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Introduction

The Indian village is changing. During its long journey through the colonial and post-colonial periods, almost nothing has remained the same in the village society of India. In 1975, the pioneer anthropologist of India, Srinivas, observed profound changes taking place in Rampura when he revisited the village after a gap of 20 years. Further, he commented that 'It looks as though the day was not far off when Rampura would be a dormitory of Mysore' (Srinivas, 1976: 233).[1] In recent times, things have changed in such a fashion that one Indian scholar argues that the Indian village is vanishing; that it 'is shrinking as sociological reality, though it still exists as space' (Gupta, 2005a). The changes in the village society in West Bengal, a state of India, have probably been more spectacular in the Indian context, particularly during the last three decades. During this period, as a scholar says, 'rural West Bengal has been subjected to extensive governmental intervention in the form of land reforms and democratic decentralization' (Bhattacharyya, 2009: 59).

A section of social science researchers, both from India and across the globe, have taken keen interest in studying different aspects of these changes in rural West Bengal. The specificities of West Bengal that have been mainly addressed in these contemporary researches are the roles and impacts of the deeply entrenched Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and organized party machineries in the countryside and the effects of various land reform measures on the agrarian structure of the state (Bhattacharya, 1998; Bhattacharya, 2002; Lieten, 2003; Rogaly et al., 1999; Webster, 1992). Mallick's (2003) work is also notable here as it tries to reveal the specificity of the 'communist' government of West Bengal in terms of its redistributive development reforms. The unusual stability of the Left Front rule in the state for more than three

1. Srinivas had studied Rampura village of Mysore province (presently Karnataka) for the first time during the period 1948–52 and wrote his famous ethnographical account, 'The Social System of a Mysore Village' (Srinivas, 1955).

decades has also impelled the social scientists to carry out studies on various issues like local governments and politics in West Bengal. A major study[2] conducted in West Bengal during 2003–06 could be a case in point (Bardhan et al., 2009; Bhattacharyya, 2009; Dasgupta, 2009; Majumdar, 2009). Moreover, the traditional social institutions like caste and religion, and particularly their relationship with the modern state and organized political parties, have been other aspects of focus in these contemporary scholarly works. But these aspects so far appear to be a relatively under-researched area which has posed, surely, an interesting problematic that researchers should address with greater emphasis.

Changes in the village society have several dimensions. While economically it might appear, with growing agrarian crisis, that 'the villager is as bloodless as the rural economy is lifeless' (Gupta 2005a: 757), one could hardly agree with Gupta (2005a) that the village is shrinking as a sociological reality. In West Bengal, perhaps the most significant changes in the rural areas are appearing in the sociological field where traditional communities are confronting the modern state institutions and organized political forces in multifarious ways, and in the process, both are undergoing certain changes. To quote Chatterjee (1997: 84):

> It does appear that while a process of differentiation within the peasantry, the spread of organized political agitations on class questions and electoral mobilization have together tended to erode and perhaps break down the bases of any earlier notion of the community consisting of an entire village, this is often replaced by the idea of a truncated or fragmented community, comprising perhaps a strata of the peasantry or of a caste, but possessing many of the ideological characteristics of collective solidarity and identity of a community.

It seems that while traditional community could not resist transformation under the impact of modern state and state-led politics, it is not disintegrating altogether; rather, the communities are reconfiguring themselves vis-à-vis the all-pervasive modern state and state-led politics.

The essential dynamics underlying rural changes probably lie in the strategy of the modern state and state-led politics to intervene and change the

2. I am referring to the major study conducted in West Bengal during 2003–06 by Bardhan, Mitra, Mookherjee, Sarkar, Bhattacharyya, Dasgupta and Majumdar to examine the factors underlying the unusual stability of political power in rural West Bengal. The study is conducted on the basis of large quantitative sample survey across all districts in West Bengal and an ethnographic observation of six purposively selected gram panchayat (GP).

traditional village society and the counter-strategy of the rural people, cutting across different social categories, to cope with these forces of modernity and translate or 'utilize' them for their own benefit. In the ensuing interaction between these conflicting forces of history, both have to undergo changes. The state tries to understand the aspirations and sentiments of the people and the political parties try to read people's demands and moods and make necessary alterations in their programmes of implementation depending both on their normative principles and assessment of the rural situation. The rural people, on the other hand, try to devise suitable strategies to best utilize the 'development' programmes of the state in their individual or communal interests, and resist the same if it goes against their interest. In the process, they interact with different organized political parties, some with access to governmental power and some in the opposition aspiring for that power, and try to extract best advantages by manoeuvring the political rivalry between the competing parties. The interrelations and interactions between these two 'porous' as well as mutually dependent forces seem to constitute the nature and direction of rural changes. If the state and state-led organized politics can be termed as the organized domain of politics, which is organized according to the legal–political principles laid down by the state, then there has been another domain lying outside it, namely, the unorganized domain of subaltern politics. In fact, this theoretical frame was conceived by Chatterjee (1984) to analyze the history of Bengal in the colonial period and explain the politics of peasantry vis-à-vis the colonial state. The question is whether the same might essentially be applicable in the present context to understand the dynamics of the grassroots village politics. Indeed, these two domains of politics have been entangled more and more in the post-colonial period, so much so that it became apparently difficult to identify the existence of a 'subaltern' domain separately from the organized domain of politics. But does that mean the evaporation of the 'subaltern' domain, assimilation of it in the organized domain or its regeneration in a different style and way? I would endeavour to address this question in the light of the changing pattern of village politics.

My contention is that to understand the changes in the village society, our focus should be on the changing interrelationship and interactions between these two entangled domains that constitute the changing pattern of politics in the countryside. The village studies in West Bengal have focussed, so far, more on the changing pattern of agrarian structures combined with the political reforms of decentralization and the changing power structure being exercised in the countryside. An intensive village study conducted by Ruud

(2003: 2) seems to be an exception which 'seeks to investigate the relationship of village to state and vice versa, to investigate a case of mutual adaptation'. It is evident from this scholarly research that state-led organized politics, that is, different political parties regard the rural people not as individuals but rather as different social groups and try to manipulate their communal unity in the interest of the political party. On the other hand, social groups existing in the study village respond, based on their local culture, to 'the modern ideology' introduced into the praxis and subsequently, in the process, village politics is transformed (Ibid.: 211). Very often, in recent times, not only the political parties but also the state in India has treated the people more according to their ethnic identity than as equal citizens, for the purpose of governance. The positive discrimination for the deprived social groups here might be a case in point.

But it is not that the policies of the state and the programmes of the organized domain of politics are determined solely by the wishes of elite policymakers and legislators at the centre of power and that there is no role of the 'subaltern' masses, that is, people outside the circle of power in determining them. Both in the colonial and the post-colonial period, the rural people, who were away from the power centres, acted under the aegis of their own community, or sometimes a larger community, with or without the 'guidance' of organized political forces and influenced the course of politics as well as views of the policymakers in a definite way. The political histories of different states in India have taken different trajectories depending not only on the divergence in the nature of organized politics in the individual states but also on the role the peasant masses played in a particular state at different periods. The emergence of left politics in West Bengal would not have been possible without the role of peasant movements (along with other kinds of people's movements) in the state, principally in the post-colonial period. While left politics have thrived in the state drawing on peasant movements, the peasants, in turn, could develop and sustain their movement and achieve certain gains with the active support and guidance of the left parties. This symbiotic relationship of the peasant movement with the left parties took a new turn since these left parties ascended to power in 1977. The ruling Left Front took several measures of rural reforms immediately after coming to power was, in a way, its acknowledgement of the role the rural subalterns played in its ascendancy to power. But even after coming to power, the ruling left could not bring the peasant movements completely under its control. Several studies (Banerjee and Roy, 2005; Ruud, 2003) have found that the

movements of the rural peasants in West Bengal had far surpassed the left leadership's efforts to keep them within the legal confines during the early stages of the Left Front rule.

Hence, the present study on rural West Bengal aims, essentially, to be a study of changing dimensions of two mutually dependent and intertwined domains of politics: the organized state and state-centric politics on the one hand; and the unorganized political culture on the other. But it seems to be undeniable now that 'the state has become implicated in the minute texture of everyday life' (Gupta, 1995: 375). In other words, as Chatterjee (2004: 39) has pointed out, 'the democratic process in India has come a long way in bringing under its influence the lives of the subaltern classes' resulting in greater entanglement of elite and peasant politics. The extent of the entanglement of these two domains is so extensive that Chatterjee proposes a new concept of 'political society' to understand the changing entanglement of two domains of politics and to analyze the contemporary politics of the peasantry in relation to governmental measures by the state (Ibid.; Chatterjee, 2008a). Bhattacharyya (2009) has expanded Chatterjee's proposition of 'political society' further in the specific context of West Bengal by introducing an idea of 'party-society' and argues that political parties in rural West Bengal largely transcended caste, religion and ethnicity-based organizations which have some relevance in other parts of the country. Gupta (1995: 392), on the other hand, argues that 'rather than take the notion of "the state" as a point of departure, we should leave open the analytical question as to the conditions under which the state does operate as a cohesive and unitary whole'.

Moreover, in the current climate of neo-liberalism and 'development-led' dispossession and displacement, India is witnessing a new community-centred rural, as well as urban, politics operating at the margin of the domain of organized politics, seeking to extend and deepen people's democratic rights. The recent outbreak of peasant resistance in Singur and Nandigram of West Bengal in the wake of land acquisition moves on the part of the ruling government in these places reveals the nature of political imagination of the rural people. These movements partly forced the central government to declare certain reformist policies in order to safeguard the interests of the rural people while pursuing the state-specific programmes of industrialization and building of Special Economic Zones (SEZs). Since one of my fieldwork sites is a village in Singur in the district of Hooghly where almost the entire agricultural land has been acquired by the West Bengal government, I have availed myself of this opportunity to observe the perception of the peasant

community vis-à-vis the impacts of so-called 'historical transition' from agriculture to industry so vigorously being pursued by the erstwhile ruling political regime in the state. But the question at this point is whether we should analyze the recent land movements in the same old tradition of peasant resistance in the rural areas of India? Or do we need to examine the recent peasant movements in a changing context marking a clear departure from the earlier situations? Some distinguished scholars have dealt with these issues and introduced a new conceptual framework, for instance, Chatterjee (2008a) and Sanyal (2007). This research endeavours to examine the empirical validity of this contextualization.

The present research marks a distinction from the earlier studies carried out in India, and particularly in West Bengal, by conducting an ethnographic study of two villages to explain the forms and dynamics of entanglement of these two domains in terms of power relations. It offers a new effort by testing and comparing, through ethnographic techniques, the available frameworks used for explaining the present political situation of rural India. Moreover, the issues of changing dynamics in political activities and imaginations of the rural people across different social groups and creeds construct a major part of this research. The book endeavours to look closely at how the people from different castes, religions and genders represent themselves in state institutions, that is, local government, political parties and even in the social movement. In other words, how do the local people interact with the state-led politics and state institutions, especially in response to different governmental policies meant for their 'benefit'? Is there any new pattern of politics emerging at the margin? How is this pattern of politics corresponding with the current discourse of governance? These questions obviously call for a new research which can unravel the underlying dynamics in micro-level politics. The book makes an effort to address these relatively unexplored questions by taking into account everyday politics in two villages in a certain period of time, with a particular emphasis on a peasant movement that arose in one of the two villages against land acquisition move on the part of the government for industrialization.

Thus, the principal focus of this research is to get an insight into the apparently incomprehensible idea of peasant consciousness, the abstruse spheres of peasant or subaltern culture and ideology that inform unorganized or subaltern politics, that is, their activities and struggles in the political spheres. What are the changes that are occurring in their cultural and ideological proclivities over the past few decades, corresponding to the changes in the economic and political spheres brought about in the state? Do these changes

in the different spheres at all cohere with each other? Can there be any linear relationship between these changes? What kind of cultural–ideological transformation do the peasants or subalterns undergo while negotiating with the development and decentralization strategies of the state? Or conversely, do the state-led development and decentralization programmes have considerable impact on the subalterns' cultural–ideological consciousness? If so, how would we interpret these changes?

Theoretical Context

The changes in rural societies have been so vast that Gupta (2005a: 751) tends to regret that 'the theoretical cum analytical frameworks remain largely unchanged, while at the level of facts there is a clear recognition that things are not what they used to be'. This urge for a change in the theoretical-cum-analytical framework while studying the village is not new as Srinivas himself acknowledged the challenge posed by the rapidly changing rural societies as early as in 1966 in the following words, 'the study of one's own society while it is changing rapidly…poses challenge that calls for the mobilization of all the moral and intellectual resources of the sociologist' (quoted in Joshi, 1996: 133). Hence, the important questions are: how to study the changing rural society and whether the existing theoretical and analytical frameworks provide us with sufficient analytical wherewithal to understand the changing rural society? Is there a need for developing an entirely new theoretical frame? Earlier, Srinivas had endeavoured to study the traditional institutions mainly in its harmony, for instance, in the continuity and integrity of different castes. Afterwards, Srinivas made some important shifts from his earlier standpoints. First, he acknowledged that he had concentrated more on reconstructing the social structure when he was doing his fieldwork in Rampura (1948–52) and this made him less sensitive to the factors causing change. Second, he acknowledged that 'conflict as such is an inescapable part of social existence, and should be of serious concern to the sociologist' (quoted in Ibid.: 134).

Pointing out the limitations of the study done by Srinivas, Joshi (Ibid.: 142) comments that 'Insights into continuity or change can be gained if changes in other vital spheres like productive forces, production relations, belief system and power structure are investigated'. A strong proponent of the Marxian view, Joshi (Ibid.) suggests:

> …the understanding of relations between man and man – caste being one such relation – will always remain illusory or partial without an understanding of man's interaction with nature…The understanding of caste in the Indian context has been largely obscured by the tendency to view it in isolation from economic activity and organization.

He criticizes Srinivas for his failure to attach proper importance to economic organization and underlines the significance of the growing approximation of caste to class from a theoretical point of view. The orthodox Marxist view is perfectly reflected in the above formulation of Joshi, where he emphasizes on the economic activity and economic organization so as to understand the changes occurring in the caste system.

In the classic Marxist literature, economic changes are seen to be constructing the base of a society and politics and culture forming its superstructure. It is assumed then that every change in the base would have corresponding change in the superstructure and that there has been some linear relationship between changes in the base and the superstructure. But these classical Marxist theories have been well criticized since long by scholars from different disciplines. The subaltern studies scholars, most of whom were Marxist in the past, in the 1970s, tried to introduce some new scholarships drawing on Gramsci's ideas for explaining the histories and societies of the countries of the South. The subaltern studies' scholarship, in fact, set a new perspective for the countries of South Asia by emphasizing on the role of the subaltern classes in determining the course of history. Spivak (1988b) well summarizes the contribution of subaltern studies' scholarship. She writes, 'The most significant outcome of this revision or shift in perspective is that the agency of change is located in the insurgent or the "subaltern"' (Ibid.: 3).

Ideas of Subaltern Consciousness

It is mainly the phenomenon of subaltern consciousnesses that the subaltern studies' scholars give primacy in studying the history of colonial India, a phenomenon that has been ignored by both the nationalist and Marxist historians. Initially, peasant consciousness was identified as the most important example of subaltern consciousness, especially in the Indian context, as most of the working people in India were peasants. Peasant movements and peasant rebellions in the colonial period are termed by the Marxists as a pre-political phenomenon. Hobsbawm (1959: 96) best describes this phenomenon when

he finds the 'traditional forms of peasant discontent' to have been 'virtually devoid of any explicit ideology, organization or programme'. In contrast, the subaltern view is most explicitly expressed by Guha (1983: 4) when he comments:

> To acknowledge the peasant as the maker of his own rebellion is to attribute, as we have done in this work, a consciousness to him. Hence, the word 'insurgency' has been used in the title and the text as the name of that consciousness which informs the activity of the rural masses known as jacquerie, revolt, uprising, etc. or to use their Indian designations – *dhing, bidroha, ulgulan, hool, fituri* and so on. This amounts, of course, to a rejection of the idea of such activity as purely spontaneous – an idea that is elitist as well as erroneous. It is elitist because it makes the mobilization of the peasantry altogether contingent on the intervention of charismatic leaders, advanced political organizations or upper classes.

Guha (Ibid.: 8) shows extensively how a political relationship of domination and subordination informs the colonial system of dominance where the peasants' 'subjection to this triumvirate – sarkari, sahukari and zamindari was primarily political in character, economic exploitation being only one, albeit the most obvious, of its several instances'. This relationship of domination and subordination at the same time contained its opposite, that is, insubordination, resistance and rebellion, that remained latent in the relationship and became explicit only at particular historical junctures. This 'subalternist' perspective, which 'has increasingly come to dominate the formation of perspective and concepts' (Ruud, 1999a: 689), still seems to be somewhat relevant for some scholars as an analytical approach to hierarchical social systems. But Ruud offered some resistance to this 'dominance'. He asserts,

> It is here we find Chakrabarty and other contributors reduce the historical (cultural) experiences of India to one single paradigm, that of hierarchy. Whatever there is of dissonance, of opposition and 'resistance', all takes place within that paradigmatic construct. I will be among the last to suggest that there is not a strong element of hierarchy in Indian culture. (Ibid.: 689)

Ruud's assertion seems to have offered a different vantage point though he never concludes his standpoint clearly and finishes his thought-provoking essay by saying that

> …there is no conclusion to this essay, only the caution not to oversimplify the lives of the 'uneducated', 'unsophisticated' 'masses', 'the rural folk' or 'toiling classes'...because such an oversimplification can readily be detected in otherwise

> sympathetic and important studies, a tendency which hampers an understanding of change, whether cultural change or an only half-backed political conversion. (Ibid.: 728–29)

But elements of subaltern consciousness, as reflected in the nineteenth century peasant insurgencies, do not remain the same in the twentieth century when 'organized' domain, organized according to legal–political principles laid down by the state, began to intervene and influence the 'unorganized' domain of the rural subalterns in an ever-increasing manner. Chatterjee (1984) proposes the division of Indian society into organized (elite) and unorganized (subaltern) domains to develop a theoretical frame to analyze the peasant movements in the early twentieth century India. Following Antonio Gramsci's ideas, Chatterjee (1984: xli) suggests:

> Colonial and post-colonial Indian history can be studied in a framework of power relationships in which the elites and subaltern classes inhabit two distinct and relatively autonomous domains of everyday existence and consciousness. The task of the new historiography is, first of all, to recover this autonomous history of subaltern classes, and second, to study in its concreteness the interpenetration of the two domains as a process of domination and resistance.

But the concept of the 'autonomous domain of subaltern consciousness' has been lately questioned by some scholars (Chatterjee, 1999: 417)[3] as, they argue, it has been shaped and directed by elements of elite consciousness. Moreover, there might be instances where elite consciousness has also very strong elements of subalternity. So, the quest for a pure and undiluted subaltern consciousness does not remain the focus of the subaltern studies in the later period. Rather, the complex relationships between the elite and subaltern domains, where both are intertwined and interdependent, each having a role in the construction of the other, where no firm division seems to be possible between the two domains, become the focus of study. That is to say, the extent, forms and mode of representation of the subaltern people in the domain of 'organized' politics now becomes the focus of the subaltern theories.

3. Spivak referred by Chatterjee (1999). Spivak was the first to raise the question of structuring subaltern consciousness in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' and 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (Spivak 1988a; 1988b).