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Walking with the Subalterns, Riding with the Academy: The Curious Ascendancy of Indian History

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Footnotes to a History

It is a rare moment indeed when a school of thought, whether in history or in any other discipline, from a formerly colonized nation that is still resoundingly a part of the Third World (whatever its pretensions to nuclear or great power status), receives in the Western academy the kind of critical attention that has been bestowed upon the Subaltern School of historians whose work revolves largely around the colonial period of Indian history. Historians might recall that even the *American Historical Review*, which is seldom a journal at the cutting edge of theory, or otherwise prone to the bacchanalia of post-modern excesses, devoted the greater part of the pages of one of its recent issues to Subaltern Studies and its rather wide impact not only on historical studies in the Anglo-American academy, but beyond as well.¹ A Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, citing the inspirational work of the Indian historians, has declared its intent to instal the subaltern at the centre of Latin American studies, though it is revealing that their programmatic statement appears in a cultural studies journal.² There is, in the warm reception given to Subaltern Studies in some circles in the Anglo-American world, more than just a whiff of avuncular affection: trained almost entirely in British universities, the original core group of subaltern historians stand forth, or so it is sometimes fondly

¹ See Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism'; Florenica E. Mallon, 'The promise and dilemma of Subaltern studies: Perspectives from Latin American History'; and Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: Rethinking colonial African history', all in 'AHR Forum', *American Historical Review*, Vol. 99: 5, December 1994, pp. 1475–90, 1491–1515, and 1516–45.

² Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, 'Founding Statement', *Boundary 2*, Vol. 20: 3, 1993, pp. 110–21. See also John Beverley, *Subalternity and Representation: Arguments in Cultural Theory*, Durham NC, 1999, which focuses on Latin America.

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imagined, as living testimony to the continuing power of the 'mother' country to influence its peripheries.³

However, if I may mix metaphors, the return of the prodigal son is not an un-mixed blessing. A few years after the publication of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, the first rumblings of discontent about the ascendancy of subaltern history, which have since greatly increased, began to appear. Social historians, for instance, argued that in substance there was little to distinguish subaltern history, stripped of its veneer of post-structuralism and Gramscian thought, from 'the history from below' associated with E.P. Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, and many others belonging to the venerable tradition of British Marxist history. Others are inclined to attribute the success of the subalternists to the fact that Indians could with relative ease take advantage of the English language's inescapable hegemony in the global marketplace of scholarship, though incipient in this criticism are numerous unsavoury suggestions about the manner in which colonialism's deep structures continue to inform the political economy and political sociology of scholarship in the formerly colonized world. When, a mere few years into the emergence of *Subaltern Studies*, Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak lent their formidable voices to the enterprise, its short-term future was certainly assured. Thus, argue the critics, subaltern history was propelled into fame not as a mode of writing history, but as another form of post-colonial criticism. This impression is reinforced by the rather bizarre recommendation with which the new *Subaltern Studies Reader* (1997), whose contributors are described as being 'instrumental in establishing' post-colonial studies, is brought to the reader's attention.⁴

I will address some of these criticisms later, but suffice it to note that just as India is represented as having sought to gatecrash its way into the estate of the nuclear powers, only to be rebuffed by the zealous guardians at its doorway, so subaltern scholarship is sometimes seen as an intruder into domains whose inhabitants are scarcely accustomed to seeing themselves in need of interpretive and analytical lessons from the East. It is one thing to turn to India for its wisdom, and indeed what would India be (for the West) without its mystics, sages, yogis, gurus, and half-naked fakirs, but no one is prepared to countenance the view that in the realm of history and reason, these being construed as one and the same, Western social scientists and historians could turn with profit to the work of Indian historians. Let us remind ourselves that, writing in 1817, James Mill, whose *History of British India* would become the indispensable historical manual for the young employees of the East India Company and its successor regime throughout the nineteenth century, could aver with perfect confidence that the Hindus, being

³ Some readers may recognize that I am rendering far more ambivalent the characterization, made popular by Edward Said among others, of subaltern history as 'the empire striking back', or 'writing back to the centre'. See his foreword to Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds, *Selected Subaltern Studies*, New York, 1988; Edward Said 'Third world intellectuals and metropolitan culture', *Raritan* Vol. 9: 3, Winter 1990, pp. 27–50; and *idem*, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1993.

⁴ Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*, Minneapolis, 1997, back cover.

'perfectly destitute of historical records', displayed every sign of being an irrational people: '[A]ll rude nations neglect history, and are gratified with the productions of the mythologists and poets'.⁵ If one should dismiss this cavalier assessment with the trite observation that Mill was merely a creature of his times, a captive of an European age unabashedly fond of its imperialist credentials, it behoves us to listen to the words, not so far removed from our times, of that 'friend' and historian of India, Edward Thompson, the father of E.P. Thompson: 'Indians are not historians, and they rarely show any critical ability. Even their most useful books, books full of research and information, exasperate with their repetitions and diffuseness, and lose effect by their uncritical enthusiasms. . . . So they are not likely to displace our account of our connection with India.'⁶

Nearly twenty years after the emergence of subaltern history, no one doubts that the old colonial histories have been displaced. Moreover, even though Delhi and Calcutta do not entirely rule the roost, the interpretation of Indian history is now largely an affair of the Indians themselves. The likes of Edward Thompson have been confined to oblivion, and the British accounts of their connections with India lie largely in tatters, worthy only of the dustbin of history. But it is also equally the case that no one can say with complete confidence what subaltern history stands for, what voices the subaltern historians speak with, and to what purposes. Ten (now eleven) volumes of *Subaltern Studies* have appeared so far, and the fifty odd historians associated with the enterprise, a few of them since its very inception, have between them produced hundreds of articles and several dozen monographs. A certain coherence seemed to mark the work of the collective in the first decade of its existence, when Ranajit Guha, then based at the Australian National University, presided over its deliberations and saw the first six volumes of *Subaltern Studies* into print. However, the imperative to diversify the membership of the collective, and to bring subaltern history into a more palpable relationship with literary narratives, the discourses of political economy, the intellectual practices of the other social sciences, and the contemporary realities of India, present even then, has only accelerated in the 1990s. Volume IV, which appeared in 1986, featured a critical intervention by Gayatri Spivak, and so marked subaltern history's first engagement with feminism, and indeed the first explicit attempt to locate it in relation to deconstructionism. It also established the pattern whereby one or more contributions in most of the subsequent volumes of *Subaltern Studies* were to offer a critical perspective on the enterprise as a whole. In Volume V this was attempted by placing *Subaltern Studies* under the scrutiny of historical materialism and Marxist economics,⁷ while the following volume featured an anthropological

⁵ James Mill, *History of British India* (edited and with notes by Horace Hayman Wilson), 10 volumes, London, 1840–48, Vol. 2, pp. 46–48; Vol. 1, pp. 114–15.

⁶ Edward Thompson, *The Other Side of the Medal*, London, 1925, pp. 27–28.

⁷ See Asok Sen, 'Subaltern Studies: Capital, class and community'; and Ajit K. Chaudhury, 'In search of a subaltern Lenin', both in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Vol. 5, Delhi, 1987, pp. 203–35 and 236–51 respectively. Volumes I–X of

perspective on the enterprise, accompanied by a debate on the representations of women in Indian feminist histories.⁸

Still, it is a striking feature of the first six volumes of *Subaltern Studies* that, with the exception of a solitary piece by Tanika Sarkar,⁹ the work of no women practitioners of Indian history was on display. This may not be entirely surprising, since the impulse towards feminist critiques in India had emanated largely from literary circles, where the disposition to engage in what was considered 'theory' was also more clearly visible. Though the debate on feminism's relation to subaltern history had commenced in *Subaltern Studies*, feminist readings of history were nowhere to be seen, except somewhat tangentially in Gayatri Spivak's translation of, and commentary on, a short story by Mahasweta Devi,¹⁰ one of India's leading women writers and an activist who has worked extensively alongside women and tribals in Bengal. Spivak had forged a unique but nonetheless ambivalent and curiously disjunctive intellectual relationship with Mahasweta Devi, but the history of this collaborative work forms a chapter in the sociology of Indian intellectual life, rather than a chapter in subaltern historiography.

Undoubtedly, there were also other sources of discomfort for certain members of the collective. In his opening salvo on elite historiography, Ranajit Guha had condemned it for neglecting and obscuring the 'politics of the people',¹¹ but it was not until 1996, when Volume IX of *Subaltern Studies* was published, that the politics of the dalits, historically the most disempowered segment of India's population, and now at least 150 million in number, received its first explicit articulation.¹² Despite the grandiose celebrations of subalternity, and the promise to furnish complex and compelling narratives of how far the 'people on their own, that is, independently of the elite', had contributed to the nationalist movement and the making of Indian society, *Subaltern Studies* seemed far too interested in the activities of the middle classes. This disenchantment with *Subaltern Studies*'s alleged abandonment of its originary ambitions, namely to understand how far the activity

Subaltern Studies (hereafter cited as *SS*) have been published by the Oxford University Press, Delhi. The first six volumes (1982, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, and 1989) were edited by Ranajit Guha, Volume VII (1992) was edited by Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, Volume VIII (1994) by David Arnold and David Hardiman, and Volume IX (1996) by Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty.

⁸ Veena Das, 'Subaltern as perspective', *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 310–14; and for the debate on feminist readings of Indian women, see Julie Stephens, 'Feminist fictions: A critique of the category "non-Western woman" in feminist writings on India'; and Susie Tharu, 'Response to Julie Stephens', both in *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 92–125 and 126–131 respectively. Vol. IV also offered, in Dipesh Chakrabarty's 'Invitation to a dialogue' (pp. 364–76), a defence of *Subaltern Studies* against its critics.

⁹ Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's movement in Malda 1924–1932: A study in tribal protest', *SS*, Vol. IV, pp. 136–44.

¹⁰ Mahasweta Devi, 'Breast-Giver', Appendix A to *SS*, Vol. V, pp. 252–76; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'A literary representation of the subaltern: Mahasweta Devi's "Stanadayini"', *ibid.*, pp. 91–134.

¹¹ Ranajit Guha, 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India', *SS*, Vol. I, p. 4.

¹² Kancha Ilaiah, 'Productive labour, consciousness and history: The dalitbahujan alternative', *SS*, Vol. IX, pp. 165–200.

of the people constituted an 'autonomous domain', and what were the modes of their resistance to both imperialist and élite nationalist politics, can be witnessed in the caustic assessment by Ramachandra Guha—who had himself once been a member of the collective—of Volume VIII of *Subaltern Studies* (1994). Guha wrote that the essays comprising the volume, though unquestionably constituting 'intellectual history, reframed as "discourse analysis"', were 'emphatically not Subaltern Studies'. He described it as a shift towards 'bhadralok studies', fully aware that no greater insult was possible. The word 'bhadralok' was made common in the 1960s by American scholars working on India, who specialized in taking the politics out of knowledge (a characteristically American trait).¹³ The word literally refers to the 'gentle folk', or the gentry, but its far more pejorative connotations call to mind a class of people who, being the progeny of Macaulay, were imitative of their colonial masters, and even professed to be more English than the English themselves. Solidly middle class, and unfailingly enslaved to the narratives of science, reason and progress, the 'bhadralok' disassociated themselves equally from Gandhian politics, which smelled too much of disloyalty, and the politics of the masses.

To say that Subaltern Studies had transformed itself into bhadralok studies, in a curious return of the repressed, was to aver that the subaltern historians, for the most part, had moved from studies of popular consciousness to unravelling the mentalities of nationalist leaders and the world of middle-class Bengali domesticity—'from documenting subaltern dissent to dissecting elite discourse, from writing with (socialist) passion to following the postmodernist fashion.'¹⁴ Similarly Sumit Sarkar, one of India's most distinguished historians and a founding member of the subaltern collective, in tracing the post-modernist turn in Subaltern Studies to what he alleges is the wholesale and unreflective deployment of the Saidian framework among a section of the subaltern historians, has not only disavowed any further association with his former colleagues, but is unremitting in his critique of Subaltern Studies for those very sins of essentialism, teleology, and fetishization which were associated with élite historiography.¹⁵ Sarkar's apostasy has not gone unnoticed: Ranajit Guha's introduction to his *Subaltern Studies Reader* (1997) thus excised all trace of Sarkar and his important role in the collective.¹⁶

Thus, as the Subaltern Studies collective prepares to enter into the third decade of its existence, the enterprise of 'Subaltern' history means many different things to different people. Over the course of time people drift into different sets of habits, take up new ideas, and form new associations. However, Subaltern Studies' sharpest

¹³ I refer here to the work, among others, of John Broomfield and Leonard Gordon.

¹⁴ Ramachandra Guha, 'Subaltern and bhadralok studies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, 19 August 1995, p. 2057.

¹⁵ Sumit Sarkar, 'Orientalism revisited: Saidian frameworks in the writing of modern Indian history', *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 16: 1–2, 1994, pp. 205–24, especially pp. 205–7.

¹⁶ See Guha, *Subaltern Studies Reader*, pp. ix–xxii, and my review of the volume in *Emergences* Vol. 9: 2, November 1999, pp. 397–99.

critics are some former members of the collective, and it is a trifle too gentle to speak of the fragmentation of the collective as though one were describing the tendency of rivers to form tributaries. The high priest of the collective, Ranajit Guha, is no longer formally associated with his own creation, and the group of younger historians he gathered around him rendered him an intellectual tribute by designating Volume VIII of *Subaltern Studies* as a collection of essays in his honour. If some members of the collective had wandered into post-modernism, or were more seriously engaged with Western philosophy or feminist theory, Volume IX of *Subaltern Studies* was to show that the collective had the capacity to reinvent itself in yet more diverse ways by embracing voices more generally associated with post-colonial theory and cultural studies, as well as with the study of contemporary Indian society. Indeed, in the American academy especially, Subaltern Studies is seen as the form in which 'cultural studies' has taken root in India, while others recognize it as constituting the particular Indian inflection of post-colonial theory. In all this, Subaltern Studies is beginning to look like the banyan tree whose magisterial presence pervades the Indian landscape and under whose enormous canvas social and cultural historians, post-modernists, post-colonialists, feminists, post-structuralists, and—if I may put it this way—post-Marxist historians have alike found some sustenance. One does not tackle a banyan tree as a whole, and, similarly, I can only lop away at some of its branches, and merely hint at some of the trajectories that a critique of Subaltern Studies, around which a formidable mass of critical literature has developed, should take.

Backdrop to a History

In the words of one of the newer members of the subaltern collective, 'subalternist analysis has become a recognizable mode of critical scholarship in history, literature, and anthropology'.¹⁷ Yet very few people outside the field of Indian history understand its particular place in Indian historiography, and fewer still are able to assess the precise departures signified by subaltern history. Subaltern Studies has certainly thrived on the impression, which it did everything to encourage, that all previous histories of India not only represented the collusion of imperialist and nationalist forces, but were also singularly lacking in any theoretical impulse. It is noteworthy that, despite the avowedly Marxist orientation of some of the subaltern historians, and certainly their repudiation of neo-Hindu histories, their work offers no engagement with an entire generation or two of Indian Marxist historians (and sometimes sociologists) who preceded them, such as R.P. Dutt, D.D. Kosambi and A.R. Desai, or even with their older and still active contemporaries such as Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib. One might well think on reading the subaltern historians that nothing in the tradition of Indian historiography speaks to their interests, and that in so far as one might wish to evoke any worthwhile lineages,

¹⁷ Prakash, 'Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism', p. 1476.

the past is a *tabula rasa*. Here subaltern history echoes, ironically, the early nineteenth century British histories of India, which were predicated on the assumption that, Indians being supremely indifferent to their past, the British were faced with the onerous task of starting entirely afresh, dependent only on their own resources.

Though the history of Indian historiography, and the precise relations of subaltern histories to Marxist histories, can scarcely be delineated in this essay,¹⁸ the advent of subaltern history might be better appreciated against the backdrop of other trajectories of twentieth century Indian history, however briefly these are delineated. The first generation of Indian historians—including the likes of R.C. Dutt (1848–1909) and R.G. Bhandarkar (1837–1925)—had expended their labours largely on the study of ancient India, which was envisioned as the high point of Indian civilization. The tomes of the Bengali historian Jadunath Sarkar (1870–1958) on the Mughals and Aurangzeb were based on a representation of political Islam as tyrannical and iniquitous, an impression equally conveyed by his celebratory biography of the Maratha leader Shivaji who was elevated as the founding father of Indian nationalism. With the attainment of independence in 1947, the creation of an Indian history for and by Indians became something of a national imperative, and it was never doubted that the ‘freedom struggle’, waged under the leadership of Mohandas Gandhi and the Congress party, would constitute one of the more glorious chapters of Indian history. An official *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, authored by Tara Chand, made its appearance in four volumes (1961–72),¹⁹ but the enterprise of state-sponsored histories extended much further, as most Indian states released their own histories of the ‘freedom struggle’.²⁰ In the gargantuan eleven-volume *History and Culture of the Indian People* (1951–69), under the general editorship of R.C. Majumdar, whose own contributions to the volumes were formidable, the nationalist devotion to the Hindu past saw its most sustained expression, and history was to be yoked to a particular vision of nation-building.

From the point of view of locating subaltern history, however, it is other trajectories, associated with Marxist or materialist historians such as Saumyendranath Tagore, D.D. Kosambi, Romila Thapar, R.S. Sharma, Irfan Habib and Bipan Chandra, or with Calcutta-based historians and scholars—Barun De and Asok Sen, among others—of the Bengal Renaissance, that demand our attention. The latter

¹⁸ I have taken up the history of Indian historiography in a series of loosely connected published papers: ‘The discourse of history and the crisis at Ayodhya: Reflections on the production of knowledge, freedom, and the future of India’, *Emergences*, Vols. 5–6, 1993–94, pp. 4–44; ‘History and the possibilities of emancipation: Some lessons from India’, *Journal of the Indian Council for Philosophical Research*, Special Issue: ‘Historiography of Civilizations’, June 1996, pp. 95–137; and ‘Claims of the past, shape of the future: The politics of history in Independent India’, in Philip Oldenburg and Marshall Bouton, eds, *India Briefing*, New York, 1999.

¹⁹ Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, 4 Vols, Delhi, 1961–72.

²⁰ See, for example, S.A.A. Rizvi, ed., *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh*, 6 Vols, Lucknow, 1957–61; and K.K. Datta, ed., *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar*, 3 Vols, Patna, 1957–58.

group, in revisiting the hagiographic accounts of the Bengal Renaissance, had come to the realization that Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Sen, and other nineteenth century social reformers were constrained by the colonial context and unable to enter into anything but an uncritical engagement with Western modernity.²¹ This insight, though shorn of any theoretical apparatus, would clearly inform the work of subaltern historians. Among the Marxist historians, a number of other considerations stemming from the immense political and social dislocations of the 1970s predominated. Under Jawaharlal Nehru, the country had seemed committed to secularism, but this consensus began to show signs of strain under his daughter, Indira Gandhi. The war with Pakistan in 1971, leading to the creation of Bangladesh, brought to the fore questions of ethnicity, language, and nation-formation, just as the massacre of Bengali intellectuals by the retreating Pakistani army brought an awareness of the precariousness of intellectual life in South Asia. Yet, four years later, Indira Gandhi was to impose an internal emergency, and political calculations impelled her, as well as various other politicians, to court religious bodies and organizations. Henceforth the 'religious vote bank' would be an invariable factor in Indian politics.

At the same time, 'communalism', or the supposition that identity in India was constituted pre-eminently through membership in religious communities, broadly defined as 'Hindu', 'Muslim', 'Sikh', and so on, was assuming a heightened importance in historical narratives. The effect, from the Marxist standpoint, was to introduce manifold distortions in the understanding of Indian history: not only were Hindu-Muslim relations being cast as drenched in blood, but conflicts among the ruling élite were also being construed as conflicts at the broader social level. Marxist historians who dared to challenge conventional orthodoxies found themselves ostracized or ridiculed: such was the experience, for instance, of R.S. Sharma, who in his school textbook, *Ancient India*, had put forth the view that the ancient Aryans were beef-eaters, a view that the Hindu Right construed as calculated to demean their faith. But the Marxist historians were by no means an undifferentiated lot: while Bipan Chandra veered towards the view that the nationalist movement could not be dismissed as a bourgeois endeavor, other historians were hostile to the received view and pointed to the Congress party's unwillingness to stand for radical economic and land reform, or its inability to draw workers, peasants, minorities, women, and other disenfranchised groups into the nationalist movement or into the mainstream of public life in the period after independence.²²

In the delineation of the circumstances under which the Subaltern Studies collective was formed, it becomes important to dwell at length on what was then the dominant strand in Indian historiography, namely the so-called 'Cambridge School'. Earlier generations of imperialist historians had sought to make a decisive link

²¹ V.C. Joshi, ed., *Rammohan Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*, Delhi, 1975; and Asok Sen, *Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones*, Calcutta, 1977.

²² A more detailed account of history in post-independent India can be found in my article, 'History and politics', in Oldenburg and Bouton, *India Briefing*.

between education and politics: in their view, it was the largely English-educated Indian middle class, nourished on the writings of Mill, Locke and Milton, and brought to an awareness of the role that institutions organized along rational and scientific lines could play in the life of a society, which had first raised the demand for some form of political representation. Cognizant of the principles of liberty, democracy, the separation of powers, constitutional agitation and freedom of speech enshrined in Western political practices, these Indians were construed as the main, and only rightful, actors in the drama of nationalism that began to unfold in overtly political ways in the late nineteenth century. They recognized, or so it was argued, that political action had to be within the framework of the law, and that nothing should violate the 'rule of law'. The British themselves might well be despotic, as the wise and the just must often be, but among a people such as the Indians—who before the blessings of Western civilization were brought to their doorstep had never experienced anything but despotism—the adherence to the 'rule of law' served as the indispensable condition of their acceptance in the political domain. All other political activity had to, perforce, be 'criminal'. The British could well be proud of these middle-class or 'bhadralok' Indians, as they provided unimpeachable evidence of the bountiful effects of the civilizing mission, the judiciousness of British policies, and the universal truth of the great narratives of science and reason. The only legitimate Indian politics was that of the English-educated 'bhadralok', and as it was they who stoked the fires of nationalism, Indians were bound to recognize that even their nationalism was the gift of a magnanimous people endowed with enlightened traditions.

Trite and comical as this narrative might now sound, it appears in a refurbished and seemingly more subtle form in the writings of the 'Cambridge School' of historians. Many commentators have been fixated on Anil Seal's *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (1968)—where it is argued that education was 'one of the chief determinants' of the politics of Indian nationalism, the genesis of which 'is clearly linked with those Indians who had been schooled by Western methods'²³—as the originary point of the Cambridge School's explorations in Indian history, but in point of fact the framework for this school of thought is derived from a broader swathe of work on the partition of Africa and the economic history of the British Empire. Rejecting the view of both Marxist theoreticians and late Victorian historians that the essence of imperialism lay in the scramble for colonies, in the extension of Western political control over territories in the non-Western world, John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson argued in an essay published in 1953 that the emphasis on formal empire had blinded scholars to the continuity between formal and informal empires, as well as to the history of the continued expansion of British trade and investment. Gallagher and Robinson posited a *reluctant* imperialism; their Empire, moreover, had nothing to do with power. The 'distinctive feature' of British imperialism, they boldly argued, resided in the 'willingness to

²³ Anil Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1968, p. 16.

limit the use of paramount power to establishing security for trade'; and power was only deployed when native collaborators could not be found to preserve British interests.²⁴

The thesis for the 'non-European foundations of European imperialism' emerges more clearly in Robinson's essay by the same name, significantly sub-titled 'Sketch for a theory of collaboration'.²⁵ The use of the word 'theory' implies something lofty, but Robinson offered nothing except the prosaic observation that 'imperialism was as much a function of its victims' collaboration or non-collaboration—of their indigenous politics, as it was of European expansion'. If imperialism had perforce to be rescued (though why that should be necessary at a time when Britain had already been divested of India, Burma and Ceylon, and was facing insurgencies elsewhere in the Empire, at a time when the writing was on the wall and Britain could choose to leave with grace, is another question), it only remained to demonstrate that the natives, or the class of natives that mattered, were enthusiastic in their embrace of colonial rule. As Robinson puts it, 'the choice of indigenous collaborators, more than anything else, determined the organisation of colonial rule'. Imperial takeovers in Africa and Asia were actuated less by the expansion of European capitalism than 'by the breakdown of collaborative mechanisms in extra-European politics which hitherto had provided them with adequate opportunity and protection'. Moreover, if imperialism was only another name for collaboration, then it is even possible to say that the natives were imperialists in their own right. Robinson can, thus, quite brazenly even speak, apropos the Tswana tribe of Bechuanaland, of the natives 'exploit[ing] the European'. European imperialism is moved to the margins, rendered into an epiphenomenon: 'imperialism in the form of colonial rule was a major function not of European society, but a major function of indigenous politics'. Imperialism was, consequently, not the cause but the consequence of the partition of Africa; to adopt the formulation of Eric Stokes, better known for his work on India, 'the powers were scrambling in Africa and not for Africa'.²⁶

Seal's work on Indian nationalism, to which I have alluded, points to the ways in which this purportedly 'new' view of imperialism found its way into the study of late British India. The sub-title of his work, *Competition and Collaboration in the Late Nineteenth Century*, gives the game away. In accounting for the origins of

²⁴ John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, 'The imperialism of free trade', *Economic History Review* (2nd Series), Vol. 6: 1, 1953, reprinted in William Roger Louis, ed., *Imperialism: The Robinson and Gallagher Controversy*, New York, 1976, p. 60; cf. also Gallagher and Robinson, 'The partition of Africa', in Anil Seal, ed., *The Decline, Revival and Fall of the British Empire*, Cambridge, 1982, p. 71.

²⁵ Ronald Robinson, 'Non-European foundations of European imperialism: Sketch for a theory of collaboration', in Louis, *Imperialism*, esp. pp. 130, 133–34, 141, 144, 146–47, from where the quotations in this paragraph are drawn.

²⁶ Eric Stokes, 'Imperialism and the scramble for Africa: The new view', in Louis, ed., *Imperialism*, p. 183. Cf. Ronald Robinson, John Gallagher and Alice Denny, *Africa and the Victorians: The Climax of Imperialism*, London, 1961.

Indian nationalism, Seal constructs an entire narrative around the lives and activities of a handful of English-educated men in the Presidencies, who competed for those jobs and opportunities which the British had provided through educational and administrative reform. A new class of people had also emerged as a consequence of the disruption of the village economy and the increasing penetration into the town and countryside of trading companies which employed educated Indians in increasing numbers as middlemen, brokers, and agents. However, the growth of this middle class soon outpaced the availability of jobs, leading to increasing disaffection among the educated youth. In the altering conditions of British rule, characterized by new opportunities for advancement, social change and institutional reform, the existing rivalries which divided one caste from another—the Muslim from the Hindu, and a community from another—became even more accentuated. Now the educated, whether Brahmins or Muslims, tradition-bound or modernizers, Bengali or Tamil, forged their own horizontal alliances—a natural enough response, but one that Indians, among whom the idea of the ‘individual’ had no salience in the colonial sociology of knowledge, were bound to adopt in a predictable surrender to primordial community instinct. Seal stops short of describing all these beneficiaries of English education as a ‘new social class’, for in his view the changes introduced in the economy were not so substantial as to ‘give India social classes based on economic categories’. He could not argue otherwise, however, for to impute a form of social stratification based on social classes would have been to obscure the differences between a colonized people and the more advanced society of the ‘mother’ country.²⁷

In a later essay on ‘Imperialism and nationalism in India’, Seal professed to have abandoned the theory so elaborately constructed in his earlier work, on the grounds that the ‘graduates and professional men in the presidencies [Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras]’ were ‘not quite as important as they once appeared’.²⁸ But, in fact, the ‘horizontal alliances’ that had once seemed so paramount to Seal now turned into ‘vertical alliances’ of ‘bigwigs and followers’, ‘factions’ with patrons and clients. Accordingly, the nodal point of the analysis shifted from the Presidencies to the localities, where ‘the race for influence, status and resources’, which alone ‘decided political choices’, was better observed. In the localities ‘the unabashed scramblers for advantage at the bottom’ became more visible; and it is not incidental that this scrambling was all done by Indians, not Englishmen. Driven by self-aggrandizement, by the lust for economic gain and political power, ‘Hindus worked with Muslims, Brahmins were hand in glove with non-Brahmins’,²⁹ and the religious taboos and social constraints of centuries were cast aside. In the words of one of Seal’s colleagues at Cambridge, ‘the most obvious characteristic of every

²⁷ Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism*, p. 34.

²⁸ Seal, ‘Imperialism and nationalism in India’, in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal, *Locality, Province and the Nation: Essays on Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940*, Cambridge, 1973, p. 2.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Indian politician was that each acted for many interests at all levels of Indian society and in so doing cut across horizontal ties of class, caste, region and religion'.³⁰ Indians jockeyed with each other for position and power in this wild scenario of collaboration and competition.

In the view of Indian history propounded by the 'Cambridge School', there was no room for ideology.³¹ Indian nationalists, animated only by self-interest, relentlessly pursued rationally calculated ends, and their pious declarations should not be allowed to obscure the nature of Indian nationalism as 'animal politics'.³² Annie Besant, an Irishwoman who came to occupy an important place in Indian politics, is described as joining the Congress 'undoubtedly . . . to bring her increased public attention', and militancy in the Kistna-Godavri deltas during the Civil Disobedience Movement is attributed to the inability of some people to 'find a satisfactory niche in local government'.³³ When Indians fail to become clerks, they opt for rebellion: such are the doings of a highly impulsive people. Writing about politics in the south, David Washbrook, one of the more sophisticated of the Cambridge historians, avers that 'the provincial political struggle was not about the nature of interests which were to be represented to the British; it was about who was to earn the money and achieve the prestige which came from carrying out the representation'.³⁴ Political activity at the provincial level, in other words, was thus seen to revolve around the institutions of government. Here again, Seal had set the tone for the argument. As he wrote: 'It is our hypothesis that the structure of imperial government can provide a clue to the way Indian politics developed'.³⁵ While earlier the 'genesis' of Indian politics was said to lie in the actions of the English-educated élite in the Presidencies, now the motor of political behaviour was described as the government, which itself showed Indians the way to political activity. The argument is rendered more explicit in Gordon Johnson's monograph on Bombay, where Indian politicians are generally described as being consumed by local politics, and compelled to take interest in national politics only when prompted by the government at the national level: in Gordon's words, 'nationalist activity

³⁰ Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism: Bombay and the Indian National Congress, 1880 to 1915*, Cambridge, 1973, p. 10.

³¹ In a different context, it is worth recalling Louis Dumont's lamentation that studies of Indian society, and specifically the caste system, had been wholly insensitive to questions of ideology, and that empirical studies could not substitute for the understanding of the caste system as an ideology. This is not to say that his work is free of other problems, or that it is not totalizing in its own fashion, but these problems have been addressed in the critical literature surrounding his book. See his *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (translated by Mark Sainsbury), Chicago, 1970; and for a 'subaltern' reading of Dumont, see Partha Chatterjee, 'Caste and Subaltern consciousness', *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 169–209.

³² See the scathing review of 'Cambridge School' history by Tapan Raychaudhuri in 'Indian nationalism as animal politics', *Historical Journal*, Vol. 22, 1979, pp. 747–63.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 750.

³⁴ D.A. Washbrook, *The Emergence of Provincial Politics—The Madras Presidency, 1870–1920*, Cambridge, 1976, p. 255.

³⁵ Seal, *Imperialism and nationalism in India*, p. 6.

booms and slumps in phase with the national activity of the government'.³⁶ Indians had to be pushed towards nationalism; they could not think beyond their village or town, nor was their gaze set on anything nobler than short-term tactics, local grievances and petty gains. Imperialist stimulus, nationalist response; the scientist in the laboratory, the rat in the cage: that is the story of Indian nationalism, that sordid tale of every man desperately seeking to find his place in this sun.

The Moment of Arrival: The Birth of the Subaltern in Negation

It is against the immediate backdrop of the 'Cambridge School' that subaltern history emerged, though this is scarcely to say that there was anything in a history of 'vertical' or 'horizontal' alliances to warrant the claim that it represented a novel reading of Indian nationalism or political history. But in the writings of the historians belonging to the 'Cambridge School' was to be found a template which pointed, in the most tangible way, to what Ranajit Guha has described as the 'bad faith of historiography', to everything which a historiography that is responsible to its subjects, politically emancipatory, sensitive in its treatment of the evidence and theoretically astute must avoid.³⁷ (I may here note, and shall deal with the matter in greater detail later, that subaltern history knows itself principally as negation, as the opposite of what it does not desire.) Since the emphasis in earlier imperialist writings on the activities of a small segment of the English-educated élite now appeared as a gross caricature of Indian political activity, the 'Cambridge School' historians, let us recall, shifted the locus of their attention to the government, whose actions were eagerly watched by the nationalists. Seal attempted to locate this argument with a cryptic formulation: 'The British built this framework; the Indians fitted into it.'³⁸ *Agency* never belongs with the Indians; they are condemned to be reactive. Moreover, whether the chief 'determinant' of Indian political activity is construed as the activities of the educated élite, or the actions of the government, the 'Cambridge School' history of India is a history of native *collaboration*. As is quite transparent, the effect of this argument is to make *resistance* invisible, to write it out of the political history of nationalism altogether; collaboration also renders Indians into willing partakers of their own submission. This is the house-cleaning and refurbishing of the 'Cambridge School' variety: since Indians must be conceived of as agents in their own right, they were to be endowed with a greater share in the institutional mechanisms that kept them suppressed and bid them to look to the *state* as the principal locus of political agency.

³⁶ Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism*, p. 193.

³⁷ Ranajit Guha, 'Dominance without hegemony and its historiography', *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 210–309, esp. p. 290.

³⁸ Seal, 'Imperialism and nationalism in India', p. 8. The modern variant of this argument has been expressed all too often by V.S. Naipaul, who opines that the Third World knows how to use the telephone, but is incapable of having invented it.

No one reading Ranajit Guha's programmatic note in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* would have missed the implicit references to the 'Cambridge School', or to the older liberal-imperialist histories from which its arguments are derived. But Guha was to be equally unsparing of nationalist histories which, since they invited and even demanded allegiance from loyal minded Indians, were, in some respects, more insidious in their effect. 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism', Guha wrote in the opening sentence, and added in elaboration that elitism contained both 'colonialist' and 'bourgeois-nationalist elitism'. The former defined Indian nationalism 'primarily as a function of stimulus and response',³⁹ while the 'general orientation' of nationalist historiography, on the other hand, was 'to represent Indian nationalism as primarily an idealist venture in which the indigenous elite led the people from subjugation of freedom'. In either case, Guha argued, elitist historiography failed to 'acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and development of this nation'. Nationalist historiography understood the 'mass' articulation of nationalism mainly 'negatively', that is, as a problem of 'law and order', and positively, if at all, 'as a response to the charisma of certain elite leaders or in the currently more fashionable terms of vertical mobilization by the manipulation of factions'. Colluding with the imperatives of imperialist histories, nationalist historiography had no space for 'the politics of the people'. Consequently, the task of a non-*élite*, or subaltern, historiography was to interpret the politics of the people as 'an autonomous domain' that 'neither originated from elite politics nor [allowed] its existence [to] depend on the latter'.

In the inelegant albeit passionate formulations of Guha's agenda-setting document lie the seeds of *Subaltern Studies*'s peculiarities and failures; and the novel readings of familiar phenomena encountered in some of the papers in the ten volumes, and in other related scholarly works, occur in spite of the extraordinarily clumsy attempt to theorize the grounds for a new historiography.⁴⁰ The peculiarities can be said to begin with Guha's deployment of the words '*élite*' and '*subaltern*', and the particular manner in which they stand in relation to each other. In a note appended to his programmatic statement, Guha states that the term '*élite*' signifies 'dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous'. Though even his use of the term *élite*, where a crude distinction is drawn between 'foreign' and 'Indian'—as though 'Indian' were a given category, not one that is constantly put into question

³⁹ Guha, 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India', pp. 1–7, esp. p. 1.

⁴⁰ This is less heretical than it might sound to an informed outsider who, cognizant of the acute differences that have sometimes arisen among the original and present members of the collective, would have noticed the near deference that they accord to Guha's writings. Though members of the collective will doubtless signal their profound unease with 'essentialisms', they have handled their differences with Guha, whose role in bringing them together and nurturing a new generation of teachers and scholars of Indian history is readily acknowledged, in a characteristically *Indian* fashion. His formulations have not been explicitly contested, or critiqued, but the most viable of the exercises in 'subaltern' history have, it seems to me, bypassed Guha's naked sociological equations.

in India itself—harks back to the equally crude notion of *false consciousness*, as when he describes dominant indigenous groups at the ‘regional and local levels’ as those which ‘acted in the interest’ of the dominant groups at the national level ‘and not in conformity to interests corresponding truly to their own social being’, it is his deployment of the word ‘subaltern’ which beggars belief.

In the introduction to the opening volume of the series, Guha describes the word ‘subaltern’ as meaning a person ‘of inferior rank’, for which his authority is the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. ‘It will be used in these pages’, Guha writes, ‘as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way’; and as he adds, the inspiration for this usage came to him from a reading of Gramsci’s *Notes on Italian History*. But as Guha is undoubtedly aware, the word ‘subaltern’, which can hardly be described as having general currency in the English language, properly belongs to the realm of the military, to designate a non-commissioned officer of very inferior rank, or even an orderly. Indeed, the *Oxford English Dictionary* concedes, in its second edition of 1989, that the use of the word ‘subaltern’ to designate a person or body of person of ‘inferior status, quality, or importance’, is ‘rare’. The last quotation from any text that is furnished as an instance of the word’s usage is from 1893. This, too, is the colonized Bengali’s mentality: an archaic, or nearly archaic, word from the English language is resuscitated, the writings of an esoteric Italian Marxist theoretician are evoked, and all this in the cause of delineating the *autonomous* realm of a people in a colonized country who are stated as having acted under their own impulse. Beckett could have done no better, if the intention was to furnish a preliminary sketch of the theatre of the absurd. Guha has sense, but clearly lacks sensibility.

Doubtless, one could argue that the word ‘subaltern’ in ‘Subaltern Studies’ stands for something resembling the subordinate ‘classes’ that are not quite ‘classes’, for much the same reasons that E.P. Thompson once hinted at an eighteenth century English history as a history of ‘class struggle without class’.⁴¹ If there was, even in England where the Industrial Revolution was born, some risk of speaking of classes as reified and bounded identities, how much more difficult it is to speak of classes in colonial India, where social relations were in a state of considerable flux and class formation, in conditions resembling ‘feudalism’, existed in the most rudimentary form?⁴² Since ‘subaltern’ sufficiently points to relations of subordination and domination without the entrapment of the more familiar but rigid categories of class derived from orthodox Marxism, categories that moreover are most meaningful when the language of ‘citizen-politics’ prevails (as it mostly does not in India), is not much gained by the deployment of subalternity as

⁴¹ E.P. Thompson, ‘Eighteenth-century English society: Class struggle without class?’, *Social History*, Vol. 3: 2, May 1978.

⁴² I use the word ‘feudal’ advisedly, as there is considerable debate, about which I do not propose to speak, as to whether one can reasonably transfer an understanding of feudalism derived from the history of Western societies of the study of Indian history.

an analytical notion and as a locus for the location of consciousness?⁴³ But does not this argument return us to the formulations of Anil Seal and his Cambridge brethren, to the contention that India did not quite have social classes based on economic categories? Must India be condemned, in subaltern history as much as in the Cambridge School monographs, to remain an inchoate mess—something that, in a typical demonstration of Indian recalcitrance, remains resistant to the categories of social science discourse? Moreover, if the notion of the ‘subaltern’ is lifted from Gramsci to explicate the social relations prevalent in Indian history, it is well to recall that Gramsci’s discussion of subalternity is framed alongside his deployment of the idea of ‘hegemony’. Suffice it to note (as I shall turn in more detail to the matter later) that Guha has throughout been insistent on characterizing the British Raj as an exemplification of ‘dominance without hegemony’, yet he does not reflect on whether the deployment of the notion of subalternity is not contingent upon the deployment of the idea of hegemony.

As a further explication of Guha’s usage of the word ‘subaltern’ shows, the entire edifice of Subaltern Studies is fraught with the most hazardous philosophical and political conundrums. Whether by his very usage of ‘subaltern’ Guha sought to impart a militancy to rebel consciousness, or to suggest that the realm of everyday life is inherently suffused with the spirit of insurgency, the suppression of which is a task to which dominant forces set themselves, is a question brought to the fore by his *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983),⁴⁴ the book with which Subaltern Studies is sometimes seen to have been inaugurated. Ranging widely and often indiscriminately across materials on rebellions, jacqueries and insurgencies in India, Guha gave the distinct impression, however subtly conveyed, that the consciousness of the subaltern is the consciousness of militancy. Peasants somehow appear not as persons who spend the greater part of their lives toiling on the fields, but as figures of resistance: that is to say, if I may invert Victor Turner, peasants are not only immersed in *communitas*, but also spend a good part of their life serving the structure.⁴⁵ Other more obvious objections have been raised to Guha’s notion of the ‘subaltern’. There are hierarchies among both élites and subalterns, and at what point one shades in to another is not clear. As colonial rule was indubitably to establish, local élites were merely subalterns to the British, and even in the ranks of the indigenous élites, subalternity was a matter of negotiation. Guha is evidently sensitive to these questions, for instance, in his recognition that local indigenous élites were sometimes subservient to indigenous élites at the national level, but nonetheless the contrast

⁴³ This is the argument of Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Invitation to a dialogue’, *SS*, Vol. IV, pp. 375–76.

⁴⁴ Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983. A glowing assessment of this work, and of Guha’s entire corpus, is to be found in T.V. Sathyamurthy, ‘Indian peasant historiography: A critical perspective of Ranajit Guha’s Work’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 18: 3, October 1990, pp. 92–141.

⁴⁵ See Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, Ithaca and New York, 1974.

between élites and subalterns is too sharply drawn. Consequently, as one critic has argued, those groups which 'occupy an uneasy marginal role between the élite and the subaltern, crossing and re-crossing the conceptual boundary according to the precise historical circumstances under discussion', receive 'short shrift' in subaltern history.⁴⁶ Moreover, in *Elementary Aspects*, Guha appears to be unable to distinguish between tribals and peasants, and often his discussion of peasant insurgency, such as in the chapter on the 'modalities' of insurgency, draws mainly upon materials pertaining to tribal insurrections. This is no small problem, because this confusion obscures the fundamentally different manner in which colonialism affected tribal communities and peasant societies. Colonialism knew of no other way to profit from tribal economies than by destroying them altogether, to pave the way for plantations or for extraction of forest and mineral wealth; in peasant communities, on the other hand, the colonial expropriation of surplus took the form of rent or taxes.⁴⁷ This meant that disaffection in tribal areas was more widespread, and given the relatively egalitarian basis of most tribal societies, the resistance to colonial rule was more thorough, integrated and uniform.

If all this seems problematic enough, Guha further complicates matters by moving from one distinctly odd formulation to another. In the supplementary note to his programmatic statement, he ventures to say of the 'people' and the 'subaltern classes', used synonymously in his statement, that 'they represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite'.⁴⁸ If we recall his ambition to understand subaltern politics as an 'autonomous domain', it is extraordinary that his definition of the subaltern is made contingent upon the definition of the élite, and that the élite is given ontological priority. That the élite constitute a miniscule portion of the Indian population only exacerbates the problem. Guha could well have said that the élite represent the demographic difference between the entire Indian population and all those who are described as subaltern, but the priority given to 'élite' clearly suggests that he considers it a less ambiguous category. It betrays his own tendency to slip into those habits of élite thinking which he otherwise deplors: when all is said and done, Guha's habits of thinking are firmly Brahminical, and consequently he appears not to recognize that at least some 'subalterns' may have welcomed British 'élites' as carriers of norms that promised them legal, social and political equality.

Having set apart, then, the élites and the subalterns, Guha admits that the subaltern classes could not originate initiatives 'powerful enough to develop the nationalist movement into a full-fledged struggle for national liberation'. The working

⁴⁶ C.A. Bayly's review article on Volumes I–IV of *Subaltern Studies*, 'Rallying around the subaltern', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 16: 1, 1988, p. 116.

⁴⁷ That large body of administrative and scholarly literature which deals with patterns of land settlement and revenue management in colonial India speaks entirely of peasant, rather than tribal, communities.

⁴⁸ Guha, 'On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India', p. 8; see also p. 4.

class did not have consciousness as a 'class-for-itself', and was unable to forge alliances with the peasantry; and so the numerous peasant uprisings eventually fizzled out, having 'waited in vain for a leadership to raise them above localism and generalize them into a nationwide anti-imperialist campaign'. If the subaltern classes 'waited in vain', to stress Guha's own words, one can only conclude that Guha does not consider their autonomy to be a fully desirable feature of their politics, which is hardly consistent with the very project of Subaltern Studies. If they 'waited in vain', then the subalterns were betrayed by the bourgeoisie, who failed to exercise the requisite leadership; and so we come to Guha's explication of the principal task of subaltern historiography:

It is the study of this *historic failure of the nation to come to its own*, a failure due to the inadequacy of the bourgeoisie as well as of the working class to lead it into a decisive victory over colonialism and a bourgeois-democratic revolution of either the classic nineteenth-century type under the hegemony of the bourgeoisie or a modern type under the hegemony of workers and peasants, that is, a 'new democracy'—*it is the study of this failure which constitutes the central problematic of the historiography of colonial India* (emphasis in original).⁴⁹

Subaltern history, if we are to follow Guha's argument, commences with a recognition of 'failure', and its provenance is the study of 'failure', that is, the realm of what did not transpire. Somehow that 'failure' seems all but natural, since the native seldom arrives at the destination: either he is still averse to clock-time, or else he has over-stepped his destination or failed to keep his appointment; and when, after much expenditure of energy, the destination is in sight, and the threshold is eventually reached, the native finds that everyone else has departed. When India arrives at the doorstep of modernity, it is to find that the West is already living in the era of post-modernity; when the great industrial targets set by the five-year plans are eventually met, the part of the world that the Indian nation-state seeks to emulate is already post-industrial, living in the mad throes of the information superhighway; when the great dams, those 'temples' of the modern age as Nehru saw them, are finished to the cheering of the leaders of the nation-state, the news arrives that mega-projects of the state are demeaning to the human spirit, productive only of waste, pollution and ruined lives. The history of India is always 'incomplete', and here is Sumit Sarkar, one of the founding members of the subaltern collective, to remind us of the modernity which we in India still await:

The sixty years or so that lie between the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 and the achievement of independence in August 1947

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

witnessed perhaps the greatest transition in our country's long history. A transition, however, which in many ways remains grievously incomplete, and it is with this central ambiguity that it seems most convenient to begin our survey.⁵⁰

India is not lacking in people, poverty or pandits, but the 'history' of India is conceptualized as a 'lack', a 'want' for something better—call it the bourgeoisie that could have, to quote Guha again, led the nation to a 'decisive victory' over colonialism, or call it a revolution of the 'classic nineteenth century type'. If only India had been like France, we might have been a fulfilled nation.

The Journey: The Practice of Subaltern History

From a reading of Guha's programmatic note, as well as of other subaltern histories which bemoan the incompleteness of modernity in India, one would be entitled to draw the conclusion that subaltern history itself exists in a position of subalternity to Europe. This is an argument that can be developed at several levels. The ten volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, as well as the other works of the scholars associated with the project, suggest that India still furnishes the raw data, while the theory emanates from Europe. India is the terrain on which the investigations are carried out, while the analytical tools are derived from the West: this is hardly a departure from the older models of Indological scholarship. The subaltern historians are comfortable with Marx, Hegel, Heidegger, Jakobson, Habermas, Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, as well as with French, American and British traditions of social history, but the interpretive strategies of the Indian epics or Puranas, the political thinking of a Kautilya, the hermeneutics of devotional poetry, the philosophical exegesis of Nagarjuna, and the narrative frameworks of the *Panchatantra* or the *Kathasaritsagara*, are of little use to them; even the little literature of the countless number of little traditions, such as proverbs, ballads and folk tales, *sel-dom* enters into their consciousness.

Still, perhaps this is not so substantive a criticism of subaltern history as one might imagine. The origins of the modern social sciences lie in Western intellectual practices, and it is not unreasonable that the interpretive models should also be derived from these practices. This, however, does not obviate the path of inquiry that some scholars have taken, which is to ask whether one can speak of an 'Indian sociology', 'Indian anthropology', and so on. There is also the argument that India is at least as much heir, for example, to Marxist thought as any other place, and that in some respects India has made more of Marx than have the Western democracies. Consequently, the objection that is frequently encountered, namely that Guha and his colleagues show an inconsistency in denouncing Western historiography at the same time that they draw upon the work of Gramsci, would strike the subaltern historians as having little merit. The precise uses to which

⁵⁰ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947*, Delhi, 1985, p. 1.

Gramsci is put is certainly, as I have suggested, an open question. But what is quite certain is that in intellectual matters, there is still no reciprocity, and one wonders what reception, if any, subaltern history would have received in the West had it not so obviously been the carrier of theoretical trajectories that were simultaneously finding a resonance in the Western academy. That this is not an idle question is clearly demonstrated by the fact that the work of many fine Indian historians whose work is less indebted to streams of post-structuralist thinking or post-colonial theory remains almost entirely unknown outside the Indian academy and certainly the field of Indian history.

The more critical point is that Europe is still, in two fundamental respects, the site of all histories. The present of India is the past of Europe, and India's future is only Europe's present. In fact, if the recipe furnished by the developmentalists and the modernists were followed, one suspects that India's future will merely yield a poor version of Europe's present. If history has already happened somewhere else, India has no history to speak of, a proposition to which Hegel would give his joyous assent. Second, subaltern historians, except occasionally,⁵¹ have fundamentally stopped short of asking how it is that history came to be so decisive a terrain for establishing the autonomy and agency of a subject people or understanding the modality of resistance, and what the consequences are for locating agency, subjecthood and resistance in the discourse of history, tethered as it is to the narratives of modernity, the nation-state and bourgeois rationality. It is history, more than any other discourse, which has enshrined the narrative of the nation-state as the reference point for all agency, and which has made it difficult to derive other arrangements for the organization of human affairs. This is not a point I wish to belabour here, as I have addressed it at very considerable length in a number of other essays,⁵² but it bears reiteration that history as a universalizing discourse, which is less tolerant of dissent than even the master narratives of science, is not merely a novel phenomenon, but has immeasurably narrowed the possibilities for conceptualizing alternative modernities, political identities, and different forms of community. History is not the only mode of accessing the past; it may not even be the most desirable one, at least for certain communities, but I shall return to this point later.

Poor theorizing does not always yield poor histories, and so it is with very considerable surprise, given the rather ill-conceived programmatic agenda as set out by Ranajit Guha, that one finds the practice of subaltern history to have far

⁵¹ See, in particular, the following series of papers by Dipesh Chakrabarty: 'History as critique and critique(s) of history', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26: 37, 14 September 1991: 2162–66; 'Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: Who speaks for "Indian" pasts?', *Representations*, No. 37, Winter 1992, pp. 1–26; and 'Minority histories, subaltern pasts', *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 1: 1, 1998, pp. 15–29.

⁵² I would refer the reader to 'The discourse of history and the crisis at Ayodhya'; 'History and the possibilities of emancipation'; 'Discipline and authority: Some notes on future histories and epistemologies of India', *Futures*, Vol. 29: 10, December 1997, pp. 985–1000; and 'Gandhi, the civilizational crucible, and the future of dissent', *Futures*, Vol. 31: 3, March 1999.

outpaced its theoretical ambitions or philosophical posturing, and to have often yielded some remarkable insights into the study of colonial India. In *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, Guha provided a reading of peasant insurgency through the texts of counter-insurgency, a strategy with particular salience for the study of subaltern agency in colonial India, given that the rebels and insurrectionists rarely, if ever, left behind any texts. This point is similar to Dipesh Chakrabarty's observation, apropos his study of the jute workers of Calcutta, that unlike E.P. Thompson's study of the working class in England, which could make use of the diaries, journals and pamphlets left behind by his subjects, he was constrained in having to use only the documents of the ruling class, which would then have to be 'read both for what they say and for their "silences"'.⁵³ It is the reading of these silences, of the insurgent consciousness, that leads Guha, in his essay 'The prose of counter-insurgency', to develop, with the aid of semiotic analysis, a typology of the discourses of counter-insurgency, which he describes as constituting three layers—primary, secondary and tertiary. The primary discourse, which is constituted by the immediate accounts of insurgency produced by colonial officials or what were fondly called the men-on-the-spot, furnishes the first instance of what Guha calls the 'counter-insurgent code'; when further removed in time and place, this account is processed and transformed into official reports, memoirs, and administrative gazetteers, but even this secondary discourse is unable 'to extricate itself from the code of counter-insurgency'. The secondary discourse shares the commitment of the primary discourse to the 'code of pacification', which entails turning the language of insurgency upside down: thus peasants become insurgents, 'Islamic puritans' become 'fanatics', the resistance to oppression is written as 'daring and wanton atrocities on the inhabitants', the self-rule desired by peasants is turned into treason, and 'the struggle for a better order' is reduced to a 'disturbance of public tranquility'. The 'rebel has no place', writes Guha, 'in this history as the subject of rebellion', and the 'official turned historian' opts to take the side of what he thinks of as law and order. At the final or tertiary level of historiography, the 'code of pacification' encountered in the primary and secondary levels is redistributed, regurgitated and replicated, since this discourse is read without the acknowledgment of the occluded other, that is, the insurgent. Indeed, the tertiary discourse is in some respects more nefarious, emboldened and fattened with the authority of the historian and the purported impartiality produced by the passage of time: and so the 'discourse of history, hardly distinguished from policy, ends up by absorbing the concerns and objectives of the latter'. If, for instance, the primary and secondary discourse of colonial officials pinned the responsibility for a peasant rebellion on the local élites for their exploitative behaviour towards the peasants, in the tertiary discourse of nationalist historiography this blame is shifted on to British rule, which is said to have aggravated the sufferings of the peasants.

⁵³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Conditions for knowledge of working-class conditions: Employers, government and the jute workers of Calcutta, 1890–1940, *SS*, Vol. II, pp. 259–310; see p. 259.

In either case, the peasant is not seen as a rightful subject, as an agent possessing a will of his own, as the maker of his own destiny.⁵⁴

Not only 'canonical' texts, but also the revered figures of the nationalist movement, none more so than Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, become the proper subjects of inquiry for subaltern historians. How Mohandas was transformed into the 'Mahatma' is a long story, but what his deification might have meant to the subaltern masses, and how they read the message of the Mahatma, is the theme of Shahid Amin's brilliantly original study of 'Gandhi as Mahatma'.⁵⁵ In the received version of Gandhi's life that predominates in nationalist historiography, Gandhi captured the Indian National Congress a few years after his return from South Africa, moved the masses with his principled attachment to truth and commitment to non-violence, and led the country to independence after waging several movements of civil disobedience and non-co-operation with the British. All this may very well be true, but nationalist historiography has had no place for Gandhi except as the example par excellence of the 'great man', and contrariwise no place for the masses, who are seen as the flock that humbly followed the great master, though on occasion they may have been led astray by trouble-mongers, the advocates of violence, or those other elements in society which refused to act in the national interest. We know of the impression that Gandhi left on Nehru, Patel, Maulana Azad and others who were to rise to the helm of political affairs in the nationalist movement, but how did Gandhi's charisma register with the masses? The burden of Amin's essay is to establish that there was no single authorized version of the Mahatma, and the masses made of the Mahatma what they could; indeed, they stepped outside the role which nationalist historiography habitually assigns to them, a historiography which seeks to marginalize competing or varying accounts of the Mahatma. For all their religious beliefs and alleged superstitions, the subaltern masses appear to have been more worldly-wise than the élite as they attempted to grapple with the mystique of the Mahatma.

Amin's narrative of the subaltern engagement with the Mahatma commences with an account of Gandhi's visit, at the height of the Non-Co-operation Movement in 1921, to the district of Gorakhpur in the then eastern United Provinces. Here Gandhi addressed numerous 'monster' meetings at which immense crowds gathered to have a *darshan* of their *mahatma*. Ordinarily, in Hindu religious practices, the worshipper seeks a *darshan*, or sight of the deity; this sighting is said to confer blessings upon the worshipper.⁵⁶ Gandhi's hagiographers were to summon

⁵⁴ Ranajit Guha, 'The prose of counter-insurgency', *SS*, Vol. II, pp. 1-41; quotations are from pp. 15, 26-27.

⁵⁵ Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as mahatma: Gorakhpur district, eastern UP, 1921-2', *SS*, Vol. III, pp. 1-61.

⁵⁶ The idea of '*darshan*' is not as distinctly 'Hindu' as is represented in the literature, for instance, in Diana Eck's book by the same name: Diana Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, New York, 1985 (reprint, 1998). What is lacking from Amin's account is the notion of *darshan* as it came to be seen with reference to the Mughal Emperors. Akbar's trusted aide and biographer, Abu Fazl, was to write in the *Ain-i-Akbari* that Akbar would come out on to the balcony of his palace

this as an instance of the reverence in which the Mahatma was held, but they seem to have been less alert to the fact that, as Amin suggests, the worshipper does not, as did many of Gandhi's followers, demand *darshan*. The crowds nearly heckled him, and after a long day of travelling and speech-making, the Mahatma might have had nothing more to look forward to than a long stream of visitors who desired to have his *darshan*, and who forced themselves upon him. At one point in his travels the crowds had become so obstinate that Mahadev Desai, Gandhi's secretary, stepped forth when the crowd started shouting Gandhi's name, and presented himself as the 'Mahatma'; whereupon the people bowed to him, and then left the train.⁵⁷ Their fervour was quite possibly increased by the rumours that circulated about the Mahatma's capacity to cause 'miracles', and certainly the local press was fulsome in its description of the 'magic' that the Mahatma had wrought on the villagers. 'The very simple people in the east and south of the United Provinces', adjudged the editorial in the *Pioneer* newspaper shortly after Gandhi's visit to Gorakhpur, 'afford a fertile soil in which a belief in the powers of the "Mahatmaji", who is after all little more than a name of power to them, may grow'. The editorial saw in the various accounts of the miracles purported to have been performed by Gandhi 'the mythopoeic imagination of the childlike peasant at work', and expressed concern that though the events in question all admitted of an 'obvious explanation', one saw rather signs 'of an unhealthy nervous excitement such as often passed through the peasant classes of Europe in the Middle Ages, and to which the Indian villager is particularly prone'.⁵⁸

There was, however, far more than the 'mythopoeic imagination of the childlike peasant at work' in the circulation of the rumours. Gandhi's teachings—among others, the stress on Muslim–Hindu unity; the injunction to give up bad habits such as gambling, drinking, and whoring; the renunciation of violence; and the daily practice of spinning or weaving—were doubtless distilled in these rumours, but an entire moral and political economy was also transacted in their exchange. One set of rumours and stories referred to the power of the Mahatma; another enumerated the consequences of opposing him, or a particular aspects of his creed; and yet another referred to the boons conferred on those who paid heed to Gandhi's teachings. In one story, a domestic servant declared that he was only prepared to accept the Mahatma's authenticity if the thatched roof of his house was raised; the roof lifted ten cubits above the wall, and was restored to its position only when he cried and folded his hands in submission. A man who abused Gandhi found his eyelids stuck; another man who slandered him began to stink; more dramatically, a lawyer of some standing in the local area discovered shit all over his house, and

and confer *darshan* on the crowds, and so provide his subjects with an assurance that he was well and capable of discharging his duties. In an era when palace rivalries could lead to the dethronement of kings, and the Emperor himself commanded the armies on the field at risk to his life, it was perforce necessary to demonstrate with a vivid display of sovereignty that the ship of the state was afloat.

⁵⁷ Amin, 'Gandhi as mahatma', pp. 1–3, 18–20.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5, citing the *Pioneer* (Allahabad), 23 April 1921, p. 1.

no one doubted that this was because he opposed the Non-Co-operation Movement which Gandhi had initiated. Gandhi was said to punish the arrogance of those who considered themselves exempt from his teachings, or, much worse, boldly defied his creed of non-violence, vegetarianism and abstention from intoxicants. One pandit who was told to give up eating fish is reported to have said in anger: 'I shall eat fish, let's see what the Mahatmaji can do.' When he sat down to eat, it is said, the fish was found to be crawling with worms.⁵⁹

In the name of the Mahatma, an entire nation could be swung into action. That much is clear, and the 'élite' histories have belaboured that point. However, as Amin's study shows, at the local level another set of meanings was imparted to the Mahatma's name. Gandhi's name could be used to enforce order in the village, establish new hierarchies, expunge violators of caste norms, drive the butcher out of the village, settle old scores, compel the wearing of khadi, or restore *communitas*. In Gorakhpur, faulting debtors were threatened that Gandhi's wrath would come down on them if they failed to meet their obligations; likewise, the Cow Protection League, eager to halt the killing of cattle, impressed upon recalcitrant Muslims the consequences of ignoring the Mahatma's message. Utilizing the name of the Mahatma, moneylenders and Hindu zealots sought to refurbish their image; contrariwise, peasants who were heavily indebted as well as under enormous tax burdens, invoked the name of the Mahatma—who had warned moneylenders that they should not bleed their poor brethren—and suggested that unimaginable blessings would fall upon those moneylenders who saw fit to offer them financial relief. The Mahatma's name, Amin argues, could lend itself to all kinds of purposes. As he posits towards the conclusion of his study, even the violence that was committed at Chauri Chaura in February 1922, when a score of policemen were killed by a crowd provoked to extreme anger, was done in Gandhi's name.⁶⁰ The understanding of Gandhi's teachings which the masses held often conflicted with the tenets of Gandhi's creed. No nationalist historiography has had room for those masses who, turning the Mahatma into a floating signifier, thought that they could justifiably, for the higher end of *Swaraj* or self-rule, commit violence in the name of the very prophet of non-violence.

In Amin's use of local literatures, vernacular newspapers, rumours, and village proverbs in the service of a reading which establishes the extraordinarily polysemic nature of the name of the 'Mahatma', we have a demonstrably good instantiation of Subaltern Studies at work.⁶¹ But if his concern is with the silences effected by nationalist historiography, in Gyanendra Pandey's work we are furnished with a powerful reading of the overt posturing and palpable presences of colonial historiography—a historiography which, in this case, offers a seamless account of

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22–45.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 51–55.

⁶¹ One of the other pieces which offers a similarly complex, detailed and nuanced reading of local sources is Sumit Sarkar's 'The Kalki-avatar of Bikrampur: A Village scandal in early twentieth century Bengal', *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 1–53.

Hindu–Muslim conflict as if it were the eternal condition of Indian existence.⁶² In reviewing British writings on Banaras in the nineteenth century, Pandey found, with respect to a Hindu–Muslim conflict that took place in October 1809, widely different colonial accounts of the events that are said to have transpired at that time. The colonial government records of that time described the ‘outbreak’ as having occurred at the ‘Lat Bhairava’ (site of an image) between 20–24 October 1809, and placed the number of casualties at twenty-eight or twenty-nine people, with another seventy people being recorded as wounded; the cause of the conflict was described as a dispute caused by Hindu attempts to render a Hanuman shrine built of mud into a more permanent structure of stone, and the subsequent Hindu outrage over the alleged pollution of the ‘Lat Bhairava’. Writing some twenty years later, James Prinsep was inclined to attribute the cause of the conflict to ‘the “frenzy” excited by Muharram lamentations’; and writing still another twenty years later, in 1848, the colonial official W. Buyers considered the conflict as having emanated from the clash between Muslims celebrating Muharram and Hindu revellers playing Holi. But all agreed at least that the initial outbreak had taken place at the ‘Lat Bhairava’. How, then, asks Pandey, did the *District Gazetteer* of 1907 transpose the site of the initial rioting to the Aurangzeb mosque, and even more significantly, how did the figure of twenty-eight or twenty-nine killed get transformed into ‘several hundreds killed’? Is this the much celebrated colonial respect for ‘facts’, the supreme indifference to which was described by colonial officials as a marker of the poor rational faculties possessed by Indians?⁶³

It is the particular features of the colonial construction of ‘communalism’—a narrative of a Hindu–Muslim conflict that is said to be timeless, beyond resolution, and the eternal condition of Indian society—which Pandey illuminates in his study of British discourses. Many of his interpretive strategies are familiar to students of colonial discourse, for instance, his analysis of the ‘type-casting’ commonly found in Orientalist writings: Muslims become ‘fanatics’ or are given to ‘frenzy’, or that Brahmins are viewed as ‘crafty’. He notes the tendency in colonial texts to describe the reaction of the Hindus as a ‘conspiracy’ instigated by the ‘wily’ Brahmins, and the depiction of the rioting as a ‘convulsion’ that shook Banaras, where the term ‘convulsion’ indicates the spontaneous, primordial, pre-political and nearly cataclysmic nature of the ‘outbreak’. Hindu and Muslim practices—the lamentations of the Muslims at Muharram, the excitability of the Hindus over their images, the fanatic attachment to places of worship—become the predictable sites of representations of an exotic, bizarre, and primitive Other. But Pandey takes us much further in his understanding of how the ‘communal riot narrative’, purporting to describe the event, itself creates the object of its discourse. The 1907 *Gazetteer*, which had indicated that the number killed were in the ‘several

⁶² Gyanendra Pandey, ‘The colonial construction of “communalism”: British writings on Banaras in the nineteenth century’, *SS*, Vol. VI, pp. 132–68.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 135–40.

hundreds', when previous sources placed them at less than thirty, introduced the 1809 riots with the observation that 'the city experienced one of those convulsions which had so frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Musalman sections of the population'.⁶⁴ A history of Muslim-Hindu conflict did not have to be established; it could be presumed. As another colonial writer later wrote: 'the animosities of centuries are always smouldering beneath the surface'.⁶⁵ If Banaras had Hindus and Muslims, they perforce had to be in a state of conflict; and the conflict perforce had to be over religion, that being the pre-eminent marker of Indian identity. More remarkably still, the observations of the 1907 *Gazetteer* appear, virtually verbatim, in the report of the Indian Statutory Commission of 1928, drawn up to consider the constitutional condition of India and the arrangements to be devised for granting Indians a greater degree of self-rule. Only now, the 'grave Banaras riots' of 1809 are furnished not as an instance of Hindu-Muslim antagonism in Banaras, but as an indicator of the state of Hindu-Muslim relations all over India: it was one of those 'convulsions which had frequently occurred in the past owing to the religious antagonism of the Hindu and Moslem sections of the population'.⁶⁶

The 'communal riot narrative' ranges widely over time and space, with scant respect for history or geography. Events can be and are transposed, the locale of disturbances can be shifted, one riot can stand in place for another,⁶⁷ an analog to what I have elsewhere described as the *principle of infinite substitutibility*, whereby any one native was construed as capable of standing in place for any other.⁶⁸ No history ever transpired in India: so, writing apropos, the Hindu-Muslim conflict in Mubarakpur, the *District Gazetteer* said that:

[the Muslims are made up mainly of] fanatical and clannish Julahas [weavers], and the fire of religious animosity between them and the Hindus of the town and neighbourhood is always smouldering. Serious conflicts have occurred between the two from time to time, notably in 1813, 1842 and 1904. The features of all these disturbances are similar, so that a description of what took place on the first occasion will suffice to indicate their character.⁶⁹

Even the future can be read from this history: the colonial official as futurist, prophet, forecaster. Like animals, Indians had no past or future: they lived only in

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135, citing H.R. Nevill, *Benaras: A Gazetteer, being Vol. XXVI of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Lucknow, 1921 (Preface dated December 1907), pp. 207–9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 151, citing Francis Younghusband, *Dawn in India*, London, 1930, p. 144.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 166–67.

⁶⁸ Vinay Lal, 'Committees of inquiry and discourses of "law and order" in twentieth-century British India', unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, The University of Chicago, 2 Vols, 1992, Vol. 2, Ch. 8.

⁶⁹ D.L. Drake-Brockman, *Azamgarh: A Gazetteer, being Vol. XXXIII of the District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh*, Allahabad, 1911, pp. 260–61, cited by Pandey, 'The colonial construction of "communalism"', p. 165.

the present and for the present, but this is not the present of the enlightened who have gained *satori*. In this colonial form of knowledge, “‘violence” always belonged to a pre-colonial condition’,⁷⁰ and the Hindu–Muslim conflict became the very justification for the intervention by a transcendent power, namely the British. If this strife did not exist, it would have had to be invented—invented, so that the colonial state, the mender of fences, could become the locus of all history. Earlier accounts (but not the twentieth century ones) of the 1809 Banaras riots had invariably also noted that the conflict was accompanied by a fast initiated at the river-side by Brahmins and other upper-caste Hindus. However, this form of political action, which was deemed to be only an instance of native eccentricity and mendacity, had to be excised out of history. The following year, Hindus and Muslims joined together in Banaras in a great movement to resist the imposition of house tax, a rather unhappy circumstance for the British who, by the early twentieth century, as resistance to their rule became more marked, had further political compulsions for sketching the Hindu–Muslim past as a bloody affair. But because these histories of independent political action, resistance and political pluralism could not be reconciled with the history of the colonial state, which refused to grant the people any legitimate agency or will of their own, they had to be rendered invisible. Another history, which it was the task of the state to create and nourish, all the better that it should become the handmaiden to policy, would stand in for the Indian past. In the twentieth century, Pandey observes, a name had to be found for this history: that name was ‘communalism’. We are still living with that history.

Accessing the Past, and the Subalternity of History

Of the dozens of papers that have been published in the ten volumes of *Subaltern Studies* and in associated works, the papers by Guha, Amin and Pandey, which I have discussed at some length, appear to be subtle demonstrations of the power and promise of Subaltern Studies. I have, at the same time, already pointed the way to a partial critique of subaltern history, but its limitations need to be addressed at greater length, particularly in view of the consideration that subaltern history has a very substantial following outside India, just as historians in India have themselves become something of public figures, however inconsequential their part in the formulation of policy. The ascendancy of historians is all the more remarkable in a country where historical knowledge had, until recently, an altogether subaltern status in relation to other forms of knowledge and other modes of accessing the past, and it is not particularly clear that even today history enjoys wide legitimacy among the common people. Not long ago, when the Babri Masjid—a sixteenth century mosque in Ayodhya which Hindu militants claimed marked the original site of a Hindu temple allegedly build on the very spot on which Lord Rama was born—was declared by the government to be a ‘disputed structure’

⁷⁰ Pandey, ‘The colonial construction of “communalism”’, p. 151.

before being brought down by a crowd numbering in the thousands, historians became prominent in the public controversy surrounding the mosque.⁷¹ Ironically, questions of faith were largely dispensed with, as both the proponents of the temple theory—that is those Hindus alleging that the mosque was built after a temple on the same site was razed to the ground in a brazen display of Muslim prowess—and the defenders of the mosque—which included not only Muslims but the avowedly secular elements of the Hindu intelligentsia—decided to wage the battle on the field of history. The proponents of the temple theory, whom the secularists preferred to address as Hindu fascists, militants or fundamentalists, gave it as their considered view that it was an '*undisputed historical fact* (emphasis added) that at Ramjanmabhumi [the birthplace, allegedly, of Lord Rama] there was an ancient *mandir* [temple]', but the '*authentic history books*' (emphasis added) they cited in their support turn out to be, on closer examination, accounts by European writers and travellers whose testimony on many other points is impugned by these same people.⁷² The rejoinder—issued amidst the controversy but two years before the Babri Masjid was destroyed—was similarly framed in the language of historical authority, far more formidable than anything that the militants could command. Jointly authoring a pamphlet entitled 'The political abuse of history', twenty-five historians at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University demolished, or so they thought, the view that a Hindu temple might have stood at the spot where the Babri Masjid had been built, and rejected, with evidence they considered decisive, the claim that this temple, had it stood there in the first place, could possibly have been built to mark the birthplace of Rama.⁷³

Undoubtedly, the secular historians had by far the 'better' evidence in support of their views, but this seems to have left hardly any impression upon the militants and their scholarly supporters, or even among the general public. The only shared area of agreement among the 'secularists' and the 'fundamentalists' was readiness to deploy historical evidence,⁷⁴ though the secular historians added the necessary caveat that irrespective of the historical evidence, the destruction of the mosque could not conceivably be justified. From the standpoint of secular historians, more-

⁷¹ Sushil Srivastava, *The Disputed Mosque: A Historical Inquiry*, Delhi, 1991, provides a balanced historical account, and finds it probable that a Buddhist stupa stood at the original site of the mosque. See pp. 113–24.

⁷² Citations are from Sarvepalli Gopal, ed., *Anatomy of a Confrontation: The Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhumi Issue*, Delhi, 1991, p. 138, notes 6–7.

⁷³ Sarvepalli Gopal et al., 'The political abuse of history', as reprinted in *Social Scientist*, Nos. 200–1, January–February 1990, pp. 76–81. Almost the only historian at JNU who did not append his signature to the document was Majid H. Siddiqi, himself a Muslim. Siddiqi offered the argument, which is deserving of attention, that historians 'must exhibit intellectual self-confidence in their discipline and determine their own agenda in terms of their own questions and not allow the existence of communalism in this society. . . to force its agenda upon them'. See his 'Ramjanmabhoomi–Babri Masjid dispute: The question of history', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25: 2, 13 January 1990, pp. 97–98.

⁷⁴ I have discussed this question in detail in 'The discourse of history and the crisis at Ayodhya', and in Sections V–VI of 'Claims of the past, shape of the future'.

over, the eventual destruction of the mosque signalled the (evil) triumph of myth over history, blind faith over principled reason, religious fundamentalism over secularism. Not many of these historians, however, asked whether the language of secularism spoke to the condition of those Hindus who, without supporting Hindu militancy, nevertheless felt themselves to be devout Hindus. What did the secular historians have to say about belief, except to acknowledge, most likely with a tinge of embarrassment, its presence in the life of most Indians? Few paused to ask why the 'hard' evidence of historical 'facts' had little attraction for most Indians, and not only the upwardly mobile Hindus who were held to be responsible for creating a climate of opinion conducive to the resurgence of Hindu militancy. Fewer still reflected on the adequacy, or even soundness, of their proposed solution to the dispute, which was to turn the mosque over to the Archaeological Survey of India, which would in effect transform it from a place of religious worship claimed by both Hindus and Muslims into a dead monument existing in 'museum time', of interest to no one except archaeologists, antiquarians, scholars and Western tourists. None of the historians or secularists showed themselves capable of a creative response to one of the most pressing crises to face India in the post-independence period, and it devolved upon the philosopher and cultural critic, Ramachandra Gandhi, to transcend the parameters of historical discourse within which the discussion over the Babri Masjid had been trapped, and furnish a radical and emancipatory reading of the events that transpired in Ayodhya. As Gandhi showed, historians had been grossly negligent in failing to take serious notice of a building, Sita-ki-Rasoi ('Sita's Kitchen'), adjoining the mosque; and from this proximity Gandhi spins a tale, and moral fable, which allows us to consider the conflict at Ayodhya as part of the violent ecological disruption of the world.⁷⁵

It is particularly noteworthy, from the perspective of this essay, that the subaltern historians, who are concentrated in Delhi University (rather than Jawaharlal Nehru University) and the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, had almost no part to play in the debate. An eloquent plea or two appeared from the pen of Gyanendra Pandey, but the subaltern historians appeared stunned and paralyzed: subaltern history seemed unable to speak to the present. Though subaltern historians are able to theorize communalism, they are still unable to speak with ease about religion or the supernatural. In common with social scientists, quite unlike the physicists or biologists who have shown themselves perfectly capable of distinguishing their own religious beliefs from the epistemological assumptions of the sciences which they practice in their professional lives, the subaltern historians are still captive to positivism and its disdain for anything which cannot be encompassed within the circle of reason. Thus, willy-nilly, subaltern histories, on closer inspection, appear to echo those familiar juxtapositions of 'faith' and 'reason', 'enlightenment' and 'superstition'; and at every instance of religious belief, the subaltern historian falters, slips, and excuses himself. How else can one

⁷⁵ Ramachandra Gandhi, *Sita's Kitchen: A Testimony of Faith and Inquiry*, Delhi, 1992.

explain Guha's constant slippage into the language of that very élite historiography which he so unequivocally condemns? He writes of the peasants that their 'understanding of the relations, institutions and processes of power were identified with or at least over determined by religion', but adds in the same breath that they were possessed of a 'false consciousness' on account of their 'backward. . . material and spiritual conditions'.⁷⁶ Though the subaltern historian is inclined to concede autonomy and agency to the subaltern, how does the historian negotiate the problem that arises when the subaltern, disavowing any agency, declares—as has happened often—that he or she was instigated to act by the command of God, or the local deity? The voices of the subalterns do not always, or even often, speak to us, and yet it is the ambition of subaltern history that it desires to make these voices heard, and by transforming them into the language of modernity, scholarship, or narratives organized along other principles of 'rational' ordering, touch us.

That the subaltern historians did not so much as lift their voices while the debate over the Babri Masjid raged across north India may be indicative of a wide and disturbing disjunction between the espousal of radical politics and history in the academy, and a nearly complete surrender in the public domain. I am by no means suggesting that historians should become policy-makers, but rather adverting to the failure of historical discourses to transplant themselves into the public consciousness, and the abject failure of those who describe themselves as opponents of 'élite' histories to speak in the voices of public intellectuals. This brings me to a more commonly expressed general criticism, which I would argue should be treated with considerable caution, that subaltern history has thrived on the fetishism of exile encountered in the American academy.⁷⁷ From among the core members of the collective, the greater majority are located in some of the leading universities in the United States and Britain, and those settled in India often have sinecures and arrangements for leave that are the envy of Indian academics. They sometimes represent themselves, usually informally, as unwilling exiles, as receiving a more sympathetic hearing in the Western academy than in Indian universities, as speaking in a language that places them at odds with their Indian colleagues. There are other ambivalent narratives woven into this tale as well, since educated Indians, who swear to the motto that 'there is no honour in one's own country', like to believe that recognition in the West is a pre-condition of success in India.

The criticism that seems to deserve a more sympathetic hearing, and which is a corollary to the suggestion that the subaltern historians have rendered themselves into exiles, pertains to the manner in which subaltern historiography has itself been rendered into exilic history. The argument, encountered in the eloquently written essays of Gyan Prakash, who has become something of a spokesperson for the subaltern historians in the West, that subaltern historiography can content itself with deconstructing master narratives, with—in his words—not unmasking

⁷⁶ Guha, *Elementary Aspects*, pp. 265–68.

⁷⁷ I would associate this argument with the likes of Aijaz Ahmad, whose voice is mistakenly seen to carry greater moral authority as he himself is an America-returned Indian academic.

'dominant discourses' but rather exploring their 'fault lines in order to provide different accounts, to describe histories revealed in the cracks of the colonial archaeology of knowledge', justifiably lends itself to the multiple charges that subaltern history, in something of a mockery of its name, is committed, if only negatively, to the printed text, to elite discourses, and to a revived form of colonial textualism. According to Prakash, 'subalterns and subalternity do not disappear into discourse but appear in its interstices, subordinated by structures over which they exert pressure', and there is the insistent reminder that 'critical work seeks its basis not without but within the fissures of dominant structures'.⁷⁸ If the fissures and gaps in dominant, almost invariably printed, discourses are enough to furnish us clues and even histories of subalternity, why go outside the realm of elite texts at all? Indeed, Prakash admits as much, and calls for a 'complex and deep engagement with elite and canonical texts',⁷⁹ which is what the 'elitist historiography' that Guha and the collective so roundly condemned has been doing since the inception of historical work.

And what of the voices of the subalterns? What of the lived experiences, so celebrated in the abstract, of peasants, workers, the slum-dwellers, the Dalits, rural and urban women, and countless others? If one can repair from time to time to 'elite and canonical texts', and repeatedly deploy those interpretive strategies that teach us how to read between the lines, which show us the precise moments at which these texts unwittingly betray themselves, then why bother with the archive at all? What makes the subaltern historian so radically different from James Mill, who authored an eight-volume history of British India without having ever visited the country about whose destiny he pontificated, or from Max Mueller, the revered father of late nineteenth century Indology, who absolutely forbade his students from visiting India, lest the contemporary India of colonial rule should irretrievably suffer in comparison with the Aryan India of the sages and philosophers which he had instilled into their imagination? If subaltern history is to become another species of post-colonial criticism as the title of Prakash's essay bids us to understand, why call it 'subaltern history' at all? Moreover, though this point is deserving of far greater elaboration, nowhere does Prakash show any comprehension that post-colonial criticism arose in the societies of the West where the forces of homogenization had historically operated with such power as to create a desperate need for plural structures, while India is a society where the ground reality, so to speak, has always been plural, whatever the attempts of militant Hindus in recent years to transform India in the image of the West. To speak, then, of 'subaltern history' as 'post-colonial criticism' is to lose sight of the fact that the task of

⁷⁸ Prakash, 'Subaltern studies as postcolonial criticism', pp. 1482, 1486–87.

⁷⁹ Bayly, in 'Rallying around the subaltern', quite rightly anticipates Prakash in his observation that in contrast to those American historians who had used 'indigenous sources (including popular ballads)', the 'subalterns' forte has generally lain in re-reading, and mounting an internal critique, of the police reports, administrative memoranda, newspapers and accounts by colonial officials and the literate', in other words 'elite texts', 'which earlier historians had used for different purposes' (p. 111).

criticism and intellectual inquiry is substantively of a different order in India and the West.

Subaltern India, one suspects, will prove itself rather more recalcitrant to subaltern history than Prakash and some of his cohorts in the collective imagine. Until very recently, subaltern history showed itself as entirely impervious to contemporary urban India, as if the slum-dwellers, urban proletariat, small-town tricksters, the countless number of street vendors, and even the millions of lower middle-class Indians suffocating in dingy office buildings do not constitute the class of clearly subordinate people that Guha designated as the 'subalterns'. The subaltern collective is doubtless moving towards a more expansive conception of its mandate, even while Gyan Prakash has been announcing that 'élite and canonical texts' furnish subaltern historians with their most effective material, and in Volume IX one finds the first explicit attempts to engage with subalternity in the contemporary urban context.⁸⁰ But as yet there is little to warrant the optimism that subaltern history will be able to extricate itself from the legacy of anthropology, with its conception of 'village India', or from the stress on rural India with which post-independence anthropology and sociology have been preoccupied.⁸¹ One wonders whether subaltern history does not also, in the fashion of Indology and Orientalism, secretly hold to the view that the India of villages and peasants, that realm of rebellion and insurrectionary activity, is somehow the authentic India, the India where the 'autonomous' realm of the people is more clearly discerned.

Though Indian subalterns have been making their history in myriad ways in post-independence India, and have moved from one form of subalternity to another, and often to other destinations, it is apparent that subaltern historians have themselves been left behind. Even their understanding of village India, to advert to one instance, seems curiously predictable, though this limitation may well have

⁸⁰ See Vivek Dhareashwar and R. Srivatsan, "'Rowdy-sheetsers': An essay on subalternity and politics"; and, to a much lesser extent, Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Problems for a contemporary theory of gender', both in *SS*, Vol. IX, pp. 201–31 and 232–60 respectively. It is a telling comment that of these four authors, only Vivek Dhareashwar, who earned his Ph.D. from the History of Consciousness Program at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has any training in history.

⁸¹ This problem is encountered in other domains of Indian life and intellectual work. I am reminded of the poignant observations of one of India's most famous environmentalists, Anil Agarwal, founder and director of the Centre for Science and Environment. In one of the recent issues of the magazine that he founded, *Down To Earth* (31 January 1999), Agarwal relates how, when he was asked in 1986 by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi to address his council of ministers on the 'environmental challenges' facing the country, he spoke forth with confidence that 'rural environmental problems are more important than urban environmental problems'. He admits that he did not anticipate the extraordinary speed with which industrial pollution would become a nightmare for virtually the entire country, and so provided the country with 'poor environmental leadership' (p. 6). The historical, sociological, and anthropological literature on modern India seems largely oblivious of the fact there is an urban India, where nearly 25 per cent of the country's one billion people live, and an ethnography of urban India has barely emerged. The observations of small-town India of one young writer, Pankaj Mishra, make for better subaltern history than the laborious post-colonial ruminations of Indian academics. See his *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana*, Delhi, 1995.

more to do with the poverty of historical thinking than with their own shortcomings. India characteristically transforms its urban areas into villages, and ruralizes its urban landscapes: in India the village is everywhere, and there is the village outside the village. There may well be the villager in most urban Indians, though increasingly urban Indians are getting disconnected from the village. Many of the subaltern historians—Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Sumit Sarkar and Ranajit Guha—have tackled Gandhi, but it seems that they are yet to understand the village within Gandhi. This may seem like an unlikely proposition, considering that Gandhi spent a very considerable part of his life in urban settings, whether London, Durban or Ahmedabad. Notwithstanding his very long spells in Britain and South Africa, Gandhi never left the village; he inhabited its structures, its modes of thought, and its imagination. That is no discredit to him at all, and Amin's reading of the polysemic nature of the Mahatma myths, which as I have suggested is accomplished with extraordinary verve and imagination, could have been richer still had he had understood not only how the peasants worked on Gandhi, but also how the village served as a symbiotic link between the Mahatma and the masses.

The subaltern historians, to put the matter bluntly, have been riding along with the academy, but they must now walk with the subalterns. There is great merit in walking, and the subaltern historians may take a lesson or two from Gandhi, who walked at least 10 kilometres every day, and often a great deal more. It is with the walk to the sea that a revolution was launched, but Gandhi would have said that walking puts us in touch with our body in different ways, as well as in touch with India. Walking introduces a different conception of time, working with (not only within) the boundaries set by clock-time: it formulates, to evoke Raymond Williams's phrase, 'structures of feeling' that cannot be encapsulated by the body put in mechanical motion. The subaltern historians have mastered the analytical models derived from European philosophy and the social sciences; they are placed in conversation with some of the other academic trajectories of thought that have become inspirational for our times; their work offers a trenchant critique of colonial, neo-colonial, and nationalist historiographies; and, though this consideration will be of more interest to Indians, and perhaps to those in the Southern hemisphere of the world, they have succeeded in placing Indian history on the world map. Yet the subalterns on whose behalf they speak are not very responsive to the historical mode of inquiry, or even to the historical mode of living in the body. Their language has more in common with the epics, Puranas, *bhajans*, folk-tales, proverbs, songs and poems than it does with the language of history. The subaltern historian, reliant on modern knowledge systems, theorizes the subaltern and works on the village; the subaltern, who inhabits the village within and without, has not entirely abandoned the indigenous knowledge systems. There is something fundamentally out of joint with subaltern studies, and a recognition of that disjointedness may yet lead to a more enriched conception of this historical enterprise.