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# Introduction: The subaltern and the popular<sup>1</sup>

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The papers in this issue address the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘popular’ as subjects and modes of enquiry into culture and history. These papers were first presented at the symposium, ‘The Subaltern and the Popular’, held at the University of California, Santa Barbara in March 2004. We began with the proposition that the precise relation between the subaltern and the popular remains untheorised.

Launching the Subaltern Studies project in 1982, Ranajit Guha explained its purpose as the insertion of the ‘politics of the people’ in the writing of Indian history:

(P)arallel to the domain of elite politics there existed throughout the colonial period another domain of Indian politics in which the principal actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and the groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and intermediate strata in town and country – that is, the people. This was an *autonomous* domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter.<sup>2</sup>

Guha’s notion of ‘subalternity’ was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, following which, subaltern classes are deemed to have limited means of representation.<sup>3</sup> And yet the subalterns have had the wherewithal to resist the colonial and post-colonial state; hence the task of the Subaltern Studies scholars became that of understanding the social and political processes by which such resistance is crafted.

The idea that subalterns inhabit an ‘autonomous’ domain has been persuasively critiqued. The subaltern has come to be seen as inextricably linked to elite discourse, even in resistance, allowing for the possibility of seeing subalternity both as radically relational, and scrupulously singular, not easily flattened into class identity.<sup>4</sup> The problem of subaltern autonomy, however, continues to provide insights into the structural limits of the modern state, as demonstrated by several essays in this volume (see the papers by Rabasa, Sen, Pandey, and Ghosh).

Recently, evaluating the project of the Subaltern Studies, Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested that perhaps the task should not be to yoke the subaltern to the nation-state (bring them the nation, so to speak), but rather return to Gramsci’s idea that the history of the subaltern is necessarily

‘fragmentary and episodic’, and learn to read in such a characterisation the possibilities of denying the binding propositions of the nation-state.<sup>5</sup> This would also imply questioning the very certitudes that operate within the idea of a willing subject that we have inherited from European Enlightenment thought.

The task of writing the subaltern into history, however, has been marked by a deeply felt anxiety of abandoning the emancipatory potential embedded in Enlightenment thought. This comes to the fore when scholars are confronted with the specter of ‘popular culture’. While much has been written about popular culture in South Asia in recent years, these draw their intellectual lineage not from the Subaltern Studies, but from a different location in cultural studies. While the idea of subaltern studies as a study of the politics of the *people*, has been instigated throughout the career of the Subaltern Studies collective, it is clear that the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘popular’ reside awkwardly even within the changing horizons of this scholarly endeavor. This awkwardness has even been interpreted as conflict. In the context of religious nationalism in the 1990s, Sumit Sarkar, among others, have warned against the ‘uncritical cult of the “popular” and the “subaltern”, particularly when combined with the rejection of Enlightenment rationalism’.<sup>6</sup>

Interestingly, Sarkar, like other scholars in the Subaltern Studies collective, makes little analytic distinction between the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘popular’. This is not to say that they consider the popular and subaltern to be the same. For example, in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, commenting on the problem of evidence in writing subaltern histories, Ranajit Guha noted that there is no reason to suppose that popular cultural forms such as folklore and ballads would render the tribal’s or peasant’s point of view, as much of these were written by elites and/or in support of elite practices. Nevertheless, phrases such as ‘history of the people’, ‘politics of the people’, and ‘popular religiosity’ are used interchangeably with ‘history of the subaltern classes’, all presumably identified by their resistance to or difference from ‘elite’ politics, culture, and history. What disturbs this conflation is the variegated career of the term ‘popular’ from its medieval European provenance as a political concept to its use as a cultural concept since the late eighteenth century. The term has been evoked both in a positive sense (e.g., widely favoured) and in a derogatory way (e.g., the popular press), giving rise to divergent implications. On the one hand, the popular refers to democratic will, and on the other, it raises the specter of the cynical manipulation of that will. Underlying all this is the further equation of the popular with the folk, an early and influential instance of which appeared in Herder.<sup>7</sup>

Within Indian historiography, the popular and the folk remain vexed categories. Partha Chatterjee has recently argued that the history produced in the 1960s and 1970s in India, which he calls the ‘new scientific history’ of post-colonial India (and to which the Subaltern Studies ‘owes’ its productive antagonism), was institutionalised by consciously purging the ‘popular’ and the penchant for it in the ‘old social history’, and by making the profession of historical study less open to uninformed popular debate.<sup>8</sup> This ‘old social history’ drew its material from folk culture, dynastic histories, and

literary mythologies as ‘lived tradition’ of the people. Even with the inception of scientific historiography, there remained ‘other large spaces’ where this old form of social history continued to be written, outside the purview of historians located in the major universities.<sup>9</sup> It is here that the problematic nature of the popular comes to the fore: many of these old-style writings were methodologically similar to those of academic historians, yet these ‘shared an orientation to the popular’ and were excluded from legitimate, professionally organised historiography: ‘denied an authorized place in the academy; it had to seek its validation from the forces in the domain of the popular’.<sup>10</sup> It is this old social history that has come back to haunt the academic profession, being at present aligned with the goals of the nation-state to validate state-supported practices and policies of religious nationalism. The burden of Chatterjee’s argument is to heed this crisis and conceive of ‘a new analytic of the popular’.

In our view, a new analytic of the popular must consider and confront the concept of the subaltern-as-disenfranchised. This would require questioning the conceptual premises of both the ‘subaltern’ and the ‘popular’. These are some of the questions we invited the symposium participants to address: Is the subaltern primarily a political construct? If we engage the problematic of the popular, how does that extend the frames of the discipline of history? What constitutes evidence in this renewed framework? What are the roles of popular cultural forms, such as popular art, film and music, in addressing and configuring the subaltern? How does one frame the question of faith and religiosity given the collusion of the popular with the state apparatus? What would be the theoretical impact of relaxing the Gramscian assumption that the subaltern is defined by insufficient access to modes of representation? Four issues emerged prominently from the discussion: the problem of historical evidence, the comparative approach of subaltern studies, the articulation of subaltern agency, and the constitutive as well as performative relation of the subaltern and the popular to the state.<sup>11</sup>

José Rabasa’s essay goes to the heart of the evidentiary problem in writing the history of subaltern groups: the overwhelming importance accorded to the written record, and the presumed exclusivity of the domains of indigenous knowledge and modern systems of statecraft and political theory. Gramsci’s notion of the subaltern, Rabasa argues, privileges the role of the intellectual vanguard in resistance movements. The vanguard is assigned the responsibility of implanting a modern language of political theory among the subalterns to supplant their backwardness and lack of articulation. Rabasa offers the example of the Zapatistas project in Chiapas to suggest that it need not necessarily be so. Rabasa’s essay points to the difficulty with which the idea of the subaltern travels from one region of the globe and one historical location to another: from Gramsci’s Italy to Guha’s India, and later to Latin America, and the burden of universality that it carries along this process.

The need to ‘de-universalise’ categories of thought, the primary gesture of Rabasa’s essay, proceeds from a different concern in Walter Mignolo’s paper. Emphasising the necessity of recognising the logic of coloniality and racism that produces the differential geo-politics of subalternity, Mignolo insists,

following Fanon, that a discussion of the *damnés* must precede any effort to define the subaltern, the popular, and its related variance: the multitude. It is, after all, in the denial of being, the denial of humanness, that the impossibility of the subalterns and the *damnés* to ‘figure’ themselves in relation to the state has been actualised.

Gyan Pandey’s essay extends the definitional problematic posed by Mignolo by exploring the concept of community and its valence in academic and popular discourse. Community, Pandey notes, is one of the most politicised of concepts and one most easily inclined towards the popular, and yet not all claims to community are considered legitimate. The ‘natural’ basis of community grates against the ‘political’ notion of community whenever it cannot be accommodated seamlessly within *the* modern political community – the nation-state. Focusing on the South Asian context he points to the difficult trajectory of subaltern community formations, and its counterface: the incommensurability of the subaltern and the logistics of the state.

The problem of the subaltern in relation to the state and the difficulty of translatability raised by Rabasa cuts across Lloyd’s and Sen’s essays as well. As David Lloyd puts it: ‘do the limits of comparison highlight the specificity of each given location and its dynamics or whether, indeed, the faltering of the concept in its extension demands rethinking of its theoretical articulations?’<sup>12</sup> Beginning with the question ‘is the subaltern a moment of the popular?’<sup>13</sup> or is it useful to think of the popular as the subaltern on its road to hegemony (and therefore representation), Lloyd tests the idea against the concept and practices of the state. The subaltern here marks the limits of representation – that which the state does not interpellate, and which lies beyond the modes of the state to interpellate. He notes, however, that there is a ‘constitutive’ relation between the subaltern and primitive accumulation as a primary and continual operation of capital. Thus, instead of thinking of the subaltern as a residual space left behind by modernity, he focuses on the dynamic, ongoing relation of the subaltern to the state. Using James Conolly’s reading of the Irish labour movement he suggests that it is the subaltern moment in the popular – the subaltern’s recalcitrance – that provides possibilities for negating the singularity of historical itinerary.

According to Lloyd both the popular and the subaltern, in their constitutive relation to the modern state, are necessarily modern; the subaltern, he notes, is figured ‘*in relation to* modernity though not *of* modernity’.<sup>14</sup> Following this we might say that the subalternisation of peasants and tribals is indeed produced by the modern state. Here Sudipta Sen’s essay provides a glimpse of the kinds of transformations that are actuated in the realm of law and justice when the modern state appropriates instruments of the pre-modern legal machinery for its own purposes. He studies the implication of the British colonial state’s appropriation of the pre-colonial Mughal system of jurisprudence, retributive justice, and the powerful figure of the Qazi as the ‘lawgiver’ in eighteenth and early nineteenth century India. By providing a track to recognise the pre-colonial/pre-modern relation between the subaltern and the popular, Sen’s essay also challenges us to think

of the analytic usefulness of the concepts of the subaltern and the popular beyond the domain of the modern state. British colonial rule, Sen argues, separated lawmaking from the exercise of law, and thereby deeply unsettled existing conceptions of retributive justice, unraveling the fabric of the popular (as in commonly held and widely accepted beliefs) that had earlier negotiated differences between the elite and subaltern masses. The impact was far reaching: while a nominal urban civil society was realised to mediate between the state and the people, 'vast and unspecified domains resistant to the imposition of colonial law remained in rural society, only to resurface during upheavals of the British-Indian political order'.<sup>15</sup> The domain of the popular became depleted of its moral capacity, and in the eyes of the state its resistance then could only be read as incoherent and immature gestures of protest. In other words, the impoverishment of the popular actively contributed to the subalternisation of the peasantry. One could argue that in this unsettled relation between law and justice resides much of the misery of the post-colonial state, and its inability to hegemonise the subaltern.

The point needs to be pushed further. We need to ask: what happens when the engagement with the state reaches a crisis – when the state is *forced* to apprehend the subaltern? If the state's attempt to hegemonise the subaltern is marked not just by subaltern recalcitrance, as argued by Lloyd, but by the impossibility of the post-colonial state, in India for example, to extend the infrastructure of bourgeois civil society to the entire population, the state is forced to recognise the claims of communities in the domain of what Partha Chatterjee has anointed as 'political society'.<sup>16</sup> Such claims may not be consistent with the claims of the law or in accordance with the domain of rights, but such claims acquire legitimacy as instruments in the administration of state welfare. Much of this is guided by an electoral calculus that breeds its own problems of hegemonising the subaltern.

Bishnupriya Ghosh's essay reflects on precisely this problem – the subaltern in the vortex of popular media and a political apparatus that attempts to gain from locating her in an electoral game. Ghosh examines Phoolan Devi's trajectory in popular media as the low-caste subaltern woman, turned armed robber, turned parliamentarian, to argue that Phoolan Devi instigates a crisis of signification between the domains of the popular and subaltern. Although invariably projected as 'subaltern-fetish' – emptied of her embodied history and refurbished externally to serve the minority-majority politics of the nation-state, Ghosh notes that the popular subaltern icon 'exerts pressure on sign systems' that are intended to contain her, thus throwing into disarray the state's distinction between law and justice, citizen and outlaw.<sup>17</sup> Ghosh's view of the subaltern moment in the popular when read in conjunction with Sen's discussion of the potential of the (pre-colonial) popular to both draw acquiescence from the subaltern and to challenge elite misuse of law and miscarriage of justice, presents possible openings in the flank to decipher/visualise subaltern resistance in the murky, and what often appears as the hopelessly compromised and co-opted domain of the popular.

Gayatri Spivak addresses the relation of the subaltern and the state from an angle different from that pursued by Rabasa, Ghosh, and Sen, by a necessary

return to the idea of representation. She begins with the strict definition of the subaltern as the position without identity. If the ability to ‘figure’ oneself in relation to the state constitutes the very possibility of citizenship, then the task of the subalternist, according to Spivak, must be to ‘learn to learn from the subaltern’ in order to build infrastructure ‘so that they can, when necessary, when the public sphere calls for it, synecdochise themselves’<sup>18</sup> as part of the whole, in a performance of claiming the state as one’s own. The danger, she notes, is the concretisation of the subaltern into the figure of the ‘people’ in whose name identity politics continues to wage wars of religious nationalism, and so forth.

We may derive the following from Spivak’s project: the non-recognition of subaltern resistance by the elite is a problem of ‘infrastructure’. The infrastructure produced by the state is inadequate for subaltern voices to be heard – the subaltern is, after all, that which the state does not interpellate. This demands an alternate infrastructure that would work towards the subaltern-as-citizen’s access to the state. Spivak explains the task of building this infrastructure briefly as ‘an invisible mending’ in the ‘torn fabric of responsibility’<sup>19</sup> enabling the subaltern’s possibility of being a citizen, a possessor of the right to metonymise/synecdochise oneself, and withdraw this privilege when necessary. One could elaborate on what this ‘mending’ actually entails in terms of the socio-cultural spaces and imaginaries that the subaltern inhabits. Perhaps that would also enable us to push the idea of representation to its limits, beyond Marx and Gramsci, and thus begin to fathom the complex potentials of the subaltern and the popular.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> We wish to thank David Lloyd and Karen Bishop for sharing their notes on the symposium, and Sarah Mclemore for copyediting assistance.
- <sup>2</sup> Ranajit Guha, Introduction, *Subaltern Studies I*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982, p 4.
- <sup>3</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (trans and ed), New York: International Publishers, 1971.
- <sup>4</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
- <sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Subaltern Histories and Rationalism’, *Habitations of Modernity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, pp 34–36.
- <sup>6</sup> Sumit Sarkar, ‘The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar’, *Economic and Political Weekly of India*, 20 January, 1993, pp 163–167.
- <sup>7</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp 236–238; Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, pp 227–228.
- <sup>8</sup> Partha Chatterjee, Introduction, in Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh, eds, *History and the Present*, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002.
- <sup>9</sup> Chatterjee, Introduction, p 6.
- <sup>10</sup> Chatterjee, Introduction, p 7.
- <sup>11</sup> The symposium participants included Gautam Bhadra, Kumkum Bhavnani, Roger Friedland, Bishnupriya Ghosh, Dick Hebdige, David Lloyd, Purnima Mankekar, Shail Mayaram, Walter Mignolo, Gyan Pandey, José Rabasa, Sudipta Sen, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Gauri Viswanathan. While this volume presents a selection of papers from the symposium, the ideas presented here are informed by the larger conversation that took place at UC Santa Barbara, and which has become the basis of a continuing dialog in the Subaltern-Popular Workshop.

- <sup>12</sup> David Lloyd, 'The Subaltern in Motion', in this issue, p 421.
- <sup>13</sup> Lloyd, 'The Subaltern in Motion', p 421.
- <sup>14</sup> Lloyd, 'The Subaltern in Motion,' p 434.
- <sup>15</sup> Sudipta Sen, "Retribution in the Subaltern Mirror', in this issue, p 441.
- <sup>16</sup> Partha Chatterjee, "Community in the East," *Economic and Political Weekly* 33, 6 (7 February 1998), pp 277–282; Partha Chatterjee, 'Populations and Political Society', in *The Politics of the Governed*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2004.
- <sup>17</sup> Bishnupriya Ghosh, 'The Subaltern at the Edge of the Popular', in this issue, p 461.
- <sup>18</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations on the Subaltern and the Popular,' in this issue, p 482.
- <sup>19</sup> Spivak, 'Scattered Speculations,' p 483.