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## STATUS OF SUBALTERN WOMEN IN INDIAN POLITICS.



### ABSTRACT: -

**T**he idea of India as a nation has undergone extensive critique in recent years. Two such incisive critiques, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (Aloysius, 1999) and *Debrahmanising History* (Braj Ranjan Mani, 2006) were instrumental in bringing a fresh subaltern perspective to the idea/reality that is India. Thus while the mainstream view sets the start of the Independence movement in the middle of the 19th century, referring to the 1857 revolt as the “First war of Indian Independence”, others point to the anti-colonial struggle by the adivasis in central India many years earlier, and continuing parallel to, but independent of the “mainstream” anti-colonial struggle as constituting the first rebellion of the indigenous population against the colonisers. Thus social location and political position are likely to mediate understanding of India’s history, present and future, just as they also impact the role, position and location of the subaltern (Dalit, adivasi, tribal, minority or OBC) women in today’s India.

**KEYWORDS:** Subaltern Women , political position

### INTRODUCTION :

The ideological weight of hierarchy and power, the problematic of subtly created spaces of

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binary oppositions, and the dynamics of superiority and inferiority traverse every realm of human experience and system of possibilities. No space is neutral, no product is apolitical. A sensitive, sensitized, seeking eye can recognize the overt and covert play of power/ politics in the multifaceted methods by which patterns and textures of subalternity and subordination are inscribed and reinscribed in the social and individual psyche. Culture, societal relationships, diverse institutions including family, education and religion, literature, sexuality – all bear the imprint of hegemony and subjugation.

Language is one of the potent tools wielded by the dominant groups in society to create binary opposites. Prioritising one group naturally creates the Other. Pushing certain groups to the margin, to the periphery, away from the vitality and vivacity of the centre necessarily involves the process of cultural Othering. The subaltern is thus created, burdened with the subordinated dimensions always on the right side of the binary oppositions. The subaltern is imbued with the negatives at all levels, be it social, cultural, sexual or personal. The subaltern is the one who is denied an authentic presence. He/ She is the one bereft of voice or dignity: one who is a mere zero, a cipher with no essential meaning or a sense of being. The gravity of the situation is intensified when the subaltern is a women. She is even denied a subject position. Being at the precarious juncture, criss-crossed by multiple forces of oppression, she is the one who occupies the lowest position in the social

ladder. Her presence is not even authenticated; if at all it is done, it is only to enforce the superiority of the male counterpart. She is the deviant, the deformat, signifying all the lacks, the voids.

The predicament of the female subaltern is the most miserable of all oppressive states. It is a lethal combination for the subaltern to be a women. Her life, dreams, hopes and the basic right to a dignified survival are thwarted by multiple forces of oppression. She is a victim of racism, classism, and most importantly, of the primarily subjugating ideology of patriarchy. The dream of transcending the threatening powers of oppression rather remains elusive for her. Even more pathetic is the fact that the dominant powers have so naturalized the subjugation of women that she often fails to recognize the pitfall that she is in. She wails in that dungeon forever, often taking it as her ordained destiny to be always the erratic, the aberrant and the abnormal.

Feminist literature has constantly endeavoured to bring to the limelight the common experience of oppression shared by women. It is significantly laden with ideological gravity and with the nuances of politically laden discourses, exemplifying the axiom, "the personal is the political." Feminists down the centuries have dissected and thoroughly verified the category called the feminine. Gender equations become a major area of feminist concern since they regard gender as a cultural construct. Being a women may be a biological categorization but being feminine is a cultural construct. The category called the feminine is constructed with reference to the male, the masculine, the norm, the centre: "Just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique is defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine" (Beauvoir,1972:15). Simone de Beauvoir further elaborates the process of cultural Othering:

She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (1972:16)

This process of taking the masculine as the yardstick against which the deviant called feminine is measured and analysed creates a negating effect on feminine identity. She starts denigrating herself. This process is accentuated by the hegemonic pursuits of the different societal institutions.

### AN INVOLUNTARY TRANSLATION

Historically the connection between the working class and subalternity is by no means unsubstantiated. According to legend, even Gramsci, who defined subalternity politically, already substituted the term subalterns for the proletariat in his prison diaries (1934-35). He could not use the word proletariat because of prison censorship in fascist Italy. In this way, the term subalternity, which actually means "of lesser rank", found its way into political theory as a kind of involuntary translation. Gramsci related the term to the groups of society that were exposed to the hegemony of the ruling classes, but especially to the peasant classes of the peripheral south, which had never been integrated into the Italian nation – in other words to groups that were inherently disunited and excluded from social representation. The subalterns did not speak the language of the nation – they could not communicate with it and were therefore also not part of it. In fact, due to the lack of a common language, each subaltern group remained isolated from the others. Unlike the workers movement of that time, which developed an internationally comprehensible language to constitute itself as a subject, the subalterns remained dispersed.

Gramsci's terminological neologism consequently experienced the same thing as every translation: translations have a dynamic of their own – they become charged with new meanings that make it impossible to translate them back. The meaning of Gramsci's subalterns soon became far removed from the proletariat of orthodox Marxist understanding. Unlike a self-organizing proletariat, the subalterns remained diffuse and disunited. For this reason, they also had no common language that would have enabled them to organize as a class or form a nation. Their dispersion prevented them from being able to speak with one voice and represent themselves politically. Hence the subalterns could no longer – or rather not yet – be translated back into the proletariat.

### TRANSLATION AS TRANS-LATIO

The whole potential of the concept of subalternity, however, was first to become evident in the course of so-called globalization. For the peripheries increasingly shifted in the course of the integration of world markets.

It seems that it is only on the upper floors of the metropolises where the assembly line from Charlie Chaplin's classic "Modern Times" no longer exists. Instead of disappearing, however, it only exploded the factory. The factory now takes place in the mines, the fields, the bedrooms and back rooms, the back roads, the garages and parking lots where day laborers wait. It poured itself into the world, producing countless new groups of subalterns almost industrially.

It is therefore no wonder that the most fruitful applications of the concept of subalternity took place in India beginning in the 1970s and thereafter in Latin America. According to Ranajit Guha, in India national historiography excluded the great mass of the Indian population from the status of political subjects as subalterns. These subalterns represented the majority of the population; however, their part in the resistance against the British colonial power was ignored. In contrast to this, the project of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group was to reconstruct the lost voices of the subaltern groups through archive work.

Spivak's article, parts of which were first published in 1985, ties into this project of counter-historiography. Although she sympathizes with the project of the Subaltern Studies Group, Spivak – similar to Godard earlier – questions whether it is really so easy to bring the excluded to speak. Is it enough to metaphorically hold a microphone in front of their mouths, even if the microphone is replaced in this case with the historical methods of archive research? This is more than doubtful, since the archive is a refuge of power, in which the traces of the subalterns are necessarily twisted and distorted. Spivak tells us how even the few female names registered in the colonial archive were garbled through the ignorance of the British to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Can we even understand the stammeringly rendered expressions of the subalterns in retrospect, especially those of women? Must "experts" in turn translate the language of the subalterns to explain to us what they really mean? The role of "experts" is also the target of Spivak's first, important criticism. She accuses theoreticians like Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault of assuming the role of these kinds of experts in conversation among themselves – specifically because they want to let the oppressed "speak for themselves". Although the reproach seems paradoxical, at a closer reading it becomes quite clear: in the conversation in question, it is the two intellectuals who represent the "speaking-for-oneself" of the others. In a way, the situation resembles the scene from "Tout va bien", although in a different guise. The workers allegedly speak "themselves", but again nothing can be heard; whereas the voice-over in the film marks the brokenness of speaking-for-oneself, here everything is overlaid with the voice-over commentary by the experts. They play a kind of ventriloquist for underprivileged groups, while acting at the same time as though they were not even there.

According to Spivak, letting others "speak for themselves" is thus an unadmitted gesture of self-glorification. She was already quite right in criticizing this gesture twenty years ago as a covert rehabilitation of the subject (of the western middle class). Spivak sees this covert essentialism as being diametrically opposed to the openly admitted and thus seemingly old-fashioned essentialism of the Subaltern Studies Group with their project of reconstructing a subaltern political subject. Whereas the former denies the subject, yet lives it, the latter denies initially, but only as being inherently heterogeneous and broken. It is only defined by being dispersed and incomprehensible and ultimately consists of pure difference.

This last aspect is what especially interests Spivak, and with it she goes beyond the approach of the Subaltern Studies Group. For how should a subject of this kind still be able to articulate itself? Exactly: not at all. Reconstructing the voice of the subalterns is principally not possible, according to Spivak, especially if these subalterns are female. Her most controversially discussed example relates to the burning of widows in India. Spivak claims that these widows are made silent by a kind of discursive dilemma: whereas they were glorified by the local patriarchy as preservers of "tradition", for the English colonial powers they exemplified the barbaric backwardness of the Indians that was to be forcibly modernized. In between these two irreconcilable positions, it became very difficult, if not impossible for these women to articulate themselves. No matter what they said, it would be misused by at least one side – if not by both – to legitimize its own position. Thus even if these women spoke, they could not make themselves heard. This was the meaning of the apodictic and often questioned slogan attributed to Spivak: "the subaltern cannot speak." The order of discourses does not allow the articulation of certain facts, because they are themselves based on this silence. This results in a close connection between

the status of subalternity and silence. If subalterns cannot articulate themselves, then this conversely means that everyone who can articulate her or himself is not subaltern.

### AUTISTIC MONADS

Yet even Spivak's text itself encountered a discursive context, in which some of her arguments could be clearly understood, others not at all (which misled someone to the ironic question of whether Gayatri Spivak can speak). We can roughly define this context as that of debates on the politics of representation, as they have been conducted since the 1970s at the latest by feminists, later also by postcolonial and cultural studies theoreticians. The fundamental question that arose was specifically that of how the subalterns could still emancipate themselves despite all this, when according to Gramsci representation in the sphere of culture was a precondition for being able to represent oneself politically as well. Hence if the subalterns could not be represented, how should they then become a self-reliant political subject?

The (provisional) solution to the problem seemed to lie in so-called strategic essentialism – propounded by the Subaltern Studies Group: even if one does not believe in identity or subject, one pretends to for a time, in order to become capable of political agency. However, the problem was not only that this approach became less and less strategic and more and more essentialist over the course of time. In addition, the problem was also that the mostly purely cultural visualization of various subject positions did not correlate to the extent that had been hoped for with an improved political representation. Instead it produced a multitude of consumable differences and placed subjectivities in the foreground that strictly insisted on their respective uniqueness. This resulted in a veritable panopticon of the most diverse ego models that largely fit harmoniously into a new form of capitalism based on exploiting difference. In relation to becoming a political subject, this politics of difference proved to be fatal, since it resulted in a cacophony of monads that no longer had anything in common and tended to be in competition with one another. Especially after the downfall of the socialist states, the jargon, into which the language of an international workers movement had deteriorated, also broke down. Since then, we have seen ourselves confronted with a multitude of mutually untranslatable political movements and demands, the absolute majority of which refer to specific cultural or national identities. A shared language independent of identity has become far removed. At best, we can only hear – as in "Tout va bien" – its unspoken thoughts.

In this speechlessness, one thing has become particularly unspeakable: solidarity beyond identity. It is as though the dominant order is no longer based on the exclusion of others, but rather on the radical denial of their possible equality. And no matter how clearly the demand for equality is articulated, it dies away in a hegemony that has refined diversity into an imperial power technique.

Peter Hallward has argued that the neglect of equality is a general tendency in so-called postcolonial studies, which have ended up at a dead end due to their unconditional insistence on difference. A multitude of singular subjects that are respectively incommensurate with all others, or at least behave as though they were, generates an autistic universe. Alain Badiou's furious conclusion to these developments was that it is no longer difference that is the problem, but instead the equality that is still lacking. Expressed with Spivak's own examples: not only is the worker on the other side of the international division of labor still subaltern, but we do not even know why anyone could be in solidarity with her. It is solidarity as such that has become subaltern today, because there is no language in which it can be audibly articulated.

And now we can return to the question at the beginning: Is the working class subaltern today? The answer is: Which working class? A global working class does not exist today, and it is not certain that it ever did. As in Spivak's definition of subalternity, it is fragmented and inherently heterogeneous; it speaks no common language and can hardly translate itself. If its components have anything in common, this cannot yet be expressed – except in the worn phrases of the workers bureaucracies that actually only represent national social lobbies. And what we regard as its "speaking for oneself" is really only the lip-syncing of the "experts".

As a global working class, the working class of today is just as subaltern as the Italian peasants of the south in former times. Yet how can the people who are set in a transnational relation to one another by the flexible production chain of contemporary capitalism articulate their relationship to one another? How do workers speak across the deep chasms of the international division of labor? We hear a swarm of voices, but no

one is really listening.

Constituting a political subject beyond the realm of state, culture and identity is precisely what appears to be structurally impossible today and is therefore all the more urgent. Perhaps an opportunity may be found, however, in that the subalterns and the proletariat have become mutually translatable in a new way. As Jean-Luc Nancy noted, it is increasingly questionable to define this inherently dispersed subject through work – and perhaps the goal of a common language is also only a stumbling block that hinders our view of common listening. The legacy of Spivak's text is the indication of this moment of fracture – and the task that it still presents to us today does not consist in strengthening the autistic "speaking for oneself" of individual subjects, but rather in hearing their shared silence.

### CONCLUSION:

According to legend, even Gramsci, who defined subalternity politically, already substituted the term subalterns for the proletariat in his prison diaries. In contrast to this, the project of the Indian Subaltern Studies Group was to reconstruct the lost voices of the subaltern groups through archive work. Spivak sees this covert essentialism as being diametrically opposed to the openly admitted and thus seemingly old-fashioned essentialism of the Subaltern Studies Group with their project of reconstructing a subaltern political subject. If subalterns cannot articulate themselves, then this conversely means that everyone who can articulate her or himself is not subaltern. The solution to the problem seemed to lie in so-called strategic essentialism propounded by the Subaltern Studies Group: even if one does not believe in identity or subject, one pretends to for a time, in order to become capable of political agency.

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- n this, cf. Kien Nghi Ha, *Hype um Hybridität. Kultureller Differenzkonsum und postmoderne Verwertungstechniken im Spätkapitalismus*, Bielefeld: Transcript 2005, and Slavoj Žižek, *The spectre is still roaming around*, Zagreb: Arkzin 1998, p. 61 f.

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