

PEASANTS' ROLE IN RADICAL SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews some of the literature relevant to the issue of peasants and their political involvements. It represents an amalgam of contemporary theorisations on peasantry and peasant mobilization with some empirical substantiations from global experiences including Sri Lanka.

INTRODUCTION

The debate on peasantry in relation to their involvement in movements for radical social change has been in progress over the past few decades. The nature of the problem undoubtedly is very complex. In Sri Lanka, the peasants' involvement in the political process of the country is rated as high and they are described as politically educated. In countries such as China, Latin America and parts of Asia the peasants have been actively involved in revolutionary movements and struggles. In fact it is said that the peasants have been the driving force in the revolutionary movements and struggles around the world in the twentieth century.

A contrary point of view exists that the peasants are politically passive and thus, occupying the position of a political underdog. Thus, the contention remains whether the peasants are really revolutionary and are capable of generating independent revolutionary actions for structural change in society.

By examining and reviewing some of the literature on the subject and analysing the cases of China and contemporary Sri Lanka, an attempt is made here firstly to evaluate the validity of the claim that the peasants are politically passive and secondly to discuss the circumstances whereby they are transformed into a revolutionary proletariat.

DEFINITIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

Various points of view that have been expressed in the course of the prolonged debate on peasantry can be assessed by way of the following evaluative summation: For some, the debate has only resulted in "a failure to understand the people concerned within their historical contents, consequently losing sight of the essential inter-relatedness of said life" (Miller, 1978:7). For some others, they yield only confusion and beyond a certain point, the continuation of a debate on how to define peasants is a waste of time and energy (Powell, 1972 ; Mick Moore, 1972 ; Hobsbawm, 1973). Yet some others have accepted the common sense definition (Harrison, 1977).

However, it is useful to define the terms of reference because the uncritical usage of terms and concepts would undoubtedly result in confusion and ambiguity which would limit their validity and quality. What is referred to as peasantry is the peasant social system. The distinctive characteristics of the peasant societies in the world are identified in general, without particularly limiting the definition to considerations related to the applicability of same to a given peasant society in a given time and space. Thus, the peasant society is defined to include societies based on small scale agricultural production with a subsistence orientation and a culture of their own in addition to a pattern of social differentiation. Radical social change is used here to denote complete overhaul of the existing social order or a total social transformation. It may be a term coterminous with revolution, but not necessarily involve use of force to change the system. Regarding the role of the peasants in evolving such a social system which is radically different to the existing social structure, in which the structural position of the peasant is now altered to the better, the assertion is that they play an active part. In this case, the central question involved is whether the peasantry can be recognized in terms of class and whether their political actions and involvements can be identified in terms of class politics.

To begin with, Marx and Lukacs who emphasised two opposite dimensions—i.e. materialism and consciousness respectively—in their theorisation, both characterised peasant social structure and values as non-revolutionary or even anti-revolutionary (Marx, 1970 : 170 ; Lukacs, 1971:59). Marx recognized the insurrectionary impulse of the peasantry, yet he saw it as merely an immediate reaction to a given situation rather than as having revolutionary potential. The uprisings expressed discontent, but not the commitment to the reconstruction of a new society which is of a qualitatively higher order. Thus, such uprisings though quite unusual for a land-based, conservative group such as the peasants, cannot be considered as radical political actions in that they do not imply “a projection of a completely new version of human life and enterprise and threat to all aspects of on-going life”.¹

According to Hobsbawm (1963) if the peasantry were at all radical, that radicalism was mixed with millenarism (The term millenarism is used typologically to characterise religious movements that expect imminent, total, ultimate, this worldly, collective salvation).² Going by this particular character, Hobsbawm described agrarian uprisings as social movements. The peasant belief system has always given enormous spiritual security and encouragement to the participants in these rebellions, and as the intermediaries between ‘this world’ and the ‘supernatural world’ the religious leaders therefore have constantly reinforced the character of the peasant movements. How was it possible that the peasant protest movements took a millenarian character? In terms of culture, the magico-religious beliefs provided the whole peasant society with a common set of symbols to which the peasant and the lord alike paid allegiance. In the social pyramid however, the peasant occupies

¹ *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 13 & 14, “Macmillan & Free Press”, 1972, P. 294.

² Vol. 9 & 10. P. 349.

a lower position by virtue of which he is in a powerless position over the political and environmental conditions etc., which explains why the peasant variant of the belief system has been different and basically magical in orientation from that of the power elites. Accordingly, his protest movements are fashioned by these beliefs, and the non-peasants take the leading role in them.

It is in the light of the above mentioned situation that Shanin used the term 'political underdog' to describe the position of the peasants who are dominated by outsiders, and as a rule, have been kept at arm's length from the social sources of power. Their political subjugation interlinks with their cultural subordination and with their economic exploitation through tax, corvee, rent, interest, and terms of trade unfavourable to the peasant (Shanin, 1971:15). Their discontent and protests therefore are more likely to manifest in the field of ideology rather than in material terms (Scott, 1977). For example, it may find expression in folklore where sarcasm figures prominently.

However, that most peasant movements are led by outsiders should not be taken to mean that peasants cannot generate revolution (Barrington Moore, 1966:480). On the other hand, one has to be cautious when describing peasant movements as revolutionary: Rebellions and revolutions are both forms of collective violence, but the latter is said to entail the aim of transforming society itself whereas rebellion seeks to redress specific injustices within the framework of the existing social order (Deal, 1975). Recently there have been attempts to heroicise peasant political involvements in terms of revolution. In these attempts peasant values, norms and cultures have been reified as denoting revolutionary potential (Scott 1976, 1977). Yet it is common knowledge that revolutions do not attempt the reconstitution or reassertion of culture, or tradition but on the contrary, at radical transformation of the entire society.

Regarding the understanding of the peasantry and their political action, therefore, one has to evaluate these theories. The peasant underdog position seems to stem from the classical view that peasants are seen as representing a "part society with part culture" (Kroeber, 1948:284) or a "little tradition" (Redfield, 1956: 25; Marriot, 1955) having a structural dependency on the centre, meaning the market, the non-peasants existing in the rural society and the state, on which the peasant society as a whole is dependent. At its most developed, the part-society approach contains ideas of political encapsulation and penetration by larger societal wholes and the extraction of a surplus from the peasant cultivator which has been described by a writer as "a kind of internal colonialism" (Foweraker, 1978). There are several limitations to this perspective insofar as peasant political involvements are concerned. Firstly, the "structural dependency" paradigm admits no room for change by way of conflict. Secondly, it obscures the class dimension of exploitation in the sense that society contains both the exploiters and the exploited (Foweraker, 1978). Thirdly, it presents the peasant way of life as essentially separated from the process of economic, political and cultural dynamism (Miller, 1978:7-18).

Furthermore, it seems that it reinforces an over-estimated presumption as to the peasant subservience which defines the peasant condition. According to this presumption the peasant is believed to seek explanation of any given phenomenon in terms of cosmology or personal virtues, but not in social structural terms. In addition it allows the peasant condition or the resultant state of affairs, to be reified as denoting a cultural value which the peasants are living up to with willingness. For example, Geertz, found the peasants' values to include "shared poverty" (Geertz, 1955) though what he observed could have well implied peasants' passive compliance to surplus labour appropriation by their superiors. Finally, it amounts to the notion of the classlessness of peasant society, and conversely, to the lack of class consciousness and political action.

We cannot but dismiss the claim that the peasantry is a homogeneous mass characterised by those traits that have been attributed to them. What are these traits? Landsberger (1974 : 55) groups these traits of peasant personality under five headings: (1) apathy ; (2) resistance to change and innovation, including the innovation represented by the establishment of new organizations; (3) suspiciousness towards all, including fellow peasants; (4) submissiveness to traditional authority, and to traditions, norms in general including those norms which result in the peasant's own exploitation ; and (5) lack of knowledge. Peasant society itself is stratified, and the distinctions may be seen between rich, middle and poor peasants. Poor peasants are landless tenants, mainly sharecroppers ; middle peasants own the plots that they cultivate with the help of family labour (they are the independent small holders) ; and rich peasants own their holdings and are able to systematically hire, rural proletarians (Lenin, 1942 : 17 ; Alavi, 1973 : 291-337) Schram notes eight different classes identified by Mao Tse Tung in the Chinese-peasant society : big landlords, small landlords, peasant landholders, semi landholders, sharecroppers, poor peasants, farm labourers and rural artisans (Schram, 1976:241).

In addition to these distinctions the peasants may not be regarded as 'peasants' *par excellence* in that they may be proprietors while being workers - "the worker is a proprietor or in which the proprietor works" (Marx, as quoted by Hobsbawm, 1964:97) ; they may perform other roles, such as taking up other employment in nearby towns while continuing to fulfil of their traditional roles (Gudeman, 1978) they may have extra-village orientation (Tambiah, 1958, 1965) they may share similar interests with the non-peasants, i.e. landlords ; they demonstrate a double orientation in productions (Lundah, 1979) ; they may also take on values permeated to them by the landlords (Foster, 1953) on the other hand, while being peasants, they may also perform capitalist functions such as money lending, brokerage, taking mortgages etc. The ensuing difficulty of these features or complexities in the context of the present paper, as mentioned before, is on how to comprehend the peasantry in terms of class relations which is a vital dimension in the case of their radical political action. In those peasant societies where the full impact of capitalism is only beginning to be felt, the demarcation of classes is perhaps even more difficult.

CLASS AND CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS IN PEASANT SOCIETY

There is no disagreement over the fact that peasants exist in class societies or societies founded upon class based production relations. The relations of production consist of the manner in which individuals are articulated in relation to productive forces. The two major positions or relationships to the productive forces are those of owner and worker. Conversely, relations of production are simply the formal property relations governing the access to and utilization of society's wealth and resources. The class production relations allow corresponding relations of surplus labour appropriation to occur, which determines, the relationship between the producer and the state (Marx, 1972 :791).

On the basis of class relations of production, Marx identified three major classes in modern society, i.e. the wage-labourers, the capitalists and land owners. To quote :

“The owners merely of labour power, owners of capital, and land owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground rent in other words, wage-labourers, capitalists and land owners, constitute the three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production.” (Marx. quoted in Cate, 1967:63).

In addition, he stressed the importance of class struggle in the identification of classes. To quote again :

“The separate individuals from a class only is so far as they have to carry as a common battle against another class ; otherwise they are on hostile terms with each other as competitors.” (Marx, Engels, 1970:82).

It is clear that the idea of class consciousness is central to the Marxist concept of class, and for the growth of class consciousness, persons in a defined social stratum must sense and articulate their shared experiences and interests to denote a sense of identity as a class, class allegiance, and class antagonism directed against those whose class affiliations and interests are opposed to one's own. Says Marx:

“Insofar as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small holding peasants and the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond, and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class”. (Marx & Engels, 1970:170—1).

In other words, these social strata must have their own individual sub-cultures consisting of distinctive life styles, consumption patterns, ideologies, etc.

The idea of false consciousness as opposed to that of true consciousness is important in this context for it inhibits revolutionary political action on the part of the peasantry : firstly, the peasant sees that it is due to his own fate that he is in his exploited position, and secondly, the individual peasant sees that it is due to something wrong with the intermediaries, i.e. landlord. True consciousness is class consciousness which views that it is the system which is wrong. For the peasants to perceive class consciousness, it is necessary that they form class alliance with the proletariat for peasants as a class for themselves have no independent existence.

In the traditional set-up the gap between the peasant and the landlord has been filled by a matrix of patron-client relations (Scott, 1976 ; 1977) and cultural or ideological links that developed in the process masked the essentially antagonistic nature of production relations. The peasant believed that if change was to come at all it had to come from outside, either from a non-peasant or some messianic character. The system of patronage justified the political dependence of the peasantry upon the non-peasant and legitimized inequality in material and cultural resources as fore-ordained. In a patron-client relationship between the peasant and the landlord, interests are tied in with the landlord ; it is a risk for the peasant to upset the particular equilibrium achieved. Thus, he has an accommodated (interdependent) consciousness which is not radical.

PEASANTS IN THE MAKING OF NEW SOCIETY

All Marxists, beginning from Marx himself, regarded peasantry as an important revolutionary force, though none ever recognized that the peasants were capable of generating independent revolutionary action. For Lenin, as for Trotsky and all their contemporaries, peasants were fated to fall under the influence either of the proletariat or of the bourgeoisie, the only two classes that can establish their domination over the society as a whole. The Leninist theory of imperialism broke Eurocentricism and suggested that the peoples of Asia and Africa (the so called dependent countries or the countries under colonialism) were capable of generating revolutions which are not only progressive but also contributory to the revolutions in the mother countries, thus according the peasantry an extremely important place as the chief force in revolution. However, he maintained that the peasantry has to be guided by the proletariat. Mao Tse Tung proceeded beyond this stance and attributed to the peasantry a more active role and a greater initiative in revolutionary struggle.

Wolf claims that it is not easy for peasants to engage in sustained rebellion, and that there are six factors which inhibit revolt : (1) the dependence of peasant productive units which compete with each other for scarce resources and credit ; (2) the tyranny of the peasant's work routine, broken only at peril ; (3) withdrawal into subsistence production in times of crisis for market crops ; (4) ties of extended kinship and mutual aid within the community which may cushion the shock of

any dislocation ; (5) peasant interests which often form cross-cut alignments in the social structure, through kinship ties, multiple roles, and vertical integration, and (6) the past exclusion of peasant from decision-making in the wider world, limiting their knowledge to articulate interests and to act on them. Thus, the peasant is a recipient of decisions made on the national level (Wolf, 1971: 264-5).

Additional weaknesses of the peasants which inhibit revolt are stipulated by Shanin : that they are segmented into local communities, sub classes and groups ; that there are different interests within the communities, hence the difficulty to crystalize nationwide aims and to develop leadership and organization; and that they are technologically backward, being no match for smaller, close-knit, better organized, technologically superior groups which suppress them politically by force of arms (Shanin, 1971:256-7).

However, there are both theories and empirical evidence to the contrary. In terms of theories, Hobsbawm has shown that the mutual recognition by peasants of the similarity of their relation to nature, production and non-peasants helps to increase class consciousness (Hobsbawm, 1973:7). Samir Amin maintains that it is the degree to which the peasants are integrated to the world capitalist system that makes them peasants or proletarians ; their market orientation and dependence on modern farming technologies make them vulnerable to the vagaries of the world market resulting in adjustment to the requirements of capital eventually making them proletarians (Amin, 1973: 328-9). Frantz Fanon claims that at present, peasants alone are revolutionary (Fanon, 1963 :48).

In fact, the contemporary empirical evidence suggests revolutions have taken place in those societies where the peasants were the majority, and not in the developed West where the proletariat were the majority. The countries of Latin America, Africa and Asia bear witness to this. Other countries in these regions are experiencing active peasant involvement in the field of politics. Correspondingly, it is no longer regarded that the peasants are less, or not at all, revolutionary. The point of concern now is under which conditions is it that they become revolutionary.

Intensified exploitation and military oppression are conditions which give the peasantry class consciousness and an ideology which explains, in realistic terms, the way society stands at present, the relationship of the peasantry to the macro-level society, and how future society should be. A history characterized by intensive exploitation and military suppression given the impetus on the part of the subjects to change the situation. Specific historic conditions thus provide a revolutionary impulse — class consciousness.

Wolf claims that peasants revolt only when they suffer from three crises : demographic, ecological and in political authority (Wolf, 1971:265-7). The first is an imbalance between population and land resources ; the second, a rapid change in ecotypes—the peasant cannot allocate resources in the traditional way ; and the third; the commercialization and capitalization of agricultural activities which may

weaken the power of traditional elites. What subsequently precipitate revolts are natural disasters, disasters, resistance to innovations or occupation by a foreign power, extra levies or taxes, and repression. According to Scott the defence of existing rights could be the basis for peasant radical action (Scott, 1976: 280-1). Referring to the middle level peasant, Wolf, has shown that in their attempt to remain traditional they become radical (Wolf 1971 : 270). Under colonialism peasants throughout the world experienced a loss of productive land (separation of means of subsistence) which implanted, in the absence of revolutionary ideologies, a deep rooted sense of discontent. The discontent manifested itself in sporadic uprisings and clashes, often in a blend of millenarism and nationalism. In these countries, unlike in the West, capitalism was subsequential to imperialism, and the superimposition of capitalistic exploitation placed an extra burden on the peasantry with extra labour because of the commercialization of agriculture. As Barrington Moore explained, the incomplete or partial nature of commercialization fixed the peasant in a feudal-capitalist limbo, rather than eliminating it through a transformation into modern social formations of independent farmers and agricultural wage labourers (Barrington Moore, 1966 : 420-6). Under capitalism, existence becomes subsidiary to the market, whilst land, labour and wealth become commodities. The growth of commercialization and markets brought new insecurities and broke the hold of local custom. Expanding market economies led to a growth of disparities in wealth, the concentration of land ownership, money lending, wage labour, and the elimination of customary economic rights. The changes emanated from the city, the markets, speculators, and absentee landlords. When the peasantry can no longer rely on his accustomed institutional context to reduce risks without a functional alteration in the modern sector, psychological, economic, social and political tensions all lead to peasant rebellion and involvement in revolution (Wolf, 1973:xix). The middle peasant, by virtue of his autonomy and by not being under strict control of the landlord, is most vulnerable to economic changes produced by commercialism, and is most likely to be revolutionary: his social relations remain encased in a traditional design : his children often work in towns and become transmitters of urban unrest and political ideas. It is his effort to remain traditional that makes him revolutionary. The poor and dependent peasants can only join the movement when a new balance of power has been established to challenge the power of the landlords (Wolf, 1971:270).

THE LEADERSHIP FACTOR AND THE CASES OF CHINA AND SRI LANKA

Peasants are not initiators, but participators. A nationally-based organization guides the potentiality of rebellion of the peasants into revolution, to transform society. Guided political action has been the most successful pattern of action. Peasant revolutions involve a conjunction of dislocated and threatened peasantry whose aims are likely to be immediate and even traditional together with a revolutionary elite whose goals and ideology are of a more long term nature. Proletarians and peasants can collaborate in the revolution provided that they have

an organization to represent and implement their interests. However, this in no way minimizes the central role of the peasant forces in making revolution possible. The revolutionary elite can do little without attaching itself to a massive form of discontent. If the peasantry is not allowed to relapse into traditional narrow concerns, peasant discontent can be mobilized to fuel a revolutionary insurrection. This was realized in communist-led revolutions; the peasants responded to the initiative taken by the communist forces who represented, for the peasant masses, a way out of their dilemma, through their competent organization and leadership.

In the case of China, for example, the traditional linkages (clan bonds) which bound the upper and lower strata of the society were so weak and indicated "lines of fracture" (Barrington Moore, 1966 : 213). Within the clans themselves activities were guided by the wealthiest, most educated, and the members with the highest status. The gentry was interested in using the clan structure to fortify and extend its power (Wolf, 1973:109). Whilst they discriminated against the poorer peasants, contacts with foreign firms and governments stimulated the development of class into quasi-business organizations where land rent became an important source of capital (Wolf, 1973:110). The gentry owned two thirds of the land of the village (Barrington Moore, 1966:221), and the new demands on the peasants proved that the old demands were no longer justifiable with the "deterioration of the upper classes, the landlord usurers" (Wolf 1973: 129). There was also increasing population stress on food production, and such a pressure led to an imbalance (Wolf, 1973:135). Industry and commerce expanded, thus there was an increase in cash crops with much of the food crops destined for overseas market. The commercialization of land affected land prices, conditions and rents, with land ownership unequally distributed. Further, China was undergoing great crisis in authority: in the nineteenth century, the state became enfeebled by foreign encroachment; the Manchurian dynasty collapsed and was replaced by a disorderly and divided republic, along with a struggle for power by warlords resulting in political segmentation (Wolf, 1973:126). Locally there was a crisis in power where the Mandarin had to yield to the entrepreneur. With foreign invasions, (by Japan) the gentry moved to the center, the cities, leaving behind the peasantry; with the elimination of the old elites the communists were able to organize these peasants into the revolution (Bianco, 1975).

The communist strategy in China, as in many other countries, was to transform the peasant insurrectionary temperament into a revolutionary force. In this exercise they were keener on the middle peasant which would make the movement all the more decisive; their attempts to set up peasant organizations were successful in commercialized areas (Wolf, 1973:143). The communists also broke the village apart at its base by obliterating the connection between landed property and kinship, thus weakening the economic basis for kinship ties (Barrington Moore, 1966: 226—7).

Sri Lanka has had a tradition of peasant revolts under conditions of foreign invasions and colonial domination. These revolts have, as a rule, been led by the non-peasants, i.e. the *Bhikkus* (the Buddhist monks) and the Chieftains (Jayawardana, 1983). The peasantry of the contemporary Sri Lanka on the other hand has also been described as one of the most politicised in the world (Jupp, 1978:186). Their relatively high literacy rate, voting behaviour, practice of working through the Members of Parliament, presence of various types of farmer organizations etc. have been the main factors behind this characterisation. The larger system to which the peasantry is articulated includes an elected Executive President, Parliament, Constitution which holds the supremacy of the Parliament, District Minister System vested with executive powers and a decentralized budget, and other elected bodies such as the District Development Councils and Gramodaya Mandalayas where the bureaucracy has been called upon to work closely with the parliamentarians manning these institutions.

Thus, it would seem that there has been a process of politicisation progressing in Sri Lanka during the period since independence in 1948. But has the kind of participation in political process described above brought about class consciousness which was conceived earlier as being primary to radical action on the part of the peasantry for effecting social structural change?

Firstly, in terms of party politics the popular support for the leftist parties has been decreasing, but in terms of organizational power they have made a significant impact. Secondly, politicisation of the people has advanced substantially but only in the development of parochial politics (Wickramasinghe, 1981:234). Rather than the formation of more broad-based identities such as class which cut across different levels in the social hierarchy resulting in the articulation of interests which are common to them, it is those divisions and cleavages that are based on such primordial considerations as caste, religion, ethnicity and other relations like personal conflicts etc. that seem to have been further enounced in the process of politicisation. It has been shown that at the village level, family feuds, personal ties and bondages weigh over and above political ideologies (Jayatilake, 1984 ; Robinson, 1975:92). There is little or no interest in national political issues or in the role of the political parties in local affairs among the colonists in the new settlement schemes, commonly known as the colonies (Robinson, 1975:272). Even in the urban set-up where professional associations and trade unions are available as alternatives to traditional cleavages, they have offered only limited or partial alternatives and membership in them have been complementary to, rather than exclusive of, caste kinship which cut across recognition of broad class or professional identities, (Jiggins, 1979:149). This along with bourgeois ideologies undermined the prospect of nations building on the one hand, and alliances of the working classes (inclusive of the peasants) on the other (Wickramasinghe, 1981 : 234). A relatively stagnant economy which needs fundamental transformation seems to be in conflict with the status-quo, although many achievements have been made towards economic modernization within a framework of small holder agriculture.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it may be said that for movements committed to radical social change to succeed in agrarian societies, an alliance between the minority proletariat and the majority peasant is necessary in addition to the presence of socio-economic crises. However, to argue on how to define peasants and peasant societies or how to demarcate classes in these societies seems to have the effect of halting the analysis at a superficial level. One must remember that the great majority of industrial workers were former peasants with strong regional or local ties. Also the integration of the peasantries into the world capitalist system has broadened their perspective. Added to these is the fact of the numerical preponderance of the peasant populace of the third world on the one hand, and the peasant revolutions' contribution to the world revolution on the other, which can be understood in terms of the thesis put forward by Lenin.

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