

Subaltern Historiography to Dalit Historiography

Tracing Heterogeneity in Dalit 'Subalternity'

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Existing academic scholarship on Dalit writings and politics seems to be heavily marked by a common perception that such politics almost always focuses on claiming the state corridors of power. This article contests that view and seeks to trace the genealogy of such common academic perceptions by invoking the Subaltern Studies discourse on caste and subalternity. It argues that the relationship of Dalits vis-à-vis the state and statist ideology is heavily ambivalent, and any attempt to construct a Dalit historiography cannot proceed without recognising that ambivalence, even while it must accept and use some of the methodological insights developed by the Subaltern Studies scholars.

"Subaltern groups whose histories we have not even begun to imagine"
— Dipesh Chakrabarty (*Subaltern Studies*, Vol VIII, 1994).

Ranajit Guha, the founder father of Subaltern Studies, was born in 1922 in a village called Siddhakati in the erstwhile Bakarganj district (Barisal region) in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). In the "Editor's Introduction" to a collection of Guha's essays titled *The Small Voice of History*, Partha Chatterjee (2010) informs us that, in pre-partition Bengal, this region had an immense and intricate structure of what economic historians call "subinfeudation". Guha's own family served as intermediaries in such a semi-feudal structure, and they used to be small-scale landowning zamindars (with a middle-sized *talukdari*) who were beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement project of British colonialism in India. Most of these zamindars were upper-caste Hindus – primarily Baidyas, Kayasthas and Brahmins.

As a child, and later as an adolescent, Guha grew up as a witness to *begar* or unpaid labour, economic exploitation, extortion, etc. Even while playing with children from lower-caste neighbourhoods and living in that state of "blissfully egalitarian kingdom of children", these social inequalities and hierarchies could not entirely escape Guha's impressionable mind. Here, I quote Chatterjee in extenso to showcase the influence of those images on Guha's mind and its subsequent repercussions on Guha:

Ranajit's companions were mostly from the low-caste tenant families of the neighborhood (in today's terminology, they would be called Dalit). He spent his days with them — playing, swimming, or climbing trees — ignorant of social hierarchies in the blissfully egalitarian kingdom of children. When he came home, he would hear his elders refer to his friends as the children of the *praja*. 'The word has remained', wrote Guha many years later, 'like the stain of some primordial sin, a perennial companion to all my thoughts.' As he grew to adolescence, he began to notice that the parents of some of his playmates would come to the house to work, and would refer to his elders as *munib* (master), never sit down in their presence, touch the feet of even the youngest 'master', and stand in silence when scolded (Chatterjee 2010: 6).

Towards a Research Problem

The persistence of such an image played a pivotal role in shaping Guha's later life during his days of political activism and academic research. Indeed, Guha himself acknowledges a persistence of such images in his later life in "Chirosthayi Bando-bastho: Kaiphiyat" (Chatterjee 2010: 6). From a theoretical and discursive point of view, it seems to be extremely significant that this image gave birth to an ontological question based on

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empirical observations of a young Ranajit Guha: “Was this how he and his young friends were destined to behave towards one another when they grew up?” (Chatterjee 2010: 6). If we have to accept and follow Chatterjee’s observation, then this personal ontological question (based on empirical observations) gradually transformed itself into political activism for some time (Guha’s engagement with Marxist politics and his membership of the Communist Party of India (CPI)), and then ultimately found its culmination in “the shape of a research problem” — “the question that had stayed with him from his days in Barisal village, asserted for a time as a political position and now began to be honed into the shape of a research problem” (Chatterjee 2010: 9).

Multiple Purposes

I seek to draw attention to such autobiographical/personal anecdotes to serve multiple purposes. First, these are invoked at the outset in order to undermine the atmosphere of academic hostility and intellectual intolerance that seem to have become more of a celebrated trend in the recent past (Menon 2012). After the publication of Vivek Chibber’s book *Post-colonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013) that attempted a critique of Subaltern Studies, there has been a flood of some micro-critiques in magazines, academic journals and conferences. Aditya Nigam’s (2013) article on the Chibber-Chatterjee debate shows how people on each side of the argument hurled abuses against each other while Chatterjee and Chibber were engaged in an academic debate. Indeed, the Chibber-Chatterjee debate at the Historical Materialism conference in New York (26-28 April 2013) was projected as some kind of “face-off” by many. This personal commitment of Guha to look for a “subaltern consciousness” can be traced in Guha’s academic career by any serious reader. The spirit with which this intellectual pursuit was conducted can be severely misinterpreted if there is such contempt and bitterness.

Second, the biographical context that I intend to invoke here also creates a distance between my subject-position as a researcher and the dominant penchant among many Dalit intellectual activists to carry a strong sense of discomfort vis-à-vis Subaltern Studies and those myriad ways through which it has mediated academic discussions on Dalit politics, caste, or such related issues. Many of the contributors to this discourse have been vehemently criticised because of their alleged reluctance to “seriously” engage with caste studies (Chatterjee 2012). But, some of the more significant theoretical postulations can be severely damaged if we refuse to acknowledge the key contributions made by the Subaltern Studies discourse. The very effort to create an alternative historical discourse by exploring non-archival material is an immensely important intellectual contribution made by scholars like Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakravorty, Gyanendra Pandey, Gautam Bhadra among others.

Therefore, the questions that we need to ask here are not supposed to carry the emotional-intellectual baggage of academic bullfights. Instead, we must make an effort to identify some important observations, assumptions that Subaltern

Studies gave birth to, and try to see whether these are entirely relevant or irrelevant in the present context of our investigations of Dalit cultural activism, Dalit narratives, and a possible alternative historiography that can be derived out of them. We must encounter a different set of questions: are those assumptions fundamentally incompatible with the theoretical propositions and implications of Dalit narratives? Or, are they capable of complimenting each other?

My reference to Guha’s preoccupation with the “subaltern consciousness”, reflected in his writings like *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Guha 1999), and his effort to explore other “archives” reflected in “*Neel Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror*” (Guha 2010), mingled with my academic engagement with Dalit literature to trigger questions of this kind. At this juncture, it is an imperative on my part to declare that this reference to Guha’s own life and my personal apathy to carry the hangover of resentment and bitterness should not be a deterrent for me to focus on the very limitations that Subaltern Studies might possess if it is contrasted with Dalit Studies. On the contrary, this is precisely what I intend to do here.

Lastly, this contextualisation also deconstructs various binaries, such as “theoretical/personal”, “empirical/theoretical”, “objective/subjective”, “scholarly/non-scholarly”, etc. It shows how one’s personal encounters, experiences, and perceptions later evolve into a theoretical discursive domain, or in other words, the personal becomes profoundly political. (It becomes even more interesting and intellectually loaded when one identifies how Subaltern Studies historians critique the transformation of “individuals”/personal into “citizens”/public during the formation of the Indian nation state.) A persistent academic (theoretical?) criticism against Dalit cultural assertion and activism is that “this is not theoretical enough” or “this suffers from community narcissism”. This reference to empirical images in Guha’s personal life determined what he did in his political life and academic career in almost a similar fashion (though different because of diametrically opposite life experiences) as the assumptions of Dalit intellectuals are determined heavily by what they have to experience in their lives. What they write reflects what they perceive and experience in their everyday life. This focus on the phenomenological and “the everyday” cannot disqualify Dalit assertion as being “empirical and not theoretical enough”. This often-cited allegation against Dalits/Dalit intellectualism is best captured and interrogated in an insightful article by Gopal Guru — “How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India?”:

Social science practice in India has harboured a cultural hierarchy dividing it into a vast, inferior mass of academics who pursue empirical social science and a privileged few who are considered the theoretical pundits with reflective capacity which makes them intellectually superior to the former. To use a familiar analogy, Indian social science represents a pernicious divide between theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras (Guru 2002).

Chatterjee’s observation of such empirical encounters in Guha’s life and admission of the fact that they played a significant role in shaping his academic project does not only destabilise the common criticism of Dalit studies, but also gives us

fresh insight as to how academic elitism is almost always punctuated by hidden casteism in Indian academia. Even a tangential look at the differential status of these two disciplines clearly proves Guru's point.

An Alternative Historiography

Subaltern Studies, in its search for creating an alternative historiography and to subvert the academic hegemony occupied by the colonialist, nationalist, and even Marxist historiographies, focused on unusual "archives". It was impossible for them to create a "different history of the subaltern" by focusing on the traditional documentation maintained at the national archives and state-owned libraries. Any serious student of history, aware of the politics of archive-making, would acknowledge the need for pushing the methodological boundaries of the discipline. The common presupposition of such historiographies is that those "archival materials" and their given legitimacy are to be unquestionably adopted and implemented as only official raw material out of which official "history" or "authentic history" has to be derived.

The Subaltern Studies team of historians, particularly focused on their research and investigation of the sociopolitical life of south Asia, were forced to deal with this issue. Consequently, most of their writings started emphasising more on those "unofficial", non-traditional, supposedly "inauthentic" sources of history writing. In its initial phase, Ranajit Guha looked at peasant insurgency as a possible site of history where the "subaltern consciousness" allows itself to surface more than anywhere else. His path-breaking books like *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* and other similar works obsessively focus on these areas. Dipesh Chakravorty (1994), in his pursuit of building a social history of public debate in the world of domesticity, relies heavily on autobiographical narratives written by women in 19th century Bengal.

Gyanendra Pandey tries to write a different history of Partition by focusing on the literary "prose of otherness" as he explores Saadat Hassan Manto's Urdu short stories in his essay "The Prose of Otherness" (Pandey 1994) and in *Remembering Partition* (2001). Gautam Bhadra (2011) engages himself with *Bat Tala* (widely accepted as Kolkata's own equivalent of London's Grub Street writings) publications that have never been considered worthy enough as historically important documents in traditional history writing. Pandey relies on calendar art, political pamphlets, and memoirs to write "a history of prejudice".

In other words, their search for "other" sources of history writing has led them to look into different literary and cultural narratives. Chatterjee sums up this intellectual inclination of subaltern historians, particularly Guha:

Instead of the archives and political discourse, there is now a surge of literary material with which Guha chooses to build or illustrate his arguments – Orwell, Conrad, Dickens, Chekov, Tagore, Bengal's personal favorite *Hutom*, and, of course, the *Mahabharata*, that infinite source of stories for every dilemma in human life (Chatterjee 2010: 17).

It is this emphasis on alternative discourses of historiography (as opposed to elite colonialist or bourgeois nationalist

historiography) that offers us a possible point of intersection — a point of convergence where two disciplines of literature and history can meet, interact, and complement each other. Undoubtedly, the literature produced by Rabindranath Tagore, or a text like *Hutom*,¹ provide us with different modes of historiographies. While acknowledging the Subaltern Studies collective's contributions in exploiting such literary texts, we must pause and think of placing the literary texts produced by the Dalits of India in the larger context of creating alternative models of historiography. It is indeed a fact that an initial non-engagement of subaltern historians with the literary texts produced by India's Dalits during the heydays of Subaltern Studies, and the subsequent closure (though that hardly means a discursive closure) of this collective failed to address this epistemological lacuna. For the convenience of our discussion, let us call such an intellectually imagined project "Dalit historiography".

A 'Dalit Historiography'

I went into such already known detailed discussion of their (Subaltern Studies) contributions to make a simple proposition that these methodological aspects of historiography can possibly be exploited (albeit with required alterations and changes) by historians attempting to create a project like Dalit historiography. However, such a proposition will be immediately followed by some inevitable questions: How do these texts form any possible or feasible model of historiography? Do they form an alternative history at all? What would be the probable nature of such construction? If they do create that space, then should we identify such historiography as alternative not just to elite colonialist or nationalist historiography, but also to subaltern historiography?

The assertion of Dalit narratives, for me, seems to have opened the limit of disciplinary boundaries further by triggering such questions. Before we move into a discussion of such questions in our quest to find suitable answers to them, polemical answers to them seem to have been already there in common knowledge. Dalit activists and writers have asked questions of this kind: Why do Partha Chatterjee and other such Subaltern Studies scholars remain almost silent about Ambedkar? Why do they talk so much about Dumont and Dirks, and not Periyar, Phule, or Ambedkar? Inane questions of this kind hardly help us address possible intellectual interrogations and interactions between subaltern and Dalit historiography.

A workable list of Subaltern Studies historians' engagements with these issues can easily dismiss such aggressive allegations. Gyanendra Pandey's book *A History of Prejudice: Race, Caste and Difference in India and the United States* (2013a) has tried to explore all of these areas — Ambedkar, Dalit autobiographical narratives, the Dalit Conversion of 1956, Dalit politics, etc, Guha (1987) in "Chandra's Death", tries to look for what Dalit/lower-caste characters have to say vis-à-vis Chandra's death, and seeks to formulate a historical narrative with such "unusual" material. In "The Nation in Heterogeneous Time", the first chapter of *The Politics of the Governed*, Partha Chatterjee (2004) discusses Ambedkar's political insights and their

significance in the construction of India's postcolonial political space. Therefore, for me, such allegations are to be read as symbolic manifestations of a symptom that hints at a far more complex problem and consequently requires closer scrutiny.

'Common Sense of the Modern'

One persistent characteristic of most of Subaltern Studies essays is a clear focus on the role and nature of the "modern" nation state. Some of our very "basic", "fundamental" assumptions of what the modern, secular nation state stands for are questioned by them. According to most of the members of this group, our perception of the state, its legal system, and its abilities to bring about a fairly egalitarian society are ideologically informed by a liberal, "middle-class" mindset, or to use Pandey's phrase "the common sense of the modern" (2013a). The centrality of this critique of the statist ideology in their overall project of alternative historiography is clearly captured in most of the essays that act as manifestos of the collective. Reference to one such passages sums up this spirit:

why any particular event or deed should be regarded as historic and not others. Who decides, and according to what values and what criteria? If these questions are pressed far enough, it should be obvious that in most cases the nominating authority is none other than an ideology for which the life of the state is all there is to history. It is this ideology, henceforth to be called statism, which is what authorises the dominant values of the state to determine the criteria of the historic (Guha 2010: 304).

They seem to be attempting a critique of the ideological basis of post-Enlightenment rationality, belief in scientific thought, progress, and other such identifiably "middle-class" perceptions. Partha Chatterjee's description of Nationalism "as a Problem" critiques the teleological conception of the nation state. This also tells us a lot as to why Gyanendra Pandey — sharing common theoretical perspective with Chatterjee — refuses to look at Partition as some kind of a "cost" that we, as the new citizens of a democratic, republic, modern, progressive state, have to pay for a forward march of our nation-building process. The problem that I mentioned earlier seems to be revolving around this pivot — a key element in the Subaltern Studies discourse. But, we have to recognise a difference before we move further: to read "rags to riches" tales as suffering from an influence of liberalism or to recognise post-Enlightenment thought behind a particular conception of the nation state is one thing, and to superimpose such assumptions on Dalit narratives and Dalit politico-cultural assertion is another.

The problem begins when these two are confused to an irreversible extent. Most of the Subaltern Studies scholars seem to have faced a problem while dealing with the persistence of post-Enlightenment values of liberty, equality, fraternity and the "subalternity" of the Dalits simultaneously. Indeed the problem is so haunting in this case that Chakravorty and Pandey find it difficult to have intellectual alignment with either of those two diametrically opposite personalities and their philosophies that are situated at the two ends of India's political spectrum — Gandhian village life of *Ram rajya* on the one hand, and an "Ambedkarite modernity" on the other (Chakravorty 2009).

This recognition of the presence of their anti-statist ideological standpoint, I argue, should also be punctuated by another identification — the popular (both *Savarna* and Dalit) perceptions of the state-as-it-functions in our everyday postcolonial consciousness. It is interesting that the *Savarna* people often look at the state as a corrupt, inefficient system and they often perceive it as a result of the affirmative action (which has allegedly made space for "corrupt", "inefficient" people), and the Dalit consciousness often perceives the state machinery as the very embodiment of caste-based nepotism, caste bias, a weapon of caste oppression, and a site of caste discrimination.

For most of the Subaltern Studies scholars, particularly Pandey and Chakravorty, the common sense of the modern acts as a "universal prejudice" in Dalit consciousness in the post-Ambedkar era (Pandey 2013 a & b). Ambedkar, according to their analysis, is an inspiring image of emancipation among Dalits and other marginalised groups. But, more importantly, his representation as the "immaculately attired, unambiguously rational, learned, imperturbable and unshakeable modern leader" of these disenfranchised groups matters more than anything else.

They read Dalit assertion in social, religious, political and cultural fields as the assertion and expression of this modernity that is, as per their reading, unambiguously determined and ideologically informed by the liberal view of the state, or in other words "statism". It is so prevalent in their thoughts that Pandey interprets the famous Dalit Conversion of 1956 as another instance where the Dalit body and its representation is self-fashioned in terms of a modern, rational world view as most of the leading Dalits of that time were perfectly well-dressed and some of them wore spotlessly clean white dresses. Therefore, it is the state that creates the primary apple of discord between subaltern and Dalit historiographies.

This inevitably leads us to our next question, and for me this is the point of departure for Dalit historiography: How do Dalits perceive the state in the postcolonial, post-Nehruvian era? Are they really obsessed with "universal prejudice" so much so that they always focus on a parochial, one-sided homogenised Dalit movement and articulate it in terms of "vernacular prejudices"?

Let us have a rough and ready list of atrocities against Dalits in contemporary India before I move further in my argument and see how that leads them to perceive the state. A few months ago, a 20-year-old Dalit girl was killed in Jind, Haryana. She was brutally raped again and again before being murdered, and later her body was thrown in a nearby dam. (A recent article on the Jind episode by researcher Jyotsna Siddharth (2013) is

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tellingly titled “State’s Apathy towards Caste Based Violence”.) In 1997, at Ramabai Colony in Mumbai, hundreds of Dalits became victims of police atrocities. In protest, Vilas Ghagre, the leftist Dalit poet, killed himself and inspired India’s acclaimed documentary film-maker Anand Patwardhan to make a film — *Jai Bhim Comrade* (2011) — on that episode and beyond (Giri 2012).

In 1979, during the Marichjhapi Massacre, hundreds of Bengali Dalit refugees got killed due to state-sponsored brutality. In West Bengal, till date, a large number of Dalits are not considered legal citizens of this country. In April 2013, in Haryana, a young Dalit man got married to an upper-caste girl, and numerous Dalit houses in that neighbourhood were pillaged, looted and burnt as a result. Sheetal Sathe, a young passionate singer and performer, along with other people in her group Kabir Kala Manch, have been called Naxalites, anti-state persons by our statist ideology.

This list does not follow any chronological order. It does not follow any deliberate “pick and chose” academic tactic. It is some kind of a random selection of recent atrocities against Dalits that I have made here. Some of them might help establish my argument and some might contest, interrogate and consequently problematise some of my suggestions. However, what is common in all these instances is the direct and/or oblique presence of the state. The state, in these cases, hardly seems to be a benevolent, welfare state with its affirmative action and legal measures such as The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 to safeguard the interests of Dalits. Far from being so, it acts as either a victimiser or a silent, passive “watchdog” while caste Hindus make Dalits suffer.

In some cases, the institutions of the state, such as the police force, do not act, do not file first information reports or register complaints, and in other cases, act as oppressors. Then, how do Dalits imagine the nation state? Do we have to assume that the Dalit movement can only focus on building a republic, and can cherish those coveted ideals of equality and justice even when their experiences tell them that they are, in many cases, illusory? Their experiences and their alleged “universal prejudice” seem to be in direct conflict in this case. They can notice the persistence of “vernacular prejudices” (casteism, sexism, and racism are some examples of such vernacular, recognisable forms of prejudice) in the domain or the very container (state, Parliament, the Supreme Court, the Constitution, and so on) of the “common sense of the modern” that tells us to believe in the “rags to riches” tales.

Let me look at a couple of these examples to push my point further. Sheetal Sathe and her husband Sachin Male, both were good students (they seem to have suffered from “universal prejudice” as they supposedly believed that education can eradicate problems). But, they seem to have left it (universal prejudice) mid-way to sing songs. They refused to be beneficiaries of the welfare state so much so that the state declares them as anti-state Naxal or Maoist. People like Sathe and her songs often face brutal attacks and censorship steps taken on behalf of the state — from those very quarters that propagate that the modern country has opened up the Great Indian dream to all and sundry. Therefore, many of these Dalit activists and

writers think of the state as a domain of casteist prejudice, caste-based nepotism and not as an institution informed by post-Enlightenment ideology that upholds virtues like rationality, reason, scientific progress and so on (Guru 2012).

A Farcical Tale

Many among Dalit writers hate the state machinery and most of their writings actually tell us how the “rags to riches” tales are farcical and misleading. It is these heterogeneous elements in the Dalit discourse that unmask the “common sense of the modern”. Even if Dalits in the first few decades of the post-Ambedkar era believed in such liberal values (e.g., Balwant Singh’s autobiography *An Untouchable in the IAS* (nd)), their subsequent long tryst with the “modern”, “democratic” and “republic” state has forced them to reconsider the true worth of such elevated, lofty values of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

Therefore, the “common sense of the modern”, as it is traced in the Dalit struggle narratives by Pandey (2013a), is not a historically fixed point. On the contrary, the Dalit struggle or anti-caste struggle in India relies on several continuously mobile and highly contingent, infinitely heterogeneous, and socio-historical factors that constitute it. Such historical contingency can be identified in *The Persistence of Caste* by Anand Teltumbde (2010), as it reflects how Dalits perceive the statist ideology in our neo-liberal times. In a chapter of this book, tellingly titled “Neo-liberalism, Naxalism and Dalits”, Teltumbde declares unequivocally:

The contemporary state — with its apparatuses of police, judiciary, armed forces — is essentially a coercive machine that seeks to conserve the monopoly of the dominating class. In the Indian context, the large majority of Dalits comprise the most exploited class and bear the brunt of the neo-liberal character of the state (Teltumbde 2010: 151).

Bengali “lower-caste” writer Monoranjan Byapari’s novel *Amanushik (Inhuman)* (2013a) shows us how our judiciary is meant for the privileged and the rich, and does not assume that the constitutional mechanism, the legal system, and liberal values are capable of changing our lives. Ironically, it is Byapari’s (2013a) life narrative that is received and celebrated by the urban, predominantly upper-caste bhadralok (despite its heterogeneous composition, its ideological structure remains overwhelmingly Brahminical and upwardly mobile lower castes’ entry into this sociocultural category always remains under interrogation — “quota doctor”, “quota professor” and other such pejoratives). Interestingly, Byapari’s other novels and collection of short stories, unlike his bestseller autobiography, remain relatively obscure. Byapari — once a rickshaw puller, a sweeper, a convict, and now an acclaimed writer — seems to be a perfect tale of “rags to riches”.

But, quite opposed to Pandey’s conclusions, the predominant subscribers and patrons of such a tale of “universal prejudice” are almost always urban, English educated *babus*, and not Dalits as Pandey would have us believe. This is a man who is not just vocal against caste (vernacular prejudice), but challenges state-supported discourse behind capital punishment (in *Amanushik*) and creates staunch criticism of almost every aspect of the state machinery (universal prejudice), and on the

other hand, ironically, his autobiography (Byapari 2013b) receives such a warm welcome from the “merit” loving, anti-reservation, liberal Bengali bhadralok.

Ambedkar

Since, Pandey and Chakravorty are so convinced that Ambedkar has been the strongest proponent of liberal values in the postcolonial Republic of India (with his role in framing the Constitution and that immaculately dressed appearance) and new “modern”, urban life with all its rhetoric of opportunities, let me go back to the man who is under such criticism. It is true that millions of Dalits worship Ambedkar’s image as a modern man in a blue suit with the Constitution in one hand as something to aspire for. In their narratives, they seem to be aspirants of public jobs. They revolt to bring about radical changes in the legal system and showcase their frustration once they are employed and give us numerous reasons to believe in Pandey’s subalternist reading of the Dalit movement in India. But, such a reading fails to take full notice of the Dalit movement’s deeply ambivalent and tenuous relationship with the state. In most everyday grass-roots instances, Dalits use it only as a survival strategy and consider it as a weapon in the hands of the upper castes as it is often used at the cost of their interests and they seek to turn it upside down by occupying it and turn the same weapon against their oppressors. Does it mean that they are the primary apologists of a statist ideology?

If rationality, science and a belief in progress was to provide the spirit of a modern, democratic society, and adult franchise, elected legislatures and governments, a free press, universal laws, and an independent

judiciary, its political institutions, then education, articulate speech, and self-confidence reflected in dress and manners were clearly necessary conditions of their (Dalits’) use (Pandey 2013a: 90).

Did the Dalits actually believe that always? Or, do their Dalit narratives and Dalit historiography tell us something else? Is it really a homogeneous construction? Or, do we have to read Dalit narratives by keeping them firmly contextualised against its various heterogeneous elements? These questions mark a point of departure in the tradition of creating alternative models of historiography. If Dalit historiography has to arrive, it can do so not only by acknowledging the contributions of Subaltern Studies, but also realising the limitations of that project. It has to take note of the profound heterogeneity of the Dalit movement and this ambivalence of Dalits vis-à-vis the statist ideology. Such ambivalence is wonderfully captured in a statement made by the man who is considered to be the liberal champion of millions of Dalits and the primary architect of the Bible of the “common sense of the modern”, the Constitution, i e, Ambedkar:

I am quite prepared to say that I shall be the first person to burn it [the Constitution]. I do not want it. It does not suit anybody. If our people want to carry on, they must remember that the majorities just cannot ignore the minorities by saying: ‘oh no, to recognise you is to harm democracy (Teltumbde 2010: 152).

It is of profound significance (and tantalisingly ambivalent) that Ambedkar uttered these words in the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of Parliament – the very abode of our common sense of the modern according to the Pandey and the Chakravortys. Is Ambedkar “an unalloyed modernist” then?

NOTE

- 1 Here, I am referring to *Hutom Pyachar Naksha* by Kaliprashanna Singha, published in 19th century Bengal. An annotated version of this text is available now. See Singha (2008).

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