

Title—Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India

Author—Ranajit Guha

Year—1999

Categories: Colonialism, Insurgency, Subaltern Studies, Politics

Place: Colonial India

Time: 1783-1900

Argument Synopsis:

Guha is focused on peasant insurgency during the colonial period in India and aims to try and identify some of the common forms or general ideas in rebel consciousness. He begins by noting how the historiography of peasant insurgency in colonial India is as old as colonialism itself. Within this early historiography, the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right, even for a project that was all his own. This book attempts to acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion; to do so it to attribute a consciousness to him. Guha is focused on a 117-year period starting with the revolt against Deby Sinha in 1783 through the end of the Birsait rising in 1900. He notes how 1900 was only chosen for convenience of demonstration, in order to show how the general ideas of insurgency behaved in a 'pure' state prior to the involvement of the peasantry in latter-day politics. He posits that the documentation on insurgency must be turned upside down in order to reconstitute the insurgent's project at reversing his world. Guha sets out to describe the figure of insurgency in its common form and in term of its general ideas. He underscores that Indian nationalism of the colonial period was not what elite historiography has made it out to be. He finds a relationship of dominance and subordination to be characteristic of Indian society before and during colonial rule.

If aim and program are a measure of politics, Guha argues that the militant mobilizations of this period must be regarded as political. He seeks to take into account the peasant's awareness of the world and his will to change it as a point of departure. Guha is trying to depict this struggle in its general form, not as a series of specific encounters. He is specifically concerned with what he deems the 'elementary aspects' or the first elements of rebel consciousness. Guha emphasizes the sovereignty, consistency, and logic of rebel consciousness in order to compensate for its absence from the literature on the subject. Part of this historiographic absence is due to the fact that the vast majority of evidence from this period is elitist in nature. Guha highlights how elite evidence has a tendency of stamping the interests and outlook of the rebels' enemies on every account of peasant rebellion. He finds that even the folklore related to peasant militancy can be elitist. Guha reveals the two ways that the peasant presence makes itself felt in these sources. The first being the direct reporting of rebel utterances—discourse enters into the records as messages and rumors circulating within a rural community. The other shows how the peasant presence is affirmed by a set of elite indices, which have the function of expressing the hostility of the British authorities and their native proteges. Guha seeks to explain the logic of a consciousness which informed some historic actions aimed at turning the rural world upside down.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- One consequence of the revitalization of landlordism under British rule was a large growth of peasant indebtedness
- Elementary aspects are subject to a high degree of redundancy because they recur again and again
- Pressures exercised by insurgency on elite discourse force it to reduce the semantic range of many words and expression, and assign them specialized meanings in order to identify peasants as rebels and their attempt to turn the world upside down as crime