

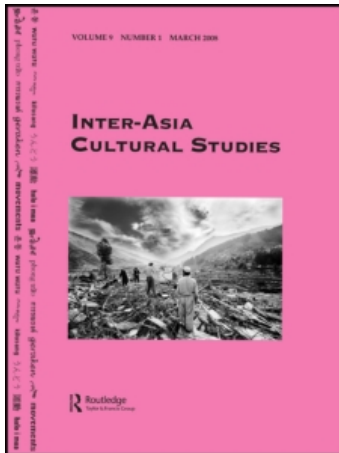
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Peasant cultures of the twenty-first century¹

Partha CHATTERJEE

ABSTRACT *In the last quarter of a century there has been a fundamental change in the historical situation of post-coloniality. The new conditions under which global flows of capital, commodities, information and people are now regulated have created both new opportunities and new obstacles for post-colonial countries. The old idea of a Third World, sharing a common history of colonial oppression and backwardness, is no longer as persuasive as it was in the 1960s. The phenomenal growth of China and India in recent years has set in motion a process of social change that, in its scale and speed, is unprecedented in human history. I will argue that the forms of capitalist industrial growth in the twenty-first century may, in large agrarian countries like China, India and the countries of South-east Asia, make room for the preservation of peasant production and peasant cultures, but under completely altered conditions. The analysis of these emergent forms of postcolonial capitalism requires new conceptual work.*

Peasant society today

The first volume of *Subaltern Studies* was published in 1982, 26 years ago. I was part of the editorial group that launched, under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, this critical engagement with post-colonial modernity from the standpoint of the subaltern classes, especially the peasantry. In the years that have passed since then, there has been, I believe, a fundamental change in the historical situation of post-coloniality. The new conditions under which global flows of capital, commodities, information and people are now regulated – a complex set of phenomena generally clubbed under the category of globalization – have created both new opportunities and new obstacles for post-colonial countries. The old idea of a Third World, sharing a common history of colonial oppression and backwardness, is no longer as persuasive as it was in the 1960s. The trajectory of economic growth taken by the countries of Asia has diverged radically from that of most African countries. The phenomenal growth of China and India in recent years, involving two of the most populous countries of the world, has set in motion a process of social change that, in its

scale and speed, is unprecedented in human history.

In this context, I believe it has become important for us scholars of Asia to revisit the question of the peasantry in postcolonial societies. This is not because I think that the advance of capitalist industrial growth is inevitably breaking down peasant communities and turning peasants into proletarian workers, as has been predicted innumerable times in the last century and a half. On the contrary, I will argue that the forms of capitalist industrial growth in the twenty-first century may, in large agrarian countries, such as China, India and the countries of South-east Asia, make room for the preservation of peasant production and peasant cultures, but under completely altered conditions. The analysis of these emergent forms of post-colonial capitalism requires new conceptual work.

Let me begin by referring to a few recent incidents that have made headlines in India. Sometime in the middle of 2006, agitations broke out in Singur, a prosperous agricultural area near the city of Calcutta, over the acquisition of land for a new automobile factory to be set up by Tata Motors, a leading industrial house in India. The protests

became national news when, in December, a prominent opposition political leader went on hunger strike demanding that no land could be taken from farmers, even after paying compensation, unless each farmer voluntarily agreed to give up the land. Even though she ended her hunger strike after 26 days, the agitations still continue, even as the construction of the motor car factory is proceeding.

In January 2006, in the Kalinganagar area of Orissa, villagers whose land had been acquired tried to break down the walls of a new steel factory to be built by Tata Steel. When the police fired at them, 13 protesting villagers were killed. More recently in May 2007, in a neighbouring area of Orissa, where another steel plant is to be built by the South Korean firm Posco, three Posco officials were taken hostage by local villagers who agreed to release them only on condition that no Posco official should enter their village again. Also in May 2007, in the town of Ranchi in Jharkhand, a group of demonstrators claiming to be vegetable growers and vendors caused extensive damage to a fancy new outlet of Reliance Fresh, a major corporate retail chain selling food and vegetables.

The most talked about incidents occurred in a place called Nandigram, also near Calcutta, where there was a proposal to acquire 14,000 acres of agricultural land to set up a special economic zone for chemical industries. In January 2007, when news spread of the possible acquisition of land, armed villagers chased out all government officials, policemen and supporters of the ruling Communist Party from the area, dug up roads, destroyed bridges and sealed off the entire area to outsiders. After a stand-off lasting two months, when the police and government supporters tried to enter the area by force, 14 people were killed in police shootings. Even after the government announced that the chemical industry zone would be located elsewhere, the area continues to be disturbed.

If these incidents had taken place 25 years ago, we would have seen in them the classic signs of peasant insurgency. Here

were the long familiar features of a peasantry, tied to the land and small-scale agriculture, united by the cultural and moral bonds of a local rural community, resisting the agents of an external state and city-based commercial institutions by using both peaceful and violent means. Our analysis then could have drawn on a long tradition of anthropological studies of peasant societies, focusing on the characteristic forms of dependence of peasant economies on external institutions such as the state and dominant classes such as landlords, moneylenders and traders, but also of the forms of autonomy of peasant cultures based on the solidarity of a local moral community. We could have also linked our discussion to a long tradition of political debates over the historical role of the peasantry under conditions of capitalist growth, beginning with the Marxist analysis in Western Europe of the inevitable dissolution of the peasantry as a result of the process of primitive accumulation of capital, Lenin's debates in Russia with the Narodniks, Mao Zedong's analysis of the role of the peasantry in the Chinese Revolution, and the continuing debates over Gandhi's vision of a free India where a mobilized peasantry in the villages would successfully resist the spread of industrial capitalism and the violence of the modern state. Moreover, using the insights drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, we could have talked about the contradictory consciousness of the peasantry in which it was both dominated by the forms of the elite culture of the ruling classes and, at the same time, resistant to them. Twenty-five years ago, we would have seen these rural agitations in terms of the analysis provided by Ranajit Guha in his classic work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Guha 1983).

I believe that analysis would be inappropriate today. The reasons are the following. First, the spread of governmental technologies in the postcolonial world in the last three decades, as a result of the deepening reach of the developmental state, has meant that the state is no longer an external entity to the peasant community. Governmental agencies distributing education, health services, food,

roadways, water, electricity, agricultural technology, emergency relief and dozens of other welfare services have penetrated deep into the interior of everyday peasant life. Not only are peasants dependent on state agencies for these services, they have also acquired considerable skill, albeit to a different degree in different areas, in manipulating and pressurizing these agencies to deliver these benefits. Institutions of the state, or at least governmental agencies (whether state or non-state), have become internal aspects of the peasant community. Second, the spate of reforms in the structure of agrarian property, whether revolutionary as in China or gradual as in most parts of India and the other countries of South-east Asia, has meant that except in isolated pockets, for the first time in centuries, peasants no longer directly confront an exploiting class within the village, as in feudal or semi-feudal conditions. This has had consequences that are completely new for the range of strategies of peasant politics. Third, since the tax on land or agricultural produce is no longer a significant source of revenue for modern governments, the relation of the state to the peasantry is no longer directly extractive, as it often was in the past. Fourth, with the rapid growth of cities and industrial regions, the possibility of peasants making a shift to urban and non-agricultural occupations is no longer a function of their pauperization and forcible separation from the land, but is often a voluntary choice, shaped by the perception of new opportunities and new desires. Fifth, with the spread of school education and widespread exposure to modern communications media such as cinema, television and advertising, there is a strong and widespread desire among younger members, both male and female, of peasant families not to live the life of a peasant in the village and instead to move to the town or the city, with all its hardships and uncertainties, because of its lure of anonymity and upward mobility. This is particularly significant for countries like India where the life of poor peasants in rural society is marked not only by the disadvantage of class but also by the discriminations of caste, compared to which the sheer

anonymity of life in the city is often seen as liberating.

A new conceptual framework

I may have emphasized the novelty of the present situation too sharply; in actual fact, the changes have undoubtedly come rather gradually over time. But I do believe that the novelty needs to be stressed at this time in order to ask: how do these new features of peasant life in Asia affect our received theories of peasant society and culture? The Indian scholar Kalyan Sanyal has attempted a fundamental revision of these theories in his recent book *Rethinking Capitalist Development* (Sanyal 2007). In the following discussion, I will use some of his formulations in order to present my own arguments on this subject.

The key concept in Sanyal's analysis is the primitive accumulation of capital – sometimes called primary or original accumulation of capital. Like Sanyal, I too prefer to use this term in Marx's sense to mean the dissociation of the labourer from the means of labour. There is no doubt that this is the key historical process that brings peasant societies into crisis with the rise of capitalist production. Marx's analysis in the last chapters of Volume One of *Capital* shows that the emergence of modern capitalist industrial production is invariably associated with the parallel process of the loss of the means of production on the part of primary producers such as peasants and artisans. The unity of labour with the means of labour, which is the basis of most pre-capitalist modes of production, is destroyed and a mass of labourers emerge who do not any more possess the means of production. Needless to say, the unity of labour with the means of labour is the conceptual counterpart in political economy of the organic unity of most pre-capitalist rural societies by virtue of which peasants and rural artisans are said to live in close bonds of solidarity in a local rural community. This is the familiar anthropological description of peasant societies as well as the source of inspiration for many romantic writers and artists portraying rural life. This

is the unity that is destroyed in the process of primitive accumulation of capital, throwing peasant societies into crisis.

The analysis of this crisis has produced, as I have already indicated, a variety of historical narratives ranging from the inevitable dissolution of peasant societies to slogans of worker-peasant unity in the building of a future socialist society. Despite their differences, the common feature in all these narratives is the idea of transition. Peasants and peasant societies under conditions of capitalist development are always in a state of transition – whether from feudalism to capitalism or from pre-capitalist backwardness to socialist modernity.

A central argument made by Sanyal in his book is that, under present conditions of postcolonial development within a globalized economy, the narrative of transition is no longer valid. That is to say, although capitalist growth in postcolonial societies such as those of the Asian countries is inevitably accompanied by the primitive accumulation of capital, the social changes that are brought about cannot be understood as a transition. How is that possible?

The explanation has to do with the transformations in the last two decades in the global understanding about the minimum functions as well as the available technologies of government. There is a growing sense now that certain basic conditions of life must be provided to people everywhere and that if the national or local governments do not provide them, someone else must, whether it is other states or international agencies or non-governmental organizations. Thus, while there is a dominant discourse about the importance of growth, which in recent times has come to mean almost exclusively capitalist growth, it is, at the same time, considered unacceptable that those who are dispossessed of their means of labour because of the primitive accumulation of capital should have no means of subsistence. This produces, says Sanyal, a curious process in which, on the one side, primary producers such as peasants, craftspeople and petty manufacturers lose their land and other means of production, but, on the other, are

also provided by governmental agencies with the conditions for meeting their basic needs of livelihood. There is, says Sanyal, primitive accumulation as well as a parallel process of the reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation.

It would be useful to illustrate this process with some examples. Historically, the process of industrialization in all agrarian countries has meant the eviction of peasants from the land, either because the land was taken over for urban or industrial development or because the peasant no longer had the means to cultivate the land. Market forces were usually strong enough to force peasants to give up the land, but often direct coercion was used by means of the legal and fiscal powers of the state. Most governments used some sort of right of eminent domain to acquire lands to be used for developmental projects, offering only a token compensation, if any. The idea that peasants losing land must be resettled somewhere else and rehabilitated into a new livelihood was rarely acknowledged. It has been said that the opportunities of migration of the surplus population from Europe to the settler colonies in the Americas and elsewhere made it possible to politically manage the consequences of primitive accumulation in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. No such opportunities exist today for the Asian countries. More importantly, the technological conditions of early industrialization, which created the demand for a substantial mass of industrial labour have long passed. Capitalist growth today is far more capital-intensive and technology-dependent than it was even some decades ago. Large sections of peasants who are today the victims of the primitive accumulation of capital are completely unlikely to be absorbed into the new capitalist sectors of growth. Therefore, without a specific government policy of resettlement, the peasants losing their land face the possibility of the complete loss of their means of livelihood. Under present globally prevailing normative ideas, this is considered unacceptable. Hence, the old-fashioned methods of putting down peasant resistance by

armed repression have little chance of gaining legitimacy. The result is the widespread demand today for the rehabilitation of displaced people who lose their means of sustenance because of industrial and urban development. It is not, says Sanyal, as though primitive accumulation is halted or even slowed down, for primitive accumulation is the inevitable companion of capitalist growth. Rather, governmental agencies have to find the resources to, as it were, reverse the consequences of primitive accumulation by providing alternative means of livelihood to those who have lost them.

We know that it is not uncommon for developmental states to protect certain sectors of production that are currently the domain of peasants, artisans and small manufacturers against competition from large corporate firms. But this may be interpreted as an attempt to forestall primitive accumulation itself by preventing corporate capital from entering into areas such as food crop or vegetable production or handicraft manufacture. However, there are many examples in many countries of governments and non-government agencies offering easy loans to enable those without the means of sustenance to find some gainful employment. Such loans are often advanced without serious concern for profitability or the prospect of the loan being repaid, since the money advanced here is not driven by the motive of further accumulation of capital but rather by that of providing the livelihood needs of the debtors – that is to say, by the motive of reversal of the effects of primitive accumulation. In recent years, these efforts have acquired the status of a globally circulating technology of poverty management under the name of the micro-credit movement, initiated by the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh and its founder, the Nobel Prize winner Mohammed Yunus. Most of us are familiar now with stories of peasant women in rural Bangladesh forming groups to take loans from Grameen Bank to undertake small activities to supplement their livelihood and putting pressure on one another to repay the loan so that they can qualify for another round of credit.

Finally, most governments today in Asian countries provide some direct benefits to people who, because of poverty or other reasons, are unable to meet their basic consumption needs. This could be in the form of special poverty-removal programmes, or schemes of guaranteed employment in public works, or even direct delivery of subsidized or free food. In India, for instance, there are programmes of supplying subsidized food grains to those designated as 'below the poverty line', guaranteed employment for up to 100 days in the year for those who need it, and free meals to children in rural schools. All of these may be regarded, in terms of our analysis, as direct interventions to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation.

It is important to point out that, except for the last example of direct provision of consumption needs, most of the other mechanisms of reversing the effects of primitive accumulation involve the intervention of the market. This is the other significant difference in the present conditions of peasant life from the traditional models we have known. Except in certain marginal pockets, peasant and craft production in Asian countries today is fully integrated into a market economy. Unlike a few decades ago, there is virtually no sector of household production that can be described as intended for self-consumption or non-monetized exchange within a local community. Virtually all peasant and artisan production is for sale in the market and all consumption needs are purchased from the market. This, as we shall see, has an important bearing on recent changes in the conditions of peasant politics and culture.

It is also necessary to point out that 'livelihood needs' do not indicate a fixed quantum of goods determined by biological or any other ahistorical criterion. It is a contextually determined, socially produced, sense of what is necessary to lead a decent life of some worth and self-respect. The composition of the set of elements that constitute 'livelihood needs' will, therefore, vary with social location, cultural context and time. Thus, the expected minimum standards of

health care for the family or minimum levels of education for one's children will vary, as will the specific composition of the commodities of consumption such as food, clothes or domestic appliances. What is important here is a culturally determined sense of what is minimally necessary for a decent life, one that is neither unacceptably impoverished nor excessive and luxurious.

Political society and the management of non-corporate capital

Having taken my cue from Kalyan Sanyal's recent book, I now wish to move on to my own analysis of peasant societies of the twenty-first century. The integration with the market has meant that large sections of what used to be called the subsistence economy, which was once the classic description of small peasant agriculture, have now come fully under the sway of capital. This is a key development that must crucially affect our understanding of peasant societies today. There is now a degree of connectedness between peasant cultivation, trade and credit networks in agricultural commodities, transport networks, petty manufacturing and services in rural markets and small towns, etc, that makes it necessary for us to categorize all of them as part of a single complex. A common description of this is the unorganized or informal sector. Usually, a unit belonging to the informal sector is identified in terms of the small size of the enterprise, the small number of labourers employed, or the relatively unregulated nature of the business. In terms of the analytical framework I have presented here, I will propose a distinction between the formal and the informal sectors of today's economy in terms of a difference between corporate and non-corporate forms of capital.

My argument is that the characteristics I have described of peasant societies today are best understood as the marks of *non-corporate capital*. To the extent that peasant production is deeply embedded within market structures, investments and returns are conditioned by forces emanating from the operations of capital. In this sense, peasant

production shares many connections with informal units in manufacturing, trade and services operating in rural markets, small towns and even in large cities. We can draw many refined distinctions between corporate and non-corporate forms of capital. But the key distinction I wish to emphasize is the following. The fundamental logic that underlies the operations of corporate capital is further accumulation of capital, usually signified by the maximization of profit. For non-corporate organizations of capital, while profit is not irrelevant, it is dominated by another logic – that of providing the livelihood needs of those working in the units. This difference is crucial for the understanding of the so-called informal economy and, by extension, as I will argue, of peasant cultures.

Let me illustrate with a couple of familiar examples from the non-agricultural informal sector and then return to the subject of peasant societies. Most of us are familiar with the phenomenon of street vendors in Asian cities. They occupy street space, usually violating municipal laws; they often erect permanent stalls, use municipal services such as water and electricity, and do not pay taxes. To carry on their trade under these conditions, they usually organize themselves into associations to deal with the municipal authorities, the police, credit agencies such as banks and corporate firms that manufacture and distribute the commodities they sell on the streets. These associations are often large and the volume of business they encompass can be quite considerable. Obviously, operating within a public and anonymous market situation, the vendors are subject to the standard conditions of profitability of their businesses. But to ensure that everyone is able to meet their livelihood needs, the association will usually try to limit the number of vendors who can operate in a given area and prevent the entry of newcomers. On the other hand, there are many examples where, if the businesses are doing particularly well, the vendors do not, like corporate capitalists, continue to accumulate on an expanded scale, but rather agree to extend their membership and allow

new entrants. To cite another example, in most cities and towns of India, the transport system depends heavily on private operators who run buses and motorized rickshaws. Here too there is frequent violation of regulations, such as licences, safety standards and pollution norms. Although most operators own only one or two vehicles each, they form associations to negotiate with transport authorities and the police over fares and routes, and control the frequency of services and entry of new operators to ensure that a minimum income, and not much more than a minimum income, is guaranteed to all.

In my book, *The Politics of the Governed*, I have described the form of governmental regulation of population groups, such as street vendors, illegal squatters and others, whose habitation or livelihood verges on the margins of legality, as *political society* (Chatterjee 2004). In political society, I have argued, people are not regarded by the state as proper citizens possessing rights and belonging to the properly constituted civil society. Rather, they are seen to belong to particular population groups, with specific empirically established and statistically described characteristics, which are targets of particular governmental policies. Since dealing with many of these groups implies the tacit acknowledgement of various illegal practices, governmental agencies will often treat such cases as exceptions, justified by very specific and special circumstances, so that the structure of general rules and principles is not compromised. Thus, illegal squatters may be given water supply or electricity connections but on exceptional grounds so as not to club them with regular customers having secure legal title to their property, or street vendors may be allowed to trade under specific conditions that distinguish them from regular shops and businesses who comply with the laws and pay taxes. All of this makes the claims of people in political society a matter of constant political negotiation and the results are never secure or permanent. Their entitlements, even when recognised, never quite become rights.

To connect the question of political society with my earlier discussion on the process of primitive accumulation of capital in Asian countries in recent decades, I now wish to advance the following proposition. *Civil society is where corporate capital is hegemonic, whereas political society is the space of management of non-corporate capital.* It is not surprising that, with the rapid growth of the Asian economies in the last two or three decades, corporate capital, and along with it the class of corporate capitalists, have achieved a hegemonic position over civil society. This means that the logic of accumulation, expressed at this time in the demand that national economic growth be maintained at a very high rate and that the requirements of corporate capital be given priority, holds sway over civil society – that is to say, over the urban middle classes. It also means that the educational, professional and social aspirations of the middle classes become tied up with the fortunes of corporate capital. There emerges a powerful tendency to insist on the legal rights of proper citizens, to impose civic order in public places and institutions and to treat the messy world of the informal sector and political society with a degree of intolerance. A vague but powerful feeling seems to prevail among the urban middle classes that rapid growth will solve all problems of poverty and unequal opportunities.

The informal sector, which does not have a corporate structure and does not function principally according to the logic of accumulation, does not, however, lack organization. As I have indicated in my examples, those who function in the informal sector often have large, and in many cases quite powerful and effective, organizations. They need to organize precisely to function in the modern market and governmental spaces. Traditional organizations of peasant and artisan societies are not adequate for the task. I believe this organization is as much of a *political* activity as it is an economic one. Given the logic of non-corporate capital that I have described above, the function of these organizations is precisely to operate successfully within the rules of the market

and of governmental regulations in order to ensure the livelihood needs of its members. Speaking from the experience of India, I believe that most of those who provide leadership in organizing people, both owners and workers, operating in the informal sector are actually or potentially political leaders. Many such leaders are prominent local politicians and many such organizations are directly or indirectly affiliated to political parties. Thus, it is not incorrect to say that the management of non-corporate capital under such conditions is a political function that is carried out by political leaders. Hence my argument, that political society as I have described it is the space of the management of non-corporate capital.

Much of this organization is innovative – necessarily so, because neither the history of the cooperative movement nor that of socialist collective organization provides any model that can be copied by these non-corporate organizations of capital. What is noticeable here is a strong sense of attachment to small-scale private property and, at the same time, a willingness to organize and cooperate in order to protect the fragile basis of livelihood that is constantly under threat from the advancing forces of corporate capital. However, once again going by the Indian evidence, it appears that these organizations of non-corporate capital are stronger, at least at this time, in the non-agricultural informal sectors in cities and towns and less so among the rural peasantry. This means that while the organization of non-corporate capital in urban areas has developed relatively stable and effective forms and is able, by mobilizing governmental support through the activities of political society, to sustain the livelihood needs of the urban poor in the informal sector, the rural poor, consisting of small peasants and rural labourers, are still dependent on direct governmental support for their basic needs and are less able to make effective organized use of the market in agricultural commodities. Clearly, this will be a major challenge for the future of the peasantry in Asian countries.

What I have said here about the characteristics of units in the informal sector are, of course, true only in the gross or average sense. Informal units, even when they involve significant amounts of fixed capital and employ several hired workers, are primarily intended to meet the livelihood needs of those involved in the business. Often, the owner is himself or herself also a worker. But this does not mean that there do not exist any informal units in which the owner strives to turn the business toward the route of accumulation, seeking to leave the grey zones of informality and enter the hallowed portals of corporate capitalism. This too might be a tendency that would indicate upward mobility as well as change in the overall social structure of capital.

Peasant culture and politics

In a recent lecture, the Indian sociologist Dipankar Gupta has taken note of many of these features of changing peasant life to argue that we need a new theoretical framework for understanding contemporary rural society (Gupta 2005). One of the features he has emphasized is the sharp rise in non-agricultural employment among those who live in villages. In almost half of the states of India, more than 40% of the rural population is engaged in non-agricultural occupations today and the number is rising rapidly. A significant part of this population consists of rural labourers who do not own land, and do not find enough opportunity for agricultural work. But more significantly, even peasant families that own land will often have some members engaged in non-agricultural employment. In part, this reflects precisely the pressure of market forces that makes small peasant cultivation unviable over time because it is unable to increase productivity. As the small peasant property is handed down from one generation to the next, the holdings get subdivided even further. I have seen in the course of my own field work in the last two years that there is a distinct reluctance among younger members of rural landowning peasant families – both men and women – to continue

with the life of a peasant. There is, they say, no future in small peasant agriculture and they would prefer to try their luck in town, even if it means a period of hardship. Needless to say, this feeling is particularly strong among those who have had some school education. It reflects not just a response to the effects of primitive accumulation, because many of these young men and women come from landowning families that are able to provide for their basic livelihood needs. Rather, it reflects the sense of a looming threat, the ever-present danger that small peasant agriculture will, sooner or later, have to succumb to the larger forces of capital. If this feeling becomes a general feature among the next generation of rural families, it would call for a radical transformation in our understanding of peasant culture. The very idea of a peasant society whose fundamental dynamic is to reproduce itself, accommodating only small and slow changes, would have to be given up altogether. Here we find a generation of peasants whose principal motivation seems to be to stop being peasants.

Based on findings of this type that are now accumulating rapidly, Dipankar Gupta has spoken of the 'vanishing village': 'Agriculture is an economic residue that generously accommodates non-achievers resigned to a life of sad satisfaction. The villager is as bloodless as the rural economy is lifeless. From rich to poor, the trend is to leave the village...' (Gupta 2005: 757). I think Gupta is too hasty in this conclusion. He has noticed only one side of the process, which is the inevitable story of primitive accumulation. He has not, I think, considered the other side, which is the field of governmental policies aimed at reversing the effects of primitive accumulation. It is in that field that the relation between peasants and the state has been, and is still being, redefined. And it is also in that field where new opportunities have emerged for the innovative organization of non-corporate capital.

I have mentioned before that state agencies, or governmental agencies generally, including NGOs that carry out governmental functions, are no longer an external entity

in relation to peasant society. This has had several implications. First, because various welfare and developmental functions are now widely recognized to be necessary tasks for government in relation to the poor, which includes large sections of peasants, these functions in the fields of health, education, basic inputs for agricultural production and the provision of basic necessities of life are now demanded from governmental agencies as a matter of legitimate claims by peasants. This means that government officials and political representatives in rural areas are constantly besieged by demands for various welfare and developmental benefits. It also means that peasants learn to operate the levers of the governmental system, to apply pressure at the right places or negotiate for better terms. Second, the response of governmental agencies to such demands is usually flexible, based on calculations of costs and returns. In most cases, the strategy is to break up the benefit-seekers into smaller groups, defined by specific demographic or social characteristics, so that there can be a flexible policy that does not regard the entire rural population as a single homogeneous mass but rather breaks it up into smaller target populations. The intention is precisely to fragment the benefit-seekers and hence divide the potential opposition to the state. One of the most remarkable features of the recent agitations in India over the acquisition of land for industry is that despite the continued use of the old rhetoric of peasant solidarity, there are clearly significant sections of the people of these villages that do not join these agitations because they feel they stand to gain from the government policy. Third, this field of negotiations opened up by flexible policies of seeking and delivering benefits creates a new competitive spirit among benefit-seekers. Since peasants now confront, not landlords or traders as direct exploiters, but rather governmental agencies from whom they expect benefits, the state is blamed for perceived inequalities in the distribution of benefits. Thus, peasants will accuse officials and political representatives of favouring cities at the cost of the countryside, or particular sections of peasants will

complain of having been deprived while other sections belonging to other regions or ethnic groups or political loyalties have been allegedly favoured. The charge against state agencies is not one of exploitation but discrimination. This has given a completely new quality to peasant politics, one that was completely missing in the classical understandings of peasant society. Fourth, unlike the old forms of peasant insurgency, which characterised much of the history of peasant society for centuries, there is, I believe, a quite different quality in the role of violence in contemporary peasant politics. While subaltern peasant revolts of the old kind had their own notions of strategy and tactics, they were characterized, as Ranajit Guha showed in his classic work, by strong community solidarity on the one side and negative opposition to the perceived exploiters on the other. Today, the use of violence in peasant agitations seems to have a far more calculative, almost utilitarian logic, designed to draw attention to specific grievances with a view to seeking appropriate governmental benefits. A range of deliberate tactics are followed to elicit the right responses from officials, political leaders and especially the media. This is probably the most significant change in the nature of peasant politics in the last two or three decades.

As far as peasant agriculture is concerned, however, things are much less clearly developed. Small peasant agriculture, even though it is thoroughly enmeshed in market connections, also feels threatened by the market. There is, in particular, an unfamiliarity with – and deep suspicion of – corporate organizations. Peasants appear to be far less able to deal with the uncertainties of the market than they are able to secure governmental benefits. In the last few years, there have been hundreds of reported suicides in India of peasants who suddenly fell into huge debts because they were unable to realize the expected price from their agricultural products, such as tobacco and cotton. Peasants feel that the markets for these commercial crops are manipulated by large mysterious forces that are entirely beyond their control. Unlike many organizations in

the informal non-agricultural sector in urban areas that can effectively deal with corporate firms for the supply of inputs or the sale of their products, peasants have been unable thus far to build similar organizations. This is the large area of the management of peasant agriculture, not as subsistence production for self-consumption, but as the field of non-corporate capital, that remains a challenge. It is the political response to this challenge that will determine the future of peasant culture in the twenty-first century.

Let me summarize my main argument. With the continuing rapid growth of the Asian economies, the hegemonic hold of corporate capital over the domain of civil society is likely to continue. This will inevitably mean continued primitive accumulation. That is to say, there will be more and more primary producers, i.e. peasants, artisans and petty manufacturers, who will lose their means of production. But most of these victims of primitive accumulation are unlikely to be absorbed in the new growth sectors of the economy. They will be marginalized and rendered useless as far as the sectors dominated by corporate capital are concerned. But the prevailing political climate makes it unacceptable and illegitimate for governments to leave these marginalized populations without the means of labour to simply fend for themselves. That carries the risk of turning them into the 'dangerous classes'. Hence, a whole series of governmental policies are being, and will be, devised to reverse the effects of primitive accumulation. This is the field in which peasant societies will have to redefine their relations with both the state and with capital. Thus far, it appears that whereas many new practices have been developed by peasants to claim and negotiate benefits from the state, their ability to deal with the world of capital is still unsure and inadequate. This is where the further development of peasant activities as non-corporate capital, seeking to ensure the livelihood needs of peasants while operating within the circuits of capital, will define the future of peasant society and culture. As far as I can see, peasant societies will certainly survive in Asian countries in

the twenty-first century, but only by accommodating a substantial non-agricultural component within the village. Further, I think there will be major overlaps and continuities in emerging cultural practices between rural villages and small towns and urban areas, with the urban elements gaining predominance.

I have also suggested that the distinction between corporate and non-corporate capital appears to be coinciding with the divide between civil society and political society. This could have many ominous consequences. We have seen in several Asian countries what may be called a revolt of 'proper citizens' against the unruliness and corruption of systems of popular political representation. In Thailand, in 2006 there was an army-led coup that ousted a popularly elected government. The action seemed to draw support from the urban middle classes who expressed their disapproval of what they considered wasteful and corrupt populist expenditure aimed at gaining the support of the rural population. In 2007, there was a similar army-backed coup in Bangladesh where plans for parliamentary elections have been indefinitely postponed, while an interim government takes emergency measures to clean the system of supposedly 'corrupt' politicians. Reports suggest that that move was also welcomed by the urban middle classes. There has been a similar social divide underlying the political conflicts in the Philippines in recent years. In India, a significant feature in recent years has been the withdrawal of the urban middle classes from political activities altogether: there is widespread resentment in the cities of the populism and corruption of all political parties which, it is said, are driven principally by the motive of gaining votes at the cost of ensuring the conditions of rapid economic growth. There is no doubt that this reflects the hegemony of the logic of corporate capital among the urban middle classes. The fact, however, is that the bulk of the population in most Asian countries still lives outside the orderly zones of proper civil soci-

ety. It is there that they have to be fed and clothed and given work, if only to ensure the long-term and relatively peaceful survival of society as a whole. That is the difficult and innovative process of political management on which the future of peasant societies in Asian countries appears to depend.

Note

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Author's biography

Partha Chatterjee was born in 1947. After getting his BA degree in Political Science at the University of Calcutta, India, he went on to earn his PhD degree in Political Science at the University of Rochester in 1971. After teaching there for a year, he went back to India and worked at the Center for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta. He became a professor in 1979 and has headed the Centre from 1997 until 2006. He was also visiting professor at Columbia University, New York; Oxford University, UK; New School, New York; and Leiden University, the Netherlands.

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