

Association of Christian Philosophers of India (6)

SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES

Philosophizing in Context

Edited by

George Thadathil

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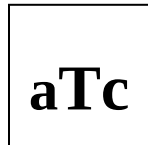
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PREFACE

After having enlightened themselves with the ‘pointers’ gathered from an in-depth study of the prevalent philosophical methods in view of evolving an Indian Christian Philosophical *Vision* and a *Way* towards that vision, ACPI has started their philosophizing with a very relevant and pressing theme: *Subaltern Perspectives: Philosophizing in Context*. The theme itself is not anything new: it has already been subjected to study and reflection from various perspectives. But the philosophizing that is carried out in this volume has—or at least is expected to have—a *difference*. Standing rooted in the twofold givenness of being *Indian* and *Christian*, ACPI carries out an ‘involved’ philosophizing on the question of the subalterns.

The *Indian* and *Christian* ‘consciousness’ of ACPI has been the motivating-force for its members to channelize their research-potential into this all-important theme of the Subalterns. None can be blind to the numerous kinds of subaltern groups among the Indian populace; and every Indian is, to some extent, responsible for having perpetuated a social structure with so many subaltern groups. Thus every thinking Indian—including the ACPI—is faced with a responsibility for the subalterns. Besides, the Christian consciousness too—evolved with the help of Christ’s message of love and compassion, justice and equality—has awakened their responsibility for the subalterns. Thus empowered by this twofold awakening, ACPI has taken a timely and urgent question for its philosophical reflection, the fruit of which is this book.

I am indeed happy about the renewed enthusiasm among the ACPI members to enter into serious philosophizing on relevant themes of philosophical importance. I congratulate and thank the contributors of the various articles in this book; and in a special way Dr. George Thadathil, the Editor, deserves to be congratulated for the exquisite care and attention with which he has edited this volume. Finally, on behalf of ACPI, I wish to place on record our sincere thanks to Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore, for publishing this volume with remarkable efficiency and perfection, and in a very special way to *Missio* (Aachen, Germany) for the financial assistance towards printing it.

It is with great joy and satisfaction that I present this book to the thinking populace of India and elsewhere, with the hope that the study carried out in this volume will awaken the dormant responsibility of the thinking people—the *responsibility* for the less fortunate subaltern people.

Dr. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal
President, ACPI

INTRODUCTION

Is there a case for subaltern philosophy? Philosophy has always claimed certain universality. Despite the erosion of this philosophical pedestal, down the centuries, with the emergence of the numerous disciplines that chipped away the pristine glory of philosophy there is yet an assumption of universality in the self-perception of the philosopher.

How can one posit the need for or clear the space for yet another claimant to the precincts of philosophy? It is important to note that as Indian Christian philosophers, when the present group of authors present their positioning of this issue what is at its heart is to take seriously the responsibility of the philosopher – to critically understand and evaluate the world in which he or she lives.

The cultural, religious, linguistic differences that colour the vision of the human in perceiving oneself, one's world and the divine dimension is an already well grounded fact. Indian Christian philosophizing is taking root and making its bold presence felt in the process of reflecting on the cultural specificity of the people of India. The encounter with the 'subaltern' is a process of self-discovery. It is an effort to own and acknowledge the face of Indian Christianity. It is equally a search to find ways to open the flood gates of freedom and liberation for the neglected segment of the population – tribal, dalit, women, minorities - that seek an equal status with the rest of the people of India.

What is intended by the present volume is to highlight the varied philosophical implications behind the subaltern project, seen as a historical revision as well as a socio-religious rethinking, and to assume these as the reasons for the Christian philosophers of India to enter the subaltern field for strengthening the efforts to contextualize philosophizing. The arguments developed in varying ways in the contributions to this volume can be summed up under the following four strands.

Firstly, subaltern historiography pointed to the significance of the everydayness in life and society as initiated by Ranajit Guha in his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), or James C Scott in his *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1986), opening up thus new avenues of philosophical reflection within the Indian context. This line of bringing to surface the concerns of the dispossessed and marginalized as a process of building anew people is taken recourse to in more than one contribution.

Secondly, with the hitherto believed role of the state as the great leveler taking a beating and critique of the state structures emerging from various quarters, people's lives and initiatives at the grass-roots began to receive an added prominence. The constraints exerted by state-power began to surface from below as the project of the subalterns and it gave a new liberal meaning to the project of constructing community. A line of thinking that community construction has to be a 'people-owned' project than 'state-engineered' is reflected in some of the contributions.

Thirdly, Subaltern studies whether in history, philosophy or religion is hinged on the premise that there is an autonomous space of the subaltern in which the marginalized communities have contributed to the build up of the nation but this has often been overlooked by the dominant narrations of the formation of the state and the nation. Almost all the contributions, in one way or the other, attempt to address this issue.

Fourthly, the linkage between a societal set up and the cultural and religious ideologies underlying the given situation are attempted to be brought to surface exposing how differing politico-religious positioning and ideology based institutions have deep impact on the shape of society. Therefore, the task of reworking tradition, even at the scriptural interpretation level becomes a philosophical task is the line of argument developed in a couple of contributions.

These above features attract the philosopher to the subaltern project to reconstitute and empower subaltern peoples. In this timely effort there is a non-duality, a life and blood synthesis of contradictory and complex contexts. This project is opening up a way of theorizing for and by hitherto hidden voices. The present volume is part of a project of subaltern philosophy by the group of Christian philosophers who annually gather to share their mite towards building a solid base for a new world order.

* * * * *

The meaning of the term ‘subalternity’¹ was reinvented by the subaltern studies series which took the intellectual world by surprise. The word is much substantiated by Gramsci but however, the Indian usage of the term, right from the beginning, had an indigenous flavour. It was an attempt to break with ‘elitism’ that dominated both colonialist as well as nationalist projects, especially in history writing. Though originating from studies in history it gave new meaning to related conceptions like, domination, subordination, hegemony, resistance and revolt sponsoring thus an intellectualization of societal reality on behalf of those hitherto forgotten agents in society.² This innovative and radical reading, though incisive, did open up difficulties on two fronts: first, because, to seek substance in subalternity one had to maintain a binary – ‘elite-subaltern’; second, in the process of highlighting the subaltern interventions, their political thrust was underplayed.

In searching for the substance of subaltern philosophy, a look at how subaltern history emerged in India is a welcome move. Interest in the close reading of the social text of India predates the subaltern history project as such. One could see a close look at society and history already emerging in the sixties (Barrington Moore: 1966) to seek out explanation for the failure or non-start of a revolution in Indian society attributing it to the caste hierarchy. This was emboldened by Louis Dumont’s English edition of *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966). In contrast to the above approach there were scholars attempting to show how the casteist

¹ Subalternity as a traditional notion within the Indian cultural scheme, wherein the lower classes (*Shudras*) and Women were seen as meant to be subservient to the upper castes is referred to by Sumit Sarkar is relevant in the context of this volume. Cf. Sumit Sarkar, “Renaissance and Kaliyuga: Time, Myth and History in Colonial Bengal” in *Writing Social History*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 186-215.

² David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, p.15. (Hereafter David Ludden, *Reading Subaltern*.)

identity was an invention of the elite applied on the subaltern to keep them relegated to the downside of society.³

The emergence of the subaltern in the project of history writing is a well-documented event and you will get more than one description of it from the contributions in this volume. However it is good to note that the concern with subaltern philosophy has a Christian root that predates the subaltern historiography project. The mere fact that more than sixty percent of Christian population comes from this group itself speaks for the Christian concern with and for the subaltern. The venture to philosophize from subaltern perspectives is an effort to affirm the constitutive character of the Christian community in India. In this sense subaltern philosophy is equally a cultural as well as religious project. It is cultural for it intends to transform the inequality prevalent with the dominant culture as theoretical construct as well as a deeply ingrained praxis. It is a religious project for the essence of religion if seen as liberatory praxis – whether intellectual or altruist in nature – intends to reshape society and in doing so assumes a religious character.

The subaltern history project with its growing corpus of writings has been faulted as yet another bourgeois project on behalf of the subaltern. A similar indictment would fall on the current enterprise were it not to keep alive the razor's edge discernment of the subaltern speaking in and through the literary expressions in this work.

The first three contributions to the collection are methodological in tenor and intend to create a framework in the sense that they look at the prospects for subaltern philosophizing from the philosophical, social and historical perspectives and offer ways to reorient Indian Christian philosophical discourse.

The first chapter entitled 'Philosophizing from Dalit perspective' by Johnson Puthenpurackal opens the argument of the following chapters by placing the need for a new philosophical ground. This ground for renewing the life-blood of philosophizing is identified in the Dalit experiences of the bygone centuries and its tacit continuation in the present times. A holistic approach representing the holistic vision of life primordially enshrined in the Dalit vision of reality is called to be returned to as a source of replenishing philosophizing.

The second chapter is by Prakash Louis who situates the discourse of the subaltern in its socio-political ramifications by delineating the history of the notion and the evolution of the discourse surrounding the subaltern in India. He identifies four groups of subalterns in the Dalits, tribals, women and minorities and comes up with some definitive pointers for furthering the socio-philosophical discourse in India.

The third Chapter by Jose Maliekal takes a critical look at the prevailing subaltern historiography and comes up with new signposts for what he calls as 'historiographies of/by the subaltern' arguing in the process that the liberative content of subaltern historiography will materialize or have impact on society with the proposed shift in perspective he suggests. This has therefore an inevitable consequence for the way Indian Christian philosophizing ought to move forward.

³ Hamza Alavi, AR Desai, and Kathleen Gough have argued thus. Cf. *Ibid.* p.9

The next set of four contributions together takes up the task of critiquing and reworking the classical tradition. There is sedimentation of classical tradition preventing its luminosity; and the emergence of subaltern philosophizing if at all it has a specific commission, it is to help dismantle as it were the oppressive features of the tradition and re-infuse the egalitarian spirit into the structures of modern society. The contributors in this section attempt to capture the texture of subalternity in terms of defining the discourse from a subaltern viewpoint.

M. A. Devasia in the fourth Chapter entitled ‘Subalternity and Hermeneutic of Religious Language’ very creatively takes up the discussion on how language-use can be liberative or oppressive. Analysing the Samkara-Candala dialogue in *Manisapancakam* with Wittgensteinian insights he establishes how within *advaita* there can be the possibility of recovering the subaltern self to its fullness rather than either denigrate the subaltern or the advaitic path to fullness of life.

In contrast to the mediational stand of Devasia, George Karuvelil in his contribution draws attention to the possible ‘Irrelevance of Subaltern Studies in India’ in making the submission that probably very little can be achieved in terms of liberty for the subaltern by having recourse to elitist indigenous classical traditions of philosophy and culture as they reveal little potential for elaborating the nature and features of a concretized personhood. Basing on Dumont and his critiques George looks at the egalitarian spirit which is required in order to bring the concerns of the subalterns to prominence. A mere nominal subscription to subaltern cause through text generation tactics may not serve the emancipation of the subaltern is the submission of Karuvelil George.

Gnana Patrick in the sixth chapter makes an incisive study on some of the outstanding features of subaltern religion and spirituality. He contrasts the classical religious traditions (Indian and Western) with the folk/subaltern types and draws out the vibrancy of context specific and emancipatory religious manifestations of the *eros* and *pathos*, be it in the resistances to oppression and domination, or, in celebrating simple joys and mourning sorrows. His study also highlights the potential in subaltern religion and spirituality to challenge and subvert the oppressive religious doctrines of the powerful like the *varna dharma*.

George Panthanmackal in the seventh chapter entitled ‘metaphysics of violence’ argues that there is a deficiency in the classical hymn of *purusa sukta*, a text used to uphold differences among people and condone the prevailing hierarchization. He argues that the metaphysics of constructing the ‘One’ over and above the rest, in contrast to a metaphysics of peace that construes being as circumincision within the multiplicity, is the underlying root cause of the social inequality in Indian society. Panthanmackel thus makes a stringent analysis, from the dalit/subaltern perspective, of the Rgvedic hymn the *purusa sukta*. It is a reading ‘against the grain’ and contrasts the texture of violence over and against that of peace in a metaphysical language.

The third part contains contributions that directly address subaltern contexts be it that of the tribals, women, or minorities. These along with Dalits constitute the different subaltern contexts in India today and their voices that needs to be heard. Contextual thinking and

reflection alone can form the bedrock of an Indian Christian philosophizing especially as, mentioned earlier, they form the majority of the Christians in India.

‘Philosophy from the perspective of the tribals’, the eighth chapter by Samuel Lepcha positions the history of the varied tribal communities within India undergoing the pressure of globalization and homogenization. Exemplifying why tribal worldview and its preservation through linguistic and cultural modes of expressions becomes a necessity he makes a plea for rooting tribal perspectives among the upcoming generation of the educated and the privileged. He cautions the respective tribal communities of the need to preserve their myths and lived experiences, in order to affirm and promote the tribal identity. Samuel argues that the egalitarian spirit and space are emblematic of genuine cosmotheandric tribal worldview and it needs to be interwoven into the prevailing philosophical perspectives. In doing so he avers that the tribal philosophizing can attain maturity as a subaltern philosophical perspective.

Shashi Bala, in the ninth chapter, makes a similar submission from the perspective of ‘Sikhism as a case of subaltern revival.’ She situates the emergence of Sikhism itself as a response to the age-old problem of casteism in society, sanctioned as it was by brahminic religion. The emergence of the Gurus and the formation of Khalsa are studied from scriptural, historical, and liturgical perspectives to scout the liberative power of cultic reformatory religion that Sikhism is.

Pushpa Joseph in the tenth chapter entitled ‘Philosophizing from Feminist Perspectives’ attempts to situate feminism as one of the contemporary critiques to philosophy and then delineates certain chief characteristics of purely feminist philosophizing that is contemporaneously in vogue among the different strands of feminists. She makes a submission that the passions and eros, society and corporeity, developed by feminist ideologues are intended to stress the transformative praxis that philosophy ought to nurture.

The last part contains three contributions that look at two western philosophers who have in a way initiated a type of intellectualizing which is increasingly in vogue and are behind the very emergence of a context specific historically and culturally located mode of philosophizing. They are Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault. These authors and studies on them provide cues for the direction in which Indian Christian Philosophizing could make its onward journey.

Stanislaus Swamikannu in his contribution on ‘The Construction of the Subaltern Identity: A Foucauldian Perspective’ in the eleventh chapter argues that Foucault opened up the discursive space to pursue the subaltern interventions by bringing to focus the issues at the periphery and their concerns. The decentering processes spearheaded by the postmoderns and especially the contribution of Foucault in and through his dissections of power distribution amidst people have thus modestly helped the cause of the subaltern.

Joe Mannath in the twelfth chapter entitled ‘The social and political role of intellectuals according to Antonio Gramsci’ makes a lucid exposition of the intellectual legacy of Gramsci by presenting few of his key concepts and their politico-philosophical implications. He submits that the popularity Gramsci has achieved as a theoretician is indicative of the route an organic intellectual ought to follow: subjecting the veracity of one’s theoretical positioning in the crucible of life.

George Thadathil in the final chapter ‘Indianising Gramsci: Pointers for a subaltern philosophy’ attempts to situate the Gramscian theoretical innovations in the Indian context. He assesses its merits in terms of its percolation into the leftist thinking agencies on the socio-political arena. The subaltern project is identified as a journey in search of the recovery and affirmation of the subaltern subject. The non-duality of the subject, especially of the subaltern, seen from within, matches the demarcations of the dominant and vice versa. A non-dual appropriation of the subject is offered as a possible escape out of the inevitable binarisation surrounding the project.

* * * * *

This volume of philosophical essays is in your hands as an outcome of a collective effort by the respective authors, the editor and the series editors and the publisher. It is dedicated to the memory of the forgotten millions of Indian history whose sweat and labour in the past and present is behind the glory and progress this country boasts of. As intellectuals and theoreticians, teachers and philosophers we have a commitment to bring about an egalitarian society and even distributions of development and progress across the length and breadth of this country is what ACPI which brings out this volume believes. The editor does not subscribe to every single assertion in the collection but endorses the vision behind the project – that of working towards a better tomorrow for every woman, tribal, dalit and minority of this country of ours called India. I would like to end by recalling a sentence from one of the contributions: “Just as one can be reduced to *an object* through torture, one can become a *human subject* again through *telling one’s narrative* to caring others who are able to listen.”⁴ I hope the reader finds justification for this in the exercise of reading the texts that follow.

George Thadathil
Salesian College
Sonada, Darjeeling

⁴ Pushpa Joseph, “Philosophizing from a Feminist Perspective” in Chapter ten of this volume. Emphasis added.

PHILOSOPHIZING FROM DALIT PERSPECTIVE

Johnson Puthenpurackal

The title of the paper implies a plea for a change from what has so far been—a change in philosophizing by a change of the perspective that has been prevalently in use. The hitherto philosophical approach and perspective has been considered as invincible and unchallengeable. On this ‘invincible’ edifice of philosophy, that stood the test of time for two millennia, ‘cracks’ were slowly becoming visible from the beginning of twentieth century; nobody then considered ‘them’ to be symptoms of some serious malaise requiring immediate attention. Now we have come to a situation of ‘no-further-possible’!! The urgency of a change of perspective in philosophizing is violently felt.¹ It is in response to such a felt need that an attempt is made towards traversing through these untrodden pathways.²

The scope of the present paper has to be seen in the context of the general theme of the seminar, namely, “philosophizing from the subaltern perspectives.” The subalterns—the socio-economically inferior, marginalized, oppressed and down-trodden people—is a comprehensive term that includes people whose ‘inferiority’ is differently based: on gender, on birth, on family-lineage, on social status, on the economic strength, etc. The *dalits* constitute, perhaps, the most important as well as the most comprehensive category of the subalterns.³ Hence the scope of this paper, though limited to “Philosophizing from *Dalit* Perspective,” spills over its own limit and embraces the various other subaltern perspectives as well.

1. Introductory Notional Clarifications

In the title as well as in the text, the term ‘philosophizing’ occupies a central place. Though the term ‘philosophizing’ is not of any recent origin, it has become in recent times more widespread in its being used in philosophical circles, in comparison to the more popular term ‘philosophy’. This change is not a terminological change of one term (philosophizing) replacing another term (philosophy). There is a basic difference between ‘philosophy’ and ‘philosophizing’ in their meaning and content. The term ‘philosophy’ is nominal in its structure, static and dead in its meaning, and refers to the finished product of thought, while the term ‘philosophizing’ is verbal in its structure, dynamic and alive in its meaning, and refers to the process of thinking. The term ‘philosophy’ presupposes a truth—at least it has been so—characterized by perenniality and universality, untouched by time and space. Contemporary thought pattern has destroyed such a myth,⁴ and has opted for a more humble

¹ As the subaltern perspective has been sidelined for several centuries, the people in question—the subalterns—have been under a suffocating experience. As a result of this delay, violent expressions of dissatisfaction are the natural outcome. But for such violent eruptions of discontentment, the subaltern perspectives would have been set aside as unimportant even today.

² In view of evolving a new philosophical method that is both *Indian* and *Christian*, ACPI strengthened and enlightened itself with a seminar on ‘philosophical methods’. With the renewed enthusiasm and determination, ACPI launched itself into an investigation on the theme of ‘philosophizing from the subaltern perspectives’ by organizing the present philosophical symposium. The fact that this theme has emerged as the first one shows that ACPI is rightly responding to the urgency and importance of a change in the way of philosophizing. The Dalits, as understood today, constitute not just one of the subgroups of the subalterns, but rather this term envelops almost the whole subaltern groups.

attitude. The term ‘philosophizing’ reflects such a philosophical humility of being constantly in search, taking serious consideration of the elements of time and space.⁵ Thus *philosophizing* is and has to be different according to the different places, times and perspectives. Hence the concrete meaning of ‘*philosophizing*’ in our context will show itself in relation to our point of departure, the *dalit perspective*.

The phrase ‘*dalit perspective*’ needs to be clarified. It can have three different, and yet related, meanings. ‘Dalit perspective’ can mean the ‘perspective taken *by* the dalits,’ the ‘perspective taken *for* the dalits,’ and the ‘perspective qualified by *dalit*’ as an adjective.⁶ In the first two instances ‘dalit’ is taken as a noun, referring to the down-trodden people, dehumanized and victimized under some unjust structure. They are not merely the economically poor, but the helpless victims of a structural situation beyond their choice and control, and their economico-social status is birth-ascribed. Such a group of people takes a stand and outlook on reality and life, society and morality; they have a *perspective*: a perspective *by* the dalits. ‘Dalit perspective’ can also mean a perspective *for* dalits, in favour of dalits, for the cause of dalits, etc. Here the subject of the perspective is not specified; whoever has taken the perspective or approach, it has a specific goal: the good of the dalits. Since these people constitute the marginalized group, the perspective taken has to be in their favour. To this effect a specific perspective or outlook has to be initiated, for which every socially conscious human being is challenged. In the third case, ‘dalit’ is taken in the adjectival sense. In fact the term *dalit* has primarily an adjectival meaning such as dependent, marginalized, oppressed, etc.; but today it is mostly used as an adjectival noun. Thus *dalit perspective* can mean a *perspective* that is weak, marginalized, stepped aside, and neglected. Just as the group of dalits, so is their perspective: weak and fragile, neglected and sidelined.

After having seen the three possible meanings for *dalit perspective*, the question poses itself as to what meaning do we give to this phrase in the context of this study. We do not intend to choose one meaning at the neglect of the other; we would rather gather the ‘pointers’ emerging from all of them, and let a meaning come to be. We are making an attempt in this study to direct our thought—a praxis-directed and praxis-oriented thought—to a neglected realm (the *dalit* realm). Our point of departure is the *dalit* experience—painful and bitter experiences of several centuries. Thus the *whither* and the *whence* of our philosophical look is the same:⁷ the *dalit* realm. ‘Philosophizing from dalit perspective’ implies a process of a stir, of a movement, of a dynamic thought; and it refers to ‘the coming of age’ of a structurally oppressed group of people, who have suddenly started to *move in thought* and *action*. This paper is an attempt to respond to this movement. From out of such an attempt will hopefully emerge a new realm, a new horizon.⁸

⁴ In postmodern thought the myth of dogmatism and absolute certainty got crumbled, as a result of which philosophy today is less presumptuous and more humble. For a concise consideration of ‘postmodernism’, cf. Johnson J. Puthenpurackal (ed.), *The Postmodern...A Siege of the Citadel of Reason*, Delhi, Media House, 2002. (Hereafter, *The Postmodern*.)

⁵ Cf., Johnson J. Puthenpurackal, “Editorial,” *Vijnanadipti*, Vol. 6 (June 2004) No. 2, 123.

⁶ Cf. Johnson Puthenpurackal, (ed.), *Dalit Movement in India: A Franciscan Response*, Janampet, ICRF Publications, 1999, pp. 5ff.

⁷ The approach here is very much different from the traditional epistemology, which has been a linear process.

⁸ We do not journey towards a predetermined goal. Towards the end of the paper greater clarity will be dawned on this cloudy horizon.

How shall we *philosophize from dalit perspective* by *responding* to the dalit movement? What method shall we employ? Since our traverse is through the untrodden realm, the way (method) is not already there; as we start moving, the way will come to be. Our movement of philosophizing will be a twofold movement or look: a historical look back and a futural look ahead.

2. Dalits: A Historical Look Back

Our historical look consists of a look at the history of the term: *dalit*, and at the history of the people: *Dalits*.

2. 1. History of the Term: *Dalit*

Dalit is an exceptionally rich term both in depth and in width: in depth, because its roots go back to the very ancient period, in width, because it transcends the national and sectarian frontiers. The roots of the term *Dalit* can be traced back to two of the most important and ancient linguistic families: the semitic (headed by Hebrew) and the Indo-European (headed by Sanskrit).⁹ In Hebrew the root is *dall*, meaning: poor, low, helpless, etc.,¹⁰ and in Sanskrit the root is *dal*, meaning: to crack, to split, to crush, to destroy, etc.¹¹ It is highly probable that the term *dalit*, with its derivative forms, must have been in use by the people of Indus and/or Babylonian civilization.

Although we can trace the roots of the term *dalit* to the ancient period, the term was made popular in its present usage in the writings of two of the Indian stalwarts, the nineteenth century Marathi reformer and revolutionary Mahatma Jotirao Phule¹² and the twentieth century intellectual and revolutionary Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Mahatma Phule used in his writings the term ¹³ to refer to Dalits. He has also used the term *dalit* to refer to the people of the outcastes (*dalitodhar*, the uplift of the depressed). Dr. Ambedkar has used the term *dalit* for the people of the scheduled castes. But it is in 1972 with the formation of 'Dalit Panthers Movement' in Maharashtra, that the term *dalit* began to be used in the sense it is taken today. Initially *dalit* was used only for Mahar community; later it was spread to all the scheduled castes. Since *dalit* means trampled, squeezed, crushed, broken or reduced to pieces,

⁹ Historically the roots of the term *Dalit* go back to the pre-classical Hebrew and Sanskrit era. Its ancient form is found in the East-Semitic languages: in Akkadian the root is *dalulu* (the weak), and in Assyrian the root is *dalalu* (to be weak or humble). *Hebrew and English Lexicon: Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v. "Dall." Quoted in Bhagwan das & James Massey, (ed.), *Dalit Solidarity*, Delhi, ISPCK, 1995, p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* The different related expressions used in the Old Testament give an indication about the depth of meaning *dalit* has. The expression *dalloth* means lean, *dalloth ha'ares* means thin ones of the land, the rural proletariat. This expression is used also in II Kg 24:14 to refer to the left over people (scum of the earth). The valiant and powerful were taken away by Nebuchadnezzar; those left behind were the weakest. They were the 'people of the land' without land or right. They were bonded labourers. After the exile, *dalloth ha'ares* gets a religious meaning. It refers to the common man who pains to observe the law and was obstinate in his 'impurity'. This describes the status of millions of people, the religiously marginalized people, who have begun to revolt against the religious establishments of oppression. Cf., Bishop A.C.Lal, in *Dalit Solidarity*, p. xiv.

¹¹ *Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1979, s.v. "dal, dalit."

¹² Mahatma Phule (1829-90) was a social revolutionary. He founded the *Satyashodak*, a non-Brahmin movement. He tried to abolish caste-system itself. In 1848 he started the first girls' primary school in India at Pune. He was convinced that the emancipation of women is the precondition for that of men.

¹³ *Shudras* are the untouchable backward classes, and *Adishudras* are the indigenous people, the original settlers, the people of the land.

all those who are in such a situation—scheduled castes and tribes, landless labourers, and those who are politically and economically exploited under the name of religion—were included under the term *dalit*. Professor Gangadhar Pantawane expresses the meaning of *dalit* as follows:

Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects the existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, fate and heaven, because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited man in his country.¹⁴

The group of people who are known today as the '*dalits*' were originally called by different names, such as 'the untouchables', 'the last born,' etc. During the British period this group was referred to as the 'depressed classes'. It was opposed to by Ambedkar because of its degrading tone; and so 'Simon Commission'¹⁵ proposed a compromise term: 'scheduled castes', which was officially introduced in the Government of India Act of 1935.¹⁶ Gandhiji introduced another term, *Harijan*, to refer to the 'untouchables'. But they objected to the use of this term as well because of its negative connotation.¹⁷ Today the term '*dalit*' has become the most accepted and used term to designate the downtrodden community. *Dalit* is specially being used for those people who on the basis of caste distinction have been considered 'outcastes'. They are outside the four-layer caste structure of Indian Society. On the basis of such a *status-less* status, they were made to bear extreme form of disabilities, as a result of which they were made to "lose their humanness, and finally they reached the state of being 'no people'."¹⁸ Today *dalit* is not a demeaning term, but an identity about which one is proud—an identity, which is the product of a long historical process, rooted in a collective conscience.¹⁹

Our quick traverse through the history of the term *dalit* has been but a traverse through the history of the *dalit* people. But we need to look deeper into their history, since the history of the term has to be concretized and complemented with the history of the people.

2. 2. History of the People: *Dalits*

Why do we look into the history of *dalits* at all? The purpose is neither for weeping over their past suffering nor for being glorious about their past achievement. A historical look into the past will enable the *dalits* to see themselves in their identity in the right perspective. To have a history and to be historizing from out of one's history is to build oneself on one's rootedness and depth. As James Massey puts it, "...only historical roots can provide the clue to the lost identity of the Dalits."²⁰

¹⁴ Gangadhar Pantawane, "Evolving a New Identity: The Development of Dalit Culture," in Barbara Joshi (ed.), *Untouchables: Voice of the Liberation Movement*, New Delhi, 1986, p. 79.

¹⁵ This commission was set up in 1931 to draw up a 'schedule' of the castes.

¹⁶ Jose Kanaanaikel, "The Return of the Dalits," *ISI Bulletin*, vol. 2 (July-September, 1994) No. 3, p. 4.

¹⁷ Although literally *Harijan* means 'child of God', this term was used to refer to the children born to the *Devadasis* in the temples. As the father of such children was unknown, they were known as the *Harijans*, the children of God. This is the reason why the use of this term was objected to.

¹⁸ James Massey, "History and Dalit Identity," in Bhagwan Das & James Massey, (ed.), *Dalit Solidarity*, p. 13.

¹⁹ Chinna Rao Yagati, "Change in Nomenclature: A Historical Note," in Ambrose Pinto, (ed.), *Dalits: Assertion for Identity*, New Delhi, Indian Social Institute, 1999, p. 93.

²⁰ James Massey, *Roots: A Concise History of the Dalits* (Delhi: 1991), p.7.

It is generally accepted that Indian history has been selectively cruel to the *dalits* as a whole, since from the time of *Rgveda* to our present age they not only never received the historical attention they deserved, but the little attention that they were given was painted in dark colours and negative images.²¹ Although we do not plan to go into the question of the dalit-historiography—as there is a paper dealing exclusively with this question—mention has to be made about the way the *dalits*, who are the real ‘subjects’ of history, have been made its ‘object’. In many of the books of history, the original people of India—the indigenous, the aborigines, the Dravidians, the *dalits*—are referred to with the blanket-term ‘non-Aryans’.²² Those people, with whom Indian history began, should be the real ‘subject’ of Indian history; but they are negatively referred to as ‘non-Aryan’—non-people, non-subjects. The Aryans, the invaders, the outsiders, become the ‘subjects’; others are just ‘non’.²³

The formulators of history—both religious and secular—are motivated by some ‘ideological interest.’²⁴ The Europeans, especially the British people, made sure that the way Indian history is formulated suited the cause of their colonial rule. The colonization of India was their only ‘ideological interest’, for which they were prepared to tamper with the interpretation of Indian History. The British rulers found that upholding the socio-religious structures of the ‘natives’ could be of help to entrench and enforce their colonial structure. Even after India’s political freedom, our leaders followed the ‘safe’ method of maintaining the caste-system, and thus perpetuating the slavery of the *dalits*.²⁵ The religious writers too were not free from ‘ideological interests.’ In the *Vedas* and *Puranas*, historical myths were created to legitimize some of the prevailing aspects of social and religious life.²⁶ In order to freeze and solidify the desired social structure and/or value system, having recourse to religion and gods has been found to be very effective.²⁷ Conformity to law and structure is almost guaranteed, when they are presented as the *will* of the Divine. Since the powerful center—the high-caste people—has had the exclusive monopoly over the *will* of God, the cause of the *dalits* could never get into the *plan* of God. The dalits have been at a disadvantageous position even in religious history.

Where have we arrived at after our quick look at the history of the *dalits*? Just as the term, so is the history of *dalits*! *Dalit* means trampled, squeezed, crushed, broken or reduced to pieces; this is not merely the *meaning* of ‘*dalit*,’ it has been their *life*. Thus we have arrived

²¹ We do not intend, nor is it demanded by the purview of our study, to go into a detailed description of the way the Dalits have been sidelined or negatively presented by the historians. The present-day Dalit literature that are in abundance contains such narrations.

²² James Massey, “History and Dalit Identity,” in Bhagwan Das & James Massey, ed., *Dalit Solidarity*, pp. 16-17.

²³ Such a presentation of the people of India as ‘Aryans’ and ‘non-Aryans’ is, in postmodern language, in terms of the binary opposites, where the first term stands for the privileged center, the other as the excluded term from the center. Thus the Aryans constitute the center, the non-Aryans have only a negative existence.

²⁴ This is the main thesis proposed by Romila Thapar in her *Interpreting Early India*. As quoted by James Massey, “History and Dalit Identity,” in Bhagwan Das & James Massey, ed., *Dalit Solidarity*, p. 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22; Priyadarshini Arunajyothi, “Historiographical Critique on the Dalit Movement,” in *Dalits: Assertion for Identity*, pp. 79-81.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

²⁷ This technique was employed in Hinduism in order to establish some social order (caste system, the custom of *sati*, etc.) that is advantageous to the powerful high-caste people. Even Christianity is not spared of this. Its moral teachings are attached to *Divine will* or *Divine law*.

at a marginalized and squeezed *life* of a group of people, who have been considered to be *non-people*, although they were the original people of the land, and constitute almost 17% of Indian population!

3. *Dalits*: A Futural Look Ahead

With our historical look back on the *meaning* and *life* of dalits—which has been largely an empirical study—we have already started our look ahead. The empirical backing that we have received has to be gradually made more of a reflective process of philosophizing. Perhaps a quick review of the meaning of ‘historicality’ (*Geschichtlichkeit*) will place the whole process in the proper perspective.

The process of historizing consists in the living of the *existentiell* possibilities by a *choosing* from the *given*. The possibilities are rooted in the past (the already), though projected to the future (the ahead). In choosing the possibilities, the humans have to keep themselves before the *fate* and *destiny* of their givenness as individual and as social beings. This process is also referred to as the ‘re-claiming’ or ‘repeating’ (*Wieder-holung*) from the inherited possibilities.²⁸ Heidegger insists that authentic historizing has to be a ‘choosing’ from out of one’s ‘rootedness’. ‘Going back’ to one’s own, one goes ahead; “... in thinking back one thinks ahead.”²⁹ Thus the purpose of our look into the historical *already*—the socio-cultural rootedness of the Dalits—is for the sake of projecting to their possibilities by extending themselves beyond their givenness.

In order to enter into the process of philosophizing by projecting to the possibilities, it is not enough that we merely have an awareness of the historical ‘roots’ of the Dalits but rather they have to *be rooted* in their identity,³⁰ which implies a ‘going back to one’s own’. ‘Going back to one’s own’ (*chez soi*) or ‘coming back to one’s home’ (*Heimkehr*) is a philosophically pregnant notion in the contemporary thought. The humans have lost their ‘identity’ that one can have ‘at one’s own’ (*chez soi*). In the dehumanized world of today, characterized by ‘rootlessness or groundlessness’ (*Bodenlosigkeit*), they have gone far away from their very own selves. In the contemporary thought, especially in that of Martin Heidegger, there is present a call addressed to the humans to come back to their ‘father-land’ (*Vaterland*) to speak their ‘mother-tongue’ (*Muttersprache*).³¹ It means that one needs to dwell near one’s ‘Source’ (*Ursprung*):³² a call to be rooted in *one’s own*—one’s own culture, one’s own philosophy, one’s own identity. In the light of this philosophical insight, in order that our attempt to philosophize from Dalit perspective be effective, we need to be rooted in,

²⁸ Cf. Johnson Puthenpurackal, *Heidegger, Through Authentic Totality to Total Authenticity*, pp. 74ff.

²⁹ “.....Andenken denkt voraus..” in Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, Frankfurt am main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1981, p. 84.

³⁰ It has been a disturbing puzzle for me whether it is possible for me to be rooted in the identity of another group of people. If I cannot have it, then my philosophizing will be from outside. Even if it is not possible to have the same experience as that of the person from the group, the more existentially identified I am with them, the more genuine my philosophizing will be.

³¹ Heidegger, *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, 5. Aufl., Frankfurt am main, Vittorio Klostermann, 1981, p. 23. Heidegger uses in this book so many expressions to refer to the need of the humans to be rooted in their own, such as: *Heimkunft*, *Heimkehr*, *Ort der Nähe*, *Stimme der Mutter*, *Treue zum Ursprung*, *Rückkehr in die Nähe*, *Boden des Geburtslandes*, etc.

³² Cf., Johnson Puthenpurackal, *Heidegger: Through Authentic Totality to Total Authenticity*, pp. 158-59, 200-01.

or to insert ourselves into, their identity, their experience. 'To be rooted' has to be taken not in the sense of mere intellectual knowledge, but in the sense of 'to be at home with,' 'to be inspired by,' 'to be nurtured by,' etc.³³ Thus our philosophizing has to flow from our *being*, rather than from our *knowing*. Only such an approach can give *depth* and *width* to our philosophizing. But how?

In our look back to the history of the Dalits, we are brought to their extremely 'marginalized' situation. The hitherto philosophy, religion and morality has only perpetuated this situation. But then those philosophizing were from the powerful group at the center, and they considered those at the periphery as 'object' rather than 'subject' of history. Now the perspective of our philosophizing is from the concrete experience of the *dalits*, the oppressed and marginalized group. Taking cue from the postmodern thought, we shall take our philosophizing beyond the structure-imposed-victimization that the Dalits have been subjected to.

From the standpoint of the established thought-pattern of modernity, the socio-religious system has been considered as a hierarchical structure with different groups placed one over the other or one around the other according to the assumed priority of importance. Postmodern thought has destroyed this myth of the higher and the lower, or the center and the periphery. Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward meta-narratives,"³⁴ is indicative of this shift of thought. Jacques Derrida³⁵ has given greater clarity to it by his notion of the *deconstruction* of the binary opposites. According to him, Western thinking—and Eastern thinking is no different³⁶—has been based on a hierarchical system of binary opposites of the center and the periphery. The center has been taken as that which guarantees meaning and truth, and what is at the periphery has meaning only in reference to the center.³⁷ Philosophy, morality, social structure, etc., have been built exclusively *on* and *for* the center, and the periphery is totally excluded.³⁸ Such a structure is deconstructed in postmodernism, as a result of which there is no more a center and periphery, higher and

³³ Philosophizing today has become very much experience-based, as different from the traditional thought-based. Dispassionately reflecting on a theme was considered to be the work of philosophers; such a 'philosophy' has been called 'arm-chair philosophy'. Today philosophy and biography are closely linked. That is the reason why philosophizing has to be from the perspective of an 'actor' and not of a 'spectator'. In such a case, philosophical questions are not matters of 'intellectual curiosity' but of 'vital concern', not 'problems' to be solved but 'mystery' to be lived.

³⁴ François Lyotard came to be known as the thinker most associated with postmodernism, especially with the publication of his book: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, published in 1979.

³⁵ Derrida is now considered as the central figure in postmodern thought. He was born in 1931 in Algeria. He came to France to study phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger in the company of Levinas and Ricoeur. During the 1960s and 70s he published numerous philosophically revolutionary books, influencing philosophy, sociology, feminism, psychoanalysis and linguistics. Some of the important works of his are the following: *Of Grammatology* (1975), *Writing and Difference* (1978), *Dissemination* (1981), *Margins of Philosophy* (1982), etc.

³⁶ Although the notion of binary opposites got developed in reference to the Western thought and life, we find that in India too this pattern of hierarchizing the higher and lower has been prevalent.

³⁷ We can give a number of binary opposites in which the first term stands for the privileged center, and the second is excluded as the periphery: man-woman, Christian-pagan, reason-emotion, nature-culture, truth-falsity, sacred-profane, etc. The second term has only a negative meaning; thus, woman is what is not man, pagan is one who is not a Christian, etc.

³⁸ Thus philosophy is based on what is true, ethics on what is right, aesthetics on what is beautiful, religion on what is sacred, etc. The periphery exists only as totally excluded.

lower. In its place there is only a 'free play' of the opposites, of the different. Postmodernism is thus a celebration of difference, of variety.

This postmodern reading can very well be applied to the hierarchical structure of our society, in which the high-castes occupy the center, and the *dalits* are placed outside the structure as outcastes. This structure has been kept frozen for several centuries by relating it to gods and religion. In the postmodern context, just as no philosophy can claim to be universal, perennial and certain,³⁹ posing itself as superior to all the rest, so also no social group can pose itself as central and superior, and no group can be thrown out to be trampled upon by the others. If no social group can claim to be superior to the others, in other words, if there are no meta-narratives,⁴⁰ how do we consider the various social groups in our society? There are no 'big stories' in society; every group is a 'small story', everybody has to be considered as 'under erasure' (*sous rature*). There are no 'texts' but only 'footnotes' in society.⁴¹ Thus with the equally placed different social groups that do not have any fixed place of priority or superiority, they are in a 'play' of difference, where every 'player' is different from one another, and no 'player' is superior to the other. The scenario of the social structure has to be seen as a *play of difference*.

The social vision, towards which we philosophize from *dalit* perspective, is a society devoid of any hierarchical structure. It consists of individuals and groups, placed not one over the other, but one along with the other: a play of difference. In such a social system some individuals and groups are not considered as the 'object' of history, in which case either they are looked down upon in contempt as 'history-unworthy' non-humans, or they are looked at in sympathy as pitiable creatures. What they (the *dalits*) need is neither 'contempt' nor 'sympathy', but their 'right' to be recognized as humans,⁴² who are worthy to be 'subjects' of history, along with and equal to others.

We have used several times the expression, 'object' and 'subject' of history—an expression used these days in the dalit-historiography; a little of philosophical clarification seems to be in place. 'To be historical' is not a *dead label* or characteristic of the humans, it is one of the essential ways of human existence; the humans are *historical* insofar as they exist as *historizing*.⁴³ The humans, as *historizing*, are 'primarily historical' (*primär geschichtlich*); the non-human entities, as related to the *historizing* humans, are only 'secondarily historical' (*sekundär geschichtlich*).⁴⁴ For instance, the walking-stick of Mahatma Gandhi is historically

³⁹ Philosophy of modernity is characterized by these three characteristics. For more on 'postmodernism,' cf. Johnson Puthenpurackal, ed., *The Postmodern...: A Siege of the Citadel of Reason*, Delhi, Media House, 2002.

⁴⁰ It is an expression used by Lyotard to destroy the assumed superiority of any philosophical thought, cultural expression, social group, etc.

⁴¹ The expressions: 'under erasure', 'footnote', 'small stories' 'perspectives' etc. are postmodern expressions to play down the dogmatic claim of philosophical thought in the past.

⁴² Emmanuel Levinas, in the context of his 'phenomenological analysis of the face' dwells at length on the ethical demand emanating from the *face* of the other to be *recognized* as a human being. The face reveals simultaneously my *responsibility* for the other, and other's *right* to be recognized. His analysis has to be seen in the Judeo-Christian religious context.

⁴³ Heidegger is the one who has given a new understanding to 'history'. For a detailed analysis, cf., J. J. Puthenpurackal, *Heidegger: Through Authentic Totality to Total Authenticity*, Louvain, Leuven University Press, 1987, pp. 74-80.

⁴⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1973, p. 433.

significant only in relation to Gandhiji, who as eminently historizing by emitting re-claimable possibilities, is primarily historical. Thus the existent humans, as creating themselves and the society, are the 'subjects' of history. The things that are used by the 'subjects' of history are the 'objects' of history. The *dalits* have been regarded as 'objects' of history, since they have been considered not as historizing persons, but as mere 'objects' to be used, manipulated, exploited, mauled, by the 'subjects' of history. Thus the *dalits*, by being made the 'objects' of history, have not only been given little or no attention in history, but have been subjected to extreme form of dehumanization.⁴⁵

4. *Dalits*: The 'Subjects' of History Par Excellence

When we suggest that the *Dalits* are to be regarded as 'subjects' of history, our proposal is much more than just acknowledging the *Dalits* as 'subjects' of history just as the people of the upper castes. It is our contention that the *Dalits* historize by their existence in a more primordial and uncontaminated way than the so called 'higher' people; and thus the *Dalits* are 'subjects' of history par excellence. We need to shed some light onto this contention of ours, which itself can be contended.

When the humans began to exist on this earth, their existence was characterized by a certain spontaneity, openness and genuineness. A cosmic relation of peace and joy prevailed among them.⁴⁶ Gradually they began to grow and make 'progress'. Life became better organized and more comfortable especially in the wake of science and technology. But such a 'progress' towards comfort and convenience has been, at the same time, a 'regress' from the genuineness of human existence. The humans have been uprooted from their real selves. The process of 'civilization' has been but a process of 'hybridization',⁴⁷ by which the original is changed into something different. The humans have thus become hybrid-humans, from whom 'humanness' is drained off; the civilized hybrid-humans have become non-humans, and they exist and historize as non-humans.

The *Dalits* have been 'the original inhabitants of the land'. The prefix 'Adi-' (original) is attached to their regional identity, such as Adi-Dravidas, Adi-Andhras, Adi-Kannadas, etc.⁴⁸ The prefix 'Adi-' is to be taken not so much in the sense of chronological priority, but of ontological priority. Thus the *dalits* are the original people insofar as the genuineness of humanness continues to be still present in them. They have a *touch* of the earth, spontaneity in

⁴⁵ Although *dehumanization* is a contemporary phenomenon in the wake of technological culture, surprisingly enough, it was prevalent even in ancient India. But there seems to be a difference in *dehumanization* as practiced in ancient India, from that of the contemporary period. In the context of extreme competition among individuals for the success and profits in the contemporary period, some get dehumanized, as they become the victims of exploitation by the powerful. In this case the exploited could, in principle, be the exploiter; there is the possibility to be out of dehumanization. But in the case of dehumanization based on one's birth, one is condemned to be in that situation. With no mistake of mine I am born in a situation of dehumanization.

⁴⁶ Most of the religions propose that there existed in the beginning a paradise situation of perfect peace and reconciliation among the humans as well as with the nature. This got gradually disrupted in the course of human 'progress', as result of which the Divine intervention was made necessary

⁴⁷ Scientific growth helped the humans to create hybrid varieties of plants, animals, flowers, fruits, etc. In the process of hybridization of other things, the humans themselves are changed into hybrid-humans. Apparently the hybrid is considered better than the original. But on closer analysis we find that the quality of the original is lost; the hybrid caters only to appearance. Thus we have fruits that are enormously big but no taste, flowers that are bright and large, but no fragrance. The humans too have grown only in appearance, but the 'humanness' is lost.

⁴⁸ Chinna Rao Yagati, "Change in Nomenclature: A Historical Note," in *Dalits: assertion for Identity*, p. 89.

expression, genuineness in relationship, peace and joy of life, etc. In a word, the *dalits* are uncontaminated and unmasked people: ontologically very much original! But this ontological primordiality has been looked down upon as a *negativity* in the sense of ‘uncivilized’ primitive people. The ‘higher’ people consider the *dalits* as an ‘exception’ to humanity: the non-humans who are to be eliminated from the face of the earth at the earliest. In the light of our above-given interpretation, the out-caste *dalits* and the higher-caste ‘civilized’ are seen in a totally different light. The original humans (*dalits*) are the real humans, whereas the hybrid-humans have come to be non-humans!

Those who exist and historize as genuine humans are the real ‘subjects’ of history. It is because of this reason that we have proposed that the *Dalits* are the ‘subjects’ of history in a more eminent way than those who have been claiming to be the exclusive creators and controllers of history.⁴⁹ In fact the very claim of theirs is to be suspected. Thus it is not a *concession* that is granted to the *Dalits* to be ‘tolerated’ as subjects of history, rather they have the right to be recognized as the primordial subjects. This contention can be corroborated with the help of the *how* of their cultural expressions and oral traditions.

The art and cultural expressions and traditions of the *Dalits* are unique in many respects, and they are great reservoirs of thoughts and insights. Some of the distinguishing characteristics of such expressions and traditions are the following: emphasis on the *oral* culture (as different from the *written* culture)⁵⁰ expressing and transmitting art-forms and traditions orally;⁵¹ more *ornamental* with emphasis of the accidental and the contingent (as different from *monumental*); more *communitarian* (as against *individualistic*), the community as the point of reference in history and performer of folklore;⁵² more *mythical* (rather than *logical*) that implies an invitation to pristine purity, celebration of plurality and exodus from rational rigidity.⁵³ All these various characteristics point to one direction: the spontaneity of the life of the *dalits* in togetherness with the community and Nature, lived in an uncontaminated manner. It is primordial historizing! They are primordial ‘subjects’ of history!

5. A Plea for a Paradigm-Shift in Philosophizing

⁴⁹ The process of sidelining the real subjects of history is found not only in India, but all over the world. For instance, when the original inhabitants of America and Australia are marginalized and suppressed to the extent of eliminating them totally, the ‘secondary’ citizens—the invaders—are asserting a claim that they are the ‘subjects’ and the ‘primary’ citizens—the original inhabitants—are only ‘objects’ of history. Thus ‘marginalization’ is a reality all over the world.

⁵⁰ In the context of dwelling on the postmodern transition of art, the present writer has contrasted the classical art from the postmodern—which is an invitation ontologically to go back to the pre-modern or primitive art—in terms of monument / ornament, logos / mythos, literacy / oracy, utopia / heterotopia. Cf. Johnson Puthenpurackal, “Death of Art, Truth of Art: The Postmodern Transition,” in *The Postmodern*, pp. 133-39.

⁵¹ The history of the Dalits is not documented in written form with conceptual clarity and logical exactitude. Their *history* is not *his* version of *story* (his + story), but their *lived* story. It is preserved and handed down in the form of legends, folk songs, folk stories, ballads, etc. They can not be subjected to textual-analytical study as the documented history in the West. It does not mean that their history is content-less and truth-less. Such a consists, not of dead documents about dead factualities, but of live stories to be lived: possibilities to be re-claimed (note the close link with Heidegger’s understanding of historicity). Cf. Anthoniraj Thumma, *Wisdom of the Weak: Foundation of People’s Theology*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2000), pp. 138-40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 131ff.

⁵³ J.J.Puthenpurackal, ed., *The Postmodern*, p. 136.

As we come towards the end of our study on “Philosophizing from Dalit Perspective,” we find it necessary to give expression to some stray thoughts in the direction of a change in the way philosophizing in general,⁵⁴ which will hopefully give a philosophical ‘ought’ to the question of the *Dalits*.

Philosophy has been criticized, and rightly so, for having been cut off from the realities of the real and practical world. It has been dealing with themes with little or no relevance to practical life, such as being, essence, existence, causality, substance, accidents, etc. To some extent, after the death of Hegel,⁵⁵ Western philosophy has been brought down from the ideal realm to the real and concrete realm. Philosophy is now no more considered as an intellectual luxury of an elite group of intellectuals. In the twentieth century philosophy began to consider increasingly relevant themes, such as death, anxiety, fear, hope, love, body, power, money, etc. It was a welcome change, a welcome beginning. This trend has to grow to the extent that philosophy will have to embrace every aspect of human life, and make praxis-oriented critical reflections, especially on the questions of the less fortunate people.

The themes for philosophical reflection are not exhausted with those given above. Philosophy has to enter deeper into human life and feel for itself the various gripping questions, without regard for other considerations. The questions that the ‘marginalized’—the *dalits*—are struggling with are more important than the problems that the powerful ones at the ‘centre’ are puzzled about. The former consists of questions of vital importance; the latter consists of questions of intellectual luxury. Indian Christian Philosophizing has thus to give priority for the questions of the *dalits* and the other marginalized people, such as the questions of exploitation, injustice, starvation, fundamentalism, casteism, evil effects of globalization, victimization and manipulation of truth, goodness, rectitude, beauty, etc., by the powerful, unjust wars, *civilized* terrorism, etc. Philosophy will have to make a conscious effort to give priority to the problems of the marginalized, since the center always gets the priority, and the periphery is liable to be sidelined and forgotten.

Philosophy has to function as the trend-pointer, rather than a trend-follower. Western philosophy has been trying to be relevant since the beginning of twentieth century by the change of *mode* and *content* of its philosophizing. The traditional way of communicating thought in abstract and abstruse language, stuffed with philosophical jargons intelligible only to the super-intelligent is very much changed. Today it is communicated in a style and language that is accessible and intelligible to the large majority of people. Thus philosophy is made available today in novels, plays, poetries, short-stories, etc. Besides, the ‘matter’ for philosophizing has an ‘earthly’ touch, since it consists of the struggles and pains, successes and failures, fears and anxieties of the humans. Philosophy has started to *speak the human language*, and to be *sensitive to the human questions*, at least in some corners of world-philosophy. The point that we want to emphasize is the following. It is not enough that philosophy discusses questions—however relevant they may be—that have arisen in the

⁵⁴ I am basing myself for this section on another study of mine: “Philosophizing in Asia: Future Perspectives and Paradigm Shift,” *Vijnanadipti: A Journal of Philosophico-Theological Reflection*, Vol. 6 (June 2004) No. 2, 213-17.

⁵⁵ Historians refer to ‘the death of Hegel’ as the end of modernity and the beginning of postmodernity. By ‘death of Hegel’ is not meant the chronological date (1831), but it is to be taken as the event of the death of reason. Hegel stood for the glorification of reason to the highest; his death refers to the event of the beginning of reason’s fall.

context of human life; it has to set the tone for the questions to arise. In other words, besides just thinking *back* on the questions that the humans are grappling with, philosophy has primarily to think *ahead* in such a way that it makes it possible for the desirable ‘atmosphere’ to emerge.⁵⁶ Philosophers have given thought to the questions of ‘dehumanization, totalization, etc.’, after these have been experienced in the life of the humans, as we do today about the question of ‘marginalization’ of the *dalits*. Could not and/or should not philosophy have thought ahead and enabled such an atmosphere to emerge, wherein the phenomena of dehumanization, totalization, marginalization, etc., would not have arisen? It is our conviction that philosophizing should be a thinking ahead and be a trend-pointer, rather than a thinking back and be a trend-follower. Although we have emphasized the aspect of trend-pointing for philosophy, it should be based on the ‘given spatio-temporal situation’. In other words, the trend that philosophy sets for the society should not be a ‘borrowed’ one, but must be ‘born’ of the soil of its situation.⁵⁷ Thus trend-pointing cannot sever itself from trend-following. But the following of the *given trend* is in view of pointing to a *new trend*. This is the reason why we included in our philosophizing a ‘looking back’ and a ‘looking ahead’ on the question of the *dalits*.

Philosophizing in the future must be towards a ‘cosmic philosophy’—and not a ‘universal philosophy’ of sameness.⁵⁸ By *cosmic philosophy* we have in mind a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it refers to a philosophy that will take into philosophical consideration the whole *cosmic reality* with its multi-dimensionality of the Divine, the Human, and the Nature. Philosophizing from the *dalit* perspective includes all these dimensions, as their approach is holistic.⁵⁹ By *cosmic philosophy* we also mean a cosmic garden with different philosophical plants. The future philosophy must be like such a garden that is open enough to accept the various plants of philosophical thoughts and perspectives. It must be a garden of unity and variety: a unity of complementarity, and a variety of uniqueness. When each of the various patterns of philosophical thought sees the other as complementing and enriching one another, there exists a unity of symphony—varieties of sounds make a beautiful piece of music, so also the various thoughts of various groups of people constitute a ‘cosmic philosophy’ of mutual enrichment. Such an interaction with one another is a ‘play’—a play *with* one another, rather than *against* one another.

The culture of ‘unity in variety’ is different from the culture of uniformity in globalization. Globalization does not tolerate any difference or variety; it levels down every different to the level of the powerful model. Here we will have only uniformity; unity can be had only where variety is accepted and respected. What we are looking forward to is not a

⁵⁶ Philosophy with the process of trend-setting is a rarity. Stray instances of this sort we find in the past. What immediately comes to my mind is the ‘trend-setting’ that took place just before French Revolution. The philosophers such as Rousseau, Voltaire, etc., with their writings created an atmosphere in French thinking that a revolution was the necessary outcome.

⁵⁷ Marxism was born from the situation of the then Europe, and it has given rise to a new trend with wide following and relevance. In our view, it is one of the philosophical schools that is very much praxis-oriented, and it has well-linked both the trend that was existent and also set a new trend that has spread to almost all the countries in the world.

⁵⁸ The reference here is the philosophy of modernity, characterized by perennality, universality, certainty, as different from that of postmodernity.

⁵⁹ From an oriental perspective we would rather consider the various dimensions as implying and involving one another. According to most of the Western thinkers, God, the humans and the world are to be considered as different entities, as a result of which they are separate, and can only be separately reflected upon.

uniformity of sameness, but a cosmic garden of unity and variety, identity and difference. Only in such a situation of philosophical openness will the *dalit* perspective not be sidelined in philosophizing.

6. Conclusion

We have made a quick traverse through the dark and unknown path of philosophizing from *dalit* perspective. Since the journey is made not on any established path, the way that has come about—the proposed way of philosophizing with a shift of paradigms and change of perspectives—is, quite understandably, not a coherent one. What we have expressed consists of some *pointers* to the future, pointers that emerge from the experience of the past. The proposed ‘pointers’ can be summed up in a single thought: a plea for an attitudinal change—a change from the presumption of *superiority* and *self-sufficiency* of one’s own philosophy and cultural group. No thought or cultural group is so ‘rich’ that it does not need to be complemented, and no thought or cultural group is so ‘poor’ that it has nothing to complement the others with. In other words, one needs a philosophical *humility* with regard to one’s own, and *openness* to other perspectives and thoughts.

These stray thoughts in view of philosophizing from *Dalit* perspective may appear to be utopian as they point to some *utopia*, an unreachable ideal, since society, religion and philosophy continue to be under the exclusive monopoly of the powerful ones in the society. But do we not need *utopias* to keep us going ahead? When the humans, at any period of history, stopped *dreaming* of *utopias*, they stopped ‘living’ as humans. For so many centuries a large section of the humans—the *Dalits*—were not allowed to have a dream! The powerful others decided whether and what they should dream. Today they have come of age; they have decided to dream loud of better morrow. The echoes of their *loud dreaming* are heard far and wide. This dreaming of the Dalits—expressed in the form of folk-stories and folk-dances, poems and ballads, painting and sculpture, proverbs and riddles, street-plays and dramas—is, what we call, Philosophizing from Dalit Perspective. Should not we, the Indian Christian Philosophers, join the *Dalits* and start dreaming a *different dream*—different from what has been dictated by the powerful center—philosophizing from Dalit perspective?

THE MEANING OF SUBALTERN

A Socio-Philosophical Discourse¹

Prakash Louis

“Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honoured disguise and this borrowed language.”

[Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. 1972, p 437].

This perception of Karl Marx emanates from his understanding of the political economy of society as existed at his times. This passage also presents one of the most central aspects of understanding individuals and collectivity in the particular social milieu they live in. It is in this given social milieu, the social groups are demarcated on the basis of ownership of means and production. These divisions of people begin or continue the process of class consciousness and class struggles.

This paper examines the discursive discourse of the term ‘subaltern’ from socio-philosophical traditions. To begin with, this paper examines the very understanding of subaltern, especially as espoused by the ‘Subaltern Studies’; presents those social groups who are in reality the subalterns in the Indian context; briefly looks at the identity formation process and emancipatory engagement of these groups; and finally calls for relocating our socio-philosophical discourses² from the subaltern perspectives. This paper is preliminary in nature and thus has its own limitations.

Subaltern: A Discursive Discourse

The term ‘Subaltern’ is a very much used but a less defined term in social sciences. Subaltern is a military usage and has come to be used in socio-political discourse. For the sake of locating our debate let us try to understand the various ways in which the term subaltern has been explained. The Chambers 20th Century Dictionary defines subaltern in the following manner: ranked successively, subordinate, holding or held of a vassal. In terms of official terminology, subaltern means under the rank of captain, a subordinate or a subaltern officer. According to Webster’s New World College Dictionary, the British usage of subaltern means a subordinate, of lower rank, holding army commission below that of captain.

¹ Right at the outset I want to place on record that this is an unconventional paper. That is, it does not follow the usual style of making a submission but tries to highlight the various streams of debate about subalterns and then focuses on one stream which has its own definition of subalterns.

². I am consciously calling it ‘discourses’ to highlight the fact that there are many discourses and not a single one. This is the reality and especially from the point of view of the subalterns, there is always scope for more than one discourse.

A series of books published under the title 'Subaltern Studies' in fact opened up the debate not only about the reality of the subalterns but the term subaltern itself. Ranajit Guha who edited the Subaltern Studies states, the word 'subaltern' stands for the meaning as given the Concise Oxford University Dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.³ Since more than any other process, the bringing out of the series Subaltern Studies⁴ has generated the debate about subalterns, it is imperative that we try to examine the various debates that go on with this series.

Writing about the series Jacques Pouchepadass states, there are 11 volumes of the series called *Subaltern Studies*, well known to all social scientists working on India. The international success of the series, enhanced by the theoretical and methodological debates, which it has generated among South Asianists in India and abroad, has been exceptional for such a specialized set of publications. The initial intellectual orientation of the group was a critical form of Marxism influenced by Gramsci and the British radical historians. The total number of authors published in these 11 volumes, whose average quality is of a very high order, adds up to almost 50. Like all collective intellectual ventures, this one has been marked by internal differences, reorientations and secessions reflecting some of the important debates which have developed in the field of epistemology and the social sciences in the course of the last 20 years.⁵

The people, according to the opening manifesto published by Ranajit Guha in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, is 'the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country', that is, 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite' (Guha, 1982: VIII, 4). That which defines the 'subalterns' (a notion elaborated by Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks) is the relation of subordination in which they are held by the elites, and that relation can be expressed in terms of caste, class, sex, race, language and culture. Some confusion has developed thereafter in the series because 'subalternity' has sometimes been defined as a substance that is, as the discriminating characteristic of a particular social category, and sometimes as a relation (in which case an indigenous elite could be viewed as subaltern vis-à-vis the European colonial elite). In any case, by choosing this category as the cornerstone of his analysis, Guha placed at the centre of his historical perspective a dichotomic vision of society in which the main fault line was the separation between the dominant and the dominated. And if he undertook to correct the widespread elitist view of the history of India, it was in the name of the conviction that although the Indian elites undoubtedly exercised their (material) domination over the subaltern masses, they were unable to subject them to their hegemony (or cultural supremacy) (Guha 1989). It is this autonomous domain of thought and initiative of the subaltern, systematically ignored by the elitist historians, that one had to reform, not only to do justice

³ Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982, p vii.

⁴ The Subaltern Studies came out with a phenomenal work of 11 volumes. This notwithstanding, the Economic and Political Weekly carried about 17 articles spanning from 1988 to 2002. This indicates the level of debate that went on or goes on about the issue of subaltern.

⁵ Jacques Pouchepadass, "Subaltern Studies as Post Colonial Critique of Modernity", in Sujata Patel et al (eds), *Thinking Social Science in India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 2002, p.84. (Hereafter, Pouchepadass, 'Post Colonial Critique')

and restore its dignity, but to expose the unequal power struggle which has taken place within the Independence movement, whose benefits have been wholly captured by the elites, and to explain in view of future struggles what he calls “this historic failure of the nation to come to its own... which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India’ (Guha: 1982:7).⁶

To rehabilitate the consciousness and agency of the subalterns, whose culture is oral and who leave no written documents, one is left with no alternative says Guha, but to go back to the accounts of popular rebellion⁷ kept in the administrative records of the state, and try to read them “against the grain”. He brilliantly explains how the discourse of these sources, with which the elitist historiographies are mostly in consonance, always tends to obliterate the subaltern consciousness by treating the revolts of the dominated as mere spontaneous reactions against economic and political oppression, thus dissolving the autonomous vision and initiative of the rebels in the mechanics of external cause.⁸

In a book edited by David Ludden ‘*Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*’, a reliable point of departure for new readers of Subaltern Studies and a resource base for experienced readers who want to review critical debates are presented. This book primarily examines various writings about subalterns primarily about ways of writing history rather than history itself. The book also highlights the fact that the most lasting impact of this scholarly enterprise is in the language employed in histories from below. Further, a critical argument is developed in this book is that there is an intellectual history of subalternity outside the Subaltern Studies.⁹

T.K. Oommen writing about “Perspectives from Below” argues that the bottom layer in hierarchical societies is constituted by the cumulatively deprived section of society. Unlike women, youth, proletariat, culturally backward or alien segments, which are deprived in one of the contexts, the cumulatively deprived are subjected to multiple deprivations. Pointing out to the contradictions that exist within social sciences in their approach to the study of those in the bottom of the social ladder Oommen states, in hierarchical societies the anthropologists drawn from upper castes were invariably reluctant to participate at the bottom rung of the society given the norms and values associated with the practice of untouchability.¹⁰ This trend continues even today irrespective of social scientists being engaged in the analysis of Indian society for more than six decades.

Continuing this debate, Tirthankar Roy contends that Subaltern Studies has changed the way in which history of the below is written. In one important respect, the change is

⁶ Pouchepadass, ‘Post Colonial Critique’, p. 87.

⁷ Ranajit Guha in another place writing about similar issue states, the ‘elementary forms’ were analysed under six thematic labels; negations (the popular conception of resistance), ambiguity (the relation between crime and resistance), modality (forms of organisation and collective action), solidarity (unity and discord within the resistance), transmission (modes of communication in the rebellion), territoriality (the spatial dimension of revolt). Refer to ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in R. Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies II*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983, 1-42.

⁸ Pouchepadass, ‘Post Colonial Critique’, p. 87.

⁹ See David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001.

¹⁰ T.K. Oommen, *Understanding Indian Society: The Relevance of Perspective from Below*, Pune, Department of Sociology, 2000, p. 12.

decidedly for the better, the accent on the ability of the underprivileged to alter their conditions themselves. But while arguing against structures, Subaltern Studies itself imposed a structure on the way this ability is conceived and discussed, distancing itself in the process from the discipline whose help history of the below needs most, the economic history. The way forward for history writing is to retain the original intent, the search for agency, while interpreting agency in a much broader way. That is, by questioning the repression-fetish built into the very term 'subaltern'.¹¹

In the same vein, Thomas Pantham argues instead of thinking of the subject of reason and the agent of political action as the pre-political/non-political or pre-social/non-social foundation or sovereign, self-legislating author of socio-political practices and discourses, the poststructuralists maintain that subject positions and political agencies are constituted in power-political relationships. In place of the fixed, pre-given, foundational, essentialist, sovereign notion of the subject, the poststructuralists speak of contingent, mobile, situated, constituted subject-agents of political practices and discourses.¹² Thus, more and more the earlier practice of perceiving subaltern as the object is shifted to perceiving subaltern as subject-agent.

Subalterns in the Indian Context

Before I go on to present my perception of subalterns in the Indian context, it is pertinent to review some of the other perceptions. Highlighting the manner in which the elite of this country appropriate every space even in cultural realms Nissim contends, *Lagaan* has been valorized both in the popular and academic discourse as having subverted the dominant order. This paper argues that such 'innocent' reading not only makes the film's hegemonic appropriation of the subaltern to the elite imaginary, but also participates in it. The contention here is that *Lagaan* is another symbolic attempt at 'nationalising' the past, an attempt that distorts history beyond recognition. And, more importantly, the 'nation' that is, 'imagined' has no place for the subaltern in it.

The critique goes on to state, as commentators have noted, the 'Janus' faced nature of nationalism. It is manifested in 'national consciousness' as a spontaneous celebration of the community of active producers and as a justification for a regime of hierarchy and domination. The seduction of nationalism precisely lies in its manifestation as the former, its appeal to the sense of community in which exploitation, generation of surplus and its appropriation is not divided in terms of those who produce and those who appropriate but is a projected communal activity. *Lagaan*'s appeal lies in this aspect of nationalism. My attempt in this essay has thus only been to uphold the 'fragmentary' perspective against the homogenizing tendencies of nationalism, against its hegemonic face. This would also see the nation as a terrain where antagonisms of class, gender, caste, region and language are played out in the struggle for a richer definition of the nation rather than as one which is 'always ready' constituted and which banishes the fragments as its refuse. Recovery of the silence of *Lagaan*'s historical gaze would be fruitless if it were to remain only that. It needs something

¹¹ Tirthankar Roy, "Subaltern Studies: Questioning the Basics", in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 37 (2002) 23, 2228.

¹² Thomas Pantham, "The Subaltern as the Subject-Agent", in *Indian Journal of Human Rights*, 4 (2000) 1&2, 7-8.

more – a reordering of the present.¹³ It is this assertion for reordering of the present which has brought the marginalised and the discriminated to the forefront of identity formation.

Analyzing the assertion of the subalterns in the literary world, Pandian maintains that as though it was a willed decision to free subaltern studies from its academic confines, wherein production and circulation of knowledge has its own moments of exclusion, most of the participants in the meet that took place in Kumbakonam were non-academics. The presentation of papers began with Azhagarasan's passionate critique of subaltern studies as a brahminical project dominated by Brahmins from Bengal and elsewhere. He claimed that in subaltern studies, there is lack of engagement with caste as a defining feature of subalternity in the Indian context. Even when the subalternists analyse caste, they distance themselves as outsiders and conduct their research in a clinical fashion.¹⁴

The emergence of the subaltern school, especially in Indian academia, raised hopes about recovering the subordinated cultures of the subcontinent. However, as Rosalind O'Hanlon has cautioned, many of the writings could not recover the Dalits as 'subjects'; they were retained as 'objects' reflecting the 'pitying images' of the subaltern specialists within a homogeneous paradigm, rather than provide an appreciation of alternative heterogeneous cultural existence in the sub-continent.¹⁵

At this juncture let us briefly present facts and figures to present our claim that the Dalits and the Tribals constitute the subalterns or the subordinated segment of Indian population. While the Dalits were subjected to exclusion and discrimination, the Tribals were subjected to isolation and exploitation.

Social exclusion, isolation, discriminations and marginalization have been part of the human history. Stratification of human beings on the basis of colour, caste, class, ethnicity, creed, region, religion, occupation and language has been a historical phenomenon. It would be foolhardy to deny this social, cultural and historical fact. But the danger lies in the fact that when one takes these social divisions as fixed and final and thus can not be altered. In this regard the most fundamental fact that needs to be brought to focus is that when we talk of social exclusion or isolation what is at stake is the institutionalized attempt to keep out or to 'outcast' or deprive some segments of the population from the social order. Here we do not deal with one particular individual who 'ill-treats' another person, but the social processes that are operative in general. Thus, social segregation is an institutionalized form of social distancing expressed in physical separation. It signifies the convergence of physical and social space and is to be distinguished from other social forms which also structure social distance in spatial terms.¹⁶

In course of human development, social exclusion has taken the form of segregating a group of people from the social, political, economic and cultural domains of societal life. But

¹³ Nissim Mannathukkaren, "Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silence of 'Lagaan'", in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 36(2001)49, 4580-4588.

¹⁴ M.S.S.S. Pandian, "Kumbakonam Encounters Subaltern Studies", in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 32 (1997) 8, 398-399.

¹⁵ Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia", in *Modern Asian Studies*, 22(1988) 1, 189-244.

¹⁶ *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1968, p. 144.

the fundamental social reality that needs to be exposed here is that social exclusion does not limit itself to segregation and deprivation. Social seclusion and isolation provides base for a sense of superiority and inferiority among the citizens of a same society or country. Further, it also culminates into a system of domination and subjugation. All these processes ultimately lead to oppression and exploitation.

Since social exclusion and segregation provide space for domination, discrimination and deprivation those who benefit out of this social formation do not want to introduce any change in this structure. Significantly, this social system becomes highly resistant to change and transformation. Interestingly it is not only those who discriminate against those who are supposed to be 'inferior, incapable, less meritorious and lower' who resist change. Even those who are victims of discrimination also do not want to alter the existing social system. This is not because they want to remain in the dehumanising social order, but because, they fear that greater discrimination and repression may be heaped upon them when they resist discrimination.

From the point of view of the Dalits, caste discrimination is an institutionalised form of marginalization and dehumanization. It has permeated all aspects of social life. In this process, social exclusion has deprived the lower castes of resources, power and human dignity and thus has reduced the Dalits to the most degrading social existence. In the same manner, the practice of isolation of the Tribals has not only reduced the Tribals to spatial discrimination but has provided the scope for exploitation and oppression. The plunder and the loot of the Tribals that go on unabated in India is a clear indication of having reduced them to a subordinate position. Let us briefly examine the subordination of the Dalits and the Tribals.

Discrimination of the Dalits

The term 'Dalit' is supposed to have been used first by Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) in his attempt to work for *dalituthan*, that is, upliftment of the Dalits. The category Dalit was first used by Ambedkar himself in his fortnightly *Bahishkruit Bharat*. He defined it comprehensively: 'Dalithood is a kind of life condition which characterizes the exploitation, suppression and marginalisation of Dalits by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahmin cal order.'¹⁷ Ambedkar, however, did not use this category often, preferring to deploy different terms depending upon the changing context. For example, when dealing with the imperial state he used the category of depressed classes.¹⁸ When addressing high caste Hindus he used the category *bahishkruit* meaning totally outcaste. Marathi literary figures and neo-Buddhists began to use the word Dalit in their writings and the contributions of the literary initiatives in replacing *Harijan and Achut* with Dalit may be located as the first case of public use of the term Dalit. They expressed their anger, protest and aspiration through this new word.

Analytically, the term *Dalit* is a past passive participle of the Sanskrit root *dal* meaning to crack, split, open, etc. *Dalana* means tearing or causing to burst. Dalit means split,

¹⁷ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Yanche Bahishkruit Bharat ani Muknayak* (Marathi), [translated to mean 'This is the Depressed India or Frontrunner'], Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990, pp. 194-98.

¹⁸ Babasaheb Ambedkar, *Writing and Speeches*, vol. 9, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

broken, destroyed, scattered, torn asunder. The noun *dala*, besides meaning the splitting, has also the positive connotation of something unfolding itself (*dala-komala*, a lotus, *dala-kosal*, a jasmine). Two inter-related processes can be identified with regard to the evolution of the term Dalit. Firstly, the term denotes an affirmative action, that is, ‘yes we are Dalits, we are crushed and broken people’. Secondly, it also indicates assertion, that is, ‘no we will not allow ourselves to be crushed by you the dominant castes anymore’.¹⁹

The word gained currency in public sphere during the Scheduled Caste - caste Hindu riots in Bombay in the early 1970s. Dalit Panthers used the term to assert their identity for rights and self-respect. Later the term came to be used to include all the oppressed and exploited sections of the society. It has essentially emerged as a political category. According to Gangadhar Pantawane,

Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism. He rejects existence of God, rebirth, soul, sacred books that teach discrimination, faith and heaven because these have made him a slave. He represents the exploited man in his country... Dalitness is essentially a means towards achieving a sense of cultural identity. The inferiority complex based on ‘to be a dalit’ has now disappeared. Now Dalitness is a source of confrontation. This change has its essence in the desire for justice for all mankind.²⁰

Table No.	Profile of Dalits and Tribals – Rights	Dalits –Representation	Tribals Representation -
1	Population	16.48	8.08
2	Literacy	37.82	29.60
3	Male	49.91	40.65
4	Female	23.76	18.19
5	Dropout by High school	79.88	86.72
6	Central Government Jobs		
	I. class	10.14	2.29
	II. class	12.67	2.68
	III. class	16.15	5.69
	IV. class	21.26	6.48
7	Public sector unit A grade	8.41	-
8	Cultivators	25.44	54.50
9	Agricultural Labourers	49.04	32.69
10	Agricultural & Allied Activities	76.22	87.00
11	Female Agricultural Labourers	68.00	44.28
12	Household with drinking water, electricity, toilet facilities19.83%	6.62	3.23
13	Priesthood	0	Traditional
14	Prime Minister of India	0	0
15	Chief Justice	0	0
16	Party Leadership	10	10

¹⁹ Prakash Louis, *The Political Sociology of Dalit Assertion*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, 2003, pp. 144-147.

²⁰ Barbara Joshi, *Untouchable! Voice of the Dalit Liberation Movement*, New Delhi, Selectbook Service, 1986, pp. 79-80.

17	In Teaching profession	9.49	7.03
18	Below Poverty Line	56.00	54.00
19	Manual Scavenging	100	0
20	Discriminated Against	100	100

Source: 1991 Census Report.²¹

According to the 2001 census, the Dalits constitute over 16 crore population. That is, they comprise about 16.48 per cent of the total population of India. They are found in most of the states of India. It is an established fact that the Scheduled Castes are the most disadvantaged segment of Indian population. A brief examination of some of the social indicators related to this disadvantaged community is called for here. Table 1 unravels the point that the Dalits are reduced to a deplorable social condition. Whether it is the ownership of resources or most ordinary indicators like literacy and education, the Dalits are subjected to discrimination and subordination.

At this juncture it is expedient to highlight some of the factors that are responsible for maintaining a low level of literacy among the Scheduled Caste population. A 'Probe Team' which investigated into this matter highlighted,

First, what needs to be considered is not just physical distance but also 'social distance', taking into account various barriers that may prevent a willing child from reaching the local school. In many areas, for instance, villages are divided into separate hamlets, and children from one hamlet may be reluctant or unable to go to school in another hamlet, e.g. due to caste tensions. Only half of all hamlets in rural India have primary schools, and in states like Uttar Pradesh the proportion of such hamlets is as low as 30 percent. For girls, restricted freedom of movement further enhances the problem of social distance. Thus the girl children from the Scheduled Caste community suffer double discrimination.²²

A careful examination of the trends of employment between the Scheduled Caste community and the general population amplifies this fact that there is vast difference between the weaker sections and the general population. In 2000, about 16.4 per cent of Scheduled Caste population was self engaged in agriculture, compared to this figure about 41.1 per cent of the non-Scheduled Caste category was self-employed in agriculture [Table 2]. In contrast to this, in the same period, about 51.4 per cent of Scheduled Caste population was returned as agricultural labourers. Among the non-Scheduled Castes just 19 per cent was returned as agricultural labourers.²³ Further, in the non-Scheduled Castes category there has been a decrease among agricultural labourers and there is an increase in self-employed non-agricultural economic activities. This goes to explain the fact that the non-Scheduled Castes are increasingly gainfully employed while the Scheduled Castes are loosing out in these sectors and joining the mass of agricultural labour force.

Table 2: Distribution of Households by Employment Type in Rural Area [%]

Household Type	Scheduled Castes	Others	Ratio (SCs to others)
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²¹ Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen, *India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995 and other reports.

²² National Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Report, 1991.

²³ Thorat, Sukhdeo, "Ambedkar's Economic Ideas and Liberalisation: Emerging Challenges Before Dalits." Unpublished Document, (2002). Sukhdeo Thorat is presently a professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi.

Year	1987-88	1993-94	1999-2000	1987-88	1993-94	1999-2000	1987-88	1993-94	1999-2000
Self Employed in Agriculture	18.9	20.1	16.4	43.3	43.32	41.1	0.44	0.46	0.40
Self Employed in Non-Agriculture	11.0	10.7	12.0	13.8	14.42	14.8	0.80	0.74	0.81
Agricultural Labour	51.7	49.3	51.4	23.2	23.2	19.0	2.23	2.13	2.71
Other Labourer	11.4	10.2	10.0	7.9	6.9	6.3	1.44	1.48	1.59
Others	6.9	9.7	10.2	11.5	12.1	18.7	0.60	0.80	0.55

Source: National Sample Survey (1987-88, 1993-94, 1999-2000)

*Social exclusion and seclusion are part of every society. With regard to Indian society, Gail Omvedt argues ‘wherever we look in the traditional Indian system, hierarchy and inequality among the exploited stands out clearly. Such inequality existed among all feudal societies (medieval Europe); but in India it was institutionalised in the caste system. Cultivating peasants with firm rights to the ‘lower share’ or to supervising the village distribution of the ‘grain-heap’ were at the top of the village hierarchies; artisans and subordinate tenants had rights that were both institutionalised and secondary; herders and forest dwelling hunters and gatherers exchanged sometimes on a basis of inferiority, sometimes with more independence; but everywhere the lower castes of Dalits/untouchables performed the most menial labour and were fundamentally differentiated from the others in being classed as ‘impure’.*²⁴

Exploitation of the Tribals

There are over 8 crore population in India [2001 Census], spread out over 20 per cent of the geographical area of the country. They constitute about 8.08 per cent of the total population of the country. It is repeatedly stated that they are supposed to be the original settlers of India. Keeping this historical fact in mind the framers of the Constitution placed them under Scheduled Areas. This was another way of providing them a protective cover from the exploitation of non-Tribal population and also a way of maintaining their cultural identity. This protective discrimination also could not save the Tribals from being displaced and marginalized.

Natural resources constitute the very lifeline of the Tribal population. These resources make up the economic, social, cultural, political and religious universe of the tribal community. The Tribal women in a special way had a say and control over these resources. With the introduction of development-induced displacement, vast segment of the Tribal population are displaced from their natural habitats and also are subjected to innumerable forms of exploitation. While land alienation and displacement have become integral part of Tribal history, rehabilitation of them does not seem to be part of the national agenda. Table 3 highlights the fact that over 74.10 lakh Tribals have been displaced in Jharkhand alone due to displacement carried out in the name of

²⁴ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, p. 47.

development.²⁵ Out of them only 18.45 lakh have been resettled leaving over 76 per cent of the displaced people in no man's land. Thus, the Tribals who are used to live in symbiotic relationship with nature are reduced to be aliens in their own land. Women in a special way loose out control over resources and this increases their burden in terms of finding fuel, fodder and food.

Table 3 : Tribal Displacement 1950-1990 [in Lakhs]

Project	Displaced	Resettled	Backlog
Dams	53.00	13.15	39.86
Mines	12.00	3.00	9.00
Industries	2.60	0.65	1.95
Animal Sanctuaries	5.00	1.25	3.75
Other	1.50	0.40	1.70
Total	74.10	18.45	56.20

Source: Update Collective²⁶

While, the Tribals in central, western, eastern and southern India are suffer due to innumerable forms of exploitation, the Tribals of North East are subjected under 'national security'. Since the early 90s particularly, recurring bouts of violence has damaged the whole fabric of civic governance and culture in the North East, though the epicentre of armed violence keeps changing from state to state, district to district. Normal process of all the three wings of governance – the legislature, judiciary and executive- have more often than not, been suspended at best and subverted at worst. There have been phenomenal violations of human rights; virtually a war culture has emerged, built around discourse on the 'enemy'. The army has taken over functions of policing in many areas; massive stores of military weapons have been built up in private hands. In the North-East, virtually all aspects of community life has become politicized, and in many areas, militarized. Religiously homogenous as well as heterogeneous communities and societies are at war; valued social relationships have been ruptured, inter-personal and intra-community trust has been destroyed, quite often by government and security forces as well as opposition armed groups and 'informants'. The erection of social, cultural, psychological and physical barriers have broken long established partners of community living; open communities have turned into closed ones.²⁷ But the recent happenings in Manipur has opened up more space and scope for assertion of individuals and collectivise against a militaristic state.

Table 4: Representation of SCs/STs in Central Government Services [1997]

Group	Total	SC	%	ST	%
A	60,067	6,135	10.21	1,840	3.06
B	94,111	11,649	12.38	2,840	3.02
C	19,59,477	3,14,995	16.08	1,22,903	6.27
D (Excluding Sweepers)	8,18,748	1,76,368	21.54	54,931	6.71
Sweepers	15,51,137	61,149	39.42	12,812	8.26

²⁵ Prakash Louis, "Jharkhand: Marginalisation of Tribals", in *The Economic and Political Weekly*, 35 (2000) 47, p. 4088.

²⁶ A. Minz, "Development and/or Destruction" in *Jharkhand and Growing Fascism*.

²⁷ K.S. Aggarwal, *Dynamics of Identity and Intergroup Relations in North-East India*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1999, p. 2.

Total (Excluding Sweepers)	29,32,403	5,09,149	17.36	1,82,524	6.22
Total (Including Sweepers)	30,87,540	5,70,296	18.47	1,95,326	6.33

Source: Department of Personnel & Training.²⁸

While the exploitation and oppression of these communities go on, the constitutional provisions given to them are not enforced at all. Contrary to common belief, the percentage of members from weaker sections employed in government services is abysmally low [Table 4]. If one pays attention to their presence in the public sector, one would be shocked by this fact that even the stipulated 15 and 7.5 percent of the reservation quota fixed for these communities is not filled.²⁹ This is irrespective of the fact that the provision of reservation has been in vogue for the last five decades. Interestingly, many of these prescribed posts are filled up by the dominant castes.

Table 5: SC & ST Students in Academics and Professional Courses

Courses	Scheduled Castes	Scheduled Tribes	Total
MA	55182	14416	69598
MSc	15328	2900	18228
MCom	8956	1980	10936
BEd/BT	15360	5498	20858
Polytechnic	43511	14619	58130
Engineering	38935	18644	57579
Medical	16972	17037	34009
PhD	3133	951	4084
Total	197377	76045	273422

Source: *Select Educational Statistics 2001-2002*.³⁰

It is significant to note that when the ruling class made just a pronouncement that reservation would be provided in private sector, the private sector created a big hue and cry. It also took recourse to the usual 'lack of merit and efficiency' among the weaker sections. Contrast to this, the government data itself bears testimony; that nearly 3 lakh Dalit and Tribal students at a given time have enrolled for academic and professional courses in 2002 [Table 5]. If this figure is added up for the last fifty years then the number of young men and women educated, trained, skilled from these communities would run up to lakhs. Significantly, they are in all the different sectors and thus are diversified. This is a great asset to these communities and the country. To argue that among these lakhs of young men and women not a single one is with merit and ability is to engage in lying. The fact of the matter is that these candidates are denied equal opportunity to exhibit their capability, commitment and entrepreneurship since they belong to a discriminated social group due to which end up becoming unemployed and underemployed. It is these forms of discrimination and subordination the traditional social and philosophical systems fail to take note of.

²⁸ Data from the Department of Personnel & Training, as quoted in *Fifth Report 1998-99*, of the National Commission for Scheduled Castes & Scheduled Tribes., p 130.

²⁹ Prakash Louis, "The Reservation Debate," in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38 (2003) 25, p. 2476.

³⁰ Ministry of Human Resources Development, *Select Educational Statistics 2001-2002*, Planning, Monitoring and Statistics Division, Government of India, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 43-55.

Identity Formation and Emancipation

The term 'identity' applied to persons generally connote to some special characteristics that define or explains a human being or rather a group of human beings at a point of time. The concept of 'identity', therefore, is related to a process of self-understanding and to a process in which the 'other' understands and defines me. The self-understanding and self-defining play an important role in the way I see my community and myself at a particular point of the time. Because it addresses the existential question of my being - it provides meaning to my existence. The understanding of the 'other' becomes important more so, because identities have to be validated or negated by those with whom one relates.

'Identity' is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality. But it is also about your social relationships, your complex involvement with the others'. Based on this definition, Bradley makes a distinction between 'personal identity' and 'social identity'. Personal identity refers to the construction of self: our sense of ourselves as unique individuals, how we perceive ourselves from the whole package of experiences that each individual has gone through, and is highly complex and individualized. Social identity is also a complex issue, which refers to the way that we as individuals locate ourselves within the society in which we live and the way in which we perceive others as locating us. Social identities drive from the various sets of lived relationships in which individuals are engaged, such as the dynamics of inequality – class, caste, race, ethnicity, age, gender etc.³¹

Bradley further identifies 3 levels of social identity: passive, active and politicized. 'Passive identities' are potential identities in the sense that they derive from the sets of lived relationships (class, gender, ethnicity, etc) in which the individuals are engaged, but they are not acted on. Individuals are not particularly conscious of passive identities and do not normally define themselves by them unless events occur which bring those particular relationships to the fore. 'Active identities' are those, which individuals are conscious of and which provide a base for their actions. They are positive elements in an individual's self-identification. Active identification often occurs as a defense against the action of others or when an individual is conscious of being defined in a negative way (exclusion). Active identities are promoted by the experience of discrimination (assertion). Where identities provide a more constant base for action and where individuals constantly think of themselves in terms of an identity, we can describe it as a 'politicised identity'. Politicised identities are formed through political action and provide the base for collective organisation of either a [defensive] denouncing or an affirmative nature (identity politics) (Bradley: 1996:25-26).

Identities are formed, developed and changed over a period of time. Identities (of the self as well as the other) are defined and redefined, formed and reformed, both by internal and external forces. However, it is not that easy in all case to change ones identity when socio-cultural and political dimension are involved in defining ones identity. In some cases, one lives with an identity, although painful, say in case of degrading caste identity or the ethnic identity. Yet in some other cases, one begins to assert. This leads to another important

³¹ Harriet Bradley, *Fractured Identities: Changing Patterns of Inequality*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1996, p. 24.

dimension of identity, i.e., defining boundaries. The process of forming or acquiring or living an identity is connected with a process of drawing boundaries around myself that distinguish me from the 'other'. It is here that the social exclusion based on caste, class, gender, ethnicity factors and the self-assertion of the oppressed communities becomes important dimensions in both defining and maintaining identity boundaries.

Collective action and emancipation have become the dominant discourse among the marginalised communities. According to Pieterse, the various terms used to describe collective action carry many different inflections. They include attitudinal terms such as dissent, opposition, resistance, protest, defiance; terms emphasizing methods of action such as riot, violence, *jacquerie*, rebellion, mutiny, revolution, petition, demonstration, consciousness raising; general terms with normative or political overtones such as class struggle, liberation, emancipation, participation, empowerment; and social science terminology such as collective behaviour, collective action, social movement.

Pieterse goes on to state that the concept emancipation is being organised around 6 distinctive dimensions. 1. The dichotomic dimension: between the emancipatory moment and the social order which has preceded it there is an absolute chasm, a radical discontinuity. 2. A holistic dimension: emancipation affects all areas of social life and there is a relation of essential imbrication between its various contents in these different areas. 3. Transparency dimension: if alienation in its various aspects – religious, political, economic, etc. has been radically eradicated, there is only the absolute coincidence of human essence with itself and there is no room for any relation of either power or representation. Emancipation presupposes the elimination of power, the abolition of the subject/object distinction, and the management - without any opaqueness or mediation – of communitarian affairs by social agents identified with the viewpoint of social totality. It is in this sense in Marxism, for instance, communism and the withering away of the state logically entail each other. 4. Pre-existence of what has to be emancipated vis-à-vis the act of emancipation. There is no emancipation without oppression, and there is no oppression without the presence of something which is impeded in its free development by the oppressive forces. Emancipation is not, in this sense, an act of creation but instead liberation of something which precedes the liberating act. 5. A dimension of ground which is inherent in the project of any radical emancipation. If the act of emancipation is truly radical, if it is really going to leave behind everything preceding it, it has to take place at the level of the 'ground' of the social. If there was no ground, if the revolutionary act left a residue which is beyond the transforming abilities of the emancipatory praxis, the very idea of a radical emancipation would become contradictory. 6. Rationalistic dimensions. This is the point where the emancipatory discourses of the secularised eschatologies part company with the religious ones.³² While domination and subjugation is part of the lives of the subalterns, identity formation and emancipation is also structurally related to the assertion of the subalterns.

Pointers for a Subaltern Socio-Philosophical Discourse

Based on the above discussion one can delineate some pointers for a subaltern socio-philosophical discourse. From the existing social realities, it can be argued that the Dalits, the

³² Jan Nederveen Pieterse (ed.), *Emancipation, Modern and Postmodern*, London, Sage Publications, 1992, p. 121.

Tribals, women and minorities constitute the subaltern since they are subjected to discriminatory behaviour or treated as the second grade citizens of the country and members of the society.

Firstly, while the occupations of the ruling class (priesthood, administration, trading) are over valued, the productive labour constantly spent for the society by these subordinate classes is undervalued. Mental labour is highly rated and physical labour is not even taken for consideration. Further, the knowledge of production and reproduction mostly oral in nature is grossly underrated. This helps in the continuance of the hegemony and monopoly of the ruling elite and subordination of the subalterns. The subalterns in turn are beginning to raise questions about the dominance and subjugation relationship of members of the same society and country.

Secondly, the ideas generated by the subaltern intellectuals are not recognised let alone made part of common knowledge collective. While volumes and series are brought about the dominant caste, class intellectuals, not even scant attention is given to Mahatma Phule, Birsa Munda, Dr. Ambedkar, Narayana Guru etc. Now when the subalterns are weaving the thoughts and ideas of these movement leaders, there is an attempt to decry them. Irrespective of this fact, the subalterns are rewriting their history on the principles laid by these leaders. The Ambedkarite and Birsait movements are indication of this.

Thirdly, access and control over resources have been denied to the subalterns. By denying these, the ruling elite have carefully forced these people to be eternally dependent upon them. It is this dependence which has denied equal participation in the socio-political and economic processes and has reduced the scope for assertion and emancipation. Over these barriers, the subordinate groups are demanding for access and control over all the resources.

Fourthly, in the recent past, the subalterns are also asking from the political establishment that “Equal Employment Opportunity Act” be enacted to provide legal safeguards to the Dalits, the Tribals, women and the minorities. This is not just asking for some special provisions but full-fledged equal opportunity so that these subjugated groups do not depend upon those who pretend to be their benefactors.

Fifthly, going beyond the provision of reservation, the subalterns are demanding for affirmative action in all sectors. The demand of women for 33% in legislative bodies, reservation for Dalits and Tribals in private sector, reservation for backward Muslims is indication of the increase in this demand. Further, they are demanding in a time bound manner the ruling elite prepare an Affirmative Action Act that clearly and categorically spell out the steps that would be taken to implement these policies both at the centre and state levels.

Sixthly, it is recommended that the political establishment prepare and present to the nation a white paper on the state of affairs of these subordinated groups, the discrimination that they suffer in economic, political, social, and educational realms. Based on these facts and figures, the government should also propose concrete measures to do away with these.

Finally, it is also demanded that a nationwide debate on these issues be initiated at the earliest with specific orientation. It is also demanded that based on the outcome of the debate, the government should introduce necessary constitutional amendment to enact affirmative

action at all levels in private sector. This would not only pave the way for ensuring equal opportunity to weaker sections but would also contribute in nation building.

It is in this crucial juncture the centres of philosophical trainings are asked to engage in a serious socio-philosophical discourse which would highlight the live issues of the subalterns. This would also ensure that these centres of learning would be pertinent to their milieu. If not these centres also would be considered as units engaged in subordination of the subalterns.

HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF/BY THE SUBALTERNS

Few Methodological Signposts for the Onward Journey

Jose D. Maliekal

“There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

- Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* -

VIII¹

“Memory is an essential element of what will henceforth be called individual or collective *identity*, the feverish and anxious quest for which is today one of the fundamental activities of individuals and societies. But collective memory is not only a conquest, it is also an instrument and an objective of collective power”²

- Jacques Legoff, *History and Memory*

Introduction

During the last few decades, history, as a discipline among the social sciences, has gone through a phase of intense soul-searching and self-critique. This process of self-engagement was triggered off by the hermeneutical turn of the sciences and facilitated by the new epistemological frameworks, created by the forces of Post-colonialism and Post-Modernism. There has been a shift from historicism to a conscious cultivation and construction of his/her/their stories, and a simultaneous critique of this very process of constructing histories, which, together go to constitute, what has come to be called historiography.

Historiography is one of the most contested sites, in terms of equations of power-relationships and identity-politics. Consequently, various historiographies are in emergence. History, which had hitherto been playing the role of a ‘fact-finding’ mistress, sees itself instrumentalized, constructed and de-constructed by the various dominant and subaltern communities.

For those at the peripheries of the nation, memory is their very mode of human survival and sustenance, in the struggle of the everydayness, in the hope of the fulfillment of their dreams. For them, history is in/of the future. Alternative historiographies must lend voice to their silent everyday protest, embedded in the texture of the local cultures. Hope this small Paper will contribute to stimulating further reflection and assist in the process of empowerment and emancipation of the forgotten of history.³

¹ Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, <http://web.tiscali.it/walterbenjamin>, accessed on 08/24/04

² Jacques Legoff, *History and Memory*, Trans. Stephen Rendall and Elizabeth Claman, New York, Columbia University Press, p. 98.

³ These introductory paragraphs are reproduction of my introduction to Felix Wilfred and Jose D. Maliekal (eds), *The Struggle for the Past: Historiography Today*, Chennai, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2002, p. 1. Hereafter this work is to be referred to as *The Struggle for the Past*.

The Paper has three main sections. The first one engages in a critical overview of the enterprise of the Subaltern Studies Collective, which was aimed at re-reading the history of South Asia, standing in the shoes of the Subalterns.⁴ This critique, from within and from without, becomes a backdrop for a two-tier discussion on the epistemological foundations called for, in a methodological shift from a Subaltern Historiography, to Historiographies of/by the Subalterns, and the grounded programmatic called for by it. Constraints of time and space permit of only dwelling with the thematic, in very broad strokes, erecting a few signposts for the historiographies of/by the Subalterns.

An Overview of Subaltern Historiography

The subaltern history was conceived as an alternative to all existing historiographies – the colonial, nationalist and Marxist. Dismissing all of them as elitist in character, the subaltern history set out to recover the voice of the subaltern, a social group identified as representing the ‘demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those who are described as the elite’.⁵ What could have distinguished the subaltern historiographical enterprise from the earlier genres of people’s history was a qualitative change in its methodology by ushering in a history from below.⁶

The declared aim of the Subaltern Studies Collective was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as subjects of history, with autonomous consciousness, with their agency, contrary to the description of the subalterns, in Cambridge and Nationalist historiography, as being guided by the elites, and in Marxist historiographical construct, as having only pre-political consciousness.⁷

It wanted to disengage the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, and initiate a critique of the nation form, and an interrogation of the relation between power and knowledge (of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge). Examining over a hundred and odd cases of peasant rebellions between 1783 and 1900, Guha showed that these involved the deployment of peasant codes of dress, speech and behavior, by which they tended to invert the codes, by which their masters dominated them in everyday life. Though under the construct of Doctrinaire Marxism, this modality and structure of inversion would be mere expressions of pre-political false consciousness, serving a mere “safety-valve” function in the overall social system,⁸ for Guha, it was a political struggle, in which the rebel

⁴ Cf. The first six volumes of the Subaltern Studies series (hereafter to be referred to as SS) have been edited by Ranajit Guha and the others by various other members of the Collective jointly, and all of these ten volumes have been published by Oxford University Press, Delhi (1982 – 1999). A later volume – XI, was edited by Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, and was published by Permanent Black, Delhi, 2002. For a critical appreciation of the career of the Subaltern Studies Collective and their output in the field of Subaltern historiography, see Vinay Lal, “The Subaltern School of Historiography and the Ascendancy of Indian History” in Q. Edward Wang and George G. Iggers (eds), *Turning Points in Historiography* - Rochester Studies in Historiography, New York, The University of Rochester Press, 2002), pp. 237 – 270, hereafter to be referred to as *The Ascendancy of Indian History*.

⁵ See Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”, SS I: 1-8, especially p.4 and p.8.

⁶ Cf. K.N. Panikkar, “Alternative Historiographies: Changing Paradigms of Power” in *The Struggle for the Past*, p. 17 -18.

⁷ Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A Small History of Subaltern Studies” in *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2002, pp. 7-11.

appropriated and/or destroyed the insignia of his enemy's power and hoped to abolish the marks of his own subalternity.⁹

It was the intention of Guha and the Subaltern Studies Collective to bring into relief the autonomous political consciousness of the Subalterns, vis-à-vis the dominant capitalist culture in India of the colonial era. This culture was not a mere replication of a liberal-bourgeoisie culture of the nineteenth century Britain or a mere surviving relic of the antecedent pre-capitalist culture. It was dominance without hegemony.¹⁰ The Indian political elite did internalize and even use the language of colonial modernity, but alongside it, there also existed undemocratic relationships of domination and subordination. This ambivalent co-existence of the two domains of politics, led to the failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation,¹¹ to the bad faith of historiography.¹²

To overcome this twin-failure of the elitist and nationalist historiography, Guha developed the hermeneutical strategy of the historian *reading* the available archives, which had been developed under the idiom of counter-insurgency. The strategy was not merely to discern and sift between the biases of the elites, but to analyze the textual properties of these documents, to get at the history of power that produced them. The hermeneutical task of the historian was not merely a question of *listening*, a passive metaphor, emphasized by E.P. Thompson, in his polemic with Althusser.¹³

In critiquing historicism and Eurocentrism, and emphasizing representations as an aspect of power relationships between the elites and the subalterns, Guha and his colleagues moved away from the guiding assumptions of the history-from-below approach of English Marxist historiography. This is not to deny the leftist moorings of the Project itself. What it inherited from Marxism was further developed in conversation with structuralism and early Foucault. Later, the *Subaltern Studies* Project came in for criticism, for the absence of gender questions in the Project, especially from Gayatri Spivak,¹⁴ and Rosalind O'Hanlon.¹⁵ Both also criticized the Project for having operated with an idea of the subject, which had not wrestled with the contemporary critiques of the very ideas of the subject itself. A critical and challenging reading of a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze emphatically raised these and other related questions, by raising deconstructive and philosophical objections to any straightforward programme of "letting the subaltern speak."¹⁶

⁸ Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter Insurgency", in Ranajit Guha (ed.), SS – II, pp. 1-42.

⁹ See Idem, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, Chs. 1& 2.

¹⁰ See Idem, "Colonialism in South Asia: A Dominance without Hegemony and Its Historiography," in *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 95 -99.

¹¹ Idem, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography", p. 7.

¹² Idem, "Colonialism in South Asia", pp. 80- 95.

¹³ Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "A Small History of Subaltern Studies", p.16.

¹⁴ Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Discussion – Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in Ranajit Guha (ed.), SS – IV, pp. 330 -363.

¹⁵ Cf. Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 22, no.1 (1988): 189 – 224.

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak" in P. Williams and L. Chrisman (eds), *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, pp. 66 -111.

Subaltern Studies scholars have tried to take into account of these criticisms and authors like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee and Susie Tharu have engaged feminist scholarship and dwelt on feminist issues. The influence of deconstructionist and Postmodern thought in *Subaltern Studies* may be traced in the way, in which Gyanendra Pandey, Partha Chatterjee and Shahid Amin have privileged and celebrated the idea of the fragment in their works, over the whole or totality. On both archival and epistemological grounds, they both question the very possibility of constructing a totalizing national history in narrating the politics of subaltern lives. Gyan Praksh, Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Ajay Skaria, Shayil Mayiram and others have made significant contributions to the critical analysis of colonial discourse. With its growing engagement with the work of Homi Bhaba, Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said, *Subaltern Studies* has emerged a project in conversation with Postcolonial studies.¹⁷

The Decline of the Subaltern in the *Subaltern Studies*¹⁸

Though for all practical intents, *Subaltern Studies* was supposed to a democratic project, a history from below/periphery, producing a genealogy of the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity,¹⁹ critics from within and without contest this claim, on the very grounds, which are considered to be the strengths and arrival points of Subaltern historiographical enterprise.

The coherence which marked the first six volumes edited by Ranajit Guha was seemingly absent from the succeeding volumes. The intended hermeneutical and historiographical thrust of “politics of the people” was lost out on the *Subaltern Studies* Project, in the later volumes. It was not until 1996, when Volume IX *Subaltern Studies* was published, that the Dalits, historically most disempowered segment of India’s population and now at least 150 million, found explicit mention in.²⁰ Most of the essays collected in the series failed to recover the voice of the marginalized by using unconventional sources drawn from Indian languages. Moreover, despite the obvious inspiration from the writings of Antonio Gramsci,²¹ the entire project lacked theoretical coherence and conceptual precision.

Gramsci had attempted to go beyond the economism implied in doctrinaire Marxism, by elaborating the cultural and the social, as the added dimensions of a subaltern search for identity, autonomy and critical consciousness, on the one hand, and the hegemony exercised by the forces of dominance, on the other. The interrelationship between the economic, the

¹⁷ Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A Small History of Subaltern Studies”, pp. 17-18.

¹⁸ Cf. Sumit Sarkar, “The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*” in *Writing Social History*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 85-90.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, p.19.

²⁰ Kancha Ilaiah, “Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative, Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds), SS IX, pp. 165 -200.

²¹ The word ‘subaltern’ is coined by Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician, who attempted a praxis-oriented re-interpretation of Marxism. For him subaltern meant one of the inferior rank. Subaltern groups are always subject to the action of the super ordinate or dominant groups. By subaltern hermeneutics is meant that type of hermeneutics in which subaltern, the underdog, the downtrodden, the subordinate is the focus of interpretation and more importantly the subject of interpretation. Cf. Antonio Gramsci, “Notes on Italian History” in Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Novell Smith (eds), *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, pp. 323-343. Also Cf. Ranajit Guha (ed.) *SS - I*, Preface by the editor Ranajit Guha and the contribution by him, “On some aspects of Historiography of Colonial India” in *Ibid* p.8.

socio-cultural and the political in Gramsci's approach to subaltern history must not be lost sight of, in any of our attempts to articulate the aspirations and strivings of the subalterns. The forgetfulness of this interrelationship, according to Sumit Sarkar, an eminent historian, and one of the founding members of the Subaltern Collective, has been the methodological pitfall of those authors engaged in the *Subaltern Studies* Project, which made them veer away from the originally intended Gramscian course.²² It was therefore not surprising that the project soon took a linguistic turn, and lost much of its radical rhetoric.²³

Moreover, its metamorphosis as a conversation-partner with Post-colonial theory, which Dipesh Chakrabarty, considered to be its strength, has become its undoing. Subaltern historians have rendered themselves into exiles, and Subaltern historiography itself has been rendered into exile, through its undue association with postcolonial discourse. Subaltern historiography is engaged in deconstructing master narratives, and thereby not merely unmaking dominant discourses, but exploring the "fault lines in order to provide different accounts, to describe histories revealed in the cracks of colonial archeology of knowledge", to quote Gyan Prakash, the authoritative exponent of Subaltern historiography in the West. But in the bargain, it has lent itself to the charge that it has, in something of a mockery of its name, committed, if only negatively to the printed text, to elite discourses, and to a revived form of colonial textualism. It has turned out to be an elitist historiography, which Guha and the Collective had so roundly condemned.²⁴

From having pretended to have been Subaltern/Peasant Studies, a-la 'discourse analysis', it has become a "bhadralok studies", says Ramchandra Guha, in a caustic and critical vein. Subaltern historians had moved from studies of popular consciousness to unraveling the mentalities of nationalist leaders and the world of middle-class Bengali domesticity, "from documenting subaltern dissent to dissecting elite discourse, from writing with (socialist) passion to following the Postmodernist fashion."²⁵

If slavery to Postcolonial discourse and elitist textualism has been its pitfall from the right, reification of the subaltern in "Village India" after the Anthropologists, has been the temptation of the Subaltern Collective, from the left. Until very recently Subaltern historiography has shown itself impervious to contemporary urban India, as if slum-dwellers, urban Proletariat, small-town tricksters, countless number of street vendors, and even millions of lower middle class Indians suffocating in dingy office buildings were not Subalterns. India is always rural, beyond the predictability of the rural India, as handled by the textual Subaltern confraternity. India ruralizes even its cities, as there is a villager, even in the most urban of Indians. Though Gandhi has come under the scrutiny of several Subaltern historians, they are yet to understand the village within the England-returned, barrister-turned villager, that is Gandhi, the Gandhi who was walking the villages of India, because he saw India in its villages.²⁶

²² Cf. Sumit Sarkar, *op.cit.*, pp. 85 -90.

²³ Cf. K.N. Panikkar, "Alternative Historiographies", p. 18.

²⁴ Cf. Vinay Lal, "The Ascendancy of Indian History", p. 262.

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 263 -264.

So, to meet the flesh and blood Subalterns of India, the Subaltern historians have to walk India, like Gandhi, going along with the ordering of time and space, bestowed by walking, and the “Structures of Feeling”, evoked by walking. In and through this walking, they may be able to listen to the histories and the historiographies of the flesh and blood Subalterns of India, in their everydayness, orality and performative narratives. In the next two sections, we shall delve into the *episteme*²⁷ of this border-crossing from the geography of textuality in historiography, to the human geography of historiography, and the programmatic of that border-crossing, its hermeneutic and the pragmatics.

Crossing the Borders: From the Textual to the Human in the Geography of Subaltern Historiography

To walk with the Subalterns is to learn not to impose our utopias on them, however democratic they may appear to us, even in our role as organic intellectuals, from a Gramscian perspective. For any utopia, even of the state, which is presented in collective political imagination, as the goal of arrival, of the Subaltern journey, is something imagined from the outside *for* them. Walking with the flesh and blood Subalterns of the sub-continent, would imply a radical valorizing of the fragmentary and episodic, in our political imagination. At least it would imply that the fragmentary and the episodic would not be considered as disabling, but as enabling. It is to move away, from certitudes of ‘fault lines’ and ‘fissures’ in the dominant texts, that is the geography of historiography and to move into a terrain of radical openness to the Subaltern realities, inscribed by contingencies.²⁸ In Heideggerian terms, it would mean the capacity to hear what one already does not understand.²⁹

Foucault’s Deployment of Nietzschean Genealogy as a Historiographical Tool

This Heideggerian call to listen to the fragmentary and the episodic, in our journey with the Subalterns, is an echo of the Nietzsche-inspired Foucauldian project of genealogy, which challenges the totalizing structural approach to history, of the Annales School. In the grandiose conception of history by the Annales School, from which Foucault took a divergent path, there was talk of classes and trends, of economic statistics, to the amnesia of individual agents. They were swallowed up by geographical and economic structures and not given a voice as to their individuality or their agency.³⁰ “... Foucault specifies Nietzschean notion of genealogy as a search for origins without assuming a substratum at the origin...Genealogy is a critique as a history investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking and doing.”³¹ In the practice of his genealogical method, Foucault was resisting “the surreptitious practices of

²⁷ Foucault’s famed notion of *episteme* – the “rules” of coherent scientific discourse in a given time described in his book, *Order of Things*, as quoted in Christopher D. Green, “Digging Archaeology: Sources of Foucault’s Historiography”, www.yorku.ca/christo/papers/digarch3.htm, accessed on 09/02/04.

²⁸ Cf. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Subaltern Histories and Post-Enlightenment Rationalism” in *Habitations of Modernity*, pp. 35–36.

²⁹ Heidegger speaks about ridding “ourselves of the habit of always hearing only what we already understand”. See Martin Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” in *On the Way of Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz, New York, Harper and Row, 1971[1982 –reprint], p.58, as quoted in *Ibid*, p. 36.

³⁰ David L.R. Kosalka, “Foucault’s Nietzschean Historiography”, www.lemmingland.com/Foucault.htm/, accessed on 09/02/04.

³¹ Michael Mahon, *Foucault’s Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, power and the Subject*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1992, p.82, as quoted in *Ibid*.

historians, their pretensions to examine things furthest from themselves, the groveling manner in which they approach this promising distance (like the metaphysicians who proclaim the existence of an afterlife, situated at a distance from this world, as promise of their reward).³²

Foucauldian genealogy is indeed a Subaltern tool for recording the histories of Subaltern everydayness. “[W]hen genealogy looks at the beginnings, it looks at accidents, chance, passion, petty malice, surprises, feverish agitation, unsteady victories and power. Historical beginnings thus are not great moments of revelation that we later must struggle to recapture in their full glory, *a la* the early Heidegger, they are, on the contrary, messy, corrupt, often ignoble squabbles that must be negotiated, refined, and “smoothed over” for a region of consensus to appear – for the possibility of a region of knowledge to arise.”³³

Against this background of the broad contours of Foucauldian genealogy, I delineate in the following sub-sections, certain other layers of the episteme of the border-crossing from the geography of textuality, to the human geography of historiographies of/by Subalterns. I develop these along the thematic of crossing the borders from privileging of time as a metaphor of history and progress, to privileging space, and overcoming the cleavage between history and memory, especially in the context of the everydayness of the Subalterns.

Pregnant Time and Pregnant Space as Symbols of History of Subalterns³⁴

Romila Thapar makes a discerning comment, towards the end of her historiographical study, *Time as a Metaphor of History – Early India*: “Our readings both of time and history have mutations, but the metaphor remains.”³⁵ But now in the context of our discussion on the historiography of/by Subalterns, we have to think not only with the metaphor of time but also with space. Foucault makes this clear in his article, “Of Other Spaces.”³⁶

The great obsession of the nineteenth century was, as we know, history: with its themes of development and of suspension, of crisis and cycle.... The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment... when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.³⁷

The shift from Time to Space as a metaphor for history has also to do with rethinking history, in the context of coping with contingencies, especially in the Subaltern context. “The opposition between Being and Becoming has become central to modernizing history. That

³² Michael Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy and History”, in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald B. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1977, p. 156, as quoted in *Ibid.*

³³ Davidson, A.I., “Archeology, genealogy, ethics” in D.C. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader* London, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 221–233, as quoted in Christopher D. Green, *Digging Archaeology*. www.yorku.ca/christo/papers/digarch3.htm, 09/02/04.

³⁴ For this section on “Pregnant Space and Pregnant Time and the Celebration of Contingencies, I rely on Ananta Kumar Giri. “Contemporary Challenges to the Idea of History” in Felix Wilfred and Jose D. Maliekal (eds), *The Struggle for the Past*, pp. 28 -38.

³⁵ Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 44.

³⁶ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces”, *Diacritics*, 1986/16, pp. 22-27.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.22 as quoted in Giri, *op. cit.*, p.29.

opposition has to be seen in political terms as the tension between the sense of time and the focus of space" ³⁸ This statement of David Harvey is a signpost to the significance of contingency in historical thinking.

In the landscape, where Modernity borders on Postmodernity, both Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault become the cartographers of the terrain of history, inspired by the role of contingency in self and society. "Until the eighteenth century, history had served as a repository for exemplary stories which supposedly can tell us something about the recurring features of human affairs..."³⁹ But with the eruption of , historical consciousness "the focus of attention shifts from the exemplary to the individual ... this historical consciousness gave birth to an evermore intense awareness of evermore widely spreading contingencies."⁴⁰

Foucault too, through his genealogical approach, draws our attention to the challenge of contingencies, as an ever-present theme in the study of society and history. He puts to question Kant's portrayal of a harmonious rapport between the three realms of knowledge--scientific, political and religious. He brings into relief the contingency, in the dynamics and work of these three domains of knowledge. Each of these branches of knowledge emerges in particular domains and in specific historical contexts, and they cannot but be viewed through the lens of contingency.⁴¹ As Giri continues:

Contingency tells us of the limits of a priori laws, formulations and determinations and look at hegemony with suspicion. Since there is no messianic solution to the problems of History by either the State or the Prophet of God, contingency calls for development of responsibility on our part. Therefore, it is no wonder that in a recent critical work on historiography, *An Ethics of Remembrance: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others*, Edith Wyschogrod, brings responsibility to the heart of history. For her, the historian has a responsibility to describe the life of those who were silenced in the past. But she makes clear: "In speaking for dead others, the historian enters into a temporal zone that is neither past, present nor future."⁴²

This responsibility of the historian has to be a creative historiographical engagement with and for the Subalterns, the nameless ones of society. In this process, we have to strive for the reconstruction of time and nurturance of spaces of reconciliation and hope. Going along with Gibson-Graham, we have to speak of pregnant space. Pregnant space, contrary to the usual conception of space as a symbol of overdetermination, is a space of exploration, creativity and possibility. Along with pregnant space, we have to invoke also pregnant time. Both pregnant spaces and pregnant times are fecund domains of reconciliation, transcending the binding of the past and making a creative leap into the future,⁴³ especially in the context of the everydayness of the Subaltern history and historiography, inscribed by contingencies.

³⁸ David Harvey, "The Condition of Postmodernity" in *Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Challenge* Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1989, p. 205, as quoted in Giri., "Contemporary Challenges to the Idea of History" p. 30.

³⁹ Jürgen Habermas, "Coping with Contingencies-The Return of Historicism" in Jozef Niznik & John T. Sanders (eds), *Debating the State of Philosophy: Habermas, Rorty, and Kolakowski*, Westport, Connecticut, Praeger, 1998, p. 7, as quoted in Giri, *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁴⁰ Habermas, *Ibid.*, as quoted in Giri, *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴¹ Cf. Ananta Kumar Giri, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

In this context of the call for pregnant space and pregnant time, it is worth recalling the thematic of trialectics of space, which has been developed by Lefebvre. He proposes a much needed shift of discourse from an epistemology of space to ontology of space. This trialectics of space attempts to go beyond the prevalent epistemological discourse on the Firstspace (objectivity and materiality) and Secondspace (visual interpretative representation in art and architecture) to a Thirdspace (remembrance- rethinking - recovery of spaces lost or never sighted), not by negating the first two, but by integrating them into the third. This ontological trialectics tries to achieve a transformation by rebalancing our approach to reality that is dominated by the dualistic dimensions of Historicity and Sociality, by integrating Spatiality of lived being and becoming, into our theorizations, enquiry and praxis.⁴⁴

Historiography as Re-membering the Lack: Beyond the Cleavage between History and Memory⁴⁵

As we consider the role of memory, its relation to history and its role in a history and historiography of the Subalterns, we may take up certain specific examples that show how history was understood as a 'lack'. This notion of history, interpreted in relation to a 'lack' becomes the major argument of the theorization of slavery. The historiographical problematic is to encounter how in the context of social movements in modernity, the slave experience was recalled and celebrated in memory, and brought on par with authentic histories, that contest the textual representation of slavery, in academic histories. This is accomplished by collapsing the borders between fiction and history, in recalling the history of slave experience. Ritual re-membering of the slave experience or rememory was the medium through which, the slave-experience was made to enter the consciousness of the people, making them re-live the horrors of slavery that existed historically.⁴⁶

Through the process of selective appropriation/erasure and reinscription of memory, the past is created and circulated. This reinscription goes into the texture of the identity for the people who have not experienced slavery in their lived experience. There is always a tension involved in the memories of individuals, between the personal life history, which does not validate slave experience, and the collective memory that celebrated the historical past, recreating images of slavery. In other words, 'ritual rememory', through which the visual images of slavery are created, is history, and a source of identity-consciousness for the individuals in contemporary cultural milieu, which is far removed from slavery as a social experience.⁴⁷ "R[sic]ememory... is something which possesses (or haunts) one, rather than something which one possess."⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, pp. 53-82.

⁴⁵ For this section on the overcoming of the cleavage between history and memory, I have relied on Sanal Mohan, "Theorising History in the Context of Social Movement: Challenges to the Reigning Paradigms of History, Felix Wilfred and Jose D. Maliekal (eds), *The Struggle for the Past*, pp. 99 -110, centred on the re-living and the celebration of the memories of the experiences of slavery by the Dalits of Travancore in Kerala, especially by the members of a sect called "*Pratyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha*", founded by Poikayil Yohannan, in 1909 at Eraviperoor. It originally developed as part of missionary Churches, but suddenly moved out of them, but remained a powerful movement that drew masses from Pulaya, Paraya and Kuruva communities, all of them Subaltern Dalit communities, and mostly all of them Christian.

⁴⁶ Cfr Sanal Mohan, "Theorizing History in the Context of Social Movement", *op.cit.* pp. 101-103.

⁴⁷ Cfr Ibid., p. 103. As an example of the strategy of rememory, as a strategy of history, see Carl Plasa and Betty J. Ring (eds), *The Discourses of Slavery: Aphra Ben to Tony Morrison*, London, Routledge, 1994.

As over against the academic conventional histories, which do not speak of emotional and somatic “feelings”, the “psycho-social history of (slavery’s) impact”, reinscribed through memory does. The theorizing of slavery, achieved through re-memory, the ‘haunting’ of slavery’s brutality, makes the history thus handed down or taken over, to be appearing as the “history of the present”. This way of re-membered theorizing takes place through the process of ‘fictioning’ or the imaginative reproduction of the past, thus triggering a process of the ‘critical revisiting’ of history. This process of revisioning is characterized by the investment of the memory of collectivity rather than absolute consensus. This remembered sense of collectivity reconstitutes the past, by celebrating it through personal/social ‘narrative or story telling’.⁴⁹

The historiographical significance of this process of the creation of history, through fictioning is brought home to us by Michael de Certeau, in his work, *History: Science and Fiction*, when he observes that ‘[F]iction in any of its modalities – mythic, literary, scientific or metaphorical – is a discourse that “informs” the “real” without pretending either to represent it or to credit itself with the capacity for such a representation’.⁵⁰

Towards a Grounded Programmatic of Historiographies of/by Subalterns

After having traced the trajectories of a hermeneutical shift from textual geography of Subaltern historiography, to human geography of a historiography of/by Subalterns, now I enter into explorations towards a grounded programmatic of these historiographies by/of Subalterns. Here I intend bringing into relief, certain areas, where a historiographical engagement will help in the identity assertion of the Subalterns, as well as give them the space due to them, in the socio-political landscape of the nation

History as the Celebration of the Fragments of Everydayness⁵¹

Historiographies of/by the Subalterns become a space for the celebration of the communion manifested at the bottom in everyday life. The plural “historiographies” is deployed deliberately to indicate the pluralism, which characterize the texture of the bonds of communion and cultural exchanges, between peoples of different religions and communities, in different parts of the country. The real history and the historiographie(s) of India is a celebration of the shared narratives, arising out of lived-fellowship and religious devotions, cutting across religious boundaries. These historiographies, which re-member the lived-history and lived-reality of relationships and exchange of cultures in the Subaltern everydayness, are the antidote and the challenge to the communal historiography,

⁴⁸ April Lindinsky, “Prophesying Bodies Calling for a Politics of Collectivity in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” in *The Discourses of Slavery*, p. 193, as quoted in Sanal Mohan, *op.cit.*, 103.

⁴⁹ Cfr *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ Cfr Michel de Certeau, “Heterologies: Discourse on the Other”, in *Theory and History of Literature* - Vol.17, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1986, p. 202, as quoted by Sanal Mohan, *op.cit.*, 104.

⁵¹ In this section on the Grounded Programmatic of Historiographies of/by Subalterns, I have relied on Felix Wilfred, “Whose Nation? Whose History?” in Felix Wilfred and Jose D. Maliekal (eds), *Struggle for the Past*, pp. 71- 96.

characterized by tendencies towards homogenization, majoritarianism and cultural nationalism.⁵²

“[M]any places where what we have come to call ‘Muslim’, ‘Hindu’, ‘Sikh’, or ‘Christian’ tradition through retrojective labeling of history have a lived-history and lived reality all their own in which devotion has not subscribed to the boundaries of what we call the ‘religion’”.⁵³

The Tragedy of Alienating Division: Eclipse of the Subaltern Dalit from the Political

It is a paradox of Indian history that in the lives of the Subalterns, what they find themselves celebrating is not the memory of the fellowship and cultural exchange, but the tragedy of submergence and alienation. For the marginalized like the Dalits and the Tribals, the experiences of everydayness are inscribed by division, discrimination, marginalization, humiliation and violence. The mainline dominant historiography celebrates neither the Subaltern history of everydayness, nor does it remember the tragedy of alienation suffered by the Subalterns. It is patently indicative of the gross amnesia of the everyday-history of the Subalterns, that the nationalist historiography makes much of the trauma of Partition, by which Pakistan came into being, while it passes in silence, over the many tragedies of caste and communal division and violence in the country. History/ historiography seem to have become a monopoly and homogenized domain of the Dominant castes, with the Subalterns like Dalits, who have been stigmatized and marginalized by history, having no stakes in it.⁵⁴

The colonial historiography, as well as the nationalist historiography by-passed the narratives of the victims in their representation of the nation. This historiographical amnesia of everyday life and history of the Subalterns has been critiqued by raised leaders like Jyotirao Phule and Ambedkar.⁵⁵ Gail Omvedt indicates the contributions of both Phule and Ambedkar, while calling into question the framework and intentions of the elitist historiography:

With Phule and then Ambedkar’s writings on Indian history begins the construction of an ‘Indian nation’ or ‘Indian people’ not dominated by elite reinterpretations. ... In truth, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the high-caste elites of India had been constructing ‘imagining’ it as a Hindu community...While the Congress and the left secularists wanted to assert another ‘unity of India’ inclusive of Muslim and other religious tradition, and Gandhians wanted to reinterpret ‘Hinduism’ to allow for a significant reformism, both accepted the elements of the framework. In particular, they took for granted the identification of the majority of people as ‘Hindus’ and the identification of the ancient Indian tradition as basically a Hindu one. This was expressed in the common framework of both British and nationalist historical writing....⁵⁶

⁵² Cfr Felix Wilfred, “Whose Nation? Whose History?”, pp. 80 - 81, especially the foot note no.17 on p. 81. “In this regard, Romila Thapar speaks of a different approach in earlier times. “Identities were, in contrast to the modern nation state, segmental identities. The nation of communities identified by locality, language, caste, occupation and sect. What appears to have been absent was the notion of a uniform, religious community readily identified as Hindus.” Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 77.

⁵³ Diana Eck, “The Imagined Landscape: Patterns in the Construction of Hindu Sacred Geography”, in Veena Das et al (eds), *Tradition, Pluralism and Identities - Contributions to Indian Sociology: Occasional Studies* 8, New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1999, p. 28, as quoted in Felix Wilfred, “ Whose Nation? Whose History?”, p. 82.

⁵⁴ Cfr Felix Wilfred, *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*.

The two perspectives of the unity manifested in daily life and the division created by caste need to be held together for a framework to interpret nation and history. Hermeneutics of suspicion has to be cast over this pseudo-sense of unity engineered by the elitist historiography, glossing over its hierarchical and casteist underpinnings. On the contrary, going along the trajectory of a critical Subaltern historiography, traced out by Phule and Ambedkar, it is imperative to deconstruct the elitist metanarrative of the Indian nation and history in religious and communal terms, and propose alternative historiographies, which remember and celebrate the space of the Subalterns in the culture and political economy of the nation.⁵⁷ In this context, it may be interesting to note the way in which the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh have reinvented their stories, to assert their specific and visible contribution to the Freedom movement, and especially the First War of Independence.⁵⁸

Celebrating the Subaltern Agency in the Choice of Alternative Religiosities

Another area where the Subaltern historiographies can inhabit as their space is the Subaltern agency expressed by the Dalits and other Subalterns, in their opting for alternative religiosities. Very often, an alternative soteriological idiom has been at work in these passages to alternative religiosities. But the Subaltern agency at play there has been instrumentalized, or eclipsed by Dominant historiographical constructs. Subaltern historiographies have to redeem and celebrate this agency:

We are proud to say that ours is the very first Madiga enclave in Konaseema to have received Catholicism. When we went over to Bhimavaram as migrant harvesters, we met Fr. Pagano and invited him to our village. Mr. Jonnada Paul was our leader. He was the most educated among us. Later, he along with Mr. Marri Ganapathi, a military man, who was a Mala, went over to Gunadala during the Gunadala *Matha* Feast. Mr John had contact with Christianity in the military. At Gunadala, they impressed upon Fr Pagano once more on the need of coming to Konaseema and almost fixed a date on which he could come over to our village. Protestants were here but we did not join them because their doctrine and approach to life seemed to uproot us from our tradition. They used to frighten us by saying “No bangles, no *bindi/bottu* and no ornaments.” But Fr Pagano's words were “You can have and wear everything. *Atme alankaram*. God looks at the heart. Adore God with happiness and joy.”⁵⁹

The above passage gives us an inkling into the circumstances of the option by the Subaltern Madigas for Catholicism and its entry into Konaseema, at their express invitation around 1942. What Kooiman noted about the nineteenth century Christian converts from

⁵⁶ Gail Omvedt, *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution*, Delhi, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 243-244 as quoted in Felix Wilfred, *op.cit.*, p. 83.

⁵⁷ Cfr. Felix Wilfred, *op.cit.*

⁵⁸ Cfr. Badri Narayan, “National Past and Political Present”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 31, 2004, pp. 3533 – 3540.

⁵⁹ In personal communication with the Madiga elders of Pullettikurru - 22/05/1998, as appearing in *Political Economy and Religion in the Encounter of the Dalit Madigas of Konaseema (East Godavari Dist., A.P.) with Catholicism*, Unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, pursued under the guidance of Dr Felix Wilfred, Department of Christian Studies, defended in the University of Madras, July 2003, Section – IV, Chapter I entitled “Encounter between Madigas and Catholicism: Narrative Genealogy of Catalysts, Continuities and Discontinuities” - Subsection entitled, “Catalysts and triggers in the Process of Conversion: A Historiography of the Fragments, and the History Outside the Archive”, p. 201. Hereafter this Thesis is to be entitled as *Political Economy and Religion*.

among the Shanars and Pariahs of South Travancore can be extended to the situation of the Madigas of Konaseema of mid-twentieth century. “ One of the main characteristics of the nineteenth century mass movements was precisely that material, political and spiritual motives were blended together in one complex whole, making it next to impossible to isolate one single factor.”⁶⁰

Overcoming the Eclipse of the Subaltern Contribution to Political Economy

In one of the many plays performed by the Madigabhigabhogamvallu (the wandering group of Madiga performers and ritual prostitutes of the Madigas), Veerarahudu, a Madiga is on his way to the market, to buy none other than *Harischandra*, who has run into penury, and is selling himself. On the way, the Madiga is singing himself away to glory and the lyric of his song, can be roughly translated as follows:

Please give some way, make some space for me. I am from an *esteemed* family.
If I don't tell you the truth, you will tell me to get out of sight
If I deliberately refuse to tell you the truth, even then you will cast me away.
If I cross you without asking, you will blame me, “Don't Pollute”
If I ask your leave and then go, even then you will question me
I am going to buy somebody, who is on sale, on the road - it seems he is good
I am going to buy him, since my wife has told me so.⁶¹

Though these lines are taken from a wandering troupe's enactment of an oft-enacted common scene, it is pregnant with self-assertion and protest against an existing oppressive order of things. It is an artist's signature on his creation, especially, the first line “*Please give me some way, make some space for me. I am from an esteemed family.*” In words couched in irony and protest, he is expressing his resistance to the existing order, in the context of the enactment, removed from the real life situation, but very much reflecting it.

Like the folk-drama, *Harischandra*, *Kulapuranas* are identity markers of any caste. They are inherited oral texts, not a piece of recitation, but as cultural metaphor, an interactive text, which explicitly relates members of a social group to its own self and to the other social groups. Jambavadu is the focal identity symbol of the Madiga caste, and the central figure of their caste. In the performance of their *Kulapurana*, he becomes a symbol of protest, of their being denied their due share in the political economy of the land, and the de-valorization of their traditional skills.

Subaltern historiographies of/for the Subalterns will be fulfilling their task, if they become sites where the performative and the oral protests of the Subalterns, vis-a-vis their

⁶⁰ Dick Kooiman, “Change of Religion as a Way to Survival” in Philip Quarles van Ufford and Matthew Schoffeleers (eds), *Religion and Development: towards an integrated approach*, Amsterdam, Free University Press, 1998, p. 171.

⁶¹ In personal communication with Sokka Venkatarao, in oral communication of the song sung by him, as young boy, as he was acting the role of _____, in the play entitled *Hariscandra*, enacted by the nomadic Madigabhogamvallu -19-08-2000, as appearing in Jose D. Maliekal, *Political Economy and Religion*, “Section – III, Chapter 2 entitled, “Jambavudu as Symbol of Resistance and Autonomy: Critical Consciousness of the Madigas in their Myths of Identity”, Subsection entitled “ Performance as Protest: Ongoing Subaltern Demand for Socio-Political and Economic Space”, p. 120.

eclipse from the political economy are highlighted, as survival is the primordial subaltern posture.

Conclusion

At the close of this attempt at an overview of Subaltern historiography and a hermeneutical and programmatic passage to historiographies of /for Subalterns, I would like to leave as a final signpost, the historiographical agenda, set by none other than K.N. Panicker, the eminent and critical historian of our land:

In the present intellectual and cultural climate in India, a major desideratum is the historiography of resistance, both the articulate and hidden forms of resistance. The implicit and silent forms of resistance have not attracted the same scholarly treatment. What have received attention so far, particularly in the Marxist, Dalit and women's histories, are more articulate forms of resistance, like movements, revolts and protests. This is to a large measure, due to the relatively underdeveloped state of cultural history, as silent resistance generally manifests itself in the domain of culture. Recovering the meaning of silence, along with the articulate, and contextualizing it in relation to the social forces should therefore form the agenda of a new alternative historiography, distinct from the textual analyses that currently crowd the cultural studies. It is hoped that it will posit an alternative both to the communal and the invented histories.⁶²

It is hoped that Subaltern historiographies, in the idiom of transdisciplinarity, by articulating the silent forms of protest, will become spaces of hope, and little pockets of resistance, enabling those at the periphery of the fast globalizing world and homogenized nation to become architects of their freedom. And now to conclude, I bring you the software chip of a Subaltern historiography/identity marker/signpost/silent resistance created, uttered by Ebenezer, a Dalit Madiga ideologue:

When Ebenezer boasted that *St. Thomas, the Apostle was a Madiga*, because he had dared to place his fingers into the wounded flesh of Jesus, he was presenting the software-chip of a potential Madiga identity theology. He was trying to assert his pride in his traditional trade, the identity-marker of his caste, by tracing aetiology for it and taking off the stigma attached to it.⁶³

⁶² K. N Panikkar, "Alternative Historiographies", p. 20.

⁶³ Jose D. Maliekal, "Identity-Consciousness of the Christian Madigas: Story of a People in Emergence", *Jeevadhara: A Journal for Socio-Religious Research*, 181 (January 2001)30, p. 25.

SUBALTERNITY AND THE HERMENEUTIC OF RELIGIOUS LANGUAGE

Some Reflections with Reference to Samkara and Wittgenstein

M.A. Devasia

“Being a Brahmana I am pure; and you, dog-eater, must therefore give way for me” [said Samkara to the *candala* (outcaste). Then the *candala* replied]: “To whom were your words addressed, O learned Sir? To the body which comes from the same source and performs the same function in the case of both a *brahmana* and a *candala* or to the *atman* ...which too is the same in all? How does such differences as ‘this is a *brahmana*’; ‘this is a *candala*’ arise in non-dual experience?”

Samkara, *Manisapancakam*

When language-games change, then there is a change in concepts,
and with the concepts the meanings of the words change.

Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, p.10e

In this paper what I propose to do is this: to wrestle with the notion of subalternity within the domain of religious language and to elucidate its hermeneutic with reference to Samkara (c.788-820 AD) and Wittgenstein (1889-1951 AD).¹ By implication, I make an attempt to interrogate the logic of the linguistic space that the subaltern occupies in religious language. At first I shall offer a conceptual clarification of the terms ‘subalternity’, ‘religious language’ and ‘hermeneutics’ and bring into focus their inter-connections and nuances. Then I try to relate them to a couple of chosen philosophical notions that constitute the very conceptual framework of Samkara and Wittgenstein. And I do this by analyzing some of the motifs that act as the fulcrum in their philosophical works. And I end the paper by spelling out the conclusions that emerge from our deliberations.

¹ This paper was also presented in a seminar on ‘**Language, Meaning and Text**’ held in the Centre for Philosophy, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi on November 5-6, 2004. I am grateful to Professor Gurpreet Mahajan and Professor Manidipa Sen of the Centre for Philosophy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for having invited me to present this paper. In writing this paper I have received help and encouragement from many persons and I remain grateful to them. First and foremost I thank Professor Vibha Chaturvedi (Head, Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi), my Ph.D. thesis-supervisor, for the fruitful discussions I have had on this subject. I am also indebted to Professor H.S.Prasad, Professor Ashok Vohra, Professor Priyadarshi Jetli (Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi) and Professor George Gispert-Sauch, SJ (Vidyajyoti College of Theology, Delhi) for the extempore exchange of ideas I had on this paper. I also thank research scholars N. Mahima [School of Oriental Studies, University of Cambridge] and M.T.Joseph [Department of Sociology, University of Delhi] for making available to me some of the reading materials used in this paper.

I pose the problem by raising the question: can the subaltern speak? This question brings into focus the speak-ability and communicability of the subaltern and the complex nature of his/her representation in religious discourse. By implication it also brings out the relation between the domain of the use of language and that of constructing as well as reflecting ideology, meaning and identity.²

Terminological Clarifications

By 'religious language' I mean the use of natural, ordinary language in the contexts that have a specific religious character. And here one encounters enormous multiplicity and pointed diversity. People use natural language for religious discourse. Cases such as stating one's belief or unbelief, explaining a belief, narrating stories, interpreting life-events, disputing about the meaning of a sacred text, writing hymns, praying, performing rituals, etc. constitute what we may call the language-game in religious discourse.³ And here 'language' is taken to mean the vehicle for the expression and exchange of thoughts, concepts, knowledge, and information. Besides it is a tool in the linguistic activity of fixing and transmission of experience and knowledge. As such it is to be differentiated from other possible languages such as animal communication and artificial languages.⁴ In that sense language is essentially communicative in nature and can be both verbal and non-verbal. In the recent approaches to the study of language one finds a sort of Homeric struggle between the theorists of formal semantics (e.g. Frege, early Wittgenstein, and Chomsky) and those of communication-intention (e.g. Grice, Austin and the later Wittgenstein).⁵ In this paper I shall concentrate on religious language in its verbal, linguistic and communicative dimension. This should not be taken to mean that 'speech' is divorced from 'silence', rather, it should be understood as a process of mutual fecundity. It is in that sense, I take 'religious language' to be synonymous with 'religious discourse' and 'religious narrative'.⁶

'Subalternity' is a polyvalent term that can be understood in many ways. Its origin can be traced back to Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937 AD), the Italian thinker, who in sketching a methodological outline for a 'history of the subaltern classes' used the word 'subaltern' in two senses. In one sense by 'subaltern' he meant the code word for the industrial proletariat. And here he emphasized that the bourgeoisie rose to power not by simply imposing domination through the coercion of the state but by the transformation of the cultural and ideological institutions of the civil society so as to construct hegemony over society as a whole. And the subaltern classes unconsciously accept such a process without any protest. In the second

² For a deconstructivist reading of this issue see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the subaltern speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan Education Ltd, 1988, pp. 271-313. And for a critique of this approach from the perspective of the discipline called 'comparative philosophy of religion' see Purushottama Bilimoria, "What is the 'subaltern' of the Comparative Philosophy of Religion?" in *Philosophy East and West*, 53 (2003) 3, 340-366.

³ See William P. Alston, J. "Religious Language" in Edward Craig (ed) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol.8, London, Routledge, 1998, p.256 and James Ross, "Religious Language" in Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion. A Guide to the Subject*, London, Cassell, 1999, p.106.

⁴ See Hadumod Bussmann, *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*, London, Routledge, 1996, p. 253.

⁵ P.F. Strawson, "Meaning and Truth" in A.P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language*, Second Edition, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, pp. 91-92.

⁶ For an interpretation of religious discourse as narrative see Gavin Flood, *Religion as Narrative* (n.d.) pp.1-13; cfr. <http://www.lhs.se/nfred/flood.html>.

sense, it meant in a general way the relationship of domination and subordination in class-divided societies. Writing about the subordination of the peasantry in southern Italy, Gramsci highlighted the distinct characteristics of the religious beliefs and practices, the daily lives and struggles, the language and the cultural products of the peasants and above all the need for a revolutionary way of studying and understanding them. At the same time, he also brought into focus the limits of the subaltern consciousness by showing that it is fragmented, passive and dependent when compared with the comprehensiveness, originality and active historical dynamism of the consciousness of the ruling classes. For that reason, he said that even in the cases of resistance, subaltern consciousness remains enveloped by the dominant ideologies of the ruling classes.⁷ Borrowing this dual sense of the 'subaltern', a group of historians of modern South Asia has developed what is known as subaltern historiography. And Ranajit Guha, a prominent thinker of this school, takes the 'subaltern' to mean the whole problem of dominance and subordination including the problem of caste and class. In his writings he has shown that the Indian culture does not stand for *ahimsa* alone but also for *himsa* when it comes to the question of power. In that sense, the Indian culture is seen to be fractured.⁸ And in this paper, in employing the term 'subaltern' I shall take recourse primarily to the second sense as found in Gramsci.

The term 'hermeneutics' (*hermeneia*) is derived from the Greek verb *hermeneuein* and it means to interpret, explain, express etc. And by 'hermeneutics' what is meant is the intellectual discipline that probes into the very nature and presuppositions of understanding human expressions. Here the predominant notion is that all human experience is fundamentally interpretative and that all understanding and meaning take place within a context of interpretation mediated by language, life and world beyond which one cannot go. Keeping in mind the various possible ways of understanding the very nature of the project of hermeneutics, as a heuristic device, I take 'hermeneutics' to mean the analytic and mediating practice.⁹ In this, the objective is a piecemeal investigation emphasizing any one or more of these concerns. First: to analyze, to clarify and thereby attempting at the resolution of conceptual issues that surround explanation and interpretation without losing sight of their context-sensitivity. Second: to establish logical connection between meaning, truth and validity. Third: to discover the philosophical significance of a subaltern reading of 'the logic of practice' that constitutes linguistic activity in general and religious language in particular.¹⁰

⁷ Partha Chatterjee, "Subaltern History" in Neil J. Smelser & Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 22, 2001, p. 15237. See also Bill Ashcroft, et al, *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London, Routledge, 1998, pp. 215-218.

⁸ See Ranajit Guha, "Writing History" [Interview with Ranajit Guha], *Biblio: A Review of Books*, Vol. VIII, No. 11 & 12, 2003, p. 12. On the idea of the 'subaltern' and the many ways in which it has been conceptualized by various authors see Guha, *Subaltern Studies I, IV-VI*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1985-9; Guha, *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995*, Paperback edition, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2000, Shahid Amin & Dipesh Chakrabarty ed., *Subaltern Studies IX*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1996; Partha Chatterjee & Gyanendra Pandey (eds), *Subaltern Studies VII*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992; Partha Chatterjee & Pradeep Jeganathan (eds), *Subaltern Studies XI*, Delhi, Permanent Black/ Ravi Dayal Publisher, 2000; D. Simeon, "Subaltern Studies: Cultural Concerns" in Neil J. Smelser & Paul B. Baltes (eds), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, vol. 22, Oxford, Elsevier Science Ltd., 2001; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Discussion: An Afterword on the New Subaltern" in Chatterjee & Jeganathan (*op.cit.*)

⁹ See Van A. Harvey, "Hermeneutics" in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 6, New York, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987, pp. 279 & 284; Michael Inwood, "Hermeneutics" in Edward Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 4, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 385 and Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (ed.), *The Hermeneutics Reader*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 1ff.

Embodying the Subaltern Self: Samkara and the *Cand#la* in dialogue

The most important issue that engages the intense philosophical scrutiny of Samkara in his *bhasyas* and *prakarana* works¹¹ is that of analysing and clarifying the very fundamental concept of ultimate reality called self or brahman. In his *Brahma-sutra-bhasya* he writes:

the existence of brahman is well-known from its being the self of all; for everyone feels that his self exists, and he never feels, "I do not exist". ...And that self is brahman. ...[But] there is a conflict about its distinctive nature ...[as] there are many who follow opposite views by depending on logic, texts and their semblances. ...Therefore ...here is commenced an ascertainment of the meaning of the texts of the Upanisads with the help of reasoning not opposed to the Upanisads themselves, for the purpose of leading to emancipation.¹²

Here I do not want to go into the problem of identifying the status of logical reasoning and argumentation vis-à-vis the corpus of the *sruti* in Samkara's logico-linguistic analysis of the Upanisadic texts. I have done this elsewhere.¹³ For our purpose it would suffice to note that brahman-inquiry or self-inquiry serves as the fulcrum in Samkara's *Weltanschauung*. And the important question that comes up here is this: does Samkara's conception of the self make sense of the linguistic space of the subaltern? A reading of his *adhyasa-bhasya*¹⁴ with which he prefaces his commentary on the *Brahma-sutras*, and which I believe is the hermeneutic key to his understanding of the self, seems to suggest a certain ambiguity in this regard. The paradigmatic notion here is that of *adhyasa* or superimposition. And it means the act of cognising something as some other thing [*smrtirupah paratra purvadrstavabhasah*].¹⁵ And it constitutes the very dialectic of the subject and the object, the self and the non-self. In the words of Samkara:

¹⁰ For a discussion on the nature of such an enterprise from the perspective of 'reflexive sociology' see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, pp.607-626. For the significance of the required theoretical framework in such an approach see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, California, Stanford University Press, 1990, pp. 23-135, especially the discussion on "belief and the body", 'the logic of practice' and 'symbolic capital'. In this connection see also Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1971, pp. 301-317 and M.A. Devasia, *Some Hermeneutic Reflections on Religious Speech Acts*, Unpublished M.Phil. Dissertation submitted to the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, 2001, where I have attempted to interpret religious utterances as performative speech acts.

¹¹ Here it is pertinent to make a distinction between the writings ascribed to Samkara by tradition on the one hand and by critical scholarship on the other. The *advaita* tradition ascribes about 167 works to Samkara. See S. Sankaranarayanan, *Sri Samkara*, Madras, The Adyar Library Research Centre, 1995, pp. 306-313. If one were to take all these as authentic works of Samkara, then as Karl Potter has commented, one should presuppose that given the short span of Samkara's life (c.788-820 AD) he should have been composing works every hour of the day! See Karl H Potter (ed.), *Advaita Vedanta up to Samkara and His Pupils*, Indian edition reprint, 1998, p.15. For a list of the original works that can certainly be attributed to Samkara see Potter, (*op.cit.*), pp.115-116; and R. Balasubramanian (ed.), *Advaita Vedanta*, New Delhi, Centre for Studies in Civilizations, 2000, p.68.

¹² Samkara, *Brahma-sutra-bhasya of Sri Samkaracarya*, Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Fourth edition, Calcutta, Advaita Ashrama, 1983, pp. 12-13.

¹³ For a brief discussion of this problem see M.A. Devasia, *A Note on the very idea of Resurrecting Samkara from the Tomb of Sruti*, Paper presented in the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, 2004.

¹⁴ See Samkara, *op. cit.*, (1983) pp. 1-6; Samkara, *Brahmasutra-Catuhstuti*, Translated into English by Har Dutt Sharma, Poona, Oriental Book Agency, 1940, p.1ff ;and Samkara, *The Vedanta-Sutras with the Commentary by Samkaracarya*, Part-1, Translated by George Thibaut and edited by Max Mueller, Indian edition reprint, Delhi, LPP, (1996a), pp. 1-9.

¹⁵ Samkara, *op.cit.*, (1940), p.5.

...one superimposes the characteristics of the body [on to the self] when one has such ideas as 'I am fat', 'I am thin', 'I am fair', 'I stay', 'I go', or 'I scale'. So also one superimposes the attributes of the internal organ [*manas*], possessed of the idea of ego, on the self, the witness of ...everything. Thus occurs this superimposition that has neither beginning nor end but flows on eternally, that appears as the manifested universe and its apprehension, that conjures up agency and enjoyership, and that is perceived by all persons. In order to eradicate this source of evil and in order to acquire the knowledge of the non-duality of the self, is begun a discussion ... about the nature of the embodied self [and] this is the purport of all the Upanisads.¹⁶

For Samkara, as is clear from the above quote, the cognition of the embodied self and in that the subaltern self can operate only when *adhyasa*, the mutual superimposition of the self and the non-self, is presupposed. And in this process, for Samkara, the locus or the substratum is not in any way affected by the merits or demerits of the thing superimposed. This becomes all the more clear when one considers the advaita conceptualization of reality at two levels. They are the *paramarthika satta* (absolute reality as in the case of non-dual brahman) and the *vyavaharika satta* (relative reality, as in the case of objects in our waking experience such as myself, others, trees, tables etc). For Samkara, brahman alone is absolutely real because it is not subject to sublation in all the three periods of time [*kalatraya abadhyatvam paramarthika sattvam*]. And the day-to-day world of ours has only relative reality and is only empirically real, because the dawning of the brahman-knowledge does necessarily mean the sublation of the world [*brahma-jnana-matra-badhyatvam vyavaharika sattvam*].¹⁷ In such a logic of the transcendental scheme of things, the understanding of the non-dual self defies even the linguistic expression. For one who realizes the non-duality of the self "has to completely give up language. He has simply to stand and stare, mute and speechless."¹⁸ In that sense, one might suggest that the very conception of the self as embodied and more particularly as the subaltern would ultimately rest on a serious misunderstanding of the true nature of the self. For the self by its very nature is bodiless (*asariri*), ever free and never bound in Samkara. If so, then arises this pertinent question, how are we to make sense of the reality of the embodied self? The technical word used in this regard is '*deha-sambandha*', that is 'connection-with-the-body' or 'physicality' of the self. Samkara in his *Brahma-sutra-bhasya* clarifies the meaning of the expression '*deha-sambandha*' in this way:

...the self, although one only, is connected with various bodies. Of what kind is that connection? *It consists in the origination in the self of the erroneous notion that the self is the aggregate consisting of the body and so on.* This erroneous notion is seen to prevail in all living beings, and finds its expression in thoughts such as the following: 'I go', 'I come', 'I am blind', 'I am not blind', 'I am confused', 'I am not confused.' This erroneous notion can not be removed by anything but except perfect knowledge...¹⁹

¹⁶ Samkara, *op. cit.*, (1983), p.6.

¹⁷ Within the relative level of reality, besides the empirical reality of the objects of our waking experience, one can also speak of another kind of reality called the *pratibhasika satta* (phenomenal reality). For example, in the case of the rope-snake illusion, the reality of the illusory snake is real only when it is cognized, and only on the basis of its cognition can we say that it exists and is real. It means both its perception and existence are coeval. The term '*pratibhasika*' means that which has reality only at the time of its cognition [*pratitikalamatrasattakah*]. See Balasubramanian, *op.cit.*, pp.41-42.

¹⁸ Ganeswar Misra, in J.N. Mohanty (ed.), *Language, Reality and Analysis*, London, E.J.Brill, 1990, p.45. In this connection for a discussion on the conceptual framework of Samkara see Chakravarti Ram-Prasad, *Knowledge and Liberation in Classical Indian Thought*, New York, Palgrave, 2001, p.162ff, Ram-Prasad, *Advaita Epistemology and Metaphysics*, London, Routledge Curzon, 2002, p.25ff and Balasubramanian (*op.cit.*), p.70ff.

Again in his commentary on the *Chandogya Upanisad* (VIII.12.1), he says:

*Embodiedness for the self, which is naturally without any body, consists in its identification with the body through indiscrimination that, 'I am that body indeed, and the body verily I am'. Therefore it is well-known that by becoming sasarirah, embodied, ...the self comes within the grasp of pleasure and pain... However pleasure and pain can not touch it when it becomes disembodied, that is, when the self remains in its natural condition of bodilessness, due to discriminatory knowledge [asariram santam].*²⁰

A careful reading of the above would help us, I believe, to construct a felicitous notion of 'self-embodiment'. The crux of the matter is this: how are we to connect the notion of the non-dual self with that of the body? If we hasten to say, that '*the self is not body at all*', then this linguistic expression would subvert the very ontological and logical truth of the advaitic paradigm that '*the self is*'. Besides, it is equally fallacious as the statement '*the self is body only*.'²¹ Further, it exemplifies the case of hermeneutic violence one engages in while conceptualizing the embodiment of the self. Against this, I want to argue that Samkara does provide us with the possibility for the radical affirmation of the embodied self and thus secure the notion of the subaltern. Here the basic idea is that the embodied self is very much constitutive of the horizon of the mundane, the empirical and is grounded in the very non-dual self. And this can be construed as constituting the very linguistic act of self-imaging.

Such an idea occurs in *Manisapancakam*, a Vedantic *prakarana* text ascribed to Samkara.²² It reports an illuminating dialogue that took place between the 'ignorant' Samkara and an 'enlightened' *candala*, the out-caste, resulting in a transformative experience and paradigm shift in Samkara's worldview. The *candala*²³ is seen as the subaltern 'who is

¹⁹ Samkara, *op.cit.*, (1996b), pp.66-67. Emphasis added. In this connection see also Sri Vidyananya, *Pancadasi*, Translated into English with notes by Swami Swahanand, Reprint edition, Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2001, III.37.

²⁰ Samkara, *op.cit.*, (1997a), p.647. Emphasis added.

²¹ I am indebted to Professor Ramchandra Gandhi for such an understanding of the advaitic paradigm. In a series of lectures, he has made a brilliant attempt to develop such an advaitic paradigm. See Ramachandra Gandhi, *War or Peace: Reflections on Secularism, Religion and Advaita*, A series of lectures delivered at the Indian Habitat Centre, New Delhi, 2002. Related to this is the notion of the human being which he develops elsewhere as a person who constitutes himself essentially in his communicability. See Gandhi, "What is it like to be a human being?" in Ramakant Sinari (ed.), *Concept of Man in Philosophy*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1991, pp.12-18. In this regard see also Rekha Jhanji, *Human Condition in the Mahabharata*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995, pp.7-23.

²² *Manisapancakam* [attributed to Samkara] in Samkara, *op.cit.*, *Prakaranastakam*, (1997), pp.17-23. For the English translation of this dialogue between the *candala* and Samkara see Madhava-Vidhyaranya, *Samkaradigvijaya*. Translated into English by Swami Tapasyananda, Reprint edition, Madras, Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2002, pp.59-61; and K. Satchidananda Murty, "What we owe to Samkara" in R.Balasubramanian & Sibajiban Bhattacharyya (eds), *Perspectives of Samkara*, New Delhi, Department of Culture, Govt of India, 1989, p. 444. For a note on the significance of this dialogue see Radhakrishnan, *The Brahma Sutra*, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1960, p.162-163; and G.C. Pande, *Life and Thought of Samkaracarya*, Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1994, p.87. Arvind Sharma, "Samkara's life and works as a source for a hermeneutics of human rights" in Bradley J. Malkovsky (ed.), *New Perspectives on Advaita Vedanta*, Boston, Brill, 2000, p. 113ff discusses this incident at length.

²³ I take the term '*candala*' to mean broadly the subaltern class of people. In the words of Klostermaier, "[The out-castes] were treated worse than cattle, which even in legal theory ranked above them. People became casteless by violating the rules of their castes, either by marrying contrary to the caste regulations, by following professions not allowed by caste rules, or by committing other acts punished by expulsion from the caste. Some books give them the appellation fifth caste [*pancamala*], but that may leave a wrong impression: they were cut off from all the rights and privileges that caste society extended to its members, ritually impure and ostensibly the

polluted as well as polluting’, the subjugated and the one on the periphery. Where as Samkara can be seen as representing the non-subaltern, a ‘pure brahmana’, the centre that typifies the religio-cultural and socio-economic hegemony. The dialogue goes like this:

In *Kasi* on an occasion while Samkara, accompanied by his disciples, was going towards the Ganga for a holy bath and prayers, he saw a [*candala*] with ferocious dogs coming across his path and shouted to him: ‘Move away! Move away!’ But the [*candala*] replied:

‘When hundreds of Upanisadic texts speak about the unique, pure, relation-less, indivisible one reality of the nature of truth (*satyabodhasukharupamakhandam*), your imagining difference is surprising. Some wear dress of recluses and act like them; without any real knowledge they deceive householders. When you shouted ‘Move away’, were you addressing the body or the self? All bodies are made of food, they are all material, and do not differ from one another. As for the inner witness self, how is the consideration of its difference in a [*candala*] and a brahmana appropriate? ...there is no difference among the one self’s reflections in various bodies. Neglecting the one perfect, eternal and bodiless person in all the bodies, why this false apprehension, ‘I am a pure brahmana, [you *candala*], O dog-eater, get away’?”

Surprised and deeply shaken, Samkara immediately recognised the truth of this and replied: O you best among the embodied, you have asserted what is truth. So because of the words of you who are the knower of the self, I am at once abandoning the notion “this is an outcaste”. Samkara at once broke forth into five verses, each ending with: ‘he who has such steadfast insight is my guru, whether he be an out-caste or a brahmana. This is my firm understanding.’ ...*Then Samkara was blessed with a vision of Siva in the untouchable and his four dogs appeared to him as the four Vedas.*²⁴

What comes alive in this dialogue between Samkara ‘the ignorant’ and *candala* ‘the enlightened’, is the dialectical tension between two different and in a sense conflicting ways of conceptualizing the embodied self in the advaitic paradigm. One is that which ‘explains away’ the subaltern experience of self-embodiment by a process of exclusive sublation and thereby in effect dis-embodies the self by completely negating self-embodiment. This implies what I call advaitic reductionism and further indicates a kind of hermeneutic violence by which the subaltern is disrobed of her/his identity. This also means that ultimately in concrete terms what is secured is the duality between the embodied self - and in that the subaltern self- and the non-dual self! And more significantly this goes against the very foundational truth of the *advaita* itself that all is self. Counter to this understanding, I argue that a possible genuine advaitic reading of the subaltern would be such that it constitutes a transformative encountering of the subaltern experience of self-embodiment. On this view, the subaltern is perceived radically as an inappropriate reflection or imaging of the non-dual self. And thereby one stands eternally challenged toward the realm of advaitic praxis. It calls for a concrete transformation of the identity of the subaltern by indicating the possibility of the full flowering of the human potentialities and possibilities resulting in the total well-being of the subaltern. It also signals alternate non-oppressive ways of being human, a celebratory re-discovery of the spontaneous dance of the non-dual self. For such is the appropriate and true imaging of the non-dual self in the advaitic paradigm. My claim is that the dialogue between the *Candala* and Samkara justifiably provides for such a hermeneutic of the subaltern

product of bad karma coming to fruition.” See Klaus K. Klostermaier, *A Survey of Hinduism*, Second edition, Albany, State University of New York Press, 1994, p.343.

²⁴ *Manisapancakam* in Samkara, (1997), translated in Murty, *op.cit* (1989), p.444. For a complete translation of the dialogue see Madhava-Vidyaranya, *op.cit.*, (2002), pp. 59-63.

linguistic space - the silence, the speak-ability and the communicability of the subaltern - in the weltanschauung of Samkara.²⁵

Embodying the Subaltern Self: 'Language-Games' in Wittgenstein

The early Wittgenstein was mainly concerned with the relation between language and the world. In *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* he saw meaningful language as ultimately analyzable into basic propositions that picture the world. And in this conception ethics and religion are relegated to the realm of the mystical and the inexpressible because they do not picture anything. But in his later work *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein disclaimed any attempt to give a unitary account of the nature of language and introduced two significant concepts: 'language-game'[*sprachspiel*] and 'form of life'[*Lebensform*]. These notions combined with his scattered remarks on religious language as found in *Culture and Value* and *Lectures on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* make available to us, I believe, a key to the symbiotic connection between subalternity and the hermeneutic of religious language. For our purpose, I shall focus mainly on the interconnection between the subaltern self-embodiment and language-game.

The term 'language-game' originates as a result of Wittgenstein's extending the game analogy to language as a whole, while drawing our attention to various analogies between language and games. First, language is seen as a rule-guided activity and is said to have constitutive rules mainly those of the 'depth-grammar'. Second, the meaning of a word is not an object it stands for, but is determined by the rules governing its operation. That is to say, we learn the meaning of words by learning how to use them. Third, a proposition is a move in the game of language and we encounter its sense in its role in the unfolding linguistic activity of human persons.²⁶ Connected with this, is the expression 'form of life' and it emphasizes the intertwining of culture, worldview and language. In other words, a form of life is a culture or social formation, the totality of communal activities into which language-games are embedded. Hence to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. Here what is important to note is that language-games are interwoven with non-linguistic activities and therefore understanding takes place in non-linguistic contexts. This reveals to us 'the depth grammar' of our linguistic behaviour. In the words of Wittgenstein: "Essence is expressed by grammar. ...grammar tells what kind of object anything is. ... How words are understood is not told by words alone."²⁷

To get the argument right, one may need to qualify the word 'grammar'. The 'surface grammar' refers to the obvious syntactic features of the sentence and the words of which it is composed. For example, the sentence 'I have a pain' has the same surface grammar as in the case of the sentence 'I have a pin.' In contrast the 'depth grammar' describes the overall use of the relevant expression by surveying its combination possibilities and impossibilities, the

²⁵ For a preliminary reflection in this regard see Ananta Kumar Giri, "Understanding the 'Social' through the 'Indian' Tradition: The Ideal and the Real", in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research*, XIV (1997) 3, 169-178.

²⁶ See 'language-game' in Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996, pp.193-198.

²⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Third edition, Reprint, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988, no.371, 373 & Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Edited by G.H.Von Wright and translated by Peter Winch, Second edition, Zettel, Basil Blackwell, 1981, no.144.

circumstances of its use and of its consequences.²⁸ Wittgenstein attempts to show the depth grammar of religious beliefs in this way: “It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it’s a *belief*, it’s really a way of living, or way of assessing life. It’s passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation.”²⁹

The basic idea is that interpretation by themselves do not determine meaning, they have to be embedded in the given ‘language game’ and ‘form of life.’ To understand linguistically ‘god’ is not only to be able to use it correctly, but also to be able to answer the question ‘what does ‘god’ mean?’ Wittgenstein asks: “What am I believing in when I believe that men have souls? What am I believing in when I believe that this substance contains two carbon rings? In both cases there is a picture in the foreground, but the sense lies far in the background; that is, the application of the picture is not easy to survey.”³⁰

Such an idea brings us to an important notion in Wittgenstein, that is, the autonomy of the grammar of religious language. It means that the linguistic rules which constitute our conceptual scheme is autonomous or arbitrary in the sense that it does not pay heed to any putative essence or form of reality and can not be correct or incorrect in a philosophically justifiable way. It attacks what is called linguistic foundationalism, the view that language should mirror the essence of the world.³¹ It follows that religious discourse is an autonomous one and is impervious to any criticism or justification from outside.

It is against the backdrop of such an understanding of ‘language-game’ in Wittgenstein that the question of the ‘permissible narrative’ of the subaltern becomes all the more significant. The availability of the subaltern religious discourse becomes not only a possibility but also a conceptually viable reality. It has its own specific depth grammar, celebrating the myriad hues and colours of the life, language and world of the subaltern. The specificity of the subaltern religious use of language becomes significant against the background of the Wittgensteinean conception of multiplicity of language-games. For the act of understanding a linguistic utterance is not merely a mental phenomenon, but rather a dispositional act signifying symbolic embodiment. And in the context of our discussion, suffice to note that it signifies the particularity of subaltern embodiment. That is to say, the subaltern constructs and expresses himself/herself in the given specific linguistic activity and concept formation in a dialogical and participatory fashion. Of course this would mean that one interprets the linguistic activity as constituting the very social practice of a given community. In the words of Richard Popkin, for Wittgenstein

The material world and its human communities ... are the twin foundations for all human behaviour. Unless they existed, none of our ordinary practices could exist. They stand fast and the doors of everyday human intercourse turn up on them. As presuppositions, they are not susceptible to such ascriptions as being known, being true or false, being justified or not, or being doubted.³²

²⁸ See P.M.S. Hacker, *Wittgenstein: Meaning and Mind*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 1990, p.708.

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Edited by G.H.Von Wright and translated by Peter Winch, Revised second edition, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1980, p. 64e

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, Third edition, Reprint, Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1988, no. 422.

³¹ See Hans-Johann Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1996, p.45.

Concluding Remarks

In our discussion so far, I have attempted to show the very possibility of the logic of the linguistic practice of the subaltern and its warranted space in the hermeneutic of religious language. I did this by analysing the concepts and their significance in some chosen writings of Samkara and Wittgenstein. And I have argued for the case that there exists a symbiotic relationship between how one conceptualises the notion of self-embodiment and that of the linguistic activity. It is in that one can secure the subaltern and its appropriate place in the hermeneutic of religious language. Samkara and Wittgenstein, as I have shown, do make available such a possibility for a hermeneutic of religious language.

³² Richard H. Popkin, ed., *The Pimlico History of Western Philosophy*, London, Pimlico, 1999, p. 641. In this connection see also David Bloor, *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*, London, Macmillan, 1983, pp 22-49; Peter Winch *The Idea of Social Science*, Sixth impression, London, Routledge, (1970) and specially Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, California, Stanford University Press, 1990 and also Bourdieu, *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999, pp. 607-626.

THE IRRELEVANCE OF SUBALTERN STUDIES IN INDIA

George Karuvelil

As we were narrowing on to Subaltern Studies as the theme for this year's ACPI meeting, it was seen as a follow up on postmodernism, a theme on which the ACPI has spent time in the recent past. Since postmodernism itself was flaunted as the arrival of the great liberation from oppression and domination of the past, the logic of choosing Subaltern studies is obvious enough. This would be giving a liberation thrust to the Christian philosophizing in India. That, precisely, is where the title of this paper meant to hit. The main thesis of this paper is that if the reason for us to focus on Subaltern studies is with a view to the liberation of the subordinated groups, then it is irrelevant to us because classical Indian culture does not have the resources necessary for it. The target is not the aim of liberation, to which I have a personal commitment, but the means. If our aim is really the liberation of the subalterns in India, it seems to me that this aim cannot be achieved by promoting philosophies like postmodernism and subaltern studies, which are based on assumptions which are not applicable to the Indian situation. Therefore, while the title of the paper is meant to provoke, it is also meant to make a point. The point is that commitment to the goal of liberation in India needs more creative and original philosophical reflection that takes the specific features of the Indian situation into account than any automatic application of the latest philosophical fashion in the West, which are responses to their situation, not ours. More specifically, I am suggesting that the liberation of the oppressed groups requires an egalitarian spirit. Since it is present in the classical Western culture, subaltern studies can contribute to liberation in their context. But such a spirit is not present in the classical Indian culture which is dominated by cast hierarchies and therefore, subaltern studies is relatively irrelevant in the Indian context. In making this claim I am aware that cultures are not uniform entities that remain fixed once and for all. At any given time there are diverging strands in a culture and they also keep changing over time. Even with a caveat like this, the point about the unsuitability of subaltern studies to our culture dominated by caste and hierarchy is one that needs to be made. In suggesting this, I am inspired by Louis Dumont's work, especially his *Homo Hierarchicus*, a work that has been severely criticized by others.¹ I shall argue that although these criticisms are important correctives to Dumont's view, they do not substantially challenge his insight that caste and equality are necessarily opposed to each other.²

The terms

The word "subaltern" stands for the subordinated groups, irrespective of whether the subordination is in terms of caste, class, age, gender or office.³ Subaltern, therefore, is necessarily a relational term since one cannot talk about subordination independently of domination. Since domination and subordination are terms that are intrinsically value laden,

¹ L. Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970; (Delhi, Vikas Publications, 1971).

² I like to acknowledge that the main sections of this paper are taken from a longer paper published earlier in *Jnanadeepa*, 2 (1999) 2 and adapted to the issue of subaltern studies.

³ Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, p. vii.

talking about the subalterns is not normally from a detached and academic point of view, but from an interest in the liberation of the subordinated groups. And the point of my argument will be to show that focusing on the subalterns without paying attention to the larger cultural map will not help the liberation of the subalterns.

The second term that needs clarification is 'culture'. The word 'culture' comes from the root 'colere', from which are derived words like "agriculture", "horticulture" etc. It implies a sense of effort and cultivation rather than genetic inheritance. Thus, 'culture' can be defined as a humanly constructed world of language, concepts, ideas, customs, technology etc. As such, culture is contrasted with nature: tables and chairs come in culture; rivers, trees and stones come in nature. However, the natural world, in as much as it is experienced and articulated by humans in a language, is also a part of the cultural world because language and ideas are a part of the cultural world. This is a subtle point. On the one hand, trees are natural entities; on the other hand the category of 'tree' is a cultural entity. And cultures are different to the extent that these cultural entities are made up of language, thinking and the way of life of a people are different. As a matter of fact the notion of culture gained prominence in Western thinking primarily to lay emphasis on these differences, as opposed to the Enlightenment idea of the universal man.⁴

If the primary purpose of talking about the subalterns is with a view to their emancipation and liberation, we also need to see the link between culture and moral norms and ethical values. The intimate link between culture and ethics can be explained in the following manner: culture is always a system, an ordered, meaningful whole and not merely chaos of unconnected entities. This is related to the earlier point about the relationship between nature and culture. While nature may or may not have an order that is independent of all human activity, the order that we know and live our lives in, is an order that finds expression in human language and beliefs, and to that extent is a cultural product. And in as much as meaning is a function of such an ordering, and human behaviour is guided by that order, we can also define culture as the meaning-system in terms of which human beings interpret their experience and guide their conduct in society. It is the societal equivalent of habit in the individual. With respect to this meaning giving function, culture is indistinguishable from ideology, except that ideology focuses only on the ideational dimension whereas culture is a broader notion related to larger society. Culture differs from society in as much as "Society emphasizes the human component, the aggregate of people and the relations between them. Culture emphasizes the component of accumulated resources, immaterial as well as material, which the people inherit, employ, transmute, add to, and transmit."⁵ A society, in contrast to culture, is the actual organization and the rules according to which one's conduct are guided in relation to others.⁶ Due to the function of guiding one's conduct, a given culture either conduces and enables ethical behaviour or hampers it. Therefore, if the relationship of domination and subjugation is to be replaced by an alternative relationship, it requires appropriate cultural resources. And my contention is that the culture

⁴ See Anthony O' Hear, "Culture" in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

⁵R. Firth, *Elements of Social Organization*, London, Watts, 1951, p.27. Quoted in M. Singer, "The Concept of Culture," in D. Sills, (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, The Macmillan Company & The Free Press, 1968, vol.3, p.533.

⁶ Besides Gupta (1992), I am indebted to Clifford Geertz for this distinction. See, Geertz, "Ritual and Social Change," in W.A. Lessa and E.Z.Vogt (eds), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*, New York, Harper and Row, 1958, p. 533.

of classical Hinduism –as opposed to both the culture of heterodox movements such as Buddhism or Sikhism and the neo-Hinduism that arose in the intellectual elite during the modern period— is lacking in such resources.

Dumont's Claim

The basic purpose of his study, Dumont tells us, is to show to his readers that hierarchy and equality are two principles of social organization opposed to each other. Hierarchy is said to be characteristic of traditional societies and equality, of modern societies; the former is based on the collective nature of man, the latter on the individual nature. Traditional societies, based on hierarchy, are not egalitarian whereas modern societies, based on equality and liberty, are egalitarian. Needless to say that he places Indian society in the former category. Further, he considers the basis of hierarchy in India to be purity and pollution. Other scholars have rightly questioned a number of these contentions. While classical Indian culture is hierarchical, is there a single hierarchy operative in Indian society? Is an egalitarian view necessarily modern and based on the individual nature of man and the hierarchical view based on the collective nature of man, as Dumont claims? Most importantly, is caste and equality necessarily opposed to each other? Please note that I am not talking of an opposition between hierarchy and equality, as Dumont did, but an opposition between caste culture and equality. Let us consider some of these points.

Dipankar Gupta and others have pointed out that Dumont's view of a single hierarchy operating in Indian society is not true. According to Gupta, the "Caste legends of Doms, Chamars, Chasa, Dhoba, Kahars, [and others] all proclaim exalted origins which of course the Brahminical texts vehemently deny."⁷ If we take the example of Chamars, the Brahmin view of this group would say that the Chamars originate from a boatman and a Chandal woman. However, they see themselves as descendants of the youngest of four Brahmin brothers, who was sent by the others to rescue a drowning cow. But before he could reach the spot the cow dies and the elder brothers force him to remove the carcass. Once that was done the hapless youngster is turned out of the caste and given the name Chamar. Upon this view it is the Chamars who come off as superior to the Brahmins: they are of better character (compassionate to the cow, obedient to elders, ready to work), whereas the Brahmins come across as cheats who take advantage of their seniority to deprive the younger one of his due. It is easy to see that although Dumont's view of a single hierarchy based on purity and pollution is not operative here, the fact remains that the subalterns, (Chamars, in this case) also have a hierarchical view where they are on top. Thus, there are multiple hierarchies operative at the ideational level in caste society.

One implication of such multiple hierarchies at the ideational level is that it introduces certain dynamism into society. In spite of the lower castes' exalted opinion of themselves, if they do abide by the lower rank allotted to them in society it is definitely not with their willing consent. Therefore, whenever the ground conditions are favourable an alternative hierarchy is there to assert itself and thus bring about a change in society. As Gupta says, "the other hierarchy is always there waiting for a propitious moment to extravert itself generally over the entire society."⁸ On the other hand, it is also true that Independent India's attempts to

⁷ D. Gupta, "Hierarchy and Difference: An Introduction," in Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992, p.12.

abolish caste have been largely a failure. This is explained partly at least by the fact that caste system has been able “to prevent the formation of social classes with any commonality of interest or unity of purpose.”⁹ In other words, while the existence of alternative hierarchies at the level of culture and thinking does introduce a degree of dynamism into society enabling certain sort of changes, it simultaneously helps to prevent the formation of larger social groups and revolutionary changes in society. This is so because the characteristic mark of caste hierarchy, unlike say a class hierarchy, is “difference” or “repulsion”. The basic idea of “difference” or “repulsion” is this: A class hierarchy is based on a single quantifiable variable (like wealth) and therefore, the “we” of such a hierarchy can become “they” and vice-versa; but difference or repulsion is not based on any single variable –it is more qualitative than quantitative.¹⁰ Therefore the “we” of caste can never become “they” and vice-versa. This feature of caste, therefore, explains the enduring power of caste and how class formation is prevented in the process. The failure of the communist movements to take root in India would become self-explanatory in this light. This being the case, there does seem to be some merit in Dumont’s contention about the opposition between caste culture and equality, even if “hierarchy” understood in the technical sense of being based on a single quantifiable variable, is not the basis of caste system.

And the idea that Dumont’s contention does have some merit, it seems to me, is a point that has been missed by most social scientists. Andre Béteille, for example, seems to argue that there is no incompatibility between caste and social equality. He writes: "It seems to me that the idea of human beings as equal claimants to justice in this broad sense [i.e., human beings as human beings] can be the monopoly of any society or culture to the exclusion of all others."¹¹ He considers both *homo hierarchicus* and *homo equalis* as “paste-board characters” that serve only a pedagogical function. “But a major civilization, such as the Indian or the Western is too rich and too complex to be adequately portrayed by the one to the exclusion of the other.”¹²

This is indeed a valid point. Dumont is mistaken in thinking that the egalitarian view and hierarchical views are based on the individual and collective natures of man. Are not some of the primitive tribal societies really not egalitarian, but not based on the individual nature of man? Moreover, both hierarchy and equality are not to be taken as empirical statements characteristic of a society to the exclusion of another, as Dumont does. Even at the time of slavery there would have been slave masters who treated their slaves with a degree of dignity and compassion.¹³ Similarly, discrimination or inequality is also a universal feature of societies in as much as human dealings with one another require some evaluation in terms of merit, quality or worth.¹⁴ This merely means that equality and inequality are to be taken as

⁸ Gupta, p.14.

⁹ J.P. Mencher, “The Caste System Upside Down,” in D.Gupta (ed.), *Social Stratification*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 93.

¹⁰ This has been pointed out by a number of authors. See, especially, Bougle, "The Essence and Reality of the Caste System," in Gupta, (ed.), *Social Stratification*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1992; A.M. Shah and I.P. Desai, *Division and Hierarchy: An Overview of Caste in Gujarat*, Delhi, Hindustan Publishing Corporation, 1988, p. 2. A note about terminology: In the place of ‘division’ used by Shah and Desai, other authors use terms such as ‘difference’ (Pocock, Gupta), and ‘repulsion’ (Bougle). I use these terms inter-changeably.

¹¹ A.Béteille, *The Idea of Natural Inequality and Other Essays*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1983, p.36 (Hereafter Beteille, *Natural Inequality*.)

¹² Béteille, *Natural Inequality*, p. 34.

¹³ A. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1933, (repr. 1948), p.23

“ideal types”¹⁵ than as exclusive characterizations of any society: they are conceptual distinctions that help us to make useful judgements of empirical reality.

Having acknowledged that, the basic question still remains. Is caste culture basically opposed to, or compatible with, egalitarianism? Gupta, after having argued that difference and not hierarchy is the essence of caste, draws the conclusion that castes are “logically of equal status.”¹⁶ I am not sure what conclusion to draw from this. Does it mean that there is no basic opposition between caste and equality? In one place Gupta does say, “with differences comes the notion of equality,” without qualifying the notion of equality as logical.¹⁷ Taken in this manner it seems to undermine what we took to be the insight of Dumont, an insight that helped to explain the failure of the communists and their strategy of class mobilization in India. However, there seems to be a confusion here. Let us, therefore, analyse the concept of equality so as to see the different senses in which it is used and identify the one that is appropriate to ethical action.

Types of Equality

i) *Logical Equality*: Equality is logical if it is necessary for certain concepts and principles to operate. An excellent example is provided by Bêteille. He argues: “...the ends of justice are defeated when equals are treated unequally, but also when unequals are treated equally.... [It is impossible to] formulate the principle of justice without some consideration of equality, however residual.” Note that this is a conceptual requirement: the concept of justice necessarily requires the concept of equality; one cannot be conceived without the other. Similarly the concept of difference and repulsion logically requires the existence of another from which the one is differentiated or repulsed. Therefore, if difference is the basic principle of caste, then it is a logical requirement that there be other groups in society for there to be any difference or repulsion. In this sense Gupta is right in claiming that the concept of difference implies that they are of *logically* equal status, i.e., they are equal as existents in society.

ii) *Empirical equality*: On the other extreme of logical equality there is empirical equality. Whereas logical equality is a conceptual matter, empirical equality is a matter of experience and observation. Thus two people could be of equal height, weight, function in society, and so on. In the social realm, inequality is as much - if not more- a matter of experience as equality. And these are not specific to any society as Bêteille reminds us.

iii) *Metaphysical equality*: Let me first explain the concept of metaphysics. The concept of metaphysics is a sort of hybrid between the logical and the empirical. A metaphysical principle is not empirical: it cannot be observed, and in this sense, it is like the logical. On the other hand, it is said to have an extra-mental or extra-conceptual or extra-linguistic existence in reality. In this it is unlike the logical, which is purely a conceptual

¹⁴ Bêteille, *Natural Inequality*, p.36

¹⁵ My use of this term is influenced by Eric Fromm and Vincent Bruemmer. Fromm acknowledges his indebtedness to Weber and to Jung. See, E.Fromm, *The Art of Loving*, New York, Harper and Row, 1956, p. 35; V. Bruemmer, *The Model of Love*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 157.

¹⁶ Gupta, *Social Stratification*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Gupta, *Social Stratification*, P.17.

matter. For this type of knowledge that is distinct from both the logical and the empirical, but has the characteristics of both, Kant used the technical term "synthetic *a priori*."

The most discussed example of a metaphysical principle is perhaps the principle of causality: "Every event has a cause". Kant argued unlike a causal law like "Metal expands when heated", which is based on experience, "Every event has a cause" is *a priori* and hence not based on experience; rather it is the very condition of experience: it is this that enables us to make empirical claims like "Metal expands when heated". But the causal principle is different: relying on the truth of the causal principle we inquire into the cause of an event and come to a conclusion based on our experience. Without relying on this *a priori* principle we will not be able to explain or predict anything and science itself would be impossible.

Metaphysical equality is similar to the causal principle. It is not based on experience and hence not an empirical concept. Nor is it simply a conceptual matter like logical equality. Without the principle of metaphysical equality we will not be able to explain certain of our ordinary human experiences. How are we to explain, for example, a boy and a girl judged to be a complete mismatch by others, fall in love leading to a happy married life? Or, how do we explain the fact that a complete stranger in need (hence, empirically speaking, having nothing in common with me) can evoke my compassion? What is involved in such cases is equality of humans *as humans*, even when there may be no observable respect in which they are equal.

iv) *Ethical Equality or equality of persons*: This is related to metaphysical equality, but different. It is an application of the metaphysical principle to the empirical realm in the form of an ethical norm. The best formulation of such a norm is found in Kant when he says, "I am never to act otherwise than so *that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law*."¹⁸ Here then, is a basic criterion of a moral norm: can the principle on which I act be applied to anyone in my situation? Such universalizability implies an equality of persons that is not based on one's birth, socio-economic status, etc. In other words, it affirms that metaphysical equality is applicable to human beings in concrete moral situations.

With these distinctions in mind let us look at the implications of caste culture for ethical behaviour. First let us make a general point about caste culture. A multiplicity of cultural hierarchies where each caste is superior to the other implies that the basic pattern of thinking is in terms of 'we' and 'they,' in-group and out-group. In the case of each, 'we' are superior and the others inferior. This is the significance of the finding that difference or repulsion is the spirit of caste. This point about caste culture needs some clarification. The distinction between in-group and out-group is a universal phenomenon and is not specific to India. Ordinarily one belongs to more than one in-group at the same time, such as family, nation, linguistic group, and so on. What is specific to caste culture is the absence of a very important in-group, i.e., the 'human' group, as I hope to show. Among all the in-groups this one has very special significance for ethics.

Ethical Relativism

¹⁸ I. Kant, "The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals," in *Kant's Critique of Practical Reason and Other Works on the Theory of Ethics*, tr.by T.Kingsmill Abbot, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 6th ed., p.18. (italics original). A positive account of the norm is "Act only on that maxim whereby thou canst at the same time will that it should become a universal law." *Ibid.* p.38. (italics original).

What does it mean to belong to an in-group called the humans? It means that in spite of the other in-groups such as family, caste or nation to which I belong, there are contexts in which when even a total stranger is made a part of the 'we' in as much as the other is a human person. There is hardly any empirical basis for such a grouping and it is based more on the metaphysical concept of person. And this is what seems to be missing in our culture.

I have noted that B  teille is right in saying that equality of humans as humans is not the monopoly of any one society or culture. But what is missing in his account is the distinction between nature and culture. Metaphysical equality of human beings is a fact about human nature, and not an item of any culture.¹⁹ In as much as it is a fact about human nature, it would be surprising if we are totally unable to feel with members of an out-group merely as human beings. This fact about human nature becomes an item of culture only when it is apprehended as a fact and given its due place in one's world-view or meaning system in terms of which one can interpret experience and guide one's conduct. Recall what we said earlier about culture as a societal equivalent of habit in the individual. When metaphysical equality becomes an item of culture it takes the form of ethical equality or equality of persons, implying the universalisability of one's moral norm.

Upon this point, the relativism of traditional Indian ethics is well known. "The question 'what would happen if everyone did this' has never cut ice in India."²⁰ According to Dandekar, "In spite of the comprehensive character of *dharma*, in its most common connotation it was limited to two principal ideals, namely... [*varna* and *asrama*]. Thus, in popular parlance, *dharma* almost came to mean just *varna-ashrama-dharma*, that is the dharmas (ordained duties) of the four classes [sic!] and the four stages of life."²¹ In other words, although we have the concept of *samanyadharma*, in practice what counts is *varna-asrama-dharma*. The implication is this: "In our society there is caste ethics and there are group norms, but there is no such thing as Indian social norms. Thus there are hardly any criteria of right and wrong, honest and dishonest, permissible and impermissible applicable across the board."²² In other words, ethical equality does not find a place in our culture. Even in such most fundamental issue as one's right to life, the Brahmin and the Sudra do not stand on equal grounds.

This is not surprising because the notion of person -someone who is always treated an end and never as a means- is crucial to ethical universalism. The concept of a person is quite different from that of a soul or *atman*. A person is a concrete observable entity, an *atman-in-the-world*, very different from other observable beings. A person is one to whom we can

¹⁹ I am aware that some philosophers consider human nature itself a cultural construct. But it makes no difference to the point being made here as long as the distinction between nature and culture is maintained. Just as the principle of causality can be considered as fact of nature distinct from a causal law which is cultural product, so too metaphysical equality of humans can be considered a fact, whereas the particular ways of conceiving persons are cultural products. My contention is precisely that our cultural construction of person is inadequate.

²⁰ M. Chatterjee, *The Concept of Spirituality*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers, 1989, p.45. She makes this observation in the context of the *sannyasi* ideal. But it seems equally applicable to our ethics.

²¹ R.N. Dandekar, "Dharma, the First End of Man," in W.T. de Bary, S. Hay, et al. (eds), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, reprint, 1988, p.218.

²² S.S. Gill, *The Pathology of Corruption*, New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1998, p.253.

attribute both mental and physical properties,²⁴ a moral agent to whom moral praise and blame can be attached;²⁴ which is not the case with a soul or *atman*. It is on account of such differences from other beings that person is considered a category by itself and differentiated from other beings. Seen thus, it is not hard to see that the concept of person is very underdeveloped, if not totally missing in our culture. The culture of our subcontinent is perhaps unique in this matter. The Japanese scholar, Hajime Nakamura, making a comparative study of the Indian, Chinese and Japanese ways of thinking comes to the conclusion that "the traditional Indian concept of man is vague; man is not seen as an individual [i.e., person], but only as an instance of the species of 'living beings'..."²⁵ Clearly Nakamura is using the word 'individual' in the sense of 'person' as a separate category among living beings and not in the sense of 'individual' as opposed to 'social.'

That 'person' as an independent category, as belonging to that special and unique in-group called the human species on account of which they have a special relation to one another, that such a category is missing from Indian culture can also be seen by examining the common categories of Indian philosophical systems. Although there are some variations in the ontologies (theories of beings) of different philosophical systems, roughly they all comprise of material beings, living beings, *atman*, and the ultimate being (*Brahman*, *Purusha* etc.) Here is an example from the Bhagavadgita: "The wise look with the same eye on a Brahmin endowed with learning and culture, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and a pariah" (5/18). This could be considered typical of Indian ontology except that material beings are not mentioned here. What is noteworthy is that human person is not a category at all, whereas the Brahmin and the Pariah are placed in different categories along with cow, elephant and dog! At the human level the most -if not the only- operative concept (after *atman*) in our culture is caste. The result is that "the social nature of man did not receive the thought it deserved..."²⁶ This is so because the very logic of in-group out-group distinction is that the members of the in-group receive a special treatment that is denied to the out-group. Ethical universalism is the cultural expression of this special relation.

The related, though, side issue that comes up here is this: how do castes come to have the dominance it has in our ethical thinking? This becomes amenable to explanation when it is seen that "Hindu law was first formulated in a tribal society, and it was based primarily on the customary practices and relationships ... The central problem at this stage was to maintain peace between the tribes."²⁷ This would seem to indicate that *varna dharma* is more concerned about maintaining peace between different groups than with any moral norms concerning all. The norms (the customary practices and relationships) prevalent within a group was not disturbed as long as it did not touch the already established hierarchical relationship between social groups. Since the basic unit here is the caste group, there is no place for an ethical norm that cuts across the different groups. This explains the divergence in the different dharmas for the different groups. Thus, the absence of the concept of person

²⁴ P.F. Strawson, *Individuals*, New York: Anchor Books, 1963. (First pub. in 1959).

²⁴ R.C. Pradhan, "Persons as Minded Beings: Towards a Metaphysics of Persons," in *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* XV (May-August 1998)3, p. 23.

²⁵ See, *India Today*, August 31, 1983, p.7.

²⁶ S. Radhakrishnan and P.T.Raju, *The Concept of Man: A Study in Comparative Philosophy*, London, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1960, (1966), p. 336.

²⁷ R. Thapar, cited in G.S. Bhargava, "Hindu Texts Not to Blame for Injustice," *Times of India*, Mumbai, March 1, 1999, p.10.

together with the existent concept of caste explains the absence of ethical universalism in our culture.

The implication of not having an in-group called the humans is this: we all agree that there is domination and subordination of different groups in our society. Whenever there is a caste or communal carnage, or honour killings or sati, we are outraged. We say the life of a cow is more important than that of human beings. The English media reflect our outrage. Both the English media and we condemn these as moral failures. But to consider these as moral failures is to betray our lack of understanding of the situation. What we are witnessing in India today is not so much a moral failure as a cultural failure. It is the failure to create culture where the human person and not caste is the primary category. Only on a chessboard do different pieces become king or pawns. When the concept of a chessboard itself is non-existent, there can be neither kings nor pawns. When George Bush bulldozes his way into the invasion of Iraq, it is a moral failure. But when Hitler targeted the Jews as Jews, it was not just moral failure; he was questioning a culture that considered Jews as persons to be equal to the Aryans. When L.K. Advani or Narendra Modi undertakes a *yatra* to attain political power through divisive group mobilization that leaves thousands of corpses on the way, it is not so much a moral failure as a cultural failure. That Hitler was condemned says something about the deep-rootedness of the primacy of “person” in that culture in spite the heavy knocks it has taken in the modern period. In contrast, the fact that Advani and Modi became heroes who were rewarded with popular applause and political legitimacy, says something about the fragility of our concept of person.

Such fragility is only to be expected when we consider that the concept of person begins to play a pivotal role in our thinking only as recently as the neo-Hindu movements of 19th century culminating in the Indian Constitution. The *Sangh Parivar* is, therefore, absolutely right when it considers the Indian Constitution and the policies of independent India to be foreign to the Indian ethos. But if we did not get to feel this and this “foreign” Constitution functioned rather smoothly till recently it is because of certain towering personalities for whom human persons and not caste was the primary category. The point is that if we are to understand the happenings in our country today, we should see these unpleasant happenings not so much as moral failures but as cultural failures. We can talk of moral failure only when there exists moral norms based on the equality of human persons and not mere caste norms.

Its implication for subaltern studies is this: Only when the basic framework in which the concept of person functions as the pivot can we talk of a group that is at the centre and another at the periphery; one that dominates and the other that is dominated. It is not that there is no subordination or oppression otherwise. But subordination of certain groups can be considered problematic only if the members of the subordinated groups are entitled to an equal status with the members of dominating groups. The same point goes for our alleluias to postmodernism. In a culture where the concept of person is well entrenched, one can ask whether that concept of person in society is too homogeneous to do justice to the freedom and diversity of individuals and groups. But the crying need of our culture is to strengthen the concept of person as the unifying vision. Once the basic chessboard is in place we can look at the particular pieces and their moves, examine the centre and the periphery and so on. Otherwise we could be excellent teachers of Western philosophy and Western cultural trends, but as far as social change in India is concerned, at best we would be absolutely ineffective

like the communists, or what is worse, we would be unsuspecting collaborators of those forces that seek to maintain the caste culture.

SUBALTERN RELIGIONS AND SPIRITUALITY¹

Gnana Patrick

Introduction

‘Do subaltern people have their own spiritualities?’ Or, to put it in other words, ‘do the religions of the subaltern people embody a component as spirituality?’ If so, are these spiritualities distinguishable from the classical or traditional ones? What are the characteristic features that distinguish them? Where and how do we identify them? – these are some of the lead questions that help us reflect on this topic of ‘subaltern religions and spirituality’.

It is time we reflected on this theme seriously. Because, ‘a movement towards the people’ initiated by the era of social movements, has taken us to a point of realisation of the wealth of religio-cultural resources present and operative among the common masses. To a question ‘what sustains the ordinary people in adverse conditions of life?’, we can say that it is their religiosity or spirituality. In secular terms, one could speak about a ‘survival instinct’ that sustains the people. But, this instinct does not explain the manner in which ordinary people conduct their lives – with a deep-seated sense of good and bad, with an ever-readiness to relate the good with the common good, an ability to share the joys and sufferings with a community, and the like. If their lives are geared only by survival instincts, then, for the kind of adverse condition in which they find their living, one can only expect anarchy. But this is not the case. Something sustains them, and does so in a harmonious manner. It is this that presents itself as the wealth of religious potentiality to a religious researcher or to a theologian. Let us see how this potentiality can be identified, situated, and brought to certain meaningful articulation.

Reflecting upon the provenance of subaltern spiritualities,² I think we need to think beyond the conventional boundaries. The traditional understanding of spirituality, the sense of which stands much associated with the Platonic soul-body dualism, needs be gone beyond. A spirituality premised on the traditional antinomies of body-soul, material-spiritual, temporal-transcendent, theocentric-anthrocentric, etc, needs certain deconstruction before it is related to subaltern spirituality.³ As Felix Wilfred suggests the subaltern religious traditions

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² This essay presumes the awareness of the academic discussion taking place on the concept, nature, functions, etc of ‘subaltern religion’. For a brief introduction of the same, kindly cf. Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity – Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998; Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2000; G. Patrick, *Religion and Subaltern Agency*, Chennai: Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2003.

³ Even the *devotio moderna* school of spirituality of the 17-18th century, which arose as an alternative to the excessive intellectualism of the previous era, and which emphasised the role of “devotional prayers and methodical mental prayer” too may not reflect the ‘spiritual’ experience manifest in the subaltern religions. In the Indian context, the so-called ‘main-stream Hindu spirituality’, if it is conceived in a linear progression as “the movement which leads from the Vedas and Upanishads through the Bhagavad Gita to the great Bhakti movements”³, will remain distant from the subaltern ‘spirituality’. Even the *marga* centred ‘practical’ spiritualities of the Indian religions do not seem to resonate with the ‘spirituality’ of the subalterns: The *sadhana* of the *Jnana marga*, which, in a step by step spiritual journey, is to lead the human beings to the realisation of the Brahman (the ultimate reality), the *upasana* of the *Bhakti marga*, which, by meditating on the name of the personal God *Isvara*, proceeds to the *sayuja* (intimacy with the Lord), and the *nishkama karma* of the *Karma marga* which emphasises the way of action, do not seem to correspond to the ‘spiritual’ traditions of the

will take us ‘beyond the contemporary polarities’ such as these.⁴ A more inclusive and radical understanding of spirituality is that which will represent that religious experience in the subaltern religions, which we would like to call as ‘spirituality’.⁵

1. Spirituality Born in the ‘Thick of Struggles’!

The monastic spirituality of the Christian tradition and the Upanishadic spirituality of the Indian tradition, known for seeking God in and through spiritual practices of meditation, yoga, etc is a spiritual journey towards certain interiority. Accordingly, St. Thomas Aquinas could think of spirituality as an endeavour “to contemplate and give the fruits of contemplation to others.” This type of spirituality bred a certain ‘intellectualism’ which reached dizzy heights in spiritual matters. This monastic spirituality has found a point of insertion in the Indian tradition of the sages and hermits, experiencing interiority in and through spiritual exercises. The Abishiktananda model of experiencing God in the ‘cave of the heart’ is a result of this type of spirituality oriented towards interiority.

On the other hand, the spirituality of the subalterns is, so to say, oriented towards exteriority, the ‘lived out mundane world’ of life. It attempts to experience the power of God in the world of actions and struggles. As life is a constant struggle for the subaltern people, their spirituality is one of endeavouring to participate in the power of the supernatural so that they may be helped sustain the struggle of life. The folk deities, who have gone through a process of apotheosis, are embodiments of extraordinary and supernatural powers. As we come to know from related literatures, these folk deities, most of whom are born in the ‘thick of conflicts leading to unjust murder’, (usually conflicts arising out of challenging unjust social structures like the caste), embody and epitomise symbolic ritual power to challenge the obstacles of life, including the unjust social structures. A devotee, by participating in the ‘spiritual’ exercises, attempts to partake of the power of these deities.

2. Transcendence in Subaltern Spirituality

In her book *A New Thing on Earth*, Gabrielle Dietrich, in one of the chapters entitled ‘Subversion, Transgression and Transcendence’, explores into the Asian spiritual experience, especially of the women and the Tribal people. Reflecting on the anti-dam struggle undertaken by the tribal people under the leadership of Medha Patkar, Dietrich observes that, in their epic struggle for their rights, the tribal people *subvert* the dominant discourse of development undertaken through constructions of Dams, *transgress* the legitimacy of the

subaltern people. These traditions – eastern or western – look removed from the ‘spiritual’ experience found in the terrain of subaltern religiosity.

⁴ Felix Wilfred, “Towards a Subaltern Hermeneutics – Beyond the Contemporary Polarities in the Interpretations of Religions” in Felix Wilfred, *Asian Dreams and Christian Hope*, Delhi, ISPCK, 2003 (revised edition), pp. 245-266.

⁵ By way of broadening our vistas of understanding on spirituality, James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow help us with a working understanding: “By it (*spirituality*) we mean the ways and patterns by which persons relate to that which is ultimately real and worthwhile to them. With this term we signify the response of the person – mind and body, feelings and relationships - to the presence of whatever is held to be sacred, of ultimate worth. In this broad sense, spirituality need not be articulated in theological terms, nor need it be explicitly theistic. All human beings have some kind of spirituality, for it is impossible to live without identifying and finding ways of relating to that which is of central worth and importance to us.” James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (eds), *Sexuality and the Sacred – Sources for Theological Reflection*, Kentucky: Westminster / John Knox Press, 1994, p. 71.

State by involving in acts that invite ‘contempt of courts’, and even *transcend* the human limitation of death by offering to sacrifice in the waters of the river.⁶ Herein Gabriele captures an important aspect of the spiritual experience of the subaltern people. In situations of domination and powerlessness, the subaltern people enter into acts of subversion and transgression, with which they transcend limitations in their own characteristic style. Ian Lewis, a social anthropologist, points out how the marginal conditions of life brings to relief the creative energies of the people and come up with psychological acts of resistance, subversion and protest. He analyses the cases of ‘possession’ occurring in peripheral conditions of life and demonstrates how these acts are also forms of subversion, protest, and negotiation.⁷ Under the increasing challenge of annihilation, marginal conditions of life bring to sharp focus human creativity, and the latter, expressing itself in multiple acts of transcendence, is at the core of the subaltern spiritual experience.

Experiences of negativity get entrenched in the lives of the subaltern people. Generations after generations they continue to live a life that is dominated over, powerless, exploited, marginalised, poverty-stricken, and diseased. Such inhuman conditions of life impose shadows of death in the lives of these people. However, it is a wonder to see that the flame of hope is not diminished in their lives. ‘Tomorrow will be mine’ is the refrain that keeps them going. It is in place here to cite the life of a Dalit saint called Nandanar from the Tamil Shaivaite bhakti tradition. He was known as *Thiru-naallai-povar*, meaning ‘one who would go tomorrow’. Born a Dalit, he, in spite of his intense devotion to Shiva (bhakti), was unable to enter the temple and take a *darsan* of his favourite deity. The oppressive caste rules prevented him from entering the temple, and threatened to annihilate him if violated. Even under this threat, his spirit did not die. He experienced an aspect of transcendence in and through his bhakti, and that got vocalised in his refrain ‘I will go tomorrow’. He kept on repeating this refrain all through his life, until the day when he did go and got annihilated in the act. The story, given out by the classical tradition has it that he, due to an oracle from his deity, ‘sacrificed’ himself in a fire in front of the temple. (S. Manickam who has made an interesting study on this saint believes that it must have been a case of murder on account of this man’s audacity to violate caste rules and enter the temple.⁸) Whatever be the case, the saint eventually emerged as a symbol that epitomised an aspect of transcendence in the lives of the subaltern people. Saint’s refrain that ‘he would go and see his God tomorrow’ and the people’s refrain that they would see a better tomorrow converge characteristically!

3. An Holistic Sense of the Sacred

An experience of what is referred to as ‘the sacred’ is integral to spiritual traditions. Institutional religions, developed against the background of ‘high cultures’ have tended to make a dichotomy between experiences of the sacred and the profane. They have tended to institutionalise this dichotomy, through the instrumentality of rituals, theologies, doctrines, belief-systems, and the like.

But the subaltern religions present a different experience of the sacred. In their experience, what becomes a vital determinant is not the dichotomous worldview, but the power of the supernatural – a reality that is not discontinuous but continuous with the natural

⁶ Cf. Gabriele Dietrich, *A New Thing on Earth*, Madurai, TTS, 2001.

⁷ Lewis, I. M., *Ecstatic Religion*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1971.

⁸ Cf. Manickam, S., *Nandanar the Dalit Martyr: A Historical Reconstruction of His Times*, Madras, The Christian Literature Society, 1990.

world.⁹ Anything, starting from an inorganic object to human beings, what reflects a sense of sacred is its ability to reflect, embody and represent the ‘supernatural’ power rather than its oppositional character in relation to what is considered as profane. Even the ordinary, commonplace, and the so-called profane can obtain a sense of the sacred. I have noticed with amazing interest this fact on several occasions. A place used throughout the year for dumping waste, turns to be a sacred place for festive occasions. They are dressed up for the occasions of ritual performances. They remain sacred throughout the festivity, but once the religious activity is over, the ground turns back to its earlier status, with no ritual significance hanging over. In the subaltern religions, no object – neither an icon nor a statue nor an individual possesses sacredness for eternity. Temporariness characterises the sacred in an essential manner. This aspect of temporariness inhibits the subalterns to raise any permanent structures of temples or Churches which will house the sacred presence for eternity. An attempt to preserve or safeguard sacredness in a particular location contributes to corruption of the same, lending itself to acts of socio-political manipulation, which is the case being demonstrated today in the Babri Masjid-Ram temple issue.

This absence of ‘fixing’ the sacred inhibits the birth of institutions like the priesthood, which, both in the West and the East, has grown with the dichotomous conceptualisation of sacred and profane. The western sense of the sacred has contributed to proscribing the female from entering the arena of sacredness, including the site of priesthood. In a different manner, the sense of sacred nurtured in the Sanskritic classical tradition has found, more than the female body, the subaltern body as impure and has proscribed the same from the arena of ritual purity, including the institutional priestly caste. Quite contrary to these conceptualisations, the subaltern religions consider neither the individual female body, nor the social subaltern body as impure. One finds women, low caste people, and even children (subalterns in a subtle way) turning to be sacred, donning the mantle of Shamans, demonstrating their ritual and supernatural power. In a further step, one can observe that the female blood, which is considered by the institutional religions a source of impurity, remains a symbol of fertility and celebration for the subaltern religions.

All these and other elements that go with the conceptualisation of sacred among the subalterns contribute to a healthy experience of spirituality. It is a spirituality that keeps a healthy congruence with reality of materiality, rather than a lop-sided alienation from the latter that might even lead to the psychological problem of serious lack of reality-testing!

4. Shamanism and Subaltern Spirituality

Shamanism plays a central role in subaltern spiritual experiences. Shamanism may be ethnographically understood as a ritual act whereby an individual (ritual leader) experiences a state of trance, which s/he and the community around her/him believe to be a moment of manifestation of the ‘supernatural’ or the extraordinary tremendous power. Manifestation of this power and the experience of the same are mediated through an *ecstatic* form of religiosity. Ecstasy, as a religious behaviour, takes the centre stage in shamanic rituals. Shaman is believed to be a ritually powerful person who ‘brings down’ the deity unto him/herself, unto the ritual participant, and finally unto the community. By ‘bringing down’ the deity, the shaman participates in the ritual power of the deity, which s/he, in turn, mediates to the community.

⁹ This supernatural power is to be understood more in terms of enormity, than something from another world. The many hands, heads, etc of folk deities indicate the folk perception of the divine as something or someone extraordinary, but not out of the ordinary world.

It will do well here to look at some of the salient functions fulfilled by the shamanic spiritual experiences of the people. Shamanic spiritual experience is quintessentially related to the human need for healing. Healing is concerned with physical, mental and psychological aspects – the tangible sides of human living. While classical religions too speak of healing, their discourse is often couched in abstract theological languages like forgiveness of sins, liberation from Karma, etc. But in subaltern religions, healing is more tangible. The subaltern religious world represents the reality of brokenness not through abstract concepts of sin and forgiveness, but through spirits, bhuts, aavi, etc. which can be tangibly dealt with in the exercise of healing. The shamans are able to exorcise the tangible representations of the causes of hurts or brokenness, and thereby heal the victims. (Shamanism becomes an effective tool for the subaltern people to respond to oppressive conditions of life too. In a patriarchally oppressive condition of life, women resort to shamanic religiosity to resist, negotiate, protest, and even overthrow the oppressive stranglehold.)

Shamans are basically embodiments of hope. They instil hope not merely in individuals' lives, but in the lives of social collectives too. A broken community brings up shamans, so that the latter may 'heal' the former. It is in place to see the emergence of a number of social shamans around whom several socio-religious movements took shape during the nineteenth century India. Many reform movements of India had 'social shamans' at their core. They became 'condensed symbols' of hope for social groups, which reeled under caste oppression on the one hand, and the colonial oppression on the other. These social shamans enkindled the emancipatory engagements of the subaltern people.

Maturing to be a shaman takes place through a process of '*sadhana*'¹⁰ – a step-by-step progression through rigorous practice. Herein the shaman goes through a journey of perfection, both inwardly and outwardly. Inwardly, the shaman puts his/her house in order, by endeavoring to obtain unity of purposes. This inner journey implies growing more and more genuine and sincere to oneself. Only a sublime form of sincerity of purposes gives the shaman the ultimate power necessary for the mission of healing. Secondly, the shaman also grows outwardly, growing in his/her sensitivity towards the outer world. The shaman needs to grow in sharp perceptions of realities, human as well as organic. Only these two sides of growth ensure the emergence of an effective and sincere shaman. Only such persons emerge as genuine shamans. It is to be noted that in the traditional societies, shamans go through gruesome ordeals to prove their worth and sincerity, failing which they even forfeited their right to live.

It is necessary to realise that shamanism, in one form or the other, is present in almost all the religious experiences. While it is readily accepted that the folk and popular religious practices are essentially informed of shamanism, there is a hesitation to accept the presence of shamanism in the 'institutional' classical religions. It is to be realised that even the classical religions, when they become mass-based, begin to accept features of shamanism in some form or the other. The Pentecostal phenomenon in Christianity including the charismatic religiosity in the Catholic church are, in an ethnographic cognition, different manifestations of shamanic religiosity. The spiritual experiences of the masses of the classical religions too are, therefore, informed by shamanism. It may be said that, today the

¹⁰ "to be a good healer one must have done '*sadhana*'; one must be a religious person who has access to greater deities." - J.M. Heredero, *The Dead Rescue the Living – Spirit Possession in a Gujarat Christian Community*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2001, p. 193.

world over, there is a revival of shamanic religiosity, including in the New Age religious groups.

5. Celebration of Eros and Fertility

Roland Rolheiser, in a recent book titled *The Holy Longing – the Search for a Christian Spirituality*, considers *eros* a positive energy that characterises spiritual personae. He considers, for example, Mother Teresa to be a very ‘erotic’ woman, whose inner fire of life-energy could never be burnt out. In his own words: “Few of us would consider Mother Teresa an erotic woman. We think of her rather as a spiritual woman. Yet she was a very erotic woman, though not necessarily in the narrow Freudian sense of that word. She was erotic because she was dynamo of energy... She was a human bulldozer, an erotically driven woman.”¹¹

In the recent years, we find similar attempts at relating aspects of *eros* and fertility to Christian spirituality. One of the reasons for doing so could be the post-modern critique on institutional religions, especially on Christianity for holding an oppressive control over the human body (the Foucaultian critique). Perhaps, as expressed by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow,

the dualistic inheritance of the classical world deeply affected Christianity and shaped the understanding of spirituality into body-denying directions. Spirit was viewed as essentially different from and superior to the suspect sexual body. Hence, the cultivation of spirituality meant control, discipline, and repression of the body. Christian spirituality was seen as a life controlled by disciplines of meditation and prayer whereby one could rise beyond the flesh to higher communion with the divine.¹²

It may also be said that the present condition of high-modernity, in its dangerous narrowing of human engagement with ‘profit and profit alone’, is strangulating the space of human joy and happiness. As noted by Audre Lorde, a feminist, “The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need - the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfilment.”¹³ Over against these restrictive factors, we find today emergence of spaces for the celebration of body-affirming emotions, *eros*, feelings, etc. It may well be said that the increase in New-age religious movements in the developed countries, the unstoppable phenomenon of Pentecostal religiosity in Latin American, African, and Asian countries are creating spaces for the celebration of emotions and *eros*.

Against such reactive developments, it may be noted that the spiritual experiences of subaltern religions, especially of folk religions, are infused with a spontaneous sense of celebration of *eros*, the life-energy, and human fertility. While the manifold religious rituals associated with birth, the ubiquitous harvest-festivals that bring to full display the human joy at productivity, etc are good examples for ritualisation of the joy of fertility, the icons of folk deities, especially the female deities with over-sized breasts, the seedlings offered to the deity, the red cloth or colour smeared around a stone symbol of a deity, etc are symbols that

¹¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing – The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, New York, Doubleday, p. 8.

¹² James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, (eds.), *Sexuality and the Sacred – Sources for Theological Reflection*, Kentucky, Westminster / John Knox Press, 1994, p. 71.

¹³ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power”, *ibid.*, p. 76.

celebrate the aspect of eros in life. Unlike the institutional religions that discipline, control and eventually even contribute to producing moral guilt in relation to the experience of eros, the folk religions solicit the celebration of the same, without creating undue guilt. These rituals and symbols that celebrate the eros and fertility are some of the spiritual sites and activities subaltern people undertake to ingrain and reinforce in their minds the value and joy of fertility.

6. Pathos as a Site of Subaltern Spiritual Engagement

One of the (may be the only for many) singular liturgical celebrations for which ordinary Christians turn up in large numbers is the ritual enactment of the passion of Christ. An amazing emotional engagement of the people with the mood or sentiment of passion is the special mark of these occasions. This ritual remembrance of the passion goes beyond mere fulfilment of ritual obligations. It is in a way a ritual enactment of the spirituality of the ordinary people. By partaking in the memory of the pathos of the Saviour, they reinforce in them the hope of resurrection too. When the forces of death surround human living, a suffering that comes as a result of challenging these forces becomes a potent symbol of hope.

This profound aspect of involvement in ritual enactment of suffering and gathering strength therefrom for further living can be found in a singular way in the lives of the ordinary people. In situations of subordination, exploitation and domination, a ritual remembrance of a valiant death, say death of a person who challenged the forces of domination, becomes, among others, an occasion of covert rebellion against the said forces. In folk / subaltern literatures, we find, especially in the Indian context of caste suppression, a number of instances that invite a valiant remembrance of the hero's death. The case of a folk hero called Madurai Veeran, whose life became a symbol of courage for the subaltern people and whose death became a symbol of challenge to the domination, has been intertextually studied by Maria Arul Raja¹⁴ (kindly refer the footnote for the story of Madurai Veeran). A subaltern people called *Arundathiyar*, a Dalit community in South India, remembers the suffering of this hero ritually every year and when they do that, they gather strength for their continuing struggle against the caste dominators.

Like Madurai Veeran, we have a class of folk heroes and heroines who are classified by folklorists as those 'born in the thick of Murder', i.e. those who had been unjustly killed by the perpetrators of domination and exploitation. The way the lives and suffering of these people are represented in ritual performances during religious occasions beckons to the way ordinary people theologise in their lives. Identifying and participating in these enactments of suffering becomes a 'spiritual exercise' of inculcating hope in life.

¹⁴ Maria Arul Raja, "Breaking Hegemonic Boundaries: An Intertextual Reading of the Madurai Veeran Legend and Mark's Story of Jesus," in Philip L. Wickeri (ed.), *Scripture, Community, and Mission*, UK, Christian Conference of Asia, p. 225. *Madurai Veerasamy* is worshipped as a deity in central areas of Tamil Nadu, among the folk section of the people. This deity has a specific history. The tradition goes that *Madurai Veeran* was a *Chakkilia* youth who fell in love with a girl called Bommi, the daughter of a Naik nobleman, and married her. This marriage enraged the caste men. In the ensuing trouble, Bommi's father was killed. The couple escaped to Trichy and found employment in the army of the Naik ruler of Trichy. On the request of the famous Thirumalai Naik of Madurai, the Naik of Trichy sent *Madurai Veeran* on a raid to annihilate the bandits of Alagarmalai who pestered the Pandyan Kingdom. *Madurai Veeran* successfully destroyed the bandits and was richly rewarded by Thirumalai Naik. But soon he got into trouble with the ruler since he was caught in an attempt to entice and abduct away Vellaiammal, the sweetheart of the Naik. The Naik killed *Madurai Veeran* cruelly. Later on, *Madurai Veeran* became a deity and was worshipped by the people as *Madurai Veerasamy*.

‘Dying for the sake of a cause’ has always been an intense ‘spiritual’ moment for the subaltern people. Their heroes, being sung in ballads, tales, legends, and the like, are mostly those that died, that too violently, for a cause. Examples are countless. The lives of these heroes gradually grow into a religious symbol, signifying the aspect of transcendence. They become symbolic embodiments of the human spirit that transcends spatio-temporal limitations, in reference to particular social locations of life. The sacrifice they make through their lives becomes the wellspring of spirituality among the ordinary people. Each time the people ‘remember’ their hero, they enliven the spiritual moment of transcendence, and each time they ritually enact the memory of the hero, they undergo a spiritual experience of transcendence. This subaltern spiritual engagement with ‘sacrificing heroes’ may be likened to the spiritual experience of the early Christians that centered around the martyrs, and ultimately the death of Jesus.

7. Earthly Gods and Context-Sensitive Spirituality

An important element that characterises folk religions is the earthly origin of their deities. Unlike the ‘classical deities’ who originate in a trans-spatio-temporal world, and descend on the earth on a soteriological mission, folk deities originate in a spatio-temporal historical context, at a very specific turn of events whence they acquire trans-human powers. Unlike the a-historical divinities of the classical religion, folk deities are historical persons who, by their valour and courage, make an extraordinary impact on the social history of the people. Oral traditions of these deities point to the fact that they were persons who deeply pulsed with the life of their communities.

Folklorists point out the different contexts that bring forth these deities. *Situations of conflict* are very potent contexts for the emergence of such deities. The headmen of tribes or clans, chieftains of village communities, or other valiant heroes who lost their lives in battles against enemies were invariably deified after their death. Tamil Sangam literature speaks of the practice of *Nadukal* worship (worshipping a stone vertically erected in commemoration of the hero) that bears witness to the existence of the process of deification from ancient times. Apart from these war-hero-deities, there were others who were born in caste conflicts too. They were those who either hailed from, or identified themselves with the people of the lower strata and heroically challenged to overthrow the structures of caste.

The feminine world, especially in the South Indian context,¹⁵ has been a fertile soil for the formation of folk deities. A. K. Ramanujam, a known folklorist, classifies them into ‘tooth goddesses’ and ‘breast goddesses’, the former being undomesticated intractable feminine divinities iconised by protruding teeth, unkempt hair, etc, and the latter being the docile familial deities, domesticated by the male. Needless to say it is the former that predominates the subaltern folk religious world. While this data may lend itself for multiple interpretations, an unmistakable one is a feminist reading of it, which would find the assertion of femininity through the religious idiom in a world entrenched in deep patriarchy. The ‘tooth goddess’ variety of female divinities in the folk religious world, apparently considered a slur on femininity, could well turn out to be a site of empowerment of the female. This probably be the manner the female world asserted itself in a mythological idiom, and this probably be the way the female experienced itself spiritually.

¹⁵W.T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism: A Study of the Local and Village Deities of Southern India*, Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1925(1915).

It is enlightening to note that the icons of these deities too represent the reality of subaltern life conditions. While the icons of classical deities wear a serene appearance, a *santha bhava*, the appearance of subaltern deities are known singularly for exhibiting terror, fear, anger, and similar other strong emotions. In a society like ours where subaltern life is characterised by an intense struggle, the religious symbols that embody these struggles too reflect the agony inherent in the life-struggles.

The earthly origin of deities and the life reality of struggle they embody in their iconic representations have immense implications for the way subaltern people experience spirituality. Their spirituality unfolds in a characteristically context-sensitive manner. While engaging their lives realistically, this spirituality inculcates fortitude to face the challenges of life.

8. A Subversive Spirituality

We find a number of instances where the popular religiosity expresses itself in and through symbolic and ritual enactments of resistance and subversions. A case from South India is noteworthy. It's a ritual performed during a popular religious festival known as *Sivarathri*. The name of the ritual is *masanakollai*. A ritual performer from the low caste of a given area garlands himself gorgeously with the intestines of a ritually sacrificed buffalo and goes to the burial ground to bite a bone of a recently cremated human being. He returns to the village with the bone and utters oracles on his way. It is interesting to note that he takes the freedom to rebuke and despise even the high caste people of that area. The ritual turns out to be a symbolic act of subversion of the ritual hierarchy of the area. Oral traditions and performances add to the aspect of resistance. The resistance may not be very obvious. What James Scott has called 'hidden scripts' functions very much in these types of rituals.

The mask dance of Korea is yet another good example.¹⁶ Through the different acts of the dance, people participate in a covert resistance and even subversion of religious and social domination. Subversion of the religious domination comes in the form of ridiculing a old monk, profaning him to the bottom, making him vulnerable, etc, while that of the social comes in the form of the low-class maltugi, on behalf of the people, putting down the yangban, the aristocrats and landlords, in front of the audience. As David Suh observes, "the people in the audience laugh at the yangbang brothers' false dignity and actual impotence, but with Maltugi, their feeling of resistance against their landlords and oppressive masters is burning deep inside their guts. Now Maltugi and his minjung audience become one in expressing their deep-seated *han*, the unresolved angry feeling of injustice and hunger, deeply stored in their hearts and stomachs. ... This is the moment they become critical of the existing order and social system. As they shout with Maltugi in the mask dance, they let out their *han*, their frustration, and their desire for resistance."¹⁷

Dharma, both as a religious (philosophical) doctrine and a spiritual vision for practical living, remains a core element of the classical Sanskritic religio-philosophical world of India. Historically, it has been the vision of the sages, rishis, sadhus and their likes, the political ideology of rulers – both great and small, the organising principle of the society

¹⁶ David Kwang-sun Suh, "Mask Dance of Liberation", in David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Hong Kong, CCA, 1991, pp. 159-175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

(*Varnasrama Dharma*), and even the guiding principle for organising labour, property holding, collective spending, etc. It has been a principle that has permeated all walks of life in the classical traditional society. That this all-permeating principle has worked out to the social, cultural, political and economic advantage and dominance of the elite and higher castes of India may not need reiteration here. The challenges that emerged to this hegemonic doctrine in the form of alternative religio-philosophical traditions were eventually subsumed, co-opted, and assimilated into the classical doctrine.

However, the intervention of modernity brought up some non-assimilable alternatives from the subaltern religio-cultural terrain. The philosophico-spiritual visions that remained embedded in the subaltern collective psyche began to surface at the interjection of modernity. Several socio-religious movements, initiated by 'organic individuals' (reformers, spiritual leaders, socially inclined shamans, etc), began to emerge subverting, re-interpreting, and challenging the understanding of the classical dharma. As an example, the banner raised by Vaikundasamy, a subaltern mystic from the erstwhile South Travancore Kingdom, is worth mentioning here. He proclaimed: 'thazha kidaparai tharkapaduve dharmam' (Uplifting the lowly is dharma). This concept of dharma is to be understood against the working of the concept in the historical context in which Vaikundasamy emerged. The concept of Dharma was a weapon in the hands of the dominant to legitimate and maintain the ascriptive caste order. As noted by Micheal Mahar, "the 'old' dharma, rooted in Hindu religious thought, provide(d) ideological support for the caste system and the Untouchable's inferior position within that system."¹⁸ And, it was to this concept the dominant took recourse to for resolving the antagonism generated in the system. Ranajit Guha observed this fact as, "it was to dharma that the indigenous elite turned in order to justify and explain the initiatives by which they hoped to make their subordinates relate to them as non-antagonistically as possible".¹⁹ Against this oppressive working of the Dharma, Vaikundasamy proposed his own variant of the doctrine. And, as in the words of M.S.S. Pandian, "the preachings of Vaikunda Swamy and the ritual practices enunciated by him had ... challenged the caste-based inequalities suffered..."²⁰ by the subaltern people.

9. Communitarian Spirituality

Folk worship is collective, congregational, and communitarian. Depending on the nature of the deities, e.g. ancestor-deity, village- deities, etc., the whole family or the village participates in the festivals. People participate in the festivals primarily by their presence and then by material contributions. People participate freely without caste distinctions.²¹ Gregarious gathering is a mark of folk worship. One could sense the fact that the collective gathering creates a 'social effervescence'²² among the participants. It is in the nature of folk

¹⁸ J. Michael Mahar, "Agents of Dharma in a North Indian Village", in J. Michael Mahar (ed.), *The Untouchables in contemporary India*, New Delhi, Rawat Publications, 1998, p. 17.

¹⁹ Ranajit Guha, "Dominance without Hegemony and its Historiography", *Subaltern Studies VI*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 244.

²⁰ M.S.S. Pandian, "Meanings of 'Colonialism' and 'Nationalism' : An Essay on Vaikunda Swamy Cult," in *Studies in History*, VIII (July –December 1992) 2, 179.

²¹ S. Sakthivel, *Naattupura Iyal Aaivu*, Chennai, Manivasakar Pathipagam, 1992, p. 221.

²² Durkheim introduces this concept of social effervescence. It is a bubbling of social sensation created in a religious gathering. It unconsciously makes the participants to feel the social bond and to reinforce their faith in social relationships.

religions to create and reinforce a sense of social solidarity among the people.²³ It is in place to listen to David Suh of Korea in this regard:

It is interesting to note that the “nature” gods of Korea are closely related to community religious activities. That is, for a better harvest or better fish catch, Korean farmers and fishermen would approach the “nature” gods as a group, as members of the farming and fishing communities. The worship of “nature” gods in Korea is community religious activity, not an act of individual religious worship.”²⁴

Concluding Remarks

The article has attempted to reflect upon some of the salient features that go into the making of subaltern spirituality. Begun with an assertion that subaltern spirituality has to be found beyond the polarities of the traditional antinomies, the article went on to argue as to how traces of subaltern spirituality were to be found in the ordinary living of the people, in their struggles against domination and oppression, in their simple joys and sufferings, in their ritual enactments, in their exhibition of life-energies, etc. The article also pointed out how the subaltern spirituality embodied subversion of oppressive religious doctrines such as the classical *Dharma*.

While these are some general characteristic features, they by no means exhaust the repertoire of subaltern religions. Unlike the institutional religions, these subaltern ones do not remain static, and on that count, keep dynamically changing their manifestations depending on the historical contexts. It needs then a context-sensitive study of the phenomenon of subaltern spirituality.

²³ S. Sakthivel, *Naattupura Iyal Aaivu*, (op. cit.), p.216

²⁴ David Kwang-sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, CCA, Hong Kong, 1991, p. 69.

CASTES AND METAPHYSICS OF VIOLENCE

George Panthanmackel

The origin of caste according to the Brahminical theory is given in the twelfth verse of the ninetieth hymn in *Mandala X* of the *Rg-veda*, known as *Purusa-sukta*. The hymn, with an incorporation and allegorical interpretation of the caste, was embellished by the Brahmin scholars, commented upon with profound metaphysical learning, and taken to the national bosom as a divine injunction for such a subordination of one class by another. This perverse and violent interpretation is rendered all the more pernicious by the fact that there is no evidence to show that the verse in question is probably an interpolation and a forgery.¹ The text appears to be implying a metaphysics of violence and war, which can be better understood against the background of a metaphysics of peace.

Metaphysics of Peace

Everyone has an experience of ‘something.’² This experience of ‘something’ is an inescapable experience. One may escape from a particular experience, but one cannot escape from experiencing something. The most fundamental and radical question one can raise is this: ‘Is there anything at all?’ The answer can either be a negation or an affirmation. If it is a negation it should be so: ‘There is nothing.’ Such an answer is self-contradictory as the answer affirms a negation which is again ‘something.’ Hence absolute negation is impossible. Therefore, an affirmative experience of ‘something’ is not ‘that which is not’ but ‘that which is’ or ‘Being.’

Being or something underlies, penetrates, transforms and unifies every human experience. First, it underlies every human experience since all questions, all insights, all formulations, all reflections and all judgments proceed from something. Second, something penetrates every human experience as all experiences spring from a common source and seeks a common compatibility and coherence. Third, something transforms all experiences as experiences originate from the ‘experience of something.’ It is free from the realization of particular viewpoints. It distinguishes positions from counter-positions in the whole of knowledge. Fourth, something unifies all experiences; for something deals with the original, total question, and in this way, it moves to the total answer transforming and putting together all other answers. ‘Something, then, is the whole in knowledge but not the whole of knowledge.’³ A whole is whole with all its parts and dependent on them; but it is not identical with the parts. So, something is prior to all other knowledge, and it presses them together in the unity of a whole.

¹ Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism*, Vol.I, New Delhi, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1983, pp. 201-202.

² For this section, see George Panthanmackel, *Coming and Going: An Introduction to Metaphysics from Western Perspectives*, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corporation, 1999, pp. 1-312.

³ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, New York, Longmans, 1965, p. 390.

Something does not restrict itself to any particular being or part of that being, but rather is common to all being, namely something which is the ground of beings since all beings are in something. Something is not a particular thing though it embraces everything in itself. That which is not particular is still something or in some way.

I experience something in my experience of other things that are distinct from me. Although they are distinct from me, they are also identical with me as I am also a 'thing.' Of course, I am not a mere thing among other things, but a thing that is self-conscious. By my consciousness, I stand out of something and other things. Does it mean that I am not something? In no way. For I can never be apart from something which is the ground of my thing. Is not 'my-thing' something? Of course, my-thing is something, but not in its absolute fullness. I can never be the absolute fullness of something since there are other things like me. I am only a finite thing. There are also innumerable things that are finite. What has caused my finitude and the finitude of other things? Since I experience myself as limited, there must be a principle of that limitation. So 'my-thing' is constituted of two principles: principle of something and principle of limitation. Principle of limitation is not nothing. It can only be something. It must be something that is limited and limiting. Now, can a limited principle limit something that is infinite or unlimited in itself? If the finite can limit the infinite by its own power, then the principle of limitation would be more powerful than the infinite. That is contradiction. True, the finite cannot limit the infinite by its own power, but it can limit the infinite if the infinite allows itself to be limited in the finite other through its own principle of limitation. In this way, the emergence of finite beings is made possible by the infinite itself by its own creative act of self-limitation. Why does the infinite allow itself to be limited in the finite other? If the infinite allowed the finite for the good of the finite, the infinite could have made the finite better, without evil and suffering. If it were for its own good, then one would understand the infinite to be imperfect as it needs to enhance its own perfection. That is to reduce the infinite to the realm of the finite. Nevertheless, the infinite must have a reason of its own which could ever remain hidden from me. Undoubtedly, my ignorance of the hiddenness of the reason of the infinite does not prevent me from understanding the metaphysical structure of the finite.

"As the operation is, so the being is." Every operation is composed of two elements: exercise and determination. (Exercise is the inner element of the operation which accounts for its taking place. Determination is the inner element of the operation which specifies or distinguishes the operation from other operations.) Hence, the finite-thing must also be composed. The finite-thing, as we have already seen, is constituted of the principle of something and the principle of limitation (determination). Further, the principle of limitation or determination is constituted of the principle of permanence and the principle of addition. They are constituted of the potential principle of materiality and the formal principle of particular determination. Every thing is constituted of various principles. Unity in variety or identity in difference appears to be the metaphysical structure of a finite thing. We come to know what something is, from the way the finite things are. If so, the infinite something must also be an identity in difference or one in many. It can be shown in the following way. *Something is one*: something is that which is in some way. Insofar as it is in some way, it is one. *Something is many*: something is that which is in some way. Insofar as something is in some way, each thing is in its own way. Insofar as each thing is in its own way, all

things are in their own ways. When all things are in their own ways, there would be a plurality of things that are many. In this sense, something is many. *Something is one-in-many*: something is that which is in some way. Insofar as something is in some way, it is one. However, each thing is in its own way. Insofar as each thing is in its own way, all things are in their own ways which are many. In other words, thing which is in some way, is also in its own way. Something is in things, i.e., One is in many. Therefore, something is one-in-many.

We see that something as one in many is neither one over many nor one under many; one does not dominate over many and many do not dominate over one. In one in many both one and many are at peace with each other. This is a metaphysics of peace that stands in contrast to several metaphysical schools of violence in which either one dominates over many or many dominate over one.

The caste system in India is an exploitative symbol of this domination. A system of the closed type is called caste system.⁴ Caste denotes large-scale kinship groups that are hierarchically organized within a rigid system of stratification. In such a system, a person's status is determined entirely and violently by birth; one's social status is always that of one's parents. A feature of caste systems is that it is *endogamous*: people may marry only within their own caste. Endogamy helps to keep up the boundaries between the castes, for it prevents the confusions that would arise if a person were born to parents of different castes. An individual's status in a caste society is said to be ascribed since it is attached to the person on grounds over which she or he has no control.⁵

Early Hindu classics describe a society divided into four varnas: Brahmin (priest), Ksatriya (warrior), Vaisya (traders), and Shudras (menials, servants). The varnas formed ranked categories characterized by privileges. It violently (systematic violence is premised by systematic justification woven from certain fundamental and universal views, i.e., from metaphysical views) excluded the untouchables,⁶ who were despised because they engaged in occupations considered to be unclean and polluting. The *varna* scheme refers only to broad categories of society. In each linguistic region, there are about two thousand such subcastes, whose cultural traditions and customs vary from region to region, often from village to village. A village would thus have a potter, blacksmith, carpenter, tailor,

⁴ Caste is to be distinguished from race. Race and ethnic relations are the patterns of interaction among groups whose members share distinctive physical characteristics or cultural traits. Those people who share similar physical characteristics are socially defined as a race and those who share similar cultural traits are socially defined as an ethnic group.

⁵ Rita Jalali, "Caste and Class" in Edgar F. Borgatta and Marie L. Borgatta (eds), *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, Vol. 1, pp. 172-176.

⁶ The Untouchables were confined to menial jobs, working as sweepers, gutter and latrine cleaners, scavengers, watchmen, farm labourers, and curers of hides. They were denied access to Hindu temples; were not allowed to read religious Sanskrit books and remained illiterate; could not use village wells and tanks; were forced to live in settlements outside village; and were forbidden to enter the residential areas of the upper castes. Even today, after fifty-six years of India's Independence, there are frequent attacks on low-castes in different parts of India. The following report in the *Indian Express* is an instance – Mysore, April 13, 2003: "Eleven Dalits suffered serious injuries after they were attacked and houses ransacked by upper castes for attempting to fetch water from a tank in Gumanahalli village of Pandavapura taluk on Saturday. The injured include some women...."

shoemaker, barber, sweeper, and a washerman, with each caste specializing in different occupations. The operation of this hierarchical society was sanctioned by the traditional Hindu religious beliefs and metaphysical justifications resulting in metaphysics of violence implied in the *Purusa Sukta*.

Metaphysics of Violence

The *Purusa Sukta* is a hymn which deals with the condition prior to creation and manifestation. It is a condition of change and unchangeability. It is an infinite process by which the Infinite becomes finite. The hymn deals with the transformation of the Supreme person and the process of world-formation. The whole process is conceived, effected and regulated by his inherent, infinite power. It reveals the nature of the creative process which transforms the truth of formless existence into a fact of physical existence in the evolution of which the Supreme Lord, the *devas* and the universe are [unequal] participants of a hierarchical society of castes as evident in this hymn, *Purusa Sukta*:⁷

1. *Sahasra sirsa purusah sahasraksah sahasrapat
sa bhumi^ visvato vrtvatyatis Yhaddasangulam.*
2. *Purusa evedam sarvam yadbhuta^ yacca bhavyam
utamrtatvasyesa no yadannenati rohati.*
3. *Etavanasya mahimato jyayamasca purusah
padosya visvō bh'tōni tripōdasyōmBtam divi.*
4. *Tripadurdhva uditpurusah padosyehabhavtpunah
tato visvan vyakramatsasananasane abhi.*
5. *Tasmadviradajayata virōjo adhi purusah
sa jato atyaricyata pascadbh'mimatho purah.*
6. *Yatpurusena havisa deva yajnamatanvata
vasanto asyasidajya^ grisma idhmaṭ saraddhavih.*
7. *Tam yajna^ barhisi prauksanpurusam jatamagratah
tana devō ayajanta sadhyō Pasayasca ye.*
8. *Tasmadyajnatsarvahutaṭ sambhrtam prasadajyam
prasuntamscakre vayavyanaranyangramyasca ye.*
9. *Tasmadyajnatsarvahutah rcaṭ samami jajnire
chandamsi jajnire tasmadyajustasmadajayata.*
10. *Tasmadasva ajayanta ye ke cobhayadatah*

⁷ The text with its translation is taken from V. Madhusudan Reddy, *The Vedic Epiphany*, Vol.I, Hyderabad, Institute of Human Study, 1991, pp. 177-179.

gavo ha jajnire tasmāt tasmajata ajavayah.

*11. Yatpurusam vyadadhūḥ katidha vyakalpayan
mukham kimasya kau bōhu ka vuru padavuchyete.*

*12. Brahmanosya mukhamōsidbahu rajanyaḥ krtah
vuru tadasya yadvaisyāḥ padbhyam sudro ajayata.*

*13. Candrama manaso jatascaksoḥ suryo ajayata
mukhadindrascagnsca Pranadvayu rajayata.*

*14. Nabhya asidantariksam sisro dyauh samvartata,
padbhyam bhumirdisaḥ srotrat tatha lokan akalpayan.*

*15. Saptasyasan paridhayastrīḥ sapta samdhah krtah
deva yadya jnam tanvana abadhnan purusam pasum.*

*16. Yajnena yajnamayajanta devastani dharmani prathamanyasan
te ha nakam mahimanāḥ sacanta yatra purve sadhyah santi devah.*

A thousand heads as the Cosmic Person,
A thousand eyes and a thousand feet;
Encompassing the entire earth all around,
He exceeds it by a considerable span.

The Supreme Person is, indeed, this all,
What was and what shall be.
He is the Lord of Immortal worlds,
And of the mortal world that grows by food.

Such is the extent of His greatness,
And greater still is the Supreme Person.
All the beings are only a fourth of Him;
His three-fourths, that is immortal, is in Heaven.

With three-fourths of Him, the Perfect Being rose high,
The other one-fourth was again down here.
From this he spread out in all directions
And that which eats and that which eats not.

From Him was born the Shining One, *Hiranyagarbha*,
And from that took birth again the Cosmic Person.
As soon as born, He stretched out all over the earth,
And beyond it, and both behind and before.

With the Cosmic Person as their oblation,
The gods performed the primal sacrifice.
Spring served them as clarified butter,
Summer as the fuel, and Autumn as offering.

They besprinkled the fire-born Being
On the sacred grass, as to be sacrificed.
Thereupon they performed the unique sacrifice, -
The gods, the *sadhyas* and the seers

From this *sarvahut* sacrifice, when fully performed
Was gathered up curd mixed with butter.
Thereafter came the creatures of the air,
Animals of the forest and those of the village.

From this supreme sacrifice, when fully performed
Were born the *Rks* and the *samans*;
From this were born the various metres,
And were born the many ritualistic formulas.

From this were born horses, and all those creatures
Having teeth in both of their jaws;
From this were born different breeds of cattle;
And were born sheep and goats.

When they divided up the Perfect Being,
Into how many parts did they make Him?
What became of His mouth? What his arms?
What of his two legs? What his two feet?

His face became the priest; His arms
Became the warrior-king; His legs
The tradesman, and from His feet
Were born the lowly serf.

The moon was born from His mind;
The sun came into existence from his eye;
Indra and Agni came from His mouth,
And from His breath was born the wind.

From his navel issued the middle region,
From His head unfurled the heaven,
From His feet emerged the earth, and from the ear
The four directions. So the worlds were organised.

Seven were the enclosing sticks of sacrifice,

Thrice seven were made the fuel sticks
When the gods made ready for the sacrifice
With the Cosmic Person as the oblation.

With sacrifice the gods worshipped the Cosmic Person
The intended sacrifice; these were the first established ordinances,
These mighty powers attain the heaven
Where abide the ancient Gods and the *sadhyas*.

Riki – 1-5

The *Purusa Sukta* is the most remarkable description of the Absolute conceived as a Supreme Person with heads, eyes and feet. He has numberless heads, eyes, and feet. He is larger than the entire universe of manifestation standing beyond everything. He is the seen and the unseen, the transcendent and the immanent, phenomenal and noumenal.⁸

The *Purusa Sukta* reveals the cosmogenic purpose and process. It praises the sacrifice of the Supreme *Purusa* for initiating the evolutionary process of the universe. The *Sahasrara Purusa* is the infinite and eternal, universal and transcendent Being. He is the self-existent Absolute, the inconceivable, ineffable Being. He is the unmanifest divine; whereas the *Dasangula Purusa* is the Manifest Divine. The Supreme *Purusa* is the Lord of Immortality, *amrta* and transcends *anna*, the material world and that which grows by it, *prana*. There is no limit to the power and glory, *mahima*, of the *Purusa*. He pervades the entire universe as well as permeates the minutest particle of matter. He is microcosmic, macrocosmic and supracosmic. He is greater than all conceivable greatness. He is perfection, the all-inclusive fullness.

He is inexhaustible; the universe is only a small part of him. Three-fourths of him remains unmanifest; only a fourth is manifest. All things come from the sacrifice, animate and inanimate, liturgical formulas and the four cosmic powers. The tree of cosmic existence has its roots in him. The world of space and time has its source in the infinite and the eternal⁹.

The creation is inseparable from the creator; the cosmos is enveloped by the supreme person. The earth is the individualised *deva*-the *Dasangula Purusa* who is the abode of Agni and Indra by the sacrifice of the Cosmic Person. The manifest universe is identical with the supreme in all respects embodying his manifest and dynamic aspects. He is *idam sarvam*, what has been and what is to be. The hymn speaks of the all-directional evolutionary procession of *purusa* set in by his sacrifice¹⁰.

The supreme personality of infinite divinity, *viraj*, arose from the absolute Being, *Svayambhu*. From *viraj* was born the cosmic person, *vairaja*, who is the principle of the universe of involutionary manifestation. The cosmic person is the one in whom manifold life is predominant. The *viraj* is the one in whom diversity appears as a principle of ideation

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

in the infinite fullness of oneness. If the Absolute, *svaraj*, is the father-principle, *viraj* is the mother-principle which receives the seed of creation from the self-existent supreme. *Svarat* and *viraj* are the complementary principles of cosmic evolution, the *Dasangula Purusa*, *Svayambhu*, *Viraj* and *Vairaj* constitute the inseparable trinity of the Father, Mother and the Son. The third is the manifest combination of the first two. The *Puranas* speak of the trinity as *Nara-Narayana*. *Narayana* contains in an archetypal form the truths of all that is created. *Vairaja* is also referred to as *Hiranyagarbha*, the principle of universal *prana* manifest in the material universe and is called *bhupati*. *Prana* controls and determines the destiny of matter. It functions from within as the centre of the divine. *Dyahu* and *Bhumi* are the two halves of a single embryonic whole (Golden Embryo) out of which the life-force wells forth in manifold directions-both inward and outward¹¹.

Rik – 6

The diversified *purusa* becomes the object for the performance of the primeval sacrifice organised by the gods with the cosmic *purusa* as offering. While the Absolute, the Transcendent and the Unmanifest is responsible for the involutionary creation, the diversified *purusa* is responsible for the evolutionary creation. He is the *prathamachhad*, the archetypal-source of the evolving universe. He is not an active agent in the creation of the world, but the cause and promoter of the evolution of the universe. In the involutionary process the self-manifestation of the Absolute precipitates himself as the Diversified Person, but when the moment of evolution begins, the stage is set for the return to the Divine. The universe comes into existence by the act of the supreme self-sacrifice of the supreme *purusa*. Again the universe is set on its evolutionary journey by the sacrifice of the diversified cosmic *purusa*. If the first act of sacrifice creates the universe, the second sacrifice recreates the universe in the nature and consciousness of the Supreme. The gods, the diversification of the one, conducted a ritual worship by sacrificing the Cosmic *purusa* which sets in the evolutionary journey of the earth. Then the eternal Time, *mahakala*, became distinguishable and emerged distinctly as the wheel of seasons: *vasanta*, *grisma* and *sarad*¹².

Rik 7

The superamental gods are capable of emanating from themselves the world of multiplicity without undergoing any change. They also help the world of multiplicity to progressively realise their immanent and transcendental oneness. They are the *purva-devas*, the divine powers inherent in the *purusa* beyond the world of change and mutability, yet are the source, cause and support of change and manifestation. These are different from the overmental and cosmic godheads, the *uttara-devas*, that enter into the act of creation (differentiation) and lose much of the awareness of their oneness. The abode of the *sadhya devas* is the luminous plane of *naka*, the place of eternal light and delight, unaffected by the world of change. In the formation of the universe the *uttara devas* are of no consequence; it is only in the process of evolution and transformation they are the most effective agents of change.¹³

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 181-182.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

Riks 8-12

The sacrifice of the *purusa* brings in a new consciousness, the new butter, *prisad aijyam*, into the world of manifestation which creates all life-forms present in the air, land and water. It was the beginning of the unfolding of the secret purpose of the cosmic creation through the truth of the *Vedas*. Agni provides the principle of individuation, and Soma nourishes life and completes the rhythm of evolutionary creation. Wisdom, power, harmony and perfection, figuratively named *Brahmins*, *Ksatriyas*, *Vaisyas* and *Sudras*, are manifested in seed-form as the elemental qualities from the body of the Cosmic Person thus sacrificed¹⁴. The Brahmin is called the mouth of *Purusa*, as having the special privilege, as a priest, of addressing the gods in prayer. The arms of *Purusa* became the Rajanya, the prince and soldier who wields the sword and spear. His thighs became the agriculturist and tradesman, the chief support of society. His feet, the emblems of vigour and activity, became the μ 'dra or worker on whose toil and industry all ultimately rests.

Riks 13-16

The subtle body of the manifold Cosmic Person becomes the celestial region, the sun and the moon, Indra and Agni, the other gods and the space with the principal directions. Agni itself comes into existence because of the infinite water, *apah*, by the primaeval forces. The evolutionary creation has its centre in the earth in which are telescoped the seven *lokas* or stations, *saptadhama*. For performing the cosmic *mahayajña*, set in the centre of the seven worlds, seven sacred fuels were produced three times. Each of the seven worlds has the threefold truth of the physical, vital and mental in varying degrees¹⁵. All these levels of existence participate in this supreme sacrifice for the evolution and transformation of the universe. Even as the ocean of milk when churned produces several products, so too the universe of existence produces, because of the great sacrifice, several evolutes. The *sadhya devas* who perform this sacrifice are not the products of the sacrifice, but they are associated with the formation of the evolutionary universe.¹⁶

The metaphysics of *Purusa-sukta* expounding the four-fold *varna* scheme reveals its oppressive and violent character. The Brahmin occupying the highest status is associated with the colour 'white' representing the *sattva-guna*. As one goes down the hierarchy, one descends to the darkness implied in the *tamas-guna* of impurity, inactivity and ignorance represented in the colour 'dark' of the *Sudras*. The colour consciousness expressed thus by the theory of *varna* may account for the premium attached to fair skinned brides evident from the matrimonial advertisements in national newspapers. The caste-order today represents several other violent features denying some basic human rights especially to members of castes placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. For instance, the low-caste people are denied access to wells used by the upper castes; they are prohibited from entering upper caste temples and participating in village festivals; their settlements are segregated from the main village and located in low-lying areas on the outskirts of the village; there are sartorial prohibitions that prevent them from wearing particular sandals or cloths; they cannot even twirl their moustaches up in the style of the upper caste men; their women are not allowed to wear garments to cover their upper

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 184-185.

bodies; they are invariably landless bonded-labourers doing menial jobs and at the mercy of their upper caste masters; they are often condemned to eat the left over food from plates of the members of the upper castes; they cannot freely participate in village assemblies; they are prohibited from learning the Vedas and are often denied access to educational facilities.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

Purusa Sukta describes in a figurative way the cosmic import of the Supreme Being's sacrifice. It speaks of the divinity of creation by the self-sacrifice of the Divine. It is this self-sacrifice that distributes divinity among gods, humans and the whole universe enabling them to move jointly and integrally towards immortality. *Purusa* is conceived as the pure absolute. It is full of life, power and creativity. It is transcendent and immanent, static and dynamic. However, it is to be noted with regret that the hymn lowers the dignity of the One by making it unequally and oppressively present in the one and the same species of human. Thus, the one is made to reign and dominate over the multiplicity in an arbitrary and violent manner, paving the way for disastrous and violent social consequences inherent in the caste system.

¹⁷ M.N. Panini, "Caste, Race and Human Rights," in Sukhadeo Thorat and Umakant (eds), *Caste, Race and Discrimination*, Jaipur, Rawat Publications, 2004, pp. 176-178.

PHILOSOPHIZING From the Perspective of the Tribals

Samuel Lepcha

Introduction

Philosophizing¹ from the perspective of the tribals² is one of the aspects of philosophical *metanoia* that is being experienced amidst the philosophical circles since the recent past. It is a philosophical clarion call to return to the roots. It is a shift in doing philosophy on the ongoing experience of the community, which is indigenous but numerically small,³ politically exploited,⁴ economically uprooted,⁵ culturally alienated⁶ and intellectually marginalized.⁷ Nevertheless, from time to time, these tribals have made their presence felt in the form of movements⁸ and agitations⁹ in the socio-political and

¹ Johnson Puthenpurackal in "Editorial", *Vijñānadīpti: A Journal of Philosophico-Theological Reflection* Vol. 6, no. 2 (June 2004), 123 writes that this term 'Philosophizing' though not of recent origin appears in the philosophical reflections as having "verbal structure, dynamic and alive in its meaning, and refers to the process of thinking...a philosophical humility of being constantly in search, taking serious consideration of the elements of time and space."

² About 4% of the world's population or over two hundred million people, distributed among two thousand or more ethnic groups, are currently designated as tribal people. Cf. Janath Pathy, "Tribal and Indigenous Peoples of the World," in Buddhadeb Chaudhuri (ed.), *Tribal Transformation in India: Ethnopolitics and Identity Crisis*, Vol. III, New Delhi, Inter-India Publications, 1992, p.13. (Hereafter Buddhadeb, *Tribal Transformation*)

³ The census report of 1991 and 2001 as reflected in *India 2004 A Reference Annual*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting Government of India, shows that the percentage of Scheduled Tribes is only 8.08 % of the total population of 1,02,70,15,247.

⁴ The historical proofs of various tribal political movements such as that of the tribal movements from the Kohan area in Orissa against the exploitation from the British in 1819, the Khonds, the Koyas and the Sapras of Orissa in 1879 and 1890 for their rights, the Bastar tribals of Madhya Pradesh (1910) for autonomous state, (Cf. S. G. Deogaonkar, "Tribal Movements", in Buddhadeb, *Tribal Transformation*, p. 290.

⁵ The Tribal movements for the retrieval of their lands point at the economic exploitation and their voice against that. In 1879, the Pahadi Reddy tribals of Andhra Pradesh started a movement for getting the ownership rights of their lands and in the recent past in Andhra Pradesh on 20th of April 1981, at Inderveli, where the tribals organized themselves in order to retrieve their lands grabbed by the non-tribals Cf. Deogaonkar, (1992), 290.

⁶ Since culture is a dynamic reality it gets formed and reformed as it encounters various historical moments. Thus, the negative impact left behind by the cultural alienation also haunts the victims perennially.

⁷ Virginius Xaxa, "Tribal Intellectual Activists," *Satya Nilayam; Chennai Journal of Intercultural Philosophy*, no.6 (August 2004), 52-59 writing about the tribal Intellectual Activists mentions that, leaving alone the tribal intellectuals, even the tribal intelligentsia has a very insignificant number.

⁸ Generally complacent, peace loving and submissive Tribals of India have reacted to the extremes of intrusions into their private world, exploitation by the outsiders in the form of money-lending, bonded labour practices, land alienation, and other economic exploitations. Surajit Sinha records the following well known movements: Sardar Larai(1885) and Birsa movement (1895-1900) among the Munda; Ganganarain Hanganma(1832) among the Bhumiji; Kol Rebellion (1832); Santhal Rebellion (1857-58); Rebellion of the Kacha Nagas (1880s) Cf. Surajit Sinha, "Tribal Solidarity Movements in India: A Review", in Buddhadeb, *Tribal Transformation*, p. 310-11.

religio-cultural milieu thus drawing attention of the concerned authorities representing the majority. Hitherto, considered as the anthropological specimens, the tribals are being considered for philosophical reflections, precisely because, in search of truth the philosophers, especially the ethnocentric philosophers believe in the presence of wisdom in the small and neglected. In order to do that the following two worldviews of the tribals should be seen closely: primeval worldviews based on the traditional myths and the changing worldviews, which are influenced by the global civilization with its banes and boons. We shall see later, the former worldviews always supported the cooperative - creative act, silently but firmly affirming the values like unity, cosmic harmony and universal fraternity. The latter worldviews will present them as those who are hurt, misunderstood and misrepresented. This is a process of affirmation, a search for identity and justice hoping to create a niche for them in the modern contemporary world, which is not as friendly and supportive as their worlds of the past were.

Philosophizing from the tribal perspective thus attempts to see a possibility of connecting all the tribal thoughts of the land, which will have a collective representation on the floor of the majority. It seeks to integrate this particular people and their thoughts in making up the Asian philosophy.¹⁰ It is not being proposed in order to create some sort of a polarity between the Western and the Eastern thoughts but with a view to exploring the possibilities of philosophical integrity from Asian perspective. Since this is the perspective of the group, which has been exploited in many ways known and unknown, it is also a subaltern perspective.

Before we venture into the possibility of philosophizing from the tribal perspective, it is necessary to situate them in the Ethno-socio-cultural background of the country.

1. Contextual Interpretations of the Terms in Use

Ethno-Culturally, India with her large population is an epitome of the world, which can boast of one of the oldest living civilizations with its diverse cultural heritage handed down from generation to generation. It is a composite of multi-ethnic groups, of which tribals are one.¹¹ The anthropologists, sociologists and historians have attempted to

⁹ R.C. Verma chronologically records 71 Tribal revolts starting from 1778 to 1986. Cf. R.C. Verma, "Tribal's Struggle for Survival", (Reprinted from *Indian Tribes Through the Ages*) in P.K. Bhowmick ed., *Rethinking Tribal Culture in India*, Calcutta, Antiquarian Book Sellers, 2001, pp. 374-378. (Hereafter Bhowmick, *Tribal Culture*.)

¹⁰ Johnson Puthenpurackal, "Philosophizing in Asia: Future Perspectives and Paradigm Shift", *Vijñānadīpti: A Journal of Philosophico-Theological Reflection*. Vol. 6, no. 2(June 2004), 204 says that the expression 'Asian Philosophy' is a misnomer because there is nothing called 'Asian Philosophy'. It has to be understood as an invitation to have a contextually situated and locally flavored philosophical reflection. (Hereafter, Johnson, 'Philosophizing in Asia').

¹¹ According to Lannoy, the Indian-Peninsula seems to have been inhabited by the so-called Pre-Dravidians, Proto-Australoids, or Veddids, who made their entry from the Northwest in more than two waves. The first wave of people was at food gathering stage; they were hunters and not organized much. The second wave had localized clans, further on developed group totemism and spread in the Chota Nagpur district. The Veddidd element, which is allied to the Australian aborigines of the Indian Archipelago, and also of the South-East Asian mainland, and Indonesia, is found in most tribes of southern and central India

divide the whole population of India from various perspectives.¹² Whatever might be the source of their origin, a number of Indians have been specified as tribals and their cultures as tribal culture.¹³

Etymologically the word “tribe” comes from the Latin root *tribus* that is composed of two words *tri* and *bu* meaning an ‘inhabited place’. Traditionally, the tribals lived in isolated areas without or with minimum interactions with the outside world. They were known for following animist religion, for having homogenous cultural heritage and traditional values. Their needs seemed limited, for they were simple, unassuming and unreflectively submissive in character. Their collective achievements of a long span of time are recorded in their cultural codes, which are transmitted from generation to generation. Like a light-tower it illumines the cultural groups and all those who interact with it.

The Latin root word for culture is *Cultura*, which means to cultivate or to grow. Thus, culture is not something static but that which grows, changes and transforms. It is dynamic and is in the process of becoming. The tribal culture too like any other culture, growing and changing, is in need of new interpretations.

1.1. Tribals: Indigenous or Evolutionary Vestiges of Human Civilization?

Tribals in general were understood as irrational, illiterate, unscientific, subordinate and segregated homogenous groups of people who claimed to have descended from a common ancestry, who spoke a common dialect or language; who maintained an autonomous socio-political and religio-cultural identity.

In the Indian context tribals were called *Bhumiputra*, indigenous, autochthon and primitive people. Though used synonymously, each term has different connotations. In the rapidly transforming tribal communities of India, autochthon could be the most appropriate word that would explain the indigenous tribal identity rather than the derogatory expression “Primitive”. The former speaks about the originality and has under

and to some extent among the other higher and lower castes. Cf. Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree; A Study of Indian Culture and Society*, London, Oxford University Press, 1971, pp.177-189.

¹² P.K. Bhowmik, *Tribal Culture*, 6-9 tells us how different people tried different methods of classification of the people of India such as based on physical features: blood groups, colour of the skin, stature, and the language etc. According to Prof. S.K. Chatterjee as quoted in Bhowmick, *Tribal Culture*, 8-9, the first ones to inhabit India could have been the Negroid or Negrito race who became extinct with little remnants found in the Andaman Islands. Longheaded, dark skinned and snub-nosed Proto-australoids are supposed to have come from Palestine that forms the present day lower classes all over India. Another view is that the Austriacs are related to the Mediterranean race that reached India through Mesopotamia in pre-historic periods, developed their culture and passed into Burma, from Indo-China into Malaya, Indonesia and beyond the Melanesia and Polynesia. This was followed by the Dravidian race before 3500 B.C., which comprised two distinct races with one language (Mediterranean and Armenoids). They moved over to the West only to penetrate into Gangotri India where they came in contact with the Austriacs, the Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese language groups belonging to the Mongoloid race. The last and vast speech group one encounters in India is the Aryans.

¹³ According to the Census report of 1991, out of the total population of India (84, 63, 02, 680) there were 6, 77, 58,380 tribals. The present figure will certainly have changed.

all circumstances meant something better than the latter, which means static, rudimentary stage, wherefrom the civilization has taken its first leap.

Therefore, the word “Primitive” commonly applied to the tribals would wrongly refer to that group of people as the uncouth savage races who have literally lagged behind in the race of civilization.¹⁴ If seen as uncouth savage, they are not more than evolutionary vestiges of human civilization, at their primary stage. Nevertheless, who called them uncouth and savage? Are they seen as uncivilized from their perspective? Veena Das says that such an expression used by the earlier authors reflects “the civilized-savage dichotomy on which the civilizing mission of the colonial state as well as the missionaries was based.”¹⁵ It reflects a misunderstood identity of the tribals by the anthropologists, social scientists and the humanists.

It is good to note here that the tribals are proud to be called tribals. They don’t consider themselves as uncouth savage, a mere **fossil of human civilization**. Take for instance the Lepchas, one of the Himalayan tribes who call themselves “*Rongkup-Rumkup*”, meaning the Lepchas, the children of God.¹⁶ Thus, there is a hue and cry of various forms to assert this identity. It is a cry for identity of a small voice. It is a search for an expression that is beyond the confines of anthropological understanding of a tribe. Therefore, there is a need to redefine the tribal identity.

However, what gives them a tribal identity? Bidyut Chakrabarty talking about the tribal identity writes,

...tribal identity is integrally linked to various other, and yet distant, ‘external’ influences, it is extremely difficult to capture the so-called general characteristics, applicable to different tribal groups, scattered all over the subcontinent. Moreover, the changing nature of tribal identity also captures the varied impact of the external world. [Therefore]...Explanation for the different nature of tribal population in India has to be located in the socio-cultural milieu which they confront in their day-to-day interaction.¹⁷

There appears a rat race for establishing one’s individual and communal identity. According to him, “...the construction of communal identity needs to be contextualized in the larger social processes...”¹⁸ This will be materialized only when the inside experience of the tribal thoughts begin to burst forth transcending its own boundaries marked by the unproductive moments of their history.

¹⁴ A. Mackenzie in *The North-East Frontier of India* (1884; Reprint), Delhi, Mittal Publications, 1989, p. 583 writes, “In many a jungle solitude, where fever lurks in every brake, and uncouth savage races dispute with wild beasts possession of the clearings, we can point to devoted men, little heard of the public, little noticed by their Government, who are spending and being spent for the sake of the people they control, and bringing by degrees whole tribes to learn the rudiments of civilizations and progress.”

¹⁵ Veena Das, “Subaltern as Perspective,” in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 318.

¹⁶ K.P. Tamsang, “The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas,” *The Unknown and Untold Reality about the Lepchas*, Hongkong, Luen Sun Offset Printing Co. Ltd., 1983, p. 1.

¹⁷ Bidyut Chakrabarty, ed., *Communal Identity in India; Its Construction and Articulation in the Twentieth Century*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

1.2. Need to Transcend Tribal Anthropology by Tribal Philosophizing

The history of various tribal groups point out that well intended but badly misplaced understanding of the tribals has led many a policy maker to protect the serenity and purity of the tribals by treating some of these tribes as anthropological specimens leading to adverse segregation. P.K. Bhowmick writes, “And they, in course of historical upheavals, have been pushed to the inhospitable tracts of the country, i.e., in areas of isolation. It might be that poor communication and other factors keep them away and thus a spirit of isolation and coyness has developed in their mental make up.”¹⁹ However, those, which are segregated, are not many. Most of them remain submerged in the ocean of other dominant groups searching for separate identity of their own. Even in their isolation these tribal communities are undergoing transformation. These societies are evolving.

Philosophizing from the tribal perspective would mean an on going reflection on the tribal society that is evolving with time. Tribal society is dynamic because it is evolving and needs a philosophically dynamic evaluation. There is a need to decode the anthropological codes, which are almost absolutized over the years. A new interpretation backed by research would unveil different perspectives. This approach and medium will help us to transcend the static anthropological attitude prevalent hitherto. Therefore, there is a need to evolve a method of thinking in order to bring out the hidden wisdom found among the tribals. A philosophical attention has to be paid to these tribal groups as to enable entry into the thought-patterns and the belief systems of the tribals. The thought patterns encoded in the world-views they hold.

2. Philosophizing from the Primeval Tribal World Views: A Mythological Perspective

As in the case of any society, the tribal communities are influenced by their respective world-views. Since, the tribal studies have remained within the domain of the anthropologists for so long, the approach has been more anthropological than philosophical. In order to demythologize the incorrect mythical wrappings, which are not true and not at all helpful in understanding them, the tribal worldviews need to be studied from a philosophical point of view. Such philosophizing is needed because the static definition of tribals and their culture cannot cover the evolving aspects of the tribal culture. Their worldviews express the philosophy of life: the question of existence, creation of the humans, the cosmos, sustenance of the created, continuation of life, cosmic fraternity, the joys and woes, anxieties and excitements, internal tensions and turmoil of the tribal communities.

The tribal worldviews are found in their myths and folklores. Myths are the entry points into the tribal thoughts. The unthought-of and unthinkable are experienced and interacted with through myths. Tribals interact with the reality through the medium of myths. Therefore myths are there with a purpose. In their myths we find the traditional

¹⁹ P.K. Bhowmick, *Tribal Culture*, p. 6.

information. Though the myths undergo interpretation and reinterpretation in course of time, they do not manipulate them. It is through these myths, they express their vision of man and cosmos and their interrelatedness. These attempts made by the tribals to understand the mystery of creation, creator and the created and their interrelations point at the presence of philosophical minds among them. It goes without saying that there are varied and different myths representing each tribe, its creation and worldviews.²⁰ Thus, one can easily derive a common conclusion by being faithful to each text.

Baidyanath Saraswati spells out the implicit philosophy present in the texts of the tribal creation myths.²¹ He categorizes them in three moments of solitude, sacrifice and integration by citing the following examples. He shows that the creation of the cosmos follows the principle of ‘from nothing to one, and to two, and to many’. Most tribal creation myths tell us that in the beginning there was nothing. Solitude prevailed all over. According to the *Singpho* myth there were only clouds and mists. The *Hrusso Aka* myth says that there were two great eggs, which shone like gold. The *Panggis* believed that the world was wrapped around by darkness. With the emergence of life, things began to change, they became complex. Animate and inanimate beings interact; women in the form of clouds; rocks and eggs become mobile, the male and female snow are born from the woman cloud; the union of male and female rocks enables the breaking of the eggs, out of two eggs earth and sky were created. Each union leads to creation of the other things and creatures.

Secondly, the moment of creation involves the sacrifice of someone. In the *Apa Tani* myth the mother Earth (*Kujum-Chantu*) dies so that from the parts of her body would emerge different realities of the world. Thus, from her eyes evolved sun and moon. The *Bori* myth tells us that the first two spirits were in the form of a *mithun* and of an elephant. The two fought and both died. The world was formed out of the flesh and the bones. According to the *Hill Miris*, the skin of the world, the rocks and hills evolved from the skin of the original tree, which grew out of the sea and fell to the ground. This shows that the spirit of the love and sacrifice was at play in the act of creation.

Thirdly, the creatures cooperate and collaborate in the act of creation. We witness a creature and creator unity, a non-duality in these myths. Everything created has life of its own. According to the *Gallongs*, in the beginning there was only water everywhere. The prawn collected a great pile of rubbish on the surface, the crab drained out the water leading into the formation of earth. The *Hill Miris* narrate a myth of a big tree that sprung up out of the sea. The worms ate up the tree; the collection of tree-dust formed the earth. According to *Minyong* tradition a great *mithun* dug a pit and dried up the water and enabled the earth to appear. The *Sherdukpens* believe that there were two brothers who threw lotus on the surface of the ocean. The four winds blew over it, cloud of dust got collected and the world appeared. The *Taraon Mishmis* say that god created the world out

²⁰ There are as many tribal worldviews as there are tribes. Only some of them are being mentioned as references in this paper.

²¹ The myths cited other than that of the Santhals and the Lepchas are from the citations available in Baidyanath Saraswati's book. Cf. Baidyanath Saraswati, ed., "Tribal Cosmogony: Primal Vision of Man and Cosmos," in *Tribal Thought and Culture*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 1991, pp. 64-83.

of the pillar of mud that was below the waters aided by the white ants. According to the *Kaman Mishmis* two powerful spirits descended from the sky to make the hills and mountains. The *Bugun Khowa* myth tells us that the two formless sons of *Zongma* (a god) created Earth and Sky. All other beings are created as a result of the love between the Earth and Sky. The other version of *Bugun* myth is that *Apuphulwa*, an elderly man married a hideous creature. As a result, rock, rivers, sun, thunder, lightning, earthquake, rain, rainbow, winds, snakes, poisonous insects and demons of disease were created. The *Santhal* myth²² of creation tells that in the beginning there was water everywhere. God had problem in creating land. He takes the help of seven animals (crab, crocodile, alligator, eel, prawn, earth worm and tortoise), which he had created. Only the last two succeeded in creating the land. The earthworm ate the earth at the bottom of the water for seven days and seven nights and excreted it on the back of the tortoise, which was floating, on the surface. The piled up earth becomes the land. God then created two birds-*Has* and *Hasil*, which flew below the sun and above the earth. Yet they were not destroyed. After their spatial trip, they built a nest and laid two cosmic eggs, which hatched out *Pilcu Haram* and *Pilcu Budhi*. Thus for *Santhals* the two birds are sacred.

One of the ‘creation myths’²³ of the *Lepchas* of Himalayan foothills of Darjeeling and Sikkim tells us that in the beginning *Itbu-mu* (creator-mother)²⁴ created everything, she created gods,²⁵ humans and the *Kongchen-Konglho* (The Himalayas) and *Chyu-bee* (the mountains). Among the mountains the *Tang-Sheng* and the *Narem* mountains were *Abu* and *Amot* (male and female) and the *Aden-chyu*, their son. According to the creation story that prevailed in Pringtamkyong of Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling, the *Itbu-mu* created the *Lepcha* primogenitors *Tukbothing* (man) and *Nazongnyu*²⁶ (woman) out of the pure virgin snows of the pinnacle of the *Kingtchumzaongbu chyu*.²⁷ The first man and woman lived in a tableland called *Sabur-ancho* at the foot of *Anden-Chyu*.

Going beyond the myths, we can get a cosmo-theandric glimpse of the *Lepcha* worldview. The act of creation is seen as very sacred. One can read the unity between the creator and the created. The concept of mother creator (*Itbu-mu*) offers an alternative to the notion of God as father. It in turn paves the way towards a dignified place for the female species in the *Lepcha* world. This worldview guides their interactions between man and woman. They regard each other as equals and as a result there is neither superiority nor inferiority problem in the relational world of the *Lepcha* community.

²² Subhra Bhattacharyya, “Man and Animal Relationship,” in Nita Mathur ed., *Santhal Worldview*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 2001, p. 19.

²³ There are more than four popularly narrated creation myths recorded by the authors like C. De Beauvoir Stocks, Geoffrey Gorer, Halfdan Siiger, K.P. Tamsang and Arthur Foning. Of them the last two are the *Lepcha* scholars from Bomkyong and Mongbol Kyong of the Kalimpong Sub-division of Darjeeling district.

²⁴ It is good to note that the *Lepchas* attribute the work of creator to mother. She is also called the *Itbu Debu Rum*.

²⁵ The *Lepchas* call both God and gods as *Rum*.

²⁶ According to A.R. Foning, in *Lepcha* language, *Nung-yong* means wisdom. Hence, from this, we see that the *Lepcha* women are regarded as the possessors of wisdom. Cf. A.R. Foning *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1987, p. 86.

²⁷ This is the *Lepcha* name for the Mt. Kanchenjunga. This mountain is the abode of God. The holy mountain of the *Lepchas*.

Since creation takes place at the abode of God it is a divine exercise. As the beneficiary of creative act of God, the humans are seen as finite. The act of creation is the meeting point of the infinite and the finite. Mt. Kanchenjunga stands as the symbol of might, protection and the continuous presence of the divine.

The creation myth is sung in traditional songs²⁸ and told in the folklores. They dance to the tune of creation song with their hands interlocked. Dancing together with their hands interlocked shows their mentality of interdependence. Their folklores and stories tell us this story. The interlocked hands symbolize the interlocked existence of the created world. The whole world is interdependent. They send a message of harmony and unity.

The creation myth manifests also the ethical lives of the *Lepchas*. *Itbu-mu* created *Tukbothing* and *Nazong Nyu* as brother and sister. They were expected to cooperate in further creation. However, their creative effort was misguided because of their incestuous relationship that begot innumerable *mungs* (devils). As a punishment the two were separated from each other. Geoffrey Gorer comments, "Incest for the Lepchas is horrifying; they do not call it a sin²⁹ but *nam-taok*, an act which produces a year of disaster for the community...*nam-taok* is the phrase used for personal acts which are felt to be strongly anti-social. Any sexual connection with blood relations for nine generations on the father's side and four on the mother's is considered incestuous."³⁰ As in the case of *Tukbothing* and *Nazong Nyu*, all the offenders of this kind will be exiled from the village as someone irremediably unclean and contagious. They will suffer total social boycott and ostracization unto death.

The creation myths of the tribals reveal also the eschatological belief. For some death is an entry point into the next world which is equally good and sometimes better than this one. The *Apa Tanis* believe in *yalo* (soul) and their entry into the *Neli* (the place of the dead), where the soul encounters the *Nelkiri* (the guardian spirit). *Neli* is like this earth. The people continue to live there in a normal manner till they die there and move on to another *Neli*. The *Hill Miris* see death as an end of misery, and according to the *Wancho* tale humans did not die but changed their forms. This was a problem for the animals and insects because the humans hurt them a lot. In order to liberate them death came to the humans. For the *Khasis*, the dead should be given 'betel-nut' to be shared with his or her relatives in the house of God. For the *Lepcha*, *namsimyu apil* (the human soul) returns to *rumlyang* (abode of God).

²⁸ Sonam Tshering Tamsang of Bomkyong of Kalimpong Sub-division of Darjeeling District has many collections of folksongs, which the Lepchas sing, with so much love. His song about the land of creation goes like this: *Kingchum Cyubong Iyang Abi, Kungbur kungpot Dulyang Abi, ...Nanglyennyu Fodonghani...Nyulik Mun-bongthing itlyang...* (Land of Kanchenjunga (meaning the foothills) where fruit trees blossom and bear fruits, where the progenitors were created, where the Priestess and Priests of the Lepchas were created...)

²⁹ Originally the Lepchas were not familiar with the concept of sin. They have been influenced by the Lamaist and Christian understanding of sin. Sin is related to the acts like killing of animals.

³⁰ Geoffrey Gorer, *The Lepchas of Sikkim*, New Delhi, Gyan Publishing House, (Reprint, 1996), p. 151. (Hereafter, Geoffrey, *The Lepchas*).

The tribal myths show no social stratifications and differentiation of status. Anyone and everybody, however insignificant one might be, can be actively involved in the creative act, in the preservation and the destruction of the world. The myths and the stories of the tribals not only inform us about the unity, harmony, peace and integrity of the community; but they tell us, also the stories of their atrocities through these media.

Therefore, they have folktales, which hint at their suffering at certain point of time. The *Lepchas* have many stories on the *Ryotkup* (orphan) and his plight.³¹ Reading in between the lines of their folktales, we can see that this tribe also had undergone a series of oppression and cultural alienation.³² Their war songs and dance, contradicting their peace loving character remind us of the pain they have undergone under oppressive rules.³³ One can notice that they are struggling for the identity of their own. Therefore philosophizing the worldviews of the tribals will be one of the important starting points in the contextual philosophizing. The other aspect, which should interest the philosophers interested in the Tribal philosophizing, would be the subaltern perspective of the tribals.

3. Changing World Views: A Subaltern Perspective

3.1. Philosophizing from the Subaltern Perspective of the Tribals

Philosophizing from the subaltern perspective of the tribal would mean doing philosophy from the perspective of the marginalized tribal people. It is a new perspective, which reflects over the people whose identity and dignity are at stake. It takes into consideration the mentality of the subaltern people. According to some of the sociologists and the anthropologists, submissiveness and defiance are two important elements to be kept in mind when we deal with the subaltern. Gautam Bhadra writes, “These two elements that together constitute the subaltern mentality. It is on account of this combination that the poor and the oppressed have, time and again, and in different histories, made voluntary sacrifices in favour of the rich and the dominant, at least as often as they have rebelled against the latter.”³⁴ Thus, Philosophizing from this perspective would mean an ongoing process of re-thinking of the tribal cultural mentality that is undergoing rapid changes. Tribal societies have undergone substantial

³¹ These Ryotkups, the Lepcha heroes who are often depicted as helpless orphan boys, start off their lives quite early, roam around all alone with no one to follow, admire or attend to their needs. They make misguided adventurous trips of various kinds, return home at the end of the adventures with many wives as the trophy of victory. Cf. A.C. Sinha, “Frontier Feudalism and State Formation in Sikkim,” in Surajit Sinha ed., *Tribal Politics and State Systems in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North Eastern India*, Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1987, p. 335.

³² They sing yet another song: *Maro Tagumka maloong kayu, Namsatet bamsyong? Maro thonglyoksagramka pitlbu, Namsatyet dasyong? Rongkup Vi aarey kayusa, Ung magonmo. Gaebusa Ageetmo, Ho Vit magunmo*, (How long shall we live by hiding behind others? How long shall we sleep under the feet of others? This is the blood of the Lepchas, not water. You are related to Gaebu, King of the Lepchas, you are not a slave).

³³ *RongKup sa Fen Alok...* (The war dance of the Lepchas) by Sonam Tshering Tamsang.

³⁴ Gautam Bhadra, “The Mentality of Sublaternity: Kantanama or Rajdharma,” in Ranajit Guha ed., *Subaltern studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 55.

transformation despite erstwhile experiences of subjugation. Their history tells us that in a way or the other they have been wronged and misunderstood, misrepresented and misinformed, often by those who are dominant.

Therefore, in the first phase, philosophizing from a new perspective of the tribals would mean taking into account the information provided by different authors and their interpretations. It will be the perspective of the interpreter, which gives the interpretations of the oral, unwritten, and traditional practices lived by the tribals, in most cases, without any written explanation. These interpretations are expected to present the tribal ethos from a proper perspective. Failure to present the inside view of the tribal tradition will amount to a gross failure.

In the second phase, we move onto the realm of the hitherto interpreted. Now the one who was so far being interpreted, interprets from the perspective of the “within”. This is the perspective of the insignificant, at least treated so, thus far. As wrongly put, it is the perspective of the savage, illogical and irrational. Thus, under the purview of the new perspective, there is a need to develop tribal political philosophy, a subaltern perspective of the tribal women and a philosophy of liberation from for the tribals exploited in the tea gardens, as bonded labourers and daily wagers. A philosophy from the vantage point of the Tribals calls for tribal intellectuals to present their self perceptions. However, the paucity of the people of this category within the tribal communities is itself an example of intellectual marginalization.³⁵ According to Virginius Xaxa, the tribal communities at present can be divided into two categories, the middleclass and the upper middle class. He says, “It is from the latter that one finds articulation about the tribal society...which is the weakest in the tribal society [due to their negligible number].”³⁶

3.2. From the Perspective of the Vanishing Identity of a Himalayan Tribe

The cultural mosaic of Indian society is composed of people belonging to various castes and tribes. Leave alone the caste groups based on the *varna* system, among the tribals of India too, there are diverse groups³⁷. Each tribal group holds its own worldview. In order to contextualize our study we shall take a closer look at the perspective of the *Lepcha* tribe of the Himalayan Foothills of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

³⁵ Owing to the missionary influence and personal efforts, few managed to hold the white colour jobs in the pre-independent India. The post independence era has seen a growth in the heterogeneous middle class tribal society around the country. Virginius Xaxa, “Tribal Intellectual Activists,” in *Satyanilayam: Chennai Journal of Intercultural Philosophy*, 6 (August, 2004), 53.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁷ P.K. Bhowmick, *Tribal Culture*, in (Appendix-14), pp. 379-412 gives the state wise list of the names of Scheduled Tribes of India: In Andhra Pradesh=33, Arunachal Pradesh=12, Assam=14 plus 46 other Tribes including the Kukis, Bihar=30, Gujarat=29, Himachal Pradesh=8, Karnataka=49, Kerala=35, Madhya Pradesh=46 plus many other subtribes, Maharashtra=47, Manipur=29, Meghalaya=17 plus 37 other kuki tribes, Mizoram=14 plus 37 Kuki tribes, Nagaland=5, Orissa=62, Rajasthan=12, Sikkim=2 plus 8 others under the Bhutia tribe, Tamilnadu=36, Tripura=19 plus 17 Kuki subtribes, Uttar Pradesh= 5, West Bengal=38, Andaman and Nicobar Islands= 6 plus 12 Andamanese Sub-tribes, Dadra and Nagar Haveli=7, Goa, Daman and Diu=5, Jammu and Kashmir=12. Of which the Kukis featured thrice in Assam, Meghalaya and Mizoram, and the Lepchas in Sikkim, Tripura and West Bengal.

Compared to the other tribes of the Himalayan region, this tribe deserves special mention because of the socio-political and cultural suppression it has experienced. The *Lepchas*, characteristically gentle and submissive, regard Sikkim as the land of their origin, *Ney mayel Lyang* (Motherland).³⁸ Geoffrey Gorer observes that, “from the time of the establishment of a Sikkimese Kingdom the Lepchas became an ‘inferior’ subject race, under the domination of the Sikkimese Tibetans or Bhotias, to which race the Maharajah and the big landowners belonged.”³⁹ Their land was snatched, the seers and priests were killed and a new religion (Lamaism) and a new culture were imposed upon them by the Bhotias of Tibetan origin. Similarly, A.R. Das notes that, “economically, the Lepchas are by far the poorest section of the population of this area and depend mainly on small landholdings. They have been able to retain their identity through relative isolation....the autochthones of this area who were dislodged from their original status first under the socio-economic pressures from the immigrant Bhotiyas and later by Nepali settlers...”⁴⁰ G.C. Bagchi shows that in 1974 alone, 25.65 acres of the land belonging to the Lepchas passed on to Nepalis in the subdivision of Kalimpong which is done through various illegal means by manipulating the legal loopholes.⁴¹

This culture of isolation has resulted from various factors affecting the Lepchas from outside their ethnic group. The cultural dominance of the immigrant groups, linguistic alienation due to the unsympathetic approach of the Government towards the language and script movements of the *Lepcha* Association marginalized them.⁴² This marginalization has been not only at socio-cultural levels but also at geographical level. Thus, as one notices, there is an undercurrent of cultural tension. There is the tension between the dominant and the recessive groups. The feeling of the recessive cultural group is that culturally, “we are the second hand people.”⁴³ In order to liberate themselves from the cultural alienation, some have tried to assimilate themselves into the culture of the dominant groups. Others who are not able to make any score in such cultural conglomeration are gradually vanishing culturally.⁴⁴ This cultural decline entails

³⁸ The Lepchas of Sikkim were colonized by the Tibetans towards the beginning of the 17th century.

³⁹ Geoffrey Gorer, *The Lepchas*, p. 36.

⁴⁰ A.R. Das, “The Language and Script Movement in the Darjeeling Himalayan Area,” in K.S. Singh ed., *Tribal Movements in India* Vol. 1, New Delhi, Manohar Publications, 1982, p. 357.

⁴¹ G.C. Bagchi, “From Semi-Nomadism to Settled Agriculture: An Appraisal of Lepcha Economy,” in K. S. Singh ed., *Economies of the Tribes and their Transformation*, New Delhi, Concept Publishing Company, 1982, p. 312.

⁴² Lepcha Association was a functional body of the Lepchas, which fought for the Recognition of the Lepcha language to be used as a medium of instruction in the primary schools in the district of Darjeeling. This has never been materialized in Darjeeling, unlike the Nepali and Tibetan (Bhutia) Languages that are being used as the medium of instruction. The same Lepcha Association is now renamed as “The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association, HQ Kalimpong Estd. 1925 (S/1L/2043 of 2003-2004)” whose main goal has remained the same that is to assert the cultural identity by demanding the Linguistic recognition of the Lepcha language.

⁴³ Carlos G. Valles, “Second Hand People,” in *Courage to be Myself*, Anand, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1991, p.1.

⁴⁴ Sir Arthur Foning in his book *Lepcha My Vanishing tribe* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Limited, 1987) laments how his tribe which is the autochthon of the place is vanishing because it has for long been pushed to the margins.

that all the riches, which remain embedded in the cultural heritage of this tribal group, are in jeopardy.

Therefore, it appears most appropriate to address the subaltern perspective of the Himalayan highland tribals by addressing the thought patterns of the *Lepcha* tribals. One of the important components, that gives these people their identity, is linguistic identity. The non-recognition of their language by the Government has pushed them to the socio-cultural periphery. In other words, this cultural group is on the verge of extinction. Therefore, the best way to understand and introduce them to the others is to philosophize on the cultural heritage of such people.

When the Asian Philosophers are looking for alternative methods for doing Asian philosophy, this could certainly be one of the contexts for philosophizing. A philosophical reflection from this perspective will be like 'widow's mite' before the colossal Western Philosophical heritage, which is like 'Pharaoh's barn' so full and overflowing. Dr. Johnson Puthenpurackal in his editorial note writes, "(Thus) *philosophizing* is and has to be different according to the different places and times."⁴⁵

Conclusion: Towards a Philosophical Metanoia

Keeping in line with the new search what I would like to propose is a change of attitude. Looking at the plight of the tribals across the country, we can very clearly understand their feelings. All the struggles, movements and agitations and insurgencies attributed to the tribals are resulting from a sense of insecurity. These insecurities are resulting from the multifaceted alienation from their lands, natural habitat, religion, and their culture. The tribals today are in search of an identity. They want to establish their social, economic, cultural and linguistic identity. Rudolf C. Heredia writes, "Modernization and development have everywhere been a threat to the cultural identity and the dignity of tribal peoples, even where in countries such as India there is an official policy of protection and promotion of tribal welfare."⁴⁶ The effort of philosophizing from the Tribal perspective should take care of these aspirations of the people. It is going to be a philosophizing, which shuns the armchair mode and gets down to the field of action. What is so dear to the tribals becomes the matter for philosophical discussion.

Philosophizing from Tribal perspective is going to question the sustainability of the alienating developmental projects, the structural violence, and its cultural, economic and linguistic hegemonies. It should enable them to challenge the 'interiorized identities' which are dehumanizing, and help them to question their silence.

Hence, this new mode of philosophizing should spearhead in reconstructing identity and preserving dignity of these people. It is an attempt to be reconciled with the fact that there are diversities of approaches to philosophical thinking. The Occidental

⁴⁵ Johnson, 'Philosophizing in Asia', p. 123.

⁴⁶ Rudolf C. Heredia, "Reconstructing Identity, Preserving Dignity: The Struggle of the Nomadic Pastoralists," in Rudolf C. Heredia and Shreran F. Ratnagar eds., *Mobile and Marginalized Peoples: Perspectives from the Past*, New Delhi, Mahohar Publishers & Distributors, 2003, p. 21.

approaches and contributions to the colossal body of philosophical heritage are not undermined. It inspires a willingness to admit the presence of wisdom in the cultural heritage of the people of the periphery. It is a philosophical perspective built on a new attitude. The voice of the people whose worldviews are changing at rapid pace is taken into consideration. It calls for change of heart. Thus, philosophizing from the perspective of the marginalized people in general and the tribals in particular becomes a philosophical *metanoia*.

Philosophizing from the perspective of the tribals still remains an ongoing philosophical reflection on the ever-transforming worldviews of the tribals. Present day tribals who are at the transitory stages, like their ancestors wish to build a world where peace, joy, love, unity and harmony prevail. Philip Viegas writes, “Tribal consciousness and ethos are in a state of flux.”⁴⁷ Their interactions with others, the ecological changes, replacement of the forest-based tradition by the tradition of the non-tribals have brought radical changes in their ethos. However, as reflected in their creation myths they wish to contribute to the creation of the world however insignificant their mite be. They want to be the partners in creating a world that is livable. They wish to determine their own future by making use of whatever is given and whatever is available to them. Thus, it is an attempt made to understand the deep-rooted sentiments of these people regarding their deteriorating ecology, alienating socio-political and religio-cultural scenario. Hence, philosophizing from their perspective could be as important as lending an intellectual thread which will enable them to knit up and plait together the tribal identity which is falling apart.

The Threads binding society
Are breaking.
Our brothers and sisters
Are stumbling in darkness,
Our community is falling apart...
Let's knit it up!
Let's plait it together again.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Philip Viegas, *Encroached and Enslaved: Alienation of Tribal Lands and its Dynamics*, New Delhi, India social Institute, 1991, p.143.

⁴⁸ A song from Singhbhum District, Jharkhand (former South Bihar). Cf. AICFAIP, *Voices of the Adivasis/Indigenous Peoples of India*, New Delhi, Other Media Communication Pvt. Ltd., 2001, p. 64.

SIKHISM: A CASE OF SUBALTERN REVIVAL

Shashi Bala

The term 'subaltern' in its modern usage, stands for the downtrodden or Dalit class; socially and economically weaker section of any society and also for the minority ethnic and cultural groups. In this context, Sikhism may be viewed from two standpoints viz, first the Sikh Religion since its inception with Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE) and till its culmination in the creation of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh (1699-1708 CE) fought vehemently against the prevalent caste-ideology and the hierarchical structure of society based on this ideology; second, it, being in itself a minority ethnic and cultural group, has undergone through a perpetual struggle to bring about cultural revolution and to establish an organised political movement in order to maintain and defend its socio-cultural identity.

To study, Sikhism as a case of subaltern revival, it is imperative to delve deep into the origin of caste ideology, which is indeed, the underlying factor of class-distinctions. In the ancient Indian tradition, the principle of *varna* is given divine sanction in the *Rig-Vedic* hymn *Purush Sukta*, which describes the origin of men of different castes from the different parts of the body of the Primordial Man. It states: "The Brahman came from the mouth of the Primal Purusha, the Ksatriya from his arms, the Vaisya from his thighs and Sudra from his feet."¹ Hence it was assumed that the predestined qualitative differentiation of society was innate and therefore cannot be annulled. The social and religious duties assigned to each social group, according to *Varnasramadharma*, validate the further social stratification which is explicitly elaborated in the Manu-Smriti:

He, the Resplendent, for the sake of protecting all the creatures, assigned separate duties to those born of His mouth, arms, thighs and feet. Teaching and studying the Vedas to the Brahmins. The protection of the people...prescribed for the kshatriyas. The protection of cattle, trade, banking and agriculture to the Vaisyas. The God allotted only one duty to the Sudras: to serve without demur, the members of all the classes mentioned above.²

This was the rigorous practice of *Varnadharma* which became the bedrock of economic and social apartheid, leaving no hope of emancipation for the downtrodden class. Nonetheless, many prophets and savants of India have raised their voice against this caste ideology but being unable to rock the inherent structure, remained confined to provide spiritual solace without casting any social impact. In order to combat with the rigid social hierarchy, it was indispensable to reconstruct the prevalent order. The Sikh Gurus have repudiated the basis as well the institute of caste-system by enunciating a universal and humanistic philosophy which was incompatible with the caste-ridden and sectarian society and which builds the platform for the super structure of an egalitarian society. The reaction and interaction of the Sikh Religion towards the existing social order and its attempt to revive the downtrodden class from this intricate net, may be analyzed from the three perspectives viz, first, the Scriptural Perspective, defining the egalitarian ideology of Sikhism; second, the Historical Perspective revealing the

¹ *Rig Veda*, X.90.12.

² *Manusmriti*, I, 87-91.

culmination of this ideology in the creation of Khalsa; and third, the Liturgical Perspective stating the Sikh praxis or community life.

1. Scriptural Perspective:

The Holy scripture, *Guru Granth Sahib*, does not give approval to the divine sanctity and theological validity of birth inequalities. It enunciates belief in one God who is the creator as well as the sustainer of all and His divine light is pervading within all. Hence the recognition of any divinely ordained class is meaningless. "Guru Nanak says: "Everyone is high, not one seems low to me; For, He, the only Potter, has made all Vessels; from His light is the light of the three worlds."³ This ontological assertion invalidates the belief in the superstitions relating to *varna*, *jati* and other caste classifications. It also makes a vivid departure from the prevalent religious belief which accords the right to worship only to the twice-born and debarred the low-born from this divine privilege. It is emphatically stated throughout the holy scripture that the supreme is he who contemplates on the Divine Name and in whose heart abides the Lord. On the other hand, whosoever forgets the Divine Name is, indeed, a man of low caste. Guru Amardas reiterates the similar idea by saying that those who are imbued with Lord's worship are of high caste and others are of low caste and like the insects abide in dirt.⁴ Guru Ramdas also acknowledged the spiritual attainments of men of low caste who attained a higher status by contemplating the Lord. He says:

Ravidas, the tanner, praised his Lord for a brief time. And he from a low-caste wretch was Purified and all the four castes repaired to his feet. Namdeva loved his Lord, though people called him a calico-printer. Yea, the Lord turned his back upon the high castes and hugged him, his Devotee, to his Bosom.⁵

The Sikh Religion believes in the spirit of religious pluralism and negates the philosophy of absolutism and religious totalitarianism which makes dogmatic assertions of final revelation. No such claim of exclusive religious authority is made by the Sikh Gurus. Though all the Sikh Gurus emerged from the upper castes, yet they revolted against and revived consciousness for the equality, universality and welfare of humanity. They identified themselves with the lower classes and showed concern for them. As Guru Nanak says: "The lowliest of the lowly, the lowest of the low-born, Nanak seeks their company. The friendship of the great is vain. For, where the weak are cared for, there doth Thy Mercy rain."⁶ Guru Gobind Singh also called himself as a slave of God and emphatically declared: "All who call me the Supreme Being, Shall fall into the pit of hell, Recognize me as God's servant only."⁷ Admittedly, the Gurus have tried to create a feeling of self-esteem and confidence in the downtrodden class by stating in different ways that no one is high or low in the realm of spirituality and deeds are more important than caste to determine one's spiritual status in this life and hereafter: "Neither the body nor the caste go along (with one) in the world, Where one is to answer for his deeds. Yea, one is released only by Practising the (Lord's) Truth."⁸

³ *Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 62, (trans) Dr. Gopal Singh, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, vol. I, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 733, Dr. Gopal Singh, *op.cit.*, vol. 3, p. 701.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15, (*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 19.)

⁷ *Dasam Granth*, p. 57, (trans), M.A. Macauliff, *The Sikh Religion*, New Delhi, S. Chand & Co., 1964.

However, the notion of social equality is derivative of the ontological principle of oneness of reality. Therefore, the social structure based on the caste ideology can never be amicable to all members of a social group. The caste ideology breeds hatred, jealousy and distrust among the community members and therefore is not congenial for the spirit of equality, brotherhood and fraternity. The pride of higher caste leads to evil inclinations. Guru Amardas says :

O unwise one, be not proud of thy caste,
For, a myriad errors flow out of this pride.
Everyone says, 'There are but four castes'.
But it is from God's Sperm that everyone is Born.⁹

The practical aspect of this ideological break with the ancient tradition is explicit in the compilation of *Guru Granth Sahib* by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Guru, who has incorporated the hymns of bhaktas and mystic saints (though some of them belonged to the lower castes) in the holy scripture and accorded them an equal status with the holy compositions of the Gurus. These compositions of bhaktas, no doubt, challenged the ideological basis of caste system and attacked the pillars on which the structure of caste order rested. A brief perusal of some compositions of these bhaktas, as are incorporated in *Guru Granth Sahib* makes the point more clear. For instance, Kabir challenged the supremacy of Brahmin caste by saying :

How are you a Brahmin and I a low-caste?
Is it that I have blood in my veins and you have milk?
Says Kabir : "He alone who contemplates his Lord,
Is renowned a Brahmin among the men of God."¹⁰

Kabir does not hesitate to condemn the religious scriptures that uphold caste distinction by giving divine sanctity to it. He states that the utterance of divine name with sincerity is more beneficial than the mere possession of religious scriptures. He says: "You are a Brahmin while I am a weaver from Kashi, how can I be your equal? But, while you are drowned with all your faith in the Vedas, I am saved uttering the Lord's Name."¹¹ However, the inhuman and the discriminatory treatment of social ostracism is vividly portrayed by Namdev, who was pulled out of the temple due to his low caste. He says:

I came to Thy Temple, O God, in a mood of good cheer,
And as I was worshipping Thee, Thy men caught hold of me and drove me out.
O king of Yadavas, they said my caste was low:
If that be so, then why didst Thou give me birth in the house of a low caste, pray ?
I gathered my blanket and I left Thy Place,
And went to sit at the back of Thy Temple.
But lo, the more I uttered Thy Praise, O God,
Thy Temple revolved to turn its face more and more towards me.
How wondrous art Thou, O Lord.¹²

⁸ *Guru Granth Sahib*, p. 112, Dr. Gopal Singh, *op.cit.* vol. 1, p. 102.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1128., *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 1077.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 324, *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 314.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 970, *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 927.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 1164, (*Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 1114.)

This description is a satire on the rigidity of the higher caste people and their discriminatory attitude is incompatible with the Divine Scheme. The most significant point of these compositions of saints is that they reveal no inferiority complex or low self-image due to their emergence from the lower strata of society. Kabir says: “Everyone laughs at my (low) caste, But, lo dedicated am I to this caste in which I contemplated my Creator-Lord.”¹³ Again he says: “My weaver's caste is no longer a stigma to me, for, within me I Cherish my God.”¹⁴

There is a sense of self-dignity in the compositions of these bhaktas, which inculcates a spirit of enthusiasm in the downtrodden class, who have otherwise, internalised their oppressor's ideology by developing a kind of inferiority complex. Such people are mostly segregated and pushed out to live on the periphery of towns and this fact is clearly visible in the hymns of bhakta Ravidas, which depict his open declaration of his low caste as well as profession with an optimistic note that despite these facts, the devotion to God has renowned him among the higher class people. Ravidas says : “O fellowmen, I am reputed to belong to the caste of cobblers: The men of my caste still cart the dead animals in the outskirts of Banaras, But, I am being bowed to even by the Brahmins, for, I've sought the Refuge of the Lord's Name.”¹⁵

This point is elaborated by acknowledging the spiritual attainments of several bhaktas, who though belonged to the so-called lower classes, got recognition from all the classes due to their righteous conduct and contemplation of Divine Name.¹⁶ However, no recognition is given to caste hierarchy which is, in fact, outrightly condemned throughout the holy scripture. The Sikh Gurus spoke vehemently against the caste-ideology as well as against the caste structure by equating themselves with the lowliest of the low and by according an equal status to the compositions of those bhaktas, who belonged to the lower strata of society. God, being the creator of all, no variation on the basis of caste is admissible in the social as well as in the spiritual sphere.

2. Historical Perspective:

The main objective of Sikh Religion, on the ideological plane was to bring about a cultural revolution and this could have been possible by changing the existing value pattern as well as by transforming the inequitable social, political and religious orders. The individual and society are inseparable and, therefore the change in the structure of society implies change at the individual level also. However, Sikhism evolved from a pacifist religious group into an organised political community, thus embodying the spirit of universal religion as contained in *Guru Granth Sahib* along with the physical form to preserve it. According to Khushwant Singh, ‘The two hundred years between Nanak's proclamation of faith (1499) and Gobind's founding of the Khalsa Panth (1699) can be neatly divided into two almost equal parts. In the first hundred years, the five gurus

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 1364, (*Ibid.*, p. 1299.)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1368, (*Ibid.*, p. 1302.)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1293, (*Ibid.*, p. 1234.)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

pronounced the ideals of a new social order for the Punjab. The second period of a hundred years saw the development of traditions which supplemented this social order.¹⁷ The distinct religious identity was vouchsafed by the first five Gurus by creating cohesive infrastructure for the community. A new dimension was given to the Sikh community by the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, who wore the two swords, symbolic of the integration of spiritual authority (*piri*) and temporal authority (*miri*), in order to control the onslaughts of the Mughal emperors.¹⁸ The spirit of integration of the sacred and the secular was carried on by Guru Gobind Singh in the creation of Khalsa in the year 1699, through the baptismal ceremony of *amrit* (nectar). The Guru had conferred on his followers not only the individual identity expressed by the five external symbols, but also the corporate identity of ethno-religious, ethno-social and ethno-political nature. Hence the creation of Khalsa is not a mere occurrence in the course of history, but it has deep philosophical basis on which the edifice of Khalsa was built.

No doubt, the religious philosophy of Guru Nanak was a great revolutionary challenge to the traditional dogmatism, orthodoxy and superstitious practices of medieval period. The question before Guru Gobind Singh was to consolidate this new philosophical awakening by revolting against the oppressive rulers and by repudiating the ethical validity of *Varnasramadharma*. To understand the inherent philosophy which stimulated to the creation of Khalsa, it is indispensable to keep in mind the five basic ideas viz., first, the goal of human life is union of the individual soul with the supreme soul and for the attainment of this goal, religion and religious activity is most pertinent; second, the basis of such activity should be equalitarian and global fraternity; third, a changed political outlook subordinate to ethics; fourth, organisation of faithful and dedicated persons; and fifth, a vision of a new and regenerated humanity.¹⁹

As the historians record, the creation of Khalsa took place on 30th March 1699, the day of Baisakhi, when addressing to a large gathering and expounding the basic tenets of Sikh faith, Guru Gobind Singh challenged and asked the audience, who will offer their lives for the sake of dharma.²⁰ The call of the Guru 'to sacrifice for dharma' was an echo of the philosophy 'life out of death to the self' and this type of death means spiritual rebirth. The enunciation of this philosophy, i.e. 'die to live' is found in the various hymns of *Guru Granth Sahib*,²¹ where it is stated that the brave men or martyrs are those who die to their selves to live for the cause of dharma. The five who offered themselves for dharma were called by the Guru as the five beloved ones (*Panj Pyaras*) and all of them were of different castes and from different regions.²² The baptism ceremony took place

¹⁷ Khushwant Singh, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol.1, Delhi, Oxford University Press, pp. 96-8.

¹⁸ For details, see Ganda Singh, *A Brief Account of the Sikhs*, Amritsar, S.G.P.C., 1956, pp. 5-8; G.C. Narang, *Transformation of Sikhism*, New Book Society, Lahore, 1912; pp. 27-28; Indubhushan Banerjee, *Evolution of the Khalsa*, vol. II, Calcutta, A. Mukerjee & Co., 1972, pp. 7-11.

¹⁹ Piar Singh and Madanjit Kaur (eds.), *Parasaraprasna*, Amritsar, G.N.D.U., 1989, p.6.

²⁰ Teja Singh and Ganda Singh, *A Short History of the Sikhs*, Calcutta, Orient Longmans, 1950, p. 68.

²¹ *Guru Granth Sahib*, pp. 580, 1105.

²² As recorded in history, Daya Ram was a Khatri of Lahore (Central Punjab side), Dharam Das, a jat of Delhi (Haryana side), Mohkam Chand, a washerman of Dwarka (Gujrat State), Himmat Chand, a cook of Jagannath (Orissa State), Sahib Chand, a barber of Bedar (Mysore State). Cf. Teja Singh & Ganda Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

with the initiation of the five beloved ones in the order of Khalsa and the Guru himself received the same initiation followed by thousands from all castes. This ceremony of baptism was meant to abolish the caste distinctions and it was made possible by breaking 'the shackles of earlier religions, earlier deeds, caste, clan and race, earlier taboos, customs, superstitions and rituals etc.'²³

Hence the new order of Khalsa has an objective to create an egalitarian society, to fight religious and political domination and to capture political power for a plebian mission. The mission of Khalsa was not only 'spreading the faith' but also 'extirpating the tyrants'. Therefore, it was the dire need of time, when the Guru created 'an armed body of revolutionaries who were to carry out the revolution by the open profession thereof'.²⁴ This type of revolutionary attitude was an outward expression of an inner feeling for the defence of the faith. Due to this courageous spirit, every member of the order was a 'Saint-Soldier' or '*Sant-Sipahi*'.²⁵ To protect the saints from the evil-doers, the use of physical force was an essential ingredient of this moral philosophy. That is why, Guru Gobind Singh 'cherished the sword as an object of worship' and in many of his verses, invoked its aid.²⁶ The sword is often portrayed as manifestation of Supreme Power to destroy and to negate the oppressive moments and also to serve as cultivator of social equality, justice and spiritual innovation. Nonetheless, the use of sword is to be made as the last resort and it is explicitly stated in a directive to Khalsa:

He (a member of the Khalsa) must always put on Sword. He should behave like a gentleman but when he finds a tyrant incorrigible and when it is the question of righteousness, or when the kind has abandoned the path of justice, he may make use of the sword according to the contingency of the situation but always as the last resort.²⁷

The distinct philosophy and a new way of life of the Khalsa was certainly a deviation from the prevalent Indian and Semitic traditions. A separate and distinct identity was imparted to the members of this order by conferring on them 'the symbols of saintliness (*bhagti*), the *keshas*, *Kangha* (comb) and *Kachha* (short breeches), the latter two being the allied symbols of saintliness, symbolising the virtues of cleanliness and continence. As symbols of strength (*shakti*) he gave them *Kirpan* (sword) and *Kara* (bracelet), both of pure steel, the latter forming a check on the use of sword hand only for pure, righteous and defensive purposes'.²⁸ The basis of moral strength of the Khalsa order is unqualified worship of One God, because they are under the direction and control of God. The Guru gave them the new motto or salutation, i.e. '*Wahiguru ji ka Khalsa, Wahiguru ji ki Fateh*' which indicates to the divine origin of Khalsa, meaning thereby that Khalsa belongs to God and so victory belongs to God. This motto generated a spirit of everlasting optimism and humility—optimism because the revolutionary cause, being

²³ Hari Ram Gupta, *History of the Sikh Gurus*, New Delhi, U.C. Kapur & Sons, 1973, p. 189.

²⁴ Jagjit Singh, *The Sikh Revolution - A Perspective View*, New Delhi, Bahri Publications, 1981, p. 176.

²⁵ H.N. Raj, *Evolution of the Sikh Faith*, New Delhi, Unity Book Service, 1987, p. 130.

²⁶ G.C. Narang, *op.cit.*, p. 142.

²⁷ Fauja Singh, *Some Aspects of State and Society under Ranjit Singh*, New Delhi, Master Publications, 1982, p. 26.

²⁸ Ishar Singh, *Nanakism - A New World Order*, New Delhi, Ranjit Publishing House, 1976, pp. 256-7.

God's cause, was bound to succeed sooner or later; and humility because all victory was God's victory and by His grace. It involved no credit for the participant.²⁹

From the historical perspective, the creation of Khalsa was the practical shape given to Sikh ideology of earlier Gurus to bring about religious, social and political revolution and it was made possible through rigorous discipline and adoption of high ideals in life. To bring transformation at the individual level, the cultivation of virtues was an indispensable condition and the members are exhorted to leave aside the mechanical performance of rituals and should pursue ethical conduct inspired by love and compassion. The real freedom lies not in escapism from the hard realities of life but it lies in release from or elimination of all worldly fetters. The physical world amidst spatio-temporal and material surroundings and the different processes of man's life viz. physical, emotional, ethical, intellectual and psychic are stepping - stones to his spiritual growth. But spiritualization, in a real sense, is not possible until we continue to be slaves of power, customs, dogmas and our internal weaknesses, i.e., ignorance and passions.³⁰ Spirituality lies in harmonious fulfilment of the different processes of life and it is a feeling of joy and ecstasy, i.e., blissfulness of unity.

3. Cultic or Liturgical Perspective:

The nucleus of the Sikh Community life is based on the ontological principles laid down by the Gurus. The basis of this type of egalitarian order was 'the abolition of caste prejudices, equality of privileges with one another and with the Guru, common worship, common place of pilgrimage, common baptism for all classes, and lastly, common external appearance.'³¹ This order of Khalsa was a practical step of subaltern revival by reconstructing society on the moral and spiritual basis. It transcends the social barriers by assimilating in its fold all humans irrespective of caste, creed and race. The unique point of this order is its democratic philosophy in bestowing an equal status to Guru and disciple.³² This was, indeed, a great revolutionary step in the history of religious philosophy, when Guru Gobind Singh, the last Guru of the Sikhs, abolished the personal guruship and conferred it on the corporate body of disciples by merging himself in the Khalsa and investing the whole sect with the dignity of Gurudom. This was done deliberately to give shape to the Khalsa community under the guidance of Guru Granth, and thus there emerged three forms of guruship viz., *Nirguna*, indicating to Supreme Being; *Guru-Sabad*, words of Gurus incorporated in *Guru Granth Sahib* and *Sarguna*, i.e. Khalsa.³³ There was a symbolic equation between the Guru and the holy congregation (*sangat*) and the latter could take collective decisions in matters of punishment or forgiveness to the individual members in case of their fault and can collectively offer prayers to God. This was a practical example of integration of temporal and spiritual, as the spiritual sovereignty was bestowed to *Guru Granth Sahib* and the temporal sovereignty, through the five beloved ones, was bestowed to the Khalsa order.

²⁹ Jagjit Singh, *op.cit.*, p. 175.

³⁰ Shashi Bala, *Sikh Metaphysics*, Amritsar, Singh Brothers, 1999, pp. 61-65.

³¹ G.C. Narang, *op.cit.*, p. 136.

³² I. Banerjee, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

³³ A.C. Banerjee, *The Khalsa Raj*, New Delhi, Abinav Publications, 1985, p. 27.

In this way, the Sikh Gurus have visualised a distinct social organisation on the foundation of moral and spiritual principles. Equality, brotherhood, social justice, humility, classless society and freedom of women are its basic postulates. They rejected the fourfold division of society as was prevalent in the *Varna*-system and reduced the four castes into one order and formed a casteless Sikh society, with a plebian base in which the downtrodden castes and classes were the architects of their own destiny. So a casteless egalitarian society was built by the rejection of caste and by condemnation of status consciousness (ego) which proved a great hurdle in the way of human's spiritual progress. The main precepts of Sikh religion are in consonance with the social life viz., contemplation of Divine Name (*nam-japna*), earning one's livelihood honestly (*kirat karna*), and sharing with others (*vand chhakna*). Prof. Puran Singh observes that *kirat karna* means work inspired by the spirit of holiness and this work includes gathering bread for hungry mouths, providing solace to the sick, clothing the naked and making the burden of suffering right for humanity by completely losing our individual selfishness. *Nam Japna* means being capable of active divinity in inspirational touch with the inviolable divine spirit and *vand chhakna* is to share our bread and joy and love and attainment of God-realisation with all.³⁴ The stress on the dignity of labour and work is laid to rise human above the material level because sincere devotion to work is an honest worship of God. Work and sharing indicates to the co-ordination of individual as well as social life and these precepts also point out non-exploitation and justice which are the important ingredients of a healthy society.

There are also two cardinal principles of Sikhism viz., '*Chardikala*' (spirit of optimism) and '*Sarbat da bhalla*' (welfare of humanity), which indicate the higher level of ascendancy which arise from the state of enthusiasm and flow out in the form of ceaseless altruistic activity. This altruistic spirit finds expression in the ideal of self-sacrifice, which does not mean self-negation or self-denial but it is self-transcendence. It indicates to a life of detachment, expansion of consciousness, elimination of fear and service for the welfare of humanity. The perennial philosophy of self-transcendence is an aspect of human existence and is an unending process which leads to the development of social, political, moral and intellectual consciousness.

To recapitulate, Sikhism originated as an ethnic religion, nonetheless, in recent times has been considered as one of the major religions of the World, due to its emphasis on the Universal Values. It began with the advent of Guru Nanak and culminated with the Creation of Khalsa by the Tenth Master, Guru Gobind Singh. It stood for a plebian mission with its aim to bring about a religio-cultural revolution and reconstruction of society. Its distinct religious-philosophy and distinct identity is certainly a deviation from the prevalent Indian and Semitic traditions. The Sikh Gurus rejected the Varna-System of society to create a casteless order of Khalsa with a plebian base. The advent of Sikhism was never opposed by the prevalent Hindu community because they never considered the Sikhs as different from the Hindus. Many of the so-called lower castes in the Hindu community adopted Sikhism and even those belonging to the higher castes had rendered great services to the community due to their great regard for the Gurus, believing that

³⁴ Puran Singh, *Spirit of the Sikhs*, Patiala, Panjabi University, 1978, pp. 27-9.

they were from the Hindus. There was also the practice of making one member of the family a Sikh who adopted the practices of Sikhism. There are evidences of double increase in the number of Sikh population in the Punjab, in the sixty years from 1880 to 1940 and its reason lies in recruitment from the Hindu ranks. The formal declaration of S.G.P.C. that the Sikhs were not Hindus, had made the Hindu organizations more alert and conscious for their communal preserves.

Sikhism is not only limited to Punjab, no doubt, it has become more popular in Punjab due to its origin and growth in this land. Though the number of Sikhs is not much more than one percent of the total population of India, yet they enjoy an importance and influence both within the Government as well as within the people far beyond their numerical strength. The Sikh Gurdwara Act was passed in 1925 and was amended in 1945 and it has given a firm and official base to the Sikh community. The Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee, known as S.G.P.C., is a statutory body elected by the Sikhs. It controls the important gurdwaras and manages to propagate the religious philosophy of Sikhism as well as to safeguard the social and political interests of the community. This collective body is propagating the Sikh philosophy and its ideal practices to the whole humanity by innumerable ways such as by organizing seminars and international conferences; by establishing schools, colleges, medical colleges and hospitals.

No doubt, the Sikhs are and continue to be an effective minority community, having a powerful influence not only in the state affairs of the Punjab but also in the whole of India. In the recent times, there are perceptible indications of positive danger in the Sikh community due to the increasing indifference of the Sikh youth towards the symbols of religion. However, the Sikh leaders are conscious of this danger and are making all efforts to check this danger. Besides its distinct identity, the Sikh religion is the finest example of democratic, socialistic and universal culture. The Sikh Religion is a finest example of democratic, socialistic and universal culture, based on the principle of equality, universality of human values, casteless and classless social order. Its contribution to the new world culture lies in its unifying force for the entire humankind, free from subjective biases and capable of bringing about lasting social cohesion between persons on the basis of equality and obliterating all distinctions of caste, creed, religion, nationality and race.

PHILOSOPHIZING

From Feminist Perspectives

Pushpa Joseph

Introduction

The very emphasis of this paper calls for a shift from the dominant modes and concepts of philosophy to an understanding of the process of philosophizing as a way of foreseeing changes in the social, cultural and political environment. In feminist parlance, philosophizing necessarily includes doubting established and obvious reasons, commonly accepted convictions and everyday beliefs of a sexist nature. In my understanding what Gramsci says about the critical study of subaltern consciousness can be applied to the project of feminist philosophizing. As such the feminist activity of enquiry “must be a criticism of ‘common sense,’ basing itself initially, however, on common sense... it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone’s individual life, but of renovating and making ‘critical’ an already existing activity.”¹ It is therefore deconstructive; the deconstruction will offer new constructive and liberating ways of thinking. Feminist philosophizing is thus considered more as a process than as a method or system which does not seek merely meanings or final satisfactory conclusions instead reveals multiple meanings, which are sometimes unconsciously at conflict with each other in the process of discourse. The aim of philosophizing in the feminist understanding is to pose a cultural critique to the established codifications of patriarchy in order to ferment a social revolution in which women and men work together, shoulder to shoulder, to re-create the world in the image of women and men. It may be best characterized as a new, challenging and invigorating critique of traditional philosophical questions and the presuppositions that underlie them.

The contribution of this paper has to be contextualized within the general theme of the anthology, namely, “Philosophizing from subaltern perspectives.” The term subaltern was originally a term for subordinates in military hierarchies. Nonetheless in its modern usage, the word refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station as a result of race, class, gender, ethnicity and so on. Women comprise perhaps the most significant and inclusive of all subaltern groups not only because of the ubiquitous nature of their oppression but also because of cultural, political, religious and ideological institutions of society that are foundational to validating and naturalizing their oppression. As elaborated in the work of Antonio Gramsci subaltern refers to groups of people who are outside the established structures of political representation. Postcolonial theorists like Gayatri Spivak have argued that women are a subaltern group because they are denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation. Feminist philosophizing is from below, focusing more on what happens to women at the base level of society. The term, *subaltern*, in its current practice comes from a tradition of writing

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 330.

about society's underclass, albeit not only from the view point of their oppression but also with specific reference to their collective resistances to structural and social injustice, as opposed to their assumed passivity and resignation to their fate.

The main claim made by feminist philosophers is that most dominant philosophies have robbed women of their agency. They theorise that men everywhere played a dominant role but not a homogenous one, so the possibility for women's agency always existed. Gramsci points out that hegemony is never achieved and is always contested. Women thus have been autonomous philosophical actors who acted on their own since they were not led by the elite class – the men.

The first part of this paper contains an overview of feminism and philosophy. In doing so this paper explores the objectives/motifs and the logical content of feminist philosophizing. In effect such an investigation would lay bare the contextual factors and logical foundations that make a feminist process of enquiry crucial and pertinent to the enterprise of philosophy. I will then go on to highlight certain important characteristics of feminist philosophizing that pose a refreshing challenge to current philosophical practices.

1. The Raison d'être of Feminist Philosophizing

The impetus for feminist philosophizing fundamentally emerged as a result of two simple and closely related factors. Firstly women have been unable to recognize themselves in traditional philosophical discourse. Secondly women sense dissonance and incoherence between what is claimed as generally true of human beings and women's lived experiences.² Philosophical discourses of the world are sated with images and metaphors describing not only women's nature but also what her function is or ought to be. In many instances however, the depiction is based on gendered roles buttressed by androcentric linguistic patterns that reinforce patriarchal strictures and norms. A classical example is the misogynistic tirade of Friedrich Nietzsche in his essay on "Marriage and Women" or the much-discussed essay entitled "On Women" by Arthur Schopenhauer.³

² See Lani Roberts, "From Invisibility to Inspiration: Feminism and Philosophy" a paper prepared for the lecture series, "Ideas Matter," at the Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, and presented on February 3, 1994. Online Version, Website: <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/philosophy/ideas/papers/lroberts.html> downloaded on 12.03.2005.

³ Schopenhauer's essay "On Women" (1851) has come to be known among twentieth-century feminists as a classic of misogynist writing. He combines virtually all the negative aspects of traditional ideas on womankind and adds one or two of his own. Schopenhauer's basic contention is twofold -- first, that women's qualities (their behaviour, virtues, vices, etc.) are natural, and second, that by nature women are in all respects inferior to men. This inferiority is both qualitative (men have certain qualities that women lack) and quantitative (women are deficient in the qualities they share with men). Specifically, women are deficient in reason, in physical strength, and in love. All these flaws have serious consequences. Women's deficient intelligence accounts for her lifelong childishness, her willfulness, and her lack of a sense of justice, since justice depends on deliberation. This explains why woman must obey and man rule by nature. She is not physically strong, and so nature made her cunning, a master of pretence and lying. This natural cunning, in turn, explains why women are by nature false, unfaithful, hypocritical ingrates, among

Women by and large have been portrayed in philosophical literature as dependent, childlike, emotional beings. The skills essential for logical reasoning, neutrality, and philosophical thought were considered almost absent in women. The catch-22 situation women experience as a result, both as students and teachers of philosophy are evident in these sentiments expressed by a woman professor of philosophy:

This kind of portrayal of women, pervasive in traditional philosophy, is particularly disturbing to its women students. The irony is that if the portrayals are accurate at all, the woman student is foreclosed from success. When I would mention my concern about such characterizations of women, I was consistently advised to take into account the historical nature of much of philosophy and to recognize how much had changed since 'those' days. And, clearly, much had improved because here I was - a woman - studying philosophy. This explanation satisfied me to a certain extent but the consistency of women's degradation continued to trouble me.⁴

Most of the traditional philosophical discourses on women have degraded women's inherent nature and being. The discord that is unmistakably evident between the classic characterization of woman and the actuality of women (excelling not only at philosophy but also in varied other fields⁵) forces one to suspect whether the generic 'man' of philosophy was gender neutral after all. Students have been encouraged to read 'man' as 'human being.' However, in most philosophy, 'man' was generally honored and woman was not. Careful examination of much of philosophical discourse seemed to show that what philosophy said was true of 'men' was not necessarily true of women too. Thus, it was exceedingly difficult for women to find themselves in philosophy.

Discrepancy of this nature between ideas inscribed in philosophical literature and the actual experiences of women led scholars to closely examine the assumptions and methods of traditional philosophy. In depth investigations led to a suspicion of traditional philosophical assumptions that function in ways that maintain male gender superiority at the deepest theoretical and methodological levels of philosophy. The critical analysis highlighted that all philosophies be it pre-Socratic, modern or present day philosophy, value hierarchical thinking, that is, the assumption that difference necessitates hierarchy in a normative sense. This basic thought lays the very foundation of much of philosophical inquiry. Lani Roberts explains,

other things. Women's deficiency in love makes her hate her own sex and unable to love her own children on any level other than the purely instinctive. For an analysis See Rosemary Agonito, *History of Ideas on Woman: A Source Book*, New York, Perigee Books, 1977, pp. 191-2. Also http://www.geocities.com/c_ansata/wom.html downloaded on 16.05.2005.

⁴ Lani Roberts, "From Invisibility to Inspiration: Feminism and Philosophy" a paper prepared for the lecture series, "Ideas Matter," at the Department of Philosophy, Oregon State University, and presented on February 3, 1994. Online Version, Website: <http://oregonstate.edu/dept/philosophy/ideas/papers/lroberts.html> downloaded on 12.03.2005.

⁵ Statistics taken on the basis of scientific studies show that in many universities many of the traditionally male domains, like Engineering and also the Applied Sciences and School of Public and International Affairs, are currently being headed by female deans. Such a transition is gradually taking place also in other spheres like philosophy and the like.

For example, pre-existing Plato, Pythagoreans laid down ten principles showing that numbers have attributes belonging to everything, even the virtues. Parallel columns list the following attributes under odd and even numbers respectively. Odd numbers correspond to limits, singular, male, rest, straight, light, good and square. Even numbers are in harmony with unlimited, plural, female, movement, crooked, dark, bad and oblong. The first time I read excerpts from Pythagorean philosophy, I was struck that male, light and the good were grouped together and opposite to female, dark and bad. Perhaps one might wish that the Pythagorean groupings were an historical anomaly but, alas, this cannot be said.⁶

The general notion that men, culture, mind and reason are superior to women, nature, bodies and emotions is the underlying assumption in most philosophies. Sherry Ortner says that women everywhere must be associated with something that every culture devalues. There is only one that would fit that description and that is nature. Culture attempts to control and transcend nature, to use it for its own purpose, culture is therefore superior to the natural world and seeks to mark out or socialize nature.⁷ Most philosophies feminists argue have underscored this basic premise. Thus giving preference to one set of these attributes privileges men over women at the very basis of the philosophical enterprise. These dualities are then raised to the status of normatives and therefore objectivity rather than subjectivity, reason rather than emotion and mind rather than body have been the tools of philosophy itself. Feminist philosophers therefore maintain that it is not merely coincidental that women have been identified with emotion, body and subjectivity while philosophy traditionally values their opposites. Feminist philosophers argue that as a result tradition itself is basically constituted in such a way that women and other subalterns who occupy the inferior side of the dualism are pushed to the margins if not excluded entirely. Feminists also suspect that the classic conception of objectivity has arisen from this hegemony.

The most interesting questions about the relationship of gender and philosophy nonetheless are not only about whether women have been excluded from philosophy or misrepresented within traditional philosophical texts. That they have been is clear.⁸ There have been historical claims to the effect that women are not fully rational or not fully capable of moral autonomy.⁹ The dominant conceptions of rationality or autonomy themselves are in many ways gendered. A good example is the opposition between

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷ Evangeline Anderson-Rajkumar, "Significance of the 'Body' in Feminist Theological Discourse" in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, XXXIII (December, 2001)2, 80-98. See 89.

⁸ Susan Wadley, "Women and the Hindu Tradition", in Rehana Ghadially (ed.) *Women in Indian Society*, (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1988) 23-43 (Seventh Printing 1996) for an overall view of the philosophical and ideological underpinnings and cultural constructs built around women's sexuality.

⁹ An interesting analysis is the colonial distinction made between 'good satis and bad satis' which is very well analysed by Lata Mani in her article entitled "Contentious Traditions." Lata Mani in her article entitled "Contentious Traditions" tells us that the accent on will signals the ambivalence which lies at the heart of the colonial attitude to *Suttee*. Within the general condemnation of the practice, there operated notions of good and bad *suttees*. Good *suttees*, by definition, were those who ascended the pyre of their own free will and burnt in conformity with the *Shaster*. Bad *suttees* were those who resisted. This goes to suggest that in the colonial inference when Hindus/ Indians/ women "acted 'consciously' they could not, by definition, be acting 'religiously.'" Religious action is seen as synonymous with passive unquestioning obedience. See Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in

reason and emotion and the tendency to identify reason with male bodies and emotion with female bodies. The problem isn't just that women have been viewed as less rational than men and excluded from social and political institutions on that ground, but that philosophical conceptions of reason and corresponding notions of a rational, autonomous subject have been constructed through the implicit repudiation of female bodies and attributes coded as feminine.

2. The Subject Matter of Feminist Philosophy

Feminist philosophy problematizes the politics of subordination and exclusion thus challenging the central presuppositions and key concepts that form the very foundation of traditional philosophy itself. It seeks to understand how philosophy's characterizations of women have functioned to maintain gender inequality. To this end, it challenges the privileging of mind over body, reason over emotion, objectivity over lived experience and so on. Feminist philosophy highlights that the basic perception of these pairs as dichotomous is problematic. They argue that mind-body, reason-emotion, objectivity-subjectivity and many others pairs are not to be considered in terms of diametrical poles opposed to one another but as complimentary elements required for a full awareness of our human existence. To value one over and against the other is to obtain an incomplete picture of what it means to be a human person. Consequentially feminist philosophers have also called into question the traditional philosophical standpoint that knowledge and truth are most exact if explored through mind, reason and objectivity.

Christian feminist philosophers also argue that Christian theology too has been influenced by the dualism of Western philosophy. This is visible even in the Indian context, which has been influenced immensely by Western philosophy. Though the normal counter argument is that Indian philosophy is more non dualistic the situation of women in India today doesn't give much relief and warranty to that claim. The increasing incidents of rape, of commodification of women's bodies and other atrocities argue for the fact that women's bodies have been consistently downplayed and devalued. Today there is a trend in Indian Christian Philosophizing to overcome this limitation by drawing immensely from Indian philosophical traditions. As much as this is welcomed it must also be said that much of the resources for Indian Christian Philosophy has been from Sanskritic and upper class traditions. This has not paved the way for construction of philosophical foundations non-inimical to women because the Sanskritic tradition, which envelops the caste system, is basically constructed on the purity-pollution ideology as a result of which subaltern groups have been attributed as inherently inferior. This has led in Indian Christian philosophy and thereby Indian Christian Theology too, to the understanding of the human condition based mainly on men's experiences.¹⁰

Colonial India," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Woman: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1980, p. 95.

Feminist philosophers conclude that since philosophy seeks to understand the human condition, women's experiences, knowledge, ways of being, learning and knowing must be articulated, examined and critiqued. Only then we have an examination of the human condition; otherwise what we know and traditional philosophy has taught us is a great deal about some men's existential condition. Thus, feminist philosophy seeks to contribute to a more inclusive conception of what constitutes the human condition.

Feminist approaches to varied areas of philosophy including philosophy of science, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, logic, aesthetics, philosophy of religion and philosophy of language are present. Although there is tremendous variety in feminist philosophies, including some deep conflicts, there is some common ground. Most argue that classic philosophy, be it western or eastern, is built on assumptions that contribute to the systematic exclusion of women's experiences and wisdom. As such reconstructing philosophy involves redefining the methods and subject matter in ways that value women and transform them from objects of the philosophical gaze to subjects, knowers and agents. This demands a thorough and critical re-investigation of the full body of philosophical discourse, in order to salvage discourses and concepts that are free from androcentric preconceptions.

In this process of reconstruction the commitment to check theories by connecting them to everyday life is a significant characteristic of feminist philosophizing. Feminist philosophers affirm that the commitment to testing theory against practice, will provide a safeguard against repeating the very errors that provided the genesis of feminist philosophy. Since feminist philosophy is based on experiences of women it values diversity in terms of gender, race, class, caste, ethnicity, and so on and is especially interested in the intersections of these categories. There is a sense of urgency to broaden the range of people who become philosophers, to include those who have been marginalized or excluded in the tradition's past. Feminist philosophers believe that such increasing diversity may allow a period of creativity equal to any in the history of philosophy.

3. Experience as the Starting Point of All Philosophizing

Feminist philosophizing begins with women's experiences, women's stories and women's visions. It comes from the awareness that the experiences of women have been neglected and marginalized. Moreover accounts of oppression form the content of women's lives. Feminist philosophers have highlighted that patriarchal ideology and codification influence women's experiences. Consequently they stress the need of a feminist and critical analysis of experience. Cultural stereotypes informed by patriarchal ideologies play a considerable role in curtailing the genuine growth in freedom of women. Therefore a critical analysis of experience is aimed at deconstructing oppressive archetypes and norms that are framed on the basis of an essentialistic understanding of the feminine that has been inscribed by mainstream philosophy.

¹⁰ For an analysis of the patriarchy in the Indian Church see the collection of essays in Margaret Shanti and Corona Mary (eds), *We Dare to Speak*, Trichy, Worth, 1994.

Since women's experiences are largely that of exclusion and silencing feminist philosophizing begins with naming these experiences of marginalisation. Stories of women's exploitation and battering as a frame of reference are crucial in the construction of subaltern discourses directed towards empowerment and social transformation since it uncovers and challenges structures of power and oppression.¹¹ Memoirs have the potential of deconstructing meta narratives that "subsume differences and restrict and contain people, by supporting a power structure in which gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality and disability all define who matters and how."¹² Elisabeth Porter in her book entitled *Feminist Perspectives on Ethics* says,

Stories are part of the moral deliberation that women as lovers, mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, nurses, charity volunteers, social workers and child-minders have always done, but has been trivialized or dismissed as sentimental, domestic, private or morally immature. Responding sensitively to the narratives of different people is crucial to moral agency.¹³

Women's stories nonetheless are not only one of oppression but also of agency and affirmation. Their narratives in very down to earth ways announce that they have challenged, struggled, resisted and survived and therefore they are. Denouncing the Cartesian *Cogito ergo sum* (I think therefore I am) of Western rational modernity; subaltern portrayals declare in loud ways that the protagonists inscribed in it are persisting subjects reclaiming their capacities to reconstruct, despite their dismembered bodies, the memoirs of their existence distinguishing it with their unique engravings of originality. Women's experiences can foster resistance and change by exploring the contradictions between the cultural patriarchal politics of femininity on the one hand, and the emancipatory democratic politics of meaning, which is ultimately, the goal inscribed in Christian Philosophical texts and traditions.¹⁴ Feminists affirm that such a radical strategy attempts to shift the cultural discourses on violence against women and children by focusing on the contradiction between the lived experience of survivors' agency and the discursive meanings that negate such agency.¹⁵

This alternative starting point that a feminist philosophizing calls for firstly challenges philosophy to rethink its conception of the self. Two views of the self have been prominent in modern and contemporary philosophy - the Kantian ethical subject and the *homo economicus*. Both these notions see the individual as an autonomous, independent and rational agent. Whereas the Kantian subject employs pure abstract reason to discover absolute truth, *homo economicus* uses reason to rank desire in

¹¹ For such an analysis See Mary Romero and Abigail Stewart (eds), *Women's Untold Lives: Breaking Silence, Talking Back, Voicing Complexity*, New York, Routledge, 1999.

¹² *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹³ Elisabeth Porter, *Feminist Perspectives on Ethics*, New York, Longman, 1999, p. 11.

¹⁴ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus and the Politics of Interpretation*, New York, Continuum, 2000, p. 22.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, Mary Knoll, New York, Orbis Books, 2001, p. 166.

sequence for the goal of maximizing desire satisfaction. Feminists argue that these conceptions of the self isolate the individual from personal relationships and larger social forces. What a feminist philosopher says in this regard is revelatory,

For the Kantian ethical subject, emotional bonds and social conventions imperil objectivity and undermine commitment to duty. For *homo economicus*, it makes no difference what social forces shape one's desires provided they do not result from coercion or fraud, and one's ties to other people are to be factored into one's calculations and planning along with the rest of one's desires.¹⁶

Feminist ethics and metaphysics shifts from the self understood as individual and separate from all others to a relational conception of the self, both in terms of personal identity and in terms of moral agency. Brison offers two feminist insights to the perception of the self and agency. Basing her arguments on the experiences of people who have survived trauma she demonstrates firstly that the mind/body emphasis of personal identity debates involve an artificial dichotomy between bodily and psychological aspects of a person, for we are all both embodied and narrative selves. Secondly the autonomous self, rather than being an independent rational will, is a relational self that can only exist and persist through relations with others and as a being that can cause change, can be recognized and can tell its story¹⁷. Thus in the feminist understanding there are three important attributes to the autonomous subject. The specific attributes of the self and agency as delineated by feminism is firstly its relational and embodied characteristic, secondly it's potential for bringing about change, and thirdly the emphasis on the 'self as narrative' for "it is a being that can tell its story."

4. Significance of the Narrative Self

Feminist philosophers thus point to the significance of a narrative self. The narrative approach, first of all, emphasizes the telling of the story, of who one is, to listening others. The self, it affirms, is constituted by social interaction in the telling. Retelling and being taken seriously as an authority on what has happened can help restore the self especially in a context where women's words are construed as lies and gossip. Just as one can be reduced to an object through torture, one can become a human subject again through telling one's narrative to caring others who are able to listen.

Secondly, there is not only an experiential nature about feminist philosophizing but also an experimental quality about it. In the words of Lois Gehr Livezey, it not only includes "internal coherence and logical consistency but also applicability to other and new areas of experience and ultimately adequacy to all experience."¹⁸

¹⁶Diana Meyers, "Feminist Perspectives on the Self" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Online version <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-self/#BM2> Downloaded on 18.01.2005. Also see Elisabeth Porter, *Feminist Perspectives on Ethics*, New York, Longman, 1999, p. 11.

¹⁷Susan Brison, "Outliving Oneself: Trauma, Memory and Personal Identity" in Diana Tietjens et. al. (eds), *Feminist Rethink The Self*, Colorado, Westview Press, 1997, pp. 4 – 50.

Thirdly, since feminist philosophizing calls for a reevaluation of experience in philosophy the shift it calls for is not only substantive but also methodological and is of crucial importance. Giving a foothold to voices and stories hitherto debarred it establishes the grounds for breaking the silence with respect to women and other subaltern groups within the bounds of philosophical discourse itself. More specifically feminist philosophy can be qualified as embodied philosophy because it underscores the physical or bodily texture of experience, which is “the beginning of the becoming of actuality, and the matrix out of which thought emerges and to which it responds.”¹⁹ Thus, feminist philosophy emphasizes the importance of the “object-to-subject structure of experience, the physical pole of all actual occasions, causal efficacy as the initial phase of the process of becoming, and ‘the witness of the body’ as an essential element in perception.”²⁰ This theme has been dealt with by many feminist philosophers in their argument against body/mind and self/other distinctions that lead us to speak of having a body rather than being a body and to obscure the bodily character of selfhood, relatedness, and creativity.²¹

In reality feminist philosophy offers a more integral description of our experience. Thus, mind/body dualism gives way to the ‘di’polarity of physical and conceptual elements interlinked in every actual event and self/world dualism gives way to the ‘doctrine of internal relations.’²²

Feminism highlights the view that dominant (mainstream – malestream) philosophical traditions have defined experience too narrowly.²³ The Cartesian tradition has excluded causality and so a ‘common world to think about’ from experience.²⁴ Focussing on the exclusion of women’s experience in dominant philosophy feminist philosophizing, emphasizes the necessity of a reinterpretation of the nature of experience, so as to include the excluded dimensions within its scope. It must be said though that within this framework, there is heterogeneity among feminist philosophers. There are some feminists who provide us with a reinterpretation of essentially human experience by defining our common humanity androgynously. There are some others who take a different path as they seek to articulate distinctively female experience.

¹⁸ Lois Gehr Livezey, “Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective” in *Process Studies*, 17(Summer, 1988) 2, 67-77. Online version: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744> Downloaded on 04.06.2004.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 5

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10

²² *Ibid.*, 8

²³ See the articles in Sheila Greeve Davaney, (eds), *Feminism and Process Thought*, New York, Edwin Mellen Press, 1981.

²⁴ Lois Gehr Livezey, “Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective” in *Process Studies*, 17(Summer, 1988) 2, 67-77. Online version: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744> Downloaded on 04.06.2004.

Finally, Feminist philosophers highlight that human experience never comes uninterpreted. Women live in a culture of interpretation regarding men and women (their character, relations, roles, etc.), which distort women's experience. In other words, as Lois Gehr Livezey poignantly says, "common sense carries an implicit metaphysics of which we must become conscious and critical."²⁵ Feminist linguistic philosophers argue that experience has two components. Firstly all experience is mediated linguistically and culturally. There is no pure experience. Secondly they stress that the personal is the political. Individual experiences are not private but public and are affected by variables of class, gender, caste, race and so on in its construction. Therefore since experience is determined socially and culturally it calls for an analysis.

Feminist philosophies thus give attention to analysis of the social order; the structural and symbolic character of our common experience. Philosophy in feminist philosophizing is not merely a task of the specialists, but of citizens. Feminist mode of philosophizing is a mode of thought in which concepts and categories can have their relevance tested in the context of our concrete world. Thus, far from being uncommitted to specific analyses of social issues, a subaltern philosophizing appropriate to the feminist struggle for justice and to democratic citizenship underscores the social and relational nature of experience.

5. Sociality and Corporeality

The most important aspect of feminist philosophizing is the awareness that we are constituted by our relationships, that relationality or sociality is the fundamental reality of all experience. In this respect, feminist philosophy has developed the view that women's moral development is characterized by agency attentive to the web of relationships.²⁶ Ultimately, this insight reaches to the nature of God in relation to the world. Feminist philosophers symbolize this dimension with poetic and philosophical power through the imagery of weaving, quilting and so on. (Thus history writing envisioned as 'quilting' feminist history becomes transformative praxis.)

Feminist philosophizing suggests varied ways of understanding the sociality or relationality of experience. Some scholars draw attention to the mutuality of relationship and individuality²⁷ whereas some others emphasize the significance of bodily experience as a principle of interpretation of women's self-identity, spirituality, and relatedness to reality.²⁸ This mutuality, they affirm leads to openness to new possibilities.²⁹ Some others

²⁵ Lois Gehr Livezey, "Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective" in *Process Studies*, 17(Summer, 1988) 2, 67-77. Online version:

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744> . Downloaded on 04.06.2004.

²⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982.

²⁷ See Valerie Saiving, "Androgynous Life: A Feminist Appropriation of Process Thought", in Shiela Greeve Davaney (ed.), *Feminism and Process Thought*, Queenston, The Edwin Mellen Press, 1981, pp. 18-26.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 35

²⁹ Marjorie Suchocki, "Weaving the World," *Process Studies*, 14/2, Summer, 1985.

also propose a principle of worldliness. These are not “either/or” options but a matter of different emphases within the complex pattern of a doctrine of internal relations.

In this context it is important to highlight that Feminist philosophizing presents a reconsideration of the meaning of power. Power is grounded in the fact that our actions emerge from and into a web of relationships. Nexus, connectedness or interrelatedness – these are technical terms in feminist thought. In other words, it is the nature of power to be community-creating or destroying. For many feminist philosophers and theorists power is also synonymous with energy, an energy born of and expressed in solidarity with others. Power thus is expressed in receptivity to the influence of others as well as in agency with respect to others.³⁰ Feminist philosophers distinguish between ‘unilateral’ power and ‘relational’ power. They also investigate in vivid theoretical tones what such a distinction would imply both socially and politically. In the feminist view power is ‘the capacity to sustain a mutually internal relationship.’³¹ It calls for a tangible embeddedness and a mutual self-disclosure, by “being present to one another, listening and speaking, and attentive to the concrete existence of one another.”³² Feminists have emphasized the power and possibilities which a relational ontology and anthropology offers. Every action has consequences which establish a context of possibilities and limitations for future actions. In a word, action is power. But this power is, as we have seen in the discussion above, characterized by receptivity as well as agency, by mutuality.³³ In simple words, be it in the process of giving birth or in the activity of collaborating in grass roots protest tirades, power by its very nature forms a web of associations.

The argument that we are constituted by our relationships envisions a worldliness and even a political sensibility. The feminist reinterpretation of the nature of experience makes a persuasive case for the ontological possibility and intelligibility of moral principles regarding the public realm. Modern science for example upheld by modern philosophy can be accused of a devaluation of the public realm. However the key factor in the doctrine of internal relations in a feminist philosophy is the principle of relationality, the fact that the nature of a thing consists in its relations with other things. Thus it establishes the solidarity of the world, in other words the world becomes a ‘common place to think about.’ Feminist philosophy also shows how the past becomes a component and a condition in the becoming of the present. Every action thus is “a mode of . . . housing the world.”³⁴ The dictum of modern epistemology that ‘apart from the experiences of subjects there is nothing’ is being challenged. Feminist philosophers have

³⁰ Bernard Loomer. “Two Conceptions of Power.” *Process Studies* 6 (Spring 1976)1.

³¹ See Lois Gehr Livezey, “Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective” in *Process Studies*, pp.67-77, Vol. 17, Number 2, Summer, 1988. Online version: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744> Downloaded on 04.06.2004.

³² *Ibid.*, 15

³³ For a feminist analysis on the misuse of power by patriarchy and how it has excluded women from the public realm, See Maithreyi Krishnaraj, “Motherhood: Power and Powerlessness” in Jasodhara Bagchi (eds), *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, (Hyderabad: Sangam Books, 1995) 34-43. Her article illustrates the manner in which maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude women from power, decision-making and a participatory role in public life in the Indian context.

also elaborated the notion that perception of the contemporary world is a complex physical feeling characterized by the fact that “we feel with the body.” Hence some process philosophers’ discussion in terms of the notion of the “withness of the body” is relevant here. Bodiliness, the body basis of perception underscores the fact that we share a past or world transmitted through the body.

6. Passion

In feminist philosophy passion appears in the celebration of our bodies/ourselves and in the intimacy thus made possible. In feminism, passion appears also in the struggle for justice and in the recognition that the old dynamics of distancing/abstraction, and disinterest/apathy are not totally adequate to the struggle. In feminist philosophizing passion appears in the very nature of perception and cognition as concern to the less privileged. There is thus an affective tone about all feminist philosophizing. Passion at the base of all experience points to the myth of value-free facts or passion-free judgment. Thus feminist philosophizing underscores the importance of an ethics motivated by the passion for love of the world i.e. a preferential love for the marginalized.

In this view, the politics of mutual persuasion and imaginative transformation, solidarity and advocacy, are essentially related to the philosophy of world-loyalty, a philosophy characterized not only by its standpoint of social criticism but by its lure to love of the world. Thus a feminist philosophizing is founded on the politics of solidarity and advocacy.

7. Philosophy as Transformative Praxis

Feminist philosophizing uses concepts, theories and systems as analytical tools but goes beyond and integrates them in the texture of the ‘life-scape.’ Hence they emphasize on making theory and praxis seamless thus collapsing the borders between the two. Such philosophizing is more authentic because it engages and is engaged with the life-scape. As such Feminist philosophy critiques the infusion model of dominant philosophies and talks about the need of an existential engagement model. Such a model of philosophy considers philosophizing more as a process and gives emphasis to the idea of ‘doing’ philosophy. Feminist philosophers like Helen Longino proposes the notion of ‘doing epistemology as a feminist’ which as S. Panneerselvam says, “is to engage the questions of epistemology with an awareness of the ways in which epistemological concepts like rationality and objectivity have been defined in terms of masculinity.”³⁵ She highlights that significance of understanding feminist epistemology as ‘practice rather than content.’ Such an emphasis draws “critical attention to the ongoing motivations,

³⁴ Lois Gehr Livezey, “Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective” in *Process Studies*, 17 (Summer, 1988) 2, 67-77. Online version: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744> , Downloaded on 04.06.2004,

³⁵ S. Panneerselvam, “Epistemology, Science and Feminism: A Philosophical Analysis,” in *Jeevadhara*, XXXV(January 2005) 205, 70

questions, and methods in doing epistemology, and thus subscribes to the kinds of considerations of verb-sense epistemology.”³⁶ Lorraine Code furthers her argument and makes a distinction between noun-sense epistemology, which focuses on set of conditions, definitions and strategies, and verb-sense epistemology, *i.e.*, feminist epistemology.³⁷ A noun-sense of epistemology, she argues, takes a specific fixed theory of knowledge as its epistemological goal and therefore they are committed to final philosophizing of epistemology. On the other hand verb-sense epistemology gives emphasis to ‘doing epistemology’ and as a result give critical attention to particular kinds of motivating concerns, questions and methods. So understood, philosophy can be made more resistant to the mood of reductionism to which traditional and modern philosophy seems particularly prone, the thought that philosophy can be pursued with minimal resources, especially certain men’s experiences. Also, in so doing it may help philosophy avoid the criticism of being arid, and fit only for specialists.

This way of doing philosophy makes us attentive to a wide range of human experiences, which too often are ignored by the dominant forms of discourse that are available today. It also increases the resources available to us when doing philosophy, particularly ethics and women’s stories.

A notion of a verb-sense philosophizing makes the notion of philosophizing more creative and radical thus responding to concrete issues. Hence a philosopher who “does philosophizing” can be best depicted as the holy poet who wisely, carefully and patiently weaves together or harmonizes the harmonies and discords. Thus feminist philosophizing presupposes the notion that a philosopher is one whose vision of new possibilities and passion for their realization inspires and so empowers the subalterns. The philosopher is one who is “incredibly imaginative in the face of what we do and who perseveringly confronts what is actual in [the world] with what is possible for it.”³⁸ Philosophizing thus is embedded and nourished by a fertile imagination that envisions transformation, which is so critical to the politics of *just* philosophizing in a world so caught by the throes of injustice. Such philosophizing will not say a priori what are the possibilities and limitations of transformation. As participants in the struggles for justice and peace the important task for feminist philosophers is to discern the new in our lives, name them and celebrate the changes. Feminist philosophizing thus creates joy in solidarity in the world through a celebration of freedom, power, and creativity, which acknowledges the irreducible plurality of powers, and freedoms in a world of creativities.

Conclusion

³⁶ *ibid.*, 70-71.

³⁷ Lorraine Code, *What can she know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell university press, 1991.

³⁸ Lois Gehr Livezey, “Women, Power and Politics: Feminist Theology in Process Perspective” in *Process Studies*, 17(Summer, 1988) 2, 67-77. Online version: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2744>. Downloaded on 04.06.2004.

This article attempted to make a quick cartography of the journey made by feminist philosophy in its endeavor to offer a new face to the project of philosophizing. It began with the assertion that feminist philosophizing is to be seen as a process with the praxis oriented goal of transforming cultures and ideologies that perpetuate a gender bias. Highlighting the obvious factors that make a feminist enterprise of philosophizing imperative, the paper proceeded to delineate the broad contours of the scientific enquiry through a presentation of the rationale, content and logic of feminist philosophy. The main thread that gives a schematic unity to the paper is the emphasis on a critical deconstruction that such a process of investigation calls for. Feminist philosophizing however, being a context sensitive analysis will be life generating only in as much as the dynamic nature of the enquiry is ensured by making it an ongoing process.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SUBALTERN IDENTITY

A Foucauldian Perspective

Stanislaus Swamikannu

1

1. The Postmodern Concern for the Subaltern

The concept of ‘otherness’ or ‘alterity’ is one of the overriding concerns in postmodernism. The postmodern emphasis on pluralism, its incredulity to and rejection of ‘metanarratives,’ and its suspicion of the claims to ultimate foundations, absolute centers and pure origins are *implicit references* to this concern for difference and otherness (alterity).¹

1.1. Totalisation and Alterity

According to postmodern thinkers, in every attempt at totalisation, which is the human desire to look for – in different ways – a ‘centre,’ or an ‘arche’ or a ‘telos’ around which to gather, organize, master, possess and unify everything else, one is bound to create otherness by suppressing those elements which do not fit. J. Derrida, the most radical of the postmodern thinkers, has brought out this mechanism operating in the whole of Western philosophy and culture through his strategy of ‘deconstruction’. By reading attentively individual texts of different origins- Plato, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Blanchot, Mallarmé, etc. – he tries to show that *any attempt at totalizing a text can be seen to depend transcendently upon a generalized form of the differences it proposes to subsume*. To put it differently, any attempt to totalize a text has to suppress necessarily elements that do not fit into, that are different from, that transcend, and that are the ‘other’ of, the scheme.

Deconstruction, according to Derrida, aims at locating, liberating those elements, those differences or those moments (marginalized, subaltern or insignificant) that thwart the procedure of totalisation. It is a process of locating the irreducible differences or alterities in a text. These irreducible differences or alterities are also the condition of possibility and impossibility of totalizing the text. He gives an example of this from Greek philosophy:

From the very beginnings of Greek philosophy the self-identity of the Logos is already fissured and divided. I think one can discern signs of such fissures of ‘differences’ in every great philosopher: the ‘good beyond Being’ (*epekeina tes ousias*) of Plato’s *Republic*, for example, or the confrontation with the ‘stranger’ in *The Sophist* are already traces of an alterity which refuses to be totally domesticated. Moreover, the rapport of self-identity is itself always a rapport of

¹ It is understandable when you know the background of the postmodern thinkers. Most of them have been members or supporters of one leftist group or other. They were activists and not armchair theoreticians.

violence with the other; so that the notions of property, appropriation and self-presence, so central to logocentric metaphysics, are essentially dependent on an oppositional relation with otherness. In this sense, identity presupposes alterity.²

The project of deconstruction, though initially began by *showing how this repression of 'otherness' or 'alterity' operates in different texts in different ways, in comparison can also be extended to the emergence and construction of all forms of 'otherness' through mechanisms of domination in the society as a whole.*³

1.2. The Strategy of Inclusion and Exclusion through the Creation of Hierarchical Binaries

Derrida avers that Western thought, life, culture and language are structured in terms of dichotomies or polarities or a series of oppositions: nature versus culture, mind versus body, the intelligible versus the sensible, good versus evil, male versus female, etc. These polar opposites are arranged in a definitive hierarchical order. The first terms of the polar opposites are qualitatively and temporally prior to the second terms of the opposites. Besides, the two terms of each pair are not opposed in their meanings. The latter terms of the opposites are corrupt, negative and fallen form of the former terms, which were construed as original, positive and innocent. Derrida's initial focus has been on the opposition between speech and writing. If we apply the logic of the opposites, that we have just explained, to the latter, we get the following result: Speech and writing perform the same task of expressing; but speech is prior, original, positive, innocent, etc.; writing is secondary, derivative, corrupt, fallen, negative and so on.

Such a hierarchical order is based on the fact that Western thought privileges unity over multiplicity, identity over difference, presence over absence, etc. This privileging is based on another fundamental bias of Western philosophy: spoken word, speech, voice of the speaker present has primacy of priority over written word. What is basic to this bias is another fundamental bias that speech or voice guarantees self-present meaning, which supports all the above-mentioned biases, is called 'phonocentrism.'

1.3. The Postcolonial Situation and the Subaltern Concerns

Colonialism, from the perspective of 'center-periphery' structure, can be explained as the occupation domination, inclusion and eventual negation of part of a cultural within a universal claim. The rest of the culture remains excluded from the colonial process.

Postmodern thinkers unearth different forms of 'center-periphery' structure in thought, culture and society. In the Post-colonial era, thinkers like Edward Said, Homi

² Kearney, R., "Dialogue with Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction and the other", in Kearney, R., *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers: The Phenomenological heritage: Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Herbert Marcuse, Stanislas Breton, Jacques Derrida*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) P.117

³ You can think of all forms of domination that history has passively witnessed and the eventual emergence of subaltern groups: male domination of women; European domination of the non-Europeans; the white domination of the blacks; the Brahmanic domination of non-Brahmins, etc.

Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and many others, look for evidences of Eurocentrism in the media and literature. Others look for the hidden signs of ‘phallogentrism’ (having a ‘masculine bias’) ⁴, ‘heterocentrism’ (having a heterosexual bias) and any number of other ‘centrism’ in seemingly innocent texts. A clear case of Eurocentrism is visible in the following anecdote:

Back in the early 1980s a group of musicians in the UK released a hit charity record in aid of famine relief called ‘Do They Know its Christmas?’ Its lyric tugged on the nation’s heartstrings by pointing out that starving child in Ethiopia would not be sampling the joys of the season that year. However, Great Britain could become Santa Claus by buying the records and delivering to Africa the ‘greatest gift they’ll get this year which is life’.⁵

The problem with this idea is that there was no reason why the starving in Ethiopia should have known that it was Christmas time at all. Christmas as we know it is hardly a Universal idea; many of its traditions are European and of quite recent origin, a large portion of the world’s religions do not recognize it and even in countries that do celebrate it there is great diversity of customs. Thus the question raised by the title of the song was entirely European in origin. In other words it was Eurocentric.

Critics informed by the ‘posts’ argue that it is better not to speak on behalf of oppressed, under-privileged or marginalized people. All groups should have access to self-representation. Speaking for others is a form of ‘grammatical violence’, as Lyotard would say, which invests them with your own values.⁶ Gayatri Spivak would say that the subalterns are socially dead, symbolically dead [...] There is something of a not-speakingness in the very notion of subaltern.

2. The Foucauldian Perspective

2.1. Dividing Practice and the Marginalized Groups

I have pointed out elsewhere how the main themes of power and knowledge are tightly interwoven with Foucault’s main theme of the emergence of the subject in the Western society.⁷ In studying this relationship and trying to understand the limits experienced in the theorizing of the subject and of the practice of subjectification, Foucault considers the limits themselves as the fundamental conditions of possibility for the emergence of the subject. In other words, according to Foucault, the subject is a ‘discursive’⁸ ‘effect’ created at the nexus of relations of power, truth (knowledge), and ethics (politics). In this manner, the discursive regulation of subjectivity serves

⁴ See the contribution made by Postmodern Feminist Thinkers like Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Michel Montray, Julia Kristeva, etc.

⁵ Glenn Ward, *Teach Yourself Postmodernism*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 2003) P.197

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cfr. Swamikannu, S., “An Intimate and Productive Relationship between Power and Knowledge according to Michel Foucault”, in S.Swamikannu (ed.) *Truth, Power, Money: A Postmodern Reading*. ACPI Series. (Bangalore: ATC Publications), pp.59-76.

⁸ In Foucauldian sense ‘discourse’ always connotes power.

to establish a discursive space within which a meaningful sense of self or personhood might be maintained. In this sense, limits enclose the ontological identity from non-identity. While limits may in this respect, be enabling, establishing an internal 'logic of identity' which secures psychic stability, Foucault is more interested in the manner in which limits become enmeshed in relations of power, thereby restricting the flux of possibilities open to the individual and eventually as a consequence, the construction of different subaltern groups.

In its productive phase, power functions to install limits through 'marking off' the discursive domain specific to individual subject positions. Elsewhere, Foucault calls such phenomena 'dividing practices'; those techniques whereby,

The subject is either divided inside himself or divided from others. This process objectivizes him. Examples are the mad and the sane, the sick and the healthy, the Criminals and the 'good boys'.⁹

One of the most important functions of the 'dividing practices' alluded to above, is the government of 'socially marginal' identities and their effect on the experience of subjectivity in the wider population. He gives the example of the identity and specific affirmation of homosexuality that *inevitably calls forth the establishment of heterosexuality* and its attendant social and political identities. I quote from a very critical and insightful commentary given by J.G. Merquior:

To Foucault, the modern control of sexuality in bourgeois culture was less a weapon for use against the lower classes than an instrument of bourgeois self-idealization.... the discourse on sex emerged primarily as a technology of the self wielded by the bourgeois sculpting his own image. The bourgeoisie built a code of sex for its own self-assertion. It erected the heterosexual monogamous couple into the standard of morality and pillar of society. Every other form of sex came to be regarded as contrary to nature and dangerous to society.¹⁰

Beyond this particular case, Foucault explores a number of other marginalized identities, including the delinquent, the madman, the pervert and the criminal, each of which only further illustrates the construction of limits distinguishing normal from deviant and self from object.

2.2. Not Given, but Socially Constructed: Discourse Constructs Reality

There is a fundamental assumption behind Foucault's enterprise of the elaborate and detailed historical study of the micro issues like the birth of the Clinic, the establishment of the prisons and the disciplinary practices, etc. In all these studies, he is less preoccupied with what is and whether there is a human nature, reason, subject, science that is given and predetermined than trying to unravel how all the above-mentioned universalised concepts functioned in the western society. In trying to answer the 'how' question, his tactic has been to historicize even the so-called most universal categories like man, subject, reason, truth, power, etc. The 'how' question leads him to situate these universal categories in the socio-political and economic situation of their alleged place of origin.

⁹ Foucault, M. "the Subject and Power" in C. Gordon. Ed. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. (London: Harvester wheatsheaf, 1983), p. 208.

¹⁰ Merquior, J.G., *Foucault* (great Britain: Fontana press, 1991), pp. 122-123.

It is his basic conviction that the interplay of different apparently contradictory discourses has constructed many of these realities like subject, sexuality, reason, madness, and criminality. The very attempt at historicizing the micro practices was prompted by the conviction that the discourses that gave rise to them were not as above suspicion and gullible as people thought them to be in the 'classical age.'¹¹

Throughout *The Will to Truth*, he defends the view that 'sex' is *social rather than natural*. Another of his convictions that discourse does not so much tame sex as it 'invents' it corroborates this. In the same provocative style he says: "We have had sexuality since the eighteenth century, and sex since the nineteenth. What we had before that was no doubt the flesh."¹² According to Foucault, confessional practices in the western Middle Ages were rituals of truth-production. Confessional practices were so part and parcel of daily life of a person that Foucault says that "Western man has become a confessing animal."¹³

In another context, Foucault talking about the emergence of man says that identity and subjectivity are not the realization of some deep, interiorised essence, ostensibly the very distillation of human nature. Rather the question of humanity's nature is a problem generated in discourse, arising at certain moments and belying particular discursive history. He concludes saying that *even the history of man has a history*.¹⁴

3. Conclusion

3.1. Positive Contribution of Foucault

The strength and weakness of the positive contribution of Foucault to the debate concerning the subaltern is the strategy used to show how the latter surfaces. The strategy used is not to directly construct and spot the subaltern groups. *It is seen more as the result of the overpowering, absolute and totalizing construction of the identity of the dominant groups*. For example, the construction of the triumphant Cartesian subject of modernity, with its objective, neutral, totally transparent and self-affirming features has been such an overpowering construction that everything else either becomes object of its scrutiny or not worth its consideration. The subject-object dichotomy of modernity has been the precursor to all other forms of hierarchical dualisms: Male/female, nature/culture, Divine/human, Spiritual/material, High/low, sane/insane, Good/Bad, boys/criminals, Heterosexual/homosexual or Lesbianism, Civilized/primitive, Original/derivative, Primary/secondary, First World/third world, Whites/blacks, etc. In the above-listed hierarchical dualism, when the first term gets constructed and identified, the second term follows. According to this strategy, the term subaltern will not be referring to one particular group or category. Instead, there will be as many subaltern groups as there are dominating groups.

¹¹ 'Classical age' for Foucault refers to the seventeenth and eighteenth century France.

¹² Foucault, M., *Power/knowledge: selected Interviews and Other writing 1972-1977*. (Brighton, Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), p.211.

¹³ Foucault, M., London review of Books, 21 May – 3 June 1981, p.59.

¹⁴ Foucault, M., *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, p.209.

The greatest contribution that Foucault has made to subaltern concerns is not how they can be liberated and attended to, but to show how they come into being as the result of or as a side effect of the overpowering construction and entrenchment of the so-called dominant groups in the society. This strategy could be used fruitfully in our Indian context to identify the subaltern groups. One of our prime concerns and difficulties is to correctly identify who the subalterns are. Using this strategy, the term subaltern can refer to any group that is the result of an overpowering and absolute construction of a dominant group. In this sense, there can be different sub-subalterns within an already identified subaltern group.

3.2. Inability of Foucault to Respond Effectively to the Marginalized Groups

Foucault was adept at identifying the subaltern groups emerging from the power/knowledge nexus. But, there is an inherent weakness in his philosophy, which blocks every attempt at responding to the plight of the subalterns. The weakness consists in reducing one's enquiry to the 'how' question and not asking the ethically important and pertinent 'what' question. The latter, Foucault feels would force one to take sides. The postmoderns in general interpret taking sides as sliding into another obvious construction, which must as well be deconstructed. While Foucault can be painstakingly alert to the conditions of oppression and suppression of the subaltern groups, however, he remains politically ineffective and powerless. This can be quite damaging and very disconcerting to any one who would like to feel one with the concerns of the subalterns.

However, it is my contention, that the very identification of the subaltern groups itself is a laudable effort. Foucault ascribes such a task to the organic intellectuals. The latter are commissioned not just to record the history of the subalterns, however good and fruitful such an enterprise may be, but also to unravel the power/knowledge nexus or structures of power operating at every place where the subalterns are at risk to be forgotten.

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ROLE OF INTELLECTUALS

According to Antonio Gramsci

Joe Mannath

Introduction

The following pages on the life and contribution of an unusual man who worked against tremendous odds and left a much-respected intellectual legacy, is a challenge to us, both as philosophers and as Christians.

This convinced Marxist saw the Church as one of the main causes of the backwardness of his country, and joined those secular forces that seemed to offer greater hope to the working classes and the impoverished masses. In working out ways of transforming society, he looked critically and creatively at his society, at its intellectuals and at his own Marxist ideology. He saw how a philosopher's economic situation and social class can influence his thinking and political preferences. His views on hegemony and on the role of intellectuals may help us clarify our own role as philosophers and educated Christians who take our social responsibilities seriously. Whose voice are we? Are we isolated intellectuals reflecting in a vacuum, or repeating the views of the elite that are accepted as common sense—or do we join hands with the excluded to use intellectual activity in pursuit of social transformation? A meeting with Gramsci will force us to confront such issues. In addition, the very circumstances of his life and literary activity are a challenge; he did most of his writing during eleven years of prison, during which he also suffered from ill health.

* * * *

Antonio Gramsci died in an Italian prison in 1937, at the age of forty-six, a victim of Fascist intolerance. He did most of his writing during the last eleven years of his life, which were spent in jail. During those years, he filled thirty-two notebooks (about three thousand pages) with his ideas. His manuscripts were smuggled out of prison with the help of his Russian sister-in-law, and published in Italian. When J. Cammett's *Bibliografia Gramsciana* was presented during an International Congress in 1989, it carried more than seven thousand titles, in twenty-seven languages. The updated bibliography, brought out in 1992, contained 11,430 items in thirty-three languages.

Why such intense interest in this man? Who was Antonio Gramsci? What did he do? Why are there so many studies on his life and thought?¹

1. Life

It is impossible to understand Gramsci's original and revolutionary thought without having some idea of his setting, vicissitudes and the price he paid for his convictions. So, we will first have a look at his life. One more reason for doing this is the fact that some of the participants may not be familiar with the life and thought of Gramsci.²

Antonio Gramsci was born to a poor family in Sardinia (Italy) in 1891, the fourth of seven children. His family was one of the few on that island that could read and write. When Antonio was four, he had a fall, which damaged his back. As a result, he was hunchbacked for the rest of his life. Because of his father's incarceration for misappropriation of funds, the family went through extremely difficult times.

¹ Number of Entries by Language of Publication, presented in Descending Order of the Number of Publications in Each Language: Italian (6077) 58.7% , English (1206) 11.65% , French (506) 4.9% , Spanish (430) 4.15%, German (401) 3.9%, Japanese (398) 3.9%, Russian (284) 2.74%, Hungarian (220) 2.12%, Serbo-Croat (159) 1.54%, Polish (150) 1.45%, Portuguese (136) 1.3%, Greek (79), Czech (56), Chinese (37), Arabic (36), Slovenian (35), Danish (24), Finnish (20), Romanian (17), Catalan (15), Korean (14), Slovak (14), Swedish (13), Dutch (9), Macedonian (6), Turkish (6), Bulgarian (4), Sardinian (4), Bengali (3), Norwegian (3), Afrikaans (1), Albanian (1), Armenian (1) An annotated list of Gramsci's publications in Italian contains 170 titles. The list I saw takes 19 A4 size pages.

² THE LIFE OF ANTONIO GRAMSCI: 1891 – (January 22nd.) Born at Ales in Cagliari, Italy. Antonio was the fourth son of Francesco Gramsci, a clerk in the local registrar's office. 1897-1898 – His father is sentenced to serve five years in prison on charges of maladministration. On his release he has no job, so his seven children grow up in difficult circumstances and deep financial insecurity. Antonio G. suffered ill health throughout his life, and from a deformity which left him a hunchback. 1903 – After completing his elementary education, Gramsci has to work in the registry office of Ghilarza, Italy, where the family moved after his father's imprisonment. 1911 – Gramsci wins a scholarship to study at Turin University. 1913 – Participates in the first universal suffrage elections and makes his first contacts with the socialist movement in Turin. 1916 – Starts working as a journalist for the Socialist Party paper. 1917 – Gramsci is elected to the Provisional Committee of the Socialist Party. 1921 – (January) The Italian Communist Party is founded and Antonio Gramsci is elected as a member of the central committee. 1922 – (from May to November 1923) Gramsci goes to Moscow as a member of the Communist International and spends more than a year in this country. In a local clinic he meets his future wife, Giulia Schucht, and later he returns to his country as a leader of the Communist Party. 1926 – (November) Because of his opposition to Mussolini, Gramsci is arrested in Rome, and sent to a camp for political prisoners. He was 35 years old. *During the trial, Mussolini said about Gramsci: "We have to prevent that this mind continue thinking."* 1927 – He was transferred to a prison in Milan, and then to Rome. He was condemned to twenty years of imprisonment. *In a letter to his family he says that he is plagued by the idea of accomplishing something forever, and he sets out a systematic plan of study.* 1929 – Gramsci receives permission to write, and February the 8th is the first date stated in his "Prison Notebooks" (*Quaderni di carcere*). During these years he studied Italian and European history, linguistics and historiography. 1930 – He begins a series of discussions with other communists in prison, but his thoughts about the compulsion of a democratic approach were not shared with the rest of the political prisoners. 1937 – (April 27th.) Gramsci died after several years of suffering. Tatiana (his sister in law) manages to smuggle the 33 books out of prison and send them via diplomatic bag to Moscow to be published. He was 46 years old. (An Outline by Monica Stillo, www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm). See also: Frank Rosengarten, "An Introduction to Gramsci's Life and Thought," www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/intro.htm

He came to know of socialism from his older brother, who sent him literature on the subject. Gramsci won a scholarship to study in Turin, Italy's leading industrial city at that time, with a strong and organized working class. While there, he began to study socialism, Marxism and society in general more thoroughly. Gramsci would become the first Marxist theorist to write on the revolutionary changes taking place in twentieth century Western European society and the first to point out the key role played by bourgeois values, and the need to fight them. The struggle to change society, according to Gramsci, had to be not only economic and political, but also ideological and cultural.

He was a bright student, and had dreams of becoming a professor at the university. As he became more and more aware of the social situation, however, his plans and dreams changed. He tried to understand the dramatic changes Italy was going through—the situation of the workers in the Northern industrial cities, the poverty of the South, the rise of fascism, the opposition of the middle class to any attempts by the workers and the peasants to come up, the use of violence by Mussolini's Fascist cadres against socialists.

During the Russian Revolution (1917), which seemed to offer hope to workers all over the world, together with others, Gramsci started a weekly paper called *L'Ordine Nuovo* (The New Order). It was a cultural review ("Weekly Review of Socialist Culture,") as he called it.

This young man seems to have understood from the beginning, more clearly than most, the role played by culture in the oppression of the working class. He tried to study the reasons for the rise and strengthening of fascism, and its links to the middle class. He was among the founding members of the Italian Communist Party, but he would go beyond Marx on a number of issues. He saw the limitations of the Marxian analysis, as well as the differences between the situation of the USSR and Western European countries.

Gramsci was a sharp observer of the social scene and a powerful writer and analyst. He spent two years in Russia, where he met his future wife. He returned to Italy, full of plans and dreams. The fascist government ordered his arrest. He was tried by a fascist court, and condemned to twenty years of imprisonment. He spent the remaining eleven years of his life in different jails. While in jail, he intensified his writing activity. He filled thirty-two notebooks with his writings. His health was poor, and he did not receive the medical attention he needed. He died in prison, of a brain hemorrhage, in 1937. His sister-in-law, Tatiana Schucht, was his biggest support throughout these years. It was she who got the notebooks smuggled out of prison, and had them sent to Russia for publication. They were published in Italian after the War, and made Gramsci's name well-known among academics and activists.

2. Writings

Anyone who goes through the *Bibliografia Gramsciana* will not fail to be impressed by the sheer volume of the publications and the depth and range of the writings. When alive, Gramsci was known for his articles in *L'Ordine Nuovo* and other periodicals, as well as occasional pieces he wrote. It was, however, during his long imprisonment that he did most of the writings for which he is best known. These came to be known under the understandable name of *Prison Notebooks*. In them, Gramsci examined, with typical depth and sharpness, some of the most pressing issues his country faced, and offered critical insights into a number

of social and political questions. He had a prodigious memory, as is seen from the fact that he quotes sources without having any recourse to libraries.

The first book to be published (in Italian) was his *Letters from Prison*, in 1947. This made him well-known. There followed several thematic volumes based on his Prison Notebooks: *The Philosophy of Benedetto Croce* (1948), *Intellectuals and the Organization of Culture* (1949), *The Risorgimento* [Italian Political Movement of the 19th century] (1949), *Notes on Machiavelli, Politics and the Modern State* (1949), and other titles.³ Critical editions of the Prison Notebooks have appeared in France, Mexico, Germany and the United States, in the respective languages.

Gramsci, while being a convinced Communist, did not refrain from criticizing the limitations of Marx's thought, as we shall soon see, or the excesses of Stalin's regime. For this, while in jail, he was not on good terms with the other Communists who too were imprisoned at the same time.

Gramsci's writings have been read and studied in different parts of the globe. His impact and the interest he created can be seen, to some degree, in the large number of titles found in the *Bibliografia Gramsciana*—11,430 items by 1992.⁴ Right now, the interest in Gramsci has waned, compared to a decade or two ago, perhaps due to the fall of the USSR, and the general loss of faith in the Communist movement.

If so, why should we study Gramsci today? Does he have anything relevant to tell us that will help us understand our world and our country better? In fact, he does; and herein lies Antonio Gramsci's relevance, far beyond the confines of his native Italy or the times he lived in. Three aspects of his thought are of particular interest to us as intellectuals and as persons committed to the welfare of our society: His understanding of how the socio-political order works, his central concept of "hegemony," and his views on the role played by intellectuals in any given society. All three, as we shall see, have much to tell us about our own times and setting.

³ Here are their original Italian titles, and what one Italian scholar says about them. "Seguirono i volumi tratti dai "Quaderni del carcere," nell'edizione tematica: Il materialismo storico e la filosofia di Benedetto Croce (1948), Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura (1949), Il Risorgimento (1949), Note sul Machiavelli, sulla politica e sullo Stato moderno (1949), Letteratura e vita nazionale (1950), Passato e presente (1951). In più volumi furono poi raccolti gli scritti giornalistici del periodo pre-carcerario. L'ordine sistematico scelto nella prima edizione dei Quaderni, con il raggruppamento redazionale delle note gramsciane per argomenti e temi omogenei, rendeva più immediatamente accessibili i contenuti dell'opera, ma non metteva in luce i suoi nessi interni e il filo conduttore seguito dall'autore nel suo lavoro. Questo compito si è posta invece l'edizione critica dei Quaderni del carcere, pubblicata in quattro volumi nel 1975, a cura di V. Gerratana, secondo l'ordine dei manoscritti integrali." -- Valentino Gerratana, "Antonio Gramsci," *Enciclopedia italiana*, Quinta Appendice E - IS 1979-1992 (Roma: Enciclopedia italiana, 1992), pp.485-486.

⁴ BIBLIOGRAFIA GRAMSCIANA, 1922-1993 Contains 10,350 Publications on the Life and Work of Antonio Gramsci in Thirty-Three Languages. A Corrected Electronic Edition, Combining Volume I (1991) and Volume II (1995), with Numerical Lists of the Entries by Year and Language of Publication, and an extensive list of the Names and Subjects mentioned and analyzed by John M. Cammett & Maria Luisa Righi with the technical assistance of Jesse Reichler and Dean Savage, June 20, 1996. [The Published Volumes were sponsored and supported by the Fondazione Istituto Gramsci in Rome, Italy] Web Site: <http://www.soc.qc.edu/gramsci>.

3. Gramsci's Understanding of Society

Gramsci accepts the central Marxian concept of class struggle as the key to understanding any society. In the Italy of his days, the class-based nature of politics and even intellectual work was evident. To oversimplify: The Northern part of Italy was more industrialized, the South (including his island, Sardinia, as well as Sicily) were more rural, with an impoverished and politically weaker peasantry. As a young student in Turin he got to know the problems and the power of industrial workers first hand. As he saw it, the way for them to come up would be to forge alliances with the economically weak farmers against the great landowners and industrialists. Instead, the workers were against the Southern farmers.

The most influential philosopher and political thinker of his day was Benedetto Croce, a highly respected thinker, with a large and influential following. Although Croce spoke for the modernization of Italy, and for the need for the country to free itself from the control of the church, if it was to become an advanced nation, he was also a member of the Parliament during Mussolini's rule. For Gramsci, this was equivalent to giving legitimacy to fascism. Gramsci believed that, since Croce was a rich landowner, his interests would never be those of the poor peasants or the workers. In fact, while in prison, Gramsci made a careful study of the social class to which Italy's leading thinkers and politicians belonged. For him, there was a close nexus between the class one belongs to—and is loyal to—and one's political views and intellectual work.

While accepting Marx's basic understanding of society through the infrastructure-suprastructure model—the infrastructure being the economy and the suprastructure the art, laws, morals, religious beliefs imposed by the ruling class on society—Gramsci pointed out that the economic realm is not the only one that influences or determines the way a society functions. In fact, unlike Marx, he did not believe in economic or historic determinism. In other words, he found Marx's view—that the oppressed masses would spontaneously rise in revolt against their exploiting masters, overthrow them and set up a dictatorship of the proletariat—unrealistic and unfounded. He also believed that what happened in the U.S.S.R. (a backward rural society) would not be a suitable model to understand the more advanced Western societies, and what was likely to succeed in that setting.

Marx emphasized the crucial role played by the economy: Those who control the means of production control society. Gramsci agrees with this to a large extent. Marx saw, too, that power comes from the force that the state machinery can impose. It can coerce, punish, impose its will. These two forces—the economy and the state apparatus—are what Marx gave importance to. Gramsci found this explanation simplistic. Why?

In Gramsci's view, there is a third factor that is of crucial importance. That factor is *culture*. Why is it that the oppressed—whether underpaid workers or impoverished farmers—seem to acquiesce in their oppression rather than revolt? Why do they accept their situation meekly, without protest? This must have some explanation. As Gitlin says, "It was Gramsci who, in the late twenties and thirties, with the rise of fascism and the failure of the Western European working-class movements, began to consider why the working class was

not necessarily revolutionary, why it could, in fact, yield to fascism.”⁵

Gramsci rejects the Marxist idea of economic determinism and sees the need of studying the underlying ideologies. Ideas can cause revolutions, or prevent them. He stressed the role of human agency in bringing about historical change. Economic changes by themselves would not remove capitalism. To understand this human agency, we need to examine culture and ideology.

In his concept of society, there are three important elements: the relationships of production (capital versus labour), the state or political society (which has the power to use force) and civil society (non-coercive institutions). These last include such entities as the churches, schools, trade unions, political parties, cultural associations, clubs, the family, etc. ⁶

As Gramsci writes, "What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the state'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the state and 'juridical' government." (12)

This is how one Gramsci scholar summarizes this idea: “It can be argued that Gramsci’s theory suggests that subordinated groups accept the ideas, values and leadership of the dominant group, not because they are physically or mentally induced to do so, nor because they are ideologically indoctrinated, but because they have reason of their own.”⁷

Ideology often serves to defend the interests of the dominant group. It is linked to power, in the sense that it legitimizes the differences in power in a society. In other words, the ruling classes in a society—the bourgeoisie in Europe in Gramsci’s days—control society in two ways: economic domination and intellectual and moral leadership. Marx had largely overlooked the latter. Gramsci highlights it. This key idea Gramsci explained under the concept of Hegemony.

4. The Key Concept of “Hegemony”

As we listen to the following quote from Strinati, parallels to our situation will be evident without having to be pointed out: "...Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups.”⁸

⁵ Gitlin, Todd, “Prime time ideology: the hegemonic process in television entertainment”(1979), in Newcomb, Horace, ed., *Television: The Critical View*, Fifth Edition, New York., Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 516.

⁶ See Barry Burke, “Antonio Gramsci and informal education”, *the encyclopedia of informal education*, (1999), <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm>.

⁷ Strinati, Dominic, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 166.

⁸ Ibid., p. 165. (Hereafter, Strinati, *Popular Culture*)

A class persuades the other classes to accept its own moral, political and cultural values. It is enough to think of the caste system in India, or of gender discrimination. The majority accept the direction given by those in power. This can happen in civil society or in religious organizations. If this consent is not given peacefully, the dominant group may use force or coercion to impose its will. Once such a view is accepted, it can appear to be “common sense,” the sensible thing to do, or the normal way of behaving. People may stop questioning it any longer. So, basically, hegemony is a set of ideas by which dominant groups secure the consent of the subordinate groups to their leadership.

Roger Simon defines hegemony as “the practice of a capitalist class or its representatives to gain state power and maintain it later.”⁹ When we speak of “its representatives,” we mean this. A powerful business lobby, for instance, may support a political party or leader that will insure its interests. To give one example, the tax cuts given by the Bush administration in the past three years have benefited mostly America’s richest citizens, especially the richest one per cent.

How does a dominant group maintain its power over the others in society? According to Gramsci, there are two modes of social control: coercive and consensual. In the *coercive* model, direct force or the threat of such force is used (e.g., by the state), to retain its privileged position. In the *consensual* model, the subordinate groups are led to assimilate the views of the dominant groups. Thus, for instance, propaganda can be used to convince the majority that a politician’s or party’s policies are the best for the country. In preparation for the invasion of Iraq, for instance, the Bush government systematically lied to the American public that Iraq was linked to the September 11 attacks on New York City. Further, US citizens were persuaded to accept restrictions on individual freedom, “for reasons of security.” It can happen that a crisis can put this hegemony on a shaky footing. But, unless such opportunities are grabbed and acted upon, the power will go back to the dominant group.

Hegemony, according to Burke, can be defined as an “organizing principle” that is diffused by the process of socialization into every area of life. To the degree that it is internalized by the people, it is accepted as “common sense.” People accept the views of the dominant elite as the natural order of things.¹⁰

Can the working class achieve hegemony? Gramsci thinks it can, on condition that it forms alliances with social minorities. This will work only if the autonomy of the different groups is respected. Thus, for instance, he would have liked the workers of Northern Italy to join hands with the farmers of the South. This is not what happened. The Northern workers came to agreements with the factory owners, and were against the Southern small farmers. This is another lesson of history, valid also in India: The poor are often divided, and seldom come together to gain their ends.

Here is another area where Gramsci differs from Marx. In the opinion of Raymond Williams, “The key to ‘revolutionary’ social change in modern societies does not therefore depend, as Marx had predicted, on the spontaneous awakening of critical class consciousness

⁹ Simon, Roger, *Gramsci's Political Thought: An introduction*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983, p. 23. (Hereafter, Simon, *Political Thought*)

¹⁰ Boggs, C., *Gramsci's Marxism*. London, Pluto Press, 1976, p. 39.

but upon the prior formation of a new alliances of interests, an alternative hegemony or 'historical bloc', which has already developed a cohesive world view of its own."¹¹

How do we overcome the hegemony of the dominant class? Is it through violence? Here again, Gramsci's stand is realistic and nuanced. The way to challenge such hegemony, according to him, is political activity. This can, however, take two very different forms. In societies with a strong state power (as in Russia before Lenin) a frontal attack is the best approach. The main goal is to win quickly. In liberal democracies, instead, where the state apparatus is weaker, but the cultural hegemony is stronger, a long struggle is needed, acting especially through the institutions of civil society. Cultural and ideological struggles are even more important here than merely political and economic battles. The reason is that, in such countries, the role played by civil society is stronger.

As Strinati says, "The revolutionary forces have to take civil society before they take the state, and therefore have to build a coalition of oppositional groups united under a hegemonic banner which usurps the dominant or prevailing hegemony."¹² Two notions that need to be understood rightly in this context are: culture and ideology.

By 'culture,' we mean the whole social process by which human beings shape themselves. 'Ideology,' instead, is the system of meanings and values. It is often the expression or projection of a particular class interest. An ideology may be wrong, that is, it may give a mistaken representation of how the world actually is. Gramsci believed that to understand a culture, we need to understand hegemony. Which dominant groups shape this culture? Culture is not a uniform or homogenous thing. He referred to India and China as cultures in which there are huge differences between the dominant groups and the rest. The dominant ideology of a culture can be expressed in different ways. One of the most prominent is the *media*.

Others are education, religious institutions and art. In fact, this is how Dominic Strinati summarizes Gramsci's position on the matter:

...Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterises mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc.¹³

It is in this context, of understanding hegemony and ways of changing it, that we need to look at the role of intellectuals in society.

5. The Role of Intellectuals in Society

Gramsci believed in the important role played by intellectuals in any society. Such persons influence the thinking of the rest. Very often, the working classes are led by

¹¹ Williams, Raymond, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 27.

¹² Strinati, *Popular Culture*, p. 169

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 168-169.

intellectuals form other classes. (This is true of many Marxist intellectuals, beginning with Marx himself. Gramsci, in his turn, came from the petty bourgeois class, not from the working class.) He was convinced that, if the working classes are to develop their own hegemony, they had to have their own intellectuals, rather than be led by intellectuals from other social classes.

Gramsci believed the transformation of society could not be brought about by a group of experts or specialists acting *for*, or in the name of, the oppressed classes. There had to be mass participation. In this sense, he did not think that the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 led by Lenin was a suitable model for Western Europe. In bringing about such participation, intellectuals play a key role.

Now, who are intellectuals? Everyone, Gramsci says, is an intellectual, in one sense of the term, but most do not have the function of intellectuals in society. Just as everyone knows to fry an egg or sew a button, without their being a cook or a tailor, so also, not everyone functions as an intellectual. Intellectuals are those who perform this function in society. They may be civil servants, clergy, professors, teachers, or scientists, or doctors. What is essential is that they have developed organically with the working class, and act for the benefit of the working class. They cannot be a distinct group acting in isolation.

There are, Gramsci says, two types of intellectuals—traditional and organic. By “*traditional intellectual*,” he means those who regard themselves as autonomous and independent of the dominant group, and are regarded as such by the population. Such are, for instance, the clergy, the philosophers or professors. But, although they seem to be independent, they really are not. Their independence is a myth. They are, Gramsci says, allied to the dominant group, and assist it in ruling society.

In contrast to this group is the “*organic intellectual*.” This is the group that grows with the dominant group, the ruling class and thinks for them, and organizes society in their favour. They are the product of an educational system controlled by the dominant group. It is through them that the ruling elite controls society.

Since their views rule society, and are in fact accepted as “common sense,” what is the way out for the working class? Gramsci sees two ways out: One is that a number of traditional intellectuals join the cause of the working class. Examples are Marx and Lenin, and Gramsci himself. The other way is that the working class produces its own organic intellectuals. How? It is true that everyone has the capacity to think, but how do we harness this potential for social transformation?

Gramsci saw his own role as that of helping in both these processes—getting traditional intellectuals to get committed to the cause of social change, and raising the consciousness of the working class, so that it can produce its own organic intellectuals. Intellectual life could not be led in isolation, but had to be in touch with the struggles of daily life. The expression of the true intellectual is not eloquence, but active participation in practical life. He must be a persuader, not simply an orator.¹⁴

¹⁴ Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from the Prison Notebook*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare & Goffrey Nowell Smith, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 10. (Hereafter, Gramsci, *Prison Notebook*)

He did not agree with writers who had an elitist conception of intellectual life. In fact, in his *Notebooks*, he asked the question: "is it better to 'think', without having a critical awareness ... or, on the other hand, is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world?". He wanted revolutionaries to be critical and made it clear that "the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is ...".¹⁵

As the Gramsci scholar Ransome says,

Because of the way society develops, different groups of individuals will be required to take on particular tasks. Gramsci suggests that although all tasks require a degree of intellectual and creative ability, some individuals will be required to perform tasks or functions which are overtly intellectual. In the first instance, these occupations are associated with the particular technical requirements of the economic system. Subsequently, they may be associated with the more general administrative and organisational institutions which synchronise the activities of the economy with those of society as a whole. In the political sphere, each social group or class (which is itself brought into being by the particular way in which economic practices are organised) generates a need for intellectuals who both represent the interests of that class and develop its ideational understanding of the world.¹⁶

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci is clear about the need to create intellectuals: "Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an élite of intellectuals. A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organising itself: and there is no organisation without intellectuals, that is, without organisers and leaders... But the process of creating intellectuals is long and difficult, full of contradictions, advances and retreats, dispersal and regrouping, in which the loyalty of the masses is often sorely tried."¹⁷

The term "intellectual" should not make us think that Gramsci means mere theoreticians. No, instead, "They are not only thinkers, writers and artists but also organizers such as civil servants and political leaders, and they not only function in civil society and the state, but also in the productive apparatus..."¹⁸

It is good to note, in this context, that Gramsci's concept of *education* is equally stimulating. Educators must be involved in the local community. They are committed to the neighbourhood. Whether they have lived in the area for a long time or not, they develop relationships with the people of the neighbourhood. They are, and want to be regarded as, part of the community. Their main purpose is not individual advancement, but human well-being as a whole.

Since this paper is meant for a gathering of philosophers, I would like to end this presentation of Gramsci's thought citing his understanding of philosophy and adding final section listing the merits and demerits of Gramscian thought. According to Gramsci, the true philosopher is an eminently practical person:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

¹⁶ Ransome, Paul, *Antonio Gramsci: A new introduction*, Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1992, p. 198.

¹⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebook*, p. 334.

¹⁸ Simon, *Political Thought*, p. 90.

So one could say that each one of us changes himself, modifies himself to the extent that he changes the complex relations of which he is the hub. *In this sense the real philosopher is, and cannot be other than, the politician, the active man who modifies the environment, understanding by environment the ensemble of relations which each of us enters to take part in.* If one's own individuality means to acquire consciousness of the complex relations and to modify one's own personality means to modify the ensemble of these relations.¹⁹

6. Merits and Weaknesses of Gramsci's Thought

A quick and summarized reference to the merits and weaknesses of Gramscian thought might prove beneficial.

Among the Chief merits could be included the following:

1. His insistence on the role played by culture and ideology—and not merely the economy—in the exploitation of the weaker sections of society.
2. The consequent need of political action to raise the consciousness of workers.
3. The role played by intellectuals, for both perpetuating and strengthening the system and for changing it.
4. The concept of organic intellectual.
5. The role of education in social transformation (not explained in this paper), and the insistence that the educator must be involved in the neighbourhood.
6. The critique of class-based philosophies and ideologies, e.g., that of Croce.
7. A political understanding of culture and a critical understanding of it.
8. Correcting Marx's excessive reliance on the economic side of society, and the expectation that the oppressed will spontaneously revolt against it. Gramsci explained why they don't.
9. Calling attention to the assimilation of the ideas of the dominant groups in what we call "common sense."
10. Indicating the role played by elements of civil society, such as, schools, churches, clubs, etc, in spreading the views of the elite groups.

The Weaknesses identifiable are the following:

1. Gramsci's theories too carry the danger of reductionism found in all Marxist interpretations of society.
2. Hegemony in any society is a far more complex reality than what Gramsci's analysis admitted.
3. Gramsci's theories are not supported by empirical studies.
4. In any society different persons respond differently to the same situation. Theories such as Gramsci's do not take this pluralism and the possibility of different individual responses into account.

¹⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebook*, p. 352. Emphasis added.

INDIANIZING GRAMSCI

Pointers for a Subaltern Philosophy

George Thadathil

“Philosophy is always caught between an anger with the way things are and the serenity it brings. But philosophy isn’t a power. Religions, states, capitalism, science, the law, public opinion, and television are powers, but not philosophy. Philosophy may have its internal battles (between idealism and realism, and so on) but they are mock battles. Not being a power philosophy can’t battle with the powers that be, but it fights a war without battles, a guerilla campaign against them. And it can’t converse with them, its got nothing to tell them, nothing to communicate, and can only negotiate. Since the powers aren’t just external things, but permeate each of us, philosophy throws us all into constant negotiations with, and a guerilla campaign against, ourselves.”¹

“How relevant are Gramsci’s ideas in relation to the economic, political and ideological developments obtained in India today? Gramsci anticipated some of the new questions such as hegemony and addressed old problems such as a state-sponsored civil society in a refreshing way.”²

“To be a philosopher is to learn to die.” Michel de Montaigne

“A human mass does not ‘distinguish’ itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders, in other words, without the theoretical aspect of the theory-practice nexus being distinguished concretely by the existence of a group of people ‘specialized’ in conceptual and philosophical elaboration of ideas”.³

* * *

My presentation will have three parts. First we will take a look at some of the ideas that surfaced in a recent seminar held on the importance of Gramsci in India. Second we will position Gramsci’s intellectual life in a nutshell. Third we will look at some of the subaltern perspectives for philosophizing in India.

1. Gramsci in India

It is significant that this year (2004) witnessed a seminar on “Gramscian Political and Philosophical Thoughts” in Hyderabad. The titles of the papers presented were ‘Gramsci’s Theory of Civil Society and Hegemony’, ‘Gramsci’s Party Building’, ‘Gramsci’s Methodology of Error’, ‘Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh from a Gramscian perspective’, ‘Gramsci’s analysis of Intellectuals’, and ‘The Problems of Left Movement in India and Relevance of Gramsci’.

Some of the points made in these above presentations can be summarized in gist as follows:

¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1995, p. vii.

² Arun Kumar Patnaik, “Gramsci Today” in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 39(13 March, 2004)11, 1120. (Hereafter cited as AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*)

³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (edited & translated by Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith), Orient Longman, Madras, 1996, p.334. (Hereafter cited as Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*)

First, the inaugural speech by A B Bardhan highlighted Gramsci's importance not merely as a theoretician, but also as practitioner who set up examples worth emulating, like his critique of trade unionism. Gramsci also brought humanism and ethical questions back into the fold of socialism by arguing that ideological and political criticism can be humane and need not be in the form of expulsion or exterminations.⁴

Second, Srinivasulu argued that Gramsci defines civil society differently from Marx and Hegel by creating a new triad: economic classes, civil society and the state. The revision Gramsci makes on Marx regarding civil society is that he shifts its positioning from structural domain to the superstructural domain. Unlike Hegel he includes family in civil society but unlike Marx and Hegel excludes economic classes from its domain. Literally Civil society occupies Gramscian middle position in the triad. Here, civil society is defined on the basis of a new parameter: intellectual and moral education; and the state, on the basis of ideological and political function. Civil society includes a vast range of institutions like families, schools, and universities, religious organs, clubs or trusts, trade unions or pressure groups (he excludes political parties as they are state like institutions). All these civil society organs – the non-economic and non-state – cumulatively contribute to the formation or reformation of the 'universal egoism' of capitalist society. Civil society organs provide 'trenches' and protect the 'fortress' of the state power. Unless political movements cross these trenches they cannot reach anywhere near the fortress of the state, let alone reshape its destiny.⁵

Third, Arun Patnaik, talking of parties, especially Communist Parties (CPs) in India, said they 'must look inwards rather than look outwards to build themselves'. Today, Communist Parties are not merely isolated from India's national history, but also from popular struggles. One has to learn from Gramsci that the principles of the party are to be adopted from history or from its new discoveries rather than by formulas or mantra like official Marxism(OM). Instead of treating new social movements as 'frontier areas' of class struggle, if not its main site, against capitalism, it looks down upon them with prejudice. There is a siege mentality, as if its cadres would run away and join new social movements once it began to appreciate them. A dialogue with old and new social movements is in order if one is to heed Gramsci.⁶ Along similar vein Eashvaraiah added that the CPs in India need to relearn from the bourgeois parties like the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 'as to how they can simultaneously operate in all fields – economic, political and civil society – to acquire hegemony. While the BJP learned from left parties regarding cadre building, working class organization, and building numerous mass fronts in civil society etc., the CPs today are only concentrating on state power through elections.⁷ (West Bengal could be considered an exception.)

⁴ AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1120.

⁵ K Srinivasulu's paper on "Gramscian Theory of Civil Society and Hegemony" summarized in AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1120.

⁶ Summary of Patnaik's paper on "Gramsci's Party Building" in Arun Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1120.

⁷ Summary of P.Eashvaraiah's paper on "The Problems of Left Movement in India and Relevance of Gramsci" in AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1123.

Fourth, Raghuramaraju developed how “Gramsci posits that error is of two kinds: scientism and divinity,” and these two have many forms: One, it is ‘an error to think that every change in the super-structure can be explained by showing corresponding changes in the structure’. Two, ‘it is an error to think that one can produce a photographic image of structural changes as these changes are happening.’ Three, it is an error to ignore that there is no error of calculation on the part of political formations. ‘Party is always right’ is an error of divinity. Four, to hold that ‘it is not ideology that changes structures but vice versa’ reveals a poor sense of ideology which is another form of the error of divinity. Five, the common error in politics ‘that consists of the inability to distinguish between what is organic and what is conjuncture and to establish their correct relationship.’ To establish the correct relationship concrete situations will have to be examined. Both mechanical causes on the one hand, and immediate causes on the other can be overestimated leading to reformism or economism in the former and anarchism or voluntarism in the latter. Six, the error of political judgment in revolutionary theory which holds that an economic crisis is sure indicator of imminent revolution ‘without knowing it might have to confront many ‘trenches’ in civil society on the way to the fortress of state power.’⁸

Fifth, Krishna Reddy and Kodanda Ram provide an assessment of ‘Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh from a Gramscian perspective’ in the following: (i) Dalits have acquired a consciousness of their own existence over a period of time, eventually raising substantive questions of caste society; (ii) Dalit specific questions were either subsumed or dissociated from in erstwhile Indian Marxism; (iii) Marxists have stayed away from active contribution to Dalit politics that evolved in the light of constitutional provisions given them; (iv) Marxists failed to recognize emerging dalit forces as a potential opposition to ruling class politics; (v) Ruling class politics is willing to grant formal equality without substantive equality (ie address caste inequalities) while Marxist politics is neither prepared to fight for formal equality for Dalits nor is it prepared to critique caste oppression in civil society; (vi) The Andhra Dalit Mahasabha, since 1985 Karamchedu incident, put forward the following: to oppose continuation of untouchability, to demand access to resource particularly jobs and agricultural land, to oppose atrocities against the Dalits and state inaction, to expose their inadequate share in political power. These are issues Marxists are criticized as having excluded. In other words, from a Gramscian perspective, the attack on state without touching on the trenches in civil society is naïve Marxism.⁹

Sixth, in the light of above Indian scenario and ground realities Anji Reddy looks at ‘Gramsci’s analysis of Intellectuals’. Intellectuals are for him active members with leadership qualities in any profession. They can be identified in economic, political and cultural fields. In a sense they are ‘technicians of knowledge’ in any given profession. They need not always be conscious of their class roles because even when they think their ideas to be neutral and universal the positions they hold turn out to be partisan as

⁸ Summary of A. Raghuramaraju’s paper on “Gramsci’s Methodology of Error” in AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1121.

⁹ Summary of G. Krishna Reddy and M. Kodanda Ram’s paper on “Dalit Movement in Andhra Pradesh from a Gramscian Perspective” in AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, *EPW*, 1121-2

they help promote the hegemony of one particular class.¹⁰ Identifying the class one's intellectual involvement supports thus becomes one of the critical roles that the intellectual himself has got to constantly perform.

In Gramsci, unlike the common perception, three types of intellectuals are identifiable: *the traditional* – religious leaders, teachers, government employees, lawyers, who defend the traditional social order; *the organic* – those from social classes whose positions they seek to elaborate and defend; and *cosmopolitan* – those who churn out abstract ideas (progressive or regressive) in relative isolation from the masses.

The larger discussion is about the second group who play a role in creating and preserving hegemony, which is for him, domination with consent. Here we have to insert what he says about hegemony as referring therefore to the organic intellectuals: 'first, hegemonic ideology is formed as a constellation of interests of ruling classes; second, it accommodates specificities of historical and cultural living of subaltern classes; third, hegemony cannot be established at once; it must be established gradually through struggles of different kinds; fourth, hegemonic ideology is hegemonic only when it depends on common sense and also aims to become part of common sense.'¹¹ Hegemony solicits the active consent of subaltern classes and thus maintains the domination of ruling classes. In other words, hegemony is that by which the domination over the subaltern classes is maintained with the aid of their active consent (which means it is not to be confused with domination proper or with consent manufacturing.)

Another point to be noted, in this regard, is that for Gramsci common sense is essentially a contradictory domain, and not merely a simplistic uncritical consciousness, as it usually is taken. Most significant part of Gramsci's theorization therefore consists in noting that counter-hegemony begins with a resolution of commonsense-in-contradiction. It is, one could say, kind of an advaitic – nondual-position.

2. Gramsci's (1891-1937) Own Intellectual Journey

What is self evident from the snippets of the seminar on Gramsci in India could be the following: one the need for working towards hegemony in civil society prior to expecting a transformation in state-formation; second, the role in bringing about this hegemony in civil society lies with the organic intellectuals. We shall take a short look at Gramsci's own intellectual journey of playing the role of an organic intellectual and then look at how the subaltern perspective for philosophizing is simultaneously a process of creating organic intellectuals from within the subaltern groups. This latter process calls for a closer look at the issue of subjecthood and agency within subaltern movements and prevailing perspectives.

Gramsci was born in Ales, on the island of Sardinia, to an educated (Albanian) father and a literate (Italian) mother. His prodigious memory held him through school,

¹⁰ Summary of V. Anji Reddy's paper on "Gramsci's Analysis of Intellectuals" in AK Patnaik, Gramsci Today, EPW, 1122.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

despite break due to father's suspension from work and change of schools. He was introduced to politics and social cause by a brother of his (Gennaro) who was employed and had taken to a socialist position. This brother would send pamphlets to him (from Turin). The first political cause he espoused was Sardinian nationalism seeing the oppression the peasant forces that protested underwent. Already from school days he moved onto an internationalist and anti-colonialist stand as an early essay of his reveals. He was against European imperialism.¹²

His imbibed interests in class and regional factors thus showed itself from these early years. Southernism which promoted the cause of the less privileged south against the more industrial North was his political position within the Italian set up. He came in contact with intellectual world first in Turin where he got a scholarship to study. His political commitment however took him away from studies proper. Regarding the influences on his philosophical vision, what he says of Marx is equally true of him: 'there is the distinction to be made between the personal philosophic culture of an author – and his own original philosophy.'¹³ In 1915, despite great promise as an academic scholar, Gramsci became an active member of the PSI, and began a journalistic career that made him among the most feared critical voices in Italy at that time. His column in the Turin edition of *Avanti!*, and his theatre reviews were widely read and influential.¹⁴

Antonio Labriola (an Italian Marxist theorist before world war I), Mondolfo Rodolfo (Italian socialist philosopher) and Benadetto Croce (student of Labriola and one time Marxist) were influences on him. Much of his writing one could say is in a way a critique of Croce from a Marxian perspective. The former tried to etherealise Marx and latter tries to recover Marx while holding on to some insights of Croceanism. For the former while politics is of no philosophical value for the latter it is the central human activity.'¹⁵

During the war years he alone remained on in Turin. He was able to mediate a position between left and right (Tosca and Borgia) culturalism and economism and made an entry into the party life through being a full time journalist of the party paper commenting on national/international events. The outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution, in October 1917, further stirred his revolutionary ardor, and for the remainder of the war and in the years thereafter Gramsci identified himself closely, although not entirely uncritically, with the methods and aims of the Russian revolutionary leadership and with the cause of socialist transformation throughout the advanced capitalist world.¹⁶

One chief characteristic of Gramsci's intellectuality is his rootedness. The *Neo Ordine* the magazine he edited during war years stood out from other journals precisely

¹² Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, (edited & translated by Quintin Hoare & Geoffrey Nowell Smith), Orient Longman, Madras, 1996, p. xix.

¹³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. xxii.

¹⁴ Frank Rosengarten, *An Introduction To Gramsci's Life And Thought*, (www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/intro.htm)

¹⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. xxiii

¹⁶ Frank Rosengarten, *An Introduction To Gramsci's Life And Thought*, (www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/intro.htm)

for its Turin context based reflections and critiques.¹⁷ He did not naively believe in the power of the violent revolution but thought that only with the transformation of the masses it would actualize, and therefore, the concept of *passive revolution* (as a precursor to the resultant transformation). Gramsci's political career and ideological positioning is to be traced amidst three factors or determinants: international developments and the united Front; Italian developments and Fascism, the struggle against Bordiga and Tosca inside the party.¹⁸

Gramsci's *Prison Notes* are 'the focus of his inner life' and 'something for ever' that he wanted to leave. It is also a testament of his conviction that Revolution calls for death, 'the manure' that nurtures life. His commitment to revolution did not suffer a defeat with his body being thrown into prison. Against inhuman and unimaginable odds he continues the revolutionary project through his *Notes*. It is this flesh and blood 'life' aspect of the words he utters that makes its power shine all the more. His notes are political strategy and outline for action: to create a vanguard party to nurture associations among the peasant masses and workers by enlightening them or intellectualizing them. A task he believed had to be done if the democratization of peoples and egalitarian society were to have some chance to survive.

The relationship between the masses and the elite (intellectual, religious or economic) is a concern of all times and places when and where disparities prevail. Gramsci observed 'the error of the party has been to have accorded priority in an abstract fashion to the problem of organizations' as to have created an apparatus of functionaries holding on to official view or orthodoxy. His observation is that 'the party has not been seen as the result of a dialectical process in which the spontaneous movement of the revolution, masses and the organizing and directing will of the centre converge.'¹⁹ Establishing this process of mutual interaction and narrativity is the role of an organically evolved intelligentsia.

In establishing this linkage between the elite and the masses he sees a model in the ecclesiastics of the Catholic Church. The priest as playing a mediatory role between the aristocrats and the masses. The role of the intellectual in society is to provide legitimation either for hegemonization process or for the revolutionary process. In this they are the ones who feel the pulse of the society and see the dynamics operating therein for the interests either of the dominant section (hegemonization) or for the interest of the masses (revolution). The manner in which they play the role is in and through the varied functions they are involved in – as bureaucrats artists, artisans, or educationists and politicians.

In this light, the Gramscian concept of Hegemony explains how states and its institutions work to win popular consent for their authority through a variety of processes which disguise their position of dominance. From this perspective, laws, institutions, processes of governing all constitute an empty performance meant to draw attention away

¹⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. xxxix.

¹⁸ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. xivii.

¹⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. lxii.

from the 'real work' of establishing the rule of one group over or at the expense of others in society. Gramsci exposes this dynamics in his analysis of Italy: the fascists against communists, labourers, and peasants.²⁰

Gramsci says "many intellectuals think that they are the state...and leads to unpleasant complications for the fundamental economic group which really is the state"²¹ Intellectuals like to feel and own their representative function, of the cause, of the issue they speak of, write about. It is an ideological function with 'thought-precedence'. The economic group which actually is the state feels this ideational threat as presumptuous because of their conception of 'matter-precedence'. This relationship between the intellectuals and the economic interest groups is analysed by Gramsci in Italy, France, England and Germany. If the above analysis were to be applied to India and the Dalit productive class were to be distinguished from the brahminic intellectualizing class there would be a similar fall out. However, in the Indian situation, it is the intellectualizing class that has come to not only 'think they are the state' but over run the Dalit classes as to transfer their economic activity gains to themselves and 'be the state'. A counter critique of the Dalits to reposition themselves would therefore, in India, call for an intellectualizing by the Dalits, to displace the hegemony of the brahminic classes while they re-appropriate the gains of their economic activity as well.²²

Gramsci argued that powerful groups don't necessarily have to impose their values on less powerful by the use of direct force. Often, less powerful groups come to accept that the differences in levels of power and economic wealth within a society are natural and just, and so will consent to the rule of their 'betters'.²³ When working-class people vote for conservative parties (as in England of Thatcher's time) they are agreeing that the *status quo* is the best option they have and are consenting to the privileged class, ie., hegemony works at the level of people's minds, because they come to believe or think that the operations of power in society are natural and just, rather than being forced to accept the contradictions in social relations.

For Gramsci hegemony was a kind of false consciousness, a mistaken view of the world that could be corrected by showing people the truth (ie how they were being dominated or exploited). Foucault distrusts both the assumptions behind Gramscian

²⁰ Geoff Dacher, *Understanding Foucault*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 2001, p.86-7.

²¹ Gramsci, *Notebooks*, p. 16.

²² It would be rewarding to contrast the notion of Hegemony in Gramsci with the notion of Micro-power in Foucault. Foucault's critique is that while he agrees that governments exploit and repress people even while pretending to be just and fair he does not hold that governments and societies are always at warfare. Application of Gramsci's insight via the critique of Foucault poses the question of the transitions modern democratic states are undergoing. A comparison with the transition from Monarchy to democracy and the manner in which monarchic wielders of power continued into democracy may throw light on the present transition.

²³ It would be worthwhile to pursue whether a parallel can be drawn here with the claim of Michael Moffat in his study of casteism in India claiming that when the 'low castes' replicate the values of the 'upper castes' they participate in their own subjugation or not. Cfr. Michael Moffatt, *An Untouchable Community in South India: Structure and Consensus*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979, and a counter to this argument by Dipankar Gupta in his "Introduction: The certitudes of caste", in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 38(Jan-Aug 2004) 1&2, v-xv.

proposition: (i), the notion that there is a right and wrong way of reasoning; (ii), that subjects have power to make sense of world through reason.²⁴ In Gramsci there is belief in arriving at the correct position. Foucault does not claim that possibility.

Societies have been conceived as having been formed on the one hand by social contract and on the other by social warfare: a tussle of different groups for dominance. The Marxist reading of class conflicts comes close to the latter. Ideology and false consciousness are regarded as mechanisms used by dominant groups to preserve their position. Finally, to summarise what we have been saying in this section, understanding Gramsci means situating him within and in relation to Marxism which he described as follows: ‘the philosophy of praxis corresponds to the nexus between protestant reformation and French Revolution: it is a philosophy which is also a politics and a politics which is also a philosophy’. Further, understanding Gramsci is to see the linkages between his key concepts: revolution/reformation, state/civil society, force/consent, domination/ownership, war of maneuver/war of position, these are opposed but dialectically united concepts.

3. Subaltern Perspectives for Philosophizing in India

At a recent seminar in Jadavpur University, Calcutta on “Remembering Edward Said” Gauri Viswanathan of Columbia University, New York, who called herself a student, colleague and friend of Said had this to say: Though Foucault is regarded as the major influence on Said, it is an exaggeration; and it is no exaggeration to say that Gramsci was a greater influence on Said. There is in Gramsci something which we ordinarily attribute to Foucault. I think it actually started with Gramsci. It is the historicizing of truth. Moving away from essentialism and stressing the contextuality of truth.

In this section I would like to offer two directions for reorienting our philosophical enterprise as to make it contextual as well as a commitment to the political cause of egalitarianism in society. I intend to do so, first, by offering few reflections goaded by a Gramscian reading of our attempt to create rubrics for Indian Christian philosophising; and second, to offer some pointers to take a look at what *indigenous rationality* could offer.

Gramsci is a sure guide for the rich dividends to be had in directing the philosophical critique onto the cultural scene of a society. The one who plays the role of a critique has the privileged position of a leader, and at the same time, take on the posture of an organic intellectual. Such critique is not one for the sake of critique rather an effort to see the interlinkages in society between hegemonic expressions and the contradictory consciousness. It is the role of the leader/intellectual to discern the type of hegemony good for the society at a given time and offer either a critique to the prevailing hegemony or offer a supportive dissemination of the emerging hegemony.

²⁴ Geoff Dacher, *Understanding Foucault*, Motilal Banarsidas, Delhi, 2001, p.48.

A second direction in which Gramscian cultural critique could be pointed is towards current spate of post colonial studies, cultural studies, and area studies wherein a lot of intellectualization (sometimes superficial) is on in the name of promoting the hitherto silenced voices. In this connection Shekar Deshpande comments on the role played by the Indian-born intellectuals in American academia, in a study of the Diaspora: “The literate, the articulate and those who can afford the leisure of intellectual pursuits dominates the discourse of identity. It is legitimate to ask: whose identity is it anyway – those who can articulate it or those who suffer it? He goes onto refer to the suffering underclass on whose behalf had political action been mooted by the intellectual class it would be praise worthy diasporic identity activity. On the contrary he exposes intellectuals, who have espoused the conservative rightist agenda of the white Americans, oblivious of the way power is used by them against the weaker diasporic segment of the Indian population. I make this apparently alien analysis with a purpose as a telling case even about us, the representative intellectuals of a community that we are. We need to test whether our intellectualizing is without reference to investment in actual politics as there is an intellectual responsibility in our time of academics having to engage in public sphere outside of their own parochial enclaves of conferences, journal publications and book editing.”²⁵

Thirdly, we cannot deny that in our search for subaltern perspectives the issue at the heart of it is poverty and how we are going to deal with it. What would be a Gramscian reading of poverty? Would it be right to say that there is a disparaging, overbearing, condescending, condemnatory approach to poverty prevalent today? This is a direct consequence of the glorification of wealth. Riches, comfort, and wealthfulness is the norm and from these poverty and want seems an aberration, an evil, a lack, a rejection. Could there be an alternative to seeing poverty and want from within. This latter would be a subaltern perspective proper. The critique of the subaltern to better the situation is not coming out of anger, and antipathy to the riches, nor because riches and wealthiness is the norm but because from within want and poverty there arises a desire *to be*. Kamala Markendeya’s *Nectar in the Sieve* is illustrative of this alternative perspective on want and poverty. She describes them as experiential and thus descriptive of a self understanding that is not marred by ideologies. It is not because somebody is poor they deserve wealth. But because there is wealth they deserve it to be shared with them.²⁶

In short, Gramsci provides an axis to the Dalit enterprise in Indian society. While talking of the relationship between political science and sociology, in the *Notebooks* he says: “Is not science itself ‘political activity’ and political thought, in as much as it transforms men, and makes them different from what they were before?”²⁷ Applying this criteria definitely the Dalit interventions through literature, associational formations in civil society are to be regarded as significant political activity or at best as having

²⁵ Shekar Deshpande, “The Diaspora”, in *Seminar* (June 2004), 44-47

²⁶ Cfr. Chandra Bhan Prasad’s *Dalit Diary 1999-2003: Reflection on Apartheid in India*, Pondicherry, Navyana Publishing, 2004. See a review on this book by Nivedita Menon, “Present Continuous: A Dalit voice that is for capitalism and against tradition” in *Telegraph*, (1 September 2004); and in *Seminar* 539, (July 2004), 68.

²⁷ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 244.

political repercussions. The ability of the Dalit ideologues to enter into the trenches of state organization and civil society in order to gain hegemony through a war of position will determine the success of the Dalit alternative vision being seen as one such. One could see here a parallel in the way RSS ideology is seeking to capture the hegemonic position. Both are claiming or making tactical moves to dominance – hegemony in society. The struggle for hegemony on the one hand by the RSS and on the other by Dalit-minority-secularist agents is comparable to a military situation: the war of maneuver is the traditional style of defending individual posts holding on to small positions; the war of position is applying all the force of state, ie hegemony and dictatorship to maintain or win a position. However the warfare in politics is not to be seen in partisan ways (in physically oppositional ways) rather as winning of hegemony in ideological sense, making one's position the common sense view and in that sense the hegemonic position.²⁸

The entry of the subaltern into the state structure is then the fourth area of Gramscian perspective applicable in Indian situation. From a subaltern perspective, taking hold of political power through the parliamentary process would be one strong instance of the arrival at hegemony and the route towards further hegemonization of society in their favour. The subaltern coming to itself is symbolically and literally represented in the assumption of state power. Traditional states utilized the school system and the legal system in order to achieve this ethical role of bringing the vast populations within the state to the hegemonic understanding. The Indian subaltern would have to resort to similar means and more.

Regarding the subaltern appropriation of the state two further points can be made: first, as Gramsci says of what the European catholics expect: “the catholics would like the state to be interventionist one hundred percent in their favour; failing that, or where they are in a minority, they call for a ‘neutral’ state, so that it should not support their adversaries.”²⁹

Second, Gramsci's critique of state is indeed a subaltern critique for he says: “there is something strange about the way a government (state) is able to reflect back upon the class it represents, as merit and a source of prestige, the fact that it has finally done what should have been done for fifty years and more – and which should therefore be a demerit and a source of shame.”³⁰ This reminds one of what Dr Palpu, an Izhava leader in the mid twenties wrote to Gandhi: ‘The right to walk through public roads is one that even dogs and pigs enjoy everywhere without having to resort to any *Satyagraha* at all. Besides, the present *Satyagraha* at Vaikom is only a year old, but our struggle here has been going on for some centuries now.’³¹ The merit content of an action by the state that is long overdue strikes as such only if reflected back to one's own class. The latter's

²⁸ Cfr. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 238-9.

²⁹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 262.

³⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 269.

³¹ Private papers of Dr. Palpu, file no.7, quoted in T.K. Ravindran, *Vaikom Satyagraha and Gandhi* Trichur, Sri Narayana Institute of Social and Cultural Development, 1975, p. 5. It is with the Vaikom incident that temple entry issue becomes an all India agenda of Congress/Gandh an social reform project.

view (if they are conscious of the anomaly) will be that of Dr Palpu – ie, it won't be perceived as anything that the state can conceive as meritorious but infact as shameful. Gramsci's own words are poignant: "the fact that the state/government, conceived as an autonomous force, should reflect back its prestige upon the class upon which it is based, is of the greatest practical and theoretical importance, and deserves to be analysed fully if one wants a more realistic concept of the state itself."³² The subaltern attempt to appropriate the state alone can eliminate the subalternity. In other words, the critique of the subaltern to be sustained they need an organization-structural backing. Gramsci gives the example of the role Catholic Church played in Medieval Europe.³³ One can see this process taking place in the politicization of the Dalit communities across the country.³⁴

In search of a subaltern perspective for philosophizing, we use the term 'subaltern' to refer to the dominated and subjugated peoples in Indian society. The issue at stake, in this task we are at, is to see how far their subjecthood can be acknowledged and promoted in and through an eventual political, economic and social emancipation. This implies on the one hand a class-caste-community reading of the Indian society, and on the other, it implies some element of essentialism in as much as the subjugated people's perspective is collectively assumed or projected. It is Gramscian theorization that provides the scheme for a philosophic perspective and enterprise that offers to reclaim the subjecthood of a people. The question of reclamation of subjecthood can be approached first in a class-caste sense: the subaltern as standing in opposition to the privileged elite; and second, as a matter of discourse on power in society – its arrival, utilization/dispensation - and its ways of constructing identity. Stating the same, in contemporary Indian history point of view, while the nationalism engendered by the nationalist movement gave rise to the transfer of power from one dominant segment in society to another, the nation itself failed to emerge in as much as it was not the 'solidarity of sovereign and self determined people.'³⁵ Contemporary history is aware of this flaw in the manner nationalist rhetoric created 'the nation'; and contemporary politics, in many ways, is an attempt to rectify the same. Only it is perceived dually by the rightist forces in society (as a project of the Hindu nation as having to emerge) and by the leftist-secular-Dalit forces (as a project of the people-powered nation coming to itself). The project of subaltern history is an attempt to rectify the latter perception of the lacuna. A similar project of subaltern philosophy and utilization of it to spearhead a movement would amount to a Hegelian perception of the subaltern mind moving forward its own history.³⁶

The recovery of subjecthood by a subaltern self is after all modeled on the essentialist normative self, the agent behind the colonial, orientalist, western dominance.

³² Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 269.

³³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 270.

³⁴ Cfr. Badri Narayan, "Inventing caste history: Dalit mobilization and nationalist past" in *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 38 (Jan-Aug 2004) 1&2, 193-220

³⁵ Cfr. Aloysius G., *Nationalism without Nation in India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.

³⁶ Cfr. Rosalind O' Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia" in David Ludden (ed), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001, p. 152. (Hereafter, Rosalind O' Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject.")

In other words, in trying to retrieve a subaltern subject, is it not a construction after the pattern of the dominant self itself. Is not such an endeavour a superimposition of what the subaltern subject is or ought to be than what the subaltern would define himself/herself to be. One of the sites on which this subjecthood is enacted is that of the claim to power by way of resistance to dominance. The studies in subjecthood of the subaltern in the subaltern studies series has been critiqued as collectivizing this power and thus falling into the trap of essentialism.³⁷

Knowledge production is another site where power is exercised and subject is retrieved. The manner in which knowledge about the subaltern is generated and how it in turn affects the status of the subaltern is worthy of note. Going by the standards of the classical ethnographer who does not grant an equal agency to the informant, the aspect of mutuality in knowledge production is often glossed over. This danger is there even in the present project of constructing subaltern perspectives in philosophy. This is in other words similar to the problem of representation: how far can we represent the subaltern because, to paraphrase Baudrillard, what we are doing is “making the subaltern’s voice heard, but construing it in our own”. Here my personal stand is that we philosophize along with the subaltern and not for the subaltern. For instance, working towards a theoretical clarity provides fuel to the political cause espoused by and for the subaltern. One such issue needing clarity is the construction of the self: is it a borrowed project or can there be an indigenous path.

The ‘subject’ discourse by the liberal humanist tradition envisages an autonomous subject as the universal agent. This autonomous agency of the subject has been deprived to the subaltern and reclaiming or restoring this subjecthood is construed as the subaltern project. This idea of a ‘self-constituting, self-determining individual, his reason enshrined in his sovereign consciousness’ is a construction of the European enlightenment has been shown by Foucault. It was at the same time that another crucial distinction between modern state and civil society arose. The latter composed of the ‘family, the church, the institutions of learning, trade union, media and cultural life’ a sphere free from the authority of the state and even further, a sphere which gave the legitimization to the authority of the state.³⁸ Enlarging upon and mapping this intermediary area between the structure and superstructure, in the Marxian analytical framework, was a specific contribution of Gramsci to political theory. The notion of sovereign subject-agent is central to this conception of a civil society operating between state and the economic structures. Civil society enhances the rights and liberties of the individual and the state is legitimated with power as long as it enables the fulfillment of these rights and liberties. Civil society has thus double characteristic of providing legitimization to state and yet being distinct from the state and its formal political structures.³⁹

Because the individual is central to civil society, marginalization of an individual from the civil society lands him in the category of the subaltern, the dispossessed. The

³⁷ Here there is a parallel with the way in which feminists (White Western) have been accused of equating their (Anglo Saxon) concerns as that of the global feminist concerns.

³⁸ Rosalind O’ Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject”, p. 176.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

process of disempowerment operates in two fold ways for the women and the subaltern. The former by being forced to recede into the realm of the family and the private; the latter is marginalised by way of his inability to avail of the civil institutions due to poverty and inarticulacy. This inability by the dispossessed to avail of the goods of civil society and thus be a full autonomous subject-agent is seen as a historical error to be rectified. It is only seen as a question of being restored into the mainstream – the part attaining or claiming to be whole. These rectifications thus become areas of special interest.⁴⁰

Implicit in this assessment is ‘the figure of a Subject Agent’ which, if we pursue the matter in depth ‘is not all that universal as the liberal humanist claims’, but rather a highly specific and restricted one ‘whose autonomy and self-determination will always render it unobtainable to all but the privileged’.⁴¹ When it comes to identifying the subaltern, not only is there a calculated exclusionary dynamics, but besides, an accusation of their shortcomings like fickleness, closeness to nature as women, and subservience to colonial authority as the cause for their dispossession, brought upon themselves.

In all this the moot point is whether there is an autonomous subject outside the subject-agent construed by the hegemonic. It raises the question whether the subaltern subjectivity is extinguishable by way of material and ideological pressures meant to obliterate its consciousness. On the other hand, there are critics like O’ Hanlon who feels, the argument that there is an ‘inherently inextinguishable subaltern subjectivity’ buys too easily into the dominant discourse that surreptitiously co-opts the resistance itself.⁴² Here it is good to note Gramsci’s analysis that “the hegemonic is the articulations of a number of historic blocks, in the ability of a fundamental class to become, in its awareness that its own corporate interests transcend the purely economic, the spokesman of other, subordinate groups, and to articulate the latter’s overt interest to its own”.⁴³ Reversal of this process as to claim dominance and achieve hegemony is what the subaltern assertiveness is all about.

In the effort to recover the subaltern subject the issue is whether the recovered subject is to be modeled after the dominant description of the subject-agent or by trying to establish the alterity of the subaltern subject. The project thus far, at least going by the standards of the work done in Subaltern Studies Series is of the former kind, is an observation made by more than one. Especially the analyses of the mode of resistance by the subaltern agent have been replications of the dominant self’s understanding of self. Even the attempt to otherize and argue for an inexhaustible alterity to the subaltern subject works on the dominant project of otherizing and thus co-opting is also an observation we have made.

⁴⁰ On a global scale the American interest in area studies originated, one could say boldly, from such a perspective. Cfr. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York, Vintage Books, 1979.

⁴¹ Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject”, p.178.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.179

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.180.

If so where and how is the subaltern agent to express an alterity. It is my submission that this alterity as Gramsci claims is in the mutuality of the project, or, as I would like to propose, in the non-duality of the project of constructing the Self. In other words, the political character of the subaltern shows itself through the struggle in which, the ‘philosophies’ or ‘conceptions’ of the world play a vital role, to exert leadership over a variety of groups, and to conform to its sway the institutions of civil society as well as the overtly political ones of the state. Thus ‘each form of hegemonic comes into existence around diversities of interest and potential sites of resistance which fracture and constrain it even as it exerts its conforming power’.⁴⁴ The subaltern self after whom we have been thus far in this search is in the dominant self and the dominant self is recoverable in the subaltern. This is a thesis that can be elaborated by recourse to empirical research⁴⁵ as well as symbolic and mythic representations in the indigenous tradition.

In conclusion Gramsci’s significance is that he is philosopher of the subaltern par excellence. Probably his years in prison made him experience subalternity from society’s entrails as it were. He is invoked in our lecture halls and political party policy discussions because of the revision of Marxian analysis of society he worked out so meticulously. An application of his insight has shown us that the subaltern is capable of moving through the cultural hegemony operating in society and even beyond it in order to forge for himself/herself a unique conception of the world. This newly constructed self and world are not to be seen in the material agency of the cultural self as proclaimed by Marx, nor in the purely subjective agency of the psychic self as shown by Freud, nor even in the self as anti-other dialectical self of Hegel, but rather in what the indigenous traditions⁴⁶ have proposed as Self as ‘also-Other’ or ‘Non-Dual’ Self. I leave a further elaboration of this claim for another occasion.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Cfr. Stephen Parish, *Hierarchies and Its Discontents: Culture and Politics of Consciousness in Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997. I have elaborated on this in my thesis basing myself on the Sri Narayana Guru Tradition in Kerala. George Thadathil, *The Vision of Sri Narayana Guru Movement in the Literature of Nitya Chaitanya Yati*, Ph.D Dissertation, Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, 2002 (to be published).

⁴⁶ I refer here, in particular, to the Sri Narayana Guru tradition, carried forward by Nataraja Guru and Nitya Chaitanya Yati in the ideological and philosophical movement spearheaded by the Narayana Gurukula Foundation and the way it has made inroads into the cultural consciousness of the people of Kerala.

ACPI Concluding Statement 2004:

PHILOSOPHIZING FROM SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES

We, the members of the ACPI gathered for our annual meeting at Holy Trinity Major Seminary, Jalandhar, 22-25 October 2004, for the purpose of a collective and in-depth reflection on the thematic: “Philosophizing from the Subaltern Perspectives,” have come to the following observations:

1. In society, the Subaltern groups are formed as the result of the hegemonic construction of identities by the dominant groups. In our deliberations on the concrete composition of the subalterns, we have identified the following four groups: Dalits, Tribals, Women and the Minorities. Our analysis of the Indian contemporary situation has revealed these groups to be subjugated in varying degrees by the dominant culture. Going along with the call of the Christian gospel, and the example of Jesus, we intend walking with these groups, as organic intellectuals, in their journey from submergence to identity, alienation to autonomy, and from contradictory consciousness to critical consciousness.
2. The Subalterns are subjects of history, and express their agency in their response to the religio-cultural and socio-economic reality of India. We have recognized in our reflections, the tendency in ourselves to essentialize and to patronize: to objectify the identities of the subalterns, eclipsing their aspirations for self-expression, and assertions of identity. We have come to the awareness of the need to contextualize, and thus to evolve a truly indigenous way of philosophizing. In this context, there is the need to go forward by helping reclaim the subjecthood of the subaltern identities in and through the ambiguities and ambivalences involved in the process.
3. Our discussions also brought to light the need for searching for alternative historiographies, which would give voice to the culture of silent resistances prevalent among and practiced by the Subaltern groups. This calls for a shift of hermeneutical keys from time as a metaphor for history (modernity) to space as a metaphor of history, celebrating the contingencies faced by the subalterns.
4. To give a substantive thrust to our mode of philosophizing from the subaltern perspective we need to critique the dominant culture and work towards building an alternative culture which emphasizes the ontology of the human person, especially given the fact that this is absent in the hierarchical and dominant vision of reality and praxis. Going along with the subaltern strategy of appropriating, and contesting the dominant constructs of religiosity and representations of reality, we realize the need of strengthening the embodied and incarnational vision of human being, as implicitly operative in the living and ongoing protest of the Subaltern groups, against the hegemonic constructs, discursive practices and alienating praxis of the Dominant sections of society.

5. Towards a critique of the dominant representations and constructions of reality, we have to deconstruct the logic, and linguistic paradigms of the hegemonic codes of systems and symbols and sacred texts. Towards this, we have identified the presence of ample resources, in the memory of their struggles, and protests against subjugation expressed in their myths, folklore, art forms and performative texts.
6. In this process of creating and carrying forward the indigenous philosophizing, we acknowledge the need of a trans-disciplinary approach, as an aid to constant listening to the primal consciousness, and the expressions of the original peoples of the land. This calls for a transition: philosophizing from knowing to philosophizing from being.
7. In the present context of the growing forces of marketization and globalization with their attendant ambiguities, having eroding impact on the identity and autonomy of the Subalterns, especially the women and the tribals, we strive towards strengthening the Subalterns against the dehumanizing potential of these forces, by stressing on the need to humanize knowledge, and making it a tool of empowerment of communities.

Our reflections and search together have revealed to us our own limitations and the need for continued effort in cooperation and collaboration with other like minded agents and agencies operating in society, like the forces for secularism and the agency of the followers of different religions, like Hinduism, Islam and Sikhism, who are striving for harmony in society, and integral liberation of all human beings, especially the Subalterns. We believe that our participatory endeavour with the Subaltern groups identified above, is a step towards reinforcing the secular and egalitarian vision enshrined in the Indian Constitution, moving ahead towards the realization of a substantive and radical democracy.

Jalandhar
22-25 October 2004

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Dr. Johnson Puthenpurackal, OFM Cap [johnsonjp@rediffmail.com] has specialized himself in the philosophy of Heidegger from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. He lectures in different Institutes in India, besides being the regular professor of philosophy at Vijnananilayam, (Janampet, A.P.). He has to his credit several studies published. He is currently the President of ACPI.

Prakash Louis [prakash@unv.ernet.in] is the Executive Director of the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. He has been working as a grass-root activist for over a decade in central Bihar. He gives Seminars and lectures in several Institutes. He has authored several books and articles on themes of social relevance.

Dr. Jose D. Maliekal, SDB [kilma@sancharnet.in] on completion of his interdisciplinary Ph.D. research in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, is presently Principal of the Vishwa Jyothi College, Warangal. He pursued his field work among the Madigas of Konaseema (East Godavari District, A.P., India) and his Ph.D dissertation is a seminal work in the field of interface between religion and societal transformation.

Devasia Muruppath Antony, IMS [madevasia@rediffmail.com] is currently a Ph.D. research scholar and occasional lecturer in the Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi. He had his M.A. in Indian Philosophy and Religion from Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi. He has presented research papers in various seminars, workshops and symposia.

Dr. George Karuvelil, SJ [gkaruvelil@hotmail.com] is professor in philosophy at *Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth*, Pune, besides giving lectures in other centers of learning. He completed his doctoral research at the University of Delhi. As a budding philosopher, he has authored many articles in scholarly journals.

Dr. Gnana Patrick is presently a lecturer in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras, where he also completed his Ph.D research on the socio-religious movement of Ayya Vali in South Tamil Nadu and a post-doctoral research. He holds a post-graduate degree in sociology as well. He gives lectures and conducts seminars in different centers of learning.

Dr. George Panthanmackel, MSFS is Professor of Philosophy at *Suvidya College* and St. Peter's Pontifical Institute of Philosophy and Theology, Bangalore, besides being a visiting Professor to several other Institutes. He secured his Ph.D. from the University of Innsbruck, Austria. He has authored several books and articles on themes of philosophical relevance. He is presently the secretary of ACPI.

Samuel Lepcha hails from the Kalimpong subdivision of Darjeeling District in West Bengal and is an emerging theoretician on Lepcha language and tribal issues. He completed his M. Ph. from *Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth*, Pune, and is presently Dean of the Department of Philosophy at Morning Star College, Barrackpore, Kolkatta.

Dr. Shashi Bala is Reader in the Department of Guru Nanak Studies, Guru Nanak University, Amritsar. She has published several books and numerous articles, and has participated and presented Papers at various Conferences. Her field of specialization is Comparative Study of Religion, and Sikh Philosophy.

Dr. Pushpa Joseph, FMM [pushpapjoseph@yahoo.co.in] currently works in the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras as Post Doctoral and Teaching Fellow. She was the Co-ordinator of EWA (Ecclesia of Women in Asia) in 2002-2003. Her Ph.D. thesis titled "A Contextual and Critical Application of the Reconstructionist Model of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza" will be published shortly.

Dr. Stanislaus Swamikannu, SDB has done his Ph.D. on 'Deconstruction' from the Catholic University of Louvain, Belgium. He has been lecturing in different Institutes in India. Presently he is the provincial of the Salesian Province of Chennai. Despite his administrative occupations, he finds time for research and publication.

Dr. Joe Mannath, SDB [jmannath@vsnl.net] is associate professor at the Department of Christian Studies, University of Madras. He also lectures at other universities in India and abroad. He was the President of ACPI for six year (1994-2000). With his vast erudition and experience he has authored several books and articles.

Dr. George Thadathil, SDB is presently the Principal of Salesian College, Sonada, Darjeeling, affiliated to North Bengal University. He completed his doctorate from the School of Religion and Philosophy, University of Madras, making a study on Sri Narayana Guru Movement in Kerala. He has co-edited several books and written many scholarly articles.

Small Corrections from the *Proof* of the ACPI Book: *Subaltern perspectives*

P. 4. Spacing between the different items as follows:

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George Panthanmackel

SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES

Philosophizing in Context

Editor: George Thadathil

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P. 5. Some curves are found on some of the lines; hope, they are from the Xeroxing.

The last line: *Panthanmackel*(*There is 'l'*)

pp. 6 & 7: same problem of some words being found in a curved manner

p. 21: name of the author: follow the same font style for all the authors after the title of the article.

p. 23. Header: Philosophizing from ('f' small, not big; all through this article)

p. 71: More space after the name of the author

p. 76: The subtitle at the end of the page is to be taken to next page

p. 109: The para, starting with: What comes alive.... (it is indented too much)

p. 101: Header: Subalternity and the ...('t' has to be small, on all headers of this article)

p. 133: Footnote No. 1 can be deleted, if there is no matter to be given

p. 155: page number on the top is to be deleted

p. 235: page number on the top to be deleted

Last article by George Thadathil, Concluding Statement and Our Contributors are to be included.

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PLURALISM OF PLURALISM

A Pluralistic Probe into Philosophizing

Edited by

Johnson J. Puthenpurackal

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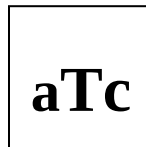
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INTRODUCTION

Pluralism has become the odour of the day; the myth of ‘uniformity’ has given way to a celebration of plurality in the postmodern today. Despite the culture of globalization trying to swallow up every *difference* under the ‘umbrella’ of the same—same culture, same religion, same morality, etc., of the powerful West—the ‘differents’ have become more *different* today, and pluralism is more evidently manifest. Gone are the days when differences used to send shock-waves and give surprises. Globalization with its powerful media has done at least this much of good: the ‘different ways’ in the various parts of the world are known to everyone everywhere, although these ‘differences’ are presented as something to be looked down upon and overcome. Today everyone at least ‘knows’ that there are people who ‘think’ and ‘act’ differently. Pluralism is the celebration of the postmodern culture.

While the West ‘academically’ celebrates pluralism, in India it is ‘really’ celebrated—pluralism is a *reality* in India. In the West pluralism is a notion to be reflected upon, to be investigated into, to be discussed about, etc. We, in India, *existentially* ‘live’ pluralism; India is perhaps the only nation where plurality of every kind harmoniously co-exists. Thus ‘pluralism’ in India is not merely an academic theme to be scientifically worked out, but an existential issue to be lived with. Pluralism being the specificity of Indian scenario, Association of Christian Philosophers of India (ACPI) has taken a right move in taking up the question of pluralism for its philosophical research. Although there is no dearth of books on pluralism, the research carried out in the present volume will have a difference, insofar as this book is the result of a concerted effort by some fifteen Indian Christian philosophers giving expression to their existential experience of pluralism from various perspectives. This explains the main title of the book: *Pluralism of Pluralism*. Pluralism is of various kinds: philosophical, cultural, religious, ethical, ecological, feminine, etc., and thus it is a pluralism of pluralism. The subtitle too—*A Pluralistic Plea for Philosophizing*—needs some clarification. There is a plea contained in the various articles of the book—a plea emerging from pluralism to be open to pluralism. Thus the tone of the book, which is both descriptive and prescriptive, is reflected in its very title: *Pluralism of Pluralism: A Pluralistic Plea for Philosophizing*.

* * * * *

The study is roughly divided into three parts: *Clarification*, *Specification*, and *Application*, and each part contains five articles each. The articles in the first part (Clarification) are intended to shed light on the general theme of the book, namely, pluralism. In the first article: “Pluralism: A Philosophical Clarification of the Notion,” Johnson J. Puthenpurackal dwells at length on setting the central theme of the book in the right perspective by specifying its meaning and differentiating it from others. The author emphasizes that pluralism calls for an existential receptivity and sensitivity to radical diversity, which is possible only with a philosophical humility. George Panthanmackel, in

the next study, finds a philosophical basis for pluralism in the plural possibilities offered in the philosophy of Heidegger. This article is largely a textually based authentic reading of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. The author conclusively shows the plural possibilities contained in the 'how' of Dasein's being-in-the-world. John F. Sequeira shows Gadamer's "Fusion of Horizon" as yet another philosophical basis for pluralism. The "fusion" is presented as a 'dialogue' between the different. It opens out a way for the pluralities to exist together. In the Indian thought there is a philosophical orientation for pluralism in the *Anekantavada* of Jainism. This is clarified in the next article by John Peter, according to which *Anekantavada*, being non-dogmatic in approach and relative in outlook, reconciles the variety without rejecting it. The study by Joseph Venattumattam, "Pluralism and Relativism," too is clarificatory in nature. The author defends pluralism by contrasting it with realism and relativism. The extremes—only one position is true and the rest are false, and truth is purely relative to the individual—are to be rejected. The study proposes neither uniformity nor pluriformity, but unity in diversity.

The five articles in the second part, "Specification," shed light on some the various kinds of pluralism—pluralism as specified to specific realms. We begin with the study "Cultural Pluralism: A Celebration of Difference," by Shailendra. After having clarified the meaning of culture, the author goes on to show that we are living in a world of multiculture, where one finds identity-wars and celebration of difference. In the context of India this study on cultural pluralism is of great relevance. Henry Kodikuthiyil, in the next study, looks into the "Emerging Trends in Ecological Pluralism." The author, after having taken note of the various ecological pluralisms, finds the gradual shift from ego-centrism to eco-centrism. Pushpa Joseph, in her study: "Feminisms and Pluralisms: A Philosophical Perspective," argues that the emergence of feminism has been in close relation with that of pluralism. The first part of the paper is more of expository in nature, and then it becomes more philosophical, and eventually it moves towards investigating the challenges of a viable feminist pluralism. Ashley Miranda reflects aloud with Alasdair MacIntyre on the movement "from Ethical Relativism to Ethical Pluralism." Disturbed by the moral catastrophe of the contemporary period, the author proposes an Aristotelian moral scheme rather than a Nietzschean one. Such a moral scheme provides a space for genuine ethical pluralism, with the possibility of dialogue. George Karuvelil looks at the question of Religious Pluralism from the epistemological perspective in his study, "Religious Pluralism: Some Cognitive Issues." The author, in this article, is concerned about giving clarity to two issues: the nature of pluralistic discourse, and the epistemology of pluralism. The study is completed with a suggestion of a new way of conceiving the epistemology of religious experience.

After having enlightened ourselves on the theme of pluralism with the help of the studies in the first two parts, we are prepared to orient ourselves towards more of a practical realm. The studies in this section are mainly focused on the way in which pluralism has to be 'applied' or 'lived' in different situations. We begin with the study, "Education as Openness to Reality," by Samuel Lepcha. The author refreshes our awareness of the prevailing diversities in the world. How one has to respond to such a situation: this is the question that should challenge the system of education. Hence the

larger part of the study is devoted to showing that education has to enable persons to be open to pluralism.

One of the important areas in which education has to assert its presence is that of Mass Media. Robert Pen, in his article “Mass Media and the Plurality of Values,” looks into this question of paramount importance. The new media-culture has affected and altered our value-priorities drastically. Keeping this scenario as the background the author makes an analytical study on the meaning of values and of media, on the positive and negative effects of media, and on the new challenges it offers. As India is the cradle of so many religions, the question of “Religious Pluralism” is not of purely academic interest but of vital importance. Scaria Varanath delves deep into this question in his article; “Religious Pluralism: Its Challenges to Christian Philosophizing.” The author is very emphatic in making a plea