

Four Rebels of Eighteen-Fifty-Seven¹

GAUTAM BHADRA

History does nothing, it possesses 'no immense wealth', it 'wages no battles'. It is man, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; history is not, as it were a person apart, using man as a means to achieve its own aims, history is nothing but the activity of man pursuing his aims.

Marx & Engels, *The Holy Family*

I. Introduction

There is a curious complicity between all the principal modes of historiography which have engaged so far in the study of the rebellion of 1857. According to S.B. Chaudhuri, an eminent nationalist historian, 'it was the class of the landed chiefs who led the struggle against the British', for they were 'the natural leaders'. R.C. Majumdar, too, is of the view that *taluqdars* and zamindars, regarded highly by the mass of the peasantry, were responsible for the 'origin and prolongation of popular revolt'. Eric Stokes, in his otherwise admirable work on the local background of the popular upsurge, has also

ABBREVIATIONS ACR = Agra Commissioner's Records. BR = Board of Revenue. DG = *District Gazetteer of the United Provinces of Agra & Oudh* compiled by H.R. Nevill & D.L. Drake-Brockman (Allahabad, 1909-30). Relevant volumes. F = File No. FSUP = *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, ed. by S.A.A. Rizvi & M.L. Bhargava, vols. I, II & V. (Lucknow, 1957-60). JP = Judicial Proceedings, Judicial Department. MCR = Meerut Commissioner's Records, dept. XII. NE = *Narrative of Events Regarding the Mutiny of India of 1857-1858 and the Restoration of Authority*. 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1881). NWP = North Western Provinces. PP = *Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, Accounts & Papers*, vol. 44, part 4, 1857-58. Proc. = Proceedings No. RD = Revenue Department. UPRA = Uttar Pradesh Regional Archives, Allahabad. UPSA = Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow. WBSA = West Bengal State Archives, Calcutta.

¹ This article is dedicated to Samar Sen. I am grateful to Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, Gyan Pandey, Bharati Roy and Tapti Roy for their comments and editorial suggestions.

described the rural insurgency of 1857 as essentially élitist in character, for 'the mass of the population appeared to have played little part or at most tamely followed the behests of caste superiors'. The stance of radical historiography has not been fundamentally different. Promode Sengupta, a Marxist scholar, has written the history of the Great Rebellion in terms of the activities and motives of Nana Saheb, Lakshmi Bai, Bahadur Shah, etc., because these feudal chiefs were, to him, the 'natural leaders'. Even that revolutionary intellectual, Saroj Datta, a leader of the movement identified with the Naxalbari insurrection, had demanded the replacement of statues of nineteenth-century intellectuals in public places by those of Rani Lakshmi Bai and Tantia Topi. With the best of intentions, radical historiography does not appear to have opted out of the paradigm within which the bourgeois-nationalist and liberal historians operate.²

In all these representations what has been missed out is the ordinary rebel, *his* role and *his* perception of alien rule and contemporary crisis. By contrast, the present essay tries to rehabilitate some of the rebels of 1857 who have already been forgotten by historians or scantily treated, with no more than a nod in their direction. I study four of them—a small landlord, a cultivator belonging to a substantial peasant community, a poor tribal youth and a Maulvi. These four may be said to represent between them a fairly large number of ordinary and yet complex insurgent personalities of that time. Leaders of a type very different from the well-known landed magnates, they were among those whom a knowledgeable district official of Saharanpur was to describe, soon after the revolt, as '*the few active spirits* who originated and organised the movement in various localities'.³

II. *Shah Mal*

Shah Mal was a resident of Bijraul, a large village situated in the eastern portion of the *pargana* of Barout. This village was irrigated

² See S.B. Chaudhuri, *Civil Rebellion in the Indian Mutinies* (Calcutta, 1957); R.C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857* (Calcutta, 1963); Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj* (Delhi, 1980); Promode Sengupta, *Bharatiya Mahabidroha* (Calcutta, 1981); Sasanka (Saroj Datta), 'Murti Bhangar Swapakshe' (Deshabratī Prakasan, Calcutta, n.d.). For a recent study, see Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857–58* (Delhi, 1984).

³ H. Dundas Robertson, *District Duties during the Revolt in the North West Provinces of India* (London, 1859), p. 192.

by the Bijwara and Kishanpur *rajbahas* of the Jumna canal.⁴ He was a *malik* of a portion of the village which at the time of the mutiny was divided into two *pattis*, known as Kullo and Bholy or Ladura. The 'notorious rebel leader Shah Mal' had control only over the former. Even there he had co-sharers like Seesram and others who remained aloof from his activities, so that after the suppression of the revolt their rights were left unimpaired. The other *patti*, with its four *thoks*, also did not participate in the rebellion and 'was in like manner ordered to be exempted from confiscation'.⁵

The *tehsil* Barout, with its rich dark loam of considerable fertility and abundant means of irrigation,⁶ was regarded as the most prosperous pargana of the district. T.C. Plowden was eloquent in his report about its prosperity. The proportion of inferior land, he calculated, was 'very small, being about $\frac{1}{8}$ of the whole'. The area of the whole of the pargana was irrigated by the small canals from the rivers Jumna, Hindun and Krishna, which led to the cultivation of 'profitable products' such as sugarcane, cotton, *mukka* and wheat. The whole area was within the circuit of a thriving commerce. Barout, Binowlle and Sirdhana, convenient marts with linkages to Meerut, Shamlee, Kandlah, Baghpat, Tandah and Delhi, afforded 'ample facilities for the disposal of every species of produce'.⁷

The population was densely settled and composed principally of Jat cultivators who were considered to be the sole masters of Chuprowlee, Barout, Katana and the upper portion of Burwana.⁸ Stokes's description of the *bhaiyachara* community is quite applicable to this area. For, as the settlement report stated, there were 'of this large agricultural population an exceptional number of petty proprietors'—indeed, only 975 zamindari mahals as opposed to 2,235 *pattadari* and *bhaiyachari* tenures.⁹ Zamindars like Shah Mal

⁴ DG: Meerut, pp. 209–10.

⁵ Forbes to Williams, 24 April 1862, F18/1862, MCR, UPRA.

⁶ DG: Meerut, p. 203.

⁷ Plowden to Franco, 16 March 1840, in H.M. Elliot, *Report of the Settlement of the District of Meerut, 1835* (Benaras, 1861), p. 228. Hereafter *Meerut Settlement*.

⁸ W.A. Forbes & J.S. Porter, *Settlement Report of the District of Meerut 1865–1870*, (Allahabad, 1874), p. 62.

⁹ R.W. Gillan, *Final Settlement Report of the Meerut District* (Allahabad, 1901), p. 9.

were actually principal cultivators and had to 'till nearly half the land themselves'.¹⁰

In this area the village proprietors and cultivators rarely belonged to different castes. 'As all the four proprietary castes follow the occupation of agriculture to a greater or lesser degree', wrote Forbes, 'it is perhaps a natural consequence that the caste of cultivators should shadow those of proprietors'.¹¹ There was a large number of Chamars who were agricultural labourers. They were excluded from the cultivating community though they were no less numerous than the Jats. It is important to note that in the mutiny of 1857 the Chamars remained largely unnoticed.

On the eve of the English conquest Barout was under the rule of Begam Samru. It was alleged that the Jat proprietors were unfavourably treated by a high-handed Taga minister. After the year 1836, when the English authority was established in this area, Plowden tilted the balance in favour of the Jats during the settlement. Yet the assessment remained heavy. But the Jat peasants, according to a settlement officer, withstood the demand. The progress in agriculture was substantial and proprietary rights were not transferred to any significant extent.¹²

But there was a smouldering grievance against the settlement. The settlement officer faced tough opposition from the petty proprietors in Baghpat. 'They have destroyed all their best cultivation in anticipation of re-settlement', he wrote.¹³ To such petty cultivators every settlement was full of uncertainty, and they therefore regarded it with suspicion and apprehension. It was ultimately the iron fist of colonial authority that made them accept the settlement with 'a decided reluctance'. The directives of the Board were categorical with regard to the recalcitrant proprietors of Baghpat and Barout:

If the zamindars or cultivators refuse to take *pattahs* and to execute cabooleat at the established rates of rents for lands, in their occupancy, you will let such lands to any of the zamindars or ryotts who may be willing to undertake the cultivation of them or allow them to remain

¹⁰ DG: Meerut, p. 205.

¹¹ Forbes & Porter, p. 4.

¹² Plowden, in Elliott, *Meerut Settlement*, p. 229; Gillan, p. 12; Willey to Great-head, 2 December 1854: 'Frequency of the transfer of Proprietary Titles', *Selections from the Records of the Government of the North-Western Provinces*, vol. IV, pt. XXIV. Hereafter *Selections*.

¹³ Letter from Meerut Collector, 12 October 1822. BR, NWP, 2 November 1822, UPSA.

fallow; in the latter case giving the recusants to understand that in the event of their cultivation without pattahs the whole produce will be liable to be attached and brought to sale on account of the government.¹⁴

Thus a political threat and an assertion of the coercive power of the state was implicit in the process of settlement. Its impact on popular perception cannot, therefore, be measured solely by statistics. There is some evidence in the records of the tensions and pressures generated by this process in the Baghpat and Barout regions of Meerut district in the 1840s and 1850s involving, as it sometimes inevitably did, the threat, actual or real, of the alienation of land from the older proprietors and the intrusion of auction purchasers as 'strangers' into *pattis* with traditional solidarities based on long-standing communal ties.¹⁵ However, not all parts of the district which were hard-pressed thus by revenue assessment and proprietary right transfers responded to the mutiny in the same manner or to the same degree. This shows that in order to understand why an insurrection actually breaks out in a particular locality rather than in another it is imperative to look beyond the immediate context of economic loss or gain.

The rebellion of Shah Mal started as a local affair. It is stated that the people of Baoli and Barout villages were the only members of the Jat caste in that neighbourhood to rise actively against the British. Yet in its intensity rebellion had assumed an importance which was acknowledged thus by the commissioner: 'The rebellion in the part of the district is kept up by Shah Mull of Byrout, his principal abettors being Bagta and Sajja . . . with them joined 60 villagers, who took no more part than individually swelling the ranks of the ringleaders'.¹⁶ A large number of these rural leaders were *lumbardars*. For example Jeerum, Badan and Gulab, *lumbardars* respectively of Jowhree, Jourmawa and Jafarbad, were prominent commanders in Shah Mal's rebel force. The *lumbardars* of Barout, such as Shon Singh and Bud Singh, also cast their lot with the rebels. Out

¹⁴ Board's Letter, 12 October 1822, BR, NWP, Proc 22, *ibid*.

¹⁵ For two such instances see D.B. Moorison's Letter, 20 August & 17 September 1850, BR, NWP, Proc 59-60, UPSA; and Suit of Laik Ram vs. Govt., No. 34/1859, MCR, UPRA.

¹⁶ Sapte to Williams, 2 December 1858: 'List of the Leaders and Instigators of the rebellion in Meerut Division Unfit for Amnesty', F101/1859, RD, MCR, UPRA.

of the sixty persons named, no less than twenty were lumbardars who had made common cause with Shah Mal. There were also the co-sharer of the patti, i.e. *hissadar* Askaran, and Harjus, *hissadar* of Doghauta, who sided with him and 'attacked the tehsildar of Sir-dauh and village of Daha'. Hargopal of Baraut and Mehira Chand of Sirsalee belonged to the same category. But there were also men of lesser social standing, such as Caloo and Dilsookli, sons of Shyam Singh, a humble 'Jat inhabitant of Dhokowlee', who took command of the insurgent forces. Again, Rajee of Kandhoura, and Hurdhyal a Gujor of Jewahanpur, were followers of Shah Mal but do not seem to have been lumbardars or *hissadars*.¹⁷

Thus Shah Mal had support among the village headmen and small zamindars in the area. The term 'lumbardars' referred to a village headman with whom an engagement for revenue had been made. In fact many village *muqaddams* functioned as such in an altered context. They were elected by other co-sharers and allowed to collect a percentage of the revenue. Through them the state approached the cultivators, offered loans and received representations. However they too were subjected, like all other petty proprietors, to the severities of the fiscal demand and the process of survey and settlement. Asiya Siddiqui has pointed out how these groups were torn between the contradictory prospects of economic advancement and the loss of their *sir* lands. Many of them were poor or at best marginally above the level of the rest of the cultivators. On the other hand they could in opportune moments use their connections with the state to enrich themselves.¹⁸ In the days of the rebellion these groups, vexed by the state's revenue demand and interference and propelled by their ambition, rallied around Shah Mal.

Upon the outbreak of the mutiny in Meerut on 10 May 1857 the English authority was soon 'entirely suspended from Barout', when 'a number of cultivators left their fields and took to plundering and many old proprietors took the opportunity of acquiring possession of their lands'. At this time, on 12 or 13 May, the first act of open defiance by Shah Mal was 'an attack and plunder of a large party of Brinjara [Bunjara] Merchants'. He followed this up by an attack on the tehsil of Barout and its destruction. After this he was appointed

¹⁷ Sapte's report: 'Persons eminent for disloyalty and proposing reward for apprehension . . . Meerut, May 1858', MCR, F79, 1858, UPRA.

¹⁸ Asiya Siddiqui, *Agrarian Change in a North Indian State* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 91-3, *passim*.

to a *subahdarship* by order from Delhi. He consolidated his position during May and June, Jat villages like Baoli joining him with their cultivating populations.¹⁹ He gained further strength when the prisoners of Meerut gaol joined his forces. His rise to power was described thus by an official:

Shah Mull, a Jhat [*sic*] . . . by collecting some bad characters, and getting aid from the rebels at Delhi, had gradually gained strength and boldness to attack and plunder the tehselee of Barouth, then to destroy the bridge of boats over Jamuna, at Baghput; then, with the assistance of a force of mutineers from Delhi, again to destroy the Baghput bridge which had been reconstructed by Mr. J. Campbell and was defended by the contingent of the Jheend Rajah . . . and finally, after all these successes, to seduce the inhabitants of eighty-four villages, principally Jats, known as the *Chowrassee des* from their allegiance to Government and *from nothing become the rebel of some importance*, collecting and sending supplies to the mutineers at Delhi, and entirely stopping the direct communication between headquarters' camp and Meerut and when he was attacked had threatened to raise the whole country to the west and northwest.

Another official wrote of him as 'a Jat of the Mavway tribe, Governor of the purgannah of Barout with the title of Rajah' whose control 'of this and three and four purgunnahs on the left bank of Jumna . . . enabled the people and garrison of Delhi to live during the siege'.²⁰

These reports underlined the importance of a local leader who, unlike Walidad Khan, was not distinguished by lineage, but proved to be no less of an obstacle to the counter-insurgency operations. His first act of rebellion was the 'plunder and pillage' of the tehsil of Barout and the bazaar of Baghpat, visible symbols of authority and wealth. In this he was by no means atypical. But, more than many others, he developed a supra-local perception of power and forged an alliance beyond his own area. On his own he sent emissaries to Delhi to make contact with the rebels there. Allah Dyah, son of Nubee Baksh, a Baluchi of Baluchpara, was appointed an officer by Shah Mal and sent to Delhi 'to get help and to bring men to fight' against the English. Wazir Khan, the *thanadar* of Baghpat, also sent

¹⁹ Sapte to Lowe, 6 December 1858, MCR, F19/1859, UPRA; R.H.W. Dunlop, *Service & Adventure with the Khakee Ressalah or, Meerut Volunteer Horse, during the Mutinies of 1857-58* (London, 1858), pp. 45-6; DG: Meerut, p. 201.

²⁰ Williams' Report, Meerut, 7 August 1857, PP, pp. 884-5 (emphasis added); Wilson to Edmonstone, 24 December 1857, NE, p. 20.

an *arzee* to the emperor for the same purpose. Mehtab Khan, son of Noor Khan at Baghpat, was yet another contact. These men had 'friends at Delhi and presented him before the King and it was consequently through these men that Shah Mall was pointed out as a man likely to benefit the rebel cause'.²¹ He disrupted the lines of communication between the English forces, mobilized the villages within his own territory, and otherwise made himself essential to the Delhi rebels for whom his area came to serve as a strategic rear and supply base. In return his authority was recognized and legitimized by the emperor. The danger of such supra-local linkages between a local insurgent and the seat of rebellion in Delhi was not lost on Dunlop, who wrote in some alarm: 'Unless some vigorous measures are taken to assist our friends and punish our foes, we shall be totally deserted by the mass of people, those still faithful to us are becoming disgusted at our apparent apathy, and the mutiny and rebellion of today may become a revolution'.²²

However, not all the villages in that area were in favour of Shah Mal. Before the counter-insurgency operations began in mid-July, Williams reported that 'many of the Jats had declared they would not assist him [Shah Mal], on the contrary would help in capturing him'.²³ Dunlop mentioned a Rajput village, Deolah, and another called Burka, both 'friendly to the English', as having been under a threat of attack from Shah Mal.²⁴ In fact Newal Singh, a Rajput of Deolah, acted as the principal guide and informant to Dunlop's volunteer force as it moved against Shah Mal on 15 July 1857. Both Deolah and Hussaodah paid their *kists* to the government. Shah Mal had taken exception to this and intended 'to attack and plunder the village' with a force of 3,000 insurgents. How close he was to executing this plan was found out by the English when on 17 July they captured the village of Bussowadah (Bussoud), inhabited by Musalman Juggars, and discovered 8,000 maunds of grain, wheat and *dal* in a 'large store house collected for the Delhi rebels'. Shah Mal had taken shelter in this village the night before and escaped just in time. Government troops put all men to the sword and destroyed all arms, while 'two ghazees from Delhi continued fighting desperately

²¹ Source as in fns. 16 & 17 above.

²² Dunlop to Hewitt, 28 June 1857, *PP*, p. 894. Also Sapte's list and report as in fns. 16 & 17.

²³ Williams' Report, 7 August 1857, *PP*, para. 2, p. 884.

²⁴ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, pp. 87, 99 & 93.

in a mosque'. But Shah Mal's authority was so pervasive that the Deolah people refused to touch any of the captured provisions 'for fear of Shah Mal's vengeance'.²⁵ The case of Francis Cohen provides yet another instance of selective violence against the allies of the English. Cohen, a tehsildar under Begum Sumru, was 'a Christian and acted a Christian's part' in giving shelter to some fugitives from Delhi. For this he was punished by the Gujars and the followers of Shah Mal who 'plundered him of 7 and 8000 rupees worth of property' and took him prisoner, 'releasing him on a ransom of 600 rupees'.²⁶

Shah Mal had transformed the bungalow of an officer of the irrigation department around the Jumna canal into 'a hall of justice for himself' and thus appropriated the office of the *sarkar* for the exercise of his own authority. He also set up a parallel network of intelligence to which Dunlop was obliged to pay a tribute when he wrote: 'The excellence of the intelligence received by the rebels on all occasions proves them to have had many friends amongst those not committed to rebellion'.²⁷ As we have noticed, Shah Mal managed to slip away from a surprise attack on Busoudh. After his death 'on his person was found a letter from Salek Ram and Lal Muin' who held undivided shares in the village of Painga. They had apparently warned him of the impending operation against the insurgents and given details about the strength of the army on the basis of information 'picked up . . . in Meerut'. These persons were caught and hanged as spies. 'These treacherous rebels and spies hanging about the Magistrate', wrote the commissioner, 'found out the intended attack on Shah Mull and strength of detachment and communicated the intelligence to him. The consequence was that the small detachment of 129 men had to fight thousands for hours and nothing but most determined courage saved the party from destruction. The spies were condemned and executed'.²⁸ It was with 'agents' like these that Shah Mal built up an organization at the nerve centre of the district authority. They moved in the night from village to village to rally the people against the English, as Dunlop

²⁵ Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 26 July 1857, *PP*, p. 886; Williams to Meerut Commissioner, 31 July 1854, *PP*, p. 887.

²⁶ Petition from Francis Cohen, 18 October 1858, F48/1858, BR, MCR, UPRA.

²⁷ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, p. 119.

²⁸ Sapte's report, 19 February 1858. Confiscation of Estates, class III, entry no. 125, F105/1859, MCR, UPRA.

was to recall later.²⁹ In practice, they functioned as an arm of the rebel authority, helping it to distinguish friends from enemies and defend itself from attacks by the latter.

In the period of the pacification campaign, the government considered it 'fair to make a distinction between those who joined the rebels at Delhi and Rohilkhand and those who joined with any upstart who took the occasion of authority weakened by a military revolt and a contest of supremacy raging in the neighbourhood to strive for independence'. And by placing Shah Mal and his followers in the latter category,³⁰ the officials helped to emphasize the political character of his revolt. References to 'the authority weakened by the military revolt', to 'a contest for supremacy' and 'striving for independence' were all indices of that politics as seen from the standpoint of the rebel's enemies. Among the latter, Dunlop, a shrewd observer, had noticed 'various symptoms' showing 'how rapidly the neglect of this part of the district had led to the belief that the British rule had terminated for ever'. And as the battle for Delhi continued and the fate of the court, which had provided support for Shah Mal, hung in balance, 'the people of the district', said Dunlop, were 'in a fever of excitement to know *whether "their raj" or ours was to triumph*'.³¹

The distinction made in these reports between the two contending authorities, 'their raj or ours', speaks of an awareness that went beyond the calculus of economic gain and loss and related to a concept of power. However, there are some other aspects of this struggle on which these official statements do not throw much light. How did Shah Mal emerge as a leader over these individual villages? In the contest for supremacy that was raging in the countryside, how was his supremacy established? These are questions which no historian on peasant insurrections can ignore. Indeed, two historians, Eric Stokes and Ranajit Guha, have tried to answer them in their works.

In their respective discussions of Shah Mal both underline the elements of solidarity and their limits in the insurrection. Stokes locates the basis of solidarity in 'factional alignments'. These alignments took the form of local groupings involving both territorial

²⁹ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, p. 95.

³⁰ Lowe to Muir, 30 November 1858. List of the Confiscated Estates of Zillah Meerut. F105/1859, MCR, UPRA.

³¹ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, pp. 97, 127.

and kinship units, such as *tappas* and *khaps*, many of which were bitterly hostile to each other. Thus Barout was the centre of the Salaklain Jats who, under the leadership of Shah Mal and Suraj Mal, were actually in the process of renewing their old feuds against the neighbouring Ghatwal Jats. It was such clan and territorial linkages as well as the tradition of old feuds which, according to Stokes, contributed to Shah Mal's success in rallying a number of villages.³² Guha argues that 'the role of territoriality as a positive factor behind rebel mobilization' was clearly demonstrated in the massive jacqueries triggered off by the mutiny. To him the notion of territoriality includes both geographical and social space. In citing numerous cases he puts the emphasis on local dimensions of the targets of rebel attack. This localized character of the rebellion also drew its sustenance partially from the 'revolt of particular ethnic masses'. The very nature of the distribution of castes and clans in an area helped to spread as well as limit an insurgent movement to a particular zone or particular castes. He cites the case of Shah Mal as a typical Gujar rebellion which 'convulsed the north-western district of Uttar Pradesh'. Its specific Gujar character was underlined by 'their attack on the Jat villages, who behaved notably in support of law and order'.³³

There is much truth in both these arguments. In fact there was intense fighting between Jats and Gujarars in this area during the mutiny and this rivalry determined, to an extent, loyalty and enmity towards the government. The Gujar village at Seekree, about sixteen miles from Meerut cantonment, took an active part in the disturbances and began to encroach on the land of other villages. The combined forces of three Gujar villages, Seekree, Nugla and Deosa, defeated a force of Jats 'who commenced collecting at the important village and bazaar of Begumbad for the purpose of defending themselves'. The incident took place on 8 July before the arrival of the government forces to save the 'loyalist' Jats. The victory of the Gujarars was possible because 'they were better armed, less divided among themselves, more habituated in the acts of violence'.³⁴

Here is a clear case of clan alignment and rivalry. But Shah Mal's mobilization cut across these alignments. Although he was himself a

³² Stokes, pp. 17-18.

³³ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983), pp. 305-32, 313-14.

³⁴ Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 11 July 1857, *PP*, p. 883.

Jat—and his successors and next in command were his own relatives—the Gujars rallied around him. His army included villagers of various castes. In fact Dunlop, the leader of the counter-insurgency force, found it difficult to decide whether a village in this area was hostile or friendly, irrespective of the caste or clan of its residents. Thus two hostile villages, Chouparah and Jafarbad, both deserted on the approach of his troops, were inhabited respectively by Taga Brahmins and Muslim Jaggars. Bussoudah, where Shah Mal had his stock of grain, belonged to the Jaggars. 'A goojur village', Bichpooree, 'had taken an active part in all Shah Mall's misdoings'. Dunlop mentioned a *sipahi* who deserted his *ressalah* for Shah Mal's army because he was a Mussalman.³⁵ Again, the people of the Gujar village, Ahehra, were prominent in an attack on Cohen and actively assisted Shah Mal in all his operations, including the plunder of Barout and Baghput and the destruction of a vital bridge.³⁶ Suraj Mal sought help in the Jat village of Sirsalle, while the rebels from Mulrurpore, who were willing to join Shah Mal, were said to have been led by 'one old white-bearded sikh'.³⁷

A clue to the logic of these wide-ranging solidarities may be sought in the notion of 'Chowrasee Des'—a term which occurs again and again in Shah Mal's messages. Williams talked of an attempt made by the rebel leader 'to seduce the inhabitants of eighty-four villages, principally *jats*, known as Chowrasee Des, from allegiance to government'. The villagers from Burka advised Dunlop to fly 'as fast as possible . . . as the whole of Chowrasee Des was being raised by Shah Mall'. On the night before the latter's fateful confrontation with the volunteer forces, his emissaries were reported to have 'traversed every village of Chowrasee Des, calling all who could bear arms to assist them and declaring that Shah Mall would meet the pale-faced invaders of his territory on the morrow and annihilate the entire party or die in the attempt'. And after his death Sajjaram tried to rally the Jats of 'Chowrasee Des', while it was to all of 'the Chowrasee Des' that Dunlop addressed his proclamation calling on them to surrender.³⁸ Thus the messages of in-

³⁵ Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 26 July 1857, *PP*, paras 6–8, p. 886; Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, pp. 95–9.

³⁶ Sapte, 8 July 1858, F8/1858, RD, MCR, UPRA.

³⁷ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, p. 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 99–100, 108; Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 26 July 1857, *PP*, p. 887.

surgency and counter-insurgency were both transmitted on a common wavelength.

Chowrasee Des offers us a rare glimpse into rebel perception. 'Chowrasee' or 'eighty-four' refers to a tract of country containing that number of villages in the occupation of a particular tribe.³⁹ It is a notion associated with clan settlements and the spread of kinship linkages over an area among Jats as well as the other castes in Uttar Pradesh. The very fact of the growth of hamlets from original villages and their establishment by junior members of particular clans at the time of their expansion in an area might have led to this notion. Each of the principal clans of the Jats in Meerut—the Gathwalas, the Baliyans and the Salaklain—had its claim to an area comprising eighty-four villages. That area would first be demarcated by the khaps. The khap itself was a unit comprising villages, most of which were linked with each other by people claiming common descent from the original settlers. Such descent groups formed their own thokes based on lineages and tried to restrict the transfer of proprietary rights among themselves. When these thokes organized themselves into a council for common action, it took the shape of the khap. The khap was named after the dominant caste and clan, but did not exclude other clans within the village when a common decision was taken. A khap could be divided into smaller units like *ganwands*. But its jurisdiction was said to extend over eighty-four villages or the Chowrasee, although the actual number could in fact be smaller. For example the Baliyan khap had its jurisdiction over no more than fifty-four villages, twenty-four having been depopulated and 'conquered' by the Pathans. Yet the area was still called the 'Chowrasee' of the Baliyan khap. It was thus that clan settlement corresponded to territorial space.

Equally important was the persistence of the notion of Chowrasee Des in collective memory. Thus, in Pandit Kaha Rambhat's eighteenth-century chronicle of the Jats of this area, political action against outsiders and resistance to the oppression of the state since the time of the Delhi Sultanate are often traced to decisions taken at

³⁹ The argument in this and the next para is based on H. Elliot, *Memoirs on the History, Folklore & Distribution of Races of the North West Provinces of India*, vol. II, ed. J. Beames (London, 1869), pp. 46–7; *ibid.*, *Meerut Settlement*, p. 191; Gillan, p. 10; W. Crooke, *The Tribes & Castes of the North Western Provinces and Oudh*, vol. II (Delhi, 1974), *passim*; M.C. Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India* (Bombay, 1966), appx. 2–4.

khap council meetings. Baraut, in this chronicle, was mentioned again and again as a place where the panchayat met to decide upon measures which would be obeyed by the various clans and villages. Baoli and Sirsauli were the other villages in which such councils resolved on actions against the sultans and the Mughal rulers. Whatever the reliability of this chronicle, the fact remains that by the late eighteenth century the Jats of this area were thinking in terms of political units like khaps and describing their memory of common actions in the past in terms of those units. The names of the villages which were prominent in the chronicle were also important centres of rebellion. In the 1830s Elliot noted the existence of the Chowrasee 'in almost their pristine integrity' among the Jat and the Rajput communities. He recognized 'the ceremony of the binding of the turbans' as an important source of prestige and respectability for the headmen of the khaps by the members of the Des. Later, decades after the mutiny, other administrators too were to acknowledge the persistence of the notion of designating particular areas called Des by the Jats. Thus Shah Mal's appeal for the defence of Chowrasee Des against the intruders relied both on lineage and tradition to make itself understandable to the people of his locality. For they were aware of the tradition of common action against the state even in pre-colonial days. It was therefore possible for the rebel leader to summon to his aid the collective memory of a territorial space over which he could claim to wield an authority hallowed by tradition. And by the same token the English force could be identified as trespassers ('pale-faced invaders') violating the sanctity of Chowrasee Des, the country of his ancestors and his clan.

What emerges from our discussion is that there were various levels in the mobilization for rebellion. At a primary level a notion of community organized along ethnic settlements and an aversion to the encroachment of an alien power into this territorial unit determined the domain of rebel authority. However, that space was not a mere geographical notion. It was embedded in a collective consciousness, sustained by clan memory and history, to which the rebel appealed. However, in this type of mobilization it was by no means certain that each village belonging to the khap would join the rebellion. As has been noticed above, Shah Mal, after his escape from Busodh, collected his forces by 'raising village after village', and sixty villages were said to have 'individually' joined his forces (although many of them withdrew as soon as the victory of the En-

glish was imminent after the fall of Delhi). However, the other thokes of Shah Mal's own village remained aloof. Dunlop, during his counter-insurgency operations, noted how some of the villages were hostile and others were vacillating or friendly.⁴⁰ Thus he found Deolah and Hussaodah docile enough to pay up the instalments of revenue due to them, while Bulaynee prevaricated, and the Gujar village of Bichpoorie, which 'had taken an active part in all Shah Mall's misdoings', was considered so hostile as to deserve destruction. And, again, the village Burka was friendly, while the neighbouring village Manee Ghat, 'where Shah Mall and some of his principal dacoits were assembled', was certainly not so. Any single factor such as faction, feuds, clan or caste would therefore not explain the variations in rebel mobilization. An understanding of the latter must also take into account the perception of conflicts and alliances by the participants themselves in terms of their own codes and the transformations of symbolic relations within that code.

On this was grafted the authority of Delhi. Jat clans have earlier been known to seek adjustment with the power in Delhi. In our case both Shah Mal and the rebel force at Delhi needed each other. Each was aware of the other's strength and importance. And this recognition was overlaid with an intense hatred to alien rule. The Meerut commissioner noticed how even after Shah Mal's death some of his followers continued to show 'the bitterest animosity against us', how 'in order to show their hatred' they dug and ploughed up the 'made road as a Feringhee institution', while, according to Stokes, the Jats of Lagoswar and the Chauhan Rajputs of Khair, despite their traditional hostility towards each other, combined in 'their hatred to British rule'.⁴¹ This hatred was a rubric that was ever present in the rebellion of Shah Mal, and was more clearly focused in the events following his death.

The elimination of Shah Mal was important for the reduction of Delhi. The government 'had promised a reward of 1,000 rupees for the apprehension or head of Shah Mall'.⁴² In July the counter-insurgency operations against him ran into a massive resistance from 'a large crowd of armed men seven thousand in number', and to an official who witnessed it all it appeared as if 'the whole coun-

⁴⁰ Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 26 July 1857, *PP*, p. 886.

⁴¹ Williams' comments on the Amnesty List, F101/1859, MCR, UPRA: Stokes, pp. 192-4.

⁴² Williams' Letter, 7 August 1857, *PP*, p. 885.

try was rising; native drums, signal to the villagers to assemble were beating in all directions and crowds were seen to be moving up . . . 'Dunlop, who led these operations, was forced to fly from 'Black Douglas Shah Mall' and remarked ruefully that 'flight from villagers, in whatever numbers, was rather a shock to dignity', for the 'sundry flowers of the rhetoric in which the Hindoostani language is rich . . . were gracefully accorded to me by Shah Mall's men'. He narrowly escaped from the charge by Bhagta, the rebel's nephew, and was chased upto Barout. There, in an orchard south of Barout, the Khakee Ressalah—as the volunteer force was named—and the followers of Shah Mal fought a pitched battle in which the rebel leader was killed.⁴³ The private who killed the rebel gave a vivid description.

I saw; in the distance, two horsemen armed with spears flying from us as fast as their horses could take them. I put spurs to my horse and overtook them after a chase of two minutes. The horseman nearer to me whom I never for a moment imagined to be Shah Mall dropped his sword at that time, but still retained his spear, the folds of his turban were also trailing on the ground.

The soldier twice shot him in the back. 'But recovering himself at a moment when I never fancied he could have risen, he took me at a disadvantageous turn and wounded me in two places'. The second wound might have proved to be fatal, 'had I not suddenly held the spear which he was driving with all his force at me and just at this moment Azeem Beg, Sowar came up, thrust him with his spear on which he fell swearing and abusing the sowar'.⁴⁴ His body was hacked to pieces and the head severed by the order of Parker who recognized him.

Now the head of Shah Mal, the rebel leader, became a symbol. To the English this was a great victory and that victory needed to be demonstrated. The force marched through the area with two symbols of power and authority. As Dunlop wrote:

We carried on a small silken Union Jack as the banner of the Volunteers and on this occasion an ensign also, in the shape of Shah Mall's gory head struck on a long spear. The last was necessary, to prove to

⁴³ For details, see Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, pp. 99–106. Dunlop's letter, as in fn. 40. William's report, cited in *DG: Meerut*, pp. 178–9.

⁴⁴ Tonnochy to Tyrwhitt, 20 July 1857, *PP*, p. 888.

the country people who knew the sternly resolute features of old ruffian well, that their leader was really dead.⁴⁵

To the rebel, Shah Mal's head was a symbol of defiance, an object of honour. There were 'sundry reports of a meditated attack by Rajputs and others to recover Shah Mall's head'. Dunlop's army was under constant threat from insurgents led by Suraj Mal and Bhagta, who were raising the countryside. 'We were followed down to the ford by a large body of Mawee Jats who hoped they might find an opportunity of taking the head of Shah Mall from us', wrote Dunlop. The rebel died but the rebellion continued. Shah Mal's successors refused to surrender and sided with the rebels in Muzaffarnagar, Rohilkhand and Awadh.

III. *Devi Singh*

Devi Singh, a village rebel of Tappa Raya in Mathura, had in his biographer his principal enemy, Mark Thornhill, magistrate of Mathura, who wrote the biography for future generations 'as illustrative of native habits and of the condition of the country at that time'. But the political implication of rural rebellion was not altogether lost on even such a biographer. 'Dayby Sing's career was brief and in its incidents, rather ludicrous', wrote Thornhill; 'it might have been otherwise. With as small beginnings Indian dynasties have been founded. He was the master of fourteen villages. Runjeet Sing commenced his conquests as lord of no more than twenty-five'.⁴⁶

Devi Singh's brief and 'ludicrous career' is important for us because in his rebellion there was no outside intervention or mediation. It was entirely the affair of a peasant community of a small area. Raya, which was included in pargana Mat until 1860 and thereafter in pargana Mahaban, was a busy market town at the centre of a group of villages. It followed the usual pattern of Jat settlement in this area. Raya itself had no arable land. But it was considered 'as the recognised centre of as many as twenty-one Jat villages which were founded from it'. The very name of the town was derived from that of its founder, Rae Sen, the ancestor of the Jats of Godha clan.

⁴⁵ Dunlop, *Khakee Ressalah*, pp. 110, 112. Dunlop to Meerut Commissioner, 26 July 1857, *PP*, p. 887.

⁴⁶ Mark Thornhill, *The Personal Adventures and Experiences of a Magistrate during the Rise, Progress and Suppression of Indian Mutiny* (London, 1884), p. 109.

It was the Jats of this clan who were the dominant cultivators of this area.⁴⁷

The most visible symbol of authority in tappa Raya was an old fort built by Jamsheer Beg and renovated by Thakur Daya Ram of Hathras in the early nineteenth century. The latter's control over this area ended with his subjugation by the English in 1817. Still, his family continued to be the dominant magnates in this area and the loyalty of Thakur Govind Singh, his son, in 1857 helped the house to recover much of its old position.⁴⁸ During the mutiny Tappa Raya had a police station and tehsil. But more important than that, it was dominated by the Baniyas. Janaki Prasad, Jamuna Prasad, Matilal and Kishan Das were leading mahajans who lived in this town. It was their masonry houses that were 'the most conspicuous buildings in that place', and a 'large orchard of mango and Jaman trees, twenty-two bighas in extent, that adorned the tappa was planted by Kisan Das'. Gokul Dass Seth, who headed a list of prominent mahajans made on the eve of the mutiny, lived in Raya, as did Nanda Ram, head of the rising Baniya family in the region.⁴⁹

The region around Raya was not as fertile as that of Barout. The soil varied in quality and irrigation was carried on from wells rather than from canals.⁵⁰ The Jats were the largest group in a population devoted exclusively to agriculture. In Mahaban pargana, which included tappa Raya and its villages, the Jats cultivated in the 1870s 22 per cent of sir lands and 35 per cent of the area as occupant ryots and tenants-at-will. From the malik Jats to the tenant Jats they cultivated 58 per cent of the entire area between themselves. Each clan had settled in a compact area: the Rayat had their holdings in Sankh, the Dugar in Sonai and the Godhe in Raya.

The very history of village settlement and the nature of holding had strengthened the community and clan feelings. 'It would seem',

⁴⁷ F.S. Growse, *Mathura, A District Memoir* (third edition, 1883), pp. 401–2. All the three editions of this work have been used in this essay and references will be made hereafter by the author's name followed by a numeral in parenthesis to indicate the edition used: e.g. Growse (3), p. 86. R.S. Whiteway, *Report on the Settlement of the Muttra District* (Allahabad, 1879), p. 33.

⁴⁸ *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North Western Provinces of India*, vol. VIII, *Muttra*, pt. I (Allahabad, 1884), p. 132. Hereafter *Statistical*, etc.

⁴⁹ Growse (3), p. 402. Also D.L. Drake-Brockman, ed., *DG: Mathura*, pp. 323–4. List of Principal Mahajans and Sahukars in the District of Mathura, BR, Mathura, ACR, vol. 146, UPRA.

⁵⁰ Drake-Brockman, pp. 278–9; Growse (2), p. 86; Whiteway, p. 32.

wrote a settlement officer,⁵¹ 'that all the Jat share-holders. . . are really or theoretically descendants of one man, the original founder of the estate. As his descendants increased and the cultivation around the old site grew, so new colonies of shareholders planted themselves in hamlets near their fields separating off their cultivation but still retaining their share in the ancestral Khera'. Nowhere was 'this tendency of the Jat caste to find new offshoots from the parent village as the community grows while at the same time the interest in the parent site remains undiminished' better illustrated than in Raya and Sonai.

Raya had twenty-four estates, covering nearly 12,000 acres. There was a group of older settlements comprising fourteen villages called Chaudah Taraf. The others were its offshoots. The history of the adjoining tappa, Sonai, with its town, Ayra Khera, had similar features. It was the recognized centre of eighteen villages. Nain Sin had established the *khera*, and it was his sons and grandsons who founded the surrounding villages after their name and became the owners of new settlements. But the bazar of Ayra Khera remained the joint property of the clan and their joint permission was necessary for the establishment of any new shop. It was obligatory too that all members of the clan should gather at the Phul Dal festival in the month of Chait. All of the arable land was occupied by the members of Godha subdivision of the Jats.⁵²

Thus in this area community or clan-feeling sustained itself by a close correspondence between landholding and clan-settlement. It also had tradition, memory and customs to feed on. The *khera*, 'often an uninhabited site', but 'still remembered as the one that threw out separate villages as colony',⁵³ was the most visible symbol of a common origin, and attachment to it as the joint property of clan leaders the expression of a primordial solidarity. Each area had its dominant clan, which again had a local village or town to look back upon as the place which their common ancestor was said to have founded. Thus, tradition combined with the concentration of proprietorship in the hands of a particular clan to generate a consciousness that would express itself in any collective action such as an insurrection.

⁵¹ Whiteway, p. 39.

⁵² Growse (3), pp. 399-401.

⁵³ *Statistical, etc.* p. 136.

The land tenure was a *bhaiyachara* in perfection. By the 1830s the estates had been minutely subdivided into the various *pattis* and it was the *pattidars* who mattered most to the settlement officers. The *pattidars* were differentiated in terms of ownership. Some could own more than 500 *bighas* of land whereas others did not have more than sixty.⁵⁴ In the twenty years before the mutiny, however, the relations between *pattidars* and *biswadars* had come under strain. Stokes has argued that the revenue demand of the state as well as the administrative arrangements connected with the settlement operations were major factors which caused this strain. The settlement operations, for instance, were aimed at determining the precise ownership of each sharer, although, as J.G. Deedes, the officer on the spot in *tappa Raya* and *Sonya* pleaded with his superiors, 'an undivided *patti* or an undivided property in land', however 'foreign to all European ideas of property', was 'well understood by the people themselves', and therefore 'to make an individual family quarrel and divide their patrimony' could 'not tend much to the advantage of the society'. But the Board insisted on the recording of rights as joint proprietorship under 'the name of the managing and ostensible member of the family' and decided to change the village measurement to a new standard because such a measurement, they thought, would be 'correct and therefore more satisfactory to all'.⁵⁵

The inflexibility of the settlements operations was compounded by the heavy revenue demand. In his report on the settlement in *tappa Raya* Deedes referred to 'the over-assessment and the resultant mortgages by which the government demand was provided for'. As the revenue demand was in many cases levied 'with little reference to the capabilities of the estate', its obvious result was 'in driving away the proprietary cultivator of the soil and eventually the loss of government is much greater than would have been incurred by granting relief in time, to say nothing of individual misery which has been caused by the numerous and repeated transfers'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Deedes' letters, 1 December 1831, 4 February 1832. BR, NWP, 8 March 1833, Proc 43, UPSA.

⁵⁵ Macsween to the Board, 9 August 1832, BR, NWP, 8 March 1833, Proc 44, UPSA; Deedes to Macsween, 26 November 1832, BR NWP, 8 March 1833, Proc 47, UPSA. On measurements in *Raya* and *Sonya*, see Macsween's letter, 31 December 1832 & Deedes' letter, 5 December 1832, BR, NWP, 8 February 1833, Proc 65-70, UPSA.

⁵⁶ Settlement of *Tappa Raya*, Deedes' letter, 4 February 1832, *ibid*.

Moreover Deedes had noted the signs of a depression in the area during the 1830s. The loans from the indigo factories had dried up since the failure of farms. There was a sharp decline in the price of cotton—from Rs 50 per maund to as little as Rs 20. As Deedes observed, 'the village bohra ceased to make advances and the whole pargannah seems in distress'.⁵⁷ One of the effects of the depression was a substantial decrease in the number of wells in this area which was utterly dependent on well irrigation—a decrease related directly in the Agra division (and in Mathura district in particular) to a receding water-level caused by a drought as well as to the 'want of means . . . found in the co-parcener of a bhaiyachara village and in the non-proprietary tenant'.⁵⁸ Indeed by the 1840s the tracts of Sonya and Raya had been so reduced 'partly from drought and partly from overassessment' that Tyler, a local official, found a decrease in revenue demand essential in the former and a revision urgently needed in the latter. Yet in Raya the same official kept demands unchanged in eleven *mahals* and even increased it in two of them. Only six mahals out of nineteen got a minor revision, amounting to a mere 2 per cent decrease.⁵⁹ Arriving upon the scene on the eve of the mutiny, Thornhill was impressed by the consensus that was there 'among the natives . . . both respectable and lower orders' to the effect 'that the settlement of this district [was] severe'.⁶⁰

In these circumstances the customary resistance of the bhaiyachara community to the alienation of its members' proprietary rights in favour of outsiders eroded slowly, over the years, before the onslaught of a few moneylender families. Nanda Ram, a petty trader who made a fortune from the sale of grains in the famine of 1838, was one of the first to penetrate into this region by mahajani transactions. He acquired a vast property extending over Mat as well as several of tappa Raya's villages—such as Acharu, Chura Hansi, Nagal, Gogu, Dhaku and Thana Amar Sing. Again, this pargana witnessed the rise of members of the Brahmin family of Jagdispore who had started their career as mere pedlars but made their fortune—they were moneylenders by profession—as they

⁵⁷ Deedes' letter, 1 December 1831, *ibid.*

⁵⁸ 'Note on the Decrease in the Number of Wells in the Agra Division', *Selections*, no. xxiv.

⁵⁹ Whiteway, p. 160.

⁶⁰ Thornhill to Unwin, 16 January 1855, Mathura—Revenue. ACR, Proc 14, vol. 145, UPRA.

built up 'a considerable estate out of lands which for most parts they held in mortgage'. Then there was the Brahmin Pachauri family of Gokharauli, members of which were sole proprietors of many of the villages in pargana Mahaban, while in each of the remaining villages of the pargana they owned at least one share, however small. This family had all the necessary political connections. They were traditionally tehsildars and one of their members, Kalyan Singh, was the *resaladar* major in the 17th regiment during 1857. Not on a par in social prestige with them, the Baniya called Jugal Kisore possessed one of the indigo factories in the town. It was to such moneybags that the proprietary rights in so many of the bhaiyachara villages of tappa Raya passed during the first half of the nineteenth century. Dhaku was established by the Dhokala Jats. The Jats were the chief cultivating caste. But Jamuna Prasad bought the rights of proprietorship in the villages from the descendants of the original settlers. Nagal was established by the Ram Singh Jats. Its Jat part was purchased by the banyas. Tirwa and Saras were similarly lost to the Bohras. Acharu's share was held both by Nand Kishore and by Jamuna Prasad, the Banyas of Raya. It is significant that these villages participated in their attack on Raya town during the mutiny.⁶¹

The process of mortgage and transfer was promoted to no small extent by administrative measures in the mid nineteenth century. Formerly in these bhaiyachara villages regular deeds against mortgages were not drawn up, an entry in a Bhai Khata being considered sufficient. When the money was paid up, the entry was also cancelled in the presence of witnesses. And there was no limit to redemption: 'land which has been mortgaged for upwards of 100 years being redeemed just as land which has only been in the possession of the mortgagee for one year'.⁶² However, on the eve of the mutiny, legislation was brought to end this custom and a regulation introduced for the registration of the transfers and mortgages prior to the registration of a decree so that it could be accepted as a valid document in the court. As predicted by Wingfield, the act helped immensely to strengthen the position of moneylenders, who, thanks to their wealth and 'acquaintance with Civil Courts', made the most of it in order to undermine the bhaiyachara community by mort-

⁶¹ Growse (1), part II (1874), pp. 86-7. These details are collated from the village lists in *ibid.*, pp. 89-104.

⁶² Whiteway, p. 43.

gages and transfers.⁶³ No wonder then that during the mutiny the moneylenders became the object of popular wrath in this area and confirmed, despite Stokes's arguments to the contrary, that the hatred of the Banias was caused by 'the loss of rights to urban moneylender and trader under the pressure of the British land revenue system'.⁶⁴

Thornhill, magistrate of Mathura district at the time, was struck by the suddenness with which the rural jacqueries began: 'The news of the insurrection and the proclamation of the king of Delhi had now become known among the native population, the country immediately became disturbed . . . The news of the mutiny had spread with great rapidity and the whole country had risen almost instantaneously'. And he went on to say, 'A month before the country had been in profound tranquility; the sudden change to the anarchy without any apparent cause was very extra-ordinary and is a matter of the attentive consideration of the government'.⁶⁵

To him the intensity and swiftness of the rebellion and the breakdown of authority in the countryside was a thing beyond comprehension. Nevertheless he attempted to describe a pattern. Thus: 'Kuar Dildar Ali Khan, a large Zamindar in Pargannah Mat was murdered by his villagers; on the 23rd May Omrow Bahadoor a relative of his who had estates in the Purgannah Noh Jheel had been besieged in his house; . . . several other murders were committed and other outrages, the particulars of which I do not remember'. And, the narrative continued, 'the whole district was in anarchy. The police and revenue establishments were everywhere ejected or if permitted to remain, allowed to remain on mere sufferance; the buniahs were plundered, new proprietors were ejected and murdered and the King of Delhi proclaimed . . .'.⁶⁶ Apparently, in the perception of the local guardian of law and order, there was nothing in the unfolding scene of a mighty rural upsurge except a generalized lawlessness which obliterated for him the individuality of the rebels and the specificity of the rebellion.

For us, however, these specificities are important as a guide to the social tensions in the area. Dildar Khan, for instance, had his estates

⁶³ Wingfield to Taylor, 2 January 1854, BR, Mathura, ACR, vol. 144, UPRA.

⁶⁴ Stokes, ch. vii *passim*.

⁶⁵ Thornhill to Harvey, 10 August 1858, NE, paras 5 and 22.

⁶⁶ Ibid., paras 10 and 19.

in Bhadanwara.⁶⁷ It seems that he was trying to consolidate his position by ejecting a large number of proprietors and thus came into conflict with the Jats. Harvey described him as 'an opulent but overbearing and unpopular Zamindar' who had 'met his end at the hand of his own dependants and neighbours'. This incidentally was the first jacquerie in Mathura district, and its seat was the pargana to which Raya belonged.

Thornhill and his forces remained at Raya for some days 'tranquillising the country'. All round him there was evidence of a collapse of British authority: 'in a circle of a few miles about five or six zamindars had declared themselves independent, assumed the title of Rajah and proclaimed the King of Delhi . . . *the impression that the English rule had ceased was universal*'.⁶⁸ The cessation of the existing authority was part of a general belief in rural areas. Dunlop had noticed the same in Meerut. Thornhill was to recollect later on how this belief was linked in popular imagination with the hope for an alternative authority in the form of a restoration of the Mughal emperor: 'Their talk was all about the ceremonial of the palace, and how it would be revived . . . As I listened, I realised as I had never done before, the deep impression that the splendour of the ancient court had made on the popular imagination, how dear to them were its traditions and how faithfully, all unknown to us they had preserved them'.⁶⁹ Thus the overthrow of colonial authority helped to rekindle an old tradition that got its verbal expression in proclamations in the name of the Mughal emperor. The idea of replacing the alien Raj by one that was the people's own—be it located in Delhi or nearer home at the seat of a rural insurrection—was very much in the air. It was in this context of political turmoil and high-pitched popular imagination that the revolt at tappa Raya broke out sometime between the end of May and early June.

The uprising, it has been stated, began with an attack on the township by the leading zamindars and the residents of the Chowdah Taraf, i.e. the core villages surrounding Raya. The zamindars of Acharu Laru named Dhani Ram and Sesh Ram (Sriram), Hulasi, Sawae and Akbar of Saras, and Chain Sukh, Jat lumbardar of Tirwa,

⁶⁷ Growse (1), part II, p. 72; M. Thornhill to G.F. Harvey, 10 August 1858; *NE*, para. 22.

⁶⁸ *NE*, para. 22. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, p. 7.

were the persons prominent in the raid.⁷⁰ The role of the Chowdah Taraf on this occasion was particularly significant. 'The fourteen villages had in times gone by, formed a single estate', wrote Thornhill. He added

During the half century of our rule they had been sold and resold, and the proprietors reduced to the condition of mere cultivators. But they still held the tradition of their former supremacy and looked forward to the time when they might recover it. On the breaking out of the mutiny that time seemed to them to have arrived, and they hastened to avail themselves of it. In each village they rose and turned on the new owners; of these most fled, the rest fought. In these fights Dayby Sing came to the front. . . . Eventually, Dayby Singh's fellow caste-men obtained the victory, re-established themselves in their ancient position, and this done, Dayby Sing elected himself as their Rajah.⁷¹

It was thus that a peasant king was made, deriving his authority from an age-old tradition of the Jats. That tradition asserted itself in the colour of the yellow dress Devi Singh put on as the insignia of his new status, 'yellow among the Hindoos being the sign of royalty', and even in the language used by fellow-villagers in addressing him (as Thornhill was amused to remark) 'with the usual string of adulatory epithets which Eastern etiquette demands', such as 'the lord of beneficence, the source of wealth . . . the supporter of the poor . . . the great Rajah Dayby Singh, monarch of the fourteen villages, the victorious in war'. But, although the sanction behind the raja of Raya was a tradition much older than the idioms and institutions of politics introduced by the Raj he had subverted, he had to rely on some of those institutions for the exercise of his authority.

On entering the town, Dayby Sing proceeded to the school-room, a building lately erected by our Government. In this he established his headquarters . . . He then constituted a government of his own, which he formed on the English model. He appointed a Board of Revenue, a Supreme Court of Judicature, a Commissioner, a Magistrate and a Superintendent of Police. For this last office he did not consider any of his own people properly qualified; so he sent a message to the late incumbent begging him to return and promising him an increase of salary.

In modelling his own government thus on the very structure of authority he aimed at destroying, Devi Singh demonstrated very

⁷⁰ Growse (2), Village Lists.

⁷¹ This and all other direct quotations in the rest of this section are taken from Thornhill, *Personal Adventures*, pp. 100-9, unless otherwise mentioned.

clearly indeed the historic limitations of the insurgent consciousness of his time. The rebel had not yet found his way to his own world.⁷²

Within such limitations the new regime appears to have settled down to a fairly well-defined, if simple, administrative routine. According to Thornhill, Devi Singh would come to the town at dawn every day, take his seat at his headquarters in the schoolhouse, receive petitions, hear complaints and dictate despatches. 'This done, he devoted the rest of his day to plundering the Bunniahs which he did very deliberately, all the town assisting'. Settling accounts with the moneylenders was perhaps the most distinctive feature of this insurrection. Indeed this turned out to be the primary expression of the new regime's coercive powers—its powers to judge and to punish. Every morning a Baniya would be brought to trial before the raja, cross-examined, entreated to declare his hoardings, and surrender bonds and mortgage deeds. He would be let off if his response was found satisfactory. Otherwise he would be 'put to the torture', but apparently without any excessive severity, for Thornhill testifies to having 'found no case where any Bunniah had been seriously hurt'.

It was not corporal punishment but pillage that was used by Devi Singh to reduce the moneylenders of Raya. Their shops as well as houses were subjected to this particular form of violence. 'Every shop was completely plundered and not only plundered but wrecked. The doors were torn out, the verandahs pulled down, the floors dug up, and also great holes dug in walls. Whatever was worth carrying off had gone to the villages, the rest lay in the street. The roadway was covered with torn account-books, broken bottles, fragments of jars and boxes, besides the debris of the floors and verandahs'. The dwelling-houses fared even worse. 'In the search for hidden treasures the smaller ones had been nearly pulled to pieces; all of them were more or less reduced to ruins'. Such disciplinary proceedings would usually terminate in the release of an offending Baniya, for 'like a cobra deprived of its poison bag, without his documents he was considered harmless'.

It was with pillage that the insurrection had started, when according to a *barqandaz* of the local thana, 'carts laden with salt and gram' were plundered by a crowd of 1,000 men in tappa Raya.⁷³

⁷² Cf. Guha, pp. 75–6.

⁷³ Deposition of Dindar Khan, *Barqandaz of Thana Raya, FSUP*, v, pp. 695–6.

And pillage, that 'quintessential aspect of insurgency',⁷⁴ continued to articulate the violence of the people in its most radical form under Devi Singh's authority. More than any other it was indeed this collective action that effectively mobilized the masses around his power base. For the highly popular character of the attacks on the moneylenders is clearly attested by Thornhill: 'When Dayby Singh advanced to call them to account he had with him the sympathies of the entire population', and the raja plundered their shops and houses 'very deliberately, all the town assisting'.

But Devi Singh did not reckon with the strength of the empire. To him the colonial state was a local affair and 'having driven out the police he thought he had overthrown our government'. This want of maturity, perhaps historically inevitable, was soon to cost him his life and his little kingdom. For the audacity of the armed peasantry, roused *en masse* to settle accounts with the Baniyas—the element of local society still loyal to the Raj in 1857—and Devi Singh's expressed intention to drive Thornhill, the district magistrate, out of his refuge in an opulent banker's house in Mathura city, prompted the latter to make an example of Raya. On the arrival of the Kotah contingent from Agra to free him from a state of virtual siege, he led it into an attack on the rebel village on 15 June, where he seized Devi Singh and Sri Ram and hanged them. That marked the end of the short-lived counter-Raj in tappa Raya and the beginning of the restoration of colonial authority in the area by early November.⁷⁵

'Dayby Sing's career was brief, and in its incidents rather ludicrous', wrote Thornhill in concluding his reminiscences of the village raja. This condescension followed to no mean extent from his discovery of the utter ordinariness of his adversary. He was 'a very ordinary-looking man' who, when captured by the counter-insurgency forces, was hardly distinguishable from the other peasants; the seat of his power was 'an ordinary village, large and very ugly, a mere collection of mud huts closely huddled together'; the only document of state that fell into the hands of his captors was a letter from a fellow-villager that 'reported only the purchase of a few pennyworths of pepper and about an equal amount of sugar and vegetables'. But it is precisely in such ordinariness, scorned by the administrator turned historian, that the student of Indian history

⁷⁴ Guha, p. 156.

⁷⁵ DG: Mathura, p. 217. *Statistical, etc.*, p. 169.

must learn to identify and acknowledge the hallmark of a popular rebel leadership—a leadership which, even when it stands at the head of the masses in a struggle, bears on it all the marks of its emergence out of the ranks of the masses themselves.

IV. Gonoo

Like the high farming areas of the Doab, the tribal areas of Chotanagpore too were affected by the rebellion of 1857. But here the sepyo element was marginal. The tribal people and their chiefs provided the main thrust of revolt against the government. However, once the insurrection gathered momentum the chiefs fell behind and an initiative began to grow from below. Gonoo, a Kol, was an ordinary cultivator in Singhbhum. The events of 1857 made him a rebel leader. The lowliest in terms of social status among our rebel characters, he is the least known to us. The material I have on him is scarce and fragmentary.

Singhbhum was divided by the river Samjai. The southern side of the river happened to be directly under British rule whereas the northern side was a part of the feudatory estate of the raja of Porahat and divided among various members of his family. However, the latter exercised only a loose authority over the ordinary inhabitants. The Larka Kol were organized into the militia of the feudatory chiefs and claimed a share of the booty from plunder and conquest as their remuneration. The raja on his part was satisfied with the nominal acceptance of his sovereignty by them and extracted no rent from them as cultivators.⁷⁶

For the Kols the functional unit of their society was their village and clan. In the Kolhan estate the villages happened to be communities of corporate owners, and zamindari and the other intermediate tenures were but a superimposition.⁷⁷ The Kols' right to their land was as immutable as their relation with their clan. 'According to their theory', wrote Dalton, 'dispossession for generations can no

⁷⁶ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Singhbhum, Saraikella and Kharsawan* (Calcutta, 1910), p. 10. S.R. Tickell, 'Memoirs on Hodesam Improperly called Kolehan', *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. ix, part II, 1840, pp. 689–700. E.T. Dalton, 'The Kols of Chotanagpore', *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, vol. vi (London, 1867), pp. 10–12.

⁷⁷ T.S. Macpherson, *Final Report on the Operations for the Preparation of a Record of Rights in Pargana Porahat, Dist. Singhbhum* (Calcutta, 1908), p. 83.

more annul their rights in land than it can extinguish ties of their blood'.⁷⁸

The Kols had two institutions—(1) *Manki* and *Moonda*, and (2) *Killi*. A moonda was the chief of his village, but he was merely *primus inter pares* and did not hold any special tenure. A group of such villages, usually seven to twelve in number, formed a *peer* or a *Ho* unit. The leader of this group was called 'manki'. A manki was probably 'a lineal descendent of the leading settler in the chief village in the group'. He might also have functioned as a military chief to organize the armed people for the raja and maintain a link with him on behalf of the villages. However, his rights were not very different from those of ordinary subjects, and according to a knowledgeable officer, 'in the interior of the Kolhan, there had been, before the advent of the British, no acknowledged head or any king'.⁷⁹ Most of these villages conformed to the killis or clans who chose a particular area and settled there.

After the Kol insurrection of 1831 the colonial government took away fifteen peers from the Porahat king, and, along with eleven other peers, brought the southern Kolhan under its rule, leaving the northern part under the rajas. In this estate the government formalized the position of the mankis and the moondas, who were entrusted with the duty of revenue collection and the general superintendence over law and order in lieu of a commission. They became a functionary of the government and bound themselves by an oath taken to that effect before the agent to the Governor-General. The oath ran as follows: that they would not receive or obey 'any order' verbal or written, of any rajah or any zamindar or any of their subordinates'. This amounted to a transfer of their allegiance to a new authority. Hereafter in the selection of a manki his local influence would be considered, but the final right of selection lay with the government—which could exclude anybody thought to be unfit.⁸⁰

In these peers the government fixed a tax on each cultivator at the rate of eight annas for every plough. Between 1844 and 1850 it made

⁷⁸ Dalton, 'The Kols', p. 21.

⁷⁹ Macpherson, pp. 14, 108–9; O'Malley, pp. 173–4; J.A. Craven, *Final Report on the Settlement of the Kolhan Government Estate, District Singhbhum* (Calcutta, 1898), p. 29.

⁸⁰ P.C. Raychaudhuri, ed., *Singhbhum Old Records* (Patna, 1958), pp. 54–5. Also see K.K. Basu, 'Early Administration of the Kol Peers in Singhbhum and Bamanghati', *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* (Sept.–Dec. 1956).

several attempts to increase the assessment paid by the killis and to estimate the lands actually cultivated. Such official interventions 'had the effect of making the Koles restless'. So the *mankis* made a compromise by agreeing to pay one rupee instead of eight annas and the government promised to make no enquiry and levy no new tax for a period of twelve years. This fiscal adjustment relieved the headmen of the task of sending annual reports on the acreage of cultivation and enabled them to impose assessments on their *ryot* according to their own judgement. But the compromise was not unattended with the usual threats. A recalcitrant *moonda* refusing to pay the higher rate would not obtain *pattahs* and villages refusing to comply would be assessed strictly. It was also considered 'prudent' that military presence in the area should be strengthened 'against every possible contingency'. By this combination of compromise and threat the revenue was already doubled before 1857. Between 1837 and 1852 the amount had risen gradually from Rs 5,108 to Rs 8,523, but the figure for 1854 was Rs 17,000.⁸¹

There is no doubt that this assessment was light in comparison to that of other regions, and led the English officials to believe that the revolt of 1857 in Chotanagpore was merely an expression of the innate fighting nature of the Larka Kols. What they failed to acknowledge was that the very presence of the colonial power and its attempt to tinker with the traditional institutions had created a new situation. The written oaths, annual visits by the commissioner, insistence on the regular payment of tax, the attempts to increase the rate of assessment and to change the mode of assessment had led to the development of a structure much stronger and more formal than that of the older segmentary authority. The traditional *mankis* and *moondas* had become revenue collectors as well as police functionaries on behalf of the government. As a result around 1857 the *mankis* were a divided group: a large number of them tried to uphold their older loyalties whereas quite a few looked up to their new masters. In fact, it is reported that in 1857 only those Kols who 'had in former times been retained by the rajah of Porahat' joined the rebellion.⁸² Again, the sanction of the *mankis'* power lay within the community. By giving them some police powers the colonial state entrusted them with the task of punishing such newly defined 'crimes' as witch-hunting, which were in fact a part of traditional

⁸¹ Raychaudhuri, pp. 40–5, 48–9.

⁸² O'Malley, p. 40.

practice in Singhbhum.⁸³ Altogether, it was the attempt made by the colonial regime to intervene in the traditional institutions of the Kol and thereby to disrupt older communal ties which prepared the ground for the conflicts of 1857 in this area.

The rebellion began in Chotanagpore with the mutiny of the Ramgarh battalions. But the mutineers were opposed by the Kols who looked upon the plundered treasury as their own and resented its appropriation by the sepoys.⁸⁴ Meanwhile, the traditional rivalry between the chiefs of Porahat and Khursawan surfaced at this juncture, and Arjun Singh, maharaja of Porahat, who was to play so confusing a part in the struggle just begun, 'appeared on the scene. . . vacillating. . . at one moment acting the part of a loyal feudatory and doing good work for government and the next in rebellion, leagued with the sepoys he had just been opposing'.⁸⁵ While he vacillated, pressure built up from below for action. Juggo Dewan and his supporters were preparing for a showdown. A proclamation appears to have been issued in the king's name but without his concurrence. The arrow of war, that traditional method of transmission of war-like messages, began to circulate, defying the warnings issued by the English to the mankis against its use.⁸⁶ On 20 November the king was attacked and fled. Juggo Dewan, thought to have been responsible for the attack, was summarily executed by the authorities in the centre of the bazaar at that place 'and his body was left exposed until dark'. By that time 'the character of the Mutiny . . . had entirely changed', as an official observed, and 'the Sepoy element had disappeared'.⁸⁷ The mutiny of the Ramgarh battalions was transformed into a rebellion of the Kols.

⁸³ Ricketts had noted how the mankis and moondas were reluctant to report the cases of witch-hunting because, to the community, it was no crime. H. Ricketts, *Report on the District of Singhbhum, 1854*, Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, no. 16, para 107.

⁸⁴ E.T. Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872; reprint Delhi, 1978), p. 183.

⁸⁵ F.B. Bradley-Birt, *Chotanagpore, A Little Known Province of the Empire* (London, 1903), p. 220.

⁸⁶ Dalton to Lushington, 30 Sept. 1859, JP, 27 October 1859, Proc 167, WBSA, para. 14. Deposition of Dubroo, son of Sikur, resident of Mouzah Kossee, Purgunah Colehan, JP, WBSA. Birch's letter, 23 November 1857, PP, 625-8. W. Crooke, 'Secret messages and symbols used in India', *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society*, vol. v, part iv, Dec. 1919.

⁸⁷ Bradley-Birt, p. 225.

Out of this process of transformation Gonoo emerged as a leader. His own perception of that process was recorded thus in his testimony at his trial:

The whole country was in revolt. . . All the moondahs and mankis went to the Rajah; I was with them. The Rajah asked us what we were going to do. We replied that the Sahibs have run away and you are now our ruler, we will hold to you. Afterwards, the Rajah called us and said see I have been hunted from Chuckradherpore and Porahat and am now obliged to live in jungles. What will you do? Will you fight for me? We said we would fight and swore to do so. Then he assembled all the *Bhuiyas* and *Dhorrowas* and gave their pay and arms and an army was collected and we went to Ajoodiah with the intention of fighting with Chuckdher Singh of Seraikella [the traditional rival of the Raja of Porahat].⁸⁸

Apparently the initiative came from below. The people, headed by their chiefs, appealed to the raja to perform his traditional role as a leader of the whole people at a time when the belief had gained ground that the authority of the English had vanished and all the older ties between king, headmen and people had been revived. The raja on his part asked the subjects for their support and, on obtaining that, ordered armed action to begin. The will of the people thus merged with royal consent, inaugurating the rebellion as a project of the entire community.

Dalton described Gonoo as 'the most active adherent of the ex-rajah of Porahat amongst Singhbhum or Larka Kols and the principal agent in spreading disaffection amongst them and the leader of the men of that tribe'. One witness testified that 'during the disturbances of 1857 he was the leader of all the Hoes from Kolehah who joined the rajah', and another that 'his name was in everybody's mouth'. And according to the manki of Barpeer, the Kols who opposed the English army at Seringsaraghaut 'acted under Gonoo's orders'.⁸⁹

It is as a leader of the Barpeer Kols that Gonoo first made his name. He was an inhabitant of Jyunteegarh in Barpeer. This area had a tradition of rebellion, and was, according to Dalton, 'one of the most disaffected Peers during the disturbances'.⁹⁰ Here, by all accounts, Gonoo mobilized the community: 'the people all ack-

⁸⁸ Gonoo's Testimony, JP, May 1864, Proc 30-31, WBSA.

⁸⁹ Dalton's letter, 15 March 1864, and Evidence of Rainse and Konka, *ibid*.

⁹⁰ Dalton to Lushington, 6 September 1859. JP, 29 September 1859, para 4, Proc 55, WBSA.

nowledged him as a leader'.⁹¹ As he was to recall later: '... the rajah sent emissaries to Buntrea and Barpeer to collect men ... I had come to the Bar Peer and heard from the Kols that they had defeated the sahibs ... Then all the Mankees and Moondahs determined to fight again ... and we assembled at Seringsara Ghat'.⁹²

However, it was at Koordiha that Gonoo established his authority as one of a triumvirate (the others being Raghu Deo and Sham Kurran) who had, for all practical purposes, taken over control from Arjun Singh when the latter found refuge there after the fall of Porahat. Here the raja was virtually a prisoner in the custody of the rebel army dominated by the Barpeer Kols. He 'had no intention of opposing the Sahibs ... but the others used to abuse him for this and say that they will fight'. His feeble-mindedness made him suspected as well as despised by the rebels. He was 'always attended by the *nugdees* (armed guards) placed to look after him', and was 'subjected to great indignities by the people and no one showed him any respect or minded what he said'.⁹³

As one of the supreme command of the rebel forces whose authority had replaced the raja's, Gonoo was involved in disciplining traitors and informers. The official policy of making mankis into local agents of the colonial administration had its allurements; a number of them worked as spies and informers to provide the regime with intelligence against the insurgents. Raghu Deo and Gonoo were anxious to wipe them off. Buddo Mahato was killed on an order from them because 'he was suspected of being a *Meriah* [a spy and go between]'.⁹⁴

Gonoo is also known to have used the threat of collective violence in order to enforce co-operation from vacillating elements within the tribal community. The testimony of the manki of Chynepore peer, which remained loyal to the government, offers an interesting example in this respect.

I am the mankee of Chynepore Peer ... He came to my village after burning Chynepore with a force of coles. There was then in the village, a lot of *suggars* laden with the provision for Chuckerdherpore. The bullock-drivers had fled when they heard of the burning of

⁹¹ Evidence of Bhogwan, JP, May 1864, Proc 30-31, WBSA.

⁹² Gonoo's Testimony, *ibid*.

⁹³ Depositions of Anadhee and Muddo, JP, 27 October 1859, WBSA.

⁹⁴ Depositions of Dhunno, Sreedhar Mahato, and Madho, JP, *ibid*. Examination of Singa, JP, 11 August 1859, Proc 62-63, WBSA.

Chynepore . . . he ordered me to collect cattle to yoke in *suggars*. He threatened to burn the villages if cattles and coolies were not provided. So to save the village I gave them both . . . A very large body of insurgents were with Goono on this occasion. They filled the village and were in every house demanding food and drink. Goono was their leader. They all said so, I had not seen Goono before but they said this is Goono our leader, Don't you know him and what he will do to you if you disobey.⁹⁵

'Gonoo our leader'. To be designated thus, Gonoo had to come a long way from his humble beginnings. His father Mata was the moonda of village Chonpattea of Barpeer. Gonoo was a pupil of Chybasa school, 'but when he left the school', said an acquaintance who knew him from his childhood, 'he became poor and took to evil ways, thieving and the like'. And yet another man of his tribe spoke of his murky background: 'He bore a bad character. His father died in jail for rebellion. His brother was hanged'.⁹⁶

It was not unusual for a 'bad character' to emerge as a leader in the course of a peasant revolt. In the Santal *hool* Domon Dakait had been transformed into Domon Darogah, and as recently as in the 1970s the dacoit Rameshwar Ahir had become Sadhu Rameshwar, the legendary peasant leader of Bhojpur.⁹⁷ The same process which had transformed the sepoy rebellion into an uprising of the masses in Chotanagpore was also what transformed a poor Kol who had taken to 'evil ways'. The *talpatras*, seized by Birch in Kordiha, with their references to the emperor of Delhi, to Nana Sahib and Koer Singh, registered a dim awareness of this process among the tribal population of Singhbhum and a vague expectation of help from those quarters.⁹⁸ It was the displacement of authority both at the supra-local level of the colonial regime and at the local level of the Porahat raj that helped to generate among the rebels the sense of an alternative authority and invest a law-breaker from a family of law-breakers with a new legitimacy for his role as a leader. However, even that legitimacy had to justify itself in the name of that very au-

⁹⁵ Deposition of Chumro, JP, May 1864, WBSA.

⁹⁶ Evidence of Konka and Martum, *ibid*.

⁹⁷ For a discussion of Domon Darogah's career, see Guha, pp. 95–7. For Rameshwar Ahir, see K. Mukherjee and R. Jadav, *Bhojpur: Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar* (Delhi, 1980), pp. 73–8.

⁹⁸ For these *talpatras* see Appendix A: Abstract translation of the letter writings on the *tal*-leaves found in the village of Koordiha by L.T. Birch, JP, 27 October 1859, WBSA.

thority which the rebellion was busy undermining. In the days of the insurrection Gonoo was said to have constituted himself as 'chief of Singhbhum', and, 'styled as a mankee', he 'rode about on a horse'. But he claimed to derive the authority that went with such title and carriage from no other source than the raja himself. 'He came to my house', said a witness at his trial, 'with a writing on talpat which he said was an order from the Rajah and he asked us if we [would] obey it and collect men'. And he told someone else that 'he had been appointed sardar in Singhbhum by the Rajah and the Rajah had invested him with a turban and given a horse'. When Gonoo described himself to his captors as 'not a leader', but as 'a mere follower of the Rajah', he was not trying to evade responsibility for his actions, but expressing in his own words the authentic limitations of his political consciousness as a typical Kol rebel of his time.

V. *Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah*

Unlike Devi Singh or Gonoo, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah is well known to the historian. He was one of a number of maulvis who figured prominently in the rebellion of 1857. Among these there were celebrities like Maulvi Liaqat Ali of Allahabad and Fazl Huq Khairabadi of Delhi and Awadh, as well as lesser known ulema and maulvis whose names occur in the lists of proclaimed offenders drawn up by the British administrators for their respective jurisdictions in Aligarh or Bulandshahr or in the towns and *qasbahs* of Rohilkhand. Indeed their role was so suspect that the authorities made up a list indicating the behaviour of *maafi* landholders in each district of the North-Western Provinces during the mutiny. In view of this it may be quite in order here to discuss the career of the Maulvi of Fyzabad as an aid to our understanding of the popular movements of that time.

The Maulvi was a member of a grandee family of Carnatic. Educated in Hyderabad, he became an itinerant preacher when he was very young. It is said that he travelled widely and visited Arabia, Iran and even England. His spiritual preceptor was Mehrab Shah, a *pir* of Gwalior. He passed through several places in Rajputana and northern India preaching jehad against the English. In November 1856 he was in Lucknow and attracted large crowds to meetings where, according to a local newspaper, he called for jehad against the government. He was soon forced out of the city by the kotwal, who prohibited the public from seeing him and restrained his move-

ments. A contemporary account describes him as a Sufi from Agra, who had a thousand disciples and rode in a palanquin, with a drum beaten in front and a line of his followers bringing up the rear. His disciples swallowed burning charcoals before the crowds, for those who did so would, according to the Maulvi, bring forth fire tomorrow and go to heaven after death. Among the people he was called 'Danka Shah' or 'Naqara Shah', the Maulvi with the drum. And 'the city was full of uneasy news'.⁹⁹

From Lucknow the Maulvi came to Fyzabad where he settled in the serai of the town with his entourage and began to draw large crowds. The authorities suspected 'that there was an evident intention on the part of the Faqir to raise a riot and dissension among the people'. An officer sent to contact him 'found the road, the entrance and interior of the Surraee very much crowded'. Asked to disarm himself, 'the Faqir said he could not and would not give up his arms as he had received them from his Peer'. On the request to leave the town he replied that he would go away at his leisure. On 17 February the officer, with a group of soldiers, arrested the Maulvi after a clash in which the latter was wounded and three of his disciples were killed.¹⁰⁰

The activities of the Maulvi had been taking place in an atmosphere of tension and apprehension. The talk of a war of jehad against the English was very much in the air since the deposition of Wajid Ali Shah. Then on 8 June 1857 the irregular cavalry and native infantry rose, and the Maulvi, who was not without his supporters even in jail, was freed and elected a leader by the mutineers.¹⁰¹ He led the rebel forces, the 22nd Native Infantry, from Fyzabad to Lucknow. On 20 June the decisive battle at Chinhhat took place and Sir Henry Lawrence was defeated. The Maulvi 'fought stubbornly' and was wounded in the foot.¹⁰² It is to be noted that it was mainly the sepoys and the lower class who were involved in this crucial battle. A contemporary witness described their activities thus after Lucknow was taken:

⁹⁹ Iqbal Husain, 'Lucknow between the Annexation and the Mutiny' (Mimeo, Department of History, Aligarh); Amritlal Nagar, *Ghadar Ke Phul* (Delhi, 1981), pp. 193-4, 234-5.

¹⁰⁰ *FSUP*, I, pp. 381-2.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386. G. Hutchinson, *Narrative of the Mutinies in Oudh* (London, 1859), p. 33.

¹⁰² *FSUP*, II, p. 54.

At first, the *shuhdas* and other rifraffs of the town reached there early in the morning and plundered whatever they could lay their hands on. Suddenly, one of the *shuhdas* of Roomi Darwaza reviling his own men (*shuhdas*) said, 'Do not indulge in plundering. Draw the cannons and place them, in position at Machhi Bhawan [the old fort of Lucknow]. Gird up your loins and fight. This will give us a good name. People will say "how bravely a debased class of people stood against such a great enemy"'. Everyone agreed and got ready to fight.¹⁰³

In taking the initiative the lower orders sensed a pride which was denied to them in ordinary times. Insurrection, they felt, was a moment when they could behave like the great and could challenge the great. They encircled the Bhawan and shelled it, forcing the English to evacuate it at night. On 2 July the *shuhdas* entered the palace, where they were joined by 'other rifraffs . . . from the different quarters of the city', and pillage went on until the evening. The popular excitement was described as below by an upper-class observer:

Encouraged by their unexpected success the debased *shuhdas* committed greater reprisals. They secured two guns and stood against the Machhi Bhawan front. They set up a *morcha* at Munshi Iltifat Hussain's Bungalow in Bhim Ka Takia and another under the tamarind tree opposite the hospital and began firing. Although all that fight was merely puerile still the *shuhdas* exceeded their limits indulging in taunts and jokes. Then they recruited a *Paltan* of their own with the permission of the Government. They went round to the doors of the wealthy, and gave threats and exacted money, which they lavishly spent on spicy and tasteful food. They took Halwa, Puri and sweets from the shops without making any payments. They reviled all sorts of people. They took gunpowder and other explosives from makers of fire-works (*atash-baz*) and paid them inadequately. There was a heap of hay in the garden of the school *Kothi* to which they set fire and thus produced huge bonfires which lit the city. They brought Mir Baqar Ali who lived at Pakka Pul and cut him into pieces at the gate of the Bara Imambara with the sword. Nobody can say why they committed that sacrilege for he was a Saiyid. They moved about with naked swords in their hands.¹⁰⁴

This description catches some of the atmosphere of the rebellion. According to its author, an Ashraf, the lowly 'exceeded their limits', and consequently their servility gave way to self-assertion. They formed their own armed contingents and indulged in language and

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 58.

behaviour that violated the norms of address and etiquette due from the lower orders to their superiors. In the mood of the shuhdas there was an element of festivity as well as defiance. The latter was expressed in such actions as making up a platoon of their own, threatening the wealthy and exacting money from them, roaming about with 'naked' swords and killing a Saiyid. The bonfire and fireworks as well as their enjoyment of food, 'spicy and tasteful', had an element of celebration, celebration at the tasting of a power undreamt of by the poor classes in ordinary times of order and peace.

It was from this 'festival of the oppressed' of Lucknow that the Maulvi drew his support,—'his considerable following of pig-headed persons', as an Ashraf contemptuously called it.¹⁰⁵ But his authority was soon challenged by Birjis Qadir's newly formed rebel court which was virtually led by Begam Hazrat Mahal and Mammoo Khan. To the latter the Maulvi's popularity seemed to be a threat to the royal court. 'So popular a commander was the Moulvie with the Mutineers both on account of his bravery and his holy character', said Wazir Khan, 'that the Begum after a time began to dread his paramount influence as dangerous to her authority. Accordingly she organized a party to diminish the Moulvie's power and the measures she took to that end did not stop short of open attack. He then left the capital and took up his abode in a garden house in the suburbs'.¹⁰⁶ His concern for the civilian population also upset the court and was used by it to undermine his authority. 'He had it proclaimed that the citizens might put to death all persons attempting to plunder them, and taking up his abode in the beautiful building known as the Observatory, adopted all the airs and ceremonials of the royalty'. That played into the hands of the party in the palace, which 'incited the troops to resent the proclamation, which was particularly directed at them; and the Moulavie was robbed and ignominiously driven from the Observatory'.¹⁰⁷

It is also known that Ahmed Ali, the darogah of Hussainabad, was sent to arrest the Maulvi, and five hours of continuous fighting took place, after which the Maulvi retreated. Again, when after the fall of Delhi Fazl Huq Khairabadi came to Lucknow and joined Mammoo Khan, his assistance was sought to curb the influence of Ahmadullah Shah. He even accompanied the force sent out by the

¹⁰⁵ Nagar, p. 237.

¹⁰⁶ *FSUP*, II, p. 147.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

court to confiscate the Maulvi's estate.¹⁰⁸ After this his influence declined somewhat. But after the fall of Kanpur and Havelock's success he gradually regained his power over the troops. He personally led the attack on Bailey Guard where the English were besieged. By then 'he had somehow gained a high reputation for courage, of which the authorities of the Palace were utterly destitute'.¹⁰⁹

In fact the Maulvi's authority, apart from the factor of personal courage and 'his penetration of character', i.e. his ability to choose his followers, had two other elements, one of which was that 'the Mahomedans had great faith in him as an inspired prophet', a faith which 'became generally diffused among all classes of every religion in Oude by the apparent confirmation of his predictions as to the downfall of the British rule afforded by the temporary success of the rebellion in the province'.¹¹⁰ Kavanagh, an English officer, also wrote about 'the religious credulity of his troops' who 'believed in his invulnerability, even after a bullet . . . smashed his thumb'. He had apparently 'impressed his followers with the belief that his Whip and Handkerchief possessed magical qualities'. With his claim to 'being an Incarnation of the Deity' and his 'predictions of complete success; of the ultimate extension of the rule of the army to the sea; and of "beating his drum in London" '—all done in the manner of a prophetic leader—the Maulvi succeeded in spreading his appeal gradually to all classes of people and isolating the party at the court.¹¹¹

Such faith in the invincibility and predictions of an inspired prophet was rooted in a religio-political type of popular consciousness. A real human being was transformed by this consciousness into a superhuman and supernatural entity. Hence, even after his wound, the Maulvi could be regarded as immune from English weapons. He was himself conditioned by this consciousness since he thought of himself as directly inspired by Allah. He refused to look upon his destiny as a function of his own will; to him it was more a product of a divine inspiration, a will independent of himself. The reasons for political action were expressed in a religious

¹⁰⁸ For these details see S.A.A. Rizvi, ed., *Sangharsh Kalin Netaon Ki Jiwanian* (Lucknow, 1957), pp. 69–70; Depositions of Abdul Alee and Abdul Hakim in Trial Proceedings of Fazl Haq Khairabadi, no. 6, UPRA.

¹⁰⁹ *FSUP*, II, p. 142.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 142, 144; *FSUP*, v, p. 541.

code. It was the consciousness of someone 'who has either not found himself or already lost himself again'. Only a prophet could talk of success against heavy odds, and only then could the rebels realize their true nature in 'a fantastic reality of heaven'.¹¹² This fantasy was the ideological basis on which the authority of the Maulvi rested to a large extent. It was one of the sources which sustained the heroic resistance of Lucknow against the English.

Another factor behind the authority of the Maulvi was a fear of betrayal by the court, a fear of aristocratic plots. He shared that fear with the troops, whose attitude towards the court was graphically described thus by Kamal-ud-Din-Haidar Husaini:

Everyday the Tilangas . . . sat scattered at the shops of Khas Bazar, sang Bhajans in accompaniment with *daira* and *dhaphili*. They reviled everybody. They called Mirza Birjis Qadar from the palace, embraced him and said 'you are Kanhaiya. Don't become slothful like your father. *Be cautious of your turbaned men, otherwise you will get spoilt*'.¹¹³

'Be cautious of your turbaned men' was a warning, a disbelief in the magnates who were supposed to be leaders. In fact the Maulvi's appeal lay against them, against their cowardice and the possibility of betrayal. He was known to have organized the assassination of Sharf-ud-dowla, the Begam's minister, after the initial success of the British, 'on the allegation that he had favoured the British attack by previously introducing European soldiers in *doolies* within the works and through whose aid within, the assault from without succeeded'.¹¹⁴ This want of faith in the nobility is worth emphasizing as a corrective of the notion of a presumed symbiosis between the magnates and their subjects, i.e. of the people unthinkingly following their rulers as natural leaders. The persistent fear of an aristocratic plot turns the evidence in the opposite direction. For such suspicion, whether based on fact or not, must have originated from an awareness that the court's commitment to the rebel cause was not total, that its interest was not identical with that of the common insurgent, and that the latter should beware of betrayal. Such sentiment was the outcome of a contradiction fundamental in a class-divided society, dimly perceived by the rebels despite their common

¹¹² K. Marx, 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law' in *Marx & Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1975), p. 175.

¹¹³ *FSUP*, II, p. 166. Emphasis added.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

fight against the English. By contrast, impelled both by their religious instincts and the experience of struggle, they had come to place their trust in the Maulvi, and at a critical juncture, with trouble brewing between the Awadh and Delhi sepoys over pay and with the enemy advancing, 'the army appointed the Moulvi their Chief' on 8 December 1857.¹¹⁵

Between November 1857 and February 1858 the sepoys made six attacks on General Outram's position in Alumbagh. The Maulvi himself led the fourth attack, which was nearly successful. Lucknow fell on 14 March but the Maulvi stayed 'with unaccountable pertinacity' at the temple of Hazrat Abbas in the heart of the city. On 21 March Lugard captured the last stronghold after stiff resistance, but the Maulvi retreated safely to Muhamdi and made it a focal point of yet another stand against the English forces.¹¹⁶ Assuming command in the name of his pir, he sent out *hukumnamahs* to several taluqdars, calling on them to rally their forces and arrange for provisions for the coming fight.¹¹⁷ In these he expressed his yearning for solidarity, both on material and moral grounds. He declared that half of the *jama* of the taluqdars would be exempted for five years if 'they fight and kill the English; if not they would be punished'. All were urged 'to co-operate whole-heartedly in winning this war and extirpating and killing the English and thus, by exhibiting bravery and manliness, to prove themselves worthy of the patronage of this Sarkar'.

However, the Maulvi's attempt to reinforce his authority by rallying the taluqdars proved to be of no avail. The base at Muhamdi had to be abandoned and he withdrew to Pawayan where, on 15 June 1858, he was killed in the course of an engagement between his troops and those of the local raja, Jagannath Singh. The latter, described as 'two-faced' by a British official (for he had flirted with the rebels from time to time, but had 'on the whole a leaning to the English Government'), produced the Maulvi's head ('cut off by order of Buldeo Singh', the raja's brother) to the magistrate of Shahjahanpore and collected the official reward of Rs 50,000 for bringing to an end the career of 'one of the most determined and influential of the rebel leaders'. There followed the usual public demonstration of the might of the colonial state:

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 258.

¹¹⁶ *FSUP*, v, p. 513.

¹¹⁷ For these *hukumnamahs*, see *FSUP*, II, pp. 365-79.

The head . . . identified by several persons, both at Powayan and at Shahjehanpoor, as being that of the Moulvee Ahmud Oollah Shah . . . has been exposed to the public gaze (gaze) in the front of the cot-walee; and the body has been, publicly, burnt this morning, and the ashes thrown into the river.

That gory display was the tribute that the Raj had to pay to one of its most feared adversaries, and it complemented the sigh of relief with which the small-town administrator, who had 'bagged' that head, wrote to his superior officer: 'I am happy to think [that] . . . a rebel leader, who was proud of himself, a most troublesome enemy owing to the wonderful influence possessed by him over his followers, has now disappeared from the scene'.¹¹⁸

What was there in the Maulvi's ideas to account for 'the wonderful influence possessed by him over his followers'? For an answer we may turn to the pamphlet, *Fateh-i-Islam*, published anonymously at a time when, after the battle of Chinhhat, Ahmadullah Shah's influence was at its highest.¹¹⁹ It is not known whether he wrote it himself; but in its tone and tenor it was evocative directly of many of his ideas and policies, such as an insistence on jihad, allusions to Quranic laws, warning against indiscriminate plunder, a vituperative attack on alien rule, and commitment to total warfare against the English. As such it may be said to have been fairly representative of his thoughts and actions. Written as a proclamation, it served as a vehicle of the ethical and political ideas of the rebellion much in the same way as the Maulvi's own prophetic statements. It was certainly meant to be read out in public places in Awadh and Lucknow city. 'The proclamation', said a loyalist Indian of Awadh at that time, 'is a highly dangerous and inflammable document for its contents are explicitly believed by the common people who are consequently much exasperated against the English'.¹²⁰

The idiom in which the proclamation was written was religious. It represented the loss of religion as the loss of life, property, home, and finally, honour. '*Religious* distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress'.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ *FSUP*, v, pp. 536, 538, 539, 545.

¹¹⁹ See note in *FSUP*, II, p. 150. The source of all extracts from *Fateh-i-Islam* is an English translation of the text as given in *ibid.*, pp. 150–62.

¹²⁰ W. Edwards, *Personal Adventures during the Indian Rebellion in Rohilkhand, Futtchghar & Oude* (London, 1858), p. 176.

¹²¹ Marx, p. 175.

So, the appeal to the feelings of the oppressed and the narration of oppression began with an appeal for the defence of religion under an alien rule. It described the pre-colonial period as an age of religious freedom: 'formerly the Mahomedan Kings protected (as they felt it incumbent on them to do) the lives and property of the Hindoos with their children in the same manner as [they] protected those of the Mahomedans', whereas under British rule, 'the accursed Christians were anxious to make both the Hindoos and the Mahomedans, Christians'.

The alleged plan for conversion to Christianity was given a political meaning: the indictment of the spiritual immorality of the Raj was made into an indictment of its record of secular administration. It was a regime based on tyranny and violence: 'O Brethren! at this present time, the execrable Christians . . . are killing innocent men, plundering their property, setting fire to their houses and shutting up their children in houses, some of which they burn down . . .' The current conflict was interpreted as an episode in a campaign of genocide authorized by the Queen of England. 'Before the quarrel regarding the cartridges took place', read the proclamation

these accursed English had written to the Impure Victoria thus: 'If your Majesty will permit us to kill 15 Moulvees out of every hundred in India and the same number out of every hundred Pundits, as well as five hundred thousand of Hindoo and Mahomedan sepoys and Ryuts, we will in a short time make all the people of India "Christians" '. Then that ill-starred, polluted Bitch gave her consent to the spilling of this innocent blood.

Such direct condemnation of the Queen of England in the most abusive terms sets the *Fateh-i-Islam* apart from other contemporary statements of this genre. 'The good Queen Victoria' who was to figure in popular imagination during some of the peasant rebellions later on in the century was condemned here as 'an ill-starred polluted Bitch'—words which stand for a defiance of the whole chain of British colonial authority from the crown to the common soldier and administrator. If the Maulvi had a hand in drafting this proclamation, his knowledge of England and its institutions might partially explain why the whole structure of colonial authority was put in the dock. If not, the perception in the proclamation implies a total rejection of alien rule, with no distinction made between the Queen and her functionaries.

'To destroy the English' is the religious and political mission

proclaimed by the tract, and all Indians—Hindus and Musalmans, men as well as women—are urged to join in it. However, in this struggle a distinction had to be carefully maintained between enemies and friends. It was 'lawful to plunder the property of the enemy'. But the sepoys had to be prohibited from plundering Indians, 'especially the people of the places' conquered by them. 'Punish immediately the plunderer and cause the plundered property to be restored to its owner'. To direct popular wrath against the enemy and not against the people was a judicious plan for recognizing and handling various types of contradictions which were often forgotten by the insurgents themselves.

Yet another set of distinctions emphasized in the text is that between leaders and followers. The struggle requires leadership: 'It is . . . incumbent on us to appoint a leader or Chief forthwith and to obey his commands for the purpose of destroying the English'. Once a leader is appointed, 'a report of the commencement of a religious war will be spread'. Who should be chosen as a leader? Here the recommendation is clearly sectarian as well as theological: 'any Mahomedan Chief endowed even with a few of the qualities of a leader and observing the tenets of the Mahomedan Law can, as a matter of necessity, be selected as Chief.' And, as far as possible, it was necessary not to interfere with the existing chiefs. Their authority was to be maintained and invoked. Only where no chief was found, the rebels would assert their choice.

The theology of leadership had as a foil to it the notion of a hierarchical order. This leader would 'select other Chiefs among [*sic*] the army', thus making up a chain of hierarchical command from God through King and to Chief and his subordinates to the people. In fact this insistence on leadership and the necessity of accepting the older, traditional chiefs might be a pointer to a certain kind of political concern. For in the course of the struggle, in many cases, various claimants came forth and many different sources of initiative were thrown open. No single chain of any universally acceptable authority had emerged yet. Hence there was an appeal to 'order'. However, that alternative authority was by no means egalitarian. It was to be sustained by a relation of command and obedience between the chief and the subjects, and sacralized by Quranic precepts and Shariat laws. And thus, one could say with Marx, 'the tradition of all the dead generations' was brought to bear 'like a nightmare on the brain of the living'.

Yet, in this very proclamation, in terms of actual action, popular initiative was not altogether forgotten. The experience of the insurrection urged the author to talk of the strength of mass violence against alien rule, and the logic of the upsurge left its imprint on the tradition of order regulated and sanctioned by a hierarchy. In that vision of insurrection everybody was a participant, everybody was his own commander.

all the people whether men, women or children, including slave-girls, slaves and old women, ought to put these accursed English to death by firing guns, carbines and pistols, from the terraces, shooting arrows and pelting them with stones, bricks, earthen vessels, ladles, old shoes and all other things, which may come into their hands. They should stone to death the English in the same manner as the swallows stoned the Chief of the elephants. The sepoys, the nobles, the shopkeepers, the oilmen, etc. and all other people of the city, being of one accord, should make a simultaneous attack upon them, some of them should kill them by firing guns, pistols, and carbines and with swords, arrows, daggers, poignando, etc., some lift them on spears, some dexterously snatch their arms . . . some should cling to their necks, some to their waists, some should wrestle and through strategem break the enemy to pieces; some should strike them with cudgels, some slap them, some throw dust in their eyes, some should beat them with shoes, some attack them with their fists, some scratch them, some drag them along, some tear out their ears, some break their noses . . . Under such circumstances they will be unable to do anything though they may amount to lakhs of men.

The role of the leader thus dissolves in a vision of popular resistance against the English. Initiative, it is suggested, ought to be everybody's, and then would victory be assured. There was on the one hand an implicit faith in the chief, and a demand for absolute obedience to him. On the other hand there was the vision of a popular uprising in which the lowly would also fight. This dual character of the proclamation made it unique. It was the same duality that had informed the prophetic leadership of Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah.

VI. Conclusion

This narrative has of necessity been fragmentary and episodic. Its range is wide and the characters drawn only in outline. Yet this episodic and fragmentary narrative points to the existence in 1857 of what Gramsci has called 'multiple elements of conscious

leadership'¹²² at the popular level. There could be any number of variations in these elements. The Maulvi could not be compared with Gonoo, and Shah Mal's political aspirations were not of the same kind as Devi Singh's. Except for the Maulvi, most of them were bound in their activity within a locality. Because of his relatively longer political experience and the scope of his ideological appeal, the Maulvi had a bigger horizon than the others and could operate on a broader political platform. Devi Singh, Shah Mal and Gonoo lived and fought under very different social and economic conditions. Those differences to an extent conditioned their activities and the nature of mobilization under their leadership. They did not know each other; yet pitted as they were against the same enemy at the same historical moment, they shared, thanks to the logic of insurrection, some common characteristics.

Their leadership was of short duration. They were products of the movement and their influence declined with its recession. Hence an official could say of Shah Mal that out of nothing he had become a leader of importance. Devi Singh had hardly any mark of distinction. Gonoo was a misfit. Of the antecedents of the Maulvi the government knew virtually nothing. The ephemeral appearance and short duration of these rebels' leadership have led academic historians like S.N. Sen to dismiss their intervention in the events of 1857 as 'minor incidents', and soldier-historians like Dunlop to mock them as 'mushroom dignities'.¹²³ But, as this narrative has amply demonstrated, the role of such leaders, far from being incidental, was indeed an integral part of popular insurgency. They asserted themselves through the act of insurgency and took the initiative hitherto denied to them by the dominant classes; and in doing so they put their stamp on the course of the rebellion, thereby breaking the long silence imposed on them politically and culturally by the ruling classes. The suddenness of their rise was an indication that colonial society had been 'unhinged' under the hammer blows of an insurrection.

It is the 'ordinariness' of these rebels which constituted their distinction. Devi Singh could hardly be distinguished from his followers. Shah Mal was a small zamindar among many and Gonoo was a

¹²² A. Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince' in *Prison Note-Books* (New York, 1973), p. 196.

¹²³ S.N. Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-seven* (Delhi, 1957), p. 407; Dunlop, *Khakee Rissalah*, p. 46.

common Kol. Even the Maulvi was hardly a learned man and knew only 'little Arabic and Persian'. The consciousness with which they all fought had been 'formed through everyday experience'; it was an 'elementary historical acquisition'. It was the perception and day-to-day experience of the authority of the alien state in his immediate surroundings that determined the rebel's action. Only the Maulvi could be said to have risen, to an extent, above this immediate experience and particularity, because he had found a comprehensive logic for his actions in the political doctrines of a world religion. Yet all he could do was talk of a jihad and the restoration of the old order led by the chiefs. He had only that within his experience to put forward as an alternative to the all-embracing alien rule. All of our rebels were firmly committed to their cause. It was they who made the thrust of insurgency in 1857 so violent and uncompromising. Yet their partial and empirical understanding of the world necessarily limited the potentiality of that movement.

The recognition of the strength and weakness of these rebels would be a step forward in understanding their role beyond stereotyped categories and formulae. They were not mere adjuncts to a linear tradition that was to culminate in the appropriation of power by the élite in a post-colonial state. Nor were they mere toys manipulated by the latter in a historical project in which they played no part. Nor can they be merely described as faceless elements in an omnibus category called 'the people'. To seek after and restore the specific subjectivity of the rebels must be a major task of the new historiography. That would be a recognition of the truth that, under the given historical circumstances in which he lives, man makes himself.