

Concept of peasant society and peasant culture

A peasant is a pre-industrial agricultural labourer or farmer with limited land ownership, especially one living in the Middle Ages under feudalism and paying rent, tax, fees, or services to a landlord. In Europe, three classes of peasants existed: slave, serf, and free tenant. Peasants hold title to land either in fee simple or by any of several forms of land tenure, among them socage, quit-rent, leasehold, and copyhold.

In a colloquial sense, "peasant" often has a pejorative meaning that is therefore seen as insulting and controversial in some circles, even when referring to farm labourers in the developing world. As early as in 13th-century Germany the word also could mean "rustic," or "robber," as the English term villain. In 21st-century English, the term includes the pejorative sense of "an ignorant, rude, or unsophisticated person". The word rose to renewed popularity in the 1940s-1960s, as a collective term, often referring to rural populations of developing countries in general - as the "semantic successor to 'native', incorporating all its condescending and racial overtones".

The word peasantry is commonly used in a non-pejorative sense as a collective noun for the rural population in the poor and developing countries of the world

The term peasant literally means a person working on the land with simple tools. Even the entire rural population including the big landlords and the agricultural labourers have been treated as peasantry. This treatment does overlook the differences between and among the categories both in terms of the land holdings, technology, employment of labour etc.

There are few definitions about peasantry. Eric Wolf, an authority on peasant struggles defines them as "population that are existentially involved in cultivation and make autonomous decisions regarding the process of cultivation". His definition leaves out certain categories such as poor and marginal peasantry including the share croppers. On the other hand another authority Theodor Shanin defines them as "consist of small agricultural producers who with the help of simple equipment and labour of their families produce mainly for their consumption and for the fulfilment of obligations to the holders of

political and economic power". This definition too does not take into account rich and capitalist farmers who try to maximise the profit by way of entering into larger market. A simple definition has been given by Irfan Habib . He defines peasantry as " a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements of his family". Here the definition excludes rich and capitalist farmers I peasants. Taking all these definitions one can define the peasantry as a category of population having certain patches of land, largely dependent upon labour, family or the hiring in - for the production of agriculture, who believes in competitive market or restricted market system.

According to anthropologist George Dalton, "Peasants were legal, political, social, and economic inferiors in medieval Europe.

Some scholars emphasized generic cultural or "folk" characteristics of peasants, while others, notably Eric R. Wolf, sought to delineate social structural "types," based on whether they had secure land rights or, alternatively, were tenants, sharecroppers or resident laborers on large properties. "Peasants" tended to be distinguished from "farmers," since the former were said to aim at "subsistence" and produced cash crops primarily for survival and to maintain their social status rather than to invest and expand the scale of their operations, as was allegedly the case with the latter.

Teodor Shanin, another leading peasant studies scholar, defined peasantry as having "four essential and inter-linked facets": The family farm as the basic multi-functional unit of social organisation, land husbandry and usually animal rearing as the main means of livelihood, a specific traditional culture closely linked with the way of life of small rural communities and multi-directional subjection to powerful outsiders. In addition, Shanin recognized the existence of "a number of analytically marginal groups which share with the 'hard core' of the peasantry most but not all of its major characteristics." These included the "agricultural labourer lacking a fully-fledged farm, a rural craftsman holding little or no land, the frontier squatter or the armed peasant who at times escaped centuries of political submission along frontiers or in the mountains," as well as pastoralists and "peasant-workers in modern industrial communities.

According to Robert Redfield (1941), peasant communities are a kind of folk society that exists on a 'folk–urban continuum,' which has both geographic and historic dimensions. Cities represent the modern urban end of the continuum and small, isolated non-agrarian indigenous societies are the extreme traditional folk end, with peasant communities near the traditional end. Redfield saw the history of traditional societies as shaped mainly by the spread of modern features of technology, social organization, family, kinship, values, and world view outward from cities at the urban end of the continuum toward the folk end, in a process of modernization or development. This diffusion of the traits of modernity, especially modern values and world view, would proceed faster were it not for barriers to their acceptance in the traditional culture. This model became important in programs of applied anthropology that sought to identify and overcome cultural barriers to modernization in peasant communities, which were defined as underdeveloped, that is, as waiting to shed their traditional cultures by becoming fully incorporated into the modern national culture, economy, and political system of their nation. This approach to economic, social, and political development in peasant communities became important in American applied anthropology during the Cold War as an alternative to socialist and communist paths of development.

Great tradition and little tradition

- Tradition implies on longstanding existence of both entities and their relations,
- The culture of rural community is a rough expression of urban or great tradition

Categories of Peasantry -there are large number of categories within the peasantry : Small, big , rich, middle, marginal etc. These are depending upon the economic position including the land holdings of the peasantry. Marxists like Engels for example include the classes of feudal peasants , tenants and poor peasants and farm labourers, who respectively perform c service to there land lords, make payments of higher rents, cultivate and own small patches of lands.

India . Of all the countries in the nonsocialist world, India has the largest peasantry and the most deep-rooted social obstacles to agricultural development. The mixture of ancient Indian, Muslim, and British notions and practices about landholding has given the country a peculiarly complex structure of land tenure. There are no significant reserves of good land to be brought under cultivation, and a number of regions are already very densely populated. Agriculture is largely dependent on the monsoons, which are fickle. Many areas are chronically short of water.

All economic and social institutions in the villages are deeply affected by the divisions and sense of hierarchy connected with caste. This gives a low value to manual labor. In many regions of India those who do the bulk of the agricultural work are the most disadvantaged and the most looked down upon—the “Untouchables.”

Since the attainment of national independence in 1947, there has been remarkably free debate as to what should be done for, with, or about the Indian peasantry, and how to implement the large number of governmental measures relating to the rural population. In addition to the more narrowly technical projects involving, for example, irrigation, use of artificial fertilizers, or improvement of seeds, there has been much land reform legislation, an impressive extension of cooperatives and local self-government schemes, and a vast program of “community development,” designed to achieve the goal of over-all betterment of living conditions in the villages. Whatever the success of these various endeavors, there can be no doubt of the interest in the discussions generated at each phase of development. Since India can boast a number of first-class economists, there are a great many high-level analyses of peasant problems and suggested solutions.

Meanwhile, the way of life of India’s peasants has been affected not only by the array of governmental actions undertaken for such purposes, but also by the great growth of industry and over-all modernization of national life since the launching of the first five-year plan, covering 1951-1956. The proliferation of factories and workshops and an immense building program—new factories, government offices, schools, housing, roads, bridges, dams—have given jobs or supplementary income to millions of peasants.

Peasant Economics

Most of the studies of peasant economic behavior have been carried out by persons trained in the classical and neoclassical economics developed in England, on the Continent, and in the United States. Quite naturally, the economists brought along with them the tools of their trade, the categories and concepts which they were used to working with. The underlying assumption—

made explicit by a considerable number of writers—is that the prevailing economic theories and methods of the Western world are universally applicable. With suitable modifications, the argument goes, they can be utilized to explain the behavior of individual economic units in any society that has ever existed. Thus Firth, in his well-known analysis of the Tikopians in Polynesia, first explains that they have no market, no money, no cash nexus, no prices, no interest, and no “entrepreneur” class as such. Nonetheless, in default of any other suitable terms, he proceeds to analyze the behavior of the Tikopians as though they were entrepreneurs engaged in undertakings.

When the “farm business” method is applied to analysis of peasant agriculture, the peasant’s land and livestock, equipment, and other goods are equated with those of a small firm. The peasant’s behavior is then treated in terms of the theory of the firm as developed for business enterprises. It is taken for granted that the peasant’s aim is to rationalize his operations so as to obtain the maximum profit. Accounts are drawn up for the agricultural year. The field work of the peasant’s wife, his children, his parents, and other relatives is evaluated at prevailing wages paid to hired laborers. Receipts from the sale of farm products, including an estimate of the value of food kept for the family, are totalled. Against these are set the costs incurred for agricultural purposes, which have been carefully separated out from the expenses of the family as a consumption unit. These costs of production include working expenses, rent actually paid or calculated from the value of the land owned, interest that could otherwise have been earned on the capital invested, and wages imputed for family labor. If these costs turn out to be greater than the receipts, the farm is said to be operating at a loss. If this situation goes on year after year, it is said to be an uneconomic farm. The problem then becomes one of trying to explain how peasants in countries like India, for example, go on for decade after decade engaging in so-called “uneconomic farming.”

Subsistence

A number of somewhat different approaches to the study of peasant economics have utilized “subsistence” as the key concept. Whereas both the farm business or small entrepreneur method and the “organization and production” school concentrate on the individual peasant, subsistence has been examined on the “macro” as well as the “micro” level of analysis. Peasants who produce wholly or mainly for their own consumption are characterized as subsistence farmers, in sharp contrast to agriculturalists who produce for the market. Groups of villages, regions, or even whole countries (particularly with reference to the

past) are presented as subsistence areas or subsistence economies. Sometimes we read of modern and subsistence sectors (often identified with different ethnic elements) within a country or an economy. It is also common to find discussions keyed to a three part scheme: subsistence agriculture or economy, semi subsistence, and modern.

Generally speaking, writers who employ the term “subsistence” take as their standard of comparison the highly organized, mechanized, market-oriented agriculture of the great industrial nations. Subsistence tends to be denned negatively, by the complete absence of markets and accordingly of all commercial relations or incentives for increased production.

Criteria of peasant societies

The scholars has suggested another possible framework for studying peasant economy and society at the macro level. My interest is to identify whole states (either current or past) which can usefully be classed as predominantly peasant in nature. The next step, and one I believe would be fruitful, is to examine the process by which such societies have come into being, their life history, and the manner in which some have passed out of the ranks of peasant societies.

(1) One half or more of the total production must be agricultural. (2) More than half of the working population must be engaged in agriculture. (3) There must be a state of at least a minimum size, and it must be organized on a territorial basis rather than as a tribal, kinship, or clan order. The administrative structure of such a state must comprise a total of at least five thousand officers, minor officials, flunkeys, and underlings. (4) A peasant society presupposes the existence of towns and a break between these towns and the countryside that is simultaneously political, economic, social, and cultural. The total urban population of the state should amount to at least half a million persons; alternatively, at least 5 per cent of the entire population of a peasant society should reside in towns. (5) The typical and most representative units of production must be family households which grow crops on their lands primarily by the physical effort of the members of these families. The household may include a slave or two, a domestic servant, or even a hired hand. But the total contribution of these nonfamily members to actual crop production must be much less than that of the family members. Half or more of all the crops grown in the society must be produced by households relying mainly on the labor of their own family members.

Political Role of the Peasantry

The characteristic subjection of the peasantry in late medieval Europe gave way to sporadic uprisings and even some sustained revolts. This facet of peasant behavior has also been noted (to mention a few instances) in Tokugawa Japan, Manchu China, modern Mexico, and tsarist Russia, where major movements were led by Stenka Razin and Pugachev.

Almost always peasant uprisings have been marked by fury, desperation, and brutality. Once in motion the peasants have usually tried to destroy records, burn mansions, and, not uncommonly, put to death the landlords and their families. The upper classes have struck back ruthlessly. Because of their narrow horizons and limited resources, education, and military experience, peasants have been ill-fitted to organize and carry through successful revolts. By contrast, princes and landlords have been accustomed to the arts of politics and war. They have known how to divide a large peasant movement or overwhelm and destroy a small one. On the whole the peasants have paid dearly for their violent efforts to break their shackles.

After the French Revolution there arose a school of “romantic” political thought which idealized the peasantry as the center of conservatism in society as a whole, the stronghold of religion, and the seat of traditional values. Supporters of monarchy who wanted to stop the spread of democratic ideas exalted the peasant way of life as a counterpoise to the radical tendencies of the urban populations and called for its preservation.