Telling Revolution: Oral History and Peasant Unrest During India's Freedom Movement

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> What was the peasant movement in Pandaul?
>
> It was then that the great lion, Suraj Narain Singh, fought the greatest of landlords, the Maharaja of Darbhanga. When these two powerful men met, it was the greatest of battles—only Suraj Babu could defeat such a giant.
>
> He was the kind of man that we all rallied behind, peacefully then—without weapons or force and with persistence alone we forced the Maharaja to give up his land.
>
> Chandra Kant Mishra
> Gandhwar Village[1]

Chandra Kant Mishra, a participant in a small peasant movement in north India in 1939, begins to tell his story of political unrest, centering on his experience as an associate of the popular labor and peasant leader Suraj Narain Singh, known to his followers as Suraj Babu. By telling the story of his political activity, Chandra Kant Mishra is coming to terms with exactly what the peasant movement of the 1930s was trying to accomplish. At that time, peasants in all parts of India protested for greater rights on their land, autonomy from landlords, and a voice in the government. Participants commonly linked agrarian unrest to the Freedom Movement from Great Britain which they saw as representing some kind of "revolution."

For Chandra Kant Mishra the story of that peasant movement cannot be told outside the context of Suraj Babu's life because Mishra had joined politics in large part due to his deep respect for Suraj Babu as a leader. Indeed, Mishra describes the movement as one of many feats performed by his hero. In doing so, he demonstrates a prevalent example of popular history: the heroic narrative.

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In fact, from the experiences of the peasants of Pandaul emerge many "histories" of political unrest which are characterized most prominently by a diversity of style, perspective, and ultimate conclusion. Although some, like Mishra's, clearly focus on local heroes, this is just one of three general categories into which the local histories of Pandaul fit. The other two are the ideological treatise and the personal account of individual failure or success.

This essay looks at these types of village-stories to explore their influence on the larger politics of the 1930s and after. It demonstrates that the richness of the local histories told in villages helped to create an image of massive rebellion that became part of official reports. But at the same time the official responses to local upheaval relied on selective understanding of these oral sources. Consequently the ultimate political solutions offered to peasant problems distorted the local situation.

To understand the quality of the stories and their political influence, we must first examine the "texts" of various local histories of the Pandaul Movement as portrayed by their "authors." The diversity of interests revealed in these texts touches on the complex relationships within an agrarian society. This paper, however, is not intended to be a broad analysis of rural social structure or of the particular peasant movement in Pandaul. Rather, by showing different, even contradictory, perceptions of the movement that coexisted among the participants, and the process through which those understandings were communicated to major political leaders, it suggests the influence that oral sources had on the politicians of the 1930s.

This argument is not unrelated to analyses performed by many scholars exploring the validity and accuracy of oral records and their uses in historiography.[2] In fact, it is perhaps a corollary to those arguments, because by examining which stories, told in the villages as recently as the 1930s, received the most attention from society, we might understand how they reached the most influential ears. From that context the heroic narrative, the ideological treatise, and the personal narrative emerge as useful categories to describe the content and style of local histories.

In heroic narratives, for example, the tellers often measure their own roles in relation to their closeness to the hero. These histories, not unlike legends of the ancient past, suggest the power of idol creation. The heroes of Pandaul, true to their antecedents of cultural myth, loom high above their followers in bravery and courage. In Pandaul, both Suraj Babu and another local leader, Ramnandan Mishra, in one way or another fit this description because of their contributions to local politics.

The ideological treatise differs from the hero story in that it focuses on a range of political conventions promoted by nationalists and socialists. But they too are punctuated by local culture. In contrast to the dogmas that shaped political action in towns and cities, rural ideologues are uniformly less uniform. Peasants did not issue platforms or publish position papers; rather,

they called upon local versions of nationalism or socialism in order to interpret their own actions. Nationalists, for example, couched the history of the peasant movement in terms of the central events of anti-British mobilization. According to them, unrest in the fields of 1939 accelerated through 1942 in the name of the Quit-India campaign; it was all part of a continuing process. The socialists, who were in fact most numerous in the peasant movement, sought to explain that movement ideologically, as a means of establishing a new system of land control, wresting land from the large *zamindar,* the landlord, who in Pandaul was the Maharaja of Darbhanga, and giving it to the tiller. Yet, even within these broad ideologies there was great variety—a hallmark of local history.

Finally, a third category of oral history is generated from the perspective of personal gain. Peasants, reasonably enough, were concerned primarily with their own acquisition of land or other resources; simply put, those who acquired land considered the movement a success, and those who did not thought it a failure. In other words, even more than in other accounts, here history becomes a matter of personal experience projected as general truth.

In most cases, of course, these three categories are neither clearly distinct nor self-consciously used. One history may combine elements of each and, indeed, all freely intertwined within most accounts. Still, the tellers were predominantly preoccupied with the veracity of their own claims. They concentrated on the "truth" and "accuracy" of their oral record. It is the objective of every teller to produce a narrative that presents an ordered picture of the movement as a whole.

Depending on the vantage of the speakers, which cut across traditional lines, such as social or economic status, the same movement succeeded, grew and spread, or became isolated and suppressed. Thus, any analysis that limits village politics by applying a single conventional mold, whether nationalist, socialist, class, or caste, quickly becomes futile. Moreover, such analysis obscures the real political significance—a significance celebrated in local legends—that the politics of rural India in the 1930s were a manifestation of agrarian culture.

LEGEND AND POLITICS

The narratives that villagers tell of their own past are steeped in the symbols of local culture and represent modern-day legends of peasant movements and of the Freedom Movement in general. They incorporate the festive ingredients of religious rituals and family celebrations into the political context of the 1930s. Costumes, bands, songs, and banners stored away after the wedding season reappear in political parades. Village politics, like village culture, grew out of the seasonal rhythm of peasant society changing and evolving in natural cycles, while incorporating the new developments of the

nationalist era. Parades, mass-meetings, and festival-like marches characterized local political expression and employed, as the symbols of protest, the essential material of field labor—food, crops, and land.

The process of mobilization incorporated these symbols into political action by means of crop burnings or taking over fields. Such politics carried meaning appreciated by villagers who shared a land-based view of the world and served to unite—or at least to create a unified image from among—a wide range of interests. Songs and legends, both old and new, were the cornerstone of that effort. They functioned as conduits for transmitting news and information from village to village and year to year; peasants, literate or not, could carry the message of unrest by mouth and by foot. Thus, the songs and stories produced by the peasant movement also defined, explained, and commemorated the process of unrest for the village community, but not only for the village community.

Political organizations, like the Indian National Congress, as well as government officials carefully monitored what they saw as a highly volatile atmosphere in the countryside. They relied on people in the villages to report local events, meetings, and issues of contention, to be recorded in their official documents. Intermediaries, who were interested in this task of reporting, passed on stories and legends from the countryside of massive peasant mobilization—a powerful image—which corroborated brief observations. The process of reporting thrust what had been local, agrarian interests into the spotlight of nationalist politics. District level Congress workers carried general accounts of meetings and protests to provincial officers and submitted the accounts to nationalist newspapers. In time, stories—with a seeming momentum of their own—were transmitted and exaggerated to indicate that violence spread through the districts, rural rebellion brewed within tranquil village scenes, and that revolution would follow. Such legends suited British paranoia and fueled rumors of the British Government's greatest fear—and a fear of the Indian National Congress as well—that the masses would ultimately rise against imperialism.

How did local legend become the source of such power? Even though there was never a unified peasant movement, the power of peasant politics lay in its potential for unification. Also, peasants controlled two essential resources: rural communication and food. Consequently, information that emerged from villages in the form of narratives shaped external perceptions of local mobilization because they were the only readily available source. The threat of uprisings, in turn, raised doubts about the reliability of the food supply: after all, peasants fed politicians, police, and soldiers—nationalists and imperialists, alike.

From this village perspective, it is clear that the motivation for political mobilization and, in a literal sense, for independence emerged as much from the fields as from the cities. Villagers, because of their central role in Indian

life, imposed their interests on the nationalist political debate, wittingly and unwittingly shaping history.

STORIES OF HEROES, NATIONALISM, AND THE SOCIALISTS

The following examples of oral history from the Pandaul circle of villages demonstrate the types of story telling characteristic of the movements in the 1930s. The Pandaul Circle was an administrative unit of the Raj of Darbhanga in north Bihar. It was a closely managed division of the massive estate controlled by the Maharaja of Darbhanga. The Maharaja was not a ruler in the political sense, but a large land owner who also collected revenue for the British Government of India. Every locality within the Darbhanga Raj and outside it had a unique history in the 1930s and Pandaul was no exception. But in the larger sense of a shared agrarian culture, the experience in Pandaul illustrated those qualities of local mobilization and the means of portraying local history that characterized village politics.

Chandra Kant Mishra's story of politics in Pandaul, as we have seen, emphasizes the role of a particular hero.

> I will tell you about the movement in Pandaul. It was in 1939 . . . led by Suraj Narain Singh.
>
> You know, he was a rebel from the beginning. He left school out of rebelliousness and joined the revolutionaries, fighting against the British. He spent much time in house arrest in his village, Narpatnagar, but every night he would sneak out and we'd hold meetings. That is how he became aware of the workers' troubles in the sugar mill. Suraj Babu went to the mill to organize them. I was a manager, but quit because of the movement. I had been arrested in the 1936 bomb case, so I was already initiated into politics when he started the first union in the sugar industry.
>
> [Suraj Babu] organized the local Socialist party and I was with him all the way. . . . Lion [Suraj Narain Singh] against the Zamindar. The Maharaja, of course, had the support of the government—the police. Even his managers were British. Suraj Babu gave speeches and was followed by the police for weeks, though we hid him out. Ramnandan Mishra finally negotiated a settlement.
>
> But we all continued fighting, even after the settlement and were arrested again in 1942. That year, Suraj Babu escaped from jail, with Jaya Prakash Narayan, fleeing to Nepal through these villages. He was hidden in the fields or in thickets by peasants along the way. People collected food for him and finally he made it to the training camp in the hills. From there we launched further attacks [on the British] under his leadership.[3]

Beyond idolizing Suraj Babu, the narrative neatly fits the local peasant movement into the whole Indian freedom struggle including the 1942 anti-British rebellion. In this account there is no clear distinction between political action for wages, land, or self-rule. The 1930s and 1940s were a time of many

smaller revolutions—both violent and non-violent—that Chandra Kant Mishra ties into the larger nationalist cause. By linking the peasant movement to the anti-British movement Chandra Kant Mishra implies that the revolution succeeded ultimately in 1947 when the nation won independence.

But national independence was not the primary aim of all participants. Socialists, for example, viewed workers' and peasants' rights as the main goal of unrest, as the following story from a local party founder, Kulanand Vaidik, makes clear.

> In 1936 we established the Darbhanga Socialist Party. Six of us met in the house of Suraj Babu in Narpatnagar village and at the same time as other socialist parties were inaugurated around the country ours was founded. We left the next morning sure we had begun something of importance. I came back to Darbhanga; I was working in the labor movement organizing mill workers. Our motto was "from each man according to his ability and to each man according to his need."[4]

Socialist rhetoric linked local politics to the budding parties, which functioned on another layer of political experience. Activists like Kulanand Vaidik, or Vaidikji, as he was called, came from villages and joined political movements near their homes. Vaidikji himself had little land but enough that it was considered a sacrifice for him to leave it to be politically active; he found his niche in the socialist wing of the Congress. He used what he knew, village issues, to mold the local socialist platform and in turn communicated these locally relevant socialist ideas to other peasants.

Fundamentally, Vaidikji wove his story of the movement from the threads of different participant's lives. In the following passage he explains his philosophy about 1930s political movement, that all the participants played separate roles which combined to create a movement with socialist objectives. He compares his own role with those of Ramnandan Mishra, the peasants who worked the land, the Socialist Party as a whole, and landless laborers.

> We convinced Ramnandan Mishra to join the Socialist Party because he was a good speaker, clearly a good politician, despite his background as the son of a large landowner. He was always prominent in the program at meetings.
>
> Each man had his own role; I went to jail, often [pause] and I led songs.
>
> [The peasants who participated] wanted the right to plant what they thought would be most useful, not the jute or sugarcane that the mills wanted for profit. . . . I was there but it wasn't my land . . . in fact, I was at all the movements [in Darbhanga] calling for peasants to stand before the Maharaja and claim their land.
>
> The first stage was to organize the peasants, the next stage would have been to organize the landless laborers. We never got that far. It is difficult to awaken the masses.[5]

Part of Vaidikji's role, as he acknowledges, was to lead the singing at rallies. Songs were among the most important media for that communication, either created for the occasion or adapted from other sources. To Vaidikji, the songs set the parameters for a political event.

> We would often begin the meetings with songs about independence or later about revolution. In the days of the Pandaul peasant struggle a thousand people gathered in the fields for weeks in the hot season. We sang at the beginning and end of meetings and Suraj Babu called for strikes and protest in between. I led the singing.[6]

The tune, the meter, and the rhythm of the songs energized political rallies and the rhyming scheme helped singers remember the words. For example this verse and refrain from a long marching song illustrates the pattern and rhetoric common to many songs.

> *Dekh kaise dhandalee*
> *Hai muthtee, ye char su*
> *Chuste hain ameer*
> *Up Gareeb ka lahoo*
> *Oh gareeb, ek awaz*
> *Utar nisan ingalab*
>
> Look at the trickery
> Churning all around
> The rich suck the blood of the poor
> Awaken, oh poor! In one voice
> Bring the goal of revolution![7]

The words echo socialist themes and may have been borrowed from another movement, another language, or even another culture. But through its use local participants incorporated both the song and its rhetoric into the literature of the Pandaul struggle. Vaidikji made songs more immediately relevant to particular occasions by adding verses or by following the singing with speeches and exhortation. "Whose land is this?" he would ask, begging the answer, "The peasants!" "Who deserves the wages?" "The workers!" "We are poor but we are strong!"[8]

Such exchanges and singing promoted the sense of community; the crowd had gathered for a common purpose and the songs reinforced lessons that participants could take home—a practice that preserved the songs over time. Even those women who never participated in the public meetings often knew the songs, remembered them, and passed them on to another generation.[9]

Vaidikji, despite his facility for working a crowd, was never anointed by participants as a "heroic" leader. Rather, he is remembered as a devoted comrade. The popular perception is that he slept on the floor and ate *marua* (poor people's food) with the peasants and the workers. And in a sense that

was his badge of distinction and popularity. He himself remained skeptical about so-called leaders and politicians. As he put it, "Each one of them has his own agenda. They have their own interests. A peasant must look out for his own rights."[10]

On the other hand, one such leader, Ramnandan Mishra, was a natural for the role of hero. He led marches, rather than followed in them, and gave stirring addresses at public functions. His manner was aristocratic, a manner that was powerful and that distanced him from his followers. He did not eat or sleep with them, and, in fact, was jailed in the special section reserved for important people. That, of course was the choice of his jailers, but it substantiated his image. As one observer put it, "His heart was the heart of a Socialist, but his mind and his manner were those of a capitalist."[11] For Ramnandan, this dual image proved to be an asset. The Socialists had cajoled him into the party when they needed a candidate to run for President of the Darbhanga District Congress Committee. As the well-known son of a prominent landowner, he might widen the socialists' base.

Even after he lost the election, however, Ramnandan remained in the socialist movement and, in part due to his visibility, he became a recognized hero. His greatest support came from people like himself, from well-to-do families; they joined in the movement either for the gratification of creating social change or for personal gain. As a wealthy villager who had acquired land through the movement said, "Suraj Babu was always very radical; Ramnandan Mishra was the real leader, greater than him."

Wealthy tenant-cultivators, some inspired by Ramnandan and others concerned about news of an upcoming election, joined Congress politics in late 1936. The first "general" election was indeed called and a limited electorate, made up of taxpayers, usually urban professionals, landlords, and large tenant cultivators, cast their first votes in January 1937 for either the Congress Party or, in Pandaul, the Landlord Party. Congress won by a large majority. In the low stakes, informal atmosphere of that election, tenants of the Maharaja supported the Congress with no fear of retribution from the Maharaja, even though he was the main sponsor of the Landlord Party.[12]

These wealthy tenants, with the same good-natured spirit of competition that they displayed in the election, remained in the Congress, despite the strong influence of the socialists, throughout the time of the 1939 peasant movement.[13] They petitioned the Maharaja to settle some of his land with them on permanent rent contracts. A settlement of this sort would allow them permanent rights to produce crops or collect rent on the landlord's land without ownership; a portion of the rent or produce was given in turn to the Maharaja. Many of these new supporters of peasant movements were already privileged tenants of the Darbhanga Raj. They guessed that moderate pressure on the Maharaja—even if not overtly from them—might result in a distribution of local land rights; and they were right. It was indeed these elites

who ultimately purchased the land rights offered in the agreement of 1939. For them more than any other group of peasants the movement that ended in 1939 was a success.

TALES OF WINNING AND LOSING

The stories of large tenant farmers recall the greatest victories of the peasant movement. As individuals, they profited most clearly from the 1939 agitation and they described the success in very personal terms. Their separate triumphs were in large part the result of their collective political influence as voters and political workers for the increasingly powerful provincial and national organizations, like the Indian National Congress. One of these wealthy tenant-farmers, Amar Kant Thakur, who was also a member of the Congress described the movement in these terms.

> Yes, I remember the Pandaul movement. In 1939 the protesting began on the *bakasht* land of the Maharaja, a few miles away, down near Sagarpur . . . . *Bakasht* land is a category of land that used to belong to peasants and was later taken by the landlord for lack of payment of rent . . . so it really [belonged to peasants]. All of this land to the left of my house was the Maharaja's *bakasht* and we got it after the struggle. Not free, mind you, but for about 75 rupees an acre.[14]

Amar Kant Thakur explains that although the protests took place on a particular field to which peasants sought access, land distributed by the agreement was situated some distance away. Ironically, the Maharaja used the opportunity of a settlement to his advantage to dispense with the responsibility of collecting rent on less valuable parcels of land.

The Maharaja also used the Pandaul land settlement to reward those peasants who by remaining out of the peasant movement remained loyal. Amar Kant Thakur's father was among them. Thus when Amar Kant Thakur tells the story of the movement he emphasizes the general qualities of the protest; namely, the success of any peasant, wealthy or poor, represents a success for all peasants.

> Many peasants were arrested for taking possession of the fields. I wasn't arrested; I was too young and my father . . . was opposed to such things. Still, the Maharaja sent his men to the field, the three-cornered field near Sagarpur where the meetings took place—and the police came too—and peasants were arrested [when they called] for land.
>
> It was not a violent movement. The peasants were going through the motions of discontent because others had before. It was all performed, symbolically. The land that they got was also a gesture. The Maharaja was never cruel to them the way small landlords were [to their tenants]. And in the end . . . there was an agreement.[15]

Amar Kant Thakur was adamant about the peasants' lack of animosity

towards a benevolent landlord, in part because that lack of animosity had helped his family get land. Other activists who had participated in the movement, however, did not perceive this benevolence. Many of them proposed not merely the distribution of land, but the abolition of the *zamindari* system, the system of land control in which power over production was concentrated with landlords. From that vantage point the movement of 1939 failed. Although the Maharaja's settlement of 1939, later called the Pandaul Agreement, had allocated some of the land to new controllers, it certainly did not over turn the general system of land control.

Hitlal Yadav, a participant dissatisfied with the Maharaja's settlement, recalled the movement as a revolution that took many years to fulfill.[16] He remembered crowds of peasants shouting "Suraj Babu *Ki Jai*" ("Hail to Suraj Babu") interspersed with "*Inqalab Zindabad*" ("Long live the revolution"), and "*Zamindari Nasht Ho!*" ("Abolish the *zamindari* system!") "Not until *zamindari* was stopped was there any success," he said.[17] And that only happened, selectively, beginning in 1953.[18]

Many other peasant-participants agreed with Hitlal Yadav's assessment, and some were even more pessimistic about the value of peasant unrest. For example, Ram Roop Yadav, who followed his younger brother, Dukhi Yadav, into politics in the mid-1930s, did not believe that the abolition of *zamindari* ever created useful change. He remembered the 1939 movement bitterly—as energy expended for no apparent purpose.

> The movement against the *zamindar,* who had [taken our land] was on the *tinkonma* land—the land of three corners—where we grew *sawai,* a grass that makes rope. It was our land; formerly we had grown food there, but later Allen *Sahab* [Mr. Allen] insisted on a *sawai* crop for sale in the market.
>
> That is why we began the protest. We should grow what we please, not what an Englishman said. Sure, he worked for the Maharaja, but he [the Maharaja] was an agent—a spy—of the government. That is why he hired the British managers. We sought to expel them, all the British, and get back our land. But when they were gone we still did not have land.[19]

Ram Roop begins to apply the logic of the Freedom Movement to the politics for land, but then rejects it. The rest of his narrative reveals, in its detail, the significance that the movement still holds in his life.

> We went to the field in the morning . . . shouting, "Abolish *Zamindari!*" My brother and his wife were among us. . . . Some people carried banners with slogans on them and red flags. Then illegally we cut the *sawai* crop until we were all arrested. . . . We ourselves had informed the police that we would do this; we expected arrest.
>
> The effect of the settlement . . . was that only some wealthy villagers got land. That is because we did not do the negotiating—someone came from Patna to do it. Then, years later they gave the land to *harijans* [untouchables]. In any event, *we* did not get the land.[20]

Ram Roop Yadav's story received concurring nods from his neighbors in the Sakri Gope Tola. Many of them idolized his now deceased brother, Dukhi Yadav, who was hailed as a local hero for his devotion to the peasant cause. Dukhi Yadav had never proposed to be a leader, but he had actively participated each time the peasants banded together. He led marches and joined the movement at its most critical moment by illegally cutting crops in the *tinkonma* field under the gaze of armed agents of the landlord. This bravery, reinforced by his lengthy record of arrest—a badge of courage among peasants and freedom-fighters—established his reputation and enhanced his brother's. Because of his relationship with Dukhi Yadav and his own initiation through jail, Ram Roop's neighbors and co-workers considered him an authoritative oral historian of the movement.

He interpreted the struggle at least in part on caste terms; it was an attempt by upper castes to retrieve land that the Maharaja had taken by treachery. By upper castes Ram Roop meant those caste he considered to be on a par with his own. The *yadavs* are a middle caste made up largely of people who derive their income from cattle raising. In Ram Roop's vision of the movement, the activists came primarily from among the *yadav, brahmin,* and *rajput* communities. The untouchables, whom he calls *harijans,* played no direct role, and in fact he considered them scabs employed by the Majaraja to do the work that peasants-in-protest had stopped.[21]

Untouchable castes, for example, *musahars, chamars,* and *dosadhs* worked as wage laborers often paid by peasants who held the land on rent from the *zamindar.* Ram Roop's bitter description of untouchables easing the hardship that peasants tried to create for the landlord highlights one of the natural tensions in agrarian relations. When peasants, whose contracts with landlords provided them some stability on the land, refused to plant or even cut crops, landlords often responded by hiring wage-laborers to take their places.[22]

Local untouchables who remembered the movement, and *hajams* (barbers) who know well the history and gossip of their village, present another image of the movement, one in which their castes were caught between two greater powers. Zugai Thakur remembered parades, slogans, and the words to political songs, though he claimed he had only watched; he had no time to participate. In a brand new *tola,* a separated neighborhood of Mohuddinpur village, some untouchables of the *musahar* caste, who had land granted to them in the 1950s, claimed they did march in the protests of the 1930s.

> We had to choose sides. The Maharaja paid some people to support him and terroized those who did not. But the peasants from Pandaul also got us to help. They promised us land, but it did not come until Vinobaji. And look—this is the meager land we got.[23]

But out of a sense of accomplishment or gratefulness or for fear of the repercussions, another resident of the *tola* defended the post-independence government: "We fought for independence and in time we got this land. Having land is everything."[24]

CREATING POLITICAL CHANGE THROUGH LEGEND

A logical conclusion to draw from the stories of villagers might be to tie together bits of oral evidence to create a cohesive account, one portrait of "truth." A single story might emerge from these accumulated fragments. But the villagers of Pandaul have many pasts, not one. The truth in their stories lies not in their corroboration with one another or with written evidence, but in what they reveal about peasant society and the way they translated local issues to a larger political audience.

The stories, then, are not random memories, but reflections of diverse interests that co-existed in the rural environment. More importantly, some of them filtered into the records and policies of the government and powerful political organizations, thus shaping the content of the political dialogue on peasant issues. But which ones? And how did that process of communication work? The contemporary political institutions are a useful starting point.

Long before India had a national government, its internal and varied political organizations debated what they took to be the interests of the masses, the peasants. On regional and national levels, burgeoning organizations, divided by special interests, fought among themselves for increased power and influence, not only vis a vis the British, but to develop an indigenous constituency. Thus, the Kisan Sabha, the proponent of peasant-rights, and the Indian National Congress debated village issues in an arena of politics peripheral to the villages. Politics at this level is what one might call conventional because it was characterized by the formation of structured organizations, elections within those organizations, publication of positions and resolutions, and negotiation with the British for official control.[25] The actors in this political arena had the power to negotiate with landlords in order to settle landlord-tenant disputes. Ultimately, the Kisan Sabha and the Indian National Congress, with the specific help of the socialists, formulated legislation and agreements intended to benefit peasants.

This style of political action existed in villages, but only to a limited degree. Village politics relied much more heavily on the customary relationships that already existed among villagers and the cultural expression of politics, like pilgrimages, festivals, or *melas* (fairs). Indeed, political activity in this era, even when it focused on the peasants, was taking place in two different though open arenas of conflict, each with its own rules, methods, and style of political action. The distinction between the style of politics at the local level and that which existed among the larger organizations is most

apparent at the point where the two arenas intersected: on the issues of peasant interests.

The large organizations carried on a debate among themselves over who could best serve the needs of the masses and how that might be done. They relied on efficient and willing "reporters" in the field to determine what issues were important to the peasants. These reporters evaluated and communicated the protests, marches, and meetings of local politics to provincial and national committees of the Congress and the Kisan Sabha, translating the story of events into political language that suited an organization's special interest.

Indeed, the extent of communication between "levels" increased with the 1937 election as local elites joined the electoral debate. Prominent tenant-cultivators found in the election a legitimate and non-threatening way to demonstrate their independence from the Maharaja's local control—by voting for an outside, Congress candidate rather than the candidates supported by the Maharaja. These few families, such as Amar Kant Thakur's, who were supporters and associates of Ramnandan Mishra supported Congress in anticipation of the new experience of voting for representatives.

That election had particular significance for these voters: the Congress government proposed that it would provide an outlet for the redress of local grievances and a forum in which voters' concerns—and those of non-voters—would be aired. For the tenants of the Darbhanga Raj this meant access to new or additional sources of mediation in local disputes. The same problems that were usually settled by agents of the Maharaja's pseudo government, such as disputes over land or rent, now might be legislated by the Congress Ministry. On a less tangible level, tenant cultivators, even the wealthy ones, felt alienated from the courts, which they associated with a British run government that was very close to the Maharaja; the Congress government expressed its duty not to the Maharaja, but to the voters.

Symbolically, the election opened up new possibilities for political expression at very little risk for large tenants of the Raj. As they joined in the political debates of the Congress, they carried their land interests with them. They also articulated their own interpretations of village politics and reformed local history in their own image. The views of these new members of Congress dominated the official Congress perception of what was going on in the villages. Other members of the Congress considered these village elites to be insiders in village affairs and so, for example, their portrayal of the Pandaul movement, as a victory for the peasants and especially for peasants in the Congress, became the accepted one.[26]

The government, interested in maintaining security in the countryside, designated certain law enforcement officials and whole departments to the analysis of local unrest. Government observers following Congress members and Kisan Sabhaites on their lecture tours collected the same tales of unrest

from the same informants. But government reports carried these stories to still another degree of abstraction. Police officers observed numbers of participants at meetings and in fields, not distinguishing between the different impulses that brought them there. The object of the report was to condense stories of unrest into neatly organized patterns and generalize from the issues raised by different observers in order to make one cohesive political argument. One incident became a trend, one dispute a general grievance; a *yadav's* clash with a *brahmin* became casteism and a legal suit between like-caste landlords and tenants became class conflict.

In other words, the government reports, as a result of over-analysis, distorted the causes, issues, and actions of local politics. The making of single reports violated the essential paradigm of local history: variation, co-existing in village society, was the hallmark of local politics. In that way, even at the highest levels of government, the process of story-making continued. Local observations became written reports—an objective written record—and were not called stories at all, but rather, documentary evidence. Committing the evolving local stories to stagnant reports gave the government version of peasant unrest undue authenticity and limited validity.

The high-level "story tellers," like those at every other stage of the process, intended their histories to further particular objectives. For example, government officers used such reports to determine law enforcement procedures. The Maharaja even suggested that the government was holding against him the fact that there was unrest on his lands and as a result he did not receive the special favors he thought he deserved. Politically, the government used the "evidence" of peasant uprisings to justify repression of Congress and Kisan Sabha politicians and to maintain legal constraints on nationalist activity. The government, in short, accepted that the large political organizations were instigating rebellion and directed remedies at them rather than at the land control situation.[27]

The Congress and the Kisan Sabha, for their parts, encouraged this perception. To each of these organizations, success in the conventional political arena depended on creating or reinforcing the impression within the British government not only that widespread rebellion was brewing, but also that the large organizations were in control and, therefore, that they had the power to channel the revolution. This shared policy between the Congress and the Kisan Sabha strongly influenced their handling of the "peasant issue." It permitted the agreement of the Kisan Sabha not to oppose the Congress in the election of 1937 and indeed the Kisan Sabha brought about the Congress' overwhelming victory.

Yet despite these organizational agreements, uprisings continued on the other level of political action, in the fields. Unable to prevent it, Congress, having won the election and formed a government in Bihar, was embarrassed. Many Congress leaders turned aside as police increased repressive tactics

against peasants. Other Congressmen secretly—and some overtly—sabotaged peasant activities and assured the British that they were in control. But they were not.

The politics of unrest, for land, the right to produce food crops, jobs as laborers, or against landlord brutality, was going on despite political negotiations or agreements.[28] People in Pandaul like those in so many other places were agitating for all the separate concerns illustrated here.

By 1939 the extent of communication between the conventional political arena and local peasant-activists expanded further, but conduits of communication remained the same—intermediaries, like the wealthy tenant cultivators, who interpreted one political level for the other. Ramnandan Mishra played this role as a local leader in Pandaul and elsewhere; he functioned in both arenas, not fitting entirely into either one.

The 1939 Pandaul Agreement, which ultimately settled some of the Maharaja's land with a few peasants, illustrates the point that rural politics had sufficient influence to bring provincial politicians to Pandaul in order to settle the dispute. The winners from that settlement were those peasants whose political action most clearly suited the Congress' impression of the movement—an impression that these soon-to-be beneficiaries themselves had helped to create. They proffered an image of a movement by peasants to regain control of land that they had owned. These same peasants, as Amar Kant Thakur put it, "had protested symbolically" or not at all against the landlord, "without animosity," and were often tenants on good terms with the Maharaja.

With the influence of intermediaries, like Ramnandan Mishra, who of course was still a socialist, the Congress and the Kisan Sabha imposed the rhetoric of revolution that was a real part of the unrest of the 1930s onto the more conservative 1939 Agreement. In the "story-making" that resulted, the two separate realities, one of a successful movement by wealthy tenant farmers and the other of a failed class struggle by poor peasants and laborers, became compressed into the image of a single successful revolt—part of the larger revolution-to-come.

Kulanand Vaidik, a local socialist, reinforced that perspective. He said, "First you rouse the peasants, then you awaken the agricultural laborers and ultimately the revolution will succeed and they will all have land." Pandaul, then, could be considered a successful first step. That perception certainly was "true," if also drastically incomplete. It ignores the complexity of interests that had made up the movement. And it was those varied interests expressing themselves in tandem that had drawn enough local support to appear to be powerful and widespread.

Still, the Pandaul movement, as an example of local peasant movements of the time and the stories they incorporated into the larger political arena, demonstrates a method by which village interests would make

themselves heard in post-independence society. Peasants, including the successful ones, understood independence and revolution in local terms based on land rights, which may in fact even have contradicted a larger nationalist vision of freedom from Great Britain. However, whether or not the 1939 movement in Pandaul itself was a general success, the peasants of Pandaul, as in other areas, through agitation and telling tales of agitation managed to project this vision of the political centrality of land into the politics of the new nation. To control the land of India would be to control the land of the village.

Thus, the continued interaction between stories of political experiences and the political experience of story-telling in a very real sense created a connection between local culture and large scale political movements. The ritual of telling about revolution flowed into the rituals of creating it suggesting some new questions to ask about the process of making history. Here, I suggest that local practice became transformed into stories and from stories to witness, from witness to evidence, and from evidence to reports. The reports were considered documents of local activities and were used not only to justify or create laws and policy, but also to write "history."

This clue to the process of creating history is at the same time a lens through which we can reexamine the histories and sources we have used before. It is not enough to treat the stories of villagers with the respect due written sources, but also we must view the written sources with the understanding that they are "stories" as well. Just as the tellers in the villages of Bihar created history, and the hearers recreated it, we propose to make and remake history. With the benefit of all those "historians" who contributed to the oral and written sources, the new histories can strive to connect the individuals to the community; they can be a combination of the local, the regional, and the national—the social, cultural, and the political.

ENDNOTES

1. I collected on audio cassette the accounts of the Pandaul Movement used in this paper as part of dissertation research in rural Bihar in northern India in 1986–87. This research was supported by a dissertation research fellowship from the American Institute of Indian Studies. Funds for arranging the material and transcribing interviews from cassettes have been provided by an American Dissertation Fellowship from the American Association of University Women. The cassettes and transcripts are labeled according to subject and date of interview, as well as by the name of the person or people speaking.

Chandra Kant Mishra, Pandaul Peasant Movement Tape Number 1, November 5, 1986, (hereafter cited PPM:1, November 5, 1986).

2. Of course, much has been written on the uses of oral evidence in reconstructing the past. Historians and anthropologists of Africa are most prominent in this field and new and interesting scholarship continues to emerge from Latin America and the United States. For examples of this literature see the ground-breaking book, *The African Past Speaks: Essays on*

Oral Tradition and History, edited by Joseph Miller, (Kent: Dawson Folkstone, 1980) and two recent examples of the uses of oral history, David W. Cohen, *Towards a Reconstructed Past: Historical Texts from Busoga, Uganda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) and on India, Majid H. Siddiqi, "History and Society in a Popular Rebellion: Mewat, 1920-33," *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 28 (July 1986): 442-467.

3. Chandra Kant Mishra, PPM:1, November 5, 1986 and PPM:6 January 30, 1987. These extracts from the interviews cited above are intended to capture the form and message of his story.

4. This bit of socialist rhetoric came out in broken English in contrast to the fluent Hindi narrative. Vaidik, PPM:4, January 24, 1987.

5. Vaidik, PPM:4, January 24, 1987.

6. Vaidik, PPM:4, January 24, 1987.

7. Transcript of Songs, Book 1, Collected from September 1986 to May 1987; this version verified by Kulanand Vaidik PPM:10, May 6, 1987.

8. Vaidik, PPM:4, January 24, 1987.

9. Although some women did attend the open meetings in fields and market places, many of them remained strictly segregated, according to a system of *purdah* or seclusion; their political activities were separate from those of the men. That makes it all the more interesting that they knew and sang the same songs that were featured in meetings, attended primarily by men. Similarly, some *hajams* or barbers who were considered very low caste, did not participate in the open meetings but knew details of others' participation. Many non-participants had detailed knowledge of the songs and stories of political participation and related them with a sense of memorized precision.

10. Vaidik, PPM:4, January 24, 1987.

11. Certain informants' names have been withheld at their request. PPM:5, January 24, 1987.

12. Actually the opposition to the Indian National Congress was fragmented; in different areas of the state different parties contested in the election and often candidates ran as independents. The Maharaja supported the Landlord Party and some independent candidates in north Bihar; however he had for many years contributed to the Congress as well. An indication of his ambivalent feelings emerges in his newspaper, the *Indian Nation,* which covered the election with enthusiasm for Congress candidates as well as the Landlords' opposition. See *Indian Nation,* especially, January 22, 1937, pp. 6-9.

13. The definition of peasant is too detailed to discuss here. Much debate has ensued about whether peasants involved in local movements were poor, middle, or wealthy. In Pandaul there is evidence for participation from all levels. Income distinctions, as we have seen, were more relevant to understanding the reasons certain people participated, than whether or not they did so.

14. Thakur (not his real name), PPM:1, November 5, 1986.

15. Thakur, PPM:2, November 5, 1986.

16. Hitlal Yadav of Soharai village was a long time participant in local peasant politics. He proudly admitted to carrying a weapon during the days of political protest in the 1930s and 40s and was arrested on several occasions. He made these comments, emphatically, first in a public discussion during which some villagers openly disagreed with his assessment of success (PPM:8, March 12, 1987). He repeated his position in a private meeting (PPM:18, April 4, 1987).

17. H. Yadav, PPM:8, March 12, 1987.

18. Zamindari lands were transferred to the state and then the rights were settled with peasants, according to provisions of the Bihar Land Reform Act of 1950. After many appeals, including those from the Maharaja of Darbhanga, were overturned, some resettling became apparent in Pandaul in the mid-1950s. Disputes over distribution of land continue today.

19. R.R. Yadav, PPM:9, March 17, 1987.

20. R.R. Yadav, PPM:9, March 17, 1987.

21. Ram Roop Yadav uses the word "untouchables" generally to describe very poor landless laborers. He recognizes that the word also has a another connotation derived from religious hierarchy that places certain caste groups in an inferior social position. Discrimination against those castes has now been outlawed and special programs established for their advancement. Many of these recent events color Ram Roops perception of the roles that laborers played in the 1930s movement.

22. The distinction between peasants who rent land and laborers who work for wages—or even the distinction between upper castes and untouchables—was never as clear as Ram Roop suggests.

23. The untouchables of this *tola* did not want their names identified because of the continued conflict over these lands which they received through the Bhoodan Movement in the 1950s. This program created and executed by Vinoba Bhave was specifically designed to distribute land grants to untouchables for building huts and creating small vegetable gardens. PPM:6, February 15, 1987.

24. Anonymous, PPM:5, February 15, 1987.

25. I have long searched for a name, other than "conventional" for the arena of politics that took place on an all-India scale and in the provinces. Some of it was nationalist to be sure, meaning anti-British; but much of it consisted of special interest groups that were trying to increase their influence in Indian society. These groups functioned in a style not unlike that of national parties today, in India and elsewhere, but the word "national" seems to ignore the state or regional component of that political activity. What separated this conventional arena from the local one was its view of politics with an eye on macro solutions through legislation and governmental control and the process of achieving its goals that is described here.

26. An elaboration of the Congress and/or Kisan Sabha impression of the peasant movements is too detailed to give here. The most authoritative analysis has been done by Walter Hauser in "The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, 1929-1942: A Study of an Indian Peasant Movement," University of Chicago, Ph.D. dissertation, 1961.

27. This process is obvious from the Government of India reports recorded throughout the 1930s. The Political Department of the Government of Bihar had a Special Section that dealt directly with the potential law enforcement problems of nationalist and peasant politics. These records housed in the Bihar State Archives have been used extensively and analyzed by many scholars studying this period. See Hauser, previously cited, and Arvind Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio-Economic Change, 1900-1980* (Delhi: Manohar, 1983).

28. The Kisan Sabha supported local agitation and split away from the Congress because of its vacillating policy toward peasants. Bitter political animosity characterized the new relationship between the two organizations which had once freely overlapped.