CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism and the historiography of peasant insurgency—the character of the latter as a discourse of power—insurgency: the name of a consciousness—a critique of the notion of pure spontaneity and pre-political peasant rebellion—political character of peasant’s relationship with sarkar, sahukar and zamindar—leadership, aim, programme of insurgency—a naive theoretical consciousness—its ‘common forms’ or ‘general ideas’ and their ‘first elements’—some questions of evidence.

The historiography of peasant insurgency in colonial India is as old as colonialism itself. It originated at the intersection of the East India Company’s political concerns and a characteristic eighteenth-century view of history—a view of history as politics and of the past as a guide to the future—which they brought with them. They were concerned to stop their newly acquired dominions from disintegrating like the moribund empire of the Mughals under the impact of peasant insurrections. For agrarian disturbances in many forms and on scales ranging from local riots to war-like campaigns spread over many districts were endemic throughout the first three quarters of British rule until the very end of the nineteenth century. At a simple count1 there are no fewer than 110 known instances

N.B. References to manuscripts and printed works have been indicated by abbreviations (see ABBREVIATIONS) or by authors (see BIBLIOGRAPHY), and not by titles.

A Roman numeral after a colon specifies the volume(s) and an Arabic numeral the page(s) of a publication.

An Arabic numeral before an oblique indicates chapter or section and that after it verse or paragraph in a Sanskrit text or its translation.

A date enclosed in brackets after an author’s name distinguishes that publication from his other writings. Of any two books published by an author in the same year one has been marked by an asterisk.

1 The estimate is based on events catalogued in three standard works, viz. S. B. Chaudhuri (1955) and Ray (1966, 1970). A complete list, yet to be put together by
of these even for the somewhat shorter period of 117 years—from the Rangpur _ding_ to the Birsaite _ulgulan_—spanned by the present work. The formative layers of the developing state were ruptured again and again by these seismic upheavals until it was to learn to adjust to its unfamiliar site by trial and error and consolidate itself by the increasing sophistication of legislative, administrative and cultural controls.

Insurgency was thus the necessary antithesis of colonialism during the entire phase between its incipience and coming of age. The tension of this relationship required a record for the regime to refer to so that it could understand the nature and motivation of any considerable outbreak of violence in the light of previous experience and by understanding suppress it. Historiography stepped in here to provide that vital discourse for the state. This is how the very first accounts of peasant uprisings in the period of British rule came to be written up as administrative documents of one kind or another—despatches on counter-insurgency operations, departmental minutes on measures to _deal with a still active insurrection and reports of investigation_ into some of the more important cases of unrest. In all this literature, known to the profession as ‘primary sources’, one can see the official mind struggling to comprehend these apparently unanticipated phenomena by means of analogy, that is, to say it after Saussure, by an ‘awareness and understanding of a relation between forms’.

Just as one learns the use of a new language by feeling one’s way from the known elements to the unknown, comparing and contrasting unfamiliar sounds and meanings with familiar ones, so did the early administrators try to make sense of a peasant revolt in terms of what made it similar to or different from other incidents of the same kind. Thus the Chota Nagpur uprisings of 1801 and 1817 and the Barasat _bidroha_ of 1831 served as points of reference in some of the most authoritative policy statements on the Kol insurrection of 1831–2, the latter in its turn figured in official thinking at the highest level on the occasion of the Santal _hool_ of 1855.

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Historians as a serious project for research, will of course show a much higher total, for it should be obvious to scholars working on particular regions that these compilations, based on published sources and secondary works, do not include numerous local instances still to be retrieved from the archives and oral literature.

*Saussure: 165.*
and that last event was cited by the Deccan Riots Commission as a historic parallel to the subject of its investigation—the Kunbi uprising of 1875 in Poona and Ahmadnagar districts.\(^3\)

The discourse on peasant insurgency thus made its debut quite clearly as a discourse of power. Rational in its representation of the past as linear and secular rather than cyclical and mythic, it had nothing but reasons of state as its raison d’être. Drafted into the service of the regime as a direct instrument of its will it did not even bother to conceal its partisan character. Indeed, it often merged, both in its narrative and analytic forms, into what was explicitly official writing. For administrative practice turned it almost into a convention that a magistrate or a judge should construct his report on a local uprising as a historical narrative, as witness the classic series, ‘Narrative of Events’, produced by the heads of the districts caught up in the disturbances of the Mutiny years. And again, causal explanation used in the West to arrive at what its practitioners believed to be the historical truth, served in colonialist historiography merely as an apology for law and order—the truth of the force by which the British had annexed the subcontinent.

As the judicial authorities in Calcutta put it in a statement soon after the insurrection led by Titu Mir, it was ‘an object of paramount importance’ for the government ‘that the cause which gave rise to [those disturbances] should be fully investigated in order that the motives which activated the insurgents [might] be rightly understood and such measures adopted as [were] deemed expedient to prevent a recurrence of similar disorders’.\(^4\) Causality was harnessed thus to counter-insurgency and the sense of history converted into an element of administrative concern.

The importance of such representation can hardly be overestimated. By making the security of the state into the central problematic of peasant insurgency, it assimilated the latter as merely an element in the career of colonialism. In other words, the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own. This


\(^4\) JC, 22 Nov. 1831 (no. 91).
denial came eventually to be codified into the dominant, indeed, the only mode of historiography on this subject. Even when a writer was apparently under no obligation to think like a bureaucrat affected by the trauma of a recent jacquerie, he was conditioned to write the history of a peasant revolt as if it were some other history—that of the Raj, or of Indian nationalism, or of socialism, depending on his particular ideological bent. The result, for which the responsibility must be shared equally by all schools and tendencies, has been to exclude the insurgent as the subject of his own history.6

To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him. Hence, the word ‘insurgency’ has been used in the title and the text as the name of that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known as jacquerie, revolt, uprising, etc. or to use their Indian designations—dhing, bidroha, ulgulan, hool, fituri and so on. This amounts, of course, to a rejection of the idea of such activity as purely spontaneous—an idea that is elitist as well as erroneous. It is elitist because it makes the mobilization of the peasantry altogether contingent on the intervention of charismatic leaders, advanced political organizations or upper classes. Consequently, bourgeois-nationalist historiography has to wait until the rise of Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress Party to explain the peasant movements of the colonial period so that all major events of this genre up to the end of the First World War may then be treated as the pre-history of the ‘Freedom Movement’. An equally elitist view inclined to the left discerns in the same events a pre-history of the socialist and communist movements in the subcontinent. What both of these assimilative interpretations share is a ‘scholastic and academic historico-political outlook which sees as real and worthwhile only such movements of revolt as are one hundred per cent conscious, i.e. movements that are governed by plans worked out in advance to the last detail or in line with abstract theory (which comes to the same thing).6

5 For a more elaborate presentation of the argument stated so far see Guha (1983).
6 This and other observations attributed to Gramsci on the question of spon-
But as Antonio Gramsci whose words are quoted above has said, there is no room for pure spontaneity in history. This is precisely where they err who fail to recognize the trace of consciousness in the apparently unstructured movements of the masses. The error derives more often than not from two nearly interchangeable notions of organization and politics. What is conscious is presumed in this view to be identical with what is organized in the sense that it has, first, a 'conscious leadership', secondly, some well-defined aim, and thirdly, a programme specifying the components of the latter as particular objectives and the means of achieving them. (The second and the third conditions are often collapsed in some versions.) The same equation is often written with politics as a substitute for organization. To those who prefer this device it offers the special advantage of identifying consciousness with their own political ideals and norms so that the activity of the masses found wanting in these terms may then be characterized as unconscious, hence pre-political.

The image of the pre-political peasant rebel in societies still to be fully industrialized owes a great deal to E. J. Hobsbawm's pioneering work published over two decades ago. He has written there of 'pre-political people' and 'pre-political populations'. He uses this term again and again to describe a state of supposedly absolute or near absence of political consciousness or organization which he believes to have been characteristic of such people. Thus, 'the social brigand appears', according to him, 'only before the poor have reached political consciousness or acquired more effective methods of social agitation', and what he means by such expressions (emphasized by us) is made clear in the next sentence when he says: 'The bandit is a pre-political phenomenon and his strength is in inverse proportion to that of organized revolutionism and Socialism or Communism.' He finds the 'traditional forms of peasant discontent' to have been 'virtually devoid of any explicit ideology, organization or programme'. In general, 'pre-political people' are defined as those 'who have not

taneity are taken from 'Spontaneity and Conscious Leadership' in Gramsci: 196–200.

1 For the citations and attributions in this and the next paragraph see Hobsbawm: 2, 5, 13, 23, 96, 118 and H & R: 19, 205.
yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which
to express their aspirations about the world'.

Hobsbawm's material is of course derived almost entirely
from the European experience and his generalizations are per-
haps in accord with it, although one detects a certain contradic-
tion when he says at the same time that 'social banditry has
next to no organization or ideology', and that 'in one sense banditry
is a rather primitive form of organized social protest'. Again his
characterization, in *Captain Swing*, of the English agricultural
labourers' movement of 1830 as 'spontaneous and unorganized'
does not match fully the observation of his co-author George
Rudé to the effect that many of its militant 'undertakings' such
as wage-riots, machine-breaking and the 'mobbing' of overseers and parsons 'even if erupting spontaneously, quickly de-
veloped the nucleus of a local organisation'.

Whatever its validity for other countries the notion of pre-
political peasant insurgency helps little in understanding the
experience of colonial India. For there was nothing in the
militant movements of its rural masses that was not political.
This could hardly have been otherwise under the conditions in
which they worked, lived and conceptualized the world. Taking
the subcontinent as a whole capitalist development in agricul-
ture remained merely incipient and weak throughout the
period of a century and a half until 1900. Rents constituted
the most substantial part of income yielded by property in land.
Its incumbents related to the vast majority of agricultural pro-
ducers as landlords to tenant-cultivators, sharecroppers, agricul-
tural labourers and many intermediate types with features
derived from each of these categories. The element that was
constant in this relationship with all its variety was the extrac-
tion of the peasant's surplus by means determined rather less by
the free play of the forces of a market economy than by the
extra-economic force of the landlord's standing in local society
and in the colonial polity. In other words, it was a relationship
of dominance and subordination—a political relationship of
the feudal type, or as it has been appropriately described, a
semi-feudal relationship which derived its material sustenance
from pre-capitalist conditions of production and its legitimacy
from a traditional culture still paramount in the superstructure.

The authority of the colonial state, far from being neutral to
this relationship, was indeed one of its constitutive elements. For under the Raj the state assisted directly in the reproduction of landlordism. Just as Murshid Quli Khan had reorganized the fiscal system of Bengal in such a way as to substitute a solvent and relatively vigorous set of landlords for a bankrupt and effete landed aristocracy, so did the British infuse new blood for old in the proprietary body by the Permanent Settlement in the east, ryotwari in the south and some permutations of the two in most other parts of the country. The outcome of all this was to revitalize a quasi-feudal structure by transferring resources from the older and less effective members of the landlord class to younger and, for the regime politically and financially, more dependable ones. For the peasant this meant not less but in many cases more intensive and systematic exploitation: the crude medieval type of oppression in the countryside emanating from the arbitrary will of local despots under the previous system was replaced now by the more regulated will of a foreign power which for a long time to come was to leave the landlords free to collect abwab and mathot from their tenants and rack-rent and evict them. Obliged under pressure eventually to legislate against such abuses, it was unable to eliminate them altogether because its law-enforcing agencies at the local level served as instruments of landlord authority, and the law, so right on paper, allowed itself to be manipulated by court officials and lawyers in favour of landlordism. The Raj even left the power of punishment, that ultimate power of the state, to be shared to some extent by the rural elite in the name of respect for indigenous tradition, which meant in effect turning a blind eye to the gentry dispensing criminal justice either as members of the dominant class operating from kachari and gadi or as those of dominant castes entrenched in village panchayats. The collusion between sarkar and zamindar was indeed a part of the common experience of the poor and the subaltern at the local level nearly everywhere.

One important consequence of this revitalization of landlordism under British rule was a phenomenal growth of peasant indebtedness. For with a land market flourishing under the triple impact of agrarian legislation, demographic increase and a progressively larger money supply, many mahajans and banias

*J. Sarkar: 409-10.
bought up estates by the dozen at auctions from impoverished landlords and evicted tenants. Set up as rural proprietors they brought to bear all their usurious skill on their function as rentiers. They were encouraged to do so by a whole set of factors specific to colonial rule—the near or total absence of rent laws to protect tenant-cultivators until towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the lack of any effective and enforceable ceilings on local interest rates, the want of coordination between a harvest calendar geared to traditional agricultural practices and a fiscal calendar geared to the routine of imperial management, and the development of a market economy luring the peasant with little or no capital to turn his field into a frontier of commercial agriculture and consequently himself into a perpetual debtor. A cumulative result of all this was to make landlords into moneylenders—as much as 46 per cent of all peasant debt in the then United Provinces was owed to landlords in 1934—\(^*\) and give rise to yet another of those historic paradoxes characteristic of the Raj—that is, to assign to the most advanced capitalist power in the world the task of fusing landlordism and usury in India so well as to impede the development of capitalism both in agriculture and in industry.

It was thus that the hitherto discrete powers of the landlord, the moneylender and the official came to form, under colonial rule, a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasant. His subjection to this triumvirate—\textit{sarkari, sahukari} and \textit{zamindari}—was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several instances. For the appropriation of his surplus was brought about by the authority wielded over local societies and markets by the landlord-moneylenders and a secondary capitalism working closely with them and by the encapsulation of that authority in the power of the colonial state. Indeed, the element of coercion was so explicit and so ubiquitous in all their dealings with the peasant that he could hardly look upon his relationship with them as anything but political. By the same token too in undertaking to destroy this relationship he engaged himself in what was essentially a political task, a task in which the existing power nexus had to be turned on its head as a necessary condition for the redress of any particular grievance.

\(^*\) \textit{Bengal:} I 98.
There was no way for the peasant to launch into such a project in a fit of absent-mindedness. For this relationship was so fortified by the power of those who had the most to benefit from it and their determination, backed by the resources of a ruling culture, to punish the least infringement, that he risked all by trying to subvert or destroy it by rebellion. This risk involved not merely the loss of his land and chattels but also that of his moral standing derived from an unquestioning subordination to his superiors, which tradition had made into his dharma. No wonder, therefore, that the preparation of an uprising was almost invariably marked by much temporization and weighing of pros and cons on the part of its protagonists. In many instances they tried at first to obtain justice from the authorities by deputation (e.g. Titu’s bidroha, 1831), petition (e.g. Khandesh riots, 1852), and peaceful demonstration (e.g. Indigo rebellion, 1860) and took up arms only as a last resort when all other means had failed. Again, an émeute was preceded in most cases by consultation among the peasants in various forms, depending on the organization of the local society where it originated. There were meetings of clan elders and caste panchayats, neighbourhood conventions, larger mass gatherings, and so on. These consultative processes were often fairly protracted and could take weeks or even months to build up the necessary consensus at various levels until most of an entire community was mobilized for action by the systematic use of primordial networks and many different means of verbal and non-verbal communication.

There was nothing spontaneous about all this in the sense of being unthinking and wanting in deliberation. The peasant obviously knew what he was doing when he rose in revolt. The fact that this was designed primarily to destroy the authority of the superordinate elite and carried no elaborate blueprint for its replacement, does not put it outside the realm of politics. On the contrary, insurgency affirmed its political character precisely by its negative and inverse procedure. By trying to force a mutual substitution of the dominant and the dominated in the power structure it left nothing to doubt about its own identity as a project of power. As such it was perhaps less primitive than it is often presumed to be. More often than not it lacked neither in leadership nor in aim nor even in some
rudiments of a programme, although none of these attributes could compare in maturity or sophistication with those of the historically more advanced movements of the twentieth century. The evidence is ample and unambiguous on this point. Of the many cases discussed in this work there is none that could be said to have been altogether leaderless. Almost each had indeed some sort of a central leadership to give it a name and some cohesion, although in no instance was it fully in control of the many local initiatives originating with grassroot leaders whose authority was as fragmented as their standing short in duration. Quite clearly one is dealing here with a phenomenon that was nothing like a modern party leadership but could perhaps be best described, in Gramsci’s words, as ‘multiple elements of “conscious leadership” but no one of them... predominant’. Which is of course a very different thing from stigmatizing these loosely oriented struggles as ‘sub-political’ outbreaks of mass impetuosity without any direction and form.

Again, if aim and programme are a measure of politics, the militant mobilizations of our period must be regarded as more or less political. Not one of them was quite aimless, although the aim was more elaborately and precisely defined in some events than in others. The Barasat peasantry led by Titu Mir, the Santals under the Subah brothers and the Mundas under Birsa all stated their objectives to be power in one form or another. Peasant kings were a characteristic product of rural revolt throughout the subcontinent, and an anticipation of power was indexed on some occasions by the rebels designating themselves as a formally constituted army (fauj), their commanders as law-enforcing personnel (e.g. daroga, subahdar, nazir, etc.), and other leaders as ranked civilian officials (e.g. dewan, naib, etc.)—all by way of simulating the functions of a state apparatus. That the raj they wanted to substitute for the one they were out to destroy did not quite conform to the model of a secular and national state and their concept of power failed to rise above localism, sectarianism and ethnicity, does not take away from the essentially political character of their activity but defines the quality of that politics by specifying its limitations.

It would be wrong of course to overestimate the maturity of this politics and read into it the qualities of a subsequent phase
of more intensified class conflict, widespread anti-imperialist struggle and generally a higher level of militancy among the masses. Compared to these, the peasant movements of the first three-quarters of British rule represented a somewhat inchoate and naïve state of consciousness. Yet we propose to focus on this consciousness as our central theme, because it is not possible to make sense of the experience of insurgency merely as a history of events without a subject. It is in order to rehabilitate that subject that we must take the peasant-rebel’s awareness of his own world and his will to change it as our point of departure.

For however feeble and tragically ineffective this awareness and will might have been, they were still nothing less than the elements of a consciousness which was learning to compile and classify the individual and disparate moments of experience and organize these into some sort of generalizations. These were, in other words, the very beginnings of a theoretical consciousness. Insurgency was indeed the site where the two mutually contradictory tendencies within this still imperfect, almost embryonic, theoretical consciousness—that is, a conservative tendency made up of the inherited and uncritically absorbed material of the ruling culture and a radical one oriented towards a practical transformation of the rebel’s conditions of existence\(^{10}\)—met for a decisive trial of strength.

The object of this work is to try and depict this struggle not as a series of specific encounters but in its general form. The elements of this form derive from the very long history of the peasant’s subalternity and his striving to end it. Of these the former is of course more fully documented and represented in elite discourse because of the interest it has always had for its beneficiaries. However, subordination can hardly be justified as an ideal and a norm without acknowledging the fact and possibility of insubordination, so that the affirmation of dominance in the ruling culture speaks eloquently too of its Other, that is, resistance. They run on parallel tracks over the same stretches of history as mutually implied but opposed aspects of a pair of antagonistic consciousnesses.

It is thus that the oppression of the peasantry and the latter’s revolt against it figure again and again in our past not only as intermingled matters of fact but also as hostile but concomitant

\(^{10}\) Gramsci: 333.
traditions. Just as the time-honoured practice of holding the rural masses in thraldom has helped to develop codes of deference and loyalty, so has the recursive practice of insurgency helped to develop fairly well-established structures of defiance over the centuries. These are operative in a weak and fragmentary manner even in everyday life and in individual and small-group resistance, but come into their own in the most emphatic and comprehensive fashion when those masses set about turning things upside down and the moderating rituals, cults and ideologies help no longer to maintain the contradiction between subaltern and superordinate at a non-antagonistic level. In their detail of course these larger structures of resistance vary according to differences between regional cultures as well as between styles of dominance and the relative weights of the dominant groups in any given situation. But since insurgency with all its local variations relates antagonistically to this dominance everywhere throughout the historical period under study, there is much to it that combines into patterns cutting across its particular expressions. For, as it has been said,

The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz. the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.\textsuperscript{11}

It will be our aim in this work to try and identify some of these ‘common forms or general ideas’ in rebel consciousness during the colonial period. However, within that category we have chosen to concentrate on ‘the first elements’ which make it possible for the general ideas to combine in complex formations and constitute what Gramsci has described as ‘the pillars of politics and of any collective action whatsoever’.\textsuperscript{12} These \textit{elementary aspects}, as we propose to call them, are subject to a high degree of redundancy: precisely because they recur again and again and almost everywhere in our agrarian movements, they

\textsuperscript{11} MECW: VI 504. \textsuperscript{12} Gramsci: 144.
are the ones which are the most overlooked. The result has been not merely to exclude politics from the historiography of Indian peasant insurgency but to reduce the latter to a mere embellishment, a sort of decorative and folklorist detail serving primarily to enliven the curricula vitae of the indigenous and foreign elites. By contrast, it is rebel consciousness which will be allowed to dominate the present exercise. We want to emphasize its sovereignty, its consistency and its logic in order to compensate for its absence from the literature on the subject and to act, if possible, as a corrective to the eclecticism common to much writing on this theme.

Our choice of historical evidence within the colonial period has been more or less restricted to a span of 117 years between the revolt against Deby Sinha in 1783 and the end of the Birsaite rising in 1900. Although some instances from other times (as well as other countries) have been mentioned for purposes of comparison, the substantive experience used as the basis of the argument falls between these dates. The first twenty-five years of British rule have not been taken into account simply because of the paucity of information about the rural disturbances of that period. Thus, the activities of the sannyasis and the fakirs in the 1770s have been left out because not enough is known at the present state of research about the volume and character of actual peasant involvement in them. And we have taken the end of the last great wave of the Munda ulgulan and the death of its celebrated leader as our terminal point primarily in order to study the elementary aspects of rebel consciousness in a relatively 'pure' state before the politics of nationalism and socialism begin to penetrate the countryside on a significant scale.

No attempt has been made in this work to achieve an exhaustive coverage of events between 1783 and 1900. The information on some of these is not accessible to us either because it has not been recovered from the primary sources or because it is available only in a language not known to the author. Yet there are other peasant movements of the period which though not unfamiliar have found no mention here because they have little to add to the argument. However, with all such omissions,
deliberate or otherwise, we trust this essay to stand its ground, for the evidence on which it draws is sufficient for its purpose.

Most, though not all, of this evidence is elitist in origin. This has come down to us in the form of official records of one kind or another—police reports, army despatches, administrative accounts, minutes and resolutions of governmental departments, and so on. Non-official sources of our information on the subject, such as newspapers or the private correspondence between persons in authority, too, speak in the same elitist voice, even if it is that of the indigenous elite or of non-Indians outside officialdom. Staple of most historical writing on colonial themes, evidence of this type has a way of stamping the interests and outlook of the rebels' enemies on every account of our peasant rebellions.

One obvious way of combating such bias could perhaps be to summon folklore, oral as well as written, to the historian's aid. Unfortunately however there is not enough to serve for this purpose either in quantity or quality in spite of populist beliefs to the contrary. For one thing, the actual volume of evidence yielded by songs, rhymes, ballads, anecdotes, etc. is indeed very meagre, to the point of being insignificant, compared to the size of documentation available from elitist sources on almost any agrarian movement of our period. This is a measure not only of the monopoly which the peasant's enemies had of literacy under the Raj, but of their concern to watch and record every hostile gesture among the rural masses. They simply had too much to lose, and fear which haunts all authority based on force, made careful archivists of them. Take, for instance, the Santal hool of 1855 which is richer than many others in this respect. Yet what we know about it from the Judicial Proceedings series of the West Bengal State Archives alone, that is, not counting the district records, far outweighs the information to be had from Jugia Harom's and Chotrae Desmanjhi's reminiscences taken together with the folklore collected by Sen, Baskay, and Archer and Culshaw. For most other events the proportion is perhaps even higher in favour of the elitist sources. Indeed, for one of the most important of these, namely, the

13 For these see MHRKR: passim, but especially pp. clxxvi–viii; Culshaw & Archer: 218–39; D. C. Sen (1926): 265–71; Baskay: passim.
Barasat revolt of 1832, it would be hard to find anything at all that does not derive from a quarter identified with opinions hostile to Titu and his followers.

An equally disappointing aspect of the folklore relating to peasant militancy is that it can be elitist too. Not all singers and balladeers took a sympathetic view of it. Some of them belonged to upper-caste families fallen on hard times or to other impoverished groups within the middle strata of rural society. Cut off from the tillers of the soil by status if not by wealth, they hung on to the rural gentry for patronage and expressed the latter’s anxieties and prejudices in their compositions on the theme of agrarian disturbances. Thus, the insurgent voice which comes through the Mundari poetry and homiletics published by Singh, or the anti-survey song in Sandip dialect published by Grierson, is more than balanced out in folk literature by the representation of an obviously landlord point of view in some of the verses cited in Saha’s account of the Pabna bidroha, Ray’s of the Pagalpanthi insurrection, and so on.\textsuperscript{14}

How then are we to get in touch with the consciousness of insurgency when our access to it is barred thus by the discourse of counter-insurgency? The difficulty is perhaps less insurmountable than it seems to be at first sight. For counter-insurgency, which derives directly from insurgency and is determined by the latter in all that is essential to its form and articulation, can hardly afford a discourse that is not fully and compulsively involved with the rebel and his activities. It is of course true that the reports, despatches, minutes, judgments, laws, letters, etc. in which policemen, soldiers, bureaucrats, landlords, usurers and others hostile to insurgency register their sentiments, amount to a representation of their will. But these documents do not get their content from that will alone, for the latter is predicated on another will—that of the insurgent. It should be possible therefore to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence.

There are two ways in which this presence makes itself felt. In the first place, it comes as a direct reporting of such rebel utterances as are intercepted by the authorities from time to

\textsuperscript{14} Singh: Appendices H, I, K; Grierson: 257; Saha: III 97–100; Ray (1966): 235.
time and used for pacification campaigns, legal enactments, judicial proceedings and other interventions of the regime against its adversaries. Witness to a sort of official eavesdropping, this discourse enters into the records of counter-insurgency variously as messages and rumours circulating within a rural community, snatches of conversation overheard by spies, statements made by captives under police interrogation or before courts, and so on. Meant to assist the Raj in suppressing rebellion and incriminating rebels, its usefulness in that particular respect was a measure of its authenticity as a documentation of the insurgent's will. In other words, intercepted discourse of this type testifies no less to the consciousness of the rebel peasantry than to the intentions of their enemies, and may quite legitimately serve as evidence for a historiography not compromised by the latter's point of view.

The presence of this consciousness is also affirmed by a set of indices within elite discourse. These have the function of expressing the hostility of the British authorities and their native protégés towards the unruly troublemakers in the countryside. The words, phrases and, indeed, whole chunks of prose addressed to this purpose are designed primarily to indicate the immorality, illegality, undesirability, barbarity, etc. of insurgent practice and to announce by contrast the superiority of the elite on each count. A measure of the difference between two mutually contradictory perceptions, they have much to tell us not only about elite mentality but also about that to which it is opposed—namely, subaltern mentality. The antagonism is indeed so complete and so firmly structured that from the terms stated for one it should be possible, by reversing their values, to derive the implicit terms of the other. When, therefore, an official document speaks of badmashes as participants in rural disturbances, this does not mean (going by the normal sense of that Urdu word) any ordinary collection of rascals but peasants involved in a militant agrarian struggle. In the same context, a reference to any 'dacoit village' (as one comes across so often in the Mutiny narratives) would indicate the entire population of a village united in resistance to the armed forces of the state; 'contagion'—the enthusiasm and solidarity generated by an uprising among various rural groups within a region; 'fanatics'—rebels inspired by some kinds of
revivalist or puritanical doctrines; ‘lawlessness’—the defiance by the people of what they had come to regard as bad laws, and so on. Indeed, the pressures exercised by insurgency on elite discourse force it to reduce the semantic range of many words and expressions, and assign to them specialized meanings in order to identify peasants as rebels and their attempt to turn the world upside down as crime. Thanks to such a process of narrowing down it is possible for the historian to use this impoverished and almost technical language as a clue to the antonymies which speak for a rival consciousness—that of the rebel. Some of that consciousness which is so firmly inscribed in elite discourse will, we hope, be made visible in our reading of it in this work.