CHAPTER 3

AMBIGUITY

Inversion by crime—Sultana's reputation as a Robin Hood—crime and insurgency derive from two different codes—reasons why the distinction is not clearly perceived—conspiracy theories—peasant uprisings preceded by increase in rural crime—starvation and banditry—Banjava Singh the Chambal dacoit—the Lodhas of Midnapur—'blurring'—two interpretations of rural crime—ambiguity dispersed by synonymy—outlaws as insurgents—dacoit/rebel—some case histories: the Santal insurrection of 1855 and the jacqueries in UP, 1857-8—a note on historiography.

'Turning things upside down' is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition of the violence of peasant uprisings. In all feudal types of societies there have always been individuals and small groups who were driven by hunger and humiliation to commit acts of violence in such a way as to amount to turning things upside down. These acts were almost invariably designated as 'crime' by the rulers of such societies. For instance, many of the offences prescribed for punishment (danda) in the Smrtri texts constituted crime in so far as they were reversals of the existing codes of deference. Even after the British introduced relatively more modern legal institutions in the subcontinent, political arrangements at the village level were allowed in many cases to continue as of old, so that the local elite went on exercising with impunity their traditional right to discipline members of the lower classes and castes for using the language, dress, transport and other status symbols of their social superiors. For a Chamar to speak like a Rajput, for a Barelia to sport a turban like a Patidar, for a Balahi to ride a horse through a Bundela village, for a peasant not to leave his cot and stand up at the sight of his landlord—were all regarded as acts of in-

1 Instances of all such inversions have been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. For a landlord's statement about the offence taken and punishment meted out by the members of his class if a peasant failed to get up from his cot as a mark of deference, see Steed: 132.
version and severely punished. By the same token, in eighteenth-century England where ‘game was a special currency of class based on the solid standard of landed wealth’, poaching was, in the eyes of the landed aristocracy, ‘not only stealing a peculiarly valuable kind of social capital’ but ‘also debasing its coinage’. For it allowed the lower classes to share with the gentry such food and sport as were considered to be the exclusive symbols of privileged status. Consequently the landed aristocracy which was still strong enough to swing the ‘rule of law’ in line with its own interests, found it necessary to use its authority in order to save the food of the gods from desecration by the underdogs: the draconic Black Act of 1723 (9 George I c. 22) was enacted, on the pretext of an emergency, as a legislation aimed equally against the ‘ancient offence’ of poaching and the ‘displacement of authority’ caused by it.

While those in control of the instruments of punishment tend thus to act upon a definition of crime broad enough to permit a defence not only of the material basis of their power but also of their prestige, the more audacious of the outlaws in India and elsewhere have been known, conversely, to add insult to injury in their defiance of authority. Shibeyshani, a notorious dacoit of Nadia at the turn of the nineteenth century, when surprised by a villager and challenged to identify himself, answered back, ‘Your father’—an euphemism, in Indian usage, for ‘You bastard!’ Apprehended, he was made to pay for his robbery compounded by the crime of abusing his upper-caste landlord captor—a serious breach in the code of verbal deference. He had his forearms chopped off and bled to death.

However, it was not in all cases that the inversion effected by crime involved such a crude and frontal assault on codes of deference. Some of the more powerful criminals are known to have brought this about by the knightly device of dealing with the forces of law and order as noble enemies. Sultan, the legendary bandit of Uttar Pradesh, combined a cool disregard for the authorities with humour, hospitality and even chivalry to impose the rhetoric of a combat between equals on a campaign launched by a Special Dacoity Police Force set up for the purpose of destroying him and his gang. He was eventually caught and hanged. Corbett who was one of the small group

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that planned and led the police war against him, concludes his account of Sultana’s career with a remarkable tribute.

Society demands protection against criminals, and Sultana was a criminal. He was tried under the law of the land, found guilty and executed. Nevertheless, I cannot withhold a great measure of admiration for the little man who set at nought the might of the Government for three long years, and who by his brave demeanour won the respect of those who guarded him in the condemned cell. I could have wished that justice had not demanded that Sultana be exhibited in manacles and leg-irons, and exposed to ridicule from those who trembled at the mere mention of his name while he was at liberty. I could also have wished that he had been given a more lenient sentence, for no other reason than that he had been branded a criminal at birth, and had not had a fair chance; that when power was in his hands he had not oppressed the poor; that when I tracked him to the banyan tree he spared my life and the lives of my friends. And finally, that he went to his meeting with Fredy [Young, the commander of the Special Dacoity Police Force] not armed with a knife or a revolver, but with a water melon in his hands.⁵

Nothing could speak more eloquently of the inversive function of crime than these words. The criminal had in this instance so fully achieved the ultimate objective of rebellion, so thoroughly had he turned things upside down that in the eyes of the custodians of order he was transfigured from an outlaw into a hero and his record remembered no longer as one of offences against the law but that of valour and humanity.

An inversive function of this kind is common to peasant insurgency and certain (though not all) classes of crime. But these two types of violence are clearly distinguished in one important respect. Unlike crime peasant rebellions are necessarily and invariably public and communal events. To generalize, the criminal may be said to stand in the same relation to the insurgent as does what is conspiratorial (or secretive) to what is public (or open), or what is individualistic (or small-group) to what is communal (or mass) in character. In other words, crime and insurgency derive from two very different codes of violence.

The distinction between the two codes is not always easily

⁵ Corbett: 130-1.
perceived by observers at the initial stages of a peasant uprising. Used to reading all signs of violence against society under ‘normal’ conditions as crime, they are inclined at first to read the same set of signs in a violence that has already switched from one code to another. Since the passage from crime to rebellion is not fully comprehended yet, there is a tendency—almost universal on the part of the authorities at the outbreak of an insurrection—to interpret the increased intensity and incidence of violence in quantitative terms alone by attributing it to the secret design of a small number of malefactors rather than the initiative of individual offenders against the law. Insurgency is thus mistaken for that larger type of crime which is produced by conspiracy.

Conspiracy theories figure prominently in the official response to many Indian peasant uprisings. The conspirators are in most of these cases suspected to be members of one or the other rural elite group on the simple assumption that the peasant has no initiative of his own and is a mere instrument of his master. At least one notorious tyrant is known to have escaped the full measure of legal punishment by manipulating precisely such elitist assumptions. Deby Sinha whose oppressions as a revenue farmer of the East India Company goaded the peasantry of northern Bengal into revolt in 1783, argued in self-defence ‘that it was the intention of the Zemindars to keep back their revenue for this year and that they had instigated therefore the ryots to rise’.

He got away lightly. How keen and predisposed officialdom could be to try and attribute a plot to an event of this kind may be seen from a report written by one of them about his own part in the military action which finally led to Titu Mir’s defeat and the fall of his rebel stockade on 19 November 1831. ‘On the 20th Instant [that is, November 1831],’ he recalled, ‘I repaired to the Stockade in order to search for Papers which might have been useful to Government to develop a Plot, if any such existed.’

‘To develop a Plot’ was also the instinctive response of some of the leading officials to the Kol rebellion of 1831–2. They saw in it the hand of the local chief. The maharaja of Chota Nagpur, wrote one of them, ‘may have considered the summary

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* MDS: 390.
expulsion of the Mahajuns and the destruction of their houses, papers, and effects, the most convenient way of squaring all accounts with them, to many of whom he is understood to be much indebted\textsuperscript{9}. However, a fairly thorough investigation carried out by the government produced no direct evidence of any such elite involvement, although NagvamSI sympathy (as against conspiracy) for the Kols as the enemy of their enemies—the suds—could not be doubted.\textsuperscript{9} The outbreak of the Santal rebellion in July 1855 illustrates again how the regime often tended to reach out for a conspiracy theory at the drop of an arrow. Reports received by the Calcutta authorities from their men on the spot during the first fortnight of the hool hinted darkly—and rather hysterically—at invisible strings pulled by hidden hands. Since it was ‘evidently a planned and concerted thing’ and appeared to be ‘long meditated and well organized’, and ‘as the Sontals [were] generally the most timid people in the world and dreadfully afraid of the Police’, it followed ‘that all this [was] at the instigation of some one else’, that ‘they [had] been put up to this’.\textsuperscript{10} Even the name of an identifiable conspirator emerged at one point. Meer Abbas Ali, a former Amir of Sind, was suspected of being at the root of all the trouble. But as an official enquiry was soon to establish, it was his passion for sport rather than rebellion that had made him recruit, in the spring of 1855, a large number of Santals as jungle-beaters from the region affected soon afterwards by the uprising. The government was satisfied ‘that Meer Abbas Ali Khan had nothing to do with this insurrection’.\textsuperscript{11}

To mistake rebellion for crime in the characteristic form of a conspiracy theory is not a matter of mental habit alone. The conceptual inertia that refuses to acknowledge, at first sight, the altered figure of violence, feeds on the sharp increase in criminal activity which often inaugurates a peasant revolt. Quantity again plays a trick on quality. A sudden rise in the incidence of rural violence has been known to herald some of the most massive uprisings in India. The link between the Santal hool

\textsuperscript{9} BC 1363 (54227): Blunt’s Minute (4 Apr. 1832).

\textsuperscript{9} J. C. Jha: 144–9 passim.

\textsuperscript{10} JP, 19 July 1855: Eden to Grey (9 July 1855); JP, 23 Aug. 1855: Elliott to Grey (19 July 1855). Also see JP, 19 July 1855: Eden to Toogood (9 & 13 July 1855).

\textsuperscript{11} K. K. Datta: 50, 125–8.
and the crime wave that preceded it was obvious enough to be noticed by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal in his minute of 19 October 1855 three months after the outbreak. 'I see no reason to doubt', he wrote, 'that the present disturbance had an intimate connection with the so-called Dacoities of 1854 or rather that these Dacoities were in fact the commencement of the present insurrection.'

We have a clear recognition here of the passage from crime to rebellion, an insight on the part of the peasant's enemies into a process by which violence switched codes. The insight, alas from the official point of view, did not come soon enough. For the process had indeed been building up since 1852 when in one single year dacoities increased by 89 and 58 per cent respectively in Birbhum and Bankura, two districts which were both to be caught up in the insurrection soon afterwards. In Bhagalpur, the other district to burn in 1855, as many as 12 gang dacoities had been committed in the previous year and led to 123 arrests and 74 convictions. 'The occurrence of so many robberies in quick succession within a jurisdiction where such acts of violence had for many years been quite unknown, excited surprise & alarm': these words taken from the Bhagalpur Police Report for 1854 show, incidentally, how difficult it can be for the contemporary observer to identify violence as it transits obscurely through the grey overlap between codes. Too close to the actual events, the Police Commissioner did not have the advantage of hindsight that was to illuminate the Lieutenant-Governor's understanding of crime as the precursor of rebellion.

A somewhat similar pattern of 'preliminary disturbances' could be seen in the jacqueries of Poona and Ahmadnagar districts of Maharashtra twenty years later. The actual outbreak of the riots there in 1875 was preceded by a spate of rural violence during the previous year. Directed invariably against Marwari moneylenders this ranged from what the Deccan Riots Commission called 'social outlawry' and 'petty annoy-

\(^{13}\) JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Minute by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal (19 Oct. 1855).


\(^{14}\) Quoted in the Lieutenant-Governor's Minute of 19 October 1855 (JP, 8 Nov. 1855) and hence taken to be more authoritative as well as comprehensive than the lower half-yearly figures given in G. F. Brown's memorial of 12 December 1855 (JP, 20 Dec. 1855).
ance’ to dacoities committed by the Koli outlaws in the hills of the western districts of Poona and Nagar. The parallelism between these Indian experiences and the English agricultural labourers’ movement of 1830—known popularly as ‘Swing’—is close enough to merit some mention here. Hobsbawm has shown how in one particular county, Norfolk, crime increased by at least 30 per cent during the six years ending in 1830, how in the twenty-two counties comprising nearly the entire domain of the Swing movement there was a spectacular rise in crime in 1829 on the eve of the outbreak, and how the incidence of poaching, the most defiant of all rural crimes, ‘rose particularly steeply in the years immediately preceding the rising of 1830’.

Statistics such as these usually indicate a lowering threshold of the peasant’s tolerance towards the conditions of his existence. Poverty has a way of compelling recognition from all Indian governments—if only as a law and order problem. The British had to take notice of it from the earliest days of the Raj. A district official in Bengal observed how in the spring of 1771 even the honest elements among the tenantry were being driven by hunger to take to banditry: ‘Numbers of ryots who have hitherto borne the first of characters among their neighbours, pursue this last resource to procure themselves a subsistence.’

The great Bengal famine which followed added dramatically to the number of starving villagers as well as of the banditti. Again, in 1792, another local administrator mentioned ‘the last year’s scarcity’ among the causes that had ‘increased the Number of Robberies’ in his district. The remaining one and a half centuries of colonial rule followed by more than three decades of government under a successor regime have made little significant change in this causal connection between starvation and violence in the countryside. The account of the restless life and bullet-ridden death of Banjara Singh, as given by a leading police officer of independent India and published with a foreword by the country’s Home Minister, is therefore still an integral and authentic part of contemporary history.

Banjara Singh was a shepherd boy who grew up to be the leader of a formidable band of dacoits in the Chambal region. His father was a poor peasant turned poorer when he pawned half of his small plot of land, sold his flock of sheep and took a loan from the sahukar—all in order to pay for his daughter’s wedding. Then he died. And as we learn from the testimony of his adversary and biographer:

The turning point in Banjara Singh’s life was the death of his father. He disposed off the field to fulfil his duties as a devoted son in connection with the last rites of the dead. The sahukar turned up to press his demand for the payment of loan. Banjara Singh had no money to give. The sahukar remonstrated with abuses. The young man at first kept quiet but later retaliated by uttering abuses in reply. At this, the sahukar hit Banjara Singh with his stick. At the first touch of the stick, Banjara was wild and assaulted him with his lathi. The sahukar fled. That night Banjara Singh decided to leave his dilapidated house and his semi-deserted village.  

Many an outlaw’s career begins in almost identical circumstances all over rural India. There are regions of chronic poverty like Banjara Singh’s own district where for hundreds of years peasant youths have been slipping out of desolate villages and starvation and bonded labour in order to take to dacoity as a profession. There are demographic masses branded by colonial legislation as ‘criminal tribes’ (a stigma nominally removed since 1952 but still intact in social practice) for whom the very fact of having been thus classified has made crime the only means left for livelihood. The Lodhas are one such group of the rural poor in western Bengal. A forest people they used to earn their living, traditionally, as hunters, trappers and gatherers of food and fuel from the jungle. But the jungle, their provider, was taken away from them by the zamindar and the sarkar as land hunger and rising birth rates combined to turn more and more of the woodlands of Midnapur into paddy fields and villages. Cut off thus from their principal source of subsistence the Lodhas had, by the turn of the century, adopted robbery

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80 Chaturvedi: 139.

81 The source of our information on the Lodhas and of all otherwise unacknowledged extracts in this and the next two paragraphs is Bhowmick: 33, 35, 36, 46, 66, 266, 268, 270, 274-5. The statistics on landholding are based on Tables 11 and 12 and those on crime on Table 29 of that work.
and theft as almost a second profession. And then, in 1916, the law stepped in to fasten on them a new identity by naming them officially as a ‘criminal tribe’.

The Lodhas had taken to crime rather than agriculture because there was nothing for them in agriculture to take to. They had very little land of their own. A study of landholding by a hundred families in five Midnapur villages showed that an average Lodha family of 4.8 members owned 0.65 acre of land, that is, 0.134 acre per head. Of the families surveyed 57 per cent were landless, 20 per cent owned less than one acre, and 17 per cent more than one acre but less than four. No wonder that the Lodha peasant starves most of the time. ‘A few families were found in the course of the enquiry . . . to have no grain of rice for 7 or 8 days at a stretch, and they depended wholly on . . . wild tubers for their food.’ Again, in one of the villages ‘a good number of families . . . were found to starve or remain without any food for the whole day. This is a common phenomenon in the life of a Lodha here. Even the children are kept starving. Sometimes they are found to collect some edible small or big fruits and leaves to tide over the period of starvation. One woman was found by the writer to swallow a morsel of soil in crushing hunger.’ What crime, if any, this particular woman was eventually driven to, we shall never know. But the author of the melancholy monograph from which these facts have been taken does tell us of another woman who was arrested and convicted. She was a widow with four children and the only way she could feed them was by stealing food or articles sold or exchanged for food. Children too had to provide for themselves by similar means. A ten-year old girl was arrested by the police for theft: she had been ‘starving for two days and was tempted to lift [a] brass cup with a view to selling it in the market for a little cash by which she could procure some food to eat’.

Hobsbawm has noticed the distinction made by the English rural labourer of 1830 between two classes of crime committed as an escape from poverty. The labourer ‘could seek a relief from poverty in crime—in the simple theft of potatoes or turnips which constituted the bulk of the offences which he would himself regard as criminal, and in poaching or smuggling, which he would not’. 22 Hunger has forced the Lodhas of Midnapur to do

22 H & R: 73.
away with such fine moral distinctions. Parents have to feed their families, and if crime is the only means of access to articles of common consumption, the morality lies with the criminal. Far from being censured for offences against the law, a Lodha punished by the court would often be regarded by his kin as above reproach. 'In a few cases', to quote again from the account mentioned above, 'the wives of the criminals defended their husbands as innocent and spotless in character. They strongly asserted that they knew nothing wrong about their husbands.' Impoverished bread-winners do indeed figure prominently in Lodha crime statistics. In a sample of 180 of them listed as criminals it was found out that 82.2 per cent had no land at all, 12.2 per cent owned one acre or less and 5.6 per cent two acres or more, while 9.4 per cent of the same population belonged to small families of 1 to 3 members each, 46.7 per cent to medium-sized families of 4 to 6 members each, 31.1 per cent to large families of 7 to 9 members and 12.8 per cent to very large families of more than 10 members each. Thus the great majority of Lodha criminals are those who have the largest number of mouths to feed and the least resources. What makes the connection between hunger and crime quite explicit is that it is the practice of Lodha dacoits to carry off from the houses they raid everything they can lay their hands on and exchange it as quickly as possible for food; any foodstuff that can be readily consumed, they consume on the spot during a raid.

Offences of this nature committed in a desperate search for food are not limited to the Lodhas of Midnapur alone. There is nothing in this that is specific to their culture or the region where they belong. Such defiance of the law arises from a common and ubiquitous tradition of resistance to poverty which, at least during the colonial period, received an acknowledgment from the authorities themselves. This was typically expressed in the words of the Police Report of 1852 for the Lower Provinces stating how the number of dacoities in Birbhum district had suddenly increased by about one hundred per cent since the previous year as the direct result of distress following a severe drought:

There appears a considerable increase in the offence of Dacoitee; but bearing in mind that this is one of the districts in which the people suffered most from the want of rain in 1851 and that the nature of the
country affords great facility for the perpetration of this offence and the escape of the offenders, such a result might have been expected.  

The identification of scarcity as a cause of crime occurs in the administrative literature relating to many other parts of the subcontinent as well. In some districts of Uttar Pradesh, for instance, the authorities saw in dacoity ‘the form of crime to which the Bundela Rajput always reverts when pressed by hard times’.  
The connection between famine conditions in this province and the rise in the incidence of crime during the years of drought and scarcity in the late 1860s was documented by Frederick Henvey. ‘In times of famine it is usual to expect an increase in the number of crimes against property’, he wrote and went on to show how taking 1867 as the index year the percentage increase for 1868 and 1869 was respectively 175 and 214 in dacoity, 158 and 185 in robbery, 124 and 170 in lurking house-trespass, and 118 and 171 in theft (other than that of cattle).  

For the south, too, David Arnold has demonstrated in his excellent study of this subject how drought, dearth and high prices constituted ‘the most readily identifiable factor in the incidence of dacoity’ in the Madras Presidency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The correlation was indeed so clear that the authorities came to rely on it as ‘a true index to the state of distress’—a sort of local barometer of the prevailing degree of deprivation—and ‘the Inspector-General of Police invariably prefaced his annual report on crime with a summary of the year’s rainfall and grain prices’.  

Again, in the west country hunger often turned peasant into dacoit as witnessed thus by a young Indian civilian in charge of relief

\[ \text{Table:} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Dacoities</th>
<th>Robberies</th>
<th>'Lurking House-trespass'</th>
<th>Cattle Thefts</th>
<th>Other Thefts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1867</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>274</td>
<td>13,665</td>
<td>10,218</td>
<td>18,699</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1868</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>17,071</td>
<td>12,196</td>
<td>22,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>509</td>
<td>23,297</td>
<td>6,751</td>
<td>32,990</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The decline in cattle-theft in 1869, explains Henvey, was entirely due to the fact that a special organization for the suppression of this crime was then in full swing.

\[ \text{Arnold: 145.} \]
operations in Gujarat devastated by a famine at the turn of the century:

I had set up camp for a few days on the outskirts of a small village some miles away from the nearest railway. Provisions used to be sent up for me by train from the district headquarters. One day it so happened that the entire supply (amounting in fact to eight loaves of bread) was looted on its way to my camp . . . The police blew up the incident out of all proportions. After three days, five Kolis, all skin and bone, were sent up on charges of dacoity for trial at my own court! 'We had nothing to eat for three days in a row', they said without any show of repentance whatsoever. 'Our bellies were burning with hunger. Should we have come across all that food and not eaten it?' Indeed, how were they to let all that food go? But how could I let them go without punishment either? So I worked a bit on the evidence provided by the police and defined the offence as a case of theft rather than dacoity. Then I sentenced them to imprisonment for a day and a fine of half a rupee per head. This was the verdict which I entered in the court records, but felt so embarrassed about the whole business that I said to them, 'Now go away. You are free. Don't steal again.' The fine I paid out of my own pocket.  

There is more to this anecdote than a parallelism between the various instances of starvation crime discussed above. It helps to define the ambivalence of the deed on which the young and evidently sympathetic officer was asked to sit in judgment. Was it an offence to be interpreted and punished according to the Indian Penal Code or was it to be justified by a code of social morality that provides for a minimum subsistence as an overriding right? A form of violence against property was obviously switching codes when it was brought before the court and obliged the young officer to produce half an answer to that question in terms of one code and half in another.

The resistance of the rural poor is bound to create dilemmas of this sort for the rulers in any society with a large peasant population, although not all guardians of law and order may turn out to be as conscience-stricken as the young civilian of Gujarat. The mysterious King John's band of 'well-disciplined social rebels' known popularly as the Blacks rode through a part of England in 1723 'administering folk justice' to the evil gentry and inevitably precipitated a lot of 'freelance actions' by

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87 C. Datta: 8.
poachers, smugglers, etc. with whom they had nothing directly to do. But, as E. P. Thompson observes, ‘all of these actions were, of course, seen by the authorities, within one common blur, as outrages by the Blacks’. This blur represents classification by a familiar and convenient code. It was obviously convenient for those in power to make no distinction between the activities of the Blacks and others and to lump both kinds of violence as crime—a code which they knew how to handle.

Significantly, however, the peasant’s own perception of violence, too, can be and often is characterized by ‘blurring’ with the difference that with him it operates in reverse. While his foes—landlords, moneylenders and officials—would tend to lump all forms of defiance of the law as crime, the peasant would tend to lump them together as perfectly justifiable—even honourable—acts of social protest. Both points of view are governed by atidesa in so far as they both read the signs of one kind of violence into another. But they do so in opposite directions and thereby produce, under conditions of extreme polarization, a categorical conflict so broad and generalized as to amount to a clash between two incompatible theories. Mao Tse-tung’s reflections on the antonyms ‘terrible’ and ‘fine’ used as contradictory descriptions of the Hunan uprising of 1927 help us to understand the emergence of such mutually hostile theoretical perspectives as the outcome of a peasant revolt.

The fact is that the great masses have risen to fulfil their historic mission [he says in the Hunan Report] and that the forces of rural democracy have risen to overthrow the forces of rural feudalism . . . It’s fine. It is not ‘terrible’ at all. It is anything but ‘terrible’. ‘It’s terrible!’ is obviously a theory for combating the rise of the peasants in the interests of the landlords; it is obviously a theory of the landlord class for preserving the old order of feudalism and obstructing the establishment of the new order of democracy, it is obviously a counter-revolutionary theory . . . If your revolutionary viewpoint is firmly established and if you have been to the villages and looked around, you will undoubtedly feel thrilled as never before. Countless thousands of the enslaved—the peasants—are striking down the enemies who batten on their flesh. What the peasants are doing is absolutely right; what they are doing is fine! ‘It’s fine!’ is the theory of the peasants and of all other revolutionaries.29

There must indeed be two different and contradictory ways of looking at the violence of peasant rebellions—the rebel’s and his enemy’s, giving rise to two different and irreconcilable ways of interpreting and generalizing the experience of that violence—two theories. But even before antagonism in rural society reaches the point of insurrection, elements of the alternative theory already constitute a part of the peasant’s perception of the conflict between himself and his foes. These are expressed most commonly in his attitude to certain acts of disregard for the law, especially those committed in response to unbearable degrees of economic deprivation or social humiliation. The Italian woman from Piana dei Greci who during the peasant rising of 1893 justified the admission of petty criminals to the Fascio on the ground that ‘if they have stolen a bit of grain they have only done so out of poverty’,30 expressed what is indeed an almost universal tolerance of starvation crimes in all peasant societies. It is again this sort of a linkage between smuggling and poverty that made many rural communities in eighteenth-century Sussex rally not merely to the support but even in defence of ‘plebeian gangs’ of smugglers, for ‘to the common people they were certainly not seen as criminals’.31 The way the poor villager’s ‘resentments of decades’ allowed the legendary ‘King John’ of the Blacks to play Robin Hood in Hampshire and ‘sheltered him and his band’, has been assigned a classic guerilla status: ‘His supporters seemed to be able to disappear as easily into the folds of popular concealment as did the Vietcong.’32 This is how Sultana, ‘India’s Robin Hood’, too, managed to evade the law for a very long time. For ‘having known what it was to be poor, really poor . . . he never robbed a pice from a poor man, never refused an appeal for charity’. Consequently, says Corbett, ‘his intelligence staff numbered hundreds’.33 This could be said also of Banjara Singh the bandit who ‘ravaged the tract between Jamuna and Chambal rivers and beyond with ruthlessness to the rich and with benevolence to the poor’. He, too, proved to be a most elusive quarry for the police. For, according to the officer who eventually cornered and killed him, he relied for his strength ‘on the

30 Hobsbawn: 189. 31 Winslow: 158, 159.
support of the many—the many who inhabited the mud-
houses... on the willingness of the people to aid his struggle
against the rich and his vendetta against the Police'.

The peasant appears thus to be ready to put up with and
often positively approve of a wide variety of crimes induced by
poverty. These may be big or small ranging from petty larceny
involving a brass tumbler pilfered by a hungry Lodha child or
a handful of grain by a Sicilian pauper to the more spectacular
and massive acts of defiance by a band like King John’s or
Sultana’s. Since E. J. Hobsbawm’s pioneering formulation of
the concept of ‘social banditry’ an attempt is being increasingly
made by historians to distinguish between such offences in
terms of the differences in their social content. Sussex smugglers,
it has been said, ‘were often the rebels of the countryside’ who
resembled ‘social bandits’ in the sense that they ‘were not
regarded as simple criminals by public opinion’, although in
certain other respects they did not conform to Hobsbawm’s
categories. E. P. Thompson defines the Blacks—the ‘armed
foresters’ of eighteenth-century England—as an intermediate
type between ‘social bandits’ and ‘agrarian rebels’ sharing
‘something of both characters’ but identical with neither.
But whatever the point of the spectrum to which one assigns
an activity of this kind, it has as its core an element of class
conflict.

Whether this is more or less evident in any particular instance
is of course a function of its relative entropy. Sporadic acts of
defiance of this genre are unlikely to have their class character
noticed by the rural population. In other words, they fail as
signals which transmit poorly because of channel noise or
ambiguity or a combination of both. And like all other messages
rural crime too requires an adequate level of redundancy or a
duplication of the coding system for its class content together
with the rest of its meaning to come through clearly enough to
make sense. This would explain why it was easy for the Deccan
Riots Commission to characterize the events it had been set up
to investigate as ‘a disturbance arising out of the relations of the
agricultural and moneylending classes’. The incidence of

34 Chaturvedi: 134–5. 35 Winslow: 157, 159; Thompson: 64.
36 DRCR: 4.
criminal offences committed against moneylenders during the previous thirty years in general and the last five in particular was high enough to make the class character of the jacqueries of 1875 obvious not only to the agrarian population but also to officialdom. They conformed to a clearly recognizable pattern. There were far too many incidents of the same kind involving the same class of offenders and the same class of victims to leave anyone in doubt as to who in rural society was trying to settle scores with whom.

As early as 1845 a large body of Bhils led by Raghu Bhangria had spread terror among the Marwari sahukars by chopping off their ears and noses and plundering their property. Bands of Kolis of the hills between Poona and Thana districts had from time to time murdered, mutilated and robbed moneylenders. Two of the latter were assassinated in broad daylight and in full view of the public during 1852 in widely separated parts of the Bombay Presidency and this was cited by an official as evidence of tolerance, if not approval, of violence against usurers among the rural poor. And the statistics of crime committed against moneylenders during this period in seven districts of the Bombay Presidency—14 murders, 16 dacoities and robberies, 34 thefts, 8 arsons, 39 cases of hurt and wounding and so on adding up to a total of 170 offences in the five and a half years preceding the riots of 1875, an annual rate of about 31 cases—leave nothing unsaid about the focus of the peasant debtor’s hostility towards his class enemies. Concentration such as this generates a sort of synonymy which helps to disperse at least some of the ambiguity of this particular type of rural crime. The diversity of violence addressed to one single group of the population—murder, arson, robbery, assault, etc. all directed against moneylenders—has the effect of underscoring not only the wickedness of the objects of such violence but also the morality of the latter as a measure of just retribution in the eyes of the less delinquent members of the agrarian community. There is in this perception the beginnings of the peasants’ sense of themselves as a social mass defined not only by a common grievance but also by the possibility of obtaining redress through militant

87 Ibid.: 4–5.
88 For the concept of synonymy as used here and its function as an eliminator of semantic noise, see Macy et al.: 285–94.
and collective action—the beginnings, if no more than that, of a recognition of their identity as a class-for-itself.

It is precisely the combination of a high frequency of occurrence and a duplication of the coding system that makes the class character of the more powerful and massive peasant uprisings so explicit—explicit at least to the rural masses. For an insurrection incorporates crime such as what has been discussed above and abolishes it thus as a form of social protest: an optimal defiance of authority, it subsumes all other acts of defiance of lesser magnitude by providing them with a total and new context. This is the context of a class war—that is, a struggle in which opposing classes consciously allow force to decide between irreconcilable aims. And just as 'meaning is controlled by the use of language in situations', crime in the new social context comes to signify an integral part of a comprehensive system of defiance—a parole in a new langue: in short, it changes codes.

This code-switching is seldom overlooked by the peasantry. Tolerant, by tradition, towards crimes of indigence as a necessary aberration rather than as a positive virtue, they now see in rebellion the operations of a rite de passage turning criminals into insurgents. This is an experience shared by many agrarian societies. Poor peasants driven to crime by feudal oppression in China rallied to the banner of the hero of The Water Margin in his revolt against the Emperor. Some notorious 'bad characters' turned out to be important local leaders of the peasant war in Germany in the sixteenth century. Rudé has noticed how the Swing movement of agricultural labourers in parts of southeastern England was on some occasions led by smugglers—a

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40 This is an important distinction. Even the Palermo woman who, as quoted above, would have no objection to admitting to the Fascio those who had been forced by poverty to commit petty crimes, insisted that the aim of this policy was to induce them 'not to commit crimes again', and that 'the object of the Fascio is to give men all the conditions for no longer committing crimes'. Hobsbawm: 183.

41 Jäcklein Rohrbach, the celebrated leader of the Heilbronn area, was known to be a 'defiant, violent and daring chap' who was suspected to have been involved in the murder of a nobleman, the mayor of Böckingen, and 'he had many debts' (Zimmermann: I 368). For the English and Russian instances cited in the rest of this paragraph see respectively H & R: 105, 106 and Hobsbawm: 27.
natural group of "activists" in this part of the world. The outlaw has indeed some advantages over others in leading an insurrection: he is less bound by deference to the authorities with whom he has already been at war for some time; and of course he has already acquired a certain amount of expertise in the techniques of defiance. This is why on the outbreak of a revolt existing bands of brigands could be better suited to act as its 'shocktroops', as Hobsbawm puts it. A Russian experience he cites in support of this view illustrates at the same time and very elegantly indeed the formal acknowledgement by the peasantry of the criminal's transformation into the insurgent. Two men who had taken to brigandage after being expelled from an Ukrainian village community as criminals were re-admitted to it when they emerged as the leaders of a local uprising in 1905. The history of India under British rule is not wanting in instances of those who had once broken the law as individuals or members of small criminal bands and did it all over again on a larger scale as initiators and organizers of rural revolt. There is a reference to a certain Siddoo Sitooba, described as an 'old offender', leading the riots against a moneylender of the village of Pimpalgaon during the anti-usury struggles in Maharashtra in 1875. What particular offence made the Deputy Superintendent of Police of Poona district attach that stigma to Sitooba's name we do not know. But we have on record a curious detail of Titu Mir's career to show how radical the shift from crime to insurgency could be. He was apparently a professional wrestler who, according to a knowledgeable official, 'became a servant to any Zemindar who desired to create Disturbances or to extract from their Ryotts'. Convicted for 'his Service in an affray which took place in the Nuddeah District' he was in prison for some time before going on a pilgrimage to Mecca from where he returned as a disciple of Syed Ahmed and a reformer. When he eventually shot into fame as a leader of the Barasat bidroha he was still mentioned in official correspondence as 'a released convict'.

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42 Deputy Superintendent of Police to District Magistrate of Poona (17 June 1875) in DRCR (C) 4.
43 J.C. 3 Apr. 1832: Alexander to Barwell (28 Nov. 1831); J.C. 22 Nov. 1831: Barwell to Thomason (14 Nov. 1831).
hire himself out as an instrument of landlord tyranny against
the peasantry had obviously turned his own consciousness up-
side down—a genuine case of *fanshen*—in order to serve as an
instrument of popular violence against landlords.

The trajectory of peasant consciousness was not in all instances
characterized by such a dramatic change of direction. More
often than not it was a matter of robber turned rebel. Two of the
principal dacoits of the Kajirhat area were mentioned by
Goodlad among the organizers of the dhing of 1783. Again, one
knows of Merhai Singh, ‘a dacoit who formerly was tried for
theft, &c. and was imprisoned in Agra Jail but at the outbreak
[of the Mutiny] escaped and [had] ever since been causing a
great deal of trouble’. By the time he was captured by De
Kantzow in the vicinity of Pawayan and sent back to Agra in
the summer of 1859, he was described in the Anglo-Indian
press as yet ‘another rebel leader’ brought to justice.\(^4^4\) None
of their exploits however testifies more fully to such a transfor-
mination than the careers of two Santal bandits. The hool, as we have
seen, was preceded by a spate of gang robberies. That these
were the acts of famished men driven to desperation was
obvious even to the authorities. ‘In many of the cases entered
as Dacoities’, wrote the police chief of the province, ‘nothing
but articles of food were carried off, and the prisoners averred
that their sole object was to procure food. Many committed
offences against property for the purpose of being put in jail
and thus escaping from starvation’.\(^4^5\) Yet this did not stop the
law from dealing most severely with them. The details that we
have for a small sample of 42 of such ‘dacoits’ convicted in
Bhalalpur show that 13 of them were sentenced to 16 years
each of hard labour in irons and the rest to 10 years each of
hard labour also in irons—the terms to be spent, for both
categories, in externment away from their home districts. And
their age distribution—85.7 per cent in the 25–40 group—
makes it clear how hunger and the hand of colonial justice com-
bined to hit the community in the guts, first by turning its most
mature male adults into criminals and then by cutting them off

\(^4^4\) For these two instances see MDS: 324 and FSUP: V 921–2.

\(^4^5\) JP, 17 May 1855, no. 27. The figures which follow are based on statistics given
in JP, 7 June 1855, no. 106.
from their families. Among these ‘dacoits’ there were, in 1854, two men, Kewala Paramanik of Sindree and Domon Majhi of Hatbanda, who were both to figure prominently in the rebellion. The former, described after his capture as ‘the person who was principally concerned in the Sonthal dacoities of last year & who then evaded apprehension’, emerged in 1855 as a principal leader of the hool. An exceptionally capable organizer by all accounts he had managed to avoid official attention for most of the time during the rebellion—until in fact his arrest towards the very end of the pacification campaign when the government realized that the man in their custody (who, meanwhile, had assumed a pseudonym) was indeed ‘one of the chief instigators & planners of the present insurrection’. He apparently was one of those who had masterminded the two key moves—the communal hunt at Buro Koondee and the march to Hazaribagh in the spring of 1855—which mobilized the Santals and made them ready for the uprising. Then he led the hool in its western sector. Domon Majhi, too, surfaces in the records of the counter-insurgency campaign, but as Domon Daroga. The new designation indicates a change of his role from village head to rebel captain—a change mediated by brigandage and acknowledged both by the Santal high command and the masses who called all their second-ranking war-leaders ‘Darogas’—that is, captains of the rank-and-file ‘Sipahis’. He was certainly close enough to Kanhu to be trusted, together with Kewala, for the dangerous—and at that particular juncture, politically crucial—mission of executing the traitor who had betrayed Sido to the authorities. An intrepid fighter, his

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46 Both Kewala and Domon were recruited for his own gang by Bir Singh, a regional chief (parganait) of the Santals. He professed to know how to put the inmates of a house to sleep before robbing them. The ability of particularly inspired burglars to cast a sleeping spell on their victims is a folk tradition of long standing in eastern India. But Bir Singh’s claim to have been blessed with this magic power only recently by Chando Bonga, the principal deity of his tribe, and its use as a protective device for raids in that critical year, 1854, contain more than a faint suggestion of the morality of breaking into the houses of the Bengali moneylenders. K. K. Datta: 51–2. The direct quotations and the information on Kewala and Domon used in this paragraph have been taken from JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Money to Bidwell (6 Sept. 1855) and Lloyd to GOI (9 Sept. 1855); JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Bidwell to GOB (13 Oct. 1855) and Grey to GOI (31 Oct. 1855); JP, 6 Dec. 1855: ‘Statement of Runjeet Pergunnait of Sarmi’. For some further discussion on the circumstances of Domon’s death, see Chapter 5 below.
death made some people very happy indeed. 'I rejoice in the death of this man,' wrote a gleeful official on receiving Domon's severed head from a collaborator: 'his death will be a blow to the insurgents.'

The transformation of robbers into rebels made sense to the Santals. Most of the dacoities of 1854 had been committed against the Bengali moneylenders regarded by the peasantry of Damin-i-Koh as their most vicious oppressors. The officials too knew this to be true, as one can see from the Bhagalpur judge's reference in a letter written in the spring of 1855 to 'the fact of some dacoities having occurred at the close of that year which were attributed to the Santals' discontent with the Bengalee Muhajuns'. Thus even as crimes these contained, from the peasant's point of view, an element of moral justification in so far as they represented a desperate attempt by the poor to relieve hunger at the expense of their over-fed exploiters. Yet the law had singled out the Santal for punishment while the mahajan was not merely spared but positively pampered by the police and the courts. The leaders of the hool registered their protest against such iniquity in all their statements. 'I have often complained [about] this to Pontet', said Sido about the way the Damin-i-Koh official of that name had dealt with him, 'but he never listened, I gave him petitions at Burrisuagore, Barhet, Gutcharree, but he will not listen. I also petitioned him at Rajmehal. He only said you have eaten first from the Mahajuns "banchut Sala" now you come to complain "Sala banchut".' It was the use of such double standards which was one of the most important causes of the uprising. Even a myopic officialdom came to see this for itself, albeit rather late in the day, as it was alerted to the rumour which spread soon after the outbreak to the effect that 'avenging the punishment inflicted on their comrades concerned in last year's Dacoities' was the purpose for which the rebels had taken up arms. 'Those Dacoities were committed on the Bengalee Mahajuns who had oppressed them; and they complained that their comrades had been punished, while nothing had been done to the Mahajuns

48 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: 'Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor'. 'Sala' means 'brother-in-law'; 'banchut' means 'sister-fucker'.

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whose exactions had compelled them to take the law into their own hands.' It was easy therefore for the Santals to regard the rebellion as a collective bid for social justice already initiated in a small, if rather aberrant, way by the dacoities of the previous year. The hool provided a context in which that limited and somewhat tainted violence of 1854 was transformed into a purer, generalized and just war, cleansing and transforming the previous year's agents too in the process.

There was of course no immediate recognition of this process on the part of the authorities. During the earlier phase of the uprising the official point of view tended to cling on the whole to the familiar penal code, although there was a shade of difference between those in remote control and those on the spot. To the administrators one remove away from the village the Santals were 'rebel dacoits'—an ambiguous expression in which the adjective, though by no means an acknowledgement of a just cause, signifies at least a grudging acceptance of the exceptional nature of this particular 'crime' as an open and collective act of defiance. Their subordinates, however, were far too close to the event and far too tied to routine to notice any difference. Hunter has commented on this combination of insensitivity and inertia among the men on the spot. Some of them, he points out, had reported much progress in the material conditions of the people and a corresponding decline in crime only a few months ago, so that 'it took time for men who had written in this strain in February to realize that their district was the seat of rebellion in July'. Besides, they failed to grasp, at the initial stages at least, that the violence which had just erupted was, despite some apparent similarities, quite different in character from gang robbery so familiar to them.

Night attacks on houses by bands of from five to fifty men had always been common in Bengal, and it was a difficult matter to pronounce the exact line at which such enterprises cease to be civil offences and become overt insurrection. A single example will suffice. 'The whole inquiry only tends to prove', wrote the magistrate of Beerbhoom, with regard to the sacking of a Bengali hamlet, 'that it was one of those occurrences common in Bengal, when the Dacoits were bold, adventurous, and determined, the Bengali a coward and helpless, and the village watchmen all

49 JP, 19 July 1855: Brown to GOB, 9 July 1855.
50 Ibid.: Eden to Grey, 10 July 1855.
absent from their posts.' It is possible that in this individual case the magistrate may have been right in his conjecture, but in many similar cases there can be no doubt that he mistook rebellion for robbery.\textsuperscript{51}

The Birbhum Magistrate was not the only one of local officers to mistake rebellion for robbery. To Mahesh Lal Datta, the daroga of Dighee, too, the sullen mass of peasants around him on that July morning looked like dacoits. For twenty years he had grown up with crime (or what he broadly understood to be so) in that area\textsuperscript{52} and dealt with it as a chore according to his not too refined notion of law and order. Blinkered by routine he had not noticed the change that had come over the Santals he thought he knew so well, and ended up by paying for this with his life. What happened at that flash point when Sido drew his sword and inaugurated the hool by slaying Mahesh Daroga, is not clear in all respects. As with many other flash points, here too the historian must content himself with an impression which has most of the detail bleached out by over-exposure. Yet the residual outline pieced together from the recollections of one of the protagonists\textsuperscript{53} is clear enough to suggest that a clash between the peasants' view of themselves as rebels and a daroga's insistence on dealing with them as criminals is what triggered off the insurrection.

For years it had been Mahesh Daroga's practice to accept bribes from the mahajans in order to harass, arrest and send up the Santals to the nearest district headquarters for detention and trial on false charges of dacoity. He did this so indiscriminately that even the more affluent Santals had turned against him. One of them whose prosperity had made him so much of an object of the mahajans' envy (presumably because it was not easy for them to exploit him) and the daroga's oppression that after being manhandled by the latter he swore: 'We shall see how much twine could the Daroga procure so as to fasten all the

\textsuperscript{51} Hunter (1897): 244. Emphasis added.  
\textsuperscript{52} K. K. Datta: 52, 142.  
\textsuperscript{53} There are four eye-witness accounts on record of the events at Panchkathia on 7 July 1855. Two of these, viz. Woozeer Sheikh's (JP, 19 July 1855: ‘The deposition of Woozeer Sheikh taken on oath before the Assistant Magistrate of Aurangabad on the 9th July 1855’) and Sido's (JP, 8 Nov. 1855: ‘Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor’) tell us what happened but not how. It is only the two statements taken from Kanhu after his arrest (JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Statement of Insurgent Sonthals’; ibid.: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’) which help us to get a closer look at the incidents as reconstructed here on the basis of this information.
peaceful Santals whom the wicked Daroga wanted to be sent up.\textsuperscript{64}

The twine with which the innocent peasants of Damin-i-Koh would have their hands tied behind their backs as they were marched under police escort to Bhagalpur on false charges of house-breaking and robbery, had apparently come to be regarded as a hated symbol of official justice. Indeed, the expression 'cart loads of rope' occurs several times in Kanhu's statements. According to him, a man from the police station had called at his house on 6 July 1855 to have a look at a gathering of the Santal chiefs there and 'went away saying he would return the next day with the Darogah and a hundred men with two cart loads of rope to bind them'. He proved true to his word, for, as Kanhu's narrative, taking both the versions together, goes on to say:\textsuperscript{65}

The next morning it was proposed to go out to Shikar. Kanoo, Seedoo, many Manjees and others, amounting to 40 or 50 went out for this purpose, armed as usual for a Shikar. On their way they met the Darogah of Burro, Mohesh Lal, with two Sepoys of the Police and several Mohajuns and two cart loads of rope, and asked where going, replied to Shikar, but the Darogah said, they were intending Dacoitee and were complained against by the Mohajuns accompanying... The Mahajuns complained to Buiro Darogah that Seedoo & Kanoo were collecting men to commit a dacoitee. The Mehajuns gave him 100 Rs to come & catch us... I said why have you come... he said that the 'Moiras have come to complain that you are collecting men for a dacoitee'. I said prove it, if I have committed a theft or Dacoitee... said the Mohajuns must be fined 5 rupee each for false complaint... The Mahajuns said, 'If it costs us 1000 Rs to your 5, we will do that to get you imprisoned'... [Kanhu] saw the cart loads of rope and told the Darogah he had prejudged them, else why the ropes for binding them. An altercation ensued... The Mahajuns began to tie Seedoo my brother. Then I drew my sword. Then they left off tying my brother & I cut Manick Modie's head off & Seedoo killed the Darogah & my army killed 5 men...

Mahesh Daroga was thus a martyr to his own incomprehension. He could not understand that by refusing to submit to starvation or seek relief in gang robbery, the Santals had transformed

\textsuperscript{64} K. K. Datta: 53.

\textsuperscript{65} We have collapsed the two statements together here. The reporting, indirect in the first of these and direct in the second one, has been left as in the original. For references see n. 53 above.
themselves into rebels and their consciousness changed codes. This is why the ‘cart loads of rope’, a punitive message meant to intimidate dacoits and meaningful only in terms of the old penal code, failed to frighten those who had just constituted themselves into an ‘army’ and were about to declare war against the Raj itself. Those first fatal cuts at Panchkathia were clearly the outcome of a dialogue in which neither of the interlocutors understood the other’s language.

Such miscognition was characteristic of a good deal of the official response to the peasant uprisings of the period of the Mutiny too. This is more than amply documented by the reports we have from the district administrators of the time on the disturbances in Uttar Pradesh in 1857–8. What emerges from this vast body of literature is a perception impaled on a single stereotype of rural violence. Unable to distinguish between rebellion and dacoity it tended to classify all ‘rebels’ as ‘dacoits’, as if the two words meant the same thing. ‘Large hordes of dacoits from Rampore and the Moradabad District filled the Bhabur villages of lower Kota’, wrote the Commissioner of Kumaun: ‘I could not offer any efficient resistance, and the rebels having in a few days plundered the villages, the country was left a desert.’ Or, take the following extracts from the ‘narrative of events’ written by R. M. Edwards, Officiating Magistrate of Muzaffarnagar, on the eve of the insurrection there:

On the 15th [of May 1857] or following day information was received that the people of the neighbouring villages were collecting in great numbers round the city and proposed attacking and plundering it. On this the Cotelaw and the Duffadar of sowars . . . went with a party of district sowars, attacked and completely dispersed the dacoits bringing in some 15 or 20 prisoners . . .

In the absence of a jail [destroyed by the insurgents the previous day] these dacoits were ordered to be flogged and released . . . The prisoners were caught with arms in their hands in open resistance to Government authority and should one and all have been hung on the spot.

. . . we see how effectively a few district sowars drove back and thoroughly dispersed this large body of dacoits . . .

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*64 This extract and the next are taken from FSUP: V 272 and V 81 respectively. Emphasis added.*
 Quite clearly Edwards was confronted with a rising of the rural population around the town of Muzaffarnagar. Indeed he came close to acknowledging this to be so when he referred to the participants as villagers ‘with arms in their hands in open resistance to Government authority’. However, the habit of identifying any serious violence in the countryside as dacoity won out in the end and an all too familiar term taken from the lexicon of the thana and the *faujdari adalat* was made to describe a very different order of disturbances.

The local leaders of these *émeutes* too were often branded by the same name. They emerged in large numbers in the rural areas as the mutiny of the sepoys in the nearby garrisons detonated pent-up anger against moneylenders, landlords, officials and a host of village tyrants. The jacqueries which thus broke out were led by men with grassroot connections. Inevitably, there were among them a handful of professional dacoits who were tempted to join in the violence only by the prospect of loot or were, as discussed above, re-integrated into the agrarian community by the very force and mass of an insurrection. But it is clear even from the government’s own information that the great majority of them were not criminals. More often than not they were members of some of the local subaltern groups and had come to acquire a degree of authority as a result of dislocations in the existing power structure. Or, they belonged to big landed families, and took up arms in order to grab more land, gain a following and settle old scores with rivals or with the sarkar itself if they had any particular grievance against the latter over lost privileges. Whatever their status they were able to mobilize the peasantry in a manner and on a scale quite clearly distinct from dacoity. Yet the distinction was not always grasped by the district and subdivisional authorities. The trauma of these sudden explosions drove them to stigmatize their protagonists indiscriminately as dacoits.

For some fairly representative samples of such ‘blurring’ one could turn to the contemporary accounts of the disturbances which occurred in Etawah district in 1858. Here the authorities had much difficulty in coping with the activities of Benikut

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57 On the Etawah leaders discussed in this and the next paragraph see *FSUP V*: 782–83, 802–3 for Benkut Singh; ibid.: 775, 787, 795, 803 for Ganga Singh and Roop Singh; and ibid.: 795, 801, 842 for Niranjan Singh.
Singh. He led a large force of sepoys and armed peasants against the government, clashed with and killed some members of a party headed by Alan Hume, the Magistrate, and sacked a place called Ajitmal. A local leader of considerable standing he was, according to Hume’s own estimate, ‘assisted by the entire population of the villages of Shahpore, Rajpoorah, Ramnugger and Ayanah’. When the magistrate led a raid into one of these villages, he found it ‘entirely deserted, even by women and children’, and again, when he and his men were about to withdraw after burning down an insubordinate village, ‘the sepoys [i.e. mutineers] and a large force of armed villagers issued’ from another. The figure sketched by these details taken from official sources is unmistakably that of a popular leader whose following was large enough to enable him to engage a superior enemy in the classic steps of a guerilla war. And yet with all this evidence before him the Magistrate spoke about Benkut Singh as a dacoit leader and a rebel almost in the same breath in two consecutive paragraphs of his ‘narrative’. It was as if the official mind was still undecided as to which of these two descriptions to focus on: pushed by the undoubted fact of insurgency in one direction it was pulled at the same time in the other by the habit of classifying collective acts of rural violence as dacoity according to the book.

There were some other Etawah leaders too for whom the two appellations were used interchangeably in much the same way. One of them, Ganga Singh, claimed to have been ‘appointed Nazim of Etawah’. He led ‘a well organized attack’, though with no success, on the government’s forces in an attempt to recover Nimree, ‘one of the chief rebel strongholds on the Jumna-Chumbul Doab’. His name is often mentioned together with Niranjan Singh’s and Roop Singh’s in contemporary accounts. Members of well-established landed families in the district they could hardly be confounded with professional criminals. The former was the Raja of Chakarnagar and the latter an uncle of the minor Raja of Bhurrey. Together they put up the most enduring resistance to British rule in this region during the period of the Mutiny and were recognized by the authorities as having ‘maintained the only remaining hostile force in the Etawah District’ as late as September 1858. Niranjan Singh eluded the law for a long time before he was
finally captured in May 1861. By then, three years after the end of the great rebellion, even the semi-official *Friend of India* had regained enough of its sense of perspective to acknowledge him as the rebel who had ‘assumed independent authority and seized the revenue of the district in 1857’. In the official reports of 1858, however, he remains classified as a dacoit leader.

Roop Singh was perhaps the most formidable of all the Etawah insurgents the British had to deal with.\(^{68}\) He appears to have been the rallying point for many other rebel bands in the region including those led by Benkut Singh, Ganga Singh, Peetam Singh and Niranjan Singh, and for a time there was a ground-swell of support for him from the mass of armed peasants and soldiers on their way back home from mutinous garrisons. By October 1857 he had gathered about a thousand men and was reported to have ‘commenced, at the request of the mutineers, a bridge at Sheregurh’ to enable the latter to cross the Jamuna. Dalalnagar pargana in the Auraiya tahsil fell to him. His stronghold, a mud fort at Ayanah which ‘promised to be of very great strength’, according to Hume, and was ‘the terror of the neighbourhood’, as the colonialist press put it, went on defying the British until April 1858. There could indeed be no doubt about the terror exercised by Roop Singh and his men against those who continued actively to collaborate with the Raj in that part of Uttar Pradesh. As a correspondent from Etawah wrote to the *Bengal Hurkaru and India Gazette* on 9 June 1858:

The Ajetmul Thannadar was attacked by a party of Burhee rebels as he was passing the rebel village Bowain, on the Jumna; he and his party escaped, but two of his Burkundazes who were lagging behind were seized, disarmed and murdered at the village, and their heads carried off to Roop Singh at Burhee.

... Mr Lance immediately proceeded ... but before Bowain was reached the rebels had recrossed the Jumna and were comfortably settled in their stronghold, the Burhee fort.\(^{69}\)

The rebel occupation of the fort at Burhi continued for some time to cause much anxiety to the British. Located at the con-

\(^{68}\) The source of our information on Roop Singh’s career in the account which follows is, unless otherwise stated, FSUP V: 776, 782, 786, 794-6, 798, 799, 803, 804, 835-6, 841-2.

\(^{69}\) FSUP V: 787-8. For a somewhat different version of the incident see ibid.: 792.
fluence of the Chambal and the Jamuna it commanded the passage of the river and was thus a source of much strategic advantage to whichever party held it. Eventually, in September 1858, it was reduced and in fact blown up in a carefully planned and combined operation of the local troops and the Madras Sappers. Dislodged from his stronghold Roop Singh retreated with his followers and some of the allied bands to the ravines on the Gwalior bank of the Chambal. In this traditional sanctuary for fugitives from the law his support among the people was still large enough to make the British authorities warn the local zamindars who had sheltered him and his men that ‘if repeated, their conduct would be punishable’. They also made a representation to the Gwalior Darbar ‘with a view to obtaining its consent to a suggestion by the Magistrate of Etawah that he should have authority in effect to punish at his discretion certain villages of the ravines of the Chumbul and Kowaree in Gwalior which had harboured or abetted Roop Singh and other rebel plunderers mostly natives of Etawah’. The British and the Gwalior State governments planned a joint expedition ‘to sweep the ill-affected portion of the Gwalior Territory’, and a detachment made up of European and Darbar troops was sent out at one point to stop him from joining forces with Man Singh. The last that we hear of him from the records is that a police party led by a Lieutenant Forbes surprised him at a village called Manikpur near Baiswarah on the Chambal, but he gave them the slip.

Nothing more is known about him. However, it should be clear even from this brief sketch based entirely on official sources that there was hardly anything either in Roop Singh’s background or in his career during those stormy years to justify characterizing him as a common bandit. Scion of a landed family he emerged as the focal point for rebel mobilization in an entire region—a sort of Kunwar Singh of Etawah district. Even after the initial reverses in his battle against the Raj, even in the period of his retreat into the Chambal ravines he seems to have secured and retained a base among the peasantry strong enough to protect him against the counter-insurgency operations mounted jointly by the colonial and princely armies. There is no evidence at all to show that he ever lost any of this popular support and was forced thereby into a
life of crime. Yet the words ‘dacoit’ and ‘rebel’ were used almost interchangeably to describe him in the official statements of the time—a fact which goes again to demonstrate how slow the administration could be in its response to the radically changed character of rural violence in conditions of insurgency.

A certain degree of cognitive failure of this kind was of course inevitable during agrarian disturbances under the Raj. It represented that inertia which made it difficult for an alien and authoritarian regime to grasp promptly enough the meaning of a quick change of temper among the habitually docile mass of peasantry. For that stagnant, semi-feudal social order derived its stability from a firm and traditional if tacit agreement between the rulers and the ruled on a mutually acceptable code of dominance and subordination. Any abrupt and extensive deviation of the subaltern masses from this code was bound to take the authorities by surprise, and the almost unavoidable delay on their part in adjusting themselves to a switch of this order had often to be dearly paid for. Indeed it was thus that, as mentioned above, Mahesh Lal Datta, daroga, found himself trapped between two codes, one that was known but moribund and the other emergent, hence unfamiliar, and triggered off that fatal explosion by trying to decipher a message put out in the new language of rebellion in terms of the old one of criminality. Yet his incomprehension is not difficult to explain. It resulted from his failure to read correctly the sign of a change in Santal consciousness at a moment when this change was actually taking place—that critical split-second when a mistake of this sort could not but cause a collision.

Historians however have been known to make the same mistake with less justification and get away with it. It is still very common for many of them to let their source material, almost invariably of an administrative nature, command their view of peasant revolts both in fact and judgement. The reliance on official evidence cannot be helped in most cases because of the absence or inadequacy of information of any other kind. But for a modern scholar to vitiate his work with the subjectivity of the guardians of law and order is to renounce the advantage he has over any contemporary witness of an event—that is, the advantage of looking at it as a past and the corrective
influence this has on the bias generated by instantaneous reaction. Colonialist historiography of course abounds in exercises of this kind, but that is hardly surprising in view of the intimate connection that existed between writing history and running the Raj. What is curious is the continuing imitation of this idiom in post-colonial India. Thus, in a study of the Pabna disturbances of 1873, published a hundred years after the event, the historian’s voice has been allowed to merge with that of the local sub-divisional officer as he speaks of the ‘bad characters’ and ‘the criminal sections who took advantage of the excitement’. This agrees with the colonialist claim so lucidly formulated by William Hunter at the time when he said that by these struggles ‘the rural population have proved themselves quick to appreciate and to act upon the rights which English rule secures to rich and poor . . . and are conducting before our eyes an agrarian revolution by due course of law’. Any act of lawlessness, therefore, has to be explained away as an aberration caused by ‘the bad characters who had evidently joined them [the peasantry] for their own gains and induced them in many instances to go far beyond their original intentions’. And to buttress this view the author quotes from a contemporary periodical which stigmatizes all cases of violence during this movement as ‘the acts of a number of professional clubmen and thieves joined by the more foolish and ignorant villagers’. An echo of the regime’s concern at any critique of high landlordism turning into a ‘critique by arms’ on the part of the rural masses, this was precisely what had alarmed a district officer forty years ago when he observed how Titu Mir’s forces brought about ‘the voluntary junctions of all the Dacoits and bad Characters of the Country to their ranks’.

Why do ‘foolish and ignorant villagers’ who are usually so peaceful and averse to crime and often preyed upon at other times by clubmen, dacoits and ‘bad Characters of the Country’ join the latter on such occasions? Because a powerful and sustained class struggle like the resistance of the Barasat or

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60 Sen Gupta.
61 Hunter (1875): Preface. Sen Gupta quotes this extract, but omits the first boastful sentence about the benefits of British rule. Sen Gupta: 59.
62 Ibid.: 58 and n. 137.
63 JC, 6 Dec. 1831: Smith to Money (26 Nov. 1831).
Pabna peasantry tends to invest the disparate attacks on property and person with new meanings and rephrase them as a part of a general discourse of rebellion. Consequently, each of these acts acquires an ambivalence: wired at the same time to two different codes—the code of individualistic or small-group deviance from the law where it originates and that of collective social defiance which adopts it—it bears the twin signs of a birth-mark and a becoming. It is precisely this duplex character which permits it to be interpreted one way or the other depending on the interpreter's point of view. A daroga or a historian who thinks like a daroga would be inclined to interpret it in terms of its past and condemn it. On the contrary, a rebel or a historian who adopts the rebel point of view would tend to seize on its present signification as the highest form of social protest and justify it. In other words, there will be a clash between two ways of looking at it—"It's terrible!"/"It's fine!"—a clash between two theories.