



UNDERSTANDING THE NEW SUBALTERN: REPRESENTATION OF THE INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF SUNDARBANS IN BENGALI LITERATURE

Dr. Samiran Mandal
Assistant Professor , Department of Bengali ,
Baruipur College , Kolkata, India.



ABSTRACT :

This paper focuses on the shifting “lived experience” and cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans, the largest delta and mangrove forest in India and Bangladesh. Although, there are a number of literary works portraying the lived experience of the different indigenous communities of Sundarbans, but scant attention has been paid regarding the interpretative apparatus that often ‘filtered’ their customs, practices and beliefs in accordance to hegemonic upper class, upper-caste interpretation. By engaging with the category of the “subaltern”, taking into consideration recent contributions to this topic, this paper seeks to reconsider the lived experience of these indigenous people, since this affects what Gramsci calls their “common sense”, their understanding of reality or, their “philosophy”. There is little doubt that the enquiry into the “Subaltern Question” in India today cannot ignore the question of ‘Adivasi’ or indigenous people as the political unconscious of Indian society. Hence, it is important to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of their lived experience and in what way upper class and upper caste literary mediations have translated that lived experience of indigenous communities and migrant-tribes in Sundarbans. Parallel to close textual readings of literary works revolving around Suandarbans, this paper draws from the year-long field work in the Sundarbans to understand those “conditions and relations of the past”, and the “integral history”, which takes into account political, socio-economic, cultural and religious dynamics, in which the “integral historian” is able to identify the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape the consciousness of the masses. Thus, this paper referring to the indigenous communities of Sundarbans not only accentuates the precarious position of these groups as subalterns, but also provides a critique of the interpretative apparatus of hegemonic literary practices.

KEYWORDS : *indigenous communities , hegemonic literary practices , religious dynamics.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to trace the multidisciplinary approach to the study of subalterns to in what way literary works portraying the lived experience of the different indigenous communities of Sundarbans, use specific interpretative apparatus that often ‘filtered’ their customs, practices and beliefs in accordance to hegemonic upper class, upper-caste interpretation. For the purpose of this study we need to take into account the development of the Gramscian concept of the sovereign state as “the protagonist of history” in relation to the “integral State” where both political and civil society intervene to preserve power for dominant groups through the hegemony of consent and coercion. There is a remarkable closeness between the two expressions “State as Protagonist of History” and the

definition of subaltern groups as being “On the Margins of History,” including slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races and the proletariat. It is clear that Gramsci has in mind “subaltern groups” where a process of colonization was already taking place even prior to the development of a territorial colonialism outside Europe.

Despite Gramsci’s interest in proposing a theory and formulating general theories and conclusions, his methodology is based on “particular events, pieces of information, and observations” in order “to translate the elements of historical life into theoretical language” (Green, 2002). In fact, it is important to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of the subaltern’s lived experience. In this paper I refer to the “lived experience” and cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans, the largest delta and mangrove forest in India and Bangladesh since this affects what Gramsci calls their “common sense”, their understanding of reality or, their “philosophy”. In order to accomplish a translation into literary language, and to understand these “conditions and relations of the past”, Gramsci appeals to “integral history” as a versatile workshop which takes into account political, socio-economic, cultural and religious dynamics, in which the “integral historian” is able to perceive the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape the consciousness of the masses (Morera, 1990, p.61).

There are a number of Bengali novels based on “lived experience” and cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans, which includes, *Uponibesh* (1947) by Narayan Gangopadhyay, *Jal Jangal* (1977), *Sundarbaner Ajan Sardar* (1955), *Sundarban* (1962), *Banbibi* (1966), *Bede Baul* (1985) by Manoj Basu, *Bagda* (1986) by Baren Gangopadhyay, *Kuberer Bishoy Ashoy* (1976) by Shyamal Gangopadhyay, *Jol Jongoler Kavyo* (1993) by Sunil Gangopadhyay among many others. While the scope of this paper does not allow me to engage with all these novels and short stories, however, the paper will try to explore in what way upper class and upper caste literary mediations have translated that lived experience of indigenous communities and migrant-tribes in Sundarbans.

Within this theoretical framework, this paper explores how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of the lived experience of the indigenous communities and in what way upper class and upper caste literary mediations have translated that lived experience of indigenous communities and migrant-tribes in Sundarbans. Parallel to close textual readings of literary works revolving around Sundarbans, this paper draws from the year-long field work in the Sundarbans to understand those “conditions and relations of the past”, and the “integral history”, which takes into account political, socio-economic, cultural and religious dynamics, in which the “integral historian” is able to identify the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape the consciousness of the masses. Thus, this paper referring to the indigenous communities of Sundarbans not only accentuates the precarious position of these groups as subalterns, but also provides a critique of the interpretative apparatus of hegemonic literary practices.

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES OF SUNDARBANS AND MARGINS OF HISTORY

The history of the indigenous communities and migrant-tribes in Sundarbans is considered a history that is so marginal and peripheral that they, echoing Gramsci one might say, “have not attained a consciousness of the class per se and ... consequently do not even suspect that their history might possibly have any importance or that it might be of any value to leave documentary evidence of it. Those who have conducted research among Dalits have experienced the difficulty of proving the researcher’s genuine interest in their history and their life. While Dalit scholars might question the validity of ‘outsiders’ producing insightful accounts on Dalits, serious scholarship remains sensitive to this problematic issue (Rao 2009).

Certeau explains the production of historiography as “operation” and “fabrication” of texts by the “circles of writing” and “institutions of power” which transform findings through the “practice of interpretation” into a “science”, thus preserving the authority of official history and achieving a kind of hegemony. According to Certeau, this is History with a capital „H“, since all others are “small histories”,

in lower case. Yet “official History” – although a fabrication – contains “traces” that the hegemonic historiography is unable to eliminate, thus preserving traces of “small histories” if only to contradict them. Certeau returns continuously to the idea of “traces as inassimilable fragments of alterity” which spring up time and again “to importune” the interpretative apparatus of centres and institutions of learning and knowledge (Certeau 1988). These traces reveal the tactics – as opposed to the “strategies” of power – used by groups which find themselves “at the margins of history” and which occupy “zones of silence”. Gramsci cannot avoid noticing that the official interpretation of the subalterns does not rest merely on a narrow definition but strikes at the very heart of their personhood as human beings, leaving them incapable of “an inner life.” Thus, if one is to summarize the Gramscian position it is revealed that firstly, it is possible to produce a history of the subalterns; second, these groups evolve according to phases or degrees of political organisation; third, the hegemonic context in which subalterns find themselves (the political, social, economic and cultural milieu) promotes and strives to maintain the situation of subalternity; and fourth, despite these difficulties, subaltern groups are able to transform their social subordination.

At this point, it is important to consider the recent trends in publications by the Subaltern Studies collective, headed by Ranajit Guha, which taking inspiration from Gramsci, has disseminated the term “subaltern” internationally. In his analysis Green includes Spivak’s article (1988) and prefaces his argument by maintaining that both Spivak’s and Guha’s reading of Gramsci is based almost exclusively on *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (Gramsci 1971) and therefore offers a very restricted interpretation of the Gramscian concept of the “subaltern”. Yet whilst Guha’s reference to Gramsci seems motivated by an acknowledgement of Gramsci’s relevance to the Subaltern Studies project Spivak’s intentions seem to be different. The shortcomings of Guha’s approach is emphasised also by Spivak, who defines as “essentialist and taxonomic” Guha’s description of subalterns as “different from the elite”. According to Spivak, the discourse of Subaltern Studies is intrinsically flawed because it relies on British, nationalist and colonialist documents, in which subalterns leave minimal traces. If the representation of subalterns finds itself “inscribed” into the dominant discourse, Spivak concludes “the subaltern cannot speak.” Clearly, this position dissociates itself from a Gramscian approach when referring to the search for “traces” offered by the subaltern.

Gramsci and Spivak: The Subaltern Question

It would be useful to propose certain reflections on Spivak’s question Can the Subaltern Speak? which “has gone around the world” and never ceases to challenge our intellect. Spivak does not seem at all interested in deepening a reflection on the Gramscian discourse on the subaltern, as she herself has pointed out (Spivak 2004). Rather, Spivak underlines at various stages that her critique of both the occidental “desire” to problematise the subject and the way in which the “third-world” subject is represented in western discourse, finds pertinent and ample support in Marx and Derrida, thus making Gramsci – presumably – redundant. It seems clear that Spivak is not only interested in exposing the deficiencies of “the Western subject”, but she is also interested in taking an explicit position within the struggle for “intellectual supremacy” in the West. However if we look the Bengali literary work based on Sundarbans and its indigenous people then we may also locate such deficiencies of representations. For instance, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Troilkyonath Mukhopadhyay and Parashuram represented Sundarban in an insignificant way in their literature.

Our main concern is that at the basis of their subalternity there lies an ideology defining them less-than-human, which is then translated and ramified in very concrete terms in the daily life of indigenous communities of Sundarbans. For them subalternity becomes a spatial/territorial, economical, social, educational and, above all, religious/ontological segregation. There is also a poignant and powerful meaning of the word “Adivasi” – “the ancient inhabitants”. The adoption of the term Adivasi as self-designation springs out of the awareness and perception of the oppression/humiliation they have to endure: the real subaltern in Gramscian terms. When the word Adivasi is spoken by a non-Adivasi it might have the character of a derogatory remark. Yet for Adivasi themselves the term has become a place of resistance and a reason for struggle.

The question thus returns - making today an ever more urgent appeal - for the subaltern-indigenous communities of Sundarbans: "Can the subaltern speak?" If Derridian deconstruction of the occidental subject prevents us from hearing the cry of the subaltern, then Gramsci becomes indispensable in calling the Western subject to its ethical responsibilities, because this is an ethical question. If upholding the sati tradition can be ascribed to a grammatical error, then which grammatical error is it that allowed Untouchability to exist and persist in South Asia? If it is true that the Western subject has imposed an imperial domination through the "violence of episteme", which episteme and what different epistemology validate the continuity of oppressive social customs? Besides the Manusmriti there is also the interpretation of these scriptures by the "centers of knowledge" and the creation of apparatuses - including mythologies (Zene 2007) - which further validate caste and Untouchability. We witness here the confluence of hegemony employed by civil society - in different ways within South Asia - with hegemony exercised by the State in a concurrence that preserves caste and other oppressive social customs, notwithstanding the fluidity of these concepts and their different construal from the pre-colonial through the postcolonial period.

Here the figure of the indigenous women of Sundarbans becomes important as a number of literary work revolves around such characters. Thus, indigenous communities of Sundarbans, especially indigenous women are doubly subaltern, both as women and as indigenous. Not only does the indigenous woman speak and talk, but she wants to be listened to through words, poetry, singing, dancing and working - and more precisely the always underpaid extra-work. Often the indigenous woman finds herself compelled to subtract a handful of rice from the family dinner, sell that rice and pay for her daughter's education, so that the latter will not like her, be illiterate, but will learn to defend herself from within and outside the group. Besides inspiring a different understanding of indigenous -ness within their own communities, indigenous women have also motivated feminist scholarship to challenge Brahmanical feminism (Narayan 2006), to address anew the "Caste Question" and to postulate the indigenous as a "new political subject" (Rao 2008).

Learning From the Indigenous Communities and Migrant-Tribes of Sundarbans

In more recent interventions, Spivak has mentioned that a "new subaltern", asserting that there are multiple levels of subalternity, replaces the "old subaltern". The "new subaltern" appears to be very permeable and thus exposed to the risk of being not only represented, but also exploited by the global market. Thus, it may lead to a pedagogic philosophy: "learn from the subaltern" and more precisely "learn to learn from below." For this to happen we must acknowledge that subalterns are in fact able and allowed not only to speak and to talk but also "to teach". The intention of learning how to learn from the indigenous people of Sundarbans, can be put into practice when this ethical subject is ready "to learn how to listen to, in order to learn from the subaltern." This pedagogy seems eminently Gramscian as it looks at "integral history" as an "integral historian", ready to listen and to search for those "traces" that will allow us to recognize elements of resistance.

Returning to Gramsci, I would like to point out: (1) If we wish to propose for South Asia a prototype of subaltern who embodies those characteristics expressed by Gramsci, we cannot but think of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans or, more precisely, of indigenous women. (2) The categories used to identify the "new subaltern" clearly point back to the phases proposed by Gramsci for subalterns. The diverse groups of indigenous communities of Sundarbans reflect this Gramscian classification of phases of subalternity, precisely because they are compelled to progress from the lowest possible level of non-humanity. (3) Gramscian terminology, which contemplates not just "subaltern classes" but also "subaltern groups," allows us to open up to different circumstances and scenarios, such as those present in South Asia. (4) In their history these indigenous communities manifest moments and "traces" of self-consciousness of their subaltern condition and they offer palpable examples of resistance and a willingness to overcome subalternity - at different levels and to varying degrees - despite the persistence of "disaggregation, multiplicity and juxtaposition". (5) Gramsci invites us to consider "integral history" as an effective methodology employed to discover those "traces" present in the history of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans. It is a history that

takes into account how indigenous communities of Sundarbans express themselves, in order to manifest and overcome their subalternity through their own means and their meta-language like the worship of Dakshin Roy and BanBibi, Vanti Puja, Bandana Songs, and other folklore, popular religiosity, so-called “superstitions”, tales and myths, proverbs, figurative arts - this is what more poetically called, the “Gramscian paths.”

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to reveal the interpretative apparatus that often ‘filtered’ the “lived experience” and cultural practices of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans, the largest delta and mangrove forest in India and Bangladesh. Although, there are a number of literary works portraying the lived experience of the different indigenous communities of Sundarbans, but scant attention has been paid regarding the interpretative apparatus that often ‘filtered’ their customs, practices and beliefs in accordance to hegemonic upper class, upper-caste interpretation. It is important to understand how the conditions and relations of the past influence the present and future development of their lived experience and in what way upper class and upper caste literary mediations have translated that lived experience of indigenous communities and migrant-tribes in Sundarbans. Thus, this paper referring to the indigenous communities of Sundarbans not only accentuates the precarious position of these groups as subalterns, but also provides a critique of the interpretative apparatus of hegemonic literary practices.

The present moment seems to be particularly favourable in the history of Gramscian studies. There is no doubt that Gramsci’s ideas have reached places of prestige as well as remote corners of all continents, including South Asia. Many of the authors quoted here suggest ways to recover and put to good use a Gramscian methodology that recognizes the presence of the subaltern in new contexts and at times different from those analysed by Gramsci himself. Our task will be to recover those “traces” present in the fragmented history of these groups so as to detect the vital elements that will assist them in overcoming their subalternity. Today, more than ever, the indigenous communities and migrant-tribes of Sundarbans are able to express their resistance to oppression through media to which in the past they had no access. To the renowned creativity of the indigenous communities of Sundarbans, who express their experience through singing, music, poetry, dance and the “beating of drums”, a great number of new reflections and publications have now been added, both in the shape of detailed monographs discussing indigenous experiences.

During the past few years, a major change has been taking place: the emphasis seems to have shifted from indigenous people’s mere awareness of their “oppression”, towards the mobilisation of consciousness as a “transforming agent” of subalternity, and hence towards a new path taking them from “desperate cries” to liberating action. This new line of thought addresses the formation of methodological concepts, which, by revealing the many spheres in which subalternity is present, offer feasible solutions to overcome it. The situation of indigenous communities in contemporary India invites us to think critically and rigorously about those categories so intertwined with the grasp of “subalternity”: state, civil society and hegemony. All this prompts us to consider how, for Gramsci, hegemony and civil society remit to unequal power relations and points to the limits of modern democracy.

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Dr. Samiran Mandal

Assistant Professor , Department of Bengali , Baruipur College , Kolkata, India.