

Sumit Sarkar, "The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*" in his *Writing Social History*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.

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## The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*\*

My title may sound provocative, but at one level it is no more than description, with no necessarily pejorative implications. A quick count indicates that all fourteen essays in *Subaltern Studies I* and *II* had been about underprivileged groups in Indian society – peasants, tribals, and in one instance workers. The corresponding figure for Volumes *VII* and *VIII* is, at most, four out of twelve.<sup>1</sup> Guha's preface and introductory essay in the first volume had been full of references to 'subaltern classes', evocations of Gramsci, and the use of much Marxian terminology. Today, the dominant thrust within the project – or at least the one that gets most attention – is focussed on critiques of Western-colonial power-knowledge, with non-Western 'community consciousness' as its valorized alternative. Also emerging is a tendency to define such communities principally in terms of religious identities.

Change within a project which is now well over a decade old is entirely understandable and even welcome, though one could have hoped for some internal analysis of the shifting meanings of the core term 'subaltern' and why it has been thought necessary to retain it despite a very different discursive context. What makes the shifts within *Subaltern Studies* worthy of close attention are their association

\* I have benefited greatly from the comments and criticisms of Aijaz Ahmad, Pradip Kumar Datta, Mahmud Mamdani and Tanika Sarkar.

<sup>1</sup> I am excluding from my count the two chapters in volume *VIII* about Ranajit Guha and his writings. Out of the four, one is by Terence Ranger about Africa, a second (Saurabh Dube) from outside the editorial group – which leaves us with David Hardiman on the Dangs, and Ranajit Guha himself on nationalist mobilization/disciplining of subaltern strata through 'social boycott'.

with changes in academic (and political) moods that have had a virtually global range.

*Subaltern Studies* emerged in the early 1980s in a dissident-Left milieu, where sharp criticism of orthodox Marxist practice and theory was still combined with the retention of a broad socialist and Marxian horizon. There were obvious affinities with the radical-populist moods of the 1960s and 1970s, and specifically with efforts to write 'histories from below'. The common ground lay in a combination of enthusiastic response to popular, usually peasant, rebellions, with growing disillusionment about organized Left parties, received versions of orthodox Marxist ideology, and the bureaucratic state structures of 'actually existing socialism'. In India, specifically, there were the embers of abortive Maoist armed struggle in the countryside, the spectacle of one of the two major Communist Parties supporting an authoritarian regime that was close to the Soviet Union, and then the hopes briefly aroused by the post-Emergency electoral rout of Indira Gandhi. Among historiographical influences, that of British Marxian social history was probably the most significant. Hill, Hobsbawm and Thompson were much admired by the younger scholars, and Thompson in particular had a significant impact when he visited India in the winter of 1976-7 and addressed a session of the Indian History Congress.<sup>2</sup> Ranajit Guha seems to have often used 'subaltern' somewhat in the way Thompson deployed the term 'plebeian' in his writings on eighteenth-century England. In the largely pre-capitalist conditions of colonial India, class formation was likely to have remained inchoate. 'Subaltern' would be of help in avoiding the pitfalls of economic reductionism, while at the same time retaining a necessary emphasis on domination and exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The radical, Thompsonian, social history of the 1970s, despite assertions to the contrary which are made sometimes nowadays for

<sup>2</sup> The paper he presented at that session was published by the journal of the Indian Council of Historical Research: 'Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History', *Indian Historical Review* (1977).

<sup>3</sup> Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1983) frequently cited Thompson with approval, and the references, significantly were to *Whigs and Hunters* and the essay in *Albion's Fatal Tree*. In 1985, a defence by Dipesh Chakrabarty of the project against criticism in *Social Scientist*, some of it from orthodox Marxist standpoints, pleaded for greater openness to 'alternative varieties of Marxism' and rejected the base-superstructure metaphor in terms reminiscent of Thompson. 'Invitation to a Dialogue', in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985), pp. 369, 373. See also Partha Chatterji, 'Modes of Power: Some Clarifications', in *Social Scientist* 141, February 1985.

polemical purposes, never really became respectable in the eyes of Western academic establishments. It is not surprising, therefore, that the early *Subaltern Studies* volumes, along with Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), were largely ignored in the West, while they attracted widespread interest and debate in Left-leaning intellectual circles in India.<sup>4</sup>

Things have changed much since then, and today a transformed *Subaltern Studies* owes much of its prestige to the acclaim it is receiving from that part of the Western academic postmodernistic counter-establishment which is interested in colonial and postcolonial matters. Its success is fairly obviously related to an ability to move with the times. With the withering of hopes of radical transformation through popular initiative, conceptions of seamless, all-pervasive, virtually irresistible power-knowledge have tended to displace the evocation of moments of resistance central to the histories from below of the 1960s and 1970s. Domination is conceptualized overwhelmingly in cultural, discursive terms, as the power-knowledge of the post-Enlightenment West. If at all seen as embodied concretely in institutions, it tends to get identified uniquely with the modern bureaucratic nation-state: further search for specific socio-economic interconnections is felt to be unnecessarily economistic, redolent of traces of a now finally defeated Marxism, and hence disreputable. 'Enlightenment rationalism' thus becomes the central polemical target, and Marxism stands condemned as one more variety of Eurocentrism. Radical, Left-wing social history, in other words, has been collapsed into cultural studies and critiques of colonial discourse, and we have moved from Thompson to Foucault and, even more, Said.

The evolution has been recently summed up by Dipesh Chakrabarty as a shift from the attempt 'to write "better" Marxist histories' to an understanding that 'a critique of this nature could hardly afford to ignore the problem of universalism/Eurocentrism that was

<sup>4</sup> Thus the October 1984 issue of *Social Scientist*, a journal with CPI(M) affiliations, published a collective review essay on *Subaltern Studies II* written by a group of young scholars of Delhi University. A similar review of volumes III and IV came out in the same journal in March 1988. Guha and his colleagues, in significant contrast, were ignored by *Modern Asian Studies* till Rosalind O'Hanlon's 'Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia' (22, 1, 1988), and the footnotes in this article clearly demonstrate that the initial debate around the project had been entirely within South Asia. Western discussion and acclaim has proliferated since then: within India, in contrast, there has been a largely derivative adulation, but nothing remotely resembling the critical engagement of the early years.

inherent in Marxist (or for that matter liberal) thought itself.' His article goes on to explain the changes within *Subaltern Studies* primarily in terms of 'the interest that Gayatri Spivak and, following her, Edward Said and others took in the project.'<sup>5</sup> Going against the views of my ex-colleagues in the *Subaltern Studies* editorial team, I intend to argue that the trajectory that has been outlined with considerable precision and frankness by Chakrabarty has been debilitating in both academic and political terms. Explanations in terms of adaptations to changed circumstances or outside intellectual influences alone are, however, never fully adequate. I would like to attempt a less 'external' reading, through a focus on certain conceptual ambiguities and implicit tensions within the project from the beginning.

## II

The achievements of the early years of *Subaltern Studies* in terms of widening horizons and concrete historical research need to be rescued, perhaps, from the enormous condescension of recent adherents like Gyan Prakash, who dismisses such work as 'the familiar "history from below" approach'.<sup>6</sup> (It is difficult to resist at this point the retort that postmodernistic moods are today not only 'familiar' but academically respectable and advantageous in ways that would have been inconceivable for radical social historians in the 1970s.) The early essays of Ranajit Guha in *Subaltern Studies* located the origins of the new initiative in an effort to 'rectify the elitist bias', often accompanied by economistic assumptions, common to much colonialist, 'bourgeois-nationalist' and conventional-Marxist readings of modern Indian history.<sup>7</sup> Thus it was argued with considerable justice by Guha and other contributors that anti-colonial movements had been explained far too often in terms of a combination of economic pressures and mobilization from the top by leaders portrayed as manipulative in colonial,

<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Marx after Marxism: Subaltern Histories and the Question of Difference', in *Polygraph* 6/7, 1993.

<sup>6</sup> Gyan Prakash, 'Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'Preface', and 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi, 1982). The quoted phrases are from pp. vii and 1. A more explicit critique of orthodox Marxist historiography was made by Guha in the second volume (Delhi, 1983), in his 'The Prose of Counterinsurgency'.

and as idealistic or charismatic in nationalist, historiography. Studies of peasant and labour movements, similarly, had concentrated on economic conditions and Left organizational and ideological lineages. The new trend would seek to explore the neglected dimension of popular or subaltern autonomy in action, consciousness and culture.

*Subaltern Studies* from its beginnings was felt by many, with some justice, to be somewhat too dismissive about predecessors and contemporaries working on not entirely dissimilar lines,<sup>8</sup> and the claims of setting up a new 'paradigm' were certainly over-flamboyant. Yet a new theoretical – or at least polemical – clarity was added to ongoing efforts at exploring histories from below, along with much empirical work at once solid and exciting. Thus Ranajit Guha's analysis of specific themes and movements – the role of rumour, the interrelationships and distinctions between crime and insurgency, or aspects of the Santal rebellion and the 1857 upheaval, to cite a few stray examples – were appreciated by many who could not accept the overall framework of *Elementary Aspects*. The publications of the *Subaltern Studies* group, within, outside, and in some cases before the constitution of the project, helped to significantly modify the historiography of anti-colonial nationalism through a common initial emphasis on 'pressures from below'. One thinks, for instance, of David Hardiman's pioneering exploration of the peasant nationalists of Gujarat through his meticulous collection of village-level data, Gyanendra Pandey's argument about an inverse relationship between the strength of local Congress organization and peasant militancy in Uttar Pradesh, and Shahid Amin's analysis of rumours concerning Gandhi's miracle-working powers as an entry point into the processes of an autonomous popular appropriation of messages from nationalist leaders.<sup>9</sup> Reinterpretations of mainstream nationalism apart,

<sup>8</sup> One could think, for instance, of some of the essays in Ravinder Kumar's *Essays on Gandhian Politics* (Oxford, 1971) influenced by Rudé, or Majid Siddiqi's *Agrarian Unrest in North India: The United Provinces 1918-22* (New Delhi, 1978). In my *Popular Movements and Middle-Class Leadership in Late Colonial India: Problems and Perspectives of a 'History from Below'* (Calcutta, 1983), drafted before the publication of the first volume of *Subaltern Studies*, I attempted a catalogue of available research material relevant for such studies (fn. 3, p. 74). And the critique, central to much early *Subaltern Studies*, of nationalist leaders and organizations often restraining militant mass initiatives, had been quite common in some kinds of Marxist writing, most notably in R.P. Dutt's *India Today* (Bombay, 1947).

<sup>9</sup> David Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District, 1917-34* (Delhi, 1981); Gyanendra Pandey, *Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh 1926-34* (Delhi, 1978); Shahid Amin, 'Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District,

there were also important studies of tribal movements and cults, Dipesh Chakrabarty's stimulating, if controversial, essays on Bengal labour history, and efforts to enter areas more 'difficult' for radical historians such as mass communalism, or peasant submissiveness to landlords.<sup>10</sup>

Once the initial excitement had worn away, however, work of this kind could seem repetitive, conveying an impression of a purely empiricist adding of details to confirm the fairly simple initial hypothesis about subaltern autonomy in one area or form after another. The attraction felt for the alternative, apparently more theoretical, thrust also present within *Subaltern Studies* from its beginnings is therefore understandable. This had its origins in Guha's attempt to use some of the language and methods of Lévi-Straussian structuralism to unravel what *Elementary Aspects* claimed was an underlying structure of peasant insurgent consciousness, extending across more than a century of colonial rule and over considerable variations of physical and social space. Guha still confined his generalizations to Indian peasants under colonialism, and sought to preserve some linkages with patterns of state-landlord-moneylender exploitation. Partha Chatterji's first two essays in *Subaltern Studies* introduced a much more general category of 'peasant communal consciousness', inaugurating thereby what has subsequently become a crucial shift from 'subaltern' through 'peasant' to 'community'. The essays simultaneously expanded the notion of 'autonomy' into a categorical disjunction between two 'domains' of politics and 'power' – elite and subaltern. Chatterji claimed that 'when a community acts collectively

Eastern UP, 1921-2', *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984). My *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi, 1983), written before I joined the *Subaltern Studies* group, tried to introduce a 'history from below' perspective while attempting an overall survey.

<sup>10</sup> David Arnold, 'Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudam-Rampa Risings, 1839-1924', *Subaltern Studies I* (Delhi, 1982); David Hardiman, 'Adivasi Assertion in South Gujarat: The Devi Movement of 1922-3', *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), subsequently enlarged into his fascinating *The Coming of the Devi* (Delhi, 1987); Tanika Sarkar, 'Jitu Santal's Movement in Malda, 1924-32: A Study in Tribal Protest', *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985); Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute-Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940', *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi, 1983) and 'Trade Unions in a Hierarchical Culture: The Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1920-50', *Subaltern Studies III*; Gyanendra Pandey, 'Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpur Region, c. 1888-1917', *Subaltern Studies II*; Gautam Bhadra, 'The Mentality of Subalternity: Kantanama or Rajdharma', *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, 1989).

the fundamental political characteristics are the same everywhere', and achieved an equally breathtaking, unmediated leap from some very general comments in Marx's *Grundrisse* about community in pre-capitalist social formations to Bengal peasant life in the 1920s.<sup>11</sup>

In the name of theory, then, a tendency emerged towards essentializing the categories of 'subaltern' and 'autonomy', in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualized meanings and qualities. That there had been such elements of 'essentialism', 'teleology' and epistemological naivete in the quest for the subaltern subject has naturally not escaped the notice of recent postmodernistically inclined admirers. They tend, however, to blame such aberrations on Marxist residues which now, happily, have been largely overcome.<sup>12</sup> What is conveniently forgotten is that the problems do not disappear through a simple substitution of 'class' by 'subaltern' or 'community'. Reifying tendencies can be actually strengthened by the associated detachment from socio-economic contexts and determinants out of a mortal fear of economic reductionism. The handling of the new concepts, further, may remain equally naive. The intervention of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,<sup>13</sup> we shall see, has not changed things much in this respect for the bulk of later *Subaltern Studies* work, except in purely verbal terms.

The more essentialist aspects of the early *Subaltern Studies* actually indicated moves away from the Marxian worlds of Thompson and Gramsci. Reification of a subaltern or community identity is open to precisely the kind of objections that Thompson had levelled in the famous opening pages of his *Making of the English Working Class* against much conventional Marxist handling of class: objections that paradoxically contributed to the initial *Subaltern Studies* rejection of the rigidities of economistic class analysis. It is true that Thompson's own handling of the notion of community has been critiqued at times for being insufficiently attentive to 'internal' variations:<sup>14</sup> the contrast in this respect with the ultimate trajectory

<sup>11</sup> Partha Chatterji, 'Agrarian Relations and Communalism in Bengal, 1926-35' and 'More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry', *Subaltern Studies I*, II. My quotation is from the first essay, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> See, particularly, Gyan Prakash, as well as a more nuanced and less dogmatically certain review article by Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia', *Modern Asian Studies*, 22, i, 1988.

<sup>13</sup> 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi, 1985).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Suzanne Desan, 'Crowds, Community and Ritual in the

of *Subaltern Studies* still seems undeniable. Through deliberately paradoxical formulations like 'class struggle without class', Thompson had sought to combine the continued quest for collectivities of protest and transformation with a rejection of fixed, reified identities.<sup>15</sup> He refused to surrender totally the ground of class, and so the rejection of the base-superstructure analogy did not lead him to any 'culturalism'. Thompson, it needs to be emphasized, never gave up the attempt to situate plebeian culture 'within a particular equilibrium of social relations, a working environment of exploitation and resistance to exploitation — its proper material mode.'<sup>16</sup> What he possessed in abundant measure was an uncanny ability to hold together in creative, dialectical tension dimensions that have often flowed apart elsewhere.

It would be relevant in this context to look also at Gramsci's six-point 'methodological criteria' for the 'history of the subaltern classes', referred to by Guha with much admiration in the very first page of *Subaltern Studies I* as a model unattainable but worth striving for:

1. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production . . .
2. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own . . .
3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them;
4. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, in order to press claims of a limited and partial character;
5. those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework;
6. those formations which assert the integral autonomy . . . etc.<sup>17</sup>

Subaltern 'social groups' are emphatically not unrelated to 'the sphere of economic production', it will be noticed — and the

Work of E.P. Thompson and Natalie Davis', in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History* (California, 1989). I owe this reference to Dr Hans Medick.

<sup>15</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Eighteenth-Century English Society: Class-Struggle Without Class?', *Social History*, III, 2, May 1978.

<sup>16</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (London, 1993), p. 7. It is this methodological imperative to contextualize within specific social relations and material modes that has been progressively eliminated, we shall see, from the dominant strand within late *Subaltern Studies*.

<sup>17</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 'Notes on Italian History', in Hoare and Smith (eds), *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (New York, 1971), p. 52.

indication is clear even in such a brief outline of an enormous range of possible meanings of 'autonomy'. Above all, the emphasis, throughout, is not on distinct domains of politics, but interpenetration, mutual (though obviously unequal) conditioning, and, implicitly, common roots in a specific social formation. Otherwise the subaltern would logically always remain subaltern, except in the unlikely event of a literal inversion which, too, would not really transform society: perspectives that Gramsci the revolutionary could hardly be expected to endorse.

Chatterji's terminology of distinct elite and subaltern domains was initially felt by many in the *Subaltern Studies* group to be little more than a strong way of asserting the basic need to search for traces of subaltern autonomy. (I notice, for instance, that I had quite inconsistently slipped into the same language even while arguing in my *Subaltern Studies III* essay against over-rigid application of binary categories.<sup>18</sup>) The logical, if at first perhaps unnoticed and unintended, consequences have been really far-reaching. The separation of domination and autonomy tended to make absolute and homogenize both within their separate domains, and represented a crucial move away from efforts to develop immanent critiques of structures that have been the strength of Marxian dialectical approaches.<sup>19</sup> Domination construed as irresistible could render autonomy illusory. Alternatively, the latter had to be located in pre-colonial or pre-modern spaces untouched by power, or sought for in fleeting, fragmentary moments alone. Late *Subaltern Studies* in practice has oscillated around precisely these three positions, of 'derivative discourse', indigenous 'community', and 'fragments'.

A bifurcation of the worlds of domination and autonomy, I

<sup>18</sup> 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy: Bengal from Swadeshi to Non-Cooperation, c. 1905-22', in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), pp. 273-6.

<sup>19</sup> For a powerful, if also highly 'revisionistic', exposition of the strength of Marxism as immanent critique, see Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge, 1993, 1995). The effort, on the other hand, to make resistance totally external to power can attain really curious levels, at times. See for instance Gyan Prakash's assertion that 'we cannot thematise Indian history in terms of the development of capitalism and simultaneously contest capitalism's homogenization of the contemporary world.' 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', *Social Text* 31/32, 1992. How does one contest something, I wonder, without talking about it? The best critique of such positions that I have seen is Arif Dirlik, 'The Postcolonial Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 20, ii, Winter 1994.

have argued elsewhere, became characteristic of several otherwise unconnected spheres of intellectual enquiry in the political conjuncture of the late-1970s and 1980s: the 'acculturation thesis' about early modern French popular culture, Foucault's studies of modern power-knowledge, Said's critique of Orientalism.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the similar disjunction that was occasionally made in early *Subaltern Studies*<sup>21</sup> provided the initial point of insertion of Said, through an article, and then a very influential book, by Partha Chatterji.<sup>22</sup> Said's views regarding the overwhelming nature of post-Enlightenment colonial power-knowledge was applied to the colonized intelligentsia, who were thus virtually robbed of agency and held to have been capable of only 'derivative discourses'. Beyond it lay the domain of community consciousness, still associated, though rather vaguely now, with the peasantry, but embodied somehow in the figure of Gandhi, who was declared to have been uniquely free of the taint of Enlightenment rationalism, prior to his partial appropriation by the Nehruvian 'moment of arrival'. Both poles of the power relationship tend to get homogenized in this argument, which has become extremely influential. Colonial cultural domination, stripped of all complexities and variations, faces an indigenous

<sup>20</sup> In studies of early modern French popular culture, notably, much early 1970s *Annales* scholarship assumed an autonomous popular level manifested in distinct texts, forms, and practices. With the growing influence of Foucault, and Robert Muchembled's *Culture populaire et culture des élites dans la France moderne* (Paris, 1978), published, significantly perhaps, in the same year as Said, *Orientalism*, there was a shift towards frameworks of successful conquest of once-uncontaminated popular culture through the cumulative impact of Counter-Reformation Church, absolute monarchy, and Enlightenment rationalism. The more fruitful historical works, however, have on the whole operated with a model of multiple appropriations rather than distinct levels: see particularly Roger Chartier's critique of Muchembled's acculturation thesis in his *Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton, 1987), Introduction. I have elaborated these points in my 'Popular Culture, Community, Power: Three Studies of Modern Indian Social History', *Studies in History*, 8, ii, n.s., 1992, pp. 311-13, and 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Moods in the Writing of Modern Indian History', *Oxford Literary Review*, xvi, 1-2, 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Ranajit Guha's programmatic essay in *Subaltern Studies I* had also described 'the politics of the people' as 'parallel to the domain of elite politics — an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter' (p. 4).

<sup>22</sup> 'Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society', *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984), followed by *Nationalist Thought in the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986).

domain eroded of internal tensions and conflicts.<sup>23</sup> The possibility of pre-colonial forms of domination, however modified, persisting through colonialism, helping to mediate colonial authority in vital ways, maybe even functioning autonomously at times — for all of which there is ample evidence — is simply ignored.<sup>24</sup> Colonial rule is assumed to have brought about an absolute rupture: the colonized subject is taken to have been literally constituted by colonialism alone.<sup>25</sup> And so Gandhi's assumed location 'outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought' can be described as one 'which could have been adopted by any member of the traditional intelligentsia in India', and then simultaneously identified as having 'an inherently [sic] "peasant-communal" character.' The differences between the 'traditional intelligentsia', overwhelmingly upper-caste (or elite Muslim) and male, and bound up with structures of landlord and bureaucratic domination, and peasant-communal consciousness, are apparently of no importance whatsoever: caste, class, and gender divides have ceased to matter.<sup>26</sup>

There are elements of a rich paradox in this shift of binaries from elite/subaltern to colonial/indigenous community or Western/Third-World cultural nationalist. A project that had started with a trenchant attack on elite nationalist historiography had now chosen as its hero the principal iconic figure of official Indian nationalism, and its most influential text after *Elementary Aspects* was built entirely around the (partial) study of just three indisputably elite figures, Bankimchandra, Gandhi, and Nehru. The passage to near-nationalist positions may have been facilitated, incidentally, by an unnoticed drift implicit even in Guha's initial formulation of the project in *Subaltern Studies I*. The 'historiography of colonial India' somehow slides quickly into that of Indian nationalism: the fundamental lacuna is described as the failure 'to acknowledge the contribution made by the people *on their own* to the making and development of this nationalism', and the central problematic ultimately becomes 'the historic failure of the nation to come into its own.'<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> For a more detailed critique of Chatterji's *Nationalist Thought*, see my 'Orientalism Revisited'.

<sup>24</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see Chapter 1.

<sup>25</sup> For an effective critique of this *tabula rasa* approach, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (London, 1992; Delhi, 1993), Chapters III, V.

<sup>26</sup> *Nationalist Thought*, p. 100; see also *Subaltern Studies III*, p. 176.

<sup>27</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 2-3, 7.

With *Nationalist Thought*, followed in 1987 by the publication in the United States of *Selected Subaltern Studies*, with a foreword by Edward Said and an editorial note by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, subaltern historiography was launched on a successful international, and more specifically metropolitan and US-academic, career. The intellectual formation of which its currently most prominent practitioners are now part, Aijaz Ahmad argues, has gone through two phases: Third-World cultural nationalism, followed by postmodernistic valorizations of 'fragments'.<sup>28</sup> For *Subaltern Studies*, however, located by its subject matter in a country that has been a postcolonial nation-state for more than four decades, an oppositional stance towards existing forms of nationalism has been felt to be necessary from the beginning. The situation was rather different from that facing a member of a Palestinian diaspora still in quest of independent nationhood. This opposition was reconciled with the Saidian framework through the assumption that the postcolonial nation-state was no more than a continuation of the original, Western, Enlightenment project imposed through colonial discourse. The mark of late *Subaltern Studies* therefore became not a succession of phases, but the counterposing of reified notions of 'community' or 'fragment', alternatively or sometimes in unison, against this highly generalized category of the 'modern' nation-state as the embodiment of Western cultural domination. The original separation of the domains of power and autonomy culminates here in an oscillation between the 'rhetorical absolutism' of structure and the 'fragmented fetishism' of the subject — to apply to it the perceptive comments of Perry Anderson, a decade ago, about the consequences of uncritically applying the linguistic model to historiography.<sup>29</sup>

It might be interesting to take a glance at this point at the glimmerings of an alternative approach that had appeared briefly within *Subaltern Studies* but was soon virtually forgotten. I am thinking, particularly, of Ranajit Guha's seldom-referred-to article 'Chandra's Death' — along with, perhaps, an essay of mine about a very unusual village scandal, and Gyanendra Pandey's exploration

<sup>28</sup> Aijaz Ahmad, Chapter v, and *passim*.

<sup>29</sup> Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London, 1983), p. 55. Very relevant also are his comments about the general trajectory from structuralism to poststructuralism: 'a total initial determinism ends in the reinstatement of absolute final contingency, in mimicry of the duality of *langue* and *parole*.'

of local memory through a small-town gentry chronicle and a diary kept by a weaver.<sup>30</sup> 'Fragment' and 'community' were important for these essays, but in ways utterly different from what has now become the dominant mode within *Subaltern Studies*. Hindsight indicates some affinities, rather, with the kind of micro-history analysed recently by Carlo Ginzburg, marked by an 'insistence on context, exactly the opposite of the isolated contemplation of the fragmentary' advocated by postmodernism. This is a micro-history which has become anti-positivistic in its awareness of the constructed nature of all evidence and categories, but which nevertheless does not plunge into complete scepticism and relativism. 'Chandra's Death' and 'Kalki-Avatar' tried to explore general connections — of caste, patriarchy, class, colonial rule — through 'the small drama and fine detail of social existence' and sought to avoid the appearance of impersonality and abstraction often conveyed by pure macro-history. Their starting point was what Italian historians nowadays call the 'exceptional-normal':<sup>31</sup> a local event that had interrupted the everyday only for a brief moment, but had been unusual enough to leave some traces. And the 'community' that was unravelled, particularly through Guha's moving study of the death (through enforced abortion after an illicit affair) of a low-caste woman, was one of conflict and brutal exploitation, of power relations 'sited at a depth within the indigenous society, well beyond the reach of the disciplinary arm of the colonial state.' These are dimensions that have often been concealed, Guha noted, through a blending of 'indigenous feudal ideology . . . with colonial anthropology.'<sup>32</sup> Not just colonial anthropology but Guha's own brainchild, one is tempted to add, sometimes

<sup>30</sup> Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', *Subaltern Studies V* (Delhi, 1987); Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', *Subaltern Studies VI* (Delhi, 1989); Gyanendra Pandey, 'Encounters and Calamities': The History of a North Indian Qasba in the Nineteenth-Century', *Subaltern Studies III* (Delhi, 1984). 'Chandra's Death' has been warmly praised by Aijaz Ahmad in *In Theory*, but this is unlikely to enhance its reputation with the bulk of present-day admirers of *Subaltern Studies*.

<sup>31</sup> Carlo Ginzburg, 'Microhistory: Two or Three Things That I Know about It', *Critical Inquiry*, 29, Autumn 1993. I have benefited also from Hans Medick's unpublished paper on a similar theme: 'Weaving and Surviving at Laichingen 1650–1900: Micro-History as History and as Research Experience'. I am grateful to Professor Ginzburg and Professor Medick for sending me copies of their papers.

<sup>32</sup> The quotations from 'Chandra's Death' are from *Subaltern Studies V*, pp. 138, 144, 155.

carries on that good work nowadays: with the result that essays in late *Subaltern Studies* which implicitly take a different stance tend to get relatively little attention.<sup>33</sup>

But there was no theorization on the basis of such micro-study, nothing of the kind being attempted nowadays by some Italian and German scholars to develop micro-history into a cogent methodological alternative to both positivism and postmodernism. And there was the further fact that this was emphatically not the kind of South Asian history that could win easy acclaim in the West, for its reading demanded, if not prior knowledge, at least the readiness to try to grasp unfamiliar and dense material, thick descriptions which were not at the same time exotic. One does get the strong impression that the majority among even the fairly small section of the Western intelligentsia interested in the Third World prefers its material conveniently packaged nowadays, without too much detail or complexity. (Totally different standards would be expected in mainstream work on any branch, say, of European history.) Packaged, moreover, in a particular way, fitted into the slots of anti-Western cultural nationalism (one recalls Frederic Jameson's assertion that 'all third world texts are necessarily — national allegories'<sup>34</sup>) and/or poststructuralist play with fragments. The West, it seems, to borrow from Said, is still engaged in producing its Orient through selective appropriation and essentialist stereotyping: Orientalism flourishes at the heart of today's anti-Orientalist tirade.

Partha Chatterji's *The Nation and Its Fragments* epitomizes the latest phase of *Subaltern Studies* at its most lucid and comprehensive.<sup>35</sup> A new binary has been introduced, 'material'/'spiritual' (or 'world'/'

<sup>33</sup> I am thinking particularly about the very substantial and impressive ongoing work of David Hardiman, of which the latest example is *Feeding the Baniya: Peasants and Usurers in Western India* (Delhi, 1996), which seldom gets due recognition. But even Ranajit Guha's 'Discipline and Mobilize', in Chatterji and Pandey (eds), *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi, 1992), far more critical of Gandhian nationalism than usual nowadays, based on a premise of 'indigenous' as well as 'alien' moments of dominance in colonial India, and emphasizing 'the power exercised by the indigenous elite over the subaltern amongst the population itself' — seems to have attracted little attention.

<sup>34</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capital', *Social Text*, Fall 1986. For a powerful critique, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory*, Chapter III.

<sup>35</sup> Partha Chatterji, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993; Delhi, 1994).



'home'<sup>36</sup>), probably to take care of the criticism that the earlier 'derivative discourse' thesis had deprived the colonized subject of all autonomy or agency. Through such a bifurcation, we are told, nationalists kept or created as their own an autonomous world of literature, art, education, domesticity, and above all, it appears, religion. They were surrendering in effect to the West, meanwhile, on the 'material' plane: for the efforts to eradicate 'colonial difference' (e.g. unequal treatment of Indians in law courts, with respect to civil rights, and in politics generally) actually meant progressive absorption into the Western colonial project of building the modern nation-state — a project inevitably left incomplete by colonialism, but realized by Indian nationalists. Here is paradox indeed, for all commonsensically promising or effective ways of fighting colonial domination (mass political struggle, for instance, or even economic self-help) have become signs of surrender.

Further implications of this suspicion about indigenous ventures into the 'external' or 'material' domain become evident in the principles of selection followed in the chapters about the nation and 'its' women and subordinate castes. For Chatterji, women's initiative or autonomy in the nationalist era apparently found expression only inside the home, or at best in autobiographies, while evidence for lower-caste protest against Brahmanical hegemony is located solely in the interesting, but extremely marginal, world of heterodox religious sects. He remains silent about the active role of women in virtually every kind of politics, as well as in specific women's associations, from at least the 1920s. Within the home, Chatterji focuses much more closely on how women preserved pre-colonial modes of being and resistance, echoing standard nationalist concerns. There is not much interest in how women struggled with a patriarchal domination that was, after all, overwhelmingly indigenous in its structures. Even more surprisingly, the book tells the reader nothing about the powerful anti-caste movements associated with Phule, Periyar, or Ambedkar. No book can be expected to cover everything, but silences of this magnitude are dangerous in a work that appears on the surface comprehensive enough to serve as a standard introduction to colonial India for non-specialists and newcomers, particularly abroad.

<sup>36</sup> I have no space here to comment on this curious equation of the 'spiritual' with home, domesticity and femininity. How, one wonders, did highly patriarchal religious traditions like Hinduism and Islam manage such an identification?

The new binary elaborated in *The Nation* is not just a description of nationalist ideology, in which case it could have had a certain, though much exaggerated, relevance. The pattern of stresses and silences indicates a high degree of authorial acceptance. And yet the material/spiritual, West/East divide is of course almost classically Orientalist, much-loved in particular by the most conservative elements in Indian society in both colonial and postcolonial times.<sup>37</sup> Chatterji remains vague about 'the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism', the 'battle' for which, he tells us, 'unlike the women's movements in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and America', 'was waged in the home . . . outside the arena of political agitation.'<sup>38</sup> His editorial colleague Dipesh Chakrabarty has recently been much more explicit. Chakrabarty has discovered in nineteenth-century Bengali valorizations of *kula* and *grihalaksmi* (roughly, extended lineage and bounteous wife) 'an irreducible category of "beauty" . . . ways of talking about formations of pleasure, emotions and ideas of good life that associated themselves with models of non-autonomous, non-bourgeois, and non-secular personhood.' All this, despite the admitted 'cruelties of the patriarchal order' entailed by such terms, 'their undeniable phallocentrism'.<sup>39</sup> Beauty, pleasure, the good life . . . *for whom*, it is surely legitimate to ask.

Chatterji's new book ends on the metahistorical note of a 'struggle between community and capital'. His notion of community, as earlier, is bound up somehow with peasant consciousness, which, we are told, is 'at the opposite pole to a bourgeois consciousness'. (Significantly, this work on what, after all, is now a fairly developed capitalist country by Third World standards, has no space at all for the nation and its capitalists, or workers.) A pattern similar to that just noticed with respect to gender now manifests itself. The Indian peasant community, Chatterji admits, was never egalitarian, for 'a fifth or more of the population, belonging to the lowest castes, have never had any recognized rights in land.' No matter, however: this profoundly inequalitarian community can still be valorized, for its 'unity . . . nevertheless established by

<sup>37</sup> For some data about a near-perfect fit between early-twentieth-century cultural nationalism in Bengal and the current argument, see Chapter 1.

<sup>38</sup> Chatterji, *The Nation*, p. 133.

<sup>39</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Difference-Deferral of a Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal', in *Subaltern Studies VIII* (Delhi, 1994), pp. 83–5.



recognizing the rights of subsistence of all sections of the population, albeit a differential right entailing differential duties and privileges.' One is almost tempted to recall the standard idealizations of caste as harmonious, even if hierarchical. The Narodniks had tried to read back into the *mir* their own indisputably egalitarian and socialist ideals: Chatterji's rejection of such 'populist idealization of the peasantry' has led him back to a Slavophile position.<sup>40</sup>

Late *Subaltern Studies* here comes close to positions of neo-traditionalist anti-modernism, notably advocated with great clarity and vigour for a number of years by Ashis Nandy.<sup>41</sup> A significant section of the intelligentsia has been attracted by such appeals to an earlier, pre-colonial or pre-modern catholicity of inchoate, pluralistic traditions, particularly in the context of the rise in India today of powerful religious-chauvinist forces claiming to represent definitively organized communities with fixed boundaries — trends that culminated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid and the communal carnage of 1992-3. Right-wing Hindutva can then be condemned precisely for being 'modern', a construct of late- and postcolonial times, the product of Western, colonial power-knowledge and its classificatory strategies like census enumeration.<sup>42</sup> It may be denounced even for being, in some paradoxical way, 'secular', and the entire argument then gets bound up with condemnations of secular rationalism as the ultimate villain. Secularism, inexorably associated with the interventionist modern state, is inherently intolerant, argued Nandy in 1990. To him, it is as unacceptable as Hindutva, a movement which typifies 'religion-as-ideology', imbricated in 'non-religious, usually political or socio-economic, interests.' Toleration, conversely, has to be 'anti-secular', and must seek to ground itself on pre-modern 'religion-as-faith' . . . which Nandy defines as 'definitionally non-monolithic and operationally plural'.<sup>43</sup>

What regularly happens in such arguments is a simultaneous

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-7, 238.

<sup>41</sup> See, for instance, the declaration of intent at the beginning of Nandy's *The Intimate Enemy* (Delhi, 1983) 'to justify and defend the *innocence* [my italics] which confronted Western colonialism' (p. ix).

<sup>42</sup> Gyanendra Pandey attempted to apply this Saidian framework to the study of early-twentieth-century communalism in his *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Tolerance', in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (Delhi, 1990).

narrowing and widening of the term secularism, its deliberate use as a wildly free-floating signifier. It becomes a polemical target which is both single and conveniently multivalent. Secularism, in the first place, gets equated with aggressive anti-religious scepticism, virtually atheism, through an unique identification with the Enlightenment (itself vastly simplified and homogenized). Yet in twentieth-century India systematic anti-religious polemic, far less activity, has been extremely rare, even on the part of dedicated Leftists and other non-believers. Being secular in the Indian context has meant, primarily and quite often solely, being non- or anti-communal — which is why Mahatma Gandhi had no particular problem with it. 'The Indian version of secularism', Rajeev Bhargava has recently reminded us, 'was consolidated in the aftermath of Partition, where Hindu-Muslim sectarian violence killed off over half a million people': sad and strange, really, that such reminders have become necessary.<sup>44</sup> Even in Europe, the roots of secularism go back some 200 years beyond the Enlightenment, for elements of it emerged in the wake of another epoch of 'communal' violence, the religious wars of the Reformation era. The earliest advocates of a 'secular' separation of church from state were not rationalist freethinkers, but sixteenth-century Anabaptists passionately devoted to their own brand of Christianity who believed any kind of compulsory state religion to be contrary to true faith.

The anti-secular position can retain its plausibility only through an enormous widening of the term's meaning, so that secularism can be made to bear the burden of guilt for all the manifold and indisputable misdeeds and crimes of the 'modern nation-state': 'the new forms of man-made violence unleashed by post-seventeenth century Europe in the name of Enlightenment values . . . the Third Reich, the Gulag, the two World Wars, and the threat of nuclear annihilation'.<sup>45</sup> The logical leap here is really quite startling: Hitler and Stalin were no doubt secular, but was secularism, per se, the ground for Nazi or Stalinist terror, considering that so many of their victims (notably, in both cases, the Communists) were also atheists? Must secularism be held responsible every time a murder is committed by an unbeliever?

A recent article by Partha Chatterji reiterates Nandy's position,

<sup>44</sup> Rajeev Bhargava, 'Giving Secularism Its Due', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 July 1994.

<sup>45</sup> Nandy, 'The Politics of Secularism', in Das, p. 90.

with one very significant difference.<sup>46</sup> The essay is a reminder of the almost inevitably slippery nature of the category of community. Sought to be applied to an immediate, contemporary context, romanticizations of pre-modern 'fuzzy' identities seem to be in some danger of getting displaced by an even more troubling 'realistic' reconciliation or accommodation with the present.<sup>47</sup> Community, in this article, becomes an 'it', with firm boundaries and putative representative structures: most startlingly, only communities determined by religion appear now to be worthy of consideration. Realism for Chatterji now suggests that religious toleration and state non-interference should be allowed to expand into legislative autonomy for distinct religious communities: 'Toleration here would require one to accept that there will be political contexts where a group could insist on its right not to give reasons for doing things differently provided it explains itself adequately in its own chosen forum. . . . What this will mean in institutional terms are processes through which each religious group will publicly seek and obtain from its members consent for its practices insofar as those practices have regulative power over the members.'<sup>48</sup>

This, to be sure, is in the specific context of the current motivated and majoritarian BJP campaign for imposing an uniform civil code through an unilateral abrogation of Muslim personal law. Chatterji's argument has a certain superficial similarity with many other positions which express concern today over any imposed uniformity. It remains a world removed, however, from the proposals being put forward by some women's organizations and secular groups for mobilizing initially around demands for specific reforms in distinct personal laws. Such mobilization is definitely not intended to remain confined within discrete community walls, but seeks to highlight unjust gender inequalities within all communities. The Hindutva

<sup>46</sup> Partha Chatterji, 'Secularism and Toleration', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 9 July 1994. For a more detailed discussion of both Nandy (1990) and Chatterji (1994), see my 'The Anti-Secularist Critique of Hindutva: Problem of A Shared Discursive Space', *Geminal/Journal of Department of Germanic and Romance Studies* (Delhi University, 1994), vol. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Chatterji takes over Nandy's secularism/toleration disjunction, but gives it a very 'presentist' twist, explicitly stating in a footnote that he is drawing out the implications of this position in terms of 'political possibilities within the domain of the modern state institutions as they now exist in India.' *Ibid.*, fn. 2, pp. 1776-7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1775.

campaign demanding uniformity in the name of national integration, it has been argued, 'deliberately ignores the crucial aspect of "uniformity" within communities, i.e. between men and women.'<sup>49</sup> Chatterji's logic, in contrast, unfortunately seems broad enough to be eminently appropriable, say, by the VHP claiming to speak on behalf of all 'Hindus', or fundamentalists in Bangladesh persecuting a dissenter like Taslima Nasreen. For at its heart lies the assumption that all really dangerous or meaningful forms of power are located uniquely in the modern state, whereas power within communities matters very much less. Despite the deployment of Foucaultian 'governmentality' in the article, this is a position that I find irreconcilable with the major thrust of Foucault's arguments, which have been original and disturbing precisely through their search for multiple locations of power and their insistence that forms of resistance also normally develop into alternative sites of domination.

These, however, cannot but be uncomfortable positions for intellectuals who remain deeply anti-communal and in some sense radical. *Subaltern* historiography in general has faced considerable difficulties in tackling this phenomenon of a communal violence that is both popular and impossible to endorse. There is the further problem that the Hindu Right often attacks the secular, liberal nation-state as a Western importation, precisely the burden of much late-*Subaltern* argument: suggesting affinities that are, hopefully, still distasteful, yet difficult to repudiate within the parameters of an anti-Enlightenment discourse grounded in notions of community.<sup>50</sup> In two recent articles by Gyanendra Pandey, communal violence consequently becomes the appropriate site for the unfolding of that other pole of late-*Subaltern* thinking, built around the notion of the 'fragment', and seeking to valorize it against epistemologically uncertain and politically oppressive 'grand narratives'.<sup>51</sup> Epistemological uncertainty becomes the

<sup>49</sup> Resolution entitled 'Equal Rights, Equal Laws', adopted by a national convention organized by the All India Democratic Women's Association (New Delhi, 9-10 December 1995).

<sup>50</sup> In May 1994, for instance, the RSS ideologue S. Gurumurthi described the Ayodhya movement as 'perhaps the first major symptom of social assertion over a Westernized and alienated state apparatus' that has imposed secularism and other 'foreign ideologies on the country, provoking a growing feeling of nativeness.' 'State and Society', in *Seminar* 417 (May 1994). An article by Uma Bharati in the same issue entitled 'Social Justice' condemned any labelling of 'Hindutva [as] a Brahmanical and exploitative order' as 'the distorted view that followers of Macaulay hold.'

<sup>51</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu-

ground for rejecting all efforts at causal explanation, or even contextual analysis. (Such uncertainties, it may be noticed, have never been allowed to obstruct sweeping generalizations about Enlightenment rationalism, derivative discourses, or community consciousness.) The polemical thrust can then be directed once again principally against secular intellectuals who have tried to relate communal riots to socio-economic and political contexts. Such efforts, invariably branded as economistic, allegedly leave 'little room for the emotions of people, for feelings and perceptions' through their emphasis upon 'land and property'.<sup>52</sup> That people can never get emotional about 'land and property' is surely a startling discovery. Even a distinction, drawn in the context of the terrifying riots of 1946-7 and simplistically represented by Pandey as one made between 'good' and 'bad' subaltern violence, is apparently unacceptable.<sup>53</sup> Pandey cannot stop here, for he remains an anti-communal intellectual: but the framework he has adopted leaves space for nothing more than agonized contemplation of 'violence' and 'pain' as 'fragments', perception of which is implicitly assumed to be direct and certain. But 'fragment', etymologically, is either part of a bigger whole or a whole by itself: one cannot avoid the dangers of homogenization that easily. It remains unnoticed, further, that valorization of the certainty of knowledge of particulars has been a classically positivistic position, well expounded many years ago, for instance, by Karl Popper in his *Poverty of Historicism*.<sup>54</sup>

But violence and pain, detached from specificities of context, become in effect abstract universals, 'violence' in general. The essays end with rhetorical questions about how historians can represent pain, how difficult or impossible it is to do so. One is irresistibly reminded of Thompson's devastating comment in his last book about the fatuity of many statements about 'the human condition', which take us 'only a little way, and a great deal less far than is

Muslim Riots in India Today', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Annual Number, 1991, and 'The Prose of Otherness', *Subaltern Studies VIII*.

<sup>52</sup> 'In Defence of the Fragment', p. 566.

<sup>53</sup> 'The Prose of Otherness', *Subaltern Studies VIII*, referring to an old article of mine entitled 'Popular Movements, National Leadership, and The Coming of Freedom with Partition', in D.N. Panigrahi (ed.), *Economy, Society and Politics in Modern India* (New Delhi, 1985).

<sup>54</sup> Relevant here would be Frederic Jameson's recent caustic comments about 'the latter-day transmogrification of these — quite unphilosophical empirical and anti-systemic positivist attitudes and opinions into heroic forms of resistance to metaphysics and Utopian tyranny.' 'Actually Existing Marxism', *Polygraph* 6/7, p. 184.

sometimes knowingly implied. For "the human condition", unless further qualified and disclosed, is nothing but a kind of metaphysical full stop' — or: 'worse — a bundle of solecisms about mortality and defeated aspiration.'<sup>55</sup>

### III

Let me try to sum up my disagreements with late *Subaltern Studies*, which flow from a compound of academic and political misgivings.

Two sets of misrecognitions have obscured the presence in *Subaltern Studies* of a high degree of redundancy, the tendency to reiterate the already said. Both follow from a novelty of situation: *Subaltern Studies* does happen to be the first Indian historiographical school whose reputation has come to be evaluated primarily in terms of audience response in the West. For many Indian readers, particularly those getting interested in postmodernist trends for the first time, the sense of being 'with it' strongly conveyed by *Subaltern Studies* appears far more important than any possible insubstantiality of empirical content. Yet some eclectic borrowings or verbal similarities apart, the claim (or ascription) of being postmodern is largely spurious, in whichever sense we might want to deploy that ambiguous and selfconsciously polysemic term. Texts are still being read here in a flat and obvious manner, as straightforward indicators of authorial intention. There have been few attempts to juxtapose representations of diverse kinds in unexpected ways, or selfconscious efforts to think out or experiment with new forms of narrativization. Partha Chatterji's *Nationalist Thought*, to cite one notable instance, reads very much like a conventional history of ideas, based on a succession of great thinkers. One of the thinkers, Bankimchandra, happens to have been the first major Bengali novelist: his imaginative prose, inexplicably, is totally ignored. Again, much of the potential richness of the *Ramakrishna-Kathamrita* explored as a text gets lost, I feel, if it is virtually reduced to a 'source of new strategies of survival and resistance' of a colonized middle-class assumed to be living in extreme dread of its foreign rulers — a class moreover conceptualized in excessively homogenized terms.<sup>56</sup> Problems like

<sup>55</sup> E.P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 188.

<sup>56</sup> Partha Chatterji, 'A Religion of Urban Domesticity: Sri Ramakrishna and the Calcutta Middle Class', in Chatterji and Pandey (eds), *Subaltern Studies VII* (Delhi, 1992), and Chatterji, *The Nation*, Chapter III. The clerical ambience of

these are not basically products of lack of authorial competence or quality. They emerge from restrictive analytical frameworks, as *Subaltern Studies* swings from a rather simple emphasis on subaltern autonomy to an even more simplistic thesis of Western colonial cultural domination.<sup>57</sup>

A reiteration of the already said: for it needs to be emphasized that the bulk of the history written by modern Indian historians has been nationalist and anti-colonial in content, at times obsessively so. Criticism of Western cultural domination is likewise nothing particularly novel. The empirical underpinning for the bulk of *Subaltern* cultural criticism has come in fact from work done in Calcutta some twenty years back, which had effectively demolished the excessive adulation of nineteenth-century English-educated intellectuals and reformers through an emphasis upon the limits imposed on them by their colonial context.<sup>58</sup>

Here the second kind of misrecognition comes in, for in the Western context there is a certain, though much exaggerated, novelty and radicalism in the Saidian exposure of the colonial complicity of much European scholarship and literature. Such blindness has

Ramakrishna's early audience and often of his conversations with them, for instance, has been totally missed. For another kind of effort to explore the *Kathamrita* — one which in its author's opinion tried to go much beyond the mere 'biographical question of Ramakrishna in relation to the middle class of Bengal' (*The Nation*, p. 36), see my 'Kaliyuga, Chakri, and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 July 1992; reprinted with minor changes as Chapter 8 within this book.

<sup>57</sup> Shahid Amin's finely crafted *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-92* (Delhi, 1995) might be taken to constitute a partial exception, within a basically early-*Subaltern* framework. But the latter often seems too narrow to adequately comprehend the richness of material, while far more has been achieved elsewhere in the innovative handling of representations: as stray examples, one could mention Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980); Marina Warner, *Joan of Arc* (London, 1981); and Sarah Maza, *Private Lives and Public Affairs: The Causes Celebres of Pre-Revolutionary France* (Calcutta, 1993).

<sup>58</sup> Partha Chatterji fully acknowledged this debt, in his 'The Fruits of Macaulay's Poison-Tree', in Ashok Mitra (ed.), *The Truth Unites* (Calcutta, 1985). For a sampling of the early-1970s critique of the Bengal Renaissance, see the essays of Asok Sen, Barun De and Sumit Sarkar in V.C. Joshi (eds), *Rammohan Roy and the Process of Modernization in India* (Delhi, 1975); Asok Sen, *Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones* (Calcutta, 1977); and Sumit Sarkar, 'The Complexities of Young Bengal', a 1973 essay, reprinted in my *Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta, 1985).

been most obvious in the discipline of literary studies, in the West as well as in the ex-colonial world, and it is not surprising that radically inclined intellectuals working in this area have been particularly enthusiastic in their response to late *Subaltern Studies*. There had been some real absences, too, even in the best of Western Marxist or radical historiography, inadequacies that came to be felt more deeply in the new era of vastly intensified globalization, socialist collapse, resurgent neo-colonialism and racism, and the rise to unprecedented prominence of expatriate Third World intellectuals located, or seeking location in, Western universities. Hobsbawm apart, the great masters of British Marxist historiography have admittedly written little on Empire, and the charge of Eurocentrism could appear particularly damaging for a social history the foundation-text of which had deliberately confined itself to the making of the 'English' working class.

Yet the exposure of one instance after another of collusion with colonial power-knowledge can soon become predictable and tedious. Thompson has a quiet but telling aside about this in his *Alien Homage*,<sup>59</sup> while his posthumous book on Blake should induce some rethinking about uncritical denunciations of the Enlightenment as a bloc that have been so much in vogue in recent years. With its superb combination of textual close reading and historical analysis, *Witness Against the Beast* reminds us of the need for socially nuanced and differentiated conceptions of Enlightenment and 'counter-Enlightenment' that go far beyond homogenized praise or rejection. And meanwhile very interesting new work is emerging. Peter Linebaugh, for instance, has recently explored ways of integrating global, colonial dimensions and themes of Foucaultian power-knowledge within a framework that is clearly Thompsonian-Marxian in inspiration, and yet goes considerably beyond the parameters of the social history of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Commenting on William Radice's statement that the elder Thompson had been 'limited by his missionary and British imperial background', E.P. Thompson comments: 'These stereotypes are limiting also, and are calculated to elicit predictable responses from a public as confined within the preconceptions of the "contemporary" as that of the 1920s. . . . The limits must be noted . . . but what may merit our attention more may be what lies outside those limits or confounds those expectations.' *Alien Homage: Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 2-3.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991, 1993). For an elaboration of my

In South Asian historiography, however, the inflated reputation of late *Subaltern Studies* has encouraged a virtual folding back of all history into the single problematic of Western colonial cultural domination. This imposes a series of closures and silences, and threatens to simultaneously feed into shallow forms of retrogressive indigenism. An impression has spread among interested non-specialists that there is little worth reading in modern Indian history prior to *Subaltern Studies*, or outside it, today. Not that very considerable and significant new work is not going on along other lines: but this tends to get less attention than it deserves. One could cite major advances in economic history, and pioneering work in environmental studies, for instance, as well as research on law and penal administration that is creatively aware of Foucault but tends to ignore, or go beyond, strict Saidian-Subaltern parameters. Such work does not usually begin with assuming a total or uniform pre-colonial/colonial disjunction.<sup>61</sup> Another example would be the shift in the dominant tone of feminist history. There had been interesting developments in the new field of gender studies in the 1970s and early 1980s, posing important questions about women and nationalism and relating gender to shifting material conditions. The colonial discourse framework threatens to marginalize much of this earlier work. A simple binary of Westernized surrender/indigenist resistance will necessarily have major difficulties in finding space for sensitive studies of movements for women's rights, or of lower-caste protest: for quite often such initiatives did try to utilize aspects of colonial administration and ideas as resources.

And finally there are the political implications. The spread of assumptions and values associated with late *Subaltern Studies* can have certain disabling consequences for sections of intellectuals still subjectively radical. This is so particularly because India – unlike many parts of the West, perhaps – is still a country where major political battles are engaged in by large numbers of people: where, in other words, depoliticization has not yet given a certain limited relevance to theories of sporadic initiative by individuals or small groups

argument with respect to such possibilities, see my 'A Marxian Social History Beyond the Foucaultian Turn: Peter Linebaugh's "The London Hanged"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, xxx, 30, 29 July 1995.

<sup>61</sup> I am thinking particularly of the ongoing work of Sumit Guha on the Maharashtrian *longue durée*, and of Radhika Singha's *Despotism of Law* (forthcoming from OUP, New Delhi), on legal practices in early-colonial India.

glorying in their imposed marginality. The organized, Marxist Left in India remains one of the biggest existing anywhere in the world today, while very recently the forces of predominantly high-caste Hindutva have been halted in some areas by a lower-caste upthrust drawing on earlier traditions of anti-hierarchical protest. *Subaltern Studies*, symptomatically, has ignored histories of the Left and of organized anti-caste movements throughout, and the line between past and present-day neglect can be fairly porous. Movements of a more innovatory kind have also emerged in recent years: organizations to defend civil and democratic rights, numerous feminist groups, massive ecological protests like the Narmada Bachao Andolan, and very new and imaginative forms of trade union activity (the Chattisgarh Mukti Morcha arising out of a miners union, one or two efforts at co-operative workers' control in the context of recession and structural readjustment). A 'social reform' issue like child-marriage had been the preserve of highly educated, 'Westernized', upper-caste male reformers in the nineteenth century: today Bhanwari, a woman of low-caste origin in an obscure Rajasthan village, has been campaigning against that practice in Rajput households, in face of rape, ostracism, and a gross miscarriage of justice. Any meaningful understanding of or identification with such developments is undercut by two kinds of emphasis quite central to late *Subaltern Studies*. Culturalism rejects the importance of class and class struggle, while notions of civil, democratic, feminist and liberal individual rights – many of them indubitably derived from certain Enlightenment traditions – get delegitimized by a repudiation of the Enlightenment as a bloc.

All such efforts need, and have often obtained, significant inputs from an intelligentsia which still includes many people with radical interests and commitments. This intelligentsia, however, is one constituent of a wider middle-class formation, upwardly mobile sections of which today are being sucked into globalizing processes that promise material consumerist dividends at the price of dependency. A binary combination of 'material' advancement and 'spiritual' autonomy through surrogate forms of cultural or religious nationalism is not at all uncommon for such groups. Hindutva, with its notable appeal in recent years among metropolitan elites and non-resident Indians, embodies this combination at its most aggressive. The political inclinations of the *Subaltern* scholars and the bulk of their readership are certainly very different, but some of their work nowadays seems to be unwittingly feeding into softer versions of

not entirely dissimilar moods. Words like 'secular', 'rational', or 'progressive' have become terms of ridicule, and if 'resistance' (of whatever undifferentiative kind) can still be valorized, movements seeking transformation get suspected of teleology.<sup>62</sup> The decisive shift in critical registers from capitalist and colonial exploitation to Enlightenment rationality, from multinationals to Macaulay, has opened the way for a vague nostalgia that identifies the authentic with the indigenous, and locates both in the pasts of an ever-receding community, or a present than can consist of fragments alone. Through an enshrinement of sentimentality,<sup>63</sup> a subcontinent with its manifold, concrete contradictions and problems becomes a kind of dream of childhood, of a *grihalakshmi* presiding over a home happy and beautiful, by some alchemy, in the midst of all its patriarchy.

Let me end with a last, specific example. There is one chapter in Chatterji's *Nation* which, for once, deals with an economic theme. This is a critique of the bureaucratic rationalism of Nehruvian planning: not unjustified in parts, though there has been no lack of such critiques, many of them much better informed and more effective. What is significant, however, is Chatterji's total silence on the wholesale abandonment of that strategy in recent years under Western pressure. There is not a word, in a book published in 1993, about that other rationality of the 'free' market, derived at least as much from the Enlightenment as its socialistic alternatives, which is being imposed worldwide today by the World Bank, the I.M.F., and multinational firms. The claim, elsewhere in the book, to an 'adversarial' relationship 'to the dominant structures of scholarship and politics' resounds oddly in the midst of this silence.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>62</sup> I am indebted for this resistance/transformation contrast to an illuminating oral presentation in Delhi recently by Madhavan Palat on the relevance of Marxist historiography today. He used these terms to indicate a vital contrast between Marxian and other strands of social history.

<sup>63</sup> I owe this phrase to Pradip Kumar Datta. Such a shift in registers, it needs to be added, has become a cardinal feature of much postcolonial theory. See Arif Dirlik's pertinent comments on the dangers of reducing anti-colonial criticism to the elimination of its 'ideological and cultural legacy' alone: '... by fixing its gaze on the past it in fact avoids confronting the present.' Dirlik, p. 343.

<sup>64</sup> *The Nation and Its Fragments*, Chapter 10, and p. 156.

## PART TWO

### 4

## Edward Thompson and India: *The Other Side of the Medal*\*

For history students of my generation, acquaintance with Edward Thompson began — and often ended — with the *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India*, the textbook he had co-authored with G.T. Garratt in 1934. Thirty years have gone by, but I can still recall the excitement and pleasure of an under-graduate discovering a British historian who could expose with such frankness, wit and anger the underside of England's 'work in India': the 'shaking of the pagoda tree' under Clive and Hastings; the 'celebrated backward charge over their own infantry . . . artillery and wagon lines' by the Company cavalry at Chilianwala, led by a superannuated general, who could not mount his horse without assistance,<sup>1</sup> the detailed account of British atrocities during the Mutiny, which contrasted sharply with the presentation of 1857 even in the standard Indian textbook of those days — Majumdar, Roychaudhuri and Datta's *Advanced History of India*.<sup>2</sup> The closing chapters of *Rise and Fulfilment*, like the title itself, produced, however, a sense of ambiguity and anticlimax, with their all too brief references to Gandhian mass movements and focus upon constitutional reforms.<sup>3</sup>

\* This is a very slightly modified version of an essay published as the Afterword to a new edition of Edward Thompson's *The Other Side of the Medal*, ed. Mulk Raj Anand (Sterling, New Delhi, 1989).

<sup>1</sup> Edward Thompson and G.T. Garratt, *Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India* (1934; reprinted, Allahabad, 1976), pp. 383-4.

<sup>2</sup> The *Advanced History*, first published in 1946, balanced a passing reference to Nicholson's notorious call 'for the flaying-alive, impalement, or burning' of the Delhi mutineers with praise for the alleged 'clemency' of Canning.

<sup>3</sup> The last two chapters, dealing with the 1920s and early 1930s, were entitled 'Dyarchy in Operation' and 'Progress by Conference'.