

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL FORMATION

AND

PEASANT RESISTANCE IN MAHARASHTRA

VOLUME

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INTRODUCTION

In comparison to Bihar, Uttar Pradesh or Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra has been generally ignored as far as research into agrarian relations in general and peasant movements in particular is concerned. Apart from Gail Omvedt's account of the 'cultural revolt' in Maharashtra during British times which refers to some peasant agitations in the Satara region, most of the studies on rural poor movements have been very scanty in number, journalistic in account¹ or written by activists who at one time or another have been themselves involved in the struggles.² A common feature of all the above sources (apart from Omvedt's and R. Kumar's book) has been that they describe tribal rural poor movements alone; there are hardly any accounts or explanations of non-tribal peasant and/or rural poor movements.

The present study deals with both tribal rural poor movements, and peasant or rural poor movements in the non-tribal areas. The general idea has been to account for major peasant movements, resistance, and agitations over the time span of British colonialism and post independence decades. More important than the attempt at enumeration of the peasant movements over the period under study were the limitations inherent in hitherto existing and contemporary accounts of such movements. The lacunae ^{in research on peasant movements} may be located in the reality of the countryside today. By and large the most militant rural poor movements

1 (i) Kulkarni, Sharad, 'Alienation of Adivasis Lands', EPW, Vol. 9, No. 35, August 31, 1974.

(ii) Mies, Maria, 'The Shahada Movement : A peasant movement in Maharashtra (India)', Journal of Peasant Studies, Vol. 3, No. 4, July 1976.

2 (i) Parulekar, S.V. 'Revolt of Varlis', Bombay, 1947.

(ii) Parulekar, Godavari, 'Adivasis Revolt : The story of Warli Peasants in Struggle', Calcutta, 1975.

(iii) 'Shahada Chalwal', Gram Swarajya Samiti, Shahada, 1974.

are amongst the tribals. We examined the problem therefore from another perspective. That is, if the lacunae in research is a function of the lacunae in peasant movements as they exist, what we need to examine is precisely the causes for the relative absence of such movements in the non-tribal areas. That is, we had to account both for the presence of tribal rural poor movements and the relative weakness or absence of non-tribal movements.

To arrive at a comprehension of the unevenness of peasant and/or rural poor movements in the State we had to undertake a critical study of each region and its characteristics. At the outset, it was decided that mere emphasis on the economic terrain i.e. the production relations would not help us adequately enough to grasp the points of disarticulation or unevenness. We had to study the whole social process in its making, even while assigning a primacy to the transformations in the production relations. Thus instead of the concept of mode of production, we have used 'social formation' for this, we hope, accounts for more totally, the whole ensemble of relations between the various agents involved in the process of production, distribution and exchange.

Even while the use of the concept of 'social formation' seemed more exhaustive than 'mode of production', in determining the complexities of relations at multiple levels, the problem remained of assigning a critical relationship between the two main, 'sites' of these relations i.e. the base and superstructure. Within the Marxist paradigm we had to arrive at a working relationship between the production relations and the ideological/social relations that avoided the orthodox Marxist tendency of viewing the superstructure as a mere manifestation or offshoot, or result of and corresponding in dimensions and

degree to the base; on the other hand we wished to avoid the 'structuralism' of Althusser which replaces the simple, linear causality with an argument of ideology and its apparatuses that has no place for the involvement of human sensual activity in the making/formation of these structures.

Within our problematique i.e. the disarticulation of peasant movements and the causes for such disarticulation, it was necessary to account for ideology as consciousness that was constantly in formation, breeding within the agents involved, a set of ideas and values that could not be very often located in any apparatus outside themselves, and that was constantly or at least at periods, modifying its dimensions, degree of influence and alliances. The most apparent example that came to mind was 'caste' or 'jati', not merely as a system, or structure, but as a living organism of ideas as knowledge.

As a counterpoint to the above two tendencies cited, ²the question of the relationship between base and superstructure, Lucio Colletti's propositions seemed to us more valid; especially from the point of view of our particular problem. As he says "the superstructure is itself an aspect and articulation of the structure [base]; consciousness is itself a mode of being; the knowledge of life is itself a mode and manifestation of life." (emphasis added) "Granted this, it is however, equally true that the superstructural or ideological level, though it may be part of the structure and of social being, nonetheless is so as consciousness or ideology; it has a specific role vis-a-vis other parts of the structure."³ (emphasis in original).

Here seemed to us a path worth exploring; the superstructure as part of the structure, performing a specific role, true; but at the same time, embodying ideology as consciousness

3 Colletti, Lucio, 'From Rousseau to Lenin, Studies in Ideology and Society', NLB, London, 1972, pp. 10-11.

or knowledge which in its own right is a manifestation of not merely the structure but of life itself; the argument seemed to hold the dialectic which the other two tendencies or explanations lack; it not only assigned an identity to the superstructure; consciousness as ideology, a relationship with life, but also involved human sensual activity. The knowledge of life i.e. consciousness held by the agents involved in any aspect of society is important in as much as it expresses the reactions, responses of these agents to life and its varied aspects.

Within our problematique, to which we have applied Colletti's proposition, we attempt to show that the production relations or changes therein need not necessarily have produced a corresponding peasant reaction to them so much as their views on such changes. That is, it is their state of consciousness as knowledge that determines their responses to the pattern, changes, crisis within their economy. If consciousness as state of knowledge manifests society, then, in turn, it became necessary for us to examine aspects of social relations and events in the regions, which to the reader, may often appear to have no direct bearing on peasant movements; but within the model or paradigm which we have attempted to build, it was incumbent upon us to venture into situation and events which may have had some bearing on the formation of the consciousness of the peasants just as importantly as the economic terrain or changes therein may have had.

Consciousness or state of knowledge is ever changing, transforming or modifying itself; its dimensions may undergo such modifications slowly or rapidly but the point is that it is an accumulation and mix of various layers of tradition. This is especially so within the peasant sections we have studied and necessitated therefore on our part an examination of the concept of 'class' itself.

Without wishing to enter into the debate about the definitional problems of 'class', two aspects became clear to us from the above stated logic and paradigm that we were tentatively groping towards. One, as E.P. Thompson in his book 'The Making of the English Working Class'⁴ has suggested, a class is not a category located at a point in time and space definitively within the 'objectified' production relations, but a process of organic growth and development that moves towards or retreats from the realisation of its 'objectified' role. Thus a study of the process of its growth and development protracted as it is, is very important to trace its formations and delineate its contours over this process of growth.

This aspect is implicit in Colletti's concept of ideology as consciousness as knowledge of life; we have attempted to apply it, (within all the limitations of the application of philosophical propositions to a specific category of society), to the study of the formation of peasant consciousness and its resultant, constitutive elements today.

The second aspect of the definitional problem of 'class' is contained within the very problematique of the peasantry that we have studied. Does mere economic differentiation within the peasantry delineate them into classes of rich-peasants, poor, middle and so on? Objectively this is the case. As we see all over the regions in varying degrees, differentiation has taken place. But from the point of view of peasant resistance, or more precisely, rural poor movements, there seem to be some problems; for the contradictions implicit and contained within, indeed forming, the production relations are not visualised as such by the rural poor i.e. the lower middle peasants and poor peasants. In the non-tribal regions under study, Southern Maharashtra and Marathwada, the prevailing

⁴ Thompson, E.P., 'The Making of the English Working Class', London, 1963, pp. 9-11.

consciousness of the poor and middle peasantry does not visualise the contradictions as central to the very existence of the dominant section of kulaks or capitalist landlords. Carrying a tradition of caste consciousness which cuts across the objectified contradictions, the rural poor have not been able to acquire the class consciousness that is the basis (in today's conditions) of any peasant resistance.

This implies a disarticulation between the objectified 'place' of the lower sections of the peasantry and their consciousness or knowledge of it; to go a step beyond Colletti, their state of knowledge does not manifest life as it is constituted today so much as it did years ago; knowledge has lapsed behind the objective march of economic events.

Tentatively, we have decided to adopt, therefore, the concept of 'strata' to delineate the objectified and differentiated peasantry. Perhaps it might be said that what we have described is a peasantry with a low class consciousness. Perhaps; but it does not solve the definitional problem of class, for it accepts the reductionist Marxist argument that class is defined by virtue of its place in the production relations alone. It does not account for the role that consciousness as ideology may play in negating within this very objectified 'class' the truth of its objectivity.

Finally we are left with the problem of determining the paradigm by which the effectivity of such rural poor movements as do exist, can be deduced. In a sense, it is possible to say that the gains of struggles launched for higher or minimum wages for agricultural labour, the abolition of bonded labour (and, in general the removal of imperfections in the conditions of existence of wage labour); the struggles for land, seeds, fertilisers for the rural poor can be evaluated to measure the

success or failure of the rural poor movement/organisation.

Such an analysis, we found, poses two problems for the determination of the effectivity of the organisation/movement. Firstly, it is possible that certain gains like increase in wages may be wiped out by the increasing cost of living, constituting as they do an increase from a hitherto very low i.e. distress level of wages. The granting of land to the rural poor especially the landless is of limited value if the other inputs are not available. Secondly, even if all the inputs were made available, the rural poor would still function within the existing production relations.

As a matter of fact, it is possible to suggest that the removal of imperfections in wage labour, or the abolition of bonded labour, may in the long run, improve the conditions of capitalist relations itself.

To transcend the boundaries of such an "immediate" analysis and place the utility of struggles such as they exist in a more rigorous perspective, we turned to Gramsci's division of class into 'rule' (dominio) and 'hegemony' (egemonia).⁵

The former concept expresses the direct and overt political domination of the given ruling classes; at times of crisis, this may (and often does) result in effective and direct coercion.

In the more normal situation, there is a complex interlocking of political, social, economic and cultural forces that perpetuates the ruling class domination. But the manner of this perpetuation is important for it is done without appearing to be so. That is, the articulation of such forces (socio-political and economic) as expressions of domination have over the years acquired a character (in the peoples' minds)

5 Gramsci, Antonio, 'Selections from Prison Notebooks', New York, 1978.

of practical processes of daily life, thus imbibing within their consciousness an idea of these forces as the simple, necessary and most commonsense systems of existence.

Relations of domination, the pressures expressed within these relations and the direction and trend of these relations are seen as the most practical and possible process of living itself. The result is that a form of cultural unity is achieved amongst all classes of society, even as contradictions manifesting themselves daily or within the general process of living are attempted to be tackled through struggle.

Within this paradigm, we have, tentatively attempted at the measure of effectivity of rural poor organisations. In a sense, this paradigm is the logical outcome of the hitherto stated analytical concepts by which we have tried to account for social political, ideological and economic forces that affect peasant consciousness and resistance. And within the paradigm of hegemony and rule or dominio, we feel, the effectivity of rural poor organisations, may be finally, tested both from the point of view of immediate interests and the eventual resolution of all contradictions existent within the ambience of peasant or rural poor life.