Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies

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Subaltern studies, while claiming to rewrite history from the perspective of subaltern groups as a prelude to creating a new emancipatory politics, has deviated from its original intent and become mired in post-modernist debates about ‘difference’. A critique of this brand of history writing should start from a simple question: what is its politics, and whose interests may it serve? But as this paper demonstrates, the subalternist approach can be criticised on many other grounds as well, including its lack of a coherent theory of how subjectivity and agency are constructed within a concrete historical context, and its refusal to acknowledge how global capitalist forces are being worked out on the ground, including the generation of ‘differences’.

In the last 13 years the Subaltern Studies group has produced a fairly large amount of literature, and its impact has been felt beyond India. Over the years numerous critiques were made of subaltern studies within India, as well as in Britain, Latin America and the US. This essay, while taking into account some of the recent critiques, further evaluates the relevance of subaltern studies to an understanding of working class history and the future of working class emancipation in a world which is dominated by a global capitalist economy.

The impetus for this essay came from my involvement in completing my book, *The Making of the Indian Working Class,* when I realised that the Subaltern Studies group has deviated from the very course which they had set. Their aim after all was to remove from Indian history a top down approach and replace it with the study of the culture of the people. In all fairness, we could say that this school got only part of it in the form of value-oriented culture of people and psychoanalysis (as a substitute for social analysis) which is generally based on textual analysis. The emphasis on textual analysis has fortunately created an unprecedented hunt by budding historians for printed materials in various regional languages which are not available in conventional places. It has also generated an interest in discourses of various kinds and in various areas, putting them under historical scrutiny – which is all to the good.

What is missing, however, in their analysis is: how do the social order and social institutions articulate in the formation of the subject (individual); or, how is the link between social and psychic reality to be spelled out, let alone how it should be theorised? In short, subaltern studies left out from their consideration material culture, such as clothes, food, furniture, living and working conditions, housing, technology, and financial system, and failed to show how material culture is produced by human agency in the process of social interaction. Moreover, this material culture is also important in the formation of the value culture of people along with the psychic activity of the brain. Besides leaving out the material aspect of people’s culture, the subaltern studies approach is not even capable of creating any emancipatory politics for the masses in whose name it came into existence. The following remarks come from a young Indian student are pertinent in this regard. He said that he found a wonderful way through Gyan Prakash’s (once the leader and gatekeeper of the All-India Student Federation at Jawaharlal Nehru University and now a convert to subaltern studies) article¹ how to remain non-committal (not to take sides as he put it) and be a leftist radical at the same time. Such remarks coming from a 23-year-old budding historian should be an issue of concern for those who are committed to writing people’s (non-elite) history.

Since subaltern studies have been visibly influential amongst the younger generation of scholars, and now among Latin American and US scholars, it is imperative that an approach it should not be allowed to create a new philosophy just for the sake of having a new one as a passing fad. If we wish to remove the elitist bias from history and empower people, as proponents of subaltern studies claim they wish to do, then my suggestion is that we must rethink it with one goal in mind: to be guided by philosophies that enable us to change our ‘miserable’ reality as it exists today, rather its promotion. In other words, we need to ascertain what our politics are when we raise certain questions over others, or when we choose certain methods of analysis over others in writing history. These are the concerns which are core of my discussion.

I should like to start with a telling exchange between a teacher of philosophy and his student:²

Teacher: Si fu, name the basic questions of philosophy.
Si Fu: Are things external to us, self-sufficient, independent of us, or are things in us, dependent on us, non-existent without us?

Teacher: What opinion is the correct one?
Si Fu: There has been no decision about it...
Teacher: Why has the question remained unresolved?

Si Fu: The Congress which was to have made the decision took place two hundred years ago at the Sant Monastery which lies on the bank of the Yellow River. The question was: is the Yellow River real or does it exist only in people’s head? But during the Congress the snow thawed in the mountains and swept away the Sant monastery with all the participants in the Congress. So the proof that things exist externally to us, self sufficiently independently of us was not furnished.

We shall come back to the lessons learnt from this exchange, that is ‘reality’ and where to find it, at the end of the essay.

I

Trained in western academic institutions, most of the subaltern studies members were clearly influenced by the prevailing trends in historical writings of 1970s under the impact of social historians such as E P Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Subaltern studies, in fact, represents the application of these ideas to Indian historiography. Although subaltern studies rejects meta-narratives, their own conditions of existence and emergence remain primarily within the meta-narrative. Today, the subaltern field heavily depends upon post-modernist ideas (which emerged in the west) and methods for textual analysis while at the same time claiming to ‘provincialise Europe and its history’.³

Members of the Subaltern Studies group felt that although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable. Their main thesis is that colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian history had robbed the common people of their agency. The subaltern studies collective thus announced a ‘new approach’ to restore history to the subordinate in order to rectify the elitist bias

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characteristic of much academic work in south Asian studies. The subaltern's agency was restored by theorising that the elite in India played a dominant role and not simply a hegemonic one. Thus, with the logic of this theory the subalterns were made into autonomous historical actors who then seemingly acted on their own since they were not seen to be led by the elites.

At the same time, subaltern studies differed from western historians' attempt to write 'history from below'. British workers left diaries behind for British historians to find their voices in, but Indian workers and peasants did not leave behind any 'original authentic' voices. Therefore to find Indian subaltern voices, subaltern studies had to use different methods of reading the available documents, i.e. read them 'against their grain'. In the process of pursuing this goal, subaltern studies concentrated more and more on how subalternity was constituted rather than finding their voices. It is with this new question that they could critique the west.

Accordingly, the next shift in subaltern studies was to concentrate on the question of how the knowledge of history was produced and how to decolonise such constructed knowledge. While trying to identify the sources which tainted the knowledge of history, subaltern studies scholars realised that they can write history only from a position of subalternity because India herself was a subaltern as a British colony, and after independence was subordinated to the neo-colonialism of the western world.

It is true of course that in order to write history a non-western scholar must read and know 'good' western scholars and historians, whereas a western scholar does not have to know any non-western works. For example, Indian economic historians and nationalist leaders in the last quarter of the 19th century developed a 'drain theory' showing that the cause of India's poverty was the drain of its resources and wealth by British colonialism. But these theories are rarely discussed or referred to in the dependency theories which came into being after the second world war. Today people in the west only know about dependency theory as a pioneer idea and the 'drain theory' propounded by Indian economic historians was conveniently made invisible.

In order to find a way out of similar impasse, the Subaltern Studies group wanted to 'provincialise European history' and to 'push history to its limits, and rewrite history from the grounds of ambiguity and contradictions'. In all these efforts, they claim, the subaltern remains the vantage point of their critiques.

With these shifts in goals and ideas subaltern studies changed their approach by borrowing from post-modernist methods, reading texts against the grain using semiotics and literary criticism, and finally reverting to the textual analysis of various sources: novels, biographies, pamphlets or any other available text written by people in regional languages, which in actual effect many times replaced the usual archival work. A prominent subaltern studies spokesperson recently expanded the responsibility of subaltern studies to include 'differences' as a tool for producing possibilities for action. His concern was that by emphasising 'differences' it becomes possible to challenge the 'problem of universality' in history. But interestingly, the same spokesperson does not wish to give up either Marx (let us not forget that initially subaltern studies was critical of Marxist categories and kept a distance from it) nor 'differences' because he finds Marx's category of 'real labour' to be useful in building up the idea of differences. Elaborating his point he clarified that the goal of subaltern studies is not to achieve political democracy or egalitarian distribution of wealth. The most important issue, according to him, is to keep alive the philosophical question of 'differences' because egalitarian concepts are insensitive to these questions. Therefore, subaltern studies are not writing the history of how this or that group in Asia, Africa or Latin America resisted the penetration of colonialism, but instead trying to take history to its limits in order to "make its unworking visible":".

II

Some Latin American progressive scholars were also in doubt about Marxism and its belief in progress and modernity, a commitment to revolution as forward looking, and linear developmental transformation. They were looking for an alternative approach but were hesitant to embrace the trends offered by post-modernism or post-structuralism. In fact, they questioned the applicability of post-modernism to an area of the world not yet modern and were surprised by the ahistorical claims of this approach. Many of these scholars have doubted the ability of post-modernism to facilitate political engagement and commitment. In such historical circumstances of intellectual doubts and crisis, subaltern studies seemed to Latin American progressive scholars a perfect compromise as it was formulated by a group of intellectuals belonging to the non-western world. Moreover, these Indian intellectuals seemed anti-colonial and politically radical, yet they were also conversant with the latest in textual analysis and post-modernist methods.

But the problem with the Latin American Subaltern Studies group is that there is only one historian amongst them and the rest of the scholars are literary critics. These literary scholars tend to borrow more from post-modernist methods and techniques (though they initially were suspicious of them), which has reduced subaltern studies to half of its complexity. This simplification of the interpretations made by the literary critiques of the Latin American group led to the creation of a 'poverty of historiography' in their writings. A Latin American historian has pointed out "the borrowing and application of the original Indian Subaltern group became a 'simplified misrepresentation' in the hands of Latin Americans."

In contrast to Latin American historiography, in African history writings the impact of subaltern studies has not been felt so strongly. Although increasingly subaltern studies are being mentioned in African historiography, as Fredrick Cooper points out, only Terence Ranger is using it explicitly. While surveying African historiography Cooper shows that South African historians share some of the 'history from the bottom' concerns with subaltern studies, but generally they do not agree with the concept of subaltern autonomy as is suggested in subaltern studies.

Another difference between Indian subaltern studies and African historians is that both are looking for opposite constructs while reacting to their respective historical situations. Many Indian scholars have been trying to pull apart and examine the idea of an essential 'India' by insisting on differences within communities and identities. But African scholars have felt they had to put together 'Africa' in the face of general perceptions of everlasting and immutable division. Therefore, subaltern studies seems less appealing to African historians.

Moreover, Africanists do not find the ideas propounded by subaltern studies to be new or earthshaking. For example, subaltern studies mainly focuses on the problems of recovering histories while understanding how colonial documents construct their own versions of them. This methodology appears to African historians more as sound practice than a methodological breakthrough. African historians learnt way back in the 1960s that colonial sources distorted history, and they saw the use of oral sources as well as reading colonial documents against the grain as putting themselves on the path of people's history. But in the process of writing people's history, African scholars placed more emphasis on showing that Africans had a history than on asking how Africans' history making is implicated in establishing or contesting power.

Similarly, Africans and Africanists are sympathetic to the subaltern studies critique of the controlling project of a colonial state and the continuation of those projects under the nation states. But they are also sceptical about the conceivable alternative
of autonomous ‘communities’. Their scepticism is based on their bitter experience in contemporary Somalia which shows that in the absence of the controlling capabilities of a state and with increasing availability of automatic weapons, ‘communities’ can also wipe out one another. It seems that African historians who feel the need to construct African history would not find much to borrow from the deconstructionist agenda of subaltern studies.

III

Subaltern studies represented a response to a genuine need for a new methodology, epistemology and paradigms, in order to overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world. The old categories, conceived by modernisationists and radicals alike in the decades after second world war to understand the structure of the globe, were called into question in face of the crisis of ‘progress’ and increased impoverishment of the ‘third world’. Mass migration of the people from poor countries to the industrialised world due to the demand for cheap labour has confounded borders and boundaries. It created a flow of cultures which has been at once homogenising and heterogenising in most parts of the world. The infusion and confusion of cultures created a vast identity crisis among the new diasporas. These new global circumstances needed new interpretations and new methodologies to understand people’s lives and experiences.

Within this world context the Indian state, which was also following the programmes of capitalist ‘development’ in fact helped in increasing social and political inequalities among the masses. This growing disparity in society led to the outbreak of powerful social and political movements which challenged the legitimacy of the Indian state. But most of these social movements were crushed with severe repression. Many elements of the old left, instead of challenging the ruling Indian National Congress Party (led by Indira Gandhi) strategy, compromised with the authoritarian claims of the Congress. Furthermore, the old left intellectuals accommodated the Congress Party’s interpretations in their orthodox Marxist Leninist theories in the economist development theory of class struggle. It is in this historical conjuncture of new conditions in the world after second world war, the increasing crisis of the Indian state, and the emergence of people’s movements in India, along with the bankruptcy and hypocrisy of Indian leftist historians and intellectuals, that the Subaltern Studies group emerged. Most of the members of this group came from a progressive background and insisted in their interpretations on the role of the subordinated and their agency in history. Their concern with the subaltern people means that these historians are committed to the notion of social justice for the oppressed. It is with this concern for the oppressed and subordinated people that I wish to evaluate the role of subaltern studies and therefore raise the following questions:

Does subaltern studies as it has evolved up till now help us in getting closer to the goal of social justice for all? What type of collective action would be possible based on ‘differences’ as promoted by subaltern studies? With the promotion of ‘differences’ what type of actions would be taken and against what forces? Do subaltern studies help in creating an emancipatory politics for the subalterns? Does this historiography help in understanding people’s lives, their actions and their histories more meaningfully in terms of developing strategies to make their lives better?

Some of the difficulties we encounter as we seek answers for these questions can be illustrated by the work of Chakrabarty. He suggests that the subjects should be engaged in the formation of their own categories. According to him, this can be done by looking at the primordial values of the people based on the power relations (pre-British hierarchical system) in their day-to-day lives, which have longer historical roots than British rule. Once that is done it would be possible to find the roots of our backwardness in our own culture and there will be no need to find a “fetishised demon called ‘colonialism’ or imperialism” to be blamed.12 It is only then, according to Chakrabarty, that we shall be able to break away from master narratives and European influence and thought, which always “peripheralise non-Western pasts and universalise them”. Chakrabarty challenges Indian historians’ debate on ‘changes and continuities’ in working class history. According to him, “the more fundamental question seem to be: From what teleological perspective do we even identify and name these ‘changes’?”13 Chakrabarty maintains that “the power relations that made up their (workers) everyday life arose out of a culture that was hierarchical and inegalitarian, subordinating the individual to imagined communities of a distinctly decapitalist character.”14 Therefore Chakrabarty thinks that “the issues of consciousness, solidarity, organisation, and protest in that history can be posed within our framework in terms of a tension between the undemocratic cultural codes of Indian society and the notion of ‘equality’ that socialist politics both assume and seek to transcend”.15 Thus, he tries to resolve the tension by rejecting “economic or narrowly political explanations”. Chakrabarty seems to be saying that by choosing the concepts of ‘hierarchy’ and ‘inegalitarian relations’ to understand Indian working class consciousness, his politics (and those of subalternists in general) is more radical (emancipatory) because it breaks away from western bourgeois culture and master narratives.

Let us examine the issues raised by the subalternists and the claims made by Chakrabarty to see if their strategy is more radical (emancipatory), valid, or even useful, for rewriting Indian working class history. The emphasis of Chakrabarty as well as of the subalternists on ‘culture’ is fundamental to their writings in their effort to reject meta-narratives. O’Hanlon and Washbrook correctly point out that cultural relativism means that this meta-narrative can do no more than stand alongside its opposite, that of local cultures’ self creation...[This] brings us close to the classic liberal view that culture represents some realm of freedom and choice... Thus activity is separated from individuals in the name of freedom of choice and thus, the promoters of these views are able to ignore the question of class... but they see themselves also as having to challenge the larger intellectual tradition of historical materialism that establishes those questions as central, on the grounds that its universalist and objectivist pretensions are really no different to those of liberal modernisation theory.16

Thus Chakrabarty’s and the subalternists’ re-emphasis of culture is in keeping with the western tradition of the old accusation of the Orientalists and developmentalists, i.e., the ‘undemocratic culture’ (seen as backward) of India being an obstacle in its development. This ideology of ‘backwardness’ based on culture is not new. We can trace it in western scholarship since the emergence of classical political economy.

Let us point out immediately that we are not promoting the idea that culture should not be included in attempting to understand the condition of the working class. Probably it is true that the cultural dimension has been neglected for long in the analysis of labour history, and this should be rectified. But it is one thing to say that culture should be included while analysing working class struggle, and it is quite another thing to say that culture should be the only basis of understanding the workers’ struggle. We have no quarrel with the first claim. It is the latter assumption that we are concerned with in this paper.

Since the beginning of classical political economy, references to ‘backward countries’ were constructed to designate the impact and consequences of European colonial experience on these countries. “For most political economists, European tutelage through colonialism was the only way to break the ‘millennial’ pattern of stagnation of backward nations and to initiate them on the road to ‘progress’.”17 Thus, a justification was developed for colonising the ‘backward

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nations’, which was treated as a temporary measure for educating these ‘immature’
nations in European values and cultures. Marx and Engels also believed in the ‘world
mission of European capitalism and showed a similar bias as well. “The 19th century
version of ‘people without history’, stagnant and backward, incapable of any material
progress on their own, and unable to present any opposition to the European experience,
lingers on in the theory of imperialism.”

The theories of development which emerged after the second world war within the
capitalist world were named modernisation theories. Through these
modernisation theories the prejudices which were the concern of the classical political
economists were reintroduced. Once again programmes were started to explore and study
the institutional arrangements, values and class structures of societies which make
development possible. Post-second world war modernisation theories used “implicit or
explicit reference to a dichotomy between two ideal types: traditional society (which
is equal to being ‘rural’ and ‘undeveloped’) and modern society (which is equal to ‘urban’,
developed’, and ‘industrial’).” Larrain has pointed out that by using Weber’s ideal types
one can find for instance the predominance of a traditional type of action (action
determined by a well rooted custom) and a traditional type of authority (whose
domination is based on “the belief in the every day routine as an inviolable norm of
conduct”). Similarly, he maintains that it is possible to construct the ideal type of a
modern or rational society.

The crux of development theories was the
evaluation of culture, instead of economy or
polity, as the basis for measuring the success
or failure of various ‘backward’ societies in being modernised. According to the
modernisation perspective, the ‘third world’ countries represented ‘traditional’ cultural
entities in contrast with west European and north American societies, conceived as
modern social entities. Thus the idea that “cultural processes intervene into the social
processes of ‘modernisation’ “ gained ground among development theorists (in the west
and were applied to the ‘third world’. With the increased propagation of ‘developmentalism’ in the world, polarisation between the
west and the third world has increased. Wallerstein has explained this theme in simple terms as follows.

First of all here is the universalist theme. All
states can develop; all states shall develop.
Then come the racist themes. If some states
have developed earlier and faster than others, it is because they have done something,
behaved in some way that is different. They
have been more individualist, or more
entrepreneurial, or more rational, or in some
way more ‘modern’. If other states have
developed more slowly, it is because there
is something in their culture... which prevents
them or has thus far prevented them from
becoming as ‘modern’ as other states.22

Wittfogel also contends that Oriental
civilisations, including India, saw no basic
change in their social structure even after the
advent of the European political, economic
and industrial revolutions. The problem is
that the majority of writings about India’s
caste system have undertaken to prove the
uniqueness of India and, therefore, its
unchanging character. Weber himself started
by implying that caste is a peculiarly pan-
Indian phenomenon. The well known French
theoretician of the caste system, Dumont,
has also argued that caste is unique to Indian
society and therefore not comparable to other
cultures.24

Thus, we find that most India specialists
have overlooked the ability of the caste system
23 to change drastically in its form,
content and meaning in spite of historic
changes which took place in the modes of
production in south Asia. Interestingly,
Chakrabarty argues that the caste system did
change. He writes:

My stress on the importance of language or
religion in the jute workers’ consciousness,
however, is not intended to situate this
working class in a web of immutable,
unchanging loyalties that social scientists
sometimes classify as ‘primordial’. The
d-called ties of birth did not carry the same
political or social significance in the 1920s
and 1930s as they did, say, in the 1800s or
before. And for that reason the social
meanings of these ‘ties’ changed. Historians
have argued for long – and with considerable
justification – that the large-scale eruption
of religious or racial violence with which
India is often associated today is a
phenomenon of ‘modern’ Indian history...
Religion or language arose as an issue within
this context. But, however, is the tendency-pervasive in Marxist
constructions of working class history – to
add up these ‘changes’ in terms of an over-
arching notion of ‘progress’ or ‘development’
within which the question of ‘consciousness’
is placed.26

Thus, Chakrabarty does not rule out the
process of change in society but objects to
the “tendency in Marxist constructions of
working class history with an overarching
notion of ‘progress’ within which the question
of ‘consciousness’ is placed”. By challenging
Marx’s construct of ‘progress’ and ‘con-
sciousness’. Chakrabarty, while raising an
important question, ignores a more funda-
mental issue, i.e., the process through which
to change takes place in any society and its
culture. By ignoring the process of change
Chakrabarty wishes to have it both ways
with his mastery of rhetoric. When Bagchi
raised a similar question about the process
of change while reviewing Chakrabarty’s
book, Chakrabarty replied to his questioning

Fundamentally, Bagchi looks for a comforting
narrative where all Indians are cast into the
role of passive victims of the huge juggernaut
of colonialism. No Indians, whether elite or
subaltern, take any responsibility for their
own histories in this narrative. To follow
Thompson’s point that ‘the(English) working
class was present at its own making’. We
Indians, in contrast, are never present at
our own ‘unmaking’. This ‘unmaking’ is
something that has been done to us by the
British and the fetished demon called
‘colonialism’ (a historian’s version, I suppose,
of what the Indian government, whenever
faced with domestic trouble, calls the ‘foreign
hand’); that is why, for Bagchi, our current
‘problems of... class, ethnic and linguistic
(gender?) differences’ and those created
by ‘numerous... prejudices and superstitions’
are all simply, inheritances from the colonial
period, the legacy of colonialism. The
landlords’ authority, even after one fully
grants the peculiarities of the colonial context,
always had elements – as Ranjit Gohain has
ample demonstrated in his Elementary
Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial
India (Delhi, 1993), derived from cultural
codes that had a history much longer than
that of the British in India. To blame
everything on colonialism is to present a
point of view and not a proven fact; nor is it
to give a very precise definition to
colonialism itself. But, most of all, it is to
write a history that can only be comforting
for the modern Indian ruling classes (to which
the historians often personally belongs).27

In this reply Chakrabarty further tries to
 evade the question of the process of change
and in fact clears the ground for logically
exonerating colonialism from the blames of
the nationalist historians. This he
accomplishes by asking Indians to learn to
take responsibility for their own history and
not blame colonialism (past or present) for
all their ‘failures’. These ‘sermons’ are very
familiar in the US where the newly emerging
upper middle class African-American intelligentsia have started telling poor
African-American that they should stop blaming slavery and the white majority
rule for their problems and take responsibility for their lives and look into their own
cultural values to explain their backwardness. Today these ideas are part of the latest
Republican agenda as well. The similarities of such
statements in the US and in Chakrabarty’s
writings cannot be ignored easily.

Furthermore, Chakrabarty’s emphasis on the
specificity of Indian culture in constructing Indian workers’ history with their
‘inegalitarian values’ brings us back to an
old question, Is India unique? If so, then,
everything in the world is ultimately unique.
As Berreman has rightly said:

Without denying the uniqueness of every
culture, every institution, every object and
every event, one can extract aspects, elements, principles or relationships which are (or are thought to be) common for purposes of comparison. In fact, this is the only way to determine what is specific to one’s culture, society or situation and what is common to recurrent processes and historical circumstances. Science, including social sciences, depends upon identifying and comparing common phenomena in the universe of unique elements. Whether and in what ways phenomena are ‘the same’ must be carefully specified but to require that they be in all respects identical is to deny the possibility of a science of society. In fact unique is scientifically incomprehensible.24

There can be no unique Indian society except in vague geographical or general terms, more than there are distinctly Indian properties in chemistry or biology. Thus the phenomenon of uniqueness does not necessarily mean anomalous social phenomenon. What is unique in India is the specificity of the social formation in special geographical and ecological conditions. Mukherjee has shown that in south-west India the village community system did not emerge as a dominant institution in society because that region was blessed with two monsoons instead of one and there was therefore no great need for artificial irrigation for the agrarian economy.25 Every country has its own specific physical and geographical conditions which contribute to the specificity of its history. In that sense, India is not any more unique than, say, China or Egypt. In the words of Bererman:

The people who comprise the system are depicted as unfeeling, regimented automatons ruled by inexorable social forces, conforming unquestioningly and unerringly to universal values. But like people everywhere, Indian people are also individuals, able to think, conformists and non-conformists. They are defiant, compliant, selfish, magnificent, independent, inventive, tradition bound, fearful, courageous, optimistic, pessimistic. They hope, aspire, despair, subvert, connive, abide, enforce, manipulate and choose among alternatives as they cope with their society and its values.26

The arena of culture means the production of forms of consciousness, ideas, feelings, desires, moral preferences, and forms of subjectivity as well as forms of material culture. These forms of consciousness cannot arise in a separate institutional arena of social life from that of material culture. Mentalities and subjectivities are formed and exposed in every sphere of social existence. Therefore the conditions of existence of classes would more profoundly shape class cultures than the specific interests of the castes or caste loyalties. In other words, the development of working class culture cannot be located in the mythologies of kinship network and ‘egalitarian’ ideas. It must be located in the understanding of the complex and contradictory forms and conditions within which the working classes live their subordinate lives. The history of working classes is full of narratives to show how they have been struggling to improve their living and working conditions and not always to retain their caste and kinship loyalties.

The dangers of the cultural trap are stronger than we realise. Making ‘culture’ the basis of historical analyses will only help ruling class interests to justify their actions against oppressed groups in the same social system.27 Elaborating on this subject Wallerstein wrote,

It is argued that one group is genetically or ‘cultural’... inferior to another group in such a way that the group said to be inferior cannot be expected to perform tasks as well as the presumably superior group... The Moslems, it is argued, are not culturally capable of recognising the same universal principles of man-woman relations that are said to be accepted in the western (or Judeo-Christian world) and from this it is said to follow that they are also not capable of many other things... the simplest solution was to argue that western culture is in fact universal culture... the Orientalist also suggested that these high Oriental cultures were historically frozen and could not evolve, but could only be ‘destroyed’ from without... The west had emerged into modernity; the others had not. Inevitably, therefore, if one wanted to be ‘modern’ one had in some way to be ‘Western’ culturally... Thus, the universal work ethics justifies all existing inequalities, since the explanation of their origin is in the historically unequal adoption by different groups of this motivation... The existence of unequal incomes thus becomes not an instance of racism-sexism but rather of the universal standard of rewarding efficiency. Those who have less have less because they have earned less... Blacks and women are paid less because they work less hard, merit less. And they work less hard because there is something, if not in their biology, at least in the ‘culture’ which teaches them values that conflict with the universal work ethos.28

In order to avoid the ‘cultural’ trap we need to first understand the source through which it is formed. Culture is ‘an aggregate of values and traditions which is deeply linked to the everyday life of the people, and in that sense it is a matrix of perception which allows one to appraise the world’.29 Therefore, as Mukherjee has pointed out, cultures do not change by themselves because by definition culture is not capable of self-revision or self-production. It only registers the world-view. He adds “in the ultimate analysis, human beings make their own history but they do so irrespective of individual wills and this means that the process generated to change society may cut across the existent culture.”30 Giving the example of the English ‘nabobs’ he writes, “they emerged from loot and plunder of India after the East India Company came to India and eventually formed a powerful culture there, based on the context of the economy and polity of Victorian England”.31

Thus, it is the social process which yields cultural products and groups. “Culture represents what has happened in society in all its manifestations, as recorded at a time point (say, t), while social processes indicate what is happening in society – within and across the culture products – over a time period (say, t to t+i)”.32

Besides emphasizing culture, Chakrabarty rejects the idea that the state or the capitalist classes have any role in putting obstacles in the way of the formation of working class consciousness. He writes, “Sympathetic observers of the working class often explain the weakness of worker solidarity in terms of the seeds of division deliberately sown among workers by interested people from the ruling classes (naturally including the employers)”.33 For Chakrabarty this “sounds like a crude theory of manipulation and conspiracy”.34

Thus by rejecting the concept of ‘subalternity’ and related categories, subaltern studies is able to get away from the older frameworks of colonialism and nationalism within which Indian history was studied. Subalternists try to reveal India instead as “a multiplicity of changing positions which are then treated as effects of power relations.”35 They are also disapproving of Marxist and social historians’ concern with capitalism as a “system of political economy and coercive instrumentalities.”36 They do not realise that the role of the colonial state and capitalism in the formation of caste and class identities cannot be easily wished away by denying its existence.37

Capital certainly has a stake in the forms of working class culture. It has a stake in labour availability, willingness of the workers to labour under conditions rational for the production of surplus, and workers having a suitable level of skill and aptitude. Thus working class culture is also the form in which labour is reproduced. These processes require continual management. In order to create the pool of available recruits, capital has to control the social reproduction of the working class. This is the significance of the whole network of social welfare and existence of the welfare state.

Wallerstein’s observation is revealing in this regard:

Indeed, so much were employers of wage-labour enthusiastic about proletarianisation that, in addition to fostering the gender/age division of labour, they also encouraged, in their employment pattern and through their influence in the political arena, recognition of defined ethnic groups, seeking to link them to specific allocated roles in the labour
force, with different levels of real remuneration for their work. Ethnicity created cultural crust which consolidated the patterns of semi-proletarian household structures. That the emergence of such ethnicity also played a political-divisive role for the working classes has been a political bonus for the employers but not, I think, the prime mover in this process.42

The above quotation explains that capitalists play upon the existing divisions in the society to their advantage as the divisiveness among the working classes always prove useful to capital in controlling them. Capitalists may not be the prime movers of this divisiveness but they are never neutral in this process. Capital’s requirements themselves are frequently undergoing transformation. The process of reproduction is always a contested transformation and many times a weakness of capitalists who, divided by competition, have had to rely on traditional forms of labour management.43 Elbaum and Wilkinson suggest that workers’ organisation in the context of the weakening competitive position of the British steel industries contributed significantly to the survival of archaic structures of production in Britain as compared with the US.44 The development of industrial capitalism in Britain failed to eliminate all ‘traditional’ groups. The reason for the perpetuation of ‘traditional’ groups in British steel industry can be located in the conjunction of the various historical forces at play in that historical time,45 and not in the culture of the working class as Chakrabarty’s approach would suggest.

Working class culture is formed in the struggle between capital’s demand for a particular form of labour power and the search for a secure location within this relation of dependency. The outcome of such struggle depends on what ideological and political forces are in play at the particular historical time, as well as on the specific needs of the capitalist. Sometimes capitalists may require a hierarchical division of labour as a mode of management. In the determination of the structure of these hierarchies, formal and informal struggles by strategic groups of workers often play a crucial role, particularly when capitalists are divided by intense competition. Elbaum and Wilkinson explain that mule spinners, who were supposed to have been crushed out of existence by the transition from the common mule to the self-acting mule, remained a strong occupational category. Despite the technical deskilling of the jobs, they continued to perform a crucial supervisory function within the labour process.46 This continuity, as pointed out by Elbaum, et al, cannot be understood solely as resulting from the organised strength of the workers in maintaining their strategic position, but rather as a consequence of the weakness of capitalists who, divided by competition, had to rely on traditional forms of labour management.

Similarly, in the case of India we cannot jump to the conclusion, as Chakrabarty has done, that the workers were holding to their ‘primordial values’ (undemocratic) whereas western workers had ‘democratic values’ (egalitarian). It seems to us that Chakrabarty’s anxiety to illuminate the struggle of the workers is important, but his historical perspective is too narrow. Thompson writes, ‘Classes do not exist as separate entities, who look around, find an enemy class and then start to struggle. On the contrary, people find themselves in a society structured in determined ways (crucially, not exclusively, in productive relations), they experience exploitation (or the need to maintain power over those whom they exploit), they identify points of antagonistic interest, they commence to struggle around these issues and in the process of struggling they discover themselves as classes, and they come to know this discovery as class consciousness. Class and class consciousness are always the last, not the first, stage of the historical process.47

The workers of the western countries did not develop class consciousness based on ‘democratic ideas’ overnight. Moreover, these ideas were not there from time ‘immemorial’ but emerged in the recent histories of those countries. In India democratic ideas were introduced later and the reinforcement of ‘primordial values’ by the colonial state further delayed the matter. In spite of that, how can one ignore the changes that took place in workers’ consciousness by the transmission and absorption of ideas whose origins lay outside their tradition? We cannot treat in isolation the changes in consciousness that lay behind the struggle from the spread of ideas generated by the nationalist movement and colonial influence as well as by the needs of capital. How is it possible to accept that Indian workers remained untouched in their so-called ‘primordial values’ in the face of the strong forces of nationalist movement and capitalism?

Chakrabarty has discussed the jute workers’ struggle in terms of organisation based on ‘loyalty’, which was derived from hierarchy and status:

It was these culturally given relationships of power that entered the field of trade unionism. In terms of their theory, the Bengali trade unionists no doubt aspired to build bourgeois-democratic organisations. In reality, however, they formed organisations based on ‘loyalty’, where authority did not flow through a grid of rules and procedures but derived directly from hierarchy and status.48

Later, on the basis of this hierarchical loyalty he concludes that, "It is possible, then, to recognise a continuing structure in the nature of working-class defiance of authority all through the history of the ‘political mobilisation’ of labour."49 Thus Chakrabarty finds jute workers’ defiance of authority within the existing hierarchical cultural context and not in the labour-capital nexus.

Contrary to Chakrabarty’s jute workers’ struggle, our study of the TISCO workers’ movement at Jamshedpur50 shows that in spite of divisions among the workers based on caste, region, religion and language, they were able to transcend these and unite against the Tata management for two long decades. This finding is important because the unskilled workers in the Tata steel industry came from the same area as those for the jute industry studied by Chakrabarty. Why did the workers in jute industries coming from the same background remain loyal to their ‘primordial values’, whereas during the same period Tata steel workers were able to transcend these? This question should make us look into different kinds of data. For example, Tata, being both employer and landlord, created conditions which were detrimental to a large extent to united action by steel workers. We find that in spite of the control mechanism of the company to keep workers divided, TISCO workers were able to unite, though at the same time it is true that there were great obstacles in the development of their ‘class consciousness’. In spite of having ‘primordial values’, TISCO workers became conscious of their poor plight and in fact went in search of a leader in 1920 who could guide them in their struggle against capital. The case of TISCO is similar to that of US Steel and other corporations, where welfarism had been widely implemented but workers “fought an intense struggle in 1919 for shorter hours of work and relief from oppressive and arbitrary foremen.”51 In 1920 TISCO workers went on strike demanding relief from the oppressive behaviour of their superiors, foremen and supervisors, along with other basic demands to improve their living and working conditions. Again in 1922 and in 1928 these workers went on strike for the same demands. In all these strikes we find, time and again, that workers were guided in their actions mostly by their day-to-day experiences at the workplace, marketplace and at the place of reproduction (town and housing was owned by TISCO). This shows that workers’ consciousness of themselves as a class vis-a-vis capital develops in the process of their day-to-day struggle and experiences, and not merely from their ‘primordial values’, as Chakrabarty would have us believe.

In our study of TISCO workers’ struggles we maintain that historical analysis is guided by the theory of underlying relations among various social and historical forces which
can explain the complex processes of actual phenomena of class struggle and emerging forms and expression of workers’ consciousness. Division within the labour force can generate radically different outcomes depending on the broader context. In the case of TISCO the colonial context created a division between the ‘literate’ (mainly Bengali clerks) and pro-Congress workers and ‘illiterate’ (mainly Punjabis, tribals and unskilled or semi-skilled workers) but militant anti-Congress workers. But these workers’ ‘class consciousness’ was perpetually formed in their daily struggle against the capital (Tatas who were in alliance with the nationalist leaders as well as the colonial state), at both the point of production and reproduction, though it was not in the sense of realising their ‘missionary role’ in history. Nonetheless, the TISCO workers’ struggle against capital and the Congress Party hegemony for three decades threatened the process of capital formation, which in turn led to a restructuring of industrial relations in the steel industry. In this struggle TISCO workers’ ‘primordial values and hierarchical relations’ were not the driving force, but workers’ consciousness to improve their lot and get better living and working conditions. We should be treating these workers’ efforts and actions as heroic rather than as negative forms of resistance and condemning them for not fulfilling their ‘missionary role’ for our benefit. It is revealing to find that TISCO workers would refuse to listen to any leader (national or charismatic) for two decades if the leader did not promise the redress of their grievances. The hourly recording of workers’ meetings at Jamshedpur, prepared both by the police and TISCO company separately, gives us a fairly good idea of workers’ mood and consciousness. It may not be a complete story but two different versions of the same meetings (also cross-checked in interviews and newspapers) do help to form some reasonable understanding of the situation.

It is time we stop blaming the ‘egalitarian values’ of Indian society, as has been done since the advent of the British in India, and in a real sense start rethinking Indian working class history. “It is true”, points out Wallerstein, “that the disillusionment with the efficacy of transforming the world by altering its economic and political forms have led to a new intellectual focus on ‘culture’.”55 But we should not get into a dangerous trap in the process of finding the alternative. “Perhaps we should constantly reevaluate whether in fact what we are doing is deconstructing an egalitarian system or reinforcing it.”56

By asking us to use “instances of cultural practices which historically evolved structures of semiotics and signification” for understanding labour history, Chakrabarty is sacrificing the politics. “What kind of resistance can be raised to capitalism’s systematic coercion if that resistance apparently denies their existence?”57 Chakrabarty’s view seems to be that ‘emancipation becomes a struggle purely internal to the consciousness of those who resist and only representable by them.”58 It is hard to accept this view because ironically this theory does not leave any scope for collective action by the underclasses.

Subalternists claim that their critiques of other forms of privileged knowledge make it a contestatory act. They maintain that they are trying to ‘unlock and release histories, cultures, identities frozen by the essentialisations of the past,’59 so that the subjects can and do represent themselves on the basis of their own experience. This claim of subalternists suggests that workers’ ‘resistance’ itself would eventually form the knowledge which then would be emancipatory, and would be able to transcend relationships of domination. O’Hanlon and Washbrook point out that,

> There are further difficulties concerning question of subjectivity and hence of history and agency. The subject-position of the subaltern likewise is an effect, contingent and unstable, which ‘exists in difference’. Questions of subjectivity are discussed in terms of discourses which construct it. The difficulty here is that it is hard to see how this approach can have room for any theory about experience as the medium through which resistances emerge and are crystallised or about the conditions under which the subordinate can become active agents of their own emancipation on the basis of this experience. Our present challenge lies precisely in understanding how the underclasses we wish to study are at once constructed in conflictual ways as subjects yet also find the means through struggle to realise themselves in coherent and subjectively centred ways as agents.60

Subaltern approaches permit the underclasses to present themselves only as victims of particularistic kinds of gender, racial, and national oppression. This approach is similar to that of the US radical post-modernist in the minorities debate which reinforces the well-known hostility of American political culture to any kind of materialist or class analysis. Thus, by denying the material basis and class analysis the subalternist solutions lead only to a methodological (or mythological) individualism which does not allow any kind of programmatic politics.61 Obviously such an approach cannot be called radical, subversive, or emancipatory.

We cannot erase the past, and we cannot go back in pre-British time to search for ‘indigenous’ frozen culture, for the simple reason that how would we decide what is indigenous, and if that indigenous past still exists in its pure form. How can we ever find indigenous culture “which has longer historical roots than the British rule”62 without using the concepts we have already imbibed under the British regime? Simply by rejecting Marxist categories do we become ‘free’ from all the western influences and thoughts? Do we become free by being ‘real’ Indian, whatever it may mean? Subalternist historiography does not help in answering these questions and we are left with more confusion.

India, as an entity known to us today, is a modern phenomenon, and India’s industrialisation and its working class is a product of modern capitalism. Should we insist on cultural differences only and find our history in cultural context alone, just to establish a distance from European thought and history, but sacrifice our politics of liberation in the process?63 By doing so, whose interest do we serve? Certainly not working class liberation, as they are condemned for being undemocratic and for being stuck in their cultural mode, where there is no hope for their liberation. By condemning them as ‘undemocratic’ are we asking them to be like western working classes? Moreover, the democratic ideas of western working classes have not created so far any working class consciousness through which they could realise their ‘missionary role’. Then the question arises, why should we look for democratic or undemocratic ideas in Indian working class culture and pass judgment on their future role. Why should we use western concepts of ‘class consciousness’, ‘missionary role of working class’ and ‘revolutions’ to judge the actions of the Indian working classes?

It seems subalternists are disillusioned with the Indian working classes because they do not fit into the available western conceptual mould. Therefore they start finding fault with Indian working class culture and egalitarian ideas, thus convincing themselves that something is wrong with workers’ culture which does not allow them to create ‘democratic class consciousness’. Subalternists simply refuse to understand that workers do not act or live their lives to prove historians’ concepts or hopes. Workers (and poor masses) have to live, struggle and act according to their life situations, needs, and opportunities and their day-to-day experiences at all the levels; at production, reproduction, community, locality, religion, and market, and in fact, all these combined forces and constraints shape their consciousness. Chakrabarty complains that this consciousness of workers is fragile and, therefore leads to the formation of ‘community consciousness’. It is surprising that he is judging workers’ class consciousness as strong or fragile and not looking at the process of its making as well as the historical and political situation in which it is formed.

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The problem with Chakrabarty’s formulation is that it isolates the process of consciousness making from history and other social, political and economic forces of the time and region, and thus is able to condemn the jute workers of Calcutta as backward, having inequalitarian values and hierarchical relationships, which could generate only ‘community consciousness’ and not ‘class consciousness’. Interestingly, subalternists challenge meta-narratives for studying workers’ lives and struggles, but for themselves they do not hesitate to accept the influence of contemporary thinkers. Chakrabarty writes:

I write at a time when a host of scholars and intellectuals – among them Ranajit Guha, James Clifford, Hayden White, Gayatri Spivak, Richard Rorty, not to mention Foucault and Derrida – have problematised ideas about representation, language, reality and voice/consciousness, in such a way that it is no longer possible for me to be theoretically innocent in these matters…Mine was a self-conscious exercise in method, using history to rethink certain ideas in Marxist political philosophy.62

Thus clearly saying that his challenge to Marxist categories and master narratives in writing the history of a working class is a product of the historical time and place in which he lives, and that he could not remain innocent to such influences. Surprisingly, he cannot see that the working class also cannot remain innocent of the historical and political time they live in, the place and conditions they live in, and the contemporary wave of different nationalist ideas and movements they absorb in their consciousness along with their ‘primordial values’. Why has Chakrabarty used this double standard in judging working class consciousness?

Chakrabarty dismisses any discussion of the living conditions of the workers as irrelevant to the constitution or reproduction of their consciousness as mere ‘economism’ or ‘political economy’63. Bagchi correctly points out that most students of society, whether trained in political economy or not, would find it surprising to be told that the experience of living perilously near the margin of subsistence and being exposed to the threats of disease and death, or living away from their nearest family member year in and year out, should somehow not enter into the consciousness of these people [workers].64

The responsibility of a social scientist is look underneath the appearances of social stratification so that he/she does not reinforce an inequalitarian system in the name of dismantling it. If the inequalitarian values of Indian people in the basis of their ‘backwardness’, how should one explain the use of the communitarian values of Confucianism by transnational capital? Today Confucianism is found more suitable to a contemporary managerial capitalism than the individualistic values of the entrepreneurial capitalism of an earlier day. What is ironic is that the managers of this new world situation themselves concede that they now have the power to appropriate the local for the global, to admit different cultures into the realm of capital only to break them down and remake them in accordance with the requirements of production and consumption. Capital has the capacity even to constitute subjectivities across national boundaries to create producers and consumers more responsive to the operation of capital. Uner such a situation, how can we in our analysis separate the formation of subjectivity from the meta-narrative if we are truly concerned with people’s history?

IV

The discussion so far shows that subaltern studies is throwing the cover of culture over material relationships in their analysis of subalterns, as if the one had little to do with the other. Such a focus diverts criticism from capitalism to Eurocentricism as a cultural or ideological problem (reducing it as one of ethnocentrism), which blurs the power relationships that energised it. Such an approach fails to explain why this particular ethnocentrism (Eurocentricism) was able to define modern global history and itself as the universal aspiration. The arguments of subaltern studies in actual effect are doing a good job of mystifying the relationship between power and culture and in the process helping the ideology of global capitalism to achieve its goal.

Ironically, the capitalist system and ‘democratic’ structure of the state seem to go together. But the democratic structure is kept alive by workers who are constantly struggling to improve their wages and living conditions. The capitalist system has to give in a little bit to workers’ struggles once in a while to keep social tension at the minimum level and to maintain its own profit margin. For example, in the course of their struggle US workers have compelled capital to restructure itself and share its profits as well. In the US, the welfare state and affirmative action was the result of workers’ struggles. Workers in the US did not know how to stop demanding more. After 1945 they wanted automobiles, college education for children, vacations in the sun and adequate health facilities. They bourgeoisified themselves quite extensively. Getting better and better living conditions has become an accepted norm in the US. If democracy has to survive in the US there is no other way but to change the system to give people better material conditions of life. Workers in the US are not in the least interested in overthrowing the system. They merely demand more wages and better living conditions, but today capital cannot give any more due to economic globalisation. In this crisis of the capitalist system the well proven policy of divide and rule is attractive for those who wish to keep on multiplying their profits in the transnational economic system and with the least amount of social tension directed against them at home where their headquarters are located. It is in this context that the US working masses are being directed to look for their individual solutions for a better life within their communities and ethnic, religious, national, race and gender differences.

The above statement is not a figment of my imagination or a theory of conspiracy but based on a clear strategy developed by a think tank in Washington, DC. Realising the grim explosive situation in the US today, it has recommended the improvement of the ‘social economy’ of the country in which churches, communities and charities are to play an important role in forming individual subjectivity (and individual responsibility). This process will help (hopefully for the capitalists) in controlling the millions who lost their jobs due to the restructuring of the US economy as well as the subsequent social and political tension in the country.65 Should we help in promoting these differences based on communities, race, nationality and religion and legitimise the efforts of the capitalist world?

Historians should not deprive themselves of the analytical tools necessary to study capitalism and its effects around the world in all their complexity, contingency and limitations. Instead of seeing them simply as meta-narrative and modernity, capital and the state should be made the object of an analysis that is more nuanced and interactive. What we really need is to find a method of analysis which does not snatch away the role of agency. At the same time we should not lose sight of the role of the state and the world capitalist system, international historical forces, elite groups, and small merchants and traders; the complicity of the subaltern as well as the oppression of one subaltern group over the other (e.g. subaltern men over subaltern women); and the material, social, and spiritual culture of the people, all of which are equally influential in forming agency as well as formed by the actions of agency. We must understand the history of people with all its complexities as well as the complexities of the ruling classes, colonial state and capitalism, which are as much part of people’s lives as their own subjectivity. Three decades before subaltern studies came into existence, such an attempt was made by K Onwuka Dike66 to write history from an African perspective. His work is a good example of how to utilise agency or resort to meta-narrative. Africans do not appear in this text as either resisters

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or collaborators in the face of European involvement in the delta. Europeans, indeed, appear as actors in the universe of different actors within the region, all trying to work with the opportunities and constraints of overseas trade and regional political structure.

In contrast to Dike's approach, subaltern studies is promoting a very problematic idea of 'differences'. It is problematic because in the world outside the academy, differences show in murderous ethnic conflict and continued inequalities among and within societies, classes and gender. Therefore we should be careful when we define 'differences' among the people and in fact should raise the following questions in this regard:

Are perceptions of differences in a given context enough of a basis for affirming diversity or are they acting more as a mechanism for exclusionary and discriminatory practices? How are different categories of people represented within such discourses? How and why do people themselves construct or represent the specificity of their experiences? Under what circumstances does difference become the basis of asserting a collective identity? What is the process in which the social order articulates with the formation of the subject? How is the link between social and psychic reality to be theorised? What qualities, characteristics and aspects are being compared in deciding the differences? What is the nature of the comparison?

We should be careful that we do not reinvent 'differences' among people based on race, nationality and gender while undermining their commonalities based on material conditions. Differences are not static as an essential culture of people. Therefore there needs to be at once attention paid to the operations of differences (mechanisms through which it is promoted) and an insistence on differences (material differences), but not a simple substitution of multiple for binary differences (such as race, caste, religion and nationality), because simple substitutions will pave the way for pluralism. In fact we should look for more meaningful substitutes for the concept of 'differences' for the simple reason that most of the time people in everyday life do find ways to relate to one another and work together in the same place and environment in spite of apparent 'differences'. Over a period of time these people develop a human bond based on similar experiences at the workplace, which happens more often than we care to admit.

Moreover, identities are never a fixed core. Changing identities do assume specific concrete patterns against particular sets of historical and social circumstances. Our cultural identities are simultaneously our cultures in process, but they acquire specific meanings in each given context. Sometimes, depending upon the context, one ethnic group may legitimise class or caste divisions by proclaiming and stressing only the unity of an otherwise heterogeneous group. They may also take recourse to constructing essentialist differences to save themselves from hegemonic forces of the time. This can be especially problematic for women if the cultural values that the groups in question excavate, recast and reconstruct are those that underscore women's subordination.

Therefore we need to understand the 'differences' within different groups. One needs to understand the subordination of one subaltern group by the other as well. Take the example of women in the most oppressed group in India, called dalits. Recently many external and certain internal factors have prompted dalit women to organise separately from dalit men because dalit leaders have always subordinated, and at times suppressed, the independent political expression of dalit women. In the cultural field also, dalit women have criticised their male counterparts for dominating the literary scene and not taking serious note of the literary output of dalit women. These women also questioned their exclusion from the top positions in dalit literary conferences and institutions.

Since dalit women are not all educated or employed on the same level, it creates another type of exclusion. For example, dalit women from Maharashtra are better educated and employed than their counterparts from Karnataka. Therefore it was Maharashtrian dalit women who represented all Indian dalit women at Beijing. Thus, here too a certain section of dalit women was rendered anonymous.

Most of all, dalit women are dependent on the state to create a space to enable them to challenge dalit male dominance in politics. This dependence on the state complicates the situation for dalit women associations because these associations are also challenging the state and state-mediated dalit patriarchy at the same time. For example, dalit women in Bodh Gaya in Bihar opposed the state's decision to hand over land in the names of dalit men, an act which would further marginalise dalit women. In Maharashtra dalit women under the Bahujan Mahila Aghadi and Shetmajar Shetkari Shramik Aghadi are opposing the process of liberalisation. Most interestingly, dalit women, particularly at the grass roots level in Maharashtra, are exhibiting a spontaneous and strong solidarity across caste and region against the violence let loose by hindutva forces. They are also participating in the ongoing struggle regarding pasture land and organising campaigns against hindutva in Bangalore.

In this example of dalit women we see multiple differences – between women and men, between educated, employed and grass roots level women, regional and linguistic differences among women – within the same oppressed caste group, as well as their struggle against global forces and demand for modernity (equality), their fight against the primordial values of hindutva (religion), their capability of transcending caste and regional identities, use of the state for their empowerment, as well as their struggle against the state policies of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation. Can we understand the complexities of these issues and the struggle of dalit people (men and women across the country) as an ethnic group or 'community' by merely talking of differences between castes or the primordial values of people?

If we wish to keep the concept of 'differences' alive it should be in connection with the overall context, because every individual is part of that context. At the same time the context itself keeps changing as it is conditioned by changes in historical and productive forces. In a highly segregated society, the overall context has a stratified impact on the consciousness of individuals. Therefore, each segregated movement in a country responds to other similar movements with its own subjective notions.

Take for example the feminist question, the dalit question, and the tribal question (led by naxalites) in India.72 All three are the outcomes of an objective condition which subjects them to varying levels of exploitation. Thus, the mass movement born in that context interacts with other mass movements on the plane of diversity. These movements seem to have hostile relations with one another. For example, dalits perceive the naxalite movement as led by upper castes because it did not take the caste question into account. The naxalites called the dalit movement bourgeois because it subverts class politics by raising the question of self-respect and capturing power as the goal, but leaves the land question unanswered. Moreover, dalits have no stand on imperialism nor any economic agenda for the oppressed. A class-based movement also perceives feminist movements largely as movements of the elite and blame them for not having a specific understanding of the problems of women of lower classes, since feminists treat all classes within the same parameter of gender. Feminists, on the other hand, argue that when atrocities are committed on dalits or when police raid villages in search of naxalites, it is the women who suffer the most and are subjected to torture and rape, all of which have their origin not in caste or class but in gender. Thus, we find that each segregated movement perceives other segregated movements more as competitors than as complementary to their goals, more as enemy
than friend. In this manner, they in effect work as a check on each other's growth and success. A further vicious circle of hostility sets in when the stagnation of one movement is perceived as the fault of the other mass movement.71

The fact is that the agenda of all the three movements, that is, land for the naxalites, gender for women, and caste for dalits, are all very real exploitative experiences and not mere hallucinations. But in order for each of them to achieve their goals, all three, while pursuing their separate needs, should also be working with one another in the process of overall emancipation. Since the overall history and the context remains the same for all three movements, it is inconceivable how any one of them can be successful in their goals without all of them achieving their goals at the same time. The net result is that diversity proves more a fetter than a potential transformer.74

As I said earlier, the writings of a progressive scholar cannot be devoid of his/her politics. Therefore, we also need to ask what is the politics of subaltern studies? What are they trying to achieve by writing the history of differences? This question is pertinent because subaltern studies came into being when all types of peoples' movements in India were being repressed. Subaltern studies seemed at that time to be the one speaking for the oppressed. Today, that voice has become the voice of 'differences' only, which is leaving no hope for a better future for the oppressed. Poor people are told that to be 'different' (inequality, 'indigenous' culture) is natural and that they should live with it and celebrate it and should have no discussion on how to change it.

But interestingly, subaltern studies does emphasise the issue of resistance, though what is being resisted is not necessarily clear. Resistance is a negative concept and may narrow our understanding of history rather than expand it. Working masses are struggling every day to make ends meet and improve their lives through various available means. Struggling peoples' efforts to survive in extremely difficult circumstances should be treated as heroic rather than as resistance. We are in the habit of making heroes only of those people (generally well off) who go for adventure trips in the mountains or in forests, or of military personnel. But we take for granted the starvation and near-subistence existence of poor people as natural, or worse, as resistance whenever they are able to survive their plight.

Subalternists ignore that the tensions of colonialism in a capitalist context are equally important to analyse. In their (subaltern studies) analysis colonialism sometimes appears as a force whose nature and implications do not have to be unpacked. Their refusal to consider class as a category within a capitalist context has freed the capitalist society from the stigma of 'classlessness'. In such a 'classless' (capitalist) society, peoples' resistance can never be directed against capitalist or imperialist forces. In this way subalternists can easily keep both the worlds (capitalism/colonialism and resistance) intact, while at the same time remaining committed to 'peoples' history'.

The above discussion makes it amply clear that subaltern studies does not capture the intricacies of the integration of the world economy in a capitalist system. What is lost in their analysis are the ways the world economy constrains all regions and states to adjust to transnational capital as it infringes sovereignty and limits state 'autonomy' and in fact restructures the nature and role of the state all over the globe. Although globalisation is frequently characterised as a homogenising force, it fuses with local conditions in diverse ways, thereby generating, not eroding, striking differences among social formations. The Subaltern Studies group seems to be promoting those 'differences' which are generated and reinforced by world economic forces. They ignore the fact that their philosophical question of 'differences' will be useful only to right wing ideologues who wish to contain the 'dangerous classes' by appropriating the ideas of individual responsibility and the role of race and community in eradicating poverty. It is not surprising that the US Republican party's slogans and agendas sound very much like the postmodern and subaltern studies ideas.

Subaltern studies does not care to note that transnational linkages are essentially stateless and held together not only by flows of commodities (labour and material) but also by marriage, clans and dialect, for example, in the case of Chinese businesses in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and within the US. Here class is overlaid by ethnic, racial and gender divisions of labour. With the impetus towards globalisation, cultural responses to the expansion of the market provide intersubjective meanings and intermediate inequalities arising from a changing division of labour in various manifestations. The discussion of this dimension of culture is missing in subaltern studies. Within this world context, some leaders of rival states may contest the reality of globalisation and try to fan the flames of economic nationalism or build competitive trading blocs. Such resistance inevitably creates social conflict. We can see it happening in India, where the Bharatiya Janata Party is fighting against economic liberalisation and entry of the multinationals in the name of essential India. It is happening in Russia and also in the US (and probably in many more countries) where the main political agenda is either to support corporate America or go back to a protectionist policy in the name of saving American jobs. The social and political conflicts arising in this process cannot be traced to primordial values of people. The fact is that working class identity is one of several mobile identities deriving from changing economic conditions, both international and national, which are enmeshed with the racial, ethnic and sexual division of labour.

Based on the above discussion, we can say that it is not possible to declare a sudden and dramatic deglobalisation of capitalist knowledge as it is deeply entrenched in our day-to-day life. Most of the theoretical conceptions of subaltern studies amount to little more than a hallucination whenever it is brought face-to-face with the concrete exigencies of society structured in dominance. To denounce hierarchy does not get us anywhere. Instead what must be changed are the conditions that make these hierarchies exist, both in reality and in minds. It is easy to privilege one tradition over the other and retire from the challenge of the contradiction between the two. The original tension in subaltern studies did not go away; instead of addressing that tension the Indian subaltern studies practitioners chose to adopt postmodernist methods.

On the subaltern studies call to 'pro vincialise' European history, what we need is to first make a detailed and nuanced engagement with the intricacies of European history. Furthermore, we need to understand that the histories of all societies are also histories of interlinkages between societies. There is no one permanent, rooted static society. Some societies may take long in changing for a period of time but none of them are static. Those which remain static disappear. Change occurs not just due to internal forces or just by external forces. Both interact with one another, and change occurs thereby creating something new at every turn in all societies. In modern times each society is linked to others, interdependent with them or even shaped by the processes of societalisation that cut across them. Obviously this suggested approach would not serve the agenda of those who dwell on 'differences' only. Today all of us, including those of the western world, experience the pressure of contemporary global circumstances which are affecting every society and bringing changes both intended and unintended, violently and diplomatically, depending upon the specific situations.

From this perspective it seems illogical and unrealistic to interpret and analyse the experiences of people and societies as only a process of internal conditions (therefore, a process of transforming the dangerous phenomenon of 'differences'). Instead, we should try to understand contemporary hegemonic powers and forces, their ideological and other mechanisms of control. It is then
that we can begin to explore how these forces interact with different societies and with different classes and groups within a society and create particular conditions which shape people’s lives, culture and consciousness.

We must also find out how people respond to these interactions with new hegemonic forces within and without each society. People do not passively absorb everything as helpless beings but in fact resist these hegemonic influences and develop survival techniques, sometimes as individuals or as a social group, and sometimes as a ‘nation’. New situations need new explanations and new strategies for resistance but they need not be devoid of history. To Spivak’s rhetorical question ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ we may answer in the following way. ‘The subaltern can speak in Subheli, Bhojpuri, and so on, if the theoretician has the capability to listen.’

Most of the members of the Subaltern Studies group in India and now a subaltern group in the Latin America as well, come from progressive backgrounds. But unfortunately, as Chakrabarty has recently stated clearly, their aim is to keep the idea of ‘differences’ alive as a philosophical question. He pointed out that having an egalitarian society and political democracy may be laudable thoughts in themselves, but these thoughts are not as important or as sensitive to the philosophical question of differences. Therefore ‘better’ histories can be written only on a clean slate (removing reality), which is possible by pushing history to its limits.

If we follow this strategy of subaltern studies, we shall not be able to write ‘better’ histories for a long time, or the time may not come at all. Will world historical forces stop functioning and wait for us until we are able to clean the slate? The question is who is benefiting from this strategy? We have no hope of getting political democracy and an egalitarian society since they are, according to subaltern studies, Eurocentric ideas, and cleaning the slate and finding people’s history (which is another big IF with all its complexities) would take an unknowable amount of time in the future. What are the poor working masses and subalterns (and agencies) to do in the mean time? What should they hope for while they wait for the slate to be cleaned of colonial constructs? Are we better equipped to answer the main issue concerning subalterns, i.e., how to better their lives, by pondering over the philosophical question of ‘differences’ only?

It is in the light of these questions that we should start rethinking the relevance of subaltern studies so that it can be restored to its original context, i.e., creating an emancipatory politics. We should not waste time in finding out if the Yellow River (coming back to our exchange mentioned in the beginning), or reality, exists in our minds or outside autonomously, because the river of historical forces, such as transnational capital would not wait for our answers and all of us would be swept away under its force. If we really believe in the role of agency then we should not allow historical forces to subsume us but truly take charge of our lives and act now in making our own history as we please, before it is too late.

Notes
[A shorter version of this paper, ‘Rethinking Subaltern Studies’, was presented at the Occasional Paper Series of the Centre for Studies on Social Change and Political Economy, New Delhi, in December 1995. After the completion of my present essay I was made aware of the article below which in many ways complimentary to my discussion above. I am thankful to Rifat Aboh el Haj for this citation as well as for his valuable comments: K Sivaramakrishnan, ‘Situating the Subaltern: History and Anthropology in the Subaltern Studies Project’, Journal of Historical Sociology, Vol 8, No 4, 1995.]

1 Ranjit Guha and Collective (eds) Subaltern Studies, nine volumes, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982 onwards.
9 Ibid.
10 The discussion on Latin American Subaltern Studies is based on Mellon.
48 Chakrabarty, Rethinking, p 154.
49 Chakrabarty, p 84.
52 Vinay Bahl, The Making. Also see Bahl, ‘Class Consciousness’.
53 Wallerstein, Geopolitics, p 229.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 I mean the type of methodological individualism promoted by J W N Watkins in “Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies”, in Reading in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, Mary Builder, (ed), MacMillan, New York, 1968, pp 269-79.
In this type of individualism intentional explanations are seen as primary and intentions remain properties of individuals. Thus, we are left unable to see how social phenomena – most importantly culture and language – interact with and enable subjective capacities.
60 Chakrabarty, ‘Discussion’ op cit.
61 Lovibond points out in connection with the question of women’s emancipation that, the ultimate goal of liberation movements is not to invent new ‘identities’ along the lines laid down by existing structures of domination, but to dismantle these structures and so release the energies of each individual for the work of active (as opposed to reactive) self-definition.
62 Chakrabarty, ‘Discussion’.
64 Ibid
67 Kumkum Sangari wrote the following on the issue of differences and feminist movement:
"The idea of difference seems to be based on an active denial or denial of commonality. A diffuse, overarching vision of post-colonial, non-western modernity combines with the inadequacies of enlightenment rationality to tacitly preclude ‘non-western’ women from any other horizon of self-definition but their ‘own’ culture... dismantling a yet incomplete project of modernity for egalitarian, feminist social movements runs the danger of political quietism, parochialism and anti-feminism... how the question of rights of women can be posed from within a claim to infinite pluralisation or from outside the parameters of the nation-state... Cultural diversity is formed in a complex play of power, resources, geography and political systems. Ideas of ‘essential difference’ have been a notorious basis of discrimination. So ‘differences’ produced on the basis of class, caste, race or gender, the products of systemic inequality now need to be preserved as indices of cultural diversity? Can plural practices resulting from the discriminations or exclusions of caste and gender meaningfully be called diversity and if so is it a desirable diversity? While we cannot afford to politically confuse cultural diversity with social disparity, we have to simultaneously recognise that in our history disparities have indeed produced specific forms of diversity... unless cultural diversity is confronted with such questions it runs the danger of becoming a localised replay of the angst of colonial anthropologists or of the bad faith of bourgeois anxiety vacillating between destroying and preserving its ‘others’.
68 Lovibond rejects the idea of pluralism and writes, “if feminism is not to be mere reformism it must call into question parish boundaries to achieve a thoroughgoing global redistribution of wealth, power and labour” and to address the structural causes of existing sexual inequality. This will entail opening a door once again to the enlightenment idea of a total reconstitution of society on rational lines. Otherwise the new pluralism is simply status quoist and there are reactionary implications in the proposed return to customary ethics”.
Lovibond, pp 161, 169.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 This example is taken from G Vijay, ‘Discussion: Mass Movements and Marxist Method’, Economic and Political Weekly, November 4, 1995.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
75 For a discussion on the transformation of the state in the globalisation era, the emergence of non-state agencies, and the redefinition of citizenship under the new realities of transnational capital. See Saskia Sassen, On Governing the Global Economy: The 1995 Leonard Hastings Snow Memorial Lectures, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, forthcoming. Saskia Sassen very kindly allowed me to read the draft of these lectures.

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