Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
July-December 2023 4(2), 1772-1778

A MILLION MUTINIES IN THE WILDERNESS: READING SUBALTERN INSUBORDINATION OF COLONIAL AUTHORITY IN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

To retrieve the voices of the subalterns from the pages of history, they need to be reiterated repeatedly. The voices of the subalterns were frequently ignored in the mainstream historical writings, and when they were recorded, they were chastised in the name of spontaneity and impulsiveness. Their resistance, history, and experience have got subsumed into the elitist record of the events, and they could not be expressed the way they should have been. This paper tries to record the little experiences of the subaltern groups and the stories of their resistance to the colonial authorities. These petty resistances were not the armed revolts or the organized insurgency against the colonial rule which could overthrow the colonial government in a short span of time. Rather, these were a million little mutinies with limited reach but they were no less effective in challenging the colonial narratives and the image they were trying to portray. These small resistances stood against the self-validating, self-authenticated colonial discourse and consequently posed serious threat to their authority. These little mutinies were not recorded properly due to their constricted scale and the lack of a wider and organized approach. This paper aims to foreground how effective and incisive these little mutinies were in their retaliation to the colonial discourse with which they paved the way to the larger aim of the decolonization of the mind. This paper tries to record the reactions, often in the form of satire, laughter, and even a sniff or a calculated silence, of the subalterns against the colonial authority and interpret them as a counter-narrative to the colonial one.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Subaltern, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, White supremacy, Imperialism.

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DOI
10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.2925

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The existence of subaltern consciousness and the coherence and structure of subaltern insurgency have been a long-discussed issue in contemporary critical discourse. The supposedly sporadic, inconsistent, and incoherent nature of subaltern actions and reactions has almost always led the traditionally established critics of the liberal humanistic tradition to believe that these actions are not the result of any conscious and coherent efforts, but rather are the spontaneous, individual responses to a specific incident or a social, or political event. These arguments see the subaltern groups not as conscious, rational, and organized groups with a pattern and consistency in their actions, but rather fragmented and alienated individuals whose will and choices are the results of their impulsive momentary reactions, which lack any scheme or long-term objective. As Gramsci puts it:

> The history of the subaltern groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic. There undoubtedly does exist a tendency to (at least provisional stages of) unification in the historical activity of these groups, but this tendency is continually interrupted by the activity of the ruling groups; it therefore can only be demonstrated when an historical cycle is completed and this cycle culminates in a success. Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of the ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only "permanent" victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately." (207)

A major problem with the subalterns' insurgency has always been that their efforts and resistance have not been properly recorded. They have been perceived and interpreted through the patterns and structures of elite historiography. This historiography has its own methodologies and ideologies which are essentially bourgeoisie, which makes it inadequate to assimilate within itself the voices and efforts of the subalterns. As Ranjeet Guha points out that the basic problem with the existing historiography is that it does not consider the peasant rebel as "as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called the rebellion" (Ludden, 61). Guha's major complaint is that these historians regard rebellion as "external to the peasant consciousness" (Ludden, 58) and that it is due to the historian's "uncritical use of official sources" (Ludden, 58) and the historian's "projection of their own consciousness into the subject they are examining" (Ludden, 58). These two aspects are the central issues that have pushed subalterns to the margins of mainstream discourse. The mainstream historiography almost always has its focus on the external conditions that led to the reaction of the subalterns and on the workings and methods of the elite groups that represented the whole reaction. Within it, the subalterns find their place merely as objects of the elite discourse, whose actions and intentions must be interpreted and fixed upon in the larger context of the bourgeois struggle. Within the context of bourgeois struggle, the subaltern's resistance finds its place only as minor events that lack larger aims and autonomy. In the contemporary discourse, this elitist historiography has been challenged categorically, and many historians have come up with alternative interpretations of historical events. These historians see a pattern and coherence in the subaltern's insurgency and struggle, and they believe that the subalterns are the subjects to reckon with in their own right. As Alam puts it, "In their struggles, whether in the sphere of productive activity or in the more directly political sphere of mass upsurges or revolts, the politics of the subalterns constitutes an autonomous domain" (Ludden, 44). He further adds that:

> However much the ruling class may control the themes and contents of politics or the sources of history, the subalterns 'that is the people', will always manage to make themselves heard". (Ludden, 44).

These critics, in their critical writings, try to establish the fact that "the subalterns have their own autonomous domain" (Ludden, 44) and that they "have their own consciousness, their own politics of resistance, their own mobilizations and their own ideologies of opposition" (Ludden, 192).

The expression of subaltern consciousness in colonial discourse is an area of study which did not find its proper place and significance in the official and dominant history of the time. History has always been the narrative of the dominant, and it has its own share of inherent elitism, which makes it incapable of assimilating within itself the voices of the dispossessed and disenfranchised. The historical 'truths' and 'facts' are often the 'truths' and 'facts' of the historian, which have the bearings of the historian's subjectivity on them. Historical writings are always subjective writings which are affected by the writer's own class and ideology. As most of history is a record of the victors and it is written from either the victor's perspective or by using the methods and tools of the victors. Such historical records usually succumb to the same fallacies and misjudgments that the dominant narrative falls upon. This paper tries to document the sporadic and inconsistent, solitary reactions of the subaltern groups in colonial discourse as derived from the personal letters and diaries of the colonial masters and the tourists who visited India during the colonial period. Further, the paper seeks to understand them in terms of the expressions of the conscious and rational rejection of the colonial power and authority, and derive from them a coherent and fully perceptible pattern of resistance and denial of the colonial authority. At the beginning of the paper, it needs to discuss the issue of rationality and impulsive actions of the natives in some detail because they are allegedly impulsive, irrational, and spontaneous. The subaltern has been denied their own subjectivity and consciousness in the historiography of the liberal humanistic tradition as well as in colonial writings. They are deemed to be lacking in the larger contexts of autonomy and appropriate judgment, therefore their actions are not the reliable sources of their conscious will and choices. There are numerous instances in colonial writings where these people are presented as incapable of framing appropriate judgments on their own, and thus they required western tutelage in proper manner and behavior. However, when we try to substantiate this point using real-life experiences of colonial people, one finds a completely contradictory position. Many colonial authors who visited India during the colonial period wrote in their private letters and diaries that in India they never felt unsafe or insecure, even in the midst

of thousands of people. These authors were "struck by the orderliness of large numbers of people in festive gatherings—no violence, head breaking, or drunken brawls" (Dyson, 44). They were amazed by the "'peaceableness of the multitude' which was as 'remarkable as its number'" (Dyson, 45). One of the tourists, Bishop Herber, records an account of Charak fair in Bengal, "nothing like quarreling or rioting occurred, and very little scolding. A similar crowd in England would have shewn three boxing-matches in half an hour, and in Italy there would have been half a dozen assassinations before night" (Dyson, 45). Even the famous colonel Sleeman, who expelled the Pindaries from central India, mentioned it while writing about an annual fair by the Narmada river:

> . . . what strikes a European most is the entire absence of all tumult and disorder at such places. He not only sees no disturbance, but feels assured that there will be none; and leaves his wife and children in the midst of a crowd of a hundred thousand persons all strangers to them, and all speaking a language and following a religion different from theirs, while he goes off a whole day, hunting and shooting in the distant jungles, without the slightest feeling of apprehension for their safety and comfort. (Dyson, 45)

According to Gustave Le Bon, the father of modern crowd psychology, "by the mere fact that he forms part of an organised crowd, a man descends several rungs in the ladder of civilisation" (46). Le Bon suggests that the crowd exerts a sort of hypnotic influence on its members (95). He adds that the anonymous individual, when part of a crowd, behaves irrationally and unconsciously as he is guided at the moment by the collective racial unconscious (42-43). He notes that the frenzy of the crowd is somehow contagious, like a disease, and the contagion feeds upon itself, growing with time. In the end, the crowd has assumed a life of its own, stirring up emotions and driving people toward irrational, even violent action (Crowd Behaviour, 1). Thus, the crowd is sporadic, impulsive, irrational, and often emotionally charged by nature, with the potential for tumult and disorder even in the most organised gatherings. The majority of those attending these fairs and religious gatherings were from the lower strata of society, the subalterns, who lacked education and exposure to civil etiquettes, but even a European did not find them intimidating or troublesome. Among the thousands of people, who were completely strangers to their language and religion, these European officers and their families felt safe and "without the slightest feeling of apprehension for their safety and comfort (Dyson, 45)." This remark is in itself a testimony of the subjectivity, consciousness, and autonomy of these subaltern people, as even at their most provoking and unconscious moments, these people do not behave irrationally and impulsively. They behave with civility, order, and rationality, which invalidates the colonial narrative that their actions are irrational and impulsive. Banking on the argument, one sees that the conscious and fully sovereign little petty revolts of working men and women are not sporadic and alienated reactions; rather, they are examples of the subaltern groups' restoration and assertion of their identity, autonomy, and sovereign subjectivity. Women finding their voice and clearly showing the consciousness and understanding of the social and political life of the time could easily be seen in their little 'revolts' through which they participated in the larger project of the resistance and subversion of the imperial centre. The emphasis on their intermediary attitude, that is, in between total subordination and open revolt, is essential to the understanding of the common people's perception of colonial rule. These deprived and disempowered individuals reflected the mass consciousness of the time in their own episodic and scattered ways, and their reactions and responses contradicted and even unauthenticated the colonial discourse. The expression of their undistorted, unalloyed experiences in simple words invalidated the forged and specifically designed colonial narratives. These scattered responses are not the spontaneous and sudden outburst of an individual's reaction without any deep coherence and significance, but rather reflections of the collective unconsciousness residing deep within the hearts, each with their own significance and coherence. Even the dominant colonial narrative is full of those experiences where the subaltern consciousness finds its own expression, not in the form of insurgency or revolt, but at the micro level, in the form of satire, disapproval, obduracy, or sniff, or sometimes only lowering the head without uttering a single word but also without giving consent. These reactions become, when understood as a whole, a very perceptive and useful historical document to understand the tension and disharmony in the social relationship between the powerful colonial masters and the dispossessed colonized gentry. These expressions should be understood and interpreted as a declaration of subaltern sovereignty and autonomy, as well as a complete rejection of colonial authority. They were prevented only by the fear of the exorbitant use of power by the colonial authorities, or else this mild reaction could easily have resulted in an open challenge and a revolt against the masters. These expressions are mostly mild in tone and manner, but pungent and sharp in meaning. For example, a rustic woman from a remote village sings:

> Lo! the white men have been to the mountains of snow,
> And have seen the great Ganga flow over the plain:
> Let us labour no more, for the rice crop will grow;
> The white men must always bring wealth in their train. (Dyson, 85)

The song sung by the rustic woman clearly reveals her profound understanding of the nature of the colonial empire. She very emphatically stresses her own assessment and her disapproval of the whole process. 'the white man must always ring wealth in their train' was the prime motive and the sole objective of the colonial venture, but here the word 'must' reveals another point that these rustic women were deeply aware of. The point is that colonial rapacity and exploitation were not only their goal, but also imperial imperatives. They needed money to run this colossal empire. The centrality of money for their colonial venture was understood and stressed in clearly visible terms. With the understanding of the colonial objective, these women have also formed their strategy of resistance and fight against this process of exploitation in the form of 'civil disobedience' by means of refusing to plant 'rice crop'. These women, illiterate though they are, are not devoid of common sense, rationality, and autonomy. They are very perceptive in their observations and are very strong and perspicuous in their resistance to this process of exploitation. They are fully aware of the fact that they cannot fight against the colonial masters on the battlefield, as they have a far superior army as well as weaponry, but if they stop the flow of money to them by refusing to participate in their colonial enterprise, the colonial empire cannot sustain itself without money. Their conscious refusal to plant rice was their perceptive way of fighting the war without going into the battlefield. Here, it must be stressed that this was not the sporadic, alienated, individual expression of a single woman, rather it was the expression of the collective consciousness which had become part of their day-to-day life. It is important to note here that, in the latter stages of the freedom struggle, the Indian leadership used the same strategy of "civil disobedience" to successfully fight the colonial empire.

The dominant discourse has been most critical of women as a category. Their actions, reactions, and resistance have been subject to double marginalization as they were marginalized by the elitist nature of the discourse as well as the nature and function of patriarchy. Women subjectivity and consciousness have always been in question and their expressions have been (mis)interpreted in terms of gender specific expressions and roles. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her much celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" discussed the issue in detail and exposed the internal workings of patriarchy and the resultant fallacy of discourse in the perception and interpretation of women's subjectivity. She established the proposition that it is not that women do not speak; the problem with the dominant narrative is that when they speak, their assertions are perceived and interpreted in the language of the dominant and by social and cultural structures that are essentially patriarchal (1). The colonial discourse as well as the elitist historiography fall prey to the same problem persistently. To retrieve the voices and experiences of subaltern groups in general, and women in particular, their experiences and utterances must be narrated repeatedly, with a greater emphasis on their understanding and expressions of the events rather than the external circumstances, patterns, and structures that led to the event. This paper aims at that by emphasizing the utterances of women in the colonial discourse.

Another example of a common woman's rational and acute understanding of the process of colonial exploitation could be discerned from the record of a colonial officer who was part of a party after the capture of Bharatpur (1826). His reminiscence clearly demonstrates the clear understanding by the local people of the colonial intentions and modus operandi in India. At the party, Begum Sumroo and her troops performed a short pantomime where an English prize agent and a poor peasant of Bharatpur were having a discussion on the tax of the land. The government agent wore an immense cocked hat and had a sword, while the peasant was stark naked, with the exception of a most scanty cloth or a waist cloth. The prize agent stops him and demands his jewels and money. When he finds nothing, he takes his tresses as booty, as he had to take something. The following excerpt from the pantomime substantiates the claim that women during the colonial period had a great understanding of the colonial ways:

> The half–starved wretch protests his poverty and appeals to his own miserable appearance as a proof. The Englishman, upon this, makes him a furious speech, well garnished with G-d-d-mns, seizes on the trembling Bhurtporean, and, determined not to leave him without having extracted something from him, takes out a pair of scizzors, cuts off his long shaggy hair close to his skull, crams it into his pocket, and exit, swearing. (Dyson, 46)

The sharp, pungent, and humorous enactment of the incident presents a belligerent and abominable distaste for colonial exploitation and avarice. It was enacted at a time when the British had just captured Bharatpur and they were enjoying the victory. The troops could laugh at their claims of benevolence and superiority on their faces and showed them the moral laxity and greed they had been degraded into. The pantomime satires the nature and scale of colonial exploitation in its own way and registers its resentment, protest, and disapproval of the process. The process and the scale of exploitation, which economic intellectuals revealed in their studies long after, were known to these poor peasants instinctively even at that time, at the beginning of the empire. This pantomime gives a dent to the claims of irrationality and immaturity of the colonized peasantry. The head of the party, Begum Sumroo, was a woman, and she also understood

and let her troops perform such a sharp satire on the colonial masters at their own party, which is further a proof of this fact that the resistance from them was not spontaneous. This enactment provides ground and validity for the autonomous and independent understanding by the subaltern groups of the colonial workings. It further leads to an inference that this understanding of the subaltern groups was not merely individual and scattered experiences but part of the collective consciousness. The mild acts of disapproval could actually become outright rejection and revolt with strong leadership.

The subaltern groups of Indian society were subjected to the rigorous and unflinching criticism by the colonial discourse. The colonial discourse persistently presents the subaltern groups as effeminate, mild, childlike people without rationality and conscious will. They are presented, sometimes, as absolute savages and brutes. This perceived effeminacy and childishness of the natives as a whole and the subaltern groups in particular, invigorated the colonial claims of divine rights to rule over them, and therefore, it was repeatedly presented in the colonial discourse so that it might be established as a natural fact rather than as an individual observation. As an observer records his observation of Indian lower class people as "their minds, except what nature gave them, no more informed than the beast which perish" (Dyson, 62) and further adds:

> " . . . what seems to complete their misery is, that whether pinched by cold or enervated by heat, indolence equally prevails to such a degree as seems to absorb every faculty; even immediate self–preservation scarcely rouses them from it." Dyson, 62)

It is absolutely a typical orientalist observation which generalizes and tries to establish his own preconceived, premeditated notions of the colonized people as the natural fact of the natives. It is just another assertion of the native's inferiority in an attempt to fix the colonized subject into the fixed image of colonial assumptions. The colonial discourse has a generalizing tendency towards the natives and it is primarily a charged and biased discourse which makes certain assumptions and then tries to confirm them through objective observations. It frantically repeats those 'observations' in order to attain fixity and certainty, but in the process it reveals its own ambivalence. In the above description, the observer assumes and ascribes certain qualities to the native and tries to establish them as a fact. The native, "no more informed than the beast that perish" (Dyson, 62) and they "would not arouse even for the self-preservation" (Dyson, 62) are the orientalist constructions to present and justify the natives in need of an enlightened authority and tutelage who may bring them out of this wretched existence. With this assumption, the orientalist discourse was created and justified across the whole continent. The colonial India was nearly as large as Europe and as diverse in customs, traditions, culture, and social practices as the people of two separate poles could be, with the colonial empire serving as the only common thread. But in dealing with the inferiority of the colonized people, the colonial discourse treats them as a homogenous and monolithic population, inherently and integrally bound by the common thread of inferiority, foolishness, irrationality, and so many other orientalist assumptions and imaginations that could be conceived of in the orientalist mind. The diversity and heterogeneity of India and the Indian population gave way to the homogeneous collectivity of the oriental types. In the colonial discourse, the whole of India becomes a simple collective unit joined together by the colonial empire and its own stupidity, indolence, and cowardice. To make this argument of India being a homogeneous collectivity, let us take two examples, first of Sciende province (Sindh) which is on the western border, and the Bengal province, which was on the eastern border, and compare the similarities and differences between the observations in the private writings of the colonial officers. It may help us understand the pervasive oriental assumptions in colonial writings:

> Scinde, Mr John Bull, is an Eastern Ireland on a large scale. The idle fools, her male children, will not work; They would rather starve: the women and infants declare they cannot work; all would rather want with ease than be wealthy with toil." (Dyson, 304)

In his private diary, F.R. Hastings, then the Governor of Bengal and later the Governor General of India, observed that "a Hindoo appears being nearly limited to mere animal functions, and even in them indifferent" (Dyson, 210). Here, the Indian people from west to east are presented as a unified whole, as an anonymous mass without any individual trait or characteristic. They are bound together by their indolence, foolishness, and animality.

When faced with these 'people' of lower and animal-like instincts, their assumed superiority finds best expression. Therefore, when these people challenged their notions and assumptions, they became more stark and pungent, which could shake the ground from beneath the colonial authority. These typical colonial constructions were often challenged and exposed from within by these subaltern people, which gave them added value. The miserable, wretched, and hungry Hindu children, notes Mrs Kinderley, "could not be tempted to eat any thing forbidden, either by persuasion, or by offering them the greatest delicacies." (Dyson, 103). This denial of the 'greatest delicacies' by the hungry children was the open revolt and most audacious refutation of the colonial might, narrative, and self-image that could be imagined.

These little 'mutinies' or 'revolts' deconstructed and to a certain extent subverted the very notion of the subject and object hierarchy of colonial discourse. It shook the self-image of the colonials founded upon orientalist assumptions. In order to restore their self-image and maintain the power relationship, the colonials often resisted these reactions and resorted to their ultimate refuge, i.e., the use of brute power. The reactions of the subaltern people reflected the consciousness of the mass and their anger and disapproval of the colonial authorities. These individuals, who were taken to be an anonymous mass, a unified whole, or an irrational collectivity without voice, intention, or identity, exerted and expressed their voices in their own ways. Their refusal to fall into the colonial 'order' often challenged the colonial narrative, which they tried to maintain so frantically. Thus, they tried to preserve and maintain this order by force. As a colonial officer records, for example:

> . . . when I told my water-carrier to put his water-skin into one of the cars in the day-time, and walk near me with my paste-board, for drying plants, under his arm, he said that it was not his business, and that too in a very impertinent tone. I did not hesitate to give him a hearty kick immediately, otherwise another would have told me that it was not his place to carry my gun, and another would have refused to carry my hammer, and so on. (Dyson, 60)

These little 'mutinies' were no less important and effective in challenging the empire, as they resisted the settlement of colonial arguments as well as their legitimacy. They repeatedly and continuously resisted and reacted against their own objectification and asserted their own autonomy and subjectivity in their own way. These petty instances made the colonials realize the inherent contradiction and ambivalence of the colonial discourse and the futility and venality of it on the ground. These reactions may not have changed the power equation in material terms, but they challenged and registered their protests, which were essentially important in no less tangible ways. By refusing to fall into the colonial stereotype, by mocking their ideals, satirizing their ways, motives, and behaviors, they persistently challenged the colonials to remodel their narrative and understanding of the colonized as being passive sufferers. They posed an incessant danger to the empire and clearly made it known that the empire was only maintained by force. Whenever the power equations were against the colonials, these people would assert themselves in more open ways. Though the colonial narratives often reject these reactions as impulsive and instinctive actions based on spontaneity and immediacy, thus lacking coherence and deeper sense, it must be understood that these individual reactions were the expressions of the sentiments of the collectivity, which could acquire a pattern, coherence, and meaning with time. Their denial on the basis of spontaneity was also a part of the colonial strategy to reject the subjectivity of the natives in order to justify the colonial invasion.

A more prudent study of these individual reactions can expose the fallacy of the colonial claims in other ways and find a clearly perceptible pattern, coherence, and consciousness in these sporadic reactions of the remotely scattered individuals. A common thread can be discerned in their actions and anti-colonial struggles that gives the sense that these reactions were the conscious and sensible disapproval of colonial rule. These reactions should be understood in terms of the expression of their opinions and choices, which should not be rejected in any way. It is understandable given that these feelings of resentment and disapproval were also prevalent among the Indian sepoys, who were fighting for the colonial power on the battlefield. On occasions such as Holi or other festivals, they gave full expression to feelings and grudges. As an observer records:

> In the Company's army the participation of British officers in the Holi was a point of etiquette. The sepoys were always delighted if they could draw the sahibs into their revelry and could play practical jokes on unpopular officers. (Dyson, 46)

The Sepoys' delight in revelry along with the sahibs, as well as their jokes on unpopular officers, can be better understood in terms of Freudian psychoanalysis (Wei Zhang and Benju Guo, 1). In Freudian terms, the jokes and humor, like dreams are the expressions of the unconscious mind. These may be the expression of those thoughts and feelings that society (authority) forbids and therefore does not sanction. The sepoys' unconscious desire to fight and excel the colonial officer finds expression in their delight and jokes, which is in fact the expression of the, on a larger scale, same collective desire and mass consciousness that pervaded the other subaltern groups, which they expressed in their own distinctive ways. These are the 'millions of mutinies' that do not go into the wilderness but rather come forth consistently to find better coherence and consciousness and to manifest themselves in various ways throughout the colonial regime.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

None

FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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