

The Subaltern in South Asian History and Society

Report of a Conference

(By a Special Correspondent)

IN November 1982, the Australian National University hosted a conference in Canberra on the subaltern in South Asian History and Society. It was organised by Ranajit Guha, who is a Senior Research Fellow there. Readers of this journal may be familiar with the first volume of "Subaltern Studies: Writings in South Asian History and Society" (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1982), which is edited by Ranajit Guha. Volume Two is expected any time now. The conference was held to discuss the essays which will form the basis for Volume Three in this series. About sixty Asian specialists from various Australian universities as well as scholars from India, Britain and the United States attended the conference.

The following papers were presented at the conference:

David Hurdiman: Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922-23.

Dipesh Chakravarty: Trade Unions is a Semi-fendal Culture: The Paradox of jute Workers' Organisation, 1920-50.'

David Arnold: Peasant Reactions to the Madras Famine of 1876-78.

Shahid Amin; Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-22.

Partha Chatterjee: Gandhism and the Political Appropriation of the Peasantry.

Bruce Kapierer: Colonial Orders, Class Struggle and Cultural and Religious Transformation in Sri Lanka.

Cyan Paucley: Religion and "Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Mubarakpur.

Imran Ali: Malign Growth: The Impact of Agricultural Colonisation on Economy and Society in the Punjab.

Sumit Saikar: From Swadeshi to Non-co-operation; Subaltern Groups and the Politics of Nationalism in Bengal.

Bernard Cohn; Discourse as Coercion: Nineteenth-century British 'Scholarship and Indian Society.

Subaltern Studies as a project aims to, put the 'subaltern' — that is, subordinate classes — at the centre of the stage of historical enquiry. The project has arisen from a belief that previous writings on South Asian History and Society have tended to be elitist in nature; the people are seen either as passive and malleable objects of elite initiative and manipulation, or as an unpredictable primordial force which

occasionally releases itself in ill-directed and futile acts of violence.

The first major question to arise in the conference concerned the meaning and usefulness of the term 'subaltern'. S N Mukherjee wanted to know why it was to be preferred to class categories, such as 'working class', 'rich, middle and poor peasants' and so on. This question was dealt with in Sumit Sarkar's paper, in which he began with a brief discussion of the use of the Gramscian concept of 'the subaltern classes' in writing on modern Indian history. He felt that the term had the advantage of not having within it the assumption that there is a developed class consciousness amongst the subordinate classes of South Asia. In a special morning session devoted to a discussion of subaltern movements in Asia as a whole, a tendency was observed for speakers to merely substitute the word 'subaltern' for terms such as 'peasantry', 'masses' and so on. This was often done in a rather uncritical manner. Partha Chatterjee pointed out that the concept should not be used in this way, for it was meant to make us rethink our approach to the study of the subordinate classes. The concept is a dialectical one which implies a *relationship of domination*. Subaltern Studies seeks to analyse the interplay of this relationship in a manner which puts the subaltern classes at the centre of the stage. There was then some debate about whether or not this was an essentially populist exercise. In reply to this, it was argued that populism treats the people as an undifferentiated mass, whereas the subaltern studies project sought to disaggregate this mass and bring out all the complexities of relationships which existed among the people. In this respect it was not at all a populist exercise. Dipesh Chakrabarty commented that the concept of subalternity did not seek to be all-embracing. Other concepts — such as exploitation — have to be used. Also, it is no substitute for class analysis. But the concept is needed to describe a master/servant relationship in which there is an interplay of power and a definite consciousness of subalternity. The relationship is not

thus a general rich/poor one, but the specific relationship of dominator to dominated. Ranjit Guha went on to argue that the subaltern classes were never entirely dominated; Cramsei has stated that the power of the state does not quite reach the people in its entirety, and that there was an element of autonomy in subaltern action.

Sumit Sarkar also argued in his paper that the essays in "Subaltern Studies", Volume One, tended to concentrate on moments of conflict between elite and subaltern classes "to the relative exclusion of much longer time-spans of subordination or collaboration — a trend, it may be argued, which really goes against Gramsci's own emphasis on the control exercised over such strata by more or less hegemonic dominant classes". This criticism was accepted as having value. In defence, it was argued that the emphasis on conflict was necessary initially, for the tendency in the past has been to over-emphasise the passivity of the Indian masses. Ranajit Guha stated that subaltern consciousness consisted of an interplay between resistance and collaboration. In Volume One the emphasis was on resistance, and the element of collaboration was neglected. This was something which needed to be corrected. In fact, most of the papers at the conference proved to have already anticipated this critique. Somewhat ironically, Sumit Sarkar's own paper concentrated largely on moments of conflict, and in this it was something of an exception.

Christine Dobbin also raised a question about the subject matter of the papers, nothing that there was a tendency to concentrate on a single event. These events — be they uprisings, popular movements or disasters — occurred when the elites were forced to modify their actions as a result of subaltern initiatives. The papers had not thus escaped from elitist history. She argued that the real subject of subaltern studies should be writings about everyday life, rather than overt protest and action. It was argued against this that the study of subaltern consciousness had, of necessity, to be undertaken through the writings of the elites, as the subaltern classes have left almost no written records of their own. It is during moments of crisis that the elites are forced to take notice of the lower classes, and thus the documentation is at its richest during such periods. The event is taken as a starting point from which relationships of domination and subordination can be analysed. It is however vital to place the event in a long term perspective. Shahid Amin

added that Christine Dobbin appeared to be asking for social history as defined in Trevelyan; that is, history with the politics left out. They were, however, examining the relationship between the subordinate and dominant classes, which was above all a political relationship. Politics were thus central to their history.

The next problem concerned the sources used by those writing for *Subaltern Studies*. Some based their analysis on conventional sources — such as archival material, collections of documents and newspaper reports — but used these sources in unconventional ways in order to try to understand subaltern actions and patterns of thought. The papers presented by David Arnold, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sumit Sarkar fell broadly into this category. David Arnold used colonial records on the Madras famine of 1876-78 to examine the response of the peasants who, he argued, were not merely helpless victims but *actors* with their own sense of justice and expectations of relief from the upper classes in times of crisis. Sumit Sarkar stated that he had re-read many of the sources which he had used in his earlier writings while preparing his paper. He also, however, made use of literary sources, such as Satinath Bhaduri's "Dhorai Gharitmanis". In the discussion, Dipesh Chakrabarty praised his use of this source, but added that such usage called for some additional tools from linguistic and textual criticism. Was the character of Dhorai articulating the actual discourse of a subaltern or was the novel in fact an elitist depiction of what was thought to be subaltern discourse? The papers by Shahid Amin, David Hardiman and Gyan Pandey sought to escape this difficulty by using more obviously subaltern sources. Gyan Pandey made use of a local history written in the 1880s in Urdu by a Muslim of Mubarakpur, in eastern UP* This Muslim was, however, a local zamindar, so that even this could hardly be considered a truly subaltern text. It did, however, give us a very different perspective of the history of Mubarakpur to that portrayed in the British colonial records. David Hardiman, in a study of a tribal movement in South Gujarat, made use of oral sources collected in interviews in numerous tribal villages. In the past, oral sources of this type have been considered the preserve of anthropologists, and interestingly enough anthropologists who attended the conference such as Roger Keesing and Bruce Kapferer were much to the fore in the discussion of this paper. Peter Reeves

commented that it was good to see that such studies were now being undertaken by historians. Shahid Amin, in his paper on the perception of Gandhi by the peasants of Gorakhpur District in 1921-22, made extensive use of Gandhi-rumours collected from a local newspaper, *Swadesh*. Many of these related the misfortunes suffered by those who failed to follow what was perceived by the peasants as the Gandhian programme. These stories revealed that the widespread popularity of Gandhi in this area was rooted in popular Hindu beliefs and practices and in the material culture of the peasantry. In the discussion of this paper, an objection was raised that once a rumour was printed in a newspaper it ceased to be a rumour, Shahid Amin replied that the rumours were sent in to the newspaper by villagers, and that the newspaper printed them verbatim, so that they could be considered representative of local patterns of thought.

There was also some debate about how such sources should be treated. Shahid Amin, for instance, was criticised for not carrying out a full structural analysis of his collection of Gandhi-rumours. There was a feeling that historians needed to take lessons from studies of linguistics and semiotics. Of the papers presented to this conference, Dipesh Chakrabarty's went furthest in this direction.

Doubts were expressed as to whether some of the papers fitted into the category of subaltern studies. Gyan Pandey's paper, which dealt with the history of a small town, was questioned on this score. There was some feeling that subaltern studies should be about workers and peasants. Gyan Pandey replied that he was examining a culture that was shared by different groups, both elites and subaltern, that he was trying to see how these groups related to this shared culture and how this culture produced particular patterns of dominance and subordination. Partha Chatterjee was also criticised on this score for in his paper he merely examined the political philosophy of Gandhi, and did not show how this system of thought related to the subaltern classes in practice. Chatterjee accepted this point, but argued that he was merely trying to lay out the theoretical conditions which laid the basis for Gandhi's popularity amongst the subaltern classes. The question as to how this operated in practice would have to be tackled later. Bernard Cohn's paper also stood out in this respect. This extremely interesting paper was concerned with the process

by which the British in eighteenth and nineteenth century India constructed a whole system of knowledge which allowed them to participate in the political system and eventually to define and control the social and political order of India. Thus, although he was discussing authority, and the way a language of authority was created, he was not here adopting a subaltern perspective.

The most controversial paper of all was that presented by Dipesh Chakrabarty, and it is worth summarising it briefly here. It was concerned with the problem of why the often highly militant jute workers of Calcutta failed to develop any lasting trade union organisations in the period 1920-50. Organisation tended to be an ad hoc affair appearing during crises, disappearing during lulls. The union leaders were invariably from the *babu* class. The *babus* felt that such leadership was inevitable so long as the workers lacked education. This however sidestepped the deeper problem of *the* culture of the worker — a culture which seemed actively to discourage regular union organisation. Chakrabarty argued that this was because unions revolved around admired individuals, and that these leaders tended to treat their unions as their own personal zamindari. A leader could build a strong position very rapidly, and he could equally rapidly decline. Thus, rather than there being an absence of trade union discipline of the western type, there was instead an alternative system of power and authority. Chakrabarty characterised the bond between the *babu*-leader and the worker as being essentially feudal. Even the communist leaders of the 1930s and 1940s who selflessly dedicated their lives to the service of the working classes conformed to this pattern of leadership. They too continued unconsciously to act the zamindar. "Their education, their appearance, the language they spoke, the work they did, could all act as indicators of their authority and superiority over the coolies".

The paper stimulated a strong debate. Sumit Sarkar argued that there was no necessary contradiction between working class militancy and lack of stable trade union organisation. He felt that Chakrabarty should have accorded the workers more autonomy, and noted that there was a tendency in the paper to argue that the workers could be saved only through the internal reform of *babu* culture. Gyan Pandey argued that the industrial situation was not comparable to the zamindari situation. The equivalent to the zamindar was surely

the factory owner. The trade union leader was a mediator. Partha Chatterjee expanded on this latter point by asking Chakravarty what, in his view, would constitute change. Was not the worker-trade union leader relationship an essentially new one? The trade union leader had, in fact, a bourgeois understanding of his role as a political representative of the people. Dipesh Chakravarty replied that although there were obvious empirical differences between rural zamindur-dominated society and urban industrial society, relationships of power and authority continued to be similar. He accepted that his analysis was pessimistic, but in India there were few grounds for optimism. It was one thing to believe in the possibility of a change for the better, another to argue that it was coming in the near future. He accepted the possibility of change, but not the immediate likelihood, and this essay was an attempt to understand why this was so. He felt that Marxists who analysed all problems in terms of structure and superstructure tended to be blind to the critical problem of culture, and he

argued that there is a great need for a theory of culture in Marxist writing.

In conclusion, we may say that the papers presented at this conference showed a greater awareness of the need to analyse the relationship of collaboration between subaltern and elite classes as well as that of conflict. Other elements which came out in the whole discussion were the need to combat narrow economic explanations for subaltern actions, the need to focus strongly on political relationships, the relative autonomy which exists between the thought and actions of elite and subaltern classes, and the need to understand better the nature of the tenacious hold of culture within the Indian social formation. The study of subaltern consciousness and culture, it was brought out, was central to the whole project. In this, the authors of these papers accepted the need to approach popular beliefs and understandings through a more sophisticated analysis of texts. This is, perhaps, one of the directions in which we may expect the subaltern studies project to move in the future.

position SPD which has put up Hans-Jochen Vogel as the party's candidate for chancellorship. True, it was Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of SPD who drew attention as far back as in 1977 to a new kind of threat posed by Soviet intermediate-range, nuclear missiles and it was he who co-fathered the NATO two-track decision. But this does not contain the kind of automatism as it attributed to it by chancellor Kohl. Indeed the controversial decision says that NATO's defence requirements to counter Soviet threat will be judged in the light of the result of INF talks. It was also at the behest of the former West German chancellor and other European allies that President Reagan's zero-zero option was evolved as the NATO position for the INF negotiations. But Schmidt himself has said recently that it was only intended as an initial stand.

In any case, the zero-zero option, as proposed by the West, is rejected by Moscow. Instead, last December Andropov suggested a solution which would permit him to maintain as many systems as the British and French together have. But not only have both France and UK rejected the Soviet move, the US also holds the view, after Bush's talks in Europe, that "independent deterrent systems of sovereign countries deployed for their own defence and not for that of NATO's non-nuclear members", particularly West Germany, cannot be counted with at Geneva. The balance claimed by Moscow, it is stated, is technically flawed and inequitable. By counting these systems, as repeatedly pointed out by vice-president Bush during his recent Western European visit, Moscow is in fact attempting to codify a Soviet right to have more nuclear systems than the US.

But while remaining firm in their adherence to the fundamental objective of the zero-zero option, the West German government and its European allies would like the US to adopt a more flexible attitude in order to come to an agreement with the USSR. They want the US not to confine itself to general statements as reflected in President Reagan's Open Letter to the people of Europe, which was read out by Bush on January 31 at West Berlin. The European allies in general and West Germany in particular would like President Reagan to accelerate the pace of accord at INF talks in Geneva. However, indications are that no concrete moves may be forthcoming until March 6 parliamentary poll in West Germany.

WEST GERMANY

Assuring the Allies

Ramesh Jaura

The US vice-president George Bush, who concluded his twelve-day tour of seven Western European nations and the Vatican on February 10, has been urged to request President Regan to seek at least a provisional agreement with the Soviet Union on intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF), before December next. The declared objective of Bush's visit was two-fold: to convince the people of Europe that US is negotiating seriously at the INF talks in Geneva, and to consult the heads of allied governments, "listen carefully" to their views and report these to Reagan in "strictest confidence".

Among the government leaders he talked to were those of West Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy and Great Britain. All these five countries are scheduled to install 572 American Pershing II and cruise missiles end of this year, if the Soviet Union does not agree to dismantle its SS-4, SS-5 and SS-20 intermediate-range nuclear missiles. Bush also met President Francois Mitterand who has publicly rejected Yuri Andropov's move December 21 last for the inclusion of French nuclear systems in a possible agreement emerging from INF talks.

The vice-president's visit to Western Europe came within days of the fourth round of INF talks which started January 27 in Geneva. On the eve of the resumption of these negotiations, the US chief negotiator Paul H Nitze had held talks in Bonn and Brussels. The Belgian capital was, in fact, the venue of a high-level meeting from which a communique indicating flexibility in NATO approach to INF emerged. In Bonn, Nitze had landed nearly a week after the Soviet foreign minister Andrei Gromyko concluded his three-day talks with West German political leaders on January 18.

Of particular importance - - to both the USSR and US are 108 Pershing II missiles to be installed in West Germany. These are capable of striking at the nerve-centre targets in the Soviet Union in a six-minute flight. Given their importance and that of cruise missiles in NATO and Soviet strategies, INF have become a leading issue in the campaign for general elections in West Germany on March 6.

The Euro-missile issue has also driven a wedge between the centre-right coalition government in Bonn, led by Chancellor Helmut Kohl, and the op-