

(Ebook pdf) Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India

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Ranajit Guha

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Ranajit Guha : Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. A defining moment in social historyBy A CustomerGuha's "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India" takes the disturbance of the nexus between the elite and the subaltern as its focus. Employing instances of resistance from across India over the period between 1783 and 1900 - defined by a dearth of information preceding the former date and the subsumption of rebel consciousness by nationalist and socialist politics by the latter - Guha seeks to tease out the underlying structure of consciousness and action in 'peasant' rebellion in its 'pure' form (pp. 13 and 334 et passim). One hundred and ten rebellions are examined under the analytic rubric of the six categories that dictate the monograph's organization: the negatively defined consciousness of the peasantry; the spectrum between crime and rebellion; the mechanics and meanings of action in the latter; the creation of solidarity; the transmission of rebelliousness; and finally, the territorial limits thereto. This framework is unlike that employed by other contemporary social historians on the count of its attention to a holistic context of power relations (as opposed to a lopsided, exclusive focus on the subaltern). However, it also blurs the vertical stratification within the subaltern classes, oscillating between treating 'the peasant' as an undifferentiated social entity and as a conglomerate body of distinct groups. "Peasant Insurgency" critically engages Eric Hobsbawm's category of the 'pre-' or 'sub-political' spontaneous peasant rebellion in arguing that the evidence from colonial India

points to the expression of a conscious collective will in the organized disruption of power relations between the subaltern and the triumvirate elite of sarkar, sahuakar, and zamindar (colonial government, moneylender, and landlord respectively) (pp. 5-11, 333-34 et passim). Guha is, however, careful to urge caution against overestimating the 'rather hesitant, inchoate and disjointed' political consciousness of the peasantry which fell 'far short of conceptualizing the structure of authority' that shaped their conditions of existence (p. 24). Other than decentering 'the spurious primacy of the elite' and restoring the agency of the subaltern in historical progression without eliding the former from its purview, "Peasant Insurgency" also strikes a neat balance between the 'material and spiritual' expressions of power. First, the synchronic snapshots of Indian society it presents show elite power as being expressed and derived in material difference - dress, housing, means of transportation, ownership of capital etc. - as much as it was predicated on cultural difference and encoded in consciousness - language, legend, scriptural sanction, monopoly over writing, regulation of bodily movement etc. - and this was *before* Foucault became fashionable. Second, when subaltern resistance systematically engaged this network of symbolic and material sites of power by inverting, desecrating, and destroying them (pp. 18 and 28-76), the same structural limitations to subaltern autonomy were illuminated in diachronic sequences. On the other hand, Guha also unearthed the autonomously articulated meanings with which peasant action was saturated. For instance, the modalities of the insurrection and the hunt or fishing expedition were juxtaposed to reveal the 'idiom' of 'corporate labor' common to both (pp. 126-30). Hence, it is noted that power is problematized in an amply revealing number of complex permutations in the earliest Subalternist historiography, the harbinger of which is "Peasant Insurgency." Of course, "Peasant Insurgency"'s genius does have its limitations. First, the binary model of power relations it sets up conflating subaltern classes into one neat camp and the triumvirate of sarkar, sahuakar, and zamindar in the other, simplifies the web of power relations existing therebetween to a significant degree. Second, though it self-consciously wrestles with the near-exclusive use of elite sources throughout, its straightforward reading of pseudo-canonical religious texts of Brahmanical Hinduism to tap the religious consciousness of the subaltern classes is unpersuasive. The argument that the semiotics of power embodied in the "Laws of Manu", for instance, 'congealed into nave tradition' 'through centuries of recursive practice,' were subsequently formalized by the literati (p. 37), and were hence representative of subaltern consciousness is belied by the fact that it was colonialism that canonized such texts as "Hindu law." Asserting that they were pervasive in their influence, or that they coalesced upward, or even contradicting this position by claiming that they were Brahmanical in source and disseminated therefrom amounts to pure conjecture. This is not a mere hiccup for a project centered on recovering peasant consciousness: an overwhelmingly elitist (colonial) archive of evidence endemic to a largely illiterate society, while craftily surmounted by historians such as Barbara Hanawalt, has consistently plagued "Subaltern Studies." However, having been a major point of debate, it appears that the Subalternist scholars are now beginning to be inventive in their use of sources.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. a classic By John R. Beverley Guha's *Elementary Aspects*--originally published in the early 1980s and then for an audience mainly limited to South Asian studies--is perhaps the most interesting work of social theory since Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. It is also a model of a new way of writing history "from below." Its implications touch not only history, but also the broad field of postcolonial studies in both the humanities and social sciences.

This historiography of peasant insurgency in India has frequently been a record of the efforts of the colonial administration to deal with mass uprisings in the countryside. The colonialist tended to see insurgency as a crime or pathology, seldom regarding it as a struggle for social justice, Guha seeks to correct this failure to understand the aims and motives of the insurgent. He adopts the peasant's viewpoint and examines the peasant rebel's awareness of his own world and his will to change it. The study covers the period 1783-1900 and identifies some of the elementary aspects that characterized peasant rebel consciousness in this period. This classic work deserves to form an indispensable part of the reading list of all serious students of South Asian history.

A classic in subaltern studies as well as in postcolonial studies. Jos Rabasa, University of California, Berkeley