Kathleen Gough with Tanjore village children during field work in the 1950s

COLONIALISM, RURAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND RESISTANCE: THE RELEVANCE OF KATHLEEN GOUGH'S WORK

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The Indian Context

At the risk of being schematic and simplistic one may suggest that mainstream Sociology and Social Anthropology in India has been dominated, by and large, by two approaches: British structural-functionalism and the Indological approach. The structural-functional approach focussed on small-scale micro-studies of social institutions and cultural practices with no attempt to relate them to the historical context. Moreover, preoccupied with harmony and equilibrium, it ignored the issues of social tensions, resistance and struggles. Studies of kinship, caste, religion and village community—the main focus of attention in the 1950s and the 1960s—can be cited as instances of functionalism in Indian Sociology and Social Anthropology.

On the other hand, the Indological approach, popularized through the *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, initiated in 1957 by Louis Dumont and David Pocock (and later on carried on by the *Contributions* . . . [New Series]), focussed its attention on the concepts and categories of social organization in Indian thought embedded in Hindu religious scriptures. In this approach, the cultural specificity of India is misrepresented as the uniqueness of Indian society which is supposedly organized on principles opposite to those governing the organization of society and culture in the West. The most serious problem with this approach is that it takes the concepts and categories out of their context and presents them as trans-historical reality. There is no attempt to look at the tension and the correspondence between the concepts and categories, on the one hand, and the concrete historical reality, on the other. Rather, the concepts and categories are confused with the concrete reality itself. Furthermore, not only does this approach reduce the entire social-economic formation to a constructed notion of dominant "Value," but, as André Béteille (1987:675) points out, it applies different scales to the dominant

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"Value" in the East as opposed to that in the West: "societies are valorized in the very acts of comparison and contrast." Béteille calls it the "disease of an intellectual climate." In my opinion, however, this is a case of dogmatic application of the orientalist ideology which tends to obscure our understanding not only of the East but also of the West.

Kathleen Gough's work marks a bold departure from both Indology and functionalism. Her approach is structural and historical. She is sensitive to the cultural concepts and practices without, however, ignoring their historical context. Given the limitations of time and space, in addition, of course, to my intellectual limitations, it is not possible to review here Gough's work on India in its entirety. Rather, I will confine myself to her concern with peasant resistance and struggles in colonial and post-colonial India.

In the spring of 1983, I had an opportunity to meet Kathleen Gough in Vancouver, when she told me that one of the incentives for her to write about peasant movements in India was the publication of Barrington Moore's famous work, *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (1966, cf. Gough 1974). It was not so much the empirical content of Moore's work as the general approach to Indian history and society, especially his representation of Indian peasantry, caste system and traditional village structure as repository of passivity and non-resistance to external (colonial) and internal (post-colonial) domination and oppression that she found unacceptable. She also told me that she was herself preoccupied with her research and writing on Vietnam, but she would very much appreciate if more historically grounded anthropological studies were undertaken to counter the representation of a passive Indian peasantry.

Going back to our first meeting at the Post-Plenary Session of the Xth World Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, 1979, in Lucknow (India), we had a brief discussion on how Barrington Moore is not alone in taking this particular approach to Indian society and culture, but rather it is part of a more general trend, including the Indological approach briefly referred to above. Since, given her other preoccupations, Gough herself did not (or could not) take up the task of returning to this problem, I may take this opportunity to briefly present the broad outline of this approach. Later on, I will show how her general understanding of rural social structure and resistance in India offers an alternative to this approach.

The Caste System in Indian History: Convergence of Orientalist History and Indology

Moore seems particularly sensitive to the importance of the caste system in organizing agrarian social structure in India (Moore 1966:117-118). He holds the caste system (and village community) mainly responsible for peasant passivity in India. The caste system in India, he argues, provided a framework

for all social activity, literally from conception to the afterlife, at the local level of the village community that rendered the central government largely superfluous. Hence peasant opposition was less likely to take the form of massive rebellions as it did frequently in China. Any innovation and opposition in India could easily be absorbed just by the formation of a new caste or subcaste (Moore 1966:315).

One may agree with Moore in his emphasis on the caste system as a specifically Indian social institution. He is, however, saying much more. It is noteworthy to mention in this context that both the Indological approach (represented by Dumont) and the "historical" approach (represented by Moore) have one thing in common: they compare India to other societies with the main objective of discovering how the Indian case is unique. Thus, Dumont begins his ethnography of South India in order to find a contrast between North and South. As he moves on, the differences within Indian society appear to him less important and less interesting in comparison to the differences between Indian society as a whole on the one hand and the West (as a whole!) on the other. Now, his main interest shifts to finding out the contrast between India and the West (Dumont and Pocock 1957; Dumont 1966). Although Moore is comparing India not only with the West but also with other Asian societies, especially China and Japan, the objective nonetheless remains the same, i.e., to establish the unique or exceptional character of Indian society and culture. Both Dumont and Moore find the main source of India's uniqueness in the caste system. They tend to accomplish this through a process of subversion, that is, rather than looking at caste historically as an institution of Indian society—albeit an important one—they tend to reduce Indian society and history to caste, and present caste as inherently stagnant and eternally static.

This similarity between Dumont and Moore is not incidental: it is a logical consequence of their common intellectual ancestry—Europe's mythology of the Orient in which oriental history, devoid of internal dynamism, is intrinsically frozen. One implication of this viewpoint is that colonial intervention appears as a positive and historically necessary step to break the internal stagnation of Indian society and bring it into the fold of history of human kind. As discussed below, Gough's work on Imperialism and Anthropology (Gough 1967, 1990) provides a very different perspective on this question, which has a powerful, general appeal, and is not confined to the specific context of India.

Kathleen Gough and Peasant Movements in India

Peasant Passivity: A Historical Fiction

Gough disagrees with the view that historically Indian peasantry has remained passive. The contrary is the case. She writes:

> Indian peasants have a long tradition of armed uprisings, reaching back at least to the initial British conquest. . . . For more than 200 years peasants in all the major regions have risen repeatedly against landlords, revenue agents and other bureaucrats, moneylenders, police and military forces. (Gough, 1974:1391)

She notes that although peasant revolts have been widespread in all parts of the country, certain areas, such as Bengal and certain parts of Bihar, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, are distinctly marked by a strong tradition of rebellion. Popular militancy, she further adds, is particularly striking in the hilly regions occupied by the tribal groups.

In particular, Gough highlights the continuous resistance and struggle—violent and non-violent—by the peasants in India throughout the colonial rule. These movements targeting the local landlords and the colonial state could be caused by various factors ranging from increased taxation to a change in agrarian relations through new legislation. She counts in all 77 peasant movements spread over a span of about 200 years of colonial domination. She recounts that the smallest of these movements engaged several thousand peasants in combat, while 30 of them affected several hundreds of thousands, and in one of them, aimed at the overthrow of British rule, peasant masses from an area of over 500,000 square miles actively participated (Gough 1974:1391). These movements, she stresses, illustrate the peasants' ability to organize, their discipline, solidarity and determination to fight the domination and exploitation by the colonial state, landlords and moneylenders (Gough 1974:1403).

Caste System and Peasant Movements in India

Gough is partly in agreement with Moore that, apart from the Great Revolt of 1857, peasant movements in India were narrower in geographical scope compared to those in China. However, the main reasons for this were more varied and complex than any intrinsic passivity of the peasantry due to the caste system or the peculiarities of the Indian village community. These included the piecemeal character of British colonial conquest of India, the division of the country into two parts, British India and princely India (known as "Indian India" during the Raj), each with relative autonomy, compounded by multiple ethnic, regional and linguistic divisions and the absence of a political party, until the 1920s, that could unite the people on an all-India basis. Last, though not the least, was the repressive apparatus of the British colonial state. Indeed, she stresses that Moore's attempt to underplay the rebelliousness of peasants during the British rule in India, apart from being historically inaccurate, is a euphemism to mask the essentially repressive character of the colonial state (Gough 1974).

Gough rejects the view that the Indian caste system breeds passivity. On the contrary, she argues that, rather than being a hindrance to mass mobiliza-

tion, caste assemblies are in fact a traditional organization that serve as a ready-made base to support peasant movements. In one instance after the other, traditional caste associations (*jati panchayats*) have been used by peasants for speedy collective mobilization. During colonial rule, caste assemblies provided an organizational base for resistance and struggle. She points out that the communists (who are often accused by liberal sociologists of being insensitive to caste) have effectively utilized the traditional, caste-based organizations in the countryside for agitational purposes (Gough 1968:539). "Even in India," she writes, "where inter-ethnic strife has produced some of the most tragic holocausts, peasants are capable of co-operating in struggles across caste, religious and even linguistic lines to redress their common grievances . . ." (Gough, 1974:1403).

She notes how Barrington Moore's position on caste and peasant passivity or rebelliousness in India is marked by a curious inconsistency. Thus he stresses that "any notion to the effect that caste or other distinctive traits of Indian peasant society constitutes an effective barrier to insurrection is obviously false" (Moore 1966:382). On the other hand, he argues that

> caste was also a way of organizing a highly fragmented society. Though this fragmentation could at times be overcome in small ways and in specific localities, it must have been a barrier to widespread rebellion . . . the system of caste did enforce hierarchical submission. Make a man feel humble by a thousand daily acts and he will behave in a humble way. The traditional etiquette of caste was no mere excrescence; it had definite political consequences. (Moore 1966:383)

Disagreeing with Moore, Gough wrote:

> My view is that an enforced etiquette of submission does not necessarily engender submissive feelings; if the subordinate comes to feel unjustly deprived, having to observe the etiquette may engender rebellious feelings which sometimes burst forth. (Gough 1974:1406)

The lower-caste labourers, oppressed by the upper-caste landlords, frequently resorted to violence in order to protect their material interests and their sense of honour. She cites various cases of rebelliousness among the low-ranking and poverty-stricken castes of Thanjavur (South India). Thus in one of the cases reported by her, the lower-caste folks in a village bound their landlord to a cart-wheel, thrashed him and drove him out of the village as a reprisal for seducing one of their women. She remarks that such acts of rebelliousness by the peasants when their material interests are threatened, or if their sense of honour is violated, are common worldwide, and the Indian peasants were no exception (Gough 1974:1406).

It may be remarked that caste in India is a culturally specific idiom of expression of economic, political and ideological interests and sentiments which

may, under certain circumstances, be used to mask the internal contradictions of status and class hierarchies. It would, however, be a serious error to infer from this that caste and collective mobilization are inversely related. In fact, the connection between caste and collective mobilization is rather complex. Thus, between the 1920s and the 1940s in Rajasthan, while the peasant castes—Jats, Bishnois, Sirvis and Dakars—and some tribal groups, such as the Bhils and the Gerasias of Mewar region, used their caste and tribal networks for collective mobilization against the landlords and the colonial state, the Rajputs failed to unite around caste. This was so mainly because, unlike the peasants and the tribal groups, the Rajputs were internally differentiated in terms of their economic, political status and interests (cf. Singh 1979).

Thus, the effectiveness of caste as a medium of mass mobilization is conditioned by a convergence or divergence of caste ties with economic, political interests. However, the circumstances under which caste may or may not facilitate collective mobilization need to be concretely investigated. Unfortunately, rather than relying on concrete investigation, the relationship between caste and peasant militancy in India has been enigmatized by a rather false controversy centred around caste and class as mutually exclusive categories. The main source of this controversy may be found in the liberal theoretical assumptions which have largely contributed to the myth that caste makes peasants submissive and passive.

The Marxists, on the other hand, have not been sufficiently sensitive to the significance of caste in collective mobilization in India. Gough's main contribution in this context is that she develops an analysis of concrete peasant movements which demonstrates how under certain circumstances caste can serve as a vehicle of organization and collective mobilization of peasantry, while under different circumstances it can be used to camouflage the real issues in order to weaken or even subvert the struggle. It all depends on the historical context (cf. Gough 1974).

Indian Tradition and Millenarian Movements

Gough disagrees with the argument made by Hobsbawm, Cohn and Worsley that millenarian movements, usually associated with the Judeo-Christian tradition, were relatively rare or absent in India. She, in agreement with Stephen Fuchs (1965), maintains that a number of millenarian movements have arisen among Hindu, Muslim and tribal populations of India. These movements were particularly prominent in the early days of the East India Company rule in Bengal when, as a result of the combined effect of rack-renting and natural disasters, the peasants were being exposed to unusual hardships in their daily lives. Many of these movements attracted tens of thousands of followers, and some of them, covering large territories, lasted for several months.

Deriving their inspiration from religion and investing their leaders with supernatural powers, the people involved in these movements nevertheless employed empirical means to redress their predominantly secular grievances. Going still further, Gough traces in India some of the common forms of popular uprisings, e.g., social banditry, terrorist vengeance, mass insurrections, etc., that occurred in other parts of the world, including Western Europe (Gough, 1974:1399-1400). She thus provides an unambiguous refutation of the "exceptional" character of the Indian case with regard to peasant movements. Comparative accounts of peasant resistance and struggles in a cross-cultural and historical perspective constitute a promising area of enquiry that can throw light on various contentious issues relating to classifying social formations and identifying the processes of change in various pre-colonial and colonial societies. In the Indian context, Gough was the first to initiate this.

The Revolutionary Potential of the Middle Peasant

Additionally, Kathleen Gough's work provides a corrective to Hamza Alavi's (1965) and Eric Wolf's (1969) notion of the middle peasant as *the* revolutionary class. Once again, her studies suggest that this question is essentially historical, that is to say, which class of peasantry takes the initiative depends on the historical context. Furthermore, even the application of such categories as the rich, middle and poor peasant depends on the historical situation. Thus, she shows how in the Indian context it may not always be possible to clearly demarcate the rich and the middle peasants. More significantly, she further remarks, the increasing polarization in the countryside tends to "knock out" the middle peasant as a viable social group as much as it tends to obliterate the differentiation between poor peasants and landless labourers. If one adds to this the cultural categories of "clean" castes, "backward" castes and *Harijans* (the untouchables), the picture gets too complicated to establish the revolutionary potential of the middle peasant on the ground (Gough, 1968:544).

Moreover, unlike Alavi and Wolf, Moore and Skocpol and Subaltern Studies, Gough is more sensitive to the significance of subjective factors, particularly the role of the party, leadership and ideology, in shaping the course and outcome of the peasant movements. In particular, unlike Subaltern Studies (Guha, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985, 1989), for her peasant and tribal uprisings are not to be singled out for celebration as an end in themselves. Rather, they are means to end the exploitation and oppression leading to a more egalitarian and democratic social order. The persistent theme in her analysis of the uprisings of the subaltern groups is that, given the correct ideology and leadership (which will inevitably have elite component), the peasants and tribal groups in India have the potential not only to struggle for, but also to realize the objective of, creating a just social order free of exploitation and oppression. She

concludes: "The increasing poverty, famine and unemployment make it seem certain that India's agrarian ills can be solved only by a peasant-backed revolution . . ." (Gough 1974:1406).

A.R. Desai (1985) in his introduction to *Peasant Struggles in India*, which incidentally is dedicated to Kathleen Gough in recognition of her contributions in this field, emphasizes a need for more theoretically grounded empirical studies of agrarian movements. Unfortunately, those who believe in a lack of peasant militancy in India have not been particularly sensitive to empirical evidence. On the contrary, Gough's refutation of the notion of peasant passivity—supposedly embedded in the Indian caste system, village community and religion—in addition to being theoretically grounded is empirically substantiated. Agrarian tensions and movements are treated by her as central to the internal dynamics of Indian society.

In opposition to a static view of Indian history, in Gough we find an attempt to explain how pre-colonial, pre-capitalist structures and ideologies intertwined with colonial-capitalist penetration to shape the economic-political development of colonial India. Her analysis suggests how this structure was finally overthrown due mainly to the struggles of the Indian people and replaced by a new structure with its own contradictions, giving rise to new tensions and struggles (Gough 1981). In other words, replacing the trans-historical or supra-historical view of India with a historical account, restoring the historicity of Indian society and culture and, more significantly, the human agency of Indian people in making their history is an important contribution of her work—a major corrective. One may disagree, in parts, with her specific accounts of this history. That does not, however, reduce the significance of her perspective and her overall contribution.

I have greatly benefited from both Gough's subject matter (peasant movements) and her method (historical-structural) in developing my own research perspective on colonial hegemony and popular resistance in India. In appraising her work, my intention is not to deify her. Her work has its shortcomings and flaws even though I have not availed of the opportunity to deal with them here. These shortcomings and flaws are, however, heavily outweighed by the overall strength of her contributions. For me, the strongest point of her approach is a conscious choice she made to write anthropology from below, to give voice to the popular masses of India who are denied a voice and agency in the writings of Orientalists, Indologists, Nationalists and many of the liberal, functionalist anthropologists and sociologists. Having made this choice, she pursued her task of investigation and analysis in a rigorous, objective manner with no trace of an attempt to fit facts into her theoretical assumptions and ideological convictions. Conventional sociology and social anthropology tend to represent scholarly objectivity and ideological commitments

as mutually exclusive. Kathleen Gough's life and work provide convincing refutation of this representation.

Concluding Remarks: Imperialism and Rural Resistance

In 1969 Kathleen Gough stressed the significance of peasant struggles in light of the fact that a third of the world was already under socialism, and there were widespread peasant movements in many parts of the Third World (Gough 1969:526). Today, the socialist world is in turmoil and the Third World in disarray. The optimism of the Third World expressed on the occasion of the Bandung Meeting in 1955 has all but evaporated, and anti-democratic forces are becoming increasingly more visible not only in the Third World but also in the first world and in most of what until recently was the socialist world. The popular resistance against the spectre of domination of the Third World by the powers-that-be has therefore assumed a new significance.

The most salient contribution of Gough in this context is her analysis of imperialism as a global phenomenon which "leaves its imprint" on the modern epoch. An urge to use anthropological knowledge to analyze how imperialism affects the colonial societies and how the colonized subjects resist and struggle against colonial/imperial domination has been her chief concern. For her, modern imperialism is neither the beginning nor the end of human history. Right from its inception, imperialism has faced resistance and struggle by those who have been adversely affected by its inherent inequities. So long as these inequities continue, the resistance and struggle against them will not cease, reducing the idea of the "end of history" to a wishful thinking (cf. Gough 1990).

In the Preface to her *Rural Society in Southeast India*, Kathleen Gough writes that the years of her work in India were among the happiest in her life (Gough, 1981:xiv). As a tribute to her memory, I may add a note from *Bahagawad Geeta*, part of the great tradition of Indian philosophy, which maintains (in free translation) that life (spirit) is never born; it never dies; it is not destroyed with the destruction of the body (which is destructible); it's eternal; it continues after death:

Na jăyatĕ mriyatĕ vă kadăchid
Năyam bhŭtwă bhavită vă na bhŭyah
Ajo nityam shăshwato yam purănam
Na hanyatĕ hanymănĕ sharĭrĕ
(*Bahăgawad Geetă*)

Kathleen Gough is not dead: in spirit, she continues to live with us. Just as her work continues to inspire us.

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