Indian Peasant Uprisings

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Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings, reaching back at least to the initial British conquest and the last decades of Moghul government. For more than 200 years peasants in all the major regions have risen repeatedly against landords, revenue agents and other bureaucrats, money-lenders, police and military forces. During this period there have been at least 77 revolts, the smallest of which probably engaged several thousand peasants in active support or in combat. About 30 of these revolts must have affected tens of thousands of peasants, and about 12, several hundreds of thousands. The uprisings were responses to deprivation of unusually severe character, always economic, and often also involving physical brutality or ethnic persecution.

The political independence of India has not brought surcease from these distresses. Major uprisings under communist leadership since British rule not unnaturally show a continuity of tactics with earlier peasant revolts. Of these, the more successful have involved mass insurrections, initially against specific grievances, and the less successful, social banditry and terrorist vengeance. Both in the case of communist revolts and in that of earlier peasant uprisings, social banditry and terrorist vengeance, when they occurred, appear to have happened in the wake of repression of other forms of revolt.

Although the revolts have been widespread, certain areas have an especially strong tradition of rebellion. Bengal has been a hotbed of revolt, both rural and urban, from the earliest days of British rule. Some districts in particular, such as Mymensingh, Dinaipur, Rangpur and Pabna in Bangladesh and the Santhal regions of Bihar and West Bengal, figured repeatedly in peasant struggles and continue to do so. The tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh and the state of Kerala also have long traditions of revolt. Hill regions where tribal or other minorities retain a certain independence, ethnic unity and tactical manoeuvrability, and where the terrain is suited to guerrilla warfare, are of course especially favourable for peasant struggles, but these have also occurred in densely populated plain regions such as Thanjavur, where rack-renting, land hunger, landless labour and unemployment cause great suffering.

IN Kilvenmani village in eastern Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu, in 1969, a group of Harijan landless labourers, influenced by the CPI(M), struck for higher wages in view of the increased production and price inflation brought about by the 'green revolution'. Goons hired by their landlords arrived on their street at night, imprisoned 42 men, women and children in a hut and burnt these people to ashes. Again, in Chandwaha-Rupaspur village, Bihar, in November 1971, a movement of Santhal tribespeople resisting encroachment of their land was met by landlords' thugs. For Santhals were roasted alive, 10 were shot dead or hacked to pieces, 33 were severely wounded and 45 huts burned down. These incidents and many similar ones have illustrated a process of peasant resistance and landlord reprisals that has intensified in India during the past seven years. Since the Naxalbari uprising in West Bengal in 1967 and the emergence of rebel and revolutionary groups among both townsfolk and peasantry, several peasant struggles have erupted, hundreds of landlords, police and money-lenders have been assassinated, and thousands of peasants have died by violence.

Social movements among the peasantry have been widely prevalent in India during and since British rule. We may define a social movement as "the attempt of a group to effect change in the face of resistance" and peasants as people who engage in agricultural or related production with primitive (pre-literate) means and who surrender part of their produce or its equivalent to landlords or to agents of the state. This article is confined to social movements which (a) involved peasants as the sole or main force, (b) were class struggles against those who exacted surplus from peasants and (c) took or were provoked to armed struggle in the course of their careers.

Generally, the scope and significance of India's peasant uprisings have been understressed. Barrington Moore, Jr, for example, in spite of acknowledging at some length instances of peasant revolts described in recent Indian writings, concludes that China forms "a more instructive contrast with India, where peasant rebellions in the pre-modern period were relatively rare and completely ineffective and where modernisation impoverished the peasants at least as much as in China and over as long a period of time". Moore attributes the alleged weakness of Indian peasant movements to the caste system with its hierarchical divisions among villages and to the strength of bourgeois leadership against the landlords and the British and the pacifying influence of Gandhi on the peasantry. I would agree that peasant revolts have in fact been common both during and since the British period, every state of present-day India having experienced several uprisings over the past two hundred years. Thus in a recent brief survey I discovered 77 revolts, the smallest of which probably engaged several thousand peasants, in active support or in combat. About 30 of these revolts must have affected several tens of thousands, and about 12, several hundreds of thousands. Included in these revolts is the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857-58, in which vast bodies of peasants fought or otherwise worked to destroy British rule over an area of more than 500,000 square miles. The frequency of these revolts and the fact that at least 34 of those I considered were solely or partly by Hindus, cause me to doubt that the caste system has seriously impeded peasant rebellion in times of trouble.

There does seem no doubt that, apart from the Mutiny, peasant uprisings in China usually had a wider geographical scope than those in India. At least since late Moghul times the reasons for this may have included the political fragmentation as well as the diversity of language and culture among India's...
people. During the later decades of Moghul rule the country had already disintegrated into a number of virtually autonomous, mutually warring kingdoms and principalities between whose peasants there was little contact. The British conquered India piecemeal over a hundred year period from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries. Early revolts against their rule therefore tended to occur at different dates in different regions, although there was inter-regional co-ordination among the largest — for example, those led by Raja Chait Singh in Oudh and other areas in 1778-81, by Vizier Ali in Corahpur in 1799, and by the military chiefs (poligars) of Madras and Andhra in 1801-5.

Shortly after the British had subdued most of India a huge uprising, widely backed by the peasantry, did sweep over most of Northern and Central India in the shape of the Mutiny, but even in this case resistance tended to be strongest in the areas more recently conquered, while those which had earlier had revolts that had been crushed, played lesser roles.

After the Mutiny, British rule and military preparedness became stronger than ever and the rural upper classes of landlords and princes were either crushed totally or co-opted by the British through concessions. At the same time, political disunity was perpetuated by the division of India into British provinces interspersed with 'native states' having separate judicial systems. Popular action was difficult to organise across these boundaries as well as across ethnic and linguistic lines. Between the Mutiny and Independence, the British government and army were able to better co-ordinate than those of China and India was not disturbed by invasions. In these circumstances, politically disunited, under a despotic Central government and opposed by their landed aristocrats, after 1858 peasants engaged only in regional uprisings led by religious figures or by local peasant committees until political parties began to form peasant unions in the 1930s. Even so, some of these revolts were impressive and wrung concessions from the rulers. Since the mid-1890s peasant uprisings as well as non-violent resistance by peasants have usually been at least partly guided by political parties, especially by communists, or else by nationalist and separatist movements of the formerly primitive tribes. In brief, I would argue that the limitations of Indian peasant revolts have sprung more from broader political forces at the level of the province and the colonial and post-colonial state than from the caste system or from peculiarities of village structure. At least two Indian authors have, indeed, argued that the caste system provided a framework for the organisation of peasant rebellions, since in many cases peasants were able to assemble quickly through the medium of their caste assemblies.

When peasant uprisings figure in the British literature, they are often obscured under such headings as "communal riots" between major religions, fanatical religious cults, or the activities of "criminal" castes and tribes. While the armed struggles of peasants have often had these characteristics, a large proportion of such movements has also, and primarily, been concerned with the struggles of tenants, agricultural labourers, plantation workers, or tribal cultivators, against the exactions of landlords, bureaucrats of the state, merchants, moneylenders, or their agents, the police and the military.

THE COLONIAL BACKGROUND

Information is limited about peasant uprisings and other forms of violence against the rich and powerful in remote pre-British times. Whatever the earlier record, revolts broke out in many areas during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as the Moghul bureaucracy became more oppressive and exacted harsher taxes, as commercial relations penetrated the countryside, and as local rulers made increasing incursions into tribal hill territories. Prominent among the peasant rebellions against the Moghuls were those of the Jats of the Ganges-Jamuna region from the 1660s to 1690s, and of the Satnami religious sect in Narnaul in 1672. In some cases, all of the revolts against the Moghul power, peasants placed themselves under the leadership of local princes or land managers (zamindars) who rebelled because the imperial land revenue pressed so heavily on the peasants that there was little left for these local dignitaries. In the eighteenth century, the rapid expansions of Sikh and Maratha power and the growth of Thuggee bands in the heartland of the empire owed much to the fervent support of peasants suffering under Moghul revenue exactations. Outside the empire, peasant opposition to encroaching royal authority in the eighteenth century was instanced in the revolts of the Maomoria movement against the kings of the Assam valley, and in south India, in the resistance of the Kallar (literally, "Robber") tribespeople against the efforts of the rulers of Ramnad and Madura to extract taxes from them in traditionally independent hill regions.

As it spread gradually throughout India, however, British rule brought a degree of disruption and suffering among the peasantry which was, it seems likely, more prolonged and widespread than had occurred in Moghul times. The effects of British rule came, of course, unevenly and in stages, but once operative, they created a structure of underdevelopment in the Indian countryside which became endemic, and which has been modified but never eradicated since Independence. Although I cannot analyse this structure in detail here, the following seem to me to have been the major changes that have affected Indian peasants during the 200-odd years between the beginning of British rule and the present time.

1. The early decades of rule by the East India Company saw outright plunder of the country's wealth coupled with ruinous taxation of the peasantry, in some areas up to twice that imposed by the Moghuls. These no doubt contributed to the Bengal famine of 1770 in which a third of the people died. The collection of heavy revenues was subsequently regularised in the Permanent Settlement of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1793 and in comparably harsh settlements in other regions. Revenues in the early decades were used chiefly for government expenses, wars, private fortunes, remittances to Britain and public works designed to increase imperial trade.

2. In later decades, land revenue declined to a much smaller proportion of the crop than was exacted by the Moghuls. This was brought about by the fact that they were being removed from the peasants by other kinds of agents such as moneylenders, non-cultivating intermediary tenants, landlords, merchants, the new professional classes such as lawyers, and particularly, although less directly, by British firms engaged in export crop farming, banking, shipping, exports and imports, and internal trade.

3. The British land settlements for the first time made land private property of a capitalist kind. The new landlords included zamindars who had previously been revenue collectors under the Moghuls, a variety of princes or subordinate rulers, village headmen, military tenants, religious or secular functionaries of former governments, in some cases peasant cultivators who had hitherto merely leased land under customary regulation, and in other cases merchants or moneylenders who bought land rights, along
private landownership, the lower ranks for little or no return. Landlords and local merchants profited from their sales to British export firms, and brought pressure on peasants to grow them in their roles as wage labourers, serfs, tenants or indebted smallholders. Despite the expansion of the total cultivated area, the production of export crops reduced the area available for subsistence farming in at least some regions such as Kerala.

4. Speculation and investment in land by merchants, bureaucrats, landlords, and successful cash crop farmers made land sales increasingly common. The growth of absentee landlordism and of cultivation for private profit meant that traditional paternalistic relations of landlord and their tenants were disrupted in many villages, and that tenants were disrupted in many villages, and that tenants and labourers were exposed to new and more alienating forms of exploitation, resulting in greater resentment on their part.

5. The British effected a reduction in the scale of at least some Indian handloom and handicraft industries, especially those for the production of luxury goods, though discriminatory internal and external tariffs. Such measures virtually destroyed India’s export of manufactured goods and also obliged Indians to buy British industrial manufactures, notably cotton textiles. Reports indicate that centres of manufacture such as Dacca and Agra, as large or larger than London in the mid-eighteenth century, shrank as a result of these and other British policies to a fraction of their former size. Craftsman deprived of their livelihood were driven back upon the land as tenants or landless labourers or joined the modern proletariat. Peasants had to sell their produce for cash, often to moneylenders in return for advance loans, in order to buy imported goods as well as to pay rents and revenues.

6. On balance, India was plundered through the export of capital to Britain by the East India Company, by conscious planning of debt services for colonial wars and public works, “home charges” and adverse terms of trade. “Chronic rural indebtedness; and the growth of debt bondage in some areas led the growth of chronic malnutrition and underemployment in the villages. In India as a whole, per capita agricultural output declined between 1911 and 1947. Some of the consequences of “agricultural overpopulation” were fragmentation of landholdings leading to dwarf-tenancies; competition for land among sharecroppers and other tenants, which encouraged rack-renting; moneylending and chronic rural indebtedness; and the growth of debt bondage in some areas and of poorly paid day labour in others. Although the data are imperfect, it seems probable that there has been, both during and since British rule, a decline in the proportions of landlords, rich peasants and middle peasants and an increase in the proportions of poor peasants and landless labourers. Today, India and other underdeveloped countries and underemployed and ill-nourished villagers.

7. From the 1850s with the building of the railways, the increased movement of goods and people had profound effects. It further undermined the unity and self-sufficiency of villages. The modern transport of foodgrains reduced the danger of severe regional famines; at the same time, by permitting grain stocks to be removed from prosperous areas it appears to have allowed the growth of chronic malnutrition throughout the country. Concomitantly, however, modern transport fostered the movement of ideas between town and country and created links between urban and rural people. Such links strengthened the Indian nationalist movement led by the bourgeoisie; they also permitted a degree of unity between peasants and urban workers in the more recent revolts.

8. There were serious regional famines before British rule, notably in the Deccan in 1630-32 and in 1702-4. It seems certain, however, that the famines of the British period were more frequent. Thus, 14 major famines are known to have occurred between the early eleventh and the late seventeenth centuries. During the period of government by the East India Company, by contrast, in addition to the catastrophic Bengal famine of 1770, there were twelve serious famines and four periods of acute scarcity before the Mutiny of 1857, while Indian peasants were being tormented by excessive revenue exactions. Still more devastating famines followed the Mutiny. The worst occurred between 1865 and 1869, and the most severe of all in 1896-97, when 97 million were seriously affected and at least 4.5 million died. Another 650,000 died in 1898, and a further 3.25 million in 1899. In the famines of the 1880s the principal victims were landless labourers and unemployed weavers, but by 1900 tenant cultivators formed the largest category employed in government relief works during famines. The Deccan and Gujarat, while landless labourers formed the next largest category, and weavers were still prominent. The data suggest that by the end of the century tenant cultivators had no reserves left and that in famines they suffered almost equally with landless labourers and with artisans thrown out of work by British industrial policies. Using figures collected by Bhatia, and selecting only those which record the deaths of more than 100,000 people in any single famine year and region, I have calculated a total of 20,687,000 famine deaths in India between 1866 and 1943. Because of the omission of smaller figures this is undoubtedly far too low.

Probably thanks to improved transportation, there was no very large famine between 1908 and 1943, when the stoppage of rice imports from...
Since Independence, and especially since 1954, foreign food loans have augmented India's food supply, but have also helped plunge the country hopelessly into debt. India's own food production has roughly doubled since Independence. This is no mean achievement, but even when combined with foreign imports the increase is barely adequate to meet the needs of a population which grew from 350 million in 1951 to 538 million in 1971. When combined with hoarding, speculation and widening inequality in incomes, it is not at all adequate.

12. Since Independence, land reforms have removed some of the biggest landlords — the zamindars — and some of the non-cultivating intermediary tenants, but in general laws on land ceilings have been evaded. Before and after each act, landlords have evicted numerous tenants on the grounds that they needed the land for "personal cultivation" and have created new paper owners' to conform with the acts while leaving the real control undisturbed. At least in some areas, therefore, land reforms have resulted in an increase in the proportion of poor peasants working part-time for wages, of landless labourers, and of both rural and urban casual workers and unemployed.

13. During 1965-71 the "green revolution" increased productivity in some regions. Reports indicate, however, that it tended still further to polarise agricultural incomes, for it enriched the larger owners while tenants and labourers gained little or none of the increase during a period in which they were also being affected by generalised inflation. As farms are consolidated and operate as industrial capitalist enterprises, the green revolution dispossesses some tenants, dispossesses some landless labourers and drives out of business small farmers who cannot afford the new technology and cannot compete. In 1972-74, moreover, the gains of the green revolution have for the most part been wiped out by seasonal drought and flooding or, most recently, by shortages of fertilisers.

The above conditions form the background of agrarian revolt from the late eighteenth century until the present. Directly or, indirectly, all of them have been either created or severely exacerbated by British colonial policies or by the policies of the Indian government, under the influence of imperialism, in the post-colonial period.

Types of Peasant Uprisings

Seventy-seven revolts, including the Mutiny, were considered in preparation for this article. Eight of them occurred in East Bengal (pre-day Bangladesh); as it happened, none were selected from regions lying in present-day Pakistan. The East Bengal revolts help to illustrate general processes at work in British India. This paper does not cover agrarian unrest in what became East Pakistan and later, Bangladesh; it is evident, however, that there have been peasant uprisings there since the end of British rule, especially during the invasion by Yahya Khan's forces in 1971, and revolutionary movements based on peasants are continuing there.

A rough classification of the revolts during British rule yields five types of action in terms of goals, ideology and methods of organisation: (1) Restorative rebellions to drive out the British and restore earlier rulers and social relations; (2) religious movements for the liberation of a region or an ethnic group under a new form of government; (3) social banditry (to use Hobson's term); (4) terrorist vengeance, with ideas of meting out collective justice; (5) mass insurrections for the redress of particular grievances.

The first and second of these types are transformative, in the sense that they sought from the beginning — and sometimes briefly achieved — a large-scale restructuring of society. Restorative revolts were, however, backward looking, whereas India's religious peasant movements have been 'nativistic' in combining traditional cultural elements and values with new themes, sometimes derived from the oppression groups, in a utopian vision of a Golden Age. The third, fourth and fifth types are initially reformative in the sense that they aim at only partial changes in society. Both the third and the fifth types have, however, sometimes become transformative and have led to the seizure of a liberated zone. The fourth type, terrorist vengeance, can take place sporadically and spontaneously with little or no organisation; it has probably occurred thousands of times in all parts of the country in the form of small outbursts of retaliation against landlords, moneylenders, etc. Occasionally, however, terrorist vengeance seems to develop into an organised movement, sometimes involving a religious cult; it is also usually present to some degree in all of the other four types. Religious movements (type 2) are thus not completely confined to attempts to liberate an ethnic group or a region: some bandit groups, indeed, have special religious cults, as well as some terrorist movements, and both restorative rebellions and insurrections have usually been regarded as sanctioned by 'normal' religion. The religious movements for liberation are, however, a sufficiently distinctive group, bearing messianic and millenarian messages, to be placed in a separate category. Finally, both messianic religious movements and agitations for the redress of special grievances have, of course, occurred very frequently in non-violent forms; but this paper deals only with armed revolts, or (in two or three cases) with armed movements which engaged in forceful action without actually resorting to fighting.

Since the mid-1930s peasant unions have been organised by a variety of socialist and social democratic groups and since the mid-1940s several armed peasant uprisings have occurred under communist influence. Some of these outbreaks took place in regions already shaken by peasant uprisings in the British period — notably, in Bengal, in various tribal hill regions and in Kerala. With modifications, the communist-inspired outbreaks have partaken of the character of types 3, 4 and 5, coupled with a consciously revolutionary and transformative ideology having some elements akin to type 2. There have thus been continuities as well as changes between the earlier revolts and the modern communist ones. The most significant changes have, of course, been the attempt at leadership by a vanguard political party, together with the possession of a view of world history, an analysis of India, a strategy of revolution and a plan for the nation state at large, derived from the theories of Marx and Lenin and, more recently, of Mao Tse-tung.

The goals and methods of those engaged in revolt varied with their circumstances. Although no neat correlations are evident I shall suggest some
connections between contexts and types of revolt. All of the revolts seem to have occurred under conditions of relative deprivation, that is deprivations considered outrageous by comparison with the past or with the condition of others in the present. All of them embodied ideas of freedom from undue economic exploitation or deprivation; of some form of collective independence from a domination conceived of as foreign and unjustified; and of a just social order sanctioned by some religious faith or all-embracing modern ideology, especially that of Marxism. It is true of course that Marxism differs from religious belief in its denial of the supernatural, and that the work of Marx and his successors points a way towards a rationally scientific analysis of social phenomena. As a political ideology, however, especially when translated into the language and concepts of peasants, Marxism has similarities to religious movements in that it purports to offer a complete explanation of society and especially of social evils, and in that parts of the explanation are accepted on faith. Marxist movements are also dedicated to a future state of ethical virtue, providing new relationships for a 'blessed community'. Finally, as in chiliasm religious movements, its followers are ideally willing to sacrifice their lives to bring this state about. Contrary to Cohn, I do not regard these qualities as undesirable in times of oppression, nor as necessarily linked with lack of realism or with collective paranoia.

**Restorative Movements**

Between 1765 and 1857 a large proportion of revolts were led by Hindu or Muslim petty rulers, former revenue agents under the Moghuls, tribal chiefs in hill regions and local landed military officers (poligores) in south India. They were supported by masses of peasants and sometimes of former soldiers. The revolts were either against the conquest itself and the imposition of heavy revenues on existing nobles, or retaliatory attempts to drive out the British after they had dispossessed a zamindar or a raja for failing to pay the revenues and had replaced him with some other claimant to the estate, with a Company officer, or with a merchant, moneylender or adventurer who had bought the estate. Very few of these revolts were complete annihilation or expulsion of the British and reversion to the previous government and agrarian relations. The peasants were not blind loyalists. Their own grievances were bitter, for in their efforts to squeeze out the revenue the Company's officers often completely pauperised the peasants or had them starved, flogged or killed.

Twenty-nine revolts involving peasants as the main force were counted for this period, 13 by tribal chiefs and 17 by Hindu or Muslim rulers or other former officials. Six took place in Bengal, five in Bihar, three in Assam and 15 in central and southern India. The enemies in these rebellions included all British officials and troops, British plantation owners, revenue agents, pro-British landlords, moneylenders, and police. Rebel armies of peasants and former soldiers holed up in forts, in the forests, on hill tops with stocks of grain, and from there made forays in bands of a few hundred or to several thousand, robbing and killing officials, looting and burning treasuries, plundering merchant boats or the homes of landlords and moneylenders, and ambushing or fighting off police and troops with matchlocks, knives, swords, or bows and arrows. All of the movements involved several thousand armed rebels and supporting populations of tens or hundreds of thousands. The largest rebellions produced alliances of nobles in several districts, peasant insurrections over wide areas, the capture of towns and the temporary expulsion of the British from one or more local government centres.

Among these major uprisings were the revolt of Raja Chait Singh and other Hindu and Muslim zamindars of Oudh in 1778-81; the subsequent revolt of Vizier Ali, the deposed Nawab of Oudh, in Banaras, Gorakhpur and surrounding areas in 1799; the massive uprisings of the poligores and their peasants in Tinnevelly, North Arcot, and the ceded districts of Andhra in 1801-5; the uprising of the Chuar tribesmen of Midnapore in 1790; the revolt of the Pazhassi Raja, which commanded tens of thousands of guerilla fighters and affected most of the population of Malabar in 1796-1805; and almost immediately afterwards, an insurrection further south in Travancore and Cochin by Velu Thampi, the prime minister of Travancore state, with professional army of 30,000 and even larger numbers of cultivators. The last of these major rebellions before the Mutiny was the famous Santhal tribal revolt of 1855-56, involving a peasant army of between 30 and 50 thousand, village assemblies in groups of 10,000, and tens of thousands of government troops. All these revolts were, of course, eventually crushed by the British. Some rebel leaders fled into banditry or, very rarely, were reinstated with less exacting revenue settlements. More commonly they were wiped out with exemplary savagery; Velu Thampi was hanged publicly after his death. The Pazhassi Raja was executed and his lineage dispossessed; his palace was razed and a road built over the site. After a few of the revolts the revenue exactions on the peasants were reduced, but more often 'pacification' was brutally effected. Half the Santhal army was murdered and the victors randomly flogged or imprisoned peasants as examples to others. The Oudh revolt of 1778-81 ended with the zamindars' forts destroyed, their owners expelled into banditry and fierce plunderings and revenue exactions in the countryside which led to the famine of 1784.

The largest restorative rebellion was, of course, the 'Mutiny' of 1857-58. Begun by Hindu and Muslim soldiers in revolt against their conditions and against offences to their religions, it engaged millions of impoverished peasants, ruined artisans, dispossessed nobles, estate managers, tribal chiefs, landlords, religious leaders (Hindu, Muslim, tribal and Sikh), civil servants, boatmen, shopkeepers, mendicants, low caste labourers and workers in European plantations and factories. The prime enemies included rajas and nawabs with the emperor of Delhi as figurehead, native gentry, tribal chiefs and village headmen some of whom set themselves up as kings. The revolt was not centrally co-ordinated, but leaped from district to district throughout most of northern and central India and inspired scattered uprisings in the south.

The racism of the conquerors, their insults to religion, their eviction of rulers and managers, and above all their ruination of agricultural communities combined to provoke an anti-imperialist cataclysm. For the peasants, years of rack-renting, famines, high prices, tariffs, debts, land seizures and physical brutality were the main grievances; for the artisans, loss of livelihood; for the workers, low wages and sub-human conditions; and for the hill chieftains, incursions, taxes and loss of land. The prime enemies were of course the British government, military and planters, the big 'loyal' princes who allied with them, the revenue officers, the wealthiest merchants and the moneylenders. The revolt raged most fiercely in areas which had been conquered after 1800, for example, Oudh (conquered in 1856), Chota Nagpur (1831-33), Jhabpur (1818), Nagpur (1854), Jhansi (1853) and Berar (1853-60). Bengal, Orissa, the ceded
ments were rare or absent in India and usually from Judaeo-Christian origins or tiny.

In the heart of the rebel area mass insurrections of armed peasants, in addition to the mutinying troops and the private armies of rulers, combined to massacre the British and to destroy government buildings, revenue and court records, coffee and indigo plantations and factories, telegraph, railways and churches — in short, every organ of British rule. The war was a holy war, so announced repeatedly by rulers and religious leaders, but it was also most interestingly a war in which Hindu and Muslim, tribesman and Sikh, explicitly foresaw mutual enmity and combined in defence of their own and each others' customs and honour against infidel conquest and oppression. Contrary to standard British accounts, it seems to have come within an ace of ending the Company's rule.42

It failed, apparently, because it did not spread to all of India and was not centrally co-ordinated (as was the British government and army), and because, spreading at different dates from region to region, the rebellion lost some strongholds, in particular Delhi, before it could properly take hold in others. Nevertheless, for several months it raged over a 500,000-square-mile region in which the peasantry, including the lowest castes and the landless labourers, formed the backbone of resistance.

RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

After the failure of the Mutiny and the annexation of India by the Crown, rebel princes and chiefs were for the most part executed, driven into exile, or co-opted by the government. Tribal chiefs played a part in some of the later risings and also some religious leaders with claims to royal or noble descent. In general, however, peasant rebels from the Mutiny to the 1930s joined bandit troops, engaged in insurrections under their own committees or local popular leaders, or else took part in movements for local liberation under charismatic religious leaders. A number of such religious movements had already occurred before the Mutiny. Hobsbawm,43 Cohn,44 and Worsley45 have suggested that millenarian movements were rare or absent in India and the view is widespread that they stem usually from Judaean-Christian origins or influences. In the strict sense of belief in a thousand year period in which the Evil One will be chained, this is probably true, but most writers give a wider meaning to millenarian. Cohen cites five characteristics: such movements are collective; they look forward to a reign of bliss on this earth; the transformation from the present evil age is to be total; it is imminent, its followers waiting in “tense expectation of the millennium”; and it will come about by supernatural means.46

In this sense, a number of millenarian movements have arisen among Hindus, Muslims and tribal peoples in India over the past two centuries and probably earlier, although their prevalence has until recently been overlooked by researchers. Stephen Fuchs’ “Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religion”47 describes more than 50 movements with messianic and millenarian overtones. All had divine or prophetic leaders who were believed to possess supernatural powers and looked forward to a terrestrial state of righteousness and justice in which their enemies would be removed or defeated. Most had transformative rather than reformative in their expectation of sudden, total change, and most believed the Golden Age to be imminent and subject to some kind of supernatural intervention.

Fuchs records 19 such movements among peasants which resorted to armed struggle against the British and against those familiar foes, the landlords, merchants, moneylenders, revenue agents and other bureaucrats, troops, and police. The Moplah (or Mappilla) revolts of Malabar which took place between 1836 and 1896 actually 22 in number and variously somewhat in ideology — are here counted as one further instance, for a total of twenty.48

Of these 20 revolts involving armed struggle, 10 occurred among tribal peoples and 10 among predominantly Muslim or Hindu populations. 10 arose before the Mutiny and 10 afterwards. Four of the non-tribal movements occurred in Bengal, one in Gujarat, one in Maharashtra, one in Malwa, one in Patiala, one in Kerala and one in Assam. Six of the 10 non-tribal movements were Muslim and only four predominantly Hindu, though most of the tribal peoples were affected by Hinduism as well as Christianity and a few by Islam. It is probable that other millenarian revolts may yet come to light among the Hindu peoples of various regions; certainly, there were some non-violent Hindu millenarian movements.49 At present it seems, however, that tribal and Muslim minorities, especially in eastern India, were those most liable to violent uprisings of a millenarian kind.

If this is true, I suggest that fervent chiliasm movements may be most likely to arise among cultural minorities who have lost their customary security, occupations or statuses and have suffered unusual deprivation by comparison with their own past and with those around them.50 This would apply particularly to the Muslim cultivators of Bengal and Kerala who suffered acutely, often under Hindu landlords, both as rack-rented or evicted peasants, and as religious groups who were hated by those in authority because their co-religionists had earlier wielded political power. I would also apply to the tribal peoples, who, more than most groups in India, suffered incursions, loss of land, swindling, bankruptcy, and the undermining of their culture by literate and technologically superior invaders, both British and Indian. It is noteworthy that the Hindus who have joined religious movements with an egalitarian and millenarian flavour, for example, the Vaishnavite Maomorias of Assam in 1769-1839 and the followers of the Bengal Sanyasis in the late eighteenth century, were also predominantly low caste or of tribal origin, suffering unusual deprivation from evictions, famine, and excessive rents or revenues.51

It seems likely that the more hopeless the real prospects of the religious movement and the fewer its means of practical rehabilitation or redress, the greater the tendency to seek an imminent millenarian outcome through non-empirical means, and to invest the leader with marvellous, indeed magical, powers. Thus five of the 19 movements studied were classically millenarian in character, waiting in tense expectation of imminent deliverance, chiefly by supernatural means. These movements included the early movement of Moplah tenants in the 1830s to 1850s led by the Mambram Tangal,52 the Naikda tribal movement in Gujarat under the Hindu religious leader Joria Bhagat in 1867-70,53 the Munda tribal movement under Birsa in the 1890s,54 and the Bih tribal movement under Gogvindri, a tribal convert to Hinduism, in 1900-1912, following a severe famine in 1900. The Bih groups of the Panch Mahals and the Naikkas, both of whom probably number fewer than 10,000, came to believe that their leader was himself an incarnation of the supreme deity (Parameswar or Siva among the Naikkas and Vishnu among the Bihis). Both groups thought that their divine leader would deliver them from British
rule and establish an independent, ethical tribal kingdom, which the Naik-das called dharmraj (kingdom of virtue), a Hindu term. The Muslim Moplah tenants suffering from rack-renting, evictions and famine with the spread of cash crop farming and the disruption of their formerly stable tenancies, were taught by the Tangal that if they would give up cultivating, pray diligently, and organise for battle, a ship bearing arms and modern equipment for 40,000 men would miraculously appear on the horizon and the British would be driven out of Malabar — a clear case of a millenarian cargo cult. Birsa received teaching from both Lutheran missionaries and Hindu ascetics but then reverted to his Munda religion, bringing with him beliefs and images from both major faiths. He taught the Mundas first that he was a divinely appointed messenger come to deliver them from foreign rule, and later that he was an incarnation of God (Bhagwan) himself. His mission was to save the faithful from destruction in imminent flood, fire and brimstone by leading them to the top of a mountain. Beneath them, all the British, Hindus and Muslims would perish, after which a Munda kingdom would be ushered in.

Although their religious predictions failed, all of these movements organised such numbers of fervent followers that they took instead to empirical means and made armed attacks on their oppressors. Birsa assembled a force of 6,000 Mundas armed with swords and bows and arrows, some of whom burned Hindu temples and Christian houses and churches, killed a constable and were finally defeated in battle by government troops. Joria’s followers were organised for revolt by Rupsing Gobar, a rebel leader who actually founded a Munda kingdom, bringing with him beliefs and images from both major faiths. He taught the Mundas first that he was a divinely appointed messenger come to deliver them from foreign rule, and later that he was an incarnation of God (Bhagwan) himself. His mission was to save the faithful from destruction in imminent flood, fire and brimstone by leading them to the top of a mountain. Beneath them, all the British, Hindus and Muslims would perish, after which a Munda kingdom would be ushered in.

The Thuggee were the most colourful and numerous of Indian bandits, the best of them combining a rather distant millenarian prospect with a certain Robin Hood gallantry and a genius for swift assassination. They arose about 1650 in the area between Delhi and Agra and multiplied in late Mogul times as revenue exactions became harsher. During British rule they spread throughout Bihar and into Oudh, Bengal, Orissa, Rajputana, the Punjab, Mysore and the Karnatak. Operating in bands of about a dozen, they left their home villages periodically and waylaid wealthy travellers many miles away, decoyed them by stealth and then strangled them with yellow scarves, robbed them and buried them. Precisely what was done with the booty is unclear, but in some cases at least the Thuggee must have shared it with their fellow villagers, for they had the peasants’ loyalty in their own territories. Thuggee were recruited from outlaws of the state, peasants and disbanded soldiers — chiefly from the most oppressed classes of their regions. Each band customarily contained members of several Hindu castes, Muslims, and in the Punjab, Sikhs. Band members observed normal social distinctions in their own communities but ate, smoked and drank together on their outings. They were initiated into a movement devoted to the service of their goddess, seen as Kali by the Hindus and Fatima by the Muslims, by whom they believed their order to have been created so as to root out evil beings and save humanity from destruction. As in the case of the Moplahs and no doubt most of the other armed religious movements, rites of dedication and purification preceded each assassination. Thuggee were forbidden by their religion to kill women, children, youth, Hindus and Muslim holy men, carpenters, poor people, beggars, bards, water-carriers, oil-vendors, dancers, sweepers, laundry workers, musicians and cripples — in short almost every productive or defenceless category in the population. They confined their

Social Bandits

Five of the revolts studied are best classified by Hobshawm’s term “social banditry”. They are the Thuggee of north and central India of 1650-1850 or later, the Sanyasis and Fakirs of Bengal in the late eighteenth century, the dispossessed military chiefs of Nagaland and Faridpur in 1838-51, and the Muslim Faraizis of Bogra, Faridpur and Barasat, Nadia, Faridpur, Jessore and Calcutta regions in 1827-31; the Muslim Pagal Pandits, converts from the Garo and Hajong tribes, under Tipu Shah in northern Mymensingh in 1824-33; and the Muslim Faraizis of Bogra and Faridpur in 1838-51. All of these movements attracted tens of thousands of rack-rented and evicted peasants, recruited armed bands of many thousands, and strove to drive out their Hindu landlords and establish a reign of Islamic righteousness. Tipu Shah and Titu Miyan conquered large territories, set up administrations and levied tribute from the landlords. Dudu Miyan, the Faraizi leader, ran a parallel administration to that of the British from Bahadarpur in East Bengal, which he divided into circles of villages under deputies. Each deputy settled disputes among the tenants, forced Muslims to convert to the Maulvi sect, and protected cultivators from the zamindars’ excesses through a mixture of litigation and armed intimidation. The British defeated Tipu Shah and Titu Miyan in battle and imprisoned Dudu Miyan in Alipore jail — a site of confinement and ill-treatment of revolutionary prisoners down to the present day.57
assaults chiefly to merchants, soldiers, money-carriers and servants of the Company. They are reported to have assassinated more than a million people and plundered many millions of rupees.

The Thuggee, like the Kallar, the Lodhas and many other tribes who raided rich plainsmen when their lands were invaded, must be classed as reformative, since they sought not a liberated kingdom but only short-term relief for themselves and their fellows, and believed only vaguely in a Golden Age hereafter. The Sanyasis and Fakirs became, however, a transformative movement and for a short time a highly successful one. These religious were originally peasants, evicted and made homeless during the wars, dependencies and revenue exactions of the East India Company and various rival Indian princes in the late eighteenth century. They first formed bands of Hindu and Muslim holy men and survived as mendicants. As their numbers swelled in the great famine of 1770, they gathered together with disbanded soldiers and dispossessed zamindars, formed bandit troops and scoured the countryside, raiding the grain stocks and treasures of the wealthy and distributing them to the starving peasants.

In trying to consolidate its rule the Company met with a large Sanyasi and Fakir rebellion in 1771 between Rangpur and Dacca which defeated a company of sepoys and killed the commander. Bands of five to seven thousand bandits then spread over most of Bengal and eastern Bihar, set up an independent government in Bogra and Mymensingh and almost wiped out another British detachment in 1773. Further frequent encounters took place between these Sanyasi-Fakirs and British forces all over West Bengal and Bihar until the movement finally disintegrated about 1800; according to Stephen Fuchs, its survivors are believed to have migrated to join the Marathas in their wars against the British.

The militant religious movements discussed in type 2 strove for the liberation of an ethnic region — both from the British and from 'foreign' Indian predators and invaders — and for the establishment of a divinely ordained kingdom of righteousness and justice. They arose among severely exploited minorities most of whom, nevertheless, remained in their home territories and were numerically preponderant within a region. Many bandit movements resembled the ethnic religious movements in possessing special religious cults, charismatic leaders and a belief that their struggles would eventually release the world from pain. Bandits apparently differed from local religious movements for liberation, however, in being recruited from displaced or outcast groups and individuals — dispossessed soldiers, unseated nobles, evicted peasants, unemployed artisans, outlaws of the state although not necessarily of the local community, and those who had lost all through war or famine. They were thus men who, although they might maintain a home or shelter in their villages, had no livelihood except plunder and were free to roam far afield. Alternatively, bandits arose part-time among tribal peoples squeezed by plains invaders and by the government, who could combine vengeance with predation by raising plains' landlords from their own base areas.

Being foot-loose, bandits had great adaptability and therefore an ambiguous status in the larger society. As Hobhawm stresses, only some of them, probably a minority, were "social bandits". There is evidence that the poor in distress used to sell their lands to the bandits in order to escape their creditors, and that the bandits probably used these lands to found new villages. The bandits also helped to destitute peasants to drive out the British. When a third of the villages of Birbhum and Bishnupur districts were wiped out, yet the Company still further increased its revenue demands by twelve per cent between 1770 and 1776. Thousands of peasants ruined by famine or rack-renting scoured the countryside as bandits and in 1787 and 1788 sacked the Bishnupur treasury, carrying off more than three thousands sterling pounds' worth of silver. It was in November 1799 that the peasants made common cause with the bandits and drove out the British from Rajnagar and Bishnupur. Very soon, however, the peasants came to be at odds with the bandits and fell upon them, slaughtering them unmercifully, and in 1790 peasants co-operated with the government to restore 'peace and order'. The reason for this clash is unclear: perhaps bandit rule proved less "social" than the peasants anticipated, or perhaps the peasants resisted bandit demands for division of their lands.
main the oppressors without plans for the future — often, indeed, in the certain knowledge of being annihilated. In India every village has its legends of individual or small group acts of violence, and of landlords, revenue agents, moneylenders, bailiffs, or other authorities or wealthy persons. More rarely, when there is extreme suffering yet when it is impossible to drive out the enemy, patterns of violence may emerge in which members of a minority or even a whole region, engage in epidemic assassinations of key enemies, or burn buildings, stacks, or other property. The individual terrorist kills and risks his life for his community, in vengeance but also partly with a sense of group pride and natural justice; sometimes, with a religious belief that this is his unavoidable destiny and his road to salvation. Although the custom was ancient among them, some of the Lushai Kukis’ headhunting raids into Sylhet and Cachar in the first half of the nineteenth century seem to have been in vengeance, “not [as some charged] to get heads to bury with [their dead chief] Laroo, but to avenge unfair dealings of Bengalis at the frontier marts.” And although they sprang originally from a millenarian ideology, most of the nineteenth century Moplah killings of British officials, landlords and revenue agents were carried out to avenge specific wrongs, to mete out rural justice and to afford desperate paupers escape to salvation through martyrdom. The British correctly estimated the element of collective justice, for they levied heavy fines on the entire village of those who died fighting after they had assassinated some high ranking person.

**Mass Insurrections**

Fourteen of the revolts studied were mass insurrections in which peasants provided the leadership and were the sole or dominant force. These revolts were sudden and dramatic. They lacked a religious movement ideology and a single charismatic religious leader. They aimed initially at the redress of particular grievances and thus were at first reformative. They started characteristically with peaceful mass boycotts or demands for the righting of wrongs, but fought when reprisals were taken against them. Seven of the revolts occurred in Bengal, two in the Punjab, three in the Deccan, one in Mysore and one in Kerala. Several became revolutionary in aim as they progressed and four actually achieved a temporarily liberated zone. These were the revolts of the peasants and bandits of Bishnupur and Birbhum in 1789, of the Jat peasants of Haryana in 1809, of the peasants of Khandesh in 1852, and of the Moplahs of Kerala in 1921. One revolt, that of the Santhals of Bengal in 1857, was predominantly tribal, although plains’ peasants took part in it. The rest involved Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs, usually a combination of members of two religions. Six occurred before the Mutiny, and eight afterwards. The biggest revolts, those of Rangpur in 1873, of Bhishnupur in 1879, of the Jats in 1809, of the Mysores in 1830-31, of the indigo growers in Bengal in 1860, of the Deccan peasants in 1875, and of the Moplahs in 1921, probably affected populations of more than a million. The revolts characteristically lasted for several weeks, but the Moplah revolt continued for six months.

All the uprisings involved tenants or small owner-cultivators. All were against economic deprivations resulting from British policies and in most cases also from landlords’ exactions. The revolt in Rangpur and Dinajpur of 1783 and the Deccan peasant uprising of 1875 provide earlier and later examples of features characteristic of all these uprisings. In Rangpur in the early years of Company rule, revenue exactions under the revenue contractor Debi Singh were outrageous — his agents chained and imprisoned selected peasants, then flogged and starved them until their villages paid the assessment. On January 18, 1783, peasants of many villages assembled in Tepah and elected a leader — the son of a peasant who had served as leader in a previous insurrection. The mob then stormed a prison and released the prisoners and marched with drumbeats to demand revenue concessions from the local agent. When his police fired and killed a peasant a fight ensued in which the agent Gaurnohan was captured and several peasants killed before the crowd could withdraw. Although the peasants made clear that they wanted justice, not bloodshed, and later presented a written petition to the government, they met only attempts to renew the revenue collections. The situation was so bad that, as they claimed, “we then sold our cattle and the trinkets belonging to our women. We have since sold our children . . . .” Failing to get relief, they killed two revenue agents? and raised a huge armed force which marched through the countryside. The revolt spread to Dinajpur, where peasants elected two more leaders and sacked and robbed a revenue office. After five weeks British troops put down the rebellion after killing many peasants, burning their homes and hanging a village headman. No relief seems to have been forthcoming from this uprising.

The Deccan revolt of 1875 was joined by water-carriers, barbers and even the house-servants of moneylenders in addition to cultivators. It covered Poona and Ahmednagar districts and spread into Gujarat. Excessive revenue exactions, low prices of grain and cotton crops and evictions and land mortgages to moneylenders drove the peasants to a three week insurrection. Tens of thousands met in public gatherings in market places and vowed to boycott the claims of moneylenders and to seize their documents. Some moneylenders fled the area. Those who resisted the armed bands who came for documents had their fodder stacks burned down, although the peasants carried on very little personal violence. After three weeks troops moved against the boycotters, hundreds were arrested in each centre, and the government levied collective fines throughout the area. The revolt produced some respite in the Deccan Culturalists’ Relief Act of 1879.

The famous Bengal indigo strike of 1850 was the first large strike in India and one of the most successful. It illustrates the initiative and discipline of which peasants are capable. It involved hundreds of thousands of tenants on British plantations. The tenants were forced to grow indigo at very low prices for the British textile industry, to the exclusion of most other crops. When they refused, slave drivers — some trained on United States southern plantations — kidnapped or flogged them, exposed them in stocks, or murdered them. Once the strike spread rapidly. Tenants gathered in stencils, swords, bows and arrows and matchlocks to defend their settlements. In Pulna an army of 2,000 peasants appeared and wounded a magistrate’s horse; otherwise, there was little violence. The strike stopped indigo planting in Bengal and forced the planters to move west to Bihar. The Moplah rebellion of 1921 lasted longer than any other peasant insurrection I have examined. It bridged the period of ‘pre-political-party, peasant uprisings and that of peasant movements sponsored by political parties. In its first large all-India struggle towards Independence, the Indian National Congress joined with Muslims of the Khilafat movement to boycott British institutions, law courts, titles, educational institutions and the pur-
tacked and engaged in espionage among Moplahs and when British troops at-
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rural poorer peasant society, or even, in some areas, co-resident linguistic
groups.86 What is labelled inter-religious or inter-communal strife is often, perhaps usually, initial.

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Menon about 10,000 were estimated to have died. There was prolonged
guerrilla warfare and two large battles were fought. On reconquering the
region the British took savage reprisals. The rebel leaders were shot, hundreds
of their followers were hanged or deported to Andaman and 61 pri-
soners suffocated as a result of being enclosed in a railway goods-wagon on
their way from Tirur to Coimbatore jail. Considering the violent enmity of the
Hindu landlords, the wavering of the (largely Hindu) Indian National Congress and the terror instituted by the
British, the rebel leaders' conduct must be considered moderate and the rebels' communal reprisals a minor part of
the revolt, which was essentially a peasants' insurrection. The Moplah rebellion
illustrates the fact that in India as elsewhere, agrarian classes usually have
a partial isomorphism with major ethnic categories, whether these are Hindu
and Muslim or culturally distinct blocks of Hindu castes, or even, in some areas,
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Seven major peasant uprisings or episodes of revolutionary struggle in the
Indian countryside have occurred to my knowledge under communist guidance. The first four were conducted by the
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started, in accordance with current party policy, and have sometimes been stopped by the party because of national or even international changes of party line.84

Nevertheless, just as modern tribal nationalist movements, in their goal of ethnic liberation, share common features with and may even draw experience and organisational strength from earlier tribal religious movements,87 so various communist struggles among the peasants have had features in common with early peasant movements involving social banditry, terrorist vengeance with ideas of popular justice, or mass insurrections for the redress of grievances.

The most successful communist led peasant actions were those of Tehgha in 1946, Telengana in 1946-48, Naxalbari in 1967, and Andhra Pradesh in 1969-71. All of them involved a large component of tribal people. All of these revolts began as strikes or other forms of popular action initiated by the peasants or with their willing consent for the redress of specific grievances. The Tehgha revolt began with a demand for reduction of the occupying tenants' (jotedars') rights in the crop from half to one-third and a corresponding increase in the rights of poor peasant sharecroppers (adhiahs or bargadars). It had been preceded in the late 1930s by a campaign on behalf of middle peasants (the better-off tenants) to abolish 'feudal' levies over and above the legal rents. In Telengana, too, the initial demands were for abolition of illegal exactions by the deshmukhs and nawabs - the feudal lords - and later on for cancellation of peasants' debts.88

In Naxalbari the demands were for halving the rents paid by cultivating tenants and doubling the wages of landless labourers. In Naxalbari the peasant unions began by taking over land which had become outright owners of the land which had been taken from the jotedars, the former occupancy tenants who by this time had become outright owners of the land. The land was distributed to the landless, but the proprietors refused to surrender it. Having driven out the landlords, the peasant unions then went on to distribute all the land among the peasants.89 Similarly, in Warangal, Khammam and Karimnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh in 1969, the communist peasant unions began their armed struggle by occupying land which had been taken from them by neighbouring landlords and redistributing it among the tribal peasants.90

In all these struggles, much as in more successful of the traditional peasant insurrections referred to earlier, the peasant unions were able to secure temporary liberated zones which they governed for several weeks or months through peasant committees supervised by the Communist Party. In Thanjavur landlords, police and bureaucrats remained in the area but obeyed the village committees; in the other regions the peasants killed or drove out these figures during the period of revolutionary government. The largest and longest revolt was that of Telengana, which is reported to have engulfed 2,000 villages in an area of 15,000 square miles, with a population of four million and a peasant army of 5,000. In the more recent Andhra Pradesh uprising of the late 1960s under the Andhra Pradesh Revolutionary Communist Committee, which took place partly in the same area, the revolutionaries claimed in mid-1970 a liberated area of 7,000 to 8,000 square miles with a population of 500,000 to 600,000.91 Repression has since greatly increased and the movement appears to be temporarily crushed.

In contrast with these efforts, communist armed action has been less successful when it employed tactics suggestive of banditry or of terrorist vengeance, unaccompanied by mass insurrection or by demands for redress of specific grievances and popular control by peasant committees. These tactics predominated in the party's struggles among the peasants in 1948-49 in Kerala and in those of the CPI(ML) in eastern India and elsewhere in 1969-72.92 In the former instance the communists had earlier, in 1946, conducted successful mass strikes for higher wages among landless labourers and mass cultivation of the forest lands of big landlords. (As in Bengal, they had also successfully organised strikes of middle peasants against illegal levies during the late 1930s.) When, however, police reprisals became heavy and several communists and peasants were killed, the party went partly underground and squads of party members and peasant leaders began to rob grain trucks andransack the granaries of landlords and distribute food to the people. Although poor peasants admired these exploits - much as they admired those of dacoits who pillage the rich and powerful - much as they admire those of dacoits who pillage the rich and powerful - no doubt also other Indian terrorist groups in urban uprisings of the early twentieth century. While commanding admiration in many villages, the squad tactic, unaccompanied by mass organisation around specific economic grievances, isolated the cadres and exposed a defenceless populace to police and later to military reprisals. The annihilation policy, along with other shortcomings, was criticised in a letter from the Chinese government in November 1970, and helped provoke a split in the party in 1971. Since the death of Charu Mazumdar, the party chairman and the main exponent of the annihilation tactic, in July 1975, it has been repudiated by most of the party's remaining leaders.93 At present, most of the CPI(ML)'s cadres appear to have been arrested, or to have left the party, or to have been killed in action or in jail.94

CONCLUSIONS

Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings, reaching back at least to the initial British conquest and the last decades of Moghul government. For more than 200 years peasants in all the major regions have risen repeatedly against landlords, revenue agents and other bureaucrats, moneylenders, police and military forces. The uprisings were responses to relative deprivation of unusually severe character, always economic, and often also involving physical brutality or ethnic persecution. The political Independence of India has not brought
sucease from these distresses, for imperial extraction of wealth from India and oppression by local property owners continue to produce poverty, famine, agricultural sluggishness and agrarian unrest. Major uprisings under communist leadership since British rule not unnaturally show a continuity of tactics with earlier peasant revolts. Of these, the more successful have involved mass insurrections, initially against specific grievances, and the less successful, social banditry and terrorist vengeance. Both in the case of communist revolts and in that of earlier peasant uprisings, social banditry and terrorist vengeance, when they occurred, appear to have happened in the wake of repression of other forms of revolt. Although revolts have been widespread, certain areas have an especially strong tradition of rebellion. Bengal has been a hotbed or revolt, both rural and urban, from the earliest days of British rule. Some districts in particular such as Mymensingh, Dinajpur, Rangpur and Pabna in Bangladesh, and the Santhal regions of Bihar and West Bengal, figured repeatedly in peasant struggles and continue to do so. The tribal areas of Andhra Pradesh, and the state of Kerala, also have long traditions of revolt. Hill regions where tribal or other minorities retain a certain independence, ethnic unity, and tactical manoeuvrability, and where the terrain is suited to guerrilla warfare, are of course especially favourable for peasant struggles, but these have also occurred in densely populated plains regions such as Thanjavur, where rack-renting, land hunger, landless labour and unemployment cause great suffering.

The more successful revolts of the recent period occurred under irregular conditions which are unlikely to be repeated. The Tebhaga revolt took place three years after a famine had killed three and a half million Bengalis, leaving a labour shortage. The British government was nervous of offending the peasantry because of the Japanese invasion; it failed to move against the rebels until the Japanese had been defeated and the proportions of the rebellion had become alarming. In Telengana in 1946-47 the change of government created an emergency, as the Nizam of Hyderabad refused to accede to the Indian Union, and it was some time before the Indian government decided to invade the state and mop up both the Nizam's forces and the communists. In Thanjavur in 1948 the government was occupied in invading Hyderabad and did not immediately institute repression. Today the Indian government is more heavily militarised than it has ever been. It has the experience of crushing recent outbreaks of peasant riots with police repression in West Bengal and of the invasion of Bangladesh. It also has the example of US methods of repression in Indochina. The increasing poverty, famine and unemployment make it seem certain that India's agrarian ills can be solved only by a peasant-backed revolution leading to socialism, but the struggle will be very long and hard.

Notes
1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a Conference on Peasants of Asia and Latin America at the University of British Columbia in February, 1973, sponsored by the Canada Council. I am grateful to David F. Aberle, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, Peter Hammett, George Viet and Thomas Weisskopf for comments on the earlier version. None of them is responsible for my interpretations.
2 The hut and charred bodies were photographed and are reproduced in Lasse and Lisa Berg, "Face to Face: Fascism and Revolution in India", Raintree Press, California, 1971, p. 55. For more details and an account of recent class struggles in Thanjavur, see Mythil Shivaraman, "Rumblings of Class Struggle in Thanjavur", in Kathleen Gough and Hari P Sharma, eds, "Imperialism and Revolution in South Asia", Monthly Review Press, 1973.
4 A supporter of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), one of the main Maoist groups, reported that an estimated 10,000 peasants and others had been killed on the communist side in the three years from 1967 to 1970 (personal communication). Liberation, the organ of the CPI(M-L), has published numerous accounts of assassinations of landlords, police, usurers and others by cadres of the party between November 1967 and January 1972. The journal was issued from 60A Keshab Chandra Sen Street, Calcutta 9, until early 1970 and was then published clandestinely. Issues since September 1970 are available from Chinigar, PO Box 32, Station F, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Volume 5, No 1 (July 1971-January 1972) contains accounts of a number of assassinations in West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.
7 Op. cit, p. 383. Moore is actually equivocal about the effects of caste on peasant unrest, for on page 382 he writes, "Any notion to the effect that one or another distinctive trait of Indian peasant society constitutes an effective barrier to insurrection is obviously false", but on page 383, "Caste was also a way of organising a highly fragmented society... Though this fragmentation could at times be overcome in small ways and in specific localities, it must have been a barrier to widespread rebellion. Furthermore, the system of caste aid emergence hierarchical submission. Make a man feel humble by a thousand daily acts and he will behave in a humble way." The traditional etiquette of caste was a way of enforcing submission; it had definite political consequences. Finally, as a safety valve, caste does provide a form of collectiveawahism through Sanskritisation". My view is that an enforced etiquette of submission does not necessarily engender submissiveness; on the contrary, it may become a way to subordinate comes to feel unjustly deprived, having to observe the etiquette may engender rebellious feelings which sometimes burst forth. In Thanjavur in 1952 I lived on a street of low ranking and poverty stricken cowherds and sharecroppers, servants of Brahman landlords. The caste etiquette was most servient I have seen outside of Kerala. In private the sharecroppers often raged against their landlords and vowed "exile". In spite of severe reprisals involving flogging and being forced to drink pints of cowdung and water, lower caste men in this village had freqently resorted to violence. One once smote his landlord across the face; another cut off his landlord's leg; two more bound their landlord to a cart-wheel, thrashed him and drove him out of the village for seducing a kinswoman. Sanskritisation permits upward mobility but only for Hindus. The conflicts of interest among castes which are respectively composed predominantly of smallholders, sharecroppers and landless labourers, are a serious matter for revolutionary organisers, but such class conflicts among peasants are worldwide.
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10 The Punjab appears to have been an exception. Although recently conquered, the Sikhs in particular provided soldiers loyal to the Brit-
12 The formerly primitive tribes of India number about 45 million and form about one-twelfth of the pop-
18 See, for example, Martin Orans, “Beyond the Shaken: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions”, Asia Publishing House, 1965, pp 143-144.
20 The century old dispute regarding the extent, or even the occurrence, of ‘industrialisation’ in nineteenth century India has not abated. Most writers acknowledge that there was certainly a decline in the proportion of Indian craftsmen relative to the total population in the first half of the nineteenth century, and some, that the decline continued throughout the century. The argu-
21 The population of Dacca is reported to have fallen from 150,000 in 1757 to between 30,000 and 40,000 in 1840. In 1778 the ex-
22 Opium, for example, was the chief agricultural crop in Malwa and lower Rajputana in 1817-18 (S B Chaudhuri, op cit, 1955, p 217), and this was still true in 1880-1880. In Bengal and Bihar, cotton in the north-west provinces, central India and the Karnatak, jute and sugarcane in Bengal, and
24 There is uncertainty about the exact proportions of the different classes of peasants and agricultural workers in various decades because of imperfect records and differences in modes of classification. Dharma Kumar rightly points out that there was a substantial class of agricultural labourers at the be-
25 The agrarian structure of India in the nineteenth century, Kumar notes that, agricultu-
26 In 1778 the exports of Dacca muslins to England amounted to three million rupees, but in 1817 they had ceased altogether. Murshidabad, Surat, Agra and also southern cities such as Thanjavur suffered corresponding-
27 See, e.g., Barratt Brown, op cit, pp 174-177; and A K Bagchi, loc cit.

and 125-132 for accounts of these.
of the total population and agricultural labourers about 38 per cent of the agricultural population. In 1971 the agricultural population had declined again to 68 per cent. Agricultural labourers still formed about 38 per cent of the agriculturally dependent population, but a larger proportion of them were probably totally landless than were in 1951. (See Dharma Kumar, “Land and Caste in South India”, Cambridge University Press, 1965, especially pp 168-193; Charles Bettelheim, “India Independent”, Monthly Review Press, 1969, p 25; and Government of India Censuses for the various decades.) In some states where the agricultural population's density is very high, the numbers of agricultural labourers have risen quite rapidly in recent decades. In Thanjavur district, for example, they increased by 60 per cent between 1951 and 1961. (See S L Myron Shiva Marion, “Rumblings of Class Struggle in Thanjavur”, in Gough and Sharma, eds, op cit, p 232.) When middle-class landowners lose their lands, moreover, not all of them show up in the category of landless labourers. Some, like some former landless labourers, are forced to migrate to cities, where they often join the lumpen proletariat of beggars, casual labourers and unskilled craftsmen or service workers. The urban population increased from about 25 per cent to 31 per cent of the total between 1951 and 1971.

25 See, e.g., V M Dandekar and Nila- kantha Rath, “Poverty in India: Dimensions and Trends”, Economic and Political Weekly, Bombay January 2, 1971, pp 106-146. The authors estimate that in 1960-61, 38 to 40 per cent of India's rural population and about 54 per cent of its urban population received inadequate diet to maintain health. (21) Based on United Nations standards, even with respect to number of calories. By 1967-68, consumer expenditure among the poorest 5 per cent of villagers had declined slightly, while the poorest 20 per cent in the rural areas had stagnated. In towns, partly as a result of the migration of rural unemployed to the cities, consumer expenditure had declined among the bottom 40 per cent between 1960-61 and 1967-68. Using a different criterion of a minimum of Rs 15 per month per capita for consumer expenditure, Bardhan estimated that the rural population living below the poverty line was 38.05 per cent in 1960-61, 44.57 per cent in 1964-65 and 53.02 per cent in 1967-68 (P Bardhan, “Consumer Poverty and Agricultural Labourers: A Correction”, Economic and Political Weekly, January 2, 1971, pp 25-48). Male agricultural labourers can find work for an average of only 190 days a year and females for only 120 days a year (Bettelheim, op cit, p 30).

26 See B M Bhatia, op cit, for the following information, especially pp 10-13, 239-242 and 308-339.


28 P L Eldridge, “The Politics of Foreign Aid in India”, Vikas Publications, Delhi, 1969, especially pp 112-116. India imported only 2.3 per cent of its food grains in the First Five Year Plan (1951-1955), but this was increased, chiefly under US Public Law 480 loans, to 7.4 per cent in the Second Plan and 7.5 per cent in the Third.

29 For the impact of land reforms, see, e.g., Bhawani Sen, “Evolution of Agrarian Relations in India”, People's Publishing House, Delhi, 1962; Grigory Kotovsky, Agrarian Reform in India, People's Publishing House, 1964; and Charles Bettelheim, op cit, pp 146-233. One? in Gough and Sharma, eds, op cit, pp 88 and 94. Observations in Kerala in 1984 convinced me that these poor people were widely at work there, partly as a result of landlords' reactions to successive land reform acts. In one north Kerala village, for example, I found that whereas in 1948 poor peasants, landless labourers and casually employed non-agricultural day labourers, having no land or only one small garden, were 72.1 per cent of the population, by 1964 they were 88.2 per cent.

30 See, e.g., Francine Frankel, “India's Green Revolution: Economic Gains and Political Costs”, Princeton University Press, 1971, for the increasing gap in incomes brought about by the green revolution and the fact that chiefly benefits the larger farmers and land owners. (32) "Millennium in India", Vikas, Delhi, 1971, pp 185-8) and Mythily Shivaraman, (loc cit) cite increases in productivity highly relevant to India.


32 See, e.g., "Bihari Nationalism: The Other Rebellion", South Asia, October 1972, pp 49-52 and "The Other Rebellion" in Gough and Sharma, eds, op cit, pp 88 and 94. Observations in Kerala in 1984 convinced me that these poor people were widely at work there, partly as a result of landlords' reactions to successive land reform acts. In one north Kerala village, for example, I found that whereas in 1948 poor peasants, landless labourers and casually employed non-agricultural day labourers, having no land or only one small garden, were 72.1 per cent of the population, by 1964 they were 88.2 per cent.

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be driven out of India by the northern rebels (W Logan, "Malar", Calcutta, 1951, p 570).

42 Chaudhuri, op cit, 1955, p 269.

44 Hobsbawm, op cit, 1959, p 58.


46 Cohn, loc cit, p 32.

48 The fullest account of the Moplab revolts up to the mid-1850s is contained in Logan, op cit, pp 554-594. See also C A. Jines, Gazetteer of the Malabar District, Madras Government Press, 1908, pp 82-99. The movements recorded by Fuchs are: (1) the Hindu Maamaria movement in the Assam valley, 1769-1816; (2) the Mahili movement of Aga Muhammad Reza with the Kuki Nagas in Cachar in 1799 (also described by Chaudhuri, op cit, 1955, p 73); (3) the Mahili movement of Abdul Rahman and Bohra peasants in Gujarat, 1810; (4) the Muslim Pagal Panthi movement in Bajwa in 1824-33; (5) the Muslim Maulvi or Wahabi movement in Bengal in 1827-31 under Titu Miyan; (6) the Muslim Farazi movement of Dudu Miyan in Bengal in 1838-51; (7) an undated Hindu messianic movement in Sondwara, Malwa, in the early nineteenth century; (8) an undated Hindu movement in Patiala state in the early nineteenth century; (9) revolts of the Gauda tribe of Mysore and some peasants of Coorg and south Canara under three successive Hindu religious leaders in 1837 and the following years; (10) the revolt of the Naik-Ors of Relesingh in 1867-70 in the Panchmals; (11) the Munda revolt of the Sardari Lari in the 1870s in Chota Nagpur; (12) the Mundu revolt under Birsa in Chota Nagpur in 1895-98; (13) the Oran movement of Jotra Bhagat in Chota Nagpur in 1914; (14) the movement of Vasudev Balvant Phadke among Maharanbrian peasants and others in 1879-80; (15) the Kach Naga movement under Sultan Basant in 1922; (16) the Kach Naga movement under Jadonang and Gaidilli in 1929-36 and again under Gaidilli in 1961; (17) a revolt of the Garos in Assam in 1902; (18) the revolt of the Gonds of Adilabad under Bhimu against the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1940; and (19) the revolt of the Bhil Nithi-parthi under Govindgiri in 1911-12.

49 Fuchs records a movement among the Pankas of Raipur an untouchable caste of weavers and village artisans who believed that a deity had entered him and preached that good men's crops would grow without sowing: when his followers were arrested and the revenue fell off he was arrested in 1860 (Fuchs, op cit, p 106).


51 Fuchs, op cit, pp 134 et seq.

52 Logan, op cit, p 567.

53 Fuchs, op cit, pp 218-221.

54 Fuchs, op cit, pp 28-34.

55 Fuchs, op cit, pp 240-243. The fifth classically millenarian movement was that of a Hindu messiah in Badawar, Patiala state, in the early nineteenth century who believed that he was Kalki, the last of the incarnations of Vishnu, whom he announced that on an appointed day he would overturn the foreign government and set up his kingdom. He was arrested and his followers disappeared. Fuchs points out that Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Jainism and Buddhism all contain millenarian mythologies — Vaishnavism that of Kalki, Shaivism of the 26 or 28 incarnations of Shiv each ushering in an age of liberation from evil, Jainism in the coming period of 63 saints whose saving qualities are similar to those to the Voivhus avatars, and Buddhism with its belief in the Bud- dha Maitreya, a future saviour of the world (Fuchs, op cit, pp x-xi, and for the Patiala movement, p 178).

56 Logan op cit, pp 558-59.

57 There have been at least three massacres of political prisoners, chiefly members of the Communist Party (Marxist-Leninist) since mid-1970. In particular on November 26, 1971, police admitted that six 'Naxalites' had been beaten to death with clubs and 237 wounded; according to some reports, however, up to 50 were murdered and many of the injured, at the time of writing, hover between life and death (Frontier, Calcutta, December 4, 1971; and Le Monde, Paris, November 30, 1971).

58 For a brief account and bibliography see "Thug", Encyclopedia Britannica, 1958, Volume 21, p 710.

59 Fuchs, op cit, pp 109-111.

60 Chaudhuri, 1955, op cit p 152.

61 Fuchs, op cit, pp 71-72.

62 Francis, op cit, pp 88-93.

63 Fuchs, op cit, pp 109-111.


65 Stewart N Gordon argues that Thuggee bands were employed by Maratha chiefs in the late eighteenth century to centre wool, and to turn instead provide them with a non-local source of revenue from plundering far afield during a period of competition in armament and new states (identifying and paying for European-style artillery and infantry (Gordon, "Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders and State-formation in 18th Century Malwa". The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Volume 6, Number 4, December 1969, pp 422-428).

66 Vasudev Balvant Phadke, the Maratha Brahman religious leader who believed himself an incarnation of Shivaji Maharaj, recruited Ramoshi bandits in 1879 and 1880, and to them carried out robberies and attacks on police stations to obtain supplies with which he hoped to build an army and drive out the British. He was disillusioned, however, by the fact that the Ramoshis looked for their own benefit, and so he turned instead to the Dhangar shepherd caste and to the Kolis, who joined him because they believed they had been unjustly deprived of a large part of their cultivated land (Fuchs, op cit, pp 228-33).

67 Francis, op cit, pp 91-92.


70 Logan, op cit, p 584. Fuchs records another rebellion in which the motives seem to have been chiefly revenge on the part of Muslim cultivators and townsmen against unjust agrarian and municipal taxes. The revolt took place in Bareilly in 1816 under Multi Muhammad Ajwaz and commanded an army of 71, and in which estimates of the number of casualties varied between five to fifteen thousand (Fuchs, op cit, pp 180-181).

71 Six of the revolts took place before the Mutiny, and are described by Chaudhuri, namely the revolt at Dinapur and Rangpur in 1783, that at Bishnupur and Birbhum in 1789, that in Mysore in 1830-31, that in Kutch in 1824, that in Kashmir in 1852, and that of the Jats of Haryana in 1809 (Chaudhuri, op cit, 1953, sections 3, 4, 31, 43 and 45). The other eight revolts were those of the tenants of European indigo plantations in

In "The Myth of the Deccan Riots", Modern Asian Studies, November 1972, Neil Charlesworth has argued that the extent of the uprising was much overestimated in current and subsequent reports. His argument does not seem convincing in the light of data cited by Natarajan and other writers.

The Khilafat movement was begun to protest against Britain's reneging various Middle Eastern territories from the control of Turkey in violation of promises made by Lloyd George during the First World War.

See Kathleen Gough, "Indian Nationalism and Ethnic Freedom", in David Bishop, ed, The Concept of Freedom in Anthropology, Mouton, 1963, pp 170-207, for further discussion.