

Defining the Peasantry Conflicts of 1857: Collective Identity or Collective Action?

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If you were writing about the 1857 conflict in India shortly after it occurred up through the era of classical historiography, you probably would refer to it as the "Indian Mutiny" or "Sepoy Rebellion." Today, you might refer to it as the "Indian Rebellion" or Peasant's Insurgency," terms more indicative of a collective resistance to tyrannical colonial rule. The discourse concerning the Indian Mutiny/Rebellion has evolved over the course of the century. I believe that the change in historiography is partly due to the change in the academic perception of the peasantry, or in Marxist terms, the masses. The earliest writers—contemporaries of the events, such as Sir John Kaye—gave little, if any, attention to those who were collectively called "sepoys." Current historiography of Marxist subalternists, such as Ranajit Guha, glorifies the peasantry and the non-elite within India. The power of a unified underclass impresses Guha.

Still, I argue that both Kaye and Guha view the peasantry more similarly that it appears on the surface. Both see the peasantry as a collective identity, rather than a unique group of oppressed peoples who span various castes and classes to overcome these stations and unify themselves for collective action. Kaye sees the Indian peoples as mutineers who challenged British colonial rule. Guha flips Kaye's view, claiming that the peasantry is a powerful force that can cause change within the oppressive colonial rule. Utpal Dutt, on the other hand, through his play, *Mahavidroh*, attempts to represent the masses as a collective of individuals. Dutt correctly identifies the masses as a multi-caste conglomerate trying to defeat the British through a somewhat rough attempt at collective action. Where Kaye and Guha fail to even attempt representation of these people,

Dutt creates unique experiences that cause underlying tension—even among those attempting collective action. Also, where Kaye and Guha fail to discuss gender roles, Women play an important role in Dutt's play.

Those recording the events shortly after they occurred were predominantly haunted by one question, "why?" In trying to understand why the sepoys suddenly turned upon their British superiors, these authors created conspirators to lead the sepoys astray. Sir John Kaye's culprits were the Brahman, the members of India's highest caste, Hindu priests. In short, Kaye argues that the Brahman felt their caste was under attack as the "enlightenment," brought by the British, crept in upon them. He writes that the Brahman "saw that, as new provinces were one after another brought under British rule, the new light must diffuse itself more and more, until there would scarcely be a place for Hindooism to lurk unmolested."¹ And as various "abominable practices,"² such as suttee, murdering little children and the elderly, human sacrificing and random stranglings were forbidden by the British, Kaye claims that the Brahman priests began to feel their livelihood threatened. He believes that reason began to replace these superstitions purported by the Brahman, thereby thwarting their purpose.

But when Reason demonstrated their absurdity, and struck conviction into the very heart of the nation, there was an end of both the folly and the crime. The Law might do much, but Education would assuredly do much more to sweep away all these time-honoured superstitions. Education, pure and simple in its secularity, was quite enough in itself to hew down this dense jungle of Hindooism; but when it was seen that the function of the English

schoolmaster and of the Christian priest were often united in the same person . . . a fear arose that even secular education might be the mask of proselytism.³

"Reason," with a capitol "R," stands as the more convicting force with the people under Brahman instruction. Reason, through Education (and Kaye claims this education is "secular") was threatening the superstitions used by the Brahman to control Indian people.

Note that Kaye is arguing that the Brahman caste is intimidated not by Christianity, *per se*, but by Reason—the product of the Enlightenment. As the masses are educated by Westerners, they will see the absurdity of the Brahman teachings and abandon them. This eliminates the need for Brahman, and they are, therefore, forced to incite the people against the British to preserve their jobs. Kaye even declares that it is out of love "for truth above error" and "intelligent progress above ignorant stagnation"⁴ that Lord Dalhousie had "emanated the annexations which had distinguished his rule."⁵ Kaye completely ignores evidence to the contrary that suggests native rulers disagreed. The Rani of Jhansi, for example, wrote a letter to Dalhousie herself. She points out that Dalhousie is not honoring the tradition that allows an adopted son to claim the throne of her deceased husband. Her letter implies that Dalhousie is using the lack of a biological heir as justification for annexing and taking control of her kingdom.⁶ Kaye, however, views these annexations as Great Britain's attempt to "extend her moral rule, and to make those people subject to powers of light rather than of darkness."⁷ He points to "Universities" and the increased expenditure upon native education⁸ as other threats to the Brahman. These institutions, which dispensed European knowledge, made plain to the "guardians of Eastern learning, that what had been done to unlock the floodgates of the West, would soon appear to be as nothing in comparison with the great tide of European civilisation which was about to be poured out upon them."⁹

Along these same lines, Kaye claims that the "encroachments of physical science were equally distasteful and disquieting" to the Brahmans. He believes they were intimidated

by such European wonders as the railway and electric wires. These wonders condensed time unlike anything the Indians had ever seen before the Western man came. As the Indians see the wonders of Western technology, they are inevitably impressed and captivated. Kaye wonders, "Of what use was it any longer to endeavour to persuade the people that the new knowledge of the West was only a bundle of shams and impostures, when any man might see the train come in . . .?"¹⁰

Typical of Kaye is to equate "West" with "Reason" and "East" with "superstition." Perhaps also implied is that the East is more prone to fanaticism, particularly the Brahman, who were the caretakers of the "East" and its "superstitions." Intimidated by the technology and rational superiority of the West, the Brahman incite the people against the British. It is understandable, therefore, that Kaye latches onto stories of conspiracy, such as Chowdeydar cakes and the circulation of chuppatties. The Brahman having the most to lose, are held responsible by Kaye for rumors of using Chowdeydar cakes and chupatties to send messages of revolt.

Kaye is concerned primarily with two groups: the Brahman, and those led astray by the Brahman. Commoners are bypassed in Kaye's scholarship. He sees them as little more than children who are easily led astray by charismatic leaders.

Yet, somewhat surprisingly, Kaye does acknowledge the power the masses have when they are unified. He writes, "If the individual energies of the leaders of the revolt had been commensurate with the power of the masses, we might have failed to extinguish such a conflagration. But the whole tendency of the English system had been to crush out those energies[.]"¹¹ Consequently, Kaye's fleeting recognition of the masses' power is similar to that of Ranajit Guha's.

Ranjit Guha actually recognizes Kaye's work in his article, "Not at Home in Empire." He writes that Kaye's *History of the Indian Mutiny* is a "truly brilliant work of imperial historiography . . . [w]ritten in the manner of grand narratives of war and revolution . . ."¹² However, unlike Kaye's conspiracy theories and exultation of the enlightened West, Guha,

founder of *Subaltern Studies*, takes a Marxist view of the masses. Guha greatly glorifies the peasantry's ability to come together and assert power over the colonizer and native elite. It is important to note that he examines several peasant uprisings in colonial India, not just the events of 1857. He points out that there were over 110¹³ accounts of peasant uprisings during the British rule, a sign of continuing struggle and discontent on the subaltern's side. One of his main goals in the introduction to his book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, is to combat the idea of the peasant revolt as being primitive and "pre-political."¹⁴

Guha believes that the early historiography was a mechanism of the state. Dipesh Chakrabarty, in her article "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," is upset by these attempts at creating a national history—she blames the West. She writes:

"History" as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation state at every step . . . It does not take much imagination to see that the reason for this lies in what European imperialism and third-world nationalisms

have achieved together: the universalization of the nation state as the most desirable form of political community. Nation states have the capacity to enforce their truth games, and universities, their critical distance notwithstanding, are part of the battery of institutions complicit in this process.¹⁵

Chakrabarty is implying that the subaltern have no voice—the Western imperial nations alongside the third-world elite have created 'history' as an instrument of the state. In a need to understand what caused the revolts, the British state turned to the study of history. Guha also points out that the need to understand the peasantry's action shows underlying tensions created by not understanding them: "The tension of this relationship required a record for the regime to refer to so that it could understand the nature and motivation of any considerable outbreak of violence in the light of previous experience and by understanding suppress it. Historiography stepped in to provide that vital discourse for the state."¹⁶ In fact, Guha goes so far as to say that these early accounts *exist* because of the state:

their "raison d'être."¹⁷ This meant that the state had no need to disguise its "partisan character" which would later be the basis upon which Western historiography is built.

This historiography, Guha points out, is devoid of the peasantry. He feels that they are not accorded a place in the events of India's past, that "the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own."¹⁸

The early histories of the Mutiny/Rebellion do not represent the subject and cause of these revolts—the peasant. The British, striving to keep a clear distance from the peasants, assumed they could understand by merely reviewing events of the past with no subaltern context. Guha changes "rebellion" to "insurgency" to show the peasantry's collective power. He writes, "To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him. Hence, the word 'insurgency' has been used in the title and the text as the name of that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known as *Jacquerie* . . . etc."¹⁹ Guha is disgusted by "elitist" historiography that assumes the revolts are spontaneous or need the "intervention of charismatic leaders."²⁰

Underlying these "elitist" histories are three assumptions. He points out that "[w]hat is conscious is presumed in this view to be identical with what is organized in the sense that it has, first, a 'conscious leadership,' secondly, some well-defined aim, and thirdly, a programme specifying the components of the latter as particular objectives and the means of achieving them."²¹ Guha is claiming that any peasant action without these factors is assumed—by the elitist school of thought—to be "pre-political," and quotes Hobsbawm who claims that the masses have yet to find "a specific language with which to express their aspirations about the world."

Guha defends the masses. He is quick to point out that the peasants *were* a political movement and had political force. He points out that there were several power relationships in the lives of the peasantry that inherently involve politics: the tenant-cultivators, sharecroppers and agricultural laborers. He also points out that these relationships contain

elements of "dominance" and "subordination."²² Guha sees a "triumvirate" ruling the peasantry: the "landlord, the moneylender and the official" who "came to form under colonial rule."²³ The peasants exhibited their colonial awareness, Guha feels, by attempting to destroy these relationships and thereby "engaged himself in what was essentially a political task."²⁴ The peasant was by no means frivolously revolting. He "risked all by attempting to destroy [these relationships] by rebellion."²⁵ The peasant was not "spontaneous" in his revolts, and "knew what he was doing. The fact that this was designed primarily to destroy the authority of the superordinate elite and carried no elaborate blueprint for its replacement, does not put it outside the realms of politics."²⁶ The peasant, Guha concludes, was aware of his own "project of power."

Throughout Guha's work, however, he views the peasantry as a collective and they by no means are. They span castes that are very distinct from one another: untouchables, farmers, merchants, soldiers, etc. His predisposition towards Marxist glorification of the collective masses eliminates their unique voices. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak complains about Guha's representation of the peasant in her article, "Can the Subaltern Speak?": "The terms 'people' and 'subaltern classes' [are] used as synonymous throughout [Guha's definition.] The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'."²⁷

Like Kaye, Guha fails to see the peasantry as anything but non-elite. In Kaye's case, the elite were the Brahman, in Guha's the bourgeoisie. Utpal Dutt, on the other hand, uses theatre to explore the peasantry in more detail.

Despite the fact that the majority of the masses are devoid of primary sources for their history, Dutt invents—responsibly—a voice for them. Nandi Bhatia, and Assistant Professor of English at the University of Western Ontario, discusses the ways in which Utpal Dutt uses the theatre to get across his ideas of historiography concerning the peasantry. She explains that "artists" in India "excavated India's heroic past . . . to generate a sense of Indian unity, instill patriotism among audiences, and foster a sense

of national identity via (mythical) revivals of India's golden age."²⁸ Utpal Dutt is a Marxist playwright in the "genre of historical drama."²⁹ His Little Theatre Group "became a central site for staging the struggles of oppressed groups against repressive forces."³⁰ Bhatia explains that Dutt recuperates history in an attempt to subvert its "colonialist myths." He advocates and "unveiling of history" that calls into question "bourgeois truths" based upon and distorted by "pretensions of impartiality."³¹

Dutt feels the need to comment upon the "profound divisions in post-colonial India which challenge the myth of Indian unity sustained by both alternative and official versions of nationalism." He uses his theatre to "engage a dialectic . . . and demands to explore its implications for official narratives of nationalism in post-colonial India."³² Much like Chakrabarty, he questions the "official" state narratives. He also seems to fill Spivak's request for un-generalizing the subaltern, at least according to Bhatia. She argues that Dutt offers an "alternative interpretation," to the events that restores significance to ordinary people's roles during the Mutiny/Rebellion.³³ Not only does Dutt represent a collective struggle, but he exhibits on which "crosses caste and class lines."³⁴ In this way, he is taking Guha one step further, by illustrating inherent differences in this "coalition."³⁵ Bhatia claims that Dutt's "project of excavating the past from the viewpoint of the subaltern populace . . . performs a dual task . . . [I]t exposes the limitations of colonialist (mis)interpretations of the first war of independence" and "it prevents a premature celebration" of ideas of Indian unity. "Dutt's play not only rewrites what the colonial rulers called the 'Great Mutiny' into an anticolonial rebellion, it also disrupts the mythical claims of Indian unity by exposing the ongoing caste and class conflicts in post-colonial India."³⁶

Dutt has an interest in the society as a whole—especially those under both colonial and Indian elite rule. In fact

"Dutt's drama focuses on the popular base of the insurgency to bring alive the constitutive role of the marginalized in the uprising—weavers, women, untouchables, the urban poor, prostitutes, and peasants—through which the sub-plot of the family drama of three

generations which inserts the history of British exploitation into the framework of the imminent uprising.³⁷

Yet, while Dutt's theatre "constitutes an ideological strategy that counters . . . imperialist revisions of the 'mutiny,'" he also "refuses to see the simplistic binary logic of colonizer and colonized, that heaps indiscriminate attacks on the colonizer, and displays, as well, the complexity of inner dissensions within a community organized on the basis of caste, class, and religious prejudice, and the failure of native leadership to aid in its success."³⁸ Dutt clearly does not merely blame the colonizers for the insurgency—even native Indian rulers oppressed those under them. Oppression cut across class lines as well, and unlike Kaye or Guha, Dutt seeks to draw attention to this. Another responsible step Dutt's theatrical historiography takes is in its representation of different genders. Bhatia points out that "[t]o account for the role of women in this historical moment, Dutt brings into the focus the nexus of gender and nationalism. However he complicates this nexus by casting one of his female protagonists . . . in the role of a prostitute" whose over is the play's protagonist and whose nights are spent gratifying the English.³⁹ By placing a prostitute into his play, one who serves as an inspiration to the soldiers, "Dutt creates . . . neither the 'respectable' mother or wife, nor a woman who is socially victimized, but one who voluntarily

chooses to sleep with the enemy so she can aid her own people . . . [Dutt] places her as an equal among soldiers."

Another woman who upsets the traditional Indian stereotype of 'mother India' is the protagonist's mother:

Placed in a doubly Othered position of a colonial economy governed by unequal power relations on the one hand, and the nationalist equation of the Indian mother as the 'mother of the nation' on the other, Katsuri's role serves as a defiance to these differentiated tropes of entrapment. Chastising the soldiers in full emotion rage, she says: 'Tell me, while I am still in this world, what son of a bitch guarantees me two meals a day? I want you all to die, so I shall have a fresh supply of merchandise.'⁴⁰

Consequently, Dutt is breaking open the subaltern's collective identity and giving them unique voices, despite the lack of true identities available for him to work with. Unlike Kaye and Guha, who view the masses, or at least speak of them, in terms of collective identity, Dutt actually breaks them down into complicated interactions among a people who are themselves divided by caste and class. In this way, the historiography which generalizes the masses can be thwarted. A new identity, one which still marvels at the power of the masses, can be understood in terms of the many voices that combine in collective action.

Notes

¹ Sir John Kaye, "The War as a Brahmanical Protest," in Ainslie T. Embree, ed., *1857 War in India: Mutiny or War of Independence?* (Boston, DC Heath and Company, 1968), 27.

² Kaye 27.

³ Kaye 27.

⁴ Kaye 28.

⁵ Kaye 28.

⁶ Rani Lakshmi Bai, "Two Letters to the Marquis of Dalhousie 1853, 1854," Barbara Harlow and Mia Carter, eds., *Imperialism & Orientalism: A Documentary Sourcebook*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), 175.

⁷ Kaye 28.

⁸ Kaye 29.

⁹ Kaye 29.

¹⁰ Kaye 30.

¹¹ Sir John Kaye, *History of the Indian Mutiny*, Vol. I, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1971), xii.

¹² Ranajit Guha, "Not at Home in Empire," *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Spring 1997), 485.

¹³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 1.

¹⁴ Guha 6.

¹⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History," in Bill Ashcroft, et al., eds., *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 384-385.

¹⁶ Guha 2.

¹⁷ Guha 3.

¹⁸ Guha 3.

¹⁹ Guha 4.

²⁰ Guha 4.

²¹ Guha 5.

²² Guha 6.

²³ Guha 8.

²⁴ Guha 8.

²⁵ Guha 8.

²⁶ Guha 9.

²⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Bill Ashcroft et al., eds., *The Post Colonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6.

²⁸ Nandi Bhatia, "Staging the 1857 Mutiny as 'The Great Rebellion': Colonial History and Post Colonial Interventions in Utpal Dutt's *Mahavidroh*," *Theatre Journal*, 51.2 (May 1999), 167.

²⁹ Bhatia 168.

³⁰ Bhatia 168.

³¹ Bhatia 168-169.

³² Bhatia 169.

³³ Bhatia 169.

³⁴ Bhatia 170.

³⁵ Bhatia 170.

³⁶ Bhatia 170-171.

³⁷ Bhatia 173.

³⁸ Bhatia 177.

³⁹ Bhatia 178.

⁴⁰ Bhatia 179.

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