CHAPTER 4

MODALITY

Public character of insurgency—Kol and Santal declarations of war on the Raj—support from public authority claimed in favour of rebellion—investiture of a rebel ‘nawab’—rebellion as a ‘collective enterprise’—parleys and panchayats—assemblies: their role in mobilizing peasantry—considered dangerous by the regime—communal and corporate aspects of insurgency—idioms of collective fishing and hunting—working together as families and neighbours—four forms of struggle—wrecking—burning—a critique of economism—eating—looting—plunder as an idiom of peasant war—totality of rebel violence—horizontal and vertical pluralities—postscript on killing.

What differentiates a peasant rebellion from rural crime is not its inverse function which is common to both and leads people often to mistake one for the other. The confusion, as discussed in the previous chapter, is particularly acute during that twilight phase which separates the actual outbreak of an insurrection from its precursor—the wave of ‘preliminary outrages’ as it is called in official language. But insurgency soon extricates itself from the placenta of common crime in which it may be initially enmeshed and establishes its own identity as a violence which is public, collective, destructive and total in its modalities. Each of these constitutes a distinctive feature in the sense that it has its antithesis in crime, so that the opposition between the two types of violence may be represented as a series of binary contrasts thus—public/secretive, collective/individualistic, destructive/appropriative and total/partial.

To turn to the first of these modalities, rebellion is by its very nature an open and public event. As such, it stands in clear opposition to crime which must rely on secrecy to be effective. It would perhaps not be untrue to say that a tendency towards an open and public affirmation is already evident in certain intermediate types of rural violence, such as the more advanced
forms of social banditry, which fall just short of rebellion. The Robin Hoods of many countries have been known to express this tendency in terms of a nonchalance tinged often with a sort of black humour. This is illustrated by a hilarious and authentic anecdote in Jim Corbett’s account of Sultana.¹ A contractor who employed a large labour force to fell trees for logging in the jungles of the Terai was induced by the police to invite the dacoit chief and his band to an evening of festivities to begin with a nautch and end with a banquet. Sultana, whose ‘intelligence staff numbered hundreds’, knew that the invitation was a trap devised by the commander of the Special Dacoity Police Force, but accepted it. On arrival at the contractor’s camp in the middle of the forest where the best nautch girls and musicians had been hired for the evening and much food and drink stocked up for the feast to follow, Sultana prevailed upon his host to reverse the scheduled order of merriment and start off with feasting, for, he said, ‘his men would enjoy the dance more on full stomachs than on empty ones’. After they had eaten and drunk well, he gathered his band, thanked his host for his hospitality and left regretting that they could not stay for the rest of the entertainment as they had such a long way to go. By the time the drums struck up the signal simultaneously for the nautch to begin and the police party to close in on their quarry, Sultana and his men had slipped away in the darkness.

Not every public act of social banditry is however informed with such witticism. It can take a sombre, declamatory form, too, as it did with ‘King John’, the legendary chief of the Hampshire Blacks. Alarmed at being mistaken for a Jacobite, he made up his mind to define his position clearly and openly. He ‘knew well what he was doing’, observes Thompson, ‘and took care to make it public’.² He made it known that he intended publicly to answer the charge of Jacobitism at a specified date and place. On that day he rode up with a small armed escort to the appointed place, declared his allegiance to the Hanoverian succession before an audience of about three hundred people who had already gathered there, and made it clear at the same time ‘that they [the Blacks] had no other design than to do justice, and to see that the rich did not insult or oppress the poor; that they were determined not to leave a

deer on the Chase, being well assured it was originally designed to feed cattle, and not to fatten deer for the clergy, &c'.

An open affirmation of intent is of course even more characteristic of rebels than of social bandits. Unlike criminals they make no attempt to conceal violence by any pretence to conform to law and order. No criminal can possibly be so matter-of-fact and explicit about the purpose of his visit to the site of his intended crime as were the Russian insurgents of 1905 during a raid on an estate as recalled by its landlord.

'Why have you come?' I asked them. 'To demand corn, to make you give us your corn', said several voices simultaneously. 'That is to say, you have come to plunder?' 'If you like, to plunder', said a young lad in the crowd...4

These are not the voices of thieves operating under the cover of darkness. The Kols of Chota Nagpur too are known to have made a strident avowal when they finally gave up any hope of obtaining justice either from the colonial authorities or from the local chiefs and pledged themselves to annihilate all tax collectors (thikadars), wreck all villages and townships including Govindpur itself and 'wash their weapons in the river (the Karroo) which flows past it'.5 The Santals involved in the hool made no secret of their intention to slay the rajas of Pakur and Maheshpur as well as all other landlords, mahajans, policemen and white planters, railway engineers and officials they could lay their hands on.6 Every village they attacked was given an explicit warning well in advance, as the knowledgeable Captain Sherwill found out in the Colgong area. 'The burning of these villages', he wrote with reference to a number of these destroyed by the rebels on 19 and 21 July 1855, 'had been notified four days previously by the sonthals to the zemindars the very hour of the day being mentioned.' He also named seven other villages south of that station which 'had been in a similar manner warned for pillage and burning on or about 26th or 27th July', but were all except one saved by the timely arrival

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4 Hobsbawm: 186.
5 BC 1502 (58891): Dent & Wilkinson to Thomason (16 Nov. 1832).
6 There are many instances of this in the records. See, for instance, JP, 19 July 1855: Eden to Grey (9 & 10 July 1855); Taylor to Mudge (7 July 1855); Mudge to Eden (8 July 1855); Toogood to Templer (10 July 1855).
of the troops. The plan they had ‘to advance by easy marches’ towards Bhagalpur and Monghyr and sack these towns one after the other ‘was also sent into Colgong by the sonthals for the information of the zemindars and Europeans’.7 Later on, in September that year, they were to send a bough with three leaves on it to Suri, the headquarters of the Collector of Birbhum, to indicate that they wished to raid that town in three days’ time.8

What testified even more to the open and public character of the hool was the parwanu issued by Sido and Kanhu announcing their decision to take up arms. Described as ‘The Thacoor’s Perwannah’, a sort of heavenly ultimatum communicated through the two inspired leaders of the uprising, it read in part:

The Sahibs and the white Soldiers will fight. Kanoo and Seedoo Manjee are not fighting. The Thacoor himself will fight. Therefore you Sahibs and Soldiers fight with the Thacoor himself. Mother Ganges will come to the Thacoor’s (assistance). Fire will rain from Heaven . . . I will rain fire and all the Sahibs will be killed by the hand of God in person and Sahibs if you fight with muskets the Sonthal will not be hit by the bullets and the Thacoor will give your Elephants and horses of his own accord to the Sonthals and on seeing this perwannah you will understand all and you will send an answer, and if you fight with the Sonthals two days will be as one day and two nights as one night. This is the order of the Thacoor.9

The leaders of the insurrection clearly felt authorized by God himself in declaring war on the Raj. As their adversaries were quick to recognize, it was from this spiritual justification that the hool derived much of its drive and fury. ‘It is a war ordered by the gods, they say’, observed the Magistrate of Bhagalpur.10 Some of the implications of such a belief will be discussed later in this work. Here it will suffice to say that in claiming to act on ‘the order of the Thacoor’ the Santals were merely affirming the public character of their rebellion.

Other rebels and social bandits too have been known to claim the support of higher authorities for themselves. The Bourbon brigands about whom Maffei wrote did not go so far as to invoke the authority of God, but came fairly close to it by

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8 BDR: 121.
9 TTP.
10 JP, 23 Aug. 1855: Richardson to GOB (15 July 1855).
invoking the authority of the Pope when they said, ‘We were fighting for the faith and we were blessed by the Pope.’ They also believed that they were acting for Francis II, thus staking a claim at a secular counter too for legitimation. In this they conformed to an even wider pattern of rebel activity. For it is very common indeed for a peasant revolt to articulate itself in the name of a secular public authority which in most cases happens to be that of the sovereign. The peasants of the Chernigor Guberniya in 1905 believed that pillage had been authorized by the Tsar. The Swing rebels acted on the conviction that they enjoyed the support of the King and Parliament. The jacqueries against the planters in the indigo districts of Bengal drew some of their considerable striking power from the belief then widespread among the rural masses that the Queen of England herself was on their side. The peasantry involved in the rent agitation in Pabna stretched the meaning of what was a relatively favourable official gesture in the form of the proclamation of 4 July 1873 to imply that ‘the government was sympathetic to the resistance movement’. A belief in the alleged intervention of a superior and more just authority against the peasant’s immediate oppressors was what fuelled the fury of the Deccan riots too in 1875. Both the versions of this belief as reported to the Commission investigating these disturbances agreed that the peasants acted on the certainty that ‘orders had come from England’ to force the Marwaris to part with their bonds.  

The self-affirmation of a rebellion thus in the name of a public authority carried, appropriately enough, its own sanction in many cases. Armed as it was with a putative approval, blessing, inspiration or support of the highest public authority, insurgent violence assumed, in the eyes of its protagonists, the status of a public service. As such, it had to be paid for. Hence the levy of contributions in food, drink and money by the rebels on their public—a feature common to many otherwise different national experiences. The French peasants who participated in the jacqueries of 1789 ‘often demanded money because they were after all under the impression’, says Lefebvre, ‘that they were

11 The instances cited in this paragraph have been taken, unless otherwise mentioned, from Hobsbawm: 180, 187; H & R: 18, 65, 86; Sen Gupta: 38–9; DRCR: 54.
working for the king and they could not work for nothing or wear their shoes out for no return: you had to eat and, above all, you had to drink—you couldn’t live on air’. In much the same way the labourers of rural England involved in the Swing movement, especially those of Berkshire and Hampshire ‘demanded a fixed monetary contribution, not so much to buy food and drink as a direct payment for services rendered’. The dhing-kharcha (literally, the money to be raised to pay for the cost of the insurrection) imposed on the peasantry by the leaders of the uprising against Deby Sinha appears to have been a levy of the same order. However, the public character of this particular insurrection is even more clearly elucidated by an episode which glows with so much meaning and yet has failed to catch the historian’s eye that it may be worth retrieving it from the musty narrative of The Report of the Rungpore Commission on the Causes of the Insurrection in Rungpore in the Year 1189. The peasants had elected Derjenarain as their chief—‘Nawab’ as they called him—presented him with their nazar as the formal sign of fealty owing to an overlord, carried him in a palanquin to Balaganj where on the advice of Bara (Baru) Baxey, a local leader, they began to get ready for a march to Demlah. The kachari of Gaurmohan Chaudhuri, a big landlord ‘who had three lakhs of rupees malguzari under him’ and with whom the peasants had numerous scores to settle, was located here.

The insurgents determined to go to Demlah the next day when Bara Baxey told Derjenarain ‘that there were horsemen and Barkandases stationed at Demlah who would attack them and therefore it was to little purpose to go there; . . . however he proposed that the insurgents should go to Demlah, and if they obtained redress, it was very well, but if Gaurmohan should attack them, they would repel his attack’; telling Derjenarain that ‘as he was Nabob, he must forgive them for what excesses (loot mar), plunder and murder were committed’, that Derjenarain considered some time and replied ‘that they did not go to fight, but were going for justice; that if Gaurmohan refused them justice and attacked them, . . . they must do the best they could, and that he forgave all excesses (loot mar), plunder and murder’. On this the people all shouted and proceeded towards Demlah . . .

12 Lefebvre (1973): 118. Also see ibid.: 42.
13 H & R: 197. Also see ibid.: 116.
What we have in this episode is a rare record of the investiture of a rebellion with public authority. It tells us of the election of the rebel ‘nawab’ as an alternative source of authority and its formalization by the general body of the insurgents through the ritual presentation of nazaran. Even more important is the information it has to offer about the specific manner in which authorization issues from the putative nawab to ‘forgive them [the insurgents turned subjects] for what excesses (loot mar), plunder and murder were committed’. The prayer for exoneration from guilt, the solemnity with which it was received and considered, and the advice so weightily pronounced granting the prayer to nobody’s surprise but everybody’s joy correspond to the classic three-step teleology of a Hindu vrat in which the uttered wish and its necessary fulfilment by divine grace must be mediated by a ritual worship of the granting deity. The ceremony described above is that of validation—the validation, one could almost say sacralization, of rebel violence as a public service duly authorized by the head of a community and undertaken by its members for their own benefit.

The mass, communal aspect of rebel violence follows thus from its open and public character and differentiates it from the typically individualistic or small-group operation of crime. A rebellion (to borrow Lefebvre’s term for the peasant revolts in France in 1789) is indeed a ‘collective enterprise’. It uses communal processes and forms of mass mobilization, expresses mass violence in the idiom of communal labour and encourages communal appropriation of the fruits of pillage in many cases. The communal process of mobilization is best witnessed in the parleys and assemblies which inaugurate most agrarian uprisings everywhere. This is how the Peasant War in Germany began in 1525:

... Then six or seven peasants met in a village near Ulm, called Baltringen, and they discussed many things while walking from one village to another, while meeting neighbours and while eating and drinking together as was peasant custom at that time. Those peasants [with whom they had eaten, etc.] went with them [to another village]. If anybody asked them what they wanted and what they were doing, they answered, ‘We are collecting the Fastnacht cake’. In this way

17 Lefebvre (1973): 118.
they travelled all Thursdays and their number increased day by day until they were 400 men. On the 8th day before the real Fastnacht... they gathered together at Baltringen. When they saw how many they had become, they told each other: 'There are many of us'...18

We see a very similar process of consultations and gatherings building up into an insurgent mobilization by the rural masses in Rangpur on the eve of the dhing of 1783. To quote from the official narrative of events:

... it appears that the ryots first met at Beedaltur in the pergannah of Bamandangah and at Cornarmouah in Tepah. In consequence of a plan concerted then among themselves they assembled and from thence they proceeded to Kyneerry in Tepah where... Dirjinarain offered to head them... After this the insurgents sent 25 or 30 men to Dakallygange who released such people as were confined there for revenue. The Ryots of the neighbouring talooks assembled and came to them in great numbers... Dirjenarain mounted a palanquin and they proceeded to Balagange where by the advice of Baru Baxey it was proposed to go to Demlah... The insurgents then circulated letters to the various talooks ordering the ryots to assemble and join them...19

Confer, plan, assemble, attack—the sequence occurs in many an Indian uprising. The initial meeting, often in the form of an extended panchayat of the leaders of the insurgent community, had an important role to play in formulating grievances, defining the course of action and generally preparing the mass of its members for the hostilities soon to ensue. Such a meeting was reported on the eve of Titu Mir's bidroha in which the Muslim weavers (jolases) played an active and militant role. The police at Basirhat received a report from a talukdar of Sarfrazpur (a village which was soon to earn much notoriety in the disturbances that followed) 'to this purport that 20 or 30 Persons had assembled in the House of one Bolaee julah... and that he had sent 3 Persons to ascertain the cause of their Congrega- tion; his men, however, were maltreated and one Peadah severely beaten'.20 A number of such parleys are known to have preceded the Birsaithe uulgulan. Some of these were reported by Rev. Hoffmann who appears to have been the voice of the true faith as well as the eyes and ears of the Raj in Munda country. 'I have been informed by a new adept of the village Simbua,' he

wrote, 'that the attack was planned in the three panchayats on three Sundays before the event. In the two first of these panchayats, only Puranaks were present. There the date was fixed, and bands of three or sometimes four men were designated each to separate places to fire houses and send arrows among the Christian gatherings usually held on Christmas eve. In the last panchayat the nanaks or new adepts were informed of the attack.'

The Kol insurrection of 1831 too had begun with a consultative meeting of this kind. As Bindrai Manki, one of its leaders, was to recall later on: 'We returned home, invited all the Coles (our Brethren and Caste) to assemble at the village of Sankah in Tamar where we had a consultation... Our Lives we considered of no Value, and being of one Caste and Brethren it was agreed upon that we should commence to cut, plunder, murder and eat.' For the Santal rebellion we have the words of both Sido and Kanhu testifying to much preliminary cogitation before the actual outbreak. 'Then the Manjees & Purgunnaits assembled in my Verandah', said Sido after his capture, '& we consulted for 2 months.' The information occurs several times in the course of his statement: 'Ever since Chait two months before the Thacoor came, the Manjees had been consulting together to kill the Mahajans.' And again, 'The Manjee & pargunnaitks consulted about this in Jait in my house.' It is as if by affirming this fact of frequent communal consultations that Sido was trying to establish what was to him the unquestionable legitimacy of the violence of the hool. Indeed, he came close to saying this in almost so many words: 'All the pargunnaitks & manjees consulted & advised me to fight.'

Consultation and advice often figured among the very first steps in popular mobilization in UP too during the peasant revolts of 1857–8. The representatives of a community or a village would meet in a panchayat to decide what course of action the local masses should follow when they rose in arms. It was thus that in May 1857 'Panchayuts were held in the

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11 Singh: 90.
13 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: 'Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor'.
14 The facts and the quotations in this paragraph are taken from FSUP: IV 102–4, 484–5. 548–9 & V 41–2, 45, 49.
villages of Cheetee, Deotah, Tilbegumpoor, Dadree, etc in order to loot Secundrabad so that the beams and rafters should not be left.' These were mainly a Gujjar affair. But at the panchayat held at Tilbegampur they were joined by Girooas and Gahlot Rajputs to make the insurrection into a broad alliance of the vast majority of the peasants in that part of Bulandshahr district. Again, in Allahabad where 'the Mewatis were the real contrivers of the rebellion of the sepoys and the Risala', a panchayat of the leaders of that community was held on 5 June 1857 at Saif Khan's house in mauza Samadabad and 'all, excepting Saif Khan, decided to rebel the same day'. At about the same time when an émeute at Azamgarh acted as a signal for revolt for 'all the loafers and vagabonds of the villages'—official euphemism for the peasantry—in Chiriakot, a pargana to the south of that town, 'the rebels counselled all the night on 4th June on the matter of robbing and that from June 5 they declared a general riot and mutiny'. And further to the east, in Ghazipur, as we shall see later, the rebellion of Meghar Singh of Gahmar was to be inaugurated the following year by a gathering of representatives of all sections of the local population at Biranji on the Karmanasa.

Yet another feature of the risings of 1857–8 was the vast assemblies of the local populations which preceded the actual outbreak of violence in most instances. It was as if the peasants, shaken out of their habitual docility and subservience, turned up in their thousands in response to some invisible, unspoken and yet universally understood signal to meet their enemy in an armed struggle. We know little of the actual mechanics of such autonomous mobilization—the pull of the primordial ties of kinship, community and co-residence, the power of rumour, the compulsion of custom and religion—all of which might have combined in various degrees to make up for the absence of any formal machinery of call-up standing outside and above the rural communities. No real understanding of insurgency in colonial India will ever be achieved without a proper study of this phenomenon. What, however, can be said with certainty at the present state of research is that most of the jacqueries of the period of the Mutiny witnessed large preliminary gatherings

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25 See Chapter 7 below.
of the armed peasantry—Gujars of the villages of Deotah and
Til assembling at Cheetee for an attack on the jail at Buland-
shahr in order to rescue the prisoners, the assembly of Gujars
and others becoming more and more frequent as the revolt
gathered momentum in Saharanpur district, massed crowds of
Gujars and Rangurs converging on the southern and south-
western parts of Saharanpur pargana prior to the plunder of a
village close to the district headquarters and the treasury,
Gujars ‘assembling in thousands under regular leaders’ in
Meerut district, large assemblies of ‘rustics’ in pargana Man-
dawar leading up to raids on the rich Roh villages in Bijnaur
district, and so on, to quote examples chosen at random from
western UP alone.26

In the case of the Santal hool, too, the parleys among tribal
chiefs led eventually to ‘an assembly of sonthals at Bagnodee,
at which there were many manjees, soobahs and Pergunnaits’,27
as Kanhu was to confirm in his statement when captured. It is
this assembly at Bhagnadihi which alarmed the mahajans and
the police so much that they lost their nerve and triggered off
the revolt by underestimating the peasants’ militancy. How
unnerving such mobilization often was for the authorities is
perhaps best illustrated by a comic incident. The Barasat
bidroha (which was itself an occasion for vast gatherings of the
rural poor28) had just been suppressed when it was rumoured
that the ‘Moolavies’ were assembling again in large numbers—
six to seven hundred of them according to one report—in the
northern part of Jessore district. The Military Department of
the government at Calcutta at once ordered ‘a Detachment
consisting of one Complete Battalion of the Native Infantry
from Barrackpore and two Six Pounder Horse Artillery Field
Pieces manned with the necessary complement of Europeans
from the Troop at Dum Dum, with the usual supply of Service
Ammunition, the whole under the Command of a Field Officer
of Judgment and decision . . . to march . . . by the most direct
practicable route towards Jessore’. At the same time the India
Gazette published a letter from a correspondent ‘stating that the

28 BC 54222: Metcalfe & Blunt to Court of Directors (10 Apr. 1832), para. 5;
JC, 22 Nov. 1831: Smith to Thomason (16 & 17 Nov. 1831), nos 82–4.
Moolavies had broken out afresh a[t] Buttai and Poorahattee'. The panic caught on. During a visit to the Kumarkhali station the Joint Magistrate of Pabna 'found all the Gentlemen there in great alarm—the President had all his Muskets brought out to clean and his people were busily employed in bullet making'. However it soon became clear that the whole thing was a hoax invented by a local planter to amuse himself and induce a friend from a neighbouring station 'to come over and pay me a visit'!29

The intervention of the custodians of law and order on such occasions is a measure of the fear they shared with their protégés, the rural elite, of any large body of peasants coming together to discuss and air their grievances, however peaceably. Even if no overt acts of violence such as plunder, arson or murder were committed, an assembly of discontented peasantry was often regarded, under the Raj, as a potential threat to the administration. The Pabna ryots' movement of 1873 illustrates this very well indeed. It was officially lauded as an agitation conducted with due respect for the law. Yet the colonial authorities who on the question of tenancy rights had their differences with the landlords, distrusted, as did the latter, any move on the part of the peasantry to mobilize for their rights, particularly when this assumed the form of large gatherings. The Indian Penal Code was used to forbid them from visiting villages in parties of more than ten in order to propagate the aims of the perfectly lawful association they had formed to resist extortion and rack-renting by the zamindars. On one occasion the local magistrate went so far as to override the police who had just released six men from custody for want of evidence and charged them with forming an 'illegal assembly'.30

Indeed it would appear that any large and autonomous gathering of the peasantry brought about on their own initiative to air their grievances unaided by and often in defiance of the rural or administrative elite ran the risk of being regarded as 'illegal' by the colonial authorities for whom its suppression amounted to a veritable principle of government. This was made explicit

29 JC, 13 Dec. 1831: Casement to Jackson (6 Dec. 1831); Mills to Thomason (8 Dec. 1831); Private Note from Jt. Magistrate of Pabna (7 Dec. 1831); Griffin to Mills (5 Dec. 1831); Griffin to Russell (4 Dec. 1831).
in the course of the official discussions on this question following the anti-survey riots in Khandesh in 1852. The attempt made by the government in the winter of that year to introduce a revenue survey in Savda, Raver and Chopda ran into stiff and widespread resistance on the part of the Kunbi peasantry. This took the form of vast assemblies in which the peasants from both sides of the Tapti demonstrated their opposition to the survey. The gatherings assumed their most massive and menacing proportion at Yaval, Savda, Faizpur and Erandol. Peaceful at first they turned violent as more and more people collected at each of these places. Eventually the army was called up and the movement put down by the combined effort of several regiments of the Native Infantry and some companies of the Bhil Corps. Looking at this event in retrospect the authorities were convinced that it was not instigated by the local elite. ‘The actors in the disturbances from first to last’, wrote Mansfield, Collector of Khandesh and Wingate, Revenue Survey Commissioner, in their joint report, ‘were nearly confined to the Coonbee Caste, and among these the two tribes of Pajnee and Telolee Coonbees who form the great mass of the cultivators of the Sowda and Yawul Mahals, were most conspicuous.’ Such mobilization, they pointed out, was indeed a part of the tradition of local peasant resistance and this was ‘not the first instance of the Coonbees having assembled for the purpose of petitioning and with the object of carrying their point by a demonstration of their number and determination’. Apparently they had done the same thing and with much success on a previous occasion, in 1849, at Dharamgaon in protest of ‘the erection of Boundary Marks to indicate the limits of their fields’. Did such a demonstration ‘by collecting large numbers of ryots to petition against the survey’ constitute a breach of the law? Not so, according to the Magistrate of Khandesh who wrote, ‘I know of no law which prevents people from assembling in any numbers for the purpose of petition as long as they conduct themselves inoffensively.’ But the view which prevailed at the top of the administration was sterner. As the Governor of Bombay formulated it in his minute of 14 June 1853,

31 BC 2354 (146775): Mansfield & Wingate to Goldsmid (8 Jan. 1853). I am grateful to Sumit Guha for this reference. My narrative of this event is based on this report as well as on Bombay (1880): 261–2.
It may be necessary here to check the commission of such a crime by severer penalties than would be had recourse to in England and certainly the danger to the ruling power in this Country from a tumultuous assemblage of thousands is greater and the measures necessary to meet it involve far more expense and trouble than a corresponding movement by a mob would cause at home.\textsuperscript{82}

Nothing could be more explicit as an acknowledgement of the fear inspired by this particular form of autonomous peasant assemblies. It constituted a ‘danger to the ruling power in this Country’ in the eyes of those who were high enough in the bureaucracy to know which side to choose when consideration for petty legalities clashed with concern for the security of the colonial state. They were right—from their point of view. For when a rebellion set out consciously to mobilize the rural masses for a war on the regime, such rassemblements could indeed be a most formidable challenge to the Raj. The Birsaite gatherings which preceded the Munda ulgulan of 1900 were, in this sense, the organs of a peasant war. Soon after his release from jail in November 1897 Birsa and his principal followers met for consultations at Bortodih and planned these rallies as a part of ‘an organisation which was necessary to recover their lost rights and to drive out their enemies’.\textsuperscript{83} Suresh Singh’s authoritative monograph on this subject mentions a very large number of these\textsuperscript{84}—far in excess of the official estimate of sixteen\textsuperscript{85}—spread over two years between the parley mentioned above and a meeting of about sixty Birsaite gurus in Singhbhum towards the end of December 1899, just a few days before the arrows began to fly. Many of these were addressed by the Munda chief himself. Long before the itinerant agitator was to emerge as a standard feature in the elite politics of the subcontinent, Birsa moved from village to village over an extensive area mobilizing his people. He did not have it all his own way on each of these occasions. Sometimes the Mundas would overrule their leader and impose their collective will on him. Thus at a famous meeting at Simbua hill in March 1898 they firmly and persistently resisted his advice in favour of a religious and reformist


\textsuperscript{83} Singh: 76. \textsuperscript{84} Ibid.: 81-90. \textsuperscript{85} Ibid.: 88, n. 100.
agitational procedure. In fact the cumulative upshot of these assemblies was 'the triumph of the neo-sardars' strategy of revolt over the peaceful means of struggle initially advocated by Birsa'. A genuine instrument of rebellion as a mass event, they mobilized the Munda peasantry for a war on the Raj.

Mobilization of this kind could often assume a religious form. It is well known that in pre-industrial Europe popular uprisings tended to correspond to the Christian calendar of fasts and festivities. Wat Tyler's men entered London on 13 June 1381, the day of the feast of Corpus Christi. The Peasant War in Germany began with Fastnacht, 1525. 'The hour arrived for the fire to be raised', writes Johannes Kessler in his chronicle 'This was on Fastnacht... when people tend to gather together.' Lefebvre has identified in this tendency of crowds to gather on feast days and start a riot a 'classic' pattern which repeated itself over and over again during the entire course of the French Revolution: 'Things would begin to stir on a Sunday: throughout the whole period, this day, like feast days in honour of local saints and baladoires, was almost a critical day; the peasants would go to mass, then, having nothing else to do, would drift along to the local café: there was nothing like this for starting a riot.' In India the calendar of pujas and parabs and the chronicle of rural disturbances did not correlate so directly, although the British authorities were constantly haunted by a fear of this happening during the Mutiny. 'The close of the "Roza" was approaching', wrote the Magistrate of Saharanpur, 'I looked for serious disturbances.' Another officer in that area thought it probable that the local Muslims 'might take advantage of the Edd [Id] which occurred on the 26th [May 1857] to create a disturbance'. Again, towards the end of July that year all European women and children were evacuated from Nainital in order to ensure their safety in the event of an uprising to coincide with Bakr-Id at Rampur and its spread to that hill station. And at yet another hill station, Mussoorie, all seems to have been well with the white community in those days except for 'an occasional alarm at the native feasts of Eeed, Buqr Eeed, etc.' The Mahomedan festivals passed off without any violence at all these places. But

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36 Ibid.: 81-2.  
37 Hilton: 139.  
38 Franz: 143.  
there have been other occasions when religious and rebel gatherings are known to have intersected. Thus, on the eve of the hool the Santals of Bhagnadihi went in a large body to the bazaar at Panchkethia to worship the local deity there and seek her blessing for the ensuing enterprise. The communal visits to ‘ancestral places’ undertaken by Birsa’s followers on his advice exceeded the limits of Sardar revivalism and developed into a series of carefully planned and (as soon as the government came to know of these) risky ceremonial marches to inspire the Mundas for the coming ulgulan. By the time the holy itinerary had been gone through over a period of two years and the ‘ancestral possessions’ recovered from hallowed sites—the tulsī leaves from Chutia, the sandal paste from Jagarnathpur temple and the sanctified water and sacred thread from Naw Rattan—‘the psychological preparation for the revolt was complete’. I was already November 1899 with just a few weeks to go before the critical Christmas eve when the uprising was due to begin.

However, it was only rarely that the mobilization of an insurgent peasantry adopted so explicit a religious form in colonial India. There was, of course, a pervasive undertone of religiosity in almost all that happened in village society. But beyond that level of generalization it would be perhaps more true to say that the rather secular idiom of communal festivity and corporate labour was what, more than anything else, characterized the agrarian uprisings of the period. In this respect again the Indian experience had a good deal in common with the European. Lefebvre mentions the ‘very strong popular flavour’ of some of the jacqueries of 1789. The peasants apparently enjoyed themselves. ‘It is easy to see that they were delighted to down tools on the spot and go for a day’s outing as though they were setting off to the market or the fair’, he observes. ‘The whole village would be on foot, the syndic leading the way in front of the most important inhabitants, sometimes with drums beating; there would be few guns, but a good number of farming implements and sticks instead of firearms; there were more young people than old . . . There were deafening shouts of “Long live the Third Estate!”’ Rudé, too, speaks of the ceremonial aspect of the Swing move-

41 K. K. Γ’ ττα: 57.  
43 Singh: 77–81.  
ment in England, which tended to be increasingly pronounced as the movement gained in strength: ‘In the earlier (and later) days, when the militants were more inclined to fear detection, raiding parties might blacken their faces and do their work at night; but as the movement developed, riots took place in open day, and were public performances and at times assumed a festive air. 44

Ceremonialism thus emerged as a concomitant of the public and communal character of the Swing. This was true of some of the Indian rebellions too. In Pahna the peasants had started off by trying to mobilize support for their cause by word of mouth sent through individual emissaries, but this was soon given up for more forceful and public demonstrations as the movement acquired momentum and self-confidence. The method they then adopted was to call up large bands of men by sounding the horn, arm them with lathis (and with polos as we shall presently discuss), and take them round in imposing columns through the villages along a given route pleading with and if necessary, pressing the local population to join the agrarian league. 45 Again, as Hunter observes, the rising of the Santals ‘could not be distinguished at first from one of their great national processions headed by the customary drums and fifes’. 46 The leaders of the hool, like those of the Swing movement, rode at the head of their raiding parties on conspicuous mount—the subahs on horseback and the supreme commanders, Sido and Kanhu, on palanquins and elephants. 47 The French and the English rebels of 1789 and 1830 respectively showed a distinct taste for dressing up for a raid. 48 So did the Santals. We have Sido’s own words testifying to the fact that

44 H & R: 211. 46 Buckland: 545; Saha: II 119.
45 Hunter (1897): 240.
46 Balai who was with the plundering Santal army during the first week of the hool referred to five or six palanquins used to carry Sido and Kanhu around. Horses seized during the raid on Putgutteah, he said, served as mounts for the Santal ‘darogas’. Kanhu mentioned that he ‘was on horse back’ when his ‘army’ attacked and looted Sugrampore, and that ‘2 Elephants, 2 or 4 palkies’ were a part of the booty acquired from the pillage of Pakur. See JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (Enclosure, 14 July 1855); JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’. Also see the song of the hool which begins with the lines: ‘Sido and Kanhu in palkis/Chand and Bhaero on horses’ (Culshaw & Archer: 221).
48 Lefebvre (1973): 120; H & R: 211.
during the attack on Maheshpur ‘many of the Manjees were dressed in red clothes’. Other armed Santals were variously reported as wearing red saloo (a variety of cotton fabric used mostly for festive decoration), white lungis, white dhotis and pagris. The Birsaite march to Khunti for an assault on the police station there had all the marks of a ceremonial procession too: ‘their bodies smeared with dust, their arms decorated with chanwar, wearing turbans and snow-white dhoties’, the insurgents arrived at Khunti ‘dancing, jumping and brandishing their swords’.

The communal idiom most characteristic of rebel mobilization in India was that of corporate labour. It is often a figure of speech in rebel discourse which illustrates how for the insurgents a jacquerie was simply another way of working together. ‘Khunti be rahar jaromakana, dolabu maea’ (‘The rahar crop at Khunti is ripe, let’s go and harvest it’), cried the Birsaites as they marched on the police station at Khunti. Or, as the formidable Gaya Munda exclaimed when he and his men sighted a posse of police constables, ‘Samare hizulenako mar gooko’pe’ (‘The sambhar deer have arrived, kill them’). The displacement between the primary and secondary referents in these utterances generates that broad, black humour characteristic of peasants out on a raid: ‘fricasser ce poulet’ is how the Mâconnais rebels on their way to Pollet’s country house described their mission by a play on their victim’s name. And the message in each of these Mundari sentences is a measure of the correspondence between its two poles—collective violence against the enemy and co-operation in a task of communal labour such as harvesting or hunting. As we learn from the historian of the ulgan, the Mundas themselves took their own rhetoric seriously enough to act up to its traditional implications. For when Gaya’s party returned home after their successful encounter with the police at Etkedih in the incident mentioned above, ‘their women turned out to greet them and wash their feet with water while the men sang hunting songs’.

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50 Singh: 105. 51 Ibid. 52 Ibid.: 101.

53 For a discussion of displacement as a joke technique see Freud: Ch. II et passim. 54 Lefebvre (1973): 120. 55 Singh: 102.
—all in the customary manner of concluding a good day’s shikar.

Or, take this circular issued by the Pabna ryots to mobilize support for their struggle against the zamindars in 1873:

So and so Projas! as soon as you see this circular, hasten over to the side of the insurgent party. If you fail to come within this day, rest assured that we go to fish in the beel, close by your village. We have already fished in the beels of so and so villages. Know this order is peremptory.66

The imagery which is meant to mask and by masking drive home the dark message of this notice, relates to a mode of collective work which was as vital to the peasantry of Pabna as hunting was to the Mundas of Chota Nagpur. The *bils* are marshes and swamps which covered a large part of the district—an incomplete list in the *Pabna District Gazetteer* mentions nine of them spread over an area of 215 square miles67—and served as reservoirs of fresh water fish ample enough to provide a secondary source of livelihood for a predominantly rice-growing population. A good deal of the corporate life of the villages related therefore to the exploitation of the bilis, especially in the form of *polo* fishing, an activity that involved all the peasants in a number of neighbouring hamlets and combined productive labour with much entertainment. ‘Besides regular fishing, *polo* fishing is an old pastime indulged in by the villagers in the summer’, writes O’Malley.

The villagers are called to the fishing by the blowing of a horn, and men and women and children, sometimes numbering hundreds, troop with *polos* in hand to the nearest bil. The *polo* is a bell-shaped split-bamboo trap, with a small opening on the top and no bottom. The fisherman walks into the water, presses down the *polo* in front of him, and then, stooping down, plunges his hands through the opening at the top and gropes in the mud for the fish that are trapped. All are busy catching fish in the shallow water, which is soon churned into liquid mud, and in a few hours the bil is despoiled of fish.68

66 Sen Gupta: 41. Unfortunately the original published in the vernacular edition of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* is not available. The text quoted here is a translation as given in the *Hindoo Patriot*, 14 July 1873.

67 O’Malley (1923): 3-5. The area of Chalan Bil has been estimated at 88 square miles to include only that portion of it which falls within the Pabna district.

68 Ibid.: 17-18. The description given in Saha: I 75-6 agrees with this. Accord-
We have quoted this description *in extenso* in order to show how closely the idiom of this particular form of communal labour was replicated in the mobilization of the Pabna ryots for the bidroha of 1873. As in the case of bil fishing a few strident notes on a horn would summon the peasants of some neighbouring villages to an assembly. The time, more often than not, was a late hour of the night, the best time for an abundant catch, too, in the swamps. This nocturnal blowing of the horn was such a dreaded symbol of the movement that in some areas the district authorities issued orders under Section 518 of the Indian Penal Code 'forbidding the ryots to sound horns at night with a view to causing terror'.\textsuperscript{59} And just as the members of a party proceeding to a bil would carry polos as their most essential equipment, the peasant agitators, too, would arm themselves with lathis, each capped by a polo, as they marched from village to village agitating for their cause and terrorizing its enemies. The polo in its turn was regarded as a badge of insurgency. It gave to the movement and its participants their respective folk names—'Polo Bidroha' and 'Polowallahs'. To be told 'The Polowallahs are coming!' could indeed panic their opponents as much as did those midnight blasts on the buffalo horn.\textsuperscript{60} In this context no one who read the circular quoted above could mistake the peasants' intention 'to fish in the beel close by your village' for anything but the chilling euphemism it was meant to be—that is, a warning to conform to the campaign or be pillaged. It is thus that a set of signs characteristic of mobilization for a mode of communal labour came to be associated with mobilization for an agrarian struggle: the *atidesa* that extended the signs from one domain to the other helped not merely to designate the peasant fishermen as rebels (*bidrohi*)—they were literally known as such—but also to integrate rebellion as a corporate enterprise of the rural masses.

Communal fishing was a part of the Santal tradition, too.\textsuperscript{61} But the operative idiom of the hool was that of another corporate activity—shikar. It was a Santal custom for a *dihri*, a man who combined the functions of a master of the hunt

\textsuperscript{59} Sen Gupta: 70. \textsuperscript{60} Saha: I 118–19; III 99. \textsuperscript{61} MHKRK: cxli.
with those of a priest, to summon all the able-bodied men within
a circle of villages at a specified place, usually a jungle or a hill,
on a particular day. According to Ranjit Parganait of Sarmi
this was precisely how two Santal leaders, Munka Majhi of
Chotbazar and Kowleah Majhi of Sindree, mobilized their com-
munity for the uprising during the spring of 1855. They ‘called
together a great number of Sonthals extensively [sic] for the
purposes of Shikar at Buro Koondee. Where [sic] they had
assembled these two Manjees told the other Sonthals to assemble
at Chotbazar from thence to go to Hazareebagh to consult the
Soubah as to their grievances.’ Ranjit himself was present at
Barakundi. His testimony is confirmed by the somewhat mythi-
fied version of the event as recorded in *Mare Hapram Ko Reak
Katha* where Jugia, the old Santal, remembers how the word
had spread that all should gather for a shikar at Layogarh to
celebrate the birth of a Soubah to a virgin girl. ‘Layogarh is
located in the hills of Hazaribagh. Some people did go there,
saw the Soubah and joined him at a hunt in Kanchan forest
too.’ The Soubah apparently ordered another assembly for
shikar to follow at Tirpahar near Deoghar, but this, says Jugia,
was never held for reasons not known to him.

It is indeed appropriate that mobilization for a communal
hunt should have merged thus with that for the hool. The
Santals themselves made the association explicit by a homo-
nymy: they used the word ‘fauj’ (literally, ‘troops’) both for
the mass of insurgents led by the Soubahs and the parties of
armed men led by the dihri at shikar. For it was in either case
a matter of arming the entire adult male population for a
communal enterprise. After the dihri announced a chase, the
villagers would start getting ready. ‘They would string their
bows, fit arrows with heads ground to a fine point, sharpen the
blades of their axes (*tangis*) and fit them to handles, fasten
spearheads to long staves and polish their swords to a shine.’
And then, on the appointed day, a roll of drums at dawn would
start calling them up to the assembly point. This was also how
the Santals prepared for war. When the time came, their enemies
were quick to identify the hunting equipment by its other

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68 Ibid.
70 MHKRK: *clxxvii*.
71 Ibid.: *exlil*.
72 Ibid.
function and ban it as the insignia of rebellion. As an order issued at the height of the pacification campaign by Major-General Lloyd commanding the Dinapore Division and Santal Field Force put it: 'All villages of the Tribe... must be made to deliver up their arms, vizt. Bows and arrows, sword, battle axes & sacrificing knives as well as the Drum called Digdighee used for calling the sonthals together into bodies.'

The order appears to have gone down well with the army, and many a gallant officer leading his men against a Santal village or a rebel camp in the jungle proudly reported the seizure of a few bows and arrows, axes, swords, drums, etc. as a part of the day's military achievement.

In one important respect, however, the communality of the hool exceeded that of a hunt. The latter was, among the Santals, an exclusively male undertaking, although it was customary for their women to prepare for them the provisions they took to the jungle and welcome them back home after shikar by ceremonially receiving them at the front door and washing their feet. But men and women would participate together in many other forms of labour essential for their livelihood, such as cutting timber, gathering leaves and harvesting a crop. On such occasions, says the Reak Katha, 'Santal men and women greatly enjoyed working together'.

They worked together in the hool too. Out on a pillage, the men busied themselves with the rough and heavy job of wrecking enemy property while the women gathered the loot—a replication, no doubt, of the standard division of labour between the sexes at harvest time.

Already in the first week of the rising the planter Maseyk had observed that a party of ten men who attacked and burnt down the village of Monkaparrah had 'a number of women with them to carry off the spoils'. The names of two women, Radha and Heera, both described as wounded, occur in a list of nineteen Santal prisoners produced before the Magistrate of Murshida-

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67 JP, 6 Dec. 1855: 'Copy of a Division Order issued by Major General G. W. A. Lloyd C. B. Comd of Dinapore Division and Sonthal Field Force' (15 Nov. 1855).
68 There are many examples of this in the records. See for instance JP, 6 Dec. 1855: Halliday to Gott (25 Nov. 1855); Jenis to Parrott (ibid.); Halliday to Parrott (30 Nov. 1855).
69 MHKRK: cxiii.
70 Bompas: 417.
71 MHKRK: cxxvi.
72 JP, 23 Aug. 1855: Maseyk to Eden (13 July 1855).
bad on 20 July, a fortnight after the outbreak. And as the insurrection draws to a close in the autumn of 1855, women come up for mention a number of times in the official correspondence about the capture, incarceration and summary trial of the rebels. Thus, a party of four Santals was captured by a Sergeant Gillan near Mohammadbazar on 15 September 1855. The leader, Dhuna Majhi, charged with 'illegally and riotously assembling with offensive weapons for the purpose of plunder and committing a breach of the peace' was sentenced to seven years' imprisonment 'with labour and irons'. His companions, all women, two of them girls of fourteen, 'accompanies the rebels with baskets and bags to carry off grain'. For this the older woman was given one year in jail plus a fine of fifty rupees, and the younger ones six months and a fine of twenty-five rupees each. Dhuna Majhi was transported to Chittagong jail at the other end of the province to serve his sentence while the three females were kept in detention in Birbhum. A rebel family of man, wife and daughters who had been in the hool together, was thus captured, punished and broken up.

Between October and November that year there were at least forty-five Santal women held in Birbhum jail. Some had their children with them. Quite a few of these still fed on the breast and were dying of dropsy and dysentery in the overcrowded and insanitary prison, which moved the Civil Surgeon with pity enough to urge for their immediate release but was regarded by the Officiating Magistrate 'only as the just retribution they have brought upon themselves'. When twenty of these women were brought to trial, thirteen were released. Of the seven others, one 'had accompanied a sonthal force which had gone forth to plunder the village of Deocha' in August and was shot twice in her left leg by the troops; captured and detained since then she had been far too ill to be produced in court and yet apparently regarded as far too dangerous to be released

73 JP, 15 Nov. 1855: '19 Jonar saotaler kagaj'.
74 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Ward to GOB (19 Oct. 1855); Thompson to Ward (15 Oct. 1855); Russell to Ward (25 Oct. 1855); Russell to Offg. Magistrate of Birbhum (ibid.); Russell to Magistrate of Chittagong (ibid.).
75 For the source of our information here and the rest of the paragraph see JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Weekly Sanitary Report of the Civil Surgeon on the State of the prisoners in Beerbboom Jail for the week ending 10th November 1855'; Thompson to Russell (30 Nov. 1855).
from custody. Five of the women sentenced by the Sessions Judge—three to one year’s imprisonment each and two to six months—were ‘all convicted on very clear evidence of having actively assisted the Insurgents in plundering and carrying off goods from different villages in this [Birbhum] district’. And one was detained on the order of the Magistrate himself, for she had failed to produce the security for good conduct demanded of her. ‘The charge was established against her of having acted not only as a spy for the insurgents, but of having been the means frequently of supplying them, by purchases in this Town [Suri] & elsewhere, with Tobacco, Salt, spirits and other necessaries and provisions.’ She obviously was by no means unique, and the entire female population of the Santal districts in 1855 could have been accused of acting as the providers and as the eyes and ears of the rebel forces in precisely the same way.

The records of imprisonment and summary justice throw some light on yet another aspect of Santal collectivity—the co-operation between people of the same village. Mutual aid and co-operative labour among fellow villagers were, according to the Reak Katha, an important part of their tradition.78 Such co-operation was needed and offered when a fairly wide range of skills had to be pooled together as in the construction of a house or when some of the more arduous agricultural operations like ploughing, transplanting and harvesting required more labour power than could be generated by single families working on their own. This apparently was common practice until the rebellion, and there is some evidence to suggest that it featured in the mobilization for the hool to some extent. I have examined three lists of Santal rebels for each of whom the records specify his residence. They were all produced before and found guilty by a Court Martial and a civilian court.77 Of the seventy-five men from nineteen villages there were only six who were on their own and not accompanied by at least one

78 MHKRK: cxxxv.

77 JP, 6 Dec. 1855: ‘Extracts from the Proceedings of an European Court Martial convened at Camp Jilmilee on the 22nd day of November 1855 etc.’; ‘Statement of 20 convicts sentenced by the sessions Judge of Zillah Beerbboom . . . 3rd December 1855’ in BDR: 125–6; ‘Statement of 22 convicts sentenced by the S. Judge of Zillah Beerbboom . . . 3rd Dec. 1855’ in ibid.: 129–30. The four non-Santals in the Birbhoom lists have not been included in this estimate.
fellow villager. Four villages contributed two men each and another group of four villages three each. The number of participants from the six other villages varied between four and sixteen as shown below.

Table 1  Distribution of Captive Rebels by Neighbourhood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of villages grouped according to size of participation</th>
<th>Number of participants per village in each group</th>
<th>Total number of participants per group</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 19

75

Two of these lists also specify the thana jurisdiction for each of the ten villages where thirty-seven of the rebels were said to have originated. Bunching them by thanas—ten from the area of Afzalpur thana, twenty-three from Nalhati and four from Nungolia—one can get some idea of local co-operation between groups of neighbouring hamlets within the jurisdiction of a police station. This is further confirmed by what we know about the residence of the participants in one characteristic act of the rebellion. The village Katna in Birbhum was raided and pillaged by sixteen men—five of them from three villages in Nalhati thana and ten from five villages in Afzalpur thana (not counting one from a village for which the thana is not given).78 And when under the pressure of Captain Pester's operations in that area the Santals were forced to fall back before Afzalpur, they regrouped at Jamjori for an attack on the army unit posted at Jamtara—a move the communal character of which was not lost upon their enemies. 'Almost every Sonthal village is furnishing its quota to Jamtarra', wrote the alarms commander of the Birbhum and Bankura Field Force to his superiors in the Military Department.79

The fruits of corporate activity are communally shared. The portions are by no means equal, headmen, priests, drummers and other special functionaries being entitled to somewhat larger helpings before the remainder is equally divided. But as the Santal book of tradition makes it clear, there is nothing arbitrary about the distribution of reward. Whether it is a communal catch of fish or a communal kill at shikar, there are well defined and universally accepted rules as to who should get how much.\textsuperscript{80} The Santals appear to have carried this idiom into their conduct of the hool too. Travelling through the Rajmahal Hills in January 1851 Captain Sherwill had noticed a curious sign in a jungle near a village called Burwa. ‘Observing a tuft of straw tied to a tree in the jungle’, he wrote in his diary, ‘I enquired of the manji the meaning or use of it; he informed me that wherever a Sonthal is desirous of protecting a patch of jungle from the axes of the villagers, or a patch of grass being grazed over, or a newly-sown field from being trespassed upon, he erects a bamboo in his patch of grass or field, to which is affixed a tuft of straw, or in the case of jungle some prominent and lofty tree has the same prohibitory mark attached, which mark is well understood and strictly observed by all parties interested.’\textsuperscript{81} Four years later the rebels were to use a variation of the same sign to indicate communal appropriation by pillage. They plundered thirty-four villages in Ooperbandah thana in Birbhum during the insurrection, and as Richardson, the Collector of the district, observed: ‘In each plundered Village a bamboo has been fixed in the ground, with a piece of leather affixed, denoting that the Sonthals have obtained possession of the land.’\textsuperscript{82}

Since the villages were thus taken over in the name of the community, the loot had to be shared out among the raiders. ‘When we attack villages’, said Balai Santal after his arrest, ‘the people run away and the plunderers take everything.’\textsuperscript{83} The cash would then be divided among the members of the party

\textsuperscript{80} For such rules of distribution of fish and game gathered by collective effort, see MHKRK: cxii, cxliv–v.

\textsuperscript{81} Sherwill: 40.

\textsuperscript{82} JP, 8 Nov. 1855: ‘Operations of the Sonthals etc’ enclosed in Richardson’s Diary (4 Oct. 1855).

\textsuperscript{83} JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (Enclosure, 14 July 1855).
and all other property handed over to the Soubahs, some of which they were to keep for themselves and the rest for communal use. Kanhu, too, in his statement confirmed that 'the treasure plundered... was shared amongst manjees and sonthals', and that he himself received a part of the booty.\footnote{JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Statement of Insurgent Sonthals'.} The portion made over to him as the supreme commander was of course far greater than anything an ordinary 'sipahi' like Balai could expect. 'The three Rupees that were (found) with me', said the latter after his capture, 'I got at the plundering of a Rajah's near Agoonerjah';\footnote{\textit{Vide} n. 83 above.} whereas after the pillage of the princely estate of Pakur, said Kanhu, 'a manjhee brought me two Kulsies [brass pots] of rupees, 2 Elephants, 2 or 4 palkies [palanquins], 2 cloths'.\footnote{JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Examination of Kanoo Sonthal'.} There was nothing egalitarian about this any more than there was about the unequal apportioning of game and fish between the village leaders and the common Santals. What is important however is to note that by insisting on the principle of communal distribution of plunder the rebels placed the hool under the sign of a collective enterprise of the same order as shikar or fishing.

The function of this corporate violence is to undermine the authority of the peasant's enemies by destroying such of their resources as constitute the insignia and instruments of that authority. The means adopted by the rebels for this purpose often vary from event to event and from region to region. But with all its variety there are in this violence certain regularities of emphasis and pattern which have been noticed by some of the most discerning students of the subject. It was thus that Trotsky picked out of the welter of agrarian riots of 1905 in Russia four main 'types' or 'forms of struggle' which 'in different combinations, spread over the country, being adapted to the economic conditions of each region'.\footnote{Trotsky: 202.} Mao Tse-tung, too, in his investigation of the conduct of the peasantry during the Hunan movement in 1927 made it a point to 'closely examine all their activities, one by one, to see what they have actually done' and in his famous report which 'classified and summed
up’ these activities he identified nine ‘methods’ governing the very large number of sanctions and coercive measures ‘used by the peasants to hit the landlords politically’. The lesson to be learnt from such distinguished exercises is that to fail to investigate and identify these ‘methods’ and ‘forms’ of peasant violence is for a historian to be resigned to the point of view which sees in insurgency nothing but chaos, confusion and disorder—‘a sort of blindness and madness’, as a modern scholar has written of the Kol insurrection echoing the sentiments of the colonial officers who were sent out to suppress it. What this point of view misses out is that there is much order in this apparent ‘madness’, a great deal of discipline in what looks like pure spontaneity. To quote Lefebvre’s memorable words precisely on this question: ‘These are not acts of collective madness, as has so often been suggested. The people always has its own way of dealing with things.

If one examines carefully enough the record of peasant activities during the great rural disturbances under the Raj and combs through the debris of undigested detail stacked in the primary sources, making up an inventory, so to say, of the means and objects of violence, one will probably have no difficulty in concluding that there were four methods or forms of struggle which stood out as the most conspicuous and the most prevalent. These were wrecking, burning, eating and looting. It is not that each of these figured to the same extent in all the events. On the contrary, it was the want of uniformity in their combinations and the uneven distribution of their relative weightage which helped to distinguish one uprising from another and lent to each its individuality. However, taken together it was these forms which made insurgency so distinctively destructive and political in its character and put it in a class apart from crime.

To turn first to wrecking, it is well known that the demolition of the symbols of enemy authority was common to all peasant insurrections. In early and modern Europe nothing seemed to the rural poor to express more blatantly the difference between the material conditions of their own life and those of the life of the upper classes than the grandeur and inaccessibility of the residential houses of the latter. The elimination of this measure

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88 Mao: I 34, 36.  
89 J. C. Jha: 172.  
of their subalternity was therefore an obvious first step for the insurgents to take towards turning things upside down. Jean de Venette, one of the chroniclers of the Jacquerie of 1358, has observed how eager the peasants were to destroy manor houses;91 and Trotsky in his account of the jacqueries of 1905 in Russia mentions this particular form of violence to have been so widespread that ‘in certain districts the landowners’ houses that were left standing could be counted on one’s fingers’.92 Some of the other peasant revolts in Europe during the five centuries between these two dates witnessed the same type of violence as the many references to the destruction of abbeys and castles in Germany in 1525 and of priories and chateaux in France in 1789 testify respectively in Zimmermann’s and Lefebvre’s histories of those times. Insurgency operated by similar methods in India as well. The wrecking of Deby Sinha’s mansion in Rangpur during the dhing was celebrated thus as a mass event in a popular ballad:

Thousands of peasants marched together. They took with them their staves, picks, sickles and choppers. There was no one who wouldn’t join. They took on their shoulders heavy carrying poles and yokes used for ploughing. The paupers made their way over fields lying fallow. Indeed the peasants of Rangpur came from all the four directions, while the gentry [bhadragula] gathered there simply to witness the fun. They [the peasants] hurled a lot of stones and brickbats which came down thudding on all sides. Some people had their bones broken by the missiles. And Deby Sinha’s mansion was reduced to a heap of bricks.93

In some of the uprisings the insurgents used wrecking as a weapon to carry out the war into enemy territory. The Kols of Chota Nagpur launched their insurrection by announcing ‘that they would destroy every village of the Sonepore Pergunnah’,94 and were almost as good as their word. And in the course of the fituris of 1899 the Saora in a taluk of the Ganjam Agency attacked and razed to the ground ‘in the most deliberate manner’ the houses of their hated exploiters, the Doms, in some

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91 Hilton: 132.  
92 Trotsky: 205.  
93 The text of the ballad is given in full in D. C. Sen (1914): 1413–18. A somewhat different version of the ballad has been reprinted from the Rangpur Sahitya Parishad Patrika in Kaviraj: 97–102.  
94 BC 1502 (58891): Dent & Wilkinson to Thomason (16 Nov. 1832).
fifteen villages. The more spectacular acts of demolition in the period under survey had the familiar symbols of British presence in the subcontinent as their targets. The revolt against the tyrannical system of indigo plantation culminated in some instances in the destruction of the factories. Titu Mir's men, for instance, spent a morning demolishing the Burgurreah factory on the Ichamati and did so thorough a job of it that the Magistrate of Nadia had to confess having 'never witnessed a more complete ransack and wanton destruction of property than the empty Bungalow on the shore'. Again in a well-known case the Farazis of Faridpur destroyed a factory at Panch Char belonging to the planter Dunlop in December 1846. During the period of the Mutiny, too, the planters came under attack. As one aggrieved member of this fraternity was to recollect later on, his factories in a part of Ghazipur district of eastern UP were raided jointly by mutineers and the local villagers and destroyed in the course of two nights' work. The Santals wrecked railways and the railroad engineers' bungalows wherever they happened to come across these during the hool. And that unmistakable emblem of colonial authority in rural India, the sadar station, with its bungalows and administrative buildings, met with the same fate when peasants marched into towns as they often did during the disturbances of 1857–8. The destruction of Bulandshahr by the Gujar insurgents provides us with a fairly typical experience in this respect:

As the Goojurs had entered the station they fired each house, commencing with the Dak Bungalow; and during the four days we were absent the station was completely destroyed, and all property private and public, was carried off and burnt, the city people and those of the neighbouring villages taking a very active part in the work of demolition.

This description taken from an official narrative matches well with Mark Thornhill's account of the sack of Mathura. 'The plunder of the [revenue] office', he wrote, 'was followed by that

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86 Elwin: 254.
87 JC, 22 Nov. 1851: Smith to Thomason (16 Nov. 1831).
88 Khan (1965): 34.
89 FSUP: IV 117–19.
90 JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (13 July 1855); Elliott to Grey (15 July 1855); Rose to Elliott (14 July 1855).
91 FSUP: V 39.
of the English houses. In this amusement the villagers spent what remained of the day. The houses contained little that they valued; that little they carried off, the rest they broke to pieces. In the morning they returned and continued the work of destruction. They concluded it by setting fire to the houses.’

The use of fire as a principal instrument of demolition was also by no means exceptional. On the contrary, wrecking and burning almost invariably went together in all great peasant revolts in India as well as abroad. Trotsky noticed the power of this combination in the course of the uprisings in the Russian countryside in 1905. He quoted from a contemporary newspaper to show how a torch set to a landowner’s estate at night would often announce the beginning of a jacquerie. The incidence of arson in attacks on farms, stacks and barns in the course of the Swing movement in England in 1830 was so high that Rudé felt justified in characterizing some of the most affected areas as ‘incendiary counties’. Lefebvre thought that there was a logic to all this burning. There are instances to show that the peasants often ‘proceeded to destroy and burn in a very methodical way’. And according to him, a historian hardly given to generalizing too much, ‘All the peasant revolts followed this pattern’. It was, he suggests, as if the rebels exercised a sort of ‘right of arson’ like what the bourgeoisie of Flanders enjoyed till the very end of the Middle Ages ‘to punish anyone who had injured them or attacked their privileges by burning down his house’.

In rural India it was not so much a sense of right but tradition supported by faith which people living close to nature had in the destructive power of fire that made them adopt arson as a major instrument of rebellion. Its use was frequent—to the point of being almost universal—in the Kol insurrection. In the most recent and detailed account that we have of it there is hardly a case of pillage mentioned without arson. Figures available for four divisions of Chota Nagpur (and those not amongst the most built-up regions) speak of a total of 4,086 houses burnt down.

103 Lefebvre (1973): 119. 104 See J. C. Jha: passim, but especially Ch. II.
105 BC 1502 (58891): ‘Statement exhibiting the Amount of Property plundered and burnt during the late Insurrection in Chota Nagpoor’. The four divisions are Tori, Lohardagga, Sonepur and Palkote.
These included not only police thanas and mahajans' gadi, but entire residential wards in diku villages and townships as well. The scale of fire-raising by the Kol on this occasion was on a par with that by the Santals in Damin-i-Koh in 1855. They too burned down mahajans' and zamindars' houses everywhere. They reduced to ashes the indigo factory at Balbadda and the railway bungalows at Sreekund and Pakur—in fact, all railway bungalows north of the river Brahmani. Pakur burned particularly high and the blaze could be seen a long way off. Indeed the hool appears never to have stopped burning. It was hardly a week old when an official marching at the head of some troops from Baharampur to Aurangabad found nearly thirty villages burnt down along his route. And 'we could see, as we were marching along, the smoke from 7 or 8 villages distant some 8 or 10 miles from us', he wrote from Kadamsar the following day reporting on what he saw of insurgent activities since leaving Aurangabad. Again, in a memorandum written on 21 July 1855 precisely at the end of the second week of the insurrection Captain Sherwill noted down his observations made during journeys to and from Rajmahal thus: 'Villages all round Colgong have been told off for loot and burning by the Santals... Major Burroughs says he will move out this afternoon (21 July) to try and endeavour to stop burning. The villages on fire seem to the East and South-east—and are visible more as I write.' And nine weeks later on 24 September 1855 the Magistrate of Birbhum mentions the burning of over thirty villages in Nangulia and Ooperbandah including the police station at the latter place during the previous fortnight.

Arson played an important role in inaugurating and extending the rebellion of 1857–8. Carey saw a sign of the things to come in a series of fires which destroyed a cantonment, an army

106 K. K. Datta: 86.
107 JP, 19 July 1855: 'Statement made before the Assistant Mag at Berhampore etc.'; Elliott to Grey (15 July 1855); Hampton to Rose (19 July 1855); Murray to Birbhum Magistrate (14 July 1855).
108 Ibid.: 'Statement made before the Assistant Mag at Berhampore etc.'
109 Ibid.: Toogood to Grey (13 July 1855).
110 Ibid.: Same to same (14 July 1855).
111 K. K. Datta: 80. 'Wrote' in the extract quoted by Datta is obviously an error for 'write'.
officer’s bungalow and a telegraph office at Raniganj and Barrackpore in the last week of January 1857. ‘And thus’, he wrote in retrospect, ‘the Fire King began to demonstrate an inkling of what was in store for almost every station in the North Western Provinces.’ The Fire King was indeed much in evidence later on that summer. At Aligarh, for instance, the burning down of a bungalow was the obvious and instantaneous index of the tension generated there by the news of the outbreak at Meerut, and when within a week the sepoys of the local garrison themselves mutinied, the Collector’s kachari and the post office, too, went up in flames. At Etawah at about the same time a similar set of buildings, all of them the visible symbols of the Raj—the kachari, the sessions court house, the post office and two bungalows—met the same fate at the hands of incendiaries. Later on, in June, when the mutineers from Jhansi arrived there, the Mewatis felt bold enough to destroy the rest of the bungalows by fire. In Hamirpur, the zamindars of mauza Gohand burnt down the tahsil, its building and its records. It was the same story everywhere with the insurgents setting fire to all administrative buildings and European residential bungalows in district after district throughout Uttar Pradesh.

The same means of destruction was used by the peasants in their struggles in other parts of the country as well—e.g. by the Kunbi as they made bonfires of the Marwari moneylenders’ bonds, shops, houses, fodder stacks, etc. during the riots of 1875 in Poona and Ahmadnagar; by the Moplah as they burnt down the landlords’ houses and temples again and again in the course of their numerous uprisings in Malabar during the nineteenth century. The last great rebellion of the century, the Birsaite ulgulan too was marked by an ‘epidemic of burning and arrow-shooting’, particularly in its initial phase. The official statistics of 33 cases in Chakradharpur, 45 in Tamar, 39 in Khunti and 4 in Basia—a total of 121—do not obviously include many

118 Carey: 9.
114 FSUP: III 627; V 632, 634, 656–7.
115 For the Kunbi see DRCR: 2, 3; for the Moplah, Logan: 554, 555, 560, 563, 586, 588 et passim.
116 The details about the ulgulan in this paragraph are taken from Singh: 97, 106, and notes 19 and 68 to Ch. VI of that work.
unreported incidents, and their value for our study of arson is diminished in any case by their being lumped together with arrow-shooting. But since the two forms of violence often occurred at the same time, these figures may perhaps still serve to give some idea of the fairly high incidence of burning. On one of these occasions after a successful attack on a police station the raiders set fire to a few sheds and thatched houses belonging to the police and some of the local moneylenders and danced around the blaze to celebrate their victory. The impact that this relatively minor incident had on a Belgian missionary who witnessed it is a measure of the fear generated by arson. ‘It was a terrible night’, he wrote, ‘to see in the brilliant blaze of this conflagration these hundreds of savage and infuriated Mundas dancing and jumping about with loud shouts and yells and brandishing their terrible battle axe(s).’ What made the Munda insurgent dance with joy made T. van der Schueren, S.J., of the Belgian mission shudder. Clearly again a case of two mutually hostile theories interpreting a rebel scenario from opposite points of view—‘It’s fine!’/‘It’s terrible!’

It should be emphasized here that destruction by wrecking and burning was by no means limited in any of these cases to ‘useless’ objects of luxury and conspicuous consumption alone. For if that were the case one would have found it difficult to explain why on so many occasions the rebels chose to demolish things and resources of obviously great economic value to themselves. Take, for instance, the classic case of the destruction of railway works by the Santals during their hool. There can be no doubt about the fact that the introduction of railways added considerably to income and employment in the Santal country. ‘High embankments, heavy cuttings, many-arched bridges, created a demand for workmen such as had never been known in the history of India.’\footnote{117 Hunter (1897): 234.} For the Santals this provided an opportunity to extricate themselves from the state of landlessness, low wages and bonded labour into which they had fallen thanks to the combination of an administratively engineered rise in the local population—by as much as thirty times in less than fifteen years, according to one authority\footnote{118 Ibid.}—and cynical exploitation by mahajans and zamindars under the protection of the Raj.
The economic prospect was indeed so radically improved for them that Hunter was persuaded to put the relevant parts of his account in *The Annals of Rural Bengal* under the ecstatic caption: ‘The Railway Abolishes Slavery’. Yet when violence actually broke out in July 1855 the beneficiaries seem to have had no hesitation about slaying the goose that laid the golden eggs for them.

The records are quite clear on this point: indeed, railway works were among the very first and most frequently destroyed objects mentioned in the reports received from the disturbed areas within the first week of the uprising. In one of these key reports Richardson identified this particular orientation of the hool and explained this in terms found convincing enough by his superiors as well. ‘The object of the Hillmen’, he wrote from Suri on 14 July, ‘appears to be to destroy everything connected with the Railway works, and their anger has been roused, I have no doubt, by the Railway Officers carrying on intrigues with their women as well as bullying the laborers.’ This was corroborated by the Officiating Commissioner of the Burdwan Division who forwarded this report to the authorities in Calcutta saying ‘that the Sonthal women have been disgraced and this injury calls amongst them for vengeance’. Quite clearly the Santals had decided that it was not worth their while coming back home to their villages with all the money earned on the railroads—‘with their girdles full of coin and their women covered with silver jewellery, “just like Hindus”’, as Hunter put it—if they could not defend the honour of those women and their own dignity as workers against the raping, bullying railway sahibs. In other words, in one of those unpredictable leaps of consciousness prestige suddenly assumed for them an importance exceeding that of money and politics transcended economics.

This was by no means the only instance one could cite. On yet another occasion later on the Santals destroyed all the green crops belonging to Bengali villagers hostile to them in the neighbourhood of Jamjorie in Birbhum district indicating

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119 Ibid.: 235.
120 *JP*, 19 July 1855: Richardson to Elliott (14 July 1855); Elliott to Grey (15 July 1855).
121 Hunter (1897): 235.
once again that they regarded the uprising as a war in which political considerations had to be given a priority over strictly economic ones, the need to destroy the enemy over that of safeguarding economic resources from destruction. The Kols are known to have ‘plundered and burned’ a little over 29,859 metric tons of gram in four divisions of Chota Nagpur in the course of their insurrection in 1831–2. And to turn to the experience of the year of the Mutiny, the damage done by the rebels to the coal mines at Kotah and their not so successful attempt to wreck those in Rewah, the destruction of canal locks by the peasants in order to prevent Major Reid’s battalion from reaching Bulandshahr by boat, the numerous attacks on railways and factories by the rural poor dependent for their livelihood on them in many parts of Uttar Pradesh in those days were all witness to the primacy of politics in Indian peasant rebellions of our period.

There was nothing of course about all this which may be said to have been peculiarly Indian. Parallels abound. During the Peasant War in Germany in 1525 the rebels were known to have damaged crops in fields and barns, destroyed the entire stock of fish in some lakes, burned down a forest and cut down a vineyard ignoring the proprietor’s offer of wine, meat, bread and money as inducement to leave him alone. The French jacqueries of 1789 duplicated the pattern: game was killed, woods laid waste, abbey lands ruined, pigeons and dovecotes destroyed, salt pans damaged, and mills, forges and sawmills broken up. On the eve of the Maji Maji rebellion the peasants of Tanganyika defied their leader’s advice to continue cultivating cotton for the German colonialists and asked themselves, ‘How do we start the war? How do we make the Germans angry? Let us go and uproot their cotton so that war may rise.’ They uprooted cotton and thereby inaugurated the revolt. In China in 1927 the Hunan peasantry sought ‘outlets for their feelings against those who oppressed them’ by slaughtering the pigs and sheep of ‘the local tyrants and the evil gentry’. It is

123 As in n. 105 above. The total amount is given as 822,992 mds. 24 srs. 3/4 chh.
124 FSUP: IV 32, 556-8; V 32.
125 Zimmermann: I 171, 303, 374; II 90-1.
128 Mao: I 53.
indeed not possible to explain solely or even primarily in terms of economic interests the destruction of so much of productive resources so often by insurgents operating under such widely different circumstances in so many countries.

We thought it fit to insist on this destructive aspect of rebel activities in order to avoid the error of reading purely economic motives in them. For that might tend to blur the distinction between two qualitatively different types of violence—rebel violence which expresses itself in what are essentially political acts intended to turn things upside down and criminal violence against property aimed at transferring economic resources from its victims to its protagonists. This is a functional difference not to emphasize which could lead to a narrowly economistic interpretation of peasant insurgency. Labry’s account of the disturbances in the Russian countryside in 1905 provides us with an instructive specimen of precisely such an interpretation. Describing the sacking of the country-houses in the Chernigov Guberniya he writes:

A very large number of those who took part in these attacks refused to regard their actions as in the least criminal, since, as they put it, they had been granted rights. They even believed that in acting as they did, they were helping to transfer the lands of the landlords into their own hands, which was the natural consequence of the rights they had been granted. Only this explains why on the estates they destroyed orange-ries and flower-gardens—which were useless to them—with particular fury, and in the houses, pictures and furniture, in a word all that they regarded not as a necessity of life, but as a sign of comfort and luxury. On the other hand they spared the cattle and took care not to destroy stocks of corn.\(^{129}\)

Quite clearly it is the author’s intention to read in this violence both a political and an economic meaning. He starts off by emphasizing the former. The peasants, he says, acted from a consciousness of their own rights, that is, from a political consciousness which, if true, must have had its objects predicated as political. It is thus that they came to regard themselves as involved not in crime but in political action aimed at demolishing the insignia of the landlords’ authority. To regard this pillage then as a merely selective attack directed ‘par calcul’ against ‘useless’ and economically unproductive luxuries and

suggest, as Hobsbawm does on the basis of this account, that ‘destruction is never indiscriminate, what is useful for poor men is spared’, is to depoliticize this violence, make it into an economism and consequently render it impossible for us to understand why ‘those who took part in these attacks refused to regard their actions as in the least criminal’.

Indeed the correct reading of this experience should be that destruction is ‘never indiscriminate’ only in the sense that the peasant discriminated between what stands for landlord authority and what does not, and not between what is ‘useful’ and what is ‘useless’ in the narrowly economic sense of these words. One can perhaps even go so far as to generalize that the more a violence of this type shifts away from crime towards rebellion the more it comes to be dominated by politics rather than economics, and vice versa. This is why it is often difficult to assign any clear-cut economic motive even to some of the more radical forms of social banditry which come fairly close to rebellion but fall just short of it on the spectrum of rural violence. Blacking, for instance, in most parts of eighteenth-century England could hardly be explained in terms of the poachers’ involvement in the illicit venison trade. ‘Other motives were dominant’, says E. P. Thompson. ‘The deer killed were often either eaten by the hunters, or their carcasses were left in the parks. Whereas there were distinct venison seasons, with the culling of bucks in mid-summer and of hinds in mid-winter, the attacks of the Blacks were at all seasons, at times when the meat would not only be poor, but its attempted sale would attract notice. Above all, the whole pattern of Black actions—the threatening letters, felling of young trees, blackmail of forest officers—disallows a simple economic explanation.’ The dominant motive here is clearly political—that of undermining the authority of the gentry by the demolition of its symbols. This inversive function of popular violence is raised to its highest power by insurgency, and destruction becomes in that context the signifier of a consciousness which is as negative in orientation as it is political in content.

No narrowly economic interpretation can explain some of the other forms of rebel activities either, such as eating and looting. There was nothing of the calculus of saving and investment in

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these. Taken together they acted as a foil to the other pair—wrecking and burning, and complemented by expropriation what the latter achieved by demolition, the function of both being to assist insurgency to destroy.

Eating, in this context, must be understood as an integral part of a political process. Neither the gargantuan scale on which it is often organized by the peasants to celebrate a successful jacquerie nor the enormous waste involved makes any sense at all of this as simply a measure of satisfying hunger. On the contrary, its use by the rebels as an instrument of inversion and/or as a penalty imposed on their foes in order to remunerate themselves for ‘public services’ rendered in the cause of insurgency bears testimony to its political character. It is precisely this meaning that is emphasized by Mao Tse-tung when he identifies this as one of ‘the methods used by the peasants to hit the landlords politically’ during the Hunan movement and characterizes it as a political demonstration thus:

**Major demonstrations.** A big crowd is rallied to demonstrate against a local tyrant or one of the evil gentry who is an enemy of the [peasant] association. The demonstrators eat at the offender’s house, slaughtering his pigs and consuming his grain as a matter of course. Quite a few such cases have occurred. There was a case recently at Machiaho, Hsiangtang County, where a crowd of fifteen thousand peasants went to the houses of six of the evil gentry and demonstrated; the whole affair lasted four days during which more than 130 pigs were killed and eaten. After such demonstrations, the peasants usually impose fines.¹³²

Demonstrations of this kind occurred frequently in Germany in 1525, in France in 1789, in England in 1830. However, the Indian parallels I have come across are rather less numerous. There is a reference in Sajon Gazi’s ballad to Titu Mir’s men feasting on the eve of the battle of Laughati. Again, Bindrai, the Kol leader, mentions that ‘it was agreed upon that we should commence to cut, plunder, murder and eat’.¹³³ Cut, plunder and murder they certainly did, but there is little evidence of the last of those resolutions being acted upon as a ‘major demonstration’. Kanhu too says in one of his recorded statements that at

¹³³ Biharial Sarkar: 30 (I owe this reference to Gautam Bhadra); BC 1363 (54227): Cuthbert & Wilkinson to Thomason (12 Feb. 1832).
Pulsa he and his men ‘looted & burnt the Sahib’s bungalow & took lots of wine’.\textsuperscript{134} We also know that on one occasion, at Umurpore, they were surprised by the troops in the midst of what was obviously a banquet in progress after a successful raid on two neighbouring villages. The Santals escaped leaving behind them ‘the remains of an ample feast, a bullock half devoured, quantities of grain, cooking pots and numberless fires where they had just been cooking’.\textsuperscript{135} And to go by Krishnadas Ray’s near-contemporary verses, they stopped at the house of one Gayaram in another village and ‘held a sumptuous feast there’.\textsuperscript{136} Elwin in his account of the fituris in Ganjam mentions a case when in the course of a raid on a Pano village the Saora ‘took pigs and goats which they killed and ate on the spot—a characteristic touch’.\textsuperscript{137}

It should be evident even from these few instances that in India as elsewhere it sometimes happened that the peasants involved in a jackerie would consume large quantities of edibles seized from their enemies as a method of destroying some of those resources which made the latter so rich and powerful—and indeed so different from themselves. However, it is difficult to decide at the present state of research how widespread this was and whether our want of information on this point is due simply to a gap in the records, or to a failure on the part of historians in extracting this detail from the primary sources if only because they have not grasped its significance, or to the fact that its emergence as a common and popular form of struggle was genuinely inhibited by the fear of ritual pollution through eating even among the non-Hindu peasantry like the Kol and the Santal who had long been influenced by Hindu caste customs.

No such doubt however can occur in the case of the other major type of such destructive activity, viz. looting. Truly ubiquitous, it appears to have made its presence felt in almost all uprisings in every land. In India it featured prominently even in the most ‘peaceful’ of peasant struggles such as those of Pabna in 1873 where looting occurred in as many as thirty out of the fifty-three

\textsuperscript{134} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’.
\textsuperscript{135} JP, 8 Nov. 2855: Chapman to Bidwell (22 Oct. 1855).
\textsuperscript{136} D. C. Sen (1926): 267. \textsuperscript{137} Elwin: 255.
(not counting five dismissed as false) recorded cases in the sadar sub-division.\textsuperscript{138} In yet another series—the Deccan riots of 1875—noted officially for its moderation the houses, shops and granaries of the Marwari and Gujjar sahukars were looted in a number of districts.\textsuperscript{139} In the more violent jacqueries plunder and demolition went together in most cases. The ryots who rose against Deby Sinha in northern Bengal in 1783 plundered and burnt down the kacharis in several parganas and on one occasion looted the East India Company’s grain stores at the flourishing centre of rice trade at Bhabaniganj.\textsuperscript{140}

Looting supported by wrecking and burning—pillage, to call this complex of rebel activities by its composite name—occurred on a massive scale during the Kol insurrection as well. A quick run through its chronology should make this clear. It started with four villages in the Sonepur pargana of Chota Nagpur being raided, plundered and burnt down by a body of seven hundred insurgents on 20 December 1831. This was followed up by the plunder of two other villages on 25 December by three hundred rebels and the sack of three villages on 2–3 January 1832 by a thousand men. On 12 January the entire pargana of Belkudra was looted and set to fire, and so were all villages within the jurisdiction of Govindpur thana as well as Barkagarh pargana and thana by 13 January. Several hundred villages under Jhikuchatti thana ended up in the same way during the next three days and the whole area was abandoned to the rebels by 16 January. All of Armai thana was overrun and pillaged by 24 January and the entire Barwa pargana by the 26th—the date by which the Kols were officially recognized as having taken ‘complete possession of the whole of [Chota] Nagpore’ excluding some inconsiderable tracts in the southern and north-eastern corners of the region.\textsuperscript{141} The value of the property and goods plundered in the four divisions of Tori, Lohardagga, Sonepur and Palkote, for which alone we have complete figures, was estimated at 203,722 rupees not counting 32,494 rupees looted in cash.\textsuperscript{142}

\textsuperscript{138} JP (P): ‘Pubna Riot Case’ enclosed in ibid.: Tayler to Mackenzie (23 Aug. 1873).

\textsuperscript{139} DRCR: 2, 3.

\textsuperscript{140} MDS: 323, 564, 582.

\textsuperscript{141} BC 1502 (58891): Dent & Wilkinson to Thomason (16 Nov. 1832).

\textsuperscript{142} As in n. 105 above.
Pillage, again, emerged as the central modality of the revolt of the Santals in 1855. To Balai Majhi wounded and captured on the seventh day of the hool during a raid by several thousand peasants on Charles Maseyk’s indigo factory rebellion was pillage. ‘I came to plunder’, he said simply and succinctly to his interrogator, and then proceeded to fill in the details thus:

After plundering Kudumsha, we looted the residence of the Maheshpore Rajah; then turned back, & went north & plundered all the villages along the back of the river, and we had settled to go as far as Bhaugulpore . . . I was present at the looting of many villages and the three Rupees that were (found) with me I got at the plundering of a Rajah’s near Agoonerjah—and we divided all the Rupees. All the other property has been taken to Takoor Sidoo & Kaloor’s house . . . and when we attack villages, the people run away and the plunderers take everything . . . The above named Sidoo and Kaloo declared themselves Rajas & [said] they would plunder the whole country and take possession of it—they said also, no one can stop us; for it is the order of Takoor. On this account we have all come with them. ¹⁴³

This insurgent view of the hool as one massive plundering expedition was shared by all the local officials too. For them no less than for ‘Bullye Sonthal, Manjee, son of Bushye . . . occupation—cultivator, caste—Sonthal, inhabitant of Bahoo or Barah Masseeal, Perghb Zilleagur’ the rebellion was pillage. ‘They go and loot villages daily 4 or 5. They say this is at the order of a God’, wrote the sub-divisional administrator of Aurangabad in his first breathless ‘demi-official’ report two days after the outbreak.¹⁴⁴ And from that point onwards official correspondence on the subject never looks back. There is hardly a despatch from the area that does not mention pillage. It recurs frequently in a diary kept by the Collector of Birbhum at the height of the rising. Thus,

¹⁴³ JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (14 July 1855). ‘Kaloor’s house’ should of course read ‘Kanhu’s house’.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid.: Eden to Grey (9 July 1855).
21 September 1855. The Sontals are looting to their hearts’ content in the Saruth & Opurbandah jurisdictions ... A report has just come in that the Sontals in very great numbers are at Bindabone ... & that they have looted Bilkandu.\textsuperscript{146}

Within a fortnight, according to this Collector, ‘upwards of thirty villages have been plundered and burned by the insurgents in Thannah Operbundha and Nangoolea’.\textsuperscript{146} This account of the progress of pillage agrees with despatches from the Commissioner on Special Duty. ‘The Sonthals are assembled in large numbers marching & plundering without discrimination all along the South of the Bhaugulpore District N and NW of Beerbhoom and along the foot of the hills’, he writes.\textsuperscript{147} The insurgents had apparently done so thorough a job already in that part of the country that he had ‘no apprehension of any plunder being attempted between this [i.e. Suri] and Rampore Haut for the best of reasons, that the whole of the country to the North of a line drawn between this and that post has been plundered and there is nothing the Sonthals can gain by invading it now’.\textsuperscript{148}

It was indeed this sweep and power of pillage which the peasants’ enemies feared most. The description of a panic in Burdwan within a fortnight of the Santal uprising was a measure of the extent and intensity of the alarm it had caused. The local correspondent of the Somprakash (23 July 1855) wrote:

The rich as well as the poor residents of Burdwan have all been seized with panic here ... The rich have heard of the depredations of the Santal rebels of the hills and are contemplating various means by which to save their wealth, honour and lives. Thus, some of them have increased the strength of their house-guards by ten times. Some others have hidden all the cash they have in pits dug into the ground and are crying out over and over again, ‘O Lord! Save us!’ ‘O Lord! Save us!’ Some others have their eyes glued to the newspapers. And still others are busy gathering news at the railway station about the number of troops sent up by the Company’s government. Altogether thus a big furore is being made.\textsuperscript{149}

There is clearly a recognition here of the threat to property sensed by those who had most to lose from rebel violence. But

\textsuperscript{146} BDR: 120–1. \textsuperscript{146} Ibid.: 122.
\textsuperscript{147} JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Ward to GOB (16 Sept. 1855).
note how very similar their response was to that of affluent villagers threatened by brigandage—burying cash and jewellery underground was a traditional measure of security against robbery in rural India—and how little this related to the actual practice of looting in the hool. For it was not money that was plundered most. ‘Grain was our chief plunder and cattle’, said Kanhu after his capture; ‘many seizures have been made by the Troops, and the remainder are in the Jungles’.\textsuperscript{150} This is corroborated fully by the records of the anti-insurgency campaign. Officers would return from their pursuit of the rebels with tales about forest hide-outs stacked with grain and herds of cattle. A Captain Phillips reports on 30 October 1855 from Camp Kurwun that in the course of that day’s dour he came upon an ‘encampment which was in the midst of very heavy jungle’ and destroyed the large quantities of grain and other stores he found there ‘all by setting fire to the encampment’.\textsuperscript{151} A Captain Pester reports on the following day from Camp Jamtara how his detachment destroyed ‘two large encampments and a great quantity of grain’.\textsuperscript{152} A Major Hampton reports from Kandra on the same day that he found the two hills near Luckunpore, a large Santal village, ‘filled with grain, a great quantity of which was carried off by some 3 or 400 men who crossed the Burrakur and followed my detachment; the remainder was as far as possible destroyed’.\textsuperscript{153} The amounts mentioned are impressive. Four to five thousand maunds of grain were destroyed or carried off and 650 heads of cattle seized by the Bengalics (who systematically scavenged on the trail of the army with the latter’s encouragement and connivance) from the 1,950 huts burnt down by the forces in twenty-three Santal villages of Birbhum.\textsuperscript{154} And at Suburpoor, west of Jamtara, the troops confiscated 5,000 heads of cattle and destroyed a ‘large quantity of grains reported by Captain Nicholls as sufficient to supply a large force [for] at least 2 years’.\textsuperscript{155} Looting in the Kol in-

\textsuperscript{150} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Statement of Insurgent Sonthals’.
\textsuperscript{151} JP, 22 Nov. 1855: Phillips to Parrott (30 Oct. 1855).
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.: Pester to Parrott (31 Oct. 1855).
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.: Hampton to Parrott (31 Oct. 1855).
\textsuperscript{154} JP, 8 Nov. 1855: ‘Memo. shewing the List of Villages burnt in the Sonthal Districts, as also the quantity of Grain destroyed and removed by the Bengalees on the 10th of October 1855’ (12 Oct. 1855).
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.: Ward to GOB (22 Oct. 1855).
surrection, twenty-four years before the hool, had followed the same pattern. It had started off with cattle-lifting, and grain and cattle were the objects pillaged most, as the campaign against the rebels was to demonstrate on that occasion too. Russell, the Jungle Mahal Magistrate, recovered 1,200 heads of cattle and 6,000 maunds of grain in the course of his military operations in one sector alone.¹⁵⁶

The pattern of plunder thus did not quite correspond to what the men of property had feared it would turn out to be. Their initial response to a levée en masse in the countryside clung far too closely to the stereotype of the peasant as a dacoit—a failure on their part to recognize (as we have seen above) that a code-switching had occurred. For the peasant, as a rebel, was out not to rob but to destroy the authority of his enemies by expropriating them. Lefebvre’s emphasis on this important distinction has a validity far beyond the particular experience to which it refers. Commenting on the character of insurgent activities in rural France in 1789 he writes:

These peasants did not band together to go stealing: they came to destroy and they gave this one basic aim their best attention.¹⁵⁷

Crime had, in his view, very little to do with the jacqueries which broke out in such large numbers in those days. Even brigandage was rare. A certain amount of petty and rather innocuous pilfering would of course occur almost inevitably during a raid on a chateau, and some would help themselves ‘to something they fancied and which was often quite valueless’.¹⁵⁸ But by and large the French rebels were positively not criminals.

This could be said of their opposite numbers in India too. The storming of the police station at Khunti was a major event of the Birsait revolt, but the Larakas ‘did not touch the money received in the thana the same day’ nor did they rob the houses in that town.¹⁵⁹ The evidence that we have of the nature and amount of fortune acquired by some of the Santals during the hool shows how little relation the scale of that vast and violent enterprise bore to the size of individual gains. Balai Majhi’s

¹⁵⁶ J. C. Jha: 77.
¹⁵⁸ Ibid.: 117–118.
¹⁵⁹ Singh: 107.
share of plunder amounted to 3 rupees; Jata's to some 'silver ornaments and [a] green tin Box he plundered from a Mohajun's house in one of the villages'; and Kanhu Subah's to:

No. 1—A looking glass in a brass case
No. 2—A Wai[s]t plate belonging to the late Lieutt. Toulmin
No. 3—Some silver ornaments
No. 4—Three Pocket Books, and an old Book on locomotive, a few visiting cards of Mr Burn, Engineer, with some torn leaves and envelopes and bits of thin English paper
No. 5 & 6—Two purses containing 12 Rupees and 1 Gold Mohur in the first, and 17 Rupees in the second, and some pice
No. 7—Pieces of silk and Native dresses, Chudders, etc

—all described graphically as 'the property on the table'. that is, as objects spread out for quick inspection on the top of a desk in Brigadier L. S. Bird's headquar.ers at Camp Raniganj. Not counting the twenty rupees in that list which represented Kanhu's own savings 'brought from home and . . . mine', as he said during the interrogation, the remainder was not much indeed to show for the supreme commander of a rebel army that had wiped out the Raj in ten weeks from an area exceeding one thousand square miles in three districts.\textsuperscript{161}

No, 'these peasants did not band together to go stealing', as Lefebvre rightly observes. It was not their purpose to appropriate resources by petty crime. Their 'basic aim' was 'to destroy' their enemy's resources and with these his authority by means of a special form of activity of the masses. They distinguished this activity from other types of violence in name by calling it 'ulgulan' in Mundari, 'hool' in Santali, 'dhing' in a dialect of northern Bengal and so on, as well as in practice by imposing on it a rhetoric of war in the form of pillage. In India pillage was not systematized according to the conventions of medieval warfare in the same way as it was done in Germany in 1525.\textsuperscript{162} But its war-like figure was never less than obvious.

\textsuperscript{160} JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (Enclosure, 14 July 1855).
\textsuperscript{161} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Statement of Insurgent Sonthals'.
\textsuperscript{162} During the Peasant War in Germany the rebels would elect, whenever the occasion arose, one of themselves as Beutemeister (Master of the Booty)—a feudal convention they had adopted, democratized and turned the other way round against the nobility. And it was the Beutemeister's task to lead 'the plundering of those houses and palaces which were declared open for pillage'. Zimmermann: II 24, 133.
Major Sutherland, the first official to investigate the uprising of the Kols, remarked that ‘they had enriched themselves with the spoils of their enemies for such they considered all foreigners’. In the perception of the insurgents plunder was thus identified as spoils rather than as criminal acquisition.

Looting as an extension of war was explicit in the operations of the Santals, too. They used this as a direct instrument of attack, reprisal and self-defence, depending on the occasion that called for it. Major-General Lloyd commanding the Dinapur Division and the Sonthal Field Force emphasized this when he asked the government carefully to consider the pros and cons of the counter-insurgency tactics. ‘For every village or store of plunder we destroy, they burn and plunder at least five’, he reported. Subsequently, after the hool had passed its peak by the autumn of 1855 looting came to be used by rebels increasingly as the means of self-defence. Burnt out of their villages by the Company’s troops and forced to retreat further and further into the jungle, they plundered in order to stockpile provisions for what they obviously expected to be a protracted war. ‘It is reported that the depredations now committed by the rebels are mainly for the purpose of plunder in order to supply themselves with the necessaries of life’, wrote the Secretary to the Bengal Government, ‘for though possessed of money they are unable to purchase supplies owing to the Bengallees flying at their approach. This state of things has produced a new feature in the insurrection the rebels being now stated to come in force at night & carry away the crops which are just ripening’. This is how the troops came upon—and in their own turn, plundered and destroyed—vast granaries and large herds of cattle in the course of their dours in the jungle. It was also during this period when the Santals came under heavy enemy pressure that they used plunder as a form of punishment against collaborators. After the capture of Kewala, the bandit who had turned into a leader of the hool, Kanhu with about one thousand of his men raided Londeeha,

163 BC 1363 (54227): Sutherland’s Note to Vice-President’s Private Secretary (Mar. 1832).
164 JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Lloyd to GOI quoting from Col. Liptrap’s letter (Sept. 1855).
165 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Grey to GOI (31 Oct. 1855).
the village where this happened, and looted it as a punitive measure.\textsuperscript{166}

It is precisely because of this quasi-military, hence political, character of plunder that cash and other objects of conspicuous consumption which fell into the hands of the insurgents tended to be treated not as articles of theft but as booty to be shared out amongst all or centralized for use by the leadership in their work for the uprising. The statements of Balai, a rank-and-file insurgent captured at the very beginning of the hool and of Kanhu, its supreme commander captured towards its end, both testify to the fact that all the looted cash was ‘shared amongst the manjees and sonthals’.\textsuperscript{167} The means of transport seized from the enemy were handed over to the commanders for their use—horses for the middle-ranking darogas and palanquins for the Subahs. And objects which were not immediately distributed or could not be broken up into divisible units for that purpose, were evidently gathered into a sort of communal store and placed under the custody of the supreme command—Sido and Kanhu. It was one such collection of booty ‘consisting of Palkees, a Buggy, Brass and Copper utensils, silks, cloths and miscellaneous property’ worth four thousand rupees as well as cash amounting to over seven thousand rupees which the rebels looted at Maheshpur but had not yet had the time to share out, that fell into the hands of the troops after they routed the Santals at that village in one of the most critical encounters of the insurrection.\textsuperscript{168}

It should be evident from this survey that in its power to destroy, its mass character and its nearly universal use as a form of struggle looting taken in its wider sense as pillage was a quintessential aspect of insurgency. It derived its strength from the collective will of large rural populations acting together to settle accounts with sarkar, sahukar and zamindar. Each plundering expedition of the Kols and the Santals was the work of thousands of people. Even in the relatively less explosive Pabna movement as many as 22,130 ryots were involved in the twenty-five cases of plunder for which figures are given—an average of

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.: Chapman to Bidwell (22 Oct. 1855).

\textsuperscript{167} JP, 19 July 1855: Toogood to Grey (Enclosure, 14 July 1855); JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Statement of Insurgent Sonthals’.

\textsuperscript{168} JP, 23 Aug. 1855: Toogood to Grey (15 July 1855).
885. In eleven out of these twenty-five cases the number of peasants involved ranged between 100 and 500 and in ten between 1,000 and 7,000. And pillage, as we have shown above, moved fast. The cutting edge of the Kol and Santal insurrections, it spread rebel power, however thinly, over the whole of Chota Nagpur in about five weeks and over Damin-i-Koh in ten. There was nothing in the character, mass or velocity of this violence that did not distinguish it clearly from crime.

To conclude this discussion of the distinctive features of insurgency it is perhaps necessary to emphasize that these forms of struggle constitute a total and integrated violence. Taken separately each of these would stand for a particular form of crime. In rebellion, however, these four types of destructive activity lose their separate identities and function as mutually connected elements of one single complex. At this level, the distinction between crime and insurgency corresponds to that between two types of violence—partial and total, the former as the expression of the will of a single individual or a small group in any society and the latter as that of the will of the Many.

This distinction is represented clearly in their respective patterns. Crime, as discussed above, expresses itself in two different ways. It is either a singular violence addressed to one particular object or, as it often happens under conditions of acute social conflict, one particular type of violence directed against a variety of objects and conversely, many different kinds of violence against one particular class of objects. The violence of rebellion, however, is conspicuous by its plurality in both respects—in the forms it assumes as well as the objects it chooses. It is the combination of this vertical and horizontal plurality which makes an insurrection so comprehensive in its scope and its articulation so very powerful indeed as ultimately to overcome any ambiguity that it may have at an initial stage. This totality is too obvious to be missed out by any serious student of a rural uprising. Rudé has commented on this aspect of the Swing thus: 'A remarkable feature of the labourers' movement of 1830, distinguishing it from many others of its kind, was its multiformity... arson, threatening letters, "in-

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169 This estimate is based on details given in JP(P): 'Pubna Riot Case'.
flammatory” handbills and posters, “robbery”, wages meetings, assaults on overseers, parsons and landlords, and the destruction of different types of machinery all played their part.\(^{170}\)

This ‘multiformity’ is clearly another name for ‘totality’ as defined above—that is, the coming together of many different forms of insurgent activity and its multifarious objects. Even the most casual account of an Indian rebellion, with all its differences of detail indicates a very close similarity, if not identity, of pattern. A comparison of the experiences of three peasant insurrections ranging from the least to the most organized and spanning almost the entire period of colonial rule at fairly even intervals should make this clear. The rising against Deby Sinha in Rangpur and Dinajpur in 1783 had among its targets the persons and properties of landlords and their officials, the East India Company’s troops, its granaries, kachari buildings and money and papers found by the insurgents there; the means of violence used by the rebels were arson, killing, armed assault, plunder, physical and ritual humiliation of the enemies, robbery, arrest and forcible detention, rescue of prisoners and looting of grain stores. Again, the violence of the highly disciplined movement of the Pabna peasantry in 1873 counted among its objects landlords’ kacharis and estates, houses of zamindari officials and the rural gentry, groceries, police officers, and the person and houses of those who collaborated with the zamindars against the peasant union; the acts of violence ranged from raids on houses and police stations, rescue of prisoners, plunder and extortion of money to rioting, unlawful assembly, intimidation by blowing horns, abuse, theft, trespass and so on—in fact offences covering as many as twenty different sections of the Indian Penal Code in just one subdivision alone. And the violence of the peasant revolt led by the communists in Telengana at the end of the Raj was directed against the landlords, their private armies, the armed forces of the state, moneylenders and collaborators; and it articulated itself in the destruction of landlords’ orchards and agricultural tools, social boycott, murder of zamindars, sahukars and des-mukhs, plunder and destruction of their houses, seizure of their grain stores, standing crops and other articles of consumption, destruction of usurers’ bonds, etc.\(^{171}\)

\(^{170}\) H & R: 195.

\(^{171}\) For details see MDS: 213, 323, 326, 330–2, 580, 582; Kaviraj: 21–4, 27–8;
In the case of the most massive and powerful of such uprisings—such as those of the Kols, the Santals and Birsaites which bordered on peasant wars, the range of the rebel attack was so wide, its form so varied and its targets so numerous—the horizontal and vertical pluralities were indeed so well integrated—that in the perception of the colonial authorities the acts of violence often lost their separate identities and merged into a blur to which the law would then assign a name as one undifferentiated crime and deal with it according to the rules of summary justice. This is how all but one of a group of forty-two participants in the hool who were produced before the Sessions Judge of Birbhum and tried in the course of one week in November 1855 came to be convicted of crimes described in almost identical phrases. Twenty insurgents sentenced on 9 November were each convicted of ‘illegally and riotously assembling with offensive weapons for the purpose of murder and to commit a breach of peace’; each of the two on 12 November 1855 of ‘illegally & riotously assembling with weapons for the purpose of plunder to commit a breach of the peace’; three on 14 November of ‘illegally & riotously assembling with weapons for plunder [of] property of parties unknown’; and each of the sixteen on 17 November of ‘illegally & riotously assembling with weapons and plundering the village of Katna in Zl Beerbhoom’.\textsuperscript{172}

Such want of discrimination was no doubt a symptom of that infirmity of the official mind on some aspects of which Hunter has left us some wry comments in his account of the Santal insurrection.\textsuperscript{173} But there was more to this blurred and stereotyped jargon than simply the inertia of administrative perception. It also stood for a groping and hesitant acknowledgement on the part of the court that the offence it was given to adjudicate constituted a totality greater than the sum of the charges. Indeed there were many among the colonial authorities, especially those entrusted to deal with an uprising on a scale larger than that of a single locality, who made no mistake about its comprehensive character. The mutually interacting

Sen Gupta: 160–83; and Sundarayya: 30, 33, 37, 38, 52, 58, 163, 234, 287–9, 292, 297.
\textsuperscript{172} BDR: 125–6 and 129–30. The date ‘7th Novr. 1855’ given in BDR: 130 is obviously a copyist’s or printer’s error for 17th November 1855.
\textsuperscript{173} Hunter (1897): 244–5.
processes of its collective violence, its mass and velocity, gave it, in their eyes, the semblance of a ‘system’. It was thus that Neave and Russell, two of the principal officers involved in the suppression of the Kol rebellion in 1832, came, respectively, to speak of it as a ‘system of burning, plundering and killing’ and a ‘system of plunder and outrages’, just as in England at about the same time, their opposite numbers operating against the Swing movement were accusing the peasantry as having established a ‘system of pillage’. Nothing testifies more to the distinction between rural crime and insurgency than such recognition of the systematic, total character of the latter on the part of those to whom it was addressed. It shows that violence, confined no longer to that grey zone where the peasant met his enemy in single combat, had emerged into the open as a war between the classes.

As the reader may have already noticed, the foregoing discussion has not included killing as a principal form or method of struggle. In insisting on this omission we have paid heed to the many references to blood and sword in our evidence and convinced ourselves that these testify less to any considerable loss of life than to the terror which grips the peasants’ enemies on the outbreak of an uprising. For the sudden and inversee character of the latter tends to elicit an exaggerated and often hysterical response from those most seriously threatened by it. In so far as the primary sources of our information are made up to a large extent of precisely this kind of response, it is useful perhaps to start by differentiating within this genre of violence between two modes which are often merged in a gory mess in elite perception and hence in elite discourse.

The first of these is the death of members of the armed forces of the Raj or those of its non-official protégés such as white civilians and rural gentry (e.g. those who fought on the side of the government during the Mutiny and the Santal rebellion respectively) caused by peasants in the course of war-like encounters such as those at Mandalghat and Patgong during the Rangpur dhing, at Narkelberia during the Barasat revolt, at Maheshpur and Pakur during the hool in 1855, at Sail Rakab

during the Birsaite insurrection and at many places throughout Uttar Pradesh in the year of the Mutiny. Most of these battles were fought by the rebels as defensive engagements and decided in favour of the regime by the sheer force of its superior fire power, but not before a few soldiers had been brought down on some occasions by arrows or by the rare volley from a rebel’s musket. Yet the very fact that the usually passive and peaceable peasant had, against all expectation, resisted the sarkari troops and even drawn a little blood was blown up into tales of massacre by flustered officers, frightened sepoys and correspondents scared out of their wits as they wrote to the vernacular and English-language press. If anything, it was counter-insurgency rather than insurgency that made of killing a principal modality in such cases, as witness the indiscriminate slaughter of Munda women at Sail Rakab which moved even a brazen Government of India to record a mild regret.  

However, the attribution of killing as a characteristic feature of insurgency does not rest primarily on such war-like situations where a peasant mass is driven to defend itself by arms against the troops or some other armed formations acting on behalf of the colonial state. What is at issue here is the notion of violence leading to the annihilation of individuals among the groups or classes hostile to the rebels. The evidence we have on this point is indeed as striking as it is negative. Contrary to the polarized myths of peasant savagery and rebel heroism estimated, in both cases, in terms of the magnitude of killing, the incidence of the latter appears to have been so low indeed as to be negligible. This is true even of the most violent and widespread of Indian peasant revolts. ‘Murder has not been general’, wrote the Collector of Birbhum in his diary recording, at the very height of the hool, the impact of a raid by the Bhagalpur Santals in the course of which ‘the Thannah & Village of Oprobundah were plundered & burnt’.  

This pattern of violence articulated in its most destructive form in plunder and arson but stopping just short of murder, holds for the Kol insurrection too. To quote from an official

176 Singh: 114–15.
178 Richardson’s Diary (Enclosure, 4 Oct. 1855): ‘Operations of the Sonthals during their recent raid into the Oprobundah Thanah Jurisdiction’ in JP, 8 Nov. 1855.
report on the havoc it caused in a small township inhabited by a large number of those whom the rebels hated most, namely moneylenders:

Boondoonugger was on the 18th [January 1832] taken possession of by the Insurgents. The town being extensive and peopled by wealthy Mohajuns occupied them four days in plundering it and then it was burned to the ground . . . the houses of all the respectable men of the Pergunnah not of the class of Coles were in a few days also destroyed, but the only murders that were committed took place in the Town of Boondoo where 3 Pattons and 2 others were put to death. 177

Five killings in a town that took four days to sack is perhaps a fair approximation of the incidence of murder as compared to that of the other forms of struggle. This is borne out also by the statistics we have of non-tribal persons (specified as Hindu and Muslim men and women) killed during the entire course of this insurrection in five divisions of Chota Nagpur,—3 in Tori, 244 in Lohardagga, 47 in Sonepur, 12 in Palkote and 9 in Tamar and the Five Parganas. A total of 315 this is not much to show in terms of bloodshed for one of the most violent of all rural disturbances which had wiped off the Raj from Chota Nagpur in a matter of weeks. The relative paucity of this phenomenon is further demonstrated by the fact that the total number of houses (presumably belonging to the same groups) burnt down during this period in the first four of the divisions mentioned above was 4,086—that is, one killing for less than fourteen acts of arson. 178

One wonders if the Indian experience is altogether unique in this respect. Not so, judging by what we know of the French peasant uprisings of the period of the Great Fear in 1789. Lefebvre examined with his customary scruple the charge of atrocities alleged to have been committed during the jacqueries in the Franche-Comté where 'violence was in general more pronounced and was directed mostly at people rather than objects' and concluded that even in this apparently extreme instance 'all in all, though attacks and harassments were many, there were no murders'. 179 And Rudé estimates the number of

177 BC 1502 (58891): Dent & Wilkinson to Thomason (16 Nov. 1832).
178 Ibid.: 'Return of Men and Women who were murdered during the Insurrection in Chota Nagpur'. For the statistics on arson see n. 105 above.
people murdered by the peasants in all the regions taken together at a total of three. ‘Only three landlords are known to have been killed’, he writes in his introduction to Lefebvre’s great work.\footnote{\textsuperscript{180}}

Mao Tse-tung, too, indicates the somewhat exceptional character of this violence when he describes it as ‘confined to the worst local tyrants and evil gentry’ during the Hunan movement.\footnote{\textsuperscript{181}} There is a suggestion here not only of the limited use made of it but also of its logic—a logic of punishment and vengeance. Most of the murders committed by Indian rebels also appear to have been discriminatory. From the cases on record one can see two governing principles at work, one punitive and the other retributive—a distinction which is merely notional and useful for analytic purposes alone, for in real life there was of course a good deal of overlap between the two.

Punitive killing derived its rationale from the exigencies of an ongoing insurrection and its victims were those who resisted it either indirectly by collaboration with the peasants’ enemies or directly by arms. Hence the execution of informers was a feature common to many of the events included in our survey. Even a natural ally would not be spared if he worked for the other side, as did that gwala whom the Kol would have normally done nothing to harm but ended up by killing because he had betrayed to his master a plan they had to attack him.\footnote{\textsuperscript{182}} For much the same reason, again, traitors were singled out for assassination—a question to which we shall return in the next chapter. The taking of life was also the rebels' way of dealing with those who met their force by force either as individuals or as members of official or private armies. ‘I ordered’, said Kanhu, the Santal leader, ‘that all men who fought were to be killed and all who did not fight to be spared.’\footnote{\textsuperscript{183}} It was as if he looked upon this particular type of violence as an extension of the peasant war itself and as a measure vital to the defence of the rebellion against efforts to undermine it by counter-violence.

By contrast retributive killing did not derive its rationale from the actuality of a rebellion but from its context. It had its referent in no current project of turning the rural world upside

\footnote{\textsuperscript{180} Ibid.: xi.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{181} Mao: I 38.} \footnote{\textsuperscript{182} ’Nagpur Trials’ (no. 85) in BC 1502 (58893): Master to Reid (22 Oct. 1832).} \footnote{\textsuperscript{183} JP, 20 Dec. 1855: ‘Examination of Kanoo Sonthal’.}
down but only in the insurgent’s past, his prehistory as the subaltern for whom no oppression had been too much to put up with. Murder was thus charged with the memory of wrongs suffered. More often than not the killers and the killed were related as polar elements in the power structure of rural society, as its upper and nether millstones so to say—as landlord and tenant, usurer and debtor, upper-caste and untouchable, and so on. The servant killing the master epitomized the reversal indexed by this violence. The motif occurred again and again. A bondman beheaded his master when the latter was found in his hiding place by a party of Kols during a raid on his village.184 Jagannath Sirdar joined the hool to slay his former master, the notorious Dindayal Ray of Pakur, and so on.186 The excessive cruelty of many of these executions was a measure of the bitterness which inspired them. A veritable settling of accounts, the violence was almost codified in some instances—each offending limb of a landlord or moneylender being chopped off by the Santals as punishment for a particular offence of which it was an instrument (‘With those offending fingers you counted your interest and ill-begotten wealth!’) and each of the seven cuts inflicted by the Kols on any oppressive sud standing for ‘the dissatisfaction with some particular tax or duty imposed on them’.186

If oppression was what made the peasants wreak vengeance by murder and there was indeed a great deal of oppression around, why were they so sparing in their use of this type of violence? The answer must be sought in two aspects of rebel consciousness—namely, its inertia and its negativity. It was not a liberated consciousness. On the contrary, with all its attempt to reverse the old relations of power it was still trapped in the old culture. That culture imbued the peasant with a sense of reverence for the body of anyone ranked as his superior. For the form of the human body is a symbol, as Hegel said,187 and its symbolism in the highly semioticized world of traditional India was very

184 ‘Nagpur Trials’ (no. 77). As in n. 182 above.
186 Ibid.; BC 1963 (54227): ‘Note from Major J. Sutherland, etc’ (March 1893), para. 15.
potent indeed. What was it there that ‘ultimately and firmly’ distinguished one person from others, we could ask taking a cue from Marx and answer with him, ‘The body’. There, like in all semi-feudal societies, ‘certain dignities, and indeed the highest social dignities’ were, as he put it, ‘the dignities of certain bodies predestined by birth’. Hence in all relationships between the uttara (superior) and the adhara (inferior) an acknowledgement of the dignity, amounting almost to sanctity, of the former’s person was a condition of the latter’s subalternity.

This was formalized at Akbar’s court by His Majesty’s ‘mode of showing himself’ in the daily ritual of darsan ‘when’, according to Ain 73, ‘people of all classes can satisfy their eyes and hearts, with the light of his countenance’. This was formalized, too, in his own way by the landlord and headman (Gauda) of a small Andhra village where his infant son’s ‘mode of showing himself’ was a part of his grooming for succession to his father’s authority as well as an affirmation of the latter. ‘The Gauda’s son is eighteen months old’, wrote a visiting anthropologist: ‘Every morning, a boy employed by the Gauda carries the Gauda’s son through the streets of Gopalpur. When the boy is not available to perform this service, a poor relation brought to Gopalpur for that purpose, carries the child . . . When he is carried along the street, the old women stop their ceaseless grinding and pounding of grain and gather around. The Carpenter puts down his tools . . .’ For the Gauda’s son, no less than for the Grand Mughal, ‘his body is his social right’. This body was still sacrosanct to the peasant even when he was angry and armed. To raise his hands against it was a sin—a notion he shared with his oppressors. As a Chamar beaten up by his Thakur told Cohn, ‘How could I have struck him back? He is my Thakur and a Thakur is respected like a father’. Thus an illiterate and untouchable villager spoke in the authentic voice of the sacred texts of the Hindus to assimilate his landlord’s authority to his father’s after that paradigm by which all superordinate authority was assimilated, in the Dharmaśāstras, to that of the King, the Brahman, the father, the guru and so on. It was the voice of the ruling culture and even an insurgent was not ready to defy it. His violence stopped short of killing

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188 MECW: III 40, 106.  
189 MECW: III 106.  
180 Abū-l Fazl: 165.  
180 Beals: 60.  
182 Cohn: 62.
not out of compassion but because of his failure to overcome fully the spiritual conditions of his subalternity.

But this was not entirely a matter of the inertia of the old culture putting the brakes on murder. It did not figure as a principal modality of struggle also because insurgency did not need it to achieve its general aim. It was not yet equipped with a mature and positive concept of power, hence of an alternative state and a set of laws and codes of punishment to go with it. This is not to deny of course that some of the more radical of the rural revolts of our period did in fact anticipate power at least to a degree and expressed it, albeit feebly and crudely, in terms of a rough justice and punitive violence laced with vengeance. Beyond that however the project in which the rebels had involved themselves was predominantly negative in orientation. Its purpose was not so much to reconstitute the world as to reverse it. This could be done quite effectively indeed by destroying and defying any of that entire range of objects and norms which represented the authority of the elite no less than did their bodies. In a land where the peasant could wreck his superordinate enemy’s prestige simply by walking past his house with an umbrella on his head or by substituting *tu* for *vous* in an argument with him, why should insurgency need killing to make its point except in battle?