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Akanksha Verma
Research Scholar,
CSSS/SSS-2, JNU,
New Delhi, Delhi, India

Towards developing a historical understanding of peasant movement

Akanksha Verma

Abstract

In sociology, among the range of social movement, peasant movement is studied under rural sociology. It is to note that several tribal revolt and peasant movements took place long before the beginning of organised national movement for independence. However, conventionally this subject is studied largely under the nationalist historiography which covers peasant/tribal movement as an extension of national movement. There are various approaches and perspectives to study peasant movement among which nationalist historiography is a major one. The major shift to approach the peasant movement took place with the rise of subaltern studies, which too has some limitations. Using both historical and sociological method, present paper aims to critically examine the developing trends of the study of peasant/tribal movement both historically and sociologically. It also seeks to explore the place of peasant study in a more inter-disciplinary manner rather fixing it in the discipline of history or sociology.

Keywords: peasant movement, national movement, subaltern studies etc.

Introduction

The term peasant is ambiguous and used differently by different authors. Sometimes it is used for those who are homogenous and have small land holding operated mainly by family labour, sometimes it is applied to all those who are dependent on the land including landless labourers as well as engaged in agricultural activities. According to Irfan Habib a peasant is "a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements and using the labour of his family" (Habib, 2007. 109). Engels has a more balanced view about the peasantry. According to him the peasantry is as an internally divided unorganized and politically important unless mobilized by the organized working class (Engels cited in Dhanagare, 1983. 1-5).

The term peasant movement is an inclusive concept formulated by the social scientists to bring within its scope a variety of organized actions of the peasants. These actions are primarily of socio-economic nature but also include political activities. In a broader sense, thus, the term peasant movement has been defined as any collective reaction of the peasants to their low status ^[1]. The concept of "peasants" generally, is defined as one who is an "owner cultivator", i.e., who owns the land, shares in the actual work on his/her land, and is, therefore, close to it. This definition too has some limitation. In the context of developing agricultural economies like India, one has to recognize the fact that "cultivator", "tenant", "share-cropper", and "agricultural laborer" are the statuses which many people occupy simultaneously. As far as peasant movement is concerned historically, the agitations aimed at changing the land tenure system have constituted the core of peasant movements in many countries of the world, particularly in the early stages of their development ^[2].

In Sociology and social anthropological literature peasants have widely been described as culturally unsystematic, unreflective, unsophisticated and the non-literati, constituting the mosaic of the "little tradition" (Redfield 1956). As far as social movements are concerned they have broadly been perceived as organised collective mobilisation to bring about changes in the thought, beliefs, values, attitudes, relationships and major institutions in society, or to resist changes in any of the above structural elements of society (H Blumer 1951; Haberer 1972; Guesfield 1971). Peasant movements are important variants of social movements (Dhanagare 1983).

Defining social movement, Ghanshyam Shah states that social movements are those 'which examine non-institutionalized legal or extra-legal collective political actions which strive to

Correspondence
Akanksha Verma
Research Scholar,
CSSS/SSS-2, JNU,
New Delhi, Delhi, India

influence civil and political society for social and political change' [3]. The study of social movements as outlined by Shah gained was widely accepted among political scientists and sociologists in India from the late 1960s onwards. Yet the historical record in India is full with instances of mobilizations by peasants, lower castes, tribal groups, workers and women etc.

In India, peasant movements emerged during British colonial period when economic, policies brought devastating impact on traditional handicraft and other small industry which led to overburdening agriculture. From 1800 century till the date of independence several peasant movements took place in different parts of the country. Along with the central issue such as of higher rate of taxation, forest law, ownership of land, wage etc. which were directly impacted by the British revenue policies; various local contradiction of farmers with feudal lord also existed. On the bases of periods, peasant movements can be classified into pre-independent period and post-independent period. 19th century experienced several peasant movements. Such as Santhal (1855), Bombay Peasant revolt (1871-75) indigo peasant revolt (1859-60) in Bengal, indigo peasant in Darbhanga and Champaran (1866-68) and others in Punjab and Maharashtra (1875)etc.

Although the beginning of peasant revolt is older than the beginning of nationalist movement however peasant movements/revolts were incorporated in the nationalist historiography which is accused to ignore the sovereign nature and the importance of their agency. Tribal revolts are kept outside the ambit of national movement as they were not pan-Indian in nature and oriented towards their specific location only. There is a general tendency to consider the peasant revolts in India as insignificant when compared to the historical experience of medieval Europe or to that of neighbouring china [4]. It is a matter of analytical investigation that peasant revolts in India do not seem to have the same political impact on the evolution of state forms as they do in Europe or China [5]. One possible reason for this could be that dominance in Indian society exercised exclusively through the legal sovereign power embodied in the feudal institutions of the State.

The colonial view tend to emphasis on the inherent view of disorderliness of Indian society and its lack of unified consciousness, while the nationalists glorified the absorptive capacity without recognising the considerable internal struggles which outlined the process of absorption or submergence. There is countering views between colonialist and nationalist historiographies about the character of movement for Indian independence.

Colonialist historians sought demonstrate that by introducing modern education, a modern economic infrastructure and most importantly the modern institutions and legal procedures of a modern state, it was colonial rule which had in effect bestowed independent nationhood upon India. The so-called 'freedom struggle' was described as nothing more than disagreement among Indian elites, mobilising the support of the common masses on the basis of traditional ties to secure the fruits political power. In response to this the nationalist historians emphasis upon overall character of the colonial exploitation of the Indian people, the obstacles imposed by this exploitative process on full development of the potential for economic growth, the role of the nationalist leadership to mobilise and unite the masses to resist and overthrow colonial rule and the

efforts by the colonial power to keep the people divided. Recognising the importance of modern institutions which accompanied colonial rule; they only emphasised the need to remove the exploitative nature of the colonial rule and to establish self- government as the necessary means for the full development of 'modernity'.

Both colonial and nationalist politics thought of the peasantry as an object of their strategies, acted upon, controlled and appropriated within their respective structures of State power. As these rival historiographical practices proceeded to analyse interpret the politics of the Indian national movement, it became apparent that neither the competitive factional interests of elite groups nor the efforts of the Congress leadership to arouse an embracing nationalist consciousness among the entire people explain the dynamics of the involvement of the peasantry in colonial movement.

Peasant movements were instrumental as it brought the participation of masses in the freedom struggle. It made the common masses to clearly realise that all agrarian problems are connected with the colonial British rule and therefore it must be integrated with the question of national freedom. The peasant movements have been studied under history as it has an essential link with national movement nationalist historiography has covered peasant movements. Subaltern historiography developed the trend to studying peasant/tribal movements and its role. In response to nationalist historiography subaltern historiography highlights some crucial questions about the issue of leadership, agency and also investigates the whole project of historiography.

Revisiting Peasant Movement under Nationalist Historiography

The nationalist historians either pay little attention to peasant agitations or view the peasants as masses whose consciousness were awoken up by the nationalist leaders for participation in nationalist struggles. The peasantry is generally seen as an undifferentiated mass whose arrival in the political arena was due to influence of the Gandhian nationalism. Later with the appropriation and co-option of these peasant movements by their local feudal lords and its submergence into national movements, directed it solely against colonial British rule. Thus, the peasant movements in the twentieth century were subsumed within the nationalist movement.

The problem with national movements to deal with peasant issue has been recognised as in the name of national unity against imperialism and peasant's interests were more or less sacrificed. National integration was promoted at the peasants' unilateral cost. The Marxist historians accept that the nationalist movement made tremendous impact on peasant consciousness and movement; they tend to view the influence of the Congress, particularly Gandhi, as negative. They conceive the nationalist movement as bourgeois who preserved the interests of the upper classes and was inclined to hinder, curb or even suppress the movement when it became militant. They argue that the Congress did not take up the anti-landlord demands of the peasants and discouraged the class organisations of the peasantry. R.P. Dutt and A.R. Desai formulated the basic Marxist approach regarding the attitude of the Congress towards the masses, and many later Marxist historians followed in their wake. He even argues that in case of a confrontation between the peasants and the landlords, Gandhi usually tried to moderate

peasants' demands and restricted their militancy. Above all, their attitude towards the peasantry was not favourable.' AR Desai ^[6] highlights the transformative nature of agriculture in British rule which resulted dissatisfaction caused by the dismemberment of the old economic system but also made deepening impact on social relations.

In an essay, 'The Logic of Gandhian Nationalism' (1985) Sumit Sarkar, argues that the Congress politics of mass mobilisation, under its tight organisational control, 'fitted in perfectly with the interests of a bourgeoisie, which needed to utilize mass discontent, and yet wanted to keep it within bounds'. Even during the 1940s, the 'Fear of popular "excesses" made Congress leaders cling to the path of negotiation and compromise, and eventually even accept Partition as a necessary price'. D.N. Dhanagare outlined the role of Gandhi in peasant movements and states that, the 'most important social function of the Gandhian "constructive" activities was that of tension management, which explains the alliance of rich landowners with their tenants and labourers' (D.N. Dhanagare 1983: 104). Contradictory views are presented by Kapil Kumar as he argues that Congress bourgeois leadership 'exploited the peasants' support to secure political independence oblivious of the economic aspect of swaraj and the demands of the peasantry'. He further states that, the main 'cause of the withdrawal of the two mass movements (1920-22 and 1930-2) had been the fear of no-rent campaigns which meant adding anti-feudal struggle to anti-colonial struggle' (Kapil Kumar 2011: 146, 147).

The subaltern historiography, dismisses all other writings as 'elite', or even belonging to the discourses of 'counter-insurgency' which tend to depict the peasant rebels as anarchists or disruptive. In the subalternist view, the national movement led by the Congress was elitist which hampered the growth of peasant rebellions against the Raj. The peasant movements developed independently of the national movement and there was no close, positive relationship between Congress nationalism and the peasantry.

Subaltern Historiography and Peasant Movement

Among the dominant framework of analysis or approaches of peasant studies are class analysis or pure histories or ethnography of tribal /peasant studies. Subaltern Studies inaugurated a mode of historical inquiry that consciously questions histories of popular mobilisation and patterns of history-writing in the Indian context. The emergence of the peasant as the exemplary figure of popular politics, as it was through these various intellectual currents produced an interesting and important set of displacements in the writings of Subaltern scholars. 'Parallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is the people' ^[7]. According to Ranajit Guha 'in the colonial period popular mobilization was realized in its most comprehensive form in peasant uprisings. In many historic instances involving large masses of working people and petty bourgeoisie in the urban areas to the figure of mobilization derived directly from the paradigm of peasant insurgency ^[8]'.

The historian of social movements in India is often faced with a persistent dichotomy, between movements for 'political' change versus those focussed on the 'social'. Gyanendra Pandey, emphasized the strength of such perceptions when he noted, 'it remains dominant in the universities and among others interested in the recent history of the subcontinent, finding expression for instance, in the common equation of the Congress movement with the "political" movement and of workers' and peasants' struggles with a "social" one' ^[9]. Such a distinction between social movements and political ones has epistemological consequences. It produces a specious hierarchy between social and political movements by deeming the latter more important since its logical culmination is seen in the independence of the subcontinent from British rule.

Highlighting the autonomy of these movements, indeed their divergence from the mainstream struggle for national independence, and to delineate something like a 'peasant communal ideology'. 'Religious beliefs—origin myths, sacred histories, legends—which laid down principles of political ethics and were coded into a series of acts and symbols denoting authority and obedience, benevolence and obligation, or oppression and revolt' was the stuff that peasant consciousness was made up of ^[10].

While the peasantry continued to be the subject of studies by Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Gautam Bhadra and Gyanendra Pandey, others like Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey turned their attention to other social groups such as factory workers and dominant religious and ethnic groups. Despite the differences between the social groups that each scholar focussed on, their works demonstrated that structuring principles of subaltern life-worlds were rooted in a rural, semi-feudal, caste and kinship based understanding of solidarity.

Analysing the importance of Guha's endeavour in highlighting on the peasant as a mass political subject, Partha Chatterjee noticed that the founder of Subaltern studies was 'right in insisting that it was not a case of drawing the faces in the crowd, as the radical social historians of France or Britain might have suggested' for the insurgent peasant in colonial India was not 'political in the sense of the individualized bourgeois citizen of liberal democracy'. They were, rather, 'mass political subjects whose rationality had to be sought in the collective life of the peasant community' ^[11].

It is necessary to use or examine the prevailing theoretical-analytical framework. Notable exceptions to this are the studies by Siddiqi, Kapil Kumar, Gyanendra Pandey and this author who have started an important debate on the precise linkage between the peasantry and the Indian National Congress, and Gandhi in particular.

Broadly designated as 'subaltern historiography', this approach seeks to restore a balance by highlighting the role of the politics of the people as against elite politics played in Indian history. Thus, 'elite' and 'people' are viewed as binary domains to constitute a structural dichotomy. As this approach argue that the elitist historiography, whether of the neo-colonialist or of the neo-nationalist variety, has always overstated the part the elite has played in building Indian nationalism, but it has failed to recognise and acknowledge the contributions made by the people or the masses on their own, independently of the elite. Parallel to the domain of elite politics there always existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the

principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society but the 'subaltern' classes and groups constituting the masses of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in the town and country-the people. Subaltern historiography treats 'people' (subalternity) as an autonomous domain that originates neither from elite politics nor depends on them. Guha, however, does admit that given the diversity of its social composition, the ideological element in the subaltern domain is not uniform in quality and density. Therefore, Guha also clarifies that the two domains have not been sealed off from each other but often overlapped mainly because the elite domain always tried to mobilise and integrate them but primarily to fight for elite objective. The whole thrust of subaltern historiography is on reconstructing 'the other history', i.e., history of people's politics and movements and their attempts to make their own history. For Guha the term 'pre-political' is as misleading as it is value-laden; it helps us the least in understanding the experience of such movements in colonial India. Tribal or peasant insurgencies have to be understood in the backdrop of the attempts of the colonial State to revitalise landlordism. Guha, however, admits that 'none of the basic elements (i.e., leadership, aims, programmes and ideology) of the insurgencies of the 1793-1900 period could compare in maturity and sophistication with those of the historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century.

Conclusion

In India peasant movements have been analysed theoretically and ideologically. The gap of the debate between post-colonial studies and nationalist historiography was attempted to fulfil by subaltern historiography. However it is noted that in order to provide the critique against the elitist approach, subaltern history also ignores the differences of the social relations among the 'subalterns'. Peasant movements differ in terms of their locality, issues raised and their composition. It is more useful to look at peasant movements as responses which were based on grievances related to their interest which was a mix of social, economic and political issues.

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