CHAPTER 6

TRANSMISSION

Insurgency regarded as ‘contagion’ by the elite—imagery of poison and infection—suggestion of irrationality—suddenness, speed and simultaneity—conspiracy theories—oppression as the objective basis of insurgency and its transmission—instruments of transmission—aural transmission—visual transmission—iconic signs—symbolic signs: messenger boughs, tel-sindur, chapati—verbal transmission—graphic and non-graphic modes—transparency and opacity—authored and anonymous utterances—rumour: its universality and necessity—anonymity and transitivity of rumour—rumour and rebel consciousness.

While the peasants regard rebellion as a form of collective enterprise, their enemies describe it and deal with it as a contagion—which goes to show again how such violence tends to evoke contradictory interpretations from its perpetrators and its victims. ‘Contagion’: the word occurs so often and so persistently in the official and pro-landlord accounts of agrarian uprisings in so many different places and times that it has acquired almost the status of a convention, that is, of a stereotyped figure of consciousness among those least likely to sympathize with disturbances of this kind. It was considered by ‘clergymen, overseers of the poor and others not notably identified with the labourers’ as one of the causes of the riots of 1830 in rural England.¹

In colonial India the authorities acknowledged its power in no uncertain terms. The spread of the sepoy and peasant rebellions of 1857–8 was often described as a function of contagion and infection in official statements. ‘Most of the mutineers from Azimgurh, Jaunpore and Benares’, wrote Lieutenant-General McLeod Innes in his account of the events in Awadh, ‘had . . . moved on Fyzabad and spread the contagion there.’ Or, to quote from the proceedings of a case before a court: ‘The mutiny

¹ H & R: 81–2.
broke out in Benares, Allahabad and Jounpore about the 4th or 5th of June 1857. Pergunnah Bhurdohee which is bounded on three sides by those districts became infected on the 7th or 8th.' The District Magistrate of Satara, too, expressed his fear in similar terms: 'Our frontier near Beejapore where there is a large Mahommedan population requires to be watched. Infection may be expected to spread quickly.' Almost any extensive disturbance, especially in the rural parts, made the authorities reach out for this particular imagery. They remarked how on the outbreak of the Kol uprising of 1832 'the people of Toree... (though not themselves Coles) had also caught the infection and risen in arms'. The potential of the Santal insurrection too was described in those terms: 'Revolt is contagious & it is impossible to foresee the extent to which the evil might spread.' On that occasion the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal himself mentioned 'the contagious character of insurrection in this country' in his minute of 19 October 1855 on the yet unchecked career of the hool.8

The collocation speaks for itself. A rebellion—any rebellion—is, in the eyes of its adversaries, a disease. The words of a provincial chief of the military police bear witness to this view of politics regarded as a pathology. 'The mutiny [of 1857] spread through the Bengal Army (already in a highly excited and dissatisfied state) like any infectious disease in a vitiated atmosphere', he wrote about a year after the event. 'The contagion being allowed to spread from Meerut unchecked and without the prompt and stern retribution the exigencies of the case required, even the cutting off root and branch of the diseased member, corps after corps caught the infection.'9 The analogy of the corps consumed by an uncontrollable virus could hardly be stretched further. When, therefore, the virus hit the countryside it was almost invariably regarded by the gentry as a morbid poison bound to destroy the peasant's healthy sense of loyalty to his master and undermine thus the moral edifice of the latter's authority. As the Officiating Commissioner of the

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8 In this paragraph the references are as follows: to the Mutiny—FSUP: IV 78, I 366; to the Kol insurrection—BC 1962 (54223): Metcalfe & Blunt to Court of Directors (25 Sept. 1852); to the Santal hool—JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Ward to GOB (15 Oct. 1855); Minute by the Lt.-Governor of Bengal (19 Oct. 1855).

Burdwan Division remarked on the way the Santal jacqueries had been enveloping the western districts of Bengal in the second week of July 1855, 'This shows that distant parts of the country inhabited by the Sonthals, to which I hoped the evil would not extend, are already tainted'. There is a distinct suggestion here in the emphasized words—emphasized as in the original—of a spiritual defilement as well as of the externality of its agent. It is being insinuated that the peasants, even those in the remotest areas, have lost their innocence thanks to the irruption of outsiders—an idea on which it is easy to hang both a conspiracy theory and the image of an uncorrupted tenantry blissfully reconciled to landlord rule.

Clearly, too, the metaphor carries with it the notion of irrationality. This has two moments. It implies in the first place that contagion affects such disparate elements of the rural population as are linked by no common grievances. A. C. Logan's recollections of an émeute which broke out in the Thana district of Bombay Presidency in 1897–8 provide us with a typical example of elite incomprehension of the processes by which the apparently unrelated segments of a rural society are integrated into a common uprising. As the officer entrusted with its suppression he wrote, long after the event but with a sense of bewilderment hardly modified by time, recalling how 'the grievance which started the troubles was confined to a few hundred forest people'. The latter depended for their livelihood on the customary right to gather firewood in the forests and sell it in Bassein and other coastal villages. When the administration put a ban on this trade, they 'defied the interdict, overpowered the forest guards and brought their loads to Bassein with riotous demonstrations'. However, the failure of the authorities to respond at once to this disturbance with punitive measures produced, according to Logan, 'a contagion of lawlessness which soon infected the whole district'. And this is how that 'contagion' spread to other subaltern groups in the region:

... forest tribes though in general unconnected with the particular trade described, rose everywhere and for a while ousted the jurisdiction of the forest department: even the European officers were assuaulted and had to be withdrawn to headquarters. The Koli fishermen who had absolutely nothing to do with the forests and who owing to

*JP, 19 July 1855: Elliott to Grey (15 July 1855).*
their trade in Bombay are an exceptionally prosperous class, rose to the cry of free liquor and free salt, and stormed a Deputy Collector’s camp demanding (and getting) orders from him to the liquor shopkeepers to supply liquor gratis. The Agris or cultivating class became turbulent and threatening in demands for various concessions, and all the guards of the subdivisional officers had to be posted to secure their personal safety. In the meantime a plot, no doubt under skilled guidance, was being formed for the advance of three mobs from different directions on the headquarters town... One of these mobs consisting of several thousand persons rose before its time and attacked the town of Mahim with the intention of plundering the treasury.  

Nothing could be more typical as an official response to what was regarded as a spreading epidemic about to destroy a body politic. From its emphasis on the very small beginnings of these riots to its belief in the existence of ‘a plot, no doubt under skilled guidance’ it has all the characteristic markings of an elitist perception. What however appears to have flummoxed Logan most is the manner in which groups and grievances scarcely connected with what had triggered off these disturbances in the first place, entered the list as the situation developed.

His incomprehension is understandable, for he had obviously never seen anything like that before. But as a matter of fact what happened in Thana district in 1897–8 conforms all too well to a familiar pattern. For when a rural society is polarized so sharply as it appears to have been on this occasion, it often leads to a generalization of violence making the individuality of other local conflicts merge in the overall confrontation between the subaltern classes and their enemies. No pre-existing tension or dispute remains outside the scope of the insurrection under such circumstances and all antagonisms start functioning as if in an altogether new context. This is why paupers’ riots, tithe riots, wage riots and food riots which had nothing directly to do with the English agricultural labourers’ movement of 1830, were all absorbed in the latter as it reached its peak.  

This is why, again, ‘the news of the formation of the [peasants’] league’ in Pabna ‘revived’ many old rivalries ‘not even remotely connected with the agrarian movement’ and ‘brought these out in the open’. In other words, these were all en-

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* BSM: II 637–8.  
* H & R: 130.  
* Sen Gupta: 57.
capsulated in the bidroha of 1873 although each of them was antecedent to it. It is this process of encapsulation which is characterized as ‘contagion’ by those who are hostile to the peasantry.

The suggestion of irrationality in this metaphor has yet another moment made up of the closely related notions of suddenness, speed and simultaneity. From the days of Jacques Bonhomme and Wat Tyler to those of Kanhu Santal and Birsa Munda no peasant revolt has ever failed to shock its upper class contemporaries by its abrupt beginning and rapid thrust. Some of that trauma as registered in the evidence (often the only available evidence) originating from elite sources and representing the elite point of view tends to filter into the historian’s discourse as well. And it is thus that imageries based on the destructive forces of nature are used as a common literary device for the description of rural uprisings. The Birsaite ulgulan is said to have been ‘spontaneous, sudden in its eruption, elemental in its character like a volcanic outburst’, the Kol insurrection to have spread ‘like wildfire’, and so on.8

From the notion of spontaneity and speed it is but a short step to that of simultaneity. In many, though by no means all cases the rebellions coursed through their respective territories very quickly indeed. It was only a matter of three to four weeks before the greater part of Chota Nagpur and Palamau was overrun by the Kols and most of Damin-i-Koh and Birbhum by the Santals. Such phenomenal spread involving people geared to an unhurried pace of life in an age of relatively slow communication generated among observers outside the rebel communities the illusion of a levée en masse everywhere at the same time in a given region. Co-territoriality thus came to acquire a semblance of contemporaneity. The fallacy was noticed by Gramsci. Commenting on the argument among historians about the character of the Sicilian Vespers he observed how this was ‘a spontaneous rising of the Sicilian people against their Provençal rulers which spread so rapidly that it gave the impression of simultaneity’.9 Lefebvre, too, deals with this notion in almost identical terms in his study of the Great Fear: ‘The fear streamed across the kingdom in a limited number of currents, but most of France was affected: this suggests that the Great Fear was universal; the currents moved with great

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8 Singh: 193; J. C. Jha: 65, 80, 179. 9 Gramsci: 199.
speed: hence the impression that the Great Fear broke out everywhere simultaneously "almost at the same time". Both these ideas are wrong. They represent contemporary opinion and have been passed on without question."\(^{10}\)

Simultaneity, they both point out, was a convenient peg on which to hang a conspiracy theory. 'Once it had been decided', writes Lefebvre, 'that the Great Fear must have broken out everywhere at the same time, it followed logically that everyone should think it the work of secret agents working together in a general conspiracy.' It is not difficult to see how this idea has its source in the psychosis of dominant social groups confronted suddenly by a revolt of those whose loyalty had been taken for granted. Yet there is perhaps an element of truth in this fantasy of 'preconcertation', as Gramsci calls it. It reflects an intuitive recognition of an organizing principle behind what looks like the world being turned upside down. However, this is not an intuition which can overcome the constraints of elitist outlook and it ends up inevitably with a false attribution—that is, by blaming the inversion on a pre-existing plot.

What the pillars of society fail to grasp is that the organizing principle lies in nothing other than their own dominance. For it is the subjection of the rural masses to a common source of exploitation and oppression that makes them rebel even before they learn how to combine in peasant associations. And once a struggle has been engaged it is again this negative condition of their social existence rather than any revolutionary consciousness which enables the peasantry to rise above localism and unite in opposition to their common enemies. 'In eliminating localism, reasoning can at best produce only limited results', wrote Mao Tse-tung in 1928 reflecting on the situation in the Hunan-Kiangsi border area under communist control, 'and it takes White oppression, which is by no means localized, to do much more. For instance, it is only when counter-revolutionary "joint suppression" campaigns by the two provinces make the people share a common lot in struggle that their localism is gradually broken down.'\(^{11}\)

In colonial India, too, exploitation and oppression helped to promote resistance among the peasantry long before the advent

\(^{10}\) Lefebvre (1973): 137; also see ibid: 52–6, 141.

\(^{11}\) Mao: I 93.
elementary aspects of peasant insurgency

of party politics in the countryside. The baffled response of the Raj to the rapid progress of some of these struggles produced the usual crop of conspiracy theories. As one officer wrote to another in a state of shock during the Kol disturbances, 'Certainly if the insurgents were not urged on and supported by such [an] influential Individual [as the Raja of Chota Nagpur], it is difficult to account for the insurrection so extensive and simultaneous.' Speculations such as these were a measure of the failure of the official mind to come to terms with the fact that an uprising on that scale required no secret plots but only the open and overbearing presence of the colonial power to stimulate it. For by building a highly centralized state in the subcontinent the British had unified and brought into focus the refracted moments of semi-feudalism in the countryside in a manner unprecedented in Indian history. And one of its direct consequences, that is, the fusion of the landlord's and the moneylender's authority with that of the sarkar, was what provided insurgency with the objective conditions of its development and transmission.

The spread of peasant violence in such conditions was achieved by a variety of means which were all specific to a pre-literate culture or, to be more precise, a pre-literate culture transiting slowly—very slowly indeed—towards literacy. This implied that rebel messages circulated more by spoken utterance than by writing, a phenomenon which, as we shall presently see, constituted a distinctive feature of this genre of conflict in rural India. It also made for the use of some traditional and relatively archaic forms of communication which, rooted as they were in a culture unfamiliar to the colonial authorities, helped merely to emphasize the distance between the latter and the mass of the native population. Not infrequently therefore the British officials felt perplexed and mystified as much by the speed of an uprising as by the mode of its transmission. It is thus that one of them mentioned, almost under his breath, that 'signals were made and given' in the course of the indigo riots of 1860, just as, according to Logan, 'occult symbols flew from village to village' in the Thana district during the events.

\textsuperscript{18} BC 1363 (54226): Russell to Braddon (18 Apr. 1832). Emphasis as in the original. For a more detailed discussion on this point see Chapter 3.
described above. There are many such statements to be found in the records indicating an acute sense of alienation on the part of the regime whenever the peasantry managed to slip out of its patriarchal embrace. Secondly, in studying this question it may be of some help to bear in mind that all rebel messages, whatever the means of their transmission, had the dual function of informing and mobilizing at the same time. It was not often that a local community involved in an émeute made any public announcement about this to its neighbours without calling upon the latter for help and emulation at the same time. ‘We have made an insurrection; join us’—this customary formula, a declaration followed by an appeal, as used by the rebels in their parwanas, governed most of their other forms of communication too.

Insurgency spread by verbal and nonverbal means. The latter were of two kinds—aural and visual. Such distinctions are, of course, purely schematic and stated here for analytic reasons alone. For in rebellion, as in other circumstances of real life, human communication operates eclectically by a mixture of signs. Thus there were nonverbal messages which were relayed by sight and sound at the same time such as in the movement called hadun when, according to Chotrae Desmanjhi, ‘the people of one village went dancing to another with buttock and anklet bells’ on the eve of the hool, or when the Santals looted the bazaars at Narainpur and Gunpura to the sound of drums and horns. The same was true of the Pabna ryots’ parades in 1873 carrying lathis and polos on their shoulders and blowing on their buffalo horns to make their bidroha known in such a way as could be seen as well as heard. Or take the pilgrimage of the Birsaites to their ancestral sites and the pageantry of their assault on Khunti all dressed up for the occasion and ‘dancing, jumping and brandishing their swords’. Each of these apparently nonverbal demonstrations relied to no small extent on words to clarify its meaning—on their leader’s aphorisms and lessons in one case and on belligerent war-cries (e.g. ‘The raha crop is ripe, etc.’) in the other. Indeed, a rebel assembly, whether it was a battle formation as that of the Santals at Pealapur and Maheshpur in 1855 or a rally to inaugurate an uprising such as the one organized by Meghar Singh at Dewal in eastern Ghazipur in 1858 or

a quasi-religious congregation like any of those Munda prayer meetings on Dombari Hill in 1898–9, transmitted its message by a combination of verbal and nonverbal signs, and within the latter category, of aural and visual signs. However, to appreciate fully the power and intricacy of such combinations one can do no better than to study the operations of each of these semiotic systems in actual historical instances.

The urum, the flute and the horn were the instruments most used for the aural transmission of insurgency. They formed a class apart from verbal media in the sense that they helped to realize what Jakobson has called transmutation, that is, ‘an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems’.\textsuperscript{15} As such they acted as a surrogate of human speech and were independent enough of the latter to permit the decoding of messages directly rather than through linguistic symbolism. In terms of the volume and variety of messages the operation of such a ‘substitutive system’ was perhaps not nearly so elaborate in our country as it was in Africa.\textsuperscript{16} Yet in both the regions it served equally to emphasize the family likeness between fighting and other forms of communal labour. We have it on Nadel’s authority that in the Nupe kingdom of Nigeria drums and wind instruments like trumpets and flutes were used to assemble people for war as well as for the egbe type of collective labour for agriculture and other forms of large-scale cooperation required for the community as a whole.\textsuperscript{17} At the other end of the continent the Kiganda drums ‘which announced to the people that there was urgent work to be done at the chief’s place’, were used to pick up the beats on the royal war-drum and relay these across the entire country to summon armed men to war within four days. Again, among the Tumba who lived on the east side of the Congo River it was customary for messages to be beaten out on the drum to call people together to fight, to warn them ‘during the rubber war days if

\textsuperscript{15} Jakobson (1971): 261.

\textsuperscript{16} We owe the term ‘substitutive system’ to Sebeok & Umiker-Sebeok: xiv. The collection of papers in this volume indicates some of the wealth of the African material and the research that has gone into it. There are no such studies for the Indian subcontinent.

\textsuperscript{17} Nadel: 111, 248–9.
soldiers were coming', to summon them for a hunt or any other kind of collective work such as roofing houses.\textsuperscript{18}

Much the same kind of semiotic correspondence existed in India, too, between labour and insurgency. The sound of the buffalo horn which, as we have already seen, brought the villagers together for polo fishing in the marshes of Pabna, was also the aural sign used by the tenant-cultivators of that district to rally people for the bidroha of 1873. The Santals, on their part, mobilized for the rebellion of 1855 at the sound of drums, horns and flutes just as they did for a communal hunt. The organization of the latter is described thus in the \textit{Mare Hapram Ko Reak Katha}:

At dawn on the day scheduled for the hunt a few men leave before the others for an open space where the entire male population of the village is to be called together. They take with them some large drums (\textit{nagra}), flutes and horns, and then go on beating \textit{dubu-dubu} on the drums, playing \textit{shorong-shorong} on the flutes and blasting \textit{tutu-tutu} on the horns ... until all the villagers come out there. When they have all assembled there, they would give a loud shout and then proceed to the spot marked out for the formal gathering for shikar.\textsuperscript{19}

An identical role was played by the same instruments in calling up the Santals for the hool, as Major Burroughs found out within four days of its outbreak. Justifying his reluctance to deplete his forces engaged in operations in the Colgong area he wrote to the Commissioner of Bhagalpur on 11 July 1855: 'We hear that the insurgents move about in very small parties but on their drums sounding they assemble in parties up to 10,000 men each for the purpose of plundering.'\textsuperscript{20} When by the end of that year the insurrection had nearly spent its force and the troops were busy chasing and harassing the Santals, the latter tried from time to time to collect their scattered fauj in the jungle by the beat of the drum for skirmishes with the enemy. Whether one believes the Birbhum balladeer's complaint about the incessant beating of the drums as 'a regular nuisance' or a captive rebel's claim to have seen over a hundred and fifty drums at the Bhagnadihi house of the Santal leaders,\textsuperscript{21} the

\textsuperscript{18} Lush: 469, 473; Clarke: 416–33.
\textsuperscript{19} MHKRK: cxlii. \textsuperscript{20} K. K. Datta: 62.
importance of that humble instrument can hardly be overestimated.

Indeed in an age of poor communication and nearly total illiteracy in the countryside the pressing need for mobilization made the use of such aural signs almost imperative in most of our peasant uprisings, tribal as well as non-tribal. It was the insurgent drum which called up the ryots taluk by taluk for the dhing against Deby Sinha in 1783. The sound of the nagra carried the message of the Kol insurrection all over Chota Nagpur and Palamau in 1832. The uprisings in rural UP in 1857 also relied partly on the same device. Dunlop of the Khakee Ressallah mentions how on one occasion when the troops approached a village in the Meerut region, ‘its inhabitants thinking themselves doomed to destruction, commenced beating their dhóól, or Indian war-drum, and turning out in numbers’. Again, as the special investigator appointed by the Lieutenant-Governor to probe into the indigo peasants’ revolt of 1860 found out, ‘A regular league was ... formed against indigo cultivation ... Ryots of one village were called upon, by beat of drum, to assist those of another ... villagers turned out by the beat of drum and proceeded in large bodies to any alleged threatened spot.”

The colonial government on its part was far from indifferent to the power of these rustic means of transmission. It is not merely that in times of trouble they broadcast messages of defiance, but their ‘language’, known only to the members of the community which produced it, was itself evidence of the failure of an alien authority fully to understand, hence control, the native population under its rule. An instance cited by Burridge of official hostility to certain uses of the slit-gong in a region of New Guinea under Australian control illuminates the attitude of colonialists everywhere. Here a community of Kanaka people known as the Tangu used this instrument customarily to communicate among themselves by sound signals not generally intelligible to outsiders. After the district passed under Australian administration, they were for some time forbidden to sound the slit-gongs when a white officer ap-

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88 Kaviraj: 41.
89 J. C. Jha: 177; BC 1362 (54225): ‘Statement of Buhardar Singh etc.’.
94 Dunlop: 114. 95 Kling: 93.
proached any particular neighbourhood. 'In this way [so ran the theory] he could see what the villages were like when he was not there. The villagers would have had no warning of his approach.' In other words the ban on a vital medium of indigenous communication was for the authorities an essential condition of their knowledge of that society, and a system of aural signs came thus to symbolize at once an epistemological and political opposition between the rulers and the ruled. When such opposition matured to the point of provoking mass peasant violence, as it often did under the Raj, even the most innocuous means of aural transmission among the people could assume in the eyes of the regime the status of instruments of rebellion and were treated as such.

It was thus that the drum and the buffalo horn, especially the latter, came to be an object of official hostility during the Pabna bidroha. In some parts of the district the local administration resorted to the Indian Penal Code forbidding 'the use of musical instruments for the purpose of invoking assemblies, intimidating union, or causing terror'. At least six peasants were sentenced to three months of rigorous imprisonment each on a charge of forming, at Ghasgali, 'an illegal assembly in which horns were blown to make a demonstration and intimidate a village which had not joined the combination'. In much the same way the prohibition and destruction of Santal drums and flutes became an integral part of the policy adopted by the Government of Bengal for the suppression of the hool. These were identified as instruments of rebellion when Bidwell, a Special Commissioner in charge of the counter-insurgency campaign, urged the government to bring in a law making it a penal offence for a Santal to possess bows and arrows, swords, battle axes, sacrificing knives (chhora) 'as well as the Drum called by them Digdighee and used for collecting the Sonthals in bodies'. Ward, another high-ranking official, disagreed. 'To disarm the Sonthal race would be almost cruel', he argued; 'it

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87 JP(P): Nolan to Pabna Magistrate, Letter no. 321 (1 July 1873); 'Pubna Riot Case' (case no. 850). Also see ibid.: Nolan to Pabna Magistrate, Letter no. 1 Ct. (1 July 1873). For a Bolivian parallel of the use of wind instruments—'intimidatory incantations of the putulus or deep-sounding bamboo pipes', see Pearse: 133.
88 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: Bidwell to GOB (26 Sept. 1855).
would certainly greatly effect [sic] their future prosperity by interfering with their intercourse with neighbouring tribes & among themselves; to many these are the only means of livelihood, besides these arms are not of a nature of which the Govt. should be afraid.' The humane alternative advocated by him was the introduction of martial law giving the army the right to dispense summary justice unfettered by the niceties of civilian legislation.\textsuperscript{39}

In the event the Santals got martial law. This, however, did nothing to save their primitive means of aural transmission, nor, of course, their crude peasant arms. For within less than a week after its proclamation on 10 November 1855 Major-General Lloyd, commanding the Dinapore Division and Sonthal Field Force, issued an order on the same lines as Bidwell had recommended earlier and almost in the same words. 'All villages of the Tribe', it read, 'must be made to deliver up their arms vizt. Bows and arrows, sword[s], battle axes & sacrificing knives as well as the Drum called Digidighee used for calling the sonthals into bodies.'\textsuperscript{40} After that the drum (in both varieties, that is, the larger nagra and the small digidi or doogdoogi) and the flute—although the latter was not named in the order at all—came to rank as routine targets in all military operations against the Santals. The reports sent in by the officers repeat this information over and over again. A summary of the record for the fortnight following that divisional order may give some idea of this war waged by the colonial army on such objects:\textsuperscript{41}

17 November 1855. Captain Halliday orders the Santals of Jagadishpur to surrender all their arms, plundered property and doogdoogis.

19 November 1855. Dissatisfied with the peasants' response to the above order Halliday invades Jagadishpur with a detachment of native infantry and recovers some flutes and drums among other things.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid.: Ward to GOB (13 Oct. 1855).

\textsuperscript{40} JP, 6 Dec. 1855: 'Copy of a Division order issued by Major General G. W. A. Lloyd C.B. Comd8. Dinapore Division and Sonthal Field Force' (15 Nov. 1855).

\textsuperscript{41} The sources for this summary are JP, 6 Dec. 1855: Halliday to Adjutant, 56th Reg. N.I., Suri (19 Nov. 1855); Lister to Parrott (20 Nov. 1855); Halliday to Gott (25 Nov. 1855); Ryall to Parrott (29 Nov. 1855); Hawes to Parrott (28 Nov. 1855); and JP, 20 Dec. 1855: Hawes to Parrott (1 Dec. 1855); Rubic to Shuckburgh (29 Nov. 1855); Halliday to Adjutant 56th Reg. N.I., Suri (19 Nov. 1855); Ryall to Parrott (27 Nov. 1855).
20 November 1855. Captain Lister raids some villages east of Uporbandha and failing to find any plundered property there takes away 'some bows, arrows, Drums and Doogdoogis'. A raid by a party of sepoys led by another officer on a number of villages six miles west of Uporbandha yields 'a good Bundle' of the prohibited articles and 'some Drums and Doogdooges'.

25 November 1855. Captain Halliday surprises a large body of insurgents assembled at Moorguthole and Amjahree and captures some arms and heads of cattle as well as a few doogdoogis.

27 November 1855. Lt. Hawes attacks a Santal camp in the jungle on the Phuljhuri Hills and seizes a quantity of paddy and arms and four drums. Lt. Ryall commanding an infantry regiment searches a village called Suttulpur in the Jamtara region and seizes 'quantities of Bows, arrows, fulsas and Drums'.

28 November 1855. Troops led by Ensign Harrington pursue a body of rebels in the jungles of Bilmee Pahar and secure a doogdoogi and some weapons. Lt. Rubie's infantry detachment on its way to Palasi stops at a village called Amdaha and destroys some grain, arms and drums found in the house of a majhi reported to have left the village that morning.

29 November 1855. A search by troops under Lt. Hawes along the base and up some of the ridges on the eastern side of the Phuljhuri Hills yields a quantity of hidden arms as well as one nagra and two doogdoogis. A dour against the rebels in the jungles near Bagmarra results in the capture of arms and thirteen tribal drums.

And thus until the end of the hool the army went on dealing with these primitive instruments of aural transmission as if they were yet another set of weapons used by the rebels.

Another class of nonverbal transmitters used for the propagation of insurgency was made up of a number of visual signs—iconic and symbolic. The best known example of the former was the arrow of war used by the Kol. Its role as a means of rebel mobilization was made widely known by Dalton in his Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal published forty years after the event: 'An arrow passed from village to village is the summons to arm and sent to any one in authority it is an open declaration of war.' On the eve of the 1832 uprising such arrows circulated 'like the fiery cross' in that region, so that by the time it got under way by the middle of January that year 'the Mundaris and Oraons had all entered with zeal into the spirit of the
insurrection’. A reference to the primary sources can help us with an insight into this mode of communication from a new angle. Major Sutherland who investigated the causes and course of the uprising even before it had been completely suppressed mentions how he was told by the Maharaja and other knowledgeable informants ‘that this system prevailed among the Larka Coles of Singhbhoom, but it had never before extended to the Danger Coles of Nagpoor and its dependencies’. He was to take up the point again in a detailed statement prepared for Metcalfe, the Vice-President of the Council. ‘This is a custom of the Lurka Colcs and had never before been generally adopted by the Dângar Coles’, he wrote. ‘In the present instance it seems to have extended throughout the country of the Dângars.’ In other words, the latter had borrowed it from the Larka Kols of Singhbhoom and used it for the first time in the course of this insurrection beginning with Sonepur pargana and then elsewhere in Chota Nagpur and Palamu. The pressure of insurgent mobilization appears thus to have helped a sign to extend its domain beyond its traditional boundaries. The fact that it was still in circulation in that region in 1857, according to Dalton, indicates how it struck root in the adopted community and continued to function as an integral part of its ‘vocabulary’.

If insurgency added to the territorial range of this particular sign, there were others of the same class, but symbols rather than icons, which it helped to expand in semantic range. One such sign which the Kol insurrection rescued from the obscurity of custom and ushered into history was the messenger bough. Known as the dhauree or dheori, this was ‘despatched from one party of Coles to another as a signal from them to join expeditiously and to engage in any contemplated exploit’. The receiving party was then ‘expected to unite with the one issuing the Summons before the leaves of the branch fade[d] away’. It was the mango tree which they preferred for this purpose. By contrast, the Santals of Birbhum and the Saora of Jaypur

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88 Dalton: 171 n.
88 BC 1509 (5427): Sutherland’s Note (11 Mar. 1832); Note from Major Sutherland enclosed in Metcalfe’s Minute (27 Mar. 1832).
84 Dalton: 171 n.
86 BC 1502 (58893): ‘Nagpur Trials’ (no. 22) in Master to Reid (22 Oct. 1832).
taluk in the Ganjam Agency were to use sāl and jack branches to rally their fellow tribesmen for rebellion later on in the century. Diversity such as this did nothing however to weaken the symbolism common to all of them. Verrier Elwin identified the Saora jack branch as ‘a well-recognized form of the fiery cross summoning villagers . . . to assemble at a fixed time and place’, and the anonymous author of the Calcutta Review (1856) article on the hool described the sāl bough as ‘a symbol which like the fiery torch in old Highland gatherings, appears to have had, either by a general ancient custom, or more probably a preconcerted recognition, a secret attached meaning’. The sign in both instances was categorized as one that had its meaning assigned to it by convention, that is, as a symbol and as such, was evocative, for all British observers, of the most celebrated symbol of that kind within their own tradition.

This rather unimaginative assimilation of so many varieties of insurgent signals in an alien land to the single stereotype of the fiery cross was their way of trying to understand an unfamiliar and disturbing message by translating it into a code they knew. The attempt did not quite succeed in every case. At least for the correspondent of the Calcutta Review (1856) it appears to have failed to clarify the ‘secret attached meaning’ of the Santal missive. This made him speculate about ‘a preconcerted recognition’ demonstrating once again how the official mind retreated into conspiracy theories whenever it was unable to penetrate the language and mechanics of peasant insurgency. What is curious about his incomprehension is that the authorities at the centre—his informants—should continue to puzzle over this particular transmitter of the hool long after the local administration had grasped what it was all about. A reminder, one wonders, that the capital, whether Calcutta or Delhi, is always so far away (dur ast)?

The messenger bough makes its appearance in the records of the Santal uprising for the first time in the form of an entry in the Birbhum Collector’s diary of 20 September 1855. It reads:

A branch of a Saul Tree has just been sent in to me by the Nugger Police Zemadar who received it from Goluck Chowkeedar of Afzool-

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88 Elwin: 254; CR: 244.
pore. This man states it was made over to him by Shiboo Gope Mundle of Champoora with the message that the Sontals would shortly proceed to Sooree for the purpose of having a meeting with the authorities. Shiboo Gope states he does not know who brought the branch but the messenger expressed a hope that the ryots would not run from their villages on the approach of the Soobah.37

It seems that the rebels had ‘stopped the Dak running from Deoghor to Sooree’, that is, disrupted the country post, and ‘ill used the runners’. This last phrase was an euphemism for the fact that they had seized one of the official couriers and forced him, ironically enough, to run an errand for them.38 But what did the ‘Saul twig with 3 leaves upon it’ mean for the head of the district to whom it was addressed? Richardson got little out of the Santal prisoners by way of an answer ‘except that the three leaves express the intention of the sender to come at the third day’. He was obviously not amused at the prospect of a rendezvous imposed on him by this ‘person calling himself the Soobah Baboo’ and asked the commander of the sadar station to take all the necessary military precautions. ‘If for my part’, he wrote, ‘shall send no answer to the message, it being my intention to put the Soobah... in irons on his arrival. The question as to whether he is about to come in peacefully to submit, or try his strength with us, must remain for the present a matter of doubt’.39

Indeed the question must remain unanswered for all time. For the Subah never arrived and we have no way of knowing why. It is possible that the Santal leadership had planned a spectacular march on that sadar station, but circumstances or second thoughts made them give it up. Or perhaps it was all a gigantic hoax played for a laugh at the expense of the all-powerful sahibs. Boldness and black humour have both been known to play their part in a peasant war, for each could be highly effective in its own way as an instrument of inversion. What is certain is that the insurgents’ use of the twig with the three leaves as the carrier of an ultimatum was clearly an iconic adaptation—‘each leaf signifying a day that is to elapse

37 BDR: 121.
38 JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Rose to Elliott (24 Sept. 1855). The version of this letter as published in BDR: 122 omits a part of the original.
39 Richardson to Burney (21 Sept. 1855) in BDR: 121.
before their arrival—of a traditional symbol which meant, by convention, a summons to a communal assembly. The Santals in Suri jail whom the Collector found ‘unwilling or unable to give any information in the matter’, could hardly have failed to recognize in this the all too familiar dheora used to call up all able-bodied men for collective fishing and hunting. As the Reak Katha has it:

Fishing, too, is work that we enjoy... The majhi of the village where the fishing ground is located, has it as his task to launch a dheora (that is, to go around carrying a branch in order to make the announcement). And on the scheduled day we the people of the neighbourhood assemble there at noon.

Formerly it was customary for a messenger bough to circulate from village to village as summons to a communal hunt. But since the days of our first settlement in Shikar country we have been sending out the message at the time of the Festival of Leaves (Pata Parob) ... There is a dihri (that is, a priest who presides at hunting ceremonies) for each area (desh). As he goes around carrying a branch at the time of the Festival of Leaves, the local people ask: ‘What is that dheora for?’ He then names a forest and says that we should assemble at such and such a place in such and such a forest, indicating at the same time where people could stop over for the night. We, the males of the community, then go home and talk over among ourselves the arrangements for the hunt scheduled to commence on such and such a day in such and such a forest or on a hill.

The circulation of a branch was thus a commonly understood signal for communal action. Its use in the course of the hool emphasized, once again, the character of the uprising as a form of corporate activity. Just as a dheora would be sent out to collect men for a big job of fishing or hunting, so ‘when the Thacoor came’, said Sido, ‘I sent a sal branch to the Sonthals to collect them together, then all the Sonthals were collected at my home at Bhugnadihee’. And the dheora, so useful at this initial stage in mobilizing for the rebellion, continued to operate at its height as the principal means of communication between the various rebel groups. ‘Messages are passing daily between

40 JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Rose to Elliott (24 Sept. 1855). For a discussion of the iconic and indexical constituents of symbols see Jakobson (1971): 345–59, especially p. 357 where he quotes Peirce to say that ‘a symbol may have an icon or an index incorporated into it’.  
41 MHKRK: cxlii–cxlili.

42 JP, 8 Nov. 1855: ‘Examination of Sedoo Sonthal late Thacoor’.
the Mangees at Telobonee and those looting in the direction of Ooperbundah', wrote Richardson in his diary on 26 September 1855, 'the communication is carried on by messengers with small branches of trees'.

It was thus that insurgency helped an old, established sign to extend its semantic range. An improvisation in the use of tel-sindur on the eve of the hool provides us with yet another instance of this kind. Unlike the dheora, neither tel (oil) nor sindur (vermilion powder) was known to have any transmissive function prior to this event. Together they constituted for the Santals, as for the Hindus, a propitiatory gift for ritual purposes. Whether offered by a newly-wed girl to the gods to seek their blessing for her married life, or by the diseased in order to pacify the spirits through a witch-doctor's (jan's) mediation, or applied by a peasant on the horns of his cows to make sure of divine protection for the herd, or addressed as a gesture of supplication to various deities during the sohrai baha and karom festivals the gift was meant, in each case, to neutralize the malignity of the supernatural powers and coax a boon out of them if possible. This no doubt was the intention of the leaders of the hool as we learn from Chotrae Desmanjhi's account of its preparation. 'Before the rebellion started', he said, 'oil and vermilion in leaf cups were sent by Sido and Kanhu and taken round from village to village to placate the bongas so that they might help in the fight'. Considering the outcome of the fight it is by no means certain that the bongas were sufficiently placated. What however is beyond doubt is that these objects put thus in circulation were understood to convey not only a propitiatory message addressed to the spirits but a militant message addressed to the Santals to prepare for resistance. In this manner a traditional symbol was fitted with a new meaning. This homonymy helped not merely to propagate the insurrection but also brought to the latter a touch of the ritual sanctity implicit in its original function.

The pacification of the Santal districts had been hardly completed when in another part of the country the government was

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43 JP, 4 Oct. 1855.
44 For these and other uses of tel-sindur in Santal tradition, see MHKRK: ciii, cxx, cl, clx, clx, clxi, clxii, clxvi. 45 Desmanjhi: 232.
alerted by a signal even more widespread and less comprehensible than anything witnessed during the hool. This was the chapati, the flat unleavened bread made of wheat, maize or barley flour, which constitutes a staple of the popular diet in many regions of the subcontinent. Its circulation during the winter of 1856–7, in what was then the North-Western Provinces, the scene of the great disturbances of the next two years, has been publicized more than any other sign of an Indian rebellion for reasons not only of its intrinsic importance but also of a historic miscognition. A symptom of collective anxiety and uneasiness in an agrarian society poised on the brink of a violent upheaval, it was regarded by some as the index of a conspiracy behind the Mutiny. This error has however had its uses: by mistaking the sign of a spreading unrest among the peasantry for that of a sepoy rebellion it has helped to underline the ambiguity generated by their overlap.

The essentially peasant character of this phenomenon is acknowledged in all accounts. According to one of these, 'A chowkeedar appears in the village adjoining his own with two small chupattees, which he delivers to his brother chowkeedar, with an injunction to make six others—to be then delivered by him, two and two, to the chowkeedars of the adjacent villages with instructions to act in a similar manner: each chowkeedar was to keep two for presentation to the hakim or "when called for". Obedience was paid to the instructions and the cakes were passed on rapidly from village to village.'

Not all observers agreed about the number of chapatis alleged to have changed hands at each point of the relay, but the fact that it increased by geometric progression and coursed with the utmost speed through much of upper India, has never been doubted.

There is, however, nothing in contemporary evidence to tell us what the circulating chapati meant. There is no trace left in the records of the interpretation put on it by the peasants at the time. As for the authorities, they identified it as a signal as soon as it appeared, but did not know how to read its message. The reaction of the Magistrate of Gurgaon was typical of the initial sense of bewilderment among the local administrators. 'I have the honour to inform you', he wrote to the Commissioner of Delhi on 19 February 1857 reporting one of the earlier
official sightings, ‘that a signal has passed through [a] number of villages of this district, the purport of which has not yet transpired.’ A fortnight later the Friend of India, that faithful echo of Anglo-Indian opinion, was still wondering, ‘What does it mean?’ And after a week when the circulation had already reached Awadh, it was obviously no wiser and referred to the matter as ‘still a mystery’. All this should make it clear that there is no way at all of knowing whether or not the chapati had anything to do with the uprisings of 1857. Yet the attempt on the part of some bureaucrats and scholars to decipher it after the event and the size of the literature this has inspired are a measure of the urge for an understanding of insurgency in terms of the processes of its transmission. At a certain official level this urge expressed itself in the search for a prime cause and helped by an obvious predilection, spawned a conspiracy theory. It was then easy to read into this hitherto inexplicable relay a meaning appropriate to that theory and brand it, in retrospect, as the signal of the troubles just experienced. Before the Mutiny contemporary opinion close to government circles appears to have denied itself the temptation ‘to detect a fiery cross in these local substitutes for a hot-cross bun’. But once the post-mortem began, the analogy was quick to insinuate its way into some, though by no means all, of the most influential writings on the subject, as, for instance, into Holmes’s classic account which described the chapatis as passing ‘from village to village through the length and breadth of the North-Western Provinces like the fiery cross that summoned the clans-men of Roderick to battle’. This is worth some reflection as more than a simple literary curiosity. It represents the misreading of a symbol as an index. Jakobson, following Peirce, distinguishes between the two types of signs by saying that ‘the index acts chiefly by a factual, existential contiguity between its signans and signatum’, whereas

50 Holmes: 90. Like many others who subscribed to a modified version of the conspiracy theory Holmes identified the chapati not as what triggered off the uprising directly but as a signal which alarmed the Indians about the subversion of their religions by official policy and helped thus to generalize the discontent that led to the rebellion of 1857. ‘The meaning of the portent has never been positively discovered’, he wrote, ‘but it is certain that many of the natives regarded it as a warning that Government was plotting the overthrow of their religion.’ (Ibid.)
‘the symbol acts chiefly by imprinted, learned contiguity between signans and signatum’, that is, by a conventional rule. ‘The knowledge of this conventional rule is obligatory for the interpreter of any given symbol, and solely and simply because of this rule will the sign actually be interpreted.’51 The colonial administrators and British writers close to them were not familiar with the rule by which the symbol of the circulating chapati could be identified. Some of them therefore sought to extract its meaning in terms of a convention pertinent to their own culture and rooted in their own history, and ended up by identifying it as the index of a preconcerted design to destroy the Raj. It is as a symptom of this miscognition that the ‘fiery cross’ haunts their discourse.

Yet for every official or semi-official statement to this effect there were others which dismissed this entire notion as fanciful. These came mostly from local administrators who, hardly wiser about the meaning of this phenomenon themselves, were clear-headed enough to see through the retrospective character of its designation as a cause of the Mutiny. In one such statement published within a year of the rebellion R. H. W. Dunlop, a magistrate who had found chapatis going round his district, Meerut, in February–March 1857, commented on these attempts ‘to connect this cake distribution with our disturbances’ as ‘without any sufficient grounds’. It was his view that ‘if any connexion existed it was accidental and the relationship acknowledged by either designing or ignorant persons was consequent upon the distribution and did not cause or precede it’. The point was made even more strongly and lucidly by yet another district magistrate—that of Budaon. ‘I truly believe’, he wrote in July 1857, ‘that the rural population of all classes, among whom these cakes spread, were as ignorant as I was myself of their real object; but it was clear they were a secret sign to be on the alert, and the minds of the people were through them kept watchful and excited. As soon as the disturbances broke out at Meerut and Delhi, the cakes explained themselves, and the people at once perceived what was expected of them.’52 Scepticism such as this has been fully vindicated by all subsequent research, and historians like Majumdar and Sen have

52 Dunlop: 26; Edwards: 15–16.
established beyond doubt that the chapati was more of a red herring than a fiery cross.

However, the proof of there being no causal connection between the relay of chapatis and the outbreak of the rebellion, as dreamt up in some Anglo-Indian circles, does not exhaust the question of their mutual association. For many others who lived through those times also linked the distribution with the disturbances, and did so retrospectively as well. But their perception differed in two important respects. First, the former ascribed a preterite function to the sign: it was, as they understood it, an index of some pre-existing plot. By contrast, those other observers regarded it as predictive, in fact as an omen the purpose of which, according to Toporov, is ‘the reduction of entropy in the language of events’—that is, to anticipate the future, so that ‘no event can be considered absolutely unexpected and independent from the viewpoint of the most powerful of possible semiotic analyzers’.

In other words, its ‘mode of being’ was that of a symbol which, to put it in Peirce’s words, ‘enables us to predict the future’ as against an index which ‘has the being of a present experience’. Secondly, it is important to recognize that these conflicting interpretations derived from two utterly different cultural codes which had little in common between them. The ‘conventional rule’ used by the British to interpret the sign was based on the tradition of popular mobilization in rural Scotland; that used by other contemporaries, mostly Indians, on the ritual of immunization against epidemics.

A cholera epidemic had swept through much of what corresponds to the modern Indian states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh during the year before the Mutiny. It had nearly spent its force in some regions while in others it was either still quite active or simply lingering on and the fear of its recrudescence was very much alive indeed when the chapatis began to circulate. The latter, occurring as it did in this context, was interpreted by many at the time as a traditional technique of disease prevention which was fairly widespread in northern India. ‘Its real origin was’, according to Dunlop, ‘a superstitious attempt to prevent any return of the fearful visita-

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88 Toporov: 159, 160.
8 For some contemporary evidence about this see Dunlop: 24–6; S. A. Khan: 3; and Keating to Hamilton quoted in S. N. Sen: 400.
tion of epidemic cholera. The superstition was not uniquely Indian and is known to have existed in a number of other pre-industrial societies, too. Its practice in northern India, described in much detail by William Crooke, involved the symbolic use of a ritually consecrated object or animal to act as the carrier of an epidemic which had broken out in a locality or was about to do so, and push it beyond its boundaries. This, it was believed, would guarantee recovery or protection from the actual or the potential disease by transferring it from the protagonists to the community next door.

This technique was known, appropriately enough, as chalawa ‘which’, says Crooke, ‘means passing on the malady’. It was so structured as to permit the use of a variety of transmitters for passing on the same pestilence irrespective of whether its victims were people or cattle and conversely, the use of the same transmitter for passing on a number of different epidemics. Thus, taking the region as a whole, the range of

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67 Our information on disease transference is based on Crooke (1968): I 141-2, 144, 146, 164-70. Crooke’s work on this subject has, apart from its intrinsic merit, the added historical value of a record of beliefs collected within a few decades of the Mutiny in regions both affected by the cholera and involved in the distribution of chapati in 1856-7.

68 An analysis of fifteen cases of chalawa described by Crooke (ibid.: 142-4, 166-7, 169-70) indicates the following pattern of correspondence between the diseases and their transmitters:

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<th>(B) Transmitter → Disease</th>
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instruments for the transfer of cholera could include images of the cholera goddess, doles of rice collected from the local residents, filth and sweepings picked up from the affected villages, domestic animals such as goats, buffaloes and fowl, or as in the case of an exceptionally cruel custom reported from Punjab, Chamars 'branded on the buttocks and turned out of the village'. Clearly, in the mechanics of this paradigmatic substitution where man and beast and inanimate object could stand in for each other as a signal for the same message, the chapati had come to acquire a place for itself as yet another vehicle of chalawa by 1856. In fact it was identified precisely as such and by this very name by a contemporary northern Indian observer whom Sen quotes as saying that the chapatis 'were mere chalawas to stop the progress of some disease'.

However, the procedure provided for substitutability the other way round too, and the same carrier could be put to work for the transference of more than one disease—buffalo for influenza, cholera and cattle disease, fowl for cholera and rinderpest, village filth for smallpox and cholera, and so on. This helped, in certain contexts, to expand the symbolic meaning of these instruments. How this happened in the case of the chapati which had by this time gained currency as a magical transmitter too, may be illustrated by the testimony of an Indian thanadar at Paharganj just outside the city of Delhi. Recorded after the event like other statements of this kind it reads in part:

I received an order from Sir Theophilus Metcalfe, then Joint Magistrate at Delhi, to report privately what I believed to be the origin of the matter [i.e. the distribution of chapatis]. I wrote that I had heard from my father how, in the downfall of the Mahratta power, a sprig of china (or millet) and a morsel of bread had passed from village to village, and that it was more than probable that the distribution of this bread was significant of some great disturbance which would follow immediately.

Clearly we have an instance here of a visual sign acquiring a new meaning in much the same way as 'shifts in application' of words and figurative usage tend to generate polysemy in natural languages. The power of analogy seems to have helped to shift the sense of the circulating chapati from pathology to

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politics: a carrier of one kind of catastrophe it came now to symbolize, by a semantic slide, a catastrophe of an altogether different kind and the calamity that had overtaken the Maratha empire was believed to be about to visit the British too. The sign was thus assigned a predictive function—the function of an omen exuding evil forebodings. However, it is by no means clear what was being predicted in this case except that it was an unspecified kind of ‘some great disturbance’. Such vagueness of meaning which arises from the multiplicity of the aspects of a sign and makes for polysemy,\(^{63}\) is indeed an essential characteristic of an omen. For the latter, as Toporov has defined it, is a ‘signal . . . in which the true signal . . . is hidden, masked or distorted by . . . noise’ creating, among other things, a sense of ‘indeterminateness’ about it.\(^{64}\) This is why omens appear in ‘moments of collision’ when the generally accepted semioticization of a social or political order comes under question and unforeseen options are opened up, when for instance the foundations of a ruling power are seriously threatened as were those of the German and Austrian monarchies by the peasant wars of the sixteenth century\(^{65}\) or of the Raj by the revolt of 1857.

It is also as a function of the noise in their signalling systems that omens tend to attract different and often mutually conflicting interpretations. In this respect they are, contrary to R. C. Majumdar’s ingenious suggestion, very unlike indeed the so-called ‘chain letters’ current in many parts of India.\(^{66}\) Unsolicited and of unknown origin as a rule, one of these bearing usually a religious (or occasionally, a religio-political) message would reach an addressee by post with the command that he should, on pain of dire consequences, make a stated number of copies of the text and send each of these to a friend or relative. The ‘chain’ in the case of this curious and as Majumdar says, powerful device operates in just the same way as the chapatis did on the eve of the Mutiny, that is, by geometrical progression. But there the similarity ends. The manner in which the system of meanings in the two missives works, is altogether different. The graphic character of the ‘chain letter’ keeps its

\(^{63}\) Ibid.: 124–5, 159–60.  
\(^{64}\) Toporov: 160–1.  
\(^{65}\) For some instances of the sighting of omens during the peasant wars of the sixteenth century, see Zimmermann: I 87, 184.  
\(^{66}\) Majumdar: 209.
meaning firmly tied to the text: in fact, the addressee is specifically warned by his anonymous correspondent not to alter the message in the least, which is precisely what makes it the very reverse of the omen. The vague and indefinite character of the message carried by the latter keeps it wide open to various degrees of semantic modification at each point of its passage between communicators.

It is no wonder, therefore, that the circulating chapati, as a witness at Bahadur Shah’s trial testified, ‘had different meanings for different people’. Zimmermann too has remarked how during the peasant revolts of 1525 in central Europe popular excitement was caused as much by the reported sightings of ‘unusual phenomena in the sky and on earth’—rings round the sun and the moon, the mark of torches and crosses on the surface of these heavenly bodies, deformed animal births, aerial battles fought between flocks of birds, and so on—as by their confused interpretations. Similarly the welter of meanings read in the relay of chapatis, too, produced more smoke than light and helped to darken the minds of men by a premonition of some impending disaster. The thanadar of Paharganj remembered it as ‘an event which undoubtedly created a feeling of great alarm in the native mind throughout Hindoostan’. And Sherer who lived through those times, confirmed this impression. ‘If the transmission of these cakes was only intended to create a mysterious uneasiness’, he wrote, ‘that object was gained.’ Evidently, the chapati, though by no means a cause of the disturbances of 1857–8, was still not altogether unrelated to them. The symbolic agent of an epidemic in the countryside it took on an added meaning as the carrier of an imminent but undefined political holocaust. No index of any kind of conspiracy, it connected neither with the past nor with the present. As an omen it looked ahead of events, and in an atmosphere charged with growing unrest in agrarian communities and army barracks it transmitted the rebellion in anticipation by sounding a tocsin for all to hear but none yet to understand why.

The verbal transmission of insurgency was of course inseparable in practice from the aural and the visual and yet distinctive

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enough to constitute a class by itself. Of its modalities, graphic
and non-graphic, the former varied in articulation according to
whether its constitutive messages were more or less opaque and
subject to corresponding degrees of semantic change. The
propagation of a rebellion was sometimes sought to be achieved
by a clearly motivated kind of writing. To this category be-
longed the letters circulated by the Rangpur insurgents in 1783
‘ordering the ryots to assemble and join them and threatening
to burn their houses and destroy their crops in case of their
refusal and delay’. 71 Nothing, again, could be more transparent
than the ‘treasonable document’ found on the person of a
Santal courier as he was arrested by the colonial authorities
while crossing the Barakar river on 22 September 1855. De-
scribed as ‘a perwannah or order from one Thakoor to another’
it read in translation: ‘The bearer will give you the particulars.
The man has come here & been well beaten. Send the two men.
The power is now ours, for the past what of it, & for the future
there is no fear. Take notice.’ 72
Rebel communication by means of such written messages
was of course not widely prevalent in a country where illiteracy
was as high as in rural India under the Raj. Writing was socially
privileged. The production of verbal messages in graphic form
for purposes of insurgency was feasible only when individuals of
elite origin were induced by circumstance or conscience or a
combination of both to make common cause with the peasantry,
or when a few among the latter had managed, against all odds,
to acquire the rudiments of literacy and put these at the ser-
vice of an uprising. Occasionally one comes across instances of
both kinds in the history of our peasant movements: some mem-
ers of the impoverished rural gentry were indeed involved in
the Rangpur dhing, the indigo rebellion, the Pabna bidroha
and so on, while a few persons—one of them a Dom and another
a ‘Joolha’—are mentioned in the records of the hool as having
helped the Santals with reading and writing. 73 But the in-

71 MDS: 580.
73 The names of Dirjenarain, Mathuranath Acharya and Ishanchandra Ray
come readily to one’s mind as members of the gentry who distinguished themselves
by siding with the peasants in the dhing, the indigo rebellion and the Pabna move-
ment respectively. See MDS: 579–80; S. C. Mitra: II 790; JP(P): Tayler to Com-
mmissioner (July 1873). For the names of some of those who helped the Santals in
cidence of such elite participation or subaltern literacy was not high enough to make the written propagation of rebellion anything but exceptional.

However, it was not only the production of writing for insurgency that was adversely affected by illiteracy. The want of literacy also made the peasants relate occasionally to a written utterance in such a way as to destroy its original motivation by deverbalizing it and exploit the resulting opacity in order to provide that graphic representation with new 'signifieds' (signifiés). Lefebvre has cited some classic instances of this genre. During the French Revolution, he says, 'the rebels were rather tempted to support their claims by showing printed or hand-written posters to peasants who could not read'. On one occasion, stolen copies of some seventy-year old official decrees were displayed 'to encourage the listening crowd', and on another, a printed booklet about legal matters concerning a particular property was flaunted as 'the King's orders' justifying the uprising.74

In the Santal rebellion of 1855 too we have an example of such separation between the content of a verbal message and its graphic expression and the uses made of the latter for the transmission of insurgency. For some of the papers which were supposed to have conveyed the Thakur's own command in writing to launch the hool and carried by Kanhun on his person as both an emblem of authority and an instrument of mobilization, proved on scrutiny to contain among other things 'an old Book on locomotive[s], a few visiting cards of Mr Burn Engineer' and if the testimony of the semi-official Calcutta Review (1856) article is to be believed, a translation in some Indian language of the Gospel according to St John.75 What is even more remarkable is that the rest of the papers said to have dropped from heaven and regarded by the Santal leaders as evidence of divine support for the insurrection had nothing in-

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74 Lefebvre (1973): 96.
75 JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Statement of Insurgent Sonthals'; CR: 245. Also see Bidwell to Richardson (30 Aug. 1855) in JP, 6 Sept. 1855: 'The Sonthal priest taken yesterday produced part of the New Testament in Hindee which he had been using in the performance of all his religious rites.'
scribed on them at all either in writing or in print. 'All the blank papers fell from heaven & the book in which all the pages are blank also fell from heaven', said Kanhu. Clearly thus the conditions of a pre-literate culture made it possible for insurgency to propagate itself not only by means of the graphic form of an utterance divorced from its content but indeed by the writing material acting on its own unscored by graphemes. The principle governing such extension was essentially the same as that of the 'drinking of the word' known in some of the islamized parts of Africa. There the ink or the pigment used for inscribing holy or magical formulae on paper, papyrus, slate or skin and believed to be invested by the sanctity of the message itself, would be washed off and swallowed as a cure for certain ailments. However, there was a difference. While the metonymic projection of supernatural faculties from written word to writing material was used in such instances to leave the cure of physical illness to Allah's grace, the Santals used it merely to legitimize their attempt to remedy the ills of the world by their own arms.

One paradoxical outcome of this extension was to convert a verbal signal into a purely visual one. This was possible because of the two-dimensional character of written utterances, which, as Vachek has argued, distinguishes them clearly from spoken utterances. But although the acoustic material which constituted the latter would permit no manipulation of meaning in quite the same way, the propagation of insurgency by speech could also be subject, on its part, to cognitive hazards. This can be demonstrated by a comparison between the two principal types of this discourse which, like those in the previous category, differed according to the degree of their transparency.

The more transparent of spoken utterances of this kind included much of the common currency of non-graphic verbal exchange used by the peasants to mobilize themselves for an uprising. It was made up mostly of declarative and deontic statements of various kinds aimed at altering, informing and commanding a local population. It could be cool and deliberate like the announcements made by the Kol and Santal tribal councils to launch their respective insurrections in 1831 and 1855 or the

76 JP, 20 Dec. 1855: 'Examination of Kanoo Sonthal'.
77 Goody: 230-1.
78 Vachek (1964): 454.
purely factual messages about enemy troop movements communicated by rebels to their leaders; or hot and excited like the traditional night cries by which the villagers were warned and rallied during the 'blue mutiny' in the indigo districts of Bengal in 1860. The transmissive function of the latter was noticed thus in the columns of a journal during the Pabna bidroha of 1873 in terms of a historic parallel:

Those who were in India during the indigo disturbances often described the peculiar effect of the night cry in the villages which were opposed to the planters. It is a shout given by all the inhabitants of a village at night in chorus and taken up by... hamlet after hamlet. In some of the places where the agrarian question is most hot this shout may now be heard at night and very impressive effect it has showing more clearly than anything else the numbers and unanimity of the ryots.\footnote{Indian Daily News quoted in Indian Observer, 28 June 1873 (Sen Gupta: 40).}

What all such discourses had in common despite variations of tone and idiom was that they related to one or the other of the practical aspects of insurgency and sought to mobilize the rural masses by means of clearly motivated messages. It was this firm empiricism which saved rebel communication of this particular type from any excessive semantic slide.

By contrast the other type of speech which helped to spread insurgency was characterized by a relatively higher degree of opacity. The most common of all means used for the propagation of mass peasant violence in any pre-industrial society it was suited, both by expression and content, to serve as a particularly powerful vehicle of subaltern politics. It was made up of two kinds of utterances which were often telescoped in practice and may be broadly classified, for the convenience of description, as authored and anonymous. The former was distinguished by the fact that its origin could be traced to one or more known individuals. Many charismatic leaders of peasant rebellions in all lands and ages have contributed to the historic repertoire of this genre of spoken utterance. More often than not, it was indeed this kind of speech which formed the most effective component of their charisma. For unlike the other type of non-graphic discourse the relation it had to an uprising was not a strictly empirical one. It was made up of words and expressions which had their referents in a universe beyond the lived,
practical domain of an insurrection and represented the urge for a change in the conditions of this world as a kind of otherworldliness. Its function was thus to shift the context of a rebellion from the real and the empirical towards the surreal and the mythical just as the feline subject of Baudelaire’s well-known sonnet, made doubly famous by Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, is winched out of domesticity by some figures of speech and fitted into a cosmic, astral frame. Thanks to the referential opacity characteristic of such discourse the mediation of the practical and social aspects of insurgency by myth articulated itself as a mediation of the ideology of class struggle by religion. In India, as elsewhere, therefore, the leaders of some of the mightiest peasant revolts spoke in the inspired language of prophets and reformers—Titu Mir of an Islamic kingdom to come, Sido and Kanhu of the hool as a project fabricated in heaven, Birsa of his war on the Raj as an exercise in a new ethic and the harbinger of an Era of Truth (Satjug). This is one reason why the politics of our peasant rebellions was almost invariably expressed in sacred idioms and some of the most militant movements of the rural masses, such as those of the Satnamis, Farazis, Birsaites, etc., ended up, apotheosized, as faiths and sects.

None of the signals discussed so far helped more to spread an insurrection than anonymous speech in its classic form—rumour. This was of course by no means a uniquely Indian experience. One would perhaps be quite justified in saying that rumour is both a universal and necessary carrier of insurgency in any pre-industrial, pre-literate society. An unmistakable, if indirect, acknowledgement of its power is the historically known concern for its suppression and control on the part of those who in all such societies had the most to lose by rebellion. The Roman emperors were sensitive enough to rumour to engage an entire cadre of officials—delatores—in collecting and reporting it, while in 1789 the French farmers found it to their advantage to want ‘to put a stop to the rumours, excitements and seditious chatter on the part of the lower orders in the

80 Jakobson & Lévi-Strauss, ‘Les Chats de Charles Baudelaire’ in Jakobson (1973): 401-19. See especially p. 416 for the correspondence between empirique/ mythologique and réel/irréel-surréal which is the sense in which we have used these terms in this section.
market place'. In India governmental anxiety about rumours can be traced as far back as the Kautilyan state. ‘Spies shall also know the rumours prevalent in the state’, prescribes the Arthaśāstra. Many centuries later gathering rumours was still a routine chore with the colonial bureaucracy, especially in periods of war and unsettled political conditions as witness that familiar rubric in the weekly and fortnightly intelligence reports in the Home (Political) Series at the National Archives of India.

Vigilance such as this on the part of the authorities was of course fully justified from their point of view. For in no country with a predominantly illiterate population has subaltern protest of any significant strength ever exploded without its charge being conducted over vast areas by rumour. The phenomenon has indeed been found to be so common and its incidence so large as to look like ‘a law of social psychology’ to some scholars. As Allport and Postman have put it in their well-known study of the subject, ‘No riot ever occurs without rumours to incite, accompany and intensify the violence.’ All historical accounts of violent crowd behaviour from Livy to Lefebvre would tend to confirm this. The former has left us with some memorable evidence of the play of rumour on popular passions in the course of the many conflicts between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome. For the Middle Ages too we have an indication from Froissart that, thanks to rumour, ‘the things he [John Ball] was doing and saying [in Kent] came to the ears of the common people of London, who were envious of the nobles and the rich’ and mobilized them for the peasant revolt of 1381 led by Wat Tyler. Blum has observed how rumour helped to rally the Russian serfs to Pugachev’s standard in 1773–5. In France, as Rudé has demonstrated it, many of the grain riots of the decade preceding the Great Revolution were stimulated by rumour while the Swing movement of the English agricultural labourers in 1830 too was enlarged in scope by the same verbal means. In Tanzania a spate of rumours concerning a ‘magic medicine’ and the extraordinary powers of its dispenser, Kinjikitile of Ngarambe, prepared the ground for the Maji Maji rebellion of

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81 Allport and Postman: 159; Lefebvre (1973): 27; Kautilya: 23.
82 Allport & Postman: 193. Emphasis as in the original.
83 For a typical sample see Livy: 178–9.
1905. One could go on piling up instances of this truly ubiquitous form of insurgent communication in many lands at many times. But for our present purpose it may suffice to represent the spirit of them all by an extract from Lefebvre’s great work on the power of rumour as manifested in the uprisings in rural France in 1789. He wrote:

The vast majority of the French people depended entirely on oral tradition for the dissemination of news... But for the government and the aristocracy, this means of transmission was a great deal more dangerous than freedom of the press. It goes without saying that it favoured the spread of false reports, the distortion and exaggeration of fact, the growth of legends... In the empty silence of the provinces, every word had the most extraordinary resonance and was taken as gospel. In due course, the rumour would reach the ears of a journalist who would imbue it with new strength by putting it into print... Indeed, what was the Great Fear if not one gigantic rumour?

In many respects the panic that spread in the wake of some of the rural uprisings in colonial India too was the work of a series of gigantic rumours. The alarm caused by the Kol insurrection of 1832 led to the desertion of villagers even from those parts of Palamau district which were not implicated in the rebellion at all. In the Jungle Mahals many of the propertied people buried their wealth underground fearing for the worst. Towns as far removed from the area affected by insurgency as Mirzapur and Banaras were caught up in the panic. Totally unfounded reports about the sack of Mirzapur, an uprising in Azimgarh and even of Maratha reinforcements on the rebel side—all duly duplicated in the press and endowed thereby with a spurious authority—added further to consternation among the suds and flight from the countryside.

One such panic which seized Pakur at the outbreak of the Santal hool has been vividly described by a contemporary who, as a child, had lived through it all.

Then [he recalled] there arose loud wailings of the females, children shrieked and screamed, men talked nonsense and rushed hither and thither without any fixed aim; fathers left aside their crying children

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unheeded; no one cared for the old, the infirm and the sickly. There was tying and untying of bundles, everything turned upside down and mixed up helter and skelter promiscuously. In short, a confused and heart-rending scene ensued which can be better imagined than described . . . The fear and anxiety with which the terrible long night passed away, beggar any description. But long before the day dawned almost the whole village became empty . . . In this sad plight the villagers left their homes not knowing where to go, what food to give to the children when they would cry from hunger. All the eatables, all the money, utensils, furniture, in short, everything they possessed was left behind, their only aim and only object being to put as much distance as possible between the Santals and themselves. 87

Something like the same ‘indescribable panic’ swept through Khunti and Ranchi, too, during the Birsai’s revolt of 1900. 88 And to avoid the facile misconception that all this was merely the dikus’s response to tribal violence, one should refer to similar instances of fear generated by the Barasat and Pabna bidrohas. On the former occasion the authorities apprehended the desertion of all the police darogas from their posts in the neighbourhood ‘now that this panic has spread abroad’, while on the latter the local gentry sought official protection against their own Bengali projas, for, they complained, ‘neither life, property, nor the family honour of the people is safe. The feeling of insecurity pervading the villages is so great that danger is apprehended at every place and every moment’ and ‘it has become difficult for gentlemen to protect their families and keep their honour any longer’. 89 Clearly the panic caused by rumour during any demonstration of peasant militancy cuts across ethnic lines.

However to emphasize only the alarmist aspect of rumour would be to miss its positive and indeed more important function in mobilizing for rebellion. In each of the instances mentioned above the anonymous verbal signal helped not merely to frighten those against whom a particular insurrection or jacquerie was directed, but above all, to spread the message of

87 K. K. Datta: 71–2. For some instances of official acknowledgement of panic caused by the hool among civilians and troops at Murshidabad and Suri see JP, 4 Oct. 1855: Macgregor to Grey (18 Sept. 1855) and Ward to GOB (30 Sept. 1855).
89 JC, 22 Nov. 1891: Smith to Thomason (17 Nov. 1891); JP(P): Tagore to GOB (1 July 1873); ibid.: Chuckurbutty, Rae & Bhowmic to GOB (1 July 1873).
revolt among the people: This was certainly true of the rebellion of 1857 which to many of its contemporaries was nothing but a direct outcome of the rumours that had preceded it throughout northern India. Typical of such an oversimplified view of what was indeed a complex happening were causal explanations of the kind mentioned below.

Previous to the outbreak, rumours to the following effect very generally prevailed:-

1st. That 2,000 sets of irons were being made by the sepoys.

2nd. That by order of government, attah mixed with bones was to be sold.

3rd. That the sepoys were to be deprived of the charge of their arms and ammunition.

These reports caused the disturbance.90

With all its naivety this deposition by Mohur Singh, a Deputy Collector of Meerut, came close to identifying what by all accounts was one of the most powerful factors in the mobilization of the subaltern masses for that event. For current after powerful current (to use Lefebvre’s aquatic metaphor) of unfounded and unverifiable reports about greased cartridges, flour polluted by bone meal and forcible conversion to Christianity, about the disarming of native soldiers and official prohibition of agricultural work, about the coming end of British rule and the advent of a deliverer—about issues touching on indigenous sentiment at profound depths—merged into ‘one gigantic rumour’ and transformed the many disparate elements of popular grievance against the Raj into a war of sepoys and peasants.

In this respect 1857 was no exception. The statements of some of the Maratha peasants convicted of rioting against local moneylenders in 1875 illustrate the role of rumour in inspiring jacqueries. Here are a few extracts:

News came from Aligaon about a riot against the Wans. People [of Supa] said that if we go to the Wans they will give back our bonds. The first rumour was that they would give back a Rs. 100 bond and take one for Rs. 50 . . .

The villagers [of Ghospuri], hearing that the residents of the neigh-

90 FSUP: I 392-3.
bouring villages have got back from sowkars their bonds by force, they also one day collected themselves and went to the shop of Moolchand Hakumchand and demanded from him all the bonds...

About 5 or 6 days before the row in my village [Sonsangwi] the villagers had heard that the residents of Kurdi Nimone have got back by force their bonds from the banias, and since then the villagers were thinking of doing the same in my village, which they ultimately did...

No wonder that the Commission appointed to investigate these disturbances came to the conclusion that ‘in almost every case the riot is stated to have commenced on news arriving of bonds having been extorted in some neighbouring village with the usual story that the Government approved of the rioters’ action’. In most other instances, too, of rural insurgency during the period under discussion rumour proved to be a powerful vehicle of the hopes and fears, of visions of doomsdays and golden ages, of secular objectives and religious longings, all of which made up the stuff that fired the minds of men.

It is precisely in this role of the trigger and mobilizer that rumour becomes a necessary instrument of rebel transmission. The necessity derives of course from the cultural conditions in which it operates. For the want of literacy in a pre-capitalist society makes its subaltern population depend almost exclusively on visual and non-graphic verbal signals for communication among themselves, and between these two again rather more on the latter because of the relatively greater degree of its versatility and comprehensibility. But it is also by virtue of its character as a type of speech that rumour serves as the most ‘natural’ and indeed indispensable vehicle of insurgency. This point needs some emphasis, for it is only by working out its implications for an agrarian disturbance that one can come fully to appreciate the contribution of rumour in developing it into a mass event and influencing its ideology.

Rumour is spoken utterance par excellence, and speaking, as linguists say, differs from writing not merely in material, that is, by the fact of its acoustic rather than graphic realization, but in function. It is this aspect of the difference which is the ‘more profound and more essential’ according to Vachek.

81 DRCR: 3; ‘Depositions of Convicted Rioters at Present in the Poona and Yerauda Jails’ in DRCR (B): 3, 9, 14.
Speech, he says, responds to any given stimulus more urgently, emotionally and dynamically than written utterance. It is this functional immediacy which develops in rumour its characteristic drive to seize upon important issues in periods of social tension and create a large public audience for them. Prasad in his well-known study of the reactions to the Bihar earthquake of 1934 noticed how anyone who heard a rumour at that time had an ‘almost uncontrollable impulse to pass it on to another person’, and Schachter and Burdick too, working on American material, have found rumour to be ‘a chain pattern of communication’ in which the ‘possession of the item of information’ by an individual ‘seems to create a force to communicate further’. This force or impulse is what makes rumour bring people together. ‘Passing on a rumour involves a desire on the part of the transmitter to affect other people’s behavior, to bring their perspectives in line with his own, or, at the very minimum, to share a valuable bit of information.’ That is, ‘the communication of a report to other members of the group implies an underlying bond of community among the members’. It helps to evoke a ‘comradeship response’ which, as was observed during the Bihar disaster, made the community ‘less one in which superiors confronted inferiors and more one in which all people were pretty much on an equality’.

The solidarity generated thus by the ‘uncontrollable’ force of its transmission confers on rumour two of its characteristic tendencies as realized in time and space. First, it is precisely to this socializing process that rumour owes its phenomenal speed. This, according to Prasad, was at least ‘a part of the explanation of the rapid transmission of the stories and prophecies of disaster’ which followed the Bihar earthquake. Rumours about man-made cataclysms, too, travelled equally fast. The news of the anti-usury riots in Poona district in September 1875 were known to have triggered off similar disturbances in almost no time at Kukur in the Satara collectorate

93 Allport and Postman have identified importance as one of the two essential conditions of rumour, the other being ambiguity (Allport & Postman: 33–4, 36 et passim). See also Schachter & Burdick: 296. For the prevalence of rumour during social crises, see Vansina: 118.
94 Prasad: 11.
95 Lang & Lang: 65.
96 Prasad: 11, 14.
over a hundred miles away. Kaye who, as a historian of the sepoy war, had to deal with some of the vast collections of rumour produced by that event, commented, in some despair, about ‘a certain description of news, which travels in India, from one station to another, with a rapidity almost electric’ and which, dismissed lightly by the English officers, ‘had travelled another hundred miles whilst the white gentlemen, with bland scepticism, were shaking their heads over the lies of the Bazaar’.  

To describe rumour as ‘the lies of the Bazaar’ is to wrap up in a pejorative the truth about its other tendency which is to originate in places where people assemble in large numbers. Since it is at the market-place where perhaps more than anywhere else in a pre-industrial society people gather regularly at frequent intervals and en masse for trade and certain forms of folk entertainment, the socializing process of rumour too tends to operate most actively there. It is thus that the verbal exchange which, as discussed above, constitutes the transitive function of rumour, comes to affirm its own identity as a type of popular discourse by virtue of its intimate association with economic exchange so essential to the life of the people. Lefebvre whose keen eye missed nothing that was significant in inciting the jacqueries of the year of the Great French Revolution, emphasized the importance of this association. The tales taken back by the country labourers from the markets, especially after outbreaks of riot there, and told in their own villages, would often, he wrote, ‘spread revolt among their fellows and fear among the farmers’.

In India the bazaar was clearly identified in colonialisit thinking with the origin and dissemination of rumour. As the intelligence records of the Raj so amply testify, official espionage kept its ears firmly glued to the bazaars throughout India and at all levels from the village upwards. For much more than in the council chambers and lecture halls ringing with elite voices it was there that the government could get ‘some idea of the standpoint from which they [the masses] regard the actions of their foreign rulers’. Sensitivity to ‘bazaar gup’ was, of course, at its most acute among the officials when the regime

felt seriously threatened by enemies abroad as in times of war or by those within as in times of popular revolt. No wonder therefore that this is mentioned so often and indeed so obsessively in Kaye’s celebrated history of the rebellion of 1857, written from a point of view identified with imperialist interests. The talk of the market-place, he insists, was an authentic register of a great deal of the most useful intelligence ‘especially if the news imported something disastrous to the British’.\(^{101}\) So in his narrative he draws liberally on material linking the rumours in circulation at the local bazaars with the spreading disaffection in sepoy ‘lines’ on the eve of each of the series of massive explosions—at Barrackpore, at Meerut, at Kanpur and so on—which reverberate throughout that monumental work.\(^{102}\) We have thus in the life of that great rebellion as well as in its reconstitution in historiography a clear acknowledgement of the correspondence between the public discourse of rumour and the popular act of insurrection, that is, of the collaterality of word and deed issuing from a common will of the people.

To regard rumour as lying is not merely a measure of the distance between a typical site of collective discourse and an ideal seat of official truth—between the bazaar and the bungalow, so to say. But it is also the result of an ill-conceived assimilation of rumour to news. Kaye in characterizing the former as ‘a certain description of news’ shares with other elitist writers the fairly common error of lumping these together and identifying one as merely a corrupted version of the other. In fact, however, no two kinds of verbal communication could be more different. They differ in two important respects.\(^{103}\) In the first place, the source of news is necessarily identifiable: its message is open to verification by being retraced to the point of its origin and the bearer is considered accountable for its accuracy in most cases. By contrast, rumour is necessarily anonymous and its origin unknown (even though on occasions,

\(^{101}\) K & M: I 361.

\(^{102}\) The instances are far too numerous to cite, but see K & M: I 394–5, 415, 417–18 et passim.

\(^{103}\) There is a fairly elaborate discussion of the distinction between rumour and news in Lang & Lang: 58–64. My understanding of the distinction agrees with theirs on the question of source; however, what they describe as a distinction of channel is perhaps more of a distinction of process.
as we shall presently see, a fictive source may be assigned to it). Hence, its message cannot be authenticated by any reference to a source nor can its purveyor be asked to guarantee its accuracy or answer for its effects in any way. Secondly, the process of transmission implies, in the case of news, a necessary distinction between the communicator and his audience. No such distinction exists in the case of rumours which are passed on 'from a teller to a hearer who himself becomes a teller'—an instance of absolute transitivity. In other words, the encoding and decoding of rumour are collapsed, unlike news, at each point of its relay.

Quite clearly rumour belongs to a class apart from news. An autonomous type of popular discourse, it may perhaps be more properly regarded as one of those 'intermediate forms' which lie, according to Lévi-Strauss, between the two poles of tale and myth.\textsuperscript{104} The characteristic they all have in common is ambiguity. This, it has been said, is essential to the making of a rumour\textsuperscript{105}—a generalization amply confirmed by the experience of some of the great insurrectionary movements in the colonial world. The story which spread, for instance, on the eve of the Maji Maji rebellion about a wonder drug passed on by a snake-like spirit to a medicine man of Ngarambe was apparently 'understood in a rather hazy way by the many people who made pilgrimage to the medicine man'.\textsuperscript{106} There was much the same kind of 'cognitive unclarity' too about the 'vague reports of some coming danger which no one could define' as they circulated in northern India just before and during the Mutiny and the peasant revolts detonated by it. Kaye mentioned the 'expressive' vernacular saying, 'It is in the air', as an index of this elusive but inflammable haziness. 'It often happened', he writes, 'that an uneasy feeling—an impression that something had happened, though they “could not discern the shape thereof”—persuaded men’s minds.'\textsuperscript{107} Ambiguity such as this is indeed what makes rumour a mobile and explosive agent of insurgency, and it is a function precisely of those distinctive features which constitute its originality—namely, its anonymity and transitivity.

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Lévi-Strauss (1978): 130.}
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{Allport & Postman: 53–4 et passim; Schachter & Burdick: 296.}
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Gwassa & Iliffe: 12.}
\textsuperscript{107} \textit{K & M: I 355, 361.}
Anonymity gives rumour its openness, transitivity its freedom. Being of unknown origin rumour is not impaled on a given meaning for good in the same way as a discourse with a pedigree often is. 'To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.' This perceptive comment which we owe to Roland Barthes, is of course true of spoken utterance as well. It explains why rumour, by contrast, is not sealed off by any 'final signified' emanating from a primal source, but remains open as a receptacle of new inputs of meaning. This openness is indeed the objective basis of that spontaneity which is exploited so well and so naturally by speech. For, as Vygotsky has observed, 'The speed of oral speech is unfavourable to a complicated process of formulation—it does not leave time for deliberation and choice. Dialogue implies immediate unpremeditated utterance. It consists of replies, repartees; it is a chain of reactions.' This could be said of rumour too. Indeed, it has all those qualities of speed, immediacy, disposition for unreflecting response to stimulus, etc. developed more fully within it than perhaps in any other type of spontaneous discourse. And the 'uncontrollable impulse' which drives any of its interlocutors to pass it on to the next person in the relay, makes it a most perfect 'chain of reactions'.

Thanks to such transitivity and the social tension in which it operates, rumour functions as a free form liable to a considerable degree of improvisation as it leaps from tongue to tongue. The aperture which it has built into it by virtue of anonymity permits its message to be contaminated by the subjectivity of each of its speakers and modified as often as any of them would want to embellish or amend it in the course of transmission. The outcome of all this is a plasticity that enables it to undergo transformations similar to, though perhaps not to the same extent as, those which occur, according to Propp, in fairy tales. The importance of these for the spread of mass disturbances can hardly be exaggerated. The additions, cuts and twists introduced into a rumour in the course of its circulation

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109 Vygotsky: 144.
110 Some aspects of the transformation of rumour are described in Allport & Postman: passim. But these are not as numerous or varied as those analysed in Vladimir Propp's classic study, 'Les Transformations des Contes Fantastiques'.
transform its message (often just minimally) by such degrees as to adjust it to the variations within a given ideology or mode of popular expression and by doing so broaden the range of its address. In other words, improvisation contributes directly to the efficacy of rumour for rebel mobilization.

Since rumour is ‘immediate unpremeditated utterance’ (to recall Vygotsky once more), it is improvised within the rebel community not as a conscious device to rally the people, but spontaneously, without deliberation, that is, by the force of ideology alone, so far as the insurgents themselves are concerned. However, seen from the other side, from the standpoint of their adversaries, this transformative process could appear to be highly motivated. Fairly representative of such a standpoint is what Kaye wrote about a group of pollution rumours of 1857.\textsuperscript{111} The most celebrated of these was the one relating to greased cartridges, which has passed into history as having triggered off the Mutiny. But fears about officially induced impurity and the consequent loss of faith ‘were not confined to the military classes’, we are told, ‘but were disquieting also the general community’. He mentions the prevalence of ‘a belief that the English designed to defile both Hindus and Muhammadans by polluting with unclean matter the daily food of the people’. However, in spite of the technical difference between the alleged media of defilement in the two sectors—cartridges for the army and food for the civilians—it was by no means two distinct sets of rumours but \textit{variations of the same rumour} which generated the suspicions both among the sepoys and the public and mobilized them respectively for mutinies and jacqueries. To quote:

Now the disturbing rumour, cunningly circulated, took \textit{many portentous shapes}. It was said that the officers of the British Government, under command from the Company and the Queen, had mixed \textit{ground bones} with the \textit{flour} and the \textit{salt} sold in the Bazaars; that they had adulterated all the \textit{ghi} with \textit{animal fat}; that \textit{bones had been burnt} with the common \textit{sugar} of the country; and that not only \textit{bone-dust flour}, but the \textit{flesh} of \textit{cows} and \textit{pigs}, had been thrown into the wells to pollute the \textit{drinking water} of the people. \textit{Of this great imaginary scheme of contamination the matter of the greased cartridges was but a part}, especially

\textsuperscript{111} The source of all direct quotations in this paragraph including the long extract at its end is K & M: I 416–17. Emphasis added.
addressed to one part of the community. All classes, it was believed, were to be defiled at the same time; and the story ran that the ‘bara sahibs’, or great English lords, had commanded all princes, nobles, landholders, merchants, and cultivators of the land, to feed together upon English bread.

Thus the variations on that single theme of defilement were addressed to all sections of the indigenous population (see Figure 2 below) and appeared, in the eyes of the authorities, as

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<th>Sections of population affected by impurity</th>
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Figure 2  Elements of a Pollution Rumour of 1857.

a shrewd unifying stratagem. Sepoys and civilians were brought together by a common suspicion—that of being polluted by oral contact with animal fat applied, inedibly, to cartridges in one case, and edibly, to ghee in the other. Then the amplitude of impurity was further extended: two other agents of animal extraction were included to cover four other edibles—flesh added to drinking water and bone burnt into country sugar as well as ground into flour and salt. Altogether five essential components of the common diet of all classes of people were thus represented as liable to pollution by three substances extracted from each of the two animals most prohibited under Hindu and Islamic alimentary rules. The threat to the ‘general community’ could not be more comprehensive. However, to leave nothing to chance the most impure of all food, ‘English bread’, believed to contain each of the five unclean ingredients, i.e. flour, salt, sugar, fat and water, and hence optimally defiled, was mentioned as the ultimate instrument of the official ‘scheme of contamination’ enforced on all from the highest to the lowest in native society. The unity of all Indians and the
opposition between them and their alien rulers were thus expressed in terms of a single theme—that of ritual pollution—phrased as a rumour in ‘many portentous shapes’. That a little fear could spread so far by means of simple verbal manipulation—it could all be said in six short sentences—was what made this type of popular discourse so alarming to those who found themselves on the wrong side of an insurrection.

Improvisations such as these testify to the freedom of the rumour process. However, this freedom is not unlimited. A rumour can be improvised only to the extent that the relevant codes of the culture in which it operates permit. In this respect it follows the logic of the ‘effort after meaning’ mentioned by Bartlett as characteristic of every human cognitive reaction. ‘Certain of the tendencies’, he wrote in explanation of this term, ‘which the subject brings with him into the situation with which he is called upon to deal are utilised so as to make his reaction the “easiest”, or the least disagreeable, or the quickest and least obstructed that is at the time possible.’ And thus ‘in certain cases of great structural simplicity, or of structural regularity, or of extreme familiarity, the immediate data are at once fitted to, or matched with, a perceptual pattern which appears to be pre-existent so far as the particular perceptual act is concerned. This pre-formed setting, scheme, or pattern is utilised in a completely unreflecting, unanalytical and unwitting manner. Because it is utilised the immediate perceptual data have meaning, can be dealt with, and are assimilated.’

Rumour, as Allport and Postman have shown, represents precisely such an effort after meaning. Instantaneous and unreflecting by its very constitution this type of spoken utterance is of course ideally suited for assimilation in an ‘unanalytical and unwitting manner’ to pre-existing ideological patterns. In conditions of insurgency it represents an attempt on the part of its interlocutors to make sense of a challenge to an established authority by matching their perception of the by then inevitably strained or already modified relations of power with a ‘pre-formed scheme’ or code of political thinking.

During the first hundred and fifty years of colonial rule and

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112 Bartlett: 44–5.
113 Allport & Postman: 37, 40, 121, 206 et passim.
indeed for long afterwards this code was a measure of the still relatively immature view, half-realistic and half-fantastic, that the peasants had of politics. In part it was based on their knowledge of the values and relations of power in the world they lived in. The rumours which circulated, for instance, in Rohilkhand in 1857 ‘to the effect that the cultivation of the fields has been prohibited by the British Government’,\textsuperscript{114} were of course silly and unfounded. But the alarm to which they gave voice had its referent in the undoubted fact of the agrarian policies of the Raj being regarded at the time as less than helpful towards the peasantry. Again, the word that spread ‘in the shops of the money-changers and in the vestibules of the Palace’ in Delhi during the Mutiny about British reverses in the Persian Gulf region or about the Persian army marching towards India through the Bolan Pass\textsuperscript{115} had, with all its exaggeration characteristic of wishful thinking, some of the actualities of international political conflict as its premise.

However, in conformity with the semi-feudal conditions of his existence the peasant’s code of political thinking in this period also involved conceptualizing all higher authority such as that of kings, landlords, priests, elders, males, etc. as quasi-divine. Consequently, he tended to look upon man’s domination of man not as a process governed by the laws of this world but by those of the other world. Instead of seeing in it the operation of human will he saw an expression of divine will. Politics took on the appearance therefore of Providence, its routines of rituals, its temporal articulations of a kind of timeless sacred history. In other words, his understanding of the relations, institutions and processes of power were identified with or at least considerably overdetermined by religion. During an uprising, that most political of all events, he was led spontaneously to interpret its vicissitudes by this quasi-religious code, and the more backward the material and spiritual conditions of his social being the more obscurantist that interpretation tended to be. Rumours in circulation at such times often acted both as the register of this political consciousness suffused with religiosity and as the media of its transmission among the subaltern masses in the countryside.

Some of the rumours which were current on the eve of the

\textsuperscript{114} FSUP: V 531. \textsuperscript{115} K & M: II 26.
Santal and the Munda rebellions illustrate how this consciousness gave a semblance of ritual to what was essentially political action. A rumour which helped to promote a ritual of friendship among Santal mothers before the outbreak of the hool, has already been noticed: explicitly political in motivation, it aimed at building up an ethic of solidarity household by household within the would-be rebel community by means of inter-dining and exchange of gifts between any two women who had the same number of children. An even more powerful instance of such ritualization of the political process as aided by rumour is recorded in the Reak Katha. ‘Then it was heard that a Subah Thakur had been born at Bhognadi in the Par country’, it says. ‘On hearing this, people began to set off, each with a pai [measure] of atap rice and the milk of a cow. There they found that an altar had been built with a railing which enclosed it on all sides. In the middle the Thakur himself was seated in the guise of Sido of that village. People worshipped him (puja) by prostrating themselves in his presence and put together all the rice and milk at one place as an offering to him.’

It was thus that the mobilization for a peasant war commenced with rumours about the advent and apotheosis of a rebel leader and assumed the form of a pilgrimage and ritual worship.

Forty-five years later the historic ulgan of the Mundas, too, began in a very similar manner. ‘The stories of Birsa as a healer, a miracle-worker, and a preacher spread, exaggerated out of all proportions to facts’, writes Singh and a great mass of Mundas, Oraons and Kharias set out for the remote and almost inaccessible hamlet of Chalkad where the new prophet had arisen. They were pilgrims and described as such by many contemporaries. Their songs about the distance, the hazards and yet the irresistible attraction of this journey towards Dharati Aba’s seat rang with the longing of the traditional Indian devotee. However, the politics of that pilgrimage was soon to become apparent to those who had most to fear from the consequences of large and potentially hostile tribal gatherings. Rev. Hoffmann spoke for all of them when he wrote:

114 MHKRK: clxxiii. 117 Singh: 46.
118 See, for instance, the excerpt from News from Murhu in Singh: 47 for a contemporary description of the pilgrimage. Singh also quotes some Birsait songs on this theme. (Ibid.: 47–8).
I distinctly remember how the known sardars were urging the common people to go on pilgrimage to 'Birsa Bhagwan'... Rumours of miraculous cures and the resuscitation of dead men were diligently spread... crowds of the Mundas, especially of the known sardari villages, were constantly going armed. I got certain news, too, that the religious colouring of Chalkad was fading more and more, and that the real political aims were coming out clearer as Chalkad was getting more and more crowded with armed men, permanently settled there with provisions for many a day.\textsuperscript{119}

Quite clearly a religious enthusiasm fanned by rumour had laid the basis for a massive and armed mobilization of the Munda peasantry, and the holy father, acting as a spiritual gendarme of colonialism, was quite understandably alarmed to see a sacred, if heathen, assembly turning so profane, so obviously political!

If political action was sacralized thus, so was political thinking. This was represented quite transparently in some rumours such as those which gained wide currency at the time of the Vellore mutiny of 1807 and again fifty years later during the sepoy rebellion to the effect that the government had plans to convert all Indians to Christianity. On the former occasion the story went round the bazaars in southern India that the Company's officers had sprinkled all the newly-manufactured salt with the blood of pigs and cows and 'then sent it to be sold throughout the country for the pollution and the desecration of Muhammadans and Hindus [so] that all might be brought to one caste and to one religion like the English'.\textsuperscript{120} The 1857 versions of that story have been discussed earlier in this chapter. Again, it was rumoured in the south in 1807 that the government had ordered a church 'to be erected in every town and every village in the country'. This corresponded to the panic caused in some parts of the North-Western Provinces in 1857 by reports about an official policy forcibly to baptize all uncircumcised Muslim infants and led to hundreds of them being rushed through that rite in Bareilly and Rampur in order 'to save them from the hands of the Missionaries'.\textsuperscript{121}

Kaye who was more sensitive than most writers about the influence of rumour on insurrections, comments on the absurdity of the Vellore stories circulated at a time 'when there

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.: 51. \textsuperscript{120} K & M: I 181. \textsuperscript{121} FSUP: V 576.
were no indications on the part of Government of any especial concern for the interests of Christianity’, and accounts for them by the fact that ‘in a state of panic men do not pause to reason’. This, of course, hardly constitutes an explanation. For it still begs the question why people in a state of panic expressed their alarm in those particular terms. However, the author himself comes close to producing an answer, apparently without being aware of its implications, when he suggests that these rumours were perhaps inspired by the belief ‘that the English gentlemen cared only to destroy the religions of the country, and to make the people all of one or of no caste, in order that they might make their soldiers and servants do everything they wished’.\textsuperscript{122}

In other words, at a time of quickening mass anxiety those figments of popular imagination had translated politics instinctively by a religious code and come to express an antagonism towards the Raj as a fear of the cultural hegemony of the Christian rulers, a sense of loss of freedom as an apprehension about loss of faith.

It was this consciousness, an unquestionably false consciousness if ever there was one, which also generated a certain kind of alienation: it made the subject look upon his destiny not as a function of his own will and action, but as that of forces outside and independent of himself. The thinking which filled the void created thus by the displacement of the subject was, in its most general sense, religious—that is, to put it in Marx’s words, ‘a product of self-alienation’.\textsuperscript{123} This was true not merely when the alienated will was attributed (as often done) to gods, godlings and jinns or mythical heroes and monsters, but equally when attributed to real, empirical people seen as the bearers of super-human and super-natural powers. What was political came thus to be regarded as religious. Rumour, again, acted as the carrier of this consciousness, although the messages transmitted by it could often be a shade more opaque than those about involuntary defilement and enforced conversion as cited above.

Even a small sample of the folklore of fear and hope known to have been current during the Indian peasant rebellions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries should make this clear. It

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{122} K & M: I 182. \quad \textsuperscript{123} MECW: III 339.
\end{flushright}
was this genre of discourse which often registered the peasant’s anticipation of the political outcome of an uprising—an outcome mediated invariably by forces other than himself. Such mediators could be either purely mythical or they could be empirical ones with mythic functions assigned to them. The former figured in some of the rumours of the hool. One of these relating to the apocalypse of Lag and Lagin had, as we have seen, inspired a set of propitiatory rituals. Yet another chiliastic rumour which made the rounds, concerned a buffalo said to have been on its way to the Santal country. ‘Wherever it found grass growing in the open space in front of one’s house’, recalled Jugia Harom, ‘it would stop over to graze and rest there and would not leave until all the members of that family had died.’¹²⁴ Whereas the harbingers of doom in these two instances were derived from a bestiary made up in equal parts of Santal and Hindu fantasy, a harbinger of deliverance, a Subah, whose advent too was reported at the time, was believed to be human, though no less mythical: as rumour had it, he was born of a virgin at Layogar, somewhere beyond Hazaribagh. Kanhu himself referred to this as if it were a real event and did so in a manner that made no distinction between fact and fancy. Thus:

The sonthals went for Shikar to Charichunarlo . . . 1 man, 1 woman & one girl/a virgin/were there & cut the Lyo/a sort of grass/they rubbed it & threw it about & it became Lyo fort or Lyghur the girl had a son who grew up at once and began to talk & became a soubah.¹²⁵

Apart from such mythical instruments of political change the mind of the rebel had room in it for empirical ones too, that is, for real human beings and institutions. But this did not prevent the latter from being brought, in their turn, into line with those in the other category of mediators by having mythic functions attributed to them. These functions varied of course according to events and the cultures specific to the subaltern populations concerned. However, taking together the elements common to them all, these could be said to belong to four notionally distinct though in fact imbricated types—divine, martial, monarchical and sacerdotal. Rumours relating to the first of these have already been mentioned in connection with the apotheosis of

¹²⁴ MHRKR: cxvii.
Sido and Birsa on the eve of the revolts led by them. Like them the mediators of the martial type, too, were real people, but unlike the former, not transformed into divinities. The mythopoetic imagination of the rebels endowed them with exceptional and indeed magical powers, a pathetic device by which a poorly armed peasantry compensated themselves in fantasy for what they actually lacked in military equipment and organization. The belief generated by rumour about the Santal and Munda leaders’ ability to turn British bullets into water cost their credulous rank and file many lives during the decisive battles at Maheshpur and Sail Rakab respectively.\(^{126}\)

But it was not the tribal peasantry alone who were prone to conjuring up the image of the deliverer as gifted with a striking power superior to that of the enemy. Among the ‘wild reports’ said to be ‘assiduously spread through the district’ of Bareilly in June 1858 ‘evidently to unsettle men’s minds and to destroy confidence in our Government’ the battered colonial administration listed one to the effect ‘that Khan Bahadur Khan will re-enter Bareilly under [the] shelter of a miraculous dust-storm and annihilate his enemies’.\(^{127}\) In fact this wishful tendency to exaggerate the strength of the enemy’s enemy and to make a potential liberator of him gave even the relatively transparent speculations based on Anglo-Persian hostilities a touch of myth when it was rumoured ‘that the Shah of Persia had for five generations been accumulating munitions of war and heaping up treasure for the purpose of conquering India and that the time had now come for action’, and that he had obtained the assistance in this venture not only of the Tsar and the Amir but also of the French and Turkish emperors. In the communication of all this, wrote Kaye, an ‘ambiguous, enigmatic language suited the occasion’, and in Delhi in the spring of 1857 ‘the talk was still of a something coming’.\(^{128}\)

It was thus that with all their practical involvement in a rebellion the masses could still be tricked by a false consciousness into trusting the magical faculties of warrior heroes to win it for them. This process of vicarious substitution was even better exemplified in the kingly function often attributed by

\(^{126}\) CR: 247; Singh: 111–12.
\(^{127}\) FSUP: V 531–2.
rumour to yet another class of these quasi-religious mediators. These, too, like the types previously mentioned, had a real, empirical existence as human beings and institutions. They stood in fact for the political system which dominated the very conditions of the peasant’s life and was indeed the object of his revolt. Yet by a curious turn of self-estrangement it was from them rather than from his own will and initiative that he sought validation for his desperate act of defiance. Representatives of the Raj at various levels these mediators came to be regarded by the rebel as a source of sovereign authority more just and partial towards the peasantry than it was in real life as the custodian of order and protector of landlords, moneylenders and village tyrants of all kinds. The experience of rural insurgency in all countries amply illustrates this mentality. In pre-revolutionary Russia the muzhiks rose in revolt again and again in the Tsar’s name at least since the days of Pugachev; in France during the jacqueries of 1789 the peasants burnt and pillaged in the belief that they had royal support for what they did; in England in 1830 the country labourers claimed authorization by the Crown for their riots.129

In India too the peasantry involved in the ‘blue mutiny’ of 1860, the Pabna bidroha of 1873, the widespread struggle against rack-renting in eastern Bengal during the 1880s—all acted in the name of the Maharani, the Lat Saheb, the Sarkar, the ‘New Law’, and so on. In each of these instances it was the force of rumour which did most to spread the illusion. ‘All sorts of rumours which agreed with the peasants’ longing for better days were circulating: the despotic power of zamindars would be soon gone for ever... rent rate would be reduced everywhere and Government legislation would deprive zamindars of all powers to enhance it, etc.’130 This description of the role of hearsay in generalizing the Bengali tenants’ resistance to high landlordism in the eastern districts during the 1880s was indeed typical of many other situations of agrarian conflict. In such cases oral communications of this kind could serve both to

129 These are fairly well documented facts of history. For some of the most authoritative statements, see Field: passim; Lefebvre (1973): 38-40, 42, 94-7, 118, 214; H & R: 18.
disseminate ideology and trigger off militant action as the following excerpt from the Deccan Riot Commission's report shows:

A circumstance which perhaps more than any other precipitated the outbreak was the circulation of a story which would seem too absurd to obtain belief even among the most ignorant . . . The most popular form of the story was that an English sahib who had been sold up by a Marwari creditor, had petitioned Her Majesty the Queen on the subject and that she had sent out orders that the Marwaris were to give up their bonds. As more briefly told and largely believed even by the more educated people of the village the story was condensed into the simple form that, on a report from India, orders had come from England that the Marwaris were to have their bonds taken from them. In some form or other this report was circulated and a belief established that, acting under orders from England, the Government officers would connive at the extortion of their bonds from the sowkars.\(^{131}\)

It was thus that the Maratha peasant was driven by self-alienation into a paradox: what he did was the very opposite of what he thought he was doing. Engaged in violently undermining a central pillar of colonialism in rural India, i.e. the authority of the moneylender, he claimed validation for that very destructive enterprise from the highest level of the colonial government itself. As in all thinking of a religious kind he 'estranged his own activity from himself' and came to confer the attributes of what should have been his own will and initiative on people and institutions 'other than and differentiated from himself'\(^{132}\)—that is, on mediators. Indeed like his brethren

\(^{131}\) DRCR: 54. The extract ends thus: 'It is somewhat remarkable that a somewhat similar belief was entertained by the Sonthals whose rebellion in 1855 originated in similar causes.' The collection of Santal rebellion papers in JP which I have used in this work does not contain anything at all to testify to such a belief. Nor does K. K. Datta's monograph based on the Bhagalpur records of the hool. The source for this particular idea may be CR: 245 where it is said that 'the order of the Thakoor was remarkable; it expressly disclaimed all intentions against the government'. This is obviously wrong, for in TTP, that key document, the Thakur appeared clearly to be dissatisfied with the way that the sarkar had been supporting zamindars and mahajans against the Santals and He quite explicitly ordered the sahibs to quit Santal territory and withdraw to the other side of the Ganges or face the Thakur's rain of fire. This speaks for the emphatically anti-colonialist character of the hool.

\(^{132}\) MECW: III 279.
operating elsewhere under similar circumstances he modelled this particular set of mediators according to his idea of a Good King—Queen, to be precise, the gender lending it a touch of spurious authenticity as well as some motherly sanctity—the very source of an abstract and universal Justice, an image based clearly on the Indian feudal concept (known to some other cultures too) of the divinity of the sovereign ruler. This image came to be foisted on all believed by the rebel to be higher in authority than his immediate adversaries. As such, the mediator could be any instrument of British power ranging from Parliament to the district level administration, from the Queen to the Collector. To describe this process as a legitimizing device (as is customary in learned discourse) would be correct only if it were made absolutely clear that for the subject, that is, the insurgent himself the legitimizing of his action derived not from the positive laws, institutions, personnel, etc. of any empirical government in Calcutta or Whitehall but from the sanctions of that heavenly kingship in which all other authority was thought to have been subsumed.

Rumour has also been known to propagate the mentality which makes the rebel have recourse to the type of mediation characterized above as sacerdotal in the broadest sense of that term. It included the functions of the priest, saint, healer, preacher, prophet, etc., some, if not all, of which the insurgents would ascribe to their leaders at critical moments just before or in the actual course of an uprising. This again was symptomatic of a consciousness that proved far too feeble to cope with its own project and left it to be completed by the intervention of a superior wisdom. The African peoples' struggles against foreign rule in many parts of that continent provide some outstanding examples of such mediation. Isaacman has documented the crucial importance of spirit mediums in the tradition of peasant resistance in Mozambique. The miracles, charms and prophecies they produced were in many cases among the most powerful influences in inspiring and sustaining the peasants' fight against the Portuguese. Again, in Tanzania it was Kinjikitile's prophecies and his eponymous medicine which helped as much as anything else to convert anti-German feelings into the Maji Maji uprising.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{133} See Gwassa & Iliffe; Isaacman.
In colonial India this particular type of mediation played a relatively less conspicuous part in mobilizing for rebellion but was by no means unknown. A certain amount of sanctity and prophetic vision was attributed by rumour to both the Santal brothers who led the hool. But it was in the career of Birsa Munda that the functions of the seer, saint, healer and preacher were all clearly and comprehensively combined.\textsuperscript{134} From that moment on a mid-summer day in 1895 when, as a Munda song had it, ‘deep amidst [the] wild forest on [a] burnt and cleared upland Singbonga entered [his] heart’, the word went round about his being the repository of a revealed wisdom, a miracle man who could walk on water and cure by incantation, a preacher with the message of a new cult, a prophet who spoke of the coming deliverance of his people from the demon-queen Mandodori’s yoke. Saintly rather than miraculous was the function that mediators of this type had in the non-tribal uprisings of our period, which may perhaps have something to do with the importance of the sadhu and the fakir in the Hindu and Islamic traditions respectively. The fracas which occurred at Fyzabad in February 1857 between the military authorities and a fakir, Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who said ‘that he was prepared to wage a holy war with the help of Mussulmans and Hindoos against the English’ and the peregrinations of a sadhu in the spring of that year between Meerut and Ambalah—‘one of the many emissaries who were moving about the country’—were to be mentioned later on as possible influences on the outbreak of the Mutiny and the civilian disturbances in those regions.\textsuperscript{135}

One of these holy men, Hasan Askari, ‘a Muhammadan Priest of the Hereditary Priesthood’, who lived near Delhi Gate, made a name for himself in 1857 by prophesying that the Shah of Persia would conquer India and restore the Mughals to power. He even performed ‘propitiatory ceremonies to expedite the arrival of the Persians and the expulsion of the Christians’. A variation of this, according to which the would-be liberator was an Arab rather than a Persian, was ascribed to a saint called

\textsuperscript{134} All information on this particular point is based on Singh: Ch. III and Appendix H.
\textsuperscript{135} FSUP: I 381–8, 397–9.
Shah Mamat-ullah. ‘After the fire-worshippers and Christians shall have held sway over the whole of Hindustan for a hundred years and when injustice and oppression shall prevail in their Government’, he predicted, ‘an Arab prince shall be born, who will ride forth triumphantly to slay them.’\textsuperscript{138} However, it was not merely Islamic fantasy which forecast the end of the Raj in its hundreth year. Hindu speculations to the same effect were also in currency before and during the Mutiny. Harvey, Commissioner of Agra, referred to a ‘Hindoo prophecy limiting British rule to a centenary of years’\textsuperscript{137} Again, the mediating functions of the partly deified leaders of the Santal and Munda rebellions were also known to have included predictions about imminent encounters with the Raj in chiliastic terms. ‘Fire will rain from Heaven’, declared Sido and Kanhu in their parwana; and Birsa caused a stampede into his village Chalkad and a run on the stocks of cloth in the local markets when he announced that on a specified day fire and brimstone would pour down from heaven and destroy all on earth except those who were with him at that time and remembered to put on new clothes for the occasion as advised by him.\textsuperscript{138}

Prophecies of this kind, whether based on what saints, oracles or quasi-divine leaders actually said or (as it often happened) fabricated by the collective imagination of the rebel community, were a concomitant of popular uprisings in many other pre-industrial societies too. On the eve of the Maji Maji rebellion in east Africa they spread by the dozen charged with the foreboding of doom and deliverance—a great flood to destroy everything, the sea to overflow and ‘devour all whites on the coast’, the earth to open up and ‘swallow all whites inland’ together with their native collaborators, a messiah soon to appear in the guise of an ape or a chicken or a man riding a dog, or even the advent of a god—the god of the Saramo—believed to have set up an empire at Kisangire, ‘8 hours from Maneromango’, as an alternative to the German colonial regime and a refuge for all from the hated rule of foreigners.\textsuperscript{139}

Europe too was no stranger to this genre of discourse. Keith Thomas has shown how England seethed with prophecies in

\textsuperscript{138} K & M: II 28, 27 n. \textsuperscript{137} FSUP: I 392. Also see FSUP: V 9.
\textsuperscript{138} JP, 4 Oct. 1855 (no. 20); Singh: 48.
\textsuperscript{138} Wehrmeister: 88; Schumann: 63; Berliner Missionsberichte: 462–3.
periods of heightened social tension both in the Middle Ages and early modern times. These were powerful enough to make the circulation of such utterances by medieval Welsh bards and the Lollards a penal offence under various governments. Later on the Tudors were to be constantly on the look out for political prophecies of all kinds in order to suppress them by acts of parliament, Privy Council orders, instructions to J.P.s, etc. For 'prophecies of one kind or another were employed in virtually every rebellion or popular rising which disturbed the Tudor state'. In fact, the association between prophecy and insurgency continued through the entire series of sixteenth-century rebellions—the risings in the North and East Ridings in Yorkshire, those led by Robert Kett in Norfolk and so on—until the Civil War. The authorities were never far from the truth in describing 'vain prophecies' and 'seditious, false or untrue rumours' as 'the very foundation of all rebellion'.

Rumour was of course an ideal instrument for making the sacerdotal function of the mediators known to the masses. For miracles, spiritual healing, revelations, etc. lent themselves more easily to being talked about than experienced in real life. Supernatural and occult phenomena, they lived only in words. As a part of the semiotic of insurgency they were realized not in terms of the visuality which imagination endowed them with, but *only* verbally. However, in one particular instance, that is prophecies, the sign of the sacerdotal function was not trans-substantiated in any sense: the material which constituted it did not alter by propagation. The mediator's words predicting a golden age or an imminent end to the world, the coming of a messiah or an apocalypse passed from mouth to mouth exactly as they originated, that is, as verbal messages.

Yet if such utterances were subjected to no material change in the course of transmission, they were still modified in another way. Rumour separated them from all the other linguistic messages circulating in the rebel community, attributed to them an authoritativeness derived from the elevated status of their speakers and bestowed on them the significance of truth—in short, *textualized* them. Distinguished thus from the mass of

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140 Thomas: 470–2, 478–9, 505, and Ch. 13 *passim*.

141 The notion of text and non-text and its implications for the study of culture as used in this paragraph is based on Lotman & Pjatigorski.
all other discourses—non-texts—current within that collective, these were represented as ‘displaying traits of an expressiveness that [was] complementary and meaningful in the cultural system’. According to Lotman and Pjatigorskij, this distinction between text and non-text corresponds to that between ‘closed’ and ‘open’ cultures. A text acquires meaning in the latter ‘because it has a definite sense that defines its functional value’ and results in an ‘absolutization of historical experience’. By contrast in ‘closed’ cultures a text tends to be ‘meaningful’, ‘sacred’, because it is a text and is characterized, accordingly, by ‘an absolutization of prophecy and hence of eschatology’. Indeed, the contrast becomes quite evident when with the transition of a culture from a ‘closed’ to an ‘open’ state the notion of cyclical time begins increasingly to yield to that of linear time and prophecy declines with the growth of historical criticism as it did in England by the end of the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{142} By its ahistorical character prophecy is thus ideally adapted to religious thinking in which man’s destiny appears not as what it is, that is, a product of his own activity but as determined for him by forces standing outside history, as a future beyond his own control but programmed in the prescience of saints and seers mediating for him. The circulation of prophetic rumours in the course of the events discussed above was thus symptomatic of self-estrangement on the part of the typical peasant rebel of our period: it testified to that false consciousness which made him look upon his own acts of resistance as a manifestation of another’s will.

\textsuperscript{142} Thomas: 507–14.