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The Silences in Dominant Discourses

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Subaltern Studies continues to be generative for understanding the present, provided we expand our evaluation beyond the question of 'who is subaltern?'. This paper considers instead underlying methodological orientations that outlive their original empirical context, lending themselves to fresh applications. The original method trained us to notice gaps in governmental discourse, silences that underlie its claims to know and administer all within its domain. Based on ethnographic work in rural south India, the paper argues that despite the radical expansion of governmental discourse, it still does not coincide with the everyday practices people continue to inhabit. These practices shape, for example, rural women's everyday poesis in the stories they tell of injustices they have suffered, and the way these injustices erupt as disorder in the body's relationship to the world. To be able to write about these silences minimally requires, however, a second orientation, also present in early Subaltern Studies. This is the underlying epistemic confidence that it is possible, despite the odds, to understand better the meanings and workings of practices that may no longer constitute coherent or self-sufficient worlds—but which nevertheless continue to enjoy a vital and lively presence for subalterns, and for us all.

Keywords: Subaltern Studies; post-structuralism; India; Ranajit Guha; bodily orientations; epistemology; ethnography

The legacy and utility of a school of thought or enquiry can be understood very differently, depending on the method we use to evaluate it. Partha Chatterjee, a founding member of the Subaltern Studies group, takes as his measure the empirical object of analysis, which he argues does not exist any more.[1] For him, the subaltern subject is by now no longer recognisable in the rebellious peasantry that makes its dramatic appearance centre stage, as the subject of action in Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*.[2] What is even less recognisable, for Chatterjee, is the empirical location of such a rebel consciousness. In the colonial period described by Guha, it was possible to describe the 'collective life of the peasant community' as located *outside* the state and the ruling authorities.[3] By contrast, for Chatterjee, governmentality has now 'penetrated deep into the everyday lives of rural people' through the provision of services. As a result, 'mass political action will no longer be characterised principally by the marks of negation', but, instead, will involve contesting claims over services and benefits and, in some parts of India, over sovereignty as well.

It seems a little odd to argue against one of the founding members of Subaltern Studies for the continued relevance of a project he helped to establish, but that is what I propose. I

[1] Partha Chatterjee, 'After Subaltern Studies', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVII, no. 35 (1 Sept. 2012), pp. 44–9.
[2] Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
[3] Chatterjee, 'After Subaltern Studies', p. 46.

provide here the perspective of someone who is neither a founding member nor a complete outsider. My work on subaltern groups in Indian society, on women in the fishing and agricultural castes of rural Tamil Nadu,[4] was influenced at quite an early age by exposure to Subaltern scholars such as Ranajit Guha and Dipesh Chakrabarty, whom I met at the Australian National University in 1979 while doing my Master's thesis on what the category of a 'working class' might mean in India.

My mode of appraising Subaltern Studies derives from this early exposure. Instead of taking the empirical object or situation as the measure, I wish to explore what the concept of 'orientations' can offer. Orientations are not the opposite of empirical situations. They can only be realised concretely, in and through empirical situations. Yet, they can connect what are very different empirical realities. An example might be the 'taste' we pick up as children for food—that taste is not the opposite of the very many varied meals we might have as we grow, each of which will be different according to ingredients, the vagaries of different cooks, the circumstances. Taste can only be acquired concretely and over a period of time. Yet, even as adults, we know when we have stepped outside our 'comfort zone' in food situations. One's taste as cultural and historical acquisition is neither entirely locked into any one meal nor is it something 'transcendent' of the many meals we have had. It is neither entirely concrete nor entirely virtual, but, rather, a relationship between the two.

Following this analogy, I will be trying to capture this more elusive dimension of orientation by discussing what emerges as a connective and shared underlying set of intellectual predispositions, as a pattern that repeats itself in the many diverse empirical situations explored by Subaltern scholars. I have chosen to focus, therefore, not simply on the insurgent peasantry, but to show what actually emerges as a pattern that connects Guha's treatment of peasant rebellion with the very different empirical situation of the subaltern woman in colonial Bengal. I then follow this by touching, fairly briefly, on the re-appearance of the same pattern in the characteristic orientation to be found in the empirically-grounded arguments of each of three key members of Subaltern Studies, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyanendra Pandey. The point here is not to try to do justice to the enormous richness of their work, which is of course beyond the scope of such a paper in any case, but rather to show how their work elaborates and affirms the significance of the weave of thread I am picking out for consideration.

Chatterjee is arguing that we are now right outside what I might characterise, following the analogy with food tastes, as the 'comfort zone' of Subaltern Studies. Any immigrant who moves to a radically different habitus after tastes have had time to form knows that tastes can outlive the empirical situations that gave rise to them. But immigrants also know that if sufficiently equipped with some skill and imagination, a series of adaptations with the ingredients and demands of the changed context can enable one to satisfy that taste and keep the cuisine alive. In this paper, I use as an example of such possibilities material from my

[4] See, for example, Kalpana Ram, *Mukkuvar Women: Gender, Hegemony and Capitalist Transformation in a South Indian Fishing Community* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991/Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992); Kalpana Ram, 'Uneven Modernities and Ambivalent Sexualities: Women's Constructions of Puberty in Coastal Kanyakumari, Tamil Nadu', in M. John and J. Nair (eds), *A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economies of Modern India* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), pp. 269–302; Kalpana Ram, 'Untimeliness as Moral Indictment: Tamil Agricultural Labouring Women's Use of Lament as Life Narrative', in *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 18, no. 2 (2007), pp. 138–53; Kalpana Ram, '"I now have *aṟivu* [knowledge] which dispels fears": Instabilities in What it Means to "Know" and the Effects of Tamil Political Party and Civil Society Intellectuals on Rural Women's Discourses', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 32, no. 3 (2009), pp. 485–500; and Kalpana Ram, 'Modernity as a Rain of Words: Tracing the Flows of "Rain" between Dalit Women and Intellectuals in Tamil Nadu', in *Asian Studies Review*, Vol. 33, no. 4 (2009), pp. 501–16.

recent monograph, *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and Its Provocation of the Modern*.[5] Based on many years of research in rural Tamil Nadu, the book takes as its starting point the intersection of governmentality and subaltern practices in relation to women's bodies, which has been divided up into 'reproductive capacities' and 'planned fertility' in the language of the state. I show that for rural women, the worlds of governmentality and of daily everyday practices are far from coincident. Instead, from their perspective, dominant discourses continue to be inhabited by what I will characterise in this paper as 'zones of silence'. Yet, there continue to exist domains of practice which keep alive another conceptualisation of justice. There are striking continuities here with the silences in dominant discourses of colonial justice described in the work of Ranajit Guha, and it is therefore with this work that I begin.

Colonial Discourses of Justice: Dominance Without Hegemony

The peasant insurgent has been central to Guha's decisive intervention in Indian historiography. But what happens if we turn our gaze sideways to a notable occasion when Guha wrote about the rural subaltern woman of colonial Bengal? In his essay entitled 'Chandra's Death',[6] Guha utilised '*ekrars*', which he describes as legal documents in the mode of confessions of guilt. The year is 1849. The 'guilt' was for the murder of a woman called Chandra, who belonged to 'the nether end of the colonial society' both in class and caste terms.[7] There is little ambiguity here about the 'subaltern' status of Chandra. The ambiguity is instead located by Guha in the discourse of guilt and murder. Chandra had been involved in an illicit liaison with an upper-caste man who wished to be rid of the unwanted evidence of the relationship, the baby she was carrying. He makes his wishes plain to her widowed mother in no uncertain manner, threatening to excommunicate Chandra if the foetus is not aborted. Ultimately, it is the women in Chandra's family and, in particular, her unmarried sister, who mobilise to procure, prepare and administer a herbal abortifacient. The treatment goes terribly wrong and Chandra dies a painful death.

For Chatterjee, reflecting on Guha's two kinds of empirical subjects, what stands out is the *difference* in the empirical situation of the peasant insurgent and that of the subaltern woman:

> Chandra was no insurgent peasant, but she deployed the meagre resources at her command to mobilise the help of her female relatives and fight against the oppressive patriarchal order in the only way she could: the result was her tragic death. Whether her act was political or not might be a matter of debate. But it is indisputable that she did not represent the mass-political subject in colonial India, and that is what the structural analysis of rebel consciousness was intended to explicate.[8]

Yet, in terms of my chosen focus, the underlying orientation is similar in both cases. Both the insurgent peasantry and the isolated subaltern woman of colonial Bengal share the predicament of being subject to an utterly uncomprehending colonial power. This is a thesis

[5] Kalpana Ram, *Fertile Disorder: Spirit Possession and Its Provocation of the Modern* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013).
[6] Ranajit Guha, 'Chandra's Death', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 135–65.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 142.
[8] Chatterjee, 'After Subaltern Studies', p. 46.

Guha consistently advanced from his earliest work, *A Rule of Property for Bengal*,[9] where he described the generalisation of bourgeois notions of private property and the figure of the 'improving farmer' in Bengal. His thesis about the nature of colonial power acquired its more explicit formulation as the exercise of 'dominance without hegemony'.[10] Colonial power may have come to dominate the state and the forms of the state, but it did not enjoy hegemony. For the colonial state to have enjoyed hegemony, in the sense defined by Gramsci whose work provides the inspiration here, it would have needed not only to have established a monopoly over violence and coercion, but also to provide leadership for the society as a whole, based on a historically distinctive set of ethical and moral meanings or even a specific moral charter. [11]

Such a definition of hegemony does not require complete continuity between past and present: quite the opposite. The successful bourgeois revolution entailed making sure of a radical break between past and present, subjecting the past to new forms of moral judgement from which it would emerge transformed into a number of discrete sites of despotism and irrationality. But the requirement of providing leadership did entail being able to forge a broad set of class alliances where even different classes and fractions could see something of their own moral aspirations reflected in the terms of bourgeois discourse.

Not all parts of Europe succeeded in living up to this standard. The 'failure' of Italy, for instance, to provide such bourgeois leadership was the occasion for much of Gramsci's own rueful reflections as he, in turn, sought to secure a broad moral hegemony for a socialist future. But the gulf between European colonial power and the rest of society was necessarily acute in the colonial context. There was certainly a moral vision implicit in the colonial vision of property as well as of justice, which Guha explores in his work. But by following the obvious genealogy of Gramsci's Marxism in Guha's work, it is easy to overlook the more novel and original aspects of his thesis, which proved equally if not more influential in the elaboration of Subaltern Studies by other members. For what he established through his explorations is not simply a moral gulf, but a vast and *unmediated* discursive gulf between rulers and ruled.

Discourse, Power and Silence in Foucault and in Guha

The term 'discourse' immediately conjures up the work of Foucault in which both knowledge and power become impossible to separate, and Guha explicitly draws on Foucault in 'Chandra's Death'. But unlike Foucault's world, where the dominant discourses infiltrate every micro-capillary of society and create subjects whose resistance will itself henceforth be shaped on *its* terms, Guha depicts a world where the dominant discourses of the state are not adequate even for a simple *description* of the lives of the people it is attempting to rule over—let alone an adjudication of justice.

Colonial courts could examine Chandra's death only as murder. Murder, in turn, could only be registered discursively at the level of individual guilt and criminality. By being locked into fundamentally impoverished and mistaken premises of individualism, the colonial system of justice was *blind* to the world it was adjudicating. Its discourse 'made the death into a murder, a caring sister into murderess, all the actants in this tragedy into defendants, and what

[9] Ranajit Guha, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 1996). The book was first published in 1981.
[10] Ranajit Guha, *Dominance Without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).
[11] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* (trans. Q. Hoare and G. Smith) (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

they said in a state of grief into *ekrars*'.[12] Of the power relations that drove Chandra and her female kinswomen to such extremes, of the assumptions of caste and gender that could turn from benevolent hierarchy to predatory violence without missing a beat—of *any* of this, not one element was able to make its appearance in the court room. Nor *would* it be possible within such a discourse of justice. Nowhere in Foucault or in Gramsci do we come across quite such a stark discursive abyss.

Guha's argument is thus able to mediate two apparently contradictory theses—the first, that subalternity is a relationship, not an essential identity as such, and the second, that there is, nevertheless, a very substantial and integral domain of meanings that remains outside the dominant discourses, and which can certainly be understood provided we are prepared to stop examining all social phenomena through the lenses provided exclusively by modernity. Guha *begins* with the 'fragment' of the colonially-produced archive, but then diverges quite sharply from post-modern advice that we resist the urge to reconstruct a more holistic (or, as it used to be termed, 'totalising') account. The account he produces is nevertheless methodologically different from the essentialism such advice is meant to safeguard against.

A further clarification is necessary about the sense in which the term 'silences' can be used to understand Guha's thesis, as opposed to the way in which it could be said to operate in Foucault, for Foucault's work could also be said to have been concerned with practices that operated without being represented in dominant discourse.[13] The liberal discourses of reform, rights and progress excitedly declare they will flood the dark dungeons of sovereign power with the brilliance of perpetually well-lit cells and ensure human rights by allowing prisoners, madmen and children to work at constantly improving themselves, instead of being shut away. But the governmental practices that accompany these discourses do their work in silence, without speech and without affect. While liberal discourses chatter on about rights and freedom, and make attempts to enforce them and to universalise them, the practices of governance do the work of dominant institutions in all-the-more-deadly a fashion for being silent, as they classify, distribute, analyse and spatially fix the object of governance.

Foucault's thesis, too, has exercised enormous effects in the characterisation of the Indian state, both colonial and post-colonial. Governmentality has dominated the characterisation of the colonial state's operations such as the Census[14] and the post-colonial state's agenda of development. In fact, certain members of Subaltern Studies such as Chatterjee have played a leading role in such characterisations. In *The Nation and Its Fragments* published in 1993, Chatterjee characterises development and planning as the 'concrete embodiment of the rational consciousness of a state. . .[which] can proceed only by constituting the objects of planning as objects of knowledge'.[15] His latest thesis on the spread of governmentality to all parts of India is therefore an elaboration of what has been a thoroughly consistent tendency in his work. The main alteration seems to lie in the draining away of sources of heterogeneity in his characterisation of Indian society. In *The Nation and Its Fragments*, he posits a split between the governmentality of planning and the domain of political society, where class and other forms of politics engage in unpredictable manoeuvres and alliances. But, increasingly, his characterisations of 'political society' locate politics *within* the nets of governmentality,

[12] Guha, 'Chandra's Death', p. 140.

[13] The description offered here is particularly derived from Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1977).

[14] See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in C. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), pp. 314–39.

[15] Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 207.

which now define 'the very conditions of livelihood and social existence of the groups they target'.[16]

I have argued elsewhere for a more rounded characterisation of the Indian state and development.[17] But my purpose here is instead to arrive at a more rounded characterisation of Subaltern Studies if we are to understand what might be of ongoing value. If the theme of governmentality has been significant in Subaltern Studies, so too has the version of silence and power that emerges from Guha's work. For him, silences are not simply a matter of doing the work of dominance all the more efficiently: they mark the gaps and opacities in dominant discourses, which cannot represent the experiences of those they purport to 'know'.

A number of scholars in Subaltern Studies have taken up and elaborated this fundamental orientation in different ways. Many went on to demonstrate that such a deep gulf between the introduced colonial order of discourse and everyday social practices has left its mark on the discourses produced by Indian intellectuals themselves. The phrase 'everyday social practice' reflects my own training as an ethnographer. More characteristically, this domain was referred to either as 'religious consciousness' or 'peasant consciousness'. Even Chatterjee, in his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*,[18] pioneered a description of Indian nationalism in its infancy as a series of halting, stumbling first steps, as successive intellectuals tried to negotiate the gulf between colonial rationalism and 'peasant consciousness'. We have seen that for Chatterjee, the theme of governmentality tends to take over, after the 'arrival' of nationalism, as the ideology of the Nehruvian state. But for other scholars in Subaltern Studies, an orientation towards silences in dominant discourse continued to yield rich dividends. Pandey's work on the category of 'communalism' demonstrated the bewilderment of Indian nationalism in trying to comprehend its own constituency when it comes to understanding the obduracy of violence, both spectacular and 'routine'.[19] Chakrabarty's work extended the thesis to the work of intellectuals in his own area of labour history, and even to the work within Subaltern Studies itself. Reflecting on previous attempts to write a history out of the Marxist categories of 'worker' and 'labour', the limits of the Marxist categories themselves become the object of explicit attention. But these limits become visible only in contrast with something that is different—namely, the life-world of those the discourses purport to describe and analyse. The life-world of the weavers of northern India, the example he takes up in some detail, defies the routine modern separations between 'religion', 'economy' and 'work'. Their daily invocation of the presence of divinity is part of a synthesis that is effected in the course of their weaving, between bodily gesture, the texture of the thread, and the breath of song.[20]

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[16] Partha Chatterjee, 'Democracy and Economic Transformation in India', in *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 43, no. 16 (19 April 2008), p. 61.

[17] Kalpana Ram, 'The Intellectual's Hidden Body. Affect and Mood in Family Planning', in S. Dube (ed.), *Modern Makeovers: Modernity in South Asia. Handbook of Modernity in South Asia* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 183–200; see also Kalpana Ram, 'Sacred Genealogies of Development: Christianity and the Indian Modern', in H. Choi and M. Jolly (eds), *Paradoxes of Domesticity: Christian Missionaries and Women in Asia and the Pacific* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2014), pp. 143–65.

[18] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World—A Derivative Discourse* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

[19] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992); and Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defence of the Fragment: Writing about Hindu–Muslim Riots in India Today', in *Representations*, no. 37 (Winter 1992), pp. 27–55.

[20] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 78ff.

'Minor Practices' in Rural Tamil Nadu

We are now in a position to return to the opening argument—that governmentality extends deep into rural society in India and that Subaltern Studies has lost its empirical object of investigation. I do not wish to dispute the reach of governmentality. In rural Tamil Nadu, this is not such a new phenomenon in any case and has been diffusely present from a much earlier period, certainly well before neo-liberal reform.[21] But a reading of Subaltern Studies in the way I have suggested places these kinds of arguments in a different light. For whether or not governmentality has succeeded in establishing dominance, we can and should still ask: are the dominant discourses of governmentality able, even today, to comprehend and represent the meanings and textures of daily life in all parts of India's heterogeneous society? Are there no more silences and opacities at critical junctures of dominant discourses?

In my recent monograph, *Fertile Disorder*, I explore practices that would not qualify for the description of an entirely integral social world. Neither are they fully 'captured' by dominant discourses. Instead, I have described them as 'minor practices' in the sense described by Michel de Certeau.[22] Writing partly against the grain of Foucault's studies on governmental modernity, de Certeau argues that a society is 'composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions and of innumerable other practices that remain "minor", always there but not organizing discourses and *preserving the beginnings or remains of different (institutional, scientific) hypotheses for that society or for others*'.[23]

The practices I describe are 'minor' because their interconnections, which gave them meaning, have been carved up and discursively distributed into governmental domains such as psychiatry, biomedicine, mental health, occupational hazard, reproductive health, population control, assisted reproductive technology, and so on. A range of professions that deal with rural people such as social workers, schoolteachers, parish priests, even the occasional psychiatrist, further carve up these practices into objects of concern and reform. The only category that occasionally brings them together is a generalised ragbag category, that of 'superstition' and 'backward beliefs'. The anthropological literature has called it 'spirit possession', in itself a bit of a ragbag of a term, one certainly redolent of Christianity's polarisation between God and devil, good and evil.

Once fragmented in this way, minor practices no longer have a discourse that captures their true interconnections. This marks a definitive change from colonial society. Yet, they flourish. They still 'preserve the remains of different hypotheses' for India as a society, as well as more general hypotheses for understanding human existence. They still suggest, for those who live them and for those who seek to understand, ways of linking up domains now held separately as religion, law, healing, illness, tragedy as well as forms of poesis usually kept apart as genres of lamentation, ritual performance of epics or the narrativisation of life experience.[24] They preserve, too, the remnants of possibilities that have disappeared altogether in the discourses of modern governmentality—the possibility of radical and fluid ontological transformations between humans, demons, deities, the living and the dead.

Occasionally, the practices can cohere in such a striking manner that it brings home to the ethnographer radically different ways of conceiving of the world we live in. Over the years, I observed many occasions on which groups of people gathered around the figure of a subaltern woman who became transformed, for periods of time, into a goddess or a saint. The

[21] See Ram, 'Sacred Genealogies of Development', pp. 135–57.
[22] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.)
[23] *Ibid*., p. 48, emphasis added.
[24] Apart from Ram, *Fertile Disorder*, see also my earlier paper, 'Untimeliness as Moral Indictment', pp. 138–53.

complaints of those who gather are heterogeneous, but they all concern loss of some form or another. Some have lost a limb or bodily function from injuries we would classify as occupational hazards—for instance, breaking their backs while shinnying up coconut trees. Others are there because of their children's loss of health in fevers and dysentery. Many have lost or never gained the capacity to have a child, experiencing repeated miscarriages during pregnancy. Some have lost land, others money. A large number of them have lost love and care. Mothers have lost the love of sons who refuse to care about their mothers' wishes; they will not marry the woman a mother has selected for them, and they repay years of nurture with obduracy and disobedience. Wives have lost the care of their husbands who have become alcoholic, turned violent or deserted them. Fathers have lost the love and obedience of their sons. In all cases, there has been a breakdown in care and concern. Someone close, someone who should have loved and cared for them, has withdrawn their love and affection; it is this that hurts the most.

The medium transforms her marginal place into a *darbar*, a court in which healing and justice are integrally interwoven by a sovereign being. I will not go into the performativity of these mediums that enable affective transformations to occur—these are described at length in the ethnography. I mention only that this is a phenomenon that crosses religious boundaries. Both the people and the medium may belong to Hindu agricultural labouring communities or they may belong to Catholic fishing communities, a striking presence in coastal Tamil Nadu. Yet, for all its pervasiveness, the phenomenon barely registers in terms of our systems of justice, global governance or medicine. For the Supreme Court and the National Human Rights Commission in India, religious shrines where such complaints are heard are to be assimilated to the language of 'mental institutions' that have simply not been properly regulated.[25] The makeshift 'courts' that mediums create out of the front verandahs of their homes or the shade of tamarind trees in the '*cheri*' or Dalit settlement disappear entirely from governmental view.

The problem, therefore, goes much deeper than giving the marginalised greater access to the institutions of the modern state. For what kind of justice could ordinary courts have to offer to those who fear, perhaps with good cause, that *they have ceased to matter* to those most intimately concerned with their welfare? Yet, these are precisely the themes that have been kept alive in practices that have a long history in this part of the world. The notion of a domain of justice that escapes the attention of earthly courts, but is witnessed by wily, unruly, yet canny, spirit beings is an old one in Tamil Nadu, one never quite assimilated even into Sanskritic versions of religion. Barbara Schuler's study describes *yakshi* female figures in the early Tamil text, *Cilappatikāram*[26]—one weeps for sorrow when the king's justice remains oblivious to injustice, the other takes direct action, punishing adulterers and cheats simply by catching them and eating them.[27] Today, performances of epics held in the temples of such fiery, indeed demonic, goddesses, and their tamer counterparts in 'B-grade' Tamil and Telugu goddess films,[28] are not simply forms of 'folk' belief: they continue to connect in intimate ways to everyday poesis in the ways that women recount and shape the stories of the injustices

[25] Ram, *Fertile Disorder*, pp. 66ff.
[26] Barbara Schuler, *Of Death and Birth: Icakkiyamman, a Tamil Goddess in Ritual and Story* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009).
[27] *Ibid*., p. 245.
[28] Kalpana Ram, 'Bringing the Amman into Presence in Tamil Cinema: Cinema Spectatorship as Sensuous Apprehension', in S. Velayutham (ed.), *Tamil Cinema: The Cultural Politics of India's Other Film Industry* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 44–58.

they have suffered, and in the way these injustices erupt as disorder in the body's relationship to the world.

Primary Orientations and the 'I Can' of Bodily Intentionality

> Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'.
>
> (Merleau-Ponty)[29]

If I were to try and characterise one of the most primary orientations in Subaltern Studies, I would say it is one of epistemic confidence. There is a confidence that there are not only meanings and experiences outside dominant discourses, but that it is also possible to come to understand them better. I wish to bring this out more clearly by comparing the work I have discussed so far with Gayatri Spivak's highly influential interpretation of Subaltern Studies.[30] As is well known, Spivak described the premise of Subaltern Studies as attempting to uncover the originary voice of the authentic subaltern subject. The characterisation, and the critique that follows, trace the contours of Derrida's ongoing project of revealing, in the very process of trying to undermine it, the centrality of the originary subject of Western metaphysical traditions of philosophy. No doubt there are many traces of such a subject in Subaltern Studies. No contemporary writing or political project simply transcends such profound inheritances and, in my recent work, I have tried to show, through the 'limit case' of spirit possession, how that tradition continues to vitiate both sociology and anthropology. But read in the way I have suggested, the orientation of Subaltern Studies is at one level not so distant from Spivak's own concerns over the alterity of the subaltern. *Both* in fact are concerned with the effects of dominant discourses that render the lives and speech of subalterns opaque.

The real difference lies rather in the fact that for Subaltern Studies, subaltern domains remain an empirical domain for investigation and reconstruction in more and less adequate ways, whereas, for Spivak, such an orientation, let alone the explicit assertion that 'the subaltern speaks', is politically suspect.[31] Yet, in her original essay, Spivak herself in fact does not consistently adhere to a strictly deconstructive stance towards the subaltern woman. As Sherry Ortner perceptively noted in 1995,[32] the essay ends not with a deconstruction, but with the attempt to *understand better* the suicide of a young woman in the colonial period:

> . . .yet even this dead young woman, who spoke to no one about her intentions and left no note before her death, forces Spivak to at least try to articulate, in quite a 'realist' and 'objectivist' fashion, the truth of the suicide from the woman's point of view. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvaneswari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of one of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself. Bhuvaneswari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of

[29] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 137.
[30] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C. Nelson and L. Grassberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271−313.
[31] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in R. Morris (ed.), *Reflections on the History of an Idea. Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 64.
[32] Sherry B. Ortner, 'Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, no. 1 (Jan. 1995), p. 189.

> illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. . . . With this discussion, it seems to me, Spivak undermines her own position. Combining a bit of homely interpretation of the text of the woman's body (the fact that she was menstruating) with a bit of objective history (the woman's participation in a radical political group), Spivak arrives at what any good ethnography provides: an understanding both of the meaning and the politics of the meaning of an event.

In a later commentary on her earlier essay, Spivak reveals that she knows Bhuvaneswari's family and that she was indeed severely disturbed by the family's ongoing lack of understanding about the meaning of this suicide:

> I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark.[33]

Inadvisable or not, Spivak continues to oscillate between lamenting over such 'failures of communication' and reiterating, in the next breath, a model of communication in which there *can* only be such failure:

> All speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception. That is what speaking is.[34]

I have come to view such oscillation as not simply a matter of Spivak 'undermining herself', as Ortner puts it, but as a symptom of the fact that the model of communication advocated by Spivak simply cannot be consistently sustained by anyone, including by Spivak herself, as a *primary* attitude to the world around us. It can of course be taken up as an attitude, but that attitude will necessarily give way at crucial points to a more primordial orientation. The quote from Maurice Merleau-Ponty with which I began this section describes this orientation as one of 'I can', rather than the conventional epistemological starting point of Western philosophy since Descartes, of 'I think that'.

I began this paper likening the 'taste' for food with the 'taste' inculcated over the years in 'users' of Subaltern Studies. It is now time to give that bodily analogy more than metaphorical force. In his phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty builds on Heidegger's critique of Western philosophy for taking epistemology as its starting point. The epistemological attitude already separates out the thinking subject from the world she inhabits, whereas the 'I can' is based on bodily engagement with the world in which we are more characteristically 'outside' ourselves, moving towards the world and moving *with* others, not only other humans, but entities of all kinds.

The intellectual's reflective model of the world in effect builds into the starting point the class and gender privileges of being able to sustain a long-term break with practical engagement. If, as both these philosophers advocate, we take practical action and bodily engagement as our starting point, then 'communication' is not *primarily* a matter of either holding representations in one's mind about what is going on around us, nor of trying to decipher what is going on in other minds, although these are certainly aspects of our experience. For the phenomenology of both Merleau-Ponty and of Heidegger before him,

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[33] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in R. Morris (ed.), *Reflections on the History of an Idea. Can the Subaltern Speak?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 63.
[34] *Ibid*.

there is always a *pre*-reflective level of existence in which we are always already *in* the world, immersed in activities and in being-*with* others:

> When Dasein directs itself towards something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of the inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated, but its primary kind of Being is such that it is always 'outside' alongside entities which it encounters and which belong to a world already discovered.[35]

For Heidegger, then, Spivak's model of communication—where we emit speech, in the hope that these sounds will be 'intercepted', or perhaps 'deciphered', by someone who is located at some 'distance'—would be precisely the kind of awkward formulation that ensues from a starting point in which we are presumed to be creatures sealed off, each into our own state of interiority, out of which we must clamber in order to gain any access to one another. Even if we hold that as our explicit model of the world, we will necessarily be unable to sustain it. For the outward directed quality of our existence, which these philosophers call intentionality, a term which has little to do with intentions, but has everything to do with the 'I can', sustains us right from our first movements as infants to grasp, quite literally, things around ourselves—even before we have quite made any distinction between self and world. In other words, our epistemic definition of what it is to 'grasp' something is an extension of this more primary sense of a bodily grasping and understanding, which contains not only motor elements but emotional understanding.[36] Of course, we may be thwarted, both as infants and as adults, in this reaching out. At such times, the 'flow' of the movement is broken. We are thrown back on ourselves; the world, and even our bodies, may appear as objects separate from our desires and will. But these are impediments that interrupt and frustrate the more fundamental orientation outward, away from a preoccupation with the self or with a world viewed entirely as objectively 'given'.

In this sense, intentionality remains more primary than the 'I cannot'. So too are intellectual projects—Subaltern Studies is one of these—that tap more directly into such a primordial orientation and build on its possibilities. Such projects are not only sustained by stronger existential grounds, but, for that reason, are able in turn to sustain a more consistent flow from critique to action. Consider, for example, Simone de Beauvoir's critique of women's subjugation in *The Second Sex*[37]—a text which, not coincidentally, plays a crucial role in Guha's analysis of the women's predicament in 'Chandra's Death'.[38] The force of that critique is fed by the premise that girls and boys are born with the same primary intentionality, the 'I can', but it is selectively thwarted in the case of the girl who is more regularly denied human status than the boy, sometimes through assimilation to Nature, at other times by assimilation to the status of an object. Notions of a universal human nature, including a proclivity for freedom, have been thoroughly destabilised over the last thirty years by various kinds of critiques such as post-colonial critique, but it is not necessary to assume anything as grand as an innate aspiration to 'freedom' in order to retain the force of de Beauvoir's critique.

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[35] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 89.

[36] Kalpana Ram, 'Moods and Methods: Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty on Emotion and Understanding', in K. Ram and C. Houston (eds), *Horizons of Experience: Phenomenology in Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

[37] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1974).

[38] Guha, 'Chandra's Death', pp. 162–5.

We need only retain—as does Iris Marion Young in her lucid exposition of a 'girl throw'[39]—the much more modest claim of the primacy of the 'I can'.

A similar tension operates to good effect in Subaltern Studies. Its double proposition must remain integrally linked if it is to deliver its power to mobilise thought and action: the first proposition, that, while dominant discourses may come to be of ever-greater import to those they govern, these discourses continue to be inhabited by silences about concerns that matter a great deal to the same people; and the second proposition, that it remains possible to better understand those suppressed concerns by developing greater familiarity with practices that keep alive a very different order of experience.

[39] Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality', *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 141–59.