



UNDERSTANDING PEASANT NATIONALISM IN INDIA: A STUDY ON ODISHA

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(Abstract- The popular peasant movement in India as a theory in social science research started emerging in 1960's and 1970's. In India it is one of a significant part of social history during India's struggle for independence. The Indian national movement as such has been debated in various ways. Among them all the Nationalist, the Marxist, the Imperialist and most recently the subaltern theory is very significant. In the present research paper thus an attempt has been made to understand the various theories and making special reference to the historiography of Odisha.)

(Index Terms- Peasant, National Movement, Nationalist, Imperialist, Marxist, Subaltern, elite, bourgeoisie, tribals, Naxalbari, Odisha)

In social science research in the late 1960s and early 1970s there has been somewhat of a paradoxical rediscovery of peasants. Suddenly, behind the newsmen's headings about glib politicians, vicious generals, pushy foreigners, and fiery revolutionaries, a great deal of unknown peasantry was identified as one of the foremost and fundamental elements which made the so-called developing societies into what they were. After a prolonged period of anonymity the peasant issue in academic discussion came back as an significant issue of research all over the world. For the English-speaking circle of Western academic culture of the post-war years it was discovered rather than rediscovered that the first extensive encounter as social phenomenon was expressed as a conceptual issue. There after it opened the flood gate of research publications exclusively relating to peasant question. The word 'peasant' moved right to the top of sociological fashions and publishers popularity charts.¹ The peasant was referred to that section of the rural masses that depended upon land husbandry as important

¹. Teodor Shanin, Teodor (ed.), *Peasant and Peasant Societies (Selected Readings)*, London, 1987.

source of their livelihood. Their primary occupation was cultivation of land and the basis of family units.² Since then it became a widely recognized fact in the history of the twentieth century that peasants, who comprise the largest solitary segment of mankind, may have a unique part to play in shaping our destinies. Interpreting the historicity of the peasantry means to investigate the past of the peasantry with a view to reveal its capacity for resistance and transformation.³ The peasantry has behaved politically often enough as a class-like social entity in pre-capitalist societies. Importantly, in the world of industrial capitalist societies the peasantry has shown their ability for cohesive political action. The historical development of political dominations by the internal or external forces has come down heavily to weaken the peasants' political power and potential. Granting this, peasantry cannot be ignored and its actions dismissed.⁴ However in the 1980's and 1990's there was a shift or emergence and consolidation of the new populism influenced by a post-modern cultural analysis as embodied in the new social movement theories, the everyday form of struggle framework, subaltern studies and within subaltern the revisionists. However, whatever might be changed or changing discourse, every political tradition is as valid as any other, and all political traditions are consequently acceptable.⁵

The scholars have accepted that under colonial rule India was a peasant society⁶ the major sections of the population lived in villages.⁷ They have a long history of resistance against the indigenous as well as the outside exploiters, who oppressed them in many parts of the India.⁸ There were more than 60 such popular resistance movements since the revolt of 1857.⁹ In Orissa, the earliest was the Khurda Paik uprisings in the period between 1817-24. In the hilly tracts of Orissa too the tribals and non-tribal peasants rose in revolt throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰

The most important issue for which the popular peasant unrest surfaced in India was colonial government's taxation system. Firstly the peasants sometimes asked for the reduction in the existing levels of taxation either on the ground that crops had failed or that prices had fallen low. At other times they resisted unfair enhancement in the existing rates on the ground that they were not based on a fair assessment of the peasants' ability to pay. However, it would be wrong to presuppose that they called for the abrogation of the taxation system. Secondly, the peasants demanded occupancy rights on lands they cultivated as tenants of landlords and which once

². Eric Stoke, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in agrarian society and peasant rebellion in colonial India*, New Delhi, 1978, p. 289 (see introduction).

(While defining the peasants Eric Stoke includes the poorer peasants and progressive farmers as they belong to a common category in terms of class. He also argues that whatever the dissimilarities in the size of landholdings, both groups are composed of individuals who possess land and even earn their living by investing their labor in it.)

³. Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, New Delhi, 1995, p. 109.

⁴. Teodor Shanin, *Peasantry in Political Action in Teodor Shanin (ed)*, Peasant and Peasant Societies (Selected Readings), London, 1987, pp. 357-362.

⁵. Tom Brass, *Peasants, Populism and Post-modernism: The Return of the Agrarian Myth*, London, 2000, pp. 5-6.

⁶. William R. Pinch, *Peasants and Monks, in British India*, New Delhi, 1996, p. 1.

⁷. Walter Hauser, *Agrarian Conflict and Peasant Movements in the Twentieth Century India* in Mencher P. Joan, ed., *Social Anthropology and Peasantry*, Mumbai, 1983, p.248.

⁸. Kathleen Gough, Indian Peasant Uprisings, *Economic and Political Weekly*, August-September 1974, p. 1391.

⁹. S.L. Doshi, *Peasant Struggles: From Feudal Break down Agrarian Capitalism*, *Journal of Contemporary Relevant Sociology*, vol.II, 1954, no.1, p. 34.

¹⁰. P.K. Mishra, *Political Unrest in Orissa in the 19th Century*, Calcutta, 1983, p. X.

belonged to their ancestors. The landlords instead of recognizing their occupancy rights, arbitrarily enhanced the rents. Besides these the peasants offered resistance against evictions, rack-renting, and collection of various illegal *cesses* or *abwabs* and demand of *bethi* (*forced labour*) or *begar*.¹¹

However, the peasant struggles, which took place towards the close of the freedom movement and in the immediate aftermath of the independence, differed from that which flowered during the earlier period as well as those that have been taking place in contemporary times.¹² Between 1858-1914 peasant resistance in colonial India was necessarily lacking coherence. Their protests were being considered as local agrarian struggle directed against the indigenous exploiters and the disturbances had their own time frame and had been quelled. However in 1918 the situation underwent a sudden change with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi. He provided a new, dynamic charismatic leadership to the rural peasant masses of India and accordingly the Congress defended the peasant demands more militantly which became a greatest stumbling block to the colonial regime. Although peasant resistance did not thus pose a direct threat to British rule between 1858-1914, it continually worried colonial officials. The colonial authorities as well as colonial historiographers frequently sought in their reports and writings to rebuff the reality of such movements. Their resistance was labelled as 'backward looking and unprogressive', and their consciousness as 'primordial' and 'superstitious'.

1960s onwards in India, an interest in the peasantry began to surface, not as mere objects of the colonial state, but as subjects of their own history.¹³ But 1970s saw a whole wave of studies on this theme and one could maintain that the historical writings on the issue peasant resistance in colonial India as a subject of independent research. The three basic approaches that have emerged in Modern Indian History are: (1) the Imperialist/Neo-Imperialist (2) the Nationalist and (3) the Marxist.¹⁴ The Imperialist, Nationalist and Marxist historiography, originated much early.¹⁵ The others are being the Subaltern and of course Neo-nationalist, Neo-Marxists debating on the issue of eruption, character and development and achievement of India's struggle for independence. They have put forward divergent views to understand Indian nationalism. Many of them time again shown the tendencies to change from one school of thoughts to another in reaction to the changed circumstances or put forward more aggressive viewpoints. The schools therefore are at best, abstracted models suited only for limited purpose. However they are still relevant because of the over increasing mass of writings on Indian nationalism, the movement, the ideologies arising from one perspective or another, emphasizing, on a set of facts in preference over others and evaluating the overall performance one way or another.¹⁶ In the present study however, we would make a brief sketch of the Imperialist, Nationalist and Marxist historiography and the way they have debated the peasant struggle during the National Movement.

¹¹. Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India: Subalterns and Beyond*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 1988, p. 2174.

¹². S.L.Doshi, op.cit., p. 34.

¹³. David Hardiman, ed., *Peasant Resistance in India 185-1914*, London, 1992, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴. Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasant Resistance and Peasant Consciousness in Colonial India (Subaltern and Beyond)*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 1988, p. 2109.

¹⁵. Partha Charterjee, *For an Indian History of Peasant Struggle*, *Social Scientist*, vol. 16, no. 11, November 1988, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶. G. Aloysius, *Nationalism Without a Nation in India*, New Delhi, 2007, p. 95.

Imperialist historiography characterizes peasants as noble, truthful, oppressed by the landlords, traders, money-lenders, reverent of authority. They pretended that the agitators were from among the Indian elite who projected them for their own vested designs.¹⁷ Furthermore, the colonial administrators considered themselves as the defender of the peasants against the extortions of the idle urban elite.¹⁸

In South Asia first such writings appeared when Hauser completed his master's thesis on the Bihar Kisan Sabha. This was the first painstaking effort to explore peasant movement history in South Asia, hence the subject in fact been delineated later on by Indian nationalist leaders during anti-colonial mass movement. Among the nationalists Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahadev Desai and many others comprehended the social equality in Indian agrarian society and it was due to British colonial regime.¹⁹ The nationalists have enumerated the overall exploitative and under-developing character of colonialism²⁰ and have explained that in colonial India peasants were simple, innocent and poverty in them were the product of the exploitative nature of the colonial rule.²¹ However, the problem is that the studies of colonial and nationalist idealizations of peasants were marginal and deceptive.²²

But it is to the broad Marxist approach or tradition that the vast majority of the writings on peasant resistance have tended to belong.²³ To name a few A.R. Desai's²⁴ in his edited volume provides a view of tribal and peasant struggles in India during the colonial period. He observes that the Indian peasants were not 'passive', 'fatalistic', 'docile' and 'unresisting'. While making such observations, A.R. Desai was highly influenced by the findings of Kathleen Gough,²⁵ who made a brief survey of 77 peasant movements in India spread over 200 years. She argued that the peasant and tribal uprisings mainly occurred in India in response to the economic deprivation they faced under colonial rule. Besides, she has also enumerated the class nature of the peasant and tribal movements. D.N. Dhanagare²⁶ has also developed similar kinds of arguments while studying peasant revolts and resistance in India from 1920 to 1950. Among the Marxist leaders and Marxist historians, the work of Namboodripad,²⁷ may be prominently mentioned. In his reference and in various other writings on the subject he has presented beautifully the class analysis of these movements.

¹⁷.Charterjee,Partha, *For an Indian History of Peasant Struggle*, *Social Scientist*, vol.16, No.11, November 1988, p. 7.

¹⁸. Pinch, William, op.cit., p.4.

¹⁹. H. Majid Siddiqi, *Power, Agrarian Structure, and Peasant Mobilization in Modern India in Willam R. Pinch (ed.) Speaking of Peasants: Essays on Indian History and Politics in Honor of Walter Hauser*, New Delhi, 2008, p. 57.

²⁰. Bipan Chandra, *Nationalist Historians Interpreting of the Indian National Movement* in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed., *Situating Indian History*, Delhi, 1986, p.195.

²¹. Partha Chaterjee, op.cit.,p.7.

²². Pinch, R. William, op.cit., p.5.

²³. Mridula Mukhrjee, Mridula, op.cit., p.5.

²⁴. A.R. Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggle in India, 1920-1950*, New Delhi, 1983 (See Introduction).

²⁵. Gough, Kathleen, op.cit., p. 1391.

²⁶. D.N. Dhanagare, *Peasant Movement in India, 1920-50*, New Delhi, 1983 (see introduction).

²⁷. E.M.S.Namboodripad, *A Short History of the Peasant Movement in Kerala*, Bombay, 1943 (see introduction).

However, very recently, Ranjit Guha and his historian colleagues in India and abroad have enumerated an important approach to the study of tribal and peasant resistance, which has been broadly categorized as subaltern historiography, originally, invented by Gramsci. They have used the proposition alternatively with “subordinate” and sometimes “instrumental” to signify hegemonic groups or classes. Guha’s arguments were further developed other subaltern historians like; Saahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Ranjit Guha and Gyanendra Pandey. In their series of works titled ‘Subaltern Studies’ these scholars repeatedly endeavored to understand peasant’s resistance movement as ‘subaltern agency’ from the viewpoint of people instead of the exploitative nature of the colonial state itself.²⁸ To mention prominently, Ranjit Guha in his introductory essay defines the role of the politics of the ‘people’ as against that of the ‘elite’. He considers all earlier historiography, *i.e.* the Neo-colonialist and Neo-nationalist and also much of Marxist historiography as elite historiography which has always exaggerated the part played by the elite. In his view, there existed two parallel streams of politics *i.e.* ‘elite politics’ and subaltern politics, which could not be integrated as a whole.²⁹ He stated that during colonial period subaltern’s political domain constituted as an autonomous agency. Going further he pointed out that the ‘the people’ or the subaltern classes were the population belonging from the labour class, intermediate strata and the people from the town and cities.³⁰ The elite constituted the foreign administrators, planters, landlords and other influential sections of the society.³¹ Guha argued that the subaltern groups expressed their dissatisfaction through rebellions, riots and popular movements. He says that the elite were the creations of colonial power in India, even the Indian National Congress as elite political organization. Hence during Indian political movement there were two political discourse functioned with their own separate identity, sometimes overlapping each other which could not be integrated as a whole.³²

Ranjit Guha furthered his argument when he published another volume, *i.e. Dominance Without Hegemony: History And Power In Colonial India* in 1998. In this book he explored the colonial state in South Asia was significantly different from the metropolitan bourgeois state, which is hegemonic in character. In fact the uniqueness of the South Asian colonial state lies specifically in this difference and thus a historical paradox. Thus the colonial state, as Guha points out was a paradox—a dominance without hegemony. Pertaining to nationalist movement he says that there was a structural fragmentation between the elite and subaltern domains of politics during colonial India. Accordingly, the Indian elite or the bourgeoisie could not comprehend the people *i.e.* subalterns into mainstream Indian politics. There was constant enmity between the bourgeois colonial rulers and Indian elite bourgeois nationalist, who led a passive nationalist movement in order to succeed the colonial ruling power with the shared values of their colonial masters.³³

The subaltern approach has attracted considerable criticism. First Mridula Mukherjee has questioned Guha’s proposition of subaltern protest movements as were spontaneous and traditional. Second, the validity of the

²⁸. Stephen Morton, *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak*, Routledge, 2003, rpt 2007, pp. 48-49.

²⁹. Ranjit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies- Writings on South Asia History and Society*, vol. I, Delhi, 1982, pp. 2-3.

³⁰. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

³¹. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³². *Ibid.*, pp.5-6.

³³. Ranjit Guha’s *Dominance Without Hegemony: History And Power In Colonial India*, Cambridge, 1998 (see introduction).

subalterns' notion of 'autonomous consciousness' and 'parallel political process' have been questioned. Mukherjee further pointed out that "this approach cannot be grasped the relationship between the peasants nationalism and the national movement".³⁴ Thirdly, this thesis lacks precise meaning and scope of the concept of subaltern as an analytical category. D.N. Dhanagare has suggested that the subaltern studies approach confines itself preferentially to the colonial period, though not all the adherents strictly do so.³⁵ Their focus now has shifted as the subaltern scholars who studied the subject as 'people's history' or the 'history from the below'.³⁶ The 'people's history' or the 'history from below' which the subaltern historiography emphasized failed to connect it from past to the present.³⁷ Further the Naxalbari Movement in Bengal in 1967 forced the subaltern historians to rethink about the subaltern thesis.³⁸ Therefore Gayatri Spivak suggested that the real ideas of subaltern historians now in the process of 'deconstruction' or 'revision'.³⁹ However, when Spivak wrote *Can Subaltern Speak?* it generated a lot of criticism from various quarters. Asha Vardharajan and Moore Gilbert define Spivak's use of 'deconstruction' as a 'negative science'.⁴⁰ Gyanendra Pandey therefore remarked that 'the 'revisionist' historians found it necessary to admit that the Nationalist Movement was not entirely an optimal illusion. However, their 'new' interpretation of its development marked a return to the stance of the post-Chirol liberal colonialists, only marginally modified by new data'.⁴¹ From Gyan Pandey's propositions it is quite clear that the subaltern historians are still not in apposition to accept the fact that, Indian nationalism was a mass movement fought collectively against the British Raj.

The regionalist school (like the imperialist school) of modern Indian historiography as exemplified in the works of A. Low (1968), J.H. Broomfield (1966) and others, moved in yet another direction away from the dominant pan-Indian historiography. For these historians, the interaction between Britain and India is not a single encounter between two great monoliths; it is only at a rather rarefied level that modern Indian history may be said to comprise a single all India story. Needless to say this rarefaction is ideological in both intent and character. He explained that to understand the Indian nationalist movement regional variations needs to be taken into considerations and it could an alternative model to study Indian society. Broomfield has thus utilized the concept of the regional elite-Bhadralok to study Bengal politics. This regional approach has been a meaningful in

³⁴. Mridula Mukherjee, *Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution: Practice and Theory*, New Delhi, 2004 (see introduction).

³⁵. D.N. Dhanagare, *Subaltern Consciousness and Populism: Two Approaches in Study of Social Movements in India*, *Social Scientist*, vol.XVI, no.11, 1988, pp. 26-28.

³⁶. Aditya Mukherjee, *The Return of the Colonialism in Indian Economic History: The Last Phase of Colonialism in India*, Indian History Congress's Presidential Address (Modern India Section), Sixty- Eight Session 28-30 December 2007, New Delhi.p.6.

³⁷. Harman Chris, *A People's History of the World*, New Delhi, 2005, p. iii (see introduction).

(*Criticizing the 'history from below' Chris Harman has suggested that 'simply emphasizing with the people involved in one cannot, by itself, bring you to understand the wider forces that their lives, and still shape ours. You cannot, for instance, understanding the rise of Christianity without understanding the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. You cannot understand the flowering of art during the Renaissance without understanding the great crises of European feudalism and the advance of civilization on continents outside Europe. You cannot understand the workers movements of the 19th century without understanding the industrial revolution. And you cannot begin to grasp how humanity arrived at its present condition without understanding the interrelation of these and many other events.*')

³⁸. Morton, Stephen, op. cit., pp.50-51.

³⁹. Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁰. Ibid., p.140.

⁴¹. Gyanendra Pandey, *Omnibus: The Ascendancy of Congress in Uttar Pradesh, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, Remembering Partition*, New Delhi, 2008, p.5.

studying regional social histories with a wealth of detail, and subtle nuances of meaning, contexts and relationships.⁴²

Dealing with the regional historiography of Orissa W.W. Hunter, P. Mukherjee, Hare Krishna Mahatab, K. M. Patra, M.N. Das, K. C. Jena, J.K. Samal, F.G. Bailey, Nivedita Mohanty, N.K. Jit, A.C. Pradhan, Sadashib Pradhan, Biswamoy Pati, Rajib Lochan Sahoo, Kishor K. Basa, Chandi Prasad Nanda, Pritish Acharya and few others have greatly contributed to the understanding of modern Orissa as well as Nationalist politics in Orissa. Therefore it is pertinent to mention that few studies are available which deal with peasants and tribals' political process at the regional level. Among these, K.M. Patra's work '*Political Unrest in Orissa in the 19th Century (Anti-British, Anti-Feudal and Agrarian Risings)*'⁴³ is the beginning of the study on the social history of Orissa. It pioneered as it brought about a history of the study of the peoples' movement right from the beginning of the British occupation of Orissa in 1803 to the end of the nineteenth century. It laid emphasis on the continuous struggle carried on in the hilly tracts of Orissa where the tribal communities were actively involved. Dealing with the peasant and tribals' political movement during twentieth century Biswomay Pati's '*Resisting Domination – Peasants, Tribals and National Movement in Orissa 1920-1950*', is most significant.⁴⁴ In this work the main focus of the author is to describe the process of *Hinduisation* of tribals of Orissa during the colonial period, which led to the narrowing of the gulf between the tribals and non-tribals, and thereby between the coastal region and western interiors and, finally, between the common people and the middle class intellectuals. The author further argues that perhaps no other factor contributed so heavily to this process as colonialism itself; the land settlements, growth of money economy, and the *peasantisation / hinduisation* of tribals. The author then has studied the role of peasants and tribals in the National Movement during the period between 1920-50. Sadashib Pradhan's *Agrarian Political Movement in the States of Orissa: 1919-39*⁴⁵ is another important work to understand the regional political mobilization of peasants and tribals of Orissa. Very recently however, Pritish Acharya in his *National Movement and Politics in Orissa 1920-29*⁴⁶ has attempted to study the Nationalist Movement and politics in Orissa during the 1920s. In his book the author tried to explore the nationalist movement in Odisha in the context regional differences focusing on cultural identity perspectives. On the other hand Chandi Prasad Nanda in his book *Vocalizing Silence: Political Protest in Orissa 1930-42*⁴⁷, has tried to understand the various aspects of Indian National Movement by giving emphasis to different social groups with fair amount of weight on peasants and tribals. Kishor K. Basa in his *Imaging Orissa: Archeology, Art History and Cultural Identity*,⁴⁸ while arguing about the Oriya nationalism has considered the emergence of Oriya consciousness as an attempt on the part of the Oriya middle class to create a political community based on two

⁴².G. Aloysius, op.cit., p.6.

⁴³. K.M. Patra, *Political Unrest in Orissa in the 19th Century (Anti-British, Anti-Feudal and Agrarian Risings)*, Calcutta, 1983.

⁴⁴. Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination- Peasant, Tribals and National Movement in Orissa 1920-1950*, New Delhi, 1993 (See introduction).

⁴⁵. Sadashib Pradhan, *Agrarian Political Movement: States of Orissa 1931-1949*, New Delhi, 1986.

⁴⁶. Pritish Acharya, *National Movement and Politics in Orissa 1920-1929*, New Delhi, 2009.

⁴⁷. Chandi Prasad Nanda, *Vocalizing Silence: Political Protest in Orissa 1930-42*, New Delhi, 2009.

⁴⁸. Kishor K. Basa, *Imaging Orissa: Archeology, Art History and Cultural Identity* in Angelika Malinar *et.al.* Text and Context in History, Literature and Religion of Orissa, New Delhi, 2004.

principles of exclusion and inclusion, the former isolating the neighbouring ethnic groups, and the latter bringing other Oriyas into the political fold. Moreover, regional nationalism and the Indian nationalism do not necessarily constitute a binary model, nor does the latter neatly follow the former, their relationship is rather complex and multilayered.

Rajib Lochan Sahoo in his book *Agrarian Change and Peasant Unrest in Colonial India: Orissa 1912-39*⁴⁹ has examined peasant unrest of colonial Orissa from an economic point of view. It has positively contributed to the understanding of the complex agrarian relations in the colonial economy of Orissa as well as India.

Thus, these are historiography discourses that have existed in the contemporary academic settings to study the subaltern or more particularly the peasant and tribals political process during the anti-imperialist mass movement in India as well as in Orissa.



⁴⁹. Rajib Lochan Sahoo *Agrarian Change and Peasant Unrest in Colonial India : Orissa 1912-1939*, New Delhi, 2004,