

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

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Monograph 03/2004

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Publisher

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Website : www.adriindia.org

Printed by

The Offsetters (India) Private Limited

Chhajjubagh, Patna-800001

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

Understanding Lower Caste-Class Empowerment – With and Without Hegemony

This paper originated in an attempt to understand the nature of power that obtained at the *Panchayat* level¹, especially those headed by the members of backward caste-class communities. To examine the extent and nature of power that the head of the *Panchayat*, known as *Mukhiya*, commanded in the two different setting of Madhya Pradesh and Bihar, we selected *Nandgaongli Panchayat* in the Jaura block of District Morena in Madhya Pradesh and *Chapaur Panchayat* of Masaurhi block of Patna in Bihar. The common factors between the two *Panchayats*, that decided their selection by us, was first, both are multi- caste *Panchayats* but with a heavy concentration of scheduled caste population. While the dominant middle caste in the case of the *Panchayat* in Jaura was the Kushwaha, its near-equivalent caste, the Kurmis, was the dominant middle caste in the *Panchayat* in Masaurhi. The Rajputs, although very few in numbers were the main upper caste of the Jaura *Panchayat*; similarly, the Bhumihars 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 scheduled caste *Mukhiyas*. The *Mukhiya* in the *Panchayat* near Jaura is a *Jatav*³ by caste, while the one in the *Panchayat* near Masaurhi is a *Dusadh*⁴ by caste. Thirdly, both the *Panchayats* have been witness to agrarian violence of one or the other kind in the bygone era, the echoes of which are still felt by the villagers in the two *Panchayats*. While the lower caste-class population of the *Panchayat* in Jaura was ravaged by the 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 in the first phase, that is till the 1960s and in the period commencing from 1970s, which also marks the beginning of second phase at least in the history of agrarian violence in south Bihar, saw an unprecedented retaliation by the lower

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

² Data collected through field work.

³ Jatavs are more popularly known as Chamars and within the Scheduled Caste population they are one of the dominating castes all over India.

⁴ Dusadhs like the Chamars are equally dominant caste within the Scheduled Caste category. 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 group within the Schedule Caste population to be mobilised by Naxalism in Bihar as early as 1970s.

caste-classes to counter the dominance of upper caste-class hegemony under the banner of Naxalism⁵. Fourthly, both the areas in the period after 1970s have experienced tremendous agricultural growth and prosperity coming in the wake of it. These similarities, minus the element of retaliation by the lower caste-class population which was missing in the *Panchayat* near Jaura notwithstanding, there is a qualitative difference in the manner in which *dalit* leadership emerged in the two *Panchayats*. In the *Panchayat* in Jaura, as is the case with many other *Panchayats* in MP where the Mukhiya belongs to the Scheduled Caste, it is largely a result of the affirmative action of the state through the policy of reservation for the OBCs, SCs (Scheduled Castes) and STs (Scheduled Tribes). On the other hand, because of the inept handling of the situation by the state government in Bihar, the issue of reservation for the post of *Mukhiya* got mired in controversy and, ultimately, the elections were conducted without the provision for reservation. Nevertheless, nearly 2 percent of the total number of *Mukhiyas* belongs to the *dalit* castes and they have all come through direct elections. Maximum 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—implies for the nature of lower caste-class leadership? To get an answer to this question, we again propose to travel to the setting of the two *Panchayats*.

While talking to the *dalit Mukhiya* in the *Panchayat* near Jaura (Morena District),⁶ 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, however, in this predominantly scheduled caste-populated *Panchayat* was still a far cry. We came across scores of complaints against the *Mukhiya* that mainly centered around a single theme — that actual power is still in the hands of a group of rich Thakur (Rajput) family, from the *Panchayat* who had a knack of getting things done by virtue of having the right connection in the block and district-level government offices. Needless to add that the pre-eminent position he enjoyed in the *Panchayat* also enabled him to swindle most of the development fund through the *Mukhiya*. Thakur *saab*, as he was popularly referred to in the *Panchayat*, had a larger design in nurturing the *dalit* Mukhiya of his *Panchayat*, by helping him in the exercise of his power and performance of his duties. Through the Mukhiya he was eyeing the *dalit* vote bank of his *Panchayat*. There was news in the air that the *Panchayat* would get de-reserved in the next *Panchayat* election.

⁵ It must be clarified here 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 Naxal movement in this area was large scale mobilisation of the Dalit (Scheduled Caste) population under this banner and the general upsurge of the lower caste-classes also acquiring an undercurrent of violence.

⁶ Jaura acquired prominence in history because of the mass surrender of dacoits that took place here in 1972 in front of the Sarvodaya leader Late Shri Jayaprakash Narayan.

Naturally, he was nursing an ambition to be its next *Mukhiya*, a post that befitted his social standing in the *Panchayat*. Incidentally, this *Panchayat*, like other adjoining areas, had been under the continued sway of Thakur dacoits 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 commanded the stamp of authority in a vast adjoining area during the heydays of his notorious banditry.⁷ But more about this we will come later, for the moment what is important to note is that the docile and pliant features of the above-mentioned *dalit* leader of the *Panchayat* adjacent to Jaura 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.

At this point, we now move over to the *Panchayat* in the Masaurhi block of Patna district. With nearly 8000 voters, the *dalits* are by far the largest social group and this segment is heavily 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 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 on the face of stiff opposition from the Bhumihar and Yadav landowners was largely ensured by the fear that his party has 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 see in him and the Party to which they can turn in time of injustice, knowing that he will stand up for them against oppressive and exploitative forces, be it the upper caste-classes or the state. Not surprisingly, Paswan is on the run from the police these days; he is implicated in a murder case and the police are on the look-out for him. Generally speaking, however, there seems to be a visible shift from the initial association with violence — with which the Liberation Group is still popularly known — to an emphasis on mass movements. This has also resulted in some positive developments, like spreading literacy and maintaining basic health care facilities within the *Panchayat*. The desire to compete with non-*dalit Panchayats* in terms of mainstream ideas of ‘development’ is unmistakable among the *dalit* population in the *Panchayat*. To sum up our story of the *Panchayat* in Masaurhi, it can be said that the manner in which lower caste-class empowerment has taken place here has not only given them voice, but also injected a belief in the poor peasantry in general and the *dalits* in particular that they can be master of their destinies.

⁷ CID Records, Morena District and DIG, CID Records, Police Headquarters, Bhopal

Now, we have two contrasting situation at hand. One of a *Panchayat* in the northern Madhya Pradesh, where in spite of the affirmative action of the state the subalterns are simply not properly equipped to take advantage of the favourable climate for them and catapult themselves to a position where they can decide about themselves. 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 mobilizing themselves to the extent of making inroads at least at the local level political structure and that too in a most empowered manner.

Conceptualizing the Problem

What accounts for this fundamental difference in the organization 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 in the rural scene. The lower caste-class population in Madhya Pradesh, according to this argument, was never subject to oppression to the scale they 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. According to this argument, 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 was little ground for friction between the upper and lower levels of peasantry in Madhya Pradesh.⁸ A closer examination of the tenurial patterns in Madhya Pradesh reveals that although *Ryatwari* Settlement was operative in large parts of the state, however, the existence of a large number of princes all over Madhya Pradesh, more so in the Madhya Bharat region, the location of our *Panchayat* in this state, created a chain of feudal retainers, the *Jagirdars* and other rural notables, the former also enjoying judicial powers in his area bringing him at par with the *Zamindars* of the Permanent Settlement area as it prevailed in Bihar.⁹ 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 Administration brings out the hold of the rural notables over the agrarian society of MP and their caste distribution clearly in its Report on Land Reforms in Madhya Pradesh. According to this report two-thirds of the landowners (of land in excess to the prescribed limit by the Land Ceiling Act) belong to the upper castes and one-fifth to OBCs. Moreover, there were several instances of the

⁸ Opinions gathered from interviews of several members of the intelligentsia, district and village level officials most notably Commissioner Land Records Mr. Maru, himself a Schedule Caste officer in March and July, 2003 in Madhya Pradesh

⁹ 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.

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 some other cases use of police force was required for giving actual possession to the allottees.¹⁰ Thus contrary to the general impression about the condition of the lower class peasantry in MP the facts about them clearly indicate that their position remained miserable despite of the non-existence of *zamindari* settlement. What most of the argument that we encountered in MP also fails to acknowledge is the rather low representation of the lower caste-class people in the various layers of power structure in Madhya Pradesh till recently. Further, this argument also does not take cognisance of questions like why, inspite of their complete dominance, the erstwhile zamindars of Bihar have become completely marginalized 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 on to their previous positions of authority in the political scene of Madhya Pradesh?

To seek an answer to this as well as other related issues of the organization of lower caste-class population in the two states of Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, we propose to examine first, the forms of hegemony that shaped the context of their subjugation in the two states and then on the sporadic and organised retaliation in which the subalterns engaged themselves to counter 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, rather in many cases dominance has continued uninterrupted but on the other hand, it is also true that instances of retaliation against the upper caste-class domination in the period prior to 1970s was rather limited in its occurrence and they acquired a more definite pattern only in the period after 1970s. The tools of hegemony, for establishing dominance, which we have identified for two respective areas, are banditry (in the absence of the institution of *zamindari*) in northern MP and *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 Madhya Pradesh, displayed many characteristics that were vital in the formation of princely states. It was a matter of time that the spreading arm of the 'modern' state put a curb on such ventures and they were destined to be denounced as 'bandits' in the legal-official understanding. This notwithstanding, the tendency remained widespread till the formal spaces of 'modern democratic' politics was more readily available to the erstwhile class of bandits for continuing their dominance. It was 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 the tradition remained alive only in the midst of rebels from the subaltern sections. Instances

¹⁰ *Land Reforms in India : Issues of Equity in Rural Madhya Pradesh*, Vol.7, ed. By Praveen K.Jha, Sage Publications, 2002, pp.107-190.

abound, as will shown later, about 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, the *banyas*.¹¹ Although the institution of *zamindari* in Bihar in the colonial period was a formal one, however, 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 as well. 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 it took two divergent trajectories in MP and Bihar. In Bihar, the spurt for the organised retaliation by the subalterns came from within the subalterns and at a much earlier stage. A sizeable section of the erstwhile subalterns now referred as intermediate backwards had already created a tradition of challenging the authority of traditional hegemonic groups¹² and had successfully made inroads in 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 in the domain of political hegemony. This in turn initiated a chain reaction in the rural society, with many belonging to this caste-class and of still lower echelons of the society started aspiring and struggling to get their rightful share in the political domain. Apart from this the formation of *Triveni Sangh*¹³ in the mid-sixties created an autonomous space for the assertion of backward caste aspirations in Bihar that, however, remained awfully absent in MP. The entry of the backwards in Bihar, in the formal political domain notwithstanding the dominating hold over the state structure by the traditional elites, however, severely constrained the actual fruition of the aspirations of the rising subalterns in the sense that many of them were restricted in their rise and relegated to remain in the arena of 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 stiff and even growing opposition of the traditionally dominant groups that created a fertile ground for the emergence of Naxalism¹⁴

¹¹ 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 in return mortgaging the latter's property.

¹² 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.

¹³ See the adjoining paper by Dr. Shaibal Gupta

¹⁴ Naxalism is broadly used to characterise the 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, Chhatisgarh and Andhra Pradesh.

in South Bihar. It is the framework of Naxal movement that will constitute our tool of analysis for assessing the nature of responses by the subalterns in South Bihar.

In Madhya Pradesh in contrast, the nature of land holdings in the rural arena where legally the tenants could not be evicted from their holdings enabled substantial number of middle castes to remain in actual possession of their land. The brunt of exploitation in this circumstance was faced by the extremely backwards and the other marginalised communities.¹⁵ 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 contradiction along caste lines. The several measures by the state through which it has tried to allot land to the Scheduled 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*¹⁶ for land that were earlier cultivated by the middle castes. In this circumstance 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. The wider acceptance of the ideas of Hindutva in the rural society of MP in contrast to the rural areas of Bihar in the more recent times has only helped in widening the divide between the backward castes and the *dalits* in the agrarian society of MP. Such divisions are not only limited between 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 which 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

Zamindars, till the abolition of zamindari, were small princes of their little kingdoms. They were known not only as *Malik* (owner) but also *Sarakar* (government) in the area of their dominance.¹⁷ Although there is no one to one correspondence between agrarian classes and caste groups, yet the landed gentry predominantly belong to the upper castes.¹⁸ The upper castes form only 13.22 percent of the population of Bihar, but their dominance in Bihar life is

¹⁵ Report of Land Reforms Unit, op.cit.

¹⁶ Government note entitling the concerned peasant to cultivate a piece of land.

¹⁷ *Landlords as Extensions of State*, EPW, 28 Jan., 1989, pp.179-183

¹⁸ *People power : The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, Prakash Louis, Wordsmiths, Delhi, 2002, p.94.

much greater than their number would suggest.¹⁹ The institution of *zamindari* along with the ritual status of the upper castes were the most potent weapon in the hands of the upper castes to overcome their numerical weakness and perpetuate their dominance in all walks of rural life. Instances of atrocities committed by the *zamindars* and the other means through which they subjugated the mass of the rural peasantry are still numerous throughout the countryside.²⁰ On slightest pretext they were more than willing to resort to the practices of banditry to terrorise the population of their kingdom and also while encroaching upon the areas of neighbouring zamindars.²¹ The end of zamindari did not result in obliterating the authority of traditional hegemonic groups. Not necessarily through their own presence but through caste and clan networks they managed to retain substantial hold over post-independent state to the extent of continuing the subjugation of subalterns.

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. 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.²² 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. Further, as the landlords sought to get shares of the growing government expenditure, the armed gangs were used to grab contracts of various kinds. The methods of force (extra-economic coercion) that were common in dealing with peasants were brought into

¹⁹ "Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar", by Ramashray Roy in *Caste in Indian Politics*, ed. By Rajni Kothari, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1986, p.229.

²⁰ See *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (Hindi), Shajanand Saraswati, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, 1985, for numerous such instances.

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

²² Devnathan, op.cit.

the modern business of gaining contracts.²³ Compensation for reduced rental incomes was sought not only through grabbing contracts, but also through banditry.²⁴

There were, no doubt, conflicts among the landlords — conflict both political and economic. But the very fact of being land-based geographically separated the contending groups and limited the extent of their conflict. Because the conflicts were not among growing bourgeois groups, but among relatively static landlord groups it facilitated division of territory and co-existence. Further, the growing challenge from those economically rising (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 engaged in conflict with other caste groups. In turn, in meeting these challenges, the landlord forces were turned into the more-or-less regular armed gangs that now dot the Bihar countryside, particularly in the area of our study, central Bihar, 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 of 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 these armed gangs were combined with those of their upper caste fellows, who could be mobilised in attacking lower caste-class areas, enforcing 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 about it as well as memories of the older tradition of banditry is surrounded by several myths that at times threaten to completely obliterate facts about it. The major problem that confronts us here is that 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 in which they have been mostly discussed and to what extent can it be envisioned as an instrument of hegemony in the hands of the aristocracy? In the theoretical postulations banditry has been defined as an imprecise articulation of social protest, its decline has also been associated with the emergence of modern organizations, demanding vindication

²³ *Agrarian Movements in India : Studies in 20th Century Bihar*, ed. By Arvind N.Das, London, Frank Cass, 1982, p.182

²⁴ Devnathan, op.cit.

for grievances. Theorising banditry Eric J. Hobsbawm identified its four main features.²⁵ First it was an ‘archaic’ form of rural protest, that is traditional and conservative or, at best, reformist. More than abolishing exploitation, its main objective is to impose certain moral limits on injustice, on the despotism of the state and the landowners, and to re-establish the broken order. Secondly, ambivalence is the distinctive trait of bandits’ action. 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; social bandits undoubtedly arise as rebels against the social system, but paradoxically, the more economic or political power they acquire, the greater the danger that they will become pillars of the established order and be co-opted by it or will 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 number of members that normally make up hands. 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 modernization.²⁶

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 with which we are concerned here. Malavika Kasturi in her study of the banditry in the adjoining region of Bundelkhand²⁷ has also questioned the application of the theory of banditry as enunciated by Hobsbawm to understand its occurrence in the Indian context. Her finding with regard to banditry as it prevailed in Bundelkhand is extremely pertinent to our discussion here. She argues that banditry was reconstituted during the struggle of princely states to maintain/exercise semblance of authority and power through non-formal means at a time when their formal authority was immensely crippled by the paramount colonial power. According to her, “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.”²⁸ She further argues that Rajput bandits were not often undergoing economic stress and decline; Rajput *biradaris* (clans) often resorted to depredation to wage war against the centralized authority or to broaden their resource base and

²⁵ *Bandits*, Eric J. Hobsbawm, New York: Pantheon Books.

²⁶ *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.

²⁷ *Embattled Identities : Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in Nineteenth-Century North India*, Malavika Kasturi, OUP, 2002.

²⁸ Kasturi, *op.cit.* pp.201-202.

power to such an extent that they were able to found independent polities. Subsequently, many of these new kingdoms that were perched on a precarious agrarian base, depended partly on plunder. 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, which the bandits had with the power structures spawning and supporting them. The success of brigandage, the type with which we are concerned here, throughout its existence depended on the support extended to them 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.²⁹ 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.³⁰ It seems from the above that, rather than defining the dacoits of the Chambal ravines in the mould of ‘social’ bandits of Hobsbawm, 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.³¹ 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 at one hand, and the banditry of the people, of the powerless at the other, even though the two categories are often intertwined in practice.

Banditry as we shall argue in our paper, in the Chambal ravines in the period prior to 1970s remained a potent weapon in the hands of the dominant classes to negotiate their individual position in the power hierarchy but more importantly to tame the bulk of the rural population in the area of their operation. A source compiled as early as in the 1920s reveals in a very telling manner the close coordination that existed between the princes and the bandits. Capturing the events which took place in January 1920 when nearly hundred dacoits surrendered in front of the Gwalior *Durbar*, a document, prepared by the Public Relations cell of Police Headquarter of Madhya Pradesh, says that the entire plan of surrender was designed by the Zamindars which ‘amply shows that these zamindars were the main protectors of the dacoits’.³² Another evidence

²⁹ ‘Scurf 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.

³⁰ Kasturi, *op.cit.* p.221

³¹ 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

³² Police Headquarters, Public Relations Cell, Madhya Pradesh. *Madhya Pradesh Mein Dacaiti 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.

equally contemporary in nature comes from the report of the Committee appointed by the Madhya Bharat government in 1952 to inquire the persistence of banditry in 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."³³ Referring to the post-independence period when new forms of tenurial rights were instituted in the wake of end of the rule by the 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.* (Italics added). 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*" (Italics added).³⁴

What emerges clearly from the above cited fragments of an official report, published way back in the fifties, are that bandits in the Chambal ravines were not mainly from the poor classes. Loss of traditional rights over land and the consequent emergence of new social groups in the countryside as 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 state was now legally and constitutionally bound to protect the interests of the poor people, banditry, as a source of establishing authority in the informal terrain, provided the dominant social groups an ideal mode for pillaging the poorer castes and classes. Throughout the history of banditry in Madhya Pradesh, Dalits were in a minority. There were just thirteen Muslims and one Sikh. Majority of the gang leaders were Thakurs or

³³ 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.

³⁴ Extract of the report as quoted in *History of the Madhya Pradesh Police*, op.cit. pp.350-51.

Gujars.³⁵ Interestingly the Gujars are identified as a backward caste, however, they thrive in their self-perception of being second to none in the caste hierarchy. We had a first hand experience of this feeling in our encounter with Mohar Singh, a Gujar by caste, and the most wanted bandit leader of late sixties and early seventies. He took pride in referring about himself and his other caste men as *Kshatriyas*³⁶ and spoke in the most derogatory terms about the growing numbers of lower caste and scheduled caste bandits.³⁷ An essentially upper caste-class framework with extreme hatred for the subaltern groups that was forged in the practice of this tradition not only prevented any attempts at segmentation among the lower caste-classes in the informal arena of authority but also made all its participants, even those belonging to the lower castes to pillage the poor. Evidence to this effect comes from Purasani village in block Ghatigaon of Gwalior district. The land record of the year 1950 mentions 146 acres in the name of 19 *Jatav* (Scheduled 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 enmasse 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.³⁸ The state government has subsequently taken steps to rehabilitate the *Jatavs* in the village but the dispute is very much alive even in the present times. More about this episode we will come in the section on responses of the subalterns what is of our immediate importance are, however, two things, first, this dispute gives us an insight about the modus operandi of the bandits leading to displacement of the lower caste-class population and second, the extremely fragmented nature of the backward and other lower caste population in the rural areas of MP, to the extent of several of the leading backward castes preferring to side with the upper caste-classes in pillaging the subaltern groups.

In a region where the ruling elites of the formal structure 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...."³⁹ Allegations of Madhya Pradesh being a 'soft state' were aired in Parliament in the early eighties. 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".

³⁵ *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.

³⁶ The warrior caste.

³⁷ Based on interview conducted during the field work.

³⁸ A Report on Land Reforms, op.cit. p. 164-170

³⁹ *The Times of India*, Editorial, May, 1981.

Mr. 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".⁴⁰

Even in the earlier period of state building exercise, when the state government appointed a Committee to go in the details of the various aspects of the problem of banditry in the Chambal region, the Committee in its report noted 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."⁴¹ 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 them cried and touched the feet of the legendary bandit whom they respectfully referred as *Dau* (elder brother).⁴²

Few years later, hectic activities by some civil-society activists were undertaken, led by Yadunath Singh, a Thakur from Itawa in the nearby Uttar Pradesh, himself a senior officer in the Indian Army, to get Presidential assent on the mercy petition of Tehsildar Singh, the elder and only surviving son of Man Singh, who was in jail and waiting for 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.⁴³ Instead of taking this discussion too far that might result in acquiring political overtones, we will sum it up by saying that there are reasons to believe that the predominance of traditionally dominant castes among the ranks of armed people and in the contending groups of the bandits, was the reason that they found a sympathetic state and civil society in the process of getting 'tamed'.

It clearly emerges from above that the practice of banditry in the period prior to 1970s far from being in the mould of 'social banditry' was a potent tool in the hands of dominant groups for maintaining hegemony. It lost the lustre once the hegemonic groups realised that in the new

⁴⁰ Ashok Vajpayee (ed.) *Bharat Bhawan : Na Bhulney ke Birudh Ek Dastabej*. Bharat Bhawan, was created as a cultural center during the regime of Arjun Singh, a prominent Congress politician of the state under the guidance 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 center.

⁴¹ 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.

⁴² Alok Tomar, *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁴³ *ibid.*

political atmosphere they could retain their power through the formal democratic institutions. It needed a respectful disbandment and therefore the surrender and suitable compensation. To patronize banditry now became not just unviable but also unnecessary. No longer could it be protected from the coercive arms of 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 over to the responses by the subalterns in the two states.

Responses by the Subalterns in South Bihar

Bajrang Singh was the chief organiser of Rajput landlords in Bhagwanpur block of Rohtas district. He was landlord, contractor, dacoit chief and Congress Party boss all in one. Maintaining a regular gang he could, in times of need, call on other caste fellows to increase the size of his armed force to terrorise the *dalits* and other lower castes of his village, Semra, and of the whole surrounding area. The emergence of Mohan Bind⁴⁴ led to a decline in Bajrang Singh's influence. He had to abandon the hills, however, the rise of Mohan Bind as a countervailing force supported by the lower castes as a whole, had its effect on the plains too providing great relief to the lower caste-class population of the 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. He too combined dacoity with his other activities. Tension started in the village way back in 1970s when the lower castes in the village started an agitation for higher wages. Nanhe unleashed a series of atrocities on the members of lower castes in the area. Nanhe was killed subsequently, although none of the radical peasant organisation 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.⁴⁵ There are end numbers of examples of this nature where the aggressions of the traditionally dominant groups have been matched by aggression of equal intensity by the subaltern section of the population. They have indeed initiated an era of blood-letting in the rural areas, nevertheless, their impact in making the society more democratic are unmistakable. Over the years, however, the non-landlord sections of the upper castes have increasingly

⁴⁴ 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 for their inclusion in the list of Schedule Castes.

⁴⁵ Devnathan, op.cit.

deserted their caste fellows in the rank of landlords for fear of retribution by the peasants and the labourers, as it happened in Dalelchak-Baghoura⁴⁶.

Coming back 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.⁴⁷ In the first case occurring in Madhuban village in 1975, the Dalits killed three Yadav landowners in retaliation to their continued tactics of terror and their attempt to appropriate the common pasture cleared by the local Dalit labourers; it then became the first village to be declared officially as a Naxalite-infested one. The entire Dalit population of the nearby village of Deokuli was similarly labelled 'Naxalite' when the Dalit population here resisted the atrocities by the landowning classes. Nema village of the adjoining Punpun block, also of Patna district, had been a scene of struggle by the Dalits for minimum wages prescribed by the government and homestead lands to which they were officially entitled. This struggle had been going on since 1967 and the armed police had been posted in the village ever since.⁴⁸ In 1975, one Virda Musahar organized the landless in a few village and they demanded payment of the prescribed minimum wages. At the same time, they 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 8 Dalits were arrested in Shahbajapur village on false charges, even though their Bhumihar landlords themselves were ready to provide alibis. Similarly, 55 so-called 'Naxalites' were arrested in Punpun.⁴⁹ Police and para-military forces patrolled the area creating a general climate of terror. The situation thus became potentially explosive and finally culminated in largescale atrocities on the Dalit population.⁵⁰

These events are significant because the landowners and the state had demonstrated that any protest by the poor peasantry, mostly Dalits, and for that matter, any popular movement would be ruthlessly crushed. In less than three weeks after the events at Masaurhi, emergency was declared throughout the country in 1975 and popular resistance to oppression seemed to have been checked for a while. The exploitation, oppression and even murder of landless agricultural workers, however, continued during the emergency and reached its peak after the elections in

⁴⁶ In an attack by one of the Naxal outfits several members of upper castes were killed.

⁴⁷ 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.

⁴⁸ Bela Bhatia, *The Naxalite Movement in Central Bihar*, (Unpublished Thesis), Gonville & Caius College, University of Cambridge, 2000.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.37-64

⁵⁰ Arvind N. Das, 'Landowners' Armies Take Over "Law and Order" ', *Economic and Political Weekly* 21(1) (4 January) : 15, 1986.

1977. What happened since then at Belchhi,⁵¹ Brahampur,⁵² Parasbiga,⁵³ Danwar-Bihta,⁵⁴ etc., are too many and too recent to need recapitulation here, but the import of these seems to be that the attempts of the poor peasantry in Bihar to organize itself and affirm its legal rights have been preempted by repression on the part of the landowners.⁵⁵

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.⁵⁶ It was precisely in this kind of environment that ultra leftwing movements found a fertile ground. People who have joined the movement in one garb or the other, not surprisingly, mostly understand their struggle as *izzat ki ladai*⁵⁷ (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.⁵⁸

In spite of its several 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 in the crafts of state power. The facts of it being at constant loggerhead with the state power makes upon it incumbent to device its struggles and visualize class relations and instruments of state power independent of the discourses of dominance. Herein lays the novelty of subaltern upsurge associated with Naxalism and its difference with other forms of lower caste-class responses. To sum up this section it can be said that 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

⁵¹ Belchi is in the Patna District of Bihar. In 1977, the upper backward landlords killed 14 schedule caste agricultural labourers.

⁵² 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.

⁵³ Parasbiga is in the Jehanabad district of Bihar. In 1980, the upper caste landlords killed 11 agricultural labourers belonging to backward castes.

⁵⁴ Danwar-Bihta is in the Bhojpur District. In 1984, the upper caste landlords killed 22 agricultural labourers belonging to schedule castes.

⁵⁵ Arvind N. Das, 'Revolutionary Movement in Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 22 (22) (30 May): 843-6, 1987.

⁵⁶ Arvind N. Das 'Violent Society: Social Fragmentation in Bihar', *Times of India*, 27 June, p.4, 1988.

⁵⁷ Bela Bhatia, op.cit., pp.159-170.

⁵⁸ Shaibal Gupta, 'Socio-Economic Roots of Peasant Movement in Bihar', *Science and People*, March, pp 45-59.

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 recognize them as sincere civil society effort especially in the context of an area 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 when we can see the emergence of lower caste *dacoits* in the ranks of bandits. But this transition, as noticed above happened when the upper-caste bandits forsook this tradition and preferred 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.⁵⁹ Interestingly, this change in the social composition of dacoit leaders coincided with the process that dominated Indian political life in the eighties and the nineties, 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 led by low-caste leaders. Moreover, the latter sought to establish their hegemony within the same cultural framework as 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 village Asta.⁶⁰ 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 emphasized here is that most of the above mentioned dacoits belonging to the lower caste-class were from the neighboring districts of Uttar Pradesh. If anything, the rise of the lower caste-class bandits was more a reflection of the social democratization 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 Pradesh⁶¹ without having too much of an impact in the adjoining areas of Madhya Pradesh. It remained there a mere instance, more in the nature of an isolated example of vengeance, rather than 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*.

⁵⁹ Alok Tomar, *Chambal Ek Ankahi Kahani*, (Chambal : An untold Story), 1996.

⁶⁰ Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen*, Harper Collins, 1991, pp.77-85.

⁶¹ Ibid.,

As noted above that in the context of a rural society where the perceived contradiction does not appear to be between the upper castes and the backward castes in general, and it is the different constituents of backwards and *dalits* who are fighting it out among themselves. It is not surprising then that the two most dreaded bandit gangs of the present times are of Gujars⁶² led by Nirbhay Gujar and Garerias⁶³ led by Rambabu Gareria. The two castes are always at the loggerheads and the gangs have been formed essentially to protect the interest of their caste group against the aggression by the other caste. The friction between the two castes seems to have reached its peak when the Gareria gang killed very recently 10 odd members of the Gujar caste. Interviews with several senior police officers in the Gwalior-Chambal division as well as the IG, CID in the police headquarters in Bhopal during the Digvijay Singh's period⁶⁴ revealed that none of these lower caste bandit gangs have the temerity to attack the members of upper castes in the area of their operation and bulk of their victims are people belonging to other lower caste groups. With such fragmentation reigning in the ranks of the subalterns it is hardly surprising that the 19 Jatav families of Purasani village, the case we have discussed above, who had to flee their land are still living in constant fear from the Gujars. In spite of immense political pressure to resettle the Jatavs and create conducive environment for them in the village, the local level revenue administration because of the fear of the Gujars have taken sides with the latter confounding the situation for the Jatavs.

Unlike Naxalism in south Bihar, banditry in the northern Madhya Pradesh failed to provide the subalterns an analogous space because they entered the fray without challenging the dominance of the erstwhile essentially upper-caste sway in this tradition and adopted an instrument, which was essentially forged by the upper-caste people to maintain their hegemony in the context of colonial paramountcy. The content of the tradition of banditry, in spite of its practice now 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 precincts of an old institution but motives are new and therefore the talk of 'changing principles'. Banditry now is no longer a respectable profession of the yore. In the police records, but more importantly, in the dominant public memory, it has been relegated to the realm of anti-social. Loss of social acceptance means *baghis* of the present do not enjoy the same degree of legitimacy as is accorded to the bandits of bygone era. As such it is no longer an instrument for maintaining or extending hegemony.

Things also appear to have changed drastically, in so far as the response of the state in the post-1972 period, in the aftermath of the mass surrender of the bandits is concerned. A clear change can be noticed in the social perception of bandits of the post-1972 period. 'The *baghis* of the

⁶² Upper backward

⁶³ Lower backward

⁶⁴ All the interviews conducted during March and July 2003.

yore were clearly distinguishable from the small time anti-socials who now roam in the garb of the 'great' dacoits of the past';⁶⁵ moreover, the modern bandits could not now lay claim to 'high social and family background, which the earlier bandits had'. In an appraisal of the bandit gangs operative in the district of Bhind since 1972, a report, prepared by the office of Superintendent of Police of Bhind says, "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 plundering money; their present day counterparts are interested more in kidnapping for ransom and pillaging the poor."⁶⁶(My Translation). One need to emphasize here how far removed is this assessment from the facts with regard to prevalence of banditry in Madhya Pradesh. But, prepared as it is by no less an authority than the Superintendent of Police, who represents the state in the district for maintaining law and order, 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 to launch an elusive search about the 'principles' of the bandits of the previous era in contrast to their lower caste-class counterparts who do not seem to have any such 'principles'.

Conclusion

Government policy in independent India for the upliftment of backward and depressed castes and classes, focused primarily on 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 for maintaining status quo. The reaction was particularly intense in the 'Hindi-heartland' because caste solidarity and community bonds were stronger here for various reasons. Apart from horizontal linkages, the age-old ideological hegemony of 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

⁶⁵ Description by Mohar Singh himself a great practitioner of banditry in the pre-1970 phase.

⁶⁶ *Report and list of bandits operating in the district of Bhind since 1972*, prepared by the office of the Superintendent of Police, Bhind, 2002.

because of the added incentive of expropriating greater share in 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. Facts presented above with regard to rural banditry in northern Madhya Pradesh and aggression of the *zamindars* in south Bihar show that in both cases, the prime targets were the depressed castes and classes and the aggressors invariably belonged to the traditionally dominant castes. The historically obtained 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 land holding in the two states. This was also perhaps the reason for ruptures appearing in the horizontal linkages of mobilisation in rural south Bihar resulting in a broader cohesion of 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 got reflected in electoral politics, leading to a more democratic agrarian society in Bihar compared to the status-quoist agrarian society in Madhya Pradesh. In Madhya Pradesh, on the other hand, despite the enduring system of alternative 'local governance' wherein the authority of the bandits was writ large over a large 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 in the hands of organised groups of upper caste-classes in the first phase and passed on in the hands of highly polarised backward caste-classes in the second phase.



The Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) Society was established and registered by a group of social scientists in 1991. The motivation for starting yet another Institute in Patna was not merely to expand social science research, but to lend it a distinct development orientation and deliver all research output to its potential users in a demystified form. In this research perspective, the broad objectives of ADRI Society are:

- ✎ to undertake academic research of direct relevance to development efforts made by an individual or a group or the community itself;
- ✎ to broaden the database of research as also of its end use by involving as many classes of persons and institutions as possible;
- ✎ to offer research results in a more innovative, demystified and useworthy form; and finally
- ✎ to restore man to his central position in social research in totality and with full dignity.