

Toward an eclectic peasant historiography

Studies on the role of peasantries in the revolutionary transformations of the modern world need to address more than overt political behaviour. Based on a detailed examination of the transformation of Indian peasant consciousness along anti-colonial, democratic, and class lines, this book fills a crucial historiographical gap in the study of peasants.

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Analyses of peasant consciousness and political behaviour have disproportionately dwelt on violent mass insurrections. Indeed, they have occasioned grandiloquent historiographical and sociological debates on the revolutionary potential of the peasantry and the unraveling of the nexus between peasant and nationalist revolutions. There have also been studies highlighting the everyday acts of apolitical peasant resistance - the so-called 'weapons of the weak' approach. The advent of subaltern studies on the historiographic scene has added another dimension to the ongoing debate between the 'heroic' and 'everyday' of peasant resistance.

Steering clear of these extremes, the present book critically examines the role of the peasantry in the Indian national movement to probe the making of an Indian peasant consciousness. Divided into two parts - 'Political Practice in Rural Punjab' (chapters 1-7) and 'Interrogating Peasant Historiography: Peasant Perspectives, Marxist Practice and Subaltern Theory' (chapters 8-12) - Mukherjee presents an empirically rich and meticulously documented account

of Indian peasants' political practices. The book covers British India and the princely states (Punjab and Patiala respectively) but also draws on generalisations from other parts of the country and from the broader historiographical debate.

Peasants and nationalism

Anchoring the historiographical debate between class and nation in the political world of the peasants of Punjab, Mukherjee convincingly demonstrates the congruence of the boundaries of influence of the peasant and national movements. For the author, 'the anti-imperialist movement created the initial political space in which the peasant movement emerged... [I]t created a new political awareness and awakening among them which made them receptive to the more radical or "class-oriented" ideas of peasant organisation and peasant struggles' (p. 314). The organic relationship between peasant and nationalist movements is manifest in the overlapping political cadres and workers. In fact, 'the ideology of class or economic struggle had no chance of success if it raged itself against nationalism' (p. 318). Even communists' success depended on their being good nationalists.

Even if peasants and nationalists were fired by a common desire to reach out to each other, it would be rash to project nationalism as historically inevitable. Nobody disputes Mukherjee's empirical claim that peasant movements in India were ideologically and organisationally linked to the Indian National Congress. Equally true is her assertion that while nationalists were striving to break out of the limitations of moderate politics, peasants were looking beyond their local, sporadic struggles under traditional leadership. Mukherjee's theoretical zeal to posit a dialectically reciprocal relationship between nationalism and peasantry, however, leaves many questions unanswered. Simply asserting that nationalism has an elemental urge to it, or that nationalism was the historically most appropriate progressive ideology available to Indian peasants, is not enough.

Peasant mobilisation

Peasants have been remarkably adept at the use of modern forms of politics - press, posters, meetings and pamphlets. Yet, the romantic notion of subaltern violence refuses to die down. The use of violence has been equated to radical and revolutionary forms of peasant protest

while non-violent means have been seen as signs of the pro-landlord, pro-bourgeois and reactionary nature of the peasant movement. This dichotomisation between mass agitations and insurrections has been the staple of numerous works on peasant protest and mobilisation.

Of late, subaltern historians have further glorified the inherent rebelliousness of the subaltern classes. While refuting these binaries, Mukherjee posits a relationship between the character of political struggles and the state, and forms of protest. In the Indian context, 'both the availability of political space within the semi-hegemonic political struggle as well as expediency and calculation of costs organically propelled the peasant movement towards use of non-violent or non-insurrectionary forms of resistance and struggle' (p. 382). However, one is surprised by her facile argument that the ideas of democracy and republic (and, hence, the non-violent mass character of the peasant movements) found relatively easy acceptance among Indian peasants because the traditional functioning of the village landowning community was, at least in theory, democratic.

Anti-feudal consciousness?

Mukherjee underlines the singular

absence of the idea of 'land to the tiller', or any other constituent of modern anti-feudal consciousness among Indian peasants. Peasants struggled more for restoration of their lost rights to land than the abolition of landlordism. Most of their struggles were oriented towards upholding their right to subsistence. Any threat to this right, be it undue increase in land revenue, or illegal cesses and abwabs, or dispossession of traditional or customary rights to land, provoked widespread resistance.

On the whole, the book highlights the historic failure of the left-popular leadership to ideologically transform peasant consciousness along modern class-based politics. In doing so, it calls for a renewed assessment of the relative merits and viability of class and nation as sources of peasant mobilisations. ◀

- Mukherjee, Mridula. 2004. *Peasants in India's Non-violent Revolution: Theory and Practice*. New Delhi: Sage Publications. 578 pp. ISBN 0-7619-9686-9 (hard cover)

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