larger definition of peasants as adopted by Marxists is still fruitful. The division of the agrarian population, as formulated by eminent Marxists like Lenin, Trotsky, Mao-Tse-Tung and others, as landlords, absentee or otherwise, rich, middle and poor peasant and the distinct class of agrarian pro-

letariat, gives a more productive and objectively more authentic approach to understanding the role of the peasantry in colonial and post-colonial societies.

This definition clarifies more sharply the dynamic of transformation in capitalistically reformed agrarian structures in colonial and semi-colonial countries. It helps to understand the capacities, and potentialities of different categories of rural population and to identify issues around which the rural population will mobilize and the manner in which it will organize its struggles. It also provides the tools for conceiving a type of socio-economic formation within which the basic problems of pauperization and proletarianization can be eliminated and the preconditions established for a society within which the bulk of the rural population can meet its requirements of employment, education, health, housing etc.

The present volume, describing a wide variety of struggles, involving different categories of the agrarian population and based on varieties of issues, in a country which is probably the largest, most complex and most systematically colonized will, I hope, contribute to the clarification of the debate around the relation of the 'peasant' to 'revolution'.

It is hoped that this endeavour to present tribal and peasant struggles in India for the first time in one place will serve the purposes highlighted in this introduction. The inadequacies of this collection will be more than compensated if it serves to stimulate more competent and comprehensive studies. The historically crucial role of the Indian revolution not only in ending the prevalent exploitative social system, but also in terms of the impact it would have on the world capitalist system makes further study of the role of peasant struggles, and the role of the proletariat in it, a vital issue.

(9)

I am thankful to those who permitted me to publish their valuable works. I am also conscious of my debt to my young friends Dr Uday Mehta, Dr M.N.V. Nair, Sunil Gavaskar and a number of other friends who helped me in preparing this volume. I cannot forget the enormous pains taken by my young friend Chandra Sen Momaya in the difficult task of preparing the Index.

To my friends at the Oxford University Press, goes the credit of

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A.R. Desai

Bombay,
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NOTES

1. It is difficult to list these books and papers. Some of the selections in the present volume contain valuable foot-notes indicating such works.
2. Douglas Deal's article 'Peasant Revolts and Resistance in the Modern World — A Comparative View, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia* contains in foot-notes and Bibliography, one of the most useful list of such publications. pp. 435-45.
3. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, *Discovery of India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay.
4. Dr K.S. Shelvankar, *Problem of India*.
5. R. Palme Dutt, *India Today*, Peoples Publishing House, Bombay.
6. A.R. Desai, *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay, 1977.
7. Douglas Deal, op. cit., p. 415.
8. E. Wolf, 'On Peasant Rebellions' *International Social Science Journal*, Vol. 21, 1969.
9. Shanin Tedor, 'Peasantry as a Political Factor', *Sociological Review*, Vol. 14 no. 1, pp. 5-27.
10. Douglas Deal, op. cit. pp. 414-45.
11. See Douglas Deal, op. cit. Bibliography.
12. Douglas Deal, op. cit. pp. 414.
13. Shanin Tedor (Ed.), 'Peasants and Peasant Societies', pp. 240, *Penguin Modern Sociology Readings Reprint 1976*.
14. Douglas Deal, op. cit. pp. 417.