Revolution and the Rural Proletariat in Contemporary Western India

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Introduction

The peasantry, it is now generally agreed, has been the pivotal force behind "Third World" revolutions. This holds true for India as well, a country in which there has been so far no completed revolution. Peasant mobilization was a crucial factor in India's independence movement, and contrary to some misconceptions, peasants were mobilized because Congress and other forces appeared to give some support to their social and economic demands, not for reasons of traditionalism and not simply through "nationalistic" appeals. And once again, in independent India and amid a developing "Green Revolution", rural revolt, however chaotic and inadequately mobilized, has become a crucial factor on the Indian political scene.

However, the class form of this rural revolt represents a new aspect, or a new stage of revolutionary mobilization. The classic peasant-based Communist revolution, as in China, as well as the pre-independence phase of Indian peasant mobilization, had involved a rural class structure in which, whatever the degree of inequality within the village, the main contradiction was between "peasants" as a whole and a class of rentier landlords. Conflicts between rich peasants, on the one hand, and poor peasants and agricultural labourers on the other, remained latent and emerged only later; during most of the revolutionary process rich peasants were either neutralized or won over to support of the revolution. Today in India, however, limited land reforms, effects of the "Green Revolution", economic ties of rich peasants with business groups, and the political incorporation of this class in the Congress party power structure have signified the emergence of what may appropriately be called a class of "kulaks" as the dominant rural class. The majority of the village population remains as poor, if not poorer than before, and now the primary contradiction within the village itself is between this "rural proletariat" of both landless and poor peasants and the rich peasants.

Is a revolution possible under such a situation? No adequate answer can really be given at this point, though it may be noted that the developing rural class struggle is clearly worrying the ruling Congress party and has forced Mrs. Gandhi to move at least nominally to the left with promises of further land reforms. At least part of the answer depends on whether the developing rural revolt can be mobilized. The state of India I shall focus on in this paper, Maharashtra, has been

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notable for its absence of radical peasant organisation in the past and for the post-
independence consolidation of an almost unchallenged, rich-peasant based Con-
gress dominance; in this sense it is probably more typical of India as a whole than
areas of Communist strength such as Andhra, Kerala or West Bengal. The reasons
for the past lack of Marxist strength in the countryside and the possibilities of
developing a basis among the rural poor under present conditions, may therefore
offer some insight into the possibilities of revolutionary developments in India
as a whole.

To understand the dynamics of the present situation, it is necessary to begin
with Maharashtra's past, with the nature of peasant mobilization and the rural
class structure during the colonial period.

The Maharashtrian Peasantry under Colonialism

The typical rural class structure in a colonial or semi-colonial situation is one in
which there are increasing inequalities within the village society, but at the same
time a primary contradiction between the peasants as a whole (including "rich
peasants" and "occupancy tenants") and rentier landlords and moneylenders. Although Maharashtra was perhaps the classic region of ryotwari land settlement,
which sought to give land to peasant cultivators rather than zamindars or landlords,
this was true here as well. Throughout the nineteenth century and the early
twentieth century periodic famines and economic dislocations resulted in an in-
creasing problem of land alienation to a noncultivating class of moneylenders who
became rentier landlords, either by gaining actual ownership of the land or de
facto control through mortgages and control over crops after harvest. These money-
lender-landlords, it should be noted, included primarily Marwari and Gujar vanis,
but also a very significant proportion of Maharashtrian Brahmans. The precise ex-
tent of this alienation is difficult to ascertain, and various studies and statistics exist;
I shall mention only one indicator here. The 1931 Census, for all of India, revealed
22.8% agricultural labourers, 37.7% tenants, and 31.4% cultivating owners; for Bombay Province (including Gujarat and parts of the Karnatak as well as western
Maharashtra) the figures were 47.7% labourers, 27.7% tenants, and 20.7% cultivators.
But in the seven Marathi-speaking Deccan districts, the Census showed an astounding
76.5% agricultural labourers, 1.9% tenants, and only 20.2% cultivating owners! This
shocking figure might be thought to be a fluke of Census gathering, were it not that
the same pattern existed in the Central Provinces, comprising the eastern Maharash-
trian districts and Hindi-speaking areas of present Madhya Pradesh. Here, for the
whole area, there were 43.5% agricultural labourers and 52.2% cultivating owners —
but for the wealthiest and most developed region of this province, the cotton-grow-
ing Marathi districts of Berar, there were in 1931 60.1% agricultural labourers, 5.9%
tenants, and 32.4% cultivating owners; the adjoining Marathi districts of Wardha
and Nagpur showed approximately the same pattern.

These "ryotwari" areas, then, had fewer owner-cultivators and more "agricultural
labourers" than anywhere else in India. The fact was, of course, that few of the
"agricultural labourers" were purely landless; only about 20% in the Bombay Deccan,
according to my calculations, had no land. The remainder were poor peasants with
uneconomic fragments of land, who gained the majority of their income by working
as wage labourers or sharecroppers on the lands of others, often on lands they had
once owned but lost to moneylender-rentiers. In these ryotwari areas there were
no recognized or protected "tenant" rights, and so they were classed in the Census
rather as "agricultural labourers" rather than as tenants or owners (occupancy ten-
ants in many areas were classed by Census definition as "cultivating owners"). Thus,
the rural class structure in Maharashtra was not one of owner cultivation, but — just
as much as in the zamindari areas of India — a structure of the type which Arthur
Stinchcombe has described as “family size tenancy":

In family-size tenancy the operative unit of agriculture is the family enterprise,
but property rights in the enterprise rest with rentier capitalists. The return
from the enterprise is divided according to some rental scheme, either in money
or kind. The rent may be fixed, fixed with modification in years of bad harvest,
or share. The formal title to the land may not be held by the noncultivator — it
is quite common for the "rent" on the land to be, in a legal sense, the interest
on a loan secured by the land. 7

Stinchcombe’s description of this class structure clarifies the factors involved.
First, important social and cultural gaps exist between the villagers (rich and poor
peasants or tenants alike) and the rentier landlords. This was certainly true in
Maharashtra where the status gap took the form of caste distinctions between the
nonBrahman cultivators and the merchant caste and Brahman rentiers. Second, the
rich peasants or leaders of the rural community, while not vulnerable to expulsion
by landlords, shared not only a cultural style of life but basic class interests in
common with tenants and poor peasants: they too were likely to take land on
lease and be affected by problems of indebtedness. This “family-size tenancy” class
structure, according to Stinchcombe, is one particularly conducive to rural revolts:

The style of life of the upper class is radically different from that of the lower
class. The lower class tends to develop a relatively skilled and relatively invulnerable
leadership in the richer peasantry and a relatively high degree of political sensiti-
vity in the poorer peasantry. It is of such stuff that many radical populist and
nationalist movements are made. 8

And this was also true in Maharashtra. The reason, I would argue, for the lack of
ongoing peasant organisation in Maharashtra (i.e. the weakness of Kisan Sabhas and
the lack of a rural electoral base for Communists or Socialists) was not due to any
lack of economic or social readiness for revolt on the part of the peasantry. Rather
it was due, in this instance, to the particular factors of leadership and mobilization. 9
And these were related to the interplay of Brahmins and nonBrahmans, the Con-
gress party and the Communists in Maharashtra.

NonBrahman Leadership and Peasant Revolts

This can be clarified if we look at developing peasant movements and their leader-
ship in the 1920s. The elite Brahmans of Maharashtra, who controlled the nationalist
organisations up until 1930, showed absolutely no interest in mobilising the peasan-
try in terms of their class or cultural demands. The emerging nonBrahman elite did.
The "nonBrahman movement" itself had begun as early as 1873 when Jotirao Phule, the Mali social radical, had organized the Satyashodhak Samaj ("Truth Seekers' Society") as an anti-caste, equalitarian movement opposing the use of Brahman priests in any religious ceremonies; the Samaj by 1920 had developed a strong basis among the peasantry. Increasingly too the movement was defined in class terms, not simply as "nonBrahman" but as a movement of the bahujan samaj, a term which translates as "majority community" or "masses"; it denotes "nonBrahmans" but excludes not only Brahmans but also other upper castes such as the urban-based CKP (Kayastha) intelligentsia and the merchant vanis. Again the "enemies" of the bahujan samaj were not defined simply in caste terms as Brahmans, but were shetji-bhatja, that is, "moneylenders or merchants" (i.e. the rentier landlords) and Brahmans.

By the 1920s actual peasant revolts were breaking out; unlike the Kisan Sabhas in northern India at this time 10 they did not feed into the nationalist movement but into the nonBrahman movement. Two examples can be mentioned: (1) A tenants' rebellion occurred in southern and central Satara district and some adjoining areas of Sholapur district in 1919-21; this involved attacks on Brahmans and temples, efforts to organize a boycott of landlords, forcible harvesting of crops, burning of houses and beating of Brahman landlords. While Brahman-dominated nationalist newspapers such as Kesari refused to recognize it as anything other than "religious atrocities and social anarchism", some lower-level Satyashodhak leaders had provided incentive and leadership for the tenants. Similar, more isolated instances occurred throughout the decade (cases for instance were reported in Ahmednagar district, though a more organized tenant movement occurred only about 1930 again with elite nonBrahman leadership) and a parallel rebellion took place in Buldhana district in 1934. (2) In 1927-8 the Bombay Government brought a "Small Holdings Bill" to consolidate fragmented strips and force the sale of "uneconomic" holdings, with the object of hastening the process of producing "kulaks" on the one hand and genuinely mobile landless wage labour on the other. A strong movement in Poona, Satara, and Ahmednagar districts developed to resist this attempt to create "agricultural capitalists" and a whole series of peasant conferences were held culminating in a rally in Poona which forced the withdrawal of the bill. Again, village-based Satyashodhak leaders helped to organise these, and even the upper class nonBrahmans who were members of the Legislative Council were forced (against their own better judgement, according to one), to yield to the pressure from below and oppose the bill. 11

The result of the "small holdings" agitation was to further radicalize nonBrahman leadership, and a "Maharashtra Shetkari Sabha" was projected to organize peasants in opposition to shetji, bhatji and sarkar, (i.e. merchants, Brahmans and the British Government). But this fell into abeyance, and in spite of these promising beginnings from the point of view of peasant radical organisation, no independent Kisan Sabhas developed in Maharashtra in the 1930s to compare with the powerful ones growing in Bihar, Andra and Kerala.

Why was this? The decisive factor was that it was the Gandhian Congress rather than a more radical Marxist organisation that managed to win over the developing rural-based nonBrahman leadership. The Congress party itself did not encourage
the formation of Kisan Sabhas, except as a counterweight to conservative opposition to nationalism (as temporarily in Bihar) or to more radical, Communist-controlled Kisan Sabhas (as in Andhra): independent peasant organisations were feared as a definite threat to the control of the Gandhian "high command". Therefore, when in 1930 most of the influential young non-Brahman militants joined the Congress in Maharashtra, they were drawn into an organisation which discouraged mobilization on class demands. Only one of these leaders, Dinkarrao Javalkar, had been influenced by Marxism sufficiently to call for an independent peasant organisation and a "peasant army", but he died in 1932 before the beginning of any actual organizing. Thus, although there was increasing discontent among Maharashtrian non-Brahmans with Congress policy during the 1930s as well as widespread demonstrations and marches to protest the land and labour laws of the Congress ministry of 1937, Congress hegemony became established in Maharashtra and the discontent found no ongoing organisational expression.

Where Kisan Sabhas were established in the 1930s it was under the leadership of the Congress Socialist Party (socialists in Bihar, Communists in Andhra and Kerala). In these regions, such Marxist leadership had developed among landholding peasant castes with interests in economic and cultural revolt similar to the Maharashtrian non-Brahmans, e.g. Kammas in Andhra, Nairs and Ezhavas in Kerala, to a lesser extent the Bhumihars of Bihar. The other side of Congress hegemony in Maharashtra was the failure of Communists to reach out for a base among such a rural, largely peasant group — and this in spite of the fact that Bombay city was the most important centre of Indian Communism in the 1920s. Though effective British repression was perhaps the most important factor slowing the development of Communism on the all-India scale, the crucial factor in this regional difference seems to have been that the early Bombay Communists were primarily Brahmans or related elite castes who not only had few rural ties of their own but also a distinct inability to appreciate the genuine factors of revolt in Maharashtra's strong non-Brahman movement.

Thus, although the Maharashtrian Communists made beginnings at gaining rural support in the 1940s, this did not get very far. Again, although a strong 1942 "Quit India" movement developed in the state, including the establishment of a famous "parallel government" in Satara, it found little real Marxist leadership: the Communists were isolated because of their support of the British in the "People's War" period and the Socialists, who did take part in some terrorist activities, were again primarily upper class Brahmans with little genuine mass base. Rural revolt in Maharashtra thus found no ongoing organizational form, but the discontent that rural leaders and the peasantry felt with Congress policy became clear immediately after independence. In 1948 the same group of non-Brahmans who had led the entry into Congress in the 1930s (e.g. Keshavrao Jedhe, Shankarrao More and equivalent district level leaders) expressed their discontent with the continuing domination of the party by "capitalists and Brahmans" and left it to form the Shet Kari Kangar Paksh (SKP or Peasants and Workers' Party). The extent of economic radicalism that had penetrated the rural areas was indicated when the SKP leaders, inspired by the peasant-based Chinese revolution and the fact that
the 1942 movement in Maharashtra had been largely a peasant movement, declared their party at Dabhadi in 1950 to be a "Marxist-Leninist Party".

One result was to force, finally, the still Brahman and Gujarati-dominated Congress to genuinely admit non-Brahmans to top level leadership, and when the Maratha Y.B. Chavan emerged at the top, he was able to eventually win over many of the SKP leaders as well as many non-Brahman Communists to rejoin the Congress Party. In the conservative period of the 1950s and early 1960s, Congress hegemony was thus completed in Maharashtra. Nevertheless, many of the rural-based non-Brahmans who are at present members of one of another of the Communist parties in Maharashtra became so through a transition into Communism through the Shetkari Kamgar Paksh.

The Role of the Rural Proletariat

This historical background brings us up to the present situation in Maharashtra. Nevertheless, it is important to briefly analyze the relationship of the emerging rural proletariat (landless and poor peasants) to general peasant agitation and organization.

The Communist view, including that of both Lenin and Mao, has been that the rural proletariat and semi-proletariat of poor peasantry form the crucial militant base for any peasant organization. The rich peasants may, in certain phases when the primary contradiction is between the peasantry as a whole and a landlord class, be neutralized or partially won over to provide leadership and support, but the poor peasantry provides the most militant and numerically dominant base. When rural revolution actually develops, it is in a process of stages in which state and landlord authority is first destroyed, and only then is the destruction of rich peasant dominance within the village itself completed. One way of expressing this is to see the revolution as moving from a "bourgeois democratic" or "new democratic" phase of radical land reform ("land to the tiller") and the destruction of "feudal" landlord power to a phase of genuine socialism involving the establishment of rural communes. Poor peasants, however, are seen as playing a crucial role in both phases, first in backing up demands in which they have a common interest with the rich peasants, then in pressing their own class demands against the rich peasant elite.

While some recent scholars, including Hamza Alavi and Eric Wolf, have partially contradicted this thesis in arguing that the "middle peasant" is the first, in fact the development of the Chinese revolution appears to confirm the Marxist stress on the crucial role throughout of the poor peasantry. In India, too, poor peasants played a crucial role from the beginning, although Kisan Sabhas eventually fell under rich peasant domination. For example, the 1920-21 agitations of peasants in U.P. involved both the opposition of substantial tenants to landlords and the mobilization of poorer peasants, "a revolt of the landless against the landholding tenants". Similarly, the 1920s agitations in Maharashtra had mobilized poor peasants in the Satara rebellion and the anti-Small Holdings Bill agitation. In Kerala, Fic has argued that tenants and agricultural labourers joined hands in the militant peasant organization of Malabar in the late 1930s under Communist leadership. Andhra Communists began to organize agricultural labourers as early as 1932, and had, according to Selig Harrison, established the strongest base of their electoral
support among agricultural workers and poor peasants. And the most famous Communist-led rural revolts in India, the Telengana and Tebhaga (East Bengal) agitations of the late 1940s had been based among the poorer peasantry. Thus, although Indian Communist leadership in the areas of their success was drawn first from richer peasants or the “dominant” agricultural castes, their mass basis was derived from the fact that these had interests in common and caste ties with lower class peasants and that they showed some ability to transcend the rich peasant focus of leadership.

The factor of cultural revolt should also be stressed. The major section of agricultural labourers were indeed drawn from untouchable castes, and the village dominant peasants who formed the early Kisan and Communist leadership did have status interest of their own in opposition to them. But radical nonBrahman movements involved, at the cultural level, opposition to the caste dominance of intelligentsia and high-caste landlords, and any truly radical opposition to the caste system had to stress the abolition of untouchability as the necessary correlate to the opposition to Brahman hegemony. Louis Dumont, for instance, makes this clear in his discussion of the purity of Brahmans and the impurity of untouchables as clear correlates in the caste hierarchy. Thus, while the relatively pure status of the dominant agricultural castes often acted to mute their opposition to the status system as such, any truly radical anti-caste “nonBrahmanism” had to transcend this status interest to give attention to the position of untouchables and very poor castes. Just as the richer peasants were in an ambiguous position in economic terms, opposing landlord power but retaining some economic power within the village, they were also in an ambiguous position in cultural terms, and this was reflected in the whole question of untouchability in pre-independence India.

The major factor in India rural revolt, as contrasted to China, was that the first stage of opposition to landlord and state power and to the status superiority of the highest castes was never really completed. Thus, as rich peasants began to be won over to the established Congress party and a basically bourgeois economic hegemony, their interests became more and more clearly opposed to the poor peasants and lower castes of the villages who had earlier provided the important impetus behind general peasant mobilization. State power was solidified before it could be destroyed, and the secondary contradiction (between rich and poor peasants) became the primary one before poor peasants had any kind of real foothold in economic or political power. Rich peasants in the earlier period had had interests in furthering revolt against the prevailing economic structure and the caste system; increasingly they lost this motivation and became protagonists of the status quo.

Under these conditions it appears that the Kisan Sabhas, which were more or less taken over by the Communists after 1940, began to express mainly rich peasant interests and to decline at about the same time. Communists, who had earlier looked to the mobilization of the rural proletariat, seemed to have made an organisational choice by the mid-1950s of sticking with the middle and rich peasants. But the result of this “kulak Communism” was the decline of the Kisan Sabhas themselves, since in almost all areas of India the Congress Party could offer more to the rich peasants than could Communists or Socialists. And in Andhra, where the Communists had had their strongest rural base in the 1940s and 1950s but where there
was no working class base of strength (as in Kerala and Bengal) to provide a
counterforce to rich peasant dominance, the most spectacular case of this decline
occurred. Simply in terms of electoral support, while the Communist vote in both
Kerala and West Bengal more than doubled between 1952 and 1972, in Andhra it
decayed drastically from 21.8% in 1952 to 9.2% in 1972. Clearly, rich and
middle peasants in the post-independence period no longer provided a basis or a
beginning point for Communist or Kisan Sabha strength.

Thus, both in many areas of Communist strength and in areas such as Mahara-
ashtra where it was relatively lacking, rural revolutionaries faced in the post-inde-
pendence period the same dilemma: that of creating an independent organization
of the rural poor. In the earlier period it had been possible to establish rural bases
by going from the top down, from a rich peasant leadership to a poor peasant
base in a process of increasing radicalization. To a very significant degree, this
seems no longer possible in India's changing rural class structure. Now any revo-
lutionary organization in the rural areas has to built from the bottom up, build-
ing on the poor peasants and detaching the middle peasants from the economic
and ideological hegemony of the village elite. And this appears as a supremely
more difficult task.

Yet, agitations of poor and landless peasants are on the rise in India, are having
an impact on Indian politics, and experiments in mobilizing the rural proletariat
have begun. One model for such mobilization was the famous Naxalbari rebellion
and the abortive CPI(M-L) organized Srikakulam revolt, both of which were
crushed by state power. Another indication of the beginnings of such mobilization,
however, comes from Maharashtra, where a dissident Communist party with largely
nonBrahman leadership has begun to make an impact in the rural districts.

Organization of the Rural Proletariat in Maharashtra

In spite of a relatively high degree of industrialisation, a large number of rural co-
operatives and a certain degree of agricultural development, Maharashtra is at present
one of the states in India with the highest incidences of rural poverty. According
to the Dandekar and Rath study, 61.04% of the rural population was below the line
of poverty (only Kerala and Andhra had a higher percentage poor); 30% of rural
households were agricultural labour households (five states, Andhra, Bihar, Kerala,
Madra West Bengal and Tamilnad, had a higher percentage); and only four states
(Andhra, Kerala, Tamilnad and Panjab) had a higher concentration of landholding. Clearly the situation would appear ripe for revolt. Yet the need for leadership and
organization to mobilize "spontaneous" peasant radicalism remains as great as ever
before. The state power of the Indian bourgeoisie is very clearly established at pre-
sent; this is particularly true in Maharashtra where the strong Congress party organization
and the network of rural cooperatives and education institutions have pro-
vided a crucial basis for a rich peasant dominance that appears almost unchalleng-
able. Srikakulam and Naxalbari appear to have illustrated the impossibility of
establishing a base in only one area against this very well organized state and police
power: any effective organization of the rural poor would require a mass organi-
sation not only deeply based in the villages but also as broadly based and extensive
as Congress party power itself. How, under these conditions, can the far-flung villages of rural India be mobilized?

While this question is sometimes debated in terms of mass organization versus guerrilla violence, it is perhaps more fruitful at this point to look at it in terms of the issue of leadership: who can provide the initial cadres to contact the villages? One classic answer to the question of original leadership cadre has been through the rural intelligentsia, that is, through students of peasant background who can be contacted in schools and hostels and who retain their ties in the villages. This, of course, was the way in which Andhra Communists and Kisan Sabha organizations began in the 1930s, and was behind the recent degree of success of JVP insurrectionaries in mobilizing student and peasant revolt in Ceylon. It remained, evidently, the crucial method the CPI (M-L) in West Bengal, where bhadralok students evidently provided a large number of cadres through whom organizers attempted to return to and contact village areas (although the Naxalbari rebellion itself did not originate this way). Unfortunately, the period of general “rich peasant radicalism” has passed, and Maharashtra has never had the degree of radicalism of elite culture (though it has a mass cultural tradition that is radical) that continues to produce student revolutionaries in Bengal.

However, in the last couple of years there has been a rise of “student unrest” in the heretofore quiet colleges of Maharashtra; significantly this began not in the elite colleges of Bombay and Poona but in agricultural colleges and rural colleges where students from peasants families have found themselves facing increasing problems of unemployment and have organized strikes, agitations, gheraos and student action committees in many areas. (Only in 1972 was there significant student agitation in urban areas such as Bombay and Sholapur). Some of these students have begun to play a role in rural peasant agitations. Similarly, while the leadership of the Nav Buddhas (the new Buddhists, formerly the Mahars of Maharashtra) have in the past been antagonized by the reluctance of Communists to take up the cause of anti-caste revolt, there is a degree of Marxist radicalization apparent among the urbanized and student section of this group as well, a radicalism that looks to the combining of cultural and economic revolt. This could be seen in the emerging influence of a group of young writers led by Baburao Bagul who attempted to reconcile “Marxism and Buddhism”, and was evidenced in June, 1972, when a Bombay group of Nav Buddhas, formed a “Dalit Panther” group modelled after the American Black Panthers and began to discuss the necessity of returning to work in rural areas. Behind these developments were some well-publicized incidents of oppression of untouchables in Maharashtrian villages, incidents that involved not only caste issues but the increasing economic assertiveness of agricultural labourers. Along similar lines was a pro-Communist non-Brahman organization in Nagpur, whose student section called itself “FUAMMA” after the Marathi initials of Phule, Ambedkar, and Marx.25

However, the most interesting strategy of organization of the rural poor, and one that involves a more classic form of “working class leadership” was evidenced in the formation in 1970 of a “Landless, Agricultural Labourer, Poor Peasant League” (Bhumiheen, Shet Mazur, Garib Shetkari Parishad) by the Lal Nishan Party (Red Flag Party), a dissident Communist party that appears to be emerging as a major
oppositional force in the rural areas.

Although only organized as a party since 1965, the Lal Nishan party traces its beginnings (unlike the more recent left splits from the CPI) to 1941, when a small group of three members and five candidates in the Communist party in Poona opposed the policy of supporting the British war effort and were expelled for indiscipline. One of these, Yashwant Chavan (not the same as Y.B. Chavan) was from a well-to-do Maratha family of Kolhapur, the former princely state that was the primary center of patronage for Maharashtra non-Brahmanism. Chavan returned to Kolhapur to work underground with a largely student group there, and many of the top leaders of LNP today, both non-Brahman and Brahman, have come out of this early Kolhapur background. Then, while detained in jail during the period of radicalism and repression in 1948, Chavan formed a friendship with Datta Deshmukh, a radical leader of poor peasant background from Ahmednagar district, another early center of non-Brahman agitation and Satyashodhak Samaj organization. Deshmukh, who was in jail for leading a tenants' agitation against the Congress government while he was an MLA, became a Marxist during this period. Today Ahmednagar district provides the strongest rural base of the Lal Nishan Party and Datta Deshmukh its most well-known rural leader. Thus, the Lal Nishan group had from the beginning a non-Brahman and rural-based leadership that the CPI lacked and, with the CPI(M), continues to lack.

When the Shetkari Kamgar Paksh was formed in 1948, Datta Deshmukh was one of its important district level leaders. The SKP leadership decided to invite the entire Lal Nishan group — not very large at the time and then known as the Nav Jivan or "New Life" group — to join. Motives evidently varied; some of the more conservative SKP leaders, such as Shankarrao More, evidently hoped that the disciplined Communist cadres would provide some of the organizing force that the SKP needed for electoral purposes. In any case, tensions soon developed and the Communists and their sympathizers were expelled from the organization. Present SKP leaders argue that the split had occurred because the Communists and primarily their most important Brahman leader, S.K. Limaye, had failed to appreciate the forces of cultural revolt, i.e. Jotirao Phule and the non-Brahman movement. Lal Nishan leaders argue, on the contrary, that the main factor was the clear orientation of most SKP leaders to the rich peasants (an assessment of the SKP that seems to be supported by most Maharashtrian political commentators today) while they were even then looking toward organization of the poor and landless rural proletariat. At any rate, when the Communists were expelled they took a number of SKP members with them (including most of those in Ahmednagar) and retained the sympathy of many others. They formed the short-lived Kamgar Kisan Paksh (KKP or Workers' and Peasants' Party) and contested the elections of 1952 for the first and only time, winning a significant proportion of the vote in some of the Western Maharashtrian districts. It may be noted, if electoral strength is to be taken as an indicator of peasant pro-Communist radicalism, that the three "Marxist-Leninist" parties of Maharashtra obtained a total of 14.3% of the total vote in the 1952 elections (9.5% for the SKP, 2.4% for the KKP, and 3.4% for the CPI), a total that compared favourably with that of similar Communist and "Marxist-left" parties in Andhra (21.8) Kerala (10.5) and West Bengal (18.9).26
If they faced problems in their relationship with the SKP, the LNP-Nav Jivan group also faced a dilemma in their relations with the established Communist Party of India. While they disagreed with a number of CPI policies, they identified as Communists and were unable or unwilling to establish a genuine separate identity. In spite of long-expressed intentions of rejoining the CPI, negotiations for this continually broke down. Significantly, it seems to have been the Russian-Chinese split and Chinese attacks on the Soviets as "revisionist" that made separate communist parties possible. It was only after this that the Nav Jivan group, who had always been more attracted by the Chinese than the Russian model, began to define themselves as a "party" and not a "group". In 1965, the Lal Nishan Paksh (party) was formed officially.

Through the 1940s and much of the 1950s LNP leaders had worked with urban unions in such cities as Kolhapur, Poona, Ahmednagar and Bombay. A strategy of mobilizing the rural proletariat, however, began to take form. The first step was to organize unions among several important categories of rural non-farm workers. The first of these was the Kotwal Parishad: "kotwals" were the village servants (assistants to the headman) who were the modern version of the old Mahar village baldades, a position that was created when this "Mahar watan" was abolished and the post made a paid one open to all; nevertheless a large proportion continued to be drawn from untouchables and low castes. A second important rural unionizing effort was the mobilization of employees of the Zilha Parishads (District Boards), and a third that of workers employed on road, construction and irrigation projects. These rural workers shared important characteristics. First, while they themselves were drawn mainly from the rural poor, their employment situation brought them into a fairly direct class confrontation with the rich peasants who were village headmen and who dominated the Zilha Parishads. Second, while their very dispersion throughout the rural areas made them difficult to organize in contrast with concentrated urban labourers, it provided at the same time a widely extended entry into the villages. Finally, with this organizing, the LNP moved away from its original concentration in western Maharashtra districts into the regions of Vidarbha and Marathwada.  

Thus, it was a joint session of these three unions at Aurangabad in December, 1969, that decided to organize a "Landless, Agricultural Labourer, Poor Peasants' Conference"; and it was these already unionized rural workers who provided and continue to provide most of the initial cadre for contact and organization. The Poor Peasants' League held its first session in Shrirampur (Ahmednagar) in February 1970, and was attended by 1000 representatives from all the districts of Maharashtra and an estimated 4000 observers. Besides the Lal Nishan Party, leaders of CPI, CPI (M) and the Samyukta Socialist Party also took part in the first conference; however, the other left parties dropped out soon after and the LNP workers carried on the organizing on their own (though it may be noted that representatives of other left parties still attend sessions of the Poor Peasants' League on occasion). Demands were formulated, and a series of district and local rallies were held that culminated on May 1, 1971 when approximately 60,000 landless and poor peasants demonstrated simultaneously in 120 taluka (county or subdistrict) centers throughout Maharashtra.
It is, in a sense, difficult to evaluate the significance of these figures. 60,000 in demonstrations does not look by itself impressive when compared with the five million rural poor (and 20-25 million family dependents) Lal Nishan leaders estimate as their organizing base; obviously both mobilization and the seriousness of rural class struggles were only beginning. Nor did it quite match the 400,000 members and 1000 village organizations claimed for CPI (M) Kisan Sabhas in West Bengal in 1968-9, or the over 150,000 volunteers said to be arrested in 73 days of CPI(M)-organized “land-grab” struggle in Kerala in May-July of 1972. But Maharashtra, unlike Kerala and West Bengal, had no tradition of Communist strength in the countryside and no periods of left-wing governments in power in the state; and what impressed many observers about the Mayday demonstrations was their very extensiveness, involving over half the taluka centres of the entire state, and nineteen of its twenty-four districts. Given the past localization of Communist rural strength, this represented an important beginning.

The Poor Peasants’ League went almost unnoticed at the time by the major press in Maharashtra; Lal Nishan organizing lacked the elite ties of parties like CPI as well as the dramatic character of sporadic Naxalite outbreaks. It did not, however, go unnoticed by the Congress Party in the state. It was, in fact, a session of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee held about a month later, in June at Nasik, that marked the beginnings of what many observers described as a “swing to the left” in the “rhetoric of the MPCC”. One prominent Congressman was reported as warning there that, “If we do not organize the landless peasants early, others will, and most probably, it will be the extremists who will get them”. The MPCC at the Nasik session reaffirmed its commitment to the “cultural revolutionary” tradition in Maharashtra (another American observer noted that Nehru’s and Gandhi’s names were no longer held in awe and that two new “idols” were installed – Phule and Ambedkar) and, more substantively, set up 15 panels to study socio-economic problems in the state. The result of the panels was a radical “Fifteen Point Programme” of the Congress, projected as the basis of the party’s 1972 election campaign, which included such recommendations as a reform of land ceiling laws, job guarantee in the villages, minimum wages for agricultural labourers and special programmes for untouchables and tribal groups.

Thus, the significance of the 1972 elections in Maharashtra was not in the percentage of popular vote received by the Congress party (in fact it won 56.3% of the vote, slightly up from its previous high point of 51.2% in 1962). Nor was it in the emergence of factionalism within the MPCC and a challenge to Y.B. Chavan’s hitherto unquestioned dominance, a factor which had attracted the attention of most political commentators; the factionalism itself was healed over and the challenge withdrawn. Nor, it must be added, did it lay in any genuine changes in the Congress power structure: the left-wing rhetoric appears, given the rich peasant basis of Congress strength, to have been mainly nominal, and even this nominal shift to the left provoked a sort of “rich peasants’ revolt” and the emergence of an organized Maharashtrian “farm lobby” similar to those elsewhere in India and threatening to leave the party if land reforms were pushed through. In Maharashtra as elsewhere in India, the retreat from the radical promises regarding land reform and programmes for the rural poor began almost as soon as
the election was over.

Rather, the significance of the 1972 elections lay in the fact that left-wing rhetoric and programmes had emerged as a response to a genuine threat to Congress dominance posed by developing agitation of the rural proletariat in Maharashtra as elsewhere in India, agitation that threatened much more than simple electoral defeat. Throughout India, agitations ranging from CPI(M) campaigns to CPI and Socialist "land grabs" provided at least some organization of these rural tensions as a background for the emerging left stance of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress. In Maharashtra, intensified class tensions had been felt in working class strikes, the spread of student agitations, localized movements of rural revolt among the Bhils in Dhulia district and among middle Maratha peasantry in Valva taluka of Satara district and, above all, in the developing organisation of the Poor Peasants' League. The most interesting aspect of the Maharashtrian case is that the "left" response of the Congress party was provoked by what was clearly the threat of extra-parliamentary organization: there was in fact no conceivable way in which the Congress party could have lost the election. And yet the leftward shift occurred; it was as if the elections themselves represented not a means for one another faction or party to achieve power, but rather a legitimizing device for a ruling class which had for a long time held consolidated power but now stood nervous in the context of a new challenge from below. It is factors such as this which help to explain the apparent paradox that, after what all observers agree was an "overwhelming landslide victory" for the Congress Party in practically every state in India, Mrs. Gandhi could state shortly afterwards, speaking to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce that

"We do not have all the time in the world... maybe we have only three or four years to show concrete results. If we fail, whether because of the mistakes of government or business or industry, or because one section is more concerned about their rights than those of the others, we will all topple together — not any one section, but the entire country."

To this it can only be added that Mrs. Gandhi was apparently associating "the entire country" with government or business or industry": the electoral victory having been won, the threat nevertheless remained, and it was one of social revolution.

FOOTNOTES


2. Among the many discussions of this, see Hari Prakash Sharma, "Green Revolution — Prelude to a Red One?" *Frontier*, May 13, 20, 27, 1972.


5. These developments and the evidence for the extent of land alienation are discussed
in chapter V and X of my dissertation, "Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India", (University of California, Department of Sociology, 1973).

6. These figures are computed from cultivation categories in the 1931 Census on the basis of male principal earners only (thus excluding female and dependent workers, in order to get a clearer picture of rural households) but including ⅔ of the categories of "other domestic labourers" and "general labourers" since the Census reports indicate that these performed mainly agricultural tasks in the countryside. See ibid., chapter V, tables VII and XIII, which indicate landlessness also.


8. Stinchcombe, "Agricultural Enterprise and Rural Class Relations", p. 171.

9. See Chapter XIV of my dissertation for a discussion of the role of economic factors and political mobilization related to the differential success of Indian Communists in organizing Kisan Sabhas and establishing a rural base.


11. See Chapter X of my dissertation for an extended description of these events.


17. Crawley, "Kisan Sabhas and Agrarian Revolt", p. 103.


24. Dandekar and Rath, "Poverty in India", pp. 29-30; Ranjit Sahu, "On Rural Poverty",...
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EPW, December 25, 1972, p. 2563.

25. These trends are indicated in various recent radical Marathi publications, such as Abhiat, edited by Baburao Bagul; Abhiat, the newspaper of the Nagpur group; and Magona, edited by Sudhir Bedekar in Poona. See Times of India, May 8, May 14, June 13, 1972 reports of village incidents regarding untouchables and resulting agitations.

26. Baxter, District Voting Trends, pp. 2, 104, 164, 356. The KKP received it highest votes in the districts of Nasik (13.1%), Ahmednagar (23.3%), and Satara (9.5%). The CPI received it greatest voting in this election in Marathwads as the Peoples' Democratic Front (15.9%), in part an organizational carryover from its Telengana success. The SKP was more consistently spread through the various divisions, though it did least well in Vidarbha (for SKP figures I have combined the totals Baxter gives under "PWP" and "SKP", which simply represent the English and Marathi names of the same party).

27. It took evidently 10 to 15 years of organizing before contracts were finally signed, large sums of back pay being awarded in the "Kalelkar Karar" (Contract) on July 17, 1967, covering western Maharashtra and Marathwads; work in Vidarbha began much later; Interview, Rambhau Kolhe (Nagpur), and Madhukar Katre, Introduction to Kangar va Maharashtra Shaan ye Mudhil Samet Mandalsphudh Karar (a publication of the contract) (Amalner, Arvind Printing Press, 1969). Estimates of the completeness of the rural unionizing vary; 42,000 kowats, 30,000 workers under the Zilha Parishads, and 25-30,000 workers on roads, construction and irrigation works are cited in "Ubha Aslela Gramin Shramik" (Rising Village Workers), Manz (June 19, 1971), p. 20. Figures incidentally cited in "Bhil Movement in Dhulia", EPW (February 1972 annual number) are much lower.

28. "Ubha Aslela Gramin Shramik", pp. 20-21; Times of India (February 10, 1970) gives the estimated attendance but mentions only CPI and CPI(M) leaders S.A. Dange and Godutai Parulekar as speakers. The CPI(M) version is reported in Peoples' Democracy (January, 9, 1972).


30. "Ubha Aslela Gramin Shramik", pp. 16-17. (This section is an interview with Datta Deshmukh).


32. Times of India, May 8, 1972 reports only the initiating conference with 1500 delegates; Peoples' Democracy (May 21, 1972) claims that in addition 100,000 attended a rally at the conference and that 162,000 volunteers were arrested after 73 days of struggle (June 18, July 30, August 13, 1972). Needless to say, in these as in all cases of peasant organizing (including the famous peasant associations of Hunan and Kwangtung in China in the 1920s) statistics are extremely unreliable and about all we can do is compare claimed figures.


34. Quoted in the Sunday Standard, (June 27, 1971) p. 10.

35. Personal communication, Jack Robertson.

36. The fifteen point programme is reported in "Programme for Power Snatching", EPW (August 14, 1971); see also "Maharashtra: Shivaji Image Smudged" (October 2, 1971) and "New Posture on Land Ceilings" (November 6, 1971). I witnessed part of the discussion of the panel on women, and it was clear that it was the issues of women mill workers and agricultural working women which most agitated the group; when asked about the agricultural workers afterwards, one participant made a comment similar to the one cited above: "If we don't do something about it, the Communists will".


38. The articles cited in EPW (see also "Election Salvoes", November 27, 1971; "Maharashtra: From Party to Factions", January 8, 1972; "And So to Delhi", January 27, 1972) concentrate mainly on the factionalism, as does N. Rajan, "Revolt Against Prokulak Leadership", Mainstream (February 26, 1972), as does Franda, "India's 1972 State Elections". The methodological issue here is that mechanisms through which lower-class revolt is felt are always less clear than the factional maneuvers of prominent party members. What should perhaps be stressed is the political context (the threat of rural revolt) which made each faction move to the "left" in its public stance.
regarding land ceilings etc., as well as Mrs. Gandhi's inability to really outmaneuver Y.B. Chavan in this respect.

39. This was the Maharashtra Shetkari Sangathana, composed primarily of western Maharashtrian rich farmers under the presidency of Shankarrao Mohite-Patil, which met first in Sholapur district in November of 1971 (EPW, November 27, 1971) and then formalized its organization in a Poona meeting (Times of India, June 5, 1972).

40. See the various reports in EPW since the elections, and the editorial on land reforms.


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