

**CULTURAL FORMS IN POLITICAL MOBILISATION:  
A CASE STUDY OF BHOJPURI FOLK SONGS IN THE  
NAXALITE MOVEMENT**

**Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University  
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CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled **“Cultural Forms in Political Mobilisation: A Case Study of Bhojpuri Folk Songs in the Naxalite Movement”** submitted by **MONA DAS** in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY** has not been previously submitted for the award of any other degree of this university or of any other university and is her original work.

We, recommend that the dissertation may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. Zoya Hasan  
(Chairperson)

Prof. Kiran Saxena  
(Supervisor)

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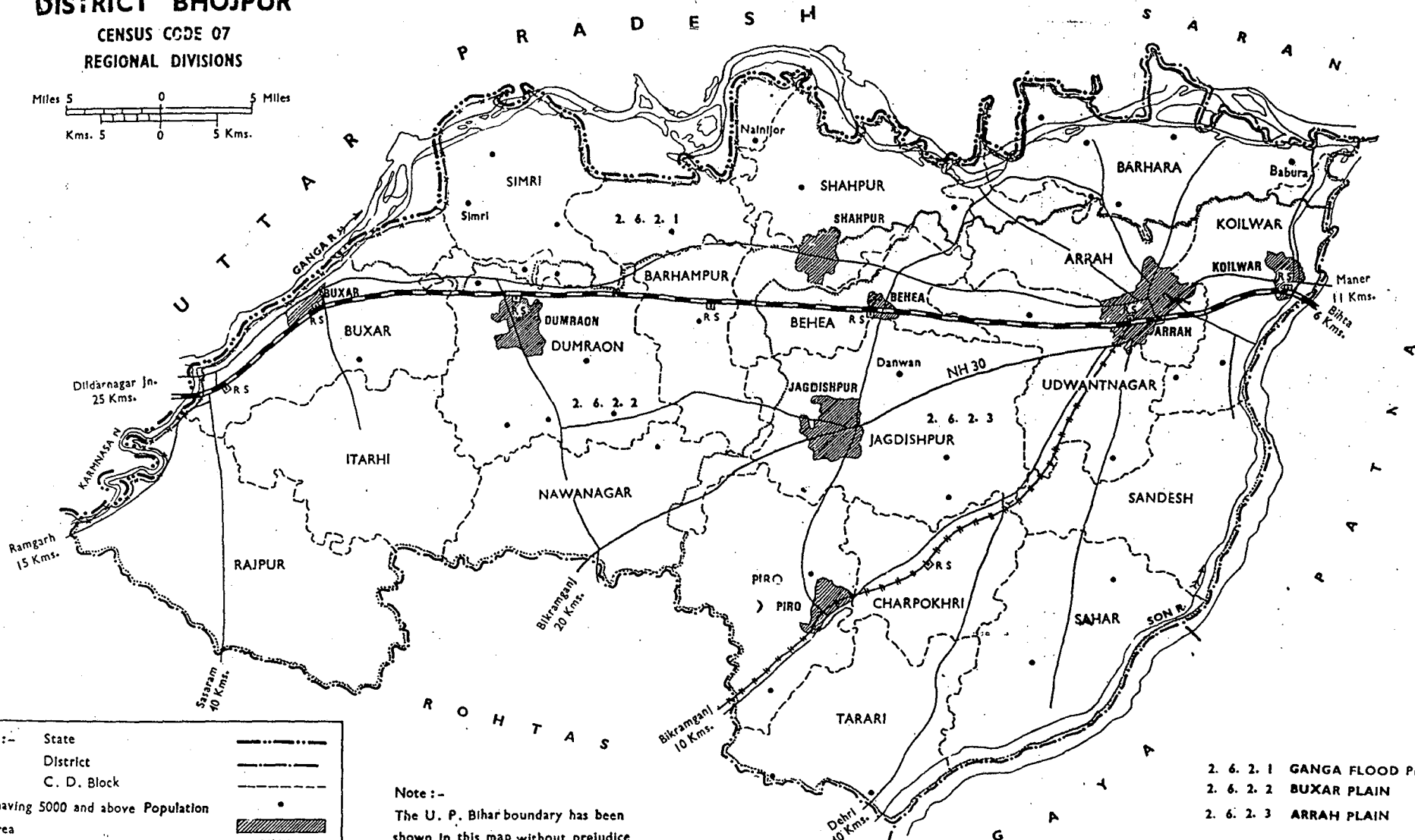
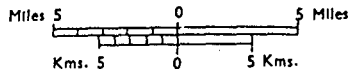
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Warm regards for my parents at this hour for their support in letting me pursue the issues, ideas and academics of my choice.

Needless to say I am alone responsible for any error that remains.

**Mona Das**

**BIHAR**  
**DISTRICT BHOJPUR**  
 CENSUS CODE 07  
 REGIONAL DIVISIONS



Boundary :-	State	-----
"	District	-----
"	C. D. Block	-----
Villages having 5000 and above Population		•
Urban Area		▨
National Highway		NH 30
Important Metalled Road		---
Railway line with Station Broad Gauge		R.S.

**Note :-**  
 The U. P. Bihar boundary has been shown in this map without prejudice to the respective claims of the two State Governments.

- 2. 6. 2. 1 GANGA FLOOD PLAIN
- 2. 6. 2. 2 BUXAR PLAIN
- 2. 6. 2. 3 ARRAH PLAIN

## Chapter-I

### Introduction

This study seeks to examine some questions regarding the role of music in political mobilization, with special reference to the protest songs produced in the course of the radical agrarian movement in Bhojpur.

Some of the questions, which often beset the student of cultural and political phenomena are: What role does culture play in political mobilization? Is culture 'external' to political mobilization? Is it merely a "tool" that is used by political groups to manipulate or indoctrinate social groups? Are shakhas and *trishul diksha* ceremonies 'used' by various outfits of the RSS, merely conspiratorial 'tools' to attract people in the name of 'innocent' pursuits like play, exercise, worship or entertainment, only in order to indoctrinate them surreptitiously with *Hindutva* ideas? Are street plays or other cultural forms employed by the Left merely to indoctrinate for crudely propagandist purposes?

To thus conceive the interplay between culture and political mobilization as largely conspiratorial is to assume, mistakenly, that 'culture' is a realm that is somehow 'pure', 'innocent' of politics, and its use for the purposes of mobilization necessarily manipulative and dishonest at worst, and merely propagandist at best. Such a conception fails to identify the complex and inextricable linkages between culture, consciousness and social and material relations. Political mobilization is, after all, closely connected to the question of political consciousness; and culture is integral to the process of formation and transformation of consciousness. This study aims to explore this process in order to gain

further insights into the dynamics of political mobilization. For this purpose I have chosen *Bhojpuri* songs, especially those associated with radical mobilizations of poor peasantry by Left groups.

My study uses a Marxist framework to look at this interplay between politics and culture. Therefore in my first chapter I have tried to grapple with the issue of whether political consciousness emerges spontaneously or does it develop due to conscious political intervention? The premise on which I propose to base my study is that political consciousness especially left consciousness can be inculcated by conscious political intervention. The songs have been analysed as tools for inculcating political consciousness besides their role in giving vivid descriptions of lived experiences and struggles. Besides looking at the traditional Marxist theories on formation and transformation of working class consciousness, I have also tried to explore the formation of political consciousness of the peasantry. This was particularly important since the songs, which are subject of this dissertation specifically pertain to the radical movements of poor peasantry in Bhojpur district of Bihar from late 60's up till early 90's.

The second chapter historically traces the instances of mobilization of peasantry in various social and political movements in *Bhojpur*. Attempts have been made to identify the issues around which peasants have launched struggles in this region overtime. Though agrarian poor have been used in all these movements yet their demands and issues never found reflection in the agenda of the struggles. Thus idea is also to trace the history of agrarian labour taking shape of a class-for-itself particularly in the course of Naxalite movement.

In the final chapter I have analysed songs that have come to occupy an important place in the life and struggles of the peasantry in this region and their political expression in the Naxalite movement. I have tried to

explore how and why a radical left movement could use these songs for mobilizing the agrarian poor. Songs that I have chosen cover a wide range, from those which have been composed by activists, performing a vanguard role in their capacity as organic intellectuals of the oppressed sections, to anonymous folk songs which have been popular in this region and have been literally adopted by the Naxalite movement. As peasantry formed the backbone of this movement we find reverberations of peasant culture in the songs. The movement raised the issue of feudal oppression, social dignity and organized resistance to oppression, which gets reflected in the songs as well.

However there are many problems that beset such a study, and I would like to clarify them. Although there is a rich and live tradition of protest music, actively used in political mobilization by many groups, I have focussed the activities of CPI(M) Liberation. Extensive fieldwork would be required to collect songs, since most of these songs are not published but are passed on and adapted orally. In many cases, the authorship of songs is lost, and in a sense, the individual authorship is less important to such mass songs, than the fact of their role as a collective cultural heritage of struggle. Since an extensive field study fell outside the scope of an M.Phil dissertation, I was forced to rely on available printed matter, and transcripts of some of the oral songs used by cultural groups. The greatest regret is the fact that I was unable to include any song composed by women, although I was told by many activists that there are several such songs, and many women singers in the movement.

The area I have delineated for my study is the erstwhile Shahabad district, which was, divided into Bhojpur and Rohtas districts in 1972. The Arrah and Buxar sub-divisions went to Bhojpur and Sasaram and Bhabua went to Rohtas. However again in 1990's Buxar was separated from the



Sadr Arrah sub-division of Bhojpur. For the purposes of this study I would restrict myself to the administrative unit named Bhojpur, because the linguistic region that has come to be known as Bhojpur does not overlap with the administrative unit, infact it extends way beyond the Bhojpur district.

In the selection of songs I have not restricted myself strictly to songs written in Bhojpuri. But have also included some of the powerful, popular songs, which have been written in Hindi but are set in the Bhojpuri milieu. Therefore Bhojpuri for the purposes of this study does not strictly correspond with the language but it communicates a wide socio-cultural context. And the idea is to place this study in that particular context.

The time period that I have chosen is from early seventies to early nineties. This was the period when radical left movement of agrarian poor shook the entire Bhojpur district. The movement travelled a long distance within this short span of time. In the initial years, it put greater emphasis on guerilla actions, but later by the eighties, concerted attempts were made to shift the focus of activities to organizing mass movements. Infact the CPI(ML) underwent a massive rectification campaign leading to this drastic change in the party line in accordance with the appraisal of the post-emergency situation. The party, as a part of this change in the line took up the Indian People's Front experiment. A combination of 150 big and small organizations gave birth to the Indian Peoples' Front at Ferozeshah Kotla Grounds in Delhi in 1981. Under the banner of IPF, new activities reinvigorated the agrarian movement in Bhojpur and other parts of Bihar.

Having outlined the trajectory of this dissertation and identifying possible inadequacies in the scope of this research, I would like to put forward my study of the struggles of the agrarian poor in Bhojpur and its

cultural expressions, forming an important landmark in the political history of India.

Writing about the role of music in the revolutionary working class movement in Europe, Hanns Eisler, the German composer, wrote:

*“Music, like every other art has to fulfill a certain purpose in society. It is used by bourgeois society mainly as recreation, for the reproduction (re-creation) of labor power, to lull people and to blunt their intellect.*

*The workers’ music movement must be clear about the new function of their music, which is to activate their members for struggle and to encourage political education. That means that all music forms and techniques must be developed to suit the express purpose, that is the class struggle.” – ‘Our Revolutionary Music’, 1932.<sup>1</sup>*

This study seeks to identify the various forms and techniques employed by songs of the revolutionary left movement in rural Bhojpur, and their role and relationship with the struggles and political mobilization of that movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Manfred Grabs (ed.), *Hanns Eisler- A Rebel in Music, Selected Writings*, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin 1978. p.59

## Chapter-II

### Culture, Consciousness and Political Mobilisation

*“Social change is not a phenomenon that simply happens like rain, it is something that needs to be done.” – Gorakh Pandey.<sup>1</sup>*

Does political consciousness emerge spontaneously, or does it require conscious political intervention to develop it? This vexed debate of Marxist theory must be one of the starting points of any discussion of the role of culture in political mobilization, since conscious “cultural work” among people with a view to transforming their consciousness makes sense only if one holds that political consciousness can be inculcated. This chapter will therefore begin by examining these issues in political theory.

#### *Spontaneity and Consciousness*

Marxist theory has paid the closest attention to the question of political consciousness and mobilization, and even non-Marxists have developed their ideas in **opposition** to Marxism. Marx made a crucial break with idealist philosophy with his assertion that “Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life.”<sup>2</sup> He later elaborated what he meant by ‘life’, with the formulation that “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in

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<sup>1</sup> Gorakh Pandey, *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, Jan Sanskriti Manch, Patna, 1990, p 15.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx and Engels, Frederick, *German Ideology*, Progress Publisher, Moscow, 1964, p 38.

general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their beings, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, he used a metaphor that laid Marxism open to the allegation of ‘economic determinism’ – he said that the productive forces and the relations of production they create, together constitute the mode of production, which forms the economic *base* which, in the final instance, determines the *superstructure* of ideas, culture, consciousness, as well as structures and institutions. But this analogy does not imply ‘superstructural’ to mean secondary or less significant. It does not mean that the cultural and ideological processes and phenomena must be ‘reduced’ to an economic structure. As Chris Harman points out, with another analogy, “the skeleton is not same as the living body, but without it, the body would have no solidity and could not survive”. Similarly, understanding the material ‘basis’ of society is an essential precondition for understanding everything else, though to understand this basis correctly is not to reduce the role of individuals or ideas to this basis.<sup>4</sup>

Marx did not underestimate the significance of the super structural realm of ideology. In fact, since Marxism is above all a philosophy of revolutionary social *change*, it is deeply concerned with the question of how the ruling class maintains its ideological grip over the masses, as well as how the masses can free themselves of this grip and transform their consciousness. If ideology, the superstructure, is where people are gripped by dominant ideas and falsely conceptualise their relationship with the real social and economic relations, it is also the arena where they become conscious of the conflicts in the economic base, and conduct the fight to throw off dominant ideas which demand their subjugation. It was because

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*, (1859), Progress Publisher, Moscow, p 21.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World*, Bookmarks, London and Sydney, 1999, p.iv.

Marx realized this that he could assert, “theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses”.<sup>5</sup>

For Marxists, the fact that ideas, consciousness and ideology belong to the realm of the superstructure does not mean that they merit less attention and importance; simply that they cannot be properly understood or changed in abstraction or isolation from their economic foundations. As Raymond Williams points out in his discussion of the concepts of base and superstructure in conjunction with Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, “If ideology were merely some abstract, imposed set of notions, if our social and political and cultural ideas and assumptions and habits were merely the result of social manipulation...then society would be very much easier to move and to change than in practice it has ever been or is.” What makes ruling class hegemony complex and challenging, demanding a serious ideological battle from revolutionaries, is the fact that hegemony “constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society”. The concept of ‘hegemony’ implies the existence of “something which...is not merely secondary...but which is lived at such a depth, which saturates the society to such an extent, and which...even constitutes the substance of common sense for most people under its sway”.<sup>6</sup>

The process whereby a new class comes to consciousness, whereby ruling class hegemony and ‘common sense’ is challenged by proletarian hegemony, is a complex and protracted one. While human history has been marked by a series of fierce class struggles, it is only the modern working class, the product of industrial capitalism, which has the potential to effect the final overthrow of class society. Marx identifies the proletariat as the

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Marx, *Introduction, Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, 1844*, Cambridge University, London, 1970.

<sup>6</sup> Raymond Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, New York, 1980. p.37.

class, which has the greatest revolutionary potential – the potential to emancipate society by liberating itself. But there is no automatic, smooth way in which this *potential* will be realized by the working class. The proletariat has a long way to go in its transition from a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself.<sup>7</sup> He recognizes that bourgeois hegemony of ideas hampers this transition: “The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.”<sup>8</sup>

How, in the face of such hegemony, will the working class realize its revolutionary role and emerge as a ‘class-for-itself’? Marx holds that political consciousness and organizational unity of the workers will arise spontaneously from their economic struggles. As an example, he cites the economic struggles of workers of separate factories for a shorter day. When these disparate economic struggles merge to demand a law for an eight-hour working day, the movement becomes political. “And, in this way, out of the separate economic movements of the workers there grows up everywhere a *political* movement, that is to say, a movement of the *class*...”<sup>9</sup>

Here, Marx fails to anticipate the power of tendencies like working class reformism to block the move from trade-union consciousness to socialist consciousness. He assumes that as long as the mass of workers are organized and united in struggles, these struggles will evolve into a revolutionary movement. It is Lenin who makes the breakthrough of realising that political consciousness would not necessarily grow organically from economic struggles, instead that such struggles could equally well engender economism and reformism. Lenin, over a period of

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, tr..H Quelch, Charles H Kerr and Company, Chicago, 1847.

<sup>8</sup> Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1964, p 60.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, cited in John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, Bookmarks, London, 1978, p 30.

time and sharp polemical debates, offered several insights about the nature of working class spontaneity and consciousness, bourgeois hegemony and the kind of political organization required to break it and establish proletarian independence.

Lenin defines the class struggle as a movement from 'spontaneity' towards 'consciousness'. He argues that the 'spontaneous element' seen in the strikes, in which workers destroyed machinery of the 1860s and 70s "represents nothing more nor less than consciousness in embryonic form".<sup>10</sup> But Lenin held in 1901-02 that, left to spontaneity, the working class could only develop trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to unite in trade unions to fight the employers, demand labour legislations for better working conditions and so on. The spontaneous working class movement, as Lenin saw it at the beginning of the twentieth century, was more likely to be dominated by the bourgeois ideology of reformism and economism, "for the simple reason that bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, that it is more fully developed, and that it has at its disposal *immeasurably* more means of dissemination."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, economic struggles alone could not bring the working class to a realization of its historic role, its "irreconcilable antagonism", not just to employers, but to the entire political and social system. "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers."<sup>12</sup> Revolutionaries, Lenin held, could develop the conscious element incipient in spontaneous struggles, only by refusing to restrict themselves to the economic sphere of the factory floor alone. Instead, they must agitate on "every concrete example" of

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<sup>10</sup> Lenin, *What Is To be Done*, 1901-02, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p.31

<sup>11</sup> Lenin, *What Is To be Done*, 1901-02, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p.42

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.78-79

oppression, though such oppression may not be a bread and butter question for workers. The revolutionary party must educate workers to concern themselves with the oppression which “affects the most diverse classes in society, ...manifests itself in the most varied spheres of life and activity – vocational, civic, personal, family, religious, scientific”; only then can it foster political consciousness in workers.<sup>13</sup> In *What Is To be Done*, he heatedly defends the role of students and youth in such a party; against the charge that such elements will “push on” the working class movement from the outside. He says that students and youth, as well as workers, can be members and leaders of the party, rather than elitist middle class elements leading the masses from “without”, as long as they are committed to being “professional revolutionaries”, bound by the proletarian discipline of the party.<sup>14</sup> Later, having witnessed the 1905 revolution, Lenin shifted his emphasis on “political consciousness from without”, stressing instead the “instinctive” revolutionary urge for socialism that the mass of workers. Now, Lenin speaks of how the “elementary instinct of the working class movement is able to correct the conceptions of the greatest minds”.<sup>15</sup> Lenin’s insights into the process of transformation of working class consciousness were reached over a period of immense tumult. This enabled him to perceive the immensely *uneven* nature of working class consciousness, composed as it is of many contradictory elements. During a period of relative stability, reformist trends tended to dominate the consciousness of workers. But when workers were impelled, at certain junctures of crises, due to their own material needs, to participate in

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.57 This basic principle of the Leninist party has bearing for the experience of the ML movement in Bhojpur, (discussed at greater length in the third chapter), where the party raised issues not just of wages and land, but also caste, social dignity and gender.

<sup>14</sup> Lenin, *What Is To be Done*, 1901-02, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p.119.

<sup>15</sup> Lenin, *Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution*, Foreign Language Press, Peking. 1975. p 155



revolutionary struggles, their consciousness had the capacity to advance very rapidly. In order to struggle against reformist trends and maintain a revolutionary core which would remain ahead of the class in a pre-revolutionary period, lead the class in a period of revolutionary advance, and consolidate the gains and advances of this period in case of defeat, Lenin saw the need for a revolutionary party of advanced workers, a vanguard of the mass of workers.

Apart from Lenin, the other Marxist revolutionary who theorized the nature and dynamics of working class spontaneity, consciousness and leadership, was the Polish socialist and leader of the German Communist movement, Rosa Luxemburg. Luxemburg engaged in sharp polemics with Lenin on these questions. Taking issue with his formulations about the need for a vanguard party to lead the mass of workers from spontaneity towards consciousness, she argues that in fact the greatest advances in tactics of struggle are not the product of an organized, centralized, vanguard leadership, but are the “spontaneous product of the movement in ferment”. In her view, the revolutionary party must seek its role primarily in propaganda, and must not attempt to plan political actions like strikes, which are best left to the spontaneous energy of the working class. She offers important insights into the ways in which workers’ consciousness can grow in leaps and bounds in the process of learning through spontaneous struggles, and also into the complementarity rather than contradiction between economic and political struggles. She also warns against the dangers of conservatism of political parties and leadership which are isolated from the dynamics of mass struggles. But Luxemburg did not account for the unevenness in working class consciousness; consequently, she underestimated the potential dangers of reformism within the working class. She assumed, as perhaps Marx did, that the objective economic unity

of the working class would spontaneously lead to its political unity with a revolutionary purpose. The complex, contradictory nature of working class consciousness, and the question of bourgeois hegemony, are not issues with which Luxemburg deals.<sup>16</sup>

It was, eventually, a historic defeat of the working class movement, and the victory of right reaction, which generated some of the deepest insights since Lenin into the dynamics of popular consciousness and political mobilization. Antonio Gramsci, the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, spent the final 11 years of his life developing these insights into the consciousness, mobilization and organization of the working class and peasantry. It is important to clarify at the outset the vantage point of Gramsci's observations. Gramsci's views have often lent themselves to distortions, in which his theory is pitted as an "alternative" or even a challenge to the classical, class-based, Leninist model of organization. Gramsci has been posed by many as the theorist of non-class "social movements", rather than class struggles. But it cannot be emphasized enough that Gramsci's central, burning concern in his writing was to outline the role and the tasks of, to evolve a praxis for a revolutionary Communist party. He addressed the questions of how the consciousness of the oppressed 'subaltern' classes is constituted, and how bourgeois hegemony seeks to maintain its ideological domination, in order to identify what the strategy of a revolutionary party must be so as to establish a proletarian hegemony, a revolutionized consciousness. In doing so, he covered much of the ground that Lenin had done before him, but his contribution was to address the question at the level of philosophy as much as at that of practice.

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<sup>16</sup> John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, Bookmarks, London, 1978, p 96-116.

Gramsci's ideas are often represented as a "corrective" to Marxist "determinism"; for instance David Arnold, echoing a position held by many, says that Gramsci's attention to consciousness and the ideological dimensions of hegemony "offers a corrective to the tendency towards a deterministic concentration upon societies' economic 'base'".<sup>17</sup> But Gramsci's position was not in contradistinction to Marx's own ideas; since, Marx had never denied the role of extra-economic factors in shaping society. Engels himself had commented that Marx and he had emphasized the 'main principle', the economic side, vis-a-vis their adversaries who denied it, and therefore had less time to "give their due to other elements involved in the interaction".<sup>18</sup> It is these "other elements" whose interaction Gramsci traces, never denying the economic principle. Gramsci, rather than denying the basic role of economic production relations, examines the dialectical interrelation between base and superstructure. He points out how "mass ideological factors" tend to "lag behind mass economic phenomena", and how, as a result, "the automatic thrust due to the economic factor is slowed down, obstructed or even momentarily broken down by traditional ideological elements", calling for a "conscious, planned struggle...an appropriate political initiative...to liberate the economic thrust from the dead weight of traditional policies".<sup>19</sup> We can see this phenomenon in India in the context of how ideas like religion, caste, community, in the manner suggested by Marx, become a material force which grips the masses, and therefore act as a drag on class consciousness, class struggles and the "economic thrust" of capitalism in India.

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<sup>17</sup> David Arnold, 'Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, (1984), 11, 4, p. 155.

<sup>18</sup> Engels to Bloch, 21-22 September 1890, in Marx and Engels, *Selected Correspondence*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1965. p 418.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996, p. 168.

Gramsci addresses the question of spontaneity and conscious leadership in a way that is distinct from both the early Lenin (of *What Is To Be Done*), as well as Luxemburg. Neither does he claim that consciousness is opposed to spontaneity and necessarily needs to be introduced from “outside”, nor does he valorize spontaneity and pit it against conscious leadership. In fact, he resembles the mature Lenin when he argues that spontaneity and conscious leadership have a reciprocal relationship.

He poses the question: “Can modern theory (*i.e. Marxism*... see footnote) be in opposition to the “spontaneous” feelings of the masses? (“Spontaneous” in the sense that they are not the result of any systematic educational activity on the part of an already conscious leading group, but have been formed through everyday experience illuminated by “common sense”, *i.e.* by the traditional popular conception of the world – what is unimaginatively called “instinct”, although it too is in fact a primitive and elementary historical acquisition.)”<sup>20</sup> This formulation has strong echoes of the post-1905 Lenin’s observation, quoted above, about the “elementary instinct of the working class” which he felt could correct even the “greatest minds”.

He answers this question by citing the example of a movement led by the Ordine Nuovo, a group in Italy of which Gramsci was part of the nucleus. “The element of “spontaneity” was not neglected and even less despised. It was *educated*, directed, purged of extraneous contaminations; the aim was to bring it in line with modern theory... This unity between “spontaneity” and ‘conscious leadership’ and “discipline” is precisely the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.198-99. In order to deflect the prison censor, Gramsci often used unorthodox terms in place of classical Marxist terminology. Generally, he used the phrase ‘modern theory’ to connote Marxism.

real political action of the subaltern classes, in so far as this is mass politics and not merely an adventure by groups claiming to represent the masses.”<sup>21</sup>

For Gramsci, this question was of particular urgency and importance. Whereas in Lenin’s context, bourgeois reaction within the working class movement took the form of reformism, in Italy it took the virulent form of fascism, which defeated the Communists in the struggle to mobilize the masses and win the consent of the peasantry. Gramsci observes, “Neglecting, or worse still despising, so-called “spontaneous” movements, i.e. failing to give them a conscious leadership or to raise them to a higher plane by inserting them into politics, may often have extremely serious consequences. It is almost always the case that a “spontaneous” movement of the subaltern classes is accompanied by a reactionary movement of the right wing of the dominant class, for concomitant reasons. An economic crisis, for instance, engenders on the one hand discontent among the subaltern classes and spontaneous mass movements, and on the other conspiracies among the reactionary groups, who take advantage of the objective weakening of the government in order to attempt *coups d’etat*. Among the effective causes of the *coups* must be included the failure of the responsible groups to give any conscious leadership to the spontaneous revolts or to make them a positive political factor.”<sup>22</sup>

Gramsci asserts that “everyone is a philosopher, though in his way and unconsciously”<sup>23</sup>, but conscious human agency and political intervention is required in order to transform the fragmented, contradictory

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<sup>21</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996. p.198. Once again, ‘modern theory’ here refers to Marxism.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p 199. John Molyneux in *Marxism and the Party*, Bookmarks, London, 1978,(p 155-56) points out that though Gramsci here illustrates his point with an instance from Italian history of 1282, probably to divert the censor, it is most likely that he had in mind the far more contemporary example of the vacillations of the Italian Socialist Party and the ultra-leftist leadership of the Italian Communist Party, as factors which facilitated the rise of Mussolini.

<sup>23</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996. p.323

consciousness of individuals, into a collective will in action. The ruling class maintains itself through a combination of force and consent, dictatorship and hegemony, institutionalized in repressive state power and civil society. In advanced capitalist societies, unlike revolutionary Russia, the relative resilience of civil society and the sturdiness of its hegemonic structure allowed it to withstand the crises, which shook the state. This impelled Gramsci to stress the need to develop tactics to suit a protracted “war of position” (to challenge the ideological hegemony of the dominant class and establish a proletarian hegemony), in addition to the “war of manoeuvre” or direct assaults on state power.<sup>24</sup> Just as the ruling class combines dictatorship with hegemony, the revolutionary party must combine the “war of manoeuvre” with the “war of position”. Gramsci identifies several levels at which the revolutionary party must struggle to weaken the consent given by the masses to the ruling class, and establish its own hegemony. Firstly, he stresses the need to forge alliances; in particular, the alliance of the proletariat with the peasantry. Gramsci paid considerable attention to the nature of peasant consciousness, and its potential for revolutionary transformation. Gramsci’s next formulation echoes Lenin’s assertion in *What Is To Be Done*, that political education and consciousness-building cannot be restricted to economic questions alone, but must embrace every aspect of life and society. Gramsci stresses that the masses, whether working class or peasantry, must be won over at the level of their worldview. In order to do this, revolutionary propaganda cannot simply try to impose views from without; it must identify, separate and develop the element of “good sense” in the “common sense” of the masses, from the elements of prejudice and backwardness. As part of the war of position, Gramsci outlines the attitude towards the intelligentsia. He stresses the need

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 229-39

to develop “organic intellectuals”; i.e. those who are organic to the working class. Such organic intellectuals are workers who are the organizers and leaders of their class. He also argues for the need to develop a left-wing tendency among the traditional intellectuals (the lawyers, doctors, teachers etc who have emerged from the peasantry but are distanced from it now), who can play a role in securing the alliance of the peasantry with the proletariat.<sup>25</sup>

### *Peasant consciousness and its transformation*

In the previous section, we have examined some of the influential formulations about the formation and transformation of consciousness in general, and working class consciousness in particular. Since the *Bhojpuri* songs which are the subject of this dissertation specifically pertain to the radical movements of poor peasantry, we must also address the question of peasant consciousness in particular.

Marx posited the potential revolutionary nature of the proletariat as a class by contrasting it with that of the peasantry. The industrial proletariat which is united on the factory floor and acquires self-awareness as an organized force, is contrasted with the small-holding peasants who “form a vast mass, the members of which live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with one another. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse...In this way, the great mass of the French nation is formed by simple addition of homologous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack

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<sup>25</sup> John Molyneux, *Marxism and the Party*, Bookmarks, London, 1978, p.148-154.

Gramsci’s observations are scattered over several notes in his prison notebooks. Molyneux skillfully brings together many of his observations which are pertinent to his theory of organization and party building. Gramsci made many of these observations in the specific context of peasantry, those will be dealt with at greater length later in the chapter.

form a sack of potatoes.”<sup>26</sup> Marx therefore, found the peasantry incapable of realizing or defending its interest as a class.

But the experience of revolutions in Russia, and later in China underlined the crucial role that peasantry would play, and we find Lenin delineating the role of peasantry as a crucial ally of the working class in revolutionary Russia. He also stressed the class differentiations within the peasantry, distinguishing between the “working peasant” and the “peasant huckster”, and emphasized that the working class must win the consent and confidence of the peasantry, by endorsing its maximum programme.

Gramsci’s observations about subaltern consciousness, the role of popular culture/folk traditions in its formation, and his suggestions for the ways in which Marxist organizers should approach such popular beliefs in order to transform consciousness, are especially useful for this dissertation, in which participants in movements draw upon folk traditions to compose protest songs in Bhojpuri. But one must first engage with some of the interpretations of Gramsci’s writings that have been made in the context of Indian peasantry, most influentially by the Subaltern School of historians.

Gramsci’s insights into peasant consciousness have often been interpreted as a corrective to ‘deterministic’ bias of Marxism. But are such interpretations in line with the context and thrust of Gramsci’s observations? One prominent historian of the Subaltern School, David Arnold, discusses the usefulness of Gramsci’s ideas for the study of “peasant subalternity in India”. He points out that Gramsci realised the need for the industrial proletariat to unite with the numerically larger peasantry for a successful revolution, a realization that was deepened by the historic failure of the Italian Communist movement to win the consent of the peasantry, leading to the victory of fascism. He asserts, however, that

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<sup>26</sup>Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1977. p 106.



though Gramsci had learnt about the role of peasantry in the revolution from the experience of the Russian Revolution of 1917, “for Gramsci associating the peasantry with the proletarian-led revolution was not mere short-term opportunism with peasants being gulled into aiding a revolution of which they would be early victims”. What Arnold implies is that Gramsci’s idea of an enduring and revolutionary unity between peasantry and proletariat was in some way an advance over the opportunism or pragmatism over traditional Marxist practice. But if one takes the experience of the Russian Revolution as the successful instance of Marxist practice, one is struck by the continuities between Lenin’s own insights and injunctions, which Arnold seems to miss. Lenin speaks of how the revolutionary proletariat won the confidence and the solidarity of the peasant masses of Russia by including its most advanced demands unqualifiedly in its programme, and thus proving that it was the working class and not the bourgeoisie that would fulfill the agenda of democratic revolution. This is echoed in Gramsci’s own conclusion that the revolutionary party must accept “the elementary demands of the peasantry” – foremost the demand for agrarian reform and democratization of land relations.<sup>27</sup> Gramsci’s studies of Italian history are all impelled by the urge to draw conclusions for the praxis of the contemporary Communist Party – conclusions that, thanks to the prison censor, he can imply, but not spell out. He discusses the role of Mazzini’s Action Party in the Italian Risorgimento, which, despite its radical rhetoric, remained influenced by the pressures of rich farmers and estate managers, and thus failed to include demands like agrarian reform in its programme. It therefore failed to give the Risorgimento a truly democratic character. As a consequence it failed to bridge the deep rift between the town and country which had riven Italian

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<sup>27</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996. p. 74.

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society, and which had momentous consequences for the modern Italian nation. By indicting the Action Party for failing to accept the elementary demands of the peasantry, Gramsci is actually indicting the Italian Communist movement for a similar failure. When he upholds the “Jacobin” model in France for the bond it could establish between town and country, he is in fact recommending that the Communist movement learn from the Jacobins and form a revolutionary bloc between the peasantry and the working class. These conclusions are well in line with those formulated by Lenin in Russia.

But what needs to be further emphasized is that for Lenin, too, the unity of the proletariat and the peasantry is in no way merely a pragmatic ploy to “gull” the peasantry or to make them “early victims” of the revolution. The alliance of peasantry with the proletariat in the revolution is a natural one between the oppressed sections of society. But oppressive class relations in rural society also need to be overthrown. Speaking on the work to be done in the countryside towards building a socialist society, Lenin stresses the need to conduct a class struggle with the rich peasantry (*kulaks*), and also the need for such a struggle to identify and ally with the “proletarian and semi-proletarian” elements in the countryside. He repeatedly underlines the fact that “nothing is more stupid than the very idea of applying coercion in economic relations with middle peasantry. He insists that all dealings of the new state with the middle peasantry must be “not the orders of a commander but the advice of a comrade”.<sup>28</sup> This section must be won over by patiently showing it that “a class of small producers cannot lose by socialism, but on the contrary, will gain a great deal by

<sup>28</sup> Lenin, Report to the Eight Congress of the R.C.P(B), March 18-23, 1919, *Selected Works, Vol III*, p 139-153.

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casting off the yoke of capital which exploits it in a thousand different ways even in a most democratic republic.”<sup>29</sup>

What Arnold makes no mention of is the fact that Gramsci’s polemics regarding the need to ally with the peasantry and with movements that are not “one hundred percent conscious” are not directed at Lenin, but at the ultra-left position of Amadeo Bordiga within his own party, who was opposed to any manner of compromises or alliances. Many of Gramsci’s positions developed in the context of inner-party struggles with the Bordiga on the one hand, and the right wing opportunism represented by Angelo Tasca on the other.

Gramsci’s remarks criticizing those Marxists who saw as “real and worthwhile only such movements of revolt as are one hundred percent conscious, i.e. movements that are governed by plans worked out in advance to the last detail or in line with abstract theory” are directed at his own rigid and ultra-left colleagues rather than at Marxist-Leninist practice as such. Gramsci himself reminds us that implied and sometimes even explicitly stated in the “doctrine of Illitch” (Lenin), that every “spontaneous” movement contains rudimentary elements of conscious leadership, of discipline, and that “common sense” elements of popular beliefs need to be transformed, educated, revolutionized.<sup>30</sup> It is in continuity rather than conflict with Lenin that Gramsci writes about the “necessity, in an exposition of the philosophy of praxis (Marxism), of a polemic with traditional philosophies”, and asserts that being a “mass philosophy”, Marxism can only be conceived in a “polemical form and in the form of a perpetual struggle”, in which the “starting point must always be that common sense which is the spontaneous philosophy of the multitude and

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<sup>29</sup> Lenin, Report to the Eight Congress of the R.C.P(B), March 18-23, 1919, *Selected Works, Vol III*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969. p 154.

<sup>30</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996. p.196-97.

which has to be made ideologically coherent.”<sup>31</sup> We have seen Lenin comment on the grip which bourgeois ideology, in the form of reformism or economism, tends to have on the masses; a grip which, however gives way rapidly to more advanced consciousness in the course of mass struggles, during which the ‘elementary’, ‘instinctive’ revolutionary urge of the masses comes to the fore. Gramsci, writing about the contrast seen between a conservative worldview affirmed in words, accompanied by a more radical action, writes that a social group (class) may have “its own conception of the world, even if only embryonic; ... which manifests itself, but occasionally and in flashes – when the group is acting as an organic totality. But this same group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but is borrowed from another group...this is the conception which it follows in “normal times” – that is when its conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.” Whereas Lenin finds the elementary urge for revolution to be something enduring and likely to last, Gramsci conceptualizes the potentially revolutionary moments of united class action in history as being more fragile, and ‘autonomous’ ideology as appearing only in ‘flashes’. But in his words, too, there is the suggestion that what is present in ‘embryonic’ form at all times, can be helped to grow and develop and overcome its subordination.

Gramsci’s ideas have been used to discuss the movements of Indian peasantry most consistently by the Subaltern School of historians. The work of these historians has been to pay attention to the peasant upsurges, tribal revolts and peasant participation in freedom struggles, emphasizing the strength, the agency and subjectivity of the peasantry against their oppressive situation perpetuated and protected by colonial rule. This work

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 420.

has been an important corrective to the official historical accounts which deny this subjective agency of the masses and reduce the role of the peasantry to that of passive followers of Congress leadership. However, some of the contentions of the Subaltern historians need to be examined and assessed more closely for their implications.

Ranajit Guha, the founding figure of this school of historiography, argues that nationalist historiography is elitist when it rejects the early peasant rebellions in nineteenth century India, as 'spontaneous' and lacking in consciousness, because it makes 'the mobilization of the peasantry altogether contingent on the intervention of charismatic leaders, advanced political organizations and upper classes'. The subaltern project argues, with help of Gramsci, that 'pure' spontaneity does not exist, and trace in these early rebellions had the beginnings of a 'politics of the people'. But Guha's project becomes more contentious when he paints Left movements with the same brush, claiming that an "equally elitist view inclined to the left discerns in the same events a pre-history of the socialist and communist movements of the subcontinent". He alleges that both the nationalist and the left historians share an outlook which, to quote Gramsci, "sees as real and worth while only such movements of revolt as are one hundred percent conscious, i.e. movements that are governed by plans worked out in advance to the last detail or in line with abstract theory."<sup>32</sup> It seems to be Guha's view that it is 'elitist' to assess the degree of class-consciousness of certain struggles, and to trace the development of a particular class from 'elementary' struggles to more conscious, organized movements. It is here that Guha misrepresents Gramsci. Gramsci not only argues for the need for historians to study "every trace of independent initiative on the part of subaltern groups", (this injunction is taken as a starting point by the

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<sup>32</sup> Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983. p. 4.

Subaltern historians), he also insists on the necessity to study the various stages in the development of subaltern groups, in the course of their active and passive participation in political parties of dominant groups, trade unions, reformist parties, and finally, communist parties, which he defines as “formations which assert the integral autonomy” of subaltern groups. He says the “historian must record...the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases”.<sup>33</sup> For Gramsci, clearly, delineating one phase of subaltern struggles as ‘primitive’, and tracing its evolution to more aware and organized, class-conscious movement, is not ‘elitism’. Gramsci himself assessed the attributes of “common sense” and subaltern consciousness as positive or negative, based on its potential to be transformed into revolutionary class-consciousness. The recognition that early peasant and tribal rebellions had a primitive but basic anti-imperialist content, and the embryonic elements of class-consciousness is necessary. But to claim ‘autonomy’ for these movements while implying that later, left-led movements are ‘elitist’ in content, is to deny the weaknesses of those struggles, and the reasons for their defeat. For instance, take the claim that these rebellions were the expression of a “subaltern peasant culture and world-view which is in itself largely autonomous from that of the elite”.<sup>34</sup> When one considers the example of the tribal uprising of the Mundas under Birsa, one sees the strong, heroic urge for resistance to colonial oppressors, resulting in the winning of a degree of legal protection for tribal land rights a generation in advance of Bihar peasantry. But one also sees the elements of pre-modern ideology, for example, the belief that Birsa’s supernatural powers could turn bullets and guns to water, which led to the brutal crushing of the revolt. How far can such pre-modern ideology and world-

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<sup>33</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Orient Longman, Madras, 1996.p. 52.

<sup>34</sup> David Arnold, ‘Gramsci and Peasant Subalternity in India’, op.cit, p 165.

view be said to be 'autonomous from that of the elite' – are not many of its features like casteism or supernatural beliefs fashioned from the elements of feudal and religious ideology?

Guha claims that the peasantry constituted an “autonomous domain”, which coexisted with the domain of elite (bourgeois nationalist) politics because of the historic “failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation”, to integrate the peasantry into their hegemony. But to expect India’s emerging ruling class to “speak for” the vast mass of poor peasantry would be to fail to recognize its bourgeois-landlord character. The Indian bourgeoisie made its peace with feudal forces in the countryside; and together this elite mobilized the poor peasantry in the struggle against the British. The peasant struggles, though they were influenced by and even revered the leadership of figures like Gandhi who curbed their militancy, often ‘flooded the banks’ and went beyond the roles assigned to them by the nationalist leadership. Participation in the national movement and direct confrontation with the colonial state and its local allies, moreover, increasingly sharpened the radical consciousness and anti-feudal urge of the poor peasantry, setting the scene for the more revolutionary, left-led agrarian movements of Tebhaga and Telengana. Recognizing this progression, this uneven journey from primitive consciousness towards a more advanced one, is an important background for the protest songs we will be studying, where the struggle to free the consciousness of rural poor from pre-modern and feudal ideas continues.

Gramsci’s concern is to set out the tasks of the revolutionary party to intervene in popular consciousness, and establish its own hegemony. We have seen earlier his distinction between ‘traditional’ and ‘organic’ intellectuals. He also makes specific observations about the position and relatively greater stature and influence of rural intellectuals – lawyers,

priests etc... he points out that when a person from a peasant background becomes an 'intellectual', he breaks his organic links with his class, and is attracted by bourgeois ideology instead. But they continue to play a crucial role in maintaining hegemony in rural society. Transforming consciousness of rural classes, therefore must pay special attention to the intellectuals – one the one hand, the party must create 'organic intellectuals', 'permanent persuaders', i.e. political organizers from within the class, and on the other, must also create a left-wing tendency among the traditional intellectuals.

One point of enquiry for this study can be whether, and to what extent, the songs we look at are the work of 'organic intellectuals' from within the rural proletariat in the Bhojpuri-speaking region.

### *Culture and Politics*

The Marxist ideas about consciousness and its transformation are crucial to our study of the protest music, which is our subject, because these cultural practices are informed by a Left tradition of organization and movement. The effort in this dissertation is to study these songs, not as 'aesthetic' texts alone, nor as sociological documents, but as a living record of an ongoing struggle to challenge hegemonic culture and politics. As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, it is inadequate and incorrect to view as a 'pure' realm separated from politics.

In this final section, the attempt will be to outline a meaningful framework for studying culture and cultural practices.

How can one define 'culture'? In an insightful lecture, Aijaz Ahmad discussed some of ways in which the concept of 'culture' tends to be understood and misunderstood.<sup>35</sup> Can culture be defined as a 'whole way of

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmad, Aijaz, 'Globalization and Culture', paper presented at People's Convention Against Globalization, 21-23 March 2001.



life'- a definition that is often used to define 'national culture', 'Indian culture', 'Hindu culture', 'western culture' and so on? Ahmad points out that in a "society which is fundamentally divided along lines of power and powerlessness", culture functions "not as an unfolding of National Spirit but as a field of struggle and contention". Rather than a "unified culture.... a unity-in-diversity", we find "a variety of cultures in mutual combat".

In the songs we will study, this 'combat', this 'struggle and contention', mark every verse, every tune. Relevant, also, is Ahmad's warning that "culture is not always a zone of freedom, self expression, self realization, community sharing... Culture, including traditional culture, is just as frequently a zone of Un-freedom and entrapment....". The songs we study often grapple with such un-freedoms, seeking to transform the often-conservative framework of folk traditions to imbue them with newer more radical possibilities.

Ahmad asserts that national culture should be defined, not as something inherited, static, already achieved, to be preserved in an ossified state. Instead he defines it as a 'horizon yet to met', horizon which can be achieved only through constant striving for radical democratic social change.

Ahmad also points out the invasive assault of globalization on this potential social change. He reminds that institutions of mass culture and popular entertainment (TV, commercialized music) invade not only the middle classes, but "have a much deeper reach into the working class neighbourhood and countryside than even before". It is important to remember that the songs we will examine, as well as the socio-political matrix in which they are produced, forge themselves in the face of a constant assault- both physical as well as at the level of ideas.

Ahmad offers a definition of culture as the "sum of means and practices through which values and means are generated", pointing out that in this definition, "culture is not about preserving the past, but about generating values for the future".

In this- 'sum of means and practices', that constitutes culture, there are bound to be contending forces which conflict. So, while there will be "cultural practices comprised deeply by violence and domination", there will also, always be other moments, "moments of insurgent cultural practice that shall go on imagining the impossible and thus keep its promise to the future".

If the songs we examine are indeed such moments of insurgent cultural practice, what are the sources of such a practice? What accounts for practices and meanings, which challenge the dominant culture in any society?

Raymond Williams offers a framework of studying cultural practices that is useful in accounting for oppositional as well as alternative cultural modes. He visualizes 'hegemony' as a dynamic process rather than a static structure: a process of attempting to incorporate residues of older practices as well as newer practices that are constantly emerging. He says that at any given time, alongside the "effective, dominant culture", there are 'residual' as well as 'emergent' cultures. 'Residual' are those which are "lived and practiced" on the basis of cultural/social residue of some previous social formation. Such residual practices often get incorporated into dominant culture. Meanwhile, new significances and experience are continually being created, and dominant culture, even alert, is usually all too ready to incorporate these. The truly significant 'emergent' cultural practices are those, which resist such incorporation. Such 'emergent' practices marked the formation of, "coming to consciousness of a new class". Williams recalls that Gramsci's whole purpose was to see and create by organization, that hegemony of a proletarian kind, which would be capable of challenging ruling class hegemony.<sup>36</sup>

Any study of Bhojpuri protest music of the radical poor peasantry must, in order to be meaningful, examine them for the modes they adopt to forge a counter-hegemony, a resistant culture of the oppressed.

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<sup>36</sup> Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, New York, 1980. p 31-50.

In the next chapter we will try and trace the historical background to the Naxalite movement in Bhojpur. Bhojpur has a long legacy of socio-political struggles of the peasantry; in the next chapter we will narrate a story of these struggles.

## Chapter-III

### Historical Background of The Naxalite Movement in Bhojpur

The extremity of the socio-economic oppression has been responsible for producing sporadic as well as organized protests and resistances in Bhojpur. Even the official and public documents of the British colonial masters, who were at the top of the oppressive hierarchy, are a testimony to the exploitation as well as the highly turbulent nature of the region and its people. Long before the 'Great Indian Mutiny' (India's First War of Independence) of 1857 when this region witnessed a massive peasant uprising led by Kunwar Singh of Jagdishpur, Francis Buchanan traveling on horseback through the area observed in 1812-13:

*Crossing Sone from Magadha, crowned with sites associated with Buddhism and teeming with archaeological evidence of Buddhist influence, into Shahabad (Bhojpur was a part of Shahabad division till 1972) one enters a country over a greater part of which there is scarcely a trace of Buddhist remains, amongst a people proverbially of more turbulent nature, who not only speak a different dialect but even use different words for some common objects and plants.<sup>1</sup>*

Much water has flown in the river Sone since then, but still one can sense the brashness of the people of this region in the saying 'arrah jila ghar ba to kaune baat ke dar ba'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Journal of Francis Buchanan kept during the survey of Shahabad District 1812-13, as quoted in Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra Yadav, *Bhojpur : Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar*, Radhakrishna, Delhi, 1980. p 17.

<sup>2</sup> Arrah is the district headquarter of Bhojpur.

The political reality of Bhojpur as a hotbed of agrarian strife has a definite historical trajectory since the intervention of the British colonialism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This is not to deny the existence of socio-economic inequality causing agrarian tension in pre-colonial times. Rather, the point is to stress the radical alteration in the socio-economic fabric of Bihar, which took place as a result of Bihar's subjugation to the colonial rule. This inclusion of Bihar into British colonial structure led to such a massive transformation that its imprints and repercussions are bold enough to be perceived in the post-colonial agrarian relations in Bihar.

As an entry-point we would briefly discuss the nature of agrarian setting in the aftermath of the Permanent Revenue Settlement of 1793 – when Bihar's economy was fully integrated into the colonial economy. This will help us in understanding the multi-layered interests and contradictions in the socio-economic life of rural Bihar. Then we would move on to look at the story of mobilization of several interests groups and their political formations and how these multi-layered contradictions were contested and negotiated over a period of time. This will enable us to comprehend the changing nature of agrarian struggle. We would be able to trace how the actors and participants and the issues at center stage of agrarian drama in Bihar underwent transition overtime.

To understand the agrarian reality of Bhojpur we shall situate it in the larger socio-political context of Bihar. Our discussion on Bihar in general is certainly not a distraction from Bhojpur. It will indeed strengthen our endeavour in situating this region in the larger historical dynamics of Bihar. Hence in the course of this chapter we would be moving in and outside Bhojpur's geographical boundary.

The Permanent Settlement of 1793, which Lord Cornwallis had made for *zamindars* ' " quiet enjoyment over profitable estates", defined the

contours of agriculture in Bihar in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Permanent Settlement vested the *zamindars* with proprietary rights over land, ensuring monopoly over land and exorbitant ground rents. It also laid the foundations for the grossly oppressive structure of landlordism, which received the patronage of the colonial state. All property in soil was vested with the landholders, completely dispossessing the class of actual cultivators.<sup>3</sup>

In Bihar there were a large number of Permanent Settlement *zamindaris*.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Bengal, the relative size of the common *zamindaris* in Bihar was by and large small. Ninety percent of the estates were of less than 500 acres. In spite of the existence of mammoth estates like those of Darbhanga, Bettiah, Banaili, and Dumraon, the number of estates with more than 20,000 acres was only 474. In addition to this *zamindars* also had their *khud-kasht* or privately owned land, which was approximately 30,46,000 acres. This means 13% of the total cultivable land was in the hands of 2% of the population. Even in the post-independence period when *zamindari* was 'abolished' with huge compensation, *zamindars* continued to own *khud-kasht* land<sup>5</sup>. Despite the small size of the majority of *zamindari* land, landlordism spawned an elaborate structure of middlemen (*dewan*, *fotedar*, *daftaris* or record keepers, *peyadas* or messengers and *sipahi* or constables) as well as agents and contractors (*Patnidars* of *Purnea*, indigo-planters of *Champaran* etc.). Landlords received proprietary share of profits from the agents in lieu of having given up management.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Arvind N Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Changes in Bihar 1900-80*, Manohar, Delhi, 1983. p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Out of the total 99,851 Permanent Settlement *Zamindaris*, district wise distribution was as follows: Patna-15123, Shahabad-11347, Gaya-9486, Monghyr-8921, Muzaffarpur-23525 and Darbhanga – 15873.

<sup>5</sup> P K Chowdhary, and Srikant, *Bihar Mein Samajik Parivartan Ke Kuch Aayam*, Vani Prakashan, Delhi, 2000, p.13

<sup>6</sup> Arvind N Das, *op. cit.* 25-26.

Rural society was structured by a hierarchy in accordance with the nature of rights over landed property. At the top of the hierarchical agrarian structure was the colonial state, followed by *zamindars*. After them at the third place came the *thekedars* or the contractors. At the fourth place came the Permanent and revenue-free *raiyyats*, whose rent was fixed or in some cases they were free from it, in lieu of their services to the colonial government. However they were insignificant numerically. At the fifth place came the occupancy *raiyyats* (tenants). They constituted 65% of the total population dependent on land, having 83.2% of the cultivable land. They also gave and took land on share cropping basis as a measure to increase cultivable land under their possession. The Tenancy Act 1859 confirmed their rights over plots under cultivation for 12 years. The Bengal Tenancy Act 1885 made the provision of increase in rent only after 15 years and that too not more than  $1/8^{\text{th}}$  of the current rate. However, in practice, the *zamindars* hardly gave them rent receipts, which could prove their claim over such land. Rent was increased at the whims of *zamindars*. At the sixth place were the non-occupancy *raiyyats* (sub-tenants) and sharecroppers. The sub-tenants survived basically as sharecroppers on the *zirat* or *bakasht* land of *zamindars* or cultivated land of rich occupancy *raiyyats*. They paid  $2/3^{\text{rd}}$  of the produce or at times even more than that as rent. At the bottom of the agrarian structure were the agricultural labourers. They constituted  $1/3^{\text{rd}}$  of the total population dependent on agriculture and owned only 2.5% of the cultivable land, half of them were bonded labourers. Their wage was 2 to 3 *annas* in cash or 2 *seers* and 8 *chhatank* (*pakka*) in kind per day. Further, for at least 3 months of the agricultural calendar these labourers could not get work to feed themselves, hence they migrated seasonally to '*pardes*' or worked in the construction projects of the government. These poor labourers and sharecroppers had to go to moneylenders, *zamindars*, rich

*raiya*s and village *banias* to feed themselves in off-season thus getting perpetually trapped in the cobweb of debt. 'Daura' or migration of thousands of impoverished agricultural *raiya*s was an important aspect of rural life of Bihar.<sup>7</sup> One fourth of the total Indian migrants to Fiji and Mauritius and other colonies were from the district of Shahabad, which later came to be called Bhojpur.<sup>8</sup>

In this kind of economically stratified society where land was the primary productive resource, the mode and manner of appropriation of agricultural surplus was bound to be the defining factor of the agrarian structure.

In 1793, the revenue demand of the state was fixed as 9/10<sup>th</sup> of the rent, without much attempt to ascertain how much the landlords were actually getting from the tenants. Even when the survey-settlement operations were taken up between 1892 and 1938, it was done in order to establish a record of rights of various classes of tenants rather than arriving at any accurate estimate of the relative quantum of revenue and rent. The records kept by the *zamindars* themselves were tailored to hide these figures; hence no accurate figure of the amount exacted from the tenants is available especially of the early periods. The precise amount of the customary share of the landlord was the result, not of nominal or theoretical claim but of an annual haggle over the division or appraisal of the crops. What the landlord received in practice was the maximum, which the *raiya*t could afford to pay. Landlords took advantage of the increased pressure of population on land to raise their revenue demand above their customary share. Generally the customary share of the landlord included the

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<sup>7</sup> This migration was not limited to Calcutta, Assam, Tatanagar and coal fields but people went as far as Fiji and Mauritius. These migrant labourers were instrumental in foundation of money-order economy in rural Bihar. It is not co-incidental that *bidesia* genre of song originated in Saran (a Bhojpurī speaking region), from where migration was highest.

<sup>8</sup> PK Chowdhary, and Srikant, op.cit. p 23-25.



produce rent and the share for providing services like maintaining irrigation work, though these services were hardly fulfilled. At times, the amount of the rent reached to 3/4<sup>th</sup> or more than that of the gross produce. As a result of their failure to pay rents, the tenants' most productive asset - land was taken away by the *zamindars*. Such land taken away in satisfaction of the decrees were known as *bakasht* land. The tenants took loans on high interest rates to save their land; delayed payments also increased the amount of rent. According to the report of the Bihar and Orissa Banking Enquiry Committee 1929-30, the peasants in Bihar paid Rs.12 Crores in the form of rent and Rs.27 Crores in the form of interest.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the exorbitant rent, which of course was a constant source of tension between the *raiyats* and the *zamindars* in the long run, more immediate and major reason for the clash between the two was on the mode of the payment of rent, that is the tussle over commutation of produce rent into cash rent. In the system of produce rent or *danabandi bhaoli*, the *amlhas* (the *zamindar's* retainer) took half of the actual produce as rent, though the officially estimated amount of rent was always less than the actual rent exacted from the tenants. In the cash rent system, rent was paid in cash after selling out the produce. The dispute became severe in the situation of general increase of prices. The *zamindars* tried to get rent in kind to take advantage of the price hike. On the other hand paying in cash was beneficial for *raiyats*. In this situation of increased prices the *raiyats* and *zamindars* paid the labourers in cash. However labourers found it very difficult to survive on the food grains they could purchase from their meagre income. In this tussle the plight of agricultural labourers remained most volatile. The *raiyats* fought for the commutation of produce-rent into

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<sup>9</sup> As cited in Arvind N Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Changes in Bihar 1900-80*, Manohar, Delhi, 1983. p 47.

cash-rent. The *zamindars* naturally resisted the *raiyyats* and very often the tension resulted in violence. For instance, in Shahabad in the year 1906, a *raiyyat* was severely beaten up by a *zamindar*, Basudev Narayan Singh. Due to his administrative clout the *zamindar* managed to get the *raiyyat* jailed. In the counter-case filed by the *raiyyat* B.N Singh went scot-free, whereas the *raiyyat* was convicted on the fake charge of theft. In 1912, a group of *raiyyats* killed the oppressive B. N. Singh while he was on his way to Sasaram.<sup>10</sup>

Apart from the exorbitant produce or cash rents, the *zamindars* and their *amlahs* levied a range of taxes. These included *salami* or consideration money, due when occupancy holdings were transferred, as well as a string of extra-legal and illegal cesses levied on peasantry and labour. A sample of these illustrates the arbitrary nature of such taxes: *Bhusawan* (supplying husk for *zamindar*'s cattle),

*Motravan* ( tax for purchase of *zamindar*'s car), *Hathiyavan* ( tax for purchase of *zamindar*'s elephant), *Petpirvan* (tax when *zamindar*'s wife conceived), *Zanmavan* ( tax when *zamindar* got an offspring), *Holiyavan* ( tax when *zamindar* celebrated holi). Social indignities including rape was also a daily social reality for the *raiyyats* as well as labourers.<sup>11</sup>

So far we have underlined contradictions in the political economy of agriculture in Bihar. In addition to this, there existed social contradictions as well. In other words, class contradiction existed simultaneously with the caste contradiction and to a great extent both were complementary to each other. If one looks at the caste wise distribution of *zamindaris* one comes across revealing figures. The table below clearly brings out the fact that maximum number of *zamindars* belonged to the upper-castes. There were

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<sup>10</sup>.P K Chaudhry and Srikant,op.cit . p 39.

<sup>11</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit .p 46-47.s

very few *zamindars* who came from the backward castes whereas the number of *dalit zamindars* was almost negligible.

#### **Caste-wise distribution of *Zamindaris***

Caste	Number of <i>Zamindars</i>
Bhumihar	35841
Rajputs	23131
Brahmins	14670
Kayasthas	9738
<b>Total number of upper-caste Hindu zamindars</b>	<b>88380</b>
Kurmi	4302
Yadav	1217
Koiri	70
<b>Total number of backward caste Zamindars</b>	<b>5589</b>
<b>Total number of Dalit zamindars</b>	<b>317</b>

*Source: Census of 1901, as cited in PK Chowdhary and Srikant, op.cit, p.62*

It is not surprising that the economic stratification was largely coterminous with a deeply hierarchised caste society of the Hindus. The upper-castes Hindus were predominantly *zamindars* and rich and middle peasants, the backward castes were predominantly middle and lower peasants and *dalits* were primarily agricultural labourers and lower peasants.

Social discrimination was prevalent in the economic realm as well. Apart from produce-rent, cash-rent and labour-rent (*begar*), even caste-rent — a term used by PK Chowdhary and Srikant — was also prevalent in

Bihar.<sup>12</sup> Not only were extra and illegal *abwabs* extracted on the basis of caste but revenue was also assessed in accordance with the caste-status of the tenants. The backward and *dalit raiyats* had to pay higher amount of revenue. To cite a few examples, the Muzzafarpur survey settlement shows that revenue in 81 lower caste *raiya* owned land holdings was increased but on 18 upper caste *raiya* owned land holdings, there was no increase in revenue. Even if the rate of revenue was increased on the upper caste owned land it was nominal when compared to those of the lower caste *raiya*s.<sup>13</sup>

Ram Vriksh Benipuri, a prominent socialist writer and a *Kisan Sabha* leader, during his survey of Masauhri Pargana in Patna district prepared a list of illegal exactions and atrocities of the *zamindars* on tenants and labourers.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from caste based *abwabs* and rent, discrimination was prevalent in use of irrigation facilities as well. The best quality land was owned by upper caste *zamindars* and *raiya*s, and irrigational facilities were constructed in places where these would benefit the *khud-kasht* land of *zamindars* and upper castes *raiya*s. Although irrigation work had to be maintained by *zamindars*, they forcibly employed labourers of low-caste in the repair and construction work, without paying wages. The expenditure on the upkeep of the canals etc. was also extracted from lower caste *raiya*s. Therefore the unpaid *dalit* labourers were used for construction and upkeep

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<sup>12</sup> P K Chowdhary and Srikant, op.cit. p. 60

<sup>13</sup> P K Chowdhary and Srikant, op.cit. p.62

<sup>14</sup>This list shows caste based *abwabs* from: *goalas* – five seer ghee for a Rupee in Holi and Dussehra *Koiri*- all vegetables at the rate of 3 *paise* per *passeri* *chamar*- shoes etc. free of cost *tehi*- 16 seers of oil for a Rupee in 'sohrai' (when women folk of *zamindar* delivers offspring) 11 seers for a Rupee in *shraddha*, etc. and some amount of oil was to be supplied daily to 'kachahari' free of cost *dom- soup*, *pitara* etc. free of cost *kumhar*- 4000 *khuprel* in a Rupee and pottery free of cost *dhobi*- washing of 'kachahari' clothes free of cost.

of irrigation works and the backward caste tenants who benefited least from irrigation facilities, had to pay irrigation taxes.<sup>15</sup>

The social discrimination in the economic sphere of rural Bihar was initially resisted in the social idiom. In the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a strong *sanskritisation* movement among the lower castes through organization of *Jati sabhas* (caste associations). There was an economic imperative for *sanskritisation* among backward caste peasantry. If a place in higher echelons of social strata meant paying lesser amount of rent and freedom from illegal extractions, the first thing that the lower castes especially those with a relatively better economic status did was to move towards claiming higher social status by wearing sacred thread and declaring themselves *Khastriyas* to overcome this discrimination.

The nuances of the sacred thread movement among the backward castes are well captured in Satinath Bhaduri's '*Dhadai Charitmanas*'. "One day every villager from old to young shaves off his head and wears the sacred thread in front of sacred fire. For two days men and women live separately and then after participating in a rice-feast return to their homes. On the same day 'tatmas' became 'das'. *Dhadai bhagat* becomes *Dhadai Das*.<sup>16</sup> On this the zamindars of high-castes and even the Ashraf Muslim zamindars were talking:

"Anokhi babu! You go to zaninia. After taking the advice of Annirudh Mukhtar put forward a legal claim of compensation against the *koiri raiyats* for the revenue dues...since they have become '*chatree*' these bastard *koiris* have turned recalcitrants"<sup>17</sup>

The formation of dozens of caste associations and their activities in Bihar was also prompted by two other factors. The first factor was the

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<sup>15</sup> Chowdhary and Srikant, p 68.s

<sup>16</sup> Satinath Bhaduri, *Dhadai Charitmanas*, Lok Bharti Prakashan, Allahabad, p90

<sup>17</sup> Ibid p.204-05

Census operation of 1901 that used H.H. Risley's method of classification of caste on the basis of social precedence. This resulted in a flood of petitions from various caste groups to place them in superior echelons. The caste associations were formed under the leadership of educated and economically affluent elites of different castes. Claims and counter claims were made, and mythographies of castes were written to buttress these claims.<sup>18</sup>

The second and more important factor was the spread of *Arya Samaj* movement in Bihar, especially among the backward castes. By 1920 *Arya Samaj* had its branches in almost all the town centres in the present South Bihar. *Arya Samaj's* sacred thread movement attracted the educated elites of backward and *dalit* castes the most, because it was a measure to attack the orthodox *brahminic* hold over Hinduism. This religious reform movement with its vertical expansion turned out to be a socio-economic movement – a phenomenon that the founders of *Arya Samaj* perhaps had never anticipated.

#### Number of caste-associations from 1912-1916

Caste	Number of Associations	Caste	Number of Associations
<i>Yadavas</i>	38	<i>Mahuris</i>	2
<i>Kurmis</i>	10	<i>Bania</i>	1
<i>Koeris</i>	8	<i>Badhris</i>	1
<i>Kahars</i>	9	<i>Lohars</i>	1
<i>Telis</i>	3	<i>Binds</i>	1
<i>Nayees</i>	3	<i>Beldars</i>	1
<i>Kumhars</i>	2	-----	--

Source: See appendix of P.K.Chaudhry and Srikant, *op.cit.*

<sup>18</sup> 'Census Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia' also see 'Notes on The History of Indian Society and Culture' in Bernard S Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, OUP, Delhi, 1987. Also see, Lucy Carroll, 'Colonial Perception of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste Associations', *Journal of Asian Studies*, February, 1978.

The caste associations, especially among the three major agriculturist castes i.e. *koiri*, *kurmi* and *yadavs* laid stress on educational activities by collecting funds for establishing schools and colleges, criticized social evils like child marriage, polygamy etc, and claimed *kshatriya* status by writing caste histories and wearing sacred thread. The movement of the *goalas* was not only very active and extensive but also influenced others. It started at *Murho* village in *Madhepura* sub-division in 1911. Sri Ras Bihari Mandal- the *zamindar* of this village and father of BP Mandal, the first Yadav Chief Minister of Bihar- was credited with the establishment of this *gop sabha*. Apart from declaring themselves as *Yaduvanshi* or *Chandravanshi Kshatriyas* and wearing sacred thread, the *Sabha* appealed to refuse *begar* and resist atrocities of upper-castes. They claimed social status, which was next only to *Brahmans* and superior to *Rajputs*. Unlike others they did not have to construct their own mythography. Further they were numerically the largest caste in most of the villages in Bihar. This *Sabha* issued appeals prohibiting *Yadava* womenfolk from working out of the home, making dung cakes, selling milk door to door and going to market places. These proposals however could never be realised, as they were unaffordable to the poor *Yadavas*.<sup>19</sup>

The very claim to '*kshatriyahood*' by the low-caste peasantry was a manifestation of resistance. The symbolic meaning of *kshatriya* in a land-centric agricultural society connotes: being owner of the land, being powerful, being a ruler or sharing political power. The claim to *kshatriyahood* by a social group hitherto deprived of landownership and

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<sup>19</sup> Unlike in the upper-castes, the women of *backward* and *dalit* castes worked in the fields. Moreover divorce, remarriage and even widow re-marriage was not taboo. But in order to prove themselves socially superior, the affluent sections of these castes initiated and practiced the traditions of upper-castes thereby curtailing the relative social freedom enjoyed by their womenfolk.

political power was an indication of the forthcoming economic-political struggles against the existing economic and political powers that be.

Aware of the class element of this caste mobilization the upper-caste *zamindars* organized themselves to retaliate. In 1912 –1913 *brahmans* and *rajputs* convened a meeting in Rosra and Kusheshwarthan respectively to deal with the new situation. The most spectacular incident was to take place in Lakhochak in Monghyr on May 1925 when a meeting of a *yadav* caste association was attacked by the massively armed crowd of *bhumihars* led by the *bhumihar zamindars*. Although *zamindars* were finally saved by the administration, *yadav raiyats* fought a prolonged legal battle on their own. They did not go for the compromise offered by the *yadava zamindars* of *Madhepura* who themselves feared the class-turn of the caste movement.<sup>20</sup>

The issue of dignity of the lower caste women was also to occupy an important place in subsequent socio-political struggles. The molestation, rape and all other forms of atrocities on the womenfolk of lower caste tenants and labourers were rampant.<sup>21</sup>

So these were the broad contradictions –both economic and social– that lay at the heart of multi-layered agrarian society of Bihar in general and Bhojpur in particular.

As I have mentioned earlier, during the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857, the peasantry of Bhojpur was led into revolt by the impoverished *zamindar* of Jagdhishpur Babu Kunwar Singh, his brother Babu Amar Singh and their followers Harkishen Singh, Nishan Singh and others. But the British with the help of loyalist *zamindar* of Dumraon successfully crushed the revolt.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For detail information on Lakhochak incident see P K Chowdhary and Srikant, op. cit. p. 74-81.

<sup>21</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 74.

<sup>22</sup> K.K Dutta, *Biography of Babu Kunwar Singh and Babu Amar Singh*, K.P. Jaiswal Research Institute, Patna, 1957



Jolted by this massive uprising the subsequent policy of the colonial government in Bhojpur was to provide both efficient administration and promote agricultural development in order to prevent the peasant turbulence. Hence, Bhojpur became the first area in Bihar, where measures like the Indian Penal Code were introduced in a bid to systematize administration.<sup>23</sup> Agriculture was to be modernized by controlling frequent floods and drought by the construction of the Sone canal system. Seventy five percent of the Sone canal system was in Shahabad district.<sup>24</sup> According to L S S O'Malley, "when the construction of the canals were in progress, sanguine hopes of revenue they would yield were entertained, but the events proved the fallacy of these forecast".<sup>25</sup>

Though the coffers of the British were not exactly swelling with canal revenue, the people on the banks of Sone were partially relieved. From 1876-77 water was supplied on regular payment of water rates. The Sone Canal system made agriculture profitable, as the regular supply of water facilitated its commercialization. But the concentration of land in the hands of few Rajput- Bhumihar rich occupancy *raiya*ts resulted in a specific type of agricultural development, what Arvind N Das calls the "junker model of capitalism from above".<sup>26</sup> This agricultural prosperity of the region provided tremendous rental income to the *zamindars*. It can be estimated from the fact that the rental income of Dumraon estate was so large that litigation concerning it provided large incomes for several years to such highly paid lawyers as Motilal Nehru, C R Das, Rajendra Prasad,

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<sup>23</sup> John Beames, *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, London, 1961 as cited A.N. Das, op.cit. p 245.

<sup>24</sup> P C Roy Chowdhery, *Shahabad District Gazetteer*, Superintendent Secretariat Press, Patna, 1966. p.46

<sup>25</sup> It is only after 50 years that the return on the capital exceeded the expenditure. LSSO' Malley, *Shahabad Gazetteer*, 1924, p.79.

<sup>26</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 245.

Sachidanand Sinha and others.<sup>27</sup> It also led to economic stability of a section of population who became increasingly restive and were at the forefront of the Indian National Movement led by the Congress. These groups dominated the rank and file of the Congress and even the *Kisan Sabha* at the district level.<sup>28</sup>

Further, commercialization of agriculture had two other consequences. Firstly along with junker phenomenon there was also a tendency of 'capitalism from below' by tenants, cultivators or middle occupancy *raiyyats* belonging largely to backward castes. They participated in the *Kisan Sabha* movements but due to its largely upper-caste character rallied behind Triveni Sangh, which will be discussed later. Secondly this also caused increasing differentiation among the peasantry and depeasantisation at lowest levels. Some of these peasants who were rendered landless were absorbed into the agricultural sector as 'attached' and free wage labourers but many of them were forced to look for subsistence outside Bhojpur.

Social or caste contradictions were more pronounced in Bhojpur when compared to the rest of Bihar. Amongst the tenants ninety percent belonged to three major backward castes that is *yadava*, *kurmi* and *koiri*.<sup>29</sup> The contradictions with a potential of organized resistance was between the *raiyyats* and the *zamindars* over the question of exorbitant rent, *salami*, *abwabs* and of course on caste discrimination in the assessment of several taxes. However caste oppression was not limited to economic sphere but always revolved around the question of dignity or *izzat* of the tenants. A major issue was the violation of lower caste women by the upper-caste men.

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<sup>27</sup> Anugrah Narayan Sinha, , *Mere Sansmaran*, Patna , 1961.

<sup>28</sup> G McDonald, 'Unity a Trial: Congress in Bihar 1929-39' in D.A. Low, (ed.) *Congress and the Raj*, London, 1977.

<sup>29</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee, et al 'Peasant Unrest in Bhojpur: A Survey', *National Labour Institute Bulletin*, Delhi, 1978, p.417.

The 'dola' tradition was prevalent in the Rajput and Bhumi-har dominated region of Shahabad. The backward castes were becoming conscious of their plight with mobilizations in the caste-associations. Amidst these class-caste contradictions, the spate of organized agrarian movement was to overwhelm Shahabad district in the 1930s and 1940s. At its forefront was the neo-rich peasantry, which had acquired some kind of an economic base, especially during the general price hike in the aftermath of the First World War.

Bihar had experienced isolated cases of peasant uprising but it was only after the World War I that peasant unrest took a less sporadic, more sustained and continuing form. The first in this series of new movements in Bihar was the celebrated Champaran *Satyagrah* of 1917, which marked the beginning of a process whereby the 'traditional' peasantry was drawn into the vortex of contemporary agitation under a modern leadership. In sum, however this movement itself was an attempt by the rich tenants to remove hurdles placed by despotic indigo planters, in the way of profitable cultivation of food grains and sugarcane. The very nature of the leadership placed limitations on the movement. It remained directed against the European planters and did not touch upon the local exploitative elements. The unchanged plight of the peasantry was reflected in the saying *nilhe gaye milhe aaye* i.e. the indigo planter went away but the mill owners replaced them.<sup>30</sup>

While the Champaran movement operated within a narrow anti-planter framework, agrarian tension in the rest of Bihar reflected wider concerns. There were innumerable cases of brutal oppression faced by occasional sporadic resistance by the up-coming rich peasantry.

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<sup>30</sup>Girish Mishra, *The Agrarian Problems of the Permanent Settlement: A Case Study of Champaran*, New Delhi, 1970.

Towards the end of the second decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, peasants had started airing their grievances in different parts of India, and Bihar was no exception. This was a result of the peasant issues being taken up, although selectively, by the leaders at national level. After the Champaran movement, from 1919 itself, the Home rulers in Bihar had listed peasant complaints against the landlords and had attempted to involve them in the *Kisan Sabha*. The local peasant leader Swami Vidyanand, was stirring peasants in order to win the forthcoming Council elections in 1920, particularly in the districts of Darbhanga and Bhagalpur. During the elections Swami Vidyanand allegedly used Gandhi's name in spite of the call for boycott of elections given by Gandhi and the Congress. He managed to ensure victory for his four *raiyat* candidates.<sup>31</sup>

Under Gandhi's leadership the Indian National Movement was trying to transform itself into a mass movement. The Congress session at Nagpur in December 1920 gave a call for no-tax campaign. Even before a formal campaign could be launched, this call sparked off militancy. Peasants defied and challenged the government in Bihar. A crowd of thousands burned the Chaupara factory in Champaran district. In Purnea, the local police were openly defied and crops were looted in their presence.<sup>32</sup>

The peasants interpreted the political struggle for Swaraj in terms of a struggle against heavy land tax. Although the movement was withdrawn the agitation itself became a lesson for tenants in the skill of revolt. As Sahajanand Saraswati, the famous leader of the latter day *Kisan Sabha*, wrote: "the peasants were baptized in the political awakening under the fire of severe repression.... The people [realized] that if they could fight out the

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<sup>31</sup> Stephen Henningham, *Peasant Movements in Colonial India, North Bihar 1917-1942*, Australian National University, Canberra. 1982.

<sup>32</sup> Arvind N Das, *op. cit.* p 82-83.

British lion, they could challenge confidently the mice like *zamindars*, *sahukars*, *taluqdars* within a twinkling of eyes".<sup>33</sup>

The high point of tension was in 1929, when a Bill was introduced in the council and it was feared that if passed this would further weaken the position of the tenants. At this point a decision, to set up an all Bihar Kisan Sabha to exert pressure for dropping the bill, was taken. Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, a popular ascetic leader who was active during Non Co-operation and was concerned with the growing misery of the tenants in Patna region, was persuaded to accept the leadership.

Swami Sahajanand began his public career as a leader of the Bhumihar Brahmin Sabha. This Sabha was established in 1889 with the Maharaja of Banaras as its founder President and was backed by the big *zamindars* like Sir Ganesh Dutta Singh and the railway contractor Sir Langat Singh. However, it was only when Sahajanand joined the organization that it became active. Significantly in Bihar the highest number of *zamindars* and a substantial number of *raiyats* belonged to the Bhumihar caste.

Sahajanand soon started urging the Bhumihars to practice '*purohiti*' as it was not the exclusive domain of the Brahmins. Even at this stage, many leaders of the Bhumihar MahaSabha began to draw back. By 1924 they started complaining to Ganesh Dutta Singh that not only was Sahajanand precipitating the issue of the ritual status of Bhumihars but also, because of his own political inclination as well as his popularity with younger generation, was dragging them into political activity like the Non Co-operation Movement. This was frightening to the landlords among the Bhumihars, who were second to none in proclaiming their loyalty to the

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<sup>33</sup> Sahajanand Saraswati, *Origin and Growth of Kisan Movement*, unpublished manuscript, Sri Sita Ram Ashram, Bihta. as cited in Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 83.

British. From the Bhumihar Sabha session of 1914 itself, when some of the rich landlord leaders had publicly disassociated themselves from Sahajanand's laudatory remarks about Max Mueller (lest they be suspected of having pro-German leanings by the British), Sahajanand had developed a dislike for rich Bhumihars. A split occurred in the caste association in 1925-26, between the 'moderates' led by Ganesh Dutta Singh and the 'extremists' led by Sahajanand. The 'moderates' belonged to the rich landlord section of the Bhumihar population and were politically loyal to the British. The 'extremists' led by Sahajanand comprised of the not so rich Bhumihar *raiyyats*. While the 'moderates' took up the cause of setting up educational institutions and resorted to constitutional path, the 'extremists' were inclined towards raising the general status of common Bhumihar *raiyyats*. Sahajanand set up Sita Ram Ashram at Bihta to teach Sanskrit to the *raiyyat*'s children. In the process he met a large number of Bhumihar tenants exploited by the landlords. His attempts at mediation between the Bhumihar tenants and *zamindars* was turned down by the rich *Bhumihars*. It was at this point, in 1929 that Yamuna Karjee and Ram Dayalu Singh approached Sahajanand for the organization of the *Kisan Sabha* and he accepted this proposal.

When the *Kisan Sabha* was established in 1929, there were various types of reactions that came from different quarters: the Government thought it was merely a Swarajist maneuvering; Congress men at the top level generally welcomed the *Kisan Sabha*, as according to them, it would widen the base of the party; the pro-*zamindar* rightist Congressmen in Bihar, like Braj Kishore Prasad were apprehensive of it whereas the young and militant Congressmen of Bihar opposed a separate organisation of peasants outside the Congress. They thought it would weaken the party.

Prominent in this group were Jayprakash Narayan, Ram Vriksh Benipuri and others.

However, soon after the formation of Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS) the Civil Disobedience movement was launched and all the leaders were arrested. But no political movement prior to this had generated so much enthusiasm. It fired the imagination of the rural population and at least in the first few years agrarian issues got intertwined with the Civil Disobedience movement. Even with the signing of the Gandhi- Irwin pact, rural Bihar was not pacified. To calm down the peasant's wrath the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee constituted an enquiry committee. Later, the Government also launched a similar investigation and found that the peasants grievances, as voiced by Sahajanand, were true. But nothing concrete came out of these investigations. Meanwhile, the impact of the Great Depression causing steep fall in prices reversed the situation. This was followed by an earthquake that shook North Bihar in 1934, accentuating the misery of the tenants. The *zamindars* were not ready to respond to the growing misery of the *raiyyats*; their oppression increased. As a result, resistance on the part of the peasants also became stronger. Some of the famous struggles led by *Kisan Sabha* were at Dalmiyanagar sugar factory at Bihta in 1938-39, the Rewa struggle at Gaya in 1933 and 1938, *bakasht* movement in Barahiyatal of Monghyr, Majiyawana, and Ambavari between 1936 and 1938.

This wave of agrarian unrest also swept Shahabad in the 1930s. In southern parts of Shahabad district i.e. Sasaram and Bhabua sub-division, a movement for commutation of produce-rent into cash rent expressed the economic discontent of the *raiyyats*.

The problem of the tenants had been on the agenda of the *Kisan Sabha* since its inception and resolutions against the *danabandi* system of

produce rent had been mooted as early as the BPKS Conferences held at Jehanabad on 30<sup>th</sup> -31<sup>st</sup> May 1931 and Sonapur in July 1931. Dumraon estate in Buxar subdivision recorded commutation tension in 1924-25 and the question of *salami* and *abwabs* grew acute in 1931.

1936 marked the peak of tenant uprising in southern Shahabad. From early 1936, the indefatigable Swami along with his trusted lieutenant Jadunandan Sharma, toured the district and organized a massive *Kisan* Conference at Jitaura on 29 January 1936, among other things, he demanded the reduction of rents. BPKS demonstrations were organized at Ekwan on 27<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> March 1936. The spread of the BPKS in Shahabad was enough to alarm the Congress, which was either unresponsive or at best responded to the peasant problem within the framework of class- alliance.<sup>34</sup>

This reluctance was natural, given that many prominent District Congress Committee members like had a *zamindari* background. However, in order to counter the influence of the BPKS, the Congress was forced to address the issue. In 1936 the BPCC decided to set-up a Kisan Enquiry Committee for Shahabad. Sri Krishna Singh and K B Sahay visited Darihat, a village in the *zamindari* of Chowdhary Kalika Prasad Singh, Jitaura a village in the fief of Babu Nirmal Kumar Jain, Atmi and Simri villages on the edge of Buxar '*diara*' in Dumraon Raj, Kendra in Bhabua sub-division and Dehri. All the villages were pockets of intense *Kisan Sabha* activity.

The Faizpur agrarian programme of the Congress in December 1936, which promised amelioration of tenant misery, was belied by the insignificant efforts in that direction after 1937 victory. The victory of the Congress in the 1937 elections and its failure to keep the promises made to the peasants, subsequently led to its break with the BPKS in 1938. That the

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<sup>34</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and R S Yadav, *Bhojpur : Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar*, Radhakrishna , Delhi, 1980, p 17-18.



tenants did not benefit from the Bihar Tenancy Amendment Act (Act 8 of 1937) and Bihar Restoration of *bakasht* land and Reduction of Arrears of Rent Act (Act 9 of 1938) was clear. At Dumraon the tenants gathered in a phenomenal crowd of ten thousand under the BPKS banner. Their ranks swelled in demonstrations at Buxar, Piro, Behea and Nawanagar. Tenants under the BPKS banner forcibly tilled *bakhasht* land of the *zamindars*. On this question, the BPCC decided to split with the BPKS. The Congress Working Committee subsequently ratified this split in January 1938. The *bakasht* issue simmered in Bhabua and Sasaram sub-division as late till as January 1938 but by that time northern Shahabad was getting embroiled in a crisis that was to occupy Congress attention and face neglect and apathy on the part of BPKS.<sup>35</sup>

The British had set up an elaborate system of leases for irrigation and an infrastructure for the collection of water rates, local bosses being an important cog in the execution machinery. Water rates were charged either flatly over the whole area of acreage, which fell within the command area of irrigation work, or on actual utilization of canal water. Generally, the former method was used in which no discrimination was made between the actual beneficiaries and others who benefited marginally or never. In fact, land nearer or more accessible to canal water supply was occupied by *zamindars* as their own *khud-kasht* land or by big and rich occupancy *raiya*s. Thus water rent always existed as a contentious issue between the revenue collectors and the neglected *raiya*s. The Great Depression of the 1930s resulted in an abnormal fall in the prices of food grains, hence the tenants were hard pressed to cough up the flat water rates. The Congress leadership realized the potential for an anti-British agitation, in which

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<sup>35</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadava, *Bhojpur: Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar*, Radhakrishna Delhi, 1980. p.21.

tenants and *zamindars* were in agreement with each other. The time was right, too, as the early 1930s coincided with the second phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The canal issue, which did not directly raise the issue of exploitation of the poor *raiyyats* by the landlords, seemed ideally suited for the Congress.

The working committee of the BPCC at a meeting at Sadaqat Ashram, Patna on 23 December, 1931 discussed the report of the Agrarian Inquiry Committee and passed a resolution: "having considered the report of the Canal Inquiry Committee the BPCC was of the opinion that the government should be approached with the request to reduce the canal rates to the level of those which prevailed in the same year when the prices of the food-stuffs were the same as those current in the present year, and further to postpone the realization till February next".<sup>36</sup>

Leading Congressmen toured the Shahabad district and met landlords to discuss the issue of water rates.<sup>37</sup> The Government response was underlined by its basic motivation of maintaining a nexus with *zamindars*, restraining tenants and containing the Congress. With the canal issue the Congress could bring both miserable tenants and prosperous *zamindars* together and thus could freeze *zamindar*-tenant antagonism at the grass-root level, at least temporarily. Ultimately, the Congress agitation fizzled out, though the issue lingered on. Tenants continued to remain the victim of political vagaries. The maximum they could get was a temporary remission from the Government.

Whatever be the concrete outcomes of the strategies and selective raising of issues by the Congress or the sincere and genuine airing of grievances by the *Kisan Sabha*, it did politicize a substantial number of

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<sup>36</sup> Report of the Working Committee's decision as quoted in Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, *Bhojpur : Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar*, Radhakrishna, Delhi, 1980. p 23.

<sup>37</sup> As cited in Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, *op.cit.* p 23.

tenants in Shahabad. But in an area where 90% of the tenants were from backward castes and faced acute social discrimination, the mobilization of even the *Kisan Sabha* could not enlist the overwhelming and active support of the vast majority of the tenants in militant struggles. The backward caste tenants did turn up in the meetings of *Kisan Sabha* to hear leaders like Sahajanand, but they could not be integrated with the ranks of the *Kisan Sabha* or the Congress. While the sheer upper class/caste character of the Congress was more than obvious in Shahabad or for that matter in Bihar, the *Kisan Sabha's* leadership was also from the upper-caste, mainly the *Bhumihar* caste.

Even if one concedes that the fact that the *Kisan Sabha* was led by Sahajanand who was formerly a leader of a caste association was coincidental, there were other reasons as well which prevented a vast majority of the backward caste and *dalit* peasants from identifying with the *Kisan Sabha*. After the First World War between 1918-28 the sudden price hike led to the strengthening of the economic position of the big high-caste occupancy *raiyats*, amongst whom *bhumihars* were in a majority. They owned most of the quality land. After survey settlements they were hardly vulnerable to the *zamindars'* whimsical increase in customary-rent. Unlike their lower-caste counterparts they did not have to face social discrimination. They came to dominate the BPKS (and also came to occupy a central place in the politics of rural Bihar). All the leaders in the *Kisan Sabha* were *bhumihars*. The Swami's charitable biographer Walter Hauser has underlined this fact. He writes: "Socially, the *Kisan Sabha* leadership was predominantly *bhumihar*, there were *rajputs*, *brahmins* and *kayasthas* but in very small numbers. Variation in the social composition of leadership appeared at the district level where locally prominent castes were found, with occasional *kurmis* and *koiris*. The *bhumihar* dominance simply

neglected the strength of that group as the major element among the 'landed gentry' and adventurers in the period. In terms of class background, the *Kisan* leaders were primarily from landholding families in some areas of considerable means, more generally of moderate holdings and in a few cases from small holding families. Some of these leaders considered themselves to be tenants but whether this suggests a complete absence of any personal holdings is not entirely clear."<sup>38</sup> Further the *Kisan Sabha* leaders never bothered to look into the matter of the absence of the backward castes in their organization. The issue of caste oppression was never touched upon. Without repeating the story of caste awakening and the activities of caste associations among the backward caste tenants of Bihar, it would suffice to say that Shahabad also witnessed a wave of caste movements amongst the *yadava*, *kurmi* and *koiri* tenants. It's activities and effects among these castes as well as the response of the upper-caste *zamindars* were exactly similar to that in the rest of Bihar. Hence, organized movements in the 1930s brought the tenants of different backward castes together on several agrarian issues. *Ahirs*, *kurmis* and *koiris* started bridging their mutual social distances against their common oppressors. Their unity was also motivated by the hope of emerging as a force that could influence local politics.

In this background, the Triveni Sangh was formed on 30<sup>th</sup> May, 1933 at Kargha gahar in Shahabad district, at the initiative of leaders of *yadava*, *kurmi* and *koiri* caste associations. Like any other caste association of the backwards its aim was broad and comprehensive: fostering solidarity among different sections of the caste community, participation in democratic politics, opposing and retaliating to upper-caste tyranny like

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<sup>38</sup> Walter Hauser, *The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, 1929-1942: A study of an Indian Peasant Movement*, D. Phil. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1961. p. 76-77.

*begar*, rape and social ostracism. In 1936 at the district conference held at village Barahra in Piro thana in Shahabad, the Sangh was even defined as an organization that would incorporate the aspirations of peasants, labourers and petty traders. Gradually, Triveni Sangh moved towards becoming a common platform of other backward castes, *dalits* and people oppressed by caste and *zamindari*, and its membership swelled to 10 lakhs.

The Sangh intensified its political activities, especially in the Shahabad district, towards the impending elections following the Government of India Act, 1935. In the Legislative Assembly elections of 1937, the Sangh leaders lobbied Congress leaders in Shahabad as well as Patna for candidature for leaders of backward caste *raiyats*. But the Congress rejected their plea with pejorative and casteist remarks. Rejected by the congress, the Triveni Sangh decided to fight on its own, fielding its own candidates from Pero and Arrah in Shahabad, and also supporting independent candidates from Gaya, Barh, Hazipur, Patna and Monghyr. The Congress and the *Kisan Sabha* (which was campaigning for the Congress) accused the Triveni Sangha of being a casteist organization backed by the *zamindars*.

The Sangh candidates lost by huge margins. The backwards caste *raiyat* voters, despite their sympathy with the Sangh, voted for the Congress. Despite this loss, the Sangh's entry into the political arena did raise the political consciousness of the *raiyats* and give the first warning signs of their emergence as an independent political force.

The many reports of caste clashes during the elections also indicate the sharpening contradictions between the classes of tenants and landlords. In Jagdishpur, four *ahirs* were killed during elections. After the victory of the Congress, the *rajputs* of Ayar village in Jagdishpur looted and burnt the nearby village of *ahirs*, and *koiris*, because they had supported the Sangh

candidate. During the district board elections two years later in Shahabad, the Sangh activists worked very hard and five of its activists won and 13 of the defeated candidates secured more than two thousand votes each, despite a direct contest with the Congress candidates. The contest, which used to be between *rajputs* and *kayasthas* became for the first time in these elections contest was between upper and lower castes – effectively a contest between the politically emergent class of marginal tenants and that of *zamindars*.<sup>39</sup>

The Sangh confronted the *zamindars* again in 1941, when a movement against the Dumraon Raj was launched by the Sangh. This movement was joined by the *Kisan Sabha* and Congress as well. In this struggle, peasants, labourers and petty-shopkeepers united against the Dumraon Raj, their movement was focused against the ‘*beyai*’ tax which was levied on every commodity that was sold and purchased. The tax was to be paid to the *zamindar* by both seller and the consumer. Ultimately, this struggle ended with a limited legal success.

In the wake of the Quit India movement, the activities of the Sangh declined, and by 1946, the Sangh for all practical purposes ceased to exist. Its leaders dispersed into various other political formations. While some of its top leaders went to the Congress and Backward Caste League, others particularly lower-rung activists and a few leaders joined M.N Roy’s Radical Democratic Party. Hence after the decline of Sangh and till the coming of the Socialist Party of Lohia, RDP remained backward castes’ political party in Shahabad.

Following the 1946 elections, a wave of peasant struggles swept the whole of Bihar. In Shahabad, the district magistrate reported to the Secretary at Patna, “the *Kisan Sabha*, Socialists, RDP activists are stopping the labourers from working, forcibly occupying *bakasht* land and there is a

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<sup>39</sup> As cited in PK Chowdhary and Srikant, op.cit. p 130.

constant threat on the life and property of *zamindars*. In Bhabua and Sasaram, especially the *raiyyats* are organizing themselves.... In this struggle 30-35 % participants are backward castes and schedule castes".<sup>40</sup> The *zamindars* responded violently, killing or assaulting more than a dozen *raiyyats* in Daryaon alone.

As we have seen above, organized agrarian struggles in Shahabad district in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were led by mainly two organizations – the *Kisan Sabha* and Triveni Sangha. The caste composition of the leadership of the Sabha, which reflected its dominance by the big tenants, and its consequent inability to articulate the social and economic concerns of the marginal tenants, led to the formation of backward caste organizations that tried to combine economic questions with those of social justice. But this organization also could not succeed beyond certain limits. Despite its rhetoric, the Triveni Sangh could not bring dalits or untouchable castes, (mostly labourers) into its fold. The economic issues raised by the Sangh were limited to that of *raiyyats*. The plight of landless agricultural labourers who also happened to be predominantly *dalits* was not touched upon, in the name of a larger unity against *zamindars*.

Thus, the question of agricultural labourers always found place in the footnote of the agenda of a proclaimed class-organization - the Bihar Pradesh *Kisan Sabha*. Its earliest constitutional document of 1929 was not even explicit on what constituted a peasant, defining a peasant as anyone whose primary source of livelihood was agriculture. An even more elaborate document of 1936 said essentially the same thing. The Hindi edition of the manifesto of the BPKS (1936) written by Sahajanand, for the first time, considered the category of agricultural labourers. He hastened to clarify that only a handful of Princes, big feudal chiefs and wealthy

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<sup>40</sup> P K Chowdhary and Srikant, op.cit. p 176.

individuals were considered as landlords against whom the movement was to be organized. By 1941, however, Sahajanand had arrived at a new realization, and was writing that the agrarian problem could not be solved without solving the problems of agrarian labourers.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this realization, Sahajanand was forced to admit that the Kisan Sabha was dominated by big and middle peasants, rather than the marginalized agrarian labourers and poor peasantry. In his presidential address of 8<sup>th</sup> All India *Kisan Sabha* Conference in 1944, he said: “The (middle and big cultivators) are using the *Kisan Sabha* for their own benefit and gain, while we are using or rather trying to use them to strengthen the Sabha. Till the lowest strata of peasantry are awakened to their real economic and political interests and needs and have become class conscious... It is they, the semi-proletariat or the agricultural labourers who have very little land or no land at all, petty cultivators, who anyhow squeeze a meagre living out of the land they cultivate, who are Kisans of our thinking and who make and must constitute the *Kisan Sabha* ultimately”<sup>42</sup>

None of this could happen in Sahajanand’s lifetime, nor he could convince his associates fully on this. Even Rahul Sankrityanan, a founder member of the Communist Party of India in Bihar wrote in the 1940s:

“it is undeniable that the conditions of agricultural labourers are piteous and their problem must be solved. However, we should remember that all the revolution can not be achieved at one go ... I feel it will be a serious mistake on the part of agricultural labour if they enter into a quarrel with Kisans just now”<sup>43</sup>

Agricultural labourers organized themselves in two platforms: one, a bogus organization set up by the *zamindars*, and another, an organization

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<sup>41</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 136-137.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. p.137

<sup>43</sup> Rahul Sankrityana, *Dimagi Gulami*, Allahabad, 1957, p. 73-74.



called Bihar Provincial Khet Mazdoor Sabha under the leadership of Schedule caste leaders like Jagjivan Ram (1937). While Rahul Sankrityayan exposed and attacked the first, for the second he advised restraint on the part of *dalit* leaders of the agrarian labourers. Instead of raising their issues, he advised them to carry out social reform and take up other constructive programmes. He assured them that their problems could be solved after the revolution, and till then the agricultural labourers should aim at furthering the cause of coming revolution.<sup>44</sup>

By independence, the organized peasant movement in Bihar had split into many factions and there existed as many *Kisan Sabhas* as political parties. Sahajanand's *Kisan Sabha* broke up with the Congress in 1939 because of the latter's policy of class collaboration and its support of propertied classes in Bihar. In the case of Congress Socialist Party, the break up with the *Kisan Sabha* was on the question of relationship with the Congress. While Sahajanand was trying to form a united left front as an alternative to the Congress and the Gandhian leadership, the Socialists strongly disapproved of it. The final break up took place in 1941. Hence, the *Kisan Sabha* of the Swami came closer to Rahul Sankrityayan and Karyanand Sharma of the CPI who, according to Sahajanand, were more interested in the welfare of the Kisans. Sahajanand worked with the CPI till 1942. But the CPI's support for the British war effort implied a halt to confrontations with the British Government during the war, and this led Sahajanand to break with the CPI in 1943, when he continued to mobilize the peasants. After the War Sahajanand strived unsuccessfully for left unity

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid. p.72.

and formed the All India United *Kisan Sabha*.<sup>45</sup> Sahajanand remained the unchallenged peasant leader in Bihar till his death.

The peasant mobilizations compelled the newly formed Indian state to try and reform the agrarian structure, in an attempt to check the impending threat of peasant militancy in general and Communism in particular. On 17<sup>th</sup> May, 1949, K B Sahay said in the Bihar Legislative Assembly: "the various tenancy measures passed by the Government would constitute a bulwark against Communism. Communists have penetrated into some industrial areas but they have no place in rural areas. This is due to relief measures adopted for the tenantry."<sup>46</sup> The first and foremost measure of this kind, though a hesitant one, was towards abolition of the *zamindari* system. The demand for *zamindari* abolition, was raised for the first time by the *Kisan Sabha* at its third Bihar Conference in 1935. By 1941 some *zamindars*, though not in favour of outright abolition, had started admitting that an improvement in the existing system was needed. The Congress exhibited considerable reluctance towards this question, including 'zamindari abolition with proper compensation' in its manifesto only when it had to face the electorate for the first time in December 1946.

Having won the election in Bihar on the basis of this manifesto, however, the Congress under pressure from the *zamindar* lobby, dragged its feet on the question of abolition. In 1947, the Government moved the *Zamindari Abolition Bill* in the assembly. The *zamindars* then launched a desperate attempt to stall it. This involved organized physical attacks on as well as evictions of the tenants, who also faced state repression. Even Gandhi, who on occasion expressed sympathies with *zamindars* against

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<sup>45</sup>For a detailed account of BPKS relationship with the other political parties see Arvind N Das, op.cit. Chapter VII.

<sup>46</sup> Bihar Legislative Council Programmes, May 17, 1949. Patna.

'lawlessness' of poor peasants, admitted that the *zamindars* had formed private armies to attack peasants. The *zamindars* also canvassed Congress leaders like Rajendra Prasad and others in a bid to stop or dilute the Bill.<sup>47</sup> In 1952, finally the Bihar Land Reform Act was passed after validation by the Supreme Court. But the provision was "to replace the *zamindari* system of land tenure by *raiyyatwari* system, under which the *raiyyats* will hold their lands directly under the provincial government and to transfer to the provincial government all the rights of proprietors and tenure holders in land including rights in forest, fisheries and minerals".<sup>48</sup> Swami Sahajanand had been perceptive enough in 1947 to observe: "... The wording and phraseology of the bill is vague. The object as stated therein is to remove all intermediaries between the Government and the *raiyyats*. But the word '*raiyyat*' did not really mean 'cultivator' or tiller of the soil. It is not clear as to what will happen to the *raiyyats* who are in possession of hundreds of acres of land and get them cultivated through sub-tenants and share-croppers."<sup>49</sup>

The Bihar government ignored these issues, and continued to enact reform legislations dealing with ceiling on land holdings, consolidation of holdings, provisions of minimum wages of agricultural labourers etc. Consequently, the erstwhile *zamindars* continued to hold 16 lakh acres of land. Around 71 lakh families of occupancy *raiyyats* with 2 crore and 20 lakh acres of land were transformed into free landholders. However around 30 lakh families of non-occupancy *raiyyats* and agricultural labourers got nothing from it.

Although *zamindari* had been abolished, generous compensation had been granted, and *zamindars* managed to retain a fairly large amount of

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<sup>47</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 188-195.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p 200.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 201.

*zamindari* land as *khud-khast jirat* through '*benami*' (fictitious) transfers. The State had taken hesitant steps towards the enactment of a land ceiling legislation in Bihar. A Bihar Agricultural Land (Ceiling and Management) Bill, 1955 had been introduced after much debate within the ruling Congress Party. Finally, in 1961 Bihar Land Reform (Fixation of Ceiling Areas and Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act was enacted into law, 'with sufficient loopholes to satisfy the most militant opponents of the earlier draft'.<sup>50</sup> Even this Act, was not implemented sincerely.

As a consequence, the landholders not only 'cleverly devised methods of evading ceiling legislation' but also 'liberally interpreted the exemptions granted under the legislation'. The Act, by allowing the landholders to resume land from their tenants for 'personal cultivation' permitted the eviction of thousands of under *raiyats* or sub-tenants and share-croppers from land which they had cultivated for generations without being accorded occupancy *raiyat* status. The landlord could select from his best quality land the area he wished to retain within his ceiling. He could evict the tenants from those lands, reducing them to the status of landless labour, and he could if at all necessary, give up poor quality land in excess of ceiling.<sup>51</sup>

Detailed information regarding such evictions or 'transfers' are not recorded in official sources. The Fourteenth State Conference of the All India *Kisan Sabha* held in Muzaffarpur in August 1954 reported that in the six years following the introduction of the *Zamindari* Abolition Bill, eviction occurred from no less than one million acres of land throughout the state, affecting seven million people. The process of eviction was further

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<sup>50</sup> F Tomasson Januzzi, *Agrarian Crisis in India: The Case of Bihar*, N.Delhi, 1974 cited in Arvind N Das, *op.cit.* p 232.

<sup>51</sup> Arvind N Das, *op.cit.* p 231.

stepped up in the wake of the ceiling legislation in the 1960s. According to G Ojha, in a single year in 1962, the year in which ceiling was effected, over 0.7 million transfer of *raiyyatwari* holdings were recorded all over the state.<sup>52</sup> Besides these initiatives of the state to reform agrarian structure from above, non- state initiatives like Bhoodan movement, under the guidance of Vinoba Bhave emerged and got Government backing by the enactment of Bihar Bhoodan Yojana Act 1954. His scheme of getting *zamindars* to voluntarily donate land for distribution among the landless seemed to have captured the imagination of people. Vinoba's movement, however soon turned out to be a fiasco. According to his estimate in 1952, 32 lakh acres of land would solve the agrarian crises of Bihar. In 1966, the Bhoodan Yojana Committee had to admit that of the total of 21,37, 787 acres obtained by it, most was either forestland or legally contested land. By March 1966, only 3,11,037 acres were distributed and even these at times were either wasteland or submerged land.<sup>53</sup>

Apart from these Acts many other agrarian laws were legislated over the years: The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the Bihar Consolidation of Holdings and Prevention of Fragmentation Act 1956 and 9<sup>th</sup> Amendment Bill 1970, Bihar SC/ ST, Backward classes and Denotified Tribe Relief Act 1974, the Bihar Money-lenders Act 1974 etc. but given the fact that these laws were ridden with loopholes, and given the sheer lack of land records and rent rolls, and above all, the nexus between the landed magnates, government officials and the police- these laws turned out to be a farce. This is best summed up in a passage of the report of the Working Group on Land Reform of National Commission on Agriculture, 1973.

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<sup>52</sup> *Report from the Flaming Fields of Bihar*, (henceforth *Flaming Fields*), a CPI (ML) Document, Calcutta, 1986, p 43-45.

<sup>53</sup> Arvind N Das, op.cit. p 205-207.

“by their abysmal failure to implement the laws, the authorities have reduced the whole package of land reform measures to a sour joke in Bihar. This has emboldened landowning class to treat the entire issue of agrarian reform with utter contempt. In Bihar, the landowners do not care a tuppence for the administration. They take it for granted. Their approach is defiant - there modus operandi open and insolent.”<sup>54</sup>

Beside agrarian reform legislations, the State after Independence promoted new agricultural technology and ‘harmony in the rural community’ through agricultural extension and community development schemes and later through specific programmes like Intensive Area Development Programme, Small Farmer Development Agency, Marginal Farmers and Agricultural Labour Programme, etc.

This administrative infrastructure, ostensibly aimed at bringing about prosperity in agriculture, was founded solidly on the assumptions that the “individuals, groups and classes in a village have common interests which are sufficiently strong to bind them together and that such conflicts of interests are easily reconcilable. Further it was generally accepted that the development work through the established traditional leaders in the villages generally the better off peasants would automatically benefit the whole community.”<sup>55</sup>

Undermining such claims was the fact that even the celebrated Intensive Area Development Plan (IADP), better known as the Green Revolution, could not trickle down to the rural poor. The government sources themselves had to admit later that landlords with a holding of 24 acres and more had turned out to be the major beneficiaries of the Green Revolution in Bihar, while *raiyyats* with holding of 5 acres or less, *raiyyats*

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<sup>54</sup> *Mainstream*, Vol. II, No. 40, 2 June 1973.

<sup>55</sup> A.R.Desai, ‘Community Development Projects: A Sociological Analysis’ in A.R.Desai (ed) *Rural Sociology in India*, Bombay, 1985, p.650.

with insecure rights in land, under *raiya*s, sharecroppers and agricultural labourers could derive no benefits worth the name.<sup>56</sup>

In short, the entire process of land reform and rural development culminated in the emergence of a new section of landlords - comprising erstwhile *zamindars*, *nayaks*, rent receiving farmers, money-lenders, traders and sections of better off occupancy *raiya*s.

After the reforms, landowners continued to come from upper castes and in some pockets, also from the upper layers of backward castes like the Kurmis and Yadavs. Rich peasants belonged to both upper castes and upper layers of backward castes while middle peasants belonged to the backward castes and in some cases Scheduled Castes and tribes as well. As far as the poor, lower middle peasants and agricultural labourers are concerned they continued to consist of the vast majority of backward castes and almost the entire *dalit* and *Adivasi* population.<sup>57</sup>

The agrarian scene in post-independence Bhojpur underwent changes similar to the rest of Bihar. The delayed abolition of *zamindari* and the non-implementation of agrarian legislation, under pressure from the landlords, resulted in a widespread ejection of under *raiya*s and sharecroppers. The IADP or packaged programme under the Third Five-year plan was introduced in this region. It was assumed that efforts towards ushering in Green Revolution would inevitably be successful due to the assured water resource of the canal system. However, soon there were signs of the green revolution turning red.<sup>58</sup>

Wolf Ladejinsky, a World Bank expert, after his tour of Shahabad in 1953 underlined the fact that the insecurity of tenants, their pauperization

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<sup>56</sup> *The Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tension*, Research and Policy Division, Ministry of Home Affairs, India, Delhi. unpublished report. 1969.

<sup>57</sup> *Flaming Fields*, p 46.

<sup>58</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, *Bhojpur: Naxalism in the Plains of Bihar*, Radhakrishna, Delhi, 1980. p 34.

and the bonded status of the labourers due to faulty legislation and negative attitude of the government officials at state, district, block, and village level, stifled the development initiatives causing sharp inequality in the agrarian society.<sup>59</sup>

The plight of the sharecroppers was equally miserable. Broadly two modes of sharecropping were prevalent. One, in which the leaser and the lessee shared 50-50 of the inputs, minus irrigation and labour costs, and divided the output equally. The second, where both input and output was calculated by the leaser. He invested 2/3 of the input, and the lessee invested only one third, however the output was shared equally.

In the contract sharecropper bore the burnt of bad harvests, being largely bound to return a specified amount in kind annually. To meet this requirement he relied on his *banihar*- a labourer who was provided with a certain amount of land for attached labour, and who for all practical purposes was a bonded slave. The woes of numerous *banihars*, struck the most plaintive note in the agrarian order. These landless *chamars* and *musahars* lived like animals in hovels, subsisting on three to five rupees per day and the master's *khesari*- an animal fodder made of husk which caused painful skin diseases and arthritis.

Thus *begari* was replaced by *banihari*. *Banihars* often worked for nothing. Wearing a clean dhoti, remaining seated on a cot in the presence of their masters even outside their own hut, or even walking erect was not permitted for them. The womenfolk were routinely raped by the landlords' '*lathaits*' (strongmen).<sup>60</sup>

The oppression of the lower castes by the upper castes flowed from the wealth appropriated due to land ownership and monopoly over labour.

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<sup>59</sup> Wolf Ladejinsky, *Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Agenda*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1970, p 336-337.

<sup>60</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, *op.cit.* 1980, p 35.



In Bhojpur, estate landlordism was nearly extinct. Only 0.4% of the privately owned land was held by this section constituting 0.2% of the population. The former estates of Dumraon and Jagdishpur were leased out to sharecroppers, who cultivated land with the help of their family members as well as *banihars*. Rich peasants, though a small category comprising only 1.3% of the total population, owned 11.2% of privately owned land. It is these sections that had emerged as new landlords and benefited the most from the IADP projects in the area. The medium (7.7%), small (12.3%) and marginal farmers (78.5%) owning 0.5 acres to 5 acres holdings together constituted 98.5% of the farmers and owned 84.8% (30.9%, 23.0%, & 30.9% respectively) of privately owned land. The landless labourers at the bottom of the social pyramid had no land and provided a cheap labour market.<sup>61</sup> In terms of castes the ownership of land was directly proportional to one's position in the caste hierarchy. Since land was largely in the hands of the upper castes any attempt at disturbing this class-caste ownership pattern was dealt with violence.

It is against the backdrop of this socio-economic pattern of agrarian society that the intensive area development programme was launched in Bhojpur. This reinforced the control of upper caste landlords over the resources, consolidating their wealth and arrogance. While the middle peasantry of backward castes also benefited to some extent, it was the erstwhile estates holders and new landlords who cornered the maximum benefits. According to the village surveys which were conducted as late as 1975-77, the latter controlled more land than it owned. Agriculture was so profitable for them that they wanted more and more land. It was this land hunger accompanied with rise in the prices of food crops that prompted landlords to take back leased land from the sharecroppers and attached

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<sup>61</sup> *Agricultural Census of India 1970-71*, New Delhi 1975.

lands from the *banihars*. In return they were paid subsistence wages in cash or inferior grains. This caused serious dissatisfaction when combined with the influx of tractors under the IADP scheme rendering a large number of attached labourers and ploughmen redundant to the production process. This development is best summed up by the government itself in 1969: "The programmes so far implemented are still more favourable to large owner-farmers than to small tenant farmers. As for the sharecroppers and landless labourers, they have been more often than not, left out in cold. In consequence, disparities have widened, accentuating social tension."<sup>62</sup>

Against this structure of socio-economic oppression that marked Bhojpur since Independence, both Socialists and Communists started mobilizing the oppressed peasantry. Whereas the CPI remained concerned with economic questions, the Socialists combined them with social questions. However their movement remained confined to the concerns of small and middle peasantry of backward castes. The issues of the landless were not taken up except those relating to caste atrocities, that too largely because of the commonality of the agents of oppression.

The popular leaders responsible for the spread of socialist ideology in Bhojpur were Ram Ekbal, Lakshman Singh, Raghunath Gope and Pranab Chatterjee. The Socialists succeeded in creating a political base in the prosperous IADP wheat bowl of Northern Shahabad by combining caste-class issues. Their mass base was the middle peasantry of Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri castes which together constituted around 36% of the population.<sup>63</sup>

Socialist leader Dharicharan Singh fought a prolonged legal battle over a rape of Chamar women by Rajput landlords of Karath in 1957-

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<sup>62</sup> *Causes and Nature of Agrarian Tension*, Research and Policy Division, Home Ministry, Govt. of India, New Delhi, 1969. p.4.

<sup>63</sup> *Agricultural Census of India, 1970-71*, New Delhi, 1975.

58. At Arrah, under the leadership of Ramsakal Singh, the socialists fought against flour mill proprietors who were making exorbitant profits at the cost of poor producers. Kamalkant Verma brought Chaurahi village of Piro block into prominence because of the agitation against canal rent around 1954-56. The canal water flow was getting irregular in Sahar, Sandesh, Piro and Jagdishpur and the rate of irrigation tax was being increased by the Bihar government in 1953. The struggle turned violent when the officers who came to confiscate the property of agitationists were attacked. Canal rent continued to be the main issue for mobilization and agitation in the district for both the CPI and the Socialists.

The CPI began work in Bhojpur in 1953, with activity in the flood-affected blocks of north Bhojpur – Arrah *moffusil*, Koelwar, Terai and Nawanagar.

During the 1955-56 canal-rate agitation in the blocks of Sahar, Sandesh, Piro and Nawanagar more than 700 Socialist as well as Communist agitators were arrested. The canal issue did not subside and lingered till 1970s.<sup>64</sup>

However these agitations did not address the deep-seated oppression in rural Bhojpur. The theme of *dalit* dignity got subsumed by the electoral ambition of the prosperous Ahir-Koeri-Kurmi combine. Poor peasants and the landless remained largely neglected. But by the latter half of the 60s, there were stirrings of change. 1965 saw the first major mass uprising in post-independence Bihar, led by the CPI, on the issues of hike in education fees, food-crisis caused by famine, rising prices of food-grains and the corruption of K.B. Sahay Government. Students and youth were the mainstay of this agitation. The firing on the student protestors further infuriated the people. Consequently in the next election of 1967 Congress

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<sup>64</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit., p 37-39.

ran far short of majority in the assembly and a coalition of non-Congress parties came to power. The new government - headed by the first backward caste chief Minister Mahamaya Prasad Sinha - consisted of the Sanyukta Socialist party, the Socialist Unity Centre and also the Jansangh. The SSP had secured 7 out of 22 seats in Shahabad district. This coalition also gave symbolic representation to the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward castes. These developments spurred on the political aspirations of the economically depressed backward and scheduled castes.

The stage was thus set for the most economically and socially deprived sections of Bhojpur society to assert their independent claims and political aspirations. However, neither the new government nor the existing political formations could seriously champion the very real issues of this section, because addressing these issues meant disturbing and threatening the basis on which the entire balance of their own social and economic power in rural Bhojpur rested.

## Chapter-IV

### Cultural Insurgency: Footfall of an Emergent Class

The first chapter mentioned Gramsci's concern for tracing the trajectory of the development of subaltern groups, from the stages of their participation in various dominant parties, to the stage of 'integral autonomy' – their participation in a revolutionary party.<sup>1</sup> In order to understand where the songs of the radical peasantry of Bhojpur are coming from, it demands that we trace such a trajectory of the political development of the agricultural labourers as a class. In the freedom struggle, it has already been said, this vast mass of agrarian labour and poor, landless peasantry, was a militant participant, but its own integral demands never found a place in the movement. The Congress leadership subsumed this mass, condemning its militancy at the slightest sign of independence. This class cut its political teeth in the struggles of the Kisan Sabha movement, but, as we have seen, could not be integrated with it. Even in the movement of backward caste peasantry, the Triveni Sangh, questions of landless, dalit and extremely backward poor peasantry could not find prominence. It was the class of *raiya*s who did, eventually, benefit from the limited land reforms carried out in independent India, emerging as a class of *kulaks*, which pitted itself against, rather than as an ally of the rural proletariat.

Why, however, did this class fail to find natural political expression in the existing Communist parties, the CPI or the CPI(M)? Why was there fresh wave of movement identified as Naxalite uprisings which

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<sup>1</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, op.cit. p 54-55.

subsequently crystallized in the form of a third Communist stream of CPI(ML)?

The ML movement, or the 'Naxalite movement' as it is often called, is often perceived as 'ultra-left', and 'extremist', in contrast to the more 'balanced' and 'sober' Left parties that pre-existed it. But such a perception obscures the real contradictions that led to the emergence of the CPI(ML); contradictions that have at their root the question of how to eradicate the stubborn grip of feudalism on the Indian countryside, and the role of the agrarian labouring class in the Indian revolution.

In its characterization of Indian society, the CPI downplayed the power of feudal forces, holding that while 'feudal remnants' did continue to exist, the Indian ruling class, the bourgeoisie, had an essentially 'national', 'progressive' character that suited it to lead the democratic revolution and do away with any feudal survivals. It was this characterization that led the CPI to draw back from the Telengana struggle, hoping for effective land reforms from the leadership of Nehru, which it saw as progressive and even potentially socialist. Naturally, the onus for Indian revolution could not be placed on the rural or even the urban proletariat; instead the CPI would, at crucial junctures, make the fatal mistake of looking towards the bourgeoisie for leadership.<sup>2</sup>

The CPI(M) broke with the CPI on this question, accepting in its programme, that the Indian ruling class was an alliance of the bourgeoisie with the landlords, and so was semi-feudal in nature. However, the CPI(M) too failed to accord any centrality to agrarian labour. Instead, they went on to advocate 'maximum peasant unity' in the struggle against feudal forces.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See *The Programme of the Communist Party of India*, adopted by the Seventh Congress of the CPI, Bombay, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> See *Fight Against Revisionism*, Political Organisational Report, adopted at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of India, Calcutta, 1964. (Note: This Congress marked the split between CPI and

The implication was that it played down the class differentiation within the peasantry; most crucially, it refused to recognize that the kulak lobby within the peasantry did not have a consistently anti-landlord, anti-feudal position. Rather, it tended to side with, even share power with, the traditional feudal class. It was this obfuscation of class relations and struggle within the peasantry that would eventually lead the CPI(M) to prioritise a closeness with parties of backward caste kulaks – the RJD and the SP – at the cost of championing the anti-feudal radicalism of the most oppressed section – agrarian labour.

It was this failure to accord any centrality to the most oppressed – the rural proletariat – that led to the continuation of the debate within the CPI(M), and eventually burst out in the Naxalite movement initiated by the leadership of the CPI(M)'s own Darjeeling district committee. When the CPI(M) disowned and crushed the movement, the CPI(ML) was born, conceiving of agrarian revolution, with its backbone of the agrarian labouring and landless class in alliance with middle and poor peasantry, as the axis of the democratic revolution in India.

The failure of the CPI(M) to make inroads in, and that of the CPI to retain its hold in the Hindi-Bhojpuri heartland, is precisely traceable to their failure to articulate a correct and consistent anti-feudal resistance. When called to explain their failure to make a dent in the Hindi heartland, as opposed to their success in Bengal or Kerala, the CPI(M) posits it to be the result of a compulsion, an inevitability rather than a mistake. Repeatedly, we find the explanation that whereas Bengal or Kerala are more conducive to the Communist movement because of the renaissance or bourgeois reform that had already been achieved there, Bihar and North India are still

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CPI(M). Thus the Calcutta document can be treated as the founding document of the CPI(M)). Also see *Tasks on the Kisan Front*, a CPI(M) document of 1967.

in the grip of feudalism and casteism, making it less fertile ground for communism. The fact that their cadres and base shifted to SP, BSP or RJD is explained away by the fact that political education was weak, rather than the linked to the fact of the surrender of these Communist parties to these very forces!

It was the CPI(ML) which could rise to the challenge of tapping the immense revolutionary potential of the rural landless poor, which could creatively combat caste and gender oppression on a class plank, and which dared to have the Communist movement take firm root in the Hindi-Bhojpuri heartland. Above all, it was the CPI(ML) which could recognize the poorest and most destitute among the peasantry as the vanguard of agrarian revolution. Vinod Mishra observed about the political impact of the Arwal massacre where poor peasantry were killed, “When the unceremonious death of the poorest among the peasants in the unknown, dingy, mud-tracked, tiny country-town of Arwal begins to shape the political crisis of the powers that be in Bihar, one can safely proclaim that the heroes have finally arrived on the stage.”<sup>4</sup> It is the arrival of these heroes on the stage that marks the songs, which are our subject.

In the songs we will examine in this chapter, we see a unique and distinct cultural striving, that is the hallmark of the coming of age of a subaltern, subjugated class as a political force in its own right. The sharp and contentious class struggle in society, and the contention in the field of culture are virtually indistinguishable. No wonder that several of the poets who composed songs for the movement, were also organisers and leaders, and were killed in false encounters with the police or by feudal forces. Cultural performances routinely faced violent repression and assault. Badri Narayan in his book *Documenting Dissent* says “many people’s theatre



groups were active in this area. These were often cultural expression of the Naxalite politics that had emerged during the last decade. The banning of the performance of such plays by these groups and their arrests did not succeed in stopping them.” Then he goes on to tabulate incidents of oppressive attacks on the actions of the people’s theatre groups in Bhojpur district during 1979-82.<sup>5</sup>

The emergent class-consciousness was marked by the rise of popular leaders and organizers from among the erstwhile ‘lower castes’. This awakening had a strong socio-cultural dimension, and issues of social dignity for women and the ‘lower’ castes were raised even before struggles for land or wages. Such an awakening is symbolized by the likes of Jagdish Mahato (popularly known as *mastersaab*) and Ram Naresh Ram, the vanguard of the CPI (ML) movement in Bhojpur, whose political consciousness began with questioning the upper caste landlords’ domination, the ‘ban’ on education for the lower castes, and the systematic oppression of lower caste labouring women. Mastersaab came from a *koiri* family of Ekwari village in Sahar, becoming the first educated *koiri* and a teacher of HD Jain School, Ar.ah. Ram Naresh Ram came from the *dusadh* caste and was the Mukhia of Ekwari village. In the elections of 1967, the initiatives of Ram Naresh Ram and Jagdish Mahto were met with brutal violence, ending up with Jagdish Mahto being hospitalized for months. Even before any formal association with the CPI (ML) party, they had felt the impact of Naxalbari, and had made attempts to shape a movement accordingly. The struggle was marked not only by militant resistance to notoriously oppressive landlords, it raised the banner of social revolt,

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<sup>4</sup> Introduction, *Flaming Fields*, p xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2001. p.25. Also see *Flaming Fields* p 112-113.

opposing for instance the '*doli pratha*', the noxious custom whereby the lower caste brides were forced to be violated by upper caste men.

It was only in February 1972 that the Bhojpur unit of CPI(ML) could be organized, but Mastersaab was killed on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1972, at the age of 37. Gradually the movement matured, and the party emerged as a mass party rather than an aggregation of squads. Armed resistance too took the shape of armed mass actions rather than isolated guerilla actions. The tremendous dimensions of the social and cultural impact of this movement are hard to imagine without realizing the centuries of subjugation and oppression that preceded it. The editors of a volume of Gorakh Pandey's poetry point out the similarity of imagery used by Arundhati Roy and Gorakh Pandey to describe the Naxalite movement. Roy speaks of how the dalit poor of the newly fledged Naxalite movement carried on their shoulders "a keg of ancient anger lit with a recent fuse", while Gorakh's poem '*Tumhe dar hai*' reminds, "*Hazaar saal purana hai unka gussa/ hazaar saal purana hai unki nafrat/ main to sirf unke bikhre huey shabdon ko / lai aur tuk ke saath/ lauta raha hoon/ magar tumhe dar hai ki/ aag bhadka raha hoon.*"<sup>6</sup> (A thousand years old is their anger/ A thousand years old is their hate/ All I'm doing is returning their own scattered words/ With rhyme and rhythm/ To them/ Yet you fear/ I'm inciting them." The thousand-year-old silence was being broken in the revolutionary songs being sung now in the southern '*tolas*' of the villages where the landless poor and the lowest castes had their hovels. To sing these songs, to even imagine them, was an act of insurgency unimaginable to their oppressors. The songs are at once a historical record, an inspiring call to action, as well

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<sup>6</sup> Pranay Krishna (ed.), 'Introduction' to *Gorakh Pandey ki Chuni Hui Kavitaein- Samay ka Pahiya*, Samvad Prakashan, 2004. The poem is "*Tumhe dar hai*", on p.22 of the same collection.

as a gesture of self-respect and dignity, accompanying the many acts of battle with the repressive state machinery and the feudal forces.

The State as well as the feudal forces used their might to try and snuff out the newly lit flame of social dignity and human rights; branding the mass of rural poor as terrorists and extremists, false encounters as well as massacres by private landlord gangs and armies became the order of the day.

A look at the social structure of this movement is also quite revealing. Its main strength was the *dalits*, poor peasants and agricultural labourers, a section of backward caste poor and a section of youth and intelligentsia. Jagdish Master, Subrato Dutta, and Sheila Chatterjee were well educated, and Dr. Nirmal was a fourth year medical student.<sup>7</sup> Narayan Kavi was a Naxalite poet, Jawahar Chamar was science graduate from H.D.Jain college Arrah. Many other local commanders and leaders had minimum matriculation education generally.

A list of 40 'hardcore Naxalites' prepared by the districts of Bhojpur included 10 *dusadhs*, 7 *chamars*, 2 *musahars*, 11 other schedule castes, 7 *yadavs*, 1 *gareri*, 1 *teli*. The list of accused of violence, attack and encounter in twelve incidents in the first phase included 15 *chamars*, 10 *dusadhs*, 9 *musahars*, 13 *koiris*, 12 *ahirs*, 2 *kurmis*, 1 *kahar*, 1 Muslim and 5 of other castes.<sup>8</sup> Almost all killed by the Police and landlords between 1972-76 were *dalits* and other backward castes.<sup>9</sup>

According to the CPI (ML) its activities shifted into the neighbouring districts and its organizational expansion took place through the organization of Kisan Sangharsh Samitis, Jankalyan Samitis and other

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<sup>7</sup> He joined the movement after being beaten up severely by the upper caste students for trying to organize a Leftist students political party in college.

<sup>8</sup> The list was prepared by Bhojpur administration for a meeting with the officials of the Home Ministry. See P.K.Chowdhary and Srikant, *op.cit.* p 232.

such popular organization between 1977-1980. Under the aegis of these organizations the rural poor raised their long pending yet immediate grievances through organizing Public Meetings and processions in front of officials from BDO to the DM. Though the issues and forms of protest varied from place to place, on the whole the following issues emerged as major focal points- stopping all atrocities on the oppressed classes and castes and meting out punishment to offenders, enforcement of minimum wages act; distribution of surplus and vested land among landless and poor peasants, provisions of adequate irrigation facilities, regular supply of electricity, seeds and fertilizers at cheaper rates; disbursement of drought relief, fair compensation and rehabilitation in case of displacement, liquidating landlord's control over all community properties; opposing various corruptions and malpractises by police and other govt. officials and soon strikes were conducted to secure increase in wages, attempts were made to capture vested lands some notorious thieves and dacoits were punished at some places, and during the days of drought the rich landed gentry were asked, and at times forced to contribute food grains for the sustenance of the rural poor.<sup>10</sup> These activities of the CPI(ML) were named variously as 'extremism - terrorism' or the activities of a 'parallel government' the govt., bureaucrats and landlords continued to witch hunt the suspects of these 'terrorist activities'.

Meanwhile the CPI(ML) had undergone a thorough rectification campaign leading to drastic changes in the party line in accordance with the appraisal of the post emergency situation . The politics of 'individual assassination' was dispensed with emphasis was laid on furtherance of people's movement. 'Undoubtedly this played a significant role in

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 32-36 in *Flaming Fields*.op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> *Flaming Fields*. op. cit. p.59-60

spreading the party's work among the Bihar peasants consequently unleashing the unprecedented peasant upsurge that shook the plains of central Bihar. With the formation of Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS 23 February, 1981) the whole process got a new fillip. The BPKS came up with a comprehensive program and started coordinating local as well as district and state level activities.

In Bihar the Deshbakht Janvadi Morcha was formed, its central axis being the BPKS. The same process at national level led to the combination of 150 big and small organizations, which gave birth to the Indian Peoples' Front at Ferozeshah Kotla Grounds in Delhi in 1981. Under the banner of IPF, new activities reinvigorated the agrarian movement in Bhojpur and other parts of Bihar.<sup>11</sup>

In what sense can the songs of this movement be said to qualify as an 'emergent' cultural/ideological practice in Raymond Williams' sense of the term, a challenge to the dominant culture? The progressive cultural movement of the IPTA, under the aegis of the CPI, had also produced a rich mine of democratic music, However, with the decline of the CPI and consequently the Progressive movement itself, this tradition too declined, and many of its most powerful figures found shelter in popular cinema, where their democratic, progressive music became quite a popular trend. In what way can the Bhojpur movement's music be said to offer anything new?

The fact is that the impact of the IPTA movement's music remained ambiguous; in cinema particularly, it was to some extent co-opted by the dominant idiom of Congress-style 'socialism'. Further, even at its best, this music providing rousing anthems for existing movements; rarely did they

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<sup>11</sup> Urmilesh, *Bihar Ka Sach – Krishi Sankat Aur Khetihar Sangharsh*, Prakashan Sansthan, N.Delhi, 1991. p.70

arise from lived struggles. There were perhaps exceptions, as indicated by some of the regional reports in IPTA's own documentation of its founding Conference<sup>12</sup>. For instance, the regional report from UP mentions the '*Gramin mushairas*' of village poets organized by an IPTA cultural activist and Kisan leader, Syed Muttalabi, in which village composers would sing about the lives and struggles of rural poor. But the fact remains that the music which is the trademark of the IPTA movement remains of a general secular democratic nature; rarely do they concern themselves with communicating Marxist ideas to the masses, even more rarely do they describe minutely the lives of rural poor.<sup>13</sup> In comparison, the songs we will examine, while sometimes (though not always) technically or aesthetically less well-formed, bear the unmistakable imprint of the lives of the agrarian poor, reflecting the ongoing struggle to communicate political ideas, and documenting the daily battles, the local heroes and martyrs, the events that the mainstream press and historians have passed by. In this sense, these named and unnamed bards are truly the organic intellectuals of the class of agrarian labourers – whether they are themselves from that class, or whether they are students and teachers, their art grapples with problem of learning and imparting ideas about labour and its exploitation, capital, feudalism, the State and its repressive apparatus, using an idiom and metaphors which can easily be grasped by the rural poor themselves. Indeed the greatest triumph of these composers lie in the fact that many of their songs have been adopted, adapted and passed on as collective intellectual and cultural property, with their authorship having been forgotten or rarely mentioned. These songs are fraught with the urgency of contemporary victories and

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<sup>12</sup>People's Theatre Stars the People, IPTA Bulletin No.1, PP Press Bombay, 1943.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

defeats; very rarely are they able to express the serene optimism of the IPTA's '*Yeh subah kabhi to aayegi*'.

There are examples of peasant rebels transforming their consciousness from that of dacoits to that of conscious professional revolutionaries. The case in point is of Rameshwar Ahir, a legendary figure of the peasant movement in Bhojpur. Rameshwar at one time confided the secret reason that spurred him to join the dacoit gang of Ram Gulam: "I wanted to be like Ram Gulam because the Bhumihars in my village were scared of him. Every time Ramgulam walked around Ekwari in his striped lungi, Bhumihars would shudder".<sup>14</sup>

Transforming traditional forms, which often contain unfreedoms and conservative tendencies is an important aspect of the socio-cultural life ensuing from the naxalite movement. A report notes, "Few years back, the drama staged locally in the villages was based either on mythological themes (eg. Bir Abhimanyu, Satya Harishchandra etc.).... A perceptible change is noticeable nowadays- while the youths of upper-castes and landlord families continue to stage the same old types of plays, with additions of chauvinistic themes...poor peasant youth have switched over to plays of new variety, like *Inquilab*, *Khoon ka Badla Khoon*, *Roti aur Insaf*, *Sava Ser Genhu* and so on and so forth. While some of these plays are original creations, many are in the old tradition of *Bhagalpuria* plays with the modification that whereas traditional *Bhagalpuria* plays use to end in defeat for the rebel peasant fighters despite many a heroic deed, the present plays conclude on an optimistic note and many revolutionary songs are interspersed in between."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit., p 76.

<sup>15</sup> *Flaming Fields*, op.cit. p.111.

### *The Role of the Music in the Movement*

Hanns Eisler, the German revolutionary composer called music a “tutor in the class struggle”.<sup>16</sup> In several interviews, speeches and writings, Eisler repeatedly identifies the crisis of music and art in modern capitalist society, where the “purpose of music in society is growing more and more questionable and the rift between music and social life is widening.”<sup>17</sup> He says, “The question facing modern music is, who writes it for whom?” For Eisler, the crisis of alienation of musicians from their audience can be resolved by “an alliance of the working class and progressive intellectuals” and musicians.<sup>18</sup> Eisler cautioned the modern, revolutionary composer that he “should not cut himself off from the mass movement. It is not enough to sit in his room and write for the working class movement. He must take an active part in social life and in the struggles of the working class.”<sup>19</sup>

Despite the fact that India is far from a developed capitalist nation, one finds an echo of Eisler’s persistent concern with the crisis in music, in Gorakh Pandey’s discussion of the crisis in Hindi poetry. A question he returns to repeatedly is that of why contemporary Hindi poetry faces a crisis of audience. He asks why this poetry, even poetry that is “progressive/democratic”, has such a restricted readership even among those who can read, and is certainly far from being heard and appreciated by illiterate people. Its audience is restricted only to fellow poets, or at best

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<sup>16</sup> Manfred Grabs (ed.), *Hanns Eisler- A Rebel in Music, Selected Writings*, Seven Seas Publishers, Berlin 1978. p 12.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p 71.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p 100.



a handful of people who have a special interest in poetry.<sup>20</sup> He identifies and criticizes what he calls a new form of 'art for art's sake' among Hindi poets, which is a tradition of writing literature "of writers, for writers and by writers" and which is also raising its head among writers of the democratic tradition as well.<sup>21</sup> For Gorakh, as for Eisler, the solution lay in a committed engagement of writers with society and the mass of poor peasantry and working class. But this professed commitment was not enough; he engages in sharp polemics with a writer (Vishnu Nagar) of the 'Janwadi' (Democratic) writers' group associated with the CPI(M), who wrote an article arguing for a complex and perhaps unpopular literature which is 'pro-people' as opposed to a simple and popular literature of the people. Nagar's claim was that people's consciousness is already evolved and developed, and that it would be "deeply feudal and anti-people" to condescend to writing simply with the aim of developing people's consciousness. In response, Gorakh covers the ground of the spontaneity-consciousness debate we have discussed in Chapter One. He argues that to say that people's consciousness is already evolved, is to say that there is no need for a conscious political organization (i.e. Communist Party) to develop it; also, it implies that the social status quo requires no change, since, after all, people are bearing with the system rather than revolting against it. To say that people's consciousness in the present society needs no further development, implies that "either the system is in keeping with 'developed' consciousness of the people, or the system has developed people's consciousness in keeping with itself!"<sup>22</sup> Carrying Nagar's claim to its logical end would lead one to dismissing Marx (for his idea that workers

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<sup>20</sup> Gorakh Pandey, 'Samkaleen Kavita Mein Roop Ki Samasyaen', *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, Jan Sanskriti Manch, 1990, p75.

<sup>21</sup> Gorakh Pandey, 'Saralta Ke Paksh Mein', *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 84.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p 81.

were in the grip of wage slavery) and Lenin (for his warning that the spontaneous consciousness of the working class was economism), by holding that they had the mentality of slave-owners and were anti-worker in attitude. Whereas in fact, Marx's dialectical thought recognized the revolutionary potential of the working class, and Lenin, recognising the objective situation of the working class for what it was, worked to create the means (i.e. a vanguard party) needed to develop working class consciousness and enable it to realize its potential. To this, Gorakh adds his own "humble submission" that literature and art too can play a role in transforming the consciousness of the masses. "The role of the artist in society can only mean that of organizing the scattered elements of people's consciousness, broadening and deepening it and helping to give it the right direction."<sup>23</sup> In this task, Gorakh compares cultural activists to party leaders and organizers. In its understanding of the scattered nature of consciousness, and of the role of the artist/activist, Gorakh (probably unconsciously) echoes Gramsci. The image of organizing scattered elements of the consciousness of the oppressed class, is a recurrent motif in Gorakh's writing; witness his own poem (quoted above) '*Tumhe dar hai*', where he describes his poetry as "returning their own scattered words/ With rhyme and rhythm/ To them".

Gorakh pithily expresses the need to *strive* to transform consciousness, in his assertion that "social change cannot is not a phenomenon that will simply happen like rainfall, it is an occurrence that must be *done*."<sup>24</sup> This calls to mind Aijaz Ahmad's assertion that "culture is, quite simply, what one does".<sup>25</sup> For fellow cultural activists committed to making social change happen, Gorakh stresses that "rather than creating works about the lives and struggles of peasants and workers for the middle

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<sup>23</sup> Gorakh Pandey, 'Saralta Ke Paksh Mein', *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 80- 81.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p 15.

or upper class, our *primary* listener or reader must be workers or peasants themselves.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, when he discusses the eternal debate of form and content, specifically the question of form in contemporary poetry, he emphasizes the special role of “songs written in various dialects, which become the voice of people’s struggles”. Such songs, he feels, are “the most useful form of people’s poetry”. Criticising the ‘literary’ language and style adopted by Hindi poets, which cut their writing off from the people, he calls for Hindi to be “enriched by the energy of various dialects, in order to develop a popular idiom.”<sup>27</sup> Gorakh’s ideas were in themselves a product of the ML movement, where he saw, and joined several activist-poets as well as groups living among the agrarian poor and composing popular songs in the languages spoken by them, drawing upon and transforming folk forms.

### *Folk Forms and Traditions*

Folk songs have been an integral part of agrarian and tribal societies in India. Bhojpuri songs are sung, not just in Bhojpur, but over a wide Bhojpuri-speaking range of Eastern UP and Central Bihar. There is an immense variety of folk forms in this language, forms which once had a close link with the agrarian seasons and the lives of rural societies. Even with the changes in these societies, folk songs continued to play a role in the social and cultural lives of the villages, and some of these forms, for

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<sup>25</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, ‘Globalisation and Culture’. op.cit.2000.

<sup>26</sup> Gorakh Pandey, ‘Naxalbari ka Kisan Vidroh aur Sahitya’, *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p. 59.

<sup>27</sup> Gorakh Pandey, ‘Samkalin Kavita mein Roop ki Samasya’, *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p.77-78. Alok Rai offers a very similar prescription for the crisis of alienation from the people which besets the ‘Hindi’ language in general, not its poetry alone. Significantly, in defence of his idea that the language of democratic citizenship in the Hindi belt can be “Hindi, with all its variants” rather than Sanskritised, purified “Hindi”, Rai quotes the poet Dhoomil, also someone influenced by the Naxalite movement. Dhoomil, at the height of the chauvinistic fervour of the ‘Angrezi-hatao’ movement, could write, “*Tumhara ye Tamil dukh/ meri is Bhojpuri peeda ka/ bhai hai/ bhasha is tikdami darinde ka*

instance the *birha* and *barahmasa*, describing the pain of separation of a woman from her lover, acquired a fresh poignancy and relevance in the context of the out-migration of males to the urban centres.<sup>28</sup> In an interview, Hanns Eisler says, “Folk songs arise under primitive economic conditions, especially in agrarian economies. Modern capitalism is unsuitable ground for the growth of folk songs. Folk culture is dying off just as the handicrafts are.”<sup>29</sup> However, he points out that a new form drawing upon the folk tradition has taken its place – “the mass song”. He holds the mass song to be “the fighting song of the modern working class...the folk song at a higher stage than before, because it is international.”<sup>30</sup> However, in India, unlike in advanced industrial capitalist societies, the economy continues to be predominantly agrarian; even a large section of those workers who work in urban factories, continue to have close rural links, often returning home to the village during the harvest seasons. As a result, folk culture survives not as an obsolete artifact, but as a live social practice. However, this does not mean that folk culture in India does not face attack and distortion. For one thing, the deep penetration of other global commercial media like television and cinema inevitably distorts mass culture, providing a cheap mass produced cultural for consumption. Hindi film music, largely, as well as television, is designed for passive consumption, rather than to stimulate thought or contemplation. Eisler compares such commercial entertainment to cheap beer or gin, designed to be “produced and consumed quickly and cheaply”. Speaking of the sentimental love songs churned out by Broadway and Hollywood, he says, “Some of you will say, that’s harmless, that’s just

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*kaur hai*” (Your Tamil pain/ Is brother to my Bhojpuri pain/ - Language is merely a morsel or the deceitful beast). Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism*, Orient Longman, 2000, p 120-21.

<sup>28</sup> A classic example is the kind of song in which the woman calls the railways her rival, because they are taking her lover away from her – ‘*Reliya bairan piya ko liye jaye re*’.

<sup>29</sup> ‘Problems of working class music’, an Interview with Hans Eisler, 1935 in Manfred Grabs(ed.), op.cit., p 99.

entertainment...But as a musician I do worry, for I know all is poison, opium for the people.”<sup>31</sup> Surely the same concerns should worry us about the effect of standard Bollywood fare, especially the contemporary films and TV fare, from which rural life has all but vanished, even as a stereotype, let alone reality! In the commercial music industry, ‘folk’ survives only in a vulgar and distorted form – witness the Bhojpuri songs sung by Manoj Tiwari, for instance. More sophisticated distortions co-opt even Bhojpuri struggle songs – for example the version of Gorakh’s ‘*Janta ki Paltania*’ performed as ‘*Hile Le*’ by the rock group Indian Ocean, but more on that later in this chapter. Eisler’s distinction is useful here, between the genuine folk song, and the “false folk song which is the product of a corrupt and sordid entertainment industry, which ‘borrows’ the idiom of the genuine folk song, only in a coarser and distorted form.”<sup>32</sup>

Criticizing commercial distortions of folk culture should not however imply that folk songs in their ‘pure’ original form are uniformly worthy of being celebrated. Authenticity – i.e. the fact that they are produced by rural societies themselves, - is no guarantee of democratic content, and one must guard against romanticizing folk culture, remembering that traditional rural societies are deeply riven by inequalities, exploitation and violence. Many of the traditional folk songs reflect and reinforce these injustices. For instance, the traditional *sohar* is sung by women to celebrate the birth of a son, perpetuating the preference for a male heir and discrimination against the female child. It is difficult to romanticize the *sohar* if one recalls the culture of female infanticide and discrimination that have produced it. Because many of these songs are sung

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p.99.

<sup>31</sup> ‘Labor, Labor movement and Music’, Speech to the International Ladies’ Garments’ Workers’ Union, 1938 in Manfred Grabs, (ed.), op.cit. p. 138-41.

<sup>32</sup> Manfred Grabs(ed.), op.cit., p 98.

and written by women, it is natural that the pain of the woman unable to produce a male child, and the despair and isolation of the barren woman, often find expression in these songs, but traditionally they do not challenge the discriminatory practices. Some songs portray the heart-rending lament of the childless woman, taunted as 'barren', whose very touch is considered 'inauspicious', and who is therefore rejected by her own mother, by the earth, heaven, water and even by wild animals. In desperation, she fashions a wooden 'baby' and claims to have given birth; when people come to see it, her prayers turn the false baby into a real one.<sup>33</sup> The pain and the hurt of the woman are depicted with feeling, but there is no word of protest. Several *sohar* songs portray the pain of the pregnant Sita, exiled unfairly by her husband, forced to give birth to her twins in the forest; many of them begin with the lament, "Who will cut the umbilical cord for me?". The only hint of protest in these songs is the fact that they always end with Sita refusing to go back to Ram, being swallowed up by the earth instead.<sup>34</sup> Another unusual and moving traditional *sohar* depicts the female deer whose mate has been killed for the feast at Ram's birth, who mourns and appeals to Kaushalya to at least give her the skin of her dead mate. Kaushalya refuses, saying she will use it to make a toy for her new baby. The female deer's sense of loss and the queen's hard-heartedness contrast with the mood of celebration traditionally associated with the *sohar* form.<sup>35</sup> One *jatsaar* song, unusually, depicts the lament of a young widow, who, in

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<sup>33</sup> See the *Sohar* section in Durga Prasad Singh, *Bhojpuri Lok Geeton Mein Karun Rasa*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1948 p17-18.

<sup>34</sup> See the *Sohar* section in Durga Prasad Singh, *Bhojpuri Lok Geeton Mein Karun Rasa*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1956. p.27-43.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, p.25-26.

her grief and rage, utters death-curses on the Brahmin and the *jyotish* who fixed her marriage, and berates her father for having got her married.<sup>36</sup>

Published collections of Bhojpuri folk songs probably edit the more subversive songs that surely must exist; the conservative attitude of their editors is quite evident. For instance, most songs depicting a woman describing her beauty, or asking men apart from her husband to provide her with flowers and jewelry, are preceded by the editorial note – “self-advertisement of a prostitute”! The text of the song does not use the word ‘prostitute’ (*kulta*); it may well be a light-hearted and mildly flirtatious song. The word ‘prostitute’ is an interpolation on part of the editor, reflecting his own prejudices.<sup>37</sup>

Other folk song forms often reinforce casteism; take the *jatsaar* song where a high caste woman marries a lower caste man, and on discovering that his mother tends pigs, tells him that had she known he was a ‘*dusadh*’ (a dalit caste), she would have had him hung.<sup>38</sup>

The tradition of adapting folk forms for political purposes goes back at least to the freedom movement since 1857. Bhojpuri songs in the *vir ras* mode describe the exploits of Kunwar Singh who fought the British.<sup>39</sup> Much later, there are several *sohar* songs where the mother celebrates the son’s birth by asking her friends to spin the *charkha*, a symbol of *swadeshi*, and to wear *khaddar*, while hoping that her son will grow up to serve the nation.<sup>40</sup>

The mass songs produced by Bhojpur’s revolutionaries should be seen in the backdrop of this mixed inheritance – and, as Eisler puts it, these

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<sup>36</sup> Krishnadev Upadhyay (ed.), *Bhojpuri Gram Geet*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1948. p. 104-105.

<sup>37</sup> Krishnadev Upadhyay (ed.), *Bhojpuri Gram Geet*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, 1948. p. 67.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p.106-107.

<sup>39</sup> PC Joshi (ed.), *1857 In Folk Songs*, People’s Publishing House, Delhi, 1994. p.99.

<sup>40</sup> Pt. Krishnadev Upadhyay (ed.), *Bhojpuri Gram Geet*, Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, Prayag, p 3-7.

revolutionaries who use folk forms “have the job of sorting out the grain from the chaff.”<sup>41</sup>

### *Music For The Sake of Change*

What is the philosophy of art and music that the revolutionary songs of Bhojpuri share? The poet Ramakant Dwivedi Ramta, in a song composed in 1984, addresses fellow singers as ‘*Bhatkal Gayak*’ (Singers Gone Astray), calling upon them to “Sing songs to rouse the self-respect of every person/ Create a Hindustan of the dreams of common people”.<sup>42</sup> He asks, “Till when will you keep wandering aimlessly, singing nonsense? Sometimes you sing of the ‘*raas*’ dance in the forest, sometimes you say the world is illusion/ Sometimes you sing of sacrificing one’s life on a stone/...the crocodile has had you in its grip for too long, it’s time now for us to cut the ropes that bind our nation/ How long will you wait in vain for god, god isn’t coming, my friend”.<sup>43</sup>

One song by Durgendra Akari refers to songs and plays as a means of coming to terms with the intense, unspeakable suffering, which otherwise cannot be expressed. In ‘*Kahwa Le Kahin*’, the poet asks, “*Kahwa le kahin*

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<sup>41</sup> Manfred Grabs (ed.) op.cit, p 99.

<sup>42</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi Ramta, ‘Bhatkal Gayak’, *Hamar Suni, Selected Writings of Ramtaji*, Jan Sanskriti Manch, 1996, p.57. See Appendix for biographical sketches of some of the poets discussed in this chapter.

<sup>43</sup> Ramakant Dwivedi Ramta, ‘Bhatkal Gayak’, *Hamar Suni, Selected Writings of Ramtaji*, Jan Sanskriti Manch, 1996. p.57. The last line refers to the myth where the crocodile had an elephant in its grip, and Vishnu came to the rescue to free the elephant who was his devotee. The song says that the singers from among the oppressed must decide to free themselves and their nation, it is useless to wait for god, and to waste one’s song in religious themes.



*vipatiya re, ay haakim?*” (How can I express my calamity, O master?).<sup>44</sup> He says, “*Chadhte aashadh mein harva chalavli/ Chaura ke ban ham kabahun na pavli*”, describing the difficulty of ploughing the fields in the ‘*aashadh*’ month (the first phase of the rainy months), but not being paid rice in kind.<sup>45</sup> He goes on to say that he worked in the muddy fields in the *sawan-bhado* seasons (the last two months of the rains), only to find that the landlord kept half the ‘*ban*’ payment, doling out only half the amount, and “*kahato mein phat tari chatiya*” (it rends the heart even to recount these injustices). His wife is forcibly stopped from harvesting the fields, and she and his children go hungry for three days. He is unable to go to work the fields, and an angry landlord comes home to demand an explanation. Despite hearing his troubles, the landlord humiliates him, abuses and slaps him. “*Batiya Akari gai gana mein sunavle/ Sathihan ke saathva mein rupak dekhavle/ kaise baachi hamni ijatiya ay haakim*” – these sufferings can only be told when Akari sings his song, and performs his *rupak* play along with his comrades, to show us how to safeguard our dignity. It is significant to recall that Akari is himself a landless labourer, whose cultural activism began with performing *rupak* (plays with rhyming script) on social themes.

Gorakh’s poem ‘*Kala Kala Ke Liye*’ (Art for art’s sake) is worth quoting in this context, since although it is in Hindi, it throws light on what he and other activist-poets think of the idea of a ‘pure’ art which is removed from social concerns.<sup>46</sup>

*“Kala kala ke liye ho/ Jeevan ko khubsurat banane ke liye/  
Roti roti ke liye ho/ Khane ke liye na ho*

<sup>44</sup>Durgendra Akari, ‘Kahwa Le Kahin’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye- Selected Writings of Durgendra Akari*, Samkaleen Prakashan, Patna, 1997. p.7. The word ‘*haakim*’ suggests a government officer rather than the landlord.

<sup>45</sup> Payment for labour would often be cereal measured in kind (called ‘*ban*’), but in place of rice, often inferior grains like *khesari* (see Chapter 2), more suitable for animal fodder, would be given.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Kala Kala Ke Liye’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 55.

*Mazdoor mehnat karne ke liye ho/ Sirf mehnat*  
*Punjipati ho mehnat ki jama-punji ke/ Malik ban jane ke liye*  
*Yani, jo ho jaisa ho vaisa hi rahe/ Koi parivartan na ho..."*  
 (Art be for art's sake/ Not for the sake of making life more beautiful  
 Bread for bread's sake/ Not for the sake of eating  
 The worker be for the sake of labouring/ Only labouring  
 The capitalist for becoming the master/  
 Of the value created by labour  
 That is, let everything remain as it is, however it is/  
 Let their be no change).

Eisler reaches a very similar conclusion about 'art for art's sake', although he expresses it in prose. He says that to talk of music for music's sake "is the same as if an architect were to say that he builds houses for the sake of building houses, but not so that people can live in them", and that this "apparent aimlessness of bourgeois music has in reality the very important function of supporting capitalism".<sup>47</sup>

### **Transforming and Challenging Backward Ideas**

Ramtaji's '*Bhatkal Gayak*' gives a clue as to the orientation followed by poets like him – attempting to challenge the traditional music where devotional and spiritual balm would be applied to suffering. Other songs, too, specifically tackle the subject of religion and mythology. Akari sings in '*Raakh Dhar Bhaiya*', "*tohra det ba na hissa, kahe karam bhag ke khissa/ aisan kissa se na mili adhikar bhaiya*" (They don't give you your rightful share, saying it's your 'karma', your fate/ such tales won't give you your

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<sup>47</sup> Manfred Grabs (ed.), op.cit., p 71.

rights, brother).<sup>48</sup> Gorakh's '*Kaise Chale Suraj Chanarma*' also begins by offering a materialist explanation for what is usually thought to be a divine phenomenon. "*Kaise chalele suraj-chanarma/ Dharatiya hae piya kekar banaval?/ Suraj-chanarma chale apne gatiya/ Dharatiya he dhani gati ke banaval*" ( What makes the sun and moon move/ Who, my love, made the earth? / The sun and the moon move through their own motion/ And the earth, my love was made by motion). Questions as to who moves the sun and moon, and made the earth usually get the answer that 'God made them'. Gorakh makes his working class lovers offer each other a scientific answer, that is no less beautiful. In the Gorakh's '*Mehnat Ka Barahmasa*', the peasant who has gone to work in Kolkata tells his wife, "*Bhagi dharmakaram avtaar sajni/ Ehi khoon chusvan ke hathiyaar sajni*", exposing all talk of fate and reincarnation as weapons to justify exploitation.<sup>49</sup>

In the section on folk traditions, we have seen how folk songs traditionally carry a range of themes and ideas, including backward and feudal ideas. How do the revolutionary composers make these folk forms bear new meanings? Take, for instance, the *chhath geet*, traditionally sung in reverence to the Sun god, at the Chhath festival. The first line of such songs would often be '*Kanchahi baans ke bahangia*', a description of cutting tender bamboo shoots for the *chhat pooja*. *Ramtaji* uses the *chhat* form to describe instead, how the singer will cut a shoot of tender bamboo, plant it in a ground, so as to unfurl a red flag which will flutter from it (*kanchahi baans kataib, gadab mahe maidan/ phahar-phahar phahraib, oh par lalka nishan*).<sup>50</sup> Another song using the *chhat* form is by Vijendra Anil, which calls upon people to break their slumber and wake to the morn of struggle. Descriptions of natural beauty take on a new meaning, with the

<sup>48</sup> Raakh Dhar Bhaiya', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit., p 22.

<sup>49</sup> 'Mehnat Ka Barahmasa', *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 113-117.

lines –“*Purab mein ugal surajva, bhai lalka anjor/ bhojpur lalaiya batorlas, muskaye lagal bhor/ thathmal dilli rajdhania, i ha kaisan gohar,*” – the rising sun’s redness is gathered by Bhojpur and the morning smiles, but the capital city, Delhi, shakes with fear. The description of greenery, *palash* and *peepal*, *mahua* flowers and bamboo shoots, are followed by the lines “*Lathiya tohar ha banukia, hasua hauey taruaar*” – your *lathi* (stick) will be your gun, and your sickle will be your sword. The religious song has been transformed into a rousing call to class struggle, without for a moment losing its beauty.<sup>51</sup>

The *sohar* form, traditionally used to celebrate the birth of a son, is used by Gorakh to describe the birth of a dream of an egalitarian world. In the song titled ‘*Sapna*’, a poor peasant woman describes her dream to her friends:

“*Sutal rahlin sapan ek dekhlin/ Sapan manbhaavan ho sakhiya, ...  
Akhiya ke nirva bhail khet sonva/ Ta khet bhail aapan ho sakhiya  
Gosaiyan ke lathiya muraiya as turlin/ Bhagavli mahajan ho sakhiya  
Kehu nahi uncha-neeche kahu ke na bhay  
Nahin kehu ho bhayaavan ho sakhiyaa*”

(When I was sleeping I saw a dream  
The dream was attractive, my friend, ...  
Tears from the eyes turned the field golden  
And the field became ours, my friend  
I broke the landlord’s *lathi* as easily as if it were a radish  
And chased off the moneylender, my friend  
No more high and low, no fear of anyone  
Neither was anyone scary, my friend).

<sup>50</sup> ‘Jhanda na kabahun jhukaib’, *Hamar Suni*, op.cit. p 50.

<sup>51</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, Jan Sanskriti Prakashan, Lucknow, 1988. p.16.

The song ends with the reign of money being wiped out, and the women finding her lover eventually. The yearning for a lover, in this case coalesces with the longing for an egalitarian world, and stands both in comparison and contrast to the longing for a son described in traditional *sohar* songs.<sup>52</sup>

Traditional *hori* songs, sung at Holi celebrations, cover a variety of themes – many describe Ram or Krishna playing Holi, others describe the separation of a woman from her lover at Holi, still others are of the obscene, vulgar variety, considered “allowed” during Holi. Gorakh has used the *hori dhun* to sing ‘Zamin’ (Land), designed to help landless poor formulate the question, “*Kekar nave zamin patwari/ kekear nave zamin? ...Jekar dhuriye mein zindagi sirail/ okar nauva kahvan bilail/ Je dharti se door rahela/ kaisa karela adhin?*”(In whose name is the land, *patwari*,/ In whose name?...He whose life is spent in dust alone/ How does his name disappear (from the records)/ While he who keeps away from the land/ How does he enslave it?). Eventually the dam of patient tolerance of this injustice breaks, and the singers declare, “*Ab ham kisan-majura milike/ Hak leib choran se chheen*” (Now we, the peasants and workers will together/ Snatch back our rights from the thief). Gorakh uses a tune his potential singers, the peasantry, is used to singing, and infuses it with a fresh content that educates people about how the powerful have acquired poverty by trickery, and how they must fight for their rights to land. This makes the *hori* truly a mass fighting song, a new kind of folk song, of the kind we have seen Eisler speak.

The *gari* form, traditionally sung at weddings by the bride’s family in the form of colourful abuses aimed at the groom’s family, is a form that lends itself particularly well to satire. Vijendra Anil uses it repeatedly, so

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<sup>52</sup> ‘Sapna’, *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 111.

does Gorakh. One such song, written in 1980 by Anil, satirises the elections:

*“Tata se milike/ Birla se milike  
Ropeya ke dariya baha da chunav mein...  
'Congress' ke boli/ Janta ke boli  
Hitler ke boli suna da chunav mein  
Ballot churala/ Baksa churala  
Buthva pa kabja jamala chunav mein”*

The 1980 elections were a tumultuous time; the Janta government had ousted the Congress from power in 1977 after the Emergency, and the Congress made good in these elections. Here this *gari* employs humour and an energetic beat to call the ‘democratic’ bluff of the Janta Government and lampoon both it and the Congress as being dictatorial like Hitler. It also lampooned most of the hypocrisies of bourgeois elections – from ballot and booth capturing to the empty promises, to the pouring of big money. This song, sung during the elections would not only be entertaining and amusing, but would also serve to expose the main ruling parties.<sup>53</sup>

Another simple song, also by Anil, uses the *gari* form successfully to expose the behavior of the ruling class and its brokers and intermediaries during a famine.<sup>54</sup>

*‘Kothi bana la / Kotha bana la  
Raasan ke bora khapa da, akaal mein  
Chaur chhipa la / guhum chhipa la  
kale kale mehangi badha da, akaal mein  
...BDO se milike / oseer se milike  
kaagaz pa sadak bana da akaal mein...’*

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<sup>53</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 10-11.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, p 14-15.

The song begins with exposing the hoarders who raise prices during the famine and become rich, and the *dalals* who connive with the Block Development Officer and overseer and take funds for 'food for work' schemes during famines, in which people are employed to construct roads etc...in return for grain. Unfortunately, these funds do not reach the starving, for the roads are 'built' only on paper!

*"Goli chalava/ Goli chalava*

*Joolus par ghoda chadha da, akaal mein*

*Ghanti bajava/ ghanta bajava/ Danga ke bigul baja da, akaal mein*

*...Seema pa sena ghuma da akaal mein"*

The song satirises state repression that punishes the protests of people against famines, the attempts to divert attention away from the anger at famines, by provoking riots, or the last resort – a war on the borders to fan up jingoism.

Another *gari* by Anil satirises the Indira regime and calls upon people to target Delhi (i.e the Central government, the seat of power).<sup>55</sup>

Gorakh's scathing satire '*Paise Ka Geet*' attacks the pervasive, corrupting influence of money in our society, ending with a taunt for the *panches*, those who dispense justice in the village, for being sold out to the rich and powerful:

*"Paise ke bootey/ Insaf ke jootey/ Khaey ja panchon*

*Maar aji paise ki"*.<sup>56</sup>

'*Samajvad*' is another song where Gorakh uses the *gari* form to satirise the ruling class slogan of 'socialism', adopted variously by the Congress as well as components of the Janta coalition. Deceptively light-hearted and humourous, one must not underestimate the potential of this

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<sup>55</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 22.

<sup>56</sup> 'Paise ka Geet', in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 81.

song to educate the rural poor and equip them to recognize the reality of the ruling class' socialist pretensions.

*“Notva se aai/ Votva se aai/ Birla ke ghar mein samaai  
Gandhi se aai/ Aandhi se aai/ Tuthi madaiyo udai...  
Congress se aai/ Janta se aai/ Jhanda ke badli ho jaai...  
Daalar se aai/ Rubal se aai/ Desva ke banhe dharai...  
Lathi se aai/ Goli se aai/ Lekin ahimsa kahai...  
Parson le aai, Barson le aai/ Hardam akaase takaai,...  
Dheere dheere aai/ Chupe-chupe aai/ Akhiyan par parda lagaai  
Samajvad unke dheere-dheere aai.”<sup>57</sup>*

It comes by notes/ Comes by votes/ Goes to roost in Birla's house  
Comes taking Gandhi's name/ Comes with a storm? And blows  
away even a broken hut

Congress brings it/ Janta brings it/ Only the flag is exchanged  
Comes by the dollar/ Comes by the rouble  
Holds the country in chains  
Comes with sticks / Comes with bullets/ Yet calls itself non-violence  
It'll come tomorrow/ It'll take years to come  
It'll keep you gaping expectantly at the sky  
Comes gradually/ Comes stealthily/ Puts blinkers on the eyes  
Their socialism is slow to come).

The *barahmasa* form traditionally expresses the pain of separation from a lover, month by month (hence its name). Gorakh's moving long poem '*Mehnat Ka Barahmasa*' (Barahmasa of labour) is a dialogue between a poor labouring couple. The journey from hopeless despair to an enlightened consciousness and a determination to fight happens in the course of the poem, and with the passage of time and exchange of ideas that



the poem describes. One section of the poem does stick to the original form of month-by-month description, but rather than describe love and longing, the wife describes the suffering and injustice that each month of hard labour in the fields brings.<sup>58</sup>

Bhojpuri has a rich tradition of work songs – and Gorakh has innovated with several of them, such as the *sohni*, *mallahon ka geet* and *dhobiuva*. In some of these, he uses the tune and form of the folk song, but uses Hindi instead. His *sohni ka geet* uses the traditional setting of women singing in the fields. But it carries an unusual element of rebellion and resistance, and bleakly describes the hunger and destitution of those whose labour actually makes grains grow in abundance. “*Hamare peeth par chabuk ke nishan/ hamare geeton mein raja ke ghode ki taap*”, (Marks of the whip on our backs/ the beat of the king’s horse in our songs) - the women sing, recognizing how most of their songs are forced to conform to the oppressive ruling ideology. Instead, this song wishes for the whip to be burnt, for the king’s horse to be reduced to ashes; and once these symbols of oppression are destroyed, for their songs to be suffused with the greenery of crops, and for them never to have to beg before anyone.<sup>59</sup>

Similarly, Gorakh’s ‘*Mallahon ka geet*’, the song of the boatmen is also in Hindi. At one level, it is an ordinary description of the beauty of the water and the waves, but each image, despite its simple language, is full of rich meaning. In the movement of the waves and its depths, the boatpeople see their own lives reflected; in the fear and disturbance of the fishes, they see their own state of mind. So they sing, “*Bhookha khewaya patwar sachha/ malik chungi udai ho sajni/ Kyahai maram is bheege pal ka/ kitna pyasa hai manwa jal ka/ kahe meen akulai ho sajni*”. Once again there is

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<sup>57</sup> ‘Samajvad Babua’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 101.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Mehnat Ka Barahmasa’, *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 113-117.

the poignant contrast between the hungry boatman plying his trusty oars, whereas the owner of the boat spends away the tax that he extorts from them. The mind that is thirsty for water, certainly expresses a longing for dignity and a full and secure life.<sup>60</sup>

The *dhobiuva* (song of washermen) has been adapted by Gorakh to become a song sung by coalmine workers in 'Koila'. Here, the 'Chaka-chaka' rhythm of the washermen beating clothes becomes the sound of the train carrying coal.<sup>61</sup>

### Women and Gender

Folk culture abounds in songs by women addressing their husband or lover, and this form has been used in many of the revolutionary songs. Some are an adaptation of the traditional exhortations to go to battle with the enemy. For instance, Vijendra Anil's song '*Bahal basanti bearia ho, piya banha pagariya*' begins with the woman exhorting her mate to 'tie his turban', that is, ready himself for battle. But its no ordinary battle – she describes how her body burns up while working in the sun every day, and how her dreams are washed away by the rains and how she has to work outside in the cold winters, "*Ghama mein din din bhar dehia jarwalae/ barkha ke paani mein sapna ghulawale/jaara mein sewe bagharia ho piya banhe pagaria*". She also uses the image of a *maina* bird in a cage, whose beak has been cut off by the oppressor- "*ori te khota ba, khota mein maina/ kainchi se julmi katar dihlas daina*".<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>'Sohni ka Geet', in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 37.

<sup>60</sup>'Mallahon ka Geet', in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 83.

<sup>61</sup>This song is unpublished and is popularly sung, often without its authorship being known.

<sup>62</sup>Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit p 31.

The image of a caged *maina* to suggest the women who fall victim to the cruel oppression of feudal powers has been used in a Hindi poem by Gorakh as well.<sup>63</sup> Clearly, the call to battle is against feudal oppression. In another poem by the same author, a woman calls upon her lover to change the structure of the country by taking the red flag in his hand “*badlin ja deshwa ke khaka, balmu lei ke lalka pataka ho*. She says (and clearly the love-song structure is also addressing and inspiring the entire society of rural poor), “*Khurpi aa hasua se kaini eyari/ jingi mein sunlin malikwa ke gari*”. (We’ve befriended the shovel and the sickle/ and heard the landlord’s abuses all our lives). Its time now to change things, but the target is not local alone; they will be satisfied only with changing the power structure of the whole country. So, she calls him to “*Ban kar dilli dilli ke naka, balmu lei laka pataka ho...jaam kar shasan ke chaka, balmu lei ke lalka paatkaa ho*”. And finally, she calls for an overthrow of the Congress government, “*Panja pe phehin ja chhaka, balmu lei lalka pataka*”.<sup>64</sup>

But this fighting song is, nevertheless also a love song, and the woman sings, “you be the sun and I’ll be its redness/ You be the waterfall and I’ll become the greenery”. Another similar song is one by Gorakh, which is both a moving love song, as well as a materialist celebration of the power of labour and the determination to struggle. In this song, ‘*Neh ke paati*’ (Love letter), the woman sings, “*Tu hau shram ke surajwa, hum kiriniya tohar*”, (You are the Sun of Labour, and I’m your ray).<sup>65</sup> Appealing to her mate not to leave her and go far away, she says, if he does, he mustn’t forget to write; “You are the love letter/ I’m its alphabet”. No translation can possibly do justice to the sweetness of the line “*Tu hava nehia ke patia,*

<sup>63</sup> ‘Maina’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 105.

<sup>64</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 29.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Neh ke Pati’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 106.

*hum achharia tohar*". There is also an inversion of the usual image of the man fighting battles while his mate never uses arms – she sings "*Tohre hathaudva se kaanpe punjikhorwa/ hamre hasua se hile bhuikhorva*". If his hammer inspires fear and trembling in the capitalist (he is presumably a worker in the city), her sickle does the same for the landlord. The unity of a man and woman in love has been equated with the unity of hammer and sickle, workers and peasantry. The line "*Tu hava jujhe ke pukarva ho, hum turahiya tohar*" says "You are the call to struggle, I'm your trumpet", together, they make a call to war against injustice.

A very different song is '*Panrah agast ke dinva tiranga lahraai lagal ho*' by Vijendra Anil.<sup>66</sup> This is not a woman singing to her mate, but a collectivity of women who are describing their thoughts on Independence Day. It is a song which can be collectively sung while working in fields. They sing to their sisters that "we sow and reap all day in the fields, yet there is no grain in the house and we are drowned in debt...my husband ploughs the field, my ten-year old son does *banihari* (a practise which covertly continued *begar* - unpaid labour) and my daughter herds cattle and listens to the abuses of the *malik* everyday."<sup>67</sup> I wish my son could have a book and slate, and study to become a man, that my husband wouldn't be naked, that his feet would be shod, and that he could attend the *Sabha*. On the day of elections, the *neta* appears like a dream in a cloud of dust; voting changes the rulers, but nothing changes for the poor". Finally, they call upon their brothers and sisters to break their shackles, only then can '*azaadi*', freedom have any meaning.

Another song in the same collection is, once again a woman singing about her love. But the difference is, he is dead, shot by a policeman. So the

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<sup>66</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 26.

<sup>67</sup> See Chapter Two for reference to *banihari*.

love song becomes a song defying state repression. She asks the policeman defiantly, “We ask you, oppressive *sipahi*, tell us / why did you open fire, tell us./ My husband was no pickpocket, he supported his family by his hard labour/ On whose orders did you spill blood, and why?...Your independence, our dark night,...We’ll bear it no longer”. This simple song burns with indignation and anger against the repressive state and its machinery.<sup>68</sup>

In contrast to the above songs, is an unusual one in which the woman exhorts her husband to take bribe and become corrupt! Clearly, the husband has not been very well off but has been elected *mukhiya*, and now has his first taste of power. It is a song that inspires humour and also serves as a caution against corruption. The wife says, “my love is now the *mukhiya*, now *dal* and rice and sugar will flow in my house, and we’ll have a treasure in our pockets to beat the collective earnings of Jharia and Dhanbad (mines). You give ration to those you chose, and take bribe too. The court and thana will be in our fist. The justification is that you’ve served enough, you’ve had your share of poverty. Take contracts for canals, and in return, buy me ornaments and sing *filmi taranas* to me, my love”. This is a satire on an all-too familiar phenomenon, what makes it unusual is the fact that the butt of the satire is a woman.<sup>69</sup>

Gorakh’s songs and poems too are rich with a sense of gender justice. *Maina*, written in Bhojpuri in the style of a folk tale is an indictment of the feudal sexual exploitation of lower caste women – a phenomenon rife in rural Bihar.<sup>70</sup> Yadav and Mukherjee’s book, *Bhojpur* documents minute details of several incidents of protest and struggle as well as state repression. In case after case, it is revealed that the landlord has assaulted

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<sup>68</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit.p 20.

<sup>69</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit p 12.

women from the families of dalits, backward castes and labourers.<sup>71</sup> A king captures a *maina* and gifts it as a plaything to his son, who torments it and kills it. He complains to his father that the toy is useless – the *maina* won't cooperate. And his father tells him you can only enjoy her when you learn to suck her blood and enjoy the taste. In '*Mehnat Ka Barahmasa.*', the labourer recounting the oppressive nature of the zamindar, compares him to a pest in the *arhar* fields (surely a reference to the rape and harassment of rural lower caste women in *arhar* fields that is sometimes boasted about in suggestive vulgar folk songs). "*Abbo gaon- gaon rahe zamindar sajni/ jaise rahri mein rahe hundar sajni*".

Gorakh also documents a remarkable episode which happened in Bhojpur in 1981, in the village of *KaitharKalan*, where women seized the rifles of police who had come to raid the homes for Naxalites.<sup>72</sup> Gorakh's Hindi poem '*Kaithar Kalan Ki Auratein*' describes the momentous nature of this occurrence. Everyone took the docility and dumbness of the women of *Kaithar Kalan* for granted. Meanwhile, the poor began to unite against oppression and revolt was in the air. One day, the police raid party found themselves confronted and chased away by the women. How did this unthinkable thing happen? "In the country where, in a full assembly/ Draupadi was disrobed/ And all the heroes remained silent/ In the same country/ Such an affront to male pride? Anyhow, this was just/ *Kaithar Kalan's* little Mahabharat/ where the women of *Kaithar Kalan* fought/ Shoulder-to shoulder with poor men/ Remember this/ Those who wish to change history/ And they too/ Who want to turn history back".

Gorakh's other poems address women of the middle class too. His '*Band Khidkiyon se takrakar*' is a sensitive portrayal of the cruel

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<sup>70</sup> 'Maina' in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 105.

<sup>71</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit.p 43-121.

imprisonment of Indian women within four walls of the house, a state which contrasts ironically with the grand claims our culture makes of revering womanhood.<sup>73</sup> In a telling reference to the wife-burnings, suicides and cases of women being locked up within homes (to prevent them from exercising their choice, the poem says “*Ghar-ghar main shmashan ghat hai/ ghar-ghar mein phansi ghar hain/ ghar-ghar mein deevarein hain*”. ‘*Bua ke Liye*’ is a loving portrait of an aunt who was widowed young. But he raises the question of why women from upper castes, though oppressed by the same feudal patriarchy that upholds the caste system, fail to feel solidarity with dalits. “*But bua/ Why do you still practise untouchability?/ You protect us / from our father’s feudal pride/ like a shield/ yet, why do you hold Ramdhani chamar to be lowly/ who ploughed our fields all his life/ always remained poor/ and bore the oppression of our father?*”<sup>74</sup>

Gorakh is ruthless in his bid to expose the cruelty and greed, which torment women within the ‘sacred’ institution of the middle class family. In his ‘*Paise ka geet*’, which we discussed as a *hori*, there is a satirical reference to dowry burnings, “*paise ki amma/ paise ke bappa/ lapaton se bani sasuraal aji paise ki*”.

### Resistance to Casteism

The hallmark of the ML movement of the ’80s was the predominance of social dignity struggles along with economic, class issues. Caste and class were addressed together in a manner, which was not contrived but most natural. This is reflected in several of the movement’s songs. In Akariji’s songs, one hears the simultaneous assertion of right to

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<sup>72</sup> *Flaming Fields*, op.cit. p 104.

<sup>73</sup> ‘Band Khirkiyon Se Takrakar’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit.p 38.

land as well as social equality and dignity. In his song 'Kahe Na' (Why Not), he asserts, "As long as there is water, why can't we (marginal peasants) divert canals to our own fields? The road belongs to all, then if someone blocks the way of another, why won't we push him aside?" This is a direct reference to the habit of upper caste landlords, of preventing lower caste peasants from accessing water sources and roads.<sup>75</sup> In another song, he sings, "We've raised the crops, created wealth,

Now we've a rightful share in all this, what'll you do, O Zamindar!  
We've also got equal rights to sit and stand".<sup>76</sup>

The poet, himself a landless labourer, is staking the claim of his class to a share in what their labour produces, and also to the right to defy the odious caste laws which prevent 'low' castes from simple social gestures like sitting on a raised seat in front of, or eating along with anyone from a 'higher' caste. Elsewhere, too, Akariji asserts "*Hola adhikar hak sabse samanva/ khan-penan ek hola hare ke makanva*" – equal rights in everything, including food and eating<sup>77</sup>

Ramtaji reclaims unusual imagery, not usually associated with poor dalits; for instance, in his song '*Badlabe na tu aise chaal apan*', he says, '*bahut parhej kai chukli bharam mein/ jagaib aab vikat baital apan*' (We've borne enough in our ignorance, now we'll rouse the sleeping *betal* within us). This is a reference to the myth of the *Brahmarakshas*, a kind of ghost, especially that of a Brahman. It is significant that the poet uses it here as a metaphor for the unfulfilled aspirations and bottled up anger of the poor, predominantly dalit, backward caste peasantry.

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<sup>74</sup> 'Bua ke Liye', in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p. 40.

<sup>75</sup> 'Kahe Na', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit., p 18.

<sup>76</sup> 'Ab ka Karbe Zamindarwa', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 23.

<sup>77</sup> 'Sahab Ab Na', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 24.



In Gorakh's '*Mehnat ka Barahmasa*', we find the poor peasant-worker recognizing the irony that labouring to provide the upper castes ruling class with necessities has turned them into 'lower' despised castes!

*"Unke joota see ke bhaili hum chamar sajni/ unke doli dho ke ho gaili hum kahar sajni/ tel perlin unke chamkal kapar sajni/ hum maelbhailin teli kalwar sajni/ gadi gadhlin, gadhlin khurpi kudhar sajni/ hum kahal gaylin badhai lohar sajni*

*jati-pati ke uthewlein diwar sajni/baatin dihlen kisan parivar sajni"*

(Sewing their shoes made us 'chamar'/ carrying their *doli* made us 'kahar'/ oil makes their head shine/ but we remained 'teli-kalwar'/ we make vehicles and implements/ but we're called 'badhai-lohar' / raising the walls of caste and creed/ they divided the peasant family...). The full impact of this song can only be grasped when one realizes that the epithets 'chamar' etc... do not just describe their occupation - leather worker, ironsmith, and so on, - but primarily connote lowness of birth.

### *The Bihari Worker*

Peasants from Bihar have gone all over the country and beyond in search of employment; they fulfill the capitalist's requirement of a permanent reserve army of cheap, unstable labour. They face the brunt of regional chauvinism wherever they go. They exist on the edges of the grand cities they build, their slums always being displaced, always on the brink of eviction. Whether in his or her native fields in Bihar, or in far-off cities, plantations and fields, they face the height of exploitation. Akariji describes the plight of the Bihari *mazdoor*, in his song "*kahat Akari, Bihari mazdoor par*". He addresses the worker, "*lai ke jawania makania banwal sarag dharatiya se sidhia chuawle/tohra ke bahar karke u baihela upar*" (you

create a ladder from earth to heaven, but he throws you out and himself sits on top”.<sup>78</sup>

The same sentiment is expressed in Gorakh’s remarkable dramatic monologue in Hindi – ‘*Swarg Se Bidai*’ (Goodbye from Heaven).<sup>79</sup> The voice we hear in the poem is that of the ruling class, yet the poem is full of the actions of the workers. The narrative voice condescendingly and casually describes the fact that the workers have worked to the bone to create a veritable heaven on earth, and many of them have even been buried beneath the grand palatial house they have built.

“Thanks very much/ Now you may leave  
Don’t ask, where to go  
Go where you please  
But be sure  
That you also vacate,  
Those shacks you have assembled  
In that dark corner...  
You’ve got your wages  
And some sweets  
Now what more do you want?...  
You may be sorry to leave this  
Grand creation of yours...  
But that doesn’t mean everything you make with your own hands  
Will be yours  
Why, that would mean the whole world would be yours  
And then where would we masters go?”

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<sup>78</sup> ‘Kahat Akari Bihari Mazdoor Par’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit., p 5.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Swarg se Vidai’, *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 87.

So, the workers are ousted with the entire force and violence of state machinery, and from the heaven they have created, they are forced to “Return/ To that world without walls or doors/ full of darkness, storms and tears/ death, slavery and lack/ Quietly.” Gorakh manages to take something all humanity takes for granted, and expose the horrific injustice inherent in it. The menace hidden behind the civilized veneer of the ruling class is present throughout the poem and is most chilling in that single word “Quietly”. The poem is equally designed to shake up the complacency of the middle class, and address the working class; not only by stoking its rage, but also by enhancing its understanding and challenging its acceptance of its own situation.

### *Our Labour, Their Luxury*

How do the poet-activists who work among the agrarian poor help them to realize that their condition is not god-given and just but exploitative and needing a struggle to change it? How do they impart a sense of pride in their status as labourers, rather than shame at their poor and low social status? In many of the songs the method employed is to build up a series of contrasts – between the penurious life of the poor person whose backbreaking labour creates wealth and beauty, and the life of luxury and plenty enjoyed by the idle exploiter.

Ramtaji’s song ‘*Ta Ham Ka Kari*’ is a typical example.<sup>80</sup> The labourer/singer asks, “*Kehu din-raat khatlo pe bhooka mare/ kehu baithal malai se nashta kare/ kehu tuthi madaia mein din kateta/ kehu kotha –atari mein jalsa kare/ ee na brahma ke taanki hae takdeer mein/ ee te dhurtha*

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Ta Hum ka Karein’, *Hamar Suni*, op.cit. p 53.

*baiman ke karsaaj hae/ hum dhakosla se parda uthaebe karab/ kehu phajihat ho jala to ham ka kari”*

(Someone toils day and night but dies hungry/ Someone sits idle but breakfasts on cream/ Some spend their days in broken huts/ Some party in palaces

This is not fate measured out by Brahma/ But the ploy of dishonest cheats/ We’ll lift the curtain of lies come what may/ If someone feels hurt, what can we do).

The song begins with local examples, easily recognizable by the rural poor, and then builds up to examples which reveal the partisan and biased nature of the State itself as a ‘bourgeois dictatorship’. This Marxist idea is conveyed without any jargon whatsoever, and flows naturally from the earlier, local examples.

*“Sau mein panchanbe log dukh bhog ta / sau mein panache sab jingi ke sukh bhogeta/ ohi panche ke haq mein police-fauz ba/dilli-patna ke hakim –hukum hokhata/ ohi panche ke chalti ba eh raj mein /uhe sabke taraqi ke rah rokta/ uhe dushamn hae danka bajaibe karab/ kehu ke dhadka samala ta ham ka kari”.*

(95 out of 100 people suffer sorrows/ Only 5 out of 100 enjoy all the joys/ It’s those five in whose defence the police and army stand/ The officers send orders from Delhi-Patna

It’s those very five whose writ runs in this regime/ It’s they who block the path of progress for everyone else/ They’re the enemy, we’ll declare war against them come what may/ If someone gets a shock, what can we do).

Two of Akaraji’s songs refer to the lot of the *banihar*, forced to labour for almost no wage. ‘*Bhaiya Banihar*’ is in Hindi, and it builds up the same contrasts between the poverty and destitution of the *banihar* and

the lavish life of the exploiter. Another song, '*Mat kar Bhai banihari*', he appeals to the labourer not to serve as a *banihar*, describing how in return for his labour, all he gets is two *seers* as *ban* (payment in kind). It is his labour which makes the landlord rich, with a produce of 560 *man* of rice, but he only gives *khakri* (inedible animal fodder) as *ban*.

In '*Sahab Ab Na*' by Akariji, we once again encounter the same reference to the tiny amount of inedible grain given as *ban* – this is a recurrent motif in many of Akariji's songs. He points out what Gorakh also does in '*Ab Nahi*' – '*Hamri banaval ba tohri makan ba/ bharleen godam aur kal karkhanwa/ bade baiman sarkar kort thanva*'. In '*Badka Banal Bada*' Akariji tells the *malik* that all his wealth and stature rests on the their labour, that he is dependent on them rather than the other way around. In a society where the landless labourer looks around and finds the power of the landlords everywhere, it is audacious but empowering to suggest that although it seems that the low caste labourers are at the mercy of the powerful landlords, in fact, it is clear that the landlords' power and wealth are reliant on labour! The songs ends with the warning that the limit to patience has been reached; "*Kaise tu bada bhail hum chot jatiya/ kahi samjhabe na ta lagab hum marey*", (How did you get to be big, and we, of 'small' castes/ Tell us or we'll start beating you up now!).<sup>81</sup>

Vijendra Anil has composed several songs which encourage the peasant to take pride in his labour, identify the exploiter who gains from his labour, and prepare to struggle rather than weep. In '*Kisan Bhaiya jani lorwa girabe*', the song tells the poor peasant not to shed tears: "*Tohre sanvarla se dharti sohagin/ tohre bansuriya pe nachela nagin/ apan jingiya ke bhaar jani banav*" (It's your labour which makes the earth beautiful like

a bride/ The *nagin* snake dances to the tune of your flute). The singer asks, “*Tohra ke henga ke bail ke banawal?/ tohra maraiyamein aagi ke lagawal?/anubhav se apna tu akil daurawal/ ke tohra mehnat ke khala kamai?/tohra laikwa ke khoon kahan jai?/ ankhia ke sojha se hatava.*”

(Who made you a beast of burden?/ Who set fire to your hut?

Use your experience to make your wits race

Who eats the fruits of your labour

Where does your son’s blood flow

Remove the blinkers from your eyes).

Lamentation is useless, since tears can’t kill the oppressor, and the butcher never willingly lets go of the goat’s rope. The only answer is to become self-aware, class conscious, and that is precisely what the songs help him to do.<sup>82</sup>

One of the most popular songs of this kind is ‘*Raura sasana ke bate na jawaab bhai jee.*’, Where a series of contrasts are drawn up.<sup>83</sup>

“*Raua bhonbha leke sagre awaz karila/ hamra muhwa pe lagal bate jaab bhaijee/ hamra jhopri mein mateeyo ke tel naikhe/ raura kothia mein bare mehrab bhaiji/ hamra satua mohal, naikhe kafan ke theekan/ raua chanpee roj murga kabab bhaiji/ raur chawra te parhe la vilayat jai ke / hamre chawra ke mile na kitaab bhaiji/raura burhia ke gaalwa pe cream lagela/ hamri naiki ke jari gayil khwab bhaiji/ raura kankhee pe thana aur jail nachela/ hamra muale pe hole na hisab bhaiji/ chahe danga karwai, chahe goli chalwai/ ‘deshbhaktva’ ke milal ba khitab bhaiji*”.

(You’ve got a trumpet to blow/ While there’s a muzzle on my mouth

There’s not even kerosene in my hut

While there are grand lights in yours

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Badka banal bada’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 24.

<sup>82</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 7.

We hardly get *sattu* and can't pay for a shroud  
You chew chicken and meat daily  
Your kid goes abroad to study  
Mine doesn't even get a book to study  
Your old women apply cream on their cheeks  
Our new bride's dreams burn up  
At one wink of yours, courts and jails dance  
Even if we die, it doesn't count  
You stoke riots or fire on people  
Yet you get the credit for being a patriot).

In another similar song, the labourer sings, "A Taj Mahal is build on your mausoleum/ While My wife is auctioned off".<sup>84</sup>

Gorakh's '*Guhar*' contains some stark and communicative images which convey the same sense of unjust contrasts.<sup>85</sup>

"*Tohre larikvan se fauzi banawe/ unke banooki deke tore par chalavein*" (Your boys are turned into soldiers/ They are given guns to fire on you). Another song by Vijendra Anil reminds the Bihari labourer, "*Tohre laikva banela sipahiya/ deshwa ke khatir gawawela dehia*" (Your son becomes a soldier/ Gives up his life for the country". This brings home the fact that most armies and police forces of the world are made up of the same reserve army of poor labourers, and in India since 1857, their rank and file has come from predominantly agrarian stock; it's a tragic irony that they are called upon to fire upon their brethren. Recall that a large section of poor youth from Bhojpur joins the army.

Gorakh's poem says, "*Tohri anguria duniya tikalba/ bakhra mein tohre narke paralba*"<sup>86</sup> (The world rests on your finger/ but in the

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.9.

<sup>84</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umadal Janta Ke Dhaar*, op.cit. p 13.

accounting you were dumped with hell as your share). This is a recurrent theme – in ‘*Neh Ke Paati*’, the woman sings to her mate, “*Tohri se bhagli banhanwa ke ratiya/ hamra se hariar bhaili dharatiya/ tu hauwa jag ke paranwa ho, hum sansariya tohar/ tohra se dagrela jingi ke pahiya / humra se upjela ban ban rahiya*”.<sup>87</sup>

In ‘*Kaise Chalele*’ we find the same assertion and celebration, that everything from grains to ideas, creativity, even freedom are the product of human labour. “*Manva ke bagiya ajadiya ke phulva/ I nehia Ay dhani tohre lagaval*”.<sup>88</sup>

The ‘*Mehnat Ka Barahmasa*’ is also a ballad where the labourer claims credit for all that makes life worth living. “*Hamri mehnat se roop a singar sajni/ hamre mehnat se pyar aur vichar sajni/ hum roki dei har aur kudar sajni/ruki jingi ke sursaridhar sajni*”. Here the labourer realizes that if he and his class were to stop work, the very wheels of life would grind to a halt. This is how the song teaches class-consciousness, imparting in the simplest of ways the Marxist way of looking at culture, labour and freedom that Gorakh’s prose discusses for a learned audience.<sup>89</sup>

### *Waking up to Resistance*

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Guhar’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 98.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Guhar’, in *Samay Ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p.98

<sup>87</sup> ‘Neh ke Pati’ in *Samay ka Pahiya*. op.cit., p 106.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Kaise Chalele Suruj- Chanarma’ in *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 74.

<sup>89</sup> See ‘Sanskriti aur Swatantrata’, in *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, p 17-21, where Gorakh points out that it is collective human labour which frees humans from the ‘inevitability’ and determinism of ‘nature’ – and this process is what is ‘culture’. Unfortunately, in class-divided society, one class has become the owner and lord of the material and spiritual products which the labouring class that gives birth to culture and freedom has produced. As a result, the latter become slaves, and culture is declared the prerogative of those who do not produce it, while the labourers are held to be in an inferior, uncultured, state of nature. In the history of our society, the example of this is the fact that the upper castes were considered ‘cultured’ and spoke ‘Sanskrit’ (derived from sanskriti=culture), while ‘lower’ castes and women (the labouring mass) were not allowed to speak anything but ‘Prakrit’ (from prakriti=nature).



Perhaps the most persistent theme in these songs is that of ‘waking up’ to a realization of the need to struggle, of saying ‘No more’ to oppression and passive acceptance. The first song composed by Akariji was ‘*Ab na kare mor manva*’, where he says he doesn’t feel like labouring anymore. We have already seen the songs ‘*Ab na*’ and ‘*Sahab ab na*’ in which the labourer announces that he won’t stand for exploitation any more. In another song, ‘*Mazdoor Ketna sahele*’ he says there is a limit to the exploitation, (once again we see the minute details of the poor peasant’s life – the fact that he receives inferior *khakri* grain as *ban*, and is paid at less than the official wage rate), and tells his fellow labourers to unite to fight. “*Mazdoor bikhral mat rah, kari la aapan ektaai*”.<sup>90</sup>

Akariji devotes an entire song to articulating and addressing the many excuses people give for not joining the struggle. In ‘*Roti Cheenta Log*’, the singer asks the questions which mainstream opinion always directs at the oppressed, “Why do you take sides between the fight between proletariat and feudal forces? Why beat your head against a wall? After all, nothing can ever change”.<sup>91</sup> The answer lies in the last stanza – one day, when you yourself find yourself surrounded, you too will run around asking others to help, so its better to use one’s wits on time, prepare to wake up and join the struggle.

Specifically, there are songs about land struggles. We have already seen Gorakh’s “*Kekare nava zamin patwari?*” on the subject. Akariji sings, “*Badka toparva hamar hoi*” (I’ll have a big field), and exposes the politics between ruling class claims of land reform, and the reality, in ‘*Leve Ke*

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<sup>90</sup> ‘*Mazdoor Ketna Sahela*’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 29.

<sup>91</sup> ‘*Roti Cheenta Log*’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 37.

*Adhikar Ba'* - "Bhu dabandi seema ghatai, kahe topra bantai/ Kahin avle na bhoomi ke sudhar ba".<sup>92</sup>

Gorakh's '*Ab Naahin*' is one of the most well known and popular song in this category. Its simplicity, and the fact that it covers a range of issues from that of the labour/luxury contrasts, the aspiration for literacy and freedom to the right to land and the need for armed struggle.

The song begins with an assertion that "We'll no longer be slaves, we've come to like freedom". Gradually the sense of injustice and the resolve to resist it and claim the fruits of their own labour is built up with several examples – "We weave the shawl to flutter at your shoulders/ But when we ask for enough to cover our bodies, soldiers come to arrest us – no longer will we let soldiers capture us, we've come to like the shawl" and "We build a palace pebble by pebble, but your laws turn us out as 'foreigners'; we won't obey your laws so easily, we've come to like the palace". And then, "We extract gold from the mines by day, but by night you take our fingerprints, your false accounts cheat us and we spend our entire lives drowned in debt; we won't let our lives drown anymore, we've come to like letters". Finally, the question of land, when laying claim to the land which they till means having to take to arms to defend it, "It's our hard labour that makes the earth fertile, and fills sweet smell in the flowers, but you lord it over us by evicting us from the land with the gun; we won't lose the land anymore, we've come to like the gun".<sup>93</sup> The song builds up to the call to arms so naturally that it seems most appropriate and logical rather than like the 'terrorism' it's made out to be.

Other songs too issue a call to arms. Akariji's '*Rakha dhaar Bhaiya*' calls upon the labourer to "Sharpen the edge of the curved sickle/ Take up

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<sup>92</sup> 'Badka Toparva' and 'Leve Ke' in *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit.p 36-38.

<sup>93</sup> 'Ab Naahin' in *Samay ka Pahiya*, op.cit. p 99.

weapons in your hands this time”, while another song calls out, “*Ab hathiyar uthava leve ke adhikaar ba*” (Now it’s time to exercise your right to take up arms). *Ramtaji’s* song ‘*Badlab na tu aise chaal apan*’ warns “*Rahi na kaanh se upar salamat pahirihe gord mein jaymaal apan*”<sup>94</sup> – a threat that the oppressor will surely be beheaded.

Another wake-up call by Gorakh, ‘*Jagaran*’, is a mass song calling upon fellow labourers to wake the village and the town, the spark within their breast that can burn up the sinful ‘*Ravan*’, the body as well as mind, their soul made of love and their dreams drowned in tears – it’s time to wake them all. Finally, “*Hathva jaga de hathirwa jaga de/karam jaga de aa vicharwa jaga de / roshaniya se rache naya jahanwa ho sangatiya sabke jaga da*” – not only the hand, but the weapons too must be awakened, not only action but also ideas must wake, so that light can chase away darkness and create a new world. Armed struggle is inextricably linked here, not with blind rage or revenge as is commonly perceived, but with an evolved political consciousness, a realization that class struggle is necessary to change the world.

This is made even clearer in the ‘*Mehnat Ka Barahmasa*’, where the peasant who has become a worker in the city (Kolkata), communicates his new-found sense of class solidarity and political struggle, to his wife who is a labourer back in the village. In the last stanza of the song, he describes the decision of the workers to gherao the owner of the factory; a bloody struggle follows, in the course of the movement, he realizes the ruling class nexus between the comprador capitalists, the landlords, and the state machinery (the army, courts, and government). All these have ganged up to loot us, he tells her. The solution? “*Inse nipte ke eke rasta maar sajni/ jab hum mili uthaebe hathiyar sajni/ machi charon aor bharee hahakar sajni/*

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<sup>94</sup> ‘Badalba Na tu Aise Chaal Apan’, *Hamar Suni*, op.cit. p 50-51.

*bhage lagihen desh chod ke hudad sajni/ aawe kal- karkhana se pukar sajni/ aab gaon gaon hoja taiyar sajna / gaanth baandh Lenin Mao ke vichar sajni/ bina kranti ke na hoe udhiar sajna*". It is a call for a revolutionary struggle, equipped not only with arms, but with the scientific ideas of Lenin and Mao, and with the vision of a workers-peasants solidarity that is as strong as the attachment between the two protagonists of the song. Another remarkable fighting song is Gorakh's '*Janta-Ke Paltania*'<sup>95</sup>, which, with its rousing and energetic tune, conveys a sense of International anti-imperialist, Communist solidarity, salutes Marx, Lenin and Mao, upholds the tradition of Naxalbari and "*Charu ke mahaan paltania*" which has come to Bhojpur having first passed Srikakulam, and now has reached "your village". The song with its chorus of "*hile le jhakjhor dunia*" conveys a sense of wave upon wave of struggle. It has been shorn of its revolutionary content – i.e. all references to the red flag, Communist figures, and even the need for struggle against the enemy ruling class - by the Indian Ocean rock group, which presents a travesty of the song with a hypnotic beat.

Another song "*Pahil-pahil jab vote mange*" traces the journey from hope to disillusionment with ruling class options over a period of three elections. In the first elections, the ruling *netas* promise the poor land of their own, and they hope for an end to the oppression at the hands of the landlord. In the second elections, the candidates promise wells and ample water. When the poor timidly try to remind them of the land they had promised, they use the Law to intimidate the poor. "*Inhva se udi-udi unha jab gailen / sochleen jaminya ke batiya bhulailen/ humnin je dheere se manwa parawleen/ jor se kanunia kanunia chilailein.*" Enough is enough, and the poor resolve that the next time the *neta* turns up, they will thrash

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<sup>95</sup> 'Janta ki Paltani' in *Samay ka Pahiya*, op.cit.p. 95.

him, and announce their intention to be satisfied with nothing less than their own rule: “*Tohra matiya milaebo, aapan rajwa banaibo*”.<sup>96</sup>

The songs of resistance are not all a solemn affair; they often use humour to lighten a serious subject. For example, when Akariji sings about jail life (a common experience for the rural poor whose slightest protest is met with jailing under false charges if not death by ‘false encounters’), he refers to the jailer as ‘*Hitva*’ (derogatory word for father-in-law). This conveys his defiance as well as his refusal to be cowed-down by the travails of jail life.

### **Recording the History of Struggle**

Songs describing and celebrating specific incidents in the movement have been written by poets like Durgendra Akari, Musahar Bihari Ram, Gorakh Pandey, Vijendra Anil just to name a few. These songs are particularly relevant as they are an attempt towards keeping specific incidents of struggle alive in public memory especially in a situation where the mainstream media usually ignores these incidents or invariably reports the ‘official version’.

#### **Chawri Kand, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 1973**

Songs highlighting the *Chawri Kand* have been written by Durgendra Akari. On 6<sup>th</sup> May 1973, police-labourer clash ensued in Chawri a village in Sahar block of Bhojpur district. Differences relating to wages existed in this village as early as 1968-69. In 1971-72, landlords made a reduction in the wages of the labourers and the area of *Kotha* land. The

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<sup>96</sup> ‘Pahil- pahal Jab Vote’ in *Samay ka Pahiya*, op.cit.p 103.

women agrarian labourers were being forced to carry harvest to *khalihans* till late in the night so that the landlords could have their way and sexually harass them. A few days before May 6<sup>th</sup> the workers stopped working on the fields as a result of which harvesting of wheat crop stopped. Ultimately on false assurances of the *zamindars* labourers resumed work.

However responding to an anonymous letter by ‘*Ek Bhaibheet Gramin*’ i.e ‘A Scared Villager’ addressed to the DM of Bhojpur police party reached *Chawri* to make arrests. The dalit labourers while resisting these arrests clashed with the police. Police fired indiscriminately injuring and killing several agricultural labourers. Durgendra Akari describes the clash when he writes: “*Solah sau police tayaar dekho/ nagrik aur police ke maar dekho/Dekho machinegun ghera siwan / janta mare beshumaar dekho*”. “Sixteen hundred police are ready/ look at the clash between police and citizens/ machineguns have encircled the village/ people are dying in large numbers.” The administration-police-landlord nexus, which resulted in police firing on poor labourers at Chawri, has been highlighted by Akariji. In this particular song he mentions the name of Krishna Sinha the District Magistrate of Bhojpur known for her open support to landlords. He makes the point that Government is for the rich and this (being fired upon) is the treatment meted out to poor labourers who asked for wages. “*Zamindar goonda police mile bhumiheen par dhai / Are aai hai aaye goli chalne aaye / zila collector Krisha Sinha aaye /Rakshak hai poonjiwad ki, mazdooron ko bhujvai/ poonjipati se congress ka pyar dekho / haq mazdoori ka asli hai kand dekho / dhani logon se yeh sarkar / mazdoori mangla ke vyavahar dekho*”. In this song Akariji repeats “*Dekho! dekho! Zamana dekho / Ankhe kholo, haqeeqat bolo*”<sup>97</sup> (Look!look! look at our times/ open your eyes , speak out the reality). This repetition

signifies as well as stresses on the fact that the way Chawri incident has been reported by the media, and the conclusions of the Chawri Firing Enquiry Commission do not reflect reality. The report of the Enquiry Commission gave a clean chit to the police. It categorically states that –“... in the circumstances, there was no question of any member of the police force having indulged in excessive or improper employment of force”. To quote Aswini Kumar Sinha the lawyer who took up the case on behalf of the dalits “the police went scot free; told lies: innocent *harijans* were arrested: and the commission ended. The episode which began with the molestation of Lal Mohar’s wife ended in violent deaths of four *harijans*”.<sup>98</sup>

#### **Bahuara Kand, 29<sup>th</sup> –2<sup>nd</sup> July 1975**

On a tip-off a large contingent of forces primarily Central Reserve Police (CRP) and Jat Regiment surrounded Bahuara village in Sahar block. They were assisted by at least 300 heavily armed Bhumihars from the nearby villages. A 96 hour-long battle took place between police force and agricultural labourers, which resulted in a heavy carnage. YN Srivastava the police Superintendent himself admitted that 400-500 rounds of ammunition and 30 hand grenades was spent.<sup>99</sup> Akari ji gives a vivid description of this battle in his song titled ‘*Bahuara kand*’. He says: “*Sahar mein, Sahar mein Bahuara goli chhalal ha Sahar mein /Police Naxalpanthi dono utral gohar mein..../ Logwa dahail jahan khoonwa ke dhar mein / Deleba sipahiya ghera nagiche badhar mein / Ginena ginata, bate gintee apar mein .... / Garle ba machinegun charo aur badhar mein / Chak chak batti ratiya*

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<sup>97</sup> ‘Kand Chawri Ke’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p.10.

<sup>98</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit. p 56-62.

<sup>99</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit.p 86-89.

*anhar mein.*"<sup>100</sup>A rift developed between police and paramilitary forces during the Bahuara siege. It was alleged that lower caste personnel were being selected by upper-caste officers to gut *dalit* huts and be on the frontlines. Akariji in the same song mentions the fact that story of a small village managed to shake the world when he says- '*Chote-mote tola, halla uthel sansar mein*'. This gruesome incident of police atrocity was reported by the BBC as well, '*zila Bhojpur ke baat, ba BBC sunata/ poore duniya ke log ke jankari ho gayeel*'"<sup>101</sup>

### Arwal Kand, 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1986

A mass meeting was convened by Mazdur Kisan Sangram Samiti- a mass organization of CPI(ML) Party Unity-at Arwal as part of a struggle for a plot of land. Police led by Superintendent CR Kaswan opened fire on thousands of unarmed participants. The meeting ground was surrounded on all sides and people had no way to escape other than scaling the wall. The entire plan was executed on the lines of Jallianwala Bagh massacre. Akariji makes this very point when he says: "*Jallianwala Bagh se badhkar Arwal ke kahani / Mare gaye bahut se janta, khoon bahe jas paani*". As a part of various protests against Arwal massacre a call was given for *Vidhan Sabha Gherao* at Patna. Akariji in his songs on Arwal killings talks of the measures taken by the Government to prevent people from assembling at Gandhi Maidan in Patna on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1986. When protestors poured out from their villages, determined to storm the powers that be, police military responded with a heavy hand blocking roads, cancelling trains, stalling boats, even resorting to lathi-charge so as to prevent them from protesting against the massacre."*Gaon gaon se janta nikse, sara raj toofan/ police*

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<sup>100</sup> 'Bahuara Kand', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 15.

<sup>101</sup> 'Tayari Ho Gayil', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 44.



*military rok laga ke kar di rasta jam/ naw nadi au road sawari, sab par rok laga di/ train force pakre na deta, booking band karwa di/ pakad-pakad ke neta bhejawe, bahutn ko shaitan/ lathi charge kare janta par, jaye de na bhagawe/ badal- badal ke rasta janta, aage kadam barhawe.”* Yet masses assembled in large numbers to protest against Arwal Massacre, challenging all repression unleashed by the Government. This mass of protestors and the spirit of resistance has been captured by Akarji when he says: “... jail gaye hazarchiyasee, teen lakh phire ghare /dheere dheere jo derdhe lakh, Patna ke andar bhare.... / Ghere assembly juloos nikale, theek samay saman”.<sup>102</sup> (Eighty six thousand were jailed, three lakh had to return/ one and half lakh managed to reach Patna/ Patna assembly was gheraoed and a protest procession taken out at the fixed time).

### **Bathani Tola Massacre, 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1996.**

Bathani *tola*, a village in Bhojpur district was attacked by the Ranveer Sena, the notorious private army of the Bhumihar landlords on July 11<sup>th</sup> 1996. Bathani was a soft target for Ranveer Sena because in no way one could call it an ML stronghold. The village had no previous history of land struggle or wage dispute. This massacre was a planned act of sheer terrorism, intended not as ‘retaliation’, but primarily to instill fear in the *dalits* and agricultural labourers in and around this area. The victims of this massacre were mainly women and children belonging to the dalit and extremely backward castes. Some poor landless *yadavs* and Muslims were also killed. Wombs of pregnant women had been cut open and the foetus disfigured – with threats that this was intended to prevent the births of *dalits* and Naxalites. It a known fact that Bathani massacre was executed with the connivance of the police, district administration and the Laloo government

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<sup>102</sup> ‘Ghera Patna Vidhan Sabha’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 20.

(a known patron of the Ranveer Sena).<sup>103</sup> The police had been informed well in advance but it refused to act. There were at least three police chowkis near Bathani but police force did not reach the spot till hours after the massacre. Akari ji in his song on Bathani categorically talks of the connivance of District Magistrate Gore Lal, SP Satya Narayan Pradhan and Laloo Yadav, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, with the Ranveer Sena.<sup>104</sup>

### *Remembering the Martyrs of the Movement*

#### *Rameshwar Ahir:*

Rameshwar Ahir popularly known as Sadhuji was a legendary figure of the Bhojpur peasant struggle. Rameshwar Ahir had turned a rebel out of hatred for upper-caste landlords and had joined a dacoit gang. The surging peasant movement of late 60s had ushered in a great change in his course of life. An associate of Jagdish Master, he became a foremost figure in the peasant struggle in Bhojpur. He was killed in an encounter in Sonatola, Sahar on January 14<sup>th</sup> 1975.

Durgendra Akari in his songs '*Neta Rameshwar*' and '*Jawanwa seena tan ke maral*' gives detailed account of his arrest and encounter. In both these songs Akariji remembers him as a hero of the battle field, he addresses him as "*Rankshetra, Randhir Bahadur. / Sher Subhas aur*

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<sup>103</sup> Laloo Yadav has made public statements to the effect that he is ready to join hands with the powers of hell to check the growth of the ML.

<sup>104</sup> 'Jansanghar Bathani Mein', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 54.

*Chandrashekhar, Bhagat rahe balwanwa / Goli dekhat seena phailaya, ban gaye aim nishanwa”*

Sadhuji is compared to Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad - heroes of the anti-imperialist struggle, who sacrificed their lives for the sake of establishing a just society. Carrying on the revolutionary legacy of these youths Rameshwar Ahir gave up his life fighting against oppressive feudal structure in Bhojpur.

Akariji also brings out class-based reactions to this killing when he says: “*Nabbe ke ghar haah paral ba, paanch rahe gup-chuppi / Paanch ke ghar mein aho bhav se, bazaat rahe bajanwa*”<sup>105</sup> 90 percent of households were mourning this killing; 5 percent were silent it was only the remaining five percent which was relieved by the killing and was rejoicing. A plaintive song wafted across the long dusty roads to Sahar and throats choked with grief, lent their voices to Mushar Bihari Ram’s song: “*We cannot express our grief. / Baruhi, Baruna, Baghi are/ Crying in sorrow. / Berath weeps with lowered head./All are weeping.*”<sup>106</sup> That night Ekwari’s landlords sang the *Ramayana* in relief.

### ***Jiut and Sahto:***

Durgendra Akari describes the death of martyrs Jiut and Sahto - leaders of the Red Army in Bhojpur in his song ‘*Kunai kand*’.<sup>107</sup> On a tip-off Jiut and Sahto were attacked by the police in the wee hours of November 14<sup>th</sup> 1985-while they were fast asleep. “*Na shanka eh baat ke rahe/ ghatihe kauno ghatnawa /Beetel raatiya bhor hoot rahe..../Hai batwa veer jan na pawne , dhari lelakh aa ke dushmanwa / Satalsher jaag na pawlein , goliya ja ke lagal seenwa.*” Once again we see that the poet uses

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Neta Rameshwar’ and ‘Seena tan ke Maral’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op. cit. p. 13-14.

<sup>106</sup> Kalyan Mukherjee and Rajendra S Yadav, 1980, op.cit. p 78.

the term '*sutal sher*' or sleeping lions to describe the martyrs. Then he goes on to narrate how police razed down a memorial for these heroes, which was raised by the local people. On this provocation villagers clashed with the police. The police fired at the crowd killing two, however by evening they had to retreat.

*"Baar shaheed smarak banawlein , janta kari ke meetingwa / Police force turat uha bake, dhaa delakh sheela asthanwa / Krodh bharal janta phir jutal, hatat gayil peeche thanwa / Lathi charge se haar manke, kare laagal goli ke nishanwa / Doo kisan goli kha ke gurlan, chan mein niklal paranwa"*<sup>108</sup> This particular incident of clash between rural poor and the police on the issue of raising a memorial for people's heroes is indicative of the fact that during the Naxalite movement the struggle was not restricted to questions of wages and economic exploitation. It was also a contest for asserting and establishing identity of the most oppressed, their symbols, their heroes who invariably were branded as extremists in the eyes of the powers that be. Killing these popular leaders was not enough, the police along with the ruling powers wanted to snuff out, even their memories.

### ***Sheila, Agni and Lahiri:***

The trio had played havoc on the oppressive landlords of Bhojpur. Though coming from different backgrounds these women were united in their mission of overthrowing the oppressive feudal structures and dreams of establishing a just social order. They were members of the armed unit of women in Bhojpur and died martyrs' death in encounters with the police. Sheila came from an intellectual family but integrated herself with the landless and poor peasants of Bhojpur. She embraced martyrdom during a

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<sup>107</sup> Kunai is a village in Jagdishpur Anchal in Bhojpur district, where Jiut and Sahto were killed.

<sup>108</sup> 'Kunai Kand', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 26.

resistance struggle against police encirclement in Ekwari (Sahar) on 10<sup>th</sup> October, 1976. Lahiri a landless peasant woman of Ramsaar village in Sandesh block Bhojpur experienced severe social as well as economic oppression before she got involved with the Naxalite movement, though not without opposition from her family. On December 31<sup>st</sup> 1975 she died offering a heroic resistance to police encirclement in Pinjrohi. Agni belonged to a shopkeeper family of Sandesh. Leaving behind young children she devoted her entire life to the movement of rural poor in Bhojpur. She died fighting against police encirclement in Pinjrohi along with Lahiri.

Durgendra Akari in his song '*Jago Behen*' written on the occasion of Second Bihar State Conference of All India Progressive Women's Association in 1995 urges women to wake up and fight for equal rights. He cites examples of Agni, Lahiri and Sheila -vanguards of the radical left movement in Bhojpur- to instill the spirit of resistance and sacrifice in women working in fields and mines. He gives them a call to break their shackles and win their battle for half the earth and half the sky. "*Samantvad ke naash ke beeda Sheila didi uthai / bahuton ke Agni, Lahiri sada ke neend sulai / kaanp gaye Bhojpur ke gunda chip gaye chuhani*".<sup>109</sup>

### **Commentary on Political Establishment**

Imposition of Emergency during 1975-77 was an unparalleled event in the political history of India. Emergency ushered in an era of severest state repression. Any opposition to Indira's reign of terror was dealt with a heavy hand. Jeeploads of CRP men surrounding villages in the early hours for suspects had become a common experience in rural Bhojpur during the

emergency. Thousands of poor associated with the radical left movement languished in jails, facing worst kind of repression until years later. Akariji writes: “*Bihar soon kailoo Indira / chatra yuva mahila ke upar gola goli chalwawlu / Mari mari ganga mein phekle, rakshah raj banawlu*”<sup>110</sup> Ramtaji writing in 1983 addressing Indira Gandhi says: “*Kahe khelat baaro khunwa se phaag raniya / ee na chooti tohra anchra se daag raniya.../tora jor julm ke aage kekro pal bhar palak na / tora janta se bate kawan laag raniya.*” During Emergency censorship was imposed on the press. As a response to this the media took an about turn and started singing praises of Mrs. Indira Gandhi thus effectively turning into ‘official press’. “*Sab akhbar ab hoi sarkari /Kalam ke dharwa ke ture ke taiyari*”<sup>111</sup>

Even beyond Emergency, censorship and repression continued and thousands of Naxalites remained in jails until years later. Nagbhusan Patnaik, a legendary figure of the ML movement remained in jail facing severe torture and even a death sentence until a sustained civil liberties’ campaign secured a commutation of the sentence and eventually his release on parole in 1984, long after emergency was ‘lifted’. People were not allowed to talk about or protest against famines, price-rise, corrupt politicians, police repression etc. Songs also emphasis the fact that black marketers and sycophants had flourished in the Indira Raj at the cost of the hardworking masses. There was a feeling that even dreams were banned during emergency. Vijendra Anil in his song ‘*Jabanwa pe lagi ab tala*’ has effectively expressed this “*Kahae jani ki neta log chor batmarwa / Kahae jani ki bardi karela atyacharwa / Aabru lootela balwanwa / jabanwa pe lagi aab tala / Suharaw tarwa te mili bara darja / Aankh kaan mooh khole kaisan u parja / Kare maharani ke bhajanwa / jabanwa pe lagi aab tala /*

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<sup>109</sup> ‘Jago Behen’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 34.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Bihar Soon kailu Indira’, *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op.cit. p 15.

*Gaonwa mein goli chale kahide ki phool hae / Jhopri mein aag lagi kahi de ki rule hae / Dekhe mat kawno sapanwa, jabanwa pe lagi aab tala*"<sup>112</sup> In the context of cold war Indira Gandhi kowtowed to both the super powers US and USSR, in people's perception this meant surrendering to the imperialist interests. References to this are found in the songs of this period. Gorakh writes: "*Samjwad babua dheere-dheere aayi/Dollar se aayi, rouble se aayi / deshwa ke banhe dharai.*"<sup>113</sup> Bijendra Anil sings: "*Raniya karele rajdhaniya mein khelwa/ samrajbadin se kailasi melwa*"<sup>114</sup> Ramtaji's song '*Ae Rani*' expresses similar sentiments when he says: "*Kare taru desh se gaddari aae rani/kare taru desh se gaddari/Russia- America ke karelu dalali, Tata- Birla se bhaiyari*"<sup>115</sup>

Akariji sings out the state of people bearing the burden of price rise. "*Deshwa mein aisan haal, aata na milela daa/Kheile jata Russ-Americania ho Nehru ke babunia*"<sup>116</sup> Time and again songs on Indira regime talk of the dynastic rule in the name of democracy. Ramtaji in his song '*Ae Raniya*' mentioned above goes on to say: "*Sunli parjatantar raj, dekhli tora kul mein taj.../ Na tora purkha ke kamai, tae tora beta kahe hatiai / Desh janta ke he tora se belaag raniya / Tu hi hau desh sanvidhan, tu hi sansad, tu hi hau party sarkari / Jhuthu ke jap parjatantar ke hota, tohar babua ba uttaradhikari*" But where there is repression, there is resistance. The spirit of resistance to this repressive regime comes alive in Vijendra Anil's song. "*Chali nahin julumi sasanwa, jabanwa ke tooti ab tala.... / Chiraeian ke thorwa bhaeil hathirwa, baila-bachurwa, turawela sikarwa*"<sup>117</sup>

<sup>111</sup> '*Ae Raniya*', *Hamar Suni*, op.cit. p 55.

<sup>112</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umrul Janta ke Dhar*, op.cit. p 24.

<sup>113</sup> '*Samajwad Babua*', in *Loha Garam Ho Gaya Hai*, op.cit. p 112.

<sup>114</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umrul Janta ke Dhar*, op.cit. p. 21.

<sup>115</sup> '*Ae Rani*', *Hamar Suni*, op.cit. p. 59.

<sup>116</sup> '*Nehru ke babunia*', *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op. cit. p. 9.

Ramtaji when he sings “*Tohre matha pe baithal kala naag raniya*”, he is hinting at the fact that this repressive regime would soon come to an end. The black crow perched on the Queen’s head has announced the death of this regime.<sup>118</sup>

A coalition of anti congress forces under the leadership of Janta Party formed the govt. at center in 1977. This brought in a lot of hope for people who were fed up of Mrs. Gandhi’s reign of terror. But these hopes were shattered soon after a coalition under the leadership of Janta Party formed government at the centre. The change of guard did not bring about any substantial change in the government policies, the masses continued to live in misery, facing state repression and the burden of an oppressive feudal structure. Gorakh Pandey in his song ‘*Samjwad babua dheere-dheere Aayi*’ talks of this when he says: “*Congress se aayi / Janta se aayi / Jhanda ke badli ho jai*”<sup>119</sup>. Vijendra Anil also expresses his disillusionment with the ruling establishment, he says whether it is Congress or the Janta government, repressive rule continues.

“*Kabo Congress ke raj, kabo Janta ke saaj / chalat bare julmi bidhan bhaiya*”<sup>120</sup>

We also come across songs on Rajiv Gandhi. One of the most prominent features of these songs, is the stress laid on continuation of the dynastic rule.

Laloo Yadav came to power in Bihar riding high on the slogan of Social Justice. However all his claims of Social Justice were exposed soon after he formed the government. Laloo himself as well his entire regime has

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<sup>117</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umral Janta ke Dhar*, op.cit. p 25.

<sup>118</sup> There is a popular belief that if a black crow sits on someone’s head that is an announcement of his/her death.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Samajwad Babua’, in *Loha Garam Ho Gayi Hai*, op.cit. p 112.



become a simile for corruption, it is known for having emptied the coffers of Bihar state. It is said under Laloo's patronage kidnapping, murder has flourished as an industry. There are a number of songs written on Laloo regime. Akarji in his song '*Samajik Nyaya ka Nara*' talks of all this : "*Samajik nyaya ka nara deke, lootmar karwai..../ Hatya-balatkar-apharan, bhrashtachar badhai /Bhoomi sudhar ka nara deke, goli se bhunjwai.../ Hawala, pashupalan ghotala, hospital ke dawai /Suraksha-vridhawastha pension, kha ke gayil motai*"<sup>121</sup>. Local politicians and officials have also been lampooned. For instance Akarji has written a song titled '*Mantri Ramlakhan*' on Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav a notoriously corrupt Minister in Bihar. He ran a huge 'education mafia', his son was accused of rape. Akarji in his song also accuses him of being "stained" by several massacres. He says: "*Siksha mafia banike loote, aapan bujhe na kehuke / Chor gundan ke sargana laaj teyagi aayeel ba / Teeskhori jansanghar, karike aayeel ba hatyarn / Chiraura-wadipur-dariyapur ke daagi aayeel ba.... / Aekro betwo balatkari, lampat-gunda hae karari ....*"<sup>122</sup>

Having examined the revolutionary songs prevalent among the rural poor of Bhojpur, we can conclude that they are indeed the work of 'permanent persuaders', in Lenin's sense of the term. They play a crucial role in educating and building up the revolutionary consciousness of agrarian labourers and the poor peasantry.

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<sup>120</sup> Vijendra Anil, *Umrul Janta ke Dhar*, op. cit. p. 18.

<sup>121</sup> '*Samajik Nyaya ka Nara*' in *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op. cit. p. 30.

<sup>122</sup> '*Mantri RamLakhan*' in *Chahe Jaan Jaye*, op. cit. p. 31.

## *Chapter-V*

### **Conclusion**

In the previous chapters I have tried to explore the relationship between culture and politics; specifically the usage of cultural forms in political mobilization. Political mobilization is closely connected to the question of political consciousness; and culture is an integral part of the process of formation and transformation of consciousness. Political mobilization is organically linked to ideology, which is the terrain in which humans acquire consciousness of their situation. Ideology is the way in which humans perceive their social and material relations. This consciousness may be distorted; that is, humans may perceive exploitative material and social relations to be 'natural', or they may attribute such relations to 'fate'. On the other hand they may also acquire a more developed consciousness, whereby they perceive the exploitative basis of their everyday social relations and lives, and may thus conceive the means to change their situation.

Cultural activism and political activity based on revolutionary ideology, define their role as that of helping the oppressed and deprived sections of humanity to recognize the fact of their exploitation, identify the cause and basis of it, and equip and organize themselves to change it.

Bertolt Brecht argued, in his theorizations on theatre, that in order to change rather than reinforce the consciousness of people, theatre must present everyday reality in a way that reveals its innate injustice and irrationality. He explained that the spectator of traditional dramatic theatre says, "Yes, I have felt like that too...It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's

great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.” Whereas the spectator of ‘epic theatre’ propagated by Brecht says, “I’d never have thought of it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That’s great art: nothing obvious about it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.”<sup>1</sup>

I have examined these views of Brecht here, because the protest music of the radical agrarian movement of Bhojpur seems to grapple with the same challenge, of how to break the sense of ‘inevitability’ that centuries of class, caste and gender exploitation (with social and religious sanction) have engendered and propagated as ‘natural’; and how to bring home the appallingly, grossly unnecessary and unjust nature of the reality around them.

In Chapter 3, we saw a glimpse of the traditional forms that form the cultural milieu of the protest songs. Those traditional songs would often be moving – evoking sympathy, for instance, for the ‘barren’ woman who was unable to produce a son, or for the stricken deer whose mate was sacrificed for a royal feast. The pathos of such songs could evoke pity, tears, but no outrage. The listeners may weep for the barren woman, they might empathise with the deer who, like them, has to sacrifice her beloved ones to service the luxuries of those who are more rich and powerful. But the songs do not tend to bring home the sheer, appalling cruelty and irrationality of a society that holds that woman without a son has no worth. It presents suffering and sorrow as ‘human’ and ‘inevitable’, ‘universal’, rather than exposing the vested social and economic interests that create such suffering.

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<sup>1</sup> Bertolt, Brecht, ‘Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction’, *People’s Art in the Twentieth Century*, Jan Natya Manch, Delhi, p.177.

The wide range of protest songs are rich with descriptions of the daily life of the rural poor – how much they labour, in what conditions, how much they are paid, what kind of grain they eat, the harassment the women face as they go to work in the fields, and so on. Yet the songs are not a mere ‘reflection’ of reality, they are no mere lament – each of them brims over with a sense of empowerment that comes from the realisation that this appalling reality is *not* inevitable, natural god-given, it can be challenged, fought and changed. Brecht wanted his political theatre to “uncover”, “make strange” conditions rather than reflect them, and this is exactly what the songs we have examined succeed in doing.

The ‘strangeness’ of all the exploitative conditions we see around us and take for granted to be ‘natural’, as well as the relationship between ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’, theory and praxis, ideas and political action, have been discussed in a remarkable poem by Gorakh Pandey, titled ‘*Socho To*’ (Just Imagine). Despite the similarity of title, it is actually quite different from the 60s anthem, John Lennon’s lyric ‘Imagine’, which hoped that many people could change the world and make it free of exploitation just by coming together to imagine it so. Although it is in Hindi, this poem spells out the agenda of the Bhojpuri protest songs, and its themes are elaborated several times in those songs.

Gorakh’s poem takes the reader/listener by the hand and gently gets them to see how strange are the things we take for granted. It begins:

*“Vaise, socho to andhere mein chamakte ye hazaron haath hain/  
itihās ke pahiyon ko gati dete hain / roti-rachna aur mukti ke paraon ki or  
badhate hue/ itihās ki kitabon mein inka jikr bhi na hona/ socho to kitna  
ajeeb hai”*

(“For that matter,

just imagine the thousands of hands shining in the dark

which move the wheels of history  
towards bread, beauty and freedom  
for there to be no mention of them in the history textbooks  
just imagine how strange it is”.)

The poem goes on to ask the reader to imagine “how strange” it is that those who grow grains go hungry, those who weave clothes are clad in rags, pointing out,

*“Socho is tarah kitni ajeeb or/ kabhi-kabhi ekdam ulti hoti hain cheezen / jinhein ham mamooli samajhkar chalte hain.”*

(Imagine, thus, how strange  
and sometimes how upside down and contradictory are things  
that we assume to be routine”

The poem then shows how, because we are humans and can think, it is possible for us imagine that crops can grow without landlords, and peace can be had without nuclear weapons, those who make a factory run with their own hands can also own it, and fire can be used to save the lives of people shivering from cold, rather than to burn down huts.

Finally, the poem appeals for the need to turn upside down all those things are inverted now, that are unjust and oppressive. With utmost simplicity, this appeal challenges idealist philosophy, explains how ideas are a necessary but not primary ingredient of change, how ideas devoid of action are useless, and finally begins the process of revolutionary ‘inversion’ by turning the famous idealist axiom, “I think, therefore I am” on its head.

*“Socho to sirf sochne se / kuch hone-jane ka nahin / jabki karne ko pade hain / ulti cheejon ko ulat dene jaise jaroori aur dher sare kam / vaise, socho to yeh bhi kitna ajeeb hai ki bina soche bhi kuch hone-jane ka nahin/ jabki hote ho isliye sochte ho”*

“Just think, that mere thinking  
cannot change anything  
while there remain  
so many necessary tasks  
like upturning things that are upside down  
but just think how strange it is  
that nothing can change without thinking either  
whereas  
You are  
Therefore you think.”

The dialectics between thinking and doing, theory and praxis, suffuses the *Bhojpuri* protest songs we have examined. They play a role in political mobilization because they are a part of the process whereby agrarian labourers and rural poor come into their own as a class.

These songs also perform the crucial function of presenting complex political ideas in a form that simplifies them without diluting their profundity. Ideas about the relations between labour and capital, feudalism, and other political ideas that are key to understanding of their own class position, are communicated and explained in the folk forms and idiom familiar to them.

What Brecht said of Eisler’s music applies equally well to these songs, “In a remarkable manner it makes possible a certain simplification of the toughest political problems, whose solution is a life and death matter for the working class.”<sup>2</sup>

The lyrics and music composed in the course of struggles have an integral link with the history of those struggles. They are thus a particularly

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<sup>2</sup> Brecht on Hans Eisler, in *People’s Art in the Twentieth Century*, Jan Natya Manch, Delhi, 1999-2000. p. 204.

rich field for the study of political consciousness and mobilization. In actual use, these songs are composed, sometimes by individuals, sometimes collectively by groups of singers and cultural activists. Often songs are part of plays performed by street-theatre groups, but acquire a life of their own beyond the play too. As we have seen, these songs very often adapt the traditions of folk music and mythology, but imbue them with fresh meanings, and create an altogether new tradition for future singers to draw upon. They thus leave a living imprint on the cultural life of rural societies.

This dissertation has been a small step in the direction of studying these cultural forms of protest. Undoubtedly there remains a vast area, as yet unmapped, of songs composed by women and men, passed on orally, passing through daily transmutations in the course of being sung and performed. The task of recording these songs, interviewing the many people who compose and sing them, and closely studying the experiences of cultural groups and activists of the Bhojpur region, is one that requires extensive fieldwork. Such an exercise is bound to yield fresh insights into the dynamics of the relationship between cultural forms and political mobilization. But an extensive field study fell outside the scope of an M.Phil dissertation, hence I was forced to rely on available printed matter, and transcripts of some of the oral songs used by cultural groups. I hope to be able to continue working in this direction in the course of further research work. In particular there is a need to record the work and experiences of women who have sung and composed songs, in order to understand the processes by which women's consciousness is formed.

I hope that the insights offered by this dissertation into the interface between cultural activity and political consciousness can be used as a vantage point for further exploration of this field.

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