Peasantry and national integration

Agüero Doná, Celma

Published by El Colegio de México

Agüero Doná, Celma.
Peasantry and national integration.
El Colegio de México, 1981.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/74369.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/74369

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2574635
The Peasantry and the Ethnic Factor: the Adivasis from Chota Nagpur (India)

Susana B.C. Devalle

The problem to be discussed in this paper came to light while observing the history of peasants of tribal origin (*adivasis*) in Chota Nagpur. They have been a permanent presence in the agrarian history of the area and a politically active force.

The history of agrarian groups has been frequently kept on the margin of official history. This has been due in part to the persistence of approaches that consider peasant groups as entities isolated from the social context of which they are a part, and as having their own dynamics, instead of viewing their role in the context of the larger society and as active participants in historical processes. In this respect it is important to observe the process of formation of a political consciousness among the peasantry and, in relation to it, the existence of organized participation in the struggle against dominant native elements, colonial domination, and the obstacles that they encounter against their participation in the political life of independent nations.

Under British rule in India, the first signs of protest on the part of the *adivasi* peasants of Chota Nagpur rose from the need to solve agrarian conflicts involving the economic relations centering around the character of rights to land use, agricultural work and production, and appropriation of the latter by local sectors or by elements coming from other parts of India. The first elements of the tradition of protest of the *adivasis* from the area 1, dating from the end of the XVIII century and

---

1 The present paper has been based on the study of cases of traditional peasant protest among the Mundas, the Santals and the Bhumijs, mainly those in the course of the XIX century. The following movement and actions of protest have been analyzed in more detail: Ganga Narain's Rebellion of 1832, among the Bhumijs; the Santal Rebellion of 1855, among the Santals, and the Birsaithe
continuing during the XIX century, were formulated around these issues and evidenced by the uprisings, the activities of social banditry and non-cooperation. Here a dual analytical problem is encountered. On the one hand, these are traditional communal cultivators that were transformed into peasants. On the other hand, the ethnic element is present. Thus, the predominantly agrarian nature of their protest movements during the XIX century and those that have occurred in the present ought to be kept in view. At the same time it should not be forgotten that these people were also defending their identity and integrity from pressures of dominant economic, political and cultural forces, a struggle that still continues.

The British colonial system began to reinforce itself through special legislation, armed force and the use of the local elements who controlled land and peasants. The appropriation of agricultural production, and of the very peasants as a captive labor force, was achieved thoroughly and systematically by way of a system of rents and taxes which used this income to feed the colonial administration's treasury. This appropriation not only affected the peasant and his produce, but sometimes the government also became the direct owner of the land, as in the case of the Damin-i-koh. In order to unite and organize themselves, sometimes in broadbased movements founded in multi-tribal alliances, the adivasis that participated in protest actions had first to define themselves as peasants in opposition to the immediately domi-


For the present situation opinions are based on published sources and interviews.

An area around the Rajmahal Hills was delimited in 1832, encompassing 1351 sq. miles (the Census of 1901 mentions 1,422 sq. miles), 60 per cent of them high lands. It was declared government property. The creation of this sector was due to the ideal of using its strategic situation for the defense of Bengal and of commerce, and to increase the rent income with the progressive colonization of the area. The Government strongly sponsored the migration of Santals to the Damin so as to open it up for cultivation. In 1851, 82,795 tribal and non-tribal migrants lived in this area, settled in 1,473 villages. Only the 1,164 Santal villages were to pay rent. (cf. W.W. Hunter, The Annals of Rural Bengal, New York, 1868, p. 234; V. Raghavaiah, Tribal Revolts, Nellore, 1971, p. 148, and Roy Chaudhur, "Santal Parganas" Bengal District Bazeteers, 1905, Patna, p. 74-75).
nant sectors: the zamindars, the thikadars, the jagirdars, the money-lenders and the merchants (when these last two also came to control adivasi lands). ³ Aware of their condition as peasants, the adivasis defended their rights to the land they had tilled for generations against sectors that, while not participating in agricultural work, appropriated the produce and even exerted control over the peasants as a labor force.

The economically powerful local sectors were used by the colonial system of economic exploitation to consolidate its political power over territories with a tribal population and, among other things, to ensure that rents and taxes coming from agricultural activities continued constant, even in periods of famine. At the same time, these locally dominant sectors benefited by British imposed legislation which introduced the idea of private land ownership and considered land as a marketable good. The deprivation of the peasants of their lands was legalized by the new laws, which were careful to regulate, but not eliminate, the system of peasant labor force exploitation, as in the case of the kamioti system. ⁴

The adivasi peasants perceived the character of the colonial system and the new economic relationships in which they were involved through their experiences in legal protest and failed uprisings (aimed at attracting the Government’s attention so it would grant justice) and, as well, through contacts with the agents of the administration and the bearers of the colonial ideology. This perception developed gradually. First, they became familiar with the strength of the army, then the increasing demands of the tax collectors, the injustice of the courts’ employees, the corruption of the police, the ambiguous work of the missionaries,

³ The term zamindar in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa designates a type of hereditary landlord; thikadar a contractor of farmers, and jagirdar a person to whom a conditional or unconditional assignment of land or its revenue is given.

⁴ According to this system, known by names in different regions of India, the indebted peasant was to pay his debt with labor and personal services to the lender while not receiving any payment. Usually the debtor passed in to the condition of a life-time serf. The situation of peasant indebtedness did not improve with the enactment of laws like the Amended Act of Land Tenancy in Bengal of 1918, or The Bihar and Orissa Kamioti Agreements Act, 1920. These laws did not eliminate the kamioti system; they just regulated it. In the thirties the system still existed in Bihar, especially in areas with adivasi population. (Cf.: E. G., Man, Sonthalia and the Sonthals, Calcutta, s.f., p. 111; R. Mukerjee, Land Problems of India, London, 1933, p. 229; W. W. Hunter, A Statistical Account of Bengal, vol. XIV, London, 1877, p. 303; A.G. Roy et. al. The Bihar Local Acts, 1793-1963, Allahabad, 1964, vol. III).
and the ideas coming from the colonizer’s tradition spread through education and missions.  

The agrarian base, a constant element in the long history of protest of the adivasis of Chota Nagpur, was later on encompassed in another kind of offensive and defensive action that developed into a struggle against the agents of the colonial administration and for liberation. The political strategy was based then on the establishment of bonds of solidarity backed by an ethnic consciousness that encouraged action in defense of the cultural and social integrity of the adivasis. The perception of their own ethnicity became a vehicle for the expression of the struggle for economic and political independence, and an instrument for organizing actions and alliances in the face of the colonial representatives. On this basis common interests and aims were detected and projects were formulated, as in the case of the Birsaite Movement. The ethnic banner was thus transformed, within the framework of the colonial system and in the context of peasant protest of the traditional kind, into a means effective for cementing the unity required in organizing a collective, though locally limited, action

5 Christian missionaries of different denominations began to arrive in Chota Nagpur in the XIXth century. Their influence was especially important in education. The missionaries offered help to the peasants against the demands of thikadars and jagirdars. The condition for obtaining their support, not explicit but present in practice, was conversion to Christianity. The converted Mundas began to protest openly against the landlords by means of non-cooperation. For example, in 1874, Christian bhuihars denied their service to the landlords. It seems that the help of the missionaries was effective in the Courts when a converted peasant defended himself against a landlord. Thikadars and jagirdars then turned violently against the missionaries and the converted peasants. Together with this conditional help a conflict developed in relation to lands. The adivasi peasants realized that there was “no difference between the white man at the Calcutta court and the white man at the mission bungalow” (Zide and Munda, “Revolutionary Brisa and the Songs related to him”, Jour. of Soc. Res., 1969, XII, 2 p. 38). It began with the attempt of the missionaries to get hold of pahanai lands for the use of the mission in the Munda area. The reaction of the Mundas was to abandon the new faith. The missionaries then pressured the colonial authorities for more strict laws concerning land. The Sardari Larai movement arose due to these conflicts over land. Conversion followed the ups and downs of peasant protest in the area. After repression, conversion was accepted as a way to avoid punishment and to remain on good terms with the Government (as the Christian faith was the religion of the colonizer).

6 The Birsaite Movement (1895-1900) was a millenarian messianic movement in its form and agrarian in its content. It had a political program where, together with the agrarian problem, the issue of political independence was also considered, conditioned to the elimination of British domination.
against the British. Ethnicity was not only a banner. The need to defend their ethnic identity appeared as a reality. The *adivasis* sought to legitimize their struggle for rights and for a total economic and political, as well as cultural and religious independence, with their own traditions and their own history. The strengthening of their ethnic consciousness and the reinforcement of their identity sprang from an awareness of the existence of processes of penetration of ideas held by the different groups that tried to establish dominion over the tribal areas. This penetration was observable in the persistent tendencies towards Hinduization, in the ideas introduced through legislation, Christianization and education.

The role that ethnic consciousness plays poses a series of fundamental problems. One aspect to be considered is that of the formation of this consciousness and its projection in terms of impairing or favoring the formation of a class consciousness. Another aspect is the detection of definitive patterns of domination as reflected in the character of interethnic relations, in the colonial situations as well as during the process of formation of the nation-state in the independent nations. Lastly, the projects for national integration should be analyzed in terms of the social groups that put them forward, and the aims of these projects.

The so-called ethnic problem has been an intellectual construct used to explain characteristics of societies under colonial domination or of societies that are in the process of nation-building. It has also been an invention of the dominant national sectors that propose historical projects with the aim of imposing them on the pluriethnic society of which they are a part. The colonial administrations skillfully used the ethnic question to impair the crystallization of alliances that could endanger the colonial system. In this situation, the reinforcement of particular ethnic attachments was generally encouraged. In the course of the process of nation-building in pluriethnic societies, the elements that monopolized the elaboration of a national project could sometimes manipulate the ethnic groups with the aim of solving the assumed problem, supporting a certain integration (disintegration) of these groups in order to subordinate them. This attitude goes together with a concept of the nation-state that denies the pluriethnic nature of its society and, consequently, denies full participation to its plural elements in the elaboration of its project. The question arises then as to whether the ethnic problem has been created by the ethnic groups themselves or rather by the dominant national groups in order to impair the development of formulations, independent of the *national* ideological current that the
latter want to prevail. Aside from this intellectual and ideological construct, how do ethnic groups perceive the relationships in which they are involved, and how do they view their participation in society?

The ethnic factor can operate in many ways. A reinforcement of ethnic identity can be used as a defensive weapon in the face of pressures external to the society (as with colonial domination), or it can be manipulated to support external domination. Also, an introversive, defensive attitude can make tendencies towards conformism prevail inside the ethnic groups which might accept terms imposed by the dominant sectors without question.

Manifestations of ethnic consciousness, especially when expressed as collective political actions, are not an example of stubbornness in defending cultural traits (sometimes seen as anachronistic). Neither are they just a mechanism for cataloguing different groups in society, as some scholars would like to present them. Rather they evidence the desire of these social sectors to defend and express themselves, and to participate in the framework of the pluriethnic society in the face of the sectors that impose, dominate and manipulate the destiny of the various components of society in favor of their own national project.

In general terms, in the policies towards ethnic groups, the tendencies are towards absorption, forced integration, elimination, changes produced and imposed from the summit, cooptation, etc. It is interesting to observe the cases where after independence from colonial domination, some of the old policies of the metropolis are again being revived, and the dominant sectors that propose the national project appropriate for themselves the mission civilatrice, formerly the monopoly of the colonizers. These they apply to the national ethnic groups, to educate them, to impose a national language to the detriment of other languages, thereby making these groups less indigenous, less tribal and less different, but not to the degree that recognizing them becomes difficult, and that the social system could continue to reproduce itself.

A criticism is necessary of the types of analyses that manipulate ethnicity to cover something vaguely defined as the ethnic problem: class situations, conflicts in the struggle for power, for superseding economic exploitation, for the avoidance of cultural destruction, for the avoidance of the destruction of the historical past of these peoples. Unfortunately, when integration is talked about in pluriethnic societies, it is generally a partial integration with a concrete aim: a better form of control and, sometimes, a better form of exploitation, as is the case of the indigenous or autochthonous peasantry. Also, unfortunately, the
development of a new and heightened national consciousness (fed with elements coming from the different sectors of the society) is not sought. Thus the possible contributions of various cultures are rejected and the forging of a more complete national history that could embrace elements generally ignored or made marginal to it is made impossible.

In the case of the tribal population in India after independence, the "special" characteristics of the adivasis have been stressed, especially the cultural aspects. It is necessary to change this view and see the adivasis that work on settled agriculture in their essential condition as peasants, as is the case of the majority that live in Chota Nagpur. This condition should be understood in the context of the economic relationships at a national level. This done, one can start to understand and explain what has occurred and is occurring to the adivasis, and how they have acted and now act in specific situations. Thus, one avoids deriving the explanations of the expressions of collective and organized protest of the adivasis from the effects of "cultural clashes" or the "inhability" of the adivasis to "adapt" themselves to the new situations. The inclusion of these protests among the so-called communal conflicts is rejected, because it masks the true nature of conflicts from which the protests derive. The fundamental problem is that of the relationships in which peasants are involved. These are unequal relationships of economic exploitation and of social, political and cultural domination. An awareness of this situation can favor the emergence of a peasant consciousness as to their condition and their interests with regard to other sectors of society. This had led the adivasi peasantry to face concrete situations with collective actions in defense of their basic interests: their land, the product of their land and their work. At another level, this refers to the defense of their land, their language, their culture, their history, as defining their identity, and the awareness of this identity. In independent India, the adivasi peasantry has been involved in political actions where confrontations have been defined in the frame of class struggle, at the level of the economic structure and also in the political front.

Adivasi peasants, together with other sectors of tribal origin, have been officially catalogued as sectors with "special" problems that deserve "special" treatment (what is called protective discrimination). They are named Scheduled Tribes or Backward Tribes. 7 From the mo-

7 Cf. Articles 46, 339 and 340 of the Constitution of India.
ment they are so qualified, the objective condition as peasants of a majority of the *adivasis* is ignored, a condition that they share with other peasant sectors. The privileges and protection given to the *adivasis* show a paternalistic discriminatory attitude that justifies the introduction of changes from above. The ideas of “weakness” and “backwardness” have been promoted in different ways through official action and the activities of working groups organized by social scientists. By defining them as a “special”, separate sector, protecting them in an oppressive fashion, and by giving them the characteristics of “backwardness” and “weakness”, obstacles are set up which prevent the emergence of a consciousness among the *adivasi* peasants as to the real nature of their situation before other sectors of society, as well as the common interests they share with other peasant sectors, *adivasi* or not.

If one considers objective reality in independent India and observes the situation of these peasants in the framework of specific socio-economic relationships, this situation cannot be described simply as the product of a process of acculturation or as a product of communal relations and conflicts with sectors identified by their caste attachments. It is necessary to concentrate the analysis on the existing class structure and the conflicts that develop from it. After independence, the confrontations of *adivasi* peasants with landlords, moneylenders and other dominant rural elements were defined in the field of class struggle. For the peasantry the main issues continued to center around the privation of lands, indebtedness and extortion, and the appropriation of the product of their work in terms of exploitation which affected the *adivasi* peasant as a agricultural labor force. The acceleration of this process increased the number of landless peasants among the *adivasis*. It is not only the local elements with economic and political power that have been responsible for this process, but also the enactment of development plans that included the establishment of large industrial complexes, such as occurred in the rich mineral belt of Chota Nagpur.

The existence of a *tradition of protest* which brings together more than a century and a half of experiences of struggle on agrarian questions tends to make actions on the political front possible, with the consequent development of a “consciousness for itself” among the peasants. The development of this consciousness, based on ethnic identity and on the acknowledgement of their peasant condition in the face of others, confronts serious problems. The hegemonic groups set obstacles to this development not only through the crude methods
of direct repression but also through the more subtle method of the diffusion and imposition of an ideology. This ideology attempts to convince the *adivasi* peasant that he is incapable of surviving without their protection, that his "inherent" weakness will not allow him to struggle or defend himself from the powerful rural sectors, and that he will only succeed if he accepts the kind of help they offer. A commonly used method for diffusing protest is that of cooptation. An example, is the fusion of the Jharkhand Party with the Congress Party in September 1963. Other common tactics include the oversimplification of the issues of national politics at the time of elections. The aim is not to make people politically conscious but to mobilize the votes of peasant masses for parties that represent other social classes.

An old ideal, the formation of a separate *adivasi* state in Chota Nagpur, is still alive. Young *adivasi* intellectuals are forging plans to make it real. This project starts from an ethnic perspective but considers the context of national economic, political and social relationships in India. While the hegemonic groups have not recognized the pluri-ethnic character of the nation, the *adivasi* have, and so are attempting to change the character of the nation-state. These ideas have been able to emerge because there is an awareness among the *adivasi* of Chota Nagpur of their own historical experience. This history in which people see themselves as members of ethnic groups in the face of the other sectors with different historical and cultural traditions and as peasants, has been painfully built up on the basis of a double experience of oppression: one derived from being treated as tribal and considered "primitive" and "backward", and the other that comes from the position of subordination and exploitation as a peasant. The old and the new forms of subordination that the *adivasi* peasants remember do not lead them to accept the imposed ideologies. The *adivasi* of Chota Nagpur have shown that they reject being subjected to a global colonial or capitalist socioeconomic system of control and exploitation. This happened generally by means of "passive" protest and, at exceptional times, with desperate frontal struggle culminating in rebellion.

8 The group of Christian *adivasis* has oriented the Jharkhand Party since its beginnings. The *adivasis* of Chota Nagpur acknowledge that cooptation has touched the Party and have doubted the moral integrity of its most important leader, Jaipal Singh. Non-Christian *adivasis* consider the converted as people that look towards the dominant national groups. The ethnic issue has been manipulated by the Jharkhand Party to attract the non-Christian sector.
These are the ones who are aware of their own history. There are others who have forgotten it and built an imaginary history of replacement, paving the way for their assimilation by the dominant social system on its terms. This latter is the case of the sectors of the *adivasi* population that make efforts towards Hinduization and, in an ambiguous way, the case of the Christian *adivasis*.

Those who are aware rely upon their history or resistance, and also upon the strength coming from the feeling of belonging to the land. Land is understood as the territory that defines the people and their *nationality*, and it also refers more directly to the work and *raison d'être* of the peasantry.

The *adivasi* peasants of Chota Nagpur have been constantly present in the agrarian history of India. However, the peasant movement in the area is still weak. Nevertheless, with the consciousness that they have developed throughout their historical experiences, they have been able to defend their interests in the economic field with actions that gradually passed to a political level. The *adivasis* have the possibility of strategically utilizing yet another resource: the strength of their ethnic identity. It allows them to define themselves, to unite for action and to look for their own ideological formulations.