CHAPTER 2

NEGATION

‘Negative consciousness’: the concept explained—discrimination—some instances—extension of insurgency by atideśa—the term discussed—logic of atideśa—caution against overestimating this type of consciousness—inversion: the principal modality of negation—‘world turned upside down’: universality and antiquity of this notion—inversion: prescriptive versus real—insurgency as a semiotic break—how codes of dominance and subordination are formed—revolt against ‘official language’—spoken and written utterances—kinesic and proxemic codes of authority—how these are defied in rebellion—other conspicuous symbols of power—physical appearance, dress, transport, residence, etc.—how these are appropriated or destroyed in the process of inversion—undermining spiritual dominance—desecration: its meaning—inversion as a struggle for prestige.

It is not by insurgency alone that the peasant comes to know himself. In colonial India a sense of identity was imposed on him by those who had power over him by virtue of their class, caste and official standing. It was they who made him aware of his place in society as a measure of his distance from themselves—a distance expressed in differentials of wealth, status and culture. His identity amounted to the sum of his subalternity. In other words, he learnt to recognize himself not by the properties and attributes of his own social being but by a diminution, if not negation, of those of his superiors.

All the force of the ruling ideologies, especially that of religion, imbued the peasant with this negative consciousness and pandered to it by extolling the virtues of loyalty and devotion, so that he could be induced to look upon his subservience not only as tolerable but almost covetable. There were ancient cults which fostered bhakti—‘the basic need in feudal ideology’, according to Kosambi¹—to make total dedication to one’s superiors, divine as well as human, a matter of spiritual com-

¹ Kosambi (1962): 32.
mitment. There were the consecrated memories of legendary low-born servants who had died for their high-caste masters. In Bengal, Kalu the Dom was immortalized in a cycle of late medieval ballads composed in honour of the deity, Dharma. Born to one of the most ‘unclean’ of Hindu castes, he was slain in battle while trying to help his lord recover some lands usurped by a rival magnate. Then there was the Poleya who, according to a legend of the Coorgs, was so grieved at his master’s death that he committed suicide by throwing himself into the latter’s funeral pyre and earned his reward posthumously in the form of an offering of food and drink in a ritual of ancestor worship. And in many of the Nayar taravads of Malabar propitiatory rites of the same kind were addressed to the spirit of faithful serfs who had died similarly broken-hearted at the loss of their patrons or in the course of heroic ventures to defend the prestige and properties of their owners—as did the Tiyyar servant in Kottayam who, so goes the story, first killed his master at his bidding and then courted death fighting rather than be captured and converted to Islam by raiders who had come with Tipu Sultan’s army in the 1780s.

Thus the power of ideas and the circumstances corresponding to them made the peasant sensitive to the distance which separated him from the pillars of that society, a distance regarded by him as almost the natural condition of his existence. Indeed, the authority of all superordinate classes and groups was secure only so far and as long as he was reconciled to that condition. However, paradoxically enough, his revolt against that authority, when the hour struck, derived much of its strength from the same awareness. Taken by itself this did not of course constitute a mature and fully evolved class consciousness. Yet it would be wrong not to regard this as the very beginning of that consciousness. Gramsci helps us to grasp its precise moment in characterizing this ‘merely as the first glimmer of such consciousness, in other words, merely as the basic negative, polemical attitude’. Indeed, with all his warning against overestimating it, he acknowledges its importance as a necessary beginning. ‘The lower classes, historically on the defensive,’ he writes, ‘can only achieve self-awareness via a series of

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negations, via their consciousness of the identity and class limits of their enemy.'

This consciousness has a historical tendency to 'come to the surface' locally among some of the more radical sections of the rural masses long before being generalized on a national scale in any country. This can be seen from Hilton's study of the peasant movements in late medieval Europe. In spite of all dissimilarities in other respects, 'there was one prominent feature which they had in common', he says: 'the emergence, among some of the participants, of a consciousness of class. It was, however, a negative class consciousness in that the definition of class which was involved was that of their enemies rather than of themselves: in other words, the nobility.'

Our study of peasant insurgency in colonial India too must take such negation as its point of departure. This is not only because of the precedence due to it as that form of rebel consciousness which anticipated others but also because it provides us with an insight into some of the more important principles governing the practice of rebellion. These principles have not always received the attention they merit. The bustle and panic caused by agrarian violence has often been responsible for highlighting its drama rather than its logic and consistency. However, once the glare of burning mansions died down and the eye got used to the facts of an uprising, one could see how far from haphazard it had been.

The negations characteristic of insurgency in our period were worked out in terms of two sets of principles. The first, which we shall call discrimination, was realized in its most explicit form in the violence selectively directed by the peasants at particular targets. The frequency and regularity with which this occurred make no sense except as symptoms of wilful commission. The pattern shows up most obviously of course in those cases where the rebels had only one or two clearly specified foes to deal with, such as the notorious Deby Sinha of Rangpur or the indigo planters of lower Bengal, so that the uprisings of 1783 and 1860 could be clearly seen as having their edge turned respectively against the kacharis and the factories. However, even in the course of violence that was more comprehensive in

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scope, its protagonists often made their emphasis speak for itself. It was this which enabled some of the local administrators in Uttar Pradesh to discern an element common to all the many-sided disturbances in that province in 1857. ‘Here as in other parts of the country’, wrote the magistrate of Muzaf- farnagar, ‘the Buneahs and Mahajuns were in the majority of cases the victims’, an observation echoed by his opposite number in Hamirpur for his own district when he said that ‘the great feature’ of the émeute there had been ‘the universal ousting of all bankers, Buniyas, Marwarees, etc. from landed property . . . by whatever means they acquired it, whether at auction, by private sale or otherwise’.8

Concentration such as this was all the more remarkable for the care with which it chose its object and demonstrated how clearly the peasants distinguished between enemies and allies. The definition of friend and foe could of course vary from one insurrection to another and occasionally between groups of protagonists within the same event depending on the conditions in which they operated and the levels of their consciousness. However, the fact that a discrimination of this order entered into insurgent practice at all, must be understood as indicative of its rationale. Hilton brings out this element of ‘conscious hostility’ in his observations on the Jacquerie of 1358. ‘Without any declaration of aims’, he says, ‘its existence could be concluded from the fact that the objects of the peasants’ attacks were exclusively knights, squires and ladies along with the castles in which they lived.’9 The Peasant War in Germany, too, witnessed much selective violence of this kind. During the sack of Weinsberg in April 1525 Metzler and Hipler made their men limit plunder strictly and exclusively to the properties of the clergy and to those of the Keeper of the Wine-cellar, the Bailiff, the City Clerk and the Mayor among the burghers. All others of the latter category were spared on the condition that they provided the victors with food and drink and looked after their wounded so long as they were there.10 To Engels this phenomenon was important enough to be picked out of the tangled history of that great revolt. The insurgents, he observed, had won over the burghers of Heilbronn to their side, so that when

7 FSUP: V 82. 8 Ibid.: III 121. 9 Hilton: 131. Emphasis added.
10 Zimmermann: I 389; Bax: 125.
the town capitulated to them, it was ‘only the possessions of the clergy and the Teutonic Order’ which were singled out for the customary pillage.\textsuperscript{11} ‘They only wanted the clergy, their enemies’, according to Zimmermann\textsuperscript{12} on whose documentation Engels based his account. Lefebvre, too, made it a point to emphasize how in the course of the jacqueries of the French Revolution the peasants used all possible means to wreck the properties of those opposed to the Third Estate, but often stopped short of arson, although that would have been simpler and more effective. They were ‘reluctant to use it [i.e. fire] because they naturally feared that it might get out of control and spread to the village’. He cites an occasion when a crowd proceeded to destroy and burn a seigneur’s farms and residence ‘in a very methodical way . . . carefully evacuating anything belonging to the farmers and the servants’. According to him, ‘all the peasant revolts followed this pattern’.\textsuperscript{13}

The Indian experience agrees with this pattern to some extent. In the course of the popular disturbances following the Mutiny in Aligarh, for instance, the crowds plundered European properties with much thoroughness but did relatively less damage to those of the natives.\textsuperscript{14} Again, nothing illuminates more the character of the Kol and Santal uprisings of 1832 and 1855 respectively than the well-known fact that in both instances the peasants spared the tribal population and concentrated their attack on the non-tribal ‘outsiders’—\textit{suds} and \textit{dikus}, as they called them. ‘Throughout the whole of this devastation’, wrote one administrator to another about the first of these events, ‘not a single Cole’s life was sacrificed nor a home belonging to them destroyed except by accident, and self-interested motives induced the Insurgents to exempt Blacksmiths Gwalas and occasionally the manufacturers of earthen vessels (who were not Coles) from their indiscriminate slaughter.’\textsuperscript{15} Indeed, as grudgingly acknowledged in these words, the limits of solidarity and antagonism were specified by the distinctions made between those elements of the non-tribal population to whom the rebels were positively hostile, e.g. landlords

\textsuperscript{11} MECW: X 453–4. Emphasis added. Also see Bax: 196.
\textsuperscript{12} Zimmermann: II 20.
\textsuperscript{13} Lefebvre (1973): 119.
\textsuperscript{14} FSUP: V 657.
\textsuperscript{15} BC 1502 (58893): Master to Thompson (17 Jan. 1833). For further evidence and detailed discussion on this point see Chapter 5 below.
and moneylenders, and those subaltern classes and castes who lived and worked with them in the same rural communities and were treated as loyal allies. Such discrimination about which official notice was taken to the effect that ‘in many villages the houses of Mahajuns were burnt & those of ryots spared’ by the Santals,\textsuperscript{16} showed where ethnicity stopped and an incipient form of class consciousness began. Conversely, the selective violence of the Kunbi peasantry in Poona and Ahmadnagar districts in 1875 testified to a modification of class consciousness by localism. ‘The Marwari and Gujar sowkars were almost exclusively the victims of the riots’, wrote the Commissioners appointed to inquire into those disturbances, ‘and in villages where sowkars of the Brahmmin and other castes shared the money lending business with Marwaris it was usual to find that the latter only were molested.’\textsuperscript{17}

Negative consciousness of this type had a tendency to extend its domain by a process of analogy and transference, which we shall call its atidēśa function (following the usage in Sanskrit grammar and linguistics).\textsuperscript{18} A detail of the Swing movement in England may help to illustrate this. The violence of the rural proletariat on this occasion had only threshing machines as its initial object. However, this was soon generalized in two ways—first, as an attack on all farming implements including iron

\textsuperscript{17} DRCR: 3. Emphasis added.
\textsuperscript{18} The meaning of the term atidēśa, as used in Sanskrit grammar, is given thus in Apte’s dictionary: ‘Extended applications, application by analogy, transference of one attribute to another, attraction of one case or rule to another’. (Apte: 29). Such transference is prescribed by Pāṇini, for instance, in śāṅkivād ādeśa ‘nālvidhau (I.1.56) indicating ‘that the operations to be performed on or by the original may be similarly performed on or by the substitute, but with certain restrictions’, i.e. except in cases covered by what is technically known as al-vidhi (Pāṇini: 42–3). The general and particular aspects of the concept of atidēśa are discussed respectively in Chapters VII and VIII of Jaimini’s Pīrṇa-Mimāṃsā, especially in connection with the transference of the details of a model sacrifice (prakṛti-yāga) such as the Darśapūrṇāmāsa to any other sacrifice (istī) modelled on it (vikṛti-yāga). (For text and commentaries see Jaimini: 417–503.) Since Vedic rituals are governed by mantras, such transference requires the latter to be modified (āha) in certain cases, and ‘the modification usually consists in picking out one word of a mantra and substituting another for it’ (Iyer: 190). Bhartṛhari justified such uses of atidēśa in his great work on linguistics, Vākyapadīyam (II. 78), and one of his commentators has pointed out that ‘in everyday life also such transference often takes place, as, for instance, when one says: ‘Behave towards this Kṣatriya as towards a Brāhmaṇa’ (Bhartṛhari: 38).
ploughs, harvesters, chaff-cutters, hay-makers and seed and winnowing machines, and then, as an attack on industrial machines of all kinds such as those used in foundries, sawmills, woollen manufactories and so on. The rioters themselves made the point quite clearly when in order to justify the destruction of a winnowing machine ‘they said it must go, as it was a machine, and it was broke to pieces’, or as one of their leaders declared, after his men had wrecked all the machinery in two neighbouring mills—one that made threshing-machines and the other sacking—‘they had come from 20 miles above London and were going as far down the country as there was any machinery, to destroy it’. Violence extended thus by atidesa from one particular implement to all other implements in the same class and from one class of machinery to another.

The logic of this extension applies to people as much as to things. It is indeed usual for a rebellion to broaden its thrust as it develops and include among its targets groups and individuals who may have no part at all in causing the outbreak. This implies, first, that under such circumstances peasant violence may tend to direct itself against all members of a given class of enemies without pausing to sort out the ‘good’ individuals among them from the ‘bad’, and secondly, that it may tend to hit out against all classes and sections of the population hostile to the peasantry, irrespective of whichever of these might have been the rebels’ initial object of attack. This is why in 1830 the incendiary’s torch did not spare the barns and outhouses of a Surrey farmer although (as The Times ruefully observed after the event) he ‘neither used a threshing machine nor even employed strangers to work in his employment’—two practices the labourers were known most to hate. For, by the time this act of arson was committed in the autumn of that year the battle lines had been drawn far too clearly to induce any leniency among the village poor towards even the least oppressive of their enemies in south-eastern England. The same tendency, the negative character of which was emphasized by Trotsky when he described it as a ‘wave of class hatred’, was conspicuous in the peasant riots of the Russian Revolution of 1905 too. ‘Estates were sacked almost regardless of the existing

19 H & R: 116, 118, 119, 121, 124, 125, 198.
20 Ibid.: 118.
21 Ibid.: 121.
22 Ibid.: 101.
relations between peasants and individual landowners', he wrote: 'if the estates of reactionary landlords were wrecked, so were those of liberals.'\(^{23}\) The jacqueries triggered off by the revolt of the sepoys in 1857 provided a good many Indian parallels of this phenomenon. When, for instance, the villagers in Allahabad district responded to the mutiny at the sadar station by their own uprising, they made little distinction in their attack between official and non-official institutions. 'The very asylums built from charitable funds provided by the Christian population for the relief of the people were burnt down and demolished with as much ill-will as our public offices', wrote a bewildered and somewhat pained British magistrate reporting the holocaust to his superior.\(^{24}\)

The same official report also testified to the other and even more significant, because radical, aspect of the atidesa function, that is, to the manner in which rebel violence tended to spread analogically developing its initial attack on any particular element among the peasants' enemies into a general attack on all or most of them, a process by which insurgency came to permeate an entire domain constituted by such authorities, institutions and groups as were hostile to the subaltern population. Thus the rebellion of 1857 in Allahabad extended soon beyond the barracks where it had originated and hurtled against everything which, like the army, represented the authority of the Raj. A prison, a chowkidar's post, a factory, a railway station, 'every house or factory belonging to Europeans and every building however large or however insignificant', in fact everything 'with which we are connected', became, according to the local magistrate, an object of pillage, destruction and arson in the city and the surrounding countryside.\(^{25}\) The pattern occurs again and again in the course of all the major uprisings during our period. Whatever might have been the immediate cause of any particular outbreak, the rebels almost invariably enlarged the scope of their operations to include all British 'connections'—all white military and civilian officials as well as non-official whites such as planters, missionaries, railwaymen, etc.; all seats of official power such as courts, jails, police stations, treasuries and so on as well as non-official buildings (e.g. factories, bungalows, churches, etc.) symbolizing British presence. The

\(^{23}\) Trotsky: 204-5.  
\(^{24}\) FSUP: I 476.  
\(^{25}\) Ibid.: Emphasis added.
evidence on this point is far too abundant and accessible to require citing here in detail. One has only to recall the threat to the East India Company’s headquarters at Rangpur and its granaries at Bhowaniganj during the dhing of 1783, the attacks on churches and clergymen during the Birsaiite ulgulan, the Santal hostilities towards railway engineers and planters during the hool, and the numerous raids on thanas, jails and public offices in all these instances and at the time of the Mutiny—to realize the almost universal tendency of the more militant peasant uprisings to take on the entire range of British authority in both its official and non-official sectors.

Generalized violence of this kind was not necessarily delimited by ethnicity. The whites were not alone in being subjected to it. On the contrary, it was not unusual for attacks on government property and personnel and Europeans directly associated with these to develop into attacks on the principal native collaborators of the Raj as well. For, no matter which one of their three main oppressors—sarkar, sahukar or zamindar—was the first to bear the initial brunt of a jacquerie in any particular instance, the peasants often showed a remarkable propensity to extend their operations widely enough to include among their targets the local representatives of one or both of the other groups too. Many of the more powerful events of our period testify to this. Titu Mir’s bidroha in Barasat and the series of Moplah rebellions in nineteenth-century Malabar started off as anti-landlord struggles but culminated as campaigns against the Raj itself. Conversely, the movements of the Farazis and the indigo ryots against European planters often developed into resistance to rack-renting and other forms of zamindari despotism. The Kol insurrection of 1832 in Chota Nagpur had landlords and moneylenders among the suds as its initial objects of hostility but ended up as a war against the Company’s government itself. And, conversely again, the Birsaiite ulgulan launched with the declared aim of liberating the Mundas from British rule made no secret of its hatred for banias and mahajans as it progressed.

Transference of this kind was most conspicuous in the course of the peasant uprisings of the period of the Mutiny. Inspired by and foil to a revolt in the armed forces threatening the very foundation of the regime, these jacqueries were directed as
much against the government as against moneylenders. Indeed, the expression of anti-bania hatred was widespread enough to be regarded by many contemporaries as the principal aspect of these disturbances. Yet as Stokes has shown by a careful investigation of this phenomenon in Uttar Pradesh, there was little in the incidence of usurious transactions to justify the extent and intensity of the aggression against their protagonists in the regions where this occurred most in 1857-8. The attacks on mahajans and auction-purchasers, he concludes, were motivated less by economic than political considerations. The importance of this finding can hardly be exaggerated. For the symbiosis of sarkar, sahukar and zamindar was a political fact rooted in the very nature of British power in the subcontinent. By directing his violence against all three members of this trinity irrespective of which one of them provoked him to revolt in the first place, the peasant displayed a certain understanding of the mutuality of their interests and the power on which this was predicated. However feeble and incipient, this represented the emergence of a political consciousness, even if no more than its very ‘first glimmer’.

An atidesa function of the Santal rebellion of 1855 may be recalled here to illuminate further this particular type of rebel perception. As is well known, violence spread in this case with the utmost speed from targets identified with the colonial administration and the whites to those representing the authority of landlords and moneylenders, though by no means in the same sequence in all regions. The Santals made it obvious that they intended to spare no person or property associated with sarkar, sahukar or zamindar, and thus established within a matter of days a well-defined domain of insurgency in which their operations had a free play between all three categories of their foes and were permuted in all possible ways. That this was not just the work of some kind of ‘instinct’ characteristic of ‘primitive rebels’ but followed from the logic of a certain understanding and will, is easily documented. For it conforms fully to the view that Sido and Kanhu, the leaders of the insurrection, had of their enemies and which they had recorded in their historic parwana sent out long before the outbreak of the insurrection. ‘The Mahajuns have committed a great sin’, it

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*Stokes: 138, 179.*
declared. ‘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 Rs. 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.’ There is some evidence here of a grasp, however weak and crudely stated, of the linkage between the indigenous exploiters and the colonial authorities with the emphasis weighted slightly—albeit very slightly—in favour of the suggestion that the transactions of the former were contingent on the power of the latter.

It will be wrong not to see in all this the imprint of a consciousness trying to identify some of the basic elements of economic exploitation and the political superstructure which legitimized these. However, to overestimate its lucidity or depth will be equally ill-advised. For it is still a rather hesitant, inchoate and disjointed perception, not unlike the discourse which registered it. It describes empirically some aspects of the peasant’s conditions of existence, but falls far short of conceptualizing the structure of authority which made such conditions possible. ‘The only form in which the State is perceived’, one could say after Gramsci, is in terms of officialdom—of the sahibs. This characteristic expression of a negative consciousness on the insurgent’s part matched its other symptom, that is, his self-alienation. He was still committed to envisaging the coming war on the Raj as the project of a will independent of himself and his own role in it as no more than instrumental. ‘Kanoo and Seedu Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight’, stated the parwana in which the authors did not recognize even their own voice, but heard only that of God: ‘This is the order of the Thacoor.’

The other modality of negation characteristic of insurgency consists of the peasants’ attempt to destroy or appropriate for themselves the signs of the authority of those who dominate them. The inversion which is necessarily brought about by such a process has been frequent and widespread enough to constitute a stereotyped figure of speech in many languages. ‘Those who used to rank lowest now rank above everybody else; and

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77 TTP. 78 Gramsci: 272. 79 TTP.
so this is called “turning things upside down”.’ When Mao Tse-tung wrote this in his *Hunan Report* as a summing up of the achievements of the peasant uprising of 1927 in his home province, he used a phrase almost identical to one in *The Acts of the Apostles XVII, 1–6*, describing the impact of Paul and the early Christians on Thessalonica when they arrived there with their revolutionary message: ‘These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also’, cried their enemies.

In the course of the centuries which intervened between these two texts the same imagery phrased in much the same way in many languages has been used to uphold, denounce or simply describe rebellion. Zimmermann tells us of the order issued by a leader of the German peasant army to a town taken by them in 1525 asking it to treat his troops well ‘or else they would want to turn the lowliest into the highest’ (*oder sie wollten das Unterste zuoberst kehren*). And Lefebvre mentions how during the French Revolution the peasants came to a small town in the Maconnais on one occasion, wrecked the offices of the ‘crues’, fined the curé and the local gentry, smashed the weathercocks, and generally, *ils en profitèrent pour tout mettre sens dessus dessous*, that is, ‘put upright what was below’. In colonial India the British described the Kol rebels as ‘endeavouring to excite the lower orders against the higher’, while the seditious posters which appeared in the bazaar at Lucknow on the eve of the Mutiny were seen by a local correspondent of the *Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette* as the work of ‘the scum of the populace who like the Scottish robber would like to see the world turned upside down’. All such expressions, in German, French and English, come close to echoing Manu’s ancient fear of the consequences which could follow from any lapse in the violence of the state. For if the king did not exercise his power of punishment (*danda*) relentlessly enough, ‘the crow would eat the sacrificial cake, the dog lick up the food put out for ritual oblation and no right of ownership (*svāmyam*) would be there for anyone to retain’—in short, we are warned, ‘the lower would become the higher’ (*pravarteta adharottaram*). This brahmanical

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30 Mao: I 30. See also I 28.  
31 Zimmermann: II 20.  
34 Shiromani: 7/20–1.
dread of the inversive process was to be systematized later into a chiliastic image of total cataclysm in the Vāyu-purāṇam. It envisaged a great upheaval (samkshovah) with the advent of Kali at the epoch’s end (yugānta). Among the many reversals characteristic of that topsy-turvy age, Brahmans, it was predicted, would behave like Sudras and Sudras like Brahmans, kings would take to the vocation of thieves and thieves to that of kings, women would be faithless to their husbands and servants to their masters.\textsuperscript{35}

It is precisely in order to prevent such inversions from occurring in real life that the dominant culture in all traditional societies allows these to be simulated at regular calendric intervals, and in so far as such a culture is almost invariably mediated by religion, the reversals condoned, in fact enjoined, by it, are acted out as sacred rituals. Hence the religiosity associated with such prescriptive inversions everywhere no matter whether the protagonists are Europeans involved in Shrove Tuesday carnivals or Zulu women in ceremonies meant to propitiate the goddess Nomkubulwana. The vast literature on the subject\textsuperscript{36} shows how on such privileged occasions the ‘structural inferiors’ in the given societies enjoy the licence to indulge in rites of status reversal with respect to their superordinates. Servants act like masters, women like men, children like grown-ups, juniors like seniors, and so on. ‘Degree, priority and place’ are not observed so long as these festivals of contraries continue and most of the visual and verbal signs of authority and obedience which represent social morality are mutually substituted for the time being. Yet, as all observers agree, the outcome of such prescriptive inversion is not to destroy or even weaken a social order, but to buttress it. It is of course possible that on some of these occasions the liminality of the participants and their particular circumstances might bring about a sudden switching of codes turning what is intended as a mock rebellion into a real one, a festival into an insurrection.

\textsuperscript{35} Tarkaratna: 58/38, 41–3. For other inversions characteristic of Kali, see ibid., 58/31–70 passim.

\textsuperscript{36} For some outstanding samples of this literature see Gluckman’s pioneering works, Gluckman (1963): 110–36 and (1966): 109–36. V. W. Turner: 166–203, contains some important theoretical considerations on this phenomenon and Burke: 182–204 a rich collection of European instances relating to carnival and the carnivalesque.
For the liminal, as Turner has emphasized, is ‘necessarily ambiguous’ and tends to ‘elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space’.

Hence the not too rare correspondence between sacred days and insurgency as witnessed, for instance, by the incursion of Wat Tyler’s men into London on the morning of Corpus Christi, 13 June 1381, the beginning of the great series of peasant revolts in Germany during Fastnacht 1525, the conversion of a carnival featuring Mère Folle and her Infanterie into a riot in masquerade against the royal tax officials in Dijon in 1630, the coincidence of some of the jacqueries of 1789 in France with Sundays, feast days, etc. as mentioned by Lefebvre and the threat of a massive uprising in Bombay during Muharram and Diwali in the year of the Mutiny. However, it is important to remember that such cases, numerous as they are, occur in spite of prescriptive inversion and represent the failure of what is meant and indeed has generally proved to be a safety-valve device. For the purpose of such rituals is clearly to empty rebellion of its content and reduce it into a routine of gestures in order to reinforce authority by feigning defiance. Gluckman’s observation about the Zulu ceremony mentioned above could indeed apply to the entire genre. ‘This particular ritual’, he wrote, ‘by allowing people to behave in normally prohibited ways, gave expression, in a reversed form, to the normal rightness of a particular kind of social order.’

Some of the more permissive Hindu festivals may be said fully to bear this out.

Take, for instance, the Teyyam festival as celebrated in parts of Malabar. This centres around the shrines of the female deity Bhagavadi, which are attached to the landowning and politically as well as economically dominant Nayar taravads. The propitiatory rituals are, for each taravad, officiated by one of its lower-caste servants who puts on a mask at a particular point of the ceremonial process and is possessed by a malevolent ghost of the teyyam (derived from the Sanskrit word deva, ‘god’) type. While in this state, the servant can and often does adopt an

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87 V. W. Turner: 95.
aggressive or authoritative attitude towards his superiors, demands gifts and voices threats and blessings—all as an instrument of the spirit of the dead working through him. And when at the end of the ceremony the oracle takes off his mask and reverts to his menial status, he receives a fee for the ritual service rendered and gets on with his other customary duties. Kathleen Gough, to whom we owe this account, has stated the importance of such prescriptive reversal in emphasizing the traditional authority of the Nayar landed gentry over the subaltern groups in their villages. ‘For the low caste officiant’, she writes, ‘these festivals permit a limited, stylized expression of aggression and a temporary assumption of authority towards their high caste masters. At the same time, the festivals underline both the interdependence between the castes, and ultimately, the lower castes’ permanent, secular role as submissive servants.’

A very similar dialectic of ritual inversion and reinforcement of authority has been observed by Srinivas in his study of the Coorgs. Among them the Banna constitute an inferior caste whose traditional duty has been to serve aristocratic okkas as priests and oracles on certain ritual occasions. They are a polluting caste, so polluting indeed that at the annual festival of the deity Kakkot Achchayya a Brahman priest carrying the idol risks defiling it as well as himself even by catching a glimpse of the Banna oracle. Normally the latter is regarded as too unclean to have access to the central hall of any upper-caste Coorg ancestral house, which must be kept in the highest state of ritual purity. Yet it is precisely in that central hall that he is made to preside over the prestigious ceremony of ancestor worship as its chief officiant. And when in the course of performing the propitiatory rites he is possessed by each of the ancestral spirits in turn, he feels free not merely to press sumptuous demands for food and drink on his landlord hosts but even to admonish the head of the okka for neglecting the paddy, for not looking after his inheritance assiduously enough and generally for failing in his duties. ‘As the temporary vehicle of the spirit of an ancestor he is entitled to say and do things which he normally would not dream of saying or doing.’ But the licence is short-lived. Srinivas insists on the purely temporary character of such role reversal which does little to

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40 Gough: 472–3.
diminish, far less end, the structural cleavages in Coorg society. The same could be said also of the ritual elevation of the Poleya, one of the most impure and exploited of all castes in this region—traditionally a caste of agricestic slaves—who are required ‘to exercise power over people belonging to the higher castes’ during certain festivals, thereby ‘compensating them for the low position they normally occupy in the caste structure’. In the event, however, it is not their inclusion in some festivals and its ‘compensation-aspect’ but their exclusion from most of these as indicative of their real, ineradicable state of degradation which emerges as the central fact of their existence. As at the end of the splendid oracular drama the Banna returns to his role as the musty repository of landlord family tradition, so after his exposure to a modicum of simulated authority in short sacred seasons the Poleya sinks back to his place at the bottom of Coorg society as its most disenfranchised member. The only purpose which the process of ritual inversion may be said to serve in either case is to affirm and make explicit at regular intervals the distance separating each of these subaltern groups from those who rule the villages.\(^{41}\)

What emerges clearly from these instances is the part played by religion in sacralizing the authority of the rural elites. But more than in any other festival this is made explicit in the celebration of Holi in the course of which these reversals are acted out with a vigour and on a scale as at no other occasion of the same kind. One of the most ancient of popular ceremonies in this ancient land, its origins go back to prehistoric times—to the late Stone Age according to some scholars\(^{42}\)—long before the beginnings of feudalism. Yet when the latter came to be established in the subcontinent, brahmanical Hinduism, often so hostile to vestiges of the autochthonous culture, bent backwards to confer on it full shastric status. Having made a début in some of the later medieval Puranas it was already enfranchised as a sacred event in the sixteenth-century law-books of Raghunandana and Govindananda.\(^{43}\) And by the time British officials and American anthropologists have come to write about it, spanning roughly a century and a half between Buchanan-Hamilton and McKim Marriott, it had settled down com-


\(^{42}\) Kosambi (1975): 199.

\(^{43}\) Chakravarti: 131.
fortably in its role as a *vrata* complete with fasting, bathing, puja and other concomitants of the Hindu ritual process. Hence nothing happens at this festival to upset society in spite of the seemingly radical *bouleversement* of the Holi schedule. The saturnalia, the systematic violation of structural distances between castes and classes, the defiance of rules governing interpersonal relationships between members of the family and community, the blatant undermining of private and public morality—all of which feature in this ceremony,—add up not to a disruption of the political and social order in the village but to its reinforcement. A great deal of verbal and physical violence, inflicted respectively by abusive speech and actual belabouring by cudgels, takes place on this occasion as all observers agree. But there is no punishment for it and yet the world is not turned upside down in spite of Manu’s fear to the contrary. The impunity is, of course, deceptive. If the exercise of *danda* is suspended, it is only because none of these stylized reversals constitutes a real transgression. Just as in Sanskrit grammar the injunction against any breach of rules is emphasized by the licence allowed to deviant usage in the holiest of all texts, the Vedas—*chandasi*, as Panini would put it ever so often turning aside from the rigour of his own great discourse,—so too does the ritual of inversion at Holi affirm the general legitimacy of spiritual and social sanctions against non-conformity by condoning the latter on one prescribed occasion. Its overall effect is ‘the stressing, not the overthrowing of the principle of hierarchy ... through reversal, a process whereby it remains the structural vertebra of village life’.

But it is not the collusion between religion and authority which alone makes Holi, like other ceremonies of this type, so innocuous. Predictability which goes with tradition, has also a part to play in this. For all such festivals based on prescriptive inversion are necessarily anticipated by their protagonists and the local communities where they belong. They are a part of the

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45 As is well known to students of Sanskrit grammar all such exceptions are compiled from Pāṇini’s *Ashūṭhāhyāyi* by Bhaṭṭoji Dikshita in his great work, the *Siddhānta Kaumudi* in the chapter, ‘Vaidīki Prakriyā’. See Dikshita: II.

46 V. W. Turner: 188.
cyclical rhythm of life in any society based on a stagnant economy, primitive technology and pre-capitalist culture. Such ‘calendrical rites’, as Turner calls this genre, ‘are performed at well-delineated points in the annual productive cycle, and attest to the passage from scarcity to plenty (as at first fruits or harvest festivals) or from plenty to scarcity (as when the hardships of winter are anticipated and magically warded against)’.47 The Indian villager recognizes them as a fixture in the annual schedule of public celebrations. Co-ordinated closely with the farm calendar and the seasons they make up an established and irrevocable sequence. They are indeed almost as ‘natural’ to him as, for instance, is the order of transplanting in monsoon and harvesting in winter to the rice-growing peasant of Bengal. Religion helps to promote this ‘natural’ look of most folk festivals and intercalate them with the seasonal routines of work on the land. It does so by, among other devices, inserting in their ritual procedure such markers as refer directly to agricultural products, many of them grown in the festival seasons. Hence the association that is there between the popular rituals of this type in each region and some of its principal crops of grain and fruit—rice and coconut in the south and the east, wheat and barley in western Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Punjab, sugarcane in Bihar and eastern UP, mangoes in UP again, and so forth. It is this mediation by religion of the natural conditions of the peasant’s labour and its products which makes the villager look upon these festivals as pre-ordained as the coming of the rains and the hoar-frost and agricultural operations dependent on them. This is why he is not taken by surprise at Holi or any other ‘calendrical ritual’ of prescriptive inversion. On the contrary, he anticipates it in every detail, if only because its conventions are all too familiar to him. Marriott’s dramatic account of the beginning of the ‘Feast of Love’ as he witnessed it in a north Indian village should lead no one to believe that the natives, too, shared his sense of alarm and astonishment on that fateful night. For they had been coolly preparing for this sacred rumpus for some time, as the author himself indicates.48 As a matter of fact, organization for this particular event begins at least a month in advance, as another anthropologist reports from the same cultural region.49

other words, ritual inversion stands for a continuity turned into sacred tradition by long recursive use under the aegis and inspiration of religion. As such, it represents the very antithesis of peasant insurgency.

For if the function of prescriptive reversal is to ensure the continuity of the political and moral order of society and sacralize it, that of peasant insurgency is to disrupt and desecrate it. In conditions governed by the norm of unquestioning obedience to authority, a revolt of the subaltern shocks by its relative entropy. Hence the suddenness so often attributed to peasant uprisings and the verbal imageries of eruption, explosion and conflagration used to describe it. What is intended by such usage in many languages and cultures is to communicate the sense of an unforeseen break, a sharp discontinuity. For while ritual inversions help to ensure the continuity of village society by allowing its upper and nether elements to change places at regular intervals and for strictly limited periods, the aim of peasant insurgency is to take it by surprise, put the existing power relation on its head and do so for good. As Christopher Hill has pointed out, the traditional foolery of Shrove Tuesday and the Feast of Fools used to serve as a safety-valve for medieval European society releasing tension and making the social order ‘perhaps that much more tolerable’, but ‘what was new in the seventeenth century was the idea that the world might be permanently turned upside down’.\(^6^0\) It is this threat, real or imaginary, that it carries of a permanent subversion of the local hierarchies of power which distinguishes a peasant rebellion from the simulated upheavals discussed above.

Such radical subversion, this real turning of things upside down, which is only another name for rebellion, constitutes a semiotic break: it violates that basic code by which the relations of dominance and subordination are historically governed in any particular society. Indeed, there is no society where politics, like every other department of the superstructure, is not regulated by such a code. For, to paraphrase Barthes, man is busy everywhere all the time charging reality with meaning and setting up semiological systems by converting things into

\(^6^0\) Hill (1972): 14.
signs and attributing signification to what is perceived by the senses. However, the degree of semioticity varies according to whether the dominant culture of a society is more or less feudal in character. Juri Lotman’s comments on the ‘medieval type’ (as against the ‘enlightenment type’) of Russian culture can help us to grasp this distinction:

The ‘medieval’ type is distinguished by its high semioticity. It not only tends to impart the character of a cultural sign to everything that has meaning in natural language, but proceeds from the assumption that everything is significant. For this type of code, meaning is the index of existence: nothing is culturally meaningless.

This could be said of the medieval type of culture in all other countries too. Huizinga has shown how the authority of the sign permeated every aspect of Western thought during the Middle Ages. It is not only that icons and images figured prominently in religious expression, but politics, too, was highly semioticized. Liveries, colours, badges and party cries were conspicuously displayed in the course of public disputes, and notions of power and subalternity worked out in elaborate sets of symbols: for, ‘feudal or hierarchic thought expresses the idea of grandeur by visible signs, lending to it a symbolic shape, of homage paid kneeling, of ceremonial reverence’.

Feudal culture in the Indian subcontinent also waxed fat on signs systematized into codes of authority and deferential response. Two contrasting and yet complementary processes, one popular and the other elitist, went into the making of such codes. First, it was through centuries of recursive practice at the grassroot level that these signs congealed into a naive tradition. Secondly, the literati, especially the sacerdotal class, conceptualized and formalized these into a set of influential, indeed decisive, prescriptions constituting the vast shastric literature of the Smṛtis. This priestly intervention went a long way to add a touch of sanctity to these codes. Even more importantly, perhaps, this helped to perpetuate and generalize them. For as Indian feudalism came of age, some of the more important sets of power relations, e.g. those between parents and sibling, guru and śishya (spiritual disciple), god and man,

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etc., emerged as paradigmatic in the sense that others were derived from or modelled on them, and it was the function of the Smṛtis to record and confirm this development.

The first of two devices generally employed for this purpose was grammatical, that is, to insert the Sanskrit equivalent of a sign of predication between a derivative and its paradigm. The copulae italicized in the following selection of sentences from the *Laws of Manu* offer a fair sample of such use:

... between [a ten-year old Brāhmaṇa and a hundred-year-old Kshatriya] the Brāhmaṇa is the father. (II 135)
... he [an infant king] is a great deity in human form. (VII 8)
... the wife of an elder brother is for his young (brother) the wife of a Guru. (IX 57)

A maternal aunt, the wife of a maternal uncle, a mother-in-law, and a paternal aunt ... are equal to the wife of one's teacher. (II 131)
... the (pupil) shall consider [his Vedic instructor] as his father and mother. (II 144)

Towards a sister of one's father and of one's mother, and towards one's own elder sister, one must behave as towards one's mother ... (II 133)
... a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. (V 154)

The other device was structural and this operated in two ways. For one thing, it was as a matter of convention that each of these sacred texts reproduced the more important hierarchical prescriptions already laid down by its predecessors. This was true even of the most celebrated of all such compilations—the one quoted above, and it is clear from Bühler's edition of this work that large chunks from it had found their way into the later Smṛtis.64

Intertextuality helped thus to sustain tradition. However, the law-givers did not stop at that: they innovated too and went on adding to the range of some of the older paradigms with almost each recension. Thus, the paradigm guru/śishya which, according to Manu, subsumed no more than two other dyads represented by the guru's wife (if of the same caste) as the first term in one pair and by his son (if also a teacher) as that in the other, came to serve, some centuries later, for as many as sixty

64 For Manu's borrowings see Bühler: 'Introduction', passim, and for quotations from it and parallel passages as found in other law books, see ibid.: 515-82.
other relations in the *Viṣṇusmṛti*. The outcome of such accretion was, in the long run, vastly to extend the scope of feudal authority by distributing its signs among the constituent paradigms. For as the latter had more and more relations stacked into them, their boundaries overlapped and they tended to merge into a generalized system signifying dominance and subordination in the society as a whole. By the time that colonialism came to establish itself firmly in the subcontinent, it had already at its disposal a well-developed semiotic apparatus which was partly inherited and partly its own invention. This was comprehensive enough to express its authority and that of the collaborating native elites. The subaltern masses too were familiar with this apparatus if only as those whose deference it was primarily designed to enforce and it is by throwing a spanner or two into the works from time to time that they learnt the rudiments of rebellion. Indeed, it would be quite in order to say that insurgency was a massive and systematic violation of those words, gestures and symbols which had the relations of power in colonial society as their significata.

This was perceived as such both by its protagonists and their foes. The latter were often quick to register their premonition of an uprising as a noise in the transmission of some of the more familiar signals of deference. A resident at Saharanpur on the eve of the Mutiny wrote thus of the anxieties of the white community there in those days: ‘Early in the month of May, it became a subject of general remark with us, that the sepoys on duty at this station had thrown off their customary quiet and respectful behaviour, and had become forward, if not insolent; they paraded the public roads in parties, scarcely deigning to move to one side for a passing carriage, and singing at the highest pitch of their unmelodious voices, heedless of who heard them.’ Later on, when the violence of that ‘Red Year’ had already reached its height, an army doctor on the run through the Gwalior countryside was to notice how ‘every villager was uncivil, and the smile of respectful submission with which the European officer was to be greeted, was displaced by an angry

65 Ibid.: 2/208, 210. For the date of *Viṣṇusmṛti* see Jolly: ‘Introduction’, especially p. xxxii. The relations subsumed under the guru/shisya paradigm have been worked out on the basis of Jolly: 28/29, 31; 32/1–3.

66 FSUP: V 93.
scowl and haughty air towards the despicable Feringhee whose raj was at an end. Quite clearly the British expected Indians to show their subservience to the governing race by a series of abject gestures and self-imposed restraints in their public behaviour. To make room for a sahib’s landau on the road, to refrain from raising one’s voice within his earshot, to smile submissively in his presence had all come to be regarded as ‘customary’, that is, as part of an established code signifying the power of the rulers over the ruled. Crowded streets, noisy singing, ‘angry scowls and haughty air’ were therefore suspect in the eyes of those who had the most to benefit from deference. They saw in these reversals not only an absence of the highly cherished collaboration between master and servant but, indeed, its replacement by hostility on the latter’s part. There was no room for neutrality in this binary relationship: non-antagonism could turn only into antagonism.

Evidence of this kind is by no means rare, although it has not often been read as an index of a clash between rival consciousnesses. The signs of elite authority were so ubiquitous, so completely did they pervade the whole of our life under the Raj and so common indeed was their violation in the course of any popular disturbance that the historian’s sensitivity to his matériél has been numbed with redundancy. Yet the character of the subaltern movements in India can hardly be grasped without specifying how dominance and subordination were represented in the ruling culture and their subjects forced to change places by the activity of the masses.

The class of signs most often and most instinctively reversed by insurgents and hence the least noticed in studies of insurgency is what constitutes, according to Bourdieu, an ‘official language’. One of its functions, he writes, is to service ‘the system of concepts by means of which the members of a given group provide themselves with a representation of their social relations (e.g. the lineage model or the vocabulary of honour)’ and in this way it ‘sanctions and imposes what it states, tacitly laying down the dividing line between the thinkable and the unthinkable, thereby contributing towards the maintenance of the symbolic order from which it draws its authority’. This was

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87 Carey: 196.  
88 Bourdieu: 21.
precisely how verbal deference functioned in colonial India, upholding semi-feudal relationships between old and young, male and female, high caste and low caste. For as Durkheim has observed, 'the word is [a] way of entering into relations with persons'. It was therefore essential that in a society which enjoined formal respect for senior kin on the part of their juniors there should be some rules of speech strictly to govern such behaviour. The latter are forbidden from mentioning any of the elders by their proper names in many communities. 'This is because calling a person by name', says Srinivas with reference to the Coorgs, 'is not consistent with putting him in a position of respect.' With the Kamar of Chhattisgarh the range of interdiction included a man’s father, mother, grandparents, uncles, aunts, father-in-law and elder brothers. The ban was even more severe when applied to a woman. Particularly excluded were the names of her husband and some of his relatives. Transgression in the former respect could lead her to being put out of caste at least for some time, as was the custom among the Dhanwar of Madhya Pradesh even until a few decades ago.

If deference in speech mattered so much in demarcating kinship and sexual status, it did so to a still greater extent in the domain of caste and class relationship where feudal authority prevailed in its most explicit and effective form. Here again one can go far back into the past and find the elements of a linguistic discrimination between castes entrenched in some of the most ancient Sanskrit texts. Thus, a well-known Paninian rule was interpreted in such a way as to make the words standing for the four varnas replicate the varna hierarchy itself in a compound of the dvandvasamāsa class and put them together in their ascriptive order descending from Brahman to Sudra.

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60 Durkheim: 343.
61 Srinivas (1952): 48. Cf. Durkheim: 343–4: ‘Every proper name is considered an essential element of the person who bears it... So if the one is sacred, the other is. Therefore, it may not be pronounced in the course of the profane life.’
62 For the Kamar, see Dube: 77. For similar customs among the Santals see Bompas: 356–7; the Chamaras—Russel & Lal: II 12; the Bhatra—ibid.: II 277; the Halba—ibid.: III 198; the Dhanwar—ibid.: II 501.
63 The compound would then read: brāhmaṇapakshāttriyaibsudrāḥ. The sutra, ‘alpāḥtaram’ (II.2.34), has a vārttika laying down that 'the castes are placed according to their order' (varpiṇām ānuṣṭhvya pūrvanipātah) so that the rule governing
Again, Manu (II 49) prescribed a series of syntactic variations on a string of words to make beggars identify themselves by their respective castes while calling for alms:

An initiated Brāhmaṇa should beg, beginning (his request with the word) lady (bhavati); a Kshatriya, placing (the word) lady in the middle, but a Vaiśya, placing it at the end (of the formula).

This meant in effect that if ABC could be said to represent the sequence of the three words in the sentence ‘Bhabati bhikṣām dehi’ as uttered by a Brahman beggar, a Kshatriya’s call was to be construed as BAC and a Vaisya’s BCA.\(^{63}\) Vocabulary, too, could serve for caste markers. Among acquaintances, for instance, phatic statements about each other’s health had to include the word kuśala if addressed to a Brahman, anāmaya to a Kshatriya, kshema to a Vaisya and anārogya to a Sudra (Manu II 127).

This tradition of using language as a register of caste status was still very much alive when Logan came across it in late nineteenth-century Malabar. A man’s deference towards those ranked higher than himself was demonstrated in explicit verbal acknowledgements of his own inferiority. In any conversation he had to debase himself by stigmatizing whatever he had. Convention required him to refer to his own food not simply as rice, but as ‘stony or gritty rice’, his money as nothing more than ‘copper cash’, his house as a ‘dungheap’.\(^{64}\) The indigenous perception of the structural cleavages in Malabar society of a century ago was recorded in a list of words for houses, as given by Logan. He wrote:

The house itself is called by different names according to the occupant’s caste. The house of a Pariah is a cheri, while the agrestic slave—the Cheraman—lives in a chala. The blacksmith, the goldsmith, the carpenter, the weaver, etc., and the toddy-drawer (Tyan) inhabit houses styled pura or kudi; the temple servant resides in a variyan or pisharam or pumatham, the ordinary Nayar in a vidu or bhavanam, while the man in authority of this caste dwells in an idam; the Raja lives in a kovilakam

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63 Bühler: 2/49. The beggars’ calls are taken from Kullūka’s commentary as given in Shiromani.  
64 Logan: 85, 127.
or kottaram, the indigenous Brahman (Nambutiri) in an ilam, while his fellow of higher rank calls his house a mana or manakkal.  

This imprint of hierarchical divisions within a speech community is perhaps most clearly witnessed in diglossia. Ferguson (to whom we owe the initial use of this term in English) had noticed this phenomenon in the coexistence of ‘high’ and ‘low’ varieties of dialects in Arabic, Modern Greek, Swiss German and Haitian Creole. The first and more prestigious of the two was used for religious sermons, academic or political lectures, personal correspondence, newspaper editorials, etc., and the second for instructions to servants, waiters, workmen and clerks, for conversation among friends, colleagues and members of one’s family, for use in folk literature, and so on. The same could be said of the native speakers of Java where, as Geertz has observed, ‘the entire etiquette system is perhaps best summed up and symbolized in the way [they] used their language’. He goes so far as to say that ‘in Javanese it is nearly impossible to say anything without indicating the social relationship between the speaker and the listener in terms of status and familiarity’.  

Diglossia of this kind, if not quite on the same scale, has been a traditional feature of many of the linguistic communities in India. For instance, the well-entrenched caste division between Brahman and non-Brahman in parts of southern India has been found to correspond to dialectal differences between Brahman and non-Brahman speech in Tamil and Kannada both with regard to vocabulary and to salient aspects of phonology and morphology. Class characteristics, too, are often branded on speech. Thus, in a Hindi-speaking village of northern India, Gumperz noticed how the distinction between moti boli (coarse speech) and saf boli (refined speech) stood for the social distance separating the ‘poorer Rajputs and members of the lower castes who spend their days in physical labour’ from the ‘wealthier Rajputs, merchants and artisans, those who held clerical positions, and especially political leaders’. The speech of the untouchable sweeper, ranked lowest both in class and caste, diverged significantly from that of his high-caste
master although he spent much of his time every day on chores around the latter’s household.⁶⁹

There is yet another aspect to differences of this kind. The same speaker would often vary his speech between the ‘high’ and the ‘low’ dialectal modes depending on the solemnity of an occasion or the importance of the person addressed. Even a person of high status could use the moti boli in speaking to his servants or his junior kin, while he would almost invariably adopt the saf boli as a vehicle of discourse on elevated political or religious topics.⁷⁰ Such switching between a formal and an informal style, corresponding by and large to a literary and a colloquial style, is common to speakers of many Indian languages including the two Dravidian varieties mentioned above. However, the freedom of switching from one to the other, especially from low to high, is far from absolute. Whether this is permitted at all, and if so to what extent, depends on the speaker’s standing relative to the addressee’s: this is all right when a person is speaking to his subordinates or equals, but anathema if the addressee happens to be of superior status. For the formal or high style is often closely associated with education, and in a land where most people are illiterate and far too poor to pay for schooling of any kind, this appears, by contrast, as an unmistakable sign of elite culture and authority. To adopt that mode of speech is therefore to claim an elite standing which is, of course, denied to the subaltern. This is why in a UP village the Chamar may not imitate Rajput speech ‘for fear of incurring the displeasure of the higher castes’⁷¹ nor a Bengali peasant utter sadhunātha, the characteristic speech of the bhadralok elite, as an indigo planter’s dewan drives it home to an erring ryot in Dinabandhu Mitra’s Neel-Darpan.⁷²

Nothing demonstrates the involvement of language with authority more forcefully than the fact that usages such as these should be regarded as deviant, hence reprehensible. And it is precisely in order to prevent transgressions of this kind from


⁷² In an obvious reference to this type of Bengali speech a writer in Sadhana, a periodical closely associated with Rabindranath Tagore, wrote in 1891 of bhadratar bhasha—speech appropriate to the status of one belonging to any of the three highest Hindu castes in Bengal. Vide Anon. (1891): 78. For a discussion of this particular passage in Dinabandhu Mitra’s play see Guha (1974): 7.
occurring in real life that societies allow a degree of licensed violation of linguistic etiquette to be ritually acted out at calendrical intervals just as they provide for prescriptive rebellions as an insurance against real ones. This is why verbal aggression figured so prominently in carnivals which, as we have noticed above, functioned as a safety-valve for popular discontent in early modern Europe. Similarly, the ritual exchange of ‘cathartic abuse’ (les insultes cathartiques) by means of ‘shameless ditties’ (chants qui point pas la honte) sung by rival groups of men and women in the course of harvesting and mowing was regarded as a positively ‘liberating’ influence on the Dogon of western Africa. To the south of that continent the chanting of lewd songs was a customary part of certain Zulu agricultural operations as well as of the ceremonial shifting of a Tsonga village site. ‘The village is broken to pieces’, it was said in justification of the latter, ‘so are the ordinary laws. The insults which are taboo are now allowed.’ In southern India much the same kind of indulgence was shown towards low-caste officiants at Nayar and Coorg propitiatory festivals: they could, on such occasions, utter the unspeakable in voicing pent-up grievances against their high-caste masters or even reprimanding them. And in the northern parts of the country the profusion of verbal abuse has always been a well-established feature of that most radical of all mock rebellions—Holi.

However, indulgence such as this stopped as soon as a breach of verbal etiquette strayed beyond the privileged domain of ritual inversion. It amounted then to what Narada, an ancient Hindu law-giver, had defined as a form of sāhasa, that is, a crime of violence. Indeed, the chapter dealing with this type of ‘crime’ in Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra finds its place, appropriately enough, between the chapters on robbery and assault. ‘Calumny, contemptuous talk or intimidation’ are mentioned there as the constituents of such crime and it is a measure of the sensitivity of the elite to unauthorized speech that an expression such as ‘a bad Brahman’ was to be regarded as ‘contemptuous’

78 In Shamasantra’s translation of Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra, these constitute Chapters 17–19 of Book III.
and punishable. The scale of penalties is revealing too. Though the precise amount of fines imposed on the offender is not quite the same in all the texts, they concur on one basic principle: that is, the lower the status of the speaker relative to that of the object of his insult the higher the penalty, which, as readers familiar with the Smrtis will recognize, is the very reverse of what was prescribed in the case of ‘crimes’ of pollution. One could hardly improve on that as an instance of the correspondence between language and social hierarchy. Thus, as Manu says (VIII 267), the penalty for speaking ill of a Brahman increased with the hierarchical distance between him and the speaker: 100 pañas for a Kshatriya offender, 150–200 for a Vaisya, and corporal punishment (vadhām) for a Sudra. The latter could be imposed in one of three ways depending on the precise character of the Sudra’s crime; he could ‘have his tongue cut out’, or get ‘an iron nail, ten fingers long . . . thrust red-hot into his mouth’, or have ‘hot oil . . . poured into his mouth and into his ears’ (Manu VIII 270–2).

This ancient recipe (by no means uniquely Indian) for dealing with verbal delinquency by destroying the organs of speech offers some idea of linguistic control in an authoritarian society. And what was sought to be controlled was not the spoken word alone, but also the zero sign of utterance—that

79 Kauṭilya: 220–1.

80 For an English and relatively recent parallel see the case of the seventeenth-century author of a blasphemous publication who was punished by having a hole bored through his tongue. Hill (1972): 176.

81 This conceptualization of prescriptive silence as the zero degree of utterance is based on Saussure’s dictum that ‘language is satisfied with the opposition between something and nothing’ (Saussure: 86). As Barthes has observed, ‘the zero degree is . . . not a total absence (this is a common mistake), it is a significant absence. We have here a pure differential state; the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs of creating meaning “out of nothing” ’ (Barthes (1967): 77). For a detailed discussion of the zero sign, see ‘Signe Zéro’ in Jakobson (1971): 211–19. Here again, as in the case of some other concepts, Pāṇini anticipated modern linguistic theory by many centuries. The notion figures in his sūtra, ‘adarsanam lopah’ (1.1.60) and some of the subsequent rules, such as VI.1.66, VI.4.118, etc. As Vasu has explained it in his edition of the Aṣṭādhyāyī: ‘This lopa is considered as a substitute or ādesa. and as such this grammatical zero has all the rights and liabilities of the thing which it replaces. This blank or lopa is in several places treated as having a real existence and rules are made applicable to it in the same way as to any ordinary substitute that has an apparent form. The Grammarians do not content themselves with one sort of blank but have invented several others . . . which
is, silence used formally and yet eloquently enough as ‘a significant absence’ of speech. It was as if language was made to operate in a state of Paninian lopa and was known only by virtue of its elision so that the ban imposed by custom on various kinds of discourse could announce and display the subordination of junior kin to senior, of wife to husband, of low caste to high caste and generally of the underdog to the elite. In Gujarat a Patidar youth was not to initiate conversation in the company of his elders, and as Beals found out in an Andhra village a young man would be sharply rebuked if he tried to put in a word edgeways ‘when big people are talking’. In the same village nuptial songs would insist that to ‘keep silent in your husband’s house’ was a part of a young bride’s novitiate. And silence was a sign of subordination to authority in other spheres too. In Orissa, a Bauri untouchable was not to speak to a high caste person until spoken to, while in a UP village ‘one frequently finds a lower-caste individual sitting or standing at a slight distance from a higher group engaged in discussion, listening to what is said, but not participating’. In parts of southern India a servant would cover his mouth while receiving his master’s command in a sort of metalinguistic acknowledgement of the latter’s power over himself. In Bengal a landlord would feel it an affront if a peasant were to speak up to him. When Abu Molla, the hapless tenant-cultivator in Mir Mosharraf Hosein’s play, Jamidar-Darpan, pleads his inability to pay a fine arbitrarily imposed by the wicked zamindar, the latter has a fit of temper not so much because of what is said but because it is a subordinate talking back. ‘Shut up, you son of a pig’, he shouts; ‘How dare you open your mouth and utter anything in my presence! Take him away at once. Take him away.’

In that play the poor ryot’s verbal protest is not followed up by any militant act of resistance to his oppressor. But when a real uprising takes place and turns things upside down, the norms of verbal deference too are demolished together with the authority structures corresponding to them. There has never been an occasion of this kind when the peasant did not desecrate

like different sorts of zeroes of a Mathematician have different functions’ (Pāṇini: 56).

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82 Pocock: 95. 82 Beals: 46, 73. 84 Freeman: 85.

83 Gumperz: 194. 86 NNQ: 80. 87 Hosein: 50.
language either by direct abuse addressed to his superiors or by adopting the latter’s mode of speech and thereby breaking into the hallowed precincts of elite culture. ‘Violent, even ferocious, language used by rioting groups’ was a prominent feature of the agricultural labourers’ revolt in England in 1830. And it was all a part of the rebellious self-assertion of the Hunan peasantry in 1927 that, as Mao Tse-tung reported at the time, ‘not a day passes but they drum some harsh, pitiless words of denunciation into these [evil] gentry’s ears’.

There is hardly an instance of open and violent conflict between Indian villagers of different castes or classes that does not lower and often cross the threshold of verbal etiquette. The terms of an altercation as recorded by Freeman in an Oriya village bring this out. The exchange of insults here between an untouchable farm hand of the Bauri caste and his landowning, Brahman master reaches a climax making the latter scream, ‘This wife’s-brother Bauri boy speaks like a king. Has your face gone up, as if proud, or what?’ Clearly, the unspeakable has been spoken and a social distance measured out in words or denoted by their absence, violated. This however was merely a quarrel between two individuals involving no physical assault at all. A great deal more can and does happen when violent disputes involving large masses of the local population break out in any particular village or region. The abuses, insults and, generally speaking, breaches in the norm of social discourse are often far too numerous and figure far too integrally in such cases to be noticed and reported on their own. Indulgence in ‘bad’ language is taken for granted on these occasions. Indeed the violence against person and property dominates events of this kind to such an extent as to make verbal violence relatively unimportant for purposes of administrative or judicial intervention. Since official records constitute the principal source of our information about such conflicts, it is easily understood why the Kautilyan category of vākpārushyam (verbal violence) had so

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88 H & R: 211-12. Breaches of verbal deference in times of acute class conflict were not an exclusively rural phenomenon in England. During the uneasy times preceding the outbreak of the civil war the ‘hatred of the citizens’ of London ‘unto gentlemen, especially courtiers’ was such that very few of the latter ‘durst come into the City, or if they did, they were sure to receive affronts and be abused’ (Hill (1972): 18).
89 Mao: I 30.
90 Freeman: 363.
little to do with the historical evidence on rural crimes under the Raj. Yet one can perhaps make up for this lacuna to some extent by recalling some of the idealized accounts of peasant violence in nineteenth-century literature. Take, for instance, Act III, Scene 3 of *Neel-Darpan* where Torap, the rebel peasant, confronts the white planter and beats him up to the accompaniment of a shower of abuse describing the latter variously as wife’s-brother, as a dog and a thief—insults which under conditions other than insurgency would be addressed, the other way round, by planter to peasant. This linguistic inversion was homologous to the reversal brought about by the ‘blue mutiny’ in the relationship which had existed until then between the indigo factories and the rural masses in the Bengal districts dominated by them.

A conspicuous aspect of this verbal inversion, as anyone familiar with the text of this play would notice, is Torap’s use of the intimate, hence in this case derogatory, pronoun *tui* and its derivatives rather than the reverential *apni*, in addressing his superordinate foe. These Bengali words correspond respectively to the French *tu* (*T*) and *vous* (*V*), and stand for what has been described as the ‘nonreciprocal power semantic’. According to this notion the more powerful of any two interlocutors says *T* and receives *V*, all relations such as ‘older than’, ‘parent of’, ‘employer of’, ‘stronger than’, ‘nobler than’ and other hierarchical expressions which can be assimilated to these being subsumed for the purpose of this generalization under the term ‘more powerful than’. Brown and Gilman who have done much to investigate the *T–V* index of authority in many cultures, past and present, have observed that it is ‘associated with a relatively static society in which power is distributed by birthright and is not subject to much redistribution’.\(^{91}\) They have situated it historically in the feudal and manorial systems of medieval Europe and identified it as a marker of ‘caste difference’ between the black native and the white colonialist in French Africa. In post-colonial India they found ‘this truly feudal pronominal pattern’, part of a long-standing tradition,\(^{92}\) still largely

\(^{91}\) Brown & Gilman: 265. Much of the argument and information in this paragraph and the one which follows, is based on this excellent article, and all direct quotations are taken from it, unless otherwise stated.

\(^{92}\) To address one’s superior by *T* was an offence according to Manu: *toamkāraṁ*—
operative in the $T-V$ expressions used in the Gujarati and Hindi languages nonreciprocally between elder brother and younger brother as well as between husband and wife. The series could of course be extended to the entire range of power relations including those of caste and class in many of the other Indian speech communities too.

When the feudal or semi-feudal authority structure of a society like any of these is overturned or seriously challenged by insurgency, the conventional use of $T-V$ as a particularly sensitive register of existing power relations comes under attack at the same time. The French Revolution has provided us with a classic instance of such verbal *bouleversement*. A speaker at a session of the new parliament in 1793 condemned the asymmetric deployment of these pronouns as an expression of 'l'esprit de fanatisme, d'orgueil et de féodalité' and the Committee for the Public Safety 'ordered a universal reciprocal $T$'. For some time the mutual *tu* became a sort of linguistic badge of revolutionary citizenship and when Robespierre addressed the president of l'Assemblée Nationale by this pronoun, it was clear that the old order had indeed come to an end. But here, as in some other respects, the innovations of a victorious bourgeois democracy were anticipated by its uncouth and naive precursor—peasant insurgency. The substitution, albeit spontaneous, of $V$ by $T$ was a well established feature of the German Peasant War of 1525 and we have it on Zimmermann's authority that the rebels often used the more familiar *du* instead of the honorific *Sie* in denouncing and mocking the nobility overpowered by them.⁹³ In colonial India the Bengali ryot's violation of the rules of pronominal deference in the course of disturbances like those of 1860 had its parallel in Malayali usage during the Moplah risings of the 1850s. It was a sign of these Malabar peasants' subalternity that the powerful Nayar landlords addressed them

*cha gartasah* (XI. 205) and required a penitential bath, fasting and a conciliatory bow before the offended person as a corrective.

⁹³ See, for instance, Zimmermann: I 393, 394. 'Das hast *du* nun lange genug gehabt, ich will auch einmal ein Graf sein', says a piper of the peasant army to a Count as he grabs the latter's hat and puts it on (ibid.: 393); and the rebels mock a Countess thus as they put her in a dung cart: 'in einem goldenen Wagen bist *du* nach Weinsberg eingefahren; in einem Mistwagen fährt *du* hinaus' (ibid.: 394) Emphasis added. For some other instances of such use of $T$ in 1525, see Bax: 127.
in terms of $T$ while they responded by $V$. In 1852, however, in a series of instructions aimed at stimulating Moplah resistance the Thangal of Thirurangadi called upon his followers to drop the customary $V$ and return $T$ for $T$ in verbal exchanges with the *jenmi* as an open demonstration of their will to challenge the latter’s overlordship.\(^{54}\)

The inversion of verbal authority brought about by rebellion was not limited to spoken utterance alone but extended to its graphic form as well. There was hardly a peasant uprising on any significant scale in colonial India that did not cause the destruction of large quantities of written or printed material including rent rolls, deeds and bonds, and public records of all kinds. When in the course of the dhing against Deby Sinha the ryots of Dinajpur attacked his kachari at Dihi Jumtah, they made it a point to take away the papers they found there,\(^{56}\) and this was the fate common to landlords’ estate offices wherever these lay in the path of a jacquerie. Again, popular violence was often astutely selective about all written evidence of peasant debts. Even the semi-official *Calcutta Gazette* noticed how during the Barasat insurrection led by Titu Mir a raid on an indigo factory in the neighbourhood did not lead to ‘merc... wanton destruction’, for apart from a little damage done to some furniture only its ‘papers were destroyed [and done so] most probably by the villagers for the purpose of destroying the record of their own debts’.\(^{56}\) In much the same way, the revolt of the Kunbi peasantry in Poona and Ahmadnagar districts in 1875 was distinguished by its singular concentration on the instruments of usury. ‘The object of the rioters was in every case to obtain and destroy the bonds, decrees etc in their creditors’ possession’, according to the Commission set up to inquire into these disturbances. Indeed it was led to believe that this ‘was not so much [a] rebellion against the oppressor as an attempt to accomplish a definite and practical object, namely, the disarming of the enemy by taking his weapons (bonds and accounts)’.\(^{57}\) Large deposits of official documentation too were often wrecked by insurgent crowds. The *levée en masse* triggered off by the Mutiny ended up by destroying ‘all records of every kind’ in Hamirpur district of Uttar Pradesh, as its magistrate

\(^{54}\) Dhanagare: 124.  \(^{56}\) MDS: 582.  
\(^{54}\) Das Gupta: 686.  \(^{57}\) DRCR: 3, 4.
was ruefully to observe soon after the event. In Muzaffarnagar, again, the records of the Civil, Criminal and Collectorate Duftars were burnt by the local population on the night of 14 May 1857, an incident regarded by the irate local officer as by no means 'a solitary instance' but as part of a pattern seen 'throughout this rebellion' of the burning of government offices by 'budmashes'.

Regarded from a less hostile perspective, however, one could see in all this a rather different pattern—that of the objectification of the peasants' hatred for the written word. He had learnt, at his own cost, that the rent roll could deceive; that the bond could keep him and his family in almost perpetual servitude; that official papers could be used by clerks, judges, lawyers and landlords to rob him of his land and livelihood. Writing was thus, to him, the sign of his enemy, and 'favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment'. The sense of these words was dyed into his soul by his everyday experience. On Lévi-Strauss, to whom we owe this formulation, its truth dawned in a flash as he witnessed the very first attempts at a crude mimicry of writing (inspired unintentionally by the anthropologist himself) and the uses made of it by a Nambikwara chief fraudulently to retain his authority over his illiterate people living in conditions of a Stone Age culture in the Brazilian jungles.

The reaction of the Nambikwara to writing was as forthright as it was negative. Having 'felt in some obscure way that writing and deceit had penetrated simultaneously into their midst' they deserted their chief and their village and retreated to a remote area of the bush. In an equally negative gesture the Indian peasant who had nowhere to hide when driven to desperation, burnt down the graphic instruments of zamindari, sahukari and sarkari dominance—the deeds, bonds, khatas and files, and their repositories—the kachari, the gadi and the government office. This by itself contributed significantly enough to turning things upside down in the countryside and conformed, as such, to a

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98 FSUP: III 113; V 80–1.
100 Lévi-Strauss (1976): 394.
tradition of insurgency as old as Jack Cade.\textsuperscript{101} But the process was taken a step further in some instances by the rebel trying, positively, to appropriate the sign of writing for himself.

Ideally such appropriation should have been no problem at all. The peasant could avail himself of the institutional means which were there precisely for this purpose. He could go to school, at least to its lowest denomination, at the village \textit{pathsala} and acquire the three Rs. Unfortunately, however, he lived in no ideal world. The colonial government, keen on educating the middle classes in order to ensure manpower for its administration, was hardly interested in bringing literacy to the tillers of the soil. Primary education for the latter was left to the mercy and munificence of local landlords who took pride in setting up schools on their estates but were careful not to encourage too much literacy among the ryots. When Govinda Samanta, the hero of Lal Behari Day’s well-known story about rural Bengal, pleads his inability to pay an arbitrary feudal levy (mathot), this is immediately seen as insolence bred by primary education. For he had indeed attended the village pathsala for some years when he was a child. ‘So you have become a \textit{pandita} [man of learning],’ shouts the zamindar at him, ‘and your eyes have got opened, therefore you refuse to pay the mathot. I must forbid Rama Rupa [the schoolmaster] to teach any peasants’ sons.’\textsuperscript{102} This was fairly representative of the attitude of the rural elite towards education for the peasantry under the Raj. Teach the \textit{chasha} the three Rs and he will ‘have his eyes opened’ and learn to resist!

In no way therefore was the peasant in a position to appropriate writing as it really was, that is, as the graphic re-

\textsuperscript{101} Jack Cade, the leader of the peasant rising in Kent in 1450, ‘proposed to burn all legal records, and “henceforward all things shall be in common”.’ Hill (1974): 185.

\textsuperscript{102} Day: 198. To some extent the attitude seems to have continued into the present century. As a nationalist organizer active among the peasantry in a northern Bengal region in the late 1920s found out, a white man in charge of a local office of the Midnapore Zamindari Company’s estates in these parts was extremely upset to learn that the peasants had started a \textit{pathsala} (indigenous primary school) in a certain village. He ordered it to be burnt down at once (S. Chowdhury: 43). Even in post-colonial India Beals was to find the landlord of an Andhra village and his assistant, the Police Headman, unenthusiastic about promoting education for the village children (Beals: 62–3).
presentation of a natural language. Want of literacy barred him access to it as a secular, intellectual aid to remembering, learning, understanding. In order therefore to use it for insurgency, for purposes of reversing the world, he appropriated it symbolically. He had been conditioned by his own subalternity and the elite monopoly of culture to look upon writing as a symbol of dominance. Lévi-Strauss noticed how in some of the villages of what is now Bangladesh the moneylender also functioned as the local scribe and this combination gave him a 'hold over others'. Indeed all who had a hold over the peasant, whether as rentiers, usurers or officials, used writing as a direct instrument of authority in one form or another. He regarded this, as he did many other expressions of power in a semi-feudal society, not as a social, empirical phenomenon, but as something that was quasi-religious and magical: to write was not a matter of skill but of inspiration. The written word was endowed with the same sort of mediatary, occult quality as he customarily attributed to the spoken utterances of an oracle possessed by the spirit of the dead during a propitiatory ceremony. The popular Hindu association of writing with priesthood on the one hand and with deities like Ganesa and Saraswati on the other enhanced this sense of sanctity about it. It was this sacred and magical power of writing which Sido and Kanhu appropriated for themselves as they declared war on the sahib and the diku.

Writing figures so prominently indeed in the Santal leaders' own perception of the hool that it is not possible for the historian to ignore it. The uses made of it for the transmission of insurgency will be discussed in Chapter 5 below. What concerns us here is the authority they derived from it in the conduct of the hostilities. Both the Subahs acknowledged, in retrospect, that their decision to launch the insurrection had been directly prompted by writing. But this was writing seen as divine intervention. As Sido explained at the interrogation following his arrest,

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'.

104 J.P., 8 Nov. 1855: 'Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor'. Emphasis added.
This, he said, was ‘the Thacoor’s order’—an order given in writing. Kanhu was to confirm this later on when he, in his turn, was captured and related the circumstances leading to the revolt. Asked, ‘What was the Thacoor like?’ he replied:

Ishwar [God] 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.\textsuperscript{105}

Thus the authority of the graphic form was further reinforced by fusing together the images of a supernatural being, a white official and a native scribe sitting cross-legged on the floor and scribbling away. In what was clearly a case of overdetermination, the power of the colonialist sahib and that of the pen-pushing dhoti-clad babu were telescoped here in a composite vision and raised to divine power. The apotheosis of writing could not be more explicit nor indeed its use by the insurgents to justify turning the world upside down in the Thakur’s name.

Of the non-verbal expressions of authority which come under attack in all uprisings, there are those which are paralinguistic in character and operate as kinesic and proxemic systems under the sign respectively of gestures and body movements and that of distances in space and time.\textsuperscript{106} Every society treats the body as a memory in which to store the basic principles of its culture ‘in abbreviated and practical, i.e. mnemonic form’, as Bourdieu has observed. This is particularly true of pre-literate societies ‘which lack any other recording and objectifying instrument’ so that ‘inherited knowledge can survive only in its embodied state’.\textsuperscript{107} It is quite in order therefore that gestures of obeisance should figure so prominently in the Hindu Dharmaśāstras as the key to a better life. Why, for instance, must a youth leave his seat and greet an older man? ‘For’, says Manu, ‘the vital airs of a young man mount upwards to leave his body when an elder approaches; but by rising to meet him and saluting he recovers them.’ (II 120) There are many other verses in that text devoted to the virtues of rising, prostrating, clasping of feet, etc. as indicative of subordinate status. And the authority of this

\textsuperscript{105} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’.

\textsuperscript{106} Our use of the terms ‘paralinguistic’, ‘kinesic’ and ‘proxemic’ follows the sense in which these have been defined in Lyons: I 63–7.

\textsuperscript{107} Bourdieu: 170, 218 n. 44.
language of the body derived not only from sacerdotal prescriptions but also from the power of the state. Thus according to Abū-l Fazl, kings ‘made regulations for the manner in which people are to show their obedience’. This was meant to promote ‘true humility’. For instance, *karnish*, an approved mode of salutation at the Mughal court, signified that the saluter ‘placed his head . . . (the seat of the senses and the mind) into the hand of humility, giving it to the royal assembly as a present’, and another, known as *taslim*, that he was ‘ready to give himself as an offering’.  

The substitution of Mughal royalty by the British made little difference to such feudal kinesics. They continued to operate as status markers in colonial India too. ‘When a Coorg meets an elder on a ritual occasion’, wrote Srinivas, ‘he has to salute the latter by bending the upper half of his body and touching the elder’s feet thrice with both hands. After each touch the younger man takes his hands to his forehead, where he folds them together.’ This, he remarked, was not very different from the form of salutation one adopted towards a deity.  

In fact, variations of ‘bodily automatism’ of this kind featured in all homologous relations—between father and son, husband and wife, landlord and tenant, high caste and low caste. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, it was customary for the wife to demonstrate her fidelity by bending down before her husband at a distance and touching the earth with her fingers. A Balahi, ranked as one of the lowliest in rural society in this region, would replicate this movement on meeting a Brahman, bending forward to touch the ground and lifting his hands, palms folded to his forehead. Elsewhere, in Orissa, a Bauri untouchable had to adopt much the same self-debasing posture under similar circumstances. ‘When we passed by higher-caste people’, said Muli to the visiting anthropologist, ‘we crouched so that one hand touched the ground; we walked by in that position, so that our faces were toward the ground.’  

It was not the rise and fall of empires but the violence of the masses which alone interrupted from time to time this age-old avowal of subservience by gestures. Yet another index of the world turned upside down, this might have been the reversal

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110 Dube: 77; Fuchs: 80; Freeman: 85.
feared by the dominant brahmanical culture when among the many topsy-turvy features of the mythical ‘epoch’s end’ (yugānta) it counted Sudras who were ‘controlled in the movement of their eyes’ (jītākshah), not unlike, presumably, their superiors in the varna hierarchy! Less fantastically, however, and indeed in our own epoch there have been occasions in the course of agrarian disturbances when insulting gestures appeared to have hurt the peasants’ enemies no less than acts of physical assault. A detail of the Birsaite ulgulan should make this clear. On 16 August 1895 the villagers of Chalkad drove out a police party which had camped out there for about a week in an attempt to seize the Munda chief but had failed to do so. As the posse began to withdraw in the face of superior insurgent forces, this was how it felt to the Head Constable of Tamar to be, for once, at the receiving end:

We then moved off by the Birbanki road towards Tamar followed by some 800 to 900 men who were having [sic] winnowing fans, beating toms and waving bows as insults to us. They were also carrying the three bedsteads (khatri) on which we had lain. These latter they flung into the river which we reached about one mile from Chalkad... In throwing the khatias in the river the crowd exclaimed, ‘The Sarkar’s Raj is at an end and their servants are dead, hence we throw their beds into the river.’ They were beating the toms and the fans not only as insulting signs but as a very inauspicious thing, as they consider Birsa was preaching to the people not to attend to the bhooth or make sacrifice but to obey him.

There are references in this account to physical violence, too—to the guardians of the law being pushed and hustled and pricked with spears by the pursuing Mudas. What however sticks out in the Head Constable’s memory of this ordeal is the rebels’ use of the ‘insulting signs’. Far from being treated as the august representatives of the sarkar to the accompaniment of obsequious body movements they were treated as bhut, dead souls fit only to be exorcised by the whiff of winnowing fans and the noise of drums. Far from being regarded as distinguished guests who brought prestige to a village by visiting it, they were unceremoniously rejected as polluting agents so that even the beds they had slept in had to be thrown away in a simulation of funerary rites. Far from being feared as the strong arm of the

state they were mocked and defied by the Mundas flaunting their bows at them. In other words, what shocked the Head Constable was that these downtrodden and docile people had ‘now audaciously lifted up their heads’ (as Mao was to say of the Hunan peasantry)—a figure of speech signifying the very opposite of what bending and prostrating stood for.

There is yet another class of paralinguistic signs which represents social rank and grade in terms of distances. Thus temporal distances indicating degrees of authority were often expressed as rights of precedence. In nineteenth-century Calcutta clan leaders used to fight over precedence during the ceremonial distribution of sandal paste and flowers at sacred recitals and funeral banquets.\(^{113}\) Again in Malwa, according to Mayer, a wife’s standing in her husband’s family varied according to whether she was allowed to have her meal at the same time as the other women of the household or afterwards.\(^{114}\) Among the Coorgs the headman was traditionally called the mūpayanda, which means ‘having precedence’, and as Srinivas observes, ‘the sense of precedence is ubiquitous’. It was the headman who took the first shot at target-shooting contests on ritual occasions, it was he who led the village dance at harvest festivals, and it was his pack-bullocks which had the right to lead a caravan.\(^{115}\) Precedence such as this governed relations between castes as well. In Nimar district a high-caste villager’s bullock-cart had the right of way over a Balahi’s, and in agricultural operations high-caste farmers had the right to help themselves first to the local supplies of labour: ‘Only after they are satisfied will field servants go to work on the fields of their Balahi creditors.’\(^{116}\)

Foil to these were distances in space used both laterally and vertically as status markers. ‘The regulation of the difference among men in rank’ at Akbar’s court was quite clearly a matter of seating and standing arrangements: the nearer a royal prince or nobleman was to the throne, the more important he was supposed to be.\(^{117}\) Centuries later distance was still very much in evidence as an index of seniority in age and caste in rural society. It was a part of Coorg etiquette that a youth did not

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\(^{113}\) Bandyopadhyay: 28. \(^{114}\) Mayer: 220.
\(^{115}\) Srinivas (1952): 63, 205.
\(^{116}\) Fuchs: 81, 93. \(^{117}\) Abū-ʾl Fazl: 168–9.
walk with an elder side by side but a few respectful paces behind him. Informal gatherings around a cot in a UP village often conformed to the same pattern. 'If all are members of one caste, the oldest person sits at the head of the cot . . . others sit next in order of prestige ranking. If a Brahman is present he will be offered the head seat. Lower caste persons and sometimes also poor Rajputs will sit on the floor and untouchables at a slight distance from the group.' Notice how the inferiority of the poorer Rajputs and untouchables is indicated by the fact of their having to squat on the floor while the Brahman has his seat on the cot. This constitutes yet another aspect of proxemics, that is, the expression of hierarchical differences in terms of levels of seating. The subordinate must not be seated above the superordinate. An unmistakably feudal notion, this too has an ancestry stretching back to the Smṛtis. 'When his teacher is nigh', said Manu (II 198), a pupil must 'let his bed or seat be low'. The principle worked with the followers of Islam as well. When the Pir Pagaro was taken out in a ceremonial procession, a devout Hur, we are told, left her perch on the roof of a nearby house so that she would not be situated higher than her spiritual leader when the latter passed along that road. Secular authority also operated by the same sign. Beals observed that in Gopalpur even the more important men of the village would, when they called on the landlord, sit on the ground beneath the platform occupied by the latter.

Distance thus was a measure of prestige. No wonder that the followers of Birsa remembered this when in explaining to their people how they 'had lost their honour and were biting dust', they mentioned that the Mundas were, among other humiliations, barred by the Raja and the zamindars from using chairs and high seats. Indeed their revolt, like all others of its kind, was made up of the peasant's urge to recover his self-respect by eliminating or turning against his oppressors the apparently innocuous, because traditionally tolerated, signs of subalternity, such as those of prescribed distances, which had been imposed on them. Inversions of this order occur frequently and on a large scale in the course of all such massive explosions of violence. The rule of differential heights is broken whenever the

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121 Beals: 61. 122 Singh: 77.
peasants ride past a landlord's or an upper-caste man's house on horseback during a riot in defiance of customary prohibitions. The calculated and otherwise inviolable margins of avoidance in a caste-ridden society sensitive to pollution are necessarily infringed whenever they raid a zamindar’s or a bania’s residence, or lay their hands on the person of anyone in authority.123 Violations of this kind are indeed so numerous that these are almost taken for granted in reporting or commenting on rural disturbances, so that what catches the observer’s eye and survives the levelling influence of redundancy in his narrative is the destruction by the rebel of the more obvious symbols of his enemy’s power.

Such symbols constitute the staple of peasant grievances. The rural masses everywhere use these both as a measure of their own deprivation and as objectives worth fighting for when roused to do so. These figure therefore conspicuously in all rebel discourse—in that ancestral voice of insurgency, John Ball’s Sunday exhortations, as well as in the Birsaites' propaganda on the eve of the ulgulan. ‘They are clad in velvet and camlet lined with squirrel and ermine, while we go dressed in coarse cloth’, said the ‘crack-brained priest of Kent’, contrasting the lords’ way of life with the serfs’: ‘They have the wines, the spices and the good bread: we have the rye, the husks and the straw, and we drink water. They have shelter and ease in their fine mansions, and we have hardship and toil, the wind and the rain in the fields. And from us must come, from our labour, the things which keep them in luxury.’124 Dress, food, mansions—these and other ‘things which keep them in luxury’, crowd into all cahiers de doléances wherever they originate. Adapted to Indian

123 Anthropological literature is packed with details of prohibitions imposed on low-caste villagers with regard to riding, access to upper-caste houses, etc. Thus, in Nimar district of Madhya Pradesh, 'a Balahi riding a horse must dismount when he meets a high-caste man or when he passes through a village. Rajputs often force a Balahi rider to dismount if he forgets to do so' (Fuchs: 81). Again, in Malabar a high-caste Hindu’s main house used to be located, according to Logan, at the very centre of a rectangular residential space surrounded by a garden. ‘The reason for the selection of this spot is explained to be that a Malayali tries to be as far as possible away from the polluting caste people who may approach the house as far as the fence, but may not enter the garden’ (Logan: 84).

124 Froissart: 212.
conditions, hence with some variation of detail, the same sort of contrast is implied in the Munda pracharaks' enumeration of the wrongs (some elements of which have been noticed above) suffered by their tribe.

The Raja and zamindars exploited them and reduced them to a position of carriers (forced and unpaid labourers) and dependants, deprived them ‘of their clothes, their dhoti and garments, turban and footwear’; they could not use even an umbrella. They were not allowed to sit on chairs and high seat, to enter a temple or to eat from golden or silver or brass plates . . .

The list of course could be longer. For the authority the elite had over the peasantry was nearly all-pervasive and symbolized by many objects and attitudes. Indeed the struggle for any significant change in existing power relations in the countryside often appears as a contest between those who are determined to retain their traditional monopoly of such status symbols and others who are keen on appropriating them—that is, as a cultural conflict. This is why all dominant cultures are particularly sensitive to anything which even remotely looks like usurpation and quick to discipline offenders.

Take, for instance, the set of symbols which related directly to the body either as its parts or as ornament and garment. Physical characteristics were often regarded as indicative of rank both by peasants and their enemies. The leaders of the rebel Tuchin movement of central France in the fourteenth century suspected courtliness or elegance in all who had smooth uncalledous hands, and rather than recruiting them to their bands, marked them out for killing. Conversely, the brahmanical nightmare of a cataclysmic upheaval, as evoked by the Vāyu-purāṇam (58:59), had in it the image of Sudras with teeth as white as those of members of the higher varnas. Even under less mythical circumstances the rural elite have been known for their aversion to sharing any of their own distinctive physical styles with their social inferiors. The curled, up-turned moustache represents one such style for upper-caste upper-class males in many parts of India. When a member of the traditionally labouring community of Bareias was found sporting such a moustache in a Gujarat village dominated by rich and

\[125\] Singh: 77. \[126\] Hilton: 132.
politically powerful Patidars, he was forcibly shaved, beaten up and driven out beyond its boundaries. This anecdote was recorded by an anthropologist as evidence of ‘greater concern with caste order in the past’, presumably in colonial times and before. However, in the light of the facts published by the Elayaperumal Committee’s report, it seems that the ban on the up-turned moustache continues to be a feature of the outcaste’s subalternity even in India today. 

Objects of wear too were seen as status markers. It was ‘out of respect to the higher castes’ that no woman of the Bharia caste of farm-servants and agricultural labourers in Madhya Pradesh would wear a nose-ring, as Russell and Lal had noticed. Many decades later social inferiority still continued to be denoted in much the same way in Uttar Pradesh by means of sanctions against the use of jewellery by outcastes: ‘Shoemaker women, for example, report having been prevented by Rajputs from wearing ornaments and clothes similar to those of the Rajput women.’ Umbrellas and shoes too have been jealously guarded symbols. A part of the insignia of feudal monarchies the umbrella retained some of its importance as an exclusive ‘sign of noble rank . . . not permitted to the commonalty’, even after it had ceased to be an appanage of kings. Throughout the colonial period it continued to operate as a general index of dominance and subordination, sorting out, especially in the rural areas, the rulers and the ruled, high caste and low caste, and so on: in Champaran no Indian ‘whatever his status’ could hold an umbrella on his head in the presence of a white planter, nor could a Bania do so while passing by a Bundela Rajput’s house in Saugor. Shoes, too, could offend if worn in the presence of one’s superiors. Members of the lower castes, particularly if they were women, had to take these off on meeting a high-caste man and in some villages even while going past an upper-caste residence or through caste Hindu wards. Indeed, umbrellas or shoes could be so suggestive of power that often

under conditions of growing antagonism between the peasant and his enemies both sides regarded these as symbolic sites of conflict. The ban imposed on their use by the diku landlords was felt to be an unbearable tyranny by the Mundas as they became increasingly politicized. Conversely, the Tamil Nadu landlord who identified shod feet as the symptom of rebelliousness among agricultural labourers at the time of the Kilvenmani massacre, spoke up against what was, to his class, a real affront: "Things used to be very peaceful here some years ago. The labourers were very hard-working and respectful. But now... the fellow who used to stand in the backyard of my house to talk to me comes straight to the verandah wearing slippers and all. ... These fellows have become lazy and arrogant, thanks to the Communists. They have no fear in them any more."134

However, of all things worn on the person it is clothes which are the most semiotized. For the body 'as purely sensuous, is without significance',135 and it is clothing, writes Barthes following this Hegelian dictum, which 'ensures the passage from the sensuous to the meaningful: it is, one could say, the signified par excellence'.136 Nowhere is this more explicit than in the countryside where the distinction between peasants and others—townsmen, officials, gentry, etc.—is often perceived as one of dress in the first instance. 'Dress is a fundamental element of distinction', said Gramsci about Italy.137 Indeed, this was true of most societies, especially of those vegetating for long under colonial and semi-feudal conditions. It is known, for instance, that in Bolivia under Spanish rule dress was 'a means of publicly manifesting the status of the persona' and of 'social control in favour of the estamental order'.138 In India too castes, classes and ethnic groups were often differentiated by the clothes their members wore and the manner of wearing them. The Bengali bhadralok was utterly self-conscious about his dress, for 'no self-respecting person could go about his business in society wrapping himself up in a dirty knee-length gamcha', wrote the Sadhana in a clear reference to typically lower-class garment.139

139 Anon. (1891): 78. A gamcha is a short, hand-woven cotton fabric used mostly to dry the body after a bath, but also worn sometimes as a loin-cloth by those too poor to afford a dhoti.
In south India it was obligatory for a low-caste man to approach anyone of the upper castes or indeed for a servant his master by first stripping himself to the waist as a mark of respect. In Gujarat, the so-called impure Mahars ‘were not allowed to tuck up their loin-cloth but had to trail it along the ground’, while in central India among the Kurmi the difference in length between the peasant’s jacket, bandi, covering the trunk only up to the hips and the landlord’s long coat, angrakha, reaching down to the knees, was indicative of the difference in their social standing. And among the Santals the word deko referred not only to alien Hindu landlords, but also, according to Bödding, ‘any Indian in good clothing’.

It is not surprising therefore that in societies so sensitive to dress differentials any serious crisis of authority should be expressed in sartorial terms as well. Dress has indeed a way of insinuating itself into the history of all of the more widespread and militant agrarian movements. It is at such times that distinctions of this order tend to generate the utmost animosity and many of the reversals characteristic of these conflicts are acted out symbolically by the reallocation of garments and styles of wear between peasants and their enemies. Zimmermann recorded a number of such incidents in his account of the German Peasant War of 1525—an insurgent snatching away a nobleman’s hat and putting it on himself, some of the counts forced to take off their gloves by the peasants while the latter keep theirs on in defiance of all rules of etiquette, and so on. During the Bolivian peasants’ revolt of 1899 all who wore trousers (pantalones) or rather were not clad in coarse rustic homespuns, were marked out by the rebels as their enemies. Willka, their leader, had it as one of his aims to try and abolish distinctions of dress between the estaments by introducing the use of homespun for all; and following a tradition of insurgency going back to the eighteenth century they forced homespun peasant clothes on townsfolk in some instances. And in Tanzania during the Maji Maji rebellion the Christian missionaries feared that the Ngoni would kill all who wore European clothes.

In rural India, too, dress which discriminated so clearly

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between the elite and the subaltern as a matter of course, acquired an added significance in the eyes of both the parties in periods of serious confrontation between them. The Rangpur dhing of 1783, for instance, broke out at a time when widespread disturbances were not uncommon in that part of Bengal, thanks to gang robberies and incursions of fakirs, sannyasis and predatory soldiers of the East India Company’s army. When, therefore, a large gathering was reported from Kadagaon and Magurrah, its character as a mass of rebel peasantry was identified, among other things, by the dress worn by the members of the crowd. ‘Each of these peasants has a stick or bamboo in his hand’, reported an official witness, ‘their dress is like that of the ryots or villagers, they are neither sephis, fakirs or night robbers.’ In yet another historic struggle, that of the tenant cultivators of Pabna in 1873, the manner of dress was recognized by all concerned—landlords, their proja and the administration—as an index of class divisions made explicit by antagonism over the rent question. The officer in charge of the sub-division most affected by the bidroha put it in unmistakable terms in a report to the higher authorities:

This class feeling was so universal that the opinion of any native on the agrarian question may be told to a certainty by looking at his dress. If he wore a light chadar on his shoulder, used shoes on his feet and carried an umbrella, one could make sure that he was a zamindar’s man. If merely clad in the dhoti and gamcha he was at heart an unionist.

Dress had a place in the Santal hool, too, as an element of the idiom of that revolt. At the battle of Maheshpur, said Sido after his capture, ‘many of the Manjees were dressed in red clothes’. Neither he nor his brothers had taken to wearing red until then. However, it appears that after his death, when the insurrection was at its peak, Kanhu, Chand and Bhairab adopted this rather conspicuous garment as an assertion of authority, as indeed a

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146 Kaviraj: 37. 147 Quoted in Saha: III 108.
148 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: ‘Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor’. About three months after Sido’s capture, his brothers had set up camp at a village where in an obvious exercise of insurgent authority they had taken a number of hostages in reprisal against what they considered as an act of betrayal by the local community. A raid led by a Major Breuer on that village on 22 October 1855 sur-
gesture of turning things upside down, just as ‘Giuliano’s solitaire ring, the bunches of chains and decorations with which the anti-French bandits of the 1790s festooned themselves in Southern Italy, would be regarded by the peasants’, according to Hobsbawm, ‘as symbols of triumph over the rich and powerful’.

There was yet another striking instance of the use of dress—the turban (pagri), to be precise—as a means of reversal during this rebellion. This form of headgear carries much weight in many regions of rural India. With some local communities, such as the Balahi, it is only the headmen who have the right to wear this. In Gujarat this used to be an exclusive privilege of the dominant caste of Patidars, so that anyone of a lower caste risked being severely punished if he was tempted publicly to try it on. The Mundas, as noticed above, held it against the dikus that the latter denied them the right to put on a turban. And if it was a matter of prestige to wear a pagri, to confer it was all the more so. This is precisely what Kanhu, the supreme commander of the Santals, did at the very height of the insurrection. As stated in a report from Major-General Lloyd on 19 November 1855, ‘Kanoo Manjhee with his Brothers and Followers had visited on Bechoo Raout a gwallah the head of the village of Sooria Haut . . . Kanoo had created him a Soobah and as a Symbol of the rank conferred, had bound a turban on his head.’

The turban came thus to stand for a historic inversion, for nothing turns the world upside down more radically than when the subaltern feel bold enough to delegate power seized in an act of rebellion.

There were of course other objects, apart from those worn on one’s person, which also acted as status symbols and had a part to play in the negative articulation of rebel consciousness. Some of these were means of transport identified with rank in many feudal societies and subject, like the latter, to the shocks and tremors of agrarian disturbances. In a well-known incident of the Peasant War in Germany the rebels used this symbolism

prised them and they narrowly escaped falling into enemy hands. ‘The three leaders were conspicuous in red garment amongst the fugitives’, wrote Major-General Lloyd reporting the incident to GOI in his letter of 1 November 1855 (JP, 22 Nov. 1855).

Hobsbawm: 22.  
Fuchs: 31; Pocock: 28; Singh: 77.

JP, 6 Dec. 1855: Lloyd to GOB, 19 Nov. 1855.
for a particularly dramatic act of reversal: forcing a wicked countess to sit in a dungcart they mocked her, ‘In a golden carriage camest thou to Weinsberg, in a dungcart must thou depart!’ The Hunan movement, reported by Mao Tse-tung, saw a good deal of smashing of sedan-chairs. And in the period of the civil war in England fraught with so many threats to the status quo, ‘the wisest of men saw it to be a great evil that servants should ride on horses: an evil now both seen and felt in this unhappy kingdom’.

The use of horses by low-born villagers was unacceptable to the Indian elite as well. No Balahi was to ride on his horse past an upper-caste person or village, no Bania past a Bundela Rajput’s house, no subordinate past his superior officer. The equestrian figure was embedded in the traditions of the meek and much harassed Santals as an image of pure force. ‘Kings and rich people move about on horseback as conquerors’, according to the *Mare Harpam Ko Reak Katha*. The other privileged form of transport in India was the palanquin. Some of the foreign powers who had acquired territorial bases in the subcontinent used this to indicate their superior standing as rulers: in Bombay under Portuguese occupation no native was ever allowed to ride in a palanquin except with the Viceroy’s permission, a practice which the British kept in force in their turn at least until 1788. In rural India the native elite, especially the big landlords, continued for a long time to treat the palanquin as a part of the insignia of their authority and no one of inferior standing was allowed to ride in it through their residential villages. If a zamindar was really powerful, even some junior white officials could risk being thrown out of his village for violating this code. It was therefore symptomatic of a radical inversion in rural society that the peasants should publicly appropriate such vehicles. They did so when during the Rangpur insurrection they carried around their leader, Dirjenarain, in a palanquin. Nothing could have been more topsy-turvy than that. For as we know from Ratiram’s ballad on this event, no one could pass through the hated Deby Sinha’s estate.

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155 Fuchs: 35; Russell & Lal: II 453, III 293, IV 439.
158 C. Datta: I 4–5.
in that district in any form of transport whatsoever without being beaten up by his paiks and that too in the most defiling manner—that is, with shoes. And palanquins as well as horses were used by the leaders of the Santal forces during the hool. 'There were five or six Palkees [palanquins] with us', said a rebel taken captive soon after the outbreak. 'Sidoo and Kanoo ride in them. Whatever horses we found at Putgutteeah were mounted by the Sonthal Darogahs (Sirdars). Kanhu himself was to state later on that he 'was on horseback' leading his men in some of the more dramatic actions such as the sack of the Pakur Raj—a neat inversion by which a symbol of the authority of rajas and the rich was transformed into an instrument of their destruction by the poor.

The power of the rural elite in all pre-industrial societies is perhaps most conspicuously displayed by the size and elegance of their residence. In periods of sharpening antagonism in the countryside this can provoke much hostility among the peasant masses. John Ball’s bitter contrast between the living conditions of lords and serfs was to be echoed five centuries later in the complaint of a peasant woman of Palermo during the uprising of 1893: 'I have five small children and only one little room, where we have to eat and sleep and do everything, while so many lords (signori) have ten to twelve rooms, entire palaces.' It is not to be wondered therefore that stately homes have often been the object of violence in many of the major peasant revolts in Europe—manor houses during the Jaquerie, castles and abbeys in the German Peasant War, chateaux in the French Revolution.

All over the Indian subcontinent difference in types of residence was—and still continues to be—a fairly accurate indication of difference in status. In colonial times this was true of distinctions between the rulers and the ruled as well as of those between the indigenous castes and classes themselves. As Anthony D. King has demonstrated so well by his researches,

159 MDS: 580. 'Sowarit choria jay paike mare juta', reads the relevant line in that ballad. D. C. Sen (1914): 1415.
158 JP, 19 July 1855: Statement of Balai Majhi recorded on 14 July 1855; JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Examination of Kanoo Sonthal'.
151 Hobsbawm: 183.
162 For some light on the situation in post-colonial India in this respect, see Bopegamage & Veeraraghavan: 142–3 et passim.
what he calls 'the bungalow-compound complex' functioned throughout this period as 'the basic residential unit of the colonial community'. Originating from a traditional house-type known in Bengal the bungalow was adapted to the urge of the governing elite to use residence as a space to demarcate itself politically and culturally from the natives without involving the actual loss of that direct physical contact so essential for purposes of administration. The result was of course that by the middle of the nineteenth century the bungalow, 'the most usual class of house occupied by Europeans in India', came to be regarded as a symbol of the authority of the whites and the Raj. In all hostile demonstrations against the government or its European associates such as planters and railway officials, it featured almost inevitably as a target of popular wrath. The Santal rebellion, for instance, was only eight days old when the Magistrate of Murshidabad arrived at Pulsa, a principal station, to find the bungalows built by the railroad engineers there 'entirely destroyed'. His was by no means a unique experience. For as one of his fellow officers was to report three days later, 'the whole of the Bungalows along the line from Rajnighal to Pulsa have been burnt down and sacked'.

The size and character of the residence were also regarded as a clear indication of status differences among the Indians themselves. As noticed above, this was integral enough to the culture of Malabar to show up in the regional language by way of a direct correspondence between caste names and hierarchically ordered names for caste dwellings. In general, a brick-built house was a decisive sign of affluence and high standing in the rural areas, as James Forlong, the planter, said about Bengal in his evidence before the Indigo Commission in 1860. This seems to have been the case in the Madhya Pradesh region too where by the end of the century a pucca building had come to be recognized as evidence of the malguzars' prosperity and power raising them distinctively above the level of the mass of the tenantry: 'They have almost without exception good pucca

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163 King: 32. This illuminating and highly original work has many important things to say about the bungalow-compound complex: vide King: 89, 91, 123, 146–50 et passim.
164 JP, 23 Aug. 1855: Toogood to Grey (15 July 1855); Rose to Elliott (18 July 1855).
165 RIC: para. 3509.
houses built with an elaborate main entrance (darwaza) which is easily distinguishable from the houses of the tenants, and around which cluster their cattle sheds and granaries.\(^{166}\) Further up the scale, a big landlord's house was often very conspicuous indeed both in size and in elegance. Day wrote of one of these in his _Bengal Peasant Life_ as 'the largest and best building in the village', with its solid masonry outer gate, imposing wooden door, the complex of inner compounds, halls and suites of rooms constituting the _kachari-badi_, the _dalan-badi_ and the _andar-mahal_.\(^{167}\) Fairly true to life, such structures testified to the disparity between the bigger zamindars and the rest of the rural population both in terms of material resources and of power. The idealized description of landlords' houses (often seen as the earthly replica of Indra's celestial palace) in some of the traditional Bengali narrative verse reflects not only the admiration but also the envy for their occupants on the part of its talented but impoverished authors.

The chagrin felt by the peasant on this score would also occasionally find its way into the otherwise placid prose of our primary sources to accuse his oppressors.

The Wani uses the large house now. We can't get houses for hire. I would be willing to give up everything and be free, but I should like a bit of a hut somewhere in the village.\(^{168}\)

In testifying thus before the Deccan Riots Commission a potter, Tatya Saloo, convicted of rioting against a Wani in his own village Supa, gave voice to that bitterness and desperation which drove the rural poor so often to vent their anger on such conspicuous symbols of the power of local landlords and money-lenders. Far too numerous and well documented to need recounting here, the attacks on the kacharis at Boda, Saal Ullah, Allanchurry, Dhee Hat, Baragang, Jamta and Dimla as well as on Deby Sinha's palace during the dhing of 1783, on the mansion of Krishnadeb Ray, zamindar of Punrah by Titu Mir's men during the Barasat rebellion of 1830, on 'all the respectable looking houses in the villages' within the area of the Kol insurrection of 1832, on the kachari of the zamindar of

\(^{166}\) _Hoshangabad Settlement Report_ 1891-96 quoted in Stokes: 258. Also see Russell & Lal: IV 87.

\(^{167}\) Day: 195-6.

\(^{168}\) DRCR (B): 3.
Ambar pargana at Jhikarhati and the house of the Raja of Maheshpur by the Santals in 1855, on the kacharis at Mirpur, Pasuria Bari, Chitturlia and Woodhunia and the house of the Majumdars of Gopalganj during the Pabna bidroha of 1873, and on the residence and gadis of banias and mahajans throughout Uttar Pradesh in 1857–8 and in the Poona and Ahmadnagar districts of Maharashtra in 1875 are among some of the instances which come readily to one’s mind.\textsuperscript{169}

It was not only by attacking the material symbols of governmental and landlord authority that the insurgents upset the established order. They did so by undermining its dominant semi-feudal culture as well. In so far as religion constituted the most expressive sign of this culture in many of its essential aspects, the peasants’ defiance of the rural elite often involved an attempt to appropriate the dominant religion or to destroy it. To those who were high up in society the emulation of their culture by the lower strata seemed always fraught with danger. There have been occasions when, thanks to the stimulus given to casteism by British colonial policy, sanskritizing movements among the lower castes to upgrade themselves by adopting the rituals and religious idioms of their superiors were resisted by the latter and generated much social tension and even some actual violence. If this could happen in conditions of social peace, the subaltern’s urge to assert his identity not in terms of his own culture but his enemy’s—a characteristic index of negative consciousness—was boosted, understandably enough, when the existing structure of authority in rural areas began to crumble under the impact of a mass uprising.

The Santal hool of 1855 was a clear demonstration of this phenomenon. Involved in a bitter and bloody war against Hindu landlords and moneylenders, the rebels took to Hindu religious practice with a vengeance. Certain forms of ritual worship (\textit{puja}) regarded as conducive to spiritual merit by the Hindus were adopted by the insurgents too. Indeed the very first intelligence report about their movements which we have on record, speaks of their ‘intention’ to march to Baniagram

\textsuperscript{169} For these instances see Kaviraj: 24, 27; Ray (1966): 273; J. C. Jha: 183; K. K. Datta: 74–5; FSUP: II–IV, passim; DRCR, passim; JP(F): ‘Pubna Riot Case’.
‘where they are to do Poojah and bathe in the Ganges’ before proceeding to Rajmahal.\textsuperscript{170} This Hindu idiom showed up emphatically and with a certain amount of consistency in the conduct of their leaders whom the crisis had invested with a degree of spiritual authority too. Thus, a headman called Ram, a local leader, was taken prisoner while ‘engaged in performing Poojah’, for he ‘could not . . . be disturbed or warned by his followers’ as the counter-insurgency forces closed in on his village and surrounded it.\textsuperscript{171} Kanhu himself is on record as having said that he ‘made poojah’ at a difficult moment during the battle of Maheshpur in an attempt, presumably, to influence its outcome in favour of his fauj.\textsuperscript{172} His brother Sido, the co-leader of the hool, had, we are told, his own plans to celebrate Durga Puja in the grand manner of the Hindu gentry of Bengal for whom the pomp and scale of this autumn festival served as a customary affirmation of religiosity as well as of social authority. And to leave no one in doubt about the genuinely Hindu character of this ceremony the insurgents abducted two Brahmans to make them perform the prescribed rituals correctly and in accordance with the highest standards of purity. As the Magistrate of Birbhum wrote to his superior officer: ‘The gang of from 5 to 7,000 Sonthals under Seeroo Manghee whom they term Soobha Thacoor at Telabonooe have strengthened their position by earthen works and dug Tanks there they have also made preparations for celebrating the Doorgapooja, for which purpose they have carried off and detained two Brahmans from one of the villages plundered by them in Thanna Nagoolea.’\textsuperscript{173} Such an open and energetic avowal of Hinduism on the part of a lowly, ‘unclean’ tribal peasantry could not have been regarded by the Hindu elite as anything but subversive. For it was indeed an integral aspect of their dominance that they should consider it threatened by any unauthorized affiliation to the ruling culture. This is why the prospect of Sudras practising dharma in the manner of the

\textsuperscript{170} JP, 19 July 1855: Eden to Grey (9 July 1855).

\textsuperscript{171} JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Ward to GOB (19 Oct. 1855).

\textsuperscript{172} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’.

\textsuperscript{173} JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Rose to Elliott (24 Sept. 1855). Ward, the Officer on Special Duty, also wrote to the Government of Bengal to the same effect on 21 September 1855. (Ibid.) For the Santals’ belief in the magical powers of brahmins, see a folk-tale in Bompas: 356.
upper varnas was envisaged in Puranic literature as a sign of the cataclysmic advent of Kali, and the slaying of Śambūka was instigated by the Brahmins and applauded by the gods as a great deed on the part of its eponymous hero in the Ramayana.¹⁷⁴

The insurgents undermined the dominant culture in its most important, that is, religious aspect not only by emulating it, but more directly and dramatically by acts of desecration. The Peasant War in Germany has provided us with some classic instances of this particular form of reversal. There in the first quarter of the sixteenth century the Catholic church was still a major feudal power in its own right and commanded wealth and political authority on a vast scale through its abbeys and monasteries. To the peasants it was as much of an enemy as any of the secular lords of the land, and consequently when they rose up in arms in the spring of 1525 there was little to restrain them from defying conventions and defiling objects sanctified by the church. It was Lent and time for fasting, yet they behaved as if they were Protestants and fasting did not concern them. They ate and drank freely. At Roggenburg drunken peasants broke up the church organ, battered the tabernacle with a rod, took away the chalices and other sacred vessels and shredded the vestments and flags for use as trouser belts. At Kempten armed contingents of them paraded past the church during the hour of high mass laughing and mocking. They brought down the pictures of the saints, sawed off the head of a beautiful statue of the Virgin Mary and smashed up the figure of the child in her arms. Indeed they made a mess of ‘everything considered holy’ (übten den grössten Unfug an allem aus, was man für heilig hielt).¹⁷⁵

In India the temple was an outstanding symbol of Hindu religion and often of the prestige of a local Hindu landlord if it happened to be patronized by his family or situated within his residential precincts. As such it often figured as a focus of conflict between Hindu landlords and non-Hindu peasantry. Being denied the right to enter a temple was among the grievances the

¹⁷⁴ As the Vāyu Purāṇa has it: ‘Sūdṛā dharmaṁ chārisyanti yugānte paryūpa-sthitē’. Tarkarāṇa (1910): 58/59. For the Śambūka episode see Rāmāyaṇam, Uttarākāṇḍa, lxxvi-ix in Tarkarāṇa (1908).
Birsait pracharaks made much of in their propaganda against zamindars, and it was as a decisive step towards the ulgulan that the Munda chief led his men into the forbidden Chutia temple, held a nautch there, threw down and defiled the images, and altogether desecrated this place of worship held sacred by the dikus. The violence of this sacrilege was not lost on the authorities who promptly issued a warrant for Birsä's arrest and put up a reward for his capture.\footnote{Singh: 77, 79.}

Attacks of this kind acquired a very special significance when the peasantry concerned happened to be Muslims. For apart from affecting power relations in the countryside even to the point of reversing them in some cases, these often led to the overdetermination of class struggle by sectarian conflict in a manner which was a commonplace of Indian politics under the Raj. Instances abound. In Malabar where the authority of the jenmi landlords derived not merely from their near monopoly of landed property but also, as Logan observed, from their function as trustees of village temples, attacks on and defilement of the latter featured in almost each of the numerous Moplah risings throughout the nineteenth century.\footnote{Logan: 554, 555, 559, 560, 565, 582, 588 \textit{et passim}.} Again in some parts of eastern Bengal where the Farazi movement launched by Shariatullah converged with militant resistance to Hindu zamindars' tyranny on the part of predominantly Muslim tenant populations, the latter were accused of defiling private shrines in landlords' houses by slaughtering cows, by forcing their entry there in clothes fastened by strips of cow-hide and at least in one case, by demolishing a set of lingas, a traditional surrogate for the image of the deity Siva.\footnote{Khan (1965): 17–19. The incidents which occurred in 1837 were reported in a contemporary periodical, \textit{Darpan}, published from Dacca, and quoted in Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, \textit{Sambad Patre Sekaler Katha}, III 311–12.} The correspondent who reported these outrages in a mufassil periodical in 1837 voicing the alarm that spread among the Hindu gentry of Dacca and Faridpur districts at the time, recalled the not very dissimilar pattern of violence witnessed during the Barasat insurrection only a few years ago. Places of worship sacred to both the faiths had come under attack during that historic struggle. In order to terrorize the mass of the peasantry inspired by Titu's
Islamic revivalism and roused and organized by him to resist zamindari oppressions, Krishnadeb Ray, a powerful Hindu landlord, had raided a Muslim hamlet and burnt down some houses and a mosque. The insurgents returned the compliment by invading Ray’s own residential village, Punrah. ‘The Zemindars had put a slight on their religious feeling’, reads the official report on this event, ‘and they retaliated [by] seizing a cow which they killed in the public market place of the village, scattered the blood over the walls of a Hindu temple and hung up the four quarters of the animal in derision before it.’ And as if to emphasize the purely symbolic character of this act ‘on this occasion they committed no plunder beyond carrying off[f] what articles they found lying immediately exposed in the shops in the market place’. Desecration was used thus by both the parties to undermine each other’s prestige—by the Hindu zamindar the prestige of the rebellion and the new faith which fuelled it; by the Muslim peasantry the prestige of the landlords and its emblem, the old established religion.

It was this fight for prestige which was at the very heart of insurgency. Inversion was its principal modality. It was a political struggle in which the rebel appropriated and/or destroyed the insignia of his enemy’s power and hoped thus to abolish the marks of his own subalternity. Inevitably, therefore, by rising in revolt the peasant involved himself in a project which was, by its very nature, negatively constituted. The ‘names, battle-cries and costumes’ he assumed in order to carry this out were all taken over from his adversaries. It was no doubt a project predicated on power, but its terms were derived from the very structure of authority against which he had been driven to revolt. He spoke thus in a ‘borrowed language’—that of his enemy, for he knew none other. ‘In like manner’, wrote Marx as he framed the paradoxes of the first bourgeois-democratic revolutions of modern Europe in a linguistic analogy, ‘a beginner who has learnt a new language always

179 BC 54222: Metcalfe & Blunt to Court of Directors (10 Apr. 1832), paras 13, 15. For some other allegations of cow killing, physical assaults on brahmins and forcible conversion to Islam, see ibid., para. 17, as well as JC, 6 Dec. 1831: Money to Thomason (28 Nov. 1831) and JC, 3 Apr. 1832: Alexander to Barwell (28 Nov. 1831).
translated it back into his mother tongue." The peasant rebel of colonial India, the infantile, blundering and alas, invariably frustrated, precursor of a democratic revolution in the subcontinent had set out to learn his very first lesson in power, but in this earlier period prior to the emergence of a modern bourgeoisie, an industrial proletariat and advanced ideas of democracy he could do so only by translating it backwards into the semi-feudal language of politics to which he was born. A historically necessary exercise in negative consciousness, this was demonstrated in its general form as a process of inversion turning, as Manu had warned, the lower (*adhara*) into the higher (*uttara*)..

180 MECW: XI 104.