Introduction. “Learning to Learn from Below”: Understanding Subalternity

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1 In a remarkable commentary on the “new” subaltern, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak examines the question of “subaltern consciousness” not as subject consciousness but in terms of “social agency—institutionally validated action” taking democracy and development as the two most urgent concerns (Spivak 2012a). Spivak sets out to do this by “learning to learn from below.” If considered in its transparent, most direct state, this is the task that scholars must engage with so as to speak with the subaltern, and be willing to learn from below without entangling voice with ideology, concepts or theory.

2 The questions that concern the papers in this special issue may be understood in terms of the authors’ overall interest in addressing issues emerging from below: subalternity, marginality, and exclusion. The articles examine complex dimensions of the experience of exclusion and inclusion through certain visible and invisible markers of difference. In addition to existing categories of caste, class, gender, and religion, new categories of distinction and differentiation may be imposed on forms, practices and experiences of subalternity. A new kind of neo-liberal India has emerged where the boundaries of distinction and exclusion as well as, contrarily, inclusion, have been modified, maintained or reproduced through encounters with “modernity.” The nation state remains central in this encounter as it sets the rules, boundaries and enclosures, as well as the liberatory parameters, in all aspects of governmentality. At the same time, tradition with caste, gender and religious prejudice holds its own in a society marked by division, hierarchy, patriarchy and ideas about what may be appropriate or necessary for social well-being. Agency however is not outside the purview of the issues raised in this complexity characteristic of social life. It remains central to analyses of how, while subjectivity may be framed within the discourse of subalternity, agency remains simultaneously present. The burden of subalternity is not overwhelming and subjects, individually and collectively, find cracks, fissures and the space for agency in everyday life. These may be expressed individually or through collective movements.
and stand at the intersection of caste, gender, religion, ethnicity and other diverse aspects of identity.

This collection is an effort to unpack the boundary markers in a region where conflict, patriarchy, caste-based violence and exclusion, religious fundamentalism and majoritarianism are paramount. The thrust is to examine subalternity, marginality, and exclusion in some of the varied categories that exist in contemporary India. The point however is not to focus on aspects of subalternity and marginality that prevail in different contexts but to unpack the experience of marginality, while simultaneously teasing out acts of resistance bespeaking of agency that arise from combative as well as from meaning making processes of selfhood and identity formation. While distinction and exclusion are paramount, it is also the case that resistance, struggle and negotiation are equally significant to the process of being in the world. The articles, rich with ethnographic insights, are interdisciplinary in their approach and method, and examine different contexts and regions within India.

Subalternity and its Vicissitudes

To understand social inequity in India, a focus on subalternity, marginality and agency is essential, facilitated in part by the work of the subaltern studies group (Guha 1982). While the primary interest of the collective was to establish the elitism characteristic of historiography and the pressing need to take account of the voice and experience of the subaltern in colonial and postcolonial times, their understanding of subalternity presented a framework that has ignited research in India and around the world. Led by Ranajit Guha, the subaltern studies collective came together in protest against “colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism” that dominated the historiography of Indian nationalism (Guha 1982:1). Guha and others were critical of the appropriation of the movement for independence and the “development of the consciousness—nationalism—which informed this process” as the exclusive accomplishments of the elite. Instead, they argued for the consideration of the contribution “of the people on their own, that is, independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism” (Guha 1982:3; emphasis in the original). This foregrounding of “the people”—the subalterns—as central to the entire discourse of the making of the nation represented a substantial shift in the understanding of the colonialist and postcolonial historiographical enterprise. In defining the people or “subaltern classes,” Guha and the collective were quick to reject all definitions of what colonialism or its aftermath had to offer. David Ludden (2002) has argued that the subaltern studies collective “reinvented subalternity” inasmuch as it sought to “invent a distinctively Indian subalternity” (p. 15). In the process of unpacking subalternity in a uniquely Indian context, the work of this collective, in the volumes that followed Guha’s initial pathbreaking work (1982), sought to enable the recovery of subaltern subjectivity through recourse to India’s cultural traditions and indigenous perspectives. This process has evoked “textual criticism, fragmentary testimonies and lost moments to restore the integrity of indigenous histories that appear naturally in non-linear, oral, symbolic, vernacular, and dramatic forms” (Ludden 2002:20). This has undoubtedly resulted in a renewed attention to the subaltern and influenced the disciplinary field of modern Indian history as well as giving rise to a slew of projects and studies, inspiring a global movement within academia.

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In his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1891–1937) first used the term “subaltern social groups” to identify and analyze the politics and activity of marginalized social groups (Green 2011:387). Gramsci's use of the term social groups' is significant as it decrives attention to social class as the defining feature of identity and instead focuses on relations within and across groups. Subalternity is “constituted through exclusion, domination, and marginality in their various forms, and given his praxis-oriented understanding of subalternity, the critical understanding of such conditions is vital to their transformation” (Green 2011:388; emphasis added). This understanding of subaltern social groups is further informed by the relations across groups and the different aspects of such relations based as they may be on domination, hierarchy, status, and other symbolic markers of relations and of the struggles within. It is clear that, for Gramsci, subalternity was not solely a matter of class relations; through an examination of different notebooks that Gramsci wrote while in prison, Green argues that it was conceived “as an intersection of class, race, culture, and religion that functioned in different modalities in specific historical contexts” (Green 2011:395).

The dynamism in Gramsci’s understanding of subalternity is noteworthy; intersectionality, a buzzword in recent times, was endemic to Gramsci’s understanding of subalternity. The complexities inherent in the category of identity drew out the heterogeneity in the idea of who the subaltern is and how the subaltern may be defined, represented or understood. Bracke (2016) for example argues that the forms of domination and marginality experienced by the subaltern are “grounded in exclusion from the political economy of industrialized capitalism—an exclusion that could not be accounted for by the logic of class only” (Bracke 2016:7). This is one lens through which we may understand the subaltern; more clearly, class, caste, gender and other intersecting factors intervene in our understanding of the subaltern. Heterogeneity prevails within a group as much as across groups and ignoring such difference within groups contributes to tension among groups that may affect relations across groups. This is a significant aspect of subalternity that reveals itself when we examine for example who is marginalized, othered or excluded within and across groups.

Gyanendra Pandey has persuasively argued that we need to view the subaltern as “subaltern-citizen” to break down the boundaries “between us (citizens, the people with history) and them (the subalterns, those without)” (Pandey 2006:4735). The current crisis in India over the proposed Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the controversies it has given rise to regarding the citizen status of people living in border regions of India, especially those belonging to certain religions, has given rise to fears about citizenship. Questions such as “who is a citizen?” in public discourse as well as among the agents, and self-proclaimed “protectors,” of a majoritarian state have resulted in persisting anxieties about identity and place, location and nationality, diversity and “truth.” This has resulted in giving a new meaning to the category of citizen subaltern through the entanglement of religion with citizenship under the garb of citizenship status that seeks to differentiate as much as to legitimize.

Subaltern citizens include those who are marginalized and live at the edge of marginality itself. The state has almost no interest in their welfare and there is no provision for their employment, food security, education, health care, or any form of livelihood except what they might garner themselves from some meagre daily wage. Some categories of subaltern citizens are particularly affected. The Musahar community, primarily in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and northern Madhya Pradesh are one
such community surviving on the margins of marginality. They struggle to find employment, scramble for food and consume rats and grains from ratholes, which adds to their outcaste status in the community and, above all, regard their fate with stoic acceptance. Musahars are predominantly landless agricultural laborers and the relationship between work, labor and subalternity is complex and fraught with multiple challenges. Most often, subaltern-citizens, due to their low status, lack of professional skills, education, or to their overriding poverty, find it difficult to find employment in the government sector. If they do, they experience difficulties that may not be overcome. A recent inquiry that examines the caste wise distribution of urban workers in India, finds that there is “a 74% difference in the regular wage employment” and a “44% difference in the average wages” between the scheduled castes and “other” workers due to “caste discrimination” (Ram and Yadav 2022). In fact, SC and ST category workers are heavily concentrated as low-paid casual workers and under-represented in better paid jobs according to their share in the population. Across states in India, the SC and OBC workers “together constitute around 60%-80% of the total workers who did not get the minimum wage in 2018–19” (Ram and Yadav 2022:49). This dismal scenario that highlights the plight of subaltern-citizens remains under recognized by the state and is therefore exacerbated by a sudden onset of unemployment such as during the nation-wide lockdown in the first phase of Covid-19 in 2020.

The plight of subaltern women is particularly fraught and complex due to the clutch of patriarchy both within and between caste, class and religious categories. India has one of the lowest female labor participations in the world. Only a quarter of India’s women are in the labor force (Reed 2020) with variations according to regional states, religion, caste, social class, and other intersecting factors. Marriage and familial practices are seen as major reasons for this abysmal situation. If we add caste, class, religion, widowhood and other intersecting categories, we may observe how inequalities for women are constituted quite differently within and across different kinds of classification.

The fact of being a subaltern-citizen also raises new questions of how we may consider writing about and representing subalterns: it is our view of subalterns as opposed to their experience of being subaltern. This kind of dichotomy is deceptively present as we speak and write for subalterns; however, seeking to understand subalternity from the lived experience and articulations of the subaltern is one way of overcoming the dichotomy as well as of problematizing a fixed view of subalternity as the oppressed, excluded, marginalized. Subalternity may be a multi-faceted experience, as is borne out by the testimonies of subalterns in their writings.

Contrary to Gramsci’s position or Guha’s elaboration on subalternity, Spivak chooses to understand the subaltern as one with no identity: “subalternity is a position with no identity” (Spivak 2012b:431). She clarifies, “subalternity is where social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action” (Spivak 2012b:431). This is based on her understanding of subalternity as a class category and, as she herself points out, taken from Marx’s position in The Eighteenth Brumaire. She adopts this position to distinguish between subalternity and agency, and basically concludes, therefore, that “the idea of subalternity became imbricated with the idea of non-recognition of agency” (Spivak 2012a:432). Spivak’s interventions made it more complex and it has been argued that “Spivak’s concept of the subaltern displays
a peculiar troubling quality, as it can only be defined via negativa, namely through its inherent status as a non-subject or non-agent” (de Jong and Mascat 2016). This apparently “non-subject” appears to be located in a “non-place” (Stephen Morton as cited by de Jong and Mascat 2016). However, Spivak is not erasing the subaltern but rather cautioning us about subalternity and representation. Who speaks for the subaltern? Academic knowledge constructs the subaltern through writing about subalternity and is thereby a representation of the subaltern. In arguing against the construction of the subaltern through academic knowledge, Beverley writes, “How can it be said then that one can ‘know’ or ‘represent’ the subaltern from the standpoint of academic knowledge or high culture, when those forms of knowledge and representation are themselves directly or indirectly implicated in the social production, or ‘othering’ of the subaltern?” (Beverley 1998:305). This position emphasizes that in academic knowledge subalternity endures through representation and reproduction of the experience of subalternity. In this context, the papers in this collection are sensitive to the dilemmas concerning representation in examining subalternity, marginality and exclusion and seek to examine subalternity, voice and agency through an engagement with subjects in the variety and complexity of their experience in a differentiated space.  

Elsewhere, Spivak (2021) warns us that most academic research and world-wide conferences forget to focus on subalterns, “social groups on the fringes of history” and in doing so, we are “caught in a bureaucratically quantified egalitarian summits/festivals culture, preaching to the choir, supported by corporate funding ... —we are organic to the ideology that lets capitalist globalization survive” (Spivak 2021:55). This is serious commentary on the way in which the academy has allowed itself to grow in South Asia as much as in other regions. The reliance on corporate groups and vested interests for financial resources results in skewed goals and dubious conclusions. Reflecting on Gramsci’s understanding of the subaltern, Zene (2011) takes particular note of how Spivak has developed her idea of the subaltern through her more than 15-year commitment to tribal education in North Bengal. At one time, she claimed that “the subaltern cannot speak,” by stressing the impossibility of recovering the subaltern as a subject; however, she latterly admitted that we “learn from the subaltern,” more precisely “learn to learn from below;” in other words, the subaltern can talk and teach us. Subalterns not only have the right “to think,” but they provide the evidence that the task of thinking, or philosophizing, is not the preserve of a privileged minority of intellectuals since “everyone is a philosopher” according to Gramsci (Zene 2016); and this is true particularly for those who have been kept “on the margins of history.” Focusing on subaltern experiences or lives may open up the possibility of shattering the boundaries of “knowledge.” This attention to subalternity, marginality, and agency in the papers in this collection is not a mere intellectual endeavor, that Spivak criticized so well in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern speak?” (Spivak 1988). It is an attempt to speak with the subaltern, if this is indeed possible.

At the same time, subalternity cannot be defined only by the conditions of existence, that is, that the view that emphasizes that subaltern social groups are “different” as opposed to the elite and that they are dominated or oppressed marks them out as a subaltern category. Undoubtedly, they are engaged in constructing the social world as much as they are constructed by it. Bourdieu argues that they do this through the "work of representation" (in all senses of the word) that they constantly perform in order to impose their view of the world or the view of their own position in this world—their
social identity” (Bourdieu 1985:727; emphasis in the original). In this process, subaltern social groups may not necessarily view themselves as makers of their destinies or as charting their own path, as it were, due to the vexed nature of their identities. Power, as Foucault famously argued, has entered their consciousness and they view themselves as trapped in it. Bourdieu in fact emphasizes that “power relations are also present in people’s minds, in the form of the categories of perception of these relations” (Bourdieu 1985:729). Elsewhere, Bourdieu has argued that they “misrecognize” the conditions of their situation as their fate or “reality” rather than the outcome of the exercise of power. To know the “world as it is” requires knowledge of one’s condition in order to beget the process of social transformation. It is therefore not inevitable that the social and cultural reproduction of domination, and thereby of the oppression of subaltern groups, holds good in perpetuity. The possibilities for individual and social transformation are endless and this depends on the knowledge we have of first, our condition as it is, and secondly, of what means are available to us for overturning the context.

Knowledge of the social world and, more precisely, the categories that make it possible, are the stakes, par excellence, of political struggle, the inextricably theoretical and practical struggle for the power to conserve or transform the social word by conserving or transforming the categories through which it is perceived. (Bourdieu 1985:729)

This is not an easy task since the modes or modalities of perception that are available are not necessarily easily accessible to subaltern groups. The awareness of one’s condition may come about through critical engagement, political consciousness and activity for which education and critical thinking are part of the toolkit for knowledge about one’s condition. Despite Freire’s important work on “conscientization” (1970) and the role of education as a liberatory force, this is not always valid as education effectively constrains even as it liberates. The school has in fact been considered “a socially conservative force” (Bourdieu 1974:33). As Bourdieu has distinctively argued, education is “the most effective means of perpetuating the existing social pattern, as it both provides an apparent justification for social inequalities and gives recognition to the cultural heritage, that is, to a social gift, treated as a natural one” (Bourdieu 1974:32; emphasis in the original). In this manner, social inequalities are legitimized as forms of natural inequalities thereby reproducing and perpetuating structural inequity through education. Gramsci had already expressed his dissatisfaction with education as an agent of change, arguing that “the separation between the ‘traditional’ and the vocational schools reproduces the distinction between elite and subaltern classes” (Beverley 1998:315). Appearing to be “democratic,” vocational schools seek to provide “practical knowledge” above theoretical knowledge and the promise of employability to the marginalized and disenfranchised. However, Gramsci argues that such an education in fact fails to equip subalterns with equal opportunity and the ability to govern and in fact serves to create further inequalities (Beverley 1998:315). Instead, Beverley asserts that Gramsci believed that subaltern “spontaneity” is necessary for social struggle to take place but this may not happen due to the inability of the “subaltern consciousness to constitute a hegemonic project” (Beverley 1998:316). In the complex web that constitutes subalternity that is about both reproduction and change, it is important to simultaneously propose and consider the possibilities that provide an impetus for voice and agency. The articles in this special issue seek to examine such
possibilities and the outcomes that they have enabled through diverse mediums, contexts and settings.

Exclusion, Caste and Subalternity

Caste is endemic to Indian society. Despite higher educational levels among Indians, the inequities based on caste continue in everyday life and in the socio-economic and political contexts that shape India in the twenty-first century. The caste system is complex, and the attempts that have been made to unpack its peculiarities and complexities have often resulted in competing understandings of caste and its practice across India.⁹

The linguistic origin of the term “Dalit” is Marathi, and it pre-dates the militant-intellectual Dalit Panthers movement of the 1970s. It was, however, not in popular use till the last quarter of the 20th century, the origin of Dalit Panthers. The term Dalit in Hindi, comes from the word “dalan” meaning “oppressed,” “crushed” or “broken,” being associated with the centuries of experience of members of the untouchable caste. The Dalit Panthers defined it thus: “Who is a Dalit? Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion” (Manifesto of Dalit Panthers 1973). Gandhi had in the mid-twentieth century tried to give it a positive connotation by using the term “Harijan” (people of God), but this was rejected by Ambedkar who did not see it as appropriate for the untouchables. Instead, he used the term “depressed classes” but because of Gandhi’s greater influence over the masses, the term Harijan persisted (Pankaj and Pandey 2018:3). Since the British government included them in a Schedule under the Government of India Act, 1935, they have been known as the “scheduled castes.” However, there is complexity and heterogeneity among Dalits, well noted by Jyoti Rao Phule and by B.R. Ambedkar, and reflected in the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s which was the first collective organized movement among Dalits.

It was Ambedkar who first sought not to merely ameliorate the conditions and status of Dalits but actually to envisage the “annihilation of caste” as the only way out of the excesses the Dalits had been subjected to. It has been suggested that Ambedkar tried to “bind all untouchable castes into a quasi-class, Dalit” (Teltumbde 2018) but the heterogeneity prevalent among Dalits does not allow this. Dalit is much more than a class, it is a category that represents the complexity of experience based on class, gender, socio-economic capital, and other markers of identity that inhere in Hindu society. Ambedkar’s position lay in his intention to mobilize Dalits as a caste group, not necessarily as a class, which needed to assert itself and fight for its rights. Hindu society itself is a complex phenomenon and Ambedkar did not view Hindu society, divided as it is by caste cleavages and caste consciousness, as a social whole precisely because there is not “a conception of their having constituted a community. Hindu society as such does not exist. It is only a collection of castes. Each caste is conscious of its existence. Its survival is the be-all and the end-all of its existence” (Ambedkar 2021:40). Caste consciousness among Hindus prevents the constitution of Hindu society as a social entity or indeed as a nation (Ambedkar 2021:41). This is a scathing critique of the suggested cohesiveness of a pan Hindu society touted by contemporary Hindutva proponents who see “minorities” and others as existing outside it. Dalits lie outside the
Hindu kutumb and in this sense, Hindu society and the Hindu nation in a collective, cohesive sense is a myth. The Dalit is therefore constructed as subaltern by Hindu society which “others” and pushes the subaltern into a position of exclusion and marginalization borne out by the life experience of Dalits captured in their autobiographies and other writings over the years.

As Yengde argues, “caste is an anti-fellowship institution” (Yengde 2019:42). It erases the sense of collective consciousness, togetherness or commonality except perhaps within caste groups. However, even within caste groups, differences persist not only amongst members but also across gender and social class. Gopal Guru has noted how men within the Dalit community may bond together in their common identity but oppress the women in their households and within the community. He argues that Dalit women are therefore more exposed to patriarchal and structural violence. They talk differently because they suffer “on the basis of external factors (non-Dalit forces homogenizing the issue of Dalit women) and internal factors (the patriarchal domination within Dalits)” (Guru as cited in Arya and Rathore 2020:12).

Humiliation remains a key trope in understanding the experience of caste identities across India. As caste is endemic to social life, “humiliation too is almost endemic to social life” (Guru 2009:1). This is based not just on the unequal nature of relationship between and among different castes and sub-castes across India but, more importantly, on the ways in which the dominant upper-caste gendered subject treats the so-called “untouchable” or Dalit. Humiliation, based on untouchability as well as on vocal barbs and taunts, contributes to the physical experience of being othered and to psychological trauma that often takes generations to overcome. As Bhikhu Parekh argues, “Humiliation is most effective when it is so deep and pervasive that it is no longer recognized for what it is” (Parekh 2009:25–26). One of the concerns of this special issue is to focus on this humiliation without representing Dalits as victims or as the oppressed with no apparent recourse to agency and its tools. Dalits have been asserting themselves since the 1970s with increasing anger and often violence in retaliation against their mistreatment. Pankaj and Pandey (2018) view the Dalit movement as characterized by three periods, reformative to start with, with Phule and Ambedkar in the lead, transformative with increasing Constitutional provisions, education and reservation in employment, and later, confrontational with more aggression and violence in their struggle for justice. Constitutional provisions have not been very successful in protecting the interests of the “depressed classes,” as Ambedkar used to refer to them. First, the “linguistic accessibility of the Constitution” and its reach to the depressed classes is minimal (Yengde 2019:76). Peasants and other rural members of the Dalit community do not necessarily rely on the written word of the Constitution to oppose caste inequity in the rural hinterland. In small towns and shanties of urban India, caste atrocities remain commonplace. It would not be an overstatement to say, “Constitutionalism has proved to be an unreliable doctrine to influence perpetrators of casteism” (Yengde 2019:78).

It is assumed that while caste is rampant in rural India, it is less prevalent in urban India where modernity has overtaken caste consciousness through all the trappings of globalization. This however is a mistaken understanding of the prevalence of caste-based attitudes, distancing practices, and the acute caste consciousness present in urban India. In a commentary based on a 2016 report of the National Crimes Record Bureau on atrocities faced by the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in
metropolitan cities, Ashwini Deshpande notes, “India’s ‘Silicon Valley’ cities, poster children of modern, globalizing India, temples of cutting-edge information technology, Bengaluru and Hyderabad, reported 207 and 139 incidents respectively in 2016” (Deshpande 2017). As these figures represent only those which were reported, it is also very likely that there were many more unreported and therefore undocumented incidents. Among state capitals, Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh and Patna in Bihar rank number 1 and number 2 with 262 and 241 cases respectively (Deshpande 2017). Humiliation of the victims appears to be a strong motivation on the part of the perpetrators, all members of upper castes, and actions include physical violence, not allowing Dalits to enter temples or use the public water tap, inflicting sexual abuse and all forms of verbal taunts and abuse to ensure complete abjection and despair. The Constitution has failed to protect the SCs and STs and, apart from the practice of endogamy and caste-based prejudice among the upper castes, there is rampant caste consciousness among the agents of the state, the police, who often fail to accept reports, are dismissive of them, and deny the victims recourse to the law.

These are processes of subalternization that are endured by subaltern-citizens. Sarker distinguishes between the “subaltern” and processes of “subalternization,” “when the term ‘subalternization’ marks the continual processes of minoritization and/or marginalization, specific to and diversely practiced in different contexts” (Sarker 2016:818–19). The process through which subalternization takes place is marked on the bodies, emotions, and identities of subaltern-citizens who struggle against the process as much as they succumb to it. Subalternity is produced through this process of subalternization with the marked body being central to the experience. It does not generate a fixed identity and is a harsh process filled with anguish, humiliation, despair and also anger towards the practices that beget it. It reflects and emphasizes “processes of systematic and systemic disempowerment and contestations that are enacted through identities that are positioned materially within and across structures of power and displacement” (Sarker 2016:819). Such an understanding does not view identities as homogeneous or static and allows space for the complexities that prevail in the experience of being subaltern-citizen.

Dalit subaltern experience is thus not homogeneous and being Dalit and a woman has particular consequences within the community as much as in relation to other caste groups. When focusing on women and their interests, it is important to distinguish those marginalized and excluded from other women and desist from viewing women as a uniform category of differentiated but nonetheless “women” by virtue of their gender. Rege has emphasized, “The ‘real interests’ of women must be conceptualized from the perspective of the marginalized; in this case the perspectives of the Dalit women” (Rege 2020a:104). In this context, it is argued that there is an “assimilation of the patriarchal caste ideology” by both Dalit men and women and this has outcomes for the overwhelming experience of oppression and marginalization experienced by the Dalit subaltern woman (Aloysius et al. 2020:174). Caste and sub-caste identity and purity in the Dalit community is perpetuated; Dalit men remain powerful within family and community circles; Dalit women’s subjectivity, including labor, sexuality and resources, is controlled by both dominant caste men/women and Dalit men (Aloysius et al. 2020:174). This includes the preponderance of domestic violence within the household and community by Dalit men including physical and sexual violence, marital rape, verbal abuse and dowry taunts. The main causes are patriarchy and alcoholism among Dalit men (Aloysius et al. 2006). The relationship between caste,
gender, honor and violence is well documented by Gorringe (2018) who concludes that the “politics of honor” are central to caste politics within the community as much as outside it. Although Dalit women more often than not endure the violence and stay on in marriages out of a sense of “duty,” or are sometimes abandoned by the men, some other women document their experiences and convey their angst through their autobiographical writings.

24 There are approximately 80 million Dalit women in India; sexual violence against them is on the rise. Between 2009 and 2019, while reported rapes dropped by 5 per cent, there was an increase of 160 per cent when they rose from 1,346 cases to 3,486 cases for Dalit women (Kamdar 2021). There would be many more unreported cases that remain excluded from official figures. This is one significant way through which structural caste and gender hierarchies are further reproduced as the perpetrators are members of the dominant caste in the majority of cases although Dalit men are not necessarily excluded. Dalit women’s vulnerability is exposed not only in their subservient relations with the dominant caste but also in the context of the household and the community where Dalit men hold on to their dominant position as male upholders of family tradition in a patriarchal society.

25 The experiences of Dalit women subalterns have been recorded and analyzed in a number of studies. The significant role of Phule and Ambedkar in bringing about a change in Dalit women’s lives through an emphasis on education and better conditions for them must not be overlooked. Yet, Phule and Ambedkar have often been neglected in social science discourse on Dalit women. Opposed to the largely upper caste social reformers, they were primarily not only focused on “‘modernizing’ education and gender relations but also sought to democratize them” (Paik 2014:5, emphasis in the original). In Paik’s words, Phule and Ambedkar emphasized egalitarian relationships as opposed to privilege, and combined critiques of knowledge, caste and gender hierarchies in ways that opened up new spaces for women in general and Dalit women in particular (Paik 2014:5). In her monumental work, Against the Madness of Manu (2013), Rege has read Ambedkar as the first Dalit feminist and argued that the Dalit woman’s subalternity is constituted through the practice of endogamy with a strong prohibition against intermarriage that provides the framework for the development of the caste structure. It is not enough to argue that patriarchy positions women in a particular way. Understanding the lived experience of the Dalit subaltern woman does not rest on viewing patriarchy in the plural and arguing that caste and gender intersect in explaining the “difference” between Dalit and upper caste women. Following Ambedkar, Rege argues that it is important “to map the ways in which woman as a category is being differently reconstituted within patriarchal relations of graded caste inequalities” (Rege 2013, emphasis added). This mapping rests in seeking to unpack the nuanced manner in which patriarchy pushes gender into gradations of difference ranging from reverence to contempt.

26 At the same time, women subalterns have themselves articulated their experience, struggles, and independence despite their marginal and humiliating status in both the community and in upper caste Brahminical Hindu society. That they have internalized their condition or seek to reproduce it is not necessarily an obvious conclusion. As a result of their awareness and sense of urgency for change, women do not hesitate to speak about their victimhood and about the possibilities for their upliftment. Instead, we need to focus “on the complexity of Dalit women’s subjectivities as both victims and
agents: their struggles against victimhood shaped their selves and agency” (Paik 2020:66). In other words, it is important to unravel the nuanced processes through which the Dalit woman’s subjectivity is experienced on a daily and continuous level. It is neither caught up completely in the narrative of victimhood which is so demoralizing and inadequate for the women themselves. It is also not framed in a heroic movement for personal and social transformation. It lies somewhere betwixt and between, captured between the experience of being victimized, oppressed and traumatized and, simultaneously, a movement towards fighting off the shackles that bind her to the persona of a Dalit identity.

Dalit women subalterns’ literary and non-literary works offer the most searing accounts of their existence. In a pathbreaking paper that challenges conventional understanding of autobiographical writing, Rege has emphasized Dalit autobiographical writing as “testimonios” and in so doing has opened up new understanding of the ways in which Dalit autobiographies are written and read:

- Dalit life narratives are testimonies; acts testifying or bearing witness legally or religiously. In a testimony, the intention is not one of literariness but of communicating the situation of a group’s oppression, imprisonment and struggle. The narrator claims some agency in the act of narrating and calls upon the readers to respond actively in judging the situation. In doing so they create new generic possibilities and invite different ways of being read. Dalit life narratives thus historically created the genre of testimonies in which the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode. This dialectics of self and community assumes further significance in Dalit women’s testimonios for, situated as women in the community, they articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of the Dalit community. (Rege 2020b:132)

Rege’s view of Dalit autobiography as testimonios opens up an important dimension of Dalit writing that has hitherto been seen as the plaintive voice of the victim and oppressed. Guru asserts, “testimonios have the ability to convert ‘what is considered pathological into subversive chemicals’” (Guru as cited by Rege 2020b:132). Subaltern narratives therefore have the potential to do away with the conventional understanding of subaltern experience. It is this aspect that we seek to understand and examine in this issue.

That voice, in its very speaking, begets agency, casts new light on subaltern agency. Beverley notes, “Testimonio gives voice in literature to a previously ‘voiceless’ anonymous popular democratic subject, but in such a way that the intellectual or professional of bourgeois or petty bourgeois background is interpellated, in his or her function as interlocutor / reader of the testimonio, as being in solidarity with (and to some extent dependent on) this subject, without at the same time losing his or her identity as an intellectual of the traditional type” (Beverley 1998:312). Subaltern writing is representative of the pathos of the humiliation and othering experienced by subalterns but also imbued with the challenges it poses for both the interlocutors and the readers. Most Dalit literary and autobiographical texts have co-authors, translators or editors who are often not Dalits themselves. This points to the important role of such interventions that commit to representing both Dalit voice and Dalit lives, to a wider arena through their writing. These interlocutors speak with and for subalterns, without representing their lives with ideological posturing. While they appear to have some kind of power over subaltern subjects, I view them as playing a far more progressive role. They help bring the underworld of Dalit experience to the surface with an enormous impact on non-vernacular readers and scholars. An early and
important work in this genre is the life story of Viramma as told to Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine (1997) that has meaning and resonates with Dalit women's experiences throughout India.

The pervasive connections between caste, class and patriarchy affect the experience of the Dalit subaltern woman and her potentiality to be an agent of change and points to the experience of being trapped in the identity of a subaltern at the margins of society, vulnerable to assault, violence and trauma of different kinds. This view tends to fix Dalits as, "ritually defined beings" (Yengde 2019:62) and denies them the expression of fellowship, humanism, or agency. To view Dalit subalterns only within a caste category essentializes not only identity but, being based on caste, experience too, and further results in the reproduction of caste identities and experience as fixed and immutable. To understand Dalits outside this fixed category based on ritually defined identity markers, we need to view Dalit subalterns as agents with the capabilities to identify, resist and be courageous in their movement for change. This needs a shift in our perception of subalternity and agency, which is possible if we view subaltern subjects as having the capabilities to offer resistance despite their othered and marginal status in Indian society.

Subalternity, Voice and Agency

Agency is a vexed concept. How we view agency and develop it as a concept and as practice, shapes our understanding of subaltern agency. The papers in this special issue seek to engage with aspects of subaltern agency in different contexts, locations and a variety of life experiences in an attempt to enhance our understanding of the multitude of meanings that both “subalternity” and “agency” bring forth. However, by continuously recounting the experience of marginalized groups and focusing only on the lived experience of subalternity serves merely to reify the subaltern. This brings us to the question that we must first seek to address: Who is the subaltern? A subaltern is, to cite Spivak, “without identity.” She explains, “No one can say ‘I am a subaltern,’ in whatever language” (Spivak 2005). Spivak instead proposes, in a powerful intervention, “The subaltern is a name for a differential space” (Spivak 2005). Subalterns seeking to establish “difference” or a “differential space” is a core theme running through the papers in this issue. Some authors seek to address it directly through, for example, the study of autobiographies, and others through certain practices of appropriation and difference that subalterns seek to create in their pursuit of mobility and challenge to tradition.

No doubt power is central to our understanding of agency. Power oppresses and dominates even as it simultaneously provides the apertures for agency to assert itself in different modes and ways of being, that may or may not intersect with pre-existing ideas about agency. We therefore need to see with another eye, listen and learn from the unravelling of agency in unique ways through the essays in this special issue. Taking a cue from Foucault’s construction of resistance, Abu-Lughod argues that we need in fact to examine resistance as a “diagnostic of power” (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). This is not to deny the significance of all forms of resistance but, as she points out, instead of viewing them “as signs of human freedom we will use them strategically to tell us more about forms of power and how people are caught up in them” (Abu-Lughod 1990:42). In this manner, it is equally important, as Madhulika Sonkar has emphasized,
that understanding “subalternty hinges not only on understanding the silencing of hegemonic narratives, but also on examining the entanglement of subalternity with questions of agency and resistance” (Sonkar n.d.).

The papers in this special issue speak to that very understanding of resistance through their explorations into vastly different marginalities and through the forms of resistance that are revealed. In one way or another, the authors assert that there is resistance and an impetus for change that comes out of the experience of being subaltern, marginalized, excluded: for example, through Ambedkar's understanding and claim that Buddhism provides a political and ethical identity; the rejection of religious ritual; everyday assertions of identity, using, for example, buffalo sacrifice as a route for transformation, among other aspects of marginality and change. The trope of resistance as an idea and as an aspect of agency is both enabling as well as limiting in its view that every act of resistance emerges from the engagement of human subjects with the exercise of power. It is the exercise of power that makes the subject subaltern as well as builds the capacities for resistance. This may not however always hold true and may perhaps result in a romanticization of resistance as a kind of creative energy that impels subjects to resist the workings of any and all exercise of power. It is therefore important to be conscious of this aspect while seeking to explain resistance.

There is undoubtedly a heterogeneity and diversity that underpins the subaltern experience. Guha defined subalterns as “a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society where this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1982: vii). He further explains that “subordination cannot be understood except as one of the constitutive terms in a binary relationship of which the other is dominance, for subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up” (Guha 1982: vii). While Guha is describing a phenomenon of power, and its corollary of oppression and acts of resistance, the essays in this volume seek to take this argument forward by asserting that agency is an essential and indelible aspect of “difference” as lived experience. It does not always emerge from a context in which power is exercised when marginality is being contested but is also the human subject’s way of being. At the same time, agency is also not a personal, individual “phenomenon” but is in fact connected to the pursuit of ethics for “good-ness” in the global human condition. Here, we invoke the work of Hannah Arendt who famously argued that agency is in the public space, and is realized and dependent on others present in that public space (Thuma 2011:6–11). Such a perspective seeks to further work with the possibilities that are opened up through an expanded understanding of how we perceive and engage with the world. This is the focus of the five papers that all engage with subalternity, marginality and exclusion through a lens that keeps the subaltern voice at the forefront of analysis.

The effort in this special issue is to unpack the varied expressions of self and identity that help to negotiate, strategize and reframe the visible and invisible boundaries of the spaces inhabited in the social, religious and political worlds. The authors do not merely document the dilemmas, anxieties, cleavages and complexities that prevail in the contexts of subalternity but seek to understand how these serve, in fact, to enhance our understanding of agency. The subaltern speaks, with voice and agency in different contexts that are viewed as opportunities not only for changing status, social position, or roles in society but also as an expression and representation of how human subjects...
view themselves, their relationships, interaction, and practice in everyday life. It is in this context that the articles examine the intersecting categories of caste, gender, sexuality, and religion, through fieldwork, for example with hijras in Gujarat, with marginalized women in U.P. and genres such as autobiographies and buffalo sacrifice. The focus on Ambedkar’s engagement with religion as crucial to the transformation of identity is central to the theme of one paper. The essays include a mix of fieldwork-based articles and a reflective essay on western, southern, and northern India by Japanese and Indian scholars.

Our concern here is to examine how subalternity both impacts the contemporary moment and speaks to it in different ways. It is here that Spivak resonates most vividly with common concerns that are of some urgency in the socio-political times we inhabit. In an interview, she states, “It is around the issues of democratization and gender-and-development that the question of subaltern consciousness most urgently arises” (Spivak 2012a). With the spread of the global economy and capitalism in India, the local economy has been incorporated into national and globalized markets, and disparities have rapidly expanded between those who have access to opportunities to gain economic capital and those who have become marginalized in India’s growing economy. It has also produced divisions within marginalized groups between those who have been able to bring about changes in their consumption behavior and lifestyle through welfare and development programs, and those who have been left behind without access to such opportunities. This raises pertinent questions on the theme of state policy, about empowering the subaltern, and its dual outcome in particular contexts. This special issue posits, as do de Jong and Mascat (2016), that “it is possible to confront subalternity while avoiding theoretical paralysis as well as dilution of the concept of subaltern, in order to constructively employ what Spivak has called ‘the possibility of subalternity [acting] as a reminder … something that would destroy [our] generalizations’” (Spivak 1996, as cited in de Jong and Macast 2016).

In her study of Bind women in rural Uttar Pradesh, Misako Kanno’s paper unravels the experiences of women whether or not they are part of the government Mahila Samakhya (MS) educational program that is in place for rural women. Based on fieldwork in Uttar Pradesh, Kanno explores how subaltern women have been affected by the capitalist economy and formed boundaries among themselves in the process of being involved in welfare programs. She argues that the women empowered by welfare programs do not address the socio-political institutions that oppress them; instead, they rally against those who are left behind within the welfare program. For example, the MS program is no doubt experienced as empowering by the women who benefit from it but participation depends on many interconnected factors; lack of participation due to the pressure of work and household chores leads to the experience of loss and insecurity and develops an attitude that emphasizes “fate,” and “karmic forces” as inherent in the nature of “womanhood” itself. This is a process of “subalternization” engendered by the MS program which is a welfare measure of a neoliberal state. It creates differences between and among the women on the basis of access alone; participation leads to further disparities as those who participate view themselves as superior to others who have been unable to access it. In other words, a welfare measure ends up becoming an assertion of the power of knowledge and skills of some kind over others, and is an expression of “symbolic violence” in a marginalized and poor community. Subalternity therefore is experienced in a manner that is entangled and fraught through heterogeneity of experience and powerlessness. Agency loses its edge and resistance...
here is circumscribed and limited. The point, however, is to listen to the excluded women and understand the process of subalternization and their response to it. The paper also emphasizes the role of the state in creating divisions and boundaries among subalterns and reducing them to fissured subjects in search of equality. Kanno is deeply concerned about the urgent need to understand the subjects of women’s empowerment in welfare programs to ensure that the existence of the left-behind is understood by anthropologists and not eliminated from the state policy discourse.

Gender however is not about “lived sexual difference” alone; it is also about “collective social negotiation of sexual differences as the basis of action” (Spivak 2005:476). Location, in addition to religion and gender, often shapes generalizations about subalternity as a limited, constructed sociality defined by exclusion, containment and stigma. Contrarily, Akiko Kunihiro’s paper in this special issue seeks to challenge the hegemonic discourse about “hijras” who have been subalternized as an oppressed third gender. Because of their non-normative gender, hijras have been described as deviants in colonial documents and later praised as “an alternative gender” or “third sex” and “third gender” by scholars. In contemporary times, under the garb of the “third gender” category, hijras have become more visible as subaltern individuals who do not fit into normative gender divisions. Kunihiro has been conducting fieldwork with a hijra community in northern Gujarat since 2000 and seeks to unpack their lives as renouncers devoted to a mother goddess. She highlights an alternative way of understanding their non-normativity in order to destabilize a monolithic image of the hijra community existing all over the country, by foregrounding local narratives and the embodiment of divinity, and the rules of incorporation of externality at the temple of Bahucharā mātā in Gujarat. Hijras of Gujarat, particularly those who belong to pāvaiya, are collectively identifying themselves with a feminine deity through their devotional means. Their collective subordination to Bahucharā Mātā is indicative of their agency to enhance their presence in the realm of religion. Kunihiro’s contribution, with thick description and experiential accounts, aims to dispel the constructions of hijras as subalternized subjects and views them instead as located in their fluid identity as devotees of a mother-goddess, and hence, with a feminine form of divinity.

Apart from the generalized intellectual understandings of subalternity as a discourse of power, and its outcome, i.e. the manifold processes of subalternization, this special issue also examines the different ways in which subalternity as a process of identity formation constitutes agency at its very core. Consider this:

The prominent Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas’s Sanskritization model, which assumes that Dalit groups and individuals imitate religious and cultural practices of caste Hindus, formed an important conceptual tool for studying Dalit struggles as initiatives for social mobility in modern India. The model of Sanskritization or emulation denies agency and autonomous consciousness to Dalits and also prevents us from recognizing their role in initiating social struggles against caste hierarchy.

Pointing to an assertive subaltern identity, this is a trenchant critique of Srinivas’s idea of social mobility through imitation. “Imitation” as an idea represents a passivity on the part of the subaltern who merely wants to be “like” the oppressor without going into the manifold reasons for mobility that emerge from a view that gives voice and agency to subalterns.
Aya Ikegame’s paper on the rejection of buffalo sacrifice by Dalits at village festivals in Karnataka repudiates the idea of the continuation of tradition through passive emulation or acceptance and emphasizes the political assertion of Dalit identity. Madigas, one of the most discriminated former untouchable groups in central Karnataka, South India, have begun to refuse their free caste duty during the sacrificial rite of buffaloes at the time of a village festival venerating the fearful goddess Māramma. They now perceive the ritual as “humiliating and demeaning. Not only does it require them to engage in many dangerous acts (such as holding the head of a large beast while it is cut and scattering blood-soaked rice in the dark), but also small mistakes in the process can lead to physical violence and even the loss of life” (Ikegame, this issue). Through a study of some influencing factors that include the leadership provided by a local NGO head and spiritual leader, MC Raj, and the work of the Dalit Panchayat movement, Ikegame traces the development of awareness in the Dalit community, and their political assertion and rejection of buffalo sacrifice. This is a new Dalit spiritual movement which supports Dalit defiance and Ikegame situates it in a long continuous, but less recognized Dalit intellectual tradition. Ikegame is emphatic that this is not a mere act of Sanskritization which may be viewed as an imitation of the “blood-avoiding” behavior of upper caste Brahmins. It is in fact an act of agency because under normal circumstances Dalits eat buffalo meat but, as Ikegame asserts, “they object to it in this particular ritual context and to the inhumane acts that they are forced to perform” (Ikegame, this issue). Their identity as Dalits and as subalterns is therefore certainly not fixed. It is a malleable, fluid identity, in process. Such a view helps us to understand the processes of subalternization, the experience of subalternity as disempowering, as well as, simultaneously, an expression of movement for change. It also allows for understanding subalternity as a powerful concept that embodies both lived experience and the imagination and potential for change. This comes through critically in subaltern writings about their lives that emphasize difference and subordination as much as they challenge the stereotypes that have trapped them in an apparently frozen identity.

Autobiography is a genre that is in the voice of the author and is perhaps the most authentic experience of subjecthood, despite recourse to memory, the play of nostalgia, and other intervening factors. Autobiographies speak to us with the heterogeneity and multiplicity of experience about the vexed nature of being a subaltern, marginalized, gendered social being at home, in school, in the village, in community and in the world at large. In other words, autobiographies foreground the experience of marginality, exclusion, shame and humiliation. In this context, Udaya Kumar has raised a pertinent question: “Can shame play a decisive role in constituting the autobiographical? Would this point to a different model for thinking about autobiographization from that of a full, self-present subject?” (2009:348). This question helps us to unravel, for example, the experience of Dalit writers who dwell on their life stories with some bitterness, shame and despair. At the same time, however, autobiographies offer a window into the souls of those who voice them. They articulate innermost fears, dilemmas, anxieties as well as document the trajectory of a life. In Kumar’s words, “they rather open up a critical space by presenting a complex account of the subject’s inhabitation of the world. Humiliation is the central narrative trope through which this complexity is captured” (2009:352). This makes the exploration of Dalit autobiographies a complex methodological conundrum. On the one hand, the texts are speaking out about very intimate, personal experiences that are placed in the public domain with purpose and
as an effort to reach out to a social world that may or may not attempt to comprehend the complexity of lived experience. On the other hand, Dalit autobiographies are illustrative also of the emphatic insistence and determination of subjects to bring about change in their social position and that of their community. Meenakshi Thapan’s paper examines some Dalit autobiographical texts and argues that autobiographical writings unwittingly push the Dalit subaltern into a narrative form that emphasizes the experience of wretchedness, isolation and exclusion. This further builds a repertoire of imagery associated with marginalization, oppression, and exploitation. By bringing in the struggle and individual acts of agency against caste dominance, the autobiographies simultaneously constitute “subaltern counterpublics,” to use Nancy Fraser’s persuasive phrase (Fraser 2018). This confirms that autobiographies are a formidable medium, not only for the representation of Dalit experience of subalternity but also for the possibilities for transformation as these emerge through the experience of Dalit writers. It is in this sense that autobiographies are not devoid of the struggles, battles, negotiations, and movements that have arisen as a result of the experience of being marginalized.

The last paper in the collection by Vidhu Verma focuses on the complex relationship between religion, identity and the secular. It is perhaps a somewhat simplistic view that subalternity is only about the experience and articulation of marginalization and exclusion while it is far more complex as, in the case of Dalits, this experience is dictated by a religious order, that of Hinduism. Their relationship with Hindu society is premised on the framework of a religious order that dominates the conditions of engagement. Under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar, Dalits sought to transform their given social realities through conversion to Buddhism. Through conversion, Dalits have questioned the legitimacy of the exploitative order and tried to fashion a new order informed by their own understanding of history, morality, and ethics. For them the divide between religion and secular is superficial; the idea is to change the inner life of Dalits so that they overturn their subalternity. Verma points out that through conversion, Dalits create “a new political space and religious authority by a theory of social action. It implies disavowing a graded society in favor of a new social grouping based on the normative presuppositions of Buddhist ethics.” Their rejection of Hinduism and embracing of a more convivial religion is an ultimate act of agency that in one swoop attempts to transcend both caste and religious difference.

Verma unpacks Ambedkar’s critique on freeing the subject from domination and violence of coercive traditions such as Hinduism. Her paper argues that Ambedkar raises a new set of questions and a new image of the role of religion in social life as the individual becomes the main point of reference in the shaping of values, attitudes and beliefs. Her paper further opens up our understanding of subalternity when she points to a “post-secular ethic” in the context of Dalits’ conversion to Buddhism. As she puts it, “The conceptualization of an ideal society is an effort to convert the Dalit’s ‘subalternity’ within the caste order into an identity as a political, ethical subject” (Verma, this issue). This has been the crux of all the papers in this special issue: viewing the subaltern subject with a flexible identity and as a political subject, imbued with agency and voice.

The category of the subaltern is thus not fixed as the papers in this special issue show us. It is a fluid category, with shifting identities made up of both oppression and freedom, of subjugation and also of an effort to throw off the yoke of that oppression,
of difference as well as the effort to transcend that difference. The spirit of what it means to be subaltern is therefore not necessarily one of abject submission, despite the stigmatization and humiliation, and social suffering that subalternity entails. Agency is a part of the experience of subalternity, it is inherent in the identity, and is incorporated into the narratives and into the experience that is revealed to us through the rich field work and analyses in the articles in this special issue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. This special issue is based on papers presented at two conferences organized by Akiko Kunihiro and Meenakshi Thapan at Waseda University, Tokyo and the University of Delhi. We are grateful to both universities and to the Indian Council for Social Science Research, New Delhi, for their financial support and to all those who took part with so much enthusiasm and intellectual passion. Select papers have been revised for inclusion in this issue. I am indebted to Akiko Kunihiro for her continuous support and friendship in the planning and execution of this special issue which we have collated and edited together. We are grateful to Aparna Rayaprol, Anurekha Chari Wagh, Ishita Dey, and Madhulika Sonkar whose participation in the sessions at Tokyo and Delhi has deeply enriched the papers in this collection. We would also like to thank Janaki Abraham for her ideas and suggestions while this issue was in the making.

2. An examination of the contributions of the subaltern studies collective and their rich contributions, or to the debates it has given rise to, lie outside the scope of this introduction. The intent here is to examine the ideas and constructs presented by the collective that have influenced our understanding of “subalternity” and the ways in which we may seek to use it in this special issue. Chakrabarty (2000) has examined the subaltern studies project and provided a powerful analysis of postcolonial subaltern historiography and its difference from the “history from below” perspective in the work of historians in the west. See also Ludden (2002), Chaturvedi (2012), Das (2015), Dube, Seth, and Skaria (2020), and others, for further analyses.

3. The subaltern studies collective has produced 12 volumes up till now.
4. For example, in the early 1990s, the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group was formed by a small group of Latin Americanists who were trying to understand the emerging social realities in Latin America. The formation of this collective and its subsequent demise also gave rise to a number of studies of the Group and its influence on studies in Latin America. See Rodriguez (2001), Williams (2016), among others.

5. Based on rich ethnography with the community, Singh (2013) has documented the plight of Musahars, living on the banks of the river, Gandak, in Uttar Pradesh as well as the role of a NGO, Action Aid, in bringing about an awareness of their rights, motivating them to struggle through the formation of different fora, using song and music (jagriti geet), resulting in the formation of an awakened self. It has also caught the attention of the local state officials who are now forced to address the community’s needs and provide relief. This however is not the case everywhere for the Musahars who continue to live in complete marginalization.

6. Reed (2020) provides a very nuanced analysis of the relationship between widowhood, age, caste, social context, intra familial relations and employment patterns; Devika and Thampi (2011) examine the linkages between space, mobility and work in Kerala; see also Mazumdar and Neetha (2011).

7. To support her contention, Spivak cites Marx in English translation, “they are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name” (Spivak 2012:432).

8. “Voice” here is not used merely as speech or utterance but “as a discursive effect that manifests subjectivity, in itself a discursive construction.” (Sbriccoli and Jacoviello 2014:1415, emphasis in the original). In this understanding, voice is therefore not necessarily direct or natural and may be “analytically reconstructed within discourse” (Sbriccoli and Jacoviello 2014:1415).


10. Rajni Kothari has referred to “this phenomenon of ‘talking differently’ as a ‘discourse of dissent’” (as cited in Guru 2020:151). It is this discourse of dissent that enables Dalit women to express their agency in different domains.

11. For more details, see Pankaj and Pandey (2018:9ff).


14. In this context, bringing Spivak’s idea centerstage, Ahona Roy explores the feminine being of a biologically born male child through “the welcoming space and possibilities premised by noting the dynamism and malleability of gender liminal identities, which also in a way disrupt gender conventions” (Roy 2021:210). This is an example of being “without identity,” as it were.

15. Instead of focussing only on subalternity, and its corollary, marginalization, as earlier stated, we need to consider the process of “subalternization” as well. Sarker (2016) argues that she attempts to “relocate’ subalternity by redefining it as a process—and uses ‘subalternized’ instead of ‘subaltern’; identity, then, is also necessarily a process, captured temporarily in the course of political–cultural engagement” (p. 816).

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