I

Introduction

A major shift has been taking place in recent years in the historiography of the Indian national movement (perhaps the most rapidly developing sector of modern Indian history writing) through the emergence of a kind of 'history from below'. The new focus is on popular and particularly peasant initiative and 'self-mobilization', as distinct from the earlier concentration on national or regional leaders, patriotic ideologies, elite pressures or factional manoeuvres by patron-client linkages. To the practitioners of what some have started calling 'subaltern studies',¹ conventional nationalist hagiography, Cambridge-type Namierism, and even much of existing Marxist scholarship focussed on party or trade union programmes and organisation appear tainted with various forms of 'elitism'. The transformation being sought for is potentially as significant as those brought about by Lefebvre, Soboul, Rude and Cobb in the historiography of the French Revolution; by Hill (particularly in his later works) and Brian Manning on seventeenth-century England; by Thompson and Gutman in British and American labour history; by Hobsbawm, Rude and Thompson in studies of pre-industrial protest. What we see today are the beginnings of an Indian participation in a worldwide historiographical trend, associated with imaginative use of a wider range of sources, along with a certain distrust or cynicism about more-or-less bureaucratically-organised and outwardly successful political movements.²

'Histories from below' naturally begin by concentrating on local or regional developments, but perhaps the time has come
for some tentative generalizations. The first aim of this paper is to bring together the data scattered in a fairly large number of specific studies into some kind of analytical framework, distinguishing various types of ‘popular’ initiative and ‘middle class’ response in the pre-Gandhian and Gandhian phases of modern Indian nationalism. I am deliberately using the vague term ‘popular’, to serve as a convenient shorthand for tribal, peasant, artisan or labour protest, and also because more precise class-analysis is necessarily often difficult in a predominantly pre-industrial society. The category of ‘peasant’ is, after all, hardly more precise or homogeneous, covering as it does the poor peasant-cum-sharecropper or labourer of Eastern India as well as the substantial *patidar* of Kheda or Bardoli with his two-storied house and command over Baraiya or Dubla labour. ‘Middle class’ is equally vague and even more controversial, particularly in colonial India where subjective ‘bourgeois’ aspirations were so often associated with links with professions and tenurial landholding rather than industry or trade. I am using ‘middle class’ to stand for the groups which began asserting some kind of regional or national leadership from the 1870s onwards and which had a significantly different social composition and outlook from the princes, chiefs or zamindars who had led earlier outbursts against British rule down to and including 1857. The objectives of these leading groups could be quite diverse: national emancipation, regional self-assertion, caste or communal gains, and formulating class demands of toilers. The dialectic of leaders and led, spontaneity and discipline, was, however, not necessarily so very different.

Constructing a provisional typology of popular movements through a comparative study of regional and temporal variations may be useful for bringing out certain complexities and unsolved problems which the new historiographical trend has to tackle if it is to develop further. The intention here, as throughout the paper, is to raise questions rather than suggest definitive answers, which I certainly do not have in many cases.

There has been a tendency in our country for ‘history-from-below’ to get obsessed by a kind of spontaneity-consciousness debate, with two opposing stereotypes: one emphasizing the key and overriding role of nationalist ideology and leadership in allegedly giving form to sporadic discontent, the other at times perhaps
overstressing or romanticizing peasant spontaneity, initiative and rebelliousness through a theory of a fundamentally distinct ‘peasant nationalism’. The debate has been probably more fruitful than the faction versus ideology controversy provoked by the Cambridge school some years ago. That it is still extremely restrictive, and leaves unanswered and even unasked a whole range of questions, would be clear to any reader of, say, Charles Tilly’s study of the Vendee or T.W. Margadant’s work on peasant resistance to Louis Napoleon’s coup deetat of 1851.

I have in mind problems like the precise location of popular militancy—why certain districts or taluks show so much more grass-roots initiative than other neighbouring areas. Gyan Pandey’s beautifully worked-out explanation in terms of variations in Congress organizational strength and discipline is a major advance, but the question remains as to why the Congress controls happened to become more effective, say, in Agra or eventually Rae Bareli but not in Bara Banki during 1930-31. One may also raise more general problems like possible alternative explanations of mass actions in terms of immiserization, growing strength and self-confidence of certain groups, or a setback after a period of relative prosperity, while it is impossible to avoid the thorny but necessary question of precise social class and/or caste composition and of the categories of classification which would be most relevant in this connection. Another vital dimension would be possible differences in deep-rooted political and cultural traditions, for it is important to try to relate the short-term explosions with underlying long-term trends: the ‘event’ with the ‘conjunction’ and ‘structure’. And in tackling all these and many other problems, the essential tool of analysis has to be the study of variations over space and time, the comparative method expounded so eloquently by Marc Bloch.

Above all, ‘history from below’ has to face the problem of the ultimate relative failure of mass initiative in colonial India, if the justly abandoned stereotype of the eternally passive Indian peasant is not to be replaced by an opposite romantic stereotype of perennial rural rebelliousness. For an essential fact surely is that the ‘subaltern’ classes have remained subaltern, often surprisingly dormant despite abject misery and ample provocation, and subordinate in the end to their social ‘betters’ even when they do become politically active. An explanation in terms of repeated
‘betrayals’ by the propertied leadership, particularly Gandhi, put forward in a crude form by R.P. Dutt a generation ago and tacitly implied by many later scholars, is surely anything but satisfactory here. It implies a kind of elitism in reverse, the evil ‘Jonah of Indian Revolution’ successfully torpedoing mass movements, and fails to explain why the betrayer always retained so much more mass popularity than his radical critics. We have to search rather for the weaknesses internal to popular movements, and a central theme of my third section is that both the strength and the limitations of Gandhian movements transcend the greatness or inadequacies of Gandhi as a person or of his ideology. A related problem is what may be described as the frequent interpenetration of diverse and even contradictory forms of consciousness, class, national, regional, caste or communal. A district like Shahabad in Bihar, to take one example out of many, was very active in 1857 under Kunwar Singh, plunged into bitter Hindu-Muslim riots in 1917, became a stronghold of the Kisan Sabha in the late 1930s, played a significant part in the 1942 upsurge, and was torn by communal strife again in 1946. Historians often like to demarcate between rival ‘trends’ of sentiment, thought and action, attributing validity to some and a lower status of ‘false consciousness’ to others, but the unpleasant fact remains that the separation was obviously very far from clear to contemporaries. We have to try to grasp the complex and varying interrelations between diverse elements in a hybrid ‘collective mentality’ of a group, class, or region.

Such limitations led up to the central fact of 1947: an achievement of political freedom successfully divorced by urban and rural propertied groups from fundamental socio-economic transformation. In the concluding section I have raised the problem of categorization of this complex and contradictory transition, and I have suggested the possible relevance here of Gramsci's concept of ‘passive revolution’.