



Department of History
School of Social Sciences
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack, ODISHA

Cordially invites you to
a UGC Sponsored
National Seminar on
Peasants and Precarity: Revisiting Paika Bidroha
after Two Centuries

Date
26th- 27th February 2019

Venue

Annex-I, Seven Pillars of Wisdom
Ravenshaw University
Cuttack



THEME NOTE

Peasants and Precarity: Revisiting Paika Bidroha after Two Centuries

The recent claim and demand voiced by the Govt. of Odisha on the occasion of the bicentenary celebration of Paika Bidroha (Rebellion of 1817), that it eminently qualifies to be considered as the first war of independence of the country not simply because it predates the "Sepoy Mutiny" by 40 years but because of its territorial spread, nature of popular mobilization transcending barriers of caste, class and creed and its organizational aspect has spurred the social imaginary of the historians, social scientists and practitioners of cultural studies. It is worth recalling that similar concerns were voiced in the context of 200th anniversary of Vellore mutiny in 2006 though the celebration of the event remained muted. The demand for an alternative ceremonial date in the national calendar as far as anti-colonial popular insurgency is concerned illuminates the need to reassess the dominant paradigms of social histories of India including histories and such commemorations like 1857 and a host of issues relating to hitherto underrepresented social categories, and voices of overlooked regions inherent in such perspectives. The contestatory spirit and the associated productive tension with which the (present?) politics of remembering 1817 vs. 1857 has been couched also provokes critical consideration of interrelated aspects of public memory, popular rituals of memorialization, democracy and mass media. One can make sense of the character of Paika Bidroha against this backdrop.

It is noteworthy that the Subaltern Studies (SS) project which emerged in early 1980s which impacted the world of history and social science with its disruptive thinking about the marginalized sections of the global south. It began with Ranajit Guha's seminal historiographic intervention with publication of his Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in 19th century India Guha probed the history of about 110 insurgencies from 1783 to

1900 focusing on the idea of peasants as the insurgent subject of history. The project conceptualized subaltern primarily in three ways: empirically as the labouring peasant; structurally as a semiotic rupture in the prose of colonial counter-insurgency; deconstructively as the abject figure of the gendered Third World subject both inside and outside the circuits of social mobility.

Such peasant insurgencies being the forerunners of a variety of struggles in both the colonial and post-colonial period that stands the test of history. In other words, the peasant insurgencies Guha wrote about were the forerunner of this political subject and their modes of mobilization are still visible in many of the riots and insurgencies in India. The SS project thus offered insights into the 'genealogy of the mass-political subject in India' that remain valid in understanding contemporary insurgencies.

Engaging with the project in a review mode not only alerts us to its genealogies and transformations as an intellectual project but importantly reminds us about the issues, fundamental questions and historical processes underlying time and scholarly disciplines.

Woven around Guha's model of peasant insurgency several issues get triggered off as we look at the peasant question today. How valid is the project in post-colonial context? What conceptual resources subaltern "After subaltern studies" can offer in 21st century to scholars of South Asia and global histories??How to assess the relevance of the project in the age of mass political movements, neo-liberal capitalism; global movements of disenfranchised populations across borders???

These figures of "precarity" (lacking in predictability), and the demotic (common, popular, vernacular, local and colloquial) in the contemporary contexts stand marked by difference from the concept of subaltern as it was crafted in 1980s in the context of South Asia and further worked on for global South. How to think through one of the paradigmatic models of subalternity as

it emerged in the context of south Asia/India in the shape of major historiographical intervention (and became provocatively, global in its appeal) in the study of modern India, its colonial past and the postcolonial present? What new models for thinking about subalternity can emerge from these figures??Is Subaltern a valid category anymore??? Can we think through this category to make sense of the “present”????What light can a retrospective analysis of the political, theoretical and cultural genealogy of subaltern project would illuminate for the global temporalities?????

In the context of India/South Asia, Dipesh Chakrabarty offers some thoughtful reflections on the many mediations through which the mass-political subject in Subaltern Studies came into being shaped by SS. Chakrabarty argues that early Subaltern Studies efforts to construct a genealogy of the mass-political subject in India was valuable for the way in which Guha and others saw their actions as innately political. Yet they fall short in the contemporary context, for the masses whose genealogies the project sought to historicise are not one unity. Reading Subaltern Studies today, however, he believes, is in the ultimate analysis, a valuable exercise. For these works are historical documents of a post-imperial world that offer important insights into the myriad ways in which human collectivities have struggled for rights and freedom without any necessary grand vision uniting different historical contexts.

Simon During’s evocative categories “precarity” and “precariat” offer yet another critical take to capture this extraordinary moment. As we encounter the post-colonial present in terms of replacement of relatively geographically and culturally stable relations of dominance and subordination by relatively unstable and dispersed conditions of deprivation and insecurity. It is further characterized by more extensions of intimations of imperilment widely across various societies. It is a situation where global social insecurity is backed by planetary ecological insecurity.

Focusing on Precarity's epistemic reach and translating the idea of the subaltern into the register of "lack" and "unease" under global capitalism, Simon During reads it as "a condition that references an important history—which has always privileged precariousness and its many cousins (vulnerability, uneasiness, groundlessness and fallen-ness, for instance) as conditions of human existence. Thus viewed, precarity extends beyond social and intellectual zones to connote an experience which is also an anthropological truth—the truth of what we might call, following Marcel Gauchet, the anthropology of negation, the anthropology of lack. In other words, the conditions of contemporary precarity lead us once again to recognize and accede to account of what it is to be human.

In the backdrop of these theoretical issues, the seminar would seek to revisit a debate on the peasant questions as it has been thought through since 19th century till date. Taking Paika Bidroha, a momentous historical event in Odisha in terms of a popular insurgency as the springboard of discussion, the participants would harp on the issues, concepts and constructs relating to the above theme both conceptually and empirically.

Call for papers

Scholars and researchers interested to attend the National Seminar are requested to send abstract of their paper for presentation in the national seminar on or before 18.02.2019. The soft copy of the abstract should not exceed more than 500 words in MS word and should be sent by e-mail to the organizing secretary (priyadarsikar@gmail.com).

Travel and Accommodation:

Local participants are requested to make arrangements for their own travel. However, organizers will take care of local hospitality and accommodation for out-station participants only on prior intimation.

Important Dates:

Submission of Abstract 18.02.2019

Submission of full paper 23.02.2019

ABOUT RAVENSHAW UNIVERSITY AND THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

Ravenshaw University came into existence on the 15th day of November 2006. It is an up-gradation of Ravenshaw College established in 1868, one of the oldest and largest colleges in India which subsequently became an autonomous college with CPE status by UGC and A' grade by NAAC.

As an undergraduate institution, Ravenshaw College offered teaching of history since the beginning of 20th century and history as an honours subject came to be taught since 1912. Post graduation programme in History was first introduced in Ravenshaw College in the year 1950. The Department of History, as part of Ravenshaw University at present offers UG, PG, M.Phil. and Ph.D. programmes. There are 32 seats at UG, 64 seats at PG and eight seats at M. Phil level. At the master level, Ancient Indian History and Archaeology; Modern and Contemporary History are offered as special papers. Distinguished historians and scholars like Sir Jadunath Sarkar,(1919-1923), Professor R G Khosla, and Professor Nisikant Sanyal as well as illustrious educationist like Syed Ross Masood, (post 1912), the only grandson of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, founder of Aligarh Muslim University adorned the department.

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