

International Conclave on Adivasi Question and Policy Roadmaps- Odisha 2036 (Chapter I)

***Department of History, Ravenshaw University, Cuttack
(28-29th October 2017)***

Venue: Annexe-1, Seven Pillars of Wisdom

Theme Note

This conclave's focus on Adivasi Question and Policy Roadmaps - Odisha 2036 conceptually emanates from the idea of exploring the possibilities of reconfiguring a Roadmap for Orissa. Such a reappraisal, we believe, assumes critical urgency in view of Odisha's awaiting status as a separate, century old province in the year 2036 in the Indian federal system. Arguably, this engagement calls for a critical understanding of the Region, and its natural and human resources in the light of surge of new kinds of knowledge and scholarship which have characterized the domain of social science in contemporary times. The conclave intends to open up a conversation on the theme with a host of issues associated with Adivasi question and idea of "development".

In many ways, the Department of History in Ravenshaw University has pursued this question as part of some of its core focuses pertaining to study and research on contemporary history and society of South Asia. This conclave, thus, can be seen as yet another attempt to celebrate an "idea" as part of the sesquicentennial celebration of Ravenshaw. As a matter of stock taking it may not be irrelevant here to note that the Department had organised two such conclaves in the past: Development, Displacement and Resistance on Social Movements (10-11 August 2015) and Of Law, State and Subaltern Resistance: Exploring New Social Movements and Voices from the "margins "in Odisha/ South Asia (27 March 2017). The present conclave can be seen as an add-on to our engagement with this question, particularly trying to think through a very substantive question of our body politic. Given the context of the size of adivasi population (22.01% of state's population and 62 tribes) of Odisha and the cultural life world they inhabit, the conclave intends to reflect on the issues and challenges facing both the state's agenda for development in the context of a globalised economy and the social movements involving the adivasis, peasants and other marginalized sections of the society in recent times.

Subaltern Studies(SS), Peasant Insurgency and Adivasi Question

The launching of *Subaltern Studies(SS)*, in 1980s with its originaryhistorigraphic intervention to document the politics of the people during British colonial rule in the subcontinent certainly created a ferment. The project called for a radical rethinking of knowledge authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination. The intellectual reach of the project has now crossed far beyond the limits of the discipline of History. Though disbanded as a research collective (1978-2008), the appeal of the SS has kept growing across

disciplines of Social Science "as a general designation for a field of studies often seen as a close relative of post colonialism."

One of the seminal contributions of the SS project was to think through an emotive of issue of the post-colonial present: how to configure the peasant insurgency? Pursuing this question, the collective portrayed the colonial Indian peasant as the paradigmatic rebel subject and sought to configure "a genealogy of the mass-political subject in India". However, understanding a complex gamut of labouring groups such as tribals, forest dwellers, migrants, workers and people whose livelihoods had only partially to do with land under the master sign and capacious category of peasant remained provocatively controversial.

Based on a non- Eurocentric perspective, *Ranjit Guha's Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983) encapsulates that urge and thus remains the most articulate, insightful and influential account of Peasant/ adivasi insurgencies of Colonial India. The founders argued that insurgent peasant in colonial India were not 'political in the sense of the individualized bourgeois citizen of liberal democracy'; rather they were viewed as 'mass-political subjects whose rationality had to be sought in the collective life of the peasant community'. Rejecting Hobswam's much familiar thesis that peasants in traditional and modernizing societies as pre-political, Guha located the political orientations of peasant insurgency in colonial India animated through its negative and inversive procedure.

The project sought to understand the nature of subaltern history and agency during a period of transition. The theory of transition, as understood in the most of the academy then, was unquestionably conceptualised in teleological terms, from semi-feudal to bourgeois capitalist and eventually socialist conditions. The project divined its departure from the scheme by seeking to understand subaltern agency dismissing explanations borrowed and modeled on the European and teleological narratives of transition to capitalism. This gesture carried radical implications as it sought to see peasant subaltern as the paradigm of a revolutionary subject. The associated attempt to understand the peasant's potential as a carrier of revolutionary consciousness was indeed reflective of the collective's way of negotiating certain dogmatic Marxist binaries such as those between materialism and culture, or between theory and praxis.

SS historians in their exploration of peasant consciousness came across patterns of behaviour on the parts of peasants/ adivasis/ workers/ minorities that didn't conform to the citizenly conduct as they were supposed to be in modern democracies. Yet, they were all made citizens of new Indian post colonial state. This begged a whole host of questions: if struggles of the oppressed elements can be treated as parts of larger narrative of nationalism?; the nature of relationship between their struggles and the nation state?; what made them resist the dominant authorities in local contexts? Whether the imaginary of these social groups differed from that of anti-colonial elite in their idea of nation state?

The configuration of these imaginaries yields rich insights on understanding social movements both in the context of colonial past and post-colonial present. This entails for historians to measure gaps between the ideas that inform citizenly conduct versus those that motivated these marginalized sections to protest against the authority of the colonial and, subsequently, the post-colonial state. The other important question remains tied up with a dominant issue: whether in the context of social movements like women/Dalit workers/peasants, the category of the collectivities of citizen-subjects can be invoked to illuminate their methods of resistance based on arms, demonstration, petition, and other means, not just against the nation-state, but also against other social, political institutions such as patriarchy, empire, class and corporations? It has further been posed: "If the primary idiom of protest among these social groups is that of religion, kinship or community, then does the constitutional category of the citizen-subject, whose genealogy lies in the bourgeois liberal development of the West, become inadequate or restrictive in apprehending the 'social' in social movements?"

This still assumes greater urgency in the context of the post-millennial conjuncture in India. Equally so is the need to assess the relevance of the project in the age of mass political movements, neo-liberal capitalism; global movements of disenfranchised populations across borders. The land question has once again become crucial since the phase of opening up of Indian economy under the sign of since early 1990s. Attempts at acquisition of land by state and MNC have given rise to struggles by marginalized sections of society since then. The popular agitations in Orissa, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana and Maharashtra built around issues of setting up industries and methods of land acquisition by state agencies. The movements that ensued around these were often marked by strong anti-state violent and ideological clashes. The local cultivators, indigenous people, local residents, and urban civil rights group constituted the base of these new social movements. Large swathes of central India are also in the throes of Maoist insurgencies. At the forefront of these struggles are issues related to resource allocation and the rights of forest dwellers, agricultural labourers and miners to land and water resources. To what extent are present-day political formations or, indeed, the Indian state able to genuinely represent popular grievances? Is there a gap between the sentiments and consciousness of 'the people' and the state that supposedly represents them?

Against these developments, the searching question has been to probe whether Subaltern a valid category anymore? Can we think through this category to make sense of the "present"?? What light can a retrospective analysis of the political, theoretical and cultural genealogy of subaltern project illuminate for the global temporalities? It can be argued in hindsight that the early SS's engagement to write the masses back into history and recuperate the subaltern agency, despite its measures of criticism, had opened up refreshing possibilities. A major strand of the enduring legacies of SS, as has been argued by Dipesh Chakrabarty, can be acknowledged in terms of its insights into the 'genealogy of the mass-political subject in India' that remain valid in understanding contemporary insurgencies" that stressed the presence of "the archaic in the modern". What is thus significant to appreciate in Guha's contention of peasant

insurgencies being the forerunners of a variety of struggles in both the colonial and post-colonial period that stands the test of history.

The phenomenon of the crowd as a distinct political presence, whether in organized demonstrations or riots, or in the electoral “waves” of post-Independence India, certainly carried distinctive traces of collective practices that were much older than the Indian Constitution. However, as against this, it is also argued that the developments in the last two to three decades in India has made it imperative to redraw the figure of mass political subject. The deepening and widening of the apparatuses of governmentality and technologies of governance, as Partha Chatterjee draws our attention, has, I believe, transformed the quality of mass politics in India in the last two decades.

On the whole, what is noticeable in the recent mass politics of India's chaotic democracy is a contest over sovereignty with the Indian state and on the other, a domain that makes claims on governmental authorities over services and benefits. The two broad patterns in popular movements in contemporary India as has been delineated by Chatterjee's recent thesis makes for critical reading.

First kind challenges the sovereignty of the Indian state. The ongoing struggles for 'Azad (sovereign) Kashmir' and the continuing insurgencies in the forest regions of central and eastern India that have intensified in the recent spate of Maoist uprisings in these states serve as examples of such struggles. The Indian state is a complete outsider in these situations. Rather, the protesting groups, the Indian state and a variety of intermediaries are involved in complex negotiations about resource allocation, militarisation and governance. The everyday stuff of these negotiations, involving actions such as villagers giving refuge to Maoist rebels, children pelting stones at policemen, the unfurling of national flags of other countries, the blowing up of Indian army camps and transport are reminiscent of Guha's framework of 'negation' in Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency.

But the other examples of social movements are too numerous to be located within a broader paradigm of peasant insurgency as developed by Guha. One of the reasons being the shift in historical context: unlike in the colonial era insurgencies, where the state was an ‘outsider’ for the rebels, under conditions of economic liberalisation, the Indian state has penetrated even deeper into the lives of the Indian agriculturist. This has however generated a context where Indian peasantry has not disappeared under the impact of economic liberalization but has emerged as a new *avatar*. This refiguration of Indian peasantry in a completely new way has been evidently marked by active negotiation with the Indian state. It is in response to this dramatically altered nature of the insurgent subject, the pressing need to have alternative conceptual schema to make sense of contemporary peasant movements has been voiced in recent times.

"Subalternity" to "Precarity": Reading Simon During

It is in this conundrum, what conceptual resources the project of Subaltern “After subaltern studies” can offer in 21st century to scholars of South Asia and global histories. How to assess the relevance of the project in the age of mass political movements, neo-liberal capitalism; global movements of disenfranchised populations across borders? Is Subaltern a valid category anymore? Can we think through this category to make sense of the “present”?? What light can a retrospective analysis of the political, theoretical and cultural genealogy of subaltern project illuminate for the global temporalities? Does it represent a moment of productive tension; posing a challenge for social science, cultural studies; how to think through one of the paradigmatic model of subalternity as it emerged in the context of south Asia/India in the shape of major historiographical intervention (and became provocatively, global in its appeal) in the study of modern India, its colonial past and the postcolonial present?? Undoubtedly perhaps the present encapsulates a moment marked by reinforced need for renewal of the term’s provenance.

Working on this problematic, Simon During (b.1950) a New Zealand born academic, a cultural and literary critic; a post colonialist offers us a concept "Precariat"(2015) to engage with all such figures like emergence of mass-political subject-citizens in democracies such as India, the masses of asylum seekers and refugees fleeing ever-increasing sites of humanitarian crises, the low-end illegal workers in a largely immigrant society, the impoverished workers at the peripheries of service economies. These figures of “precarity” (lacking in predictability), and the demotic (common, popular, vernacular, local and colloquial) in the contemporary contexts stand marked by difference from the concept of subaltern as it was crafted in 1980s in the context of South Asia and father worked on for Global south.

During's concept of “precarity” and “precariat” perhaps captures the present tension in “Subaltern” concept's vulnerability to the contingencies of the contemporary, characterized by a sense of indeterminacy. As a concept the Subaltern may not always mean historian's "people"; anthropologist's "folk" and critical theorist's "mass". It could be rather be the signifier of history's remainders; a concept metaphor that seeks to measure the detritus (waste; debris of any kind) of the potentiality of “demotic” power. It illuminates strikingly too a mode of thinking the political subject through a radical critique and questioning of the very foundations of both the philosophy of history and philosophical anthropology in western thought.

Pitted against such conceptual canvas, a reading of Subaltern in heterogeneous space time of global contemporaneity can offer critical possibilities. Configuring precarity's reach and translating the idea of the subaltern into the register of “lack” and “unease” under global capitalism, During productively reads it as “a condition that references an important history— which has always privileged precariousness and its many cousins (vulnerability, uneasiness, groundlessness and fallenness, for instance) as conditions of human existence. The conditions

of contemporary precarity, During stresses,needs to be engaged by recognizing and acceding to a particular account of what it is to be human.

Public Policy: Privileging Policy Intellectuals or Public Intellectuals? Reading Shiv Vishwanathan

It has often been lamented that "Our knowledge society does not differentiate between information and knowledge. Knowledge is embodied, epistemic, and has tacit elements. By confusing information and knowledge, we lack critical thinking, the meta-languages and the heuristics that go into the definition of knowledge...Contemporary India, in that sense, was never sensitive to the genealogies of knowledge...We consumed knowledge but we rarely added creatively to the stockpile. India became a consumer of knowledge rather than a translator or an inventor of knowledge systems."

A complex set of questions confront us when we seek to understand new social movements of India today. The recent debates around growth, development and the fate of forests and the future of mining have also raised issues that public policy must answer. Nature which was once taken for granted or seen as passive in the realm of knowledge is now becoming a part of the social contract. The new generation has to ask itself whether nature has rights: for example does a mountain have legal standing? When a tribal says that when a mountain dies, a myth dies, how does one translate his language into the dialects of policy? How does one analyse the death of a 'myth' through costs and benefits? Is a waterfall only about cusecs of water?

Against this backdrop what could be the possible epistemic reach of public policy? Pursuing this question, Viswanathan reminds us:

What makes public policy exciting, protean and potentially inventive is the contested nature of the public sphere. It is anchored in a diversity of perspectives which challenges the dominance of one subject. For example, economics, which was almost a canonical discipline, now realises that it confronts a new commons of social sciences which sees its sense of measure as inadequate to understand freedom or suffering. The new developments in feminism, cultural studies, future studies and science studies have added an increasing plurality to the fields of knowledge...Governance is now seen no longer as a statist exercise and the question of governmentality involves civil society articulating new epistemologies, notions of citizenship, ideas about the democratisation of knowledge and the assessment of public policy impacts. Governance has become tied to democracy, with the public sphere becoming crucial and public policy a critical field.

Democracy is no longer to be seen as a passive exercise of citizenship reduced only to the exercise of periodic elections. The proactive orientation of democracy makes the informed citizen demand more, challenging the dominance of the expert. She "senses" her active role as

fundamental for ensuring sustainability of the society. The public sphere today has emerged more dynamic and contested.

It needs no reiteration that one cannot but integrate ethics, science, suffering and philosophy as dynamic conceptual entities in the context of policy formulations. One has to think through the images of futures "in realistic terms going beyond the simplicity of smart cities to ask what urban space and urban imagination are." Remaining sensitive to the call for "diverse ways of being human", acritical student has to answer the new challenges to citizenship. The burden of this responsibility becomes more pressing at a time when appropriateness of academics is pathologically questioned. It is in this context, a dialogic conversation with public policy may open up refreshing possibilities to draw the contours of a feasible future.
