The Prose of Counter-Insurgency[1]

RANAJIT GUHA

I

When a peasant rose in revolt at any time or place under the Raj, he did so necessarily and explicitly in violation of a series of codes which defined his very existence as a member of that colonial, and still largely semi-feudal society. For his subalternity was materialized by the structure of property, institutionalized by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable—and even desirable—by tradition. To rebel was indeed to destroy many of those familiar signs which he had learned to read and manipulate in order to extract a meaning out of the harsh world around him and live with it. The risk in 'turning things upside down' under these conditions was indeed so great that he could hardly afford to engage in such a project in a state of absent-mindedness.

There is nothing in the primary sources of historical evidence to suggest anything other than this. These give the lie to the myth, retailed so often by careless and impressionistic writing on the subject, of peasant insurrections being purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs. The truth is quite to the contrary. It would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms. In events so very different from each other in context, character and the composition of participants such as the Rangpur *dhing* against Debi Sinha (1783), the Barasat *bidroha* led by Titu Mir (1831), the Santal *hool* (1855) and the 'blue mutiny' of 1860 the

[1] I am grateful to my colleagues of the editorial team for their comments on an initial draft of this essay.

Note: For a list of Abbreviations used in the footnotes of this chapter, see p. 40.

protagonists in each case had tried out petitions, deputations or other forms of supplication before actually declaring war on their oppressors.[2] Again, the revolts of the Kol (1832), the Santal and the Munda (1899-1900) as well as the Rangpur *dhing* and the jacqueries in Allahabad and Ghazipur districts during the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857-8 (to name only two out of many instances in that remarkable series) had all been inaugurated by planned and in some cases protracted consultation among the representatives of the local peasant masses.[3] Indeed there is hardly an instance of the peasantry, whether the cautious and earthy villagers of the plains or the supposedly more volatile *adivasis* of the upland tracts, stumbling or drifting into rebellion. They had far too much at stake and would not launch into it except as a deliberate, even if desperate, way out of an intolerable condition of existence. Insurgency, in other words, was a motivated and conscious undertaking on the part of the rural masses.

Yet this consciousness seems to have received little notice in the literature on the subject. Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history. Even when this historiography is pushed to the point of producing an explanation in rather more human terms it will do so by assuming an identity of nature and culture, a hall-mark, presumably, of a very low state of civilization and exemplified in 'those periodical outbursts of crime and lawlessness to which all wild tribes are subject', as the first historian of the Chuar rebellion put it.[4]

[2] The instances are far too numerous to cite. For some of these see *MDS*, pp. 46-7, 48-9 on the Rangpur *dhing*; *BC* 54222: Metcalfe & Blunt to Court of Directors (10 April 1832), paras 14-15 on the Barasat uprising; W. W. Hunter, *Annals of Rural Bengal* (7th edition; London, 1897), pp. 237-8 and JP, 4 Oct. 1855: 'The Thacoor's Perwannah' for the Santal *hool* C. E. Buckland, *Bengal Under the Lieutenant-Governors*, vol. I (Calcutta, 1901), p. 192 for the 'blue mutiny'.

[3] See, for instance, *MDS*, pp. 579-80; *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, vol.IV (Lucknow, 1959), pp. 284-5, 549.

[4] J. C. Price, *The Chuar Rebellion of 1799*, p. *cl*. The edition of the work used in this essay is the one printed in A. Mitra (ed.), *District Handbooks: Midnapur* (Alipore, 1953), Appendix IV.

Alternatively, an explanation will be sought in an enumeration of causes—of, say, factors of economic and political deprivation which do not relate at all to the peasant's consciousness or do so negatively—triggering off rebellion as a sort of reflex action, that is, as an instinctive and almost mindless response to physical suffering of one kind or another (e.g. hunger, torture, forced labour, etc.) or as a passive reaction to some initiative of his superordinate enemy. Either way insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant's consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.

II

How did historiography come to acquire this particular blind spot and never find a cure? For an answer one could start by having a close look at its constituting elements and examine those cuts, seams and stitches—those cobbling marks—which tell us about the material it is made of and the manner of its absorption into the fabric of writing.

The corpus of historical writings on peasant insurgency in colonial India is made up of three types of discourse. These may be described as *primary*, *secondary* and *tertiary* according to the order of their appearance in time and their filiation. Each of these is differentiated from the other two by the degree of its formal and/or acknowledged (as opposed to real and/or tacit) identification with an official point of view, by the measure of its distance from the event to which it refers, and by the ratio of the distributive and integrative components in its narrative.

To begin with primary discourse, it is almost without exception official in character—official in a broad sense of the term. That is, it originated not only with bureaucrats, soldiers, sleuths and others directly employed by the government, but also with those in the non-official sector who were symbiotically related to the Raj, such as planters, missionaries, traders, technicians and so on among the whites and landlords, moneylenders, etc. among the natives. It was official also in so far as it was meant primarily for administrative use—for the information of government, for action on its part and for the determination of its policy. Even when it incorporated statements emanating from 'the other side', from the insurgents or their allies for instance, as it often did by way of direct or indirect reporting in the body of official correspondence or even more characteristically as 'enclosures' to the latter, this was done only as a part of an

argument prompted by administrative concern. In other words, whatever its particular form—and there was indeed an amazing variety ranging from the exordial letter, telegram, despatch and communiqué to the terminal summary, report, judgement and proclamation—its production and circulation were both necessarily contingent on reasons of State.

Yet another of the distinctive features of this type of discourse is its immediacy. This derived from two conditions: first, that statements of this class were written either concurrently with or soon after the event, and secondly, that this was done by the participants concerned, a 'participant' being defined for this purpose in the broad sense of a contemporary involved in the event either in action or indirectly as an onlooker. This would exclude of course that genre of retrospective writing in which, as in some memoirs, an event and its recall are separated by a considerable hiatus, but would still leave a massive documentation—'primary sources' as it is known in the trade—to speak to the historian with a sort of ancestral voice and make him feel close to his subject.

The two specimens quoted below are fairly representative of this type. One of these relates to the Barasat uprising of 1831 and the other to the Santal rebellion of 1855.

TEXT 1[5]

To the Deputy Adjutant General of the Army

Sir,

Authentic information having reached Government that a body of *Fanatic Insurgents* are now committing *the most daring and wanton atrocities on the Inhabitants* of the Country in the neighbourhood of Tippy in the Magistracy of Baraset and have set at defiance and repulsed the utmost force that the local Civil Authority could assemble for their apprehension, I am directed by the Hon'ble Vice President in Council to request that you will without delay Communicate to the General Officer Commanding the Presidency Division the orders of Government that one Complete Battalion of Native Infantry from Barrackpore and two Six Pounders manned with the necessary compliment (sic) of Golundaze from Dum Dum, the whole under the Command of a Field Officer of judgement and decision, be immediately directed to proceed

[5] *BC* 54222: *JC*, 22 Nov. 1831: 'Extract from the Proceedings of the Honorable the Vice President in Council in the Military Department under date the 10th November 1831'. Emphasis added.

and rendezvous at Baraset when they will be joined by 1 Havildar and 12 Troopers of the 3rd Regiment of Light Cavalry now forming the escort of the Hon'ble the Vice President.

2nd. The Magistrate will meet the Officer Commanding the Detachment at Barraset and will afford the necessary information for his guidance relative to the position of the Insurgents; but without having any authority to interfere in such Military operations as the Commanding Officer of the Detachments may deem expedient, for the purpose of routing or seizing or in the event of resistance destroying those who persevere in *defying the authority of the State* and *disturbing the public tranquil*[l]ity.

3rd. It is concluded that the service will not be of such a protracted nature as to require a larger supply of ammunition than may be carried in Pouch and in two Tumbrils for the Guns, and that no difficulties will occur respecting carriage. In the contrary event any aid needed will be furnished.

4th. The Magistrate will be directed to give every assistance regarding supplies and other requisites for the Troops.

Council Chamber — I am & ca

10th November 1831 — (Sd.) Wm. Casement Coll.

Secy. to Govt. Mily. Dept.

TEXT

From W. C. Taylor Esqre.

To F. S. Mudge Esqre.

Dated 7th July 1855

My dear Mudge,

There is a great gathering of Sontals 4 or 5000 men at a place about 8 miles off and I understand that they are all well armed with Bows and arrows, Tulwars, Spears & ca. and that *it is their intention to attack all the Europeans round and plunder and murder them. The cause of all this is that one of their Gods is supposed to have taken the Flesh and to have made his appearance at*

[6] *JP*, 19 July 1855: Enclosure to letter from the Magistrate of Murshidabad, dated 11 July 1855. Emphasis added.

some place near this, and that it is his intention to reign as a King over all this part of India, and has ordered the Sontals to collect and put to death all the Europeans and influential Natives round. As this is the nearest point to the gathering I suppose it will be first attacked and think it would be best for you to send notice to the authorities at Berhampore and ask for military aid as *it is not at all a nice look out being murdered* and as far as I can make out this is a *rather serious affair*.

Sreecond — Yours & ca

7th July 1855 — /Signed/ W. C. Taylor

Nothing could be more immediate than these texts. Written as soon as these events were acknowledged as rebellion by those who had the most to fear from it, they are among the very first records we have on them in the collections of the India Office Library and the West Bengal State Archives. As the evidence on the 1831 *bidroha* shows,[7] it was not until 10 November that the Calcutta authorities came to recognize the violence reported from the Barasat region for what it was—a full-blooded insurrection led by Titu Mir and his men. Colonel Casement's letter identifies for us that moment when the hitherto unknown leader of a local peasantry entered the lists against the Raj and thereby made his way into history. The date of the other document too commemorates a beginning—that of the Santal *hool*. It was on that very day, 7 July 1855, that the assassination of Mahesh daroga following an encounter between his police and peasants gathered at Bhagnadihi detonated the uprising. The report was loud enough to register in that note scribbled in obvious alarm at Sreecond by an European employee of the East India Railway for the benefit of his colleague and the *sarkar*. Again, these are words that convey as directly as possible the impact of a peasant revolt on its enemies in its first sanguinary hours.

III

None of this instantaneousness percolates through to the next level—that of the secondary discourse. The latter draws on primary discourse as *matériel* but transforms it at the same time. To contrast the two types one could think of the first as historiography in a raw, primordial state or as an embryo yet to be articulated into an organism with

[7] Thus, *BC* 54222: *JC*, 3 Apr. 1832: Alexander to Barwell (28 Nov. 1831).

discrete limbs, and the second as the processed product, however crude the processing, a duly constituted if infant discourse.

The difference is quite obviously a function of time. In the chronology of this particular corpus the secondary follows the primary at a distance and opens up a perspective to turn an event into history in the perception not only of those outside it but of the participants as well. It was thus that Mark Thornhill, Magistrate of Mathura during the summer of 1857 when a mutiny of the Treasury Guard sparked off jacqueries all over the district, was to reflect on the altered status of his own narrative in which he figured as a protagonist himself. Introducing his well-known memoirs, *The Personal Adventures And Experiences Of A Magistrate During The Rise, Progress, And Suppression Of The Indian Mutiny* (London, 1884) twenty-seven years after the event he wrote:

> After the suppression of the Indian Mutiny, I commenced to write an account of my adventures . . . by the time my narrative was completed, the then interest of the public in the subject was exhausted. Years have since passed, and an interest of another kind has arisen. The events of that time have become history, and to that history my story may prove a contribution . . . I have therefore resolved to publish my narrative . . .

Shorn of contemporaneity a discourse is thus recovered as an element of the past and classified as history. This change, aspectual as well as categorial, sites it at the very intersection of colonialism and historiography, endowing it with a duplex character linked at the same time to a system of power and the particular manner of its representation.

Its authorship is in itself witness to this intersection and Thornhill was by no means the only administrator turned historian. He was indeed one of many officials, civilian and military, who wrote retrospectively on popular disturbances in rural India under the Raj. Their statements, taken together, fall into two classes. First, there were those which were based on the writers' own experience as participants. Memoirs of one kind or another these were written either at a considerable delay after the events narrated or almost concurrently with them but intended, unlike primary discourse, for a public readership. The latter, an important distinction, shows how the colonialist mind managed to serve Clio and counter-insurgency at the same time so that the presumed neutrality of one could have hardly been left unaffected by the passion of the other, a point to

which we shall soon return. Reminiscences of both kinds abound in the literature on the Mutiny, which dealt with the violence of the peasantry (especially in the North Western Provinces and central India) no less than with that of the sepoys. Accounts such as Thornhill's written long after the event, were matched by near contemporary ones such as Dunlop's *Service and Adventure with Khakee Ressallah;* or *Meerut Volunteer Horse during the Mutinies of 1857-58* (London, 1858) and Edwards' *Personal Adventures during the Indian Rebellion in Rohilcund, Futtehghur, and Oudh* (London 1858) to mention only two out of a vast outcrop intended to cater for a public who could not have enough of tales of horror and glory.

The other class of writings to qualify as secondary discourse is also the work of administrators. They too addressed themselves to a predominantly non-official readership but on themes not directly related to their own experience. Their work includes some of the most widely used and highly esteemed accounts of peasant uprisings written either as monographs on particular events, such as Jamini Mohan Ghosh's on the Sannyasi-and-Faqir disturbances and J. C. Price's on the Chuar Rebellion, or as statements included in more comprehensive histories like W. W. Hunter's story of the Santal *hool* in *The Annals of Rural Bengal.* Apart from these there were those distinguished contributions made by some of the best minds in the Civil Service to the historical chapters of the *District Gazetteers.* Altogether they constitute a substantial body of writing which enjoys much authority with all students of the subject and there is hardly any historiography at the next, that is, tertiary level of discourse that does not rely on these for sustenance.

The prestige of this genre is to no mean extent due to the aura of impartiality it has about it. By keeping their narrative firmly beyond the pale of personal involvement these authors managed, if only by implication, to confer on it a semblance of truth. As officials they were carriers of the will of the state no doubt. But since they wrote about a past in which they did not figure as functionaries themselves, their statements are taken to be more authentic and less biased than those of their opposite numbers whose accounts, based on reminiscences, were necessarily contaminated by their intervention in rural disturbances as agents of the Raj. By contrast the former are believed to have approached the narrated events from the outside. As observers separated clinically from the site and subject of diagnosis they are

supposed to have found for their discourse a niche in that realm of perfect neutrality—the realm of History—over which the Aorist and the Third Person preside.

IV

How valid is this claim to neutrality? For an answer we may not take any bias for granted in this class of historical work from the mere fact of its origin with authors committed to colonialism. To take that as self-evident would be to deny historiography the possibility of acknowledging its own inadequacies and thus defeat the purpose of the present exercise. As should be clear from what follows, it is precisely by refusing to *prove* what appears as obvious that historians of peasant insurgency remain trapped—in the obvious. Criticism must therefore start not by naming a bias but by examining the components of the discourse, vehicle of all ideology, for the manner in which these might have combined to describe any particular figure of the past.

The components of both types of discourse and their varieties discussed so far are what we shall call segments. Made up of the same linguistic material, that is strings of words of varying lengths, they are of two kinds which may be designated, according to their function, as indicative and interpretative. A gross differentiation, this is meant to assign to them, within a given text, the role respectively of reporting and explaining. This however does not imply their mutual segregation. On the contrary they are often found embedded in each other not merely as a matter of fact but of necessity.

One can see in *Texts 1* and *2* how such imbrication works. In both of them the straight print stands for the indicative segments and the italics for the interpretative. Laid out according to no particular pattern in either of these letters they interpenetrate and sustain each other in order to give the documents their meaning, and in the process endow some of the strings with an ambiguity that is inevitably lost in this particular manner of typographical representation. However, the rough outline of a division of functions between the two classes emerges even from this schema—the indicative stating (that is reporting) the actual and anticipated actions of the rebels and their enemies, and the interpretative commenting on them in order to understand (that is to explain) their significance.

The difference between them corresponds to that between the two

basic components of any historical discourse which, following Roland Barthes' terminology, we shall call *functions* and *indices*.[8] The former are segments that make up the linear sequence of a narrative. Contiguous, they operate in a relation of solidarity in the sense of mutually implying each other and add up to increasingly larger strings which combine to produce the aggregative statement. The latter may thus be regarded as a sum of micro-sequences to each of which, however important or otherwise, it should be possible to assign names by a metalinguistic operation using terms that may or may not belong to the text under consideration. It is thus that the functions of a folk-tale have been named by Bremond, after Propp, as *Fraud, Betrayal, Struggle, Contract,* etc. and those of a triviality such as the offer of a cigarette in a James Bond story designated by Barthes as *offering, accepting, lighting,* and *smoking*. One may perhaps take a cue from this procedure to define a historical statement as a discourse with a name subsuming a given number of named sequences. Hence it should be possible to speak of a hypothetical narrative called 'The Insurrection of Titu Mir' made up of a number of sequences including *Text 1* quoted above.

Let us give this document a name and call it, say, *Calcutta Council Acts*. (Alternatives such as *Outbreak of Violence* or *Army Called Up* should also do and be analysable in terms corresponding to, though not identical with, those which follow.) In broad terms the message *Calcutta Council Acts (C)* in our text can be read as a combination of two groups of sequences called *alarm* (a) and *intervention* (b), each of which is made up of a pair of segments—the former of *insurrection breaks out* (a′) and *information received* (a″) and the latter of *decision to call up army* (b′) and *order issued* (b″), one of the constituents in each pair being represented in its turn by yet another linked series—(a′) by *atrocities committed* (a_1) and *authority defied* (a_2), and (b″) by *infantry to proceed* (b_1), *artillery to support* (b_2) and *magistrate to co-operate* (b_3). In other words the narrative in this document can be written up in three equivalent steps so that

[8] My debt to Roland Barthes for many of the analytic terms and procedures used in this section and generally throughout this essay should be far too obvious to all familiar with his 'Structural Analysis of Narratives' and 'The Struggle with the Angel' in Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (Glasgow, 1977), pp. 79-141, and 'Historical Discourse' in M. Lane (ed.), *Structuralism, A Reader* (London, 1970), pp. 145-55, to require detailed reference except where I quote directly from this literature.

$$C \equiv (a+b) \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots \text{ I}$$
$$\equiv (a'+a'')+(b'+b'') \ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots \text{ II}$$
$$\equiv (a_1+a_2)+a''+b'+(b_1+b_2+b_3) \ldots\ldots\ldots \text{ III}$$

It should be clear from this arrangement that not all the elements of step II can be expressed in micro-sequences of the same order. Hence we are left at step III with a concatenation in which segments drawn from different levels of the discourse are imbricated to constitute a roughly hewn and uneven structure. In so far as functional units of the lowest denomination like these are what a narrative has as its syntagmatic relata its course can never be smooth. The hiatus between the loosely cobbled segments is necessarily charged with uncertainty, with 'moments of risk' and every micro-sequence terminates by opening up alternative possibilities only one of which is picked up by the next sequence as it carries on with the story. 'Du Pont, Bond's future partner, offers him a light from his lighter but Bond refuses; the meaning of this bifurcation is that Bond instinctively fears a booby-trapped gadget.'[9] What Barthes identifies thus as 'bifurcation' in fiction, has its parallels in historical discourse as well. The alleged commitment of atrocities (a_1) in that official despatch of 1831 cancels out the belief in the peaceful propagation of Titu's new doctrine which had already been known to the authorities but ignored so far as inconsequential. The expression, *authority defied* (a_2), which refers to the rebels having 'set at defiance and repulsed the utmost force that the local Civil Authority could assemble for their apprehension', has as its other if unstated term his efforts to persuade the Government by petition and deputation to offer redress for the grievances of his co-religionists. And so on. Each of these elementary functional units thus implies a node which has not quite materialized into an actual development, a sort of zero sign by means of which the narrative affirms its tension. And precisely because history as the verbal representation by man of his own past is by its very nature so full of hazard, so replete indeed with the verisimilitude of sharply differentiated choices, that it never ceases to excite. The historical discourse is the world's oldest thriller.

V

Sequential analysis thus shows a narrative to be a concatenation of

[9] Barthes, *Images-Music-Text*, p. 102.

not so closely aligned functional units. The latter are dissociative in their operation and emphasize the analytic rather than the synthetic aspect of a discourse. As such they are not what, by themselves, generate its meaning. Just as the sense of a word (e.g. 'man') is not fractionally represented in each of the letters (e.g. M, A, N) which make up its graphic image nor of a phrase (e.g. 'once upon a time') in its constituting words taken separately, so also the individual segments of a discourse cannot on their own tell us what it signifies. Meaning in each instance is the work of a process of integration which complements that of sequential articulation. As Benveniste has put it, in any language 'it is dissociation which divulges to us its formal constitution and integration its signifying units'.[10]

This is true of the language of history as well. The integrative operation is carried out in its discourse by the other class of basic narrative units, that is, *indices*. A necessary and indispensable correlate of *functions* they are distinguished from the latter in some important respects:

> Indices, because of the vertical nature of their relations are truly semantic units: unlike 'functions' . . . they refer to a signified, not to an 'operation'. The ratification of indices is 'higher up' . . . a paradigmatic ratification. That of functions, by contrast, is always 'further on', is a syntagmatic ratification. *Functions* and *indices* thus overlay another classic distinction: functions involve metonymic relata, indices metaphoric relata; the former correspond to a functionality of doing, the latter to a functionality of being.[11]

The vertical intervention of indices in a discourse is possible because of the disruption of its linearity by a process corresponding to dystaxia in the behaviour of many natural languages. Bally who has studied this phenomenon in much detail finds that one of several conditions of its occurrence in French is 'when parts of the same sign are separated' so that the expression, 'elle a pardonné' taken in the negative, is splintered and re-assembled as 'elle *ne nous a jamais plus pardonné*'.[12]

[10] Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale, I* (Paris, 1966), p. 126. The original, 'la dissociation nous livre la constitution formelle; l'intégration nous livre des unités signifiantes', has been rendered somewhat differently and I feel, less happily, in the English translation of the work, *Problems in General Linguistics* (Florida, 1971), p. 107.

[11] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p. 93.

[12] Charles Bally, *Linguistique Générale et Linguistique Française* (Berne, 1965), p. 144.

Similarly the simple predicative in Bengali 'shé jābé' can be re-written by the insertion of an interrogative or a string of negative conditionals between the two words to produce respectively 'shé *ki* jābé' and 'shé *nā hoy nā* jābé'.

In a historical narrative too it is a process of 'distension and expansion' of its syntagm which helps paradigmatic elements to infiltrate and reconstitute its discrete segments into a meaningful whole. It is precisely thus that the co-ordination of the metonymic and metaphorical axes is brought about in a statement and the necessary interaction of its functions and indices actualized. However these units are not distributed in equal proportions in all texts: some have a greater incidence of one kind than of the other. As a result a discourse could be either predominantly metonymic or metaphorical depending on whether a significantly larger number of its components are syntagmatically ratified or paradigmatically.[13] Our *Text I* is of the first type. One can see the formidable and apparently impenetrable array of its metonymic relata in step III of the sequential analysis given above. Here at last we have the perfect authentication of the idiot's view of history as one damn'd thing after another: *rising - information - decision - order*. However, a closer look at the text can detect chinks which have allowed 'comment', to worm its way through the plate armour of 'fact'. The italicized expressions are witness to this paradigmatic intervention and indeed its measure. Indices, they play the role of *adjectives* or *epithets* as opposed to verbs which, to speak in terms of homology between sentence and narrative, is the role of functions.[14] Working intimately together with the latter they make the despatch into more than a mere register of happenings and help to inscribe into it a meaning, an interpretation so that the protagonists emerge from it not as peasants but as *'Insurgents'*, not as Musalman but as *'fanatic'*; their action not as resistance to the tyranny of the rural elite but as *'the most daring and wanton atrocities on the inhabitants'*; their project not as a revolt against zamindari but as *'defying the authority of the State'*, not as a search for an alternative order in which the peace of the countryside would not be violated by the officially condoned anarchy of semi-feudal landlordism but as, *'disturbing the public tranquil*[l]*ity'*.

If the intervention of indices 'substitutes meaning for the straight-

[13] Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (London, 1967), p. 60.

[14] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p. 128.

forward copy of the events recounted,[15] in a text so charged with metonymy as the one discussed above, it may be trusted to do so to an even greater degree in discourses which are predominantly metaphorical. This should be evident from *Text 2* where the element of comment, italicized by us, largely outweighs that of report. If the latter is represented as a concatenation of three functional sequences, namely, *armed Santals gathering, authorities to be alerted* and *military aid requested*, it can be seen how the first of these has been separated from the rest by the insertion of a large chunk of explanatory material and how the others too are enveloped and sealed off by comment. The latter is inspired by the fear that Sreecond being *'the nearest point to the gathering . . . will be first attacked'* and of course *'it is not at all a nice look out being murdered'*. Notice, however, that this fear justifies itself *politically*, that is, by imputing to the Santals an *'intention to attack . . . plunder . . . and put to death all the Europeans and influential Natives'* so that *'one of their Gods'* in human form may *'reign as a King over all this part of India'*. Thus, this document is not neutral in its attitude to the events witnessed and put up as 'evidence' before the court of history it can hardly be expected to testify with impartiality. On the contrary it is the voice of committed colonialism. It has already made a choice between the prospect of Santal self-rule in Damin-i-Koh and the continuation of the British Raj and identifies what is allegedly good for the promotion of one as fearsome and catastrophic for the other—as *'a rather serious affair'*. In other words the indices in this discourse—as well as in the one discussed above—introduce us to a particular code so constituted that for each of its signs we have an antonym, a counter-message, in another code. To borrow a binary representation made famous by Mao Tse-tung,[16] the reading, *'It's terrible!'* for any element in one must show up in the other as *'It's fine!'* for a corresponding element and vice versa. To put this clash of codes graphically one can arrange the indices italicized below of *Texts 1* and *2* in a matrix called 'TERRIBLE' (in conformity to the adjectival attribute of units of this class) in such a way as to indicate their mapping into the implied, though unstated terms (given in straight types) of a corresponding matrix 'FINE'.

[15] Ibid., p. 119

[16] *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, vol. I (Peking, 1967), pp. 26-7.

TERRIBLE	FINE
Insurgents	peasants
fanatic	Islamic puritan
daring and wanton atrocities on the Inhabitants	resistance to oppression
defying the authority of the State	revolt against zamindari
disturbing the public tranquil(l)ity	struggle for a better order
intention to attack, etc	intention to punish oppressors
one of their Gods to reign as a King	Santal self-rule

What comes out of the interplay of these mutually implied but opposed matrices is that our texts are not the record of observations uncontaminated by bias, judgement and opinion. On the contrary, they speak of a total complicity. For if the expressions in the right-hand column taken together may be said to stand for insurgency, the code which contains all signifiers of the subaltern practice of 'turning things upside down' and the consciousness that informs it, then the other column must stand for its opposite, that is, counter-insurgency. The antagonism between the two is irreducible and there is nothing in this to leave room for neutrality. Hence these documents make no sense except in terms of a code of pacification which, under the Raj, was a complex of coercive intervention by the State and its protégés, the native elite, with arms and words. Representatives of the primary type of discourse in the historiography of peasant revolts, these are specimens of the prose of counter-insurgency.

VI

How far does secondary discourse too share such commitment? Is it possible for it to speak any other prose than that of a counter-insurgency? Those narratives of this category in which their authors figure among the protagonists are of course suspect almost by definition, and the presence of the grammatical first person in these must be acknowledged as a sign of complicity. The question however is whether the loss of objectivity on this account is adequately made up by the consistent use of the aorist in such writings. For as Benveniste observes, the historical utterance admits of three variations of the past tense—that is, the aorist, the imperfect and the pluperfect, and of course the present is altogether excluded.[17] This condition is

[17] Benveniste, op. cit., p. 239.

indeed satisfied by reminiscences separated by a long enough hiatus from the events concerned. What has to be found out therefore is the extent to which the force of the preterite corrects the bias caused by the absence of the third person.

Mark Thornhill's memoirs of the Mutiny provide us with a text in which the author looks back at a series of events he had experienced twenty-seven years ago. 'The events of that time' had 'turned into history', and he intends, as he says in the extract quoted above, to make a contribution 'to that history', and thus produce what we have defined as a particular kind of secondary discourse. The difference inscribed in it by that interval is perhaps best grasped by comparing it with some samples of primary discourse we have on the same subject from the same author. Two of these[18] may be read together as a record of his perception of what happened at the Mathura sadar station and the surrounding countryside between 14 May and 3 June 1857. Written by him donning the district magistrate's topee and addressed to his superiors—one on 5 June 1857, that is, within forty-eight hours of the terminal date of the period under discussion, and the other on 10 August 1858 when the events were still within vivid recall as a very recent past—these letters coincide in scope with that of the narrative covering the same three weeks in the first ninety pages of his book written nearly three decades later donning the historian's hat.

The letters are both predominantly metonymic in character. Originating as they did almost from within the related experience itself they are necessarily foreshortened and tell the reader in breathless sequences about some of the happenings of that extraordinary summer. The syntagm thus takes on a semblance of factuality with hardly any room in it for comment. Yet here again the welding of the functional units can be seen, on close inspection, to be less solid than at first sight. Embedded in them there are indices revealing the anxieties of the local custodian of law and order ('the state of the district generally is such as to *defy all control*';'the *law* is at a *standstill*'), his fears ('*very alarming* rumours of the approach of the rebel army'), his moral disapprobation of the activities of the armed villagers ('the disturbances in the district . . . increasing . . . in . . . *enormity*'), his appreciation by contrast of the native collaborators hostile to the

[18] *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, vol. V, pp. 685-92.

insurgents ('. . . 'the Seths' house . . . *received us most kindly*'). Indices such as these are ideological birth-marks displayed prominently on much of this type of material relating to peasant revolts. Indeed, taken together with some other relevant textual features—e.g. the abrupt mode of address in these documents so revealing of the shock and terror generated by the *émeute*—they accuse all such allegedly 'objective' evidence on the militancy of the rural masses to have been tainted at its source by the prejudice and partisan outlook of their enemies. If historians fail to take notice of these tell-tale signs branded on the staple of their trade, that is a fact which must be explained in terms of the optics of a colonialist historiography rather than construed in favour of the presumed objectivity of their 'primary sources'.

There is nothing immediate or abrupt about the corresponding secondary discourse. On the contrary it has various perspectives built into it to give it a depth in time and following from this temporal determination, its meaning. Compare for instance the narration of events in the two versions for any particular day—for, say, 14 May 1857 at the very beginning of our three-week period. Written up in a very short paragraph of fifty-seven words in Thornhill's letter of 10 August 1858 this can be represented fully in four pithy segments without any significant loss of message: *mutineers approaching; information received from Gurgaon; confirmed by Europeans north of the district; women and non-combattants sent off to Agra.* Since the account starts, for all practical purposes, with this entry, there are no exordia to serve as its context, giving this instant take-off the sense, as we have noticed, of a total surprise. In the book however that same instant is provided with a background spread over four and a half months and three pages (pp. 1-3). All of this time and space is devoted to some carefully chosen details of the author's life and experience in the period preceding the Mutiny. These are truly *significant*. As indices they prepare the reader for what is to come and help him to *understand* the happenings of 14 May and after, when these enter into the narrative at staggered stages. Thus the mysterious circulation of chapatis in January and the silent but expressive concern on the narrator's brother, a high official, over a telegram received at Agra on 12 May conveying the still unconfirmed news of the Meerut uprising, portend the developments two days later at his own district headquarters. Again the trivia about his 'large income and great authority', his house, horses, servants, 'a chest full of silver plate,

which stood in the hall and . . . a great store of Cashmere shawls, pearls, and diamonds' all help to index, by contrast, the holocaust which was soon to reduce his authority to nothing, and turn his servants into rebels, his house into a shambles, his property into booty for the plundering poor of town and country. By anticipating the narrated events thus, if only by implication, secondary discourse destroys the entropy of the first, its raw material. Henceforth there will be nothing in the story that can be said to be altogether unexpected.

This effect is the work of the so-called 'organization shifters'[19] which help the author to superimpose a temporality of his own on that of his theme, that is 'to "dechronologize" the historical thread and restore, if only by way of reminiscence or nostalgia, a Time at once complex, parametric, and non-linear . . . braiding the chronology of the subject-matter with that of the language-act which reports it'. In the present instance the 'braiding' consists not only in fitting an evocative context to the bare sequence related in that short paragraph of his letter. The shifters disrupt the syntagm twice to insert in the breach, on both occasions, a moment of authorial time suspended between the two poles of 'waiting', a figure ideally constituted to allow the play of digressions, asides and parentheses forming loops and zigzags in a story-line and adding thereby to its depth. Thus, waiting for news about the movements of the mutineers he reflects on the peace of the early evening at the sadar station and strays from his account to tell us in violation of the historiographical canon of tense and person: 'The scene was simple and full of the repose of Eastern life. In the times that followed it often recurred to my memory.' And, again, waiting later on for transport to take away the evacuees gathered in his drawing room, he withdraws from that particular night for the duration of a few words to comment: 'It was a beautiful room, brightly lighted, gay with flowers. It was the last time I thus saw it, and so it remains impressed on my memory.'

How far does the operation of these shifters help to correct the bias resulting from the writer's intervention in the first person? Not much by this showing. For each of the indices wedged into the narrative represents a principled choice between the terms of a paradigmatic

[19] For Roman Jakobson's exposition of this key concept, see his *Selected Writings, 2: Word and Language* (The Hague and Paris, 1971), pp. 130-47. Barthes develops the notion of organization shifters in his essay 'Historical Discourse', pp. 146-8. All extracts quoted in this paragraph are taken from that essay unless otherwise mentioned.

opposition. Between the authority of the head of the district and its defiance by the armed masses, between the habitual servility of his menials and their assertion of self-respect as rebels, between the insignia of his wealth and power (e.g. gold, horses, shawls, bungalow) and their appropriation or destruction by the subaltern crowds, the author, hardly differentiated from the administrator that he was twenty-seven years ago, consistently chooses the former. Nostalgia makes the choice all the more eloquent—a recall of what is thought to be 'fine' such as a peaceful evening or an elegant room emphasizing by contrast the 'terrible' aspects of popular violence directed against the Raj. Quite clearly there is a logic to this preference. It affirms itself by negating a series of inversions which, combined with other signs of the same order, constitute a code of insurgency. The pattern of the historian's choice, identical with the magistrate's, conforms thus to a counter-code, the code of counter-insurgency.

VII

If the neutralizing effect of the aorist fails thus to prevail over the subjectivity of the protagonist as narrator in this particular genre of secondary discourse, how does the balance of tense and person stand in the other kind of writing within the same category? One can see two distinct idioms at work here, both identified with the standpoint of colonialism but unlike each other in expressing it. The cruder variety is well exemplified in *The Chuar Rebellion of 1799* by J. C. Price. Written long after the event, in 1874, it was obviously meant by the author, Settlement Officer of Midnapur at the time, to serve as a straightforward historical account with no particular administrative end in view. He addressed it to 'the casual reader' as well as to any 'future Collector of Midnapore', hoping to share with both 'that keen interest which I have felt as I have read the old Midnapore records'.[20] But the author's 'delight . . . experienced in pouring over these papers' seems to have produced a text almost indistinguishable from the primary discourse used as its source. The latter is, for one thing, conspicuous by its sheer physical presence. Over a fifth of that half of the book which deals specifically with the events of 1799 is made up of direct quotations from those records and another large part of barely modified extracts. More important for us, however, is the evidence we have of the author's identification of his own senti-

[20] Price, op. cit., p. *clx*.

ments with those of that small group of whites who were reaping the whirlwind produced by the wind of a violently disruptive change the Company's Government had sown in the south-western corner of Bengal. Only the fear of the beleaguered officials at Midnapur station in 1799 turns seventy-five years later into that genocidal hatred characteristic of a genre of post-Mutiny British writing. 'The disinclination of the authorities, civil or military, to proceed in person to help to quell the disturbances is most striking', he writes shaming his compatriots and then goes on to brag:

> In these days of breech-loaders half a dozen Europeans would have been a match for twenty times their number of Chuars. Of course with the imperfect nature of the weapons of that day it could not be expected that Europeans would fruitlessly rush into danger, but I should have expected that the European officers of the station would have in some instances at least courted and met an attack in person and repulsed their assailants. I wonder that no one European officer, civilian or military, with the exception of perhaps Lieutenant Gill, owned to that sensation of joyous excitement most young men feel now-a-days in field sports, or in any pursuit where there is an element of danger. I think most of us, had we lived in 1799, would have counted it better sport had we bagged a marauding Chuar reeking with blood and spoils, than the largest bear that the Midnapore jungles can produce.[21]

Quite clearly the author's separation from his subject-matter and the difference between the time of the event and that of its narration here have done little to inspire objectivity in him. His passion is apparently of the same order as that of the British soldier who wrote on the eve of the sack of Delhi in 1857: 'I most sincerely trust that the order given when we attack Delhi will be. . . "Kill every one; no quarter is to be given" '.[22] The historian's attitude to rebels is in this instance indistinguishable from that of the State—the attitude of the hunter to his quarry. Regarded thus an insurgent is not a subject of understanding or interpretation but of extermination, and the discourse of history, far from being neutral, serves directly to instigate official violence.

There were however other writers working within the same genre who are known to have expressed themselves in a less

[21] Ibid.

[22] Reginald G. Wilberforce, *An Unrecorded Chapter of the Indian Mutiny* (2nd edition; London, 1894), pp. 76-7.

sanguinary idiom. They are perhaps best represented by W. W. Hunter and his account of the Santal insurrection of 1855 in *The Annals of Rural Bengal*. It is, in many respects, a remarkable text. Written within a decade of the Mutiny and twelve years of the *hool*,[23] it has none of that revanchist and racist overtone common to a good deal of Anglo-Indian literature of the period. Indeed the author treats the enemies of the Raj not only with consideration but with respect although they had wiped it off from three eastern districts in a matter of weeks and held out for five months against the combined power of the colonial army and its newly acquired auxiliaries—railways and the 'electric telegraph'. One of the first modern exercises in the historiography of Indian peasant revolts, it situates the uprising in a cultural and socio-economic context, analyses its causes, and draws on local records and contemporary accounts for evidence about its progress and eventual suppression. Here, to all appearances, we have that classic instance of the author's own bias and opinion dissolving under the operation of the past tense and the grammatical third person. Here, perhaps, historical discourse has come to its own and realized that ideal of an 'apersonal . . . mode of narrative . . . designed to wipe out the presence of the speaker'?[24]

This semblance of objectivity, of the want of any obviously demonstrable bias, has however nothing to do with 'facts speaking for themselves' in a state of pure metonymy unsullied by comment. On the contrary the text is packed with comment. One has to compare it with something like the near contemporary article on this subject in *Calcutta Review* (1856) or even K. K. Datta's history of the *hool* written long after its suppression to realize how little there is in it of the details of what actually happened.[25] Indeed the narration of the event occupies in the book only about 7 per cent of the chapter which builds up climactically towards it, and somewhat less than 50 per cent of the print devoted specifically to this topic within that chapter. The syntagm is broken up again and again by dystaxia and interpretation

[23] It appears from a note in this work that parts of it were written in 1866. The dedication bears the date 4 March 1868. All our references to this work in quotation or otherwise are to Chapter IV of the seventh edition (London, 1897) unless otherwise stated.

[24] Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, p. 112.

[25] Anon., 'The Sonthal Rebellion', *Calcutta Review* (1856), pp. 223-64; K. K. Datta, 'The Santal Insurrection of 1855-57', in *Anti-British Plots and Movements before 1857* (Meerut, 1970), pp. 43-152.

filters through to assemble the segments into a meaningful whole of a primarily metaphorical character. The consequence of this operation that is most relevant for our purpose here is the way in which it distributes the paradigmatic relata along an axis of historical continuity between a 'before' and an 'after', forelengthening it with a context and extending it into a perspective. The representation of insurgency ends up thus by having its moment intercalated between its past and future so that the particular values of one and the other are rubbed into the event to give it the meaning specific to it.

VIII

To turn first to the context, two-thirds of the chapter which culminates in the history of the insurrection is taken up with an inaugural account of what may be called the natural history of its protagonists. An essay in ethnography this deals with the physical traits, language, traditions, myths, religion, rituals, habitat, environment, hunting and agricultural practices, social organization and communal government of the Santals of the Birbhum region. There are many details here which index the coming conflict as one of contraries, as between the noble savage of the hills and mean exploiters from the plains—references to his personal dignity ('He does not abase himself to the ground like the rural Hindu'; the Santal woman is 'ignorant of the shrinking squeamishness of the Hindu female', etc.) implying the contrast his would-be reduction to servitude by Hindu moneylenders, his honesty ('Unlike the Hindu, he never thinks of making money by a stranger, scrupulously avoids all topics of business, and feels pained if payment is pressed upon him for the milk and fruit which his wife brings out'), the greed and fraud of the alien traders and landlords leading eventually to the insurrection, his aloofness ('The Santals live as much apart as possible from the Hindus'), the *diku*'s intrusion into his life and territory and the holocaust which inevitably followed.

These indices give the uprising not only a moral dimension and the values of a just war, but also a depth in time. The latter is realized by the operation of diachronic markers in the text—an imaginary past by creation myths (appropriate for an enterprise taken up on the Thakur's advice) and a real but remote past (befitting a revolt steeped in tradition) by the sherds of prehistory in ritual and speech with the Santals' ceremony of 'Purifying for the Dead' mentioned, for instance, as the trace of 'a faint remembrance of the far-off time when they

dwelt beside great rivers' and their language as 'that intangible record on which a nation's past is graven more deeply than on brass tablets or rock inscriptions'.

Moving closer to the event the author provides it with a recent past covering roughly a period of sixty years of 'direct administration' in the area. The moral and temporal aspects of the narrative merge here in the figure of an irreconcilable contradiction. On the one hand there were, according to Hunter, a series of beneficial measures introduced by the government—the Decennial Settlement helping to expand the area under cultivation and induce the Santals, since 1792, to hire themselves out as agricultural labourers; the setting up, in 1832, of an enclosure ringed off by masonry pillars where they could colonize virgin land and jungle without fear of harassment from hostile tribes; the development of 'English enterprise' in Bengal in the form of indigo factories for which 'the Santal immigrants afforded a population of day-labourers'; and last but not the least of bonanzas, their absorption by thousands into labour gangs for the construction of railways across that region in 1854. But there were, on the other hand, two sets of factors which combined to undo all the good resulting from colonial rule, namely, the exploitation and oppression of the Santals by greedy and fraudulent Hindu landlords, moneylenders and traders, and the failure of the local administration, its police and the courts to protect them or redress the wrongs they suffered.

IX

This emphasis on contradiction serves on obviously interpretative purpose for the author. It makes it possible for him to locate the cause of the uprising in a failure of the Raj to make its ameliorative aspects prevail over the still lingering defects and shortcomings in its exercise of authority. The account of the event therefore fits directly into the objective stated at the beginning of the chapter, that is, to interest not only the scholar 'in these lapsed races' but the statesman as well. 'The Indian statesman will discover', he had written there referring euphemistically to the makers of British policy in India, 'that these Children of the Forest are . . . amenable to the same reclaiming influences as other men, and that upon their capacity for civilisation the future extension of English enterprise in Bengal in a large measure depends'. It is this concern for 'reclamation' (shorthand for

accelerating the transformation of the tribal peasantry into wage labour and harnessing them to characteristically colonialist projects for the exploitation of Indian resources) which explains the mixture of firmness and 'understanding' in Hunter's attitude to the rebellion. A liberal-imperialist he regarded it both as a menace to the stability of the Raj and as a useful critique of its far from perfect administration. So while he censured the government of the day for not declaring Martial Law soon enough in order to cut down the *hool* at its inception, he was careful to differentiate himself from those of his compatriots who wanted to punish the entire Santal community for the crime of its rebels and deport overseas the population of the districts involved. A genuinely far-sighted imperialist he looked forward to the day when the tribe, like many other aboriginal peoples of the subcontinent, would demonstrate its 'capacity for civilisation' by acting as an inexhaustible source of cheap labour power.

This vision is inscribed into the perspective with which the narration ends. Blaming the outbreak of the *hool* squarely on that 'cheap and practical administration' which paid no heed to the Santals' complaints and concentrated on tax collection alone it goes on to catalogue the somewhat illusory benefits of 'the more exact system that was introduced after the revolt' to keep the power of the usurers over debtors within the limits of the law, check the use of false weights and measures in retail trade, and ensure the right of bonded labourers to choose freedom by desertion or change of employers. But more than administrative reform it was 'English enterprise' again which radically contributed to the welfare of the tribe. The railways 'completely changed the relation of labour to capital' and did away with that 'natural reason for slavery—to wit, the absence of a wage-fund for free workmen'. The demand for plantation labour in the Assam tea-districts 'was destined still further to improve the position of the Santals' and so was the stimulus for indenturing coolies for the Mauritius and the Carribeans. It was thus that the tribal peasant prospered thanks to the development of a vast sub-continental and overseas labour market within the British Empire. In the Assam tea gardens 'his whole family gets employment, and every additional child, instead of being the means of increasing his poverty, becomes a source of wealth', while the coolies returned from Africa or the West Indies 'at the expiry of their contracts with savings averaging £20 sterling, a sum sufficient to set up a Santal as a considerable proprietor in his own village'.

Many of these so-called improvements were, as we know now looking back at them across a century, the result of sheer wishful thinking or so ephemeral as not to have mattered at all. The connection between usury and bonded labour continued all through British rule well into independent India. The freedom of the labour market was seriously restricted by the want of competition between British and indigenous capital. The employment of tribal families on tea plantations became a source of cynical exploitation of the labour of women and children. The advantages of mobility and contractuality were cancelled out by irregularities in the process of recruitment and the manipulation of the contrary factors of economic dependence and social differentiation by *arkatis*. The system of indenturing helped rather less to liberate servile labour than to develop a sort of second serfdom, and so on.

Yet this vision which never materialized offers an insight into the character of this type of discourse. The perspective it inspired amounted in effect to a testament of faith in colonialism. The *hool* was assimilated there to the career of the Raj and the militant enterprise of a tribal peasantry to free themselves from the triple yoke of *sarkari, sahukari* and *zamindari* to 'English enterprise'—the infrastructure of Empire. Hence the objective stated at the beginning of the account could be reiterated towards the end with the author saying that he had written at least 'partly for the instruction which their [the Santals'] recent history furnishes as to the proper method of dealing with the aboriginal races'. The suppression of local peasant revolts was a part of this method, but it was incorporated now in a broader strategy designed to tackle the economic problems of the British Government in India as an element of the global problems of imperial politics. 'These are the problems', says Hunter in concluding the chapter, 'which Indian statesmen during the next fifty years will be called upon to solve. Their predecessors have given civilisation to India; it will be their duty to render that civilisation at once beneficial to the natives and safe for ourselves.' In other words this historiography was assigned a role in a political process that would ensure the security of the Raj by a combination of force to crush rebellion when it occurred and reform to pre-empt it by wrenching the tribal peasantry out of their rural bases and distributing them as cheap labour power for British capital to exploit in India and abroad. The overtly aggressive and nervous prose of counter-insurgency born of

the worries of the early colonial days came thus to adopt in this genre of historical writing the firm but benign, authoritarian but understanding idiom of a mature and self-assured imperialism.

X

How is it that even the more liberal type of secondary discourse is unable thus to extricate itself from the code of counter-insurgency? With all the advantage he has of writing in the third person and addressing a distinct past the official turned historian is still far from being impartial where official interests are concerned. His sympathies for the peasants' sufferings and his understanding of what goaded them to revolt, do not, when the crunch comes, prevent him from siding with law and order and justifying the transfer of the campaign against the *hool* from civilian to military hands in order to crush it completely and quickly. And as discussed above, his partisanship over the outcome of the rebellion is matched by his commitment to the aims and interests of the regime. The discourse of history, hardly distinguished from policy, ends up by absorbing the concerns and objectives of the latter.

In this affinity with policy historiography reveals its character as a form of *colonialist knowledge*. That is, it derives directly from that knowledge which the bourgeoisie had used in the period of their ascendancy to interpret the world in order to master it and establish their hegemony over Western societies, but turned into an instrument of national oppression as they began to acquire for themselves 'a place in the sun'. It was thus that political science which had defined the ideal of citizenship for European nation-states was used in colonial India to set up institutions and frame laws designed specifically to generate a mitigated and second-class citizenship. Political economy which had developed in Europe as a critique of feudalism was made to promote a neo-feudal landlordism in India. Historiography too adapted itself to the relations of power under the Raj and was harnessed more and more to the service of the state.

It was thanks to this connection and a good deal of talent to back it up that historical writing on themes of the colonial period shaped up as a highly coded discourse. Operating within the framework of a many-sided affirmation of British rule in the subcontinent it assumed the function of representing the recent past of its people as 'England's Work in India'. A discourse of power in its own right it had each of its

moments displayed as a triumph, that is, as the most favourable upshot of a number of conflicting possibilities for the regime at any particular time. In its mature form, therefore, as in Hunter's *Annals*, continuity figures as one of its necessary and cardinal aspects. Unlike primary discourse it cannot afford to be foreshortened and without a sequel. The event does not constitute its sole content, but is the middle term between a beginning which serves as a context and an end which is at the same time a perspective linked to the next sequence. The only element that is constant in this ongoing series is the Empire and the policies needed to safeguard and perpetuate it.

Functioning as he does within this code Hunter with all the goodwill so solemnly announced in his dedicatory note ('These pages... have little to say touching the governing race. My business is with the people') writes up the history of a popular struggle as one in which the real subject is not the people but, indeed, 'the governing race' institutionalized as the Raj. Like any other narrative of this kind his account of the *hool* too is there to celebrate a continuity—that of British power in India. The statement of causes and reforms is no more than a structural requirement for this continuum providing it respectively with context and perspective. These serve admirably to register the event as a datum in the life-story of the Empire, but do nothing to illuminate that consciousness which is called insurgency. The rebel has no place in this history as the subject of rebellion.

XI

There is nothing in tertiary discourse to make up for this absence. Farthest removed in time from the events which it has for its theme it always looks at them in the third person. It is the work of non-official writers in most cases or of former officials no longer under any professional obligation or constraint to represent the standpoint of the government. If it happens to carry an official view at all this is only because the author has chosen it of his own will rather than because he has been conditioned to do so by any loyalty or allegiance based on administrative involvement. There are indeed some historical works which actually show such a preference and are unable to speak in a voice other than that of the custodians of law and order—an instance of tertiary discourse reverting to that state of crude identification with the regime so characteristic of primary discourse.

But there are other and very different idioms within this genre

ranging from liberal to left. The latter is particularly important as perhaps the most influential and prolific of all the many varieties of tertiary discourse. We owe to it some of the best studies on Indian peasant insurgency and more and more of these are coming out all the time as evidence both of a growing academic interest in the subject and the relevance that the subaltern movements of the past have to contemporary tensions in our part of the world. This literature is distinguished by its effort to break away from the code of counter-insurgency. It adopts the insurgent's point of view and regards, with him, as 'fine' what the other side calls 'terrible', and vice versa. It leaves the reader in no doubt that it wants the rebels and not their enemies to win. Here unlike in secondary discourse of the liberal-imperialist type recognition of the wrongs done to the peasants leads directly to support for their struggle to seek redress by arms.

Yet these two types, so very different from and contrary to each other in ideological orientation, have much else that is common between them. Take for instance that remarkable contribution of radical scholarship, Suprakash Ray's *Bharater Krishak-bidroha O Ganatantrik Samgram*[26] and compare its account of the Santal uprising of 1855 with Hunter's. The texts echo each other as narratives. Ray's being the later work has all the advantage of drawing on more recent research such as Datta's, and thus being more informed. But much of what it has to say about the inauguration and development of the *hool* is taken—in fact, quoted directly—from Hunter's *Annals*.[27] And both the authors rely on the *Calcutta Review* (1856) article for much of their evidence. There is thus little in the description of this particular event which differs significantly between the secondary and the tertiary types of discourse.

Nor is there much to distinguish between the two in terms of their admiration for the courage of the rebels and their abhorrence of the genocidal operations mounted by the counter-insurgency forces. In fact, on both these points Ray reproduces *in extenso* Hunter's testimony, gathered first-hand from officers directly involved in the campaign, that the Santals 'did not understand yielding', while for the army, 'it was not war . . . it was execution'.[28] The sympathy expressed for the enemies of the Raj in the radical tertiary discourse is

[26] Vol.I (Calcutta, 1966), Ch.13.

[27] For these see ibid., pp. 323, 325, 327, 328.

[28] Ibid., p. 337; Hunter, op. cit., pp. 247-9.

matched fully by that in the colonialist secondary discourse. Indeed, for both, the *hool* was an eminently just struggle—an evaluation derived from their mutual concurrence about the factors which had provoked it. Wicked landlords, extortionate usurers, dishonest traders, venal police, irresponsible officials and partisan processes of law—all figure with equal prominence in both the accounts. Both the historians draw on the evidence recorded on this subject in the *Calcutta Review* essay, and for much of his information about Santal indebtedness and bond slavery, about moneylenders' and landlords' oppression and administrative connivance at all this Ray relies heavily again on Hunter, as witness the extracts quoted liberally from the latter's work.[29]

However, causality is used by the two writers to develop entirely different perspectives. The statement of causes has the same part to play in Hunter's account as in any other narrative of the secondary type—that is, as an essential aspect of the discourse of counter-insurgency. In this respect his *Annals* belongs to a tradition of colonialist historiography which, for this particular event, is typically exemplified by that racist and vindicative essay, 'The Sonthal Rebellion'. There the obviously knowledgeable but tough-minded official ascribes the uprising, as Hunter does, to banias' fraud, mahajani transaction, zamindari despotism and sarkari inefficiency. In much the same vein Thornhill's *Personal Adventures* accounts for the rural uprisings of the period of the Mutiny in Uttar Pradesh quite clearly by the breakdown in traditional agrarian relations consequent on the advent of British rule. O'Malley identifies the root of the Pabna *bidroha* of 1873 in rack-renting by landlords, and the Deccan Riots Commission that of the disturbances of 1875 in the exploitation of the Kunbi peasantry by alien moneylenders in Poona and Ahmednagar districts.[30] One could go on adding many other events and texts to this list. The spirit of all these is well represented in the following extract from the *Judicial Department Resolutions* of 22 November 1831 on the subject of the insurrection led by Titu Mir:

[29] Ray, op. cit., pp. 316-19.

[30] Anon., op. cit., pp. 238-41; Thornhill, op. cit., pp. 33-5; L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Pabna* (Calcutta, 1923), p. 25; *Report of the Commission Appointed in India to Inquire into the Causes of the Riots which took place in the year 1875 in the Poona and Ahmednagar Districts of the Bombay Presidency* (London, 1878), *passim*.

> The serious nature of the late disturbances in the district of Baraset renders it an object of paramount importance that the *cause* which gave rise to them should be fully *investigated* in order that the motives which activated the insurgents may be rightly *understood* and such measures adopted as may be deemed expedient *to prevent a recurrence of similar disorders.*[31]

That sums it up. To know the cause of a phenomenon is already a step taken in the direction of controlling it. To *investigate* and thereby *understand* the cause of rural disturbances is an aid to measures 'deemed expedient *to prevent a recurrence of similar disorders*'. To that end the correspondent of the *Calcutta Review* (1856) recommended 'that condign retribution', namely, 'that they [the Santals] should be surrounded and hunted up everywhere . . . that they should be compelled, by force, if need be, to return to the Damin-i-koh, and to the wasted country in Bhaugulpore and Beerbhoom, to rebuild the ruined villages, restore the desolate fields to cultivation, open roads, and advance general public works; and do this under watch and guard . . . and that this state of things should be continued, until they are completely tranquillized, and reconciled to their allegiance'.[32] The gentler alternative put forward by Hunter was, as we have seen, a combination of Martial Law to suppress an ongoing revolt and measures to follow it up by 'English enterprise' in order (as his compatriot had suggested) to absorb the unruly peasantry as a cheap labour force in agriculture and public works for the benefit respectively of the same *dikus* and railway and roadwork engineers against whom they had taken up arms. With all their variation in tone, however, both the prescriptions to 'make . . . rebellion impossible by the elevation of the Sonthals'[33]—indeed, all colonialist solutions arrived at by the casual explanation of our peasant uprisings—were grist to a historiography committed to assimilating them to the transcendental Destiny of the British Empire.

XII

Causality serves to hitch the *hool* to a rather different kind of Destiny in Ray's account. But the latter goes through the same steps as Hunter's—that is, *context-event-perspective* ranged along a historical continuum—to arrive there. There are some obvious parallelisms in

[31] *BC* 54222: *JC*, 22 Nov. 1831 (no.91). Emphasis added.
[32] Anon., op. cit., pp. 263-4.
[33] Ibid., p. 263.

the way the event acquires a context in the two works. Both start off with prehistory (treated more briefly by Ray than Hunter) and follow it up with a survey of the more recent past since 1790 when the tribe first came into contact with the regime. It is there that the cause of the insurrection lies for both—but with a difference. For Hunter the disturbances originated in a local malignance in an otherwise healthy body—the failure of a district administration to act up to the then emerging ideal of the Raj as the *ma-baap* of the peasantry and protect them from the tyranny of wicked elements within the native society itself. For Ray it was the very presence of British power in India which had goaded the Santals to revolt, for their enemies the landlords and moneylenders owed their authority and indeed their existence to the new arrangements in landed property introduced by the colonial government and the accelerated development of a money economy under its impact. The rising constituted, therefore, a critique not only of a local administration but of colonialism itself. Indeed he uses Hunter's own evidence to arrive at that very different, indeed contrary, conclusion:

> It is clearly proved by Hunter's own statement that the responsibility for the extreme misery of the Santals lies with the English administrative system taken as a whole together with the zamindars and mahajans. For it was the English administrative system which had created zamindars and mahajans in order to satisfy its own need for exploitation and government, and helped them directly and indirectly by offering its protection and patronage.[34]

With colonialism, that is, the Raj as a system and in its entirety (rather than any of its local malfunctions) identified thus as the prime cause of rebellion, its outcome acquires radically different values in the two texts. While Hunter is explicit in his preference of a victory in favour of the regime, Ray is equally so in favour of the rebels. And corresponding to this each has a perspective which stands out in sharp contrast to that of the other. It is for Hunter the consolidation of British rule based on a reformed administration which no longer incites jacqueries by its failure to protect *adivasis* from native exploiters, but transforms them into an abundant and mobile labour force readily and profitably employed by Indian landlords and 'English enterprise'. For Ray the event is 'the precursor of the great

[34] Ray, op. cit., p. 318.

rebellion' of 1857 and a vital link in a protracted struggle of the Indian people in general and peasants and workers in particular against foreign as well as indigenous oppressors. The armed insurrection of the Santals, he says, has indicated a way to the Indian people. 'That particular way has, thanks to the great rebellion of 1857, developed into the broad highway of India's struggle for freedom. That highway extends into the twentieth century. The Indian peasantry are on their march along that very highway.'[35] In fitting the *hool* thus to a perspective of continuing struggle of the rural masses the author draws on a well-established tradition of radical historiography as witness, for instance, the following extract from a pamphlet which had a wide readership in left political circles nearly thirty years ago:

> The din of the actual battles of the insurrection has died down. But its echoes have kept on vibrating through the years, growing louder and louder as more peasants joined in the fight. The clarion call that summoned the Santhals to battle . . . was to be heard in other parts of the country at the time of the Indigo Strike of 1860, the Pabna and Bogra Uprising of 1872, the Maratha Peasant Rising in Poona and Ahmednagar in 1875-76. It was finally to merge in the massive demand of the peasantry all over the country for an end to zamindari and moneylending oppression . . . . Glory to the immortal Santhals who . . . showed the path to battle! The banner of militant struggle has since then passed from hand to hand over the length and breadth of India.[36]

The power of such assimilative thinking about the history of peasant insurgency is further illustrated by the concluding words of an essay written by a veteran of the peasant movement and published by the Pashchimbanga Pradeshik Krishak Sabha on the eve of the centenary of the Santal revolt. Thus,

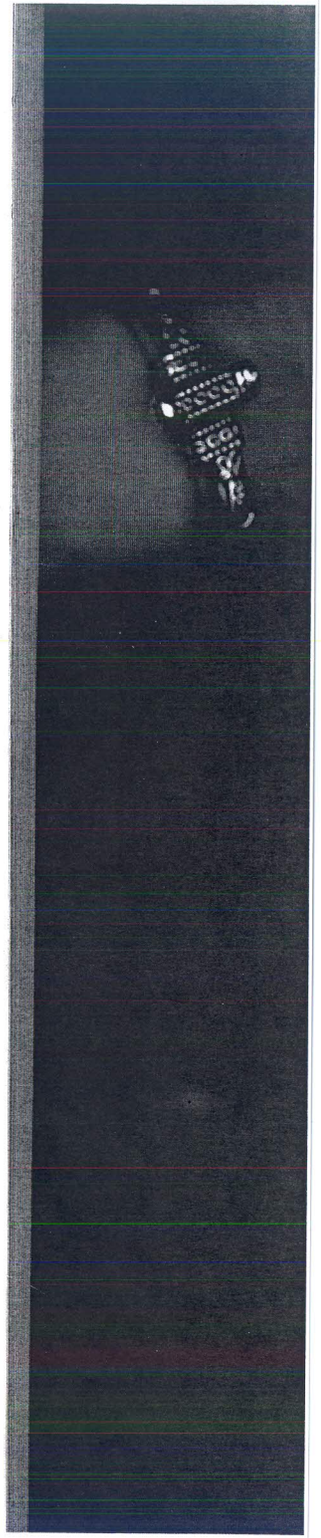
> The flames of the fire kindled by the peasant martyrs of the Santal insurrection a hundred years ago had spread to many regions all over India. Those flames could be seen burning in the indigo cultivators' rebellion in Bengal (1860), in the uprising of the raiyats of Pabna and Bogra (1872), in that of the Maratha peasantry of the Deccan (1875-76). The same fire was kindled again and again in the course of the Moplah peasant revolts of Malabar. That fire has not been extinguished yet, it is still burning in the hearts of the Indian peasants . . .[37]

[35] Ibid., p. 340.
[36] L. Natarajan, *Peasant Uprisings in India, 1850-1900* (Bombay, 1953), pp. 31-2.
[37] Abdulla Rasul, *Saontal Bidroher Amar Kahini* (Calcutta, 1954), p. 24.

The purpose of such tertiary discourse is quite clearly to try and retrieve the history of insurgency from that continuum which is designed to assimilate every jacquerie to 'England's Work in India' and arrange it along the alternative axis of a protracted campaign for freedom and socialism. However, as with colonialist historiography this, too, amounts to an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history and incorporates the latter as only a contingent element in another history with another subject. Just as it is not the rebel but the Raj which is the real subject of secondary discourse and the Indian bourgeoisie that of tertiary discourse of the History-of-the-Freedom-Struggle genre, so is an *abstraction* called Worker-and-Peasant, *an ideal rather than the real historical personality of the insurgent*, made to replace him in the type of literature discussed above.

To say this is of course not to deny the political importance of such appropriation. Since every struggle for power by the historically ascendant classes in any epoch involves a bid to acquire a tradition, it is entirely in the fitness of things that the revolutionary movements in India should lay a claim to, among others, the Santal rebellion of 1855 as a part of their heritage. But however noble the cause and instrument of such appropriation, it leads to the mediation of the insurgent's consciousness by the historian's—that is, of a past consciousness by one conditioned by the present. The distortion which follows necessarily and inevitably from this process is a function of that hiatus between event-time and discourse-time which makes the verbal representation of the past less than accurate in the best of cases. And since the discourse is, in this particular instance, one about properties of the mind—about attitudes, beliefs, ideas, etc. rather than about externalities which are easier to identify and describe, the task of representation is made even more complicated than usual.

There is nothing that historiography can do to eliminate such distortion altogether, for the latter is built into its optics. What it can do, however, is to acknowledge such distortion as parametric—as a datum which determines the form of the exercise itself, and to stop pretending that it can *fully* grasp a past consciousness and reconstitute it. Then and only then might the distance between the latter and the historian's perception of it be reduced significantly enough to amount to a close approximation which is the best one could hope for. The gap as it stands at the moment is indeed so wide that there is much



more than an irreducible degree of error in the existing literature on this point. Even a brief look at some of the discourses on the 1855 insurrection should bear this out.

XIII

Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the *hool*. The notion of power which inspired it, was made up of such ideas and expressed in such words and acts as were explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion. It was a matter of both being inseparably collapsed as the signified and its signifier (*vāgarthāviva sampṛktau*) in the language of that massive violence. Hence the attribution of the rising to a divine command rather than to any particular grievance; the enactment of rituals both before (e.g. propitiatory ceremonies to ward off the apocalypse of the Primeval Serpents—Lag and Lagini, the distribution of *tel-sindur*, etc.) and during the uprising (e.g. worshipping the goddess Durga, bathing in the Ganges, etc.); the generation and circulation of myth in its characteristic vehicle—rumour (e.g. about the advent of 'the exterminating angel' incarnated as a buffalo, the birth of a prodigious hero to a virgin, etc.).[38] The evidence is both unequivocal and ample on this point. The statements we have from the leading protagonists and their followers are all emphatic and indeed insistent on this aspect of their struggle, as should be obvious even from the few extracts of source material reproduced below in the *Appendix*. In sum, it is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as a religious consciousness—except, that is, as a massive demonstration of self-estrangement (to borrow Marx's term for the very essence of religiosity) which made the rebels look upon their project as predicated on a will other than their own: 'Kanoo and Seedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight.'[39]

How authentically has this been represented in historical discourse? It was identified in official correspondence at the time as a case of 'fanaticism'. The insurrection was three months old and still going strong when J. R. Ward, a Special Commissioner and one of the most important administrators in the Birbhum region, wrote in some

[38] The instances are far too numerous to cite in an essay of this size, but for some samples see *Mare Hapram Ko Reak Katha*, Ch.79, in A. Mitra (ed.), *District Handbooks: Bankura* (Calcutta, 1953).

[39] *Appendix:* Extract 2.

desperation to his superiors in Calcutta, 'I have been unable to trace the insurrection in Beerbhoom to any thing but *fanaticism.*' The idiom he used to describe the phenomenon was typical of the shocked and culturally arrogant response of nineteenth-century colonialism to any radical movement inspired by a non-Christian doctrine among a subject population: 'These Sonthals have been led to join in the rebellion under a persuasion which is clearly traceable to their brethren in Bhaugulpore, that an Almighty & inspired Being appeared as the redeemer of their Caste & their *ignorance & superstition* was easily worked into a *religious frenzy* which has stopped at nothing.'[40] That idiom occurs also in the *Calcutta Review* article. There the Santal is acknowledged as 'an eminently religious man' and his revolt as a parallel of other historical occasions when '*the fanatical spirit of religious superstition*' had been 'swayed to strengthen and help forward a quarrel already ready to burst and based on other grounds.'[41] However, the author gives this identification a significantly different slant from that in the report quoted above. There an incomprehending Ward, caught in the blast of the *hool*, appears to have been impressed by the spontaneity of 'a religious frenzy which...stopped at nothing'. By contrast the article written after the regime had recovered its self-confidence, thanks to the search-and-burn campaign in the disturbed tracts, interprets religiosity as a propagandist ruse used by the leaders to sustain the morale of the rebels. Referring, for instance, to the messianic rumours in circulation it says, 'All these absurdities were no doubt *devised* to keep up the courage of the numerous rabble.'[42] Nothing could be more elitist. The insurgents are regarded here as a mindless 'rabble' devoid of a will of their own and easily manipulated by their chiefs.

But elitism such as this is not a feature of colonialist historiography alone. Tertiary discourse of the radical variety, too, exhibits the same disdain for the political consciousness of the peasant masses when it is mediated by religiosity. For a sample let us turn to Ray's account of the rising again. He quotes the following lines from the *Calcutta Review* article in a somewhat inaccurate but still clearly recognizable translation:

> Seedoo and Kanoo were at night seated in their home, revolving many things . . . a bit of paper fell on Seedoo's head, and suddenly the Thakoor

[40] *JP*, 8 Nov. 1855: Ward to Government of Bengal (13 Oct. 1855). Emphasis added.

[41] Anon., op. cit., p. 243. Emphasis added.

[42] Ibid., p. 246. Emphasis added.

(god) appeared before the astonished gaze of Seedoo and Kanoo; he was like a white man though dressed in the native style; on each hand he had ten fingers; he held a white book, and wrote therein; the book and with it 20 pieces of paper . . . he presented to the brothers; ascended upwards, and disappeared. Another bit of paper fell on Seedoo's head, and then came two men . . . hinted to them the purport of Thakoor's order, and they likewise vanished. But there was not merely one apparition of the sublime Thakoor; each day in the week for some short period, did he make known his presence to his favourite apostles . . . . In the silvery pages of the book, and upon the white leaves of the single scraps of paper, were words written; these were afterwards deciphered by literate Sonthals, able to read and interpret; but their meaning had already been sufficiently indicated to the two leaders.[43]

With some minor changes of detail (inevitable in a living folklore) this is indeed a fairly authentic account of the visions the two Santal leaders believed they had had. Their statements, reproduced in part in the *Appendix* (Extracts 3 and 4), bear this out. These, incidentally, were not public pronouncements meant to impress their followers. Unlike 'The Thacoor's Perwannah' (*Appendix*: Extract 2) intended to make their views known to the authorities before the uprising, these were the words of captives facing execution. Addressed to hostile interrogators in military encampments they could have little use as propaganda. Uttered by men of a tribe which, according to all accounts had not yet learnt to lie,[44] these represented the truth and nothing but the truth for their speakers. But that is not what Ray would credit them with. What figures as a mere insinuation in the *Calcutta Review* is raised to the status of an elaborate propaganda device in his introductory remarks on the passage cited above. Thus:

> Both Sidu and Kanu knew that the slogan (*dhwani*) which would have the most effect among the ***backward*** Santals, was one that was religious. Therefore, ***in order to inspire*** the Santals to struggle they *spread* the word about God's directive in favour of launching such a struggle. The story *invented (kalpita)* by them is as follows.[45]

There is little that is different here from what the colonialist writer had to say about the presumed backwardness of the Santal peasantry,

[43] Ibid., pp. 243-4. Ray, op. cit., pp. 321-2.

[44] This is generally accepted. See, for instance, Sherwill's observation about the truth being 'sacred' to the Santals 'offering in this respect a bright example to their lying neighbours, the Bengalis'. *Geographical and Statistical Report of the District Bhaugulpoor* (Calcutta, 1854), p. 32.

[45] Ray, op. cit., p. 321. Emphasis added.

the manipulative designs of their leaders and the uses of religion as the means of such manipulation. Indeed, on each of these points Ray does better and is by far the more explicit of the two authors in attributing a gross lie and downright deception to the rebel chiefs without any evidence at all. The invention is all his own and testifies to the failure of a shallow radicalism to conceptualize insurgent mentality except in terms of an unadulterated secularism. Unable to grasp religiosity as the central modality of peasant consciousness in colonial India he is shy to acknowledge its mediation of the peasant's idea of power and all the resultant contradictions. He is obliged therefore to rationalize the ambiguities of rebel politics by assigning a worldly consciousness to the leaders and an otherworldly one to their followers making of the latter innocent dupes of crafty men armed with all the tricks of a modern Indian politician out to solicit rural votes. Where this lands the historian can be seen even more clearly in the projection of this thesis to a study of the Birsaite *ulgulan* in Ray's subsequent work. He writes,

> In order to propagate this religious doctrine of his Birsa adopted *a new device (kaushal)*—just as Sidu, the Santal leader, had done on the eve of the Santal rebellion of 1885. Birsa knew that the Kol were a *very backward* people and were full of *religious superstition* as a result of Hindu-Brahmanical and Christian missionary propaganda amongst them over a long period. Therefore, it would not do to avoid the question of religion if the Kol people were to be liberated from those wicked religious influences and drawn into the path of rebellion. Rather, in order to overcome the evil influences of Hindu and Christian religions, it would be necessary to spread his new religious faith among them in the name of that very God of theirs, and to introduce new rules. *To this end, recourse had to be had to falsehood, if necessary, in the interests of the people.*
>
> Birsa *spread* the word that he had received this new religion of his from the chief deity of the Mundas, Sing Bonga, himself.[46]

Thus the radical historian is driven by the logic of his own incomprehension to attribute a deliberate falsehood to one of the greatest of our rebels. The ideology of that mighty *ulgulan* is nothing but pure fabrication for him. And he is not alone in his

[46] Ray, *Bharater Baiplabik Samgramer Itihas*, vol. I[2] (Calcutta, 1970), p. 95. Emphasis added. The sentence italicized by us in the quoted passage reads as follows in the Bengali original: *'Eijanyo prayojan hoiley jatir svarthey mithyar asroy grahan karitey hoibey'*.

misreading of insurgent consciousness. Baskay echoes him almost word for word in describing the Santal leader's claim to divine support for the *hool* as propaganda meant 'to inspire the Santals to rise in revolt'.[47] Formulations such as these have their foil in other writings of the same genre which solve the riddle of religious thinking among the Santal rebels by ignoring it altogether. A reader who has Natarajan's and Rasul's once influential essays as his only source of information about the insurrection of 1855, would hardly suspect any religiosity at all in that great event. It is represented there *exclusively* in its secular aspects. This attitude is of course not confined to the authors discussed in this essay. The same mixture of myopia and downright refusal to look at the evidence that is there, characterizes a great deal more of the existing literature on the subject.

XIV

Why is tertiary discourse, even of the radical variety, so reluctant to come to terms with the religious element in rebel consciousness? Because it is still trapped in the paradigm which inspired the ideologically contrary, because colonialist, discourse of the primary and secondary types. It follows, in each case, from a refusal to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history. For once a peasant rebellion has been assimilated to the career of the Raj, the Nation or the People, it becomes easy for the historian to abdicate the responsibility he has of exploring and describing the consciousness specific to that rebellion and be content to ascribe to it a transcendental consciousness. In operative terms, this means denying a will to the mass of the rebels themselves and representing them merely as instruments of some other will. It is thus that in colonialist historiography insurgency is seen as the articulation of a pure spontaneity pitted against the will of the State as embodied in the Raj. If any consciousness is attributed at all to the rebels, it is only a few of their leaders—more often than not some individual members or small groups of the gentry—who are credited with it. Again, in bourgeois-nationalist historiography it is an elite consciousness which is read into all peasant movements as their motive force. This had led to such grotesqueries as the characterization of the Indigo Rebellion of 1860 as 'the first non-violent mass movement'[48] and generally of all the

[47] Dhirendranath Baskay, *Saontal Ganasamgramer Itihas* (Calcutta, 1976), p. 66.

[48] Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed.), *Peasant Revolution in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1953), p. 5.

popular struggles in rural India during the first hundred and twenty-five years of British rule as the spiritual harbinger of the Indian National Congress.

In much the same way the specificity of rebel consciousness had eluded radical historiography as well. This has been so because it is impaled on a concept of peasant revolts as a succession of events ranged along a direct line of descent—as a heritage, as it is often called—in which all the constituents have the same pedigree and replicate each other in their commitment to the highest ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity. In this ahistorical view of the history of insurgency all moments of consciousness are assimilated to the ultimate and highest moment of the series—indeed to an Ideal Consciousness. A historiography devoted to its pursuit (even when that is done, regrettably, in the name of Marxism) is ill-equipped to cope with contradictions which are indeed the stuff history is made of. Since the Ideal is suppose to be one hundred per cent secular in character, the devotee tends to look away when confronted with the evidence of religiosity as if the latter did not exist or explain it away as a clever but well-intentioned fraud perpetrated by enlightened leaders on their moronic followers—all done, of course, 'in the interests of the people'! Hence, the rich material of myths, rituals, rumours, hopes for a Golden Age and fears of an imminent End of the World, all of which speaks of the self-alienation of the rebel, is wasted on this abstract and sterile discourse. It can do little to illuminate that combination of sectarianism and militancy which is so important a feature of our rural history. The ambiquity of such phenomena, witnessed during the Tebhaga movement in Dinajpur, as Muslim peasants coming to the Kisan Sabha 'sometimes inscribing a hammer or a sickle on the Muslim League flag' and young maulavis 'reciting melodious verse from the Koran' at village meetings as 'they condemned the jotedari system and the practice of charging high interest rates',[49] will be beyond its grasp. The swift transformation of class struggle into communal strife and vice versa in our countryside evokes from it either some well-contrived apology or a simple gesture of embarrassment, but no real explanation.

However, it is not only the religious element in rebel consciousness which this historiography fails to comprehend. The specificity of a rural insurrection is expressed in terms of many other contradictions

[49] Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal, 1946-47* (New Delhi, 1972), p. 49.

as well. These too are missed out. Blinded by the glare of a perfect and immaculate consciousness the historian sees nothing, for instance, but solidarity in rebel behaviour and fails to notice its Other, namely, betrayal. Committed inflexibly to the notion of insurgency as a generalized movement, he underestimates the power of the brakes put on it by localism and territoriality. Convinced that mobilization for a rural uprising flows exclusively from an overall elite authority, he tends to disregard the operation of many other authorities within the primordial relations of a rural community. A prisoner of empty abstractions tertiary discourse, even of the radical kind, has thus distanced itself from the prose of counter-insurgency only by a declaration of sentiment so far. It has still to go a long way before it can prove that the insurgent can rely on its performance to recover his place in history.

Abbreviations

BC:	Board's Collections, India Office Records (London).
JC:	Fort William Judicial Consultations in *BC*.
JP:	Judicial Proceedings, West Bengal State Archives (Calcutta).
MDS:	*Maharaja Deby Sinha* (Nashipur Raj Estate, 1914).

Appendix

Extract 1

I came to plunder . . . Sidoo and Kaloo [Kanhu] declared themselves Rajas & [said] they would plunder the whole country and take possession of it—they said also, no one can stop us for it is the order of Takoor. On this account we have all come with them.

Source: JP, 19 July 1855: Balai Majhi's Statement (14 July 1855).

Extract 2

The Thacoor has descended in the house of Seedoo Manjee, Kanoo Manjee, Bhyrub and Chand, at Bhugnudihee in Pergunnah Kunjeala. The Thakoor in person is conversing with them, he has descended from Heaven, he is conversing with Kanoor and Seedoo, The Sahibs and the white Soldiers will fight. Kanoo and Seedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight. Therefore you Sahibs and Soldiers fight with the Thacoor himself Mother Ganges will come to the Thacoor's (assistance) Fire will rain from Heaven. If you are satisfied with the Thacoor then you must go to the other side of the Ganges. The Thacoor has ordered the Sonthals that for a bulluck plough 1 anna is to be paid for revenue. Buffalo plough 2 annas The reign of Truth has begun True justice will be administered He who does not speak the truth will not be allowed to remain on the Earth. The Mahajuns have committed a great sin The Sahibs and the amlah have made everything bad, in this the Sahibs have sinned greatly.

Those who tell things to the Magistrate and those who investigate cases for him, take 70 or 80 R.s. with great oppression in this the Sahibs have sinned. On this account the Thacoor has ordered me saying that the country is not the Sahibs...

P.S. If you Sahibs agree, then you must remain on the other side of the Ganges, and if you dont agree you cant remain on that side of the river, I will rain fire and all the Sahibs will be killed by the hand of God in person and Sahibs if you fight with muskets the Sonthal will not be hit by the bullets and the Thacoor will give your Elephants and horses of his own accord to the Sonthals . . . if you fight with the Sonthals two days will be as one day and two nights as one night. This is the order of the Thacoor.

Source: JP, 4 October 1855: 'The Thacoor's Perwannah' ('dated 10 Saon 1262').

Extract 3

Then the Manjees & Purgunnaits assembled in my Verandah, & we consulted for 2 months, "that Pontet & Mohesh Dutt don't listen to our complaints & no one acts as our Father & Mother" then a God descended from heaven in the form of a cartwheel & said to me "Kill Pontet & the Darogah & the Mahajuns & then you will have justice & a Father & Mother"; then the Thacoor went back to the heavens; after this 2 men like Bengallees came into my Verhandah; they each had six fingers half a piece of paper fell on my head before the Thacoor came & half fell afterwards. I could not read but Chand & Seheree & a Dhome read it, they said "The Thacoor has written to you to fight the Mahajens & then you will have justice" . . .

Source: JP, 8 November 1855: 'Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor'.

Extract 4

In Bysack the God descended in my house I sent a perwannah to the Burra Sahib at Calcutta . . . I wrote that the Thacoor had come to my house & was conversing with me & had told all the Sonthals that they were to be under the charge of me & that I was to pay all the revenue to Government & was to oppress no one & the zamindars & Mahajans were committing great oppression taking 20 pice for one & that I was to place them at a distance from the sonthals & if they do not go away to fight with them.

. . . . . .

Ishwar was a white man with only a dootee & chudder he sat on the ground like a Sahib he wrote on this bit of paper. He gave me 4 papers but afterwards presented 16 more. The thacoor had 5 fingers on each hand. I did not see him in the day I saw him only in the night. The sonthals then assembled at my house to see the thacoor.

. . . . . .

[At Maheshpur] the troops came & we had a fight . . . afterwards seeing that men on our side were falling we both turned twice on them & once drove them away, then I made poojah . . . & then a great many balls came & Seedoo & I were both wounded. The thacoor had said "water will come out of the muskets" but my troops committed some crime therefore the thacoors prediction[s] were not fulfilled about 80 sonthals were killed.

. . . . . .

All the blank papers fell from heaven & the book in which all the pages are blank also fell from heaven.

Source: JP, 20 December 1855: 'Examination of Kanoo Sonthal'.

Two Frontier Uprisings in Mughal India[1]

GAUTAM BHADRA

Introduction

The existence of a long tradition of peasant and tribal uprisings in India is now a well-recognized fact.[2] These uprisings are no longer ignored by historians as a subject not worthy of study. Perhaps the political role played by peasants in the nationalist and communist movements in the Third World during this century as well as the programme of agrarian revolution initiated by their radical leaders, have forced historians of all political persuasions to revalue a hitherto submerged and neglected tradition. Some historians, however, are attempting to appropriate this tradition of peasant resistance on behalf of the ruling elites of Third World countries. The polemics have already begun.[3] Before we can understand the dynamics of such

[1] I am grateful to Mrs Mandira Sen and Maulavi M. A. Quddus for their help and suggestions. The sketch map of the Mughal north-eastern frontier where the rebellions occurred, is based on Rennell's *Bengal Atlas* (1779) and the district map of Kamrup with additional information from *Kamrupār Buranji* and *Baharistan*. I am indebted to Mrs Keya Dasgupta for drawing the map.

[2] One of the earliest works is W.C. Smith, 'Lower Class Uprisings in the Mughal Empire', *Islamic Culture* (1946). For the best available general introduction to the subject, see Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India* (Bombay, 1963), Ch. IX. My article in Bengali 'Mughal Juge Krishok Vidroha' ('Peasant Uprisings in Mughal India'), *Ekshan*, Autumn Number (1385 B.S.).

[3] Eric Stokes, 'The Return of the Peasant to South Asian History' in *The Peasant and the Raj* (New Delhi, 1978). For a review of this book see Gyanendra Pandey, 'A View of the Observable etc.', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 7:3 (1980). Also see Joy Mukhopadhyay, 'Bharate Krishok Bidroher Itihas Lekhar Samasya' ('Problems of writing the history of peasant uprisings in India': in Bengali), *Deshapremik*, Autumn Number (1387 B.S.).