

Democracy and Economic Transformation in India

Partha Chatterjee

Peasant Society Today

The first volume of *Subaltern Studies* was published in 1982, twenty-five years ago. I was part of the editorial group that launched, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, this critical engagement with Indian modernity from the standpoint of the subaltern classes, especially the peasantry. In the quarter of a century that has passed since then, there has been, I believe, a fundamental change in the situation prevailing in post-colonial India. The new conditions under which global flows of capital, commodities, information and people are now regulated – a complex set of phenomena generally clubbed under the category of globalization - have created both new opportunities and new obstacles for the Indian ruling classes. The old idea of a Third World, sharing a common history of colonial oppression and backwardness, is no longer as persuasive as it was in the 1960s. The trajectory of economic growth taken by the countries of Asia has diverged radically from that of most African countries. The phenomenal growth of China and India in recent years, involving two of the most populous agrarian countries of the world, has set in motion a process of social change that, in its scale and speed, is unprecedented in human history.

In this context, I believe it has become important to revisit the question of the basic structures of power in Indian society, especially the position of the peasantry. This is not because I think that the advance of capitalist industrial growth is inevitably breaking down peasant communities and turning peasants into proletarian workers, as has been predicted innumerable times in the last century and a half. On the contrary, I will argue that the forms of capitalist industrial growth now under way in India will make room for the preservation of the peasantry, but under completely altered conditions. The analysis of these emergent forms of post-colonial capitalism in India under conditions of electoral democracy requires new conceptual work.

Let me begin by referring to the recent incidents of violent agitation in different regions of India, especially in West Bengal and Orissa, against the acquisition of agricultural land for industry. There have also been agitations in Uttar Pradesh and Jharkhand against the entry of corporate capital into the retail market for food and vegetables. The most talked about incidents occurred in

Partha Chatterjee, Professor, Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta and Columbia University, Calcutta – 700 094, West Bengal.

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