



***International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)***

*A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal*

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-VII, Issue-VI, November 2021, Page No. 105-107

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v7.i6.2021.105-107

---

**Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*,  
Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. pp. ix-361.**

**Gopal Chandra Das**

*Former M.Phil Research Scholar, (Department of History)*

*Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol, Paschim Burdwan, West Bengal (India)*

*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* is the noteworthy work of Ranajit Guha, which has now become an institutional document of Subaltern Studies School. The two main approaches in Ranajit Guha's scheme of analysis are 'Subaltern' and 'Elementary'. The first is from Antonio Gramsci's 'Prison Notebooks' and the second is from Emile Durkheim's 'The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life'. But Guha has seen each point from his own different perspective. Guha discusses in this book about rebellious peasantry in detail. How much did the mentality, values, ideas and structure develop behind the expansion of peasant movement in colonial India between 1783 and 1900 that are reflected in Guha's own thoughts? Guha has discussed six rudiments to explain the multiple characteristics of the peasant movement, e.g. negation, ambiguity, modality, solidarity, transmission and territoriality.

Ranajit Guha in the second chapter discusses the 'negation' which is the first elementary device of peasant consciousness. Guha argues that, the peasant does not recognize himself by insurgency alone; rather they understand themselves through negation and negative conciseness. In colonial India, a notion of identity was imposed on peasant class by those who had power over them due to their class, caste and other kind of social status. Those elite classes made peasant society aware of their place in society as a measure of their distance based on their wealth status and cultural differences. The elite class always tries to impose their identity on the peasantry, but the peasant with that identity is the first to realize that they are in fact victims of discrimination. Guha thinks that the negations characteristic of insurgency were worked out in terms of two sets of principles. The first, when the peasants sets his goal in selective way, against whom they will lead the movement, then the form violence is revealed—that is call discrimination. Secondly they also try to extend their domain of politics by analogy and transference—which Guha called *atidesa* function. A notable example of this is the destruction of implements of the enemy. In a word, the peasants resorted to incessant movements to perpetuate their violence. And ideas through that the upper class people want to negate their existence, they (peasant) began to ignore

and rejected those ideas or identities. In this way, his violence or insurgency against elite class became the target. So Guha says, violence extended thus by *atidesa* from one particular implement to all other implements in the same class and from one class of machinery to another. Ranajit Guha also show that this negation consciousness has a historical tendency to 'come to the surface' locally among some of the more radical sections of the rural masses long before being generalized on a national scale in any country. Needless to say, Guha was deeply influenced by Rodney Hilton's study of the medieval peasant movement.

Ranajit Guha described another interesting aspect of the peasant insurgency in next chapter that is the 'ambiguity'. According to him, a kind of self-contradiction works in the peasant movement. According to Guha's point of view the ruling authority, the police, the law-courts have always identified the rebellious peasants as criminals and anti-social, they are involved in criminal activities. On the other hand, peasants never consider themselves criminals; rather they always believe that they are rebels fighting against exploitation. Each of their claims is legitimate. And the violent action they have taken to assert this legitimate claim is perfectly reasonable. If the peasants cannot convey their rebellion to the upper classes through their violence, no one will listen to them. Guha says that, when the elite class writes the official report on the rebellion, the imprint of all their consciousness is reflected in every line by line of their writings. So, the historian's task is to reinterpretation it in such a way as to remove this impression from those who are being stigmatized as criminals. And when that happens, the rebellious peasants will become the makers of history.

Chapter fourth Guha moves back to take another wide-angled perspective. In this chapter he discusses 'modality' where he shows there is a modality or specific structure of peasant movement. The upper class people know peasant through the peasant consciousness structure and organizational structure, when he rebels. Guha says the nature of crime is that it is an individualistic act, secretive, appropriative and partial and it makes individual man. On the contrary, peasant revolt but no individual man, rather it always public, collective, destructive and totality. So, according to Guha peasant movement is an open and public act of violence. And it is collective ideological consciousness and a massive mass violence, where the individual peasant has no place.

In the fifth chapter Ranajit Guha talks about 'solidarity' in discussing the basic features of the peasant movement. The solidarity is another tool of the rebellious peasant movement. When they are facing the ruling administration, they are fighting in unison without retreating. They think of themselves as belonging to one group, one community that creates a bonding between them. Although the peasant movement developed as a class struggle as a whole, there was certainty an impression of religiosity and ethnic solidarity. Guha remarks that it is very difficult to ruling class to break this unity and this solidarity can cause a fear in the minds of the ruling classes.

In the sixth chapter he shows that, how did the radical message of the peasant revolt spread among the peasants from one region to another with incredible speed? He says the collocation speaks for itself. He likens the rapid spread of rebellion to a contagious disease. Guha has seen the way which modern society is communicated through newspaper, telegraph, telephone etc. But the message of rebellion did not transmit the pre-modern, pre-capitalist society in that way. Instead, the rebels used to convey symbolic signs of boughs, *chapati*, *tel-sindur* etc. as messengers of the rebellion. Aural, visual, iconic, verbal, graphic and non-graphic etc., were also other devices of the rebel messengers. Guha's statement is that rumors play the most significant role in this case.

In the seventh chapter professor Guha talks about different types of spaces while demarcating the peasant movement. According to Guha, the economic life of the people related to extent of the rebellion, the territory they are fighting for, their arm strength etc., differ from one local event to another. And gives each of them its specific character. The domain of rebellion is form of two categories of concepts denoting ethnic space and physical space, each of which has negative and positive aspects. He has commented that the peasantry never crossed the boundaries of local relations and local attitudes. Rather they are confined to their local sphere. Guha argues that various factors i.e. ethnicity, caste and religion contribute to the formation of territorially. Ranajit Guha has shown on the basis of various contemporary testimonies that the localism of 1857-58 coup came from their ethnic character. He also traces that caste ambitions inspired some *jequeries* that helped emphasize their rationality and ethnicity. But as a result of such ambition, the rebels lost their territory and prestige.

Ranajit Guha's this book is an important secondary source to know the dynamics of the peasant movement in colonial India. In this book, he gives the paradigm of the peasant movement in other parts of the world to show the form of the peasant movement in India. Guha's clear statement is that so far, the Indian historiography was seen from the point of view of the elitist class and blinkered. He says that the subaltern or the exploited classes were not seen as a creator of history and the subject of history. In this book, he shows that it is no possible to explain the present movement directly with some economic conditions. Rather behind it is a specific motive or outline of preparations, organization and political activities. This motive or outline is rooted in peasant consciousness. Guha argues that the peasantry attracts the attention of the elite classes through rebellion. He indicates through his own perspective that on the one had the upper classes of society tried to suppress the peasant movement by creating terror and on the other hand the peasantry of lower classes tried to sustain their existence through rebellion and violence. He thinks that the peasant history of South Asia has progressed through two tensions of dominance and resistance. But the organizational unity that will always be present among the peasants cannot be said with certainty. Over time the peasant makes such decisions to improve his position from other peasants. So I think the peasant movement does not always take a collective form.