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DOMINANCE AND RETALIATION IN THE INFORMAL STRUCTURE OF AUTHORITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF MADHYA PRADESH AND BIHAR

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**Dominance and Retaliation in the Informal Structure of Authority :
A Comparative Study of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar**

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Introduction

In post-independence democratic India several measures have been initiated in order to bring the marginalised and depressed sections of its population into the mainstream of development. While some of these measures have yielded positive results, several others have failed miserably to achieve the desired goals. This has kept the equity issue alive as a hot topic right up to the present day, leading to a great deal of dissatisfaction among the vast majority of India's population. Given the close affinity between caste and class in India, it is not surprising that the bulk of the population who still remain outside the purview of development happen to be the lower castes of the country.

The other side of the same coin is the near total manipulation of the instruments of state policy by the higher caste and the elite, thus creating a chasm between the aspirations of different sections of the country's population. This has resulted in fractured verdicts in electoral politics and in the growth of regionalism, casteism and religious fundamentalism. The growing difference in class character between policymakers and the recipients of various policy measures has not remained unchallenged and at times manifests itself in violence. Continued inequity in the distribution of landed property in areas of intense agricultural activity, particularly in the rural setting, exacerbates the intensity of such conflicts. The age of liberalisation has introduced a new complexity into the whole picture. The presence of a state, which in several areas never did penetrate very far in the pre-liberalisation phase and thus left the population to fend for itself and seek sources of authority in the informal sector, finds its reach even more constricted in the new setting, with most of its energy and resources being devoured by the ever growing sector of the urban middle class. While the dominant section in the rural setting relies on the age-old instruments of hegemony in the informal arena to perpetuate its authority, the instruments of retaliation forged by the depressed and the subaltern section of the population have now acquired a history of infamy in the legal discourse of the state. This paper focuses on such instruments of hegemony and retaliation in the informal arena of authority in the two Indian states of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, and in particular seeks to trace how capable, or incapacitated, are the lower echelons of society in coping with these new situations.

Understanding Lower Caste-Class Empowerment – with and without hegemony

This paper originated in an attempt to understand the nature of power that existed at the *Panchayat* level,¹ especially those headed by members of backward caste-class communities. To examine the extent and nature of power that the head of the *Panchayat*, known as the *Mukhiya*, commanded in the two different settings of Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Bihar, we selected *Nandgaongli Panchayat* in the Joura block of District Morena in Madhya Pradesh and *Chapaur Panchayat* of the Masaurhi block of Patna in Bihar. We selected these two *Panchayats* on the basis of four common factors. First, both are multi-caste *Panchayats* but with a heavy concentration of schedule caste population. While the dominant middle caste in the case of the *Panchayat* in Joura was the Kushwaha, its near equivalent caste, the Kurmis, were the dominant middle caste in the *Panchayat* in Masaurhi. The Rajputs, although very few in number, were the main upper caste of the Joura *Panchayat*; similarly, the Bhumiars constituted the tiny majority of the upper caste population in Masaurhi *Panchayat*.²

The second factor that was common between the two *Panchayats*, was that both were headed by schedule caste *Mukhiyas*. The *Mukhiya* in the *Panchayat* near Joura is a *Jatav*,³ while the one in the *Panchayat* near Masaurhi is a *Dusadh*.⁴ Thirdly, both *Panchayats* have been witness to agrarian violence of one kind or another in the past, the echoes of which are still felt by the villagers. While the lower caste-class population of the *Panchayat* in Joura was ravaged by rampaging bandits, who ironically spared the upper caste landlords of the area, the *Panchayat* near Masaurhi underwent a series of atrocities committed by the upper-caste landlords up until the 1960s; and from the 1970s there was an unprecedented retaliation by the lower caste-classes to counter the dominance of upper caste-class hegemony under the banner of Naxalism.⁵ Fourthly, in the period since the 1970s both areas have experienced tremendous agricultural growth and prosperity.

These similarities notwithstanding, there is a qualitative difference in the manner in which *dalit* leadership emerged in the two *Panchayats*. In Joura, as is the case with many other *Panchayats* in MP where the *Mukhiya* belongs to the Schedule Caste, it was largely a result of the affirmative action of the state through the policy of reservation for the OBCs, SCs (Schedule Castes) and STs (Schedule Tribes).⁶ On the other hand, because of the inept

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¹ *Panchayats* are the lowest administrative unit in the local self government structure that exists at the village level in India. It is headed by a functionary known as a *Mukhiya* who is an elected representative

² Data collected through field work.

³ *Jatavs* are more popularly known as *Chamars*, and within the Schedule Caste population they are one of the dominant castes all over India.

⁴ *Dusadhs* like the *Chamars* are equally dominant castes within the Schedule Caste category. The majority of them, like the bulk of Schedule Caste population are, however, employed as agricultural labourers. Traditionally they were also famous as a martial caste and in several instances they were also recruited by the *Zamindars* as *lathais* (stick wielders). They were also one of the first caste groups within the Schedule Caste population to be mobilised by Naxalism in Bihar as early as the 1970s.

⁵ It must be clarified that the two phases cannot be neatly isolated. The retaliation by the lower caste-classes in south Bihar has a long history beginning from the activities of Kisan Sabha movements. What was new in the phase marked by the beginning of the Naxal movement in this area was large-scale mobilisation of the *Dalit* (Schedule Caste) population under this banner, and the general upsurge of the lower caste-classes also acquiring an undercurrent of violence.

⁶ 'Reservations' are entitlements to access to resources, for instance school places, subsidies of various kinds, or employment.

handling of the situation by the state government in Bihar, the issue of reservation for the post of *Mukhiya* became mired in controversy and ultimately the elections were conducted without the provision for reservation. Nevertheless, nearly, two percent of the total number of *Mukhiyas* belong to the *dalit* castes and they have all come through direct elections. The highest concentration of this group of *Mukhiyas* is in south Bihar. What does this difference in the manner of emergence of lower caste-class leadership—the one in Bihar based on a history of struggles and the other in MP largely a result of state endowment—imply for the nature of lower caste-class leadership?

Conceptualising the Problem

While talking to the *dalit Mukhiya* in the *Panchayat* near Joura (Morena District) in MP,⁷ one could easily sense that although the *Panchayat* by virtue of being a reserved seat boasted of having a *dalit Mukhiya*, the idea of lower caste-class empowerment in this predominantly schedule caste populated *Panchayat* was still a distant dream. We came across scores of complaints against the *Mukhiya* that mainly centred around a single theme - that actual power is still in the hands of the head of a rich Thakur (Rajput) family, who had a knack of getting things done by virtue of having the right connections in the block and district level government offices. The pre-eminent position he enjoyed also enabled him access to development funds through the *Mukhiya*. *Thakur saab*, as he was popularly referred to in the *Panchayat*, had a larger design in helping the *dalit Mukhiyaa* in the exercise of his power and performance of his duties. It was rumoured that the *Panchayat* would become “de-reserved” in the next *Panchayat* election, and through the *Mukhiya* he was eyeing the *dalit* vote and apparently nursing an ambition to be the *Panchayat's* next *Mukhiya* - a post that befitted his social standing. This *Panchayat*, like other adjoining areas, had been under the continued sway of *Thakur* dacoits (bandits) for a long time. Ramesh Singh Sikarwar, a *Thakur* by caste, was the last of such dacoits whose name still invokes fear in the minds of the local people, and who held authority over a vast adjoining area during the heyday of his notorious banditry.⁸ It is important to note that the docility and pliability of the *dalit* leader of the *Panchayat* adjacent to Joura, is not an isolated example of how the traditional elites are trying to combat legal barriers, by putting up proxy *dalit* candidates to continue their uninterrupted hegemony.

In the *Panchayat* in the Masaurhi block of Patna district in Bihar, the *dalits* are by far the largest social group out of the nearly 8000 voters and are dominated by the *Dusadhs*. The other notable caste within the *dalit* community is the *Musahars*. Although the *Dusadhs* in the *Panchayat* have a longer tradition of retaliation and they are more closely associated with the Communist Party of India–Marxist-Leninist (CPI–ML) (Liberation) group, they nevertheless share the general features of extreme poverty along with other *dalit* castes of the *Panchayat*. The *Mukhiya*, a *Dusadh* by caste, is a senior leader of the Liberation Group, but comes from a poor family background. With little sense of history, he is nevertheless politically very astute. His victory in the *Panchayat* election, despite stiff opposition from the *Bhumihar* and *Yadav* landowners, was largely ensured by the fear that his party had been able to generate in the area. His espousal of the causes of the lower caste-classes has earned him considerable popular support among the poor and the *dalits* throughout this *Panchayat*. The poor feel they

⁷ Joura acquired prominence in history because of the mass surrender of dacoits that took place here in 1972 in front of the Sarvodaya leader, the late Shri Jayaprakash Narayan.

⁸ CID Records, Morena District and DIG, CID Records, Police Headquarters, Bhopal.

can turn to him and to the Party at times of injustice, knowing that he will stand up for them against oppressive and exploitative forces, be it the upper caste-classes or the state level. Not surprisingly, at the time of our visit to the area Paswan was on the run from the police, having been implicated in a murder case. Generally speaking, however, there seems to be a visible shift from the initial association with violence - for which the Liberation Group is still popularly known - to an emphasis on mass movements. This has also resulted in some positive developments such as spreading literacy and maintaining basic health care facilities within the *Panchayat*. The desire to compete with non-*dalit Panchayats* in terms of mainstream ideas about 'development' is unmistakable among the *dalit* population in the *Panchayat*. In summary, it can be said that the manner in which lower caste-class empowerment has taken place in Masaurhi has not only given them voice but also has injected a belief in the poor peasantry in general, and the *dalits* in particular, that they can be master of their own destinies.

Thus we have two contrasting situations. In the *Panchayat* in northern Madhya Pradesh, despite the affirmative action of the state the subalterns are simply not properly equipped to take advantage of the favourable climate for them to assume greater power. More importantly, they still look at the state and the elites as providing the panacea for all their ills. On the other hand, the *Panchayat* in south Bihar posits another extreme. Here, despite a largely non-functional state and a prolonged history of atrocities against them, the lower caste-classes have succeeded in mass mobilisation to the extent of empowering themselves, at least at the local level.

What accounts for this fundamental difference in the organisation of lower caste-class population in the two regions of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar? Our initial interaction in Madhya Pradesh suggested that the nature of landholding in Madhya Pradesh pre-empted a possible confrontation on the rural scene. The lower caste-class population in Madhya Pradesh, according to this argument, was never subject to oppression on the scale it had been in Bihar. This argument further suggests that, unlike in Bihar, the peasantry of Madhya Pradesh has enjoyed a longer history of tenurial rights and this holds valid even for the lowest caste-class peasantry. Existence of a free peasantry in Madhya Pradesh, in contrast to the dependency on the *Zamindars* (landlords) of the mass of peasantry in Bihar, ensured that there were little grounds for friction between the upper and lower levels of the peasantry in Madhya Pradesh.⁹ However, a closer examination of the tenurial patterns in Madhya Pradesh reveals that although *Ryatwari* Settlement was operative in large parts of the state, the existence of a large number of princes all over Madhya Pradesh (more so in the Madhya Bharat region, the location of the *Panchayat* studied), created a chain of feudal retainers, the *Jagirdars* and other rural notables, the former also enjoying judicial powers in his area putting him on a par with the *Zamindars* of the Permanent Settlement area as it prevailed in Bihar.¹⁰ This enabled the class of feudal retainers to command unchallenged authority over vast tracts of agrarian land in the area. The Land Reforms Unit of LBS National Academy of

⁹ Opinions gathered from interviews with several members of the intelligentsia, district and village level officials - most notably Commissioner of Land Records Mr Maru, himself a Schedule Caste officer, in March and July 2003 in Madhya Pradesh.

¹⁰ In the *Ryatwari* System (*Ryat* is the word for tenant cultivator) the tenant cultivators were in direct contact with the state; in the Permanent Settlement area, on the other hand, it was the intermediary class of the *zamindars* who mediated between the tenant and the state, collecting revenue from the tenants on behalf of the state and they were also invested with quasi-judicial powers.

Administration has highlighted the hold of the rural notables over the agrarian society of MP and their caste distribution. According to its '*Report on Land Reforms in Madhya Pradesh*', two-thirds of the owners of land in excess of the limit prescribed by the Land Ceiling Act belong to the upper castes and one fifth to OBCs. Moreover, there were several instances of the allottees being denied possession of the allotted land, particularly if it was of good quality, mostly because of the dominance of the landlords. In some cases the allottees lost control of the land allotted to them due to the strong-arm tactics of the landlords. In other cases, the use of police force was required to give actual possession to the allottees.¹¹ Thus, contrary to the general impression about the condition of the lower class peasantry in MP, their position remained miserable despite the non-existence of *zamindari* settlement. What most of the arguments that we encountered in MP also failed to acknowledge was the rather low representation of lower caste-class people in the various layers of the power structure in Madhya Pradesh until recently. Furthermore, this argument also fails to take cognisance of questions such as why, despite their complete dominance, the erstwhile *zamindars* of Bihar have become completely marginalised in the political discourse in Bihar, whereas the rajas and the maharajas and other rural notables of the erstwhile order, mostly Thakurs and Brahmins, still manage to hold onto their previous positions of authority on the political scene of Madhya Pradesh.

To seek an answer to this, as well as to other related issues of the organisation of lower caste-class population in the two states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, we firstly examined the forms of hegemony that shaped the context of their subjugation in the two states; and then the sporadic and organised retaliation of the subalterns by which they countered the hegemony of dominant caste-classes. It is important to clarify here that the context of hegemony and retaliation does not necessarily indicate the existence of two distinct phases. In many cases dominance has continued uninterrupted, though it is also true that instances of retaliation against the upper caste-class domination in the period prior to the 1970s was rather limited and only acquired a more definite pattern since then. The tools used for establishing dominance are banditry (in the absence of the institution of *zamindari*) in northern MP and the *zamindari* system (also indulging in occasional cases of banditry) in central Bihar. The reasons for conflating the two categories (of bandits and *zamindars*) are that in its essential features, the practice of banditry in the Chambal ravines of northern MP displayed many characteristics that were vital to the formation of princely states. It was only in time that the spreading arm of the modern state put a curb on such ventures and they came to be denounced as 'bandits' in legal-official understanding. This notwithstanding, the tendency remained widespread until the formal spaces of 'modern democratic' politics were more readily available to the erstwhile class of bandits for continuing their dominance. It was only then that the pre-modern institution of '*baghi*' (literally rebels, as the bandits are more commonly known in this area) was forsaken by the hegemonic groups and that the tradition remained alive only amongst rebels from the subaltern sections. Instances abound, as will be shown later, of the close coordination that the princes and their retainers - the *jagirdars* and the *zamindars* - enjoyed with the bandits for keeping intact their hegemony, not only vis-à-vis the subalterns but also to thwart the challenge from the other dominant class in the rural society,

¹¹ *Land Reforms in India : Issues of Equity in Rural Madhya Pradesh*, Vol.7, ed. By Praveen K.Jha, Sage Publications, 2002, pp.107-190.

the *banyas*.¹² Although the institution of *zamindari* in Bihar in the colonial period was a formal one, the continued dominance of the *zamindars* in the post-colonial period was without any legal sanction and was primarily due to their dominance in the formal arena of the State. Moreover, the armed band of retainers that accompanied the *zamindars* made them appear much like the rampaging bandits of the Chambal ravines. Because of the absence of any legal-formal sanction for the establishment and continuation of such practices of hegemony and institutions by the traditionally dominant groups we have called them 'Informal Structures of Authority'.

So far as the response or retaliation by the subaltern groups to their continued domination by the hegemonic groups is concerned, MP and Bihar took divergent trajectories. In Bihar, the spur for organised retaliation by the subalterns came from the subalterns themselves, and at a much earlier stage. A sizeable section of those now referred to as 'intermediate backwards' had already created a tradition of challenging the authority of traditional hegemonic groups¹³ and had successfully made inroads into the formal state structure by the time the state had acquired some semblance of authority in the wake of independence. The early awakening of a sizeable section of the subalterns in Bihar created a politically volatile class of middle castes. This in turn initiated a chain reaction in rural society and many belonging to this caste-class, or to even lower social echelons, started aspiring and struggling to get their rightful share in the political domain. Moreover, the formation of *Triveni Sangh*¹⁴ in the mid-1960s created an autonomous space for the assertion of backward caste aspirations in Bihar that remained absent in MP. The political entry of the backwards in Bihar, with the traditional elites still dominating the state structure, severely constrained the actual fruition of the aspirations of the subalterns in the sense that many of them were restricted in their rise and were relegated to remaining in the arena of the informal structure of authority. It was this gap - between the extent of aspirations of the emerging social groups and their actual representation in structures of dominance - in the face of the stiff and even growing opposition of the traditionally dominant groups, that created a fertile ground for the emergence of Naxalism in South Bihar.¹⁵ It is the framework of the Naxal movement that will constitute our tool of analysis for assessing the nature of responses by the subalterns in South Bihar.

In Madhya Pradesh by contrast, the nature of land holdings in the rural arena, where the tenants could not legally be evicted from their holdings, enabled a substantial number of middle castes to remain in actual possession of their land. In these circumstance, the brunt of

¹² *Banyas* are a dominant caste group in Madhya Pradesh; their power comes from the prosperity they have acquired by their hold over trade and commerce. Their influence in the rural areas mainly stems from the fact that they are the main money-lenders for the peasants and in return mortgage the latter's property.

¹³ This space was mainly provided by the activities of Kisan Sabha (the movement of the tenant section of the peasantry) led by the great peasant leader of 1930s, Swami Shahjanand.

¹⁴ Triveni Sangh was a broad coalition of the three important backward castes in Bihar, viz., the Yadavs, the Kurmis and the Koeris who also happen to be the main agricultural castes of Bihar, at the time mainly constituting the tenant section of the peasantry. Initially they began their agitation within the broader ambit of the Kisan Sabha led by Swami Shahjanand but they later parted ways as it became apparent that the Sabha was becoming the forte of big peasantry. See "Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar", by Ramashray Roy in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. By Rajni Kothari, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1986 and also *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Change, 1900-1980*, A.N.Das, Delhi : Manohar

¹⁵ Naxalism is broadly used to characterise those radical agrarian movements with a marked emphasis on violence. It originated in the late 1960s in West Bengal and is now more pronounced in its occurrence in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhatishgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

exploitation was faced by the extremely backward and the other marginalised communities.¹⁶ Moreover, a perceived identification of socio-political and economic interest by the middle castes (without any actual benefit or political representation) with that of the upper castes, led to a smothering of class contradictions along caste lines. The several measures by which the state has tried to allot land to the Schedule Caste population has further acted as a hindrance in the emergence of unity between the backward caste-classes. In most of the cases the *dalits* are given *pattas*¹⁷ for land that was earlier cultivated by the middle castes. In these circumstances the operational antagonism that prevails in the rural society of MP is between the subalterns and the middle castes—who ironically act as the bulwark of ruling caste-classes against the lower caste-classes. In recent times, the wider acceptance of the ideas of *Hindutva* in the rural society of MP, in contrast to the rural areas of Bihar, has only helped to widen the divide between the backward castes and the *dalits* in MP's agrarian society. Such divisions are not limited to the backwards and the *dalits*, mainly due to the lack of any common framework for either domination or retaliation; the backward castes are themselves a fragmented category. In the absence of any organised yearning among the subalterns to counter the hegemony of the traditionally dominant groups, the old tradition of banditry of the Chambal ravines remains the only tool in the hands of the subalterns in the informal arena. Through this they seek to redefine the individual position of their caste in the hierarchy of dominance, not by challenging the traditionally dominant groups, but fighting it out among themselves.

The Dominance of the *Zamindars* in South Bihar

Until the abolition of the *zamindari* system, the *Zamindars* were small princes of little kingdoms. They were known not only as *Malik* (owner) but also *Sarakar* (government) in the area of their dominance.¹⁸ Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between agrarian classes and caste groups, the landed gentry nevertheless predominantly belong to the upper castes.¹⁹ The upper castes form only 13.22 percent of the population of Bihar but their dominance in Bihar life is much greater than their numbers would suggest.²⁰ The institution of *zamindari*, along with the ritual status of the upper castes, were the most potent weapons in the hands of the upper castes in overcoming their numerical weakness and perpetuating their dominance in all walks of rural life. Instances of atrocities committed by the *zamindars*, the other method through which they subjugated the mass of the rural peasantry, are still numerous throughout the countryside.²¹ On the slightest pretext they were more than willing to resort to the practices of banditry in order to terrorise the population of their kingdom and to encroach upon the areas of neighbouring *zamindars*.²² However, the end of the *zamindari* system did not result in obliterating the authority of traditional hegemonic groups. They managed to retain substantial hold over the post-independence state, to the extent of continuing the subjugation of subalterns not necessarily through their own presence but through caste and clan networks.

¹⁶ Report of Land Reforms Unit, op.cit.

¹⁷ Government note entitling the concerned peasant to cultivate a piece of land.

¹⁸ *Landlords as Extensions of State*, EPW, 28 Jan., 1989, pp.179-183

¹⁹ *People power : The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, Prakash Louis, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2002, p.94.

²⁰ "Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar", by Ramashray Roy in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. By Rajni Kothari, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1986, p.229.

²¹ See *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (Hindi), Shajanand Saraswati, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1985, for numerous such instances.

²² *Bihar : Peasants, Landlords and Dacoits*, EPW, 21(34), 1986, pp. 1531-35.

In the colonial period the erstwhile *zamindars* and their sub-feudal agents, the tenure holders, had revenue collecting machineries of their own. The *zamindars* had quasi-judicial powers to enforce revenue payments and the armed force of the retainers backed these powers. The colonial state was, of course, the final sanction for the powers of the *zamindars*. But what is important to note is that *zamindars* were also themselves organised as organs of the state.²³ British colonialism initiated the process of separating the state machinery from the landlord class, but this separation was not carried through to the end. Consequently, *zamindars* continued to be organised as quasi-state institutions right through the colonial period. *Zamindari* abolition, which followed soon after the end of British colonial rule, put an end to the official judicial and revenue-collecting functions of the *zamindars*. But the landlords retained their arms and continued to maintain their feudal retinues of '*lathaits*' and '*pahalwans*' (stick-wielders and musclemen). The armed bands were used to browbeat defiant individuals from the lower castes. The old *zamindars* and new landlords continued with various quasi-judicial functions, the difference with the colonial period lying in these functions no longer being official. In the changed context new functions were also added to the older roles of the landlords. As will be shown later in the context of banditry in MP, wherein the services of the bandits were utilised for strengthening hegemony in the functioning of modern state, in a similar fashion the services of the erstwhile *zamindars* with their armed retinue were sought by most of the political parties to prevent the participation by lower caste-classes in the election process. This had become all the more imperative because of the gradual emergence of political aspirations among the backward castes. Furthermore, as the landlords sought to get shares of the growing government expenditure, armed gangs were used to grab contracts of various kinds. The methods of force, or extra-economic coercion, that were common in dealing with peasants were brought into the modern business of gaining contracts.²⁴ Compensation for reduced rental incomes was sought not only through grabbing contracts but also through banditry.²⁵

There were both political and economic conflicts among the landlords but the very fact of being land-tied separated the contending groups geographically and limited the extent of their conflict. Because the conflicts were not among the growing bourgeois groups but among relatively static landlord groups, this facilitated division of territory and co-existence. Furthermore, the growing challenge from those who were rising economically (the upper backwards) and from the lower orders, helped the coalescence of these groups into caste units, accepting the hegemony of a particular landlord, while at the same time engaged in conflict with other caste groups. In order to meet these challenges, the landlord forces were thus turned into the more or less regular armed gangs that now dot the Bihar countryside, particularly in the central area where the challenges to landlord authority have been most intense and sustained. The regularisation of the landlord forces has been the result of a number of factors. For one, the challenge from armed peasant squads could not be effectively met without a regular force. With the formal state structure concentrated in the urban and semi-urban centres, the reach of this machinery was naturally limited in the countryside. The state then encouraged the regularisation of the landlord gangs, so that they could act as extensions of the state and increase its reach. In the early stages of suppression, the actions of

²³ Devnathan, op.cit.

²⁴ *Agrarian Movements in India : Studies in 20th Century Bihar*, ed. By Arvind N.Das, London, Frank Cass, 1982, p.182

²⁵ Devnathan, op.cit.

these armed gangs were combined with those of their upper caste fellows, who could be mobilised to attack lower caste-class areas, enforce blockades and so on.

Banditry in the Chambal Ravines : Social Banditry or a Tool of Hegemony?

While the dominance by *zamindars* in the region of south Bihar presents a rather uncomplicated history of hegemony in the area, the same does not appear to be the case with the tradition of banditry as it was practised in the period prior to the mass surrender of the bandits in Jaura in 1972. The historiography, as well as memories of the older tradition of banditry, is surrounded by several myths that at times threaten to completely obliterate the facts. The major problem that confronts us here is to what extent can the tradition of banditry in the Chambal area in its pre-1970s avatar be classified in terms of ‘social banditry’ - the framework mostly used to discuss it - and to what extent can it be envisioned as an instrument of hegemony in the hands of the aristocracy? Banditry has been defined as an imprecise articulation of social protest, and its decline has been associated with the emergence of modern organisations demanding vindication for grievances. Hobsbawm identified its four main features.²⁶ First, it was an ‘archaic’ form of rural protest, that is traditional and conservative or at best reformist. Over and above abolishing exploitation, its main objective is to impose certain moral limits on injustice and on the despotism of the state and the landowners, and to re-establish the broken order. Secondly, ambivalence is the distinctive trait of the bandits’ actions. The state and its agents may deem their activities to be purely criminal; however, the peasant communities where the bandits operate consider the same actions as a legitimate reaction to an offence. According to Hobsbawm, this relation between the ordinary peasant and the rebel is what makes bandits ‘social’. Social bandits’ actions express another ambivalence: they may rise as rebels against the social system, but paradoxically, the more economic or political power they acquire, the greater is the danger that they will become pillars of the established order and be co-opted by it, or at least join the rich and powerful who protect them out of self-interest. Thirdly, banditry is a marginal phenomenon, operative not only within the geographic confinement of isolated and sparsely populated regions without means of communication, but also involving limited numbers. Fourthly, banditry emerges in backward or pre-capitalist societies, particularly as they enter a period of transition or disintegration. The phenomenon tends, therefore, to disappear with the expansion of the forces of modernisation.²⁷

The emphasis in this schema on bandits as ‘primitive’ rebels supported and revered by the peasant community as heroes and avengers does not, however, apply in the context of banditry in the Chambal ravines. Malavika Kasturi, in her study of the banditry in the adjoining region of Bundelkhand,²⁸ has also questioned the application of the theory of banditry as articulated by Hobsbawm to understand its occurrence in the Indian context. She argues that banditry was reconstituted during the struggle of princely states to maintain and exercise a semblance of authority and power through non-formal means, at a time when their formal authority was immensely crippled by the paramount colonial power.

²⁶ *Bandits*, Eric J. Hobsbawm, New York: Pantheon Books.

²⁷ *Primitive Rebels, Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movements in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, E.J.Hobsbawm (Manchester, 1959), pp.1-3. Also see Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, op.cit.

²⁸ *Embattled Identities : Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in Nineteenth-Century North India*, Malavika Kasturi,, OUP, 2002.

According to Kasturi:

Rajput banditry, far from being in the mould of 'social' banditry, had elite origins, preying on the lower classes with whom they shared a relationship based on coercion, co-operation and ties of allegiance. Peasants, who feared rather than revered the bandits, were the prime targets of attack.²⁹

She further argues that Rajput bandits did not often undergo economic stress and decline; Rajput *biradaris* (clans) often resorted to depredation in order to wage war against the centralised authority or to broaden their resource base and power to such an extent that they were able to found independent polities. Subsequently, many of these new kingdoms that were founded on a precarious agrarian base depended partly on plunder to survive. The political processes relating to state building, therefore, mediated the relationship between economic variables and Rajput banditry. What is of importance to our discussion here is the proximity that the bandits had with the power structures spawning and supporting them. The success of brigandage, of the type with which we are concerned here, depended throughout its existence on the support extended by local rajas and *zamindars*. Evidence further suggests that princely rulers often used bandit gangs in power struggles and partook of the proceeds of plunder. Thus, Stewart Gordon argued that the 'plunder ethic' was important to the 'structure and processes' of state formation between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Malwa.³⁰ Though we cannot trace a linear pattern with regard to the evolution of banditry in north India, what remained unchanged from its pre-colonial to colonial existence was the social composition of the banditry, which was by and large in the hands of the Rajputs. While dacoits consisted of men belonging to various communities, Rajputs usually constituted the backbone of these groups. The leaders, moreover, were invariably Rajputs.³¹ It seems from the above that, rather than defining the dacoits of the Chambal ravines in the mould of Hobsbawm's 'social' bandits, our purpose would be more usefully served by recalling the distinction drawn by Juan Regla and Salustiano Moreta regarding Castile and Catalonia in the late Middle Ages, which implicitly points to the issue of different forms of banditry.³² These authors differentiate between feudal and non-feudal malefactors; in other words, between the banditry of the aristocracy, of the landlords and of the dominant classes on one hand, and the banditry of the people and of the powerless on the other, even though the two categories are often intertwined in practice.

Banditry in the Chambal ravines in the period prior to 1970s remained a potent weapon in the hands of the dominant classes for negotiating their individual position in the power hierarchy, but more importantly for taming the bulk of the rural population in the area of their operation. A source compiled as early as the 1920s reveals the close coordination that existed between the princes and the bandits. Capturing the events which took place in January 1920, when nearly one hundred dacoits surrendered in front of the Gwalior *Durbar*, a document prepared by the Public Relations cell of Police Headquarters of Madhya Pradesh says that the entire plan of surrender was designed by the *Zamindars* which 'amply shows that these zamindars

²⁹ Kasturi, *op.cit.* pp.201-202.

³⁰ 'Sarf and Sword; Thugs, Marauders and State Formation in Eighteenth Century Malwa', S.Gordon, *Indian Economic And Social History Review* (1969), 6:4, pp. 416-29.

³¹ Kasturi, *op.cit.* p.221

³² As cited in *Bandits, Peasants and Politics*, Gonzalo Sanchez and Donny Meertens Translated by Alan Hynds, University of Texas Press, Austin; Institute of Latin American Study, 2001, p.7

were the main protectors of the dacoits'.³³ Another piece of evidence comes from the report of the Committee appointed by the Madhya Bharat government in 1952 to inquire into the persistence of banditry in the Bhind-Morena region. It observed that:

The main cause is often suggested to be the fact that the economic resources of the area are inadequate to support the population. Holdings are small. There is little irrigation and there are no subsidiary industries. But poverty is a bane of the whole country, not only of Bhind and Morena. The prominent dacoits are not mainly drawn from the poorer classes, nor does their history show that they were driven to crime by poverty.³⁴

Referring to the post-independence period, when new forms of tenurial rights were instituted in the wake of the end of the rule of princely states and the abolition of *Zamindari* rights, this report further noted:

..the economic malaise has been aggravated This economic reform (abolition of princely and zamindari rights) has no doubt given security of tenure to and strengthened the position of the small men especially the sub-tenants who were drawn from the lower classes. But many petty proprietors have been deprived of small benefits and the incorporeal sense of prestige derived from proprietary rights. They do not see any compensating advantage flowing from the change and have not been able to reconcile themselves readily to the change in land tenure. Moreover, even though the large body of petty landholders had little to lose by the abolition of the proprietary interests in land, emotionally they felt themselves aligned with the big landholder who has had much to lose and who often govern their opinion. *The assertion of social equality by the Dalits and the inconvenience caused by the Dalits giving up some of their traditional occupations in the village life has added fuel to fire..* Elections have further widened the social schism. In this atmosphere, the dacoits found a fruitful field of new endeavour. *They found in powerful sections of the community if not active support at least passive sympathy for organised violence and pillage of Dalit* (Emphasis added).³⁵

What emerges clearly from this is that bandits in the Chambal ravines were not mainly from the poor classes. The loss of traditional rights over land and the consequent emergence of new social groups in the countryside in the form of an economically empowered class, combined together to make the erstwhile dominant social groups more resolute in their struggle to protect their traditional hegemony. Since the formal structure of the state was now legally and constitutionally bound to protect the interests of the poor, banditry provided the dominant social groups with an ideal mode of establishing authority in the informal terrain by pillaging the poorer castes and classes. Throughout the history of banditry in Madhya Pradesh, Dalits

³³ Police Headquarters, Public Relations Cell, Madhya Pradesh. *Madhya Pradesh Mein Dacaitiy Samasya-Azadi Se Aajtak* (The problem of banditry in Madhya Pradesh-From Freedom to Present Times), Document prepared for private circulation a copy of which is in the possession of present researcher.

³⁴ Excerpts from the *Report of the Bhind-Morena Crime Situation*, Enquiry Committee constituted by the then Madhya Bharat Government. as quoted in Taroon Coomar Bhaduri, *Chambal: The Valley of Terror*, Vikas Publishing House, Delhi, 1972, pp.208-9.

³⁵ Extract of the report as quoted in *History of the Madhya Pradesh Police*, op.cit. pp.350-51.

were in a minority. The majority of gang leaders were *Thakurs* or *Gujars*.³⁶ Interestingly the *Gujars* are identified as a backward caste, yet they thrive in their self-perception of being second to none in the caste hierarchy. We had first hand experience of this feeling in our encounter with Mohar Singh, a *Gujar* by caste, and the most wanted bandit leader of the late sixties and early seventies. He took pride in referring to himself and his other caste men as *Kshatriyas*,³⁷ and spoke in the most derogatory terms about the growing numbers of lower caste and schedule caste bandits.³⁸ Thus, the practice of this tradition forged an essentially upper caste-class framework with an extreme hatred for the subaltern groups and this not only prevented any attempts at segmentation among the lower caste-classes in the informal arena of authority, but also made all its participants pillage the poor, even those belonging to the lower castes. Evidence to this effect comes from Purasani village in the Ghatigaon block of Gwalior district. The 1950 land record mentions 146 acres in the name of 19 *Jatav* (Schedule Caste) families as landholders. These families thereafter left the village and were subsequently declared absconders. Their land was then redistributed among the *Gujars*. The *Jatavs* claim that they were forced to flee *en masse* in 1950, due to the violence perpetrated by the *Gujars* against them. The *Gujars*, on the other hand, allege that it was not them but the dacoits who had terrorised the *Jatavs* in the area.³⁹ The state government has subsequently taken steps to rehabilitate the *Jatavs* in the village, but the dispute is still very much alive. Two things are important about this: first, this dispute gives us an insight into the *modus operandi* of the bandits leading to the displacement of the lower caste-class population; and second, it highlights the extremely fragmented nature of the backward and other lower caste population in the rural areas of MP, with the result that several of the leading backward castes prefer to side with the upper caste-classes in pillaging the subaltern groups.

In a region where the formal ruling elites and bandits of ‘un-domesticated’ tracts shared a common social origin, the state had little option but to act as a ‘soft state’. Moreover:

Most of the dacoits enjoy the protection of powerful politicians, landlords and, on occasion, even some of the police officers in the ravines. Members of all parties against one another routinely make allegations of such collusion... Indeed instances are not lacking where a politician has called in dacoits to liquidate a rival or silence a critic....⁴⁰

Allegations of Madhya Pradesh being a ‘soft state’ were aired in Parliament in the early 1908s. When, on the issue of Malkhan Singh’s surrender to the Madhya Pradesh police, a Member of Parliament from the province shouted: ‘Dacoits have no confidence in the Uttar Pradesh police’, Ammar Razvi, Minister of Parliamentary Affairs, replied: ‘I am delighted to hear such news. But I tell you that if criminals have faith in the police force of another state, it is sad reflection on the state of affairs there.’⁴¹

³⁶ *History of the Madhya Pradesh Police* Government of Madhya Pradesh, Police Department, Bhopal, 1965. R.P. Garg, *Dacoit Problem in Chambal Valley : A Sociological Study*, Gandhian Institute of Studies, Rajghat, Varanasi, 1965. M.Z.Khan, *Dacoity In Chambal Valley*, National Publishing House, Delhi, 1981.

³⁷ The warrior caste.

³⁸ Based on an interview conducted during the field work.

³⁹ A Report on Land Reforms, op.cit. p. 164-170

⁴⁰ *The Times of India*, Editorial, May, 1981.

⁴¹ Ashok Vajpayee (ed.) *Bharat Bhawan : Na Bhulney ke Birudh Ek Dastabej*. Bharat Bhawan, was created as a cultural centre during the regime of Arjun Singh, a prominent Congress politician of the state under the guidance

Even in the earlier period of state building, when the state government appointed a committee to go into the details of the various aspects of the problem of banditry in the Chambal region, this committee reported that:

At the same time, we have to take into account the fact that allegations have been frequently made about the existence of a fifth column operating within the ranks of the police on behalf of the dacoits. In these circumstances it is important that Government place trusted and capable officers in charge of the districts, and allow them, within reason, to screen and select their staff.⁴²

According to Thakur Deep Singh Tomar, who was part of the police party which encountered the famous bandit king Man Singh leading to his killing, when his body was identified as that of Man Singh, several of the party cried and touched the feet of the legendary bandit whom they respectfully referred as *Dau* (elder brother).⁴³

A few years later, hectic activities by some civil-society activists were undertaken, led by Yadunath Singh, a *Thakur* from Itawa in nearby Uttar Pradesh, himself a senior officer in the Indian Army. The activists were seeking presidential assent to a mercy petition for Tehsildar Singh, the elder and only surviving son of Man Singh, who was in jail awaiting his death sentence. Many of these activists sincerely believed that it would have been a great insult to the memory of Raja Man Singh if his only surviving son had gone to the gallows.⁴⁴ There are reasons to believe that the predominance of traditionally dominant castes among the ranks of both the army and the contending groups of bandits, was the reason that they found state and civil society to be sympathetic during their process of being ‘tamed’.

It clearly emerges from the above that the practice of banditry in the period prior to the 1970s, far from being in the mould of ‘social banditry’, was a potent tool in the hands of dominant groups for maintaining hegemony. It only lost its lustre once these hegemonic groups realised that in the new political atmosphere they could retain their power through formal democratic institutions. To patronise banditry now became not only unviable but also unnecessary and no longer could it be protected from the coercive arm of the Indian state.

Having outlined the features of dominance in the informal arena in a comparative perspective in the two states of MP and Bihar, we now move on to the responses by the subalterns in the states.

Responses by the Subalterns in South Bihar

Bajrang Singh was the chief organiser of the *Rajput* landlords in the Bhagwanpur block of Rohtas district. He was landlord, contractor, dacoit chief and Congress Party boss all in one. By maintaining a regular gang, he could in times of need call on other caste members to increase the size of his armed force and terrorise the *dalits* and other lower castes of his

of Ashok Vajpayee, a prominent cultural activist and a bureaucrat. He put together several documents in this book as a response to the controversies that started appearing around the functioning of this cultural centre.

⁴² Excerpts from the report of the Bhind-Morena Crime Situation Enquiry Committee constituted by the then Madhya Bharat Government, as quoted in Taroon Coomar Bhaduri, *op.cit.* p.208.

⁴³ Alok Tomar, *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

village and of the whole surrounding area. The emergence of Mohan Bind led to a decline in Bajrang Singh's influence,⁴⁵ and he had to abandon his hold over the hills. However, the rise of Mohan Bind as a countervailing force supported by the lower castes as a whole, also had an effect on the plains too, providing great relief to the lower caste-class population of this area. With the decline of Bajrang Singh, government contracts that were earlier under his exclusive preserve were now open to various bidders, thus benefiting the business community too. In the adjoining Parhi village in Rohtas district, it was Nanhe Upadhyaya who lorded over all and who also combined dacoitry with his other activities. Tension started in the village in the 1970s when the lower castes began to agitate for higher wages and Nanhe unleashed a series of atrocities on members of the lower castes. He was subsequently killed, although none of the radical peasant organisations took responsibility for his murder. Nevertheless, the poor people of the area were harassed and forced to flee the village. They subsequently returned and organised a *dharna* (protest), following which the local administration was forced to help them.⁴⁶ There are many such examples where the aggression of the traditionally dominant groups have been matched by aggression of equal intensity from the subaltern section of the population. They have indeed initiated an era of blood-letting in the rural areas, nevertheless their impact in making society more democratic has been unmistakable and over the years the non-landlord sections of the upper castes have increasingly deserted their caste fellows in the rank of landlords for fear of retribution by the peasants and the labourers, as happened in Dalelchak-Baghoura.⁴⁷

To return to the setting of our *Panchayat* in the Masaurhi block of Patna district, this block, like many other blocks of Central Bihar, has a history of protest by the *Dalit* peasantry which goes back to 1970s.⁴⁸ In the first case, which occurred in the village of Madhuban in 1975, the *Dalits* killed three *Yadav* landowners in retaliation for their continued tactics of terror and their attempt to appropriate the common pastureland cleared by the local *Dalit* labourers. Madhuban then became the first village to be officially declared as Naxalite-infested. The entire *Dalit* population of the nearby village of Deokuli was similarly labelled 'Naxalite' when the *Dalit* population resisted the atrocities carried out by the landowning classes. The village of Nema in the adjoining Punpun block, also in Patna district, had been the scene of a long struggle by the *Dalits* for the minimum wages prescribed by the government and for homestead lands to which they were officially entitled. This struggle had been going on since 1967 and armed police had been posted in the village since then.⁴⁹ In 1975, Virda Musahar organised the landless classes from several villages and demanded payment of the prescribed minimum wage. The villagers refused to let their womenfolk go to the landowners' houses for menial jobs and the men refused to do *begar* (labour without any remuneration). The landowners and the state immediately cracked down on them and eight *Dalits* were arrested in Shahbajapur village on false charges, even though their *Bhumihar* landlords themselves were

⁴⁵ *Binds* are among the Extremely Backward Castes group and are listed in the Annexure I of the Backward Classes Commission's Report for reservation. Very recently the state government has recommended their inclusion in the list of Schedule Castes.

⁴⁶ Devnathan, op.cit.

⁴⁷ In an attack by one of the Naxal outfits several members of upper castes were killed.

⁴⁸ For a most recent survey of the events associated with 'Naxalism' in Central Bihar see Prakash Louis, *People Power : The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2002.

⁴⁹ Bela Bhatia, *The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, (Unpublished Thesis), Gonville & Caius College, University of Cambridge, 2000.

ready to provide alibis. Similarly, fifty five so-called 'Naxalites' were arrested in Punpun.⁵⁰ Police and para-military forces patrolled the area creating a general climate of terror. The situation thus became potentially explosive and culminated in large scale atrocities against the *Dalit* population.⁵¹

These events are significant because the landowners and the state had demonstrated that any protest by the poor peasantry, who were mostly *Dalits*, and for that matter any popular movement, would be ruthlessly crushed. Less than three weeks after the events at Masaurhi, a state of emergency was declared throughout the country and popular resistance to oppression seemed to have been at least temporarily checked. However, the exploitation, oppression and even murder of landless agricultural workers continued during the emergency and reached its peak after the 1977 elections. The events that have happened since at Belchhi,⁵² Brahampur,⁵³ Parasbigha,⁵⁴ Danwar-Bihta,⁵⁵ and other places are too many and too recent to need recapitulation here. However, the lesson seems to be that the attempts of the poor peasantry in Bihar to organise itself and affirm its legal rights have been pre-empted by repression on the part of the landowners.⁵⁶

Repressions and atrocities notwithstanding, these very acts quite ironically also made the *Dalits* in the area more resolute and also created a tradition of silent retaliation and occasional direct confrontation.⁵⁷ It was precisely in this kind of environment that ultra leftwing movements found a fertile ground. Not surprisingly, people have joined the movement for a variety of reasons but they mostly understand their struggle as *izzat ki ladai*⁵⁸ (a fight for basic dignity). Moreover, the struggle on the ground has tended to focus on basic economic, social and political rights. Examples include struggles for minimum wages, for land rights, for access to common property resources, and against various forms of social exploitation such as untouchability and rape.⁵⁹

In spite of its many limitations, Naxalism, with which most of the lower caste-class retaliation has been identified, has emerged as an instrument devised by the poor and the backward. At least in south Bihar it has succeeded in unveiling a counter-culture of violence against the atrocities of the upper-caste/class landed elites who also held sway over state power. Being at constant loggerheads with the state power made it necessary to devise its struggles and visualise class relations and instruments of state power independent of the discourses of

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.37-64

⁵¹ Arvind N. Das, 'Landowners' Armies Take Over "Law and Order"', *Economic and Political Weekly* 21(1) (4 January) : 15, 1986.

⁵² Belchi is in the Patna District of Bihar. In 1977, the upper backward landlords killed 14 schedule caste agricultural labourers.

⁵³ Brahampur is in the Bhojpur District of Bihar. In the 1977, the upper-caste landlords killed 4 Dalits belonging to the category of middle peasantry.

⁵⁴ Parasbigha is in the Jehanabad district of Bihar. In 1980, the upper caste landlords killed 11 agricultural labourers belonging to backward castes.

⁵⁵ Danwar-Bihta is in the Bhojpur District. In 1984, the upper caste landlords killed 22 agricultural labourers belonging to schedule castes.

⁵⁶ Arvind N. Das, 'Revolutionary Movement in Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 (22) (30 May): 843-6, 1987.

⁵⁷ Arvind N. Das 'Violent Society: Social Fragmentation in Bihar', *Times of India*, 27 June, p.4, 1988.

⁵⁸ Bela Bhatia, op.cit., pp.159-170.

⁵⁹ Shaibal Gupta, 'Socio-Economic Roots of Peasant Movement in Bihar', *Science and People*, March, pp 45-59.

dominance. Herein lies the novelty of the subaltern upsurge associated with Naxalism and its difference to other forms of lower caste-class responses. In summary, if the mainstream political parties are seen to represent the class interests of the privileged classes, the ultra leftwing movements clearly represent the exploited classes. It has become a force that cannot be ignored. While it is yet to be seen whether such movements can visibly contribute to the course of state politics, local politics have been indelibly marked by it. The above reference to Chapaur and adjoining blocks is only to underline that there is a pressing need to move away from arguments that seems to be dismissive about such movements as perpetrators of mindless violence and recognise them as sincere social actions where the formal presence of state institutions are highly constricted in their impact.

The Subaltern Response in Northern Madhya Pradesh

The period of Naxal upsurge in central Bihar nearly coincides with the period of the emergence of lower caste dacoits in the ranks of bandits. But this transition, as noted above, happened when the upper-caste bandits forsook this tradition, preferring the more lucrative and relatively less risky profession of modern democratic politics. Malkhan Singh and following him, Baba Mustaqeem, Vikram Singh Mallah and Phoolan Devi were the first crop of non-*Rajput* and non-*Gujar* dacoit leaders.⁶⁰ Interestingly, this change in the social composition of dacoit leaders coincided with the process that dominated Indian political life in the 1980s and 1990s, through which the lower castes became aware of their political potential and actually acquired some political power. Caution is needed, however, before we conclude that the rise of lower caste bandit leaders manifests 'lower caste resurgence' in Madhya Pradesh. There were several *Rajput* and other upper caste men in gangs which were led by low-caste leaders. Moreover, the latter sought to establish their hegemony within the same cultural framework as that employed by upper caste gang lords. Thus, one of the proudest moments in the life of Vikram Singh Mallah was when his exploits were integrated into the tradition of upper-caste dacoits such as Man Singh in the village of Asta.⁶¹ The issue of 'lower caste resurgence' never remained central among the bandits, in the absence of any social democratisation process in Madhya Pradesh. What further needs to be emphasised here is that most of the above-mentioned dacoits belonging to the lower caste-class were from the neighbouring districts of Uttar Pradesh. If anything, the rise of the lower caste-class bandits was more a reflection of the social democratisation process and the consequent political empowerment of these groups in Uttar Pradesh. When Phoolan Devi, the last captive of the era of rural banditry, massacred *Thakurs* at Behmai village, this created a lot of turmoil in the socio-political life of Uttar Pradesh,⁶² without having much of an impact on the adjoining areas of Madhya Pradesh. It remained more in the nature of an isolated example of vengeance, rather than the result of any pattern of yearning for social mobility among the lower castes. If a pattern was visible at all throughout the existence of rural banditry in Madhya Pradesh, it could be seen in the continued atrocities on the *dalits*.

In the context of a rural society where the perceived contradiction does not appear to be between the upper castes and the backward castes, but rather it is the different constituents of backwards and *dalits* who are fighting it out among themselves, it is not surprising that the

⁶⁰ Alok Tomar, *Chambal Ek Ankahi Kahani*, (Chambal : An untold Story), 1996.

⁶¹ Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen*, Harper Collins, 1991, pp.77-85.

⁶² *Ibid.*,

two most dreaded bandit gangs of the present times are of the *Gujars*⁶³ led by Nirbhay Gujar, and the *Garerias*,⁶⁴ led by Rambabu Gareria. These two castes are continually at loggerheads and their gangs have been formed essentially to protect the interests of their caste group against aggression by the other caste. The friction between the two castes seemed to have reached its peak when the *Gareria* gang recently killed around ten members of the *Gujar* caste. Interviews with several senior police officers revealed that none of these lower caste bandit gangs had the temerity to attack members of upper castes in the area of their operation, and the bulk of their victims are people belonging to other lower caste groups.⁶⁵ With such fragmentation reigning in the ranks of the subalterns it is hardly surprising that the nineteen *Jatav* families from the village of Purasani who had to flee their land are still living in constant fear from the *Gujars*. Despite immense political pressure to resettle the *Jatavs* and create a favourable environment for them in the village, fear of reprisals has led the local level revenue administration to take sides with the *Gujars*, thus confounding the situation for the *Jatavs*.

Unlike Naxalism in south Bihar, banditry in northern Madhya Pradesh failed to provide the subalterns with an analogous space because they entered the fray without challenging the essentially upper-caste dominance of this tradition; they adopted an instrument which was essentially forged by members of the upper-castes in order to maintain their hegemony in the colonial context. The tradition of banditry, despite its more recent practice by lower caste-class people, did not undergo any transition and it remains essentially a tool for terrorising the poor. New dacoits are following in the precepts of an old institution, although their motives are new and they talk of ‘changing principles’. Banditry nowadays is no longer a respectable profession. In the police records, but more importantly in the dominant public memory, it has been relegated to the anti-social realm. Loss of social acceptance means the *baghis* of the present do not enjoy the same degree of legitimacy as was accorded to the bandits of earlier times. As such it is no longer an instrument for maintaining or extending hegemony.

Things also appear to have changed drastically in the post-1972 state response to, and social perception of, bandits in the aftermath of the mass surrender of the bandits. ‘The *baghis* of yore were clearly distinguishable from the small time anti-socials who now roam in the garb of the ‘great’ dacoits of the past’; moreover, the modern bandits could not now lay claim to ‘high social and family background, which the earlier bandits had.’⁶⁶ In an appraisal of the bandit gangs operative in the district of Bhind since 1972, the Superintendent of Police in Bhind reports:

If one looks at the gangs operating prior to 1972 and compares their *modus operandi* with the gangs who are active after 1972, there does not seem to be much difference. However, significant changes have taken place in so far as the ‘principles’ of the bandits are concerned. While the earlier gangs were firm about some of their principles, the present dacoits are without any ‘principle’. The present dacoits live an opportunistic life and they also vie to get political protection. While the gangs of the earlier period were mainly interested in

⁶³ Upper backward

⁶⁴ Lower backward

⁶⁵ All the interviews conducted during March and July 2003.

⁶⁶ Description by Mohar Singh, himself a great practitioner of banditry in the pre-1970 phase.

plundering money; their present day counterparts are interested more in kidnapping for ransom and pillaging the poor.⁶⁷

One needs to emphasise here how far removed this assessment is from the facts with regard to the prevalence of banditry in Madhya Pradesh. But, prepared as it is by no less an authority than the Superintendent of Police, who maintains law and order for the state in the district, this report introduces us to some interesting insights into the perceptions of the state about the transition that has taken place in the social background of the bandits. Interestingly, some of the key features of this report have been replicated in the reports of the other dacoit infested districts of Madhya Pradesh. In effect, it seems that the transition in the social background of the bandits - from predominantly upper caste before 1972 to predominantly lower caste after 1972 - have made some of the agents of the state launch an elusive search for the 'principles' of the bandits of the previous era to contrast with their lower caste-class counterparts who do not seem to have any such 'principles'.

Conclusion

Government policy in independent India for the raising of backward and depressed castes and classes focused primarily on the liquidation of feudal control over land, the downward percolation of the beneficial effects of agrarian development, and the consequent empowerment of the lower caste-classes in the society. However, this also led to a 'feudal' reaction to maintain the *status quo*. This reaction was particularly intense in the 'Hindi-heartland' because caste solidarity and community bonds were stronger here. Apart from the horizontal linkages, the age-old ideological hegemony of the upper castes in agrarian society allowed for vertical linkages of mobilisation. In the Hindi-heartland, this struggle was more severe in areas that were agriculturally more developed. Consequently the desire within previously dominant classes to prevent the empowerment of the 'lower' classes and to retain their primacy in the agrarian structure became more pronounced. The struggle was acute here because of the added incentive of expropriating a greater share of the benefits of development. Ironically, this was also the area where subordinate social groups started to challenge the upper caste-class hegemony and sought to assert alternative modes of power and authority.

The facts presented above with regard to rural banditry in northern Madhya Pradesh and the aggression of the *zamindars* in south Bihar show that in both cases, the prime targets were the depressed castes and classes while the aggressors invariably belonged to the traditionally dominant castes. The historical difference in the two situations was predicated upon more extensive agrarian activities in Bihar as compared to Madhya Pradesh and in the difference in the pattern of landholding in the two states. This was also perhaps the reason for the absence of ruptures in the horizontal linkages of mobilisation in rural south Bihar, which resulted in a broader cohesion of the depressed castes/classes in south Bihar as opposed to northern Madhya Pradesh. Because of this, the lower castes/classes in south Bihar were able to present effective limits to domination by the traditionally hegemonic groups. Thus, while the depressed castes/classes have been the main victim of *zamindari* violence in south Bihar, their constant struggle against the hegemonic groups was reflected in electoral politics, leading to a more democratic agrarian society in Bihar compared to the *status quo* type agrarian society in Madhya Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh, on the other hand, despite the enduring system of

⁶⁷ Report and list of bandits operating in the district of Bhind since 1972, prepared by the office of the Superintendent of Police, Bhind, 2002. (My Translation)

alternative 'local governance' wherein the authority of the bandits was writ large over a substantial part of agrarian society, the transition in the social composition of bandits - from predominantly upper castes to lower castes - did not result in the formation of a counter-culture, independent of the dominance of the upper castes. Banditry in the Chambal ravines of Madhya Pradesh remained for the most part an effective medium which was in the hands of organised groups of upper caste-classes in the first phase and which was passed on to the highly polarised backward caste-classes in the second phase.

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The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- 1 We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- 2 We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- 3 We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- 4 We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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